Camera roll. This is a United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Mrs. Natalie Kent Kempner on December 7th, 2018, in Woolwich, Maine. Thank you, Mrs. Kempner for agreeing to speak with us to share your experiences, to tell us a little bit about your life. I'm going to start with the most basic questions. And from there, we'll develop your story. Can you tell me, what is the date of your birth?

January 18, 1924.

And where were you born?

In Philadelphia.

And what was your name at birth?

Natalie Faith Pierce.

That was your maiden name?

Mm-hmm.

Pierce? Did you have brothers and sisters?

None.

You're an only child?

Mm.

OK. What was your mother's name?

Gertrude Lindahl.

Lindahl was her maiden name?

Maiden name.

OK. And your father's?

George Pierce.

Can you tell me the years that they were born?

Yes. He was born in 1890. She was born in 1895.

Are they both from Philadelphia?

Oh, no.

OK, where do they come from?

He was from Iowa. She was from Illinois. She was from a Swedish immigrant family. And--

Did she speak Swedish?

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As a child, yes. She went to Swedish school. They only spoke Swedish at home. But by the time I knew her, she'd forgotten her Swedish, more or less.

Did you know your maternal grandparents? Did you know them?

Did I know my pater-- my ma-- no. No, I didn't. They-- he died when she was 17. Her mother died when she was seven. But she was the last of the children. She was the 14th child.

Oh my goodness.

Yeah. Some of them were born in Sweden before they came, and they went to a Swedish school.

Did you know your aunts and uncles from--

Oh, yes. I knew some of them, not all 14. I knew seven of them.

Did they live in the Philadelphia area?

No. Nobody was in Philadelphia. They were all in Illinois.

Ah, OK. And your father's side of the family, did he have brothers and sisters?

He had one sister.

OK, and were they from Iowa for several generations? How did they get there? Do you know?

They came-- his grandmother came in a covered wagon to Iowa from the East. I don't know where. And they were pretty thoroughly US people, American.

So part of our history, part of the US history from the 19th century for sure onwards?

Yeah.

OK, were they a farming family in Iowa?

Yeah. More or less, yes. Yes. My mother's family, definitely. My father's family-- my grandfather, his father was a postman. He rode a horse and buggy and delivered mail.

Did you know him?

Oh, yes. He lived to be 96. And I--

And your paternal grandmother, did you know her?

Yes. She lived to be in her 70s. I knew them both. They lived in Iowa.

And what was it that-- why is it that you were born in Philadelphia?

Oh, because my parents were living there.

And what had brought them there?

And what?

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What had brought them to Philadelphia?

Oh, my mother, as a teenager, left Iowa with a friend. She'd gone to a kind of-- she'd learn typing in shorthand. She had only gone through eighth grade. But she was-- somebody took interest in her and gave her this education in typing and shorthand, and she and her friend got on a train and went to New York, and they went to Brooklyn. And they found jobs with the Long Island Rail Road. And they loved it.

They were there. The war began, and they had lots of boyfriends who were in the Army. And I think, though, that she met my father through one of her sisters in Iowa. But he was in the service. I mean, he was a GI but hadn't gone to war. He was just getting trained. And--

This was World War I.

This was World War I, yeah. Yeah. It was 1918 or so. We hadn't-- I think we were just entering the war. My father never got to Europe. He only got trained and got halfway across the ocean, and the war ended. So he came back. But she-- they were pretty steady, I think, all through that time. And they just ran off and got married one night.

And from Brooklyn to Philadelphia, what brought them there?

Oh. I suppose my father's job. He was working for-- he sold farm equipment. He was a good person to teach farmers how to use the new equipment, the new plows and so on. And his company had a-- their main office must have been in Philadelphia, I think. But I think that's the reason. I don't really know.

Did you grow up in Philadelphia?

No. We left there when I was three. But I was there very often. But then they moved to Upstate New York to Binghamton where he worked as a traveling salesman for John Deere.

Oh, from John Deere equipment.

Yeah.

No kidding.

John Deere, the inventor of the steel plow.

Wow. And I didn't realize John Deere company was already in existence in the 1920s.

Yeah. Oh, yes. It started in the 1800s, I think, when he invented the steel plow.

Tell me, you say you went back to Philadelphia a lot. What brought you back? Were there family there when you had left?

Very close friends that I called them aunts and uncles. And I loved going to Philadelphia because there were escalators and automats-- I loved going to the automat-- and these wonderful adults in my life who made me feel very cared for. And my mother loved Philadelphia. And they came off and to visit us, too.

And was it the same with visiting your mother's family and your father's that you would travel to Illinois and to Iowa to visit them? Or-- because it's really far away. Everything is very far away.

Oh, very far away. Yeah, it took a long time. We had to sleep on a sleeper when we went on the train. But during the Depression, my father used to quit his job. I mean, they didn't need any salesmen, so he would go work on a farm. And my mother and I would get on a train and go to Illinois to one of her sisters or to Iowa and stay for the summer, which was nice.

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Does that mean that you no longer had a home in Binghamton of your own? Or--

Well, we always rented. We had an apartment in Binghamton all the time. I did-- I went all the way through school in Binghamton.

How did the Depression-- [PHONE RINGS] OK, let's cut for a second. How did the--

Fine? How did the Depression affect your family?

Well, looking back, I know we were very poor. But it didn't affect me in the slightest. I felt cared for. I never felt-- I mean, it didn't affect me in the way that I was hungry or anything. I just know how hard it was when I think about it. I didn't think about it then.

And they-- my mother used to save postage stamps by walking to all the places where she had to pay bills, like the electric and the gas and the fish market, and we'd walk because she'd never learn to drive and she didn't want to buy stamps. What were stamps? Like, $0.01, $0.02. But she was very frugal and very good, very savvy about saving money.

So that became part of me. I'm really-- frugality is part of me, and I-- there were no such things as charge cards and plastic and-- we paid. They never bought. That's why we didn't own a house until I was in college, because they never wanted a debt. So they waited till they had enough money to buy a house because-- and they never had a debt in anything. So I grew up sort of feeling very stingy. I mean--

But that's also freedom.

Hmm?

That's also freedom that--

Yeah. Oh, it was-- yeah. And it also-- I never knew we were poor. I had many friends whose fathers were lawyers and doctors and they were better off. But they're worried about money all the time, and I never understood whether my father can't sleep at night because he's so worried about this and that. And I didn't know. They kept it all from me.

Were they worried, do you think, though?

Hmm?

Were your parents worried, however?

I don't know. My mother was confident. She was a very strong woman, and she liked good things. So she always bought quality things that lasted. She would have loved LL Bean where you can return things. But, no, she was-- and my father went along with it. They were both frugal. And it was just part of us.

So tell me--

[COUGHS]

I beg your pardon.

That's OK. That's OK. We're fine. Don't keep it in. Thank you. Your father, you said, ended up working on farms after he no longer had a job with John Deere.

No, he had a job all the time, but they would lay him off for the summer. And so he would go work on a farm with one of the farmers that he was trying to sell the tractor to. But he was a good farmer. So-- and then we were taken care of

because my relatives were-- they were much more poor than we were. They used to get my hand-me-down clothes. But they had pigs and cows and milk, and I loved it. I mean, it was a good life.

Well, yeah.

Yeah.

Yeah, I mean, it-- when times are tough and people are hungry, it is usually the city folk who are hungry but not so much the country folk.

Exactly.

Because the country feeds the city. And if you have somebody who has a cow or a pig or something like that or honey or bees, you're OK. Or you're better. You're better off.

Yeah. And my mother was a good gardener, so she grew things.

Did you have-- so the place that you rented, was it a house? Was it an apartment?

It was like a two-family house. We had sometimes the first floor, sometimes the second floor.

Different places in Binghamton?

No, they were mostly on the same street. And sometimes we would move downstairs, and then we'd move up. And it was-- my mother was very keen to not interrupt my schooling. So she found what was supposed to be the best school, and that's where we lived.

And whenever-- I used to kind of dream of moving to a big city like Philadelphia or Boston. And she said, you better stay here. You've got friends. You've got a community. And she was right. I mean, it was a very safe, wonderful growing up in the '30s, '20s and '30s.

What else did I want to ask about those times? Tell me a little bit about your parents' personalities. What kind of a person was your mother? You've given me some indication. What are the things that she liked to do? What were some of her interests?

She loved to travel. She wanted to go everywhere, and she ended up doing quite a bit of it. And she loved adventure. She had a great sense of fun. And she was a very hard worker. As soon as I grew up and-- she got a job in a bank. And she was the only one of her friends who all played-- they spent their afternoons playing bridge, which she had done, too, because she wanted to watch over me. But when I finally got off a bit, then she got this job, which she loved. She loved working. And she loved being in the business world. And she worked in a bank. She considered herself a banker. And she loved good clothes, quality clothes.

And she would-- she was a very sort of unusual, independent woman for her time, I think. She would have loved to have done more, only it wasn't done, you know? And my father, on the other hand, was just a kind of a laid-back guy. He didn't like to travel. He'd like to be at home.

Well, you know, if you're a salesman, you travel a lot. And you want to be at home, then, because you're on the road so much.

Yeah.

But maybe that's not what was--

No, say that again.

I said, if you a traveling salesman--

Oh yeah.

--you're on the road.

Right.

And so then--

He was always glad to get home.

Yeah, yeah. But you say he was more laid-back person.

Yeah, well, he-- yeah. He was quiet. He loved music. He had a great singing voice. And--

Did he sing songs to you?

Oh, yes, lots of times. We'd go and-- when I'd go traveling with him and his salesman job, he would sing songs. And I-- now, I sing those songs while I'm walking on my treadmill when nobody's in the house, 'cause I can't carry a tune. That's-- in the second grade, I was picked out with one other boy in my class-- no, in first grade. We were called the bad singers.

Oh, that's cruel.

Isn't that cruel?

That's very cruel.

I mean, awful. I love to sing. And Miss Allen was the music teacher. And she'd come into our classroom. And she'd say, bad singers forward. So Ben and I-- Ben with a little boy-- went forward. And she would pull Ben's short hair like this to get them to sing-- we had to sing the scales up and down.

So pulling the hair would help him sing the scales?

So that helped Ben get up, but she didn't do that to me. But there we were in front of the class having to sing scales. And it really kind of put a damper on my feeling like singing in school. I was always called a second soprano, which was like nowhere, I guess.

But, still, my dad didn't mind. And he taught me all these songs from the war and from-- just hokey sort of songs that-- and then I go in there and sit-- they all come back. It's amazing. I sing these songs about Young Johnny Steele and his old mother's Oldsmobile and beautiful Katie and two little girls and-- oh, they just go on and on in my head. And I look at the river, and I sing, hoping nobody's in the house.

And the thing is, having been a bad singer, when I met my second husband after I was a widow-- that's, of course, later on. He had never been married. And he had always thought that he would marry someone who had a beautiful singing voice and spoke many languages because he spoke many languages. I spoke nothing but English, some bad French, some bad German, and so on. And of course, I couldn't sing a note. So he settled for me. So life is funny.

Well, I'm sure your father didn't think you were a bad singer.

Oh, he didn't. He never complained. And I loved standing next to him in church because we would sing the thing that goes, "Praise God from whom all blessings flow." And he would sing the bass. And to me, it sounded like he was off

tune a bit. But it was-- he had a beautiful voice. He had sung solos in church and so on and so-- (SINGING) Praise Father. And it just-- it was wonderful.

It also sounds like it was happy.

And he was also a very fun kind of father. He loved to play games, card games, and he could do all kinds of magic tricks, like pull pennies out of his ear. He was a good father. My mother didn't have time for that kind of stuff.

Well, it often happens that the fathers end up playing with their kids and mothers end up having to do all the work.

All the work, yeah.

All the work, yeah, and being the disciplinarians.

And she was a good cook. She loved to cook. Yeah, she often-- she was the only one that ever spanked me. Oh.

But were they strict parents.

No, not at all. Not in the slightest.

You mentioned-- let's hold on a second while you can put the glass down. I know it's a little hard. There we go. You mentioned church. Were your parents religious people?

Not particularly, but they usually went to church on Sunday. They sent me to Sunday school. I loved Sunday-- I loved school. So I loved Sunday school because these bright rooms and we sang these songs about Jesus loves me. I had no doubt he loved me. Just to me it was like another parent. He loved me the way my parents did, without judgment. And it was just a kind of happy religion. It was Methodist. They were not-- she was Swedish Lutheran. And he was-- I don't know if he was much of anything when he was growing up.

But the church that you were introduced to was the Methodist church.

It was a Methodist church, yeah.

OK. And you're saying they weren't particularly religious, but you did go every Sunday?

Oh, I did, yeah. I liked rel-- I got kind of religious when I was a young teenager. I was interested in it. But then I began to feel that people were sort of hypocritical, that they dressed up for Easter and didn't sort of live their religion, but they showed it off. I don't know. It bothered me.

Well, that's true.

Hmm?

It's true. It's been true through the ages that some people go to church, but they have no sense of spirituality in them. They go to church for reasons other than those that one thinks--

It's the thing to do.

Yeah. What was regular school like? You said you liked going to school.

I loved going to school except for Miss Allen.

Well, I could understand why.

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And she was always there. And I had a little part in a play when I was in about fifth grade. And I had to sing a solo. And she was quite amazed that I could sing this song.

So maybe you weren't a bad singer?

Maybe I wasn't. I mean, I don't know. Every now and then, I think, hey, I can carry a tune. But I never thought I could then. So it really killed my-- and Ben, he was braver than I was. When he went to college, he went to Union College in Upstate New York, and he was in the choir and the boys chorus-- the men's chorus. So he ended up having a good time singing. I didn't ever do that, but--

But, you know, I'm saying it sort of like in a more lighthearted way. But seriously, when we think about it, to put such a label on a child--

It's terrible.

--at such an age. It's-- and to know that that's something that you still carried as a doubt for decades, it sounds like.

That's exactly what I learned from that, because when I taught school and when I taught little kids, it would never occur to me to tell them they were bad at something, really bad. A bad singer-- oh!

Yeah, yeah. It's sort of final. There's nothing you can do about it.

Yeah, that's it. So you're set for life. And I remember being at an office Christmas party once in Ithaca, and we were singing Christmas songs. And one of the workers sitting next to me said, oh, she has a beautiful voice. Listen to her. I thought, oh, me? I mean, it was such a shock.

Yeah, yeah.

And I always loved to sing. I loved the peace songs and the war songs and--

Were there other subjects that you really liked in school?

Social studies.

You liked social studies?

Yeah.

What about social studies was interesting for you?

Oh, the maps, reading about the people and the different places in the world. And we had some pretty good innovative teachers for the '30s. When we studied Arabia, we all wore sheets to school and ate dates.

Oh, really?

And when we studied Norway, we ate sardines out of cans. And we sort of really-- and we made little dioramas. And I loved-- I just loved hearing about other people in other countries. That was my favorite-- reading, too. And my mother valued books so highly that she took me at least once a week to the library, and I'd get a stack of books. And she also joined me to something like a kind of literary club where I got a new book every month. It was so exciting.

Well, that's huge.

Hmm?

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That's huge for this--

That's huge, yes.

That's huge, yeah.

Yes, I love-- you can tell I love books. They pile up. But-- and she didn't read much herself. But when she read, she read intensely. I remember her reading Gone With the Wind when that first came out, and she'd be reading late at night when I'd see her in the living room reading. And she didn't read a lot, but she read-- she liked reading, and she wanted me to read. She thought that was the most important thing.

Well, it opens up worlds.

Yeah, it was--

It opens up worlds. That's what it does.

Yeah, it was great. I loved it.

Well, it sounds also like you got a little bit of the travel bug from your mother.

Oh, yes.

Yeah. Social studies is the subject that most appeals to you and reading about those different people and different countries. And you're right. I mean, it's a proactive way for children to learn about other cultures is to not just have them read but have them feel something of what's involved.

Eating a date.

Yeah, yeah. Who would have thought of that?

I mean, I never had a date at home. I never had a sardine. We had the most ordinary middle Western fare. But--

Did you-- describe for us a little bit about home life in the '30s in a place like Binghamton. And I'm thinking more along the lines of modern facilities. I take it you had electricity. Yeah?

Yes.

Did you have--

But my relatives didn't, the ones in Iowa. They still had kerosene lanterns.

Lamps. Did your father own a car?

Own a car? No, but his company-- he had a company car.

--car that he could use.

Well, then-- only when I was about 10, he got my mother a car because she wasn't supposed to learn to drive on his car. And she wanted to learn to drive. But she gave up after a few attempts. She did not like driving.

So we had this just big old Nash, or it was a new Nash then. And it lasted until it just went dead one day.

And how many years would that have been?

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Hmm?

How many years would that have been?

Oh, 10, 15, I don't know.

OK, OK.

It was--

This is so crazy. But when you said "Nash," I am thinking of a Billy Wilder movie called One, Two, Three. And one of the characters, who plays a Soviet commissar, wants to trade a very nice car for a 19' something Nash.

Oh!

And that's the only other time that I have heard of that car.

Well, I don't think anybody's heard of it anymore.

Yeah, yeah. It must have-- it was one of those--

But cars were very important. I mean, we knew the names of all the different kinds of cars. We could identify them. And my friends who were in families with four kids usually had a car with the seats that came back so that all the kids could sit down, but no seat belts. And-- oh, and our car was very fancy. It had window shades--

Oh, really?

Yeah-- that you pulled down. So it was a great. When we'd go swimming and wanted to change our clothes, we'd pull the shades down.

Did you have many clothes? Did your mother make them or did you buy them?

Oh, she never made-- she hated sewing. And so do I. I had not so many but very-- she got good clothes. She liked to shop-- to go to New York on a shopping trip and take me to Best's. Do you now Best's? No. Best and Company was a very-- but it was expensive, and she was very selective, but very nice-- she got good stuff, and it lasted. So it was part of her frugality was being kind of extravagant.

Well, there is a saying in another language that I remember hearing, which is I'm not so poor that I can afford to buy cheap things. You know? You have to-- you know?

Exactly. I learned that when I taught kids in poor neighborhoods in Philadelphia. They had so much stuff, and it fell apart. I mean, their shoes were always breaking, and their-- and that never happened. My stuff lasted forever.

In the 30s growing up, did you have a radio at home?

When I was 10, we got a radio. That was most exciting.

I can imagine.

Oh. My-- we would-- my mother and I would do exercises listening to the radio. And of course, then I listened to all the-- the radio was this object that-- well, I'll tell you, when I was working with kids in Philadelphia, we went to the Plaything Museum-- a recreation. And it was a history of recreation in the States through the years.

And we got into this room, and it was a room that was almost bare. There was a rug, and there was a Zenith radio, which was exactly the kind we had. And it was sitting on a rug. And it was on, and The Shadow was on. And I just thought, oh wow. And my kids-- I had a bunch of school kids with me. And they said, well, what goes on in this room? And I said, well, you have to sit down and listen to that program. No TV. Oh, no TV. How could you-- but we listened to those programs, and I swear we saw them.

When the King of England abdicated and new king came in with his two little girls, we were in junior high school. And we were taken to the auditorium to listen to it. And I swear I saw it. I swear I saw the king and the queen and the children. All audio.

Well, you know, that shares itself with books is you read a book and you picture something in your mind. You hear something and you have pictures in your mind. They're not created for you, which was the power of radio. You know?

Yeah.

And that you have this memory of these particular things-- the abdication , the program The Shadow. What kind of a program was that, The Shadow? Tell me, because I've heard of it, but I don't know--

You don't know The Shadow?

I only heard of it. I don't know what it was.

Ooh! Well, he was the Shadow. And he-- "ooh, the Shadow knows." I can hear him saying that. I don't know why he was saying it. "The Shadow knows." And he always had an adventure.

And then there were things like Amos 'n' Andy, and everybody seemed to listen to that. And of course, that was two guys-- African American. And they were white guys, and they did this Amos 'n' Andy thing. It was probably very racist. I don't remember any of the stories. But--

But it was of the time.

Well, at the time, I didn't like it as much as I liked things like stories, like-- oh, there was The Lone Ranger.

Did you get news over the radio?

Oh, yes. Yeah.

Did you listen-- of the programs that were on, in your family, did you listen more to news or more to the sort of entertainment programs?

We didn't listen to a lot of news, no. And there were important things that we listened to. I'm trying to remember. Well, like-- I can't think of them.

It's OK. What about newspapers? Did your parents read newspapers?

They read the local paper and the important news. I read the comics. I loved the comics. And they had good comics in those days. Sunday comics were colored. And I felt-- we got a local paper on Sunday which had color comics. Some of my friends got The New York Times, which struck me as terribly boring. It was all--

No comics.

No comics.

No comics.

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Why would you take that?

Yeah.

So they weren't big on news, not particularly. There was-- I remember a few times, like when they did the story of-- what was it-- the time that the world was invaded and--

Orson Welles'--

Orson Welles' thing, yeah.

OK, and people believed it?

Oh, yes. They believed it because it came on and it seemed real. And that was just kind of a scary night. But-- and I remember, also, very clearly when the Lindbergh-- well, of course, I remember when Lindbergh flew across the Atlantic. And from then on, whenever a plane went by-- and planes were open in those days-- we'd run out in the yard and wave our hands and yell hi to Lindy. And--

Every pilot was Lindy.

Yeah, every pilot was Lindy. And there were air shows. Airplanes were big things. And he-- so then his child, his first baby, was kidnapped. That was a huge thing. And that meant that there was a final newspaper, that if there was a final-- it was a peach. It was colored. Peach and you would hear the newsboys on the corner saying, "Peach final! Peach final!"

And what does that mean if it's a final newspaper and it's peach? I mean, what--

It's the final news of the night and--

Oh, you mean the most recent--

It's a big piece of news-- if a war had started or when the Lindbergh baby was kidnapped. That was huge. And that scared us all. I mean, we went-- I went-- I did not like to visit my friends who were much better off than I was. I was sure that some kidnapper would come and take me and think I lived there. So I was all ready to say, I'm not the one that lives here. I would not have been a good, loyal friend. But--

But it scared people at the time.

Oh, it scared us as children. You know, what was I, six years old? I mean, kidnapping, taking, stealing a baby and then finding it dead. We knew that.

Did you have people in your neighborhood in Binghamton who were of different backgrounds? That is, they were either immigrant background or they were African American or--

Oh, there was one African American in our school, in our whole elementary school. And her father was a chauffeur of the only rich guy in town. And Jewish was totally separate. I mean, it was a very prejudiced time. It was horrible.

Ooh. I can't imagine why-- there was a Jewish girl in our class. And she had lots of birthday parties and Valentine parties and things, and we'd all go in to her house, but none of us ever asked her to our birthday parties or-- I don't know where our mothers were. I mean, it was just-- it was a given. And they didn't even know her. I mean, she-- it was absolutely-- all these things registered, I'm sure, on how unfair it was. It made me feel very uncomfortable. But still I was part of it.

And I remember-- oh, there was one Black boy in our kindergarten class. His name was Eddie Brown. We all assumed

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he was named Brown because he was Brown. And he had a hard-- he struggled in school. His father worked for the same rich guy-- had horses and his father was a groom. And he used to-- he lived on the estate, and he passed by my house to go to school.

So he used to stop for me, and I'd walk to school with him. And I never thought about color. But we soon learned. And he flunked kindergarten. And I don't know how you flunk kindergarten, but he did. And so he kept getting behind, and then he began to be bullied. I used to see him having fights on the way home from school with the bigger boys. There would always be a fight with Eddie.

But interestingly, just recently, my granddaughter, Libby, was skiing, and she met a family, a Black family, who had an uncle Eddie. And it turned out to be my Eddie. And pieces sort of fit together. I can't remember the details, but I thought that was amazing. He actually overcame it and did something with his life. Oh, it was bad.

So was there only the one Jewish girl in your class? Or were there other Jewish children?

I think-- oh, oh, there was another. There was a boy whose father owned the movie theaters. But he wasn't part of our social group either. And I know now that the reason our parents could tell they were Jewish was by their names. I had no idea. But, you know, Cohen and-- and I remember when I had my first boyfriend gave me a ball of tinfoil, and his name was Anthony Savaggio. Isn't that a beautiful name? My dad asked who gave it to me, and I said Anthony Savaggio. He said, hmm, little Italian. I thought, how the heck does he know that?

And how old was Anthony when he gave you a ball of tinfoil?

Oh, probably second grade.

Oh, poor kid, you know? But what does a boy give a girl when he likes her? Tin foil.

Til foil? Eh.

Tin foil, why not? Were there immigrant children from Europe, for example, of people who would have been, let's say, like your Swedish relatives but of a more recent immigration? Do you remember that in your growing-up years?

No, no. I think-- no, not at all. I don't think any of them-- I mean, nobody spoke a different language at home. Binghamton was sort of a divided town. The people who were from Slavic countries lived over there. And I didn't know that until later. But-- no, we were pretty white bread.

We had to figure it all out. The books we read-- boy, I read some of those books, and they are so full of racist thoughts. And I mean, I couldn't read them to my children because they were so bad. But I didn't know it. And kids don't judge. But they pick up stuff.

Yeah.

Yeah.

Yeah.

I think--

In the '30s-- I mean, Hitler came to power in 1933. And that means you were nine years old at the time when he would have come to power. And one of my questions and one of the reasons I ask about newspapers and radios and things like that is to try and get a sense of how much did this news of the wider world and what's going on in the wider world be part-- was part of the life that one knew at the time? And I don't get a sense that any of European kind of news permeated in Binghamton, New York, that--

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Nope, nope.

--there was no talk of it. There was no--

No, not at all, really, because later my second husband was part of the-- I mean, he was Jewish, and he was very aware of that in 1933. He was a little older than I. And I mean, the war was very much a part of their life. And he lived in Berlin.

Oh, wow. He was from Germany?

Oh, he was from Germany. Yeah. And--

He was at the center of it.

Hmm?

He was at the center of it. He was at the center of it.

Oh yeah.

Because if he's Jewish in Berlin and that's where--

Yeah. And he was a Mendelssohn, which was a very Jewish family. And in fact, he's very much in the Holocaust Museum and his family, the one in Berlin. But that's why I know that he, at my age, was so much more aware than I was. His family was leaving Berlin. They left for England and then emigrated here. And I was oblivious. I was a teenager during those early years of the war. I really had no idea that there was a war going on.

Well, there is-- to be fair, there is a difference. When you are first part of the targeted group and you are in the center of where these policies are formulated, you're going to feel it on your skin right away. And if you're living in a country where those policies aren't implemented-- it was an isolationist country, which for a long time did not know, do we want to be involved? Do we not want to be involved? And you're not living in a major city. You're living in a second-tier town.

Oh, very much.

That's one of the-- I do not want to put words in your mouth, but these are the things that I'm thinking when I'm thinking of Binghamton, New York, and when I am-- when I'm thinking of how much did international news and want to know how much of international world affairs been part of the basic sort of assumed knowledge base that people had. And what I'm sensing is that not at all.

Not-- I don't think so. I mean--

Or hardly at all.

Hardly at all. I mean, it was just out there. I was oblivious. I know that.

You were also a kid.

Well, I was-- I became a teenager during the '30s, finished high school in '41 just before the war, had no idea that we were on the brink of war. All I worried about was boyfriends and social life and having fun learning to ski.

That's so unlike a typical teenager.

But, you know, I felt so-- Binghamton was a very safe environment. I think all the people I know who grew up with me-

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- we all think we had a very safe, comfortable, protected kind of life. But, boy, were we out of it of what was really happening. I mean--

Do you remember how you felt and how you heard about Pearl Harbor?

Oh, I was-- in my first year of-- just gone to college. And it was a-- we just had a-- well, today is the anniversary. And it was December. So it was my first year, and I'd been there about two months. And we had the big winter dance that weekend. And I had my boyfriend-- one of my boyfriends from high school was there for the dance. And we came down on Sunday mor-- I mean, on Sunday morning, we were meeting in the living room of the dorm where I lived when the news came about Pearl Harbor.

And we all sat there just stunned. And within a year, every one of the guys that were there being a date that weekend had been drafted. It just happened like that. And nobody expected it at all. I mean-- I mean, they weren't prepared to go to war. We had grown up-- and so they-- but within a year, they were most of them off at boot camp or training or something. But it didn't affect us much at that moment-- me. I mean, I was in a girl's college.

What was the name of the college?

I'm going to have to--

It was Smith.

--switch slots here.

OK.

I'm sorry.

OK, we're going to cut, then, for--

All right, sounds good. Oh, sorry about the door.

So you were in Smith College?

Mm-hmm.

And that's in Boston, isn't it?

No, it's in Northampton, Massachusetts.

Sorry. You're right. You're absolutely--

An hour from Boston.

An hour from Boston. I should know that. I was born and raised in Boston. I had forgotten. Why did you choose Smith College?

Well, my mother admired a woman in Binghamton who was very bright and very-- she ran a lot of things. She was somebody my mother admired. And she'd gone to Smith College. So that's where she dreamed of me going. And she wanted me to go to a good college. We didn't have the money.

And after my first year there, my father came up, and we were riding in the car. And he told me, you know, we just can't swing another year. I'd had help. I'd had some help from the col-- it only cost $1,100 for room, board, and tuition. Today, it would be like $60,000 or something. But that was more than we could--

That's a lot of money in the '30s.

That was-- oh. Was it-- my mother kept a little book about all the expenses, every stick of chewing gum that-- when I went to college. And she made it, but I said I didn't really care. I mean, if I can't come back next year, I've had one good year. I have lots of new friends.

But my grandmother, my father's mother, came through-- I mean, she just-- she said, I can donate $500, which was half of it. And I got work scholarships and things to help me along. So I got-- and then the war started, and my mother went to work in the bank. And that helped. I mean, she had money to help pay. But that was a hard-- I mean, I loved being in college. I loved-- I always loved all that school stuff. But--

But they had to patch it together.

Hmm?

They had to patch it together--

Yeah.

--your family.

And we did it. We did it all. My grandfather lived to see me graduate. He came to the graduation. And by then my grandmother was dead.

That's quite a gift.

Hmm?

It's quite a gift.

It's a terrific gift. They gave me many gifts-- the gift of reading, of loving books, music. My father used to play the piano, too. He played by ear, but he-- I still have some of his sheet music.

So the US declares war in 1941.

I what?

The US declares war on Japan in 1941. But the war in Europe had been going on since 1939.

Yeah.

Had you gotten news of that? Was that something that was in people's consciousness in Binghamton and in your circle of friends?

I can't speak for Binghamton, but certainly wasn't much in mine. I-- you know, the Japs were the bad guys, and the Germans were the bad guys, that sort of-- but it wasn't really in my--

Did your parents ever talk about these things?

No, not that I remember. I don't think so. My mother adored Roosevelt. My father was more of a staunch Republican. But-- and we used to listen-- we'd listen to his Sunday news program called The Fireside Chat-- Fireside Chat.

And we-- they just liked some of the stuff he did during the Depression. He had a lot of work corps and people out

working on the streets, and they always felt these guys were goofing off. I can remember them complaining about the guys leaning on their shovels and so on. But Roosevelt was doing some great stuff, getting us out of the Depression. So I was political enough to be interested in candidates, but not very. I wouldn't--

When all of the young men were drafted, that meant that college life changed a lot.

It did. Well, ours didn't because it was all girls. But it meant there were no guys at the local nearby colleges. But then they began using the colleges for training programs, and there would be-- they could sort of go to college and be trained to be in the Army or the Navy or something.

The women-- some women chose to go in the Navy. They were called the WAVES. And the WAVES were housed at Smith. So we had WAVES walking around the campus, marching around, singing a song about WAVES of the Navy. And-- my mouth is getting so dry.

Let's cut for a bit.

Let's cut for a bit.

Let's cut for a bit. Any time.

Standby.

It's on speed.

OK, so-- ah, I know what I was asking is that the war in Europe had started in 1939. And was there news about what was going on in Europe that you were hearing about or reading about or people were talking about?

Not that I was much aware of. It's interesting as I'd been aware that there was some kind of trouble in Spain--

1936, yeah.

--in the '30s because we read these little weekly newspapers in school-- weekly readers. But I honestly can't say that I was terribly concerned about the war in Europe. It just wasn't on my radar.

Were-- what was your major at college?

Sociology.

OK. And did you continue going to church?

Oh, well, no. I decided when I went there that I would try out all the different churches. So I went to different churches to see what I thought. And I quite liked the Catholic. I thought that was kind of exciting with all the things that go on.

But-- I babysat for a Quaker family. I never heard-- I thought the Quakers were extinct. But they were very active. And I babysat for this family. I loved the way they treated each other and their children. And I just-- I thought, I'm going to find out. And I went to the Quaker meeting, Friends, Society of Friends. And it was an unprogrammed meeting with no pastor. And people just sat in silence, and they spoke with the basic idea that everybody had a communication with the spirit. And if they had something to say, it was important. They could say it.

Well, I liked this idea lot. And they also-- it turned out that they were pacifist. And so, as I became interested in Quakers, I became interested in pacifism. And I saw what was happening in the war. And just about this time in my freshman year, my high school boyfriend-- my junior high school boyfriend who'd stayed-- we'd been together when actually-- when they chose the most popular girl and the most handsome boy and stuff, we were chosen as the ideal couple. That was Johnny.

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And Johnny went off that first year of the draft. And I mean, he went off, and he was at Yale and got drafted and went to France. And at the end of my junior year, I think it was, I saw him a few times in college. He died in France. And that kind of settled it for me that war was something I wanted not to be part of. So I became a really ardent pacifist.

So I figured the two things that I got from growing up were frugality from the Depression and commitment to pacifism from the war experiences. So many of just the boys-- they were boys. We did call the men. The boys who had gone to school with all those years just were dying off. And the thought that Johnny had died in the battlefield was a bit much. And I ended up-- Oakie, the guy that I married that was in Europe with me, was Johnny's best friend. He was wounded, but he wasn't-- he lived.

What is Oakie's full name?

Orlow, Orloff.

Orloff. And his last name?

Kent.

Kent. OK, Orloff Kent. And his nickname was Oakie?

Well, we called him-- his initials were OAK.

Ah, OK. And was he drafted together with Johnny?

Yeah, they were both drafted. But Oakie got into the ski troops, which he liked skiing. That was good while it lasted. But he got sent to Italy. And he was in the-- he was just in the-- I don't know. What do you call it? The-- anyway, he was just a soldier.

He was not on the front lines? Was Oakie on the front lines?

He was, yeah. He was.

He was on the front lines? OK.

Oakie was. He was wounded in Italy. He was in the mountains. He had nothing to do with skiing once he got in the Army, sort of like now when they train guys to do something and then they send them to some place and they have to do something else.

It's not to do with their training. It has nothing to do with their training. Yeah.

But--

Well, I'm going to ask you a controversial question.

A what?

I'm going to ask you a controversial question, what I think could be a controversial question. There are many people who would say, yes, we would be pacifist except in this war, except in World War II, except when it comes to stopping a force like Hitler.

I know.

How did you address that? Did you think about that? Is that something that came up in your own mulling over of

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becoming pacifist?

That's the crucial-- that's the question that my second husband kept getting asked because he was a Quaker. He became a Quaker, too. But he didn't-- he was not-- he felt that war had to be fought. And he lived there, so who am I to say?

But to me, it just seemed a silly thing to do, that they should have talked. They should have done something else. But then I'm probably naive. I mean, you know-- but I just-- the idea-- I know I would-- if I were drafted and given a gun, I couldn't shoot somebody. I think I. Couldn't I mean-- but--

Did that become a discussion between you and your second husband? Did you talk about this?

Oh, yes, a lot. He was-- oh, it was long before that I'd become a pacifist. And he had a lot of exposure to Quakers along the way before he met me.

Tell me a little bit about-- you say you liked how the family behaved with one another, the people that you--

I what?

You liked how the family, the people that you babysat for--

Oh yeah.

--how they behaved with one another. Describe that a little bit for me. What was different from what you had been used to and grown up with?

I don't know. I mean-- and I think-- I mean, they had difficult kids. I think they were adopted. And it was just a kind of gentleness. But I wouldn't-- I like my parents, too. But at that time-- you know, sometimes you're looking for other people that would have been--

Yeah, you're exploring the world on your own.

Right. And I loved going to their house. It was a house full of books and soft voices and no arguing about anything. But then we didn't argue a lot either. My mother and I did argue, yes, very much.

The first meetings you went to, were they all unstructured? Are there ever times when there are structured meetings?

Structured?

Yeah.

No, they were just always silent meetings.

They were always silent meetings? Do you remember--

Well, silent until somebody said something. But there are Quakers who have pastors. There's two kinds.

Do you remember the first time you said something? Do you remember the first--

I don't think I said anything when I was in college, ever. I thought a lot of things, but I don't think I spoke. But later I became more vocal as I grew into it. But, no, I didn't say anything.

They're very different when you think of the two religions that you say you were attracted to, Catholicism on the one hand with rituals and a sort of mystical kind of approach and the Society of Friends. They're very different.

There's what?

I said, they're very different.

They're very different. But there's a stream of mystical stuff that goes through both, I think.

Yeah, yeah.

The Methodists can be pretty pacifist, too, during-- yeah.

So let's go back to-- you finished college. And that was in what year? What year did you finish--

'45.

Oh, so you finished in 1945. I see. You started in '41? That's right. You started in '41 right before Pearl Harbor happens.

Yes, and the war ended in Europe the week I graduated.

That's right.

So I was in the college during the war years. That was a short war, if you think about it.

Short but effective, you know?

I know. And they had good solutions, I mean, to some of the after.

We'll talk about those things. We'll talk about that. So when you're graduating, you graduate in a degree with sociology. And your family comes to-- your grandfather comes to your graduation. Your parents come?

Mm-hmm.

Any other relatives?

No.

OK. And by that point, were you already dating your first husband, Oakie? Or not yet?

I wasn't dating him yet. I mean, he wasn't my boyfriend. And I wasn't really committed to anybody. But that first week after college, he got a leave from the Army. He was on leave, and he came to Binghamton. His mother-- his parents had split up, and his mother lived in Schenectady. And so he came to Binghamton, and he was looking for a date. And nobody else was out of school because it was still a school year. But Smith had finished, and I had finished. And so I was sort of the available one.

And we had a really wonderful evening together just walking around Binghamton and doing things we had done in high school as a group. And it was sort of instantaneous. That kind of made us know that this was it. I don't know how it happened so fast. But I'd known him since kindergarten, so--

He wasn't a stranger.

It wasn't that difficult, except his family was very dysfunctional compared to mine. And-- oh--

Did he have brothers and sisters, as well?

He had two sisters.

He had two sisters. Was he also a member of the Society of Friends?

Oh, no, not then. He was still in the Army. And he still expected he'd have to go to Japan because that war was still going on. But--

Did you have any idea what your future was going to be?

My future?

Yeah, after you finished college? What were your plans?

My ideal plan was to do something to change the world. I think we sort of dream of that. And I wanted to make a difference. But I didn't have any big plans. I needed to think of something. So I started out doing social work, which-- like home relief and child welfare.

In Binghamton?

Ithaca.

In Ithaca.

Why was I in Ithaca? I don't know. Oh, well, then I got-- I wanted to be a writer. I was really going to be a writer. And when I went to the local newspaper to see if I could work for them-- I wanted to be a reporter-- they said I could do the society page. And I wasn't interested in that. So I went back to look for something else and got a job in Poughkeepsie up on the Hudson in the child welfare department and worked there.

And during that time, Oakie had come back to Cornell to finish-- he had two years left of college. So while he was doing that at Cornell, I was going to work. But we got married that summer and moved to Ithaca.

And that was the summer of what year?

That was the summer of '46. We were married in June and moved to Ithaca. That's why I was in Ithaca. And--

And he continues with Cornell?

Hmm?

He continues with Cornell?

He does, yeah. And I got a job in the Ithaca Welfare Department with three other case workers who were also wives of veterans who were studying. And that was my first paying job. And he had-- because he'd been wounded, he had a bonus or some kind of stipend and also, because if you were in that war, you got free tuition. So he didn't have to pay for tuition. And so my money earned our rent and our food. And it was good.

But during that time, we decided we wanted to travel. And I knew that with the Friends Service Committee, which is-- well, the other thing I liked about the Quaker religion was that they don't so much go by the Bible. But they have what they call faith and practice. And the practice goes along with the faith. I mean, you can't have just faith without putting it to practice. And so you find things to do that witness to your faith. And so that's--

Are there specific programs?

Hmm?

Were there specific programs?

Well, so then they set up-- during World War I, they set up the American Friends Service Committee, which sends out-- it would send help to refugees, to people-- it never chose sides. I mean, if it helped one side, they helped the others too. They fed the German children, and then they took care of the refugees. Anyway, that's what we got very interested in, the AFSC, the Friends Service Committee, and decided maybe we could work for them.

And this is while you're in Ithaca?

Well, while we were in Ithaca, yeah. And the family who had helped me wanted-- the people that I babysat for, the Quaker family. He had been in France helping with the AFSC, so he gave me some advice about how to do it and who to get in touch with. Anyway, we ended up with the Service Committee.

Let me ask a question. When he was in France, that was in World War I? Or World War II?

When he was, what?

The person who gave you advice-- and you said he was in World War I when it started or was that--

No, it was during World War II.

OK, OK. And do you remember the kind of advice he gave you?

No, but he just-- I just-- he was more of a model than a giver of advice. I don't know. But he had gone-- to the children in occupied-- I'm forgetting.

He had gone to-- France, during the war, was divided. There was Vichy France under German occupation. There was a free zone, I believe.

There was-- Le Chambon was the place that he'd worked. And-- I just-- I'm at a loss.

That's OK. That's OK. I know that a lot of the questions that I ask are so detailed and out from left field. But I ask them just in case, just in case.

Well, it's something I love talking about. I just can't think how it worked. I mean, it was a village in France where they--

Le Chambon?

Le Chambon, yeah.

I've heard of it.

Have you heard of it?

I've heard of it, yeah.

And there's been things written about it. And refugees appeared from-- Germans-- no. Oh.

That's OK. That's OK. But at any rate, the issue is that you wanted to do something that made a difference. You were attracted to the service part of the Society of Friends through the American Friends Service Committee. You spoke to the gentleman for whose children you had babysat who had had some experience.

Yeah, he was a professor at Smith.

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What was his name? Do you remember that?

Burns Chalmers.

Burns Chalmers?

Mm-hmm.

Oh, OK. OK. And then what happened after that? Did you have to go through some sort of training program or something?

Well, when we were selected to go, they decided that we should go to Poland. So we went to-- they have a place called Pendle Hill, which is a kind of retreat education center outside of Philadelphia. And we went to Pendle Hill. That was a summer after Oakie's graduation. And we started studying Spanish all morning every day.

To go to--

I mean, Polish.

OK, I was going to say, to go to Poland?

I've studied so many languages, and I can't speak any of them. But Polish was very intense. Every morning-- it was a very hot summer in Philadelphia, and every day we went to this mister somebody who was a Polish man and did Polish. And it was a terrible hard language. I mean, it had six conjugations or something. It was terrible. But it was fun, sort of.

And it was a summer so hot that the newspaper would show people actually frying eggs on the sidewalk. And it was-- we would go into Philadelphia, and then we would sort used clothing to be sent overseas and worked all day after we studied our Polish.

And we got training about lots of things, and we packed trunks. But we became the test case because the Iron Curtain was coming down. And they were not sure that they could go to Poland.

This was in 1947?

'47-- '47, yeah, '47. And they didn't want to get another whole team of people going to work in Poland if they couldn't go in. So we became-- we waited four months in Pendle Hill, going into Philadelphia every day and helping where we could. And it was-- well, and then they decided to send us to Paris to wait because we were this test case.

So that was really not a bad deal because that's what we'd wanted to do. And we went to Paris to the Friends center there where we had a room on the top floor and then still studied Polish with a Polish woman. And-- the only way we could be helpful was-- this was a center through which people came who were on their way to their assignments-- or on their way home or on their way back. So they'd stop in the Paris center.

And they loved to do things like go to the opera or to a play. So we spent our days going out and buying tickets for them so they could go do that. And we got to know Paris inside out. It was such a learning experience. And we were part of this life of people coming and going from all different countries.

I wonder what Paris was like in those first post-war years. Was there still rationing? Was there-- was it a city that you could see the war had been there?

Oh, yes. And the food-- the quality of the food-- what they lamented so much was their lovely French bread. It couldn't be white anymore. It was sort of brown. We thought it was terrific. It was really good. But it was not white. It was soft. And yes, there was rationing. I mean, there just wasn't much food. But we had-- one thing we had was peanut butter, which came from Philadelphia, which kept us going. And of course, Europeans had no use for peanut butter.

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[CHUCKLES]

And--

Yeah. But it's kept quite a bit, you know. It has its positive properties, peanut butter.

Hmm?

It has its positive properties, peanut butter does.

Oh, yes.

You know, protein?

Good protein.

Yeah, yeah, so how long-- when you were in Paris, you were still learning Polish. You were buying tickets for people to-- who are coming through to be able to enjoy something of the city. Were you involved in any other kinds of activities?

Well, whatever went on, whatever-- and Eleanor Roosevelt was the representative at the UN, and she came for tea. And we talked with her, and I mean there were--

That's quite special.

Yeah, that was very special. She was somebody I had admired since junior high school. I really liked Eleanor. [CHUCKLES] And we would spend a lot of time visiting the United Nations, their sessions, and finding out what was going on. And we just spent a lot of time getting to know Paris. We went to the opera a lot. I'd never been to an opera in Binghamton.

And we didn't-- our French was never very good. I had three years in high school in college, but Oakie was better. But going to a play was difficult.

Did you write home much?

Hmm?

Did you did you write home much?

Oh, endlessly.

Endlessly.

I have boxes of letters, copies. You know, I did carbon copies of every letter so that I would have my record. And I wrote to my mother. I mean, I just can't believe how much I write-- five, 10, 15 pages, two or three times a week. How, I don't know.

There's a writer in you.

Last night, I found a box of them in the basement. And I sat down to read them, and I just got fascinated. [LAUGHS] Oh my gosh, I did all that? Nobody would do that now, just--

So you had a little portable typewriter with you?

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Oh yeah, a nice little Corona, and it was not even so little, but yes.

And the letters that you read yesterday, were they from this time period when you were in Paris?

Some of them-- yeah, but I was reading the ones from Bad Aibling times because I wanted to think about it a little bit more. And I wrote endlessly then. [SIGHS] I didn't realize I had so many.

So tell me, how long did you stay in Paris?

Four months, again.

Four months.

Four months.

So four months in Philadel-- four months in Pendle Hill, and then four months in Paris?

Mm-hmm.

So it's eight months after you kind of enter the program, all right. And that brings us up to, let's say, winter 1948? Is that so?

Yeah, it was '48 when we got there, I think.

Had you seen many refugees when you were in Paris?

Not that I remember. There must have been some, but they didn't come through the Quaker Center there. But when the Iron Curtain came down, they suddenly did. It was just at the time when they needed staff for the children's village, or for the children that they were gathering up in Germany after the war. And they were all different nationalities. It was a perfect job for us because we loved kids and because they were from all different countries.

We had a smattering of Polish and a smattering of some Czech, and so that was a help, and--

So in other words, if I understand this right, you're in Paris and all of a sudden, the plans for Poland get aborted. You don't go to Poland.

No, we couldn't go to Poland because--

Was this, then, probably after-- well, Churchill gives that famous speech at some point about the Iron Curtain coming down.

Yeah.

I don't remember what year it was.

I don't--

But at any rate, it's at this time. And the government then probably doesn't allow you to go in or do--

No, they wouldn't. In fact, we went after we got to Bad Aibling, we went to visit, and we had a hard time getting in. They didn't want people that represented religions, so we said we worked for the International Refugee Organization. But they were doubtful about that too. They finally let us go, but boy, did we feel watched. I mean, they were very careful.

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You went to Poland?

We went to Poland to visit. And some of the boys wanted us to look up their parents, and we tried.

So let me understand this. This was like a personal visit, not one that was sponsored through the organizations.

No.

OK, and where did you go in Poland?

Where we were only allowed to go in the center of the city.

So Warsaw?

Warsaw, yeah, I think it was Warsaw. And we went on the train. But we did find a few parents. But when we'd go to talk to them in their apartments, they would turn off-- they would turn up the radio, and pull down the shades, and talk in whispers because they felt they were being listened to and watched all the time.

So we didn't think it was very helpful for us to be there. But the boys wanted messages to go through because the boys had run away, and their parents didn't know that they were still around, so that-- yeah.

Well, that was important for those families to know their children are alive.

Yes, that really was and they were very relieved, the ones that we got to.

So you would go visiting on your own to these, with an address or something when you were in Warsaw? And--

Yeah, I don't think--

Or you don't think it was Warsaw?

I'm thinking maybe it was KrakÃ³w.

OK, was it very bombed out?

Yes.

Warsaw was--

But Berlin was very bombed out too.

Yeah, but Warsaw was really leveled. KrakÃ³w--

I don't think we were in Warsaw.

OK.

I just don't know where we went. We must-- because several of the boys lived there. KrakÃ³w, I just really don't know.

OK.

I'll have to find the letters from then.

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That's OK. That's OK. But for me, it's interesting, and of course, connected to the Bad Aibling story, that you actually do go to the East and you do see something of what's going on there, and that the parents are pulling down the shades and turning up the radio because that speaks to the question of repatriation because there was the effort to repatriate people who had come from the East and were in the West to go back there.

Was that something that was part of the questions that were in Bad Aibling about the children that you were taking care of there?

Was what part of the--

Repatriation to Poland.

Yes, I mean that was one of the aims. One of the first aims of the refugee organization was resettlement if they could find their family. That seemed the best thing. But then, sometimes kids didn't want to go back. They tried to account for everything. It was a-- it was such a strange set up because here we were in this children's village with a couple of hundred kids at a time.

And they were coming through and we had social workers who tried to get them to where they could emigrate or resettle. Go back home. And the aim was to get everybody out, and it was such a strange feeling to know that if our job got done, there'd be nothing left.

And how strange to go-- that's why Christian, the young man who did his thesis on Bad Aibling, he grew up in Bad Aibling. He'd never heard of it. He didn't have any idea. And I said, well, that was our point. And yet, I tried-- I've been back a couple of times, and it's always been a US Army base or something else, but there's no trace of the children.

Because in a way to think that our job was done when there was nothing left to show, so really, only when it finally-- when it shut down, there were just what they called the hardcore, a few people who hadn't been able to pass immigration.

I think we'll stop here and take a break. Take a lunch break.

I think that's good.

Yeah, and we'll come back to talk more about Bad Aibling in full after lunch.

Yeah, I feel funny talk--

Rolling.

OK, before our break, we started to talk about Bad Aibling. And I want to get a sense of your travels from Paris to Germany and how you then end up in Bad Aibling. Did you go straight there, or did you go other places first?

You mean when we left--

Paris.

When we left Paris when we knew we couldn't go to Poland?

Right.

Well, we rode in the back of a big truck. And it was a long, long trip. I mean, you didn't fly or--

Do you remember what you saw of the landscape or the towns that you were passing?

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Oh, everything was very drab. We stopped in little villages. People were very kind to us. They'd take us in and give us food. And there was a-- it was an AFSC transport, this truck, and the drivers were Americans who were over there working. And they drove us to Munich. And in Munich, we met people who took us out to the children's village. I don't have any clear memories of arriving.

Do you have memories of what it looked like when you got there?

If what?

Do you have memories of what it looked like when you got there?

Of what it looked like, the village?

Yeah.

It was all painted camouflage green. It was barracks. It had been a Luftwaffe camp, and so there were the officers' quarters, which were pretty nice. And that's where we housed the babies and the preschoolers. There were about 150 of them, I think. And then, there were these other barracks where the older kids were housed.

There were six Quakers, and we were divided among the various age groups. We had one in the kindergarten with the little children. And then, there was a reception house. When children came, they had to stay in quarantine for a couple of-- for a month, I think. I don't know. And then, they would stay there until they were cleared for getting out. And then they could come to us.

And then, so there was-- and one was assigned to the 6 to 10-year-olds, and one to the older girls, the teenagers, and Oakie and I to the teenage boys. And we had about 150 teenage boys. They were boys as old as 18. And they were pretty grown up, but in a way, they were surprisingly young.

They were very naive and in a sort of a way. But they they'd seen the war and they'd wandered around Europe. They were a very strange combination of naive and experienced beyond their years. They had-- most of them hadn't finished any schooling.

Who ran the place? Who ran--

The International Refugee Organization. We called it IRO. And that was--

Was it part of UNRRA?

Hmm?

Was IRO part of UNRRA, or was it part of the Red Cross? What was it affiliated with?

Oh no, it was part of UNRRA, I think.

It was part of UNRRA.

Yeah, and--

When you came, was the camp already established and running for a while, or was it new?

Not that camp-- the children had been wandering around Europe, and some of them had-- they been in various little villages. A few Quakers had been working there at one of the villages. They just decided it would be more efficient to put all the children together and either resettle them, or get them a chance to emigrate, fill out their papers. And so they had a staff of social workers. We were very short-staffed, but--

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Was this the only village of its kind? Was this the only sort of, like, center of its kind?

It was the only place where so many were gathered together. And this was the main-- this was going to be the place where they all came through. And they came, and they left. I mean, it was a constant flow at first.

Another question-- were they all orphan children?

No, they weren't all orphaned. They were called unaccompanied, and unaccompanied meant you had no family with you or no known person to take care of you.

So in some ways, it could be that you have a mother or a father.

Oh yes.

But you don't know where they are.

Exactly, or they might be sort of sick. The Boyko boys, two boys from the Ukraine, had a surviving mother. They had left the Ukraine with both parents. The father died, and the mother was not well, so-- but they still had a mother. And a lot of them wanted to be with their parent, but it wasn't feasible. And some of them decided they'd rather move on, but they mostly wanted to go to the States.

And when you say that you and your husband were assigned to the older boys, what were your particular responsibilities?

Well, we were assigned the very nice job called home life. And this was a very drab, inhumane sort of place, like all the DP camps, and we were to make it more homelike. So we did things-- we thought up things. We played games with-- at that point, there was no very functional school, so we sometimes taught classes.

But mostly, we tried to make life pleasant. We tried to set up what we call a Wohnzimmer, a living room, in each barracks. And we make it as pretty as-- I mean, the kids would decorate it and try to make it nice. And it would be a place they could hang out.

One of the first things we got was a radio for each Wohnzimmer.

Each living room.

That was popular. The kids loved listening to the radio. They loved music. They loved dancing. We had lots of singing. Oh, they loved to sing their songs, and--

How did they speak with one another? I can imagine it was a Tower of Babel.

It was. We spoke DP Sprache.

DP Sprache? [LAUGHS]

And it was a language all its own. If something was stolen, you'd say it's comme si'd, comme ca'd.

Comme si'd, comme ca'd. OK.

French, but just a mash of languages. Some of the kids spoke five languages, but they probably didn't speak any of them very grammatically. But they were very-- they were very savvy kids in some ways. They knew how to do stuff on the black market.

Did they teach you?

[GIGGLES] They tried.

Yeah?

We were very honest and pure. [GIGGLES]

Well, I'm sure that kids needed that as a model. But the reason I ask that is that it's a level of trust, that they'd only tell you about it if they trusted you.

Well, they trusted us, I think.

OK. So what are some of the items that they would exchange or sell on the black market? What did they have to sell?

Sheets, not money-- I mean, I can't imagine they get much for sheets. Cigarettes-- it's amazing reading my letters to see how many cigarettes we offered these teenagers. What a dreadful thing to do, but we don't know yet.

Well, it was also currency. Cigarettes were more currency.

Oh, it was great currency.

Yeah.

We could get cigarettes for $0.05 a pack in the [PX] We could go to a restaurant and if we left a pack for a tip, they would tell us that's outrageous. Leave two cigarettes. That's enough. I mean, that's how-- and coffee was very greatly wanted on the black market.

But they went-- they used to go walking on the highway near the camp, they told us. And they'd pick up cigarette butts. They'd open them up, rerolled the tobacco, and sell the cigarettes. I mean, they were very savvy.

Resourceful, resourceful.

Mm-hmm.

Did you get to know them so that you learned something of their stories of who they were?

Oh yeah, they loved to talk about their stories.

So tell me. What are some of those that stayed with you, some of the experiences that you saw these children had gone through?

Well, that's-- I can't quite just grab one.

OK.

Many of them did. But I can't--

Do you know of any who had been in forced labor?

Do I what?

Were any of them in forced labor camps?

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Well, you never knew whether they-- the ones who said they were, whether they really were or not. I mean, their stories sometimes changed. But certainly, some of them were in places where they had to do forced labor. There was one boy who came to us about 12 or 14. He hadn't ever been to school. He was totally illiterate. His name was Mitka. Has that name come across your radar?

Mm-hmm.

But his story changed so often that I'm not sure what's the real story. But he had a very sad story about being injured in the massacre at Babi Yar, or whatever that was, and that he was in forced labor with the Poles. I don't know what was really true.

But the Boyko brothers were-- their story was very clear. They had little photographs of themselves with their mother and father. And there were a couple of boys who were mascots, GI mascots. And the Army, the US Army coming through, as they were cleaning up, would go and they'd pick up some kid. And he'd join up with them. They'd give him cigarettes, and they treat him really nicely.

But they picked up the lingo and they were like little Americans, so they wanted to go to the States. They all thought America was the land of dreams, and they all wanted to go to Texas.

Really? [LAUGHS]

They thought Texas was the place to be. I remember a boy named Harry who wore cowboy boots, acted like a Texan, and was really planning to emigrate there. I do not know if he ended up or not, but--

What were some of the nationalities of the children who were at Bad Aibling?

Oh, the biggest number was Polish. And then, I think probably Ukraine. Czech-- there were quite a lot of Czechs, but many of them were latecomers. They weren't from the war so much as escaping now the communists when they were afraid were going to take over.

There were Latvians and Lithuanians-- not so many-- and Estonians, and--

Were there any Russian children?

Yes, there were a few Russians. Oh, there's a woodcut done by a Russian boy who it says on the back, made by Russian boy, Amir Hamidullin. That was his name-- at Bad Aibling children's village. But he-- his mother drove a streetcar in Stalingrad, and he had escaped. But he wanted to go back.

When he left, I was pregnant. And I told him I liked his name, and if I had a boy, I might name him Amir. He said, well, it would make a nice girl's name, too. [LAUGHS]

Where there are many-- were there efforts at repatriation in Bad Aibling? That is, to have children go back to where they came from?

Oh yes, quite often, but most of the Czech boys, the handiest place to go is Australia. And if they could find their parents, they wanted to send them home, so that was happening. There were two great kids. There were-- There was a sweet-- there was a French one-- one or two, at least-- one Italian, I think.

Have you ever heard of the Kalmyks?

Yes.

Yeah, well--

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So from the Soviet Union, the Kalmyks?

They were the descendants of Genghis Khan. They were Asian.

Right.

And they were kept. They were excluded from the United States because of the Oriental Exclusion Act, and Canada wanted nothing to do with them. Australia said they didn't want them, so these-- we only had four of them, I think, in the camp. Two of them were boys in our group, and they were the smartest kids we had. And they'd been there a while. They saw other people come and go.

And there was this big outgoing group going to Australia. The Czech boys who were coming in were very much wanted in Australia because they could do the work. The US was the only place that we heard about it where they took children into families, and the other places had reasons. Canada wanted workers. Australia wanted workers. They wanted-- they didn't just want nice little kids to adopt.

And so it made a huge difference with these older kids, but I know I remember the Kalmyk boys were so sure that they would go to Australia. You know, it's just too heartbreaking to tell them that they were excluded there too. They didn't get it. They were people of color. They were Oriental. There were many reasons that they were kept out.

Actually, do you want another story?

Sure, yes.

When I was teaching in the '70s in Philadelphia, there was a cleaning lady in the school. And she and I were usually the last people in the school at night because I was always working in my room. And she was cleaning it, and we would talk. Turns out she was a Russian DP, and she had been in forced labor with the Russians and then had gone to a displaced persons camp after the war where she met her husband, who was a Kalmyk.

And he looked like a Buddha. They lived in North Philly, and they were part of the-- oh, well, they all were Buddhists too. That was the other thing. Their Buddhism made them ineligible. And they were-- [CHUCKLES] I--

So she used to tell me stories about her husband, who would come home drunk every Friday night and so on. And then, she talked about the Buddhist community and invited me for a Buddhist ceremony at her house, which was in the neighborhood. When I met her husband and he looks so much like the kids I knew, I asked her if Goropov was a common Kalmyk name.

And she said, oh, you don't mean Alex and Nicky. I said, yeah, that's who I mean. And they were part of the Philadelphia Buddhist group, and they'd grown up. They've been sent there.

So they made it?

They made it, and what had happened was that, well, they were very endearing kids, especially Alex. He was bright, and a Quaker man named Francis Bosworth took an interest in him, helped him emigrate, came to Philly, and his brother too. But he was the one that-- the brother ended up being alcoholic and dying rather young.

But Alex, Francis helped him grow up, got him a scholarship to Middlebury, and he had a good education. And he married a Kalmyk woman. And so we met him finally, and that was one of the happy stories.

How amazing. Yes, it is a happy story.

Hmm?

It is a happy story from that unknowability, that sort of hanging in the air--

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Yeah.

--to know that the--

It's amazing.

Yeah.

That was a very, very nice ending to things. He had four or five children. All looked just like little Buddhas. They all looked like those dolls, those nesting dolls.

Yeah. Were there stories of children who never got placed, who never were able to leave?

Well, I heard that when they finally closed-- I left about a month before they closed the camp. I heard there were a few left. They were called the hardcore, and I don't know what happened to them. There was probably a Kalmyk or two, maybe some Jewish children. That's another whole story.

Tell me about that.

The Jewish children often got placed quickly because the Jewish organizations, the humane or the international organizations, had good funds and were taking care of Jewish kids. But it also made for hard feelings because they often got better food, better rations. They had kosher food, but they also had more butter, more eggs. So they occasionally had cake. And this was not nice for the other kids to see.

And then also, they couldn't do any work at all-- they couldn't even turn a light switch-- on the Sabbath, which was Saturday, which was the work day in the camps. So the kids that were-- they were housed all the Jewish kids in one dorm.

So they weren't intermingled with the other kids?

They weren't mingled much. And well, that's another story. I was one night sitting here in my kitchen. A friend from Philadelphia, Kate, wanted to come through. She worked for the AFSC, and she brought a friend with her. And we were sitting around eating supper and talking, and they asked me about my work with AFSC. And I was talking about DP camps and so on.

And the visiting woman, Gabriela, she said, oh, my father and his brothers and sisters were all in a DP camp. In fact, she said he used to talk about it with great affection. And when I asked what it was, she didn't know, but she said it was a children's village. And I said, well, I suspect it could be.

So she called him up. He was a dentist now in New Jersey. She called him up. And I could tell she was talking on the phone. She said-- I'm sitting here-- and she said, and I'm with somebody who remembers those days. And she said, what were the names? And he said, Kent, Again, he said Kent.

I was just-- oh. She was-- she began to cry. She was just sort of overwhelmed. And his name-- he changed his name to Silver. It had been Silverman, I think. And I didn't remember them particularly, but he remembered us because we were in the same dorm. And he and his sisters and brothers, they think they had relatives here and they all came together.

But then, finally, she got him and her stepmother. They came to visit later, and they were very kosher. They brought their own eating utensils and cooked their own food.

Was it-- when you were in the camp, though, were you also houseparents to the Jewish children or were there different people?

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[AUDIO OUT]

And I am now rolling.

OK, so I want to understand. Were the Jewish kids in the same dorm as the other kids?

Yep, but they were in one room, I think, most of them. I mean, the boys-- the girls were in a different building.

Were you houseparents to these children as well?

We were never houseparents. We were just home life.

OK.

But no, they had the same houseparents as the other kids. I don't know just how that worked, and I don't know-- I don't really remember a lot about the Jewish children because they ate in a separate dining room, and they had their own Jewish holidays.

So I have a number of questions. What's the difference between home life and houseparents?

Oh, houseparents were mostly DP people-- I mean, displaced persons themselves. One of the ones that we first knew was Papa. They were called Papa and Mama-- Mama Helena and Papa Wladimir. They were Polish. He was a University professor in Warsaw, and now he was going to emigrate to the States where he'd gotten a secure job as a janitor in an apartment building.

And he brought us-- he showed us what he was going to do. And we just thought, oh man, some big apartment in New York City. But he was very delighted he was going to get to go there. But these were often very intellectual people who spoke several languages, and a lot of the house parents were like that.

But they were basically very kind to the children, most of them. Some of them had strict ideas of discipline, which were not ours. And they didn't-- they wanted to hold a tighter control over them. But no, houseparents were hired from among the displaced persons camps. It was a much better place to live than the camps, which were--

And what was their role that was different from yours?

Oh, they had to be sure the kids brush their teeth, and just being there to help them in their housing. We were there to make life more fun. And what could you have as a better assignment, huh?

Yeah.

And they got very good at it. They painted. If we got a little can of paint, they would paint furniture. These great, big teenage boys would cut up strips of paper and decorate the Wohnzimmer. And even sometimes with toilet paper, if they could get that. And we began to write to every group, everybody we knew in the States, telling them what they could do.

They could send a box with all the materials for a birthday party because once a month, we had a birthday party in the Wohnzimmer for the boys whose birthday was that month. And we just were overwhelmed with stuff people sent us so much. People were feeling so generous and so helpless. They were really grateful.

And I spent a good part of my working days responding, thanking people for these boxes. But it was-- they sent great stuff. They sent a lot of jello, which we had no way to--

To make jello?

We had no way to make it gel. But we found you could mix it with water, and it made a drink sort of like Kool-Aid

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later. And they loved that sweet drink. They loved sweets. And they sent marshmallows so they could toast-- they'd never heard of a marshmallow. One of them asked me what kind of a tree it grew on. And you know, how do you explain a marshmallow? [CHUCKLES]

Yeah.

The birthday parties were very popular. And as time went on, our Wohzimmers got better and better. They got really quite comfortable. We'd have a cot with a blanket or something, and they could come and sit and chat.

You mean before, they would decorate it, but there'd be no furniture in it?

There was no furniture at first, but we went around in the warehouses and scrounged things, comme si'd, comme ca'd.

You comme si'd, comme ca'd things.

Yeah.

A number of questions-- One of them is-- let me ask the simpler one in my mind, simpler one first. 1948 is already pretty late after the war to start taking care of children because the war ends in 1945.

I know.

And what was going on with them until that camp was organized, until the children's village was organized? Who was taking care of them?

Well, I guess there were holding places, or they might be with some adults in adult camp. I don't really know.

OK. And were there people like psychologists or counselors in the camps? I mean, did any of the kids have the kind of traumatic experiences that you could tell, this is a troubled child. They've been through too much. They need some extra kind of help.

Yes, I'm sure there were children like that. I wasn't very much aware of any one individual. I remember one little boy who climbed into every car that left the gate, hoping that he'd be taken to somewhere to a home. They had their worries, but talking to some of them in later years, they said you know, that was not a really bad place.

We had our own culture, our own rules. We got along with each other. We took care of each other. The older brothers and the sisters really took care of their little brothers and sisters. And it was very civilized, in many ways. And there was not the bickering that goes on in a family.

So that was-- you anticipated one of my other questions. The kids from different nationalities-- the Poles, the Czechs, the Ukrainians, the Jews-- was there any friction between national groups?

Definitely the people were antisemitic. And also, most people did not like the Hungarians. They called them Tartars, and they just didn't like them. And they have the friction-- there was friction between the nationalities. You got it, yeah. But as a community, they worked out their own rules. They began having their own sort of government and even their own kind of money, little paper money that they could use at a store.

Tell me. When you mention antisemitism, what kind of form did it take?

What kind of--

Form did it take? That is, what were the incidents that would tell you this, that would say, yeah, I see this happening.

I'm sorry. What were the incidents what?

When you mentioned antisemitism--

Oh yeah.

How did that manifest itself?

I think I already mentioned that one time, they found needles baked into the cake. Somebody had sprinkled needles into the cake.

That was for Jewish children?

Yeah, it was only-- it was from the Jewish-- from the kosher kitchen. As I said, they had butter and eggs, so they could make cake where the other kids couldn't.

Well, that's very cruel.

That's terrible.

Yeah.

It's terrible. I don't know who did it, or I don't know if they ever did anything to try to solve it.

But there was that incident, and you remember that incident?

Yeah. But when we-- there was real unrest when we went into the village, and we asked every door to name themselves. In our dorm, they put all the most troubled boys together in the dorm where we slept. And they named themselves the gangster house, [LAUGHS] which didn't augur well.

No, were they gangsters?

Well, they wanted to be.

Were they gangsters in the making, in other words?

They thought they were pretty big, but--

Were these the kids that you thought were hardcore, that in the end couldn't get placed?

No, not these. A lot of the boys went to Australia. Some of them went to the US. Harry went to Texas. The Boykos went to Pennsylvania. No, the hardcore came two years later when they were ready to close. We were just opening at this point.

Then, what constituted being hardcore? Was it behavior, or was it that--

No, it was just being left.

I see.

Just not being-- being Kalmyk.

So it was nothing they could do. It was just they weren't wanted.

Right. They were-- and they didn't know why sometimes. I mean, the Kalmyk kids didn't know that they were dark-

skinned and slanty-eyed. I mean, they were the popular-- ["Shurka" [Rus. diminutive of "Alexandr"] Alex, was the most popular little boy of his age. And after a little while, after the older boys were getting sent, there's one of our workers, our Quaker workers was disappeared from us. They took her away.

We never knew what happened. Turns out that she had had lesbian experiences, which at that time were definitely out. And we didn't-- I mean, she was a wonderful worker. She worked with the 6 to 10-year-olds. And no one told any of us of the Quaker team what happened to her. They took her off. She thought she was getting a new job.

And the Quakers didn't want to do this. It was IRO. It was the international people who didn't think it was a good influence on the children. I didn't learn about it until I read Christian Hoschler's book about Bad Aibling.

So that's only a few years ago.

Yes!

It's only now. I never knew why it happened. The two Quakers who knew who were sort of above us in Munich never told us. One was one of my best friends, but she never told. And Elaine the woman, never told us. We wrote-- I mean, we were always writing to her, and she went on and lived. And she became a very active women's rights person, but what a horrible experience it was for her.

She said she'll never forget. They put her on a plane, sent her to the US, and she said she just cried all the way home. I mean, she-- and the kids loved her. She just vanished. And so right about then, they asked, Oakie and me to go and work in that with those kids because they become so traumatized by this loss.

So that was a very-- there were only about 10 little girls. They were the children who were-- didn't get born because of the war, and they were the smallest group of children. And they would, if they'd been born, they would have been born within the last 10 years. And nobody was going around having babies if they could help it, so there were only a few.

But we-- those little girls were so-- you asked about kids who were showing problems. They really did. They were so needy. They were so-- they would just cling to us, climb on us. We couldn't walk by without-- they'd leap on Oakie's back and hug him and sometimes even bite, just because they were just so-- it took a long time to let them know that we were there, and we weren't going to go away yet. And they were very troubled, especially the little girls.

And you say that they were from a generation that wasn't born. In other words, they were the exception. They had been born during the war.

They'd been born during the war, when it wasn't easy to have a baby, and when--

Do you know some of their stories of how the circumstances--

How they--

And who their mothers were, who their fathers were?

No, not of those children-- I never knew any of the parents that survived them. The little girls were just there. The little boys, they were-- oh, it was a lovely age. And they were such beautiful children.

Tell me. What was the relations with the village of Bad Aibling? Was there any contact between the villagers and the children's village?

That's a good question. No, not really. We had a house mother, Mama Steinbeck, very good German. She lived in the village, and through, her I got to know part of the village, but no. The local people, I don't think they thought much about this village, what it was doing there.

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It sounds more like just a barracks rather than a village.

It was fenced in, and it had guards standing at the gate.

Did that mean the children couldn't go out?

Oh, they couldn't go out without permission. They could go to town if they were older, but they had to have permission.

OK.

Bad Aibling was a town known for mud baths. [LAUGHS] People came there to get a Moorbad.

So it was like a spa town?

Hmm?

It was a spa town.

It was a spa town, probably a rather nice. It's a very beautiful setting, so--

And then, OK, I'll ask my question while you take a sip. In your opinion, how was it run as a management? As a place, was it run well? Was there problems with the running of Bad Aibling, the administration, and things like that?

Well, I think they did the best they could. I think people complained a lot. If you read Christian's book, he has a lot about the administration and changing. The first director when we were there was a Czech-- a former Czech, a lawyer-- who was named Otto [? Bayer. ?]

And he just did the best he could, but he wasn't very-- he wasn't trained to work with children. And the unrest grew and grew, and the children complained about the bad food, the excess of bread and potatoes and macaroni. And then, there began to be a sense that they were being cheated out of stuff, which may have been true in some ways.

So finally, it came to a point where they had a strike. And they spelled it S-T-R-A-J-K.

[LAUGHS]

And they went all around, throwing little pieces of paper saying, strike! And we were living in our dorm, and this happened and they came and told us. They said, you be careful. You stay in your room. [CHUCKLES] We won't hurt you. And Mr. Bayer was on vacation, but he came back. And as I remember it, he called the military police because he couldn't think of-- he felt helpless, and he felt it might get out of control.

And the military police came roaring in and running through the dorms. And we were in our bedroom. We had put the kids to bed, but the boys were up--

Striking, S-T-R-A-J-K-ing.

--and barricading things, and so on. And these policemen came into our room and one of them grabbed Oakie and took him out in the hall and said, ah, I found this one and he has a woman in his room! [LAUGHS]

Not the brightest light bulbs, huh?

Huh?

Not the brightest light bulbs.

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No! [LAUGHS] I mean, Mr. Bayer came running up, saying, oh, no, no, no, no, that's Mr. Kent of the American Friends Service Committee, and it was just-- it was very funny.

What was the outcome of this, then? What was the outcome?

Of that? They did negotiate. oh, we had a wonderful nutritionist come. Her name was Miss-- was Frances [? Flor. ?] And she wrote good reports about the place. She told about how, yes, they could say the kids got 3,000-- I mean, 300, whatever-- 3,000 calories a day. But it was all starch.

Yeah, and it was all inappropriate. One time, we got a huge shipment of chocolate sauce, and they served the chocolate sauce on dark bread. So I mean, pretty disgusting. But Miss [? Flor ?] put down rules. And the first thing she did, it was Easter time. She provided for an egg for every child. That was such a luxury, an egg.

And then, she began thinking of other things. She stayed quite a while, and she was very good. So that was a good result of this strike. They got one of their things. And they got better teachers. And we got more social workers, which we'd wanted. They were paid for by IRO, but wanted by us because that was the only way the kids could move.

Were there other organizations in addition to the Friends who were involved in some way with the camp?

The YMCA, which was called IMKA, after YMCA, IMKA. And they did-- they were in charge of recreation. They were very good. They had good programs, and there was a man full-time. There were priests from different religions. What other organizations? There were others.

You said there were some Jewish organizations too?

Yeah, I've forgotten the names of them.

OK.

But there were lots of US Jewish organizations interested in their own children and getting them out of there, out of Europe. And they worked faster, I guess, because they could find-- if they found a home that was good, kids could go there.

Now, what was the process, then, for-- OK, so there was one route this way. If you were a Jewish child and one of those organizations was involved and they found a foster family for this child, or maybe the child's relatives in the United States, what about the children who didn't have that route? How was their path, let's say, to go to Australia or to the US? What were the actual bureaucratic agencies that needed to be involved in order to get that child there?

I don't know.

OK. OK, I know. I mean, it's-- I know I'm asking a question that's about 60 years ago, 70 years ago.

It's an interesting question. If I thought about it, I might come up with an answer. But I don't really know.

Was there much contact-- I mean, I already asked about the village of Bad Aibling, but what about Germany in general? Did the children learn any German while they were there because they're in Germany?

No.

No.

No, some of them knew some. But no, they didn't learn much about Germany. I don't think they quite knew where they were, a lot of them.

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Was there much contact aside from Mrs. Steinbeck, I think, who-- local Germans, who--

No, I didn't know any. I mean, there were-- occasionally, one of our houseparents would get married in the local hotel, and we'd go and be there. But we weren't supposed to go and do any kind of business with German--

With the local economy.

With the local economy, right. And one of the things we did that was-- that the kids really loved is we found a good lake to swim in. And we could load up a truck. We could get people in the motor pool to loan us a truck, and we could go over to this lake they called the Simssee. And the kids, they just thought that was heaven. They wanted to go every day in summer. They still talk about that when I see them.

Really?

We looked it up on a map to see where it was, and some of these kids have been back to check it out.

You said earlier-- oh, one other question-- DP camps-- did you ever visit any of the adult DP camps?

Yes.

Which ones?

Oh, Funkkaserne. I forget the names of most of them, but we visited parents and people that we knew who ended up there. They were very, very wretched places, really. Their beds were separated by blankets. I mean, that was their only privacy. And the food was minimum.

OK, so in comparison, was the children's village a better place to live?

Oh, much better, that's why the houseparents like getting a job there. They had perks. I mean, there were good things about being there. They had a room of their own, and--

The incidents of the war-- I remember reading that in the first years after the war, the whole notion that this had been a Holocaust was not really coined. Did you learn of some of these things when you were in the children's village? Did you learn of what had gone on, even if it wasn't called Holocaust?

You mean about the--

The workcamps, the labor camps, the mass murders, the gas chambers, things like that-- I mean, you weren't far from Dachau. Dachau was not so-- is also in the area of Munich.

Yeah, it was. I don't remember that that was much that we had in our consciousness. I mean, I'm sure we knew about it, but it was beyond our-- beyond me, anyway. I wonder if the others-- I would like-- I wish we could all be here and talk about what we remember.

Yeah.

I don't-- I don't remember. I don't remember the word "Holocaust." But then, maybe it was there.

I don't think so. I mean, I wasn't there. But from what I've read, that the scope of what had happened really only started to become known, but it wasn't fully named. It wasn't fully--

Exactly.

--until a while after that.

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Yeah.

But you said earlier on in the beginning of our discussion that this experience changed you when you went to Bad Aibling, that you had wanted to do something meaningful. You wanted to make a difference in the world when you finished college. I wanted to ask, how? In what way did you feel like this experience changed you? What did it show?

It changed me more than it changed anything in the world. It just made me-- you know, I just got a whole new perspective on how life could be for people and how oblivious some of us can be, how unaware I was. So you know, it was just a whole new dimension to somebody who had grown up in a very sheltered, naive way.

Also one that was safe. There was no war. There were no bombs.

Hmm?

There was no war. There were no bombs. That was something that was part of your world, that it was stable.

Yeah.

And you end up in a place that had been chaos.

Yeah, it was chaos.

Yeah.

It was. But the children-- children are resilient, if they're allowed to be. And boy, they were strong, some of them. And some of the adults too.

How many children were in the camp at the beginning?

Oh, I think it started out with about 500. I mean, when they brought them all, and then they would send off bits. But it kept coming in for a while. There were nearly always 500, 400, but it got smaller and smaller.

Did your activities change much over the time you were there, that is, making places--

We had more material things, which was nice. We had more games, more recreation, more teachers. The kids loved school. They loved learning to make things. And we had wonderful music, and we loved-- the kids loved movies, so we had a lot of movies.

How long were you there for in total?

Oh, a little over-- not two years because of the baby.

Ahh.

You know, I had a baby, and our time was up. We spent a lot of time waiting in Paris and Munich and places. So our time was up, and because of the baby, I couldn't really renew it. They wouldn't particularly want me. But anyway, it was time to close, so we all closed down.

I want to-- before we go there, after Mr. Bayer who came in to be head?

Oh then, they got a man named Douglas Deane who was Australian and had a long experience working with children in Switzerland and in Europe. And he was more he was more fit for the job, more experience. He fit it better. And he came and he lived in the village and entered our games. And he was much-- he was a much more suitable person to be head of

a children's village.

And did things change after he started out?

Well, there were more orderly ways of doing things.

OK, OK.

I think nobody would say it wasn't better. I mean, it was better. And I think probably Mr. Bayer would have thought so too. He felt totally burned out and wasted by it. It was a hard experience for a man who had not had much experience. I mean, he didn't have children of his own, so--

Were other people burnt out by it who came to work there?

Oh yes, some of the Quaker workers that were there before me, working with the children in the little villages before they unified them, were totally burned out. One named Marge [? Heyer, ?] she was just-- and there were a couple of others.

And what was it that-- why? Why were they burnt out? Was it that they were doing too many jobs, or was it--

It just seemed so hopeless, I think. I think it was just, there was so much to be done and it seems so impossible. But I don't know, I think.

OK, did you keep in touch with any of those boys afterwards?

Oh yes, all that I could. And so did Cathy Reagan, and we had reunions. Several of them have been here to Maine and spent time with us. And I visited them and their-- one, the artist, the Ukrainian guy, Paliychuk Vasyl. I've seen a lot of him. And you know, he still calls me once a month or so and just talks. And the Boykos, and Alex Goropov, the Kalmyk, but I've lost track with him.

He went back to Russia at some point, and I helped him raise money to go back. And I think it was a huge disappointment when he went back, and he never really could articulate it after that. So I never much got in touch with him. I think he's seeing his relatives. They weren't so absolutely happy to see this well-off guy that had a good education, and I think-- but I never-- he never would come and talk about it, so I don't know. And I don't even know if he's still around.

And again, repatriation-- I come back to that. In many of the DP camps, in the very beginning, there were efforts to repatriate people back behind the Iron Curtain.

That was coming-- starting while we were there, yeah.

Yeah, and did that happen too that there were situations where someone would come and say, we want to take this child home, and the child said, I don't want to go.

Yeah, that happened.

And what would happen then? Would they take the child anyway?

Sometimes yes, sometimes no-- they tried to evaluate the child's real concern. The Czech boys were mostly runaway teenagers, who were usually-- it was hard. What they tried to figure out is if they were using it as an excuse to get out of the Czech Republic, or it was called Czechoslovakia. Or I mean, maybe they just wanted to come to the States.

But they ended-- they could go to Australia, and quite a few of them chose to go back to the Czech--

Czechoslovakia.

But a few Polish kids decided to go home, but some of them some of them had become very attached to foster parents and they would rather stay with them, which is understandable in a way. They felt abandoned by their own parents. I don't know. I wonder what happened to them.

So what year did you leave Bad Aibling?

Hmm?

When did you leave Bad Aibling?

In the summer of '50, yeah.

Had you already given birth?

Oh yeah, Michael was about three or four months old. I have his passport picture of this little baby. [CHUCKLES]

And did you come back to the States after that?

Yeah, we came back to the States. And we ran a children's home in Ithaca, New York. And that's why it changed my life too because I knew I wanted to work with children. We both did, so we ran that children's home. Oakie finished. He got a Master's degree in social work and switched from English.

We had, rather quickly, four more kids.

And did you go abroad again?

Oh yes, [LAUGHS] in 1960-- '64, we went to Tanzania and worked with the AFSC in a-- our work was community development with families and teaching children, teaching sewing, teaching. We had a team of-- and it was a program for conscientious objectors who are objecting to going to the Vietnam War.

So they could work in this program for two years and be exempt from the war. So that, we did that for-- but then this time, Oakie was killed in an automobile accident in Tanzania. And so again, I had to come home earlier than I had expected. We were going to stay a couple more years. That was another whole thing.

Of course, you had children. You were-- I can't imagine how that was with--

It's been a wonderful, wonderful, exciting, surprising, sometimes disappointing life, and it's been very long. [CHUCKLES] I'm tired.

[LAUGHS] Well, I thank you for sharing it with us, sharing at least some of your long and very interesting life and these episodes from it.

Yeah.

Is there something I haven't asked you that you think that is important about Bad Aibling, about the Friends, about what you experienced there?

Not off the top of my head.

OK.

I'll probably think of lots of things when I go to bed tonight.

This is one of those things with interviews is that we can never capture everything.

Oh no, your job must be hard.

Oh, it's a wonderful job. I love it. I love it.

See, that's good. That's what matters. If you have work that you want, people that you love, that's important.

Yeah.

I've always loved my jobs. I love teaching. After Oakie died, I mean, yeah, that's when I went back and got a teaching degree so I could teach. I love teaching. Elementary school and environmental education, that became my passion. And I started a project in North Philadelphia that's now 40 years old. I can't believe I've lived so long. I mean-- [LAUGHS] They had a celebration of 40 years.

Wow, it runs like this, doesn't it? [SNAPS FINGERS]

Yeah, I've seen so many children grow up. Kids that I taught when they were eight and nine years old are 50. And kids that I-- when I talked to Vasyl the other night, I said something about, I'm too old to think about that. And he said, I'm 84, and I couldn't believe it-- I mean, this kid.

But you see, we weren't very far apart. I was probably 24, and he was 14.

But there's a huge--

That would be just right.

Yeah, but there it is. You're already a young adult, and he's not. He's still a kid.

He's still a kid to me.

Yeah.

Yeah.

Well, thank you very much.

Well, thank you. I have a lot to think about.

And you've given us an awful lot.

I thank you for your patience.

Oh, it's--

I feel like I rattle on and on and on and on.

No, no, your answers were very much to the point of the questions. You painted a picture for us, which is exactly what I wanted. And we're very grateful for it.

Well, I'm grateful to have to think about it for a while.

OK.

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I mean, if that's one of my experiences in an older life-- I mean, I feel like I've had several since. So but anyway, I enjoyed the day.

Thank you. And I'll say, then, with this that this concludes the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Mrs. Natalie Kent Kempner on December 7, Pearl Harbor Day, 2018 in Woolwich, Maine.

Right.

Thanks again. And now, we cut for a second.

I can't read the date.

Let me see. Maybe I can help.

That's his name. Is that a date?

Let's take a look. Take a look.

Sure. Oh geez, well, I see it says 25. OK, I'm going to say, yeah, 25, 4, so April 25.

It should have been about 1948.

And then, it looks like-- yeah. You can almost make out that it's a 4 and a something.

OK.

Now, hold it up high.

Like this.

No, I was going to say hold it up by your side.

[INAUDIBLE]

OK.

[CHUCKLES]

Can you focus in just on the photo, on just on the picture?

Yeah, that's fine. Are you running? OK.

Natalie, tell me. Who is this? What is this picture, and who made it for you?

A Ukrainian refugee named Vasyl Paliychuk.

Paliychuk.

Yeah, and he lives outside of Baltimore. And he taught at a college in Baltimore. He taught art.

I see, and he was one of the kids that you looked after?

He was of the kids. He was 14. And the first time I met him, he was in the hospital in the village near our camp. And I

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went there to visit one of the kids in the village who'd had appendicitis. And this boy was in the next bed, and he said he'd been in and out of hospitals since his father had been sick. And he was sort of lost.

And he'd heard from my kid, Dmitri, about the children's village, and he wanted to come there. So we found a way to get him there, even though his father was still around. His father came to the States, but he came to the States with the children. And this is one of his first paintings.

And he-- while I was visiting, he gave me a cardboard picture of he did with watercolors. And he went camping with us when he came to the village, and he was a Boy Scout. And he was always-- he always had his paintbox. And he was always painting, painting, painting.

And was this of a local scene in Bad Aibling?

Was it what?

What is the picture of?

Oh, it's the church in Bad Aibling, or in Rosenheim, I guess. Rosenheim is the next village over.

OK.

And I love it. It's a watercolor, and you look closely, and the trees. Everything is quite lovely. He sent it to me this last Christmas when he was cleaning out his-- he also sent me a recent painting of the things that make up borscht. I mean, the--

Can you hold it up?

Let's stop and do this part.

Yeah, right. That's OK. That's fine.

Is it tiring for you?

I'm tiring.

Yeah. This is going to be the last thing.

Let's do this, then.

OK.

Put it in your lap. Sit in your lap. Yeah, there you go. That's perfect.

And you can lift your hand up, if you like. Is that better? There you go.

Yeah, that's perfect.

OK, good.

Thank you.

You running?

Thank you, Rob.

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Yes, I am.

OK, so from what I saw, he sent this to you last Christmas, but it's dated--

Oh, yes.

--the 25th of April 1949.

He was working on it the day I was in the hospital visiting. And he just kept it. It was just a piece of paper. I framed it.

How nice, how nice-- thank you.

You're welcome.

Thank you very much.

OK, we're fine.

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