

All right. I think we are now recording. It is June 22, 2020. We are here together with Mr. Helmut von Schweitzer. And in the background, we see his lovely wife, Rivka, who is coming around. And we are in part three of our interview, taking up where we left off on Friday.

So now, when we were still off camera, you had mentioned that you remember June 22 in a particular way. So tell me what is brought to mind with the date of June 22.

Well, June 22, I was going to a handball match, which our school, our high school, Wiesbaden High School, was playing against a high school team of a town some way away from Wiesbaden.

What year was this?

That's on the 22nd of June, 1941.

I thought you said 1940 before.

No, 1941.

It was in 1941. OK.

I had-- on the Friday was the final meeting of the school at the end of the school year. And Dr. [? Spatz, ?] my great master of the class of our form master who'd badgered me all along about the bad suits I was wearing. And so I'm proudly-- oh, made me proud when he said, you know, that dang Schweitzer has really worked out and hasn't given up. And he's passed. He's passed. And he's now in the next form.

And then there was this handball match for the Sunday on which I was running out in the Sunday on a very sunny day. And people sort of, as I was walking to the station, kept saying, there is a war with Russia now. There's a war with Russia. And of course, that was the beginning of the end, really, of the great German victory run.

Well, it was also the breaking of the alliance that Hitler and Stalin had made together in August 1939, known as the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact when Germany attacks the Soviet Union.

Yes.

Yeah, tell me, did it have an effect on you right away? Or was it, oh, my goodness we hear about this. War with Russia is not like the same thing as war elsewhere. Is that what was going on? Was people saying this?

Well, it certainly was something that in my mind that stirred me up. Pardon?

Where has she gone?

Is your picture still there?

Yes. I just turned.

OK.

I just turned it off when I was saying something. That's all.

OK. But no, you know, it was obviously a startling novelty. Because you know, I think I wasn't the only one at the time. There was a kind of feeling before the attack on Russia that this world war would sort itself out without-- I mean with Russia being already satisfied, having half of Poland regained and Germany maybe being now-- having been victorious to a degree and could sort of stand back and say, well, let's sort it out from here.

I had that kind of feeling. And of course, you know, going out, being-- representing after all that our school in the handball match, which we won incidentally, [LAUGHS] it was a happy kind of day for me. And although there was this worry now about this war in Russia, but I certainly wasn't upset too much about it.

So it was not something that was taken in and absorbed as, oh, the course of things is going to change now? It was just one other event on a day that happened to be a very nice day for you, you know. You were on a personal high. How old were you at that point? Were you 15, 16?

15. 15. 15.

15. Yeah. Well, for a 15-year-old boy, most of the time, these other larger events aren't that relevant unless you're directly affected by them, you know? So does your life change after June 1941 in any significant way?

Well, at the time, it was changing for the better because I was leaving Wiesbaden. And I was going to have the next school year with my relations, Austrian-type relations, in Sudetenland and where Aunt [? Tillie ?] was already there living with these people. They were manufacturers, the Klugers, manufacturers, large textile manufacturers in Sudetenland. And we-- Aunt [? Elsa, ?] [? Elsa Kluger, ?] was one of the sisters with my mother's mother, my grandmother.

OK. Can I stop for a second now?

Yeah.

I want to make sure I understand things. Your father's sister, that is your Aunt Matilda, [? Tillie ?] is that how you call her?

[? Tillie. ?] Yeah.

She was already living there in Sudetenland.

Yeah. When--

[? And the Klugers, ?] and the [? Klugers ?] are relatives of your birth mother, [? Greta ?] [? Von ?] [NAME]. And they are what relation to her? Can you tell me again?

Aunt [? Elsa, ?] who's married into the [? Kluger ?] family, she was the youngest sister of-- she was the younger sister of my grandmother, my mother's mother. And she was a very strange kind of person because she had a-- what do you call it?

Hunchback.

She was a hunchback-- very lively person. She would, everywhere, she would be very social and very-- so on. She would always start something but never finish anything, you know, and rush off. And she was one of these people, you know, when Sudetenland existed, would still have many Czech friends and visit them, which, well, nobody-- everybody else had sort of cut off with the Czech people. She knew everybody. She was one of those people.

But she had upset Aunt [? Tillie ?] tremendously because she had all these unfinished jobs. She would pull something out of a wardrobe that needed putting somewhere but just leave it there. And Aunt [? Tillie ?] was just the opposite. Everything had to be just tidily done and finished. So you know, there was a constant to-ing and fro-ing between Aunt [? Elsa and ?] [? Tillie ?]

But Aunt [? Elsa ?] had come to our farm in Wallbachsmuehle in the summer of 1939, just after Sudetenland had been grabbed by Germany. And she said, we are inviting all the family to our house in Sudetenland. And we want Helmut

and [? Rosie ?] and [? Ernie ?] to come, too. And our parents said, yes, OK.

OK, so-- whoops. Hello?

Yes.

I disappeared for a second. So I have a number of questions at this point.

Yeah.

Had the [? Kluger ?] family lived in the Sudetenland for a long time? Or had they just moved after it was annexed by Germany from Czechoslovakia?

No. No. They were original Sudetenland people, you know. There was that German built around the real Czech in this part with Prague which was predominantly Czech. But there was around built on the right round all the borders, north, west, and south, not east, where there was the German fringe, if you like.

And the [?Gromans?] and [? Klugers ?] were a part of that. They had grown up through the generations from being large farmers to starting in the 19th century factories. And they had these-- there was the flax was being grown and linen was being produced in the factories. And the Klugers had the largest group of-- largest organization of that kind in all of Czechoslovakia and probably even in Germany. They had a huge range of factories. And she-- Aunt [? Elsa ?] married into that family. And that's how I got and how--

OK. OK. So then the question that I have is, where in particular in Sudetenland did you go? Where did they live that you went to that they invited you all to join them?

Well, they lived-- that's where most of the factories were also in the area of the [?giant?] mountains. I don't know how it-- it's also the source of the Elbe River. And the nearest sort of slightly larger town was a town in-- called in German Hohenelbe. And now it's called Vrchlabí.

I'm looking it up right now-- Hohenelbe.

Or Vrchlabí.

I see it. I see it. And when I'm looking on the map, let's see. It seems to be, as you said, really in the very central but north part of what is today the Czech Republic but really on the border, like you were saying, this rim.

So how would we say it in Czech? It would be Vrchlabí or Hohenelbe.

Yeah.

And so it looks like it could be on the border of either Poland or Germany? Which was it. I don't see from this map.

Of course, at the moment, with the new boundaries, post-war boundaries, it is very much at the corner there of both Germany and Czechoslovakia. Now I think, roughly speaking, I think it is the Polish border directly across from where they used to live now.

Yeah. So it could be also that if we're talking about post-war changes when Poland acquired some of the eastern territories of Germany that had German. And the border moved, shall we say, westwards for Poland. And Germany lost those. So that could be directly north from Hohenelbe and this-- yeah.

Yeah, that's right.

OK. So describe for me what you came to when you came to, and I will call it Hohenelbe for want of a better

description, what did you find? Was it a large estate? Was it a manor house? Was it a palace? Was it a villa? Was it an apartment in the middle of a city? Where did you live.

Well, it was a villa with a small farm surrounded by a small farm. And it was directly across the road, across the main road connected with one of the [? Kluger ?] factories. That was a dyeing and bleaching plant. And then further along in [PLACE NAME], which was the name of the village was the weaving-- or a weaving plant of theirs. And the whole village was seven kilometers from beginning to end along a fairly narrow valley. And this was the southern end of it.

It sounds like it could have been a very pretty place if it was by the mountain.

It was a very place, Yep. Yep, definitely. And now-- sorry.

Yeah, who else besides Aunt [? Elsa ?] and Aunt [? Tillie ?] or Great Aunt [? Elsa ?] and your Auntie [? Tillie ?] was living there? Who did you join?

Well, it was Uncle [INAUDIBLE], the father, the [? Kluger ?] man, who with two brothers was running the whole big organization at the time. And there was [? Bertel, ?] their only daughter, who was studying in Berlin geopolitics and-- oh, now I came my name, remember her name, one of the very famous, at the time, German geographers. He was killed by the Gestapo at the end of the war.

Do you know why?

I don't know exactly why. But you know, after Hitler's attack, when the day I was called up or got my call-up papers, the security services went crazy and arrested all kinds of suspect people, you know, in inverted commas. And then at the end of the war, when the Russians were approaching Berlin, these guards had no instructions what to do so they killed them all.

So if I understand correctly, what you're talking about is the Hitler's attack, is that the assassination attempt on Adolf Hitler in July of 1944?

That's right. That's--

So he could have been--

--set off a complete panic wave among the security people. They arrested anybody who sort of appeared on their lists. And then they were kept in prison there. And Hitler himself sort of got more and more out of touch of what was going on. He was there in this fortress in Berlin locked up, and no purpose and the best state of [?state of health either?].

And so, as it also happened with many of the concentration camps, that a lot of people were killed on these terrible marches. And because the guards didn't know any better, you know, better kill them than being accused by them, something.

Well, yes, there is chaos. And then that chaos--

Chaos leads to panic. And then people do most terrible things.

So this professor was [? Bertel's ?] professor in Berlin?

Yeah.

And that was-- had you ever met him? Or had she just told you about him?

No, I had never met him personally. But for me, because she had studied with him and she got all the study papers brought back from Berlin. So I was particularly interested in history and geography anyway. They were my favorite

subjects in school. So I was very much reading all her papers and discussing them with her.

And you know, the name just escapes me at the moment. But I can look it up. And so he was a kind of intellectual hero at the time for me. And it was only, obviously, after the war that I learned that he was killed among all this killing that was happening just when the Russians were occupying Berlin. And I was really only a few kilometers up the road from the defending [INAUDIBLE] order from the Russians at that time. But we are coming to that.

We will talk about that in a minute. But I want to focus on now is still a life in this-- amongst the family members, this time from your mother's side of the family. Do you know if any of them had been active on, let's say, agitating for the Sudetenland to be connected to the German Reich and taken away from Czechoslovakia? Clearly they had a lot of financial interests. So was there any kind of activity that you knew of?

No. None of them had been politically active. Because I mean, the factories, people were obviously-- everybody was greatly in favor of being with the Germans rather than with the Czechs. I mean, let's face it, historically they were part of the Austrian Empire. And the German fringe of the Czech area was obviously-- they were the superior people. They were the superior Austrian people.

And then after 1918, it was reversed. Suddenly, they were the lunatic fringe. And they were being-- Prague was laying down the law. And they were definitely second-class citizens when it came to anything politically and also economically. So you know, they felt they have liberated, as it was claimed. And that--

So in other words, they were in favor of this takeover by Germany.

Absolutely, unqualified, yeah.

OK. OK. And is that why it was so surprising or so unusual for your Great Aunt [? Elsa ?] to still maintain relations with local Czechs?

Yeah, exactly. I mean, she, for her, people were all that mattered. And if they were Czechs or Poles or-- it didn't matter. If she liked the people, then she would associate with them. And as I say, she remembered even these kids, [German] kids in Hessen and made a special trip to fetch them along for that summer holiday, which was a great experience for us. Because we hadn't seen our Viennese cousins since we left Austria five or six years earlier.

And they were all there. And of course, [? Bertel, ?] we had never met in our lives before. And Uncle [?Hanus?], we hadn't met. And he, again, was for me, a very important part-- man in my life because he was a great guy.

Tell me about him. What kind of personality did he have? What kind of values did he have?

Well, he was a sort of down-to-earth, straightforward kind of guy. He had a hearty dislike of the Roman Catholic priests who all had the housekeepers in their villages and so on. And he felt the whole Roman Catholic Church was a rotten setup. OK. He had a--

Was he Catholic? Was he Catholic?

Well, not a practicing Catholic, but obviously a nominal Catholic.

So in other words, he was born Catholic. It wasn't that he had a Lutheran dislike. It didn't come that?

No, oh, no, no, definitely not. I mean, anybody, all-- I mean, obviously, having been part of the Austrian Empire, I mean, all Germans in the Austrian area, with few exceptions, or German-speaking people in the whole Austrian Empire, were automatically Catholics. And the Catholic church was almost a kind of state institution. I mean, your birth was registered by your local priest, not by any official government employee or anything like that. But it was a standard kind of situation.

So Uncle [?Hanus?] was straightforward. He was down-to-earth. He sounds like he was a very practical person. And he was the one who was running the factories. Is that correct?

Well, with two of his brothers-- he had two older brothers. And between them, they ran this overall concern. I mean, [INAUDIBLE]. When-- after I sort of lived with them, he had various disputes with his brothers over this running the factories. It may have been about the forced labor people, including Jewish people who were allocated to the factory for work to replace men or women who had been called up or been lost to the company.

So because the whole of this, the whole concern was very much part of the great German effort to work, more than 100% to support the war, sort of, of everything connected with it. So they were part of that system.

So first of all, let me understand one thing. Was this supposed to be just a summer holiday? Or was this a new move to a new place for you when the family is split apart following the sale of the unsuccessful farm?

Yeah. Then in 1939, of course, it was a pure family get together that hadn't been possible or not easy before when all the official boundaries between the countries existed. But this, now in 1941, it was my next or final station, if you like, of schooling before I was going to be called up.

OK. So that means that you were there for beyond the summer. You-- this was your new place to live. Is this correct?

This was my new place to live, and I lived there until July '44, when I was being called up on the very day when I got my papers on the very day when there was an attack on Hitler at his headquarter in East Prussia.

So this was July 20, 1944.

Yeah.

So in other words, if we look chronologically, you stay in Hohnsleben? Is this what-- Hohenelbe? I forgot.

[INAUDIBLE].

[INAUDIBLE]. From the summer of 1941 to July of 1944, that is your home?

Yeah. That was my home. But of course, at Christmas and Easter, I would go back to my stepmother on the small-- where my smaller siblings were. And we used to have a kind of family get-together.

OK. Now, when your-- do you remember the name of the factories that the [? Kluger ?] family owned, what the general concern, you know, if it had a-- yeah, what it was called?

It was called IA [? Kluger. ?]

IA [? Kluger. ?] And do you know if they produced any military or war materials? Because being a textile company, could be a place where you, for example, would produce fabric for uniforms or--

I would imagine. Definitely any fabric materials-- they didn't make actual garments. They weren't-- they didn't have a garment factory. And Uncle [?Hanus?] started also during the war when Yugoslavia was occupied by the Germans, he started a factory down there, which was very much a special kind of tech program.

Who is Johannes? I don't recall hearing him before, of him before?

Uncle [?Hanus?], that's my aunt's, or great aunt's, husband, [? Kluger. ?] He was the father [INAUDIBLE].

[? Elsa's. ?] OK.

[? Elsa's ?] husband.

OK. And so he goes to Yugoslavia during the war and starts a factory there.

Yeah. Well, he started it actually just before the war. But of course, it-- when it became, when Yugoslavia was occupied by the Germans, then it became sort of certainly part of the German, what do you call it, area.

Do you know what part of Yugoslavia it was in, this factory?

The northernmost part of what the republic is now, which borders on [? Galicia ?] and Germany and Austria.

So maybe it's Slovenia?

It is Slovenia. You're quite right. Thank you for mentioning it. Because I was chasing in my mind for the day and couldn't quite catch it.

OK. So do you know what kind of-- what he produced there in Yugoslavia and who worked in his factories? Do you have any idea about that?

Not really. All I know is that it was very much local products, local raw material. And as far as I know, it was a mixed spinning and weaving undertaking combined.

Did you ever visit it?

No. No, I never had the opportunity.

What about closer to home? Did you ever visit the factories that were near where the family was living? Did you ever visit those?

Yes, once or twice. I mean, on the whole, you weren't-- I mean, people weren't really-- outside people weren't allowed into the factories to any extent. But the-- particularly the local, the ones sort of at the doorstep would go along but not be really admitted to the actual working part area because of the disturbance. You you have a kid-- I was a kid. I mean, I wasn't in any way of any significance to it.

But once-- the main works, the spinning, particularly the spinning plant, was in [INAUDIBLE], which was [INAUDIBLE]. That was in [INAUDIBLE], the suburb where it was, there I had a conducted tour with some other important people. I was a sort of run with them. And there, I saw some Jewish girls working in the factory, specially one that gave me a very long, deep look. She was a beautiful girl.

Describe this for me. Why does it stay in your memory? What did she look like?

It always stayed my memory because it was such a startling figure in the middle of this rather dreary factory. And it was a tall girl. And somehow, she sort of fixed her view on me. And I was, you know, looking back.

Do you think she was trying to say something to you?

Well, she did--

With those eyes?

She did something. I don't know what it is, but she certainly gave me a message.

Do you understand what that message was? Do you know what gave you ideas of what that message could have been?

Well, surely, you know, how can you people do this to me?

It was that kind of a look?

It was that kind of look, yeah.

Can you describe for me what the circumstance was, what the place looked like, what you saw, as much as you remember?

She just was working a machine. And we happened to stop there because Uncle [?Hanus?] or whoever it was who was doing the conducting was talking. And her station was just sort of across my side. And she turned around.

Did anybody else notice this look?

I don't think so. I mean, the conversation was going on. I didn't really obviously, particularly when I met her eyes or she met my eyes. And I certainly wasn't listening to what they were talking about?

What did she look like? What kind of clothes was she wearing?

Well, she had a sort of work kittle on. you know, quite-- nothing very-- obviously nothing very, very, very special. She was blonde.

Did she have a yellow star on?

Oh, yes. That was--

And where was that?

On the chest, you know, the way it were supposed to be under the regulations.

About how many people do you think were doing something, working in that room? Was it a very large place or was it a small--

No, it was part of a proper hall of machinery.

OK. And were most of the workers there Jewish?

I really don't know. I mean, I was too much taken by her to sort of look carefully, or especially around all the other places. And then the whole group moved on, and so did I.

And this was one of-- was this the only kind of tour that you had of an actual factory inside a factory? Or had you been on other ones, to other ones as well?

Well, I think it was the only really sort of thorough one. In the other cases, it was mainly going to the office, setting something or meeting somebody. You didn't-- you weren't really then going into the working area.

And your uncle, did he ever talk about these workers or how he got them and where he got them from and how they came to be there/

No. I mean, it was typically something that wasn't talked about, not in good circles, not at-- over dinner and that kind of thing. It was something also to do this work. And that was only being done at work.

Did her clothes look like she was having a-- she had a uniform. Or let's say, it could have been like prisoners' garbs? Were they just normal working clothes, nothing special?



It was normal working clothes, apart from the jacket with a star in it.

OK. And how, in general, did the worker-- did they look any different? Did they look more malnourished? Did they look like everybody else? Did they-- is there any-- could you have told, if you hadn't seen them in that setting, that yes, these are workers, forced laborers or slave laborers or just prisoners who are working here? If you had met them in town, would they have looked different than anybody else?

Well, in town, of course, they would have looked different, simply because there wouldn't be-- wouldn't have been working clothes, wearing working clothes and so on. But no, she didn't look malnourished. But in fact, she was quite a formidable kind of person. She wasn't a thin little girl. She was a big, strong girl.

Was she about your age?

I would guess so-- maybe two or three years older.

And didn't-- all right, let me turn the conversation a little bit more generally.

Yeah.

Did people know? I mean, was the family aware? Did you ever have any conversations about what was happening with the Jews in general? After that incident when your grandmother, I think [? Lily, ?] explained to you when you went collecting for money in Wiesbaden, it was. She said, well, you know, the Jews are under difficult circumstances. And they may not like what they see when you come to the door asking for money and you're in that uniform, the Hitler uniform. So my question is, is after that, in what way was the whole issue of what's going on with the Jews handled?

Well, I mean, it is common knowledge that the Jews were in big trouble and were concentrated in camps. But obviously, the way the German propaganda worked, it said is, they were-- you know, it was war. They would all be employed somewhere to sustain the war effort.

And I mean, the little farm that Uncle [? Hanus?] had and [? Bertel ?] was then, later when he volunteered for service, and [? Bertel ?] was running. I mean, she had first a Polish forced laborer running it for her and then a Frenchman, a rather-- a guy who always picked up disputes, this Frenchman, you know, complaining about his being left there to do all the work and that kind of thing.

So that was your experience with any of the forced laborers or these people who would have not in there on their own will? Yeah.

I mean, they also had it when we were on the farm and before the war, if you like. And we had always Italian laborers coming in in the summer to help with the harvest work. And they were sort of staying there. To some extent, they were conscripted. Because I'm sure that it was something that was great growing from, if you like, from bad to worse as the war approached and as the war went on.

But when you talk like that, it suggests that there isn't much difference between, let's say, a migrant worker before the war and a forced laborer during the war when they're doing the same things. Or were they doing the same things on a farm?

Yes, they would have to do it because there's nobody else to do it. That was the problem. So I mean, they had, if you like, but on a farm in particular, they had a lot of freedom to do things the way they liked or not. And I know [? Bertel?] and her Frenchman always had endless arguments where he said one thing and she really wanted something else or done more work and that kind of thing.

But it was a verbal kind of arguments. She would never-- she wasn't in a position, I think, to use any kind of as a force on him. And of course, he could help themselves to food to quite an extent without anybody else having noticing it or

not. And that was certainly not the [? Kluger's ?] idea to spy on their forced workers.

OK. OK.

There was a kind of understanding he shouldn't. But if he would, OK, as long as he did the work.

Was [? Bertel ?] married? Or was she a single person?

She was a single person at that time.

OK.

But she had a boyfriend during my stay there whom she married then.

And what was his name?

Ernst, Ernst Brass, Brass, B-R-A-S-S. He came from--

And did you know-- where did he come from?

Oh, I knew him very well. He came from Prague. His father was a renowned chemical professor at the Prague University. And he himself had studied a lawyer, became-- was a qualified lawyer in the beginning of the war. And he had been very active in the student time just before the Czech crisis, organizing students to organize for a kind of Swiss solution for the Czech people-- in other words, a neutral land within-- with the Germans around.

And according to the story, family story, when the Germans occupied Prague, they arrested him. Or the security services took him in and interviewed him as a kind of hostile kind of influence. And he was more or less forced to join them to avoid being sent into a concentration camp.

So he was then-- I didn't know that at the time. But he was an officer. He was a lieutenant. He used to visit--

Hang on a second. Let's wait till you're able to get the earbuds in again.

--visit [? Bertel ?] at the farm at-- very frequently and stayed for weekends and so on. He had a fairly kind of-- he didn't have a kind of job where he had to stay in one place. He obviously had a lot of room for his private affairs. And--

Well, do you know anything about what kind of job he had?

No. There was-- that was obviously, like so many other things, secret. It wasn't being talked about. Later on in 1943, he was on the Russian front. He got wounded. And-- but he was still part of this somehow security organization. So when the Russians actually entered East Germany and Czechoslovakia, he organized-- by that time in 1944, December 1944, he had married [? Bertel. ?] And she was expecting a baby.

So he organized-- he obviously had some influence. He organized a special truck to take her to Bavaria. But when they got to Bavaria, the Americans were already in Bavaria. And it was a security truck. So they arrested her, took the baby away and put it to a private family.

And she was then, for I think a year or two, an American political prisoner. And she, because she was one of the few people who spoke reasonably English, she was a kind of go-between, interpreter, between the American authorities dealing with all these women who were basically the wives or lovers of the top Nazi political people.

So is that also what Ernst Brass was, a top Nazi in the Sudetenland, in Prague and Czech Republic?

I don't know. I mean, he was a clever guy. I mean, he-- after the war, he had no problem at all. I think it was the French

[INAUDIBLE] in Lindau, in Lake Bodensee. And he got through. And then, in fact, he became quite a leading figure in Lindau because he had a good friendship with the [INAUDIBLE]--

How does he get from the Czech Republic to Lindau? And is Lindau in--

He wasn't in the Czech Republic. I mean--

OK. I'm a little confused now. We're talking about and Ernst Brass and [? Bertel. ?] And he arranges for [? Bertel ?] and her baby, his child and his wife, to go to Bavaria with a special security truck. And that security truck signifies to the Allies that they are truly enemies. And she is arrested. And the baby is taken away.

She is the wife or girlfriend of an important political figure. Ernst himself went back, when the collapse came, he went back to Prague to find his old friends from before the war with whom they had agitated to have Czechoslovakia becoming a kind of Switzerland. And these friends then treated him as if he was a criminal. And he was threatened with his life.

But he then managed to persuade them that he was not himself. He was his brother. There was some evidence that his brother hadn't been involved in any of these things. So somehow, he then got from Czechoslovakia to Bavaria.

And he needed-- he made good contact with the newly risen ex freed personnel of the Lindau area and made common cause with them. He built a play-- what do you call it-- [GRUNTS] where you play for money. What is it called?

Gambled? A gambling house, a casino? I can't hear you now. I can't hear you at all. I am going to stop the recording. And something needs to be changed and we'll start recording again in a little bit. OK? But we'll fix this and then we'll start recording again.