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Kristen Renwick Monroe: The Hand of Compassion

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I
S
Margot

You don't walk away. You don't walk away from somebody who needs real help.



The wealthy only child of the head of General Motors for Western Europe, Margot trained for the German diplomatic corps before moving to Holland in protest against Hitler's policies.

Q. Why don't you just tell me the story of your life, from the beginning.

That's just what I want to tell you. My father was—I can tell you without bragging—a very wealthy man. He was the head of General Motors for Europe. He also handled imports of food. We had bags of candies, almonds from Paris, stuff like that, you know, wholesale.

We had German citizenship. But Hitler took it all away from everybody who didn't like him. Hitler didn't like people who didn't like him. Later the [Dutch] queen had me come and made me an honorable citizen. Now I am American. I was Dutch. But before that I had German citizenship. I was born in Germany in 1909, on April the third. I was raised in Germany actually but I didn't speak German. I spoke only French. I had a French governess. The war broke out in 1914, and my mother said, "Don't speak [French] on the street." But I had to go, like a kid does, and say something to a French girl. Then some German kids came and slapped me half to death.

So, I spent all of World War I in Germany. I was a kid, just a little kid, five years old. Nineteen hundred nine I was born and 1914 it started so I didn't know anything about it. Then I was sent to Geneva to school.

My father was in the import business. He called me in one day. "What do you want to be?" he asked. "Because I have now money, and I can pay for it. But money comes and goes. What you have in your mind and your head will not be taken away from you."

I can hear him like it's yesterday! That's my father. [Margot pointed to a large oil painting hanging over her mantel.] I was sent to England to learn English. And it so happened that every morning I went to Pittman's College. I went down in the ground, on that underground [subway]. I had already a penny in my hand for a paper. Now I liked the rag paper, which was the *Daily Mirror*. It wasn't a fine one. It wasn't the *Times*. And I sit in that underground and I read the paper. Now, this is something you can tell to your children. I found the thing that was for my life in that paper. A story about William of Burleigh.¹ Burleigh had a son. And the son said, "Father, what is diplomacy?" Burleigh took his little boy on his knees—I know it as if I read it today!—and said, "There was a sheik in Arabia who dreamt that he lost all his teeth. So he had a dervish come to interpret the dream. And the dervish said, "It's very simple. All your sons will die before you." *This* dervish he had beheaded. Then the sheik had another dervish come and asked him, "What does it mean? I dreamt I lost all my teeth."

This dervish said, "Go down on your knees, oh high ruler. And thank the almighty Allah that he will give you such long life that you will even so live to see the lives of your sons." To this dervish he gave gold, silver, and jewels. And so Burleigh said, "*This*, my son, is diplomacy."



After World War II, Margot moved to Los Angeles, where she lived until her death. Here she is pictured with her little dog, who—I came to suspect—Margot would suddenly announce needed a walk whenever our conversations became too painful.

When I came home, back to Germany, my father had at home a little room with a lot of books, a library you know, and a couch. And he always called me when he had something serious. So he called me. “Yes, Dad?” I was always scared, because there was always something I was afraid of. But my father never struck me or anything. He was wonderful. He said, “Did you make up your mind what you want to be? I told you I can pay for everything now, but you never know. You can lose your money. It’s the same old story.”

Anyway, “Yes, Dad,” I said. “I want to go into diplomacy.” *That* was the thing of my life!

Next thing I know, I was sent to Italy to learn Italian. I was at the University of Florence. I was in Italy when I was about seventeen years old. I was still young. In Italy, at the big exam, there was a big round table. I can see that stuff now like it was yesterday! There was a big round table, and lots of professors around, for the oral exam. When it was through, one of the professors said, “Child, have you ever thought of writing?”

“No, sir.”

“You should, you know. And I want to give you advice for your life.”

“What?” I was curious.

He said, "Never, never go for your second thought. When you have an idea or a thought or you feel something, stay that way. Never change it. Never."

That advice saved the lives of a lot of people during the war. I didn't know my father knew that. I never told him. But one time when I came during the war to my father in the middle of the night and said, "Oh, my God. The Germans are watching this man. They promised me they wouldn't hurt him. But I got to go to this man and warn him."

"Sit down. Tell me something. When they promised they wouldn't hurt that man, what was your feeling? Did you think they speak the truth? Or did you doubt them?"

"I believed it."

"Then don't do a thing," he told me.

I didn't know that my father knew me so well. I didn't do a thing. And the man was never touched. Can you imagine? Because that professor said, "Stick with your first impression. Don't change it." Isn't that funny? I think it's important. I didn't know how important it would be later on, see. I just thought, "Oh, big deal." You know how it goes.

Can you imagine, how it goes in life sometimes? Little things!

So anyway, then I came home to Germany. I was home a very short time. All my friends go tennis playing. Go swimming. They do everything. Why can't I? My father said, "When you finish learning, you can."

And you know what happened? I had to finish learning. I went to Spain. I was at the University of Madrid. Then, I tell you what happened. In Germany, the League of Nations started a collegium in Heidelberg. I went there. You could study what you wanted. The exam was set for people to go into business consultation, economics, and stuff like that. And politics. Well, I went into politics. Only 302 students made it for politics and I was one of them. You had to know a minimum of four languages. I don't mean knowing just a few words of a language. No, you had to really know them. I was fluent in German, French, English, Italian, and Spanish. Oh, my gosh, this is an awful long study to get into the diplomatic corps. You wouldn't believe how long. You had to know about all the English history. All the Chinese history. You had to know about everybody. It was interesting. But to learn it so thoroughly wasn't so good. I didn't think that was so interesting. But you had to. Then I got married, to a guy I wasn't so happy with.

Q. When did you get married?

I don't know the year. I don't want to remember it, because I got divorced from him. We were married eight years, I think. He had an affair with the maid. It was kind of funny. I caught him coming out in the morning in his underpants from the maid's room. It was something like that. I can't remember. I just don't want to remember.

But with him I had two little girls. We'd already gone away [from Germany] because of Hitler. The war hadn't started. It was in 1935, I think, that I went to Holland. I was still with my husband then. I remember because I divorced in Holland. With him I went to Holland. Because in 1936 my second little girl was born.

Oh, I don't want to talk about him. I think he was a banker. Why should I tell you all what happened? I can't even remember it. Anyway, then he came out with the underpants, and the hell with it! I divorced him. That was in Holland. Then he went with that very maid, he went into hiding. He hid, like a lot of people, who were Jewish.

Q. Your first husband was Jewish?

Yes, my [first] husband was Jewish, and he hid with that girl, the maid. And I was out. So I had separated from my husband by the time the war started. Oh, yes. Separated, but not divorced.

After the Kristallnacht my father came to Holland. When they talk about the Kristallnacht, I tell you what they did. They threw pianos out of the fourth-floor through the window. They threw little babies, in their cribs, through the fourth floor windows. I can't tell you what these Germans did! But I can tell you one thing; the Japanese were worse than the Germans, if there is any such thing that can be worse. I saw things that you wouldn't believe. I can't even talk about it. I have never told him [my second husband]. I never had told him anything about what was going on.

So my father left Germany right after Kristallnacht. He had an apartment near me. In Amsterdam. I was living by myself. Not divorced, but separated, and living with my two children. I had a maid, who watched after the children.

I went to Czechoslovakia around 1939. I was in Prague when the Germans came in. Somebody came to me and said, "Listen, I need somebody I can completely trust. You're the only person I can think of. Would you go for me to Czechoslovakia and do something?"

"Yes, why not?" I went to Czechoslovakia and there was just one hell of a mess. There was an American, in this fabulous hotel where I'm staying. He calls me up in the morning at 6 o'clock and says, "Come on down, quick. The Germans are walking in."

I said, "Yeah, my foot. Let me sleep." I didn't know the Germans are invading in reality. I thought my friends were twisting my leg because we were always doing funny things to each other, practical jokes. Yes, it was in March 1939.² God, I can remember that, how they walked in. I tell you what happened. I stood in front of the hotel with a lot of women. They were so mad, these women. One of the women went up to a car that drove by and slapped the German. The German pushed her back and she fell on top of me and I fell back. There was a guy from the hotel, in uniform from the hotel, and he caught me. It was terrible.

Then the Germans wanted the hotel. People came and said, "What are we going to do? They want the hotel?"

"Well, I tell you what. Everybody has a couch. Let's bunk together." Because a lot of people who had fled Germany and were not yet citizens in England had no passport. I went downstairs and told the Germans, "I speak English. I can help you."

"Good. We can use you." So they used me to translate [when they interrogated people]. And I translated wrong. I just lied like you wouldn't believe. I did not tell them the truth.

After the Germans came in, my stuff was at the airport. But I couldn't get out. I don't know how, but I got out by train and I got back home after a while. I was a mess. God, what a mess. An American from New York said, "I came for the mess and a fine mess I'm in."

And I said, "You ain't kidding." It was terrible what a mess we were in. So the Dutch, when they knew what I had done [translating the languages in Czechoslovakia], they asked me if I would help. They said they wouldn't acknowledge me if something happened. But I said, "Fine."

Q. So once you were back in Holland [after the Germans declared war in 1939], did your husband have any contact with your children or with you at this point?

I don't know. Could be. I know that once when I was taken to prison, somebody went to him and that girl he was hidden with and said, "Your wife is in prison. You have to come and help your children."

And he said, "I'm not going to endanger my life for the children." That's the kind of guy he was. But my father took them. My father came in the middle of the night. He had a feeling something was wrong. He put them in a convent with the nuns.

Q. And your children are, of course, part Jewish?

Yes. But God, those Germans took little kids whether they were Jewish, Catholic, or anything else. They couldn't care less. They just killed everybody.

So let's see. It's 1939, and I went back to Holland. The Germans came in May 1940.³ Boy, that was something! My doctor killed himself. A lot of people killed themselves.

Q. How did you get started helping save people?

I was living in Amsterdam. I helped right away. Well, my father helped more than I. I didn't do so much. My father was in chemical stuff. He had ties to the _____ Works, which were very well-known. They have some in the States, too. He called and told me he had a chemist

who is Jewish. "Can you help us?" And we took in the chemist and his wife. We had a lot of people hidden upstairs and so forth.

But, darling, I can't tell you how I got started [helping people]. I can't tell you the whole thing. Because first of all, I think of it all the time. I can't sleep. It's too much for me. I can see things that I can't even talk about, it was so bad. I know that they came in the houses with guns. They didn't bang on the door. They tore the whole door down. They turned the couches over. They cut them open. They broke the sliding glass doors open. You wouldn't believe what happened. I don't believe it and I was there.

But I remember like yesterday! Yesterday! Once I was taken and third-degreed. You know what happened then. The Germans are always so thorough.

I know the German mentality. That was what the Dutch wanted: my knowledge of the German mentality. I know them so well. What had happened one time, the guy comes in and I had a lot of [clandestine] stuff, and my little daughter was in bed already since it was in the night. I stuck this clandestine material under her cot. I thought, "Oh, my God. I hope she doesn't say anything."

The kid didn't open her mouth. I take a book like this and I start to talk, just reading any words. And I read and read and read in Dutch. The German stood behind me and said, "You're reading very well."

"Yes," I told him. "But you don't come so close because the doctor says he doesn't know what the kid has. It could be something that you can catch."

I know that the Germans are deadly afraid of any germs. So he stayed away. The kid wasn't sick! She just was in bed for the night. And all [the material] was in Evelyn's bed. Can you imagine? Everything was in her bed. Evelyn still remembers that.

Q. You were in the Resistance too? You weren't just hiding Jews?

How did I know I was in the Resistance? I came in by mistake! I don't know how I got started! I don't know. I just helped when I could. The Dutch were not like the Norwegians. The Norwegians had that Quisling. The traitor! The Dutch weren't traitors! There was no one traitor there. And the ones that were, were already killed by the Dutch. It was terrible. I tell you. As if we would want to be one of the master race!

One time, we had a man planted into the Gestapo. It was a policeman, a Dutch policeman. One day I had to contact him. So I call him up at Gestapo headquarters [for Amsterdam]. A man answers and I said, "Is Mr. _____ in?" You know, referring to my friend.

"No, he's not in. You got a message?" this voice asks.

I said, "Yes. This is Margot. Would you tell him please dinner is at

eight.” You know, that was code. That was the end of the conversation. So later when my friend comes to me that evening, he said, “You dolt!”

“What happened?”

“You know who you talked to?” he asks.

“No. What do I care who I talked to? What happened?”

Now there was an expression in Dutch. When you want something you say, “*Rits* for that.” For your sweater, for example. *Rits* was money.⁴ It was worth about two dollars and fifty cents, or two guilders. It’s like saying, “A penny for your thoughts,” or “I’d give anything to have that.” So my friend says, “The person you spoke with is the Gestapo commander for all of Amsterdam. And he tells me, ‘You got a message. “Dinner is at eight.” *Rits* for that woman, for that voice.’ He wants to meet you.”

I said, “Wonderful!”

“No way.”

“Oh, yes,” I said. “You have a nice lunch tomorrow and you introduce me.” And that’s what happened. That guy [the Gestapo commander] was my friend. You wouldn’t believe what I went through with a friend like that!

Q. So you became friendly with the Gestapo commander for Amsterdam, while you were hiding Jews and helping the Resistance?

[Margot nodded.] You know, a person who has not been there cannot really understand. It’s impossible. One time this man [the Gestapo commander for Amsterdam], when he comes into my house, I was standing there, staring, just looking in the street. The Germans took young people away from the street. It doesn’t matter whether they were Jewish or not. That had nothing to do with it. They had to work in the German factories in the east. He comes and I look at him and I said, “Isn’t that awful?”

Now I tell you something that is true, darling. Honest to goodness. This is something that I never forget. I said, “Isn’t that awful, that they’re taking away these young people?”

And he said, “So what does one more or less matter?”

I turned on him and I said to him, “I want to tell you something. The Germans will never win the war. Never! There will be a time that you will ask me to help you. And I will say to you what you say to me now: ‘So what does one more or less matter?’”

I said those very words to that man, to this Gestapo commander. He got up and came over to me. And he said, “You are a little kid and I love you.” And he kissed me on the forehead.

And I said, “I got to go. But you’re going to learn a lot.” And he laughed.

Now, here the war’s over. I got to tell you this. My people—like the

FBI, but in Holland, it's more like the police—they came to me when the war is over and say, "Have you got time tonight?"

"Yes, I always have time. Why?" The war was just over. I said, "Why? What happened?"

"We have to go to the camp, to the German camp," they tell me.

"Okay." I said. "Fine."

So they picked me up at 10 o'clock at night. We got up there. It was up north, west of _____. I didn't know what my people wanted. We got in there and they asked for Mr. such-and-such. I don't even remember the name. They said, "Yes, we'll get him for you."

This German Gestapo commander, the one I was friendly with, was a general. He was always dressed immaculate. His boots were shined. His nails were done. His hair was beautiful. Now, in comes a man. No shoes on. Dirty feet. Dirty nails. Disheveled hair. Horrible looking. It was him. He sees me and gasps. One of the men says, "Do you know that lady? Tell me about it."

I hadn't told anybody about this event. You know, [the story I just told you] when I said the war will be over and you won't win. And he falls on his knees and he says, "You know I only did what I was told to do."

And I despised him like you wouldn't believe. He just clung on to my legs and he says, "You have to help me."

When he was through begging, I said, "So. You're through?"

"Yes, please."

I looked at him and I said, "I know, not too long ago, somebody was standing at my window and said, 'What does it matter a few of these more or less,' when those poor Dutch youngsters were taken away. I said at that time, the tides would be reversed. And since you are ready, I want to ask you people to kill this gentleman, because we don't need one of these 'more or less.' Good night."

I opened the door and I walked out. And the next day the Dutch hanged him. They got the whole story. When or where, I don't know, because I didn't tell them. Isn't that something?

Q. Were you friendly with this man all during the war, this Gestapo head? Oh, was I! Sure, because I had to.

Q. I'm just struck by how difficult it must have been for you personally. You're a young, attractive woman. There must have been advances made at you?

Oh, yes. We had an affair! I had to. I had to.

Q. How were you able to do that?

I was very young, and I just. . . . [Margot shrugged.] I saved a lot of people, a lot of people.

Once I told my people [in the Resistance], this Gestapo guy says he'll come by with a few friends tonight. He says to me, "But we have to be at 2 o'clock in the *polder*" [the reclaimed land in Holland, which is below water level].

"Well," he says, "we heard that some of the Dutch are going to England and we'll intercept them by 2 o'clock tonight." So I had his men here, over to my house. The Resistance gave me a case of wine. I poured and poured and poured and poured, until they were all a little drunk. Then I heard a small click [the pre-arranged all-clear message]. It was not loud. But I knew it was over. Our people had left. I said [to the Germans], "Well, people, it's time to go home." They wobbled down the stairs. They were drunk like you wouldn't believe! And they yelled at me, "We missed it. We missed it. We're too late."

I just shrugged and said, "Not my fault." It wasn't my fault they missed it. I got them drunk so they couldn't round them up, the people trying to escape.

Things like that happened, you know. You can't tell that to anybody because nobody can understand the gravity of the situation.

Q. Did people around you know what you were doing?

There was a man, a Jewish man, who betrayed others to save his own skin. I knew his daughter was engaged to somebody, and I helped them out of the country. All of a sudden, on my birthday, a year later, somebody came and said, "I have a gift for you." Somebody, I don't even know who it was. The present was a gulden in a diamond-shaped form. I had a charm bracelet, and it said on one side "thanks" and on the other side the date when I got that young couple out. Can you imagine? I often think maybe they were the ones in Jerusalem who told the Yad Vashem people about me. There are lots of people who said that my name was up there [on the Yad Vashem list]. But, of course it wasn't my name now because I married later and changed my name.

Q. Can you tell me what it was like for you during the war?

No. I cannot tell you. You cannot possibly, as a human being, imagine the agony and the fear that people have. Now, for instance, when you wrote that you would like to interview me, my husband said, "What is this all about? What's going on? What happened?"

I said, "Well, she heard that I helped a few people."

"What was going on?" he asked.

"Even if I tell you, you cannot possibly understand." Sixteen years I had been married to him. And I never told him what happened.

Ten years, I woke up every night and heard the poor girls who had a little gold in their mouths cry. No dentist. No nothing. Just a little bit of

gold. But you see, all these girls, all these people who had gold, it was taken out. The Germans needed it. I tell you quite frankly, you cannot imagine how it is. The darn thing is, you cannot see the agony and the worry.

So when you said yesterday [that you wanted] a photo of me during this time, well, even afterwards, you did not feel like a photo. Now you come, you're a nice girl, and you say, "Do you have pictures?" Now, here's why you don't. There was this woman who was very religious. A Jewish woman. She was the kind who wears wigs all the time. One weekend we go out to hide her through the forest. And her wig got caught on a tree. Ordinarily, she'd yell, "Ouch!" But she was not even allowed to talk. She can't even tell us to go back for her wig, hanging on the branch of the tree. It's always, "Shhhh, be quiet! So the Germans don't hear and come and kill us all!" Now that's funny, the wig on the tree. You got to laugh a bit. And yet that isn't funny. But you don't take pictures of it. You don't think of pictures. Later, you meet these people [you worked with], you may tell a joke. You may be jovial. But nobody ever thought of taking pictures.

Once we had made in jail with a nail [a] little hole so that we could look out with a half an eye. We saw how the Germans pulled the men on their ears and they screamed. And for ten long years—I swear it's true—I heard every night these people crying. Now, what is the good of saying it all again? Because when you haven't been there, you cannot visualize it. One Jewish woman who heard that I helped a lot of Jewish people, she told me, "You know, my husband was in [a] concentration camp. He lost his wife and his kids. He never wanted to talk about it. He was a lonely man."

I told her, "I can understand it. I never talk to anybody either." I never said anything to anybody. Even my husband had no earthly idea about what I'd done. He was married to me for sixteen years or more when he finally found out. He had no idea. I said, "If I had told you, you wouldn't have understood it. Even if you tried to understand. It was such a terrible thing. It's not life."

You know, my daughter Evelyn, came once from school. And she said, "Mommy, is there a heaven and hell?"

I didn't know. And you know what the kid says to me? "I think hell and heaven is right here on earth." And I think that kid was right.

I have studied in Italy and read Dante's trilogy, *The Inferno*, *The Purgatorio*, and *The Paradise*. It states, when one enters hell, "Leave all hopes behind, you that enter here." That's hell. And I often think that my daughter was right.

These people [during the war] have suffered. Some were better off dead, yet they clung to life. I don't understand how people cling to life

when their lives are so bad. Why have some people such a wonderful life and why are some people so terribly suffering? There must be something to it. You cannot understand it. I don't think anybody can understand it if you haven't been in there.

Q. What do you do when you have these dreams or nightmares? When you hear things from that time? You said you would go to bed at night and you would hear the people screaming.

I woke up.

Q. Are you frightened to go to sleep at night?

No. I have never been frightened. But I woke up in the night and I heard the screams. That went on for ten years. Finally, it stopped by itself. You know, time is a big healer they say.

Q. During that period for you, was there something that you clung to that gave you hope?

I'm a religious person. But I don't go to churches. Look what happens with Reverend Swaggart. He goes to bed with somebody. All that holy doings! You don't have to show it that you're so holy. I don't really have any particular faith so to speak. I am baptized but I'm just as well Jewish. I know the Jewish religion very, very well. I know the Catholic religion very, very well. I know everything. I learned it.

Q. What kind of faith do you have?

I believe in God, in one God. But not in falling down on the floor. In Spain, when I studied, I had a teacher. She told me: "Nobody can learn it [faith]." There are lots of things that you can't learn. You can feel things. Some people want other people to talk about it, to tell you what is in them or what they feel. Either I think, "Uh oh, there's something wrong," or "Everything's all right." I *feel* them. You cannot learn certain things. You have either compassion with these people, or you think, "I couldn't care less when they drop dead."

Q. Where does it come from though, these feelings? It must come from some place.

I think it's born in you. That's what that Spanish teacher said. It is in you. You feel things. I feel an enormous lot of things. Have you ever thought of somebody who just that minute called, or came in, or whatever? Have you ever been in a place where you know you have never been before? But you know it? Suddenly, for a second or just a fraction of a second you think, "I've seen that before"? I stood in the Piazza Michelangelo in Florence. I knew I had never been there before in my life.

It was the first time I came up there. And yet I'd seen it. I knew it. For the longest time.

Q. Are you saying that our soul has a life that moves in and out of the body?

The soul hasn't but your heart. . . . The soul is going on. Now, I was engaged to be married to a man who went to [a] concentration camp. Alfred. I can't show you a picture of us together but from him I have a picture. Just not a picture of me. And one [photograph], from the concentration camp where they took him. There is a big wall that the Dutch made, where the names are. Where people are listed and what happened. To them, the Dutch made that wall with a cross.

Alfred and I weren't arrested together. He didn't know a thing about what I was doing. No, I was already in jail. He just wanted to get me out. He didn't tell me what he tries. I was in prison. He didn't tell them what I was doing and they beat him to death.

Q. Were you in jail then because they suspected you were helping to save Jews?

No. I'm trying to tell you. There's no reason to their arrests. They came in one evening into a house where I shouldn't have been. And they took me in. It's not like here, where you go to an attorney and you say, "Listen, I'm accused of breaking law number 1375" or whatever the law is. No.

I went to jail and Alfred came to my father. My father [said], "Don't go. Don't go to the Gestapo." But Alfred thought he could get me out. So he went there and they took him.

"We'll get it out of you," they said. And so they slapped him until he was gone. There was a gentile man—I think he was Protestant—and later he brought me a cookie jar, which I just gave away this year [1989]—and he said, "I was there and they clobbered him to death."

The day this happened, I thought of him. I said to myself, "Margot, you should worry." When my fiancé died, I knew it that night. I felt he was lying on his back. *Before* the guy came and told me what really happened. I knew. He was beaten to death by the Germans when he was only thirty-eight years old. And I know that night—it was at night—I was sleeping and I felt as if something was detaching from him—I've never talked to anybody about this before—something was detaching from him and he was embracing me and said, "Margot." And then the man comes and said, "You know his last words were 'Margot.'"

"I know."

A rabbi came to me, and a Catholic priest came to me, and they told me the man [Albert] died of a heart attack. And I said, "Bull." I could have said "bullshit" but I didn't. I just told them, "It's not true. He was beaten to death."

Q. Tell me about Alfred.

Oh, Alfred. He was about the most fabulous man. I'll get you his picture in a minute. I have learned so much from him that you wouldn't believe. I said to him, "Don't trust these people."

He just smiled, "If you cannot trust anybody, you may as well not live." He trusted and that was. . . . [Margot shrugged.] Somebody betrayed us because he was too trustful. Now me, I have a little suspicion. I'm a schluz, you know. I always think, "Well, I see how bad people can be." I mean, not bad really but they can do you bad. And you feel it.

Now, I wrote a story. I didn't know how to start it because I'm not a writer. That was my first story. I wanted to write it actually for Alfred. I have also arranged my will that the Holocaust Museum gets—if I have left something—some money. For Alfred. In his memory.

He was a very intelligent man. He loved people and he helped everybody. Now, a lot of people from Germany came over to Holland and they were taken into camps. Not like camps where you'd pay the money to live, like here. No. The Dutch government—which at least didn't send them home, like Roosevelt did here—the Dutch government took them up and put them in camps. Alfred went every week up there and brought food, coal, music, everything to these people.

He had a factory for clothes. I had that factory later. I didn't know anything about clothes. To me, it's like dancing on the moon, what I know about clothes factories. But I did it. I sold to Egypt. To Switzerland. I sold to all the countries. To everywhere. Alfred left it to me. Well, not he himself because he couldn't leave anything. He had no will and he was dead. But the government gave it to me.

So you see I'm trying to tell you that you could be arrested just because they don't like you. You don't have to have done anything. For example, there was a Jewish girl. She went to bed with a guy because he wanted to make whoopee.⁵ So what did he care? She had the attributes. She didn't look Jewish or whatever. He didn't think of Jewish. He didn't think of anything. Like hungry, he wanted to eat something. So it has no rhyme or reason. And this is why nobody, nobody who hasn't been there, can ever understand it.

Q. Let me see if I'm understanding what you're saying. Are you saying that you think that people are born, or at least some people are born, with an ingrained sense of compassion, of right or wrong?

I think so.

Q. Is everyone born with it?

No. Well, could be. But some people, already at home they have such a terrible home life that they get angry at everybody. You cannot learn

some things in life. But there are lots of people that do you harm and they are disagreeable and they hurt you. Then you just leave them alone and think, "Oh, to hell with them." But on the other hand, you can't help everybody in life.

Q. How do you decide whom to help then?

Well, I didn't decide. There's no decision. It's not like you say, "Oh, well. It's five o'clock. The people come and the judge will come in and so forth." No. There is no decision. You either help or you don't. "Can you do something?" they [the Underground] asked me. They knew that I speak the languages. I spoke German like a German, of course. And I know the [German] mentality.

Q. You were talking about the dreams that you've had at different points.

It is not so much a dream, as it woke you up. You know, you hear it and it wakes you up in the middle of the sleep. Now it's better, of course. But for ten years after this [war] you can still hear them screaming. They had an old woman next door [in jail]. They pulled her by the hair down the stairs. Can you hear her screams? You cannot imagine that sound. Nobody can. No.

But you know, not all Germans did it. I know quite a lot of nice German people. Now, my son-in-law was too young. He died when he was fifty-two, four years ago. He was [a] professional and very good. But his brother-in-law was a Nazi and his brother was not; he was in [a] concentration camp. Same family. Hitler said to people, "You tell me when you don't like your parents. You come and tell us when they say something about you." He wanted people to betray the others.

Q. You were talking about your strong sense of faith. You said you believe in one God. But you don't believe in churches?

I don't believe in these people who tell you what to do and then not do it themselves.

Q. Then you said that you'd been in the Piazza San Marco in Florence and you had a feeling that you'd been there before. Do you believe that the soul lives on beyond people?

It must be. Because I have that [feeling] very often. Sometimes in company, when you know you have never before seen these people in your life, and all of a sudden you hear something which you think you've heard before. It's only a second. Or maybe a part of a second. But that was [what happened] to me in [the] Piazza San Marco. It was up there. I never forget it, if I live to be one thousand years old.

Q. Now, what about Alfred? Do you think that he's lived on in you in some way?

I don't think it's that he is in me, because I was already born and I'm here. But there is not a day in my life that he's not with me. I mean, I married him [Ted], but it's not a childhood love. You know, he's a nice guy and I like him. But we are old. He's eighty-five and I'm eighty so what's the big deal?

There were things from Alfred that I always felt that he takes care of me. Very often, I sit here and I see that dog of mine. When somebody comes, she comes and wants to come close to me. The dog jumps up; she takes care of me. Now, isn't that strange? She's just like Alfred. When I'd say, "This window should be opened," Alfred would say, "Let me do it." Or when I had some worries, "Let me take care of it."

You see? There is something in this life and I would like to know what it is that people hang on so much on life. Is it going to be better or not? My godfather, if he hears that, he'll be furious. He doesn't like me saying that. He doesn't like these things. But there must be something in this life. There must be something. Well, why are we all here? Why are we making ourselves so crazy?

Q. I wonder sometimes about a purpose in life that we don't know about.

My mother always said you come with the empty hand and you go with the empty hand. Well, you were born with empty hands. We have little fingers and you go out with empty hands. What can you take with you? There's that old joke, where that Chinese man said, "I want every son to put some money in my grave." He had seven sons, and after he's buried, each son puts \$10 into the grave. Then the last son comes and he puts in a check for \$70 bucks and takes the \$60 out. Now *he* was smart.

I don't know if we take anything out of life. I don't think so. I don't think you take anything along. I think you start fresh. But start you must. Look, some people love horses. Some are crazy about cats. Some people love birds. And so forth. Have you ever thought about that? Some people look like a dog, like a bulldog. Look at that Jacques Cousteau. He loves fish. He goes down in the ocean. Do you think he was maybe in his former life a fish?

I don't like birds and I don't like fish. But I love dogs. Maybe I was a dog. But I wonder why is it. I don't know if I'd say there's reincarnation. But I wonder if maybe there may be a nirvana. Jesus, when I think what all I studied! And the more I studied, the dumber I was.

Q. I don't know if I should ask you this or not. Forgive me if I'm being too personal. But, as we've spoken during the last few months you've said at several different times that you just turned eighty and that your mother

died when she was nearly eighty. I know you've just turned eighty. Your mother's death at the same age seems to have been on your mind at different points.

Yeah, I envy her.

Q. You envy her. You're not afraid of dying?

No, not a bit. I asked my mother once. I said, "Are you afraid of dying?" She was so upset. But I'm not afraid of dying. I never was. But what do you think? It can only get better.

Q. You think it gets better after you die?

Honey, if you have seen what I have seen people do to each other, you wouldn't ask. I sometimes think, "Oh, no. It's not possible." And still I've *seen* it with my own eyes.

Q. That's what I wanted to ask you. You said you have memories. You said you've had dreams. What is there before you die that you would like to get out? To leave behind so that you don't have to deal with it?

[Margot shrugged.] I think you have to fight. Alfred always said life's a constant fight. He was fighting. He was fabulous. I learned so much from this man and come to think of it, I was already older when I met him. I mean, I'd studied and learned. I lived in various countries. I was here and there. I was in Russia. You know, the Russians did a ridiculous thing, because people cannot all be put in one mold. One person wants to get ahead in life and works hard. And one says, "Why should I?" [In Russia] it doesn't make any difference. It all goes to the state anyway. Communism is not for me. You cannot put all people in one thing. You have good ones. You have bad ones. I have German people I like and German people I don't like. But those who were in that skinhead thing, *them* I don't like. They don't like you. Absolutely. I found that out. It doesn't make any difference what you are or what you do. You cannot make it good when they are like that.

My daughter wrote when they had the last election [in Germany] that somebody said to her, "The Nazis are back again."

I wrote back, "They haven't come back again. They never went." They never went, because once it's in you, it's in you.

Q. So you have to fight when you meet people like that?

Well, Alfred always said it's a fight. People all over, they act just the same as here. It didn't make any difference. . . . Like in Moscow, like in the communism, you cannot put them all on one thing. One is like this and one is like that and they never change. They are like that and *they are like that*. You cannot say, "Come on. Change and do this. Do that." They are

brought up that way and they feel that way and their parents are that way. You cannot change them.

Q. Margot, you said two things. You said that people are different. And you said that you think some people are born with a sense of compassion. . . . Do you think everyone is born with some kind of a sense of compassion?

No. I don't think that. There are people born from a mother who hates the father because she was made pregnant. She didn't want the baby and when she carries the baby she is already madder than hell for the baby. That you cannot change. The hatred is already in you and that stays in you.

I think people are born with different things in them. Yes. Absolutely. Don't you think so? If I were made pregnant by somebody I didn't like and I had to bear the baby. . . . That's why I am not for these pro-life people. And surrogate mothers, out! I don't like anything that's not natural. That's how it starts out. If you're supposed to get a baby, you get one. If you don't, to hell with that. They play God, these people, and I don't think that's any good. But if a mother or a father is a drunk and hates people, then the kid is born already with hatred in his heart. It doesn't change after you're born. No. I don't think so. It will always be. I think people are born pretty much one way or the other. Yes. They are born the way the mother was.

You know that the Jews, when somebody dies, they don't say "son of Mr. Genendal" or whatever, they say "son of Mrs. so and so." They say your maiden name. Why? Because they don't know whether the guy is the father or not. And you shouldn't lie in the face of death. That's why that is so. Isn't that strange? Now, for instance, there's one thing that Hitler did good. That is, when people have afflictions, any kind of an affliction, they can make whoopee, but they do not get children. And that's a good thing, that they sterilize them. I think that is a good idea. I absolutely agree with that. But I don't agree with making kids artificially and doing all that artificial stuff. I absolutely don't agree. Even the heart transplant, I don't agree. I have subscribed in my driver's license that everything I have that's good, they can use. But personally, I'm not for it. If your time has come and you should die, good-bye my good friend. It's bad but it's only bad for the ones who stay behind.

Q. So you don't think dying is a frightening thing? You're not afraid to die?

No, not at all. Are you afraid to die?

Q. Yes, I think so.

I'm not comparing. I was thirty-two years old when I agreed to work for [the Resistance]. The Dutch had told me, "If you do work for us, we

cannot help you if you're arrested. We cannot help you. We don't know you if you get caught. Are you afraid?" I said, "No."

Q. What do you think happens to you when you die?

I think your soul lives on. I don't know how it lives on and I wish to God I did. But it lives on. You live on, in somebody [else] maybe. Listen, I want to tell you something. My first language was French. My parents spoke French to me. Everybody did. I had a French governess. I didn't know a word of German when I was a little kid because nobody spoke German to me. Remember I told you I was scrapped by some kids in the street because I couldn't speak German [during World War I] when I was just a kid. Maybe my parents spoke German to each other. I can't remember. I think so; but they always spoke French to me, always French. So my [early] languages were French or German. Then I got an operation for my appendix. My doctor was a good friend of mine. He said, "Boy, did you blabber."

"What did I say?" And he told me it was all in English. I said, "English! I don't even know English." Oh, I knew a few words, you know. But I only spoke French or German. I told him, "You're nuts. You just can't tell English from French."

"I sure do know English from French. You spoke English."

Now this is the funny part of it. My grandmother was born in Woodville, Missouri. I don't want to say I'm my grandmother but somewhere back there, there was English. I had never studied English. No. I never knew it at the time. I was later sent to England to learn English. But it was much later, after this operation.

This living on after we die, if you want to call it that, it's a nirvana kind of thing. Like what the Hindus have. Now, I don't talk to people about this because nobody asks me. But I often think there must be something. Why did I speak English that time? Only English. He said, "You spoke beautifully."

And I said, "I don't even know English. What are you talking to me about?" But my grandmother was born here [in the United States]. They moved back to Germany to avoid the Civil War. Boy, they'd have saved me a heck of a lot of trouble had they stayed!

Q. Margot, let me ask you about how you view other people in relationship to yourself. How do you see other people?

Some are boring. Some are interesting.

Q. In terms of relating to them, though, do you feel a strong sense of community? Do you believe that there are some people you meet and you just decide you want to be friendly with them or you don't? Or do you believe that there are ties that we all have?

No, I don't think we have ties. I think you meet somebody—like I met you—and I think, “There's a fabulous person. I like her.” And that's it. But it's not in a community. I single it out. It's one person I like. And I said, “Oh, I met a guy who's terrible.” I don't think anything of it.

Q. Would you help the person that you thought was terrible?

If something happened to that person, certainly. But I would stay away so far that I would probably not be asked to help. But if I can help somebody, I will be happy to do it.

Q. Do you feel you have a choice here? [Margot shook her head, no.] It just happens? That's just the way you are?

Yeah. You don't just stand and think. You have no time to think if something happens. Suppose somebody drowns. If you stop [to] think, “Shall I? Shall I not? Eeenie, meenie, miney, mo.” You can't do that. You either help or you don't.

Q. Do you think it's just a disposition that some people have toward helping others?

[Margot shook her head, no.] You don't walk away. You don't walk away from somebody who needs real help. But some people who are real nasty. . . . Now, suppose something would happen to Hitler. I often thought, would I help him? Because I never believed that he was dead. Now I believe it more, but at the time I didn't really think he killed himself. But would I help this guy, after what he did? But on the other hand, people didn't have to do it.

Q. You must have taken a tremendous risk, though. You were essentially acting as a double spy.

Yeah, but so what? Listen, I was taken one night and third-degreed, with the lights on me by some guy who looked like a bulldog. I called him bulldog. He was terrible. He said, “If you don't tell us, we'll [he makes a big motion across his neck, like he's cutting his throat].” Then I made a big mistake. You know how you sometimes do? I said something so dumb. I said, “I don't know anything. But if I knew I certainly wouldn't tell you.” That was the dumbest thing I ever said. It made him think I knew.

“*That* we got to see!” he said. “If you don't tell us, we will kill you.” They put me in big lights. They were standing there. I thought they'd see my heart bust up, here. I could hardly breathe. But I stayed cool, you wouldn't believe. I tell you something. I was cool. And I had the luck! I said, “Now you got a chance that I will blabber it out. But when I'm dead, I can't blabber it.”

Q. But weren't you in a situation where you were dating the head of the Gestapo? Didn't that protect you?

This [arrest] was before. After I met that guy, I was able to do something. I tell you one thing I did. The Germans once came into one of the best streets in Holland. Very elegant, like Rodeo Drive in Beverly Hills, only [whereas] in California are fine houses, mostly in Amsterdam are fine apartments because in Holland you don't have so many houses. And this is what happened. A German was killed. My friend [the Gestapo commander], he said, "We're going to make sure a Dutchman gets killed, too." They were going to make sure a Dutchman was taken in because a German was killed.

"How do you know it was a Dutchman who did it?" I asked.

"It can only be a Dutchman," he said. "No possible way that a German killed another German."

I said, "If you give me one of your men, I'll find out who it was." So he gave me one of his men. And I found out that the murdered German man was killed by another German who was jealous because he took his girl! But before I found that out, before I knew anything about it, they went into that elegant street. They took out the men, all the men from the apartments. They took them down, and lined them up like a row of tulips. The women and children had to look out the window. Then they shot them. Can you imagine? That's a minor thing that happened. Isn't that awful?

I asked this [Gestapo] guy, "Could it be a German?"

"No, it can't be a German," he says. "It was a Dutchman."

I showed them. I showed them. What a superior race!

Q. Before you started going out with the man who was head of the Gestapo, you were arrested six times, is that what you said?

Not before. Also during [the time I was seeing him].

Q. So that was not a protection for you?

Oh, no. He didn't know everything.

Q. So he didn't make sure that you weren't picked up or anything like that?

He didn't know that. The Germans, they were all so special. "We are the master race." And all the Dutch—because I was Dutch—all the Dutch were nothing. And everybody else is nobody.

Q. But you still had German citizenship during this period, didn't you?

I didn't have any citizenship. Do you think that Hitler leaves you to be a German?

Q. How did Hitler take your citizenship?

Everybody who was against him [lost their citizenship].

are my cousins. My father's brother's kids. Real cousins. But they wouldn't know me. None of them. They were afraid.

I tell you what happened. Things were so hard, I cried. My youngest daughter said, "Let's go back." My ex-husband has an uncle in San Francisco who was much against the ex because he knew what was going on [with the maid]. He was for me. He was actually the head of the family. He was Jewish. His name was Izzy. We met because we saved him, too. I saved his little girl. Full of lice and fleas, she was, like you wouldn't believe. Well, during the war, Izzy went to his nephew [my ex] to ask him to save Izzy's kids. And the ex didn't save them. So Izzy's boy was killed. Then Izzy came to me for help. He wrote to me.

My father said, "Do you know that handwriting? Is that Uncle Izzy?"
"Yeah, looks like his."

Father said, "He needs money." Immediately, my father gave money. I went there and I helped Izzy. I took Izzy's kids, who were hidden somewhere and were full of lice and fleas. I took the girl home and I saved her. So later when we came to the U.S., we went to San Francisco. When I was so unhappy, we talked to Izzy. I told him, "I go back to Holland. I can't stand it here."

Izzy said, "Why?" I told him. I had brought everything I had. My jewels and everything, all stolen.

Izzy said, "You show them. You stay and you show them." And I stayed. I got a job at the Bank of America as a teller. I didn't even know what a dime was. They made a test. I passed it and I got a job. But you couldn't sit in a bank job at that time. You had to stand up. Oh, my feet hurt me. You wouldn't believe it. It was awful. Then we got an apartment. Of course we had no furniture. We had nothing.

My parents were still living during this time but my parents were in Holland. That's why I wanted to go back. Then I got a job in a Chinese firm and I wanted to let my daughter go back. Because the school called and said, "Your daughter is sitting in school looking out of the window."

I said, "I would [look out the window] too if I don't understand a word and they confuse me," because this is so. I went to the attorney for the exporter I worked for to get a passport for my daughter to come back into the old country. I said, "Evelyn should go back to school in Holland. Besides the schools are much better there."

He said, "Why?"

"She doesn't understand English."

He said, "Leave her here." He convinced me to leave her here, but to take her to a Catholic school. So I took her to a Catholic school. We didn't have the money for the school. I asked my cousin, the oldest one who is dead, this one who wouldn't have given me anything. But I asked him could he loan me a hundred dollars till next week, Friday. I got it

back to him right on the dot. It was good she went to the Catholic school here. But it was pretty hard for me. Everything was stolen. I worked like a dog. Well, I haven't actually seen a dog work.

Q. How would you view yourself? How would you describe yourself? You said you were an extrovert. How else would you describe yourself?

I never would describe myself. I have my good sides and my disagreeable sides. I can be a bitch and I can be nice.

Q. When I go home tonight, my husband will ask, "What was this woman like?" What should I say to him?

Well, what would you say? Nothing, nothing special. Just a person. Just an ordinary person.

Q. You don't see yourself as anything special?

No, I'm nothing special.

Q. You don't think you did anything extraordinary?

No. Definitely not.

Q. How can you say that?

Because I *didn't* do anything extraordinary. Lots of people help others. No, I certainly didn't. No, absolutely not. I didn't do that much. If I had had the money my father had I probably would have done more. But he did so much. So whatever I had, I went to my father and he did everything. He helped everybody. He was fabulous. He had good ideas too, as you saw with his handling of the letter we sent to Switzerland.

Q. You seem to be somebody who's willing to take on a lot of responsibilities.

I'm wondering why I'm still alive. That's one thing: I'm not afraid.

Q. You're not afraid?

No, never. I was one time a little bit afraid in prison. They had these coffee mugs out of aluminum. I held it against the hole that the Germans always looked in to spy on us. I said, "If one German comes back I'll stick out my tongue and make an ugly face at him." And by golly, I took that mug down and made that face, and he was standing right there, looking. That set my heart going. But otherwise. . . . I tell you something. I am not afraid because I think if I die, I die. I'm afraid of being hurt, of having pain. I don't like to have pain if I can avoid it, or if that can be avoided for me. I don't want to be sick and linger around. But otherwise, I don't need anything. We live very modestly. We don't go out much. Maybe tonight we go out, because a friend, seventy-five years old,

his girlfriend will call and say, "Let's go over to the Sizzler," you know, a family restaurant. Big deal. That's about it.

Q. You seem very self-confident. It seems as if you take the initiative.

I'm very self-confident. I have no inferiority complex whatsoever. I'm very confident.

Q. Would you say you're a leader or a follower?

Leader, yes. I can be a leader easily.

Q. An insider or a loner?

I'm not a loner, not at all. I like to lead and I like to tell people what to do; whether they do it or not is another thing. [Margot shrugged and laughed.] I make a lot of mistakes, a lot of them. But then I say, "That's tough! There's nothing I can do." I'm dumb. I make mistakes. I'm going to be eighty next month; how do you like them apples? Old! I think people live too long. I don't want to live so long. My mother had her seventy-ninth birthday and a few weeks later she died. My father was seventy-nine and he died. I think they were married fifty-three or fifty-four years, just a week short. But I don't want to live so long. I tell him [my husband] I've never been so long with one man.

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I have to tell you this. This is something funny. This is not serious. Just something I did when I was young and good smelling. When I was in England, I went to the library and got the names and addresses of famous people. I want some signatures. I didn't think it was valuable or anything. It's just for the fun of it. I told my cousin I'm going to write to them and she said, "I'll tell you one thing. You will never get Bernard Shaw."

I said, "You want to bet? So I wrote to Bernard Shaw. And I got this letter back. It says here,

Dear Miss Scharff, Many thanks for your letter which I greatly appreciate. Those few kind words of yours greatly touched me. Today, I'm an old man and cruel criticisms are so often launched against me. Indeed, I have much to bear. Then it is the innocent words and praise springing spontaneously from the lips of a young girl. (I feel, I *know* that you are young.) It is like balm that soothes the savage beast. My child, it is with the utmost delight that I render you my paltry services of sending you my autograph. Dare I do more? May I perhaps meet the authoress of the charming epistle? There is a restaurant I know, a quiet select spot, the Piccadilly Circus, where we could perhaps have a cozy chat together. Only one

word from you, and my Rolls Royce awaits you. With mingled feelings of hope, fear and despondency, I await your reply. George Bernard Shaw.

Now, when I read that I just roared. I screamed, "That Phyllis! She did that to me." Right away, I knew that was my cousin Phyllis.

And you know what happened? We *did* write to Bernard Shaw. Everybody said you will never get anything from Bernard Shaw. So I wrote, "Dear Mr. Shaw, Enclosed please find a schilling. We would like one word from you." And this letter came, return mail, addressed to me. It said, "Thanks." Just one word. No signature. Isn't that funny?

I think he wanted to flatter me. I learned later not to be flattered, not to be taken in by people making you feel important. This Gestapo guy, he wanted to try this, 'cause he wanted me to tell something and I made that mistake, you know, when I said, "I don't know but if I knew I wouldn't tell you." That was my mistake. And I thought of that French fable. The one where the fox said to the raven, "Give me the cheese." The fox got the cheese 'cause the fox said to the raven, "You sing so wonderfully. Why don't you sing a song to me?" The raven opened his mouth to sing and the cheese fell out! Well, I thought of that, and I said to myself, "Margot, be careful. Be careful." I talk to myself, see? I didn't say a word out loud. But I thought of this story which I learned when I was a kid.

Q. It's funny isn't it how in times of great stress or crisis, something from your childhood will come back.

Oh, yeah, it always comes. Your whole childhood comes back when you don't behave or do behave and so forth.

Q. The activities that you did during the war. Did they change you as a person? Did they affect you?

No. The only thing is, I suffer still that that man [Alfred] was killed. But I don't hate anybody for it. That Gestapo commander, you know, if he had said, "I'm a Nazi. I believe in it." If he had been more manly, it wouldn't have affected me. But hanging there, hugging onto my legs and saying, "I only did what I was told to do." The little schlepp! The hell with him! I said, "Kill him." And they did. They knew that I had something to say and they thought that guy was my friend long enough. No, no deal. He wasn't worth it.

Q. You said you believe in fate. In predestination. Do you think man can control his fate?

No, you cannot control it because when you control it, that's your fate, that you should control it. It is your fate that you do it like this. For

instance, if I want to push you, it's my fate that I push you. You know what I mean?

Q. Are you a religious person?

Yes, very. But I don't run to churches, no. I don't run to churches. I don't do it because I think you can pray at home. One religious lady said to me, "I'm not afraid about my son and me because we go to God." I said, "Why? Did you call up and get a special seat up there?" I never forget that! She was mad! The next week she called up and she apologized. I think it's not necessary to go to church. On Sundays these people all say, "I go to church. I want to see what Mrs. Myers wears. Oh, yes, she wears today the lilac one." You know, it's so dumb. I don't go there. Of course, if something happens, I'm very religious. I believe in God. Absolutely.

Q. When you say you believe in God, is that the same God for Jews as for Christians?

[Margot nodded yes.]

Q. It doesn't matter to you?

It doesn't matter to me. There's only one God. Of course, I'm not a Buddhist. I'm not a Zen Buddhist. You know, when I was in Italy I studied religion and all of them I knew about, except the Mormons. I heard about that one only after I came here. During the war, I worked together with a Catholic priest. Every Monday, the priest was supposed to come for dinner. One Monday, he didn't show up. We found out he was in a concentration camp. The Germans spit on him. They said, "You kneel in front of us." And he didn't. Oh, it was a terrible thing. We got him out. Finally.

Q. Do you have any particular ethical credo that has guided your life? Any system of ethical beliefs?

No. You don't steal. You don't hurt anybody. You don't lie. Well, I lie sometimes. When I was in the Resistance I lied a lot. When I was in Prague and I had to translate, you should have heard what I told them! I didn't believe it myself.

Q. How did you develop your ethical beliefs?

[Margot shrugged.] That was me. I don't know. You know, when you travel around you see people from all countries, from all walks of life.

Q. How did your rescue activities make you feel about yourself?

Not at all.

Q. They didn't affect you?

Nothing special, no. No feeling.

Q. Were you surprised that you were able to do the things you did?

No. Because since I have seen so many people, in so many countries, I knew quite a bit of life. I think people are basically the same all over the world.

Q. Was it important to you that you were the one who saved the people?

No. They just had to be saved. I wish I could have done more. I haven't done much.

Q. Let me ask you a question about religion. You mentioned you believe in God. Do you think there's a heaven, an afterlife?

No. My daughter once came home from school. She was a little afraid. She said, "Mommy, I think heaven and hell are right here on earth." And I think she's right. I think that's so. Why are some people in such terrible shape and some have it so good? I think it's right here. But I could be made to believe in that nirvana, what the Buddhists believe in, that you come back maybe as something else. Often I think, why do some people like ducks. And some are so crazy about birds. Maybe they were birds in their former life. Heaven knows.

Q. Do you think it might be?

If we would just know.

Q. So you'd like to think that there may be a reincarnation, but you're not sure.

I'm not sure. I don't know.

Q. Let me ask you what really is the hardest question for me, the hardest to understand. What do you think it was that made you able or willing to risk your life, when so many other people did not?

Well, I think it's just me. I would risk it now. I wouldn't care. I don't care whether I die or not. I never cared, and especially when my man was killed. There's a guy came out, I think he was Protestant. He had a thing for cookies and he brought a cookie jar to me. He told me he saw him [Alfred] die, being beaten. And that night, when that happened—and that is not a lie—I dreamt he was lying on the floor. His soul or something went out of him, and he embraced me with nothing that you could. . . . [Margot stopped and sat quietly, as if thinking.] It was as if he had taken me along. Now there is not a day in my life that he is not with me. It's like the man is with me, because I learned an awful lot through

him. I learned a lot of life through this man. He was good to everybody. I said, “Don’t trust these people,” in the beginning when we were together. And he said, “If you don’t trust anybody, you shouldn’t live.” He trusted everybody and that woman betrayed us. It was a woman who betrayed us. Some people, you have a feeling about. I have a tremendous feeling, my daughter has even a better feeling, that somebody is—I don’t want to say good—but somebody is agreeable. Somebody is false. Somebody wants bad with you. Somebody wants good with you. I have a tremendous feeling for some things. It’s like intuition. Yes, intuition. I don’t know the characters of people but it’s just a feeling. But you know, I met so many people. Everybody wants to go to Germany. It’s okay with me. I wouldn’t go and live in Germany for all the tea in China.

Sure, I’ve gone back [to visit]. I liked my son-in-law. He was too young to know anything. He was a young guy. The war is over in 1946 and he was a ten-year-old kid. What does he know? But his family were wonderful. The father, too. The father was a very well-known theologian and philosopher named Herman Raschke. He was a very wonderful guy.

Q. Can you tell me something more about your family background? You said your father was very wealthy. What about your mother? What was she like?

My mother. She was like a mother should be, but she wasn’t so understanding, like my father. My mother once in a while had a loose hand. My father never touched me. With my father, everything was good. But she was a good woman and I took her along. I showed her this and showed her that. I took her to Palm Springs. I took her to Las Vegas. I showed her everything.

Q. It doesn’t sound like you were as close to her as to your father.

I was close to her like a kid is to a mother. But I want to tell you something. My mother once said to me, “I’ve seen the whole world. But I’ve never seen San Francisco.” I had just taken her to all these other places and I said to myself, “Oh, God.” It cost me so much money. I had to take care of the kids. And I was robbed, don’t forget. I had to start from nothing. Now my mother wants this? Oh, forget it. And I didn’t show her San Francisco. To this day today, I’m sorry that I didn’t take her to San Francisco. I should have. I did everything I could for my mother. I did it mostly also for my father. Because I took a trip with my father every year.

Q. Did you have siblings?

I’m an only child. But my father had people he took care of and he had them study and had them learn everything.