

I didn't. Not until you just mentioned it.

OK, we're ready.

OK.

So tell me about liberation.

Well, this was the very last phase of the war. We were on this death march which started on the 29th of January in Greenburg, in Silesia. Our destination actually was Oranienburg. Oranienburg was a murder camp near Berlin. Oranienburg fell into the hands of the Russians and we were zigzagging through Germany and in Czechoslovakia in a tiny place called Volary, where the march came to a halt. Ilse had died just a week before.

It was evening. And one of the SS women came by and she mentioned to one of my friends to take my boots off, which sort of signaled usually the last thing. And my friend, her name was Hannah Kotlitsky, Hannah Keller in those days, told me that. And she says, hide. Don't let her see you. And a truck came and she said to me, you better get on that truck so she shouldn't see you. And I said, you know, I'm in no hurry. And I remember sitting there and really knowing that this was definitely the end.

We heard American planes overhead. There was shooting. The German army was running away. There were people on the roads with children, with animals, and tremendous chaos. And I was sitting there and it was really a beautiful night. It was May. It suddenly got a little warm. And I permitted myself the luxury of thinking of home, of my parents, of my brother in a different sense. I always thought of home, but somehow this was different.

The truck didn't come back for us. And they came and there was this enormous factory. We were sort of in front of it and they took us in there and they locked the doors. I was told that they planted a time bomb to blow us up so we won't fall into the hands of whoever will come in. We didn't know if it would be the Russians or the Americans or what.

I must have been pretty sick during the night. Only isolated things which I remember. I remember that we tried to break out of there and we couldn't. The doors were really locked and chains were put around it and everything. And it started to rain, torrential rain, which obviously somehow the bomb and timer did not connect. Then we were told that they are coming back. I remember crawling into one of those long chimney cylinders that was on the floor. A few of us got in there and there was some shooting. I remember a bullet went by and then it was quiet again.

And then the doors, it must have been the following morning, the doors were open. The Czech people called and said the war was over. I didn't understand the reality of that at all. I remember there were some Americans that night before, but my true impact of freedom and of it being over actually must have happened the following morning.

I do know that the SS had run away and they had changed from uniforms into civilian clothes. I did find one of those great coats from the army and I wrapped myself in it and tried to sleep on the floor. I must have been quite feverish. I was already getting quite ill. And it was the following morning that was, as I said, we met two Americans the night before, but all that somehow sinks into oblivion.

My very clear view of freedom and liberation came that morning when I stood in this doorway of that abandoned factory and I saw a car coming down the hill. And the reality of that came when I saw the white star on its hood and not the swastika. And there were two men in that car. One jumped out, came running toward me, and asked if there was anyone who spoke English or German. I told him I spoke German.

I remember that aura of anger, of that awe, of the disbelief in daylight to really see someone who fought for our freedom, for my ideals. And he looked like God to me. And I knew what I had to say. And I said to him, we are Jewish, you know. For a very long time, at least to me it seemed very long, he didn't answer me. And then his own voice betrayed his emotion. He was wearing dark glasses. I couldn't see his eyes. He said, so am I. And the impact of that, to be liberated not only by an American but by a fellow Jew, it just caught me so totally.

I think this is when that feeling of such an incredible joy which fills your whole being. It must have just burst out. I remember I couldn't get ahold of myself. And then he asked a strange question. He said, may I see the other ladies? A form of address we hadn't heard for six years. I told him most of the girls who were inside were too ill to walk. And he said to me, won't you come with me? I didn't know what he meant. So he held the door open for me and let me proceed him. And that was the moment of restoration of the humanity, of humaneness, dignity, of freedom. And this first young American of liberation day is now my husband. He opened not only the door for me but a door to my life and my future.

I took him to see my friends. But I was very sad because that morning I went to look for Susie because Liesl said to me, Susie went out to get some water and she has not returned. So I went out to look for her. I found her near the pump. I thought she had fainted, but I touched her, she was gone. I wanted to tell her, Susie-- and I did tell her-- I said, Susie, we are liberated. We are free. We had made a bet more than three years earlier on a train which took us to camp. I bet for a quart of strawberries and cream to be payable after the war. I said, we will be liberated and she said we would not.

I didn't tell Liesl. I couldn't tell her. Liesl was very sick. We all were very sick. We were immediately taken to a field hospital which had been before a schoolhouse. We were very, very ill. I weighed 68 pounds. My hair was white. So I was going to be 21 the following day. I was told that Liesl had trouble with her legs. She had been injured. She'd been shot in the leg. And I asked to see her and I was told that I was too sick to go, that I couldn't walk.

I kept asking and asking, then I sort of collapsed for quite a while. And finally I was told that she had died. So the four of us I was alone. I was the one that had the cold and they were all concerned about me that I would not make it and I was the only one who survived. Only one for my family. The only one of my dearest friends.

Tell me about the numbers of girls that started out and the numbers that made it.

About 4,000 when we started-- 2,000 from our camp, 2,000 that came from Auschwitz. Then along the way there were certain divisions. We had stopped in other camps and a few of the girls had run away, most of them who had run away, were caught and executed. A few, however, managed to escape and survived. I'm not sure of the exact number. When we were in the hospital we were about 120 of this entire transport. Of those, quite a few still died. There is now a cemetery in Volary, Czechoslovakia, where we were liberated where 95%--

I want you to talk to me about the legacy, the goodness that you saw in humankind kind contrasting. And feel free to retell the raspberry story or other examples that you've done before as though you hadn't told me before.

Tell me when.

Now.

Now? Looking back now almost half a century, it is half a century, I think one is struck by the nobility of the spirit which also lived in this darkness. The act of kindness, the type of support, the selflessness and the love which I think was the support system to be able to endure that, a belief in something. Not the inhumanity of our captors, but the humanity which existed in the victims. And there was a great deal of that.

My friend Ilsa who gave me that raspberry, she carried it in her pocket all day long on a hot, incredible day and derived joy of giving it to me, the one time when we stood roll call for a long time and a piece of bread sailed over the barbed wire into our group and one of the girls caught it. And we all knew when it came and who had it and we were all questioned, we were all beaten. No one gave the person away.

If someone which became much more difficult later when we went not with Mrs. Kugler anymore who had showed such humanity but later on when really cruelty and bestiality was their aim, one helped the other. If somebody couldn't work or was sick, we all tried to help the other person, to pull them through. And that was taken absolutely for granted. Now I don't mean to say that at everyone there was angelic, I mean, they were human, but by and large.

And this is why when I wrote my first book to me it was the most important thing to be able to put on that it is all based

on truth. I used all names, all places, and whatever I have written I always use my maiden name as well as my married name. I want anyone to challenge the truth of that statement.

Unfortunately, so few stories survived. So little has been said about that because the overwhelming thing, of course, was the horror. And when one tries to explain the Holocaust it is the horror which has the upper hand because such horror has never, never been done to people before. That somehow what seems to escape are the little acts of kindness, the everyday things which really spelt out a spark of hope that one had to have in order just to go on.

And that was there. I don't know if anyone who committed suicide. The camp was surrounded by barbed wire, which was electrically charged. Not one person that I know of ever went and touched it, though we certainly had enough reason to do it quickly. No one did. Everyone wanted to live with every fiber of one's being. And I think this was a defiance. They wanted us dead but we are going to live for as long as we possibly can. And we did.

And this is why it is so sad that when one sees pictures of concentration camp one sees those big vacant eyes over the barbed wire, people who look more like animals than as human beings, and no one seems to know what was going on in the minds and hearts of the people, that they were looking at something beautiful. I remember one time a bird flew into camp and it perched itself on a bunk and started to sing. No one ever had a more appreciative audience than that bird did. And how we watched its flight then to freedom over the barbed wire and over to camp.

And one time in Greenberg, where we also stood for hours roll call, one spring in the corner of this courtyard amongst the debris of the cement a flower poked its head. And you could see hundreds of feet shuffling around and nobody stepped on the flower. It was something incredible to see that a flower heralded sort of a new spring, something of beauty. Now one should not need to stay in a concentration camp for appreciation of beauty, but it was an incredible moment to see that. Many things that one sees for granted.

There were beautiful things there, unfortunately, and that is always the biggest pain that so few lived to know the joy of freedom. And that is the most painful thing. And sometimes a difficulty to enjoy all the things to know how many were deprived of it. That's it's the hardest thing. But I think if one can somehow give the legacy of the nobility to the inheritors of this new spring, a new generation, the children, the grandchildren who've grown up in freedom, if they can understand it and value it, then they have achieved a sort of immortality.

I think this is really why they have to understand that. Because it is difficult. Millions, numbers have no meaning. It's the identification with one that counts. And if someone somehow today and people who live in freedom can take the identity of just one who was deprived of it all and live their lives vicariously and enjoy the things for which they have so hungered, I think that we will build a better world. And I have hopes for the world in spite of everything.

Thank you.