

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Interview with Lena Gitter
July 21, 1998
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PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of an audiotaped interview with Lena Gitter, conducted by Esther Finder on July 21, 1998 on behalf of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The interview took place in Washington, D.C. and is part of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's collection of oral testimonies. Rights to the interview are held by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

The reader should bear in mind that this is a verbatim transcript of spoken, rather than written prose. This transcript has been neither checked for spelling nor verified for accuracy, and therefore, it is possible that there are errors. As a result, nothing should be quoted or used from this transcript without first checking it against the taped interview.

LENA GITTER

July 21, 1998

Question: This is the **United States** Holocaust Memorial Museum volunteer collection interview with **Lena Gitter**, conducted by **Esther Finder** on July 21st, 1998 in **Washington, D.C.** This is a follow up interview that will focus on **Lena Gitter's** post-Holocaust experiences. In preparation for this interview, actually I interviewed you for the Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation on January 29th, 1997. I will not ask you to repeat everything you said in that interview. Instead I will focus – I will use this interview as a opportunity to follow up on that interview and focus on your post-Holocaust experiences. This is tape number one, side **A**. What was your name at birth?

Answer: My name? My married name was **Lena Gitter**, and middle initial **L**.

Anything else?

Q: Your name at birth?

A: Was **Lieba Rosenblatt**.

Q: And when were you born?

A: July 17th, 1905.

Q: And where were you born?

A: **Vienna, Austria. Vienna, Austria.**

Q: When did you come to the **United States**?

A: We came July, I think it was the last day of July, 1938.

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Q: And where did you settle when you came to the **United States**?

A: Well, we settled in **Washington, D.C.**

Q: Before you came to the **United States**, what were your expectations of **America**?

A: Well, we had a lot of the idea of the – from the movies, you know, and from the news – there was a newsreel late in one of the movies, so you got the idea of the big buildings, and the – and the beautiful **New York** and all of those skies – what do you call them? Skyscrapers, and you know, like that.

Q: What surprised you about life in **America** when you first arrived?

A: Well, one of the things that was very su-surprising when I started to read, that you didn't judge the people by their profession and by what they did for humanity, but with a price tag. It seemed that at – the man, 200,000 dollar man. You know, that just was very – the people who did so much for humanity or for their country, had an un – a name tag. And I see now, I would have – where I live in the retirement home, many men who are here and they had big positions, but since that price tag is up, they don't feel very comfortable, you know? They feel very depressed and so on. So, that – that's something for your whole life, I think.

Q: When you came to the **United States**, who did you come with?

A: I came with my husband and a two year old little girl.

Q: How did you support yourselves when you first came?

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A: Well, I really couldn't support myself because I knew very little English, like please and thank you, good morning and some [indecipherable]. My husband, who was a physician and knew English and some other languages, got a job in **Casualty Hospital** in **Washington, D.C.** driving the ambulance, and he got 50 dollars a month and room and board. So with 50 dollars a month my little girl and I stayed an apartment house where he paid 12 dollar a week. So that's – because we could not – the only thing we could take with us was eight dollars per person. We had 24 dollars with us. So that th – took a long time til we were able to – even to move into a room and s – and use kitchen facilities. But you know, we – it somehow, with this Holocaust survivors, I think most of us did not expect that the government or different places will take care of us. So it was a very difficult time and my little girl and I went to Americanization school to learn English. And we met a lot of other refugees and came through **France** with some of them. And little by little we got to know some of the physicians and we were in-invited a lot, and it was very difficult. If you don't – if you don't – can't reciprocate, you feel rather badly about. And we came to visit one of the doctors, and the doctor's wife said, oh, go up the steps, on the bedroom you put your coat on, and the bathroom is there. So I looked at myself, I said, what's wrong with me, you know, is my petticoat hanging out, how do I look? But sh – sh – I didn't realize that people want to make you comfortable, as you know where the bathroom is, or where you can put your coat. Th-This is some

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of the things which are not done in – in **Vienna**, or – or in **Austria** in a certain class, you know, so – so there were many, many things. It took a long time to be comfortable, to ask somebody. Now I will ask, oh, you have a lovely bag. If you're finished with it, you don't it, give it to me. Or I go – I dr – I dro – drove by, and – some friend, three in the afternoon and I was hungry and I would visit a friend and I s – and I – I said, **Jean**, I'm so hungry, what do you have in your refrigerator? But I had a **Visa**, I could si – and I had some dollar bills, and I could buy something, but it – it – it was different now, that I could ask people to do or give me something. But when we first came it was very depressing to have to ask. We went in **New York** to try to get sponsors for some family in **France** and it was in August, in September, it was very, very hot. And when we walked into somebody's and they offered a glass of water, as you did right now, we said no thank you. We didn't even want to accept a glass of water, we felt so – s-so bad about ourself that we couldn't **[indecipherable]**. So it was very wonderful that so many people gave affidavits. They didn't even know the family, or they didn't – they had the s-same name or something, you know, and – and it was really wonderful the way, particularly the very poor Jews in – the poorer class, you know. Of course, they had to have a certain income, or a t-tax return to show that they would be able to – to support or – or help – help the people. So it was a very di-difficult time.

Q: Did somebody help you and your husband and child come to this country?

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A: Not really, because my husband was registered at the – at – at the embassy as a student to come to the **United States** with his professor. So he was on the – well, we had, or my husband had family here in – in **United States**. But we – we had a certain pride, you know, and just to take or ask me for something, it's very difficult.

Q: When you came to this country, did people ask you about what was happening in **Austria**?

A: No. The pi – the peop – some knew **Vienna** or **Austria** from – from visiting there or from movies and so on. People were not so – so interested in – in what had happened, and a – it was very little known, you know. Even we didn't know too much about. We were very fortunate to leave – **Hitler** marched in on the 13th of March, and we were very fortunate to leave the beginning of July, you know. So – but my husband had, as a physician, really terrible experiences. He could not treat Jewish people at all, or – or in – not – he couldn't, not Jewish, Gentile people, but Jewish people he could treat. And he would get phone calls from the family that the husband was taken to concentration camp, **Dachau**, **Buchenwald**. On – on the following week she received a – at – not a fa – didn't have faxes that time, a telegram that her husband had died on pneumonia and they have – she would get the ashes back. So he knew all these and he was very, very depressed, but it was very difficult for him to get ready to leave, much more somehow than it was for me. You know, and I felt for a longest, longest time until we had the first interview that

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you did, I felt very guilty that I, my family, we were able to escape and – here, and I was able, you know, the education that I – that I have to make a success, and so did my husband here, and here my family and – and friends lost their – their life, and – and so I – I felt very, very guilty. But now, since that – it has changed my attitude since that interview and also I did not realize that I – that I am considered a Holocaust survivor. I didn't – never, never occurred to me to be in the same category. But now I feel that I have a voice, I can do something and I'm very fortunate that I have that **Montessori** education, or early childhood education that I was doing so much in the **United States**, was very successful. I got the gold medal for my work in **America** for the – in **Montessori**. I got [indecipherable] what do you call it, gold medal from the – from the embas – from **Austria**. I got my citizenship back, and I have a voice. Being angry, it – it does not help. So I feel now that since the – all my writing, I have written about 18 – not – not high class and not people who made the best seller list, but they helped the people, the poor people that I worked in **Mississippi** to write and be able to vo – to vote.

Q: I'm going to ask you to pause because you're running a little bit ahead of me. I – I would like you to tell me how you began your professional career, and I'd like you to explain about your background with **Montessori**. I-I would like you to take your time and do that very slowly, from the beginning, please.

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A: Well, w-w – in **Vienna**, you know, after the first World War, we began to ask ourselves, what is wrong with education, what has to be done? And we were young people and so we wanted to change the world. So **Montessori** was brought, she was a physician from **Italy** and she brought the **Montessori** method to **Vienna**. So we all ran to these lectures and got a – a book that sh – the first book she wrote and so on. And you had, in **Vienna** you had to do first your exam as a kindergarten teacher, you know, and then you could specialize in **[indecipherable]** in **Montessori**. So I took the – the training, then when I got married, I opened up a kindergarten, and I – cause I had the middle or the upper middle class children. I did not have the poor – the poor ones as I really had here in **America**. So na – when I first came, it took a long time til I learned enough English to take some of the tests that were necessary to establish myself. And at that time was the English word against the English **[indecipherable]** that's what the – some of – of the newcomers have to learn, you know, that you have to know the language in order to be political active or – or – or – or have a job and **[indecipherable]** thing. So first I got different jobs in special education, because at that time in the early sh – the special education was on the lower bottom of the education. So – so when I applied they were happy to – to get me to take care of the special class children. And then they were very surprised the big success, because I was bootlegging **Montessori**. I made a lot of material, I use that method of **Montessori**, and so the supervisor, she used

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to bring teachers or students to observe in my – in my classes and so on, to see what I'm doing.

Q: Can you explain what is different about the **Montessori** program that you were initiating, as opposed to what was going on in this country at that time?

A: For one thing, I did not initiate. **Montessori** was here in the early – 1913 she was – she was here, and there were schools and by 1918 when the war – when the first World War start, these schools were all closed. **Montessori** approach is entirely different, it's very difficult to explain on – on a few minutes.

Q: If you could just give a little bit of an idea for someone who does not know about **Montessori**.

A: Okay. For one thing, it's a different layout of a classroom. Children are – are not expected because they're six years old that they be reading, or three years old. We don't – we – in a classroom we have children from three to six, for instance, because a three year old one might be able to read, or a four year old one, but unable to kick a ball or something than a six year one. So they're – it's a such – like in a family. We do a different classroom arrangement. So we don't have this is the class two years old, or four year one, we have them – we have now infants' classes too, you know. So this is one of the things. And also that there are certain rules and – and regulations in a **Montessori** classroom and people in there – it has to work like a – like a society. You can – I mean, you have to show them, for instance, how

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to open a door and close a door. How to lift a chair and put it down. And how – and if you play with something, that y – I cannot come and say, this I want to play now with it. So, he learns that he has to ask. We have little rugs for the children, and they put their toys on that rug, and this is his territory. So they have to learn territorial rights. It's laid out the way, like a library with the books and stuff. You just can't take out a book and then, oh, I want to read the book. We have to return it to there, and th-th-then next child can. So that the – he learns in – the way a classroom and the way the whole thing is handled, he learns the rules for society. So, th-this is a very im – important, and the different expectations for the parents too, to – to understand that, you know? And the teacher is not called a teacher, she is a directress, she directs activities. She doesn't sit at her desk and the children come in, she has to be like a hostess, stand at the door, greet the children. And as she greets them, says **Esther**, you have a lovely dress and your hair is done so nice. Oh, and you have such a doll. And **Esther** says, oh my grandma came and she brought me that doll. So you know from that, that the child will want to walk around the classroom, show the doll to her. She doesn't want to disturb. And then there comes **Jim**, and **Jim** is so sad. So he said, you know, teach – some didn't know, you know, very much. He said, you know, the police came and – and took my ha – my father to jail. Then you know that this child needs help, somebody to help him to deal with it. And so that your aid spends a lot of time because otherwise he's gonna run

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around, disturbing and knocking things over [indecipherable] knocking things over. He – somehow he has to deal with it, but then you assign somebody to help him, hold his hand, take him around and so on. So that **Montessori** said like a hostess. If she greets the people at the door and says, oh, Mrs. **Finder**, you have a lovely dress today, and – and then you tell [indecipherable] or your husband to go and get yourself a drink. You don't talk to her the rest of your party, but she will come home and she says, you know, Mrs. **Finder** saw what a beautiful dress I had, you know. So the same way children know they – they were recognized, and that you knew dealing with their problems or – and also, this teaches sort of manners to the children, to greet people in the morning. Some people talking – were critical when I talked at one of the university, I had some black students, teachers. And he said, oh yes, you come from a country, ki-kings and queens and you shake hands and you do all these nice things. But it's a – a very important thing to be nice, and so on. And so we do a lot training and what you call practical life. And under that comes also the manners and behavior. And what is father of the cons – of the – the president, the first president, we had? **George Washington**. When he was 15 years old, he wrote a book on manners that is – can be had. Now, we have – “**The Washington Post**” has a columnist and she wrote just recently a very great book on manners, the ya – and once I said, like lubrication of your wheels. At that time very

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few people have cars, you know. But so she had a different – so these are some of the things that were – we were teaching. It's very difficult to do it, and you know.

Q: Thank you for – for sharing that. When you first were working and – and showing people the **Montessori** method, what difficulties did you have explaining or trying to initiate or introduce the Americans that you were meeting to this new way?

A: The first time when I was called to **Mississippi**.

Q: When was that?

A: That was in the, I think, early 60s or something. And it was the War on Poverty, which [indecipherable] I don't know, so we can – politically th-the time ca [indecipherable] exception. So I went to **Mississippi** to work with poor mothers and – and poor children. The – most of the southerners are Baptists, so – and so we had – the daycare centers that we opened for the War on Poverty was in Baptist churches. We could not bring kindergarten teachers in, or – because they don't want to have jobs and such. So we t-ried to train the people who lived there. I worked in **Naches, Mississippi**, was my first assignment, and at that time, Governor **Bell** did not – he was the governor of **Mississippi** and he did not want the – the money assigned for the president to use it. We came under a different, other th-thing. And it was very, very difficult to – to teach these mothers how they could read themselves. I had to teach the mothers reading and writing and show them on a

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somewhat basically they could – I did not know that I'm all of a sudden a political worker because I helped these mothers, and some of their husbands would come in too, to learn to read and write so they could do the – an-and johns – not **Johnson**, the **Kennedys** used to come on weekends and help. So these people were able to go to the polls. And I worked with **Charles Evers**, who was the first black mayor to be elected in **Mississippi**. And was – so I became a political worker without realizing what just – I didn't know that teaching somebody to read and write is – is a very big thing that you're giving. And ma – my motto is the word against the weapon. If we will teach people to read and write, then – then they don't need a weapon to – to get some of the things.

Q: I wanted to know how you got involved with what became what you just said, a political issue, but I – I would like you back up just a little bit and – and go back to the late 40s, and the 50s, when – when there are a lot of things happening, not just in your life, but in – in this society here, and news was coming out in **Europe** about what had happened during the war. Can we go back for a little while and then come – we'll return to the 60s in – in a few minutes, but can we go back to the postwar period, the immediate postwar period, 1945, and can you tell me what was going on in your life in this country as news of what happened to the Jews in **Europe** became public here?

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A: Well, I d – I d – I can't put it on dates. I'm – I was – on the 17th this month, I was 93 years old. So you don't – your memory is not so, on dates and so on, I'm not so – I really – well, we opened up the first mo – **Montessori** training center in – in – in **New Jersey**, at one of the universities, they opened up to try to train people in **Montessori**. And there was **Nancy Rambush**(ph) arrived, an American who had studied the method in – in – in **Paris** and so on. So little by little we started training centers, but that was all middle class, for middle class because it was quite expensive and – and mothers began to go to work, or they are forced, they didn't have husbands, they had died in the war, whatever. And so most of the – some people [**indecipherable**] started the, you know.

Q: Approximately when was that? You said some of the women had their – their husbands had been killed in the war. When did you start some of these training programs?

A: With what program?

Q: The – the **Montessori** training.

A: Well, I really couldn't tell you exactly the – the years, but anyway it – it – really, when the **Sputnik** came out in space, **America** began to ask themselves, what is wrong with our education, that the Soviet take us over? So, they looked and they l – and since **Montessori** was the first woman who was asked to come to the – when the war was over in 1918, to the first conference in peace, and she wrote a little

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booklet, **Peace and Education**, and she was very concerned about the peace, you know. So we looked – and then I went to **England** for awhile to take a – a training course, and I went to different places in – in – in **Europe**, you know, for retraining. In the beginning we got a lot of teachers from **India**, because **Montessori** was, for 10 years she was in **India**, because she was Italian citizen and she would not follow – what was the name in – I forgot his name. What? Yeah, mo – and then she went to – to **Spain**, and then she had – she would not follow [indecipherable] the directions of, what was his name [indecipherable]. So – so we – so finally she went to **India**, because when the war broke out the – as an Italian citizen she had – she was for 10 years in **India**, and she became a friend with **Rabindra Tagore**, the first who got the Nobel prize [indecipherable] Indian, he wrote books and poetry and he was very much involved in peace. And also the **Indira Gandhi**, with **Gandhi**. He didn't – the two of them were not – **Gandhi** and **Montessori** were historically living the same time, but also they shared the whole idea. He was for non-violence for adults and she non-violence for children. At that time, as we see and hear it now in the newspapers and radio, the children were just suffering. Perhaps not as much, but they were – they – and when they were eight years old they went to mines to work and so on. So, you see, she was very, very involved in – in – in peace movement. And so, this is very important for us in – and to do this, and that's why I am so happy that my materials and all that is going to **Vienna**, yet,

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w-we – we paid a [indecipherable] we'll be able to do something towards peace, and also that the university, they realize here is a Holocaust survivor and what he did with that method, you know, they will know something, cause a lot of materials and stuff, I'm working with these Holocaust interns at the museum, they're from **Austria**. It's the fourth one or fifth one that I am working, we worked on different things, with the **Montessori** method and others, how it can be. So that I feel now that, of the end of my life, I feel, as **Montessori** said, in the service of the child, that that will go on. And, but it also – it will be a separate room where all the materials and books are being – and films and [indecipherable] si – si – many books, because textbooks are so much written for the upper middle class. Or they are tested on the university, on the professor's children. But there aren't books and materials for the children who don't have that background and don't go to the museums and all that business.

Q: You just gave me a lot of information, let me just clarify a few points. You made reference to your – your books being collected in a university setting. Can you please clarify what that is all about?

A: Well, I talked all the time with the embassy and with the people from – these interns, the importance of – of education and so on. So, I don't know how it came about, but I – not only that I have my books, but I have 200 books, thi – this – that's written by other writers and also **Montessori** was not the discoverer of her method,

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there were two French doctors before her. And I went – and she went to **Paris**, it's funny, I went to **Paris**, too, to – at the same – later on. And – and I got th-the materials on th-these doctors wrote. I have **Montessori** books I'm – I'm – I'm – I taught a class in – in **Japan**, so I have a book on – **Montessori** book in Japanese. I have the Madonna painted on a silk. The Madonna is a Japanese, and the holy child she's holding looks like a Japanese too, and so it shows you how universal that method. We – I lectured in – in **Israel** a few times. So you see, this is a method that has some technical ways to teach peace, you know.

Q: And where are your books being collected for public access?

A: The books – the books are here, and I got – for instance I got an – this is **Elisabeth** who you read about, **Gehrer**. She is the mi – Minister of Education in – in **Vienna**. We [indecipherable] have a librarian, a young librarian from Catholic University and he comes and he has registered – we sent already 14 cartons of books to **Vienna**, films and different materials. And the embassy ships this stuff, but it's packed in my apartment and the different – I hope to get some volunteers to help, because I have videos and I have a lot of material. It's not only my books, but – and also, there are other books that teachers need to read. Now this room that they're opening in **Vienna**, it's not gonna be – people cannot borrow these books, it's they can go and read it there, you see? And so I hope, you know, that this – this Holocaust – and I'm so happy that, because there's a – I don't know if the plans was

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going through to have a – stones with the names on of the survi – of the Holocaust victims.

Q: We have to pause so I can flip the tape. Just one moment. **[break]** This is a continuation of the **United States** Holocaust Memorial Museum volunteer collection interview with **Lena Gitter**. This is tape one, side **B**. Now, you were giving me a lot of information about your **Montessori** work over the years, and you had been telling me about this collection of books and films and – and other things. And I'd like you to – to finish telling me about that before we go on to the next topic. If you could tell me a little bit more specifically, where this room, where your collection will be housed, where exactly is it? Is it part of a university?

A: No, it's gonna be in th – **Vienna** – I don't think we have any private universities in **Vienna**. This is **[indecipherable]** which is part of the university, people in early childhood education. And they have different libraries, but mine is gonna be a special room, and it will have my collection in there, but it's only people can do research there, but they cannot borrow any of the books and so on.

Q: When do you think that this collection will be assembled and open to the public?

A: Well, it's – it's hard to say that, and they would like to, in **Vienna** the Dr.

[indecipherable] is in charge of this particular program, the director. He would like maybe by September to – but it's very difficult to get it all shipped and packed and – and also that you have to have lists, and you can't just go on, and – so I have

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librarian and they sorting, you know, the unpublished papers and books and – and magazines and th-the different speeches that I have given, or other people, you know, that deal with **Montessori**. So, it's ga – quite a lot of work. I don't ever have any room now to live in my apartment, that's [indecipherable] I'm really working on the –

Q: How did this project of, you know, with your collection being sent to **Austria**, how did this develop? Where did it begin?

A: Two year ago, a – a professor and – and journalist and so on from **Graz**, you know, in **Austria**, came, she – to the **United States** at the Library of Congress. And she had heard me speak, and when – when the biography was published and I was there to promote it. She heard me speak, but she could not come up to – there were so many people in line, she had to leave. So when she came for research she called me, and she would like to see me. So I invited her for lunch, and we became friend, and she was the one who sort of said, lis – it would be a good idea if you would get to know a-and get your material to know in v – in **Vienna**. So she sort of started, and I was thinking about it, but I really did not realize it's gonna be such a big project. So, let's see. Last year, the – the Austrian embassy gave me the – the gold medal for the work that I did because I worked a lot with these Holocaust interns, took them to some of the Jewish places, I had them for Jewish holidays because they have to learn to know how we're celebrating them. And also, I – on all – on all

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the holidays, I – I invite them here to a little meal, my family and friends, and then I invite one or two with – of the Holocaust, or non-Jewish people to come. And I don't want the people to bring me flowers or candy. Everybody has to write something about that holiday. So, even these Holocaust survivors have written very interesting things, and I've taken them to the Temple **Sinai** to some – so the-they learning a lot of – of Jewish life, to – and to understand. And [**indecipherable**] in my family I have a lot, and two of my granddaughters are married to non-Jews too, you know. So I'm very interested of this understanding, you know. So, I don't know, cause a lot of people come, when they come to the Holocaust Museum, they come to visit me too, and I – I lived in different things [**indecipherable**]. But anyway, I don't know exactly, but all of a sudden th – told the – one of the attachés that I think maybe I have so many books, perhaps they would be interested in **Vienna** to get it. So he asked me, and he made sort of a temporary list and send it to **Vienna**. And they were very happy, and so they have already 14 boxes, and that's just with books and then films, and videos and I have hundreds of beautiful photography of the poor people in **Mississippi** and in **New England**, and different places, and it – it opens the world to the people here and in **Vienna** too, because they – they only think **America** is you know, the – the rich country, you know, it – on the **Fifth** Avenue, or **Madison** Avenue, whatever they see. So that – I'm taking that movie attitude away from other people. So we started, and I looked for

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somebody to help with the packing, and I got this young librarian at Catholic University who is very interested, and when he's off he comes and works a few hours and packs a thing. And then the embassy ships it.

Q: I'd like to go back to your work in the War on Poverty, when you went in the 1960s to **Mississippi**. How did it happen that you got involved with this particular program, and left your home and did this?

A: Well, I – a lot of people in **Montessori** knew me and some people got involved in – in these different issues and – in **America**. And I got a phone call one day, would I come to **Mississippi** and introduce a little bit of **Montessori**? So I went down, and at that time in **Mississippi** there were different [indecipherable] **Montessori**, some people were from other universities with specialties in – in – in their field. So, what – we were hired by the, I th-think one of the **Kennedy's** brother-in-law, I don't know, he was in charge. Anyway, we were paid. So we got to **Mississippi**, and my husband, and we felt this is an opportunity to repay something to **America**. And when I got to **Naches, Mississippi**, I – I – one of the in – newspapers came down for an interview, one of the Catholic paper. And – a-and in there I didn't even remember, but in there I had said I felt when in **Mississippi** that I'm back in – under **Hitler**, you know, the way things were going. And then to come to my hats. I wore hats because I can't always comb my hair so well. So I wore hats, and I have different hats. And the **Ku Klux Klan** was very much behind

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me, they didn't want us to come in to teach the blacks. But I heard from somebody who was friends with the **Ku Klux Klan** too, said we can't take – we don't – **Hitler** didn't want that little Jewish woman, we can't do it either, because everybody knows her by her hats. So that was a – that sort of saved me from being killed by the klan.

Q: And every time I've seen you, you've had a different hat.

A: Right. So people, some people when they go on a trip, my grandchildren or something, they bring me – I have chapeaux from all over the world. And there is a – a place here in the **United States**, they have only – a – a woman has a shop only with hats. I shouldn't nor – need to go there, and see what I don't have. S-So – but I didn't stay the whole time, you see, in **Mississippi**, I did work and to train them, and I would fly back to **Washington**, then go down again for a week. And so it wasn't that I continuously stayed there. But you see, my teaching and – and the politic was – was one thing. Because like I worked in **Naches** with the poor people who didn't know how to read, an-and – and **Charles Evers**, he was – he was from **Naches** too, and he was running for an office. So he – sometimes I was up here with him, you know, on – when he – when he was – spoke somewhere, or we have catfish, or **[indecipherable]** and stuff. So that – you know, so I – I appeared and I was some help, you know, the **[indecipherable]** thing, and he was elected not because just of me **[indecipherable]**. But I was then at the – what's the city, the

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capital city, when he was elected. But we did not – our checks came from a different group, not from – from the state of **Mississippi**, you know. So many, many things I somehow adopted that **Montessori** method and I have to rewrite a lot to understand their backgrounds and their needs and so on. And it was very difficult in the beginning because these mothers wouldn't sleep or clean up. They said, oh don't I know that they don't have to do these slave type work? And I said, you know, but still, you know, we have to clean up. And then I called the – here the national gallery of art and ask the cur – one of the curators in education, could he send me some paintings that glorify work? And he did. And so we hung it in the different classrooms, and so they – the “Girl with a Broom” by **Rembrandt**, they realized now the – somehow, without having ever been to a museum, they knew that paintings are something very precious. And – and [indecipherable] and different paintings and we had it in the classrooms. And i-it – during that time, War on Poverty, they were, you know, the se-senators and congressmen and people would come to **Mississippi** and they would come to visit these centers. And – and we – I taught them the names of these paintings and – on the – and so when these pa – people came, and these pro-professors and so, and painting, and – and she could say, oh this is, the name of the painting, say something. All of a sudden that little black woman without any art education was at the same level as the senator or the

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[**indecipherable**] and she knew. So the arts plays a stellar role too, in the many things that I have done in the art.

Q: When you said they sent you paintings, they sent you what, copies? What – did they send you posters? What did they send you actually, when you requested this for this – for the classroom?

A: They sent in – the educational division at the national gallery, or most of them have an education department. They send me slides and they send me, not too large, but anyway, reproductions, you know.

Q: I also want you to clarify something you said a few moments ago. You said that being in **Mississippi** was like being back under **Hitler**. Could you please clarify what you meant by that?

A: Well, the fear that – that people had, to – to go to a certain store. For instance, in **Vienna** when I was going in stores that belonged to some of Jewish people, I didn't have look. I had braids, and – and a – they would say, *fräulein*, you can't go into that, the Nazis would tell me you can't go into the store, because they thought I – y- you know, that's only for Jewish people, you know. And we could not be out at – very late in the evening, and you couldn't go into – to a movie, or you couldn't – and it was the same thing, because the blacks, you could go only on the – some of the gallery [**indecipherable**]. And they couldn't sit in a – a restaurant. I mean, the things that were done to us in – in – under **Hitler**, these conditions existed there. So

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I was able, you know, and then I worked with – with others, not only **Mississippi**, with other states, flying in, and I wrote papers and I wrote little pamphlets and different things to help the people to – to learn. And I was so happy to see that – what's that comedian, that black one? He lost his – his son was killed?

Q: Bill Cosby?

A: Yeah. I – I was on a program years ago with him at – on special education for black chil – what he has written now, books for children to read, and – and they have – they have **[indecipherable]** they have blacks and – and it's so important that children find something where they can relate to, what not – you know, the father coming home with the attaché, you know. And when the children are asked they say they don't – no, my father doesn't do anything, he goes with the – with that attaché case, you know. So – so from what I have done over the years was an example for some other daycare centers and places to – to use and how to teach adults, you know, that's all.

Q: When you were working in Mississippi, and – and starting to speak to people, did you ever tell them about your experiences in Europe?

A: Very little, there either. They were so, when e – so poor enough, and to – and the things they had to do, they really did not have time. Just – just to be eight hours in that day care center, and then I had them paint and clean up, because they were an awfully messy and – and dirty, these places. And so we didn't have any money for

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painting, but the people came early in the morning. They had to open at eight, or they would come at six and paint these day care centers and scrub floors and – and we made waste baskets and – and we made bookshelves, getting – at that time you still could get boxes, you know, crates where apples came, they were very well done, I – as a matter of fact I had them for years as bookcases in my first apartment in **United States**. So, we were so involved with their own life that they did not have time to –

Q: You said that you noticed a parallel between your experience and what they were going through. Did anybody ever ask you why are you doing this kind of work?

A: No.

Q: You were going from **Mississippi** back to **Washington**?

A: Yeah.

Q: And back and forth. What were your thoughts at the time about the American social order, based on your perspective as a refugee?

A: Well, I – it – I traveled mostly with – with educators and so on, along with physicians, so I don't know really, I'm – one is so involved in what else was going on and we didn't talk too much about our past either, you know.

Q: Who else was working with you? You said you were working with other educators, but were there other people who were coming from **Washington** or from the big cities to work with you, or were you going on your own?

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A: Most of the time I went on my own, and met some people from – from other states or from other universities or colleges and so on.

Q: You mentioned **Kennedy**. Did you have any contact with **Kennedy**?

A: Yeah, because they used to come to **Naches** on weekends with their airplane and they would help the people, you know, prepare them too for – for their rights. I wasn't so invol – you know, I wasn't **politishin**(ph) involved or no, you know, with the rights, or what in – people need to know, or you know, to get to the polls, and people are very much afraid, you know, too. So the **Kennedys** would bring a lot of students down, too. And you know, the people that sent it, the students who were not dressed well on the campground, they said, look, we are dirty, we want models of people who are dressed properly and combed and so on.

Q: Which **Kennedys**?

A: Oh, I don't remember their names now. You're asking me t – hundreds and thousands of names it seems.

Q: You worked also with **Jimmy Carter**. Can you tell me how you met and started working with President **Carter**?

A: Well, I – I'm a member of the Women's National Democratic club, and when Carter was running for office i-in – where was it, in **Pennsylvania** and a couple of other states, the Republicans had the majority [**indecipherable**]. So the – I don't know how the club arranged what they called the Peanut Brigade. They had I think

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about four or five very huge buses, and they had banners, they were called the uni – and [indecipherable] you know, that you could talk, you know, on the different, and they were asking some – they – we had a lot of young students, political science from the different universities, but they also ask for some volunteers, you know, teachers and so on. So I didn't know exactly what I could do, but I thought I'll go. And that was a very wonderful experience, to go to the different places and talk to the teachers of their importance in educating the children that they will be able to – to go to [indecipherable] and so on. So, we stopped at different, you know, wherever there was some – some monument, we had to stop there, the newspaper come, and we had – I still have that shirts with their whole – with **Carter** and so on. So, when he – when he was elected we were invited specially to the White House and stuff. And then he was the first one who got – when my biography came out and he was in **Vienna**, so the president gave him a book of the – a – the – we worked with – with Mrs. **Carter** a lot, but not her – really so much with him, I mean, I was there and so, but –

Q: You mentioned your biography. Why don't you take a moment now and tell me about your biography.

A: A few friends and I have organized a little German club, and so we meeting once – once a month. And one day a Mrs. **Schroeder** came, and she is a journalist and so is her husband. And she came to the German club and said, I know I don't

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need to learn German, however I want to know what makes you guys get together and speak German, you know. And somehow, after a year or so she was there – she asks her husband, and she asked me did I want to do a book, because from what I was saying at the club, or somehow she thought that I have – we – I had a story to tell. So we did. So it was a – quite a decision, and also you know, I did not – I hadn't planned, you know, and – and a lot of dates and stuff like you are asking me. I'm a – mathematics wasn't my strong forte. So, it was v-very difficult, but as a journalist, I mean like he went to – they went to **Vienna** when they were doing the – and they found the coffee shop where I went to, and they found the schools I went to, and they brought photographs and – and they got i-in – **Austria** pu-published every year, every month what's happening and every day. So he found the 1905, what in July, had happened, you know. And there were similar things being – we will want now [**indecipherable**] that. And some from newspaper they were – I have an awful lot of newspaper clippings, cause wherever I was, somehow there was an interview on – in some newspapers, so – we could establish some days where I went or what I did, you know, from the newspaper clippings. But this – my memory is not so – so good any more. In particular for dates. But, as I say, what – they were able, you know, to search through newspapers, and si – and there are some books and there's a chapter or something about me said in – in there, on the War on Poverty people who wrote books, so in several books was something about me or

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my work, you know, so – so that's how it came. It took a long time, and – but unfortunately it isn't translated into English yet. That bothers my grandchildren because they never learned any German because my daughter was so – she would not want to have her children on **Hitler's** language. So – so the – course there's not enough on **Montessori** in there, and – well, you can't di – you know, write so much when you live a long life as I did, and – but I was so fortunate as a title, it – the book, I was very lucky that what I did, it was a success, you know. And had some – everybody lives a life and has some sad things, but **c'est la vie**, and it doesn't have to – just to sit and – and feel sorry for oneself, that I lost my daughter and I had to take care of my grandchildren. But I'm very lucky, they all did not go on drugs, they finished their education, they are married, they have children and they are working and I can be very happy with that. And that my work that I did is successful – was very successful in that it's a – a [**indecipherable**] and we'll find a place and I feel in a way it will constantly remind people when they go there to visit, that this Jewish woman was a Holocaust – what the Holocaust room, even if they will not have everybody's name, but somehow I feel with the videos and with th-the – everything is going to be there, that it will be some – in paying something back that I did not suffer. But I feel it – that the work that I have done that is being – being used, it will tell the story of these people that I did not know and that had to suffer and – and die such a terrible death. So I feel that really I have to be grateful

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particular to **Spielberg** that his first video that made me feel I have some spot in that history and I have done something with my life, and that I have in some way, is – is – I wanted to dedicate this memorial to these people that – that I don't know, and some names I know. But I always wanted when they were talking about a stone wall with the names, the people in **Vienna** have such magnificent buildings and museums. People on – spent a lot of money will not go to that that. But the – the young teachers who will come to that, or people to do research will somehow remember, because I have a lot of materials from the Holocaust Museum, they were used, from the educational department. I – it's – it's going to **Vienna** too, you know, to that museum, yeah.

Q: Before I let you go further I want – I want to ask you a few questions. Could you please tell me the full name of your book and the name of the author – your autobi – your – your biography, not an autobiography.

A: Yeah. That's "**Das Grosse Glück, der Lena Lieba Gitter Rosenblatt**" by **Peter Schroeder**. Now, the – they used my maiden name too. As a matter of fact the publisher wanted only my maiden name because **Gitter** is not Jewish enough for him, they wanted a very Jewish title. So then he wanted to leave **Gitter** out, but I said, you know, if I'm – if he's gonna leave **Gitter** out, I have a lot of books and I'm – if people – they will not remember the title that book, but if they punch **Gitter** at the **Library of Congress**, some of my materials will jump up and they will find

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me. But if he doesn't have that, then – so [indecipherable]. But I think constantly, it somewhat was a good choice because I'm always lucky to find some people or some people find me to do things with – that I'm interested in to do.

Q: I wanted to ask you when you lost your daughter, and how old was she?

A: I don't know the date right now, can you imagine? It's something, you know – i – some dates you really don't want to remember, so – it's about 15 years now, I think.

Q: I also wanted to – to ask you about your husband, you haven't mentioned him in a while.

A: Well, he died 1974. But he supported me with my work, and he ab – some of his colleagues would say, you're making enough money and you let **Lena** travel around to **Mississippi** and – and [indecipherable] and all these different places. And I went out of the country too, you know, to **Japan**, I went to **Alaska**

[indecipherable]. But he said that's – he wanted me to have my job and my position because he said men die before women, and so you will have something.

When he was 40 years old he bought a book, teach your wife how to be a widow because he said why he – why he – the statistics, you know, men die before women because [indecipherable] we're gonna die before them.

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Q: You mentioned also a Holocaust memorial in **Vienna**. You have told me about this in the past, about your work towards some kind of Holocaust memorial. Did you want to elaborate further on that?

A: No, there isn't – there isn't one yet. I don't know if they did agree. Some British designer or architect. But I don't know. We were involved, **Schroeder** and several of us from the two – we fought for the location and also we – we wrote letters to newspapers and so on, because we felt a museum that just go there and touch names, it has to have something to walk in, for children to learn and to have proof, but then – having the names there, I didn't think this is – so I don't know what is happening with that.

Q: Are you actively involved in this as an issue?

A: In what?

Q: In this Holocaust memorial in – in **Austria**, are you involved?

A: No, I – I'm not involved but from reading in the papers and – and the – the Austrians don't want it there, they want it somewhere else, you know. And I agree – I agree with the Austrians, if at all, but it should have something where people would go in and have books, have photographs, have something that know what happened in, but they were coming to – to **Vienna**, then they run to the museum, and the – all the architecture, they will not go there. And these names will not mean anything to some of them.

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Q: You became involved in the War on Poverty and with the Peanut Brigade. Did you get involved with any other social causes? The war in **Vietnam** or the Women's Movement?

A: I was involved in so many things, you know. Practically with all – with **Carter**, you know, I was involved in. And you know, I moved in the day **Carter** went to the White House. And a – they didn't want me to, it was a special holiday, and I re – I composed a letter on this historic day that a President **Carter** moves to the White House, **Lena Gitter** moves to the **Chevy Chase** House and this is my address, telephone number, please get in touch with me, come to see me. And the – I didn't have the post office send them the change of address. So I'm very involved with them, in [**indecipherable**]. So you sometimes, th-the – the names, even while I'm speaking, di-di – disappear.

Q: Would you like to take a break for a few minutes?

A: Okay.

[break]

Q: This is a continuation of the **United States** Holocaust Memorial Museum volunteer collection interview with **Lena Gitter**. This is tape two, side **A**. And we just had a little bit of a break. I wanted to ask you about some of the things that we didn't cover yet.

A: Sure.

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Q: I wanted to ask you to go back to 1945 - '46, the immediate postwar period in the 19 for – late 40s and ask you what was going on in your life and in your immediate society here when news of the genocide reached the American public.

A: Oh, I really don't remember exactly, but we were happy some of the family members came back, and a lot of people somehow, always stopped in – in **Washington** with us and told us some of the experiences they had. But I d-don't – I a-absolutely cannot remember, you know. I wasn't politically so involved in. Of course, we had – we knew a lot about the **Nuremberg** trials because some – a young friend of ours, he was a court reporter and he was in the **Nuremberg** trials, so when he came back he told us different things and so on. And here was a – a nurse. She passed away, she's – was visiting – I mean, she was staying here too, and she was at the **Nuremberg** trials, and she was assigned to take care of **Eichmann** – **Eichmann**? And – no, not **Eichmann**, another. And she was a nurse for him, and he was a – a t – he – he was hanged. But the day he was sentenced, in the morning she was called, she gave him his bath. And there was always a military man with her. And then she – he called her, she has a headache – he had a headache, she gave him aspirin, and two hours later he – he was ha-hanged. So she told some of these things, but I really – I don't know with what, I was so involved with other things.

Q: Did you follow with any involvement really, the partition vote for the state of **Israel**, the partition of **Palestine**?

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A: A lot in – in my family were involved in – in – in **Israel**, and we had a lot of immediate family who lived in **Israel** and were very involved in the whole [indecipherable]. That was – it's just everything's so mixed together now that I can't separate the way you do now, you know. Maybe a few years ago I could have done it, but not – not any more now.

Q: You mentioned earlier about your Austrian citizenship. Can you share that with me now?

A: That was about two years or three years ago. I-I really d-don't know exactly how it came but I read somewhere in these – I got "**Der Gemeinde**" from **Vienna**, this is a newspaper, magazine comes out every month, that people can get their citizenship back. So I applied and I – I got it back and they had a very lovely party for me at the embassy, too. And because I felt that I will be able to vote, I will be able to say something of what I don't like or what could be done. So we discussed, we have meetings, and the attachés and everybody is very helpful and trying to – to understand, you know, what had happened, because the people don't realize why, politically **Austria** w-was not considered that they owe us money like some of the other countries, you know? So people think they're getting out, getting away. We got a little bit money now from. And we hope to get a – the paintings that they sold, the – they found, you know, a lot of paintings in one of the church basements. And so there are all these owners, so most of them have died, and so – so they are

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planning to give us a little bit of money, some of the older people, you know, so I don't know, I hope I'll – I'll get a little bit money, I could use it. See, with that German club, we got involved in so many people coming, discussing things about education, which is very important, we have to ask ourself, what – and n-not only Gentiles, Jewish too, what have we done that s – people could grow up and being so terrible? We have to learn from what has apa – gone on in – in – in past. And – and being hateful, you don't really achieve anything, you have – it's very [indecipherable] to know what has happened, but you have to try to see if you can make them understand and the responsibility that all of us have towards a peaceful world. It's not only the Gentiles, their job, it's ours too, you know.

Q: I wanted to ask you how your experience as a Jewish refugee influenced the choices that you made during your life.

A: I don't understand your question, would you repeat it?

Q: I wanted to know ho-how your experience as a refugee, a Jewish refugee has influenced the choices that you made in your life.

A: Well, I don't – I really don't – don't know, because I – I was so little with – really, in my work I was very little with Jewish people, you know? So I – I'm – I really, you n – and ca – I cannot – everyone's involved in Jewish circles too, because in the – in **Washington**, th-th – there were very few doctors too, in – Jewish doctors, or t – or doctors who had come from – from the Holocaust. One of

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the doctors that came then and worked at – in the hospital with my husband. But we were not so in-involved in it, the type of patients and the ty-type of the hospitals and the doctors and everything.

Q: What changes – what positive changes have you seen in **America** over the years since you've been living here?

A: Well, it's a – made tremendous progress in technology and – and a lot of freedom. But th-the – the – the program with the – with the poor people and the – and the education, that is still – they're trying but we haven't – we really haven't done anything. And also we have to study what has become of the children of these, particularly of these very big shots Nazis? Their children are grown, they have children now too. How – there are some books written about them, but we have to ask how their feeling is, and what – what they want, what we haven't – there's one thing we did neglect, I think, to take care in some way of these children. Because they are the one who might really feel that they could be Nazis again. [break]

Q: I'm sorry, we were interrupted by someone who just walked in. We're back now, please continue. You were – you were saying about what we've neglected was to pay attention to the – the grandchildren of the Nazi big shots.

A: The children and the grandchildren now. We haven't done – some when their fathers were executed and so on – these children, in a – in a sense they were not responsible what their fathers did. And we have not turned a little bit to see what

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could be done, because we – we haven't – we haven't helped them. And it's still – some research must be going on because these children and grandchildren can grow up being hateful and continue that. So it's not only, you know, we have to reach out for the – the victim, and yeah, the non-victims, like the – one wrote a book, very famous. I can't think about his name, an Austrian. Not the – not the one who kills you, but the one who was killed. How – how is his responsibility [indecipherable] you know? It's – in German it sounds [indecipherable] taught about the theater, you know, it's – is responsible too. So, there is – education must study much more wh-what had happened to these people. Where have they gone, what was going on with them.

Q: I'd like you to reflect back on your life and tell me what do you think has been the greatest contribution that you made to **America**?

A: Well, that I was able to teach many to read and – and write. I invited my child's [indecipherable] invited him to one of the conferences, **Montessori** conferences as a speaker, you know, to come. So, to see that im – it was very much for us, but for him too, and for the other, to see the in – importance that he – even he doesn't have the academic education, but what he could do for people, you know? And this is very important. When I had the – the 90th birthday, and that embassy gave a party. So I invited the chef, we had a black chef and I invited some of these people who – who bathed me, or feed me or do things, to sh – and they were all in different

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costumes and different nationalities and a lot of black ones. To see – and I didn't invite so much of that white staff because they're collecting the – the checks and stuff like that. But to show, you know, how w-we are dependent on – on the non-academia to keep us alive and going. And so **America** has an – a long way to go too, to accept, you know, other nationalities, because we have here, right in the **Chevy Chase** house, right, a United Nations now. You have seen different customs and different languages, and they have to learn to work together and to – and they're poor – some have very poor English language. And you learn then – when you go to English classes, you don't learn, give me eggs over on, or – or make my bass this way, or you know th – this – every day vocabulary is not taught for people, you know. So they have a difficult – we have a difficult time to understand them **[indecipherable]**. So I'll – I don't know, I mean it – there's so many changes in that – just in the medical technology because in my family is so many doctors. And my husband was a physician and my grandson. I mean, from the – the little thermometer in your mouth now **[indecipherable]** you know. And the – the medical technology is incredible, you know, that we have now. And food and so on. But more and more we have to learn th-the – that we're the brother's keeper and the responsibility that each of us have, the one that – who is preparing that – with canning, that he is – really everything is clean, because we don't know now who cans, or who builds that car, so many people, who is responsible? So each of us, we

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have to teach much more responsibility, that I can die because you forgot to put this and that into the food, or – or you put something in – on – in my car, that, you know, would – would not drive right, and it's – so this new technology has brought a lot of responsibility too, that has to be taught in a way to the children too, you know.

Q: I wanted to ask, what's still on the horizon for you? What – what things would you like yet to accomplish?

A: Well, I would like to see all that material and stuff to – to go to **Vienna** and get in place. When you get my age you just want to be like **Gandhi**, he only wanted his [indecipherable] and – and his bible and his – what do you call that, the one wheel – you – spinning wheel. My grandchildren said the spinning wheel is an antique now, that would be too costly for me to – for them to buy it for me. You know, I – everything becomes very difficult. I had a professor in **Vienna** in psychology, and he said, once a man, twice a child. Of course at that time he didn't know about women's liberation. And I feel that we're really like children, you know, if I'll forget where I put it and – and you know, and that brings me that research is now going on how **Montessori** can be used for **Alzheimer** patient. So there's some of the things that we are teaching the young children would be very helpful to – as a matter of fact, I'm meeting in a couple days, somebody is coming with student rep –

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research and so I – I don't know, I always get involved into something, that's easy.

I don't have to plan it, I have the time.

Q: There are many things that we obviously didn't cover today. Is there anything that you wanted to add? Anything else that you wanted to talk about that – that we didn't cover already?

A: Well, I really don't know. I would like to – the – as I say, there's some of these things that we more – more covered, and more – it's – it's nice that the museum and all that, but the educational department, I think, should be in – more en-enlarged, some more money has to go to – towards the education, I think it's – that's my criticism for the Holocaust Museum. But all the volunteers in my family, they are hooked on that. The – the days they – they go there and they – they don't want to miss it, it's – it's a wonderful [indecipherable]. Well, thank you for giving me an opportunity to – to speak, but it's – it's just too – too much for me to cover now.

Q: I want to thank you for taking the time to speak with me today. And this concludes the interview – the **United States Holocaust Memorial Museum** interview with **Lena Gitter**. Thank you very much.

A: Thank you very much.

Conclusion of Interview

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