

This is a continuation of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum volunteer collection interview with Barbara Goldberg. This is track number 2, and we were talking about your poetry, and would it be possible for you to read some of your poems?

Yes, I'd like to, because it says in such a more profound way what I've been saying. It seems to not have the kind of life that a poem has.

I'm gonna turn it on.

Carvel. In the summer, when the days were light longer, we'd pile in the car and drive down Metropolitan Avenue for soft ice cream at Carvels. Those nights, we could have been a regular American family out for a spin, whose father maybe tossed a ball with his kids or tousled their hair or let himself be tickled, but we knew his moods would return when we'd tiptoe around the house, lay low. This was the '50s. There was Korea, but it was far away, and it wasn't our war, and they were murdering our people.

Later I'd learn-- but only much later after he was long gone-- that he gave our blue Persian carpet to Franz [PERSONAL NAME] who was broke and could sell it for cash. He also gave money to his mother's seven brothers and sisters, and some got out in time, dispersing to Israel, Australia, South Africa, or the year he paid the bills for the Swiss sanitarium my uncle stayed at after the war to put on fat. These kindnesses. These things my father did without thinking twice.

What to say about them-- about him except that how a man treats his own children is only one part of the story, and there are others.

And that is from your book?

That's from my book *The Royal Baker's Daughter*, and the whole first section of that book is kind of about growing up in a house where atrocity is always the undertone. The next poem I'll read is from *Cautionary Tales*, and this poem is about my mother, and just imagine that the I in this poem is my mother speaking. Survivor, and the child, by the way, is me.

They say I should feed you, child with the gift of tongues, but darting through woods of dark pine, hounds chase the scent of sandals. Days spent undercover in a field of eiderdown. My fingers search for traces of my own lost mother. At night when the bulb shines through the parchment and I scrub my body down with soap, I think of her parting lace curtains looking for father to round the corner.

A small patch of pine presses against the north side of this house. Here by Union Turnpike, a car is parked in the driveway. We'd all fit in-- all if we had to make a quick journey. I keep a bar of gold under my pillow. They bring you to me, my locket clasped in your fist. I want to feed you.

It's those spike needles that scrape against the glass. Those shadows that won't sleep behind the drapes. It's that woodsman walking through this forest swinging his axe.

I said just a little while ago, where the undertone is everything, and this poem is called "Uninvited Guests" and it's also from *cautionary tales*, and it has an epigraph. Three can keep a secret if two are corpses. That's a Yiddish folk saying.

Even the dead can't keep a secret. They barge in, sit at your table, demanding to be served. They bang their spoons like children crying, feed me, feed me, and you have never prepared enough. Once, you would have welcomed the dead, begged mother to set out extra plates. But now they consume what was promised to the living. They climb into the marriage bed with their own unearthly linen, whispering old secrets you wish they would keep to themselves.

Do you think that you will be continuing to write poetry with this underlying-- these underlying things?

Well--

You still feel the need to write?

No, I don't, actually, because the Royal Baker's Daughter's my fourth book of poetry, and The Royal Baker's Daughter is to me, that's the close of a chapter, because it's only been out for the last couple of years, and it really reflects a lifetime of not just observing but trying to understand what their lives-- how their lives and their histories were taken in by me. And it's possible I might write fiction about it, but as far as the poems, I don't think I will.

Maybe I'm wrong. I mean, for a whole year I was writing mother poems, saying, please, spare me. Not another mother poem.

[LAUGHTER]

You don't have any control over what you'll be writing about.

What is the significance of The Royal Baker's Daughter phrase?

Well, she's obviously the poor stepchild. She's getting the leftovers from the royal house, from the royal king and queen. Her father's the royal baker. He just makes the stuff. She's getting the crumbs.

That's putting it quite overtly, but actually, it's a line from a poem that's in the book that's not really about my parents at all, but I think it does reflect the fact that, even though I wasn't starving, that I might have felt that I was starving, so that's what the title means to me. Cautionary Tales, well, I don't know if you've ever heard of-- what's his name? Those books that were read to me when I was a child. Oh, my God how could they do that? Struwwelpeter.

And these terrible tales of what happens to bad children. Like I used to suck my thumb, and there's a story in there about how a tailor comes at night and cuts off the thumb. So--

These are German folk tale?

Yes. By a German pediatrician of all people.

It would be read to you in German?

No, I don't think so. Struwwelpeter, in English, it's shock headed Peter.

Well, speaking about the German language, what are your thoughts about Germany and German?

Funny you should say that, because I've never been to Germany.

Because?

Because my mother always used to say she could never go back to that country, and she said Austria was just as bad, if not worse in terms of the anti-Semitism. And that if she were in Germany, she'd never know who did what, and I guess I absorbed those feelings, too. I remember her being quite upset with my sister when she bought a Mercedes. How could she do that?

But this trip I'm taking with my sister, it's a pleasure trip. It's not a history trip, but we're taking a river cruise up the Rhine. So it will be my first time in Germany, which I always kind of said was unconscionably beautiful from what I could see. But again, those woods, so I guess I will see.

And I know that I have some time after the trip, and I feel a compulsion to go to-- compulsion because we end up in Amsterdam, but I want to go to Berlin, because I understand that it's a very interesting city, and it is a city where my father lived for some time, so I'll be doing that too. And I do speak a kind of child's German, so I won't feel-- I'm not

comfortable going to a country where I don't speak the language, but I will understand most of it.

So when you hear a German being spoken, do you have any visceral reaction?

Yes.

In what way?

Well, I'm very curious where people come from, and I always ask. I'll always say, well, what's your country of origin or whatever, and when I hear German, it's like it's not my mother tongue because my mother tongue, I guess, is English, but in a way, it is because it's what I heard before I could speak. So I feel-- I don't feel, oh, my God, a Nazi. When I went for therapy or whatever, I went with an analyst who was Austrian German, because the accent just made me feel at home and that she would understand-- there are words that exist in German that I don't even know what they are in English.

[GERMAN] My mother always used to say nach mir keine [GERMAN] I don't make any accusations. I don't know. Don't give me a hard time. I just don't even know how to do it, and I'm sure there are things in English that are untranslatable too. But if I knew that if I threw in a German word because of the English didn't occur to me it would be understood.

Did the therapy help you?

I've thought about that a lot. I think I have to have been the longest. This is analysis we're talking about it. It was many years ago. It was 10 years, and at the time, I was just very committed to it and took it seriously and I said, I don't want a Band-Aid, I want surgery. But you don't have another way of comparing.

I think a lot of the things might have come to me anyway just by getting older and more experienced having made my own mistakes, but I think I really started writing poetry seriously during it, so yes, for that, I'm grateful. I mean, before that I was writing short stories and stuff like that.

About your parents or about--

Some of it. The same things in the prose fashion.

I don't know, I'd say 50-50. As I said, it's hard to walk the line of not wanting to make it your life, but yet recognizing that it's a big part of your life.

Why did you want to be interviewed today?

Frankly, I wanted to be interviewed so the stories about my uncle could be preserved, and about [? Gertie ?] and these people who-- and my cousin Tommy who I loved. He's the only person in my family who I felt was related to me, because he was so forthright. And my family was so subtle. You always had to kind of guess, and I mean, his stories were amazing, and he had no ambivalence about talking about them.

But I mean, the story of how it was in terms-- I mean, maybe it's because I can picture Mengele so clearly doing that. The image of it is so permanent within me, so I didn't know it was going to be so much about me. It was more about my parents, and those were really-- but I mean I really do think it's important to know the residual flavor that lingers and goes on in generations to come. It's all I know are embedded in some way in my children in ways that are not so obvious.

Are there any other stories you wanted to tell? Relatives?

Well, I adopted Hans and [? Ilse ?]. And then there's-- in terms of these events, salons, or whatever you want to call it that happened at my house, there was one-- I can't imagine this happening in my neighborhood. There was a cabaret

singer who would sit on the piano with black and sing these old cabaret songs.

This is in your house?

In my house, and I knew she was a survivor. And Lily Robinson with the beauty mark here, who had a-- shouldn't say her name. A what's it called? Had a threesome going. Everyone was very happy, and it's hard to put-- it's just so odd to think that these were all people who had suffered trauma, even if they themselves hadn't been in the camp and in terms of being torn up from their lives.

And it was like the Israelis in a way. They were parting with a vengeance, because Israel is like that a lot. I mean, everything is so intense, and you feel you have to live to make up for everything that's come before, and you may not see another day.

And I guess it's affected my politics, too. I guess I'm more or less hawkish internationally, while very liberal domestically. My son, by the way, is in the State Department. He loved languages, although his language is Japanese.

I remember [? Moshe ?] saying, Japanese? Why couldn't it have been Hebrew? And my other son is a scientist-- neuroscientist. They're just my pride and joy along with my grandkids.

Oh, if there's nothing else you want to add, that's a lovely--

No, I'm going to call at 5:00 in the morning. No.

[LAUGHTER]

Something else.

That's a lovely note to end on. Your pride and joy is a lovely note to end on.

Well, they're my joy. I'd rather have it be that, because I don't know what effect-- direct effect-- I had on their formation.

Well, thank you--

Thank you.

--very much for--

Glad to have done this.

--doing the interview. This concludes the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Barbara Goldberg.