

GLORIA FREDKOVE

I was born in Italy in May 1943. My name was Yolanda Bass and is now Gloria Fredkove. I grew up on the lower East Side of New York, my mother died in 1971 I went to Colorado at about that time, I did not know anyone there and I had no job to go to. I never felt a strong sense of roots. I had no relatives in New York. I have a brother who is 11 years older than I am and with whom I am not close. I was 29 when I left New York. I met and married my husband in Colorado. He was from St Paul, I have twin boys. We moved to Minnesota and have lived there since 1975. I am a legal secretary and director of a singing choir.

Recently I joined an animal rights' coalition and have become active in that group.

There are natural and manmade disasters. Of manmade disasters the Holocaust is the most unique. I understand less about it the more I delve into it. The survivors did whatever they had to survive, luck, intuition, suicide, whatever they had to.

My grandparents are ultra orthodox Jews from Poland. They had five children. My mother was the youngest. She was a rebel of an artistic nature, she wanted to be a singer. She left home when she was in university. She married in 1931, had a child the next year and a year later, her husband died.

My mother did not tell much about the Holocaust. My mother was in France and made her living by singing in nightclubs. My mother was born in Switzerland and left for France. When it became too dangerous in France, she left for Italy. She lost contact with her siblings. They all died in concentration camps. After the war she tried to locate them but could not find them. My grandparents, my mother, brother and I were the only survivors. My mother spoke, French, Italian Yiddish and could understand German. This was a tool to survive. My mother was in prison in Italy for five days and in detention camps in Italy.

Survivors children block out much information that they receive. I did that and now do not remember much of what she told me. I had a sister who was adopted but she didn't discuss this much. In 1945 when we came to this country, mother was pregnant and gave birth in a shelter in Oswego. They rushed her to the hospital after she arrived. Her health was very poor. She had a weak heart. We had no relatives in this country. They found an apartment for us on the third floor of an apartment house, walk up. She could hardly make it up the stairs. Public assistance helped us also Jewish agencies gave us clothes. It was a ghetto like life. We left there when I was ten years old because they were building a project there. We were sent to another project. People ostracized us and we felt very isolated My brother quit school in the 8th grade and hustled as a peddler on the streets and turned to gambling. He is 58 years old has had 3 failed marriages and is now married to a nice woman and has said he has given up gambling.

In the project we were labeled refugees in a negative way. My mother was beat. I became the mother and tried to help her. I took on her pain,

Q: What about religion?

My mother came from an orthodox home and she was a rebel but she did believe in God. As I became older I had more faith. My husband had a German mother and Jewish father and was raised Jewish. We are conservative with a liberal bend.

Q: How many children were there on the boat over?

Only 2 or 3 babies.

Q: How did your reluctance to talk about the Holocaust affect you?

I would not discuss the Holocaust with the outside world and the mystery about my father, enraged me. I believed that God chose us to survive and we felt guilt for surviving. I felt I had not suffered as much as other survivors and other children of survivors and that gave guilt. I went to a meeting of children of survivors where I felt very comfortable and talked about some of the issues of being a child of a survivor. I went to a support group for 8 weeks. It's like finding a connection. It is not a normal life. I hope my children when they are older will go to this group.

Survivors were allowed to survive to be witnesses. (very poor sound and couldn't hear one question or answer)

If we discuss our sufferings then it waters down the suffering of the real survivors of camps. There are children who do not want to talk about it. They want to think of themselves as Americans only. I never discussed my background until I was in my 20s and then to a select few.

Q: Do you feel any real anger?

Yes As a child I saw the newsreel in the movie theater showing the horrible scenes in the camps. I was extremely angry. How could this happen. How could anyone let it happen. I thought it was an isolated case in one camps. I cannot read a whole book on the Holocaust.

My brother's problems were the result of the Holocaust. Not understanding it and his anger were the center of his problems. I think he had a lot of anger and no support system. My mother opposed my having therapy. My brother never went.

Q: Have you thought of writing it down?

I wrote everything out for this talk. It was painful for me and I relived it. I have thought about writing a book about my experiences. I have written poems. I do not know if it is dramatic enough. Maybe I will write it for my own use. When we get a word processor, I will put it down as oral histories for my children.

My mother thought America was the greatest. Even though we were on public assistance because her health was so bad, she did take care of children part-time and did other things. My brother also felt the U.S. was great and was grateful that they took us in.

I did not know anything about my father. She met him in Italy, she said he had a Jewish father and that he was in the army. They were married in a Jewish ceremony, not a legal one. I know nothing about my father. She said he died. I have had a lot of therapy with this. I felt I was a victim of the Holocaust as a survivor. I felt sorry for myself, and guilty of being here because so many died and so many had a much more difficult time in the camps. Now I feel that the people who did not help me should feel guilty and ashamed.

I met a friend of mine in Milwaukee who showed me a picture of myself, my mother and brother in a book entitled HAVEN by Ruth Gruber, in which the story of WW2 refugees' stories were told. I learned a lot about myself from this book. I contacted Ruth Gruber and went to see her in her apartment and through her met many people who were on the boat we came over on and who knew me as a baby.

My mother loved this country and she wanted me to have an American name and changed it to Gloria. When I became a citizen in 1961/62 I changed my name legally.

When we came here on the boat President Roosevelt passed a resolution that we would be here, 1000 refugees, until the end of the war. We represented 18 countries who found ourselves in Italy in August 1944. 3000 people applied and only 1000 were selected. Mother, grandmother, my brother and I. Truman changed the resolution and allowed us to stay.

My mother wrote a statement about her experience and Ruth Gruber gave that statement to me. It contained most of the things my mother told me. (She read it very rapidly)

I tried to locate my sister Susanah. The Jewish Agency in Buffalo put me in contact with the adoptive father. He wrote me that she died 9 years ago in her late 20s. Part of me doesn't believe it. I have not pursued it.

The Holocaust has made me lose my identity, my family, loss of innocence, I had no childhood. I felt more comfortable with older people. I missed out on my childhood. I am lucky to have a husband so understanding.

The Holocaust was produced by antisemitism. Hitler was evil but he had a long list of supporting players who helped him, doctors, scientists, college educated people like yourselves. Antisemitism has not ended with Hitler. Jews have been scapegoats for centuries. People are afraid of differences and this fear can produce prejudice. We are all prejudiced. It is up to us to deal with it.

Questions: What do you tell your kids about the Holocaust. I have not told them too much. Their attention wanders. They are 15. They know the basic situation. When they are older they will have more information than I had.