

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 sixth season of First Person. And 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 of their experience during the Holocaust and World War II. Each First Person guest presently serves as a volunteer here at the museum. We conclude our 2005 season with today's program.

The museum's website at www.ushmm.org-- that's www.ushmm.org-- will provide information about the schedule and First Person guests for next year's program. This 2005 season of First Person is made possible through the generosity of the Louis and Doris Smith Foundation to whom we are grateful for sponsoring our program this year. I'd like all of you to know that Mr. Louis Smith is with us today.

[APPLAUSE]

Ruth Greifer will share her first person account of her experience during the Holocaust for about 40 minutes. We will follow that with an opportunity for you to ask Ruth some questions. Before you are formally introduced to her, I have a couple requests of you.

First, we ask that you stay seated, if possible, throughout the one-hour program. That will minimize any disruptions to Ruth while she's speaking. Second, during our question and answer period, please try to make your question as brief as possible. I will repeat the question so that we ensure all in the room, including Ruth, hear your question. And then she'll respond to you. I'd also like to let those of you who may be holding passes for the permanent exhibition this afternoon know they're good for the entire afternoon. So no reason to leave early in order to get to the permanent exhibition.

The Holocaust was a 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're about to hear from Ruth Greifer is one individual's account of the Holocaust. Her experience is one among many different experiences from 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 existence for Ruth, who was not yet 20 years of age.

We have prepared a brief slide presentation to help with Ruth's introduction. We begin with this 1932 photograph of Ruth at age 10 with her mother, Sophia, and her older siblings, Edith and Karl. Our map shows Europe, and the arrow points to Germany.

In this map of Germany, the arrow points to Geilenkirchen, where Ruth was born. Her father, Isidor, was a respected cattle dealer in the area. Here, Adolf Hitler poses with the members of his first cabinet in the chancellery on January 30, 1933. The townspeople of Geilenkirchen support the Nazi regime, and not one of them helped their Jewish neighbors.

This 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 returned to cattle dealing in the Netherlands.

On May 10, 1940, German paratroopers landed in the Netherlands on the first day of the German invasion. The country was quickly overrun and 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.

We close our slide presentation with this portrait of Ruth at age 18 taken in 1940. Ruth and her husband Bernie live in Alexandria, Virginia, just across the Potomac River from Washington, DC. They have three daughters and 5 grandchildren.

Ruth has been a volunteer here in the museum since it opened 10 years ago-- 11 years ago, excuse me. You will find Ruth at the donor desk on Mondays. I'm pleased to let you know that Bernie is with us. Bernie, if you wouldn't mind waving. And with that, I'd like to ask you to join me in welcoming our First Person, Ruth Greifer.

[APPLAUSE]

Go slightly.

Yeah. That's fine.

There we go.

Yeah.

Ruth, thank you for joining us and your willingness to be today's First Person and our last First Person of this year.

Right.

And so we'll look forward to today's program and having you back on First Person next year, I hope.

Thank you.

Good. Ruth, to start, 1938 is when your family decided to go to the Netherlands and thus began a journey that would end up with hiding for several years.

Right.

But you've described to me your early years up until that time as, in many ways, a wonderful life. And maybe we could start today with you telling us a little bit about your early years, what your life was like up until when the Nazis really came to power.

Well, as you know, I was born in Geilenkirchen. And in the early years, everybody could walk around, do anything. But when Hitler came to power, I could not use the swimming pool. Or I could not go to the movies. And anyway, it wasn't very good to live there anymore. In 1938--

Ruth, before we talk about moving in '38, just a little bit more maybe about your early teen years and years before that. Your father, as we noted, was a cattle dealer.

Yes.

Tell us about the size of your family.

Well, my father came from a family of 11. And my mother came from a family of 4. In fact, except my mother, all three died in concentration camps. And my father was 1 of 11. And about, I would say, 6 of them died in concentration camp. We lost a whole lot of family in concentration camp. My brother also died in concentration camp.

But it was easy living. We had a nice congregation. We had a rabbi, Rabbi Froman. And I went to Hebrew school every Sunday and every Tuesday. I learned to read and write Hebrew. I can't write it anymore, but I read it very well.

And I remember our synagogue. It was a beautiful, beautiful synagogue. That was also burned in 1938 when they

burned all the synagogues. But by that time, we already lived in Holland. And I never saw the burning of the synagogue.

But it was not-- we moved to Holland just because my mother was Dutch. She and my father went to Holland. And they let us in. They didn't let you in otherwise. It's not easy.

Even if you want to come to America, you have to show a lot of papers. At least when I came here, you had to show a lot of papers. You had to be well. And you had to have somebody to vouch for you. So my sister's cousins, who lived in New York, they voted for me. So I could come to the United States.

Ruth, what prompted your family to decide in 1938-- you were just 16 years old-- what prompted them to say, this is the time to move, we've got to go now?

To move to--

To the Netherlands. What prompted them?

Well, they took my dad's business away. And he had to make a living. So my mother went to Holland. And since she had been Dutch, they let us move.

And your father, as we noted, ended up not only losing his business, but then tried to sell the house. Tell us about the sale of the house.

Oh, the sale of the house. Oh, we lived in a beautiful house. By the way, I went back to Germany, and I saw the house.

And I hope we can talk more about that a little bit later too.

Well, anyway, well, the doctor from across the street bought our house because we had to leave. And I guess we could have gotten more for the house, but we needed to leave.

And so he bought it--

He bought it.

--at a tremendous discount price--

I would think so.

--from your father. Yeah. So you moved to the Holland. You're able to do that because your mother was of a Dutch origin.

Right.

How did your father get established back in business when you got into Holland?

I really don't know. I absolutely don't know. But he started back in the business. But you have to have a lot of nerve going to a different country and starting a new business.

Oh, absolutely.

But my dad did it.

Who else in your family was able to go with you when you moved to Holland?

Wait a minute. Not my sister.

So she stayed behind in Germany?

Oh, yes. But Karl moved with us too, my brother.

Your brother moved with you.

Right. But he lived with my aunts.

Why did your sister stay behind in Germany?

She got married.

She got married and so stayed there.

Yeah, she stayed there.

And what was your life like when you moved to Holland? What was different for you? Well, I had to go to school in a new language, which wasn't easy. And--

You'd said to me one time that it actually was a pretty tough adjustment for you.

Oh, it is, absolutely. You go to a new country. Even so I knew the language because I always went to visit with my grandma and grandpa in Maastricht. But it's not like you live there. But you get used to everything.

Ruth, on November 9-10, 1938, of course, the Nazis launched what has become known as Kristallnacht,

Right.

--or the Night of Broken Glass all over Germany. And that night, the night of Kristallnacht, your family was affected by that, the family members still in Germany. Tell us what happened to your grandmother on Kristallnacht.

Oh, my grandmother-- oh, they came into the house. And they broke everything, the furniture. They didn't even have a cup to drink out of. But then when the soldiers came to my grandmother's room, that's the only thing they left alone. The rest was all broken up, the furniture. They didn't have a cup to drink out of or a plate to eat from.

But she was in her room and left her alone.

She was in her room, and they left that alone.

Do you know what happened to your sister on the night of Kristallnacht?

Yes. They took my brother-in-law and sent him to Dachau. And he would stay there for a good while.

Yes, he stayed there for a good while, absolutely.

Do you remember if you knew, because you were now in Holland, did you know what had happened to them at Kristallnacht? Were you aware of what had happened to your grandmother?

Well, I know that they left her alone. But everybody else was taken.

For the next, oh, almost a year and a half, you would continue to lead your new life in the Netherlands. Your father building his business. You establishing yourself, learning the language, as you said. But on May 10, 1940, Germany overran-- or invaded Holland. And then--

I can remember the sky was dark with airplanes. And I remember on the 10th how the soldiers came marching down our street.

And you remember that vividly?

Oh, definitely. I remember that very much so. And we were scared. I mean from then on, we had the German occupation. And they ran over Holland in about five days.

What changed immediately for you once the Germans were there? Tell us what changed in your life.

Once the Germans were there, oh, yes, they worked very fast. They took all our bicycles away, because in Holland that's your life, your bicycle. They took our radios away so we wouldn't hear what was going on. And--

Why would they take your bicycles, do you think?

Because I always did ride my bicycle to go to Maastricht, to go anywhere.

So just to keep you stuck and unable to go anywhere?

Right, anywhere. Right.

And what else changed quickly under the Nazis?

Oh, gosh, they gave us a curfew. And--

And it was an early curfew too, wasn't it?

Early curfew.

5:00 PM, does that sound right--

I had to-- as a young girl, I had to wear my Jewish star anytime I would leave the house. And this is the star that I wore right here.

And, Ruth, that's the actual star that you wore, isn't it?

That's the actual star my neighbor saved it for me. I don't know where she hid it, but she did. And when I came back, she gave this to me.

You told me your mother was very concerned that you might lose the star.

Right.

And what did she do to ensure that that did not happen?

Well, she gave it to a neighbor.

But I mean even-- she was concerned, if I remember right--

Oh, OK, she--

Put a lining in it.

Put a lining in it. And this is the original lining and how she sewed it. Yes.

If I remember right, you said that she sewed each of the points to your clothing to make sure you would not accidentally--

Absolutely.

--lose it.

Yeah. So I wouldn't lose it.

What was it like for you-- you're still a teenage girl. What was it like for you to have to put that on and wear that?

Look, if you to, you have to. What are you going to do? Especially as a youngster, what whatever happens, happens. You know? You have to put it on.

But then from that house that we lived in, they put us, first of all, people-- they took people away. And they came to my house. The soldiers came to my house. And I screamed, and I carried on. And I don't know why, but they let me stay.

Then they came to get my mother. And she also, whatever happened-- we had to have a knapsack ready any time they were going to take us out of the house. My mother also, they let us stay. I mean, it is like a miracle. So--

So they actually came to your door to take you and then didn't.

Didn't. So here was my dad and my mother and I. And sometimes people disappeared. And my dad asked this young man, somebody, a neighbor, what happens if they disappear? And somebody said, but they go in hiding.

They go to the post office, he said. And you talk to Mr Jansen. Well, dad went to the post office and talked to Mr. Jansen. He came to our house.

But in the meantime, they had moved us from our house to a big complex, where everybody else, the whole community, stayed. And they just let us take a bed to sleep and, I guess, a chair and a table to eat from. And it was just horrible, just to think back how horrible it is.

Anyway, well, Mr. Jansen came to the door. And we told him that we would like to go into hiding. He said, yes, for a young girl like you, it's nothing. But for an elderly couple, it's very, very difficult.

And he was referring to your parents?

Parents, right. Well, he did come. One day, he did come. And he said he had a place for us to stay.

Ruth, let me stop you just for a minute and ask a couple of questions before you go on with Mr. Jansen. At this point, we're in 1942 when the deportations really began.

Yes.

And you described to us the incident where they came to the door and they were going to take you and they didn't.

Right.

You had that happen to you a couple of times if I remember correctly.

Right. But they took my brother and my aunts.

They took your brother and your aunt.

My aunts. I couldn't get in touch with them. And they took my brother and my aunts. And my aunts was taken to Auschwitz. And I know for sure, since they were elderly, they were gassed probably as soon as they came.

But my brother went into concentration camp. And he died on the death march with typhoid. That I know. So we lost my brother, and we lost my two aunts.

The two aunts.

And mother had another sister, who also never returned.

So, Ruth, when your father finally said, I've got to find steps to hide my family--

Yeah.

--at that point, it was you and your mom and dad.

Right.

And so Mr. Jansen comes to the house and talks to you.

Right.

And says he can hide you easily. But it's a different story with your parents.

Right. Well, he found a place for us where all three of us went. It was in a townhouse. And the lady said that she just had company for the weekend. And so we went into hiding there. But before I knew it, I stayed with them, and my mother and dad found another place to go into hiding.

Will you describe for us what it was like when he came to get the three of you and actually what happened in transporting you, getting to this first hiding place?

First of all, we had to take this off. And we had our suitcase packed. And he came with a car at the top of the hill. So first of all--

Was this under cover of darkness or--

No, it was early in the morning.

Early morning, OK.

Early in the morning. And we walked up the hill. Of course, we had taken this off--

Which was very risky.

Very risky. I mean, if they would have found us, that was the end of us. Anyway, we had little suitcase with us. And if you ask me what was in that suitcase, I wouldn't know.

Anyway, I still don't remember what I wore when I was in hiding. But it's so long ago. Anyway, they took us-- first of all, took us to this couple. And I stayed with this couple for a while.

In fact, I was afraid-- that was the time when the airplanes came over from London to go into Germany. And we were always afraid that if-- they would shoot at those. So if one of those airplanes would come down, they would look for the

pilots. And so people were scared. And I had to move.

In fact, I think you described it to me as the war was being fought-- the war for you was on the ground, your fears, and in the air too--

Absolutely.

--because when they would shoot down an Allied plane--

Right.

--and if the pilots would parachute--

Absolutely.

--that's what they would come searching for door to door.

Right.

And they might then discover you in hiding.

Yes, right. Well, anyway, I left them. And I was in a house, in a big house, where I was a maid. And--

And that was the pretense to get you there, to say that they needed a maid.

They needed a maid.

That would explain why you were there in their house.

Yes. First of all, she said to me, you don't have maid's knees. And I said, what are maid's knees? Well, she said, when you had to wipe all the floors on your bare knees. See, she said, you don't have any bad maid's knees.

This was another maid saying this to you, was it?

Yes, absolutely.

She sees you immediately--

They always had two maids.

And so she sees you and says, you don't have maid's knees.

Right. So I go to the lady. And I said, I don't think I can stay here any much longer. So went to many different places because if they would have found me, they would have just shot me and the people in the house right away. So I was very lucky. And when--

Ruth, interrupt again, if you don't mind, when something like that would happen where you had to move, when the family was scared the first time, and now when you said to the woman, I can't stay here because she knows I'm not a maid--

Yeah, Mr. Jansen would come and move us.

So he personally would come and--

Oh, yes.

And he was always your contact?

He was always my contact. Yes.

And so he somehow or another would find another place and take you there?

Yes, absolutely.

During that time, did you know anything about your mom and dad?

No, never. Never heard a word until liberation.

Did you know if they were alive or not?

No, not a word.

Not a word.

No.

OK.

No, not a word until liberation.

So tell us about the next house that you went to.

The next house, that was the house where-- the house was in the middle of nowhere. We had no lights, no electricity. And the water was pumped in the backyard. We had oil lamps. I think that's what it was.

So really a farm community?

Oh very. Very much a farm community. And she gave us this much water to wash us for the week.

For the week?

Because she had to pump it. But the people were wonderful. People itself absolutely wonderful. Look, what did I have to say? I'm glad they took me in.

Anyway, I stayed at that house for a while. And--

Before you leave that place, tell us a little bit about-- there were so many complexities about keeping you hidden. For example, you were telling me that it was important that the family not appear to be buying any extra food whatsoever.

Right.

Describe--

No, they couldn't. Because if they would-- so the lady of the house would go to this little store. She would walk to this little store and never buy more sugar or whatever as she had done before. But she got rations. We got rations from the underground. Mr. Jansen bought rations.

So he'd bring some rations.

Oh, he brings rations, oh, yeah.

From what you were telling me, what would happen is that in a small community, small little shop--

Oh, yes.

--people would notice--

Oh, absolutely.

--if you were getting a couple of extra eggs, they would notice that.

I know. I know. Just by hanging out the clothes--

Extra laundry.

Extra linings or repetitions, oh, yes. You had to be so careful.

Were you-- especially in this rural house, could you go outside?

Never.

Never. So you're completely indoors this whole time.

Oh, absolutely.

I did have to go out to the bathroom.

Because it was an outdoor--

It was an outdoor bathroom, yes.

You said also to me that you could not afford to get sick.

No.

Why was that?

Well, if there would have to call a doctor, maybe he would tell the Germans who was there. Now, thank God, I never got sick and my parents never got sick either.

You told me a very sad story about somebody I think that might have been related to you or a friend that had appendicitis.

Oh, yes. Yes. Yes, friend of my brother. He had appendicitis. And he died. And they buried him in the backyard until I guess after liberation.

And in his case--

No, you could not get sick. Could not allow to be sick.

So they could not get a doctor to come and attend to him.

No. No. No. No.

I was also struck by you saying that during that time you would have birthdays. But they could not go out and buy a present for you.

No. No. Birthdays, there were no gifts at any time.

At any time.

No. I couldn't go out. I didn't have any money. And birthdays, no, absolutely nothing.

Do you remember much-- I know you said you don't remember what you wore. Do you remember what life was like for you on a daily basis being inside a house, not being able to go out except the one place to go to the restroom? Do you know what you did to just spend your time?

I really-- oh, I know, I knitted. I knitted something. And what they did, they took an old sweater and unraveled it. And that gave me knitting yarn. And I knitted some. Yes.

You also had no choice, you said, but to eat foods that you would not normally have eaten.

That's right. And that was in the first place where they had a rabbit. And, well, I've never eaten rabbit. We're not allowed to eat a rabbit.

Right.

So I left the rabbit on the table. Well, next time that rabbit came to the table, I ate it because I was hungry without the rabbit. So just think, I ate rabbit.

And yet again, you would move at least one more time.

Oh, absolutely.

Tell us about some of the other places that you went to. And particularly, I want you to tell us about that very, very frightening experience you had.

When I sat under the table.

Yes. Yes.

That was the other time that I was in the kitchen. And I don't know what happened. All of a sudden, the soldiers came in. I guess the dog didn't do anything. They came in the kitchen.

And next door, there was a dining room. But there were doors between the dining room. And I sat under the table. I couldn't get up the stairs. So--

Just because they were in the door--

They were in the kitchen, yeah.

Yeah.

I sat there under this table. And there was a tablecloth that was just very long. Anyway, a sneeze or a cough would have just done me in. So after that, we started to move again.

Tell us a little bit more about that. If I remember right, the lady of the house had to actually just talk with them right there in that room.

Yeah, she entertained them.

Entertained them.

She entertained them in the kitchen. She gave them sandwiches and gave them coffee. And here I was sitting under this table. Oh, yes, absolutely.

Can't imagine anything more frightening than doing that.

Right.

And then you moved again.

Then I moved again. And in fact, the daughter that was in this house now lives in Scarborough, right here near Toronto.

And you're in contact with her?

I'm in contact with her, yeah. I call her. I write to her. Absolutely.

She was at the last house she went to or the--

No, that was not the last house.

The one where you were hiding under the table?

Right. Right. That was Katie. And now, I went to another house just before we were liberated. Don't forget, I was liberated in 1945, which is much earlier than the rest of them.

And, no, I was in that house. And I was so scared that I went to sit in a potato bin. I went down in the basement. And I went to it sat in a potato bin. But then we were liberated at that time.

Why were you so scared?

I don't know. I didn't want to be found. I didn't want anybody to see me.

Wasn't that the house where actually you saw the Americans coming?

Oh, yes, that was the house where the Americans came. The Germans were shooting over the coal sled at the Americans. And the Americans saw the tanks coming in.

And you're in this house right--

And I'm in this house--

--right in the middle of this. But then all of a sudden, the American came and said we were liberated.

But this was not--

But still--

--you were down-- you were in the potato bin.

I was scared. I thought in case they're not going to-- they have to track back, I stayed in that potato bin until Mr. Jansen came and said, your parents are already in Valkenburg. And he took me to see them.

And that's when you knew you were now free.

Right. Right.

As you said, you were liberated earlier than many others.

Oh, absolutely. We were lucky. We were liberated in 1945.

And the Americans had gotten there fairly quickly.

Oh, yes.

Right.

I was liberated by the Americans.

Did you interact with the Americans?

Oh, absolutely.

What was that like for you?

Yes, they asked me out. They asked me to dance. [LAUGHTER] Yes. They asked me-- they asked me to dances. And I learned to do the jitterbug. I'd never done that before. [LAUGHTER] So, oh, yeah.

And tell us about being reunited with your parents.

Oh, yes. somebody. Invited us to move into the house. But we didn't have any furniture. But the Germans had left a lot of furniture. And we got them-- we moved into this house.

But in the meantime, we didn't hear from anybody. And my dad would stand at the trains-- they would come from trains-- and waited for anybody of his family or my brother or anybody that he recognized. And nobody, nobody came back.

He'd go to the train station each day--

Yes.

--in the hopes that Karl, his son, would show up.

Right. Or my aunts or anybody. No. Nobody came back.

What did you do then to get back on your feet at that time? War is still going on elsewhere in Europe. You happen to be liberated where you are. What was your life like then?

Well, I just went to work. I was a seamstress at the time. And I had to earn a living.

But in the meantime, my sister, Edith, was in America. And one thing I regret, I left my parents alone in Valkenburg and I went to America. But I had to have so many papers. I had to have my-- my sister and brother-in-law gave had to give me papers then. A cousin from Brooklyn had to give me paper. I had to go to the consulate and sign all kinds of papers.

I had to be healthy. It wasn't easy, like I get on the plane and be in America. No, not at that time.

Your sister, as you just said, your sister, Edith, was already in the United States.

Oh, yes.

The last had mentioned her before this, of course, was after Kristallnacht when her husband I believe went to Dachau.

Dachau.

What happened that allowed her then to get to the United States?

They let them go out of Dachau because the papers were ready to go to America. And--

So they released him, but said--

They released him.

--as long as you leave and leave Germany.

Right. Oh, yeah.

So they were able to move to the United States fairly early.

Right. And my sister also was a seamstress. And I don't know what my brother-in-law did.

When did you come to the United States?

1948.

So it took several years.

Oh, absolutely.

Tell us a little bit before we come back to the United States, when the war was finally over in 1945, you would remain in Holland for a better part of three years.

Oh, yeah.

What was life like for your family and trying to rebuild itself? Did your father get back into the cattle business?

Oh, yes, absolutely. Right.

And you worked, the three of you-- when did you find out what happened to other family members?

Well, they just didn't return. And I remember going into town, to Maastricht, and people recognized my mother. And they always asked about my two aunts. I had three aunts. And they just didn't return.

My mother absolutely died of broken heart, absolutely, because her son didn't return. Her three sisters didn't return. And my mother was 67 years old when she died.

When was that?

And then my father came over to America.

Once you were established here?

Once we're established. First, he lived with Edith. Then when we got married, he lived part time, six months with her and six months with me. And then when we moved into the house, he said, I'm not going back. So he stayed with us until he died.

And when did he die?

He died in 1971.

Yeah, he lived he lived quite a long time.

Yeah, he was 93 when he died. 1971, that's when I got my first job.

You were a seamstress when you were in Holland.

Yeah.

What did you do to get yourself established here?

I went to school.

OK.

I graduated from Northern Virginia Community College. And I was a teacher's aide until I retired.

And I would like you to tell us about-- I think you mentioned this a little bit earlier. You went back to your hometown in Germany.

Oh, yeah, I did.

Tell us about what it was like for you to go back.

I went back with the three girls.

With your three daughters.

Oh, yes. And, well, I visited at that time who was living. First, I went to in Holland-- wait a minute. In Holland, that was-- in Maastricht, that was-- what's his name? I can't think of his name. And I still correspond with him and talk to him on the phone. And--

He was one of the-- was he one of the people who hid you?

No.

No.

He was just a friend of the family.

Friend of the family. OK. OK.

And he's still alive.

What was it like for you to go back to your town in Germany with your daughters? What was that like?

Well, I saw everybody. And I told him I wasn't going to come back. And I still correspond and talk to one of my school friends. And she's still alive. There are two of them. But I mostly talk to one of them.

When you went back to Geilenkirchen, you mentioned that you saw your house was--

Oh, yeah, they invited me into the house.

The present owners?

The present owners.

What was that like for you?

Well, it wasn't the same, of course. But my girlfriend, we walked up to the house. And they allowed us to see the house. In fact, there was a cherry tree, a sour cherry tree that was still there. But I'm not going back anymore.

Was there anything left of the Jewish community there?

Oh, no.

No.

No. No. No. No. No. Nobody. Not in Aachen, not nowhere.

Nowhere.

Right now, the people that are coming back are people that can't or don't want to go back to Poland and Russia. Those people are moving back to-- I don't know about Germany, but I know Holland. But not the regular, not the regular people. They were all exterminated. They're all gone.

Ruth, this Mr. Jansen--

Yes. He disappeared.

I was going to ask because he seems like he must have been a rather remarkable man.

Yeah, he disappeared.

What do you know about him?

I don't know a thing about him.

That's it.

I know he was a single man and he lived--

I'm sorry, he was a single man?

He was a single man. And he had a housekeeper. That I remember. But he disappeared. I've never heard from him-- we had never heard from him again.

And yet, he clearly was alive right up to the end of the war.

Uh, huh.

And then that was it.

That was it. And that's why I'm sitting here today. If it wouldn't have been him, I would have been gone like all my friends, all my family, everybody else.

Ruth, you mentioned that you still stay in touch with Katie who is the daughter of one of the--

Yeah.

--one of the owners of one of the houses you stayed at.

Yeah.

Have you ever been back to any of the houses that you were hidden in?

No.

No.

No.

Have you been able to stay in touch with anybody else? Or did you ever--

No. Just Katie.

Just Katie.

And she lives in Scarborough. And there's somebody here who is from Scarborough or taught in Scarborough. I don't know.

Yes. Caroline I think back there. That's right.

Yeah.

Well, Ruth, with that, why don't we-- I'll stop with my questions for the moment. Why don't we turn to our audience and see if they have some questions to ask of you. And if they don't, then I'll continue on with some that I might have.

Right.

But, folks, this is an opportunity to ask Ruth some questions. And I ask that you make it brief, if you can. And then I will repeat it just so that we all hear it, including Ruth. So who's got a question they'd like to ask Ruth? Gentlemen right here, yes, sir.

The question I have, I guess is what kept Mr. Jansen from getting caught?

The question is, what kept Mr. Jansen from getting caught?

That I don't know.

No.

I have no idea. I have no idea.

You know that he was part of the Dutch resistance.

Oh, absolutely.

That's it really.

And he disappeared.

He disappeared.

Yeah.

Really remarkable. Yes, ma'am.

Were there times before you moved to the Netherlands that your family thought about moving and said, not now, we don't have to move now.

The question is, before you went to the Netherlands, were there times when the family said we should move now or we're thinking about it, but then decided that wasn't the time? Did I get that right? Yeah.

The only reason that we moved to the Netherlands because they took my dad's business away. And that was in 1938. And that's the only reason we moved to the Netherlands.

It wasn't out of fear that you moved.

No.

Just out of fear not being able to--

Yeah. Dad couldn't make a living anymore. And that's the only reason we moved to the Netherlands because in Germany it would have been the same everywhere. And we could move to the Netherlands because Mother had been born in Holland.

OK. Somebody else? Another question?

Yes.

Yes.

Did your parents-- have any word from you or about you while you were in hiding?

Question is--

You didn't know about them.

Did your did your parents know about you? As we noted, you didn't know about them. Did they know about you?

No.

So Mr. Jansen really kept everybody from knowing anything.

That's right.

So I assume so you couldn't reveal anything--

That's right.

--and get caught.

Absolutely. No. No.

Wow.

He brought us together, you know. But, no, I didn't know anything about my parents. Yes.

Let me ask, and your parents when you were reunited, did you talk much with each other about what your experiences were like right afterwards?

No.

No.

Not at all.

Not at all.

OK. I'm sorry, yes.

Were her parents moved as frequently as she was moved?

Question is--

Dutch people helping, and where was Mr Jansen getting his gasoline, petrol from?

Question-- a couple questions for you, Ruth. One is, do you know if your parents were moved as often as you were or did they stay--

No, they stayed in one place.

One place that whole time?

In one place the whole time.

They did.

Yeah.

And the other part of the question was, I guess, really about Mr Jansen's resources, including his gas to get you around--

I have no idea.

No idea, yeah.

[INAUDIBLE]

I have no idea.

OK. All right. Do we have another-- yes, young lady right here.

I'm just wondering, what nationality do you consider yourself? And did that change as you moved from country to country?

The question is, what nationality do you consider yourself? And did that change as you move from country to country? Did I get that right? Yeah.

I never gave that a thought. But right now, I'm American.

Right. OK. Got a question here.

What would happen if you were caught without your star?

Question is, what would have happened to you if you'd been caught without your star on?

Oh, well, if I would have been caught, period, they would have killed me right then and there.

Before you were in hiding.

Oh, there was no question about it. I mean I had to-- at that time, when I had to go out, I had to wear a star, I would wear a star. But, thank goodness, I wasn't caught when I was in hiding.

It happened to a friend of my father's. They were in hiding. And they were caught. So they killed the whole family. An elderly couple were caught.

Bernie.

You asked whether Ruth ever visited places where she was in hiding. And the fact is that the underground took Ruth to one place and another. And she never knew where she was. She didn't know what city she was in or anything while she was there. She didn't know where her parents were either.

Bernie's making-- Ruth's husband is making the point that the reason she could not go back and visit the places where she was hidden is because they were taken to places that she didn't know where they were, didn't addresses, and no way to go back because it was all clandestine. That was the whole point of it. And how was it you were able to stay in touch with Katie?

I don't know. I'm in touch with Katie. In fact, she and her mother came to visit us. I have no idea. But Katie is still very much alive.

I guess the astonishing thing, probably for all of us, is that the linchpin here was Mr. Jansen. And Mr. Jansen was the one who had the knowledge of this places and the people and the resources. And with his disappearance after the war, that's all long, long lost.

Ruth, what was life like for-- you've mentioned that your mom essentially really died of a broken heart.

Oh, yeah.

And your dad came to visit and decided to stay in the United States and then lived for many years after that. What was his life like in his later years once he was here?

Difficult. He couldn't speak English. He-- thank you, Bernie. He could speak a little German. And it was-- you know, you get used to an old man. And he stayed with us for a long time, at least 10 years.

Did he move out on his own after that?

No, he got ill. And we had to move him to a nursing home. And he died at the nursing home.

Ruth, when you look at your entire extended family, did any others survive besides your sister and you?

Who survived? Yeah, I have some cousins. I have Elsa in Kansas City. And I have Erich in Saint Louis. And then I have family in-- oh, gosh where are they, Bernie?

Sao Paulo.

In Sao Paulo.

Oh, Brazil.

Right. I have cousins in Sao Paulo. And I talk to them.

Did they go there after the war? Or were they able to leave early and get out like your sister got out?

They got out on time.

They got out early.

Right. My aunt and her two daughters and two son in-laws, they went. Yeah.

When you came to the United States, where did you first go?

To my sister.

And where was she?

In Kittanning, Pennsylvania.

And how did you find your way to Pittsburgh where you met Bernie?

Well, I needed a job. I couldn't get a job in Kittanning. But I got a job in Pittsburgh. And I shared-- I went into an apartment where I shared a bedroom. The person that I rented from had two beds in one room, and that's where I stayed first.

And then I had to move out. And I moved into another house where I was alone. And that's where I met Bernie.

Where you put your jitterbug skills to use that you learned from the GIs, right?

Couldn't do it. I still can't.

You met at a dance actually. I was asking him before this. Any other questions--

No, we met playing bridge.

Oh, playing bridge, and then went to the dance, that's right. OK. Playing bridge. Any other questions from anybody in the audience? This is my sister, Michelle. Michelle.

Miss Ruth, because you are in an important age, 16, 18, any of your host or surrogate mothers, you know what I'm saying, or was it just hiding her, did you get this is how you be a lady?

Question is, did any of the women in the houses where you were, did they take on a role as a surrogate mother or was it just I'm hiding you?

That's right.

The latter.

That's the way it was. I'm hiding--

I'm hiding you.

I never dated in my life until I was liberated. Never had a date.

Folks, I think we're moving towards the conclusion of our program. And I'd like to-- before I turn back to Ruth for some concluding thoughts for us, I'd like first of all to thank all of you for being here and being part of our last program of the 2005 season. There will be another First Person series next year.

And so I urge you to go to the museum's website, if you would, and look at what the schedule is for next year. We're likely to begin again in March. And if you live in the area, please come back. We'll be on Wednesdays at 1 o'clock next year. And if you're not, plan your visit so that you come to the museum on a Wednesday so that you can hear a First Person program.

It's our tradition at First Person that our First Person has the last word. And so I'd like to turn to Ruth to conclude our program with thoughts that she'd like to share with us.

Well, I appreciate you coming here today to listen to what my life was like when I was young. And in the meantime, I would like us to remember all the 6 million that were killed during the Holocaust. And I thank you for coming.
[APPLAUSE] Thank you.

[APPLAUSE]