UNITED STATES HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM
FIRST PERSON SERIES
FIRST PERSON MARGIT MEISSNER
Wednesday, April 6, 2016
11:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m.

Remote CART Captioning

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>> Bill Benson: Good morning and welcome to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. My name is Bill Benson. I am the host of the museum's public program, *First Person*. Thank you for joining us. We are in our 17th year of the *First Person* program. Our First Person today is Mrs. Margit Meissner, whom we shall meet shortly.

This 2016 season of *First Person* is made possible by the generosity of the Louis Franklin Smith Foundation, with additional funding from the Arlene and Daniel Fisher Foundation and the Helena Rubinstein Foundation. We are grateful for their sponsorship.

First Person is a series of conversations with survivors of the Holocaust who share with us their firsthand accounts of their experience during the Holocaust. Each of our *First Person* guests serves as a volunteer here at this museum. Our program will continue twice-weekly until mid-August. The museum's website, listed on the back of your program, provides information about each of our upcoming First Person guests. The address is www.ushmm.org.

Anyone interested in keeping in touch with the Museum and its programs can complete the Stay Connected card in their program or speak with a museum representative at the back of the theater. In doing so, you will receive an electronic copy of Margit Meissner's biography so that you can remember and share her testimony after you leave here today.

Margit will share her "First Person" account of her experience during the Holocaust and as a survivor for about 45 minutes. If time allows, we will have an opportunity for you to ask Margit questions.

Today's program will be livestreamed on the Museum's website. This means people will be joining the program via a link from the museum's website and watching with us today from across the country and around the world. A recording of this program will be made available on the museum's website. And we invite those who are here in the auditorium today to also join us on the web when the rest of our programs in April and early May will be livestreamed. Please visit the *First Person* website, listed on the back of your program, for more details.

For our web audience, if you would like to use Twitter to ask a question, send a picture, or write a comment during the program, please feel free to do so using the #ushmm.

The life stories of Holocaust survivors transcend the decades. What you are about to hear from Margit is one individual's account of the Holocaust. We have prepared a brief slide presentation to help with her introduction and I will be bringing up those slides momentarily.

Margit was born Margit Morawetz on February 26, 1922, in Innsbruck, Austria. When Margit was a baby, her family moved from Austria to Prague, Czechoslovakia. The arrow on this map, the first

arrow, this map of 1933 Europe, points to Austria and our second map points to Czechoslovakia. Prague is identified on this map of Czechoslovakia.

Here we see Margit at the age of 3. She was the youngest of four children born to Gottlieb and Lily Morawetz. Gottlieb was a banker from a religious Jewish family.

Here we see Margit's family at the Lido, a beach resort in Venice, in 1926. From the left are her brother Felix, cousin Erni, her brother Bruno, her mother and father, Margit is circled, Margit's governess, Yeya, and her brother Paul.

Margit's father Gottlieb passed away in 1932 when Margit was 10. In 1938, when Margit was 16, attacks on Jews in Central Europe escalated and her mother decided she should leave school in Prague. Margit was sent to Paris to live with a French family where she studied dressmaking. In March 1939, Margit's mother joined her in France. This is Margit with her dog Flippi, just before leaving Prague in 1938.

As the Germans were advancing on Paris, Margit's mother was ordered to report to an assembly point in the south. Margit bought a bike and fled with other refugees to the South of France.

Margit found out that her mother was at the Gurs Detention Camp in Southern France, shown here in this photograph. She eventually got a train ticket to a town outside of Gurs.

When France surrendered to Germany in June 1940, Margit's mother was able to leave Gurs in all the confusion and join Margit. The two fled via Spain and Portugal to the United States where they settled in 1941.

In this photo, we see Margit in 1941, soon after she arrived in the United States.

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

We can't do justice today to describing the remarkable journey her life would take from there but it included many stops in the U.S. and abroad. Margit would eventually spend 20 years with the Montgomery County, Maryland, public school system specializing in disability issues. She remains on the board of an organization which she helped found 27 years ago that helps youth with disabilities obtain employment after graduation from high school.

Margit lives in Bethesda, Maryland. She has two children and two grandchildren. Her daughter Anne lives nearby in Silver Spring, Maryland. Margit's son Paul is a hospital planner at Montefiore Hospital in the Bronx. Since Margit's partner, Ervin, passed away in 2008 at the age of 97, Margit's friend, now husband, John, takes very good care of her.

Margit leads tours in all three of the museum's exhibits and speaks in various settings about her Holocaust experience. Recently, she spoke in Congress to call attention to Syrian refugee crisis. Margit also works in the museum's archives translating documents from Czech and German to English.

In 2003 Margit's autobiography, “Margit's Story,” was published. Immediately after today's program Margit will be available to sign copies of her autobiography, which is also available in the museum bookstore.

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

>> [Applause]

>> Margit Meissner: Thank you very much.

>> Bill Benson: Margit, thank you so much for joining us today and thank you for being willing to be our *First Person*. We have an amazing crowd for our first day of livestreaming over the internet. So you're our First Person for us to do that with. We have so much for you to tell us about in a short time so we'll started right away.

Although you were born in Austria and your family moved to Prague, Czechoslovakia, when you were very young, you lived there until 1938 when your mother sent you Paris at age 16. Let's begin our conversation today with you telling us, Margit, about your family, your community, and yourself in those years before you went to Paris when your life would change forever.

>> Margit Meissner: Well, I was the youngest of the children, as you saw in the picture. We were a very well-to-do family that was very intent on keeping up the decor in which we lived. As the youngest of four children and the only girl, I was always considered a little doll. And I did not like that.
>> [Laughter]
>> Margit Meissner: They just wanted to hug me and really sort of play with me. And I thought it was not a good idea to be a girl and to be so young. Of course, now I don't have this problem anymore.
>> [Laughter]
>> Bill Benson: Margit, tell us about your brothers.
>> Margit Meissner: I had three brothers, as you saw also in the photograph. The interesting thing about them is that each one eventually settled on a different continent. My oldest brother, Paul, found refuge when Hitler entered Czechoslovakia and Australia. My second brother, Felix, had come to the United States before the beginning of the war. And my third brother, Bruno, became a Canadian. And I became an American. So that was really due to the fact that nobody in the world wanted to give asylum to penniless refugees and we just had to find it wherever we could.
>> Bill Benson: You lost your father early. Do you remember much about him?
>> Margit Meissner: Well, unfortunately I don't remember much about him at all. Because in the kind of world that I lived, children were the work of the mother. And I primarily had a governess who really brought me up. So my father was a very distant figure but I knew that he was an important man and that one had to respect him.
>> Bill Benson: After your father died you told me that you were put on a guardian. What did that mean to you and your mother?
>> Margit Meissner: Well, my father, I think, didn't believe that his wife, my mother, was able to handle finances. Because in that world women were not expected to know anything about money. So when my father passed away, in his will he decided to leave his assets to a guardian. So, although we were a well-to-do family, my mother did not have very much money with which to run the rather complicated household.
>> Bill Benson: In 1938, after Hitler annexed Austria, your mother and you made a momentous decision to send you from Prague to live in Paris. Tell us what convinced you and your mother to make that decision, why you chose Paris, and what your life was like once you were there.
>> Margit Meissner: Well, it was a momentous decision, certainly. But in the environment in which we lived where we really had no idea what was going on in the world, it didn't seem so momentous. I was in 10th grade. I was a good student that passed tests. I was not interested in school because I was interested in boys.
>> [Laughter]
>> Margit Meissner: And when my mother said you should leave here, I thought that was a good idea. I was proud that mother had confidence in me at age 16 that I could take care of myself in a foreign country. And I knew French because we had had a French governess at home, so the language was not a problem.

I was going to go to Paris to study dressmaking. Now, why dressmaking? You have to understand that in 1932 if you wanted a dress, you didn't go to the department store. You went to the dressmaker. So dressmaking, sewing, was a very respectable profession. And I thought the idea -- because we knew that the Jews lost all of their assets if they wanted to emigrate from Germany. So if we lost everything, then I would have to be able to make a living someplace and the someplace was very unknown with a language that I might not know. So if I had a profession like a lawyer or a doctor, I would need to know the language but as a dressmaker, I could make my way in any country.
>> Bill Benson: When you were in Czechoslovakia, before going to Paris, you were at all times an Austrian citizen. What significance was that?
>> Margit Meissner: Well, the significance of that at the time -- when I was little it didn't make any difference. When Austria was annexed in 1938, that became a very important point. I think if I hadn't been an Austrian citizen, if I had been a Czech citizen, my mother wouldn't have felt as frightened. But because Austria was now part of Germany and because the anti-Semitic laws in Germany were very

threatening, she thought I should get out of that environment. When we came to France, it started to make a huge difference.
>> Bill Benson: And we'll hear more about that in a few minutes. Did you or your mother know the family that you went to in Paris?
>> Margit Meissner: No. Mother found this family who was willing to take me in. It was a very good choice. They were lovely people. There were young people, my age, who took me in right away. And it really was not a difficult transition.

I think for most refugees who had to leave their home, it was a very traumatic decision but I was not the father of a family who had outstanding in the community. I had no standing anywhere. I had not left anything behind. So for me to leave was rather an excursion. I had no idea that I would never see Prague again, my friends. It was totally unpredictable.
>> Bill Benson: At that time was your mother able to travel to see you in Paris?
>> Margit Meissner: At first she wasn't but then she decided to come and see me. And during that time all of Czechoslovakia was annexed. So basically she had left Prague as though she had gone on vacation. And when she was in France, she was not able to go back. All that remained of all of our possessions was a little suitcase with which she came. And from one day to the next we really became penniless. Which was a huge issue because until then mother had been able to send me a certain amount of money every month to pay for my expenses and now that was all gone.
>> Bill Benson: Before we turned to what life was like for you in Paris and then in France, you mentioned Hitler annexed Czechoslovakia. That meant essentially that he took control of Czechoslovakia. And this was before the war began.
>> Margit Meissner: Correct. That was in March of 1939. It was a huge disappointment for Czechoslovakia because Austria was interested in being part of Germany but the Czechs were really enemies of the Germans and they felt that the world had abandoned them because the French and the British made a pact with Hitler to hand over parts of Czechoslovakia without consulting the Czech government. So this was famous appeasement at Munich which nowadays sometimes you hear mentioned when there are discussions about our dealings with Iran. They say this is going to be another Munich, which means we are going to be sold out again.
>> Bill Benson: So Margit, as you were beginning to tell us, your mother did come to Paris. So once there, you lived together for a while. What was your life like together? What did you face?
>> Margit Meissner: We had very little money, so we lived in a rented room. I went to dressmaking school, very happily. It was fun. At the beginning I was a very bad student but then I caught up with the rest. I think I became quite a competent patternmaker and dressmaker.

Then one day -- then, of course, World War II started in September of 1939. Because Austria was part of Germany, France was at war with Germany, I became an enemy alien. That became very uncomfortable because the French in general didn't want to have refugees there and certainly they didn't need any former Austrians who were now Germans.
>> Bill Benson: Did your mother and you have the same status?
>> Margit Meissner: Well, it turned out that we didn't. When war came close into France, my mother was not permitted to live in Paris where we had this rented room so she had to move to the countryside, a few miles out. And there, one day as the war was approaching, she received notice to present herself at the police station with three days' worth of food, whatever she could carry on her back, and two blankets and she would be evacuated, which basically was the buzz word for being deported. I took her to this bus station. When I asked the people why are you deporting her and where are you taking her, they said, "None of your business. Go home." So just in the very last minute before mother boarded her bus she took out of her pocket a significant amount of money, which I didn't know she had, and she gave it to me with these words. "It's now up to you to get us out of here."

Now, I never found out what that meant but it certainly meant that I had to get busy to find her, to get her out wherever she was, and to get both of us out, away from the approaching German Army.

>> Bill Benson: And, of course, the German Army did approach in June of 1940 when they attacked France. You're separated from your mother. And you were forced to flee Paris. What did you do? Tell us about that.
>> Margit Meissner: In -- I didn't have any friends in France. Most of my friends were from Czechoslovakia. They were not enemy aliens and they were able to leave without any problem. I had to go to the police every other day to show my face. They always said, “If you do anything illegal, we will immediately arrest you.” And, of course, I was very threatened.

The crowds were streaming out of Paris, away from the Nazi onslaught. So I went to the police station to get permission to leave. And when I got to the police station, the police station was opened. The policemen had fled, so there was nobody there. So I couldn't get permission. But I had an alibi that I thought I'd at least try to get permission.

And in my despair, when I saw all of these crowds walking, walking, I decided to take the money that mother had given me and bought myself a bicycle. And I found the only bicycle that was available in Paris, I think, on that day. And it had men's racing bike handles, these kinds of handles. I was not a good bicyclist but I just knew how to ride a bicycle.

So I bought that bicycle. I had with me a little case for the back of the bicycle which contained a set of underwear, a chocolate croissant, and my dressmaking notes because now that would be important. And then I had a case of oil paints. Because as a dress designer, I had to be an artist. So it was important that I had these oil paints. Now, when I think about this today, it just seems absurd.
>> [Laughter]
>> Bill Benson: And that was the sum total of what you had with you when you decided to flee Paris on this bike.
>> Margit Meissner: Absolutely.
>> Bill Benson: Let me go back a little bit right before that. You were out on the streets of Paris. You were telling me you saw everybody around there, their faces covered in black.
>> Margit Meissner: That was a sign that the German Army was approaching. The day before when I went to the police station to get permission, I saw the people in Paris with black faces and I couldn't imagine what had happened. And then when I came home, I had the same black face. So it seems that the French Army had put a smoke screen across -- to be able to evacuate the French troops across the river before the Germans approached. So that was a sign that the Germans were really at the gates of Paris and that I had to leave. It was very frightening because there were streams and streams of people all going in one direction, which I assumed was going south. They didn't have many belongings. People drove cars that they didn't know how to drive and they got stuck. It was a tremendously chaotic situation.
>> Bill Benson: And literally thousands and thousands and thousands of Parisians on the road and there you are on your bike with your little provisions.
>> Margit Meissner: All by myself, always wondering where am I going, what am I doing. Am I doing the right thing?
>> Bill Benson: Did you have an idea where you wanted to go?
>> Margit Meissner: I had wanted to go to the West, Northwest of France because the only friends I had in Paris that were also Austrian, they also fled and we said we would meet on the northwest corner of France, near England.

As I was going on my bicycle, I was just riding. I didn't know where I was going. I wasn't tired. I was not hungry. I just kept bicycling.
>> Bill Benson: You shared with me that at first on the bicycle you were upset about being on a bicycle, I think because young women your age weren't on bicycles.
>> Margit Meissner: Of course, I was continuously conflicted about not only whether it was the right decision but whether a young lady in my situation could really do something that unusual, whether it was proper.

Everything in my life had to be, quote, proper because that is the kind of world that I grew up in. And if you remember the first picture that you saw on the screen was of me of a little girl with white

socks. Well, these white socks were really important because I went to the park with my governess with white socks and the big issue was that I shouldn't step in anything and make my white socks dirty. So a proper little girl could walk in proper white socks. So that concept continued throughout my adolescence.
>> Bill Benson: So here you are on this bike riding all day with thousands of people. What happened at the end of the first day?
>> Margit Meissner: At the end of the first day a policeman motioned to me as it was getting dark and said, "Come close." Of course, I was sure he was going to ask me for my papers. I didn't have the proper papers and he was going to arrest me. But he said, "Madam, take your bicycle. You can spend the night in the school in the next block and you can lie down on the classroom floor and spend the night." So I took my bicycle and went to the school.

And when I laid down there, it occurred to me that I had a letter in my pocket, a letter which I had received just before I left the house and hadn't looked at because I didn't recognize the handwriting. I looked at the letter and it was from somebody who my mother had been able to tell that she was in a concentration camp, in a French camp called Gurs. Now, nobody had ever heard of Gurs but I knew -- it said that it was close to the Pyrenees at the French-Spanish border. So at least I had an idea where Gurs was and where I could maybe find my mother.
>> Bill Benson: That was day one. What happened on day two?
>> Margit Meissner: Then on day two I continued riding. Now I had a destination, although it was not a destination that I had originally thought because I was going west and now I was going south.
>> Bill Benson: And now you're going to Gurs.
>> Margit Meissner: So I continued riding. I fell off my bike. I collided with another woman. We both looked at the bike, looked at the damage of the bike. It wasn't severely enough damaged that I couldn't continue riding so I continued riding.

A few minutes later a young man approaches me. And, of course, I got frightened. What does a young man want from me? He said, "Madam, madam, you can't continue riding; you are going to lose too much blood." And he pointed to my leg. And, indeed, I had a very deep gash in my leg that was bleeding heavily but I didn't realize it. I just kept on going. I didn't look. Now that he told me that I had a gash in my leg, now it started hurting.
>> [Laughter]
>> Margit Meissner: He also said there is a drug store not far from here, go there and see whether you can have the leg bandaged. So I went to the drug store. The druggist looked at it and said you have to go to the hospital, it has to be sewn up. I said, "I can't go to the hospital. I have no papers. Just bandage it." Then he said to me, "Why are you riding a bicycle?" I said, "Because there are no trains in France." The reality was there were no trains in Paris but further south there were trains. So he said go to the train station.

So with a bandaged leg I went. And there was another chaotic situation with hundreds and hundreds of people were waiting for trains to arrive. It was really chaos with women fainting and children crying, old women sitting there whimpering. It was really a very chaotic situation.

In the middle of this, after I had waited several hours to approach the window, there was an air raid alarm. Everyone went to the basement. I viewed the situation and decided I wasn't going to the basement. I stayed up on top and I watched the bombs coming out on both sides of the railway station. And fortunately they did not catch us.

What I didn't know at the time was that the school where I had spent the night a few hours after I left, because I left at day break, the school was bombed to smithereens and I wasn't there anymore. So I was very, very lucky.
>> Bill Benson: In fact, your decision to not go to the bomb shelter at the train station meant you were at the front of the line when the air raid was over and you were able to get a ticket.
>> Margit Meissner: Correct. I was able to get my ticket. I was able to register my bicycle. But I never rode it again.
>> Bill Benson: Where did you go from there?

>> Margit Meissner: Well, then instead of going to the West, the train that I was in was going south. And when I got out, it turned out I was in a town where I had friends, near the Pyrenees. And when I told my friends where my mother was, they said it is 12 kilometers from Gurs. So this was an incredibly lucky coincidence.

So the lady who took me in went to the camp to see whether she could find my mother but she couldn't find my mother. This was the day before France capitulated, so there was basically no more government working. She came back and said, "I couldn't find your mom. I left a message. She's most likely not going to get it so I don't know what we're going to do."

So I didn't expect her; that France had capitulated and I was not knowing what to do. One day I was sitting in the yard and from far away a woman comes up and waves at me. I didn't wave back. I didn't know anybody who could wave at me. And she came closer and closer. She kept waving more energetically. I still didn't respond. When she came real close, it was my mom. She was so thrilled to have found her child because she didn't know where I could be. She had no idea that I had bought a bicycle and tried to leave. She was afraid I was in Paris. I was so stunned to see her that I didn't even run to embrace her. And the one thing she said about her concentration camp experience, because she never talked about it but the one thing she said: here I found my child and she wasn't even coming to welcome me.

>> Bill Benson: Before we continue, I want to ask you a couple of questions. When you finally got off the train ride, the train and into this little town, what did you do when you got into that little town? And one of the things I want you to share is you ended up being taken to the police station.

>> Margit Meissner: I went -- I knew that I had friends. I went to my friends' house. They were very welcoming but I couldn't stay there. Because there wasn't room. But they knew of a peasant woman who lived on the other side of the square where I could maybe find a place. So I went there. It was 3:00, 4:00 in the afternoon. I had not slept yet. I don't know whether I had eaten anything. I don't remember that. So the lady took me in and showed me the room up under the roof and I laid down, finally sort of thinking now I could relax.

A few minutes later. I don't know how much later. All of a sudden there's a knock at the door and two policemen come in. And the lady, the peasant lady who had taken me in, obviously thought there was something strange about me and she alerted the police that I had come. And these two policemen took me by the arm and said, "We'll take you to the police station." And, of course, I was totally stunned. In this town there is this big, huge cobblestone square. And two policemen walking next to me and I thought the end of the world had arrived. I started to cry.

And then they took me to the police station. And the police chief took one look at me and said to these eager policemen, "Let her go." So that was a great thing because he realized that I wasn't the spy they were afraid of.

That was before my mother came I had that experience. And, of course, it was a very frightening experience because I was nowhere, I didn't know what was going to happen and it was such a chaotic time for everybody because the government had just fallen, and no new government was in place.

>> Bill Benson: When your mother did arrive, she had been in this camp that people who didn't know about, Gurs, but was notorious. What kind of condition was your mother in?

>> Margit Meissner: I really don't know very much about this except that she spent most of her time outdoors. She was so sunburned. It's one of the reasons I didn't recognize her. She had lost so much weight and she was so sunburned. I think that was a reason I didn't recognize her.

She said it was an unbelievable experience. And she really didn't talk about it. But much later when she was at our house, when my children were little, when my children made a fuss about eating, she always said, "You should have been at Gurs. You would eat whatever was put in front of you." That was the one thing she kept saying about Gurs, that they really didn't have enough food.

>> Bill Benson: And as you told us, Margit, the French government had now capitulated to the Germans. You were in what's known as the occupied zone.

>> Margit Meissner: The occupied zone. So now we had to get out of the occupied zone into the unoccupied zone if we wanted to leave. Of course we wanted to leave. Everybody wanted to get out of the war zone.

We didn't have permission to leave. Mother, of course, had no papers and I did not have the right kind of papers. We left our belongings. I still have the little box on the back of my car and mother had the backpack with which she was arrested and we gave that to a farmer with a wagon to take it to the other side, to the unoccupied zone of France. And we walked out of the occupied zone as though we were just taking a walk. And there was no border there but people knew where the border was. Every step was frightening because we didn't know whether they would find us whether they could see us, what they would do with us. It seemed like a very simple activity that was very stressful.

>> Bill Benson: Is that when you fell in with a group of Lutheran pastors?

>> Margit Meissner: Yeah. That was another tremendous coincidence. We found an abandoned house on the other side of the divide. It was an abandoned house that had a roof, it had windows that were cracked, and it had some bedstead. So we decided that was better than nothing so we installed ourselves there. I can't remember what we ate but we must have eaten some of the vegetables that were around.

A couple of days later, a few gentlemen who were properly dressed, who didn't seem to be refugees, came to this house. And when we started talking to them, it turned out that they were from Czechoslovakia. Imagine the coincidence. And they were pastors in the Lutheran church. And they were also fleeing from the Germans. They were going to Marseille, on the coast, on the Mediterranean coast of France from where they hoped they were going to be able to leave Europe. They said to us, "You can't stay here. You also have to go to Marseille."

It would have never occurred to us to go to Marseille if it hadn't been for these pastors. So again, tremendously lucky and coincident. So, indeed, we then tried to follow them but our trip was very eventful because we always tried to avoid the police that were searching the trail. So when we saw the police coming, we tried to get off the trail, go back on in the car in which they had been so that they would not find us.

When we got to the police station -- the railroad station in Marseille, they were checking papers. And, of course, we didn't have papers so we waited until everybody was gone, the police was gone, and they weren't looking anymore. So that's how we got into Marseille.

>> Bill Benson: And once you were in Marseille, from there you wanted to get out of Marseille and get out of France. You and your mother's determination to escape the Nazis and to flee Europe would then take you on a journey over the Pyrenees mountains into Spain and eventually to Portugal. How did you do that?

>> Margit Meissner: My mother was completely passive. This very, very courageous, energetic lady didn't want to do anything. She said to me, “If we are going to leave here, it's going to be up to you to do it because don't expect me to do anything.”

>> Bill Benson: Was she just worn out at that stage?

>> Margit Meissner: Well, she was shocked by the experience. She just didn't want to have any responsibility and make any decisions.

So I became very active. It was really a role reversal. I became the mother and she was the child. I found us, through circuitous ways, a Spanish and Portuguese transit visa which meant we could go through and wherever else. The French would not give people like us exit permits. They didn't want us there. But for some reason they had promised the Germans they would hand over all the Jews so they didn't want to give us exit permits.

>> Bill Benson: So you had transit visas that would allow you to travel but the French wouldn't give you an exit visa to allow you to use the transit visas.

>> Margit Meissner: Exactly. So the exit visas were good -- the transit visas were good for a month. And the month went by and we couldn't get the French exit permits. So the last day of the validity of the visa we met a gentleman in the street who we barely knew and he said, "Yesterday they let people like you cross the border. Go to the border."

Now, to take this advice from somebody we hardly knew was really not a very smart thing to do but we did it. We came to the border. And everybody had to get off the train because they had to go on to a different train. And everybody left and we were left behind because the border police said you don't have an exit permit, go back.

So, again, it seemed the end of the world had arrived. But there was a porter there to whom I confided our problem. And he said, "Well, maybe I can help you. Maybe I can show you how you can walk across the border." Walk up on the French side and down on the Spanish side. And I said, “Ok, how do we do that?” And he explained the way to me very carefully. So I said to mother let's go.

And it was really, if you think about it, it was a lovely excursion because the weather was good and the countryside was beautiful except we were, of course, tremendously scared and stressed. But we walked and I knew exactly where I was supposed to go. But we lost our way.

>> Bill Benson: Pyrenees has peaks as high as 11,000 peaks.

>> Margit Meissner: It was not that high but we lost our way and got caught by the Spanish police because although we had a valid visa, we had crossed the border at an unauthorized border crossing point. So, they took us in. This was a small border -- railroad station, took us to the railroad station. And then decided they were going to take us to the next town where there was a police station, to arraign us. And I remember sitting at this little railroad station with two policemen at either side and my mother on the other side and thinking that's the end.

>> Bill Benson: After all you had been through, this is the end.

>> Margit Meissner: So, we went to the police station. It was night by then. There were lots of other refugees at that police station. It was, again, very chaotic but not as chaotic as the railroad station in France. They had taken all of our belongings, my box and my mother's backpack. So we had nothing.

There was a French-speaking policeman whom I approached and said, “Look, nothing is going to happen here until tomorrow morning when the police station opens; why couldn't we go someplace and spend the night?” And a few minutes later he came back to me and said, "Follow me." So I thought he was taking us to someplace where we were going to spend the night. Indeed, he did. But that place turned out to be a prison.

So now we were in a Spanish prison that was part of the Franco fascist regime. That was a very scary place. And the only other people who were in jail at the time were teachers, because the Francists didn't think the teachers would ever be democratic. And the other group that was in the prison wore prostitutes because prostitution was forbidden.

So there was a huge hall where there were probably 60 beds. The beds were about this size, half a yard with a straw mat on some kind of straw on the iron springs. And that was the bed for mother and me. And the light was not turned off. It was very bright. And this was right next to the latrine. And the stench was really awful.

In the morning we came to the police chief who looked at us and said, "So you are ex-Austrians which means you're German so we will inform the German authorities in Spain and they will come and take you over."

So all of this whole trek that I just described we did in order to avoid the Germans and then we were going to be turned over to the Germans in Spain. But, you see, fortunately I am here.

>> Bill Benson: How did you manage that?

>> Margit Meissner: Well, another complicated story. That's why I wrote this book.

>> [Laughter and Applause]

>> Bill Benson: In the little time we have left -- we want to ask our audience to ask you some questions but you managed to get out of that. And the book tells us how. You made it to Portugal.

>> Margit Meissner: Made it to Portugal. And there I became a dressmaker. So the idea that I would become a dressmaker without knowing -- without having to know the language was correct because here I was in Portugal, didn't know the language, but there were lots of refugees now from Czechoslovakia that had also lost all of their clothing so nobody had anything to wear and they were delighted that they had a dressmaker to whom they could speak in their language. So that was very

fortunate. And I became the dressmaker to the refugees. I had to learn Portuguese very fast because I had to go to the market and I had to go buy fabric and it was a very fast learning experience.

I had a very good time in Portugal, mainly because I was not a young Portuguese girl. Portuguese young women of a certain class were never permitted to walk in the streets by themselves because it wasn't proper. They had to have an escort, a brother or a parent. I was not a Portuguese girl so I could walk in the streets freely. And the Portuguese young men all were impressed that there was a young girl walking alone. So they would start talking to me. And if I like the way they look, then I talked to them. If I didn't like them, I said I don't speak Portuguese.

>> [Laughter]

>> Margit Meissner: In the very end -- I made friends with a couple of Portuguese young men who then the day before we left for the United States took me to a resort area to show me parts of Portugal. Of course, we had no money, no time to be tourists. We just had to survive there. But it was very ego supporting to always be accosted by young men whether I liked them or not.

>> Bill Benson: Portugal was a neutral country so it was a safe harbor for you. But from there you made it to the United States. You came to the U.S. on a ship.

>> Margit Meissner: Yeah. Really quite remarkably and unexpectedly we were able to get an American immigration visa. And then there were no boats to be had because there was war and there were submarines in the Atlantic ocean. So in the end, the only boat that we could find was a Portuguese cork freighter, corks for bottle cork. That took about two weeks. There were about five other people on the ship. I was seasick continuously because the boat was very light. And if I wasn't seasick, I used to play ping-pong with the crew. So I became a very good ping-pong player. And I also learned a lot of Portuguese talking to the crew on the ship.

When we came to the United States, one of my brothers, who had been here before, came to pick us up. Of course, we did not arrive and see the Statue of Liberty because we arrived in a small port on the Chesapeake Bay.

>> Bill Benson: And here you are today.

>> Margit Meissner: Yes. Very lucky.

>> [Applause]

>> Margit Meissner: Thank you.

>> Bill Benson: We obviously could spend hours and hours and hours here with Margit and I wish we could do that but we aren't going to do that today. We have time for a few questions. We're going to start first with taking questions from our web audience on Twitter. Then we will turn it our live audience here in the auditorium to see if you have any questions.

Let's take that first question that we have online. I think it's back there.

Caroline O'Neal asks: Margit, why do you think regimes continue to target their own people like those in Rwanda and Syria? How is this still possible 70 years after the Holocaust?

>> Margit Meissner: Well, this is a very important question. I think as a Holocaust survivor, I would have never expected that such a thing could happen again. I very naively thought that if one had seen Hitler and the persecution of the Jews on television, the world would not have permitted it. So I was very naive and unfortunately I was wrong. Regimes still persecute their own people for religious or for political reasons and they are as vicious as the Germans were against the Nazis.

I think the Syrian refugee crisis is an enormous crisis. There are millions of people who are displaced inside Syria and millions who are trying to seek refuge abroad and the world is not really interested in helping them or in helping them well enough and in understanding how to deal with this crisis. It's a major issue. I have been speaking about it at what Holocaust survivors feel when they see these many, many refugees who have no place to go.

>> Bill Benson: Thank you, Margit.

I think we have time for a couple of questions from our audience here in the auditorium. I see a hand here. We're going to ask you to come to the microphone if you don't mind just because it's so big and that way everybody can hear it. Try to make your question brief, if you can. And then I will repeat it as best I can just to make sure everybody, including Margit, hears your question.

Yes, sir?
>> How do you feel that any of the remaining Nazis today -- if they should be punished or not?
>> Bill Benson: How do you feel about any remaining Nazis today and whether or not they should be punished?
>> Margit Meissner: Well, I think most of the perpetrators of the Holocaust are not alive anymore. Really most of them are dead. I really do not feel any animosity towards Germany because the present generation Germans really had no responsibility for what happened. The Germans were responsible for having a government like Hitler and for letting that government persecute Jews because they were not watching what the government was doing. They were just letting it happen. They were not anti-Semitic maybe themselves but they were also not willing to be active and do anything against the Nazis.
>> Bill Benson: To stand up. Thank you very much.

Do we have another question? We have, I think, a young man here and then a young woman in the middle.

Can you go to the microphone? You're going first. You're like Margit, walking on the road by herself.
>> What are your thoughts of Hitler?
>> Bill Benson: What are your thoughts of Hitler after all of this time?
>> Margit Meissner: I think Hitler was a deranged man who was very clever and very charismatic and he was able to persuade a large group of Germans to follow his way of thinking. I am a person who is not interested in vengeance. I don't believe that that gets you anywhere. I think perpetrators should be punished but one should not ascribe responsibility to basically innocent people who stood by. I wish that he hadn't existed.
>> Bill Benson: Thank you, Margit.

I think we have time for one more question. You had your hand up. Now you're standing up. There you go. All right.

I'm going to also say that Margit is going to stay. She concludes the program in a few moments. Margit -- no, you have to sign your book. That's right. So that might be an opportunity to also ask Margit some questions.

Yes? A young man here.
>> How did you feel when your mother went on the bus and you didn't know where she was going?
>> Bill Benson: Say that one more time for us.
>> [Laughter]
>> Margit Meissner: Right? How do you feel --
>> [Laughter]
>> Bill Benson: How did you feel when your mother went on the bus, when she went away?
>> Margit Meissner: That's a very good question. Because I felt terrified. I didn't know where she was going. And you have to understand that one didn't know what was going on in the world. There was no information. There was no way for me to get any information. So I was pretty terrified. On the other hand, she had said to me it's up to you to get us out of here so I couldn't just be terrified; I had to do something. I wasn't sure what I was going to do but I went back home and thought, now, what am I going to do. So I think that helped me overcome the terrorized part. It was a very tough moment.

I have to congratulate you that you caught that. That was very perceptive of you.
>> Thank you.
>> Bill Benson: Thank you.

I want to thank all of you for being here. I remind you that we'll do *First Person* programs each Wednesday and Thursday until the middle of August. For April and May we will be livestreaming them over the internet so you can watch that way. They are going to be archived. You can look at them later. So a lot of opportunities to see our *First Person* program.

It's our tradition at *First Person* that our first person has the last word. So I'm going to turn to Margit now to close our program. Then as soon as she's done, we want her to make her way up the stairs so that she can get up to where she will be signing copies of her autobiography, "Margit's Story."

And as you can see, there's a lot of details that we were not able to hear today that I think all of us would want to hear about.
>> Margit Meissner: Well, the important thing that I have to leave you with is that you should not be a bystander when you see injustice in your own communities. When you see bullying, when you see scapegoating, prejudice against people who may be different, don't just stand by and say I'm just a little person; I can't do anything. That's not right. I think what each individual does really does matter. And the Museum's logo is "What you do matters." I really believe that. I try to live that way because -- I think that I continue working here because I would like to tell people like you all how important it is that you should be informed about what goes on in the world and in your community and that you should be active and see whether you can make the world a better world, better place, where violence is not used as a means of settling problems. So I'd like you to remember that.
>> [Applause]