

Reta Schwisow

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Question: Let me start just by getting your first and last name and correct spelling so I have it on tape.

Answer: Hm-hmm. Well, I'm R-E-T-A

Answer: And the last name is Schwisow, S-C-H-W-I-S-O-W. We always say if you can spell it, you can't pronounce it, if you can pronounce it, you can't spell it.

Question: Let me just ... OK. Now, you were a newlywed and your husband -- so he actually was in boot camp when you got married. Or in -- past boot camp but in training.

Answer: No, actually, he got his commission in March of 1944 and came home on a leave, I forget how many days, but he was home. And soon as he saw me he brought his wings. And gave them to me, pinned them on me. I thought that was rather nice. But it -- he never told me what it really meant. (laughs) It was one of his friends who said, well, you're engaged. (laughs) Oh, really, OK. This was a shy country boy, you know. So he just pins on the wings and I'm supposed to know what that means. (laughs) And actually then of course, a short time, maybe not more than ten days I think that he was home and we were together a lot and we talked a lot but, and had a good time, too, with our family and friends. And so we really didn't get all that serious about the future. And it was, I think, after he went back that we got to thinking and writing. We really wanted to get married. Why don't we just go ahead and do it. And so I was teaching. I had left Wesleyan University where I was a sophomore. I finished my sophomore year. He left in February of my sophomore year. I stayed on at school until the end of the semester and then I took a teaching job. Taught 7th grade in a small town about 30 miles from my home town. And since we decided to get married I then resigned one month before school was out -- left my teaching job. Poor superintendent. But he had others who did the same thing. There was one married woman whose husband came home on leave and she just took off and went with him. You know, so everybody made accommodations for the situation. I think as Lauren was being interviewed he said that it was an all out effort on the part of everybody and so everybody that did things that normally people wouldn't do in order to make the war effort succeed. And I, with my mother and my future mother-in-law, went by train to Boise, Idaho where he went for B-24 training, you see. And we were married there in a large church in Boise with 14 guests -- his crew, my, our two mothers, and a cousin of my mother. And then his best man who was also an airman and the best man's sister who was visiting him from Nebraska was my maid of honor. So that was all the crowd that was there.

Question: One second here. (pause) So you get married in Boise.

Answer: Yeah. And we lived in a little garage, a garage that had been converted, again to accommodate the military families, couples. It had a stove, a bed and a bathroom and a table, and that was about it. And that was our honeymoon cottage. We thought it was quite wonderful. We had our own individual place. But I had to get it. And we stayed there for less than two months because it was on the 10th of July at Topeka, Kansas that the bombardiers' wife and I told the guys goodbye.

Question: So describe that scene to me. I mean I just -- I can't even imagine. You're newlyweds and in a war. I mean -- not two things that go together well.

Answer: But we had faced reality, you know. We really did know that -- probably that we'd have a very short time. So we just did it, that's it. Went back home. She went to Seattle where her father lived and I went to my parents' farm in Nebraska

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Answer: And we corresponded, she and I did. She was the only other -- the bombardier was the only other married individual on the crew. Because they were all young. Very young. We were young to be married, actually.

Question: So you go home and you're on the farm and --

Answer: I start as soon as I can. I don't remember how I learned what his address would be, but I started -- we always had written to each other. He as gone 13 months in training and we wrote daily to each other. And we continued that as soon as we could start it again we continued it for as long as it lasted. And so, you know, it was a contact, it was something to do and letters were wonderful to share with family, too.

Question: Must have developed your writing skills.

Answer: Yes, we did. I -- we still have that collection, too. We haven't looked at them for a long time, and as we go over this history, it's important now that we get those out. I have letters that he wrote to me; I have letters that I wrote to him, letters that he wrote to his parents and that his parents wrote to him. And we really need to organize those. Here it is, 56 years later, we're still talking about unfinished business. We need to organize those and get them in order so that our children and grandchildren will enjoy them.

Question: Definitely, definitely. I mean, that's -- for me it's fascinating as I do family research and that's the essence of -- that's the real people. Pictures are a part, but now I can understand who they were and what they believed in.

Answer: Right, exactly.

Question: So how real was the war to you -- I mean --

Answer: Oh, it was very real. We didn't have TV. I am impressed with the difference in communication. Take the Gulf War. We saw what was happening right there all of the time. He mentioned news reels. A few times we went to movies, you did see war -- it was more intense and more visible. But it was radio. We heard radio reports. We sat by the radio when -- took -- had maps. My parents were very much interested. My dad had been in World War I in Germany. And so we marked places on the map and kept track of where the action was. It was very consuming and ... we were very much engrossed in it. And concerned, you know, for all.

Question: Fearful?

Answer: Oh, yeah, sure. Yes, indeed. I was teaching. I taught in my home town school, 3rd and 4th grade kids, and it was really hard to -- to keep my mind off of what was going on in Europe.

Question: So tell me about the day -- how did you find out --

Answer: Oh, okay, okay. You're really ready for this now. All right. The first inkling that I had that something must have happened was when his letters stopped coming. Because, now there couldn't have been too many because the time was so short. But daily letters and air mail. That was air mail time, you know. Everything was mailed air mail. And they just stopped coming. And so I rationalized that he was probably busy flying missions and -- too tired. (laughs) That's what I told my mother, anyway. Then it was -- I looked at the telegram

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today -- the telegram was oh -- dated May the -- no, not May, (crying) August the 9th, and on August the 10th, the pastor of our church (crying) -- I'm sorry.

Question: That's ok. And there's just no hurry.

Answer: -- came out and talked to my father. Handed him this telegram. (crying) It was from the War Department (crying) and it said that he was missing in action. (crying) Again, I had protected my mother so much that I didn't really have release at that time. I'm still getting it, you see. (laughs) Anyway, and it all ended happily. That's why this is so disturbing to me. Because we were so fortunate, really. But there were tough times because Hitler had actually at one point, and I think it must have been toward March or April, after the Battle of the Bulge or at the time perhaps of Battle of the Bulge when things were getting very hard for the Germans as well as difficult for the Americans, Hitler had threatened to kill all the prisoners. And so that was a constant worry, you know, when and would he really.

Question: And you had heard that?

Answer: Oh, yes, yes, we knew that, hm-hmm. And we heard President Roosevelt talk - - we always listened whenever he talked. He had his Fireside Chats, you know, and then he died April the 12th, I believe it was, of 1944. That was kind of a traumatic thing, too. Then after, oh, okay. That was on August the 10th. So the very next day I had a call from the bombardier's wife. No, I guess I called her as soon as I had heard that Lauren was missing. Anyway, we both knew that our husbands were missing someplace in Germany. And we talked. And then it was about a week later that she called me from Seattle and said that I have very good news. Orrin is a prisoner. That was her husband, the bombardier. And of course I was delighted because I thought Fulton, maybe they're going in alphabetical order. Maybe tomorrow or the next day I'll hear. Well, I didn't. It was three weeks later that I heard that he was a prisoner of war which seemed like an eternity, particularly after others had heard. And there was some, I guess it was some message, maybe it was one of the -- somewhere we heard that -- do you remember, Lauren, where that was that there was word that there were some parachutes that were seen in the air but then there were some that weren't accounted for. They talked about that particular plane and that there were at least some people got out. But then it was not clear what happened to others. I can't remember now where I heard that. I did get probably about 20 some cards and short letters from individuals who had heard short wave messages. I think they were interviewed and perhaps wrote out messages that they wanted sent home. And this was directed to me from Lauren and I was identified as his wife and he said that I am -- don't worry I am a prisoner of war and everything will be OK or something like that. And some of the crew, I guess he also told that he knew that most of the crew was OK. Anyway, it was just a short message but I got 20 some of those. And some of them were slightly different, you know.

Question: And this is a letter now that you're -- or a card or --

Answer: Actually a post card, most of them. Some of them were short letters.

Question: And again probably very stifled in some of the writing because of where it was coming --

Answer: Some were written, some were typed. And some of them had more to them than others. I suppose they heard, you know, depending on the reception, what did they hear.

Question: So --

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Answer: But it was consistent enough that I felt some comfort in it. Yes, he was alive and would be in a German prison camp. And then through the auspices of the Red Cross, we did get messages about where he was and that -- how we could send him letters and packages as well. He got very few of them, I guess, but we did as often as we could, sent him clothes. I even sent cigarettes, although he was not a smoker because we had heard that they could use them sometimes for barter, trade-offs. I don't know, I suppose that's how somebody got a radio.

Question: So there were probably some happy German guards over there that --

Answer: Yeah, they had good American cigarettes. Yeah, well, I think he did smoke some, too, just boredom, you know, anything to be occupied. I think he smoked a pipe -- maybe in some of the parcels he got pipe tobacco and pipes.

Question: So now that you have contact, there's some sense of stability or relief. You know he's down, he's alive, helps -- but it also seems like in war, like so many things, there were no rules. So, you know, my husband's missing. What do I do? How do I find out. What --

Answer: Yeah, and whom do you talk with about it, too. It was very hard to deal with. Nobody really could understand what I was experiencing. And of course my family was a real comfort. I had a sister who was, I guess in high school at that time. And his parents lived close by. And they were -- he was -- he's an only child and so they were just devastated, of course.

Question: The -- so you're -- consoling person must have been your friend in Seattle then?

Answer: Well, yeah, she was the one I could talk with who understood most of what was going on. And, let's see, she was pregnant and had their child, I've forgotten just when he was born but I sent her gifts and communicated with her.

Question: So could you get back into life as normal at all or was this something --

Answer: No. It was a really tough time. I remember being -- feeling isolated and -- and ... it was difficult. There was the confidence that he was being cared for but how and when, you know, and we just couldn't see any end in sight for long months ahead.

Question: Were you being bombarded with propoganda back at home? Proud to be an American and

Answer: Oh, yeah, there was always some of that. And we heard that they were, too. That there were women broadcasting -- what was it called -- Radio Free Europe -- or news to them. Yeah, all of those things were a concern. Of course we also knew about Bob Hope and (laughs) people who went over to entertain the troops and that was heartening and a touch of lightness and joy that I think pervaded the thinking back here too.

Question: How did you finally find out that he was freed?

Answer: Well, that was another telegram and that came three weeks after the first telegram and it said that he was a prisoner of war. And I don't recall that it said where, I'm not sure. I don't know what happened to that telegram. I really don't. I don't know where

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that is. Maybe it's there some place at home. We save things, I tell you. But that was very joyous, happy time for all of us. We did feel much better after that.

Question: So what started going through your mind at that point. I mean, did you start planning for him to come home or was it just he's free and you don't know where he's at or --

Answer: Yeah, at first, you know, it was exhilaration and then we got into it for the long haul because it was clear this war was intense and it was going on and on. And no assurance of what the final outcome would be. And communication was so poor. Now there's instant communication, e-mail and everything. Cablegrams. I think he -- I got a cablegram from him after he was back in France at Camp Lucky Strike maybe, saying that he was there and that he would be coming home. Well, then it wasn't until the 24th of June that he did come home. A good six weeks after the war was over. So even that was prolonged. And that was a very joyous time. I can remember shopping for a new dress and getting ready to go to Lincoln. I can't remember how I got there. I probably went by bus, because he said we came home by bus. There was a small bus that went -- the 55, 60 miles from this little town of Western where I lived to Lincoln and that was our sole means of transportation.

Question: It's amazing when you drew the perspective of communication. I mean just looking at how different that had to be.

Answer: Well, and during the 13 months in 1943 up through March of '44 when he was in training for those 13 months, first in Minnesota and then in the Southwest, California and Arizona, we didn't communicate except by letter. And those were very -- they were very precious, of course 'cause, oh, you know, those were saved in a box and re-read and re-read. Because that's all the contact we had -- the only contact we had. I did visit him once when he was in Minnesota

Answer: His parents and I drove -- they drove and I went with them. We went up to see him in St. Paul. And that was delightful but too short. (laughs)

Question: Having lived through an event in history like this and having had your husband taken as a POW, do you see a message for generations out of all this?

Answer: Yeah, what I see is that they were very young patriots who were sincere about following through -- about being faithful to their training schedules and serious about their duty and intent upon doing what they were trained to do. And I think one of the things that must have been terrible, actually grief, I would imagine to Lauren and anyone whose military career was interrupted so early -- it was a tremendous loss, you know. No opportunity to use that training. And I think it probably affected him greatly.

Question: Did the same person come back that --

Answer: No (laughs). Well, somewhat the same, yeah. He was a delightful young person, but it's only in recent years that these men have started talking about this at all. For one thing, in his case he went back and got education, Masters, Doctor's degree. And profession. And work, you know, family and work. And we didn't talk much about the past. It was the present and the future, you know. Being successful in a career and raising children. So, there just wasn't a whole lot of discussion about it. And there's a lot -- I keep hearing new things. Every time I hear him talk I hear something I never heard before. Right now I can't think of what it was but there was something this morning that I had never heard before. Keeps coming out, gradually and slowly. So I think the thing that you people are doing is absolutely tremendous. You're drawing them out; you're documenting this for the children

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and the young people of the future. It's important. It's important that they know what the history of this country and sacrifice that people have made. And the possible sacrifice they may be called upon to make.

Question: And that's, I think, -- that's some of the hardest thing to understand. Especially from World War II. Because you exactly said. They went over, from what I've seen, they did their job because they believed in their country; they believed in what was going on, and when it was done, they came back.

Answer: Hm-hmm.

Question: They started their families, they did whatever, that's it. And 50 years ago --. I mean, today we have a war, I mean, you hurt your finger and you have to have 37 counselors in, you have to go through post-traumatic on your finger being hurt and you've got to discuss the heck out of it where this is a generation that what they did for us, I don't think people of my generation and the generations fully comprehend the sacrifices that were made.

Answer: No, that's right. And I don't think they thought of themselves as heroes, either. Again, they had a task to do and they did it as best they could. And everyone was doing it. You know, all of their buddies -- their friends were involved. And they cared about them, of course, what happened to them.

Question: But it was -- it sounds like when you got back, did you discuss the POW camp at all or was it pretty much --

Answer: I was very curious and he did have the diary which he brought back. It was sketchy. Busy, busy, busy, you know. No, there wasn't - no, we really didn't talk about it all that much.

Question: You were ready to move on in the exciting new US and --

Answer: Oh, yeah, sure, hm-hmm. Just this week I was talking with a friend who had a fire in her -- the roof of her house and it was damaged by smoke -- her possessions were damaged by smoke and water, and she had counseling about that. And I think hallelujah, that's wonderful. But we didn't have that. There was nothing like that. And goodness knows, we probably all needed it.

Question: Do you think so? Or do you think that it built these strong people that --

Answer: We didn't know -- we didn't know we needed it. And so now it still bubbles over, you know. And we're getting it, I guess now, therapy from sharing our stories.

Question: Do you think it changed -- that your marriage would have been different had it -
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Answer: I don't know. I don't know. I think probably in essence it perhaps strengthened it. You know, the separation and having shared that. It made -- made the reunion all the more important.

Question: It sounds like it laid even a stronger foundation in the fact that the two of you could survive --

Answer: It did, truly, hm-hmm.

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Question: So does he cook at home? Cause I hear he cooked over in the POW camp.

Answer: Yes, he does. He always gets breakfast, isn't that wonderful? And I do things -
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Question: Pancakes?

Answer: We have pancakes now and then, but you see, having once been hungry, he now has promised himself and everybody else that is around him that he's never going to be hungry again. So he tends to overeat. And I try by mentoring and no nagging to exemplify, well, let's just keep it down a little bit. So while he's making this breakfast, I do things -- do other errands, other tasks, you know, like press some clothes and get them put on the hangers, fold the laundry -- and it's really wonderful. And besides he makes -- grinds coffee -
- fresh coffee beans, and we have wonderful freshly ground coffee for breakfast every morning, which before that -- before he started doing it, we had instant coffee. (laughs) So it gets better all the time.

Question: Do you think there are certain parts of his life that he savors more because of the experience?

Answer: I surely well hope so. Because he has told us today and in the past several instances of which -- under which he was indeed fortunate. He was able to get out of that airplane. That burning airplane. His seat in the plane was bombed after he -- you know, not bombed but shot by the Germans. He would have been killed if he had stayed in there. Then he could have been annihilated in Mauthausen. Russian soldiers were. Thousands of them were cremated, you know, killed in that camp. He could have been. If the timing had been such the Gestapo, the SS, whoever it was, could easily have said, well let's just get rid of those guys along with the Jews, too. Who would know? Who would have known for sure what happened to them? All along the way. And then he might have -- after prison camp there were people who had illnesses and injuries who died there. He could have escaped, possibly or -- he was the conservative -- among the conservative ones, the majority actually, who stayed in the camp instead of going out into the countryside. That could have been quite an adventure. So many things could have happened but they didn't. So we have so much to be grateful for, and we are.

Question: Are you -- when you hear the Star Spangled Banner played, when you see the raising of the flag, is there a sense of patriotism?

Answer: Yes, indeed, there is. Hm-hmm. There really is. Yeah, it's strong, and it's partly pre-war, you know, upbringing, training, and certainly the war experience. It deepened that all the more.

Question: Okay. Thank you very much.