

There's a time limit, I think.

Let's talk about D-Day again.

Gladly. We knew already, more or less, that something was in the air that Germany finally did lose. I have to add that, from the day Hitler conquered France, I stopped reading the newspapers and listening to the news. I didn't want to know anything anymore. It was just so upsetting that I just felt, well, whatever will happen, will happen. And I don't bother anymore-- I mean, not bother, but I mean I just didn't want to read it anymore.

But then, little by little, towards the end of 1944 beginning of '45, things seemed to fall into place more and more. And we heard the good news, the retreat on all fronts, and all that. So more or less, you had that feeling that something was going to happen.

And the place I was working at that time-- that must have been V-Day. And I think there was a General Jodl who read the declaration that Germany has lost the war. And I have to say that my boss called my-- I was working with another German Jewish girl. So the two of us were called into his office. And he let us listen to the radio to the declaration that Germany gave. Now we'll declare--

They surrendered.

--that they had lost the war. And that was-- I think Hitler had already killed himself, and all that. But as I say, it was a very bittersweet victory. I was still hoping that my parents would have survived. But then, when the reports came after, what the concentration camps looked like, I knew there was no way they could have survived.

People already, at that point, came to Sweden. First came the Danish Jews, because the Danish Jews-- I think you know that story. They were under the protection of the Danish king, King Christian--

Yes.

--who had said, well, if you put-- at that time, if you put yellow stars on my Jews, I will bear it, too. And then they were-- even in the concentration camps, what I was told-- first of all, they were all sent to Theresienstadt, which was the camp-- which was, God forbid, the best of the concentration camps, so to say.

Relatively speaking.

Relatively speaking. Right. And then they were always told-- well, everybody else, but not to Danish Jews. They were under the protection of the Danish king, more or less. And I think not one Danish Jew was killed in concentration camps. They all did survive. And they were the first ones to come to Sweden.

And I think you know the story about the Danish Jews being saved, coming at night. Don't you know the story, that the Danish people used to bring them by boat?

No.

You don't know that?

No.

Yes. They used to do that. To save the Jews, they used to take them in-- by night, they used to take families by boat--

And bring them--

--and bring them into Sweden.

--into Sweden.

Yes. Yes. Sweden was declared a-- how do you call it, heaven?

Haven.

Haven.

Yes.

Haven for the Danish Jews.

Was Sweden at the time governed by King Gustaf.

Yes, it was. Yeah.

And what was the second wave of Jews who were brought over from concentration camps?

Then came the Jews.

Where were they from?

Yeah, then came the Jews of all nationalities-- Romanian, a lot of Romanian Jews and Polish Jews, some German Jews, Hungarian, a lot of Hungarians Jews. See, the Hungarian Jews, there were quite a-- they survived, too. I mean, a lot of them got killed. However, many survived. But because-- you know about the story of Raoul Wallenberg, and all that.

Yes.

But they were only deported as late as 1944. So they hadn't been in the camp that terribly long. And all those people came into Sweden, as I had mentioned before.

But not only that. I mean, the stories you heard, and the things that were going on in Europe were just so bad, everything. The railways were all bombed out. And people were walking around the highways trying-- I mean, the highways, the streets, trying to go back home to see who had survived. They wanted to find out if there was anybody of their family or their town who had survived. So there were people wandering all over Europe.

How well known was the work of Raoul Wallenberg in Sweden?

It was known, because I know I had read about it. And I was very impressed. And I could not understand that nothing ever was said about it over here.

What was your thoughts about the American Jews at that time? Were you too young to think what was going on here in this country?

To tell you the truth, I really didn't know much about American Jews. The only thing which surprised me is that there wasn't any more help to the European Jews. That was one thing I couldn't understand-- that people would sit by, and watch other Jews suffer so terribly, and not move a finger to help them.

That was the only thing I was thinking about. However, I have to admit my knowledge of American Jews was very limited. I didn't really know any.

No, I meant from the point of view of what you just mentioned, the lack of help and whether, as a refugee living in Sweden, were you conscious of the fact that more was not being done by American Jews--

I think.

--or by Roosevelt?

Yeah. I wouldn't even say American Jews-- by the United States. You know about the St. Louis who were sent back again. I mean things like that, where they really-- and as I say, the quotas were so high. All those things really added up saying that, actually, the United States did so very little.

Now, when you think how they're open to anybody who wants to come here-- even war criminals are allowed to come over here. And here were people who really wanted-- they didn't want to be a burden to anybody. They would have done-- I'm sure that my parents would have worked, I don't know, on a farm, or cleaning houses, or whatever as long as they would have been permitted to come over here. And I'm not only speaking for my parents. I'm speaking for a lot of people, too, who would have loved to come over.

We had a young-- I mean, my god, I had a couple living in the same building we lived in. And they had a boy and a girl. And they were about the same age as my sister and I. Those two young people did perish. They were about 16, 18 years old, something like that.

And I had a girlfriend who was a very-- she was very good in sewing and doing things. She would have loved to go out and earn her living. She was a very vivacious girl. She loved to live. And I think about that this girl was not permitted.

And you can multiply that by a million young people who were not permitted to live. Then I think it is really so sad, when you think about it. And as I say, my parents always-- in letters always said, we're hopeful, and saying, well, maybe those will help us, and those will help us. Somehow, they didn't give up hope. When you finally think that--

You see, that's the way it was, even when we lived in Germany. It was like there was a rope around your neck. And it was pulled tighter and tighter. That was really the feeling I always had when I was a child over there, with a rope. To finally-- it was so tight already. That's when I wanted to get out, because I felt, well, what else can we do?

After all, what they did in Crystal Night, what else can they do to us? That's why I really think the Crystal Night was really the beginning of the end of the European Jewery. And once the Nazis could see how they could get away with things, and nobody did really move a finger to help, then the whole world was theirs, so to say. They could do whatever they pleased.

What led to your decision to come to the United States?

When-- why was my--

Yeah, how did you--

Well, before we left-- see, my parents did have an affidavit to come over here. However, the quota-- as I mentioned before, the quotas were so high. They had to go to Berlin to the consulate. And the quotas were very high.

But somehow, our agreement had been, once the war was over-- and first of all, actually, you didn't know. Except maybe we go back to Germany, or somehow live with my parents. Even during the Hitler time-- there was no war yet when we left. So we were hoping that maybe somehow they would let my parents go out, and then we could come over here. It was like daydreaming, or something like that.

But after the war was over, and I knew my parents were not alive anymore, and Europe was in such a terrible mess, I didn't feel like staying in Sweden. And I didn't want to go back to Germany. And I had relatives over here. So I felt, well, the best thing to do is to come over here.

Or I was considering Israel. However, I didn't have really very close relatives in Israel. And I had made applications to

both to the United States and to Israel.

And I said, whatever comes first, I'll take. And the United States really did come first. And finally, we got our visas. And that's what made me leave.

So when did you leave for the United States?

We left January 1947. And we left on a Swedish boat out of Goteborg, or Gothenburg, like they say here. And it was really-- they had brought people. So many of the survivors were with us on that boat. I mean people, especially from France.

They came with busloads, with people who were survivors. And people came there really with those little packs, not even suitcases. They had a pillow, pillowcase.

Bundles.

And they had bundles, and all that. It was a very-- it was very sad.

Sad.

I have to say that, really and truly. A lot of Hungarian Jews were on our ship. And I made friends with many of them. Yes.

Was your sister Vera with you?

Yeah, the two of us. We left together. Yes.

How long did the trip take?

Oh, it was a bad trip. It was in January. And it was very stormy. We didn't get sick, but most people did. The trip took about 11 days. Yeah, it was really bad.

And your uncle met you when you arrived?

Yes, my uncle and his wife came to meet us when we arrived here. Yes.

And did you live with them?

No. My uncle had rented a room for my sister and myself. We all-- everybody then lived in Washington Heights.

Right.

So my uncle had rented a room for my sister and for myself in Washington Heights with a very nice German Jewish family, an elderly couple. But they also were so nice to us. Yes. And then both my sister and I just started to go to work.

And then my sister, soon afterwards, got engaged. We came here February. And she was engaged by May. And she was married by August.

Oh. And how did you meet your husband?

Since my sister was already engaged to be married, she was mostly with her boyfriend and had left me by myself. And I, through a young man we knew Sweden at that time who had come over here before us, we joined a German Jewish club. And that club used to go make field trips, go out and-- well, I joined them once.

And then I got-- I have relatives. I had other relatives here. I got very involved with relatives and friends. And they always kept on sending me literature about joining them.

So one day-- as I say, I love swimming. I love the beach. So one day, there was a field trip to the beach. So I said to myself, oh, I'm going to go to that. And I joined it.

And my husband, who had a cousin who belonged to that congregation, to the club, had joined his cousin. And it's more or less how we met. Both being strangers in the group, and going there-- I mean, on a field trip.

He's also a survivor, I take it, your husband.

My husband?

Yes.

I don't know if I can call him survivor. In a way, I guess anybody who survived the Hitler regime in Europe, you can call it survivor. However, my husband already came over here in 1937.

Oh.

Yes. He came without his parents. His parents came. His sister was here already. She had come already in 1935, I think. And my husband's parents came then in 1938. So when I met my husband, he was already an American citizen. And he spoke in beautiful English. I was very impressed. Yes.

And you've learned English very, very well.

Oh, thank you. Well, I made it my business. I think you have to speak the language of the country you want to live in. I knew it. I had learned it already in Europe.

I mean, it was not that I came here, and I didn't know a word. I had learned it already over there. However, once I started to live here, I really felt it was my duty and my obligation to try to do the best with it.

Mrs. Prager, do you think we've learned anything from the Holocaust? Do you think the world has learned anything from the Holocaust?

I'm sorry to say, I don't think so. I don't think the world learned anything. You see what's still going on. You know what they learned from the Holocaust? They learned from the Holocaust what you can do to human beings and get away without being punished. That is my feeling.

I think there's things that are still going on today. Things don't look any better, and the opposite. Here, in Germany, I would think it was government organized brutality. In other countries, you don't even have to go so far. People are brutal in their own, the way they treat their fellow human beings.

So I really feel, unfortunately, not much has really been learned. I mean, that is my personal feeling. Not much has been learned by it. And if it would be-- god forbid-- the same situation, I don't think things would turn out much better. I really think so. I think people still are the same selfish, greedy people they always have been. And nothing will change that.

After the Holocaust, people felt sorry. And well, we should have done more. Yeah, but as I say that, I think, more or less-- as a matter of fact, that is the reason why I feel I have to speak about it. And people have to be reminded. Otherwise, it is too easily forgotten, the terrible bloodshed that really happened.

The world has forgotten. Nobody thinks about it anymore. Maybe there are exceptions. Maybe some people in-- I don't know-- in Holland, in France.

As a matter of fact, I think just now there is a French film, which is called [FRENCH]. There are certain people who think about it. But altogether, people have forgotten it already.

The only ones, I have to say-- next to the Jews-- who more or less are bothered by it, I can say, are the people of Germany. They really-- yeah. You see, that's the guilt, which nobody can take it away from them. It is a guilt. They did it.

And when we went to Germany, my husband and I, we used to go to restaurants. And I used to listen to people talk. They all still spoke about World War II. Everybody spoke about it.

And even when we met all the others, they all wanted to declare how they didn't know anything about it, how innocent they were. But you know what? I don't know. That you don't know anything about it? I mean, you knew.

Right now, I'm taking a class about history again. It's histories for film. And we were shown the movie Triumph of the Will, and Hitler always talking about, emphasizing what he will do to the Jews. So don't tell me nobody suspected anything, knew anything. I think you have to know. You knew how brutal those people were.

I would think-- I couldn't say that people learned anything really from it. But the only thing is I do not want, as my husband had mentioned-- I don't want to condemn everybody, because I sometimes say to myself, what would I have done if the shoe would have fitted on the other foot? If I would have been in the shoes of the Germans, and I would have been threatened-- well, if you hide the Jews, we kill your family. I don't know what I-- I mean, I cannot say what I would have done.

And being older now-- when you are young, you're much more enthusiastic. You are much more of an idealist. And you do things. But I don't know now, let's say, I would have been in a position at my age now, in a position of a German woman. And I don't know what I would have done. I really cannot say.

But to answer your question, no, I don't think really the world learned enough. As a matter of fact, I even think that a professor wrote a book that the Holocaust never happened, that Anne Frank is a hoax, all that kind of things. So what can you say? I don't think, unfortunately, it's--

Well, this is why we ask people like you to come and tell us, so that we don't forget.

I really appreciated that you gave me a chance to let me speak to you, because I really feel that it's something people have to be reminded about very often that they shouldn't forget, and especially for coming generations, that they should know what has happened in the middle of the 20th century, how really 6 million people were killed, exterminated. And it was really a scheduled extermination. And nobody raised a finger really to stem it, to do anything about it.

Well, we want to thank you for sharing this with us. I know it must have been painful. But we do appreciate it very, very much.

Well, I really thank you both for taking the time out and asking me to come here. Thank you so much.

Sure.

[MUSIC PLAYING]