

Wentworth Films Holocaust 7 60-cycle sync. March 13, 1992. Camera roll 7 is up. Sync take 10 is up. Scottsdale, Arizona. Continuing interview with Gerda Klein.

Where do I start?

Start with the death march.

I don't remember where I finished.

Just start with the--

I'm starting getting a little-- Well, the years in camp became progressively worse as raw material was running out and also as it seemed that a war was taking a different turn. We sort of knew that if Germany should be victorious our doom is going to be sealed. But if for what we prayed for that we would be liberated we were afraid that when things start turning bad for them they are going to let their venom and their frustrations out on us. So there was really a no-win situation.

It became pretty obvious in the winter of 1944 as it turned to '45 when there were frequent-- We heard planes coming in and production stopped and things were getting bad. And then on the night of the 28th, rather the day of the 28th of January '45, we did not go to work. It was a workday and we did not go to work. We were told to stay in camp.

And toward evening we heard an enormous commotion and a transport of 2,000 girls came from Auschwitz, mostly Hungarian girls. They told us they had been marching and that the Russian front had moved closer. Auschwitz was being liberated and they were running away from the advancing Russian army. And so we were going to join that march the next morning.

It was bitter cold. It was in January. And I was coughing terribly. I had a very bad cold. And my three dearest friends, Susie Kuntz, Liesl Schteburn, Ilsa Kleinzeller and I, we huddled together the four of us. And they were very concerned about me. They said, if you can only pull through that terrible cold and that terrible cough, might be pneumonia, what have you. And in the morning very early the doors opened, not to the type of freedom we had hoped but it opened to an incredible picture. There was freshly fallen snow for as far as the eye could see. An enormous surface. It was a plateau and then came up to a gentle hill that was just covered with snow.

It was gray, it was snowing, and we were told to assemble four abreast. So of course there was the four of us, and we held hands and we took the first step. And I guess we all knew that this is going to be the first step to the end of the road-- is it to liberation or to doom? And in front of us stretched this incredible line. And people looked, with gray camp blankets over them, they looked like winged death. All you could see way, way ahead, 4,000 girls. And on the side were SS men and SS women, and they lifted their whips and they said, forward march and we started to march.

We started to march. It was the 29th of January. We left a lot of girls back in the snow. Many were killed. That was something one can really not describe. My father had asked me when I last saw him in June, the very last day, practically in the last moment before he left, he said to me, where are your skiing boots? I said, why? And he said, I want you to wear them today. I said, Papa, skiing shoes in June? He said, I want you to wear them. One didn't argue with one's father, so I put on those boots and I wore them throughout my entire stay in the camps for three years. And in them I had also hid the pictures of my parents and my brother.

I didn't know, and I don't know how my father could have known that those boots were really instrumental in saving my life on that march. I had ski shoes. Some girls had sandals. We slept outside. The frost I saw girls breaking off their toes like twigs. I had my ski boots.

On the 29th of April, or rather I should say the 28th, Ilsa wasn't well at all. She was sort of hallucinating. She was saying things which I didn't know what she meant. And when we stopped for the night, a lot of girls died [INAUDIBLE] the girls who died, and I dragged away from there. And she didn't seem to know what was going on. But then she

became totally lucid. And one of the most shocking things was that one of our other friends had somehow found two potatoes. And she gave them to me. She said for you and for Ilsa.

I gave Ilsa a potato and she said she wasn't hungry. That was the most incredible statement not to be hungry. And she said to me, you eat it. And then she said-- She said, I'm angry at no one and I hope nobody's angry at me. And then she said, if my parents and Kitty Kitty-- was her little sister-- she said, if they survive, don't tell him how I died. And she said to me, you'll be along, she said, but you have always been lucky. I begged her not to say it but she did. And she said she wanted some water and there was a little brook nearby so I got up and I wanted to get it. An SS man came and he shoved me and I begged him to let me have water for her and he kicked her head. So it was raining. so I got some water in my hands and I gave it to her. And I held her and we both fell asleep. I woke up. But she didn't.

Did she make you promise to hold out?

Give me a break.

Let's cut.

She asked me to promise her two things. One, that if her parents and Kitty survive not to tell them how she died. And the second problem is concerned me. She asked me to promise her to go on for one more week. She said, you have to promise me. No matter what you will hang on for another week. Little did I know that a week later, exactly to the day, maybe even to the hour of her death, we were liberated.

Tell me how the four of you pretended things on the death march.

Well, not so much on the march. It was before. We had, particularly Liesl and I. Susie faced things much more. It was Susie who said, we probably won't have a chance. They will kill us first. But Liesl and I, we had a wonderful game. We could play a game and just fall into the game while we were still in camp. And we worked on the night shift at one stretch. We worked for nine months on the night shift.

And I remember waking up and it was raining. The camp had overhead was like a factory. The windows were on top and we could hear the patter of the rain. And we must have woken up at the same time and she said, oh, it's a rainy day. And I said, yeah, but we have got to get up. We have an appointment. And she said, I have an appointment with the dressmaker. I said, yes. But she said, I've got to go first out of the garden and pick up some green apples. They taste wonderful after the rain. And she would say, I need a new raincoat and I have to do this. And then my mother expects me to clean up my room.

And we would get used the ordinary which suddenly became extraordinary but we could go on like this for hours, spinning the sort of tales which totally blocked out reality and made the horror around us in a way disappear. And I think it was those things which helped enormously survival. You know you dredged them up sometimes from the recesses of whatever of your mind and the other thing became the abnormal. We were right back to-- we blocked everything else out. And it also was, I mean, there was some humor. There was some laughter.

All right, wait. I want to do that one again.

So tell about the humor and the laughter.

There was laughter. There was some innocent fun. Don't forget we were a group of young girls, and we could play games of pretend I think we honed to a certain perfection. We could just go on and on and on.

This is a bad plane. Let's just-- Tell me about the laughter.

There was laughter in the camps. There was joking. There were funny stories. There were things that lightened our burden. You do not live for years like that without that. It was gallows humor, but humor nevertheless. And we played the games of pretending. We did it very well-- some better than others. Some people wouldn't have a part of it and said,

you're crazy. You are insane. But we did it, mostly Liesl and I. Ilsa was much more serious. Ilsa was a musician. She was a very fine pianist. At a very early age she was sent to Vienna to study at the Conservatory of Music. She really showed enormous promise as a pianist.

Susie was by far the most intellectual of the group and probably the most mature. She had lost her mother when she was a baby and I think she was much more serious. Liesl and I both had older brothers and were younger sisters. And I think we had more of a sense of fun. And incidentally she was just beautiful. She was probably one of the most beautiful girls I'd ever seen. Susie was a redhead, green eyes. Liesl was dark with enormous dark eyes as did Ilsa. And I was the ugly one in the group. All three, they were just beautiful girls.

In a way we had much in common and we sort of supported each other. We made a lot of fun of each other as well and of others, the truth must be told, but it was all part of it. It established a certain normalcy.

Did you make fun of your guards?

Of course.

Tell me some of the you said.

There were wonderful ways of cursing them. For instance, one of it was he should become an onion. Was it an onion? Yeah, I guess so. With the head buried in the ground and I don't remember some of the things. Or one of the favorite things was we called him a lamp. And it was a lamp because during the day he should hang and at night he should burn. Things like that. It was not particularly attractive, but all kinds of things. And we mostly did caricatures of them, of what he looked like. And we gave them certain names. I don't recall some of the names anymore. Imagine them in different settings.

And we didn't think highly of them to be sure. The ones which were most threatening were the others like Meister [? Zimmer ?] and so on who had a different approach to it. You know, the ones who regarded us as complete idiots and talked down to us as if we didn't know the most elementary things. That was much easier to take because we looked down on them. The others who had much higher intellect and who knew exactly where to hurt and what type of things to say, that was more difficult to take.

But by and large, I think we were able to do that. And that could only be done sort of with a support system. One talked to the other about it and say, well, this idiot give us some talking-to today. Listen to that one. Things like that. It was pretty bitter by and large. But in a way we could laugh it away.

And of course the constant radio broadcasts which were broadcast through the camp which usually started with a melody. We knew when that started and it went [SPEAKING GERMAN] "We are going against England." And following that little musical interlude always came an announcement of the incredible victories which they had won. And that was pretty hard to take.

Did you get news from the outside?

No, nothing at all.

Did you do any sabotage?

No, that would have been foolish. I mean, what type of sabotage can you do? Make a hole in one of the cloths and be killed for that so they throw the cloth away? I mean-- I mean, for that we were too realistic to see that there was very little that we could do. We were totally in their hands, totally dependent on their whims. Every one held to power of life and death over you.

Were they following orders?

I don't know. Orders from where, from what? Mrs. Kugler showed that orders could be interpreted in a different way. But I think it was the individual cruelty which hurt so much because it was so unnecessary.

Retell as though you didn't tell it before your bet with Susie at the beginning. Give a little description of her and the bet you had for the quart of strawberries.

Tell it again?

Tell it again. We ran out actually before you were finished.

It was on the way from the transit camp in Sosnowiec to the first camp in Bolkenhain when we were on a train. And this is actually where I met Susie. She introduced herself. She was a tall, very pretty girl with auburn hair, a few freckles on her nose, very open face. And she introduced herself as Susie Kuntz. She had come from Vienna. Her mother had died when she was a baby. Her grandmother lived in Czechoslovakia and she spent a great deal of her life in the care of her grandmother. That's where she was when the war started in the fall.

And I said something to the effect, won't it be wonderful when we make that journey back? And she said, we'll never make the journey back. And I said, of course we will. She said, that war will drag on forever. And I said, that war is going to be over in less than a year. So she said something to the effect, that is a very stupid or very hopeful, something like that. So I said, well let's make a bet then. And she said, OK. And so we made a bet for a quart of wild strawberries [NON-ENGLISH LANGUAGE] we would call and whipped cream. I lost the bet. I never paid it because Ilsa died on liberation morning. I found her that I didn't know if she knew that we were free or not. She was an incredible girl.

Now tell me again the story of the raspberry and Ilsa in the context of human spirit.

[OFFSCREEN] May I say something?

I know about it. I know about it. Just--

Is there anything Kurt?

Yeah, you said Ilsa died instead of Susie.

No, I said-- No, I said Ilsa. I said Ilsa died?

You said Ilsa.

Unfortunately they both did. What did you want me to say now?