Interview with Dr. Gisela Konopka

By Stuart Markoff

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In Dr. Konopka’s Home

Jewish Community Relations Council, Anti-Defamation League

of Minnesota and the Dakotas

HOLOCAUST ORAL HISTORY TAPING PROJECT

Q: I’m in the home of Gisela Konopka for the Oral history Project of the Jewish Community Relations Council. It’s January 26, 1985. I’d like to ask you first of all, your name.

A: This is Gisela Konopka. My maiden name was Peiper, and what I’m talking about was much done under my maiden name.

Q: What were your parents’ names?

A: My father’s name was Mendel and my mother’s name was Bronia.

Q: Do you remember any of the grandparents’ -- on either side?

A: They were not existing anymore. I have to explain that. My parents, as young people, were immigrants from Krakow and Prezemysl to Berlin, Germany.

Q: This is where you were born?

A: That’s where I was born. But that means I never knew my grandparents.

Q: Can you give me your date of birth?

A: It’s February 11, 1910.

Q: Do you have clear memories, in your early years, of life in Berlin? Religious life? Cultural life?

A: Very much, because I have a memory like an elephant, and I can talk for ages about it! My parents were what you might call, here, Orthodox Jews, but at the same time, my father, as a young man, was very early part of the Polish Socialist movement, so it’s kind of a combination that I did think existed a great deal in eastern Europe-- but is not as well known here.

Q: Did he have a specific party? Do you remember the name of the Polish party?

A: No. He belonged all his life, the way knew it, to the Social Democrats in Germany.

Q: Did he identify at all with the Arbeiterung?

A: I wouldn’t know.

Q: You never heard that phrase in the home?

A: No. My father was a Social Democrat. And he was very much for the women’s movement. And was very active in all these things. He read The Forward, which is the German Social Democrat Party paper.

Q: Written in German.

A: In German, yes. I sometimes regret it, but they did not teach us Polish -- ever. They only talked Polish when we shouldn’t understand them. But I also know the reason. My mother told me once that she was about 16 years old when she came alone to Berlin with her very long hair, and very heavy headaches, because it was sitting on top of her head. Her brother had immigrated earlier. Germany, at that time, was the refuge of freedom to the Jews that came from that area. And she came, got off, and threw her arms around him, and spoke in Polish. And the first thing she got was her ears boxed -- from her brother. He said, ‘ You don’t speak Polish here. That’s bad.’ So my parents never spoke Polish, with the exception to each other. But I have to say, at the same time, all this nonsense about eastern Jews and western Jews against each other -- I have never experienced. As in many other ways you will hear, I feel totally a person-of-the-world, even in that, I with most of my relatives, lived in the eastern part of Berlin, because that was where the poor Jews, mostly, lived. And I knew them all, and I was very close to them. On the other hand, my parents had a little store in West Berlin, so I grew up with what you might call western German culture. I had deep respect for both and have never lost it.

Q: Did your parents ever speak Yiddish that you recall?

A: Oh, yes. They spoke Yiddish. I understand Yiddish. I’m not very good at speaking it, but I can understand it. And when my mother, many, many, many years later came to visit me here in the Unites States, that was a great help, because I found then other people who could speak Yiddish, and that way she could communicate, because she didn’t know English. But I have to say, she lived from 1936, I think, on, in Israel, and she told me that in Israel, she doesn’t dare speak in Yiddish. It’s considered inferior. I still remember my mother saying to me that never in her life has she felt as much appreciated by everybody than when she was here. Nobody made fun of her about not speaking English, or speaking Yiddish.

Q: I wanted to ask you more about your father’s store.

A: Well it was West Berlin. Oh, what business! It was a little store. We had very little money. Started out, like many Jews that were immigrating at that time, it was just eggs! Big crates of eggs. That’s what we were selling. It was just a little tiny store.

A: Do you remember helping at all?

A: Oh, G-d, yes. But first I have to explain that when the war came, my father was called into the war as an Austrian. And mother was alone with three children. Mother was much more enterprising than my father, so meanwhile, she got a bag of flour, or a bag of sugar. And in the long run, we were a little grocery store. Heaven help me, I have sworn in my life, and it’s the one thing that I have kept, is that I never in my life will have a store. It was the most horrible experience, I think, of my childhood, helping in the store, because we always had to carry -- either half-a-pound of butter, or 20 pounds of something else which was heavy -- to the rich people in the neighborhood, who would never come and pick up anything themselves. And you always had to go through the ‘hintertrapper.”

Q: Back roads, avenues…

A: No, these are apartment houses. The front is always for the good people. That has carpets and decent flights. And in the back are always these round ones that’s called “spindletrapper” -- very difficult to walk. You only got into the kitchen that way. And certainly those who delivered could only go there! So it was kind of demeaning.

Q: It didn’t apply to Jews, it applied to anyone in the trades.

A: To anybody! Anybody who was in the trades. So I hated it1 I literally hated it! And then the worst time, I have to say, was Passover, because that store was very strange -- typical for Berlin stores, this is not just for Jews -- there was one little room in the front and one little room in the back, and between was the store. So we were always sleeping, four people, in one room, and doing all our schoolwork in one room, but at Passover, because everything had to be changed -- everything had to be taken out of the store into the cellar.

Q: So your parents were strictly kosher then?

A: Oh, this wasn’t for us, it was for selling, also. So the whole store had to be changed, and huge rolls of matzoh. They didn’t come in nice little packages, as they come here, they came in huge rolls. And the whole store looked different, and we had practically no place to sleep, and we would be up all night, taking matzoh flour and put it in little bags, because it would come in big sacks, and also getting things ready -- again, the rich Jews would order all that stuff, but would never put a foot in by buying it themselves -- so we would put it in big boxes, and we children would do that. And we went to school. I have to tell you, I once fell asleep sitting on the toilet. I have no good memories of the store. And I never will have a store. (Laughs)

Q: How many brothers and sisters did you have that were doing these things with you?

A: We were three girls. And school is another side that I think one should know. Germany is a class society, which meant only kids with money could go to the better schools. I’m talking about just gymnasium. We went to the lyceum ,which already had to be paid. It’s difficult to explain. It’s higher than the gemeindeschule than the general school. But anyhow, that’s the first few years. Then my sister asked that she would like to be transferred --the older sister, she’s two-and-a-half years older than I -- to the gymnasium, and that was all right. My parents worked very hard to get the money. And then came my time, and I always say I cried myself into the gymnasium, because I wanted to learn! My parents would have liked us to learn, but they didn’t really have the money. My mother always said: “Every girl can make a living by sewing. Well, I probably couldn’t, but that’s another story.

Q: Did you have this awareness of a very class-conscious society when you were very young?

A: From very early on. I repeat, my father was a socialist. That means we read the literature. (Laughs) I read Bebel and Braun. I grew up with Kaete Kollwitz, the painter, with Barlach. I’m in Berlin! This is the time of the Piscator ,the great plays of all the revolutionary things. We saw the revolutionary theater. We saw Yiddish theater that would come.

Q: Is this all before the First World War? Or are we talking in the Weimar Period?

A: Right now I’m talking post-war, but let’s go back. I’m four years old when the First World War breaks out. I do remember that, because my father was called up, and we were all crying. And he was away. But he came back, because he had a bad heart. I had an uncle who was living in east Berlin, who was a prisoner of war, whom I saw when I was seven years old, when the war was kind of over, coming back. And didn’t look like the same man I remembered when I was four years old. I mean, there were these kinds of things. I remember the war years because we had a little bit more than other people, because we had always eggs that were broken, but I remember the long lines of people, and I do remember that they sent me, always, to get in line for the butter, because I was little and very thin, and so people let me go in front. So I remember all these things during the war.

Q: Do you think you can recall whether or not in the wartime, that you ever felt that you heard any remarks against the Jews, or particularly when the war was going badly at the end, or just after?

A: No, not during the war! Maybe I was too young. But the war ends in 1918 and I’m eight years old. And there definitely anti-Semitism started. I remember there were swastikas at that time in the streets -- painted. Being that I’m conscious of being very much for “human liberty” and “human rights” from very early on, we had little pocket knives, and we would scratch them off. I did that. And I remember one example when I was probably eight or nine years old, when one of the girls in my class drew a swastika on the blackboard. And all the kids came up to me, “Gisela, you have to go and protest.” I don’t know why I was always the protest leader. But in that whole school, was only one Jewish teacher! That was very unusual. Jewish teachers were not allowed to be in the Lyceum. And she was only allowed to teach Jewish religion. She wasn’t allowed to teach anything else.

Q: But this was allowed by the state -- in other words, the state financed the school?

A: This is still the monarchy. Again we are just now coming into the revolution, right? I went to her, and she says, “Oh, don’t make any fuss.” Because she was very afraid. And so then I was in school, and the teacher who was responsible for all of us, stood up in front of the class, and she said, “There’s some kids that make trouble…” and the swastika was still on the blackboard. “There’s some kids that make trouble, and I don’t want that there’s any nonsense done here.” And I started to cry and I went home. My father said to me, “ Gisela, you’d better learn, Jews are there for suffering.” I was very angry. I must have been eight or nine. And I said, “You taught me that we should fight.’ This is an experience that I vividly recall. And I don’t make it up.

Q: You felt that your father’s remark was inconsistent with his own beliefs.

A: I felt so, but I found him very often inconsistent. My father was a very, I think intelligent, frustrated man. Both my father and mother had no opportunity for any education, but they were highly educated people. The house was full of books. But I think that my father was always inconsistent. I’m older now, already twelve, and I didn’t like his being so orthodox, and at the same time being a socialist. I thought it was inconsistent.

Q: What about your own Jewish education? Did he have an interest in the daughters going to cheder or anything like that?

A: Ah God, yes. Now I can’t tell you anymore whether it was every day or every second day I was in Hebrew school.

Q: This is after the regular school?

A: That’s after regular school. I always went to that. They were very poor, very strange teachers. I must say, I have that memory, that all the kids made fun of them, and I felt sorry for them.

Q: Well this doesn’t change. In America, too, the same thing, too.

A: Just terrible! And we went. I learned Hebrew. I learned the Bible. I liked it. I was very curious about it, but I have to say, at the time -- I’m talking about between 10 and 13 years old -- the revolution has already been. But for instance, I remember that one of the teachers talked about Christ as a “momzer.” And I got up in class -- furious! I said, “ You don’t talk about other people’s religious…” Well, I was just an outcast. And I loved art. From little on, I have seen, I have walked and because I wasn’t allowed to go on the streetcar, to go on Saturdays, and Sunday, we walked to the museum -- for two hours -- and saw all the art.

Q: So you saw all the great Greek antiquities and everything in Berlin.

A: Oh, I saw the Pergamon, but I saw all the moderns! Franz Marc. I’m filled with the beauty of that. But I loved the paintings of Marees. I didn’t ever think there was a contrast. There is a very beautiful experience that I always talk about. I have to say it! And I was very young then. This is during the war, when my father’s away, so I’m not yet in school. I must be about five years old. My youngest sister was a baby. And so a woman came running into our store and said to my mother, “Mrs. Peiper, we are planning…” they called it “lebenbilder” -- “living picture.” Tableaus. “for Christmas, but the Christ child that we wanted is sick. Could we have your little Ruth -- as Christ Child?” and my mother was, strange enough, always much more open-minded than my father. She said, “Well certainly1 Under the condition that the two older ones can come along and see it.’ It was beautiful! Here was my little Ruth lying in the crib with all the angels around her, being very quiet and very sweet, and Mary was in the back of her. And I have never forgotten that, because they all came later and stood around us and loved my mother, and loved us. I’m just thinking of that as a symbol that I did not grow up with hate of one way or the other! Father was more inconsistent.

Q: It sounds also, that your family was unusually open to the surrounding culture and felt very much, maybe, a part of German culture.

A: Yes, but not in the way that they forgot their own. People are always thinking you have to be hating your own to like the other. No. Only, as I say, my father, the older he got, the more rigid Jewish he became. And he didn’t get very old, you know. He died very young

Q: Did he ever talk about the war as a particularly Jewish experience for him? Or whether he had Jewish officers or comrades?

A: No, never. My father didn’t ever tell us about the war! He was away for two years. He was sick. I never knew about the war.

Q: I ask this, because of course, in the rise of Nazism, the theory developed -- the “big lie” -- one of the big lies that the Germans were stabbed in the back, of course, the Ludendorff Theory that Jews were the ones that were doing the stabbing, the betrayal.

A: But we all know that this is a lie.

Q: And we know that so many German-Jewish Germans served in the war with medals

A: By the way, I have a medal, too, from the Germans, but that’s later. I knew many who had been in the war, but my parents were not “Deutsch nazionale” -- they were not German nationals.

Q: They were more internationalists if they were socialists.

A: They were much more internationalists. They were socialists. 1918, you remember, is the revolution. I’m the little girl, bringing out the goods to rich people, my father once had to go with me because there was too much. Big camions came up with people on top of it, showing the lights, and red flags, and I got very scared. And father said, ‘Don’t be scared, they are good people, they just don’t want the Kaiser.” So, you know, that was kind of the attitude in my family. I am a history major, besides the other things. This is all a lie, certainly, to disadvantage the Jews. The war wasn’t ended because there was a revolution. You can be sure of that. They were really defeated.

Q: So now you’re growing up in the famous Weimar Republic, which is now being studied very much again by historians.

A: And there is a lot. One of the magazines -- I have it upstairs -- wrote when they had that exhibit here, about my experiences with that. I am definitely a product of the Weimar Republic. I’m a strange mixture. But that, to me, is the time of great excitement.

Q: This is German expressionism and many other movements.

A: Everything, these things. I am part of the Youth Movement, which is, you know, the revolutionary movement. We think all people who are adults are stupid. (Laughs) And wish we could do away with them. We hiked all over the country. We saw art. I loved the churches, I loved the synagogues, they were beautiful.

Q: In your group together, were Jewish and non-Jewish young people?

A: In the beginning I belonged to a Jewish youth movement. I started out with the Kamaraden, which was a German-Jewish youth movement, not Zionist. And we did split off from that, and that is a very radical split off. A very radical split of the Kamaraden that I belonged to. Very much interested in art and the social conscience kind of business. I have to think of time. I would think I’m about 18 -- or 17 years old -- when that group again splits, because this was very revolutionary times.

Q: This was about 1922, ’23?

A: No, it’s ’27. And they joined parties. Many went to the Communist Youth. Some went to the Social Democratic Youth. At that time, you have to know we were reading so much. Bellamy and the Fabians, and Marx.

Q: So the Fabians were very influential.

A: Very influential on me. On some not, but on me.

Q: This is Beatrice Webb, and Shaw…

A: That’s right. This is 1927, about. So I am somebody, and I was a little bit the maverick in that group, who didn’t want to join the Communist Youth, because I said that Marx -- I totally agreed with him that you have to fight for the poor people and all that -- but I didn’t believe in determinism in history. And so I couldn’t find my niche. The Social Democrats were a little too soft for me. So there is a group that was called “Internatzionale Sozialist Tzecumpfbund.” The International Socialist Fighting Unit. They belonged quite a long time to the Social Democrats. But they were kind of a split, because their leader, if you want to call it, was Leonard Nelson, who had been a university professor of philosophy. He is translated. Yale has all his books. I don’t agree with him today anymore. There are lots of things I don’t like, really, about him anymore. And I did not know him personally. But the movement began to appeal to me, because they were idealists. They called themselves idealistic socialists. I think they had a lot of stuff that I, today, wouldn’t agree with. They were all vegetarians, so I became a vegetarian because you shouldn’t eat meat. They were thinking we shouldn’t get married because we have to be there for the great fight. But they all stood straight under the Nazis, I have to say that.

Q: Were they programmatically anti-Zionist at that time?

A: Well, no. First of all, that I’m not talking about, as a socialist group who is not Jewish anymore. It’s very difficult to put me into boxes, and I always have that difficulty. The Jewish Youth Movement to which I belonged first, was not a Zionist one. But my best friends, and my cousins, whom I loved very much, were very strong Zionists. Some of them are founders of Givat Brenner in Israel. So again, I wasn’t separated from that. I had great respect for them.

Q: Did the cousins all live, also, in Berlin? Or the environs?

A: Oh, yes, they lived in the eastern part of Berlin. I had respect for them, but we had lots of discussions, and I always said, “I’m an internationalist. I don’t want to start any new state, anywhere. If you start a new state, I guarantee you there will be wars around that again, because there will be new borders.” So I just wanted to say, I still remember that, because they reminded me of that when I came back to Israel later. The other youth movement is later.

Q: What are your observations, particularly in relation to this project? Of course there was the growing National Socialist movement. There is the Kultur Kampf going on between various parties as well as more basic political struggle. I’d appreciate knowing where you sensed anti-Semitism, if it was growing? If you saw it or if you felt that really the atmosphere was, as we learn from history books on the Weimar Republic, supposedly very, very open and very experimental.

A: It was very open. I told you that anti-Semitic thing around 1918, 1919. There is a National Socialist Party, but it’s a very small one. I’m now talking about 1924, ’25. 1929, I have to say, I’m leaving Berlin and go to Hamburg and work in a factory. I was very much imbued with the feeling that we are in the middle of a terrible hate of class against class. For instance, I worked in a factory, where I was very poor, and I was thrown out because I belonged to the labor unions, and that in the German Republic.

Q: This was in Hamburg.

A: In Hamburg. But then I got into another where the labor union was very active. Now you did find here and there anti-Semitism as you found other things, I have to say. For instance, I remember in that factory, there was a woman -- she wanted to be my friend, and then when she got mad at me, she said something, “You are a Jew.’ I expected that! That these kind of things would happen. Now I have to say, the way the Nazis came to power, I have always said to people, “We knew, by 1932, that horrible things were happening!” I saw with my own eyes that they would march through the streets, because they weren’t allowed to carry weapons, they were carrying spades! If you were standing at the corner and would say something against them, the spades would fall on your back. By 1932, this movement to which I belonged, we went to the harbors and distributed leaflets against the Nazis -- not ’33 -- remember, he comes to power -- but ’32 we distributed leaflets against the Nazis. Jews and non-Jews together. In that movement, there was no difference. We were very aware what would happen. Some of you might know that Kaete Kollwitz, herself, signed one of those calls that were put on all the walls, that say, “Workers unite! So that you have to get against the Nazis!” I think that there was partially lethargy, partially, certainly, there was poverty, and poverty breeds an awful lot of awful things, and partially -- I know some of my friends don’t like that I say that --I blame the Communists. I do blame them, because they split the labor movement, and did not want to join in anything. I went to a big rally where there were Communists and Socialists, and they would say, loud and clear, “It doesn’t matter. Let the worst come, then we will be victorious.” Then not my husband, but my very close friend, and who’s later my husband for many years, and who’s not Jewish, got up in that huge rally and said, “The worst will be that we all meet each other in the mass graves!” And this in 1932!

Q: This he said?

A: Yes. I know that I’m not quoting him wrong. I know that. “In the mass graves.’ “We will meet in the mass graves!” So this is 1932. And what I’m saying is, it is a fight between (them and) those who believe in humanity and decency of everybody, not just Jews. Do I make that clear? We knew there was anti-Semitism! My G-d, we read Mein Kampf! It was sold! You had to read it. You knew what was going on. But you knew they would kill the Jews and they’ll kill everybody who has some decent thoughts. And this is 1932. That’s why I will never accept this business, “We didn’t know.” I will say something loud and clear. There were many Jews who said, “Oh, it won’t be so bad.’

Q: Well how did your parents react? Do you recall?

A: I’ll go into that, but I remember one who said, “I have a good business, and at least we get rid of the labor unions.” My parents had a little store (Laughs). They had very little money. The children, meanwhile, my younger sister was still in the gymnasium, my older sister was studying medicine. I was in Hamburg. I had finished working in the factory and was studying to be a teacher. So my father was very scared that this would come, and was very much against it. And I do remember that once the shoemaker next to us was attacked by Nazis -- this was before they are in power. And he is not a Jew! And my father was the one who helped him and called the police, but later he would spit at him.

Q: Even though he helped him.

A: Oh, yes! So, I do remember my father was shocked that I had a non-Jewish friend. Jews, I think, were just as prejudiced in that area.

Q: This is your future husband you’re talking about

A: Yes. And he was absolutely shocked that one of his daughters would do that, and that would be terrible. And I do remember the Nazis came, but the Nazis were in power just a few months.

Q: He never went so far as to forbid the relationship, did he?

A: He couldn’t. My father couldn’t forbid me anything any more after I was 18 or 19. He knew that. And I was away! I wasn’t at home anymore. There were others who were sitting shiva when something like this happened. It’s just awful. But now he couldn’t. He knew he couldn’t. But he was against it.

Q: Did he reconcile?

A: Yes, I want to say that. Shortly after the advent of the Nazis, my father came visiting me in Hamburg. And at that time, Paul showed him Hamburg and went with him everywhere. And my father said, ‘Well for heaven’s sake! I didn’t know there was somebody like that!” And I will be eternally grateful, when my father died -- and he died at the age of 52, which is very young, but the Jews fell like the flies even when they were not attacked -- he called for Paul. He called for him! Because that was a symbol to him in many ways. I will quick go back, 1933, the Nazis come to power. I have seen them come to power. I was in Hamburg, now.

Q: I feel like I’m neglecting your mother a little bit because we haven’t talked about her influence on you. Here she’s married to a man of strong political feelings. Did she have a voice of her own, do you feel?

A: Mother was a very quiet person. Many years later, when I saw her later, I found she was very strong! And she was strong always. She got us through the times of hunger and stuff like that. But she also had a terribly domineering husband. When I say about my father, I respect him, but I think he was terrible! He would scream and shout! And she had always to smooth the waters. And this is the way I have known her mostly. And I think, inside of her, my mother was in many ways a much more tolerant person. I gave you that example. My mother told me about her father. I have to say, mother’s family was very different. My great-grandfather was a writer of the Torah. They were very important people. But my mother told me about her father, a story, and that was that there was a “miracle rabbi” coming around. They came in these little shetls there. Everybody was admiring him, and they would come out and kiss his hands. But, she said, her father said. “I don’t kiss anybody’s hands! He’s not a God!” And she told me that was pride. What I’m saying is, I think my mother had a lot of strength, but she wasn’t politically that involved. And when the Nazis came to power, she was mostly afraid for all of us. But later, when I was in a concentration camp, my mother was strong. She was willing to go up to the Gestapo to tell them that they should let her good girl go. She didn’t, but I mean, she could have done that. And then later she lived in Israel. And she’s lived for one year with us here. No, it’s the quiet person. It’s not the terribly involved person.

Q: There can be great strength!

A: Oh, enormous strength! I still think she was the one who got us through it all. And she dared -- as I say she dared -- but she would dare, like the lioness that defends her cubs, I think. She wouldn’t go and demonstrate.

Q: But you were out there actually in the streets, participating with leaflets, and…

A: And all that. And very active in it. We had always these debates with the Communists on the one hand, with the Nazis on the other hand. You debated with Nazis1. In 1932, with their swastikas. And you would debate, and you would discuss, and I still remember some of these young -- and I was young then too. I was 22. They would say to me, “You’re such an active girl! You should really join our group!” And I would continue debating. At the end I would always say,” Now you better know I’m a Jew.” They recoiled! How can such a nice person be a Jew? Oh yes, we knew this. I will give you one example in ’33. I’m still at the university, and already, the Jewish professors have had their dismissals, and all that, but they still were allowed to give the final examinations. I will say that the day before my final examination, the Nazis searched my room. Threw out every book. They’re such idiots, you know. They would see naked figures, and they said, “Those dirty schwein Jews.” There was a Michelangelo.

Q: Where was this? Where were you living? Were you still in Hamburg?

A: Hamburg. They saw Michelangelos and they would say, “That dirty Jew has naked figures.” So it’s just ridiculous. But they threw everything out. This was the evening before my final oral examinations. We were always on bicycles. I went there. I first vomited, then got in there. There were the other students sitting. There was one girl who had always been a Nazi. She was sitting next to me. She was talking about that “dirty Jew William Stern” who was a famous psychologist, who was born in this country, too, and she hated to take examinations with him, “All these dirty Jews.” And I finally turned to her and said, “I’m one of them. You say you smelled it, you didn’t smell it for three years?” and she said, “ I’ll denounce you, because you are not a Jew! You just say so.” You know she was furious that she hadn’t “smelled” it. I passed my examinations, always superior.

Q: This was for a teaching degree?

A: Germany is different. It was in psychology, philosophy, history. I forgot what the other one was. Pedagogics, I think. I was always superior. And I still remember, I came out of the examination room, and there stands that one professor and says, “This is the coming genius of our schools,” And I turned around and said, ‘that genius is not allowed to enter any school.”

Q: At that point, you already knew that the final exam was almost useless for you.

A: At that point -- it was ’33 -- we knew it. William Stern was, for instance, in psychology. He was a Jew. He was giving the final examination. At the other end of the table sat the Nazi in uniform -- watching what we were doing. Already there was the Reichstag fire. You see, people who were arrested first, which often we don’t know, were not just Jews. The famous Socialists, the famous Communists, too were arrested, made to scrub the floors -- we knew all the worst things --were beaten. And then the terror starts. All over, we knew it. I couldn’t go to school service anymore. A few months later, there was a person coming from Switzerland to ask, would we be willing to do underground work. And we did. I can go into a long tale of what we did, but it’s not important.

Q: I think it is important.

A: It’s all in that book. You read about that.

Q: The book, by the way, that Dr. Konopka is referring to, is an autobiography that’s in manuscript, partially typed, that I will review just for the sake of getting a better sense of the record. And provisionally, I think, you have a title for it -- In Spite of Everything. Which is a wonderful title, by the way.

A: I would love to get it published. Just for the sake of…that people understand that some of us fought. We weren’t all just victims lying in the street.

Q: Well the underground movement, was that mostly then Germans?

A: Inside of Germany, were many German nationals, but again, we were part of groups, because across the group lines, you couldn’t meet anymore. It was much too dangerous! You wouldn’t trust anybody anymore.

Q: No gatherings were allowed.

A: Nothing! You couldn’t trust anybody. You could only trust people you knew. But these were Jews and non-Jews together. There were a few other Jews. I’m not the only Jew in that.

Q: Were there a lot of people in the professions, do you recall? People like lawyers, or…

A; Both working people, students. In that movement in which I was, certainly were many working peoples, because already, around ’32, there was a much closer identification with the labor unions. I really felt that what I was doing in the underground movement was mostly related to the labor unions. But the labor unions weren’t what they are sometimes here, you know, just being for wages and so on. They were really cultural organizations.

Q: So they had complete programs of education.

A; Yes, everything. Very strong. In fact, my thesis, many years later here, in this country, in Pittsburgh, was on labor union education in this country. Because it interests me that they did this here, too. But what I’m saying is, when somebody asks me, “With whom did you work in the underground?” I would say the labor unions, because that was really the nationals and internationals.

Q: And of course, Hitler quickly forbade the…

A: Oh, that was totally forbidden. When people ask, “What did you do?” There were very thin little leaflets -- newspapers -- because we felt people have to know. There was no other communication. This is something that I think people don’t understand. We tried to paste slogans on the walls, because it was very important that people should know that there is a resistance. That we think we could do. My own husband invented incredible things…

Q: What would have been the penalty at this time if you were caught putting one of these posters up? Was there an awareness that there might be a risk at your life?

A: Death! It was always death, for all those things. But when, for instance, he did something that we could put up, and I won’t go into the details, but at the time of the Olympics, big signs that “The German calm is the calm of the cemetery!” This is what we did.

Q: This was 1936.

A: Naturally, all this was death: distributing leaflets was death. We knew that. And I can’t describe the atmosphere. Everybody talks only about the horrors in the concentration camp. I think we should once feel the horror of a society saturated with fear! I was sent back, you know, by the American government later, and have really helped them to build up their social organizations again. When people would say to me, “I didn’t know.” I said, “Were you afraid?” “Yes.” Then I say, “Then you did know.” This is saturated with that!

When people say, “How did you eat?” Well, I ate. There was a little bookstore that let me work with some Jewish children. I’m just not going into all the details.

Q: Let me ask you this: The underground, to me, sounds like it was still a continuation of the Youth Movement -- rather than the involvement of people in position, or the middle-age group that had more authority and a little bit more power. I’m talking about the middle classes. Even if they had a socialist orientation, did they at all help the underground? Or give money to the underground?

A: There is no real underground. That’s the wrong way to put it.

Q: Well your group then.

A: It doesn’t exist! It’s all small little totally unrelated groups.

Q: So it was uncoordinated.

A: Couldn’t be! You couldn’t trust anybody. People do not understand what the word “totalitarian” means. We know about “authoritarian” but “totalitarian” is different. There is no way that you can communicate with anybody you haven’t known before.

Q: So you’re saying that the state terror existed from the very beginning.

A: From the very beginning! From the second that Hitler is made Reichscounselor…in the Reichstagfire…There is incredible terror! There’s no communication anymore. So when we say, “There is no underground,” after the war I found out there are people like Catholics who were fighting, other people were fighting. You don’t know that.

Q: Everyone had to do it on their own.

A: You had to do it just as an act of conscience with a few people that existed, that you knew! So that’s number one.

Q: Now this is a terrible thing, when one thinks that people had to act out of a pure drive -- inward drive --without any sense of any help anywhere else.

A: I have always said, “All this business…” That’s why I somehow resent some of the books that have come up. It sounds almost as if you knew the glory. I remember, I stood later in the concentration camp -- in a cell --and I said, “ The worst thing is that nobody will know that I was even a decent person.” There’s no glory! There’s nothing! There is no satisfaction. I hate behavior modification! It tells people that if you behave well, you get a reward. And I think that’s the worst lie! That’s not the way you can get anybody to act ethically! It just isn’t true. There is no reward! Absolutely none. I can’t remember. Now I have a reward! Because first of all, I am alive. And people are nice to me. But at that time, there is none! There isn’t even anything in meeting, because when you meet, you’re deathly afraid! We met what we called private groups. At most five people. You took ten minutes to discuss why you are here, because you had to pretend that you were here for a birthday, or something like that. Nothing is simple! Everything is drenched by fear.

Q: Even between friends.

A: Oh yes! And you had to be very sure that you knew this other person. Paul and I, I have to say that, were very much in love. There was no way to get married. No way! He was not Jewish. I was Jewish. Right? That was one of the greatest crimes for the Nazis. Immediately the laws forbade that. The laws made me an outlaw very early, because the Nazis had a law that any Jew who was naturalized after 1918, his citizenship would be revoked. So, my family who had become German after 1918, because we were nothing, we were Austrians, or whatever we were, right? This was taken away. I was stateless. That means you didn’t have a passport anymore. We went for a little while, still to a theater, and I still am very, very pleased that I saw Schiller’s Don Carlos being played in Hamburg. And then Marquis Posa stands there and says, “Sir, give us liberty of thought.’ A whole theater got up and applauded. That, if you talk about reward, that’s a reward I remember. The next day, they forbade to play Schiller! (Laughs) their greatest! Ridiculous! This is another lie, to say that all Germans were Nazis. They were not! There were lots of Germans that were not Nazis. There were lots of people who were cowards, who wouldn’t move. And there were some people who were fighting. And I fought side-by-side with Germans. When I say “fighting” I’m not talking about weapons, because nobody had weapons.

Q: And you’re saying there was not even an awareness that there may have been opposition to Hitler in the higher levels -- even say among the military -- the older Juncker groups that probably would have regarded him as an upstart.

A: I think there were. Later, after the war, I found out that there were people.

Q: Well we all found this out, but at the time you were saying that no one had awareness of where the opposition was.

A: We did not know. That’s why we had those leaflets. Because we thought, that way at least some people will find out. There’s strange things, they’re ridiculous things that one did. I remember we had little things printed that said, “In some place they obstructed Hitler’s speech.” Then that had to be distributed. How do you distribute it? You can’t distribute it! It was an act of incredible courage, and I know who did it. Who went up to the roof of one of the big apartment buildings in Hamburg, put that stack of leaflets at the corner of the roof and then left. The wind distributed them. Now these are things that…I don’t know how to describe them!

Q: This is really to report a little piece of news about a disruption of a speech.

A: That’s all! That’s all!

Q: It would not be in the newspapers.

A: Nothing is in the newspapers. Nothing is. In the newspapers is only how wonderful the Fuhrer is and so on. One more example. The first of May was always a labor holiday. The Nazis made it into their holiday. All, the workers had to go. They had to go. So they demonstrated. I saw with my own eyes, that the workers went, and then, when they had to stand around and listen to Hitler’s speech, I don’t know how to describe it. These are very strong! These are workers from the harbor. They lifted their arms, and there was a cordon of police around, so that they shouldn’t leave and they hit down at the police..

Q: Dr. Konopka is illustrating this by holding her arms over her head with her hands locked, and then she’s showing how they came down with their strength.

A: Yes, on the police, so that the police had to let their arms go, and they left. Just as a protest. I saw that. But, who would know about it? Nobody. You had to have a leaflet to explain that this happened. To say that this happened.

Q: It strikes me that it’s similar to the Jewish resistance in the camps. We now know there were many revolts, and many, many protests, but nobody knew, one from the other. And even the great uprising in Auschwitz was not known, at the time, outside or in other places.

A: Right! And I think, that’s what I want. I’m getting angry when people tell me, “All the Jews just went” like sheep to the slaughter” That’s not true! Yes, some did, and they couldn’t do anything else! I’d like to know what people would do if you are stripped naked with dogs on you. What else can you do! In fact, I’m told that one of my uncles, was one of the leaders, and he went in with the Sh’ma Yisroel -- somebody who had seen it told me that. Yes, and I think that’s courage, too.

Q: I also believe, myself, that there is heroism in the mothers who quietly, with their children, tried to keep them calm in the face of a terrible…

A: Right, right. And we have to say, “ But there was resistance!” Two, there were women who resisted, which is never told. And three, I want the people to know the Germans resisted! It isn’t only Jews! It’s anybody who had decency. I also have always underlined, and we can talk now about my other experiences, that the worst isn’t killing somebody. The worst is demeaning people. And they did that, systematically! Scrubbing floors with toothbrushes. That’s demeaning.

Q: People could see this! In other words, the ordinary citizen could walk by and see a group of Jews…

A: Yes. It was Jews, and I have to repeat, also the high Social Democrats, for instance, in Hamburg that were, I have to quick go now into what happened. I’m very poor right now at dates. 1936. My husband, I had to warn him. The underground -- and I say husband, but he wasn’t my husband then, not legally -- gave me the information -- that was one thing the underground did, they got information and they got, sometimes, people out of the country -- that the Nazis were waiting in his room and that I should prevent him from going home. I will not go into the details, but just know how complicated that is. A man is coming home on his bicycle from work. I greet him with smiling, you know, “How nice that I meet you!” And whisper to him, “Go to the cemetery, we meet you there.” In the cemetery, with flowers in our hand, on a grave that nobody knows who it is, there were some others, and in a very complex way, which I will not yet describe now, we got him out of the country. I stayed, because we had made an agreement, that anybody who can still stay, stays, to continue the fight. But then, only a few months later, there is that famous ring at night. I was at that time living in a room with a family, not my family, some other family in Hamburg. There is that ring at the night. And you know what it is.

Q: This is Kristallnacht we’re talking about?

A: No, no, it’s much later. Kristallnacht was much later. This was ’36. But we knew when it rings at night that the Nazis are coming. I was, at that time, one of the major contacts to others, which means I had a few little addresses around. We had practiced -- I can swallow, still today, any pill without water -- and I swallowed that very fast. Everything was swallowed. And the door was opened by the landlady. And in marched three of those young storm troopers. Get right in front of my bed, and say, “Get up! Out!” And I pretend that I am very surprised what they are doing there, and say, “Would you turn around when I get dressed?” And they laugh in my face, naturally. And meanwhile, they are tearing apart everything in my room. Strange the way…they were very smart, actually, they tore apart all the books, because they knew that sometimes you hide things in the backs of books. They tore apart, were terribly interested in the photos of a little boy I had. I had a lot of photos of that little boy. It was actually my nephew in Israel. But that little boy -- I knew why they were so interested -- is a blond child. They thought I had done something with that child. So they were very mean.

Q: It shows their stupidity, in a way.

A: Oh, they were stupid. Then they said, “You come with us!” I told the landlady, “Please tell my mother.” And I left with them. They had me between them in a car. In the night -- it was night -- they stopped at another place, and out came another person of the same underground group that I knew. A young woman who is not Jewish, a factory worker.

Q: Did you feel she had denounced you?

A: No. Not at all. I knew that that was not the case. We were very aware of each other to find out what we would say. And she was very, very intelligent! The first thing she said was. “What are you doing here in the night?’ Remember I met you once when we did that trip with the children of the school.” She immediately gave me the idea what she would say how we knew each other. Very, very good.

Q: So that your stories would concur.

A: The stories would concur. She played the dummy. I have never seen anybody playing that well. With the Nazis going into the worst place at the city hall where we knew everybody would be beaten up. She would stand there and say, “kitty, kitty, kitty,’ and all, “Come little cat,” or something. I mean, she played the dumb one, and they would look at each other and say, “that dummy!” I mean, it was good. She played stupid. But we were both at the same time, so I knew something had happened, that somebody had given names. That much we knew, already. The first night in the -- it’s not yet concentration camp -- police thing -- it’s unbelievable. I always have said, if they tell you it wasn’t so bad. They put us into what I would call “a standing coffin.” It’s really a box. Small, dark. I think maybe there was a hole in, because you could breathe. I couldn’t sit. I could only stand in that coffin. And that’s where they put you for hours. I heard men scream around me! “Let me out, let me out! I’ll tell you what you want.” I have a very good imagination. It still has stood me in good stead, years later when I was very ill here, I can do something with myself. I use my imagination. I can put myself away from where I am. Now they tell me, that’s a technique they teach people, but I didn’t know it. (Laughs) That’s very odd, but I didn’t know it. I could do that at that time. I was on a meadow. I still see that meadow. The sun was flooding, and this is where I was. It still stands out. An old man was the jailor, who opened that thing. And I have always said, “Angels in heaven, obviously, have long beards.” Because it was one of the old -- you know, once in a while there were old jailors that were still used -- because he was kind. He shook his head and said, “ What do they do to these poor people?” And he asked us whether we had eaten. And he brought us soup. Most of us couldn’t hold the soup. Interrogations, interrogations. Through the interrogations, you know what they know. You deny. You have learned, meanwhile to deny anything and everything. The concentration camp I was in is known comparatively little. I read it though, the other day, in a book, so it’s known. It’s Fuhlsbuttel.

Q: Very near Hamburg?

A: Very near Hamburg. It’s really the Hamburg prison.

Q: But it was used, you think, very early on for political prisoners?

A: Yes, completely. And the guards were the SS. We called them, “the black guards.”

Q: Not the SA. By this time, they had been purged.

A: Yes, it’s the SS, which is much worse. Much, much worse. I will not go into all the details.

Q: At any point in this process, were you able to send a note to your family?

A: Yes, I must have been able to send a note to my family. I was even able to send a note to somebody to bring me something, I remember, because we had practiced disguised writing. And I must tell you, that I partially forgot how we did it. Which is good. But I did get messages out. That I know. There were lots of other people brought in that night, but I was the only one who was put in solitary. Part of it is, because I think I was considered an “intellectual” -- and a “political” -- and a “Jew.’ I had three things, while my young friend was at least not an intellectual, and not a Jew. The experiences, I can’t go into all of them. I remember that young SS guard who was about my age. I was then 26. He was maybe 24. Standing in front of me. It was like a flood of dirty words that I had hardly ever heard. He’s yelling at you and you stand in front straight. And years later, I have said, it did something for me. I suddenly thought, “I’m wearing a raincoat, and it’s just running down me.” That’s the way I felt. I remember that I was very surprised that the ones that were treated at that moment worst -- most yelled at, pushed -- were women, older women. I had no idea who they were until a few days later, and these were Jehovah’s Witnesses. So we better know. They didn’t say, “Heil Hitler!”

Q: Just as today, they wouldn’t in America. They don’t believe in taking oaths or saluting the flags.

A: No. But we have to say, that that was there! I saw them. Lots of other people that I don’t know who they were. I was put into the cell in solitary, and I always say the most incredible thing to me was, that right there on the little wooden table, was lying a sharp knife. They wanted us to commit suicide! That was their intent! And all I can think, is they have now done the dumbest thing, because I’m a very, how do you call that, trotsich. You just do that to me, and I get very, very angry. And I thought, “The dirty job you do! You want to kill me? You kill me. I’m not doing it for myself.” But that was the intent.

Q: It’s interesting that a lot of survivors in the camps often have come through with a similar philosophy. They’ve said, “ I will not do their work for them.” “I will not let myself collapse or die.”

A: Exactly. No, let them do it. “Let them do it.” It’s their dirty job. Anyhow, I’m only telling you that I was in solitary. That I consider solitary an inhuman thing, because I wasn’t allowed to do anything, and I can tell another time how I dealt with that. I will not go into it anymore.

Q: It is terrible isn’t it, when one has nothing to do.

A: Nothing, nothing. And especially if one is a very active person. I don’t think you want that right now, how I dealt with these things, because here and there, these long interrogations. I was there over Christmas. And the Christmas Night was something to behold, because I was locked in. I was locked in in that solitary. I heard them pulling out one person after another and beating them, like merciless! If I have seen sadists, this is what they’re used for. And while they were doing it, you could hear these cries! The beating! Then they would sing this: “And when the blood of the Jews…” I don’t think were only Jews. I want you to know that. But that’s what they did. This was the Christmas night! One day there was commotion. If you talk about a window, there’s a little hole like in many prisons -- a little opening, high up, you can’t really look out. I heard a lot of commotion. I heard a lot of shouting and there’s a little footstool. I stood and I looked out. And I’ve seen it with my own eyes, a man literally hunted to death, like you hunt an animal. He was not running. They made him run. They made him run. Then he had to jump, run, lie down --this was winter, so it’s cold -- and he had to jump, throw himself down, jump up, and I saw with my own eyes when the blood spurted out of his mouth and he was dead.

Q: Do you recall the name of anyone who ran this prison?

A: No. I don’t know a single name. I have to say that. That’s terribly wrong, but it’s because all this is about six weeks. There was no name. There was one woman who was wonderful. Kind, did everything to make things a little easier, and I do know from this other person who was arrested with me -- who by the way, later, was another two years in prison; I was gone already -- she is in Germany. She is not a Jew. And she wrote to me that she testified for that woman when the de-Nazification came. Because she remembered her, and she has done good things for all of us.

Q: She acted out of some instinct.

A: Absolutely. It was just one of the old women that apparently worked in this prison work, but she has done good things for us. She always made things a little better. I was a very short time, a very short time. Six weeks is nothing! But six weeks is an eternity if you think you are in it all your life.

Q: When you don’t know what’s going to happen next.

A: And you don’t know. You have no idea. The things I saw. We were allowed once to go to the showers -- once. These are still showers, real showers. In front of me walked a woman whose hands hang in a totally distorted way. I could see that the hands were broken. When we had to walk back from the showers, everybody had to take two heavy pails with water to carry. She was supposed to carry that! She lifted. And she couldn’t. I jumped up and simply took it -- another pail -- which was totally forbidden. But that one decent woman was in charge, and she said, “ Forbidden, but go.’ These things are unbelievable. I later heard she was a Social Democratic fighter. They had taken her child away from her. But I don’t know the name. And I know a lot of the names of people who later were arrested. I would say how I got out, but I want to say, I never got before a trial. Others did! The young woman that was arrested with me, got before a trial and got two years. I never did. I was called in one day. They had told me at the last interrogation, “You will never get out of here, because you are the worst. You don’t say anything.” Then they called me in, and the man said to me, “You can go home.”

Q: Just like that.

A: Yes, “You can go home.”

Q: Did you know that you were classified “intellectual?”

A: No.

Q: Did you know any of those classifications were then being put by your name?

A: No, I tell you, I know it before, only about my husband, because later he was with the O.S.S. in the American Army, and he saw his own dossier. He was classified as one of the most dangerous. “Watch weapons!” He never had weapons. And he found me, but I don’t know what classification I was. The interesting thing is, that I was told, “Put your clothes on.” I was put against the wall. There were people next to me in the cell -- mostly prostitutes --who came out and put their arms around me and said, “ The worst will happen, but we are with you.” They were kind people. I went out. I went into the police thing again, and the policeman who had interviewed me all the time said, “You can go home.” I said, “What!” and he said, “You go home.” And he shook my hand, and he said, “Auf Wiedersehen.’ I have never forgotten. And I said, “ No, not auf wiedersehen.”

Q: (Laughing) you certainly hoped not “auf wiedersehen.’

A: I went out, and I didn’t know. I knew later what happened…they had done that with others. The ones that they felt they couldn’t interrogate -- and this is still the period where they want to get the network -- they let go, because they wanted us to meet others. There were others who were then caught and brought back and so on. They really were very smart on that one.

Q: So you feel that if you had divulged information, your life might have been worthless to them.

A: Yes, that’s right. I was still worth something, and they thought I would meet all these people.

Q: It’s diabolic.

A: I can give you a story that I have here, that my mother wrote, and it’s a true one -- of one of our friends who was released that same way, and he was smart. He had arranged to meet somebody! And he just threw himself under a car, because the other one would have come up to him! They followed him!

Q: So he sacrificed his life.

A: That’s right. And that, by the way, was a Polish Jew, who in these early days who was also an anti-Nazi fighter. Just let’s know that there are these people! Hilda Monte was one, and really her name was Meisel.

Q: She’s a wrier.

A: She was. She was killed. In Austria, they have a stone for her. We don’t know enough about all these people, but I can show you some things upstairs if you want to. I have a lot of these things.

Q: I want to go back just a little bit. You had passed your examinations in ’33, but you couldn’t go into the profession of teaching. So survival was just happenstance?

A: Well, I have always been able to do some tutoring. Then there were children whose parents wanted to emigrate -- Jewish children -- who wanted to emigrate to England, or to the United States. I taught them English. You make a little money that way. Very little. People don’t understand. I lived on nothing, practically. But I’ve been used to that.

Q: That was more towards the war.

A: This is before that time. It’s not war yet.

Q: And the other question I had for you, about how you got Paul, your husband, out of Germany.

A: I didn’t do it alone.

Q; Were there any Jewish organizations that were helping with his escape? Do you recall that?

A: At that time? No. This was purely through the labor unions. That I know. But we are not yet in America, so I had better tell you quick. Cause it’s a long story. I’m not going from Germany. I went back to Berlin after that. Got my mother out of the country. My sister was already in Palestine.

Q: And of course it’s her child whose picture you had on the table that the Nazis had noticed.

A: Yes, my sister’s child. But my mother I got out. I got her out of the country. And because I thought they’d get me back anyhow, what difference does it make. I was left with nobody.

Q: Your father had died?

A: My father had died earlier. I had a cousin, who was a very decent person -- who nobody, nobody would dare touching me; I had been a person in a concentration camp! But she said, “You can stay with me for a few days.” So I stayed there. And I have said, in my life, are strange miracles! You sometimes just wonder how all this happens. I’m guessing everybody tells some of those strange things. I walk in a street. I see a young woman whom I knew was Jewish, who looks beautifully suntanned! At a time when most of us didn’t look very suntanned. I said, “ Where have you been?” she says, ‘ I was in Carlsbad.’ In Czechoslovakia. And I said, ‘ How did you get out?’ I knew that she also had no passport, no nationality. She said, “ Oh, we have these passports. They had given us passports, the stateless passports.” She says, “ If you are sick, there is a doctor at the Czechoslovakian embassy who writes out a certificate and they let you go.” I went to that doctor. He looked at me, and he said, “What is it?’ and I said, “I’m run down.’ And he said, ‘ Well, for that you don’t go to Carlsbad.’ And I said, “Well, I have kidney problems and all that.” And he looked at me with his big sad eyes, and he wrote out a certificate, how desperately ill I was. Not a cent he asked. I will never know, his name.

Q: This was a German doctor.

A: No, a Czechoslovakian doctor. At the Czechoslovakian embassy. In Berlin. And then there was a contact with some of the underground people, including that Julius, who was in one of the major show trials, and I can’t think of his name right now, who was formerly a teacher, is also a Jew, and one of the most extraordinary people, who said, “Gisela, we’ll get you out illegally. You have to get out of the country. You’re no use anymore to the underground.” And I said, “ I’m not going illegally, because they find their ways of finding out who smuggled me out. If I go out, I go legally.’ To go out legally, I needed a visa. That you could get only in Hamburg, because my passport was issued in Hamburg. I went back to Hamburg. I was in the police station. This is incredible -- here in that office where they arrested me that night, and next to it is that office where I went and they gave me the stamp -- on grounds of that sick certificate. They’re not always smart.

Q: So no questions were asked.

A: No questions asked. They didn’t even look at my dossier.

Q: Well you just maybe were there on a good day, and they were in a nice mood. (Laughs)

A: It’s very strange! I have to say that I got out of Germany in a regular train with very little money. Mother had given me some before she left for Israel. I got into Carlsbad. I lived about a week. Mostly on the hot water that they have there. There was a Socialist who had been contacted. Klein is the name. Today I think it probably was a Jew too. And he was a wonderful newspaperman, and he and his wife committed suicide when the Nazis invaded Czechoslovakia. But they were kind to me, and they gave me also something to eat. And meanwhile, the refugees of that group to which I belonged -- which is both Jews and non-Jews, I repeat -- the person who was very active was -- and he is very well known -- Eric Levinski. Eric had been a very famous lawyer in Germany, and was also part of that group to which I belonged, and had just made it, to come out. And he was in France helping a lot of refugees. He and others had arranged for me to get to Bratislava. In Bratislava was a non-Jewish lawyer, who was a Socialist, who helped people whatever it is to help them to gain, regain something. They thought I was too valuable to the underground movement to just let me go. And I was willing to continue fighting the Nazis. So the decision was made, that I would continue to fight the Nazis in Austria, which at that time was under Schuschnigg. Schuschnigg, at that time, was arresting both the Nazis and the Socialists. He sure didn’t know who were his friends. I was continuing the fight against the Nazis in Germany in Austria, and the only way to do that was that I had an Austrian passport, and the only way to do that was to get married to an Austrian. So somebody -- I won’t name him -- was willing to marry me. It’s a sham marriage. It’s not a real marriage. I didn’t want to do it. Paul was sitting, poverty stricken, and eaten by vermins in France. As one of my friends said, “ In the olden days, kings and queens had to get married.” You know, whether they wanted to or not. And that friend I have never forgotten said, because I didn’t want it, said, “ In our days, it’s the anti-Nazi fighters that must do it.” So with that conviction, I did it, but I never… That poor guy once wanted just to say “hello,” and I said, “Don’t you ever touch me!” And that wasn’t very friendly, because actually, he did take a risk, too. But I was mean. I didn’t want to have anything personally to do with that person. I did have his name! I had an Austrian passport at that point! So I could go across the border. In Czechoslovakia, I lived with some lice. Anyhow, I got into Austria, and now I’m doing this again.

Q: When you entered Austria, it was 1937?

A: When did the Nazis invade?

Q: They didn’t march into Austria until ’38 -- the Anschluss.

A: That’s ’38, so it’s ’37. I get into Austria. I’m a married woman entering Austria, and another person from the German underground, whose name I don’t like to mention right now, she’s not Jewish, but as active as anybody else, had to do the same thing. She also had to marry an Austrian. So we moved together, telling that our husbands had to do something else, and so on. Anyhow we moved into a small room. What we had to do, was again, getting leaflets and all that into Germany, which is much more complicated across borders. And how did I make a living? By again taking care of children. Absolutely a miserable life, but we were there.

Q: Were you able to continue your cultural and artistic interests, and your professional interests?

A: No, but I wouldn’t have lived through the solitary -- ever --without being able to say hundreds of poems to myself. I can do that by heart. I read whole pages of books without having the books. In Czechoslovakia, I grabbed very quickly a lot of the books that were written against Hitler. Everybody had it! There were an awful lot of Nazis in that period. But I could read those.

Q: Bratislava – was that in the Sudeten area of…

A: Yes, it’s Prestbourg. Now the Sudeten area is Carlsbad, and, oh, were they Nazis! It was just terrible. So all this was published, but there they didn’t believe the newspapers! And in Austria, I was again part of the underground. Life was very miserable.

Q: I don’t like to interrupt the flow. Your mother got to Israel, obviously with the help of her daughter, who was already an Israeli. Is that how it was arranged then, through the Israeli Consulate? It’s Palestine, of course -- I shouldn’t say “Israel” --at this time.

A: She got out legally. She had papers. She could sell very little at that time.

Q: So she left Germany about the time you were just coming out of the prison.

A: I had just come out of prison, and I said, “ Mother, you go!” She didn’t want to go, but I practically pushed her out of the country, and I’m glad I did. I had to go. I’m in Austria. Part of the Austrian movement -- mostly Social Democrats at that point.

Q: Right, it wasn’t Schuschnigg’s and the Party.

A: Yeah. Then I once had the opportunity to go to France. So I saw Paul again. We hadn’t had any contact for two years. Oh he had done some terrible things! He wanted to go into Germany to get me out of the concentration camp, and they held him, practically physically held him back.

Q: Where was he living in France?

A: In a hole, eaten by vermin, literally.

Q: But where? Was it in the capital?

A: In Paris. Paris treated refugees’ abominably1 I will not go into all that. Just abominably! They were not allowed to work. They were not allowed to do anything. It was just awful. The French were very awful.

Q: And he was a non-Jewish refugee.

A: Yes, but that isn’t it.

Q: Sometimes the Jewish refugees were helped by agencies in Paris.

A: Well, he was, too. The Socialists did some, but my God! I mean, what was it! Naturally, they helped each other1 But it was still very bad. I go back to Austria, because I was able to go out. Talk about culture, I still remember the time when they had the great Van Gogh exhibit in Paris and in spite of everything, I saw the beautiful Van Gogh exhibit. Paul and I were both there. But I had to go back. We had agreed that as long as I could, I would fight. And I went there, but then this other friend also went out and she came back, and she said, “ Gisela, let’s burn everything. In about an hour the police will be here. They caught me at the border.” And so there was a police. And we burned everything. We both were put into an Austrian prison.

Q: You were again put in a prison, with the friend, who had also made a marriage in order to become an Austrian. In Vienna?

A: That’s right. This is before the Anschluss. I’m in a horrible police prison in Vienna. Really awful. It’s dirty, filthy. They wanted to take my glasses away. that’s something I don’t let anybody do, because I have very bad eyes, and I fought it. They interviewed me. I thought that they would send me back to Germany, because they can hear my accent is German, not Austrian, But I was still kept in the police prison. I can’t tell how many days, but it was quite awhile. I think, if people talk about it, I remember going through a dark corridor with a big fat policeman who tried to rape me, but he didn’t quite succeed. These are the kinds of things you experience. But it was police. It wasn’t yet the Nazis. It’s the strange, Austrian kind of thing. I was experiencing on week-ends, these poor fat women coming in, who weren’t allowed to sell the apples that they wanted to sell. I’m just not going into all that. I saw poverty, and I lived with a girl who was found in the streets. And in some ways, it was very strange, because they always felt most sorry for me, because I was political, and they were just poor. But it was a very strange experience. Finally, the police decided that I should get into a concentration camp, and not be in the police station anymore. Vienna had concentration camps within the Vienna walls. I’m talking concentration camps under Schuschnigg, not yet under the Nazis. I can’t give you the streets anymore, because you get always transported. You don’t really know where you are. It wasn’t comic then, but today I think it’s like a comic opera, because it was a men’s prison, actually. There were no women. It was huge! But they had no other rooms. Through the lines of all these men, I was pushed into a huge room with hundreds of mattresses, it seemed, but I was the only one in that room. It was just idiotic. And every time I had to go to the washroom, everybody was called out to go back in. I had strange experiences there. I had nothing again. I wasn’t allowed to write, or do anything. Suddenly paper and pencil flew through a little hole at the door. And it said, “ Who are you. Nazi or Sozi?” So the co-prisoners wanted to know. And I didn’t answer, because I had learned to be so suspicious of people, that you didn’t give an answer. So I didn’t answer, and then they said, “Say at least that one, Nazi or Sozi,” and I said, “ Well, definitely not Nazi.” That much I thought I would say. A man came --it was very cold -- to put coal in my oven. A prisoner I think. Left some newspaper. When I opened the newspaper, everywhere there were words like. “Don’t feel too bad, you’re not alone. We think of you.” It was one of the most touching human communications. I can’t tell you even how long I was in there. I have probably documents on it, but I don’t know. It wasn’t so long. At one point they again said, “ Go home, but you have to be available for the trial of your friend.” Because she was caught with the stuff. I went back to the room, and very short after that -- a few days after that -- I went back, taking care of some of these kids whom I had taken care of. This was a Jewish family. And that day I went there, and I went home and it was getting dark. And there were rumors flying that the Nazis were coming. And I said to the mother of the children, “Don’t listen to rumors, but it’s possible.” I walked into the street, and I met an old woman -- people were walking, like always, in the streets -- and that old woman came right up to me, crying, just crying, and handed me a leaflet. And that leaflet said, “ We are entering…and it was a German, Nazi…

Q: It was an announcement that the Reich was coming.

A: It was a Nazi announcement leaflet. At that moment I went upstairs, and there was this friend of mine who had been released. Schuschnigg, I should have said, by amnesty, let everybody go just before the Anschluss. So she was just let go, because of the amnesty. She was sitting there with the man whom I so-called had married. And I said, “The Nazis are coming.” And they said, “Don’t pass rumors.” I showed them the leaflet. At that moment we turned on the radio, and there was Seizenkrat, saying, “Viennese, the Germans are coming as friends. Be quiet.” So that night, I don’t wish it for anybody, but to see Vienna, it was unbelievable! The sky was filled with smoke and fire, everybody was burning material that was dangerous. I’d never seen anything like that city. The German planes were circling, circling, circling. And that Seizenkrat voice simply said, “This is probably the end.” At that moment, we decided that this other woman should immediately leave the country, because she had a passport. The people who had gone under amnesty had got their passports back. I did not. I was again left without papers. But she had it, and I said to her, you go, not to the closest border, Czechoslovakia. Go to the French border, because you can always say you go to your husband who is in France. Well this saved her life, because the Czech border was already closed. And they took everybody. I was still there. So very quick, I was alone in that place with a landlady who was decent. She was a Catholic, but she loved a Jew. And she knew that she has to protect what she could. But there wasn’t much protection she could give. I had to get out of that place. I came the next day to these Jewish people where I had taken care of the children. The furniture was already demolished. That means in that first night when the Nazis invaded, the Austrian Nazis knew where the Jews were. They were much more anti-Semitic. And they had already destroyed the furniture. The mother was lying on a couch. The two children were with her. I have used that, once in a speech, to say to people, this is the way one teaches children to be afraid. Because the child says, “I am going to school.” And the mother says, “ You can’t go to school. They’ll spit at you.” He says, “ I’ll spit back.” And the mother says, “ You can’t because you are a Jew.” This is the way one learns. When people say Jews are cowards, that’s the way you make cowards. And it’s tragic! And all I could do was say good-bye to them. I went back. I had to take another little room -- I had practically no money anymore -- in a family that I knew was Jewish, but I didn’t know, really, what they were, and they didn’t know who I was. The interesting thing is that they were Sephardic Jews. And they were from, I think, Turkey. They had Turkish, I think, passports. So they could get out pretty soon. But during that first days, they couldn’t go in the street, because they had very dark hair, and beautiful, these beautiful black eyes, but that for the Nazis was a stereotype! Now I’m grey, but I always had kind of a light brown hair. So they couldn’t go out. I went out to the marketplace and bought the food for them.

Q: You wouldn’t be an obvious stereotype.

A: No. I could go out and buy food for them. But there wasn’t much food. I lived on potatoes. They lived on very little too. I can tell you, I want to tell the world. I would like to tell what happened in Vienna, because this isn’t yet Crystal Night! It’s Anschluss. They searched out the pregnant Jewish women, and they made them scrub the streets. Because there were slogans by Schuschnigg on the street. These were highly pregnant women! They were sure showing. They were scrubbing streets. I saw it! I’m now talking about things I saw. I saw these women, and some pregnant and some not. They made them carry heavy -- do you know what a long carpet weighs?

Q: Yes, I have an idea. It is heavy. It’s heavy for a strong man, anyone.

A: To carry them into these offices where the Nazis…the Nazis came to Vienna totally prepared with everything. They didn’t trust the sloppy Viennese. They made their own offices. They had everything there.

Q: So they came with all the furniture.

A: The women had to carry those furniture, the carpets. I saw them. I saw with my own eyes, a woman on two sides storm troopers, and it was a very handsome blonde woman, and they had put a sign on her brow, “ I slept with a Jew.” And she had to walk the streets. I had seen bad things in Germany. In Austria, they were drunk. They were drunk with victory! They really knew now they had the world! They really showed it! So I saw all this! And I was sure I would die anyhow, so what difference does it make? I walked the streets. I saw all of it!

Q: Did this fatalism that you felt, at that time, do you think that it gave you the courage to still continue the struggle?

A: Yes! I think I didn’t really struggle anymore. This is the days in Vienna. I myself think that you get into a very strange, almost shock-like… For instance, I slept. I have never slept as much as during that time. I slept. I didn’t have to eat, either, much. But I slept. I don’t think I was very courageous. I really don’t. I slept and then I walked out and I thought, “ if ever I come out, I want to tell them, but otherwise, what difference does it make?” In some ways I felt oddly protective of that family whom I didn’t know. But I felt they were so beautiful! I like dark-haired people.

Q: And you took this as your responsibility, even in these circumstances.

A: Yes. And I heard later that they were saved, somehow they got out. A letter came. I still got mail through others. Again, in the way in which we could write, my younger sister was at that time a nurse in London. And she was in contact with Paul. So she could write to me, because it was my sister. She gave me instruction in that way that isn’t obvious.

Q: Did she get out at the same time the older one did, about the same time?

A: No, my older sister came out early to Palestine. Ruth, my younger sister, had just finished her Abitur, which is the entrance to the University. There was only one way to go to England, and that’s to be a domestic servant.

Q: So she had a work permit, in other words.

A: She had a work permit to go there, and then she became a nurse. I still think Ruth was the most beautiful and the most gifted of all of us three, but she’s not alive any more. I will say in a minute how this went, but I can say that later. We two were very, very close. By the way, all her letters are there, and they should be collected some way. But she gave me instructions to get out of Austria, and go to France. I didn’t want to. I thought, “ It’s enough running -- from one place to the other. I don’t want anymore.” But there was one man -- and it’s terrible that I forgot names, but he had his doctorate already -- one of the very young doctorate. He was also Jewish, but also a part of the Social Democratic underground. He talked with me and I never forget, because he said, “Gisela, do you like to go under a cold shower?” and I said, “Yes.” He said, “ That’s just what this is. You are trying. And you must go. There is no way that people should just stay here!” So, you must imagine the Vienna railroad station filled with jubilation and I’m going on a train to go to Innsbruck, in Switzerland. They are drunk in there -- literally! They were drinking. They were young. Everybody wanted to grab me and put me on their laps. Nazis. It was their day. There was an agreement in Innsbruck, a person would meet me with white gloves, and that’s the way we would recognize each other. Not somebody I knew. Once more, I underline, when somebody’s helped me, it was sometime Jews and sometimes not. This is a person whose name I will never know. I only know that she said that she was a minister’s daughter -- a Swiss minister’s daughter, who had never done anything illegal, but for this, she would do it any day. She helped Jews and others. I got on a false passport. I had to go. It was something I thought was the worst, because I had to go back to Germany! I was in a train where they were jubilant, and I didn’t dare open my mouth, because I knew they would recognize my accent. Once when I had to say something, one of them said, “You don’t sound Swiss.’ And I said, “ My mother was a German.” I had to go through Munich, which was the worst. I cannot describe that trip. It was like a nightmare.

Q: You must have had your heart in your mouth through the whole…

A: I did, but the other side of me said, “ I don’t care. Let them kill me.” On the other hand, I wanted to be out. It’s this kind of dual thing. Anyhow I got out. I got into France. And then I have to say, the life of a refugee, which is horrible…especially if you used to be important, because at least you were part of an underground.

Q: You had a mission.

A: You had a mission -- was gone. There wasn’t anything. You are just nothing, right? France treated people abominably. When you ask about the interest, yes, I got a taste of Czechoslovakia. I wished I had that letter. I wrote an article about Masaryk and his son, who later was killed. He wrote me a beautiful letter, thanking me for that.

Q: Masaryk was the leader of…

A: The underground against the Nazis later.

Q: What was the route of the train? It went through Munich and then Koblenz and over to Germany?

A: I think it’s Koblenz but I can’t tell you for sure. I crossed the border in Alsace-Lorraine, that I know. I didn’t really care. France was miserable. France didn’t give any permission to stay. Some Austrians were allowed to be in France, I was not Austrian, I was considered an Austrian refugee. I wanted to stay with Paul, but that wasn’t allowed, because the Austrian refugees had to go. There was a big, fat guy from the committee -- he made every woman sleep with him until he got her some help. I just didn’t go back there.

Q: There’s always some corruption.

A: There’s always corruption, even on the committees there. I got to Lyon, to be a maid in somebody’s house, and was terribly exploited! Really badly exploited. But you are alive. Also there was a wonderful Protestant man in the government. He later became very famous after the war. His name was Monet. A very famous person, who helped me to get some permission to stay in France.

Q: Is this the Monet, he developed the concept of the United Europe?

A: Yes, he’s very famous. But that’s the one who helped me with that. I stayed then with these awful people in Lyon. What happened then? I got a job in a tiny little place outside of Lyon, in a family of very high nobility in France. I have had the most odd life, because this was unreal. It was a castle with young girls, very protected. But I also learned something about the life of nobility. The mother and father were separated, and I was always having to sit there in the evening and do some cross-stitching, and suddenly I realized that some evenings she didn’t want me there. Then I realized that there was a young man with whom she slept on those evenings. You live a totally unreal life! The kids -- there were two young girls -- had to go on a trip and I was a governess. I had to go with them. We went first to Paris, and then to someplace near the Gulf of Viscaya. I saw horrible scenes of these poor, Spanish refugees that tried to escape Franco, and were shot right on the water there across from us.

Q: Really! As they came over into France?

A: As they came into France.

Q: This was near Biarritz?

A: Right there in the south. So I saw it! They tried to cross. If they didn’t quite make it, the Spanish bullets hit them and they died. We found a naked man in the bushes when he made it. The world was crazy. I tell you that. And that I saw there. Then I had to go back with the two young girls to Paris. This is the period of what they called the “droll de guerre.”

Q: The “Funny War.”

A: And I have to get the sequence straight. The Funny War breaks out. It’s a declaration that France is in the war. They arrested all -- the idiot France -- all the German refugees, their best friends, they arrested them and put them in camps. Paul was again in a camp. And other, too. They did not arrest the Austrians. So I was not in a camp. I had no place to go, because Paris was zone “enterdit” which means you are not allowed to stay. So was Lyon. There was no place to go. I said, “ I’ll just go up in the air.” But the father of these kids had this little place outside of Paris, and kind of liked it, that somebody was there. So he said, “You can stay there.’ And he was very high nobility. “You can stay there and just take care of it.” I stayed. It was winter. It was ice cold. There was no heating, but I stayed there. In between he would come for weekends with his mistress. Sometimes she would stay there, and I learned to know a very poor little French girl who had to be protected, because she felt very bad about the whole thing…But, she was there. That’s another story. Meanwhile the bombs are beginning to fall. Very soon it was impossible to stay there, because the whole village was beginning to talk about that strange woman there. And he was getting afraid. And he had two mistresses -- that was too much -- you can’t do that. The refugee committee in Paris -- it’s both Jewish and non-Jewish refugee committee-- found a place in Jouy en Josas, I still remember. It’s not far from Paris. There was a young farmer living there who was Jewish -- he was actually a Jewish refugeee, but he was meanwhile settled there a long time -- who had a non-Jewish wife, so they said I could stay in their house. And the refugee committee said I could come occasionally to Paris and kind of help them with -- quote -- “investigations”, which was pretty horrible, to check out things. I had a place. It was under a roof and it was all right.

Q: So you were working with the committee then.

A: I was working with the committee. It was pretty awful.

Q: In other words, you were in a position where you had to make some judgments.

A: Yeah, and very bad. They were doing terrible things. I surely would have never liked social work if I had believed that’s social work, I’ll tell you. Taking out of somebody who has nothing, taking more out of nothing. I won’t go into all this. Both Jews and non-Jews -- it didn’t matter. It was awful. And I saw situations where they checked out a woman -- when I got into her room, she was sitting on the bare floor -- with nothing! Literally! Nothing. And then you check her out. I called her, all I could do was put my arms around her, and say, “ This is ridiculous. I better get you something to eat.” But this is the kind of thing that happened. I didn’t do much of that. I don’t remember I did much of it. I got some support that way. I also, in that time once, could visit Paul who had become what they called a “prestataire.” The French allowed the refugees that they recognized as definitely anti-Nazi to build kind of an auxiliary column to their army. And they were digging trenches and doing these kinds of things. So I could visit him once there, They lived in barracks. That’s a whole other story. I was still there. But then one day, I went into Paris and a French teacher whom I knew came and said, “ Gisela, the Germans are approaching Paris, and the worst thing will be the refugees. They are just killing them off on the way. You better leave.” I still remember there was already terrible confusion. I got back to the village. Again, as usual, you have to leave everything. You don’t take anything with you. You always accumulate a little bit of something -- some books, usually. And we had to leave everything. I have to say something. There has been a lot of bombing. The Belgians had already streamed in, and we saw all the soldiers coming, and all that. But we had been used, already, to have in our pockets, one lemon and some nuts, because that’s the way you saved some food. And with that, I was supposed to go back to Paris. I forgot to tell you that, perhaps, two weeks earlier than that, a telegram still reached me that my sister had been killed in England. The one whom I loved very much. So that was gone too.

Q: Was her death related to the war?

A: Not totally. She went to Wales. She was a nurse. She went to Wales for having a few days vacation -- with her friend -- and a truck ran over her. It’s the confusion of the war. It isn’t killed by a bullet. She was for many years a nurse in that large Jewish hospital in London.

Q: She had not married or had children.

A: Couldn’t. No. I went back, the Gar St. Lazaire was completely closed. They had put the doors locked so that people couldn’t get on the trains. And it was a confusion! People were sitting in masses around the station. Sitting there, the planes coming over, the smoke pouring through, to hide the city. It was bedlam! Paris was totally demoralized. People were streaming in from all over the country, and the Germans were just coming, coming, coming. An so I just felt I couldn’t sit there, and there were some others, I was one of two, we just kind of started walking. At one corner there was a little bit of a thing open. We were pretty thin at that time. So I sneak through. There was a train sitting. Got into the train, which was full of people.

Q: You just squeezed through a narrow door? It said, “Closed,” but…

A: Yes, but we got in. We weren’t many. Maybe I was alone, maybe two people. Everybody else was just sitting, waiting.

Q: You didn’t know where the train was going to go?

A: No, we didn’t know. But the train was moving south, which was what we wanted. Everybody had said, “ If you can, go to Montauban.” Montauban was kind of known for the Austrian refugees. A refuge. The train was going south. Didn’t know for sure. Every minute it stopped, because there were some bombing, or something. It became night. We went out, nearby, you had to go to the washroom. On the outside.

Q: It was in the fields.

A: In the fields. But suddenly the news comes, the Italians have entered the war. So we knew we were kind of between the two. But oddly enough, that train went to Montauban! Some of us went off in Montauban. Suddenly there were a lot of refugees.

Q: And you were still free. And, then you were still in Free France -- technically.

A: It was still free. That was Free France, from then on. The mayor of Montauban was a Socialist. He had called the whole city to aid any refugees who would come. I still think Montauban should get a medal, somehow! They all helped. Everybody opened their homes. I still remember the man was a letter carrier.

Q: Do you recall if Montauban had any significant Protestant population?

A: No, I’m not sure. It’s not the same as the other place. I know about that other place. In fact, I hear that the daughter of the man, who is living right here in Minneapolis.

Q: Yeah. Her name is Mrs. Blackwell; teaches at Blake. [ Correction: her name was Nelly Blackburn; she has married again, and is now Nelly Hewitt. She is the daughter of Pastor Trocme, of Chambon, France.]

A: That’s right. But it’s not the same place. Montauban had both. Catholics, Socialists and probably Protestants, but it was mostly the Socialist mayor who was fantastic. He gave us false papers. He gave us rations. He gave us all these things that you needed. They streamed in, and they streamed in. We had all lost each other. We didn’t know what was what. I was very sure that I had lost Paul for eternity.

Q: You had to leave him behind.

A: Well, he was in that prestataire camp somewhere. Now his story, which is in that book, is unbelievable, because they simply went on the road. They told the French that when the Germans came in, they would be killed, and they don’t want to be killed yet, and they went on the road, and they lived. He lived on, alone, on sour grapes and stuff. By accident, he saw somebody on a bicycle whom he recognized -- and that person knew where I was. We always went to the post office to find out whether anything was there, and one day there was a letter I found from Paul. He will be here soon. So we were reunited! In this terrible mess! In so-called Free France, where there were constantly German commissions. You were ready at that time, you heard the Nazis…And the German refugees didn’t dare to say a word in the street, because they would recognize our accent. Very quickly, it didn’t go that everybody could stay in Montauban. The city got over-filled. But I must say, again, how other people helped. The surrounding was open country. These are farmers. They said, “ We’ll help these people. Never mind Jews, non-Jews.” And this was really a mixture. And so, I still remember, we were delegated to be a couple -- we could still not get married -- but a couple going to Lavitt. It’s far out. Somebody gave us bicycles. We bicycled there. The mayor knew who we were. The mayor gave us papers that we were Belgian refugees. I spoke perfect French, which made it easy. Paul can speak what’s called low German, which is like Flemish. So we made a very good Belgian couple. We lived. I can’t tell you how long, in that place, a very strange interlude.

Q: Were you assigned different names?

A: Oh, yes. And I forgot what my name was. It’s awful, but I forgot. We lived in, literally a stable, where you had to crawl in underneath. We had practically no food. The farmers gave us milk. We ate blackberries, mashed and whole, all the time, because that was something to eat. I still remember the incredible thing, when the Americans sent to the mayor, he wants some of that white fat.

Q: Oh, suet?

A: Yes. It was fantastic. We thought it was the best thing the world had ever invented. And some bread. But after a few months, the farmers began to like us. Paul -- now if you look at this house, this was all done with his own hands. This was a broken-down cottage, this house. He can do anything with his hands. I’ll show you something later-- other things. So he began to look into the garbage things, and found, sometimes, left-overs, and he soled their shoes. Then we helped when they had to harvest something. So we got a little better to eat. It was a very strange interlude. Then winter was approaching, and they needed woodcutters. And as I say, Paul was strong and could do anything.

Q: This has to be now, already, 1940.

A: That’s right. It’s 1940. It’s war. The Frenchmen were almost all prisoners, so they needed woodcutters. And I will tell that story, because there was a farmer, a French farmer, who needed a woodcutter. We went to him and we said, “Monsieur and Madame,” whatever our name was, and he would like to be a woodcutter. And the man said, he’s delighted. And then we said, “ But this isn’t our real name, and we are really German in origin.”

Q: You said this.

A: We had to tell him that, because Paul needed papers on his real name if he ever would be able to get a visa to the United States.

Q: You were already thinking of immigrating to the United States?

A: The committee came around. Always there were contracts. And they said, ‘ There are possibilities, but we don’t know when. And you must have some papers.”

Q: Did you think of Israel at all, as an alternative, with your sister being in Israel?

A: It was impossible to go to Israel from France at that time. There was no way. We didn’t like the United States, especially. We didn’t want to go at all. We wanted to stay there and fight, but everybody said. “There have to be witnesses, and this will be all overrun,” and lots of other things.

Q: Do you recall the name of the committee? You call it the committee? Did it have any kind of a name?

As: I don’t know. I cannot tell you which ones were the committee in Paris. I will explain that to you. But the committee that finally got us out, is the Unitarian Service Committee, and in New York, the Jewish Labor Committee -- it’s the Jewish labor group. They were Socialists. But they were Jewish -- Jewish Socialist labor unions. It was all coming through the labor union.

Q: So in a way, you still kept your connections all the way through all of this.

A: Oh, yes! All the way! It was always the labor unions. Always! That I have to say. And that’s why we got out. If you have no organization, you don’t get out. But what I’m saying, Paul needed that name, and I have to say, we said to the man, “Now you can hand us back to the Germans,; because they’re coming there regularly. And this man -- a little farmer in France, who had lost one leg, said, “This leg was shot off by a German bullet in the First World War. But I can distinguish between those who are in power and those who are not, and you are against those.” He said that. And that’s a little French farmer. I think we should remember that. Anyhow, Paul was working in the woods, very hard, every day, back with bleeding hands, because it was cold. No water. No soap. I cannot tell all these stories; there are lots of stories! Then the news came that Roosevelt has appointed a special committee that sifts out people who are in real danger. And there were visas given outside of the quota, to come over.

Q: Yeah. We have to explain that the background of this, is that the Evian Conference, and other things, had virtually closed immigration to almost anyone with a Polish or…particularly, there was a larger German quote, but that, obviously, was now closed, also, once the war started.

A: Yes. So it was all closed. But Roosevelt had appointed that committee. And meanwhile, there were again, the labor union people and some of the refugees that had gone out earlier, that together collected those lists. We were little people, but we were on those lists.

Q: You were on the lists.

A: We wanted to get married in France, because it would have been easier to go over as a couple. The village was delightful. They already had the banners out. But the man who had the say on that was the district attorney -- something like that. He has to make the decision.

Q: I don’t know the French name for such an officer, but I know what you’re referring to. He would be the Magistrat or something like that.

A: And he was a Croix de feu, that are the French Nazis. He was a French Nazi! He said, “ I will not think of marrying a Jew and a non-Jew! Because the Nazis will be in power, and I have no interest in having my name on their document like that.’ So we couldn’t even get married in France. It’s unbelievable. I mean, not even that was possible. My visa came first. I didn’t want to go. Paul said I had to go, because somehow the good fight has to be continued wherever we are. The farmers did something that I will never forget. They said to me, “You are afraid for him. Come on, we show you something we haven’t shown anybody!” and they took me into the woods, both of us, Paul and me, and we saw for the first time that the village had created an underground shelter -- totally hidden -- which was filled with food. They said “ It’s for food for us, but there’s three people we know,” and we didn’t even know that they knew that about us,   
but we have learned, meanwhile, it’s you, it’s Paul, and…” there was a third one who was an Englishman. “ And we’ll hide you there.”

Q: So this was your contingency.

A: So they said, “ You go to America! Nothing will happen to him. After the war he will come out.” That kind of thing. I didn’t want to, but I had to. Very quick. I went out in Spring, 1941. I had to go over Spain. I could still do that by train, which was unusual, but it was still possible. We saw the starving children -- literally starving in the streets of Spain. Madrid. You asked me about my cultural interests. We had not had much to eat. I had one suit -- one blouse and one skirt --but I tell you one thing, I was in Madrid, and we had an overlay of 16 hours, I think, and I said, ‘ If I’m 16 hours in Madrid, I’m seeing the Prado.’ So that’s the way I’ve seen the Prado. (Laughs) it’s very strange. But anyhow, I saw the Prado.

Q: I think it’s wonderful now that they’ve actually put the “Guernica” of Picasso there. This is an amazing thing.

A: I have seen it!

Q: And I was lucky enough to have met the King of Spain last spring at the Harvard commencement. And I shook his hand, and I said, “ I hope that the Jews will always now be pleased to shake his hand.” He said that, yes, that Spain was actually going to come up with a new concordat. Very, very attractive person.

A: Yes, I went over to Portugal. We were warned by everybody that Portugal is a spy-nest, so you couldn’t talk in the streets. We were distributed by the Unitarian Service Committee.

Q: They had sponsored you through the trip.

A: Yes, through different places. I saw several other people, not Paul. I stayed with a woman who I still think is incredible. She did not know one word of a language that I knew, and I did not know Portuguese. But we communicated. And she made me a dress -- that’s fantastic -- she could see that I had only that, so she made me a dress. I got, in ’41, on a boat, the Nyassa, and I have found there are some other German refugees in social work around here who came on that boat. But not at the same day. It was a horrible trip, because it took, I think, over two weeks, and had to always zig zag, because there were mines. It was filled to the brim, and we were all in the bottom of the boat, and I was sea-sick all the time.

Q: What was your destination, New York?

A: New York, but this is the only place that people go from Europe.

Q: Who looked after you once you came into the city? Was it the labor organization?

A: Just a second, I have to say that, because on the boat was again a mixture of Jewish and non-Jewish refugees, I want to say one thing: The Unitarian Committee had got the notice that there was a list of the people who are most in danger -- and they needed that in New York, and they needed somebody to smuggle that out, and I am proud of the fact that they asked me to carry it. It was very difficult, but they did a good job of hiding it. I just feel good that I did that! It’s the one thing I felt good about. Now in New York, when we arrived, the people who really took care of us when we arrived, were these Jewish labor union people. To me it looked like little old men and they were just so gentle and so kind. But on the boat, just when we docked, came a swarm of journalists! We were not used to that. Most of us were hiding. I was literally hiding under benches. I didn’t want anybody to see, because there were still people over there. They didn’t understand.

Q: You didn’t want the publicity.

A: No! And there were too many. Our faces shouldn’t be shown, nothing. That was very odd. There were odd little things that I will not go into details, but that’s when I arrived. I want to say that Paul had a much more dangerous voyage. He got on a last boat, about, that was bound for Martinique and then to the United States. But, on that boat were refugees, as well as Nazis, which they did not know first -- a contingent of Nazis. And the Vichy government had made an arrangement with those Nazis, that in Martinique all these people would be arrested that were on the boat. Nobody knew that. They were on that boat. Then we, in New York, suddenly heard that.

Q: When did he take this -- do you recall? You were in New York about how long before?

A: I was there in spring, and Paul came, I think, in summer.

Q: So it was maybe a few months.

A: It’s just a few months later. But we in New York, suddenly got the news that that particular boat was bombed by a Dutch Free Force that was under English flag. That’s all we knew first. I should say that Paul later told what we knew. The Dutch had bombed the boat, and stopped it. At that moment, those who were Nazis, began throwing things into the water. Typewriters, all kinds of stuff. The Dutch came in board and thought they had captured all Nazis. Which doesn’t make it very good for the refugees, either. Paul, fortunately, as I say, spoke that strange language that’s close to the Dutch, and explained to them what the situation was. They took all of them to the northern part of South America -- I’d have to look it up -- the English had established there German prisoner of war camps. They took all these people, and Paul always told me that the worst day of his life was when they got off the boat, because there were black people under the English, you know, who threw stones at them, because they thought they were all Nazis. But they took them there, and they wanted to put them all into those camps. There was this whole group of German refugees -- anti-Nazis -- and also with women and children, and they said, “ You do that, and it’s very simple. Tomorrow morning, there is nobody alive. We cut their throats, and they cut ours. But we will not spend one night with these people.” There was really that kind of desperate hate at that moment. And the English separated them. Then, at that time, Lord Halifax was the ambassador in New York. In New York, again, the committee -- when I say “the committee,” it’s always the labor unions together with the Unitarians --that had all the names. They were cabled there, and so after a while, they came to New York.

Q: So that was from the list that you also had helped them with.

A: That list and other lists, yeah. They came over. And Paul and I got married, I think, after a week after he got here. (Laughs) In New York. There’s a lovely story, if you have a minute, I’ll give it to you. You can read it in five minutes. I wrote that for him for his 25th wedding anniversary, because it’s a beautiful story.

Q: I want to get a little bit of chronology clear right now. After the marriage, you went to do graduate work at Pittsburgh?

A: Well, it’s not that simple. There are refugee committees in New York, right? You get transferred to refugee committees. When I arrived, I was with a refugee committee, because I was Jewish, right? I better not say that, but the social worker was impossible, but I don’t want to say that. (Laughs) There were very bad experiences, actually. When Paul and I got married, we were transferred to the non-Jewish refugee committee. It’s ridiculous! I had, meanwhile, found some work. That means I worked twelve hours a day taking care of some old man. It was fine. I made a living. But that particular refugee committee -- and I would have to look up the papers -- was very good. They really sat down with us and discussed what we wanted to do. Meanwhile, I had a friend in Cleveland who said, “ You know, you should go into social work.” I said, “Heaven, no. Not social work.” She said, “ Well listen, there’s something new there that is called social group work, and it’s working with young people, and you like that, and you should study.” Paul said, “ Gisela, you study, because you’re much farther ahead in university studies.” So they arranged for us to go to Pittsburgh, and on a bus with six dollars between us, we went to Pittsburgh. Got into a little room. And there was -- My God, it was Family Service committee, I think.

Q: Possibly Jewish Family Service?

A: No, the regular one. It was the regular city family service committee, but she was Jewish -- the social worker -- wonderful person. So she gave me better ideas about social work than the other one. Glick was her name.

Q: Did your mother know that you had married now?

A: Oh, yeah. That finally went. There was no correspondence through all those horrible war years. Eight years are cut out of our lives, you know. In fact, they got once a letter, and they still saved that, because it said, “Fished out of the channel in…” You know, and that was during that period. But yes, mother lived with us. She loved Paul, and there was just no question about it.

Q: So she came to Pittsburgh.

A: No. Mother came to visit us here.

Q: Once you were established in Minneapolis.

A: Pittsburgh is a different story. Paul was an iron worker first, then a welder. He’s very good at anything! He can do anything with his hands! Could do anything with his hands. And then he went in the American Army for three years. In another bombing in London.

Q: He was back in Europe during the war.

A: So we got separated again. We were separated for eight years, and then again for three years. But we wanted it! We wanted to fight the Nazis. And I, meanwhile, studied social work, and I gave a lot of speeches during the war about the Nazis. Pittsburgh had a lot of Nazis. Pittsburgh had Nazis, because there were lots of Germans. And also many Yugoslavs were Nazis. Very strange. But there were also very good experiences in Pittsburgh. I was placed my first year of field work at the Jewish Community Center. I made it very clear that I don’t want to only work with Jews, but they were wonderful! I don’t know whether you know the name of Miriam Ephraim. She was one of the greatest, I think, in Jewish work. Without question. She later was a national -- one of the greatest. She was superb! She understood what I stood for. I have never forgotten that Miriam Ephraim was the first one who gave me to read the Bill of Rights, among all the people. And I said, “ My, God!” No search, this kind of thing. It was just beautiful.

But Paul was very early in the Army, back again. Because of that, also, we became very early United States citizens.

Q: Were you together sworn in as citizens?

A: Oh heavens, no. Paul was in the Army.

Q: So he, already, was a citizen to be in the Army.

A: No, heaven no! Americans know better. Everybody who’s an immigrant in the United States, regardless whether they are citizens or not, when there is an induction into the Army -- are inducted into the Army -- you can refuse, but you never will be a citizen. Anyhow, we wanted to fight those. But no, he was not a citizen. But before they went overseas, it was the custom to swear them in as citizens. It was a much better idea, anyhow, because that way they had American passports. I could become a citizen, then, a year later. I became a citizen in Pittsburgh. But when Paul came back from the Army in 1945 -- this is another long story. I was meanwhile working at the J.F. I had spoken in many places, and then in ’47 they called me here.

Q: So this is where your academic appointment came in ’47. So that’s how you came out to Minnesota.

A: Yes. ’47. And Paul came along. It’s not only since women’s liberation that the husband comes along. He said, “ Your father had bad eyes, so you’ll just come along.” He has then worked as an engineer at General Mills. We had no money when we came here. We came to this place here with two suitcases.

Q: I’m sure you have speculated about why this happened in Germany rather than another country. In a very cultured country. People still try to explain, or understand this, why this movement should have grown in a country that had produced Schiller and Beethoven and so forth.

A: And all these fantastic people in the time of the German Republic. I think there’s several reasons. One is that historically, certainly, there was a lot of anti-Semitism, earlier in Germany. And I often think, as Germans, who are always very thorough about things, it was such a -- quote --“thoroughly” grounded philosophical --totally wrong, you understand -- but it was always in the literature.

Q: But they had a science that would give it a legitimacy.

A: It had the literature. I think that’s one part. But that doesn’t really explain that well. I don’t think there are simple explanations. They’re always complex explanations. I think there were terrible economic situations. There had been this incredible inflation. And then this enormously high unemployment. And people, I think, who are desperate, can be bought.

Q: It often makes me wonder, that if we had a terrible depression here, and a man on a white horse came up and said, “ I’ll give you jobs, it may not be the politics you like… but you’ll have a job.”

A: That’s right. I’ll tell you, that’s one thing that I always tell people, “ I am as afraid of unemployment as I am of war.” Literally, when I walked in the street in Hamburg, I heard behind me two young men talk. And one said,” I’ve just joined the SR” -- that’s before the Nazis came to power -- and the other one said, “ Yeah.” And he said, “ I’m getting three marks a week that way.”

Q: So he sold his soul for three marks.

A: They sold them! And then you make good-enough propaganda. You make them feel that it’s right.

Q: Why do you think that if propaganda is thorough enough -- if the lie is big enough -- that people are capable of accepting, where they would know in detail that it’s something illogical, or that it doesn’t smell kosher, that they might be able to reject or resist it.

A: One wants to be comfortable. And when one feels very down, which many people felt, it’s wonderful to have somebody to blame. So you blame everything on the Jew, right? And you blame everything on the intellectual, because it wasn’t only the Jew! And you blame everything on the Socialists, and the Communists, and you have somebody to blame! Right? That’s number one. I think, also, you can make propaganda, almost chisel it to a fine point. I was sent back by the United States government, several times, after the war.

Q: And to help in the de-Nazification process.

A: Well, in helping a lot with the establishment of social services, youth services. I was teaching teachers in schools of social work. It was one of the most -- I could talk for hours about that -- a moving type of…

Q: And before the war, Germany had good youth services, did it not?

A: Yes. But it was moving experience, because they would come to me at night begging me forgiveness, and so on. I remember one woman who said to me, “ I was good Catholic. And I was very young…”

Q: Where were you when this happened? Do you recall?

A: Near Dusseldorf. She said to me -- she was a teacher in social work -- “I was a good Catholic, and I was very young! I was maybe nineteen. And we didn’t want to really believe everything that the Nazis were saying. Then they got us together and they would play the Gregorian chants. And they would say to them, “Can you hear that? That’s about the same. This is what the Jews have done. They have brainwashed you! It’s their music that they have… With that they have brainwashed you! Your music is just Jewish music. And you see, this is the way they have done it. They insidiously have always lied to you.” And she said, “ We began to believe it, it was so incredible!” I’m just giving you that as an example. I have a book by Masserman that’s very interesting -- it’s written in Germany. It’s called Fatsich, “No Justification.” It’s unbelievable what they would tell young people -- you know, the lies, and the insidious way. I think, one is that people are down, second is everybody wants to have an enemy that makes life so simple.

Q: It does make it simpler if you objectify all of your anguish.

A: That’s right. I think that’s the second. I think the third is that they called on something that is in many ways quite human, and that is the wish to be very important--strong! You know, a strong Germany! A very wonderful Germany! Better than anything else, you know. Then you feel that you are part of that. The last thing is, I always say, in any country; If you suddenly give power to the murderers, the sadists, the ones you put in prisons, you have a whole army I’m afraid ready made. And this I’m not inventing. I’ve seen it. They were the people you would have otherwise have behind lock and key. But you don’t only let them free! You give them the power. You say, you are the one who’s right. So I think all these things together make it. I don’t believe that it would happen only in Germany.

Q: So you don’t feel that there’s a special human nature that applies to them.

A: No, I don’t.

Q: We’re all capable of this.

A: I’ve seen too many Germans who fought them, right? I know a lot who fought them. And lots of them who died. And I have to say, no! I don’t say it’s only German. I think in their history. There have been too many periods, for instance, of overwhelming authority.

Q: Americans like to forget, too, that we too, have pro-fascist movements.

A: Oh my God, and we still have them!

Q: In the ‘30s we had many, many, important big movements. The Silver Shirts. There was Father Coughlin, and Gerald L.K. Smith.

A: The things that have been done to blacks in America is not less sadistic. And it was justified by, “These are not people!” Jews were not people! “They’re just vermin! You have to exterminate!” That’s what you have to know. That’s what they are told, you know. It’s horrible. I can give you symbols. I’m very interested in this.

Q: You said your father became more religious as he grew older.

A: More practicing, I always say.

Q: In other words, he went to shul more frequently.

A: Oh, he always did that anyhow. He always was observant. I always say, “I know all the rules and regulations.” (Laughs)

Q: But you feel he retained his idealism -- his Socialist vision -- to the very end?

A: Yes and no. How can I say this…Yes, but he was also getting bitter, and bitter, and more bitter. Then when the Nazis came, he was just almost wiped out. “How can they do this!”

Q: How did you and Paul react to the creation of Israel? From your Socialist standpoint, I imagine there were some confusions about whether this was a good thing.

A: I personally am an internationalist. I have always said I was not a Zionist and I will never be. I have respect for what, especially, the people in the kibbutzim did, because I think they wanted to create an ideal state. I don’t think they succeeded. I finally said, “Well, since they did it, they did it.” From that moment on, you don’t want to have that little country go to the ground, either, because they’re human beings there, you know. But I can’t say that I’m totally identified. Interesting enough, Paul has always been much more pro-Israel than I. These beautiful statues are all done by Paul.

Q: In the living room of Dr. Konopka’s home, there are these beautiful small figures of all kinds. I’m looking at a wooden -- looks like teak or something -- a very hard wood. Strong hands clasping a column -- two arms.

A: Two arms who are really starving. Starving to death.

Q: With the fingers open. In a pleading gesture.

A: Yes, starving hands. And it is clear when that is done. It’s December, 1973. Paul did that when Israel got into this horrible war. You know that very short war? And I said, “ What are you doing?” He said, “ Gise, to me that represents that I am so angry that people care more for oil than for human beings. That war is fought against Israel because of oil, and nobody cares. So I want that as a memory to it.”

Q: That’s a very fine piece, I think. It’s about a foot-and-a-half high.

A: But this is interesting. He felt, in some ways, more identified. He has been with me to Israel. We have visited quite often. And I have to say that my cousins, whom I love, in Israel -- in the kibbutzim -- loved him. I had a cousin in Jerusalem, who is not alive anymore, but they were especially fond of Paul. Because Paul had a sense of great love, but it was the love of the persecuted. Is that clear? Not necessarily that it became a new nation, okay.

Q: Think about this for a minute, if you would. Your own Jewish identity. After all, you grew up in a tradition. You saw the catastrophe. You were part of that. As you said, eight years, almost of your life. Involved in it -- that stopped your growth -- when I say “stopped your growth” it was an interruption, of just surviving from one minute to the next doing things, trying to help. How do you feel now about human nature in general? After all, I’m asking this of a very well-known social worker and professor -- maybe it’s not a fair question.

A: It’s a fair question, but it’s a complicated question. I wrote a book on philosophy -- with Lindeman, on Social Work Philosophy --which includes a lot of my philosophy. But it was written in 1954, so maybe I have changed. I don’t know. And it’s not easy to say, though many people have asked me. First of all -- and I stole that from something I once saw somewhere -- “ I’m a Jew by discrimination.” I will always admit loud and clear that I am Jewish, because I will never deny something that has made me, in other eyes, something inferior -- which I’m not. That means I feel that very strongly. Religiously, it’s much more complex! I have a long struggle, since the age of 17, when I struggled that out with my father and the rabbi.

Q: So you made your declaration of independence when you were very young.

A: Very early. I’m not someone who just throws away these things. I’ve often said, “I’m religious, but I’m not denominational.” Maybe that’s the way to put it.

Q: How about the children? Your children, and…

A: I don’t have children of my own. That means I have had lots of children, but not children I have borne. I think that if I would have had children, both Paul and I always felt that we are not in disagreement in any of our basic philosophy, so they wouldn’t have had any problems with that. We recognized the basic need -- now this sounds sentimental, but I don’t mean it sentimental -- for love and acceptance in the world. I think that’s available in all religions, almost.

Q: For validation. Some kind of validation

A: That’s right. We both did not believe that rules and regulations make a religion. So we probably wouldn’t have raised our children with a lot of traditions. I have to say that. I find some traditions beautiful, and I would let them know about them. I have met many of my young American friends, and I always say -- some of them who are Jewish -- and I say, ‘ It’s a pity you don’t know any of these things! You should know them! But I think you should also know about the religious things that…” I read a lot about the Hopi religion. What I’m saying is I think one should know. I do not accept rules and regulations as making a religion. I think, to me, there is a basic need to understand the incredible dignity of the human being -- the incredible, amazing creation of something like the human being, that I think can be devilish, and can be wonderful. People have often asked me after my experiences, how can I still believe in human beings. I’ve seen beautiful things. I don’t know whether I have told them all.

Q: You’ve mentioned some, even in the midst of horror! That people have been decent.

A: That’s right. I was recently in Holland where I was lecturing, and the man who asked me to lecture there. I had no idea, was a three-year-old, in a concentration camp and was not a Jew. And was separated from his mother! Was a child! Wandering in a concentration camp. The Dutch. Just incredible! And he was three and four and five. And I said, ‘ This is unbelievable!” He says, ‘ I’ll tell you something. I remember the horror and the way I was crying, because I saw all these dead people -- saw ‘em on a heap.’ And he says, “ you know what I also remember? Little old faces looking into my eyes and little old hands wiping my bottom. They were all Jews.’

Q: Looking after him as best they could.

A: Then he says, “ They were probably not so old, but to me, these were little old fasces. And taking care of me.” He happens to be a very practicing Catholic today. But he says, “ The religion came to me through that experience.” So I don’t see religion as just belonging to one kind. But I do know the Jewish tradition. As I say, I’m not a Zionist. And perhaps what I have to say, when groups say, “ I’m proud! I’m proud to be Polish! I’m proud to be German! I’m proud to be Catholic! I’m proud to be Jew!” I say, “Nonsense!” I wish that people can be proud of their goodness -- or at least that they try to be good. That’s all we can do. And that’s the way I see it! But I will always say, I am a Jew, because that’s the way I am born!

Q: Do you think there’s anything that can be learned? A lot of people deny that. They feel the Holocaust is such an unique event, that the Nazi period, however they define it, as modern totalitarianism and using the machinery of the state to destroy groups that any sane person knew were helpless, that this doesn’t teach us anything, really!

A: It does. And it also isn’t that unique. The only thing that’s unique is we only think of ourselves. We have the same kind of horrors being committed against blacks -- and children -- separating them, killing them like little flies. Right! It has happened! I don’t say it happens today, but it has happened. I think in modern history, it’s the only one, and maybe the one piece that I, perhaps, think is history, it’s the only one, and maybe the one piece that I, perhaps, think is German, is the orderliness of it. Which is terrifying! You know, this cleanliness.

Q: Yeah. Everything has to be cleaned up.

A: It’s all orderly. And this is terrifying. But no, demeaning of people, unfortunately. Has happened. I think what we can learn…a lot of things we should learn. One is to raise children, from the beginning, not in obedience. I am a fighter against obedience! That sounds strange.

Q: In other words, if you see a child that is too rigidly over behaving, you sense something is wrong.

A: You know that my special interest is in children in institutions? When I look at these delinquency institutions, all they do is train them to be obedient!

Q: which is just an outward conformity of behavior.

A: And they will be obedient to anybody who will sing the Piper’s song one day.

Q: So if there would happen to be someone who would be over them in an authoritarian position, they would obey whatever.

A: If we want to keep a sane--democratic, or whatever we want to call it--society, we must not raise people just being obedient. Eichmann, I quote it all the time, said it at his trial, “Until May,” -- whatever he was when he was captured -- “I have always believed that one has to be obedient.” They believed that! And that’s number one. The second thing we have to learn is that you must inform people. I still think a free press is, to me, the greatest guarantee of a free society. We must keep it alive.

Q: So that means we have to tolerate obnoxious opinions.

A: Yes. I have great difficulties with it. I think some opinions are terribly obnoxious. But I don’t wasn’t only opinion. I want facts! When people have come to me with very definite opinions, I say, “ Alright, what are the facts that are underlying this?” I think the third is you have to raise human beings with a philosophy of ethics -- or whatever we want to call it -- and if it’s Judaism, wonderful, because it has a basic ethic. And if it’s Christianity, it has a basic ethic. But we have to raise people with a conscience. You can’t just say there are no values. You don’t press values on them. You just let them think. I think that’s what helped me! My father was fighting me when I said, “ I don’t believe in this and all that.” But at least, somehow, it was possible for me to think these things through.

Q: Yes, and you felt, maybe, that even in your rebellion, you were rebelling against an authentic person.

A: That’s right. Exactly. So I think there are many things that we learn from that. And to be very watchful when these things start up again. Where was it where I thought I was really kind of pleased. It wasn’t very recent. I didn’t have time to go, but I think the Anti-Defamation League had a meeting together with the black community. It was quite recent. I like that. I think the bridging of those who are very often discriminated against, is very important. The divide and conquer is done to kill off people. So, I think we can learn a lot.

Q: Is there anything you want to add at this point?

A: No, at the end, I’ll probably think half the things I want to say I haven’t said.

A: Well, this has been extraordinarily informative for me, I must say…

A: And for me, I tell you what, it’s hard, but at the same time, I’m glad I can do it. When the 40-years Nazis were, I asked once to speak publicly, and I did. ‘Cause I felt very strongly that I must let the lies be fought, It wasn’t only the Jews that were…Everybody who had a decent thought. The Nazi philosophy – it’s insidious!

Q: You mentioned Jehovah’s Witnesses. You saw the persecution of others.

A: The Socialists. The lie that nobody fought, that they all just went to the slaughter. It’s not true. It’s not one nation. There were good Germans, you know. We have to fight these things! Because otherwise, we will become like they. I don’t want us to become like they.

Q; So in a way, you’re saying that we’ve got to be careful not to develop our own lies about the past.

A: Right! I’m very afraid of that. I know that we always are that way. It hurts me more when a Jew is prejudiced than when anybody else is prejudiced. I always say, “ Not you! We mustn’t do that. We just can’t do that.” We can’t become like they. I don’t want that.

Q: And this has been a common criticism, too, that there are many people who in order to fight and survive, become, in some ways, like their persecutors.

A: I know. I couldn’t believe it! I saw people coming out of the concentration camps -- oh, hating!

Q: Well I heard a very interesting response that I’d like your comment on. I only heard this second-hand, not first-hand. A young man said that he’d asked his father why he’s never told him about these experiences in the war, and the father said, “ Because I don’t want to pass my hates onto you,” he said, “ I was silent for this reason.’

A: But silent isn’t enough. They should talk. I have talked a lot about the Nazi period. My sister until today in Israel, will not tell anything . Not how she felt. Her son has never known anything if I hadn’t told him. Many people I saw in Israel who don’t want to talk about it.

Q: they feel that they’re trapped, in a way, in an ideology of…

A: Part of that had a real hate! I talked with somebody in German in the streets of Tel Aviv and somebody was almost spitting at us. Certainly we were both Jews (Laughs) who were talking to each other, (Laughs) and I understood it. A woman who must have lived through horrors. It’s not that I don’t understand it. It’s just that I wish it wouldn’t be that way.

Q; So some of them just have different copying mechanisms. Your wish is that they could have come through -- and many have -- with…

A: Many have, many have. I have known wonderful people. And I also want to say, “ I’m not only talking about the ones who have gone through it. ‘ When you say, “How do you prevent it -- the next one?” Let’s not start all that hate against people. It’s harmful. It’s not good.

Q: I want to thank you very much for taking the time with me.

A: Well, I want to thank you.

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