

Present Memories, Eric Kahn

0:01

Both sides of my family had settled in Germany thousands of years ago.

0:07

My father and grandfathers had fought proudly for their country in the wars.

0:13

When my parents married, my mother, who was Christian, converted to Judaism, and my brother and I were raised as Jews.

0:22

This must have been a tough and courageous decision because anti-Semitism was flourishing by the time I was born and had greatly intensified by the time Nazis seized power In 1933, when I was three, my father and his brother owned a successful wholesale business.

0:41

As soon as the Nazis came to power, boycotts of Jewish establishments commenced and soon their business was in bankruptcy.

0:51

My father took a job as a salesman for an Aryan company and travelled all over Europe.

0:58

I remember starting first grade in a German public neighborhood school Easter 1935.

1:05

The same year the Nuremberg laws, the Nazi racial laws, were adopted.

1:11

Less than a year later, Jewish kids were prohibited from public school.

1:16

A new school was set up for us in an old barracks building in the outskirts of the city.

1:23

Since we were not allowed to use public transportation, we had to walk 45 minutes to school each day.

1:30

The classroom space was limited and kids of different ages doubled up in the same room with the cold stove in the corner.

1:38

The all Jewish teachers were first quality and we were taught English and put on plays.

1:44

There were no playground or sports facilities available for Jewish kids, so we had races and did broad jumps on the asphalt in front of the barracks.

1:54

I was on the track team.

1:57

Attendance at this school marked us as Jews.

2:01

Although we were frequently yelled at and chased by other kids, we never questioned our parents why these kids were so mean to us.

2:10

Even at this young age, we understood that to be Jewish was different.

2:16

The war on us in Germany was in full swing long before the outbreak of World War 2.

2:22

Laws were passed requiring Jews to use the middle name of Israel and Sarah.

2:28

We were forbidden to use movies, playgrounds, streetcars. On Rosh

2:34

Hashanah, 1939.

2:36

The Gestapo came and confiscated our radio, a bicycle, and a fur coat.

2:42

The bank froze our assets and we were allowed only small withdrawals.

2:48

We were ordered to sew a yellow Star of David on all our outer clothing and to affix one to the door of our apartment.

2:57

Violations meant arrest and a concentration camp.

3:01

In October 1938, my father was fired from his job.

3:06

Jews no longer could be employed by Aryans.

3:10

From now on, we could only dig ditches and perform menial tasks.

3:15

During Kristallnacht, November 1938, Nazi Stormtroopers and Brown Shirts destroyed almost all of the synagogues and the few remaining Jewish businesses.

3:27

In the middle of the night, Gestapo agents came to our apartment and arrested my father.

3:33

He was incarcerated in Dachau, where he and the other Jewish men were severely mistreated.

3:40

Some were killed, but most, including my father, were released after six to eight weeks.

3:47

They all had to swear on the threat of death not to reveal what had happened to them in that camp.

3:54

My father realized that we had no future in Germany and used all of his connections in other European countries and in the US to try to get us out.

4:05

It was to no avail.

4:07

Jews were not wanted.

4:10

The American consulate in Stuttgart was overrun by Jews trying to get out.

4:15

Frantic scenes took place there, and family members were often separated by technicalities.

4:23

Because the quota for Jews was very low, the application numbering system only provided the prospect of being called years from then.

4:32

Even if your number came up, no visa was given unless someone in the United States provided a financial affidavit to ensure that you would not go on welfare.

4:44

The world did not realize the impending slaughter by the Nazis and the urgency for us to leave, so we were stuck and nobody really cared.

4:55

We prayed for better times, but the adults kept talking of the coming war.

5:02

In a small side room of our devastated synagogue, services resumed and I sang second voice in the choir.

5:11

Money became scarce.

5:13

To help make ends meet, my parents rented a room out to out of town Jewish guests who by law could not stay in hotels.

5:23

Sometimes at dinner, my brother and I often had to share one hot dog.

5:30

A few days before the war started, I was offered an escape with the children's transport to England.

5:38

My parents held me back.

5:39

I was just 10 and they felt that in wartime I would be safer with them.

5:45

My cousin Hans had left on another transport to England a few weeks before.

5:51

He would be the only one in his family to survive.

5:55

The German victories on the battlefields made it even less likely that we would survive.

6:01

The Jewish school was closed.

6:04

Education was banned.

6:06

A few teachers defied this order and risked their lives by teaching in their homes.

6:13

And then the deportations to the East began.

6:16

We did not know that the final solution to the Jewish problem had started and the decision to exterminate all Jews was being implemented.

6:25

In June and September of 1942, my schoolmates, our teachers, my father's relatives and all the Jews that we knew were arrested and deported in two large transports.

6:38

One kindly lady gave us her black hidden money before committing suicide daily.

6:46

We feared we too would be sent with these transports, but miraculously we were temporarily spared because of my mother's Aryan birth.

6:57

In February 1945, our luck finally ran out.

7:02

My father, my brother and I were arrested and sent in cattle cars to Teresenstadt with other Jewish non Aryan partners and children of mixed marriages.

7:14

We did not know that we were destined to die.

7:17

For most,

7:18

Theresienstadt was but a way station to Auschwitz.

7:23

My father, brother and I spent several months of fear, starvation and disease in Theresienstadt before the Red Army liberated us on the very last day of World War Two, May 8, 1945.

7:38

A month later, we returned to our waiting mother in Wiesbaden.

7:43

A year later, we finally made it to these shores and started a new life.

7:49

My wife Ruth and I are the proud parents of two children, Lisa and Mike.

7:56

For many years I did not talk about my experiences during the Holocaust.

8:01

Then I realized that by keeping silent, I was negating the very existence of my dear friends and relatives.

8:09

And so we remember together.