

This is a continuation of United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Volunteer Collection interview with Ruth Harvey conducted by Margaret Garrett on August 22, 1997 in Bethesda, Maryland. Tape number two side A. During the break you were talking about your father's first marriage.

Yes, he has always been a stage-door Johnny, a man about town. He really was. He once had a violent love affair with a young actress named Ellen Victor, and he was so jealous of her. He was all set to shoot her. He was a very passionate young man.

Well, he got over that. But he did marry an artist as his first wife. She was prima ballerina of the Berlin opera. Her name was Elizabeth Grub. She was non-Jewish, and she was a very good dancer. They were married about four years. And then she ran off with the stage designer, a Greek stage designer. And then he was a divorced man, and I think it was a very good thing when my mother-to-be walked into his life as his secretary.

So he had no children from his first marriage?

No. and she later married some titled German and barely escaped with her life when the Russians overran their estate that they lived on. Barely escaped. She later died. I met her once. She was a very charming lady.

OK, let's go back to New York, and you went to high school where?

I went to the High School of Music and Art, which had always been a fond project of Mayor La Guardia's, Fiorello La Guardia. And you could only go in there by passing certain tests, and I'm happy to say I passed them. And there were two categories in those days.

Now it's the High School for the Performing Arts. But in those days it was just Music and Art. I belonged with the artists. It was a regular high school, but they were these two different things that we concentrated on, a career for music or a career as an artist in addition to high school subjects.

So you graduated from high school in what year?

I think maybe '48? I was always one year behind because of my having been a refugee. I believe I graduated in '48 if I'm not mistaken.

And then what happened?

Well, I went to Cooper Union for a time. I did not graduate from there. I was-- that's another thing. You had to take an exam to get into that. I passed that for the day courses. And then my parents took me aside and said, Ruthie, there just isn't the money there. You just going to have to take a daytime job and go to night school.

Well, I was very upset about that. All my friends who were able to go to Cooper Union were going in the daytime, and it was very hard for me to work at jobs, sales jobs. The worst job I ever had as a very young person-- oh, this was ghastly-- was in some horrible neighborhood downtown where we spray painted little monkey masks.

You know the little faces of little monkeys? We spray painted them. Every time I sneezed I'd get out a different rainbow color. It was unhealthy and unpleasant. It was, I would say, factory work. It was just ghastly.

Well, I did-- the jobs I got in those days were not very good. And it was a great strain to work that and then go to night school. And after a while I just dropped out. And much to my regret really.

And then I eventually, after many lesser and less enjoyable jobs, I found a lovely secretarial job with Paramount Theaters in the Paramount Building in Times Square where I stayed for four years, and I really enjoyed it. I was ordering candy for the theater chains and doing secretarial-- Candy was bigger with them than the films were. They got more revenue from that. And I stayed with them-- oh, I must tell you how I got the job at the State Department in

Washington. Would you like to hear how I got that?

Well, now, were you in New York when you got the State Department job?

Yes, I'll tell you how.

OK.

My parents went for a vacation to Nassau. And it was February, and I was alone in the apartment and feeling a little woebegone. Things were not going terribly smoothly in my life. And late at night I had the radio on and I heard an announcer say, would you like a career in the Foreign Service? If so, apply for the State Department at Center Street downtown and get your form. Well, I took off from work the very next day and took the subway all the way down the Center Street near Wall Street and applied for form 57 for employment with the State Department in quintuplicate.

Why were you interested in applying for the job?

New York was not a healthy environment for me. I had been there 16 years, and I was not flourishing. Things were not happening well for me, and I felt that I needed a change of life-- lifestyle, surroundings, everything.

What was not happening that you wanted to?

I met a lot of people who I thought were rather neurotic. There was something unhealthy about life in New York. If you were not well cushioned by money, if you had to struggle, it could be downright depressing at times. And I felt that I was young enough and I owed it to myself to go someplace else and try something new.

So the very next day I got the form. My parents were still on vacation. Every night after work I would lie on the floor on the carpet on my stomach and fill out some more of this huge, positively endless form in quintuplicate. You had to go back to your very first beginnings of life, everybody you ever knew. You had to get references and schools. It took a week to fill it out conscientiously.

I did that, and I listed references here and there and whatnot. And I mailed it off, and this was February. And I forgot about it. In May, I'm sitting in my office at the Paramount Theaters when the phone rang, and it was Washington offering me a job.

Well, my father was so pleased because he had always had a high regard for diplomats, the diplomats life, and here was his little Ruthie entering, true, at the very bottom, but still it was the State Department. He couldn't have been more pleased. So I gave up my job at Paramount and traveled to Washington.

Now, you had been living still in your parents' home?

Well, at first in their home, and then I managed to get a room in the same building above them. But I left all that quite happily and settled in Mount Pleasant and worked for the State Department for about four years.

Did you know anyone in Washington?

I had had a boyfriend who had lived in Washington on and off. He was a flight engineer. And I had visited him once, and the first thing I saw from Union Station was the Capitol and trees everywhere I looked. I fell hook, line, and sinker. I fell in love with Washington, and I wanted to live here. So when the State Department job came I thought this is wonderful. This is a wonderful way to get where I wanted to go.

So you came down by yourself and you found housing by yourself?

Yes, my father treated me to my first night's hotel room. And then at the State Department I went to the registry for housing, and they found me a pleasant place on Mount Pleasant. Yes, it was nice. A group home with lots of other

young women.

And that job worked out pretty well for you?

Oh, indeed I had a wonderful-- I loved working for these. The odd thing is I wanted to go as a foreign secretary, and they offered me such a hideous assignment that I simply just switched to domestic because I thought I'd be happier than-- what this country? It was landlocked, and I can't think of the name right now. But it was the least appealing country in Latin America. No ocean, no nothing. And I thought to myself, to lose two years of my life in this boondocks, that didn't seem right.

And so I simply-- and in those days you can get a second choice. And so I switched to domestic, and I worked on the Latin American division with my previous knowledge of Spanish. And I had a very good time as a single girl in Washington. I enjoyed myself. Then I met my husband-to-be, and that starts another chapter in my life.

And how did you meet him?

Very romantic. In those days the Park-Sheraton Hotel had a magnificent Olympic-size pool. Now it's been paved over as a parking lot. Can you imagine? But in those days it was a very refreshing, beautiful blue-green water. And one Labor Day-- it was Labor Day 1957. It was very hot. My girlfriend and I decided to go to that pool for a nice swim. And so we went, and that's how I met my husband.

At the pool?

He was sitting next to me. Mm-hmm.

And what was he doing?

Well, this is so strange. He said he was also in the foreign service. And what he couldn't tell me in those days but what I can tell now because he's been dead since 1972 he was with the CIA. Only he didn't tell me that, of course. He just-- we exchanged telephone numbers, and he said, if you call me and I'm not there, just leave a message because that's the way it is.

I didn't know that, so he called me and he missed me, so I called him and he wasn't there. And I wasn't going to leave a message, so I just hung up. This way we never would have gotten together. But finally he got me at home because I'd only given him my office number. My boss took pity on him and he said, I'll give you her home phone number. God bless him.

And then we saw each other every day for about nine months. And then he was assigned to Athens, Greece. And that's when he asked me to share his life there with him. And we got married, and we went to Athens and lived happily there for five years. And two of my three children were born there.

Now, when did you learn he was with the CIA?

He told me after much hemming and hawing months and months later.

Before you get married?

He had to because I was-- oh, let me see. No, I was aware of what he was doing before we talked marriage, yes.

So before you talked marriage you knew that he was with the CIA.

Yes.

Was he Jewish?

Oh, no. He was-- he came from Milwaukee of Polish and Welsh stock. The Welsh or English part would have been Protestant-- Unitarian. And the other part was Polish Catholic. His mother was Catholic. She came from Polish peasants, maybe third generation. And his father was first generation who-- they came over from England and went into real estate in Milwaukee.

And what religion was he?

Well, like his-- well, he was not Catholic like his mother. He was like his father. Could you stop it for me?

Yeah, sure.

I'm trying to-- [AUDIO DROPS] Unitarian. It was congregational.

Oh, would you say that again? That tape didn't start when you spoke. So would you just repeat that.

Yes, I had said Unitarian, but I misspoke. He's congregationalist, In fact, our three children were baptized at Plymouth Church in Milwaukee on different home leaves when we came back to visit his folks. And he had them christened right there.

Now, did you consider yourself at that point Jewish, not Jewish?

This is the story of my life. I've never figured out exactly what I am. I certainly feel more Jewish than anything else. And yet I am not really a practicing Jew. I don't follow the high holidays or the customs because I was raised so differently. And so there is sort of a conflict within me as to what exactly-- where do I belong.

So your children were christened in the congregationalist church.

Yes. Now, they're fully aware that my background is Jewish, that some of their blood is Jewish, and they know all this. And they are simply-- all three of them, I have tried to get them to go to Sunday school or have given them bibles, and they're just-- they're wonderful, they've got good characters, but they're non-religious totally. And I couldn't get anywhere with them.

Why did you try to get them to go to Sunday school?

Because we were in the Foreign Service overseas. There was a lot of people going to church. It was a social thing for the people to get together. Their children went to Sunday school, and I thought it'd be kind of good for them to learn the stories of the Bible, you know? But I couldn't get them. They didn't want to.

And in your home did you celebrate Christmas and--

Christmas, Easter, Thanksgiving, and birthdays. That was about it.

Mm-hmm. So you were in Athens with your husband for five years.

Yes, five years.

And you had two children there.

Well, two were born there, yes. The third was born in Fairfax Hospital later.

How do you think the-- having been a refugee and that entire experience, how do you think that affected your life when you went back overseas to Athens?

This is interesting that you should ask this because the Greeks, down back into history, have always been known to honor the stranger, to give hospitality to the stranger, to the visitor. Xenos, a stranger. They couldn't have been more hospitable or welcoming. It's in their blood. And I compare that to the German character of mistrusting instinctively the foreign element, the alien right away. And I thought to myself, what a shame that the people have to be so different.

So the Greeks were hospitable. How about other people in the foreign service and in the CIA? Did you feel--

Well, those were the days when there was a very idealistic bunch of people there like my husband and his friends. Very good sort of people and true patriots and risking their lives. And we had a very high opinion of the people we worked with.

In fact, I didn't realize-- you know, in those days I didn't think about liberal or conservative, Democrat or Republican. In those days, in the '50s, there were so many moderates on both sides that they sort of melded. It wasn't really until the '80s and '90s that you see this really ugly tooth and nail attitude between the Democrats and the Republicans, the ultra conservatives, and liberal has become a dirty word. This is something that didn't exist then.

Did you feel there was any discrimination about you being Jewish?

I must say no.

So you were in Athens for five--

However-- excuse me for interrupting-- had there been anything like that I would not have hidden. I would have spoken out. But I was fortunate in that that never came up.

Do you think that's because of your previous experience that you would have been more likely to speak up?

Oh, definitely. Of course, yes.

And what about having children? Was that for you, do you think, a different experience because of your previous life in Germany?

I would not wed these two ideas together. It was something entirely different. A totally different trip, and nothing to do with religion or past or anything. It was something new, a new world that I was going into. Yes.

And so that was--

Oh, it was the best thing I ever did or went through and gave meaning to my life. I mean, this is what I had been born for. And raising the-- and then later when my husband died fairly early we had only been married 14 years, leaving me with three children. And their ages were at the time 11, 10, and 8.

And fortunately the government provided pensions so we didn't suffer hardship. But still, I was the one to raise these three. And this is interesting. Maybe my past experiences in dealing with hardships gave me the strength to endure this terrible shock of losing him so young and being in charge of three young lives.

And I must say, they had such good character. it was so easy to raise them. I thoroughly enjoyed being a parent. And I must say, they didn't give me much grief at all. They were good kids. I raised them instinctually. All of us do. I mean, there's no handbook for being a parent. And it came out well.

You have boys?

I have two boys and the girl is in the middle. Now of course they're men and a young woman. Jenny just moved to Brooklyn to follow her man who got a job there, and she is a clinical social worker. She just got her master's last year, a year ago. And Michael is an honors-- the oldest boy. He's an honors professor in Milwaukee at the University of

Wisconsin.

What is his field?

He's teaching an honors course.

An honors course, OK.

Which will be up next year, and then he has to struggle to get another job. It's not easy.

So an honors course would cover a number of different subjects?

Yes, arts, politics. And those things are only for three years. So when that's over-- the present problem with teaching and professors not having tenure, he'd be lucky if he gets another teaching position. Although he's very good and the students love him.

And my youngest is working here in Washington. He's got a nice job. He just got married recently. And nice young couple, very happy with life. So I can gratefully say that-- I would say the most creative thing and the most constructive thing in my life would be raising these three children having gotten them in the first place born healthy, and I'm very, very grateful about that. And that's what helped me through my widowhood, having them to take care of.

Did you work after your husband died?

Oh, yes. I remember that I had worked-- I had a little part-time job at an insurance company when Johnny was still working for the agency here. And then he left. And a month after he left I got the death notice. And struggled a little bit longer at that job. And then they replaced me with somebody who'd been there before.

And like a homing pigeon I fled to the agency that he'd worked for and told them my story, and they gave me a part-time job, which I kept for eight years while raising the children. I couldn't take a full-time job. I had a part-time job. I was home when they came home from school. And then I switched to full-time for a few more years when they were bigger, and then I took early retirement. Now I'm retired, and it's amazing how full one's days can be although retired.

And so have your friends been some refugees, not refugees?

Well, there's still Vera, although she's far away. I've had friends from all over. Refugees and Native Americans and Cubans and, oh yes. I just take people as they come. I don't have groups, you know.

So you haven't felt limited to having other refugees who have similar experiences to yours?

That is a feeling I had in New York when I was a teenager by 13 or so. And those days, all those poor, frightened, sick people who had survived Nazi Germany had all come to Manhattan, had all settled on the West side. And I remember how terribly depressing it was as a young teenager to see these poor, old, pale, gray shadows of themselves walking around Broadway, each one a tragic story. There were so many of them. I remember the feeling I had at the time of how tragic this was and how I wanted to get away from it.

So that was part of your wanting to come to Washington?

Well, by the time-- yes, you know, by the time that I was ready to leave, those people were still there. Oddly enough, many, many decades later I went back. They were all gone, and their offspring was doing well, and the places had been-- bad neighborhoods had been made wonderful. And New York was totally different, a completely different stage set.

All those poor, poor shadows had vanished. And you saw nice young people jogging along, healthy, and it was just like it was when I went to Germany and I said, this is a brand new country. New York was a brand new country decades after I left it. But at the time when we were all refugees there together I found it very, very sad.

But when you came to Washington you did not have that feeling of all refugees together?

Oh, no. In fact, you know, New Yorkers had this unhappy reputation for not being terribly polite. Well, I thought everyone in Washington seemed so healthy and so pleasant, and I really enjoyed the people here. I liked it very-- I mean, I must admit, I had gotten fed up with New York. And considered this place a place to get my health back, and I did.

And you went back to Germany when?

With my-- oh. After I became widowed in '72, my mother and I managed to plan to go back to Germany. I think it was '76 or '78. I don't remember which. And the sad thing about my husband is he died in Vietnam, and when he left here we had decided that when he had finished his tour, which was supposed to be 18 months, we would meet in Germany and I would show it to him. He was going to come straight from Vietnam. I was going to go straight from Washington. We were going to meet there, and I told you we're going to paint the town red. And I was so looking forward to that.

He was in Vietnam with the CIA?

Yes.

And how did he die?

Well, there's several versions about it, which I don't know that I want to go into. One is that he died in a swimming pool and the other one is a different version that somebody got to him from North Korea. And so not knowing the full truth, it's best not to-- I mean, I don't know. I'll never know the truth. So I can't really tell you.

But anyway, the idea being that when he had finished this tour we were going to reunite and I was going to show him my hometown. So you can imagine the state of mind I was in when I went years later with my mother. I remember being very unhappy and very unpleasant and very crabby. And I apologized to her. I said, Mutti, I'm sorry, but I'm just so sad. I pictured this so differently. And she said, apologies are not necessary, my dear. I fully understand.

But then after I'd gotten there I discovered that everything was so different from what I remembered. And people were pleasant. And this was before the return of the skinheads. At this point I thought, oh my, this is marvelous. The new Germans are great. This is a democracy. How nice.

And it was only later when I was back home a few years later and I read about these outrages against the Turkish laborers and the skinheads setting houses on fire and just being generally nasty to the alien labor forces that they had. And skinheads with swastikas and whatnot. And I get so fed up and so disgusted, you know.

So as you can see, I've always had a roller coaster feeling about Germany. It'll always be with me. My daughter said, maybe you should see a therapist. And I-- I don't know. I just don't know. Should I or shouldn't I? I don't know. She thinks I should.

Let's talk about your experience with the Holocaust Museum.

Yes. It's funny, people had always told me through the years, Randy, why don't you be a docent maybe at the Smithsonian or something. And I'd say, yeah, yeah. I didn't really want to. I had no desire to.

They thought you needed an interest or you had too much time?

Yeah, besides I'm garrulous and I like people. They thought it'd be terrific. And I said that nothing tugged at me. And then I read an article in the "Washington Post" about the new Holocaust Museum and the idea that I adored. In those days they still had those past machines where you would take one of those ID cards or pamphlets from the machine and you would read-- people who had been through the Holocaust and you'd read their story.

And in those days you would have to go to a different floor and get the second page. You couldn't just read the whole thing. As you went from floor to floor, the fate of this person unfolded. They got rid of those machines because they were used to death. They died. They got rid of them. They were always breaking down.

Now you get the whole little passbook, and unless you control yourself and wait, you can read the whole thing while waiting for the elevator. The idea being that you didn't know then would this person make it or would they perish. And that was rather dramatic. I thought the idea was phenomenal, you know.

And then I read that they were looking for volunteers. And all of a sudden it was like boing. All of a sudden I was interested. My heart was in this. This was something that I felt I could do so well with my background. And so I wrote a letter, and they replied, and I came for an interview. And I was accepted. I was thrilled.

I love the museum. I love what they're doing. And I enjoy being a volunteer. And were it not for my bad ankle and knee, I would be there much more often than I am. But fortunately they have an opening for me here in the oral history department, and I'm very happy translating and checking through these documents.

You said that you love the museum and what they're doing. What is it that you love about the museum?

It's a learning museum. It teaches people, often to young people who otherwise might be totally unaware of the Holocaust, that there was such a thing and that those flakes who keep claiming that it never happened are flakes and that this really did happen. There's enough evidence in this Museum to show that.

I love that that somebody took the trouble to build it. And I love the architect who went to the camps and got the idea for the architecture directly from the camps, James Ingo Freed. And I love what he did. It's a magnificent building.

And the strange thing is when I applied I said, please don't put me near scenes of horror. I don't want to see them. Put me anywhere. Well, sure enough, they did just the opposite, and I found myself walking through the permanent exhibit. But I learned to live with it.

What was your first assignment there?

To be a walker through the different floors of the permanent exhibit, make sure everything was going along well. You know, as you come out of the elevator you see a horrible thing on the fourth floor up against the wall with all the corpses. I mean, this is what I had tried to avoid. But somehow they got me into that. But--

Did you ever ask to be transferred?

No, once I was there I decided that having seen it once I could live with it and do the job that they wanted me to do. And of course, there's many others. You're not constantly walking through the permanent exhibit. There's many other areas. So I do it.

And unfortunately, because of my bad foot now I don't go as often. I intend to go perhaps once a month on a weekend when they need people. Keep my foot in, so to speak but concentrate more on oral histories of translations.

You said that when you read about the need for volunteers something leapt--

Oh, my heart just jumped. I said to myself, god, if anybody can show the public, it's me. And I think any one of those volunteers must have had that same zing when they read about this. Don't you think?

And can you say more about that feeling that you would be able to show the public--

I had a feeling that my life-- remember now that I was a middle aged retired woman without a husband in her life, children grown up, life a little empty. And all of a sudden here is something that totally engaged me, my mind and my



heart. And I said, this is what I was put here for.

I must say I was in this guilt complex because I didn't suffer as much as the others. I said, this is maybe how I can atone for that. I can tell people what these people went through and where they ended up. And I can be more dramatic perhaps than somebody who wasn't as close to the subject, you know? And I had the feeling that this museum gave more meaning to my life.

We have to turn over the tape then we can talk more about it.

Yes.

When we stopped you were talking about your work at the museum giving meaning to your life. Can you say more about that?

Yes, first of all, when I was an only child and shy I didn't know that I really loved people. But as I got more mature and more worldly I discovered that I really like people very much, and it's wonderful working with the public. You meet so many different people, different outlooks on life.

I'm able to use by two foreign languages on them. When I speak Spanish to some bewildered family from Argentina their faces just light up, and I can convey to them the things they want to know about the museum. And when Germans come to visit-- And this is a strange thing. I've seen young German people come in, and they have the strangest expressions on their faces. Maybe I read more into it because of my background. But maybe not.

There's a mixture-- sort of fear and shame and more. It's a combination of impressions. Like if I look at the young faces, they know what their country has done, and I'm sure they feel terrible about it. And they feel embarrassed and guilty but eager to see this and afraid to see it. It's a fascinating expression. I've seen it various times. And I try to put them at ease. I mean, they didn't cause this.

How do you do that? Try to put them at ease?

I speak their language to them. I look at them kindly. I'm gentle with them. But I say how happy I am that they're here. Then I emphasize-- but you of all people, you have to know this. And that's all I say, and they nod, you know? And I have a feeling I'm getting my point across.

Do you think any of the visitors pick up that you were a refugee?

Oh, this is interesting because one of those minutes suggestions was-- the minutes from the meeting of the survivors-- that the survivors ought to have special badges saying survivor. Some people want that. Others, myself included, do not think it's such a great idea.

But whenever I think it's appropriate to a particular group of people given the situation, I'll mention. There's one place, my favorite in the whole museum, and that's Remember the Children, Daniel's House. That is my favorite exhibit because that is partly my youth growing up in Germany. Many of the things in that exhibit-- it's like walking through a series of stage sets-- remind me of my own childhood, although it didn't have the terrible ending pictured there like the ghetto and the camps. I left before then.

But very often when I have a nice family who brought their children I'll put the emphasis-- I'll look at the children and I'll say, that's just like my childhood was. I grew up under those circumstances. And then I say, but I didn't have the sad ending. But I say this makes me remember my own childhood there.

And the children look at me with big eyes. It's very useful to be able to do that convincingly because it's the truth, you know. And I do that when I like a given group and I want to add to their knowledge. I don't feel that I want to go around with a badge that says survivor though, you know? I wouldn't do that. Was there anything else on this subject that you wanted to know? Oh, my interaction with people.

Yes.

Once this sweetest little old peasant woman from some East European country talking Yiddish came. She had misplaced some objects, lost something that your granddaughter had given her. And it had been found in the lost and found, and I got it for her and handed it to her. And she didn't speak the language. She grabbed my hand and kissed it. And I thought that was the sweetest, most touching thing. And I was smiling the rest of the day. Embarrassed, but also touched.

You meet so many different people. Sometimes you see a lady, middle aged, totally overcome. There was one where she'd come out of the Hall of Remembrance, and she was just standing there and her shoulders were shaking. She was leaning against the column, her face to the column.

And I just gently-- I know we're not supposed to touch the public, but sometimes the human touch is sort of instinctive. And I just gently patted her shoulder and stood by her, and she calmed down. You had the feeling that you are an ambassador between the museum and the public, and you try to be a good influence and help and represent the museum and all that. Many other stories.

How has it been working with the other volunteers there?

Well, I met the nicest bunch. First I went on Wednesday afternoons. And then Larry asked if they were anybody there who would be willing to work on weekends because that's when they really need help. So I decided, sure, if that's what's wanted. And I worked on Saturdays. First in the afternoons and in the morning every second Saturday. And that worked out very well.

As I said, everything was fine until I got my trouble with the knee and the ankle, which I hope will improve so I can do more. But I found it very challenging and very nice. There's always the odd pill in every crowd. There was one that was particularly odd, but she's no longer there I'm happy to say.

And on the whole I found them very pleasant. Not everybody is pleasant, but most of them are. And some of them have stories to tell, again, which makes me feel guilty because I didn't go through what they went through. It's always that conflict.

So you mean the other volunteers?

The volunteers, yes.

Survivors that have stories to tell. And how does that come up?

Well, I know that Nesse Godin for one, she's legendary. When we had our training she was the speaker. She told us about when she was a young girl. I think she was 15 and she was in one of the worst camps. And told of life in camp. And you know, ever since then whenever I see her I throw my arms around her and hug her. And compared to her I feel guilty.

It's not my fault, mind you. I know that. But the interesting thing is I discussed this with another volunteer, and she looked at me and she said, you have the same feeling? She said, I thought I was the only one. And I said, oh, thank god. There's more. And it's a common feeling for those of us who have not had the utmost pain that the others did.

So have you had more contact with survivors and other refugees through your work at the museum than you had before as far as an opportunity to talk about this?

Oh yes. Opportunity arose there which I didn't have before.

Uh-huh, and has that been helpful to you to have a chance to talk about some of these things?

Absolutely, I mean, it's fascinating. There's some such dear people. I look at them, and I listen to their past as very young people in the camp. And I say to myself, how can this man be so pleasant and so normal after what he went through, you know?

Are those things that you didn't think about before?

Well, those are things which I thought about before but had not being confronted with in the flesh. And you meet these people actually, and you wonder about the human spirit, how much it can take and stay normal.

So overall would you say it's been more upsetting for you or it's been more helpful to you to have the volunteer experience?

Oh, it's been heartwarming. It has filled an empty place. I wanted to do something important, something necessary. I was feeling too comfortable here, a little isolated with not terribly much to do. And I think that for the rest of my life until I'm no longer able to, I want to be involved with this museum. I just love it.

And you started as a volunteer when?

At the very beginning when they were first open. I was there before they opened the museum to the public, the day before. Here's another little story. I went with my very nice, mature daughter, Jenny. And we went to the museum, and she went, you know, where those boxes are where adults look down at a series of clips below-- pictures and film clips about the really horrendous things that you don't want kids to see. Nazi experiments and that, beatings and that sort of thing. It's kind of sad how many people are always eager to look down at that.

Jenny came up to me and she said, Mom, she said, don't ever look at those. And I knew exactly what she meant because I'm the type if I see an animal being treated cruelly, I can't get over it. And you see some of these things, it sears your soul. You can't forget. She did me a big favor. And I've been working there since the beginning, and I have never gone and looked at those things. Never. And she warned me. I'm very grateful to her.

Had I looked at that, I probably couldn't continue working at the museum. You have to shield yourself against the utter horror. There's limits to what you can take. In fact, I'm going to travel to Eastern Europe in the late fall. And on the way there'd be a chance to go to the camps. And I'm not going to go. I don't think I can face it. It's enough that I go through a permanent exhibit. It's not because I don't care but maybe because I care too much that I don't want to go.

So now you are working less with visitor services, and you're spending some time doing translations.

See this purple folder? It's full of a document which was on videotape in German. First I took it down word by word in German, 39 pages of it. And now I'm translating it from the German to English. Unfortunately I'm not ready yet for word processors and things like that. I understand the museum might give courses on that. I'd like that. I'm doing it by hand. It would be lovely if I could just sort of take it off like this.

So you do this in longhand?

Oh yes, that's why it's taking a little longer.

And do you go down to the museum to do this?

When it's done I'll go down. In the meantime--

No, but--

--once I have a sufficient amount I'll mail it to Miss Rubin. Amy Rubin. I work for her. She's a lovely girl, and I want to have her know that I've been working on this. It's taking quite a while.

No, I wanted to understand the process. The museum lends you the video.

I could do it all there in the library. But I've chosen to do it at home. It makes no difference.

OK, so you put the video--

I take that information from the video at the library, of course, with their machines. And then when I have the document I go home and I translate it.

I see. And what is that like for you?

Fascinating. For instance, I'll tell you, there is this wonderful video out. It's called Weapons of the Spirit, and it's about the wonderful French Huguenot mountain village of Le Chambon. And they're legendary for the aid that they gave to Jewish refugees. They're famous for it. In fact, if you'd like me to lend you this, it's wonderful. It's called Weapons of the Spirit.

And it's this very stirring, which I've always been so moved by, that this particular translation is of a man who was a French Swiss who worked at Le Chambon during the war helping numerous children, caring for them, nourishing them, helping them escape, and how the village of Le Chambon worked with him. And it was a very famous priest, Father Trocme. He's legendary. And he's mentioned in this manuscript.

So I have been so thrilled to be working with this material because even before I knew of the museum I was touched by the story of Le Chambon and how they helped the Jews there. They were all Huguenots, not Catholics.

So working--

It's very thrilling material. First I did the story of his wife, and now I'm doing his story. And it's absolutely thrilling work. And it shows you the heroism the people are capable of. This is a particularly-- this is not a story only of suffering and victimization, but it's what one man with goodwill can do to prevent horrors from happening, and together-- he always emphasizes in this report that he didn't do it by himself.

He had the help of the village people and of the priests and many others. But he had this gift of networking, which is a gift. And he used it to full advantage to save many lives. You can imagine how honored I am to be working with his story.

You said some minutes ago that working with the museum is heartwarming for you. Could you say how that is?

Well, maybe that's the wrong phrase. I just have the feeling that it engages my heart, my emotions. I'm fully committed to bring out the best that this museum has to offer and to share it with the public.

I have had no dealings with creating it or furnishing it or anything. But what I am able to do is be in between the Museum and the public and convey to them some of what the Museum is about. And I feel that I'm uniquely qualified to do that. And that is satisfying.

And what do you think is the best that the museum has to offer? What is it that you want to convey?

It teaches the world about the Holocaust. That is its purpose. And sometimes I look through the book that visitors who leave data on their thoughts about it, and it's marvelous, wonderful what they have to say about it. You get the occasional oddball who'll say something horrible, but fortunately they are few and far between. The majority of people are absolutely enthralled by it.

What kinds of things do you remember people saying.

How wonderful for you to be here and show the world, or this sort of thing must never happen again, and may God

prevent this from happening again, and thank you so much for showing gratitude and astonishment. And you know, it's just fascinating.

But I don't know what people know that they can go up to the second floor and look through these books of what others say about-- at the end of the exhibition it crosses the Hall of Remembrance. And then when you go through the little corridor there are these big books that you can write in. And it shows you that the public really does appreciate it.

Do you feel that your work is appreciated?

Definitely. I've had numerous-- we have one little gimmick that's very satisfying. Each one of us receives every month 10 tickets. Now, you know the tickets are free, but you have to wait in line for a long time. And it's very convenient to be handed a ticket.

Now, I don't always have 10 family members or intimate friends that I give these tickets to, so I keep them on my person when I'm at the museum. And when that hour finally arrives when there's no more tickets and I see some desperate young visitor from a far off country, I'm so happy to slip her a ticket or him.

And ooh, right after the Oklahoma bombing I had the attorney general of Oklahoma. He was in the news just the other day. I forget his name right now. It's Rasmussen or something. Very nice man. And he looked at me. I had no idea who he was.

And he said, oh, what a shame. He said, I can't get any ticket, and I'm only here for the day. I said, where are you from? He said, Oklahoma. He said, I'm the attorney general. No, he didn't say that then. He just said he was from Oklahoma. I liked the way he looked, and he seemed like a nice human being. And so I reached into my pocket and I said, here, let me give you this little pass. I'd hate for you to be here for nothing. And he thanked me so much and dashed off.

Hours later he found me where I was collecting tickets or something. And he said, I want to thank you so much for making it possible for me to see. He said, I'm the attorney general of Oklahoma. And I said, oh my god. I said, your poor state. I'm so sorry for what you had to go through. And it was just like instant friendship. We'll never see each other again, but I don't think we'll ever forget each other.

And it's that sort of human story that is so enriching, you know? And many other instances that I can't all remember of a direct contact with another life. Brief, but you don't forget it. I just-- I can't remember. But you know what I mean. Different various instances remain in the mind.

What else would you like to talk about?

Well, OK, let me say that I appreciate that the museum gives us folks a chance to voice our experiences from where we came from and here we are and how it felt and how it was. This is a wonderful thing that you're letting us do, and it's always nice to have a voice and to be counted and to be heard from. And I appreciate that, and I want to repeat that I really love the museum. And I'm terribly glad it came to this city. And I think that's all, don't you?

Well, you've told us quite a lot, and your story has been very important. Thank you very much for sharing your testimony.

Thank you very much. And you're very welcome.

This concludes the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Volunteer Collection interview with Ruth Harvey.