Holocaust Memorial Museum First Person
Margit Meissner
Thursday, April 18, 2019
10:30 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.

>> JoAnna Wasserman: Good morning, and welcome to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. My name is JoAnna Wasserman. I will be the host today of the museum's public program, First Person. We are in our 20th year of the First Person program. Thank you for joining us.
Our First Person today is Mrs. Margit Meissner, whom you shall meet shortly. This 2019 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 August 8th. The museum's website, at www.ushmm.org, provides information about each of our upcoming First Person Programs. Margit 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 Margit a few questions. If we do not get to your question today, please join us in our on-line conversation: Never Stop Asking Why. The conversation aims to inspire individuals to ask the important questions that Holocaust history raises. You can ask your question and tag the Museum on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram using @holocaustmuseum and the hashtag #AskWhy.
Today's program will be livestreamed on the Museum's website, meaning people will be joining the program online and watching with us today from across the country and around the world. We invite everyone to watch our First Person programs live on the Museum’s website each Wednesday and Thursday at 11:00 a.m. Eastern Standard Time through June 6th. 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 Margit is one individual’s account of the Holocaust. We have prepared a brief slide presentation to help with her introduction. Margit Meissner was born Margit Morawetz on February 26, 1922, in Innnsbruck, Austria. When Margit was a baby her family moved from Austria to Prague, Czechoslovakia. The arrows on

this map of 1933 Europe point to Austria and Czechoslovakia. Prague is identified on this map of Czechoslovakia.
Here we see Margit at the age of 3. She was the youngest of four children born to Gottlieb & Lily Morawetz. Gottlieb, seen here, was a banker from a religious Jewish family. Here we see Margit's family at the Lido, a beach resort in Venice, in 1926. From the left are her brother Felix, cousin Erni Morawetz, her brother Bruno, her mother and father, Margit, Margit's governess Yeya, and her brother Paul. Margit's father Gottlieb passed away in 1932 when Margit was 10 years old.
In 1938, when Margit was 16, attacks on Jews in Central Europe escalated and her mother decided she should leave school in Prague. Margit was sent to Paris to live with a French family where she studied dressmaking. In March 1939 Margit's mother joined her in France. This is Margit with her dog Flippi just before leaving Prague in 1938.
As the Germans were advancing on Paris, Margit's mother was ordered to report to an assembly point in the south. Margit bought a bike and fled with other refugees to the south of France. Margit found out that her mother was at the Gurs detention camp in southwestern France, shown here in this photograph. She eventually got a train ticket to a town outside of Gurs.
When France surrendered to Germany in June 1940, Margit's mother was able to leave Gurs in all the confusion and join Margit. The two fled via Spain and Portugal to the United States where they settled in 1941. In this photo we see Margit in 1941 soon after she arrived in the U.S.
Margit leads tours of the museum's Permanent Exhibition and speaks about her Holocaust experience. In 2003, Margit's autobiography “Margit's Story" was published. She will be available to sign copies which is also available in the Museum's bookstore. With that, I'd like you to join me in welcoming our First Person Margit Meissner. Margit, please stand.
[Applause]
Margit, as was mentioned, you were born in Austria but your family moved to Prague when you were a baby, and you lived there until 1938 when your mother sent you to Paris at 16 years old. Let's hear a little bit about your childhood, your family, and your life in those early years in Prague.
>> Margit Meissner: Good morning, everybody. It's wonderful to see so many people. So I come from a very privileged family. My family was very assimilated Jewish. We were mainly cultural Jews, although my father came from an orthodox family. And I was the youngest of four children, as you see. I had three brothers. And they -- I was much younger than my next brother, five years younger than he, and they thought that I was a little doll that they could play with. And my nickname was Doll, and I hated it. I didn't want to be a doll. Nor did I really want to be a girl. I thought it was much better to be a man. But a boy. But of course now I don't think that anymore.
[Laughter]
And my -- so my mother, who was a very energetic lady, had this idea that her children ought to speak four languages by age 16. So we spoke German at home, Czech in the street. We had a French nanny. We had an English nanny. And when we were too old for nannies we just had private lessons. So we really did speak four languages at age 16. And I somehow thought that that was normal. It took me some time to realize that it really was not normal at all.

And our house was a very formal place. You had to really know how to behave here. For example, we never ate with our parents until our table manners were good enough to eat at the big table. We always had our own dining room. So one of the main issues was to be socially well educated.
>> JoAnna Wasserman: What are your memories of your father and how your family and life changed after his death?
>> Margit Meissner: So my father was a -- as I said, he came from an orthodox Jewish family in Bohemia, and his father had died when he was a year old. His mother had no money. There was no high school in that village. So he was sent to Vienna, where he lived with an older brother who didn't have any money either. So at age 11, he had to make a living. And he did that by tutoring other students.
Eventually he got a law degree, and he became a banker. And when -- in 1918, when Czechoslovakia was created, he was then persuaded to come to Czechoslovakia to help create the new currency because when a new country was created, it needed a new currency. So that is why I came to Prague as a baby.
And my father in 1932 fell on a very fast train and hurt his leg and had a blood clot in his leg. Of course there were no blood clotting drugs at the time. And the clots went to his brain, and he died quite unexpectedly. And left his wife with four children to raise.
And my mother never knew anything about finances. I think my father didn't trust her with money. She had household money, and that's all she knew how to budget. So he decided to -- in his will to have a guardian for her and for us. And that guardian was in charge of our family money.
And at the time when it was obvious what was happening in Germany to the Jews, many people who had money tried to smuggle money out of Czechoslovakia. It was not permitted to send out money. But wealthy people were able to smuggle out money. And my mother because we had a guardian was never able to smuggle out any money so that when the Germans came and took away everything, we became completely penniless.
>> JoAnna Wasserman: You talked about being from a Jewish family that was culturally Jewish but not particularly religious. Do you have any memories of anti-Semitism in those early years in Prague?
>> Margit Meissner: I personally really never experienced anti-Semitism, although it was all around me. But I was a very protected child. So I only knew about it. My future husband, Frank, who comes -- who came from a small town in Moravia, was beaten up every single day on his way home from school because he was Jewish. So there was -- there were various amounts of anti-Semitism in different communities.
>> JoAnna Wasserman: So Hitler came to power in 1933 in Germany. And were you aware of what was happening there?
>> Margit Meissner: Well, we were only vaguely aware. You have to understand that in the 1930s, there were no media. Today if you want to find out what goes on in the world, you look at your phone and you can see what is happening as it is happening. We had newspapers, and we had film --
>> JoAnna Wasserman: Newsreel?
>> Margit Meissner: Newsreels. But for that you had to go to the movies. So the newsreels were a very good means of finding out what was going on in the world. We only knew some of it. But in 1938, when Hitler annexed Austria, there were pictures of --

there were pictures in the newspaper. And one of the photographs was of elderly Jewish women forced by Nazis to clean the sidewalk with a toothbrush. And that was such a threatening picture for my mother that she decided it wasn't safe for me to stay in Prague.
>> JoAnna Wasserman: So at that point, once the Nazis had annexed Austria, there's a feeling that the situation is getting worse and threatening. And the decision is made that at 16 years old, you will leave Czechoslovakia and go to Paris. Tell us about that.
>> Margit Meissner: So my mother interestingly had the idea to show my handwriting to a graphologist, a person who interprets handwriting. And the graphologist said this young lady is very smart but she will never be happy doing something only with her head. She has to do something with both her head and her hands. But don't worry because she's going to get married very soon.
[Laughter]
However, it gave my mother the idea that I should become a dressmaker. And where was the fashion industry in the world? In Paris. So the idea was I would go to Paris and become a dressmaker. Because in 1938, if you wanted a dress, you didn't go to the department store. You went to the dressmaker because dressmaking was a very respected profession. Any of you here do any sewing? Yes, a few people. Because most people look at me and cannot imagine that being a dressmaker was a good idea. I thought it was a great idea. Also because I at that point knew that it wasn't predictable where we would end up. And dressmaking you could do if you didn't know the language. If you wanted to become a doctor or a lawyer, you had to know the language of the country you would wind up in.
>> JoAnna Wasserman: Once the decision has been made that you're going to go to Paris and study dressmaking, how did you feel about leaving your home, leaving your mother, at 16 all alone?
>> Margit Meissner: Well, I was in the middle of 10th grade when Austria was annexed. And the idea was that I would leave as soon as possible. I was a very good student. That means I had good grades because I knew how to take tests. Did I learn anything in school? No, because I was not interested in learning. I was interested in boys.
[Laughter]
And some of the boys I was interested in were not interested in me. So leaving was not such a big thing. You have to understand that I didn't leave anything behind. Leaving was a terrible decision for families where the father of the family had to find a new home and make a living and go to a different country. That was a terrible decision. For me, it was not a big decision because I thought I would be back in a couple of years anyway. And I was very proud that my mom had enough confidence in me at age 16 to send me away to a foreign country.
And this coat that you saw, you saw that picture of me with my dog, Flippi, that was a coat that was specifically made for me by a dressmaker for this trip to Paris because I was going to go on an airplane. And that was the most sophisticated thing that one could do. One didn't fly around in 1938. So you wore your very best clothes on the airplane because that was such a sophisticated activity.
I didn't know that the plane I was on was not pressurized. And when I arrived in Paris, my ears hurt so that they nearly fell off. And I could not really greet the family that had

come to pick me up. So this was obviously one of the ideas of -- that one could not anticipate.
>> JoAnna Wasserman: Tell us about what life was like for you in Paris. What was your day-to-day life like? Did you have friends there? What was your social life like?
>> Margit Meissner: Well, the family that was willing to sort of mentor me was an impoverished aristocratic family living in a slight abandoned castle. And the lady of the house was a French teacher. And although I spoke French, quite well, so that making myself understood was not a problem, but I did not speak perfect French. And so this lady took it upon herself to make me into a perfect French speaker. So I had three hours with her in the morning. One-on-one. In the afternoon, I did homework for her. And in the evening I sat in front of a mirror pursing my lips in such a way that I would know how to make these sounds which are special for the French language. And I really spoke French without a foreign accent. So I have much less of a foreign accent in French than in English.
And I went to dressmaking school. The first school I went to was a school for young women who had sewing in vocational school. I was in an academic high school, so I had no preparation for that kind of school. And the teacher was exasperated with me because I was supposed to make tiny stitches, one next to the other, exactly the same. And of course I couldn't do it. And she thought I was really incapable. Well, I was. But then I transferred to a different school where I learned how to make patterns and how to make -- how to design things. And there I was a good student.
>> JoAnna Wasserman: So the situation becomes worse at home after the Nazis annexed part of Austria. And at that point later in 1938 your mother comes to join you in Paris. So tell us what life was like and how things changed once your mother arrived.
>> Margit Meissner: Well, my mother actually first came when Czechoslovakia was annexed in March of 1939. But she left Prague just to come and visit. Then she went back and was there in -- she was there when Czechoslovakia was annexed. And before the Germans had time to implement their anti-Semitic measures, she left Prague the next day and she took with her a small little suitcase, which was basically all that was ever left of our really significant assets. And we -- overnight we became very, very poor. And this happened to my brothers as well. My brother Paul, whom you saw in this picture, happened to be in Thailand working for a Czech firm. And overnight he lost his job because he was Jewish. And he had to find asylum someplace. And nobody wanted to give asylum to penniless refugees. So he eventually got asylum in Australia. So that's why I have a big Australian family.
My brother Bruno, who left Prague with my mother and was able -- the day after the Germans came -- was able to go to England. And there he found out that the Canadian government was willing to give somebody $1,000 if he wanted to become a farmer in Canada. So Bruno took this $1,000 and became a food farmer in the Niagara Peninsula that he had never heard of before. So I have an extended Canadian family.
And then I have my brother Felix. He was in the American army. But then after the war he moved to Spain. So I have a Spanish family and I have an American family.
>> JoAnna Wasserman: So as you and your mother are living in Paris, how much news were you getting about what was happening? And did it feel like war was imminent?
>> Margit Meissner: Well, in Paris, there was a strange situation. In September of 1939, a few months after mother arrived, world war II broke out because the Germans invaded

Poland and then France and Great Britain declared war on Germany. And we were in Paris as former Austrians. And as such we were not welcome. What I never told you before, that when I first came to France, I had to go to the police to get all kinds of documents. And the first thing they said to me is, why did you come here? We don't want any refugees. Go back. We don't want to be the country that takes care of all of the flotsam in the world. So on a personal level, I felt very welcome. But on a political level, it was very difficult.
And so after Germany and France went to war, we were now enemy aliens because as Austrians we were German citizens. And Germany was at war with France. And we became enemy aliens. Now as enemy aliens, we were watched and very unpleasantly treated. They really didn't want us there.and they thought we could be spies. The fact that we were Jewish, they just didn't take into account.
>> JoAnna Wasserman: So later as the war comes to France, you and your mother were separated. Tell us how that happened and tell us what she told you before she left.
>> Margit Meissner: So when war broke out in September of 1939, the Germans were fighting only in the east in Poland. But after six weeks, they had conquered Poland, and then they started going to the west. Because in the beginning France was at war with Germany.
But there was no sign of war in Paris. There was lots of French propaganda, which showed the whole world in black and then a little spot in the middle was red. That was Germany. And they tried to tell the French people not to worry about it because they could defend themselves with the fortress that they had built after World War I. Well, it didn't occur to anybody that the Germans can go around the fortress to Holland and Belgium and come into France. And they came very, very quickly. And France was not prepared for it. Either France was not willing to defend itself or it couldn't defend itself. And we were -- I was a great believer in French propaganda. I thought that they had everything under control. And I was not particularly worried because I simply didn't understand the situation. When I think back of how ignorant I was of the world around me, I am really shocked. But that's who I was.
And so when the war -- when the Germans kept approaching Paris, my mother one day got notified that she had to present herself to the police station with whatever she could carry on her back. Two, three days' worth of food and two blankets. And she was going to be deported. They didn't call it deported. They called it -- I can't remember the term now. It wasn't deported. But in effect it was deportation. They wanted to get all of the foreigners out of the Paris region.
And I went to the police station with her. She had this backpack and some food. It was difficult for her. And I went -- at the police station, I said why are you -- where are you taking her? None of your business. Go home. And why are you taking her? None of your business. Go home. So I was standing there by myself, no idea what to do. And in the last minute before Mother entered the bus that was taking her away, she grabbed -- she put her hand in her pocket and came up with a couple of thousand French franc notes. I had no idea she had that money because if I knew we had no money. She gave me this several thousand francs and said to me, now it's up to you to get us out of here. Whatever that meant I have never found out. But it was clear that I had to see whether I could find her, get her out of there, and get myself out of the war zone. But I had no idea what to do.

>> JoAnna Wasserman: And by mid June, just a couple of weeks later, Paris fell to the Nazis. And you had to decide what you were going to do. So tell us about what you decided and your escape.
>> Margit Meissner: So all of a sudden I saw people streaming out of Paris. I had no idea where they were going. But obviously they were going to the south because the Germans were approaching from the north. And I went to the police station. And they said you cannot leave. And then you just stay where you are. And then I saw this -- a couple of days later, everybody had -- in the street had a black face. And when I came home I also had a black face. I then realized that the French army had thrown a smoke screen across the River Seine so they could evacuate the armies to the south. So at that point I realized it was really, really time for me to leave. But I couldn't see myself joining this chaotic crowd that was leaving. So I went to the police station and said, now you really have to give me permission to leave. And the police station was open, but the policemen had left. So now I felt I had an alibi, that I had tried to leave and couldn't get permission because the policemen weren't there.
And then it occurred to me that I could take this thousand francs that mother had given me and buy myself a bicycle. I felt that I would be safer on a bicycle than just walking. And so I found the last bicycle in Paris that had this kind of men's racing bike with this kind of handle. And I bought this bike. And decided that is how I was going to leave. I had on the bike a little case that had two -- a change of underwear, two chocolate croissants, my dressmaking notes, and a box with oil paints because I thought if I am going to become a designer I needed these paints. Don't ask me on what basis I made that decision.
[Laughter]
And I started bicycling. At first I was terrified. I had no idea whether that was the right thing to do. I had no idea where I was going. But I was just following the crowd. And I was not a good bicyclist. I mean, I just barely knew how to bicycle. But I bicycled all day, and I was not hungry, and I was not thirsty. I just went, went, went. And it was very crowded. But after a while, it turned out that I was lucky on a bicycle because the roads were completely stuck with cars that had ran out of gas or people who didn't know how to drive and tried to flee. I could get around these cars on the side of the road, and I made good progress. And I bicycled until nightfall.
And then I came to a little town where a policeman motioned me to him. So the first thing I thought, now he's going to ask me where my papers are, and I have no papers. He said, you can spend the night in the school next door. You can lie down in the classroom. So I took my bike and went to the classroom. And when I lay down, I suddenly remembered that I had received a letter, just before I left Paris, that I hadn't opened. And it occurred to me I should open that letter now.
And this was from somebody who wanted to tell me that my mother was in a camp called Gurs. Nobody had ever heard the name of Gurs. And nobody knew where it was. But it said also that it was near the Spanish border. So now I had a destination. So that was already a great help.
And so I spent the night there. And at daybreak I got up, because now I was eager to go to Gurs. And I didn't know until I found out a couple of days later that two hours after I left the school, the school had been bombed to smithereens. So I went -- I continued bicycling and collided with another woman. And we both fell. And I looked at my bicycle.

It was damaged, but I could continue riding. So I picked myself up and continued riding. And after a while, a young man approaches me and says, Mademoiselle, you're going to die of blood loss. Look at your leg. So I had not been aware that I really opened a big wound on my leg. Because I was just so eager to go.
And he said, you have to have it fixed. There's a drugstore on the next block. So now that I saw that my knee -- that my leg was really bleeding profusely, now it started hurting.
[Laughter]
Because I had not realized that. So I went to the drugstore on the next block, and he said you have to go to the hospital. It has to be sewn up. And I said it can't be sewn up, because I have no money and I don't have no papers. So he just bandaged it. And he said, where are you going? And I said I am going to Gurs. And he said, where is Gurs? In the Pyrenees. You are not going to bicycle to the Pyrenees. And I said, yes, because in Paris they said there were no trains. But he said there are trains in Orlean. You go there and get the train.
So I bicycled with my sore leg. And now it really hurt, but I had to continue. And so I went to Orlean and there was the most chaotic situation ever. I mean, hundreds of people trying to get tickets to get on a train. And there was just people were fainting and children were crying. And it was the kind of situation that made you really even more afraid than you had been. And in the middle of that air raid alarm, everybody had to go down to the basement. And I looked at the situation, and I said to myself, I cannot go to the basement because when I come back, I will be at the end of the line, and I won't be able to do this.
So I stayed on top of the railroad station. And watched the bombs falling on both sides of the railroad station. And fortunately it did not hit us. So I was taking probably crazy chances, but I took -- I was a risk taker. And I became a risk taker because I'm still a risk taker today.
>> JoAnna Wasserman: So you were at the front of the line. Did you know where you were going?
>> Margit Meissner: Well, the train that I was going on I thought was going to the northwest of France. That's where I wanted to go because it was closer to England, and I thought that one might get a boat to go to England. And so I was on this train going there. And when I got off that train, I realized that I was in the southwest of France. And that I was within 12 kilometers of Gurs. So it is an amazing story.
And I knew that I had French friends near there who would welcome me. And they really welcomed me. And they were very, very happy to see me. But I couldn't stay at their house because it was full. And so they said you can go to a neighboring farmhouse, and there you will be able to go to sleep. Because I hadn't slept yet.
So I -- the lady of the house when I told her that my mother was in Gurs, she hadn't heard of Gurs either because it was at that time a secret that they had a camp there. But she had a car, and she said she would go to Gurs to see if she could find my mother and tell her that her child was here.
Well, she came back from Gurs, and she said, don't put your -- I don't have any hope. It was so chaotic. I wasn't able to find your mom, and I was able to leave a message which I think she will never get. So I went to sleep at the farmhouse. And the lady

showed me an attic room. And I finally sort of lay down on this bed relieved that I was someplace safe.
And half an hour after I got up -- after I fell asleep, there was a knock at the door. And there were two policemen standing there who said, we have to take you to the police station because I think the farm woman was suspicious of me. Why has this young lady all of a sudden come here by herself? So they took me, each one by one arm, across this cobblestone square in Salies-de-Bearn to the police station.
And at that point I was crying. I started to cry in the middle of the square because I thought now the French are going to jail me, and I will never find my mother again. But we came to the police station. The police chief took one look at me and said to the policemen, thank you for bringing her, but you can let her go. So that was very, very lucky.
And I was told -- I went back to my friend's house. I really didn't like this farm woman for her being -- what is the word --
>> JoAnna Wasserman: She denounced you.
>> Margit Meissner: Yeah. But my friends were very welcoming. And I was sitting in the yard of their house wondering what were my next steps and what could I do now, and a woman from way back I saw waving at me. Well, I didn't wave back because I didn't know anybody could wave at me. And she came closer and waved some more. And I still didn't wave back. And when she came close, it turns out it was my mom. I didn't recognize her.
She had such a dark face because she spent most of her time in Gurs outdoors, and she had lost so much weight. And so I didn't jump up and came to embrace her. And the one thing she said about Gurs -- she never talked about it, but she said here I found my child, and she isn't even happy enough to come forward to embrace me. That really bothered her, and it bothered me forever. I still think about that.
But the one thing she said about Gurs, when my children were little, and they would fuss about food that I wanted them to eat, she said to them, if you had been in Gurs, you would eat anything that people offered you. That was the only thing she ever said about Gurs.
>> JoAnna Wasserman: So by this time you and your mom are back together. You're in the southwest of France. You have been put in charge of figuring out what the plan is, getting you out of there. And France had divided into two zones by that time, one occupied by Germany and one administered by France. So tell us how you eventually were able to make your way out of France and into Spain and then Portugal.
>> Margit Meissner: So eventually we were able with a lot of problems to get into the unoccupied zone. And this is one of the reasons why I wrote this book because my children were just bugging me and bugging me, and said you have to write this story because you will die, and we will never find out what this family was about and what your escape was all about. So you've got to write it. And so finally when I was 80, I sat down and wrote this book, which you're going to see at the end of this lecture. "Margit's Story." It describes in great detail how mother and I escaped. And there's no time for me to really tell you the details.
But I -- we finally -- we ended up in Marseille where there were lots of foreigners who also had lost all of their clothes and who also were trying to leave. And the French would not give us exit permits. And I had been able to get a Spanish and Portuguese

transit visa, which meant you could stay only while you are transiting, you can stay there.
And these visas had a validity of one month, and we still didn't get an exit permit. So the day the visas were going to expire, we went to the Spanish-French border hoping they would let us go through. And of course the police -- the police said, why do you come here? You can't leave. You don't have exit permits. So I talked to a porter there who -- and told him our story, and he said I can help you. I can show you how you can walk across the Pyrenees from France into Spain up on the French side, down on the Spanish side. But you must not lose your way because if the Spanish police find you, they will jail you. Well, I said, don't worry. We are not going to lose our way. Of course we did lose our way.
[Laughter]
We got -- we went to jail in Spain. And that was a life-changing experience for me. I was very socially well-mannered young lady who thought I would never go to jail. And I didn't realize that people -- good people were also jailed. I was not aware of that at that time. And so jail was really -- in many ways it was a great experience for me. Not only that we got bed bugs and that the situation was awful -- the physical situation was awful. I learned a Spanish Franco song, and the jail authorities, when they saw us and they had all of our belongings there, because the belongings had been taken away from us, and they said, ex- Austrians, you are Germans, we are going to call the German authorities and they are going to take you over. So we made all of this trip to avoid the Germans and then we were going to be handed to the Germans in Spain.
But we were lucky again with good friends and lots of risk taking. And happy endings. We ended up in Portugal. And in Portugal I became a dressmaker because there were lots of refugees who needed clothes. And I could sew. And we had a rented room in the house of a Portuguese lady who had a treadle sewing machine and an iron which I was able to use to make these clothes. And I had a very interesting time in Portugal.
First of all, I learned Portuguese because I had to go to the store to buy things. And also at the time in Portugal a young lady from a good family was not permitted to go on the street by herself. She always had to have someone escort her. And I was not a Portuguese young lady, so I could walk the street by myself. And I had lots of young Portuguese men who tried to accost me. And if I didn't like them, I said, I don't speak Portuguese. But if I liked them, they became my friends.
[Laughter]
And so I really had a good time in Portugal.
[Laughter]
And I made enough money that when it came time for us to leave, we had each one a full suitcase because we came originally with nothing. But here in Portugal all of a sudden unexpectedly we got an American immigration visa. The State Department had cancelled all of the 11-year waiting lists that -- of which German Jews were. And we never were on any waiting list. And when we came to the American consulate in Lisbon, we were the only people who were looking for visas. And we got it.
But we had a visa which was only good for a certain amount of time. And then you had to find transportation across the ocean to go to the United States. And there were no boats. There was already war, and there were submarines, and going across the Atlantic Ocean was really dangerous.

And finally, finally we were able to get seats on a Portuguese cork boat. That was bringing corks from Spain to the United States. Corks for wine bottles. And it was bobbing across the Atlantic. And I was desperately seasick most of the time and thinking I would die because I couldn't stand it. But when I was better I played ping-pong with the crew, and I became a very good ping-pong player. I also learned a lot of Portuguese.
And finally we arrived in the Chesapeake Bay not far from here. Almost three years to the day when I left my home in Prague. So that is basically my story. And you have been very -- a very good audience because you have paid attention.
[Laughter]
[Applause]
>> JoAnna Wasserman: So we have time for a couple of questions for Margit. If you have a question, there are two microphones in each of the aisles if you want to make your way over. I will repeat the question so everyone can hear it. And when the Q&A concludes, I'll turn back to Margit to conclude the program. So any questions?
>> I was just wondering what did you do once you got to America? Were you still a dressmaker or what did you do once you were in the states?
>> Margit Meissner: In the states, I had lots of different jobs. The first job was I was going to be a dress finisher in a fancy store on Madison Avenue. I went to present myself, and I expected to be interviewed and my credentials because I had a certificate from the French school. They were going to examine it. They said to me, do you have a Social Security number? And I didn't know what a Social Security was. So they said come back next Monday with a Social Security number.
So I came back, and they sat me down. I did not know how to thread the electric sewing machine. I sewed for three inches. It broke again. I couldn't thread it again. And the boss came, tapped me on the shoulder and said, young lady, we cannot use you. And I was fired. I was desperate that I was fired because I thought I was such a capable young lady. I really knew how to sew. And just because I couldn't thread that machine, they fired me.
Then I had all kinds of different jobs. And always -- I got married to a friend of my brother's who was a volunteer in the army. He was in North Carolina. And we got married two days after Pearl Harbor in New York. And he had to go back to his regiment in Ft. Bragg, North Carolina. And I started moving around the country with him. And I got a job as a finisher in a department store in North Carolina. And the boss somehow realized that I was quite capable, so he said, you can become a cashier. So I became a cashier. I didn't know how to be a cashier, but, you know, there were these boxes that came up, pneumatic boxes. And I had to make change. So I learned how to be a cashier.
I also -- the lady in whose house I stayed had never heard of anybody like me. And when I started telling her my story, she was very -- she became very interested because she didn't know what was going on in Europe. And so she said, you have to come and speak to the P.T.A. I said what is the P.T.A.? Because of course I didn't know anything about the United States. That was my first speech.
And then I spoke to various groups in Fayetteville, North Carolina, to the Rotary and other public groups, who were very interested that there were people like me who were able to escape before the Holocaust really started. Because you have to understand

that the real killing of Jews started only in 1941. And there were all these years between 1933 when Hitler came to power and 1941 when the Germans really started murdering Jews that one could have avoided the Holocaust. It was not a given that it was going to happen.
So then I had all kinds of other jobs. I worked at the Office of War Information because I knew Czech and Portuguese. And eventually I became a dress designer. I had a dress factory in San Francisco. Eventually when I came to the Washington area, I became a -- I worked in the Montgomery County Public Schools for 20 years on the integration of handicapped children into the general education program. And that was a job that I was very passionate about.
But in the end, I realized that youngsters who graduate from special education usually cannot find employment because employers don't know how to employ them. And I helped create an organization called Transcend Transition Center for students with disabilities who transition from school to work. And that organization is now 25 years old. And I just retired from their board because I thought that was a really important thing that I had done in my life.
So I took lots of chances. Lots of risks. And I always had enough confidence in me that I would learn it.
>> Thank you so much. You're so amazing. [Applause]
>> JoAnna Wasserman: I think we probably have time for one more question.
>> Good morning. I'm very happy to be here. I have a question for you in the state of the United States with different people from all walks of life. And listening to your story I believe it's a replica of what's happening in American society right now from different experience, different languages, and different families from different aspects of the world due to the war. How do you think you can advise people based on the state of the country right now?
>> Margit Meissner: Well, it's a very troubling question. And the only thing I can say is that even if you cannot -- you as the individual cannot influence the federal government, you can certainly influence your local government. And that is what I would really recommend all of you to think about, is how you can involve yourself in your own community and make sure that it is a gentler, kinder place where people are nice to each other, except for fighting all the time. I, you know, don't want to go into the political situation because that's not what I am here for. But it troubles me a great deal to think that there are many similarities between today and what I lived with in the 1930s.
>> JoAnna Wasserman: In a moment, I'm going to turn to Margit to close the program. But before I do that, I want to remind you that this First Person program you're attending today will be happening every Wednesday and Thursday at 11:00 from now through mid August. So you can join us in person or online. And also to let you know Margit just very briefly covered many, many years of her life. But she will be available to sign copies of her book, which is fascinating and really great read, at the end of our program. So, Margit, it's the tradition that the First Person has the last word. So what are your closing thoughts for our audience today?
>> Margit Meissner: Well, I think whenever you see prejudice, anti-Semitism, bullying in your own community, you must not walk away, because what you do as the individual really matters. It is not a good idea to say to yourself, I am just a little somebody. I cannot make a difference. That's not true. You really can make a difference. And so I

would urge you to see how you can involve yourself and make sure as I said that the situation is kinder and not so explosive.
The other thing that I think you should do is you should be risk takers. Because it is better to risk and fail than never to try. And there is nothing wrong with failing. You tried something. It didn't work. So you learned something. You're going to go someplace else. And most people are so afraid of failure because what will people say. I think what will people say is not a good thing to say to yourself.
And I think that you need to continue learning, and that you need to make sure that you understand what goes on in the world because only then can you really be an effective citizen. So I try to live up to that. Sometimes with more success than others, but I don't give up. I keep doing it.
>> JoAnna Wasserman: Thank you, Margit.
[Applause]