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Salinger, Marianne

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Transcriber: Reyna Stovall

Sophia Maier (SM): Well, it had been very rainy on Friday, and I was caught in the cold rain in Manhattan. It was terrible.

Marianne Salinger (MS): I don't go —

SM: Yeah, it's better that way.

Reyna Stovall (RS): Stay in the warmth.

SM: Yes. So just tell me a little bit about your growing up experience. So you said, where did you grow up?

MS: I grew up in Kew Gardens. I grew up in Germany, and I came to Kew Gardens. I was 15. I went to school there, Richmond Hill. And I grew up to be a mensch in Kew Gardens.

SM: And what year were you born?

MS: '23. I'm 99 years old.

SM: Oh, my goodness.

MS: I made it to 99.

RS: Wow.

SM: You don't look any older than 70.

MS: Oh, but I am 99. And I can feel it. I'm not interested anymore. I'm not doing things anymore.

SM: No

MS: I'm just hanging in there.

SM: And so, tell me a little bit about that school environment that you went to?

MS: Where?

SM: Where you were living in Germany.

MS: I was born in Berlin. I lived in Berlin until the Nazis came and threw us out. Then I went to England. Then I came to America. And first I lived in Philadelphia, until school started, then I had to move to Kew Gardens and go to school. And then I went to college, and then I went from there on.

RS: So what was life like — how did it change from before the Nazis took power? And then afterward, how did your life change?

MS: Well I was a child. I — as a matter of fact, I was nine years old. And I went to school. I was going to make a star for our Christmas [show]. And I was told, “You're Jewish. You don't have to make a star for our Christmas. You're Jewish.” So I came home and said, “I'm Jewish, what does that mean?” And it meant nothing at that time. But soon thereafter, when the Nazis took power, I had a girlfriend from school. She was everything I was not. She had long, thin hair, she wore glasses, she was Judith von Mueller. I adored her. She raised her thin arm, her elegant arm, to my mother and she said, “Heil Hitler, Frau Salinger.”

SM: Oh, yeah.

MS: It was the end. I never saw her again. I found myself going to the Theodor Herzl school.

SM: Yeah. My goodness.

MS: But that summer. I still went to Norderney — I've been reading about Norderney now. And Norderney is *judenfrei*, you know, they told the Jews to leave. I didn't experience that.

SM: Yeah.

MS: I was nine years old. But by the time I was nine and a half. I had gone to Jewish school and had gone — and we had something called a *litfaßsäule*. And it was a very fat column with all sorts of programs included on there. I suppose it was not — they didn't have newspapers. Or maybe they didn't have money for a newspaper. But it said, “*Norderney ist Judenfrei*,” it's free of Jews. And that summer, when I was nine, I learned I was Jewish. I learned the Jewish holidays and Hebrew and I learned we were still German somehow. And so they wanted me for the Olympic Games because I was a very good swimmer.

SM: Wow. Okay.

MS: And I was very young, and so they thought they could mold me. But they couldn't anymore. At that time I told them I only swim for Palestine.

SM: That's wonderful. Yeah.

MS: That was the end of my Olympic career, of course.

SM: Yeah. Of course.

MS: But that's when it started, you know, when we noticed. At first we didn't notice so much. We could go to theaters and we could go every place. But it got smaller and smaller and smaller. And then came the 10th of November. The shock where everything collapsed. And our school collapsed and our teachers. My father was on a business trip in England. He got a passport as a Jew, because he brought in foreign currency. And so, he arrived in London on the ninth of November, and my mother telephoned him and said, "Walter, stay where you are and try to see our son because they took the boys." And then we hung in there. Sold the furniture, sold everything. Tried to get out. And while he was in England, and my mother and my brother and I were in Germany. We got out the end of March. We got to Holland. I remember the train. I remember being on the train, and the train stopped and I said, "I'm running." But I didn't run.

SM: Okay. Thank goodness.

MS: It was just a signal. Yeah, I thought about running out. I remember that.

SM: Yeah.

MS: And so, then we got to Holland, and we were in Holland for a few days with friends of ours — I think relatives of my father — and then we went to England. And we stayed in England until our American visa came through. And we came to America.

SM: What year did you come to America?

MS: '39.

RS: Oh, wow.

MS: And I remember having breakfast on the boat when somebody yelled, "Statue of Liberty!" And everybody ran, they left their breakfast and everybody ran to the deck to see the Statue of Liberty. But that's when we had emigrated.

RS: So growing up, you said your family wasn't very observant. But your family were Zionists or did they consider themselves Zionists?

MS: No, they were not Zionists, no. No, I don't think they even knew that — it was at that time it was Palestine that it existed. No, no, no. No, we had a Christmas tree. Why? Because, well, we had a governess, we had a cook. These people wanted Christmas. And my mother would have heard it from us if she had Christmas for them and not for us. It was much better to have Christmas for everybody. But I understand later that my grandfather, who died when I was three, he came from Russia, that he'd never attended our Christmas.

SM: No.

MS: I do remember him because the last year he did come. He was dying of lung cancer. And I was three years old. So I remember that he did come. But German Jews were German. You know, my father fought in the First World War for four years for the Kaiser, for the Fatherland. And my brother and I, we sang all the German songs — of course, we were German. Until Hitler came, there was no difference. We were German, we had a German flag. I think it was *schwarz, rot, gold*, [black, red, gold, the Republican Flag] or something like that. And we were German.

SM: And so that was even more of a shock to you, because you felt so German?

MS: It wasn't a shock to me because I was nine years old.

SM: Yeah. Yeah.

MS: You know, I took it as a development of growing up. But to some people, it must have been a shock. And, as a matter of fact, I know I had — just a few days or weeks ago, I had an email from somebody. They saw a picture of a teacher, and they couldn't identify him, and I could because he was a teacher of my brother's when he was in school. And he was a German. He lost a leg in the First World War. And my father served for four years. And the first one, they were German, they couldn't understand.

SM: And what kind of business was your father involved in?

MS: I don't know.

SM: Oh, that's okay. No problem.

MS: I think it was women's clothes. Yeah. I think most of the Jewish men were in that business.

SM: Yeah. It's very true. Yeah.

RS: So, what was it like coming to America? What kind of culture shocks did you experience after you came here from Germany?

MS: Well, the language for first of all. I didn't know English. I had to go to school. And I didn't know what was going on. I think at first they probably looked at our report card somewhere, whatever it was to send us to class. I found myself in the wrong class often until I found my way. And well, it didn't take long, you know. First of all, you were 15 years old. You adjust. Then you got kicked out of Germany. You haven't been to school for almost a year. So, it was a big adjustment but you made it, and then came Kristallnacht which was a great shock to everybody, because that was the beginning of the end. And especially now, you know, at Purim. I was thinking of the synagogue and walking around there and I think they threw candy, didn't they?

SM: Probably

MS: I think they threw candy at us. So, Kristallnacht, that was the end. And after that, we knew we couldn't stay and we couldn't live there and we couldn't be part of it. It was the end.

SM: Yeah. Were you able to learn English quickly once you came here?

MS: Yes. I think so. I think so. I don't think I knew English, but I had already spent three months in England where I picked up some. And then — no, no. When I first came over, I didn't know English but I picked it up fairly quickly. I think that after two years, or two and a half years, I had to take an exam, an entrance exam, for Cooper Union.

SM: Okay.

MS: And I couldn't — there was a flower that I had to design and I don't know, to this day, what it was. So, there were gaps. All together, I think when you're 15 you learn pretty fast.

SM: Did you have a difficult time making friends when you came here?

MS: No. No, because there were many children or young people in the same situation. We all didn't have money. We all didn't know where we belonged. We all didn't know the language. No. So, no, no, no, I think within two years, I was pretty well settled. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

RS: So, what was it like in the Bronx after you came? What do you remember about living in the Bronx? What kind of building —

MS: Where?

RS: In the Bronx?

MS: In the Bronx. Well, I didn't move to the Bronx until I was old.

RS: Okay.

MS: I moved here to this old, old age home.

SM, RS: Okay.

MS: I had a little apartment in Kew Gardens, which was a very nice neighborhood. And I went to school in Kew Gardens. But later when I had my own apartment, and I stayed there, I think for 40 years or something like that. A long time. I didn't come to the Bronx. The Bronx was kind of — you didn't advertise that you lived in the Bronx. Although there are very nice parts here. Beautiful parts. But we didn't know.

SM: Yeah. And so, when you were living at Kew Gardens, was it a predominantly Jewish area?

MS: Yes. Yes, it was very German Jewish when I lived there. Yeah..

SM: Was it still very German Jewish when you left?

MS: Less so. Less because there were a lot of Hispanics and a lot of Russians, mixed neighborhoods. But, when we came — maybe mainly it was because we only moved in certain circles. We didn't really get around.

SM: That makes sense.

MS: Yeah.

SM: Absolutely. And so is there anything you remember about going to school when you were there that you — anything important?

MS: Yes, yes. Yes. I went to Richmond Hill High. And I remember the gym suits.

SM: Oh, goodness.

MS: They were terrible. Gray and red. We had, the Jewish schools had very trim, you know for Palestine, blue and white. I remember the gym suits. Oh, yes. And I do remember the school very much. And from this school, we had an art teacher. I was always interested in art and she told me about Cooper

Union. And then when I passed the test, I went back to her. I said, “Do you want to [hear] good news? I got into Cooper Union.” And Cooper Union was a fantastic school. It was a beautiful school.

SM: And did you study art there?

MS: Yeah.

SM: Wow.

MS: Yeah. And I graduated from there.

SM: What kind of art do you like to do?

MS: Well, I was in decorative art, which meant that I took weaving. I took book illustration. I took lettering. And, later on in business, I did a variety of things. I had my own studio for more than 20 years. I think maybe 40 years. I am very old.

SM: So, you've had time to do many great things.

MS: I didn't get my studio until maybe I was 30. I have to say one thing, one segment of my life. I moved to France after the war, because my mother's family was killed and only the children were left. So I stayed with the children. And I lived in Paris for about two years. And then when I came back, I established my business. And I had my business for many, many years. Until I moved here. And even from here I went two times a week to the Leo Baeck Institute to do translations.

SM: Wow.

MS: Until the virus destroyed lots of things.

SM: Yes. And, so, what was it like when you were living in France?

MS: Well, first it was very restricted. We didn't have much. What we had came from America. I came, I think, with 50 kilos per person or something. I could bring a lot of stuff. And I brought everything, and my mother sent [things]. Because at first we didn't have, eventually we got. And it was nice. It was very nice to live as an American. We were the dollar princess. Absolutely. Absolutely. We were the liberators of Europe. They fell at our feet.

RS: So, what year did you end up coming to the Bronx? I don't —

MS: To the Bronx? I'm thinking, I'm here seven years.

SM, RS: Okay.

SM: So, 2016 maybe?

MS: Something like that. Yeah, something like that. The reason I came to the Bronx, I knew the rabbi here. And Rabbi Franklin — his wife was the daughter of my mother's best friend. So, when I came to America, there was no room at my uncles — there was room for my brother and my parents, but not for me. I was put on a bus and shipped to Philadelphia.

SM: Wow.

MS: I stayed in Philadelphia until school started. So, Philadelphia was like home to me. And... what was I saying?

SM: About knowing Rabbi Franklin's wife.

MS: Yeah. See, sometimes my brain —

SM: Happens to all of us.

MS: It does? It happens to me. Suddenly, the brain gives out.

SM: Yes.

MS: Yes. Her grandmother was my mother's best friend, and her son and my brother, and I grew up together. So this is a long —

SM: Mix?

MS: Yeah, yeah, long, long, long.

SM: Do you remember anything going on in New York City while you were living here? Anything significant?

MS: Oh, yes, lots of things were going on. But of course, it was overshadowed by the war.

SM: Yes.

MS: We were all involved. There was rationing. Not very bad, but there was some rationing. And there were some things that we couldn't get, like nylon stockings.

SM: Okay, yep.

MS: And you did everything for our troops, our boys. If you friend or your brother had a buddy, and he didn't get mail, you wrote to that one — you just took in everybody. But, all together, we were very lucky, because during the war, the guys left, but we didn't suffer anything. We had some shortages, but that's not so terrible. No, no, when you're younger it's not even terrible at all. And we just survived the war. Until the war turned. And then we had victories constantly and we had a lot of demonstrations for victory.

SM: Do you remember, were you at any of the victory parades that they had?

MS: The what?

SM: At any of the victory parades? Or celebrations?

MS: No, not parades. But we were, I was painting scarves over at the school because it paid very well. And we threw everything out the window. I know that.

RS: Do you remember learning about the concentration camps?

MS: Oh yes.

RS: What do you remember about that?

MS: Well, we did lose maybe 40 people. My aunt was not allowed to come here. My father's sister. She was not allowed to come. She had two sons going to Israel, or Palestine at that time. And we tried — we couldn't get her out. And we had neighbors. I remember that she had three children. I think the boy was a little older than my brother. And the girl was about my age. And then there was a little child. She had the three children. She said, "At least the Nazis will not get those." But she and her husband perished. And then we had relatives that perished. We lost at least 40 people.

SM: And did you know about this during the war, or did you not find out until afterwards?

MS: Well, most of it you found out afterwards. During the war I don't think you could find out. I think you found out afterwards.

SM: And, so, did you attend a Jewish school when you were in the United States?

MS: Did I what?

SM: Attend Jewish school while you were in the United States, a religious school?

MS: Well, I was very pro-Jewish. Oh, yeah. Until I moved here [to Riverdale]. I mean, now I'm not anything. Now I'm just old, but until I moved here, and especially now I think it's Purim tonight.

SM: Yes.

MS: We used to go to megillah and all that. We had a very nice Rabbi but he's retired. And it was very nice here. It was nicer than it is now. Now, we got all sorts of people. But what can you do?

SM: Very true. And, so, what kind of, a little more positive I guess, what kind of foods did you like to eat when you were growing up? Or when you came over here?

MS: What kind of what?

SM: Food did you like to eat?

MS: Oh, what do I like to eat?

SM: Yeah.

MS: Well, I did. I did. But now, I don't care. Now, I don't care. But I did like to eat. Oh, yes. We — Europeans ate very well. And especially the French. Eating is very important. But now at 99, it's not important anymore.

RS: Growing up did you have a cook at home? Or did your parents — your mom cook?

MS: We had a maid who, I think she cooked. We didn't have a separate cook. We had a maid who cooked and my mother went... she went shopping for — I think that's how it was, I don't remember too much about it. But yeah.

RS: All right. When y'all came here did you still have a maid or did you —

MS: No, we were a maid. We were the maid. I cleaned houses. I cleaned — I was already in school — for three hours a week and I got \$1.05. 35 cents an hour.

RS: So, what did you all tend to make when y'all were cooking? Or how did you get by with the war and the rations.

MS: We all scraped everything together on the 15th of the month when rent was due everybody who had something scraped it all together. And to have a dime was a big thing. But food was very cheap. I think peaches were six cents a pound or something. Very little. I remember milk was about 11 cents a quart.

SM: Yeah. Not the same.

MS: No, not the same. But, I don't think you earn the same.

SM: No, yeah, very different. And so —

MS: Did I hear the —

SM: I think the door opened, yeah.

MS's Nurse: It's me Miss Marion.

MS: What?

MS's Nurse: I said it's me. I'm getting something from my bag.

RS: She's getting something from her bag.

MS: Oh.

SM: Your nurse. Yeah. Okay. So what kind of music did you like to listen to?

MS: What kind of music?

SM: Yeah.

MS: Classical music, always. We had the opera. You had the opera on Saturday afternoon for nothing. And, later on, you could afford to go. I listened to beautiful operas. And I think it was much more elaborate. I remember it fondly.

SM: Yeah, that's wonderful. And you liked the opera even when you were young, when you were a teenager?

MS: Yes.

SM: That's wonderful. And what other things would you like to do for fun when you were, you know, a teenager or young person?

MS: I went skiing. I went ice skating. Even later when I had my own business I used to skate like a feather in Central Park. Because I used to go on Saturday in the morning, go skating first and then go to the office. I could do as I pleased. And I did go skiing and ice skating. I never went into baseball.

SM: No?

MS: I took one boy, one child to a baseball game in Ebbets Field, I think. It was terrible. I had to run for autographs. And when we came out of this door, they ran to the other door. We ran to the other door, they came out of the other one. No, I never could take to baseball.

SM: Did your brother or your father, did they like baseball or those sports?

MS: No.

SM: No.

MS: My father — my parents separated.

SM: Okay.

MS: Like so many did during the immigration. And my brother went to the army. And my father went to Connecticut, because they hired all these old Germans, you know, for factory workers. And I went to France. So I wasn't there. And then, later on, my father moved to California when the restitution started. And he lived in California. And when he got a few thousand, I think they got an advance of a few thousand dollars or something, he went on a trip. He went to — I think he went to Spain, but he also went to Germany. And he died there. My aunt called and she says she had very bad news from Germany. I didn't know that — I didn't know — I didn't realize it was my father. And so he died. And my mother was the widow, because they never did get divorced. So, my mother was the real widow. And she got German restitution until she was 100 years old.

SM, RS: Wow.

SM: It seems the women in your family live for a very long time.

MS: Yes. Not all of them.

SM: Yeah.

MS: My mother's sister died when she was 20. So, some did, some didn't, and some got murdered. My father's sisters, one got very old, one got murdered, and one got to 80 or 90 or something, I don't know.

SM: And so, have you noticed any changes going on in New York City in the years that you've lived here?

MS: Oh, yes. We didn't have this violence that they have now. We didn't — well, we had refugees, we were refugees ourselves. But you somehow felt that you had to merge into the whole instead of the whole coming to you, like they do today. I don't think that I would like to live there now. No, no. I don't think so.

SM: And so, did your family become more religious once you came to the United States? Or were you still very secular?

MS: No, I was the one who was very religious.

SM: Okay. Yeah.

MS: I went to a Jewish school and I learned about Judaism and I became very religious but my family didn't.

RS: Did you ever keep kosher?

MS: I didn't, but I think I avoided bad things.

SM: Shellfish, pork, things like that.

MS: Yeah. That we did anyway. But I don't think I kept kosher.

SM: Did you attend synagogue more after you became religious?

MS: Oh yes, I was very active in the Kew Garden Synagogue. When I returned from Europe, I joined the synagogue and I was very active. As a matter of fact, I used to call myself — what did I call — the stuckee, I was stuck doing the — see my brain? Sometimes my brain just shuts down.

SM: No problem.

MS: I'm old. What is the word that I'm looking for?

SM: I'm not sure. But you were stuck doing the work of everyone else at the synagogue.

MS: I wanted to — the synagogue asked for volunteers. And I said to my mother, you know, we don't have any men and so we never volunteer, so why don't we volunteer to do the decorations. And of course, I was the one to do the decorations, I did the synagogue [decorations], for at least 40 years.

SM: Yeah. Wow.

MS: I always did the — and as a matter of fact, I resented it very much. When I left nobody called. Nobody took any notice, and I was there for over 40 years. I stood there. I did all their decorations. And I remember after 9/11 we got some money from the government, and I gave it to the synagogue. And I remember we talked — we had a very nice rabbi at that time — and I said, “I don't want it known, but take my money and buy new coverings for the sukkah.” So he did, and he said, “You don't want me to mention this?” And I said, “No, no, no, don't mention it. It's a secret between us.” I come to the synagogue on *yontef* and everybody is talking about it. I thought, Oh my god, the rabbi talked. The rabbi didn't talk but the handyman did.

SM: Well, I'm glad you got the recognition you deserve.

MS: But, you know, after I left that's it. Finished. I never heard from anybody again.

SM: That's unfortunate.

MS: No, I was very good terms with the rabbi. But, no — but that's how they are today.

SM: Yeah. Would you say it was different when you were young? Was it different when you were first starting there?

MS: Yeah, I think so. I think there was more of a giving. Especially during the war.

SM: Yeah. So I know you speak German and English. Did you speak Yiddish or any other languages?

MS: I speak French. Yiddish, I spoke some Yiddish because I understood.

SM: Yeah.

MS: You know, it's like German, especially in the beginning. When we didn't know English, on the radio I spoke the Yiddish. *In die Shtetl gefunden eine grosse yam* [a combination of Yiddish and German].

SM: And what does that mean?

MS: A big battle took place in the *grosse yam*.

SM: Wow. And was that also helpful for you to communicate with some other American Jews if they spoke Yiddish and you spoke German, or not really?

MS: I don't know.

SM: Okay.

MS: I don't know. I know, we had some Americans that came to greet us when we didn't speak anything but English [German].

SM: Yeah.

MS: We had one person, she kept saying, "*Es shpringt fun unz enk.*" [It's just a hop, skip, and a jump from us to you].

SM: Okay.

MS: I'm around the corner. And this became a special word — *unz enk*. But we wouldn't — I didn't speak Yiddish. No.

SM: So did you ever get married?

MS: No.

SM: No. Because you chose not to? Or just —

MS: It just didn't happen.

SM: Yeah. Interesting. And so, did you remain close with your family in the United States?

MS: No. Because of my father. You know, my father's family was very distant. They were pretty cold. I have cousins here. I have no idea where they are. But I mean, by now, they must be — if they are much

younger they're in their middle 80s. If they are younger, maybe they're not. But I'm not in touch with them.

SM: Yeah. And so, when you think back on your experiences, what kind of emotions do you associate with them?

MS: I think kindness. There were many people that were kind. There were the teachers that helped. There were professionals that helped. There were neighbors that helped. I think kindness is — and I think that's lacking today. It's very, very unfortunate. I don't think I would like today's life. I mean, I don't have it anyway. You know what I mean, if I had a choice, I don't like what I see, right.

RS: What is your hope for the future then? Like you talked about kindness, but what do you hope the world becomes?

MS: How can I hope for the future? I am 99 years old. There is no future.

RS: Maybe for future generations.

MS: They have to figure it out themselves. We did too. We did. We were a lot less materialistic. We also didn't have anything. I'm trying to read this, "Jews for Black Lives." [Reads sticker on Sophia's laptop]

SM: Oh, my sticker. Yeah, it's an organization I'm a part of that works for, you know, racial and economic justice.

MS: When I think for any, any life is important, but I'm not — Jews for Black lives. I don't go for that.

SM: Yeah, that's okay.

MS: Any life.

SM: Yeah. I agree.

MS: You agree?

SM: Every life is important, absolutely. I think that's in part something we learned from your experiences right and what you spoke about, about kindness towards everybody, you know?

MS: Yeah.

SM: Wonderful. Is there anything you'd like to add before I finish the recording of our interview?

MS: Well, I don't like very much what I see. I hope it turns around, but I'm not so sure.

SM: Yeah.

MS: Right?

RS: With antisemitism happening today, or what specifically?

MS: Anti-people. It doesn't matter whether it's antisemitism, it's anti-people; anti-Black, anti-white, anti-refugee, anti-everything.

SM: Absolutely. Well, thank you.

RS: Thank you.