

Here we go. Cameras rolling at speed.

This is a United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Wendy Muchman on September 27, 2016 in Chicago, Illinois. Wendy, thank you so much for taking part in this interview today, which is a little unusual. It's not our usual kind of oral history interview. But we've got an unusual situation today, and we'll be speaking not only with you, but with your mother, and with your newfound relative.

And so it's part of a story, and it's one of the few that has perhaps a happy end or a bittersweet end. So as before, in saying these things, I'm kind of leading people on. They don't know what we're talking about yet, but they soon will. So let's start at the beginning. And I'm going to ask a few questions about you, and then we'll take it from there. OK. So Wendy, tell me, where were you born?

I was actually born in Lawton, Oklahoma, where my mom and dad lived when my dad was in the army there.

OK. And what year was this?

1956.

So you're a post-war baby.

Yes.

OK. And tell me about your mother and your father. Who is your father and who is your mother?

So my father was Irwin Muchman. He was born in Chicago in 1933. And my mother is Beatrice Westheimer Lewy Muchman, who was born in Berlin, Germany in 1933.

So your father is American?

Yes.

And your mother is European.

Yes.

OK. And they both are Jewish?

Yes.

OK. How did your parents meet?

My parents met in college at University of Illinois and were college sweethearts. And my mom who had, well, they'll hear that story later, but my mom who had come here from Germany just loved my dad and his Russian Jewish family. And they took her in with open arms, and they were college sweethearts and were married, boy, I have to figure out, married in '54 or '55. She'll know precisely. So and then they had me in '56 and my brother, Robbie Muchman, who's not alive anymore, in 1958. My brother was killed later in an accident where we were hit by a drunk driver, my only brother.

My brother, too. That's a loss.

Huge.

You say your father's side of the family were Russian Jewish. So when had they emigrated to the United States?

So my grandma, Anita Muchman, was born literally on the boat over. And my grandfather's family I know less about, because he died when I was very young. But it's my understanding he came over. He might have been born here. My mom can clarify that. I think he was born here. He fought in the war. He won the Purple Heart, but he fought for the Americans. He fought in the First World War. So my grandfather was born here. And his family was from somewhere in Poland.

So it would be safe to say that when they came over to the United States, it was part of that huge wave of immigration from the late 19th, early 20th century?

Yes. My dad's family.

That's from your father's side of the family.

Yes.

And what about your mom?

So my mom came over with her grandmother after surviving as a hidden child in a little village in Belgium called Ottignies.

And this was which war?

Second World War, sorry.

OK. So she is a refugee from World War II.

Yes.

OK. And how much of your mom's story and how much of your dad's side of the family were you familiar with as you were growing up?

So my mom was adopted after her parents died in the war. And I know she's going to tell you that whole story, so I won't belabor it. But she was adopted by her mother's sister. So my grandma, because that's all they ever were to me. Margaret and Werner Lewy, who brought my mom and my mom's grandmother, my grandma's mother, over after the war. Used to talk to me all the time about her sister [? Majta ?] and [? Majta's ?] husband Julius, who had died in the war.

And that was your birth grandparents?

Yes, so my adopted grandma who, as I said, to me they were only my grandparents. I call them Gramsy and Opa, used to talk about my birth grandparents all the time to me. So I knew this story. And interestingly enough, because my grandma didn't talk to my mom that much about my mom's birth parents. I think it was because she didn't want my mom to be sad. And she wanted my mom to have a normal life, because she felt so badly for the circumstances in which my mom found herself. Because she shared a lot with me over many years.

So more than she did with your mother?

Yes. Yes. And my mom always found it hard to believe that she would tell me all these things. But I'm like, mom, don't you see? She's just trying to protect you. She doesn't want you to be sad.

Off camera you had mentioned something to me about your mom and how it is that she ended up being alone but surviving. Can you share that with me about her own parents?

So when my mom, she was born in Berlin in 1933. Her father was taken away to camp Gurs. Her father, Julius, who must have been an incredibly brave person. He pretended to be dead and actually escaped the camp and got back to Berlin. And then they left. So they was my mom, her mom, and dad.

Excuse me. Can we cut for a second?

Pausing. Here we go [BACKGROUND TALKING]

Oh, hang on.

Sorry. Just one moment please. Here we go. Rolling at speed whenever you're ready.

OK. Sorry, Wendy.

No, no problem.

So what I wanted to know more was how did your mom talk about her own parents?

So my mom's parents were victims of the Holocaust. They were killed in an escape attempt. And then after the war, as I said, she was adopted. And I think that all her life she until later when we found some letters, she felt that her parents had abandoned her. And even as a young girl, I used to say, mom, don't you see?

What they did was the ultimate sacrifice and the ultimate bravery of parents. They gave you away so you to sisters so you would survive. And I think that being the child who was six when she was sent away, it was hard to get over that. And so she always felt that her parents had abandoned her.

So tell me, did that ever change?

Yes.

How did that change?

So when my grandfather, Opa, died, I was cleaning his apartment one day, and I found in his closet in a Marshall Field's box taped shut a box. And I had been-- it's sort of a miracle, because I had been throwing out so much stuff from the closet. But I looked at this box and I thought, this is curious. Why is it taped shut?

And I opened the box, and in the box there was a three ring binder full of letters. And I sat down on the couch and I started reading the letters. And they were in English, German, and French. I read French, no German. And I realized that what I had found were letters from the relatives here to the relatives in Europe during the war and from the relatives in Europe to the relatives here.

And that would include your birth grandparents, who didn't survive?

Correct. It did. And I knew that none of us knew that these letters existed. And the first person I told was my dad. And he said, his first reaction was, we can't tell mom. She'll be too upset. We can't tell mom. And we thought about it together, and then we both finally decided, they weren't our letters to hide from her. We had to show them to her and tell her.

And what did they do?

So when she found the letters and read them, there's one in particular that she'll discuss further. But it's from her mother. Sorry. To her mother's sister, Marget. And it is so touching. I've read it hundreds of times, and I cry every time I think about a mother having to write this letter.

And it said, basically, dear Marget, if anything were to happen to me, I can barely stand to think of this, but will you take my [? Trixieline ?] and raise her as your own? And so it's this heart wrenching letter from a mother to her sister saying, if I don't survive, because this sister was already in the United States, if I don't survive, will you adopt my child?

And I think upon reading those letters and seeing the pain that her parents went through and then this agonizing letter of a mother to her sister, it made my mom finally understand how brave her parents were and how all they cared about was that she might survive. Because they already knew since my grandfather had already escaped one camp. They were not delusional about the dangers that potentially awaited all of them. It helped my mom a lot.

And so you were in many ways a catalyst for having this box of letters, actually give a gift of love from 70 years earlier to your mom.

It's true.

And I want to stop now at that point and fast forward to a few years ago. Because it sounds to me like you're catalyst for yet another discovery.

It all comes from keeping my maiden name, I think.

[LAUGHTER]

You never know. You never know. So tell me what happened in 2014, I believe it was.

So I told you before we were on camera. It was Halloween, and I remember, because I have a funny neighbor who always had a Halloween party. And we had come home, and when I walked in the door of my house, I found a letter. And it was addressed to me from a Mindy Malinoff Lorey. And it started and it said, dear Wendy, if you are the Wendy Muchman that is Al Muchman's granddaughter, we're cousins, because my grandma, Fanny Muchman Malinoff was his sister. And the second I read it, I knew we were cousins. Because I knew that my paternal grandfather, who died when I was very young, had a sister from whom he was estranged.

And this is the Russian Jewish side of the family.

This is the Russian Jewish side of the family. And he had this sister from whom he was estranged. I knew right away, and I knew her name was Fanny. So I called Mindy, and we spoke. And then we've been in contact with Mindy and Doug Lorey, who are amazing and lovely and incredibly knowledgeable about researching family histories. It's a passion of theirs. And so they researched. They like to research ancestry.com, and that was how they found me and then my mom.

So here's the thing, if I can understand it. They are both newfound cousins that you didn't know existed.

Correct.

And they are also genealogy aficionados.

Yes. 100%. Neither my mom nor I could have figured out any of this without them.

So what happened after you discovered and after they discovered you?

So I see them with my mom a couple times a year. My mom sees and talks to them more regularly. And either they offered or my mom asked to see what they could find about her father, Julius Westheimer. Because we knew her mother's family tree, so the Boas side, which was her mother. We knew that history. But we didn't know a lot about her father. We always thought-- whose name was Julius Westheimer. We always thought he was an orphan. So Mindy and Doug did some more research on ancestry.com, which led us to this discovery.

And what was that discoverer?

So the discovery is there's a large branch of the Westheimer family that lives mostly on the East Coast and that my mom actually has a lot of second cousins living, still alive, living on the East Coast.

And when did you find out about that?

So in about I want to say it was June of this year.

This year? So about three months ago.

Yes. My mom called me at work and said, I can't believe it. Doug and Mindy found these cousins. I think I have a cousin Renate who lives on the East Coast. And her daughter, Sherry Goodman, is a lawyer. Do you think you can find her? So I said, give me 20 minutes. Because as I told you, I'm a lawyer. And lawyers all have to be registered publicly in some state.

And so with my investigator at work, we started calling some of the state bar councils. And literally we called New York, I think Connecticut, and then Massachusetts. And boom, I found Sherry, who's incredible, who unfortunately had to leave this morning. But she made this whole thing happen with you and this interview. And she's a lost cousin, Renate's daughter, close to my age. So it's just been lovely.

So here's the thing is that through your newfound cousins on your father's side of the family, you discovered new found cousins from your mother's side of the family that you never knew existed.

Never. And I told Sherry this morning as she was leaving, you're the kind of relatives that are nice to find.

[LAUGHTER]

Because they flew in yesterday, or was it Sunday? No, they flew in Sunday, and we all met for the first time, and it's just been a wonderful sort of magical and kind of incredible couple of days.

Thank you, Wendy. Thank you for sharing this.

Thank you so much for your time and your interest and your knowledge as well.

Thank you. Thank you again. And you've given the perfect intro for now for us to meet your mom and your new Aunt Renate.

Great. Thank you.

All right. Thanks so much.