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Hello. I'm Jack Needle, professor of history at Brookdale Community College and director for the Center of Holocaust Studies. With me today we have a very special guest, Ruth Knopp. Ruth has worked with us at the Center for Holocaust Studies for two years as a volunteer, and she's organized our library. But more importantly, it has taken us this long to convince Ruth to tell us her story, which is, again, a tragic story from the Holocaust.

Ruth, thank you for coming and sharing these painful memories with us. You were born where?

I was born in a small town in the southeast of Germany, Bad Reinerz. It was a spa. And my parents had one, or owned one of the two Jewish hotels in the spa. So our youth or our childhood, my sister-- I had an older sister-- was a happy one until, of course, 1933. And Hitler started to come to power. Everything changed very drastically.

At the time, we went to school and had all those friends, non-Jewish friends. And suddenly they started to call us names.

And you were the only two?

We were the only. There was no Jewish community in that town. And my sister and I, we were the only Jewish children living there, going to school. And up till '33, we really didn't have any problems. But of course, as I said, afterwards it changed.

And for another two years, we both were kept in school. But then my parents decided it would be better to put us in a big city, put us into a Jewish school. So we were put into a boarding school in Breslau.

At your original school, the elementary school, do you remember any definite change as far as the teachers were concerned?

Yes. The teachers didn't treat us very nice. They wouldn't ask us questions. You know, they-- we couldn't, or they wouldn't let us, participate as usual.

Did you sit anywhere in the classroom, or--

They didn't change the seats.

They didn't change the seats.

I don't recall that.

But you did felt that you were left out of--

Yeah. Definitely There were some teachers which were fine, and some teachers were just-- you felt there was a definite change. And the children too, they started with nasty remarks, called us names. And there was also an incident where one guy, one little boy threw stones at us just because we were Jewish children.

So at that point, the parents decided this is not-- you know, no place for us to be. And they sent us to a boarding school in Breslau. Breslau was the capital of Silesia. Had a large Jewish community-- two big synagogues, two big schools. And we continued there, went on the gymnasium. And that was-- from that on, things became a little normal again because we were under Jews.

Normally that would be-- that went on till '38. And then came Kristallnacht.

Which was November 9--

November--

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--1938

--9, 1938. And we experienced Kristallnacht by being woken up and hearing terrible noises, glass bursting, lots of loud voices on the streets. And our rooms had balconies. We were on the third floor. So we ran out. And here we saw the Jewish shoe store across the street was being demolished, everything thrown on the street.

And we said-- of course, we were afraid something will happen to us too, being a Jewish dormitory. And amazing enough, they never crossed the street, didn't do anything. Nor did they do anything to the Jewish orphanage, which was just a block, not even a block away.

Something else we noticed, that was the sky was red. And it was in the direction of the big, big synagogue. And that beautiful dome was all on fire. And with that day, our school was past because they also closed Jewish schools.

So what happened to you then with the school closed?

The school closed. In the meantime, my parents had lost their hotel in Bad Reinerz. And they both came to Breslau. So for a while we lived together.

My sister had met a nice Jewish boy at the time. And they planned to get married and tried to get out to Palestine. So they went on hakhshara, which is the preparation for Palestine. They learned gardening and all that stuff.

For me, I didn't really know what to do. I was always interested in medicine. So we found an ad in a Jewish paper that, in the Jewish hospital in Berlin, they were looking for Jewish girls to be trained as nurses. So we went there, applied, and I was admitted. In 1939, I think it was April, I left for Berlin to start nurses training.

And amazing enough, in spite of the war, we had regular training. And we finished our training. And I even have my diploma with a big swastika on it.

And there, yes, the hospital became more or less a ghetto. Transport left from there. We had only Jewish patients. There was one time, in 1943 I recall, they were picking up all the Jews from the streets. They just went with huge trucks on the street. And whoever they saw wearing a swastika was picked up--

A star-- the star.

The yellow star, not-- excuse me. Not-- the yellow star with Jew on. And at that time, I remember there were hundreds of patients brought in. They had committed suicide. Knowing that they were picking up the Jews on the street, they just went and committed suicide.

And I remember for the doctors, it was a big decision. Should they save them, or should they give morphine to help them? And I do know, the young people were saved. When they were very old, and it was pretty hopeless, the doctors almost gave morphine to help them to finish their life because it was either going there, to Auschwitz, or die in a bed.

Had you heard of Auschwitz at that time?

Oh, yes. Oh, yes. We have heard because there were constantly transports going to Auschwitz. Auschwitz was actually the only one, you know, the big concentration camp everyone feared. Birkenau, the name came through, but we didn't know if people were going there or not. It was always, you go to the east, to Auschwitz.

And there were also transports to Theresienstadt from Berlin. And up to '43, I was in the hospital working there. In 1943, it was my turn. And I was picked up.

We were notified the day before to get everything ready. That was a little bit of-- I think you had 10 kilos or something like that. And you put it in a knapsack, put your name on-- you got a number. And then the next day, they came to pick you up.

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And there was no sense to run away unless you knew where you were going. Where would you go? So we went. I came on the transport and left for Theresienstadt. And I spent two years in Theresienstadt. The time there-- hmm.

Now, what had you heard about Theresienstadt that when you were in Berlin?

Oh, we knew that Theresienstadt was a better camp, that people, prominent people were sent there. The Czech Jews were there. We knew that. Nobody had returned from there, but it was known. And also, they would send people there out of mixed marriages.

As you know, Theresienstadt became a show-off camp. So they wanted to show off, look, we have it. We have concentration camp, but it isn't all that bad. You never, never heard anything about Auschwitz. You only knew you go to Auschwitz, you work there, as work camps. But you knew, in Theresienstadt, it wouldn't be so bad.

And fortunate enough, I just was selected to transport to Theresienstadt. I don't know how come. But it's, again, fate, luck, whatever. And in Theresienstadt, we had to work in the beginning, something they called [NON-ENGLISH]. I don't know why.

We worked on a-- built barracks. And they didn't care if it was men or women. The younger people were selected for that. Very heavy work, we had to unload wood, which was used for the barracks, put it on huge heaps and things like that. And I worked there for about four weeks, I think.

And then I had to change. And I was ordered to work in a laundry. And I think the laundry was worse than the wooden-- the barrack place because you had-- the people had dysentery, and the dirty linen came. We had no hot water. We had hardly soap or things like that.

We tried our best to clean the sheets and dry them again. I don't know-- I don't remember where we dried them. I'm sure we didn't have dryers there. But being that that was I think by now November, very cold. And we stood there with bare feet, the cold water running over our feet.

So I got a cold, turned into pneumonia. And they put me in a barrack where they had all the sick people. They were younger people who were sick. And there I got a little better after the pneumonia, got an infectious hepatitis. I was very sick again.

But after this time, it had one advantage. I wasn't hungry anymore because I was so sick and didn't feel the hunger. Before that we suffered very much, the first few months, nothing really to eat. We had our barley soup and bread, but it wasn't too much. It wasn't the most nourishing things they gave us.

How many meals a day did you have?

We got, I think, some sort of coffee-- it looked like coffee-- to drink in the morning. It wasn't-- it wasn't coffee. Then we got our ration of bread, I think, every four days. We got a little tiny package of sugar at times, sometimes, not always. Middays, they had some barley soup or sometimes real barley to eat. That was good because it filled your stomach a little more.

And in the evening, you had to eat your bread. And you had to ration it yourself. When it was gone, it was your tough luck.

But I survived all that. I survived the hepatitis. And at that time, one of the doctors who used to come and check us found out that I was a nurse. And he said, oh, well, we need you. I'll make sure you come to the hospital. And from then on, I worked as a nurse in the hospital.

They had a regular hospital there. And the doctors-- the prisoners who were doctors worked there as doctors.

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And this, you claim, saved your life.

And that saved my life, I'm quite sure. Because-- and it was also-- the patients would get their food. If they didn't eat it, we could eat the rest. And you weren't fussy. You just-- whenever you could find some extra food, we ate it. That was the way to survive.

And I was there for two years. And of course, during that time, the people were talking. Oh, the war, I think, ended, since '43, since I got there, the war ended every month. This was rumors which went around. And you believe it because you want, you hope that things will come to an end, that you will survive, that you will see your family again. So you just keep on hoping. And I think that's human, and it's good. Otherwise, nobody would have survived.

When it-- excuse me.

No, I just want to say, do you remember any special groups coming through? Do you remember the Red Cross coming through for the inspections?

Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Oh, yes. I do remember the Swiss Red Cross coming in. And there were big, big preparation before. They changed the middle of that little garrison town, made a park out of it. There were suddenly flowers, tables, chairs. They had a little store, they wrote on "cafe." You couldn't buy anything, but it was written on. Yeah, it looked pretty.

And they had-- there was an orchestra. And they had to play. Children were dressed, and they were playing around. You know, it was just an ideal place to show the world and mainly the Red Cross, look, what are they talking about? Concentration camps. This is fine. This is the way they live here. So it was all a hoax.

And the moment the Swiss Red Cross disappeared, everything else disappeared too.

And yet, the incarcerated did try to keep up their morale with cultural events.

Yes, with cultural events. Yeah, there were. We used to go to, like, chamber music. They would play. Or someone would give lectures. Oh, we tried that. Every free minute, if you heard there was a lecture somewhere, you went in order to-- I think you wanted to live. You know, you didn't want to become an animal. And this was the only source which kept us alive Yeah, it was amazing.

Of course, you know, you worked most of the time. But we had some free time. We did have some free time and would go there and would meet friends. And as I said, this is the only thing that keeps you alive.

And then came-- and there was another incident I remember, that was very much in the beginning. They were trying to count us. I think it was November in the first year I was there.

We all had to go to a huge place, everyone, old, children, thing. I think we stood there almost 24 hours. They put groups. It was a big counting. We don't know why, what, or when. But we stood there and stood there. People-- people died there, you know, old people. It was horrible.

That was the only-- that was something I remember. And otherwise-- hmm.

And the transports kept kept going out.

The transports kept coming and going, coming from Germany of from Denmark, a big transport came. And the transport kept going out, and they were going to Auschwitz. And we knew that. And of course, everybody dreaded to be on there. And again, being a nurse, they needed me, and it probably saved me from a trip to Auschwitz. You see?

And I remember, when I got to the camp in 1943, there were approximately 60,000 prisoners in there. And I remember, in the beginning of '45, there were less than 10,000. So all those people had come and gone, come and gone.

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And then came April '45. We heard-- we could hear alarms from the bombing. And the Swedish Red Cross came one day. They were picking up all the Danish people. And they had room for 460. How many Danish people came in, they wanted to pick up. In the meantime, quite a number had died. So they did take a few of us.

We were fortunate. I knew someone who came from Denmark, and he spoke with the Danish soldiers-- with the Swedish soldiers. And this way I got onto that transport. And we were leaving for Denmark. So the war ended for me in 1945, in April already, even though the Russian, who later came to Theresienstadt didn't come until the beginning of May, I believe.

And I ended up in Denmark, came to a wonderful Danish family, total strangers. They just took me into their home. And these were the ones, the people who taught me to do the first steps as a free person again. And they also helped me to cope with the most difficult time, which was still to come. That is when you find out that your family didn't survive.

They taught me how to live without bitterness. They taught me how to live without hatred. They were just marvelous.

Ruth, we're going to take a short pause at this time.

Mhm.

OK. Does she want some-- can I get you water or something, or are you OK?

No, I think so. Do you want some water?

Yes, I'd love to.

What we'll do is we'll-- they're just doing some editing now. They're doing some editing now.

Oh, I see.

And then what we'll do is we'll go back, and we'll mention a few other things.

OK.

I hope you're not taping now. Oh, are you? Good.

I want to talk about the bombing in Berlin and what life was like--

In Berlin.

--in Berlin.

Well--

Then we'll go back to the liberation, how you went, how you got-- physically how you got out of Auschwitz and where you went.

When the white the buses came.

Yes. Yes. Yeah. And then--

Yeah. This I remember very well, of course. And there's a book written by the way, The White Buses.

Oh. Do you know the author?

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I think we have it.

Oh. I didn't know that.

Oh, yes.

I didn't know that.

The White Buses, it's our trip out of camp to Denmark. And this was, by the way, during one of the biggest bombardments in Berlin. OK.

Ruth, I wanted to go back to what life was like in Berlin. The Allies started to bomb Berlin very early in the war in retaliation for the bombings of the major cities, but particularly of London. What was that like, living under the bombing?

We didn't feel the bombing as a bombing. For us it was-- every bombing was a step towards the end of that war, which we hoped. And we didn't mind it as much. I don't think we were afraid.

The only thing, we had, like working in the hospital, it was-- real setup. The moment the alarm came, we had to be on our stations transporting patients into the cellars. At times, when everyone was at the cellar, we would run up and look at the fireworks because for us the bombing didn't mean that.

It didn't mean what it means for the Germans, that they lose their homes or so. For us, the bombings was the Allies are coming. And you know, Hitler will lose out at the end.

Did you see much devastation in the cities? Could you get out to see it?

Yes. We would go out the next day. As a matter of fact, I had one incident, where I was at a friend's house. And the bombing started. And the west of Berlin was very badly hit. And afterwards, there was no way of taking a subway or a streetcar back to the hospital. I walked. And I think I walked for several hours.

And I do remember, when I got home, I had all my legs are bleeding-- were bleeding. All little splits of glass had jumped up. I didn't even feel it. But it was burning right and left. And you had to try to go a little bit this street and the street, until you finally-- took hours. So this was one, you know-- I've been in many, many bombings.

But most of the time we had to stay with the patients and transport the patients. When it's clear, we would go up. And I think it was already in 1943, once there was an alarm, we would remain there during the entire night. Because in the beginning, we would take the patients up and an hour later take them down again. So it was much easier to remain downstairs.

And at the time of the Swiss intervention, could you tell us more about that in detail?

The-- which Swiss?

Not-- the Swedish, I'm sorry. I'm sorry-- the Swedish intervention, when the Swedish Red Cross came.

Came into the--

Into Theresienstadt.

--Theresienstadt. Yes, they came to-- I was working, and I remember the people came running to us and said, can you believe it? The Swedish Red Cross is here. They came with a whole slush of buses, white buses with a big red cross painted on top of the buses. So that they had done that they can be seen.

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And all the Danish people-- and as I mentioned before, we-- I was fortunate enough to get out with the Swedish Red Cross in that action. It was, by the way, an action-- Greve Bernadotte.

Count Bernadotte.

He was responsible for that action, that the people were taken out. And this was-- the war was still going on. So we were loaded into the buses. The music had to play, by the way, when we left. That was a horrible sight.

You know, we were already on Swiss territory. The moment we stepped into the bus, they couldn't touch us anymore. And here all the other people-- and war was still going on.

We left, and it took about eight days to drive through Germany to reach the Danish border. And I remember we had two German soldiers in each bus. They were just sitting there. And all the buses, the windows had shades. They didn't want us to see anything.

And at the time-- I don't recall which day it was-- they just kept driving. And there was two motorcycles which kept the whole group of buses together. They would just forth and back, back and forth. And we came towards Berlin. And suddenly we heard we had to turn around because there was a big bombardment plan, from one side the Russians, from the other side the Americans. And they could not stop it.

We would have been in the fire. So we turned about 60 kilometer back, into a forest, and waited there until it was over. You could hear the whole night the bombs flying. We had a few broken windows in the buses, but nothing happened to us.

And the next morning we start-- when everything was over, we started again. And I think it took an entire day just to go through Berlin because Berlin was, by then, ashes, nothing but ruins.

You went a little while, the street was closed. Ruins were lying on the street. It was burning. We turned around again. But we finally made it through Berlin.

By then the German soldiers, they didn't look at us anymore. They didn't object when we opened up the shades. It was-- we knew it was going to the end. And this way we reached, after about seven days, we reached Flensburg, which is the border town between Germany and Denmark.

And this was by then-- even though Denmark was still under German occupation, but we felt it was freedom already. The people knew that we were coming and were throwing flowers into our busses. It was like a-- it was a very strange feeling to be free again.

And even though they had German-- Germans on the street, they didn't do anything anymore.

And then you took the boat to--

We took the boat to Sweden. We remained in Sweden for three weeks. First they checked us. They had to see. We came with lots of fleas. And our hair-- we were-- as a matter of fact, I think they also-- the doctors checked us, and we had an X-ray. They wanted to see if people come with tuberculosis or things like that.

And then for three weeks, they kept us in quarantine in Sweden. And then we were returned to Denmark. And that's when I came to that family in the country somewhere. It was beautiful.

Did they give you any opportunity to go elsewhere? Or you just all had to go back to--

No. Most of the people who were on the bus, they had-- they came from Denmark. So they had--

I see.

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--either homes there--

I see, of course.

--or relatives. Everyone but a very few, about 10-- we were about 10, which they took along, and we were not-- we'd never been in Sweden-- in Denmark. So that was the only-- and as I said, they found homes for us.

Do you remember the names of the people?

Oh, yes, Rasmussen. Yes, I will always remember them-- just wonderful, wonderful people. They had three children, a girl who was younger than I am, a boy was my age, and an older one. And even though I didn't know a word of Danish, they made me feel so much at home. And as I said, they helped me very, very much.

And they also-- I'm grateful to them because they taught me to look ahead and not to look back constantly, which is probably the most important thing once you survive things like that.

And how did you find out about your family?

In the meantime, it became known that in Geneva is a place, where you could write to. And if they have lists from the concentration camps and so forth. And I don't know how they got them, but I wrote the names down of my parents, my sister. And I got the answers that they perished in Auschwitz. And that my-- my sister, I couldn't find out anything about my sister.

Much, much later I found out. I only knew she was stuck in Yugoslavia before I even went to camp. And they perished. That transport perished. I think altogether three illegal transports trying to go to Palestine at the time, two made it and one perished. And my sister was there.

How did you bring your life together after that?

Hmm?

How did you bring your life together after that?

Again, the profession I had helped me. I could start working in a hospital. I was left alone, but you find other people who were left alone. You meet friends. You make friends. And slowly but surely your life becomes worth living again.

And as I said, you just-- I will never forget. But you can't just look back all the time. It will kill you. It really would kill you. In this way I survived.

Then I went to Sweden. I worked in Sweden for a while and eventually managed to get an affidavit. And I came to the United States in 1949.

This was a testimony from Mrs. Ruth Knopp. And we greatly appreciate it. We know that the recounting of memory is painful. But it's something that the future has to know. Thank you, Ruth.

Yes, I think that's the most important thing. Thank you, Jack.

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