

Adults' Childhood Narratives of World War II on the Homefront

Name: Kathryn Brenan . Birth Year: 1929.

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KATHRYN BRENAN

NATALIE GORIS

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KB = Kathryn Brenan

NG = Natalie Goris

[Time Code 00hrs:00mins:00secs]

Natalie Goris: So first, what is your name?

Kathryn Brenan: Kathryn Brenan. And it is spelled, K-a-t-h-r-y-n.

NG: Thank you.

NG: Uh, how old are you?

KB: Seventy-nine years old. [Kathryn Brenan is actually eighty-nine years old.]

NG: And when was your birth year?

KB: Nineteen twenty-nine.

NG: Uh, what is your family background?

KB: (Sigh) I guess I'm a Hines kids. Uh, fifty-seven varieties, but mostly Irish.

NG: Okay.

KB: Okay.

NG: Uh, and what is your native language?

KB: English.

NG: What part of the word are your parents from?

KB: Here, America.

NG: So what city or town are they from then?

KB: What?

NG: City—what city or town are they from?

KB: We were from Pennsylvania. Okay, that was Upper Darby, Delaware County, Pennsylvania.

NG: What level of education did your parents have?

KB: My father only went to sixth grade. But he wound up being a self-made man.

NG: Um-hm.

KB: My mother—you know—I don't know how far she went to be perfectly honest with you.

NG: And what did they do for a living?

KB: My father was in the insurance business and my mother was a homemaker.

NG: Um-hm.

KB: Right.

NG: How many siblings did you have?

KB: I'm an only child. (Both laugh)

NG: Do you have any other important information about your parents that you would like to share?

KB: Uh, my father was the oldest of fifteen children and my mother was the youngest of fifteen children.

NG: Wow.

KB: I guess that's why I'm an only child.

NG: Yeah. (Both laugh)

NG: In what part of the world—or city or town—did you grow up in?

KB: Upper Darby, Delaware County.

NG: And between 1939 and 1945, where did you live? So what city?

KB: In Upper Darby, Delaware County.

NG: What was your home like?

KB: (Sigh) It was—then at thirteen, I guess we had just moved from one street to the next street. And it was a three-bedroom home. We had a garage, uh an enclosed front porch, a living room, dining room, kitchen, one bathroom—uh nobody had two bathrooms then—it was uh a detached home—I guess you would call it now a twin, you now a side by side, yeah.

KB: So.

NG: And what was your neighborhood like?

KB: Uh, actually there weren't too many children my age in that neighborhood. I would say that the average age was probably between forty to sixty probably, yeah.

NG: So were you—were you in school at the time of the war?

KB: Yes.

NG: What grades were you in?

KB: Eighth.

NG: Eighth grade?

KB: Yes, yeah.

NG: And what was your school like?

KB: Uh, I went to Catholic school. Uh then we had nothing but nuns. I walked probably—maybe a mile and a half to school there and back.

NG: What did you do for fun?

KB: (Sigh) Well, let's see. You didn't watch TV because there was none. Well we didn't get TV until—what—1954 I believe, yeah. So you'd listen to the radio, you went to the movies, you rode your bike, uh you roller skated, uh when it snowed you did lots of sledding. So you just kind of kept yourself pretty busy that way.

NG: So since there were like no kids in your neighborhood, did you go to different neighborhoods to—

KB: Uh.

NG:—spend time with friends? Or did you mainly just see them in school?

KB: Well uh, I had a couple of friends from school and—you know—we kind of hung out together.

NG: So between 1939 and 1945 [00:05:00], were you aware that there was a war going on?

KB: Oh for sure.

NG: Yeah?

KB: Yeah.

NG: What was your earliest memory of World War II?

KB: Uh, December seventh. Right?

NG: Uh-hm.

NG: So what do you remember about that—December seventh—like how did you find out about it?

KB: The radio.

NG: The radio?

KB: Yeah, the radio. President Roosevelt got on and said that we were now at war with Japan, right? And it was—I remember my father was very upset because he had been in the first world war. So you know, he was upset about it.

NG: Uh-hm.

NG: Uh how did World War II affect your everyday life? Like your family life or your school?

KB: Well we didn't have a car, but there was gas rationing and we did have—uh food was rationed also. Yeah—I mean you got a book, a ration book, and it was basically for meat, you know. I mean a lot of times shelves were empty.

NG: Uh-hm.

KB: You know so basically—you know I guess basically everybody was uh concerned. I mean it was definitely a concern because some of my friends' fathers you know—and some of you know—had to go into the service. My father during—he was probably maybe—the second world war—he was maybe forty-three, forty-four years old because he was in the first world war when he was seventeen. He enlisted when he was seventeen. Right?

NG: Uh-hm.

NG: Uh did like your teachers talk about the war at all? Or did they just not mention—

KB: Not really.

NG: Uh-hm.

KB: Not really. The nuns just kind of you know, screamed and hollered at us most of the time (Both laugh).

NG: And how did the war affect your immediate family? Was—did it affect like—?

KB: Oh well as I said the rationing because my mother was a big one for meat. And so I mean, you know that was a big deal trying, trying to get meat.

NG: Uh-hm. Did—

KB: Of course being Catholic, Fridays we'd always ate meat.

NG: (Laughs).

KB: Or I mean fish. We always ate fish so you know, that made things easier. (Laughs).

NG: Uh did it affect you extended family?

KB: Uh no, not really. Not really.

NG: Uh what about any friends or neighbors? Did like any of your neighbors have children since they were so old—like so much older than you—have children in the war?

KB: No.

NG: No?

KB: No.

NG: Uh what storied did you hear adults tell about the war? Or did they mainly keep quiet about it to you guys?

KB: Well it wasn't like it is today where, you know you could see things on, on TV. I mean you just listened or heard it on the radio. Or when you went to the movies it was in the news reel, that's how we saw what was going on, it was more or less what you heard.

NG: Uh did you talk about the war with the other children?

KB: Yes, I guess I did. With a couple of gals that—you know we hung out together, yeah, we used to talk about it.

NG: So what did you guys talk about when you like were discussing it?

KB: Well it was—uh we felt bad about all of these boys being killed. You know, I mean that was basically what we talked about—

NG: Yeah.

KB: —was all the killing going on.

NG: And what stories about World War II have you told about—have you told as an adult? Have you shared any stories—

KB: Uh.

NG: —thinking back on the war?

KB: I guess the one I remember because I did have an uncle uh who was on the Normandy beach.

NG: Oh really?

KB: Right, I had forgotten that. Yes, yes. And when he came back [00:10:00]—now what is, they call it Post Stress Disorder, well at that time they didn't even know anything about that and yes he definitely wound up with mental problems, you know. And, and he had been married and after seven years when he came back, he and his wife separated because he was just you know. And he became homeless.

NG: Uh-hm.

KB: And actually, he died here in Florida. He was homeless here in Florida.

NG: Wow.

KB: Yeah.

NG: And did that affect your family at all? Like—

KB: Well.

NG: —your parents?

KB: Yes, of course. He had a sister—one of my father's sisters—and his sister too, who the VA paid whatever was due him on a monthly basis. They paid it to her and she kind of took care of things. But then when he came to Florida, he kind of lost con—they kind of lost contact and it was kind of shocking when we heard that he had passed away.

NG: Uh-hm.

KB: In one of the homeless camps down here. So yeah, when you asked me, “Did it affect the rest of my—,” yeah it did, didn’t it? Pretty seriously.

NG: And how have your experiences as a child during this period shape your life?

KB: (Sigh) Well you hate to hear anything where these young kids are being killed. I mean, it’s tragic that this this has to happen. And I mean with all this terrorist things that’s going on these days it’s shocking. Shocking. I mean, seventy-five years ago, or when I was growing up, I mean you know, you went out—you went out to play in the, in the morning and, you know, you got called in for lunch an you went out and you were called in for dinner. It’s not like today where you can’t leave your children out by themselves, they have to be constantly watched. This world is going to hell in a handbasket.

KB: And I sincerely hope that all the corruption in the government can be taken care of because that’s—I, I hate it. I hate it. (Coughs).

NG: Uh do you have any photographs or wartime memorabilia from your childhood?

KB: I think I have my father’s dog tags. [KB gets up and walks to another room to look for dog tags].

KB: [KB reenters room] There.

KB: That’s my father’s dog tag and that’s my husband’s dog tag. [KB is holding a keychain that has two dog tags on it, her father’s and her husband’s].

KB: Look at this.

NG: And that’s from World War I, this one? [NG is questioning about KB’s father’s dog tag]

KB: Yeah, that’s from World War I. No that’s—yes, that ones from World War I.

NG: And this one’s from World War II? [NG is questioning about KB’s husband’s dog tag].

KB: No, no.

NG: Or—

KB: That was after.

NG: After. Okay.

KB: Okay, that was right after. That was before the Korean War.

NG: Okay.

KB: That was Jack's. Yeah, that's my father's.

KB: So no, I don't really have anything from the second world war.

NG: Uh-hm.

KB: So.

NG: Uh, do you know anybody else born before 1941 who would want to be interviewed?

KB: Yeah, but none of them are here.

NG: So your husband was in the army, do you think World War II influenced his decision to join at all?

KB: No.

NG: No? [00:15:00]

KB: He was the oldest of eight children and he knew he wanted to go to college. So he went to college on the GI Bill.

NG: And since your father was in World War I, how did he—what was his view about World War II? Like what did he think about it? Or did he talk about it with you at all?

KB: Oh, well yeah. He was in the main—the main battle he talked about was Argonne Forest, which was in the first world war. And yeah, he was very concerned and he listened to the news all the time. But it was a totally different war, World War I and World War II. World War II was a whole lot more mechanized really. I mean my father, her was a member of a gun crew and those guns were pulled by horses. And he used to talk—he had this horse and he used to talk about his horse all the time, that he had to take care of.

NG: Uh-hm.

KB: And then he was—remember he was only seventeen, eighteen, nineteen years old. So yeah, he was very concerned about the war.

NG: Yeah?

KB: Yes.

NG: Was your—did your mom talk to you about the war at all or did she stay quiet about that subject?

KB: She stayed pretty much quiet on it.

NG: Uh-hm.

KB: Yeah.

NG: With listening to like the radio, was it often that like you heard about the war?

KB: Yes.

NG: Yeah?

KB: Because my father was, as I said, extremely interested in what was going on. So yes, I did listen to the news.

NG: And did you have any friend's who had like older brothers who were in the war?

KB: I'm sure that I did. But right off hand, I can't give you—but yes. Yes, I remember a couple of brothers of kids that I went to school with were in the service.

NG: And could you see how that affected them? Did you talk about it?

KB: Not really. Not really.

NG: Uh-hm.

KB: You know they would say they heard from “my brother”, you know. But no, not really.

NG: So your uncle was the only one that was in the war?

KB: Yes, yes.

NG: Only one, okay.

KB: Right.

NG: Is there anything else you would like to share about World War II? Any stories, anything you have?

KB: Trying to remember seventy-five years ago is—

NG: Yeah.

KB: —a little tough you know.

NG: Uh-hm.

KB: I remember D-Day, you know specifically. You know with the planes and ships that were sunk and you know that was really traumatic—

NG: Do you remember—

KB: —to hear all of those things.

NG: Do you remember how you felt that day?

KB: Upset.

NG: Upset?

KB: Upset, yeah. Yeah, definitely.

NG: Do you remember how you felt when the war ended?

KB: Oh yeah. I was on my way to Wildwood, New Jersey. Okay, and of course when the war ended all these kids that were on their way to Wildwood, New Jersey—all those guys were kissing us and it was party time.

NG: (Laughs)

KB: Right so yes. Yes, I remember that. (Both laugh).

NG: Well thank you for—

KB: Oh you're so welcome.

NG: —sharing everything.

KB: You're so welcome. I hope I was helpful. You know trying to remember things seventy-five years ago is a little difficult. Because right before you came I walked back to the bathroom, when I got there I said, "What the hell did I come back here for?" So trying to remember—(both laugh).

KB: Did you shut that thing off? (Laughs).

