

This is a continuation of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum volunteer collection interview with Maryla Korn. This is tape number 3, side A, and we're talking about receiving reparations.

I don't think that ever-- first of all, nobody can ever repay or take away the pain or take away whatever or repair. As much as it's called reparations, I don't think anybody can repair. This is not a question of repairing, but there were many people in Israel who would have not managed financially who-- that made a difference.

It certainly is going to make now a difference with all of the East Europeans who are going to be getting it, who suffered and should have-- because they were behind the Iron Curtain then. And I don't think that there is ever really a way of doing it right. It's just-- it's one way of helping, and thank God that it was there to help and that it was established. But I have no charity. I have absolutely no feeling of--

And anyways I told you, either forgiveness or for thinking that this makes it OK. This makes it only right in a certain way. It's not a reparation. It's not a reparation. It's not taking away somebody's goods, land, or something-- a farm, a house, or something-- and then repaying for that. This is destroyed lives. Now how do you repay for destroyed lives?

So that's fine with me. They should continue paying. Now it should not be-- I'm just curious what will happen with the Swiss money, and I am I'm a little bit concerned that the Swiss money plus other moneys are going to go now to fix the thousands of abandoned cemeteries and Jewish schools and synagogues in Poland that the Polish government didn't know what to do with and they have now, quote unquote, as far as I'm concerned dumped it on the Jewish community and now fix it.

So what? Is this money going-- instead of helping people so that they could end out their life in dignity and in some kind of a financial security, it's probably going to go to take care of some cemeteries that have been abandoned in Poland and nobody cares anymore except maybe one survivor. One family member was somebody buried there. So here we go probably spending very, very good money on something that will prove to be a total fiasco.

Do you feel Polish in any way?

Polish! No way. The only thing that I really felt very strongly is that my children had to see from where they came. That's a self-respect. We did not come out of nowhere.

We were-- an American friend of mine-- just maybe one of more reasons why we have good European friends because nobody would ask us question like that-- she said I did not know that there were well off Jews in Poland. Well, excuse me. You have to explain to them to somebody who knows you're from a background does not know any--

We're sitting at a family bar mitzvah a while back, and my husband's cousin who knew my grandparents very well turned to his wife and he said between Krakow and Warsaw, the wealthiest Jews was Maryla's grandfather. Well, I couldn't care less whether he was the wealthiest Jew or not, but the fact was that it was connected to something that this was not this poor little Jew shoemaker somewhere in a shtetl, but it was somebody who had-- and whose children were starting to go to the university, et cetera.

And that was of the importance of knowing from where you come. But not Poland. No way. No way.

Though you were born there?

I was born there. Sheer accident. Unfortunately, I wasn't born in Geneva or in Lausanne in New York. But that's all that there is to it. Yes, my father's family went back straight line in that little town, village from which they came up to 1780 almost Mayflower. But, again, it's-- no it's not. It's a country that gave too much grief.

Yesterday, I was translating at the museum some stuff by a Pole who wrote it. And I was shaking my head. He's giving excuses.

And I understand from where he comes, but they are excuses because we know that some people did save some others. So saying if you hit a Jew, you and your family were in danger. Well, it's true, but still-- and then-- of course, he give an explanation that it was easier to save women and girls than men and children for visible reasons. And I said, yep, right.

Let's now talk about the museum. What was your first encounter with the museum before you worked as a volunteer? In other words, how did you hear about it?

Long, long before when it started to be put together. I really had mixed feelings. My reaction was it had no business being put in the middle of Washington. It should be put in the middle of Warsaw or Berlin. That was the initial reaction.

Then we were quite involved through one way or another. Family gave a lot of money, some of those millions that come from the family, not us here but our family in New Jersey. And friends started getting involved, and my husband was politically involved. That was the beginning was Carter and then Reagan.

I was involved also because I had some good friends that were working there. And so we had a connection in that respect. But I was very critical of it. I thought this was turning out to be ridiculous, especially when they started talking about who should be represented there and who shouldn't be represented and this whole thing. And I said here we go again, one of those Jewish stuff.

And it really basically brings me to what's going on now is a crisis in Poland because that brings up then what are they going to be doing. And I kept saying there is Yad Vashem, but, of course, to me now, Yad Vashem represents a monument, a memorial, or this is a museum, educational. So now I have the differentiation.

At this point, I have very different feelings about it. I think it serves a wonderful purpose. I-- but I think it as much as at the beginning I believe that there were people involved there that cared. I think now it's becoming a little bit too much a institution where most of the people who work there-- I have to explain to them what I am doing with those tapes that I am translating, translating, and transliterating and doing-- excuse me. I have to explain to them how on Earth are they going to take this and get it in-- [? let's say ?] from me in English and know what's of importance in there. These are memoirs.

Some memoirs talk about clothing. Some talk about food. Some talk about [INAUDIBLE]. How do they have the feeling of what's of importance in there and what is not. Who is supervising this work that I am doing? See I'm [INAUDIBLE] the tapes. These are memoirs of Polish Jews that were gotten from Poland.

Now I go-- and it's in Polish. So I write out words of importance. Well-- and I'm not saying me, but anybody who worked on that thing has to know of what is of a value to this or what is just blah, blah, blah, blah by a 16-year-old, which I had a couple of weeks ago, her life. But her life was important.

But what is important in all of this? What do you take-- what do you think is important? Then if I think it's important, who's supervising my job, taking out what's important? Maybe that isn't what they were looking for. Maybe they were looking and I missed something.

And I think there's a lack of supervision because these people that work there are young professionals who come from this is a librarian and this is this and this is that. That's upstairs in the archives. They have no clue except from a professional point of view, but the professional-- there is-- here there is still memories, emotions, and everything.

There was one story, the story of a man who went-- this is the best research if anybody wants to tap into what hunger does to you. This is the story. This is the story, the depression and the hunger. Somebody can read this who is not connected to that time and say [INAUDIBLE] What is this?

What this is is the history of hunger and how hunger brings on depression. And that's where I have difficulties. I think the museum is becoming too political.

I don't think it's anybody's business whether Arafat is brought in by the State Department or isn't brought by the State

Department. And it shouldn't be an in fight in the house, and it shouldn't have people fired by this. And everybody there is an expert.

And it doesn't-- it-- I think it's-- it-- it's becoming an institution, and it's losing its soul, personal feelings. And the more the survivors will disappear and the less of a soul there will be because the people working down there, the volunteers-- not talking about me and the archives and some others in the archives. We are doing translations, and we are doing the paper stuff. But I'm talking about the people down there.

Some things are so insensitive, so lack of respect or lack of understanding, so taken for given, doesn't work that way. I don't know. I have very mixed feeling. It's a wonderful institution. It does its job.

Upstairs, scholars are working. There is an extending library. There is an extending archives. At the-- half of the stuff disappears somewhere and nobody knows where it is. Well, maybe 100 years, it will reappear. But the fact is it's there. It's expanding.

It's going to be a research place. It's going to be-- and it is-- the lectures. But there's something lacking in humanity that I find more and more. And I'm happy where I am working upstairs. I wouldn't want to be downstairs.

First of all, I don't want to be downstairs and respond to questions about the Holocaust. I really find this very difficult, very difficult. Because you can't stop talking and it brings out your own emotions no matter what. Upstairs-- at this point, they are joking. They saying so you came here to relax because they know pretty much what I have at home. And I said, in some way, yes. I do my thing, and I go home. When I can't take it anymore after three, four hours, five hours, then I go home.

But I hope that it will maintain or that it will have-- the only way that I can think of is in Yiddish. [SPEAKING YIDDISH], that it's going to keep it because just to be a museum, so what is going to happen in 100 years? So in 100 years, they won't be able to change exhibits, and there won't be new exhibits anymore because there's new material. thank God that is coming.

New material, yes, but it has its time limit. And then what will happen? And then what will happen?

When did you start working here?

The minute I left Georgetown. I immediately work. A very good acquaintance of mine, Babe Abramowitz, was working there long from before as a volunteer, and then she became part of the staff. And she was in charge of fundraising the big fundraisers, and she knew that if I went to some of our family that had given a couple of millions that I could probably get from that society that grew up a little bit more.

So she brought me in very excited except that she had had a stroke and she was on her way out. And the young woman who works-- worked with her and is now working there is either unbalanced-- and I really mean it-- or unwilling to sever. And at this point, I avoid her like the plague because I came in there to work on the-- so that I could do something, whether it was lecturing-- which I did sometimes in the schools-- or whether it was doing something that was-- or fundraising.

And the first thing that she did-- I came in there, it was winter, and all the snowbirds were in Florida. So I was sitting at the desk downstairs, and I was getting quite a lot of money from the people who were stopping by. I'm not the only one. Everybody else manages to get there very nice [INAUDIBLE].

And she came by one day, and she says we don't need you here, don't want you here. And by the way, unless you give the donation first, you have no business being here. So I said to her thank you very much, and that was the last. And this type of a behavior-- and she's still there. You see her constantly.

And at this point whenever I see her, I very nicely turn around and do this. What I'm saying to you, I did not encounter upstairs that because it's a much more-- I call it more rarefied and more-- it's different thing. You do the translations

[INAUDIBLE]. And they are wonderful, and they are caring. But I do have the concern of who is supervising what I am doing. You know what I'm saying?

So you're primarily doing translating and--

Translating, absolutely. Yeah.

Of Polish Jewish memoirs?

Polish-- Polish, German, and French.

Memoirs of people.

Memoirs or whatever comes that needs-- yeah or donations that need to be--

Has your working at the museum affected your life?

I feel that I am contributing something, that I'm doing something.

It's part of me. After my generation after me, that's it. And I think, yes, I'm doing, and my kids know that I'm doing it. So, yes. Oh, yes, it has.

I think in some ways it enriches your life. Look, you know what you're doing, and you know that there is a limited amount of-- now do I believe that some of these things should be not volunteer but paid staff? Yes, by all means.

I take sometimes home stuff, so my husband says to me how long did you spend on this. I said, oh, it took me about two hours. These are not bad at \$150 an hour. But that's exactly what it is. Another institution would not rely so heavily--

Either they take advantage of it or maybe we take advantage of it. But I have no problem doing it. I will do it as long as I can do it.

Has what you learned upstairs affected your memories of the Holocaust or enlarged them?

Enlarged, very much enlarged. I did some things about a Jewish hospital in Berlin, totally flabbergasting. There are sometimes stories that are totally flabbergasting, events that are flabbergasting, things that you learn. Yes, of course.

Like what?

Like this Jewish hospital staffed by Jews all the way through war. On the way to Auschwitz, they were bringing in people to cure them or give them treatment for cancer or other things, and then they were sending them to research that. Now never knew about this, certainly not mentioned in the book of Jews who survived in Berlin. Oddly enough, there it was.

So you do learn every so often or you find something that is odd, that is strange. And then you say to-- like yesterday, I didn't finish yet. I'm working on this memoirs of this Pole, non-Jewish, about Sobibor. There was a fact-- there was a factory that was there at the beginning of the war [INAUDIBLE] where Jews were working-- were being paid, minimal but were being paid, were given a lousy lunch but were fed, and were sent home to this little town seven, eight kilometers away to stay overnight until they started building the camp and then nobody could get out from that.

So, yes, of course, you learn. You always learn. You read some things as silly or as profound as it is and you suddenly going to always learn something.

What does that do for you?

Sometimes it infuriates me even more, gets me angry. Gets me angry.

Sad, angry.

Sometimes you have a good cry. Sometimes you have a good laugh. There was a funny story a couple of years ago after the Schindler movie was shown. There was an article interview with Mrs. Schindler, and she said-- I was sitting-- no, I'm sitting at the table next to a gentleman who's working on his papers, an elderly gentleman. Didn't recognize him. Should have then.

And she says this son of a bitch. This no good womanizer. He did it all for money. This, that, something. It's also-- she contradicts [INAUDIBLE] in her book, but anyway that's the article. And I start reading this, and I start giggling.

Now there's one thing that you don't hear in that place and that's laugh. You don't hear laugh. You don't have giggling. Nothing. You can hear all kinds of sounds or silence, but it's an interesting place, no laugh ever or no happy voice ever upstairs. It's frightening in some way.

And he looks at me with this almost angry look on his face. What is she giggling? And I cannot stop laughing because I figure the scorned wife, here we go. He went to Argentina with two of his mistresses and his wife. Come on. What did they expect from her?

But they're making big hero out of him, and she's saying, hey. And I-- this took me a couple of minutes, and I keep him seeing as I progress in this article. So I turned to him, and I say, sir, I know you're looking at me with this funny look. Would you please like to hear this, or would you like to read it? So he says-- and he's working seriously there-- he says what is it? I said this is the interview with Mrs. Schindler saying son of a bitch.

He starts laughing, and he says, yeah, I know about this article. I said it's almost funny. It is funny in the context--

That type of things do happen, but this is not a place where you either-- and slowly you start to engage conversations with the people who do the same work who are sitting around you. So there gets to be this-- but it's a very strange camaraderie. This is not-- because we are not sitting doing nothing. We are all concentrate.

Help each other if there's a language or something. Like I had the German guy sitting across from me who spoke German. I went to him, and I said look what does this word mean. It's not in the dictionary. Doesn't make any sense.

So there is some connection there, but it's not a camaraderie type of a place. But everybody does it, and some of them come in every day. There is a non-Jewish lady there every day. Marian is on her job five hours a day. So it's going somewhere.

And I know it's doing a lot of good. You go downstairs, and you see the young kids that are coming in. And it's not anymore to Jewish groups that have gone. And you say to yourself I don't know what they learned from it but something will stick in their minds.

If you have-- well, your friends who are survivors, do you encourage them to come and work at the museum?

Whoever comes to Washington, I give them tickets to go and see it.

No, I meant friends-- no--

Non-Polish, non-survivors.

No, friends of yours here who are survivors, do you encourage them to come and volunteer at the museum?

Some cannot even take it as much as going and seeing the exhibit. You have all kinds of reactions in there. I don't have too many friends who are going to volunteer there interestingly enough. A lot of our friends are still involved in

working. We are still this generation. What you have, there are a lot of volunteers are the older ones.

But I haven't heard anybody saying I'm going to go and give my time for it. They all think it's wonderful that I am going--

Do you encourage them?

No. I think everybody has to do their own thing. Some people do it at UJA, which is not my shtick, and some people do this. And I think I can do much more this way. At least with my languages, I do some good. And I know what I'm doing, which is even-- I know-- when I read something, I know what's of importance and what is of no importance or lesser importance let's put it this way because absolutely everything.

There was a story two or three years ago, it's better than Anne Frank and more mature.

And they know that the museum exists, so they know I'm doing it. Nobody's asking too many questions. And I don't think that people-- look, if they don't have the skills of translating, they find it very depressing going down there and working on that. So that's pretty much it.

What is your relationship with-- well, you did talk a little bit about this, your relationship with the other volunteers there who are survivors.

I know them because I know them for years. With those, it's-- the ones that I know for a long time, that's fine. It was the others--

It was the volunteers who are survivors?

Yes, very little connection with any. You come, you do your thing, and then you go except I suspect downstairs down there they work because they don't work on something. They work at a desk or whatever, so they talk and they have-- and I'm sure that they have much more connection. I don't have upstairs any connection.

Not the-- there's nothing there. There is a-- today-- no, it's tomorrow. Tomorrow's the 10th-- there is a meeting of the volunteers, the survivors, but I can't go because I have a meeting with Vito. So what's more important to me? Well, I'm doing my thing at the Holocaust Museum, but to me my involvement with Vito is the treasurer and that is something that I did I put as a priority.

So when I have the two things, which one do I go to? Well, I go to the one-- I go to that one. It's more relaxing. It's more-- it doesn't concentrate exclusively-- you can't be totally surrounded by the experiences. You have yourself already as a Holocaust survivor. You can't be constantly surrounded by this. You'd go nuts.

So like tomorrow, I'm going to my Vito meeting. I'm not going to my Holocaust meeting.

But you've gone to the other survivor volunteer meetings?

No, I haven't because first of all because there's an older generation. They will monopolize. I know it by experience they will monopolize it anyway. They will do what they want to do. So my reaction is just like the commemoration every year, let the-- Herman Taube and the others do it their own way. Let them have the respect of doing it. Then we'll have our time.

When they are gone, somebody will have to take it over. Let them do it. It's their shtick. Let it do. Let them do it.

So do you go to these meetings run by Marty Goldman at all?

No. No. I really honestly believe I'm letting them do their own. Let them do it their own. I don't think it would make any difference. I come there, I want to do my productive work if you want to. And then I come home, and that's it.

What are your impressions of the museum's non-survivor volunteers?

No idea. No contact. No idea. I think they're doing their job, they want to do their job, and that's wonderful.

[PHONE RINGING]

And I was asking whether these non-survivor staff you had alluded a little bit to it, did you want to say any more whether they're jury staff or non-Jewish staff.

I think they are professionals, but that does not mean bad. And I'm sure that they do the things that have to be done professionally whether it's tapes or whether it's something else or whatever. But I question how much anything that-- for example, I do is supervised. That was my question and how much then the one who does it knows what the heck they're doing, and that I don't know. I have no idea. But I think that they would be very well served by having more paid staff being the survivors.

I think that would be better served at this point of the game.

Why?

Because they have the knowledge. Because at least they have the insight, which these don't. That's all that there is. Nothing else. No-- I'm not looking for a job, but that's exactly how I feel and have felt this way for a long time.

You had said that the Daniel Story exhibit is something that you can certainly relate to. Are there any other parts of the museum with which you identify--

Extraordinarily well done. The whole thing is well done. Of course, you do. It's well done. It's well presented. It's taken to the maximum with sensitivity and well, well, well done.

There's not an iota of criticism about this. On the contrary, I think they have done a wonderful job in this exhibit. Whether they do a wonderful job with the speakers that they bring in, that's another question.

The last couple of days, there are some speakers that they brought in, this is incredible, and I'm sure that they're paying them very healthy money. One of them, a guy who worked with the KGB and now he's coming to talk about fascism in Russia. Well, where are we going with this?

But that's, again, this is maybe too much money spent in some ways that they consider right. And I do have a lot of questions how it's being spent. And, again, this is a question of sensitivity. Comes from the guts.

Again, are the survivors all right with what they're saying? No. But they have their background with their criticism or with their approval. My reaction is I'm not in there to criticize them or to approve them. I just do honestly believe that there needs to be more on the staff-- on the paid staff, not the good doing in between.

I come in whenever I feel like it. That's not serious work. There if I were paid-- if somebody else was paid, they would come in. They would put in the [INAUDIBLE]. It would move faster. Nobody says that it has to take a year to decipher a tape.

But if they had more paid staff, there are some from all kinds of countries that were survivors. It would be much smoother at this point. That's all I am saying.

Have you suggested that?

No.

Why not?

To whom? You can talk to the wall there. And then you see what's happening politically there, and then you realize that one or two people are-- my husband went to Poland two year-- a year and a half ago from the American government, from the White House, from the AID. He was going to Poland. He was speaking to the top people there. He came in, and he said can I be of some help.

Now this guy is taking care of Poland. Two guys are taking care of Poland. Without naming names, two guys are taking care of Poland. Wonderful. It's their little territory. So that's what I'm saying.

No, I'm not passing judgment at this point. I think it's a wonderful institution. It's wonderfully put together. And hopefully it will go forward.

Do you belong to any groups of child survivors?

No, child survivors. I belong to the Holocaust survivors in Washington.

See child survivors is a very strange-- there's one group from Baltimore, Connected Baltimore, or it's Washington, and then there are the Hidden Children. I don't fall into any of this. Children-- child survivors I do to be very honest too much school. There's such a-- that's such a heavy stuff there. You go-- I went to one meeting. It's so heavy.

I don't want to do it. It's unfair to myself, to everybody else.

Do you speak to or have you spoken to school groups?

Yes. Long ago.

What level?

High school. High school level. When I was in substituting in Maryland in the 19-- late '70s, early '90s-- early '80s. I'm not doing it anymore.

Really comes a time everything takes over.

And I find it very difficult to talk to-- about it. Strange enough but I do find it very difficult.

That's me.

Is there any message you want to leave to your granddaughter?

[SNIFFLING]

I guess there is one. I'm glad that we lived to see her.

And that's pretty much it. We're expecting another one. That's it. That's maybe the whole meaning for anything else. Parents are going to normal. But OK. And she's named after her wonderful grandmother, David's mother, and her other grandmother but this grandmother. And I think that's continuity.

That's what I was saying from the beginning and that it had to have a meaning. This is the meaning.

When she walks around and said she wants a kippah I said OK. That's what I said. You see that's why I don't want to talk to groups because I do get emotional about it.

Maybe not about what basically happened to me, but I think the loss-- the loss of everybody who was there who could

help. And it's unimaginable, people going up in smoke, people being herded into gas chambers, people this and that. Come on. My only [INAUDIBLE] who gave you the right to do this.

That's why maybe I don't have any-- you see, it all brings back-- this is maybe why I don't have any sympathy or any feelings about Blacks going and protesting. Sure there were killings and there were everything else but come on. Then you think what's of importance. Well, it's not comparing one horror to another, but I feel terrible.

Japanese were interned. Wonderful, they were interned. And somebody else says, but it's terrible. Yes, it's terrible but compared to what. So maybe I-- it's not that I'm insensitive, but I'm coming from a very different-- it wasn't right, but it was war. OK but nobody shot you and in such horrible ways.

Anyway so that's my-- that's my story.

Anything else you wanted to add?

No, not really. You did a wonderful job. It's a long one.

Well, thank you very much for doing the interview.

You're welcome.

This concludes the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Maryla Korn.