

HELEN KUNZ

Wife of William J. Kunz

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Helen Kunz

Wife of William Kunz

April 11, 1994—my name is Phyllis Gordon. I am a volunteer with the Midway Village and Museum Center, which is participating in a statewide effort to collect oral histories from Illinois citizens who participated in the momentous events surrounding World War II. We are in the Museum Center and we are talking with Helen Kunz who participated as a civilian on the home front during World War II. We are interviewing her about her experiences during that war. Helen, would you please start by introducing yourself to us. Please give us your full name and the place and date of your birth.

HELEN: I'm Helen Kunz and I was born in Patterson, New Jersey on May 24, 1922.

PHYLLIS: We would also like the names of each of your parents.

HELEN: My father's name was Stanley and my mother's name was Freda.

PHYLLIS: Did you have any brothers or sisters?

HELEN: No, I did not.

PHYLLIS: Are there any details about your parents or you family that you would like to give?

HELEN: Not really. I can't think too much.

PHYLLIS: Okay. At any time during the time were you employed or a volunteer in a war-related work or service?

HELEN: No, I was employed, but not in a war related...

PHYLLIS: Would you please tell us about what your job was?

HELEN: Okay. We lived about thirty some miles from New York City and I commuted every day about an hour and a half. I worked for a steamship company and also an insurance company. The interesting part—when I worked for the steamship company was—it was Holland ___?___ line and they had to leave Europe because of the war. And their main office was in Pier side so I got to meet a lot of people and we had the crew—ships' crews—not the cruise ships but...

PHYLLIS: The crew of the ships?

HELEN: Right. The crew of the ships. They would come in and we would have crew pay day and I would get to meet a lot of these Japanese and people from that area.

PHYLLIS: Did you have any friends that were involved in war related work?

HELEN: No.

PHYLLIS: During the war was there any population shifts because of the need for workers in certain industries?

HELEN: Not in our area because we didn't have any defense areas.

PHYLLIS: So you didn't have to move because of work?

HELEN: No.

PHYLLIS: Was there a military camp near you home community?

HELEN: There was one later on established. Bill had gone overseas already when this was established in a town nearby. Called Orange burg, New York and they put Camp Shanks. In later years being out here in Rockford one of my bosses left from that same camp.

PHYLLIS: Can you tell us how the service men and civilians mingled in the community?

HELEN: Well, we had one of two USO'S FROM THIS Ca\mp Shanks. The fellows would go there. In fact that's how some of my friends met their future husbands. But that was the only activity.

PHYLLIS: Was there a military equipment or supply factory near your home community?

HELEN: No. There was not.

PHYLLIS: Was there a prisoner of war camp nearby?

HELEN: Well, this Camp Shanks—later on they

brought prisoners back.

PHYLLIS: Can you tell us any experiences you or your friends may have had with these prisoners?

HELEN: No, because they were far enough away the only time we saw them was when I was on the commuter trains going back and forth to work and they would be waving to us as the trains went by

PHYLLIS: One the home front we know you had to cope with rationing and recycling. Can you tell us how your family attempted to cope with the rationing and the control of food, fuel, clothing and housing?

HELEN: Well, we were like everybody else. We had a few stamps and we made do. Some weeks it went further and other weeks it didn't and then we had to watch. We couldn't use the car very much because you couldn't get the tires, unless you were...

PHYLLIS: And the gas?

HELEN: And the gas, right. Unless you were...

PHYLLIS: Did you or your friends have victory gardens?

HELEN: No.

PHYLLIS: Did you save and recycle any household waste such as grease, paper, and metals?

HELEN: No. They weren't into recycling like they are now.

PHYLLIS: Did you participate in any war bond drives or fund raising efforts to for the war—or activities?

HELEN: No. My day was pretty much spent in commuting back and forth. When you spend a couple hours then you never knew. The trains were coal driven and sometimes it was a poor quality and I remember sitting at one station for almost an hour one night coming home because they couldn't make the grade.

PHYLLIS: As the long war progressed what thoughts do you recall about the attitudes you, your family or your friends may have had toward the value of the war and the importance of your contribution and Bill's contribution.

HELEN: Well, we thought it was never going to end. It just seemed to go on and on and on. We were

looking forward to the day when it would end. And of course we had two VE days then. We had a false one that we celebrated on the 7th of May. The message had come through that it was over with. And we were let go from our office. We were working on Wall Street in New York City and we all went up to Times Square just like on New Year's Eve and then the next day was the official one and so we celebrated two days in a row.

PHYLLIS: Two celebrations.

HELEN: Two celebrations, right.

PHYLLIS: This next question I already know the answer from your husband's interview. Did your interest in the war increase, decrease or remain about the same from 1941 to 1945?

HELEN: It definitely increased.

PHYLLIS: I know that you were faithful letter writers.

HELEN: Also, we could only send—you mentioned something about packages. We only could send a package that couldn't four pounds. And you try to figure your box, so we would try to put some candy bars and some cookies, but it was very little that you could in those boxes.

PHYLLIS: When things did not go well for our side during the early days of United States in participation in the war, particularly in the Pacific, did you ever fear that the Japanese might bomb or invade the west coast or the war might eventually come to your community?

HELEN: No, I was pretty confident that we had excellent service people and that we were hoping it wouldn't come or we were very very confident it wouldn't ever.

PHYLLIS: Do you remember if you ever had air-raid warning systems.

HELEN: Oh, yes. We had blackout drills every day. Yes, we did.

PHYLLIS: Can you tell us anything you remember about those? Can you tell us anything you remember about those?

HELEN: Well, I remember one night a good friend of his came up to visit me. He lived in this other town

and we were talking and we heard the air raid signal go off and apparently one of the curtains wasn't closed. I remember they blow the whistle and yelled close that curtain. That is when Warren came up to see me that night. (Laughter)>

PHYLLIS: Were there ever any feelings of hatred or distrust of United States citizens who were of Japanese descent or German descent in your community?

HELEN: No. There weren't.

PHYLLIS: No hostile actions ever taken place against such people? Do you recall the opinion of you or your family or friends may have had toward our war time president, Franklin D. Roosevelt?

HELEN: Well, there was the usual pro and con. That we shouldn't have gotten involved as you have with every president. Some are for and some against, but I think the majority of people felt that that was the way to go in that situation.

PHYLLIS: So you would say that there was general support in your community for FDR's involvement of the United State?

HELEN: Mm hmm. Yes.

PHYLLIS: Was there general support in you community for FDR's candidacy for a third and fourth precedent breaking term?

HELEN: Mm. Not too much. The thought we should have a change, but then they thaught that was not the right time either.

PHYLLIS: Some have said the war years were "fun time years for the home front." What did you and other civilian on the home front do for entertainment and recreation?

HELEN: There was very little to do. As I said, I spent most of my time commuting. By the time you got home at night and had your dinner, it was time to go to bed and you got up early next morning. I did have one circumstance. One time with some of the girls I worked with in New York City went to Times Square for New Year's Eve. And that was entirely different because it was blackout and very few lights were on but there were still crowds there, but nothing compared to what there is now, but it was a different experience.

PHYLLIS: I can imagine. How closely did you follow the progress of the war through newspapers, magazines, books, radio, and movies? Do you remember listening to the radio?

HELEN: The radio—right. And we followed everything closely through newspapers and magazines and I had a feel for where my husband was stationed at the time and I could tell from his letters and I figured from what his division was with I could figure out some things. Some of his letters there was one in particular. Captain Bailey—that innocent little things he wrote in would always be cut out. I would get my V-mail letters with cut out. There were holes in them. And I always said that at one of the reunions I would like to meet that gentleman but he passed on so I could never...

PHYLLIS: So you could never talk to him?

HELEN: Right.

PHYLLIS: Did you ever feel that any of the information you received might be propaganda?

HELEN: No, I don't think so.

PHYLLIS: Before the end of the war was you aware that any civilian concentration camps existed in the enemy nations?

HELEN: Yes.

PHYLLIS: How did you learn about them?

HELEN: (No reply)

PHYLLIS: In looking back over the past fifty years, do you feel the social changes that began developing during the war years have in general been good for the nation, good for people, good for you and your family? Why or why not? Be as specific and frank, as you want to be.

HELEN: Of course, we were just talking about how women were liberated, so to speak, to go into the work force. I think one thing that changed, people did more moving around like some of these girls that I knew that met fellows at the USO and they were fellows from Texas and Indiana. They married and relocated, whereas before the war, you pretty much stayed in your hometown and also I think the people became lenient with their children in later years. They spoiled them because they figured "I didn't have it." I don't think that was very good for the general outlook of the younger people.

PHYLLIS: Perhaps you have some other ideas, or concepts or memories of the war years that are important to you even if I haven't specifically mentioned them during this interview. Do you have other views or memories you would like to share? If so, we would like to hear about them now. Maybe about getting Bill's letters or...

HELEN: Oh yes that was always a highlight. And then he sent some souvenirs home. That was always a highlight of getting some of those things and we were amazed at how they came through. One thing in particular, he is still wearing the ring. It was given to him by his grandmother. It broke and I said return it. I had an uncle who was a jeweler and I would have it fixed. He just put it in a regular airmail envelope and it came through. How it ever did, I don't know. The prongs were sticking out of the envelope and it made it from overseas.

PHYLLIS: You would think it would tear the paper and it would and it would get lost.

HELEN: Right. That was one of the highlights. I remember that and then trying to get the small packages down to four pounds. I bought a special scale and tried to put everything in. Apparently something I had forgotten was when I did mail the letters. I used to put perfume on them and at the reunions, several of his buddies mentioned that a highlight was when my letters arrived. I had forgotten that. And also the packages with cookies in them.

PHYLLIS: That 's interesting. We didn't talk much about the rationing. Was there any part of the rationing that you remember as being particularly troublesome?

HELEN: No, no really. We just knew that was what we had to d. I think I remember the sugar was a thing because you couldn't bake. You couldn't do very much. Sugar and the gas. Those were the two hard things. Eventually we just had to put the car up on blocks because we couldn't get the gas for it.

PHYLLIS: And the tires.

HELEN: The tires, right. So when he came home the family car was up on blocks.

PHYLLIS: Not exactly ready to go.

HELEN: No. Right. Exactly.

PHYLLIS: Is there anything else that you would like to share with us about your time during World War II?

HELEN: No. I think 3we've pretty well hit all the high spots. It seemed like a long time. It just seemed to go on and on. I thought Bill would be some sooner. I talked to some of his buddies when we were visiting and he had been badly wounded. The one fellow told me when we were up in Boston—and he told me I didn't think they'd put him back in again but they needed the valuable ones with experience so he stayed in right through to the end. They said they didn't see why he should have ever come back again, but when you have the experienced ones you just have to hang on to them. It was interesting when he was in the hospital in Naples. Years later a good friend of our got into service later because he was a married man with a child and he was stationed at that same hospital where he had been in.

PHYLLIS: That is interesting. Well, thank you for sharing these remembrances. We appreciate it very much.