

This is a continuation of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum volunteer collection interview with Regine Ginsberg. You had mentioned about your last name being changed. Your birth name, your surname, your final family name was-- your family name?

In Belgium?

In Belgium, yeah.

Zylberstejn.

Zylberstejn, right. And then did it change when you came to this country?

Yes, my father changed it to Silven-- S-I-L-V-E-N.

And when did he do that? When he first came--

I think when he went into business.

In McKeesport.

In McKeesport. Because it was the Silven's Leather Goods Store.

You mean, that's the name he gave to the store?

Yes, uh-huh. And how he came to Silven I really have no idea, because his brother in Belgium kept the name Zylberstejn until the day he died, which was just a few years ago.

So did your name then become Regine Silven?

Silven, Regine Silven, married Reuben Ginsberg.

Oh, OK. So you-- how did you feel about that?

I had no feelings about it one way or another. If I did, it wasn't discussed with me. It really wasn't something-- you know, you accepted the facts as they came because you didn't question.

Right.

They didn't ask me what my opinion was. And that's just the way it was. That's all there was to it.

Did your parents-- well, first of all, the war was over in '45. Do you remember, have any memories of hearing that the war was over?

I have memories of hearing the war being over. There was is one thing that I must tell you, that my brother enlisted in the army when he was here. He became a captain. And he was sent back to Belgium and lived in a home in Belgium as a captain of the American army. And I thought that was just absolutely wonderful.

Now when was this? Do you know what year?

During the war.

During the war.

During the war. Not after the war, during the war. And I remember he's writing us that he was in the house. And he was living in the house with other officers. And I thought that was absolutely wonderful. What else do I remember?

Was he being used as an interpreter?

Yes, actually he was--

Intelligence work?

--in intelligence.

Intelligence, yeah, right.

Yes, he was in intelligence. Because he had had a college education. He was-- and his French was absolutely superb. He sounded like Charles Boyer. And he had his charm.

And he had the same charm. Oh, my. Did he bring back anything from the house? Or did he say what condition?

Actually, I had-- not from the house, because I think everything was pretty well destroyed inside the house. But he brought me back, and I still have it, a bracelet that has all the communities in Belgium-- Brabant, I remember, and the East Coast, the names of the important--

Provinces.

Provinces.

Provinces.

Provinces. And that was a long time ago. He brought it back to me in 1945, I guess.

And just to repeat, when you were settled here, again you did not really talk about-- or did you talk about, to your parents, what you all had gone through?

No.

You just turned the--

Never.

--turned the page. And it was a new chapter.

We turned it completely. Because mother was never happy, I don't think, in the United States.

Really?

She had a difficult time adjusting. And my father had his first heart attack at 50. And mother was so afraid of losing him that she didn't allow him out of her sight. And I think that happened quite a bit in those days, also, between husband and wife. So they were not-- they never adjusted. I think it's very difficult in later age to adjust to a different country.

They came in their 40s. They were in their 40s.

Which shouldn't be too bad, really. But they had a good life. They had a very good life in Brussels.

Yes.

And from then on, it was a struggle.

Yes.

From the day they left Brussels, it was a struggle for them. And I do think, and I hope they can hear me, that they showed such courage.

Yes.

Such courage, both of them, really, of survival.

Thank goodness.

It's mind boggling sometimes. I mean, do we still have that in us? And I hope we do. I really hope we do. Because I think when you're faced with that kind of crisis, you really don't know how you're going to react. But they just were incredibly courageous.

You graduated from high school, worked with your father and then met your future husband. And then--

I graduated at 18. Yeah, I must have-- I must have-- I must have met Reuben when I was 19.

19.

For the first time. And at that time, I was still a very protected young woman.

Had you thought of going to college? Or was that not on the horizon?

That was not on the horizon. It was not even discussed--

Discussed, yeah.

--at that time. Why, I'm not sure. Maybe mother and dad needed me.

I was going to say, they may have needed you in the store.

I think they might've needed me.

And then you got married.

Yes.

What year did you get married?

1947. And Reuben was in law school. And we lived in a little community in upstate New York. I think it was called Nyack. I'm not sure.

Nyack, uh-huh.

Nyack. And we lived in army barracks. And I must say that was the happiest time of our lives. My mother came to visit me. And the first thing she said was, oy vey iz mir. His mother came to visit me, both of us, and she said, it's beautiful. I'll never forget that.

But it was wonderful. I would drive in with Reuben. And I would take courses at Columbia University.

While he was at law school.

While he was in law school.

Wonderful, wonderful.

And I adapted to marriage very beautifully. Because he was a very kind, and patient, and understanding man. And I think the security-- and I don't mean financial security, I mean--

Emotional.

Emotional security that I have today is what really due to him. It really is due to him. Because I was a pretty messed up 21 year. I was afraid of everything-- thunder, flying, you name it, going into a store and buying something, everything scared me really. But over the years, it worked.

Do you attribute those fears when you were young to your childhood experiences.

Absolutely, absolutely. And I had them for a long time in my married life. I could see-- because we have actually two sets of children. Because there is 14 years difference between my son and my youngest daughter. So that we have my son, and Debbie, and then Jackie, and Lisa. And these two are not quite as hyper as these two--

The first, yeah.

The first two. So your first child was born when?

My first child was born-- I went home to mother. Because we were living-- Camp Shanks, actually, was the name of the place, Camp Shanks. And it was a military camp at one time. But in my ninth month, I went home-- the beginning of my ninth month, I went home to mother.

And Reuben must have had a feeling, because--

Was he still in law school?

He was still in law school. But he came flying home on the evening that I went into labor. He just had a feeling. And Michael was born. He was such a Texan, my husband, that he always wanted to-- he was sorry he hadn't bought a little dirt from Texas to put on the table. He was a devoted Texan. And Michael was born in McKeesport, Pennsylvania.

And what year was that?

Michael is 61 years old. So that would be--

'48--

1948. I was so, so naive. I remember we had a neighbor at Camp Shanks who explained to me at what period of time I couldn't get pregnant. It didn't work.

Speaking about 1948, what did Israel mean to you then? A large part of your awareness in that time?

I don't think that I was broad-- broadened enough really to think about that part of the world. I didn't think about Israel until my oldest daughter went over there when she was in high school and got caught in the Israeli war. And from then on, I think Israel started having meaning for me.

What was the reaction of your parents? You were still young-- well, not that young-- when the war was over and the

news came out about what had happened to the six million Jews?

I think they must have known about it. Because why did they want to run like that if they hadn't known what was happening? So whether--

But I meant the full extent of what had happened.

Probably not the full extent, but I think they must have known about the extermination. Because it happened before--

Right.

--even. I think rumors have a way of coming around, like a newspaper. They must have heard. Maybe what was going on in Poland. I think that that was going on before 1940. They must have heard about the ghettos.

Right.

I don't think they heard the full extent of it, of what I saw in the Museum, for example, yesterday, the outrage of the Americans and the British when they came and what they saw. I'm not sure that they saw-- they knew it to that extent. But they knew that they had to save themselves and their children.

Yeah, know that part, yeah.

Why did they know that, I don't know.

Well, no, but my question was, what were their reactions when the full extent came out, after the war was over? And pictures were shown.

It was, again, something that was not discussed with me.

OK.

Which I find very interesting.

Well, it's too painful. It's too painful.

I guess. Because they lost so many members of their family.

Right.

And that's the way they lost them.

Yeah.

So.

So you had your first child. And then how long did you stay in the East? Or your husband graduated from law school?

Well, Reuben graduated from law school. And nobody would hire him in Texas. They all told them to go West.

Why wouldn't they?

He just couldn't find a job. But he had a sister who lived in Tulsa. And she found him a job with an attorney there. And we moved to Tulsa with Michael. And we lived there for about a year. But Reuben really wanted to be in Texas.

So we came back to Texas. And those were the days that you really were living on a shoestring. Parents were always helpful, his parents and my parents. And he finally found a job in a lawyer's office, who gave him space for typing for the lawyer. So he typed a lot of his material and he didn't have to pay rent. And he grew very successful.

What town-- what town were you living in?

What town-- Dallas.

Oh, you were in Dallas then.

We always lived in Dallas.

Dallas.

Yeah. That was in the '50s when we moved back to Dallas. And then we had Debbie. And we lived in the little house in Dallas. And I must say, those were the happiest years of our lives, really. It was not complicated.

Right.

And then we moved to our big home that I'm still in right now. I started getting busy myself. I had a career. I was an art dealer. And in the '70s, I had a artist friend who came to me, who wanted to open a gallery.

And I was interested. We worked very hard. We were never in the red. After about five years, I sold out to her. And Reuben, who was very wise at that time-- this was in the early '80s-- insisted that I go back into business. And insisted on setting me up again. But I worked out of my house.

And at that time is when I really made all the wonderful contacts that I made and have a wonderful art collection.

These are paintings, or sculpture, or both?

Both.

Both. Truly a wonderful-- mostly contemporary art. And I'm delighted. Because I think I have quite a legacy for my children.

Children, wonderful.

I also, when I stopped doing that, I became interested in Golden Acres, which is a Jewish nursing home in Dallas. We formed an organization called Friends of Golden Acres, for the renovation that was very needed in the home at that time.

Ethel Frankfurt and I, who is now Ethel Zale-- she married a Zale-- managed-- we built such a successful organization, we managed to raise over the years that we were together about a million and a half. And we renovated several floors really in the home. And I was president. I really loved it at the time.

I did that in honor of my mother and father, who both were in the home. I also was bas mitzvahed in 1992 in honor of my dad, because he had died. And I wanted to do that for him. So that even though I didn't go to college, I managed to have two wonderful careers, one that I'm still enjoying. Because I love the art in my house.

And I have some very good art. And that's one of the reasons I'm not selling my house. Because I get up every morning and it's so rejuvenating. It really is rejuvenating. And my family loves to come over. And I'm still very close to-- I have a wonderful family. Reuben passed away a year and a half ago.

And they have just-- everyone should be as lucky to have the kind of attention that I have had. Really, I'm blessed. I am

truly blessed.

And as I said, starting in the late '70s, from the time I went into the art business, and going on to what we did for Golden Acres, it's been very rewarding, very, very rewarding. And I'm just so happy that I've had that time to have had two wonderful experiences later in my life.

Can we talk a little bit about your thoughts and your feelings now about what you went through? When your children were the age that you were when you had to leave quickly, in France, in that 14, 15, 16, 17-year-old age bracket, when your children were that age, did you-- did it bring back memories for you? Did you relate?

Gail, it did not. Because as I told you when I started, this is truly the first time that I have spent any amount of time talking about my growing up. It almost seems as though my life didn't start for me until I got married and moved to Texas.

You had two parts to your life.

Yes, two parts to my life. And my best memories are from that time on. In fact, when I went back to Belgium with two of my girls, I wanted to show them the place where I lived. I couldn't believe it. It was condemned.

Oh, really?

For what reason, I don't know. So there were no memories there.

But it didn't-- my point was it didn't trigger, when your children were that age, it didn't trigger memories of what you had to do go through.

Only because I was too young, really, to be able to import those kind of memories at their age to them. And it was a time of my life that, obviously, I didn't want to think about.

You didn't want to, right.

And I didn't.

OK.

It affected me emotionally very badly, very badly. And I think because it affected me emotionally so badly that I just closed it off.

Right. Were your parents aware that it affected you so much?

I don't think that psychologically-- people--

Didn't think in those terms.

-- of that time thought about those terms.

Yeah, right.

Because if they did, they would have sent me for counseling. But that isn't anything that occurred to them really. Life was simple.

Yeah. Did your parents become more religious when they came here or less religious?

Actually, it was difficult to keep kosher in Dallas, Texas. Mama didn't like the kosher butcher. He was very mean. I

remember that. The only time that mama kept kosher, which really tickled me, holidays. Jewish holidays we had to be kosher. And Passover we had to change dishes the whole time that she lived in the United States.

Right.

It was all right not to the rest of the week. But my sweet memories of Passover was that the day before you were supposed to get-- not the day, but the day that you were supposed to get rid of the chametz.

Right.

Mother always had for lunch liver and potatoes, boiled potatoes. And we had to come for lunch. And that was the end of the chametz.

Right.

After that, we started Passover.

Right.

And I think it is so wonderful to keep up those traditions.

Yes.

Because it stays in the mind of children. Those are the things that--

oh, absolutely--

--really remain with them.

Makes the impression, right.

And how important it is. And I do think today that the Jewish institutions are trying to go back to that I know that our temple has changed tremendously in their practices of Judaism. They are catering to the younger people now. Because I think they feel there's no hope with the older ones. We are set in our ways.

Do you remember the Eichmann trial at all, when Adolf Eichmann was--

Well, that was already over when I was--

Yeah, no, I was just saying, did you have any special feelings?

Yeah, I got emotionally involved in that.

I was going to ask you--

Yes, I did get emotionally involved in that.

In what sense?

And I remember I watched it. In the sense of what happened to them, because of them. I have several friends who are still living, who are survivors. They are the ones who really went through Dachau and the horrors of the concentration camps, the experiments, the nakedness, the shaving of the hair, everything.

But I told my children today at lunch that I really feel as badly emotionally it affected me, in life it made me strong. My



experiences during that period have given me a strength that I don't even see in my children. I mean, I really feel strong in crises. It's very interesting.

I change completely in a crisis. I don't scream. I don't cry. I just internalize it. And I become strong. And I'm grateful for that. And I really think it's because of my war experiences. Because I can't place it anywhere else, really, that kind of strength.

Having to cope.

Yes. Yeah.

Do you talk about your wartime experience, or did you talk about your wartime expense with your brother later on as adults?

No, because unfortunately, there was not a good situation between his wife and my mother, who lived around the corner, which affected our relationship. The good old Jewish story. So that we didn't have much time together to talk. And I regret that very much really.

And I'm very serious that today my friends who still have husbands, who still have a brother, I'm like a preacher. I really am, Gail. I tell them, appreciate what you have, the time that you have together. Don't stop and pick nit the little things that are not important.

Discuss your childhood. Discuss things that have happened between the two of you. And they do.

Do you feel you were overprotective in raising your children or did you raise them to be--

Very much so. Very much so.

Because of the--

Thank God I had a balance. I had a husband that didn't feel that way. Very overprotective.

Because of what you had gone through?

Exactly. Don't do this, and don't do that, you're going to get hurt. Really, really, to the point I think where they resented it. And I think my youngest child probably didn't go through all that. And she's the one that has the most even temperament of the four children. No, it's true, terribly protective, terribly protective.

Were you active them in any way when the Civil Rights movement began. Here, Jews were deprived of their civil rights in Europe.

I couldn't understand it. That was one of the things when I came to the United States that I had never seen before, where Blacks were not allowed to drink from the same fountain or use the same bathroom. I really was incensed about that. I remember that.

Because I had never seen anything like that. I wasn't there when the Jews were deprived also of doing that, because we had left already. So I had never seen that before.

And I remember telling Reuben, how can you accept anything like that? I don't-- I really remember having some very violent reactions to that.

Is that due to what because of what happened to the Jews in Europe?

Perhaps, perhaps. It was terribly unfair. A mensch is a mensch.

Right.

It didn't make sense to me.

What was your reaction going through the Holocaust Museum yesterday, as you went through the exhibits?

I felt at one time that I wanted to get out of here. And then I--

It was too close to home? Too close to--

I-- I don't know. And then I told myself don't give in to your weakness. This did not happen to you. And although it happened to several members of my family, whom I didn't know that well, if I had been very close to them, it probably would affect me more than it has.

Yeah.

It didn't happen to my mother. It didn't happen to my father. It didn't happen to my brother. But it did happen to some very close friends of mine, who have not talked about it. But Jesse was gracious enough, a very close friend, to let me listen to her yesterday. [? Irma Freudenreich ?].

To listen to her--

When she gave--

To listen to her interview.

--interview.

Oh, I see.

Yes. And she never had told me some of the things that she went through, which is very interesting. That's what I'm trying to explain. You really don't want to talk about it. Do you have a hard time people talking about it, Gail, when you interview them?

Are you more comfortable around people from Europe who went-- the Jews, let's say, who went through the war, are you more comfortable than someone who was born here?

No. No. As a matter of fact, today, I have more-- for a long time, more feeling for people-- this is my country.

I was going to-- that was going to be my next question. Are you Belgian--

This is my country.

Are you Belgian, are you American?

I'm American. I always remember a friend of mine who said also, a refugee, who said when she comes back from the trip, she wants to kiss the ground--

The ground, right.

--when she gets out of the plane. No, I am really 100% American.

Do you feel that the world has learned a lesson, learned the lessons of the Holocaust?

Has the world ever learned a lesson, Gail? As you look back into the centuries, I don't know. I hope so. All we can do is hope. But what you're doing, it's marvelous, recording it.

I listened to a lecture by the director of the Holocaust Museum in Dallas. He died recently of a heart attack. And he was talking about the fact that even though the war was over in '45, the Holocaust didn't come, really, to be talked about, to the surface, until what, 1979.

Yeah, it took a long, long time.

Took a long time.

Right, right. Are there any sites today, or sounds, or smells today that remind you of that--

Of what?

Running to the train, and leaving, and hearing the bombs?

No.

Being-- living in the South of France. There's nothing that triggers it?

No. No. And never did. Never did, from the moment I came to the United States. I used to have nightmares at night, I remember.

About what?

The Nazis chasing me.

Really?

Yeah, for months, or maybe for even years, really. I remember the nightmares.

Did you tell your folks about that or you kept it to yourself?

I kept it to myself, yeah. My mom would say it's nothing.

Right, right.

I think that there's such a difference in parenting today.

That's for sure. That's, yeah. As you've gotten older, do you think you think about what happened more? Or do you not think about it?

As I told you when I started this, and when Jesse asked me if I would do this, is the time I started thinking about it. I don't think about it. My best memories of my life started in-- maybe not right away in 1947, but from the time I got married. And I'm not just saying that.

That's when I really started growing, living, understanding life, and learning about life a little bit. Because I didn't know much about life before.

How soon did you tell your future husband about what you had went through? Right in the beginning?

What I was going through?

No, what you had gone through as a child, having to leave, when did you tell him?

We didn't talk about it a lot.

Even when you first met him?

But he did know. Because I remember him repeating several times when we were out that we were the last boat out of France of refugees before the Nazis took over all of France and everybody died. And that was in June.

And for some reason, that was a paragraph that he kept repeating, and repeating, and repeating.

He would tell other people.

Yes.

He would tell.

That we were the last boat out of France, the four of us. And we were. It was miraculous.

And he was born in the United-- your husband was born in--

He was born in Texas.

Texas, oh, OK. OK.

A real Texan.

A real Texan, yeah. Well, is there anything, any message you wanted to leave for your children or your grandchildren that you haven't said? Any thoughts that you have because of what you went through? Anything that you--

Appreciate this country. Appreciate what you're allowed to do in this country, the freedoms that you are allowed. The fact that you don't have to carry an identity card that says that you're Jewish. The fact that you don't have to be recognized as a Jew or any religion. That you can practice any religion that you want to. That you are accepted.

This is something that you should treasure. Because as a child, growing up, I really never knew that. And if you could just remember how lucky you are to live in this country. There is no other country in the world-- no other country in the world where you can live and allowed to live the way you live in this country.

And I mean that from the bottom of my heart. I've always appreciated that from the moment I set foot in this country. Because I've had a wonderful life here. I've lived in a part of the country that has been hospitable. It was just a joy.

And when I hear some of the things that are going on now, I just can't understand it. But to my children, and to my grandchildren, and to people in general, cherish it.

What are your thoughts about Germany? Have you been to Germany?

No, I haven't. And my husband bought a German car. I never would drive it. He had a Mercedes. Actually, there's a whole new generation of Germans now. And I don't think you can blame that generation for what happened. But they should be aware that it never happens again.

But I don't blame the new generation at this point for what their ancestors have completely ignored. And they were not the only ones. It was ignored all over the world, what was happening in the camps and during the war, or the soldiers wouldn't have acted so amazed when they opened the doors. They didn't know.

And it was interesting yesterday to read Eisenhower's comment. Really, this is-- and I was so delighted to see so many children standing in line. And there was a heartfelt thought to see a couple of young kids crying, actually crying yesterday. And this is good. This is good.

And I didn't know that you had such an attendance. I mean it's constant. And I think that's great, I really do. In fact, I think I'm going to become a member of this one too. You could sell thousands of memberships.

Have you been back to the South of France, to where you--

No, never been back.

Do you have any desire to go see--

Not really.

--to see where you lived?

Not really. It doesn't bring back good memories. Why go back to a place where you were miserable. Go back to happy place.

Go back to happy places.

Yeah.

Well, is there anything you would like to add before we finish?

No, I think I have--

And we haven't talked about? Anything you wanted to say before we close?

Well, I thank you for the privilege of being able to remember some of the things of my childhood. Though, I must tell you that right now is a good time in my life also, because of my family, my children, my grandchildren, my art that I still enjoy.

That's wonderful.

And it's wonderful at 84 to be able to have the kind of feelings I have. I'm very grateful for that. We all have our moments, but I think that the good moments overshadow anything else. And I thank you, Gail.

Well, that's a nice note to end on, that you say that you're at a good time in your life.

Yes, whatever time I have left, I want to enjoy it.

Wonderful.

I really do. And that's what my husband would have wanted me to say and feel.

Yes, yes. Well, thank you for doing the interview.

Thank you, Gail. Thank you very much.

This concludes the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Regine Ginsberg.