



The Weston Voices Oral History Project

A Conversation with Margot Hopfer

In this interview, Margot Hopfer, with the help of her daughter Helen Goldenberg, shares her memories of being a refugee from Nazi Germany as part of the Kindertransport rescue effort.

The interview was conducted on March 30, 2016 by Jean Hofheimer Bennett, a retired Weston High School history teacher who had invited Mrs. Hopfer to address her class on the First and Second World Wars a number of times. The students also studied human rights in her class "Facing History and Ourselves," which, among other topics, took a close look at the Holocaust and the factors that led up to it, including the issue of global responsibility with regard to refugees.

Margot's story provides insight into the horror of Kristallnacht, how her life was spared on the Kindertransport, and how the people of Great Britain refused to be bystanders and served as "upstanders" instead. Between 1938 and 1940, some 10,000 children's lives were saved on the Kindertransport. Several families in Weston have grandparents who took this journey.

Mrs. Hopfer lives in Weston with her daughter Helen Goldenberg and son-in-law Rick Goldenberg, along with her three grandchildren Dan, Sherrie, and Jenna.

Jean: Please state your name and tell us where and when you were born.

Margot Hopfer: My name is Margot Hopfer, and I was born on January 2nd, 1926.

Jean: Can you tell us about your parents?

Margot: My mother was a housewife. My father was a traveling salesman. My mother's mother and her sister married two brothers. My mother was the younger one of the two, and my father was also the younger one. We were very close, although it was pretty far away. I was born in Würzburg, and my mother and their family in Stuttgart, Germany. We were not rich people, but we were content and we had a lovely life. My grandmother lived only about an hour away from us, and all of my vacations were spent either there or in Stuttgart.

Jean: Do you remember any particular highlights from your childhood years, the time before you left on the *Kindertransport*?

Margot: Everything was fine until November '38. I was in Jewish school and I had nice friends nearby. We played dolls [laughs] every day after school. This one girl was very rich and she had no mother, so the father always invited us. We could come and go and sleep, whatever. I met her once here many years ago, but we never, after that, kept in touch. Then, of course, after the *Kristallnacht*, all of my life changed.

Jean: Do you want to tell us about what happened on *Kristallnacht*?ⁱ

Margot: Yes. What happened was that I was sick, in my nightgown. I had fever. They came to pick us up in my home. November was not warm, and they made us walk through the whole town to go to the jail where my father was. They picked him up before us. He must have seen us. That was their torture. After that, everything went bad.

Helen Goldenberg: Do you want to tell the story about how they came to your apartment? Who was it who came to the apartment?

Margot: The Gestapo. They had a little old man who lived a few blocks away, and his name was Mr. Lieberman. He was holding on to me. He was half dead. That's one of the worst things. I wasn't feeling good myself. Then they dropped him, [*she gestures to make it clear it was literal -ed.*] and then they let us go, and we went for an hour or so to a friend near the jail.

Then we went to an apartment, to a couple who also had two daughters. We were about six or seven people, afraid -- we couldn't go back home. We stayed, and every time we heard a noise we got scared, we hid. About two days later, the Gestapo found us and somebody from the Gestapo took us to the office to tell us that my father was killed.

They said he was running away, which we knew was how they justified killing him. We were there, and it was very hard. I was only 11 then. After that, one of my relatives came from Stuttgart. We went to Stuttgart, and there the Jewish organizations somehow found out about us, so my brother and I went to the *Kindertransport*.

Jean: I just want to back up. You didn't say how they came to your apartment. How they knew to come to your apartment.

Margot: There was an upstairs lady who was single, and we never met much. We said hello and goodbye. And she called up and said my mother is playing the piano to celebrate the murder of that German embassy official in Paris, the act that started the whole thing. She said my mother is playing the piano! We had no piano. She made up a lie.

Jean: Wow.

Margot: This was a neighbor.

Jean: To get you in trouble. Do you know how you were chosen to go on a *Kindertransport*?

Margot: I presume it was because we lost my father. That's the only thing that I can think of. We weren't there long enough for people to know us. We went to Holland with the train, and they stopped someplace and they brought us white bread. We ate like

crazy. But somebody else...who did we meet...who said also about the white bread? Because in Germany you didn't have white bread. We had black bread. [laughs]

Jean: Did you have siblings and were they also chosen to go on the *Kindertransport*?

Margot: My brother, and he went with.

Helen: Yeah, but he was younger. He was two years younger.

Jean: Where were you when you had to say goodbye to your mother?

Helen: Where did you say goodbye to your mother?

Margot: On the train, on the station. We didn't know if we would ever see each other again. It was sad.

Jean: What year was that?

Margot: 1939.

Jean: So you didn't make a plan with your mother about reuniting or...

Margot: No, we figured we'd never see her again, so that was very hard.

Jean: What were your feelings as you traveled on the train? Did you know other children on the train?

Margot: No. They came from all over the country. I remember somebody's face and I can't remember the name, a guy, who was very tall but...

Jean: How long was the train ride before you got to England?

Margot: I don't know. We landed in Dover.

Jean: Can you describe how you were matched with your British family?

Margot: We went to a place called the Bloomsbury House that took care of the children. They wanted me to go to be a companion for a girl, and I said, "No, I'll only go where my brother goes." And then we both hit the wrong thing. [laughs]

Jean: What do you mean?

Margot: Because when we got to these people, they were very strong Baptists. She immediately said we have to go to church twice a day, and they wanted my brother to convert. If I said "no," or did something that she did not like, she let it out on my brother. She didn't give us enough to eat. If there was an apple all we got was the peels. She was a witch.

Jean: How long were you with her?

Margot: That, I don't know. But I went to church and the minister – Baptist--was lovely, and of course he thought we would convert, so we let him [think that]. I said, but I want my mother to come and he [the Baptist minister] gave the affidavit for her to come. [*i.e. To leave Germany and come to England. -ed.*]

Helen: What was she going to do when she came?

Margot: She worked as a housekeeper. She was there but not too long. One day my mother was very smart. She said to the witch that she got a letter from Germany. We have to sign something in London. The witch didn't realize that we were not coming back. We didn't know where to go in London, but we took a chance.

Jean: Your mother was helping you escape from that family?

Margot: We left everything, every piece of clothes.

Jean: What happened when you got to London?

Margot: We stood in front of the Victoria Station and we stood there and we cried. [laughs] A man came up and said, "What's the matter? Are you Jewish?" He wore a skullcap and we said "yes." He said, "You're coming home with me to my house," and we stayed with them.

Jean: This was your mother, your brother, and you?

Margot: Yes. And that is when we went to a hostel [he had found for us to live]. My mother got a very good job. Also by German people, well to do.

Jean: This is still 1939 or 1940?

Helen: It might be 1940 by then.

Margot: While at the hostel I went to a school that had been started by a rabbi from Cologne, Germany, who evacuated the entire school before *Kristallnacht* and moved it to England. I was there until war broke out, and then everybody was evacuated. I got a very nice family [in London] who had no children and they were very nice.

Jean: So this is your third family.

Margot: Yes. But I only stayed a day or two in London because my mother had arranged for us to come to America.

Helen: When did that happen?

Margot: We came here in September, 1940, [I think].

Helen: Those dates are vague. We have to think that she was 12 or 13 at the time, so that's one we don't have. We do have July. Would you look at the passport, Jenna? [turning to her daughter, off camera. -ed.] Here's the passport. Can you see the date?

Jenna: July 13th, 1940.

Jean: Someone had to vouch for you.

Helen: It was a strange story.

Margot: You want me to tell that story?

Helen: Yeah.

Margot: [The answer is incomplete in the video interview. A follow-up interview yielded the more complete story. -ed.] We were told to get in touch with the wife of our doctor in

Germany and that she would help us emigrate. She and her husband, our doctor, knew the mayor of Baltimore and he got us an affidavit to come to America. But we were told that there was one condition and that was that we never contact him. I don't know why, whether it was because then he would be legally responsible for us, or due to political pressure at the time against refugees, but we honored that request and never contacted him, not even to say "thank you." I would have liked to do that.

So that's how we came here.

Jean: Did you stay in touch with the British family, the second one that took you in?

Margot: No, because of the war. Somehow, I didn't want to know too much anymore.
[laughs]

Helen: How did you meet your husband? Over here?

Margot: I knew my husband when I was in school in Germany, in the Jewish school. He was an apprentice in a bakery. In Germany, they used to come to the school with their basket full of rolls during recess. He always wanted to give me a roll.

Helen: How did he get the apprenticeship?

Margot: That I don't know.

Helen: Your mother knew his family.

Margot: Yeah. Our two families knew one another in Germany and when he came to New York, my mother took him on as an apprentice. He came to our apartment, and he asked my mother if she would give him a room. We had a little room in the back, and he got that. I didn't like him [at first]. Well, I didn't like boys at all. But...then he went in the army, and we started writing. Somehow, when he came home...

Jean: You had to learn a whole new language when you were here?

Margot: I knew some English when I went to school.

Helen: In Germany, they taught you English?

Margot: Yeah. Everybody at that time. Somehow, I did it.

Jean: So you settled in New York City?

Margot: Yeah.

Jean: And had a bakery?

Margot: I worked in a bakery. When I was 16, I left school. You were allowed to leave school here and just go to continuation school. I worked in a little bakery right near my house. Then I worked at Barton's during the war, when there was rationing, and people used to stand in line outside to get a box of candy. That's all that you could get. The bosses liked me. So, afterwards, I was kind of managing.

Jean: Do you remember when World War II ended, and you were in New York?

Margot: Oh, yeah.

Helen: Do you remember the summer?

Margot: Somehow we go someplace, and everybody was kissing everybody else. [*She is referring to VE Day, May 8th, 1945, when everyone in NYC was celebrating. -ed.*] [laughter]

[*The story about working at Barton's reminded Helen of the story she heard about her mother's strong dislike of a particular food she was served when she was staying with her first family in England, so the interview abruptly jumps back to that time. - ed.*]

Helen: Do you eat Jell-O?

Margot: Oh, no. [laughter]

Helen: Why not?

Margot: When I was with my first family [in England], she also had another couple of children there, a young girl and a guy. We were hungry, and when we went to the grocery store, we had to buy something, she stole the Jell-O boxes. But it was not like now, on sticks.

Helen: It was concentrated, right? It was like you had to reconstitute it.

Margot: In the meantime, I blew up, eating all that stuff.

Jean: All that sugar.

Margot: I was very heavy when I came.

Helen: What do you argue with your brother about? What did she give you?

Margot: [laughs] I know that she gave me the apple peel, the outside...

Helen: Not the apple, just the peel?

Margot: Not the apple, just the peel. My brother, to this day, swears it was oranges, but they didn't have oranges in England.

Margot: He still insists. He tells the girls, [laughs] everybody, but I know.

[*The interview now shifts back to the present. -ed.*]

Jean: Did you think you would go back to Germany?

Margot: Never. My husband went, and I could have gone. I was invited. All these people [who originally came] from Germany [were invited]. Most of them went, and they got wined and dined. I said I could not. To this day, I could not. When you're 11, you don't forgive, and I didn't. I don't, not to this day. That's the hardest.ⁱⁱ

[*The conversation returns once again to Margot's growing up in Germany and, in particular, the irony of her father feeling safe before his arrest and execution as well as the circumstances of her larger family circle at the time. -ed.*]

Helen: Why did your father think there wasn't going to be any problem with him; that nothing was going to happen to him [even up to the events surrounding *Kristallnacht*]?

Margot: Because he had been in the army.

Jean: In the German Army, for World War I?

Helen: World War I?

Margot: Yeah.

Helen: He was decorated, right? He had medals?

Margot: Right, he had medals. [*turning to Helen*] You have the medal someplace.

Jean: It made no difference?

Helen: No, and what about the family, your aunt and uncle and grandparents who were in Stuttgart? Did they have a good business?

Margot: Yes.

Helen: When you went there for the *Kindertransport*, by that point they still had their business?

Margot: Yeah, they thought, "Nothing is going to happen." They could have done the same thing what we did, but like everybody else, they all thought, "Nothing is going to happen."

Jean: And then...

Margot: I went through papers the other day, how many people from my family on both sides, 14, 15 people were killed. My grandmother was at that time 80 or more. She went. They took her to Theresienstadt.

Jean: The concentration camp.

Helen: So all those family members who stayed in Stuttgart were deported in '43. We saw there's a memorial there now. We [*i.e. Helen's family. -ed.*] went back, just to Stuttgart, not at her hometown. I also felt that I didn't want to go back, but my daughter was studying, and not far from where my father was from. My father didn't have as many bad memories. His community was...

Margot: Half and half.

Helen: Half Jewish, so there were a lot of other Jews. He left earlier. They knew in this little town, in the middle of the Black Forest, to get out. It's amazing.

Jean: It's easy to understand why people would think it would blow over.

Helen: Absolutely. How they got to this little town. It's in the forest. It's like nothing. It was amazing.

Jean: How many Jews were in that town?

Helen: A lot, half of it and they're all gone.

Margot: They were all related somehow, interrelated.

Jean: Do you remember your wider family's views of Roosevelt and the government here?

Margot: Not really. We had no idea about America.

Jean: Once they came here, did they become political at all, or...?

Margot: No. Oh yeah, but Roosevelt was God. Now we know he's not.

Jean: I've heard that many times. People thought Roosevelt was God, only to find out that he could have done more.

Margot: That boat that went, and they had to go back.ⁱⁱⁱ

Margot: He [Roosevelt] could have, but he was afraid of...who was the guy, the isolationist by him? Somebody from the Midwest.^{iv}

Jean: I don't remember his name now.

Margot: He was afraid. It will come to me. I'll let you know.

Jean: Do you see any parallels today with the current refugee crisis?

Margot: I feel sorry for, especially now with this politics about Muslims. It's the same thing. They wanted to close it. That's a ghetto. That's what we had, but it's not going to get better. When I watch these debates and all, I say, "This is what the exact same what happened."

Jean: Does it remind you of Germany in the '30s?

Margot: Oh, yes, very much so.

Helen: Did they throw rocks at you when you would walk to school back then?

Margot: Oh, yeah. They taunted, yeah.

Jean: Where? In Germany or here?

Helen: In Germany.

Margot: But who knew that? I was a kid. Stupid kids, you know.

Helen: One of the reasons I think she said she never went back to Germany...why did you say you'd never go back?

Margot: Didn't...?

Helen: No, if you would see someone who was your age, you would think that it could have been someone who abused you.

Margot: Yeah.

Helen: That was always the reason.

Margot: It is. It's not so good there now, either. There's a lot of anti-Semitism. [laughs]

Jean: Did you experience any anti-Semitism when you came to New York?

Margot: No, not really. It was so different. Everybody hung out on a corner. I had that whole street. At the corner was a drug store and we went there, and we talked...

Helen: A lot of different ethnic backgrounds, right?

Margot: Oh, yes. Greek, Spanish...

Jean: Spanish-Spanish?

Margot: At that time, I don't think they had Puerto Ricans. Irish...

Jean: Did your mother and you guys join a synagogue? Did you go to synagogue when you were in New York?

Helen: You joined a synagogue when you came here?

Margot: Oh, yeah. It was nice, moving there, but not past five o'clock with the cars. My brother got bar mitzvahed there. My brother, in England, we went to the *beth din*. You know the *beth din*? It's a Jewish court, high court. We had to go there and we had to talk to the rabbis. It's very religious. [indecipherable] was only 11 or 11-and-a-half. It was time for bar mitzvah, so they took us to the synagogue and gave us a quarter.

Jean: Where is he now?

Helen: He's in Florida now.

Jean: Are your brother and you still close?

Margot: When we were in England, and he was way up north, we couldn't be. But once we came here, we were. We still are. He's in Florida.

Jean: So you don't get to see him that often?

Margot: We used to see him more when they lived in New York.

Jean: Can you think of any other lessons you would like to pass along from your experiences, other than the ones you've already told us?

Margot: Be more tolerant, everybody. That's my wish. Both my brother and I, when we were in New York, we had friends at that time. They were Negro, right? We went to each other's house.

Helen: I think that was very interesting for me, how liberal she was considering what she had been through. Sometimes we see people who are the opposite.

Margot: No, I think I learned a lesson, to be more liberal. At this time, politics were far from...now I realize, in my later years, how intolerant we were, but that was...

Jean: Well, thank you so much for sharing your story with us. It's really been wonderful to hear you talk about everything.

Endnotes

ⁱ The incident that started the Nazi police action known as *Kristallnacht* began on November 7th, 1938, when a 17-year-old German-born Polish Jewish student named Hershel Grynszpan shot Ernst vom Rath, the Third Secretary of the German Embassy in Paris who died two days later, on November 9th.

News of the Third Secretary's death reached the leading figures of the Nazi party later that day while they were attending a dinner in Munich. Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels delivered an inflammatory speech, urging the assembled crowd to take to the streets. The message was clear: The German Jews would have to pay for vom Rath's death.

As German authorities looked on without intervening, SA paramilitary forces and German civilians ransacked Jewish homes, hospitals, and schools. Over 1,000 synagogues were burned and over 7,000 Jewish businesses destroyed or damaged. (The name *Kristallnacht* comes from the shards of broken glass that littered the streets.)

Kristallnacht provided the Nazi government with an opportunity at last to totally remove Jews from German public life. It was the culminating event in a series of anti-Semitic policies known as the Nuremberg Laws that we set in place once Hitler took power in 1933,.

ⁱⁱ Margot's husband worked at the Edelweiss Bakery in Darien, CT and his boss, Eric Ortmeier, who wasn't Jewish, offered to take him back to Germany.

ⁱⁱⁱ Margot is referring to the voyage of the *St. Louis*, which set out from Germany for Cuba in 1939 with 908 Jewish refugees aboard. The Cuban authorities denied the passengers entry and the ship's captain, Gustav Schroeder, then set sail for Florida. However, the US authorities also refused it the right to dock, despite direct appeals to President Franklin Roosevelt.

The refugees were finally accepted in various European countries, and historians have estimated that approximately a quarter of them died in death camps during World War II. The event was the subject of a 1974 book, *Voyage of the Damned*, and later a movie of the same title.

^{iv} She is referring to Breckinridge Long, a close friend of President Roosevelt's who was a special secretary of state in charge of problems arising from the war. Within FDR's Cabinet only the Secretary of the Treasury, Henry Morgenthau, Jr., stood up for the refugees.