

Yaffa Munch, March 11, 1997, tape 2, side A. You were talking about Esther going to Tel Aviv. And you were still in Jerusalem. And that was the first time you had been separated. And how did you take that, being separated from Esther, even though you knew that was important for her to be doing what she was doing?

In a way, it was very difficult, because I had nobody except her. And being the older sister who, all the time, felt a certain kind of responsibility, and being a substitute mother, in a way, as much she could. But by that time, perhaps due to my friends that were very, very careful, and very giving, and very supporting, it was a little bit easier to take that separation, and be very in constant touch with each other.

But then when Jerusalem was surrounded, and I could not leave, and she couldn't come to visit, that was a little bit difficult, because the fear was there. There was hope, but there was a fear, too. Who knows how long will be this separation. When will I be able to see her again? And she was the one who initiated that I should be leaving Jerusalem.

And it wasn't easy, because you could not, as a civilian leave the city. Soldiers were going in secret ways. And they organized that, once in a while, to unite sisters or unite families, they would take, each time, a few people. And so happened that she made this arrangement. And with the convoy of soldiers, I went from Jerusalem, which was quite a dangerous kind of a trip to do, to Tel Aviv. And she made arrangements in Tel Aviv for me that I could continue in the same kind of school setting that I have been attending in Jerusalem and also in the orphanage home.

There where orphanage homes established by the Jewish Agency in different cities all over in Israel. So I went back to school. I continued my learning. And Esther was visiting me on a daily basis. She was earning a little bit of money. So she bought a blouse for me or some extra little food.

And then, eventually, after being in that orphanage home for about a year, we rented a little room with the privilege of using a little bit of kitchen. And we joined together again. And we lived on our own.

So this was--

This was about 1948.

And so you were 16?

Yes, yes, I continued to go to school. And Esther continued to go to her work. And we lived by a family who rented out one little room. And we were able to use our little burner in our room and make, one in a while, a little soup or a little bit of food.

It was a interesting kind of situation, because we felt that we are, again, independent. And that one little room, even though it was a rented room, but we felt that we are no more orphans. That we are like living a normal life, like other people are living. They're very friendly with the people rented us the place out. They were very nice to us. Very highly intelligent people who helped me a lot with my learning, also.

Then we made friends, neighbors. There was a piano teacher who was very much looking out that we should come to her house, that we should be in a family environment, once in a while. She lived with her mother. She had two young children. And I'd love to go to visit her.

She had a brother who was a teacher. And in manner of fact, I wanted to learn, at that time, a little bit English. Because by that time, I had a command of the Hebrew language. And I wanted some other foreign language to learn, because I always planned to be a teacher. And I knew that I would eventually need more languages to know.

Yeah, did you assume that you would live in Israel for the rest of your life?

At that time, I assumed that I am going to be in Israel. And I am going to establish a family life, eventually. And it's very interesting to note that he was teaching me. And he was always looking my handwriting. And in those days-- This

is the brother of that music teacher who were the neighbors we have been living. It's outskirts of Tel Aviv, outskirts between Tel Aviv and Ramat Gan.

So you went to him for English lessons.

For English lessons free of charge.

Just you?

Just me. And whenever I came, I used to be amazed with my handwriting. I don't know, I was young, very foolish. I didn't notice that, actually, he is teaching because he is in love with me, not because he really was interested to teach me.

And why did you think he wasn't charging you?

I thought that so many people wanted to help all the refugees in many different ways. Some who could help financially, some who could help educating way. So I thought that this is another-- yes, and I was really not interested, at that time yet, to get married. And nevertheless, even if I--

So now you're about 17?

I am about 16, 17, going on 17. And he wanted to take me to a theater. And it's not only that I was not interested, because humility came back to me. And for sure, at the age of 16 and 1/2, 17, something is moving in you. And you do feel you are a girl and this is a man, right?

But he was not attractive at all. And I really didn't want to be too much in his caught by me. I enjoyed learning. But that's about. And later on, he was expressing that he wants to really date me. And he would like to go with me. And I said I am too young, yet.

How old was he?

He was much older. He was much older. He must have to be 28, 29, much older than I. And many, many years later, when I was already a mommy of two children, and I visited in Israel, I happened to be in the temple with his mother, who loved me very much so. And later, I understood why they were so much inviting us to the house, because they had a plan in their mind for the son to marry me.

And she said to me, no, later, you can-- years later, now you can tell me. You married already, and my son is married. Why didn't you want that to have Zori for your husband? I said to her, don't ask me such questions. But I know what I was thinking at the age of 16. And I didn't want to tell her that he was not attracting me. You can't say that to a mother.

But I started, with him, to learn. And I with the sister, I was learning a little bit music. I wanted, very much, to get back to all the things that my parents always wanted to give us. And unfortunately, it was interrupted, by the Germans. But it was very difficult because we didn't have the means, financially, that I could go and study music or financially take private lessons in English. So here was the opportunity. But that had to stop after I learned that there are other alternative motivations than just giving us the extra lessons.

So after you figured out what was going on, you stopped the lessons?

I stopped the lessons. I stopped the lessons.

Was that hard for you to do?

It was, because I wanted very much to further, in any way, and in every way, my education. But I was involved in the school. And eventually, I learned a little bit music from other sources. And I finished the high school. And not too many

years after it, I met my husband. And I got married with him.

How did you meet him?

My husband was living by the principal of my school. In Tel Aviv, I was in Tel Aviv in school.

What school?

In Tel Aviv, it's call Bet Yaakov. And my husband was living in their house. And one day, he said to my husband, he wasn't born there, people used to take room by families. And he said, I have a lovely girl. And I think that this girl is just for you. She has the very similar kind of a background. Although my husband was in Israel from 1939, and I only came in 1946, but the background is very similar.

In what way is it similar? Similar because he comes from Czechoslovakia, from where my father, from the exact same city. He went to the very same school that my father went before him, many years. But it's the same kind of setting, more or less, from the same type of religious background. Educationally, the same type, financially, nobody was-- everybody of us so-called middle class.

But what did we call middle class? If you had that room and you had a bed, that was middle class in those days. So he was in the army at that time. And he had a furlough, few days of vacation from the army, and she said, you come to the school. I will introduce to you the girl that I am mentioning.

My husband knew me from before, seeing me in the street of Tel Aviv. He used to walk with his buddy from the army. And he would say to him, you see that girl, then blond one? I will take her out.

He knew me from even before, when we attended the wedding of my teacher, Esther Echstein, who was my teacher after the war. And she is related to my husband. She is a second cousin, which I didn't know until that wedding. I went as a student of her to the wedding. He went as a relative. And I was introduced to him at the wedding, but nothing more than this is one of my students.

So when he was on the vacation from the army, he came to the school. And I was called out from the class that I have to go to the office. The principal wants to see me. My heart was beating. I thought God, did I fail in the test? Did I do something? Why I am called to the office?

And she says to me, somebody wants to meet you. And here on the porch of that office building is a soldier in uniform. And he asked me, I have two days off from the army, I want to take you, tonight, out. I said, I have to ask my sister.

I was-- I had no parents with whom I am talking anything over and I said, by the way, my sister is older. And she has to get married before me. Lo and behold, I don't want to elaborate on this story. But now slowly from this, within a year, we developed a friendship to the extent that we got engaged and married.

So you were how old when you met?

19, 18 in the school. And then at the age of 19, I got married.

And you were still in school?

I was still in school. I continue--

But this was equivalent to a college?

This was already done, yes. Yeah, it was a teacher seminary. Which, we don't have too much today, except in--

We used to have a lot of them.

Yeah, but we don't have anymore. I know that near to Allentown, Kutztown?

Kutztown.

Kutztown has a teacher seminary. But it's very, very rare. I think that is something that I would like to see that it's coming back again.

So you were still in school?

I was still in the school. And he was in the army.

He was still in the army. When you married, he was still in the army?

He was still in the army when I married my husband.

And you were then 19?

Yeah, and it wasn't easy life. But we were very happy. We lived in one room apartment, which one was our living room and dining room. And later on, when my baby came, it was even the baby room. And we were very happy, very happy, and very thankful for everything. And this was the first baby, my son, that was born into our family, the first child after the Holocaust.

So it was a very special--

Very, very moving moment. I remember them from year they interviewed me for the Holocaust testimony. And this was the highlight of my life, when this baby was born, because that minute, I felt that there is continuation. And that our nation and the people are renewing and getting back their strength.

And what did you name him?

I named him after my husband's father who perished also in the Holocaust, Gabriel. We wanted, while I was pregnant, we were discussing, all the time, each one of us lost both sets of parents. And each one of us lost a brother. So as many children we will have, we would like that, in that way, their name should not be forgotten.

So we will name the children. I wanted to be a good wife, and I said, if it's a girl, I will name it after your mother. If it's a boy, it will be after your father. So it was a boy. And this one that is getting now married is named after my mother. But we have four children. And it's after the four parents.

So you have two boys and two girls?

Two boys and two girls, yes. Now, the life was not easy, I have to say to you, after the Holocaust. Even, in Israel, even when got married. We lived in one room. We shared the kitchen, three families together. It was apartment of three rooms. In each room, one couple was living. And the kitchen, we divided. And three women were sharing the kitchen.

But there was a lot of happiness. There was a lot of positiveness. There was a lot of sharing and doing together things, and respectfulness, and try to cheer each other.

Were the other women older than you?

Yes, I was the youngest.

Before we started the interview, we were talking about your learning to cook. And how you didn't have a chance for your mother to teach you how to cook. And that when you were married, you didn't know very much about cooking.

You lived with Esther. Did you learn some of that cooking when you lived with Esther?

When I lived with Esther, Esther was mainly in charge of the cooking. And I was mainly in charge of cleaning or ironing. I was not so much interested, really, in cooking. I was more into books in those days.

So how was it after you were married as far as cooking?

After I got married, it was difficult. I remember that once, I tried to make a cake. Because my husband said that it would be nice on the day of Sabbath to have a cup of coffee with a piece of homemade cake. I mean, bakeries were not in existence. It was too expensive, if it was here and there, a bakery. Who bought?

And I attempted to make a cake. And it was a yeast cake. And it wouldn't rise. So what should I do? It's already afternoon and it's nothing moving. It's soon the holiday coming, the Sabbath. I am not able to bake anymore. So I took that dough. And I put it in the garbage can.

And one thing I forgot that I should have been wrapping it or hiding it more. That was the task of my husband. He came home that he helped me take down the garbage from their apartment and into the dumpster to put it. And as he was throwing it, he saw the dough. He didn't say nothing.

Sabbath morning, I was serving coffee. And I had a piece of chocolate. And he says, it would be nice to have a piece of cake. But what can we do? It's in the dumpster. So I know that he noticed the dough.

But slowly, I don't know, very little, I am not a big cook, today, either. I am admiring how my daughter is cooking. She is a really gourmet cook. I do simple things. That taste, I think, came back, remembering from the home. I remember how it tasted, good potato soup. I remember the dill that mother was using on the [INAUDIBLE] or seeing her doing things. Eventually, certain things come back to you.

And from experience, and as my husband says, I experimented on him. He had to be the one who had to eat certain foods that was not so good. But thank God, he survived. 47 years, we will be married, in April. So apparently, something went good.

So back to your schooling. You were in school when you were married.

I was in school after I got married. I was in school for a very long time. And at a very early age, I was still in school and married, I went to teach in the outskirts of Tel Aviv. That time, the head of the country of Israel, was Ben-Gurion, which one is a known name.

He asked all the students who went to teacher seminar to volunteer and go out to teach, because the influx of immigration was so high. And Israel was not ready and prepared with enough teachers. So it was counted, to a certain degree, as credit towards our learning. We went out to teach in remote places, outskirts.

My job was in a slum area, so to say, of Tel Aviv, my first job. I had 42 students in the class. Not being experienced teacher was not really a easy task.

What were you teaching?

And it was maybe-- I was teaching first grade.

First grade.

First grade, reading. And I remember that I counted at least 30 different countries where the children from.

And many different--

And many different languages, yes. But I still cherish that year, because it was not only teaching those children, but helping them to adjust to a new life again. Later on, I was teaching children, mainly, that they came from Morocco. And I remember, I wasn't yet married when I was already helping out in that special observation center to teach children. And I used to take home to bathe children.

I was not only teaching, but I was teaching the parents, because they came from Morocco, from caves that they lived in. And they had very little knowledge of how to maintain hygiene life at home. I used to take home children for the weekend, that they should have a little bit better food, that they should have a little bit better home.

And in matter of fact, I got sick from one of the children. They had a lot of problems with eye infections, trachoma. And I developed from this one little gorgeous, beautiful child, I bedded her. I put her next to me in bed. I didn't have extra bed anyway. And she was sleeping with me.

So my husband is always teasing me that when I said to him, yes, I marry you, I was not seeing really well, because I had that sickness of my eye. But it was pioneer years. And everybody was doing. And everybody was helping. So even if we had a lot of difficulties, but we felt that we are all together, building back normal kind of a life. We are building a new home for all of us, that we are establishing back a nation that has been destroyed.

Until this day, when I see a pregnant woman, I bless, because it means one more life is coming to this world. And it's strengthening, again, the humanity. That there is one more instant of the ones that have been wiped. We have to replace the ones who we lost. So it was a very-- it was like the spring.

Yeah, the springtime is the time when everything is starting to come to life. That's how those years will be always remembered by me. Difficult in one way, it was very little income. It was very hard to find a job. It was very hard to have normal living quarters, or any, really, luxurious condition. Who had a car? We walked to places.

And we never minded, because they were all determined to try to prove to us, to the world, and to humanity, that with all of us we went through, we are back to humanity. And we are building back a normal kind of a life. So I think that that gave us a lot of courage, a lot of strength, and a lot of hope, seeing that things are getting back to normality.

So this year that you were teaching on the outskirts, you had finished school?

I finished school two years after I was married. I have a teaching more. I was teaching and going to school at the same time.

In school, was your training elementary education?

Elementary education.

That's what you were studying in school?

I was-- yes, I always wanted primary grades. And until these days, it's 40 years that I am teaching.

So you're still--

And always raise young children.

So you continued going to school and finished when you had been married for two years.

I had been married. In matter of fact, I had been pregnant. And I was teaching. And I was going to school. And I continued to go even after it.

After you had the baby?

After that I had the baby, yes.

The same school?

I went to the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. I have my BA from the Hebrew University in Jerusalem.

So did you transfer or you had finished one school?

I finished one school. And then I started the other school at the Hebrew University.

And you got a BA there?

A BA there, in education. And then, we came to this country as exchange teachers.

Now, your husband was out of the army by now.

My husband was out of the army very shortly after we were married. Very shortly, I was pregnant with my first son when he was out of the army. And he went back to his profession. He is a high school teacher. And he was back to teaching.

And what was his subject?

His subject was Talmud, and Bible, and prophets. And we were both a couple of teachers. And then came as exchange teachers.

Now, why did you decide to do that?

Teaching?

No, to come to--

To America?

As exchange teachers, yes.

Because Esther, my sister, got married about a year and a half, because I was in high months of my pregnancy when Esther got married. So she got married a year and a half, about, after I got married. She married a rabbi from America.

In Israel?

In Israel.

She met him in Israel?

Yes, he was visiting in Israel. And he met her. And they got engaged. And they got married. And she had to wait for papers to join him here back. He was a rabbi near to Pittsburgh, named a place, Braddock. And he came-- she came out.

And we didn't see each other for a couple years. And when this opportunity came that I can come to the state as exchange teacher. I was very happy to do that, because I wanted to see my sister.

So you thought you would be able to spend some time?

Some time, yes. I thought we came for two years teaching in a school named Yeshiva Flatbush. One of the best Jewish day schools in this country.

And how many children did you have?

I had two sons when I came. I came with two sons. They are Israeli born, my boys. Citizens of America, because, after a while, you got your citizenship here. But I was able to be-- Esther moved, at that time, to New York. And I was in New York. And we saw each other, almost, on a daily basis.

And she had children. So the cousins played together. And after the two years, we wanted to return, because that was the exchange teachers. And we were asked, in Allentown, Pennsylvania, by the school established a couple years prior to our coming to this country. And they asked us to help them out.

They had problems with the principal and the teachers. And they said to us, knowing you, as pioneer kind of people, who like to build and who want to do, could you do this much a favor that you extend your stay? We'll make the arrangements for you and stay at. Lo and behold, we stay 10 years in Allentown.

10 years.

10 years until we establish that school. It's a flourishing school. We are still in contact with people. It's already over 25 years that we left that place, more than 25. And we still have some people who are in touch with us.

And when did you decide to stay permanently in the United States?

About 27 years ago, 30 years ago.

How did you make that decision?

Well, I tell you, I love you Israel. But I am very thankful to this country. It has been very good to us. And I like the education that my children were acquiring here. And I felt that, after Europe, this is a country that gives a lot of freedom. I wouldn't go back to any of the countries in Europe. I am amazed whoever is able to live there. And there are people who went back. But this country is really home to me.

You talked about Israel as though you might have felt at home there.

Israel or America, these are the two places that I can see myself living. But that time, it was really, mainly-- the decision to remain was mainly my kids had very good education. And I felt that I can give them a University education here much easier if I made the right decision. Thank God, I raised four beautiful and very well-educated children who contribute to the country as much the country has contributed to us.

So your children were feeling at home here and getting plugged in to things. And it seemed that they--

And then I went, also, I went to Lehigh University that's in Bethlehem, next to Allentown. And I got my master's degree in Children's Literature there. It's very hard to jump from one place again to the other place. We spend a lot of time in Israel. We have a little condominium in Jerusalem. And as much we can, we spend. And whenever I go, I try, there, to be with young children.

This whole desire of being with children and teaching, I think it comes from the time when we're in the cattle car, going towards Auschwitz, and the crying, in the night, of the children, which is still ringing in my ear. I was very young. But yet, there were younger children who unfortunately never made it. I tried to sing to them. I remembered a lot of stories. Our house was-- mama was into poetry. And my father was always reading to us in the evening, or walking with us near to the bank of the river, he would always tell us stories.

So I used the stories and calmed the children. And they all took to me during that trip of a few days. And at that time, I somehow, it's not that I made a oath. But it went through my mind that maybe one day, that would be my profession. Even my parents encouraged that I go into medicine. But maybe that would be better for me.



So when I came back from the war, I started. I always have been tutoring younger children or helping the ones that needed in a certain area. And it came to me very naturally to go into.

Seem to fit. We have to turn over the tape. So teaching has always been an important part of your life. And you go back to the time when you were in the cattle car with the children. You've been teaching for most of your life, I gather. Is that right?

That's very right. I am teaching most of my life. And I hope to continue for many years. And what I like that I want to give to my students not only knowledge, but strength, and hope, and stamina, and just to teach them that they should cherish, always, the positive and not to dwell on the negative. And I think that comes from my experience as a Holocaust survivor. And to tell them the story on their own level.

Well, I think you have lots more to tell us. I think we will conclude this interview. And then we'll pick up on another day with more of your story. Thank you very much, Mrs. Munch, for giving your testimony today.

You're very welcome. And I'm looking forward being with you again and tell as much I can for the future generation to know.

This concludes the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Yaffa Munch.