

Hana Wirth-Nesher
RG-50.120*0353
One Videotape
In English

Abstract

Hana Wirth-Nesher was born in München, Germany, in 1948, to a Polish father and a German mother. When she was one year old, they immigrated to the United States, and settled in Allentown, Pennsylvania.

Hana was the only Jewish child in her school, and her family experienced anti-Semitism, including swastikas in front of their home. They moved to a neighborhood with a larger Jewish population, but the native Jewish community rejected Holocaust survivors and their families. So Hana never felt really American.

Hana graduated from Columbia University and then taught English at Lafayette College in Easton, Pennsylvania. At the time she was interviewed, she was chair of the English Department at Tel Aviv University, where she had taught since 1982.

When Hana went to Israel and met her husband, also from a survivor family, she discovered that Israelis did not understand survivors either. Hana says her personal history affects her relationship with her children, as she feels that neither she nor they belong to any type of survivor group.

Hana's father, Shmuel Brostlavsky, was self-educated and had worked in a small factory making women's and children's clothing in Poland. In 1939 in Sieradz, Poland, Brostlavsky was arrested. After he was released, he, his brother and nephew tried to go to Russia. Shmuel left behind his wife and son, who were killed. While trying to cross the border, the Brostlavskys were caught and severely beaten by the Germans.

They forced Shmuel to play the violin while they murdered people. His experiences caused him severe depression and other mental illness that required many hospitalizations. He never told his daughter about his experiences, but her aunt and a neighbor told her.

Hana's German-born mother had been married previously as well, and had also been caught trying to cross the Russian border. She and her husband were deported to a labor camp in Siberia, where her husband died of typhoid fever. She witnessed many mass shootings, and spoke often about them. In 1941, she was given amnesty and went to Uzbekistan, where she met Brostlavsky.

Interview

- 00:01:00** Hana Wirth was born in München, Germany, in 1948. Her father, Shmuel Brostlavsky, was born in Poland, and her mother was born in Germany. Her parents were in München from 1945 to 1949. There, they applied for a visa to the United States, and left when it came through in 1949. Hana was one year old when she arrived in the United States in 1949. They lived in Allentown, Pennsylvania until she was 18 years old. She graduated from Columbia University and then taught English at Lafayette College in Easton, Pennsylvania, for seven years. In 1982, she went to Tel Aviv University, where she chairs its English Department.
- 00:01:04** Language was and is a very important facet of Hana's life. She spoke Yiddish with her father, German with her mother and grandmother, and English outside her home. She never really would have known her parents if she had not spoken with them in their respective native language.
- 00:01:09** Her father was self-educated and worked in a small factory making women's and children's clothing. He had been married previously and had a son, but they had been killed. Hana's mother had been married previously as well. She had married her first husband at the beginning of the war. When they had tried to cross the Russian border, they were caught and deported to a labor camp in Siberia, where her husband died of typhoid fever. Hana's mother had witnessed mass shootings and spoke often about them. In 1941, she was given amnesty and went to Uzbekistan, where she met the man who became her second husband, Shmuel Brostlavsky.
- 00:01:15** Hana's father never talked to her about his story. But she heard about it from an Allentown neighbor in whom the father had confided. Brostlavsky was arrested in 1939 in Sieradz. After he was released, he and his brother tried to go to Russia. They left behind Shmuel's wife and son, Nathan, and they were killed. Another version of the story was that the father had left his son in a convent that took care of children, but the Nazis came in and killed all of them. Hana's father died in 1977.
- 00:01:21** Hana's father, his brother, and his brother's son were caught by the Germans when they tried to cross the Russian border. They were severely beaten. The Nazis forced Shmuel to play the violin while they were murdering people. His experiences caused him to suffer severe depression and other mental illness that required many hospitalizations. He never told his daughter about what had happened to him during the war in order to protect her.
- 00:01:28** Hana's father forbade her mother to talk about the experiences. His overall behavior appeared to Hana as very strange.

- 00:01:32** Hana at 16 visited Israel with her father to meet her aunt, who told her about her father's history.
- 00:02:00** Hana talked to her aunt and niece about her family history, but did not tell them about her father's depression.
- 00:02:06** In Allentown, her parents associated mainly with fellow survivors, and it affected her greatly to be around people who were damaged and had been through such horrors. She was not supposed to know what was wrong with these people and why they were the way they were.
- 00:02:14** Hana had the difficult burden of not being allowed to ask and not knowing why. She was supposed to support her parents when they cried, but not ask why they cried.
- 00:02:17** Hana's parents had difficulty adjusting to the United States. Initially, they worked in the garment industry and later started their own business.
- 00:02:20** Her parents talked about their relationship with the American Jewish community. They could not afford at first to live in a middle-class Jewish area, and they experienced anti-Semitism. Swastikas appeared in front of their house. Hana was the only Jewish child in her school. When she was 12, their family moved to a Jewish area of town, despite her father's being suspicious of other Jews.
- 00:02:28** Other survivors were rejected by the Jewish community, and this greatly affected Hana. She never could feel like a real American. When she was 35, she came to Israel, where she met the man she married. He was from a survivor family. Israelis, like the Americans, did not understand survivors.
- 00:02:33** Hana's father had endured forced labor in Siberia, where up to 800 people lived in one barrack. He was deported because he had refused to become a Russian citizen and was therefore declared an enemy of the state.
- 00:03:00** Her father had loved music and poetry, and played the violin when young.
- 00:03:06** Her mother, 86 years old, lives in the past and has never recovered losing her earlier years. She claims, "Nothing is ever as good as it was." Hana feels that she herself is not enough for her mother.
- 00:03:16** Hana wonders how her parents happened to settle in Allentown, which was a predominantly German town, and alien to them.
- 00:03:16** Hana met her husband, also from a survivor family, in Israel. After they married, they lived in the United States for 15 years.

- 00:03:21** After they had children, their respective families' history became relevant again, especially regarding their son and daughter. She named their son after her deceased half-brother. Her own sense of instability, the feeling that everything can change, affects her relationship with her children.
- 00:04:00** There is a remarkable difference between her reaction to her own family history and her children's reaction.
- 00:04:03** Hana does not like her status as a second generation survivor and how it affects the third generation. She does not like people using different generational groups to describe survivor status, and feels that she does not belong to any survivors group.
- 00:04:13** Hana's personal history affected her work. She studied Yiddish for herself, but studied and teaches American and British writers.
- 00:04:21** She speaks American English with her children, and her reasoning for doing so also affects her children.
- 00:04:28** Hana's father gave her self-confidence. Because of all the horrible things that happened to him, and that it would not happen to her, she knew she would always have to achieve and give her best.
- 00:04:30** Hana does not feel Israeli. Her father did not move to Israel. He wanted her to be safe.