

--is right here. So because I don't have a table, I'll hold it up close.

All right.

All right, and then you can just talk into here.

OK.

First of all, let me ask you your name again.

My name is Gabriele Silten. Actually, the German version with which I was born is Ruth Gabriele Silten.

OK, and you were born in Germany?

I was born in Berlin, yes, in 1933.

I see. OK. Can you give me a little bit of an idea of-- you were held? You were born in 1933, so you were a very young girl.

Right. Yes. We went to Holland in '38. My father tried to get us to Argentina, but the Germans came before the visa came, so we were stuck in Holland.

I see.

And I went to school. Then eventually, we were picked up to go to Westerbork, which was a concentration camp in Holland, on June 10th, if my memory serves me well, of 1943. And we stayed there till January '44, and then were sent on to Theresienstadt. And from there, then were liberated.

I see. OK. Can you describe what the conditions were like, as best that you can remember living in Holland, before they actually took you away?

Sure.

OK. Of course, I at the time was a child, and I went to school. But we had to go to Jewish school. First, I went to regular school. Then eventually, when the Germans came, we had to go to Jewish school.

And one of the things I remember best was essentially learning how to lie. We weren't supposed to have fruit. We weren't supposed to have this, we were supposed to have that. So the first thing the teacher did when we came in was, first of all, check that we had our star on, and secondly, put us through our paces. What will you say if the Germans ask you how did the fruit taste? And you were supposed to say, well, we're not supposed to have any fruit, so we didn't have any, this type of thing.

I see.

Plus, of course, as all children, I had to help mother with the shopping. And shopping was only allowed between 3:00 and 5:00. So you had to stand in line, and make your way through, and eventually get your shopping done.

And, of course, there was a daily sort of a fear that you could come home and your parents weren't there. Your friends from school disappeared. They simply didn't come back. We changed teachers all the time, because the teachers had been picked up. And, of course, soldiers were in the street. Tanks were going through and this type of thing, so it was very much born in that things were not normal.

How old were you at this time?

In '40 when they came in, they came in on May 10. And that's about 20 days before my seventh birthday.

Your seventh birthday. So you were very young.

Yes.

You were very young. How many are in your family-- were in your family?

I'm the only child. At that time, in the house were my father, my mother, and my grandmother, my father's mother.

I see. OK. Then there came a point in time when they eventually took your-- was it and your family away?

Yes, all four of us. No, all four of us.

Can you describe that particular day as best you can remember what happened that day?

Oh, sure. I can remember quite well, as a matter of fact, this is one of the very few very warm days that Holland had. In Holland, the climate is not usually that warm. And they came, well, in the daytime-- middle of the morning, I think.

And this is one of the biggest roundups-- they were called razzia in those days-- of Jews at that time. This is in '43, so towards the end, more or less.

Right.

We had not hidden, and so they were going from house to house, I believe, at that point. So when we were taken out with our little rucksack and the little few things that we were allowed to take, there were all the neighbors. And I remember leaving a little note that I had written for my neighbor girl, who was my best friend, that I stuck through the mailbox. And the corner grocery owners were out and crying.

I see.

And we were loaded into, well, something that looked like trucks-- probably soldiers trucks with canvas over it and so on-- dark inside in any event-- and taken to a general collection place, which is a square-- one of the squares in Amsterdam. And from there, taken to the train station, the Central Station in Amsterdam, and there put into the cattle cars and taken to Westerbork.

OK. How long was that trip on the cattle cars?

Well, it seemed quite long. I can't really tell you an hours. I don't know. But it seemed quite long. It seemed-- it shouldn't have been more than two hours, but it probably took longer than that.

Were you with your mother and father?

Yes, and my grandmother.

And your grandmother.

Yes.

Were you also in the train with neighbors that you knew and friends, Jewish friends and neighbors?

No.

Oh, so these were--

Not neighbors or friends that I know.

OK.

My best friend had been taken away earlier. And others either went at different times after us or before us.

When you were at the collection point that you mentioned before, were there non-Jewish people standing around and looking?

Yes, all through the route actually.

I see.

Just as our grocery owners or friends of ours were watching the neighbors were watching, so also at the collection point were there people standing on the street and watching but, of course, not allowed to do anything.

Right.

And out of the windows and so on, and as far as possible.

Before I forget to ask this question, do you-- and again, I know that you were very young. Why did your father and mother not-- if you knew that they were coming house by house, did the thought occur to them to try to escape or at least do something to avoid being captured?

Yes. The thought occurred to my father-- I learned this after the war-- not to escape, but to hide. And he decided against it, because it would have meant separation-- all of us, all four of us-- in different families. And he did not want to do that. He wanted us to stay together and either live together or die together. But the thought had occurred to him, and he had, in fact-- I assume he had some contacts.

I see.

But then, as I say, he decided against it.

OK.

Of course, the danger was if you were caught after hiding, you were then executed practically right away. Whereas if you didn't hide, you might survive.

Again, before we pick up with the point of where you actually-- you know, after you got off that train ride-- do you recall seeing incidents in the street as a child of brutality, of the German guards doing anything to the Jews, just right out?

No, I don't recall.

OK.

Of course, on the other hand, we children-- that is I or my friends-- did not stay out any longer than we had to. So we didn't play outside. We weren't allowed to play with Christian children.

Right.

And so we didn't play in the streets as we would normally do or have done, not having any gardens. And we went home,

of course, directly from school.

Right.

You did not know Anne Frank, by any chance, did you?

No.

OK.

I did not know her or her family, but my father, like her father, had his office on the same street, on the Prinsengracht.

Oh, they did.

And I think the numbers are quite close.

I see.

So I know the area.

Do you know how far her house was from your house?

Yes, about five minutes away.

About five minutes.

Yes.

So you lived five minutes from Anne Frank, where she lived.

Yes.

All right. So you got off the train, and what happened then?

Well, then my parents put me on a chair. There was a chair there. I don't know why it was there, but it was there. And they had to go into one of the barracks. These were long, low wooden barracks, like temporary buildings are quite often here in the States.

And this was still in Holland.

No, this was in the camp.

Oh.

Yes, in Holland, in the camp.

Yeah, and the name of the camp again is?

Westerbork.

OK.

W-E-S-T-B-O-R-K.

OK.

And it was built for this particular purpose, with the low barracks and so on. We called them barracks. And they had to go register, and they went in with a crowd of people, of course. And after about half an hour, I remember I started crying bitterly, because I thought I'd never see them again. I had no idea what happened to them.

Right. And eventually, somebody told them, or word filtered to them, that a little girl was sitting out there. And, of course, that place and the name and so on registered. So my mother came out and took me in. And we went through the registration, and were then quartered in one of these low, long barracks.

They were split in the middle. The middle was an entrance. And then there was a long, dormitory-like room on one side and one on the other, one for the men, one for the women, each with a long bathroom on the very end of the barracks.

And there were bunk beds, and we were assigned a bunk bed, my grandmother, my mother, and I, the three of us together in two. It was the middle row of the bunk. They were three high. And the three of us had to sleep in the two beds.

And, of course, any washing or toiletry and so on was done in a long bathroom. There was one toilet for I don't know how many people were in this dormitory-like room, but probably at least 200, if not more. And the washing-- the faucets-- there were long sinks with faucets certain distances, maybe three or four feet distant from each other with only cold water, of course. And this is where we washed and did our dishes and so on. Between the bunks, there were tables, like picnic tables here, with a wooden bench on either side. And that's where we ate.

How long did you remain in this camp?

From June '43 till January '44.

I see. Was there a significant amount of brutality in this particular place?

I did not see any, but my barracks where I lived with my mother and grandmother was directly opposite next to what they call the S barracks. S is the German letter for punishment, [GERMAN]. And they were treated much, much worse than we were.

I see. And then there came a point in time where they told you that you had to leave this particular place?

Yes. My father was called in to the commandant, whose name I don't remember, and couldn't go because he was ill. And for some reason, they just let it pass. So instead of going to a transport to Bergen-Belsen, which is where we were supposed to go, through my father's illness we went to Theresienstadt, which turned out, of course, to be much better.

I see.

My grandmother at this point had died. She committed suicide. She was on another transport list and didn't want to go, so she committed suicide. But this was before January '44.

I see.

Did you have any idea of what Theresienstadt meant or what Bergen-Belsen meant? Or did you know what these places were?

I knew that they were concentration camps, yes. Now, what type, no, I did not. My parents might have, but I did not.

I see. And when you got to--

Theresienstadt.

Right. When you got there, what happened then?

Again, at this point, they had already built the train that came directly into Theresienstadt. Theresienstadt is in Czechoslovakia. It's about 30 miles out of Prague, and it was originally built as a soldiers training camp. And the barracks, of course, were meant for that, most of them in squares with a courtyard. And we were quartered in the attic rooms and other rooms in the barracks, mostly dormitory style, again, with bunk beds.

And they kept together-- the Dutch altogether, and the Czechs all together, and the Germans all together, and so on-- the different nationalities. And so they had renamed the barracks with German names. And so the Hamburg barracks were the barracks where we were quartered as well, again, in dormitory style. To begin with, my mother and I in a square room with bunk beds again, and my father in another room somewhere else with the men.

I see.

What was life like there?

Different from Westerbork, because here children also had to work as of age 10. So my father went to work. He was a pharmacist, and he did, in fact, work later in the pharmacy. He started out by being a street sweeper. And my mother went to work first as a cleaning woman, and later in the mica industry. They had to split mica for the German war industry.

And, as I said, I was 10 by that time. And I went to work as what they then called an ordinance, which was a message bearer. They gave me messages for here and there and everywhere in what was there called the Siechenhaus. I'll spell it. It's S-I-E-C-H-E-N-H-A-U-S, and that really means the house for older sick people. And I had to carry messages either within the confines of that house, or to the pharmacy, or to anywhere else they sent me.

I see. Now-- go ahead, I'm sorry.

I did that for-- I don't remember when that started, when I started the work. I also remember going to one of the illegal schools they had, the underground schools. And at home even, before the war, we spoke both Dutch and German. Because I'm born in Germany, so my parents kept the German up. And I went to school in Holland, so, of course, I learned Dutch. I never did know how to write German, though. And this I learned in Theresienstadt in the camp--

I see.

--in one of these illegal schools. I learned to read it, and I learned to write it. And I also remember working at one time in the crematorium. They did not, at this point, gas people, but they did have to get rid of bodies of people who had either been tortured or had died-- natural causes. And this was also done by cremating.

And my friends and I, people of the same age, say 10, 11, something like that, we formed a sort of human chain to put the boxes with ashes into a car. They were then taken away. I don't know where to, but this is the type of work I did--

I see.

--for which you got an extra ration of food. So it was a popular occupation.

I see. Yeah. Do you have any idea of how many people they tortured or anything like that?

No, they did do that in what was called the small fortress. That was somewhat outside of Theresienstadt. And they were people that led a resistance or that they caught, say, leading resistance, or speaking out against the Germans, or trying to escape, or painting, or drawing, or writing-- anything that they didn't like and so on.

I see.

Then you remained there with your family until they liberated you?

Yes, the Russians came and liberated us.

I see.

This was in May '45.

May '45. Well, that's quite a story. What does the Holocaust mean to you?

That's a difficult question in a way. It's something that keeps coming back. It's something you never forget, but you don't-- at least I never forget, but I never dwell on it either. It comes back when you do something-- let's say, I became lately a member of a society to be cremated after my death. Automatically I think back to Theresienstadt, and cremation, and ovens.

I knew people in Theresienstadt that probably perished in the ovens. I had friends. I also met people again-- friends again-- after the war that did come back.

To the day of today when I meet somebody, I don't ask after family. I never ask what happened. We were trained that way. You don't ask. If people have family that survived, they'll tell you.

I see.

But what it means is an all-round phenomenon, I think that's difficult to answer.

Yeah, I agree. It is difficult. Do you feel any animosity towards your Dutch neighbors-- the grocery man that was crying but maybe didn't help you?

No, I don't, because they did help. They didn't just cry. One of the things-- again, the little girl that was my best friend, they were our upstairs neighbors. We lived on the second floor. They lived on the third floor. It was a family with two little girls, the younger of whom was my age. When we had to start wearing the Jewish star, the lady whom I called aunt called me in and said, now, you have to be-- what do you think about the star?

And I said, well, my father told me that I should be just as proud of that star as the Catholics are of their cross. They were Catholic. She liked that, so she said, well, I want you to come up every morning before you go to school, and I'll give you some sweets. Quite apart, of course, from getting us extra food and extra whatever it was that they could get and we couldn't get. So this is what I did.

I see. After the war, the first thing, as soon as the liberation about, this family went to the Central Station again where people come in, and said, if the family Silten comes back, you tell them that they have a home with us.

I see.

And they did tell us, and we stayed with them for three months.

I see, after the war.

And the grocery people, same thing. They would come and deliver to these neighbors things for us that we couldn't get.

I see.

So it wasn't just crying.

Did you lose any family in Germany? Was there any of your family left in Germany?

Yes, I had my grandfather. The husband of this grandmother that died, he also committed suicide, and my mother's mother who also committed suicide.

Oh, my. The older people maybe weren't able to tolerate or to withstand it as much as the younger.

Yes. My grandfather had not wanted to leave. We left late. We left in '38, and my grandfather left even later in September of '38. And after that, my grandfather couldn't get out, and did not want to, actually, either.

Yeah.

So he also was a pharmacist, like my father, and had the wherewithal to commit suicide.

Right. I see.

So he did when the Germans came knocking on his door to get him.

I see. OK, I thank you very much. I thank you very much.

Thank you very much.

And I hope that you have a-- you're heading back to Pomona, right?

Yes, indeed.

Yeah. OK. It's been my pleasure, thank you. Thanks a lot.

Thank you.

And I think the only thing--