

This is during the Holocaust. Even picking flowers was, oh, my God, they're going to come and kill us for picking flowers.

And of course, I didn't realize what it meant to be a Jew. I didn't know that my life was in danger. The only thing that I noticed was that my grandparents were always extremely nervous. If the doorbell rang, it could be a neighbor. Open the door.

They were frightened. Who is it? Who is it? Always like this, always like that, always tense, non-stop smoking, just something that a small child doesn't grow up with. You just know that there's always tension in the house, but they never told me why.

They never said that you are Jewish. And someone can come and take you and kill you. I mean, obviously, they weren't going to say that. But those were the circumstances that we lived under.

Now obviously this was wartime. Were there food shortages?

There were food shortages. You also have to remember not only did the Holocaust occur, but there was a second world war going on. We as Jews received ration cards. And we received very, very little. I mean, the Germans were being rationed already. So we got half of what they received.

We were not allowed to go to the theaters. We were not allowed to go after dark. There was a curfew. We were not allowed-- when I say "we," I'm talking about my parents and people my parents' age or grandparents' age. They were not allowed to work in the places that they had professions in.

It was a very terrible time in such that people didn't know what was going to happen from night to day. If they woke up in the morning, are they going to be in their homes? Are they going to be deported? What's happening?

And also, by this time already, it was too late to emigrate anymore. Because I think the last you could emigrate was either '41 or '42. By 1943, it was impossible for us to get out.

So from spring 1943 when you came to your grandparents until the end of the war, it was a good two years under these circumstances?

The war ended May the 8th, 1945. What's today? May the 12th. All right.

Yeah, this week.

Ironic, yeah. And of course my grandparents were jubilant. The German people were not.

So the beginning of 1945, when the Russians came into Berlin, was also a terrible time. Now that I remember, because I was getting close now to almost seven years of age. And in April 1945, the Russians liberated Berlin.

Now we were always waiting for the Americans to come. And all of a sudden, they stopped. And the Russians advanced.

And at that time, we, when I say we, Gentiles and we were the only Jewish family left, we were all together. Because at that time, even the Germans said, we don't know, we don't care if you're Jewish or not. We're just afraid of the advancing army.

So we sat in the bunkers for days. We never even left to go home anymore. We just sat in them. We just lived in the bunkers.

And then the Russians came. The first ones to come in were the Mongolians. They were like the scouts that the Russians

sent out. And they were very short people. And they were very frightened-- I was very frightened of them.

Because you have to remember, here were people who had been in the war all of these years. There was no shaving or anything. And they didn't speak German. Of course, nobody spoke Russian. It was really, really frightening.

And at that time, my grandparents took out the star again, the Jewish star. And we put the Jewish star on. Because we knew that the Russians were kind to the Jews. And they couldn't believe that we were still alive in 1945 in Berlin. And, again, nothing but luck.

And after the Mongolians came, then the Russian soldiers came in. And that was a terrible time for the Germans because of what the Germans had done to the Russians in Russia during the war. And they took a lot of the young women and they raped them. And took a lot of the men and just shot them.

And it was very frightening to hear all the screams and all of the shots around me. Again, I was a small child. And I really didn't know what was going on. I just knew that I was afraid of these men, of the Russian soldiers.

But they were very kind to me as soon as they saw the Jewish star. And they picked me up. They gave us food. And they really couldn't believe that we were alive in Berlin in 1945.

So the marker that previously would have meant a death sentence for you in this case protected you?

Absolutely. Absolutely. And I still have that star.

Let's go back a minute during the war, during the two years of wartime that your grandparents were sheltering you, what, if anything, did they know about their son, your father?

My father was able to, and I don't understand it to this day, my father was able to write letters that were smuggled out of Auschwitz. Because he was an electrician, he was able to save his life at Auschwitz. He worked for Buna, which is a company that made rubber for the production of German trucks or whatever it was. But that's how he was able to save his life.

And Buna actually had a factory located at the Auschwitz camp?

At Auschwitz, yeah. It was called Buna-Monowitz, which was a little outside of Auschwitz. And that's how he was able to save his life. And he was also able to write letters.

And they were smuggled out by a Polish Gentile woman. My grandparents sent her packages, food packages from Berlin. And food was very scarce obviously in those times, not only for Jews but for the Gentiles also. It was a second world war going on.

And I guess she was hungry enough. Because if she had been caught, then she would have been shot also for doing this. But we received approximately 40, 43 letters from my father that the museum has. I gave those original letters to this museum.

I transcribed some of the letters into English. And they were very, very sad for me to read. And as I get older, I miss them more and more.

Even though I'm in my 60s now, I'm a little child again. I'm four years old again. And I want my parents. I want my mom and dad. I want my Mutti and my Papa.

The letters were written almost a little bit in Morse. I knew what he was talking about after reading them now. He heard about the air raids in Berlin. He wanted to know if everyone was OK.

He asked about me. He used to call me "my little dolly," meine kleine Puppele. How is she doing? Is everything all

right?

Please send bread. Please send cigarettes. Please send a belt. Please send a pair of socks. Please send a shoe. Either for himself or he traded in the camps, I don't know.

And then the letters stopped in January of 1945. That was the last letter that we received from him.

So even from his position as a prisoner in Auschwitz, he was concerned for your well-being, for his family back home?

Absolutely, yes. And he wrote that transports were coming in. This was all in code. We found out about my mother's death also through code messages in the letters where he had said Sonja, which is my mother, which was my mother, is now with Lola.

Lola was my aunt who had died in 1941. So when my grandparents read that she is now with my aunt, we knew exactly what he meant, that my mother was dead.

And did they tell you that at the time?

No.

Or did they wait till you were older?

No. I had always thought that my parents would be coming back. Now one thing my grandparents always did is they always said to me that you are our granddaughter, not our daughter. They never pretended to be my parents. They didn't want to take that from my parents.

To me, as I was growing up, they were, of course, my parents. But they never said that we are your parents. You are our granddaughter.

They never said anything of how my father died, of how my mother died. I only found out later through some investigation. I still don't know how my mother died. And I don't want to know. I just don't want to know at this time.

There were some horrible things that happened at the camp, at the women's camp. She was at Birkenau, which was primarily the woman's camp. She was a very attractive woman. I don't want to know how my mother died.

Do you know the circumstances of your father's death?

Yes.

And how were you able to find that out?

A friend who was with my father, they were friends in Berlin as young men, was with him all during the time at Auschwitz. And he was lucky enough to return.

January 18, 1945 is when the camp wasn't liberated, but the Germans took all of the prisoners who were still able to walk out of Auschwitz because they were afraid of the advancing Russian army, of what they would see at the camp of what the Germans had done. So they tried to march several thousands, I guess who were still left at Auschwitz, they marched them west towards Germany.

And it was called the Death March because hundreds of thousands died on that march. It was January. It was one of the coldest winters, I understand, in Europe during that time.

And you have to remember these people weighed 60, 70 pounds, men, grown men. They had no winter clothing. They only had the uniforms that they had at the camps.

So many died from exposure, from starvation, from beatings, from whatever. A lot of them just gave up. They just lay down in the snow and said, I'm not going any further. And they died.

I understand what happened to my father through this friend who apparently saw this. In February, that means that he must have been marching for approximately two or three weeks from Auschwitz, that he stole a piece of bread, or he stole a loaf of bread, or was trying to steal a loaf of bread. And one of the Nazi guards took a shotgun and broke his skull. And that was the end of my father.

[CRYING]

Just one little thing and he'd survived so long, survived until '45. And if he hadn't stole the bread or taken the bread or who knows, his luck ran out.

And then, after the war in 1945 in the spring, I always thought that my parents would come back. Because I mean, obviously, my grandparents didn't tell me what had happened to my parents.

And every woman that I saw that kind of resembled my mother and, of course, I knew what she looked like through the photos, I said, oh, mummy, mummy. I mean, obviously, it wasn't my mother.

And I think my grandmother sat me down one day and said Mommy is not coming back. Mommy is with Tante Lola. And you know what that means. I could connect the two. Because I remembered my aunt had died.

So when she said she's with Tante Lola. That means, oh, OK. That means that she's really not coming back. She must be in heaven. Because that's what little girls think of, their parents are in heaven.

And as I got older, it became more difficult not to have parents. And then we go into teenagers and you go on and on and on. I mean, we could stay here for another 10 years. I could tell you my story.

So here it is in Germany after the war, how long did you and your grandparents remain in Germany? And how did they make the decision to leave and when?

My grandfather, who had lost his entire family, meaning he had lost a young daughter who was 22 at the time. She died. He had lost his son, who was my father.

And he had lost his brother. He had lost his three sisters and their three children. So he lost 11 people from his immediate family.

And he felt he needed to get out of Germany. Even though he didn't know English, he didn't know the language, he was in his late 50s at the time, he could not remain under the German people.

So we applied for visas to come to the United States in 1946. And it took us until August of 1947 to land in New York. We arrived August the 3rd, 1947 with a troop ship called the Marine Flasher.

Go on.

And we landed in New York. And we stayed there for six weeks. But in 1947, a lot of the GIs had come back from the war. So housing was at a premium. Jobs were at a premium.

So it was the GIs who were trying to get housing and who were trying to get jobs. So we weren't really accepted that kindly in the beginning. So they said, well, you can't stay in New York. You have to go someplace else.

And one of the Jewish agency-- we came with the Joint, said you either have to go to Indianapolis or to Chicago. And we wound up in Chicago six weeks after we landed in New York.

And it was very difficult, again, for my grandparents, who had gone through all of the war, to come to a totally strange country not knowing anyone here and not knowing the language. And my grandfather, who was very ill because of all the things that had happened to him, died a year after we arrived.

So here was my grandmother alone, again, with me. And some people said, well, why don't you go back to Germany? And she said no, I can't, because of me. So she never went back. She didn't feel that I had any future in Germany as a Jewish child.

So she found herself alone here.

She found herself alone.

You were what, 10 years old, 9 years old?

I was nine years old when I came over. And obviously, we made friends through other immigrants who had come over at that time. Because in 1946, the gates of America opened, unfortunately too late for 6 million people. But they did open, and we were allowed to immigrate to this country.

How did your grandmother, not knowing English, suddenly alone with you, how did she make ends meet in Chicago?

My grandmother was a seamstress. So she took in sewing. And we were also helped by the Joint because I was still under the age of 18.

And as soon as I graduated high school, I became a secretary. I went to business school, became a secretary, and provided for my grandmother and myself.

The Joint which Hannah has mentioned as helping them, supporting them, is a charitable organization, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, which helped especially many new refugees who came with nothing, knowing no one. One more question before I open it up, because I'm sure they have many questions for you.

We've been talking a lot about your grandparents. But arriving here at nine, I assume at some point you started to go to school. Can you just tell us a little bit about adjusting to this entirely new country and what that felt like for you?

OK. As I say, I was nine. I looked six because I was very, very underweight. You could see the bones sticking out from me. I didn't know the language.

So at the age of nine, I was supposed to have been in third grade. Well, because I didn't know the language and I was so small, they put me back in first grade. I was still the smallest one in there.

My first grade teacher didn't know how to adjust to immigrant children because this was all new to them, also. So she wasn't really that kind. She was kind of impatient that I didn't know the language. And I kind of looked at her and gave her a blank stare. So she wasn't too thrilled about that.

But you know, young children, and especially under the age of 12, you pick up a language literally in months. When we were here a year, I spoke perfect English. My grandmother did not learn English, obviously, as quickly as I did, so at home we always spoke German. And my grandmother has now been gone for 27 years. And my German is going very fast.

[LAUGHS]

OK. I'd like to open it up for questions. If you could raise your hand and also when you say your question, I'll repeat it just to make sure that everyone can hear it and also we're being recorded today. Yes, sir, in the front.

Your grandparents were of Jewish faith. Did they practice? Were they able to practice while you all were in Berlin under the Nazi party? Did they bring you up to be Jewish in religion too?

No. They were not allowed to practice Judaism, meaning they were not allowed to go to temple during the high holidays. We did practice at home.

Yes, for your second question, yes, I was brought up Jewish. My husband is Jewish. I never felt anything but Jewish.

No, we were not allowed to practice during the war. But what we did during Passover, we did special dishes. My grandparents did special dishes for it. That was the only way that any type of religion was in our home, privately and secretly in the house.

I'd like to mention that Hannah's husband Les is also here with us today. Other questions? Yes, ma'am?

For you, the hardest part of the whole experience.

The question-- sorry, just repeating for those in the back. The question is about what was the hardest part of the experience.

Losing my parents, because as I said before, as you get older, you miss your parents more and more because you realize what kind of a life you had without parents. And I'm sure someone in the audience has lost a parent, also, or parents through some type of either accident or illness or something. It's a terrible thing for a child to lose its parents. So that was my worst experience, was losing my parents and growing up without them. Because the consequences are still with me 60 years later.

Other questions? Don't be shy, any questions?

OK. Well, then I get the prerogative to ask another question. Have you returned to Germany?

Yes. I have returned to Germany. I wanted to see where I grew up. Because as you know, after I left, I was nine years old.

So I was aware of the things around me. I was aware of where I was living, how I was living. Yes, I did return there. America is my home now, though.

Anyone else? OK. Well, I'd also like to encourage you while you're here today, here on the lower level of the museum is a special exhibition that some of you may have seen called Life In Shadows, Hidden Children In The Holocaust. And in that exhibit, Hannah's story appears along with that of many other girls and boys who survived the Holocaust in hiding, whether in physical hiding or under an assumed identity as a non-Jew. It's a very powerful exhibit. If you don't have a chance to see it today, there's also a version of it online on the museum's website. And I highly encourage you to check it out.

I'd like to thank our guest, Hannah Kastan Weiss very much for joining us today. Before we close, it's not easy to talk about these painful times. And we appreciate your willingness to share and your courage in sitting up here in front of a room full of strangers to do so as well.

We also welcome all of you and your friends who may be visiting Washington, or if you're in town, to join us each week between now and August 25th for another First Person Conversation. They're happening every Thursday for the duration of the summer.

It is our tradition here at First Person to let the first person have the last word and share any thoughts that he or she might have. So with that, I'll turn it over to Hannah to close. OK?

Well, I had my appointment here for 11:30. And we were a little early, my husband and I. So we just sat and watched

the people coming into the museum.

And I thought it was very interesting, even in this audience, that there are that many young people here who only know about the Holocaust through books and what they have either read or if they were lucky enough to talk to survivors. To show an interest-- this is not a pleasant place to be. And I don't mean that in a derogatory way. But this is not a fun place. This is a place where you really see some absolutely horrible and horrendous things that actually happened. They're not only on paper.

And it struck me that, as I saw the young people coming in, that you are very lucky to be only going through a museum to see these horrible things. Because if you had been Jewish 60, 65 years ago, if you had been alive, you would have been marching to the death camps. You wouldn't have been marching through a museum like this.

And after an hour, after two, after three hours, leaving the museum, coming out into the open and into freedom. You would have been marched into the gas chambers. Think about that and how lucky, how lucky we all are to just go through a museum to see this. Because this could have happened to all of you if you had been living in a different time and in a different place.

So thankfully, we're only looking through these horrible things through a museum. And as soon as you leave here, you'll be out into the sunshine. And you will be going on to your lives, as it should be. And that's the thing that really struck me is, thank God, that they're not being marched into the death camps, but that they're free to choose and to choose to come and see these horrendous things and then to be able to go back to your normal lives. Think about that.

OK. Thank you very much, Hannah.

[APPLAUSE]

Thank you all.