

Good evening. My name is Toby Tickin Back, and I'm the director of the Holocaust Resource Center. This evening our guest is Sister Judith Fenyavesi. Sister Judith, could you tell us about your childhood in Romania?

Well, I was born in 1923. And I was the second, the middle child of my parents. There were three girls in the family. And I had a very, very beautiful childhood. I will never forget the loving atmosphere that I enjoyed in my family.

My father was a pharmacist. My mother was a teacher. She taught piano. She gave piano lessons. And she was also able to-- for a while, she was a French teacher in the school. But I remember that they were extremely loving to us. And they would just do whatever was possible to make our life happy.

Things went very beautifully. I remember I went to grammar school in my town. It was a small town.

In my own family, there wasn't too much of an exposure to the practice of faith. My parents were emancipated Jewish people, as you would say. And so I didn't get too much in that respect. But they were really people who, I think, deep down in their heart, they believed because the way they lived. They were very, very good. And I think that's the great heritage I have from them.

I remember that I became conscious of being Jewish, but not so much from my parents, but rather from the experience that I had in the synagogue and through the religious education classes. It was a time when Zionism was beginning to be talked about in our country. So I showed great interest. And the rabbi, realizing that, encouraged me in that and invited me to his house for Seder. So I had some experience with the traditions, but not too much.

You didn't have a Seder or other traditions-- No.

--in your house?

We never had it.

There were no grandparents around who would give you these traditions?

I only knew one grandmother. She lived also in the same town. But the others were already dead by the time I came into the world. And so I didn't have that experience at all in my family.

I think we could show the pictures now of your parents and the three little girls. Oh, here's the picture right now of your parents. Your father's name was what?

Francis was my--

Francis. And your mother?

Elisabeth.

Elisabeth. And what was your mother's maiden name?

Waldman.

Waldman. Very handsome couple. And tell us something about this picture, please.

This was taken when my older sister was seven years old, seven and a half. And I was six. And the youngest was five years old.

So you were very close in age and very close in spirit, probably.

Yes, we were very close in age. That was my younger sister when she was about 13 years old.

Very pretty.

Her name was Marta. And this was my older sister. She was about 19 when this picture was taken. Her name was Marianne.

This is before she was married?

Yes-- yes, before she was married.

Tell us about your high school years.

My high school years. See, when I finished eighth grade, then I went to a boarding school, to Oradea, which was a nice city close to us, and the city where actually my parents grew up. And it was already a very difficult time.

What year are we talking about?

It was in 1937.

And it was already difficult in Romania?

Yes.

In what way?

In all the schools, especially in the public schools, antisemitism was felt very, very much already. And we could hear this constantly, the way the Jewish pupils were treated. And my parents were thinking of a way in which they--

To protect you?

--could protect us from all that. And then they decided that they will send us to a Catholic school. And their choice was the Catholic school with the boarding--

Facility?

--facility of the Notre Dame [FRENCH] nuns. These were French nuns. So my parents wanted us to be there. And it was really a wonderful place to be.

It wasn't difficult to leave your very protected home and parents?

It was a little bit difficult. I remember that I cried a lot [LAUGHS] during the first times that I was there. But my older sister was there already for two years before I went.

Oh, I see.

And then my little sister and myself, we went at the same time. And so there were three of us at the same time there. Our parents visited us because we were just 40 kilometers from that place. So they came. And we went home for weekends, so.

Did your father still have the pharmacy at that time?

Yes, yes, we still had the pharmacy. So it was at that boarding school, at that high school, that I really had my first experience with the Catholic faith. And I became very much attracted to it.

There was always in me a desire to understand the meaning of life. I remember I asked myself, what's the purpose of life? And I didn't have the answers as I was growing up. And then I saw that very beautiful atmosphere among the nuns and the beautiful services in the chapel, and I just naturally was drawn to that.

And one day I talked to the nun who was in charge of my class. And I asked her, could she give me some books about the Catholic faith? And then I began to read about the life of Jesus. And it all seemed so beautiful. And I found so much comfort and consolation.

And so, gradually, I became [LAUGHS] a Christian in my own heart. This is how it all started.

Did your parents realize this?

They didn't know too much about it at the time, but my older sister also got very interested, even before I would get there. And she would talk about this to my parents. And my parents would always say, well, we don't know exactly whether we would agree. But they weren't completely opposed to her interest and to my interest.

My younger sister, she was, I think, a little bit too young. And she didn't have that interest. But this is how we then began to orient ourselves to the Catholic faith.

But there was something else that was very important in the life of my family. Perhaps I should mention this, that my father was so deeply aware of what was going on in Europe and in Germany. And he would be so concerned about this family--

The political situation?

--and the political situation. And my uncle from Budapest was able to leave the country, probably in 1935. And he emigrated to Australia. And he was able to arrange everything so that we could also go.

And we had everything ready. We really were ready to leave the country. But the main thing was that we didn't have any money unless we really sold the pharmacy. And that didn't go through because one of the ways in which the government already demonstrated--

Controlled?

--controlled the thing was that they wouldn't approve this because they knew that, sooner or later, probably they will confiscate the pharmacy anyway. So then, when that happened, my father was very, very discouraged. He felt that what he thought would really help us to survive was impossible. And he felt that we were all trapped.

And it was at that point that he began to think about trying another way, that perhaps, having heard about this in other countries, that the baptized Jewish people would be saved, then he thought maybe our family would also be saved if we would be baptized. And I must say that there were already members of our family, my uncles who have become Christian years before that, so it wasn't altogether so unheard of for my family.

But it was this strange coincidence that my father thought of this because of what he thought would save us and we, on the other hand, who were living among the nuns, we really became deeply touched by the Catholic faith. And so then these two things have come together, and my parents decided that we really will be baptized.

Everyone, including themselves?

My mother decided that she would, but my father, at that point, couldn't decide because it was probably too hard for him, even though he wasn't a practicing Jew. But he found it so hard that he couldn't make-- he couldn't take that step. So we did it. My mother and the three of us, we became Catholic in 1938. We were baptized in the chapel of the nuns.

How did your grandmother-- was that your maternal grandmother?

No, my--

Your paternal grandmother.

Paternal.

Anyway, how did she react to it?

She didn't--

She didn't realize what was happening?

She didn't have too much to say. But one year later, I must say that my father decided that he wanted to be baptized. He wasn't really convinced of the Catholic faith, but he just wanted to be one with the family. He didn't want to be different.

I understand.

And then, finally, he made the decision, just by himself. So one year later, he was baptized. But my mother, because she has always been attracted to some kind of a faith, even as a Jewish person, she went through this whole education. And when she was baptized she was also very happy that she discovered the Catholic faith. So this is how, then, we all became Catholic in those years.

And as I said, we were sheltered. I didn't experience the terrible things that many other Jewish people experienced already, and young people in the schools in that time. We were surrounded with great love. And we were very much at home in this boarding school. So actually, they were, in a way, very beautiful times.

But then, when the time of my graduation came from high school, I began to think of what I'm going to do. And I wanted to be a medical doctor. And my father was very happy that I wanted to be. But at the same time, I realized that that's an impossible dream because of the numerus clausus that was already there in Hungary.

Was your sister in university yet?

No, she got married after she finished her high school.

Did she marry a Christian?

She married a Christian of Jewish background.

Oh, he was already baptized?

Baptized as a child.

Oh, as a child?

Yes. So they got married. I think it was in 1940 that they got married. And they lived in the same town with my parents. But we lived-- my little sisters, in Oradea, in the boarding school.

In the boarding school.

So then that was a time when I realized that I probably will not be accepted to the university even though I had many people who made interventions. But it didn't work. But even before I was rejected, I realized that that will not work. And I began to look out into other directions. And I heard about a school of social work that was run by the Sisters of

Social Service.

That was a different group of sisters from the high school group?

Yes. And those sisters had the School of Social Work in Cluj, in another city of Transylvania.

And one thing I didn't mention that before I entered my senior year in high school, the Hungarians occupied that part of Transylvania-- that was in the fall of 1940-- so that as we lived under the Romanians up to that point, then we were annexed to Hungary.

Did that make any part of your daily life any different than before?

Well, I would say that in Hungary things were even worse at the time. So anyway, I say all of this because when the events of '44 happened, that we belonged to Hungary. And in Hungary, things were really much worse than in Romania when we got to that point in 1944.

So what happened then, in 1941, when I graduated from high school, then I applied to the School of Social Work. And it just sounded so beautiful, just working with people and helping people.

My parents didn't believe very much in it because social work wasn't very popular at the time. And they said, what will you do? Anyway, to make a long story short, my mother inquired. She investigated. And finally they gave me the permission.

And so, after my high school, I went to Kolozsvár, which is called Cluj today. And then I started my life among the Sisters of Social Service. I completed the school in 12 months. And then I got a job as a social worker.

What did you do? What kind of work did you do?

I had a very beautiful job. I was supposed to visit the Catholic people who lived in diaspora, which means that they lived in small villages all over Transylvania. And they were kind of very much on their own. They didn't have any support from the church because they were just in very small numbers in these small villages. So then it was my role to visit them, to see what their needs were-- spiritual needs and financial needs and human needs.

So that was a wonderful time for me to do this all over Transylvania. I traveled a lot. And it was a very rewarding type of activity. And I must say that even before I started that, already in 1942, in March, my father had died.

Died?

Yes. He just couldn't take the terrible suffering and the many concerns, as I said, that he felt, that we were all trapped. And then he was able to sell the pharmacy--

Oh, he was?

--under the Hungarian regime. But at that point it was impossible to leave. And he was already-- he developed a heart condition. So in 1942 he died.

So he was a young man?

He was 52 years old.

A very young man.

Very young. And my mother was just four years younger. So these were the things that happened during those years. And then, of course, I was still doing my best, but we knew that things were getting worse and worse. But when it really

started to be very bad was in March of 1944 when the German Army came to Hungary. And so the Hungarian government had to really do everything that was expected of them from the Nazis.

But you and your family were Christians.

We were Christians, but the Jewish law, as it was called at that time in Hungary, meant that all Jewish people are considered Jews, even if they are Christian. It really didn't matter.

It didn't make any difference.

You had to prove that for three generations you have been Christian. There were some other stipulations. For instance, children who came from mixed marriages where one person was of Christian background and the other of Jewish background, they were exempt. They suffered in some way. I can't really tell you exactly what restrictions there were for them. So they didn't have it easy, but they weren't considered as the other Jewish people.

And then, because Hungary was a Catholic country, they made some concessions for Jewish clergy, for Catholic priests who were of Jewish background, and for Catholic nuns who were of Jewish background. So these were some things that put some Jewish people in a different category.

So then, in March 19-- I remember these days-- everybody was in a great panic because we knew that this is now going to be accelerated and the persecution will get worse.

Had you, up to this point, had you heard anything about deportations or gassing or concentration camps?

I haven't heard anything about gassing. Really, that didn't reach us at all. We heard about Jewish people having been deported and that they had to work. That was what we heard.

I can't believe that this was possible when I think back. But we really, really didn't know what was going on in the world. That's the hard thing to believe, that those things could go on. And much later, when I studied these things, I discovered that there were people who already knew about the gas chambers, but--

Of course, so many people just didn't believe.

They didn't believe it. So anyway, then the first thing that came shortly after the Nazis really took over in Hungary, they gave this order that all the Jewish people should wear the Star of David. And then shortly after, all the Jewish people were put in the ghetto. And then very soon the deportations started. It all went very fast.

How did this affect your mother and sisters and brother-in-law?

Well, my mother lived, as I said, in the small town. And my two sisters were there and my grandmother. My brother-in-law was forced to leave his house, his home, in 1942 already. He had to work in a labor camp. So when this thing started, then really my mother and my sisters knew that times will be very, very difficult. And I was at the time in Cluj as a social worker and was very, very concerned about them.

So in my own town, because there weren't so many Jewish people-- it was a small Jewish community-- they didn't set up a ghetto for them. They ordered them to wear the star.

Did the star say "Jew" in Hungarian?

No, it was just a yellow star.

Just the star?

And then, shortly after, in other cities the ghetto started. Then, in my town, my parents and the Jewish people had to stay

in their own homes. They weren't allowed to walk on the streets except between 9:00 and 10:00 in the morning. That was it.

One hour?

One hour to do all their shopping or whatever they needed. That was all they could do. And at the same time, you see, I was in Kolozsvár. And the people with whom I worked, the Catholic priest, he wanted me to continue my work. And I continued to stay in that home which was a home for social workers. It was right on the grounds of that place where I went to the School of Social Work, where the nuns lived.

That was very convenient.

And that's where I lived, just waiting to see what will happen. And when the order came out for the ghetto, then I really wanted to go home. And I said, no sense for me to go into this ghetto here in Cluj. I want to be in the same ghetto where my mother is. And I will just go. And I packed, and I was ready to go.

And then this priest with whom I worked wouldn't let me go. He said, Judith, you don't know what this means. And I kept telling him, well, whatever will happen to my mother, that will happen to me. And we are just going to work together. And we will suffer together. And I will just go.

But he insisted and insisted. And then he said, Judith, I want to go and talk to your mother. And stay here. And don't move. And I want to talk to your mother to see what she thinks. And then he got himself in the train, and he went to my mother in my town. And then--

Did you go with him?

No. And then he came back a day later. And he told me that I met with your mother. And my mother told me that her only consolation would be to know that at least one of her daughters will survive. And then the priest told me that he assured my mother that he will take care of me. This priest is still living in Romania.

Are you in touch with him?

I was in touch with him a few years ago when I went back. He's old now. He's, I think, about 80.

And so, finally, this priest explained to my mother that he will take care of me. And my mother told him that that will be her only consolation and that my mother would agree that I would be living with the sisters. And my mother would even agree if I would embrace the life of the sisters because my mother knew that I wanted to be a sister.

You mean prior to this?

Prior to this. And when she first learned about my desire to be a sister-- that was two years prior to that-- she would not agree because she said she doesn't believe that I would ever be happy as a nun.

So then the priest came back with this message. So perhaps I can just give you a few details, that I really thought of becoming a sister several years before these things happened. But I knew that it would be very hard for my parents to accept it because it is so-- oh, you know.

It was foreign for them to have a nun in the family.

It was just very hard to imagine for a Jewish family to have someone with this choice of life. So then, when my mother found out, she was so opposed to my idea. Then I decided to wait. And I had a good priest who advised me to really wait and not cause my mother this pain. My mother had enough to suffer because she was a widow. That was after my father died. So then I decided just to wait and see what my future will be.

But in the meantime, I remembered what the priest told me, that if you really will want to be a nun and if God really wants you to be, then maybe one day the doors will open for you and you will be able to follow this calling. And then it just seemed so mysterious to me that in such tragic ways my mother would not just allow me to be, but would say that that's my only consolation, that at least one of my daughters will survive.

And I have only one desire, she said, that if I ever survive this persecution and oppression and if I return, that my daughter would come and live with me for one year, just to see. Perhaps she will want to give that chance to herself. And if, even at that time, she will want to be, will be fine. But she really, really said this in so many ways, that she wanted me to be there. So that gave me the strength to remain and not join her.

I must say that that was the most difficult decision I had to make in my life because, with all my heart, I wanted to be with my mother. And I must say that there was always this relationship between my mother and me, a very, very close relationship. And I remember that, perhaps, from among the three of us, I was the one who would never want to cause her pain.

And that's why it was so hard for me to imagine that I would be a nun at that cost. I couldn't have caused that pain to her. It was just too hard. So then it was somehow her desire for me to live that gave me the courage to--

So at this point you became a nun?

I became a nun. But it is this point that I want to tell you how it all happened, because this priest approached those sisters of social service who knew me very well. I have lived among them as a social worker. And they said that they would do anything they could, but they still had to consult with the Diocese and priest, with the--

Mother Superior?

--vicar, yes. And the Mother Superior at the time was a Sister Augusta. She was a beautiful woman. And when she consulted with this vicar, then he said, of course. That's natural that they would do that, even though they all knew that if this would be discovered, they could really end up with a serious problem. But they took the risk. And they took me.

Because you were-- but you were already Christian. What was the risk?

The risk was that I wasn't a member up to that time. So that they would just take me in, you know?

I see. I see.

But they took the risk. And they said I am a member. I am a member. And for me it was for real. But they told me, Judith, we know that you actually wanted to be a nun in another community where you have become a Catholic. And we will be the happiest if one day you would really be able to go in that community where you always wanted to be a nun. Or we would be the happiest if we could give you back to your mother. We really do it just to save your life. We would never expect you to commit yourself. But in my own heart, it was--

You were already committed.

Yes. But I just accepted this as a way of beginning my life as a sister. But because it came about in this way, I also felt that, in a way, my life would be given for my mother and my sisters, that they will be saved and that they will somehow be spared and that somehow this terrible thing will bring out something that will be for the better.

What touched me very deeply is actually what the life of Jesus told me, that Jesus gave his life. He was willing to die on the cross. And he was willing to suffer. And he was hoping that, through his death, something good comes out. And somehow I saw my own life as being totally united with this Christian way of self-giving to God. So this is then how I took that step.

But the inner suffering was still very great. And the time came when, again, I struggled so much. Maybe I should go



with my mother. And that was another moment when I shared all these concerns with the sisters.

And then another superior was there. Her name is Margaret Slachta. She was the one who lived in Budapest, but she came to Oradea. And then I talked to her. I am so concerned. What is it that I am supposed to do in this time?

And then she said, well, maybe we can save them. And then we started the whole process. The sister went out to convince my mother to come, to accept, to be with the sisters.

Oh, were they ready to take your mother and sisters into the convent?

They were ready. But my mother and my sisters were afraid, were afraid. So they said that it's more dangerous to go into hiding. And they said, we will do whatever happens to everybody else and we will work and all that.

So while they were really unwilling to take that risk, things progressed. And the weeks went by. And the Jewish people from Oradea were already being deported. And here, the Jewish people in my town were not put into the ghetto, so they were beginning to hope that maybe nothing will happen. But one day, on June the 8th--

You remember the day, don't you, so well?

Yes. They were all taken, all gathered to the synagogue, and transported to Oradea, to the ghetto from which the Jewish people were already deported. The ghetto was emptied. So from all the small towns from the area, the Jewish people were brought in.

Was that too late to bring your mother and sister to the convent already?

Well, that was then very, very hard because it involved smuggling them out of the ghetto. That was almost impossible. But still, I heard that some people are working on that. So I spent all my time in trying to get in touch with those people. And some people who kind of mediated these things promised me. During this time, I was able to visit my mother in the ghetto.

As a nun? Dressed as a nun?

Yes, dressed as a nun.

And the Hungarian police didn't mind that, prevent you?

They didn't. Another sister came with me. And we just went.

You went to see your mother. Was that the last time you saw your mother?

That was the last time I saw my mother. And the most painful thing was that, while I was on the road the whole day and trying to work out this smuggling out of the ghetto, then my mother one day was taken out from the ghetto.

And here I want just to give you a detail that the head of the ghetto in Oradea was given a room in the home of a friend of ours. And this friend was the one who actually obtained the permission for me to visit my mother, through this person. And that man was willing to do even more. He took out my mother from the ghetto on the basis that she is going to clean his room. And for a whole day my mother was waiting there actually in the house of our friends.

And they were trying to reach me. That would have been the last time for my mother to see me. And they couldn't get hold of me because I was running around from one place to the other, trying to work this out. And when I went home on that evening, I just didn't know how I can survive this, my mother waiting there.

So anyway, I was still hoping that we can free them. But every day I hope that something will happen. But nothing happened. The miracle didn't happen. Somehow it didn't work out. And I will never know what happened.

And they were deported to Auschwitz from there?

On June the 27th, in 1924--

1944.

--they were deported. 1944, June the 27th.

They were so close to the end of the war, but that didn't help.

Of course, once I got a card, but there were just two lines written. That was sometime in the summer. There was a number where I could write, so it probably came from a place in Germany. But that was the only sign of life. I got a sign of life from my mother. But then I haven't heard anything. And I was just living with the hope that they will survive and they will survive.

Did your sisters and brother-in-law and grandmother go with your mother?

My brother-in-law wasn't there at all. He was in a totally different labor camp. He was in Transylvania someplace. But my grandmother, my two sisters, and my mother, they were all taken.

They all went together.

And my older sister was in the last months of her first pregnancy. So then--

You don't know if the baby was born, do you?

Well, from all I know, she wasn't seen anymore because I know that all the pregnant women--

Were separated.

--were separated right away. And my grandmother was never seen again. She was 80 years old. And my mother and my younger sister were seen. And that was in 1945 when the war was over and people--

Oh, they were seen at the end of the war?

No, no, no. When people from my-- the survivors, when the survivors came home--

Oh, when they came back, they told stories?

Yes. Then I went to see them and talk to them in the town from which my parents were taken. Very few came back. But I talked to two women who were rather close to my family, the mother of a schoolmate and the wife of a doctor who was a good friend. And they both told me that they don't remember when because everything was so--

Confusing.

--confused. But they were together with my mother and my younger sister for a while. But one woman told me that one day the Nazi soldiers came. And they said that those of you who feel that you cannot go to the work, that you would be going, that you would say so, those of you who feel that you cannot do that, because they have been working. They were in a camp where they were.

If it's true, I don't know. But then my mother said that, well, I will. I will say so. And many people-- the other women told her, don't go, because that means the end. And then my mother perhaps-- that's what I heard-- would have said that, anyway, I just feel I can't. I don't have the strength to go on.

But who knows? But that's what I heard. That was the only one. But both of them, when they were talking about those experiences, they couldn't really give me too many details. But both of them told me that they have seen my mother and my younger sister.

Marianne.

Yes.

Sister Judith, we have a few pictures before we conclude. Maybe you can tell us what is this picture here on the screen?

Oh, well, that is that provincial house of the Sisters of Social Service in Cluj. This is where I went after high school, where I was very, very received and where I got my degree in social work. And right next to this building was this other building where I lived after I graduated from the school. That was just the home for the social workers.

So that's a nice memory. I think we have a picture of your certificate here?

Yes.

What a pretty young woman.

That was given in '43, when I was a social worker traveling all over Transylvania as an employee of the Diocese of [INAUDIBLE].

We have another picture that follows that.

That's my grandmother. She must have been 70 or 75. But at the time she was deported she was 80 years old.

And she probably didn't last very long there, I shouldn't think.

I am sure she didn't.

Very handsome woman. And the last picture is-- you want to tell us about her?

This is this Sister of Social Service. She was the provincial at the time. And she has become like a second mother to me.

And what is her name?

Augusta.

Is she alive?

No, she died in '73.

In America?

No, in Romania. She has been a great, great inspiration to all of us. She was actually the foundress of that Romanian province of the Sisters of Social Service. And she was the one who conveyed to me always that full freedom-- she said, Judith, you should always know that you are free, that we do this because we love you and we want you to live. And you are free, free to do with your life what you want to do with your life.

And then later, when everything was over, then I really told her, Sister Augusta, I really like to be a member. I really made this decision in full freedom.

When did you actually become a sister then?

[INAUDIBLE], after the war was over.

In 1945?

Yes.

Then you didn't want to stay in Romania? Did you come to America then?

Well, I lived in Romania until '63.

Oh, I see. And then why did you come here?

Well, many, many things happened. In 1947, then I became a regular member. It takes three years to be a regular member. And then I was sent to Bucharest, where we had a small mission of the Sisters of Social Service.

And then, in 1951, I was arrested. But at that time I was arrested by the Communists. So the church was persecuted. And the religious communities were suppressed. In 1950, the Sisters of Social Service and other religious communities were suppressed. And many sisters and members of religious communities were put in prison.

Were you put in prison?

And I was put in prison.

How long were you in prison?

For 10 years.

For 10 years? Oh, dear.

Yes, it was. Yes.

It was a hard time, a terrible time.

Yes.

So after that, you decided to come to America?

So then I had the opportunity to come because life would have been very, very hard for me there as an ex political prisoner. So I had the opportunity to come. And then I took the opportunity. And I joined the same community that had a small group here in Buffalo.

And that's how you came to Buffalo?

Yes.

Are there other convents of the Sisters of Social Charity in--

Social Service.

--Social Service in the United States?

We have a small group in Miami and a small group in Puerto Rico.

Sister Judith, I think we have to wind up now. Is there anything that you want to say in conclusion?

Well, I feel that I just carry the memory of my loved ones in my heart. And I think they continue to live in my heart. And I hope that their life and their death was not in vain, that somehow their suffering and their deaths has been instrumental, just as the life and death of all the other victims, that that somehow will bring life.

I always believe that suffering has a meaning. That kept me alive, believing in the meaning of suffering. And I believe that the suffering of my loved ones has not been in vain. And I believe that somehow, from all that Holocaust, new life will come and greater justice and goodness and love and harmony and acceptance and peace. So that's my hope. And that's what keeps me alive.

Thank you. And I'm so sorry that you did all this suffering and that we put you through this again. Thank you.