

This is a United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Christine Cohen conducted by Margaret Garrett on January 5, 1997 in Bethesda, Maryland, tape 3, side A. Mrs. Cohen, on the videotape that you loaned to me, you were talking about watching war movies and the effect that has on you. Can you talk about that?

Yes. When I say war movies, I don't mean the Hollywood-- there are 10 American soldiers and 3,000 Germans, and they win. I don't mean that sort of Hollywood movie. I'm talking about the documentaries and the real movies, something like Schindler's List, which comes as close to being not Hollywood as can be.

It all upsets me. Everything, I try to see everything on the war or read everything about the war. And I know I'll be very upset, but it's almost like I cannot stop. I have to do it. It's a very, very strange feeling. And then I'm sad for days, but I have to do it.

How do you feel as you watch it?

I relate everything to me, I guess. I see someone in a concentration camp. I think that could very well be my family, I guess. And I make it personal. I guess, every war film, I kind of make personal.

And how do you feel after you watch it?

Very, very badly. I try to do something fun, just forget about it, but you don't forget.

But you continue to be drawn to watch--

Yes, yes.

--movies even though you know--

Even though I know--

--after.

Uh-huh. It's almost like a drug. You're drawn to it. You know you shouldn't. And my husband keeps telling me, don't watch it. You will be upset.

And I tell him I have to. And I don't know that he understands, but I have to, and I do. And it's not just movie, anything, written material. Anything, I feel like I need to know.

So you also read about the war--

Oh, yes.

--and about the concentration camps and--

Yes, yes.

--about other people's experiences?

Yes. Yes, I do. I feel like, the more I know-- I guess, I think maybe-- I think it will have a healing effect on me, but it doesn't really. But I keep thinking, the more I know, the better I'll feel. But I don't.

Do you know any other survivors? Or do you talk to other survivors at all?

Well, my cousin for one in San Antonio. But she's very difficult to talk to about it because she lives in the past. I at least

try to make an attempt at being in the future or now. She lives in the past, and only her experience counts. So it's very difficult to talk to her about it.

So you don't feel that you really have rapport with here?

Not in that sense. In fact, I try to avoid that subject because she just falls to pieces.

So that just makes it worse.

Yes. So I can't talk to her. And in San Antonio, there are not that many survivors. There are some. There's a group out I'll bet you Once a year I see them when they have Yom HaShoah where you light the candles in April for the 6 million Jews, and you have the service.

Once a year, I see them. They usually have the service at one of the synagogues. And I light the candle with the other people.

And I would venture a guess that there may be, in the city of San Antonio, maybe 25 of them left at the most. So it's not that many people. And most of them are of my mother's generation. So I wouldn't know them well anyway.

So is your family observant?

My family, as in--

Now.

--me and--

Yes.

My husband-- it's not so much observant as traditional. My husband grew up in an orthodox home. He got away from it when he went to college. And, when I came, because we weren't observant, we ended up in a Reform temple with the Reform. And I felt I fitted in. He never felt he did.

My children, so we sort of went the middle of the road conservative. My children were very comfortable there. And they grew up. My son was bar mitzvahed. My daughter didn't want to have a bat mitzvah, but she went to Hebrew school and all that.

And now that they're grown, we're back at the orthodox, which doesn't mean a thing to me because I am not that-- I'm observant in a sense, only because I know it's important to my family. The holidays, once a year, twice a year, I go to the synagogue.

Your family, you mean your husband?

My husband and my children and especially my son. My son is the one probably that-- my husband does all that because he grew up with it. It's tradition. It's what's expected of him.

I do it because of him because I still-- the symbols don't mean anything to me. None of it means anything to me because I didn't grow up with it. But I wanted my children to have the Jewish education.

And my daughter, I'm sure it means something to her. But, to my son, it's very, very important, very, very, very important. I don't mean he's religious and [INAUDIBLE]. He may go to the synagogue twice a year, but Jewish symbols, Jewish way of life, holidays, whatever means a lot to him.

In fact, for the last three years, he's been-- when he's out of school in the summer-- he's still at the university-- he's been

a counselor at Camp Young Judaea where they really observe the laws and all that. But we do it. And, like I said, I do it because of the children. My husband does it because it's expected of him.

But you wanted your children to have the education?

Absolutely.

Why did you feel so strongly about it?

Because all of this doesn't mean that much to me because I wasn't exposed to it, but I'm thinking, well, maybe if I was, it would. And also it doesn't mean that Judaism doesn't mean much to me. It means everything to me because I was Jewish. I come from Jews. And that's why they're dead.

And I guess I feel none of the symbols are going to bring them-- with me, it's like one-track mind. Everything goes back to the fact that my family is dead. We suffered along with everybody else that was Jewish.

And lighting a candle on Friday night is not going to bring them back. It's not going to do anything for me. That's why it doesn't mean anything to me. But I don't want my children to feel that way.

So you think maybe they will have something--

They will have something--

--that you don't.

--that I don't. They should have the opportunity to have that. There's no reason for them not to have it because I'm bitter about it. I'm bitter to the point where I feel like, well, if they weren't Jewish, they would be alive. So why should I light that candle? But I do it because of the children.

Is it hard for you to do?

No, no, no, no. The traditions, some of them are nice. Some of them I think are ridiculous. Like, now that we belong to the orthodox synagogue with the women sitting here, men sitting here, that's ridiculous, but it doesn't bother me because I'm not doing it for me.

I'd be happy never to go to the synagogue. I would be just as happy, but I like the tradition. I like having the kids come home and family and friends for dinner, all that. That part of it, I like.

So it's not hard for me. But it's like my husband expects me to truly believe, to truly follow, like if we're in the synagogue-- not that he is that-- he does it-- my husband does things that are expected of him. So, when we're at the synagogue, I'm supposed to follow. I'm supposed to feel something. Well, I don't.

The only redeeming quality there is is we have a wonderful rabbi. Even though he's orthodox, he's very, very flexible, I guess, for lack of a better word. And we can really talk about anything and everything. And he's a wonderful man. And even the Reform Jews belong to the orthodox because of the rabbi. So that part is OK.

But, again, it's almost as if, sometimes, I think I wish I wasn't born Jewish, even though I'm not hiding the fact that I'm Jewish. But, if I wasn't Jewish, I wouldn't have had to go through all this. And I can't help it, and it kind of spills onto the religion.

And if you don't grow up with-- I suppose-- of course, I got away from the church thing, but I'll go to a wedding in a church. And those symbols still mean more to me.

Because, in your childhood, you had--

I don't feel uncomfortable in a church. When we belonged to the Reform synagogue, my husband didn't want to because there was an organ there. He says that's like a church. I said that's what made me feel comfortable.

And so religion is another-- it's almost like it's a casualty of all of that. And like I almost resent the whole religion because-- I mean, when I think about it, you can't blame the religion. But it's like, why couldn't I be one of the others? And that's basically what I live with every day. I'm not saying I think about it 24 hours a day, but, when I do think about it, that's what I think.

Well, you've told us quite a bit. Thank you.

I hope so.

Yes, you have. And it's very important. So thank you very much--

Thank you.

--for talking with us. This concludes the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Christine Cohen.