

Interview with Sidney Shachnow - 3-22-90

WH: Where and when were you born ?

SS: Kaunas (Kovno), Lithuania, in 1934. I had one brother, still alive, who's out in California, a retired engineer. He has a disability now, a heart problem. My mother's still alive and lives in Florida, in Miami Beach. My dad passed away about ten years ago. They were in Lithuania, in camps, during the war. But we were all separated. My dad escaped early on and joined the partisans, my mom stayed in the camps.

WH: Where were you during the war?

SS: I was outside of a place called Viliampol (Slobodka) between

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Kovno and Vilna.

WH: What was your place like compared to other camps ?

SS: I have no basis of comparison. It's just one of those things that you adapt to and those that didn't adapt....

WH: What was the key element in being able to successfully adapt ?

SS: To retain your sanity and not necessarily capitalize on your education or your status.

WH: Is it true that ~~the~~ the house you live in was once a Nazi officer's house ?

SS: It belonged to the Nazi finance minister.

WH: It's ironic.

SS: Yeah, there are a lot of ironies in life. What could be more ironic than a Jew commanding a brigade in the capital of the Third Reich and renting his house back in Washington to a Saudi Arabian. Anything is possible. The only permanent thing in life is change. And so you keep an open mind.

WH: How were you able to survive as a seven year old ?

SS: Well, I think each survivor will probably tell you his own version, sometimes colored by time. I think the bottom line is that there are two major ingredients. One is timing and another one is luck. In a normal environment a child goes to school and plays ball. And so one asks here how do kids survive that kind of thing? Well, the reality is that kids can grow up rather fast and we cannot look at a kid in the U.S. and say this is the kind of kid because they're very different kinds of kids. And this is not limited to the Holocaust. In Vietnam the young kids who used to

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hang around the streets of Saigon were twenty and thirty years wiser than their age. You grow up quick and if you don't grow up quick, you don't survive. It's true in the animal world too.

9 WH: Is there a survival of the fittest concept here ?

SS: I certainly believe in that. I won't attempt to define what "fittest" is.

— WH: Were there differences between the conditions people in Vietnam and Lithuania were subjected to ?

SS: Oh yes. Although there were many similarities, there were differences. A kid in Vietnam was not concerned about being different. As a survivor once said: "Not all the victims were Jews, but all the Jews were victims.?" And you knew you were there because you were a Jew.

WH: Where were you between 1946 and 1950 ?

SS: We spent a lot of time moving and finally ended up in Furth. From there we applied for visas. My father was concerned that if he said he came from Russia he wouldn't get into the U.S. because it was the Cold War then. So he lied, but he was caught and we were taken off the quota list and had to go through an appeals process. And then a year later ^{we} were able to enter the U.S. My father stayed back in Lithuania and my mother, brother, and I came first.

— WH: Your brother was five in the war. Who took care of him?

9 SS: I really don't know. He took care of himself. There are always people who will give you a hand even in the most disgusting situations. There's something about a human being that's pretty decent and it manages to survive. With some it's more visible than

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with others. We certainly went pretty low and came close to an animal existence but we didn't quite become animals. Because I think a man or woman has a conscience.

WH: And what about the Nazis?

SS: (pause) That's an interesting thing. I used to be pretty bitter about it. And in the early days I used to feel that there had to be justice, and in those days justice and vengeance were pretty similar. But it's like everything else in life. When you grow older you realize that we are all vulnerable to becoming very callous. And we see that in Vietnam where we produced a Calley. We have a remarkable ability to rationalize and you do that regardless of your education and position. People don't remember. A man says: "I didn't say that." There were some who absolutely were sadistic and don't fall in that category. I'm not a social scientist but there is an explanation why some of the people behaved the way they did. I don't understand it but I accept the fact that there are a lot of things in life I don't understand.

I remember when my uncle picked us up in Boston when we first came from Bremerhaven on the U.S.S. Rose. We drove to his house in Salem, Massachusetts, a comfortable place. And he had this big box with a 13 inch screen and he turned that thing on. It flickered and the first thing that came on was John Cameron Swazy and I saw that there was a picture. And I looked in the back and there were only two wires that came out of that box. And I couldn't understand how it was possible to have this picture through these two wires. Well,

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I want you to know that many years later, I still don't understand it but I accept it.

WH: Was there anything in your wartime experiences that helped you to rise in the Army ?

SS: A lot of people succeed in various walks of life. I think my experiences allowed me to understand people a little better. They caused me to mature a little quicker than some other people. My experiences have caused me to be a little bit thick-skinned, to accept hardship, to maybe weather disappointments, and to still persevere. Because although there were people who had humanity, ultimately you had to rely on yourself, you had to have confidence in yourself, you had to have the will to survive and succeed. And those are qualities that serve you well in any endeavor. And I've seen people like that and thought 'I'm not so sure they would have succeeded if they hadn't had that kind of experience.' You have to walk away from such an experience with something.

WH: Do you see things differently as a result of what you went through ?

SS: I see that people have a capacity to be very cruel and very inhuman, and that one cannot allow little things to develop and you become too liberal-minded and you say: "Well that's all right." Then, before you know it, it's those little things that synergetically have created serious problems. And that's why I watch very closely now how a country like Germany treats, a day before yesterday, a Nazi rally; there were 100 or so people, skinheads. It's easy to say we're a free country and we have to

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tolerate. But a government has certain responsibilities. I'm suspicious of any government that pushes nationalism to the extreme. I'm suspicious of the left and I'm suspicious of the right.

WH: And when you see the wall coming down now?

8 SS: Well, it's certainly something that no one could have predicted. I just don't know what to think because every problem that you ultimately solve creates a new problem. The wall comes down and they talk about a unified Germany, there are then another bunch of issues out there. And if there's anything we learn from history, it's that we don't learn a goddamn thing. At first no one wanted to criticize the developments; it was sacreligious. It was like it was natural that Germany be brought together. It's only recently that it's turning into a reality that a Polish attache says to me: "Much as we dislike the Russians, we want the Russians to stay on our soil because we trust the Russians more than we do the Germans." It's only lately that the French have come on board and expressed their concern about this whole development. Now one can look at history and you find that whenever you talk about a European tragedy or a war, guess who's right in the middle of it?

WH: Germany?

SS: Yeah. It wasn't Lichtenstein; it wasn't Switzerland; it wasn't Norway. It was Germany. They're very powerful, very passionate, intense people. Once they set upon doing something they will succeed. And one cannot separate military power and economic power. They go hand in hand. And you can have military power without

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economic power and it's only a facade. That's what the Soviet Union's problem is----strong army but they did not have a strong economy, so they're on their ass. On the other hand, the U.S. obviously is a history of success because we had a strong economic base. So we're going to have a very powerful Germany. And it is true that over the last 45 years, West Germany behaved very responsibly and has shown its commitment to democracy but you're now mixing things up. East Germany has lived under a very different system for the last 45 years, has never acknowledged responsibility for the Holocaust, has strong nationalistic tendencies, and you wrap it all up and say that hopefully it's harnessed and goes into the right channels. I don't think I'll see another war in my lifetime but I want my children not to also.

WH: Where are your four daughters ? Here ?

SS: No. They're all grown up. Our youngest is 22 years old. She's still single. She works in Washington as a management analyst.

4 Another daughter, our oldest, also lives in Washington. She's married and her husband's in the army and she's also in the army. They're captains. They're going to be promoted to major. Then we have another daughter who is also married to a young officer who's stationed at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. And our fourth daughter is married to a major who's going to be a lieutenant colonel shortly and is stationed at Fort Benning, Georgia.

WH: Do they identify Jewishly in any way ?

SS: I think so. I don't think that religion became a very strong driving force in our lives as we went along. It did shortly after

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I came out of camp but, I'll tell you the truth, my experiences have caused me to question things and I never got satisfactory answers to them. And I think it certainly weakened my religious foundations. Some people found refuge in religion afterwards; I found the answers to some of my questions too simplistic and I could not accept them. There are all kinds of answers but when you get down to specifics and you say "that child; what harm did that child do?" Then you get some cockamainy answer. You have to have tremendous faith to accept those answers because they're not good answers.

WH: Where is your wife from ?

SS: She's born in Salem, Massachusetts. Came from a hard-working, lower-middle-class family. I met her in high school. She's Catholic but not strongly so. We started dating and got married and that is one reason I came to the army. When I first came to Salem, there were not that many immigrants or survivors there. And the Jewish community there took great pride in, and embraced us. They provided us opportunities. My dad was an engineer and because of language problems and a title, he was never able to transfer his background into a useful field here. Like today, a mechanic in East Germany is not employable in West Germany. They have different cars, different training. He found himself in the same situation and the capitalist system can be a very cruel system. You just have to produce and there is no handout.

WH: So what did he do ?

SS: Well, he was a janitor! He worked in a plastics factory and he

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was a proud man, but he just couldn't do anything else.

WH: Did he suffer more during the war ?

SS: I'm not sure he suffered more during the war but he suffered a great deal when he came to the U.S. He suffered because he had problems with his self-esteem. A man who was educated and who was certainly not a millionaire, but his parents were well off, respected in the Jewish community in Lithuania. He came in with certain expectations in the United States, the land of plenty, and he found out that you just better hustle. And he couldn't speak; that was the problem----the language barrier, you feel inferior. And then, you don't have to be extremely smart to wash a floor or latrine. And then you're not in middle level management; you're
4 down at the bottom of the heap.

WH: What about your mother ? Did she work ?

SS: Well, my mother and I didn't know what he did for a long time. All we knew was that he worked in a plastics factory. And one day after school I went down there, and I was going to pick him up and he was not in front of the factory and I went inside looking for him and some people told me where he was. He was late, or maybe I was a little early and I was shocked when I saw him washing that floor and latrine. And that was the first time I had an inkling of what he did. I tried to move away but he, he saw me and.....We drove home and he cried.....a terrible day.

WH: When did he pass away ?

SS: About ten years ago.

WH: Well, he must have been very proud of you.

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SS: Yeah, I think so.

WH: Maybe children of survivors, especially child survivors, feel a special obligation to make up for what happened to their parents.

SS: I would think so, but I don't know. I think most people would like to succeed.

WH: But certain people seem better able to succeed.

SS: It's an inner drive. I don't think you can pick that up theoretically, by reading a book. You get an education in the life of hard knocks. It hardens you; it develops your character. And some people don't have it. Some people got all beat and they came from good families and you don't know why. I think the human mind is too complicated to be subjected to such a simplistic analysis.

9 And I wish that sometimes we could just take a compression gauge and stick it up someone's rear and say: "It reads nine, so he's this kind of an individual." We're talking about motivation and God knows how many books have been written. What motivates one guy to do something and another to quit? In the military, we seek out soldiers for some of our elite units. We put them into very stressful situations to see how well they handle them. And we find that some handle it extremely well and others don't. I always remember there was a soldier not too long ago who was supposed to try to escape from the stockade in Fort Bragg in a basic course after being subjected to intensive interrogation. And the next thing you know we found him in a corner in this little cell mumbling: "Mommy don't hurt me, don't hurt me"...a grown-up man.

Of course the doctors tried to bring him back down. He had a bad

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time in childhood. He snapped right back to that period. What caused that ? It's hard to tell.

WH: Do you have any thoughts about Jewish resistance during the war? You had mentioned something about the partisans.

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SS: Well, I was a young kid and have to look at it after the fact. We were not radical enough; we were not hard enough. There was this eternal optimism; that it was just a bad dream; this has to come to an end and somebody else is going to save our ass. I don't know who the hell it is, but if I can just hold out, someone else will do it for you. And that's the best I can generalize. You can take isolated instances where people resisted, but when you look at the 6,000,000 Jews, we were fairly timid the way we accepted our fate. Yes, in the early years there was the shock, but when it wore off the opportunities for resistance were there. But from what I know about the camps, those places were not heavily guarded; much of the internal management was done by other Jews. We were sometimes our worst enemies.

WH: Do you identify at all Jewishly today ?

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SS: I go to temple. I never deny that I'm Jewish. I support those things that I feel a contribution would make a difference, but I don't go to the temple because I feel I have to talk to God. If I have to talk to God, he'll hear me wherever I am.

WH: How do you feel about Israel ?

SS: I'm kind of sensitive to that, I'll tell you the truth. I am first an American and as a soldier I have even a greater commitment than maybe a citizen does, but I have a great emotional attachment

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to Israel. I don't agree with everything Israel does because I have to examine every policy and then judge it. But I guess in some ways some of my thinking and even some of the things I did were somewhat colored by my feelings toward Israel. In my last position I probably encouraged our relationship with the Israeli Army more^{so} than... I rationalized it, but I also felt it was the right thing to do. I didn't do it merely because it was a Jewish state. Our relationship was mutually beneficial, and at least that's the way I rationalized it.

WH: Did you consider going to Israel after the war ?

SS: No. After it looked like we might not get to America on the first round we were looking at Venezuela. And ^Wthen it became clear that we could go to the U.S., we put Venezuela on ice. We always wanted to go to the U.S. because a good part of my mother's family lived in the United States.

WH: The uncle was your mother's brother ?

SS: Yes.

WH: You mentioned something before about going into the army.

3 SS: There was very strong opposition to my marriage. The Jewish community took a keen interest in me and there were some families that wanted to finance my way thru college, etcetera, and it was based on the fact that I was Jewish. And when the issue came up that I would marry someone not Jewish, it just didn't sit well with some of them. My parents felt very strongly too. They were upset about it. And I must admit there was no great joy on Arlene's side of the family because Catholic^s are also sort of dogmatic.

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3 And for a young person who just finished high school there were not too many options to escape. So one day I saw a big sign as I walked by the post office: "Join the Tenth Mountain Division. They're shipping out to Germany." And I thought this is about as far away as I can get from Salem and I thought maybe some of those forces and influences would diminish and I'd be able to put my life together. I looked upon it as a temporary relief but once I got in there I kind of liked it.

WH: You were completely helpless during the war and now you're really on the other side. You're in a position of authority. It's like turning the tables. Isn't there a feeling of getting back at them ?

8 SS: Yeah, but I don't think you ever exercise as much control. I realize how little control I had when my kids grew up; it seemed like overnight, I realized I had no control over them. I could give them my blessings, but they were going to get married.

WH: Are their husbands Jewish ?

SS: No. None of them. Even here there are rules and procedures. You're not the final authority. You still have a conscience to deal with. And so, yes, I'm still in a heck of a lot more comfortable position than I was before, but it's not the extreme. It's not the other side of the coin.

WH: Do you ever dream about the war ?

9 SS: I used to. I don't anymore. As a matter of fact I very seldom talk about what happened in those years and I normally skirt around those issues because I don't handle it well and you may recall the

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Iranians when they used to flog themselves; I just don't want to punish myself. Nothing good comes out of that.

WH: Did your children ask you about it ?

SS: Yeah. And I gave them a book to read.

WH: What prompted you to talk to me ?

SS: I think it was an interesting thing, what happened after the war. And what happened afterwards, there were some fateful moments, like when I thought of the episode with my dad because it was such a sad experience. But in general, my experiences after the war were pretty good.

WH: How did the Holocaust paper get hold of your name ?

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SS: Well, it happened really by accident. I was stationed in Washington. They have an annual event at the Naval Academy and I was asked by the school commander to talk to the cadets. It seemed that somebody in the audience picked up on that and I was asked to participate in a candle-lighting ceremony in the Capitol. So I did that and the press was there and asked for a bio, not from me, but from the public affairs department.

WH: Was your name changed ? I met someone who knows you from Kovno.

SS: Yes; it was Shachnofsky.

WH: His name is Dov Levin. Would you like to hear from him ?

SS: Yes I would.

WH: Do you think another Holocaust is possible?

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SS: Yes, look what happens when the farmers in the Midwest are suffering economically. Right away they turn around and blame the Jews.

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WH: Well there are blacks in America too.

SS: Well, I'm not saying the Holocaust would necessarily happen to Jews. It could happen to other minorities too. It's part of human nature to look for a scapegoat.

WH: Could education prevent a Holocaust ?

SS: I don't think education is the answer. We sit here in Berlin and watch the events go by and there isn't really anything we can do about it.