

Mrs. Jeremias. We're continuing now, and I'd like to ask you to retell the story that you were telling about your mother in Auschwitz after she was taken. Something about Kristallnacht.

It was Kristallnacht. After Kristallnacht.

After Kristallnacht, I'm sorry.

Yeah. My mother took the Kristallnacht, the November 10th, as a fast day. She felt this was like the destruction of the temple being that all the synagogues in all of Germany were burned the same night or destroyed.

She felt this warranted a fast day. So she fasted even when we were in concentration camp that day from 38 until, I presume, she got killed. She felt that was a very important date for her as far as the Jewish people went.

Yeah. Let's get back to your own story. You were taken in by a family, you said.

In France. A non-Jewish family. The man was a scout leader in the non-Jewish scouts. And this is, I presume, how the people found him. I was taken in-- I was taken as a maid. They had six children. And I had to do, you know, the work of a maid.

I had to eat in the kitchen as a maid, and so on and so forth, which made me feel very bad. After three months, when the people knew me, they made me part of their family. I was able to eat with them at the table. The children had to help me whatever I asked them to do. And they were very nice.

They knew, of course, that you were Jewish?

I don't know what they knew. They did not know the whole story. I think they knew I was Jewish, but they believed I came from Alsace-Lorraine because at this point I had false papers. I had them already in the convent. At that part I'm already there.

Did you have a feeling that they didn't want to know perhaps?

They should not have known, no. Because the less they knew, the better off they were as well as I. They should not have known.

How old were the children in the family, and how many were there?

The oldest was 10 when I got there. There were six of them. And the little one was three months old. And being that I always wanted to be a baby nurse, that's the one I took care of. I was supposed to do all kinds of menial work as they were both teachers, English teachers. And I took to the baby and I bathed the baby, which she was going to do when she came home.

So they, as I said, after three months, I basically took care of the children and the baby. And the rest of the work, they took somebody in to do the-- not the cooking or the ironing but the heavy cleaning. They took somebody in because they thought that I was good with the children, and she didn't have to do it when she came home.

They were very nice, but they knew very little. I presume they knew I was Jewish. My papers read that I came from Alsace-Lorraine, that I was not Jewish. And this is what I told the children. I did not speak French yet at the time or very, very little. I took the children's primers very often during the morning, instead of dusting and read them, and this is how I taught myself French.

The lady of the house spoke a little German because she originally came from Alsace-Lorraine. So this was good. But once I started speaking, we no longer spoke German, only French. So I taught myself to read and write in French.

I never walked out of the house. We lived in the two family building. We were on the top floor. I went to the yard with the children. I did not go shopping or anything because at that time, this was now 1943 I guess, the Germans were all over France at this point already.

And in the region that was again in Brive, where I had been earlier, they had a lot of Maquis in that part of France, so the Germans were very prevalent there and constantly looking where they could find Maquis or Jews or whatever.

The Maquis being the resistance?

Yes, that's the French resistance. Yes. I just did my work and spend the time with the family, and that's it. I saw no one. Again, the same lady who had taken care of me earlier would come and bring ration cards because you could not live without them. They were very important.

I don't know what kind of papers she had, but she somehow managed to come through. So I don't think she came monthly. But whenever she came, she would tell me what was going on and little tidbits of other children and where they were that I had been with. Other than that I was completely isolated with this family.

In 1944, in the spring, when things went bad for the Germans and when the resistance was already very prevalent in France, the Germans were just in this part of France terrible. They would go into a village where they suspected that they had either Jews or resistance or both, take all the people into the church, and burn the church. That happened right near where I was.

In the next-- nearby in a village, they would take 100 men, kill them, and string them on the balconies. And everybody had to go by and look at them. This is what happens to you if you harbor Jews or if you harbor Maquis. They were absolutely impossible. So again, you lived in constant, constant fear.

They made a-- must have been Easter time when they came to each and every home to look for Jews. They came to our house as well. I was hiding in the attic. The family underneath us I found out later, didn't know that time, were collaborators. They happened to like me because I helped them out at times. They had children. If they needed somebody, they could always call on me.

Maybe they had an inkling of something because, after all, what maid is always home and never goes out? Maybe they had an inkling. They told the Germans nobody lives in the upstairs except us. We occupy the whole house. I think this is how come I wasn't found. Would I have been found--

So even though they were collaborators, they were still--

I guess they still-- as I said, they liked me. They liked the family. They themselves would have been in danger had they found me because not only would I have been killed but the family I was with and them for not having said anything. So they could not take a chance of having me found. So this is how I escaped that day.

I slept in the attic from that day on. I would not sleep anyplace else. I would sleep in the attic only. That was in April, also in the spring. I forget which month. In August of '44, we were liberated by the Maquis. They somehow did that.

For a while we had to go-- the Germans came back. They were bombing that whole area. So we had to flee into the woods again not to be bombed. But that was only, I don't remember, a couple of weeks maybe. And then we came back and we were free. After I was freed I had to go to the prefecture. This is--

Police.

The police headquarters.

The police headquarters to get my own papers. Because up till now I had only false papers. So I brought the false papers in and I got my own papers. And--

You did this on your own--

Yes.

--without any fear of anything backfiring? Other people were doing it at this time?

Yes, you had to do it. Because you had to be-- because at this point you were free and you had to be open. You needed ration cards. You needed to be part of the population. So you had to do that. So that's what I did.

I stayed with this family until the fall, I think it was October, until then school started. At this point, again, the children homes were opened and the children were collected from the various places. I then went again to a scout home, but this time it was mixed. We had 100 children in that home from all ages.

Of course, I was one of the oldest and no longer was a child at this point. But I was a child because of circumstances. I was in the home. It was very well run. And I think the money came largely from America. And the German-- and the French government did pay something to the home for us.

In the home they had something different. In the mornings, the children would go to school. In the afternoon, they would have workshops. They had sewing for the girls, bookbinding, [? iron ?] for the boys, woodworking shops. What else was there? I think that's it. I don't know. Maybe another thing.

And this is how the children were basically rehabilitated in the home. It was very well run. I, having always wanted to go become a baby nurse, did not do any of these things. I was sent out into a home in the village to take care of babies, to learn how to take care of babies.

They asked you what your interests were, in other words?

Yes.

Kids were not just arbitrarily put into these--

Oh, no. No, no.

Whatever interested you.

You had a choice on what you wanted to become. And if they saw you were especially good at something or other like with me, and Jews who had the experience of the war where I was and what I did, they had psychologists working. And they didn't work with the children, not that you knew it, but they knew you anyway. So I was going out and doing that. But that didn't last long because I wasn't taught anything.

The people who did all this were free French? They were the--

By now we are back again to the Jewish people who survived, the French Jews who survived.

The French Jews.

The French Jews who survived and who originally-- this was called-- the organization was OSAE-- Organization of Security-- of Secure Children. I mean, [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH]

[NON-ENGLISH SPEECH]

Yeah, that's originally who did it. But I was mostly with the scouts who was part of this. So were are all very, very dedicated people who did that. Many older people and many-- and basically young people.

You mentioned that that didn't last very long, your training.

No, it didn't last long. So I--

What happened then?

--came back to the home. I sat in on the sewing. And the doctor who was-- the person who was the doctor in the home had two little children. One was one year old and the other one was two years old. Her husband was a rabbi. They were very instrumental also in hiding people and doing all this. This man was caught in '44, a month before the liberation, was killed. She was left a widow with the two children.

I became very friendly with her, and I took care of the children while she was busy doing other things. So this is what I did then instead of being in the home. After I was in the home for about a half a year or longer, the home was willing to send me to Paris to a very famous school to learn that, which costed a lot a lot of money. They were willing to do that for me. The school would not take me because I was German.

Not Jewish, but German.

Not Jewish, German. In Germany I couldn't go to school because I was Jewish. In France I couldn't go because I was German. So I just was in the home and was very helpful. The younger children somehow seemed to take to me. Whenever they had a problem, they would come to me. Some of them called me my little mother. So I was-- being that I was old, I was very helpful in that sense that I was with the younger children.

They had a very nice system where the children got paid every month a certain amount of money if the grades were good. If the grades were below a certain grade, they would get less. If it was above, they would get more. And with that money I had to buy their own toiletries and personal things.

I was in charge of buying these things and selling them to the kids for less money, obviously. But this is how they taught the children to take care of themselves a little bit. Because after all, it's all from nothing. So this home was very well run.

And after I was freed, the Red Cross-- this person who took care of me got in touch with the Red Cross. I had kept one piece of paper with a number and the name of a street. That was the name of-- the street name and the number of where my sister was here in America.

I didn't have a name with it. I didn't have a town with it. All I had was a number and a name because I was afraid if I would be caught of what would happen. I gave this number and then, of course, the name to the Red Cross, and they looked for my sister to let her know that I was alive. Give me a minute. It took six months for me to hear from my sister.

Take a drink.

When I heard from my sister, I got a package from her. I was in the home already. She sent me a package. There was no letter in it. Just a package. It was a very upsetting thing for me that I heard and that I didn't have anything in writing. I sat down on the floor, opened the package, and handed out whatever I had to all the children.

A few-- I don't know how long much later I did get a letter. And of course, that made a big difference. My sister in the meantime had gotten married and lived in a different place. But this is how I heard.

And she, of course, immediately said she wants me to come and immigrate to America, to where she is. I had really wanted to go to Palestine. But once my sister wanted me to come, that was it. It took two years for me to get papers and to be able to immigrate to America.

You had to still wait for the quota?

I don't think there was a quota at the time anymore. Again, in those days, with me I lived in a fog, and I just did things automatically without thinking. It took time for me to get the papers. It took time to get to the consulate. Now, I don't know if there was a quota or if there was a different reason why it took so long for me to go to the consulate where they examined you and they-- I don't know, the kind of questions if you were, you know, a good candidate to come to immigrate.

Wasn't easy to come. Even in those days they did not let you in just recently. And my sister had to put money up for me to come. This is what they did all along. People who gave affidavits had to put money into the bank, and that was earmarked for the people that came.

So you had to have means in order to give affidavits. I presume that's why when my sister got the affidavit, the uncle of my mother, he had let a lot of people come. And when it came to us, I guess he figured he lets my sister come and whatever. It was not easy for the people here either. Was not like today that you just can walk in.

So I was in the home until 1946 in August when I immigrated to this country. And the day I immigrated was pretty bad too. Because up to that date I have always hoped that I would see my parents, that somehow they would show up because we did not know what had happened.

In the meantime, we knew about Auschwitz. We knew about a lot of things because in the home, after the war, after Auschwitz, the director that ran the home was Hungarian. And the Hungarian Jews were taken the very last to Auschwitz. So there were Hungarian survivors. We in the home took some children in from Auschwitz. I guess it must have been in the middle of '45.

Hungarian children?

There were Hungarian children that came from Auschwitz. So of course, we knew all about Auschwitz at that time already. I did not know my parents ended up there. I found that out when I came here. Until the day I left France, I was hoping they would show up.

When I left, I was all alone. All my friends-- because I left from Paris, they were all scattered about. And I went in to train all by myself. And it was a terrible thing to have to come all by yourself and knowing that this was it. Your parents were no longer to be found. I came to this country, and I lived with my sister who at that time lived in a one bedroom apartment, had a baby. I slept in the living room.

Was that in New York?

In New York City. And of course, they were not able to support me so I went to work in the garment district. Having been sitting in on the various courses when I had nothing else to do, I did pick up sewing. And this is how I made my living then when I came to this country.

I met my husband through my sister. And we knew each other for two years when we got married. And I lived with my sister until the day I did get married. We were married, and we have two children.

By now we have seven grandchildren. And this is really-- we picked up our lives. And thank God our children are wonderful and so are the grandchildren, and this is what gives us the pleasure and the nachas.

Your husband is a survivor too?

Yes, but he was not in a concentration camp. He left Germany in 1936 to go to school in Italy because he no longer could go to school in Germany. So his parents were able to get him to Italy. And--

He came with his family to Italy?

No.

No, just alone?

He went alone. I believe he told me that two times he was able to go back to Germany to visit them. And then the Germans wouldn't let him in anymore either. He came to this country in '39 alone also. His parents came later. They were in Santa Domingo waiting out their border number there. So he has his own story to tell.

Were you able to talk about your experiences?

No. Also my sister told me when I came here, I don't want to hear your story. I had it hard here myself, which was true. She was 17 years old and no parents and had to fend for herself here also. And I couldn't even talk about it even if she had wanted to. But she, at the time, was not able to hear what had happened. I guess she felt guilty that she was here and we were there.

Did that ever change as far as she was concerned?

No, not really.

What about your children? Have you--

No, I did not talk to my children about it. I wanted to forget about it. I needed to forget about it. I had an uncle here. He passed away in '53. For some reason that triggered basically a nervous breakdown for me. I used to wake up with nightmares. I used to scream, and it was a very traumatic thing.

Somehow his passing away, I guess, was, for me, the link with the past, and that triggered a very bad experience for me. And I wanted to forget it. And I never-- my children knew where I come from. They knew my parents got killed. But they did not know anything of what I'm telling you-- told you today.

And they didn't ask questions either?

Not too much, no. We had, I would say, a, normal life at home in the sense that the children were not made to feel that we went through a lot. And you know-- and you have to know about it. We wanted them to have a good way of living rather than to have to live our past.

So we did-- they knew-- one day my daughter brought home a friend from school-- just remembered that-- for lunch. And very nice child. We started talking. Children always came to me. Turns out this was a child from German parents, non-Jewish parents. Girl was a very nice girl.

I said to my daughter, Paulette, please don't bring her anymore. I do not want to have anything to do with her. And she didn't. She understood. So they knew enough to be aware of my feelings and of what I was telling them. But they did not know any details.

At what point and how did you find out about your parents?

Well, we had to go through the restitution business. And so the Germans keep records. So they're the ones that told us, I mean, not us, whoever did this, that they ended up in Auschwitz. I knew they were taken in '44. August but not where to.

That's when we found out that they had ended up in Auschwitz. From Rivesaltes they were taken to Les Milles, which was another camp in France near Paris. And from there they went to Auschwitz right away. So that was in '44. And I don't know how long they lasted there.

Have you ever had the feeling or the curiosity that you would want to go and check your hometown where you once

lived? Because some people do.

The first letter my sister wrote she says, what do you want? I said, I want money to go back to Germany to show them I'm alive. She said, no way. I'm very grateful today because it was a childish attitude on my part. What I wanted to do was just to walk in and say, see, you didn't kill me. But it would have killed me if I had done it. So she was very smart to say no way.

It's a normal reaction--

Since then I have had no desire whatsoever to go back. None. If I ever am in Europe, I may want to go and visit the cemetery where my grandparents are but not to stay in Germany. I feel they-- somehow I would not feel comfortable there. I do remember too much on how it was and what it was like in school and how the children were taught. And to me, this is still in them.

What makes you able to talk about this now when you found it so hard before?

Several years ago when my grandson was in third grade-- now he's 15. That must have been when he was nine years old. Maybe six years ago. His teacher was a friend of my daughter's, and she taught on the Holocaust. She asked me to speak to this class. I told her, no way.

She said, try to think and try to push yourself to tell your grandson a little bit about what went on because I feel it is very important that these children learn. And this is how I pushed. And then I pushed it away again for several years until I felt that we, the German Jewish people, have not spoken about it, and it should be done. And therefore I'm pushing because I really feel that we kept too much to ourselves.

What was your grandson's reaction?

At the time?

Yeah.

The whole class was very intuned to me, including him. But they were nine years old. They had a lot of questions. One little girl, she said, how could you survive with two suitcases? When I go overnight I need two suitcases. This is the kind of reactions these little ones had.

They were very attentive and listened very carefully. And so did my grandson. But after that, I'm his grandmother, and let's not talk about it. Every so often now his sisters more and my other daughters also, the girls come. Grandma, please tell us what happened to you, and please tell us.

And we sit down for hours. But I don't tell them these stories. I tell them all the nice stories of what happened to me. But they do ask, and they do want to know their own way, yes.

Is there anything else you want to say?

I can't think of any just now, and I possibly will have forgotten a lot of things that were in here. But--

You can take a minute to look through if you want.

Just to look through. I guess nothing very important.

Were you left with any feeling about religion?

What is my feeling about religion?

About Judaism? About God?

I was-- as I said, I was raised in an Orthodox way with my mother-- I don't know if I told you that. I was allowed to go to Heidelberg. I think I did.

Yes.

I feel it's very important that we keep the traditional way of Judaism. I think that we are making a mistake if we go away from it. This is what the Jews in Germany tried to do. And Hitler would not let them. If you had one drop of blood yay many generations ago in you, he would find you, and he would make you to be a Jew.

I think it is a mistake for us to assimilate too much and to go away from our own. This is my feeling. We are traditional at home. We are not Orthodox, but we are very traditional. We keep the holidays. We keep Shabbat.

My one daughter is Orthodox, and the other one is like us. And I feel it is very important that we keep it that way. As a Jew, we cannot afford to go away from it and to water it down too much. That's my feeling.

Thank you very much.

Thank you.