OK. So we are turning now towards those topics that deal with the museum, deal with how much you spoke of your story before and to whom. And so my assumption, from what you're telling me, it sounds like it was to these cousins at some of these get-togethers you would speak of certain things, certain aspects, certain things that happened.

Yeah. But as I recall, that wasn't very extensive. It was understood. It wasn't very extensive. The things I recall, as you're asking me questions, I was not the storyteller. I was back to being the one who doesn't remember anything anyway. I was too young.

Oh, I see.

Nobody asked me. And certainly, while I was attending the high school there, nobody asked me in high school, no teacher, no student. So I was not telling. My sister talked more to the people, cousins and so on.

So 1949 then, got married. And we moved to Michigan. And my husband was attending University of Michigan. And I met all kinds of-- we were living in a GI community that all the GI's who came back and married and had children. It was a whole community. And then they all went back to college because of the GI Bill that paid for it.

Of course.

So I was in this community, the young mothers, some with young children. And nobody wanted to know. Their husbands were in the war and all that. There was-- absolutely didn't talk about it. I was there for four years.

The husband finished his PhD. We came to Washington and moved into, again, in a community. Washington was very different. There was a community, garden apartments, in the area of Shirlington.

Oh, I know those. I know those, yes.

Shirley Duke Apartments was filled, again, with married GI's, this time all with children. And I already had a two-year-old, a one-year-old, whatever. I had a child. He was two years old.

And so again, there was absolutely no talking. There was one woman with a child who was interested. And she kept asking me things. There was one person.

And because she was just one person, it was easier to talk. It wasn't talking to a group. So occasionally, I answered her. But it wasn't a significant thing.

So then years after, we moved, bought a little house, and moved into a little house. And again, there was a woman. I made-- when you have a child in a carriage, you meet a lot of mothers.

That's true. That's true.

All my contacts were young mothers with children [INAUDIBLE] park, whatever. And so there was this other woman who-- and she was very interested. She lived nearby and saw her occasionally.

She was interested, a little was said, just basics, definitely not-- just that I lost my family. And there was a Holocaust, nothing.

But she was interested in my tattoo. That caught her attention. I was hiding it so that I wouldn't have to talk about it. But it was being with her a lot. So she's the one who then convinced me to go to her doctor, who will take the tattoo off. And he did.

And I suffered so much because of having to talk about it, about my tattoo and what it meant, that I was somehow willing to listen to that at the time. It was a good thing at that time in my life.

And so did that, and again, nothing. And so now, my husband has a job in the government as a geologist, a paleontologist. And I'm trying to think when the second child was born. No. Yeah, Lesley, my daughter, was two years later.

Anyhow, I'm now beginning to take college classes in the evening because I see that my language is good enough. This time, I wanted-- I knew I needed an education, not people telling me to do it. And I was very interested.

And there were a lot of evening classes. University of Virginia had extension classes in Arlington. Later on, University of Maryland had it.

I started at the University of Virginia. And I took the classes in the evening. And my husband came home and took care of the children. He had a 9-to-5 job. I drove a car by then. And I drove at night and all that, things I don't do now.

Anyhow, I attend the classes regularly and the one at a time, sometimes two subjects at a time. And I really was very interested. I just realized I knew nothing about America. I knew nothing about nothing. And I had this enormous knowledge of something that I don't want to share. And it's irrelevant.

But I need to get some general knowledge. I really felt very strong. Studying and degrees and so on was very much in my family. My husband's brother is learning. Learning was in the marrow of the bones, so was OK for me. I liked it.

So I accumulated two years worth of credits. And beyond that, if I wanted a degree, I had to be on a campus. That was the rule. You can transfer two years. But I have to be on the campus to get a degree.

And so I did that. I decided to study to be a teacher, because that was going to be good for my family. And it's a long story short at this point. It took me 10 years to get a degree--

Wow.

--between [INAUDIBLE]. I had another child. But I will always go back. But eventually, I had to be on the campus.

So I transferred to American University. And I didn't live on the campus. But I was a full-time student, not a part-time student, in the daytime.

And I had to do teaching. For one semester, I had to teach in a classroom. That was requisite.

Anyhow, 10 years, and I was a teacher. So now, my kids are in school and so on. And I'm looking for a part-time job.

And I easily get it, because by now the Fairfax County and the Washington area is filled with thousands and thousands of refugees from Vietnam, from Korea, from Afghanistan, from South America, all these refugees being admitted here, and all these children. And they're flooding into the public schools.

And the public schools have to do something with them. And so they've started an ESL, English as a second language, department in the public schools in Fairfax County. And they were looking for teachers.

And so I thought, gee, that's sounds like something I could do. And I went and applied. And what they wanted, they wanted a degree in teaching and a degree teaching of reading, an elementary school degree. But one other thing they wanted, someone who was familiar with other cultures.

And you were. And you were.

You're not going to find one who's not-- I'm very familiar. I got the job immediately. And I was assigned to a school in my neighborhood. And I started part-time. I could teach part-time.

Many years, I was in that. I taught many years. And eventually, I was full time.

But in the school setting, one year-- so what is it now? We got here around '52, '62, somewhere in the '60s. Well, I have said it took me 10 years to have a degree.

So in the school, the building where I was, they were teaching World War II history. And I never brought up my history in any of my classes, ever, because I didn't want to be labeled or known as that refugee, as that survivor, as-- I was teaching survivors. I was teaching refugees.

I just had to know how they felt. And I think I became a mother to many of them. But I didn't bring it up.

They had this terrible suffering from Cambodia. And all the kids were orphans. And I listened to their stories. I just never brought it up. But some of the teachers knew that I was from Europe and that-- they knew that I was a survivor, but nothing more.

So one of the teachers were teaching World War II history said, you probably could tell us something about World War II. Would you be willing to come over to my class and just give a little talk?

Oh, I thought to myself-- by then, I was more comfortable, and it's World War II-- yeah, I'll do it. It's my field. It was like it was natural.

And so I did, but very little, again, none of the suffering, none of the nitty gritty, a bit of an overview. And it was fine.

Was this the first time that it was public? Was this the first--

Oh, the very first time. I gave so little. And I stuck to the war [? and the bombing. ?]

Rather than the Holocaust, but the war.

Yes, yes. But I did say-- it seemed like as if my family was killed in the war. You could interpret it like that. Because again, I was very emotionally restricted and aware of my surroundings and aware of what's appropriate and who wants to know.

I did OK. It was OK what I did.

But this is the 1960s, just to get us a sense. The first time you talk is sometime in the mid '60s.

In the '60s, yes. So it seems that, in another public school in Fairfax, a Jewish teacher heard that this woman at this school had something to say about her experiences.

And he contacted me. He said, I want to know the story. This is a Jewish teacher.

And word got around. And I began to be called to other schools to speak. And I wasn't happy about it. But I went to his school, whatever. I don't even remember exactly. And word got around like this, that I was a source.

But I didn't volunteer. I never volunteered. I was a fish out of water. I was getting my bearing. Now, so when did I-- because when the museum opened, that's 25 years ago. What year was--

Actually--

--that now?

--it's a little bit more than that. It's 1993 is when the museums opened.

Yeah, that's already--

27--

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

--years.

When it did open again?

1993. So we're talking--

Oh, that was much after. Yes, yeah.

Well, I did not speak. I don't remember speaking. But I must have. I must have--

Your first interaction with the museum, were you at the opening? Did you go later? When did you first come to the museum, just--

Oh, much--

--to see it?

--much later, much later. The museum tells me-- [INAUDIBLE] I hope-- that I must have come to them about 12 years ago to want to speak for them, to want to do something for them.

So you've been a volunteer at the museum since 2008?

Say that again? I didn't hear that. What?

So you've been a volunteer at the museum since 2008?

Right. Right. When was that? Do you have that number?

If you say it's 12 years ago--

About, yes.

--it would be 2008.

Oh, it must have been around there. Yes, because this is since I'm speaking, so it must have been earlier.

But you see, it wasn't so long. It's long ago. It's 2020 now, yeah. So it's something like that, so might been a little closer to 2000.

I heard about-- I went to see it. I met people there, survivors. They were very friendly. The atmosphere seemed very nice. People were pouring in there, visitors, schools, and all kinds of people.

And I looked around. And I said, you know what? They could use some help here and particularly as the groups of school kids from 50 states were coming there.

They would come off from the permanent exhibit, come out the elevator, and go right out the door. And I thought, that's not right. Just seeing it is not enough. They should be met by survivors, so they can ask questions. Something is wrong there. They don't have enough people.

And something-- I want to tell them. And so I was just desperate to see that they are losing all these people who were going out. And I know, when I used to go through as a tourist, the kids were not paying attention. It was a day off from school.

Yeah. Yeah. But they do pay attention to an individual saying something?

Yes. And it's happened a few times that I was at the desk first, letting people into the elevator. But I had a chance, sometimes, to sit on the bench there as they came out. I would talk to them about it.

And as soon as I said that-- well, they knew that I was a survivor, because I was one of those there-- their questions were just amazing. They took my number. They ask questions. The teacher said, can we talk to you? Oh, it was such a need to answer their questions.

What kind of questions would they ask, for example?

All about the Holocaust. Why did this happen? When did that happen? What happened to you? How did you lose your parents? What about the crematorium? Who knew about it?

They got nothing out of the exhibit. There's a lot of reading there. And there are crowds there. They're talking to each other. They've pushed from floor to floor.

I mean, they got something out of it. But it's not what people came from Minnesota and Florida and all over. For the teachers, was not enough.

So I decided that what I-- I don't like to be at the desk. I'm not doing anything enough at the desk. I can't meet them on the bench there.

I started meeting these people coming out and talking to them. I said, now wait a minute. There has to be a better way.

So I told them that, actually, even when I signed up, I told them that what I would like to do is speak. I did say that, I remember, to Diane Saltzman, that I would like to speak. But they said, you do the museum for a while first-- and that was sensible-- just do this for a while.

But when I discovered that there was such a need for straightening out all these questions, I [INAUDIBLE] back to her. And I said, I want speaking.

And they began to assign me to speaking to groups right in the museum. And it turned out that they could have used me every single way and every single day, because there were requests.

There were always groups. I mean, there were in this--

All these groups who requested, not just who were already in the museum with their people, but other groups, outside groups, who wanted a speaker.

That's right.

And I realized there were other speakers. And as soon as I got my confidence-- and also, I realized that when I started speaking to groups, and they had all these questions, and that they were so immersed in it, and it really affected them, and that really had an impact beyond what the exhibits had-- I said, OK, that's what I want to do. And I did a lot of speaking. I did a lot of speaking.

Well, tell me, in those first years before the museum, when you were still in the high school, the Fairfax County High School system, and people would call, other teachers would ask you to come, did you get the same level of interest

from--

Yes.

--the young kids?

Yes, there was. I don't quite remember when the first one was to speak to a large group. I'm almost certain it was with some high school, which is the neighborhood school here where all my children went to the high school.

They had some-- well, actually, it was another school. It was a school in the Bailey's Crossroads-- I forget now-- toward-- it was somebody.

I do remember now. It was a school that was near Lake Barcroft where it had two types of students, [INAUDIBLE] students in a very poor area in the Bailey's Crossroads area and very high-end students who came from what is called Lake Barcroft, a very expensive area.

It is a very expensive area.

Yeah. And the school, it became-- it was a controversial thing in the county for a long time. And so what they did, they ran two separate kinds of systems in the school to satisfy both sides. And in the higher end in Lake Barcroft, I had a friend who was teaching Hebrew school to the Jewish kids in Fairfax County.

And then the Jewish day school, Gesher Jewish Day School, she was speaking in that. My grandson went there. We met.

Anyhow, her daughter went to that school. And she said to her mother, she would like-- very bright girl-- that she's going to talk to her teacher. They were talking. They were learning about World War II.

And this young girl in high school said she wanted to know--

There--

--the teacher should know--

--is a high school near Lake Barcroft called the Stuart High School. Could that have been it?

That was the one. That was the one, Stuart High School. And there was a lot of controversy because of the two types of students. But they compromised somehow. They ran two tracks. I don't know exactly how that worked.

But this girl whose mother I knew, who was a teacher at Gesher Jewish Day School, she wanted to have a survivor come and speak when they were learning about the Second World War. And so I was asked to come there.

And the staff was very welcoming, huge auditorium with 400 kids and so on. And I would speak. And I would get flowers and letters. And everybody was very happy, the teachers, the principal. And somehow, it spilled over to my neighborhood high school, Woodson High School, where my kids and later grandkids went.

And Woodson has me blocked for every year. When I have finish speaking in January, my next year's date is set. They put it--

So tell me--

--on the calendar.

--what kind--

And this year, I skip because of the virus.

The pandemic.

I have my date. They decided that it was absolutely essential as part of their curriculum.

And I had such a welcoming reception. They did all kinds of welcoming. There were banners up on the wall, "Welcome, Mrs. Weiss," all kind of things. And the whole school was there, and the principal, and the janitor.

Tell me--

And they gave me an hour.

Tell me, why do you think-- first, again, when you say something, I have not one question but many questions. Number one, why do you think-- that's quite a jump from being a speaker who comes in because the teacher would like you to address the class on a particular topic that they're studying to becoming part of the curriculum. So my first question, why do you think that is?

Well, I think I can go right back to the theme at hand. It was the influence of the museum, the Holocaust museum, absolutely. Because I went there first as a visitor. And then I saw the need that people need to know this.

And then I realized that I actually could do it and that I just must to do it. I felt I had to do it. This is not enough. These people want to know.

And as soon as I got over the fear of speaking-- and believe me, in the beginning in the museum, speaking to all kinds of distinguished people, or just school-- military people, FBI people, police groups-- I mean, my heart was pounding plenty, believe me.

Oh, my. Oh, my.

My heart was pounding, sweaty palms and all that. I had a lot to overcome. I had two things to overcome. One, becoming public, which I just began to want to do, but talking to children in a more casual way, not into an organized I am upfront, and they are sitting there.

That's right.

Yeah, it was very hard. It was public. It was public speaking.

And then the questions, I realized that I had to speak on my feet, a vast number of questions, and politics, and interpretations, and religion, and personal feelings. They ask everything. I didn't think I was informed enough. I didn't think I was smart enough. I didn't think I had the clout to do that.

I just wanted to speak to high school kids who come in there anyway. It was very hard.

Have you changed your mind about that?

Did I--

Have you changed your mind about all of the doubts?

Oh, I didn't change my mind. Even though I had a very hard time, I used to take two Tylenol to calm me. There were times early on where I was nauseous before I got there--

Oh, dear.

--mostly because I had to be exposed so personally. I don't know how to explain that. I wanted people to know that. But somehow, my inner-- things I tell you now, it's so personal.

Of course, it is.

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

Of course, it is.

--painful. And it was raw. And I became aware that other survivors were speaking. And I became aware of the fact that they broke into tears while they were speaking. And they actually cried through the whole thing.

And I was determined never, never to cry because I understood that, if I start crying, I cut off the questions. People feel they're hurting me. And they will not ask questions.

You know something? Again, I go back to this incident I told you about earlier-- not incident, but the interest I had in interviewing and writing about people who survive torture. And one of the people that I spoke with, I spoke with not only the director of this rehabilitation center but also with a physical therapist and a psychiatrist. Clearly, there was a psychiatrist.

The psychiatrist told me many, many interesting things. And one of those interesting things is, as a torture victim finally is opening up and starting to tell the psychiatrist about what happened to him or her, if the psychiatrist starts crying-- because it's a horrible, horrible event that he's listening, or she's listening to-- that victim, that person who survived this, clams up and shuts up--

Interesting.

--and will not talk more, because they do not want to hurt the psychiatrist.

Works both ways.

Yeah. And so when you say you don't want the audience to see you cry because then they'll think that they're hurting you, which was exactly that same reaction that you anticipated, something that actually happens in this interaction.

Saw some of those, I heard some of those occasionally. And then they cried. I [? saw ?] them on TV or whatever.

And I, right away, saw that that was wrong. It was wrong. She lost the audience.

And in addition to that, there's another element. It's very complicated. I did not want pity, not pity. It's a terrible thing. I do not want to be pitied. I did not do anything wrong that people did this to me.

But I am more angry than anything else. And I don't pity me. And if I cry, I'm going to invite pity and all the rest. And so I held on to that.

All of those factors play into you coming up and becoming a public speaker about these things or speaking about these things publicly. All of these things play into it or did play into it?

Yeah, yeah. So eventually-- that fear and so on-- I overcame, because I realized that it got easier, that people seemed to connect to it. And the more questions they asked me, the more I realized that I did have some answers.

In other words, I became more confident. And then it was not-- but the beginning was hard. I was not taught how to speak and all that, but still.

So I was in great demand, like all other survivors. And I was in the museum a lot. And I realized that this museum is a fantastic place for remembering, and projecting, and explaining what happened in Europe long ago. And that even though when it was planned and built, Americans and others said we are not guilty. This didn't happen here. This museum doesn't belong on the--

On the mall. On the mall.

--on the mall. And it's a terrible thing you remember, the fight, and that this is wrong, and all that. By the huge numbers of visitors that poured in there and the great interest, that stopped.

And everybody realized it belongs here, because it was a genocide of a continent. And it doesn't matter if it wasn't on this continent. We have a great deal to learn about it and must learn about it.

But in general, the welcoming was very welcoming there, all the people who work there, and the people who run it, and all the survivors. I became very comfortable there. I had made many friends there that you didn't have to explain very much at all.

Yeah, you don't have to go-- it's not like you're talking to someone from another planet.

No. And they had events that were social.

But most of all, I understood what-- since the world forgets, and Germany was forgiven-- very few were punished-- and so how are we going to keep this horrendous, brutal genocide? How are we going to keep this alive for other generations to remember this incredible event that they perpetrated in the middle of the 20th century, trying to wipe out an entire people and aiming to wipe out our babies and everybody who belongs to this group? How can we preserve the memory and teach from it, to teach these barbaric humans?

This museum was doing a wonderful job doing that without even trying very hard, just opening the doors and having the exhibits and welcoming people. And then of course, it's more than just opening the doors.

It's like a college with many disciplines; all the researchers; all the translators; all the people who dig deep into the why it happened, how it happened; tracking the survivors; and tracking the perpetrators; and tremendous amount of research that goes on there; and that there are so many people, survivors of children, who are willing to support it financially.

And it has a very high standard. And it's just a place where students come to be interns, to write books and do the research there, to get PhD's on the subject. It's a whole college. It's a whole universe.

And it's all about what happened. And it deserves all that, because what happened is a mark on human civilization and, certainly, worse than anything that ever happened to the Jews from way back to when we lost the Temple, and Jesus, and all the rest.

This tops it all because of the time when it happened, the enormous preparation for it, the great success with which they carried it out. It happened to me out of the blue and people like me, who lived their lives like ordinary people.

This is the perfect institution that embraces all aspects of it. And they keep adding, and building, and doing more and more that-- they have lectures. They have movies. They have everything for the audience that comes in, for the scholars who want it.

They have this new building for the--

I want to--

--artifacts.

Yeah, the artifacts. That's actually the place where my office-- I mean, where I work. My workstation is in that new building.

Is it in Maryland?

Yeah, in Bowie, Maryland. And it's a way to let viewers-- not viewers, but listeners-- when they will listen to this interview in years from now, know that we are now talking during a pandemic where we are working from home. And this pandemic, at some point, will be over as well.

So when we talk about the museum-- and it's sometimes in the past tense. But it's only a temporary past tense. For right now, the museum is closed. And all of the things that you are mentioning have been suspended. But that's only temporary.

I have a question that is somewhat provocative. But there are few people that I think could address it as well as you could. And here is the question.

What does the museum offer? What relevance does it bring to a student, for example, whose parents might have come from Cambodia and who experienced the Pol Pot regime; or, let's say, any of the repressions that happened in the United States to groups that are discriminated against, whether these be Native Americans, whether this be the legacy of slavery; or to Stalinism, and to what the Soviet Union did to its own people? When someone who has experienced these other kinds of repressions, what relevance does this story have?

Well, I have witnessed the relevance. The museum gives all these people a platform, a recognition, and a belief that it happened. And they can tell their story. They can do their exhibits, the Rohingya, all the others that you mentioned.

The museum speaks in their behalf. It publicizes their plight. But most of all, it welcomes to them and opens.

Then, just like I could open and speak about it, they can come and speak to large audiences. And they know that they have a platform. They have a friend. And they know that the museum will spend money and effort to follow up on it and to-- the museum is going to advocate for them.

What happened to the Jews, to this day, is that, when I was in Auschwitz, and I witnessed killing around the clock, nobody cared. Nobody knew, [? must ?] not have known. But nobody cared.

And these people feel the same way. It's an open world. There's a lot of communication. And yet, nobody cares.

And here is a huge institution with a lot of reach to a lot of groups. They care. They listen. And they advocate for them.

It's invaluable for people. They don't feel forgotten and neglected. And even though the museum can't turn over every wrong in the world, the world will know, through the museum, what happens in other parts of the world, what is being done to people.

And I know that they are very grateful. And the museum sends people into these countries and basically listen, report, and recognize that they're suffering. And if I had had that in Auschwitz, I wouldn't have such terrible lack of faith in people. I would say, yes, there are people who care and are doing all they can to stop it and to publicize it.

Irene, I couldn't think of a better way to conclude our interview.

Well, thank you.

I think you've said it all and said it well. And it's been a true gift. Thank you very much. Thank you.

I want to really apologize to you for all the many details--

No.

--that I don't know. You know how I feel. I understand you want the details. And nevertheless, I think it's very almost selfish to be so--

No, no, no.

--involved.

No, no. You have painted a picture for us of what happened at various stages. And you've also let us into your mind. And that, I particularly appreciate, because that's so personal, and grappling with these questions, which nobody has had an ability to answer, because the atrocity was so huge.

Talking to you has provided an opportunity for somebody to think about what you said and then to see what can they take from it. How can they go forward with it? How can they try to understand, because you've spent a lifetime trying to understand. And you've shared that with me.

Yeah, it really is not comprehensible. So I suppose the more people tell, the more likely something will stick.

Well, talking does not always solve it. It is what one says. And you know the phrase of somebody who may say not a lot, but what they do say is very valuable.

Well, you've said a lot, but all of it's very valuable. It's not just-- I don't know--

Well--

--if I'm expressing this well.

--I hope that it has-- and it's personal history-- but that it applies to others who've went through this similar way.

Yeah, thank you.

Well, thank you for being so patient. And your questions were great.

Thank you.

And you certainly made it easy for me to open up. And so I thank you for that.

You're welcome. You're welcome. And what I will do now is I will say a few words to conclude the interview. I'll turn the recording off. And then we'll talk of a few other things.

So I will say that this now concludes the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Mrs. Irene Weiss. And I believe today is the 29th of May in 2020. And thank you again.