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Jeannette Bercovickova Bornstein oral history interview by Ellen Klein, November 5, 2009

Jeannette Bercovickova Bornstein (Interviewee)

Ellen Wilson Klein (Interviewer)

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Ellen Klein: Today is November 5, 2009. I'm here today with Jeannette Bercovickova Bornstein. This is Ellen Klein. And we are here in Clearwater, Florida, United States of America. Our language today is English, and our videographer from the University of South Florida is Jane Duncan.

I'm here today with Mrs. Jeannette Bornstein. Would you please spell your name for us?

Jeannette Bornstein: My name is Jeannette, J-e-a-double n-e-double t-e, Bornstein, B-o-r-n-s-t-e-i-n.

EK: Okay. And you were born when?

JB: I was born in 1935.

EK: Okay, and what day and month?

JB: January 6.

EK: January 6. Okay. And you were born in which city?

JB: Antwerp, Belgium.

EK: All right. And would you spell the city and country for us, please?

JB: A-n-t-w-e-r-p, B-e-l-g-i-u-m.

EK: Wonderful. Thank you. So, to get started, would you share with us first some of your experiences before the war that you remember?

JB: Yes. I can tell you that my grandparents were Czechoslovakian, and my parents also were Czech. Now, in—I don't remember the year, but they moved to France: Lans, France, L-a-n-s.

EK: All right.

JB: Where my sister was born in 1931. From there we moved to Antwerp, because my father had a sister who lived in Belgium, in Antwerp. So, we moved to Belgium, and I was born there in 1935.

Life at home was very pleasant. We lived in a nice community. My sister went to school, and she played the violin, because our neighbor downstairs played for the Philharmonic and he taught my sister to play the violin, and she loved it. I was too young to go to school, and I was a hellion. My mother took me to the park with three outfits so that I would come home looking clean.

In 1940, rumors started that the Germans were close enough, but nobody paid too much attention because people thought that it would never happen; the Germans would never get there during their lifetime. However, the anti-Semitic rumors started to go around, and indeed the Germans did get to Belgium in—I think it was 1940. We were among thousands, and my parents knew that it was too dangerous for us to stay. They packed up whatever they could and, like thousands of others, we ran to catch a train to France, where the Germans had not yet invaded. We were fortunate to get on that train. The train was packed like cattle, and I remember—as little as I was, I remember hearing the continuous noise of bombs. I didn't know they were bombs, but I later found out that that's what they were.

EK: How old were you then?

JB: I was five. I was crying and I asked my father, “Where are we going?” And he said to me, “Jeannette, we can't stay in our house anymore.” When I asked him why not, he said, “Because we are Jewish.” I didn't understand. I was confused and I was scared. By then, I was six years old.

After many stops, the train let us off in Toulouse and we arrived in France, where we were hidden in the home—it was a farm, actually—of a gentile family. And there were many such families who took in Jews that were hiding. They hid them in barns and cellars and attics. We were hidden in the cellar. It was dark. And, again, I was scared. But my parents were with me, so that sort of relieved some of my fears.

EK: It was just you and your parents and your sister?

JB: Yes. Yes.

EK: And you told me something before about when you were running to the train station, about your sister and her violin.

JB: Oh, yes.

EK: Would you tell us about that?

JB: Sure. As we were running to the train station—and we were running: not walking, running—my father told my sister—my sister was carrying her violin, and my father said, “Marie, you've got to drop that violin, because you're holding us back.” And as much as she hated to do that, she had to. And we did get on the train, which was a small train, and it was packed like cattle. Now, we were in Toulouse, France, hiding in the cellar, and it wasn't long before the Gestapo squads were making house searches and rounding up all the Jews that they could find.

EK: Do you know how your family got in contact with the family that hid you?

JB: No.

EK: Okay.

JB: I don't know that. As I said, there were many families who were sympathetic with the Jews that were running and hiding, and we happened to come to this family. Now, I wish I did know who they were, but I don't. And as I said, it wasn't long before the Gestapo squads were making house searches and rounding up all the Jews that they could find. And we were captured. My mother, my sister, and I were piled in an open truck and transported to an internment camp, a German prison camp, which eventually supplied the slaughterhouse in Poland and Germany. My father was separated from us, and we didn't know his whereabouts.

EK: Was he taken at the same time, or he was somewhere else when you were taken?

JB: He was not with us. And I don't know where he went. We were sent to Camp Rivesaltes in Perpignan. It was the southern part of France. And what I can tell you is that Rivesaltes was a real hell. We lived in overcrowded barracks. We slept on a cement floor that was covered with a little bit of hay. And we were given a very small space. We couldn't stretch our arms or legs without touching another body.

EK: Were you kept with your family?

JB: Just my mother and my sister. My father, we still didn't know where he was. We were cold and always hungry. Our daily rations consisted of a bowl of soup and a piece of bread. Camp Rivesaltes was our home for nine months. News from the outside, it trickled in the camp through the underground, and my mother learned that partisan couriers were able to reach the camp and smuggle children to a safe place. So, in the middle of one night, my sister and I were awakened, and without any warning or explanation my mother took us to a designated meeting place and handed us over to these couriers. I didn't know them. I didn't know where we were going. I was terrified.

EK: What did your mother tell you?

JB: She didn't tell us anything. She just told us to be quiet, because it was the middle of the night. And we slipped through the part of—the fence in the camp was not nailed to the ground, and so we were able to slip underneath the fence. (coughs) And we did meet with the couriers; as I said, I didn't know where I was going, and I was terrified.

EK: What do you remember about them?

JB: The couriers? No, except that they were big strong men. Of course, I was a little six year old. They were United States spies that—well, they worked for the United States, and they took us to an established hiding place for Czech children. We were in Vence, V-e-n-c-e, in Vence, France. And while we were there we had some schooling, and we were able to play outdoors. And I mention this because after being in the dark for such a long time, playing outside with other children was a real treat. And for a while we felt safe there.

I don't know how, but miraculously my parents found each other, and both managed to escape their camps and flee to Nice, which is close to Vence. The odds of surviving such an attempt was nearly nonexistent. Theirs was a fortunate exception. I can only surmise that their desperation to see Marie and I, perhaps for the last time, they were willing to risk death. We were reunited in Vence. How they got from Nice to Vence, I don't know. My father looked like a human skeleton. He was ill, and he died shortly after our reunion.

EK: Tell me about your father. You told me some things in our pre-interview about him as a person and what he had hoped for himself and for your family.

JB: My father wanted to be a rabbi, but my mother did not want to be a rabbi's wife. So, while we were still in Belgium he worked in a (inaudible) until it closed and we had to leave. Other than that—and this I was told, because I don't remember my father too well, except that he was very kind and I know he loved me. Even as a little child, I remember that. But when I saw him in Nice, or in Vence, he didn't look like my father. He really looked like a living skeleton. And as I said, he died shortly after our reunion; the cause of his death were the atrocities that he endured in the camp. It was decided that he be buried in a gentile cemetery in order not to arouse suspicion that there was a Jewish refuge nearby.

After my father died, my mother remained in Vence. The safety that we felt in Vence and the few happy days were short lived. We couldn't foresee the danger that laid ahead. The Nazis were on our backs, and we needed another hiding place. Again, with the help of the underground, they took us to Creuse, France. It's a small town in the mountains of France. In Creuse we were taken to an old castle that was given by the owners to Jews on the run. We hid there until warning came that the Nazis were near, and their mission was to send every Jew to a concentration camp in Germany.

EK: Do you remember the trip that you made to that castle and how you got there?

JB: No. The only thing that I remember is that we were told not to utter a sound. We had to be very quiet, not to talk to one another, not to talk to any strangers. That's the only thing that I can remember. But as far as the trip, I don't know how long it took. I just, you know, have no idea. And my sister doesn't either, although she's four years older and remembers more than I did. We just didn't know how long the trip took.

We had an aunt and uncle in Belgium who had escaped and were living in Spain. Now, they hired—my uncle was in the diamond business. Now, diamonds could buy you more than a loaf of bread. You could get very far with diamonds, and that's how they managed to escape, and they went to Spain. Now, they hired and paid for two couriers that if they could find us, they would smuggle my sister and me out of France and hopefully to Spain. Again, my mother was faced with the agony of having to send us away. This time she told us about the journey that we were about to take, where we were going and why we had to go. However, despite my cries and my pleas, my promises that I would be good, she handed us to these strange men again, who led us away. She watched us leave, knowing that she had no alternative. It was a matter of our survival.

We took the train to the foot of the Pyrenees, and from there we crossed the mountain by foot. It was snowing and bitter cold. We walked during the night and hid during the day. We walked single file, and were sternly warned not to utter a sound. See, the Nazis were all around us and we could hear their gunshot, and if the slightest noise would attract them, we would be victims of those guns. One night while we were walking, I was so cold, so tired, so scared that I cried. The reason I cried was that I wanted to hold my sister's hand; she was walking in front of me and I went up to hold her hand. Within seconds, my mouth was taped to keep me silent. I was silent for the rest of the journey. And to this day, I don't cry.

I don't know how long we walked until we finally reached the border of Spain, and from there we took a train to Barcelona, where we were met by my aunt and uncle.

EK: Will you tell me something about when you were traveling through the Pyrenees and you were hiding during the day? Do you remember how you were hid, and did you—what did you do while you waited for night to fall?

JB: We were hiding behind trees, bushes. I also remember that our feet were frozen. They were frostbitten because we didn't have proper shoes, and so at one point our feet were wrapped in newspapers and then put back on our measly shoes. And we were fortunate that we were not caught.

We were met by my aunt and uncle when we reached Barcelona, the other side of the mountains. We lived in Spain. My aunt and uncle were strangers to me. I don't remember them, because I was so young when we all lived in Belgium.

EK: How old were you at this point when you made it to Spain?

JB: I was still six years old. Yeah.

We lived in Spain for six months while waiting for our visas to Canada. However, bureaucratic regulations would not allow my sister and me visas to Canada, because we were not registered as my aunt and uncle's children. Now, their visas were for Canada, but we could not go with them because we were not their children. And we were wards of the United States Committee for the Care of European Children, and our visas were for America. So once again we were separated [from] what had become familiar to us. On April 7, 1944 we arrived in America, and our first stop here was in Philadelphia. We were greeted there by the committee, who escorted us to Newark, New Jersey. There we were placed in an orphanage until a foster home could be found for us.

EK: Can you tell me what it was like when you were making your trip and when you first got to the United States?

JB: The only thing I can remember is fear. I just can't remember anything except being afraid, and why did my mother—why did my mother let us go? Why did she leave us? I knew my father had died. But I didn't understand why my mother had left us. So, I was afraid, although my sister was with me; that relieved a little bit of the fear. A foster home was found for us in Providence, Rhode Island. My sister and I lived in the same foster home until the end of the summer, and then for the first time in our life we were separated. Nobody wanted two foster children, two refugees. And so my sister went to live with one family and I went to live with another. We weren't too far apart, and we were able to see one another occasionally.

Although I missed my sister very much, my new foster family made me feel wanted, protected, and for the first time free from danger. Since I didn't speak a word of English when I came here, communicating was not easy, but I learned quickly, because at the age of ten I wanted to be like every other kid, and I certainly didn't want to be identified as a refugee. I never talked about my past, I never acknowledged it, and in my quiet shame, I denied it. It was many years before I understood that my denial provided me the means to forget the painful experiences of my early childhood.

While I was adjusting to life in America, the Red Cross, with Jewish organizations, were searching for my mother. It took over a year to discover that she was alive and to locate her. After the war, my mother went back to Vence and reburied my father in a Jewish cemetery. It took another five years before she was able to get a visa and the proper papers to come to America. Seeing my mother for the first time was a shock. She looked haunted and sickly. I thought that this can't be my mother. I looked at her with the eyes of the six year old child that she had abandoned. I had to leave the comfort of my foster parents and rebuild a relationship with my mother.

With time, the events of my childhood surfaced, and I was compelled to recall the events of my early years in order for my own life to have meaning. I didn't know then, I couldn't know what was in my mother's tortured mind. But I soon learned that my feeling of abandonment that I felt for my mother was the bravery and the courage, the self-denial, and the love that my mother had to save our lives. When I think of the parents today that would not send their children away, many of them never saw them again.

I can close now. Okay?

EK: You'd like to stop? You'd like to stop?

JB: Can I stop for a minute?

Part 1 ends; part 2 begins

EK: This is Ellen Klein, and we're in Clearwater, Florida, and I'm with Mrs. Jeannette Bornstein. This is tape two.

So, if it would be okay, let's go back just very briefly, because I hear you telling me how it felt for you to feel that your mother had abandoned you and she didn't get to go with you when you left for Spain. Tell me about that.

JB: As a six year old I did feel abandoned, but of course as I got older I realized that adults were not allowed to travel during the war. They didn't have visas. They didn't have any sort of papers, and it was just too dangerous for them to travel. Children they didn't bother, because children didn't have papers.

EK: Okay.

JB: And I didn't realize this, of course, until I was older.

EK: Right.

JB: Yeah. And when my mother came and we tried to piece some parts of our travels, our hidings, my mother just could not talk about it. (coughs) It was just too difficult. When I was older—and as I said, I was still very feisty—there was a time when I really insisted that she talk to us about it. And I thought I would stroke her out. I really thought she would have a stroke. She just would not talk about it. And I never asked her again. (coughs)

EK: So how old were you when you were finally reunited? How old were you when your sister—

JB: Fourteen.

EK: Fourteen?

JB: And my sister was eighteen.

EK: That's a very different child than six.

JB: Oh, God, yes. And, you know, I had become apple pie American. And here my mother came, and was just like when I came, didn't speak English. It was very hard. It was hard to leave my foster parents and to, again, meet someone who was a stranger to me.

EK: Tell me about that, the first time you saw each other.

JB: The first thing that I can remember is that I didn't want to go. I didn't want to go and live with her, but of course I had to. She was my mother, and I lived with foster parents. And I'm just very happy that I came to make amends not only with myself, but also with my mother.

I am a member—I was a member of the youngest generation of Holocaust survivors. I was born at a time in history when death was my destiny. In my earliest years, I wasn't allowed to live. I'm here after all those years thanks to the sacrifice of all those who dared not tolerate the injustice, and who would not agree that death was my destiny. I speak to you about the evils of the Holocaust because I am a credible witness, but the generation of survivors is disappearing. And because of that, I hope that by sharing my experience, you will stand up to protect the memory of the Holocaust. The memory must be kept alive.

EK: Thank you.

End of interview