

Activity 5: The Legal Effect: How Laws Can Persecute or Protect

Irene Watts - transcription

IW: I have such strong images of what happened, they're like photos imprinted on my brain, of what happened in the, in the different parts of the house. There was a night and I know from research where—exactly when it was: It was in '38 of course, which was a day when anybody who was married to a Pole would have to be sent to their place of origin.

And I was in my room, asleep, and I, I woke up and around my bed was standing my mother and father and my father's youngest sister, Greta, and her husband and a 13-year-old cousin. It was his favourite sister, although we only saw them from time to time, they would be invited for a meal.

And I remember she had a head scarf round, round her head and they were all dressed in black, and it must have been eleven o'clock at night, and they came to say goodbye before being deported to Poland.

And I remember the very strong image.

[...]

IW: I remember the day that my father came back from Sachsenhausen and he sat—there was a dresser that if—you have to imagine there was their bedroom and then there was a dressing room where my father was shaved every morning—somebody came up to shave him every morning—and everything seemed to be done in dark green silk—I don't know, my mother's eiderdown comforter was dark green silk—and then there was my bedroom adjoining. And he sat in this chair and I was quite frightened at how he looked because his hair was shaved and he was very thin and very pale and he just sat in the chair. And I remember his hands and long thin fingers and he looked like a ghost. I was terrified to go near him.

And my mother said, “Oh look vater's come home from holidays and he's brought you a present”, and he brought me marzipan, which is my favourite kind of chocolate. And I always remember that. Although I knew intuitively this, that he hadn't been on holiday. I, I don't know, I just knew that because nobody looked like that. I hadn't seen anybody look like that.

And do you know it wasn't 'til I was, oh, nearly 60 that I found out that he had—how he had been treated in Sachsenhausen. I found this out because a cousin in Israel wrote and told me. And he had been made to stand naked the whole night, you know, in the square that night when they took all the men to Sachsenhausen, and they'd been whipped.

And my father was an extremely fastidious man, and not a strong man, a delicate man. And I don't think he ever recovered from those couple of months or weeks at Sachsenhausen.

[...]

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IW: What was going on in the city was reflected in my life. For example, I went to dancing class and I was, I was removed although I loved it. And I heard my mother say to various people, 'Oh Irene didn't like the nail polish on the teacher's hands', which is an absolute fabrication. And it's again, this keeping of silence. Obviously, I was Jewish. 'You can't go to the dancing class'. I desperately wanted to go to the movies—there was a Shirley Temple film—but I do remember very, very clearly the big sign, the Jewish star and 'Jews not allowed' and just couldn't go. Things like that are, are very clear.

Interviewer: Is there anything else you'd like to say about your life before the war started?

IW: Yes, I ask myself why I wasn't allowed to say goodbye to my grandfather before I left. I had gone to Montessori school—I suppose a Montessori kindergarten—one day that stopped and I was just at home. That was before I went to the Kaliski school. Again, I presume because of being Jewish.

I also remember very clearly always wearing a little gold Star of David, but I wore it underneath, you know, I didn't wear it out I wore it inside, but I always wore that.