United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Interview with Helen Schwartz
March 1, 2010
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PREFACE

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HELEN SCHWARTZ
MARCH 1, 2010

Question: This is a **United States Holocaust Memorial Museum** volunteer collection interview with **Helen Schwartz**, conducted by **Gail Schwartz**, on March 1st, 2010, in **Silver Spring**, **Maryland**. This is a post-Holocaust interview, and so I just wanted to give out some of your information first. You were born **Hela Kirschner**, April 8th, 1925, in **Lódz**, **Poland**. You were in the **Lódz** ghetto from 1939 to August 1944. Then you were in **Auschwitz** from August 1944, and then to **Stutthof**, to **Proust**, and many other places. And when you were on the march, towards the end of the war, you were liberated March, 1945, near **Gdansk**.

Answer: Yes.

Q: Okay. So let's talk now, what happened after that. What – where did you go after liberation?

A: After the liberation, there was a small group of women, and we were liberated by the Russians. They took very good care of us, they supplied us with food, with clothes, because we were almost clothes-less. Nothing that we had on was a sack. No shoes, no nothing. The Russians supplied us with everything they could, but it didn't take us long – w-we stayed in a group, maybe eight or 10 women – girls mostly, young women. And must be we ate too much food, or the dirt, because we were invaded by – by lice, and two days, three days after, everybody fell sick. And by being sick, the Russians were afraid to come near us, and we didn't know what

was wrong with us, because we probably had high temperature, and none of the girls was probably normal, and didn't know what happening. But when the Russians didn't come near us, we kept on asking, why don't we get any help, or anything, to make us well? And we were told, either there were nurses, or they were – I – I s – to this day I don't know who the people were who took care of us, that we have typhus fever. And nobody want to come near us, because they were afraid, the military, that they might get sick, too. There was one woman who had a daughter my age.

Q: You – you were 20 years old at the time.

A: Yes, I was 20 years old at the time, yes, I – and there was one woman, as I say, and she spoke a little Russian. She ran out to get help, so we can go to a hospital. Soon after, a wagon with a German came, horse and wagon, and they put us all on a wagon, and **supposingly** we went to a hospital. But it wasn't a hospital, it was a school converted into a hospital, because there were many other women from other areas, which I – I – I still don't know where they came from. And they put hay on the floor, and we were laying on the hay, with no pillows, with no nothing, but all we wanted is help. The Russians did a lot for us.

Q: A-Are you still near **Gdansk**, still, at the time?

A: Yeah, that was, yes, near the area where I was liberated. I can't account the time, but after a while, they took us to another place, which was better than the hospital,

the school hospital. And at that time we saw already Russian doctors, Russian nurses. But the Russians were so bitter, so upset, that they couldn't even – even stand if a German ca – if German woman or man came to help, to be on the same floor at the time when they were there. Because the Russians suffered a lot too, from the Germans. And **supposingly**, I have no idea, but we tried to figure out why the Russians were so mad at the Germans, that after, when we came back to ourselves, when we – we – we were sick for two months. So I cannot count the time when we felt better, but I assume maybe a month, maybe six weeks. We kept on asking why the Russians are so mad at the Germans. And they said, they killed our parents, our sisters, our brothers, just as much as they killed your sisters and brothers. But, after two months, we were released, and we were told – we were asked where we want to go. So I said, I want to go back to **Lódz** to find out who survived. And Red Cross took us over at the time, and they brought us back to **Lódz**. **Lódz** was just as bad as the place we came from, which, I don't know the name of the place, but was near **Gdansk**. We didn't have anybody, but I found a place which was for me to stay, with some other people. And every day we went to check the list of the people who survived, and who came from **Lódz**. So I found my sister and my brother also survived. But my sister came after to **Lódz**, but my brother remained in **Germany** because he was liberated by the Americans, and that

was German territory. And where we were liberated was the Russian territory, because **England**, **Russia**, everybody took a p – a – a part of, I think the country. Shortly after I was reunited with my sister, because knowing – she probably checked the list where she was, I checked the list where I was, and we got reunited, so I was with my sister shortly after.

Q: Is this still in **Lódz**, are you –

A: And that was still in **Lódz**, yes, and we couldn't get in touch with my brother, but people who I don't know what – they were not sick, or they were hiding, used to com – communicate, go places. So we sent the message, through this person, to my brother, who was in **Ainring**, near **Feldafing**, in **Germany**, that we both survive. We are only two sisters, and we survive. So he sent back a message with somebody, not letters, because at that time that was too early for mail, and it was such a mix-up that it's hard to describe, but everybody just want to know who survived. That was the most important thing. So the brother sent back the message, and he said, I survived and I am in this particular place, which was **Ainring**, by **Freilassing**. If you could, come back to **Germany**, so we can be all together. Shortly, when we felt we can travel, and the travel wasn't that you took a ticket and you went on the train, or – or airplane. What – travel, you had to find somebody who took you from one place to another, until we reached the border of **Poland** and **Germany**, and then

somebody else would – took us to the place where my brother was. We – we – we did survive the trip, and we came back to **Germany**, which nobody liked to be in **Germany**, but we had no other choice, because we couldn't stay in pol – in portla – in – I'm sorry, in portla – we couldn't stay in **Lódz** because nobody was there. And the place which we lived was torn down, because di – the place where we used to live was very close to the gates where the ghetto started in **Lódz**. So we reunited, and we stayed in **Ainring**, with my brother and my sister. We stayed there from '45 til I came to the **United States** in '49. There I met my husband, and we got married. My sister met her husband in the four years, and my brother got married. So we all got married in **Germany**, and from **Germany**, the first chance anybody had, they want to go away from **Germany**. So we all registered to **America**, to – to **Canada**, to **Israel**, and whichever came first, we – we went.

Q: Were you in a **DP** camp?

A: Yes.

Q: All this time, these four years?

A: All those four years, yes. Some people went to live privately, but we went – we were in a camp. And we were by the Americans. So my husband registered for all the places which were available to go. He was a tailor, and my sister and her husband and my brother – so the first to leave **Germany** was my brother, because

by choice, I don't know exactly how it worked. And he went to **Canada**. And we were supposed to go shortly after. Then, my sister and her husband went to **Israel**. And when they came to **Israel**, they came right into the war, because they came in '48, from – from the ship, my brother-in-law was taken to the army, and my sister was left all by herself, and very, very sick and discouraged, because we left one war, and came right into another war. And I stayed on in **Germany**, because I had a child. I ha – I was the first one to have a child from my brother and sister.

Q: But your brother and sister were older than you, or –

A: Yes, I was the youngest in the family, but I had a child the first. My child was born in '47. I married in '46, a year later I had my daughter. And with children, nobody was very happy to take. **Israel** didn't want anybody with children. They took only young people, because there was a war, and they wanted people to go to war with no children. And by that time, my brother was already in **Canada**. And he said, be patient, wait, and I'm trying to get you to **Canada**. That was my brother. Meantime, there was a opening to the **United States**. And we were very happy. At the time, it was **HIAS** who was working to – to bring the people to the **United States**. But there was a nice family in **Portland**, **Maine**, which at that time I didn't even know what **Maine** was, and they needed somebody to work in a clothing factory, and my husband signed up as a tailor. So, we were chosen to go to

Portland, **Maine**, and we were very, very happy. Came to **Portland** with a two and a half year old child. And the man who signed up for us to come to **Portland**, I – was one of the nicest people. He supplied us with an apartment. My husband was right away paid 40 some dollars a week, which I thought I am a millionaire, because 40 – 40 some dollars at – in – in '49 was a lot of money. And we were very happy to be in **America**. So my sister was in **Israel**, my brother was in **Canada**, and I was in **America**. We were not happy about it, because we want to be together. So I was the one who was saying, I'm going to start doing something. Maybe I can bring you to **America**. My sister said, oh I would like you to come to **Israel**, and my brother said, you – I would like you to be in **Canada**. But, it took a long time, and everybody already had settled in the places where they were, so my husband didn't want to leave **Portland**, **Maine**, and my sister didn't want to leave **Israel**, and my brother didn't want to leave **Canada**, so we were all separated. In **Portland**, I had a beautiful life. The people were so nice, and they were not all Jewish. Even the Gentile people, they accepted us like we were somebody special. They came – they was quite a few families who came to **Portland**, but they didn't stay on, because at that time, the people who came to **Portland**, they were single people. And for single people there wasn't really much to do in **Portland**. And the majority left, after a while. But three, four – four families were left in **Portland**, who had

children. And I came in ’49, in ’51 my – my son was born in **Portland**. And I already had two children, and life was beautiful. And I realized what a beautiful place is to be in **America**. And as the years went by, I had another son, who was born in ’57, and this was that, and we were all settled in **Portland**. After my – after five years, my husband worked for this man who signed it up for us. In gratitude, he didn’t want to leave him, but he always want to be on his own. So, after five years, pay him back what this man did for us in **Portland**, we opened a little shop for ourselves, which was a tailoring, clothing, like Mom and Pop shop. And I helped my husband, and we were there for – for almost 40 years, until my husband took sick, and my husband died in 2000. After when I – and my kids, meantime got married and moved away from **Portland**. After 2000, I was left by myself, and very few friends in **Portland**. I stayed on for another year in **Portland**, in **Maine**, and my daughter who lived in **Virginia** at the time, said – and my son settled in **New Jersey**, and already had families, and my daughter had families. They ask me, where do I want to go to be again together? So I decide I’m gonna come near my daughter. And near my daughter, I didn’t want to be in a single home again, so I have chosen to be in **Leisure World**, which I have no regrets, I’m very happy, and I made some new friends and I been living – it’s been nine years since I came to live

in **Leisure World**, and I hope, God willing, that I will have a few more years, and enjoy life in **Leisure World**.

Q: Can we go back a little bit now, and I can ask you some questions?

A: Yes, ma'am.

Q: Thank you for telling me your story. When you were liberated in '45, you're 20 years old.

A: Yes.

Q: What did that mean to you? Do you remember what your feelings were, to get –

A: A feeling – it's very hard for me to describe. Like, you take a child, which I was – 20 years is not a baby any more, but like you take a child who came out of the woods, and lost. That's how I felt, with no parents, and before I united with my sister, life wasn't worth living. And I kept on asking, why did I survive, and what did I do to – for me to survive and not others, or my parents. It was very hard. But when I re – reunited with my sister and brother, then life became a little better.

Q: You were 14 years old when the war started.

A: Yes, ma'am.

Q: So you really lost a good part of your childhood.

A: I had no – I had no, like they say now, a young – how – how do they call it?

Q: You mean, the teenage years?

A: Teenage years.

Q: Yeah.

A: I didn't have teenage years.

Q: Right.

A: I don't – at that time, I didn't even know what that means, teenage years.

Q: Right, yeah, yeah.

A: Because when we were in the ghetto, life was terrible. And thanks my brother, who – he used to – I can say it now, he used to steal potato peel, and bring it home. So my mother cooked it, every day she made something else. Some people were not as fortunate. But my brother was a fireman, and he – in the ghetto, he was – well, we were working. I was working too, in the ghetto. But I was working in a laundry where – what the German who stayed in the ghetto, we washed the clothes for the Germans. And I never had done anything, because I was youngest at home, but I quickly learned how to iron, how to fold up the shirts, how to – the socks, and everything, because that was a special place, and not everybody was fortunate to work in the ghetto, in a place like that. So I could get a portion of a little water soup, **supposingly**, but it was more water than anything in it. But my parents worked, and my sister, my brother worked. We all work. So that kept us alive. And having parents, that was another plus that we survive. In the ghetto, oh, I hate to go into it,

but life in the ghetto was unbearable. Kids my age, very few survived. I was fortunate to survive because I – as I said it, I had my parents. And I didn't have myself to fight every day, for that little piece of bread, because my mother used to – my mother used to ration. She didn't eat.

Q: Yeah.

A: But she gave it to us.

Q: Yeah. Right.

A: I – I don't –

Q: Yeah.

A: I don't want to talk about it.

Q: How did you find out what happened to your parents?

A: If you – anybody – if anybody went to the museum, up – upstairs in the museum, there is a cattle train. Leaving the ghetto, we all went on those cattle trains, **supposingly** that we are going to another –

Q: Right.

A: – place of work, better circumstances, everything better, so we all were happy to leave the ghetto, and to go – we thought we are gonna go with that train. But when we saw those cattle trains, we looked at each other, and I – I went to my father and I said – I didn't go to my father, because we all stayed together – and I said, Dad,

what – what is that cattle train doing here? And he said, oh, they probably just staying here. And the train for us is gonna come soon. The train for us never came, and we went on this cattle train. A night and a day after, when we embark from that cattle train – I don't even think it took a minute, and it was so bad, because half of the people probably were dead, who were in that train overnight. The smell, and everybody relieved themselves standing. You couldn't even sit down or lay down or whatever. Everybody was in standing position. So, when they opened the door, we were happy to run out as quick as we could. And they made us to run out, but we stepped over other people. Mine father said that the best place is to be in a corner, because when we were on it, he direct – my father direct us to go to the corner, maybe there is gonna be better, so we all stayed in the corner. But when we came out, we had to kind of haul over the people who are laying on top of each other. And when we reached the outside, within a split of a minute, or a second, it went so quick, mine parents went one way, and my sister, my brother went the other way.

Q: Yeah.

A: Okay, girls, women were separate, and men were separate.

Q: Right.

A: And they said that because we want to run back to my mother's side, my parents' side, they said, no, no, no, they go to work. You gonna see them tonight.

So my mother said no, don't – don't go, go to work. I see you tonight. But soon after we walked away from the cattle train, we saw the people on the other side, which looked to us like crazy, and we thought that we came to work in a crazy house. And being young, I – I – I didn't realize, I – we didn't know where we are – we are going, and we didn't know that such a thing exist like **Auschwitz**. We never hear the word **Auschwitz**, and that was another thing which the – the – the **[indecipherable]** from **Auschwitz**, which was a Jewish man, oh, I forgot his name. He never said the truth, where we are going. And our transport was the last one leaving the ghetto, except the people who were hiding, and didn't want to go. And the one who were hiding, cleaned up the ghetto. And we didn't know about it, okay? So, that was the last time, on that cattle train, that I saw my parents.

Q: When your children were growing up –

A: Uh-huh?

Q: – did you tell them your story, or did you wait?

A: No, I did not tell them, no, no.

Q: Because?

A: I – I – I was talking – I was telling my children very little, because when they were young, I didn't want to tell them the truth, because I was afraid that they might grow up with anti – anti – anti-Semite feeling. And I didn't wanted that to mine

children. When they were old enough, people used to write books. I was suggested to write a book too, but I never want to talk about it, write about it. So, I used to get them a book, and I said, read that to me. And I felt, as long it's not their mother and father, it won't hurt them as much. But when they understood, they didn't ask any questions, no. And I have very intelligent children. My daughter's a social worker. My son is working for the court, he is an attorney. And my youngest son is a doctor. So, I did very well with my children.

Q: When your children were your age, when things started to get bad, like –

A: Yes.

Q: – for instance, you were 14 when the war started.

A: Yes.

Q: When your children turned 14, did that trigger any responses in you, when you looked at them and thinking well, when I was 14 –

A: No, no. I was happy that I could – that they had everything, I could give them everything. No, no, no, I – I never – my feeling, I never gave – I don't know how to say it. I never expressed that. I never –

Q: No, but I meant inside. Did you feel inside –

A: I was happy that my children didn't have to go through.

Q: Yeah.

A: That I am living in a beautiful country. And I was always hoping that never, never again would I live through any war.

Q: Were you overprotective of your children, do you think?

A: Yes, oh yes, oh yes. Mine children never had a babysitter, because I didn't trust anybody. Oh yes, this I got to admit.

Q: What were you afraid of? What would happen if you had a babysitter?

A: That – always my thought that I might come back, because I was working, but I tried to be home when the kids were home from school. But always my thought was, because in the ghetto, they used to go around and pick people. So, let's say if a small child was left home, and the parents were working in the ghetto, they came back, and they found no child.

Q: Right.

A: I was protected, and I don't want to go into the ghetto, because we were hiding, and it was unbearable, okay. The ghetto life – I don't – I don't want to talk about it too much.

Q: No, no, no.

A: But overprotective, yes, because I was afraid.

Q: Something might happen to them.

A: That while I'm not home, something might happen. And that was for a long time with me.

Q: What did the **United States** mean to you, when you were –

A: The world. Everything. Everything.

Q: How did you –

A: Freedom.

Q: How did you know that?

A: Happiness. How did I know about the **United States**? I came and live. Before, I didn't know about **America**.

Q: Okay. So that's what I meant, when you were in – in that –

A: No, I –

Q: – you didn't know much about it, but you knew you wanted to come to the **United States**.

A: Oh yes.

Q: Because?

A: Because what I knew at the time about **United States**, it's a beautiful country. Freedom. Everybody can live the way they want to live. And everybody can be rich. That was – that's what they said.

Q: So, when you put your foot down on American soil for the first time.

A: Oh, I kissed the soil.

Q: Did you?

A: Yes, I did. Yes, yes.

Q: Did you take a boat in? Did you come by boat to the **United States**?

A: Yes, yeah, General **Stuart**, yes.

Q: General –

A: Yeah, yeah, it was a military ship. Yeah, and I – I forget so many things, but General **Stuart**, I have never forgotten.

Q: Yeah, yeah. And so, coming to the **United States**.

A: Coming to the **United States**, yes.

Q: Yeah, yeah, yeah. And di – when did you become a citizen?

A: In ’55.

Q: And what was that like?

A: Oh, freedom, happiness. Everything that you can wish for. I think people who went through a time as I went through, appreciate every bit. And I have never forgotten my past, though I don’t talk about it, but it’s always with me.

Q: How is it always with you? Do you think about it every day?

A: I – it’s – it’s always with me in a way – let’s say – I will give you an example. When we had that little shop in **Portland**, **Maine**, if somebody co – came in, and

said, do this, do this, do that, we did more than the person ask for, but ask less than somebody else would ask for. And we used to have customers who used to say – my husband's name was **Adam**, they used to say, **Adam**, is that all? You should charge more. My husband used to say, I should charge nothing, because I want to give back to **America**, what **America** gave to us.

Q: Did you become more religious, less religious –

A: No, less religious.

Q: Because of what you went through?

A: Yeah.

Q: Why is that?

A: I don't know, I – being young, I ca – my mother was religious more than my father. Maybe because I didn't come from a very Orthodox home, but God was always with me. And I used to say, to myself, why couldn't I have my parents? Why did they had to go, the way they went? I always said, would be so nice if I could have a grave to go to. And that was with me, all the time. Oh please, I can't talk.

Q: Have you been back to **Poland** at all?

A: No.

Q: Would you want to go?

A: No.

Q: Why not?

A: Because the Poles were even worse than the Germans. In beginning, they used to tr – we had a – we lived in like – like in a court, you know? Houses were around, and we had like a janitor. He was the first one who threw stones into the house, when the Germans came in. No, I – I have no desire. That – **America** is my home. I grew up in **America**.

Q: Are there any sights today, or sounds or smells that you – that trigger memories of the past for you? If you hear something, or smell something, or see something that triggers a memory from the past?

A: I – it's always with me, so it's when – when a holiday comes, and I remember my parents.

Q: Mm-hm, that's hard.

A: That – th-that's – that's the hardest part.

Q: Are you angry that you had to go through what you did, when other people, for instance, who were living in the **United States**, didn't have to?

A: No. Because now that we have so many wars since, and I sit at the table and eat, and – and I realize that there's so much going on in the world, I don't blame anybody, because I cannot do anything. So I think of the people, they probably

couldn't do. Maybe they could do something, but they couldn't stop the war. They stopped the war when time came to stop the war, yes. Maybe they could stop it a little earlier, but that's life. No, I'm not angry. No. I think about it, because every time when I watch television, and see what's going on in the world, I think back of myself, and I say, why don't I do something. But I can't. But, I give to **DACA**. I do everything in mine power to help. And thank God for that.

Q: Do you receive reparations?

A: Yes.

Q: And what are your feelings about that?

A: I wish I wouldn't, but I don't get back what I lost. And that makes me feel better when I say to myself, I lost so much. Money is not everything. If I could back – buy back with the money, I would have. So, money is – is okay, but I don't live by the money. Money is not everything for me. Maybe I'm different, I don't know. I don't know.

Q: Are you – well, we talked about whether you're more comfortable around those who survived the war, than those who didn't have to.

A: No, I'm comfortable around anybody.

Q: Do you think you'd be a different person today, than you are, if you hadn't gone through what you went through? Here you were a young woman on your own,

surviving, you know, unspeakable conditions. You must have had an inner strength. Do you think you would be different if you weren't tested the way you were tested.

A: I – I don't know, I don't know. But one thing I know, that I'm very sensible, and I try to help everybody I can help. I am the first one who will – which people used – used to make remarks about me, I didn't realize. Why are you doing that? And I say, I don't know, I'm doing it. But people say, oh, you didn't have to do that. But I do it.

Q: You mean – you mean to help other people, is that what you mean?

A: Yes, yes, yes. Yeah. I have a little problem, I used to work for the – not work, but volunteered for the – for the museum, but I have a problem with my feet, which at the time it bothered me, but not as much, and I had to stop, because I had back surgery. But I always am thinking, even at my age now, which I'm older now than – when I first came, I was so happy, because I was always thinking, what to do, what – wh – how can I pay back? I always want to pay back to the beautiful **America**. So they said, oh, why not volunteer for the museum?

Q: The Holocaust Museum.

A: Holocaust Museum, yes. So I said, sure, why not? So, I couldn't do it for too long.

Q: What kind of work did you do?

A: I – I was at the desk, I was –

Q: Visitor services.

A: Visitors, yeah, yeah, yeah. And I enjoyed it, and I love to do – even now, I love to do for people.

Q: What's your feeling when you walk into that building?

A: I become numb. I really cannot say how I feel. I went upstairs. When I saw the train, i-it bothered me a little, but that was only once that I went upstairs, and I didn't go back there. But when I am with people, all I want to do is help people.

Q: What were your thoughts during the **Eichmann** trial?

A: It didn't help me personal, because I couldn't bring back anybody. If we could switch, and bring back the people who were lost, probably I would feel good about it. But it – as I say, I don't think I have hate in myself. And I'm happy about it, I don't want to hate. I don't – I – I have white friends, black friends. Everybody who is a **mensch**, nice, human, I like him. I don't care who they are.

Q: If you walk down the street and you hear somebody speaking in Polish, let's say, does that – does it –

A: No.

Q: – catch your ear?

A: No, no, no. I don't care. I don't even want to hear it.

Q: You don't want to hear it?

A: No.

Q: But what about German?

A: The same thing. But I have never shown that – that bothers me. No, I wouldn't be in **Germany** if you paid me, and I wouldn't be in **Poland** if you paid me.

Q: So you have no desire.

A: No, not at all. Because **Poland** said, that if you come back, if you have property and you come back and you live in **Poland**, you gonna have all privileges. I said, you have the property and everything, I don't think we want to. But the Germans, when I get mine check, I say, it's nothing in comparison what I lost.

Q: During the 60s and 70s with the civil rights movement here in the **United States** –

A: Yes.

Q: – did that – did you – I know you were raising young children, obviously, at the time –

A: Yes.

Q: – but this – you know, this was the story of people who were deprived of their rights, just like you were deprived.

A: Right, right.

Q: Did you relate in any way, to the civil rights movement?

A: Being in **Portland**, and just watching television, because when you watch something, and you're not next to it, it's a different feeling. At least, this is how I feel, I don't know about other people, I can only say about myself. I feel everybody should have the – the – the – their rights, but what you see on television can only aggravate you, but you have no power of doing anything. And that word always bothered me. I am – I was powerless. And when I came here, and I was near the White House, I said, oh someday I'm gonna say it, what I feel. But, you know, as you get older, you get slower and you mellow, and – and you are different person when you old, or when you're young. When you're young, you got all that will and that power you think you have. But now, I'm too old.

Q: Living in **Portland** –

A: Yes.

Q: – where – well, let me just say this; many Holocaust survivors came to **New York**, you know, came to the big city – big cities.

A: Right, right, right.

Q: So there was that grouping, but you didn't have that in **Portland**.

A: No, no.

Q: So, how did you keep your identity there, when there were not people –

A: I was just one of – of so many thousands. I wasn't any different than anybody in **Portland**. Everybody respect everybody. **Maine** is a beautiful state.

Q: The people –

A: I didn't encounter any –

Q: – any anti-Semitism?

A: – anything. Not I. I don't know, maybe it was, but not toward me.

Q: Did a lot of people ask you about your background, about your experiences?

A: Very intelligent people used to talk about it. And most of the time I said, I respect you, but I prefer not to talk about it. But they were bankers, or – or high ranking people, who understood the Holocaust better than an average person. And if they want to know, I wasn't talking to them about it. Maybe it wasn't right, but this is how I am.

Q: So you have never, in a sense, talked publicly, to groups, or anything like that?

A: No, no. I did talk here to – to schools. But when I came back, I – I – I was sick, because a few times I –

Q: When you say here, what – what do you mean by here?

A: In **Silver Spring**.

Q: Oh, in **Silver Spring**.

A: Yes. A – a friend of mine, who lives in the same building where I am, he came before the war, okay? Her grandchildren go to schools in **Silver Spring**, and she asked me, **Helen**, would you like to come and talk to the kids, which are nine, 10 year olds, 11 year olds. And I said, okay, I will. I did a few times, three or four times, and I came home and I said no, I'm not gonna do it any more. Because beforehand I was told, don't say it too much, because they are too young –

Q: Young.

A: – to understand. And when I start talking, kind of goes out like – flows like water, and I had to think, oh, don't say this, don't say that. And it took too much out of me, so after a few times I said no, I cannot do it.

Q: What about your grandchildren, have you talked to your grandchildren?

A: No. They ask me, I answer. And they ask very little, because they know how I feel.

Q: Painful.

A: Yeah, how painful it is, yes.

Q: Did you have to wear a yellow star in the ghetto?

A: Absolutely.

Q: What i – was your feelings about wearing the yellow star?

A: Oh, in beginning – and having parents and being the youngest child, I – I – I felt different. I felt protected, I felt safe, I felt good. So the star in beginning was like – oh, like a little game. And maybe because my parents didn't dwell into us as much either. My father, there was a time before they closed the ghetto, that you could go anyplace you wanted. You could leave the ghetto. And the only place you could go was to **Russia**. So my father said, I don't want to go to **Russia**, they – my father was a very intelligent man, he spoke a few languages, and at the time I thought he is the smartest in the world, but it turned out he wasn't as smart, because he made a mistake of staying on, not to go anyplace. So my father said no, I'm not going to the Russians. And we kids used to say, oh why not? Anot – another place, excitement. And he said oh no, the Russians are not as intelligent, not as educated as the Germans are. My father felt the Germans will do no harm to us, because he was going back before the first war, and I think the first war, the Germans were better than the Russians. I don't know the history as well. And when the father said no, was no.

Q: How much schooling did you have?

A: I – like high – no, like –

Q: Through high school?

A: No, no, not high school. Like – like junior high school.

Q: Junior high school, yeah.

A: Because when I came to this country, and I tried to go to night school, but the same thing, I couldn't go, because I had a child –

Q: Child, yeah.

A: – and didn't want to leave the child.

Q: Right.

A: And my husband was working, so he had the priority, so I said, you go to night school, and I will be okay. So I was tested from a very nice gentleman, who was a teacher in high school, and he said the ability at the time, I had like high school. So I don't know – I don't know where it came from. But as little school I had, it was in comparison to high school.

Q: Back in **Poland**, you mean.

A: Yes.

Q: The schooling in **Poland**, yeah.

A: Yes, yes.

Q: And how did you learn English?

A: Just from talking to people.

Q: N-Never any specific lessons or anything?

A: Oh no, no. No. And my daughter, she picked up, being two and a half, by three – by four, she spoke perfect English. So I picked up probably from her.

Q: Do you think the Holocaust could happen again?

A: Ah boy, I hope it never does. But I think the world learned a lesson, that no country will allow that something like that should happen again. **Iran** is a trap. I'm not a politician, but a little I'm listening to everybody. I think he is more – how should I say? He is more mouth than –

Q: Action.

A: – action, yes. And it might turn out that I am right, because what my sister told me about the war with **Israel**, with the Arabs at the time, they knew nothing. Okay, that was in '48 – okay. Okay.

Q: Well, who – who – who knew – who knew nothing?

A: The Arabs.

Q: Oh.

A: It was only talk.

Q: Oh, I see.

A: Yeah.

Q: T-Tell me your –

A: I – I don't want to go into –

Q: – your sister and brother's names. Your sister's name?

A: First name?

Q: Yeah.

A: **Rachel**(ph).

Q: **Rachel**(ph).

A: And my brother's named **David**.

Q: **David**. Have you been to **Israel**?

A: Five times.

Q: What does it mean to you?

A: Coming home. I loved it. I would go more times, but since I had the back surgery, I cannot walk. I walk, but I cannot go to **Israel** without walking, and I don't want to go in a chairs, or – you know. The last time I was – I think it was in '06, yeah. Because – because my husband and I were planning to go together again. That would have been the fifth time. I was four times with my husband. And since we were talking about it, I said, okay, I go by myself. It wasn't like I was with my husband, but I was happy to see **Israel**. And every time, looks a little better.

Q: Do you get together with other survivors over there? Can you –

A: In **Israel**? No, no, no.

Q: No.

A: Living in **Maine**, I – I was very little in contact with any survivors.

Q: Survivors, yeah.

A: And that's why I don't know anybody in here. When you told me about somebody who was from **Lódz**, I'm – I'm surprise.

Q: Well, is there anything we haven't covered, anything you wanted to say?

A: Oh darling, we could sit here probably for days, and I wouldn't cover everything.

Q: Yeah, yeah.

A: Because when I talk about the ghetto, I – I – I really get sick. It – it – it was five years of a experience that I don't wish it, like they used to say, on a dog. So. And after the war, everything was beautiful. **Maine** is a beautiful country – not country, but place to live in, and **America's** a beautiful country to be in, yeah. I'm very proud to be an American. I am. I consider myself an American.

Q: I was going to just ask you that, you're not Polish, you're –

A: I absolutely not, no. I am an American, yeah.

Q: Okay. How did you impart Jewish tradition, or Jewish culture to your children, when they were growing up? Or did you?

A: Oh yes.

Q: Yeah.

A: Yeah, oh yeah.

Q: How did you – how did you do –

A: Oh yes, we had Hebrew schools, we had synagogues in **Portland**, oh sure. Mine daughter is – my kids, my boys and my daughter are better in Hebrew than I am, because I lost the years which I have learned, and when I learned when I was a little girl, was Yiddish.

Q: Yiddish, yeah.

A: And Yiddish is not Hebrew. So they are wonderful in Hebrew. When comes a holiday, and I always am with my children, when my daughter takes the **siddur** and she reads it, I say, oh God, it's so beautiful. And I **shep naches** from my kids, yeah. My kids had the utmost of everything I could give it to them, because, as you asked me, all I could do, what I didn't have, I – I was happy that they had that. And they had. Education was priority. And they had the utmost, whatever they could learn, the most of it.

Q: Do you do – ever dream about your experiences?

A: Oh yeah, oh yeah. Mine parents, mostly.

Q: Yeah.

A: As old I am, I'm still – I'm still missing my parents.

Q: They're your parents.

A: And I keep on saying to myself, how stupid can you get? You are 85, you are 85. The parents wouldn't be alive. But, I do miss them.

Q: Yeah.

A: And that's why I – I cannot talk, because every time I say mother, father, I choke. I don't know it's me, or – or – I don't know it's normal or not normal, but that's what I am.

Q: Is there any message you wanted to leave for your grandchildren before we finish? Anything you'd like to say to them, about life?

A: What I want to – and I always tell my grandchildren that I'm proud of them. That my kids, their parents, gave them as much goodness as I gave mine kids, and they inherited something good, and they should be proud of their parents, and grandparents. That's what I tell them. They know about it, and they are very proud of their grandpa – grandma was everything for them. And Grandma's still everything for them. And they are for me, too.

Q: Have they seen any of your interviews? Have they watched – your children or your grandchildren watched your interview?

A: Mm-mm. Mm-mm.

Q: Why not, or – you don't want them to?

A: No, I don't wanted them to.

Q: You didn't.

A: Because on this tape, I'm talking and crying, and I don't wanted them to see them cry – me crying. When I am working, I don't want it that they should have appearing that their grandparents are different. I didn't have any grandparents. I – I had my grandparents, but when I was little. I – I – I hardly remember them.

Q: Your husband is a survivor also?

A: Ab – yes, yes.

Q: Just very quickly, where is he from, and –

A: Not far from **Lódz**, **Tuszyn**. That was like a small little town near **Lódz**.

Q: Yeah, where –

A: And I met them in **Germany**.

Q: Right, in the **DP** camp, you said.

A: Yeah, yeah.

Q: And just generally, where was he during the war?

A: The same thing. He went through camps.

Q: He went through different camps.

A: Yes, yeah.

Q: Okay. And about his family, did his – I mean, his –

A: Yeah, he had three – there were nine children. So three, with him, four brothers survive. But none of the sisters, and the sisters and brothers children, nobody survive. And he always – he was always talking because one of his sisters gave a couple boys, two children – she had two boys, and she gave them away to a Pole. And she gave him whatever, gold or whatever, money. And he – he was supposed to keep the boys as non-Jews. And that's what my husband was always talking about. Not talking to anybody, but he always used to say, oh, I will never forget the scene when I saw the two boys, when the Poles brought them, when the Germans came to collect the kids. And he couldn't do anything. Okay, my husband was working also in – in – in the ghetto. I didn't know him at that time.

Q: Right, right.

A: But he says that he saw the Poles who held the two boys, bring them to the Germans, and they threw them on the wagon. And he saw the boys, but couldn't do anything. And that was haunting him always.

Q: Did you and your husband talk about your wartime experiences all the time?

A: Very little.

Q: Very little.

A: Very little. But it came up like we were talking about boys, children, when I had mine boys, he used to say, oh my sister's boys would be 20, 30, whatever. That's – and he was saying – I will never forget.

Q: Yeah.

A: Because it bothered him that he saw them –

Q: And couldn't help.

A: – and couldn't help. That's what was always on his mind.

Q: Yeah.

A: Not the parents, not other things, but the two boys the sister gave to that Pole. That's why Poles – and my husband felt the same way, Poles were just as bad as the Germans, maybe even worse in it – in some instances. But before I was liberated, there were Poles who went – oh, I forget the name – which the Poles converted into Germans. And they went – and they were helping the Germans, and they were soldiers. So I had a – a easy time before the liberation, that one of the Poles – and I knew, because I could hear the Polish language from far away. We never were close to anybody. And I knew, I – I used to say, oh they speak Polish – because you expect the Germans to speak German. And at the very end, they said, whoever can f – hide, this was the last hide.

Q: Oh, mm-hm.

A: Because maybe they were afraid that after the war somebody will point a finger and say, oh, you were a soldier. So, they said in Polish, whoever can hide, well, it won't do any good to say it in Polish, but they said it. And that's all I heard about them, but they were worse. As I say, we can talk and talk and never come to an end, but –

Q: Yeah.

A: – how long was I talking? I'm surprise about myself.

Q: Well –

A: I said I'm not gonna say anything, but I said it, right?

Q: Well, thank you so much for doing this interview

A: Okay. You're welcome.

Q: This concludes the **United States Holocaust Memorial Museum**, volunteer collection interview with **Helen Schwartz**.

Conclusion of Interview