

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Interview with Anna Leiser-Kleinhaus
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PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of a taped interview with Anna Leiser-Kleinhaus, conducted on September 29, 1994 on behalf of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The interview is part of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's collection of oral testimonies. Rights to the interview are held by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

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ANNA LEISER-KLEINHAUS

September 29, 1994

- Q: Will you just begin by telling me your name during the war and date of birth and where you were born?
- A: Okay, well my name during the war was -- I had several names, but the name I was born to was Annaliza and I was born in Antwerp Belgium in December 1936.
- Q: So you were very young at the time before the war. You probably don't have too much memory about what was happening prior to the war?
- A: No, only very sporadic memories of my father and memories that perhaps are based on stories more than memories but I do think I have very clear pictures of going to the park with my dad and playing with him and doing things that normally you would expect a boy to do with a father rather than a little girl and I thought that people usually ask me why I chose a profession that I chose and although my father was a very orthodox Jewish man and certainly would have never admitted to that feeling I think that I was his first born and I think he considered me in some ways his son. I remember the feeling of going to the park and playing with him and him being perhaps more involved with a child, particularly a man of his generation than you'd expect him to be particularly with a girl. That's what I remember.
- Q: You had a comfortable family life?
- A: Yes. I remember having two dear little friends who lived with us in the same house, and my grandfather and just pictures mostly not -- I remember I had a little friend who's exactly my age a few months older and his sister who was two years younger and we lived in the same house and we were constantly fighting cats and dogs. We couldn't be without one another. So, we almost really always be together and I also remember that I didn't like dolls and I used to get dolls and I used to give them to my little girlfriend. She loved the dolls. That's what I remember. I remember being very comfortable. I'm sure we were not comfortable I mean financially but I had a very nice feeling about the family. I mean just my grandfather was a very sweet old man. He used to tell me stories. That's basically all I remember.
- Q: Now what kind of business was your father in?
- A: I'm not sure. I think he started out delivering milk and learning how to be a diamond cutter or something of the sort. He was very, very religious. I remember that. He was always going to synagogue, coming from synagogue and praying an awful lot. In my head it seemed like too much. It seemed like not a very tense life. He was going to work and coming home and we observed the Sabbath. We would always go for walks in the park and things of that sort.

Q: Did you have non-Jewish friends as well, or were you mostly in a Jewish community?

A: I was strictly Jewish community before the war and to my knowledge, I don't think my parents knew anyone that wasn't Jewish except in an official capacity. I don't know, postman, policeman, -- no social interaction with non-Jews at all.

Q: Your neighbors were Jewish as well?

A: Yes. The ones I knew. I mean I was a kid so I don't remember everybody who lived there but I would say the majority were Jewish.

Q: Now, your mother spoke of a lot anti-semitism in Belgium before the war. Do you have any images of that?

A: The only one is a story that my mom told me and that sort of became an indication of my early rebellion and that was at some point during these --right either at the beginning of the war or the pre-war period my grandfather was beaten up on the way back from synagogue or threatened or harassed and he I think people were pulling at his beard and he hid his beard in his coat. When he came home, he looked really terrible and very upset and he had told me that this was a Friday night that Friday night when men used to go to the synagogue they had a couple of angels who were watching over them and walking with them to and from synagogue. So, when he came back beaten and so on, I asked him Grandfather where were your angels then. So, that picture remained with me, his frightened look and the statement that I made then, I don't remember having made it, but it fits with the way I think. So, and several people that I have met, in fact recently, very recently just about three months ago when I was last in Belgium said you are this little girl who said that. They remember that statement. That's the only evidence I have of anti-semitism that touched us directly but before I really don't know.

Q: Do you remember what your grandfather's response was to that?

A: I don't think he said anything. He didn't say anything.

Q: Did you ever have to wear the Star of David?

A: Yes, I did. Both my mother and I wore it I think after the men, -- the husband of this neighbor and my dad were taken I think to go to a work camp, and we had to wear the star. One picture I have of that is that she used to always carry me over her shoulder to hide her star so that we would travel in the trolley or something and she would carry me so that her star and mine were essentially hidden to avoid being harassed in the streets. She'd always do that, carry me.

Q: Do you remember, and I assume we'll be getting into things that I think you probably have a very clear memory of -- do you remember when Belgium was occupied by Germany? Do you remember seeing troops or hearing noise?

A: I remember having to leave in the middle of the night and walking through woods and being petrified and having German shepherds, hearing German shepherds barking in the distance and dragging and running through woods. I remember that, so I remember the German voices and the dogs, particularly the dogs and until maybe ten years ago I had to run if I saw any dog or heard a dog. So, I've overcome that too, but I really was very shaken by a dog. I couldn't go in a room -- and particularly a German shepherd, I would just freeze. I would completely decompensate so I remember that. I don't remember the streets of Belgium per se. I remember the terror of what appeared -- I saw my mother being frightened and I became completely petrified. I remember that march through the woods and ending up in some abandoned home somewhere and being there with a lot, a lot of people. I don't remember who these people were except for those friends that we were living with basically.

Q: So you were running to hide from the Germans?

A: Yes, we were running to try and escape because at some point after the two husbands had gone to work, during that period some people came into the house and they weren't really Nazis, but they pretended to be Gestapo and they beat up everyone in the house. My mother and my grandfather and me and they were really beating us and I remember screaming and my mother screaming. They finally left. They ransacked the place and they were looking for money and so on. They got in on the pretense of being Gestapo and --

Q: These were just Belgium police?

A: Yes, they were just Belgium police or Belgium hoodlums, not necessarily in any kind of official capacity. They might have just done that. This was a good time to do that. I mean it was perfectly acceptable. So, at that time my mother I think and her friend decided to leave and try to join the husbands and I think that this is when we went to France with the idea of trying to get to Switzerland because Switzerland was a safe place. If I remember when we got to the rendezvous essentially of where we were supposed to meet our fathers and someone to take us across the border, someone had betrayed and so that's when my parents went to the camps, the French camps _____, was one of the camps that they went to. I'm not exactly sure how we got out of there and they went to another camp and that period my friends and I went to that home that we were hidden in.

Q: I just want to backtrack a second so I don't get confused. Now you had mentioned that your father and his friend your neighbor were sent to a work camp?

A: In France.

Q: This was before you went out into hiding into the woods? I'm trying to get the sequence here. If you remember, through researching any dates, maybe that would help me too. I mean that I know that you --

A: I think the first time we left, because we left twice. The first time we might have gone all of us together to _____ in France, and that must have been '40, '41 somewhere around there. And then we came back to Belgium. I think subsequently the men went to work again to that place in France.

Q: Which was called?

A: _____ or something like that.

Q: This was near _____ I think?

A: Yes, in the north of France somewhere. And during the period that they were away that's when we had the incident of people breaking into our home and then we left I think that's when we went through the woods and were supposed to meet up with the fathers and then supposed to meet up with someone who was going to take us across the border to Switzerland, but we didn't make it. So, and we got caught that time. The first time we were simply sent back home. The second time we got caught by the French police who then put us into these sort of transient camps which are really deportation but I certainly didn't know. I don't know how much my parents knew of what these places were going to lead to. I'm not sure they really knew. At some point they heard that people who left there never got back. I mean that through the grapevine that sort of information started to filter through and so they found that out and that's when I was in the children's home they were at a camp and that's when they decided to run out of the camp before they were sent to Germany.

Q: Now, as I understand it, the second camp they went to was _____?

A: Right.

Q: Were you in that at all with them?

A: No, I think that when they were transferred to _____ they had made some arrangements to take the children away and try to hide them, and that's when we were, my friends and I in that camp in that home near _____.

Q: Tell me a little bit about the home, who was there, what was it like?

A: Well, the children ranged from about four or five years of age, somewhere around there until they looked very big to me, but actually they were 16. I think the oldest were 16 to 17. There was a mixture. They were all refugee children. Many of them were not Jewish and many were actually refugees from the Spanish civil war because this place was very close to Spain. It's in the part of France that borders on Spain almost so the catholic archdiocese of that area had taken in some children from that war and kept all of them together in that home.

Q: So, this was a catholic home?

- A: It was a catholic run home but it ha connection to Jewish organization who was able to channel some of their kids into that particular home.
- Q: Now you were about how old then?
- A: At that time I must have been about seven, six or seven because I was born in '36 and that must have been '42, '43 somewhere around there.
- Q: How long were you in this home?
- A: In this home I was approximately eight to nine months and that part I remember quite well.
- Q: Tell me about it.
- A: Well, things that stand out hunger, real, real hunger. Nothing to eat, but that didn't bother me because I really didn't like to eat but I remember my little girlfriend, food was her thing. She was this plump little thing and you could always shut her up by giving her food. So, I used to run to the kitchen at night and steal whatever I could find and feed her because she was crying all night. She was crying because she was hungry, and I was crying because I wanted my mother. So, we were quite a pair. So, hunger -- and I knew there was nothing to eat and whatever there was I couldn't swallow. I just couldn't swallow any food there. The other thing I remember is lice and the worst incident which may look ridiculous now but was when you had lice they shaved your head, and I was very proud of my hair. I had really beautiful long hair and when I found out that I had lice and I could tell, because I was really itching. I hid in the outhouse. There was no indoor plumbing. There was indoor cold water to wash but no toilet. I hid in the outhouse for a couple of days and nobody could get me out of there because I knew as soon as they found out they would shave my head. So, but they eventually did. I had to get out. They shaved my head, and it was absolutely horrible, just horrible. Now, it looks kind of silly but and it wasn't just lice it was scabies, you know the things that crawl under your skin, so we were not really in very good shape. And there was always a feeling of fear and just terrible -- feeling terrible. First of all, not understanding at all why you were there what was happening, missing your family and just the terror basically. I think I acted irrationally on many occasions where I would just run out of the window in the middle of the night in the nightgown and just try to run away and being caught. You know, brought back to this, so we had songs but I don't know if they made them up or the older children probably did which referred to us having to wake up at 7:00 in the morning and having to wash with cold water and the son reflected that there was no food only some kind of vegetable, something like a sweet potatoes. That's why when people serve me sweet potato at Thanksgiving I say thanks but no thanks. I can't even look at the stuff. I don't know if it's the same, but it's so similar that it's enough to turn me off. That's all we had. SO, there was a song that reflected the realities of the time.
- Q: What was a normal day like in this home? What did you do?

A: As little as possible. I mean I'm not a psychologist but if I look at myself back then I must have been -- I would qualify myself as a really depressed child, entirely depressed. I couldn't do much of anything. We were very regimented so we had to get up at 7:00 and we lined up. I don't know if you saw the several films about children's homes, catholic homes _____ I think is one of them where children just line up and they wash and then they go to breakfast and then they go to prayer. They used to pray but we sort of didn't pray along. I believe that there were some kind of organized games, like playing ball or something like that and there were various levels of instructions, but I don't think I learned a tremendous amount. I just don't remember anything that was organized. There was some instruction but I'm sure the way I feel when I think about it I was just there, but I wasn't there basically. That was that. We had to make our rooms and we had to help in the kitchen. We had to peel the few potatoes there were, the sweet potatoes, whatever this vegetable was. We had to help clean up and that was it. There was nothing else going on.

Q: Was it crowded? Did you sleep in the same area with a lot of other kids?

A: Yes. There were two areas, there as a female area and there was a male area, boys and girls. We were lined up like in the old hospital wards, a number of beds together one next to another. We had essentially no possessions. We didn't have anything. We just had our beds and I don't remember if I had any change of clothes. I mean I don't think I had anything. Maybe they provided us with some old clothes, but we didn't have -- I don't remember having a cubicle I could call my own you know with my stuff. I had nothing.

Q: How many kids were there?

A: I really don't know. I'd say 100 or so, not more than that.

Q: Were the people who took care of you nice?

A: No, I don't think so, but it's hard to tell. I was just so unhappy. I don't have good feelings about anybody there, but it may not be them. I don't remember-- for instance, this incident with the hair, I thought they were barbarians when they did this. I felt that this was a middle age torture but in retrospect maybe that was the only way to deal with the lice. SO, I Thought they were mean, but maybe they weren't. I don't remember anybody being particularly kind to me or particularly paying attention to me but then they probably were understaffed and lots of kids and all of us were miserable and unhappy. I know for a fact that I was extremely rebellious and did exactly the opposite of what I was told. It didn't matter what it was, I would just fight it. I would continuously argue and fight scream run a way. So, you really would have to be a very well trained professional to handle a child of that condition and they weren't. I assume they were volunteers from the church or from other relief organizations and I guess they did the best they could but I can't say that there was somebody there that was nice.

- Q: You said you were there about eight or nine months, how did you get out of there? What were the circumstances?
- A: Well, the circumstances are a little bit muddled but apparently my parents send someone to pick us up from there because they were escaping to Nice to the part of France that was occupied by the Italians as to the Germans.
- Q: How did your parents get out of _____?
- A: From what they told me is that they were told that they were going to be sent somewhere else and they sort of smelled a rat and they asked for one day off to come in and say goodbye to their children or visit their children and then of course they ran away to Nice during that supposed trip, but they didn't come to pick us up because they were afraid. So, they apparently sent some lady to pick us up, but my friend whom I spoke to yesterday, said that this person was afraid to travel with three children, so she gave us the money and left and told us how to get there.
- Q: Were you the oldest?
- A: He and I were the oldest.
- Q: At age seven or eight?
- A: Yes. And I do remember parts of that trip like getting on trains and getting off trains and somehow getting to Nice, but I cannot recall the details of that but I know we made it. My recollection is that there was no adult with us and he confirmed that that this lady had at least given us the money, she didn't take it and run, but she was afraid to travel with three children. She thought -- the way we looked with our shaven heads and with the lice and the scabs. We really looked awful so she decided to just tell us how to get there. We had grown up pretty quickly, and we got there. We simply made the rendezvous with our parents in Nice. That was --that's why I say it sounds like it's not true and just like a dream, but it is true. We did get there and we did find our parents. But I then in Nice it actually was a very happy period. It sounds also crazy but we were living in a hotel and in the same hotel we had Italian soldiers and they were very, very nice. They were not too interested in what the directives were from the Nazi government. I remember them giving me chocolate and I used to go up with them and play with them. I mean they were just very lovely people. And we were together but the remnants of that previous experience were there with me and so by that time I was eight or so and I was wetting my bed and I was screaming, having nightmares every night and waking up and screaming even though the days were fairly happy, the nights were just terrible, really terrible. But that stands out as a nice time in Nice because we were all together and we would go to the beach and I wasn't at the time fully realizing -- we lived pretty much for the present. As a child in general you don't anticipate much in the future, you know, at that age. We were together and we were having a good time. I could not imagine that first of all things would get worse again and that was not a temporary arrangement, that it wasn't a full time solution to the problem.

Q: I don't understand Nice was under Italian occupation, Italian German occupation?

A: Right. But Italian, not German. The Germans came in later, so it really was strictly Italian.

Q: Did you have total freedom as Jews at this time?

A: Officially no because the official party line of the Italian Nazi government with Mussolini was also that Jews had to be deported and rounded up, but the orders were not quite as effective and there was very little discipline in the Italian army, and those people who were in the army just couldn't care less whether we were Jews or something else. They simply couldn't care less so we were supposed to officially hide that we were Jews, but they knew fully well we were and I think we were fairly free to go and do as we pleased. I'm not sure, I think that the order of deportation sort of depended on your nationality and so my parents at the time might have become Czechoslovakian or something like that and giving me a different name and that name I don't remember. If you had Czechoslovakian papers it really didn't matter at the time whether you were Jewish or not. For a short period of time the authorities respected the nationality versus your ethnic background. That didn't last, but for a short period of time it was that way and the soldiers who were supposed to execute the orders couldn't care less. I mean they just did not round up people.

Q: So, you were in Nice leading what you felt was a pretty nice life in the daytime anyway?

A: Yes.

Q: Do you remember about how long you were there?

A: I would say also about ten months or so approximately and then when Italy capitulated and the Germans came marching in through the part of France that had previously been occupied by the Italians.

Q: When was this?

A: The end of --must have been the beginning of '44 or somewhere around there, I think. The war was over in '45 and we were in _____ for perhaps a year, so I'd say '44 or so, but maybe you can check the accuracy of that. At that point the news spread rather quickly that -- well they already knew what the Germans were doing to various people in various other places, so when they heard that Germans were coming they decided to run and again try to get to Switzerland the second time around. Things moved very quickly so it also became known that entire families were subject to being arrested and they would be preferable for women and children were still sort of led through without being bothered or had a better chance. So, my mother and her friend and neighbor and my two little friends, we decided to leave from these to a border town Switzerland and to leave the men behind and they were going to try and find some way to get there, not by public

transportation but try to arrange some kind of private way to join us. From there we were going to try and get through to Switzerland together. So, the train trip was uneventful, I mean my mother and myself and her friend and her two little children went along and we got to a place where I don't know if we stayed in a hotel or I don't know where we stayed exactly. In the meantime my father and his friend was going to come by ambulance. They had found someone who was going to drive an ambulance and take them as being ill. So, they established a point of meeting which was a block from the hotel where we had stayed. My father for some really stupid reason decided to go back to his hotel room because he had forgotten his prayer shawl and his _____, and when he got to the hotel the Germans were there. So, he didn't make it. They arrested him. Apparently Mr. _____ waited until the evening and then the ambulance driver says I'm not going to stay any longer because we're going to get picked up. So, they left and they came and dropped off Mr. Shimmer wherever we were. And then I remember this most horrendous scene of my mother collapsing when she saw him come in alone. She immediately knew that something was very, very wrong. I just remember her just totally going completely hysterical and screaming and pulling out her hair and to me this was just the most frightening because I just came out from something that was relatively safe, and it just was everything fell apart. We stayed together for a while with those people and the family had their parents at least. The woman had her parents in Switzerland and so they decided to really push on and try to get to Switzerland and my mother at that point said she didn't care anymore. She just didn't care, and she decided to stay put in _____, which was the town where we were at. At that point we got papers from people who proceeded us and who we paid a lot of money to get those fake papers. So, we changed our name again.

Q: To a French name?

A: A French name so my name was _____. I had one or two names in between but I just don't remember and that was a terrible thing because they tell you you are no longer such and such but you are such and such, and you keep repeating it to yourself until you actually believe that you are this other person. It gets extremely confusing. At that point, I must have been around eight or so, eight and half, and I mean I was very angry. At that point I just became very, very angry about everything and we moved into an apartment in a private house where they were -- actually it was owned by the people who lived downstairs and there were two floors above. The first floor was inhabited by a Jewish family who were German Jews. They had become French, but they were German Jews originally, and then we had an apartment which was not really a real apartment but just under the roof where the roof actually meets the floor. It's called _____, like an attic apartment essentially. I don't know if we had three or four rooms there, but really two rooms maybe, just two room, one which was an everything room and one which was a bedroom. We stayed there pretty much to the end of the war with the false identity and at that time, my mother became involved with the resistance not officially part of it but harboring people who were in the resistance and also harboring a lot of people who were in transient trying to get to Switzerland. She would provide them with hiding place and with food and when they left they left their papers behind and we'd get their ration cards for food. So, at that point, we were really

wealthy in terms of food availability. It was a time for me where I was pretty much like a street child. I did whatever I wanted. I was supposed to go to school but I never did. I mean I said I was going but I played hookey and I was hanging out with sort of the worst characters of the town, but compared to what worst characters are now, I guess they were pretty mild. But we just would go and hide and play. We'd play three musketeers and we'd play all these fighting games. I didn't go to school, I just never showed up, and when I was there I was so disruptive that they used to throw me out, so it really didn't matter. But I learned how to read by myself. Two things I was doing. I was reading voraciously. I didn't understand a thing of what I was reading. I just simply didn't understand. I was just reading books and books. Whatever it was, it didn't matter what it was. It could have been the phone book. It didn't matter. It was an escape, you know, and I could just not be in the present. It was away from everything. I had another friend then who lived nearby. I was friends with all the village kids, basically. Then, the people who were renting us the place were very, very nice. They were French, but they pretended not to know, but they knew of course that we were Jewish. They never questioned anything, but they knew and I used to go to church with them on Sundays because it was kind of accepted and would be better that I would show up. And my mother's French was not great. It still has a very foreign accent, whereas I as a child had really become completely fluent from that time in Nice and in that home I was perfectly fluent so I could pass for French kid easily. They thought it would be a good idea for me to go to church, so at least the child goes even if the mother doesn't show up. I was quite taken by that service. As much as I had been anti-religious to my own religion, there was something very comforting about the church and the priests and there was a very safe feeling in that big building and the way the voices resounded. That I remember that feeling for the church. Now, I hate the catholic church, but I really felt very comforted by that whole atmosphere. The daughter of the people who were renting the place to us had her solemn communion as they call it, and I was very envious. They wore this white dress and this white veil and to me this was like I don't know, utopia, to be able to do all these things.

Q: Do you think unconsciously anyway that you knew these people were not being annihilated the way Jews were.

A: Oh, I knew that going to church was a safe thing that once you belonged to that group you were okay. So, I guess it was wanting to be safe and wanting to be part of another group. I mean I knew that I couldn't tell who I was. And, as I said, I was really very angry and I was very nasty. One of the people that my mother had taken in in the meantime until they got someone to take them to Switzerland was extremely fearful for good reasons and was not leaving the apartment at all. I mean it was just really sequestered and would not go out. My mother was circulating freely with her fake papers. I mean if they would really look into it they would have found that her French was not great and she would have been picked up, but she braved it so to speak. I certainly could pass for a French kid, but this man and his wife were there and they were absolutely petrified. He, in particular was just I mean, he wouldn't leave and we had curfews where we had all the windows and so on, and I used to come home supposedly from school, but from wherever I was hanging out and I would scream at the top of my

lungs for him to come down and I used to tell him that he had to carry my bookcase up. I had this little thing, and if he didn't I was going to give him away to the Germans. You could see the warped feelings that in some way I could pass for not being Jewish. I convinced myself that I was catholic and I was going to be fine. I also knew this wasn't true, but somehow I took it out on this poor guy who was really terribly frightened. I mean I can still see myself standing at the foot of those stairs and screaming, you come there and pick up my bag and if you don't I'm going to tell on you. He would come, you know, he would just come. He didn't know what to say.

Q: You were trying to exercise some sort of control?

A: Yes, like I could go out and he couldn't. But deep inside I knew this was just really not true, but somehow we managed to fake him out a little longer and he didn't have papers and he did nothing and he didn't know French, and he looked real Jewish. He would have been picked up very quickly. In incidents like that where I was just doing really nasty, very nasty things. They were really a way of saying, you know, I can do what I want basically. I'm not going to school. I can just do whatever. Nobody can tell me what to do. There were some terrible moments for me because my mother was frequently gone, and I never knew if she was going to come back, and there were nights where there were alarms for bomb raids, and those were really horrible. They were just just horrible. I would be totally, totally petrified and I had to run to the shelter by myself. I was afraid to get out of bed let alone -- it was all in the dark-- let alone go down the stairs and go to the shelter by myself. I usually managed to somehow make it to the people below and we'd go together. So, when she wasn't home, but then to go back to my place. I mean she didn't want to always say that she was leaving, you know, to the other people. You don't know. They could put a trace on her. She was going to Switzerland. She was getting watches and she was then going to Paris and she was selling them. She was doing all sorts of weird things just to get some money to survive, and she was helping people get across the border, so she really never wanted to say what she was doing and she didn't tell me either. She would just tell me I'll be back as soon as I can, but to an eight year old, that's not that reassuring particularly having been separation where I didn't know if I ever was going to see her again having seen her reaction to my father's disappearance and knowing that that certainly was not really good. I was really scared, I mean really, really scared.

Q: Was the bomb shelter in your building or in the town?

A: It was not in the building, it was somewhere further away. I don't exactly know where it was, but we had to go walk in the dark, run basically and to this day I must say that I'm still afraid of the dark. If I'm in the house alone, I'll have every light on. I just won't be -- I really have to talk to myself to be able to turn off all the lights and say nothing will happen. We were in the dark because of curfew to begin with and then you weren't going to start taking flashlights going to a shelter. That was really better.

Q: The Jewish family on the first floor, did people know they were Jewish?

- A: Well, they looked awfully Jewish, but they were French citizens and so they thought -- I don't remember, or I don't think that papers in France said that you were Jewish. The French documents, I don't think that they mentioned religion but I'm not sure. They looked awfully Jewish, because she had a wig, but he was a lawyer and he was a very distinguished gentleman, German origin, and perhaps he thought that was going to save them. It turned out that he was picked up a day or two before the liberation and he never made it back.
- Q: Did you help your mom with any of these activities in small ways or --?
- A: Well, I'm sure I helped just with housekeeping things. I'm sure I did some of the shopping where she'd send me to buy food. I remember going to the grocery store and doing all of that stuff. In a more concrete way in terms of I mean I remember seeing all these people, being upset because sometimes we had ten twelve people sleeping in one room. We had five or six people in one bed, so I was not thrilled and I did sort of threaten some of these people, but for the most part I was probably helping her as much as I could. I know that as I said I'm sure I did the shopping and I brought food home and I helped her with cleaning up and that sort of thing. I didn't go to Paris with her to sell watches.
- Q: It's interesting that your mother, as you described it, really fell apart when she didn't see your father, and yet it sounds like she was pretty courageous.
- A: She was extremely courageous but she was courageous throughout but that first impact, that first shock and this is what I remember. Now, I think there's nothing worse for a child than to see the mother fall apart. As long as the mother is still in tact then they know they have somebody to lean on. I realize at that moment that something terrible had happened to my father but I didn't realize exactly what but when I saw her, it just hit me like a sledge hammer. She was really gone. I mean she was just not -- I don't know that it lasted a few hours and maybe the next day she sort of composed herself and she certainly picked up the pieces and went on and survived, and not only survived but helped me survive. There is no question about it, I would not survive without her.
- Q: When you think back on the kind of person your mother is, do you think it was predictable that she would get so involved in illicit activities like this?
- A: No, not at all. But one thing about her is that even though she came from this small village from this very orthodox background, she was quite somewhat of a maverick within her generation. She was orphaned very early, I don't know if she told you that, but she was about six years old when her mother passed away, mother and one brother went with the Russian flu, so she was very young at the time. She became really the housekeeper for her father for a short period of time, his mother came and took care of the household, and then she got killed in some stupid accident. She got kicked in the belly by a horse. She went to market, so she lost her grandmother maybe a year after that. So, she really became the woman of the house at age eight or nine or something, so she was quite independent. She had to be. She's a really intelligent person and she was

always interested in a lot of things so she became interested in zionism, and so she took Hebrew lessons secretly because it certainly was considered inappropriate for a girl to do that. So let's say that it's not totally out of character to do things which one would not have expected of a woman of that generation and that background. She adapted. She learned Hebrew, she learned French. She even learned English at that point on her own. She didn't have any formal schooling, and she's really a very educated person and it's all self made. I think that she had no inclinations to be a delinquent let's say but certainly to take charge of herself when needed, and so she did. This was the only thing that was opened to her, so she did that. I mean the smuggling of the watches with the resistance that was really self preservation. I think to some extent she I don't know that she really cared that much about herself at that point. I think she just forgot about herself. She just did things for the wider picture if you wish, but she was no longer afraid for herself. She sort of thought well, you know the worst has happened as far as her husband is concerned. She had to leave her father behind in Belgium. She couldn't take him because he wouldn't come. He had to cut his beard off and he wouldn't do that so he stayed behind. She already had lost her mother and a brother so somehow she felt it doesn't matter anymore. There was her child, and so I think she did a lot for me, for my sake.

Q: Even though the people like your landlord who probably looked the other way and knew you were Jewish and was very kind, he must have had some concerns about all the people coming in and out of your attic apartment.

A: He might have, but I wasn't aware of any frictions. That she could tell you much better. I was very welcome in their household. These people were -- he had been a fighter in World War I and he had actually lost a leg or suffered a severe injury so he was limping or had a wooden leg. I just remember him limping rather heavily, and she was just a very sweet lady and they could not have children. In fact their daughter was a adopted one. She was one of 14. The woman's sister had 14 children so she adopted her youngest. Then I was sort of a welcome addition in a sense because she had hoped to have a large household with a lot of children, and she didn't. I felt so good in that household. It was very warm and just normal. Basically it was just normal. So, that I really always felt very good there, and my mother still writes to them every Christmas. Every Christmas she sends them a box of chocolates. The older couple is now gone, but the one girl, the one whose communion I envied so much is now a grandmother. She's in her 60s. I don't think there could have been too much antagonism. Like I said, he fought in World War I and he was not very fond of the Germans at all, and he was a really strong French patriot and this invasion did not sit too well with him, and he was sort of in a way sorry that he was too old to fight. So, I think in that sense, he knew we were Jewish, but he wasn't quite too sure and all that activity to him sort of looked like a good thing in the sense of being resisting the occupation. Although he wasn't personally involved in my knowledge, he sort of turned away. They were in their 60s at the time I think. They looked very old to me, but again, now that I'm going to 58, it doesn't look that old.

Q: How did you hear about the liberation?

A: I'm not sure how, but I remember that we all were dancing in the streets of _____. The entire town was there and there was really a jubilation and I didn't fully -- so I guess it came over the radio and all the people from the resistance knew that the end was near.

Q: Do you remember when this was?

A: It was May 8 of '45, I think.

Q: This area wasn't liberated until then?

A: No, I don't think so. It was the final -- it was when they gave up. There was no liberation there in France. I mean they were there until the very last, because they picked up this gentleman, my neighbor, a few days before, literally a few days before. She had a baby right then after he was gone and something really very moving. My mother went to the maternity with her, for the delivery, and he turned 50, this young man just recently and his mother lives in Israel and so does he and the mother called up my mother from Israel to remind her of the night when she gave birth that she had been present at that time. That was 40 years ago, so that '44, the end of '44 beginning of '45. I don't think it was liberated before that.

End of Tape 1

Tape 2

A: When we went back to Belgium on that final trip back, we stopped again, me and my complete negative and angry nasty self, we stopped several times on the road to drink and at one point the only thing that was available was beer and I said I would rather die than drink beer.

Q: Which might have been the choice.

A: A person told me well, maybe you're just going to have to do that. Maybe you're just going to have to die because that's all we had. Telling me, a nasty kid.

Q: Okay, just to backtrack a bit from where we stopped the tape, upon liberation your first memory is everyone dancing in the streets.

A: Yes. I remember just elation. That's the feeling for everybody and sadness. My neighbor because she had no trace of her husband, and I remember that and I remember my mother leaving and going back to Belgium and telling me that she was going to find my father.

Q: You were all alone then?

A: At that point I remained with the landlords. I was in the apartment, but in the same house. I had been pretty much alone for a long time, so at that point I wasn't even all that scared because it sounded good. So, as I said my mother came back. I don't know how long she was gone, whether it was a week or a month. I don't know. She said we are going back. She had found my dad and that was that. So, we went back and finding him was the real disappointment, because he had changed from the memories. I mean I had this illusion you know as a four year old child your father and the way he was involved with me and he was really -- he was not the same person and by then I was nine years old and I could see things very differently. He came back. I saw him, he had no hair. His teeth were shaking. He looked like a skeleton. He just looked frightening to me, very frightening.

Q: Where had he been?

A: He had been in Auschwitz mostly. And, he was extremely -- he had become very impatient and irritable and I just wanted to cling to him and it was broken. It just wasn't there anymore. We were just coming from different places all together, and he had become even more religious and rigid about it. I had at that point completely rejected. I mean I just couldn't deal with that at all. I was doing whatever I wanted during the war. Certainly not observing the Sabbath, and all of a sudden we're back to not turning on lights, and not going to the movies on Saturday and all that sort of stuff. I just couldn't deal with that at all. I mean I just couldn't deal with that. So, we had lots of fights, really a big arguments and right after we came back we lived in a place that belonged to one of the people that we had met in _____, a Jewish lady whose husband did not come back and who had owned a house with her husband and so we lived in that place and I remember the three of us, my mom, my dad, and I sleeping in the bed and he was having the worse nightmares and he would scream in the middle of the night and of course I would just relive all my terrors. It was just not what I had hoped for or what my fantasies had about how it was going to be when my dad came back. The reality was very, very different. Not only that, we pretty much had no money so we had very cheap bed and the bed would collapse every so often so between the screaming and the collapsing bed I mean it was really terrible and we didn't have any warm water. We just had a pump in the kitchen. It really was very primitive. And then in my view what really made things completely disastrous was when my father found out about his surviving relatives in Russia. He sent for them, and where I was really craving just my mom and my dad, all of a sudden these people descended upon us. There were two brothers, a sister and a grandfather, and we all lived together. There were ten people every day, all the time without any space for anybody. It was literally a nightmare. To me, this was a nightmare. I resented them for a long time. I mean there was nothing else to do but I really couldn't say I was very thrilled with that whole set up and then to top it off, my brother was born. My mother couldn't handle it. She simply couldn't handle the food for all these people, so I essentially was trusted as the permanent babysitter for my brother. I was in charge of him basically. I had nothing to say about it. I had to feed him and dress him and just take care of him, except for going to school. Things were just not great. Then, at that point, all my fears came through. I could not stay alone. I tried, I remember that my parents wanted to go for a walk on a Friday night after dinner and I would say

sure I'll stay, and as soon as they walked out I was just overcome by such fear that I would just scream by myself in the house and my neighbor upstairs would come and get me. I was trying. I always said, sure you can go. I'm fine. I'm great, no problem. As soon as maybe five minutes after they walked it would just come and engulf me and I couldn't really function very well. Then school was another nightmare because we were people of all ages put into the same class. Now, I was put in the right grade for my age, but I really knew nothing. I just knew how to read because I had read -- and I spoke French beautifully because finally I began to understand what I was reading and I developed a very nice vocabulary. So, on account of that they decided to put me in the proper grade for my age. I knew nothing, so I was in school feeling like I was among -- just what am I doing here. I don't know, but I made it. I don't know how I made it. I just picked up whatever had to be picked up and there were people there who were speaking Polish and there were people speaking Yiddish and there were those who were speaking German and I was speaking French. The teachers were themselves, they came from concentration camps or other places. They didn't know anything about anything except they had sticks and when they misbehaved they hit us.

Q: This was the Jewish school?

A: Yes.

Q: They just rounded up whom they could find as teachers and there were no one that you could really call a teacher. But I don't know, I just somehow started to click and I became their prize student, so that was another thing that I always had this thing of taking out this anger in some way, so they had these donors, these potential donors and they were trying to raise funds. It was a private school, so they would parade the bright kids around and they didn't have that many. This was like an ape in the circus, do this trick and do this trick. I would recite, they would ask me a question and I would always know the answers. Then, after that, there was nothing in terms of discipline that I would obey. We had these individual benches you know, and I would just run across on top of the benches and teachers would run after me with a ruler. I mean some of these teachers are still alive and when they see me they say all this grey hair is from you. I mean, I was just impossible. When I think about it now, really I under normal circumstances would have gone to a reform school or something. It sort of calmed down and at that point, somewhere around the age of nine or so or ten I said I'm going to do something with me life. I'm not just going to be a housewife and sit here passively and have some guy tell me what to do.

Q: At age 10?

A: Yes. I had a big argument with my mother's friends who told me I should think of getting married when I'm 18. I said no way, not ever, and I decided to get there I had to get to a better school, and so I was in that school for two years. This time in Belgium it's divided into six and six. Elementary and then high school is six years, and I decided to go to the public high school. The public high school which was at the time considered the top high school because from that one you could go straight to university without having to take

special entrance examinations. So, after two years I applied to that high school which was unfortunately in Flemish and that was a language I didn't know at all. So, the only Flemish I knew was from talking to the cleaning woman who used to come once a week and that was the extent of it. But I made it. I mean I got in somehow. I guess I faked it. Whenever I think about it objectively I should have never gotten in there because my knowledge of everything was completely sporadic and having big gaps in various places. I never learned how to do multiplication, things like that. Big, big gaps, but I got into high school, because it wasn't automatic. You had to apply to get into that particular school. So, but there was anti-semitism in the high school.

Q: After the war?

A: After the war, quite a bit, and there was only two Jewish girls in that whole school, another one and myself. We really had a tough time. It took us years to be accepted and to make friends only a few friends we made on the whole the atmosphere was not welcoming at all, not at all.

Q: Were you blamed for the war?

A: No, but for instance my dad was religious at the time there was school on Saturdays, and he didn't allow me to go. It was a horror show. I already had missed so much school throughout my life and of course they put Latin and Greek and math and whatnot on Saturday. This really is not easy, and the teachers refused to help. I mean I would have to go every Saturday night -- I mean that's why I became even less attracted to the religion. I had to go and beg from some girl who really didn't want to give me her notes for all the lectures that had been given that day and then try to work it out on my own because my father didn't know anything and my mother didn't know anything about that stuff. The teachers just said, her statement was, "Well, you Jewish girls don't want to come to school on Saturday, you just work it out. It's not my problem." It makes you feel that after all that hearing this business about Jewish girls -- it was a secular school, it wasn't a school that was under any kind of religious aegis or directives. That's what the public school was. It was a secular school where there was religion given according to what you wanted so there was one hour you could choose either religion or ethics so you didn't have to attend -- because there was a catholic school system just as there is one here an official catholic school system. So, the people who were there, weren't even observant, but they still had a feeling that we were foreigners. Essentially the feeling was that we were foreigners. We were different and foreign. We did not feel very well there, really not, and then later they opened a Jewish high school and most Jewish kids now go to the Jewish high school, which is now fully accepted.

Q: Still?

A: Yes, oh yes. They go to a Jewish high school, which the Jewish high school is accepted. It's a completely official school and they can get from there to the university, again without entrance examinations, so and that's what I had wanted but there wasn't anything

at the time. We were, as I said, in fifth grade, everybody was together, all ages, all languages. This high school developed just a few years after I started high school.

Q: What happened to your grandfather?

A: My grandfather I think was essentially beaten to death. My mother's father, the one who's picture is there. He refused his son, my mother's brother, left I believe it was the last boat that left Antwerp and they went to Brazil and then somehow got to the states, and he didn't want to go because you had to cut your beard to get on that boat. I think when we fled, he refused to come for the same reason and so apparently my mother had asked a neighbor, a non Jewish neighbor to take care of him and she said she would but she heard when she came back to Belgium that he had essentially been beaten to death on the streets.

Q: What other aspects to your life during these years do you think are real important to remember?

A: You mean during the war years?

Q: Yes.

A: In what sense.

Q: I don't know if I have all the right questions. I think that we covered the areas that I had some idea about, and if there's anything else that you think would be useful to record that I haven't asked you, I want you to feel free to say it.

A: In terms of who I am today, I would have liked all this activity around survivors of the war whatever events took part in their own lives to happen earlier because even as I tell these things and some of these things bring tears to my eyes so that i know that I still feel them, but they're not -- I think I'm now perhaps able and it hasn't been that long -- able to associate my reactions to trauma and whatever from the past. So, it's hard for me to say now. The worst part of it was the fear, you know the absolute terror that I can still invoke certain times thinking back particularly --the salient points were in that home where I just didn't know where anybody was. And then when my dad was taken. These were just terrible, terrible moments. I know that until he died, my father -- I had many, many nightmares about anticipating his death that they were just really terrible and I was acting irrationally during many years in relation to him in terms of being so afraid that he would die that I could not even enjoy when I was near him. He wasn't a well man, although he pulled together and rebuilt a life for himself and helped his brothers build their own lives, so he did a tremendous job. I couldn't even appreciate any of this. I was just always afraid of losing him so that was sort of something that marred my life for a long time. In fact, I think I was liberated from that feeling only when he died. When he finally died, I sort of gained some peace which seems sort of crazy, but that's what happened. When he died, I said okay that's over. He's really gone and he's not coming back. That's it.

Q: Are you at all religious today?

A: No, I'm not, but I observe the traditions because I think they're pretty and perhaps only recently I have trouble with dogma in general. I have trouble with authority, but there is sort of a deeper philosophy which guides the lives of those who are truly religious and I really don't refer to people who are shut off from the outside world like _____ or that type of think. I'm thinking of my brother who is really an exceptional human being in that he lives his religion. This is who he is in terms of his interaction with his wife and his children, his family. He lives in Jerusalem because that's the only place where he can be the full Jew in his view, but he's politically left wing so -- and when I see him, there's a deep meaning to the rituals that is not the superficial type of thing that many people see and rebel against which is the things that I rebel against. You can't go here, things that look totally idiotic to me. It's a lot easier to take an elevator let's say for a person my mother's age and condition than to walk upstairs. That kind of thing, but when you go deeper and you make it part of an entire frame work and what it means, then I'm beginning to appreciate it although I think I live my life in a certain way in that sense, in terms of how I relate to my mother and to my family and I'm really a very good friend. People know that I'm really a loyal friend, that you couldn't have a more loyal friend. But I have no inclination to do the ritual, but I do like to go to synagogue on high holidays only because I identify with the group, because I like to be identified with the Jewish people. I'm proud of them. But not in terms of observing the things that I consider interfering with the conduct of modern life.

Q: The obvious reason I asked that was clearly during the war years you appeared to be a little bit resentful of it and sort of embraced the security of the catholic church and all these other things and I think people certain people after the Holocaust felt stronger about their Judaism, some felt irrelevant.

A: I don't want any part of it.

Q: Or they had been abandoned by it.

A: I think those that felt abandoned by it I felt abandoned by it, but as I said the story about my grandfather and the angels, I was maybe four years old when I asked him that, which I mean this is a logical question to ask. Where are your angels, and there's no logical answer to that. So, then of course there was no time to practice the religion after that whole incident because we weren't supposed to be Jews anymore. That's one of the things I resented when my dad came back. I embraced catholicism only because it represented a safe haven and not because of anything that had to do with Jesus or anything like that, didn't appeal to me very much. What appealed to me really was the ritual and not the content. What appeals to me in Judaism really is more the content and not the ritual. The ethics behind it and so I think I'm a very Jewish person and I don't hide that anywhere. Perhaps if I were in a place where nobody observed anything I would do it just to express my Judaism to the rest of the world that way, but I don't feel that I have to do that. But as I said, I do identify with the group, so --my mother says that after the war my little girlfriend, the one that I had spent all this time with in the home

and so on and we stayed friends for a while after. She became religious and I wasn't, but a certain point in time we were going to synagogue for the high holidays and our mothers would try and make us pray and we would just giggle. I mean that's all we'd do, we'd giggle. We could just not do pray or do anything. Then when I went to study, I left home and I went to Switzerland and the very first Rosh Hoshana Eve I went to synagogue. I didn't even go inside. I stayed outside the entire time, but I was there. You know, I just felt that I had to express that I was part of that group but I wasn't going to pray because the prayers meant nothing to me. The prayers are sometimes very pretty if you look at them in terms of poetry, but I really don't believe in God. I really don't believe in that at all. So, my religion would be expressed in terms of how people should relate to one another and nothing to do with some superior being. I'm a scientist and I don't believe in that at all.

Q: Anything else you want to add?

A: Well, the only thing is that you can overcome anything. You at some point have to take responsibility for your own life, no matter how bad. If you do that, you won't be alone. If you persist in living in the past and saying that you can't do anything and nothing is going to work out because you went through this terrible thing, then you will remain stagnate and people will shy away from you and you'll just be a very lonely person. I like to be with people. I don't like to be alone. That's all I have to say.

Q: Thank you.

A: Thank you.
(Viewing pictures)

A: This is my mom and dad's wedding picture and I think that occurred in 1934 something like that, in Antwerp. These are my fraternal grandparents, grandfather, grandmother, uncles, aunts. That was taken in Poland. It must have been around '34 or '35 because my father is no longer on that picture. He had moved to Belgium by then. This is my maternal grandfather, my mom and dad, my mom's brother and his wife. The baby on the old man's lap is myself and the three children that are standing are my cousins. They are my mother's brother's children. I assume, I was born in '36, it had to be, I was close to six months to a year. That's the town in France where we stayed when we didn't make it to Switzerland. That was the place.

Q: Weren't there a couple pictures on here?

A: This is _____ which is on the Belgium coast and it must have been very shortly before. The one on the right is in _____ which is a town where my mother and I spent the last year of the war approximately. This picture is the center is my grandfather and it's essentially many of the same people that appeared in that previous picture. So, it's my dad's brothers and sisters after the war after they got married and had children.

Conclusion of Interview.