

# United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

## Interview with Susan Feingold May 5, 2015

[edited for clarity, with permission]

Julie Kopel: My name is Julie Kopel and I am interviewing Susan Feingold. The date is May 15, 2015 and the interview is being conducted for the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. We are in New York City. Hi, Susan. Thank you so much for meeting today and agreeing to tell us your story.

Susan Feingold: It's a pleasure.

Q: It's very nice to meet you. Can you please tell me what was your name at birth?

A: Sosanna Frank.

Q: Where were you born?

A: In a large town called Krefeld in the Rhineland in Germany.

Q: What was the date of your birth?

A: December 17, 1924.

Q: Susan, can you tell me a little bit about your family, where were they from? What were your parents' roles in the household? Did you have siblings? Anything you want to share about your family?

A: Well my father was born in a small town called Wintrich, on the Mosel and my mother was born in Krefeld in the house that we lived in, except the house was pulled down and a new one was built when I was three years old. And my father, he had a ladies garment store and, a very large one. And so my father ran that. And my mother was a singer and, in my young years I went to concerts when she was singing. And she was a wonderful singer. She sang mainly Mozart, Beethoven. And I grew up in a very large house with 48 rooms if you can imagine that, yes. And

in the house lived my parents, my grandparents, my mother's parents, my brother and I. And a number of maids, yes.

Q: Your brother is younger or older than you?

A: Three years older. And he is not alive.

Q: What was the nature of religious life in your family?

A: My father was fairly Orthodox. My mother was not at all. She did not believe, she was an atheist really, my mother. But we grew up with Jewish tradition. I went to Hebrew school and so did my brother. And that's about it for that.

Q: So you went to secular school and Hebrew school?

A: Hebrew school was after school, a couple of hours a week.

Q: So your regular school was a secular school with Germans as well.

A: I went into an elementary school. That's what happened in Germany the first four years. You go to an elementary school. Then you can go to high school if you want to. So at ten I went to high school and when I was not quite 13, I was kicked out. You know Hitler was in full swing and they threw me out of school one morning, the ninth of November. Yep, Kristallnacht.

Q: Let's back up a little bit. Do you remember if your family had any sort of political affiliations?

A: Well my mother was quite radical, to the left. And my father, I don't really know. My father was not very active politically.

Q: Did you keep a kosher home or –

A: Sort of a pretend kosher home. (laughs)

Q: And what about Shabbat? Did you participate in Shabbat rituals and go to synagogue?

A: Yes, I went to synagogue.

Q: And did you go only with your father, since your mother was more of an atheist...

A: My mother, she was a singer so she sang solos in the choir and she did all the solos in holidays, yes.

Q: You had mentioned that your grandparents also lived in your house?

A: Yes.

Q: Were there other members of your extended family who lived –

A: There was an aunt, a sister of my mother's. And with 48 rooms it was quite -- there was quite a lot of space. Yes, so my grandparents, they had one floor and my aunt who had several rooms.

Q: Can you tell me a little bit about your childhood before the war?

A: When I was very little, my mother did a lot of singing. She gave a lot of concerts and she traveled. So there were a number of maids in my early years, but all lovely, very, very good. And my brother and I were very close. We fought like mad together but we loved each other. And my parents were, I would say model parents. I had a lovely childhood in that sense, yes. And my father was, he was a businessman. We had, we had a very large store, which he took over from my mother's father. My father was a very quiet man, very accommodating. My mother was extremely temperamental. (laughs) But wonderful, she was wonderful. And so I grew up in a household with a very calm, calm male presence and my brother was very temperamental. I was more like my father, not quite as –

Q: Right and he was more like your mother.

A: Yeah, yeah and he was more like my mother, yes. But we were very close, very close knit.

Q: Susan, you were telling me about growing up in your home with your brother. You said that you were very close and that your mother was singing a lot but you had a very tight knit family.

A: Yes.

Q: Tell me a little bit about your daily life as a child.

A: How early do you want to start?

Q: As early as you can remember.

A: Well I remember when I was three years old. I remember a little bit and there was a nurse actually, but she was a baby nurse. But she was with us for many years from when I was about three until I was about ten. And because my mother was singing and my mother was also participating in the business. And so there needed to be someone full time that was appropriate certainly. So what was the question?

Q: You were telling me a little bit about your childhood, what your daily life was like.

A: So it was until Hitler came and I was ten years old when it really kicked in. Was '33, '34. And so my childhood until Hitler was very serene, very loving. My parents sent me to the elementary school. And my mother was a leftist and my father, I don't know. I was very close to both my parents. My mother and I were very similar in many ways and my father was for me the saint. He was absolute goodness. And patience and kindness and, and my brother and I, as I said fought like cats and dogs but loved each other. My brother went to the United States in 1936. My parents got him out, yes because he was a very stormy child and, and he would have gotten into a lot of trouble because he couldn't – the whole anti-Semitism he would fight like crazy to defend himself. So he went to the United States to strangers. Not very good, not a very good home. So at 18 he was independent, you know. Then he went into the army when the war broke out and he became a citizen. And I went to England in, three months before the war broke out. World War Two.

Q: What language did you speak at home?

A: German. Also my parents both spoke perfect French. And my father spoke very good English.

Q: Do you remember, can you describe what your school was like, if you remember any friends or hobbies?

A: I remember many things, yes. Elementary school was run by a very good friend of the family, Leo Portchtell his name was. And Henishtar was his wife. So I have very happy memories of the good four years of schooling. The first four years were elementary, public school. That was the norm in Germany. Then you could continue in public school for another four years or you could go to a private school, so when I was ten I went to a private school. And of course, Hitler -- when I was 12, I was kicked out of school.

Q: That was what I was going to ask you next. When did you first start to feel a presence of anti-Semitism in your town?

A: Certainly 1933.

Q: You were already nine.

A Yes.

Q: And your brother was how old, like 12?

A: 12. Yes. And when I was ten I was then going to -- at ten you could go to high school. And I went to a Jewish elementary school and then when I was ten I went to high school in my town. And when I was 12, they threw me out.

Q: They kicked all the Jews out of school?

A: Mm hm.

Q: And before we get into that, before you noticed the anti-Semitism, did you feel any anti-Semitism between your non-Jewish schoolmates before 1933?

A: Not at all.

Q: So the Jews and the non-Jews got along well?

A: And when Hitler first came in, things began to change. I used to get notes from the girls in my class saying dearest Susan, I love you so much but I can't talk to you anymore and that was the beginning of the end.

Q: Do you remember what you felt like at that time?

A: Yes. Well it was interesting because you have defense mechanisms. And so a good part of me felt proud that I was a Jew and despise these girls who were so stupid and superficial and -- they threw me out of school on Kristallnacht. The morning after I went to school. I had no idea that anything had happened and but the girls were, in my class, it was a girl's schools and they were jeering and throwing paper balls at me and stuff like that and told me that when I came home my house would be burned down. And so I left school. I ran out, ran home and I remember my father standing at the top of the stairs looking down at me as I was running up the stairs. And he was absolutely marvelous. And brought my mother and me through these awful times. And that first night the Nazis came to our house, about a dozen of them. And they took me into my room. I had my own room and so they took me into that room and they made me stand against the wall. And pulled out their revolvers and said where is your foreign money and something else? I can't remember now. And I said we don't have any. And they said if you don't tell us we'll count to three and if you don't tell us we'll shoot. It's unforgettable, that. And I remember I was standing against the wall with my hands against, the palm of my hands against the wall. And they counted, one two three and of course they didn't shoot. And eventually they left.

Q: So your brother had been sent at this point?

A: Yes, he was already in the United States.

Q: Ok and how did they manage to get him out?

A: Through the Jewish Refugee Committee.

Q: And what year was that when he was sent to the US?

A: He went in '37.

Q: Ok , so your parents saw that things were changing?

A: Oh yes. But they couldn't get out. My father was very well known in that town where I grew up and there was no way.

Q: What kind of things were changing in those years?

A: Well we, for instance, we had to close our own business. We had this very large store and we had to, it was an Auflökauf. You don't speak German, no. Auflökauf is when you sell out, you sell everything.

Q: Right, you liquidate the store.

A: Liquidate, yes.

Q: Did you have to wear a yellow star at that point?

A: No. Did I ever wear one? Isn't that interesting? I'm not quite sure.

Q: But you were kicked out of school and your father's business had to close.

A: Yeah, we closed the business. The Jews couldn't go to the movies. Everything stopped. You know, any kind of recreational activity, we were barred from. And so the elementary school that I went to which was headed by a friend of our family, they took us in, you know. Even though we were too old for elementary school. So I went until shortly before I left for England. I went to that school just to sort of, it was wonderful. The man – he sort of managed to teach us appropriately in terms of our age.

Q: The school was still open, that lower school?

A: That school it was still open, yes.

Q: Your parents decided to send your brother off. The night of Kristallnacht comes. You come home from school. The Germans come to your home. They eventually left. Then what happened?

A: Yeah, they ransacked the place. It was November ninth.

Q: Kristallnacht, right?

A: And then they left and of course the business was closed, but my – we were still comfortable financially and my parents only wanted the kids to get out. And so when I went to England I tried very hard to get them. I got an affidavit. I was able to do all those things, but then the war broke out three months after I got there.

Q: First tell me about how it is you, how is it that your parents set you up to go on a Kindertransport.

A: How they did it?

Q: Right.

A: Through, I mean through the synagogue too you know. There was ways of doing that and –

Q: This was in what year?

A: I left Germany in 1939.

Q: Do you remember the day you left?

A: We got up terribly early, at four o'clock in the morning. And my parents – my brother was in the United States. My parents took me to Dusseldorf, which is a major city and from there, there was a train to Rotterdam and that was the train I took. So I said goodbye to them at the station in Dusseldorf. And I remember we hugged and I started to move away and then suddenly I couldn't do it you know. I turned around and they were standing there and I ran back and I said I can't go, I can't go and my father in his inimitable way persuaded me to go. So I remember that last look.

Q: Were you with other children that you knew?

A: No, nobody. Nobody I knew. Many, many children. I mean to me it was like hundreds of children. I'm not sure just how -- but there were a lot of kids. And pretty much between the ages of 7 and 14. And so we went to Rotterdam and then we -- I remember we walked for a very long time and I had a suitcase, an attaché case and rucksack on my back. And we walked through

Rotterdam endlessly and went into a children's home eventually where we stayed until close to midnight. And then we took the boat to England. And well, we arrived at six in the morning.

Q: Did you know where you were going at the time?

A: I knew the names, but they were strangers.

Q: Were there adults who were looking after you, who were supervising?

A: Of course, of – yeah. They were both 35 years old.

Q: Were they from a specific organization?

A: Well she was very religious. He was not though. He had a father who was really quite famous, Gastar, the name was Gastar. I don't know whether it rings a bell. But he was a philosopher, a Jewish philosopher. And he had 14 children and I came to one of those children.

Q: So you're talking about the family that you came to in England. I'm talking about during the trip, before you got to England. Were there any adults who were helping the children with the transport?

A: Peripherally. There was no, I don't remember anything affectionate or kind. It was just business.

Q: Do you remember what agency helped you, you know?

A: The Jewish Refugees Committee.

Q: Ok and so you were with approximately how many other children?

A: Maybe 30

Q: But you didn't know any of them.

A: No.

Q: So you were ten years old.

A: No, no, no. I was 14.

Q: So you were 14 years old. And you were getting on a train and leaving your parents and leaving your home for the first time.

A: Never to see them again.

Q: When you left though, did you feel like you were going to see them again?

A: No. I felt that I wouldn't see them again.

Q: Cause you knew enough and you were old enough to understand what was going on.

A: Oh yes.

Q: During those last few years before you left, you had still been living in your home?

A: Yes. Though we gave up. I mean we had this huge house and my father gave up the business, which was part of the house. You know the ground floor. And then there were three floors above it, you know that where we lived.

Q: You were telling me so you were on the transport. First you went on the train from Dusseldorf and then you arrived in, what was the city?

A: Well then I was on the train. Then we went to Holland and I remember eating supper in Holland, in Rotterdam. And then we went back. It was evening. And we took the boat to Hoek van Holland, we took the boat at and we went to Harwich in the west, on the east coast of England and I arrived, we arrived in Harwich at about noon I think and here were all these children waiting to be placed and of course I was one of them. And I remember somebody put me on a train to the city where they lived. The couple who took me in. And I remember we arrived there about ten o'clock at night. I hadn't slept for two nights by then. And I remember getting off the train. It was dark and there were little lights, red lights, yellow lights. And I stood on the platform. I didn't know what to do and suddenly there appeared a shape out of the dark and a man's voice said I am, I am Uncle Michael come to greet you in German, he did it in German. And they were fabulous, both of them. They didn't have children and she didn't want to adopt so they decided to take a refugee child and they wouldn't get that attached to a child that's

on its way to America, it was. And of course they became very attached and I did too. And we were in touch always until they died.

Q: What was it like living with them?

A: I didn't live with them very long. The war broke out. I was enrolled in a high school. I learned English very quickly. And three months after that the war broke out and I was evacuated. So I only lived with them for three months. But all my vacations I would always come back to their house.

Q: Where were you evacuated to?

A: The first year to Scarborough which is on the east coast of England. A beautiful sea resort. It was really a pleasure place, fabulous place. And we were in a boarding school. We were there for one year and then we were sent to the Lake District. Also very beautiful and I had another year there and then I graduated high school.

Q: Were you in touch with your parents during this time?

A: I was in touch with them. The only thing that I could do. I wrote, I think, it was 13 letters. And then I couldn't write letters any more. They wouldn't allow it, but I could write messages 30 words in a message and I would do that as often as they let me.

Q: Who would send the messages for you?

A: The people I lived with, you know. They took care of it. I don't remember at all. They must have taken care of it.

Q: And did you receive correspondence back from your parents?

A: Yes, just 30 words. It was always.

Q: What kinds of things did they say?

A: Happy things always, you know. And always be good. (laughs)

Q: When did those communications stop?

A: War broke out in '39, in '40.

Q: Do you know what happened to them?

A: Yes, they were sent to a concentration camp. They went to, and I know from a girlfriend of mine who was in Germany and survived. And so she knew all this. And she, the place was Lublin, it's become Lublin. I don't think there was a single, there was one survivor. I think. And, and they vanished.

Q: Did you ever receive confirmation of their death from any organization or so what you know is from your girlfriend?

A: Exactly and she who got some mail from them and but no, it's just they disappeared.

Q: You found that out after the war?

A: But I knew, I really knew.

Q: Were you in touch with your brother during this time?

A: Yeah, I was always in touch with him. Then he went into the army when the war broke out. And he was stationed in England for a while so I saw him. And then I think I came to the States just a little bit before he came back.

Q: So what happened once you graduated high school?

A: When I was 17, school was over. I graduated high school and I decided that I wanted to be independent. I felt from my parents I could have taken anything forever without batting an eyelash, but it was different [with my foster family]. I loved the two of them but I didn't want to be dependent. I wanted to be independent. So when I was 17, I went to London and I got a job as a runner. I was a messenger— that was called a runner because I had no skills whatsoever, had a high school diploma and so I worked at Bloomsbury house, the Jewish Refugees Committee and by the time I left for the States, I was promoted to head of a department there. It was the relocation department. And in 1945 I went to the United States.

Q: And you were in touch with your brother.

A: He came to England. I saw him. He and I we loved each other but we were very different in our sense of the world, which was very oppositional. And he was a big bigot, which sort of really hurt the relationship a lot. What can I say? It is all a long time ago.

Q: So you came to America and where did you, how did you get here?

A: I worked for the Jewish Refugees Committee and I contacted the American Distribution Committee in New York. And through them they sort of requested me. They asked for permission to bring me to the United States. So I did. Right after the war.

Q: Did you come by boat?

A: Yes, yes I went by boat and found, it was – I had a very good childhood friend who lived in Chicago and I told her to come to New York when I arrived and I was taking care of all the expenses. I had saved money. And so I booked a room at the St. Moritz hotel. (laughs) And there we met and she stayed with me for a week. And I found a room during that time that I could move into and then I went to the Joint Distribution Committee and said here I am and they hired me. And so I was there for a while, but not for that long because I wanted to go into the theater. So I auditioned. There was a school in New York. It was called the Dramatic Workshop of the New School for Social Research and it was attached to the New School. And the head of it was a man called Erwin Piscator who was a very, very famous stage director in Germany. He was not Jewish but politically he was so opposed to Hitler he had to get out of the country. And he opened a school here. And I asked for an audition because I couldn't afford to pay so he gave me a scholarship. I auditioned and he was wonderful. And so I stayed for a year and worked for a Jewish organization. I can't remember the name. On the side. I did both. And then I had my own apartment. And from there I took off. What did I do? I did quite a bit of theater yeah. On Broadway, off Broadway. Yes, that's how I met my husband.

Q:.. And he was American?

A: Yes. He was an American, second generation I think. And we were married for 60 years.

Q: Did you continue to practice Judaism after the war?

A: (pause) Now I remember, when was it. That's hard to remember. I was in Wales vacationing and I was walking through the hills, all by myself, you know. These wonderful sort of mountains, and wonderful forests. And it's funny. All of a sudden I stood still and there was a silence around me and at that moment, I said I don't believe in this any longer. And that was it.

Q: Your husband wasn't Jewish?

A: Yes, he was. Oh I couldn't, I don't think I could have married a non-Jew, but –

Q: But you didn't practice once you were married?

A: No. We got married in a synagogue. Why? Because he said my grandmother would never forgive me. We need to show her pictures. So we did. But we were not, no longer, I mean traditionally religious.

Q: Do you think that your experiences, losing your parents at such a young age and you know all that happened to you was part of the reason why you didn't want to be a practicing Jew any longer?

A: I remained a Jew, not a practicing Jew, but very much a Jew. And I don't know. I really don't know.

Q: Did you continue to be in touch with your brother once you were here?

A: I came to the United States in 1946 and he was in Boston. And he wanted me to come and live with him in Boston. And I said no. I stayed in New York and that's where I met Lester, my husband. And in acting school and we – so we got married. I came to the United States in '46 and in '48 we were married, yes.

Q: Where did you live together?

A: We lived, the first place we ever lived was wonderful. It was at 50 Grand Street. You know where that is?

Q: The Lower East Side.

A: Yes, yes and there were a bunch of actors who found this building. We were among them and it was empty. It was totally, I mean you couldn't, it was uninhabitable. And we took it on and we renovated it. We did, we worked like dogs and we lived there and I lived, we lived there \$25 a month. (laughs)

Q: You stayed there for how long?

A: Several years. We loved it. We had a wonderful time there, yes. And then we moved to 46<sup>th</sup> Street and then we moved to Brooklyn Heights. That's where my daughter was born and –

Q: What year was that?

A: 1960. Late. We were married for many years before we had a child. And Lisa died when she was 40.

Q: I'm sorry. Have you ever returned to Germany?

A: Once. Very traumatic. My husband and I went to Europe. We never took a vacation and then after ten years of marriage we took a vacation for five months. And we toured Europe. We had a marvelous time. And I wasn't going to go to Germany and toward the end of the trip he said look, I just have a feeling it's important for you to go back. How about it? So he persuaded me and I spent two nights there in my hometown. Saw a very good childhood friend who was half Jewish and survived, she stayed in Germany. And I saw a cleaning lady we had when, when we couldn't have maids any more. Jews couldn't. This lovely woman, Mrs. Sangzen, came and she, she cleaned. I can't remember, almost every day she came. And she was just so wonderful. You know with, with my brother and I and my parents and she was just, it was a love affair.

Q: Did anyone in your family ever receive any sort of compensation for the property that was –

A: Yes, I did. (laughs) Like, I think \$2000 they gave me for the life of my parents.

Q: So you don't get any ongoing compensation? Nothing –

A: I think that I was too young and I didn't know how to maneuver it, so I didn't.

Q: Can you talk at all about the long-term impact your experience as a child had on your life and your family and how you chose to raise your child?

A: I think the major impact was I hated discrimination and I needed to do something that addressed that and so I did.

Q: What kind of work were you involved with?

A: Theater. I was on Broadway and off Broadway in work you wouldn't know but there was a very famous acting couple, Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne. Very famous and I eventually worked with them and I had a very good role and sort of launched me into television and stage, et cetera. I did quite a bit of work. And then when my daughter was born, I dropped it. I stopped it and I spent the first three years with her. That was the only time in my life that I didn't work.

Q: And then you went back to work when she was three.

A: Yeah, yes. I did, I became a Head Start director, right. And it, I started a school for young children, two and three years old. And as the school was growing, Head Start had come into being and so I applied for a Head Start grant and I got it. And so for many years, many years, I can't remember how many, I, until 2008, I was with something called the Bloomingdale Family Program, a wonderful organization and it's my organization that I started. And I was with them for many, many years. And it was very meaningful and because I worked with minority children from very poor families and it opened a whole new horizon for me. It was wonderful time in my life.

Q: Sounds like it.

A: Still I'm in touch with some of the parents and children, yes.

Q: What was your husband doing during this time?

A: My husband was in theater but also because there wasn't enough money always in theater he, he one day decided, he said I think I'm going to make a handbag. He bought some leather and a couple of tools and before we knew it, he had, we had a store on Christopher Street. And he was very talented in many ways. He had a Ph.D. and in theater and criticism, that was his field. He was a wonderful stage director. And we met in acting school, that's where we met.

Q: Do you ever dream about your experience as a child?

A: I used to. I haven't for quite a long time. But I used to. It was a recurring dream and yeah it was awful always, the same dream over and over again. And yeah it was awful always, had the same dream over and over again.

Q: Is there anything else you want to tell me about yourself or your story or anything you want to pass on to anyone who may be listening to your story?

A: I don't know. What, what can I say? I believe that the experiences of the past made me a better person, because there was a lot of pain and a lot of guilt. And a tremendous need to protect freedom and justice and I became very committed to that. That was my work for many years [with the Bloomingdale Family Program]. I had 200 children in the program, in my program and I stayed in touch with some and it was just a marvelous different experience for me.

Q: Sounds like it. Well thank you so much for sharing your story with us, Susan. I really appreciate it.

A: I'm very glad to do it, yes, yes.