Hear My Story\_ Lisa MacVittie

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**SUMMARY KEYWORDS**

Holocaust survivor, Lisa McVitie, Shanghai escape, Nazi persecution, family legacy, military service, refugee experience, cultural shock, Jewish community, American visa, wartime survival, family resilience, hope and perseverance, storytelling, Holocaust education.

**SPEAKERS**

Cori Silbernagel, Elisha Wiesel, Jackie Congedo, Lisa MacVittie, Al Miller, Bella Ouziel

**Lisa MacVittie** 00:00

Nonetheless, survivor of the Holocaust in our family

**Jackie Congedo** 00:04

behind the words pictures and artifacts in the museum are people whose stories of survival and hope come alive to inspire new generations of upstanders, one by one, these stories stir the soul.

**Al Miller** 00:18

Can there really be hope for us?

**Bella Ouziel** 00:20

See, mine is 40018, my sister was 40017,

**Jackie Congedo** 00:28

Holocaust survivors, their descendants, liberators, champions of justice and courageous upstanders ask only this - hear my story - so that the lessons they teach will echo for generations

**Elisha Wiesel** 00:41

I will never meet someone else like my father, but there are many of us who, if we come together, can keep his voice alive.

**Jackie Congedo** 00:48

These stories will change you. They will move you to action, inspiring the best of humanity every day.

**Cori Silbernagel** 01:00

I'm Cori Silbernagel, Director of Collections & Exhibitions at the Nancy & David Wolf Holocaust & Humanity Center. Today, we have been welcomed into the home of Lisa MacVittie, a local Holocaust survivor. Many of the stories we share at the Holocaust and Humanity Center are stories of escape through Europe. Lisa's story of escape is a lot different, and I'm thrilled to be here today and to welcome you, Lisa,

**Lisa MacVittie** 01:26

well thank you

**Cori Silbernagel** 01:27

to our Hear My Story segment. Thank you for hosting us. One thing I think about when I think about you is that before we met each other, I knew very little about escape and survival in Shanghai, China. I didn't really know this part of the Holocaust. And through learning your story, I've learned, I've grown, and I'm really grateful to be able to sit here with you today and have you share this story with us.

**Lisa MacVittie** 02:01

Thank you.

**Cori Silbernagel** 02:02

So let's, let's get started. Tell me. Tell me where you were born,

**Lisa MacVittie** 02:08

in Berlin,

**Lisa MacVittie** 02:09

Berlin, Germany. Okay, my maiden name was Isaac. You, let's face it, how much more Jewish can you get than have a name like Isaac? So I had, we had no business in, in living in Europe at that time anymore, so my parents decided to vacate Germany and head for the hills.

**Cori Silbernagel** 02:09

tell me about your early life,

**Cori Silbernagel** 02:39

Yeah,

**Lisa MacVittie** 02:39

the Swiss Alps,

**Cori Silbernagel** 02:41

Well, and you, you were born in 1932 right? So you were born very shortly before the Nazi party came to power. You were young. You probably don't remember a lot of those early years, but what are there some things you do remember of life in Berlin. Are things your parents shared with you?

**Lisa MacVittie** 03:02

Well, I was six, going on seven at the time that we left, but I also had polio, and at that time, the general consensus was that polio was contagious, so they hauled you off to another hospital, and my parents had to get me out of that hospital in order to just get get away from The Nazis. And actually, in 1936 I think, yeah, 1936 that's when the Nazi party really came to power, and it was all because there was one young boy that objected to the treatment that his father got in France, and he was publicly beaten to death. So as a result, that gave Hitler the excuse for what he called it,

**Cori Silbernagel** 04:17

right,

**Lisa MacVittie** 04:19

whatever it is,

**Cori Silbernagel** 04:20

yeah, well, and and persecution of Jews happened quickly, yeah, and somewhat quietly over time. What drew your parents to leave? Was there a certain moment in time that they decided, "We can't stay?"

**Lisa MacVittie** 04:37

Well, when the, what they call Kristallnacht, which is crystal night, that was when they burned all the synagogues, all the all the Bibles and everything else they just destroyed. And anybody had a store, they destroyed it. And so that's when my parents and my uncle and aunt decided, "We gotta get out of here."

**Cori Silbernagel** 05:03

How? How did they decide where to go? What? What happened next?

**Lisa MacVittie** 05:09

Well, first of all, nobody in this world, except one place, was allowing Jewish people into the country, and so that place was China, or Shanghai in particular, and it was Harbin also. But they're the two major group where they said there were 20,000 of us in the Hongkew gathering we had. And it was just we had to get out, and that was the only open port. So we headed south to to Italy, my grandmother, we were there. We were at their house the night before we were to leave. And so as a result, you know, she got the family together and very quietly and all that, and had a nice dinner. And as we were leaving, my grandmother took my hand and she said, put something in it. And she says, "Now I want you to wear this for me when your mom and dad say it's okay to wear it," and it was a necklace with a little Star of David on it. Now she gave Ingrid, my sister Ingrid, hers also, and evidently, something I didn't know up until just the last 15 years, she must have given one to my aunt also. Well, my mother took my sister and my and me, and she took these necklaces and put them in a pocket in the back of a stroller they had rigged up for me because I was in a cast from the waist down. And so she put that way down into that pocket there on the back of a stroller, so in case they did get stopped, they weren't advertising, you know,

**Cori Silbernagel** 07:25

right

**Lisa MacVittie** 07:25

So anyways, flash forward a bit. 16 years ago, my uncle passed away in Los Angeles. I was, I was the one that was, I was to dispose of all of whatever stuff he had. Well, I flew out to Los Angeles and got there at nine o'clock at night, as there's nothing that I can do tonight. I couldn't sleep. I couldn't I couldn't concentrate on what I had to do, which legal processes and all that stuff. But so I couldn't sleep. I looked around. I said, There's got to be something I can do. I can't sleep. I can't keep pacing like that. So I decided, well, my aunt had passed away about six years earlier, and my uncle hadn't uncovered all of the reflections, stuff like my aunt's, what do they call it? It's a dresser drawer type thing, with a mirror and

**Cori Silbernagel** 08:37

her vanity

**Lisa MacVittie** 08:39

Her her vanity. It was still covered. And I says, okay, Aunt Harriet, time to uncover you. Any time I was out there, I always did things that he wanted me to do. He never asked me to uncover Aunt Harriet. So I decided, well, time has come. I've got to do it now or at a later date, you know. So I went, there were three jewelry boxes there. So I picked the middle one up, put it in the dining room table, and just tipped it. And when I brought it back, there was this little chain like you would on a bracelet, you know, a safety chain between the felt of this box and the wooden part on the outside. So I'm just pulling on this thing, and it keeps coming up and coming up, and there's a Star of David, the necklace like I had that I boohooed all the way from Germany to back to Shanghai, however far that I would never have because my mother and my father had forgotten that carriage that they rigged up was still on the tarmac when the train left. So the necklaces were gone. And says, I kept pulling and I says, Okay. Then it dawned on me, my grandmother must also have given my aunt one of those. Now I have that one, and it felt just like my grandmother was on my shoulder up here and is saying, "Okay, you can quit howling about it not having one," you know? So I have it in a frame now.

**Cori Silbernagel** 10:23

Wow, that's a beautiful story. I'm almost speechless just thinking about that. You know, this, this story that spans

**Lisa MacVittie** 10:33

Six and a half years old, you know?

**Cori Silbernagel** 10:36

Yeah

**Lisa MacVittie** 10:36

And I was just being a normal kid,

**Cori Silbernagel** 10:40

Yeah, well, and I imagine, you know, when, when you're six years old. I have a daughter that's six years old. Little things like that given by loved ones, particularly a grandmother, that's so special and so important, and that gift is being given to you at this point in your life where I'm sure

**Lisa MacVittie** 11:03

everything was upside down,

**Cori Silbernagel** 11:05

certainly, absolutely,

**Lisa MacVittie** 11:08

When I was hospitalized, we - Ingrid, and I - had one bedroom to share, and my brother, Joe, he had the other bedroom. And then my parents, well, that I was taken out of and put into an isolation hospital, and then from that to go on the road, even though I had to be pushed, pulled or carried because I couldn't bend with that cast.

**Cori Silbernagel** 11:36

Yeah

**Lisa MacVittie** 11:37

So you know, so many things were happening so fast at that time, yeah,

**Cori Silbernagel** 11:43

and I imagine then losing that necklace, that treasure,

**Lisa MacVittie** 11:48

yeah, that was traumatic, I guess,

**Cori Silbernagel** 11:51

Devastating. Yeah. How special, though, many years later to then

**Lisa MacVittie** 11:57

Like I say it's like she was sitting on my shoulder of my aunt says you can quit howling now.

**Cori Silbernagel** 12:02

That's beautiful. So, so let's talk about your escape a little bit more. You said goodbye to your grandmother that day.

**Lisa MacVittie** 12:14

Yeah,

**Cori Silbernagel** 12:15

she didn't leave with you.

**Lisa MacVittie** 12:16

No.

**Cori Silbernagel** 12:17

What happened to your grandmother?

**Lisa MacVittie** 12:19

Well, I up until recent years, and this is very recent, I never knew what happened to her. I couldn't find I found my grandfather, where they where he was buried, but my grandfather also was. They came in the middle of the night. My grandparents had a German Shepherd dog. In the middle of the night, they tried to break the door down, and the dog, of course, naturally attacked. So they shot the dog. And my grandfather was coming down the steps directly behind him, behind his dog, and they also shot and killed him right there. And that much I could find out from people that were still living weren't necessarily Jewish. And then my grandmother, I could never find out they took her, but I could not find out, what did they do with her? She was 63, years old. She was a diabetic, a type II diabetic. So how far could they have gone with her, you know? Never could find that out up until the the JCC not to see it's not the Jewish

**Cori Silbernagel** 13:37

Family Service

**Lisa MacVittie** 13:38

Jewish Family Service came along. I don't even, oh, I remember how I get there. Now, one of the gentlemen, I'm also a veteran, okay, so one of the gentlemen at the post at Legion Post over here, my husband had told him part of the story, and he says, You know, I have a, I don't know whether she was a niece, a cousin or a friend. I don't know, but she's still over there. She as we were leaving, well, this guy said his niece, or whatever, she would probably like to see me, and so we went over there and did we... as we were leaving the museum, I told you I was impressed with it, because it was really done tastefully, you know, not all the gore stuff, yeah. So he, she, as we were leaving, I told her, I says, "You know, to this day, I have no idea what they did with my grandmother." She says, "Well, you got time to come in back to my office?" And I, of course, I had a ride over there, and I looked at the gentleman that gave me the ride. And I says, Do you... he says, "Well, I don't have to be anywhere until six tonight. So yeah, why don't we go back?" So she when we went back to her office, and she put something in her computer, and immediately got a whole print out of what they did with my grandmother. They had her. They had her in three different countries over there, where they moved her from place to place to place, and then finally, in Belarus, is it they they euthanized her or killed her. I never knew that up until just recent years. So it's been maybe 10-15, years now.

**Cori Silbernagel** 15:45

Wow. You know, when you share the story of what happened to your grandmother and grandfather with me, it reminds me how, how few people even had the opportunity to escape.

**Lisa MacVittie** 16:01

That's right,

**Cori Silbernagel** 16:03

and and I, I'm so happy that you know you have this story of survival to share with us.

**Lisa MacVittie** 16:12

Well, that's that's what you do, what you must. And my parents were concerned. There were three of us there, and you know it's, you got to get your kids out first.

**Cori Silbernagel** 16:29

Yeah,

**Lisa MacVittie** 16:29

they should be first. And so they, I guess they sold everything they could sell without raising a question.

**Cori Silbernagel** 16:39

And who left with you? Just

**Lisa MacVittie** 16:42

my uncle, my aunt and my aunt's father.

**Cori Silbernagel** 16:46

Okay, tell me about the journey to Shanghai. You told me about, you know, them picking you up from the hospital. You not. You know you having to travel in this cart. Tell me a little bit more about what that was like. What do you remember from that time?

**Lisa MacVittie** 17:06

Really, like we wound up in Italy, and we had to eat, so we went into a not so nice restaurant, because I remember my mother didn't want to really eat there, so, but we had to stay undercover, more or less

**Cori Silbernagel** 17:27

sure

**Lisa MacVittie** 17:29

And I remember slurping the spaghetti, you know, go like that, like any kid would do. My mother told me the first time that was...wrong. That's wrong. You know, don't do that again. Of course, I couldn't resist there it went the third time She smacked me right alongside the not this leg this leg, so

**Cori Silbernagel** 17:58

she didn't want to draw attention to your family.

**Lisa MacVittie** 18:01

That's just it. But, you know, yeah, well, like you, how can you not draw attention when you've got a child in the cast on a stroller, you know? So you already were jeopardized as far as that goes. I remember that. I also remember going, I do not remember anything how we got from nape, Rome to Naples. We had to be in Naples in order to catch this ship that we had been able to acquire tickets for

**Cori Silbernagel** 18:35

I see.

**Lisa MacVittie** 18:37

And so I have no idea how I how we got from Rome to Naples, none whatsoever. I don't know why, but I just don't remember anything. Maybe they put they I did a lot of sleeping in those days. You know when you're being rolled around on a on a flat bed, of course, so maybe I was sleeping the whole day, but it's too far a distance. I don't know whether we took a train or if there was some underground activity done. I don't know, but I do remember when, as we were getting ready to enter the ship, there was lightning on the horizon. And my brother, who was six years older than me, he told me the story about how, if the ship gets hit, it'll sink. Lightning hits, it'll sink. And then he looked at me, and he says, are you on that cast, you'll never be able to come up again.

**Cori Silbernagel** 19:44

Oh, no.

**Lisa MacVittie** 19:45

Needless to say, I did the howling thing again. So my father was not happy, not happy with my brother at all,

**Cori Silbernagel** 19:54

I'm certain,

**Lisa MacVittie** 19:55

because he was old enough to know better than that.

**Cori Silbernagel** 19:58

Well there's, you know. There always has to be a good amount of healthy sibling.

**Lisa MacVittie** 20:03

Oh, yeah,

**Cori Silbernagel** 20:04

torture in family relationships.

**Lisa MacVittie** 20:06

I think my brothers, my brother's whole aim in life was to terrorize us two younger sisters.

**Cori Silbernagel** 20:12

Oh no... So how long was that ship journey?

**Lisa MacVittie** 20:18

About six weeks.

**Cori Silbernagel** 20:19

It's a long time. How did your family pass the days?

**Lisa MacVittie** 20:23

Well, actually, actually, after Joe told me that I they, they actually had to take the cast off, and it took a special kind of saw to do that with evidently, and they put me asleep to take it off because I was unconsoleable and scared stiff.

**Cori Silbernagel** 20:44

Wow, so, so when the cast came off as you're recovering from polio, was it? Was it difficult to regain your strength?

**Lisa MacVittie** 20:56

Actually, it was. I've got a picture where my mother and I are walking away from the camera, and you can still see how far I bent on the right side, but like I say, Joe was something else.

**Cori Silbernagel** 21:18

What was your relationship with your sister like at that time, you two are much closer in age, yeah,

**Lisa MacVittie** 21:23

only... months, yeah, 14 months. Actually, she was always the good sister. I was the mischievous one. So no, we were close sisters. Yeah, she always looked out for me. I remember one time when just towards the end of the war, the the American Air Force over there were ordered to bomb, you know, they were bombers, and they were going to hit Japan. That was just before the atomic attack. Just shortly before it, they were supposed to bomb the heck out of Tokyo and well, when they got there, Tokyo was covered in in clouds. They couldn't see what they were bombing. And in those days, you know, they opened up the bomb hatch when they think they could see it, you know. And it wasn't done with computers or anything like that. It was all manual, and they radioed back to them. Said, we can't see Tokyo. Tokyo is fogged in. So they said, All right, go ahead and go on to Shanghai and hit them. And we were hit pretty heavy over there. Well, Ingrid grabbed my hand and she says we got to run from the school where we were at to the where we were kept. Was quite a distance, about a 20 minute walk if you wanted to... You know, compare it to... it's about a 20 minute walk one way. And Ingrid and I decided we got to get home. So she dragged me through this field that I had no idea where she was going, but she got us home. So she's always been a big sister, you know. But here I am all by my lonesome, left of the Last of the Mohicans,

**Cori Silbernagel** 23:47

But today you have several generations of family.

**Lisa MacVittie** 23:53

Yes,

**Cori Silbernagel** 23:53

I think that's a beautiful legacy to leave.

**Lisa MacVittie** 23:56

Well, that's the whole point in life, is to enjoy life and well, just live it. Don't just drag through it.

**Cori Silbernagel** 24:10

I think that's really great advice. That's something I should really take to heart and carry with me every day, personally. So you and your sister were very close. And you know, I don't think I've ever heard that story of her telling you to run during that bombing... She sounds quite brave. Incredible.

**Cori Silbernagel** 24:10

She was the sensible one. I was the daring one.

**Cori Silbernagel** 24:17

Yeah, yeah.

**Cori Silbernagel** 24:19

So you, you were both and the others that traveled with you and your family, you were all in Shanghai for a long time. Tell me before we get into what what life was like and how it changed over those years. What was it like when you arrived? What happened?

**Lisa MacVittie** 24:55

Well, as we were getting off the ship, my mother said to my father, "Kurt, what... have we gotten us into?" The odor of the pier of the where the ships land, the odor from that was horrendous. My mother was a, what you could call a clean freak. She'd polish something she'd already polished before three or four times. And for her, this was, had to have been horrendous. You still had from the Sino Japanese war that was still pondering around over there, you know, where they killed each other and left the bodies in the street. And there's no garbage collector over there at all. So it all went by the side of the street, and the odor, like I say, the odor in itself, must have been horrendous for my mother and the not, what do you want to call it? They, they washed clothes a whole lot different than what my mother was used to. And they would hang them. They would they overhead on the top of the house. They always had on two houses apart. Over the top they had ropes, and they'd hang their wet clothes out on it, and then pull it over a bit and to the next spot and hang the next item you had on it, and all in the city, stinky air. And my mother remarked on those, "How can they wear these clothes like that?" So many times I heard her say that it was just, I think that bothered her more than the fact that it was really, basically, comparatively, I should say they lived dirty. They were not clean, not not healthy, and it was so different.

**Cori Silbernagel** 27:18

Yeah, it sounds, it sounds like a really different.

**Lisa MacVittie** 27:20

 It's a culture shock. It's a culture shock.

**Cori Silbernagel** 27:23

Yeah, so where, where did you live? How did your family, kind of, you know, for lack of a better word, settle in to this new life? Well,

**Lisa MacVittie** 27:37

Hongkew, or then they call it Hong Kong now, but Hongkou was always the poor level for the Chinese and also for a lot of of the people that came before us. The Shanghai, they opened up stores, European type stores, you know, like shoes and groceries and stuff like that that you need every for every day they they opened up stores for it. It became a Jewish community, almost the entire Hongkew and the Chinese nor the Japanese. Now, they got to remember China belonged to Japan at that time already, because they Japan won the Sino Japanese war. So the Chinese and the Japanese had didn't have a problem with the European influx. So while living there, at least you had some normal outlets, you know, like you needed a pair of shoes desperately. Not like me, I've got, I don't know how many pairs of shoes, but you had one pair, if you were lucky. Yeah. So we integrated with that. And of course, the school I was going to at that time, already, by time I was eight, I think I started kindergarten, because it was an English school. Sir [Horace] Kadoorie was the owner. The Kadoorie were owners of schools in... in China, and so they a allowed the school to for us to be schooled, but we had to take Japanese and school, which, of course, went in one ear and out the other ear.

**Cori Silbernagel** 29:36

Yeah, is so is this the school that you began to learn English?

**Lisa MacVittie** 29:40

Yes, and we could not. We weren't, weren't allowed to use any other language in English in school, because all the kids that were going to the school there came from all different parts of the world, and that would have been mayhem, really, you know? So they just decided English only. So this is all we were. Allowed to use. And you learn very quickly. When you're a child, you're like a sponge, you know, you sop up everything, sure, absolutely

**Cori Silbernagel** 30:10

well. And I imagine at this time, there's many other refugee families, oh, yeah, whose children are attending this school?

**Lisa MacVittie** 30:18

Right? They were all that way interesting.

**Cori Silbernagel** 30:23

So while you, while you and your siblings are at school learning, what were your parents doing? How did they get by? I really don't know.

**Lisa MacVittie** 30:37

I do know that there was a relief organization there, and they would, they would make, like, like, like, your kitchens now, like,

**Cori Silbernagel** 30:52

like a soup kitchen, yeah, parish kitchen, yeah.

**Lisa MacVittie** 30:56

And actually, there's one lady here in Cincinnati, whose parents probably are the ones that help keep us alive. They they had a butcher shop, and her father was, he was a butcher.

**Cori Silbernagel** 31:19

and did you live with your your aunt and uncle that traveled with you?

**Lisa MacVittie** 31:24

No, not really, okay. No, he, they, he and his father in law and his wife. They lived a little little ways away, not too, not too much, really, but a little bit.

**Cori Silbernagel** 31:42

When you arrived in Shanghai, it was not yet occupied by the Japanese.

**Cori Silbernagel** 31:49

It was okay. So what, you know, you talked a little bit about having to learn Japanese in school. What were some other ways that that this occupation was realized in the Shanghai ghetto?

**Lisa MacVittie** 31:49

Yes, it was.

**Lisa MacVittie** 32:08

Well, they put us all two together. Actually, they they made the rules, and the rules had to be enforced by inmates, actually, or whatever you want to call us. And they had to get permission from Goya. He was, they had a he was from the good faction, faction of Japan, and he was the overseer for the Shanghai ghetto, and you had to have permission to leave the... Hongkew area at all you know you if, if you they gave you a card or something, If you get stopped on the other side of that imaginary fence, sure, you know, then you better have one of those passes.

**Cori Silbernagel** 33:08

Yeah, yeah. It sounds, you know, it sounds that although your family had escaped, you know, Nazi Germany, life was still really very difficult, very restrictive, and you know, it's, it's hard to balance that survival, yet also struggle. What? What happened upon the end of the war? How? How do you remember learning about the war coming to an end?

**Lisa MacVittie** 33:41

Actually, we did have a radio in the - we didn't have it, but there was a radio in Hong Kong, and the Japanese never could find it. It was a short wave, and it traveled between like "Joe" would have it today, "Andrew" would have it the next day or forever time they

**Cori Silbernagel** 34:10

interesting, wow.

**Lisa MacVittie** 34:11

They just moved that thing around so they couldn't find it. The Japanese Couldn't find it

**Cori Silbernagel** 34:17

so is this how you got your news of what's happening?

**Lisa MacVittie** 34:20

always have the news, right

**Cori Silbernagel** 34:21

Wow.

**Lisa MacVittie** 34:22

And then also, they, after the war, they had this huge like a cork board where you pin up a message or something on it, that's before you had stickies. They had this board, and on it would be John Smith is looking for, for Adam, or somebody you know, and that that had supposedly like they had incoming messages that they pinned up. On that every morning, at about four o'clock, those messages came through, and they were put up on that board. And my father would check the board each time to find out who's left in Berlin, you know. And of course, none of my family, my father's family, survived that didn't get out. So it was - he kept looking, though. Checked the board every morning.

**Cori Silbernagel** 35:29

Yeah, when the war ended, did your family begin to plan to leave Shanghai?

**Lisa MacVittie** 35:38

Oh, yes, by all means,

**Cori Silbernagel** 35:40

yeah,

**Lisa MacVittie** 35:40

my mother - but we weren't going back to Germany, that's for sure.

**Cori Silbernagel** 35:45

So, so where to? how did they?

**Lisa MacVittie** 35:48

We know my my father talked about the United States, and my mother did too. So, but she did not speak a word of English. She had, she's been a mom. No, she didn't have a profession. And when you check back, the old quota was issued on what you could give to this country by coming here. And you had to be, you know, you had to be free from any legal stuff you had, you know, you you just had to be just a very nice person that had something to offer to this country. Well, my mother has been a mom, that's it. And by that time, my father was gone, and so my mother is left with two teenage girls and a baby, and she must have had courage beyond compare, to go into a country where you don't speak the language, you have nothing to offer them, and here you are getting out of it. Yeah.

**Cori Silbernagel** 37:10

How did she? How did she work to get an American visa to come to the United States?

**Lisa MacVittie** 37:18

I don't - Well, we were on the list before my father got killed. We were on the list of my father's sister and her husband. They had come instead of going the route we went. They went through into Canada, and then came from Canada to New Jersey. And so they, they were our hub, yeah, yeah, we had to, if we got to the states, we had to go to New Jersey. So she, she and her husband sponsored us. We had sponsors.

**Cori Silbernagel** 37:59

Okay, and how old were you when?...

**Lisa MacVittie** 38:01

16- 16, going on 17, just short of 17. So

**Cori Silbernagel** 38:05

again, so many years have

**Lisa MacVittie** 38:07

10 years

**Cori Silbernagel** 38:07

passed. What? What was it like first arriving in the United States as a teenager?

**Lisa MacVittie** 38:17

 Awesome.

**Cori Silbernagel** 38:18

Yeah. What are some of the things you remember?

**Lisa MacVittie** 38:21

Well, I remember the coming, the ship coming into the harbor over there, going under the Golden Gate. And it was the last ship of refugees that came out of China. We got off the ship under the Golden Gate Bridge. And everybody that was on that ship, they were all on deck. I couldn't believe how many people were on that ship. I had never realized there were that many people. And it was awesome to come into that harbor there and in San Francisco,

**Lisa MacVittie** 39:00

yeah, yeah.

**Lisa MacVittie** 39:03

The HIAS organization, I guess, had something to do with it

**Cori Silbernagel** 39:07

with this ship of refugees. You know, another interesting part of your story, to me, is that you know you didn't arrive through New York Harbor in New York City, like so many Holocaust survivors, did. You came through San Francisco and and I think that's fascinating. How long were you in San Francisco? You had said you needed to go to New Jersey,

**Lisa MacVittie** 39:36

Right, And when we got to the port by daylight, there was somebody standing down there with a big sign "Isaac." My mother says, hmm, what's that? I said, I don't know. We'll go find out. And so this lady, she immediately took us to a hotel, and we remained there for maybe 10 days. I don't know for how, for sure, how long, but there was, I don't know, back in the years, that they had places where kids can go and play these machine remember them, the ball machines. They used to have

**Cori Silbernagel** 40:21

pinball,

**Lisa MacVittie** 40:22

arcades. There you go.

**Lisa MacVittie** 40:24

Yeah, love that.

**Lisa MacVittie** 40:25

There was one down the street, and I I couldn't figure out what they were doing, but it was fantastic. And I remember thinking, this is going to be fun, yeah, yeah. So and like I say, they my mother had to have been courageous beyond compare, because when you've got two teenage girls, you have no way of income, you have no you don't speak the language. What happens? Definitely nothing good. But my mother didn't realize how well a mother she was. This woman put us on a train, and off to New Jersey we went. And as with the train was rolling, my sister and I were looking out, you know, just watching the scenery. And one of us said to the other one, I wonder what they got "lots for sale of?" All the signs were lots for sale. The gentleman that was in the seat in front of us there came up over like "Kilroy Was Here," you know, you just see the head and the hands, and he says, Where are you two girls from?

**Cori Silbernagel** 41:50

So he was eavesdropping a little bit,

**Lisa MacVittie** 41:53

right? Never thought of it that way. But he cleared that one up for us. So we realized we definitely had to learn another language here.

**Cori Silbernagel** 42:05

Yeah, that's interesting. So you had learned, you had learned English in school,

**Lisa MacVittie** 42:11

even though, even though we spoke English, we didn't speak the same English,

**Cori Silbernagel** 42:15

yeah, now you need to learn, learn how to walk the walk. So So you came to New Jersey,

**Lisa MacVittie** 42:24

and there again was somebody "Isaac," actually was we were in Chicago. We had to change trains in Chicago, and there was this lady again, another lady, "Isaac." So we went there, my mother and my baby brother and my sister and me, she put us on a train - in a taxi to get to the other train station, because the station we were on from California didn't go straight through to New Jersey, so you had to go to another train station to catch it. Now, can you imagine, you have two teenaged girls and a baby, and you're getting on a train with in a cab with a woman that you don't know? You know had it been horrendous...

**Cori Silbernagel** 43:16

Yeah? Yeah. I think, you know, I think not only about your mother's bravery and courage, but also just her perseverance and in doing what she had to do, I think

**Lisa MacVittie** 43:32

she lived to be 88

**Cori Silbernagel** 43:34

Yeah, that speaks volumes. And then again, to go on to live a long life

**Lisa MacVittie** 43:41

and the not so bad life she had. She worked for minimum wage all of her life and but she made do with it.

**Cori Silbernagel** 43:54

Yeah, yeah. So let's move forward a little bit in time. You know, we've, you've shared, you've you've shared your story of your childhood escape from Berlin and then now to coming to the United States and rebuilding your life here. Your sister doing that, your mother doing that. What? Where did you go as an adult? Specifically tell me about your military service.

**Lisa MacVittie** 44:34

Okay, isn't much to tell. I made my citizenship in November. You had to have four years in country before you could become a citizen. And in December, I joined the Air Force, the American Air Force. I felt that the... There were so many young people like myself at that time that had had to go to war. Some of them came back, others came back in a box, and I always felt that I owed them something. So that's how come I decided to join the Air Force, and off I went to Texas.

**Cori Silbernagel** 45:24

What was training like for you?

**Lisa MacVittie** 45:28

Actually, I don't, they don't compare to my mother, let me tell you that.

**Cori Silbernagel** 45:33

So she was really the one that prepared you for military.

**Lisa MacVittie** 45:37

I think so we were, if we were told, if we were told to do something, my parents didn't have to remind us twice or three times. You know, one time is all and the same thing is in the military, yeah? And, you know, my grandchildren, I got a lot of them that were all in the service. My own children, all were all but one of mine were in the service. And the only reason Kurt wasn't in the service was because he was born with a bad heart, and the Air Force had to pay because my husband was a lifer in the service, and so the Air Force paid for his medical for Kurt's medical bills.

**Cori Silbernagel** 46:24

So you and your husband were in the Air Force? Yes, as we met them there, how many children did you go on to have?

**Lisa MacVittie** 46:31

four

**Cori Silbernagel** 46:31

four children, and where? Where did you end up? You? You didn't come to Cincinnati until a bit later in life, yeah,

**Lisa MacVittie** 46:42

well, I we, we signed them when basic training was in Lackland, Texas, okay, and your your training, depending on your career field that they trained you in, you had to go to the various different schools. Well, my husband and I wound up in the same school. He and I had the same what they called an AFSC, that's a whatever you were trained in schooling additional to what you know you know. So so he and that's how we met, is in that school, and that was in Texas. And then after that, women weren't allowed in the service, unless they were they had no children or no husband, you couldn't be married and be in the service for women at that time.

**Cori Silbernagel** 47:48

Yeah,

**Lisa MacVittie** 47:49

and but finally, I don't know how we managed it, but we allowed, we got permission to get married, and then the with the condition was that if I got pregnant, child would come first, and I'd be out of the service. So two years later, I got pregnant, and I was out of the service then,

**Cori Silbernagel** 48:18

and then you became a mother. Yes,

**Lisa MacVittie** 48:20

we know the same week, the same week that I was out of the service, my husband also got orders to go to Germany, and I had trepidations about going to Germany, but I decided I looked in the mirror and I says, You idiot, they'd never know you can speak German as fluently as I could, unless you told them so, so, yeah, they wouldn't let me fly even because I was pregnant, they wouldn't let me fly over. I had to take a ship. I don't know what's which is worse a ship or

**Cori Silbernagel** 49:00

a long ship passage or flight.

**Lisa MacVittie** 49:04

Comparatively, I don't think there's much of a of a bet as to who would be in the best interest of

**Cori Silbernagel** 49:12

Yeah.

**Lisa MacVittie** 49:12

But anyways, I took a ship over and he met me. We he met me in Paris. Well, from from the port, the ship landed on to Paris. I had to take a train, and he met me there in Paris, then, and the rest is history. We were married. We had first child, the second child before we came back, we were three years over there.

**Cori Silbernagel** 49:40

Wow. When we were when we were playing phone tag, calling each other back and forth, trying to schedule a time for this interview. I called you on Veterans Day this year, and I thanked you for your military service, and you said something to me that I still think about all the time, believe it or not. You told me that you are just one of many generations of your family that have served in the military. And I think, I think that is a beautiful legacy that your family carries into our world today. Can you tell me a little bit about about these many generations of military service?

**Lisa MacVittie** 50:34

Well, from my husband and me, we had four children. These four children, two boys, two girls. Let's see No ...I got to put those people in order. Anyways, my daughter had four children. My oldest son had four children, and then my number two son, he only had two. And then number three son, well, he had four, but three of the four were adopted. He only really had one. But so all of my children, the majority of them, somebody has served in the family, and right now, my one grandson, he's a father, he's married, happy marriage, at least, I think it is, and he's in the service.

**Cori Silbernagel** 51:38

I think that's really, I think it's a really special legacy that you and your husband have handed down to your children, and grandchildren

**Lisa MacVittie** 51:46

At last Fourth of July, we had 134 years of service in the military from my husband and me down. That's a lot of years, but it

**Cori Silbernagel** 52:05

is, yeah, it's a lot of years. I have a question for you. Today, you know, after all of these years have passed since your childhood, in the years rebuilding after the Holocaust, why do you share your story today?

**Lisa MacVittie** 52:25

Simply so young people in school can learn from it, from learn what you can and then what you what isn't right. Don't just accept it and look the other way. You know, if it isn't right, it's wrong,

**Lisa MacVittie** 52:44

yeah,

**Lisa MacVittie** 52:45

there is no in between,

**Lisa MacVittie** 52:47

yeah

**Lisa MacVittie** 52:48

So I always, I just figured, just like this book, yeah,

**Cori Silbernagel** 52:55

yeah, you know. So, so we brought this book with us today. You wrote this book with your son.

**Lisa MacVittie** 53:03

My youngest son.

**Cori Silbernagel** 53:04

Why did you decide to write down your story?

**Lisa MacVittie** 53:08

Because so many people have said, "You need this in writing."

**Cori Silbernagel** 53:12

Yeah,

**Lisa MacVittie** 53:13

you need to put it down and well, there may have been 20 or 30,000 Jews in Hong Kong. I never quite could get a straight answer. I always assumed, or I heard it somewhere, there were 20,000 of us there. And then, when I was talking to the curator for the Shanghai museum there, he said there were 30,000 so make up 25,000 halfway through, right? Yeah, either way, a lot of people wound up in Shanghai and the Chinese they this is their way of life. For us over here, like if we have exchange students, they always marvel at how much green space we still have in this country, that they don't have in theirs.

**Cori Silbernagel** 54:15

Very different way of

**Lisa MacVittie** 54:16

Yes.

**Cori Silbernagel** 54:18

Well, I I have read this memoir that you've put together, and I think that it really captures some some of these significant stories of life in Shanghai, of your escape from Germany. What did it mean? Maybe you don't know, but what did it mean for your son to work on this project with you?

**Lisa MacVittie** 54:46

I - He was one of the ones that always kept saying, Mom, you gotta write it down. Yeah.

**Cori Silbernagel** 54:51

So it's important to your kids that this story is remembered.

**Lisa MacVittie** 54:57

And believe it or not. I am the only Jew in this family, in all of these other generations, but each one of these kids, when Hanukkah comes, they can light the menorah.

**Cori Silbernagel** 55:15

Beautiful.

**Lisa MacVittie** 55:17

It's just they're doing it for me. And I think that's great.

**Cori Silbernagel** 55:25

Yeah, I think that's very special. I want to read a passage from your book, if that's okay with you. In the very beginning, there's a series of acknowledgments. You know who this book is written for this beautiful dedication here, and it's something that as we at the Holocaust center, as we read your book and actually use it as a resource and teaching children that come into the museum or into the classroom, this is a dedication that you know really is special to us because it reflects our mission and why we are sharing about the history of the Holocaust. So I'm going to read this to you. I would love to hear a little bit about what this means to you. So you wrote here, "To the survivors. There was much between here and there, and yet you persevered. You found your new home in one of the many countries that eventually took in refugees, and you thrived. Though our story starts in terror, it ends in joy and peace." And you also write, "To those who have never seen terror. It is my sincere hope that you never see the type of persecution that the Nazis brought to a fever pitch. But if you do, this book is for you to remind you that this too shall pass. Do all that you can do to stop such oppression when it starts. But should you be the victim? There is hope. Cling to it." It kind of it kind of chokes me up to hear that. I think that's really powerful.

**Lisa MacVittie** 57:21

My father was the one that kept saying tomorrow will be better. We knew tomorrow won't be any better than yesterday, or we knew that, but just hearing him say that made the difference. He had hope, a lot of hope, and yet he never got to leave Shanghai. He's buried over there.

**Cori Silbernagel** 57:46

How special though, to have to continue carrying that message forward, though, that message of hope. It reminds me that, you know, we can overcome the troubles of the day, that we can continue to persevere, and it's such an incredibly important message. It's such an incredibly important lesson, that we can carry forward from the Holocaust. I have one more question for you, Okay, before we end today. I asked, Why? Why you share your story? My other question is, is it hard to share your story?

**Lisa MacVittie** 58:42

I uh, yes, but I do do it. It's one of those things that somebody has to do it. It might as well be me, yeah, since I can still talk, I can still stand upright, I walk. I may be 92 years old, but I'm 92 years young.

**Cori Silbernagel** 59:05

That's beautiful. Well, thank you from the bottom of my heart. Thank you for sharing your story.

**Lisa MacVittie** 59:12

Thank you for allowing me to share it.

**Cori Silbernagel** 59:16

Thank you, Lisa.

**Jackie Congedo** 59:19

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