

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Interview with Rita Penn
March 2, 2010
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PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of a recorded interview with Rita Penn, conducted by Ina Navazelskis on March 2, 2010 on behalf of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The interview took place in Silver Spring, MD and is part of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's collection of oral testimonies. Rights to the interview are held by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

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RITA PENN
March 2, 2010

Question: This is a **United States Holocaust Memorial Museum** interview with **Rita Penn**, on March 2nd, 2010, conducted by **Ina Navazelskis**, held at **Leisure World** in **Silver Spring, Maryland**. Thank you **Rita**, for coming to speak with us. I'd like to start this interview like we do almost all of ours, at the very beginning.

Answer: Okay.

Q: And that is information about your birth, who were your parents, where were you born, did you have siblings, what did your family do? Provide us a context for the story.

A: Okay. Well, I was born March 29, 1933, in **Vienna, Austria**. My parents are **Simon** – well, he used to spell it, **s-z-y-m-o-n**, but now, later it became anglicized, and it was **s-i-m-o-n Knoll, k-n-o-l-l**. And my mother, her maiden name was **Appel, a-p-p-e-l**, and I have no siblings, I was an only child. We lived in an apartment house in a two part apartment, and my – my father's brother and his family, they had two children, their – they did not stay in **Europe** either. And we lived in the – the same building. Some years ago, I took my family to **Vienna**, and I knew the address, so I went to look at the building. And there was a plaque there that said this is not the original building. The original was destroyed in the war – in the World War II and I thought, good for them.

Q: Was your family originally from **Vienna**, were they Austrian Jews, or were they from – **s-z-y-m-o-n** suggests **Poland**.

A: Yeah, yes, yes. Both my parents were born in **Poland**. They came to **Vienna** as young adults, and I don't know exactly when that was, and they married. My father had six brothers and three sisters, large family. And the family was in – they had a business that had to do with sewing machines, and they did something with cloth for sacks and things. But the whole family worked there, the sisters worked in the office, the three sisters.

Q: This was in **Poland**?

A: No, this was in **Vienna**.

Q: Was in **Vienna**, I see, okay.

A: Yeah. So they all worked there together. So, they – and I knew – well, some of them I knew later, because many – several of them escaped, a couple of them didn't.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: So, I had – I – I still have one cousin who lived in the same apartment with us, she lives in **New York**; I don't see her very often. Her brother, who I was a little closer to, he died a few years ago. He was a journalist, and he actually worked for "**The Washington Post**," for awhile.

Q: What was his name?

A: **Irwin Knoll**. He worked for the **Post** and then he went out to **Madison, Wisconsin** to edit “**The Progressive**.” He was very liberal. Good guy, but didn’t take very good care of himself. His widow still lives in **D.C.** now.

Q: I see. And there – and he then also escaped.

A: Yeah.

Q: Okay.

A: Yeah.

Q: What are your earliest memories that you can remember of – of your home, your household, your – of **Vienna**, of your childhood, while you were still there?

A: Mm-hm. Well, I was six when I left, so it’s not very, very clear. In fact, when we went back with the family, I walked around trying to think if anything looked familiar. At the time we were there, they were building a subway, so the whole city was sort of torn up, and so –

Q: What year was this?

A: That we went back?

Q: Mm-hm.

A: It must have been in the 70s.

Q: I see. So it’s a good 30 years ago.

A: Oh yeah.

Q: Okay.

A: Yeah, with my husband and two children we went there before they went off.

You know, they're adults now, with their own children, so –

Q: And do you – do you remember then, aba – about those first six years? Do you have any sense of **Vienna**?

A: I have vague memories, mainly of my family and my cousin, th-the one who died, who lived in the building with me, beating me up. That I remember very clearly.

Q: Yeah.

A: And I remember we had a fairly large extended family and we used to get together at – I think it was my grandmother's house. But I don't have very clear memories of as – you know, a six year old is not really too sharp. I do remember when we left **Vienna**. I remember it was kind of uncomfortable. My mother – we were not allowed to bring any jewelry with us or anything. And I re – I remember I had a necklace, a very thin little necklace, and I remember my mother sewed the necklace into the elastic of my underpants. And my father had left a little before us, because it was really very bad for men. And so my mother and I left, and I remember going on the – the boat from **Calais** to –

Q: Do you remember the trip from **Vienna** to **Calais**?

A: No.

Q: No?

A: Well, I thi – I remember being on the train, but not very clearly, you know? And then I remember on the boat over to **Calais**. And then we were in **England** and we lived in **London**. We were there during a lot of the blitz.

Q: Oh my.

A: I remember wonderful times we had going to sleep in the subway, the underground, as they call it.

Q: Yeah. What part of **London**, do you know?

A: We were in – **jeez**, I don't remember exactly where it was. **Kilburn**, I think [**indecipherable**] section.

Q: I think that's in west la – western part of the city?

A: I'm not sure.

Q: Okay.

A: I – I've been back several times to **London**, but I don't re –

Q: Not east **London**. Not – not south **London**.

A: I don't think so.

Q: Yeah, I think **Kilburn** is west, if I remember it.

A: Yeah, yeah. We were there for awhile. The – there was a – a Jewish agency that – that helped at the beginning.

Q: So you weren't on a **Kindertransport**?

A: No, no, no, no.

Q: Okay.

A: I was with my mother the whole time. My father went to the **Isle of Man**.

Q: Oh my.

A: He was interned for 11 months, because the British were very nervous about people who spoke German. And of course, we spoke German then. So he was interned there. Also, my mother had a sister who had married a German, who tried to follow – who did follow her to **England**. And then he was sent on a transport to **Canada** and it was torpedoed, and he went down. And that was – she never remarried or anything. My father was there for 11 months. He had a great time. He became a cook, which he never did before or since. And in – it wasn't –

Q: He wasn't mistreated?

A: No, oh no, no. He – he seemed to, you know, get along with all the people there, and when he was released, he came and joined us. By this time –

Q: Do you remember not having him around?

A: Yes. My mother was only able to work as a domestic. That was the only job that was available for the immigrants. And I remember we went to – she worked in what was called a – a boys' college, it was like private school, with kids living there. And I got the measles. And so they shipped me off to the hospital very fast, before I spread it through the entire –

Q: Right.

A: – school population. And that was my – just my mother and I were there at that time. And then my – the school that I went to in **England**, and I don't really have a

clear picture of that school in **London**, decided to evacuate everybody out to the country. So they sent us out to **Gloucestershire**, and we lived in a little town – a little village outside of **Cheltenham**, and we were boarded with a family there. And I – I have very clear pictures of that. I went to school there, they had a – a regular school in a neighborhood. And I – I do remember one day the principal I guess it was, called me into the office and said, you – you understand German? I said, well, I don't speak it much any more, because by then you – you didn't speak German.

Q: That was going to be – that was going to be one of my questions, is how was that transition for – for a young child? They – they soak up languages like sponges.

A: Right, right.

Q: So, I could imagine –

A: I was teaching my parents. My parents had been taking English lessons, you know, with – with records and stuff. And they – they died with an accent, okay? I picked it up immediately. And the principal said to me, you speak German? I – well, I understand German, cause I didn't want to speak it any more. And apparently, there was a prisoner of war camp nearby, and they wanted to bring these prisoners over to talk to me, the Germans. And I –

Q: And you were how old?

A: – refused to talk to –

Q: You must have been a little girl.

A: I must have been about eight or nine at the time. And I said no, I won't talk to them. And I wouldn't. I would not talk – I wouldn't meet with them, I wouldn't talk to them.

Q: So tell me though, as an eight or nine year old child, to have such – such a very strong, marked position, how had things been explained to you by your parents, of what was going on, and why you'd left **Vienna**, and – and this war, and so on. Ti – can you recall that?

A: Not really. I don't remember ever actually discussing it with them. It was just sort of a fact of life that you left **Vienna**. You didn't – you – you couldn't stay there any more, because there were these guys marching around with the brown uniforms, and the boots, and – and these were not good guys, and the sooner we got out of there, the better. So, off we went to **England**, and I became an English child fast. I – I was – as I said, I was teaching my parents English because I – I picked it up, you know, very quickly.

Q: So, in other words, was it an English child saying to the principal that no, I don't want to talk to the German prisoners of war, because they're the enemy of **England** and we've just survived the blitz, or was it a –

A: No, I just said I don't want to talk to them.

Q: And that's it.

A: And that was the end of it, yeah. And I didn't. I never met them, and I – I wouldn't speak with them, so I – I don't know why they wanted to talk to me in the first place.

Q: I also find it very surprising that a principal would ask an eight year old child to meet with prisoners of war.

A: Yeah, yeah.

Q: I find it –

A: It was – I don't know, maybe – I don't know, maybe they were being rehabilitated or something, I don't know, I really don't know, but it was kind of a strange episode.

Q: But other than that, did you wa – did you feel comfortable in – in **England**, in **Britain**?

A: Yes, except we always felt a little bit like the outsiders. We were the refugees. At that time, **Britain** was not very cosmopolitan, especially out in the country, you know, **London** was a little different, but out in the country, you know. They didn't know what Jews were. We sort of had to explain, you know. There was a woman who came from **London**, once or twice – I think once a week or twice a week, I don't remember exactly, to teach me Hebrew, which I still can't read. And once in awhile, after things were not quite as bad, we – we had some relatives in **London**, so we would go to visit them in – in **London** occasionally. Meanwhile, my aunt, the aunt, my mother's sister, the one who married the German, she had also been

interned in the **Isle of Man**. And she was released, and she stayed in **London** for – until after the war, and eventually came to the **U.S.** But we would go and visit her too, but this was, you know, not while the blitz was going on. That – that was pretty bad.

Q: Do you remember war – wartime sorts of episodes or experiences while in **Britain**, or was it blitz, and **Cheltenham** and – and this, you know, inter – non-interaction with – with the – the **POWs**, you know, that you were asked to do.

A: Yeah.

Q: Were there more such things that – that – that are in your mind?

A: Well, I remember listening to **Churchill** on the radio. I mean, everybody listened to **Churchill** on the radio, and he made things, you know, he was very positive, and – and upbeat and everything. I remember the sound of the – the bombs, you know, the – those things that – that made this noise.

Q: The **V2** rockets?

A: Yeah, and then they stopped, and then you knew they were gonna fall. And then when we went to the underground and – at night, we would come out in the morning and there would be rubble all over, because you know, the bomb had dropped not far away. But the – the underground was very safe, and everybody went to the underground. I loved it, because I – I have no siblings, and when we went to the underground, you know, we'd go with our pillows and our blankets and

everything, and there'd be kids to play with. It was wonderful. On the platform, you know, we – we'd run around and have a great time.

Q: What – what kids do.

A: Yeah, yeah.

Q: What kids do, and thank goodness they do.

A: Yeah, yeah. It was a very, you know, su-supposedly normal childhood. But –

Q: Do you remember **V-E** day? Do you remember th-the day that war was over, or not?

A: I remember I went to school, and the teacher said, do you know what day this is?

It was **V** day – **V-D** day, **V** – the day that they landed at the –

Q: In **Normandy**?

A: Yeah.

Q: Okay.

A: And, of course, none of us knew.

Q: **D-Day**, yeah.

A: And she said, remember this day, because it's very important. There – the place where we lived, it wa – there was a – a group of – th-there was a – an American base not far, and so the soldiers used to come in, and I had a – a friend who had an older sister who, you know, they used to go out with the **G.I.s** and everything. And we used to follow the **G.I.s**, and we'd say to them, got any gum, chum? And they would give us gum. And we thought that was –

Q: The coolest thing, huh?

A: – the won – wonderful thing. So that – that was – that was really fun. So I – I really didn't have a deprived kind of childhood. I had a – a really, you know, pretty decent, considering, you know, when you look back –

Q: The circumstances, yeah, yeah.

A: – and you think about where – where I started, and what happened, it was really pretty normal.

Q: Did your parent try to get out of **Vienna** earlier than '39? Do you – did they ever talk to you later, when you were older, about the circumstances, and the planning, and the, you know, everything –

A: No.

Q: – that went into leaving, and how they left?

A: No, they never did. The only thing, after the war, we – my father had a sister who married a doctor, and he survived. He – I don't know if he's still alive, he lived in **New York**, but I do – I don't know if he's still alive or not. He came to visit us in **England**, and he told my parents what went on. His – his wife, my – my aunt, and they had a child who died in the camps. And he told them, but they wouldn't let me listen. They sent me to bed, and said you – you can't hear this. So I never did hear the story, which – you know.

Q: And this large, extended family that your father came from, did most of them stay in **Austria**?

A: Just – well, one brother was severely beaten on **Kristallnacht**, I remember. I don't know if he died after that, or if he disappeared, or what happened. Another brother was killed, I believe. His son is still alive, and his – his wife escaped, and they went to **Canada**, and he's my Canadian cousin. He's – I just saw him a couple of weeks ago, we were – he – he goes to **Florida** in the winter. There was one – let's see, was that a – that was a – a brother of my father's, and his family. He had wife and two children. They died. They stayed in the camps. As far as I know, my grandmother died, she never left. The rest of the – the family escaped. My father's family. My mother didn't have a very big family, she had a brother and a sister, both of them went to **Canada**. So they escaped. So, I basically lost two cousins, several uncles, and a couple of aunts. But I have an uncle who went to **New York**, and he is the father of the – the cousin who was the reporter, and I had another aunt who also came to **New Jersey**, and when we came to the **U.S.** we stayed with them in **New Jersey**. She married a man who, he had also, he had come from **Austria**, I think he was a native Austrian. But they – they had come earlier. And their son, who – who is another cousin of mine that I'm very fond of, he was born in the **U.S.**

Q: Post-war, while still in **Britain** –

A: Mm-hm.

Q: – are there any – what kind of a life was that, in those first, post-war years?

A: We left the little village where we had been billeted with this family, and we went to **Cheltenham** town, and we bought – my father bought a house. You know,

it was a duplex, so he bought the – half of the house. And I went to school there, not liking school all that well, because they made me do phys ed, which I didn't like.

Q: I share that with you. I share it completely.

A: I – I w – I went back to the school when I went with my family, and I said, could I look at my record? You know, here you can look at any –

Q: Sure.

A: Oh no, we can't show you the records, they said.

Q: School records? **[indecipherable]**

A: Because I – I – whenever we – th-they were very much into gymnastics, and I can't do any of that stuff. And so when – when – whenever we – we would have one of these days where we would have to perform for the rest of the school, and everything was in teams, you know, you were on this team, and – and you had to do things for the good of the team, and – and all that. I would stay home that day. And I remember going back the next day and the headmistress – this was a girls' school, said to me, why weren't you here yesterday? And she said, you weren't sick, were you? And I said no. And she said, why weren't you here? And I said, I didn't want to let my team down. I thought that was a good way to put it. And they whacked you over the head in those days, they did. I would get whacked. But, I could –

Q: But were – were you made to feel like a foreigner?

A: We – we were never really considered English. We were always those people that came from **Europe**, you know. And after awhile it didn't really bother me, particularly.

Q: Do you think it bothered your parents?

A: It – I think it bothered my father, because he couldn't wait to come to **America**. He had family here, you know the – whatever remained of the family had come to the **U.S.**

Q: Did they sponsor him in?

A: Yes. The cousin, his father sponsored us in, and so we came. And I immediately felt much more at home, like I could belong here, you know, it was a different feeling. Although I – I love the British. I go back and I love to go to **London** and go in the theater and do all that kind of stuff. And –

Q: I think you caught it right, though, when you said that, after the war, it was not yet a very cosmopolitan society.

A: No. Right.

Q: And it's harder to integrate into British society than it is into American society.

A: Yes, yes. And American society, even though I came here with a pronounced British accent, I went to high school, and people would say to me, talk British to me.

Q: And they still do.

A: But I don't have the accent any more.

Q: Tell me, did you ever use German again?

A: The only time I used it was when I was in college, and you had to take two years of language, and I figured ooh, hey, this is gonna be easy. So I took first year German, which was hard because it was a lot of grammar, which I'd never done, cause I'd never gone to school in German speaking country. But the professor said to me, don't take second year German, because you know the vocabulary, go right into third year German, which was basically reading a lot of literature.

Q: Literature.

A: And it wasn't in the old script, it was in new script, and so I took that and then that was really a goo – the extent. We have been back to German speaking countries. We took one trip for three weeks. We went to **Germany, Switzerland** and **Austria**, all in the German speaking parts. And by the end of the three weeks, I found I – I remembered more words. And I – I said to myself, if I ever had to learn German to really communicate, I could do it. Wouldn't be a big deal.

Q: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

A: But it's not something I've ever – I've tried to learn Spanish, you know –

Q: Yeah.

A: – stuff like that. But I – I – I've really no desire to speak German, or to – we have a German club here, I've never gone. I just don't want to even bother.

Q: I understand.

A: I have too many other good things to do here.

Q: Can you tell me when you started to learn more about the context of what had happened to your family, of what – what had happened historically, politically? Were you already in the **United States**? Were you already a – an adult? Or, through childhood, did you know about the Holocaust, did you know about –

A: Well, when – when my uncle came to visit us, I sort of got the gist of what happened, even though they wouldn't let me hear all of the details. There was a lot of information. This was right after the war, and there was a lot of information in the papers. I think I was aware of what had gone on.

Q: But it wasn't that you had cut – that there was something particular, you'd go home, you'd talk about it, your parents would have conversations with you, and – and that it was a per – a more personal aspect because it could have been you.

A: It could have been, yeah. No, I don't think so. It was okay, we're here now, we have survived this, and now the next step is to go to the **U.S.** We had to wait four years before we got here.

Q: Oh, I see. So your father tried even from right at the very end of the war.

A: Yeah. We applied immediately, and it took four years, and now – we came in January '49.

Q: I see. I see. Excuse me.

A: Sure.

Q: I'm looking for the culprit who made the noise.

A: For the what?

Q: The culprit, who made a noise.

A: Oh.

Q: Yeah.

A: It was somebody walked through.

Q: Oh, oh, I see. Is there anything that you think needs to be said, that I didn't ask you about? About your story, about – about those early years in – in **Austria**, that you would want people to know?

A: Just that I don't feel – you know, people say to me, where were you born? And I se – oh, **Vienna**, oh, that's a wonderful city, and – and – and – you know, they talk about the music and dance and everything. Doesn't do anything for me. I just have no strong feeling about it. None.

Q: No identity, no identi –

A: No, no, it doesn't mean anything, it – it – it really – you know.

Q: And you di – when you went back, you saw that the building wasn't the same building.

A: Yeah.

Q: Was there anything else that you recognized from the first six years of your life?

A: No, no.

Q: No.

A: Nothing. We walked around. Well, it may have been because of, you know, everything was dug up.

Q: [indecipherable]

A: But I was ready to move on to other places, and we enjoyed **Switzerland**. We basically flew in and out of **Germany**, we didn't spend any time there. But, you know, we went around and we looked at things, but it – it's not the kind of thing that I say to my children, oh, you must go back there, because it's your heritage. It's not your heritage.

Q: Yeah, yeah.

A: So, I – I don't have any – I would not – well, I – if I had to go to **Europe**, I would go to **England**, because I – I do have a feel for that.

Q: Yeah.

A: But **Austria** doesn't –

Q: Doesn't do it.

A: – doesn't do it for me, no.

Q: Got it. Well, **Rita**, I'd like to thank you for talking with me today. And –

A: I enjoyed it.

Q: – and this concludes our interview, the interview with **Rita Penn** on March 2nd, 2010, held in **Leisure World, Silver Spring**.

A: Thank you.

Q: Thank you, thank you.

Conclusion of Interview