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LISA (LIESL) SARETZKY

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AUSTRIA VIA ENGLAND 1939

AGE 15

PASSAGE ON A DUTCH SHIP

RESIDENCE: VIENNA AUSTRIA; LIVERPOOL ENGLAND

RESIDENCE IN US: NYC TO BOSTON

ORAL HISTORIANS NOTE:

LEVINE: Today is February the 13th, the year 2004. I'm here in Pompano Beach, Florida with Lisa Saretzky, who was born Lisel Rubin, and lived in Vienna, Austria; and was part of the Kindertransport, which left England, probably Liverpool, England in 1939, and that's when Lisa came through Ellis Island. She was fifteen, between fifteen and sixteen years of age, and she was detained there. So this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. Okay could you start at the beginning with your birth date and where you were born.

SARETZKY: Okay. I was born in Vienna 1925 and I had a normal sort of real European childhood and --do you want me to talk about Hitler when Hitler came? Not yet?

LEVINE: Well, I think if you could say a little bit about before he came.

SARETZKY: I, I had a brother five years younger and we were two very happy normal children with two very loving parents. My parents had a little meat stand called the Grossmarkt Halle in a large hall.

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LEVINE: You can't come in now (said to her husband).

SARETZKY: And, we were I would say middle class maybe a little below middle class. We had a little, nice apartment and I was always a very good student, sort of the good girl type. My mother worked so we had a Christian nanny housekeeper maid take care of me. And, so, you know it was just a normal sort of European childhood. We weren't rich we weren't poor I had girlfriends, I played in the park and just sort of a normal kid, but always ambitious, always working hard in school trying to get good marks, that was my trademark.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, and, was your family a religious family?

SARETZKY: No, not at all in fact our maid was Catholic and we always we said we did it for her, we always had a Christmas tree. But strangely enough I was a religious girl and they used to call me the Betschwester the praying sister. The synagogue was exactly across the street from where we lived called the Mina Temple and I used to go there and I went to Hebrew school and I learned how to read Hebrew. My parents were totally unreligious but I had that spiritual connection always. As a matter of fact when Hitler came and things were really horrible, I'm jumping ahead, I found out that my Rabbi and some of the Jewish children met upstairs; we had a tower and a circular staircase led up to the tower. And every day I would walk in through the back door at the, definitely death if they found you, but it was sort of a trap door in the back. I don't remember how I found this door. And every day at a certain time, I think it was one o'clock, I would sneak up there and, there were about twenty kids and the Rabbi and he would bless us and we would read from the Hebrew books and he always had a candy or a cookie and he told us to come back. But whoever couldn't come back we will not discuss it. So everyday kids were missing, but to save ourselves we never talked who was there was there, who wasn't, wasn't'. We didn't even know each other's names. And that was so wonderful for me, that was like my heavenly place everyday, and then one day he blessed us and he told us not to worry that god is with us no matter

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what but he told us not to come because he knew that, that night would be Kristallnacht, November 10th, when the temple would totally be destroyed, which is exactly what happened and I remember that and then the Holocaust really started and you couldn't even think to meet with other Jews.

LEVINE: Wow. Let me just pause (sneezes). Just to recap a minute, how long did that go on that you went up to the tower?

SARETZKY: Well, several weeks, I really don't know the time frame, but it was quite a long time. I never even told my parents or anyone. The times were so horrible nobody talked about anything. But I knew I had that heavenly place and he would bless us and he kept telling us not to worry that god is inside of us. And then the night of Kristallnacht we all collected ourselves in one Jewish apartment in our building it was like wall to wall Jews in that apartment and in a million years I didn't think I would survive, that's the night we knew they came to get the Jews. But I did what my Rabbi said. Stay inside of your heart and its beautiful in there and people out there are ugly and horrible but god lives inside and it really and I still do that my whole life and that spiritual connection in spite of the ugliness that was people, that wasn't god. People have free will to be horrible but people also have free will to be good and I chose to look inward. Sort of like when Anne Frank said people are still good, I also felt like that.

LEVINE: Well, could you say anything about prior to going into the tower when you knew things were really getting bad, the build up?

SARETZKY: Well slowly, you know Hitler came into Vienna but my father and mother were quote "real Austrians." My father was the head of the football guys and he was in with all the Christian guys, and he kept saying, Ah. this can't be, and that was not unique. Even though Germany was already invaded by the Nazis next door and yet we had this total denial. I think denial is just something you have when things are horrible and my family had that denial. So we would be around the radio and

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listen and sort of hear everything, but there was still food and we were very modest family if you had a little cream of wheat for supper with a piece of bread, I mean basically we lived very simple life, so it didn't really get worse. And then he couldn't go to work anymore but we still ate that cream of wheat with the little bread and I think my parents tried to make it good for us two children, my brother and me. I sort of knew it was bad but not in a million years did I project what was coming; it was a day at the time we could manage.

LEVINE: Could you say your mother and father's name?

SARETZKY: Yes my mother name was Martha and my father's name Leopold. So they were very European people they couldn't even, why would anybody want to hurt them? They weren't rich, they weren't bad, they were wonderful, kind, decent human beings, as were we two children.

LEVINE: How about your mother's maiden name do you remember that?

SARETZKY: Heller. H-E-L-L-E-R.

LEVINE: And your father, what did he do?

SARETZKY: He, we had a meat stand in a huge ah it was called a Halle, like a big hall where they sold vegetables but it was covered over it doesn't, I've coming back to Vienna twice, everybody remembers it, it was called the Grossmarkt Halle, the Grand Market Hall, but it doesn't exist anymore. And he had a stand for meat and she went to work with him everyday and they sold to cafes to retail a little bit but mainly wholesale and she would chop sides of beef and they had one employee and they made fair living. And then they would go in the coffeehouse that was the Viennese way of life, you sat in the coffeehouse you talked to other people, you read all the newspapers.

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LEVINE: What about the culture?

SARETZKY: It was more of an intellectual rather than a drive for money. We never had that I have to have gold earrings or... it wasn't a drive for money it was more you meet your friends in the coffeehouse. He was in the culture of sports and we kids went to school and worked. We had take Latin at an early age. It was more of an intellectual culture. And our maid Resi, Theresa, we called her Resi. She was a very important part of my life cause she was there when I came home from school. She took me to the park and we talked about and she bought me a candy. It was a very modest intellectual sort of life.

LEVINE: And how about children, did you play with gentile children as well as Jewish children?

SARETZKY: No. Strangely enough all my friends were Jewish. You know the school I went to had a crucifix with Jesus in every, even though it was a public school. And then before Hitler came I went to an upper school and uh but these were all public schools but they were, in Austria all the schools were Catholic schools and then when the priest came to teach the Catholic school their religion, the Jewish kids had to go out. But that's why I loved going to temple. I felt well I have something too, but uh my friends were all Jewish.

LEVINE: But in your classroom, there was a mixture?

SARETZKY: Mixture, and then we couldn't go, you know, slowly, slowly then they told us when you asked me how did it slowly happen that we had to go to Jewish school. So okay I went to Jewish school but the Christian, the Hitler youth boys would be ready outside the Chris, the Jewish school to spit at us and they would say give us a shilling, a groschen, whatever it was and we won't spit on you. So in the morning my mother would give me pennies and we were basically a poor family so we had nothing but she would always a few groschen so the boys wouldn't spit

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on me. It was a very, and then after a few, and then I remember we would dance the hora in a circle, the Hebrew and, we would sing, I don't remember it anymore because many of the children were hoping to go to Palestine. That was, there were transports to go to Palestine, but I knew that I had no connections with Israel. But we would dance the hora and give each other courage, and we sort of felt like we're young and strong and we're not going to take this crap, little did we know. And we had this feeling that we're going to stand up to them.

LEVINE: What about your brother, what was his name?

SARETZKY: Yes. Hans.

LEVINE: How, how was he as a boy?

SARETZKY: Yeah, I adored him. I, we would go to sleep in the same room holding hands. I don't know why, we just didn't have this sibling rivalry ever.

LEVINE: How old was he, was he older?

SARETZKY: He was five years older. He was a lousy student, never was a good student so he went to the Schneider Academy a tailoring academy, and my parents paid a lot of money and really worked hard like I said, we were pretty poor so he could learn tailoring and become a Schneider, a tailor. Which when he came to America he worked in Bloomingdale's and he sold men's clothes to very fancy people. But because he knew how a suit was made he always had very good high paying jobs. There's more to say about my brother, when it got really bad one day they knocked on the door with their boot and uh they came for my brother just because he was eighteen and all men of eighteen that day they were eighteen year old boys were taken. And he was this naïve boy and I was in bed shaking and I remember the Nazi took the cover off me and then he said to the other guy in German, ahh, these two kleine --I was very skinny; there was nothing to eat and he said in

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German, and I just laid there in cold sweat and didn't move and that was probably saved my life. He said "she's too small lets just leave her," and they took my brother to the uh, right across the street from our building, was the, it used to be the Police Academy and it became a Gestapo headquarters so I had good view of schlepping the Jews away every day. I mean when it got bad, after the Jewish school and we couldn't go to school and we had nothing to eat then it was totally out in the open that there was no way to survive this. And they took my brother it was early in the morning and my father in his nightshirt, European type night shirt, no shoes, we lived on the sixth floor no elevator. He ran behind the Nazis to see where they took him because otherwise they would take you and you wouldn't even know where your child was. But in a way it was a blessing they collected the Jews in this police academy. So my father knew he was there, and I had my father's brother of course was Jewish but he had a Catholic beautiful wife who was tall and thin and a model and its really a long story she went in and she promised the Nazi and she was an American citizen. She happened to be in Vienna at the time so she put on her American flag, a little pin, and she was gorgeous like Marlene Dietrich type and she went to the police academy and she said you have Hans Rubin? Yeah, yeah in the morning he goes to Auschwitz, or Dachau, I'm not sure. And she said, no, no I'm taking him to America. And the Nazi said, well if you'll have sex with me tonight I'll let him, I'll give him to you. Oh yeah, no problem, sex tonight. So my aunt Minca Rubin saved my brother, took him to, he already had papers I really don't know all those horrible details. If you saw Schindler's List who ever is listening, this thing with the papers was so well done. You needed 10,000 stamps and if then they would throw everything into a puddle of water and you had to start again. But we were just this magical family: My brother marched out of jail, she took him right onto a train, onto a ship and next thing we know he came to America, very confused and screwed up (starts to cry). I don't want people to think that this doesn't leave you tremendously damaged for the rest of your life but, never the less, we were a blessed family.

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LEVINE: What a heroine that your aunt was, to have done that.

SARETZKY: Yes, to have done that. And she never had sex with the guy, never went back.

LEVINE: Oh she didn't have to?

SARETZKY: No, nothing. So of course then we were shaking that now they're going come and get us, but things weren't that well organized. He left and they were still schlepping thousands of Jews every day across the street in these cattle cars and you know throwing babies against walls and with bayonets slicing women's pregnant bellies open and all that so they never, he was gone, he was just one of thousands. So he somehow escaped with this Catholic aunt.

LEVINE: Did you, did you have any association with German people who weren't Jewish?

SARETZKY: No. I have to tell you I know there were heroes and I don't want to take anything away from heroes. Not only did I meet no heroes but they were horrible. We had a woman upstairs, she was a single old maid lady with her brother. The brother became an instant Nazi in a black outfit and she, every time they schlep Jews down, you know like my Rabbi lived one floor below us and they schlepped him with his red beard grabbing him the six flights, he kept falling and they picked him up by the beard and she would stand up there and clap, (she claps) Good, good, another Jew is gone. And she was our friend, she used to come and eat in our house. I didn't meet any. That isn't to say there weren't any. The ones I met were all monsters. Everyone was a monster. But I'm not saying there weren't any good ones, yeah.

LEVINE: What about attitudes? Is there anything you could say about the German attitudes?

SARETZKY: They were monsters! Of a type that sometimes now, I think I'm making it up it was so unthinkable to take an adorable baby, grab it out of a mother and smash its

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head against the wall, or throw it up in the air and catch on a bayonet. Then I stopped looking because you couldn't bear to see it, screaming, crying, they would go on their knees and beg the Nazi, Let me live, they, it was beyond belief. You know now that I'm well and spiritual, but I have to say it like it was. That's what I saw with my eyes.

LEVINE: Did you have any sense of what, how they were, how people sort of ordinary people were provoked to get into that horrible . . . ?

SARETZKY: Yes. Why isn't somebody saving us? There must be people who know this is going on, where are they? Everyday I would think *they* whoever *THEY* are, are going to come and help us because they must know, but nobody came to help us and it went on and on. But of course in my case the Kindertransport came and I was helped. So I shouldn't have said they were all bad because there were Quakers in England who gave, I think it was a dollar a kid, a head or whatever, but it was a lot then, and they decided to save children and uh my father found out about this. I don't know how, my family's gone now and I can never ask them and I never did ask him, and their only idea was, Save the children. So my brother was now gone, now Liesl, how do we save Liesl cause they adored me. And one day my father came home and he said there's a Kindertransport. We have an aunt in London, you know if they think that Jews went silently to the slaughter without putting up a fight, they are wrong. Jews tried to figure out every angle, that's what occupied you every minute of your life, at least in my family, how the hell to get out. You have to realize many maybe gave up and said there is no out. But my family no, we will try to live. So we, the aunt in London who had nothing to eat, got an address of a family called Tish and she went there. She didn't even have carfare. She walked. She cheated her way on the bus to find these people in the suburbs of London. And she knocked on their door and three times they said, We don't want a refugee, and shut the door because war had started. Refugees in London were everywhere. They were not a rich family, they didn't want, and I totally understand. Well my aunt didn't give up. Boy you had to get up early in

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the morning to get her to give up. Came every single day, no money, like I say, cheated her way through on a bus to get way out to Ilford, Sussex, England, at the end of London. And everyday she was at the door cause they told me later. The third day she was so sick of it she put her foot in the door. She rang the bell, they came, they made the mistake to open a crack; her foot was in that door. And she cursed them in Yiddish and she said you shouldn't have a peaceful day with your children, you should go to hell, you will have be cursed forever if you don't take this wonderful child. And Mrs. Tish later told me she felt, Oh my god I have two girls she's right. Alright bring the kid, and she, my aunt signed all the papers, whatever with the papers and within a couple of weeks my father got the papers for me to go the Kindertransport. But he had to go to the court to Skimeinde (?) that was the Jewish community which still exists I was there recently and they had all the papers in shoeboxes from floor to ceiling and by the time my father, you have to realize again, no money, torn shoes, hungry as hell and every step he would look around if Nazis were coming to get him. He did this to save me at the peril of himself of course. He finally got there. It was very far away, and some drunk Nazi with his bayonet and a big joke threw all the boxes on the floor with papers. Half were torn, some were not and he had to find my birth certificate or some that I'm a citizen of Austria who the hell knows, but some papers with out which I couldn't get that magic stamp. But he was there all night. By four in the morning he found my paper. My story is really a story of God looking out for us, and uh he came running home, Liesl goes, he said to my mother, Martha I need -- you have to bribe, maybe that's why they think Jews are so money crazy because everything was with money and it wasn't Jews it was the Chris . . ., the Nazis who expected money. So we had nothing. By then we were starving. Every piece of bread, we gave them a plate, a cup whatever we had. He said, Martha I need one more stamp. But this, whatever he just got, this certificate, and she said, Well I have a beautiful silver spoon. Maybe the Nazi will take it. And he took the spoon, he got the . . . And I still drive my car, I have a silver spoon in my car so I'll never forget this. (her voice breaks) So anyway, next thing I know I'm sitting on a train with hundreds of children and we uh, the Nazi --and I wrote a story it's in a

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book about this-- with a bullhorn was yelling if anybody cries or waves or makes any noise they will be schlepped away immediately. So you have to think, little kids, babies in wash baskets, three year-olds, ten year-olds, me, we had to like be quiet, but we were, you could hear a pin drop. We didn't wave, we didn't cry. Maybe he did us a favor, because we became like stone. But you sort of learn to, quote "behave," and not let hysterics. You were too weak and too tired to be hysterical. Now I'm rich and fat [she's not fat] and I can afford to cry but you really couldn't afford to take to the energy to be emotional. And next thing the train left and I have to be honest, my mother looked shabby, my father looked so skinny but I was so happy, I am going to live. It's only a natural thing. I felt totally guilty that, okay you can stay in this shit, I am getting out to freedom. And we went through Holland and Holland was not occupied yet and they were, it was the first time I saw kindness. 'Cause you asked me about kindness in Vienna; not one inch of kindness; brutality and cruelty. But all of a sudden these women ran when they knew the train was coming cause there must have been many, many, trains before, cause I was next to the last. And they had milk and cookies and they couldn't wait to give it to us and with a napkin and kissing us and it felt so good and I said, Okay, they're good people in this world, these were evil people. And then I came to London and this family took me and we became so close. They're gone now, but the two girls, younger than I, there's hardly a month we don't call each other, we've seen each other. I've gone there, they've come here and it turned out to be a fabulous relationship. And I didn't stay very long so they didn't have to worry because I did want to not be a burden, and . .

LEVINE: How long did you . . ?

SARETZKY: nine months.

LEVINE: And can you talk a little more about those nine months, what happened?

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SARETZKY: It was very hard. I didn't speak any English, but they spoke Yiddish so they could understand German. And I went to a school and I felt really, you know hard with my German clothes, and there was war and the English hated Germans; but they understood I'm Jewish and I'm not a Nazi and they were so wonderful to me. The children, they brought me presents and sit here, no sit there and as an honor you could open the door when the teacher walked in and I got that honor. They were wonderful. It was like a calm, uh you know, like God gave me this, all these good people in my life, and I was a smart girl. I learned English very fast, I learned poetry and I was very hungry. I still am like that, sort of more, not bragging, but more the intellectual type, so school was always my cup of tea. And when I left they made me a party and they were crying. So my English, I was lonely and miserable and I didn't know what happened, and I slept with my parents and my brother's picture under the pillow and I fell asleep crying every night but it still it was a wonderful experience.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Were there, were you in contact with a lot of other children who had been brought to England at that point?

SARETZKY: No, no children. My friends I think in Vienna never survived and on the train you didn't make friends. You were sitting on the train by yourself you were totally traumatized by from this whole experience. I remember nobody talked. I almost don't remember, it was like this, and then crossing the channel on a boat we all got a little bed, and I was really sea sick I was vomiting but no, no connections to any other h an being from the holocaust, no none in England.

LEVINE: And could you have any communication outside of England while were you there that nine months?

SARETZKY: Well I tried to hear from parents, but the letters came through the Red Cross I didn't hear, I assumed they were killed from that point of view I suffered terribly. I, every night I didn't want them to hear me cry and I was just totally

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miserable. I just wanted to come to, my brother was in Boston, worked in a factory, and as I said before I adored him. I just wanted to come to America. Still they were kind, but I was sort of the fifth wheel and I'm very sensitive and I wanted to get out of there. I knew this wasn't my home, and they weren't my parents. They asked me to call them mom and pop. I could never do that. After nine months, through my brother and another uncle, I got an airplane, there wasn't, well I had to come up with the money from London to New York. And Mr. Tish belonged to a synagogue and he brought me there. And on one Saturday morning and he asked them all, Look at this beautiful girl, now were going to pass the hat for money. Ohh, I hated that. And they all stroked me and looked at me. It was like selling a cow and saying how much will I get. But I didn't care. Going to America was what I wanted, so let them touch me, let them feel me. And we collected enough and again I was out of the woods and they gave me a complete works of Shakespeare which I still have as a parting gift cause they know I like, I'm the intellectual (she laughs). They always teased me about that. And a Mezuzah, a gold Mezuzah. I don't have that anymore. So it was really beautiful and I loved them but they definitely could never, I was too old to now think that, I know when we get together from the Kindertransport, the younger children really loved these people. But there's a cut off. I was a big kid. I was menstruating. I was not a child anymore, and they could never have

END OF SIDE A

BEGINNING OF SIDE B

LEVINE: Do you have much contact with the aunt that arranged . . . ?

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SARETZKY: Yes. Oh, I every, once a week I wanted to go to the aunt but I needed money. And I loved the Tish's but I know the B'nai Brith, the Jewish organization, gave them money to keep me, and when I found that out that made me feel really bad, and I even more than ever I wanted to leave there. So they gave me a few shilling and every Sunday I went to the aunt. I adored her. And then I had to go back to the Tish's. Please keep me. She said my uncle would go to the market place and take the rotten apples that fell down from the floor, that's what we ate, I don't care I will eat rotten apples, Can I stay with you? I don't know if it was me, I had that incredible urge not to go to the Tish's but to live with the aunt. She was like the next thing to a mother. But she pushed me back; No you're going to a wonderful school, they can feed you, they can buy you clothes, your getting an education and she was very tough. And when I had to leave on that bus, I was sobbing the whole time. But she did the right thing.

LEVINE: So you took a bus then to the port is that what you did? Oh you mean I see to visit the aunt.

SARETZKY: To visit the aunt.

LEVINE: When, how did you hear then that you were actually going to leave?

SARETZKY: Yes. I heard from my brother, I was in constant touch with him, he was in Boston and I had the ticket I don't remember all the details. I just know all the papers, I mean now I'm England, its not Nazis anymore, and I was able to leave. And I don't know all the details, but I did have a suitcase and all my papers and by myself I went on this Dutch boat. And I'm a very sea sick person, so I was throwing up the whole time was sort of a miserable trip and I didn't really make friends or anything. But why I came to Ellis Island, which is what you want to know, it's really interesting. A day before we arrived in New York where my, I had an Uncle and my brother had come from Boston

to pick me up. And I was really happy and excited and someone on the deck put a book in my hand and on the front cover that was facing outward on the book was a picture of Hitler. But inside the book only told when Hitler would die and what a horrible death, it was all bad stuff about Hitler. But the boat was a Dutch boat and the captain, all their families were in Holland and they thought those Nazis are killing our families while they are transporting this boat to America. And the captain with his, all his fancy stuff on the shoulder came by as I'm sitting there reading this book with the Hitler picture facing him and he grabbed the book and threw it over board into the ocean. The Dutch hated the Nazis violently and he said to me "What's your name?" And I said, Liesl Rubin and I knew I'm in bad trouble. And there was no way to prove to him that this was not a pro-Hitler book because the book was now floating in the ocean. And I said to myself, Oh maybe its going be okay, but he wrote down my name. And two days later everybody clapped the Statue of Liberty, well A, I was all alone. I didn't know if my parents were dead; and B, I had that horrible experience and I knew, you know I was never a child from the day the Nazis came you become very intuitively smart. And sure enough they called out names who should leave the boat and they never called my name. I knew! So me and a priest, believe it or not, he had a collar on, he was some kind of a European priest, were told, You have to stay on the boat and they put us in a cabin and lock, well he in one, me in another, not together, and I heard the click of the keys that I'm locked in now. And well, A, I thought I don't want to go back to England I said goodbye, I loved them but they're not my parents, or B, they're going to send me back to the Nazis. So first thing in the morning a little boat, like a motorboat, putt, putt, putt, motorboat came alongside the boat and the priest and I were put on this boat. I had no, Ellis Island, I never even heard of it, and we went to Ellis Island, which when I saw it, it was like a fortress you know, it's a long time ago but it was like a prison. I thought, This is a prison. And they let me off and again, you know with lock ups and there was this big dining room in the middle, and there were a lot of people and some were black people in striped uniforms, uh

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it was a horrendous experience. But I must say a lady came around, I remember that, with a little basket of sewing, we could make a little apron. I think the Quakers or some organization donated money so I felt really good that they gave me this. And then we slept in this huge uh dormitory and if we had to go to the bathroom a matron came with you with a key. So it was totally like being in prison. But then I started speaking to people and they told me my uncle will come and somebody will interview me and it was like a court. They had different people in uniform sitting there and they questioned me. Even though I was nine months in England, my English was not that good but I guess I, and I explained the captain saw this book but I'm Jewish and I'm certainly not a Nazi. They thought at the time Hitler was smuggling some German girls to be spies and because I was, you know I had a small nose, blonde, now I'm gray but I was blonde and pretty and I looked like a German child: They thought I'm a spy. And I guess they were convinced and they immediately released me and my uncle was waiting and took me on a subway; no money, poor, it was the garden of Eden for me. I was now going to see my brother. And then after a week or two they gave me money to go to Boston. And uh and then soon after that my mother came, my father, and I have to brag a little bit because I was always the studious type, I went to Simmons College, which is a very fine girls college; really it still is. I'm an alumna now, four years. For a refugee girl at that time to go to college it was a huge achievement. But I think from all this ashes came enormous strength.

LEVINE: How do you think that happened?

SARETZKY: I was very good in high school. I never invited a boy to my, we lived in this little apartment the Salvation Army gave us the furniture. My mother worked in a factor. We were very poor. I always worked and I was always embarrassed to invite an American kid, so I kept to myself, very lonely. But school was my like my, you know reading books, and getting A's was my forte. So my mother said you have to go to college, you can't work in the

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factory, you're too smart and I want you to have a better life. It's a real refugee story. I'm not the only one. I saw the poverty and the shit jobs that they got and the exploitation. My mother worked ten, twelve hours in these sweatshops. And that would have been my lot. No, I'm smart, I'm going to college. And it changed my life.

LEVINE: Now when you got to Boston your mother and father weren't there then?

SARETZKY: Yes. They were.

LEVINE: Oh they were? Now how did they get out?

SARETZKY: Ouh! That would take another hours or more. My mother uh, I had one uncle in New York and he was able to get affidavits. My father got out through my present husband, Simon Saretzky. My mother, my brother and I were now in Boston. My father was still in Vienna, no chance in a million years to get out. You needed \$5,000 to, in the bank to show he will not be a burden. We didn't have 5 nickels! At that time that was like having a million dollars. So my brother was roommates with Simon, my present husband. And every day my mother would say, we lived with a family, my mother was a cleaning woman and they let me live there. Mr. Simon they're going to kill my husband we need \$5,000. Simon was an engineer he was already not rich, but he was well established. He said, Okay Mrs. Rubin I'll put \$5,000 in your name you do whatever you have to do and when Mr. Rubin comes you give me back my money. Well this opened the door. My father was the, got the papers, the last Jew to leave Vienna. In fact there were a few more Jews sort of, the walking dead in the street. They were taken by the collar and say, Leopold we're going kill you if you don't tell us, they were going --the Jews were going to kill him --how you got the papers. He couldn't wait to get out. He never told them because it was unthinkable.

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LEVINE: It was unthinkable that they could. .

SARETZKY: That he got out! And, but his trip he was with ten or fifteen other men and he told us, there were all you know, they had to go through Germany, so there were trains, you have to remember that was a long time ago, who made stops and the Nazis would come on the train. They would say “Okay count to three, every third come with me,” and you were not finished till you were really over the border. But my father was never three, or five or seven. By the time they really let them go, there were just a handful of men. I don’t know the numbers. So he arrived in Boston and we came to pick him up and we gave Simon back the money. And then we all lived together. I lost total contact with this man Simon, who I loved and he was my friend, but he is eighteen years older. I was a young girl, so at that time the age difference. And he had a wife in Israel. It wasn’t a love affair at all. Anyway we went out together. I mean we had two teaspoons and we passed them to eat some soup but it was magic, beyond belief that we made it and we found each other, healthy, strong, still young we could make a new life in America.

LEVINE: Wow. And how about your mother, was there a (laughs) miracle story with her also coming here?

SARETZKY: Well, hers was fairly easy. There was an uncle who found a sponsor who said, But don’t ever come near us, we don’t want to support them. You have to realize refugees were a dime a dozen. There was Depression. So uh, but they signed the papers and they sent them to her and she was able to leave. And she left my father, they were married since she was seventeen. And she kept saying, there was still one uncle who was a lawyer alive, and she said, Alfred I can’t leave Leopold, how can I leave him to die? And the famous words we kept quoting for years was (speaks in German), “Whoever can save himself must save himself”, and he said, Martha you have children, you have to go. Whatever will happen to him, you have to go. She would not have gone

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otherwise. To leave him there totally, it was unthinkable. But Simon saved him, and now I'm saving Simon. (they laugh)

LEVINE: Wow. That's wonderful, wonderful, oh boy! So tell me a little about your first months here, what was it like for you then?

SARETZKY: Yes. Well I loved America. My whole family, we were and still are the biggest patriots. Who couldn't love a country where you come with nothing -- the Jewish committee came every month and they paid our rent but we are very independent people. There's a word in Yiddish called "shnora", someone who is a beggar, we are not like that. We're from that era your very independent. So as soon as my mother could wash floors and I helped her after school, always a little embarrassed, but we worked and didn't take charity and we were happy. But I was always a loner. I was different I didn't want to have anything to do with, certainly in college, these rich kids, always some lousy job that I was ashamed of, but inside I knew I'm going to, and I married a doctor and I certainly made it out of the poverty. But that feeling of your different, your like a, everybody's pink and you have polka dots. I can sort of understand how black people feel, I felt like that.

LEVINE: Do you think the experience made you more empathetic to other people?

SARETZKY: Oh very much! Totally! I have to tell you one more thing, I became an alcoholic and I've been sober now thirty-five years. I go to AA. I still do. It has given me so much of being able to help other people. After I married my first husband, who was a physician, we had beautiful house, two cars, three fabulous kids. We weren't rich but we were certainly upper middle class. I had that guilt feeling they all died, and I'm living in this house with a maid and two cars and I, you know it was normal to have a drink. Well you know, maybe people don't know, but it is an illness. Some of us have an allergy to alcohol. So for me taking one drink, I couldn't stop. Slowly, slowly like the

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Nazis, it became an obsession. And you know, I functioned okay but I knew I wasn't okay. And then my husband got cancer, I was a young woman in my forties with three young children, and he died. And I drank, I worked. I am a dietician from Simmons College, I became a nutritionist. But I had hangovers, I knew I was really sick and now I'm alone with three kids. I can't handle this with the drinking and I called AA in desperation and I never had a drink again. They totally, it was like another escape from the Nazis.

LEVINE: How about your spirituality?

SARETZKY: Yes, well I think AA, I always had it as I explained, but in AA I felt like God saved me twice, from Hitler and from alcoholism. And it's very strong. And in AA of course we pray, we help each other. I love being Jewish. I'm not Christian, but I have a lot of Christian friends and it doesn't matter. I don't really like to go to church or synagogue. We go once a year. I love being Jewish but its much more of a spirituality. I've seen what religion can do when it says, You're wrong or You killed Jesus and so God bless them if some of my friends . . . I even have a very good friend in AA who's a nun and I write to her and I even send her money cause she needs it. But I'm spiritual but not religious. And right now my husband is old and I pray a lot but not that he should live forever but just that I should be able to handle it. A turning book in my life has been when bad things happen to good people, which a Rabbi Kushner wrote and he also had some horrible experience with a child that died and he lost all his faith until he realized his answer is people have free will, which I've always said that, and they can do evil or good and its still going on. But that God, if we are good people and spiritual and we love god, he will give us the strength to survive what we have to survive in life. And we all have stuff in life. I mean my husband is now really getting old and I have stuff to deal with that I don't like, but God is standing there saying, He saved your father there's no free lunch. Now he, I was very poor, I live a very rich life now. I mean I'm very modest but still he's given me

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security, lets put it that way. I have three fabulous kids who have kids. I have seven wonderful grandkids and a wonderful stepson. I have so much. So if I have to do things now that are not so easy, God is right there with me, and I pray all the time.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Now have you, you mentioned earlier before we put on the tape about the Kindertransport reunions and meetings could you say a little on the tape about that?

SARETZKY: Well about seven or eight years ago it was another miracle. I'm not religious but somehow we got the Jewish newspaper in New York in our door because we're members of a synagogue I think. And I never read these things and I read there's a Bertha Levitton in England from the Kindertransport and she wants to make a reunion. If anybody's interested call Bertha in London. So I immediately called her. I never talked about the Kindertransport I felt I didn't really suffer why should I talk about it. And she said "Darling don't come. So many people are coming, I rented a hall but its overflowing. But we're writing a book called ' I Came Alone,' --which in New York I have the book-- but if you want to write a story write a story." Well I'm a good writer, I sat immediately down, I wrote a story. And my story was very short about when I came on the train and in the bull horn they said, No crying, no waving, and I said, with that the train left and my mom, Mutti, looked so . . . you know, it was a very heart wrenching story of how I left. And they published the book with all stories. So I felt, Okay well I paid for it and they sent me a tape of this reunion. I didn't go to the original reunion. But from that came a whole world of kinder! So we now have kinder in New York and in Florida and anything they go to or once every three years we have huge reunion from all over the world, wherever it is I go there. And about four or five years ago we had another London reunion, but I had a slight heart attack and I was in the hospital, but all my children went, I couldn't go. They loved it, and they met my two sisters, they had dinner with them, my children. And maybe in God's

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wisdom that I wasn't there was a good thing, because that way they could come out of it in their own way without me directing the orchestra or being the main star.

LEVINE: Now you're saying your three children met the two children that you stayed with in London.

SARETZKY: Yes, exactly. They will never forget it and I think that I was not, I wasn't that sick but I really couldn't go. That was another miracle. I just feel, you know I don't know why the others died and it still plagues me and I was picked out to live. But all I know is if God decided that, that every day I have to try to make the world a little better. As I told you I make quilts for the Make a Wish Foundation, I volunteer here with underprivileged African children, I make little pot holders with them as much as strength as God still gives me and I'm getting old now, I am a doer. And my own kids, I think I've steered them in a very good path. My oldest daughter who is a PhD and brilliant and is very special, she's the one that made me go to Auschwitz last year. She's been sober 25 years and I feel, you know, I'm leaving the world a little better.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, wow, what would you say you're proudest of that you've done in your life?

SARETZKY: Well, I think that by myself I raised, you know my husband died my kids were nine, fifteen, and eighteen and very screwed up and I got sober and raised them really well. I think I did a fabulous job with my kids. And my first husband, as he had cancer, every morning he read the Wall Street Journal and there was a picture and article about Simon Saretzky, my husband was the president of a huge corporation, had fifteen hundred employees all over the world. And he said, Oh you always talk about Simon, he saved your father. Well it turned out Simon lived ten minutes from us and we went to see him and then my husband died and his wife died and we got married. And I never

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would tell him that but I think I've been, you know he's much older than I am and he's a wonderful man but not socially oriented, so I've given up a lot to be married to him and to find my own life. But I think that's what God wants from me and I think I'm very proud how I handled this marriage so wonderfully now for a long, long time. And I think if it weren't for me he wouldn't be alive anymore.

LEVINE: You know you read a lot about how the children of people who went through the Holocaust have been affected or are emotionally distraught and all that, can you say anything about that?

SARETZKY: Well my oldest daughter Susan, who is really in my heart is very much like me, much, much more brilliant, her father was a doctor, really smart, she was totally affected. Not only did she drink but she had to see a psychiatrist, cause she has two children, they're grown now, but she used to, I think there was movie where a mother had to pick between kids, which kid do you want me to kill. And the Nazis did tortuous things like that all the time and she had these nightmares, she had to pick. She has a boy and a girl and she became mentally, she wasn't in a nut house but she called me up one day, she lived in Boise, Idaho. Her husband went to Harvard Business School and he worked for Hewlett Packard in Boise and she was very lonely and miserable and she said, Mom I'm having nightmares about the Holocaust. I think I'm going crazy. So she went to see a psychologist and uh somehow she got sober and she got healthy and then last year she had to go Auschwitz, just to put the dot on the i, and she said it was very healing for her.

LEVINE: Do you think there was something about you and your guilt about it that got transmitted to her during the Hol....

SARETZKY: Totally, completely, that guilt. But I'm not alone not that I want to make, guilt, how can you not be guilty your whole family . . I think and I wouldn't

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want that but I know when I meet with Kinder, the ones who lost their parents, I'm sure they are much more unhappy than I am and all that, but they don't have the guilt. They gave their pound of flesh. They lost everything. I'm the one with the guilt. And I still have it but you know because I'm very spiritual I let the God business be God's, not mine. But I think they don't have the guilt that I have. I, my parents were saved I married a doctor now I married another rich guy you know not that money is everything and I'm not like that, but . . .

LEVINE: You're comfortable and you can...

SARETZKY: I'm comfortable, and you know sometimes I go back to, like we have a hot thing where you go in, you know after you take a swim, I could never go in there. I think it's like the gas chamber. And I still fantasize about all that. It's still the guilt is nagging but I try and I pray to be released from that. I don't have to feel guilty. Would it be better if Hitler killed my parents in Auschwitz? That's what Susan wanted me to see. And we had a wonderful guide--you pick French, or Japanese, we picked an English-speaking young, Polish, Christian man, but he knew everything. And, you know, even though I know it all, when you're there and he tells you the tortures and what went on, it was very healing that I could say, Susan now we're going to have a cup of coffee and we're going to pee in their bathroom and we can, you know we held hands and the prayer we said to them was,(she is moved) We didn't forget you and we're here to tell you that you're in our prayers and in our life, but God picked us to go on and we're living instead of you but we're trying to make the world better, and I think you can be proud that we were picked to live that was why we came. To come as people who were picked out to live and I said to myself, You have to be crazy to think if your parents were squeezed in this horrible place and died tortuously then you wouldn't be guilty? Say thank you Lord that your parents didn't have to go through that.

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Right now I'm very emotional but really I'm a very happy person. I live a wonderful life and I don't cry anymore.

LEVINE: It sounds like it was the guilt more than the other things you went through that was on your...

SARETZKY: Guilt, much more, guilt, right.

LEVINE: And how about, just before we close, how about today the world today the situation today do you have any comments on that?

SARETZKY: Well I just rather than feel guilt I give thanks that for some reason I'm living. But you know anyone who didn't go through the Holocaust has to realize it is with you. My son is coming fishing in two weeks. He lives in Maui, Hawaii and I adore him and I'm so looking forward to it. And then we have a luncheon from the Kindertransport. They're going to show us a movie and I write little, I'm a good writer so I write stories for the AA newspaper, one was just published. And I'm really a very busy person whose always . . . I think if God gave me talents I have to use them. And basically I don't, I'm, really, my day's filled with forward things rather ... you know. I'm making quilts because they are already waiting in New York to auction them off and they get thousands and I picture some kid with cancer going to Disney World on the money my quilts made and everyday is a gift from God. And I laugh and uh I really have a full wonderful life. Its always very emotional to talk about this stuff but its not like I relive every minute every day. I would be dead now.

LEVINE: Ok, well we're at the end of the tape and I thank you so much for a beautiful interview. Thank you.

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SARETZKY: Thank you, I've given it all away but you know you have to be honest in these things.

LEVINE: Oh absolutely. Well thank you I've been speaking with Lisa Saretzky and this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service and I'm signing off.

END OF INTERVIEW