

We continue with Lillian Ross's narrative. Continue with your story of Ravensbrück.

No, Ravensbrück was a terrible camp. It was a camp of living skeletons. Because the people there stayed for years. And that was in Germany, where the food was really very scarce.

And it was unbelievable how the people lived. They were just-- they didn't gas them, they starved. They starved. And it looked like that will be our fate, too, because we were totally isolated in this camp, you know. Nobody even came close. I mean that Lager. The [GERMAN].

Oh, the only way to get food was through your German, the woman who was in charge. And of course, a lot of the girls that came from Auschwitz-- and a lot of them were very good-looking. And you know, they were, they had-- who stayed in Auschwitz to the last minute. You know, they had positions. That they were well-fed. They went for it. So there was a lot of stories there.

It was very interesting, in a way, to see how they were competing for her attention. Because she was a lesbian, too. And trying to get some food. And luckily, one day, they took us on a transport. And we really couldn't believe they put us in a passenger to Pullman's cars with heat. And they gave each a small care package to eat.

You can't imagine what that means, to feel warmth. When we sat down on the soft seats and we felt the warmth coming through it, we felt that that must be the end of the war. And especially, when we've got a little ration of things that we didn't see for such a long time. That gave us a tremendous hope.

We came to Neustadt-Glewe. That was a camp that was an Air Force factory. But there was no work for us. They just kept there all in the camp and gave us a daily ration of food. I had the bad luck, again, to go with that Polish [GERMAN], which I told you. And the bread that we got, one for 10 or something like that, mostly was molded.

So of course, the molded bread was distributed among the Jewish people. And the [GERMAN] elders that I suspect she must have been a Jew who was posing as a Polish apologized to me. And she said, what can I do? If I give you the good, they will kill me.

And I was her favorite, because she used to bring me papers, German papers that I've translated for her. And from the papers, we could see that the war was almost over. As I told you, that's all the Polish people were waiting for. They should take us out and kill us. Then they will really know the war was over.

But the starvation was terrible. We really, we couldn't go on. My sister was already on her last leg, and so was I. Because the last two days, they didn't give us any food at all. And we could see through the window the officers of the Air Force coming in and going out in civilian clothing. And the English planes were flying and dropping leaflets-- keep courage, we are coming, we are close by, the Allies.

How could you-- you could talk to people who were dying of hunger. And lice. Lice-- that was a terrible thing. We were just covered with them. That was tough.

But there was one thing that was helping us to survive. And that was everybody was grouping around me and my sister. And we were telling them about my grandfather's Purim fast. What she was cooking. My grandmother was a terrible cook.

And it seems, not knowing at that time the psychology, I was using imagery to keep those people alive. Because every day, they came to me like for food, to listen to what? To the strudel and all good things. And I was talking for hours, describing the smell and this. And that really kept us alive.

Till finally one day, you know, you could see those people, it was something was in the air. And then all of a sudden, like a big scream went through the camp. And somebody started to scream the Americans, the Americans are here. So of course everybody, even the skeletons like us got up. And hooray, where?

And then the German black-- the camp, the SS woman came in, and she said, children. Children, mind you. Be quiet. The Americans are here, but not yet. They come very soon. Just keep quiet and everything will-- and stay in your rooms. Stay in your rooms. Everything will be all right. So being used to being ordered, we just stood in our rooms.

We stood and stood, but finally, one woman so got curious, and she went out. And she went to the room where the SS woman was. The room was empty. And she came back, and she said, there is no SS woman. As we could hardly walk. But we crept out from the block, and we saw there were no guards on the towers. The camp was deserted. All the Germans ran away.

And then what do we do? We all went to the warehouse, like a bunch of crazy people. Because we were all starving. And there was a-- the warehouse was closed. But there was a little window, like in the cellar. And we somehow managed to clip in through the window and get-- and the warehouse was full of food. They just didn't give us anything to eat.

And I just took some crackers, because I felt that's all my stomach could with. And I grabbed a bag of crackers, and I came out in the air. And I begged my sister, I said, come, let's go out, let's sit and eat. And she said, no. She wants to look for something. I could have killed her. I said, what are you, crazy? I said.

Because a few days before, we got a care package. Which was sent, was divided. One in four among the Gentiles, and one in 17 amongst the Jewish people. So she got a little bit of sardine. And she wanted to have the same taste.

I just went out. And I was sitting there. And I could see the girls. There was a truck that the SS woman left with clothing and everything. The ones that still had strands that worked in the kitchen going through clothes and taking out beautiful underwear and everything, and grabbing these things. And I was sitting there and thinking to myself, are they crazy? What do they need that thing like for? Why don't they go for food?

And I was sitting and waiting and waiting, and my sister didn't come out. And I was sure that she's already finished there, you know? And finally, finally, I saw her. And when I saw her, I started to scream at her. I said, what, you crazy? She had a can of sardines. I said, for that, you risk your life?

So she said to me, be quiet. Don't you realize it? We survived the war. And then, it hit me. We really did. I couldn't believe that we really did survive the war.

Then we went to the gate. The gate was open, deserted. But strangely enough, I couldn't close it. Because I was not used to go by myself. We were always escorted. And finally, one of the girls said, let's try. We can do it now. And she closed. And the rest of us closed, too. And that was a feeling of such terrible freedom, to be able to walk by yourself, not escorted and to go wherever you want to go that I just couldn't believe it.

And then, we came back to the camp, which of course, by that time, looked terrible with excrements and vomits. People who started eating after starvation. And one of the Polish women, she grabbed bacon, raw bacon, and ate. I think she died. And she was screaming something awful.

Anyhow, we still didn't see anybody. We know the camp was deserted. But then we saw Russian soldiers. And they said, be quiet. And tomorrow, we're going to give you food. Next day, they set us up together, and they took out a cow, which they divided in four quarters. And they gave every 10 people a quarter of a cow. Of course, that contributed to more death.

Anyhow, they told us to go home. And I said, I have no home. Where are you from? Poland. Go back to Poland. So me and my sister and two other women baked some little crackers and put it in a pillowcase. And we went walking to Poland.

And then one little town, there was some kind of a castle. And they assigned us to a Polish man, who stole the horses from the woman he worked for. And he was going with them. He was a fireman going to Poland. So we went with him.

The final [INAUDIBLE] we went by train. We came to Lodz. Of course, it was a terrible thing, you know. We went to my grandmother's house. And the janitor recognized us. I mean, we told him who-- he did not really recognize us. But when we explained to him and this, he believed us.

Because we didn't look like human beings. The hair was just starting to grow a little bigger, and we were skeletons.

He gave us an apartment. We had to lay on the floor, no furniture. But we were happy with it. And then every day, we were going to the council, Jewish Council, to look for the list of survivors. And then one day, a woman came in and asked, could you direct me to the Kronenberg sisters?

And I looked at her and her voice and something strike me. And all of a sudden, I cried out, Aunt. And she was scared. She couldn't believe it. I said, this is me, Lillian, your niece. I must have looked very terrible. Because back then, of course, she knew when I told her.

How did she look?

She looked good, she looked good. She survived as a Gentile in Vienna. She had her hair, she was dressed very nicely. She was still herself. We were not human anymore.

Whose sister was she?

What?

Whose sister was she?

She was sister of my father. The only one that survived from his family. It was her other sister, also was as a Gentile. But she was denounced by the Polish people. I mean, her husband was denounced. With the children was denounced.

And then she could have lived. But she went herself to the SS and said that the woman knew that she was keeping a Jew just to get even with her. Because she said, she has no reason to live anymore. So that's how they died. That's what my sister Mary Ann told me.

Anyhow, when she came, our situation became a little bit better. Because we had a relative. You know, that I hardly know. But she knew him, you know. And he had a beautiful house and a big apartment. He gave us a room there. And we lived there until I found out that my sisters are in Stuttgart.

And that was that man who showed me the picture of my sister with Eisenhower. I couldn't believe him. Because I was already taken. Somebody else came and said, he has a message from my father. And I gave them money. And of course, it turned out that he was just out to get the money. And my father was not alive.

But when I saw the picture, I have to believe him. And then he just wanted to go back to-- he just wanted to leave Poland. And my aunt didn't want to leave. Because she found out that her husband survived in Russia. And she had to wait for him. So me and my sister and my husband smuggled the border.

Where'd your husband left?

How did you find your husband?

What? Oh, my husband came after the war. Somebody told him. A friend of mine was looking for her husband in Germany. And when she saw my husband, she told him that she saw me in Lodz. So he came to see me in Lodz. And we went to Czechoslovakia, and from Czechoslovakia to Germany. There I was reunited with my sisters. We were four again.

But I tell you, frankly, we couldn't go out together in the street. Not even two. Because these people were so decimated. There was unheard of that four sisters should survive. And we were really afraid to be seen together. Because people were very envious. I don't blame them, you know. They told me straight points. You know, how come that the four of you are alive and I can't have even one?

So my sister, younger sister, got a job as a secretary of the director of UNRRA. And she was one of the first ones to go to the United States. And she gave the job to me after she left. And I worked there.

And in the meantime, my older sister got very sick and she died. But of course, that was a result of all the experience. The doctors couldn't just believe that she survived. She said, she survived on sheer will to live.

And then I came to United States in March of 1945-- '49, '49. Came to United States. And I tell you, it was a great shock me to see that there is a country that was not touched by war. I just couldn't believe it.

You had expected the United States would be like in the jungle? Was it like that to you?

No, I knew what to expect because my both sisters were here already. And they wrote letter. And they told me they were both working and saving money. But having a very hard time living in the East Side and Williamsburg. Walking five stairs. But we had it much easier because my husband had a family, wealthy family. And they took us in.

Where did you live?

In Newark. And so it was easy. But it was for me to tell. You know, to see that family doing so well. And to realize that there are Jews who were not touched by the war, I just couldn't believe it. Because as long as I was in Germany, the Germans were suffering, too. Everybody was touched by the war. So I was just one of the victims.

But here, all of a sudden, I realized that by the fate of geography, we were really terrible victims. That if I wouldn't live in Poland at the time I did, I could have been a different person. And I could have helped my family. So that was, of course, a shock to me.

But there was no time for shocks, because I had to make a living. The family was very good to me. But you know, I had to support myself. Which we did. I worked, my husband worked. And of course, we had to struggle financially quite badly. But we were able to raise two children, who turned out, thank god, very nicely.

What is your husband-- or what did your husband do?

You know, my husband, his first job was as a dental mechanic. He was a dental mechanic. But he didn't make enough money. So his uncle took him as a shipping clerk in his business. And then later on, he went in and out of this in a netting business. And he was doing better. But we were struggling very badly. So was my sister.

Were you ever able to talk with your children about--

No.

--these experiences?

No, no. I'm glad you asked me. Because I didn't tell my children about the Holocaust. I just couldn't bring myself to destroy their childhood.

Did they want to know?

They never asked me.

They must have known that you came from Poland.

They found out. Yes. No, sure enough, they must have found out something. Because they were sort of raised together with my two nephews, Eva's two boys, who had a grandfather, also a survivor. And I'm sure that he told them something.

But I personally didn't tell my children anything. Because I was trying desperately to give them a good childhood and to believe that life is good. And how could you believe life is good if I could tell them a story like that?

And later on, of course, my girlfriend came from Israel. She was a psychologist. And she came here to teach in college how to tell the children about the Holocaust. She was very shocked when I told her that I didn't tell my children. And I said to her-- because according to psychology, as you know, any truth is better.

Because my son told me once, of course, when he knew it already. I said, how did this affect you? He said, I was growing up with a feeling that there is a terrible secret in my family. And I was afraid to ask about it.

And that's when I told her that. She said, you see? I said, no, I don't see. I agree with you that a secret is no good psychologically. But not in a case like that. It's better to grow up with a feeling of a secret than to grow up from a child up knowing that the world can be able to do such terrible things.

So you're going to show them this tape and that's going to be their first account of their own?

No, no, no. My younger son went to Israel. And that was the first time he was brought face to face with Holocaust. And when he came back, he took me aside, and he said-- you know, he's a doctor now. He was always very scientific.

So he said, Ma, if it wouldn't hurt you too much, could you just tell me the sequence of the events to explain to me how a thing like that was possible? He said, I can't understand that. Then of course, I just came out and told him. Not everything. There were things I just couldn't tell him. But at least, I explained to him how we were deceived and how we were trapped later on. And there was nothing that we could do about it.

And of course, we felt very close. And he, I imagine, must have told my oldest son about it. But one thing I have to say that was in favor of my not telling my children. My son went to Albert Einstein Medical School. And he was rooming with a doctor's son from California. And their parents lost the whole family in Holocaust. And the boy grew up with they were constantly talking about. And he grew up.

When he found out that my son is the son of survivor, he said, gosh, do I feel sorry for you. If I had to go through such a terrible thing, I imagine what you must have gone through. My son said, I had a very happy childhood.

So I knew that I was right. He found out and it was a terrible shock for him. And there is a lot of anger with him. But at least he was old enough to deal with it at that time. So I didn't want-- so at that time, I didn't know nothing about psychology. And I see that my--

That your instincts were right.

--instincts were right not to tell. Because my older one grew up feeling about a secret. But my younger one didn't. He was just happy. So that's it.

And you've been a student here? And you graduated from Kean College.

Yes, I graduated in 1980 when my both sons left the house to go to, you know, schools, different schools. I decided to do something for myself. And I have to tell you, those were the best five years of my life. I picked psychology, of course, because I wanted to understand what made me survive and what made people animals.

I can understand while I survived. But I can't understand. Still, I can't understand how people are able to do such terrible things to another people. I still can't understand it.

Do you think, in large measure, your survival was due to the fact that you had your sisters and the closeness with them?

Yes, yes, that was very, very-- also, logically, my survival was due-- first of all, there were a lot of people that helped me. You know, like that woman who was bringing to me this soup, carrying that thing. That Hungarian doctor who saved my life twice. A Jewish policeman who told the man that I was a good dressmaker. A lot of things like that.

But the main thing was that I was never in an action that was complete. There was always selection. Therefore, there was whatever slight, but there still was a chance that I could slip through. It would be a complete thing, like in Lublin or in Russia, when they did, I won't be able to do anything.

But in this case, somehow, it seems like-- I mean, I don't know what it was, a fate or something. Because when my sisters, they gave us up completely. You know, they left us in such a bad state in Auschwitz, that they had absolutely no hope of us ever being alive. When they found out-- because I wrote. I sent a letter that we are alive, they just felt it was a miracle.

We have no more time, Lillian. Thank you so much.

You're very welcome.

I hope your story will someday be written down.

I hope that people will understand and prevent occurrence of such terrible things.

Thank you. Well, you're welcome.