

--June 29, 2020. And we are continuing the interview, the USHMM, Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Mr. Helmut von Schweitzer, which we did several parts of last week and the week before. And now we're taking up where we left off. So, Helmut, please, Helmut Yzchak, tell me, when we left off before, I believe we were talking about your cousin [? Bertel, ?] who, at war's end--

Yes.

--there had been a-- her husband, [?Hans Strasse?] I believe his name is--

Yeah.

--had hired some kind of vehicle. Whether it was a truck or a car, I'm not sure.

Oh! That really is charging ahead, ahead of time completely. Because I'm talking about my school when I was 15 years old. It didn't-- there was nothing like that then. I mean, the war was on. But, I mean, nothing like that-- all that is post-war or-- you know.

OK. But because we were at this point-- we'll go back to your schooling. We'll go back to it. But in this post-war time, I want to kind of finish up the story with [? Bertel, ?] and then come back, if that's possible. Is that OK?

Well, it's possible from your point of view, but it'll be out of-- we're bound to come back to it at the right time when-- later on.

OK, OK. Well then let's do that. Let's do that. You--

Yeah.

So let's talk about your schooling now and what kind of school you went to when you joined your mother's family, [? Kluger, ?] in the Sudetenland.

Yes.

And this is your birth mother, who passed away when you were a little boy.

Correct, yeah.

And so describe for me what it was like, and how it was-- was it different than what you had experienced in Wiesbaden?

Well, [LAUGHS] it was something totally different. Because some-- I mean, apart from the very quiet, old-age home of my step-grandparents, this was a lively kind of industrial leader home on a little farm. He had a little farm attached to his home, and a lot of people coming and going the whole time, even though it was the wartime. And they even had soldiers there who had been wounded and were released from their hospital, but who didn't have any home to go to while they were still recovering. So then they had a special guest room for these soldiers at their home.

Did you ever engage with the soldiers? Did you ever talk to them and find out about their experiences?

Oh, yes. But they certainly didn't want to talk about war. I mean, quite frankly, I mean, everybody was under oath that they mustn't talk about the war and the war experience. That was secret. But I think quite naturally they didn't want to be dragged into that at all.

So, for me, it was quite frustrating because I wanted to find out what was really going on, not just the newspaper reports. But I was always sort of put off. They'd say, no, we don't talk about that, and that was that.

Do you know at least where they served? Whether it was the Eastern Front or in France or somewhere in Western Europe, from what part of the war they had come to your home?

Well, I can't remember now. I expect they would have said that they were either in Italy or on the Balkan Front, or something like that. But, now, it didn't make the greatest impression on me, and it certainly hasn't been very recorded by me.

So let's talk about school. What was it like going to school during the war years in the Sudetenland?

Well, of course, I was-- you know, I arrived there as a kind of favored, kind of a new arrival. Because I had been in a big city, Wiesbaden High School, where I had passed my latest year. And I was of the Kluger family. And so there was absolutely no question of doing an entrance exam, as I was in Wiesbaden. I was, in fact, invited in as, well, somebody a bit special.

And the school, were there Czech students as well as German students in it? Or how-- what was its makeup? What was its context for where you were living?

Well, it was only German-speaking pupils, mainly. This town called Arnau, [? Arnof, ?] now, I think-- on the River Elbe, a small town, but they had a huge paper manufacturing plant. That was the only industry there.

And there were a handful of girls, mostly boys. And teachers at that time were beginning to-- and also some women, which in Wiesbaden, they had all still been men, to some extent men who'd be already pensioned, but would come back to fill gaps of people called up, that kind of thing. So that was it.

Do you remember anything from your lessons and any particular kinds of subjects that you were covering?

Well, for me, the most important thing was that, in that school, English had been a foreign language taught right from the beginning, from the first year. Whereas in Wiesbaden, it was French. French was the more old-fashioned kind of system. And so I had to catch up four years of English. With the help of my Aunt Tilla, who was obviously very useful and helpful to bring up to date, I had no real difficulty in catching up within my first year at [? Arnau ?] High School.

And, otherwise, well, one of the things that I found difficult at the time is the school, our class, had organized dancing lessons. And me being by far the youngest guy, and of course relatively few girls there, I was the usual guy sitting out at the dancing lessons, [LAUGHS] which was a very humiliating kind of experience.

Well, in those years, when you're a young teenager, nothing is more mortifying, nothing. The world falls down when you feel like you are the most unpopular kid.

Kid, yeah, that's right, certainly. It was for me. I mean, I stuck it out, but I never really, really learned dancing well. And then, I married with Rivka, a champion dancer, which-- [LAUGHS] but between us, we haven't been able to make it out.

[LAUGHTER]

That's funny, that's kind of cute.

It-- yeah, at first it was a bit of a problem. Because, naturally, she would naturally go to the dance floor when I would hesitatingly follow her, which-- then we somehow compromised. But I don't think I ever became a really good dancing partner for Rivka.

Oh. I've got to ask you. We're having very good sound on our interview, but something is rattling that I-- that comes through. Do you think it could be your wire connecting the earbuds or something? Or-- don't take them out, they're fine.

[INAUDIBLE]

It's some place lower below. Yeah.

I mean, they're a bit loose in my ear, but I've got another set.

No, no, no, no. I'm thinking it's rattling down closer to your waist, is there's something going on closer-- that rattles.

Nothing.

No?

No, nothing at all.

OK. Well, here's the thing. When you have-- one of the aspects of very good sound is that you hear everything. And so I'd much rather that we hear everything and continue having good sound rather than not. So we'll ignore this and continue, and sorry for the interruption.

No, no. It's fine.

So do you remember any kind of political classes during the war? Because this is wartime, this is the Sudetenland, this was the patriotic place that wanted to join Germany. And I want to get a sense of what was the atmosphere in school and outside of school?

Very, very liberal, if you like. OK, in Wiesbaden, I mean, it was sort of the [? spark ?] attitude, which really the war and everything just-- but, even there-- but the only thing was, of course, that the whole class was older by roughly a year older than my Wiesbaden class. And of the oldest group in 1924, the group were about to be called up sometime during that year, that first year. So there was a different attitude. I mean, these guys realized they couldn't finish the final certificate, tests or whatnot.

And, in fact, I think it was in that year, or at sometime during that year, Hitler made a special order that in each class, each high school class, the youngest people-- they were defined which year of birth and so on-- would be retained to do the final high school examinations, regardless of whether they were already 18 or not. And I was the one in that school who was dedicated in that way.

Forgive me, I don't fully understand this. Let me repeat what I think I've heard and correct me in the areas where I didn't understand it properly.

OK.

You are going to a school now in the Sudetenland where most of the other students are young boys. There are some girls, but most of them are young boys.

Yeah.

And they're about a year older than your students--

Well, a year and a year and a half older than I was.

OK.

But this, the Hitler order, was general for the whole of the German Reich. He wanted to be sure that, at the end of the victorious-- naturally, victorious-- war, there would be people ready to go to university and ready to continue the university life. And, for that purpose, there were these exceptions made for their final examinations to stay on, regardless of their actual age, until the final examination.

In actual fact, even after 1941, the call-up ages were constantly reduced. I mean, when I think to 1942, '43, even 16-year-olds were called up, not directly to the army, but to the arbeit [? steins ?] to the workers.

Labor force, labor force.

Labor force, yeah, yeah. So I avoided all that because of my age, and also partly because I was a Hitler Youth Leader.

OK, I'm going to see if I can get it this time. So that means that, within any one class-- that is, you're in school, you have a certain number of people in that class. In your case, most of them are other young boys, but they are older than you are-- they will be called up simply because, in ratio to everyone else, they're older. But you are an exception, you will not be called up because you are younger in that class. Is that my understanding?

Yeah, that was the way it was decided. I suppose the idea was really to still get a maximum of students to be turned into soldiers. And the least lack of attendance for actual fighting would be that these youngsters, like myself, who would, in any case, only maybe arrive just at the end of the war. And that was-- it became one of my concerns because I wanted to be in the war. Because people the street would say to me, you look pretty fit, why haven't you been called up? And that kind of thing.

Was it something-- the others who were in your class, was that a sentiment that they all shared? They wanted to be called up, they wanted to go fight?

Well, the opposite didn't say they didn't like the idea. Nobody would do that. They were apprehensive, yes. And a few of them, they were really looking forward to it. For them, the idea to get away from all the school drudgery, which they sort of felt immediately that there would be some sort of-- they would be released from the-- but, of course, the army life isn't like that.

Yeah.

Except not the one-- the way I experienced it.

So let me understand this. If you were born in 1926, by the time you are going to school in the early '40s, what year would you have been called up and at what age, which was now suspended in your case?

I mean, originally, it would have been 26 and [INAUDIBLE] in 1944. Yes, it was still-- the basic rule was at 18. So in 1944, I would have been called up. And, in 1944, in the normal course of events, I think the early summer of 1944 would have been my final examination. But if you were born in 1925, or even the guys in '24, obviously they would have been called-- well, they were in any case called up long before they would have been able to finish course.

Were you able to finish your course? Were you able to finish school?

Well, that's quite another story we hope to-- we are getting to. Because at the last minute, or at the beginning of 19-- at the end of 1943, I became the-- there was another Hitler order that the final examinations would be done in January 1944, not in July. So that was already a cutback of six months or so, and that certainly applied in my case. So I had my examinations. But I think we are talking too far ahead now, because there were other complications as well.

So I have a few questions. Number one, I want to find out about the other complications you just mentioned. And number two, I wanted to find out if you were part of the Hitler Jungvolk, the Hitler-Jugend?

Yeah.

In what way was that different from what you had been doing when you were in Germany proper, and how do you compare and contrast it? And what actually were your activities now that you were in Sudetenland?

Yeah. Well, of course, I was more senior than-- I mean, in Wiesbaden it was really only a complete side issue, because

the Hitler Youth wasn't well established in Wiesbaden, and certainly not in the spa area where I was living with my grandparents. And so it was really only a Saturday duty, which I attended. And usually it was just cleaning up part of the streets or something like that, some sort of-- and collecting, of course, and I talked to you about that, meeting some Jewish people who were naturally very upset that somebody like me wanted to collect money from them.

OK. In Sudetenland, the issue was much more that all these guys who were my classmates who were Hitler Youth leaders of one kind or another, when they were called up, they were looking for somebody to replace them. So I had, if you like, a rapid advancement simply because they left and somebody had to be found to take their place. And I was fit, physically fit, and I was already in the Jungvolk, the Hitler Youth. So I sort of graduated automatically.

And what were some of the things, the duties that you then had? And how much more of your time did this take up?

Well, obviously we're talking not a city life, we're only talking countryside. So the distances to move to get to places became bigger and bigger. So I had my bicycle, but there were no proper streets. I mean, it was all rough gravel. So it was quite a-- you had to be fit to cycle around these places with the big puddles, some mud, and all that kind of thing.

And, again, due to the war condition, the professional leader for the Hitler Youth in the whole [? area ?] Kreis district in [PLACE], he was a cripple. The boy had a bad foot. So that's the only reason why he hadn't been called up. So he was in charge.

And, of course, he was relying on somebody like me to do a lot of the work that he would have needed to do, getting around to things like when a boy died for any reason or an accident, somebody had to go and attend the funeral, and that kind of thing. So I was the one then sent along. And, actually, if the leader says you must go, it's an honor, so you must go. You attend--

So did you still collect money? Is that part of your duties here? Or, I'm trying to get a sense of what are the activities that a Jungvolk person undertakes and is involved in in this part of the world at that particular time.

Yeah, exactly, it became more and more practical things to do, fixing and carrying, cleaning up areas. Particularly also, that was one of my specialities, having-- collecting camps in the woods or in the mountains of berries and mushrooms and so on, collecting them and bringing them back for extra food for the community. But I liked the camping idea, and so did a lot of the boys. And that's it.

Were there-- was there anything political about these activities, outside of wearing a swastika, wearing of a scarf or a uniform, or something like that?

Less and less, because as the war intensified, all that Hitler stuff went by the way. I mean, the war effort was everything, and everything else was just something that-- maybe Goebbels made a speech, but, locally, the political leaders, they were already in the army or already killed. So the whole spirit of Hitler revolution was gradually being squeezed out.

What about-- your school was German-speaking, but was there a Czech community? Were there Czech people living around you, or not so much? Was this homogeneously German, or was there a mix?

No, it wasn't homogeneously German. There was, in my particular area, a minority of Czechs, but they were usually living in sort of settled areas. They hadn't been resettled or anything. They were just left behind kind of people.

And for instance, when I was cycling from my home there to the high school, I went through a little valley where there were Czech houses. They looked the same as the German houses, but there were known. And those people were sort of separate. They had, presumably, a separate school. But I wasn't really involved with it. So--

Was there any interaction? Did you ever meet any of them, talk to any of them?

Not directly. But Aunt [? Elsie, ?] my aunt, she continued to have with her Czech friends, which most German-speaking people didn't do after the occupation. But she couldn't take any notice of all these official things. And she often went

through-- also into the Czech area to visit her old friends and so on, and continued to have good relations with them.

Did she ever bring back any kind of news about what their thoughts were, what their sentiments were? Was there any filtration out of how they were feeling that was coming to you? To your--

Well, everybody was sure they were resenting everything that was happening to them, so one didn't bring up sore subject straight away. Because they would sort of only then feel embarrassment. There was no positive feelings between the Germans and the Czechs, not at all, except Aunt Elsie. She had a natural charm that somehow bridged the divide.

Did you ever go with her--

No.

--to visit your Czech friends? No.

[LAUGHS] She was impossible to go with. [LAUGHS] No, no. She was very much a unique traveler, that's for sure.

What makes her impossible to go with? Tell me, explain to me why.

So lively! So lively and always such a positive-- I mean, she was a lovely person. But, as I say, she left always a trail of undone, unfinished [LAUGHS] things behind her. I mean, till I was-- I just couldn't take it.

Tell me, why was it that Tilla was there? She's actually from your father's side of the family, and this was your mother's family.

[INAUDIBLE]

How is it that she ends up there?

I don't know how it was fixed. Obviously, that's something I expect Ulla, my stepmother-- she was the wonderful organizer of everything. And when they sold a farm in [PLACE], she somehow managed to find a place for everyone us. And she was just keeping the small children, her own children, her own three children with her.

So could one understand that Tilla was there to mind you? Was that her main role?

No, she was there before me. She went there directly when [PLACE] broke up. It may be that Aunt [? Elsie ?] and she had already made arrangements to some extent. I mean, I can imagine that Aunt [? Elsie ?] would have only said, yes, you must come to us, and that was that, you know.

And as far as Ulla mutter is concerned, I mean, she had to manage with her children by herself, yeah. Well, that's how it turned out, and, you know.

Mm-hmm. So Tilla is there, you were there. What about your younger sisters? Are they also with you?

They were with my aunt further up in the Sudetenland, the [? Grumman. ?] They had a clothing factory in a town, which now is sort of facing Poland.

What was it called, the town? Do you remember?

Yeah. I mean, they went to school in Troppau, Troppau, which was very far east and part of the Czech area. But WÄ¼rbenthal was the name of the particular one where they actually stayed.

[? Luvental? ?]

WÄ¼rben-- WÄ¼rbenthal. W-u-- umlaut-- r-b-e-n-t-h-a-l, WÄ¼rben-- WÄ¼rbenthal. But I don't recall at the moment what the Czech name was.

Did you visit them there?

Yes, oh yes, very often. [INAUDIBLE]

So was it far from where you were? Was it like two hours or an eight hour trip? Or how was it?

No, three-- I would say three to four hours with the train. Not very fast trains in those parts.

And was the town significantly different from where you were? Or was it pretty much the same?

No. Well, very much the same. And I only knew, shall we say, the upper, better part were they had their villa and the factory. So I didn't get much into the actual town area at the center.

OK. Now, the years-- the years that you are in-- with your mother's family, the [? Klugers, ?] between '41 or '44, are pivotal years for Germany, in that they're-- when you arrive there, they're winning the war. By 1944, they're not winning the war.

That's right.

There is-- 1943, there is Stalingrad, which is a turn militarily. Did any news of such things filter down to your town?

Oh, of course it did, [LAUGHS] in a big way. Maybe not strictly on time, but sooner or later, it had to be told. In particular, of course, Stalingrad was so much of an actual event with, I think, Germany and Hitler expecting that they would be the winners in the end of the big battle. So they couldn't just drop it at the end. [INAUDIBLE]

So how do you remember Stalingrad being talked about, whether this was officially through newspapers or radio or unofficially amongst people? Oh. We froze for a little bit. Can you hear me? I think I'm going to have to stop the recording, and we'll turn it on again because something happened. So, yeah.