

This is a continuation of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview of Gerald Averback, which began on October 28, 2016. It is being conducted by Gail Schwartz on March 16, 2017. And it's taking place by telephone in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, and at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

Before we begin, I just wanted to summarize your experiences. And then we'll go on from there. So I just wanted to say, you were born Isidore Averback on February 19, 1930, in Sorooca, Bessarabia. And you lived in Oradea Mare. Am I pronouncing it correctly?

That is right.

Which was occupied by Hungary in 1939. You were in the ghetto from late 1943 for two and 1/2 months and then went to Auschwitz by cattle car, arriving June 16, 1944. And it was the last time you saw your parents. You were 14 years old.

You were in the children's camp. And after four days, an adult male prisoner got you into the men's group. And you hid for two and 1/2 days.

And then you went with a group, leaving Birkenau. And you went to a work camp in a castle in Breslau, Poland, for six weeks. Then to Czechoslovakia by railroad cars in Prague. And then to Flossenburg camp and Freiberg.

And then on a cattle car, you were bombed by the Allies. And you walked to Tuttlingen. And then you were wounded by Allied bombs, rescued by a French medical team, went by plane to Strasbourg, France, and was in the hospital two to three months in Colmar.

Then you went to Paris, and then Davos, Switzerland, to a sanatorium, then to Versailles. And in September 1947, you went to London, and then sailed to Halifax, and then Montreal. And you finished your education, high school, law school, worked in the prime minister's office. And now you have your own law offices in three provinces.

So I just wanted to summarize that. So I'd like to now talk about some of your thoughts and feelings. Do you think about your experiences often now?

I think about some of it, especially when I read the newspaper of the different genocides that are happening worldwide, which means that in my view, I think that, obviously nothing has changed. Humanity hasn't learned anything. And what I've been thinking quite a bit from time to time because you asked me to think about what the museum can do, or done in the past, or what they ought to do, in my opinion, in the future dealing with genocide. And I've been really thinking quite a bit about it. And I don't always agree.

But, I think, because things are changing and the world, in my opinion, is becoming more unreasonable. And we learned nothing, really, from the past. And that, I'm thinking about it from time to time when I read the newspapers and whatever. I was hoping that World War II has taught nations a lot. But I'm wrong. Obviously, that is not happening.

And I've been thinking a lot since you asked me, what do I think about the museum generally? And, what do I think they ought to do? Or, am I satisfied that they have done everything they can or they are licensed to do in this world? And I'm not always agreeable myself as to whether I have the solution.

So that's basically, I think, about many times when I read. And it reminds me of incidents and pictures of my past. And that is reference to the time I spent in camps and so on.

And many times, I get the impression that, why did I survive? And I get the idea of, maybe it was meant to be. Do I owe the world something by doing something or saying something on a subject matter? But I'm also not discussing these things with anybody, except sometimes some incidents come up. And, yeah.

But one thing is I don't share my thoughts of my past because, A, I feel that, whoever I talk to won't understand it

anyway. So, what's the point of saying it, or complaining, or discussing it? I get the impression that people would not understand me anyway. Unless you went through things, you won't understand. So, what's the point of discussing it? So I'm a loner in that respect.

You lost your childhood in many ways having to go through what you did. Do you feel you got any of it back?

No. No, but it made me a person that I don't trust people by nature. In other words, the idea, many times I've been approached in business to join and so on, other offices, and so on. And I don't do that because there's something in me that I don't trust people that they will not double-cross me.

Another thing because apparently I found out that I'm not the only one. When I walk into a grocery store, I buy 10 times more food than I would consume. I was told that I'm not the only one that went through the camps because of the hunger and whatever that we feel that tomorrow there'll be no food left or whatever it is.

So I buy without any reason tremendous amount of food that I cannot consume. But, apparently, I've heard from other people who went through the camps that they do exactly the same thing now. So there's something there, I don't know why, that the past has something to do with my present and my future, yeah.

For instance, the other day, I was talking about a graduation. And I was saying to people that I went through university, and so on and so forth, got degrees, and so on. But I never attended a graduation.

In other words, I made them send my degrees and whatever because, I felt that, I would be there alone. But everybody and family would be there. And sooner or later, people would turn and says, how come that fellow who has just got that degree over there-- he has nobody there family wise and so on?

In other words, I don't like to stand up in a crowd to speak about the Holocaust. I feel that is not a plus. So I have some idiosyncrasies, so to speak, because of what happened in the past. And I don't share it with others or loved ones and nobody. So I'm a loner as far as the past is concerned.

And I don't like to advertise it. I don't like-- I'm not proud of the past. I'm not too font-- pontificate, so to speak, about the past and find flaws or whatever it is. So these things, I have in common as many people, I understand, who went through the identical thing.

And many, many, many times, I think, I don't know why I survived that, or this, or that, not understanding this. And I got this word that I've invented is hand of God who was there because somebody had to be that what happened-- was responsible that I'm still alive. And, of course, the question is, why me?

And others, I've heard saying the same thing went through that we don't know going through whatever we did in the camp or even after the camps and so on and so forth. But I'm not unique in that case. But again, I repeat, I don't like to share my experiences.

What do you think kept you going after you didn't see your parents when you, I think, you were 14, you said? What do you think kept you going? You were a young teenager at the time.

What do you mean exactly?

How did you keep on going, surviving on your own, in a sense?

Well, I kept on going because I wanted to make sure that my parents who were no longer alive would be proud of me in Heaven. I mean, it sounds silly. But in other words, notwithstanding that I had tremendous difficulties financially and otherwise, that I was going to show not the world but my non-existing parents that I don't let them down. I mean, it may sound not reasonable. But this is not to disappoint them in Heaven.

That's once you heard that they didn't survive. Before that--

Of course, I'm talking about after the war.

Yeah, but even during the war, how did you keep going without your parents? You were so young.

Well, during the war in the camp, you tried to survive on a daily basis.

But you were young.

Yes, that is right.

Do you think being that age was an advantage in a sense because that you weren't aware of the whole ramifications of what was happening?

Well, that's one thing. But many people there were not aware. And you didn't know on an hourly basis, never mind on a daily basis, what's waiting tomorrow morning.

And many times, you went hungry because by the time you were on the line with your dish for the soup, they ran out of soup. And they told you, get lost. And there's nothing you could do about it.

However, I did many times since then thought about people who I've never known, strangers came to my aid here and there for no reason at all, no reason at all. And yet, I've been thinking about it because these people who were old enough to be my parents looked at this young kid. And many times, they would give me a piece of their bread or anything else, not that I asked for whatever it is. So amazing how strangers had something to do directly or indirectly with my survival.

And even the stranger who got me out of one camp to take me to the other camp, me not realizing what I'm getting into. And he didn't want to see me after that at all and so on. And I asked why in my mind.

And this is where I see this hand of God, what strangers sometimes would do and I don't know why, which is fantastic. But I can understand it that I would do the same thing now if I were that. I didn't understand it then because I was a young kid.

You were too young, yeah.

But I would do it again. I would do it not again, I would do it because I can see it now why they have done it. I didn't see it then.

At the time, yeah.

At the time, yeah. So you do learn. Life teaches you sometimes good things and sometimes bad things.

Do you feel in a sense that you're two persons, one person on the inside and another one to the outside world?

Very much so, very much so. I'm not trying to hide the past. But, somehow, I'm not proud of the past. And I don't want anybody's pity.

And that's why I've been asked many, many, many, many times in my lifetime to stand up and tell the people who are going to be there what I went through and all of this. But I don't want to. I don't want to.

I don't want sympathy. I don't want pity. I don't want anything. I'm not that proud of going through pure hell. And my joke used to be, I know I won't go to hell because I've been there already. But that's true.

Are you angry that you had to go through what you went through while children your age, let's say, in the United States

didn't have to?

No, I'm not angry, because angry at what or at whom?

I mean, while other children here were playing in their backyards while you were going through what you'd had to go through.

Yeah, you're talking about after liberation.

No, no, during the war. During the war, are you angry that you had to go through the wartime experience that you had? And right after, yeah. And right after, whereas other children in the United States were leading a happy childhood.

Well, it's not my parents' fault. I mean, this was life. And I'm just lucky that I survived. And so, I feel that, I'm lucky.

And I kept asking myself many, many times, I don't know why me. But I'm not the only one who asks those questions.

Right, of course.

And I cannot answer the question. But it's something that we have to face. But, of course, then you have to fight the fighting in you that you want to prove to yourself and to the world-- the world couldn't care less-- is that you can survive, that you can do, notwithstanding A, B, C, D that's happening to you, that you will survive.

I did work extremely hard at university. I went through university where I could only afford one meal a day. But I didn't tell anybody and so on because it was very important to get that degree.

It was very important to get a job because what it paid and so on. And without me telling anybody that it's their fault or whatever it is. You accept life as it is and try to make whatever it is.

Sure, I lost my youth. I lost all the things that go with that, the good part. And there was a struggle. But I'm not saying now, poor me that I had to struggle while everybody else just enjoyed life. I had to accept the best I can do.

In my mind, I was looking after myself, like two people. And, I felt that, am I doing what my parents would have wanted me to do? Or, am I-- so on and so forth. So I was policing myself sometimes, do I do it right? And so on and so forth.

Yeah, I was looking after myself, so to speak, a two-person thing. And, would my parents be proud of me if I do this and that? That always went through my mind.

I know you were a child at the time. But, how did the experience affect your feelings about being Jewish? Or, did it affect your feelings about being Jewish?

It affected me. Let me answer your question a little differently. When I was in France in the orphanage, the OSE, many of the kids there came from camps. So we were brothers and sisters, whatever it is.

The general idea there is, we need revenge. And if you have seen the movie Exodus, many of our kids in the OSE there were on that real boat. I mean, the movie, of course, and so on. And they want to Israel-- the country that hasn't been yet a country-- to fight. And that was for revenge. And that's [AUDIO OUT] about.

And when I-- I'm also here to light candles once a year during the Holocaust Day where I am right now. I asked them many times that I like to light a candle-- seven candle, not six candle. Use seven. And I said, I wanted seven for all those young kids after the war who went to Israel and died.

There were over 10,000, 11,000 of those kids fought during the liberation and died. Their idea there was that-- mind you, life was cheap those days-- is that they had to have revenge for all the bad things that happened in the camp. And

they were proud to go there to fight and die.

And I asked the local community here, Jewish community, to let me light a seventh candle for those people who have-- nobody survived-- because they were great heroes in my heart that went out after the war-- they didn't have to-- to fight for Israel, and to show their anger, and whatever it is. And those were, in my mind, my brothers and sisters, so to speak, because they came out, they had great anger, and they felt that they can do this and they can do that. And they were proud to go and fight and die for anybody.

But this was a new country that's being born. That was the general attitude is after the war, especially in institutions where you had these survivors there. And I was one of them. And I shared with them the idea.

In fact, I wanted to go too. But I had TB. And they wouldn't let me, et cetera, not realizing what I'm getting into. But I was ready to do that.

And so there was the anger for a long time that we owe it to those who didn't make it. And we want to fight for it. And if you know history, about 10,000, 11,000 did go, and were involved in the war, and paid the price.

This is what I'm thinking about. And there's nobody to talk about them. These are the heroes that there's nobody. And that's why I asked the local to allow me to light the seventh candle. They haven't so far. But they're talking about it.

And I don't like to explain whoever is around why I'm doing it and why, I believe that, should be done. But that's my personal thing that I feel that those who survived have not-- I shouldn't say, received. Well, vengeance is not normal and shouldn't be used.

But the idea is that they all felt the same thing, that they don't want to turn the other cheek, so to speak. And the time has come that you stand on your own feet and fight for whatever rights you have. You have the fighting in you that you feel that the world took advantage of you, the past world.

In fact, when we left the ghetto, and were all going to camps, and so on, our elders did not tell us-- not that we could have done anything about it-- where we're going and what our chances. And they knew. Or they ought to have known.

So there is a fight in you. You feel that you were cheated by the world. You got cheated by the people around you by not telling you the truth, not that you could have done something. But at least, there were opportunities to do something.

And so you have the fighter in you that you're now liberated. You don't trust anybody. And you do find or meet antisemitism. I met that in Canada.

The very first job that I applied for, just a summer job during university. It was a very large company. And they told me right then. This goes back many, many years. They said, we don't to hire Jews.

And that was a shock, I thought that what I am. And that was in Canada. But even in the USA, things were still the same what you had during World War II. And especially in Canada, what I'm told that they had both coming from Europe the people escaping. And they didn't let the Jews in because they said, one is too many.

So what I'm trying to say, you accept what you get. But it doesn't mean that you're really happy with what you get. But I wanted to leave Europe for all times, which I managed to do. So that's a plus. And I was able, notwithstanding what they had in Canada at the time after World War II, to survive.

But even at the university that I have applied for, I was told by the dean that too many Jewish people, youngsters who come to university, and especially in the colleges of medicine, law, and two or three other ones, and so on and so forth. And they apparently had quotas. This is in Canada at that time. 6% whatever it is of the applicants and so on. Now that was a shocker to me coming to a country like that. But USA was no different.

Do you have any nostalgia?

Any what? Any nostalgia for Romania, for your birth, for your childhood place?

No, not at all. I can't even speak Romanian anymore. I forgot everything, I suppose. No, no.

So you don't feel Romanian.

No way.

You're Canadian? How would you describe yourself?

Oh, definitely. Oh, yes. Oh, yes. I have definitely been a Canadian. And I feel nothing for Romania or, to be honest with you, for that part of Europe, all of Europe there.

Have you been back to Europe at all?

No. The only back-- I went to Israel. So I had stopped in Netherlands for a day. But I don't call that--

And all of Europe, you have no desire.

Correct. Oh, no. I don't consider myself a European at all. And, I suppose, you know. Well, you should know. I worked for the prime minister. And I was shocked years later that I had no problem getting a job.

I think that they knew, not when they hired me. But, eventually, they did know that I was Jewish. No problem at all. So that's a great plus.

And, indirectly, I benefited a great deal by working and a great privilege when they hired me. And at that time, I didn't think about it. But, subsequently, I was really very privileged that being Jewish meant nothing.

And I was staying with a Jewish family while I was in the same town and so on and so forth. So I was very proud. And because of that, I kept being somehow active in politics in Canada, in conservative policies and whatever it is, not now so much, but through the years, and by donating, and getting involved in [INAUDIBLE].

So when you were working for the prime minister, you were living in Ottawa. Is that where?

No. I was working for him in the city that he comes from. And he had a law office. I was not working in the government.

Oh, I see. I see.

So he hired me. It had nothing to do with my political views and whatever it

is. He hired me because he wanted a lawyer, a young lawyer. And I learned a lot. And even after I left him, I came to the city I am right now. And because of that, they offered me a part-time job as a Crown prosecutor. And I've been a part-time Crown prosecutor for 16 years in this city before I dropped it. And I'm doing civil matters.

What language do you think in?

Oh, I would think in English.

You think in English, OK.

Oh, yes. I speak French. But I don't think in French. I don't think in any European language.

Are there any sights today, or smells, or sounds that remind you of your childhood, being in the trains, being in the camps? Anything that brings back those experiences?

I cannot think of any. No, that was a long time ago, I left Europe. And I have no desire or connection to visit, or stay, or whatever with the exception of, perhaps, France, but not Eastern Europe or whatever it is.

What were your thoughts during the Eichmann Trial? Did you have any special feelings at the time?

Well, the idea is that they should have prosecuted more than Eichmann. There was many, many who got away as far as prosecuting. But it was important to have it because by having it, you show the world.

But, I believe, that today, all these years have passed, you will have a more difficult time to prosecute somebody like you did Eichmann today. In other words, what I find very disappointing that the world has changed not for the better. And where Europe was still, what's right is right and wrong is wrong, that, I think, has vanished in Europe very much so in the last few years.

And the way I look at Europe today is what Europe used to be prior to World War II. Sometimes, the hatred, the changes, and whatever it is, it's not the Europe that I would like to live in even today. And I cannot see much difference. Mind you, I'm not there on a daily basis or whatever it is.

You have asked me, what do I think about the museum that you're working for and what I would suggest and whatever. And I thought about it a long time, in today's world, what should be done or could be done. And I made a couple of notes and so on.

I was very impressed of what I saw in Washington, D.C. about the Holocaust Memorial Museum. And, I think, I mentioned in writing before that the museum will survive many generations because it touches the heart of many faiths regardless of who they are when they come and visit.

And it will continue to shine the spotlight on areas of our world where the horrors of the past is being forgotten and/or repeated. And we see brutality as it was in the past. Now, am I right that you want me to express an opinion as to what I think to the future for the museum? I'm asking a question.

If you wish to say anything, that's your prerogative.

Well, what I believe-- and I did think about it. I feel that it should be a duty of the museum to remind the world from time to time of any horrors that-- what was happening. And to remind them, the world, that actually will never be forgotten, or forgiven, or accepted by the world. And that people in all parts of the world will be held accountable and brought to justice. I'm convinced that any such declaration and/or action by the museum against the perpetrators in the world will give the museum the stature it acquired since it has been founded.

Mind you, because the museum is not meant to be an institution to police the world from repeating the horrors of World War II, I cannot see the museum involvement, except for stating numerous times to the perpetrators, wherever they are, of a specific horror that they will be held accountable and brought to international justice in due course. And stating that the objective of the Holocaust Museum is to make available the names of all the perpetrators to every country and get a commitment from each country to deny entry to those individuals to their country for life. I mean, this is a threat.

And I think about one thing because it was only about two, three weeks ago. Two elderly ladies in Canada, I think, Toronto, came on the television, radio, saying that they were survivors of the Holocaust. And they feel that all what's going on in the world is almost a repetition of the Holocaust whether it's Syria or some other places and so on and so forth. And they were saying that no country is standing up for those victims.

And then I was thinking about the Holocaust Museum that it's not for the museum, of course, to police it. But, I think, that the museum should condemn regardless-- nothing to do with being Jewish or not Jewish-- against the perpetrators, saying that you cannot get away with it. That you will be held accountable in the future by the world for doing what

you're doing. It is genocide because that's what you hear.

It's not only the Middle East. It's Africa as well and some other parts. And people who are running away from many parts of the world because of what's going on there. And this hasn't happened since World War II. And it's happening now in more places.

So that's my view because you have established something which is fantastic. Now that's fine. It's in the USA. And that's where you have all those people coming day in, day out to see it and be a part of it.

But, have we learned anything from the past not to do in the future? Obviously, we have not. And that bothers me. So the question is, whose job is it to make it known to the world that's not acceptable? And, I think, that you cannot find anything better, anybody more well known than the Holocaust Museum in Washington. And so anyway, this is just my thoughts.

OK. Well, that's important. It's important to you. You certainly have the right to say that.

Lots of people have put their heart and soul in the museum volunteering, I think, including you. So you're doing a great job. But the question is, are you doing a great job for the world? It's not only for the museum. You are for the world.

Now you're not a police person. You cannot say, we're going to go out there and throw you into jail. You're not saying that.

You're only saying that we haven't forgotten. We'll make it known to the countries in the future that whatever you're going to run in the future, will catch up with you. And we won't let you in or whatever it. That is a threat that you cannot get away with it. That's basically what a threat is about.

But I do notice. I did notice, especially this year, that they have a Holocaust Day in Europe. And they had it in Germany. They had it in two or three places, Holland and some other places. And that's great.

But Europe is something. They know what has happened in the past. And they can police themselves. But, what about the rest of the world? They're not doing it.

I was going to say, that's a very timely message to conclude our interview with. Is there anything else that we haven't discussed that you wanted to include before we end? Well, we have discussed my past, which is--

If there's nothing else, if you feel we've covered the important areas, I wanted to--

I do. I mean, you're in command.

OK.

Are you satisfied that whatever you wanted to know?

Yes, very much so, very much so. And I wanted to thank you then for agreeing to do this interview in two parts.

Well, I do appreciate it very much. And, I think that, I keep repeating that you people are doing a tremendous job. But you have to make it known to the world that it's not forgotten. I know World War II was a long time ago. But that atrocities committed then and now are not forgotten or will not be forgotten.

Right, absolutely. Yeah. Well, thank you for doing the interview and let me just say that this concludes the interview of Gerald Averbach.