

I think we're close to the end here. Could you just continue with what you were saying?

About the religion?

Yeah.

All right. I was saying-- You asked me whether I was brought up in a religious family. And I said that I knew I was Jewish and that my father would go to the temple but would never take me along to the temple because men would go on one side and the women would go on the other side. My mother, because of her upbringing and her father, who was a consulate in St. Petersburg, she didn't really know much about the Jewish religion. And it was only when my grandmother started visiting us from the United States that she took me to the temple. And then I was sitting with the women and I just don't know why I had this strong feeling about being Jewish.

And actually when we got those papers I remember that my mother tried to talk me into it and ask the priests from the Lutheran Church in Belgium to give us papers that we were not Jewish, and I just didn't want to have any of it. I just didn't want to have any of it. And so although I did not have a religious education, I always felt Jewish, being Jewish.

Did your family celebrate any of the holidays, the sabbath?

Well they did Passover and the Day of the Dead-- how do you call that holiday?

This is not my area.

It is not your area of expertise either? Yes, the Day of Atonement and Passover they did. And Rosh Hashanah they did. Yom Kippur they did. So there were some religious holidays that they were celebrating. We did not celebrate Hanukkah. And this is actually kind of very strange because when I lived in Connecticut and I taught French in Connecticut and there was a large Jewish community there. And I would go to the temple there and they were very wealthy people and the rabbi would say, and what did you get for Hanukkah? And then one guy would say a bicycle and the other guy would say, I don't know, a television set.

And I would bring my two sons there, and what did you get? And you know they'd say, a book. And I got so disgusted actually with the attitude there about the values put on presents that I told my sons we are not going to celebrate Hanukkah anymore. And they were kind of provoked by that, but well anyway, at home we did celebrate the Jewish holidays.

What town was that in Connecticut that you were living in?

New Britain, Connecticut. And I would go to Hartford to the temple. And that was a very wealthy community, a very wealthy community.

Was the man that you married Jewish?

No. It was deliberate. I promised myself not to marry a Jewish person after the camp.

Why?

Because I didn't want my children to go through what I've seen. It didn't work out. I'm divorced.

Have you told your children that was part of your motivation?

No. No, I haven't. Actually, this is very strange. My younger one feels very Jewish. My older one I don't think so. My youngest son does.

Did your experience have anything to do with the breakup of your marriage?

No. I think that it is very hard for a person with a European background to find the exact person to live with in an American-born person. And my ex-husband was in science, in biology, and I'm in literature. And I think that intellectually we didn't really match. And then that was transposed into different ways of behavior. It was not really because he was not Jewish. It was just that we had a different outlook on philosophy of life.

But I know it was deliberate, because when I went to Israel I think I had about 15 marriage proposals in one month. Because they all wanted to get married. It was a young state. And I knew already then that I wasn't ready for that.

How do you feel that your Holocaust experiences have affected your adult life, your later life, in the kind of person you are and the way you make decisions and the sort of things that you do and don't do?

It has really affected me that I have learned that nothing in life is permanent and that actually I am shying away of any permanent job. I have taught, and all my teaching assignments would be five years. And it's a deliberate choice because I don't want anything permanent. Because I know that nothing is permanent. And so that it has affected my life.

And I think I am appreciating life more now. And I am trying to give myself a little treat every day on something, to pause and think and think, well, today is a day to celebrate. Every day is a day to celebrate. A little something every day. I think that I don't take life for granted.

Can you give us an example of the little something that you're talking about that would be a day of celebration?

A day of celebration? Well, to be with friends, to exchange ideas, not to think about material things. I think friendship and family is very important. And enjoy little things. And treat yourself once in a while to something extravagant, even if you feel, I can't afford it. Go to a restaurant, invite friends, thinking, what am I saving it for? Spend it now. I'm not an extravagant person, but this save it for later is not really my philosophy because later may never come.

Did you have psychological problems as a result of your war experience?

Well, I will tell you that this friend of mine asked me to join this group in Berkeley about the survivors, but these are children survivors. I find it difficult to attend these meetings because I just don't want to hear depressing stories anymore, and I really want to put this behind me. And I think that these meetings do me more harm than good. Although I feel that maybe we cannot really help those people. I think that these people need personal counseling, and that standing in front of a group--

You see, the requirements to belong to that group is that you stand up and you tell your story. And I still have refused to do it. And this is why I'd rather come here and this is why I sat down at home and wrote it out and gave it to my children. I just don't see any purpose in doing that. This is my personal feeling I think, yes, it has affected my life. You cannot be the same anymore.

There was a time when I was in New York and I stayed with these friends who were Jewish friends in Belgium. And they immigrated and their son now is a dean at Harvard. And his mother, when she'd introduce me to people, I would always say, I'm Jewish. And she said, will just please drop that? Nobody cares. And I don't know why I always had to explain that I was Jewish. And maybe she's right or maybe she's wrong, but I always had to explain that I was Jewish. And that it took me a long time not mentioning it.

Now many people don't even know I'm Jewish and I figure maybe it's wrong too. But then I don't know how to start explaining it. I do have a little problem with that, when to tell and not to tell. I think it's a problem. I don't know if I answered your question.

Yes. Those are all my questions, Peggy.

Anything else you'd like to say?

No. I just want to have a little message here to a future generation that don't take life for granted. It's a gift. And don't waste it because it's a great gift. And you can do great things. And be grateful and be happy.

When you just said that you wanted to put this all behind you, does that mean, you don't think you have?

I don't think so.

How do you?

Little things remind you of it. And I do have dreams. And actually I have resolved a few of my dreams. I had this one dream that I wanted to take a shower. And I stand in line and I don't know where it is. And I never get to the shower and I get very frustrated. And then a friend of mine said that it was because I'm guilty that I'm still alive. And now I don't dream about it anymore.

But I am sometimes guilty that I'm here and so many people are not there. And therefore, I try to be an overachiever and raise my two children and try to get a PhD. And why me? Why was I spared? Yeah, it's a responsibility. Yeah.

What is that responsibility?

What is that responsibility? To set out a good example of your life since life has been given to you a second time, I guess. To go out and achieve more. And then of course it's in the media also all the time. You are reminded of it. And maybe it's not meant to be forgotten because then it can happen again. Who knows? I don't think it will happen in this country, but we said it in Belgium.

I don't really care because I live my life. It's just my children and my granddaughter. I guess this is it. I'm finished.

You mentioned earlier that a therapist said something to you one time. Does that mean that you actually got therapy?

When was that?

Earlier in the interview.

What did the therapist say?

I forget what, but you said they had told you--

Oh yes. No, it was a counselor when I got a divorce. And she kind of wanted to see how I was doing on my own. My children were very small. And then the PhD came up, that it was kind of an obsession with me to try to get the PhD. And I tried five times. I put myself through the PhD program five times into the prelims to the orals five times. And then she would say that it is this committee of men that reminds me somehow of the Gestapo and this is why I can't get through with this. And maybe she was right. SO I've been pretty hard on myself because you don't go for a PhD and raise two sons and teach full time and fly back and forth to take your oral exams from the east.

So you got counseling when your marriage broke up, but not about the Holocaust.

Right. Oh no, I didn't ever. No, because I don't really consider myself a victim of the Holocaust. I was not in an extermination camp. You see what I mean? It was just a camp where things were more or less still civilized. I was deprived of my freedom, and of course from 18 to 20 I had no fun. But then it could have been so much worse.

You don't feel like you were a victim.

No, except that my freedom was taken away from me.

Did you ever tell your husband about your experiences?

Oh yeah, because I'm pretty good in German and all his friends had to pass the German reading exam for the PhD in biology and I helped them all out on getting prepared for this. And when it came to him, he claims that I have communicated my hatred for the Germans to him and this is why he had a block and he couldn't pass the German reading exam. Pretty good, eh?

I will tell you something better. When I was in Connecticut, I taught French, German and Russian. And I don't recommend it. And I was so good at my teaching in German that my students would ask me whether I was German. Isn't that something? That is really the irony of the situation.

Yeah.

And I don't know how I brought myself to teach German, but it was just that I did it for my two sons. When they hired me, they asked me if I could also teach a German section, somebody was on sabbatical leave, and so I did it. But I'm not going to put myself through that again. No. Teach two languages, but three, you divide yourself in three? No. I wouldn't do that. I wouldn't recommend that.

What about your children? They have this thing they call Holocaust Survivor Syndrome, children of Holocaust survivors.

Well, I wouldn't know about that. But when there was the ceremony here at the Temple, I don't remember what the name of that ceremony was, it was the commemoration somebody had given my name and I was there to light up the candle. I think neither of them wanted to participate. Friends came, but neither of them wanted to participate. I think my youngest son doesn't want to be part of any unpleasant topic of conversation. And he says it's not because he's indifferent to it, it's because it takes too much out of him.

Do you think your experience has affected your children?

It might. I can give you little examples. They wouldn't eat, and I would say, there are children starving and in concentration camps and all that. And then they would say, that doesn't concern me. Or my older son, Greg, he's a high school dropout but he got his navigator's license and he is captain of a boat and he takes people salmon fishing. I couldn't understand this that he would be a high school dropout. I'd give my life, my right arm, to finish that high school diploma.

And well, this is just what happens in Berkeley High in those days. He was a high school dropout and I just couldn't understand it. Still today I still can't understand it. But he turned out all right, but that this education is given to you and you drop it, you don't finish it? I couldn't understand that. Actually, we never discuss it anymore. Maybe because in the United States it's not that drastic. You can always pick up from where you leave. There are the junior colleges. But I just beyond my way of understanding.

I remember when you said earlier that when you told your sons about your experiences you left some stuff out. Did you include that in this interview, any of those things?

I don't think so. I really blocked it. Now I can't really remember them. There are a few things that I really did put behind me. I probably-- It's a good question. But so maybe I did put some things behind me, right? This would answer the previous question. I must have blocked a few things out for good. I don't know whether it's good or bad.

One more time, is there anything more you'd like to say?

No, I'm just glad I'm here and I'm alive. And you will see that my story is not really as gruesome as other people's story. And I think that these are happy times now, although they are never really happy times. But there is a time to grieve and there is a time to be happy, and I would emphasize on the happy, on the positive.

Do you think that the degree of suffering makes the suffering any less important?

Probably, yes. The duration, the intensity, yes, I would say, yes. You don't relive it. Because you think that you reach a certain plateau and after-- I identified a lot with the hostages in Iran. But then when I started to compute my days of how I was 2 and 1/2 years in a camp. But being a hostage is a very traumatic experience, except that I think I had it better because I had other people to communicate with. Very intelligent people. It was really the elite out there. And I think that's what helped us to survive.

And the hostages, if some are isolated, it must be very hard for them, very hard. Because as long as you have one another to communicate with, it makes it so much easier. And I think that's what helped us. Definitely. Yeah.

We don't have any more questions.

Well, this is it.

Thanks very much.

You're welcome.

You didn't happen to bring any old photographs with you or anything like that?

Well, I brought the tape and I gave it to her.