

# Dreaming of an Orange Christmas

## Holocaust survivor ripped away from peaceful isle of Guernsey



**A NEW ROLE, TEACHER**—Jill Oliver, 90, has spoken to visitors at the RUTH: Remember Us The Holocaust exhibits created by Southwestern College Honorary Degree recipient Sandra Scheller.

Photo Courtesy of RUTH: Remember Us The Holocaust



By Alfonso Julián Camacho

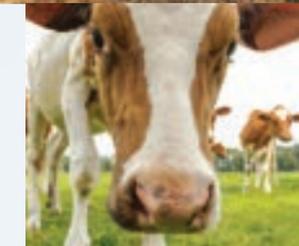
**J**ill Oliver's best Christmas present ever was an orange. A thin slice of an orange to be precise.

For the young Holocaust survivor it was a magical orange because it was sweet, juicy holiday hope in a bleak, sour prisoner of war camp.

Oliver and her family were not typical Holocaust survivors. They were not Jewish. They were English civilians who were not involved in the war. They were far from the action. They never dreamed they could be in danger.

They were—mortal danger. Even their isolation on the remote, windswept British island of Guernsey could not

**SO REMOTE, SO VULNERABLE**—Nazis annexed lightly-guarded Guernsey, a rural outpost in the English Channel Islands between England and France, in June 1940. Germany imprisoned its inhabitants.



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– Jill Oliver, Holocaust survivor

save them. Nazi Germans seized the lightly defended outpost in the Channel Islands for an airbase near the underbelly of England.

Nazi Luftwaffe planes bombed the island during a surprise attack that killed 44 and quickly took over, unleashing four years of terror for Guernsey’s bewildered population.

“I was six years old when they dropped the (first) bombs,” she said. “I didn’t know (at the time that) they killed 44 people. My parents never told me. I was too young to know.”

Shortly after the bombing raid Nazi soldiers occupied the rural island.

“Nazis took over and took everything from my parents, including their car and their boat,” said Oliver. “We had to do everything they told us to do. When I was eight years old, we (were ordered) to an internment camp. (We went) to St. Malo, France, to Dorsten, Germany, and then to Biberach camp, where almost 800 individuals from Guernsey were sent.”

Adults worked hard to keep the children from being scared, she said.

“To me it was nothing but a train



**WITNESS TO WAR**—Jill Oliver, like many Holocaust survivors, was quiet about her experiences until she was older.

ride,” she recalled. “(My younger brother and I) slept in the luggage racks. We thought we were having a vacation. Ridiculous! We didn’t know that the Germans had rifles. It was not pleasant, but my parents made me feel like we were not at war.”

Guernsey’s adults did their best to shelter children from the horrors of global combat, Oliver said. Adults created moments of magic for the children with paltry resources. Each was allowed to bring one small suitcase to Biberach, and they focused on

“what was most important,” she said.

“People brought pillows,” she recalled. “I didn’t know where I was going to sleep that night and didn’t care. I was young enough not to care, old enough to remember. Even though there was barbed wire around us, and they had watchtowers (with Germans) ready to shoot us if we tried to escape, I (was not worried.)”

Modest treasures from the suitcases became talismans for the children’s mental health. Everyday items were transformed into conduits of magic.

“At camp we had parades and other celebrations,” Oliver said. “Someone (wrapped) themselves (like) Cleopatra for a float on a special occasion.”

Oliver said the adults assured the kids they would only be in the camp for one Christmas.

“We were there for three,” she recalled.

Red Cross parcels were essential for survival, she said. Food was scarce and eaten with great measure. A can of spam was a delightful feast to be savored, cut into thin slices and heated to perfection. Corned beef was another prison delicacy that Oliver said remains a favorite of hers.

Then there was the magical Christmas orange. It would be her family’s only present that December, but her favorite ever. It was sliced into waferish pieces and savored like fruit from Heaven.

Simple pleasures became precious.

“Singing was part of life in camp,” Oliver said. “(I remember singing) ‘You are My Sunshine.’

A group of musicians played it as their last song before being shipped out of the camp. They left and we never knew what happened to them.”

Children were instructed in an improvised school organized by adult prisoners. A Girl Scout troop was created. “Teachers” carefully created awards and honors with hard-to-get colored paper.

A favorite memory was practicing embroidery on sackcloth and scrap thread found in the Red Cross parcels. Her son still has the small, embroidered piece she created while in camp, she said. Birthday cards were created by trading cigarettes for crafting supplies. Jacks brought the most joy to Oliver, she said, followed by chalk used to play hopscotch on the cement.

There were inevitable moments of horror.

“One time as I was doing a cartwheel I looked into the sky and saw an airplane that ... crashed into the hill behind us. I guess (the pilot) was killed. At that moment I was a little scared. I lay flat and then ran into the barrack. I knew something was wrong.”

Her overriding memory of the camp was that the adults – with great courage and nobility – sheltered the children from the worst of it.

“I believed that (the camp) was home,” she said. “I had very good parents. They didn’t (dwell on the fact) that we were in a prison camp.”

Oliver said she was fortunate to stay in a barrack with her mother and brother. Her father slept in men’s quarters.



"We were divided by barbed wire... and only allowed to get together during the day," she recalled. "My dad, being a dentist, was taken out of the camp and asked to help people in town... as well as German soldiers."

Then, suddenly, they were freed.

"When the war was over the Americans came in and took us for rides in jeeps and gave us chewing gum," she said. "I'd never tasted it before!"

Oliver said the people from Guernsey learned what had happened to prisoners in other camps and developed a form of survivors guilt.

"Once freed, we were allowed out of the camp but had to wait for transportation to travel to England. My dad and I walked to the river Riss. I remember putting my feet in the river, (and feeling the) freezing cold water. My dad and I looked at each other, we both felt guilty for being out of the camp. We felt we should have just stayed."

**UNEXPECTED OCCUPATION**—Nazi officers on Guernsey shipped thousands off the island and into mainland prison camps.

Returning to Guernsey was surprisingly difficult, Oliver recalled.

"Accepting freedom took a while," she said. "Once we got back to the island, things were different. My dad was 61 and couldn't start his dental practice again. Instead, he associated with someone. It was hard to start over. The Red Cross people were nervous that we wouldn't be able to get back into normal life and it was hard. It was hard. We'd be gone for three years, and our friends weren't used to us anymore. We hadn't been in their lives for three years. They hadn't been in our lives for three years. When you take that away from people it's hard sometimes to jump back in."

Oliver said she did not truly understand freedom until she

emigrated to the United States.

"In England food and clothing were rationed until 1954," she recalled. "I arrived in this beautiful country in the 1960s. That was only six years (after rationing). In England, I remember going to the grocery store and standing in line while the grocer behind the counter would go get the sugar and flour from (a secured) cabinet. When I walked into a grocery store here... Oh my! Oh, wow! I had no idea there were so many boxes of cereal! You could put them in a cart and check them out yourself!"

Oliver's family was fortunate, she said, and came out of the camp whole. Most had long lives. Her father, though, may have had disturbing memories of the war at the end of his life.

"I remember the hospital didn't give him tea. I ordered some tea for him and I think that made him happy. I put ice cream on his tongue and sang 'You are My Sunshine.' The next day he died."

Like so many Holocaust survivors, Oliver did not talk much about her wartime experiences. One fateful Boxing Day – a British celebration held the day after Christmas – Oliver sat with David Treadway, a man she had just met.

"Jill seemed to be the oldest person there, so to start conversations around the table I (asked) 'Jill, what's your oldest Christmas memory?'" he said. "She replied, 'I remember the Christmas that all my family got was one orange to share.'"

About 12 years later Treadway asked Oliver if he could write a book about her life. One particular memory really touched him, he

said. Young Jill had fallen ill and there were no doctors in the camp.

"A German guard named Hans sneaked her out of the camp and walked, carrying her for hours, to where they removed her tonsils with no anesthesia, and then walked back in the snow to get her back to the camp before morning," said Treadway. "That probably saved her life."

Oliver is careful to distinguish between the Germans and the Nazis.

"Hans, the German guard, was without a doubt a miracle in a world besieged by death," Treadway said.

He titled his completed book "An Orange for Christmas."

Oliver met Holocaust educator Sandra Scheller at an exhibit Scheller curated and designed for the San Diego County Library system. She said it was easy for her to relate to Oliver.

"I was born out of the ashes of the Holocaust," Scheller said. "My parents were survivors. It was just a way of life."

Scheller sought out Oliver's story.

"The starvation, the lack of health care and the mistreatment were no different than what the Jews went through, except there wasn't a gas chamber," said Scheller. "There was no reason for her to have been in such a horrific environment just because of where she lived, not because of what she believed in. The Nazis didn't care about anyone, any spirit, except for themselves. The world needs to know that hatred comes in all shapes and sizes."

So does grace and love. ■