

Claire Kahane
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Interviewer: On June 10th, 1990, Mrs. Kahane could you tell me about your life in Europe? Where you were born and where your family is from and something about your experiences before the war?

Claire Kahane: I was born in Antwerp, Belgium on October the 3rd in 1937, and my recollection is not great since I was very young at that time but let me give you some dates. The Germans invaded Poland in 1939 and just around that time, since the great many of my family members had come from Poland, everybody started to get very worried. And my mother immediately wanted to leave Antwerp, where our family was living, and get as close to the French border as possible and this was in a town called Lapan, right near on the France-Belgium border. We stayed there actually for about nine months. My father commuted on weekends and came to see us. So there already was a great deal of tension because we worried about other family members. But nothing was actually done until the Germans invaded Belgium on May the 10th in 1940.

Interviewer: And then how did this affect your family's life?

Claire Kahane: At that time everybody went into action. My father, who was a wealthy man, had a car and he made many, many trips back and forth. The first thing he did was to come to this little town, Lapan, and take us by car to the nearest train station, which was Dunkirk. And we took a train, my mother and I and an aunt of mine and her two small children, on the first round, and we took a train all the way from Lapan, let me show you. A great distance from Lapan through Paris all the way to southern, well about middle France to a place called Bordeaux. The family had made a reunion spot in a hotel a called Le Faison, for as soon as possible that everybody could go. And my father drove lots and lots of trips back and forth, and a great many of us were able to reunite by May the 15th in this hotel in Bordeaux. But things moved very, very quickly in Europe, and Belgium gave up very soon and the French army started retreating immediately. And really by May the 15th we had to already leave Bordeaux, the entire family, because the French army was retreating and they were requisitioning all of the hotel space. So there was no place to stay. So we had to move even farther south, and what we did, my father started looking around for places out in the county side. And he tried first in one area, over here and we stayed very briefly, and then they finally found an old historical chateau in a place called [unintelligible 0:03:20.1], way out in the country. This was a historical chateau, very, very large and the owners had abandoned because they were in the French army and they

wanted someone to take care of the chateau. And as many as we could, about 22 of us, lived in the chateau. And actually we stayed in this chateau from June through August of 1940. It was apparently very primitive. I myself do not remember this at all. We made our own butter, our own cheese. The peasants were still willing to sell us some food. By this time one could no longer drive. There was no gasoline so my father gave up his car and my parents got bicycles and they went back and forth trying to see how close the Germans were coming. And the Germans actually stopped advancing only five kilometers from this chateau.

Interviewer: Were all the people in the chateau members of your family?

Claire Kahane: Yes, or very close relations, really. Yes, there were 22 of us there and we stayed a really considerable amount of time. There was really a priest in the village, who actually helped our families to move. It was very isolated, there were not many communications. No one even knew how close the Germans had come and this priest came to our family one day and told us that we were no really no longer safe there, that we had better live and so we did. But we heard soon afterwards that the priest had been caught by the Germans and executed. So our family went from there and started going in this direction. There was a question of where to go. By this time the Belgian army was completely disbanding. And we decided to go to Montpellier because an aunt of mine who was in the chateau had a husband who she thought that she could find in Montpellier because he was part of the Belgian army, and so we went there. By this time, however, the family realized that they had to leave Europe and the decision was made to come to the United States.

Interviewer: Now why did they decide on United States?

Claire Kahane: I'm not absolutely certain. I feel it's probably because my father was in the banking business and the bank had a great many connections in the United States and we had money in the United States. We also had some family here.

Interviewer: Before all this happened your father was a banker in Antwerp?

Claire Kahane: Yes. My father was a prosperous banker and that's really quite important to the story, because had he not been prosperous and had these connections, we all would not really be alive today.

Interviewer: And did you have brothers and sisters?

Claire Kahane: No. I have a brother now, but because of the war experiences my family decided not to have any children until after the war and so I have a younger brother, he's eight years younger. He was born in 1945, in the

United States.

Interviewer: So do you know anything about your home or in Antwerp or...?

Claire Kahane: I have been back. I have never gone in to the apartment building where I was born, but our families scattered, really. I have family all over, in Australia, in Brazil, all over. The entire family scattered and I have been back to Belgium. I have family that has returned to Belgium and so I have been there.

Interviewer: So it was a nice apartment in a nice part of the city and...

Claire Kahane: Yes. Yes, we had apparently a very prosperous, nice comfortable life. It was not easy to leave but we knew we had to.

Interviewer: And so like your parents' families has always lived in Antwerp?

Claire Kahane: Since about the First World War. My mother's family came from Krakow in Poland, and my grandfather was in the diamond business as many of the members of our family were in Antwerp. And he came there right after the First World War. So our families really had been ensconced in Antwerp for a while but my father's family came from Antwerp.

Interviewer: Do you know any names of who it was your father knew in the banking business that...?

Claire Kahane: Well—yeah. That's really quite interesting because here we are in Montpelier and we know that we've got to get out. The nearest consul was in Marseilles which is, well, not far, over here, and the nearest consul is in Marseilles right here, and this is a gentleman that I've heard spoken of many, many times, his name was Miles Standish and he was a great anti-Semite. In order to get to the United States we needed a sponsor, and we had an American family member who was able to sponsor us. Actually it's rather interesting, I realized in speaking to my husband who has identical background that I have, that a sponsor had to be extremely wealthy. In other words if we earned... we know that someone who earned in the equivalent of like \$200,000 today was not wealthy enough to sponsor a family to come to the United States. You had to go pretty high up and have a great deal of power. This gentleman Miles Standish kept on saying that the sponsor that we had who was a very wealthy member of our family in the United States at the time, had sponsored too many families and he would not let us out. So my father had to use any possible connection he had and he had a connection with Manufacturers Hanovers Trust Bank in New York. We had members of our family who were American at that time and they did the running around in New York City. They went to the president of the Manufactures Hanovers Trust, a man

named Mr. Johnson, and he said, “Hey, I’m not high enough. I can’t do anything for you, but I know of somebody and I know the circumstances who maybe can help you.” Another member of the firm who’s the son-in-law of JP Morgan and this man cabled Mr. Miles Standish, the consul in Marseilles, and said, “Okay, I’ll sponsor them.” So one had to go as high as that to get out.

Interviewer: Did you know his name?

Claire Kahane: Yes. His name was [unintelligible 0:09:59.8]. I imagine he’s not alive anymore. Yeah, so I think that’s important to the story. Let say a guy who was as high up in Manufacturers Hanover Trust or people who earned that much money would not do at the time, okay? You really needed connections to get out. Anyway at this point the decision to split the family up and get out as fast as possible had to be made. My father felt that he could not leave France because, even though he was not in the army, he was of military age. So it was decided that my mother and I and an aunt of mine and her two small children get out as soon as possible and go through Spain and go to Portugal. The people who are under the Polish quota would go to Nice in southern France, because apparently there was a consul there who was friendlier and less anti-Semitic. And they were able after a while to get a boat to go to Cuba, which is where they spent the war years. We had a difficult time but we were able to go through Spain, get the visas to go to Spain to get into Lisbon...

Interviewer: How did you get to Spain? Do you anything...?

Claire Kahane: We took a train from...it was complicated because money, it was always a question of money. We were able to leave. If we had a transit visa which we were able to get with great difficulty, none of this apparently was easy at all, but we could leave with no money or very little money because I guess it was already occupied territory and you couldn’t move money around and my father again tried. He had diplomatic connections and tried to put money and wire it for us to go to Portugal in a diplomatic pouch through the French government and this was not allowed anymore. They said they couldn’t do it. So he had to go as far as going to the Dutch consulate, and he managed to get some money in Portugal, but this consulate who helped my father was also killed because he helped other people. Another person that helped us is an aunt of mine had met in previous years. She had made a friend, a non-Jewish lady, who lived in Madrid. She had met her at one of this health cures that people were going to in Europe, and she gave us money so that we could go to Lisbon. We were able to I guess the train stopped or something in Madrid, they gave us money, loaned it to us and we were able to get to Lisbon and we stayed there until we left for the United States. My father with great difficulty, great difficulty joined us three months later.

Interviewer: How long were you in Lisbon then?

Claire Kahane: We were in Lisbon...let me check my dates again. We were in Lisbon really from about...we left Marseilles in September of 1940. We left Lisbon in March of '41. So we were in Lisbon quite a long time. My father was able to join us in December of 1940.

Interviewer: Now where were you staying there?

Claire Kahane: Okay, we stayed at a hotel [unintelligible 0:13:27.4] all over and really my first recollections of the war as a child really take place in Lisbon.

Interviewer: So what was your life like?

Claire Kahane: Well, I remember living in hotels and moving around. I remember we still lived fairly well because we had been able to get some money. So we never really suffered ourselves. One of my first recollections is we were in this fancy hotel and my mother took a seat for me near a window, and I proceeded to eat. And I was a very young child at the time. And hundreds of children piled near the window, starving children and watched me eat every mouthful of food, and I no longer could eat. And that vision is with me today. This vision of ragged street urchins in Lisbon. I also remember going to the consulate because even though after JP Morgan the son-in-law intervened and we were able to get permission to come to the United States, the visa was not granted and so that we went constantly to the consulate. And these memories are with me a little bit. Just this is how we spent our lives really. How I remember my life even in the United States, of going to consuls and trying to help the other members of our family get to the United States. These things I do remember.

Interviewer: Were the consulates crowded? Was it...?

Claire Kahane: Yeah, I just remember we spent our days going. I was a child, and it was just my mother and I and we went back and forth and for most of the time, I mean, my father wasn't even with us for a great deal of time. It was just waiting in lines, endless bureaucracy, that kind of thing. It was interesting really. My memories are very, very fragmented really, since I was quite a young child. Last year I was in New York City at the funeral of my father-in-law, and someone came up to me and said, "I remember you. I remember you playing with my child and you had this game that made us so sad. Every day you played on the sandbox and you played the same game. We're gonna go to the consulate to get the visa, the visa is not granted so we'll try again tomorrow." And it really, really brought tears to my eyes. I don't remember it that vividly, but to have that kind of a...that's what I played as a child.

Interviewer: Do you have pictures of your family from this time?

Claire Kahane: I have passport pictures and pictures in Lisbon. I don't know whether you can see them here. There are very, very few pictures left. These apparently our passport pictures and pictures in Lisbon and when we were waiting to get the boat to go to the United States.

Interviewer: So that's you and your mother on top there?

Claire Kahane: Me and my mother on top, my mother and father and I on the bottom and same thing here.

Interviewer: So when you came to the United States, it was just the three of you together?

Claire Kahane: Uh-huh. Just the three of us together. I remember the boat trip vividly. We came on the boat called the Sepa Pinto. We arrived here on March the 31st of 1941. My father had a sister who had married an American and they were living in Europe, but they had managed of course to get out faster than we did. They were with us the beginning of the flight but they were able to get into the United States quicker than we were and so they were able to meet us

Interviewer: Do you remember anything about the boat?

Claire Kahane: Yes. I remember the boat as being tremendously crowded first of all. It was not a very large boat and everybody was piling onto it. We were lucky enough to have a cabin, and I remember as a child...I must have thrown a tremendous temper tantrum because I remember vividly what this cabin looked like. It must have been royal, but I wasn't granted a bed, I was granted a crib and I threw a tremendous temper tantrum saying, "Hey, I needed a bed." I was big enough. And my parents had to explain to me I was small enough to stay in the crib and they needed beds for older people. Another thing that I remember is that my parents gave up the cabin during the daylight hours to another family that had only gotten steerage passage, so that I was not able to go into the cabin at all during the day because we had to give it up to other people. I remember there were people all over on every deck, everything. The boat ride lasted longer, of course, than it should have because of the mines and apparently we were detained in Bermuda. It lasted about 14 days, we ran out of food, this kind of stuff, I remember. There was absolutely nothing to eat but I remember spinach and it was terrible, but we did make it to the United States. And my aunt and uncle I remember picked me up from the boat in New York.

Interviewer: And this was New York?

Claire Kahane: Uh-huh. They already had an apartment here and they had also—they had made our lives a little easier. They had helped us get a hotel room for when we arrived here, and so we were able to settle in with them. We had a little family here and we did have a place to stay when we arrived.

Interviewer: So it was fortunate that you had some family that helped you when you arrived?

Claire Kahane: Yes.

Interviewer: Can you talk about some of these experiences upon coming to America? Some of the difficulties...

Claire Kahane: Yes. Yeah. Of course I was still a young child. I was four years old. I was not in school yet. I stayed constantly, of course, with my parents. I had very little contact really, with anybody who was not a member of the family at this point. We moved from this first hotel to another hotel fairly soon. We actually lived in hotels for many, many years. We only actually moved into an apartment in New York City in about 1945. So my family never really got settled and of course this I remember because we all lived in one room essentially.

Interviewer: Were they unable to get an apartment?

Claire Kahane: No. They didn't really want to. The feeling was that they would go back as soon as possible. They were trying to maintain contact with everybody. My parents really only decided to settle down really after the war was over. That's when they decided to have a second child. Most of the family had been by this time brought into the United States by the tremendous efforts of my parents. I remember my father and mother going to Washington constantly, to try to help out other members of the family and see where they were. We knew that my maternal grandparents and so on were in Cuba by this time. My father's parents were in the United States. They lived with an aunt of mine but we had the immediate family here, and that's when my parents decided to stay here, and I assume that's when they decided to have a child, and settle down, and get an apartment, and not return. I don't think this decision was made until then. It wasn't that they couldn't get one, I don't think. I think it was a psychological.

Interviewer: It just seems like it so...