

Blanche Stern

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1hr 16m 37s

Interviewer: First thing I'm going to ask is for you to tell us your name so that it will be on tape.

Blanche Stern: Blanche Stern.

Interviewer: Blanche, tell me a little bit about what life was like for you before the war, growing up in Germany.

Blanche Stern: Very good, very happy life. My parents were comfortable and I lived just a normal life until it started in Germany. I had to my schooling, my dancing lessons, my music lessons. I had anything anybody can ask for.

Interviewer: What kind of education did you have both your secular education and your Jewish education?

Blanche Stern: I went for ten years in a private parochial school in two different schools. My education was equal to high school graduation plus.

Interviewer: When you say "parochial" was it a Jewish school?

Blanche Stern: Yes.

Interviewer: And that was pretty common in those days?

Blanche Stern: In the bigger cities, yes. It was a private school.

Interviewer: What kind of activities, you mentioned a little bit your dancing lessons and things, were you involved in any youth groups of any sorts?

Blanche Stern: Yes. I went to [Bnei Akiva], Blau-Weiss, those were Jewish organizations. In private clubs, we went in a club where we spoke English and French and this came very handy to me when we came over here. I really can't remember all the things but I have done a lot of things which were quite interesting. I have very precious memories of that time.

Interviewer: Generally, you really enjoyed your childhood. The reason I asked is that many others that I interviewed, they were very troubled times.

Blanche Stern: Yes. I was very fortunate because I was 23 years old when that whole thing really happened. Until 23, those are the years where you really enjoy your youth. As I said before, I have very precious memories.

Interviewer: When you talked about having gone to Jewish schools, was your family very religious?

Blanche Stern: No. But it was a thing to do. Those were private schools. They thought it would be good to have Jewish education at the same time.

Interviewer: And did your family go to the synagogue a lot and things like that?

Blanche Stern: Yes, on holidays and on Sabbath quite often. They didn't practice religion that much but I still have a very good background and I think I know a lot when it comes to Jewish education.

Interviewer: In general, if you could, just describe for us a little bit what life was like, not just for you but all the Jews in your hometown in the years prior to the war.

Blanche Stern: I lived in a town where there were 30,000 Jews. My whole life was really, more or less, exposed to Jewish people. And it was, like I said, it was very comfortable. We got together socially. As a matter of fact, I had just come back from Israel and I talked to one of the women I went to school with. We just talked how wonderful it was while we got together every week when we were girls and just enjoyed everything what we'd been doing. Of course, I was protected by both of my parents and I had a brother who also lived here and passed away. It was just a life anybody can ask for until the whole thing happened.

Interviewer: How did the Nazis' rule first affect you?

Blanche Stern: First of all, of course, that was the first of April which they had to close all the Jewish stores. They rounded up merchants at a certain place and they had to go walk through town and looked at and spat at. Of course, everybody was—the non-Jews, most of them were very indifferent or happy about it. There was one incident, I really want to—I worked at my father's business, I was a secretary there, and we had a woman who really was a very nice devoted person, not Jewish. We never even thought that she had anything against Jews. As those merchants, which I was telling you, walked by—we had our business in the main street, the third floor or the second floor—as they walked by there, she said, "Well, maybe they did something wrong after all."

Interviewer: And you heard this?

Blanche Stern: Yes. And, of course, this shocked everybody a lot. So this was my first reaction.

Interviewer: How old were you at that point?

Blanche Stern: Twenty-two. My second reaction—would you like to hear this?

Interviewer: Yes, please.

Blanche Stern: My second reaction, in that summer, in 1933, I went to visit a friend of mine in Berlin. One day I was sitting on the street, in a café, which was very customary there, I saw the Nazis, the SS or the SR, passing by in a group—40, 50, I don't know—they were singing. I just caught the words when—I say in German first: “Wenn's Judenblut vom Messer spritzt, dann geht's nochmal so gut”—meaning “If Jewish blood splashes from the knife, everything goes twice as well.” Then I made up my mind, “That's it. I'm not going to stay in”—excuse me—“Germany, and I came”—I'm sorry—I came home and I said to my parents, “I'm going to leave. I'm not going to stay here.” I really wanted to go to Palestine at that time, and my parents said, “It's so far.” In these days, it was really just a very small country. They talked me out of it. They said, “Why don't you go to Belgium? You know people there. You have some relatives there and if the whole thing is over soon, which everybody hoped, of course, you can come back.” So in November 1933, I left. I met my husband there. We got married. I lived there in Brussels. Now what would you like to know now?

Interviewer: Oh, no. This is fascinating. I'm just taking a few little notes.

Blanche Stern: We lived in Brussels until May 1940. Everything was fine. My child was born there and we had a very nice time. We knew what was going on in Germany and then—but we decided to stay because we could stick it out. But in the night of 10th of May, we woke up in the middle of the night and that's when the Germans invaded the Lowlands. The war had already started in '39 but it didn't really affect us, which was very foolish, but this is hind-thought. So the men were arrested to go to a place where they collected all the alien enemies because we were still Germans. We did not have citizenship. My husband was hurt. Something fell on our back porch and he was trying to carry some of the children, the neighbor's children in the basement, and he was hurt and he was spared to go to that camp. Then a week later when the Germans came closer and closer, my husband, my child and both of my parents, we went in the car and we were trying to go to the coast. We went there, got into some friend's house where we tried to spend the night. So this was very crowded. My mother and my child and myself, we spent the night in the house. My father and my husband decided to stay in the car overnight. Are you really interested in that?

Interviewer: Yes.

Blanche Stern: So they—in the morning, they decided to get out of the car and were walking on the street and the police came and asked for the papers and since the papers were German, they were arrested, put to prison...

Interviewer: Your father and your husband.

Blanche Stern: My father and my husband. We didn't know what happened and all of a sudden a guy with a bike came by and gave us a little slip from my father which said, “No matter what the cost, get out.” So we tried to get out and we were caught actually in the Battle of Dunkirk, which was quite an event now. At the time, we just tried to save our lives. We crossed the border and we went into France and

we drove and drove till we were out of gasoline. Well, you were too young, but maybe you have seen the pictures somewhere where the people walked and walked and cars after cars. The poor people, I always felt sorry for them, they were trying to carry their belongings and they sold this away and that away because they couldn't carry it anymore. When we finally got out of gas, we had to spend the whole day in line to get some more gas. Then, the car broke down. We asked somebody to pull us, which they did, and then the police asked different people for the papers, when they see we had German papers, they disconnected our car and they put us in jail. Then a few days later...

Interviewer: This was in France?

Blanche Stern: In France. Yes.

Interviewer: Do you remember which town?

Blanche Stern: Yes. In fact, it was a very well-known town, Le Mans, you know where they have the car races?

Interviewer: Sure.

Blanche Stern: And we've been there in a—it wasn't a prison anymore. It was a collecting center where they collected all the women. I can't remember if they had some men too. They may have put them in somewhere else because I remember we slept on straw, hundreds of women, on the floor, of course. I can't go into details to tell what happened there but then one day they told us they're going to ship us somewhere. They were not ugly to us, the French people. We just were enemies to them and they wanted to get us out of the way.

Interviewer: Let me back up just a little bit and make sure we understand exactly what happened. You left Germany in 1933. Then you lived in Brussels for about seven years with your husband. When you left Belgium, he was still in jail with your father?

Blanche Stern: Yes.

Interviewer: So when you were travelling to France, it was just your mom and you and your son?

Blanche Stern: We went with some friends.

Interviewer: And some friends. What was the whole feeling like? From that period, you described the very beginning the rise of Nazi power and your first memories in your hometown. But in Belgium, for example, in-between 1933 and 1940, what was it like? Did you feel free? Where you removed from all the problems?

Blanche Stern: Yes.

Interviewer: But what kind of letters were you getting from your family back in Germany?

Blanche Stern: Oh, well, that, of course, my family lived there until '39.

Interviewer: In Germany?

Blanche Stern: In Germany. They left after the Kristallnacht. You know, of course, needless to say, we were terribly worried about what happened to them and we phoned and go out and they finally decided to leave. They thought they could stick it out in Germany.

Interviewer: What made them think they could stick out? What was life like for them between '33 and '39?

Blanche Stern: In a big town, in a city like Frankfurt, it was not as bad as you probably find out from the others like from Höchst who lived through a horrible life because they knew everybody in those towns. But in Frankfurt, more or less, I mean, they knew the Jews were not allowed to go here. They were not allowed to have German maids. You heard of "rassenschand" and all those things? But, unfortunately, the people there, a lot of them, still thought that they can stick it out. My father had a very flourishing business. That's why a lot of people were caught in the last minute and they couldn't get out. My parents, luckily, they could get out and came to Brussels then.

Interviewer: A lot of people in this country—you always hear people say, "Oh, something like that could never happen here." Was it the same kind of feeling when you were growing up and especially after you left when your parents stayed, did they have any idea how bad it could get?

Blanche Stern: No. It was a big mistake made by the Jews. Hitler wrote a book, *Mein Kampf*, you heard of that?

Interviewer: Of course.

Blanche Stern: And instead of us reading that book, we said very foolishly, "Oh, no. We are not going to read it. We are not going to support that, the sale of that book." And we did not know what was going on. They also had a very anti-Semitic newspaper, *Der Stürmer*. Nobody wanted to read it. Nobody wanted to hear about it. In other words, we played—what do you call it, stick your head in the sand—ostrich. That's what most people did. Of course, there were some smart people who left already in 1933 and they were able to take a lot of their money with them. Especially if they had a lot, they could have half of it which was better than—when my family left, they could take 10 Marks. They couldn't take anything except, let's say, try to get out under the carpet, under the table.

Interviewer: I was in Hungary a few years ago and looking at some of the things that were saved from before the war and there were a lot of—it was a lot of propaganda against the Jews, was it the same way in Germany from what your parents told you?

Blanche Stern: Yes.

Interviewer: Okay. Back to 1939, your parents finally—they just had enough. At this point, when they decided to leave, they weren't able to continue their business as they had before, were they?

Blanche Stern: In Frankfurt? Yes, they were until—yes. But then, instead of selling the business or instead of doing something, it was just taken away from them.

Interviewer: And that's when they left?

Blanche Stern: That's when they left.

Interviewer: Okay. So they joined you in Brussels and that's when your father and your husband were taken prisoner. We left off where you were talking about your experiences in France but I wonder if you could just tell us what happened with your father and your husband.

Blanche Stern: It was very simple. If you can visualize the map, the Germans cut them off. They were still in that prison and that was already cut off. You know when they called all the British and the British left and they left all their merchandise, all their food, everything there, and they were in this part of Belgium while we were already out. I mean, I could find it to you, I could make a map of it, but you should be able if you are familiar with it, how it was. Therefore, they were in the occupied part of Belgium while we were in the non-occupied and we were going south. That's when they caught us.

Interviewer: Did they ever get out?

Blanche Stern: Yes.

Interviewer: What happened to them after they were—how long were they held in Belgium?

Blanche Stern: Just a few days because they wanted them out of there because they didn't know what would happen and they sent them back to Brussels. Of course, I hadn't heard from neither one of them neither did my mother until much later. We struggled along. They took us to a concentration camp, "Gurs," they called it. And we've been there from end of May until the middle of September. We were just lucky that we could get out.

Interviewer: You were talking about your mom and you and your son and friends.

Blanche Stern: Yes.

Interviewer: Was your husband and your father with you at that time?

Blanche Stern: No. They were in Brussels. They send them back then they lived in their own places. In the beginning, it was all right for them. But then little after little it got worse and my husband finally through some false papers he could get out. My

father didn't want to leave until my mother would come back, which she did, also through false papers. So my parents lived in Brussels until the end of the war. And this is what I wonder if you like to hear just a couple of thoughts, incidents what happened to them.

Interviewer: I do want to hear them. I just want to understand. So you were in France with your mom and then she went back?

Blanche Stern: My mother went back and my husband came to find us, through some connections they got. Because we were—one part was the Vichy and then we were in the other part, and somehow the mail was smuggled and he found out where we were. When we were dismissed from that camp, after all, we didn't do anything, we went to Toulouse into a very lousy little place. I didn't have a lot of money with me. My son and my mother and I, we stayed in that place and my mother went back and my husband found us in that hotel.

Interviewer: When did you go to camp in this whole...

What year was it when you were in France, when you got taken to a camp and why did it happen? How did it all happen?

Blanche Stern: It was in 1940. It was still in May after we had left. How it happened? I told you, we were arrested on the street, and because we had German passports, German papers, they arrested—this was a camp. They had thousands and thousands of women. The men were somewhere else. That's where they collected us and that's where we stayed. A lot of them did not come out because after France was taken over by the Nazis, they shipped them all to Auschwitz. We were just very lucky and fortunate that we got out of there and found our way out.

Interviewer: How did you find your way out?

Blanche Stern: It takes too long to tell you everything and I'll try to make it short. When my husband finally met me, as I told before, in that hotel, we tried to get to the border. At the border, they were telling us we can't leave because my husband was in the military age and we didn't get an exit visa. So we went back. We tried to get out again a few days later. So the German occupied the part of France. They wouldn't let us go through because we were Jewish. We went again and somebody told us there is somebody, if you bribe them with 100 gold dollars, my husband had a small amount of gold collected for that purpose just in case because we still thought maybe something will happen. We gave most of what we had to those people and we went to the same place where we went first. Then our name was read, they let us in.

Interviewer: They let you in to where?

Blanche Stern: Spain.

Interviewer: And then you were done, and then...

Blanche Stern: Uh-uh, we thought we were done. He had a visa, a transit visa through Portugal, go to South America—I forgot which country it was—but that second visa was a false visa. We took the night train from the border, from France to Spain, and came to Madrid and spent a day there because the next train was at night again. We take the night train to go to Portugal. When we came to the border in Portugal—and don't forget we had a three-year-old child with us—they looked at the visa and the Portuguese visa was expired. So all we had to do was go back to the Portugal consulate and get another visa. So we travelled the third night to Spain, took a cab, went to the Portuguese consulate and they said we have to first verify our other visa to get there. If we have that, they give it to us. So we went to South American consulate. They looked at it and they said, "That's not a real visa, that's a false visa," and he just tore up the visa and there we were stuck. We left some of our belongings at the Portuguese border and, of course, they said that half of the stuff was stolen. We sat there. I think it was the only time I ever said to my husband, "I think we better kill ourselves." We didn't know the language. We didn't have any place to go. We didn't have any money. We really didn't know what to do. So we went to the American Express because it was the only thing we could really read and understand. So there was a little Jewish man and he saw us, how desperate we were. And he said, "I know what happened to you because the same thing happened to me. I live in a very, very low-grade cheap boarding house but if that's sufficient for you, you can go there." So we went and, needless to say, it was awful, it was terrible, nobody could speak my language except one guy, he spoke some French. We lived there for four months. We couldn't get out. We didn't know what to do and there were a few other people in the same boat like we were and we got together every day and we said, "How are we going to do that?" By the way, the food which we got, we had some horsemeat. It was practically nothing. One day, somebody said, if you can put down so much money, you can get a visa to Havana, to Cuba. And, of course, we were in touch with the Mays and my father had some money in Nashville which, he wasn't supposed to, of course. And they put the money up for us and then on the 19th of May, a year longer, in 1941, after we left, we sailed to Havana and stayed there for a month until we could get our American visa.

Interviewer: During that year, you were on the run for a year basically?

Blanche Stern: Yes.

Interviewer: What kind of word were you having from your parents back in Belgium? No, in Germany?

Blanche Stern: No, in Belgium.

Interviewer: They were in Belgium?

Blanche Stern: Yes. They lived in '39. They lived in Belgium. At that time, not too bad, at that time, mind you.

Interviewer: Did they have any contact with anyone back in Frankfurt during that period?

Blanche Stern: No. See, it wasn't bad in Belgium the first few years. But then after—I'll get back to that a little bit—but they were in Brussels and I had some letters from them. But when we sailed to the United States very shortly after, the war started with America and Germany, and then I haven't heard from them at all. I thought they were killed.

Interviewer: During that year, when you were trying to get out of Europe, your parents were going to stay in Belgium? That they...

Blanche Stern: Well, they couldn't get out anymore. There was no way for them to get out.

Interviewer: And even you who were trying, it wasn't an easy task at all.

Blanche Stern: For what?

Interviewer: To leave Europe.

Blanche Stern: No.

Interviewer: What was it like in these other countries, in Spain and Portugal, besides—you talked about the economic experiences—where they aware of what was going on in Germany and east of there? Were you treated differently because you were a Jew on the run from the Nazis?

Blanche Stern: We were not treated at all as Jews because, at that time, Jews did not exist in France. They had no Jews, openly. And even at the German consulate, we had to prolong our permit to stay longer. Even there, they didn't look at us as Jews while all Jews in Germany had a "J" on it. They didn't put a "J" on anything. We were not Jews to them. There were no synagogues. There were nothing. As a matter of fact, I really like to mention this. We met a family who lived in Spain, not as Jews either. When Passover came, there was a knock on my door, and that guy comes and brings us two Matzos. They had received the Matzos from Tangiers because in Spain it didn't exist. They said, "At least, I want you to know, that it's Passover."

Interviewer: And that was during that year when you were in...

Blanche Stern: Yes, in Spain.

Interviewer: What was the May family's connection to your leaving to Cuba? Was there one?

Blanche Stern: They gave us an affidavit.

Interviewer: To go to Cuba?

Blanche Stern: No, to Cuba, you didn't need anything. All you need is cash, money. They sent it to Cuba. That's why we could get in. I may have—no, I don't think I had a visa, I don't remember that.

Interviewer: What was your family's initial connection to the May family from Nashville? What was the original connection?

Blanche Stern: My father's sister was married to a May. So they were brothers. So in other words...

Interviewer: Living in Nashville? She was living in Nashville?

Blanche Stern: Yes. Excuse me. [Pause] There's one thing I really wanted to tell you about my parents leaving so that—they were hiding. Is it okay?

Interviewer: Sure. Go right ahead.

Blanche Stern: My brother, who was with the American Army, with the military police, he was stationed in Paris. After the war, he was trying to get to Brussels to see if my parents were still alive. We had no idea. And when he came to the place where we used to live, there was a woman who lived with us and she said, "Mr. Levison, your family is fine. They live in such and such address." My brother went there and he found my both parents looking terrible but they were all very happy. He wrote in that letter. For 30 minutes, we didn't do anything but cry. Then they told him a lot of things which happened but there is one thing which I really like to tell you. They, as I said, they lived in the apartment and my mother told my father to go and buy some fish. So he went to the fish store and brought the fish home and my mother said, "You have to take the fish back because it smells." My father said, "I won't do such a thing." So my mother insisted and he finally went—I never found out if he got his money back by the way—and when he came back he saw the Gestapo in front of the house. So he said to himself, there's no need. He said, "I go up because they're after me. If I don't go up and they get my wife, maybe I can be of some help." So he walked around the block and walked until the [Gestapo] were finally gone. He goes upstairs, the door was knocked in or out and my mother was there crying and he said, "What happened?" She said, "The Gestapo came and when I didn't open the door, they knocked it out and they said, 'Where's Mr. Levison?'" She said, "Mr. Levison is out-of-town." "When do you expect him?" "Not until late this evening." They said, "Okay, then we take you with us." My mother was very charming, beautiful woman. Somehow, I still don't know how she sweet-talked them out of it. They said, "You tell Mr. Levison we need to ask him a few questions and we are coming back later." Now my father was a very clever man. He had paid an attic room every month just in order to get there in case something would happen to them.

Interviewer: He had paid what?

Blanche Stern: A room in an attic.

Interviewer: I see. Smart.

Blanche Stern: I don't know if they had already packed before just in case or if they packed [after], I never find out. They went there, and they lived in that room for a year-and-a-half. No heat, no nothing. They supported themselves by my mother was knitting, and she knitted for other people, and at night when it was dark she went to deliver and got new merchandise to take home. That's how they maintained their living.

Interviewer: And this was in Belgium?

Blanche Stern: Yes.

Interviewer: I take it, did they ever tell you—they were very lucky to be in Belgium as opposed to Germany were they not?

Blanche Stern: Oh, yes, because in Germany you couldn't do that.

Interviewer: Okay. You were starting to explain to me when the war first started, did you have contact with the Mays? Did you know that they were going to try to help you get to the United States?

Blanche Stern: Well, my brother was here already. And I had contact with them. But once they whole mess started it was very difficult. But I did know—he said if I needed some help, they would help me. It was just the question of when. Because the American quota was closed and there was thousands and thousands of people who wanted to get in, and nobody could get in. But when the war started, nobody could get out anyway and that's why we could get our visa very fast while we were in Havana. I hope I make myself clear.

Interviewer: You do and when you don't I just stop you and make you go back. What year did you go from Portugal to Cuba?

Blanche Stern: We never got to Portugal.

Interviewer: Oh, you were in Spain the whole time? What year was it that you went to Cuba?

Blanche Stern: 1940. The whole thing took place from May 10th until June 13th when we finally landed in Nashville.

Interviewer: So you were in Cuba about a month?

Blanche Stern: Yes.

Interviewer: Was it when you were there that you got in touch with the Mays or your brother?

Blanche Stern: I suppose so. See you couldn't call in these days. But I must have written them or something. But anyway, they put the money out for us, a certain amount they kept, a certain amount they gave us back when we left the country. So we

stayed a month in Cuba, which was very pleasant really, except that we were anxious to get started again because it was a terrible life to be on the run for 13 months.

Interviewer: How did you choose the United States as opposed to—at one point, you'd mentioned that you wanted to go to Palestine—why, was it just because your brother was here?

Blanche Stern: Yes. Most of my family was here and we knew that was the easiest place to go. There was no way to go to Palestine in these days and we wouldn't know where else to go but that was our final goal.

Interviewer: So did they Mays signed your affidavits to come over?

Blanche Stern: Yes.

Interviewer: And what day did you come to this country? Did you come through New York?

Blanche Stern: No. We took the clipper. Do you know what a clipper is? This was an airplane in these days which flew over the ocean. It landed on the ocean.

Interviewer: Like a hydroplane kind of.

Blanche Stern: Something like that. Yes. And we took that clipper and went from Havana to Miami and then we took a train and went to Nashville.

Interviewer: What was it like arriving in the United States?

Blanche Stern: We were so happy. We said, "We finally went somewhere where we were hoping that we could stay." It was a wonderful feeling. But I always had a terrible feeling about my parents.

Interviewer: How long had it been—by the time you got to the United States, how long had it been since you heard anything from them?

Blanche Stern: Oh, I did hear while we were in Spain. That was very fast. The mail from Madrid to Brussels went in a day. That was fine. I heard from them even in the United States until the 6th of December when the war started and everything was cut off.

Interviewer: How long was it that you didn't hear from them in total?

Blanche Stern: After the war when my brother found them.

Interviewer: So for years you didn't hear them?

Blanche Stern: Well, in the beginning, once in a while I had a little note from them from somebody in Switzerland. But that stopped too and, as a matter of fact, I tried to write with the Red Cross and each time I got my letter back and it says: "Left

without any known place.” So I thought, for sure, they’ve been sent to Auschwitz. I was just living in hope. Thank God, everything worked out.

Interviewer: When you first arrived in the United States, what did it feel like? What was your first goal, I guess?

Blanche Stern: To start housekeeping. I had a husband. In the meantime, my child was four years old. Not only this, we had to find some work. I worked for the Mays and my husband worked for—at the time it was Stan and Lightman. We together made about \$25.00 which was just enough to keep us above water. But then little by little he got raises and I got a little raise here and a little raise there. We struggled for a long time because we couldn’t take any furniture, we couldn’t take any money. We really lived, what you call from hand-to-mouth, but we were happy that we could accomplish what we really had to. So it’s fine.

Interviewer: Describe a little bit your feelings after everything you’d been through and what you were starting to be aware of was happening in Europe to other Jews, what did you feel like, knowing you had escaped it?

Blanche Stern: Well, I was very, very happy. Very happy, I said, finally I was in a country where—I can’t say that I was free because I was free in Belgium also. But in a country where I was hoping that I could start making a living again and living a normal life once more, because it’s very difficult for someone to understand what it means to live with a small suitcase. I think I had one dress which I had on and another one which a woman made for me while we were in the concentration camp from the mattress material. We took the straw out. You know, some people were dismissed. That’s all I had. So it didn’t matter to me. I was happy. I said, “Well, maybe in a short time we can start living a normal life” which we did. We got a furnished room with somebody in the beginning and after a week I went to work. I had to. My husband had to work and with the \$25.00 we could live.

Interviewer: Did both of you speak English?

Blanche Stern: Yes.

Interviewer: You were very lucky in that regard. Life could have been much harder.

Blanche Stern: Yes. I learned it in school and I went to, like I told you, in the two private clubs. We spoke one night in French and one night in English. So I spoke to get by not really well.

Interviewer: Yet, there were probably many differences between your life growing up in Germany and life in the United States. What struck you about the differences at that point when you were new here?

Blanche Stern: I felt I was nobody. I felt I had nothing. I felt I have to go ahead again and do something but I wasn’t even comparing—see, that year where we’ve been

away, on the run, really wiped out everything. I could not even compare except here and there when I saw people they lived a normal life. I said, "Oh, my God, I wish I had that kind of life again." But that was about all. I was too happy. I said I had a place which I could call my home.

Interviewer: Were people nice to you? How did people treat a refugee? I don't mean just your family...

Blanche Stern: I know what you mean.

Interviewer: People in Nashville.

Blanche Stern: Well, people are people. Some people were very nice, some people were nice just to be nice, and some people just ignored us. People are people all over.

Interviewer: When you were worried about your parents—once you got here, the war broke out, right? And there was a period of all those years that you were really uncertain about their future. Was there anything you could do to...?

Blanche Stern: No. Absolutely nothing.

Interviewer: Describe your feelings during that period about that, the frustration.

Blanche Stern: I can only give you one example and I think that it's significant. I went to work, like I told you, and especially in wintertime when I came home in my warm apartment and I was looking forward so much. After all, I worked in the factory first and then in the office and it was long hard day for me. I opened my door and it's so nice and cozy and warm, and I was grateful and happy for a second and then I said to myself, "How can I be even happy when I don't even know where my parents are?" I think that's the best way I can describe it.

Interviewer: Did you also think about your childhood friends? Did you wonder what happened to all of them, other Jewish people?

Blanche Stern: No.

Interviewer: You didn't?

Blanche Stern: Not in particular. I thought, "What happened to everybody?" but I was so concerned about my parents that all the rest I was trying to wipe out.

Interviewer: Did the community—and when I say the "community" I mean Nashville or the American government—did anybody help you try to get word about your parents?

Blanche Stern: There was no way. It was completely cut off.

Interviewer: There's always a lot written and a lot of discussion about whether Americans really knew what was going on in Europe at that time, about the camps, how much did you really know about what Hitler was doing?

Blanche Stern: We heard here that something happened to the Jews and said they kill them. Whichever way, we didn't know too well, but we knew; otherwise, I wouldn't have been that worried about it. We knew and the Americans knew it too.

Interviewer: So your feelings during this period of resettling, you were both happy but also very distraught about your family?

Blanche Stern: Yes, of course.

Interviewer: Any other description of your thoughts and feelings during this period?

Blanche Stern: Well, alright, let me tell you this. Of course, we tried to live a normal life. Every year, on Christmas Eve or on New Year's Eve rather, we were in a certain group and we got together and I never really was very happy. But I remember one year, in 1945 it was, we've been with that group on Christmas Eve, on Christmas Day, so we often wanted to be together. Then the same group had a New Year's Eve party and I still remember. I received that letter from my brother where he wrote me, he said he found my parents. And I didn't even know if I mentioned—yes, I did. I still remember that Christmas Eve party—now, I don't think we had a Christmas party, it was just a holiday for us and we just tried to be together. It was very dull for me. And then I got the letter between Christmas and New Year. And I never forget what a wonderful New Year's Eve party I had, and I'm sure it wasn't any different from anything else but knowing that my parents were alive, that made my whole life different.

Interviewer: Did they end up coming to Nashville?

Blanche Stern: Yes. My brother brought them over.

Interviewer: How soon after the war ended?

Blanche Stern: They came in December 1946 because he was an American citizen in these days and because he was fighting in the Army. I think they had some preferences. So they came in—I think it was in summer in June 1946.

Interviewer: As awful as their experiences were, did they ever talk about how lucky they were in light of what could have happened to them?

Blanche Stern: Yes, of course. When they talked about what happened to them with that fish story and I was, "Why they were even hidden in that attic?" They were trying to find an—either the British or whoever—the flyer who parachuted somewhere and they were really going through the matter—what do you call it—looking for him. They went from house to house and they gave up or found him, I don't know, right before they got to their place. That's one time. There was another time when they arrested somebody instead of my father. So they knew how lucky they were. Sure.

Interviewer: Did they bring stories with them when they came about things that they knew about from back home that you didn't know?

Blanche Stern: You mean from Belgium?

Interviewer: From Belgium or things they might have heard from Germany while they were over there.

Blanche Stern: It's not—I don't remember. It's been so long ago. It's almost 50 years so I really don't know much about it.

Interviewer: But the reunion must have been wonderful.

Blanche Stern: Oh, needless to say. I went to New York to pick them up. By the way, you asked me before what kind of feelings I had. I remember one day I went to a funeral. A woman lost her mother who was way up in her 90s or 80s and she cried something awful. I said to myself, "I would give anything if I could bury my parents here" because I was sure that they were not alive anymore. So that shows you how—and when my father—unfortunately, he died a year-and-a-half after he was here—when he died and I was heartbroken and I visualized myself standing on that grave and having the feelings which I did. That gave me some consolation.

Interviewer: Knowing that they had come out?

Blanche Stern: Right.

Interviewer: And that you had gotten to see them again?

Blanche Stern: Oh, yes. My mother lived quite a bit longer but my father died a year-and-a-half later.

Interviewer: How long was it before you really felt at home in this country?

Blanche Stern: About five years. It takes anybody five years to make such a tremendous change. Even if you move in another city, it's sometimes difficult to make changes.

Interviewer: Did your son grow up—did he think of himself as an American child?

Blanche Stern: I ask him sometimes. I ask him now, "Did you ever feel poor?" And he said, "Not really," while he was young. We had no car. All the other guys had cars, I mean, the parents and all of this. But he said, "Not too bad," while he was young. But somebody told me once, he never told me that, he mentioned to that particular person, he made up his mind he will never be poor. So it must have stuck with him, but he never let me know. It's different when you're in something or when you look at it from the outside.

Interviewer: Absolutely. I'm just wondering did you ever feel resentment because you had a really good life in Germany prior to the war. Did you ever think about Hitler and do you feel any bitterness the fact that your life was interrupted and you had to start over again?

Blanche Stern: Of course, I did. I still do. It's not in my life, maybe my life is better than it would have been in Germany. I don't know. You can't compare. But that's natural when you think about what you had and what you had to give up even if you have a wonderful life. We gave up an awful lot. Well, I don't know what life would have in store for me had I not left under normal circumstances. But sure, my whole life would have been different.

Interviewer: What was your Jewish life like in Nashville when you came here? Did you practice the religion at all?

Blanche Stern: Yes. My husband was more religious than I was. We joined the Orthodox synagogue at the time. Because of him, I did a lot of things and I'm still kind of religious. I'm holding on to certain traditions.

Interviewer: Tell me a little bit more about the May family? I realized you had a very personal connection because your brother married a May.

Blanche Stern: Not my brother, my father's...

Interviewer: Your father's.

Blanche Stern: It doesn't matter.

Interviewer: Wait, who was it again? It was your father's?

Blanche Stern: My father's sister married a May.

Interviewer: Which May?

Blanche Stern: Have you heard of Jacob May?

Interviewer: Yes.

Blanche Stern: His brother, Moses May. You will hear about Moses May later from the people from Höchst.

Interviewer: Oh, I've interviewed some of them already but I wanted to—we're particularly interested in their story because of something else we may do about that family and I just wondered if you could talk for a few minutes about what role they played and what kind of feelings you have. They helped a lot of people and I wonder how much you thought about that during your transit and your settlement here.

Blanche Stern: Well, first of all, I felt very grateful to them, of course. Somebody said you can't be grateful for the rest of your life. But we were always very close—not close close—but I felt Mortimer was very, very nice to us. His children, who—one of them lives here, Leon—when we see him, we always feel like, we are not family but part of the family. There's always a warm feeling. Whenever something

happens in the family even now, they don't ignore it and I won't ignore it either, so there is—because we did have a mutual relative.

Interviewer: And yet they went beyond just their family and helped so many others from Höchst and I just wonder what do you think motivated their desire to help people so much?

Blanche Stern: Humanity. I think, if I'm not mistaken, they gave about 300-some affidavits until they were told that's all they can do. Then Mortimer went around and asked his friends to give him affidavits. See, the people helped people here. They were wonderful in terms of that.

Interviewer: Not to look at the negative, but do you often think why didn't more American Jews do the kind of thing that the Mays did to help others get out?

Blanche Stern: Even some German Jews didn't help. They were afraid. They didn't want to put their money out. There are a lot of people who didn't. Now I had a cousin who just passed away, Selma Oppenheimer, her mother bombarded her with letters—"You must get out. You must get out"—and my cousin didn't really have the money. She borrowed the money and paid interest for it just to get her mother out. She did, while other people didn't do that. Like I said before, people are people.

Interviewer: Do you mean she borrowed the money from another American?

Blanche Stern: Yes, and she paid interest. She paid so much every month and got her mother out.

Interviewer: Did you feel that—what did the Jewish community, once you got out and you were here, did you witness—did you feel that they were doing enough, or what were they doing about what was happening in Europe? Was there anything they could do?

Blanche Stern: Let me tell you something. We came in June '41, right?

Interviewer: Right.

Blanche Stern: And in December '41, everything was cut off. There was nothing anybody could do anymore. You couldn't write. You couldn't—you didn't hear. Those people who were caught were caught. Some were lucky and were hiding but officially there was nothing. The only ones who could have done was the government and, as you know, they didn't do very much.

Interviewer: I understand you went back to Europe not all that long ago. Somebody told me that you went back. When was that and what prompted you to go back?

Blanche Stern: I went to Europe for a couple times besides that. I always wanted to go to Frankfurt and whenever we were ready to go, I didn't have the courage. I just didn't want to go. Then came word out that the city invited former citizens of

that town because they wanted us to see that things have changed and this and the other. So I decided, "Why not?" I thought it would be exciting to see people because they came from all over the world: my former friends, people I went to school with, some neighbors. So I said, "Why not?" and I went. But to be very honest with you, I left my feelings behind. I knew already beforehand, I'm not going to get upset. I'm not going to get excited. I take it in. After all, it's been good to be invited and stay in a nice hotel and see what's going on and get it out of my system. When I got there, there was one time when I went to the zoo, where I spent so much time when I was a child and I looked at the pond where there was skating, ice skating. For 30 seconds, maybe my eyes were misty and that was the only time. The house I used to live in was bombed out—a new house. The streets looked different. It didn't affect me at all. Other people say they had mixed feelings. I had no feelings. Except I enjoyed very much being with my former—and I hadn't seen them in 50, 60 years and we had a ball. We really did.

Interviewer: Were most of the stories ones that had happy endings? The stories your friends told them had some of them been through much worse things?

Blanche Stern: No, those who I met all got out. I asked them about what happened to this one, what happened to that one. Well, this one was killed by the Nazis. This one was killed by the Nazis. But those who came, most of them were happy. There were a couple of them who lost their parents in the Holocaust. I said to myself—I didn't tell them—"I would have never put my foot into Germany if I had lost my parents regardless of what." But thank God, I was very lucky. My father, my mother, all their brothers and sisters and all my cousins came out. I lost three cousins in that—we had a very large family—so I consider myself very lucky.

Interviewer: What were the Germans like in Frankfurt when you went back?

Blanche Stern: Well, I only had to deal with younger people and they were very nice. They're trying very hard. In fact, I had a letter at home now to write what happened, and why it happened and how I feel about it. The younger people really, at least they say, they feel bad. So I will say those things happened and they want to make up for that. The people, my generation, I didn't see. Well, of course, most of them are gone anyway. But to those which were involved in the Nazis, I don't think I saw—maybe one.

Interviewer: You told about the bookkeeper or the woman who worked for your father and some of those things that had surprised you as a young girl. Did it make you suspicious of the motivation behind the Germans even today? Because you never thought that woman, for example, would have ever had a bad thought about Jews. I wonder were you suspicious of the motivation behind the Frankfurt people?

Blanche Stern: I brought it up quite often. For instance, I went in a store. There's a woman, she was younger than I but still I thought, "Maybe she was involved." And everybody said the same thing, "Yes, it was terrible thing what happened to the

Jews.” And most of them said, “I didn’t know anything about it.” I had a friend. They used to live here in Nashville. She was a little child when that whole thing started. She told me she asked her father at one time after she was grown up, “Dad, did you ever know what happened to the Jews?” Most people in Germany said they didn’t. But he said to her, “Yes, I did.” And she said, “Why didn’t you do anything about it?” He says, “You know, there was no way I could do because the moment I would have opened my mouth, they would have sent me off just like the Jews. I really was a coward,” he said, “but I couldn’t do it.”

Interviewer: And this was a German friend?

Blanche Stern: Yes.

Interviewer: This story you told about the little girl and her father, was this a German youngster?

Blanche Stern: Yes.

Interviewer: It was somebody you knew growing up?

Blanche Stern: No. In fact, I never had met her. She and her husband lived in Nashville.

Interviewer: You met her afterwards?

Blanche Stern: I met him after they moved back to Germany and for some reason, she—as a matter of fact, let me tell you why I really got so close with her. When my parents lived in Germany—that was already when the Nazis started but it wasn’t really that bad yet—my parents had a gentile couple who they were very friendly with. They had a young guy who was with the Hitler Youth. He came at night on the back steps—they had a step for the delivery and all that—upstairs and brought my parents what they couldn’t get, eggs and milk and butter, whatever. When those people—when she was already back in Germany and he came once to visit us—he said, “It would really help me if you would find out the whereabouts of Seth”—now he’s a man of course, in his 60s—“where he is because I like to do something for him.” She right away tried very, very hard to find him. She never did, by the way, but she went through God-knows-what. That’s how we even got acquainted and we wrote each other letters and we phoned. When she heard that I was coming to Germany, she said she couldn’t wait to meet me and I really wasn’t disappointed when I got there. She was wonderful and they drove us to little towns nearby where I really wanted to—they did anything and everything they could.

Interviewer: She was not Jewish?

Blanche Stern: No.

Interviewer: She was a German who had lived in Nashville and through your Nashville connection is how you got in touch with her?

Blanche Stern: Right.

Interviewer: Were there others in that community who you might have—did you run into any non-Jews in Frankfurt when you went back that you had known prior to the war?

Blanche Stern: No. I wasn't even interested. But I wouldn't even have known how to get in touch with them. I hadn't been with too many non-Jews to begin with—children I played with and all that but that's all.

Interviewer: Were there any Jews in Frankfurt when you went back recently?

Blanche Stern: Yes. There are about 6,000 now and they have several synagogues and they have a lot of things. But let me tell you something. There was a guy. We had a get-together. I was trying to get a ride home because I couldn't walk well and my cousin couldn't walk well. She went with me. My husband didn't want to go. His name was Levy. He was an American citizen but he lived in Germany. I said, "Mr. Levy how is life in Germany?" He said, "Well, it's a very good life. It's really good to live here, but," this is exactly what he said, "our suitcases are always packed."

Interviewer: Once they saw it happen to other people, they always knew it could happen again, is that his basic thought?

Blanche Stern: Listen, history repeats. It doesn't look like it's going to happen now but you never know. You never know.

Interviewer: They were free to observe their faith though. I mean, were they?

Blanche Stern: Now?

Interviewer: I'm talking about even when you went back a few years ago.

Blanche Stern: Yes, I'm talking about that. It was only three years. Oh, yes, as a matter of fact, very much so. There's much more religious life in Germany now than here in Nashville, believe it or not.

Interviewer: That doesn't surprise me. Did you get any criticism from others for going back?

Blanche Stern: Yes and no. They never said, "How can you? How could you?" But I said, "I wouldn't go back for anything." That's as much as a criticism was. I could see that he didn't approve of it. But I went. Believe me, I don't think I want to go the second time, not because I have hard feelings, but I'm not interested. The town, the city left me cold. It's not what it's used to be. In fact, I felt like I was in another city. I didn't feel like I was in my hometown where I had such happy times.

Interviewer: Is that because, in large part, because of everything you know that had gone on since?

Blanche Stern: I don't think so. I can't tell you because, like I said, I had no feelings. I don't know. I did not go around and say, "What you did, what you didn't." Except, one day, they took us in a city tour in a bus and every ten minutes they stopped and said, "This is Mr. Watchmadoodle. He gave 100,000 Marks for the University," or "This is"—I'm just using said amount. "Oh, this is what Mr. So-and-So and he did the University and he did this and this one did that." I said to my friends, "It makes me sick to think what the Jews really have done for the community, and what happened after all."

Interviewer: So they were pointing out on these tours some of the things that these Jewish citizens have done?

Blanche Stern: Yes.

Interviewer: Do you know, because you left, but I wonder if your parents or anyone every told you, did the people of Frankfurt, in general, how were they towards helping the Jews once the problem started in the '30s, did they do anything to help?

Blanche Stern: They were afraid. I'm sure there were quite a few. I know of people who turned their back on certain things, we've said that. I know people when they packed and they were not supposed to take certain things and they didn't look. I'm sorry, I have to repeat myself all the time, people are people. There were some horrible, horrible Germans but I'm sure there were some also who just went along with the rest because there was nothing else for them to do.

Interviewer: Do you think you look at life differently because of your pre-war experiences and what you went through?

Blanche Stern: Yes.

Interviewer: How so?

Blanche Stern: First of all, I think things don't matter so much anymore. My neighbor at one time she broke all her dishes, nice china, and she cried something awful. I said, "Look, not only did I lose all my dishes, I lost everything what I have. So don't cry." This is an attitude—of course, I must say, to be very honest, you lose some of that feeling. You want to get ahead. When we went to Spain—remember I told you in that terrible place—the best thing we ever had to eat was one fried egg and some French fry potatoes. And I said, "If I ever come to America, that's what I'm going to have for a delicacy." Well, you know good and well you change your attitude after a while. But I used to say, "If I only can get out of Germany, I would be too happy to live in an attic." Well, I don't know anybody for all the people who came out of Germany who live in an attic now.

Interviewer: But yet you appreciate little things in a way you never would have whether it's food or...?

Blanche Stern: You're talking about now or later?

Interviewer: Now. Anytime in the last 40 years since you've...

Blanche Stern: No. You wanted me to be honest with you, no.

Interviewer: Really?

Blanche Stern: Well, no. But the only thing is in the—because you keep forgetting those things. To give you an example, a year-and-a-half, I was very, very sick. I really was closer to death than anybody. Miraculously, I snapped out of it. Ever since, and I really mean it, I said to myself, “Nothing upsets me anymore except health-wise.” Nothing can upset me. I think—of course, I don't have so many years left anyway—but I think that I will stick with. But what happened 50-some years ago, I don't think anybody said, “Oh, I'm so glad I saved my life.” That's, again, I must say, human beings are human beings.

Interviewer: What you've been through, did it affect how you brought up your son at all? Would you have any—

Blanche Stern: I don't think so. I couldn't give him what I would have liked to give him and I think that's one reason why he's giving his children everything. But ever since I know, we gave him a good education. We tried to save enough to do that. He's a Vanderbilt graduate from Law School and, no, I don't think so.

Interviewer: Is there anything else that you want others to know anything at all about your experiences, your thoughts, something that you want? These tapes are being done in part just so that there is a story saved forever and ever for the Nashville community to listen to and for children to learn from. Is there any message that you want others to remember about everything you've been through?

Blanche Stern: Yes. There's one. Money should not be an obstacle to help people, because if it hadn't been for money, a lot more people could have been saved. That's about what goes through my mind quite often.

Interviewer: Is there any anecdote or any historical fact that I left out? Is there anything else you'd like to tell us about this whole 60-year period that we've talked about?

Blanche Stern: I can't think of anything significant right now. There are a lot of things which happened and I'm sure after I'm through with you on the way home I will remember. But there's nothing really to think about. I was happy. That was the happiest day of my life when I heard that my parents were alive. I had a lot of good things but this was the best thing that happened to me. But even this fades out, because life goes on.

Interviewer: There's a lot of emphasis put in this country in Jewish communities about remembering the Holocaust, remembering what happened, is that a smart thing that we do, you think?

Blanche Stern: We have to, because if it is forgotten, it's so much easier to start all over again. What I think more than anything else is really—and I just came back from

Israel—we need that country, in case, God forbids, something happens. I've seen a lot of things while I was in Israel which people really don't know here.

Interviewer: One thing I have to ask you just because I'm curious in light of what's going on right now, how do you feel about the reunification of Germany?

Blanche Stern: I personally don't like it.

Interviewer: Why?

Blanche Stern: Because the Germans, when they get stronger, they can easier start again. They had the First World War, and the Second World War could have been eliminated if the other countries had been more aware of it. But before the war, I don't know if you know that, they started getting the weapons again and—you know what, they're trying to disarm now. But if they are strong again, God knows what's going to happen. That's my personal feeling.

Interviewer: Do you think your personal feeling is a result in part of being from Germany and knowing German people?

Blanche Stern: Yes.

Interviewer: People make a lot of the German mentality. People talk a lot about this ingrained nature to be both productive and perhaps a little bit too organized, if you know what I mean, and I just wonder what you think about that? Is that a lot of hogwash or is there something to that?

Blanche Stern: I think there's something to it. I really do. The Germans as such are very cool. They are. They try to make up for what has happened but their attitude is cool. This is just a very—I don't know if it's interesting to you—I have always been afraid of dogs. I never knew why. Only about ten years ago, a song came to me which my mother sang when I was a little child and then this child go to sleep: "Sleep my dear child. The wind is blowing and the little dog is barking. And he bites the beggar and he tore his pants." What kind of a business is that to sing to a child? When my mother sang it to me, I didn't think anything about it. Or take those stories like "Hansel and Gretel" or "Little Red Riding Hood." How horrible they really are and that shows the attitude of the Germans. That's my opinion and a lot of people agree with me.

Interviewer: Cliff, is there anything?

Interviewer 2: Did you ever question your religion? You, as a Jew, were being persecuted, did you ever say, "Well, why am I in a religion? Why can God let things like this happen?"

Blanche Stern: I'm not questioning my religion from that point of view. Because I'm a very proud Jew and, as a matter of fact, I know somebody very well who is a missionary and we are very friendly and I once told her, "No matter what we went through, I am a very proud Jew and I would never even think of not being

Jewish.” But on the other hand, like I said, when I was in Israel, my family is very religious. I said, “There’s something I don’t understand, God created the world. He wanted people to live in the world and they said even he created them on His own image, why there’s so much suffering.” I’m not talking about Jews. I’m talking about the world. Look what the underprivileged countries in Africa, what they suffer—no rain, no food, no nothing. That I question quite often but not as a Jew but as a human being. Am I still on that thing?

Interviewer: Anything else Cliff?

Interviewer 2: I think that’ll do it.

Blanche Stern: Okay. I hope it...

Interviewer: It was excellent, really. You were...