

This is a continuation of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum volunteer collection interview with Helen Luksenburg. This is tape three, side A. I wanted to ask you-- you told me that you had gone back to Poland. Wanted to ask you about your opportunities perhaps to visit Israel and what that experience was like for you.

Israel means a lot to us. The first money we could afford, we'd never been any place in America except New York, which we could drive. Our first trip in 1962 we had enough money. We took the two children and went for six weeks to Israel.

I was eight times already in Israel on three missions from UJA. So Israel is very dear to me, and I do everything to help. I'm going next week to the Ambassador's Ball. I buy bonds. I support Israel. I'm very involved with everything what is Jewish.

How has your Holocaust experience influenced some of the choices that you made over the years?

The Holocaust experience made me much more compassionate. I have more compassion for people because I understand how people suffer. It didn't make me much harder. On the contrary, I mellowed tremendously. And I tried to help less fortunate people. And I'm always there giving and helping, and maybe that's the experience because I am a Holocaust survivor.

When you look back at yourself as a parent, what influence did the Holocaust have on the way that you raised your children?

To make them aware, again, who they are and what it means to be Jewish and to help our own people. I remember once Rabbi Simon and Rabbi Siegel at the time ask to go to demonstrate for the Soviet Jewry. Amy was a little girl. I couldn't get a babysitter. And Harvey was home, so I asked him.

I said, Harvey, you go and represent the family. He was a teenager still at the time. I remember what he said to me. He said, why should I? You didn't help [INAUDIBLE]. I said, Harvey, nobody likes us. We have to help each other.

When we came to this country, the Jewish organizations help us. Nobody likes us, and we have to help each other. At that time were 200 million people in America. I said, we're just six million.

We have to look out for ours-- I don't say that I don't feel sorry for the other people. But we have to help each other. Look who helped us. So he's answers, if any discussion I had with him about Black people, he said-- I said, look, we help each other. Jews help each other with organizations and things for poor people.

And he said, but because you had a different background from home. These people don't have the background from home. That was his answer each time. But I convinced him that time, and he went to represent. I went to every demonstration.

I remember once was rainy. We were walking. And one woman, a survivor, said to me-- I said, why weren't you there? Late in the day, I saw her someplace. She said, oh, you like to go to these things. What do you answer? I'm not going for my pleasure. I'm going to be there, to protest.

In retrospect, would you have done anything differently with respect to raising your children?

I don't think so. I tried to be very-- my husband always said I tell them I always prepare them, even if they had to go to a doctor. He said, why do you make them cry because you said maybe they would get a shot. I said, I tell them what to expect. That's how I understood to do it.

I didn't want to in the last minute to tell you are getting a shot. I wanted that they know and they are prepared. It's for their own good and thing. I always was honest with them. I told them what I think. I never lied to them. I think that we did a good job.

Do you speak to your grandchildren about your experiences?

My grandchild, the oldest one, will be 13 in three weeks-- 2 and 1/2 weeks, she will be bat mitzvah. Many times, I try. Stephanie, it's time. I want to talk to you. She doesn't want to hear.

Her brother, who is nine, he is much more aware. We went there for Thanksgiving. And when he was telling them about he went to see a movie about the express something, the Turkish express or some-- Midnight Express. And he was telling him that he had an accident because he was so taken, so upset what he saw, how they treat the prisoners in Turkish prisons.

So David immediately to me-- that was in the car-- said, Papa, don't you know why? Because that reminded you of the Holocaust. He knows. He was watching-- we were there just for the weekend. And Pam, his mother, was telling me there was a program on television about the Danish something.

And they said the parents should watch with the kid, with their children about the Holocaust something. He sat with her, and he was asking questions. But she doesn't want to face up to it, and the others are too young.

You speak publicly about the Holocaust. You mentioned to me that you did an interview with CBS, Charlie Rose. Can you tell me how that came about?

CBS called us up that they want to interview us, and we agree. We went on M Street to a studio. Charlie Rose interviewed us. And we were telling stories. We also was interviewed-- I told you about it-- the Board of Education.

And he asked a story about how bread-- I guess you watch the other tapes, you've heard about the bread stuff. So they have the tape someplace. Somebody else, maybe from the-- Mr. Ashkenazi, who used to work in the-- before the Museum was open, he recommended the same, the book Spirit of Triumph. Did you ever see that book? I am in it. So that was-- I think Ashkenazi recommended that, who is not there anymore.

Are you involved with any survivor groups?

Yes. Yes, I belong to the Friends of the Survivors. Sure. Sometimes I go to the meetings, and people come-- I don't want to make myself important or anything, that I'm any better. But some people there, all the people come and they don't know anything. And they don't come to the Museum.

One man is still asking-- he lives here so many years already. He doesn't know how to go to the Museum. Then my husband picks him up. So I said, even Martin Goldman ask us many time-- he's now in charge of the survivors-- ask us if it pays if he gets a bus to bring them, like from the Jewish Community Center.

I said, I don't know how many will come. It costs money if just three, four people doesn't pay. It's too expensive. So it's a problem. They ask so many questions. They don't know. They don't read anything, and they don't know what's going on. It's sad.

You mentioned that you had a tattoo, and you don't have one now. Can you tell me what happened to the tattoo?

When I arrived here in the beginning, I got a earache. And it was very painful. I didn't know how to speak and talk. Was a woman living across the street who was original from Germany, so we converse with them in German.

And when I got sick that time with an earache, she knew a doctor. And she said she called him up at that time. It's 49 years ago. They came to the house, the doctor. So the doctor came.

And he was a special doctor, Simon Bartov. I don't know if he's still alive. And he examined me. And how did we converse? We didn't know how to read English and didn't understand.

So I used to go to the laundry room, and somebody was leaving The Forward. So I knew the alphabet. I know how to read Hebrew, but I didn't know how to read Yiddish. But I taught myself how to read The Forward. I couldn't live without reading a newspaper.

So he came in, and he saw The Forward on the floor. So he started to talk Yiddish to us, and that's how we got communicated. And he noticed that-- he was a nose and throat specialist and also a plastic surgeon.

He noticed the number. So he said, after-- he was very kind to us. He came a few times I came. He gave me shots. And each time, I learn how to say how much of this? What do I owe you? He said, next time. Next time. He never charged me.

And he wanted to remove the tattoo. I wasn't ready for it. During the Korean War, I read about sandpapering, that they are removing burns from soldiers. And Harvey already knew and he kept asking-- he was two years old or so-- when he will have a number. So that really turned me.

So I went to him, and he couldn't-- it was too deep in the muscle. They couldn't remove it by sandpapering. I think in 1953 I had it removed. And I told you before, people were asking me such stupid question.

So they gave me a local, and they were like with the little dots, taking out the ink. Twice, he did it. And I'm glad I did it.

Have you had any recurring dream since the war?

The amazing thing is that I don't have any as often. But after many years, my dreams turned to my personal thing. It's not my parents and my brother and sister and the rest the family. I saw my immediate family, my children in it. And I used to get up, scream middle of the night.

But lately, I don't have as many. I guess time is a healer. And the dreams-- very seldom, I have another dream. But this is almost 50 some years. It's about time. Maybe my brain doesn't work as good anymore.

There must have been some things that you had to learn to do to survive the Holocaust. Were there some things you had to unlearn when the war was over to help get back into a normal life?

No. I tell you why. Because I wasn't aggressive enough. If wouldn't be for my friend, I don't know if I would survive. She was helping me. There was expression-- I don't know if you heard it before-- you had to learn how to organize, how to help yourself. Who didn't, died.

I was her little maid. I was washing for her. Sometimes she got that powder to make a soup, so I cooked it on the iron thing, what we had in the room to warm the room. And if wouldn't be for [? Gucha, ?] I don't know. Because she really sustained me.

And after I met Willy by the fence, he sometimes gave me something. He tried to organize and think to do things, gave me something over the fence. And again, I wasn't such a big eater. So I was satisfied, and I kept clean.

It was very important to keep clean. Otherwise, the lice and everything else was eating you up and disease spread. But I don't think that I-- I never did anything, steal or do something or be dishonest or something. So I still am the same.

What has been your biggest surprise about your life in America?

You know what I'm the biggest surprise? I have a lot of respect and admiration for people in general, Americans that are so generous. And they give so much, philanthropy, they support many organizations. Because my first experience when I was in Israel, I was very annoyed because the Israelis were making fun.

A group of Americans came, and they showed them so many trees they planted. After they left, they took out their names and put somebody else name. And I was annoyed with it. I said, I know Americans. They work very hard, and

they are very generous. It's not fair to treat them like that.

So I always stuck out for people. And I admire the people, even maybe they are not-- it's everybody made it the honest way. It's none of my business, but they are very generous. They help a lot, and that's why we are here because of the American who helped us.

America was very good to us, and we had the opportunities to educate our children. We worked hard. Nothing came easy. Nobody gave-- I'm not obligated to anybody, because we did it all on our own. We didn't come to family. Nobody helped us. On our own two feet, we did it, my husband and I.

I was always behind him, helping him. I still do all the bookkeeping and everything for him. Otherwise, we work hand-in-hand. Otherwise, you can achieve anything.

What's been your biggest disappointment with respect to your life in the United States?

My biggest disappointment is that some Jews don't feel strong about Judaism. I don't mean Judaism so much. I mean to be 100%. And I'm worried that in another 25, 30 years, we'll be poor-- because I see it now with UJA because I always-- we used to collect much more money than we do today.

The younger generation doesn't feel the same way like their parents in giving in philanthropy for Jewish causes. And I'm worried about it, what we'll become.

What's next in store for you? What would you yet like to accomplish?

First of all, I like to see my children happy and successful, what are-- in a way, they are. I'm most concerned now about health, as we get older, not to be a burden to our children and to help as much as I can, to be involved, to help others. And I'm going tomorrow, after tomorrow, Sunday, to the Jewish Council affair for the old people.

I am going to the [? GSA ?] affair because I feel obligated. They helped us, and I'm giving a return many times back. I'm going to the Israeli bomb thing because I strongly believe in helping the Jewish people.

Is there anything you'd like to add before we conclude today?

What I like to add is, as I said before, I'm very concerned about Israel. And I hope they arrive at peace because somehow they have to settle. It can't go on like this. They are losing too many people on both sides. And to have peace in the world and good health and to see my children healthy and everybody should be happy. That's the most important. We've paid a high price.

One thing I do want to say, what I didn't mention before, when I was in Auschwitz-- I have a picture of my children, Harvey and Amy-- Stanley didn't want to go-- standing under the sign arbeit macht frei.

And we paid a high price, but some of us survived. And now, at least we live to see our grandchildren, that [INAUDIBLE] is alive. We have life-- Jews have to go on. And I hope that they are for many, many years to come.

How the situation looks now, I'm worried about it. Too much intermarriage, that we can be just disappear from the [? group. ?] Sometimes I think maybe the orthodox are right. They multiply. They have a lot of children. They will be the only one who will keep up the Jewish race. At this point, how I see it right now.

Thank you, and this concludes our interview today with Helen Luksenburg.