

Irmgard Mueller

[Good evening. My name is Toby Ticktin Back and I'm the Director of the Holocaust Resource Center in Buffalo. This evening our visitor is Irmgard Mueller and she will tell us her story.

Irmgard, could you tell us about your childhood?]

I had a very pleasant childhood and a very privileged childhood, with any kind of luxury that one could imagine surrounding me. And I suppose my future was sort of circumscribed. I was supposed to get a reasonably good education and be sent to a finishing school, get married, and have children. And that would have been that. But that is, of course, not what happened. When I was 12 years old, Hitler came to power and my future changed very rapidly. First of all, my education was in question. But luckily the authorities decided to let me finish at least one part of it. And so I was in school until 1936. And then I took a commercial course and learned to type and shorthand and bookkeeping, much to my chagrin because I felt that was not anything that I needed to ever know. Then I learned how to sew professionally and I took a course in fashion design. And then by that time, it was 1938 and after the Kristallnacht, all Jewish schools in Germany were closed, so then I started to work as a nursemaid. And after the child went to Australia with its parents, I went to an agricultural training school. I was in that training school un-, from 1940 until Spring 1941, and then was transferred to a forced labor camp for –

[Irmgard, excuse me. Before you tell us about the labor camp, could you give us your impressions of Kristallnacht?]

Well, I was in Berlin at that time, going to school. And actually I lived far enough from any commercial place, so that I was completely unaware of what happened during the night. I didn't hear or see anything until the next morning. And then of course in the streets in Berlin, where

the many Jewish shops were, all the windows were smashed in, and there was a lot of looting and destruction. And of course all the synagogues were burning.

[You saw this yourself, when you went downtown?]

Oh yes. Yes. I passed some on my way to school. That's why I, that's why I saw them. I did not make a point of going there to see it, I just . . . And communication wasn't then what it is now, so there was no way for me to know that the school wouldn't open that day. But of course the school was closed, and I went back to my furnished room, and then called my mother. And she begged me to come home immediately. I lived in Halle an der Saale, so I took the next train home.

[How far away was that?]

It was about three hours by, by train, so.

[And in your hometown, were people aware of Kristallnacht?]

Oh yeah. The same thing happened there. All the Jewish stores were destroyed and the synagogue was burned. My father had been arrested and my mother was all alone. Then our house was searched. It was turned upside down.

[Searched by whom exactly?]

By police.

[Local police?]

Local police, yes. So the house was turned upside down. When they left, there was not a spoon in a drawer or a bed that hadn't been totally demolished. It was really pretty bad but at least they left my mother alone.

[Were you there when that happened?]

Oh, yeah.

[And what were they looking for?]

They were looking for weapons and for contraband books. They took away the radio. And weapons they didn't find because we had long destroyed my father's army revolver.

[Your father had been in World War I?]

My father was in, yeah, my father was an officer in, during the world war.

[What did your father do?]

My father was a lawyer.

[And he was taken away at this time?]

He was taken to Sachsenhausen. Yes, he and my, my uncle. My, my father came out of Sachsenhausen 6 weeks later but my uncle died in the morning of the day they were released.

[What did your uncle die of?]

He, he died of a heart attack. My father was pretty sick. If he had been in Sachsenhausen any longer, I don't think he would have made it either.

[Was he able to practice –]

But then in the meantime –

[Was he able to practice as a lawyer?]

Oh, no, no, no. He was not allowed to. But in the meantime, while my father was in the, in Sachsenhausen, the local National Socialist Party forced my mother to sell the house. It was sold for one-eighth of its estimated value. They threatened her with my father's life, if she didn't sell the house, so she sold it to a local Party member. And then for the rest of their stay in my hometown, my parents lived in one room, in a small apartment, which was –

[What, what did they subsist on?]

Well, my father had a reasonable amount of money and also my parents had had some real estate. The money was all managed by a Party member, and who dished out every month a certain amount of money for my parents to live on.

[And with your father having been a lawyer, I presume he had a good position in town. What did the townspeople do with the new kind of life that your parents had? How did they relate to them?]

Well, since 1935, it was very difficult for non-Jews to have any sort of relationship with Jews. I had some friends who came, when it was dark at night, if they thought it was safe to come, who saw my parents occasionally and sort of smuggled in some food because rations was already pretty restricted. Jews didn't get any white flour or meats, one egg a month, and that sort of thing, so, but it was very dangerous for people to do this.

[Were your parents depressed?]

Oh yes, of course they were depressed. And then for some time, they forced my father to, to dig ditches for the city. He was 65 at the time.

[And other Jews as well?]

Oh, yes.

[And your grandparents, were they put in –]

My, my grandparents, my paternal grandparents, were dead by then, but my maternal grandmother was living in Essen in the war. They left her pretty much alone. She was eventually taken to Theresienstadt, and she survived Theresienstadt.

[She did?]

Yes, but she died about a month and a half after she was brought back to Essen.

[So you never saw her after that?]

No, and she didn't find out that I, that I, was alive. So sad.

[Oh.]

Because all communication stopped in Germany when the war was over. And I didn't find out that she was there until after she was dead. So.

[Anyway, to get back to –]

Yeah.

[- to your being taken to a labor camp from the agricultural –]

Yes, the forced labor camp first and then agricultural labor camp. I was in there until early Spring 1943. And then –

[So you were there two years. Is that it?]

Yes.

[Two years in forced labor camp.]

Right. And in '43 we were suddenly all gathered together. All the groups of, of small forced labor camps were all gathered together in one area in Berlin called Grosse Hamburger Strasse, which was a gathering place prior to be taken to concentration camps. And they put us there for about 2 weeks.

[What was it, a hall or dormitory?]

Well, Grosse Hamburger Strasse, I just recently found out actually what it was. It was a Jewish old age home which was very near the oldest Jewish cemetery in Berlin. I really never knew what it was. It, it was sort of a city block of interconnected buildings. And they put us all there clumped together.

[How many were you?]

Well, I think ultimately we were about a thousand roughly. I should –, I only can guess that.

[Yes, I understand.]

And when they had about a thousand, they took us to Auschwitz.

[Did you know you were going to Auschwitz?]

No.

[Did you know what Auschwitz was?]

I had no idea. No.

[And were you with your friends from the camp?]

Yes.

[Young men and women.]

Right. About –

[Can you give us your impression, how, how were you taken to Auschwitz? In a cattle car?]

No, these were regular, sort of, all the old trains. They weren't cattle cars. We arrived in Birkenau on the day of Hitler's birthday in 1943 and I found out afterwards that this, somebody had made Hitler a promise that on this day in 1943, they were going to have Germany free of Jews. Judenrein.

[Rein.]

Right. They didn't quite manage it, but . . .

[He was well on his way.]

Right. So we arrived in Birkenau and it was probably a standard way of arriving there. There was so much yelling and screaming going on. Everybody was just jumping out of the cars. They left all the belongings behind and lined up on the, on the siding. And then within minutes they had the men separated from the women and the children.

[Was this nighttime, or daytime?]

No, it was daytime. And then they, they took us into the camp.

[What were your impressions there? What do you remember?]

Well, that's sort of nebulous. I do have some pictures of it in my mind but they aren't really cohesive. I don't know how we got from the siding into the camp. I have a feel – I think that we were marched there, but I'm not sure. And then very quickly they had also the older women and the women with children separated, until there were about, I think, 130 of us roughly left. And so we were taken in to be tattooed. My number was 4-, 41,965.

[Did you know what that was? Did they prepare you in any way?]

No. They just stood there and tattooed us. And then –

[You must have been very frightened.]

Yeah, it was very scary.

[Was it painful too?]

I was told afterwards that it was painful but I don't remember that it was painful. I think I was too scared.

[And you were still with your friends?]

Oh yes. They arranged us alphabetically so I was with some, but not with others. And then after we were tattooed, they, we, we were ushered to a place where we were told to strip and then we were shaved and then we, we were brought to a place where we were taking a cold shower.

[Were you shaved all over, your head and your pubic hair and everything?]

Everything.

[Were you examined as well?]

I don't call it "examined." I call it . . . By men with guns standing there making rotten remarks and some of the women were very hysterical. They were quite a bit younger than I, and I don't think any of them had ever stripped in front of a man. So there was a lot of crying and, and hysterics. And then we went to the shower which was cold. It was very cold at that, in those days. It was really there, there was still some snow on the ground. And then we were given long men's underwear and a uniform of some kind, which we found out afterwards were uniform of dead Russian prisoners of war.

[So it was pants and a jacket?]

Yeah.

[And what kind of shoes?]

They didn't have any shoes which was very lucky. So we were allowed to keep on our shoes. I don't know what would have happened if they had had the same old wooden shoes that they'd given out. Because they were very bad –

[Very difficult.]

– and people very quickly got blisters and infections in those. But your own shoes were reasonably good.

[All right.]

So that wasn't so bad.

And then we, then we were put into a barracks which was the worst barracks in the whole place.

It was just absolute hell.

[Were there tiers of bunks? Was that it?]

Well, I don't know really what, whether you call them bunks. But they were walls of brick with, with platforms made of doors from old houses. Two doors made a, a platform. And there were 8 people on each one of these. But if you were on this –

[Was there a mattress?]

No mattresses. Nothing. Just –

[Any covers? Any straw?]

No.

[Any –]

Nothing.

[Nothing.]

No, and if you, if you happened to be on one of these, you were lucky because some of the people got on, you know, on the ground which was muddy.

And of course there was, there was not enough room for everybody to stretch out so we took turns. Some of us were stretched out and some of us were hunched together.

The worst part was the sanitation in that, at that time, because very quickly all of us had diarrhea.

And at night they wouldn't let us go to the latrine. There was only in this whole camp one large latrine, which was very horrible in itself. A sort of a concrete ditch which had a little low wall all surrounding it that you could use to squat on. And that was all. No toilet paper.

[And you couldn't use that at night at all.]

No, they wouldn't let us out.

[So you soiled yourselves.]

No, at night they let us use a metal wheelbarrow which was put in front of the entrance to the barracks.

[Very primitive.]

Well, it was very primitive. It was also very bad because the kind of diarrhea we got was sort of like dysentery which is very explosive and very liquid, so it was, it was just really pure hell.

And, and I was brought up in such a way –

[Very refined.]

– that that was the worst part.

[Yes.]

18:41 Also on the second day I got my first beating because I hadn't yet understood that water was very precious. I sort of saw a line of prisoners standing there with little cups. We all were given a sort of a metal cup with a handle and they were all standing there, so I thought that I would stand in line too because maybe there was some food. Turned out that they were standing lined up to get water. There was one spigot of running water at the whole camp at that time. And when I reached the, the spigot with the water and I held my cup under it, I got beaten up because it was a privilege to get water for which you had to exchange something with the women who were guarding the spigot.

[Oh, I see. So it was bribery. And you didn't –]

Yes. I hadn't learned that yet. Yes, they expected a slice of bread or something else in return. So – thrashing.

[So you got that.]

Yes.

[That must have been a shock to you.]

It was. So then in order to get water I started volunteering certain, for certain jobs because if you did certain jobs then you got a little more bread. If you had a little more bread then you could exchange that for water.

[Otherwise you wouldn't get water?]

No, not really.

[No.]

No water. I mean, they brought you some, something they called coffee in the morning, which was, I don't know what it was made of, but it certainly wasn't coffee of course. It was some kind of dark brown with water.

[Perhaps it was chicory.]

Probably was chicory, yes. And that was practically the only thing you got to drink.

[So you were always thirsty.]

Oh, always, yes.

[What kind of work did you do in the camp?]

Well, they didn't have any work for us. It was the strange thing. So, you had to find work. And every once in awhile I found some work. I helped scrub a, a barracks that had been closed because all the people in it had died of some kind of epidemic. So I helped scrub this, and so I got extra bread.

[They didn't use your skill as a sewing, as a sewer?]

Not then, no. No. Then as it got a little warmer I helped dig ditches. There's something that most people don't know about Auschwitz. They had malaria there. It was one of the few places outside Italy where they, where there was malaria because it was very swampy. And in order to

protect the guards, they wanted to drain the swamps so they used us to dig the, the drainage ditches.

[Did anybody get malaria?]

Oh yes. Yes. One of my good friends had malaria. She nearly died, but she –

[– there was no quinine or medication for her.]

There was quinine but you had to pay for it dearly. It was one of those idiocies of life. There was almost anything in, in Auschwitz. People brought it with them when they came. It was put in warehouses. Somehow the German, the, the SS, was not very good at using what we brought there very efficiently. It was all warehoused. Why, I don't know.

[I thought it was sent back to the cities in Germany.]

Well, that's what we were told, but very little found its way back. Much of it was, was there, and then it was used again to bribe, to do anything.

[It was recycled.]

Yes. Right. Some of the clothes went back to Germany, I'm quite sure.

[What was the roll call like?]

Oh, the roll call.

[You hear stories about that.]

Yes, well the roll call happened as a standard kind of procedure. Once in the morning, once in the, in the late afternoon. And you lined up 5 in a row and if somebody was missing, then you stood there and that's how, until that somebody was found. So sometimes hours and of course if you were ridden by dysentery or some other kind of disease, and you couldn't stand, then you get beaten up or they sic the dog on you.

[Did that ever happen to you?]

No. no. I did, I did pass out sometime but there was no dog along. And that was at a different occasion. Now I probably survived because of pure dumb luck. And the first piece of luck was the koya, the SS koya who took us as a group from the Grosse Hamburger Strasse to Birkenau. He became very intrigued with some of the things we did in the Grosse Hamburger Strasse. We were there for 2 weeks with nothing to do but sit. And so we put together some sort of cabaret almost every night. There were some very talented people there and the SS guards came and sat and applauded and asked for more. He liked that. And so he somewhat took a liking to this whole group of people. I don't know just how to explain this.

[Yes, that's evident.]

But after he had brought us to Birkenau, he, he disappeared. But he came back with the next transport. And the moment he came to Birkenau, he came into the camp and he started looking for what he called, "Where are my Berliners?" And he found that we were in this miserable barracks. And evidently he did something about it because we were pulled out of this barracks and, and distributed to different jobs and different locations and, and housed better.

[But you were separated?]

25:34 Some of us were separated, right. And I ended up doing some sewing, mending of uniforms and things like that, but only for a very short time. Then there was a selection for people who after 6 weeks still looked reasonably strong. And I happened to, because that's the way I'm built. So when I stood there without my clothes on and they, and the SS doctors looked at me, I looked reasonably good. They didn't see that I had a very bad infected heel blister, thank goodness, and I was taken out of Birkenau and put into a building that housed, it was, it was a barracks, an army barracks. On the top floors lived the female guards and in the basement was a laundry for the uniforms and and underwear and socks of the whole guard group. They

had made some rooms in this basement with triple deckers and we were there to wash the laundry day and night. They, there wasn't enough room to just have a day shift, so they used the beds 24 hours around the clock. Some of the girls were washing laundry during the day and some others washing laundry at night. And of course there was a shower room, and we were not allowed to have lice or, or any kind of dangerous insect. And again this was one of those lucky breaks because lice meant typhus and very often certain death. So if you didn't have lice, you already had one lucky break.

[And the sanitation was better there too, I presume?]

Oh, yes. Regular bathrooms.

[Regular toilets.]

Yes. Yes. And whatever food we were supposed to get, we got. It was delivered to the basement and the, the hierarchy in this particular set-up was so closely scrutinized by the guards that they could not really use the food that was meant for us to buy themselves luxuries with, which was a common thing in the, in the camp at large. The food was usually delivered to one of the barracks in the camp, but the prisoners didn't always get it.

[But in this case, you got yours.]

We got it, yes.

[How long were you in this situation?]

That, I don't quite remember. Certainly a few months. Then one, one day a guard appeared and asked if anybody could type, could do bookkeeping, and stenography. Now my father had always been carefully coaching me not to volunteer for anything like that. So, I wasn't about to, but one of my friends stood behind me in this line of 5 and she gave me a push. She knew I could do all these things. She gave me a push and I nearly fell. So, I made a step forward to

catch my balance and he thought I volunteered. And so I ended up in one of the buildings in Auschwitz, which was most, and it was, it has a reputation. It was called –

[What was that, Irmgard?]

It was an organizational sort of a building where all the bigwigs had their offices. So, I saw the Kommandants of Auschwitz practically every day because the office I worked in was on the same floor, about 3 doors down from their private offices. So, I've seen all of these men: Hoss and Liebehenshal.

[Did Hitler ever come to your offices?]

No.

[Or Goering or Eichmann?]

Not when I was there.

[How long did you work there?]

Well, I worked there until the 18th of January, 1945.

[So you, in total –]

It was from '44, sometime in '44, until the January '45.

[So in total you were in Auschwitz for –]

Two years.

[Two years.]

Yes.

[And the last –]

Well, not quite. A few –

[And the last part was better than the first part.]

In Auschwitz?

[In Auschwitz.]

Yes, much better. Yes, because then the, we were working in offices where there were also guards working. And they objected to the fact that we didn't have any hair. There were some kind of crazy rules that ordinarily every time you were on the outside, you had to wear a white kerchief which had to be folded very exactly, to show some corners and have the ends tucked under very precisely. But indoors we were supposed to take that off. Well, they complained because there were all these women with bald heads sitting there and they found that very ugly. So, we were allowed to grow about 2 centimeters of hair. I did some job, which unfortunately I don't remember it's in enough precision. But I can tell what it was. It has bothered me for years that I don't remember some of the details. I wrote into ledgers every day certain amounts of foodstuffs. There was, I think, something in the Geneva Convention that said certain types of prisoners had to have so many calories per day as food. And so that was worked out into being so much rice, so much barley, so much coffee, so much sugar. And all this was very neatly put into ledgers and then it was multiplied by the number of prisoners. So every morning, I knew exactly how many prisoners were in all of Auschwitz and all of the satellite camps. Because as soon as I got to the job there, to the, to this building, and sat down at my desk, runners, so called runners, would come from the satellite camps. These were guards who came on these motorbikes with the sidecars and give me forms. And it said, "Yesterday there was this many prisoners. Today there are this many prisoners."

[Imagine with that machinery that they bothered with, with these details.]

Oh, yes, they were very precise. And so I could tell every day whether the difference was because some people had died overnight or some people had been gassed, because if there was a difference that was larger than say a couple of hundred, then you knew what that meant.

[Yes.]

But I don't remember the details about it so I can't tell you at what time the large gassings were.

[Did you see the gassings though?]

No.

[You weren't near the crematoria?]

No. No, I was then in Auschwitz and the crematoria were in Birkenau. You see that Birkenau is sometimes referred to as Auschwitz II.

[Oh, so its entrance.]

Yes. And I was then already having transferred to Auschwitz I.

[Were you with your friends?]

Some of my friends, yes.

[Did all your friends –]

Not all of my friends.

[No, did they, did they remain alive?]

No.

[No.]

No.

[Some of them died.]

Yeah.

[Did they die in the camps of malnutrition?]

Well, malnutrition, diseases. And some of them were selected. Supposedly I was in a selection which was carried out by Mengele but I don't remember anything about it.

[You just –]

There were some people who were very interested in knowing the names and the, and the dates of everything. Seems to me that I was only interested in being alive and staying alive. There was enough going on, and I don't even think that I would ever have recognized Mengele if I had seen him. The, at one time, shortly after I started working in the office, all of us were transferred into a brand-new barracks which was very clean in a comparison, very luxurious. The building where the, the experiments on the women were carried out was right next door to this barracks. But of course when I say barracks, these were really substantial buildings with thick walls, reasonably thick walls, brick buildings that were several floors high, so actually I don't ever, I didn't see any of these women, but every once in awhile you could hear them scream. Yes. Now we were housed in this, in this new barracks that people who worked in this office building. And there were several different kinds of offices. There was also the famous Politische Teilung, which I think is a misnomer. It, it was called "political division" but I don't think it really had anything to do with politics. These were the people who knew more about insurrections and subordinations and punishments. And who also catalogued all the important goods that were being brought in, gold and silver, which was brought in by Hungarian Jews. There was not much gold and silver left in, that German Jews brought in, because that, that had been taken away earlier. But the Hungarian Jews brought considerable amounts in, and of course, I saw washtubs full of, of wedding bands that were taken away, and various jewelry. I have never seen teeth that were supposed to be broken out because they contained gold but I have heard that that was done. If it was done, I never saw that. But all these offices were in the same building. It was a fairly large building. And so we were all housed together in this barracks. And also there were some of the women who were in one of the orchestras. Now there were actually two orchestras. There was one in Birkenau and one in Auschwitz. And, this is another one of these peculiarities, the,

the girls who played in the orchestra didn't have to wear prisoners' uniform. They were allowed to wear skirts and shirts and jackets. The jackets all had a large red oil paint stripe on the back. And they were also allowed to grow some hair. Now anytime on Sunday when the weather was good, they were made to sit near the smaller one of the two circumferential fences and, and play. And the guards would bring their wives and children and stand outside the fence and listen to the music. And then when the regular concert was over, they requested very often certain kinds of music be played. So this . . .

[That was peculiar.]

Yes.

[To bring that –]

That's why always, I keep remembering these women in their dirndl dresses and the little children standing there, and then I keep hearing that, by and large, this German population didn't know what was going on.

[Seems rather strange.]

Aye.

[Now did you get any news about what was happening?]

No news. Practically no news; I have to qualify that. We got sort of third- and fourth-hand news that was filtered down. There was a, I understand, a quite accurate news network that was carried on by the Polish underground, but we didn't speak Polish and most of the Polish prisoners were very wary of us. They wouldn't come near us. So it, it sort of filtered down, somehow. We knew the war was going on because occasionally, there were air raid alarms and we were forced to go into the basement of the barracks where we were, we were. As soon as there was an idea that there was going to be an attack, by mostly American bombers, we were

forced to stop working and we were immediately driven back to the, I mean marched back, to the, to the camp proper, and we were forced into the basement because they were, I guess, afraid that we would signal in some way. And once, unfortunately, we were, we were bombed. It was on the – in September 1944. The, the barracks, the building on the other side of, of our building was a tailor shop where a whole, a reasonably large group of Polish men, tailors by profession, manufactured uniforms and, and also repaired them. And they unfortunately got a real hit.

[They got hit.]

Yes. It was very bad. And our barracks collapsed from the air pressure. So that –

[Did you know that the war was going poorly for the Nazis by any actions of the guards?]

No.

[No.]

No. Oh, no.

[No.]

I don't think they knew it either.

[So what happened in January?]

Well, in January we were suddenly all –

[This is January, 1945.]

Ni-, January 1945. The 18th of January, 1945, we were told, I think the day before, that we were supposed to pack up some of our office material in big boxes, and also some of us were burning things. Now I don't know why they didn't burn it all. I also don't know why they marched us out of there. We were, we had already been suspicious about for 2 weeks, there were some rumors that something was going to happen. And we thought that they were going to kill us because we knew too much. They couldn't just suddenly left us, you, you know, to, they

couldn't have left us to, to tell the truth, so to speak. So we were really scared. But instead they marched us out of there. It was terrible. It was very cold and it was lots of snow on the ground. And we were really not well-dressed for this kind of business and there was very little food. Then we were loaded into open cattle cars and coal cars, about 70 to 80 people in one of them, which meant that most of us had to stand. And it was snowing. And we were being sprayed by airplanes. I don't know which airplanes they were. So that took about 3 days and the intervening nights. No food. No water. And only once in a great while did they ever stop the train and then they let a few women at a time out, to use the side of the railing, the, the train rails as a toilet. In the meantime, we had one bucket per car to use, and so we were allowed to empty that then too whenever the train stopped. And then we were taken to Ravensbruck, which was a disaster. Ravensbruck was already so overcrowded because ours apparently was not the first train to get there. So they didn't have any room to put us anywhere, so we were standing, I don't know how many hours, but the, the best guess is 10. And many of the women who had made it died then. But of course at that point so many had died on the march and during the train ride, which is another one of those reasons why I think many of the Germans who said that they didn't know what was happening lied. Because what could you do with dead prisoners in this packed condition in the, in the cattle car? They were all thrown out over the side of the car. So there were dead bodies lying all along from Auschwitz back into Germany. Somebody must have taken them away eventually. So that is a pretty blank time in my head. I know that I, that we were packed into a large open building like a shed and we were there for a few days. Then we were shipped to a satellite camp of Ravensbruck. And from there we were shifted to the last camp I was in, which was, which was called Malchow. And that was very bad. There was very little food. There was no work. All we did was lie around and get weaker and weaker all the

time. And eventually there was also no water. But at that point, we knew that something was happening because there were, there were, day and night there were, dogfights between German and British planes that were, that were close enough you could see the markings on the planes. So that we knew that something was about to happen, and you could also hear the, what I assume, was heavy artillery from the east. Malchow was in Mecklenburg and it, it is probable that what we heard was the bombardment on Berlin. And so eventually, the guards decide to march us all out of Malchow. I don't think that was a higher order. This was one of those desperation moves, I think. They didn't want to be captured by Russians so they marched us toward the west. There was no particular plan that we could find out. Now I was in pretty bad shape and some of my friends were not capable of really marching anymore either. It was very very dark at, at night and during one of the lags where there were no fights that lit up the area – usually, you know, when there were, when there were airplane fights, there was also this tracer ammunition, tracer bullets which lit up the whole sky.

[Right.]

But during one of these lags we sort of dropped off in, into a ditch on the side of the road and we waited until no more people came, and then hid in a bunch of hay that was left on the field.

[You and several friends?]

Yeah. I and 6 friends. Yes. And the next day, just as dawn was coming, we sort of crept across the street where we found there was a farm. The farmer was very happy that we came because we, we were all emaciated and we had prison uniforms, and he did not want to run away, as apparently many other Germans did. He thought that if he put us up and gave us something to eat, that whoever came to occupy Germany would be nice to him. So he made us a space in one of his barns and gave us a, a big bucket full of potatoes, which we ate and then we went to sleep.

I don't know how long we slept exactly but it must have been about the rest of the day and the following night. And the next morning, somebody came running into the barn and said, "The war is over! The Americans are coming!" And so we just crept out of there and march toward the west where we thought the Americans were coming from. This big tank came, and it had the Allied Star in front of it, but we had never heard about the Allied Star, and the only star we knew had something to do with Russia. So we said, "Oh, my God, everything is lost." You know, these are the Russians. These are not the Americans. But then, the, as we were watching, the, the tank came by and on the side it said, "Blue Rain" which was the name of a popular tune, and I think the American soldiers named their tanks and their airplanes after girlfriends or tunes or something like that. And we just jumped up and down as much as we could.

[It sounds like a wonderful day.]

And the, the guys for, in the tank threw chocolate at us and, and k-ration. And that was wonderful, yes. Unfortunately it didn't stay very wonderful because they were only there the day. Then they were through, and the Russians took over, and all hell broke loose. So my friends and I managed to escape from that, and with the help of other American soldiers, and this happened to be people from the 82nd Airborne Division, we got to cross one strip of no-man's land. You see, the, the demarcation line between the Russian army and the American army was fluctuating all the time, back and forth. It took several weeks before that stabilized. And here was this no-man's land, and the, the boys from the 82nd Airborne Division weren't really allowed to help us across.

[Oh, because of frater, fraternization.]

They did this – Yes, yes. Right.

[But they did help you.]

Well, not only, not only this but many German Nazis tried to escape too.

[Right. The same way.]

So, but, but they stashed us away in the middle of the woods somewhere and then brought us over during the night. And so we finally were reasonably safe. Unfortunately, they didn't stay there either. Eventually, well, the British took over, and then eventually the Russians took over finally again, but by this time, we had got a little strength back. And we managed to get to the other side of the Elbe, with the help of the British army. And from there, then we, we dispersed.

[You dispersed.]

Right.

[Before –]

Is there any, any kind of detail that you would –

[Yes, I think before we phase out, we'd like to see that picture of you, your identification card.

Perhaps – oh, this is a picture that we never showed, in the agricultural farm, back in the late '30s or early '40s, but now we'd like to see the other picture, with the identification. Can you tell us something about that?]

Yes, well, as soon as the war was over, the various Red Cross organizations came in and helped.

[Why don't you take some water there?]

Yes, that would help much. They helped the nationals to get out of Germany. But since we were German nationals, nobody helped us. So the first thing to do was, one girl figured out we needed identification since all our papers, everything, was destroyed. So they made up this kind of an identification card, which we could use to show that we were not just German Germans but different Germans.

[Displaced Germans.]

Displaced Germans, yes. Right. And that if we went to any kind of aid organization, that we could legitimately ask for help.

[And that helped you, I presume.]

Yes.

[Irmgard, will you show us your number? If you don't mind.]

Well, I can't unfortunately show you the number. I don't have it anymore. My relatives, when I came to this country, were so upset about the commotion it caused every time I walked around with short sleeves, that they asked me to have it taken out. It was rather too large to take out this piece which was one part of the Star of David, and I was told that it, that the scar wouldn't heal properly if they tried to take it out at the same time, but I was told eventually I could have it taken out too, but I never bothered.

[So, in other words, they insisted that you take the, the number off.]

Yeah, every time I went, I went somewhere with my relatives, people just stared at me, as were, as I were, were a creature from outer space. It was just really bad.

[It's a shame that they put you through that, after having been put through it initially.]

Well.

[Did your parents survive?]

No, my parents did not. Most of my family, they just, some uncles and aunts and some cousins, got out of Germany early enough. But anyone who was, any one of my family who was in Germany after the war broke out, did not survive. So . . .

[So you came to this country virtually relative-less].

Well, I wouldn't really say that because my brother got out of Germany very early and he was a soldier in the American army during the second world war. Unfortunately, because of

circumstances, he could not help. He was an enemy Aryan soldier, and therefore he was sent to the Philippines rather than to the, to the European theatre.

[It would have been something if you had met, wouldn't it?]

Yes, that would have been. Yeah, I was asking anyone and everybody I could find whether they had ever met my brother. Since my brother is multilingual, it seemed to me that he might have been used as, as an interpreter.

[Interpreter.]

But I was told that very often, it was too dangerous to have a, a former German citizen be in the American army.

[Even if he were Jewish?]

Yes. Even if he were Jewish.

[– was Jewish. That's strange.]

That if he, if he became a prisoner of war, his treatment certainly would be very bad.

[Oh, yes. Yes. I understand that we, we don't have much time, but just briefly, after the war, you were in Sweden?]

Yes.

[For awhile for rehabilitation?]

No, not really for rehabilitation. I needed to get out of Germany as fast as I could, or at least I thought so. And I had relatives in Sweden who got me a Swedish entrance permit. And so with the help of an UNRRA officer I got out of Germany. I stayed –

[What year was that?]

That was in 1946. And I stayed in Sweden until my American visa came. It only took about 10 month, and I left Sweden in February '47.

[Did you leave with any of your friends?]

No. No.

[Are you in touch with your friends, some of them?]

Some of them, yes. Some of them.

[Could you tell us in, in conclusion, in summation, if you have a message or anything particular that you want to close with? It's hard, I know.]

Yes, it is hard. Seems to me that when I came here, I had lots of messages but nobody wanted to hear them. So for years and years I didn't talk about it. Now, the whole, the whole part of history, that part of history has been so sugar-coated and so trivialized that any message you would want to have, I think only a historian can really formulate one. I, I don't think I have anything to say in the way of message. No.

[Well, telling us your story was certainly message enough, and I know it's hard to go back on those times.]

Well, well, I have left out lots of gruesome details. They certainly could think up a lot of bad things to do. Like forcing everyone to watch executions and if they managed to see that you did, that you, that you looked down on the ground instead of looking up while the execution was taking place, then you got beaten up. And it was one of those cruelties. And then there were jokes that happened. Like one day they took us all and showed us a movie. What can you say? I mean, the whole thing was so schizophrenic at times. There was no way of making any sense of it. If you tried to guess whether you would ever get out of there alive, it was hopeless. The situation could change from one day to the next. There was no way of predicting it.

[Thank goodness, thank goodness that you, that you survived.]

Yeah.

[It's important for you to tell the story. Thank you very much, Irmgard.]

You're welcome.

[Thank you.]

Transcribed by: Andrea Zevenbergen, SUNY Fredonia, January 2023