

Today I'm talking to Ursula Rosow, a non-Jew who lived in Germany during World War II. My name is Donna Karen Yanowitz. And first, let me thank you, Ursula, for participating in this Holocaust Archive Project, which is sponsored by the National Council of Jewish Women, Cleveland section. To begin with, let's talk about your life today in Cleveland. Tell us a little bit about yourself-- your full name, your age, where you live, and so forth.

I live in Cleveland Heights for 27 years already. And I live alone now. I'm divorced. And I've been trying all these years to keep up the house, and now I'm ready to sell it and join my children in Los Angeles.

How many children do you have?

I have two children. My daughter is about 36 and my son will be this month 28.

And do you work, Ursula?

No, I don't work. I have worked during the '60s, in the theater mostly.

What kind of work did you do?

I started out with Karamu, and I did costumes there for the operas and I painted the scenery.

What was your maiden name?

Braatz, B-R-A-A-T-Z.

And you are divorced?

Yes.

OK. Let's talk about your life now, what it was like before the war. Let's go back to the 1930s. Tell us where you were born and something about your life then.

I was born in Berlin in 1919. That was right after the war, the First World War. I don't remember much of that, except when I was three years old, there was a lot of money around because it was inflation, and butter cost a pound, about 2,000 Marks. And some of the money I could play with, and that's why I remember it.

What else do you remember about your childhood?

Well, I have memories of family and playing with my cousin and going camping. That was a very common way of recreation in Germany. Especially around Berlin were many lakes and rivers, so you could always go swimming somewhere in the summer. And we used to tent over the weekend and have an awful lot of fun that way.

You lived with your family, your parents? Did you have brothers and sisters?

Yes. No, I don't have any brothers and sisters. But since apartments were very tight in those days, my aunt, my mother's sister and her two children, lived with us for some time.

And what did your father do? How did he earn a living?

My father was a photographer. He was a lab technician, and he made huge photographs of murals, landscapes, and he translated them into photographic murals for exhibitions and things like that.

Describe the relationships between the Jews and the Gentiles during your younger days that you remember.

Well, if there was somebody who was Jewish, it was usually known, but it didn't mean more than knowing that my mother was part Polish and my father was part Hungarian. And it had no other meaning. It had no other consequences until the Hitler time, or shortly before the Hitler time.

Did they go to the same school as you did?

Yes. Well, there were some Jewish people who sent their children to Hebrew school, just like here in America, but most of them went to public school.

Did you personally associate with any Jews?

Well, our neighbors were Jewish, some of our neighbors, and I played with the children. They were my closest friends.

Could you tell us something more about your family? Who lived in your household? You mentioned your aunt and some cousins.

Well, after my aunt got a divorce, she moved in with us. And she had a son, who was half a year younger than myself, and a little girl who was seven years younger than myself. She was a baby at the time. And my cousin, of course, went to the same school, only on the other side of the school. Boys and girls were separated. And we also had religion in the morning. So everybody who went to public school had one hour of religion.

Could you tell us a little bit about the religion class?

We learned everything about the Old Testament, the Bible, and the New Testament, which is the story of Christ, and some popular children's stories, of course, when we were little. But I took it for three years. And since we were not religious, I asked my parents to excuse me from having religion all the time, since I always got an A, and they agreed with me, and I left religion.

The students had the option of--

Oh, yes.

--not going to the religious--

Well, I was punished in a way because I wasn't given a stipend for high school. You would have to go to high school at the age of 10 and make up your mind for the rest of your life. And I was scheduled to have a stipend to go at the age of 10 to high school, but since I wanted to be released from religion class, the teacher said, then you cannot have the stipend. That was my first punishment.

Did that mean that you couldn't go to high school?

For standing up for my non-beliefs.

Did that mean you couldn't go to high school or that you had to pay for it yourself?

We would have to pay for it ourselves, and my father couldn't afford it.

You told me what your father did for a living. How would you say you were financially? Were you poor?

Well, I would say we were middle-middle class. We were not poor, but we were not rich, either. We just sort of made it nicely.

You lived in Berlin.

In Berlin.

What part of Berlin did you live in?

Well, I was born in the western part, which was a sort of plush part. And later on, my parents finally got an apartment for themselves. We lived with my grandparents in the west, and that apartment was in the east, so we moved.

What was a typical day for your family? Would you describe a typical day?

My father went to work. My mother made the beds and swept the floor and washed the dishes from breakfast, and then we went shopping. I'm not going to school at the time, but if I went to school, then she did all these things without me. And sometimes when I came home from school, she sent me shopping, like most children were sent shopping.

What do you remember about holidays and other special occasions?

We always had a Christmas tree at Christmas. Like when I was 12, as I mentioned before, I said this is enough. I'm now a big kid and I don't need it anymore. So we never had a Christmas tree anymore. But Easter was always nice and Whitsuntide. You have green trees outside the doors at Whitsuntide, which was very nice.

You mentioned that you were not religious. Was your family religious?

No. No. Actually, I'm coming from a long line of freethinkers, which reaches back until the middle part of the 19th century.

Did socialism or any political organization play a role in your family's life?

I think it played a big role in Germany altogether. I think it started with the publishing of Karl Marx's Capital. And many other people, like pedagogues, like Fichte, who was a forerunner of pedagogy for children, to raise them as individuals, rather than as little slaves for the state. And these ideas sort of spread, and many people were attached to these ideas, and some of them joined organizations that were socialist-- some radical, some less radical, some more centrally-oriented. But you could find these people just about wherever you went. And you could find them at the beaches, too.

Did you participate yourself in these events?

Well, as I was little, my parents participated in some of these events. My cousin and I, we enjoyed it very much, too. It was very much an atmosphere of freedom, rather than put your hands in your pocket or don't do that don't. Put your skirt over your knees. Don't open up your knees, or whatever. We could be free and spontaneous, and we liked that very much.

Your parents were active socialists, would you say?

Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah.

Can you tell me a little bit about their activities and what happened to them?

Well, we knew people from almost all walks of life. In our family, I remember when I was five years old, we used to have weekly sessions in our living room, where people would come together after having read an assignment by Schopenhauer, by Kant. Would then discuss what they had read. And there was a professor from Berlin University who would give the assignments and who would discuss what they had read with those people. And these people, some were very educated and some were factory workers. And they all wanted to know what was what in politics and philosophy, and so on.

Did your parents have any problem with being socialist during that time?

No, not in those days. No. That was during the Weimar Republic. There was no problem whatsoever.

How about in 1933, '34?

That's when it started, obviously. The signs were already there in '31, I would say, when there were fistfights in the streets among people, grownup men. '32, some people were already shot in the streets. It wasn't just fistfights anymore. And after '33, that was pretty common.

Your parents never had any problems?

Oh, yes.

What happened to your parents?

My father, one day, came home after work. Well, he went to a pub to have a beer. He was pretty erudite, and he couldn't stand it when people sort of muzzled intellectually. So he said something, and didn't realize early enough that two SS men had come in to the pub, and they heard him. And they were just drinking a beer, but my father had the feeling he had to be very careful from then on. And that was in 1934, early-- no. Yeah, early '34. And he finally left the pub and went, very fast, in the middle of the street.

As he heard steps behind him, he just sort of furtively looked around and he saw those two SS men after him. So he started running and they started running. And as he came into our little alley, there was a bend in the alley and the door to which he had the key. And he could disappear there. They couldn't find him afterwards, but they shot at him, and there were two marks on the wall where the bullets hit. And that was in the beginning of '34.

You had mentioned that your parents were imprisoned then at that time.

Yes. That was for political reasons. We tried to help somebody who was transporting printed material from England to Czechoslovakia. I don't really know, or I don't think anybody really knows, what was printed in it, but I think it was something like propaganda against the Nazis that was supposed to be distributed.

And these people were caught at the border after they had picked up the stuff from us. We took it in for about three weeks, and then it was supposed to be picked up. And those people who picked it up were caught and they were beaten to a bloody pulp. And I went to the trial of my parents. They were imprisoned for a year. And my mother's aunt, my mother's sister, too, my aunt. And they left us children out in the cold.

Who took care of you?

Nobody. My father left a little bit of money, and we skimmed and skimmed and skimmed.

How old were you then, Ursula?

I was 14 and my cousin was 13 and 1/2. And my little cousin, who was seven, was picked up by some relatives of her father's.

And you lived alone with your cousin?

Yes. And since I went from jail to jail, where my mother was and where my aunt was and where my father was-- and I didn't have any money for the bus or for the streetcar, so I walked all these distances. Miles and miles I walked. And I was out of the house, and the neighbors in the house thought I was walking the streets.

So they called the social workers and they picked me up and put me in a house of fallen girls. But the social worker noticed on the bus, when we went to this home, that that wasn't the right place for me. But she made me sort of a go-

between the girls and the authorities. And I was on the side of the girls, of course.

[LAUGHS]

And then when your parents were released from jail? What happened then?

Well, they were acquitted, and that was a fluke, because the judge who normally presided at these trials was on vacation. It was in August. And the judge who substituted for this other one was an old-timer. He was an old man, and he was obviously not a Nazi. But he still had his job, and they probably let him die out of his position. And he let my folks go free. He acquitted them. And I was just lucky.

Now, let's talk about you personally before the war. How do you remember yourself? What did you look like and how was your health, and what were your interests, generally?

Well, as a child or later on?

Well, when you were a little older, right before the war.

Well, I was 15 when my parents came out of jail, but the social worker was still interested in me and we sort of had become friends. And I used to help her sometimes with some girls who defied her but would talk with me. And I went on some of such errands for her to talk with young girls and to take them to the police station, and so on, and take care of them.

And she found out that I was interested in drawing and painting and clothes. I had always made dolls for my dolls, I mean doll clothes for my dolls. That was the only thing I played with. And I wanted to become a fashion designer, and she made it possible for me to go to a very, very good school, a private school. And that was in 1937 that I started the school.

And in the meantime, I had TB and I was in a sanatorium, so that delayed everything a bit. But when I came out, I was very healthy and raring to go. And I went to art school for six years. And after a year and a half, I had my first job through the school. And I'm very proud to say I had two teachers who were friends of Paul Klee from the Bauhaus. One of them was Hanns Johst and the other one was Georg Muche. And they gave me a very good grounding.

That's very impressive. You mentioned that you did have some Jewish people who lived in your building and you had friends who were Jewish.

Oh, yeah.

And that you played with them.

And all these organizations I talked about previously, there were always Jewish people.

Did you know about any plans or any actions to fight antisemitism?

There seemed no reason to fight antisemitism before Hitler, since antisemitism was like a growling cat in the background. You could always kick it out. You didn't have to really take it too seriously. There were always antisemites, yes, but they were not in the foreground.

Well, let's say during the rise of Nazism, did your friendships continue with your Jewish friends?

Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

But there was no change in--

Well, there was no change in our friendship. The change came when some of them left the country. Others were incarcerated or were put in concentration camp and others went into hiding.

Well, then as the war progressed, what were the changes in the way non-Jews acted toward Jews, in other words, in general, the people?

It became highly dangerous to be seen with Jews. And many Jews wouldn't want to be seen with a non-Jew in order not to jeopardize that non-Jewish friend.

Do you remember any non-Jews trying to help Jews at this time?

Oh, yes of course. Most of our friends were helping.

In what way did they do this?

In 1935, we had connections with people who forged passes to help people to leave the country, because the government was very reluctant to give Jewish people passes to leave the country. And so many of them who didn't have much money for bribes got their passes through this underground organization. Now, we didn't do that ourselves, but we had connections, and we contacted Jewish people we knew, remembered.

And we tried to get them to accept this and leave the country, if they could possibly do that, and in that way make it easier for them. And that worked very nicely for a number of them. Only one mother and her son-- her husband had died a few years before we contacted her. And we found out that they probably were in such fear that they switched completely, in the sense that the son, who was about 17, became a member of the SS Hitler Youth. It wasn't just the ordinary Hitler Youth. It was the SS branch.

Do you remember their names?

Sonnenfeld.

Sonnenfeld?

Sonnenfeld, yeah. Sunfield in English. My mother and I, who visited them, tried to make clear to them, without necessarily mentioning everything openly, what possibility we had for them. And the young son said something to the effect, well, we don't see anything wrong.

This is a very beautiful country and it has very beautiful ideas, and we are not going anywhere. We are going to stay right here, and you better make sure that you don't have to go somewhere else. And at this point-- or something to the effect, I don't remember the exact words anymore-- at this point, my mother and I looked at each other and we figured we'd better go home, or otherwise they might denounce us to the police.

Once the war started, did your life change?

Well, everybody's life changed.

How did it change?

Well, in 1939, the first thing that was rationed was milk and butter and eggs, and it was rationed severely. And then as the war proceeded, of course, everything else was rationed, and it was very difficult for Jewish people who were in hiding to get any food.

Did you know any Jewish people who were in hiding?

Oh, sure. Sure. And so the only contribution-- I was going to art school at the time and I had friends at the Berlin

Academy of the Arts. And many of them were left-wingers, still left over from before Hitler, and I knew they would contribute if they could. And I went around the Academy to all these people I knew and collected ration cards-- two grams of butter, five grams of meat, 10 grams of potatoes, something like that.

And what did you do with this?

Well, I collected them, and then I gave them to another person whose name I didn't know, who would then distribute them to other people whose name he didn't know. And we hoped that in the end, they would go to some of the people who were then found, at the end of the war, still living in Germany in hiding.

There were some Jews that--

That's how they got their food.

There were some Jews who spent the entire war in Berlin.

Yes. I had a friend of mine, she was a dancer. And she came home one evening and saw two men in the hallway talking with her landlady. And she didn't want to turn around and go back down again, so she went right past them, and the landlady didn't say a word.

If the landlady had said something-- oh, there she is-- then that would have been it. But the landlady didn't say anything. No, she is not here, she said. And she went upstairs and waited upstairs until those two Gestapo men had gone. And then she went in and got a few of her things and came to a friend's house, who was also my friend, and there I met her.

And she said, guess what happened to me? I was nearly picked up. And so stay here for a while. Don't leave the house. I bring you food tomorrow and clothing, and so on. And I got her a passport with a picture that looked like her. It wasn't her, but it looked like her. And if you didn't look too close, it could have been her.

And well, I kept her there for three weeks. I didn't think we could make it any longer. She might drop something and people might hear somebody was upstairs, and there wasn't supposed to be any upstairs. It was too dangerous to keep her any longer. I sent her on to somebody else, whose name I didn't know, and I hope she went over the border.

She was a dancer and she was a Jewish girl? Do you remember her name?

No, hard to remember. She was not a close friend of mine. She was a friend of my friend, who was also a dancer. She was a student of my friend, and I had met her previously several times.

When did the Nazis really become active in Berlin?

Oh, they became active around 1930.

1930?

Yeah.

But as the war progressed, now we're into, say, '39 and '40.

They became active very early in '34 already. After '33, you couldn't be safe anymore, if you had any left wing affiliations, or even if you were not left wing but if you were just known to be anti-Nazi, anti-fascist.

Did you have to move?

That was very dangerous. Yes, we moved, but not because we were afraid. We just had to move.

What happened to your family as the war continued, to your parents, to your aunt, to your niece?

Well, my boy cousin was drafted into the army. And my little cousin, during the war, during the bombing raids, was sent to Silesia, a children's camp. And in 1943, September 22nd, I had acquired a little studio in the meantime. That was bombed out. And the next day, I walked over to my parents' house on the other side of town, which took me hours because there was no public transportation left after that bombing.

And when I came to my parents, all the windows were gone and there was an air mine exploding somewhere there. And that night and the next night, my parents' house was burnt down. And the whole neighborhood, everything was gone. And we went into the underground train station. There were electric trains going north, south through the city.

And that was my idea. I said, let's all go there. And I ran ahead and I found the second-class compartment, where the seats were upholstered. I was one of the first one to get in there. And after people saw me going in, the others came, too, and within half an hour, the whole train was full of people. And we stayed there for three days, until we finally got some food.

There was bombing going on during this time?

Oh, yeah. The whole city was in flames. You didn't know where you were. If you turned around a little bit, you wouldn't know where you were anymore. It was all rubble.

What happened when you left the train?

We went to a part of the city that wasn't bombed out yet, in which some friends of my father lived, and they took us in for three weeks. And then we got an apartment.

[LAUGHS]

This is the irony. The owner, or the renter, the prime renter of this apartment, was an SS man guarding the fuhrer at Berchtesgaden. And my father got this apartment because he had been drafted to a military laboratory, where he had to work.

All the men were all drafted, but since he had this skill, they didn't put a broomstick in his hand to go up and down like a soldier. They took him to this lab and he had to work there. And through one of those Nazis there, he got the apartment. He said his son was in Berchtesgaden, guarding the fuhrer, and we could have his apartment.

And how was life then in the new apartment?

It was precarious because every night there were bombs and you had to go in the basement, and that went on for two years. But what was terrifying-- that was terrifying enough, because you never knew when you would be hit again. But my father was working in this lab, and one day, a bunch of SS men and Wehrmacht men-- in their uniforms and the tassels and all the lametta, as they used to call it, the tinsel, Christmas tree tinsel-- gave him some glass plates to develop.

And as he developed them-- and they were standing there watching him-- as he developed them, he saw that they were pictures of shootings, that there were whole rows of people that were being shot at. And in front of them were a big ditch dug, and there were woods behind them. And some of the people who were shot had uniforms that my father didn't know. He didn't know who they were.

But one of the guys, who came with those who brought the films, mentioned a Polish city or a Polish region. And so my father assumed that perhaps these things came from Poland. Well, later on, after the war, we found out that there were many shootings going on in the woods, in the forests of Poland, and here was my father developing the negatives.

Did you know about the death camps?



Oh, yeah.

How did you find out about that?

Some of our friends died there of unknown diseases after two years.

But you knew of the concentration camps? And you knew when your friends were being sent there?

Mm-hmm. Well, there were trucks going through the cities, these sort of dark olive green, grayish-green trucks with canvas tops. And they would rattle through the streets and stop in front of a house, and some SS men would go out and go into the house and come back with an old couple and a young woman. And somebody from the inside of the truck would open it a little bit and then they would have to climb in that truck.

And the SS man wouldn't help them in, not even the old woman. Somebody from inside pulled them in. And you couldn't see who it was on the inside, but I assumed there were other people already in it. And sometimes the truck would rattle through the street. And under the awning, you know, where the boards and the awning met, a little hand would stick out, a three-year-old child or so. So you knew what was going on.

You would say that most of the people in the [CROSS TALK]?

People would look at each other and look away. They didn't want to make a comment because you didn't know who the other person was. If you showed sympathy or horror, you were anti-Nazi and you could be denounced. So after a while, nobody said anything. You didn't know who anybody was politically anymore.

You couldn't trust anybody. And when you were listening to the English sender on the radio, you took a big blanket over your radio to muffle the sounds. And you tuned it in very, very low and everybody put his ear right next to the speaker so that nobody else would hear a sound.

During those days, did you have any contact then with any Jews who might have been left in the city?

Yes. There were many students in the art school who were Jewish, and some of them went to New York, and we had a farewell party in the cafeteria. And it was all very tearful, but at least we knew they were going to be safe. But they were rich. The poor ones couldn't get out.

And what happened to the others?

Well, they get transported to Auschwitz and Belsen, all the others. And there was one young man who was a student. He was a bit younger than myself. He was in love with me, but I was not in love with him. And he came to school with his yellow star.

And one day in a hall, he grabbed me and kissed me. And I was sort of taken aback. First I was angry, and then I realized what was going on, and this was in 1939. This was late. And I said, when are you leaving? Instead of saying anything else, I said, when are you leaving?

And he said, we are not going to leave. I said, why not? We can't. I said, why can't you? I can't tell you, but I love you. And before I die, I would like to go to bed with you. And so I did. He was 18.

Did you keep in contact with any of the people that you helped or with whom you worked?

No, and we were bombed out. There was very little contact left with anybody, even the ones who weren't Jewish and weren't in hiding. I had very, very few friends left. I left with my mother to the Saar country where we had relatives. It was between France and Germany, that part that was given to France and then to Germany and now to France again, and so on. And we lived in the country there for some time until--

What year was that?

We were bombed out on November 23rd, I remember, 1943. And we left Berlin in the spring, early spring, I guess in March of '44. And my father couldn't leave because he was drafted to that lab. And my mother and I went to my aunt and my cousins. I thought I could go without.

That's all right. You stayed in the country then, in the countryside?

Yes. Yes. And when the front came closer, we had to leave there, too. In August, I had gone to Wurzburg, which is a beautiful medieval city, full of history and architectural beauties, and I loved the city. And I was bombed out in Wurzburg, and my mother had to leave the country. She left on a tank, sitting on a tank, with her two suitcases in the rain.

And she came to Roseburg, just about two weeks before I was bombed out. And I sent her on to another place about Kissing, in the village next to Kissing, where she was lodged with a farm wife, a peasant wife, whose husband was at the Russian front, who had a Belgium prisoner of war helping her with the fields and the animals. That's where my mother lived.

And I took some of my belongings and went there and put them there, and I went back again. And one night I was bombed out there. Because I had friends in Wurzburg. I didn't want to leave yet. So I went also to that village. In that village in April, the Americans came and liberated us.

What year was that?

It was in April '46. And my mother nearly went wild. She wanted to run out when the first tank came around the corner, the main street, in that village. She wanted to run out and welcome, but they would have shot her. They didn't know she was a friend. So the Belgian prisoner of war, he subdued her. And I talked to her, said, you can't do that. They don't know us. She was hysterical.

Were you able to get back together with your family after the war?

Well, my mother and I stayed together in Kissing and we moved into the city then. And I got a job with the Red Cross Special Service. I was making portraits, sketches for the officers and sergeants and enlisted men.

Actually, it was the Americans then who liberated your village?

Oh, yeah. Yeah, we were liberated a month before the official liberation.

That came before. What effect do you think this experience had on the rest of your life?

There is a part of me that doesn't belong anywhere. I mean, I have tried to adjust. I had a culture shock when I came to America. And even though the two cultures are probably closer than any other culture, it was a shock. You grow up with certain expectations that seem so natural, and then you find out they aren't natural. They are only your set of expectations. They are not other people's set of expectations.

So you constantly run into certain frustrations and disappointments and misunderstandings. And certain sets of knowledge and experience lose their validity. They lose their currency because there's nobody else who remembers those things you remember. You would have to find somebody who comes from that same place, from the same time, with whom you then could talk sort of spontaneously without having to explain anything.

And I mean, even if I wanted to translate a joke, I had to make a preamble first so that people would at least understand the joke. And then it fell flat because it wasn't spontaneous anymore. There was one joke from the concentration camps. It was called galgenhumor in German. It means gallows humor.

And there's a row of Jews. They have dug their own mass grave and they're standing at the edge. And they're supposed to be shot. And the SS man who is going to shoot them all of a sudden says to one of the Jews, turn around. You there, you turn around. And he turns around. And he says, look at me. And he looks at him. And he said, you know what? I'll save your life. You can go home again if you tell me which of my eyes is the glass eye.

Well, it's pretty obvious. Well, which one? It's the left one. Jeez, how did you guess that, he said. It looked so human. No, you can't really laugh about that, can you? But it was funny. And with the preamble, it just went to the ground.

Now after liberation, in this small town with your mother, where did you go from there?

What was it? Oh, well, I made portraits in the Red Cross club, and that's where I met my husband, my future husband.

Was he an American?

Yes, he was an American and he was Jewish.

[LAUGHS]

I couldn't get away from them. Some of my best friends are Jewish.

I think we're going to stop now for a little bit and take a little breather and then we'll come back.

OK.