

## Finally Telling the Story: Former Augustana Professor Discusses the Holocaust

Written by Jeff Ignatius

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Ralph Troll spent 40 years teaching biology at Augustana College, and he only told the story there twice.

The first time was in the late 1980s, when he was asked to speak to a German class, because he was from Germany.

"It was just kind of part of the story," he said last week.

And then in the 1990s, the college asked him to give a senior-recognition talk. "I'm a biologist," he said. "They didn't want to hear about anything like that.

"I decided: This is a good day to do this. ... That's really the first time I told the whole story."

In all, Troll - who is now 77 years old and an emeritus professor at Augustana - said that he's told about his family's experiences in Germany during World War II five times, which is five

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more times than his mother talked to her children about her stay in a concentration camp. He'll lecture twice next week, on Sunday at Davenport's Temple Emanuel and on Monday at Augustana College.

Although Troll's father was Catholic, his mother was Jewish. For her protection, their family moved from Darmstadt into the nearby countryside in 1938, and she evaded the Nazis for years. She was finally arrested February 12, 1945, Troll said, and her concentration camp was liberated by the Russians on June 3, 1945.

"Overall, I was very fortunate," he acknowledged. "Our whole family was very fortunate. A lot of people had it a lot, lot, lot worse."

It would be three decades before his mother told of her time in the camp, and her son would only learn details of the stay after she died in 1978.

"Most of what I learned eventually came from a seven-page letter that was written in kind of a poem form by one of my Mom's roommates in the concentration camp," Troll said. "That's when the whole story really came out. My mom *never* talked to me or my sister about it, and the only one she told the story [to] was my niece - my sister's daughter - who pestered her continually. And one day she sat her down and she says, 'Okay. I'm going to tell you this story once, and that's it.'"

That conversation happened in the mid-1970s, Troll estimated, and the letter - along with a Star of David his mother wore in the concentration camp - surfaced when he was going through her belongings after her death.

Troll said that neither he nor his sister pressed their mother about her experiences. "We knew our Mom," he said. "If she didn't want to [talk about it], we weren't going to force it."

Similarly, the family never discussed the Holocaust: "They never talked much about it. But that was the nature of my parents; that had to do with everything. But we knew."

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From the letter, Troll learned about the concentration camp's routines, its liberation, and how people were sent to farms to recover after being released. Although Theresienstadt (in what is now the Czech Republic) was at that time a labor camp, the conditions were horrible. Sixteen people were packed in two small rooms, and they dealt with insect infestation, typhus, hunger, and hard labor cutting mica into sheets.

Troll's mother was, of course, lucky that she spent so little time in the concentration camp. The family stayed in Germany because of Troll's father's job as a chemist with Merck, and the move to the country kept the family safe, because the Nazis weren't looking for Jews in the rural areas.

"At that time, Jews were being arrested all over Germany and sent to concentration camps ... so the family thought that was kind of dangerous to hang around town," Troll said.

At six years old, Troll said he didn't have much sense of what was happening. "Just vaguely," he said. "I knew the reason for the move. Actually I enjoyed it because I like the country. I also realized that my Mom never, ever ventured into town or anywhere else. ...

"We also knew that most of our [Jewish] relatives had gotten out of Germany" by the end of 1937. "No one from my Dad's side left."

Because of Allied bombings, the family spent much of its time in the farmhouse cellar and in a reinforced foxhole. "I could see and hear bombings of the larger cities around us, especially at night ... but our nearby town was not bombed at all," Troll said. A train was bombed about a mile from his house, and one day some shrapnel hit the barn on his family's property.

But Troll said he wasn't afraid. "When I was sitting in these foxholes watching the planes overhead ... there was absolutely no fear," he said. "In fact, we were kind of cheering for the Allies to stop Hitler's madness.

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"My allegiance was with the Allies, actually."

Troll said he and his family felt safe until the night that the "Gestapo stormed into our house in the middle of the night - we were all asleep - and simply arrested our Mom."

When she returned from the concentration camp, she weighed only 90 pounds, despite being what Troll called a "strong, healthy woman" before her arrest.

"Almost immediately we started making plans to go to the United States," he said. "We were just ready to leave."

They began that process in June 1945, but they weren't able to leave until January 3, 1947. Once in the United States, the family settled in Chicago, and Troll's father worked as a chemist at the University of Chicago.

Troll said he doesn't know why it took so long for him to speak publicly about his family's experiences, but he said he recognizes the importance of talking now.

"I keep realizing more and more, especially with all the things that are going on in the world, that the story of the Holocaust needs to be told" generation after generation, he said. "Bigotry and prejudice and disregard for human rights simply have no place in the scheme of things. Period."

*Ralph Troll will be the featured speaker at Yom HaShoah, which will be held on Sunday, April 26, at 7 p.m. at Temple Emanuel (1115 Mississippi Avenue in Davenport). Admission is free.*

*As part of Yom HaShoah, the Figge Art Museum (225 West Second Street in Davenport) will screen the Oscar-winning film The Counterfeiters at 7 p.m. on Wednesday, April 22. Admission is \$5 for adults and free for students.*

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*Troll will also speak on Monday, April 27, at 7 p.m. in Augustana College's Centennial Hall (3703 Seventh Avenue). Admission is free.*