

War Stories

Some of history's most important lessons are not found in books. They're found in the minds of ordinary people who lived through extraordinary events. For our Eyewitness to History Contest, we ask readers to interview people who have witnessed historic events. Three winning interviews have a common theme: life as a child during World War II. That war began on Sept. 1, 1939, when Adolf Hitler's Nazi Germany invaded Poland. The United States entered the war in 1941, after Japan, Germany's ally, attacked the U.S. naval base at Pearl Harbor, in Hawaii. The war ended in 1945.

A Jewish Girl Growing Up in Germany in the 1930s

By Julie Sarne, The Latin School of Chicago, Ill.

Hitler hoped to conquer all of Europe—and he wanted it to be free of Jews and other people he deemed inferior. The Nazis killed more than six million Jews in the Holocaust. Julie Sarne's Oma (German for "grandmother") managed to escape.

Q: How was your childhood?

A: I grew up in a large house. My father was a wealthy lawyer and an officer in the German cavalry in World War I. We lived in an expensive suburb of Berlin. I went to a private school. We had many servants.

Q: When did things start to change?

A: [In] 1933. I was seven and was told little, but suddenly my governess was gone. My father's clients were threatened, so he lost his income.

Q: What happened at school?

A: My girlfriends stopped playing with me. Boys taunted me and chased me when I walked home. I learned to be afraid.

Q: What happened to your house?

A: One day the Gestapo [secret police of Nazi Germany] came and told us to leave our house, where we had lived for twenty years. We moved into a small apartment with my aunt.

Q: What else happened?

A: The government closed all but two Jewish schools. We couldn't go to movie theaters, restaurants, or public parks, which had signs [that said] "No Jews Allowed."... We were allowed to shop one hour a day. Our ration cards had a big *J* on them, and we couldn't buy everything the Germans could. We could only buy meat on the black market. Once, I bought chocolate when a clerk made a mistake. I later found out my father got in trouble for this.

Q: What do you remember about Kristallnacht ["Crystal Night"]?

A: In November 1938, most synagogues were burned. Jewish shops were looted, and the windows [were] smashed. Men were sent to concentration camps. My father hid at his sister's house. I didn't know where he was, but he called daily.

Q: Did you try to leave Germany?

A: I was to go to England but [I] couldn't, as I had an operation. In the hospital, I heard the groaning of men released from the concentration camps with frostbite or worse. I shall never forget that sound.

Q: When did you leave Germany?

A: [My father and I] left Germany [on] December 7, 1940, when I was fourteen. My father wore his Iron Cross, the highest German medal of honor, but a Gestapo man ripped it off. I know that hurt my dad, but he kept his cool. ... We took the Trans-Siberian Railroad across Russia and a ship to Japan. Most countries, including the United States, wouldn't let Jewish refugees in. We went to Shanghai, China, one of the only places you could go without papers. Nearly 30,000 Jewish refugees entered Shanghai, more than were taken in by the United States [which set a quota to limit the number of Jewish immigrants]. I was finally able to leave [China in] 1948 and came by boat to San Francisco.

Q: What happened to your parents?

A: In China, we learned that [my mother had] died in Germany. My father was on the Polish quota and had to wait longer. I never saw him again, as he died at sea.

The London Blitz in WWII

By Claire Curtis, Schaghticoke Middle School, New Milford, Conn.

Claire Curtis's grandfather was nine years old during the 1940 Battle of Britain, when Germany launched a huge air attack on England. The eight-month onslaught was known as the Blitz (from the German term Blitzkrieg, meaning "lightning war"). The German air force dropped 18,000 tons of bombs, killing more than 43,000 people.

Q: Where did you live?

A: I was living in London with my parents and attending school.

Q: Where did you go when the bombing began?

A: It depended upon where we were when the air raid siren sounded. Sometimes we went to the public air raid shelter ... sometimes to the basement of the theater ... sometimes to the subway. At night we would go to our own basement and sleep there. We slept there for weeks. My mother, while insisting that my father and I go to the basement, would sleep in the bedroom. She found it claustrophobic down there.

Q: What went through your mind?

A: Being so young, I [wasn't] particularly afraid. I did anticipate the possibility of being

able to gather some shrapnel from the bombs and shells from antiaircraft guns in the morning to add to my collection!

Q: Did you ever get used to it?

A: It became a way of life, lasting [fifty-seven] continuous days.

Q: What did the city look like after the bombings?

A: The city seemed in ruins. Some buildings were still burning. ... The rescue of people who were trapped under the debris ... came before the fighting of the fires. Firemen were busy night and day, even as the bombs were still falling. Glass and bricks were strewn all over, and roads ... had to be cleared for ambulances and fire trucks. All able-bodied men were recruited to clear rubble.

Q: Was your house ever attacked?

A: One day, without warning ... bombs landed in our area, one striking the house directly across from ours. The woman in the house was killed, and her body landed in our front yard. All of the windows in the front of our house were shattered, but no major damage was done to the building. I had been playing in the front room. ... Just moments before [the bombing, I had] gone to the kitchen in the back of the house, beside my mother.

Q: London was bombed day and night. What did you do to stay safe?

A: Everyone carried [a] gas mask. ... I carried mine to school, where periodically we would have air raid drills. ... The shelter in my school was in the basement, and during air raids all of the classes would go down there and wait for the all clear. There were benches for us, and blankets. The small windows in the basement were mounded with sandbags.

If there was not time to get to the basement, we had to wear our gas masks and crouch under our desks, covering our heads with our hands.

It was mandatory for all the windows to be curtained with blackout material so that not a chink of light could show [and] alert the enemy to habitation. ... Air raid wardens patrolled the streets looking for ... exposed light.

After the bomb hit so close to home, my parents decided they could take no more chances, and we moved up to Scotland, beside my grandmother, for safety. We remained there for the duration of the war.

When the war ended, the country was jubilant! Church bells rang; streetlights were turned on again. There was dancing in the streets.

Germany in WWII

By Jamie Lytle, South Park Middle School, South Park, Pa.

Life in Germany wasn't easy during the war, even for people who weren't Jewish. Hedy Gaetano, Jamie Lytle's grandmother, recalls how her home near Munich was bombed three times by Allied forces. (The United States, the United Kingdom, the Soviet Union, and China were known as the Allies.)

Q: What was life like during WWII?

A: It was ... sometimes scary. School [was often] cancelled ... but if there was an air attack during school, you had to stay at school. There was little food, times [when] you did not have a home. Most families were without fathers because they were fighting in the war. Most kids only had one pair of shoes.

Q: How old were you when your house was bombed?

A: The first time I was five. The second and third times I was six.

Q: Were you aware of why your house was being bombed?

A: Yes, because we were at war with the Americans.

Q: What do you remember?

A: I remember being in the shelter, and everything was shaking. Once we came out of the shelter, and our house was burning, so we spent the rest of the night on the street. We usually slept in our clothes because if there was an air attack, we were not allowed to turn the lights on, or there was no electricity. The first bombing of our house was ... at night. The adults were so upset about our homes being destroyed, but as a five-year-old child, I looked up to the sky and saw the most beautiful red sky I had ever seen. The red was a reflection of the burning city of Munich.

Q: What was the procedure when the air raid signal went off?

A: You rush to the shelter. You take, if you can, bare necessities: a blanket, a piece of bread, or maybe your doll.

Q: What happened at the war's end?

A: The Americans came, and they were smiling and giving us chewing gum, peanut butter, and coffee. It was several years of rebuilding our house and going back to a normal life, which meant going to school.