

I'm Donna Karon Yanowitz and I'm talking with Ursula Rosow, a non-Jew who grew up in Germany during World War Two. This project is sponsored by the National Council of Jewish Women, Cleveland Section.

Ursula, we were talking about after liberation. And you were working at the Red Cross, and you were doing portraits. And you had just mentioned that this is where you met your husband.

Yes.

Would you like to continue from there?

[SIGHS] Well--

How did you meet your husband?

I had just finished a portrait, and there was a soldier sitting there. And since nobody else was waiting in the wings to sit down and have his portrait taken, I said, would you like to have your portrait taken? And he said, no, thank you. And he was the only one who ever said no. [LAUGHS] And that sort of took him out of the crowd.

And he also wore his cap very much askew and very unmilitaristically. And that touched me because no German soldier could ever dare do something like this, wear his cap the wrong way or whatever. And there were other aspects of American soldiers, that nonchalant behavior, rather spontaneous, very informal, even to officers. There was no heel clicking. There was no straightening up, no ramrod back, and easy answers, and no jawohl. [LAUGHS]

And it was human and natural and right. And it was new to me.

Where was he from?

He was born in Cleveland, but he grew up in Detroit. And at the time that I met him, his parents lived in Detroit. Or his mother lived in Detroit. His father was already dead. And well, he wanted to get married right away. And I said, uh-uh, not so fast. Because he had told me what he wanted to do. He had attended Princeton in the army to learn German, to become an interceptor for German Luftwaffe. And so he was in intelligence.

And he spoke German very, very well. And I knew already that he wanted to study. He wanted to go back to the university. And I knew if he was going to sign up again, it would be another two years or four years, and all his plans would be thrown overboard. You know? And I didn't want to be responsible for that because it was his life too. You know?

So he said he would come back as a civilian. And he tried, but it didn't work out that way. So finally, we got together. And I don't want to go into details. It's really not relevant. I came to America. And we got married in Reno.

Before you came here, were you able to re-establish your family ties with your father and your mother?

No.

Didn't see your family again.

No. Nothing.

And you decided to leave Germany in order to get married. Is that right?

Well, I had never been a patriot. And I'm not a patriot now. To me these are artificial emotions. I feel loyal to the people but not such remote ideas. You know. But when I left Germany after the war-- I came here in '48-- I had the feeling I wasn't making a contribution to the country, that I might have made if I had stayed, whatever it was, whatever little I

could contribute. That was my only regret.

Did you have any difficulties in getting to the United States?

No, not to great difficulties. But I don't want to go into details there.

And when did you arrive in Cleveland? Was this before you got married or after you were married?

No. We lived in Cambridge. My husband went to Harvard to get his PhD in sociology. And from Cambridge he got a job in England. We spent almost three years in England, where my son was born. And he has dual citizenship until he decides to vote. Then he will either vote in England or in America.

And-- what was I going to say? Oh, yeah. And then we came back, and we spent a year in Lafayette, at Purdue University. And then he got his post here at the Western Reserve University, Joint appointment as a sociologist. We bought a house in Cleveland Heights, in which I still live, which I now try to sell. [LAUGHS]

Let's talk now a little bit about the effects of the Holocaust.

On me?

Well, how often do you think about the war in your part, for instance, in assisting Jews with the passports or other Nazi victims that you may have helped? How often do you talk about these events? And with whom can you talk about them?

Very little because people don't really want to hear about it. It's too, too frightening. The on some-- one couple asked me once, did that really all happen? And I said, yes, it did. I said, it's so hard to believe. I said, I was in it and it was hard to believe. It was happening all around me, and I couldn't believe it.

How have your war experiences affected your physical and your emotional health?

Well, obviously it has affected me emotionally. But I think when I was younger, I could handle it much better than I can now. I did see a psychiatrist from time to time, just to have somebody to talk to.

Do you ever dream about the war?

I used to dream, but I haven't been dreaming in a long time. A big knock on the door was always something frightening because you never knew who it was usually. And it was somebody you didn't want to see.

What made you decide to share your experiences with us? And do you have a personal message--

Well--

--that you would like to give? What really brought it home to me, that history should commemorate these events. I have some friends-- as I said, some of my best friends are Jewish. And they have a farm in Pennsylvania. And some of their neighbors look after the house. And they had talked with those neighbors and heard from them that there's a rumor going around that the Holocaust is a hoax. And they said, would you talk to them? Would you tell them that it really happened? And I said sure.

So they brought them over. And they said, you know, I've heard you come from Germany. You have lived through the war and so on. That's really happened, all these things, with the concentration camps and this? I said, yes, it did happen. And I started talking about some of the things. And that you didn't have to be Jewish for this to happen. You could be French. You could be Ukrainian. You could be Hungarian. You could be almost anything and it could happen to you-- and German, you know.

And they mentioned a magazine, where they had read some articles that propounded the fact that all this was a hoax and

just to bad mouth the German people And so on. I said, no, no. Don't believe that. But there was nothing that I could do to change those people's mind until they were willing to change it. If they didn't want to believe what I said, and if they wanted to believe that article, that was what they could do. The only thing that bothered me is, when it is more than just an isolated couple who don't believe this, when it becomes organized, like people who write articles in magazines and people who put out magazines that carry messages of this kind. This is when it is frightening.

And for this reason, I called. I saw the advertisement on TV one day. And I have a hard time remembering phone numbers, but somehow I remembered this. That really rang a bell in me. And I remembered the phone number. I wrote it down immediately, and I called up. And it took some while for the people to get in touch with me, but then they finally did.

So that is my purpose, to verify again what had happened. And it is not a hoax.

In your opinion, what would be an appropriate way to commemorate the memory of those who lost their lives during the Holocaust years?

That's hard to say because, when friends are dying, the memories die with them. I mean, I still remember people that have died. And as long as I live, they live with me. But when I die, my children have no memory of them. They just heard the story. And there's very little, I think, one can do, aside from having national holidays, or formalized institutionalized things. You know, celebrations or whatnot. But nobody wants to celebrate anything like this. It's too horrible to celebrate.

What do you think are the reasons for your personal survival, your stamina, your outlook on life?

I was lucky. I was lucky I was not caught by the Nazis, and I was lucky I wasn't hit by a bomb. That was sheer luck. It could be-- both of these things, many times over, and it just didn't happen. I mean, my father was called to the police-- that was even during the war-- because some people in our house, in the apartment building that we lived in, denounced us at the police station, that we never greeted with Heil Hitler. We greeted with guten morgen, good morning, good day, good afternoon, good evening, good night. But we never said Heil Hitler. And they found this was very suspicious.

So they went to the police and told them. And the police called my father to come and justify his not greet-- and his family not greeting with Heil Hitler. And he said it's a very personal thing. I don't think I would like to use anyone's name for a greeting. I mean, Hitler is a good name, a good sounding name. But if it were Schultz or Croider, or Schmidt, I wouldn't feel so good about it. And I just don't believe in using names for greetings.

And he just made this up as he was standing there. You know? And they believed him. And they sent him home. That was lucky because if that policeman had been a shrine, [LAUGHS] he could have kept him there already. The whole family could have gone off to concentration camp just for not saying Heil Hitler.

Is there anything else you would like to share with us?

Yes. There's a story that my mother initiated. She went shopping one day, and she bought 5 pounds of potatoes with her ration cards and some vegetables. And in the store, which was very full with many people, there was a sort of strange figure, a young man, standing in the shadow of a corner behind the door. And as she was turning to go through the door, he winked an eye at her. And she caught the wink, and she winked back.

And as she left the store, nothing happened. But after a while, she turned around and he was following her. And it was not very far from us, the store, so she didn't have to go very far to go home. When she reached our house, she just stood awhile in the door, very short while, and looked around and winked again and went in, and went up one flight and waited there until she heard the door opening. And then she looked down and saw that was the young man. And she didn't know who it was, but she just had a feeling it was somebody who needed something.

And she took him into her apartment. And since she still spoke a little bit Polish from her childhood, she could understand what he says because he was Russian. He was from the Ukraine. And he was one of those people that were

shipped by the Nazis, from the Russian front to Germany to do slave labor in camps.

When my aunt came home from work, she had been in Russia for several years. My little cousin was born there. She spoke Russian, so she translated everything he said. He was from the Ukraine. He had a family, two children. He was a truck driver.

He got caught by the Germans as a soldier at the front. He was shipped to Germany in a cattle car. He was living in a camp in the north of town, about an hour's walk away from where we lived. And once in a while, he could go out.

And when he could go out, he tried to solicit some extra food or ration card. And why did he winked at my mother? He doesn't know. He just had the feeling. And somehow she had the feeling that she should wink back.

And it was dangerous for both of them. My mother could have been a Nazi, or he could have been a Nazi in disguise. And either one could have been arrested. But it worked out. And we had a neighbor who was a doctor, and many people were coming as patients. So we said he could come too, between the hours that the other patients would come to this neighbor, and nobody would know he was going to us.

And he wouldn't come into our house, if somebody would see him. He would ring the bell, and he would stand by the doctor's door. And when the person was going up the stairs, or down the stairs, then he would finally come he would always look through first to see that he was alone when we let him in. We had to be very careful about these things.

And he told us horrible stories from camp. People didn't get enough to eat. They got the potato soup that was very watery. And people got swollen legs and swollen / people broke out with pimples from lack of /

Do you know what camp he was in?

It was one of those--

Work camps.

--work camps Yeah. And they were all from the Ukraine, men and women. And some of the young girls got pregnant. They got no extra rations. Some of the kids were born dead, others died shortly afterwards. Those who survived a little bit longer died later on, at the age of two or so, just from malnutrition because they didn't get any extra rations. And the mothers died because they tried to feed their babies from their own rations, and it didn't work.

So he and a couple of other guys would go around and solicit food and ration cards or money. So what we would do, we-- I went around to collect ration cards for Jews in hiding. Now I had this guy on my hands too. Now I split the ration cards, so the Jews would get a little bit less and the Ukrainians would get something. And I also solicited for clothing-- shoes, gloves, hats, scarves, clothes. You know dresses, pants, everything.

Who could you go to for these things?

[SIGHS] Friends, colleagues trust. Some people I didn't know. I just was told, go to so-and-so. I didn't know the name. I just knew the address.

I rang the bell. I didn't know who it was going to be. I said, I come from so-and-so. Oh, yeah, come in. He told me. Yeah. It was all just trust, trust and chutzpah. You know? Just a feeling you had, whether you could trust or not.

But most of the time you had to be suspicious of everything. Somebody was walking behind you, you had to be very careful.

You didn't go back to Berlin at all after the war.

No. After I was bombed out and we left, I never went back to Berlin. I couldn't take it. I just couldn't take it.

Is there anything else that you can remember that you'd like to share?

Yeah, there's a story of a young woman, a Jewish woman, who had liaison with a married man. And his wife knew about it. And he knew that his girlfriend was Jewish. And she hated Jews. And she always threatened with denouncing him, and if not him, then at least her. And he had, in the meantime, tried to get her across the border. But she had his baby, and that was difficult to go across the border with a baby.

So he arranged with some other friends, whom his wife didn't know, that she would bundle up the baby, and somebody else would take the baby and put it at those friend's doorstep. Now, this young woman was red haired and had green eyes. And she looked like a Raphael Madonna. But she was Jewish, and so the kid was half Jewish but it was blonde.

And the people duly found the baby and took it in and had it certified as an Aryan baby and adopted the baby. But shortly after that happened with the baby, she had to-- it was the timespan that she had to stay in town until she could make contact with somebody who would take her across the border. Where could she stay?

So a friend of mine said, I know somebody who needs a night's sleep. Could she stay with you? So I asked my parents because we lived together. I couldn't just decide that for them. You know? And they said sure. So I picked her up at the subway with some description. And she wouldn't even have recognized me. She didn't know who I was. I just went to her and said, is your name such-and-such? It was a fake name. And she said, yes. I said, come with me.

She stayed that night and left early in the morning, going to some other place. And that's exactly what some friends of ours had done several years before. And they got two years imprisonment. The husband-- when after two years they came out, and after four weeks being out, the husband was taken to concentration camp. And after two years, he died of an unknown disease, just for having somebody overnight.

After having had this example, what do we do? We take in a Jew. And yet, how could you not? There's somebody's coming, you say, look, she needs a night's rest. She's on the run. So what do you do?

I hope she got across the border. I don't know. She was a stranger to me.

Can you think of anything else that you might want to share with us?

God, I don't know. There are so many things, they don't always come in a bunch. But I think I have given enough evidence of the fact that all this happened and that it was horrible and unbelievable in the middle of it all, and that I should sit in a basement with the bombs falling around me and be actually glad that the Americans came to bomb us, just so we would get rid of the Nazis, knowing we would have to lose the war in order to get rid of the Nazis and thereby gain some freedom.

Now, anybody being in a position to wish that his country would lose a war, that's pretty weird. Isn't it? That's not a normal wish. But then those were not normal times. And I guess that will be all.

This is Donna Karon Yanowitz again, and I want to thank you, Ursula--

You're very welcome.

--for participating in this project, which is sponsored by the Cleveland Section, National Council of Jewish Women.