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Ruth Danner's interview, interviewed by Robert Buckley

My name is Ruth Danner. I was born on the 9th of December 1933 at Yutz in the Moselle region. I was blessed to be raised in a family of Jehovah's Witnesses. From a young age I developed a close relationship with Jehovah. For example, we started each morning by looking at a bible text and then before leaving the house to go to school, I would say a prayer with my mother. My parents had instilled in me good spiritual habits by attending the meetings, taking part in the preaching work and applying Bible principles each day. I was taught to always pray before speaking in front of the authorities.

I wanted to dedicate my life to Jehovah at 8 years old, so that's what I did. I also wanted to get baptized, but my parents considered that I was still too young, and it was during the war period. So, I was baptized in August 1947 when I returned from the camps. At this time, the preaching work was still under ban in France, so I was baptized in the Moselle River during a "picnic".

The arrival of the German Army in 1940 ushered in a period of challenges. For example, at school I refused to say 'Heil Hitler', to salute the flag and to sing the National Anthem. Meetings and the preaching work were also banned, so our activities were forced underground. Now I was able to really feel the benefits of having been taught by my parents, of praying with my mother before leaving the house and before speaking in front of the authorities. School became a battle ground and on a daily basis I was a regular target. This was particularly difficult for me, as I was painfully shy.

The Authorities regularly came and raided my home. On coming home from school, my neighbors said, "Come into our house, your house has been raided, the SS have taken your mother in for questioning". As I was so timid, I didn't dare go into their home. So, I said, "I know where I need to go". In reality, I hid and when the other children went to school, I would catch up with them, and then I would go to school without having seen my mother. This caused me a great deal of anxiety. I wondered "What are they doing with my mother? Will my parents be home when I come back from school at 4 o'clock, and if not, where am I going to go? Will the authorities be there? Will they arrest my father?" This was the order of events each time the SS raided our house. My father was regularly picked up at his place of work because he refused to join the Civil Defense. My mother and sister systematically refused to repair the military uniforms and I regularly refused to say 'Heil Hitler' at school. As a result, we were constantly doing the opposite of what the authorities wanted.

In school they said to me: « If you don't want to raise your arm and say « Heil Hitler » then just do this (raise it a little), or mumble some other words instead », « just pretend to do it ». However, my mother had already explained to me that this would still be a compromise. It would be like Mordecai or the three Hebrews pretending to bend down to tie their laces, rather than bow down in front of the idol. From the authorities' point of view, they were bowing down, but in reality, they were tying their laces. This meant they were compromising, and they couldn't do this. I remember clearly, that my parents had taught me to always pray before speaking, and one day at the beginning of the school day, we were ordered to say "Heil Hitler" and sing the Anthem. There was a different teacher this day and as usual, I refused. So,

I had to explain again why I wouldn't say "Heil Hitler" etc. This was new for her and during the recreation period, I was called before the headmaster and all the other teachers.

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I was asked: « It seems that you have refused to say « Heil Hitler » Why is that? » I didn't answer. So after a while I was asked again « Why won't you say « Heil Hitler? » Again, I remained silent. Then the headmaster told me "You will be beaten if you don't answer". I said « I can't answer your question because I haven't said my prayer yet ».

Also, we had our meetings at our home in secret. As a child, I would play outside, I kept a watch out for people. When there was someone suspicious, I would call my mother. This was a code which meant they had to hide the publications and start drinking coffee. When the authorities entered, there was no meeting taking place, just people drinking coffee.

So, because of the actions of my family: the fact that my father refused to support the war effort, my mother and sister refused to repair the military uniforms, and my refusing to say "Heil Hitler", this drew attention to us and as a result we were deported. Also, although they couldn't catch us having a field service meeting, they still knew that such meetings were being held.

So, in January 1943, the authorities took my whole family, which was a blessing to be kept together and to not be separated. We were deported at the end of January 1943 to Upper Silesia in Poland, where it was very, very cold and we went to 5 different camps. From Upper Silesia they brought us back to Silesia. From there, we had to walk 249 km in the space of 3 weeks.

Everyone had to work, even the children. If you didn't work, you didn't eat. There were different types of work: cleaning and especially plucking feathers. As I was one of Jehovah's Witnesses and known for being obedient, I was often sent outside of the camp on errands for the SS secretaries or to buy them their white bread. I went to the bakery, and I was fortunate because people took pity on a child from the camp. They would often give me a piece of bread, or a bread roll to eat. This helped me to stay healthy. Although everyone had to work, as one of Jehovah's Witnesses I was privileged to be better fed. In general, the food was disgusting. One day, food was sent back to the kitchens and one of the prisoners said "Surely, you only give this to the pigs!" and the supervisor replied "No, this isn't even fit for the pigs". So, this was the type of food they gave us. Once a week we had potatoes, but they poured congealed blood over the potatoes. So, we couldn't even eat the potatoes as they were covered in blood. For us, in the truth, we had to remain faithful to Jehovah.

The fact that I had been brought up to be polite by my parents resulted in me being treated fairly well. This meant that as long as I was polite and I didn't taunt the Nazis, everything went smoothly but the moment I refused to say "Heil Hitler" the problems started again. The situation deteriorated and I was beaten. They hit me and tried to force me to say « Heil Hitler ». I suffered due to hunger and the cold, but this is what it was like in the camps. The only time I was beaten was because I refused to say « Heil Hitler ». Apart from this, it was bearable. My parents had raised me to have my own personal convictions. It was my personal decision to refuse to say "Heil Hitler", not because my parents had forbidden me. They had

always said” If one day you give in because of the beatings and say ‘Heil Hitler’, you will still be our daughter, but you will have to sort out the issue between you and Jehovah”, which would be even worse. Therefore, refusing to say « Heil Hitler » was my own personal choice. Our faith was constantly put to the test. In one camp, we were given the option to sign a paper renouncing our faith but we refused. They told us that if we didn’t renounce our faith we would never go home and that we would be exiled for the rest of our lives. Finally, on the 20th of April 1945 we were released by the Allies and sent back home very quickly on the 5th of May 1945.

Even if the outright persecution had finished, we still needed to remain faithful.

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When we returned on the 5th of May, we were in a very bad state physically due to the deprivation and hardship that we had been through. It took time for us to recover. Our clothes had not been changed since the 19th of February, we were covered in vermin, lice, fleas and bedbugs. Our neighbor on the ground floor invited us to « come in » as someone else was living in our apartment. However, we dared not go inside because we were too dirty, so she lit a fire in the laundry room and we burnt our clothes in it. We then got washed and she lent us some clothes. That day my mother turned to me and my sister and said « May this day always be remembered as the most beautiful day of our lives. We may have nothing left, not even the clothes on our backs belong to us, but we have each other, we came back home, all four of us together and we have all remained firm. We have not lost anyone, either spiritually or physically. »

These words are still so important to me and have stayed with me to the end. Remaining faithful to Jehovah is what matters the most.

[Recording ended]