

Articulating the Unspeakable
Interviewer

You know, when we think of the war in terms of casualties, we always think of soldiers; but how tough was it on civilians as well?

Eva Krutein

It was terrible for the civiliansâ€”not only the air attacks, the bombing, spending half of the night in the cellar.Â We never undressed because there was no wayâ€”no time to dress in front of the cellar.Â You could be killed on the way.Â So that were the nights.Â Then during the day, something similar, also, and now my question is what time of 1945 do you mean?

Interviewer

Alright.Â So one more timeâ€”weâ€™ll start that againâ€”the notion of how awful it was for civilians as well.

Eva Krutein

The civilians were mainly women and childrenâ€”a few older peopleâ€”because the men were all fighting on the front.Â And it meantâ€”to the civilians to spend half the nights in the cellar; never undressing before going to bed, because there was no time to dress when the alarm went off and you ran to the cellar or to the bunker; wherever it was.Â So you slept in your stuff all the time.Â Then during the day, very often it was the same thing.Â Thenâ€”right now Iâ€™m talking only about the time when the war was still on, the last months. Â

Eva Krutein

After that, it was even worse, because when the Russians came in, they raped people; mass-raped them, and then came the famine.Â Some of it was done as a punishment for what the Germans had done to the Jews. And so to have childrenâ€”to have a baby, and so on, you never got milk or anything to eat, so what do you do?

Eva Krutein

Half of the cities were destroyed, anyway.Â Whatever was half-destroyed was looted, and you did that for survival.Â And since war books are only written by menâ€”or usually only written by menâ€”people never get to hear what happens to the civilization.Â And so I could tell you lots of details about it.

Interviewer

Yes, yeah, but weâ€™llâ€”yeah, weâ€™ll go into some of those details.Â So immediately, then, when the war was over, tell me more about this mass rape situation. I mean, you know, Iâ€™ve heard so much about that, with, you know, with a few specific examples, if you could.

Eva Krutein

That was mainly after the war, with one exception which was well-known, in Emmersdorf.Â That was a village in East Prussia, more or less Russian territory now, or Polish territory.Â At that time, it was German.Â The Russians captured Emmersdorf, and the Germans

recaptured it. And so what had happened to the population, everybody was killed. The women were raped—even children of eight years—so from eight to eighty, women were usually raped.

Eva Krutein

One was nailed to the barn door that way, and we knew that would happen to us if we stayed. So we all set off to escape that. It wasn't easy, because in the first place, it was winter; January, February, and the water was icy. There was snow and ice on the roads. Finally, the roads couldn't be used because the Russians were there already, so the only way to escape was on ships.

Eva Krutein

I happened to be in Danzig, which is a harbor city, and—but even for me, it was difficult to get on it. There were about two million women and children around us in those days, and everybody tried to get on a ship, which was very, very difficult. So it was an adventure by itself. Finally, I managed to get—to smuggle myself on the ship with my baby. I was twenty at that time, and my baby was a year and two months. And we were on the ship going to the west somewhere, and nobody knew where to go. But we hoped that it would be safe in the west, away from the Russians, so we wouldn't be mass-raped and so forth.

Eva Krutein

The ship itself had a capacity of 1,600 people, but we were 6,000, so you can imagine how squeezed we were. But we didn't mind, because we thought we were going to the freedom—to freedom. And—but then we heard that the Russian submarines around in the Baltic Sea were shooting torpedoes at us, and one ship in front of us was blown up with six or 8,000 women and children on board. There was no way of survival, or very little, close to zero, because the water was icy—it was January, February—so most of the people died of the exposure immediately.

Eva Krutein

A handful of people were picked up by some ships around, small ships around; German ships, and they survived. And nothing happened to my ship—otherwise I wouldn't be here—so we made it.

Instant Refugees
Interviewer

And where did your ship make it to? I mean where did you

Eva Krutein

We went to the west—that's all we knew, as keeping from the east. We went to Kiel in Schleswig-Holstein—or you would pronounce it Schleswig-Holstein, something like that, where the famous cattle come from. That was the first place to go, and so the ships were unloaded of people, and everybody had to go somewhere. That means we were homeless, and we were beggars immediately because we had left everything behind. We couldn't take anything except our clothes, our children, whatever, but we were never—we never spent a night in the streets.

Eva Krutein

At that time, the Nazis were still in power, and the police took us and forced us into homes. That means they knocked at any door, and when somebody opens it, said, "So you take in this women with two or four children, or whatever." There was no "no;" no saying "no" at that time. And so we all found a place, somewhere, in somebody's corner or so, so we didn't have to stay on the street. And then, the bombing nights, so every night in the cellar.

Eva Krutein

And when the war was over, it's interesting "how do you know when war is over?" Nowadays, you switch on TV, radio, or whatever "TV didn't exist at that time, but the radios didn't work because the electricity didn't exist anymore." So it was this way: one morning I woke up and thought, "That it was strange!" I had slept all night long. I wasn't "nobody woke me up." No air raids or anything. That meant the war was over. And that was a relief at the moment, because the killing would stop.

Eva Krutein

But then other chaos came up because immediately the merchants removed all things from their shelves, and were willing only to exchange things. Mainly we were interested in food, because we had to feed our children. In this case, I had only one child, and we didn't have anything to exchange. We were refugees "we didn't have anything.

Eva Krutein

I was lucky. Somebody had told me before I went on the flight, "Take" "put three dresses on, and three underwears, and whatever, and I did." I mean I looked very fat. So I could take one or two things off without being without clothes, and could exchange it for food. So that was "that went on for months, if not one or two years, because the famine was imposed on the Germans as a punishment for the atrocities, the extermination camps. And so we had to go through all that. That means we had to loot whatever we could find.

Eva Krutein

And so most people made it. Very small babies usually didn't make it because there wasn't enough milk. Older people couldn't stand it either; but I was then 21, 22 or so, and I could make it. Nobody had a weight problem at that time, so that was one of the good things at that time, so we have to fight that now. But at that time, we fought to stay alive; not to starve of famine.

Interviewer

Yeah. I mean what kinds of things were you eating? I remember in the book there's a lot of references to horse meat. I mean what were

Eva Krutein

Oh, horse meat is nothing special. I was very glad to get that one day, also with rationing cards. It doesn't taste any different from beef. So we had that very often, so I don't mind that.

Subsistence in the Deracinated City

Interviewer

Yeah. But physically, what did Germany look like at that time? I mean how devastated

was the countryside from the war?

Eva Krutein

Most cities were destroyed; I would say at least 50 to 75 percent. In the case of my own hometown, Danzig, was destroyed 95 percent. There was really nothing left, and that was terrible, because it's a thousand-year-old city with Medieval towers, Gothic cathedrals, Renaissance buildings, and all that was destroyed. And we had the pictures, and I showed you the pictures also. So I didn't want to return after the war.

Eva Krutein

And maybe I'm going a little bit too far. The Poles rebuilt the whole city, stone by stone—every ornament was there. When I returned after 20 years, everything was as I had left it and it was a wonderful job, so I thought the Poles should have it. They have rebuilt it—their city now.

Interviewer

That's amazing. So now were you in Berlin at all during this immediate post-war time?

Eva Krutein

No, not in Berlin. We couldn't travel at all. We weren't allowed to travel. There was—there were no means to travel at all. But I've seen pictures, and there was no difference from all the other cities, particularly the bigger cities, Berlin included, got the main thing. If you bomb a city, big city, every night, you get pretty close to rubble.

Eva Krutein

Yeah.

Interviewer

So Berlin was no difference. There was no difference in that.

Eva Krutein

So tell me a little bit about being on the run. How did people travel? Was there a lot of hitchhiking going on? I mean, walking? How did you get from place to place?

Eva Krutein

There were buses pretty soon, and I always wondered how they could run, because as far as we knew, there was no fuel available. But apparently there was—otherwise, they couldn't have run. We went to the countryside in order to get food from the farmers, and I remember that I went to a farm and I had something—I don't remember what I had for—oh yes. I had—while we were looting a former warehouse of the German Air Force, I got a lot of blouses; silk blouses. And I took two of them, went to the country, and got potatoes—full sack of potatoes—maybe 20, 25 pounds, something like that. I was very proud, and I thought, "Oh, god we could live off them forever."

Eva Krutein

So when the bus stopped at our city, I got out. There was British police, and said,

“You have gotten something—you’re not allowed to get food anywhere. And he confiscated it. And so that was the end of it. I couldn’t say it. I was so full of frustration, of anger, that I couldn’t say anything. He took it, and that was it. After all, he had a gun, and I didn’t have any. I wouldn’t have used it anyway, but that was something also. If you could get something, it was very often somebody who took it away from you—you couldn’t even do that—and then the hunger continued.

Eva Krutein

It’s not that bad—you get used to it, and you have fantasies of breaking into a store, into a food store, and getting everything, whatever. But it’s very difficult when a little child comes to you and said, “Mom, I’m hungry. I want to eat something,” and you have absolutely nothing. Not a crumb. And that is terrible. I don’t want to go to that, too. Through hunger, okay—it’s my own suffering—but not when you can’t help a child with a primitive thing like this—“Give me something to eat.”

Eva Krutein

Or freezing to death, and when the winter came and there was nothing to warm your home. There was nothing available. So you had everything on you you owned, and were sitting around—because you were frustrated and you were depressed, you sat around. Where would you go? What should you do? Oh, it was terrible.

A Fiscal “Stroke of Genius”

Eva Krutein

The time was really very difficult, but till—dear, oh, more than ten years—then it became better, a little bit. Just a minute—I’m not right—no. After two or three days—years, I’m sorry—after two or three years, it became better, because there was the change of currency, and that meant at one certain day—it was a Sunday—every German citizen got 40 mark—that’s it. I got one, my baby got one, and my husband was already there. We had 40 mark, and that was it. And with that, the economy started again.

Eva Krutein

And later on, also, it was kept that way. So whoever came to look for somebody looked at the lists and sometimes found the person. My husband, at that time, is a Naval architect, and being with the Navy, was repairing ships in France at the Atlantic coast. So he knew from the news what was going on in the east. He could figure out that my little daughter and I would be somewhere on the route to the west—on the way to the west, and so he thought, “Where could they land?”

Interviewer

And that was with the establishment of the mark, right? What was the currency before that?

Eva Krutein

Before it was called the Reichsmark; and later on, Deutsche mark. And that was the difference. But imagine: everybody in the whole country had the same amount of money. Nobody had a penny more than that, and it worked.

Interviewer

No.

Eva Krutein

A strike of genius.

Interviewer

Yeah. Now, is that what they call the German economic miracle "was that the"

Eva Krutein

I think that was later. No, that was meant actually that they really started working, and Germans are hard workers and frugal and save money, and that's it. I think that's the best thing, and we tried to teach our children to do that, and I think that's a very good thing. So the miracle "economic miracle came later on, when really stores were open and when most things were available.

Interviewer

Right, right. But this establishment of the mark, then, was really, at that point, a savior then, I guess.

Eva Krutein

Oh yes, absolutely "the way it was handled, also.

Interviewer

"Cause then before that happened, describe to me a little bit more about the exchanges before that. I understand that, you know, cigarettes were the closest thing to currency.

Eva Krutein

Yes, absolutely. Now, how to get cigarettes "some" "I'm a nonsmoker, so I save the cigarettes I could get on ration coupons, and then we could exchange something. Again, instead of currency, because the Reichsmark had absolutely no value, so you couldn't get anything with it. But with cigarettes, but if you could get British cigarettes or American cigarettes, I mean that was the highlight. I could do it sometimes. Because "I'm a musician and I played very often for British parties, so my husband did that, too.

Eva Krutein

So we could "we got them, and we saved them, because we didn't smoke. And so for that, you could get "let's say for a German cigarette, you could get maybe half a bread. And for an American cigarette, you could get two breads "two full loaves of bread. So that was a difference.

Interviewer

So literally the major bartering item at the time was cigarettes, right? I mean there

Eva Krutein

Yes. Also, again, if I think of the British parties, when we made music there, they came

with drinks and so forth, and we all came with empty bottles and a funnel and put all together, so we could exchange with Schnapps.

Landscapes of Annihilation
Eva Krutein

People who didn't live near a harbor and couldn't get a ship had to walk through Europe, and it was in the winter, as I mentioned. And when they had little children, they took the snow and melted it and gave the children water-ice, or ice water to drink. For very small babies, it was impossible. They usually died on the road, and also of exposure, of course.

Interviewer

Yeah. So now where were you living at the time? I mean what were the living conditions like? I mean it must've been very

Eva Krutein

Horrible.

Interviewer

Yeah. Tell me a little bit about that.

Eva Krutein

Usually if one family, no matter how many children, lived in one room, because every city was bombed out, so even the people who lived there had difficulty. Some had to move out because there was only rubble left, and they had to go to friends, relatives or so. And now the homes were crowded, and then we came in also, so it was very, very crowded—you can't imagine. And

Eva Krutein

In let's see—a two-bedroom home would have five to seven families in the

Eva Krutein

home. If you count the living room, the dining room, and the bedrooms,

Eva Krutein

sometimes the kitchen, yeah. People slept in the kitchen also. So

Eva Krutein

that wasn't the worst.

Interviewer

No. And were there large numbers of people at the time with no home at all, and did you go for a while without a place to stay? You know, we get these images of people just kind of wandering around this destroyed landscape.

Eva Krutein

Yeah. There's a difference between what you describe, those landscapes, before the war was out and after. Before the war was out, the police took care of us and forced us in. For instance, there was one day I was living in Kiel, which is a rather big city, and they said the bombing would be too difficult, so all women and children had to leave the city. And we were distributed with farmers in the countryside, and but then there was still kind of a sense of order.

Eva Krutein

But after the war, the same destroyed landscape and wandering around,

Eva Krutein

but nobody took care of anybody. But somehow you always find something.

Interviewer

The stories that I've heard—I mean did you do this personally, or was this something that you heard? Remember in the book, stories of, you know, melting snow in the mouths of the children.

Eva Krutein

Yeah

Eva Krutein

Tell me those stories.

Eva Krutein

Sometimes these crowds, a crowd of, let's say 10 to 15 people, had a wagon, a horse-drawn wagon, so the horse had to be fed. But then very often, Russian planes came through very low and killed people; as many as they could. So people, definitely the horses, and so forth, and all of a sudden there was not even a horse left to carry anything. So the ones who weren't killed just wandered around and went to the west, of course—always the same.

Eva Krutein

The west isn't—it sounds like geography or so. It had nothing—it actually has a political meaning, because in the east were the Russians, and they were wild and it was terrible—were terrible. But in the west were the Americans and the British. The British were absolutely gentlemen. We lived in a British-occupied zone, and I had so many good experiences with them. They were just gentlemen. It was wonderful. And the Americans were good, too. I didn't live in the American zone. There were some single events which weren't good, but they happened everywhere. They happen every day here, also, so there was no difference. So we felt protected whenever we went west.

Eva Krutein

The Russians—we have lots of Russian friends now—they are very interesting. They seem to have two natures. For instance, it came out when one soldier—let's take one Russian soldier. Was drunk, raped a woman, maybe only one. Next day when he was sober, he came back, looked for the woman, and brought her bread and chocolate for

the kids and so forth, and was very nice. That happened very often. So it's the alcohol, and it's also, of course, the philosophy that women are part of the loot. So whatever a conquering soldier can get any object, he can get a woman, too. And since he can't carry a woman away, he rapes it, and that's the main thing.

Interviewer

But now what was it like in the Soviet zone?

Eva Krutein

In the Soviet zone, the same thing. People who couldn't escape were raped. Women were raped. Men weren't there very old men, and they weren't touched at all. Many were shot. But it was mainly done in the first three days, in these famous three days of victory where they could do what they wanted to.

Eva Krutein

And that is a philosophy that isn't that yet, and we have seen that in Yugoslavia, and I read it was going on in Chechnya also, so nobody ever learns from history, unfortunately.

Father's Touching Gift

Interviewer

So what were some of the other factors, I wonder, that would lead to this. For years I guess they had been fighting, or for years they hadn't been with women, and now all of a sudden the war is over and they

Eva Krutein

Yes, from what I have heard, they had to fight year in, year out, and never saw a woman, and they were young people, young men. And then here again, being victors, getting drunk of course, it was easy to behave that way. So, that's part of machismo.

Interviewer

Yeah, right. A sad [Inaudible.] Now, I mean how close did this all come to you, personally, in terms of, you know, anybody, family, friends, yourself, or

Eva Krutein

Oh, okay. Now I have to tell you about the two different movements, I would say movements of people. When I ran away from the Russians and the others with me that was still during the war we call ourselves refugees, because we escaped and so forth. Voluntarily, of course. My parents stayed there. They were too old at that time 62, and that was considered to be too old to go on a flight like that.

Eva Krutein

When the war was over and the discussion in Potsdam, or Berlin, of the Allies was taking place, Stalin was the first one to say, "I want for all the help I have given you, dear Allies, I want part of Poland, and I want Danzig, and I want part of whatever." And the French wanted something I don't remember what the British wanted, but mainly the Russians took over eastern parts of Poland. And the Poles took over parts of Germany, and Danzig, and so forth. And finally, the ethnic cleansing took place. That is a modern word it wasn't used at that time, but the whole thing was used.

Eva Krutein

That means whoever was German had to leave, and it was planned that these people should be taken by the train going, for instance, from Danzig to Berlin, and that is a ride of about eight hours. But it took four to five days to arrive. The people were put into stock cars, standing room only, and there was no food, no water, and no toilets or anything. So then sometimes the trains stopped, and then bandits came in and robbed these expellees, as we called them, of the little things they had—their own clothes—and so they arrived half or totally naked in Berlin, if they lived at all. Because you can live even without water for a long, longer time than we thought.

Eva Krutein

My father was among them, but he contracted—he came in half-naked also. They left him underpants, and that was it. He was 62, so he contracted typhus fever and died immediately. My mother wasn't there because when the Russians came into Danzig, into the cellar where she and neighbors and relatives were sitting, she was raped—gang-raped by the Russians, and all the other women also. But she was the only one who committed suicide.

Eva Krutein

It was easy to do, because before the Russians came in—let's say a few hours before—a neighbor pharmacist was in the same cellar, and told them, "If you can stand it, this here is potassium cyanide. You can kill yourself. It takes a fraction of a second, so it's not painful." So everybody got a vial with potassium cyanide. Nobody else but my mother used it, so she used it and was dead immediately. So she wasn't expelled like all the others. And I mentioned before, people like us, being volunteers and escaping the Russians, were called refugees.

Eva Krutein

These people were called expellees, and their fate is not known in this country. And it's very difficult for me whenever I talk about it, as people say, "We haven't heard of it." How is that possible? Because it affected 14 million people—not only Germans. The Germans were expelled from the former German areas, but the Poles, for instance, were expelled by the Russians. The Lithuanians, the Latvians, the Estonians were also expelled, and so there were about 14 million people this way, and nobody knows about it.

Eva Krutein

And that—I think this is very tragic, because as an average American, you can think about the Germans this way, so they're murdering

Eva Krutein
Interviewer

We were talking about—you were talking about the American attitude about the Germans at the time.

Eva Krutein

As I said—an average American might think the Germans are just murderers, or they were murderers during the war, because of the extermination camps, and now they have a good

economy going, and they were never punished. A We were punished. A Not the right people—other people. A For instance, what the expellees had to go through was incredible. A For instance, my parents, my mother was dead pretty soon after the Russians came in. A And later on, the Poles came in.

Eva Krutein

But my father stayed there, and there was absolutely nothing to eat, so they rummaged in garbage cans. A If I think of my father rummaging in garbage cans—it's terrible. A At the same time, there were lots of mark bills in the streets. A I don't know where they came from. A Maybe people have thrown them away because they were worthless, or—I have no idea. A But they were there—my father picked them up. A And I don't know what he thought, but he thought of us, yeah, I think so, because when he was expelled and was in one of those stock cars, he had hidden the mark bills in his underpants.

Eva Krutein

And when bandits came in and robbed him and the others of their clothing, somebody said to him, "Oh, you're old man. I leave you your underpants." A I don't need any. A And he had hidden the money there. A He brought it to Berlin, and he made it on foot to a certain hospital where he died of typhus. A The hospital contacted me and said, "You are the heir—your name is here, and he left a lot of mark bills here, and you'll get them." A I got them, and I know that he had said to somebody, "I'm going to build up my daughter's and my husband's and my son-in-law's life." A I mean, this was really very touching. A

Eva Krutein

So—but they are dead, and all these expellees, who have been punished, and probably not one of them, or very few of them, have really done any atrocities in their lives. A And they had—they were punished in a horrible way—not only being homeless and beggars, and being raped and maybe starved to death or seeing their children raped or starved or shot, whatever—it's terrible.

Eva Krutein

People can live with that. A It takes a while. A I couldn't write my book before—five years, so that means it took me about forty years to be able to do that. A And even then it was very painful, and by rewriting the same scenes to make them better, I didn't have to cry anymore and so forth, and finally I could talk about it. A And now I give presentations on the book very frequently, and I feel people want to hear it. A I know that. A And they can't even ask the questions—they don't know what was going on, so I tell them. A And I have a good response to my book also, and lots of people write to me, and hundreds of people—I have stacks. A They're thanking me for telling the story, because they didn't know.

Eva Krutein

And most people are pleased, except a few full of hatred and who can't forget—hatred and anger—see that there was some justice taking place, so the Germans had been punished very, very severely. A Never the right persons, of course, or very seldom, but you can't help that. A So that's what it is.

Unspeakable Horrors
Interviewer

Right. Now, when you were writing the book all those years later, what were the—what were the most painful parts? What were the, you know, one or two spots—

Eva Krutein

The death of my mother, because that—“for two years I couldn’t even think about it. I mean I cried immediately, on the street or in the car, whatever—when I thought about it, I cried. That was the hardest, because I knew she hadn’t deserved it, and how terrible it must have been for her. And of course, it was. But now I know she’s in peace. It’s bearable now, and she wasn’t the only one.

Interviewer

And tell us again, just separately, so we have it in this spot—I mean how did she die? What was the problem with that?

Eva Krutein

With what? I didn’t understand you.

Eva Krutein

Oh, just tell us once again about your mother’s death, how that happened.

Eva Krutein

How it happened—okay. She was sitting in the cellar the day the Russians came into Danzig, and they destroyed—and they destroyed Danzig. She and our household—my father, our maid, and some relatives and employees—and the neighbor, a pharmacist, distributed small vials with potassium cyanide and said to the people, “When the Russians come in and it becomes unbearable; you don’t want to live anymore, take this. It takes a fraction of a second, and it’s a painless death.”

Eva Krutein

And all the women there were raped—my mother had, I think, five Russians—and she cried, she cried and then there was such a chaos after the Russians had left, because they were all drunk and they destroyed everything, and broke everything they could, because of anger. And then they left, and then all of a sudden, my relatives, my neighbor said, and all of a sudden they said, “Well, where is she?” And then they saw she was dead, and had the vial in her mouth and was dead. The only consolation is that I think it took very little—I mean there was no pain involved, and she wanted to go that way, and did go.

Eva Krutein

The others didn’t take it, because their—maybe they were younger—no, not all—that’s not true. They were stronger, or they didn’t take it that seriously. That’s all I can say, and they didn’t take the poison, and survived. And I talked to them, so I have the eyewitness—lots of eyewitnesses. So that’s what was it. There was no tomb, there was no funeral or anything like it, neither for my father, so it’s strange. After a month—months after they died, you hear about it, just by accident or by whatever.

Eva Krutein

Or somebody comes around and says, “Oh, yeah, you’re the one—” okay, I can tell

you what happened to your parents, or whatever. So you're very alone with it. Of course you start crying then, but there is no saying good-bye, and that is so important—and funerals. Just as painful as it is, but it's very natural to say good-bye and that's it. And if there is nothing, you don't even know where they are and under what rubble they are and whatever—it's terrible, so.

Interviewer

The other story that you were telling me before about a father being forced to watch while a large number of Russians

Eva Krutein

Oh, yeah, that was a terrible scene, and I thought that was so terrible that I didn't put it in my book. It was a friend of mine, of my age, so she was about 20 or whatever. The Russians came, and she had a little child. She ran away—she and her mother ran away into the nearby woods, but a young Russian soldier followed them, and shot the mother, and raped her after her death. Then shot the little girl, but shot only one arm away and half of the face.

Eva Krutein

And my friend, the young mother, killed her own child, because she said, "She can't live that way—it's impossible." So she killed her, and with that done, more Russians came and dragged her into the house, and there were lots of them—exactly 32. And the way I know it was this way: she told me that. Her father was still alive. They put him in a corner and said, "You stand there and you count the rapes on your daughter." So all the 32 Russians raped her, and the father had to count out loud, "One, two," and so forth. That's why I know it was 32.

Eva Krutein

This young woman, my friend, survived it, and I lost contact of her—I don't know if she is now alive. But I had seen her years after the war. So the stories like that are just awful. You can't even write them out. It becomes obscene to write things like that. It's terrible.

The Absurdity of Desperation

Interviewer

The desperation of finding yourself looting—I mean did I come to understand that you were looting a warehouse at one point?

Eva Krutein

Yeah.

Eva Krutein

Done before—no, I had definitely never looted before, not even stolen or so.

Interviewer

Yes. Tell me about that. Tell me about

Eva Krutein

Yeah. We all lived in the country, at a farmer's house, and then somebody said to me, "Well, if you don't have anything, you have to go and loot." I said, "Loot what?" And he said, "Well, you know, like to find something." And he said, "You know what? Half a mile from here there's a warehouse—an Army warehouse or Air Force, I don't remember." "And that's open—nobody's there. And before the British come in or the Americans and take the things, we take them."

Eva Krutein

So I went, put my baby in the stroller and went with her to that home, and then I saw lots of people coming out with lots of things, mattresses on their backs and whatever. And I thought it was funny. All of a sudden—I can't explain it, but it was funny. So I thought then, "Okay, it's for everybody, so I can take something, too." So—and I took lots of blouses. I think they were for Air Force girls. They had certain uniforms that had blouses—silk-like blouses, so I took a dozen of them, and left. For one blouse, I got several pounds of sugar, which was very important, so I exchanged them against for food.

Eva Krutein

But it was really everybody was laughing there. It was like—it was hysteria, of course, but in some way, it was funny, because these were all people who probably had never taken anything from anybody, but here there was no owner. So it was a very unusual situation, and since everybody laughed, I laughed, too, and that was it. And I never regretted having done it, because after that, I mean foreign soldiers came in and took everything, and then it was too late, so I was there on time to get some food.

Interviewer

So the existence at the moment then that you were going through was pretty much day-to-day, right? I mean you never—

Eva Krutein

Yes.

Interviewer

Literally knew where you were going to eat or what you were going to eat.

Eva Krutein

No, no, definitely not.

Interviewer

And you had a child at the time, I mean, it just—

Eva Krutein

Yes.

Interviewer

Describe to me a little bit more about that frustration and fear about where you were going to get the food for the baby and yourself, and—

Eva Krutein

I would say the thinkingâ€”my thinking, and probably everybody elseâ€™s, too, was: â€œWhere do I get food, now, or an hour later, or in the afternoon, or tomorrow, or whatever?â€” Youâ€™d think nothing elseâ€”absolutely nothing else.â€” And you watch out what you can do, or you could work for somebody and do something for the farmers.

Eva Krutein

And sometimes you had to go very far to get something, because the farmers had limited resources also. I mean the wholeâ€”half the population of the area came to them to exchange, and they were afraid that they would be killed, whateverâ€”but they were never killed. I mean, that didnâ€™t happen, so. But they ran out of things, also, so you had to go to the next one. Here again, you thought nothing else than that. And I succeeded. The alternative, I guess, is depression. If you donâ€™t do anything, you kill yourself that way. I didnâ€™t want to kill myself. I wanted to live with my daughter, and I did, and finally Manfred found us

A Serendipitous Reunion

Eva Krutein

Thatâ€™s also very interestingâ€”how people found each other, because they were wandering through Europe. Particularly when the ships arrived in certain cities in the west, during the war, the Red Cross came in and opened stations in every village and every town and several parts of the townâ€”and with long lists for refugees. And everybody put his name and new address on, and the lists were duplicated at night and carried to other cities, also only in certain areas, of course, not over the whole of Germany, where refugee ships arrived.

Eva Krutein

And later on, also, it was kept that way. So whoever came to look for somebody looked at the lists and sometimes found the person. My husband, at that time, is a Naval architect, and being with the Navy, was repairing ships in France at the Atlantic coast. So he knew from the news what was going on in the east. He could figure out that my little daughter and I would be somewhere on the route to the westâ€”on the way to the west, and so he thought, â€œWhere could they land?â€”

Eva Krutein

So whenever he got out of his locationâ€”which was an adventure by itselfâ€”he went to the cities where the ships arrived, and he found us in the lists and thatâ€™s how we found each otherâ€”all of a sudden he was there. It was wonderful.

Eva Krutein

So we survived that, and many people found themselvesâ€”found their relatives and friends that way. He also found friends, and so it was wonderful. So thereâ€™s the Red Crossâ€”Iâ€™m very thankful to the Red Cross for it.

Interviewer

How long was it after the war thatâ€”

Eva Krutein

It was during the warâ€”at the end of the war and after, so I would say at least for two years or so.

Interviewer

No, but how long did it take you and your husband to find each other after the war?

Eva Krutein

Oh, we found each other during the war, at the end of the war.

Eva Krutein

Because he was stationed in Saint-Nazaire, with, I think 30,000 other Germans, but he was only repairing ships. And I think thatâ€™s a mysteryâ€”still a mystery. Sometimes planes came in flying over France, which was already occupied by the Germans, by Americans, whatever, and brought in medicine; mainly medicine. And in order not to fly back empty, they let two or three or four people fly with them.

Eva Krutein

And they were pickedâ€”my husband was picked because he was an expert for submarinesâ€”for building submarines and repairing, and they were needed very much. So he found himself on a plane back to Germany at night, very lowâ€”and very low flight, so that the flak couldnâ€™t hit them and shoot them, so it was also very dangerous. But he landed in Stuttgart, I guess, and then made it somehow to northern Germany and found us. And we experienced the end of the war together.

â€œNow we will hear Jazzâ€

Interviewer

Now, when we think of the end of the war in the United Statesâ€”we were talking about this before, you and Iâ€”you know, a very joyous time. You know, dancing in the streets and everybody huggingâ€”you know, that was it. The country wasâ€”â€” Now, contrast for me, if you could, the end of the war experience in America and the end of the war experience in Europe.

Eva Krutein

I have seen it maybe last year, on TV, how the end of the war was, that people were dancing on the street, and for a few seconds, I was shocked, and I thought, â€œHow could they dance?â€ And but it was a different continent, and when we heardâ€”well, we didnâ€™t hear it, actually. As I said, when I woke up one morning and there was no air raid and I had been sleeping through the night, I knew the war was over, and there was a minute, or maybe a secondâ€”second of chaos in me. I thought, â€œNow what?â€

Eva Krutein

And then what came to me was, â€œNow we will hear jazz.â€ We never could hear jazz in the last years, because it was forbidden in Nazi Germany. It wasâ€”I donâ€™t knowâ€”it was considered to be bad music or whatever. And I missed it. And that was the only thing I could think of: â€œNow we will hear jazz.â€

Eva Krutein

And I enjoyed it, and but then, that took not very manyâ€”maybe a few minutes, and then

reality set in. A I thought, "Now chaos is going to start, more chaos than before and where's my husband, where are my parents?" So we were waiting for my parents for half a year. They were long dead, and we were waiting for them. Very often, I looked out of the window and thought, "Maybe they are coming that street along. Maybe they'll walk" or whatever. They were long dead, and I didn't know it.

Eva Krutein

So I would say at the end of the war, except my hysterical reaction, I would say, enjoying"foreseeing that I would hear jazz, it was utmost fear. And then also, the humiliation"you have lost the war. That is a terrible feeling. So far, most Germans, including me, had been taught: "War is an act of god." You can't avoid it. There have been wars all the time, there still are, it's true, so you have to accept that, period. You are unfortunate to be born at the time when there is a war, and now it was over. Chaos, total inner chaos, also"it was terrible. I don't want to go through that again. That's why we are here.

Interviewer

Yeah. Yeah, I bet.

Eva Krutein

That's why we left Germany, because we thought there was a time when we left Germany in 1951"excuse me" when the tension between the United States and the Soviet Union became so tense that we thought"so intense that we thought the Russians would take over Western Europe. And we thought we should leave, and we left because of that. We didn't go"we couldn't go to the United States as we wanted to because we needed sponsors, and we didn't know a single soul here, so couldn't get a visa.

Eva Krutein

That's why we went to Chile, South America. And then when the immigration laws changed, my husband could sponsor himself, and then we could come in here.

Interviewer

Well, tell me a little bit about that tension, then, in 1951. I mean in Germany, I mean did you get the feeling of these two, big, warring giants about to

Eva Krutein

Yeah, and we were in the middle of it, ja. So the next war would happen where we were, and we were sick and tired of war"of wars. You saw that in the newspaper, you heard it on the radio all the time. I don't remember details, but actually, we knew the tension between the two superpowers were getting greater and greater.

Eva Krutein

And there was no way out, because they were at the different poles of a stick. So"and we in the middle of it. And everybody feared it, but most people had established themselves very well already"1951, things were going very well in Germany.

Eva Krutein

With us, tooâ€”my husband had a shipyard with 350 people working for him, so we were well-to-do at that time.Â And then he said, â€œI donâ€™t want the war anymore.Â Letâ€™s go.Â Now we have the money, we can take our things,â€”so we werenâ€™t refugees.Â In a way we were, of course, but not poor refugees.Â We could take our household and so forth and goâ€”go away with it.Â And most people either didnâ€™t have the courage to go when they were afraid of this, of the coming war, or they didnâ€™t care and said, â€œOh, nothingâ€™s going to happen,â€”or whateverâ€”were optimistic, or whatever. They were right, by the wayâ€”nothing happened there.

Interviewer

What were some of the events that made that period tense?Â I know there was [Inaudible] blockade, or things that happenedâ€”

Eva Krutein

You mean 1951, at that time?

Interviewer

In that â€™51 period, yeah.Â Why did you think at that pointâ€”

Eva Krutein

Well, we could feel it in Germany because Germany was split into two, into West and East, and the eastern partâ€”thatâ€™s where the Russians were.Â And they were all ready to go into Western Europeâ€”in the first place, to western Germany, of course, and thatâ€™s where we were.Â And we heard that all the time, and trips were impossible to the East, or people were shot who went over the wall in Berlin, or so forth, so it was very tense, and we knew that, and it got tenser and tenser. And thatâ€™s all I can tell you about this, about â€™51.

Interviewer

Sure.Â It was againâ€”it got tense.Â Do you remember immediately after the warâ€”tell me a little bit about how Germany was divided immediately after the war.Â There was the British, the Soviet, and then France and thenâ€”

Eva Krutein

Yes, but these were occupation zones, so the British naturally on the north of Western Germanyâ€”the Russians went into the East, and so wherever they came fromâ€”the Americans mainly in southern Germany; Bavaria.Â They all know about Oktoberfest, and so forth, which I have never seen and have experienced.Â Thatâ€™s only southern Germany.Â So that wasâ€”these were the occupation zones, and right after the war they kept more or less order. It was chaos anyway, but they kept order.

Eva Krutein

And as I said, if you were fortunate enough to be within the British zone, I mean, you had only gentlemen around.Â It was wonderful.Â You were treated as a lady and not as a victim or something like that.Â Nobody raped or whatever.Â They helped if they could.Â It was reallyâ€”it was great.Â And similar things in the American zone, but I wasnâ€™t there.

Eva Krutein

But thatâ€™the troops left soonâ€™I think after a year or so; Iâ€™m not quite sure about the time.Â They left, so all the soldiers went, and what was left was East Germany and West Germany.Â West Germany had their own government, but the East Germans had the Russians there, and they were there and watched out.Â And as I said, ready to goâ€™you never knew.

Eva Krutein

Then the Berlin Wall, and all that was because too many people, too many East Germans fled to West Germany, and that was humiliating to the Russians.Â And so in order to prevent that, they built the Berlin Wall, and now itâ€™s gone.

Surviving on Wits Alone
Interviewer

Tell us again this notion of finding the situation so bleak and so desperate that you were forced to move, which is something that you never wouldâ€™ve dreamed of doing. Just tell me the difference in thatâ€™I mean finding yourself doing something you had never expected.

Eva Krutein

At that timeâ€™do you mean 1945â€™

Interviewer

Yeah.

Eva Krutein

Thatâ€™s what you mean. Actually, whatever happened, I never dreamed it would happenâ€™leaving my town, being homeless, being poor. Having absolutely nothingâ€™having to borrow everythingâ€™if you wanted to eat a soup, you had to say, â€œMay I use your spoon? May I use your plate? May I use this and that?â€

Eva Krutein

And finally you get sick and tired of it. You didnâ€™t have anythingâ€™not even anything to cover yourself. Sometimes in the winter, Manfred covered me with newspapers, because it was just too cold, and whatever I had on wasnâ€™t good enough. So he got old newspapers and covered me with that, and so.

Eva Krutein

But when you are young, it is bearable. I wouldnâ€™t like to go through that at my age, now, and people who were older had a hard time. And I think that helps, if youâ€™re young and you see everything as an adventureâ€™that helped. It was always with me, this feeling itâ€™s an adventure.

Eva Krutein

When I was going to be on a ship, I knew it was a small ferry, andâ€™yeah, a ferry or somethingâ€™so I went on that. And we stayed there for two or three days. We were about 100 people there; women and children. There were no toilets, or the toilets were broken or whatever, so they carried buckets in so we could sit down on them among all the other

things. There was nothing else we could do. And that was something that I really hated. I couldn't see that as an adventure.

Eva Krutein

But then after two or three days, nothing happened—the ship never left. And I said to the sailor, "I'm sorry," I asked a sailor, "What's happening?" He said, "Well, I'm not allowed to say it." But finally I got it out of him: the engine wasn't working, and the weather in the Baltic Sea was so bad that they couldn't dare leaving it.

Eva Krutein

And all of a sudden, I had it up to my nose. And I thought, "I'm leaving." I can't stand it anymore. And this primitivity, these buckets—and you know these were closed rooms. I mean it was horrible, and stench and so forth. I thought, "I'm leaving." I don't care if the Russians come or not. So I took my baby and left the ship. Everybody said, "Are you—are you insane?" We are on our way to safety, and so forth.

Eva Krutein

And I said, "I don't see it." We sit here. I'm going home. So I left the ship, and then I saw lots—it was snowing, and there were many more refugees, and they all spoke different languages, so I gathered they were Lithuanians and so forth, and I didn't understand the language. And I thought, "Where should I go now?"

Eva Krutein

And all of a sudden I saw a man, a young man, standing there in a uniform with all the things my husband had on the, on his sleeve, telling me that he was a Naval architect also. So I thought he would know my husband.

Eva Krutein

I went to him and said, "I'm Eva Krutein." Do you know my husband? He said, "Of course," and I said, "What are you doing?" He said, "I'm leaving with another ship," and I said, "Take me," and he said, "No, I can't. Nobody can go without a permit. There are two different sets of guards; you can't make it." I said, "I'm going with you anyway." So a small motorboat came to pick him up, and I yelled to the sailor, I said, "Wait—take my baby and take me also." And the sailors thought I was the wife of him or whatever.

Eva Krutein

And then were standing in front of this big ocean liner, and there were the guards, and I thought, "I must be on that ship." I will go. And I faked—I said—I tripped and I yelled and so forth and they came to me and said, "Can we help you?" and I said, "Oh, it hurts so much." And all the others had to show their permits, and since I was so miserable and had to hold the arm of the sailor, they let me through and didn't check me.

Eva Krutein

And they said, "They are all the same." They all belong together. And so I was on the ship, on this huge ship with a capacity of 1,600 people, and we were 6,000. They

were all lying on the floor and everywhere. And so I had made it on the ship.

Eva Krutein

Here again, it was an adventure, and this kept me going, particularly because before that, before—half an hour—half a year before the war ended, I had been sick for a year in a hospital with—they couldn't find what I had. And so it was a terrible life to lie in bed for a year. Finally I made it out, went on the flight from the Russians, and it was an adventure. Something was going on. All of a sudden, there was something going on. It was something new—an adventure.

Eva Krutein

But the despair came much later, particularly when we heard, even on that ship, that the torpedoes were—that they were shooting torpedoes at us. The constant fear—all of a sudden, there was no euphoria anymore. Now it's going to hit—“Now! No. Maybe in a second, maybe now—you never know when it hits. It was terrible. You couldn't sleep, of course. And mainly the nights were this way, because submarines attacked during the night, and not during the day, so when daylight came, we felt safer.

Trading one Necessity for Another on the Black Market
Interviewer

Right. The—how precious were certain food items then? I mean what was considered a real treat in that most desperate time? I mean what kind of food were you—[Crosstalk]

Eva Krutein

In the hunger times, later on, during the famine?

Interviewer

Yeah, tell me about that.

Eva Krutein

Bread. Bread was the easiest available, because you could carry it, and it held for a while, and that was mainly it. Your fantasy was with everything else: ice cream, chocolate, and cake, and good meat, good meals, and so forth. They were constantly with you, but they were pushed away by the—at least with me—by thinking, “How do you get—what can you do? What can you do? Where can you go to get something to eat?” As I said, it never left you, so.

Eva Krutein

So, and when—there were people who were going back to Danzig—I'll never forget that. Said, “I want to be there.” Some people just couldn't stand to be in a different place under those circumstances, and they had fantasies of at home it will still be the old way. And they waited until they got a piece of bread, at least half a loaf, and that was it. That's all they needed for their walk through Europe to Danzig. I don't know if they ever made it. But bread was once in a while available, and as I said, when I exchanged one of my looted blouses for sugar, I had sugar for my baby.

Eva Krutein

And that's how I discovered the black market; I didn't have to steal. Right from the

doctor, I went to the black market. It was in the park of the city, and there were lots of people around. They asked me, "Do you want eggs? Do you want eggs?" "Yes, of course I want eggs. What do you want for it?" They said an amount of money and cigarettes "I didn't have anything with me. Not even money. And then the woman said, "You have kid gloves, kid leather gloves. I want them, and you get six eggs."

Eva Krutein

And it was pretty cold, but I thought I will get them, and I said, "But I want 10 eggs." "No, six." Back and forth, then I took my shawl and gave it to her, too, and I got my 10 eggs. So and then I saw how easy it was, actually, if you had things, and as I mentioned before, I had three sets of underwear, three dresses, and three jackets. So slowly I exchanged them, so on the black market I became a winner.

Interviewer

Right. A plan you got provided with a plan.

Eva Krutein

Now, the baby was malnourished for a long time "finally had eczemas on the whole body. And I took her to a doctor that was after the flight, and she said, "That's malnutrition. You have to feed her proteins," and so forth. And I said, "Okay, tell me exactly where to get that and I'll feed her." And she said, "I don't know." She said, "Steal it if you want your baby alive. She can't make it. This is the beginning. All the children have that, or they have it this way or that way "it comes out that way. Go and steal it."

Horrifying Revelations

Interviewer

So immediately after the war, then, how different and how long did it take people to perceive that there was a difference in life in the British zones and the American zones and the Soviet zone. I mean did everybody fear getting stuck in the Soviet zone?

Eva Krutein

Not immediately, because we thought it would be static for a while, and the Russians were satisfied with all they had gained in Poland and wherever "the Baltic states, and also East Germany, so we didn't fear them at that point. But at least not at the beginning, and only later when we heard that the tension between the two superpowers happened, then we were afraid. But"

Eva Krutein

It escaped me. I wanted to tell you something very important that escaped me, so I'll interrupt you when "when it comes back to me.

Interviewer

Yes, do.

Eva Krutein

Or something, so. What was that?

Interviewer

Well, we were just going over this contrast between, you know, what life was like in the American zone, what life was like in the Soviet zone, immediately afterward.

Eva Krutein

There was no—there was no mail allowed from one part to the other one. There was no mail, and so we heard very little about it, even before the Wall was up. If there wasn't a wall, then there were soldiers always on the ready, and—but we didn't know how it was there. What was this important thing I wanted to tell you? Damn it.

Interviewer

Yeah, let me know if you think about it, because I—

Eva Krutein

You will cut this out, I know.

Interviewer

No, I was going to say I mean we're pretty much finished, unless there's something else that you can think that you wanted to add. I want to—let's do another turn on just this kind of broader idea about civilians, which—

Eva Krutein

Oh, I know now.

Interviewer

Okay, good—what is it?

Eva Krutein

Oh my gosh—you see, I blocked it out because it's so terrible. When there were newspapers around, when they came up maybe a few months after the end of the war, then we read about the opening of extermination camps. And what we heard about it, we didn't believe. There is a difference between concentration camps and extermination camps, and that is never mentioned here, because people throw that together. How couldn't they otherwise? Because how could they do it otherwise? They don't know.

Eva Krutein

Concentration camps were in every city—almost every city I know of—and most people had somebody of the family in there, for whatever. One was homosexual, the other one was Catholic, the other one Protestant, and very ardent Protestant—or whatever. And maybe Jews in the family or something, so they went in concentration camps.

Eva Krutein

People got out—I had a cousin who got out after a few months—and they were never allowed to tell. They had to sign a document. If they ever told what happened in the concentration camps, they would put back and never get out again, so nobody told me. Even this cousin who was very close to me didn't.

Eva Krutein

So—and now we learned that there were extermination camps; there were many in southern Poland, and Poland was sealed off during the whole war. We couldn't set a foot into Poland; and Auschwitz, for instance, and then two others. And whatever happened there, we never heard of it, and the Poles who lived around there, they probably knew. I don't know about that, because I never talked to them. But then it was in the newspapers, and we couldn't believe it, because it was too gross to believe it, so we thought, "Oh ja, they just want to humiliate us and tell us these lies."

Eva Krutein

And that went on for a while, until the pictures appeared in the newspapers. It didn't get—become that—it didn't get that fast as we have it here nowadays, so. So and when we saw that, all the dead bodies on top of each other, and all the terrible things we know of now, that was unbearable. And with all the running after food and whatever, and waiting for waiting for parents and—it was terrible.

Eva Krutein

And it's still terrible, only it's now everybody takes it for granted and nobody doubts it, or the few people who doubt it, I don't even take them seriously. But anyway—so that was a terrible time.

Hope Amid Rubble
Interviewer

Yeah. I'd just like to get another statement from you, if we could, about this notion of civilians, of being kind of ignored in the war statistically, and you know how really tough it was, and how long it took to recover from the war.

Eva Krutein

It took a long time. The cities were cleared up of the rubble pretty soon. The men weren't back yet—the husbands weren't back yet, because either they were prisoners of war, or dead, and so the women took over, and we moved the rubble. They were called "the rubble women," and I had never done it because I had other jobs. I became an opera coach immediately, in the middle of the rubble. We had an opera house and I coached operas—it's incredible.

Eva Krutein

But they at first, put the rubble away from the street, so cars could move, or people could move. And then the rubble stayed there for a year or two, and then finally they began to rebuild it. And in case of my hometown, Danzig, it took the Poles 30 years to do it, but in a fantastic way—I mean the architects have done a wonder. Most cities in Germany aren't that beautiful and historically that important.

Eva Krutein

But it didn't take very long, a few years only, because everybody who lived somewhere and had the rubble around them, and lived maybe in the cellars, took care that he could remove all that and carry it away and build up new things and establish their new businesses and so forth. They were working seven days a week and that happened—because of pride, and nobody paid them for it, but was of pride that—and the

need for living more comfortably than in cellars, under the rubble. Soâ€”but that was the time when the men were already back, as long as they werenâ€™t fallen.

Eva Krutein

But the suffering of civilians are usually not mentioned in any history books, and that is very unfortunate, because it involves millions and millions and millions of people, and only the fact that the women didnâ€™t have guns and didnâ€™t fight didnâ€™t mean that they didnâ€™t have to suffer. It was just horrible, because to live in the rubble andâ€”you could be killed at any minute by bombs and so forth. It was terrible. And then, as I said, the children begging for food, and you didnâ€™t have any. That was terrible.

Eva Krutein

Soâ€”and then when, I mean troops like the Russians came in and raped everybody, and everybody knew thatâ€”that was well known. And everybody feared it, and nobody could prevent it. Allâ€™s that you know is the door will open and a few guys will come on and throw you on the floor and rape youâ€”terrible. Iâ€™m glad I didnâ€™t have to go through that.