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Tell me your full name. Elizabeth with a Z. My middle initial is A. And I'll spell the last name F-E-L-D-H-U-S-E-N. Nobody ever gets it. Feldhusen.

Husen.

Feldhusen. I guess in German, you'd say Feldhoosen, and I say Feldhusen.

OK. This is July 14th, 1995. We're in West Park, New York. This is Neenah Ellis interviewing Elizabeth A. Feldhusen. Tell me, please, when were you born and where were you born?

Well, I was born in Brooklyn, New York, April 21st, 1918.

And where were you living when you decided to become a nurse?

Oh, I was still living in the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn on MacDonough Street between Lewis Avenue and Stuyvesant, which was a very nice area at that time. And my family lived there about 10 years. And then we moved to Park Slope in Brooklyn.

And why did you decide you wanted to be a nurse? How did you decide that?

Well, things happened in my life in peculiar ways. I had been a Girl Scout. And when I was 12, I still remember that we were given a course on home-- I think the Red Cross gave it. Home nursing and care of the sick.

And I just looked at that book, and read it once, and the whole thing was memorized. But my mother was always against it. So when I graduated from high school, I looked for a job. It was in the middle of the Depression.

What year did you graduate from high school?

In 1936, in June of '36. And I looked for a job and I finally found something in a hair net factory. And I worked one week and I wouldn't go back. My mother went back for my $7 check-- or cash, they paid in cash in those days. And then the same agency that had gotten me that job said, she would-- I was a Roman Catholic.

And they kept asking me if I would change my religion, believe it or not. So by then, that was around I think September or so. So I finally said, all right, I'll change it. So she said, just fill out the card and put Protestant down. Just, you know, make out the card the same way.

And she sent me over to a place where there-- oh, there must have been about 10 or 12 of us. And they gave us little tests. And the one test I remember was a row of numbers. And they said, just put a circle around, say, the sevens. Just go down the whole column.

And then we had some other things that were similar. And then they disappeared. And then they came out again, and they said, well, miss so-and-so, and miss so-and-so, and miss Feldhusen will please remain. And the others may go.

So I was hired. And I worked there until-- I think it was from November, maybe October, until the 1st of February. And then I went into nurse's training. But the way the nurse's training came about was that my father tuned pianos.

Can you tell me this, I'm going to, hang on one second.

One of his jobs was a Brooklyn state hospital. In those days, they had big state hospitals.

OK.

So my father talked to the-- well, when he went to Brooklyn State, he always went in to see the superintendent. And

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then they would let him know where he was to go. So he knew the superintendent quite well. So he told him about his daughter who was having trouble finding a job.

But eventually, you know, I was working, just doing file clerk work. And so the superintendent says, well, we have a nurses training school here. Why don't you have your daughter come and enter our class? And that was around October, November. So my father came home and told me that.

And I said, well, I'm sure the classes started in September. And I would be two months later. And I'd never be able to catch up. So my father says, well, I pass by Kings County hospital when I go to Brooklyn State. Because he went on the subway.

And so I wrote to Kings County and applied. And they sent me all the applications and whatnot. Now, they took classes twice a year. And their next class was the 1st of February. So I was accepted.

And then where I was working, I worked right up until the last day, and left, and went into nurses training. And just by happenstance, I really picked one of the best schools in New York. In its day, it was very, very fine.

And I had a friend that went to Bellevue, and there was just no comparison. We were treated like young ladies and we were expected to be young ladies. And at Bellevue, it was helter-skelter, come as you go, and just really you had to be tough to go there. So it worked out very well for me.

When did you finish your training?

Well, that was a three-year training course. And they practically don't have those anymore. But when I graduated, I had always wanted to go into public health. We had two months of public health experience as part of our nurses training, and I liked it.

And so I went to the Brooklyn Visiting Nurse Association and applied for a position. And she said, you have to have one term of college. So then I went to New York University and went to night school. And I finally got my 16 college points.

And I worked for them almost a year. But then people were going into the army, and I had patients. My sickest patients would say to me, what are you taking care of me for? You should be taking care of the boys.

Really?

I heard that time and time again. So I have a very close friend, and she also wanted to go. So we went in together.

When was that?

That was very vivid in my mind, the 1st of July, 1943. I still remember that first day.

What was it like? What happened?

Oh, it was a day like this. Hot as anything. And her brother took us to get the train to go down to Wilmington, Delaware. And we were given very little instruction as to what to do. We got down to Delaware, down to Wilmington.

And I think there was a very brief letter. And it said, you go to Wilmington and you take the Army bus to Fort DuPont, Delaware. And we couldn't find the bus. And there was no air conditioning in those days. And we were rushing around from here to there. And we were there almost all day. And we were so hot. I was exhausted.

And we went to the travelers agency that was supposed to help travelers. They didn't know a thing about Fort DuPont. And they were there, really, to help people in the service. Didn't know anything about their bus service.

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Well, finally, as I recall, somebody overheard us. Must have been a soldier. And he said, oh, yes, there was a bus around 6 o'clock at night, something like that. And he told us where to go. So we ended up at Fort DuPont. We didn't have any supper. And we were just exhausted.

And the chief nurse just acted as if we were arriving at 8 o'clock in the morning. And I thought she was going to put us on duty right away. But she finally let us go and showed us our rooms. And that led-- that was my first day of Army experience. And it was really, really-- it wasn't very pleasant.

Now, I was just looking at Phyllis's photographs. Now, she was in big hospitals, like Tilton General and England General. And I was very small. We only had seven nurses and four doctors, very small place.

There at Fort DuPont?

At Fort DuPont, Delaware.

How long were you there?

I was there, I think, about a year and a half. And then my friend and I were picked to go overseas. And we joined this 131st Evacuation Hospital.

Where did you join them?

Well, I try to think. I'm not really-- we went. I really don't remember, really, how we formed or whether we had to report someplace down in South Carolina. That's where we left from. But it's really very vague in my mind.

Were you on the ship, then, on the Queen Elizabeth crossing with them?

Yes, we were all together. Yes. And there were 40 of us. And half were in one state room and half in another state room. And we had bunks up to the ceiling. And I had a bottom bunk. And I really had to lie on the floor in order to get into that bunk.

And then all night long, the ship would go this way and that was-- so you're either on your feet or on your head. But the reason was-- I don't know if the other girls told you. But that we turned every seven minutes in order to avoid the submarines. Because we did not have any escort across the ocean.

Were you nervous?

I don't remember that I was. You know, when you're young. And it was like an adventure. You know, and all these activities and whatnot you had never been exposed to before. But we were very crowded. That I remember. It was very hard to find a place to sit down anywhere, as you know we had about 10,000 troops on that ship.

Wow. And 40 nurses?

Yeah. Well, the nurses, we didn't do anything. You know, we were just in a group. We weren't performing any nursing-- excuse me, any nursing functions.

Were you the only women on the ship?

Yeah, as I remember, we were the only women.

40 women out of 10,000.

Well, I'll tell you, men were more respectful in those days. In fact, I remember when I was at Fort DuPont, and two of the men, two of the corpsmen were out in the hall, and one of them used a foul word.

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Watch your microphone there.

And he immediately came in and apologized. You see, and that wouldn't exist today because the girls themselves use terrible language. I hear it when I go to Brooklyn, right in the street. So I think women have really damaged themselves by trying to become-- meet the level of everybody else.

Tell me what it was like in England. What did you do in England?

Well, course, we landed in Greenock, Scotland. And we had to climb over the side and get down onto a trawler because the Queen could only go in so far. And then we tramped-- we had these heavy boots on and fatigues. And we tramped to a train station. And I can still remember that the noise, you know, as we walked in the street.

And everybody, of course, I think everybody was probably nervous because we didn't know what was going to happen. And we came to a train station and we got on the train. And this is about 2:00 or 3 o'clock in the morning. And we rode for a while and then we got off. And then we tramped some more.

And then they said, the girls will have this building, and then the men will be here, and the other men will be there. And as we went down the street, everybody got a place to live. And you went in, and there was a pile of blankets in the front hall. And you grabbed a blanket and you just laid on it. And mine was so greasy. I was awake all night, I couldn't sleep. And that was the beginning of our adventure there.

See, we were supposed to go right into France, and then changes were made. Something happened to the American troops. And so everything was changed. So then we didn't do much of anything. And finally, we were assigned to local units. And I know I went to Wales and worked there. But I really don't know how long I was there. A couple of weeks.

You were there caring for American soldiers?

Yeah, they were running, actually, American-run hospitals. And the one in Wales, the nurses lived in these Nissen huts. And when you wanted to take a bath, you had to run out and, well, quite a distance to go to the bathroom or to take your bath. And so you didn't take a bath too often.

But I know the nights when I got off duty, I had everything all ready. And I just grabbed everything and then ran up to that place. Because if you didn't get there first, somebody else did, and you didn't get any more hot water. So I mean, even if you took a bath twice a week, at least you got a good one if you got there first.

So I was there probably a couple of weeks. And I was on a psychiatric ward, which I never cared for that service. But anyhow. And then eventually, we were all recalled, and then we went over into Europe proper.

All of you 40 together.

Yes, all of us, yes. Except one nurse. She was married and before we went overseas, we had time off. And she met her husband in Florida. We were all wondering what's happened to her. You know, we lost sight of her. And she got pregnant in that short period. So by the time we got to England, she knew she was pregnant. And they sent her right home.

So we had 39. And we never-- and they told us, if anything happened, we would never-- nobody would be replaced. So we functioned just with the 39 then.

So you crossed the English Channel and went to--

And we did that in the middle of the night also. And they dropped these big gasoline-- I don't know what they call them. They're about as big as gasoline cans. And that went on all night. You just heard boom--

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Death charges?

--boom, boom because of the submarines. So and then we landed in France. Gee, I've forgotten the name of the place.

Le Havre. Le Havre, Le Havre is where we-- because I'd never been to Europe before. And I wanted to see everything I could. And then they loaded us into trucks.

Do you remember what month this would have been?

We were not allowed to keep diaries. And I had everything with me. And we were told we must get rid of everything. And that's my-- and a lot of people-- I don't know about my unit, but other people did keep diaries. I mean men. And so the dates are very vague to me. And I don't know if--

Was it warm? Was it summer? Do you remember?

Oh, no, no.

Was it, would it have been--

I remember now. Now, I'm beginning to remember. When we were still in England, we landed two days before Christmas. Now, it's coming back to me. And when we were still back in the States, somebody, one of the girls said, we're going to land near Christmas, let's get gifts for the men. And I don't know who that was. Or a couple of them bought all little gifts and wrapped them all up. And we knew how many people there were.

And one of the men dressed up in Santa Claus. This is after we were in England, in Bowden-- what's the name. There were three names. Anyhow. And Santa Claus went around and gave out the gifts. And the men were really shook up, because a lot of them were family people. And anyhow, that was our first Christmas. Just about two days before Christmas was when we landed there.

That was Christmas of 1944.

Yes.

Right.

Yes.

So the Battle of the Bulge was going on in--

Which may be why we didn't go into France directly. But we really-- I mean, all these things you hear about, all the Stars and Stripes, that newspaper. I never saw that paper. We never had any of this entertainment, you know, of the troops being entertained. And we never had any of that.

We were always very isolated. When we went into Europe proper, then we were living in tents. And there were about six of us in each squad tent. So we did go over, I would say February, March. Some ways around then.

Somebody else told me March.

Yeah, it could have been March.

And you were transported, then, through France?

Well, we always drove in 2 and 1/2 ton trucks. And our unit was always together. And we had a colonel that was very considerate of the nurses. And he always had a party go ahead to wherever we were going to be. And he had the

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trenches dug, you know, because we-- and the tents put up.

So when the nurses arrived, they went right into their tents. And we had our latrines and everything set up. He always had that done first. He was a very considerate man, which is sort of unusual, you know, especially when they're doctors.

And then he loved to travel. And eventually, when we were working at Gusen, camp Gusen, and we were near some of these-- now, one of the girls mentioned this place. And I'd been there twice. And he knew about it because he traveled a lot in Europe and wanted us to see that. And I had two chances to go because not everybody wanted to go.

Let's go back. A little bit before you got to Gusen, that wasn't the first place where you set up. You were set up in tents?

Oh, yeah, we were set up in quite a number of places, yes.

In the spring of '45.

Yeah.

March, April, May. Before the war. There was still fighting going on.

Oh, yes. April. I mean, when we were in Germany, when the war was over-- no, before that, we were going to be overrun by the Germans. We all got a Battle Star for that. And we were given instructions. That I remember vividly. And we were told, just continue working as if nothing was happening. Take care of your patients, do the same thing. And you may be questioned, but just answer the questions. But don't let it bother you.

And of course, we weren't. But we were very close. And you could hear these great, big tanks coming. In fact, one day, on my ward, one tank was so close, and you could hear it coming, that even the bed patients got out of bed to see it. You know, you could hear this noise coming. And I guess they were alarmed because you didn't know who it was. But they were Americans.

So we were very close, just at that one period. And that was some place in Germany. I couldn't tell you where.

And then eventually, we went into Austria. And that was when our unit left us for about a week or two weeks. And the colonel said, we'll be back. And one of the girls, she was going with one of the men that she eventually married. And she started crying. I can remember Jeanie [? Albers ?], so upset. She says, we're never going to see them again.

Anyhow, they did come back when they said they would. And they got us. And then the colonel in the morning said, you know-- where he had us all standing. This makes me very emotional. I can't help it. Every time I tell this.

He said, you don't have to go. He said, there's a lot of tuberculosis and a lot of chronic illnesses. And he said, you don't have to go if you don't want to. Well, everybody went except about three or four people. And when we came back the next day, everybody went.

Where was? Where were you when he told you this?

That was at Gusen.

When you arrived there?

Yeah, we were living in Linz. Well, we had to go on duty the next day, as soon as they came and got us.

Wait, let me make sure this is clear. You went to Austria from Germany.

Yes.

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Right. And this would have been the end of April, early May.

Maybe, could be. I've always been wanting to get my units-- you know, each unit had to write up their experience. And I've always been wanting to get a copy of that. Because I don't know about the dates.

Well, when did he tell you this? Before you got to Linz?

Oh, no, when we arrived at Linz. He then said he wanted the nurses lined up. You know, you lined up for everything. And we stood. And and that was when he told us that, that we did not have to go if we didn't want to.

Did he tell you what you would see?

I don't remember. All I remember is that he said there's a great deal of tuberculosis here, which is quite infectious. And whatever else he told us, that's about all I remember of it. And maybe he told us we'd see a lot of things that would be very hard to accept. But I'm very vague on that. Had you heard anything about concentration camps?

No, I never had. No. Now see, some of the girls knew a lot of the officers, you know. And they may have learned things that way. But I never knew. I never had anything to do with them. I never bothered. Well, like that one girl, they were keeping company. So I'm sure he must have talked to her about things. Now, what he heard, I don't know.

The next day, then.

The next day, we went on duty right away. The next morning. And that was when he told us that.

And that was at Gusen?

Yes.

And what was your responsibility?

Well, I had a ward, big ward. And there was a great deal of diarrhea. And we were giving out sulfanilamide, which is I don't think it's a drug used anymore. But it's before the antibiotics came in. And oh, we gave out like 20 pills. And everybody was up in tiers. In order to get up to the top person, you had to stand on the lower tiers to reach them.

Was this a barracks that they were in?

It was like a barracks, yes.

It wasn't a hospital.

Well, I think our hospital called it the hospital because all these were the sickest people. And they were in line in these tiers, these one, two-- there were at least three.

Were those are the barracks that they had been living in previously?

That I really don't know. That I don't know.

But you would-- that became your ward, then. And you cared--

That was-- yes.

--for them every day?

And eventually, we got these young German prisoners of war to help us as wardmen, you know, to carry bedpans, and

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urinals, and help. And we had very little to eat. We didn't have much food. And our group went around, thinking they could get food from the German warehouses. And they found they were empty. Everything had been used up, you know, because it was the end. And everybody was-- I guess the Germans were fleeing and had used up what they could. And that was really, I guess, they ran out of-- must have run out of supplies and whatnot.

And what was the condition of the people when you first saw them? Were they all men that you were caring for?

Yeah, they were all men where I was. Yes.

And the first day you saw them, what was their condition?

Well, they were lying in bed, and they were weak, and very thin. And I guess it was shocking when you're not used to seeing all those types of things and people.

Were they clothed? Yeah, they had shirts on of some kind. And pajamas.

The striped--

Seems to me.

--did they have on the striped?

No, I don't remember that. It just seems to me that they had plain pajamas on. I don't really remember exactly what they had on. But they were covered.

Were they able to speak to you?

Well, they didn't speak English. But I can get by with a little German. And so that was-- but I mean, there really wasn't too much to say, either, you know, when you're coming with the pills, and they're objecting. And you're saying, [GERMAN] taking, you know, me with my German and English. So they got the picture. And then they'd swallow them.

Were you bathing them?

No, we didn't do anything like that, no.

Did other people do that for them?

No, I don't think so. Really, it just took you all day giving out the medication.

Why did that take so long?

Well, because we had so many people. Oh, I had a big ward. I don't know. I had rooms and rooms with all these people in tiers, three or four tiers growing up. In one room, you had, boy, three, four, eight, 12. I bet you had about at least 20 people in one room. You know, all these, like three and three. It's sort of vague to me, though.

Did you feed them? Did you have food for them?

Well, we had food. And that's another thing. I don't quite recall how we did that. We would have to have had trays. Unless we had-- maybe there were tin dishes and we gave them the dishes. You know. That, again, is vague to me. Just how we did that, I don't remember anymore.

What kinds of precautions were you able to take to protect yourself from?

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We really didn't take any.

Nothing.

No, we had fatigues on and that was all. We didn't wear gowns or anything.

Other people have mentioned DDT spray.

Oh, that's another thing. Yes. Before we went on duty, we had a gun that was about that long, and they'd fill it with DDT. And then it had a plunger, and you held your thing, your suit open like this, and somebody would plunge it and plunge it down the back. And then your hair was all done. We wore helmets.

It was powder. DDT powder.

With powder, yes. And I don't know. I had cancer of the breast. And nobody ever asked me if I was exposed to DDT. And I often wonder if I don't have anything to do with that. But then there are an awful lot of women that have had the same thing that I have. But we certainly was full of DTT.

Every day.

Every day we did it, tons of it. Nobody realized how dangerous it was.

Probably grateful to have it.

Yeah. Yeah, because they said there might be lice, you know, and whatnot. But I never caught anything.

Did anybody?

I don't think so. I was very sick when I was in England, but that's before I ever had any contact with them. So I think we were all quite healthy.

In the evenings, when you weren't on duty, what did you do?

Well, all we had were these tents to sit in. We went on walks. Oh, that was in England, when I went on that walk. Oh, I know. When we were in Germany, in one area, a whole group of us, including the men, decided to go on a walk. And we did walk up on a hill.

And there was-- you could hear the cuckoo. You know, in Germany, the cuckoos sound like the cuckoo clock. And I was a bird watcher, and I says, oh, I'm dying to see that cuckoo. So the whole group of us went up and climbed up that hill. And we were walking around and looking. And we could hear it coming from different.

And all of a sudden, bullets started firing. See, it was a come on. And we got down from there very, very fast. And there was no mistaking who we were, because we had big red crosses on all our tents. Our tents were all down at the base. But you could hear the bullets flying right overhead. You could hear them whistling. Never saw anybody.

When you were working every day at Gusen in Austria, do you remember ever going out into the town there? Seeing the local people at all? Did you ever do that?

Well, we lived about 10 miles away. And they transported us back and forth by truck. And we did-- in the building I was, we were in two houses, the nurses were because we were all bunched up together in the rooms.

And we had a girl, a German girl, that took care of-- kept everything clean and whatnot. But we really didn't converse very much with her because most of the girls didn't know any German. And she didn't know any English.

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But there was one girl in my group that wanted a tablecloth that she had fixed up nicely to decorate, you know, make everything look nicer. And she wanted that tablecloth. And she said, ask her, you know, if I can have the tablecloth, or she'll sell it to me, or what.

So I asked her. And she said no. She says, my husband gave me that, and I don't know where he is. So I mean, the sorrow was on their side also. So war is just awful. That's why this Bosnia really bothers me. What they're doing there to people, just awful.

How long did you stay there working at Gusen?

Well, we came home-- the war in Japan. Well, while we were still-- no, that was in Germany when the war was over and Hitler killed himself. And my friend Grace brought this radio with her. I think she was ready to throw it away many a time. And you could never really get anything on it because we had so little electricity.

But she had it connected that night. And we could hear the funeral music. And we said, something has happened. But we found out later, you know, that Hitler had killed himself. And that was all, you know. Everything was garbled. You couldn't get anything. We hardly had a light to see by. You know, one light and just enough electricity so you could find your way around. Because we had our own generators and they were very limited.

But when we were in Gusen, did somebody tell you about that terrible accident when we were crossing the river? We were talking about it earlier. Every once in a while, you know, like the infantry or the armored group would find out that there were nurses in the area. And then we would be invited over for a social evening. And we'd all went in a big group. And we all came back together.

And we were going to cross the river, the Danube. And that's a very fast-flowing river. And there were signs there. I'd been across it a couple of times. And signs that said to the Jeeps, do not start up your engines until the boat has docked.

And it was just a flat board, you know, boards. And we went over on a wire. And the wire was connected to the boat. And that would guide it over. And then it would come back again. Otherwise, the boat would-- it wasn't really a boat, it was a raft-- would be swept down the river.

So we arrived this evening. We were quite a group of us. For a social evening, some group across the river. And the soldier that was there on duty was in a terrible state. And he said the most awful thing has happened, he said. So there'll be a little delay.

He said, one of the Jeeps started up their engine. And a nun had come along with her horse and carriage. And the horse bolted, it frightened him so, that he just ran. And of course, there was nothing to stop him. Ended up in the river. And she and the horse drowned.

Now, we were talking about that earlier today. And they said, they thought that the nun had some children in the-- orphans or something. I says, I don't ever remember hearing that. But I know then-- and they finally found her and the horse. The horse, they let him just go. He was already gone. But she was drowned. The waters was so swift there. So little things like that happened, you know. And tragedy. Didn't have to.

Yeah.

But it was the way they-- because all the bridges had been blown up, you see. In fact, when we crossed the bridge, the Rhine, we came down a hill. And we were in a truck. And we went across on pontoon, a pontoon bridge.

And I remember, we were coming down the hill, and one of the girls stood up, and she started screaming. She thought we were going to go right into the water. And the pontoon bridge, you know, the pontoons with something in between were just wide enough. And the truck went across very carefully. So that was an experience, too.

Do you ever remember having any sense of whether or not the local people knew that there was a concentration camp

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there?

No, I really never mingled. We really didn't have that occasion. And the only person was this maid that we had in our building. And I don't remember her name anymore. She was, really as I remember, a very nice person. And some of the girls said they asked her. I never did. And they said she didn't know anything about it.

But I mean, when things have come up like that, I said, if terrible things go on in our prison, do we really know about it? I said, like the people living in Sing Sing. Unless they know the guards who come home at night, how, really, are you going to find out about things?

So I don't really know that you can really blame somebody and said they must have known. But I mean, how do you really know unless you knew somebody that had something to do with it?

Well in some cases, if there was a crematorium, there would be smoke. And, you know, thousands of people coming in and nobody coming out.

But see, the town we lived in, they said, was about 10 miles away. They told us. You know, we'd be-- apparently, that was the only housing they could find. And we had to. We were driven those 10 miles going in the morning and 10 miles coming back in the evening.

You didn't have any sense of that.

No. And there weren't people living around us. I think the German officers had lived in these houses and left in a hurry. Did you get that story from anybody? And they left two dachshunds. And we adopted one dachshund. And we took them all the ways back to France when we were going home. And then we had to stay in these Lucky Strike. Did you hear about those? The different--

Camps.

--camps. And we stayed in Lucky Strike. And they wouldn't let us take our dog in. And the fellow said, no animals allowed. But when you go home, you can have them back. And we never saw him again.

What was him name?

Schlafen. Means he was sleepy. He was probably an older dog. And he was such a nice dog. We have photographs of him. And when we were going back, we went back on the train. And then we'd take turns, you know, when the dog had to wee-wee, jump off the train.

Or the train would stop in the middle of woods, wooded areas. We don't know why it stopped, but it would stop. And sometimes, it would be there a half hour and sometimes 10 minutes. Well, I know when I jumped off with the dog, and he's going from one tree to another, as dogs do.

All of a sudden, the train started up. He didn't stay there. He must have been there five minutes. And I'm running. And I lifted up the dog. And I could still remember all the hands. And they took the dog and then they grabbed me because it was going faster and faster. So I would still be there, I guess, if they hadn't got me back on.

Well, do you know how long were you in Gusen? When did you leave there?

I couldn't tell you exactly how long. But I was home for August, when the war was over, the Japanese War. I had just gotten home before that. Well, our unit did. And they gave us a month vacation. And I was home during that period.

On leave.

On leave. And then we reassembled. And that was August. So I must have been there then till the beginning of August.

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Or maybe the end of July.

And do you think you were at Gusen three, four weeks, something like that?

Oh, at least. Oh, I think so. Longer than that. And then the different nationalities were coming. And I can remember the French came to take all those prisoners that had been French. Or victims. And the French were so ungrateful. Because we hadn't fed them, and we hadn't this, and we hadn't that. And there wasn't anything to do anything with.

Who? Who was ungrateful?

They were like the French nationals.

Who were in the concentration camp?

Oh, well, people. We had all nationalities there. And the different representatives from those countries came. And then they'd go off for the whole group of, say, French-speaking or Dutch people, or-- there were other nationalities there. I remember the French most vividly.

And who was not grateful?

The French that came for their nationals.

They thought that you should care for them.

We should have done much better than we did.

For them?

Yeah, for their nationals that were in the concentration camp.

Did you treat everybody the same?

Everybody was treated the same. In fact, you didn't know who was who, one from the other. But that was-- you know, when everything was winding down and these people were going home back to their own countries.

But in retrospect, was it-- are you saying it was the best care you could give? But was it?

It wasn't really the best. But it was the best in the circumstances. I don't think anything more could have been done. I mean, you could think of when you run a hospital, what about the laundry service? And what about this service? And that service? And I guess it was all minimal. Probably there wasn't any laundry service.

But I can remember that they had sheets. I think they had straw as mattresses. And it seems to me that it was like in a bag, like a sleeping bag. You know, it would all be stuffed in there. Otherwise, it would be flying all over.

And it seems to me that's what they had. And I don't remember that it was especially soiled or anything. You know, when you look back all those years and you don't pay that much attention, you don't really recall all that.

Yeah. Hang on a second. This is the end of tape two, side A, Elizabeth Feldhusen. OK. Here we are. Hello, hello, hello, hello. When you were in-- oh, I'm sorry, this is tape three, side B, Elizabeth Feldhusen.

When you were in Austria and attending to the survivors at Gusen, I understand that there was also near by the Mauthausen concentration camp.

Yes.

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Were there nurses caring for people there also?

Not that I know of. I really don't know of any other nurses that ever worked with concentration patients.

Americans.

I don't know of any. No.

Americans in Europe?

Yes.

I didn't realize that.

It would be interesting to find out if there were any others. But I never heard of any others. And there may have been, but I don't know of any, personally.

When you would come back from your duty during the day, what would you all talk about at night? What was?

Oh, my. That's so many. I guess we talked about our work. Because nurses tend to do that. And so we probably did talk about what we saw and experiences during the day.

Do you remember it being hard for people to cope with or was it just--

No, I really don't. I don't really. And how did you find out about us having a get-together? Not through this Genie Striker, she's down in Florida. Her name, she's married now. She has a different name.

How is it that, out of 40 nurses, so many of you have kept in touch over 50 years? What was it about that experience that made you all be so bonded together?

Well, I think one thing was that we had lived together so closely. The whole time we were in Europe, until we got to Linz, we lived in these squad tents, and there were always five or six of us in a tent. And when we were in England, we lived in one house. And we had to fit into that house. There were always quite a number of us in each room. So you grew to be very close.

I think if we probably all had our own rooms-- and yet, in my nurse's training, we had our own rooms, and my class is still very close. We still-- in fact, I go to all my Kings County luncheons. We have one in Pennsylvania and we have one in New York City. I go to both of them. But most of the girls go to the one in Pennsylvania. So most of them have moved out of New York and live there in Pennsylvania.

But I think it's the living close. And we all got along very well together. I really don't know of any enmity between anybody, you know, ruffled feelings or anything. I think we've always gotten together.

But really, I think I have to pat myself on the back. Because I think I started having us get together. And there was-- in 1947, that was the big snowstorm. And I had arranged for us to have luncheon down at a candlelight restaurant in Brooklyn Heights, which was a lovely restaurant in a brownstone. And they gave you popovers. The whole dinner, they kept coming out of the oven with these delicious popovers.

And we had this get-together. And with the storm that we had, two people came down from Syracuse. Phyllis Law was one of them and Loreena, who passed away, was the other one. And Loreena says, I was so amazed to see all that snow because Syracuse has the snow, usually. But they didn't have it. And we were just snowed in. And our chief nurse just couldn't get there. She called me. She says, I can't get the doors open.

How many people were able to make that first reunion?

I think we had about 10 or 11. And I believe we were expecting about 20 because they would be the people from the New York area. But the two came from Syracuse. But it was the big snowstorm. And then they said that we had a reunion at Hotel St. George. I said, I'm sure it was the candlelight. Because I know the one was at the candlelight. And I almost think we had two at the candlelight.

And I kept calling the woman who owned the restaurant. And she says, it's perfectly all right. Because I thought we'd be charged for all those dinners. And she said no, it's perfectly understandable, you know, when people can't get in. And so every time I had a cancellation, I'd call up.

When you look back on your experience 50 years ago as a nurse and during World War II, and especially that experience you had caring for the survivors of the concentration camp, what is the lesson for you? Or how do you think that changed your life in any way, or you as a person?

Well, I mean, I was talking to the other girls earlier. I don't know if you were there. But I mean, what's going on in today's world, I don't think we've learned lessons at all. And at that time, I felt just like the United Nations.

We would all be getting along together and create an understanding. I've been a member of the United Nations for quite a number of years. When I lived in New York, I went to a lot of their activities. But it seems worse to me than ever. Which I can't understand.

You were hopeful at the end of the war.

I was very hopeful. Yeah. But I mean, it's all within the last 10 years that things have changed. And to me, it's so hard to understand, when we can all get along together and be happy. It's very disillusioning to me.

And you would think, after that experience of the Holocaust, that everything would have dramatically changed. But now, these skinheads that you read about, they even have them in this country. I mean, nobody seems to appreciate what they have.

And in this country, you have more of the good life than you have almost any place. And because I'm very much against these people, what is it, that rifle group. I think they all help to perpetuate these terrible things that are going on. And I think things are going to get worse.

How do you think that having witnessed what you witnessed-- what kind of an impact did that have on you as a person after the war?

Well, I think that-- everybody said it can't happen again. You know, it just can't happen again. You know, we had a chaplain, and he gave us all these photographs. You probably saw them. I don't know whether you did or not. We all had a set of them. Horrible.

But I mean, those photographs, I think, were worse than anything I really saw. You know, the bodies in the pits being buried, and all this and that stuff. I think that we were sort of shielded from that, and really didn't see as much as in those photographs. So it's hard to say.

And I mean, I happen to be German. And I have relatives over there. I have never talked to them about it. Well, the younger ones were born way after. You know, they're all about in their 30s.

But my cousin, she's my second cousin, she's about 65. I never brought it up to her. I never talked to her because I was sort of embarrassed. And I didn't know how to bring it up. And so I never really said anything to her. And I had stayed with her parents once, when I first went to Europe. I stayed with her parents for almost a week. Five or six days. And they never really talked about the war.

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And in '58, you know, it wasn't too far behind. And they had one chair in the house. And I don't know how that came up, whether I said something, what a nice chair it was or not. I don't recall. And he said, we were all out. He said, the children were in school. And he and his wife-- he was at work and his wife was off someplace. And when they came home, the house was just rubble.

And he said, I pulled that chair from the rubble. He said it was the only thing that was any good. And that's all that was ever said. I never said anything more, never brought it up. Well, I mean, that's no joke either.

What about since that time? Have you ever had a conversation with somebody where they tried to tell you that the Holocaust didn't happen?

Not really. It's only what I have been reading in the paper. And I really don't know how they can believe that. I mean, when all the evidence is there. To me, I can't see. It just doesn't match up at all. How can you deny something when you have all the evidence? The photographs, and you can go over there and see it, and everything else.

Well, I think we just have a lot of crackpots or something or other. Just like those skinheads. They're not all normal, they can't be, to act the way they are. And arousing all these anti feelings against people.

Because I grew up in New York, where your friends-- I had all kinds of-- I had Black, and White, and Jewish, and all. And you just knew everybody. And a lot of my friends from childhood, I still keep up with. You accept people for the way they are. And maybe people growing up in smaller towns aren't exposed to different types of people to that extent.

Did you have Jewish friends growing up? And in nursing school?

Oh, yeah. I have a friend in Lakewood, Lilian Scherr. And I always, I say to Lilian, how'd we have ever get acquainted? Because she's about three or four years older than I am. And she was working in the operating room. And we're very good friends.

Do you ever remember her or anybody else saying something to you about the difficulties that Jewish people were having in Europe before the war? Were you conscious of that at all?

No, no, no. Now Lillian went into the Army, but she was in Burma. And she will not speak about her Army experiences. And lately, I've been thinking about it. I wonder why. Because I always thought so many of my experiences were so interesting. But I once asked her about Burma. And she's different, you know? She'd say, I don't want to-- she'd go like this, you know. She didn't want to.

So I really don't know what went on. She never talked about her own experiences. So it must have been a very unhappy experience for her. But I don't think they ever had anything to do with the native people. And I would think going to Burma must have-- just to see the country, you know.

This is the 50th anniversary this year of the end of the war. Has that made you think about your experience more?

No, someone asked me, aren't you going to go to some of these reunions over in Europe? And I said, I have no desire to go. And I don't know of any-- I haven't heard of anybody that I know that has gone, except one man I know. But he's very active in military organizations. But otherwise, I really don't. And I have no desire to go.

I think maybe if a group of us had gone, that might have been something.

Would you be interested, for example, in going back to Gusen? Or go to Linz?

Well, I've sort of wondered about it. I've been to Europe several times, but always with a group. When you're on a tour, you can't do what you want to do. But some of our people did go back. I don't think anybody in this group, you know, that's here today. But I would say at least three people did go. And I'm trying to think who they were that did that. Woody might remember. But I really don't recall.

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And I know one person said, well, it seemed to be the same as it was when we were there. But I don't have any burning desire to go. It was just an unpleasant time of life.

And that's how you think about it, it's something you'd rather forget?

Yeah, I think so. Yeah, I believe so. And then sometimes, I wonder why, you know, rehashing everything. You know, what is the real outcome of that going to be? But I think the reason was so that it wouldn't happen again.

But when you think of what people do to people, what's going on today, I don't think it's had any influence whatsoever.

Anything I didn't ask you about that you would like to talk about or tell me about?

Well, no. It's only that, once in a while, something that's said brings up another idea. But otherwise, just some funny incidences. And I don't think so. I think we covered the highlights.

OK, good.

Unless you want to hear about my German prisoner of war that helped us in--

Of course.

--Gusen. I don't always tell it because some people don't really think it's-- anyhow, he was a very-- I don't think he was more than 18, 17. And he lost his meat can. You know, it's a two-part dish. I still have mine at home. And you have your silverware on the inside. And when you go to get something to eat, you open it up and you have two parts. And they put the food in it. And then you wash it and put it together again.

Well, he came on duty. And he hung, I guess, a jacket and his meat can on the back of a door. Happened to be a hook there. Well, and then he came to me, and he told me in German that his meat can was gone. And I said, are you sure you left it there? And yeah.

So I started looking under everybody's pillow. And I'm climbing on all these tiers and looking. And I finally found it. My god, he was practically kneeling every time I passed him. Because he told me he'd be killed if it was found out that he lost it. Oh, he was so frightened. Oh.

Which is why I really worked very hard to find it. And I did find it. Oh, he was frantic. And he was just a kid, you know. And we had German prisoners of war when I was at Fort DuPont. And I had some funny experiences with them, too.

Before you went overseas?

Before I went over. Yeah, we had 10,000 prisoners there at Fort DuPont. And when we were on night duty, we worked from 7:00 PM to 7:00 AM, 12 hours. And then you got an extra day off for that. You did that for two weeks.

So the prisoners, when we were preparing for them, we had just a very small hospital with three wards and some private rooms. And the prisoners of war were at least a mile away. We had quite a big hospital there, but it was empty. So they put their ward as far away as you could go.

How I wished I had roller skates. Because you had to go down there and gave out-- you put out the medicines. I put them in all little medicine glasses with the name of the person. Because we had a ward man who was German. He gave out all the medicines. He did everything except the narcotics and the injections.

So he called me one night. It was pouring rain. And he said, we're being flooded down here. And because I could understand them, you see. And one of the duties of the night nurse was to run across an open ramp into the nurses'

quarters and close all the windows. And we had these rainstorms that came up in Delaware in a second. And it just came down, you can't imagine.

And so I had just come back from the nurses' quarters. You ran into everybody's room closing windows. And the telephone call came in. So I ran down there, and they had a guard. And he had a whole ring like this of keys. Well, anyhow, I said, I got to find out what's happening in here.

So I got in there, and they had all the beds pulled to the center. And the floor was wet. There was a couple inches of water on the floors. And everything-- the bed linen was wet. I know I had to go back and get more bed linen because they didn't have enough. Because they didn't use that much at one time.

And they got me a chair. Oh, and we had bars on all the windows. Not regular bars, but screening. That metal screening. Each one with a lock. And they were not in succession. So I'm looking for the key, got that window open. Opened it, they closed it. We locked that again. Go to the next window. By then, somebody moved the chair. I got up on the chair. Got that window closed. And the next one.

So finally, I said, for heaven's sakes, will you find the right key? Go down while I'm working on this window, and you get that lock for that window. Well, and we had one window next to one another. Must have had 40 windows on that ward.

Well, I can tell you, about 7 o'clock in the morning, I was down in the office of a man that was in charge of that. And he got a-- heard from me. I said, there is absolutely no sense to what you people have done. I said, first of all, you don't need those metal screens on those windows. That's asinine. I said, and if they get out of the window, how are they going to go further? Because there were big bars and that curly--

Concertina wire?

Yeah. I said, how can anybody get over that? And I said, where are they going to go if they get out? And there isn't any place. I said, they can't get any food. Nobody will have anything to do with them.

And the next night, they were all off. Everything was off those windows. That I remember vividly. Well anyhow, while I was jumping from one chair to the other, one of them says in German, he said, she's like the little old lady who lived in the shoe. She had so many children, she didn't know what to do. Well, I burst out laughing. I couldn't help it.

And I was supposed to be very stern. You see, they were our enemies. I'm just couldn't. They were all young people, you know. And I couldn't help it. I was accused of being too friendly. I couldn't help it. I was going with a fellow then. And he said, the word is that you're too friendly. I says, I can't help it. I said, they're nice, young men. Most of them were very young.

And there was one fellow that had had-- I think he had his appendix out. And they get morphine, you know, every four hours if they need it. So I prepared up at my place. We kept the morphine and those drugs, you know. They didn't have them down there. So I went down with my syringe. And because Hans's, I remember, had called me and said he was in terrible pain.

So I went down and the poor fellow, when he saw me, the sweats started coming. And he was in awful pain. And he's inching away back to the wall. He saw me with the syringe. And I remember, Hans said, he thinks you're going to kill him. Put him to sleep or something. So I'm trying to tell him, you know, this is to help him. See, they were so, so-- I mean, the tales that we heard on our side, they also heard against us.

So anyhow, so I finally got him, gave it to him. He was almost fighting me. You know, and he was in terrible pain. It was probably gas. So we had a remedy that I used to use. What was it now? Something old-fashioned. It had two things, and I got it from the pharmacy. And all they needed was a little sip of that and it brought the gas up. And it worked miracles.

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I think we're done, Elizabeth.

Yeah, OK.

I think so. This is the end of the interview with Elizabeth Feldhusen. This is tape three, side B.

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