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Susan Thorne Bryant oral history interview by Tori Chambers Lockler, June 18, 2010

Susan Thorne Bryant (Interviewee)

Tori Chambers Lockler (Interviewer)

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Tori Lockler: Today is June 18, 2010. We are here with Susan Thorsch—Thorne—Bryant. My name is Tori C. Lockler; I'll be the interviewer. We are in St. Petersburg, Florida, in the United States. The language of the interview is English, and our videographer is Jane Duncan.

We are here with Dr. Susan Bryant. Today is June 18. I'm Tori Lockler and we'll be conducting our interview. So, will you start by telling us your full name and spelling it?

Susan Bryant: Susan Thorne Bryant. Should I spell all?

TL: Um, your last name.

SB: B-r-y-a-n-t.

TL: And was that your—that was not your name at birth.

SB: Mm-mm [no].

TL: Would you tell us your name at birth?

SB: That was a very peculiar name, and there—anybody who has that name is a relative. It's T-h-o-r-s-c-h, Thorsch, and it doesn't sound either Czech or German. No idea where it came from.

TL: Okay. And can you tell us the date of your birth?

SB: 7-8-29 [July 8, 1929], which means I'll have a birthday in a few weeks.

TL: In a few weeks—happy early birthday.

SB: Thank you.

TL: Can you tell us first your mother's full name and then your father's full name?

SB: My mother's full name was Antoinette Marie. And I don't know whether she was named after Marie Antoinette, but she escaped her fate. (laughs) And my father's full name is Frederick Martin Thorne—Thorsch. When we were all naturalized, they took the name Thorne, which I've been using as a professional name, so they all became Thorne.

TL: Okay. And do you remember—so your mother's name at marriage was—

SB: Was Thorsch.

TL: Thorsch. And then Thorne.

SB: And then Thorne, right.

TL: And do you remember her maiden name?

SB: Her maiden name was, I believe, Wallfish. I don't know how it's spelled, maybe just the way it sounds. And she was born in Hungary. And my father was born in the Czech Republic—which is now the Czech Republic and, as you know, at the time it was the Austrian-Hungarian Empire. So all of—it was very fluid, people moved back and forth.

TL: And can you tell us about your grandparents, their names and where they were from?

SB: My grandfather's name is Jacob, my grandmother is named Ida. And I don't know where their families came from, but they lived either their whole life or were born in the Czech Republic. I don't know where they were born; I just know that my father was born in the Czech Republic. It was called Czechoslovakia at the time.

TL: Right. And that's your father's parents.

SB: Right.

TL: And what about your mother's parents?

SB: My mother's—and I didn't—unfortunately, didn't know any of those people. I didn't know any of my grandparents, except Ida, my father's mother. All the others had died before. My mother's mother was called Adele and her father was called Emanuel.

TL: Okay.

SB: And my mother's—my mother was born in Hungary. Where those two grandparents were born, I don't know.

TL: Okay. And where—and you were born where?

SB: In Vienna.

TL: Vienna.

SB: Vienna, Austria.

TL: Austria, okay. And do you have any siblings?

SB: I have a half-sister named Erika, and she was born—it was during the First World War, and my mother was with her husband somewhere in a city that has changed nations a few times. It was Italians—I don't think it was Swiss, but it was back and forth between Austria, Italy, and maybe even one other country. Europe was very fluid for a while. (laughs)

TL: Yes. Can you tell me what your mother and your father did for a living?

SB: My father was a banker and my mother, as many women did in those days, did not have a profession. She stayed home.

TL: And can you tell us your earliest childhood memories? Do you remember anything about the town you lived in?

SB: I have a very early memory of a vacation; it must have been before I was two because my birthday's in July. And I was a very active child. My mother used to tell me stories of my being—you know, you were strapped in, in a baby carriage, and I would sort of hang over the side with the strap and passersby would say, "Your baby's out of the carriage." And she would say, "I know, but I've put her back so many times and she still does that."

So I was jumping around the bed in this place where we were, and I stuck my finger under a picture—this was a little Austrian village, in the farmhouse where we spent the night. And I got a terrible shock: apparently they had used the picture to cover up an open electrical outlet. And I still have the scar from it. And I remember there was a parade or some sort of noise coming from the window—which she didn't remember, so I know it was my memory; it wasn't something that she had told me. And of course I screamed and she comforted me, and that's my earliest memory.

TL: Okay.

SB: And I've been afraid of electrical outlets ever since. (laughs)

TL: I can see why. So, no other specific memories about the town you lived in?

SB: I have very many early memories. I have memories of going to something called the Prater, which is a little bit like Tivoli. It's not quite as famous, but it's a place where

there are rides and so forth. And we lived within half a block of the Prater, so I very— from a very early age on, I could go there by myself and meet my friends. As I will tell you later, if you want, I started acting at the Burgtheater at the age of six, and I remember all of that and the wonderful plays that I was privileged to know at a young age, such as *Macbeth* and *The Golden Fleece* [by Franz Grillparzer] with Medea and Jason. Do you remember that from your mythology?

TL: Yes.

SB: So I really have many, many memories of my childhood—including Hitler's coming. I very well remember that.

TL: Okay. So can you tell us, maybe leading up to that, what do you remember about before the start of the war? Anything about the way your town changed or anything about—?

SB: I know one thing from history, and that is that many grown-ups said that Hitler accomplished in Austria in three months what it took him the whole time—check me on my dates. Did he come to power in Germany in 1931?

TL: Nineteen thirty—

SB: Thirty-one [1931]?

TL: Nineteen thirty-one, thirty-two [1932].

SB: Thirty-two [1932] I think he took more power, and then at some point he took complete power. So from thirty-one [1931], let's say, or thirty-two [1932], until thirty-eight [1938]—about six years. So in three months, he accomplished what it took him six years to do in Germany. And one of the things was to have all of the people—they had by that time already agreed that you were Jewish if you had one Jewish grandparent. It was almost like the one drop of blood with the blacks in this country.

TL: During slavery.

SB: During slavery and whatever lingered after that. So all the people who had this one grandparent or more had to register by June. The Anschluss, the annexation—which, by the way, I witnessed, and I'll tell you about that in a moment—took place in March, I think middle of March. And so it was April, May, June—three months later, they had everything organized. They knew who all the Jews were and everybody had to register and state every single one of their belongings—what they owned. Why do you suppose they did that? (laughs)

TL: Well, I can ponder a guess; will you tell us?

SB: I think it was because they wanted to make sure that they had everything that the citizens had, so that when it came time to take it they would be sure that they could get everything; because that what I've read in history was certainly one of the reasons that they started this pogrom against the Jews. Because most of the Jews, through hard work and a certain amount of intelligence, were middle or upper middle class and had gotten together quite a few belongings and they wanted to be sure that they would get all of them, so they had them register them all. And I remember that vividly, my father going to register.

TL: Before you tell us more about that, will you tell us some about your religious life that young?

SB: One of the things that I'm very sad about is that, from what I now know about the Jewish religion, that I wasn't raised in it because it's such a wonderful family-oriented religion. You get together, you have family get-togethers, you have frequent prayers and so forth. And the reason that I wasn't is that my father, from his father, had gotten a feeling about religion that there's a lot that's difficult about religion and that it's caused a lot of difficulty in history, going back over the years. And his father felt, and inculcated that into him, that it was better not to be religious and not to further that, because it's caused so much difficulty during the years.

So I was actually not raised in the religion because for some reason—and I don't know why, because I think Hungary had a lot of Protestants, but my mother was Lutheran and my sister was raised in the Lutheran faith. But they didn't put me into any particular faith until I was in school, and then it was the easiest thing to make me the state religion because you had religious instruction in the schools. So I had my religious instruction from first grade on. As I said, Austria was a Catholic country, so it was easy to make me a Catholic. I was very pleased with that, because we had a wonderful priest who came to school and told us stories, and I have such happy memories of him. And when I went back to Vienna and tried to find him I couldn't, which was a shame.

But I did find a girlfriend, and the reason that I could find her and not others was that—because I didn't remember names or addresses or anything. I left in a rush, which I'll tell you about later. And the reason that I could find her was that in the Prater, her parents owned the concession of what they called the living horses: instead of a merry-go-round, these were living horses that went around. There was only one. So when I went there and I asked where the living horses were, they could show me. And it was so nice that I could see her.

But the sad part was I also looked up my nurse, and I saw them at least twice. And the second time, when I left, my nurse died and this girlfriend, who was at that point I think only in her fifties, died. So I had nobody anymore whom I knew in Vienna. That was the last time. So it was very sad. But it was wonderful seeing her again, and her family and so forth. And the children told me that any time I came, you know, that I should visit them and spend time with them.

TL: That's nice. So you were—when the war started, you were around nine years old.

SB: When the war started, I was eight.

TL: Eight.

SB: Oh, I'm sorry, 1939—no, I wasn't in Vienna when the war started. I was already in England.

TL: So, what I was hoping was maybe you could tell us some of your school experiences before the war started, because you would have been of an age where you went to school —

SB: I went to school, yes.

TL: —a number of years.

SB: I remember I told my mother that the women who—the mothers who were standing all around did a great deal of talking, but that the children sat very quietly and listened. (laughs) And I remember my first second and third grade. I left at the end of third grade and went to ostensibly a different school, and if you remind me I'll tell you about that.

But the main thing that I remember from my early childhood was playing in the Prater with a group of children, and apparently it was a rather mixed group. There were some Jewish children in there and some who were not. And there—since there were so many Jews in the cities in Western Europe, in Vienna and Berlin and so forth, it wasn't at all unusual. And they didn't live in ghettos as they did in Eastern Europe, in Poland, Russia, wherever, so that it was all integrated and people lived together. And children were not that aware, unless—I imagine that there was a certain amount of prejudice among some people. Unless their parents were prejudiced, the children wouldn't know, you know, who was Jewish and who wasn't. And as far as I remember, nothing ever came up about it.

TL: Oh, okay. So, no specific memories of anti-Semitism.

SB: Not at that time. Then, once Hitler came in, he fostered it by making—I don't know whether you've read *Mein Kampf*, his work of art, but I've often wondered how the worlds of history would have been different if he had been allowed to enter art school—they didn't accept him. Isn't it amazing how a little thing like that could make an enormous difference in history?

TL: Right.

SB: So he immediately put his philosophy into operation by issuing edicts that Jews were evil people, they had caused all the trouble in the world, and therefore this wonderful new government that was coming in was going to try to get rid of them. And he didn't specify at that time—what they call the Final Solution, I think, only came during the war, that a group got together, made the Final Solution, which was going to be the gathering together of any Jews that were left and send them to the concentration camp. And as we all know, with German efficiency, they were very well able to do that, and only a few escaped at that time.

In my childhood, I was eight when he came, when he took over Austria. I'm sorry—I forgot; what was I talking about?

TL: Well, we were talking initially about your school experiences up through—you said third grade, which was when you moved schools.

SB: Right.

TL: So we were talking some about that. And then I was gonna ask you about the changing of schools in third grade.

SB: Well, before that, let me tell you about the Anschluss, because I had totally by chance become a child actress at the Vienna Burgtheater, which was one of the big landmarks on the Ringstraße because it was the theatre where the Kaiser attended, and there was a big beautiful box with beautiful interior. And I had been walking with my mother—there's a park around it—and I said I wanted to see the inside and she said, "Okay, we'll go in and look." She hadn't seen the—unless she had gone for a performance, she hadn't seen the inside. So we went to the stage entrance and, just like a Hollywood movie, they were casting children's roles.

TL: Wow.

SB: So I won the part of the younger child in *The Golden Fleece*. Medea had two boys, and at that time I had short hair and I could just as well pass for a boy as a girl. So I played the part of the younger boy, and then at dress rehearsal they didn't like the performance of the older boy who had all the lines. I just had one line. So apparently I piped up and I said, "I know his part," because they wanted to get rid of him. They took me aside and let me say his lines, so I got his part. They imported a smaller boy and I had to press his hand when it became time for his one line. (TR laughs) And that's how we did it.

And then after that, I was privileged to play many of the children's roles in the Vienna Burgtheater. As a matter of fact I was probably the last person of Jewish background who was working, because Jews in Austria—again, much more quickly than in Germany—were fired from all their jobs. And I was still working in May, because the leading actor said—who apparently was a Nazi, but he wanted me to stay on until that particular one ended; he didn't want changes in characters. So I was working for three months into Hitler's reign, when most people were no longer working.

TL: Wow.

SB: Of course, I didn't know that at the time. But the experience that I remember very vividly was on this March evening, about the middle of March. My father came to pick me up; it was usually my mother, who was there the whole time, who took me home, so it was strange that he came. And he was rather agitated, and we went out and we couldn't get any public transportation. And there were crowds and crowds of cars and people

walking about the Ringstraße, which is a very famous street in Vienna—it was the street where there was a wall in the Middle Ages surrounding the inner city, and now they've made it into a beautiful thoroughfare, wide thoroughfare with the Opera and museums and so forth on either side.

So, as I was saying, there were tons of people and cheering and so forth, and my parents seemed quite agitated, and of course I had no idea what was going on. And then finally a police truck with policemen in the open part of the truck with their hands up, and my father turned to my mother and he said, "If the police are in on this, that's the end." And of course, again, I had no idea what they were talking about. But he knew if the Viennese government and all this cheering were for this, for this annexation, that there was nothing that could be done.

And certainly, as history later showed, there were a great many Austrians who were Nazis who were very pleased about this, but nobody knows how many were against it because you didn't speak up about that. But the U.S. and England, later what were known as the Allies during the war, treated Austria as a nation who had been subjugated, you know, who was invaded and they didn't, and therefore the feeling was that it was unwilling. But certainly from what I saw and heard that night, it didn't seem unwilling. It seemed very welcomed.

TL: Do you remember that date?

SB: I don't remember the date.

TL: Or the roundabout date?

SB: But I know it was around the middle of March.

TL: Middle of March?

SB: Could have been the fifteenth, fourteenth, something like that, I believe.

TL: Nineteen-thirty—?

SB: Thirty-eight [1938].

TL: Eight. Okay.

SB: And I had been tutored at that time, because the play that I was in was on quite a—it was a repertory theatre, but it was on quite a few nights a week during that run, so that my parents felt it was better that I not go to school at seven o'clock in the morning. So I had a tutor for a while, and then when I went back to school, everything had changed. There was a big picture of Hitler at the front of the classroom and the children not only said their prayers, but then they said, "*Heil Hitler*." And of course that took me completely by surprise and I didn't know what to do, and my parents very wisely did not talk to me at home about what an awful man Hitler was and how awful this was, because even then, when children spoke in school and said what their parents said, the secret police came to the home and it was very bad for the parents and for the family as a whole. So they didn't talk to me about really anything, so I had no idea what was happening and whether I should do what the children were doing, you know, raise my hand and salute. I really didn't know that much about Hitler, except that it was a change in the government: a new person came in.

And then at the end of the—oh, and because I had religious instruction with the children and they knew I was Catholic, I didn't have the reaction that so many of what I read about Jewish children, who did not have this instruction, that their classmates turned on them. My classmates didn't, because they didn't know that I had this—that I had a Jewish forebear. But I remember one incident as we were walking home. There were a group of us, and a little girl who had sort of dark skin talked—actually, a man came up to me and tore off my swastika and said, "You shouldn't be wearing that." And now, looking back on that, can you imagine somebody going up to a child and doing that? And apparently that's the kind of spirit, the whole thing existed in, that people really felt very free to be hostile, even with children. I didn't respond because my parents didn't give me a swastika, so I couldn't wear one. And I think I even felt a little bit of regret at that time, because everybody was wearing one and I felt I should have one, too. And I can't remember whether I asked them, "Are you gonna give me one?" but I just remember that I felt regret that I didn't have one.

And then I was told that I had to go to a different school, and when I asked why they said that the children who were Jewish or of Jewish ancestry had to do that. So they did tell me a little bit, but of course they didn't tell me that Hitler wanted to eradicate the Jews because they really didn't know about it at the time; this just came about later. That was one of the reasons why so many Jews didn't leave immediately, because none of them knew really what was going to happen. They felt and hoped that all of this would blow over and that it would not continue to get worse, which of course it did.

I cannot remember whether I ever ended up at that school or whether they just kept me home, because on the way to the school—my father walked me since I had no idea where it was. And he was walking his bike, and he bumped into a young woman and she absolutely berated him, and he stood there and didn't say a word. And I couldn't understand why he didn't tell her, "Look, miss, this was an accident, you know. Don't get upset. I certainly didn't do it on purpose." And I realize now that she wore her swastika and was a total Nazi, and she could have taken him to the police station if he had said anything or tried to defend himself and it would have gone bad for him, not for her. So, that's why he didn't say anything. But as a child, I couldn't understand why he didn't tell her that. So, you know, there were a lot of these subtle things that made me feel that there was real danger all around.

And speaking of danger, one of the most frightening incidents—and that was, again, around that time, not too long after Hitler came, marched in—that there was an enormous knocking on the door in the middle of the night. And of course it woke me, and I called to my parents and they said, "Just stay quiet, lay in bed, everything is all right." But the banging continued for a long time, and they didn't open the door. And I have read since then those people who did open the door, because this was done quite frequently among the thugs who knew where Jewish families lived; it was an easy way to get, you know, merchandise or whatever you wanted to get. And officially, if any official was present in this group of thugs, they moved the whole family into another Jewish family, took all the belongings that they wanted, and then when the family was allowed to go back to the apartment, it had been looted. And since my parents didn't open the door, that didn't happen. It was a very stout oak door and withstood their sticks, but we could see all their marks in the door the next morning.

TL: From the banging.

SB: From the banging. So, as I said, I don't remember if I ended up at that school. I have no memory of it whatsoever, and I remember everything else. So whether that's a sign that I was very unhappy or I never went, I don't know. It's hard to tell.

TL: Okay.

SB: And then in the meantime, my sister Erika, whom I mentioned earlier, was married to a Belgian and she was living in Antwerp. And she, as soon as Hitler marched into Austria, left her husband—and he was very sweet and said it was okay—and spent months in England, in London, trying to get us a visa. Because after a very short time, there was apparently a window of opportunity right after Hitler came for people to leave. But then immediately restrictions came, and it became very difficult to leave. So that's why she had to do that.

And after many months of volunteer work in some agency, she was able to get somebody to sign a visa for the family. And she sent that to my mother and my mother took it to the consulate, and the woman behind the counter crossed out my name and said, “This does not include the child.” By the way, my name was Inge at the time, I-n-g-e, a name which I have always hated, and I can’t remember if I hated it before, but I’ve hated it ever since.

TL: Ever since.

SB: And that’s why I took my second name, which was Susie, or Susan.

TL: Okay, so your name was Inge—

SB: Was Inge until I was nine.

TL: Until you were nine. Okay. Okay.

SB: And the woman did that most probably because she wanted to make things difficult, and this way—she knew my mother wouldn’t go without me.

TL: Oh, so she crossed your name off.

SB: She crossed my name out. That was a good way to get two more people who had problems and couldn’t leave.

TL: Right. Right.

SB: And not knowing my mother, you know, who was determined that we were going to leave. We did. And at some point my father was picked up off the street—again, by people who knew that he was of Jewish ancestry—and put in a concentration camp called Dachau. And in relation to Dachau, [Hermann] Göring—do you know the name Göring?

TL: Yes.

SB: Anybody in history knows [Joseph] Goebbels and Göring. Göring was the fat guy who was in charge of, I believe, the air force. And he issued an edict that anybody who had been in World War II, any Jew who had been in World War I and had distinguished himself in service and had served should not be in a concentration camp. And at that point, Dachau was not yet a death camp; it was simply a holding camp. So, after about three months, my father was released.

TL: Oh!

SB: As I say, that was one of the few things that I can recall that Göring did that was appropriate. And my father had won a medal in World War I, so he was one of the ones who was released. But at that point, my mother and I had already left. So he was all alone. The apartment was gone because he had been away and my mother and I had left it. So I really don't know what he did during that time, how he existed, because as a child—I'm so sorry, but I didn't ask those questions, you know, "What did you do?" It just didn't occur to me.

But let me tell you my escape, because I only escaped due to my mother. She was absolutely miraculous. When the two people came in who were going to look at the luggage—you know, the officials at the stop between Austria and Germany; there's a border, and these border officials came in. And she told them, "Please be quiet; my baby is sleeping and I don't want her to wake." And they cast one glance at me—she had covered me with a blanket, and they could see that I wasn't a baby, I was very long. And we will never know whether they were kind or in a rush or what the reason was, but they said, "Sure."

And they didn't even check our luggage and they just walked out, which was absolutely amazing, because anybody who knows the German character knows that if you put a uniform on a German they become very efficient and very officious. And for them not to look and search and see that I wasn't under one, where I didn't need a visa, was really a miracle. Because if they had, they would have sent us back to Austria and there was—you know, my sister couldn't get another visa. We would have been killed. So it was absolutely miraculous that we—they were type officials that they were. And then on the other border, the Belgian and German border, she had me follow a man, and nobody paid that much attention to a little girl sort of wandering around, which again was very fortunate.

TL: Yes.

SB: And once we were in Belgium, we were safe. We took a—at that time, there was no path under the water, no tunnel. We took a boat across to London and stayed for a few weeks with my sister's husband's mother, so my sister's mother-in-law. But she had a small apartment and she couldn't keep us. And people who came to England to Vienna, from Austria or Germany, were not allowed to work in any field except as domestics. So my mother had to work as a domestic and couldn't keep me because she couldn't leave me alone while—and it was mostly full-time domestics.

So she took me to another agency in London and asked a woman there, "Could you tell me where I could leave my child while I work?" And the woman looked down at me and she said, "I'm expecting a child from Breslau in about two weeks; she's ten." She found out I was nine. And she said, "That'll work out very well. I'll keep the two of them rather than just one." And I should have prefaced this whole thing by saying how enormously lucky I personally have been. And it's been a blessing and also a difficulty, because why should I be alive and have had all this good fortune and good luck, and so many of the playmates, the Jewish children that I played with, and so many of my relatives in Poland and Czechoslovakia are dead. And why my immediate family and myself survived all of this—as I say, it's a mixed bag, realizing that.

So, I was sort of adopted by this family. And the woman couldn't have been more wonderful. Uncle George was wonderful, and not only was she a wonderful mother and he terrific, they were—not of the nobility but the very upper class in England, and an ancestor had been the Lord Mayor of London. So they were very wealthy and well connected, and it was really the most wonderful home you could have. They sent me to an excellent school. I was with them for about a year and a half.

TL: And did you see your mother during that time?

SB: My mother came to visit, and I always felt very bad about our not being together; but on the other hand I had a wonderful home, so it sort of balanced itself out. And I didn't know about domestics or housework, and so I didn't realize, you know, whether it was difficult for her or not. And actually it turned out pretty well, because she either had borrowed—I know she couldn't take them—but some Austrian cookbooks. And at that time, English cuisine was terrible; now it's a lot better. So having this Austrian cookbook in one hand and cooking with the other, she was able to produce—she didn't know how to cook before, because we had a cook in Vienna. So she was able to make very good meals, and they loved the food that she prepared.

TL: That's how she stayed employed?

SB: That's how she stayed employed, absolutely. And she—again, both—and my father came over; she was able to get my father over. She got a visa in London, maybe one of the people she worked for; again, I don't know that. But she was able to get a visa; he came over, so that my immediate family was saved, my mother and my father, and I'll tell you about my sister in a little while. And then they worked together as a couple, and he became a butler and she was the cook. And I'm sure that he made a very good butler. (both laugh) Even though he didn't have much experience, I'm sure he had read about butlers, and he knew just how to act.

TL: How to act, okay. Okay, and so that's your—you said your immediate family, so your mother, your father, and then—would you like to tell us about your sister?

SB: My sister had an amazing experience when the Germans—this was after the war started, and I'll also tell you about my—because I was evacuated in London, from London to the country. She was in Belgium and the Germans—remember the *Blitzkrieg*, how quickly everything happened? They had no idea that France would surrender, and of course little Belgium immediately surrendered. And they had to leave in the middle of the night. My brother-in-law, who was a wonderful guy, had procured a tandem [bike], and my sister is totally un-athletic and had never ridden a bike. So they both got onto this tandem and traveled from Antwerp down to Marseille, which is an enormous distance.

TL: Right.

SB: How she managed, I'll never know. And they had—every once in a while they had to get off the bike and go into the ditch, as the Germans were strafing the roads. In Marseille they had, as you so often read about, some—he was in the diamond business. They had some diamonds inside of their clothes and were able to get passage to—I don't know whether it was South America or one of the islands, but in any case they could get across. And she has written all of this out for me, and it's an amazing story, that she went through. And then my mother was able to get her to the United States, after a while.

And the other person who was saved was my aunt, my mother's sister, whom she was also able to get to London but who stayed there. My mother was able to contact relatives here, and we left England shortly before our war started here. So it was in the fall of forty-one [1941], I guess. And the boat that we were on was sunk on the return trip. That's why I say I'm so lucky. I've escaped death a number of times. And it could just as well—and all people were lost. And it could have been just as well on the voyage to the U.S. rather than leaving it.

TL: Right. So you were away from your parents for about—

SB: About a year and a half.

TL: A year and a half?

SB: Yeah.

TL: Can you tell us what happened at that point?

SB: Well, when the war broke out in September of 1939, the people of London who were in charge of the schools decided that they wanted to get the children out of London, because—I don't know how they knew, because there wasn't that much bombing in World War I. But I guess they had seen how Hitler was carrying out the war in Europe and they knew that airplanes would be used a lot, and they'd better get the kids out.

The logistics of this just boggles the mind, but within a short period of time they had every single one of the children all packed. They packed all the schoolbooks and they took us by train to a small town called St. Albans. It was only ninety miles away, but they didn't do it in one night. We took the train to a small town and we walked through the town, and in front of each doorstep a woman was standing and was saying, "I can take one, I can take two." This was for the night. And arranging all of this is just amazing, you know, that all the women there had been told, "If you can have a child for one night, you'll be out on your stoop," and they all were.

So then they had arranged for us in St. Albans to stay with a retired minister, and I think that was because they felt that there might be feelings against Germans and Austrians, you know, just in the typical English family. So we were with this minister of the cathedral—it's beautiful cathedral in St. Albans, with lots of Roman ruins and baths around it. And again, a lovely family, and we stayed—Gizeleh, my temporary sister, and I stayed with them—well, I stayed with them about six months. She stayed with them much longer because she didn't go. Her parents didn't go to the States; they stayed in London.

TL: So you've been evacuated by the officials and by—

SB: Yes, by the London—

TL: To this—

SB: To this town of St. Albans.

TL: And now, how do you reconnect with—

SB: Well, my mother had, in the meantime, gotten the visa from relatives in New York City. And it was difficult to get a visa, particularly from strangers. We didn't know them from a whole—they were relatives by marriage. The guy and his wife who sent us the visa was the brother of my sister's husband in Poland. So they were double in-laws.

TR: Right.

SB: And she was one of the many of my relatives who was killed; her husband was killed; they were in a town in Poland called Kraków. And their son Egon, whom I've only seen pictures of and just knew occasionally, had letters from them, had just married. And that's another one of the things that I feel so bad about. Here's this young man and his bride and they were all carted off to a concentration camp and never heard from again.

TL: Oh.

SB: And so, that family and my grandmother are the two that I feel the most bad about. My grandmother had lived underneath us in Vienna. We lived about four stories up—there was an elevator, but it never worked; that's one of the reasons I couldn't have a dog. (laughs) My mother didn't want to keep climbing up and down the stairs. And she would—my grandmother would often take me for walks, and she was such a wonderful—I thought very old lady, but she probably wasn't that old at the time; she just seemed very old to me.

And after we left, my mother and I, my father was in the concentration camp. My father had a brother who lived nearby, and apparently that brother took her and his wife—who was not Jewish; it was, again, a mixed marriage—to Prague. So she was safe there for a while, because Hitler had not invaded Czechoslovakia, as it was known at the time. And if you remember your history, Czechoslovakia was sort of given to Hitler by Chamberlain, who said, "Peace in our time." He was the premier of England, and they all wanted to avert war at all cost, so this was before World War II started.

And an interesting thing about Poland: You know, he [Hitler] attacked Poland and that started World War II because after this Czechoslovakian incident, where England and France sort of gave Czechoslovakia to Hitler, that's when he did that little dance, and that was shown in all the newsreels. He was so happy about how easily everything went. Then he invaded Poland, and I think he felt the same thing, that it would be very easy. But in the meantime, England and France had signed a pact with Poland, that if Poland was attacked they would declare war on Germany.

But I have a good friend who was in Germany at the time that the Germans we told that Poland had attacked Germany. Can you imagine poor little Poland attacking this country that's been arming all of these years? That's how Hitler revived the economy, by building all these factories which built planes and tanks, and Poland didn't do any of that. And that's what the *Blitzkrieg* was. None of the other countries had armed and he was just able to run through all of Europe. And when I was in junior high school in history class we looked at the newspaper each day and all of Europe was black, including the Scandinavian countries, because he had conquered every single country.

TL: Well, I think if it's okay with you, what I would like to do is we're going to go ahead and take a break here. And then when we come back and pick up, I would like to talk a little bit more about your grandmother, and then what happened after you reconnected with your family.

SB: Okay, sounds good.

TL: Thank you.

Part 1 ends; part 2 begins

TL: Okay, we are on tape two. We are with Dr. Susan Thorsch—Thorne—Bryant, and I am Tori Lockler.

At the end of our last tape, we said we would start this one talking some about your grandmother, you father's mother, who you said lived below you in the house you were in.

SB: In Vienna.

TL: In Vienna.

SB: Right.

TL: Will you tell us a little about her and the relationship you had and what happened to her?

SB: Well, as I mentioned earlier, she was the only grandmother that I had because my mother's parents were dead, and her husband had died, I think, in the twenties [1920s]. She was quite elderly, but was a very lovely person. I remember taking long walks with her, and I have such good and loving memories of her. But we—I don't remember saying goodbye, so I know that we must have left pretty quickly because I think she was—maybe she had left earlier; again, that I don't know. But in any case, at some point my father's brother took her and his wife from Vienna to Prague, where they lived then for a number of months.

And then, when the Germans came in and took over Czechoslovakia, she was taken from where she was living with her son and sent to a concentration camp which was the show camp, the one that the Germans took the Red Cross to. And it was supposedly beautiful and clean and the people were all ecstatically happy there; this was the image that they try to create with this place, and obviously it wasn't a death camp. So she was there for a while, and right now the name of that camp has escaped my mind. You by any chance know it?

TL: Um—

SB: In any case, it's fairly well known because it was the one that they used for propaganda. And then—and this part of it is something that is so difficult for me to even think about. She was taken, at her age, and I think she was in her late seventies, via these cattle cars that Germans used because they could take more people—and of course there were no seats so they either had to stand up or sit on the floor—and crowded them up, and you can imagine sanitary facilities, just think about it; it's absolutely horrible. And taken to Auschwitz, which was one of the most notorious death camps. And whether she died on the way there or at Auschwitz, I have no idea. But I have read, unfortunately, descriptions of some of these trips. I wish I hadn't, because I sometimes wake in the middle of the night and think of her and going through that. And how anybody could do these—do this to these people of any age, but particularly old women, is just beyond my imagination. So she was never heard from again, and obviously died either en route or there.

TL: So she was in one camp and then was transported to Auschwitz?

SB: Yes, and she was in what was not a death camp—

TL: That was Theresienstadt.

SB: Theresienstadt, that's the name of it, and how humane it was I have no idea. But I do—when I was in a museum in Prague, they had some pictures that children had drawn, children who were in that camp, and their mentor, their teacher who encouraged them to draw their home and so forth. So I know that at least that group did do some recreation. Later on, most of those children were sent to Auschwitz, as was that woman who was so creative and helped them feel better by getting them to draw pictures; she was also sent. So that was quite some experience, seeing that museum, how many people were sent to Auschwitz from Prague. And—

TL: Please, go ahead.

SB: I don't know where we are at this point.

TL: Oh. Well, what I thought I would ask is—I know that we have talked some now about your immediate family and now a little about your grandparents. You've told us a little about some of your—someone specific, like your aunt. What about your other relatives?

SB: Well, let me finish about my aunt. She was one of the many who was totally separated. She was able to come to Vienna and did the same thing as my mother: she worked as a domestic. She had to send—stayed with us for a while because they had been living in Germany. Then they came to Vienna and she sent her son, who was fourteen at that time, to a Swedish farmer who was willing to take an assistant—you know, somebody who would help him, a big strong boy. And so my cousin Edgar, at the age of fourteen, totally lost both of his parents and his homeland, because he didn't speak Swedish. You know, he was just sent off to—because that saved his life. If he had stayed in Vienna or Germany, he would have been killed.

And her husband, my uncle, did what many people did who couldn't get a visa. He went to Shanghai because they did not require a visa, and he made his living there by teaching English. He taught English to the Chinese or whoever needed to learn English. So she

was in London and he was in Shanghai and Edgar was in Sweden. And that happened to so many families: they were just torn apart. And again, that's why we were so lucky, because after England we were all together in the United States. And then Edgar had the choice of leaving Sweden and joining my aunt and my uncle, who had come by that time, at the end of World War II. But by that time he had met a Swedish woman and married, and that's why I have Swedish cousins who are in Sweden. He never came back. And they never lived together again.

TL: So it tore the family apart permanently.

SB: Yeah.

TL: And do you have other family members you would like to tell us about? And then I would like to get back to your story with your parents.

SB: Well, aside from family, there were a lot of cousins and aunts and uncles whom I only knew from their names on tombstones, because my Australian cousin, who was the daughter of my father's brother, the one who took the grandmother to the Czech Republic—and he also ended up in the concentration camp, but it was towards the end of the war, and he met somebody in the concentration camp whom he fell in love with and it broke up his marriage. So there were not only the deaths, but the total disintegration of families with all of this tearing people from each other and sending them all over.

So when she and I worked in the cemetery in the little town where we had our family reunion, practically every grave—it was a Jewish cemetery—every grave that was a relative, it said, "Killed in the concentration camp." So there was a large number there. And I became so exhausted with her working on this that I came down with something called shingles, which you get when you're very exhausted. And the nurse in that little town said it's an allergy, so it was a long time before I got the proper medicine; and I unfortunately then had the post-syndrome, which I still have, but it's not too bad. And that was a terrible experience, working in that cemetery and seeing how many members of the family had been decimated by the Nazis. But we did do a nice job with the graves, put them into better shape.

TL: So—

SB: Aside from the relatives, the things I regret still are the—I played with about seven children. We had formed sort of a little club, and we were all different ages: we were six, seven, eight. And I remember the—at least three of the Jewish children, who were such

good friends and such lovely little girls, and they were never heard from again, just perished with their parents. So it wasn't only relatives, it was also friends that I remember, and I remember them so vividly because we played together every day.

TL: Right.

SB: Now, you started to tell me something.

TL: Well, we had seen your family now go from Vienna and then to London, and you said that you were separated for about a year and a half.

SB: Yes.

TL: And that your parents were working eventually, after your father came, as—

SB: As a cook and a butler, right.

TL: A cook and a butler. Can you tell us what happens from there?

SB: Well, since a cook and a butler don't pay rent and don't buy their own food, they were able to save a lot of money. And my mother, in the meantime, who was extremely resourceful, was able to locate a relative in the States who was persuaded to give us a visa by her saying we would not be dependent upon them. They were rather reluctant because they didn't know us and they didn't want to be saddled with having to support a family. So she indicated, you know, we would be very self-sufficient. So they did send a visa, we could come to the States, because it was very difficult for refugees to come to the United States. I don't know if from your history books you remember there was a very strong isolationist element in the States, and they didn't want anything to do with this foreign war, and certainly not be overrun by a bunch of refugees. So it was extremely difficult to get a visa if you were either German or Austrian. But she managed, and managed to save enough money for my fare, her fare, and my father because they didn't have any other expenses and they didn't spend money on anything except saving for the fare.

So we got onto the boat—I think the name was the [RMS] *Britannic*—and I said a very sad goodbye to Polly and to Uncle George, because they were really like my second parents at that point. And we sailed for the United States and had air raid drills and everything; it was during wartime and there were lots of torpedoes around. And we

arrived at Ellis Island, and I remember sleeping in a big room with lots of beds, and whether that was on Ellis Island or someplace else I don't know. And then my father had a friend on the Upper West Side in the "eighties" in New York City, and they got us furnished room, so we moved into that with our few belongings. You weren't able to take much stuff from Vienna; we didn't have much, thank goodness, in the way of luggage.

And then my mother was able to find an apartment on Riverside Drive, which had four rooms, a kitchen and a bath, with a central hallway. And it cost \$55 a month and she was able to rent out two rooms, so we were able to live rent-free. And my father's first salary—he got a job, I think indirectly, through my sister's husband, because he was in the diamond industry in New York City on 47th Street. And his first salary was \$9 a week. And I had, in the meantime, had been fortunate enough to have gotten in some children's programs on NBC, and I earned \$3 on the Saturday morning one and \$2 on the Sunday morning one; that was a total of \$5. So if you take nine plus four—plus five—it's fourteen. So on \$14 a week, my mother managed to feed us and whatever other expenses we had, and we did live rent-free because the tenants paid the rent. So it's just amazing that you were able to do that on that amount of money.

TL: And do you remember how old you were at that time?

SB: At that time, I had turned ten.

TL: Ten.

SB: So I was—I was ten. And as I say, I remember everything from very early age on, so I have vivid memories of all of those years, you know, and everything that happened at that time. And obviously I can't tell you everything, but looking back—I didn't feel it at the time, but looking back, I was so extremely lucky and our immediately family was so lucky, when you consider how many others are just no longer here, and so many of them—there are very few relatives left. My cousin in Australia, the daughter of my father's brother, is a very good genealogist at this time, and she researched the whole family. And we have a few in England who were able to escape to England, and a few in the States. But considering how large the family was before, it's a drop in the bucket. And that's—you can see it, and this is within one family. You can see how easily the number 6 million is reached.

TL: And what can you tell us about life after the war for you in the United States?

SB: Living here? I was fortunate enough to get a scholarship at Professional Children's School, and that was quite different from other schools because the kids all had a passion, whether it was ballet or acting or music, so that there was not that picking on people or having nothing interesting to do except going after girls or boys or dating. And so it was an interesting experience and an unusual bunch of kids; and again, I was very lucky to go to that school, and it made it much easier for me to do the radio work and the TV work. I was in one—lucky enough to be in one Broadway show, and it enabled all of that because if you were out you got what they called correspondence, and you got your instructions and then you did your homework and you handed it in, if you couldn't go to school. So that was very nice.

And because I had—in my London school, my foster mother wanted me to go to school with a child who was one year older than I, because then we could both go to the same school. So there I was nine and in with ten and eleven year olds, not speaking a word of English, but a child learns a new language very quickly and it turned out fine. And when I came to the States I had told them that I had had Latin and other things in London, so instead of putting me into fourth grade they put me into sixth grade. So I graduated at fifteen from Professional Children's School and was able to enter NYU at a very young age with the veterans coming back, who were in their twenties and thirties. So that made social life a little difficult (laughs) with that spread of age. But again, I remember that as a very happy time, because there was a group of us who sort of formed a group and didn't date but did things together as a group. And I think that there was more of that, anyhow, at that time, rather than people pairing off and just co-dating. So, it worked out well.

TL: And one of the interesting things, when we ask the question about what you did and what your life was like after the war, was the idea that the experience of the Holocaust—it's almost as though people have lived two separate lives. So, that's why I ask if you will tell us other aspects of your life after the war, after coming. So once you started NYU, would you just tell us a little about your life in the United States?

SB: Well, you are absolutely right, it really is like—in my case, really like three different lives because my life in London, which was in between these, was quite different from the New York one and from the Viennese one. So it's like by the time I was in my middle teens, I really lived three lifetimes, plus all the acting and, you know, the radio acting. I was in the beginning of TV, when TV—*Kraft Television Theater* and all those early shows, which were a lot better than some of the ones we have now. So that was very consuming, and I really was always so busy that I didn't have time to—at that time, again, you probably know this, but refugees didn't talk about their previous lives or their troubles.

I overheard my father telling about the experiences in the concentration camp and a lot of it was gratuitous cruelty. They would make them look at the sun and line up in freezing

weather for roll call, and then nothing happened; they just stood. So it was those kinds of stories that you've read about that were absolutely true. They just did those things in order to make life as miserable as they could for them. But he didn't talk much about that, just as he didn't talk much about his experiences in World War I, which for a nineteen year old, I think, must have been very difficult.

And it was only much later that I began to know more of the history and put it in to context. When you live through something, you don't see the big picture, and then later on I was able to integrate my experiences with history. And at that point, I began to be a speaker at the Florida Holocaust Museum and was able to talk to a lot of boys and girls. Florida has a wonderful program, as does Connecticut, because one of the kids who helped me in my garden up in Connecticut was in eighth grade and he was just going through the program. So I was able to tell him a lot of my experiences, which he related to the—to his class.

But I think what it's left me with was what I had mentioned earlier, and that is why am I alive and so many of my relatives and the kids that I played with are not? And many survivors have that feeling, and I've read a statistic that so many of the survivors went into helping professions, whether it was social work or psychological counseling or whatever, in order to try and make their life a little more meaningful and help as many people as possible. And I was very fortunate that I worked in many schools where I could—because I had not only the psychology background, but I also—and at this point I can't really think of why, but I became very involved in learning disabilities, so that I had the combination. I was able to help and work with parents of children with learning disabilities in addition to social/emotional problems, and that was very valuable, because so often parents of children with learning disabilities get to feel that they are stupid and there's something really wrong with them. And I was able to explain to them, no, they are really very—your child is really either of average intelligence or very high intelligence and it's the learning problem, and I could show them what to do.

So that was—that, looking back on it now, really made a difference in a lot of lives, and that was very gratifying. It doesn't make up for anything, but it really was a need that I had to be useful and to pay something back. And I still feel—that's not a feeling that goes away, you know. Why am I here and all of the others are not? But you just try to do the best you can with that.

TL: Well, is there anything else you would like to add about either your story or your family's story?

SB: I think with my mother, that she was an extraordinary woman and made an enormous difference in our stay here, not only the way she managed money. She never worked,

except that cooking that I told you about in London, but here she took a course in infant care and made, for somebody who had never worked, a very good living taking care of newborns. So she would leave me alone as a child—my father took care of me—and go and live with families for two weeks and took care of the infant. And it was the best profession that she could take because she got a very nice amount of money, a salary for that, and there was nothing else that she could have done that would have given her as much.

And my father, because of his—never was able to connect with any similar position to what he had in Vienna, never made a good salary. So it was important that she did that in order to augment the family income. Because even though I worked fairly steadily, you don't make a huge amount of money in radio or TV, at least in the early days. And in the acting field there are few people who make a lot of money, and most of the others don't; they're lucky if they work.

So I was very fortunate, yes. I did work over the years. But I do—now that you ask me about some of my other feelings, since I felt that I had to help the family with money—I was fortunate that I won a lot of the auditions; you know, you audition for parts. But when I didn't, I was distraught, because I knew that I wouldn't be able to bring in the money. And I remember walking back to school on 57th Street in New York and crying, because I hadn't won an audition and it would have meant a goodly amount of money that I could contribute to the family. So that was one of the downsides of the acting profession. But at least I was able to contribute, which many children can't, you know, when they're ten, eleven, twelve. So I was fortunate that I could help a little bit.

But to sum it all up, I am amazed when I look back upon my life from this perspective of how personally how lucky I have been. And that's nothing that you can do anything about; it just happens that some people are a lot luckier than others, and I've been extremely fortunate in that almost anything that happened in my life has turned out well, including living with this wonderful family, being able to come to the States when so many others weren't able to, being able to work in this country from a young age on; and I think now, talking from my older age, of being—meeting such a wonderful person like my second husband, whom I had mentioned to you, who was my professor at Columbia when I was getting my doctorate. And again, it was so fortunate. We knew each other for many years and worked together and became good friends before we fell in love, and that's the best way to make a happy marriage because you really know the person then, and it's not the infatuation that you have when you first meet somebody, if you are just attracted to them. So I've been very fortunate in that, too.

TL: And what message would you leave with anyone who watches this?

SB: Well, I always tell the kids who I talk to at the Holocaust Museum that education is so important, and to know history and what happened. And also the very obvious one, which the message they get from so many sides, is not to be prejudiced by externals because somebody is dark skinned or a different religion. It's so important to judge a person, if you need to judge, on what kind of human being they are and not about these externals. And of course the kids get that message so often it's nothing new to them. Some internalize it and practice it; for others it's just words and they continue picking on people, but hopefully they don't continue to do it after school. And it never hurts to tell them. As I say, some listen and some don't, as we know from our own children.

TL: Yes.

SB: So, I guess that's pretty much it.

TL: Okay. Well, thank you very much. I appreciate your time and you sharing your story with us.

SB: And I appreciate your presence and your listening, and thank you for the opportunity.

TL: Thank you.

End of interview