

This is the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Peter Phillips conducted by Gayle Schwartz on June 16, 1997 in Bethesda, Maryland. This is Tape 3 Side A. Tell us about some of the experiences you've had working at the museum.

One of the first ones I was on the third floor of the permanent exhibit, PE, when this wiry little man came up to me. I was standing just by the Auschwitz barracks. And he was shorter than I am, probably about 10 years older than I am. He looked at me and he said, I slept in one of those things. That was very emotional for me.

Then all of a sudden he grabbed my arms, pinned them to the side, and pushed me away from the exhibit and said, I know I'm not supposed to take pictures, but I want to take a picture. Why don't you just go away? Which I did, of course. And in those days not only was there no photography allowed but they didn't allow flash, and this man took flash pictures. I could see them out of the corner of my eye from around the corner. Well, a couple of hours passed and I was somewhere else in the museum, I think downstairs by then, and he came out of the exhibit and he recognized me. He gave me such a hug, I thought he would crack my ribs.

That's one extreme. The other extreme just this past week I was at the information desk and a man in his 40s I would say came and asked, what is this? I answered as best as I could. Well, why is this here, meaning the museum. I answered that as best I could.

How did you answer these questions?

Well, I'm not sure I remember it because I was very uptight by then already because he was obviously hostile. I told him the museum is here to tell the story of the Holocaust. It is in America because America had a leading role in ending World War II. The third question was, well, are we supposed to feel sorry for these people, he said with a sneer. Luckily, the telephone rang just then, and I said, excuse me, I have to answer this call.

And there was a caller from outside wanting to know about the availability of tickets. And while I answered that question this man disappeared. I don't think I could have answered the question. It was all I could to keep from hitting him. He had a pugnacious face. Luckily, there are very few of those. I've only had one before-- I don't even remember. I erased it from my memory-- somebody who was hostile.

Most people who comment at all comment positively, and they are either survivors who have survived the death camps who want to share that with you, want to tell somebody that they lived through it. And then there are those who are mostly native-born Americans-- I don't mean Indians, I mean people born in the United States-- who may or may not have had any knowledge about the Holocaust but who will come up to you shaking their heads and say, this is incredible. Things like that. That is very heartwarming. It makes it all worthwhile.

When people come up to you and say they lived through part of this, do you volunteer that you too were born in Germany?

No, I don't want to take anything away from them. They've had a unique experience. I am in awe of their ability to survive, and this is a little moment of glory, if you will, for them. I didn't choose a good word, probably, but I don't want to in any way detract from the-- I think if I say that I shared some of your experience it would diminish their need to tell me their psychological or whatever it is they get from telling me. So I have a hard enough time not showing any emotion at that point. I have at times actually broken out and cried. The exhibits, of course, are sort of dimly lit so they may not have noticed. I hope they haven't.

Do the volunteers who are survivors get together as a group, or is it an informal type of relationship?

I'm very fortunate to have a very nice group of people in the Thursday afternoon group. We have become quite friendly. We have only socialized once at someone's home. That was about a year ago. We haven't done that. We probably should. I should take the initiative, actually. We are a very caring group. When somebody is absent, we all call as soon as we get home to ask, why weren't you at the museum? Are you OK? We keep up with each other with family stories,

family pictures, and things like that.

We switch off among ourselves on our assigned posts if somebody is tired and doesn't want to stand or isn't feeling well. We keep an eye on each other. We help one another out with tickets. It's a nice group of people.

These are people who also are survivors, or is it a mixture?

It's a mixture. There's one couple who have a story similar to mine the others are all American-born.

But my question was is the group of volunteers who are survivors themselves, do they get together, or do you get together?

I'm not aware of any of that. The museum, of course, has an annual volunteer appreciation night where we all get together. But these survivors as such do not get together that I'm aware of, no.

I just meant a more formal acknowledgment of a bond that you all share, that you experienced or share.

I don't think so, no. I really, in fact, don't talk much about it.

Why is that?

I don't know. , I think I tend to be obsessed is probably too strong a word, with the Holocaust more than others, but I can't get enough reading of it. In fact, I don't know how many people saw Schindler's List twice. I did. The first time I was so upset I think I missed a lot and I wanted to see it again so we rented it and watched it at home. Evelyn can't understand how I can read all the books that I do. I think it's because no matter how much I read I still can't believe it all. So I do. And I want to enhance my knowledge as well.

Meantime, ironically enough paradoxically if you will, the exhibits themselves don't upset me the way they did in the beginning. You become used to it. It's only when I see other people getting emotional in the exhibit that I in turn become emotional. But having gone through it now for four years and knowing where everything is, it doesn't have that impact any longer, which is good, which is good, I guess.

The first time I went through it with Evelyn, she couldn't take it. And although she was born in New York and did not have these experiences, she couldn't take it. We had to leave.

Where are her parents from?

Evelyn's mother was born in Berlin. Her father was born in a tiny town called [? Zuterne. ?] I don't even know where it is, but in the Western part of Germany. He was a physician in Berlin and they met in Berlin and fell in love. She, my mother-in-law, they're both deceased, was then married and had two sons. It was a poor marriage, and to make a long story short, she fell in love with Evelyn's father. And he came to the United States in 1934 because he was no longer permitted to operate as a doctor in Berlin.

He came to the United States and she followed him. He was one of these people who thought that even though he had been deprived of his livelihood he thought it would blow over and he sent her back. He literally sent her back. And during her absence, her husband, realizing that the marriage could not work, said he was willing to give her a divorce, but he left for Brazil with the two sons. So Evelyn has two half-brothers living in Brazil. I'm wheezing. The relationship with them is not very good.

But anyway my mother-in-law came back and obviously they got married. And they spoke only German to her when she was born-- she is the only child-- Because they knew there were grandparents and they might have survived and they wanted Evelyn to speak German if and when the grandparents came to the United States, which indeed happened.

Her grandfather also had a second marriage, and he and his first and second wives came to the United States after the

war, lived with the Cohen's in the same apartment. The grandparents were hidden during the war separately, did not know of each other's existence until they met again in New York quite by chance.

You obviously lost your childhood in many ways. And given such responsibility as a young child, do you think you ever got it back?

No, I don't think so. I still have a yearning to have an electric train and I think I'm too old now. No, I don't, and I think my lack of interest in sports has to do with it. Although I liked to play softball when I was a kid, I went to camp and all that, I have absolutely no interest in sports. There's something infantile to me about sports respectively. The excitement that the sports engender nowadays, I just don't relate to it.

You said you have two children?

Two daughters.

Two daughters. When your children were very young, at the age that you were when you had to move, did that.. At that time in their lives did that make you think of your childhood even more so?

I don't think so. I think in part because they are girls. I was very enormously lucky to have two children. They are the first members of my family born on American soil. They are true Americans. They are very much aware of my history, my family history. They are very Jewish, which I'm enormously pleased about. Our older daughter just got engaged to a very nice Jewish boy and I'm just a very, very lucky man. I have a wonderful family. And they indulge my interest in the Holocaust. They have seen the tape of the survivors now twice and they'll probably see it a few more times with me.

Did you talk about your experiences to them when they were younger?

When they were old enough to understand, when they were teenagers, yes, I wanted them to know. I wanted to drill into them the idea that-- and I hope I'm not saying anything offensive to anyone now-- I wanted desperately for them to be Jewish and to marry Jews. I didn't want Hitler to win posthumously. So far so good.

How did you convey that to them?

I talked about it ad infinitum, probably more than a father should have, but I kept repeating that message over and over again. And I think it, again luckily, they didn't rebelled against it. I think they understood how I feel. I think they are better children than I was to my parents because I left the Jewish religion and religion altogether for a long period. I didn't go to synagogue. I even worked on the high holy days sometimes.

The conflict about the subject between my parents was a terrible emotional drain on me, but my mother retreating from all her history made it easier. So I made my father very unhappy, but I am now back in the fold, as it were, and go to synagogue and all that. I wish I knew more. I wish I could read Hebrew better than I do. It's at a very infantile stage.

Evelyn and I belong to a Catholic-Jewish dialogue group, have been members for about 20 years. It's been a very enriching experience. We've made some good friends. We also belong to a chavurah, which is rather new. So I'm trying to be a better Jew, trying to make up for the years of neglect.

How often do you think of what you went through and the childhood you had and the moving, the constant moving through the years?

Quite often. But as you get older, the memories recede and that's only healthy as it should be. But I have reactions to situations in everyday life that are totally unrelated to the Holocaust and to my experiences, but they upset me. Any kind of uncivil behavior, coarseness, meanness, it upsets me terribly, more than is normal I'm sure. Any unkindness, any bad behavior.

I have a phobia about driving on the Beltway. It's different from other people's phobias in part, I think. I'm not afraid of

something happening to me. I get very upset seeing the aggressiveness, any violence. I go to the movies once a year on Halloween. I cannot stand violence and the coarseness of the language and all that. And I'm sure that's all because of my background. It's not a normal reaction, I'm the first to admit it.

You mean because of the overlay of violence in your childhood.

Absolutely, yes. I'm a vegetarian. Have been for about 20 years. I think that somehow is related. Also irrational, inexplicable, but eating meat involves killing. I do wear leather shoes and I have a leather chair, and so there's some irrationality in that. But my first years growing up were paid for by the leather business, my father having sold hides and skins that were made into leather. So I rationalize it that way, but I don't eat any animals at all.

Are there any sights or sounds today besides what you talked about, aggressiveness, but anything more concrete that triggers memories of your childhood?

I can't think of anything off hand, but you used the word sights and sounds. I cannot stand the music of Wagner. It's to me background music to a pogrom. Hate it. I know there are great fans of Wagner's music. I am not one of them. One of the operas my father took me to was Meistersinger. And for many years I liked Meistersinger. The libretto was different. It didn't have the gods and goddesses and all that fairy tale quality. But I no longer do.

What about seeing somebody in uniform?

That doesn't bother me. After all, I wore the American Army uniform myself. I was very proud of being an American soldier, particularly in Germany. I do get a little uptight if I see a cop. I still think of cops as being friendly. I don't think of them as the enemy, that they represent law and order. So I feel safer on the street if I see police. However, if a policeman came behind my car I would immediately think, Oh, he's after me. It just happened the other day some police car in my rear-view mirror. I couldn't imagine why he was following me. He wasn't following me, but I assumed he was.

Are there any smells the bring back memories?

Smells? No, not really. Nothing I can think of.

What kind of a person would you be, do you think, if you hadn't experienced what you have?

I think I would be much more self-confident, assertive, and more successful. I grew up believing that if you did your job, did it well, and just generally did what you were supposed to do, you would move up in the world. But it doesn't work that way. You have to blow your own horn. You have to be assertive. You have to do something just to stand out. I never could do that. I wasn't brought up that way. I always shrunk back.

It's a shrinking back from authority in a way, I think. Always afraid of my boss, always afraid of my teachers. Respected them, certainly. It's deferential to a fault. Still am to this day. I think that's all because of the way I grew up.

When you say the way you grew up, because of the way your parents raised you or because of the wartime conditions?

It's a combination of both. I think basically authority is no longer respected in this country since 1960s, but I have that extra overlay.

Give me an example.

For about 15 or 16 years, I was an usher at Washington Hebrew Congregation. I couldn't take it anymore. I couldn't take the behavior of the kids. On Saturday afternoons when I ushered at a borough bar mitzvah, I would come home so upset by the behavior, a lack of respect shown to the rabbi, that I had two stiff drinks and so I decided it wasn't worth it.

I get upset about things that don't upset other people. I get upset about litter on the side of the road, people tossing beer

cans out the car window. I can't laugh anything off. But that's my own hang up.

Did your father ever get any or did anybody in your family ever get any reparations?

Yes. I myself got 5,000 marks for the disruption of my schooling. My mother got nothing because there was no record of her having worked, so she got no restitution nor the equivalent of the Social Security. My father got a very small amount of money and then signed a release saying that he would not make future claims. So my parents did not get a so-called renta, monthly payments.

How did you feel about getting those 5,000 marks?

I think it was the equivalent of about \$1,000. I don't remember what I did with it. I didn't do anything foolish with it, that I'm sure of, unless I bought a stock that didn't do any good. But I never had a choice. My parents, my father, actually, applied for this money in my behalf. And I signed the document and I didn't question my father and I just got the money and that was it. It's very possible that he invested the money for me, that I never even saw it. I don't remember.

You don't remember any particular feelings you had about getting money from Germany.

No, but looking back with hindsight I would again take that money. I would not mind taking it, yes. I think my schooling was interrupted. I spent a lot of years trying to catch up, learning English and all that. And so whether 5,000 marks or \$1,000 to make up for it I don't think so, but it was a token, and yes, I would have accepted it and I would again today.

Have you been back to Germany since the '50s?

Well, I was a GI, of course. I was in Mainz for almost two years.

Since that time.

Since then, no. No. I am now in touch with the city of Essen. I wish my German were good enough to write some to them in German. So we correspond by my writing in English and they write back in German. They have just sent me two books about the city. I'm hoping that they will invite Evelyn and me to visit. I did see the synagogue where my parents, or at least my father and I, went in 1956, I think. My parents showed me it was then a burned-out, bombed-out hulk. It is now rebuilt. I would love to go back.

I would gladly talk to German schoolchildren about my experience, if that were a quid pro quo, and I've written to them, written to the city to that effect. I think they consider me too old by about 10 years. I have about 200 former residents of Essen, and they're taking them in very small numbers by your birth, starting with the oldest, obviously. So I think I have a while to wait.

So you're not too old, you're too young.

Excuse me, too young, too young of course, yes.

Anything else you wanted to add or any message to your daughters? Anything that you'd like to say?

The kids know how I feel and what experiences I had. Unlike most kids, they don't say, Oh, I don't want to hear about that again, which pleases me and makes me very proud. They both went to the museum. Our younger daughter went twice of her own volition. And I hope that they will remember me as a survivor and tell their children about it. It's a story worth telling. That's it.

Thank you very much for telling.

Thank you very much.

Thank you. This concludes the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Peter Phillips.