

Good afternoon and welcome to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. My name is Bill Benson and I am the host of the museum's public program, First Person. This is our fifth season of First Person. Our first person today is Mrs. Ruth Greifer, whom we shall meet shortly. First Person is a series of weekly conversations with survivors of the Holocaust who share with us their firsthand accounts associated with the Holocaust.

Each First Person guest presently serves as a volunteer here at the museum. Each Wednesday through August 25 we will present a new First Person program. If you go to the museum's website at [www.ushmm.org](http://www.ushmm.org), that's [www.ushmm.org](http://www.ushmm.org), you will find a list of upcoming First Person guests.

This 2004 season of First Person is made possible through the generosity of both the William Goldring and Woldenberg foundation and the Helena Rubinstein Foundation to whom we are grateful for sponsoring this year's program. Ruth Greifer will share her first person account of her experience during the Holocaust and as a survivor for about 40 minutes. We will follow that with an opportunity for you to ask Ruth some questions.

Before you are introduced to her, I have a couple of requests of you. First, it's our hope that you will stay seated throughout the one hour program. That way it'll minimize any disruptions while Ruth is speaking. And second, during our question and answer period, and we hope you will have questions, please make your question as brief as you can. I will repeat the question so that everyone in the room hears it, including Ruth, and then she'll respond to your question.

I would also like to let those of you who may be holding passes for the permanent exhibition for this afternoon know that they are good for the entire afternoon. So no need to feel anxious that you might miss the permanent exhibition if you stay through the program, because you won't. The Holocaust was the state sponsored systematic persecution and annihilation of European Jewry by Nazi Germany and its collaborators between 1933 and 1945.

Jews were the primary victims. 6 million were murdered. Gypsies, the handicapped, and Poles were also targeted for destruction or decimation for racial, ethnic, or national reasons. Millions more, including homosexuals, Jehovah's Witnesses, Soviet prisoners of war, and political dissidents also suffered grievous oppression and death under Nazi tyranny.

What you are about to hear from Ruth Greifer is one individual's account of the Holocaust. By 1938, Ruth's family concluded that life under the Nazis would only get worse. So they went to the Netherlands. Germany's occupation of the Netherlands forced her family to separate and go into hiding with the help of the underground. That began a frightening clandestine experience or existence for Ruth who was not yet 20 years of age.

We have prepared a brief slide presentation to help with Ruth's introduction. And we begin with a 1932 portrait of Ruth at age 10, her mother Sophia, and older siblings Edith and Carl. Next, we have a map of Europe with an arrow that points to Germany.

Our next map is a map of Germany with the arrow pointing to Geilenkirchen, Germany where Ruth was born. Her father was a respected cattle dealer in the area. And note how close Geilenkirchen is to the border with the Netherlands.

In this next photo, Adolf Hitler poses with members of his first cabinet in the chancellery on January 31, 1933. The townspeople of Geilenkirchen supported the Nazi regime. The townspeople of Geilenkirchen supported the Nazi regime and no one helped their Jewish neighbors.

Our next map shows the Netherlands and the arrow points to Valkenburg, where Ruth and her family moved in 1938. Her father was forced to close his business and sell their home at a considerable financial loss. Her father Isidor returned to cattle dealing in the Netherlands.

On May 10, 1940, Germany invaded the Netherlands. Here, German troops are parachuting into the Netherlands, which surrendered to Germany on May 14. In the summer of 1942, the Nazis began rounding up Jews for deportation. Ruth and her parents went into hiding with the help of the Dutch resistance.

And our final picture is of Ruth at age 18 in this 1940 portrait. Ruth and her husband, Bernie, live in Alexandria, Virginia just across the Potomac River from Washington DC. They have three daughters and five grandchildren. Ruth has been a volunteer here in the museum since it opened 10 years ago. You will find Ruth at the donor desk on Mondays. I am pleased to let you know that Bernie, her husband, is with us also. Bernie, you might give a little wave.

[APPLAUSE]

Mr. Ruth Greifer.

[LAUGHTER]

And with that, I'd like to ask all of you to join me in welcoming our first person, Mrs. Ruth Greifer.

[APPLAUSE]

Ruth, thank you so much for joining us and for your willingness to be our first person again this year. We're very pleased to have you back.

Thank you.

You were our first person guest last year and we're delighted to have you back.

Thank you very much.

Ruth, your journey to the Netherlands and then later into hiding began in 1938 when you were 16. You described to me that your early life was really a wonderful life. And I thought maybe we could begin with you telling us about your family, about your community, and about yourself in those years before the war began.

OK. I was born of a German father and a Dutch mother. My mother was born in Holland, and dad was born in Germany. And I always said, mother, how could you marry a German? And she mentioned that at that time there was no difference between the countries. When you fell in love, you fell in love.

So I was born into my family. We had three children, an older brother, and an older sister, and I was the youngest one. We lived in a big house, and we lived very, very comfortable.

But then when Hitler came to power, things were entirely different. I was not allowed to go to the movies. I was not allowed to go swimming. And people said, why don't you just hide? Well, if you live in a little town where everybody knows everybody else, you just can't do those things. So it was very difficult for me. But there was just nothing that we could do.

Ruth, let me just ask you a couple of questions.

Yes.

When you can no longer go to the movies, I believe you can no longer use the swimming pool, were those rules that the Germans passed that said you can't do that anymore?

That's right.

And you also, up until that point had actually been going to a Catholic school.

Oh, yes.

Is that right?

Oh, yes.

Why was that?

Well, that was the best school in town.

OK.

And my father could afford to send us, my sister and myself. And I got a very good education.

And we mentioned in the slide presentation your father, his business was cattle dealing.

Right.

Do you do you remember much about his business at all?

Oh, yes. Oh, yes. But I really never had anything to do with it.

But oh yeah, I do I do remember very well.

Tell us a little bit about your mother.

Oh, my mother was a wonderful woman. She was born in Holland. And in those days, I don't think you went to college like everybody does here now. You go to high school. And I think in a lot of cases, you expected to go to college. My mother learned how to make hats.

And before she married my dad, she opened a hat store in Maastricht. But at that time, you made the hats by hand, just people come in and they order it. And they're all made to order.

Before we move on to when the war began with your father, am I correct in that he was a veteran of the German army from the First World War?

Oh, yes. Oh, yes. He was for four years in World War I. He fought and then what happened was when Hitler came to power and there were so much against Jews, and he said, well, I don't think they'll do anything against me because I fought for them.

He's was a veteran.

In World War I. That's right.

In 1938, of course, things turned far worse for your family, and for your community, and for Jews in Geilenkirchen. Tell us about your family's decision at that point to go to the Netherlands, and how you got there, and what it was like for you once you got to the Netherlands.

Well, they took my father's business. In 1938, they took my father's business away. Well, if you don't have an income, you can't live. So it was already difficult to go to Holland. So mother and dad took a trip to Maastricht and Valkenburg, and asked for permission that we could move. So the doctor from across the street bought our house. And of course, we were glad to find a buyer for the house, because it was a pretty big house. And we moved to Holland.

Now when you say the fellow across the street bought your house--

Yes.

He didn't pay a fair market value for that.

No. No.

You really, really took-- We were glad that we had a buyer for the house.

Right, and took a tremendous financial loss.

Absolutely.

Absolutely.

Right.

So but you were able to sell house, and so then you made the move.

Right.

What happened then?

Well, before you know it, I don't know what went on. But by 1940, I remember distinctly, May 10, 1940, we woke up. And the sky was dark with airplanes. And before we knew it, by 10 o'clock in the morning the Germans were walking, marching past our house. And as you know, what history will teach you, that the Germans ran over Holland within five days.

Within five days. And of course, you're right on the border.

We were right on the border. There was nowhere that we could go away. There were a lot of people that tried to escape. And it was just not possible.

Before we go on with your story, once the Germans came to Holland, did all of your family move with you from Germany to the Netherlands?

Oh, well, no. My brother did. And he stayed with my aunt.

And that was Carl?

That was Carl. He stayed with my aunts in Maastricht. My sister stayed in Germany. Before we left, she just got married to a German in Germany. And Kristallnacht, they arrested him and put him into Dachau.

Into Dachau.

Yes. So that was very, very unhappy for all of us. But to come to the United States, you had to have blood relatives. And my brother-in-law is the one that had the blood relatives. So they worked very, very hard between their family from New York and my brother who could speak English, got the papers, and got my brother-in-law out of Dachau into America. So that was-- and that ended up to be a very good thing for me too.

So your so your brother-in-law actually gets arrested on Kristallnacht, or the Night of Broken Glass.

Right.

In November of 1938. He goes to Dachau, and then is able to get out and come back to the United States.

Right.

Tell us about your grandmother on Kristallnacht.

My grandmother was 93 years old. She lived with her daughter in Solingen. And they came in, the Germans came in, and destroyed the house. Everything in the house was destroyed except when they saw this 93-year-old woman in the room. And they said, don't touch this room. But they didn't have a cup to drink out of, a chair to sit on. Nothing was done except when my grandmother was in that room.

Then after a while, my grandmother got sick. And we got a call in Holland of what shall we do. Gangrene set in. And we said just let her go. And she died in her own bed. Thank God, before they were able to take her away.

So you were telling us, of course, about that day in May of 1940 when the Germans overran the Netherlands.

Right.

And there you were right on the border, so feeling the brunt of it from the get go.

Oh, yes.

Tell us, you saw the planes. You saw the troops come into your town. What happened next, once they were there?

Once they were there, they worked very fast. The Jews were not allowed to have bicycles. They came and took every bicycle. In Holland, everybody has a bicycle. They took the bicycles out of the house. They took the radios out of our house, that we couldn't listen to what was going on in the world. And then the worst part was that we had a curfew.

And a curfew said, you cannot get on the street unless you have a Jewish star. And this is the star that I wore when I lived in Holland.

That's the actual star?

That's the actual star. My mother put pins around it, because you were not allowed to have no pins on it, because if there was a wind or anything, it would turn over. So this is the star that I had to wear when I was in Holland. And how do you feel as a young teenager, a girl, going onto the street and be a marked person? This is what I had to do. So before we knew it, in '42, they started to pick up people.

They took away our next door neighbor. And they knocked on our door. And we had the knapsacks ready next to our bed, because any time that they would come to take us, they would take us with the knapsacks. Well--

So you had them at the ready? Your mother--

Oh, yes. Well mom, and dad, and me. And so they came for me, and all I did was scream, and scream, and scream. And a miracle really happened. They did not take me. So then they came another time for my mother, not for my dad, for my mother. And mother, you could have heard her here, her screaming and carrying on, and they wouldn't take her either.

In the meantime, they had taken the family away from next door, a mother, and a father, and a grandma, and a young boy. Some people were taken away and some people disappeared. And my father asked some of the men. And he said, well, you have to go to the post office. There is a man. And if you ask him for Mr. Jannsen then he knows that you want to ask him a question.

So my dad went there and asked him if he would be able to come to our house, because we wanted to talk to him. In the meantime, they had moved us from the house that we had lived in to another big, big house with the people that had not been taken away. They wouldn't let us take much. They let us take a bed to sleep in, and a chair to sit on, probably a table, and so forth. I don't know.

Ruth, if you don't mind, I'm going to go back a little bit, if I could. The deportations that you're describing were in 1942.

Right.

Between May of 1940 and 1942, for that nearly two-year period, roughly two-year period, how did your family make ends meet during that time with all the restrictions that the Nazis imposed? How were you able to eat and get by during that time?

That I don't know.

But somehow your mom and dad were managing.

Yes, we were managing. But in the meantime, they had been to in Maastricht my aunts were, my brother was with them, and he said when they come, I'll just go with them because I'm going to protect them, not knowing that my aunts went to Auschwitz. And within the first two or three days, they asked them to take a shower, and they gassed them.

And I tell you the truth, when I see here at the museum what the beds look like, and the utensils looked like, what they have in Auschwitz, I'm happy that they didn't live much longer.

In the meantime, my brother went from camp to camp, and he died on the last march, the death march where they all got typhoid. And that's all I know. So he never came back.

Your brother Karl chose to stay with them in Maastricht.

Oh, yeah.

To protect them.

Right. Right.

Were you during that time, were you in touch also with your sister, your married sister in Germany? Do you remember if the family knew what was happening to her during that time?

Yes. We were. But then Kristallnacht, when they sent him to Dachau, when the papers came through, they let my brother-in-law out of Dachau, and my sister and her husband were able to come to America, pretty much on the last boat.

Were you able to correspond with them and know how they were? And did they know how you were doing?

Yes.

Yes. OK.

For a little bit.

So here, the Nazis are now rounding up the Jews and somehow miraculously you escaped the first couple of attempts. And then finally, they collect you and take you with a few belongings to the big building. What happened then?

OK. Then we got in touch with the gentlemen from the underground. And he said that he possibly could help me, but for an elderly couple, it would be very difficult.

Meaning your parents?

My parents.

Parents, OK.

Within a couple of days he came and he said he had found a place for me, and they would take my parents in for a couple of days. And that we should pack a little suitcase. And he would come in the dark, the next day or two, and pick up the suitcases. And then the next morning after, we would have to go up the hill, where the car would be ready and pick us up.

We, of course, you take your life in your hands. You don't go with a star. You don't go with a suitcase. And before we knew it, thank God, they picked us up on the hill, and we went into hiding.

And at that point together? The three of you were together?

The three of us, yes.

At that point.

So the lady of the house told the neighbors that she had company, out of town company, and because there would be a lot of noise. And we would go-- he picked up my parents I think the next day. And I tell you the truth, from that time on, I never knew where my parents were. All these years that I was in hiding, I never knew. They didn't know where I was and-- I didn't know where they were and they didn't know where I was.

Ruth, do you remember the feelings that you had that next day when he comes to pick up your parents to take them someplace else? And there you are, now really truly alone in terms of your other family.

Yeah, but I'm happy. I have to be happy, because at means they found a place to take my parents. Oh, yes. But then I stayed with these people a while. And at night, we had to get up and had to be dressed, because the airplanes would come over from England. They would fly into Germany, bomb, and then fly back. And in case that one of these airplanes was shot down, I had to be ready to run. Run to the gentleman, he was pretty close to where I was, and to go and stay with him. But it didn't happen.

But they told me there was a time that they just got tired. And I had to be-- go to a different place. Well, it's not easy to find places for people that are really-- if they get caught they're Jewish, and they would have been killed. So they took me to a big house where there was a lot of work to be done. And honestly, I'd never done that kind of work. So the girl that was there said to me, you're not really doing a good job cleaning this house, and you don't have maid's knees.

I said what are maid's knees. She said they are flat from crawling on the floor. I got scared, and went to the lady of the house and mentioned that I was scared, and called a gentleman from the underground to find a new place for me.

So you had to go find yet another place after that.

Another place.

But you had gone to this house under the pretense of being a domestic.

That's right.

And then, of course, this woman notices that that can't possibly be the place.

I wasn't doing a good job.

Let's go back for a minute. You described when the Allied planes were going over to bomb Germany.

Oh, yes.

But you had to be packed and ready to go. Elaborate on that a little bit. Why was that so?

Because if one of these airplanes would be shut down, and [AUDIO OUT] neighborhood to look for pilots.

Who had parachuted out.

To parachute out, they would have found us.

So the irony of these planes that are fighting the war going overhead, actually could pose a risk to you.

Yes, they would help winning the war. But it was a risk for me.

Do you recall, was there ever an incident where a pilot came anywhere near?

No. Thank God.

So you go to the next house, and as you described, you realize very quickly that you're not going to be able to pass for the help in the house. And you asked to go somewhere else. You're able to contact-- somehow, you're able to contact the man from the underground again. Do you have any idea how those contacts were made? Because I'm sure it was very dangerous for everybody involved.

Right. But I guess the lady from the house would get in touch with him. So then I went from house to house, because nobody really wanted to take the risks to have me in the house. The next step was a very positive step. He found a house in the middle--