

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

**Interview with Ruth Cohen
October 4, 2011
RG-50.106.0190**

PREFACE

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RUTH COHEN

October 4, 2011

Gail Schwartz: This is the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Ruth Cohen, conducted by Gail Schwartz on October 4, 2011 in Potomac, Maryland. What is your full name?

Ruth Cohen: It's Ruth R. Cohen.

Q: And the R stands for.

A: Renee

Q: And what name were you born with?

A: Well Renee Ruth Cohen.

Q: Cohen is your maiden name?

A: No, Friedman, sorry.

Q: The name you were born with was Friedman.

A: Friedman.

Q: And where were you born and when were you born?

A: I was born in, on April 26th 1930 in **Mukachevo**, Czechoslovakia.

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Q: You have been interviewed before so just to put this post Holocaust interview in a framework, I'm going to summarize a little bit of where you were during the war and then after that we will focus on your post-Holocaust experience.

A: Ok.

Q: You stayed in Mukachevo until May or June of 1944 when your whole family your parents, your sister, your brother and the rest of your family and the whole city was taken to Auschwitz.

A: Right.

Q: And then in October 1944 you went to Nuremberg.

A: Right.

Q: With any members of your family?

A: My sister.

Q: Your sister. And her name?

A: Terry.

Q: Terry. And you went to work in a factory in Nuremberg.

A: Right.

Q: And then in February 1945 you went to **Holachov** to work in another factory.

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A: Right.

Q: And you were liberated in Holachov.

A: Right.

Q: Ok, so I just want to ask you a few questions before we do the post-Holocaust part of the interview. How aware as a teenager were you before you went away, before you were taken away.

A: I was 14.

Q: In 44. But before that how aware as a young girl were you of what was happening?

A: We were quite aware.

Q: Did your parents talk about it with you?

A: Yeah, we talked about it. We lived it. We mourned it. We lived it. Quite.

Q: And so you had heard about this man from Hitler, from –

A: We heard about Hitler by, in 1938.

Q: And 38 was when you first heard of him?

A: Oh.

Q: What language did you speak at home?

A: We spoke Hungarian, German and Hebrew. And some Yiddish.

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Q: And was your family religious?

A: Yes.

Q: They were? So they were quite observant.

A: Yes.

Q: What kind of work did you do in Auschwitz?

A: I was a messenger girl.

Q: Taking messages where?

A: Taking messages from the gate, from the SS guys to anyone who needed to receive a message. It could be the **bloc artist** [ph – a military rank?]. There could be another officer. It could be anybody.

Q: And you were staying with your mother and your grandmother and your sister all together in the barracks, in Auschwitz.

A: No. My mother. Only my sister and I.

Q: Because –

A: My mother and brother and we had some other children with us all got killed the same day we got there.

Q: The same day you arrived. Ok. When you got to Holachov, what kind of work did you do in the factory?

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A: It was some spool winding for airplanes.

Q: This was a Siemens' factory.

A: Yeah. They were both Siemens, both in Nuremberg and in Holachov.

Q: So you did the same kind of work in both.

A: Yeah.

Q: And what was your health like at that time, before liberation?

A: It was bad. I got sick in about January, mid-January 1945. And –

Q: But did you continue to work?

A: I continued to work for a while at Nuremberg. And we all had to stop working beyond that because our camps were being bombed constantly. There was no time to work. And then when we left to Holachov, I started to work for a few weeks and then I had to stop.

Q: You had to stop because –

A: Because I couldn't sit. I couldn't –

Q: You were too sick

A: Yes.

Q: Do you know what you had at that time?

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A: Well now I do, now I do. I had tuberculosis on the spine.

Q: And then you were liberated?

A: Then I was liberated.

Q: Liberated. Let's take the story from then on. Can you tell me about what you remember about liberation.

A: Well very interesting story was that, was two days before the end of the war. We were in the barracks cause we weren't working anymore. I suppose the Germans knew that the war was coming to an end so they, they were all hiding. You didn't see any Germans around. And somebody got up on the cots and happened to notice from a window men running down from the mountain. And so we watched for a while and then somebody realized that the men were carrying guns and they were running.

The point was that they came. They unlocked the camp.

Q: They being –

A: They being well we found out later White Russian partisans. And all they, they took the Germans. They found the Germans in their barracks, in their rooms, wherever they lived and took them prisoners. They shot one of them because he didn't want to be a prisoner. And told us that we're now free but we have to stay here because it's not the end of the war yet. Although it'll be finished very soon, within a few days.

And the Americans would probably come and open the gates for us because they had to lock us in so that we're not in danger, which is what happened. And just before they left, they said whoever wants to come with us can come with us. We'll go back to our camp and they can stay there.

At any rate, about 120 women of the 500 that we were 500 of us. About 120 women went with the men.

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Q: Was the factory only of women?

A: Yes. The camp consisted of 250 Jewish women and 250 political prisoners. They were Polish, German. Mostly Polish and German. As I said 120 women left with them. About three hours later 90 came back and they were Jews and they were told that Jews are not wanted in their camp. This was in the White Russian partisans camp. So they came back and they, I don't know how they got in because the doors were locked but they did get in. And they told us a story of what happened which is that this was on a Saturday. Friday night some of the Wehrmacht women went to a bar in Pilsen which is about 30 kilometers away from Holachov. And told the bartenders or bartender that the camp is, is circled with cans of um.

Q: Explosives.

A: Explosives or petroleum or whatever. And that at 12:30 tomorrow morning they are going to blow us up. So I guess word got to these partisans and that this was around 11:30 when they ran down and opened the gates and I guess they got rid of the explosives whatever they were. And so this, this my liberation. Two days later the Americans did come in and (both talking)

Q: Where did you go when you left, went out of the gate?

A: We didn't.

Q: Oh they just opened the gate and took away the explosives.

A: Right.

Q: You stayed.

A: We stayed.

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Q: Until the Americans came.

A: Right.

Q: You are 15 at that point.

A: I was 15 years old.

Q: What were your feelings. Do you remember? Did you know what was happening?

A: Well we knew that we were liberated.

Q: What did it mean to you as a 15 year old? A sick 15 year old?

A: What can I say. We were all dancing on the bed.

Q: You were dancing.

A: Yeah, not realizing any, you know we probably didn't even think further at that moment.

Q: What was the difference in age, what is the difference in age –

A: My sister is seven years older.

Q: Oh, seven years older. So she was already 22.

A: Yeah. So she was an adult almost.

Q: So you stayed then. Did you see the American soldiers?

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A: Of course we did. They came in. They, they opened the gates, they let us stay there. Of course they took all of the information necessary. I suppose for Red Cross or for themselves, I'm not sure.

Q: And did you know what had happened to the rest of your family at that time?

A: I knew right away. It just so happens that I knew right away. Not my father. My father survived and I even saw him in Auschwitz but we knew right away that my mother was, my mother and my brother. We also had adopted two little cousins to save them. We didn't so –

Q: Where was your brother in the order of children?

A: He was a year and a half younger than I.

Q: Oh so he was the youngest.

A: He was, yeah, yeah. He was twelve and a half. And these children were about eleven and nine. They went with my mother right away.

Q: Went with your mother.

A: So I knew right away.

Q: Is that something you talked over with your sister while you were in the camp?

A: Well we talked about it, but we didn't, we really didn't believe it. We didn't want to believe it. Absolutely not. And my father was also in Auschwitz. He sent us a message to meet him once so we did so we knew he was fine. And we met an uncle but, but –

Q: So now the Americans have come and what did you do? They took the information.

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A: They took the information. They treated us well.

Q: What did you know about America at that point?

A: A lot. I had family here.

Q: You already had family?

A: Yeah, we had family here from 19, late 1920s, early 30s. So yes.

Q: What did America mean to you as a 15 year old?

A: Well not that I'll be here, no. But my family meant a lot. We knew about America, we knew about Israel and we –

Q: Did you know any English? At that point?

A: My sister did. I knew a few words because we started English in third grade but not much.

Q: Then after the Americans took the information from you?

A: They took the information. They fed us. They stayed there and they fed us. And they were very careful because they had had bad experiences with other camps where they overfed people. People died. Nobody died, nobody got sick with us.

Q: How did you communicate with them?

A: I don't ever remember talking to them, but my sister probably did. There were many people. We had, we had Dutch girls who spoke English quite well. We had, well many people spoke English.

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Q: Were there many other children your age?

A: Not there. I was, there I was the only one, in Holachov. In Auschwitz, I think we were ten or twelve of messengers. We took turns.

Q: That were your, approximately your age?

A: Yeah. I was, there was one who was thirteen years old. Everybody was my age or a year older. And in Holachov some women left the camp and went looting and problems did arise. But

—

Q: Looting in the town?

A: Mm hm, but then the soldiers, the American soldiers warned everybody of the dangers and it mostly stopped. But we only stayed there for a month. After that we went back to my home town.

Q: But you stayed in the barracks which you had been in?

A: Yeah, there was no other place.

Q: No place else to stay.

A: We stayed there and we were, we were there. I don't really have memories of what happened there, while we were there but I know we were there. I know we gave information. I suppose that's how my family here found us. I suppose so.

Q: So then after the month was over —

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A: We again I don't remember exactly but we boarded a train. I don't know where. I suppose in Pilsen. And I don't know how we got there. Or Prague. No real memory of it. And it took us about a week to get back to Mukachevo.

Q: You went back to Mukachevo?

A: Oh yeah and on the way home we found out that my father was alive and he's back in Mukachevo. Don't ask me how. I have no idea. And so we went home and then find my father living in my grandfather's, one of the apartments in the house. And –

Q: So did you saw non-Jewish residents of Mukachevo when you returned? And if so, what did they say to you?

A: I didn't see any, no I didn't speak to any I should say. There was nobody, nobody living in -- our house, my father had tried to get into. I don't know whether he did or not. But when my sister tried they didn't let her in. they didn't even open the –

Q: The people that were living there.

A: In our house. My grandfather's house was different than ours. And it had a main floor and then it had a main apartment on the main floor where my grandparents used to live. And upstairs were three apartments. On the main floor was occupied by Russian soldiers. Because Russia liberated Mukachevo. So Russian soldiers lived in that big apartment. And upstairs my father took one of the apartments. I don't remember who lived in the other two apartments. Well yes I do.

One of my old friends and his mother lived in one of the apartments. I don't remember who lived in the third apartment.

Q: And so you moved in there, you and your sister?

A: With my father, yes.

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Q: And your father?

A: Who was already living there.

Q: Right, when you got there. And how was your health at the time?

A: Well my health was that I was in terrible pain. That's how it, that's how I, I knew that something

Q: Manifested itself.

A: That's how it, exactly. But I wasn't feeling sick. I just was in horrible pain, constantly. So as it happens, psychologically the pain stops when you passed away and it did. It stopped when we were bombed in Nuremberg, until I got to Holachov and started to work. I had no pain for about, probably ten days or so. And then it got progressively worse. I don't remember being in pain on the train, coming home where we had to stand for a week. We slept standing, whatever we ate I don't know. Whatever was done, was being done standing, this whole.

Q: Was this in one of these cattle cars.

A: No, no it wasn't.

Q: It was a regular railway car.

A: Right, right, right. But it was, it was completely mobbed because everybody was going place, mostly home.

Q: Did you get any medical attention after the war?

A: After the war, of course.

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Q: I meant immediately after.

A: I even got medical attention in the camps. I mean I was in a, in the infirmary and I got probably something like aspirin which didn't help much but it helped somewhat.

At home, I got home and I was kind of ok for almost a month and then I started being in terrible pain. So I went to Budapest to children's hospital in Budapest. Spent a month there with being x rayed, two, three times a day, every single day and I'm still here.

And they couldn't find what was wrong. and they said oh it's something, whatever. Nothing. They couldn't find it. And naturally from lying in bed for a month, I felt better and I went home. I went home for the holidays so it was the end of August I came home. And spent the holidays in, in with my father and sister. And then it started again.

So somehow my father arranged with my aunt who survived in Slovakia, near Bratislava. And my aunt was instrumental in somehow arranging with them that as soon as there was an empty bed, they would take me. So I went from Mukachevo to **Holohovitz**. Where my aunt lived and waited for a bed. This was around November.

Q: Of 45.

A: Of 45. And they didn't have a bed for me until March. So I stayed at my aunt's house.

Q: Getting medical attention?

A: No. But I was, I was in bed and I mean I was lying down . I don't remember going anywhere. But that's what had to happen. Cause in the meantime, the border in Mukachevo was closed, shut. If you wanted to leave you had to leave by December 31st. If you didn't leave by then, they you couldn't leave. So my father and sister decided to leave. So they weren't there. It was a good thing that I was here. And so I waited until March.

Q: Did they come to you?

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A: I'm sure they came to see me but they didn't stay there. They ended up near Prague.

Q: They went to Prague.

A: Right. And I stayed there because we had this arrangement. I got into the hospital I think on March 16th, 46. And left March 16th 47.

Q: So you were in the hospital for a year.

A: A whole year, exactly a year.

Q: And was your father and your sister able to come, were they able to come visit?

A: Either one or the other came to see me at least once a month. Yeah.

Q: You're only 16.

A: Right.

Q: 16, 17. Your frame of mind. Were you, do you consider yourself strong, I mean were you a strong young woman at that time. You were still just a teenager. Strong mentally, not physically. I know you were in pain.

A: Yes, yes, yes.

Q: To be able to go through what you did at such a young age and not with family. I mean you were —

A: Well there was nothing that we could do. I mean my aunt also came to see me frequently because she was, I don't know. I can't tell exactly, about 20, 30 kilometers away from

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Bratislava. She did come to see me frequently. And of course there wouldn't be any other survivors. In the hospital so we sort of formed a family. There were lots of lovely young people in Bratislava. Jewish people who visited and brought books and little gifts and their company constantly was –

Q: Did you talk to the other young people about what you all went through?

A: I don't think so. I don't remember so I don't think so. I brought a diary and not once did I mention what I went through.

Q: The diary, you wrote at the time?

A: In the hospital.

Q: In the hospital.

A: Not once did I mention.

Q: It was just what you were doing at that time. It was like a journal.

A: Exactly.

Q: Did you think about what you had gone through in the previous couple of years?

A: I don't even think about it now. But –

Q: So you got good care in the hospital.

A: Well it took them –

Q: A year?

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A: Almost three months to find what was wrong –

Q: What was the matter?

A: I had tuberculosis on the spine. And it took them a long time to actually find out and then get the, find the cure for it.

Q: Which was medicine?

A: No, it was bed rest. Absolute bed rest.

Q: Just bed rest?

A: But absolute bed rest. After the three months I was in a cast in bed for about eight and a half months. And nutritious food. That was the important thing. Food and I suppose, I'm sure they gave me vitamins and very good nutrition which was the first thing the doctor said when he discovered what was really wrong. So that's that. And I did get better.

Q: And then a year is up and then.

A: I went to a sanatorium for three months.

Q: Where was that?

A: In the country, **Tatri** mountains. So that was the end of the summer, I suppose. I think I went home after the hospital, I went home. I went home to my father. And then from there I went to the Tatri mountains for three months. And I came back to **Zhakets** [ph] and that, which was near Prague which is where they lived. And I didn't work. My sister worked. My father was I don't know what we lived on. No idea.

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And around the end of January of 48, my aunt either she picked me up or I must have gone there by myself, to her house and we traveled around central Europe for a month. She took me to many places.

Q: Now your schooling had stopped at 14.

A: Completely.

Q: By age 14.

A: Right, right. There was no such thing as tutoring or anything in the hospital. And then I read a lot and I taught myself how to speak Russian and I read a lot. That was the main occupation. But no schooling, that was not, no.

Q: Were you in school, to go back to the war time, up to the time you were taken away to Auschwitz. Had you –

A: About a month before that. We were in school until March 44, right.

Q: So you were 14.

A: Right. And never, never got a diploma thing, because eighth grade which was the end of that school, not session but it's like a middle school but we did get diplomas there. But we never did because we didn't finish.

Q: Cause you didn't finish. So now you're traveling with your aunt and you said you –

A: Yeah so let's say traveled all of February or all of March. I'm not sure. All of February and after we came back she did come back with me. We came back. We got ready to come here. We left April 48.

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Q: April 48. Ok how did your father arrange that? Do you know?

A: My family here arranged it actually.

Q: They sponsored you?

A: They sponsored us. They sent us tickets. My sister arranged the visa and for us because she got the passport, the visa whatever.

Q: How did you feel about leaving Europe?

A: No, no problem. Not at all. I didn't miss it as a homeland, not at all.

Q: And were you fearful of going to America? Or eager?

A: Oh, well we were very excited about seeing my aunt, my uncle and my whole family. We had family –

Q: So it was more a matter of seeing family rather than going to America.

A: Right. And we knew we were, we knew we were going to live here. We had choices before. We could have gone to Israel too but we chose to come here. We had family in Israel and we could have gone there also but I guess my father and sister decided that we were coming here.

Q: Did he keep up his religious observance immediately after the war?

A: Not, not to the same extent but yes, but not to the same extent.

Q: So you came to the United States. How did you get here?

A: By boat.

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Q: From?

A: From Le Havre.

Q: Do you remember the name of the boat?

A: I do but I can't find it on the, on the computer. I'll have to find it because yesterday I found a piece of paper that –

Q: You say the name of the boat. You don't –

A: Is the SS Washington.

Q: Oh the SS Washington. Very appropriate, yes. And you landed?

A: In New York, right and –

Q: Any special feelings when you landed?

A: Yeah it was quite special. We arrived around 5:00. They told us that very soon you're going to pass the Statue of Liberty. So of course everybody was up on deck and there was most, I can still cry.

Q: The Statue of Liberty meant something to you at that age?

A: Not only that age, to everybody on the – I suppose that that's how (pause)
How we expressed our joy.

Q: Joy and relief and everything.

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A: And even now when I see the Statue of Liberty, I still have the same feeling. It doesn't go away. And it was Pesach and so we arrived on the first day of Pesach. We had the first Seder on the ship. There was a Seder on the ship.

Q: What was that like?

A: It was very nice and very, very proper. There were, everybody was Jewish, everybody knew what to do.

Q: So it was all refugees on the boat.

A: Of course. And the only difference was from what I was used to, to what was there is that you know how familiar you were. But we had celery for **karpas**, rather than the parsley. Big difference. Anyway we, my family here wasn't whoever is left is still ultra-Orthodox. So two of my cousins walked from Brooklyn to meet us. And another cousin from the Bronx came by train or however. **Mishy** is no, she, they were not religious but these cousins were the son and son in law of my aunt and uncle.

Q: This on your mother's side or fathers

A: My mother's side. My father's side, my aunt in the Bronx was not. She may have been religious but her children were not.

Q: You had relatives from both sides, your mother and your father?

A: Right, yeah. And my, of course we walked back with my cousins to Brooklyn. All our luggage had to stay on the ship. And I don't know it was Shabbat but they let me carry my pocketbook. Which is interesting. Anyway I did carry my pocketbook. And we walked back from I think 21st street.

Q: Is that where you landed?

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A: I think, pier 21, I don't think it's on 21st street. I think it's further up. I can't remember.

Q: After the war was over til the time you landed here, did your father talk about your mother or about your brother or did he just kind of close up?

A: Yeah he did. We all did.

Q: You did talk among yourselves?

A: No, no, no.

Q: You did not.

A: No we all closed up

Q: You closed up.

A: Like I think everybody else did. I'm sure that my mother and my brother got mentioned but we didn't talk about what happened to them or my grandmother or the rest of the family and my, the whole, my father was of eight children. One was here. All the others were there. So there were six other people who did not survive, with their families. All together there were 58 people, my mother and father. So –

Q: Which you lost.

A: I'm sure we mentioned everybody but we never talked about what happened. I didn't even remember telling my father about what happened in Auschwitz. I don't remember. It doesn't mean that I didn't.

Q: So now you walked to your relatives' apartment.

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A: We walked to their house and it was the first day of Pesach and we had the second Seder. And of course it was, I can't, I can't even imagine, if that's bothering you just move it. I can't even imagine how amazing I felt. I don't know how my father felt. I'm sure equally so. And at the Seder I remember, it was an ultra-orthodox Seder. I loved every minute of that, but I sat there crying all. Also it was my birthday. So it was a very, very, very emotional day.

Q: A real day of liberation.

A: Yeah.

Q: Being rescued.

A: And then we stayed living at my aunt and uncle's house for this was April. Until almost, almost or until July. I don't remember. When somehow because apartments were unbelievably hard to get at that time. You had to either know somebody or you had to have money to pay as they said under the table to get an apartment, if it, even if there was an empty one. So what happened was we shared an apartment with an old Russian couple who lived in a private house. They lived upstairs. It wasn't their house but they occupied the apartment and we shared it with them. We had room, a bedroom, I guess we had two bedrooms and we had the use of the bathroom and use of the kitchen. We lived there for a little while. I can't remember how long. I started to work. Where did I work? Oh in a, in a t shirt factory. I don't know how I got the job but it was again everything was, everything was arranged with a Jewish owner who was willing to hire people. My father got a job also with a man from Mukachevo who was also, he had been here for many years. And established a factory. My father became a tie presser, a necktie presser, which was a terrible come down for him. But he did it. I mean I just know that he was not happy about it. But we all survived. And –

Q: Did your sister get a job?

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A: My sister wasn't here yet. She didn't get here for six months. Six months later and there was a little story she went to get our visa and she left one piece of paper at home. So she had to go back to Zhakets and back again immediately and the line was a thousand different numbers. She was one thousand numbers behind us. So she got there by Sukkot. And she got a job also. But –

Q: Did you think about going to school or were you just –

A: Well I went, I immediately went to school to learn English immediately. Of course that was, nobody would speak to me in any other language but English. They insisted and they made me read English, even before I went to school which was the easier part. But –

Q: So where did you go to school? Was it Americanization?

A: Erasmus hall.

Q: Oh you went to a regular public high school

A: High school right. I did that and then they had the English as a second language. And that was about my only formal education here, but I finished high school. After I finished high school I went to some private thing where I learned how to do typing and steno which I never used. It's not me. And so I had this job doing, working in this, in the t shirt, men's t shirt factory. And I met a lifelong friend there. We are still friends. But after a short while they were laying people off and they fired me. So I had to find something else and I worked for a place called Barton's candy store. Again I got the job because either my aunt, uncle, somebody knew the Kleins, who owned the place. So I got a job there. And worked there for six, seven months.

And then I couldn't stand it so I again, through a friend I got a job at, in an insurance office. No I got a job with my cousin in his office, a real estate office. Where I learned some skills. You know office skills. How to deal with people whatever. And when I left that I got this job in the insurance office and doing bookkeeping. They actually taught me how to do it.

And when I realized that they were really taking advantage of me because they would make me stay a while later and then I would have to go to their house and they would send me home in

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3:00 in the morning because they were teaching me was, a lot unfairness. I quit that and I got a job at the educational alliance which was a social work agency, doing I was a cashier and doing some, some kind of bookkeeping.

And when I left that because they were also letting people go and there was a man who had six children and he needed a job. I had seniority but some, one of the bookkeepers said why don't I leave. More than happy to do it. So I left and then found a job at the union School for social research where I stayed until 50, 56.

Q: And you were all still living in that apartment with your father?

A: Oh, I'm sorry no.

Q: You had moved out?

A: I think you mean in the shared apartment. No I'm sorry, I forgot. I we shared, we stayed there for oh less than a year and then the Kleins, the Barton people. (sound in background) That's my husband, he has a cold.

Left their apartment. They were moving from their apartment and they offered us their apartment. So we moved there. We only stayed with that couple, maybe nine months, maybe a year or less than that. At any rate we moved to, a few blocks away and then I got married.

Q: How did you meet your husband?

A: At the Educational Alliance.

Q: He was working there also?

A: No, no, he was, he was still in school. He was graduating as a matter of fact when I met him and then he was inducted in the army.

Q: And his name?

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A: Ben Cohen.

Q: And when did you get married?

A: In December 1952. So –

Q: And then he –

A: He went in the army.

Q: He went in the army and you stayed where you were?

A: I stayed here, I stayed wherever I was living and my father died in 53. And because he died, my husband got a compassionate transfer. He was transferred to Governor's Island in Manhattan. So he lived at home.

Q: And you continued to work?

A: And I continued to work until I had my first baby. In 56.

Q: And then, from then on, do you have other children or –

A: I have three.

Q: Three children.

A: Right and I worked at the new school and I attended many, many, many classes and I've got a diploma but, that was my basically my education.

Q: And so you stayed in New York from then on?

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A: Until four years ago.

Q: And what kind of work did your husband do in New York when he got out of the army?

A: He was in, he had his bachelors and then he was in the army, he got his master's in business and he was an accountant. He had his own firm. And then when my kids grew up I went back to work.

Q: Doing what?

A: I was, I started doing bookkeeping and then I, being asked to do, I was a comptroller of a company in the garment center of all places. And I stayed there until I retired.

Q: And then you moved to the Washington area?

A: In 20

Q: 2007?

A: Seven, right.

Q: Well let's talk –

A: That's my story.

Q: That's your story and I just have a few questions. When your children were growing up, did they ask you or did you talk about what you went through and the fact that there weren't that many relatives and –

A: Yeah, of course we did. I did.

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Q: You did tell –

A: My husband's an American born so it was I and my friends, my closest friend who I met in the hospital in Bratislava and her friend. There were the three of us. Survivors. Yes.

Q: They both came to the United States? And their names.

A: Well there were two Suzy's, one was black Suzy and one was red Suzy and we stayed friends until the end of their lives. So our children grew up with them. And grew up with their children. Matter of fact my daughter's best friend is red Suzy's oldest child. They're still good friends.

Q: So you did speak to your children when they were relatively young?

A: Yeah.

Q: About what you had gone through?

A: Well I believe that whatever they asked, I answered which is what I really do with most people. I don't (both talking)

Q: Are you more comfortable being with other people who went through similar war time experiences?

A: No I'm not. I must say –

Q: Would you prefer to be with ---

A: No, no I'm not more comfortable or less comfortable but somehow when you meet someone who had your experience you have this immediate camaraderie. But it doesn't mean that one is

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more, that I am more comfortable with them, but it does, there is a, an immediate connection. But most of my friends are not survivors with the war, except for my –

Q: Those two women.

A: Well three women but two of them because they lived in Jersey. We lived in New York. My third friend lives in Boston so it wasn't the same thing. I mean she and I and her husband were great friends. But the children were not involved with our children.

Q: How is your health now, the TB, the tuberculosis of the spine got cured.

A: Well that got cured. It actually never gets cured but it's totally arrested. No, it's arrested. It's not in control.

Q: It doesn't get worse.

A: It, it's non-existent unless it would reignite itself, which it hasn't done. Ben, this is Gail Schwartz.

Q: Are there any sights or sounds that remind you –

A: Not anymore but there were. Airplane going by, but not anymore.

Q: How long did that go on for?

A: I can't tell exactly but for a bunch of years.

Q: Even coming to the United States?

A: Oh sure, of course.

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Q: And what would you do?

A: Nothing. You, you'd think, you'd feel, you'd think but that's it. I didn't duck.

Q: You didn't duck?

A: No.

Q: Any smells that evoked –

A: No. No. But that was, that was real for a long time.

Q: Tell me about becoming a citizen. What was that like?

A: It was exciting. One of my uncles here. It was different than it is now. We didn't have to study for it. It's what you know, I mean. What you knew from living here.

Q: Was it five years after you –

A: Five years almost exactly. My uncle was my witness and I think my husband was my witness. And but it wasn't a big deal I think as now. Now I understand it's really a big deal. You have to pass tests. We were asked a few questions.

Q: What did it feel like to be a citizen?

A: Great. Accomplishment.

Q: On that note then, do you feel European, do you feel Czech, do you feel, what do you –

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A: I don't feel European and I don't feel Czech. I have some sort of joy in Czech people's accomplishments such as tennis players, musicians, but that at this point, that's about it.

Q: You don't feel –

A: Not any more no.

Q: Did you miss the country at all when you first got here?

A: No there was no one to miss. Honestly there was no one to miss. My aunt from there went to Israel and there was no one.

Q: What language do you think in?

A: All, I think in English but when I speak the other languages, I think in those languages.

Q: So you're still fluent in other –

A: Fluent, no. I didn't speak Hebrew for about 30 years before I started to speak Hebrew again so –

Q: Cause you had learned it as a child?

A: Yeah and I, my education was in Hebrew, completely.

Q: You didn't go to a public school. You went to a Jewish school.

A: I went to a Hebrew school. It was not Jewish. It was a Hebrew gymnasium. That's what it was called. So my whole education.

Q: Your classes were –

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A: All, everything. Math, history. English was English. But everything else was in Hebrew so I was really, really fluent. I was also really fluent in German. I did most of my reading in German but not after that.

Q: On that note, what do you think about Germany? What are your thoughts about Germany?

A: Now?

Q: Have you been there?

A: No, I won't be there.

Q: Why not?

A: I can't, I don't want to. I can't and we've been all over Europe but I couldn't get near Germany. When I did I was, and we didn't. We made plans to go. At one point we were driving from France to Italy and we were going to go, take a route through Austria and we had to change plans because I just wouldn't.

Q: So you haven't been to Austria either?

A: No.

Q: So Austria and Germany you would not go to.

A: Right, right. No. Now the people in Germany, I have a different feeling about them. I know what the oldsters did and I, I don't have a thousand percent faith in, or I shouldn't say faith, but trust in the younger ones. But I met many younger German people, many and if they were real then they were wonderful. I just can't trust in my head that they were absolutely real and they were honest in their behavior and what they said. But all the young, younger German people I

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met were great people, good people. I met many before and I met several at the Holocaust museum and every one of them was more than grateful. At least on the youngsters, 30 year olds, 40 year olds.

Q: How does it feel to speak German?

A: I don't.

Q: You purposely don't.

A: I purposely don't. I have friends in New York, Austrian friends who would speak to me in German and I would answer them in English. I, I knew they understand, not Jewish. They understood. They can speak to me but I will not speak and here too. I won't do any translation in German.

Q: So if you met a German tourist at the Holocaust museum, you would speak –

A: They speak English. Yeah let them speak my language. But definitely. I still feel very much the same way about that.

Q: You have traveled a lot in Europe you said.

A: But no, but we never went –

Q: To Austria or Germany.

A: Yeah, that's because of me, not because of the rest of my family. And I don't understand who many of my friends have gone to Germany, but if you can do it, fine. More power to you. I can't.

Q: Have you been to Israel?

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A: Yeah, many, many times.

Q: What does that mean to you?

A: Oh, kind of it's of course yeah. Many times.

Q: Do you speak Hebrew there when you're –

A: When I'm there I would like to speak Hebrew but my friends want to speak English so it goes back and forth. But I speak more Hebrew here than I do there.

Q: Do you think you would have been a different person if you had not gone through what you have –

A: Oh I'm sure I would have been.

Q: In what sense?

A: First of all I would have my education, first of all. I would have had a profession which I don't. Of course I would have been. And I wouldn't have had, I would have had my parents for a long time.

Q: But I mean psychologically do you think –

A: Well that is –

Q: Affected you. That you would have been a different person today. Did it make you stronger, did it –

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A: I was brought up to be strong. My family was strong, my mother was strong, father was strong. My family was.

Q: How did your parents grow you that way?

A: I don't know. I really don't know what they did. They really did.

Q: Did that hold you in good stead when you went through terrible times.

A: Probably, probably including my sister who was not, who was, it was, it's, intelligent as could be. She's not as emotionally healthy as I am. She's a very strong person. She had her problems but aside from those problems very strong, very capable. Probably much more so than I. Or was.

Q: Were you an independent child? Did you do things before the war started, independent

A: Independent in what sense.

Q: Do things on your own or were you more dependent on your parents?

A: I was 13, I was 14.

Q: But up to that time is what I mean.

A: Dependent in what sense? I mean they have to support me. They did support me. That was no –

Q: But in doing things.

A: In doing things.

Q: You know on your own.

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A: Was a good student. I didn't need help with –

Q: So they didn't hover over you or –

A: No, no, no. Neither my mother nor my father. No, they were not the kind.

Q: So you felt you could handle, and you certainly did.

A: Well my sister helped. I must say. Because she was there, whether she helped or not. She was there.

Q: Do you feel you lost part of your childhood?

A: Of course I did. Not part. All of it. From eight on.

Q: From 1938.

A: Cause life changed completely after that. And that's too bad. So of course I would have been different well that would have been very different.

Q: When your children were your age, let's say eight through 15, starting at eight, did it bring back memories for you? And what you had to go through from the ages of eight to 15 and what they were going through.

A: No, no it's interesting. Never thought about it. It never occurred to me until I heard that some people did feel that way. No, never.

Q: So you never compared this is what, where I was.

A: No, no. It was, it's really interesting when it hit me that I didn't. I found it very interesting.

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Q: Did your children feel they were different than their friends who had grandparents, both sets of grandparents.

A: I can't speak for my sons, but I can speak for my daughter who yeah she, she and my friend's daughter became sort of sisters and my daughter feels that her, Renee's mother, Suzy was family. This, you know that's what it was.

Q: Becomes family.

A: Yeah. Because they too didn't have grandparents. And my sons never, sons are different ones. But yeah my daughter definitely felt the loss. They had grandparents. They had my husband's mother and father. Not for terribly long but they did. But yeah they did. They did feel different because of that. But they also felt different because I raised them differently. I have different values than most of their friends' parents did. So –

Q: In what sense?

A: Oh well, I was more strict. They couldn't watch all the television they wanted. They couldn't be out at night all they wanted. And you know they didn't like that but life is life.

Q: What kind of work do your children do?

A: My oldest one is a vascular surgeon. My daughter here is a researcher and the oldest one is doing acupuncture but he has a degree in the neurosciences which he chose not to do.

Q: Do they have children, do you have grandchildren?

A: Yes. Eight of them.

Q: Did they know, what's the age range?

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A: 26 to ten.

Q: They are totally aware of what you –

A: Of course.

Q: Lived through. Did they question you or do they question you?

A: Mostly my grandchildren who, my daughter's children. They go from my youngest one is most sensitive. The oldest one is, is 19. And he went, they go to JDS so he went to Auschwitz and, on the, no --

Q: Not the March of the living?

A: No but they go –

Q: They go senior year

A: Right. And he was totally, totally distraught when he went to the, Auschwitz was their third stop. The first one was **Majdonek**. No the second one was Majdonek. The first one was one of the other.

Q: Theresienstadt.

A: No, no, no. That was the last one. Between Majdonek and Auschwitz. He was totally, totally distraught.

Q: You don't mean Auschwitz II, Birkenau.

A: No, no, no. Another one of the camps near Majdonek. Majdonek was where?

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Q: Lublin.

A: Yeah but my family, part of my family was in 41 or so but the other one.

Q: Treblinka.

A: Treblinka, thank you, yes. Beside himself. And but he doesn't talk about it. He wrote to me when he was there. He has amazing. Email actually. And then when he went to Auschwitz he described that and I'll talk to you about it when I see you. Of course I saw him. He never mentioned it. I just asked him this summer when he was home. You never said anything. Ok he will. He never will probably.

Q: Too painful.

A: And I dread my youngest granddaughter when she will be going there. I don't even know that I want her to go. But my oldest granddaughter who is now 13, well she'll do fine, she'll be fine. But they know all that. And that they go to JDS so they study it, everything. They've gone to the Holocaust museum. They're part of the family. And the others I don't know how much they care or not but they know. And they come here of course, they went to the Holocaust museum. They know all about it. They know a lot about it.

Gail Schwartz: This is a continuation of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum volunteer collection, post Holocaust interview with Ruth Cohen and this is track number two. You were talking about your grandchildren and going to the Holocaust museum. I was wondering and we'll talk about the Holocaust museum in a while. Do you feel that you are two different people, one on the outside to the public and one on the inside.

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Ruth Cohen: Not really, not, not really because I don't, I really, really don't live in the Holocaust. I live here. And I know that some people always talk about it, always remember it, always, everything, everything connected with today is connected with yesterday. And somehow I don't. I don't know why but I don't.

But what I did want to mention was that my granddaughter's bat mitzvah. I didn't know about this until a year ago or so, two years ago, year and a half ago. About sharing your bat mitzvah or bar mitzvah. I had, no one told me about it, until I found out and then my granddaughter last January mentioned my brother and the two children who we had adopted. She, what is it called, sharing her bat mitzvah with them and then my other grandson who was bar mitzvah'd in July mentioned four of my cousins. And now my youngest granddaughter will mention some others and then will bring some other children to share. To make sure that all my family had sort of a bar mitzvah. No, a bar mitzvah cause this is done at services. So.

Q: Do you read a lot about the Holocaust?

A: No I don't.

Q: Purposely not.

A: Purposely not.

Q: That's too painful.

A: Yes and I don't want to see any movies. I just don't need to be, I don't need to live it, to relive it. I also don't talk about it at the museum ever. In other words, first person or any of that. I just won't do it.

Q: You have not done first person –

A: No not at all. I couldn't.

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Q: Why is that?

A: Because I don't feel like standing there and crying.

Q: Cause you know that's what you would do.

A: And you see -- Yeah I did, I did my, my grandsons' fifth grade teacher pleaded with me to come and talk. So I gave in and I regretted it because there were 20 children who watched me cry and what for? Let them learn it from somebody else. They –

Q: More objectively?

A: Right or else somebody else who doesn't sit and cry. There are plenty of people who manage to do that. I don't know how but so I just don't want to have them see you, my pain and be in pain because of that. There's no need for it, as far as I'm concerned. There is a need to talk about it. But I don't have to be the one to do it. And there are lots of people.

Q: Did you ever need any counseling?

A: For that, no. No I really, I really feel –

Q: You thought you handled it.

A: Right.

Q: What were your thoughts during the Eichmann trial?

A: Hoped that they would get as well as the Demjanjuk trial. Or any of the others but those were the named ones. Oh I'm very happy to see that people are punished for their atrocities. There's

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no question about it. I just don't feel like reliving things constantly. So I don't. Right or wrong, that's the way I think.

Q: But you said you do feel at this point very American?

A: Oh yes. I have for the longest, a Jewish American.

Q: A Jewish American. And how religious was your home when you were raising your children?

A: The same as now. We are traditional. We travel on Shabbat.

Q: To observe Shabbat in a sense.

A: We observe Shabbat. We have Shabbat dinner here every Friday night with my family and friends. And we all go to services. Not all the time but at times. We don't travel on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. And we have a strictly kosher home.

Q: Did your father keep up his observance?

A: Yes. As I said, not to the same extent and I can't even tell you to what extent he did not but it was not the same as when we were at home. He wasn't as strict about it. I mean he put on **tfillen** every morning. He, I don't remember him going to services at night. He said he put tfillen on at home. But we did belong to a shul you know while he was alive.

Q: What about your feelings about being Jewish, that you had to go through these terrible tragedies and terrible losses because –

A: I'm proud to be Jewish.

Q: And even so –

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A: Absolutely. I wouldn't be anything else.

Q: Even though you lost so much?

A: Absolutely. I can't think of anything else that I would want to be. And I feel our religion is fine, except for some little things but –

Q: Do you have any non-Jewish friends?

A: Not here, interesting. In New York I did.

Q: Did they ask you or did you tell them about your life story?

A: If they asked me, I told them. I, as I said I never –

Q: Bring it up.

A: I might bring up that I was. That I was in concentration camp if the subject comes up. Or if I, but I don't go saying my name is Ruth Cohen. I'm a Holocaust survivor.

Q: Did you ever get a number?

A: No, I didn't. Nobody, nobody in that lager had a number. We were there to, we were in the **formishten's** [ph] lager, not in an **Arbeit's** lager. The, the I don't even know what to call it. That one certain block section was strictly for **mishtung** [ph], not for work. I was the only one, I and these few kids were the only ones who were.

Q: As messengers, you're talking about as messengers.

A: Right, nobody else was.

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Q: The others were.

A: My sister worked but she was, where she, very interesting thing happened as we walked into our barracks. This was when we first got there. The first day. My, as we walked in, my sister and I, a woman came to greet us. Greet her and they hugged and kissed. And she was, they were in camp together in 1938. In summer camp.

Q: In the summer camp?

A: Right. She was from Slovakia and we were from Hungary at that time. And she is the one who got me the job to be a messenger and she had my sister help her with her you know cleaning and whatever, office. So we were very lucky about that.

Q: Were you ever physically abused?

A: No.

Q: In any of those camps.

A: No.

Q: You were not. You weren't beaten or anything like that.

A: Nobody there was. She must have been, this **blochateste** [ph] because she was there from 40 or so. Who knows where she was. She never talked to us about it. But we were not.

Q: You were not.

A: Nobody was. We were abused emotionally.

Q: Yes, but I meant physically. Beatings and –

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A: No, we were not. Not that when we stood on **salappel** [ph] and we wanted, somebody wanted to use his leash, not his leash, his whip. Didn't just use it but for no reason or nobody got beaten. Emotionally was a different story. And we, as we were standing by the gate, we, the children.

Q: The messengers

A: We all spoke German. The SS guys were talking purposely loudly, telling us not telling us, telling each other horror stories so we heard them.

Q: To frighten you, you mean?

A: Oh so, let them suffer a little. It wasn't a question of frightening. It was a question of torturing. You know they were talking about this person got killed. That the way or this person got – you know just so that we heard it. You know they weren't nice people. But that, that was, that was a kind of abuse that we suffered.

Q: Do you find that you've changed as you've gotten older? Do you think more about the war as you get older, have gotten older?

A: No. As I said, I don't want to be the bearer, I don't want any association with it that will remind me of it, and when we talk about the Holocaust museum.

Q: Well let's talk about the Holocaust museum.

A: Ok.

Q: When did you first go to the museum, your first experience?

A: I went there before I moved here. Yeah. Once. Because a friend of ours donated a large sum of money and he invited friends and family and for a tour, a complete tour.

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Q: And your thoughts then.

A: I still can't take it. Then there were, the same as now. I don't look at certain things. I don't, I don't partake in certain, I don't really go to the third floor. I don't really go to the fourth floor, the second floor much. The second floor, yes I do. I even work there. But the third and fourth are kind of out for me. I don't need it.

Q: What kind of work do you do for the museum?

A: I work on the fifth floor in the archives. I do translation and I –

Q: In what languages?

A: Now Hungarian but I was doing Hungarian, I was doing Yiddish also. I can do both. But before that I was doing transliteration of stories such as mine and they were very difficult.

Q: To control you mean?

A: Yes. And for a while I was bringing my writing home and typed it out at home and then I stopped because I tended to do it in the evening and I just decided not to do it. Cause I said I really don't need to torture myself.

Q: So you are not doing the translating at the moment?

A: No, no.

Q: Because it was too painful?

A: Yeah. But I do translations and the translations are ok.

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Q: You do translations at the –

A: At the museum.

Q: You do?

A: Yeah.

Q: But not, I misunderstood you. I thought you said you don't do it anymore.

A: No, no the transliterations I'll do –

Q: Oh transliterations. I'm sorry. Transliterations.

A: Of stories.

Q: What are your impressions of the non-Jewish volunteers at the museum?

A: Oh the non-Jewish volunteers I admire. Amazingly. Not necessarily the non-Jewish workers.

Q: You make a distinction.

A: Yes. I mean volunteers do it because they want to be there for a reason. They want to I suppose there are many reasons for it, one of which is to learn. One is to give. And self-satisfaction which is the same thing as giving. But the non-Jewish workers I don't think have the kind of understanding of what transpired for them to be in certain roles. My feeling.

Q: Do they just need more training? Is that what you –

A: More learning.

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Q: More learning.

A: More, more comprehension, more understanding. More caring. More feeling. Which I don't know whether the feeling part is possible. But somehow the people who volunteer are a different breed. I'm talking about the non-Jewish.

Q: Non-Jewish volunteers. Are you a member of any of the survivor groups outside groups?

A: I just joined the –

Q: The local holocaust survivors?

A: Right. At JCC. That's it.

Q: So you go to their meetings and –

A: Sometimes. I never was, I never joined any groups of my home town, which existed in New York. And that's all I'm a member. Truly that's all I'm a member of, I don't join groups.

Q: You're not a joiner?

A: No. I'm a doer, I'm not a joiner.

Q: If you meet other survivors here in Washington, would you encourage them to work at the museum?

A: I would, of course. Sure. I think it's quite gratifying. If you find the right thing to do.

Q: So your feeling when you walk through the door, when you come into the building. Do you have a visceral feeling when you walk in?

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A: I now do because I just, we just had a lecture about the building which I never bothered to really learn about and find out about. It's quite amazing. So now I'm looking around to see –

Q: You're talking about the architectural –

A: Right, right, right.

Q: Did anything strike you that you learned or –

A: Well, specifically the way it was designed. I can't remember the name of the person that designed it.

Q: James Freed.

A: Right. Amazing. All the thought that went into it. The separation of the different areas and the entrance hall on what is it, 14th street.

Q: Or 15th street. The side that the Washington Monument is?

A: No.

Q: 14th street.

A: Right. Amazing how the – I always liked it but I didn't know what I was liking. And the outside architecture means so much more to me now than it did before. I think they should do that for every volunteer who signs up to –

Q: To have them take that tour?

A: I think so. This wasn't even a tour. At the membership meeting two weeks ago. This was –

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Q: Were you part of the volunteer writing group?

A: Yes I am. I am, I did join a group. Yes I am.

Q: So you've done some writing about your experiences?

A: I did but I don't, I joined after they finished all the books so now whatever writing I have is just loose-leaf done but some things –

Q: What do you write about?

A: About my life and my, in the past, my childhood and during the war and I think two or three of my papers are on the internet now or are going to be. I don't know if it started already. I have a whole bunch.

Q: Were you in any way active in the civil rights movement in the United States when you were younger. I mean here your civil rights were taken away from you and your family and more, even more than that of course.

A: No I was but not as a member of anything. I mean we did a lot of marching and we did a lot of –

Q: You did?

A: Both my husband and I and my children too. My youngest son especially with the, not especially but not the oldest but the youngest would be. The oldest one wouldn't be. He lives in Georgia (inaudible)

Q: But you feel you have more knowledge because of what, or more affinity for this because of what you lived through being deprived of your civil rights?

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A: No, also that's the way I was raised. I was raised that way by my parents. From early childhood. I was raised that way.

Q: Do you ever have feelings of anger that you had to go through and had the losses that you've had?

A: I don't, I can't say but I, yeah. I do. I can't say that it's anger but of course I lost my mother. I lost my father because of it. I lost my brother and my family. How can you not be. But I'm not angry, I'm not hateful, absolutely not. Whereas I had friends who were terribly hateful but --

Q: These are friends who are survivors who --

A: Yes, of course. Of course.

Q: Have the lessons been learned?

A: No. Have they been? No. Look at what's happening now. In our country and everywhere in the whole world. That angers me. I get rather angry and frustrated about our country at this point and about the world at this point. And that includes not only Israel but other parts of the world.

Q: So why hasn't the world learned?

A: Who knows? Really, will the world ever learn? No. Cause we say and then we do.

Q: Do you feel a need to bear witness to this?

A: I do but I can't go so far as to sit there and talk about it in public. I just can't. My friends in Boston went from school to school to talk to children. I couldn't understand how they could do it, and I still can't. I can't, I can somewhat understand it because maybe my female friend survived with her parents. And my male friend survived with his mother who died maybe ten,

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eleven years ago. So that might make it easier but I'm not sure, because there are people who didn't survive with family and can also do it. I can't.

Q: Did your sister have children?

A: No.

Q: Oh she didn't. Is there any message you would want to leave to your grandchildren, anything you want to say specially to them?

A: Well I've said many things to them. Live in a much better world than we have now. Much better. And do whatever you can to make it so. And I hope they will. Some of them will. Some of them will. I know. Some of them I don't think.

Q: Anything you wanted to add before we close. Is there ---

A: Just what I said, I want, I would love to see the world a much better place for the future, for children, for everybody. And what to do about it, I don't know. I'm not that smart. Smarter people than I don't know what to do.

Q: Well thank you very, very much for doing this.

A: Thank you.

Q: Interview.

A: I think that alone will have helped, maybe someone a hundred years from now.

Q: By listening to this. Is that why you were willing to do --

A: Yeah of course.

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Q: For future.

A: Right, right.

Q: Well again thank you for doing this. This concludes the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Ruth Cohen.

(end)