

Good afternoon, Noemi.

Good afternoon.

Today is June 10, 2020. This is a interview with Noemi Stern. My name is Yael Siman. Noemi, do you agree to be recorded today?

Yes, I do.

Thank you, Noemi. So we'll start, Noemi. So what is your full name.

My name is Noemi Stern, Salamonovitz on my mother's side. But by birth, my name was Noemi Agnes Silberberg.

Can you tell me, where were you born and when were you born?

I was born in Budapest, Hungary on December 30 of 1943.

What were the names of your biological parents, Noemi?

My mother's name was Edit, in Hebrew Rivka, Salamonovitz Horowitz, and my father's name was Abraham Bumi Silberberg Bernstein.

Did you have any siblings?

No.

And what were the names of your adoptive parents?

My mother was Ilonka Salamonovitz, but I married when she-- Stern when she got married, and her husband was Moore Moshe Stern Boxhorn.

Do you have any siblings?

Yes, I have three siblings. My oldest sister is Judith, in Hebrew Sarah. She is-- by marriage she is Nurko. She lives in Israel. And then comes my brother, Arthur Abraham Shmuel Benjamin Stern, who lives in Teaneck, New Jersey. And then comes my sister, Yergi Rahel, who lives in Mexico City. And those are the three of them.

Thank you. What memories do you have of your childhood?

Well, not too many because I was too young. I was 2 and 1/2 months old when the Germans came into Budapest, which was on March 19 of 1943. I know that we had to be hiding and we went from place to place, to several safe houses, and we ended up in the one that was set up by Raul Wallenberg, who was a Swedish diplomat in Budapest.

For some time we had to hide in the Jewish ghetto that was set up just then, and I was with my mother at my grandmother's, my paternal grandmother's home that was in that area. But I don't remember any of this. All of this was told to me.

And I know that my father was taken, even before the Germans came in, to labor camp, which is the way most of the Jewish men were taken for work. And since my father was a textile engineer, his skills could be used for sewing uniforms for the German army. Unfortunately, I don't remember neither my father or my mother or anybody else at that time. The only memories I have is of a man after the war ended, and now I understand that that man was my stepfather. But nothing is very clear.

Thank you, Noemi. And what do you know about your family before the Holocaust, even if you don't remember it but maybe it because someone told you? How was your family?

Oh, well, beginning with my grandparents, my maternal grandparents were in a small town called Edeleny, which was not far from Miskolc, which was a city about 15 or 20 miles away from Edeleny. And my grandfather and grandmother lived in Edeleny, and they had 12 children. And both my birth mother and my adoptive mother were siblings from that family, from the 12 children. There were 11 years difference between them.

And my grandfather, when he came back from the yeshiva, he started the business in that town, and he bought a forest. It was a place where a lot of people were in the lumber business. So he had some forests, and then he processed the lumber. And he had his store, and then he had the general store for the town, where they sold everything.

Later on, he bought mine with some partners. And to be able to work the mine, he got a generator that produced electricity for the whole town. Also, the house that he bought, he had a tavern, a pub in it. It came with a house. But my grandfather never worked there. It was my grandmother and the aunts, when they grew up, that worked that place.

And it was a small town. They had geese and they had, I guess, other animals there. And he was in a very good standing with a city council member the town council. Actually, who was a council man there, and he used to go to the meetings in his horse and buggy. And he even wore a top hat for that. And so he was very well respected and admired there.

And then the children, well, they all started-- they went into business with their grandfather. Now, by the time my mother got married, they were already in Budapest because grandfather had two or three strokes, of which he mostly recovered. But he was in a wheelchair most of the time, and that's where he was-- how he was when he was taken to Auschwitz.

I don't know if you want to know anything else about my grandfather's family. On my father's side, I don't know a lot because I didn't know about them until I was about 24 years old. I know that my father was one of six siblings, and he was the oldest. And he and a sister were murdered during the Holocaust, and the other four ended up in Palestine, one of them before the war and three of them after the war, and so was my grandmother, Yola, my father's mother.

And my grandfather on my father's side had passed away already when I was born, from what I hear. And I don't know what was the business he was in, but besides that, he was a cantor. He went to different towns and cities when they needed him to lead the prayers. I understand he had a beautiful voice, and I know so had my father. My mother also liked to sing, and so do I. I used to at one time.

And I don't know if you know anything else about the families, or you want--

Maybe you can maybe you can tell a lot about their Jewish identities? Were they religious or not?

Yes, both families were orthodox, and all the boys went to yeshiva and the girls just went to a Jewish day school. And so they were really-- they were very religious, but they were not like the Haredi nowadays. They were modern orthodox

That means that they didn't dressed in black. They had modern clothing. And they all wore a hat, but it was a hat that was in style at that moment, with a color gray or whichever thing that went with the rest of their clothing. And the only one that had a beard was my grandfather, my paternal grandfather. I don't know about my maternal grandfather. I think he also had a beard. But there were no payos, and there were no-- I think both families were like that.

My survivor family, on my father's side, they all lived later in Iraq, so they were pretty orthodox, especially after because they were in that environment in Israel. My mother's family, on the other side, few stayed orthodox, but most of the survivors were not so observant.

Thank you, Noemi. So both families lived in Hungary before the war.

Yes. But they were-- I know that my father was born in Transylvania, which at that time I think it was part of Hungary because borders used to change every Tuesday and Thursday, and governments. But later, they move to Budapest, and that's where he was when he met my uncle, my adoptive father, who was Moore Stern, even though she was not my father while he was alive. He was also murdered by the Nazis.

And the Nazis in Hungary, the job was done mainly by the Hungarian Nazis, who were the Iron Cross. They were worse than the Germans to the Jews, to the Jews. And when the Germans came in to Hungary, it was already the last place and it was almost the end of the war. But as usual, the Germans did a very perfect job, and of the 800 and so many thousand Jews in Hungary, which were mainly in Budapest, they exterminated more than 600-- no, I'm sorry 500,000. So they did a very good job.

But the heads of the Nazis were they Germans that came in, like-- oh, what was his name that was caught in Argentina? Eichmann. But the people who carried out the dirty job were the Hungarians.

So both your families had been living in Hungary for a long time?

Yes. Yes, I think probably about 200 years. On my mother's side, my grandmother was a Horowitz, as I think I've mentioned before. And they originated-- they came from a small town, Horovice, which is in what used to be Czechoslovakia. They changed it. Now it's the Czech Republic.

And then they moved to Prague, and eventually, from there, they spread to other places, having started, actually, in Spain. Well we have family genealogy books that go back to the 15th century. But we know from the Israeli encyclopedia that they have found us all the way back in the 13th century in Spain. I don't know what you would like to know.

Thank you. Thank you very much. So how and when did life change for your family?

Well, my grandparents and the two single daughters came to Budapest when things started being bad with the Germans all over Europe, all the Nazis, and after my grandfather had the strokes. And I think my aunt, my second mother, wanted them to be there. I guess they were better doctors or something.

They had their own building with three apartments. I think it was one for them and one for the future families of the two single daughters. But then the war became worse and people started being taken away from Hungary. They didn't send away the Jews at the beginning because the ruler of Hungary, Horthy had a treaty with Hitler, and so the only ones that were deported were those Jews that were not Hungarian citizens. But the men were all taken to the working, to the labor camps.

Now, later on, after the treaty was broken because Horthy's son was kidnapped by the Germans and he was forced to implement they the Jewish final plan, and that's when Eichmann came. And so that then started sending away the Jews, but from the provinces from the countryside, not the people from Budapest. We were the last, actually. We were-- those of us that survived were never sent to the concentration or the death camps. We were just in the shelters, in their hiding places in the ghetto.

Thank you, Noemi. So can you tell me more about the ghetto? What do know? Who was sent to the ghetto and how long were you there?

Well, I know that my mother and I went to the ghetto. And as I mentioned before, we stayed at my grandmother's house, my Silberberg family because my grandmother, her apartment was there in what became the ghetto. My second mother, Ilonka, and the three siblings were also in a ghetto, but they stayed with some family members of their father.

My family-- I'm sorry, my grandfather and the sister that was still single, Lili, went back to Edeleny. And from there, after the Germans came in the Jews of the countryside started being there to send to Auschwitz, they were taken there, too. Some of them survived, but most of them were killed.

And so do you know, how long were you in the ghetto? Did your-- Ilonka tell you?

Not very long. Not very long because they kept moving us from place to place. From the ghetto, I understand that before the ghetto we had been already in one of the shelter houses. And when we were at the ghetto, we were ordered to go to the train station, and we didn't know why or what for we were going there.

So I understand that we were in line, both my mothers and my siblings, myself, waiting to see what were the next orders when a soldier approached us and asked I don't know which one of my mothers, what are you doing here? And it was probably Ilonka because she was older, and she said, well, we were ordered to come here and wait for the train. And so this soldier, who was a human being, fortunately, he told to my mothers, as soon as I tell you, just grab the children and run away from here. This is not the place for you.

So that's what we did. And when we escaped, we didn't want to go back to the ghetto because we were afraid that they would go back to get us there. So that's when we went to Raul Wallenberg's safe house. And it was probably a matter of weeks or a month, not more than that.

Thank you. And you've mentioned before, Noemi, we were sent or we were moved several times. Do you know who walked you around?

Well, the Nazis, the government, the Hungarians, that's who gave-- those are the ones who gave the orders. Supposedly, it us from the Hungarian government, but they were puppets of the Germans.

And do you know how did you get to the shelter houses?

I think it's-- I don't know exactly, but it was known that it was there, or they were there. There was one from Sweden, there was one from Switzerland, which I think it was together with the Vatican. Then there was one from the Red Cross. There were different shelters, and people know about them. And I guess he went from mouth to mouth, the information. I'm not sure.

Do you know if one of your moms had to make certain choices to be able to go to these places and protect you? Or did Ilonka ever tell you of any choice she made or--

No. No. Well, I know she told me several times, when she used to talk about it, that some places where we went, they wouldn't let us in because both my sister, Yergi, and myself, we were babies. So in many places, they didn't let children in, especially very young children.

And until my mother, Ilonka, my anyu, she put her foot down and she said, I'm not moving from here. You don't want me here, but I am staying here. I don't have any place elsewhere to go. And then we stay there.

And I know that when they had them both mothers to wash diapers, they would wait until it was nighttime and everybody else finished already, and they would go out and wash the diapers. And then since there was no way to iron them or dry them, they would bring them into the place and fold them, and then they would sit on them.

That's crazy.

So with the heat of their bodies, they kind of made it more bearable for our bodies, for our lower bodies to take them.

Thank you, Noemi. Do you know if you stayed together all the time?

I understand that, besides the time that we were at the ghetto where we were in different houses but not far from each other, obviously-- it was just a few blocks, the ghetto-- that besides that, we were together most of the time, as far as I know.

And do you know anything else about your life in these shelter houses, anything else that Ilonka told you?

Well, there is a memory, which I don't know if it's a real memory or later spoke it with anyu, it's that I saw these-- that the beds where like those in the camps, like boards, you know, and two or three people, one on top of the other. And that's in my mind, but I don't know if it's because I saw it someplace or because or that's the way it was because I can't imagine that I have a memory from that time when I wasn't even a year old.

And then on the other side, I know that my father used to come and visit us, because at those times, at the beginning, they still allowed the men to come from the work camps. But later, they couldn't do that anymore. And when my father came the last time, that's when he was taken out with about 10 other people and was taken to where they were killed.

That's what they used to do. They used to bundle up a few of the Jews and kill a couple of them and throw them into the Danube. And they would tie them together so that the weight of a couple of them, they all drowned.

I recently found out that my father-- before that, when they came and took out about 10 people, the excuse was that there was a radio, that they were broadcasting our where we were to the Russians. And so they took out 10 people, and my father was not among those chosen at the beginning. But then a lady bribed one of the guards, telling him not to take her son, and after that guy was left, they took my father.

They were not taken straight to the Danube. They were taken to a high school that was not far from the safe house. And there was a big gym there, and that's where they were. I understand that there were other Jews already there that they gathered from other places.

And then they interviewed-- they told them to get undressed. Everybody was naked. It was freezing cold because it was December 30 of 1944, my first birthday. And so when the people, why did they do that? I would say just to punish them, to make them suffer.

And then they brought in each one of them into a room, and they tortured them and they were interrogating them about that radio. And they all said they don't know anything about it. There was only one of them that-- they both went off, and he said, I know where it is. I will take you there.

So he saved his life at that moment because all the rest were taken out. There was a short wall, not very high, and they were all put by that wall, kneeling, and they were all shot in the nape. Then some of those that were still alive were ordered to put them into carts and taken to the river and dump them and get rid of them. And others were ordered to clean up where they were killed so the blood would not to be seen by others. So they were ordered to shovel all that dirt, put them into some other wheelbarrow carts, and take them to other places and spread that soil so nobody would know what they did, that they murdered all these people.

Fortunately, one of them, I don't know-- the two that took all the dirt and the people down, somehow they escaped. And also the guy that said that he know where the radio was, he ran into the woods and hid, and they didn't find him. So one of those people, I don't know which one, went to the safe house and told them what had happened because that way in Judaism, and you need witnesses for somebody's death in order to declare him dead and in the future for the former wife or husband to be able to remarry, otherwise they are not allowed to.

So this man came back, and I understand that he told my mother, Ilonka. But Ilonka never told my birth mother, Edit, until after the war was over. There was nothing to be done and it wouldn't help, so I guess she wanted to save her the pain.

Thank you. So your father was never sent to the ghetto.

No. He was in several work camps, labor camps, but not in the ghetto.

And you never met him because you were a baby, so you don't have memories of him.

I don't have any memories of him. Absolutely.

What did it mean to you not to have these memories of him?

I grew up thinking that my uncle Moore had been my father. In that sense, it didn't make a difference because I didn't remember neither one of them. And they had been good friends, and actually, that's why my mother, Edit, married Bumi because he was in the group of friends of Moore. There was a youth organ-- of young men, an organization of orthodox young men that was called Tiferet Bahurim. And they both belonged to that group. So I don't remember them.

When I grew up, for me it was terrible. I did not have a father and I did not have any grandparents, and I felt very, very deprived from everything. There was a certain feeling inside me where I did not belong anyplace or to anybody.

I had this Cinderella complex, let's put it that way. Even though I considered my mother and my siblings my real mother and siblings, there was a certain something I felt always that something was not right. And when we were at school, we were poor, but we always had enough to eat.

And we had clothes to wear, which, for me, they were all inherited, be it from my sisters or be it from some other people that had daughters and that had outgrew their clothes. And so we got those. So we never had-- as a child, I never had anything new.

So I always considered if I had a father, he would provide for us and we would have more of the things that we need. It's not because I needed more clothes, but because people would not have to pity us or something like that maybe, or wouldn't laugh at us because of what-- they were laughing already at school, I remember, from their lunch we had because it was different from what other children ate, to begin with because we were kosher, because, believe it or not, even though we were at an orthodox Jewish school, but most of the kids were not orthodox and most of them were not even kosher. So they made fun of us, and so I always felt that we the father I would have been more protected.

Then as pampering goes, of course, kids came to the class, to school, and they said, oh, my grandparents were here and here, and they brought me back this and this, or my parents were on a trip. And we never had that. And I always was thinking, my grandparents could not give me anything. I knew they were murdered, even from when I was a very little child and we arrived in Mexico, from their first holiday that we had and there was a yizkor said.

I remember me standing next to Jutka, Yuri, because she know how to read already, and she would say the prayers and the yizkor, and I would say it after her. Now, I would say it after my father, Moore, Moshe, but I didn't say anything for the mothers until I found out later. And now, unfortunately, I have to say it for both mothers and their fathers. So that's about it.

Yes, it was-- I always felt that life would have been completely different if we had a father. Grandparents also, but mainly a father. And I thought even my mother would have been a happier person because my mother was always angry at us, at the children. And I felt she was angry at me.

And I used to think, well, and being the situation as it is-- and the war had been raging in Europe already for years-- why would they have a fourth child? And I didn't know I wasn't really the fourth child. But why did they have me? My mother would have been much more happier only with three children, and it would have been easier for her to remarry with three children. But who will want a woman with four children?

And all those things went on in my mind. So I always felt I was-- I don't know. The word wouldn't be "unwanted," but it would be not needed, not actually a bother, that the world would have been better there for everybody without me. So it was very difficult for me.

[INAUDIBLE].

That's why I was so-- I was an introvert. I didn't speak to anybody, and I was afraid of all the adults, all the adults, especially if somebody had a uniform. I was afraid of my uncles, of everybody, every adult.

That's why I never had-- I never dared approach any of them when I had a need because, first of all, my mother always told us to be quiet. We children were not allowed-- we allowed to be seen but not heard. And when we first arrived in Mexico and we had a sofa bed in the living room, well, every once in a while one of the uncles would come. We were not allowed to sit on that sofa bed. It was just for the uncle to lay down.

So it was very, very-- it was a difficult childhood, definitely. It was sad. I was always a sad child, which developed later into depression, which is what I have up to until today. I'm chronically depressed. But we survived. We are survivors.

Thank you so much, Noemi, for sharing your feelings. Thank you. So I'll go back to Moore because I think we still need his story. So what happened to Moore?

Moore-- oh, Moshe, he was from a very aristocratic-- not meaning get like in the not Jewish world, but for Jews his great grandfather had been the Chatam Sofer, who was a very, very important rabbi. And so he was very orthodox, he was very intelligent, and he was the president of that group I told you, the Tiferet Bahurim.

And he was a furrier, so he was also making uniforms for the Nazis. And he was taken to several camps also. And at the last place where he was, I think when they closed it down, they took them all to Bergen-Belsen. And from Bergen-Belsen, they took them on a forced march to-- I think they were going to Berlin.

And well, he was not a strong man. He was always very, very thin. And when he was on the march, it came a point when he decided he couldn't or wouldn't go any farther. And he had a vest, and of course, it was winter, and he gave it to another younger man. And also he took off his boots and gave them to another younger man and told them, you will give them a better use than me.

And eventually, he couldn't walk anymore, and he was shot by the Nazis. And that was, if I understand well, the day before the war ended. A real tragedy, a real tragedy. And everybody who knew him, be it from his family or my other family or my cousins, whoever knew him, they all praised him. He was such-- he was a very, very special man.

Now, my father was not so known because he was more recent, and it was just practically the year before the war ended, because they married I think it was February of '43, 1943, and I was born in December the same year. So I understand that he was his friend. He was quite younger than him. But I don't know much about him either.

They were all well learned in Jewish Studies, and they all always learned every day. But they still worked in the secular world and they had careers. So they both, unfortunately, were killed almost at the-- my father almost at the end of the war because you know this was December 30, '44. And in '45, I think in March or something like that, the Russians were in already. That's why they were looking for that radio, that transmitter. And my father to be Moore just a day before the day the war ended.

Thank you, Noemi. Do you know what you were doing this entire time that you were in these houses, protected houses, if you experienced hunger or if anyone got sick in the family?

Yes. I don't know if we were hungry or not because I, even today, have no idea what we were eating. I suppose I was still sucking my mother's milk, but I can't imagine how long she could have-- she was hungry because they were all hungry, the adults. And neither Yergi, I have no idea what we ate, we as babies.

And the adults, I know that my mother, Ilonka, since they had the fur business, she still had some furs hidden. And also Moore's family was in the diamond business, so they had some diamonds. And I know that once she exchanged a mink fur for a sack of potatoes or something like that, or a kilogram of sugar for a diamond, things like that to keep us alive because we needed the sugar.

Otherwise, people would take saccharin, but babies cannot have saccharin or something like that. So I don't know. Maybe they gave us order with sugar. I have no idea what was our food.

I know we were very, very weak when we were liberated. Yergi and I could not stand on our legs for a couple of months

because we didn't have the strength to stoop or stand. And now everybody was very, very thin, of course, the adults also because nobody had food.

Later, the winter in Hungary was terrible. So I heard that the horses, when they died or were killed in flight or something, their bodies, the corpses were just left there. They didn't decompose because of the cold. So some people went out in and cut up a horse and brought in some meat. My anyu used to say that she wouldn't eat it, but she would feed it to everybody else.

And so I don't know what else we ate. But the potatoes, I know that was one of the main things. And sometimes, if you have the means, you would ask a peasant or somebody who went by. I think she always had a good relationship with the person in charge, the manager of the building where she lived, the porter, and she asked her to buy her things.

I know that most people who were sick, and both Jutka and Arthur, Erchi, my brother, were in the hospital because there was a scarlet fever epidemic. And actually, we didn't know if Jutka survived until the end of the war. And Erchi was also sick, and that was the reason they didn't leave when they had their-- they had passports and visas to leave before, but he was in the hospital and the transport left.

And I don't know if they were going to Palestine or to the United States. I have no idea. And so they couldn't go because his father said he's not leaving without his son.

And so they saw-- but he was also in the hospital. So I don't even know if they ever were in the safe houses with us. I think it was mainly Yergi and myself.

Now, Yergi he also became very ill. She had-- I think he was encephalitis. But fortunately, she survived. But my mother, my anyu, always kind of was very careful with her because from then on she treated her like a sick child.

And I know they were quarrels inside the safe houses because there were quarrels for the places and for the blankets, not that I remember, but that's what I heard.

Thank you, Noemi. And do you know why you had to move from one house to another house, multiple times?

Well, because the way I told you, in the one house, they wouldn't take us because we were children. In other houses, they were too full. I understand there were hundreds of thousands of people in between those houses and other houses, and other places that we were hiding. I mean, there were 300,000 Jews that survived, mainly from Budapest, so there were a lot of people. And they fought for room and for food and for everything possible.

I mean, we're human beings, not angels. They were needs, and everybody tried to survive.

Thank you, Noemi. And do if your moms had a network of support, given that they were leaving in Budapest before the war, in other words, neighbors or people who they knew who helped them throughout this difficult time?

I don't know about anything about friends in Budapest. I mean, I know about the man I told you about, that organization. So there were a lot-- I have a picture of all of them. But those were the men. And I don't know anything about the women, just the family because, well, I guess, when you have a large family, it's your family who are the support.

Thank you. And what do you love about liberation? And how did that impact your family?

My-- about what, I'm sorry?

The liberation of--

About liberation?

Yes.



Well, when the Russians arrived, and so we went out, from what I know. I don't know where my mother and myself went at the beginning, because my grandmother on my father's side was not-- no, she was still there. So we might have gone back to the ghetto to where she lived. I don't know where we went.

But my mother Ilonka and the children went back to her apartment, and with a surprise that there were some Russian people that had taken it over already. So she went to the police to tell them that she wanted her place back, and the police said, well, there is enough room for you and for them there. Just take a place where you're not too close to them, and stay there.

And so that's what they did. I think they stayed in the kitchen because it was warmer and more convenient, and they could cook. But then these neighbors started-- I mean, they were not neighbors. They were in the same apartment. And they were partying every night and bringing women and drinking a lot. The Russians were always drinking. And so their neighbors started to complain.

So when everybody was complaining about them, my mother Ilonka went again to the police. And then this time, they came and they threw them out. So my mother stayed there. And she was afraid that these thugs would come back or something, so she invited another widow or some-- I think she-- another woman, the younger one that was also alone in the building in another apartment, and told her to come and live with them because that way at least they were two of them, and they could better defend themselves. So that's what I know after.

Now, later on, when the family came back, those that survived the camps, and they went to-- first, they went through Budapest, and from there they went to Miskolc. And the uncle Hermosz, Herman, he had to survive, and he had he rented a house in Miskolc. And all those of us that survived went over there because there was more food and it was easier to survive there.

And my aunt Malvina, who had a restaurant before the war, she was taken to Auschwitz, her husband murdered, her youngest son murdered. But she still had two children, adults. And she had a kosher restaurant before the war, and she reopened it for a couple of months when they came back from the camps. So we were all there.

And I think I have a picture that I sent you, Yael, about myself as a baby. And that's when that picture was taken, in Miskolc, because we had a cousin that was a photographer. And my cousin Erika, who survived the camps, she took me in Miskolc to have their picture taken, and she had one taken off herself.

And we were already in contact with the three uncles that we had living in Mexico, who were preparing papers and visas for us to emigrate from Hungary because we didn't want to stay in Hungary. First of all, we had not good means to survive, but besides that, we didn't want to be under the communist government. And the family in Mexico were already preparing all those documents for us when we were supposed to emigrate in '47, which we did.

But we didn't know that by then my mother would be dead. My biological mother Edit died in September of 1947. She had remarried a man called Miklos Nicholas Weiss, who had lost his wife and two children during the Holocaust. And she was going to have a child by him. And they both died, my mother and the baby. So they never got to leave Hungary. And my mother was buried still in Budapest, but later her body was moved to Israel by my Uncle Herman, who by then, when her remains were moved, he was already living in Israel.

And so the rest of us, 10 people that survived, we left for Mexico because we didn't have visas to stay in the United States. The United States was not giving out visas at that time. And my uncle Itzu, the oldest one, brought us in with false papers for myself because I was supposedly a daughter of Ilonka with the other three children. And my uncle Itzu adopted us as his children in Mexico when we went there. And my mother Ilonka came in as a caregiver. That's the way we could immigrate into Mexico.

The other two aunts, an uncle and an aunt, went to Cuba with the two cousins. And the uncle had married in Budapest before leaving, and she, this lady, Margaret Hollander, she had a brother who was who had money some way and they did get visas for the United States. And so they went to New York and later arranged for my Uncle Herman and Aunt

Mani to immigrate into New York also, and they went into the nursing home business. They never had children, none of the two couples.

But my Aunt Lili, who survived Auschwitz and the camps with my Aunt Malvina and my cousin Erika, she married also before going to Mexico Uncle Bela, and they spent some time in Paris on their way to Mexico. But they were the first ones to leave Hungary and the first ones from those that survived to get into Mexico. His brothers were also in Brooklyn, New York, but they didn't go right away there. They went to Mexico first.

So we grew up with them as family. My Aunt Lili was very, very dear to us. She gave us the emotional nurturing and love that my mother was incapable of because she was so embittered herself that-- to the world outside, she was wonderful. She was smiling and she was sweet. But to the children she was not. She, I think, in her subconscious or "inconscious," she blamed the children for her sufferings.

And so that's what we had. We all loved her dearly. I still miss her. But she was not a happy person, especially to us. I think she really resented us, the children.

But she protected us, overprotected us because she had promised my biological mother that she would protect me. I didn't know all of this, of course, until later, but that was the story. So that's it. I don't know what else you would like to know.

Thank you, Noemi, for again sharing your feelings. I want to go back just briefly to the post-war period. So you mentioned in the beginning of the interview that one of the first memories that you have that is your memory is about your stepfather. So can you tell us more about what memories you have?

Well, the memories I have about him is of playing with him and of him buying me toys, especially a small baby carriage made of wood, blue, for the doll. And then I remember there was also a little crib that he bought for me. And the crib was metal bars, and it had a mesh hanging on the metal bar to lower it on the sides, both sides of the crib, so like a really crib, to put the baby in, in my case, the doll. And that was color pink.

And I remembered that my toys were behind a door. There were some-- I think they're called French doors that are divided in three pieces. So when they are folded, it's like a triangle behind, and that's where I used to keep my toys. And those doors were glass. That's what I remember, and playing with him on a sofa.

I know that he didn't like me when my mother leaved because I reminded him of the children he had lost. And why did I survive and his children didn't survive? But after my mother passed away, he suddenly had nobody but me. So he became closer to me, and he started-- he wanted to be with me all the time.

In fact, he wanted me to stay with him when we all left for Mexico, but my mother's family would not allow that because my mother had told my second mother that she wanted me to be with her. But I know that he came with us on the train, at least until Vienna, and that over there he gave us the girl's presents of a small ring that was like a small rectangle on top of gold, with a-- well, of course, mine said Noemi in that little rectangle, and Yergi had hers. I'm not sure-- I don't remember if Jutka got one or not.

And later on, I kept asking, who was that man? And I never got an answer. And I think that man was my stepfather. And when we got to Mexico and we went to school, and I remember that the school principal looked very familiar to me. So I am not sure. I don't know if he resembled my stepfather, but I know that he resembled somebody that I knew. Could have been my stepfather or could have been my uncle Hermosz who came with us to New York, up to New York.

We took the trains and we got to-- I don't remember which port in France, where we crossed the channel in a small ship to Southampton. And then from there, we took the first Queen Mary to New York. And the 10 of us were on that ship. I know we were in Paris because I remember going up to the Eiffel Tower, and in New York I remember going up to today to the Empire State Building and many other buildings, but not many not many memories.

I know that on the ships, especially Erika and Yergi, were always sick, seasick and vomiting. A lot of people were sick,

especially the short trip from France to London. I know that I don't remember it, but we had family both in Paris and in London from Moore's family, which were at the Boxhorns in Paris and the Sterns in London.

He was one of Moore's brothers, I think the oldest. His name was Shlomo, and he had two sons. One was Bubi and Brudi. I don't know what were their real names, but those are the names that we I always heard growing up. I don't think I ever met them. Anything else you need to know?

Yes. Thank you, Noemi. So how did you get from the United States to Mexico?

OK. When we arrived in New York, people from the family, from the Horowitz Margareten family, were waiting for us. And it's a very large family, and there were doctors and attorneys. And one of our cousins, cousin Florence, who lives now also in Washington, but she was there, and they came to pick us up when the ship got to New York. And I remember going to different buildings to see an attorney or things like that because of papers. We had a visa just to go through the United States.

And from New York, we took a train to Laredo. And in Laredo, my uncle Ali, was one of the three uncles in Mexico City, was waiting for us, and so it was a very pleasant surprise. And of course, he didn't come with empty hands. He came with toys for us. And that day was my fourth birthday.

And from there, I think we changed trains to the Mexican train, and we continued with the train from Laredo to Mexico City. In Mexico City, the uncles had prepared for us already an apartment at the Acros building at the Insurgentes Circle in Mexico City. And so we went there.

My other Uncle Dave [INAUDIBLE] was living in an apartment in that same building. It was a very nice building. It had a roof garden, of which I have pictures. But I was afraid of the elevator in it because it was one of those metal see-through, you know, that you opened the doors and closed them.

And I was always afraid I would get trapped in the doors because I had a bad experience in New York with the elevator, because I was so small. I was four years old, but my size was that of a year and a half. So when all the people, the 10 people that we were, nine of them went into the elevator in one of the high buildings and I stayed behind. Nobody noticed that the doors closed and I wasn't inside. So I started yelling like crazy.

And my cousin Zoltan-- Zolly, Itzhak we called him then-- he came up running on the stairs and grabbed me and saved me. So I had a bad history with the elevators. Anything--

Yeah, I was going to ask you, what was the date that you arrived in Mexico?

I am not sure. We arrived in Mexico around my birthday. I don't I'm not sure if we arrived in Laredo on my birthday or in Mexico City on my birthday. I think it was Laredo. So I don't know how long could it have taken, a week maybe, to get to Mexico City on the train, so the first week of January sometime, January of 1947. No, sorry, January of 1948.

And two months after that, around February 15, we started school because at those times, the school year went from about February 15 to November 15, and the long vacation was in the winter. Later it was changed. Now it's the same as in the United States.

And can you please list who came to Mexico with you?

Yeah. To Mexico, just the five Sterns, my mother Ilonka, my anyu, and Jutka, Erchi, Yergi, and me, but for all purposes, my nickname was Amy. So the four of us and Aunt Ilonka. And my Uncle Hermosz and Mani and my Aunt Malvin, and Zoli and Erika went to Cuba. With the time, when papers were ready for my aunt Malvin and Zoli, they joined us in Mexico City.

Erika never came to Mexico at that those times. Later, she came to visit. But in those times, she was smuggled into the United States, back to Florida from Cuba, because she got engaged before leaving Budapest to Uzi, Dr. Emil Jacoby. By

then, he was a doctor already. He got his doctorate in Budapest before leaving. That was Erika's boyfriend.

And in Hungary they met because Uzi was the director of the-- it skipped my mind now. I'm forgetting things-- of the youth organization that they went, the Zionistic Bnei Akiva. I don't know how I can forget that.

Anyway, so Erika went there, and they met there. And they got engaged before leaving Hungary. He went to Paris for two years, as he was working for the Sochnut. And she came with us to New York, and from there to Cuba. But then later, when Uzi came to New York, of course, they wanted to be together. There was no way of getting a visa for the time being, so she was smuggled in and after a long pursuit by the FBI, she had to give up, give herself up because since we came from Hungary, they were afraid of communist spies.

So finally, one of the attorneys in the family arranged for her to stay for the time being, but she had to go to leave the country in order to get her visa to come back in. So she went to Canada and came back the last minute that she could, a minute before the time ran out. And well, the rest is history. She stayed here and with the time, and they got married, and then she got her papers.

So as I told you before, Uncle Hermosz and his wife went to New York, so nobody stayed in Cuba. Everybody left. My aunt Lili and Uncle Bela were already in Mexico and five of us, and then came our Aunt Malvina and Zoltan, Zoli.

Thank you. And sorry, what were the names of your uncles who brought you to Mexico? And what was the relation? Where they brothers of Ilonka and--

They were all part of the Salamonovitz family. The one that brought us out, the first one that went to Mexico, was Uncle Itzu, Ignacio, Ignaz. He was very, very smart. But he was also a rebel.

When he was sent to a yeshiva when he was 16, and grandfather or whoever went with him put him on a train, on one side of the train, and he stepped down on the other side of the train, and he left and he went to Vienna. And he stayed there for a couple of years, working at some family member's business. And when he was about 18, he wrote to my grandfather that he wanted to go to Mexico, to please send him money.

My grandfather would not send him the money because he ran away, but he told the oldest daughter Malvina to send him the money like he was from her, not from grandfather. So she sent him the money, and he then went to Mexico.

Why to Mexico? First of all, it was a very exotic place to go, from the movies and everything. And besides, there was no way of getting visas to go into the United States. So he went to Mexico and established himself.

He traveled through the whole country. He was a peddler, as most of the Jews were everywhere where they immigrated, and selling neckties and whatever he could. He got very sick. He got-- I don't know if it was the yellow fever or-- what's the other name. Anyway, he suffered from it his whole life-- malaria.

But finally, he established himself. He went into business with somebody that had a tailor business. And from there, later, he started to-- he went into the shoe business and all kinds of other businesses. And then he made enough money that by 1936-- when he went was in the '20s, I don't know. But a by '36 he had enough money to go back to Hungary to my mother Ilonka's wedding. And he already went back with his wife, my Aunt Margaret, and his oldest daughter, my cousin Clarita, and even my Aunt Margaret's Julia. So the four of them went for a visit. So that must have cost a lot of money.

And so later, after he went to visit, my Uncle Ali, the youngest, told him he wanted to join him in Mexico because he wasn't happy in Hungary. He wasn't happy living in grandfather's house because there were two older brothers that were always abusing him. They were very strong and they were hitting him, and so he was the baby. And so later, when my Uncle Itzu went back to Mexico, he sent him money and tickets to go to Mexico.

And the third one was Uncle Dave. In Hungarian, he was Dezso, Desiderio in Spanish. His Hebrew name, of course, was David. And he left practically in the last-- in '39, in the last possible ship before the war. And they were all

established when we got to Mexico already, and they were all married.

Thank you, Noemi. I want to see about you. So how was life in Mexico for you?

Well, it was exciting, I think. It was very difficult because I couldn't speak the language. We spoke Hungarian, mainly. And even when I started going to school two months after we arrived, in school they spoke Spanish and Yiddish. And we didn't speak Yiddish at home.

But because of that, and also probably because I was so shy, I practically didn't speak the whole first year. I was, like, mute, and I was afraid of everybody. Now, we always had a maid, and so we started learning probably to speak a few words with the maid at home. And my mother used to take us on Sundays to the movies, where we would watch one or two Mexican movies with all the churros and all the a Mexican music and everything, and I think that's how we started learning the language.

It was exciting in the sense that there were so many new sounds, new smells. I remember, first, we had them [SPANISH], which are yams or sweet potatoes, and they were sold on the street in a cart where they were cooked, boiled with very hot water so that the cart had a steam sound. So they were blowing, toot, a loud noise and that the guy was yelling, [SPANISH]. That was one of them.

And the other guy was yelling, elotes, which are corn on the cob cob, also. And then another guy was selling little birds in little cages. I also remember not exactly then, but eventually seeing they were they had all the turkeys walking on the street with a guy that was yelling, [SPANISH], which is I think a native word for turkey. And all the noises, the turkeys say, [TURKEY GOBBLE], all that.

So they were very colorful, interesting. Everything was new for us. We had an ice box, and there was also a guy that came in and sold ice, yellow. He would also announce himself. And I don't know how we communicated with all these people, but I think he was through the maid. And so slowly, slowly, we learned the language. But I was always quiet, always quiet.

I remember one thing that happened when we had recently arrived, and my mother wanted to fix one of my brother's pants because my brother was a devil. He was always up to some mischief. And anyway, the knees of his pants were always torn. So my mother wanted to patch his pants and she thought, OK, I'll take this old skirt from Emi, who is so little, and the skirt was very little and old, so I'll use this to patch it.

And I made a whole scene about it. I don't want you to use my skirt. That's my skirt. I'm not going to let you do it. Don't do it. Please don't do it, and yelling, it's my skirt and my skirt and my skirt. I don't know if it's because I had lost so much, that anything that I had was so precious to me that I couldn't part with it.

Finally, my mother gave up and she took something else. I think it was something of Jutka's, and she used that to patch my brother's pants. And of course, then came the guilt. Then I felt so guilty that she had to use a better cloth on skirt or whatever she used than my old skirt. How could I be so bad? How could I be so selfish?

And I think it lasted my-- up to today, I feel bad about it. It was so terrible. But I was so attached to my things. I felt like I had lost my father, then I had lost my mother, and my supposedly other father and my stepfather and my toys that I had to leave there, and I was crying when I left, and everything, everything I had. And then, of course, which I didn't know, but it's true, my identity. I even lost my identity. So I couldn't separate from anything else.

And what do you mean when you say that you lost your identity?

Well, because some way, I forgot everything. I was now Emi Stern, now Emi Stern Salamonovitz. But before we left for Mexico, I was Noemi Agnes Silberberg Salamonovitz. So it was a different person, and my whole history after we left, because I forgot everything.

And I can probably say that I blocked everything out of my mind because I don't remember remembering my mother. I

don't remember remembering my father. The only one I remembered was this man that I suppose was my stepfather. And that also is very blurry, not a clear face or what happened. So one person, one state in Budapest, and a different person went to Mexico.

Thank you. And how would you say did you cope with all these losses?

By closing up into myself. As I told you, I didn't speak the whole first year. They didn't know what was exactly wrong with me. I was anorexic. I didn't eat, couldn't eat, couldn't swallow anything. I think in a way I was, as much as a four-year-old knows, but not knowing, I was killing myself.

When I was six or seven years old, I was sent to Rochester, to the Mayo Clinic, to see what was the problem because I wasn't eating. So I was very small anyway, and then I wasn't eating. When we were in Mexico City, everything I eat, I couldn't pass it. I always felt like something in my throat that wouldn't let there be food to go down, or I was nauseous. And so when I finally was able to swallow something, I would vomit it up.

And the doctors said-- I went with my aunt, my Uncle Ali's late wife, Graciela, because she spoke English, and my cousin Clarita, who was a teenager and she also spoke English because they both went to American schools. And we went with a train, and I have a paper, a piece of paper, that when I went back to Mexico, just by myself on an airplane. And they sent me back, and they stayed there to visit, to travel. My aunt did not fly at that time. Later she did, but at that time, she was afraid of flying.

And they put me on an airplane, which was not the same plane I arrived in because they had to jump from plane to plane in those times, and so I don't know how, but I was sitting in the kitchen all the time with the stewardesses at those times. So there was a piece in the newspaper about a child of six or seven if lying by herself in Mexico City. And then I have that piece of paper someplace.

And my aunt said that what the doctor said was that I needed a different mother, more nurturing. But the doctor sent a letter to my mother, what it just said, just treat her like any child in and force her and have her eat. So my mother used to love my first teacher in kindergarten because she was [SPANISH] who was always scolding everybody. And she wasn't very young, she wasn't very nurturing, but my mother loved her because she forced me to eat at school, to eat my lunch.

But that's how I-- I guess I didn't speak to anybody. I didn't have any friends. When I was already speaking, I made some friends. I was kept back a year in kindergarten because I wasn't speaking. They didn't have psychologists or such a thing in those times, so to be able to know that the only thing with me was that I didn't know the language, but I was not retarded.

Actually, this teacher, Tamarita, many, many, many years later, she told me that she can never forget the beautiful [SPANISH], the figurines I made with the-- how do you call? The thing that children play with, it will come back in a second. Anyway, that with my hands, I have very good hands-- I always had good hands-- and I could form all these figurines and families together and all kinds of things. I mean, a child whose brain is not working well will not be able to do that. But I was kept back.

And then later, they never want to put me ahead again because they always convinced me by, listen, you are the best in the class. Why would you like to risk not being the best in the class? If I put you one year ahead of you, it would be more difficult, and blah, blah, blah, and the children.

Anyway, the only good thing about it is that, yes, I was a very good student, and my only friends were those that wanted to either learn something or wanted to be near me while we had a test or something. And then I had two good friends that we have been friends with, one of them specially up until today. And since I arrived when I was 4, and I'm 76, I would say for 72 years, and that would be your mother.

And that she was the only really friend I had. The others were acquaintances, and there were several reasons not to have friends. Besides my shyness and I was a nerd, so it's like today. Children don't want to play, and I wasn't playing. And I wasn't skipping classes or taking off a day when there was school.

So I wasn't like everybody else. I always was different. I guess from the day I was born, I was different because I was from Hungary. I was different because I was orthodox. I was different because I studied. I was different because of many, many, many things, everything.

And I was different because we were poor. And when a birthday came of a classmate, I couldn't go to the birthday because we didn't have enough money to buy a present, and I didn't want to go with empty hands. Or I couldn't eat at the party because it was not kosher. So I didn't go to most parties. I went to very few parties.

And the only friend I went to the house was at your grandmother's Aida house, and she was always, always so sweet and so nurturing and so nice to me, just like the mother I didn't have. And so that's the way-- I was terrible in sports, terrible. I couldn't catch a ball. And the only sports we did, really, was to play volleyball.

First of all, I was so small. When they chose people for the teams, I was always the last one they chose because nobody wanted me, and I don't blame them. I was terrible. And the only thing I could do, even with my short legs, was run. And I was running pretty well, but then I was also falling. I guess I didn't have a good method or something. There were no teachers teaching you or something, I don't know.

So I fell several times. And my mother said, no more, no more running because she always felt responsible. She promised my birth mother that she would take care of me, and she didn't want me injured because of running, doing a sports class. So again, another reason not to be popular, not to have friends, nothing.

There was an episode when a friend of mine-- well, one of the girls sat in the class was inviting all the others to share in her potato chips that she had bought, and she told me plainly, not for you because you never buy anything. Well, I never buy anything because I didn't have any money to buy anything. And if I had to buy, I would have bought something that I had to because I need it.

Anyway, so of course, I was insulted and was crying. I cried in those times for all the years I wouldn't cry later because today, even if you ask me to cry, I cannot cry. I don't know if it's because of the medication I take or something, but I cannot cry. So when my sister, Yergi, saw me crying, she came running because she was also my protector there.

And what's wrong? Why are you crying? Well, because she didn't want to share her potato chips with me, and she said that I never give her anything, so I'm insulted. So Yergi started yelling at her, and anyway, but that's the way it was. That's the way it was.

Thank you, Noemi. And do you think you developed a special bond with George given that you survived the war together and then came to Mexico together?

Definitely. Definitely. We are very, very close. I'm close to Jutka and Erchi also. But with Jutka, there was always a certain-- we were robbing each other because it was kind of-- I don't know if, well, inside her she felt jealous that I came into their life because I took away part of my mother's attention or something like that, and she was the oldest. Also, she was a wonderful student, very, very bright until today, even more, better than me. But I was competition in a way. I don't know.

So that was one thing why many times, and sometimes I felt Cinderella with her because she tried to manipulate me. And it wasn't as close as with Yergi because Yergi and I were so close in age, just one year difference, and everything we passed, we passed together. And we more or less felt the same way.

And with my brother, we had a wonderful relationship, at the beginning especially, even though he was such a little devil, but he was the only one who could sit down with me when I wouldn't eat and feed me like a little bird, a little bit of-- in a spoon that we would put from the bolillos, the hard bread rolls from Mexico, little pieces in to my coffee and then feed me one by one, little by little. And he could sit with me for hours, trying for me to eat.

It came a time when the only thing I would eat was the dry bread because that didn't make me vomit, the crust, just the

crust. I remember going to the Mexican-- the [SPANISH], the lottery, when they did the choosing. It was a big show for the radio, and there were many singers. And you could go to the show.

So I don't remember who bought tickets for us to go, but we went to the show of the National Lottery. And I remember taking two or three bolillos to eat the crust, just a crust, not the inside, because the inside would make me vomit. And that was a nice experience, I remember. We had the regular Mexican singers that we all loved until today.

Thank you. I have another question, Noemi. So you mentioned before that you didn't know about your story until much later. So can you tell me when and how did you find out, and how did that impact you?

Yes. I got married when I was 19, and I didn't really want to get married then. I had known Robbie-- Robbie Stern, Robert Stern-- since I was a little girl because they were also Hungarian, but they were there from before the war. And anyway, Robbie was my brother-in-law's best friend, Yergi's husband, and they kept inviting me when he came to visit them. And we all lived in the same building.

Until I grew to love him, and my mother wanted me to marry him. The whole family wanted me to marry him, and there was a very important reason. I had planned on going to Israel to the Michlalah for a year of schooling after I finished the seminary. I was going to go with Lili, with your mom, but my family didn't want me to go. Now I know it. I didn't know then why they were doing everything possible for me to get married, and the reason was that I had all that family in Israel that they didn't want me to meet or didn't want me to know about.

Anyway, I got married when I was 19, and for some reason we couldn't get pregnant. And when I was married about four years, we decided to adopt a baby. So we adopted my son, a beautiful, gorgeous, smart, all the good things you can imagine, but a terrible mischievous guy. He was walking when he was seven months old by the hand, and at nine months he was walking by himself, jumping out of every carriage, every stroller, everything. The bed, of course, when he was six months old, he would jump out of the bed, of the crib.

But anyway, we thought with time, or everybody thought we would calm down and it would be easier to get pregnant, whatever. Meanwhile, of course, I was going to see doctors, and they couldn't find anything wrong.

Then my family in Israel kept sending me messages with anybody they could find that was visiting Israel from Mexico and asking them to look me up. My grandmother was probably in her 80s, and she wanted to see her grandchild, her only grandchild from her oldest son. And she was promised, actually, by my mother's family that they would take me to Israel later, because she wanted me to be with them, and it never happened. And my family just never told me anything.

So they kept sending the messages. And eventually, Robbie's parents started going to Israel every year. They had a condo there. And they got to meet them, and they gave them the letters, and they gave the letters to Robbie. Now, at their instigation, or I don't know how, they convinced Robbie to tell me. So Robbie told me, my story because they thought that because my mother had died in childbirth, that was what was keeping me from getting pregnant.

Anyway, Robbie told me. First, I kind of knew it, I kind of didn't believe it. Fortunately, my mother was not in town when he told me, so I didn't have to talk to her. And I called up my Uncle Ignacio, Itzu, the patriarch of the family, and told him I needed to speak with him, to please come to my house. So my uncle came, and I asked him.

And so he said, he told me-- he still kind of lied to me because he said, yes, you are adopted. Your mother died, but he said that she had died during the war, not-- omitting all the second part. I guess their thinking was that if they tell me that my mother died in childbirth, that would not allow me to get pregnant.

Anyway, when I was told, I was devastated, even though I knew it but I didn't know it, I felt it but I didn't know it. I had had several encounters with people. When Robbie and I were going to get married, we went to visit-- I mean, the custom was in Mexico, I don't know if it's still now, that if you get married, you bring the invitation personally to the people that you are inviting because nobody trusted the mail. So here in the States, we send everything by mail, but over there we used to take it personally. And people were used to that. If you didn't take it personally, they got insulted.



So I went to a couple of people that way from my mother's town, and by their questions, I knew something was wrong. One of them kept asking me when I said-- I came with the invitation with Robbie and said, we are here to invite you to my daughter's wedding. I am Ilonka's youngest daughter.

And this was a man, and he kept asking me, which one of her daughters? Hers or her sister's? And I said, Ilonka's youngest daughter. But which one of her youngest daughters?

So anyway, this went on for a little while. And when I came home, I told my mother. I said, listen, I think this-- I don't remember if it-- I think it was one of the Weinstains. There are two families from my mother's town, the Weinstains and the [PERSONAL NAME] that also went to Mexico with the help of my Uncle Itzu, from Italy.

And I told my mother, I don't know if this guy is senile or what's wrong with him. Why does he keep asking which of her daughters, when I'm telling him, your youngest daughter OK, now I know. And then I kind of knew it. I felt it, but I didn't know it.

And there was another one who also asked me something similar. So something was going on. So when Robbie told me and my uncle came, and I just asked my uncle, please don't tell my mother because this was a feeling like I've lost everything. Now, I had already lost everything. Now I'm losing again my family, and I didn't want to lose my family. And I didn't want my uncle to tell my mother that I knew because I didn't want her to know that I knew because if she knew that I knew, she didn't have to be my mother anymore. That's what was going on in me, terrible, terrible thing.

And of course, my uncle said, no, I won't tell her. But of course, I knew he would tell her. And with the time, slowly, slowly, the thing came out. I never really had a talk with my mother about it. I know that she knew, and she knew that I know, or with my siblings. Only later it came out, little by little, from them, different occasions, but nothing aggressive or nothing bad.

And with Yergi, we were always so close. We were like Siamese sisters. So then when I read all the letters from my family, I wrote to them. It happens that I used to write to my grandmother, not knowing it was my grandmother, because she used to send us things or in writing and she would sign [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH] which means "from grandmother."

What my mother used to say that in Hungary because of respect we used to call Grandma all the old ladies. And my mother said that, so we accepted that. So I used to write to Grandma a few words every year for Rosh Hashanah, but I didn't know that Grandma was really Grandma.

And so when I went, I arranged with them to-- I said, we will go visit, and we finally went in '69, in September. We went to Israel for five months, but I couldn't feel anything for them. They were my family, but I couldn't feel them as my family. Even today, it feels strange.

They are closer because I had met with them many, many, many times. Unfortunately, the uncles and aunts are all dead besides one. One uncle's wife was still alive, but very, very old. And my grandmother also, I saw her a few times.

That time we stayed in Israel for five weeks, so we had a chance to visit with everybody a few times, even with Moore's family, who were in Mea Shearim and also Bnei Brak. So even today, I have gotten farther away from religion for many things, for my life. And I still am observant up to a certain point. I eat kosher, I keep Shabbat.

But I'm not like they are, and they are Haredim. And they are very nice, but we treat each other with the kid gloves. We love each other. We know we have to love each other. We are family, but it's not the same thing. It's not the same thing.

Thank you, Noemi. I to ask you a question about Mexico, and then some reflections, current reflections. So would you say that you eventually developed a sense of belonging to Mexico?

I'm sorry. Yes, with reservations. I did not belong to Hungary. I was and am grateful to Mexico for having taking us in, when where nobody else would take us in. And I loved Mexican history and Mexican culture and the Mexican people,

who are so warm.

But even though I had a Mexican passport, I wasn't Mexican either. I only got my passport when I got married because Mexico-- well, because when I got married, I obtained the citizenship because of Robbie, who was born in Mexico. It was very difficult to get the citizenship in Mexico in those times. I don't know how it is today, probably even worse. I don't know. With a lot of money, you could do it, but we didn't have a lot of money. And we had all the rights being just permanent residents of Mexico. The only thing we didn't do is. Vote

When I got married, I right away went to vote at the first occasion I had. And in that sense, I felt very, very Mexican, and I was-- on the other hand, there were certain things of Mexico that I couldn't get used to. Something that nowadays we have everywhere, unfortunately, I have to say in the States also, but in those times at least we thought it was cleaner in Europe or the United States, the question of politics and corruption.

We knew in Mexico we couldn't trust a policeman. And I was afraid. I was afraid still, as I told you, of every adult, especially somebody with a uniform, from the time of the war. And here, for some reason, actually, because I have worked with law enforcement for many, many years, I'm not so scared of them. I know there are good ones and bad ones.

But over there, I was scared of all of the police or anybody in the government. Whenever we went to the government to renew any document, we knew we were not allowed to talk, had to keep our mouth shut, and just let the attorney do whatever he had to do, give a present. Even when I got divorced, the attorney told us, bring something nice for the judge, something that you would never think of here. Over there, it was something understood. You had to give a present, give something. If not money, something.

And then when I got divorced after some time and my children left-- they went to Israel-- I thought it was time for me to start my third life. And then I moved to Los Angeles because of my cousin Erica who was living here already and we were always very close because of the Holocaust. And I first thought of going to New York, but then I changed my mind. I came here and started a new life.

I went to UCLA, got my search certification as a court interpreter and started all over again. And I was 45 years old.

Thank you, Noemi. I'll ask you some reflections. So why do you think you survived the Holocaust?

I think there is something in us survivors. There is a certain strength, a certain will. I don't know how to explain it.

Now, a baby months old, I survived because I had my mom and my other mom, and in a way because there was a certain amount of money, not in money, but as I said, you know you could buy a kilogram of sugar with a fur or a diamond, or potatoes, so that helped. And I had God on my side. I've always, always felt that I have a special relationship with God, not with the religion, which I was religious anyway, but a personal bond, something that God wanted me to live because I know my birth was very difficult.

I almost died myself and my mother, both of us, when I was born. But we survived. I survived, when I should have probably died. So I always felt that there was something special. God wanted me to live for some reason.

Then when I was growing up, the first years, I had all these fantasies. I was going to be like Superman. I was going to be Superwoman. I was going to save the Jewish people. Something like this was never going to happen because I was always going to be looking out for my people, and because God was with me.

And I had special powers. I even used-- I was sure I could fly. Maybe you think maybe I'm crazy. Maybe I was crazy, I don't know, from so much suffering. But I was sure, until almost I became a teenager, that I could fly. I wouldn't tell it to people because I knew they would say I am crazy.

In my daydreams or dreams, I would levitate. It wasn't really a flying flying. I would levitate, elevate myself. And then eventually, I thought, of course, I turned around and I was flying, and I am Superman. I guess I was not the only Jew,

that there was somebody who created Superman who felt the same way. But I had the same feeling myself.

So that kept me going and surviving everything. And God has been with me because I've had lots of things in my life, lots of things and moments when I said, that's it. I don't want this. But I keep going.

I have tried to find in myself what was the reason that God kept me alive. The only thing I could think of many, many years ago was that it was to adopt and take care of my dear, wonderful, beautiful children. And I don't know, but that's what I think kept me alive.

And of course, the love of my family, and now these last 17 years at least, being with Barry, having made bad moments and good moments, but we are here. And Robbie was a wonderful man. He was very, very good. We had problems. We weren't the right people together, but he was a very good person.

And so I think that's what's kept me going all my life. And I'm here. And since I was able to survive the worst part, so now it's just keep going. My family, especially the women, had lived a long life, those that we know of, and so I'm still pedaling.

Thank you, Noemi. One more question. Why did you choose to share your story?

Well, because I'm so saddened by everything that's going on in the world nowadays, by all the anti-Semitism, by the fact that "never again" has become "better again," by the fact that, like Elie Wiesel said, what did we learn from the Holocaust? That they can get away with it. And it's important to tell our story because more and more people will come up, and they already do it now, say that this never happened, this never affected us.

It affected us, not only those that were in the war, not only those in the camps, those that we're living at that time, that era, and the survivors and the children because, like my uncle and my cousin used to say, we are all damaged merchandise. And we could never live normal lives because we were not normal. They destroyed a lot of things, not only 6 million people-- almost-- but they destroyed many, many more millions, a third of the Jews of the world-- but they destroyed faith in mankind.

And I felt I had to do it, at least if nobody else will listen, for my children, my grandchildren. And I have a great grandchild and I'm very much afraid for them, for their future, for their lives as Jews. They're all very assimilated, but that doesn't mean anything. And it's not that I want-- I want them very much to be Jews, and so I want them to know my story. And I want them to be strong and to learn from what we went through, and to protect themselves and to defend themselves and not to let anybody take them to the gas chambers.

And of course, Israel is very important to me. And I want Israel to be safe because the world has never been the same since Israel became our country, even though we don't live there. We got a little more respect from the rest of the world because they can't tell you-- cannot tell you-- go away, or I'll kill you, because if they tell me, go away, I have a place where to go.

And here in the United States, we are very fortunate and we believe very well. But as I say, I will put my hands into the fire for anybody. And I know there are anti-Semites everywhere, even here. I have more protections here, thank God. But you have to know-- you have to be prepared for life, and that's why I tell my story.

Thank you so much, Noemi. One almost last question, what does it mean to be resilient today?

Well, it's very personal because Jews have to be resilient in a certain way, other people have to be resilient in other ways. Minorities have to be resilient in their own way, but they have to learn to come out of where they are and fight, fight for whatever they feel they need. And always think that there is a better day tomorrow.

Israelis have a very good saying, [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH]. This will also pass. And you have to go on, just go on. Continue walking. It's put one foot in front of the other and continue walking. You just have to go on.

Thank you, Noemi. Before we conclude, would you like to share any information, any other information, about your family, your children, your grandchildren?

Well, yes. I have, as I have mentioned, my son is 52 years old. He lived for 21 years in Israel. He had a very important job defending Israel. He was a paratrooper and a sniper, and he worked for different intelligence agencies. And he worked also for the American State Department, at the American embassy in Tel Aviv.

And he also worked with technical things, with the internet and computers. He's the one that programmed the Museum of the Palmach in Tel Aviv, which is across the street from the University of Tel Aviv, and you will see his name up on the wall with the creators of the museum. His name is Gary, Gary Stern.

He grew up as Gerardo in Mexico City, but he likes Gary better. And we adopted him in Anaheim, California. He has a son, my only grandson, Yonatan, who lives in Israel and has finished his army already. He's in Tzeva.

And now he's working and studying college, doing it now online. And his work is similar a little bit to the father, but not exactly. I don't even know what it is.

And then my daughter, who is 48 years old, and we adopted her from the city of Bath in England. At that time, the United States had the abortion law already, and it was not easy to get a child for adoption. And this came up just by chance with a doctor in Mexico, who asked a friend of ours if-- that they know about somebody in England who had a month-old baby, wanted to give her up for adoption. We were interested, and we said, yes, of course, we are interested. So we got beautiful Galia to come to us.

And both of them were the vet were very difficult to rear. They were both hyperactive children, which was a challenge. But they are two wonderful people, and I think that's the main thing. Galia has four daughters, my four granddaughters.

She married an Israeli person when she was 21, here in Los Angeles. and it was a very bad marriage, and it was on and off for many years. And that same year, she had our first grandchild, granddaughter, Ilana. And a year after, she had twins. So we had in one year, three babies, and I was pushing a three-baby stroller.

And they're all beautiful, wonderful. Ilana is 26 now, the twins are 25. And then Galia remarried 13 years ago, and they have a 12-year-old girl. Her husband is Eris, a wonderful person. I love them all.

And Gary was first married in Israel. He's divorced, and he is married now to Cathy here. But they had no more children because Cathy had children of her own from previous marriages. And Eris had never been married before, so they had this girl who is 12 now and she's taller her mother already because the father is very tall. And that's my Gaby, Gabriella.

One of the twins-- the twins' names are Ariela, beautiful Ariela, who we call-- she is our hippy. She likes to work the land, and that's what she does. She lives in northern California and she works on the land. I don't know exactly what, where, but she's happy that way, so that's good with me.

And her twin is Esther, who lives now in Las Vegas, and Esther has now a baby who is a year and three months old. She is not married, but she lives with the father of the baby. The baby is a quarter Black, but she looks white, only with black, curly hair. And the father is half Black because he has a white mother and a Black father.

And we went to visit them almost a year ago. And I never met him, but the baby has been an incredible experience. I don't see the baby, but I get almost everyday pictures of her.

Now, the rest of the family with my siblings, we still love each other very much. We don't see each other as much as we would like, but I'm close to all of them. I saw Jutka last year. I hadn't seen her for three years. I last saw her before that on her twin grandson's bar mitzvah in Israel. But this time, we met all in Prague, not only just Jutka and her husband Pepe, who is my brother the same way that Haim and Yergi's husband was my brother, because I was 14 when they started dating them. And so they have been in my life forever.

And it was incredible to meet with Jutka. It was a long trip. We were away for four or five days on a cruise and then in Hungary, my first visit to Hungary after 42 years. And we went to Prague and all the Jewish places. In every place we went, we tried to find a Jewish connection in the temples and the Jewish history.

And just by chance, I met with Jutka in Prague, and it was just fantastic to be with her. It made my trip, really. It was a very fantastic trip in every way, but meeting with her it was very good.

And Yergi, she came to visit a couple of years ago to see Erika and me, and then I went to Mexico for a week just to visit the family. Usually, when I had gone before, it was for the weddings or bar mitzvahs or things like that. But this time, I just went to have a girls' meeting, and that was nice. But I haven't seen them since then. Neither have I seen my brother since when we all met together in Israel for that bar mitzvah, the twins' bar mitzvah.

But I know they're there, and they're always in my life. I speak with them. I see them now with WhatsApp or Skype or whatever other, fortunately, these electronic devices we have. And the rest of the family, unfortunately, I think, in Mexico, we have only one cousin's wife, and everybody else is either moved to another place or died. Fortunately, Yergi's family has been growing, and they're all in Mexico. But besides them, we are all over the world.

Thank you, Noemi. So we're almost finishing. Is there anything else you would like to share?

I think it's very important, the work you are doing. And I am very thankful for you and James for doing this. I think I'm the first person, probably, that you do it this way, through Zoom or whatever media thing. But I think it's very good to have this, to be able to do it. And I just will say, like we say in shul, [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH]. All the best to you and thank you.

And I will end thanking God for everything, and that in my last years, in my old years, found my hubby.

What?

I'm thanking God for having found you.

[INAUDIBLE].

And just go on, one foot in front of the other.

Thank you so much, Noemi, for sharing your story. We have completed the interview with Noemi Stern. Thank you.

Thank you.