

NPS-12/MARIA BERL LEE

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AGE 16

PASSAGE ON "THE EXCALIBUR"

NASH:Today is September 7, 1973, and I am interviewing Mrs. Maria Berl Lee. Mrs. Lee came to this country from Europe, fleeing Hitler's persecution and she has a fascinating story to tell and I'm just going to begin by letting her tell it. Mrs. Lee, please tell me where you grew up.

LEE:I grew up in Vienna, Austria which, as you probably know, is a very beautiful and old city on the Danube. I had a very, very happy childhood there. I went to school, I did the usual things that children do, and in 1938 Hitler invaded Austria and was welcomed by a part of the population quite happily. We were in a rather strange position because we were not Jews but we had some Jewish antecedents and whereas in Germany the persecution of so-called "part

Jews" had not been very bad, when he came to Austria it got much worse. The Austrian half Jews were persecuted much worse. Also, my father was a very great Austrian patriot. As a matter of fact, the 11th of March, which was when Hitler came in, found him in his old World War One uniform in an --what do you call these things there --an armory, I guess, with his saber, trying to defend the fatherland. So, of course, he realized that we better leave and fast. And it was very, very difficult at that time to find a country which was willing to accept you.

The first thing that we did was my parents found a temporary refuge in France, southern France, while I was put into a boarding school in Switzerland. In boarding school in Switzerland, I remember with utter horror because I had never been away from home. I was an only child who was very attached to her parents and I had really lost, in one fell swoop, everything. Not only my country, my city, my friends, my school, for all practical purposes, my parents and relatives, even our money. And I entered that boarding school, you know, as a scholarship student and it was made rather difficult for me. Well, after one year there my parents had bought a very small farm in southern France, which they were trying to run with no success whatsoever because they had goats and sheep and

my father had been a lawyer and, of course, knew nothing about goats and sheep and olive trees and so on. So I joined them there and I again was put into a French boarding school which was run by nuns. And I must say, the French boarding school was much nicer and, despite the fact that we were considered in France German enemies, this was a very, very strange fact of the whole process that in Hitler's Germany and Austria we were Jewish enemies. In France we were considered German enemies. And while my parents lived on this small farm, we had all kinds of really weird experiences. My father, as a German enemy, was put in concentration camp. The only thing that saved my mother from being put there too, was that I was under sixteen, that she had a child under sixteen. So she and I and an old lady from Vienna lived in this very small, dilapidated farm rather far away from the small village that it belonged to. And I remember there were several scares that parachutists were seen parachuting over the woods near our farm, and I remember that the police came, searched our house, were sure we were in cahoots with the parachutists and were hiding them and left threatening us that if one were found on our property they would shoot us all. And, of course, when they left we were terrified because we were the ones who were most likely to be their

victims. And I remember that night I had my bicycle ready.

We said, "Well, if anything happens, one of us tries to barricade the doors and hold out, that would be my mother and I would take my bicycle and rush down to the village and try to get help. And as it got dark, we hear the dog barking and, of course, we were sure the parachutists were, you know, around and I was ready at the door waiting to get on my bicycle. However, nobody showed up. And this went on all night long, the dog barking and we thought we saw movement and heard people, but actually as it turned out in the morning, they had search parties for those parachutists and that was why the dog was barking.

The parachutists were never found and apparently it was some of the engineers from a near-by factory who were sitting with aperitifs and watching the show and I guess they had a few too many and that was the whole parachutist scare. So in 1941, I think it was in May of '41, the German Armies overran Belgium and northern France and got very, very close and our position got untenable, so we knew we had to leave. And at this point we were lucky enough to get a so-called "Danger Visa" to the United States. We left France with all kinds of supplies because at that time conditions in France were so bad--no meat, no food, no nothing, and we took every scrap of material of what

we thought might be useful and tried to drag it along.

I remember we even had a bucket of honey because we didn't think, you know, we just couldn't imagine that there could be a country that had plentiful food. So the bucket of honey was stolen on the train through Spain. In the hotel in Madrid, we had a lovely porter who said, "Don't worry about anything. I will take your suitcases to the customs and I will get them through and you won't get any trouble at all," which he did. But by the time we got to Lisbon from where we took the boat, we found out that the lovely porter had taken half of our things out of the suitcases before he put them through customs.

NASH:What is a Danger Visa, and did the United States issue it?

LEE:A "Danger Visa" was a visa that was given to a few people who were in great danger in Europe and who had no, let's say, no support from the Jewish Joint Distribution of (?) or, you know, whatever these organizations were, and that had no other way of getting to this country. And we had, I think our's was given out by the Otto of Hapsburg, who was the, you know, the son of the last Emperor of Austria, of Kaiser Karl. He issued this and then we had a backer here in New York who gave us an affidavit, and this was

how we were able to come. And we came, I remember being in Lisbon, we were scheduled to leave on one of the American Export Line boats, I think around the 25th of August, and then something happened in Germany that all the visas which had been issued to German Jewish people to go to Lisbon were cancelled. They could no longer get out. And we were asked whether we wanted to take the earlier boat on August 15th, and of course, we were anxious to leave Europe that it couldn't be fast enough. So we came on the "Excalibur," which all these American Export Line ships were called Excaliber and Ex -- I don't know, something. They were all Ex-something. And we came on the boat. It was a lovely ride. We came by the Bermudas, we saw Hamilton, and we arrived in New York Harbor on August 25, 1941. And I remember we arrived during the night or very early in the morning and I was very excited. I couldn't wait to see the land and I looked out of the porthole very early in the morning and I could see --it was Staten Island, I didn't know it at the time --but I could see a wooded shore, misty morning mist, and the look of car lights shearing through that mist, and that also impressed me because in southern France, you know, there were no cars at all or very few. Maybe an old pickup truck, but more likely horses or, you know, a little donkey cart or

something like that. There was no gas, no nothing during those days in France. So then the first thing that happened was unfortunately there was a clerical error.

Our names did not appear on the list of passengers of the ship and we were put into Ellis Island. I didn't particularly mind it because for me it was all so new and so exciting. I had never in my life been in a detention camp, but my poor mother, for her, you know, this had been salvation and somehow to be then put in --well, it wasn't exactly jail, but it was the next best thing to it. She had been so brave all through that horrible flight through Europe and at that point she really started giving way and crying, crying, crying. But we weren't there very long. I think we were there just overnight. And our dear friends who gave us the affidavits got us out.

NASH:What do you remember of Ellis Island while you were there?

LEE>About Ellis Island? You know what I remember most? You will laugh. I remember that everybody was given a whole cake of soap and a towel and of course, soap was very scarce in France and I just couldn't believe it. Every day a whole cake of soap. It sounded fantastic. And then I remember another thing which was that children under

fifteen were allowed to play out in the yard for a little while. Well, I was slightly over fifteen, but some kind soul said, "Ah, she is under fifteen. Take her, too."

So I was able to play out in that yard, too. Otherwise, it was, you know, they were not unpleasant or anything.

The guards were very nice and everybody was kind, but it was just the idea of having escaped Europe, which at that time was a huge prison. And seeing the Statue of Liberty so close by. You know, we had a gorgeous view out of our windows of the Statue of Liberty. And then sitting there on Ellis Island and being unable to get on land. But it only lasted for one day.

NASH:Do you remember what you ate there?

LEE:No, I don't. I have a very bad memory for food, but it must have been something fantastic, you know, because in France we ate things --my poor mother baked cakes out of coffee grounds because she had nothing else. And I know at the boarding school one of our favorite meals, which was a dinner, was leftover hard bread toasted, no butter, no nothing, just the bread, and cocoa, and that was the meal, which appeared about three times a week. Another one was potato soup. And you can't imagine the joy, the

succession of those meals was. But then we got out of custody, well, and, you know, the amount of things that you could get and you could have just floored us. I remember our friend took us first of all to a Bohack to shop for the first time. We had never in a supermarket.

In France you had, you know, small individual stores and you went to the butcher and to the baker and to the green and our eyes just popped. And, of course, our English was terrible. Actually, we all had learned English, but it was the king's English; it was the English of Dryden and Johnson and Pope and it didn't help us very much in New York City.

NASH:Could you give me an example of that kind of English?

LEE:Well, for instance, instead of saying "me neither," I would say "I neither," you know, that kind of thing. And I would pronounce things the English way like "neither", you know. And it was just a British accent overlaid with an Austrian accent overlaid with a French accent. So you can imagine what came out of this. And I remember, for instance, I was here two weeks when I had to go to high school. And that, of course, was very, very difficult. My friend who gave us the affidavit took me to school because our English

wasn't really up to registering. I was put in the last year of high school and I remember that the first weeks there I took notes by sound. I had no idea what the teacher was talking about. I had no idea even what subject it was. And then at night I would sit with the dictionary and I would try from the sound to find out what words he had been using and what subject he was talking about. But, of course, you know when you are young you catch on very quickly and I was able to finish that term of high school--it was the first term of my last year of high school--my marks were all in the 80s, and then after that one term year I went on to Rochester, New York to finish there because my parents in the meantime they didn't know what to do. My father was a lawyer. Law here is very different from law in Europe. American law is based on English Common Law. European law is basically based on the "Code Napoleon." And there is just no connection between the two--so, my father thought he would try again with a farm since that was what he had been doing in France. And we had vague relatives in Rochester who very kindly offered to take me for the remaining term so I could finish high school there. So in Rochester I was able to finish with an all "A" score. You know, I passed the Regents all in the 90s and I got all "A's" and on the strength

of that I was given a scholarship to Nazareth College in Rochester. But to go back to the language difficulty, when I was a couple of weeks in high school, a bunch of kids wanted to go to a drugstore and have sundaes. Well, I had no idea what a sundae was but I went along. So we were sitting there and the waitress asks me, you know, what I wanted. And I heard the other girls say sundaes, so I said sundae, so she said to me, "Do you want that with whipped cream or do you want it with marshmallow?"

And the only word I could understand was "marshmallow," so I repeated "marshmallow." So she brought this concoction and of course, marshmallow is something that I cannot stand and I remember that well to the end of my days, that that is what I don't want. But these are the things that happen to you when you are asked a question and you just don't understand what the people want.

NASH: You mentioned that you had trouble in getting help from agencies when you first came. Would you go into that a little bit more?

LEE: You see, I was really too young to do anything myself. Now, my parents, of course, got no help from the Jewish agencies because we were not Jewish. They also got no help from

the Catholic agencies, who at that time just simply were not aware, I think, of the plight of people who came from Central Europe and also there were not too many people who fled Hitler who were not Jewish. So we were in a rather strange category. We really belonged in nobody's fold and nobody really did anything for us. However, we were fairly fortunate because while my father was unable to do anything, he was gentleman I think in his middle forties at that time or maybe pushing fifty. My mother, who had learned sewing before leaving Austria, right away found in the same little house where we were able to rent a very modest apartment --it was in Elmhurst, I think on Baxter Avenue or Elmhurst Avenue --she found in that house a Turkish seamstress by the name of Madame Satue, and Madame Satue needed help with her --she had a lot of business apparently, so Madame Satue employed my mother for five dollars a week and we were at least able to earn a little bit of money that way. And after my parents went to the farm, and I was left alone a couple of months in New York to finish the first term of high school and I rented a room with a lady which was exceeding cheap and somehow I managed to survive on two dollars a month. I don't know how I did it even in those days. I think I ate nothing but bread and applebutter and once or twice a week we had

kind friends who invited me to dinner and I guess that was my dinner for the week. And otherwise, I lived for groceries. I paid two dollars a month. Don't ask me how I did it. I don't think I could do it anymore now. But then I went on to Rochester and stayed with the relatives and then got the scholarship to college. And while in college I had three jobs, basically. I had a job cleaning the laboratories, the science laboratories at the college.

Then I had a job as a mother's helper. I stayed with a family and, you know, I cleaned the house and I took care of the children and so on and so forth. And I also had a job Saturdays working for Sibleys which is the biggest department store in Rochester, as a cashier. They had a system where all the money was put into little tubes which then were socked into the pneumatic tube down to the basement and all the change was made there by me, by a cashier. And I had this job too. And this way I was able to survive quite well on the scholarship and, you know, living with this family and taking care of the children and getting a little extra spending money by working at Sibley's until the last year when I decided that I was going to get an apartment of my own and stay there by myself, and I worked every summer and I had made enough money so I figured it out I could rent a very modest

room, I could get enough to eat and I wouldn't have to be a mother's helper because I was so thrilled to be able to go to college that I took, I think, most people took let's say six subjects. I took twelve. I took everything in sight, I was so interested. And I was so anxious to get all the subjects I could, and it was a bit too much.

You know, all these jobs and all these subjects and being a mother's helper. So I got a room, I got well set up, I got everything arranged, and I contracted pleurisy in the middle of the first term. And this was really rather awful because I didn't know what to do. I was home in this room. I didn't even have a telephone. I couldn't even call a doctor because it was winter, it was icy cold outside, I was afraid to go outside. The woman who had this rooming house was very unkind. She didn't want to let me use the phone. So in desperation I went back to college. I figured, you know, maybe if I just stay on my feet it will go away. So I must say the kindness of the people at that time was unbelievable. I had an English teacher who when she saw what bad shape I was in, took me home with her and called her doctor and put me to bed in her house until I was better. I mean, this I have never forgotten. But anyway, after I got through this, in the meantime I should say, that my parents hadn't abandoned

me. They, after being on the farm and realizing that things were not working out too well because they knew nothing about cows and so on, my father decided to take his law studies over. A man of almost fifty, he wrote to various universities. He was accepted by Syracuse University, so during the winter they went to Syracuse, he took his law studies, he had a job on the side, my mother worked in one of the china factories that they had in Syracuse, and they at that point--I didn't write them how sick I was, I didn't want to add to their troubles, but when I finally came out, of course, they came and they brought me back with them and I stayed there until I was well. And then when I was well the school --this was a Catholic school run by the Sisters of Saint Joseph --one of those sisters had a cousin who had never seen me in her life and that cousin took me into her house for a very small amount. I think she charged ten dollars a week for room and board. Would you imagine? And this is how I finished my last year at college. But in the meantime my parents had bought this farm in Cobelskill. The farm was a dairy farm. It had about one hundred twenty acres and it had, I think, about twenty-five cows. Now, my poor parents had never seen a milking machine. These cows were milked, not by hand which maybe they had seen, but with

milking machines. They had to learn from scratch how to do this. And, of course, being central Europeans who are very fond of animals, they loved these cows. They gave each of them a name.

NASH:Do you remember some of the names?

LEE:Well, one was Daisy, one was I think Alma, one was Whitey. Some had German names. I think was Elfrieda, yes, one of their favorites was Elfrieda. Then they had fourteen cats and all the cats had names, too. And, of course, when a calf had to be sold to the butcher it was terrible because neither my mother nor my father, you know, wanted to bring it to the butcher. It was awful. They really suffered. They loved these animals much too much to be real good farmers. And then they, of course, also had the trouble with their English. As I said, my father's English was the king's English, but he had no idea of American slang. And there was one famous story. One of the cows, I think it was the famous Elfrieda, was sick and he needed to call the vet. And they had at that time one of these old-fashioned party lines where you had four or five parties on one line. When it rang it rang in everybody's house, everybody knew who was being called, you know.

Each one had a different ring. So he called the vet and he asked for the vet and the wife said, "Why Mr. Johnson," or whatever his name was, "Mr. Johnson has passed away."

Well, my father had never heard that expression "passed away." He thought it meant that he had gone out for a walk, so he said, "Well, when will he be back?" So the woman said, "Mr. Johnson has passed away." So my father said, "Yes, well I know, but when will he be back?" And this went back and forth and finally one of the neighbors whose main pleasure was listening in on telephone conversations and who was listening and couldn't hold on any further, and she said, "Arthur, I have to explain to what 'passed away' mean," and she straightened this up.

But these were some of the difficulties that you could get into. Nevertheless, my father was one of the favorite speakers at the Rotary Club and so on because I guess they were always short of new speakers who had something different to tell. And in those days, people from, refugees from Central Europe, especially in small towns, were few and far between and, of course, everybody was interested, you know, in what is it like in Europe and what experiences did you have and so on. So he was very sought after as a speaker and he liked to do it. The only stipulation was for some reason he did not want his family

or his friends to listen. That he was adamant about. He did not want us around. He said, "You make me nervous."

So sometimes when we knew that he had a speech, we would sneak in the back, you know, after he had started speaking and we would stand behind the door and we would listen and he wouldn't know that we were there.

NASH:Did he ever catch you?

LEE:No, he never did, lucky me.

NASH:Did you find out why he had kept you away? Did he say anything that shocked you?

LEE:No, absolutely not. As a matter of fact, he was a charming speaker. I really don't know why he didn't want us except for some reason we made him nervous. Strangers did not, but we made him nervous. And my mother joined the Ladies Aide, of course, and she went on, you know, quilting bees or whatever they had in those days. And, of course, she having been a lady in Vienna who had maids and cooks and so on, she was not very well-versed in housekeeping and she learned how to butcher a pig, she learned how to make and stuff her own sausages. You know, all these things.

It was really remarkable. I must say that these ladies who came at that time from Germany and Austria, most of them, you know, they are doctors or lawyers or writers or some kind of professional wives who had been used to having maids and servants and who knew very little about housekeeping. But it was remarkable, the adjustment they made. I mean they went right in and they worked and they learned by doing. I know several--I know one lady whose father was a famous publisher in Germany who worked as a maid when she got here and she was not the only one.

And my mother learned very quickly how to do housekeeping and how to do it well and she learned how to, you know they had chickens too, and she was the one who did the egg business. She learned how to weigh eggs and how to sort them and how to crate them and how to pack them, you know, and how to --I think you held a candle up to them and all these things. It was remarkable what all she learned in a short time.

NASH:And they are on the farm still?

LEE:No, my parents --this was also kind of ironic --my father finished his law studies here. He passed everything. All he needed was the Bar examination and he was ready to practice

in New York State. And this was in 1947 or '48. And at that point in Vienna there was a great shortage of judges and he was asked and begged to come back, and the offer was Supreme Court Justice, and this was what all his life he had wanted most, to be a Supreme Court Justice and he couldn't resist. So he went back and they are back in Vienna now. But they are coming day after tomorrow for a visit. Isn't that nice, yes. My mother in particular was very, very happy here. It was very hard for her to leave here and to go back. She made a remarkable adjustment. I think on the whole it was easier for the women than for the men to adjust. The men, of course, they had a profession like lawyer, which was useless here. It was a much harder adjustment. But my mother loved it. She knew the least English when she came and she learned it--I won't say best--but she has the least accent of any of us. I mean, I have been here for many, many years. I still have, as you will notice, quite an accent, and she has a very little accent. It really was remarkable.

NASH:When was the last time that you saw them?

LEE:My parents? I saw them last March. I went to Vienna. And they

tend to come every two years or every year and a half to visit us here. And the last time they were here I took them on a cross-country tour all the way to San Francisco.

You know, my husband is from Texas so we went first to Texas to visit his people and they saw Austin and San Antonio, which they thought were very beautiful. Then we went to Grand Canyon. Then we went to Phoenix, Las Vegas, San Francisco, back to Denver, Rochester and back to New York. So we made really the grand tour. And this time I want to show them Virginia and North Carolina, including Williamsburg and the Skyline Drive and Montecello and Charlottesville and all these things which they don't know yet.

NASH:Well, it has been a fascinating story. Thank you very much.

LEE:Thank you. It was a pleasure talking to you.