

I'm Sidney Elsner. Today, January 14, 1985, we are continuing our interview with Sylvia Malcmacher, a Holocaust survivor from Vilna, Lithuania. This project is sponsored by the National Council of Jewish Women, Cleveland section. Sylvia, when we left off, you were telling us about your arrival in Cleveland in 1949. Did you talk to anyone about your experiences at that time?

Just between us survivors. Wherever we came, that was the only topic of conversation. Up till now, it's the same thing.

Not too much about it, and not to many people. I didn't know that many people outside the survivors group what we had, and my kids were still very young when we came. So it was kind of hidden inside for a long time.

How many children have you?

I have two daughters. One is now 36, and the other one is 32. The older one was born in Feldafing in Germany. She was a year when we came, and the younger one was born here in '52.

Did you talk to them about your experiences and your husband's experiences as they grew up?

Not too much. I don't know the reason, but it was very hard to talk about it. And I thought that I kind of wanted to spare my children. Even by listening to it, they shouldn't go through the fear and the experience. I don't know if it was a right thing to do, but automatically, I think most of our people, survivors, didn't talk to the children about it because it was too painful. And I figured I went through hell. Why should the kids in a free country, they were born in the United States, why should they go through hell just by listening to it?

So when they were young, we didn't talk about it. My husband more so always told his experiences because every minute something came up. He talked about it. But to really sit down, and talk to them, and tell them all about it, we didn't do it.

Have you done it yet to this day?

Yes, yes. When they grew older and they started asking questions, they came home a lot of time from school. And they said, Ma, how come I don't have grandparents? How come I don't have no grandmother, no grandfather?

My husband's mother survived, and she was the only one that they had. But from my side, they didn't have nobody. They came and asked me, all my girlfriends go to their grandparents overnight. How come we don't have any? What happened?

So by then, little by little, we started to tell them about it. And even they asked me, why can't we see a picture how your parents looked like? Why don't you tell us about them? And I don't even have a picture.

That's the irony of it, that I don't have them to guide me when I grew up and to be there when I was married and had the kids. But I don't even have a picture of them. I would give anything to have a little picture of my sisters, or of my father and mother. It was all taken away.

And then that's when they start asking, can we see? Do you have a picture of them? Nothing. Even now, when they bring me a whole bunch of pictures, I don't think I could recognize and pick out. Because just in my dreams, in my nightmares, I see them. But otherwise, I can't.

You speak of dreams of nightmares. Do you dream frequently of the Holocaust?

Yes. Yes.

To what extent has the Holocaust affected your emotional state?

Well, we try to be normal people. But as I said, it comes up day or night. And we never can forget it. It comes up every minute of our lives.

We go on with our lives. We try to make a life of ourselves, which our kids say that it's unbelievable how nice we made our life in a country where we didn't have no language.

Tell us what work were doing in Cleveland and what your husband has been doing.

As soon as my husband-- as soon as we came, my husband started to work on the second week. He didn't walk around without work. He went-- he started work in a meatpacking sausage plant. That was the first day he went in, and he worked there for 30 years. Since he retired. He was a sausage maker.

Were there other Jewish people working in the plant?

No. He was the only one. And a matter of fact, when they send him to work there, I guess from the Union, they told him, you go to work there. It's a good place to work. But you can't tell that you are a Jew. Here in this country.

In Cleveland.

In Cleveland, in '49, they told him, whoever sent him, that that's a nice plant to work in, but you can't tell him that you are a Jew.

What was the name of the plant?

Was [INAUDIBLE].

On the west side of Cleveland. And he was a sausage maker?

Yes.

So why couldn't they tell--

When he heard that, he told the people, he said, you know what? If I can't go to work, and if I can't tell them that I am a Jew in this country after I went through that Holocaust and after I went through that war, that forget it. I'm not going. If I go, I'm going to tell them that I'm a Jew. If they don't want me, then forget it. And that way it was.

So he told them, and what happened?

He told them he's a Jew, and they took him in. And they were-- and he worked there till he retired. Lately it got very bad there because the boss has changed, and he felt that--

Well, how about his co-workers?

His co-workers were all somewhere German, somewhere from Ukraine. And they-- lately, it got to that point that he had to retire.

Had any of them been in the war?

Some of them, I'm sure, because they bragged about it. Some of them told him that they were in the war. Some of them told him--

That they were in the German side?

Right. Some of them told him that it's a shame that Hitler didn't finish all the Jews. He heard it. And he came home very

upset over it, but he worked there. He had to make a living.

And he made a nice living, and the kids got education. And they went to college, and--

Were any of the other people there in the German army, or any other German forces?

He told me that there were, yes.

Any in the SS?

He said there was.

How did he know? They bragged about it. So he was there till he retired, and the kids got their education. And we made a nice life for ourselves here in Cleveland.

Did the man who was in the SS show him any identity when he said to?

He told him that he had a tattoo.

An SS tattoo under his armpit?

Under his armpit, yeah. But he had to work there. He had to stay. That was his line of work.

So as well as Holocaust survivors in Cleveland, we've got Nazi SS survivors, if we can call them survivors.

That's why we have to do everything we can, and we have to educate the people that a thing like that should never happen again.

Well, what made you decide to share your experiences with us today, Sylvia?

Well, to start with, I have to leave something for my parents. I was the lucky one to survive.

Do you think that the survivors have a message that others need to understand?

Yes, I think so.

And this is?

This is never to forget from where we come from and what we went through. And the whole world should know that it can happen all over again if we don't look out for it. Because when Hitler came to power, it was the same thing.

He started all by himself, and he took over a whole country in his sight. And things went bad in Germany, and people hang on to him. He promised them everything. And the world paid the price, and the Jews paid most of it.

This is Sidney Elsner. Our Holocaust survivor today has been Sylvia Malcmacher. This project has been sponsored by the Cleveland section of the National Council of Jewish Women. And Sylvia, I thank you very much for coming and sharing with us.

Thank you for having me. Thank you.