

This is a United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Rachel Goldfarb conducted by Margaret Garrett on May 20, 1997, in Silver Spring, Maryland, tape two, side one.

Mrs. Goldfarb, you were talking about the school and being put-- moved up from the elementary school to the junior high school, and working very hard on your English.

My homeroom teacher was a Jewish woman whose mother spoke Yiddish. So that-- she was-- the reason I was put in her homeroom is because she said that she could help me, that her mother could translate some things for me if they became too difficult. And also, my English period instructress was a woman who lost her husband and two sons in the Second World War, and was very sympathetic to my problems.

This woman really took me in hand. She would meet me every day a half hour earlier prior-- before classes and would instruct me in sentence structure and grammar. I think she was probably--

And this was just voluntary on her part?

Voluntary. I was the first-- I was the only foreign student in that school. And whether they were impressed with the fact that I wanted to learn-- and later on, working as a teacher, I think it's always an incentive to help if you feel that the student is willing. And also, the fact that she had compassion. That's the best way I can put it. Between these two women, really, they set me on a course of study. But not just on a course of study, but also with the desire to excel. I couldn't let them down-- forget myself.

Most of the kids were pretty kind, even though I was two-- was at that point, I was about three years older than they were. I didn't-- I kind of fell in with everybody. And they were trying to make me feel comfortable. Also, they tried to include me in everything. I must say that my cousin-- my cousin kind of felt like I was a drag, a noose around her neck.

Now, you were 17, 18?

I was at that point-- no. I was born in December. So like 1947, the end of '47, I was just turning 17.

And they were about 14?

They were about 14, [CROSSTALK] beginning in [? January. ?]

Such a big difference.

It's a big difference in maturity. But then again, I was immature. I mean, like I told you, I was dancing-- at the age of 14, I was dancing with-- now I think of them as men of 20, and I never thought of anything being unusual, and being friends with them, and going to movies, and to the opera or whatever with them, and swimming. Never dawned on me that you had to beware or be afraid of something. I guess I didn't know much.

My cousin really in a way, I think, resented the fact that I was thrust upon her. And I tried in every way possible not to hang on, because I realized then and there that it's not good for me or for her. But I found that a lot of her friends have taken compassion and included me in a lot of things.

And then again, really, I think I-- the way I handled it is I made fun of myself. Gym was one of the things that I guess that was funny to me. It was painful, but I made it out to be a big joke.

We had gym. We had to dress for gym and go out and play baseball. I didn't even know what baseball was. I didn't know what a bat was. I didn't know the rules of the game. And they told me to get up there and try to hit the ball.

Nobody showed you how to hit the ball?

No. I mean, do what everybody else does. Remember, I was the first one in there. And I stood up there. The ball was thrown. What do I do with it? Well, they told me to swing at it. So I swung, and I swung so hard I hit myself in the back and everybody laughed, so I laughed along with them. I mean, there's no better laughter, laughing at yourself.

[PHONE RINGING]

And-- my husband can take it.

Is that your telephone?

My husband can take it.

OK.

[PHONE RINGING]

Took him a while. Anyway, so I found that that was one way of getting along well. And if anybody made fun, I kind of kidded along and did not make much out of it. So I guess that's in one way I'm not sensitive. I had to overcome the sensitivities.

But I did work with the teachers that were giving me help. Shakespeare was awful. Julius Caesar was presented at that time, and I was nicknamed "Shakespeare in Yiddish" by this woman who did the translation for me, because I-- there was no way I could understand it. And fortunately, she was willing.

I went to summer school-- finished that semester, went to summer school. And my mother got a job in New York. She couldn't get work here. And we moved to New York.

Now--

That was in June. My mother moved in June of '48.

So she had not found a job. And she did find something in New York?

In New York, yeah. There were the shops, sewing-- garment industry. And she found a job there.

In the garment industry.

In the garment industry. It was extremely difficult to get living quarters. Some of the family, my uncle and some other members of my father's family-- my mother had very little family. She had one uncle who was childless and didn't have much to offer or much to share. And he was married to a woman that I could not see helping anybody.

But on my father's side, there were some cousins in New York, and they helped out and managed to locate an apartment for us. It was over a pub. You talk about scared, you know? [INAUDIBLE] that was the only place I was scared to come home at night Because there were some drunks. And most of my work was in the library. I had no books. I had absolutely nothing other than the textbook.

Now, were you in public school or in a Hebrew school?

I was in public school. No. Once I entered junior high, it was public school. But what I did was manage in that semester-

Oh, excuse me. In Washington, when you moved up from the elementary, you went to public school?

Yes. I went to public.

Oh, that was not in the Hebrew school?

No. No, no. That was the junior high school, public junior high school, Eastern Junior High School.

OK.

And then during the summer, I went to summer school and take mostly required subjects. English was the most part. The math I had no problem with. I was probably advanced in math. History, I had no problem with. Civics, I had to master. And I made some friends by that time, and I was coached through Civics during the summer.

So by fall semester, I was preparing myself to enter high school. And I mean, I was still younger than the students there, but I was closer in age. And since my mother lived in New York, I had to enroll in school in New York.

The first school I went to that was in the district where I lived, the principal told me that most of the students drop out at the age of 18. So he didn't see any reason to enroll me because I would turn 18 in six months. And the school was very rough, he says. You'll never be able to keep your lunch. It will be stolen from you. And you've got to beware of knives and so forth. And that was 1948. I mean, this wasn't today. So--

Where was the school?

The school was in Brooklyn, in east actually. East New York was the area there. But my father's cousin's daughter who was my age said, come on. She just graduated high school, actually. She was starting college-- Hunter College. I remember that. She says, come on with me. The principal at the other school is a very kind man. He's a Jewish man. He'll understand your situation.

We went there, and she immediately made me two years younger. She says, you were born in 1932, and don't let anybody tell you otherwise. Because if they say that whatever documents I had said 1930, just say in order to come to the United States, in order to survive, you had to higher your age, because otherwise, you wouldn't have been-- you wouldn't have survived. But your true age-- you were truly born in 1932. And we had no documents. There was no way they could get documents. That'll get me into school. That was fine.

So we went, and I was enrolled in high school from her home. So I had to stay partially over there in order to qualify to be-- well, I was happy to be allowed. But again, I was partially separated from my mother.

High school, of course, was a different set of rules. And my English was not up to par yet. I was pretty good in understanding it. I had no problem reading it, no problem writing it. But my pronunciation was terrible.

And again, I was in luck. I was assigned to a woman who was actually of German birth, Ray Reed. And the first thing she told me, she says, I don't want you to come as a surprise to you, but I was born in Germany. My parents brought me here as a child. But my sympathies are with you, and not with the Germans.

And really, I think she has helped me overcome the first-- how should I put it-- helped to overcome the difference in people. Not thinking whenever I thought of Germans, the only thing I could think of is the Holocaust and what I've gone through-- start thinking of people as individuals, and assessing them for their own nature and their own feelings and their own everything.

You'll recall that I said, we came to Italy and felt real warmth from the people. And I think that helped me here in the United States, too, is to have her as my guidance counselor. And the principal was Jewish. I quickly identified with him, needless to say. But she helped me to look at things a little differently, too. And she found two Jewish teachers who were-- their specialty was speech and elocution, and to get them to help me, again, after school. I used to have special instructions.

Voluntary?

Voluntary. They were men up in age that were called back, I guess, into the teaching profession because there was a shortage of young teachers due to the fact that a lot of the young men were in the service. And they were kindly gentleman who made me practice in front of the mirror to make sure that my T-H's and my R's and my L's, which were-- the Polish "L" was pronounced "ELL..W," very difficult to overcome-- to, what they called it, learn to speak properly.

I found that the students were helpful. Again, I made everybody laugh along with me at myself. I didn't know the first thing about football. I knew nothing about baseball. I knew nothing about basketball.

And one of the criteria to pass gym was that you had to understand each game. And these kids really were wonderful at helping me. Of course, I was able to help them in swimming. We also had to pass the lifesaving test. There was a swimming pool in the high school.

I was good at math, so I helped them in math. In order to get my English requirement, the school had-- one of the foreign languages was Hebrew. I couldn't bring myself to do the German-- probably could have passed it in German, too. But I took the Regents in Hebrew, so that gave me the language requirement for graduation.

European history-- I just took, again, the Regents examination. I didn't-- just needed a little bit of review. American history, I had to take. I filled in with the subject that I needed. I taught myself typing, so I got credit for that, to get my, I think it was 32 credits we needed.

So I did what I could on my own. I also worked. I worked a 30-hour week, in addition to going to high school.

What did you do?

When I first came to New York, I got a job painting piggy banks. You know, the penny piggy banks that stood up with a slot in there. I did those. I knew how to use a brush from my childhood because I had some painting lessons. And I transferred into a profession sort of, to speak.

30 hours is a lot.

No, I didn't start out working 30 hours. I started out-- we were on split session. School was [COUGHES]-- excuse me-- from 12:00 to-- from 8:00 to 1:00 and 12:00 to 6:00. And I was first put in the later session. Everybody wanted the early session. So I took whatever was given to me. And I worked from 7:00 in the morning till 11:00, four hours a day, five days a week, so it was 20 hours, and went to school afterwards.

As soon as I finished my first year in high school, I had gained enough knowledge that I was able to get a job. I got a job with Miles Shoes working as a cashier in one of their stores and do the books. And actually, it was just for the summer to start with. But the manager liked me, and even permitted me-- I worked from 6:00 to 10:00 every night, and then I worked on the weekends.

Was that hard for you to do that much work and keep up with your schoolwork?

I managed it, though. I don't even remember thinking of it as being hard. I even managed sometime to go out and have fun, too.

I was going to ask you whether you had a social life outside of school.

Yes, I did. I met some people that had been in Bari, in this last place in Italy, because all of them were waiting to come to the United States, and a great many came to New York-- where else-- and somehow kind of got together again. I don't even remember how. Because this friend that I told you, when his brother sent him money, and he kind of gave everybody a share-- met up with him again.

And again, through-- I ran into one of the girls that I knew in camp, and she came to the United States, too. But she

came directly to New York, and she went to Americanization school where all the foreigners went to learn English. So she had contact with these people. And through her, I met the rest of them, and probably kept more company with that group than I did with the high school group. I sort of-- half and half.

Did you feel more comfortable with people who were Jewish refugees like you than you did with the high school girls?

Yes, definitely. Definitely. In the first place, the high school-- they were all younger. Their values, their attitudes, their approach to life was completely different than mine. And I felt more comfortable with the people that have gone through the same experiences.

And nobody wanted to hear about my experiences. Nobody wanted to know about my experiences or how it affected me. So needless to say, comfort comes from different ways. School was fine. And I pledged for whatever there was to pledge, even though I thought it was silly or whatever. But I wanted to be--

What do you mean, pledged?

Oh, there was the Honor Society. And in order to-- since I was accepted into the Honor Society, my grades were good enough, you had to pledge for the different clubs. And of course, there were different letters to be earned and to be part of the crowd.

If I wanted to become part of the crowd, if I wanted to become Americanized, I had to do those things. I mean, to dress up like a child with a big lollipop to go from Brooklyn to the Statue of Liberty and to grin at everybody wasn't exactly my idea of fun. But if everybody else did it, and that was their idea of fun--

So you wanted to --

--went along with the crowd.

You wanted to fit in.

I wanted to fit in. Also, I was told by my cousins very early that if I wanted to sound American, I better learn slang. That was another thing. I mean, I had-- I've been pushed from different directions I guess, all of it for my good, even though at the time it may not have seemed so. And I kind of absorbed a little bit of everything.

And if I had to go to football games and scream, and I didn't know which side was which and who was winning points, but if everybody stood up and cheered, I stood up and cheered, too. And if somebody slapped me down and say, hey, that's not our side. Fine. I made a mistake.

And after a while, I started to kibitz around, if it got me attention, it got me the right kind of attention, and if I was accepted by the crowd. So I had two groups of friends. I had the school friends that I never dated, and I had the outside group.

And through some of them and some of the older boys from school, I was labeled a snob because I'll only go out with college boys. But it was necessary. I mean, I couldn't tell them that I wasn't silly, that some of their pranks were not what I consider the right code of behavior.

So you went through high school in how many years?

About two and a half, I think it was. No, [CROSSTALK]. Wait a second. In New York, I graduated in mid-semester-- two and a half.

And you were living with your cousin most of the time?

Part of the time.

And part of the time with your mother?

Actually, afterwards, I just lived with my mother. I told the principal what my problem was. And he said it's fine. I've proven myself in school. We were sort of-- it was very close to the dividing line for the school district and you could make an exception. And I did not-- I was not a liability to the school. I was not causing any problems.

And when I told them that I live during the week-- I stayed at my cousin's, and then I had to go to work. And like I would come back one place, but I had to make sure I went to the other place to fulfill my residency, so it was kind of difficult. But I think after the first semester he waived it.

Now, how did you and your mother get along under these new circumstances? And you were rapidly learning English.

Mother did not take to English very easily. She had-- she did not have the desire nor the drive. I'm still bilingual, Yiddish and English, and actually, Hebrew, too. If you speak to me one language or the other, I will automatically answer it.

And probably one of the reasons that I was able to learn English as quickly as I did was the fact that I could switch from one language to another without thinking about it. So automatically, I guess I thought in English instead of trying to translate what I was saying. And once I understood the sentence structure, I never reverted to a translation.

Actually, in those days I could revert to Russian, too. I mean, it-- whichever language was spoken, I had to answer it automatically-- got answered in that language.

So what was your relationship with your mother like at that point?

My relationship with my mother-- very cherished one. You have no one else. What do you cherish? What you have. And the same thing for my uncle and aunt. I didn't feel that my aunt was my aunt. She almost felt like my second mother. And my uncle definitely had taken on the replacement of a father.

But if you were becoming very comfortable with English, your mother was not learning English--

It never bothered me. It doesn't bother me now. I go to a store, I take her to a store-- my mother is alive. Unfortunately, my mother never quite-- she was a businesswoman before the war and very independent, which was unusual for women in that day and age. And yet, here, she never was able to regain the community respect that she had there, and that kind of affected her general outlook to life.

I'd say I'm more of a mother to my mother now than I am a daughter. I'm a daughter in name, but when I go shopping with her, it doesn't bother me at all. I mean, she speaks English. She speaks English. She worked, and she spoke English, but not to have the command of language that's really necessary to function well in this environment. She can get along very well, but don't expect anything too much. I mean, for her needs, she knows enough English.

So she can get along?

Oh, yeah.

OK.

Yeah, she can get along. But to me, she will not speak in English. Now automatically, I answer her in Yiddish. And also, she's very hard of hearing now. My mother turned 90. And the sounds that are more familiar to her are the Yiddish sounds. So she can pick up half words and make out their meaning. Whereas, in English, at time it becomes very difficult.

So when you graduated from high school, was that a big deal for you?

It was just a step, another step.

OK.

And I'll brag now. I graduated fifth in my graduating class of 598.

And how did you feel about that?

There was nobody to really rejoice. My aunt came to my graduation. My mother-- I graduated. That was-- the big point was that I graduated, and I can get a better job and I can help more. Because she was just at that point-- I think now, knowing what I know now, I think she was very depressed and tired and unhappy in the line of work that she was in. And it just meant that I would take over more responsibility.

So nobody made a big fuss that you had done so well?

No. It was nothing to make a fuss over. I mean, I've kept my few trinkets from graduation-- the medal and a few pins and whatever, but there was no big deal.

OK. So then what happened?

Then I-- actually, I was exhausted. And the doctor suggested that I take some time off. Also, mid-semester was difficult to arrange college education, plus the fact that I didn't have the funds, plus the fact that I had a scholarship to Brandeis if I went into the teaching profession, taught Hebrew, which I could not quite see as a goal for myself.

I wanted accounting. And I actually worked as a bookkeeper and was offered a job by the company in their headquarters. But I still couldn't see that as a goal, and I couldn't leave my mother.

So my cousin was getting married within a couple of weeks here in Washington. And my aunt kind of helped me make the decision to take some time off work in the meantime. And my idea was to work, save up some money, and start college. I came back here to Washington, and I just couldn't bring myself to leave Washington.

You came back here to the wedding or to live?

For the wedding.

OK. Not planning when you came to stay.

Not planning. No. No. No. Just planning to stay for the wedding, take a couple of weeks off, go back. I had a job waiting for me that everybody considered that a very good job in the main headquarters at Miles Shoes on Wall Street. I mean, that was an achievement.

And I said, I have to ride the train, the subway, every morning to work-- didn't appeal to me. I'm a small-town girl at heart. Came back here to Washington for the wedding. And needless to say, as was the habit, go down and help at the grocery store, especially on weekends and evenings when it got busy.

And my uncle had some customers that I kind of took a liking to, and they took a liking to me. They were childless, actually. They offered to adopt me. Needless to say, I had a mother. But still, we kept on very good terms.

And the wife worked at the Internal Revenue Service, but that was civil service. I couldn't work for them. And there was another customer that worked for the FBI and had an in with the State Department. And his idea was they were looking for Russian translators to try to get me in to work there.

I remember Russian pretty well, and my English was good. And even though-- actually, my expertise-- if I would have

to translate from English to Russian, I wouldn't do as well as from Russian to English. The spoken language was more familiar to me than the written in grammar. Because I hadn't really learned it for that long.

I think I went to Russian schools during Russian occupation, which was for about two years. And they tested me-- gave me a document to translate from Russian to English. I had no problem with that. And they said, yes, they would consider me, and they asked me to fill out an application.

Well, I wasn't a citizen. Sorry, can't employ you. You don't have to be civil service, but you have to be a citizen. So there was a dilemma.

What was required for you to be a citizen? Did you want to be a citizen?

Yes, but I haven't had five years in this country.

So you had to be here five years. OK.

Five years. Right. I had filed my intent to become a citizen. That you do after two years.

OK.

But you had to live here in this country for five years, which I didn't. So that job was out. And then these people wanted me to stay so much that they went inquiring of other friends.

And this couple that I mentioned, Mr. and Mrs. Long that they offered to adopt me, a neighbor of theirs was the chief probation officer for the district court. And he said, hey, we're not under civil service. And if you say this kid is so good, why don't you send her down for an interview? So I went down for an interview, and I was hired. And I started to work. I got a job. I got a job as a grade 3. I mean--

And what was the position?

The position was general office work and some bookkeeping. I didn't know any shorthand. I knew typing. It was my first problem, because I did not-- my aim was to have the proper credits to go to college, and I learned typing because that was a necessity.

He liked my work and the fact that I caught on to things quickly. And I promised to take a course in shorthand, which I did immediately. I enrolled into Strayer College. But my mother was in New York, and I was here. And frankly, I didn't want to go back there.

Why didn't you want to go back to New York?

I did not like the size of the city. I did not like transportation in the city. Washington was like a small town compared to New York. You took the streetcar, and you were there. And if you wanted to walk, you walked. And I liked the greenery. I liked the fact that not everything was towering over each other-- I mean, the general feel of the city.

And so I was working in the probation office, took my course in shorthand, and then I became a little more interested in the intricacies of the law. So I enrolled in night classes just to be acquainted with the codes and everything else.

And what kind of night classes?

College. George Washington University. We lived in the district, so Maryland University was out of--

And what courses were you taking?

Gosh.

You said you wanted to become more familiar with the law.

More acquainted-- any of the courses that were offered that had-- I don't remember exactly which ones now, but any of the courses that were offered that they suggested I take.

OK.

Actually, I was working under a special appointment of the chief judge. It was laws at that time. And I had to have the sponsorship of three judges. Judge Holzoff and Judge Schweinhaut were the ones that signed my-- signed the approval for me to work there even though I wasn't a citizen. And I was known as the kid. I was the youngest member of the staff. And I enjoyed working there. I became a citizen in front of one of the judges in the court, and it was kind of fun.

What are you doing there? I saw you. What were you doing there? You stood up. I said, I wasn't a citizen. But I enjoyed working there. And my mother came here. We found an apartment and we set up housekeeping.

So she decided to move here.

Yes, definitely. At that point, I was already able to support both of us. So it wasn't a problem for me. Whereas, before, I couldn't earn enough-- at \$0.50 an hour, I didn't earn enough to support both of us. It took both of us to support us. Mother made very little.

But here, I started out as a grade 3, which was a decent salary in those days, and today probably, too. I don't know what it pays today. But if I'm not mistaken, it was like \$2,500 or \$2,600 a year, which was considered good money-- enough for us to sustain an apartment and to be able to provide whatever the necessities were.

Now, had you been living with your aunt and uncle, or on your own?

I was living with my aunt and uncle. And actually, when I first started to work before my mother came here, I lived with them, and my uncle banked all my money. So I didn't expect it. I just gave it to him. Just took enough for-- or asked him for enough-- I turned my check over, and asked him for enough for what I needed for daily expenses and schooling.

And he saved it all for you?

He saved it all for me.

And did he take out--

So he basically supported me for several months and paid for my schooling. And when we were going to set up an apartment, he handed me the checkbook-- the savings book. I beg your pardon. It wasn't a checkbook-- the savings book with all my savings. I mean, I bought some clothes. I thought I was spending my own money. Well, needless to say, I didn't overindulge.

Oh, he saved your entire check?

He saved my entire check.

And the money that he handed to you was not from your paycheck. It was a gift from him.

It was a gift. Basically, he supported me.

When I went to junior high, and when I went to school, and he would hand car fare and lunch money to the children, he handed me the same thing. I never spent it. I walked to school. I didn't take the bus.

And he would ask me, don't you need a-- how come the kids always ask me for more? I give them the week's allowance, and they always ask me for more. You never ask me for more. When I want to give you the next week allowance, you show me you still have some.

Well, I didn't feel that it was-- that I was entitled to it. So I just spent very frugally. I didn't have to have the extra soda. I mean, water is fine enough to drink. I didn't need the ice cream. We had lunch packed.

We have to stop, turn over the tape.

Tape two, side two. So you were working at the probation office, and then what happened?

Well, shortly thereafter, I got married.

And how did you meet your husband?

My husband is also a Holocaust survivor, and I met him-- actually, I met him a while back when I first came here to Washington through relatives. My uncle knew a cousin of his, and kind of tried to get us together. But in the meantime, my husband spent a tour in the service, and a second tour in the service.

He was drafted when-- he came here to the United States in 1946, and he was drafted because he was of serving age. And he put in a year. He got out of the service, and then he was called back for the Korean War. And I actually met him again at the end of his tour of service of the Korean War when he was about to be discharged. And it didn't take us long to find each other.

And where did you meet him?

Right here in Washington.

I mean, how?

A party. Also friends, Holocaust survivors, had a get-together. We kind of tried to keep in touch and socialize.

Is he from Poland, also?

Yes, but he's from central Poland. And once we met, his family urged him not to procrastinate. And we got married in 1952, in June of 1952, and started a family thereafter. My daughter was born in 1954.

I actually went back to work at the probation office. I took off maternity leave. Believe it or not, in 1954 took maternity leave, stayed out for three months, and went back to work, and worked for about a year after that.

Was that hard for you to leave your baby and go back to work?

It was, but my mother was living with me. And I had a built-in babysitter, so it wasn't as difficult. But then it became too much for her to take care of my daughter. So actually, I went on leave again, but I never did return to work. I did continue with some schooling-- classes here or there. And I did volunteer work. That was my big period of volunteer work.

Was it difficult for you when you got married to have your mother living with you?

Never thought of it this way. My husband lost his family. He didn't have a parent, and we just accepted it. It wasn't a matter of-- I don't think-- it would not be a hardship.

Now it would be a hardship. I don't think my mother could get adjusted to our mode of life. I don't think we would be adjusted to her mode of life. It's a lot different now. And fortunately, she can live independently, so that is good for both

of us. But my mother lived with us actually the first 15 years of our married life.

That's a long time.

Yes, and went on vacation with us. We never went on a vacation by ourselves until that time.

So that was a big change when she moved out.

It was. It was. But she decided-- I think she probably worked out a lot of the problems from her losses of family and in stature and status and financial position. And she found a niche at work at Hex.

She worked behind the bakery counter, and she found that that was a good way for her because she would meet people, and was in a situation where she did not feel inferior, I guess to say. Because working in the shops in the garment industry in New York, I think she found very inferior. Because in Poland, she had the store where she sold dry goods, sold fabrics. And here, she was doing the sewing.

And we raised a family. I went back to work-- actually, at that time I got my teaching certificate, and I went to teach in the afternoon school so that I would not be away from my children. And they were attending, too, so I started out with two days a week and progressed to four days a week of working.

Now, this was teaching Hebrew.

Teaching-- no, actually, I taught-- well, I taught the Hebrew language, too, but mostly history. And we settled into typical American life.

You said in the previous interview that your family had been very observant.

Yes. In Europe, they were very observant. But here, we became conservative. We adhere to a great many aspects of the Jewish religion. The holidays are very meaningful to us. I keep a kosher home. I feel that that kind of distinguishes my house.

I do not eat kosher all the time. My husband's relatives do not keep kosher, and not wanting to be an outsider all the time, kind of got adjusted to eating some things. I will not touch pork. Somehow that has a stigma to it.

And I will not eat anything that's milk and meat. And you know, it's crazy. I will eat non-kosher meat, and yet, I will not anything that's cooked with milk-- a combination of dairy products in with meat products combination.

So some of the principles are very important to you.

They are. They are. The holidays we observe religiously. Have a lot of company over the holidays-- I like to have family around-- don't have much family. One of my cousins passed away, and my other two are not very close with me. But my husband's family is very close. They are unusual. They are really-- in addition to me keeping holidays, the religious holidays, the Jewish non-religious holidays we attend with my husband's family, and it's a big family.

My husband's mother was one of eight, and I think six survived. And they all had families here. And actually, my husband's mother was the only one that was still in Europe. And the reason he came here in 1946 was because papers were already made out for them to come to the United States. The war stopped them. He was on the first ship that arrived from Germany to the United States-- first transport.

So his family is very attentive. My children don't feel that they are deprived of family because of that. And even though his mother was the youngest, and his cousin's children are his generation, we're all cousins. Nobody ever thinks about it-- first, second, removed, whatever. And my children, the same thing. They are cousins. They're not thought of as actually distant relatives, if you want to know.

Do your children live nearby?

Yes. My daughter lives here in Potomac. My son right now lives at home. Both of them are architects.

Architects?

Yes. My son actually is working on a project now in Syracuse. Well, he will be going to Syracuse, but he is working here in Washington. He is with a well-known firm, Baltimore firm, Ayers Saint Gross. And my daughter is with AI, which is an interiors firm-- very well-known firm in Washington.

And is your husband retired?

My husband's retired, yes.

And what did he do?

He was in sales with Sears.

So he wasn't an architect? That's not where they got it?

No. No. They blame me for it. I don't know. I really don't know where they got it from. Our son was five when he sketched the Verrazano bridge. And our daughter was interested in the arts, and she just fell into architecture.

She spoke to her advisor, and he suggested since she likes math and she likes art that she ought to try architecture. And lo and behold, she made it. She was accepted into the School of Architecture here in Maryland, and completed her course and did well for herself.

You said that early in the states most of your friends were also refugees and/or survivors. What about now? Do you have--

Well, I always had two sets of friends. I had a special relationship, I guess, with survivors. And then I just made friends-- neighbors who became friends and from school. I've met some people that have remained friends, and still make some new friends now through work.

But there's always a special feeling, a special closeness, a special relationship with survivors because we have the same background and I think certain values that remain with us. We may not be related, and yet it feels like family-- always attended each other's happy occasions, celebrations.

And a celebration wouldn't be the same if we wouldn't have each other to attend. It's sort of like-- I'd say like a support group, like a second family. There's a certain bond-- I don't know how to say it. There's a certain kinship that goes beyond family.

I know you can make very close friends that can be like sisters and not being related. But that's the best way I can describe it. It would be like having sisters, being able to share some things that nobody else would understand is-- there are certain experiences that nobody else can understand them, what it means to us.

Do you talk about your experiences during the Holocaust?

Occasionally of-- just as reminders. And I mean, we don't sit down and talk about them per se, but it has to come out. It has to come out in some way.

You mean something might remind you of something?

Something would remind-- give you a little example. We were celebrating Mother's Day here around this same table,

and we had some guests. And my husband actually has difficulty talking about the Holocaust and his experiences. I seem to be able to talk about it easier. He gets very emotional.

And out of nowhere, oh, I don't know, something touched off, and he started to talk about things. This Passover, the same thing. Something came up, and just a slight thing, something that draws the memory to back home with family, with friends, celebrations, it comes back. And needless to say, the next thing comes around is, what happened during the Holocaust during those holidays.

And my husband remembered that Yom Kippur, which is our day of atonement, he hid his portion of bread. He couldn't bring himself, as hungry as he was, to eat on that day. And even though he needed the energy, he still couldn't bring himself to eat that. And really, just knowing what day it was, and getting together a few men discreetly and intoning some prayers, whoever-- who remembered what portion of what-- those things come out.

Was he in hiding or in the camps?

No. He was in camps. He was in camps. Actually, he managed to run away once from the ghetto and found that he had no way to hide, and he had to bribe his way back into the ghetto. And then he was worse off, because he didn't have any papers. Then he had to be in hiding in the ghetto. But those things come out.

I don't know his complete story. I get bits and pieces.

He hasn't told you?

I get bits and pieces because he cannot sit down from A to Z.

Have you-- go ahead.

That's why he has never been interviewed because he just breaks down. His first experience going over his story was with the Department of Justice. They were looking for some information, and he had volunteered to do some interviews with them.

And needless to say, it's not sitting down like I'm sitting with you and talking about it. It was really being grilled. And he just-- since then he can't bring himself to sit down and talk about it.

And of course, the recordation of the history is fairly new. It's not that it was done years ago. This was-- this has only been done within the last probably six or seven years. I know I was one of the early recorders of it. And the only recordation, as I told you before, was a tape that I made for Brandeis University.

But then, it was very few and far between that recorded anything. There have been some that have written books about their experiences and so forth. I think I feel more comfortable talking about it than to write a book about it. Because frankly, I don't have the organization of thought to go through. I would have to have a ghost writer. And then it doesn't have the same meaning.

Have you always been able to talk about it?

As I told you, more or less, always. And part of it came from my experience and my relationship with my guidance counselor. Because she made me in a way bare my soul, as she said. Bare your soul now. And I think it's helped for me.

But then again, experiences as a child are quite different than when you're more grown up. I think they affect you differently. The things that affected me, the things that were memorable to me, were probably a lot different than to somebody who was an adult.

I mean, one of the memories that I have is playing hopscotch and knitting, because you had to be productive in the ghetto or else you were eliminated. And in order to survive, you had to be productive. So I learned to knit. My mother

couldn't knit, so I had to produce my quota and her quota.

And yet, you know, I'm thinking about it as playing hopscotch and knitting because this is my memory of it. I learned to spin wool because this was another way of proving your worthiness to live, or to be allowed to live, I should say.

Do you think as a child you didn't see the larger picture in the way an adult would?

Probably. Probably. Probably. And also, I think the fading of memory, where I'm sure if probably somebody would extract more from me, I would remember a lot of other things, and the normal and natural way of burying in your memory some of the worst memories.

Did you tell your children about it?

Oh, they're very much aware of it from early years.

So when they were young you told them.

They were very protective of us. Because any time there was something on television, they would make sure that they kept us busy with something else so we wouldn't turn on the TV and watch it. And especially early films of the Germans and so forth. I mean, just seeing the Germans march can touch off a certain memory and a certain bitterness, I would say.

And really, our youth was stolen from us. Our families were stolen from us. No experiences that the normal child has, or the normal teenager or young adult, or old adult, for that matter of fact.

How did that affect you as a mother when your children were living through those years, when you didn't have a childhood?

I guess in a way I have rejoiced in my children's childhood. You know, the only thing is I'm sorry I'm not a grandmother. And doesn't look from-- my daughter is 42. My son is 38, almost 39. And I don't see myself as a grandmother anymore. But I have enjoyed my friends' children.

And I have one friend, and she works at the museum-- Regina Spiegel. And it was always a joke that-- watch it. My grandchildren like you more than me. Always enjoy them. I enjoy children. I wish I had grandchildren, but one of those things that you adjust to, you live with.

You said that you're active in Jewish organizations?

I was very active in Hadassah, very active at the temple. In my early years before UJA became an organization per se, even went door to door collecting for UJA. But I was more active in Hadassah-- not in the last 10, 12 years, though, with my aunt, when she was aging. She passed away, and my, God, it's almost five years ago.

She lived here. She was at the Hebrew home-- want to visit her. So if you spend a day here and a day there, you don't want to commit to a day of organizational work.

You said that when you were in Italy, your first choice was to go to Palestine. Did you ever get to visit Israel?

Oh, yes.

And what was that like for you?

What was that like? Like-- I don't know-- like being in cloud nine.

In what way?

Well, you've never visited there?

No.

In the first place-- I mean, for me, especially, knowing the history and having read the Bible, as I told you, cover to cover, it was like coming to a place that was alive, seeing the accomplishments of the Jewish people, knowing that there is a place that at any time anybody tried to do something like that to the Jewish people, that there are-- and hopefully, there's always going to be a state, that there is somebody that could speak up, that there is-- that there is an entity that cares, and an entity that has the ability and the power to make it known to somebody else.

Having experienced life under Russian rule, under the communists, and under the Germans, needless to say, coming to the United States, experiencing what I experienced here, my first comments were when-- during the McCarthy era is, gee, anybody who wants to be a communist, let them go to Russia and be a communist. Let them experience firsthand what it's like, and they're not going to feel so communist inclined as much.

I feel that this country has afforded us freedom, opportunity, has allowed us to have a way of life. I consider myself having a very good life. I think that we're not wanting for anything. The experience of being able to work and supply for ourselves and make our own way was the most wonderful gift that any country can give anyone. The opportunity to go to school, the opportunity to just learn English-- I mean, I consider that a height above all others. Because unless you know the language, you're not part of the country.

It's a freedom that I think is being missed out on now. I think that keeping with tradition is important, but tradition belongs in the home. It does not-- it does not have to be imposed on the population around. I feel American.

And so how did you feel in Israel? Did that feel--

It was a different feeling. I felt a feeling of belonging. I was part of a people. If you ask me what am I first, I couldn't answer you whether I'm a Jew first or an American first. I'd say I'm equally. I'm an American Jew.

I'm a Jew. I have feelings for Israel. We do donate to Israel. We buy Israeli bonds. We support Israel. But I always wanted to be there. But I still feel an American. And I think it's wonderful that America is a country that allows us to be loyal to Israel, and not feel that we are disloyal to America. I don't know how else to put it.

OK. Well, we're getting near the end. Is there anything that I neglected to ask you, anything I should have asked you that I didn't, or anything that you would like to say?

Well, the only thing I can say is to-- and I guess this tape is going to be listened to generations after, is value what you have and keep freedom. Don't let it slip away. And your life will be only as good as you make it yourself. Take advantage of all the opportunities that you have and that this country gives you. How else can I say it?

You put it very well. Thank you very much, Mrs. Goldfarb.

Thank you very much.

This concludes the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Rachel Goldfarb.