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Following is an interview with Gerda Klein, G-E-R-D-A Klein, K-L-E-I-N.

Well, I remember [INAUDIBLE] always in there.

OK. Let's talk about the start of the war and some of the things that you remember from those times.

I remember it very vividly. As you well know, war broke out on the 1st of September. And Germany said that they declared war. Of course, there was no declaration, they simply marched across the border. And we lived very close from the Czechoslovakian border, Czechoslovakia already having been occupied by Germany. But I remember it.

You know, actually, I was terribly busy, you know. First of all, my father had suffered a heart attack just a few weeks earlier. And it was a great deal of concern, and turmoil, and all that. And this was our prime concern.

And other thing, of course, school was going to start in another week or so. So you know, I was getting ready for school, and talking to my friends. And not really truly being aware of what might be happening. And that was the last week of August or so.

We really came face to face with it on Friday morning, very early in the morning, when people said that there were lots of planes. We heard a roar of many planes. And when we went out to the street to see it, the wings of the planes had the swastika on it. And that was the first ominous thing of sort of helplessness and horror. You know, this was above us. They could do almost anything.

And that's when hysteria really broke out. People started digging holes in the yards and erecting barricades. And my father was upstairs in the bedroom. And my mother cautioned everyone not to mention the war to him and didn't let them listen to the radio or anything.

But I guess my father knew, obviously, what was going on. And there was a horrible night, lots of explosions. And I remember being in my parents' bedroom with my mother, and my brother, and I. And this is when my father told me to go and call the family. I remember.

We better stop. OK.

Am I talking too long?

No. A lawnmower just started. OK. Let's continue with the beginning of the war. Why don't we do the Saturday, the quiet Saturday?

Saturday was very, very quiet. As a matter of fact, I remember it still as one of the most beautiful, and probably the last peaceful day of my life. You realize I was only 15 at the time. And I remember in the morning, we wanted to turn on the radio, and there was no sound. And the electricity had been cut off. There was no telephone.

My father got up. He had been so ill before, and it was the first time I saw him dressed again. He suddenly looked very gray and very old. And when I look back now, I realized that he was only 49, I guess.

And I remember we were sitting at breakfast. It was a beautiful, beautiful autumn day, very bright, very cold. And the flowers were bright outside. And we were all together. And it seems all activity outside has stopped as well. And it was sort of a very, very special, memorable day because it had no intrusion whatsoever. And we were together.

And then in the evening, a great deal of activity started. There was shooting, there were planes, there were some explosions. We went to the basement. My cat was outside and my brother went out to let the cat in. The cat was meowing. And he came back with a hole in his trousers. And he said there was shooting from the rooftops and that the Germans were coming.

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I don't remember too much more of that night. But I remember in the morning, we came up from the basement and we sat around the table. And my brother walked toward the window. And then he sort of sat down.

And at that moment, we heard an incredible roar. And a motorcycle came down the street, and it had a side car in it. And there were people in different uniforms. You know, our army, the Polish Army, had sort of beige khaki uniforms. And those uniforms were green.

No, I'm sorry, actually what happened-- we saw people walking with flowers and cameras.

Wait. We have to stop. The noise.

OK. Let's pick up with seeing the people with flowers.

Saw people with flowers and cameras walking up the street. You know, our street was called Cesinska, which means like Czechoslovakia, which was the street which led to the Czech border. And people were walking up that street. And my mother said something like, oh, my god. I hope they are not-- and at this point, that motorcycle came down. It was an incredible roar. Came down the street and was two German military in them.

And the thing which I remember most vividly-- my brother had his wristwatch in his pocket. And he was just removing it from his pocket. And so his hand must have trembled because his watch fell to the floor. And I remember seeing it was 9:10 in the morning. And I always sort of take it as something that that was the moment when my world was gone.

Tell me about the woman who wanted your Polish flag.

Well, we realized that things were-- I think what was most astonishing thing is that we heard roars of people. Our neighbors, and friends, and people I've known all my life. You know, my mother was born in the same home I was born. And you know, that's been the family I don't know for how many generations.

People were shouting, you know, Heil Hitler, long live the fÃ¼hrer. And people were waving flags with swastikas. And there was that feeling of complete betrayal. And suddenly, you were home. And you were not home anymore.

You know, I mean, that was Poland, you know. And we loved Poland. That was at least the young generation, you know. Because the older generation had grown up under Austria. But of course, we were born under Poland. And this is something I couldn't understand.

And probably, the most vivid example of that was that my friend Trudy, who had a very, very bitter life-- her mother had died and she had a stepfather. My mother met that man went through. There was very little. He was terribly cruel to her. And he was beating her. She spent so much time with us, you know, and I really felt I was so close to her.

And I saw her going to our garden and picking white roses. My mother was particularly proud of them because they had bloomed into fall, out of season, and she was handing it to a German soldier. You know, people were bringing. And I think that gesture sticks in my mind as one of complete betrayal.

And also, I remember handing on the roses to the soldier who was reaching out to her. And at that moment, someone else was handing him a glass of schnapps or what, you know, some sort of whiskey. And he let the roses fall to the ground. And people were trampling on my roses.

And I don't know. It sort of later became a symbol for me. That very moment, it's arrested in my mind, what was happening there, that everything was sort of upside down. And I don't know.

Tell me about the neighbor who wanted the--

Then there was a woman. You know, some people tried to be helpful. I don't mean to say that it was a direct betrayal of us at that particular point. It was not.

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Stop. OK.

Yes, of course, we had some very good and very close friends among our neighbors. And one woman, her name was Frau Rescher. And I remember she came in and she asked where the Polish flag was. The Polish flag, of course, is a strip of white and a strip of red, very long strips. And my mother said, why?

And she said, it's really very easy to make a German flag out of it. You know, all you have to do is cut out a round thing from the white and impose it on the red, and then with ribbon, make the swastika. You know. And my mother absolutely turned pale. And the woman said, we better make that flag and fly it from the house.

You know, obviously, she wanted to protect us. Because the houses which did not fly the swastika flag were under scrutiny. And figured that they were anti-German, and if they discovered that we were Jewish. So she just took the flag.

My mother looked for it in all places where she knew she couldn't find it. But finally, she did produce it. And they did make it. My mother did not. But the neighbor and another one made a flag.

And that was sort of unbelievable to see that flag flying from my childhood home. I remember, I thought of it like a spider, you know, the swastika sort of reaching out to engulf us. And it was a horrible thing, something that was supposed to be for our protection was actually terribly threatening, particularly to a young girl. And it all came so fast. It was all within a day.

Brett, now we do have-- OK, OK.

The war started in September. By Christmas, we had to move to the basement of our home, which was very cold and clammy. We had no running water, no electricity. And things were really quite bad. But we were still in our own home. And spring was very difficult because I always loved my garden. I used to spend a lot of time there as a child. And the sign appeared that dogs and Jews were not permitted to enter.

When we had orders to move to a shabby, remote quarter of our town, which became the ghetto, I defied that order. I remember, I said, I don't care what they're going to do. I had to see my garden again. It was a beautiful, fragrant, spring morning. It was in April. And I remember I jumped over the fence, and went to the garden, and pretended that I was just picking violets.

And I pretended just for a little bit what it would be like if the war hadn't happened. I would be going in, my mother would say I need to take my raincoat to school, and my brother would be hurrying off. My father would be going to his office. My mother would be setting the table for breakfast and urging us to do this or that.

And I remember it was sort of the most incredible thing that the reality, which I had always taken for granted, now became the most remote fantasy. And I think it stayed with me, you know, in a way, throughout all the years to return to that.

Later, of course, it took on other forms of when I was in the camps to imagine an evening at home. But here, I still was looking at my childhood home. My parents were inside. My brother had been taken away. Maybe six weeks after the war started, he was taking away. October 19, since the war broke out the 1st of September.

But I was with my parents at my home. I could see from the garden. And the room which had been mine, the wallpaper. Even though we lived in the basement, I was still there.

And yet, I somehow must have been at least subconsciously aware that maybe I'll never come back. So I would never recognize it, you know. I lived throughout just to think I'm going to go home, always. But when I look back now, over the many years, and I still can very vividly recall my feeling it was sort of a farewell to my life and to my childhood. And I was 16 at that point.

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In the ghetto, tell me about some of the things you remember.

Well, you know, as much as I dreaded going to the ghetto, actually, in some ways, it was a little easier for me because my friends were there. You know, I was not as isolated as I'd been at home when we had curfew and I could see my friends only like a certain time. And it was dangerous to go out anyway. But there, I was closer to my friends. So that somehow compensated for that, even though in every little room, another tragedy played.

And then we had to work in a nearby community called Wadowice. They had the shops where they were sewing uniforms for-- I guess for the army. And we were marched, my mother and I. And we went. Of course, in the ghetto, there were almost no men. There were mostly women and children, all the people.

My father was one of the few because he had had that heart attack and he was permitted to stay. But he had to work also in a nearby little town to fortify the river, in a place called Sucha. And we were terribly worried every morning, maybe daybreak, 4:00 or 5 o'clock, that he left. Because he had a heart condition. And we were afraid what that hard labor will do to him.

And my mother, and I, and some of my friends, who a few blessedly are still alive, had to go to Wadowice to work in that shop sewing. We left in the morning and came back late at night. And then the whole thing started again.

And actually, I think the discipline was pretty good. You know, you were so tired, you worked so hard that you did not have too much time to reflect of what was happening. At least for me, it was. I'm sure it was much more difficult for my mother.

And then, well, I'm taking you from 1939 till the worst day of my life. The 28th of June, '42. That is when I saw my father for the last time. The following day, my mother.

We were told to assemble. Oh, the day before, I heard my parents. Of course, you know, we all lived in one room. And I heard my parents talk through that night. And I still cannot comprehend their incredible bravery. They spoke only of their lives together, of the love, the good times, the children, of their parents. And with that, they faced the morning.

And I know it sort of became perhaps my own defense. I always felt, you know, when things were very tough in following years that I had to emulate my parents. If they could do it, I can do it. And that I must never disappoint them. I knew that if they return.

At those times, I thought when they return, I never would say if. That you know, I will show them that I'll come back. I'll do everything to come back to them. Because I remember how horrible it was for them when my brother left.

Blessedly, they never knew that my brother did not return. But you know, that was the daily conversation, when Arthur comes back home, and this, and that. And I felt that, you know, I owed it to them to stay alive no matter what. And not give them the pain of that loss.

However, you know, we had-- of course, I always had a great deal-- even though I was not particularly religious, I had a great deal of respect for religion and books. And one of the things I wanted to do after I said goodbye to my father, I wanted to-- I knew what would happen. In the ghetto, you see, my father was taken away on Sunday, the 28th of June.

And I asked a friend of mine to go with me and collect prayer books. You know, I was afraid when they will find it, they'll probably use it for toilet tissue or something like that. And we dragged-- it was a rainy day.

And we dragged those books to a little cemetery which was adjacent to the ghetto, an old cemetery. And we took the books there. We couldn't really bury them, but we sort of stashed them in one of those things where there were, I guess were some coffins and things were. Frankly, I don't remember that too well. But I know we did it there. We first tried to bury some of them. And sort of give it the decency of a burial.

I would rather not recall the night, the last night which I spent with my mother, which was very bitter. And then in the

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morning, very, very early in the morning, came the final moment. And they rushed through the ghetto with the whips and what have you.

My poor mother, you know, my brother left on a Monday. And he left, which was three years prior to that. And my mother fasted every Monday, sort of atoning. I don't know for what. Probably begging God, if she's going to fast, that my brother will return. And that was also on a Monday.

And I remember, I begged her to have something to eat, and she wouldn't. But she had also saved from before the war a bit of cocoa and some jam. And she decided to make that cocoa for me that morning. And I remember all those years looking at that cocoa with great longing, and we didn't have any throughout. But it didn't taste particularly sweet on that morning.

We had to march through our town. And I guess it's a sort of a similar journey than a journey to execution, when I think of it now. Because you know, you saw people looking out from behind curtains. Some waving, sort of a mute farewell. Seeing somebody was painting a new sign on a shop. The movie was putting on a new feature on marquee. And we were marching.

There was an SS man there that was near the railroad tracks where the circus used to come to sort of an empty place, accommodating all kinds of things. A circus before and now sort of a tragedy of a different nature.

We just have to reload. We have to put another roll on the-- if you can pick up maybe. Maybe you should tell me who Merin was. And then you can pick up.

OK. OK. I was with my mother and a number of my friends as well as their mothers. And we heard that Merin was there. Merin was a man of-- if the stories were to believe-- not anyone to be greatly admired. Man apparently of a little character, what have you, and he was called an opportunist.

And this opportunity was presented to him that he was working with the government there. The story also had it that he had a child, a little daughter whom apparently he adored, and that he would do anything in order to save that child.

And the Nazis apparently gave him that opportunity that if he would be helpful to interpret or get people to come, his child would be saved. That was the story. I don't know how much truth, though, is in it.

But I saw him. He was a very small, sort of sour-looking man. And it was raining, but it was oppressively hot because it was the end of June. And he was wearing a very sleek raincoat. And then of course, there were the Germans there in uniforms, the Nazis, the SS. He was standing to the side.

We had to form a line. And an SS man stood there with a little stick. And I was holding hands with my mother, I came up to him, and he looked at me. And he says, how old? I said, 18. And he sort of pushed me one side and my mother to the other side. I wasn't aware of what was happening at that particular point.

But shortly thereafter, when I stood with my other friends, who were also separated from their mothers, we realized that we were going to go to separate places. And it was enclosures, an enclosure there with barbed wire to the right, where our mothers were. And we were immediately taken to the left.

Now, again, I don't remember the time sequence at all. I just remember the tremendous panic. And shortly thereafter, some trucks arrived, open trucks with sort of a gate behind it. And we were loaded on the truck. And I heard my mother's voice from afar to ask where to? And I shouted back, I don't know.

And I guess I must have been aware that I was taken away from my mother. So I jumped off. And Merin came. And he was a very slight, small man. You didn't expect such strength in him. And he picked me up bodily, and he threw me on the truck, and he says, you are too young to die.

And I guess the trucks were set in motion. Again, I don't remember the time sequence. And I just heard my mother's

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voice over that entire-- over crying and everything. And came like an echo. And she was saying, be strong, you know, [GERMAN] in German.

And then the trucks rolled out of there. And ironically, the sun came out. I still see it, rooftops sort of wet, illuminated by the sun, and the church bells were ringing. And that was the last view.

We were taken to a train. And of course, then I was with my friends. And I think we all started talking and facing the reality what was probably happening. And I remember rejecting it completely. Saying, it cannot be, you know. They're going to be all right. And frankly, that kept me going all those years, you know. They have to be all right.

We went to Sosnowiec, which was a transit camp. You see, our part had belong to Austria before the First World War. This is why we were German-speaking. And this was quite early. This was June, '42. And in that transit camp, your names, your ages, and the places you hailed from were registered.

I came from Berlitz, which was a well-known textile center. They called it the Manchester of central Europe. And people would come from all over Germany who were in need of labor. The men were in the army, the women were given responsible positions. And they needed slave labor. However, they needed people who could understand German and speak German. So we were in a more favorable position.

And a man came from [GERMAN], which is a very large textile Senator I guess so maybe many factories in Germany. And he bought us for that factory to be slaves.

But in that [GERMAN], transit camp, I think I came face to face for the first time with the concept of concentration camp, to which of course, slave labor concentration we were. Because shipments came with girls from the camps where the maimed could no longer work. And that was the last stop before Auschwitz. And I met those girls.

And I remember my first contact was probably the first evening when we stood in line to get some food out of battered aluminum bowls. You know, we used to feed our dogs out of bowls like that. And I didn't understand when that bowl, was given to my hand, what to do with it.

And then we stood in line. And I got some food. And I remember putting a spoon in, and scraping it, and there was sand in the bottom, you know. And I saw this girl was, you know, her hair was very short, shorn hair. And she had enormous eyes. She was emaciated. And she looked sort of hungry. And I asked her if she wanted it.

And she looked at me as if I gave her the greatest treasure. And she said, yes, she says, aren't you hungry? And I said no. And she was sort of silhouetted against the fence. And she sort of give a benediction when she got it. And then she handed me a empty bowl. And I didn't understand.

And she said, you know, if I be found with two bowls, I'll be beaten that I stole it. So she gave me that bowl. And that was sort of the first impact of things to come.

I was with a very close friend of mine, Ilsa, who was like a sister to me. We had grown up together. And a number of my other friends. And there, I met people who became my best friends, family to each other. My friend Liesel, my friend Susie. One was from Vienna and the other one from Prague. We became very close friends.

And we were sent to a camp called Bolkenhain. And strangely enough, on that right from Sosnowiec, from the transit camp to concentration camp, there was a certain lightness which I remember. And I can identify it now as the worst has happened.

And as tragic as it was to be separated from my parents, in a way, it was almost, you know, some of my fear left me there. You know, I was always afraid that I would see something, you know. And I once saw an SS man beat my father. I mean, those were the most horrible things. To see my parents concern about me and their concern about each other.

Now, I knew that whatever will happen will happen to me. And for some reason, I was really not afraid any longer. And

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I was with young girls, we were together. And there was almost something lighthearted that happened there.

And I think that, in itself, I think it's much easier to bear whatever happens to you alone, not to watch someone you love-- it's happening to them and to also see their concern and pain when it's inflicted on you. And this is why I think perhaps it was so much more difficult for people that had to suffer together.

And of course, youth, you know, also is resilient. At that point, I was 18. And then of course, I was in the camps for three years.

OK. We have one minute.

I made an incredible bet on that train. That girl I met. She was a beautiful girl, her name was Susie Kunz. And Susie said, that war, how long, she said to me-- we stood at the window of the train, she said, how long do you think it's going to last?

And I said, well, it'd be wonderful when we make the journey back, it's going to be probably less than a year. And she said, less than a year, she said, no, they'll kill us first. She said, it's going to be a long, long time.

And I said, well, let's bet, make a bet. And she said, OK. What shall we bet for? And she said, I love strawberries, field strawberries, passionately, and whipped cream. Said, OK, then we'll bet for a whole quart of it. And we shook hands there and made that bet.

I lost the bet but I didn't pay it. She died tragically on liberation morning in Czechoslovakia. I don't know if she knew that we were free or not. I rather think she did not.

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