

This is a United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Mrs. Irene Weiss on May 20, 2020, recorded remotely. Mrs. Weiss is in Vienna, Virginia, or Fairfax, Virginia. And Mrs. Weiss, before we go further, I wanted to find out from you, do you consent to this interview?

Yes.

OK. It will become part of the USHMM archives here in Washington, DC. OK.

OK.

So I'm going to start kind of at the beginning and ask you a few questions about your life, about your experiences. And then we'll also talk about your work as a volunteer at the museum, at the Holocaust museum. So my very first question is, can you tell me when you were born?

In November 21, 1930.

OK. And where were you born?

I was born in a small town in Hungary called Bótrágy. Actually, when I was born, it was Czechoslovakia, but basically I grew up after it became Hungary.

Well, there is a part of the-- there is a part of Europe, and particularly near the borders of various countries, that have neighbors where one can be born in a city, stay in that city their whole life, and have lived in four countries.

That happened to me.

Yeah. So do you speak any Czech? Do you remember anything from Czechoslovakia when it was--

Yes, well, I do remember-- you know, I do or can translate some of it, but it's not-- I would be-- it's not alien to me, let's put it that way. But my other best language is Hungarian.

I see.

I speak Hungarian, and had most of my education before the war in a Hungarian school.

So was Hungarian your first language at home?

Well, Yiddish was the first language in my family, and Hungarian was the second.

OK. Did you have brothers and sisters?

Yes, there were six children in my family.

Quite a lot.

Yes. It was common in those days.

OK. And where were you in the spectrum? Were you the oldest, the youngest?

I was the third.

OK. And who were-- tell me the names of your brothers and sisters.

Yes. So the oldest was Serena. She survived.

What year was she born?

Pardon me? What?

What year was she born?

Oh, OK. She was born in 1927.

OK. And then after Serena?

And after Serena was a brother, Moshe, and he was born in probably 1937-- '27, I mean. Maybe '25. No. No. No, later. Maybe '29-- 1929.

OK. So he was like a year older than you were?

Yes.

OK.

Just about. There were year and a half, something like that.

OK. And then the other siblings after you?

Yeah. So then there was a sister, Edit, and she was born in 1932; a boy not-- Ruvayn, 1935.

How do I spell his name?

Well, it will be phonetic, because it's the Yiddish name. So R-U-V-A-Y-N-- Ruvayn.

Ruvayn. I didn't hear it properly. OK.

OK.

OK.

And then there was Gershon, 1938.

Oh, so he was a baby when everything started, a toddler.

He was the youngest, right.

What were your mother and father's names?

My mother's name was Leah, and she was-- in 1944, she was 44 years old.

So she was born in 1900.

1900, right.

And your father's name?

And my father's was Meyer, and he was-- in 1944, he was 47 years old.

So he would have been 1897.

Yes, or '98, something like that. I think '98.

What was your name when you were born?

My Yiddish name was Rahel.

Rahel.

Yes.

OK. And your maiden name?

Fogel. F-O-G-E-L.

OK. So how-- just a side note, how did you become-- how did Rahel become Irene?

Yes, it's puzzling, because usually they try to match up at least the first initial. I don't know. It doesn't match because the others are pretty much-- their Hungarian names do sort of match up with the Yiddish, and mine doesn't. I really don't know.

Oh, so does that mean that you used to have-- even from birth, you had a Hungarian name as well as a Yiddish name?

Oh, yes. The Yiddish name was registered also at the registry, and the Hungarian name had to be given because of the schooling-- Hungarian school or any other school.

So who did you identify with more, Irene or Rahel?

Well, again, in my house, as we spoke Yiddish. They would call me Rahel. In Yiddish, it's even a different pronunciation-- I would be Rahel. And outside playing with kids or in school, I was-- actually, the pronunciation was in Hungarian, Irén.

Irén.

Yeah, dropping the last "e."

I see. I see. Irén. So both of them were familiar for you?

Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

OK. Tell me a little bit about your family. Were you a very religious family?

Well, we were an Orthodox family.

I see.

Not the most strict and, you know-- not the Hasidim that we know now with the special-- my father did not wear special clothing to be identified as a Jew. But everybody in the town, all the Jews, I mean, were Orthodox. I mean, everything was observed, but there were distinctions.

My father did not have the very visible payots the Orthodox did, or the clothing. But he did have a beard. But again, it was a trimmed beard rather than the free-flowing. So I would say in today's understanding would be more modern than Orthodox.

OK. OK. And Bótrágy itself did have a large Hungarian minority?

The town was very small, population 1,000, and it was a farming town. It was a farming area.

I see.

Just all of the Hungarians were farmers.

OK. And your father himself-- was it a large-- was there a large Jewish community within it?

No, not at all. There were a total of 10 Jewish families in the-- in Bótrágy.

Oh, so it was quite small that way?

Very small. A small village and small Jewish population, and the general population, 1,000 farmers, so it's kind of a-- not a very wealthy town, yeah.

How did your father support the family?

Well, my father had a lumber yard, a lumber business, in the neighboring town, which was about 5 kilometers-- it's something like 2 and 1/2 miles. And he would go to the town, which was called Batyu. And he would go on his bicycle in the morning and come back in evening.

The lumber yard was substantial in the town of Batyu, which was much larger, and many more-- maybe 50 Jewish families. And he-- the other interesting aspect of it is that my mother's parents lived in that town, in Batyu

How would I spell Batyu?

So in the Hungarian way, let's say, would be B-A-T-Y-U.

OK. OK, Batyu.

Batyu, yeah. And Batyu was a railroad center, and it was an entirely different town. It was a more modern, up-to-date busy place.

And was your father from-- and tell me again, how do you spell Bótrágy? Was that your birthplace, your home?

So Bótrágy was B-O-T-R-A-G-Y. That's Bótrágy.

OK. And your father, was he born in Bótrágy? Was his family from there?

He was born, yes, in the general area when Batyu and Bótrágy were sort of the same region from what I understand. Then it got divided. Yeah, his father was born there. And so it's his grandfather, from what I understand, originally came from Poland to that area. He was a young man at the time.

I see. And did your mother and your father also have a lot of brothers and sisters?

Oh, yes. Quite large. So there were-- my grandfather was married and had three children, which included my mother and two brothers. His wife died-- his first wife died-- and he remarried a younger woman, and she was the one till-- that was alive during-- when the Holocaust came about. And with the second wife, he had, I believe, six children.

Wow. So she had six stepbrothers and sisters and two other siblings?

And there were three from the first wife. So it was my mother and two brothers. So yes, it was a very large family. My grandfather was an interesting person, because he lived in and grew up in a different area, which was in the mountainous area of Carpathian Ukraine, where he established himself as a wealthy man.

And for some reason, he decided to move to the more flat area of the Batyu area, and there he opened-- without selling his holdings in the mountains, he bought and established a flour mill. And, as I said, this was

a farming region altogether, and the flour mill was an essential industry for the farmers.

Of course.

So he became a very wealthy man, having property in two places.

Did you know him?

Oh, yes. Very well. Right.

What kind of personality was he?

Well, I perhaps will retract very well, because it's interesting to me. Now, I'm-- been a grandmother for a long time, and of course, my husband's grandfather, we were a different type. But that is how he was. He was reserved.

And the thing that-- when we went to visit as children, and we went often because it was very near, the greeting at that time was in Yiddish. It was-- it meant-- it would-- it meant you kissed his hand-- kiss the hand. And that was the greeting, kiss the hand. And then that was it. And he was in the background.

But I understand from the history of the family-- see, my mother was very young when his first wife died. When her mother died she was very young, and the little boys were even younger. And so then a stepmother came into the situation. And the story my mother used to tell is that her father was an exceptional father because he did not allow the first three children to be treated differently than the following children by the stepmother, and that he was very honored by his first three children because he protected them and took care of them, I imagine financially too.

And so was your stepgrandmother-- did you know her very well?

Well, again, she-- you know, it's a long story. We were little kids who loved to go to Batyu to the grandparents. We just couldn't get enough, because there were the young uncles and the young aunts, and they loved us, and they played with us, and they took very good care of us. And there was activity there.

There was the mill that was humming and working. And my father was across the street, his business was across the street, and we went back and forth. And it was just a magical place to be there.

And when we were children, we were not told that she was a stepmother. And not until I was maybe 13 that I found out. So since grandparents were not hands-on-- she was not hands-on. But we did not know that any different. And so we didn't know that she was not the real-- you know, [INAUDIBLE] my mother's--

So we didn't expect anything. But in retrospect, I know a whole lot more. So I don't know which is authentic. In retrospect now, I realize that we were not-- she was not as interested in us as I am in my own grandchildren. But that was the way it was.

Grandfather had this great reputation, and she-- by the time I knew her, she was-- she looked elderly. Now, she wasn't. So the fun there was the young uncles and aunts. They provided tremendous amount of love and attention and excitement. And it was really great to go there.

Well, it sounds lovely. It really sounds lovely. And you're telling it in exactly the right way, the way you would as a child-- what your child's experiences were, and what comes later comes later. But this is what I wanted to get a sense of. Was your parents' marriage arranged, or did they meet on their own?

Oh, I am absolutely sure that-- you know, nobody explained it. However, the following-- you know, there was-- from the new marriage, then there were three girls, and of that, I was aware even as a young person that the grandfather was searching everybody who had any money, particularly who had some property and was wealthy, that it was all arranged. It had to be matched according to family, reputation, a family's financial standing and all the rest. It was all arranged.

So I am sure that my mother's was arranged way back even more seriously, because she didn't have a mother who looked after, you know. And when she got married, then the family still lived in the mountain area, which is quite a distance. And so however, my father comes from the new area where my grandfather moved. So I don't quite know where it all happened, but then it was arranged, I am absolutely sure.

OK. And was your father's family also a large family? Did he have brothers and sisters?

Well, that was a much smaller family. Again, it is very sad to say, the women, not just the Jews, women died either in childbirth or illness. So my grandfather Fogel only had two children, a daughter and a son. The son was my father. And his wife died. And I don't know whether it was childbirth or-- the illness there was tuberculosis.

Ah. Yes, of course.

Rampant, you know. So it could have been either one. They didn't-- I didn't get a chance to really know that. But when-- so when his wife died, so he left two young kids. And my father was younger than the sister. And basically, the sister raised him, and they remained in the same house.

And I understand that sometime later their father remarried, and that somehow that didn't work. And so basically, they grew up in the house. As my aunt-- my father's brother died, as she got older, my aunt, she was the head of the family there. And so there were only the two. And I do remember that grandfather very vaguely. I think he died in 1934, and my memory of him is sitting on the lap of an older man with a long beard.

Oh, yeah.

That's my-- I must have been four years old.

Of course. You're little at that time. And did you know your father's sister, your aunt, very well?

Oh, now, she played a huge role in our upbringing. But she, to all of us children, all six, was a most important person in our lives to the very end.

In what way?

I have lot to say. Well, my mother had to-- she originally-- it seems that she had a hard life without a mother, even though her father protected her. So there was a point where she was sent to my-- the new grandmother's family, a brother who lived in Budapest of all things. My step grandmother's brother was a chazzan, and he lived-- he sang in the fine synagogues in Budapest.

And my mother, as a young girl, was sent there, probably, I would think, to get her out of the new family it seems to me. And so-- but she lived there for a while. And then when she got married, she came into this very small farming town that had very few conveniences. Our house didn't have running water and similar things like that.

So my mother became a very hardworking person when she married and started having children, practically one a year. So she was hard-working. She had to cook and bake. And she had a huge vegetable garden, which was very necessary because everything had to be grown. And she became very hardworking, very efficient.

And she was, I think, must have been overwhelmed with giving birth to children in the house with a midwife, taking care of all these kids. And so my aunt, my father's sister, was there, and she raised us. She actually raised us because our mother was very, very busy.

What was your aunt's name?

Her name was Leah. My mother's name was Leah, and hers was Leah, too. But-- yeah, they were both Leah. In Hungarian, my aunt was called Lene, of any interest. So Lene would be spelled like L-E-N-E. So she was patient. She was loving. And we-- she raised us.

And she married briefly, and that didn't work out. We children didn't know all this until much later. And since she was-- young women, single or married or widowed, never lived alone. That would have been a scandal. And so she lived with her brother's family-- my mother and all the children.

And of course, she couldn't support herself because in those days women didn't. So not only in retrospect, but we children became aware that in a small house with so much going on she felt displaced by my mother because that was her house, and my mother came to her house.

Oh, I see. I see.

So we remember the tension. And that had an effect on us, but not so much because we were young. We were just-- felt her total love and devotion. And she was very, very close to us because of her loving nature. And our mother was just simply overwhelmed with the many chores and children, and she was unavailable.

Oh, well, I mean, when you think of it, if her first child is in 1927, and her other child is in 1934-- 1938, her last one, then the decade, the 11 years, the 12 years that she is both giving birth and raising children, I can't imagine that she had any time to turn around.

Well, you know, and not only that, she had several, at least three, who died.

Oh, my goodness.

These were not all-- well, these six were not all her-- these were her live births.

Oh, my goodness.

And children died. There was there was no medicine, and they [INAUDIBLE] either in childbirth-- the miracle is that she didn't die in childbirth.

That's true. That's true.

Primitive way of giving birth without running water in the house, with a midwife who didn't know any more than anybody else about any of that. And so my mother had a very hard life. But we remember her as working all the time, and being exceptionally productive, and never complained. She just worked and worked and worked.

And coming from Budapest, for a while that she was there, it must have been very hard on her. We-- I don't have any misgivings about her love for us. She not only loved us, but she-- like, she trembles for our welfare.

She just-- she was just totally terrified because she lost one-- it's our impression that she lost the first one who was about three or four years old. And that set the tone. She never got over that, which is understandable. And after that, she was desperately worried about all of us. So it wasn't that she didn't pay attention to us, it was she didn't-- she did the work of 10 mothers.

Yeah. Yeah. It sounds that way. And it's sad to know that there was tension between them, because both of them were devoted to you it sounds.

Yes. And not only that, it's also-- I certainly understand now. That was my aunt's home. That's where her mother died. That's where she raised her brother and my father.

And if I look back now in retrospect, my father was in a terrible position, because he had to take sides with his wife and his sister. And he loved both. And it must have-- things must have been hard on everybody.

But, you know, I only remember a lot of love and a lot of concern by our parents for our welfare.

And my mother didn't give up on plans for her children, especially when it came to education later on. She made many sacrifices to make sure that we had more than the local education.

Your father-- let's turn to your father a little bit. Excuse me. I'm going to pause because I need to check something. I'm getting too much noise on my phone. I'm going to pause just for a minute. Hang on.