

Good evening. My name is Toby Ticktin Back and I'm the director of the Holocaust Resource Center in Buffalo. This evening, our visitor is Irmgard Mueller. And she will tell us her story. Irmgard, could you tell us about your childhood?

I had a very pleasant childhood and a very privileged childhood, with any kind of luxury that one could imagine surrounding me. And I suppose my future was sort of circumscribed. I was supposed to get a reasonably good education, be sent to a finishing school, get married, and have children. And that would have been that. But that is, of course, not what happened.

When I was 12 years old, Hitler came to power. And my future changed very rapidly. First of all, my education was in question. But luckily, the authorities decided to let me finish at least one part of it. And so I was in school until 1936. And then I took a commercial course and learned to type, and shorthand, and bookkeeping, much to my chagrin because I felt that that was not anything that I needed to ever know. Then I learned how to sew professionally. And I took a course in fashion design.

And then by that time, it was 1938. And after the Kristallnacht, all the Jewish schools in Germany were closed. So then I started to work as a nursemaid. And after the child went to Australia with its parents, I went to an agricultural training school. I was in that training school from 1940 until spring 1941 and then was transferred to a forced labor camp.

Excuse me. Before you tell us about the labor camp, could you give us your impressions of Kristallnacht?

Well, I was in Berlin at that time, going to school. And actually, I lived far enough from any commercial place so that I was completely unaware of what happened during the night. I didn't hear or see anything until the next morning. And then, of course, in the streets in Berlin, where the many Jewish shops were, all the windows were smashed in. And there was a lot of looting and destruction. And of course, all the synagogues were burning.

You saw this yourself when you went downtown?

Oh, yes. Yes. I passed some on my way to school. That's why I saw them. I did not make a point of going there to see it. And communication wasn't then what it is now. So there was no way for me to know that the school wouldn't open that day. But of course, the school was closed. And I went back to my furnished room and then called my mother. And she begged me to come home immediately. I lived in Halle in Saar. So I took the next train home.

How far away was that?

It was about three hours by train.

And in your hometown, were people aware of Kristallnacht?

Oh, yeah, the same thing happened there. All the Jewish stores were destroyed. And the synagogue was burned. My father had been arrested. And my mother was all alone. Then our house was searched. It was turned upside down.

Searched by whom, exactly?

By police.

Local police?

Local police, yes. So the house was turned upside down. When they left, there was not a spoon in a drawer or a bed that hadn't been totally demolished. It was really pretty bad. But at least they left my mother alone.

Were you there when that happened?

Oh, yeah.

And what were they looking for?

They were looking for weapons and for contraband books. They took away the radio. And weapons, they didn't find because we had long destroyed my father's army revolver.

Your father had been in World War I?

My father was in. Yeah, my father was an officer during the World War.

What did your father do?

My father was a lawyer.

And he was taken away at this time?

He was taken to Sachsenhausen, yes, he and my uncle. My father came out of Sachsenhausen six weeks later. But my uncle died on the morning of the day they were released.

What did your uncle die of?

He died of a heart attack. My father was pretty sick. He had been in Sachsenhausen any longer, I don't think he would have made it either.

But then in the meantime--

Was he able to practice as a lawyer?

Oh, no, no. He was not allowed to. But in the meantime, while my father was in Sachsenhausen, the local National Socialist Party forced my mother to sell the house. It was sold for one eighth of its estimated value. They threatened her with my father's life if she didn't sell the house. So she sold it to a local party member. And then for the rest of their stay in my hometown, my parents lived in one room in a small apartment, which was--

What did they subsist on?

Well, my father had a reasonable amount of money. And also, my parents had some real estate. The money was all managed by a party member and-- who dished out every month a certain amount of money for my parents to live on.

And with your father, having been a lawyer, I presume that he had a good position in town. What did the townspeople do with this new kind of life that your parents had? How did they relate to them?

Well, since 1935, it was very difficult for non-Jews to have any sort of relationship with Jews. I had some friends who came when it was dark at night, if they thought it was safe to come, who saw my parents occasionally, and sort of smuggled in some food because rations were already pretty restrictive. Jews didn't get any white flour, or meats, one egg a month, and that sort of thing. But it was very dangerous for people to do this.

Were your parents depressed?

Oh, yes. Of course, they were depressed. And then for some time, they forced my father to dig ditches for the city.

And other Jews as well?

He was 65 at that time. Oh, yes.

And your grandparents, were they put like this?

My grandparents, my paternal grandparents were dead by then. But my maternal grandmother was living in Essen an der Ruhr. They left her pretty much alone. She was eventually taken to Theresienstadt. And she survived Theresienstadt.

She did?

Yes. But she died about a month and a half after she was brought back to Essen.

So you never saw her after?

No. And she didn't find out that I was alive. Because all communication stopped in Germany when the war was over. And I didn't find out that she was there until after she was dead.

Anyway, to get back to your being taken to a labor camp from the agricultural.

Yes, the forced labor camp first and then agricultural labor camp. I was in there until early spring 1943.

And you were there two years, is that it?

Yes.

Two years in forced labor camp?

Right.

And then in '43, we were suddenly all gathered together, all the groups of small forced labor camps were all gathered together in one area in Berlin, called Grosse Hamburger Strasse, which was a gathering place, prior to being taken to concentration camps. And they put us there for about two weeks.

What was it, a hall or a dormitory?

Well, Grosse Hamburger Strasse, I just recently found out, actually, what it was. It was a Jewish old age home, which was very near the oldest Jewish cemetery in Berlin. I really never knew what it was. It was a sort of a city block of interconnected buildings. And they put us all there, crammed together.

How many were you?

Well, I think, ultimately, we were about 1,000, roughly. I only can guess that.

Yes, I understand.

And when they had about 1,000, they took us to Auschwitz.

Did you know you were going to Auschwitz? Did you know what Auschwitz was?

I had no idea. No.

And were you with your friends from the camp?

Yes.

Young men and women?

Right about my-- the same age.

Can you give us your impressions? How were you taken to Auschwitz, in a cattle car?

No. These were regular sort of rather old trains. They weren't cattle cars. We arrived in Birkenau on the day of Hitler's birthday in 1943. And I found out afterwards that this-- somebody had made Hitler a promise that on this day in 1943, they were going to have Germany free of Jews, Judenfrei.

Judenfrei.

They didn't quite manage it.

He was well on his way.

Right. So we arrived in Birkenau. And it was probably a standard way of arriving there. There was so much yelling and screaming going on, everybody was just jumping out of the cars, left all the belongings behind, and lined up on the siding. And then within minutes, they had the men separated from the women and the children.

Was this nighttime or daytime?

No, it was daytime. And then they took us into the camp.

What were your impressions there? What do you remember?

Well, that's sort of nebulous. I do have some pictures of it in my mind. But they aren't really cohesive. I don't know how we got from the siding into the camp. I think that we were marched there. But I am not sure. And then very quickly, they had also the older women and the women with children separated until they were about I think 130 of us, roughly, left. And so we were taken in to be tattooed. My number was 41,965.

Did you know what that was? Did they prepare you in any way?

No. They just stood there and tattooed us.

You must have been very frightened.

Yeah, it was very scary.

Was it painful too?

I was told afterwards that it was painful. But I don't remember that it was painful. I think I was too scared.

And you were still with your friends?

Oh, yes. They arranged us alphabetically. So I was with some, but not with others. And then after we were tattooed, we were ushered to a place where we were just told to strip. And then we were shaved. And then we were brought to a place where we were taking a cold shower.

Were you shaved all over-- your head, and your pubic hair, everything?

All over.

Were you examined as well?

I don't call it examine. I call it glared at by men with guns, standing there, making rotten remarks. And some of the

women was very hysterical. They were quite a bit younger than I am. And I don't think any of them had ever stripped in front of a man. So there was a lot of crying and hysterics.

And then we went to the shower, which was cold. It was very cold in those days. It was really-- there was still some snow on the ground. And then we were given long men's underwear and a uniform of some kind, which we found out afterwards were uniform of dead Russian prisoners of war.

So it was pants and a jacket?

Yeah.

And what kind of shoes?

They didn't have any shoes, which was very lucky. So we were allowed to keep on our shoes. I don't know what would have happened if they hadn't had the same old wooden shoes that they'd given out because they were very bad.

Very difficult.

And people very quickly got blisters and infections in those. But your own shoes were reasonably good. So that wasn't so bad. And then we were put into a barracks, which was the worst barracks in the whole place. Was just absolute hell.

Were there tiers of bunks? Was that it?

Well, I don't know, really, whether you call them bunks. But there were walls of brick with platforms made of doors from old houses. Two doors made a platform. And there were eight people on each one of these.

Was there a mattress?

But if you were under-- no mattresses, nothing.

Any covers, any straw?

No, nothing.

Nothing.

No. And if you happened to be on one of these, you were lucky because some of the people got on the ground, which was muddy. And of course, there was not enough room for everybody to stretch out. So we took turns. Some of us were stretched out. And some of us were hunched together.

The worst part was the sanitation at the time because very quickly, all of us had diarrhea. And at night, they wouldn't let us go to the latrine. There was only, in this whole camp, one large latrine, which was very horrible in itself, a sort of a concrete ditch, which had a little low wall all surrounding it that you could use to squat on. And that was all, no toilet paper.

And you couldn't use that at night at all? So you soiled yourself?

No, they wouldn't let us out. No. At night, they let us use a metal wheelbarrow, which was put in front of the entrance to the barracks.

Very primitive.

Well, it was very primitive. It was also very bad because the kind of diarrhea we got was sort of like dysentery, which is very explosive and very liquid. So it was just really pure hell. And I was brought up in such a way that--

Very refined.

--that was the worst part.

Yes.

Also, on the second day, I got my first beating because I hadn't yet understood that water was very precious. I sort of saw a line of prisoners standing there with little cups. We all were given a sort of a metal cup with a handle. And they were all standing there. So I thought that I would stand in line too because maybe there was some food.

It turned out that they were standing, lined up to get water. There was one spigot of running water in that whole camp at that time. And when I reached the spigot with the water, and I held my cup under it, I got beaten up because it was a privilege to get water, for which you had to exchange something with the women who were guarding the spigot.

Oh, I see. So it was bribery.

Yes.

And you didn't know that.

I hadn't learned that yet. Yes, they expected a slice of bread or something else in return. So--

So you got beat up.

--got a thrashing. Yes.

It must have been a shock to you.

It was. So then in order to get water, I started volunteering for certain jobs because if you did certain jobs, then you got a little more bread. If you had a little more bread, then you could exchange that for water.

Otherwise, you wouldn't get water?

No, not really.

No.

No water. I mean, they brought you something they called coffee in the morning, which was-- I don't know what it was made of, but it certainly wasn't coffee. Of course, it was some kind of dark brown water.

Probably so it was chicory.

Probably chicory, yes. And that was practically the only thing you got to drink.

So you were always thirsty.

Oh, always. Yes.

What kind of work did you do in the camp?

Well, they really didn't have any work for us. That was the strange thing. So you had to find work. And every once in a while, I found some work. I helped scrub a barracks that had been closed because all the people in it had died of some kind of epidemic. So I helped scrub this. And so I got extra bread.

They didn't use your skill as a sewer?

Not then, no. No. Then as it got a little warmer, I helped dig ditches. This is something that most people don't know about Auschwitz. They had malaria there. This was one of the few places outside Italy where there was malaria because it was very swampy. And in order to protect the guards, they wanted to drain the swamps. So they used us to dig the drainage ditches.

Did anybody get malaria?

Oh, yes. Yes. One of my good friends had malaria. She nearly died. But she didn't.

And I'd think there was no quinine or a no medication for her.

There was quinine, but you had to pay for it dearly. It's one of those idiocies of life-- there was almost anything in Auschwitz. People brought it with them when they came. And it was put in warehouses. Somehow, in the German-- the SS was not very good at using what we bought there very efficiently. It was all warehoused. Why, I don't know.

I thought was sent back to the cities of Germany.

Well, that's what we were told. But very little found its way back. Much of it was there. And then it was used again to bribe, to do anything.

It was recycled?

Yes, right. Some of the clothes went back to Germany, I'm quite sure.

What was the roll call like?

Oh, the roll call.

We hear stories about that.

Yes, well the roll call happened as a standard kind of procedure once in the morning, once in the late afternoon. And you lined up five in a row. And if somebody was missing, then you stood there until that somebody was found. So sometimes, I was-- and of course, if you were weakened by dysentery or some other kind of disease and you couldn't stand, then you got beaten up or they sicked the dog on you.

Did that ever happen to you?

No. I did pass out sometime, but there was no dog around. And that was at a different occasion. No. I probably survived because of pure dumb luck. And the first piece of luck was the courier, the SS courier, who took us as a group from the Grosser Hamburger Strasse to Birkenau.

He became very intrigued with some of the things we did in the Grosser Hamburger Strasse. We were there for two weeks with nothing to do but sit. And so we put together some sort of cabaret almost every night. There were some very talented people there. And the SS guards came, and sat, and applauded, and asked for more. He liked that. And so he somehow took a liking to this whole group of people. I don't know just how to explain this.

Yes, that's evident.

But after he had brought us to Birkenau, he disappeared. But he came back with the next transport. And the moment he came to Birkenau, he came into the camp and he started looking for what he called [GERMAN], where are my Berliners? And he found that we were in this miserable barracks. And evidently, he did something about it because we

were pulled out of this barracks, and distributed to different jobs and different locations, and housed better.

But you were separated?

Some of us were separated. And I ended up doing some sewing, mending of uniforms, and things like that, but only for a very short time. And there was a selection for people who, after six weeks, still looked reasonably strong. And I happened to because that's the way I'm built. So when I stood there without my clothes on and the SS doctors looked at me, I looked reasonably good. They didn't see that I had a very bad infected heel blister, thank goodness.

And I was taken out of Birkenau and put into a building that housed-- it was a barracks, an army barracks. On the top floors lived the female guards. And in the basement was a laundry for the uniforms, and underwear, and socks of the whole guard group. They had made some rooms in this basement with triple deckers.

And we were there to wash the laundry day and night. There wasn't enough room to just have a day shift. So they used the beds 24 hours around the clock. Some of the girls were washing laundry during the day. And some others washed laundry at night. And of course, there was a shower room. And we were not allowed to have lice or any kind of dangerous insect. And again, this was one of those lucky breaks because lice meant typhus and very often, certain death. So if you didn't have lice, you already had one lucky break.

And the sanitation was better there too, I presume?

Oh, yes, regular bathrooms.

Regular toilets?

Yes, yes. And whatever food we were supposed to get, we got. It was delivered to the basement. And the hierarchy in this particular setup was so closely scrutinized by the guards that they could not really use the food that was meant for us to buy themselves luxuries, which was a common thing in the camp at large. The food was usually delivered to one of the barracks in the camp. But the prisoners didn't always get it.

But in this case, you got yours.

We got it, yes. Yes, we did.

How long were you in this situation?

That I don't quite remember-- certainly a few months. Then one day, a guard appeared and asked whether anybody could type, could do bookkeeping and stenography. Now, my father had always been very carefully coaching me not to volunteer for anything like that. So I wasn't about to.

But one of my friends stood behind me in this line of five. And she gave me a push. She knew I could do all these things. She gave me a push and I nearly fell. So I made a step forward to catch my balance. And he thought that I volunteered. And so I ended up in one of the buildings in Auschwitz, which was [INAUDIBLE] and with this reputation is called Standortverwaltung.

What is that, Irmgard?

It was an organizational sort of building, where all the bigwigs had their offices. So I saw the commandants of Auschwitz practically every day because the office I worked in was on the same floor, about three doors down from their private offices. So I've seen all of these men-- Hoss, and Hossler, and Liebehenschel.

Did Hitler ever come to your offices?

No.



Or Goering or Eichmann?

Not when I was there. How long did you work there?

Well, I worked there until the 18th of January, 1945.

So in total?

That was around '44, sometime in '44 until the January '45.

So in total, you were in Auschwitz for?

Two years.

Two years. Well, not quite, a few months less than.

And the last part was better than the first part?

In Auschwitz? Oh, yes, much better. Yes. Because then we were working in offices where there were also guards working. And they objected to the fact that we didn't have any hair. There were some kind of crazy rules that, ordinarily, every time you were on the outside, you had to wear a white kerchief, which had to be folded very exactly to show some corners and have their ends tucked under very precisely.

But indoors, we were supposed to take that off. Well, they complained because there were all these women with bald heads sitting there. And they found that very ugly. So we were allowed to grow about 2 centimeters of hair. I did some job, which unfortunately, I don't remember in enough precision.

But I can tell what it was. It has bothered me for years that I don't remember some of the details. I wrote into ledgers every day certain amounts of foodstuffs. There was, I think, something in the Geneva Convention that said certain types of prisoners had to have so many calories per day as food. And so that was worked out into being so much rice, so much barley, so much coffee, so much sugar. And all this was very neatly put into ledgers. And then it was multiplied by the number of prisoners.

So every morning, I knew exactly how many prisoners were in all of Auschwitz and all of the satellite camps because as soon as I got to the job, there, to this building and sat down at my desk, runners, so-called runners, would come from the satellite camps. These were guards who came on these motorbikes with the side cars and give me forms. And it said, yesterday, there were this many prisoners. Today, there are this many prisoners.

Imagine with that machinery that they bothered with these details.

Oh, yes, they were very precise. And so I could tell every day whether the difference was because some people had died overnight or some people had been gassed because if there was a difference that was larger than, say, a couple of hundred, then you know what that meant. But I don't remember the details about it. So I can't tell you at what time the large gatherings were.

Did you see the gatherings, though?

No.

You weren't near the crematoria?

No, no. I was then in Auschwitz. And the crematoria were in Birkenau. You see, that Birkenau was sometimes referred to as Auschwitz II.

Oh, so its entrance.

Yes. And I was then already had been transferred to Auschwitz I.

Were you with your friends?

Some of my friends, yes.

Did all your friends--

Not all of my friends.

No, did they remain alive?

No.

No, some of them died?

Right.

Did they die in the camps of malnutrition?

Well, malnutrition, diseases. And some of them were selected. Supposedly, I was in a selection which was carried out by Mengele. But I don't remember anything about it. There were some people who were very interested in knowing the names and the dates of everything. It seems to me that I was only interested in being alive and staying alive. There was enough going on. And I don't even think that I would ever have recognized Mengele if I had seen him.

At one time, shortly after I started working in the office, all of us were transferred into a brand new barracks, which was very clean, and in comparison, very luxurious. The building where the experiments on the women were carried out was right next door to this barracks. But of course, when I say barracks, these were really substantial buildings with thick walls, reasonably thick walls, brick buildings. And they were several floors high. So actually, I don't ever-- I didn't see any of these women. Every once in a while, you could hear them scream. Yes.

Now, we were housed in this new barracks the people who worked in this office building. And there were several different kinds of offices. There was also the famous Politische Abteilung, which I think is a misnomer. It was called Political Division, but I don't think it really had anything to do with politics.

These were the people who knew more about insurrections, and subordination, and punishments, and who also cataloged all the important goods that were being bought in-- gold and silver, which was brought in by Hungarian Jews. There was not much gold and silver left in that German Jews brought in because that had been taken away earlier. But the Hungarian Jews bought considerable amounts in.

And of course, I saw a washtub full of wedding bands that were taken away and various jewelry. I have never seen teeth that were supposed to be broken out because they contained gold. But I have heard that that was done. If it was done, I never saw that.

Well, all these offices were in the same building. It was a very large building. And so we were all housed together in this barracks. And also, there were some of the women who were in one of the orchestras. Now, there were actually two orchestras. There was one in Birkenau and one in Auschwitz.

And this is another one of these peculiarities. The girls who played in the orchestra didn't have to wear a prisoner's uniform. They were allowed to wear skirts, and shirts, and jackets. The jackets all had a large red oil paint stripe on the back. And they were also allowed to grow some hair.

Now, any time on Sunday, when the weather was good, they were made to sit near the smaller one of the two circumferential fences and play. And the guards would bring their wives and children, and stand outside the fence, and listen to the music. And then when the regular concert was over, they requested very often certain kinds of music be played.

Oh, thank you.

Thanks.

Thank you. That was peculiar.

Yes.

Bring back normalcy.

Just as always, I keep remembering these women in their dirndl dresses and the little children standing there. And then I keep hearing that, by and large, the German population didn't know what was going on.

It seems rather strange.

Right.

Now, did you get any news about what was happening?

No news. Practically no news, I have to qualify that. We got sort of third and fourth-hand news that was filtered down. There was, I understand, a quite accurate news network that was carried on by the Polish underground. But we didn't speak Polish. And most of the Polish prisoners were very wary of us. They wouldn't come near us. So it sort of filtered down somehow.

We knew the war was going on because, occasionally, there were air raid alarms. And we were forced to go into the basement of the barracks where we were. As soon as there was an idea that there was going to be an attack by mostly American bombers, we were forced to stop working. And we were immediately driven back to the-- I mean, marched back to the camp proper. And we were forced into the basement because they were, I guess, afraid that we would signal in some way.

And once, unfortunately, we were bombed. It was in September 1944. The barracks, the building, on the other side of our building was a tailor shop, where a whole reasonably large group of Polish men, tailors by profession, manufactured uniforms and also repaired them. And they, unfortunately, got a real hit.

They got hit.

Yes. That was very bad. And our barracks collapsed from the air pressure.

Did you know that the war was going poorly for the Nazis by any of the actions of the guards? No?

No, oh, no.

No.

I don't think they knew it, either.

So what happened in January?

Well, in January, we were suddenly all--

This is January 1945.

January 1945, the 18th of January, 1945. We were told, I think, the day before that we were supposed to pack up some of our office material in big boxes. And also, some of us were burning things. Now, I don't know why they didn't burn it all. I also don't know why they marched us out of there.

We had already been suspicious. About for two weeks, there were some rumors that something was going to happen. And we thought that they were going to kill us because we knew too much. They couldn't just suddenly left us to-- they couldn't have left us to tell the truth, so to speak. So we were very scared. But instead, they marched us out of there. It was terrible. It was very cold. And there was lots of snow on the ground. And we were really not well-dressed for this kind of business. And there was very little food.

Then we were loaded into open cattle cars and coal cars, about 70 to 80 people in one of them, which meant that most of us had to stand. And it was snowing. And we were being strafed by airplanes. I don't know which airplanes these were.

So they took about three days and the intervening nights, no food, no water, and only once in a great while did they ever stop the train. And then they let a few women at a timeout to use the side of the railing, the train rails, as a toilet. In the meantime, we had one bucket per car to use. And so we were allowed to empty that, then, too whenever the train stopped.

And then we were taken to Ravensbrück, which was a disaster. Ravensbrück was already so overcrowded because ours, apparently, was not the first train to get there. So they didn't have any room to put us anywhere. So we were standing I don't know how many hours. But the best guess is 10.

And many of the women who had made it died then. But of course, at that point, so many had died on that march and during the train ride, which is another one of those reasons why I think many of the Germans who said that they didn't know what was happening lied. Because what could you do with dead prisoners in this packed condition in the cattle car? They were all thrown out over the side of the car. So there were dead bodies lying all along from Auschwitz back into Germany. Somebody must have taken them away eventually.

So that is a pretty blank time in my head. I know that we were packed into a large open building, like a shed. And we were there for a few days. Then we were shipped to a satellite camp of Ravensbrück. And from there, we were shifted to the last camp I was in, which was called Malchow.

And that was very bad. There was very little food. There was no work. All we did was lie around and get weaker and weaker all the time. And eventually, there was also no water. But at that point, we knew that something was happening because they were-- day and night, there were dogfights between German and British planes that were close enough, you could see the markings on the planes so that we knew that something was about to happen. And you could also hear the what I assume was heavy artillery from the east. Malchow was in Mecklenburg. And it is probable that what we heard was the bombardment on Berlin.

And so eventually, the guards decided to march us all out of Malchow. I don't think that was a higher order. This was one of those desperation moves, I think. They didn't want to be captured by a Russian. So they marched us toward the west. There was no particular plan that we could find out.

Now, I was in pretty bad shape. And some of my friends were not capable of really marching anymore, either. It was very, very dark at night. And during one of the lulls when there were no fights that lit up the area-- usually, when there were airplane fights, there was also this tracer ammunition, tracer bullets, which lit up the whole sky. But during one of the lulls, we sort of dropped off into a ditch on the side of the road. And we waited until no more people came and then hid in a bunch of hay that was left on the field.

You and several friends?

Yeah, I and six friends, yes. And the next day, just as dawn was coming, we sort of crept across the street, where we found there was a farm. The farmer was very happy that we came because we were all emaciated. And we had prison uniforms. And he did not want to run away, as apparently many other Germans did. He thought that if he put us up and gave us something to eat, that whoever came to occupy Germany would be nice to him.

So he made us a space in one of his barns and gave us a big bucket full of potatoes, which we ate and then we went to sleep. I don't know how long we slept exactly. But it must have been about the rest of the day and the following night.

And the next morning, somebody came running into the barn and said, the war is over. The Americans are coming. And so we just crept out of there and marched toward the west, where we thought the Americans were coming from.

This big tank came that had the Allied star in front of it. But we had never heard about the Allied star. And the only star we knew had something to do with Russia. So we said, oh, my god. Everything is lost. These are the Russians. These are not the Americans.

But then as we were watching, the tank came by. And on the side, it said "Blue Rain," which was the name of a popular tune. And I think American soldiers named their tanks and their airplanes after girlfriends, or tunes, or something like that. And we just jumped up and down, as much as we could.

Wonderful day.

And the guys in the tank threw chocolate at us and a care ration. And that was wonderful, yes. Unfortunately, it didn't stay very wonderful because they were only there the day. Then they were through. And the Russians took over. And all hell broke loose. So my friends and I managed to escape from that.

And with the help of other American soldiers-- and this happened to be people from the 82nd Airborne Division-- we got to cross one strip of no man's land. You see, the demarcation line between the Russian Army and the American Army was fluctuating all the time, back and forth. It took several weeks before that stabilized. And here was this no man's land. And the boys from the 82nd Airborne Division weren't really allowed to help us across.

Oh, because of fraternization.

They did that, yes. Yes. Right.

But they did help you.

Not only this, but many German Nazis tried to escape too.

Right, the same way. But they stashed us away in the middle of the woods somewhere and then brought us over during the night. And so we finally were reasonably safe. Unfortunately, they didn't stay there either. They eventually withdrew. The British took over. And then eventually, the Russians took over finally again. But by this time, we had got a little strength back. And we managed to get to the other side of the Elbe with the help of the British Army. And from there, then, we dispersed.

You dispersed.

Right.

Before--

Is there any kind of detail that you want to hear?

Yes. I think before we phase out, we'd like to see that picture of you, your identification card, perhaps. Oh, this is the

picture that we never showed in the agricultural farm, back in the late '30s or early '40s. But now, we'd like to see the other picture with the identification. Can you tell us something about that?

Yes, well, as soon as the war was over, the various national Red Cross organizations came and helped.

Why don't you take some water there.

Yes, but that won't help much. They helped their nationals to get out of Germany. But since we were German nationals, nobody helped us. So the first thing to do was one group figured out we needed identification, since all our papers, everything was destroyed. So they made up this kind of an identification card, which we could use to show that we were not just German Germans, but different Germans.

Displaced Germans.

Displaced Germans, yes, right. And that if we went to any kind of aid organization, that we could legitimately ask for help.

And that helped you, I presume.

Irmgard, would you show us your number, if you don't mind?

Well, I can't unfortunately show you the number. I don't have it anymore. My relatives, when I came to this country, were so upset about the commotion it caused every time I walked around with short sleeves that they asked me to have it taken out. It was rather too large to take out this piece, which was one part of the Star of David. And I was told that the scar wouldn't heal properly if they tried to take it out at the same time. But I was told, eventually, I could be taken out too. But I never bothered.

So in other words, they insisted that you take the number off.

Every time I went somewhere with my relatives, people just stared at me as if I were a creature from outer space. It was just really bad.

It's a shame that they put you through that after having been put through it initially. Did your parents survive?

No, my parents did not. Most of my family-- there are just some uncles, and aunts, and some cousins got out of Germany early enough. But anyone who was-- any one of my family was in Germany after the war broke out did not survive.

So you came to this country virtually relative-less?

Well, I wouldn't really say that because my brother got out of Germany very early. And he was a soldier in the American Army during the Second World War. Unfortunately, because of circumstances, he could not help. He was an enemy alien soldier. And therefore, he was sent to the Philippines, rather than to the European theater.

It would have been something if you had met with him.

Yes, that would have been. I was asking anyone and everybody I could find whether they had ever met my brother. Since my brother is multilingual, it seemed to me that he might have been used as an interpreter. But I was told that very often, it was too dangerous to have a former German citizen be in the American Army.

Even if he were Jewish?

Yes, even if he were Jewish.

That's strange.

That if he became a prisoner of war, his treatment certainly would be very bad.

Oh, yes. Yes. I understand that we don't have much time. But just briefly, after the war, you were in Sweden--

Yes.

--for a while for rehabilitation?

No, not really for rehabilitation. I needed to get out of Germany as fast as I could, or at least I thought so. And I had relatives in Sweden who got me a Swedish entrance permit. And so with the help of an UNRRA officer, I got out of Germany.

What year was that?

That was in 1946. And I stayed in Sweden until my American visa came through. And took about 10 months. And I left Sweden in February '47.

Did you leave with any of your friends?

No.

Are you in touch with your friends, some of those?

Some of them, yes, some of them.

Could you tell us, in conclusion, in summation, if you have a message or anything particular that you want to close with? It's hard, I know.

Yes, it is hard. It seems to me that when I came here, I had lots of messages. But nobody wanted to hear them. So for years and years, I didn't talk about it. Now, the whole part of history, that part of history has been so sugarcoated and so trivialized that any message you would want to have, I think only historian can really formulate one. I don't think that I have anything to say in the way of message. No.

Well, telling us your story was certainly message enough. And I know, it's hard to go back on those times.

Well, I have left out lots of gruesome details. They certainly could think up a lot of really bad things to do, like forcing everyone to watch executions. And if they managed to see that you look down on the ground instead of looking up where the execution was taking place, then you got beaten up. It was one of those cruelties.

And then there were jokes that happened, like one day, they took us all and showed us a movie. What can you say? I mean, the whole thing was so schizophrenic at times. There was no way of making any sense of it. If you tried to guess whether you would ever get out of there alive, it was hopeless. The situation could change from one day to the next. There was no way out.

Thank goodness. Thank goodness that you survived.

Right.

It's important for you to tell the story. Thank you very much, Irmgard.

You're welcome. Thank you.