

[TEST TONE] Excuse me. If I move my position, would that interfere?

No, you're fine. Just be comfortable.

OK.

Be comfortable. That's the most important thing.

All right.

We're having a conversation. You know, we're in a cafe.

All right.

And I've just met you. And you're telling me--

I want cappuccino.

--your life story.

I'd like a cappuccino.

OK.

OK. If you could give us your name.

My name is Susan Bluman.

And where are we?

We are in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada.

OK. Can you tell me, at the start of the war, where you were, what you were doing?

Well, the war started on September 1st, 1939. That's was my birthday. And actually, I was in bed. Because the war broke out about 4:00 in the morning and we were all awakened by the massive plane attack on our city. And actually, we were not so prepared for it.

Mind you, there were some sirens. And the Polish government tried to prepare the people about upcoming war. But never took it seriously. So we had at home some black tar paper in case of an attack because that's what they told us so that we could cover our windows.

And at the time, just like we are now afraid of nuclear war, people were afraid of gas war. And because there were not enough masks to go around for everybody to buy it, they were quite expensive. And I say, nobody really took it so seriously. So we used to use cheesecloth before the war.

And we prepared a few layers of cheesecloth with a tape on each side. And we just put it-- in case of something, put it around our nose and mouth in case of the gas war.

So when the first siren at 4 o'clock in the morning woke us up, we did not have proper shelters. The shelter-- we were living in an apartment block. We were living on third floor. So the shelter was really a cellar in this apartment block. So we all rushed down to the cellar, which was wet, and dark, and it wasn't just a regular shelter. Everybody was crowded into it.

And while we were there, the bombing started. And while the bombing started, some of the mortar of the apartment block was falling off. So when we came out of the shelter, we saw thought that was the gas. Because people were so scared after they already signed off that that's it, you are free. You can get out.

And we thought that that's the gas. And it was a terrific panic, and everybody was pushing everybody else, you know, because people just behave like animals when there's a danger. Like you will say fire in a cinema or something. So this is my recollection of the first day of the war.

Could you do it one more time and tell me that you were in Warsaw?

Can I just cough?

Yes.

What do you want me to say?

Just where you were. You were in Warsaw, Poland.

Yes.

You didn't tell me that.

Oh, OK.

So I don't know-- when the war started, you were in Warsaw.

Oh, OK.

And you were with your family?

Yes. Well, when I-- when the war-- should I start now? OK.

When the war started, I was living in Warsaw, Poland. So of course, that's where I was when the war started. And I was with my family. I was the youngest in my family. I had two older sisters and a brother, which were all married by that time. Because my older sister was about 14 years older than me. And my next one was about 12. And a brother who was nine years older. And I was the little one at home, I was the baby at home, what they used to call.

And before the war started, there were already rumors of a possible war in Warsaw, I mean in Poland. And the Polish authorities tried to prepare the population of the upcoming war.

And they suggested that you buy black tar paper, that you had those gas, which were really a few layers of cheesecloth put together with a tape so that you could put it over your face in case of, I guess. But that's all the preparations we had.

You know, we were not aware of it that the war is when it was. And being young-- so when the first sirens sounded, that the German planes are approaching Warsaw, I didn't take it seriously. I remember myself. I didn't take it seriously because we already had something like sirens before. And there were only preparatory sirens. I really didn't take it seriously that that's the real thing.

Wow. And when did you decide to leave Warsaw? And who did you leave behind? And why did you decide to leave Warsaw?

Well, the war in Warsaw lasted 28 days. Actually, Warsaw held up longer than most of the countries in Europe. And Warsaw was surrounded by the German artillery on top of the planes who were flying overhead and throwing bombs.

And finally, I mean, it was hunger already. There was no water, there was no communication.

And as a child-- I wasn't a young woman then-- I was wishing that the war is over. I couldn't care less if the Germans come in or not. Because we were living in constant danger and constant fright. And as I said, your food supplies were already exhausted.

For 20, we couldn't get out and do anything. So when, after 28 days, the German armies finally marched into Warsaw, we didn't realize how our life is going to change completely. Because as the war broke out, I would say that my life changed 180 degrees. It was just completely-- whatever it was was no more.

How did you decide to leave? And why did you leave? And who did you leave behind?

Well, I was in with the Germans for about three months. And of course, the Germans, right away, they had all different-- how do you say it? The different orders. They were issuing different orders.

So could you start over again?

Yes. Because-- OK.

Well, I was with the Germans for about three months, over three months. And then the Germans, the minute they walked in, a few days after they walked into Warsaw, as I say, my life changed about 180 degrees. And the Germans right away issued orders which were mostly directed against the Jewish population. We couldn't walk, we couldn't talk. We were even afraid in our own homes.

And progressively, the situation became worse. Because they picked up my father one time, they shaved off his beard, they made him work hard. We were really afraid for our father to go out. One time, some of the Germans got into our house where my mother was by herself and beat her up.

And I had a boyfriend from before the war. His name was Nathan, who was my future husband. And he escaped when the war broke out. On September 6th and 7th, most of the young Jewish people were leaving Warsaw, escaping from the Germans.

And actually, even the Polish government was encouraging any young men to leave Warsaw because they were hoping to establish a second front in the eastern part of Poland.

And among them, my husband. And he left with his family, with his father and his brothers. They had a car and they went by car towards the eastern part of Poland. And of course, they had to leave the car on the way because of shortage of gasoline. And they just had to-- I don't know how they got there, but they had to walk there, to the front.

And they got to a place, a small place in the eastern part of Poland. And I-- of course, there was no communication. And I didn't know what's happening to him and what was going on.

But after three months, when I was under the Germans in Warsaw, I got-- my future husband, who was already there in Lwow sent someone with a letter to my family and to me. And he suggested that I go with this particular person, who is going to take me across the border to the Russian side.

I just want to mention that when the war broke out after-- we didn't know about it. But at the time, Germany and Russia, they signed an agreement according to which, the western part of Poland was going to be occupied by the Germans and the eastern part of Poland by the Russian. And I think the dividing line was the River Bug. That was the name of the river.

So consequently, as I said, Nathan found himself on the Russian part of Poland and I was still in the German part of Poland. And he wanted me to join him in Lwow. That's where he finally came to.

And being the youngest, well, my father didn't want to let me go. He said no, you are too young, you can not go. And besides, the morality was different than it is now. A young woman got to a boy, it just didn't work that way. But anyhow, I tried to convince my father.

And finally, my sister-in-law-- because my brother also escaped at the time, on September 7th. And my sister-in-law was going to go with me also with this guide. So my father said, OK, but remember that you have to come back in two weeks.

And of course, I was in love with my husband, and I wanted to be with him, and I said, of course, I will be back. But not realizing that. Actually, I said that I will be back. Maybe not in two weeks, I'll be back in a month or two months, you know. And I said, of course, I will do that.

And I just took a knapsack and a few things in it. No photographs of my family, nothing. And all I had was my father gave me his belt, which was kind of a folding belt. And in this belt, he inserted for me two two American dollar bills. Those were like \$4 American. And a few Polish money, which after I got to the Russian side, was not worth very much. And that's how I escaped from Warsaw.

And you never went back?

And I never went back. I never went back to Warsaw. It was impossible. Now, for instance--

Could you tell me-- could you try and convince that story and tell me that story in 30 seconds?

Wow. I shall try.

And really let it--

Start from which point?

The story is I left Warsaw.

I left Warsaw.

Or I decided to leave Warsaw, I asked my father, I got a letter from him.

I don't tell about this person who came and brother, everything.

No, you don't need to tell. And you just left, and you never went back.

OK. So after being for about three months with the Germans, I had a chance to escape from Warsaw, which I did. And I went to the Russian side of Poland, to the city of Lwow, where my boyfriend Nathan was there already. And I took with me only very few things. The only thing which I really had from my family was a belt which my father gave me. And he said that two two American dollar bills.

Could you try one more time? But and so then you went and you never came back. Tell me about your father wanting you to come back.

Oh, shall I tell you that?

You gave me about 15 seconds. So you had--

Oh, I had 15, well, gee I didn't realize that was much. I was trying to make it shorter.

So start again with why you decided to leave Warsaw and--

After being three. I'll rather wait. Well, after being in Warsaw for about three days under the German occupation, I had a chance to escape and to join my boyfriend, Nathan, who was already in the city of Lwow, which was on the Russian side, Russian-occupied Poland.

I didn't expect not to come back. So consequently, I didn't take anything of value from my family. No photographs. The only thing which I had with me was the belt, which my father gave me in order to cross the border. And in this belt, he inserted two two American dollar bills. And I finally got to Lwow. And I was with Nathan. And after a few weeks, we got married there. Still not good?

Well, I just wanted you to say-- and your father wanted you to come back--

To come, I didn't say it.

--and you never came back. That's all right. We can move on.

I can say it. You want me to say it again?

OK, well, tell me. Was the border crossing tough?

Very tough.

Was it dangerous? OK, so include that in it. So maybe a minute story.

All right.

Well, after being for three months with the Germans in Warsaw, I had an opportunity to escape. I took this opportunity. But my father was not very happy about it since being the youngest at home, he was very worried about me. So I promised him that I would come back in about two weeks. And under those conditions, my father let me go.

And of course, he didn't realize, and neither did I, is that crossing the border wasn't just an easy thing. We were detained at the border. I was thrown into jail for about two days. And then finally, through some miracle, we were let go. And I continued my journey by foot. Sometimes, maybe by sleigh because it was winter time, to Lwow, where was my boyfriend Nathan. And unfortunately, I have never seen my family again.

OK. When you've got to Lwow, you got married? Can you tell me about that?

Yeah. When I got to Lwow, about two weeks later, we got married. And so we stayed for another week or two weeks. And my husband thought that it would be a good idea if we just leave the Russian side and go to Lithuania, which at that time was a free country, one of the very few countries not occupied by the Germans.

And on the contrary, Lithuania was larger than it was before the war started. Because the Russian gave part of Poland to Lithuania, like the city of Vilna, which before the war, belonged to Poland. But during that time, belonged already to Lithuania because the Russians gave them, made Lithuania larger so that they could occupy it later, the whole thing.

But anyhow, my husband-- I have to add this, that my husband before the war, after he finished his university education in Warsaw, he went to New York. And he spent a year there. And so he had some connection in New York because he went to practice at a company which used to do business with his father's company in Warsaw.

So he still had a passport. I didn't have a passport. And in the passport, there was an American tourist visa. So thinking-- and his tourist visa didn't quite expire.

So he was thinking that maybe if we were to get to a country like Lithuania, which was still a free country, and the embassies were there-- because there were no consulates or embassy in Lwow. Maybe if we go there, we'll be able to

get an American visa or an extended American visa. Because this tourist visa already expired. And it would have much better possibilities to escape from this Nazi-infested Europe.

Great. Can you tell me about your wedding in Lwow? Was it a joyous affair? Did you have any family? Did you feel sad that your family wasn't there?

Well, it was a very sad affair. Start with my wedding.

OK. Well, my wedding in Lwow was really nothing to remember it by. It was done by a rabbi, by a very well-known rabbi in the city of Lwow. And of course, when I was crossing the border, I had only one dress with me. So I had this dress which was dark blue or something.

And my husband's father was at the wedding because when my husband escaped, his father escaped also with his sons, the three of them. So he found himself in Lwow. And also my brother, who also escaped on September the 7th, and his wife, who also crossed the border to Lwow, she was also with him.

So those were the people who were at the wedding. So I had my brother, and my sister-in-law, and my husband's father. But it was a very sad affair.

You know, it's really much more to it. Because a girlfriend of mine, she also escaped. And she much later to Lwow than I did. About two weeks after I got to Lwow, she got there to join her boyfriend. And before she left, she went to see my family in Warsaw.

And my father said to her, remember tell Susan-- at that time she called me Zosia, because I changed my name. Not to get married. She has to come back home. But of course, it was impossible. So we had a double wedding ceremony because she got married to her boyfriend and I got married to Nathan at the same time by the same rabbi.

Wow. So can you tell me-- once you were in Vilna, what did you do? And how did you live? And why did you get married again?

Well, we finally went, and we finally got to Vilna, because it was not very easy because we had to steal across the border. And the snow was up to your waistline. It was very hard crossing. But we were very fortunate. Somehow, we made it across.

But some people who were with us, they were caught by the border police, by the Lithuanian border police. So we had to hide. We hid behind a small building, just like a small little village. It was a very small village, called Ejszyszki. Because we had a guy who lived in Ejszyszki, and he took us to this little village.

But we were caught-- the other people were caught. We were younger and we were kind of ahead of them. And we hid behind a small little hut. It was like 2 o'clock in the morning. And a dog started to bark. And we were just petrified that the dogs are going to give us away. But somehow, they didn't.

And we notice a light in one of the houses. So we knocked on the door, and the lady let us in. And she gave us some straw to sleep on. And we were just extremely tired after this on foot going through this deep, deep snow. So we slept there.

But in the morning when we woke up, she was no longer there. And the guide knocks on the door. And here, a small village, they knew exactly what's happening. And he said, you have to run away right away from here because this woman was an informer. And her house was right on the border. So anyhow, so then we got to this guide's house. And the guide took us by sleigh to Vilna.

Amazing. You're lucky, huh? OK so then tell me what life was like in Vilna.

Well, in Vilna, here it was a bunch of refugees. Because there were quite a few, we were not the only one. Were there

many other refugees from all parts of Poland with the same ideas as we had, that there would be much easier to get a visa to get somewhere because it was a free country.

And there was just nothing to do because you could not-- you didn't work. You had hardly any money. We were lucky we just had a few dollars because my husband was in New York. So he was saving a few dollars while he was there. So they sent us some money from his account. But still, we didn't have enough.

And there was a Jewish community there. Not community, but Jewish maybe welfare from New York. I don't even remember too well this. And they were helping us along. But still, we didn't do anything. We were playing bridge or playing some other cards with the refugees.

And we're going constantly to Kovno. Constantly to Kaunas because all the embassies and consulates were located there. And we made the rounds of all the consulates and all the embassies. And nobody wanted us. Nobody wanted us. We were just damned to be the victim of Hitler.

Because the situation-- we had this feeling. We knew that war between Germany and Russia will soon come to be. And besides, while we were in Lithuania, we got to the free Lithuania, Lithuania got occupied by the Russians and stopped being a free country. So we knew that the situation really looked very, very tacky. And we knew that something is going to happen.

And at the same time, the news from home what we're getting were terrifying. So we were extremely uneasy. We didn't know what to do. And we didn't have a way to communicate with our family. We didn't know what was happening to them. Only rumors, rumors, rumors. And you constantly only lived on the rumors.

And so when we were there-- we got there about January, we were in Vilna. And in the spring, my husband met one of his professors from university.

And he said to him, you know, I know about a job opening in a small little place in Lithuania called Kiejdany, where there is a Hakhshara, a young people commune, people who are training to go to Palestine. There was no Israel at the time. To go to a kibbutz. And they need instructor to help them, to teach them how to cultivate the land. So Nathan took this job and we moved to this small little village Kiejdany.

And that was like April, I'd say. April, May. And we stayed there. And he worked there on this. And we had a small little room rented from a very lovely poor, poor family, which was very, very nice Lithuanian family. And we just stayed there.

And we didn't know, of course, what goes on because we thought that our hopes of getting out were slim. There was just no possibility of us to get a visa to get somewhere. Because as I said, no one wanted us. We just exhausted all the embassies, all the consulates. So until we found out about consul Sugihara.

OK. Could you tell me? Could you start with how everyone rejected you?