

This is a United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Beatrice Trixie, Westheimer Lewy Muchman, and Renate Westheimer

Windmuller.

Windmuller Wasserman.

Right.

Thank you, ladies. On September 27, 2016. And part of our story today is a contemporary story, not the story of the past, but of the present, in particular the year 2016 and how you come to meet. So I'll start with a few introductory questions, and then we'll talk about that.

Trixie, could you tell me your date of birth and where you were born?

June 5-- excuse my voice. I'm froggy today-- June 5, 1933 in Berlin, Germany.

And Renate can you tell me when you were born?

October 27, 1933, in Berlin, Germany.

Both of you from Berlin, Germany.

Yes.

OK. Did you know of one another's existence when you were in Berlin?

Not at all.

No, absolutely not.

And did you know of your existence once you came to the United States?

No.

Not, strangely, because when I came to the United States, we lived-- and we did a nostalgic--

Excuse me.

The door.

We're going to have to cut, yeah. Sorry.

You have to slam it. Slam it.

And rolling and speeding.

OK. So to repeat the question, did you know of one another's existence in the United States?

Not at all.

OK. And where did you, Trixie, come to when you left Germany? When you left Europe after the war, what was your route westwards?

I landed in New York. And actually, someone by the name of Joe Westheimer came to greet the ship. He was 19 and I was 13. And I knew there was a relationship, but somehow we just never connected again.

And he was from which side of your--

My father's side, Westheimer. And so he would have been a second cousin. Did I realize exactly any of these things at the time? I think in the chaos and the excitement, not. And obviously my grandmother, nor later, my adoptive parents, must not have realized it, either.

So then, from New York, I moved to Chicago where my adoptive parents lived. And I found out yesterday when Renate-- well, we had talked about it. But when Renate and I were revisiting Hyde Park where we both lived, we realized that we not only lived about, what?

Half a block from each other.

Half a block from each other. We went to the same high school.

We went to the same high school.

Hyde Park High School. We eventually went to the University of Illinois. All this, like, six degrees of separation.

But you didn't know of each other.

Well, yes. I knew--

Oh, excuse me.

Oh, I'm sorry. I'm interrupting you.

It's OK.

So I remember Trixie. As soon as we sort of reconnected, and her daughter Wendy sent my daughter Sherry a letter-- an email I think it was-- and I heard about it, like, June 8. And June 6 I had had total knee replacement. So when I heard about this, I was like in a fog because I was on heavy duty drugs.

By the time I finally came out of it and focused in on it, and I said, I don't remember anybody named Beatrice from high school. But as soon as I heard the word Trixie, I knew exactly who she was. I had a picture of her in my head. I had remembered this smiling beautiful person.

But for some reason, we knew each other, but we were not friends. We never-- I mean, we were sort of in the same circles. We have some mutual people we know, or knew. But I never visited her house. She never visited my house. It just was one of those things. It wasn't because we didn't like each other. We just didn't know each other, I think.

So tell me, Renate, what was your journey westwards from Europe? Did you also go via New York, or did you come straight to Chicago?

No. Well, I came-- actually, 1933, the year I was born, was the year Hitler came to power. And within six months or a little more or a little less, my parents, who were managing my grandfather Max Westheimer's butcher shop and meat store, whatever you call it then, I could no longer work. They closed the stores. So my parents ended up going to Bulgaria because apparently they had some connection and they could work there. And I stayed in Berlin until 1937.

Excuse me, can we cut?

So where do you want me to start here?

So your grandparents had a butcher shop in Berlin. Within how long was it that they left and came to the United States?

Well, my grandparents stayed in Berlin, and I stayed in Berlin, and my parents went to Bulgaria in, maybe, '34 so they could work. And they worked in a similar establishment there. And I stayed in Berlin. I was a baby. And in 1937 or late '36, my grandmother took me to Bulgaria to reunite me with my parents. And my father came to this country maybe six months before we did. My mother and I, I think, came in, like, April of '37. And my father met us in New York, put me on his shoulders.

And we lived in New York among many other relatives who had been able to come over on the Upper West Side, Dyckman Street area, until my father found a better paying job in Chicago. And then we moved to Chicago, and I went all through school in Chicago.

What year is this that you moved to Chicago?

1940.

1940.

So I went to elementary school in Chicago. And then we lived in a very small apartment hotel in a very small little place, no bedroom. And after the war, my parents were able to buy the furniture and get an apartment on Hyde Park Boulevard, which turned out to be half a block away from where Trixie ended up.

And you ended up in Chicago what year?

1946.

So six years Renate.

Actually June, right. And you know, I had survived the Holocaust. And then, through letters-- there were four sisters, and one sister was going to be the one that was going to raise me. And she happened to live on 5503 Hyde Park Boulevard, which was really a half a block from Renate. But the Windmullers and the Lewys somehow had immigrant, really, friends. But each were from a different group. And the people who lived downstairs of us were the very closest friends of Renate's family.

Right.

So that even she was called aunt.

She was. My kids--

So you had things to connect you. You just didn't connect.

Well, it couldn't-- no. The people who owned-- it was called Lotta's Candy. It was a candy store. It was in the basement of the building that Trixie was living in. And I'm not sure how my mother became acquainted with Lotta and Kurt. But probably she went into the store and they found common connections. They were my parents' best friends.

And Kurtie died first, but Lutchen was-- my kids knew her afterwards as Aunt Lutchen. They didn't even know she wasn't family. And all the years my mother would tell Lutchen about me. And Lutchen had a niece who went to Israel. Lutchen's brother's family emigrated to Israel, and Evelyn would hear about me.

And so we had really close connections. And I met Evelyn in 1933. 1972, the first time I went to Israel with Sherry after her bat mitzvah. And we have like family. I mean, it's not blood family, but we are family in Israel through these people.

And yet somehow, the groups of friends my parents were friendly with and the groups of friends the Lewys were friendly with, all of them being German Jews who had come to this country.

And all of them-- in both cases, Trixie's family was the only one who had kids, and my parents were the only one who had a daughter. Nobody else had children. But they were two different groups, and they never connected. And my name was Windmuller and her name was Lewy, so who would think there would be a connection there?

So now I want to go to Trixie because part of the mystery, it sounds to me, stems from the lack of knowledge that you had on your father's side of the family. Tell me a little bit about what your assumption was about your dad and his background and his relatives.

Well, you won't believe what we found out while you were setting up here. But my knowledge, up until moments ago, was that my father was an orphan, which I do believe he was. And my adoptive mother wrote a letter to a Max Westheimer in Houston, who answered rather brusquely. The letter is in my book. As a matter of fact, I had the letter. Now the museum has the letter.

And he said, well, I don't feel very well right now. I can't deal with it. I will forward this to my nephew. And nothing happened. And so now she was writing from the United States.

In what year?

This was in 1941, right?

'41, right.

And what was the point of her writing to a Max Westheimer?

Well, what people did is they went through phone books and found Westheimer.

But why would she do that? Why would she be looking through a phone book?

Because she was looking for someone to save my father to get the Westheimers out of Berlin. In 1941, the situation was already so grave--

Is that when you left Berlin, in 1941?

No, we left Berlin in 1939 after Kristallnacht to come to Brussels, where other family lived. And the chaos and the confusion led everyone in the United States-- there was no television. There was no internet. People were getting letters late. So the only thing they could think of doing was scrolling the phone book in the United States, finding Westheimers. And Houston was full of Westheimers.

So and behold, they found Max Westheimer. And Renate is going to tell you the rest of the story that we just found out while you were setting up in the bedroom about the letter.

OK. Hang on just a second. But I want to reiterate here that your father's name was Julius Westheimer. And you were looking for his relatives even though you thought he was an orphan. It was your understanding and assumption he was an orphan.

Much later. I mean, I was a visibly hidden child in Belgium, totally separated from my parents, who both perished. So I wasn't really looking for anyone until much later in my life when my daughter found letters. And I never really understood what this-- when I found the letter, the mystery started. I always thought my father was an orphan. There was nobody. I didn't know about the letter.

OK. So Renate--

We don't know, Trixie, whether Margot Lewy knew that Max Westheimer's was your father's father. Right, that's it. But she was looking for a Max Westheimer. It turns out that the Max Westheimer who was her father's--

Uncle, actually.

Max Westheimer was his father's uncle. Your grandfather and my grandfather were actually brothers. They were brothers. This is what was discovered much later when we found the family tree. But they were looking for a Max Westheimer who was-- I can't get the genealogy straight here-- who was the brother of your father's father. Brother of your father's father. So the real Max Westheimer was my grandfather.

And just a few minutes ago while we were waiting for you, I was looking through the material that Trixie had given to the Holocaust Museum. I'm getting-- and I look at the date of the letter that this Margot Lewy wrote to this Max Westheimer in Houston. My grandfather was in New York.

I should back up and say that my family, all of my family except my husband's grandparents were able to come to this country. And most of them came to this country because-- I'm getting chills even thinking about this thing. So my grandmother, who was married to Max Westheimer, Bertha Westheimer, was one of 11 children of a family named Hamburger that lived in Mannheim, Germany. The youngest son, Herman Hamburger, came to this country in the '20s. And he did very well for himself. He was in the diamond business in New York. He had a company called H Hamburger and Company.

And when the war broke out-- before the war broke out, and the situation became dire, he provided visas for every one of his siblings and all of their family. So you can imagine how many people. There were 11 brothers and sisters, and all of them had kids. And so that's how we came to this country.

So most of the Westheimers were able to make it out.

Well, I don't know about the other Westheimers because this was a Hamburger. He was a Hamburger

You're right.

Hamburger. So I'm looking at this book while we're waiting for you. And I look at the date of the letter that Margo Lewy wrote to this Max Westheimer, which was May 27, 1941. My grandfather, Max Westheimer died in New York on May 16, 1941.

The real Max Westheimer.

The real Max Westheimer. So all of a sudden, all I could think of is that if that letter, which-- that was his reply, so the letter from Margot Lewy came earlier. If it had gone to the right Max Westheimer, whether he was alive or dead, it would have gone to his wife, my grandmother, and my mother's sister, whom she was living with. And it would have gotten to my Uncle Herman.

Hamburger.

Hamburger, right. And I'm thinking if it had gotten there, I'm sure that this family would be in this country. And I'm just like--

That was now, an hour ago.

I mean, I read Trixie's book, but somehow I just didn't make the connection until just now.

Until you saw the letter.

I saw the actual letter.

It's at the museum.

And so now the story has a whole other twist to it.

I mean, we loved each other the minute we met each other. And we would have loved each other way back when. But when Renate just told me this, I've tried through the museum, through Ancestry, through my own records of these hundreds of letters, to find an answer to who was this Westheimer in Houston that so rudely-- well, no wonder he answered the way he did.

He wasn't a relative.

And he also-- I found this out-- he also died shortly thereafter. But he was a wealthy-- I've been to Houston-- he was a wealthy insurance owner person. And I think he might have extended a visa had he lived. But he didn't know who he was extending it to. So this just got clarified after all these years. It is amazing.

I mean, meeting Renate is amazing enough. But then just-- you were here setting up.

So Max would have known this connection. His wife, my grandmother, would have known this connection, obviously. And everybody's life would have been very different. So it's just like--

And you have found out about your relation to one another since June, is that correct? It's June of this year, which is three months ago, four months ago?

Yeah. It took a little bit of doing. But maybe in June.

June is when the email went from Wendy to Sherry.

OK. Let's back up a little bit. When I was speaking with Wendy, she talked about newfound relatives on your late husband's side of the family who were genealogy experts. And how is it that they started researching something on your family?

OK. It started with the Muchmans and a phone call to Wendy about my late husband's-- she would have been my daughter's cousin. And there aren't many Muchmans. So we connected and we became friends. And when they read the book and heard the story, because they just loved genealogy, and obviously felt some connection to us--

The book being your book called--

Never To Be Forgotten, right. And so they decided, OK, we're going to look into the Westheimer family.

So they did it on their own.

They did it completely-- believe me, I do not understand Ancestry. The Laurie's did this totally on their own. And this is well-researched. This is not just taken out of someone's hat. There are grave sites that are visited in Germany. And you know, Ancestry does a very good job at this.

The museum couldn't answer any of these questions. But they somehow found Renate and then Sherry and the entire family tree of Westheimers.

This family tree from a father whom you thought was orphaned and didn't have that many relatives.

Exactly. But the chances are that my father was orphaned. That doesn't change. I think that his father died when he was six years old. And his mother was Rosa Epstein. And as Ancestry shows it, she gave up this child. Maybe widows in

1905 couldn't raise children. I don't know. But whatever the reason was, he was raised by someone else.

Which adds another layer of unknowability.

That is-- yes. And since my father didn't ever discuss it, or it just stayed that he was an orphan. And I don't imagine he had a wonderful time growing up. But I don't know anything because my father wasn't even 40 when he died. And I didn't see him again since I was about seven years old.

What does this mean, your discovering one another?

Oh, Renate can answer that really well.

Well, first of all, when we moved to Chicago, we left our whole family in New York, both my mother's side and my father's side. We were kind of in Chicago without relatives. And as soon as I heard this story and made this connection, all I could think of was how my mother would have cherished to have Trixie so close by and family there because we kind of felt-- I mean, we had friends, but we were alone. And that was my first reaction when I heard about this connection.

And the second one was, I knew exactly who she was. She was this beautiful, smiling woman whom I knew from high school. But for some reason, we just never related. How would we relate? In high school you not talking about your mother's maiden name.

No, of course not. You're talking about boys.

So that's what it meant to me. And now that we've actually met again and become so fond of each other, and our kids have met. My three children were here. And as Wendy said, we're so happy we discovered each other, we actually love each other. We're relatives. We want to know each other, and we want to know each other better.

And interesting enough, my cousin Evelyn, my first cousin Evelyn, who is my mother's sister's only daughter, who was not able to be here, but her granddaughter is in Chicago. So she was here. So they've actually met someone from my cousin's family. So she was here Sunday.

And that cousin would be my cousin, too. We would all be second cousins.

So you are second cousins.

We are second cousins, indeed.

Yes. Her father and my mother would have been first cousins.

Correct.

Their fathers were brothers.

But my first talk with Renate-- I Facebooked, and I saw Renate. And of course, we've all changed. And Renate-- the hair, I think, has changed. You had short hair, right, when you were very young?

I had different hair. I had hair and I had braids. I don't remember what I had in high school.

I saw your yearbook pictures. You were both beautiful. You were both stunning and you still are.

No, Renate was beautiful and accomplished. But when we first connected, we both decided the same thing. What's important? I don't know about all the ancestors from 1780. And it does go way back. The Westheimer line goes way back. But we didn't care about any of that. We cared that we were going to live to know each other. And I knew I was

going to like Renate from the very few things we said to each other because some things are just about today and the moment. And man, if you don't grab it, it doesn't come back.

And we both felt exactly the same way. Totally.

Absolutely. Absolutely. It was just--

And I think our kids are just-- I don't know whether they really grasp. I think they do.

I think they did.

And they're connected. They have the same kind of work. They connect. Sometimes I can sound normal. Today I can't.

It was very important. My son flew in from New York. Lauren came in from Pittsburgh. Everybody said they want to be here for this. And Sherry, of course, was coming all along. She and I had decided we were going to go to Chicago and reconnect. And she gave me a date when she was available. We said, OK, this is what we're doing.

And it was just like something-- it was very important to me. My husband died a year and a half ago, which you probably know. And then I had this knee surgery thing. And I was like, this was an awful year and a half. But this is the best part. So it's a present. It's a big present.

It is a present.

It's a present. It's a big present.

It really is about the here and now. And we will make that count.

That's amazing. You know, I'm also thinking that this is the first time you've had relatives from your father's side of the family. Aside from the gentleman who was 19 years old who met you in New York, this is it.

I have reconnected because of this family tree. And I have asked him, how is it that you came alone, and where were your parents? And he sort of like you need to leave the past behind. He was really not answering these questions. But there are several cousins, second cousins, one of them being Jerry Belfer, who has a very interesting, very sad life, too. But Renate is it. She counts.

And Renate, you talked-- like how wonderful it would have been for your mother to know that there was Trixie. What was the impact for you when you first even learned that there was somebody who was your second cousin?

Well it was totally that we lived our lives so parallel and didn't know that we were related was just like-- I said, I have to know this woman better. I have to know who she is. I remembered who she was, but I didn't really know Trixie at that time, and she didn't know me. And it's just one of those crazy things that people work in kind of different directions.

We had a lot of friends in common. She showed me pictures from her high school, and I recognized this person, and I was very friendly with this person. But she and I-- I don't know. It's just the way life is, I guess. So I said, well, I don't want to let this go. I want to know who this person is. I want to see this family.

I don't have a lot of Westheimer. I have a huge Windmuller. Windmuller family probably have a Facebook page. They have a website. You know, there are millions of Windmullers around the world, but never heard much about the Westheimers. And I knew some of my husband's family. So this was a whole new revelation, and turned out to be somebody I actually knew.

Yeah. That's another connection. It's not that you discover someone who lives in another part of the world who doesn't have any common friends.



I really don't have any interest in that. I'm not looking for relatives all over the world and I don't want to go-- I have cousins who would like to go dig up relatives and go visit them wherever they are. It doesn't really interests me. But Trixie interested me very much from the beginning.

It was really six degrees of separation for the entire time. And of course, coming here as an immigrant, that wasn't what I wanted to talk about. I wanted to be American. So no one really understood the story. And Renate would not have understood it. So why we didn't connect-- well, we'll never know. But it was always six degrees of separation all the way through--

College.

The University of Illinois.

Her husband went to university, too. We graduated at the same time.

Together.

Oh my goodness. Oh my goodness.

Yes.

We didn't know each other there. I don't remember Trixie from the university at all.

You know, the other thought that occurs to me is some of the miracles-- and I don't think they're any less than that-- that occur as a result of databases on the internet or databases that technology has allowed us to develop that wouldn't have been there. Had there not been this Ancestry, who knew that people would have the power-- your cousins from the Muchman side, would have the power once they gained the knowledge of being able to find human beings who--

And to find cousins from the Muchman side who took the time, because it is involved. I mean, you have to spend your life doing this. It wasn't going to be me. I didn't even understand it. But--

[CLOCK CHIMING]

[LAUGHTER]

It'll be fine. It will be over.

This happened yesterday, too. Or Sunday. Sunday. Happened Sunday, too.

OK. So you were saying how involved it is.

On the part of Mindy and Doug Laurie, who are the Muchman cousins, also my second cousins, Wendy's. And I would say without their effort, this would never have happened because I didn't even understand ancestry.com. I think Renate's daughter, Sherry, went on it, but she didn't follow through too much, either. You have to dedicate a lot of hours to digging. And what came out is worth it. It's just incredible.

What would you want other people-- I can understand that your children-- it's very meaningful for everybody who's part of your family. But what would you want others to understand about the essence of what this means this connection, because it's not a reconnection. You didn't know before. What does this mean that others should realize of its value for you?

Well, to me, personally, it really speaks to the chaos. I mean, we don't have to go very far today, do We but the chaos that ensued because of a genocide like the Holocaust. And it does profoundly make me think-- and I know Renate feels the same way-- of all these orphaned children who will never know who their families are.

And so we all need to know about the Holocaust. But we need to know the damage that a Holocaust can do in the future if we don't remember. And it seems that, really, the world has forgotten this. And Renate and I are a perfect example. Here we led a life where we could have been such wonderful friends. And it took all these years because of the chaos that ensued.

I'm sure my adoptive mother thought she was writing the right person. And I was very angry at that letter. I always thought, oh my goodness, how rude. And this man didn't even know who we were. But this is nothing compared to the chaos we're witnessing today. On a broader spectrum, I would want that to be known. And I think about it.

Renate?

Well, I think Trixie said it beautifully. We've talked about this, how unfortunately, the world seems to always be repeating itself, and nobody seems to learn from history. And knowing Trixie, knowing who she is and is how she got to be where she is today, has made me realize what a very charmed life that I led and what a very difficult life she has had, and how wonderfully she has managed to live her life and overcome very, very bad things, and yet be this beautiful person that she is today and with a lovely family.

And I was an immigrant, and we talk today about immigrants coming to this country. And I know exactly what that feeling is like. But I was a little girl. But my parents experienced a very uprooted lifestyle and worked very hard to provide for me and give me a good life, and I had all of that. So I'm grateful for that.

I feel so sad, especially after what we discovered this morning about Trixie's life. And then in the bigger context of what's happening in the world today, it's just like it's history repeating itself all over again. And there are all these poor people who are going to be thrown apart, just the way she and her family were. So it just brings it all home. It makes me more aware of what needs to be done today, and what little bit each individual can do, which I try to do.

And how, in some ways, that toxicity that spread in Europe through the policies of Hitler, and how it affected your family, how up until, let's say in June, it had a certain power to keep you separated until something else came in and pushed it away.

I mean, I'm interpreting here. But in some ways, that was a result of this policy. You may not have known each other had there been no Hitler, had there been no fascism, had there been no genocide. It could have been other forces that kept you apart as cousins, but they would have been more natural. They wouldn't have been forced. They wouldn't have been on purpose. They wouldn't have been directed.

This is a very good way of putting it because I think there might have been, in Berlin, a disconnect between the various Westheimer families. So of course. But added to that came this terrible event. And of course, this is unimaginable, so it's nothing that we couldn't do anything about except in our own little small ways. And maybe it takes a lot of little small ways to make a big thing happen.

Well, you wonder why people listened. What is the magic power of demagogues like Hitler to get so many people to go along with these awful words that he's saying and so many German citizens being unknowingly complicit-- is that the word? Yeah-- in what was going on. And unfortunately, you see it repeated over and over again. And you wonder, why do these people listen to people like that? But somehow they do.

Thank you very much, ladies. Is there anything else you would like to add to our conversation today?

No, I think we're done.

I think we're done. And really, the Holocaust Museum in Washington does a wonderful job of attempting to be on top of any beginnings of any misunderstandings or any oncoming genocide. And that's a big job. It's the world.

Thank you very much.

You're welcome.

And I will say this concludes the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Renate Wasserman and Beatrice Trixie Muchman Abrams. Thank you.