

This is a United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Elise Garibaldi on September 19th, 2019 in Scarsdale, New York. Elise, we're going to have an unusual kind of interview today because it is not about the Holocaust, it is about post-Holocaust. And I want to talk to you a little bit about how the events of that time has affected you and influenced you, yourself.

So I'm going to start like I do all interviews, with basic questions. And we'll go from there.

OK.

Tell me, when were you born? What's the date of your birth?

February 24th, 1978.

And where were you born?

In Queens, New York.

And what was your name when you were born?

Elise Bahar.

Elise Bahar.

Mhm.

OK. And do you have brothers and sisters?

Yes, I have one older brother. He's three years older, and his name is Michael.

OK. When you were growing up, can you tell me a little bit about your family, your parents and your grandparents? Did you know your grandparents on both sides of your family?

Yeah, I knew both. My paternal grandparents live in-- well, they used to live in Istanbul, Turkey. So there was a distance there. So we'd go and visit sometimes in the summers, but we weren't as close. It was mostly through telephone conversations.

But my maternal grandparents live in Queens, New York, or lived in Queens, New York. And so they were second parents to me. So we were very close. I even lived there until the age of three. And I still see my grandmother once a week, every other week.

That's a lot.

Yeah.

So tell me your parents' names, first of all.

My mother's name is Ruth Bahar, and my father's name is [? Salim ?] Bahar.

OK. And your paternal grandparents' names, the ones who live in Istanbul?

Yes, [? Elias ?] and [? Eliza. ?]

OK.

Bahar.

Bahar.

And your maternal grandparents.

Yes. Inge Berger and Sam Berger.

And can I ask, what is your-- in Europe, we would say confession. What is your religion?

Oh, Jewish.

OK. On both sides?

On both sides, yes.

On both sides of the family. And was your family in any way touched or impacted by the Holocaust, the older generations?

Oh, tremendously. My grandparents are both survivors, my grandmother from the concentration camp Theresienstadt, and my grandfather met her while he was in Theresienstadt, but then he also went to Auschwitz and then Dachau.

OK. So this is on your mother's side of the family?

On my mother's side of the family.

What about your father's side of the family?

They're actually descendants of the Spanish Inquisition of 1492, so they were expelled from Spain at that time, and they've been living in Turkey ever since then, for the past 500 or so years.

OK, so that's that branch of the family.

Yeah, so there's persecution actually on both sides, yeah.

Yeah. OK, let's focus on your maternal grandparents. How well did you know-- or do you know your grandfather? How well do you know your grandmother?

Yeah, I know them both very well. I spent every weekend in their homes growing up, probably until I was a teenager. And my grandfather passed away 14 years ago. So up until then, he was a very integral part of my life. And my grandmother is still alive. She's 95 years old, and I see her regularly.

Can you tell me, did they talk to you much about their own childhoods, their own growing up years, their own youth?

No, they never really spoke about that. The furthest of their past that they would speak about was during their time in the Holocaust. They would actually-- that was pretty regular conversations for us.

So you did know about the Holocaust years.

Yeah, very much so. Since I was little, like I said, when I'd spend the weekends there and I wouldn't finish all the food off my plate, I would get a lecture. You know, we were starving, you're so lucky. And we were never allowed to leave any food on our plate.

So I didn't-- you know, it was as much as a child could handle, but I did know that they met in this period called the Holocaust, where they never had enough food, and they were treated very poorly. So I mean, as early as the age of five on, I was hearing these things as a lesson for me.

OK, so it--

To shape me.

--it wasn't so much of this is our story and these are the details as much as knowing that we-- well, you wouldn't know, but they knew what they had been through, and they saw you, and you didn't want to finish the food on your plate--

Right, yeah.

--and that's something that you had to do.

Right. Well, those were my earliest memories. And then as I got older, they would speak more about how they met and fell in love, which I was fascinated with, about how they weren't allowed to have flowers in the concentration camps, and how my grandfather risked his life on her birthday to give her this flower.

So I was told about these heroic and inspirational acts of love. And I think it was through those stories, I mean, probably as early as eight, on that made me have this view, this ideal form and belief in the value and the validity and the truth of real love. So they very much influenced me.

That's a huge thing.

It's enormous. I met my husband, actually, around the same age my grandmother, as a teenager, that my grandmother met. And everyone says, oh, it's impossible, you can't find real love as a teenager. And we're here together 25 years later. And that was because of the stories. I said, well, if my grandmother did it. And we got married at the same age and everything. So she is a very big influence on my life.

And did you at school-- you know, that's a personal circle, that's a personal kind of influence. At school, what did you learn or find out about the Holocaust, if anything?

Yeah, so we were educated in the United States, or at least in New York, in the seventh grade. And that was when I learned more about the Holocaust and on a larger scale, not just necessarily how it affected my grandparents, but how it affected the Jewish community, and what it meant to the world. And to be honest, that was extremely traumatizing.

That was the first time I had ever seen the images and found out about the numbers. And ironically, I was so afraid, it was really a trauma, that I actually ran from that history. It was almost too much to bear, especially as a 13-year-old girl. I didn't have the emotional capacity to really handle that.

And because I was always told, for example, we always had to have a passport ready because you never know when something would happen. And that was just what I grew up knowing. And then at 13 in school, when I found out what would happen if we didn't have our passport, it's very much a reality. And I really couldn't handle it, and I ran away from that for many years.

Did you come back to it?

Yes.

How and why?

It's strange. One day-- well, my grandfather had passed, and my grandmother was turning 88. And all of a sudden, through of a moment of inspiration-- I was getting ready in the morning-- I just felt, you have to write her story. And I

don't know who I was speaking to-- I was speaking to myself, I guess-- and I was like, no, no, I can't handle that.

I can't handle the emotional burden, and also the responsibility to those who have been lost, to the history of it, to the people alive today. It was too large a task, I thought, for me to handle. And like I said, I had always run away from it. But it was just compelling, no, you have to write the story, you have to tell the story.

Was this like an inner voice?

Yeah, exactly. And I was really afraid, so immediately after these five minutes of epiphany that I had to write her story, I immediately called my grandmother. And I told her, I'm going to write your story. And the reason I did that is that, once I told her and voiced it and made that commitment that I would be the one responsible for telling her story, then I couldn't back out from fear. So I held myself, I made that contract with her in that moment because I knew somehow it's what I needed to do. It was the right thing.

And how did she react?

So it's a long process. At first-- she's very private, and she doesn't like to-- like I said, she never really spoke about the particulars of the Holocaust, just really about her relationship with my grandfather and they didn't have enough to eat. So she's very private, and so she didn't really want to.

And but she's like, you know what, I'll do that. She was always very supportive and loving for me, but she would agree to do it for me. But she would say, but this is only for our family so we have a record for the family. And I said, well, no, I would really-- I always found her story so inspirational, like I said, about love and about their morality and they never lost their faith, I always found her very inspiring.

So I said, the world should hear about that, because others would also find that inspiring. So I told her I'd really want to publish it. And she's like, oh, so OK, just for the family. And I was like, no, but OK, if that helps you. I was very clear, but I had to remind her. I interviewed her for about a year and a half.

Oh, wow.

It took a long time.

Did you interview her on tape, or did you just sit down and talk to her?

no it's actually funny, I sat down and talked to her, and she gave me this stack of papers. My son was little and liked to draw, and she gave a stack of papers for him. And it was actually the stationery of her father in Bremen, from his company. And my mother says, oh, why don't you write all your notes on this? And I just thought that was just such an amazing--

Idea.

Yeah, I was like that's really beautiful and poetic. And so I wrote down the interview completely on his stationery, just with my hand.

So you would take notes.

I just took notes.

Notes.

And then I'd go back. We'd meet once a week or every other week, and I would write everything that I understood. And then she's very German in that everything has to be very, very perfect and accurate. And so she'd go over everything that I possibly didn't get accurately. Those were tense moments. Yeah, but we did it. Yeah, it took a year and a half, but we

got through those years, yeah.

And those were which years?

So that was-- I wanted to start when did it become real to her, when did--

No, no, I'm asking the year that you started this process, these interviews, what year was that.

Oh, so that was seven years ago.

So that would be 2012?

Yeah.

2012, 2013.

Mhm. Yeah.

And then let's go to the other what years did you start, meaning the way you understood it.

So I just said, when did the war become real to you?

OK.

So for her, it was when she was 13 and the night of Kristallnacht. And I said, well, then that's a perfect time to start the story.

OK.

And I knew where I wanted to end it, as well, which was easy. It was after she and her now husband separated, when they would find each other again after the war.

OK. So is it basically a love story?

It is a love story. It's not only a romantic love story. Yes, that was the initial idea, was how beautiful their relationship was, but it's a much larger love story. It's the only reason they survived is because the family was really so close and they risked their lives for each other on a daily basis.

So it was love of a daughter to a mother and to a father and to the cousin, her best friend that she lost, and the other relatives that she lost, as well as it was a love for the Jewish people, because even when they had nothing, they never turned on each other, and they always shared the little bit that they had. And that meant the difference of life and death.

And they would always-- I talk about in the book when my grandfather was working in the bakery, and he had just had his first date with my grandmother. And when he dropped her off, he saw that her mother was really in bad shape and starving. And he was always given a little extra food for working in the bakery. And he then, from then on, after that first night of meeting her, would give it to the family to share.

And that could have meant the difference of life and death for himself. And he had that, and he gave it. And with other prisoners, as well. So it was not only a love story romantically, but of family and of community, and of God. They never lost their faith in God.

Well, that's also crucial.

It was extremely crucial. That's the only way they survived.

Before your grandfather passed, did you ever have a chance to interview him or talk to him about how he would have expressed the same experiences?

Well, he did write a book.

Oh, he did?

He also did write a book, yeah, about his time. And so when my book branches off, a lot of the information that I used was from his own words when he wrote his own story.

And it was published, his book?

It was-- was it officially published?

Yeah, I think so.

OK.

OK, all right. Do you know the title of it?

Yeah, it's The Face of Hell.

The Face of Hell.

Mhm.

And it's by Samuel Berger?

Sam Berger.

Sam Berger. OK, so what happened with your book? Once you did all this and you wrote it down, what happened?

It really just took off right away. It was amazing. And it was funny because a lot of publishers and people in general told me, well, the Holocaust is such a sad subject matter, no one's going to be interested in hearing about it. And it was quite the opposite.

A few months after I released it, it was already a bestseller. And with no promotions and no publicity. And it was just through word of mouth. And that was it.

What's the name of the book?

Roses in a Forbidden Garden: A Holocaust Love Story.

And who published it?

Decalogue Books.

Deca?

Decalogue Books.

How do you spell that?

D-E-C-A-L-O-G-U-E.

OK. Are they a New York publisher?

Yeah, they're in New York.

OK. And so you started having book sales?

Yeah.

All right.

And then people just heard about it, and I had articles, which generated more sales and more interest. And I even made it into a play, because people were saying, well, wouldn't it be a great idea if schools could have like a multimedia approach? And so I wrote it as a play, and then I didn't really like it because I don't actually like dramatic theater that much, but I love musical theater. So then I wrote music for it, and so now it's a musical theater production.

Oh my goodness.

Yeah.

And has it been produced already here?

It has been performed, but we're looking for producers. So we've performed it in New York and in several venues, even in the town hall of Bremen, Germany to their parliament. So it was very well-received, and we had great coverage on it. And that was just not even a year ago. So we're looking to-- we've had many invitations to bring it to other theaters, and so now we just need a good production company to help us do that.

So in other words, you brought it to Germany. It ended up in Germany, and that is where your grandmother came from, is that correct?

Yes, from her city in Germany.

And that city is?

Bremen, Germany.

OK. So was your book-- did it reach Germany? Was it translated?

Yeah, so it was-- after we attained a lot of success already, it showed that people are really interested in these stories from the Holocaust. And so they translated it and published it outside of Berlin, Germany.

OK.

So it's now in Germany, and taught in schools there.

That's amazing.

Yeah.

That's amazing, from five minutes one day when you were getting ready and an inner voice tells you I've got to write this story.

Yeah.

Do you know the German publisher?

Yes. My mother has a better pronunciation of it.

[GERMAN]

[GERMAN]

OK. And do you know its title in Germany, in German? It's OK, [INAUDIBLE].

It's the direct translation.

[GERMAN]

[GERMAN]

Yeah.

OK. How has the story developed within Bremen? That is, your book comes out.

Yeah.

Did you go and you give book talks and meet people and so on? So tell me how that has gone.

So we had the premiere in December of 2018. And I used it as an opportunity to also bring a bit of a show there, as well, just to make it more interesting. I like everything to be a big production.

OK.

So we did that. And while we were there, we met with the parliament and the vice president of the parliament. And it was so well-received. I mean, we spoke to so many journalists. We went to maybe 10 different schools. And one of them, interestingly enough, was the school that my grandmother was no longer allowed to attend from the age of 13 on.

And so you gave a performance there, or reading.

That wasn't a performance. They fortunately didn't have the technological setup to support that. But my mother and a few other people spoke and gave the presentation. And it was very emotional. And the staff and the students were so moved that they're actually trying to rename the school after my grandmother.

That's huge.

Yeah. And it's already passed, I think, three rounds of votes, and it has one more step to go. So we're crossing our fingers, because that's just so beautiful. She was forced to sit way in the back, and she was forced to listen to the principal in his Nazi uniform give lesson plans about how the Jews were subhuman and they're the-- you know, every bit of Nazi ideology against the Jewish people. And she was forced to sit in the back of the class with her cousin, eventually expelled from school, and now, because of her story they want to name the school after her. I mean, it's just incredible.

That's huge. Well, it's also because you had that inspiration.

So did you meet anybody there who knew your grandparents? Was there anybody left in Bremen who might have even known the family or anything like that?

They knew of him more than they knew him. His old secretary is still alive, and we met with her. But for the most part, he was very influential. He was a large name in his community, and in West Germany in general. He was very integral in the East-West relations after the war.

Was he really?

Yeah, so he's a very known personality there.

Tell me, what was his name?

Carl Katz.

And how do I spell Katz?

K-A-T-Z.

And Carl also with a K, or with a--

C.

--with a C.

Mhm.

So it's C-A-R-L K-A-T-Z.

Yeah.

OK. And so you knew of people who knew of him.

Mhm.

You met them who knew who he was.

Yes.

Do you know how he was influential in East-West relations?

He was in the Commerce and the trade of-- and just bridging the divide of the two, correct?

He was the president of the Commerce Group, which was the initial link between East and West Germany.

OK.

He was its president.

In Bremen, or in West Germany?

No, no, this was in West-East Germany, because he was the link between East when the wall was still up.

OK.

He was bridging the wall. So this was before the wall came down, of course.

Yes.

And the headquarters of this organization, because he was the president, was in Bremen, Germany.

OK, so your mother just spoke and she's not miked up, but she said that this was his role in this trade--

Commerce Group.

--Commerce Group was for the entire West Germany. It happened to be headquartered in Bremen. And it was while the wall was up. So that would have been after 1961, when the wall did come up, and before it came down. At any rate, he had a prominent role in post-war Germany.

Yes. Very much so.

So there are people who knew of him. In other words, one could even say there's a story about him. We may not have it written down, but his story didn't end when the war ended.

No, he loved-- he fought in World War I for his fatherland. He loved Germany. He saw the Holocaust and World War II as a very small amount of time. He was about 40 years old when World War II--

Happened.

--broke out. Exactly. So for him, that was like a glitch in his experience. He, first and foremost, loved Germany, and believed he was a German before he was even a Jew. Obviously, Germany disagreed with that, but he had a love for the country. So he wanted to actually, believe it or not, wanted to rebuild Germany after the war. And so he stayed, whereas almost everyone else left. They were the only family to actually return alive to Bremen. And he wanted to stay there and help recover it.

OK.

Yeah.

So when you're-- did you ever know your great grandfather?

No, he passed away before I was born.

OK. And what kind of reception did your book have in Bremen amongst-- you talked about the parliament, you talked about the schools.

Yeah.

Did you get any kind of response from the public?

Yeah, it was a bit divided. I was shocked at how well it was received, and that gave me so much hope. And back to that initial feeling, I was like, OK, this is important, I'm glad I followed my instincts. And then we did receive opposition, which I did expect. I expected more of.

Talk to me about that. Talk to me about that opposition. What form did it take?

Well, it was still-- we were still faced with, I guess, racism. We were interviewed by journalists, and they would ask questions, well, because I'm blonde and I didn't fit into the stereotype of the Jew that were on the Nazi propaganda posters, they're like, well, how Jewish are you? Are you really Jewish? Are your grandparents?

So things like that, where I saw that they still had their preconceived notions of who Jews were. They couldn't believe

that I could be Jew, whatever that meant. Another journalist was saying to me, oh, so you want us to perceive you as normal. And I'm like, well, no, we are normal. I'm just telling their story. So just little things like that.

And also, there was not an outcry, but all of a sudden, we started to-- for example, we were actually supposed to premiere the book, the translated version a year before it actually was. But mysteriously, publishers no longer wanted to publish it, and we were removed from the venue in favor of somebody who is actually anti-Semitic, who is known and actually puts out anti-Semitic literature. And so we were told-- different accusations were placed on Carl Katz.

Such as?

Such as he was complicit, and he was as responsible, if not more so, for Jews dying as were the Gestapo, that he was somehow responsible for it.

How did you hear of this? How did that news come to you?

So basically, when we were planning to go to Germany for the premiere of the book, we had made contacts. And one such resident actually told us about what was happening. And interestingly enough, his father was Carl Katz's apprentice, and not Jewish. But he had grown up with stories about this amazing man, Carl Katz, and it was actually a role model to him, even though he had never met him. So he was appalled, and he recognized that this is very typical anti-Semitic rhetoric.

But tell me, I mean, what did he hear and where did he hear it from? He passes on to you some kind of information about your own blood relative, a grandfather who happens to have been prominent.

Yeah.

What did he base his news on?

So the person that was replacing us for this speech at a commemoration of--

Can we cut?

What? Oh, you don't want to talk about this.

No.

OK. So Elise, tell me, were you really familiar with the sources that this apprentice, the son of the apprentice of your father had? Did you know anything about those sources?

No, I didn't personally know anything about that. He then communicated with my mother. And that's where this investigation and everything took off from there.

So this would have been the first time you had heard anything negative about your great grandfather?

Up until that point, I had only known that he was very celebrated. They still have his name up on his old office building. There's a street named after him in Bremen. And I had only heard stories about all the amazing things he had done from relatives, that he had taken in after the war and gotten them back on their feet. So we were very, very shocked at this news that basically they're painting him as evil, as a face of evil. And that was in direct opposition of anything that we had either experienced or heard.

OK. Well, Elise, I know that there would be more to talk about, but thank you very much for sharing what you have and what you did. As I said, this interview was a little bit different from most of those, because most of the time, the story of the Holocaust ends with the Holocaust.

Yeah.

And your involvement sounds like it had an amazing effect, but it also brought up something that hadn't been known before by the family.

Right.

OK? Well, thank you for sharing it.

Yes, thank you.

And I'll say that this concludes the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum with Elise Garibaldi on September 19th, 2019. And now we're going to welcome your mom, because she's going to pick up on some of what happened there.

Perfect.

Thank you.