

[MIXED CONVERSATIONS] Good afternoon, and welcome to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. My name is Bill Benson, and I am the host of the museum's public program First Person. Thank you for joining us today. We are in our eighth season of First Person. Our first person today is Mrs. Margit Meissner, whom we shall meet shortly.

First Person is a series of weekly conversations with survivors of the Holocaust who share with us their firsthand accounts of their experiences during the Holocaust and World War II. Each First Person guest presently serves as a volunteer here at the museum. With one exception, we will have a First Person program each Wednesday through August 29. The museum's website, at www.ushmm.org-- that's www.ushmm.org-- provides a list of the upcoming First Person guests. You will find it under the Public Programs portion of the museum's website. This 2007 season of First Person is made possible through the generosity of the Louis and Dora Smith Foundation, to whom we are grateful for again sponsoring First Person.

Margaret Meissner-- Margit Meissner will share with you her First Person account of her experience during the Holocaust and as a survivor for about 40 minutes. We will follow that with an opportunity for you to ask Margit some questions.

Before you are introduced to her, I have several requests of you. First, we ask that, if possible, you stay seated throughout the one-hour program. That will help to minimize any disruptions for Margit as she speaks. Second, if you have a question during the question and answer period, we ask that you make the question brief. I will repeat the question so all in the room, including Margit, can hear the question, and then she'll respond to your question.

I'd like to also ask you, if you have a cell phone or a pager that has not yet been turned off to please do so. And I'd also like to let those of you who may have passes for the permanent exhibition today know that they are good for the entire afternoon.

The Holocaust was a state-sponsored systematic persecution and annihilation of European Jewry by Nazi Germany and its collaborators between 1933 and 1945. Jews were the primary victims. 6 million were murdered. Gypsies, the handicapped, and Poles were also targeted for destruction or decimation for racial, ethnic, or national reasons. Millions more, including homosexuals, Jehovah's Witnesses, Soviet prisoners of war, and political dissidents also suffered grievous oppression and death under Nazi tyranny.

What you are about to hear from Margit Meissner is one individual's account of the Holocaust. We have prepared a brief slide presentation to help with Margit's introduction.

Margit Meissner was born Margit Morawetz on February 26, 1922. Margit was the youngest of four children, born to Gottlieb Morawetz, a banker from a religious Jewish family, and his wife Lilly, who was from Vienna.

Margit was born in Innsbruck, Austria. When Margit was-- I skipped over a picture. I'm sorry. This is Margit's father, Gottlieb.

Margit was born in Innsbruck, Austria. When Margit was a baby, her family moved from Austria to Prague, Czechoslovakia. The first arrow on our map of Europe points to Austria, and our second arrow points to Czechoslovakia. On this map of Czechoslovakia, the arrow shows the location-- or-- excuse me, the circle shows the location of Prague.

As a young girl, in addition to the Czech and German spoken at home, Margit learned French and English. Here we see Margit's family at the Lido, a beach resort in Venice, in 1926. From the left is her brother Felix, cousin Erni Morawetz, her brother Bruno, her mother and father-- Margit is highlighted here with the circle-- 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 then sent to

Paris to live with a French family where she studied dressmaking.

In March 1939, Margit's mother joined her in France. In this photo, we see Margit with her dog, Flippy, just before leaving Prague in 1938.

As the Germans advanced on Paris, Margit's mother was deported. When Paris fell to the Germans in June of 1940, Margit bought a bike and fled with other refugees to the South of France. At this time, Margit was unaware of her mother's whereabouts. Her mother had been sent to the Gurs detention camp. And here we see a photograph of the Gurs detention camp.

Margit would reunite with her mother, and the two fled via Spain and Portugal to the United States, where they settled in 1941. We close our slide presentation with this photo of Margit taken in 1941 soon after she arrived in the United States.

Upon her arrival in the United States, Margit would find employment as a dress finisher on Madison Avenue in New York City. From there, she would attend Black Mountain College in North Carolina, and marry three days after Pearl Harbor. Margit would later work for the Office of War Information, spend time with MGM Studios, and, because of her language abilities, work for the US Army of Occupation in Germany re-educating Hitler Youth.

We can't do justice today to describing the remarkable journey her life would take from there, but it included many stops in the US and abroad. Margit would eventually spend 20 years with the Montgomery County, Maryland public school system specializing in disability issues. She remains on the board of an organization which she helped found that helps youth with disabilities obtain employment after their graduation from high school.

Margit has two children and two grandchildren. Her daughter Anne lives nearby in Silver Spring, Maryland, and her son Paul is a hospital planner at Montefiore Hospital in the Bronx. Margit and her partner, Irvin, reside in Bethesda, Maryland. Margit leads tours of the museum, mostly for groups of police officers and the FBI.

She also works in the museum's archives translating documents from Czech to English. The first document she translated was the memoir of a Czech boy who was 15 when the war ended and wrote his memoir at age 17. He was so pleased with the translation that he donated the original manuscript to the museum.

In 2003, Margit's autobiography, *Margit's Story*, was published. Her book is available in the museum's bookstore.

I'd like to let you know that Irvin and her daughter Anne are both with us today. Irvin if you wouldn't mind, just a little wave so people see you down here. And I think I spot Anne in the back. Anne, if. You would do the same. So we're glad you're with us today.

And with that, I'd like to ask all of you to join me in welcoming our "first person," Mrs. Margit Meissner. [APPLAUSE]

Thank you.

I'll slide that in very close.

Yes, OK.

[INAUDIBLE]

Margit, welcome, and thank you so much for agreeing to be today's "first person."

Well, it's an honor for me to be here.

Margit, although you were born in Austria, your family moved to Prague, Czechoslovakia when you were very young-- I think just one year of age. And you would live there until 1938, when, at the age of 16, you would be sent to Paris.

Let's begin our conversation, though, with learning a little bit about your family, yourself, and your community in those years before you left for Paris-- in other words, your childhood years.

Well, so, as you already said, I was born in Austria, but my family moved to Prague, Czechoslovakia very soon after I was born, so that basically I grew up in a new country, because Czechoslovakia was created in 1919 at the end of World War II. So when my father was moved to Czechoslovakia, it was a big decision for my family, whether they should leave Austria and come to this new country, Czechoslovakia.

And the fact that we were Austrian citizens in Czechoslovakia created all kinds of difficulties in our lives. As you have heard, I have three-- I had three brothers, and I was the youngest of four. And I didn't like that one bit, because I thought that as-- anyway, I mean, I was just a girl. And it seemed to me that being a girl was inferior.

Now fortunately, I don't think this anymore. But at the time, I was young, and I felt powerless, and my brothers had all kinds of intentions on me because they wanted my mother to educate me a certain way, which wasn't always what I wanted.

But we lived a very privileged life in Czechoslovakia. And my major goal, my major task in life, was to be a student. I was expected to study all the time. I went to school in Prague. We went to school six days a week, from 8:00 till 1:00, including Saturdays.

And then I had private lessons in any subject I think that one could possibly imagine. So I learned-- I spoke French, I spoke German, and Czech at home. And then I had private lessons in English, and in French, and in horseback riding, and in skating, and in piano, and in gardening, so that my body as well as my mind would be treated. And I thought that that's how people lived. I really didn't think there was anything unusual about it.

And so I was a very-- I was a very good student. My brothers were not very good students. So it was always-- I was always held up to them as an example. And I was their-- I was their teaching aid. Whenever they prepared for an exam, they would ask me to coach them.

So I learned lots of things as a young child. And I became a very precocious child that wasn't always welcomed in school because I always knew the answers. So the other kids didn't think that was so great. But that's just how it was.

But it sounds like you did have some leverage with your brothers, since they needed you.

They needed me, right.

Margit, your father would pass away while you were pretty young, I think at age 10 in 1932. Do you remember much about your father?

No, I don't remember very much about my father, because he was very remote. I think at the time, fathers like mine really did not pay much attention to the children. But he always played. He always played educational games with us. So name all the composers with "B," or name all the capitals with "D." So we were always learning. I think that the main goal of our parents was to make us erudite. Now, I don't know whether they succeeded. But--

I think we would think they did in your case.

My father died in 1932. I was 10. And of course, that was also the year Hitler came to power. And it became a very important date in the life of the family as well as the life of the country as a whole. Now my oldest brother was just-- had just graduated from high school. And he decided that he had to leave the country and go explore the world. And that's what he did. And he eventually wound up in Australia, because that was far enough away to get away from-- get away from the storm that was taking place in Europe.

So he and other members of the family were well aware of what was going on in Europe at that time.

Well, they were-- I was 10. And the only thing that I remember very clearly is that my mother always used to fiddle around with a radio. Now I have to tell you, I would really like you to close your eyes, the audience, for just one minute, and think of a world there was no television, no radio, no-- no telephones, very little electricity. So imagine-- and no radios. Imagine what your life would be like without all these things. So we did not have a radio.

But my mother had a little crystal set, which she-- on which she tried to find out what was going on in the world. And she was very eager to find out what Hitler was saying in Germany in 1932.

Now I only remember that because she used to yell at me to be quiet when she needed to hear Hitler. And I didn't know what was so important about Hitler. But I--

I was going to just say that you mentioned to me when we first talked that, unlike others, your mother took Hitler very seriously from the get-go.

Yes, that is really true. I think that from that time on, my father died, my oldest brother left, and the preoccupation, which what was happening to the Jews in Germany, became very important.

And I also remember, as a 10- or 11-year-old, that we used to have guests for lunch very frequently. And when I asked mother who is coming, she would tell me, I don't know. They are refugees from Germany who had to flee Germany and leave all their belongings behind. And they don't have enough money. So I am inviting them for lunch. So that was one way that I, as a young child, became aware of what was going on in Germany, although I didn't understand it very well yet.

But I began to understand it better as I grew up a little bit. And by the time-- so during all these years of 1932 to 1938 then, my second brother left. He graduated from high school, and he left. And he went to Spain.

And in Spain, the Civil War between the fascists and the Democrats had just broken out. And he was on a seaside resort just at the beginning of that war, when they stood him up against the wall and were about to shoot him. And he had no idea what, why, or how this happened to be.

And just as they were about to shoot, somebody came along, running down the road, and said, no, no, no. You have the wrong guy. It's not him.

So that was such a scare for him that this happened that he came back to Prague and said to his mother, I am leaving Europe. And he decided then-- I think this was 1936-- to come to the United States.

At that time, it was still relatively easy to come to the United States, because as you all know, there was an immigration quota. And this quota was very small for refugees, for people. But if you had a little bit of money, you could get a visa.

So he came to the United States. And in a way, he came and thought he was going to prepare the way for the rest of the family, if in case they ever really had to leave. Because even in 1936, it was not certain that Jews could not survive there. I think that there was an enormous amount of denial. People didn't want to know that it was true.

And imagine that you are uprooted from a life, which is a good life, where you have a lot of support from the community. And are you going to leave all your belongings, everything behind, and go into some kind of strange country where you may not know the language? It wasn't such an easy decision to make.

So I think that, in a way, I can now better understand why so many people who could have saved themselves-- I mean, people here say easily, well, why didn't they just leave? Well, how-- where would they go and how would that work?

So this was, in our case, a little bit easier, because my oldest brother would gone. My young-- my second brother was in America. My third brother was a staunch Czech citizen, and he said it couldn't happen in Czechoslovakia, because Czechoslovakia was a democracy, and was not like Germany. And the Czechs would never persecute the Jews. That's what he believed.

But my mother wasn't so sure. And because she wasn't really sure what she would do, what she should do with me, she took my handwriting to a graphologer. You know what a graphologer is? It's a person who analyzes handwritings and makes prognostications on the basis of the handwriting.

And my handwriting apparently showed that I could become a good dressmaker and dress designer. Now that was-- I was a high school student. I was in 10th grade. And I was a pretty good student. And I was pretty intellectual. However, I had been very good at making dolls' dresses. So I thought the idea of becoming a dressmaker was kind of fun.

And so if you want-- so my mother believed, all right, if you want to become a dressmaker, where should you go? Well, to Paris, of course, right? Paris, fashion.

So she decided I would quit school in the middle-- in the beginning of 10th grade and go to Paris on my own. And she found a French family. They took in paying guests. And the lady of the house was a French teacher.

And so I went to Paris alone on an airplane-- the first airplane ride, in 1938, in a non-pressurized plane, which hurt my ears tremendously. And I thought I couldn't stand it.

But when I arrived in Paris, there was the lady waiting for me. And I went to live in a French family outside of Paris, and started learning French. And this was a full immersion program, six hours a day with Madame, and two hours of homework in front of a mirror to learn to pronounce properly. And in three months, I was pretty fluent in French. So that was my-- the beginning in France.

Margit, you were-- you said that sounded pretty exciting to go become a dress designer. So was going to Paris by yourself, was that something that was fun, in a way, at that point, or was it also a little scary to you, knowing that there is upheaval going on around you, and you were without your family at that point.

Well, the upheaval was very upsetting, because I knew that I was-- that in a way I was sent away, not because I was supposed to become a dressmaker, but I was sent away to get out of harm's way. Because in Czechoslovakia, one believed that France would be safe from the Germans. Nobody really believed that World War II would happen the way it did.

And I knew that my mother was very much concerned. And I also knew that money was a big issue, because although we were quite well to do in Czechoslovakia, there were currency restrictions. And I didn't know what I was going to live on. And Mother somehow managed to get the permit from the Czech government to send me enough money on which I could live in Paris as a student, some kind of student, student program. But I didn't know how this would continue.

So on one hand, it was scary. On the other hand, it was exciting. And I was really sort of willing to enjoy it.

Did you go back to Prague at all during that time, or once you were in Paris, that was it.

No, I didn't I didn't go back to Prague at all, because there was always a visa problem. And you see, I was already in a very difficult position then because I was an Austrian citizen, and Germany had invaded Austria, and Austria became part of Germany. And in the eyes of the French, I was a German citizen.

The fact that I was Jewish didn't make any difference. They thought that if I-- I could maybe pretend that I was Jewish, and I could infiltrate someplace and become a spy. So they were very leery about me. And that was very uncomfortable. So I was continuously under supervision by the French authorities.

And my mother came to visit, just to visit me in Paris, just at the time when Hitler occupied parts of Czechoslovakia, called the Sudeten region. The Sudeten region was a border region between Czechoslovakia and Germany, where the inhabitants spoke German. They were very interested in becoming part of Germany, but the Czech government said that this is part of Czechoslovakia. Hitler, you have no right to annex this part of the world.

And Hitler very cleverly invited the French and British prime ministers to a city called Munich, in Germany. And there they negotiated that Hitler could take over parts of Czechoslovakia. And the Czech government was not even invited to this conference. And Hitler was given the Sudetenland. And he promised Britain and France that he had no further territorial ambitions.

So what happened? Hitler took over the Sudetenland. The Czech government had to abdicate. And my mother, who was in France, felt that maybe now she had to go back to Prague and see whether she could give up her apartment, and clean, and maybe try to ship some of our belongings away from there because it was really quite clear that war was about to break out, or that the situation was very unclear.

So my mother went back to Czechoslovakia--

For the purpose of really--

For the purpose of closing the apartment and seeing whether she could ship some of the furniture, as many people had done, to Holland, to a port where it could remain.

Well, while she was there doing this, Hitler took over all of Czechoslovakia. That was in March of 1939. And there she was, having packed nothing, having clothes, nothing, having really accomplished anything. And fortunately, because she had been in France before, she was able to come back to France, because at that point, people really did not have any place to go, and countries were not willing to issue visas-- issue visas.

So my mother very, with a lot of-- with a lot of trouble, was able to leave Czechoslovakia after the Germans had entered it. And my very Czech-thinking brother was also now convinced that indeed, he thought it could never happen in Czechoslovakia, but it did happen. And he was initially in helping my mother get out of there by giving his and her passport to a smuggler, for a lot of money, hoping that he was going to get them exit permits. And that was a very daring thing to do, because most people didn't have enough faith in the smuggler to really try and get them an exit permit, and they got stuck.

But my brother was lucky, and both he and my mother were able to leave. And my brother went to England, where he could still-- for two more days he could go without a visa.

And the two more days, if I remember it correctly, there was a deadline for the ability for people to get out of Prague at that point. And your mother and brother came very close to missing that deadline.

They came. They left on the last day that they were able to leave. And that was very fortunate.

And my brother eventually went to England. And then he immigrated to Canada because he was willing to become a farmer. And in Canada, it was possible to get a visa for Canada if you were a farmer. In the United States, there was no possibility at all because he was born in Austria, also. So for Austrians, the American quota was closed for years.

So now your mother has-- and left everything behind in Prague.

Left everything behind. Absolutely. She came with one suitcase.

And now she's back in Paris living with you. You moved out of the Madam's house too.

Yes, I moved out to the Madam's house. And we were able to get a very lovely apartment that belonged to an American painter who had left France because he thought it was too dangerous. But he was willing to sublet his apartment, together with his housekeeper. And so that's where we lived.

And in a couple of weeks after Mother arrived, she was forced to leave Paris because they did not want any enemy aliens. She was, again, an enemy--

Because of her--

Because of her Austrian citizenship. She was an enemy alien.

And why weren't you treated that way?

Well, I was treated that way also. But I had arrived before a certain date. And mother arrived after a certain date. And every refugee-- she was now a refugee-- every refugee who arrived after a certain date had to move out of Paris into a suburban town, Versailles.

So my mother moved to a boarding house in Versailles, and I stayed in Paris by myself with the apartment and the housekeeper. And Mother came into Paris every day on the train, and we had lunch together. And then, in the evening, she had to go back to Versailles.

And that was during the time when World War II had already started in Poland. It started in September of 1939. And we are now talking about the period of the end of 1939 and the beginning of 1940.

And so Mother lived in Versailles and I was going to dressmaking school. And I was very close to graduating from this school. And as a graduation project, I had to make a two-piece dress for myself and a cape. That was my graduation project.

And I was just about ready to finish it when my-- so that was in the spring of 1940. And the Germans were now-- the Germans had not attacked Western Europe at all. They were fighting in the east. But in the spring of 1940, they decided now it was time to invade Belgium, and Holland, and France.

And as they were ready to move to France, the French decided to move people like my mother away from Paris. So one day, my mother was told to come to the police station in Versailles with enough food for three days, with two blankets and whatever else she could carry on her back. And she would be evacuated.

Now I had no idea what that meant. I didn't know where she was being sent. I just knew that she would be evacuated to the south.

And before she left, she gave me the sum of 10,000 francs, which I've always tried to find out how much money it was. It was quite a bit of money, I think. And she said, now it's up to you to get us out of here.

Now I don't know what she thought when she told me that it was up to me to get us out of here, but I think what she meant was that I had to find ways for us to get out of France, because France was obviously not safe anymore.

So while I was-- I negotiating, really, to see what I could possibly do for Mother, and where she was, the war became serious. And Paris was about to be invaded by the Germans.

At that point, there was a tremendous, a tremendous rush of French people from the north to move south to get out of the way of the fighting. And I could not get permission to leave. I was, at that point, I had to go to the police station every week to show my face, to make sure that I was still there, and that I had not become subversive. And they sort of stamped my identification card every week. And they kept saying to me, you must not leave here without permission.

Well, so the Germans were coming closer. And most of our friends were Czech citizens. And the Czech citizens didn't have the same problems, because the French felt the Czechs were victims of the Nazis, whereas the Austrians had been allies of the Nazis. So all our French friends left Paris to the south.

And they were essentially free to go.

They were free to go. Right.

[MUSICAL CHIME]

Am I doing this?

No, I think we're OK.

[LAUGHTER]

So I was kind of desperate, not knowing what to do. And I had friends who were Austrian friends, who were in the same position as I was. And they said they would try and leave Paris and go to Brittany. Now Brittany is on the west, northwest coast of France. So I said, OK, so I will go to Brittany with you. I didn't know where my mother was.

And that happened about a day before I tried to take a train to Brittany. And when I came to the railroad station, I was told no more trains until the end of hostilities. So what was I going to do? So I still was not knowing, prevaricating, kind of desperate.

Had your friends gone by that time?

My friends, no, they had not gone either, because they couldn't leave either.

They were in the same boat.

They were in the same position.

So as I came home from the railroad station to come to my house, I realized that all the people on the street had black faces. And I couldn't imagine why was everybody black. Did nobody wash this morning. What happened? And when I came home, I realized I also had a black face.

And it turned out that the French army had put a smokescreen across the River Seine so that the French troops could evacuate across the Seine and going south. Well, these black faces meant for me that now I really had to take serious action. I couldn't wait there anymore.

Time to go.

Time to go. So I went to the police station as a final try, and said maybe they will give me-- maybe they will give me permission to leave. And when I got to the police station, the policemen had left. The police station was open, the doors were not locked, but the policemen had left together with everybody else trying to flee the city.

And the roads were bedlam. I mean, there were people leaving with baby carriages, with hay wagons, with carts, with cars that had no-- that had no gas in it. And everybody was going south. I didn't know where they were going, but certainly away from the fighting.

So I had, as you know, my housekeeper in the apartment. And she suggested that she knew somebody where-- someplace where I could buy a bicycle. So she and I went to buy a bicycle. And the only bicycle that I could find that there was was a men's racing bike, with these kind of--

The curved handles--

Curved handles. So I bought a men's racing bike, and took with me as the most important assets that I owned was my dressmaking handbook. I wore my new outfit--

With the cape?

--with a cape, because that was very important to me. It was not very handy on the bicycle, I must say.

[LAUGHTER]

But I can remember it exactly. And I had my oil paints because I had also gone to art school, because if you want to be a dressmaker you have to also be able to draw, right? So I had my dressmaking notes, my oil paints. I had a change of underwear and two little chocolate croissants. That was all that I took along.

Those were your belongings.

Those were my belongings, right.

And because you said they were your most important assets, because they were the key to your livelihood as far as you were concerned.

They were the key to my livelihood, right, if I was thinking that far. I must have been thinking that far.

So off you go on a bicycle in these--

So off I go.

--chaotic circumstances, under the most chaotic circumstances you can imagine. I felt very sorry for myself-- very. First of all, I was all alone. I had no idea where my mother was. I had no idea where I was going. I sort of vaguely thought I was going to Brittany.

And more than anything else-- and I had no permission to go, right? So any time I saw a policeman-- and there were lots of policemen around-- I always thought he was looking at me, and he was coming over to see whether I had the right kind of papers.

I very soon found out that having a bicycle was a great help because I could go sort of around stalled cars, and go up on the sidewalk, or the side of the road, where everything was standing still. And I kept making progress. And so I just bicycled, bicycled, bicycled.

I was not hungry. I was not tired. It was not stress. I mean, my legs carried me. I don't know how I had the strength to do all this. I just must have really just used my adrenaline.

And there were big signs all over the highway. First of all, the highway was littered with people who couldn't continue for some reason. And there was no food anywhere.

And I bicycled until late in the afternoon, early evening. And I came to a little town called Etampes. And there, there was a policeman guiding the refugees to shelter. And there was somebody-- a policeman told me I should go into this school building over there.

Well, when the policeman first started talking to me, I thought surely he's going to ask me where are my papers, right, because that's the only thing I could thought of when I saw a policeman. But he just said, go to the school and you can spend the night there.

So I did follow. I took my bike and went to that school. And when I-- and there were lots of people lying on the floor there like me, also trying to have shelter over the night.

And when I sat down, got off my bike, I remembered that just before I left Paris, the concierge of the building had given me a letter that I stuck in the pocket of my cape. And I didn't know the handwriting, and I had no idea what-- where this letter was from. So I didn't look at it.

But there, when I sat down in Etampes on the classroom floor, I looked at this letter. And the letter was from somebody

who my mother had contacted to let me know where she was.

I now knew that she was in Gurs, but I had no idea where Gurs was. That didn't mean anything to me. I just knew that she was in the South of France someplace in an internment camp called Gurs. So at least I had some news from her.

Well, I spent a little bit of the night in the school. And as soon as daylight broke, like at 5 o'clock in the morning, I got up, and took my bicycle, and started riding again, and started-- there was not as much of a crowd anymore, but it was quite clear where people were going. They were just going south, going south.

I did not know at the time that the school building where I'd spent the night was bombed to bits at 6 o'clock that morning.

An hour after you left.

An hour after I left. So I was just really incredibly lucky.

And I kept riding. I don't remember ever eating anything. I don't remember whether I ate my chocolate rolls. But anyway, I was not tired, not hungry. It didn't make any difference.

And I kept riding. And I was riding on a fairly steep hill going south when another lady and I collided. And we both fell off the bicycle. And I looked at my bicycle, whether it was still-- whether I could still use it. And I could still use it, and I continued. I could continue riding.

And a few moments later, a young man came up to me. And I said, my god, what does he want from me? Because one of the problems that I had on this whole trip was that I felt that how could a young lady like me go out by herself on this main highway without any protection. Was that really the proper thing to do for me, right? So I was, on one hand, trying to save my life. On the other hand, I was afraid that I was going against the conventions that I was brought up with.

So when this young man approached me, I was startled, and I wondered what he wanted from me. And he said to me, young lady, you cannot continue riding like this. And I said, what do you mean? Well, look at your knee. It's all bleeding. You're going to bleed to death.

Well, my knee was bleeding, but I didn't know it. I didn't notice it because I guess I had to-- I was--

You were on a mission.

I was on a mission. So he said, well, go over-- he directed me to some place where I could find a pharmacy. And indeed, I-- and now I realized that my knee was bleeding, and it started to hurt, and so I was eager to go to the pharmacy.

And I came to the pharmacy. And the pharmacists said, well, this is really quite a gash you have. I can only patch it a little bit. But you have to go to the hospital to get it sewn up. Well, where was I going to go to the hospital? So I said, just patch it up so that I won't bleed to death.

So I continued riding. And he also said to me, why are you going by bicycle? And I said, well, because there are no trains. He said, what do you mean there are no trains? If you go to Orleans, which was, I don't know, maybe 15 kilometers from where I was, there are lots of trains.

So I mean, I went to Orleans. And indeed, I found the train station. And there was a line waiting to get tickets which was at least a mile long. Well, so I stood in line. And it was in the middle of the day, and it was hot, and people standing in line fainted, and kids were screaming, and it was again bedlam. And I stood in line. And I knew that I had friends in the South of France, near the Spanish border, where I could possibly go to, and they would receive me.

So I finally-- so I stood in line and I stood in line. And the line wasn't moving, because in typical French fashion, there was one counter open, and people ask 25 questions for every single ticket. And so it was hopeless.

And at that moment, the air raid sirens sounded. And everybody was asked to get down to a air raid shelter. And I looked at the situation and said, I can't go to the air raid shelter. I have to wait here. Because the idea that I would lose my place in line was so upsetting to me that I preferred to take a chance with a bombing.

And then be first in line.

And then be first in line. Right. That seemed more important.

Well, so I stayed there. And I watched the bombs drop on either side of the railroad station. And I was standing under a glass overpass. And somehow I wasn't scared. I don't understand. I mean, really, when you think about it, how could that be? But I was not frightened, because I had had only-- my mission was to get a railroad ticket.

So the bombing stopped, and we were not bombed. And I got my railroad ticket. And I registered my bicycle to go to the South of France.

But I was still hoping-- that's not true. I didn't register my bicycle to go to the South of France. I registered my bicycle to go to Brittany.

So you still hoped to get there.

I still was going to Brittany.

Yes. But I didn't know anybody in Brittany, whereas in the South of France I knew somebody.

And so I get onto a train, and lo and behold, the train is completely empty. There was nobody on this train because nobody knew that there were trains. So I get into this train all by myself, and now I start being really scared, because a train, it was beginning to be night, and dark, and everything was blacked out, and there were no lights whatsoever. And I was in this big train compartment all by myself. And I kept wondering, what happens if a man comes in. This was my great preoccupation.

And the train kept moving a little bit, and standing, and moving a little bit. And there were other trains coming the opposite direction. And once I was standing with a troop train on the other-- on the other rail. And I opened my window. And there was a soldier who was standing on the other window. And he started to talk to me.

Now I had tried to avoid speaking to anybody, because although I spoke very good French, really, without basically the trace of a foreign accent, I was never quite sure whether I could be recognized as a foreigner, and I didn't know who my enemies were. I was just afraid that people would denounce me.

So the soldier came and said, where are you from? And I told him, I am from Paris and I am trying to go to Brittany to save myself. And where was he from? And he was from a northern regiment.

And he said, when have you eaten last? I really didn't know when I had last eaten. I can't remember. I couldn't remember.

So he said, here I give you a piece of boule de pain, a round French bread. And he gave me that round French bread. And just at that time his train left and we parted.

So here I had this big loaf of-- a round loaf of French bread. And the train kept moving. And then it stopped again. It was pitch dark, night. You couldn't see anything anywhere, not in nor out.

And suddenly the door to my compartment opened, and a man came in.

Well, I was terrified. Who was this man, and what was he going to do to me, and what was he going to want from me?

And he turned out-- he was a French soldier who had defected from his regiment and he was trying to go south with-- to find his family. And he told me his long story. And I said very little.

And then he said that he hadn't eaten in days. So I said to him, here. I have some bread. You might want some.

So he looked at-- he took my bread. He did. I don't know whether he looked at it, because I couldn't see. It was dark.

In any case, I did realize that in three minutes the bread was gone. He ate the whole thing.

The whole bread.

He ate the whole thing.

Well, I thought, God bless him. I still wasn't interested in eating.

So it turns out that the train that I was in was not at all going to Brittany, but it was going to Bordeaux, which is in the southwest of France. Now I didn't know whether that was good or bad. There wasn't a question. I just was going. And as daylight came, the train became full, because now there were people from the South of France who were going south. There was not more-- there were no more refugees.

And among these people that had now peopled the compartment that I was in, they started talking about the war. And it turned out that France was going to capitulate the next day. And they were discussing politics. And they were very-- they were very eager to-- to assign blame to whoever they could for the trouble that they were in.

And the one thing they said to me, you, Mademoiselle, are the example of a brave Parisian girl, and you-- a brave Parisian girl. And the next sentence, he said, and the people who really got us into that kind of trouble that we are in are those damn refugees whom we let to come to France.

And here I was, the brave Parisian girl, who basically was one of those refugees whom he just insulted. And I did not have the guts to speak up. And this is something which hurts me to this day, that I was not brave enough to speak up. And I didn't.

But you're here today.

But I am here today. And so maybe it was a good thing that I did that.

Margit, from there-- and I want to-- our time is moving on. You would then-- the train would start to fill up more and more. And eventually you would get off that train. Tell us where you got off, and what happened then.

Well, then, my friends-- then France capitulated. My friends welcomed me. I showed them the letter from my mother.

This is when you got off the train.

When I got off the train. And it turned out that the place where I was was 10 kilometers away from where my mother was. I mean--

Just by chance.

Just by chance. Pure chance.

And when France capitulated, the camp of Gurs, which you saw on the picture, where my mother was, the camp commandant said to the refugees there, you can leave if you want to. We don't need to have you here.

And my mother-- well, I have to backtrack a little. The lady where I stayed tried to inform my mother that I was there where I was. But I wasn't sure that my mother got the message, because she couldn't, in this big camp, she couldn't find her.

But in retrospect, I found out, when mother was released from the camp, knowing where I was, she was able to hire a farmer with a hay wagon to take her the 10 kilometers to find me. And indeed, she came to-- she approached the house where I was. And I was sitting in the garden. And she was waving at me from far away. And I didn't wave back, because I had no idea who this person was who was waving at me.

And as she came closer, I still didn't recognize her. And as she came closer, I did recognize her. It was my mother. But I couldn't recognize her because she had lost 30 pounds, and she was so sunburned and so dark that I hadn't recognized her. And she has often said afterwards that one of the most traumatic experiences for her was that she finally found me, which without-- because she didn't know where I had been, and I didn't recognize her.

So then we went on a whole-- then we had to get from the occupied zone of France into the unoccupied zone, and had all kinds of problems with the police, and very dangerous moments where every time we thought we would get caught. And the French were really merciless at that time. If they caught you, you went to jail.

So eventually we moved to Marseilles. There we tried to get-- get some place, asylum someplace in the world, and an exit permit from France to get there. Well, we got some kind of implausible way, a visa to go to the Belgian Congo. Now the Belgian Congo is no longer the Belgian Congo. Now it's called Zaire. And it's in the middle of Africa. And with this visa to the Belgian Congo, we got the Spanish and Portuguese transit visa.

But the French didn't want us there, but they wouldn't let us leave either. And so finally, to make a long story short, because I didn't realize I have spoken so long--

I wish we had two or three hours here.

We eventually crossed the Spanish border illegally and went to jail in Spain.

Before you jump quite that far, when you say you crossed the border illegally, you went-- you walked with your mother over a mountain range. You walked over the Pyrenees Mountains.

We walked over the Pyrenees Mountains.

I went on the website, the internet last night, to look up the Pyrenees. And it has peaks that are 11,000 feet tall. It has very few low passes. So that must have been an arduous--

Well, I tell you, it was actually a beautiful trip, because it was a lovely fall day.

[LAUGHTER]

And we didn't have any luggage.

[LAUGHTER]

And we walked across the mountain. And I think we had a little bit of food along.

The great danger was, because we were told where to go, and we would have to avoid certain places where we could get caught. But we lost our way in this. It was really, when I sort think about it, it was a wonderful excursion, except you were-- so there was this conflict between enjoying the nature and being scared to death that we would get caught.

And finally, when we got down on the Spanish side in order to avoid where we were told we would get caught, we took off our shoes, and we walked in through the bay, into the town. And when we got there, again, long story. We tried to

find somebody who was going to help us. And that helper said, I can't do anything, because my contact went to jail yesterday, and please don't even mention my name.

And we went to the, finally, went to the police station so that we could-- to the border police station so that we could get the train to continue to Spain and Portugal, where we were going. And there they found-- we found two Spanish policemen who said you are under arrest.

And so we were under arrest in this little town. And they took us not with handcuffs, but holding our arms, on the train to a larger town called Girona. And there we went to the police station.

And it was night. And they took whatever we had-- passports, whatever we had. The little luggage we had, they took away from us.

And I said to the police guard, look it's nighttime. And where are we going to sleep? And you took everything away from us. Why couldn't we go to a hotel to sleep, and then tomorrow morning, when the police commissioner starts, they could then investigate our case.

And I thought they said, OK. And after a few minutes. They said, well, follow me. Follow me. And we followed the-- we followed the policeman, and we kept walking, and it kept getting darker, and it was farther, farther away from the center of town.

And suddenly-- I thought this was really strange. It was cobblestone streets. And suddenly, I see a big building in the back. And the policeman calling to the over there, and they are calling, telling him something back. And the closer we get, I saw a great big gate with a big key opening. And they pushed us in and locked the gate behind us. And we were now in jail.

And of course, that was a incredible moment for me, because I thought such a upright person like me would never go to jail. I would never commit a crime that really would end you in jail.

And this was a jail that was not just for refugees.

No, this jail was not at all for refugees. The jails were mainly teachers who belonged to the Republican Party. That was before Franco, the Franco government took over. And then prostitutes were there in jail because they, in the Franco government, could not-- did not permit prostitution.

So we were in jail. And an incredible sort of moment of recognition. And the next morning, when the police commissioner came, he said, aha, so you are now-- you come from Czech-- you are refugees from Hitler Germany? So we are going to turn you over to the German consulate. So that's all that we needed.

So it was a pretty horrifying experience. But I think we are out of time.

And to summarize very, very quickly for us--

[LAUGHTER]

--you would call upon-- you would somehow get a letter to friends who would then come and actually get you. And from there, you would be able to eventually make it to Portugal. And once you got to Portugal, you had to earn a living until you could get the visas to leave. And what did you do to earn a living?

I became a dressmaker, of course. That was wonderful, that I was able-- that I was able to make dresses, because many of the refugees whom we met up with in Portugal had lost all their belongings. So they were eager to find somebody who could make dresses. And I became a very successful dressmaker, and my mother became my helper.

And we sewed on a treadle machine. And we had an iron that had coals in it. And you had to do like this with the iron to

make it hot. And we really, I had a business going. And I was very pleased with myself because I thought it was great that I could make a living for both of us.

And then, of course, you would be able to get in touch with family. I think your mother was able to get in touch with your brother, and eventually get a visa. And in 1941 you made it to the United States.

And then, of course, what goes from there we could spend days talking about the rest of Margit's life from there, including being present at the Nuremberg Trials, working for the US Army of the Occupation, re-educating Hitler Youth, and so on. I wish we had more time, but I'd like to, of course, thank Margit for her willingness to share what she could with us today, a very difficult job to do in a short amount of time. I want to thank you for being here. And I'm going to turn back to Margit in just a moment to close our program.

But I'd like to remind you that we do a First Person program each Wednesday until August 29 at 1 o'clock on Wednesdays. So next Wednesday, May 16, we'll have another First Person program. And our first person will be Mrs. Nesse Godin. Mrs. Godin, who is from Poland, survived a ghetto, slave labor, several concentration camps, and a death march before her liberation. So please, if it's at all possible for you, come back to another First Person program.

It is our tradition at First Person that our "first person" gets the last word. So I'm going to turn back to Margit to close the program. I'd like to say, because she had so much to share with us, we didn't have a chance for you to ask her questions. But Margit will remain behind, over here down by the podium. So anybody who would like to come up and chat with her, meet her, or ask her a question, absolutely please feel free to do that. And so with that, I'd like to close with Margit sharing her closing thoughts with us.

Well, I would like to thank you, Bill, for being such a wonderful interviewer. And I'd like to share-- to thank the Holocaust Museum for making it possible for me to talk to so many of you. It's really an honor and a thrill for me to tell you so much. And if I had looked at the clock, I would have probably hurried up a little bit, and not skipped so much over the end.

But I'd also like to tell you that I am-- I did all kinds of different things in my life, as you heard from Bill. But what I am doing now, as a volunteer at the Holocaust Museum, must really be the most meaningful experience that I have had in my life. It is just a fantastic place.

And the ability to use the story, this horrible story of the Holocaust, with people like you, because it is the only way that we can learn the lesson that this Holocaust-- from the Holocaust with young people and with people who are really-- who are so important in trying to avoid the further Holocausts.

And you see, this lesson which this museum can teach, how to avoid further Holocausts, has not been well learned. Because look at what is going on in Darfur now, I mean, and what went on in Rwanda and in Bosnia. I mean, people get killed simply because of what they are. And I think that if this-- if we can really use the resources of this material, of this museum, to teach about how to avoid further Holocausts, then I think that is certainly the most meaningful thing that I could be doing with the rest of my life.

So I want to thank you very much for having been such an attentive audience. And thank you again, Bill.

[APPLAUSE]