

Interview with Vladka Meed - 1/5/90

VM: Survivors are normal people. They think about the past, but they go on with their lives. I certainly told my children about the past.

VM: Did the Bund help you come here ?

WH: In a way they were involved. They came to the pier to greet us. They gave my husband some contacts in the fur business.

WH: Where did you first settle ?

VM: We took a room in a big apartment. It had rooms for newcomers, six people. We shared the kitchen. It was a six room apartment. It was very difficult. It was on 114th St. between Riverside Drive and Broadway.

WH: When you were free did you get together with friends in the park ?

VM: Of course. We went to the park. We were on the grass in the evening, on blankets and we were singing and talking. People received us very warmly when we first came. I represented a world which was no more. Some of the people had come in 1941.

6 WH: Did you meet other newcomers in the park ?

VM: Yes. Especially when my daughter was born, we talked together, not so much about the past as about the daily necessities, how to cope---Do you know about an apartment or a job?; taking care of someone's child if they had to go away. The people were mostly from Poland, but if someone came from Germany, they also entered the group. I would meet a group of 5-10 people. Then we got together

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with the husbands.

WH: Were you friendly with any American Jews ?

VM: I came in contact with Americans mostly as neighbors.

WH: Who did you lose during the war ?

VM: Everybody. Parents, brother, sister.

WH: When were you born?

VM: December 29, 1921.

WH: You were already a legend in Europe during the war for your work in the Underground. You're discussed in Donat's The Holocaust Kingdom.

VM: I never thought I was a hero and I still don't think in these terms. I was entrusted to contact people in the camps, in hiding, or in the partisans.

WH: Were you afraid ?

VM: Yes, I felt fear; yet one gets used even to fear. This is the way it has to be. I felt fear but I continued doing it. You had to go on because it was survival.

WH: But weren't some people simply paralyzed with fear?

VM: Yes, some people were like that .

WH: What makes a person not feel fear ? Is it the way you were brought up ? One's basic makeup ?

VM: It's very difficult to say. But I can understand people being absolutely paralyzed and not being able to move or even think. I didn't have it.

WH: What happened to the plans for Treblinka you smuggled out ?

VM: I gave them to Nikolai who was the leader on the Aryan side. He

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probably transferred it to the Polish Underground.

WH: Did you feel at any time that you wouldn't make it ?

VM: There was a certain inner optimism by the young that the war would not go on forever.

WH: Didn't you feel pride that you were giving people hope with your actions?

VM: Yes. I knew they were waiting for me and I knew that I meant something to them. There was a feeling that you were still needed.

WH: Moving to the present, when there's a family crisis, are you the person they often turn to ?

9 VM: I always give advice. But I would say they are quite independent. But what remained with me from those years is a certain fear that something can happen to my loved ones, those closest to me. It makes me sometimes hyper-alert and sometimes it makes me even act stupid. Steven was in the Sholom Aleichem camp and he liked very much to dive. When I saw him dive my heart stopped and I said to the counselor: "Please, don't let Steven dive because he has sinuses." And the counselor stopped him from diving. But he didn't have sinuses. And I told Steven the truth. That I cannot see him until he emerges onto the surface again. Now he's a doctor, so he laughs at me and makes jokes. And almost any survivor has this fear----that a child takes the car to a faraway place. But this fear doesn't prevent you from letting the child develop. You're just more cautious.

WH: But you weren't a cautious or timid person during the war ?

VM: I am a cautious person. I was cautious enough during the war;

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otherwise I would not have survived. I was determined to go through with a mission. I had to be cautious to be successful. I was the Bund's representative to the Jewish Underground.

WH: How were you chosen as the representative ?

VM: I was fluent in Polish and had already been entrusted with certain missions before the deportations.

WH: Have you been active in the Bund here ?

VM: Yes. I've been an active member. I've traveled to various cities, not only the Bund but also the Jewish Labor Committee. I've been a member of the Workmen's Circle. My father was involved. Here it's a continuation of the circle I've been in. It helped me adjust and gave me ^{my} place to put down some roots and make new friends, American-born friends. Since I wanted my children to know Yiddish I sent them to such camps and additional schools. And it didn't create a problem in terms of their regular school. I think it enriched them to have a Yiddish-English culture.

WH: Have your children continued this ?

VM: My daughter lives in Phoenix but she sends the children to the Orthodox additional school. And my son sends to a Solomon Schechter day school on 86th Street. I don't see that he'll teach them Yiddish, but the Yiddish roots, the Yiddish continuity, is not lost.

WH: How did you become involved with the teacher's program?

VM: I always had in mind that the story should be told. But not to tell a story that people would pity the survivors, that they couldn't adjust. I always resented that. And they they always

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described how the Jews cooperated with the Germans and how they "went like sheep." This always irritated me. I'm not a historian but these arguments are mostly based on German documents and archives. I always see one chain of resistance that took different forms at different times. Before deportation it was resistance to the laws and coping with the hardships with dignity, not like animals. It's true that people stole in the ghetto, but the majority lived with dignity. There was a network of schools, political groups, and community groups. Most of the historians didn't know Yiddish or Polish and their description of the Jews is so pitiful and I resent this.

WH: But you have a few. You have Yisrael Gutman, Yehuda Bauer.

7 VM: Yes but there are acclaimed historians who present a distorted picture of the ghetto. And when deportations started there was resistance to the German orders, with arms. In many cases of resistance there were no witnesses. In the camps there were also many cases of resistance. There was renewed interest in the past and schools started to do something. I thought we should work with the teachers. And this is how the three week seminar was organized. We do it in Israel because Israel represents the continuity of Jewish life. And Israel is constantly in danger and they can then understand the response. We started the program 6 years ago. Most of the teachers are Jewish. We started with the UFT. The survivors subsidize it also. We went to Yad Vashem, Kibbutz Lochamei haGetaot, and we toured a bit. The next year there was so much interest that we did it nationwide through the AFT. In 1986 we had

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40 teachers, in 1987 there were 45, in '88 there were 47, and in 1989, there were 45. The program is known and very successful. There are workshops with acclaimed professors. Through working together the people become closer. The theme of resistance is very important, especially now as the ranks of the survivors are thinning out.

VM: The survivors have succeeded quite well in America. They don't have large families. And despite loneliness they have succeeded.

WH: How do you explain this ?

VM: If you lose one thing [your family and culture] you compensate in another area. You don't give up because you lost so many years. You want to do something with what's left. You have to justify your existence.

WH: Was your father a fighter ?

VM: No, but they knew we did illegal work. My mother cooperated with us.

WH: How did you come to write the book ?

VM: At first I wrote for the Forwards. Then people suggested I should write it as a book. It was very hard. I would cry and want to stop because what happened became very vivid in front of my eyes. I didn't concentrate so much on my personal life because my personal life was not so important. It was like a little drop, not even a drop, a speck in the lives of all the others who perished.

WH: But it's an answer to those historians who deny resistance?

VM: Yes, it is an answer; today people look at it differently. To go on with life was not so easy in a ghetto. And it was, in a way,

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resistance. The survivors achieved quite a bit and the children also achieved. Life and how to live is the resistance. The desire to live is also very strong.

WH: Did you want to go to Israel after the war ?

VM: I came here because of close friends. I would have gone to Israel maybe under different circumstances. At that time [1946] it was not a free Israel.

WH: Where did you and Ben meet?

VM: During the war.

WH: How is that both you and Ben are so involved in keeping the survivors' memory alive ? Did you arrive at this together ?

VM: In the beginning I was more involved. He was making a living. Ten years ago he became much more involved. It is an inner feeling that this is an obligation and we have to do it. Those who perished were very close to me and it's an obligation not only that they shouldn't be forgotten but that they should be understood.

WH: How do you explain the behavior of people who were kapos ?

VM: Among all people there are some thieves. But the percentage was much smaller. Why always pick on these ? So there were some, but most were not. Most of the time, they were appointed by the Germans.

WH: Now that the Holocaust is known, do you think people would act differently if it happened again?

VM: It's a very difficult question. I don't think the same thing can happen, although many survivors, including my husband, think it can happen again. I don't believe it. Knowledge is a very important

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issue. That's why it's so necessary to implement Holocaust studies.

WH: But when you see the terrible things done in Cambodia and in Africa, doesn't it make you lose hope ?

VM: No. I still believe in people. These things will go on but it can be caught if people will become more interested in being their brother's keeper. Not just separated. We have to be more alert and know that the destiny of one people depends on the other. Education is important. Of course, the Germans were also highly educated, but we need education plus teaching of what is right and wrong, human behavior.

WH: What about the Polish people ?

VM: They have been antisemitic for generations. Only a very small percentage of Poles behaved well. Today they want to clarify and justify. It's true they were also victims, but this doesn't justify their behavior at all. Many Jews died because of Poles.

WH: Do you see them in the same way as the Germans ?

VM: No. The main enemies were the Germans, but they were helpful.

WH: Do you see the survivors in Israel as different from American survivors ?

VM: Only in the way that Israelis differ from American Jews.

WH: How did you feel about Rosensaft's contact with Arafat ?

VM: It's a free country but he should think twice because people look up to him as a leader of the Second Generation. He has a responsibility to the Jewish community. Survivors were very hurt by his stance because they are very much behind Israel. And this made his stand wrong. I wondered since he was the President of the

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Farband and they were against it; I don't know what was going on there.

WH: What do you think was the catalyst for all the interest in the Holocaust ?

7 VM: The Six Day and Yom Kippur Wars. It made people feel it could happen. What would happen if Israel lost ? A Holocaust could happen in a different way, in a different form. Also the Holocaust films; and little by little the voice of the survivors came through. Then there were the memorials, the Gatherings, Elie Wiesel. I would say Elie Wiesel played a very important role in bringing the message of the survivors to the public. He's a writer and a very talented person. His books; the Bitburg incident. In these ways his point of view penetrated into the public's mind and he did it in a very convincing way. Not every survivor can do it in this way. So he appealed to the outside world and they picked it up. Why ? Because he has a greater ability to do it.

WH: And what must every survivor have felt when he received the Nobel Prize?

VM: It's a big achievement, not only for him personally but it is in a way a compensation for what the Jewish people went through. He came from the ashes to a hope for the future. His Nobel Prize was in a way an acknowledgement of the other survivors. We were invited to Oslo by Wiesel. It was one of the high points of my life after the war because I saw we weren't just living in our own circle. It was for the world. I was very proud, very much taken by it. What made a very big impression on me was when he was in the hall with

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what touched me even more was when Wiesl accepted the Nobel Prize, and the king to receive the Prize, with the TV and the media and they before giving a response he put on a yarmulke called his son. This was really an exception to the rule. But

because he had not wanted to have a son, because he thought it's such a big responsibility; and because he came from the ashes, he

called him him to express the hope for continuity. But what got to

me even more was that when he got the Prize, he put on a yarmulke,

and he said he's going to say ^{the} a prayer that his father and grandfather\$ from generations before him were saying during the

most important moments in their lives. And he made a shehecheyanu

in the hall filled with 800 people. I felt prickles through my

whole body. The combining of your roots with this hall, with the

king and the ^{international} ~~national~~ diplomatic corps in front of the whole world..... This was for me very moving, that we are proud of

something that has not been destroyed and can never be destroyed.

WH: Isn't that the whole message that should be given after the Holocaust ?

VM: Yes, because good deeds as well as bad deeds depend on people. And if I stop believing in people then I have to stop believing in life.

WH: You did a lot in your life.

VM: I don't know if it's a lot. I did what I did. I never measure it or think about it.

WH: Well, let's say you went through a lot. What accomplishments give you the greatest pride or pleasure ?

VM: My children.

WH: How many times have I heard that answer ? You could have told

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me the teachers' program, the Resistance, I don't know what. When a group of people believe, not only in themselves but in their children, it's very hard to eliminate them.

VM: I don't know if the children will go in the way that I would like them to go. But they are good people, they chose good professions. They are my family's life and through them we have hope and despair, but through them we can continue and maybe this is the most important thing.