

Good evening. My name is Toby Ticktin Back, the director of the Holocaust Resource Center in Buffalo. This evening, we have with us Vera Baer Ellis, who lived in Germany and has an interesting story to tell us. Vera, would you start with your childhood?

Yes. It was a very happy childhood. I was brought up by my grandparents in northwest Germany, near Hanover. And I lived there until I left Germany in 1939. And there's a lot of in between. I was the only Jewish child in the whole school system, which was very hard. I was persecuted to a certain extent.

Well, let's flesh in the details.

OK.

How big was the town? What was the school like?

The town? Well, it was really a village of about 2,000 inhabitants. My grandfather settled there, I believe, in 1904. And he had a dry goods store. And he had a very successful business.

Had his parents been born in Germany too?

As far as-- yes, my grandpa's parents, they were all the way back born in Germany as far as I know, yes.

Did anyone serve in the service?

My grandfather served in World War I. And of course, my father, my natural father, was in World War I.

Oh, I think we have a picture of your father in his German uniform from World War I. Right. We could get that on the screen. This is your father.

Right, World War I.

So he was a German officer, German soldier. And he fought.

Fought for Germany like every good German person did, right? You're no different than anybody else.

OK. So you're in this little town and you're raised by your grandparents and your mom.

My mother was there too. But she went to work as a housekeeper for a Jewish family in 1937. She was still young. But it was hard for her too.

In the same town?

Yes. My mother, she would help in the store, waiting on people. It was mostly farmers. And my grandfather and my uncle-- it was my mother's brother-- they would travel and take the goods to the farmers because they had more-- we had more transportation. We had a car, which was unusual, too, at that time and would take care of the farmers and the farmhands with bedding and so forth.

And often, they wouldn't pay in money, they would pay you in food, like a ham, whatever. And there, again, you see, even though my grandfather was brought up in the Orthodox way, he said, when he came back from World War I and had to eat horse meat, there was no way he would keep a kosher household after that.

So for all intents and purposes, you were raised as any other little German girl in the small town? Did you realize you were different?

No, not till, I would say, 1936, when my grandfather was told I shouldn't come to classes three times a week, when there was religious instructions, since I was not of their faith, and they would be talking about Jesus Christ. But I soon found out that that's not what the case was. They were talking about Hitler in the class-- because I would be sitting outside waiting to go to school. It was Heil Hitler. And I would hear they were. The indoctrination was Hitler-- nothing to do with Jesus Christ at all. I mean, that was their Christ. That was it.

How did you feel? You were different than everyone else, all of a sudden.

Well, I think that's when the realization came. And also, in 1935, my mother and I had gone away on a vacation. When we came back, there was the propaganda box in the middle of the village, saying that anyone who buys from a Jew is a traitor to their country. And it all kinds of-- and you probably know this-- newspapers with Jews with long noses and propaganda.

Oh, from the newspapers.

The StÃ¼rmerkasten, they call it.

The StÃ¼rmer.

StÃ¼rmerkasten. And soon after that, somebody had cut it down and threw it in the river. And we don't know who did that either.

Oh, it was a friend.

There was some Social Democrats, even in such a small place. In fact, the principal of my school, who fought in World War I with my grandfather, he was a very, very nice person. And I go to him for advice. And he said, he couldn't help me because there was nothing he could do.

Did they permit the store to be open even though it was run by a Jew?

No. Store was not open. I mean, it was open, I think, till 1935. That was it.

And then what did you do for a livelihood?

My grandparents did. Well, they would travel. They would still travel.

Oh, with the--

With the goods, right.

--with the domestic goods.

And Christmastime, before the other people would come in, but sneaking in in the dark or after, at nighttime, or something. It was very sad.

Did you try to leave at that time?

No, you really never thought about it because see, there again, my grandfather was of the old German school-- and I can remember in back in '35, seeing pictures of a house in America, that a man wanted to exchange his house for our house. And my uncle would have had the opportunity to come to America. And my grandfather said, what do you want to leave for? When I die, you're going to have the business. And he was a young man who could have made a life for himself. And of course, he was killed in camp anyway.

Oh, that was your uncle.

But my grandfather in that respect was a very stubborn German.

He was German first.

Right, it means. And if you didn't, you couldn't be a conscientious objector if you had to fight. I mean, you were one of them. So that was all quite natural. And I can also remember, we had a tenant house with three families because they were all asked to join the party. And there was one who absolutely refused it, said, this man is my landlord. And I'm not going to do it. And he was actually put in prison for about 10 days because he wouldn't help demolish our house during the Crystal Night.

And he, in a way, was persecuted too because he was a Social Democrat. He did join the party. But he would not do anything to hurt us in any way. And he would play cards with my grandfather at night, sneak in the house very late at night. But that was all part of it.

You mentioned Crystal Night. Were you affected by Crystal Night?

Yes, I was.

Could you tell us what happened?

That was my last day of school. In fact, I was going to put this in now too. During my school days, after '35, '26, I could not eat my lunch with the other children. I was forced to eat in the outhouse.

In the outhouse?

Well, that's what it was, open. And I would eat my lunch there because they would kick me and to either take my lunch away, which was very important to eat your lunch. But in those days, the boys were on one side of the courtyard, the teacher would walk down the center, and you were the girls on the other side. Then also, during the school day-- I mean, I don't think I was stupid. But there was another bench where usually-- what they called the [GERMAN]. And I was put there because I was different than everybody else.

How did you feel about all this? I don't know. I don't remember ever thinking about it. So many years later, you really think about it. At the time, I suppose, you don't.

You weren't traumatized at that time.

No, I don't think so. Right, let's try now to get back to the Crystal Night. That was my last day of school. And we had two school. One was like a senior high. And then I suppose this was junior high.

Elementary?

No, junior. And they had already been released from school. We had heard this on the radio the night before, there was something going in the big cities. But then again, we thought, they would never come to us. We have no synagogue in our village. They were burning synagogues. They won't come to us.

And around 11 o'clock, I saw my teacher with his uniform on, his Brownshirt uniform. And the kids from the other school came so they taken-- they have tiles in Germany on the roofs, the [GERMAN]. And I said, oh, I remember saying, oh, we're getting our roof fixed. Now, whatever entered in my mind, I don't know. And then they released school at 11 o'clock.

And I tried to walk home through the garage because our tenant house faced the street where the school was. The door was locked. And I could hear my mother crying the other side. She says, well, walk around. I tried to walk another way and they were following me. So then I finally got to drive to the house. It was completely lit up with glass. We had,

including a small pantry window, 52 windows.

52 windows. And they were smashed?

52 windows in the house, except the four big windows from the store, but that was plate glass. So that would have been quite expensive to replace for anybody. They were not smashed. They completely smashed every piece of furniture, cut all the feather beds, that the women were standing in the street with their aprons open, catching the down.

These were your neighbors and friends?

No, I wouldn't say they were our friends anymore. I mean, there was a certain element of people in that village who were never our friends, from-- I would say-- well, I maybe shouldn't say never. I mean, from the time Hitler came to power.

But they had patronized your grandparents' store.

Oh, yes, they had patronized the store at one time or other. And then I went into the garage. My mother was sitting there. And he took the battery out of our car. And then they called my grandfather and uncle in. And my grandfather kept books for this-- oh, there must have been at one time a Jewish community in the neighborhood, as there was a small cemetery. And you paid taxes for they have to keep up the graves.

And by that time, I mean, everything, all the shelves in the store, everything was taken out, every button was smashed. Everything was just-- you can't imagine. It was like a bomb fell on one house. And we had four floors in the house, including two attics. Everything was smashed.

And where were you all while this was going on?

Oh, I was sitting in the garage. See, this was 10:00-11:00. It took them about an hour to go from one end to the other. It didn't take them long.

What were the reactions of your mother and grandparents?

I mean, we just--

You were petrified.

Well, I don't think we were petrified. We were, I think, scared. What's going to happen next?

You probably feared for your lives.

And then I remember my grandma saying, OK, now, let's go in the house and clean up. And I think she just did it automatically. And we tried to get one room a little bit cleaned up. I mean, everything, all the food was inedible. They even smashed the toilets, everything. And like I said, it was like a bomb fell on one house.

I wonder what they expected you to do.

I don't know. I mean, it was a thrill for them to do this, to finally, I suppose, get even for something. I don't know.

Well, you were Jewish. And that was the--

This was it. That was it. And it was the low-- and most of the people that did it were farmhands who didn't even-- who came from other villages, who worked, let's say, for farmers here, who were in the party, who were told to do this. But they never had-- we never had any graffiti on the house. But I can also remember when they came up with the swastika flag.

And when anything was in Germany, flags were always the big thing. They were very patriotic, as far as flags. Any occasion flags, were hung. And we had the striped one. And we hung it out. It was we couldn't hang it out because my grandfather wouldn't fly the swastika. So we didn't fly a flag. That was in '35, I believe.

Oh. You told me before about someone attempting to burn up the house.

And then that night, there was guards around the house. They're changing-- taking off their heels every two hours.

These were Nazis?

Yes.

Why do you think they were guarding the house?

I don't know. In case something fell down, I suppose. Who knows? And because like I said, too, there were Social Democrats. Maybe they thought they had to guard against somebody. Because that night, my mother went upstairs. I don't know what she was going to do, in particular, she needed to get some more clothes. This is November. It's pretty cold.

And she saw somebody with it looked like a piece of square linoleum with some wood trying to-- and it was already lit-- just throw it in the back window in the store. And my mother yelled. And they stopped him. And whoever it was ran away. And to this day, I mean, somebody might know who it was.

Maybe it was one of the outsiders probably.

It could have been. Like I said, there were Social Democrats who did not join the party. And we don't know who it was. Well, this would have been a Nazi who tried to do that.

Sure. What did you do for food?

Well, like I said, our maid, may she rest in peace, she was a real good soul. She came to us when she was very young, in 1930 or '31. And she stayed with us through thick and thin. And she had a lot of problems during the war towards being Judenfreund.

Oh, a friend of the Jews.

Yes, right. And she had a lot of problems that way. But she lived through it. And she only died a few years ago.

Was she put in a camp because she was?

No, no, no. But if you live in a small place, and people sneer at you, and your friends are Jews, it's not very pleasant. So she threw food in that night through the window. And there were no-- it was-- we had blankets in the winter. We were sitting there shivering all night. And then the next day, a truck came and took everything out of the store. Took them the whole day, all day Friday.

All the merchandise?

All the merchandise. And this man, who-- it was called like repossessed because we were not paid for that. They just took it. And he opened up a store in Hildesheim, which was like the county seat, in a street called Judenstrasse.

Jew Street. What a rare coincidence.

In fact, my mother had put away a piece of material to have a suit made. And she had to go there and buy it back.

And he had no compunctions about taking material?

No, no. He knew who she was. She went there. And instead of giving to him, and this all legally belonged to her, he said, well, she had to pay. He didn't charge-- I forget how much. But she had to pay for it.

So you were left without food, without furniture, without blankets, without livelihood.

Well, no, we had blankets. Like I said, we went upstairs. And we found another room. But the way they had smashed all the furniture, the wardrobes were tipped on top of the beds. And I remember, me being small, I had to climb underneath to get something out. And then it all fell on top of me. And then my mother-- and since we were cut off completely from electricity, and of course, no radio, no telephone, nothing. It was, like I said, a bomb fell on one house.

And then my mother got money from a very good neighbor next door. He always had cash in the house. He had an upholstery store. And he gave my mother money to go to Hanover by train. And she heard there that the men who fought in World War I, who were obviously over 60 years old, would be released.

Oh. What happened to your-- in the meantime, your grandfather and father were-- your grandfather and uncle were taken away.

Yeah, well, they were taken that-- on the Crystal Night. They were taken to prison. And my grandfather always enjoyed a cigar. And they hadn't eaten all day. And the local police took them in their van. They were not Nazis. They were just the regular local police. Said, we have sandwiches. And we have cigars. And we have a cigarette. Don't worry, we'll feed you.

And they were treated-- in fact, my grandfather, when he came to the prison in Hildesheim, he often had to take somebody, let's say, to court if they didn't pay. And when he got there, they didn't even think he was Jewish because he always treated his clients very well. He said, oh, forget it. Don't bother. And he would threaten them and never go through with it.

So they didn't even think he was Jewish the way he handled people. Because there, again, you see, don't forget, there was some Jewish people who didn't handle themselves very well at times and made themselves, I would say, sometimes, maybe not such a good name for themselves.

Why do you think your grandparents settled in a town where they were the only Jewish family?

Well, there was a nearby town where there was a Jewish some Jewish families, and my grandfather was the apprentice there. So he liked the neighborhood. And he settled there, which was normal. I mean, it was nothing.

That was normal for a family to do.

Sure, I mean, you build a beautiful home, big house. And that was-- we were no different than anybody else. That's where you made your livelihood. And so then that night, my mother went to Hanover. And she found out that my grandfather would come home because by that time, he was crushed as far as this should never happen to him.

Because he was German national.

He was German. And I mean, even there, when they came through in '37, giving out a medal for World War I veterans, and he wanted to go, and my grandmother, who had more foresight, would say, Herman, you're not going. There was an argument. Well, they saved him the trouble. They came a few days before and brought him that medal.

Oh, because they didn't want a Jew to be honored.

Right. Because they knew it was going to be Hitler talk and this. He didn't want a Jew there.

So when he came back from prison, he was pretty well traumatized.

Yes. He was mentally very crushed. Physically, he was OK. And then my uncle, of course, stayed in prison. Like I said, I was ready to leave Germany already, I was all packed, in October '38.

Where were you going?

To England.

How did that come about?

Through my cousin, who was going to school for young ladies who were being trained to work in-- not to be nannies, but more, let's say, companions to English ladies, and to learn the English language. They were mostly 18, 19-year-old Jewish girls.

And she had heard about this Dr. Schlesinger, who was bringing children out of Germany to England. And she knew that being in a small place, my mother would never hear of this. So she notified my mother. And my mother said, fine. So we got the ball rolling. And we were sent clothes from their children, was certainly to our boy-- there were five boys and seven girls.

Did you know anybody?

No, no, no. I was pretty well from the country. They all were from Berlin. And one other boy, with whom I'm still in touch, he lives in New York, he was from Frankfurt. And so everything was marked. And my box was packed in October '38. And when they came through in the Crystal Night, they didn't touch it.

Oh, that was November. They didn't touch your box?

Because my teacher, he knew.

He knew that you were ready to leave?

He knew we were to leave. But unfortunately--

Isn't it strange?

--the transport-- as they love to use the word is the transport, that is children leaving Germany or whatever. And it was the biggest transport to leave Germany, and I believe, the last one. There were trickles after that. This was in March '39.

March '39.

There were 250 children on this transport. It was just a train loaded with children.

And you had-- were they all Jewish children?

Yes.

And did you have chaperones?

Yes.

And where did you-- where did you go and how were you took there?

The train came from Berlin. And I was the last one to get on in Hanover. And I remember sitting in the corner, feeling. And there were all these so-called-- they called them [GERMAN], big shots from Berlin. And they wouldn't even let me look out the window to say goodbye to my mother. But that didn't seem to bother me at the time. I thought, well, I'll just sit down. It's a big story to leave.

Oh, so you looked upon it as an adventure.

Yes, I think so.

You were 10, 11 years young?

And I was just-- I turned 11 in January, right.

That's very brave to leave your grandparents [CROSS TALK].

Right. Well, I don't-- I think, probably, I thought, well, England isn't that far away or something. But before-- I want to inject this too. In February, my uncle did come out of prison. And we finally got the affidavit from America.

That's February 1939.

In '39. And did they flesh that card on that, on that thing? That came out in February '39.

Oh, your identification card. Actually, we have a picture. On the outside, you have the J for Juden. And on the inside, we have your picture. I guess, we'll be seeing it soon. Could we see the inside of the identification? Right. And there's the J again. And could you tell us what it says? It says, it's good till January 31, 1944. In other words, it was issued to me in February of 1939. And legally, I should have never been issued this because it was only issued to children 16 years and older. But since, then, it was a moneymaking thing for the German government, they gave me one.

So this was done in your town?

We had to go by train to a nearby town where it was done.

I see, it says--

It's written, in German script, Alice Vera Sara Baer.

Sara was not, obviously, your name. That was given to all Jewish girls.

No, that was given. And the men were, of course, Israel.

Israel.

And of course, from the fingerprints, very, very legal.

I think we also have another picture of you, maybe when you're a little bit younger, and you're carrying the flowers.

No, that was a bag of goodies.

Oh, a bag of goodies?

In Germany, when you start-- I don't know if they still do it-- when you start your school there-- not that I needed it-- but you get a bag of goodies.

You get it from the school?



No, usually a member of your family.

Oh, that's like--

This was my cousin came. I had two. She thought I wasn't going to get one.

And what year is this?

1934.

Oh, so you were littler.

If you notice, I have in my lunch bucket in front of me. In the back, I have a-- what do you call it-- like a briefcase, and you see a sponge, and a cloth because I learned to write on a slate 1934. See?

Oh, I see.

They were on the left-hand side.

Those were the good days--

Those were the good days.

--before you got that identification paper.

1934-- it was April '34.

All right. Let's go back now. You're on the transport to England.

Now, we're leaving. Shall I got to Hanover? My mother and my uncle took me. In the meantime, he was home. But unfortunately, he never came out of Germany. He was also killed in concentration camp.

Oh, he was.

Let's face it, at that time, even with the affidavit, and since we lived in a small village, you had a quota number. Of course, in our case, it was very, very high. So they went according to the number.

The quota for the United States?

Right.

And he never would have made it.

And he never would have made it. Never would have made it. So then they took me to the station. And I don't know if they're going to put the picture when I left-- the day I left Germany, we had some pictures taken. And my uncle was so afraid. I had a little ring that my aunt had given me.

And unfortunately, he showed it to somebody. And when I found out, when I came to England, about all the jewelry that the other children had I wouldn't say smuggled out, but had been given for sentimental reasons-- but he was so afraid that I would have trouble with that one little ring, I never took it out with me.

So you never took it. So that picture that we have of you with your mother, is that when you're leaving?

That's March 15th. Right. That was taken in Hanover the day I left Germany.

And you're 11 years old.

And I'm wearing my so-called school uniform, which was a serge tunic with a white blouse and a tie, which my uncle tied for me.

And how did your mother take the separation?

Well, I think to her, too, it was a matter of getting me out of Germany.

It's very courageous of her.

Yes. And I think, at that time, too, she probably thought, too, that she would get out as a cook/housekeeper, which they did in July of '39.

Did she go with her mother and her father?

No. No, no. She went with her sister. Well, my grandparents, don't forget, they weren't that young anymore.

Did they survive?

No, no. My grandmother died in Germany in 1940, before they were deported, in a hospital.

In the hospital.

And then my grandfather and my uncle, who got married in Hanover, they were all deported. And my uncle had a child born that got to be two years old. And his wife and the child were gassed in Auschwitz.

And he too?

Well, as far as we know, he died, supposedly, of exposure, probably-- what do you call it-- lung.

Pneumonia?

Pneumonia.

And your grandfather?

He died of so-called old age.

In town?

In the ghetto. In the ghetto.

In the ghetto. Taken out of the town and taken there?

They were all-- the Hanover transport left, I think, in 1941. They left from Hanover. I'm not sure now.

And where did they go?

I think Theresienstadt and Riga. See, I had a cousin here, who was together. And she died a few years ago. And she was together on the same transport. So we got all or most information from her.

It must have been so hard for these old people to be uprooted.

Right, right. My grandfather just was thrilled because he was able to-- my cousin worked in the kitchen. And they would feed his little grandchild. Because I was the one who had left. And so he had another little grandchild that never made it. But like I said, I was very fortunate that I was able to get to England. And I was adopted with 11 other children by a family by the name of Dr. Bernard and Mrs. Schlesinger.

And was this in London?

Yes. They opened up a home for us. It was called Highgate in North London, beautiful home.

Did they have any children?

They had five children of their own.

How very [INAUDIBLE] of them.

In fact, they adopted 13. The 13th child, he lived with them because his mother and Wren Schlesinger were cousins. But the 12 of us, there were seven girls and five boys. And would you believe, we're still in touch with the Schlesingers? And in fact, he's just passed away. And everybody can be traced, except one boy, even after all these years.

And how long did you live with the Schlesingers?

We never lived with them. They opened up a home for us.

Oh, nearby?

Well, they lived in Hampstead. And they opened up a home for us with staff and everything. We had a woman who was so-called the head of it.

And you went to school from there?

Yes, we went to a regular London school. This was in March at the beginning of the Easter vacation, March '39. Then we went to regular public school, but of course, with the intention that we were going to go to boarding school. But we didn't know this. It all came about much sooner than I think they had planned because war broke out September '39. And then we went to boarding school in January of 1940. Five of us went to the same school.

In London also?

No, no. We were already evacuated. It was a London school, but it was evacuated to Cornwall.

Oh, so you were safer from the bombs there.

Yes, from the bombs there.

How was it for you there?

Very nice. I have no complaints. It was very hard for us. We didn't know any English. I mean, the little bit of English we knew didn't get us too far. And fortunately--

You had each other, though.

Well, yeah, but you see, we didn't live together. We were all separated by that time too. And we really didn't get to know each other too well. I mean, you figured, we were in England, in Highgate, from March till August. That wasn't

really very long to really get to know each other. I think, now, some of us have gotten to know each other more than we did then because it's part of growing up.

Sure, you had some--

Because when you're 11 years old, I mean, that's just another 11-year-old.

I think we have a picture of you with the other children--

Yes. Yes. Yes.

--with you and your pigtails. Is this at Hampstead?

No, this is in--

In Cornwall?

No, this is in Highgate in London.

It looks like a very happy scene.

It's before the war. It's before. We're dancing the Hora.

Now, the woman, is that the doctor--

Way in the back, there, she was--

--Mrs. Schlesinger?

No, it was Mrs. Glucksmann. She was, in fact, the head of the school for young ladies in Berlin. And I think she had to do with the Federation. She was not too-- well, not too pleasant.

So thank goodness all these people survived.

Now, I don't know if you can see, there's a man next to her. He's a rabbi. He lives in Poughkeepsie. And I'm still in touch with him too.

Oh, my. Oh, my.

And the girl in the background is me. And then the one on my left, she lives in Toronto. Well, right now, we're scattered all over. There's in England, Israel, and Holland, Canada, United States.

So how long did you-- we're up to 1940. Now, what happened-- where's your mother?

My mother is in England. And meantime, she was interned in the Isle of Man as an enemy alien for eight months.

That must have been so difficult for her.

It was very difficult. In fact, I have-- she gave me some letters some time ago. I should've brought them with me. There also were sensitive letters she received from my grandparents from Hanover with the German swastika on the back. They were all censored. Through the Red Cross, that was sent over Switzerland. And I sometimes got letters.

And then when my grandmother died in '41, I believe, and my mother sat in the Isle of Man for eight months not working. But there, again, it was very strange because she was classified B. And my aunt, who worked for a English

major, who lived, actually, in a restricted area, right near an airport, she was never interned. My mother was just really unfortunate, was, to be interned. So when she came back from the Isle of Man, she had to find work as a cook housekeeper. And that's what she did.

In London?

Wherever she could find work.

So where did she?

In Slough, Slough, which is outside London, Buckinghamshire, and in London.

A young woman all by herself.

Right, right.

Did you have any relatives or friends in London?

My mother had-- well, we had friends. And we had some very distant relatives, but that's it. Of course, my aunt was in London too then, and my other sister. And of course, I was in boarding school for five years.

Were you in touch?

Yes. Oh, yeah.

Did she ever come out to visit?

I was able to always-- my mother would say that she has a child in boarding school. And I would visit her wherever she worked for the holidays, like Christmas vacation, summer vacation. So it was kind of nice.

So that was a little bit of normalcy.

And then just to give an example as far as the boarding school, this was kind of strange too. The boarding school was originally in Hampstead, which there was a predominantly Jewish neighborhood. The headmistress-- mind, most of her students were Jewish before the war. And I know, she was very antisemitic.

She was?

Antisemitic, but most of her students were Jewish. This is before the war.

That's strange.

Yes. She was a very strange woman anyway. And when war broke out, and of course, we were evacuated in 1940, and there were some girls who were, of course, early for matriculation in 1941, that were for already that summer. We were not allowed to speak German, which made sense.

Well, she wanted to get you to learn English.

And she sent them back to England. She didn't want those girls at her school. They were all Jewish girls. She told them to do the matriculation in London. She didn't want them.

Were you among them?

No. No, they were older than me. See, I only 12 then, you see.

How long did you live in Cornwall?

I was in Cornwall till September 1944. Then I came to London. And I worked. I went to school to learn typewriting. And I worked as an office.

Did you live with your mother then?

No. No, a matter of fact, I lived-- my mother, see, as she was still working, I couldn't live with her.

So where did you live?

I lived on my own. And I had my own room.

But you were so young. You were only 16.

Well, that's it-- no, '44, I was-- no, in '44, I was, yeah, 16. But you started working. No, I was almost 17. And I lived-- kind of strange enough, the boarding school that I went to, the Kingsley School for Girls, apparently, the Jewish Federation had taken over that building, which was in Hampstead, Swiss Cottage. And that was a hostel for 50 girls, all Jewish girls.

And that's where you lived?

That's where I lived then. And the woman who was the head of this one was also, at one time, the head of our hostel in Highgate when I came to England. And she was not very nice. In fact, I was telling my daughter before that when we went to boarding school and the Schlesingers picked up all our belongings, our so-called silverware was not amongst the stuff. And this woman took it.

Silverware?

Yes. See, when you left Germany, I don't know if you know this, you had to hand over all your silver.

Right.

And you were allowed to have one setting.

One place setting.

And I had one with my name Alice on it, but I don't go by that name. And one with AB. One was plated.

So she took it.

She took it. And when I came to this hostel in 1944, I saw the silverware there. And I said, gee, can't I take it? And the girl said, no, she goes, everything she has. I don't know whether she ever sold it or what, but we never got it back. I mean, it's kind of strange because she was Jewish herself. What could she gain by it?

Not very honorable.

That wasn't very honorable, that's right.

When did you join up with your mother?

Well, we came, then, to America in 1947, March '47.

And how did you get to America? My cousin gave us affidavit. My mother has cousins from Buffalo.

Oh, so you came directly to Buffalo?

Right into Buffalo. My aunt got married. She met a Jewish man in England. And he had emigrated to Nashville two years before. And then he asked her to marry him. So we went the long way around.

You went to Nashville?

We landed in-- no, we landed in Galveston, Texas. We were on the boat for three weeks. And then my mother and I came to Buffalo.

And your grandmother?

My grandmother died in the internment.

Oh, that's right. It was your grandmother who died. Right.

Yeah, in '41.

Right. So that was quite a saga that disrupted your life because you were Jewish.

Yeah. But like I said, too, as far as-- to go back before, the German Jewish mythology, I mean, my grandfather was a true German Jew. And I can remember going to Hanover. And he would resent the Jewish person being there with a beard. And he would look the other way.

Because he was German first.

He was German first, right? But then when he was spat upon, well, you had to take it. He had to take it then.

That's what had happened.

That was bad. I mean, I don't know if that's such a good idea that the Germans Jews had this--

Superior feeling.

--I don't know if you'd call it superiority or power.

Well, they were very assimilated, whereas the Polish Jews were not.

Of course, they had the money, I mean, the bankers, the Rothschilds. They had the bankers. And I think that's why, probably, they never liked them, because of all the money they had. And if it hadn't been for the Jews, where would've Germany have been, right?

Well there were other--

But basically, I mean, it--

--wealthy people too.

--a lot of the money came from the Jews, though, in Germany.

But the Jews were not the majority population.

Not the majority, but a lot of it.

Do you tell these stories to your children?

If they ask me enough. I mean, I sit here and my husband went to concentration camp. And as you know, he finally made his tape, it was a big step. And I think it's important that his should be recalled too.

His story too.

And mine is a little different. And I believe you know Dr. Reid Taylor.

Oh, yes, of course. And he made a very interesting remark some years ago. He came over to shake hands with my husband. He'd been teaching a Holocaust course here at Emerson High School. And he asked me whether I was from Germany too. And I said, yes. And he wanted to know if I was in camp. I told him, no. But I said, I lived in a place where I was the only Jewish child. And his words were well, then you were in a concentration camp by yourself. And that's basically, really, I think what it--

Your were persecuted in--

And I was persecuted on my--

--in a different--

--in a different way.

--but a similar way.

Right. I mean, knocked off my back, which is probably nothing compared to what people went through in concentration camp.

But your whole life was traumatized and changed.

Right. And I can remember when girls my age, with whom I played with dolls and everything were joining the BDM, Bund Deutscher Madel, like the Hitler Youth with the girls.

Oh, yeah, yeah, the Hitler youth.

And I'd remember asking my grandfather that I want to join too. And he would say, no, you can't but couldn't give me any specific reason why I couldn't. And I kept saying, if your child comes to you now and want to join Brownies, how would you tell a seven-year-old, eight-year-old, but you can't give her any reason why she can't join, you're just telling her, no, you can't.

Why she's different.

And my grandfather couldn't tell her well, because you're Jewish, you're different, you have a different nose, you have different this. I wasn't any different. And it wasn't till much later. I don't know when I realized that that was the reason.

Well, you weren't that much different from your compatriots. You weren't extremely observant or religious.

No. And I don't think I look particularly Jewish. No, you said you were very fair.

Matter of fact, I had one instance where the doctor came from a county seat to examine all the children. And he had heard there was a Jewish child in the school. And so happened that my teacher's daughter looked predominantly Jewish, very dark hair.



And you were blonde.

And I was blonde. There was a lot of Jews who were born in Westphalia known to be blonde. I don't know why that is the characteristic. But that's a known fact. And this doctor actually came to my grandfather and said, is this really your granddaughter? In fact, when I was in Germany in '79--

Oh, that was my next question, have you been back?

--yes. Well, we went the first time in '74. And it was a very, very traumatic experience for me getting off the train. Because for me, it was like a dream come true. I would think about every nook and cranny that I knew, being a small village. And it was just like something that had to be-- I had to go back.

Was it a happy trip?

He would say to me, do you have to go back? I said, I have to go back. And like I said, fortunately for our maid, Frieda, who was very, very-- oh, how shall I say it-- she knew exactly who to look at and who not look at. People would move their curtains to see, I suppose, what the little Jewish child looks like now.

And she says, you don't look there. And you don't look here. And just go with me. And I'll tell you who to say hello to. That was basically what it boiled down to. But those two days, I was so-- how shall I say-- astounded to the way I was treated by the people that I knew, who were good to me, like Frieda, and her husband, and her whole family.

Treated well, I presume, very well.

Right. But I left, I was completely exhausted. I mean, it was just--

It was too much of an emotional experience.

And I also-- see, the bank was in our house. And that was used to be the store. So our living quarters were occupied by families. And I went into the house, but I didn't have the heart to go upstairs. And Frieda says, you don't want to go? And I said, no. And then we went back to Germany in 1979. And I got up enough nerve. And I have to go upstairs.

Do you know? I sat there and I cried like a baby. And the woman who-- she knew who I was because Frieda had told her. In the meantime, Frieda had died. And she said, would you like to come upstairs? I sat there. And it was just like a dream. And she said, would you like a cup of coffee? I said, no. I said, just let me sit. And I came back. And my husband said, where were you? I said, why did you go in there? I said, I had to get it out of my system. Even though it was remodeled, it was still basically the same house.

Was your growing up house.

Right, right.

How do you feel when you hear German spoken?

Doesn't bother me.

Doesn't bother you.

I still speak German. We have some very dear friends in Germany, like I said, Frieda's daughter, who has been here. And my other daughter, Susan, just visited.

Oh, they're all Christians.

Right. But again, Social Democrats.

They're just good people.

But a strange thing-- my husband was liberated in Belsen, which is not far from Hanover. And when you talk-- when we talk to people in Germany, where is-- you call it Bergen-Belsen. In Germany, it's just Belsen.

Belsen.

They'd never heard of it.

Because perhaps they didn't want to hear it.

Well, they knew. But they just-- it's near Celle. They just didn't want to be-- it was too-- again, this little village was too far removed from Belsen. So they didn't associate it with that.

Your grandparents had this property and the store. Did you ever get reparations for these things?

Well, my mother in 1950 was-- she had a lawyer in Hanover. And he suggested that she take a lump sum. It was a very, very small sum, in fact. And in case the law gets changed, you may never get anything. And it was a big mistake. And like I said, the property is still standing. And when I was there in '79, I was told, why don't you get the ball rolling and have your mother give you a power of attorney. But I know my mother doesn't want to give me the power of attorney. So I can't do anything about it.

Why do you think that she doesn't?

I don't know. I don't know. In the meantime, it's owned by the bank, I presume.

Well, I mean, as far as the money, I mean, they paid my grandfather till probably, I don't know, till he left Germany. But even just the interest alone of the money they didn't pay him because he was in also-- I don't know if you know this, after the Crystal Night, we had to fix up the house again.

At your expense?

At our expense-- replace the windows, the roof. And then also, you see, my mother's bedroom set, which was, I believe, oak. It's a softwood. They took the butt of the gun and bore holes.

And damaged it. Where did you get the money to do this?

Well, like I said, my grandfather, he had bank accounts. And they were only frozen temporarily. And I don't know they found them. Because when they-- see, when I left in March '39, my grandparents, my uncle, and my mother, and my aunt moved to Hanover. And that was, again, in a big-- it was like a ghetto because they lived in an apartment house with all Jewish families. And sometimes, four or five families shared one small apartment. My uncle, Francis, slept in the living room with a curtained-off area. That was his so-called bedroom. And you had maybe six families living in one two-bedroom apartment with only one bathroom.

What a shock for families that they had lived comfortably and happily.

Right. And then also, as far as furniture, they just took whatever they could grab. They took, I believe, my mother's bedroom set.

How did you get these pictures? Oh, you just took them with you?

I don't know. Well, my mother-- my aunt had some of the pictures. I guess, when they left Germany, they probably took

some of those and put them in their one suitcase.

One suitcase.

One suitcase because they were both going to go into employment. So they took their uniforms, like a waitress uniform, and left all the other belongings in Germany. And then when war broke out and my grandparents sent all their belongings to Holland for safety.

To Holland?

To Holland. This is a good one. And when my mother was able to retrieve her things-- and my aunt's too-- they had to send so many pounds. It was in a warehouse, I believe, in Rotterdam. By the time they were able to send it, it was bombed. That was it.

So you never got that.

Never got that, never any of her, really, dowry, I mean, whatever-- she has everything so that she didn't have to start a household.

One circumstance after another. But you survived.

I survived, yes.

And your mother and your aunt.

I have two wonderful daughters and a very good husband. And you make the most of it now, right? That's what I'm going to do.

Right. Is it hard for you to talk about--

No, I mean--

--this?

--I've always wanted to talk about it to get it out of my system.

Many survivors can't.

Yeah. And I think it's good that I do it anyway.

It's very important that you do tell people. There are many people out there who deny it.

I'm not boasting. I say, I was one of the fortunate ones. And even having gone through the Crystal Night, that was my big, traumatic experience. And also, in '37, when they came in and used our house as an air raid shelter. That, to me, it was a big thrill again, see.

That was an adventure. But--

Right. Right.

--for your mother and grandparents, I'm sure it wasn't.

Well, yeah, I don't-- I mean, they just-- but they never asked for permission. They just opened it up.

They just came in.

--came in. [INAUDIBLE]. And my teachers, oh, you know, that's--

But your normal life was really not normal after a while.

No, no.

But you were a child growing up.

At the time, I had everything that I wanted. I was probably spoiled rotten by my grandfather. In fact, when my mother came to England, I remember, I had asked my grandmother, I needed a coat or something. And I saw this coat in my mother's suitcase. And he must have snuck it in there to make sure I got it.

What a beautiful memory. What a beautiful memory you have that you can give to your children.

Right, right. And really, he was a remarkable man.

Thank you, Vera. Thank you very much for sharing your story.

My pleasure.

We really appreciate it. And other people will too.

Thank you.

Thank you.