

This is a continuation of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum volunteer collection interview with Irene Silver. And you were talking about your experience raising your children and their religious--

Affiliations?

Yeah, mm-hmm.

Well, that was about it, as far as that they're all bringing up their children in the Jewish tradition. Since I was never that deeply steeped in religion, certainly, I don't feel that they should be doing anything different, but I'm happy about the way that they are being brought up in.

OK, are you more comfortable with people who lived through the war than let's say Americans here who never had to experience what you experienced? Are you angry that you had to experience things that others didn't have to by living in a different country?

No. I'm basically very tolerant. I don't judge other people, and the fact that I had to live through the war and others didn't, I'm happy that some people didn't have to experience it. Of course, I'm angry then that the people who were there and suffered. That, of course, is a very deep anger, but you can't be angry forever.

You can't think about it forever, or your life will become miserable. And then am I more comfortable? Not necessarily. I have very close friends who have never gone through it, but I do feel more comfortable and close to those friends of mine who understand as much as they can what happened.

I don't think I would be very comfortable with people who say, well, what happened happened, and let's just forget about it. I would not want to hear that. There's one other thing that sometimes comes up, and it really, I think, is unfair and bothers me is when people say, well, why didn't the Jews rise up? Why did they just go there like sheep?

Well, times were very different. Civilians did not have any arms. They couldn't defend themselves against an army. How could a civilian without any arms stand up to an army with the guns and ammunition and tanks and everything else?

And in the end, there were those who were still surviving in the ghetto who did fight, and they fought to the end. But that was at the very, very end, and they felt they would try to do anything they could. But the general population, they had no way to defend themselves. In the beginning, nobody knew about the concentration camps, at least I don't know-- that's what I hear that they didn't know. I certainly was too young to know anything like that, but I don't know if my family knew about the camps.

I think that eventually it became clear that people who went never came back and that there were these camps. But I just don't want to hear people saying, why did they not fight back? I'd like to see how they would feel if they were in that situation. Now, of course, anybody can get a gun and anybody just about can defend themselves, but I don't know what would happen if that ever happened again. I hope it never does, but you should never judge people if you have not been in that situation.

Are you a different person because of what you experienced?

Yes. When I was still with my parents, even the ghetto, I was-- I was an only child. I was-- trying to think of the right word. I was some doted upon. My mother would feed me-- my nanny and then my mother would feed me I was probably about seven or eight years old, because I didn't like to eat. And so there was always somebody taking care of me.

I was really well taken care of. And because I was with my family and with my parents, I didn't feel that I had to behave in any certain way. I don't know how I did behave, but I'm sure I could do whatever I really wanted if it was safe. But when I left the ghetto and I was with strangers, I learned to be, not only obedient, but not to annoy other people.

And so I think that I became more tolerant of others. I think that I was spoiled when I was very young, but after that, I didn't grow up very spoiled. I always had to-- when a child grows up, like my children, for instance, if you are not happy about something, you let your parents know. Well, when they're not your parents, you're not going to let them know.

And even with my aunt and uncle, who are certainly my closest family, but still, they were not my parents. And so I was very careful most of my life as to how I behave. Now, other than that, I don't know if I would have grown up to be a social worker. Probably not if the war hadn't happened.

I don't know what would have happened-- what kind of person I would have been if the war hadn't happened. I would hope that my war experiences have helped to make me into a person who cares about others.

What about an inner strength to cope with crises?

Well, I haven't really made up my mind about that, because I've had a number of crises in my life since the war. Health crises, basically, and sometimes I think that when you have a lot of trauma in your life, it makes you stronger, but sometimes, I think it might work the other way, and I haven't really come to any conclusion on that for myself. I think with age, you become stronger.

I think most people will say that they're stronger than they were when they were younger. I know I was much-- not that I'm a nosy person, but I was more quiet, do what others want you to do person. I will stand up for myself more now, but that may be age. I don't know if it's just my experience.

Do you receive reparations?

I got some. Yes. I did not want to. I was in my 20s and my uncle said to me once-- asked me if I wanted to apply for it, and I said, I don't want any money from Germany. They cannot repay me. And I didn't-- for the longest, longest time-- apply for anything, and then eventually I did.

I did because it changed my view upon it. I thought, that will never repay me, but if my life can be made a little better, maybe it'll have my children, then why not? Why should it stay there? I'd rather have it here.

And so my son, actually, has done-- anything that's been done, it's my oldest son. He pushed me to everything that I have done on in this area, and that's about what's happened lately.

Do you dream about war years?

No. At least, I don't usually remember what I dream about, so I don't know. Maybe I do, but I honestly don't know.

Were you active in the Civil Rights Movement because what happened to the Jews being deprived of their civil rights?

No, I mean, I certainly sympathize with them, but I wasn't active in it. I was very busy raising my family. I really-- I felt terrible about all of it and wished everybody to get all their rights and everything. I always felt that way, but I would not say that I was an active in it. No.

What were your thoughts about the Eichmann trial? Did that bring up any memories for you?

Didn't bring up memories, but I was certainly glad that they had gotten hold of him and whatever punishment was due that happened then, and I'm certainly upset about some of the people who have gotten away in Argentina or wherever they went. I think that that's a shame. But I feel that I was more immersed in my family, in my work, rather than-- I did not think about it unless it came up on the news or something like that.

Do you feel that lessons have been learned? The world has learned any lessons from this?

No.

[LAUGHTER]

I don't. I think that I thought so at first. For many years, I did think so, but now, looking around, I think people-- there are those who will try to get rid of anybody who doesn't think their way or who they don't like or don't want to deal with. And as far as Israel is concerned, I think it's-- I can't do anything about it, so I try not to-- I'm really, really concerned, and I just feel that after everything is said and done, I don't know if there ever be peace.

And that's a very sore point with me, because I feel that people who really built their country from nothing, why shouldn't they finally have some peace? And I suppose they do to a certain extent, but they're always under this siege, and I worry about Iran and their nuclear bomb. But I think that Israel has to do something, and maybe they will. I don't think they're just going to go quietly anywhere.

So I feel that-- I worry about it. I worry about everything that's happening in the world. It's just not a, not a peaceful time, and I worry about the future for my children, grandchildren [INAUDIBLE]

Are you a member of any survivor groups?

I was. For a number of years, I was part of the Hidden Children Group in Rockland County. It was a small group and maybe there were 25 of us, and we used to meet on a monthly basis, and I found a lot of common ground with them. We were all, more or less, on the same page. And so sometimes, I write to one or two of them, but that was a close group, and that was from the Marriott Hotel we started that after that.

However, when they came to Washington area, there is a group, but it's a very, very large group. It's Baltimore and Washington Hidden Children. They had been a group for about 20 years, even before any of that, and I went to a couple of meetings. I really tried, but I'm not terribly outgoing. Maybe that's part of the problem, and I didn't feel-- they said they welcomed me, but they were such a close group, they knew all about each other's backgrounds.

They had a history, and it's very hard to get them to something. And after a while, I stopped going. So I don't belong to them.

Have you been to the Holocaust Museum building?

Yes.

What are your thoughts when you walk in there?

Well, it was very-- first of all, I went to the opening with Elie Wiesel and all that, and I will never, ever forget that, because that was extremely emotional for me. I cry easily, anyway.

[LAUGHTER]

All my children came and we were all there. It was the rainiest day possible, and I thought, that's probably the wrong thing to start talking about. I thought, it must be the heaven's coming down crying.

Right. Right. But anyway, I didn't go to that, and then I didn't go to the Museum one time, and I think it's extremely well put together. It's a place that other people can come and see what-- it was very realistic, and I was very emotional about it. Oh, did you want to put it on?

Yeah. So we were talking about going into the building itself and the exhibits. Did you go upstairs to any of the exhibits when you went into the building? I'm not talking about the time the dedication, obviously.

No, I know. No, I did go through the--

Section on the Warsaw ghetto?

I don't know. I went through the whole thing, and I think so.

Yeah, OK, so you didn't have particular--

It was many years ago.

Yeah, so you didn't-- particular memories of going through the section of the Warsaw ghetto?

Tell you the truth, I tried to go through. I couldn't handle just taking every everything in. I just couldn't, so I paced myself rather quickly. I went back 10 years later to the re-dedication, or you know when they had that the 10-year anniversary? And I felt, now, that was a summer day. The sun was shining, and I was with my husband and my son, and I said, this is so much better.

We have gone through 10 years, and-- not that there has been healing, but I think we're past some of the things. And I just felt that it was almost like rebirth. That's how I felt. It was just-- the whole atmosphere was so much different than the dedication, which was-- it just, I thought that it was so-- very traumatic for me. I don't know why, really.

I just felt very traumatized. Not traumatized, but emotional about it. And then when we came back, it was different 10 years later. I'm glad that it's there. I'm just--

Why are you glad?

Because I think that, not so much for us who have survived, but for those who didn't. They're not forgotten. The room with the shoes was just too much.

Is there anything else you would like to say before we end the interview? Any thoughts that you have? Any message to your grandchildren, possibly, that you would want to say to them?

Be strong. Follow your star. Don't forget what happened, but don't be burdened by it. You have to go on with your life and make Jewish people proud to know you well, and I love you.

That's a beautiful note to end on. Thank--

I'm sorry, about all-- my children know me, and so when something emotional comes up, oh, here comes mom.

[LAUGHTER]

So I'm sorry about that, but I should have brought a whole box.

Well, thank you--

I thought this was going to be a real dry interview.

[LAUGHTER]

Well, thank you so much for doing the interview.

You're very welcome. I hope that it becomes part of something bigger than just one person.

Yes, it will be. This concludes the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum volunteer collection interview with Irene Silver.

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Contact reference@ushmm.org for further information about this collection