

My name is Suzanne Helfand, and I'm here at the Washington Convention Center in Washington, DC, to interview survivors of the Holocaust.

Could you begin by giving me your full name?

Claudia M. Sissons.

Could you spell that?

S-I-S-S-O-N-S.

Thank you. Where and when were you born?

I was born in 1927 in Berlin, Germany.

What was your mother's maiden name?

Joseph.

Could you tell me some of the very earliest experiences you had?

My experience is somewhat different from a lot of people's experiences in that, first of all, I was what is known in German as a Mischling-- my father was not Jewish, my mother was. So by Jewish law, of course, I am Jewish, and think of myself as Jewish.

My father left us because of the rule that Hitler instituted, that if you wanted to remain in your profession-- he was an architect-- you couldn't stay with Jewish relatives. So he abandoned us, and at the ripe old age of 11, my parents explained to me that this was a divorce in name only. That it would all be over when Hitler would go away.

And then, subsequently, they gave me a choice of staying with my father in Germany, or leaving for America with my mother. School time, at that time, was very difficult, because I was totally ostracized in school. And when my mother-- when I would come home and complain about it-- my mother would say, shh, you don't know who might be listening. And this was in our own apartment.

So I grew up with a constant fear of something terrible happening. I'm not sure how conscious I was, and just what it was, except that I remember waking up in the morning and finding [INAUDIBLE] filthy Jews written on the sidewalk in front of our house. And the neighbor-- drugstore across the street smashed in, and the owners had disappeared.

And so it got to be every time the doorbell rang, you wondered whether you were going to be next. So my mother asked me-- I decided to stay with her, and the next thing was, she told me she was sending me to England. So I wouldn't end up in a camp.

Did you have any brothers or sisters?

No, I was an only child. And I didn't want to go. The pain of that decision is something that I'm only now beginning to deal with. I never talked about any of this stuff till two years ago.

Anyway, I did go to England, to a family that I didn't know, a Christian family. And I was told that I would be there a maximum of three months. Because my mother was going to go to America, and then get me from England to America. But this was the beginning of '39, and in September, the war broke out for England.

And she was put on a Polish quota. So she didn't get out until 1941. And I don't really know very much about it, except that she took her three months by boat. They slept in boxes like coffins. The boat was so crowded, and typhoid fever

broke out, and a lot of people died. She got typhoid, and was on Ellis Island for a number of months.

And she wasn't able to get me, then, to come from England to the States. So I was in England, living with a Christian family, presumably being saved from a concentration camp. Meantime, we were being bombed by the Germans, right? On the other hand, people who had saved my life were bombing my family in Germany.

It's very crazy for a kid to deal with. My foster family always wondered why I didn't take any interest in the news. Well, I think if I had taken an interest in the news, I probably would have gotten crazy completely.

So I didn't come over to the States till '46.

Your mother was able to send for you then?

Yes, after the war was over, I came over. What's sad is that somehow the tragedy didn't end then, because a lot of stuff had-- a lot of water had gone under the bridge, and my mother and I could never get back together. It's like-- it's hard to talk about.

I never really was able to say, hello, to her. I mean, we saw each other, we were together, but I never wanted to hear her talk about the past. And so now-- she died in '75-- it's only now that I'm realizing that, on an emotional level, I was furious with her for abandoning me. And a whole lot of questions that I'm never going to get an answer to.

Our uncles who died in concentration camps, I don't even know what camps they were in. I thought maybe I would be able to find out here. It's impossible.

And it's very-- there's very little written about people like me. And what's interesting is that among survivors-- I mean, I was talking with a woman just now who was in Auschwitz, lovely lady, really wonderful, but she said to me, why are you here? You know, I'm a survivor. But if you haven't been in a camp-- camp survivors feel like this is not your experience.

And you know, I'm a psychologist, so I know the emotional implications of this. I'm only now-- I've been therapy before, but I'm now working with someone who is a survivor, herself, and an expert. And so everything is-- I'm finally beginning to work it through.

But I'm thinking about possibly collecting an anthology of stories like mine, because I read most of the literature, and there just isn't anything about people like me, who are really child survivors. Most of the people out there are older than I am.

Did you hear from any of your relatives when you were living in England? Either from your father's side, or your mother's side? Did you have grandparents?

My grandparents were dead.

On both sides?

Yeah.

Did you ever know your grandparents?

I knew my grandparents on my father's side. And I corresponded with my father for a while, and then lost touch. And corresponded with my mother until she left Germany, and then we lost touch for several months, till she got to the States. Which was a very scary time.

I've been back to Berlin to visit my father's sister, who, at first, I felt connected to because I remembered her as a child being a good friend. And now, I'm feeling very angry because I'm realizing that she was a very strong force in the

family-- why didn't she say to my father, stay with your family?

There are so many ambivalent feelings.

Right. You know, I mean, intellectually I understand it, but emotionally, there's all that stuff to deal with. And I just have a feeling that there are a lot of people like me who have suppressed their stories, and whose stories are impacting on their lives. I mean, I know how it's impacted on my life.

What is the impact?

Well, when I came to this country-- I became a Christian when I was in England. I lived with a Christian family. And there was this children's special service on the beaches in the summertime, and they talked about Jesus. And I think for me, Jesus became mother, father, all the family I didn't have.

I didn't get along with my foster family. They were very cold. They didn't know anything about this experience.

Were there siblings?

Yes, there were four.

How did they treat you?

Three older-- well, the whole family always reminded me that they saved my life, and that I better say thank you for everything. How did you get to these particular people?

A friend or my mother's, a German person, who had business in England, asked a business friend, would he know anybody who would take any Jewish refugees. So I didn't go over with the Kindertransport that most Jewish children went-- which was another problem for me, because I then had-- first of all, I wasn't in a Jewish family.

Secondly, I had no contact with Jews, or with other refugees. So that my experience has always been one of being alone. Like when I arrived here today, I felt, my God, this is it all over again, you know?

Going back to Berlin, before this decision was made with your parents, do you remember instances of antisemitism? Or things that had happened at school, that people treated you? Could you tell me some?

In school, I was treated-- I mean, I was totally ostracized. What friends I had had kind of dropped away. I remember standing in the playground always by myself. Nobody would have anything to do with me.

Were there other Jewish children at your school?

No, if there were, I didn't know about them. And I remember one incident in particular, coming home one day-- see, my mother couldn't go to certain stores because she was Jewish. So she would send me. And I was coming up the street, and there were some men standing on the corner talking. And it was evening time, and I was sure that they were Nazis, or SS. And I can still see myself walking up the street and feeling absolutely terrified of them, feeling that when I pass them, maybe they would grab me and take me away.

But I had to go past them in order to get home. And I remember I ran past them and up the stairs to my house. Just totally terrified.

How old were you?

I was about nine or 10 at that point.

And did you tell your parents?

I told-- well, my father was already gone.

When did he leave? At what point? Do you remember?

I don't know. I don't know. My parents never told me that he was going to leave. I mean, I asked my mother that, just before she died, I said, did either of you say to me, father was moving out? Because I thought maybe I had forgotten it.

And she said, no. And I said, well, didn't you think I'd notice? And she said, well, we didn't want to upset you. I mean, they had trouble dealing with what was going on. So I have no memory of the day that my father left, it's just that one day he was there, and one day he was gone.

So there was no formal goodbye, or anything like that.

No, they got me from school one day at lunchtime and told me they were getting a divorce in name only. And then, they sent me back to school, which looking back on it now, seems extraordinary. And I was very upset.

But all the messages were, don't discuss anything. Don't talk about it. And I find-- I thought this is turning out to be much harder for me than I thought.

Do you feel it's--

It is hard for me to talk about details. I can give a global picture, but it's hard for me to focus in on the details. Because a lot of it, I've forgotten.

And repressed.

And I used to be able to go to the movies with friends, and that all stopped, because nobody-- basically, nobody wanted to have anything to do with me.

How did your mother explain that to you?

I don't remember. Other than, I mean, I knew that we were different because we were Jewish. And yet, it was confusing for me, because my father wasn't. And I didn't know. My mother was not a-- she went to temple in the high holidays.

So she really was not an observant Jew.

She was not an observant Jew, except high holidays. And she would take me along. But we didn't have a kosher house, or anything like that. So that being Jewish was something that I'm not sure I really understood.

And did your mother have brothers or sisters that lived near?

She had six-- she was one of six. And one brother had come to the States many, many years before Hitler. And two brothers-- let's see, one brother died in the camp, that's the one I've been looking for-- we don't know where, with his wife.

Another brother went to Theresienstadt, and was liberated. And the story is, he walked back to Berlin, and died when he got there.

Any cousins, do you remember?

I have cousins-- I have a cousin-- see, my mother was the youngest of six children and didn't marry till she was 40. So I have many cousins, all of whom were old enough to be my parents. So that even within the family unit, I'm alone. And it's curious.

I have a cousin in Palestine-- in Israel, she went there when it was Palestine-- and she had two children. She's a widow now. And I have a cousin in Colombia, and a cousin in Italy, and I had a cousin in Lichtenstein, but he died. There is a cousin in Chicago I've never gotten to know. Her mother-- one of my uncles was her father, the one who died, after coming out of Theresienstadt.

And the mother was not Jewish, and the mother baptized two daughters. And I've never really-- I guess I felt angry with them for what they did. They kind of abandoned their father.

Was there ever any discussion that you remember of conversion?

Yes, my grandparents-- my father's parents-- insisted when I was a baby that I be baptized.

Is that because they could foresee problems with the--

I don't know. I really don't know. I think there was some antisemitism there.

In the family?

In the family. I don't know.

Could you tell me about that about Berlin at all? The city, itself? What you remember?

Well, Berlin was-- just before I left, there were big plans afoot to rebuild the Kaiserdamm, which is on the main street. I lived in a part of Berlin called Charlottenburg, which is now West Berlin. And Berlin was an attractive city. And I remember going to cafes with my mother, getting cake and [GERMAN]-- that's whipped cream.

And violin music, which still upsets me when I hear. I remember the 1936, was it, yeah, the 1936 Olympic games in Berlin. Seeing the running coming with the torch from Greece.

I remember standing in the schoolyard, doing my hand out, singing the German national anthem, "Deutschland, Deutschland, Ä¼ber alles," and wondering whether other countries agreed with that. That we should be over everything-- over other countries.

You actually thought about the words.

Yeah. Somebody explained to me recently, that that's not what the words meant. What the words meant was that Germany should be more important to Germans than anything else, not that Germany, as a country, should be over other countries. But that's the way I understood it. And I sort of wondered how other countries felt about that. I was about 11, 10 years old.

When did you lose contact with your father? How old were you?

I really don't remember. Probably not very long after I got to England. When I went back to Germany for the first time, in '77, to see my aunt, I was very moved and startled to find that she's living in an apartment with his second wife. And he died in '68. And I really didn't think that he thought about me much.

When I walked into the apartment, and she showed me his room, and on the wall, there was this big painting that had been done of me when I was about four years old, big, gold frame. And some pictures-- some other pictures of me. And I realized that I had really been a presence in his life.

And she had saved the letters that I had written to him. And she had them and gave them to me, so that I was able to read letters that I had written to him when I was a child.

Do you remember how the communication stopped between you and your father?

I think part of it was that neither of us was a good letter writer. For, I guess, emotional reasons. And also, my foster mother told me shortly after I went to England that I should forget that I'd ever had a father. Because he had abandoned us.

I remember that very well.

That must have hurt very badly for a child to hear.

It did, and they were strange people. I mean, I remember-- the uprooting didn't stop. As in '39, when the war broke out, I was evacuated with the school children. So it was another uprooting, and stayed about three months. And we came back again, and then in '41, we were evacuated again to another place, another family.

And the first evacuation, I joined the Girl Guides, and there was to be a little parade of some kind in the town-- it was a small town in Lancashire. And somebody had suggested that I carry the Union Jack in the parade. And the townspeople got up in arms about it, that they saw me as a German girl. They didn't see me as a Jew.

And on the way home from school, kids waylaid me and started calling me names, and started throwing stones at me. It's like crazy, you know?

When they did that, were you able to feel like you could defend yourself in any way? Or you just felt so alone?

No, I just ran like hell. I didn't understand. I mean, I didn't think of myself as German, or as German as in Nazi, obviously. I was very confused by that.

How about the language?

Oh, the language. I didn't know any English. I had learned a few words, and I remember, my mother had taught me to say to my foster mother, when I arrived, I should say, please, would you send a telegram to my mother saying that I arrived safely? And so I very painstakingly trotted that out.

And that was-- I remember that-- some things stand out in your memory-- very clearly, that was like my first rebuff from this foster mother. What she said was, well, of course, we will. You know, like how can I even ask such a dumb question?

And then, when we got to the house, she asked me if I wanted warm milk or cold. I hated warm milk, but I didn't know the difference in English. Unfortunately, I made the wrong choice, so I drank this warm milk.

And I was very seasick on that crossing, the channel crossing. And every time I sat down, the room would weave. And she wanted me to unpack my clothes, but I couldn't explain that I was feeling sick. So whenever she would leave the room to get something, I would lie down on the bed and I'd listen for her, you know. And I'd hear her coming, I'd get up and start unpacking some more.

So for a long time-- I learned the language quite quickly, but I spend a lot of time being very silent. Silent children make adults very nervous, I discovered. And just I would sort of watch. I think that's where I first learned to notice non-verbal behavior in people.

How did the children react to you?

Well, the youngest boy, who was 15 months younger than I was, they had staying with them a Spanish refugee at the time, also a boy. And later, sometime later, when I could speak, he told me that Michael and Pablo, in Spanish, were so furious about my coming they decided they were going to get up in the middle night and drag me out of my bed, by my hair, and stick my head under the faucet. Fortunately, they never did that.

But what did happen was that the family was a middle class family, and they had a cook who was Welsh-- never did get to like Welsh people-- who befriended me. And of course, I desperately needed a friend. And I would confide in her all kinds of things, you know-- a 11-year-old would talk about.

And I discovered that I was forever getting into trouble with my foster mother, and I couldn't understand how. And it took a long time before I discovered that the cook had decided that she hated me before I arrived, because she decided that the Turners should be taking in-- charity begins at home-- British children, not some German child.

And so what she would do is she would take my little confidences-- you know, I'd say, oh, dumb things like sleeping in a room where my foster brother had a tooth taken a few hours before, and they'd used ether, and I was terrified that there was ether in the air and it would knock me out. It's the kind of thing a kid would worry about.

And she would then tell my foster mother about it, but she would twist it just a little bit so that I would come out looking ungrateful, and uncharitable. And so I was ever getting into trouble of one sort or another.

I don't know, it was not very good. But it took me so long to find out what was happening.

It must have been very painful.

It was very painful. And the air raids started-- every time the air raid siren went, my eye would start to tremble, my nose would start to bleed. At the beginning of the war, fortunately, after a while, it began to stop. Because while I was evacuated at the beginning of the war, I was back again, I was in Manchester during the Manchester blitz, while Manchester was bombed very, very heavily.

We were in town for the first night of the-- second night, three nights. We went out of town to some friends. I don't know whether all this hangs together, I'm feeling like I'm sort of weaving around.

This is the kind of experience that I haven't read about anywhere. I feel-- I would like to connect with people who had a similar experience. I know that concentration camp survivors tend to gather together, and they do a lot of talking about their experience. And what I'm beginning to observe is that this is very good for them, you know? That out of it comes a real sense of, we've survived, and we're victorious.

Whereas for me, it's all being kept inside. And I'm only now getting to I've survived, I'm victorious. Not feeling like a victim. And I have a hunch that there are a lot of people around who've had similar experiences, who haven't talked about it, and who would really benefit.

And I just feel like this should be part of the archives. It isn't just people who in a camp. I mean, God knows, that was horrendous. But there are many different experiences that went with the Holocaust.

How many years did you live in England?

Seven and a half years.

And did you find that it was just as terrible later on as it was in the beginning? Or did you have better experiences as you learned the language, and you lived with another family?

No, I liked the families that I was evacuated to very much. I really got along well with them.

How many families did you live with?

Altogether, the original family and two others. And I kept in touch with them.

How was it that you were switched to a different family?

Well, because the Manchester-- it looked like we were going to get bombed. So all of the schoolchildren were evacuated. First time to a little place in Lancashire, and the second time, we stayed two years to a place in Shropshire. And what happened there is, the first time we went, we were on lists home from school, and told you just to bring bare necessities, just enough to put in a rucksack. This was September 1st, and the war broke out the 3rd of September.

And we all got put on buses, and lots of tearful goodbyes. And we went off to this little town. And we were brought to the town hall.

What year is this?

This was '39. See, the Americans don't think of the war starting in '39, because you came so much later. So we were shepherded into this little town hall, and there was somebody on stage, and they'd say, Mrs. Jones will take two. Mrs. Smith will take one.

I had a friend, and she and I wanted to be billeted together. But somehow, the way it worked out, we didn't. I ended up with one family, by myself, who had two grown sons, almost grown. And they'd had a daughter who would have been my age, so they really were simple, working people. And really, I liked them a lot.

But we only stayed there till after Christmas. And then, didn't look like Hitler was going to bomb Manchester, so they brought us back home again. So then, when the blitz came in '41, we were all there. So then, after that, they decided to evacuate the schools again. And this time to a different place.

Did the people know that you were Jewish? Or of your background of Jewish?

Yes, because for the first time, I'd only been there for a few months. And I'm sure I was still speaking with a German accent. But the second time, I don't know, you know. By that time, I'd become a Christian.

Had you actually converted? Or you just were--

I was confirmed in the Anglican church.

I see.

And when I came to this country, I married a minister.

And did you communicate with your mother at that time?

Yes, I was communicating with my mother, who said, yes, it was fine with her if I did this. And then, when I came over here, she was very upset that I had done it.

So when I came to this country, she was not too happy about the fact that I had converted. And I remember we had big fights about the fact that I was wearing a gold cross. And after I divorced my minister husband, who had made me promise that I would never tell anyone I was Jewish-- which was something I fought against, but at the time, I wasn't strong enough to really hold my own.

After that divorce, I really began to reclaim my Jewish heritage. And slowly we switched from celebrating Christmas to celebrating Hanukkah. And now, I totally see myself as being Jewish.

How long were you married?

16 years.

All right, so going back, you were growing up in England, and you were treated as a German, not really as a Jew. And



then you had converted. Did you witness any antisemitism at the time in England?

Not really. On some curious level, I've always wondered whether my foster parents were antisemitic, in that they didn't encourage me to kind of nourish my Jewish roots. But I don't know the other curious thing is my mother, who subsequently met my foster father, he came to this country on business after the war, always swore up and down that he was Jewish.

And there was no reason to believe that he was, but she-- I don't know, something about her that I almost am inclined to believe her. I don't know, I began to reclaim my Jewishness after I divorced. My mother was still alive, and I started-- I had long stopped wearing a gold cross, I might say. But I started wearing a chai, and one of my children gave me a Star of David.

And I'm wearing it one day, and my mother looks at it and says-- I can hardly believe it, she said, why are you wearing that? And at this point, you know, I'm feeling, I mean, really crazy. I mean, why is she asking me that? Why didn't she say, I'm glad you're wearing it?

I guess she'd gotten so used to my having converted that it confused her. But I remember, I felt very angry when she asked me.

When was the point that you knew you were going to be joining your mother in America? Your mother was living where?

She was living in New York. Living in New York, she'd been middle class, Jewish, German, who worked as a buttonhole maker here, doing piecework. Now, my mother was called by her friends, [GERMAN], that means the duchess. She had a very duchess-like quality about this lady. To imagine her doing piecework, making buttonholes, is just really incredible.

When, as soon as the war was over, we set the wheels in motion, and I came over here in '46.

Did you come by yourself, or with anyone you knew?

No, I came by myself.

And how did you get here?

Went by myself from Germany to England, traveled with somebody, but I didn't know.

Did you take a ship at the time?

From-- when I left Berlin, we left by train to the Hook of Holland. And then, the boat over to Harwich. And I remember when I left Berlin, I don't know any memories at all about the days before. I remember the scene of the train station, and my parents came down to see me off, but they wouldn't be with each other. So one was standing on one end of the platform, and the other was standing on the other end of the platform.

This is when you were-- I'm sorry, this is when you left Berlin to come to--

When I was 11.

I see.

That's when and I went to England.

Right. So they were not standing together, because at that time they didn't want to be seen together, being your father was not Jewish and your mother was Jewish. What was your father's-- what kind of work did he do?

He was an architect. He built the first high rise office building in Berlin, on the Potsdamer Platz. He worked with somebody who was very well-known in architectural circles, Erich Mendelsohn. They worked together. In fact, Mendelsohn offered him a job in England. He didn't take it.

So he remained?

He remained in Germany. And in '61, I decided that I wanted to see him again. I'd never seen him.

And you were how old at this time?

'61, I was 33, 34. And so I wrote to him and asked him-- invited him to come over here, and offered to pay his way. He came over for 17 days.

I didn't really know him at this point. And my mother had fed me a lot of negative stuff about him. So he came over, and he had been a very good-looking man, and he was just a shadow of his former self. But I recognized him.

He didn't speak any English, so I had to translate everything anybody said-- the children and my husband. He stayed 17 days. And he was a weak man who was very attached to his mother and sister. And couldn't break the ties. But he was a nice man.

And we really had a very nice visit. It was very hard saying goodbye, because I just knew I would never see him again. He died in '68. And I found out that he had died from my mother, which sort of surprised me. And I thought I would hear it from my aunt.

From my aunt, I got a death notice-- nothing written on it. I remember sitting-- it was like, I kept thinking, maybe something was written in invisible ink. And it was a printed death notice saying that the survivors were his sister and his wife. And I could say, what about me? And why didn't she write something?

And I don't know. I still don't know why she didn't. But somehow my mother had found out, and called me at work and told me.

And it was surprising it upset me, very, very much. I was very upset when my father died. I visited his grave when I was in Berlin, visiting my aunt.

I don't know, you know, it's all very mixed up. I've been back three times. The last time I went back was this past October with my oldest son. See, my children, if they want to know anything about their roots, on my side of the family, they have to leave the country, because there's nobody in this country.

So my oldest son went with me this time. And he was a good person to travel with, because he asks a lot of questions. And we got into a lot of hassles-- I think I was just beginning to get in touch with my anger at them. And especially with my father's second wife, who I'm sure was a Nazi.

And she kept saying how much they had suffered, and you know, it was ridiculous. And we got into this competition-- I would say, yeah, but you had-- at least you had a decent childhood. You know, my childhood was all screwed up. And she said, yes, but you have children, and I don't have children. And it's very crazy kind of conversation.

How did you adjust to America? You came right to the United States, and then you went right to New York City.

Right. Well, when I came to New York City, I swore I would never get nervous and hurried the way New Yorkers are, but that didn't last very long.

It was hard. I lived with my mother, who was living in a furnished room. And so here we were.

And you were how old at this time?

19.

19 years old.

I left when I was 11, or almost 12. And she had all of her life was wrapped up in me. So I moved into this furnished room with her, and she began to treat me like I was still 11. She wanted to buy me clothes, and tell me what to wear, and where to go, and fix me up with a blind date, even. And it got to be absolutely horrendous.

What I didn't know at the time was that I really was furious with her. Not only about what she was doing, but the fact that she had, to my emotional self, abandoned me.

Did she try to explain that she was doing this to save you?

Well, she did, and intellectually, I've always known that. But--

Emotionally.

I'll tell you something. When I came off the boat in New York City, when I arrived, and we docked in Brooklyn, I was very excited. I really wanted to see my mother. For seven years, I had been living for this moment, because she and I had been very, very close when I was a little girl.

And so I'm walking down the gangplank, and I can see her standing on the pier. And she is a very nice-looking woman. So there was nothing physical about her that was repellent at all. And I see her standing there, looking very smart and attractive. And something in my gut-- I felt as though something tore.

I mean, it was a physical sensation of something ripping. And all of a sudden, I felt, in that moment, all the excitement of wanting to be close to her changed. I didn't even want to touch her. Now, we did embrace, and so forth.

But I had this feeling of, don't come near me. And I've never really understood what that was about until about four or five weeks ago, I'm in therapy with Yael Danieli, who has a project of working with survivors. And I realized that what happened in that moment was that my rage at her for sending me away-- I mean, intellectually, I understand, I've always understood.

And understanding intellectually has been bad for me, because it's permitted me to-- encouraged me to repress my anger. My rage surfaced in that sort of symbolic form. And on some level, she and I never really ever said, hello, again, after we said goodbye [INAUDIBLE]-- saw each other. We were together.

And so after six months of living with her in that room, I moved out. She was very upset. But I just-- I felt that I had to get out, or I would suffocate. It was a difficult decision. But I think it was the right one.

And she subsequently said she wished she had taken an apartment. It would have been much better.

After you left--

Coop us in the four walls.

Yes, after you left your mother, did you still visit with her?

Oh, yes, no, no.

You didn't physically live with her in the same--

No, we continued to see each other, and so forth. But we never really got along. You know, I mean, apart from the Holocaust, and so, I think sometimes we forget that people had histories before the Holocaust, she was a very narcissistic woman who saw me as an extension of herself. So that there was an additional reason that I needed to cut the symbiosis, as it were, to use jargon language.

But the only times when we felt I felt closest to her, curiously enough, or not so curious, I guess, was when she was ill. She was very ill the last summer before she-- the spring before she died, from April through August. And she was in and out of hospitals. And when she was ill, some of this stuff kind of dropped away and we could get a little closer.

And what I regret is that we never really talked. I mean, we talked very briefly a couple of times about each of our experiences. And I always resisted talking about it, especially when one day she said something that intimated to me that she thought I'd had a great time in England. And I was very angry.

But then, when I got my father's letters, I understood why. I was a very grown-up child. I wrote letters that said, everything is fine over here. I'm doing great, because I didn't want to upset them.

So they thought everything was fine. I didn't write and say I'm miserable, I hate these people. My foster mother is a cold fish, and all the things that were going on, getting stones thrown at me. And you know, I didn't talk about those things.

I just always said, everything is great. So she was very surprised when I said I was really unhappy.

And she probably wanted to believe that everything's great.

Of course. I'm very good at understanding everything intellectually, it all makes sense. But you know, I started having anxiety attacks after my father left.

What kind of anxiety attacks? What would happen to you, physically?

Physically, I would be absolutely certain I was going to die. I would start to tremble uncontrollably.

This is in Berlin, still?

Started when I was-- I don't know, about eight or nine. And somehow, during my stay in England, I think things subsided somewhat. I would be anxious often, I was afraid of going to sleep, and things like that. Terrified of air raids.

And then, they started again when I came to this country. And then, they subsided for a while. And then, about two years ago, in '79, I read a book by Maya Angelou, *Why the Caged Bird Sings*-- have you ever read it?

I've heard it.

And I cried and cried and cried. And I realized that something was going on besides what I was reading. And I was identifying with the loneliness of Maya-- it was an autobiography. And that's when I started really talking about all this stuff, and the anxiety attacks started again. Feeling like--

And I wonder whether my mother used to have them. Because sometimes she would say to me-- I'd call her in the morning. I'd say, how are you? And she'd say, you know, I feel terrible last night, I really thought it was going to be my end.

And there was nothing physically wrong with her. And in retrospect, I just wonder whether she didn't have similar experience, feeling like something possessed you, that you're out of control, really, really terrified. Sure that I was going to die. It's a horrendous feeling. I mean, really horrible.

How long does this feeling take over?

Oh, sometimes it would last an hour. And an hour of that feels like a year. And what's interesting is that, when I saw-- I started seeing Yael, she said to me, Claudia, those aren't anxiety attacks, they're rage attacks.

And she's right, because I've noticed now when I get anxious, and I remind myself that this is anger surfacing, and I allow myself to focus on who or what I'm angry about, and really give myself permission to have some angry fantasies, it disappears. I just am angry and furious.

How has this affected your life, as far as your husband and your immediate family, your children?

Well, as I said, my husband didn't really want to know about the fact that I was Jewish. And that's another issue-- I mean, my choice of husband was not a good one. But I had just been in the country a couple of years when I met him, and I was scared and frightened. This is the third country-- I was only 19, and he looked like a solid citizen.

And I mean, he's a nice man, but it was not a good choice. I married him because I'd been told I would never get married. I was too tall. I was ugly, I was stupid, a lot of stuff like that was fed to me in England.

My children, now, I have a very good relationship with my kids.

How old are your children?

My daughter is 25. And I have three sons, aged-- let's see, just all had birthdays-- 27, no, 28, 30, and 31. And the oldest one is married, and is a psychologist, also, with a doctorate.

My kids are very open to my talking. This weekend, I was very nervous about coming here, and so yesterday-- Monday, Saturday-- I went up to Connecticut to visit my married son and his wife. And we went out to dinner, and I was talking, and I asked them, I'm so nervous about talking too much.

And my daughter-in-law said to me, look, Claudia, I've known you for over seven years. And it's only in the last year and a half that you've talked about it. And both of them said, you don't talk too much, and you can talk as much as you want to.

And they're extremely supportive and very eager to know about my life in great detail. They feel that that's part of their heritage.

Did you always tell your children, from the time they were young, about your heritage? Or did you wait till they got older?

No, Steven, my oldest son, said the first that he remembered ever hearing about it was when he was about eight years old. We were watching television together-- he said there was some kind of a movie about the Berlin Wall. And he said, I was sitting there crying, quietly. And that was the first he ever knew anything at all.

I guess, he asked me why I was crying, and I explained. But I really didn't talk in any detail till '79. Though in '75, my PhD dissertation is about my experience. And at that time, it's done in a series of letters, written as if I was beginning at nine, in the present tense, to appropriate people all the way to my age then, which was 50.

And some of the letters are to my children. So I began to talk about it then, within the context of the dissertation. But there is a whole different flavor to my talking since '79. It's like in '75, it was very intellectualized stuff, you know. I talk about it sort of the way I'm talking about it today. I'm feeling somewhat distanced, because I think I'm just protecting myself.

But since '79, I've really allowed myself to feel the feelings that go with the history. And last week, when I was seeing Yael, she said to me something-- she really validated my personal pain, which nobody's ever really done. The message has always been in England-- of course, the English are, keep a stiff upper lip.

All the messages have been to me, don't talk about it, it's not important, it doesn't count. Other people suffered more. In the meantime, I know, when I look at my life, I've done well. I mean, I've really been a survivor in every sense of the word, but I can see how not talking has impacted in ways that I wasn't aware.

So then, you recently just decided this was-- that you wanted to do this today, because you felt that this was important for you?

It's important for me, and also, I really want to see whether I can connect with other people with similar stories. I'm wondering whether through you, I can-- if there's some way I can find out other people like me. I'd like to talk to them, I'd like to share experiences.

Because you know, I mean, no matter what your experience is, we all have our own histories-- to talk to somebody who's had a similar experience, you learn things. And it's comforting to know, gee, you felt that way, too? Like I recently found out by reading, that orphaned survivors, child survivors who were orphaned, who went to England, there's a book called-- it's a new book-- Love Despite Hate, by Sarah Moskowitz-- all about orphans.

And almost every single orphan had trouble with his foster mother. And I thought, well, maybe my foster mother wasn't as terrible as I thought she was. Why? Because you can't be nice to your foster mother, because it makes you disloyal to your mother.

Now, I never thought of that. And I'm a psychologist. I never thought of that kind of stuff.

It's like, I tend to think in pictures, and what I'm seeing is a jigsaw puzzle. Our lives are broken jigsaw puzzles. And what we're doing is looking for the pieces to put them together. The seams, you know, they'll always be cracks.

But at least-- if at least you can get a partial puzzle put together, so you have some idea of what you're looking at, how things fit together. And by talking to other people, I think you can help fit some of the pieces together. Are you following me?

Yes, I do, and I think that this is very important. And I think that the problem is, how do you get in contact with these people who share these very similar experiences?

I don't know.

And I think that that, in itself, like I agree with you, it has got to be a subject of tremendous concern and interest. And it would be a good thing to be able to locate these people, and to--

Well, if I decide to do some writing, or put together an anthology, or something, that one way of doing it, of course, is to put an ad in Jewish newspapers, and so on, to say what you're looking for. And there will be a certain percentage of people who will answer-- Yael, I know, knows people.

I don't know. There's a part of me that wants to do it, not only-- I mean, a lot of the impetus for doing it is that I am looking for a community, with a similar experience, that I can make connections with. On the other hand, I know that it would be a very arduous, very painful task. And I'm not sure whether I'm up for doing that.

Do you belong to a synagogue in New York?

No, I don't. Well, actually, that's not true, I do. I go very seldom-- I belong to a little synagogue, and that's another way of possibly doing it. I belong to a group of therapists who meet with Yael who are thinking of running groups for survivors.

That's really how I sort of got to her. I went to a seminar she gave, and then thought I was ready to run a group. Culminated in my deciding that I needed to get back into therapy. Maybe someday, I will, I don't know. But we still-- the group of therapists still meet with her and discuss the literature and our own experiences.

So I mean, I'm sure there are ways of finding people like that. I think I need to think about whether I want to do it. I want to do it, but can I do it?

We seem to be running out of time. Is there any last thoughts that you would like to tell us in this interview? It has been very interesting. Is there a message that you would like to even give to others who might even be sharing the same kind of experience that you are?

Just that I think that-- I'm talking about possibly writing an anthology, and I have a feeling, I mean, my own sense of my life is that there are certain things that happened that I do, as I go with the flow, and that maybe if somebody gets in touch with me as I'm telling people about this and says, listen, I would be interested in helping you do it, that that might be the impetus for me to go ahead and do it.

Well, I hope so. And I wish you a lot of luck. Thank you for participating in this interview.

Thank you.

This concludes our interview with Claudia Sissons at the Washington Convention Center.