

REALTIME FILE

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum
FIRST PERSON: CONVERSATIONS WITH HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS
FIRST PERSON JACQUELINE MENDELS BIRN
JUNE 13, 2018

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>> 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*. We are in our 19th year of the *First Person* program. Our First Person today is Mrs. Jacqueline Mendels Birn, whom you shall meet shortly.

This 2018 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 twice-weekly conversations with survivors of the Holocaust who share with us their firsthand accounts of their experience during the Holocaust. Each of our *First Person* guests serves as a volunteer here at this museum. Our program will continue 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 Jacqueline a few questions. If we do not get to your question today, please join us in our online conversation: *Never Stop Asking Why*. The conversation aims to inspire individuals and new generations to ask the important questions that Holocaust history raises,

and what this history means for societies today. To join the *Never Stop Asking Why* conversation, you can ask your question and tag the museum on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram using @holocaustmuseum and the hashtag #AskWhy. You can find the hashtag on the back of your program, as well.

A recording of this program will be made available on the museum's YouTube page. Please visit the *First Person* website, listed on the back of your program, for more details.

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 WWII began.

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

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

And we close with this photo of a memorial stone. This one was placed in Hamburg, Germany, in memory of Jacqueline's grandmother.

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 have a pretty significant anniversary taking place this year.

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

Both Jacqueline and Richard are now retired. They have two children, Daniel Franklin, and Anne Emanuelle. They also have a 17-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 MacLean Symphony in MacLean, Virginia. Jacqueline also plays in several trios, quartets and quintets. For the past nine 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. 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 and her sister Manuela. They are sitting next to Jacqueline in the front row.

And with that, I would like you join me in welcoming our First Person, Mrs. Jacqueline Mendels Birn.

>> [Applause]

>> Bill Benson: Thank you so much for joining us today and being willing to be our First Person. You have so much to say to us in our short period that we will go ahead and get right to it if that's ok with you.

Let's begin with you telling us what you can about your family and your own early years before the anschluss when Hitler annexed Austria and Czechoslovakia in 1938. And, of course, you were so young that what you know is what you've learned from your parents and others but share what you can about those very early years.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: All I can say about those early years is that my father tried to get my grandmother, the one where you saw the stone, and wanted to get her out of Hamburg, Germany. He said that's the last time I go through Nazi Germany. And that was that.

Otherwise, I know we fled Paris a few times after Kristallnacht. Then we came back to Paris and we fled when Hitler invaded Austria. But those are things -- because I read them. I was much too young. And I didn't really understand at all what was happening. I was just a happy young child playing with my big sister.

>> Bill Benson: A couple of questions about that time. What were your parents' nationalities? You were living in Paris but what was their nationalities?

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: My father was Dutch, for generations and generations. A town in Holland has tombstones from past centuries. He was in training in Hamburg, Germany. And Hamburg is fairly close. He met my mother. And they fell in love. About four, five years, they got married.

My father was offered a job in Paris in 1926. He was always very proud to show that he was in Paris. My mother went with him and she became Dutch by marriage.

>> Bill Benson: Dutch by marriage. What was your father's occupation? What did he do to earn

a living?

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: He was a businessman, import-export of fancy goods. I can go ahead and tell you what happened when the Nazi Germans were in France that he lost his job.

>> Bill Benson: Later when --

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: In 1941.

>> Bill Benson: Even before that, I think you shared with me, that he had gone through some hard times financially with the business, in the 1930s.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Well, there was a depression just like in the U.S.

>> Bill Benson: Exactly.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: And his family in Holland, his brother and the rest, were suffering also from that depression.

>> Bill Benson: One more question before we move on. Did you have a large extended family?

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: We had nobody in France.

>> Bill Benson: But beyond France, relatives elsewhere?

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: We had our family in Holland and our grandmother in Hamburg, Germany. And they had children that went -- in 1938 on the Kindertransport, and they went to England. I have photos of them, yeah.

>> Bill Benson: After the anschluss, which took place in 1938, your parents left Paris with you and your sister, Manuela, for a short time. Tell us what you can, again knowing how young you were, what you can about the events that occurred for your family before Germany invaded Poland in 1939. You did leave Paris for a period. Tell us what you know about why they moved and what it was like in those -- in that time right before the war began.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: I really have no recollection, you know. It's impossible. I don't know if anybody here remembers their grandmother from when they were 3 and 4 years old.

>> Bill Benson: I remember you telling me that even though you don't remember much about that time, your parents took you to Fontainebleau for a period, I guess right after the war began. And you returned. And you referred to it as an appeasement period. What did that mean? It was right after the war began in September 1939.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Yes. There was no real war at that time. And the French believed that nothing was going to happen. My grandmother, actually, in Hamburg, said, Oh, it's just a passage and Hitler will go away. But the appeasement -- all the French soldiers were called to arms. There was nothing happening.

>> Bill Benson: Before the war began in September, in March 1939, your parents had you and your sister declared French citizens. Why was that significant?

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Well, in France even though you are born -- I was born in Paris. My sister was born in Paris. We were not officially declared -- I have papers signed declaring us -- well, asking permission for us to become French. And that was quite an event. I have that on the wall in my hallway.

The problem, or the catastrophe, with Hitler invading France, we lost our French citizenship and we became Dutch, again from our parents side. So we were Dutch Jews. And foreign Jews were first ones to be rounded up.

>> Bill Benson: To be rounded up. So even though you had been given French citizenship, it was taken away from you.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Exactly. And many year after the war I found out that actually I was French. I became French again. [Laughter]

>> Bill Benson: Ok. After war broke out, you and your family left Paris for a second time but

returned for a short period. In May 1940, Germany invaded Holland, Luxembourg and Belgium and quickly followed by invading France in June 1940. You then fled Paris for a third time and returned to Paris again. Tell us what you know about why your parents left -- left Paris each time and why they returned. And then once you were back for that third time, what was life like for you? Because now you're under the Germans.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Yes. Well, my father said, "I have to earn a living." And when they went to a little town, we left for three weeks. It was a wonderful family that gave us their dining room and their kitchen. But then my father said I have to go back home.

>> Bill Benson: Because his business was there.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Right.

>> Bill Benson: Ok. So you returned to Paris.

You mentioned earlier that period when there was no war, even though the war had begun with the invasion of Poland. You had referred to it as the Phoney War. And that was that period between the war beginning but it wasn't in France yet.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Yeah. So in English Phony but it was really funny, what kind of a war is that? And the soldiers were back at home and there was nothing happening. They were hoping, of course, that nothing would happen. But it did.

>> Bill Benson: And all of that changed, of course.

At one point you shared with me that your parents considered leaving for a Dutch colony but they didn't. Tell us about that.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Curacao was a Dutch colony. And my father, I believe, asked the queen of Holland, Queen Wilhelmina at the time, if she would help the Jews. And nothing happened.

And I did a lot of research in that and I found out that even if Curacao would have accepted the Dutch Jews, there is almost total certainty that we would not have been accepted in Curacao.

>> Bill Benson: Even though you might have gotten the permission, they wouldn't have accepted you possibly. So you didn't go.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: We didn't go. We stayed in France.

>> Bill Benson: You and your sister, Manuela, you both have some early memories, I think, of the German attack on France, Paris. What do you remember about that?

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: I remember seeing German soldiers getting into Paris. We lived next to the zoo, that I loved. Of course it was forbidden for us to go to the zoo and other places. But I remember the uniforms and their faces.

>> Bill Benson: One of the things you also shared and you write about is after the Germans invaded and began marching on Paris, on June 10, 1940, your family joined hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of other French people, particularly Parisians fleeing. What do you remember of that?

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: That was the third time. My father was able to borrow a little van from his office. I remember taking my doll, and my sister, her doll. People always ask me what was her name. She never had a name but I have the doll.

>> Bill Benson: You still have the doll to this day.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: I do.

>> Bill Benson: That is what you took with you through this exodus out of France.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Right. And I know from some other survivors that it was extremely dangerous because there were bombardments lost his grandmother and members of the

family. We had no family with us in France. It was the four of us. So we spent three weeks with that wonderful family. We saw them after the war. They've died now. But the family were wonderful people.

>> Bill Benson: They took you in for several weeks?

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: And then of course you again return to Paris.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: One of the things you shared with me is that your father witnessed Germans beating black soldiers.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Yes. On the way back from that little town we saw German soldiers beating an African contingent. You know, France had colonies. It was one of the colonies. And my father said in his memoir when he was interviewed after the war, "Now we know what's going to happen to us."

>> Bill Benson: Once he saw that he knew what was in store.

So now you're back in Paris. Paris is an occupied city. Do you know if many other Jews returned to Paris like you did?

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Some of them did and some of them did not. I have a very good friend whose parents fled to Toulouse in the South of France and never got back. They were rounded up.

>> Bill Benson: And speaking of the roundups, of course you and your family continued to live in Paris until the summer of 1942. So really for the next two years -- and at that time in the summer of 1942, your parents arranged for the four of you to leave Paris for Vichy, or free France as it was called. Tell us the events that led up to your parents making the decision to once again leave Paris but this time head for the unoccupied zone of France and how you ended up -- or how they found this little village where you would then spend almost three years.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: It's a very long story. My friends kept on telling that you can't stay in Paris, too dangerous. By that time we were wearing the Jewish star. I remember the Jewish star. And I remember --

>> Bill Benson: We have a picture of it here.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Yeah. I was wearing that. My sister was wearing that. It was on a Sunday morning. It was in June of '42, May or June. When I interviewed in the project Remember Me, I talked to somebody who had survived like me and she said oh, yes, I remember that Sunday morning. I was wearing a red dress. And I had that yellow star. But me, I was wearing a green sweater. And I remember that vividly. I said it was so pretty, the yellow star on my green sweater. I had no concept.

>> Bill Benson: Of what that really meant.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: No.

>> Bill Benson: I think you also shared with me that you were required by the Nazis it was to be sewn tightly on your clothing. But your mom didn't do that.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: She did.

>> Bill Benson: Oh, she did.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: You couldn't just pin it. You had to sew it on. My sister recalled something very vividly, very clearly, that the school teacher -- I was in kindergarten. She was 20 months older than me. She said the teacher, I think Madam Den -- anyway, she called Manuela to the podium and said, "You have to be very nice to this little girl because she's living

in very hard times." And that was very dangerous on the part of the teacher. Because the kids could go home and say, oh, we have a Jewish kid in the classroom. And it could have been the end of my sister and the end of the teacher. And the teacher survived, as I understand.

I know the next day, the Monday, my father took us to school. I don't remember being scared. I remember other things about that kindergarten. Like we had to eat -- at recess we had to drink powdered milk and it tasted so bad that we had to do that. It was food, you know. And we didn't have much food to eat. Even then.

And then something I haven't told you yet but these past years I have is that my father lost his job. He went illegally, probably on his bicycle, and helped his associates but he had an acquaintance in Marseille that was [Indiscernible]. We sat in the kitchen. I remember that. We ate [Indiscernible]. Don't ask me if I like it. Not much. [Laughter]

>> Bill Benson: Before you left, I think it was late 1941, before you left Paris that last time, your mother received a farewell letter from her mother, your grandmother. Tell us about that letter that she got.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: My grandmother in Hamburg never used the word suicide. She said farewell. I have a copy of that letter. And she says goodbye to all of us. And it was very sad. I don't really remember clearly. All I know is that on her birthday, every year my mother put an azalea on her piano as a memory to her mother.

And she had gone to a concert that evening in Paris and she had this premonition that perhaps something terrible was happening. The -- it was, I believe, the 21st of November 1941, they found her dead on the floor and in her night gown. And they found four tubes of [Indiscernible]. I don't know how my grandmother got poison except she had German friends that were doctors and she also turned on the gas in the kitchen. And there was an explosion. And she was buried.

After the war my mother went to the Jewish cemetery in Hamburg and found her tomb. She went with her brother who had escaped. He was in -- he escaped and went to Brazil, and to New York. They went together to the cemetery. But I'm not sure I'm answering your question.

>> Bill Benson: No, no. That's what I wanted you to tell us.

Another sort of interesting thing you shared with me about your father is that he went out and purchased a cheap radio. Why did he go purchase specifically a cheap radio?

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Because it was forbidden for Jews to have a radio. The French authorities, actually, said, oh, those Jews are going to tell bad news about the Germans. So he had to report and give his good radio -- I forget, I don't know what it was -- to the authorities. And instead he bought a cheap radio.

>> Bill Benson: To give to the Nazis and continue to listen to his good radio.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Also, my father kept on saying, "We're going to do what they want and they'll leave us alone." And these are his words. So. So we registered. We were registered as Jews at the little Town Hall.

>> Bill Benson: Your parents made the decision and planned their departure from Paris for the final time following a really massive roundup of Jews in Paris in July of 1942.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: July 16 and 17. They were rounding up Jews. Massively. The French police were rounding them up. And they forgot to ring our bell. We were registered.

>> Bill Benson: You were supposed to go, too.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Well, yes. And they came one week after we had left.

>> Bill Benson: So the first time they just forgot to come to your door essentially?

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Probably.

>> Bill Benson: And that's when you got out of Paris. You described your parents as arranging your departure very quietly. Say a little bit about that.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Wonderful friends, a family in Paris, said, well, you can't leave like that with your Jewish star. Take the Metro because the Jews could only take the train. Why don't you come and spend the last night with us? Which we did.

My parents, very good friends, 15 year-olds purchased backpacks. And they took the backpacks to the train station [Speaking Non-English Language] and they bought the train tickets because it was forbidden. You needed a visa. You needed [Speaking Non-English Language] they called them in German. And all of that was forbidden for us. Everything was forbidden, going to the zoo, going to the park. My father's business was gone. Everything. Life was forbidden to us.

So we went to that wonderful family. I have a memento here that I always wear when I speak. Most people in France are Catholic. Very few Jews and Protestants. And Genevieve gave me this, which is in order in order. If anybody's Catholic here, they know Notre Dame de Lourdes. My sister has a medal. My mother, I don't know what happened to it. But imagine all of those years I have that medal.

>> Bill Benson: That's the one that was given to you?

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Yes. And then her husband Maurice went down in the basement. And even though it was late July, he turned on the stove and he took our Jewish stars and burned them. But my parents didn't have false ID cards and it says "Juifs," Jews. So they could have caught us.

But we made it to the trains. The two boys, 15 years old, they were working. They got the backpack from my parents. What did we have? A sweater with us. My father had our ID cards where it said Jew but --

>> Bill Benson: On his ID card.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Yeah. And the train would leave. We got the on the train with whatever papers we had. I think it said Juif. And the train wouldn't leave. And I remember that. And the train wouldn't leave. And the train wouldn't leave and my father became frantic and went to the head of that particular --

>> Bill Benson: That car.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: To see what's going on. And a woman said, "Oh, they are rounding up Jews from the other side of the tracks." So that was a miracle, one of the many, many, many miracles. They had their quota of Jews. They called them in German [Speaking Non-English Language], the Jews. And they didn't go to our train. And the train started to go slowly, slowly, and we left.

The train had to stop -- well, my parents had arranged -- or my father, rather, arranged two smugglers, as they call them these days. In French [Speaking Non-English Language]. So we were supposed to meet them. But we had to change trains in a little town called Angoulême. I don't know if it's on the map there. And we had to change trains, go on to a little train. And my sister fell down. I think she still remembers the bump on the head. And imagine if it had been --

>> Bill Benson: A serious injury.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: We would have had to go to a hospital that would have been the end of us. But she said it's ok. We went on that little train.

We got to that station where the smugglers were supposed to meet us. They said --

>> Bill Benson: These are the smugglers to take you across the demarcation line.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Yes. They said we can't take you. Why? Did they have other Jews? Was it too dangerous at night? Anyway, we couldn't go. We went to a hotel. They said we'll meet in two days or one day, I'm not sure. We'll meet in the cemetery next to the church in that little town. What was it called? Anyway, we did. And it was midnight. It was the summer. But it was still cool at night in July. It was July 31. And they were there.

So one of them was the son of a baker. The other one was a son of a farmer. They were very young. Never found them again. But they were very brave. They came with their bicycles. We started walking. You know, at night, through the woods, it's wet. And Manuela suddenly says "I have to do pee-pee." Sounds funny but it could have been tragic. You know, the Germans were there. We were there. It was very, very close. They didn't hear us.

And then the smugglers put Manuela and me on their bicycle and the other smuggler went ahead and had a whistling, a signal, with my father to announce it's ok. If it were ok. And we crossed the border.

My father wrote, when he was interviewed after the war, that he saw or he heard a motorcycle. They were probably German. You know, the Germans were there. And then there was a French contingent of soldiers permitted, between Petain and Hitler, for a while. Not for very long.

So we made it. We got to the end of that crossing in the middle of the night. I remember hearing one of those soldiers saying, [Speaking Non-English Language], who goes there. And a French military term. He took us to the barracks and we spent the night.

>> Bill Benson: In the barracks?

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Yes. But then the next morning the Commandant, the man in charge, said, you know, we can't keep you. And they took us under escort. We didn't know anybody. My parents checked in a hotel. We were very tired. The bell -- there was a knock at the door. My parents were under arrest. They were interrogated. I have all of those papers.

>> Bill Benson: And this was by the French authorities.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Yes. Yes. Absolutely. Well, you know in a hotel, when you went to a hotel, you had to register. So whether it was the head of the hotel or whoever, the guardian who denounced us, I don't know.

So then we were -- then they took us again. There were all the papers that my father signed. My mother was interrogated for 15 minutes. My father was interrogated for 15 minutes. They both say that they had something, I don't know exactly how many francs and my father said that he had the money and some jewelry [Speaking Non-English Language]. And I have a feeling [Inaudible: off mic] the associate probably took money for us, for later.

So anyway, they took us under escort to the headquarters, you know, like a state, in the U.S. you have a state and a governor. And that was [Speaking Non-English Language]. And my parents had to go to the headquarters every day. Every day. And I have a copy of those papers as well.

There was the head of the governor, like a super governor, who had the orders from Petain --

>> Bill Benson: Who was the head of Vichy France.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Yes. To let us go if we could prove that we had enough money that we wouldn't be --

>> Bill Benson: Dependent.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Yeah. I'm looking for my words. Dependent on the authorities.

That part of France was not occupied. But still, my father could prove that he had some money so that the man said, get lost. And we were allowed to go 100 kilometers, 16 miles, not more. And we were registered, the head of Jewish affairs, we were registered all the way to Petain. It could come any day. They did come, actually. But for the man who lived downstairs from us. I can tell you that in a few minutes.

>> Bill Benson: So you were allowed to leave but you had to stay within 60 miles.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Right. And the train, that little train, was still working. My father or my parents found that little village called Le Got. We were the only Jews except for one other family. The mayor, he's the one that was able -- he's dead now a long time ago but I had him declared a righteous among the nations.

>> Bill Benson: I'm going to want you tell us more about that a little bit later.

So you're now in this little village. Tell us what life was like for you. You're the only Jew in the village, Jews in the village. What was it like for you in this little place, hidden, essentially?

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Yeah. Well, we lived on chestnuts mostly. My mother made bread, cake, and everything with chestnuts. I think we had walnuts. And then in the summer we went and got some strawberries. There was not much at all. Once in a while we got eggs. Which was a blessing.

And then the farmer -- there was a farmer there who couldn't write. My father wrote in his name a letter saying that he was going to be helping. He was a farm hand. And my father didn't know how to grow potatoes but instead of a farm hand, and it's in my book, he was in hiding most of the time. And he couldn't lie down. He couldn't sit up. It was pretty horrible.

>> Bill Benson: About a year after you got to Le Got, because you were there for 29 months, I believe, in August 1943 your mother gave birth to your brother, Franklin. Tell us about his birth and what it meant to you, your parents, and your sister to now having an infant living with you while you are in hiding in this little village. Tell us about that.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Well, my mother became pregnant. Not too long after we fled and hid. In May of 1943, all of France was occupied, you know, since November 11, 1942, all of France was occupied. The Germans were all over.

>> Bill Benson: So there was no longer an unoccupied part of France.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: No. There was no such thing. The Germans were all over. So my mother -- if we had more time, I could tell you that the Americans landed in Morocco and Tunisia and Hitler was furious. And that's why he decided November 11, 1942, all of France is occupied.

So my mother became pregnant. She was very sick. There was no doctor. There was nothing for her. I have little notes, little letters that I wrote in French, of course. My French was getting a little better maybe. Saying I hope you feel better tomorrow.

>> Bill Benson: Your mother almost died giving birth, didn't she?

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: She did. So in May of '43 -- I'm sorry. I become too emotional. Took us on their lap. I think I was on my father's lap. Saying, you know, we have no money and you will not get a gift for a birthday but there will be a surprise. And my sister guessed that it was going to be --

>> Bill Benson: A baby.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: And my brother, under terrible circumstances, was transported, which was forbidden. It was the middle of the night. And she was not allowed to travel. We had

temporary papers from that wonderful mayor but it said Juifs. So if there had been police, French police that day, that night because it was night, I think a Friday, she would have been caught. But she made it to the next area. There was a wonderful person there, and the doctor. On one side they had an Englishman that had crossed Belgium and France. And on the other side there was a Jewish woman. And my mother had a terrible birth. But my brother --

>> Bill Benson: Your parents named your brother Franklin, which is not exactly a French name. Tell us why.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Well, when we were still in Paris, my father had his radio. And he read news about Roosevelt. And for him it was Roosevelt who was going to save us. So when I have a young audience, I always say "Why Franklin?" It was Franklin Roosevelt. Now we know better about Roosevelt but my parents were hoping that Franklin Roosevelt would save us.

>> Bill Benson: You remained in Le Got for 29 months, more than two years. How do you think during that time that your parents were able to avoid being denounced and, therefore, arrested and taken away? How do you think that was able to work for you?

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: The farmers were very poor but very honest and what we call [Speaking Non-English Language], they believed in honest country. There were many prisoners of war. I had that little friend who was my age whose father was a prisoner.

>> Bill Benson: Prisoners of war, the Germans.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Yes. They hated the Germans. They knew we were refugees in that tiny, tiny village. But I don't think they knew what Jews were. We were refugees, period.

>> Bill Benson: Ok.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: But that was not your question. Was it? Oh, how --

>> Bill Benson: No, you were answering it. I was asking why you think you weren't denounced.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Yeah.

>> Bill Benson: And because they were honest people and they hated the Germans.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: And they were very poor. The resistance came, and the Germans at that time, and stole whatever goods the peasant had. We had no meat. We had no nothing. And they stole those goods. Sometimes it was the resistance, the underground people. They needed to eat, too.

I should tell you something. We went to that little school, thanks to the mayor, in the beginning. And the priest, Catholic priest of course, said the mass. And I remember seeing them doing the sign of the cross. I'm left-handed so I could never do it. And besides, we were imitating the other children for catechism. So it was very odd. But on Sunday he did the mass. And all the resistance, the underground people, were in the back of the church hoping for a good word on the part of the priest.

>> Bill Benson: For the resistance fighters.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Yes. He was a wonderful priest.

>> Bill Benson: And speaking of some wonderful people, you mentioned the mayor. Tell us what he did.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: He warned us every time -- at one time he told Manuela and me we should go to a convent in another town and we would have had to walk, of course. There was no other way.

>> Bill Benson: To go hide?

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: I remember we prepared a little bag. And then he said don't because there are German trucks and you will be caught. So we never went. That's one thing.

And then my father had long conversations with him at night when he could get away from his hiding place. They confided in each other. He helped us -- we had to go and hide outside of our hiding place because it was too dangerous. And we were hiding, where they put the poultry -- what do you call that?

>> Bill Benson: Put the poultry?

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: What?

>> Bill Benson: A chicken coop?

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Maybe, yeah. So we spent the night there.

Also, there was no crib, no nothing for my baby brother. But there was a wonderful woman who had I don't know how many children and she gave my mother or lent my mother a little carriage. Don't ask me how primitive it was but it was. I don't know how my mother found about clothing for my baby brother. There was a merchant or something. And she was able to get diapers. But you had to go and wash them in the cold place there in the middle of the village. And my poor mother with her hands, you know, she had to do that. The farmers' wife said, "You don't have to wash them, just hang them up and use them again." It sounds funny but it was tragic for my parents.

>> Bill Benson: And generally not only were you not denounced but you said generally most everybody in the village was very kind to you. And the mayor, of course, did all kinds of things to help you.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Oh, yes. But I had one insult. I think it's in my memoir. One girl, we were on the little trail in front of the house maybe singing. I don't know. That girl -- I don't know her name -- said, Oh, aren't you ashamed to play with Jews that are dirty like pigs in the stable -- or something like that. And it was such -- I ran home, of course. That was not something nice to say.

>> Bill Benson: And that could have led to some real danger if she had said something.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Of course. Yeah. She must have heard the word Jew at home.

>> Bill Benson: After the Normandy invasion, June 1944, Paris was soon liberated in August. After the liberation of Paris, your father made his way back to Paris and then came back later in 1944, I think in November, to get his family and take you all back to Paris. Tell us about that time. First of all, tell us about your father learning about D-Day and learning about the invasion.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: In French it's called [Speaking Non-English Language], D-Day. My father, it was in June, of course, as we know, June 6, 1944. My father heard about it. He was in a tree. It was time for cherries. He wanted to bring us some food. He heard that and he fell from the tree. But he didn't break anything.

>> Bill Benson: So excited about the news.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Yeah. Yeah. We knew. In my journal what we call our baby book which is in the archives here, that it was a big event. We were all hoping for that. We wrote, and Manuela wrote in hers and I wrote in mine, that we will see all of our family again, which, of course, never happened.

But, you know, it was far from the end of the war. In 44 -- there's a village that my parents knew about [Speaking Non-English Language] and that village was denounced. It was the women and men were put in the church. The church was burned. The men were on the wall and were all shot. It was a crime to such extent that to this day that village is a memory. Never rebuilt.

>> Bill Benson: Never been rebuilt. Just what was left.

Jacqueline, you're right, the war would continue until May 1945, but your father went

right away to Paris.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Not right away. When he could. There were no trains. I don't know how he made it to Paris. Did he do it by bicycle or maybe there was a train? I don't know. But he wanted to go back to see if he had a business and if we had an apartment. Our apartment was occupied the whole time by German soldiers or German officers. I don't know. But that was after the liberation of Paris.

>> Bill Benson: After the liberation, right.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: August 1944. He found out that the apartment was there but where was the furniture? It had been all put here and there. The Town Hall. He tried to manage. Oh, this is our dresser or this is our table or this is -- and he found some pieces of furniture. But his business was in shambles. There was nothing. Later on when we came back to Paris, he was selling jam from door to door.

>> Bill Benson: Selling jam from door to door.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Trying to make a living, yeah.

>> Bill Benson: When you all returned to Paris in November 1944, again the war would continue after that for almost seven months. What was life like for your parents? Your father is selling jam. Was he trying to rebuild his business? Were you able to go back to school yet?

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Yeah. My sister and I got a wonderful four-year scholarship to a school, which has changed names now. I found out not so long ago. And the head of that school was a hero herself in the resistance. She gave us four years private school no fee to pay. And we had to catch up. Yeah. That was a grand thing on her part. She was a very good woman. And the concierge was there.

And then my mother acquired a piano. I made a drawing. I think it's in my book. The piano was given to a neighbor. I don't know how they transported that in the middle of the night. That man kept the piano the whole war. They had the little boy but he was not allowed to touch the piano because what would have been said all of those months, all of those years with a piano suddenly.

And then the woman on the fourth floor, Madam Deneux, kept important things. And then she sent -- she was able to make a package and send it to my father's fake name, Monsieur Frederique. So we were able to get some clothes. I don't know. That's how we survived.

>> Bill Benson: So neighbors and friends had hung on to the things from the family.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Yeah. And bicycles, too, though that didn't last very long. And we got our dolls.

>> Bill Benson: You got your dolls.

Jacqueline, when did your parents learn what happened to the other members of your extended family elsewhere?

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Well, the war in Holland lasted much longer. It was a terrible winter. And then my father found out from his cousin, his first cousin, that most people had been murdered.

My father went to the red Red Cross. That's how he found out that his mother had been murdered, east of Auschwitz. That was in 1943. My father was so -- he wrote in my brother's journal, "Oma will be so happy to have a boy in the family." He had no idea that his mother had perished. If you go to the Permanent Exhibition, you see those signs where they put -- yeah. And then he found out that everybody else, little by little, through the Red Cross, I believe, that everybody else. We know now that we have 200 members of our family had been

murdered.

>> Bill Benson: 200 members of your family.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: My brother's daughter, Jessica, did a lot of research. My daughter did a lot of research as well. So that's the count. And they're still looking, I think.

>> Bill Benson: Jacqueline, we are close to the time to end the program. There's so much more I would like you to tell us but -- your memoir, which you're going to sign copies of afterwards, tell us what it meant to you to write this but also tell us about your title.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Well, yes. My niece, who was so instrumental in taking photos and things that that neighbor had kept for us. And she asked me [Indiscernible]. If you know French, you know every Sunday morning my parents said "Let's be alive one more week". "Let's be alive next Sunday." So I kept that in my head.

>> Bill Benson: One more week.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Yeah. Until next Sunday, meaning let's be alive next Sunday.

>> Bill Benson: They would say that to each other.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Yes. And to us, the four of us. Five.

>> Bill Benson: It's a marvelous, marvelous memoir, I have to say. Very sad but very powerful as well.

Jacqueline, it's time for us to close our program. We're going to hear from Jacqueline again in just a moment, so I'm going to ask you to stay with us. There was so much more Jacqueline could have shared with us. We had to skip over a great deal. We didn't have a chance for you to ask questions; so remember that you can do that with us online as well. And also when Jacqueline goes up to sign copies of her memoir, that also might be a chance for you if you have a question to ask her. Please do so.

It's our tradition that our First Person has the last word. So I'm going to turn to Jacqueline for that in just a moment. I remind you that we have a program each Wednesday and Thursday until the middle of August. We'd love you come back. But if you can't, all of our programs are now available on the YouTube page of the museum, so you can view our other programs. And we hope you do.

When Jacqueline is finished, right before she leaves the stage to go up there so she can sign copies of her memoir, our photographer, Lolitta, will come up on stage, take a photograph of Jacqueline with you as the background. So we want you to stay with us for that.

I'll now turn to Jacqueline for Jacqueline's last word for us today.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Well, I thank you, all of you, for listening so patiently to this horrible story. But I always say maybe it's not so horrible because I'm alive and so is my sister. But I find that you listen to the news or you don't listen to the news every day or every night and you see that there are horrible things happening all the time. When I speak to the young generation, especially, I say you have to try and do good and hope that this earth will improve. Because right now it's in very bad shape. I'm not very optimistic for my nephews and nieces, daughter, granddaughter. It's just frightening to read and listen to all the bad events that we hear every day and every day and in every country in the world. So we have to try and improve things if we can.

>> [Applause]