

13th. And with Ruth Friedman at the American Gathering of the Jewish Holocaust Survivors in Washington, DC. Ruth, can you spell your name and give your maiden name and the spelling of that and tell where you're from?

OK. Ruth Friedman-- F-R-I-E-D-M-A-N, maiden name, Cukier-- C-U-K-I-E-R. I was born in Berlin, Germany in 1937. And I live in New York.

Fine. And is there a particular area that you would like to talk about. I'd just like-- as you can see from Ruth's birthdate, she's very young. And maybe can give a little bit of a different perspective from a child's point of view of what happened.

Yes, I'd like that. I'd like to talk about one story, which I think is the most-- has been my most powerful memory, the one that-- it was something that affected our entire family. And it's something that I think about most frequently.

I must have been about three or four. And we were in hiding in Brussels. And things were getting harder. There were a lot of razias. People were being rounded up. We moved around several times.

We would rent a room someplace else. And after a few days, the landlord would come and say to my father, I'm sorry, Monsieur. You have to leave. The Bosch are coming. And since we didn't know whether the Germans were coming or if they might call them, if they might betray us, in fact, we had to leave after paying, I don't, for a week or a month rent.

And then we went home. And my parents decided that we would stay home, that there was, in fact, no place else to go.

How many of you were there? Did you have siblings?

No, I'm an only child. And there were the three of us. My mother also had a younger brother and his wife in Brussels. But as a family, we were just the three of us. And we had a boarder, Mr. Duduzak. We rented the bedroom to him. And we were sleeping in the living room, dining room. And although I was big already, I was in a crib. I remember sleeping in a crib.

And I wasn't afraid, but I could sense fear. I could sense my parents' fear. And once my father said-- he said, Ruthie, if the Nazis come, and they want to take me away, you should cry and scream. And if they ask you why, you should tell them because you want to take my father away. And somehow, I didn't think of that.

And one night, we all went to sleep. And then I woke up. And there were other people in the room. There was a brown shirt at the entrance of the apartment, of the living room. There was another one at the door which led to the kitchen. And from the kitchen, there was a little terrace. And there was a Nazi officer standing next to my crib.

The lights were on. It was very bright. And I just remember that he was very, very tall from where I was, those huge boots, long, long boots, and the gray uniform. And I found him very handsome and impressive.

He was telling my father to get dressed. And he said-- he told him to hurry up. And my father was-- it was winter, and he was in his long Johns, and he was trying to put on his pants. And he couldn't. He kept putting his foot into the-- both feet into the same--

Pant leg.

--pant leg. And I thought that that was very funny. And I was about to laugh. And then I looked at my mother. She was sitting. And her chair was next to the wall. And she was white like the wall, and I realized that she was terrified, that she couldn't speak. I just knew that. And then suddenly I started-- I remembered what my father told me. And I started to scream.

I didn't-- I wasn't really afraid, but I started to scream and to shake the bars of the crib. And the more I screamed, the more I believed in it. And after a while, I was really terrified that they would take my father away. And this officer went

down to me, and he spoke to me in German. And he said, why are you crying? Why are you crying, little girl?

And I said, because you want to take my papa away. And he looked at me, and he smiled very kindly. And he said, I promise you that I won't take him. And then he stood up. He was kneeling or crouching on his heels so that he could speak to me on my level. And he stood up. And in a very gruff voice, he told my father to prepare himself, to get everything ready. They would be back next day to pick him up. And they left. And we were saved.

Did you leave immediately after that?

No.

[GASPS]

After that the neighbors came, that lived in the same building, all Gentiles. And the owner of the house, a Mr. Jakob, who was a very decent man, took us immediately to the attic, where we stayed. The next day they came, and they found the apartment empty. They sealed it.

After that, my mother didn't want to stay in Brussels anymore. And we arranged to go to Switzerland illegally. You know, with a guide, but only my mother and I because there were rumors at that time that they were-- true-- that they were sending the men back to the German border. So my father remained in this attic until the end of the war.

And Mr. Jakob brought him food, brought him newspapers, brought him conversation. And we were in Switzerland. My mother was in several camps. And I was with two families, as a matter of fact, foster families, one and then another one. And then after the war, we were reunited. We all, all three of us.

That's incredible. You were three or four, and you have vivid, vivid memories.

Yes. Yes. That I remember very, very distinctly.

Now, when you say your mother was in several camps, concentration camps? What kind of camps?

No. No, those were-- those were camps where the immigrants were kept. I mean, they were not concentration camps like the Nazi camps. They were-- everyone had a job to do. They received a certain amount of pay. But they were interned. These were internment camps.

And this is in Switzerland?

In Switzerland.

And they were run by the Swiss?

Yes.

And you were put with a Swiss-- a couple of Swiss families.

Yes. Yes. And my mother had--

How did she arrange for that?

--visiting. That was not arranged by her. That was arranged by the Swiss government. You know, the children--

They didn't have children in camps.

No. No.

I see.

No, we were together for a short time. And then we were separated. And then she had visiting rights. And because she was-- she had a very good position. She was working in the kitchen, and the cook accidentally cut off his finger while slicing meat. And being very good, she became the chef then. And afterwards, he remained working under her, but she kept him as a friend, even though she had superseded him.

And so she had a very good position. She was very well-liked in that camp because there was no-- no one in the-- you know, usually in that situation, everybody takes a little food. By my mother that did not exist. The food was distributed, and she always made sure that there was some extra milk or something for the old people. And so she was loved.

And because she did such a great job, she received special permission. I was able to spend every summer with her for two months, which was exceptional. And since the camp was-- I don't remember. You see, I don't remember dates. I don't remember the names of cities. Things like that I don't remember.

It was a hotel that had been-- all of these hotels had been requisitioned for wartime purposes. And it was by a lake with mountains, and it was a very beautiful place. So I remember those summers a, you know, very, very lovely memories.

And you were separated from your father for four years?

Three years.

Three years. And he survived in that attic.

Yes.

Do you keep in touch with the people who made it possible for your father to survive?

We did for a while when we were in Brazil. And then we lost touch. And I went back to Belgium two years ago. And of course, I went back looking. And I couldn't find him anymore. And no one could tell me whether he's alive or what happened. That area changed, and I couldn't make that contact.

What did your father do? And was it unusual that you would be the only Jewish family in a Gentile-- you said everybody else was Gentile.

In that building. The neighborhood was, I would say, 50/50. It was mixed. But the people in that building were all Gentile.

My father, he is-- he was a tailor. Before the war he had his own shop in Berlin, ladies clothes. I remember Antwerp just very, very vaguely. I must have been maybe three then. I remember that we lived facing the park. I remember lace curtains on the window. And that's all.

And then I remember that we were going-- we were on the road, my mother, my father, my mother's brother, and his-- he was not married yet. She became his wife later, his fiancée. And we had a cart, a wagon. You know, a handcart with all sorts of household things on it. And we were going to Bruges.

I later asked my aunt what we were doing in Bruges. And she said the family was trying to get on a boat to get out because the Germans had occupied Belgium. We never managed to get out. But I remember that road and pastures and cows and bombings. And I wasn't very impressed with the bombings, but I was fascinated with the cows because I had never seen the cow before. We were in hiding all those years.

And then a catastrophe struck. I lost my pacifier. And that was terrible. I had a tantrum. And they tried to-- they found me another pacifier but that wouldn't do because it wasn't the right color, the right texture. And I became very difficult. I

was a good Jewish spoiled child.

And then I wanted to push the wagon. You know? And of course that would delay them. And they wouldn't let me. So I kept crying and throwing myself on the road and, you know. And they were screaming at me. And it was terrible. And suddenly, I heard a voice. And the voice said moo moo. The cow said that Ruthchen, that's my German name-- Ruthchen must get on the wagon.

And you know, I scrambled up on that wagon so quickly because the cow had said. You see? And after that, I was a perfectly good girl, and I didn't cause any more trouble until we got to Bruges.

So when was that in the time frame? That must have been when the Germans first came into Belgium

And it was before you left for Switzerland.

Yes.

And before your father went into hiding.

Yes. That was before Brussels.

And where were you reunited, and how were you reunited?

We were reunited in Belgium, in Brussels. My father came to the train station. And I was wondering whether I would remember him. Three years in the life of a child is a very, very long time.

Sure.

And I recognized him at once. He was very tall. He was taller than most of the people there. And he was very handsome. And he smiled, and I recognized him.

And then how soon after that did you leave Brussels? I think that we left-- I'm not sure. I really don't know.

And you went to where?

We went to Brazil.

Directly from--

Yes, to Sao Paolo.

Were they allowing Jews in? How did your father choose Brazil?

My mother had a brother, who had been in England during the war, also interned. And he had papers to go to La Paz, to Bolivia. And since-- and a lot of people were leaving. Belgium, being a small country, they really were not so crazy about all these immigrants who came to Belgium before the war and stayed there.

And it was difficult. They made all sorts of difficulties. We had to have--

And some who had been there--

--property. You have to own property, to have money, to have all sorts of things that they couldn't possibly have as immigrants. So that my father said, look, we've gone through so much, and they still don't want us. You know, let's leave. And so we made these arrangements. We had applied to come to the United States. But that was a long quota because my parents were Polish, and that hadn't arrived yet.

And we did stay in Brazil because this uncle, my mother's brother, in the meantime had left Bolivia and came to Brazil. And he told us Bolivia's a terrible place. And so we remained in Brazil. And we had some difficulty getting our papers there, but it all worked out.

And then how did you get from Brazil to the United States? And where are your parents?

My parents are dead. My parents-- my mother died 10 years ago. My father died 12 years ago in New York. We came to the United States 26 years ago.

But you have very little accent. Did you speak English before?

I took English in school.

And you were schooled then in Belgium.

In Belgium and in Brazil.

I meant in Brazil. Most of your schooling was done in Brazil.

Yes. Yes. And a bit in Switzerland too. I had a year of the school in Switzerland.

And how many languages do you speak?

I only speak English well, but I speak a few languages. I speak Portuguese, French, German, Yiddish. But English is really my best language.

And at home when you were young, what language did you speak with your family and then with the community?

Interesting-- we spoke German when I was small. And then later, as my parents got older, they spoke more and more Yiddish. And I used to resent it because it was a mixed language, half German, half Yiddish. And I didn't like Yiddish very much. I thought that it was a bit dÃ©classÃ©. And then after they died, I missed Yiddish very much.

You know, whenever I would hear it, my ears would perk up. And I finally went back to school, and I took a master's in Yiddish literature. And that was very gratifying.

Isn't that interesting?