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INTERVIEW WITH: Isseroff Family  
INTERVIEWER: Ken Rothchild  
DATE:  
PLACE:  
TRANSCRIBER: Eileen Mulvenna

MR. ROTHCHILD: This is Ken Rothchild interviewing the Isseroff family. I'm going to be interviewing Gizella, Yaro (phonetic) and Jacob Isseroff. Gizella is a survivor of the Holocaust. Jacob is an American-born Jew who married Gizella. And Yaro is their daughter.

MRS. ISSEROFF: Youngest.

MR. ROTHCHILD: Youngest daughter.

Gizella, let's go back -- first of all, where were you when everything first started?

MRS. ISSEROFF: I was home. I was fourteen-and-a-half years old.

MR. ROTHCHILD: Where? What part of the world were you in?

MRS. ISSEROFF: Czechoslovakia. Well, it belonged to Hungary after the Second World War broke out. Before that, it was part of the Austro-Hungarian empire. So it belonged to Czechoslovakia while I was born. But as of 1939, it

1  
2 belonged to Hungary. And now it's part of Russia.

3 And in 1944, they collected us and put  
4 us into a ghetto. And from the ghetto, they took all  
5 of us.

6 I was the oldest of six children. My  
7 father was thirty-six. My mother was thirty-four. I  
8 was fourteen-and-a-half. And I had sisters -- the  
9 youngest was two-and-a half years old.

10 And we were taken to Auschwitz after  
11 four weeks of being in the ghetto. And we were in  
12 cattle wagons when we went to Auschwitz. And we  
13 arrived eight days -- in May, eight days before  
14 Shavvos.

15 MR. ROTHCHILD: What year?

16 MRS. ISSEROFF: 1944, beginning  
17 of May.

18 And after the selections, my father went  
19 into lab -- to the concentration camp to work. My  
20 mother was selected right away, with the children, to  
21 go to the other side, and they burned her. I tried  
22 going back to my -- I did not want to be separated  
23 from my mother. And my mother begged them and cried  
24 in German that I was a sick child and they should let  
25 her come with me. I was holding my youngest brother

1  
2 and -- because you had to line up five in a line and  
3 we were seven, because they separated the men first.

4 We were six children; and my parents  
5 made eight; and my grandfather came with us. So  
6 first they separated the two men. So that left just  
7 the six children and my mother, which is seven. You  
8 had to go five in a line. So I was in front of my  
9 mother holding onto my baby sister when the selection  
10 was. So he asked, "Whose child is it?" My mother  
11 assumed he's referring to me. She said, "She's my  
12 child." He says, "Well, then, give the child to your  
13 mother and you go to the right."

14 So my mother says, "No, she's fourteen  
15 only. She's sick. Please, let her come with me."  
16 And he grabbed me by my coat and said, "I told you to  
17 go on this side." I was on that side.

18 As I was walking away, I realized that I  
19 had, in the bag, the food, whatever food that there  
20 was in the family, which was, hum, toast and  
21 whatever. I started running back to my mother. And  
22 he had -- a German who was doing the selection had in  
23 his hand a dog in one hand and another he had a cane.  
24 And he calls me, "You dumb cow. Where are you  
25 going?" I said, "I'm just going to give her the

1 food. I'm coming right back. I have all the food."  
2

3 So I handed her the food and I went back  
4 to the other line. As I was walking towards the  
5 showers we were going for to cut our hair, I heard  
6 somebody calling my name. And my father was on the  
7 other side selected. He asked me, "Where's your  
8 mother?" So I said -- I pointed that she was on the  
9 left side. He passed out in front of my eyes. That  
10 was the last I ever saw of him.

11 And I was in Auschwitz till January. I  
12 worked at sorting out clothes in the crematory. And  
13 I never wanted to accepted that my mother was  
14 actually burned, so I always said no, even though we  
15 saw constantly the burning and the stench was just  
16 unbearable, because they had the bunks there and you  
17 saw the sky was always red and the smell was just  
18 horrible. But I always said, "No, she's somewhere  
19 with the children, she's away."

20 Then I sorted the clothing out. As the  
21 people got undressed and they got burned, they tied  
22 in a big sheet all the clothing, and you were sorting  
23 out the clothing. The shoes went one place, the  
24 dresses someplace else. You were supposed to turn in  
25 all jewelry that you found, which you were supposed

1  
2 to give to the Germans, the leaders there, the Kapos.  
3 And they were going to give it to the German -- what  
4 do you call it?

5 I opened up a bundle and there I saw the  
6 bundle, the clothing that my family wore. My kid  
7 brother, I had made him a sweater for Passover, and I  
8 recognized it. And I passed out. I woke up and the  
9 bundle was gone and I was all wet. They used to pour  
10 on you water, girls that you worked with. So I was  
11 just drenched, wet, and the bundle was gone. And  
12 then I just sort of -- but you never really accepted.  
13 You always, nah, it's not true.

14 And I worked there until October -- no,  
15 it was September. September, October I worked  
16 selecting clothes. Then it slowed down, the  
17 transports. And they didn't burn that many. The  
18 allies were coming closer. And they transferred me.  
19 First I was selected out and -- but they didn't burn  
20 that many. So all of a sudden, they just took my  
21 blood and they sent it to the soldiers.

22 I used to suffer from migraine  
23 headaches. And after that I was really just  
24 terrible. And I worked in the vayborri they had  
25 there. I just met a lady here, said she worked

1  
2 there, too.

3           And I was very fortunate that the Kapo,  
4 she was a Polish woman. Everybody was scared of her  
5 and she was very mean to everybody. But me she used  
6 to call clainshika. That means little one. And when  
7 she saw them coming to check how much -- you were  
8 supposed to make a certain amount of mileage each day  
9 on that vayborri. It was a -- you weaved for the --  
10 for the -- they used it for lighting the things. I  
11 don't know. What is it called? To light up the --  
12 anyway, it was used in the munitions by them.

13           And you had to make a certain amount.  
14 There was a quota to make. And she saw I couldn't do  
15 it. She would, the mark, move the marker each time  
16 for me. And when they came in, she'd say -- when  
17 they came to check, she says, "Oh, she had made  
18 already ten miles." And when they left, she'd say --  
19 when the Germans left, she'd say, "Put down your head  
20 a little bit." And that kept me going for a while.

21           And then I stayed there till January in  
22 Auschwitz. And in January, the Russians were coming.  
23 And we started out on foot in a snowstorm and with a  
24 piece of bread. I had wooden shoes. And I had -- my  
25 hair was shaven off twice, because once they selected

1  
2 me out, too. So I was almost completely bald. And I  
3 had a little sweater that clung to my body, plus that  
4 gray dress that they issued for us, and the little  
5 jacket.

6 And we walked through the snowstorm for  
7 a few days till -- on the way, they had cattle  
8 wagons. An awful lot of us died on the way. But it  
9 wasn't so bad as the men. And the only thing that  
10 kept me going was that I knew my father was at  
11 home -- was in the forced labor -- I mean, in  
12 concentration camp. So I felt, he's going to come  
13 home and he's not going to find anybody. My whole  
14 family was destroyed. I says, "I can't do that. I  
15 have to go on."

16 And I used to see the bodies on the  
17 ground that one -- some shot and some frozen. I'd  
18 say, "Oh, I can't go. I can't walk anymore." And  
19 the people -- the girls that I walked with would say  
20 to me, "Remember your father. He's going to come  
21 home. He's not going to find anybody."

22 And I would turn over to see their faces  
23 of the men who were on the ground. Maybe I'd see my  
24 father; I don't have to walk anymore, because I  
25 couldn't walk.

1  
2                   Then we stopped and we went into cattle  
3 wagons. There was only standing room. And each time  
4 they would attack somebody. They was standing --  
5 they thought he had a piece of bread. They would  
6 grab and grab away the bread. He collapsed. And  
7 when the train stopped, they throw him out in the  
8 snow, through the window.

9                   MR. ROTHCHILD:     Where were you  
10 walking to? You were leaving Auschwitz?

11                  MRS. ISSEROFF:     Yes.

12                  MR. ROTHCHILD:     This was --

13                  MRS. ISSEROFF:     We were leaving  
14 Auschwitz. The whole transport was leaving.

15                  MR. ROTHCHILD:     Going to where?

16                  MRS. ISSEROFF:     The Russians  
17 were coming. We ended up in Ravensburg, which was a  
18 big concentration camp. I came, my knees were all  
19 frost-bitten, and my toes, but I refused to go into  
20 for the -- to be treated, because I knew that minute  
21 you went into reported sick, they'd kill you, they  
22 burn you. So I didn't want to go.

23                  MR. ROTHCHILD:     So they were  
24 moving you out of Auschwitz to another camp to avoid  
25 the Russians who were coming?



1  
2 MRS. ISSEROFF: Right, they came  
3 in. As a matter of fact, I just spoke to the lady  
4 who said she couldn't walk from Auschwitz. She  
5 stayed there. The Russians came and they liberated  
6 her. She said she couldn't -- came time to leave,  
7 she said she was sick, she could not walk. She  
8 worked also in the vayborri. She was in the same  
9 camp. She said she couldn't walk and she wasn't  
10 physically up to it, and she didn't. And she was  
11 liberated. But we walked. This was in January.

12 And then we ended up in Ravensburg. And  
13 after Ravensburg, they sent us to another -- this was  
14 not a crematorium, this was Mawhoff (phonetic) it was  
15 called, which people used to work in. And it was a  
16 concentration camp, but it wasn't -- they didn't have  
17 crematoriums. And the people were treated much  
18 better. There were two to a bunk only and the food  
19 was better. By the time we arrived, they didn't have  
20 that much food, but -- and we didn't work anymore.  
21 It was just a stop-over.

22 When I came back, I was very sick. And  
23 I got -- had got the jaundice. I was very yellow and  
24 blown-up from hunger. I remember staying -- we used  
25 to stand up and fell every time. And I looked --

1  
2 there was a puddle. It rained. Didn't have a mirror  
3 or anything. And I seen in the puddle that I'm all  
4 swollen and all blown-up. You start to recognize the  
5 symptoms, the signs, because after that, you usually  
6 died. And I --

7 MR. ROTHCHILD: I'm sorry. The  
8 symptoms of what?

9 MRS. ISSEROFF: You know,  
10 malnutrition and being swollen and sick. So you used  
11 to blow-up and turn colors. And I looked in the  
12 puddle and I saw that I was all blown-up. And I knew  
13 I was jaundiced. So I figured, here it is. Here I  
14 go. And I'd go to sleep. And in the middle of the  
15 night, I have the same nightmare over and over.

16 I died. And I gave my mother an  
17 argument. I believed in Heaven. I was brought up as  
18 a very Orthodox -- I came from a very Orthodox  
19 family. And I couldn't for the life of me figure out  
20 that all these innocent people didn't go to Heaven.  
21 So I came to the other world, and I gave my mother an  
22 argument. What are you complaining? You didn't have  
23 it hard. They killed you right away with your  
24 children. You didn't suffer. What about me and  
25 daddy, look what we went through. This went over and

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over.

And then beginning of May, we started to -- the Russians were closing in on us again. So we started to move away, walk. We walked a couple of nights. And then just the middle of the night, the guards just left us. And we were liberated by the Russians on the road. And we started walking. There was a few girls there from other towns. I didn't know them, but you get to know them. And a mother was there and a Russian soldier, a Jewish soldier, came and got us a horse. And he took -- got some bread for us. And then we started on the way back.

Except when we came, the Russian soldiers decided -- you know, they were attacking everybody. We looked like -- skeletons looked better. But you can imagine that five weeks after the liberation, I weighed forty-two kilos. How much is that in pounds? About eighty, ninety pounds? That was five weeks after the liberation. Just a skeleton. It was sick. But they were busy attacking them.

Anyway, we got to Krakow. And from there, by train, by horse, by you name it. And in Krakow they had set up a train where the unra was

1  
2 supplying food and medication. And they got us back  
3 home.

4 I came home; didn't find anybody. My  
5 father's whole transport was killed. And I came back  
6 home; didn't find anything. Our apartment was --  
7 everything was -- everything was --the walls they  
8 broke up, lifted the floors to see if they can find  
9 anything.

10 I remember walking into my parent's  
11 house. And my father was a scholar, learned a lot.  
12 And all his books, all his seforiu was torn to  
13 shatters. Standing knee-deep in them trying to find  
14 a picture, a handwriting, anything, a postcard.  
15 There was nothing.

16 And I remembered that my mother had  
17 given some things to a Christian lady, she should put  
18 away things. And I came home. I walked and I said,  
19 "Do you have anything of our things?"

20 "Oh, dear," she starts to cry, "Where's  
21 your beautiful mother?"

22 "She isn't here. She isn't alive."

23 "Your father?"

24 "No."

25 This was my grandfather's landlady, a

1  
2 lady -- and my grandfather gave her things and my  
3 mother. And then she questioned me, "Who is coming  
4 home?" And I tell her, "Nobody is alive except me."

5 I says, "Could I get something back as  
6 remembrance from you?"

7 She said, "Dear me, the Russians took  
8 everything. They kicked and they robbed and they  
9 take -- took everything away from us. I have  
10 nothing."

11 As I was walking out, she had a little  
12 table, and on the table was a little cloth. a little  
13 tablecloth with my grandmother's initials. My  
14 grandmother's initials were the same as mine. I was  
15 named after her. And I recognized it and I saw it  
16 there.

17 And I said, What, am I going to fight  
18 with her over a tablecloth? I've lost everything  
19 anyway. I just walked out.

20 And then -- and I was fifteen-and-a-half  
21 at the time. That was a year later.

22 And then I found out they had set up  
23 Jewish kitchens, and whatnot. People -- whoever came  
24 home didn't have anywhere to stay, slept on the floor  
25 there. And we ate that day.

1  
2                   And then people told me that my uncle,  
3 my mother's brother, is alive; and my mother's niece,  
4 my cousin, is alive, in another town where my mother  
5 lived. I went on the train and I came to that other  
6 town. And as I got off the train, my mother's sister  
7 came off, from concentration camp. And then her  
8 brother came. And that's how we started staying  
9 together.

10                   And we came to here, to my mother's  
11 uncle through marriage, who lived in Wilmington,  
12 Delaware, who brought us out. And that's how I met  
13 my husband.

14                   I have four children; three professional  
15 children. My oldest daughter is a dermatologist.  
16 My son is a podiatrist. My other daughter is a  
17 lawyer. I have four beautiful grandchildren. This  
18 one is my fifteen-year-old daughter.

19                   I could tell you lost a lot of things.  
20 It's very hard to comprehend.

21                   MR. ROTHCHILD:     If there's  
22 anything you just want to tell without my questions,  
23 I'd be interested in that. I mean, I have a few  
24 questions, but I'd certainly be interested in any  
25 impressions. All right. If anything occurs to you

1  
2 that you'd like to put on the record while we're  
3 talking --

4 MRS. ISSEROFF: One thing I can  
5 never forget is when we came in the cattle wagons.  
6 The things -- you know, people, everybody thrown  
7 together. And I remember my parents, both my mother  
8 and my father, were constantly saying tihilim. I  
9 don't know how it's called in English.

10 YARO ISSEROFF: Psalms.

11 MRS. ISSEROFF: Psalms. They  
12 were praying and singing psalms. And I can see them  
13 as clear as anything, the tears rolling down their  
14 faces, and discussing -- my mother says, "God,  
15 please, whatever happen till now, just don't punish  
16 me to the point where I should have to watch my  
17 children sorrow or suffering. Anything has to happen  
18 to us, let's all go together. Don't punish me to the  
19 point I should have to watch my children suffer,  
20 because I couldn't bear it."

21 And my father would each time pick up  
22 his head and say, "God, please, just spare one child  
23 of mine. Don't make us completely disappear from the  
24 world."

25 He tried very hard to save me before.

1  
2 He wanted to -- one child, somebody. So I always  
3 used to feel that God did grant his wish because I  
4 stayed alive and my mother never did watch those  
5 children suffer. But the pictures are so clear.  
6 They're -- always you can see them.

7 MR. ROTHCHILD: How did you know  
8 that your brothers and sisters were all dead?

9 MRS. ISSEROFF: I told you. I  
10 found the bundle that came out of the crematorium  
11 with their clothes.

12 MR. ROTHCHILD: Right, with  
13 their clothes. Oh, with all their clothes? You  
14 found all their clothes?

15 MRS. ISSEROFF: They wore -- the  
16 clothing that they wore, the sweater that I made.  
17 Until then, I didn't want to accept it. When the  
18 lead -- stubenouster said, or the Kapos said -- we  
19 asked, "Where's my mother? Where are our children?"  
20 She'd point, "You see that smoke? That's where  
21 they're coming out."

22 So I would say "mean people," just  
23 because they've been -- they're hardened, they're not  
24 human anymore. Just because they suffered so many  
25 years and we just came in '44, these people were



1  
2 there already since '39, '40, they have no more  
3 emotions, they have no more soul. That's why they're  
4 so mean to us.

5 Or they would say, "You see the ground  
6 you're standing on, it's soaked with our blood. We  
7 built up this camp. It was nothing when you came  
8 here."

9 So I said, "Ah, miserable people.  
10 They're just saying that."

11 And they did put some things in the food  
12 where you really couldn't think. You didn't think.  
13 You didn't function as a normal human being or a  
14 thinking person.

15 And I said, "Nay, it's not true." And  
16 even though I worked -- where I worked, I saw it  
17 daily what was going on. I still, "Nay, my mother's  
18 someplace else. She's safe."

19 Till you're confronted with everything,  
20 you know. I was sorting out the clothes that came  
21 out of the crematorium. That was my job. When I  
22 found the bundles, I knew there was no use kidding  
23 myself.

24 MR. ROTHCHILD: Can you remember  
25 back to the time before you were picked up and moved

1  
2 to Auschwitz? What was your thinking then? What was  
3 the conversation among your family before your family  
4 was actually directly affected?

5 MRS. ISSEROFF: Well, I told you  
6 I came from a very Orthodox family, very sheltered.  
7 But a lot of the family -- my father was in and out  
8 of forced labor since 1939. And it was very  
9 difficult. You had no means of support, of making a  
10 living. There was no industry. There was no -- I  
11 mean, it was very, very difficult.

12 My father was in and out, a few months  
13 in and then he got out on all kinds of pretenses;  
14 imaginary illnesses, that you went to an insane  
15 asylum and took shock treatments in order to get out.  
16 You have a doctor sign that you were -- you were  
17 depressed, you were -- all kinds.

18 And at one point, he had put some kind  
19 of a salve on his foot and he got an ulcer, a very  
20 severe ulcer, which excused him to stay home another  
21 six months. All kinds of things. And that way, he  
22 was home. And he happened to be home when they took  
23 him away.

24 My father's only brother was grabbed in  
25 1941. And he was hiding on papers in another town.

1  
2 And they killed him just a day before the Russians  
3 came in Budapest. He's not alive. My father had --  
4 my grandfather from my mother's side, they came  
5 originally from Galitza, so they were constantly in  
6 hiding.

7 People who they grabbed in '41 came back  
8 and told us stories we didn't want to believe. And  
9 then my father said, These are foreigners, but my  
10 great-grandfather was born here. How could they put  
11 us -- where would they take us? We were born here.  
12 My great-grandfather was born here. We are an asset  
13 to the community.

14 Our city had a lot of very respectable  
15 Jewish people who contributed an awful lot to the  
16 whole community, to the whole city. My uncles  
17 were -- one was -- Rabbis and all kinds of things.

18 We never thought that we'd really be  
19 taken away. Why would they want to kill us? Fine,  
20 we'll work. They'll make us work. But not kill us.  
21 We never really expected that they'd -- this was just  
22 something that we didn't think of.

23 Yet, a few years ago, I met somebody  
24 who -- that his son was my brother's age, they went  
25 to school together. In other words, my brother was

1  
2 twelve-and-a half and this boy was a year older -- a  
3 year-and-a-half older. He was fourteen when he went  
4 to the camp. And he went -- he was together with my  
5 father in concentration camp.

6 So he said that he remembered that at  
7 night at the discussions at the bunks, the first few  
8 nights he was with my father, and my father knew  
9 right away that my mother and the children were  
10 destroyed. And he knew that I was alive, and the  
11 only one. He knew right away that that was it,  
12 because he overheard my father say, "Do you  
13 realize" -- this was his friend, his closest friend,  
14 the boy's father -- "Do you realize that it's only  
15 who are here? And the other side, the women that are  
16 alive -- the women and the children are gone."

17 So, evidently, my father knew. But I  
18 was a child, and a sheltered child at that. I had no  
19 idea. I mean, I really didn't know. I was the  
20 oldest child. And economically, things were very,  
21 very tough. I helped out in the house with  
22 everything that I knew how. I was responsible for my  
23 younger brothers and sisters. My mother, she'd be  
24 able to see -- to provide some kind of, you know,  
25 living food or whatever it was. So I helped with

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that. But anything else, I really didn't know.

MR. ROTHCHILD: What can you tell me about Auschwitz as far as life among the prisoners, how they would relate to each other, what they would talk about? Was there an internal communication? What did people do?

MRS. ISSEROFF: What did people do? Well, I'll tell you. I happened to have fallen -- they were clickish, of course. I was never referred to as anything else except the ma-jar-ka (phonetic). In other words, if you -- as the Hungarian little kid. I happened to fall in later on in a group where most of them were Polish Jews. So they would call me the little Hungarian. And not in a flattering way about it, either. They felt that we had it very easy till then; that we lived a life of comfort, because in Hungary, people were economically more or less better off for a few years than the Polish Jews. So there was a slight resentment.

And, of course, everybody was out for themselves. I saw mothers stealing from -- daughters stealing from their mothers, the food, they should be able to survive.

When you lined up, people just couldn't

1  
2 take any more, they'd go against the fence just to  
3 get electrocuted. They couldn't -- a cousin of mine,  
4 a young girl my age, when they selected her out after  
5 seven weeks there, she was busy thanking God that she  
6 doesn't -- she couldn't take any more and she would  
7 thank God that she was going to be burned. That's  
8 it.

9 Another girl who lived in our yard was  
10 there with her mother. She was selected. And I went  
11 to see her, that she was selected out. This was  
12 after three months of all that. She couldn't take  
13 any of it. She was completely -- she didn't know who  
14 she was. She didn't know anything.

15 We went to work with music every  
16 morning. And I went right away to work after five  
17 days being there. I worked selecting out the  
18 clothes. So the first few months, I had food, more  
19 food than the other people. Because there was --  
20 first of all, the diet was better if you worked,  
21 number one. Number two, people brought in from the  
22 crematorium packages of food like I took the food. I  
23 gave my mother the food. So it was there. So we had  
24 better food. We had much better food first.

25 MR. ROTHCHILD: What was

1  
2 important to survival in Auschwitz? What was  
3 important to keeping your mind together and keeping  
4 your soul together?

5 MRS. ISSEROFF: That we were all  
6 drugged, number one. And you really couldn't think.  
7 And you had to have an upper-most drive. I think if  
8 it wasn't for my father, seeing the way I saw my  
9 father pass out in front of my eyes, if that wasn't  
10 with me, I don't think I would ever made it -- have  
11 made it.

12 Of course, it was luck. I was selected  
13 out. I went through things that is utterly  
14 unbelievable that a human being can survive it all.  
15 But I think that drive, that no, I must get home. It  
16 was constantly in my mind, God, I must get home. If  
17 I'm coming -- if anybody's going to come home, and if  
18 my father -- I knew my father saw me and he's going  
19 to do everything to come home. He can't come home  
20 alone. Somebody's got to be left, somebody. That  
21 drive, I know that was the only reason I came out of  
22 it.

23 That (inaudible), that march, that death  
24 march, very few people survived. The percentage, I  
25 think it was much bigger of male. Men died, many

1  
2 more men died than women. The women somehow survived  
3 it better. Maybe because they didn't work as hard as  
4 the men, or maybe they have just better stamina. I  
5 don't know why. But for every five men on the  
6 ground, you found one woman in that death march.  
7 Every five, I would say. I remember I told you I  
8 kept looking to see if I see my father. So it was  
9 always for every five men, you'd see one woman. I  
10 don't know.

11 MR. ROTHCHILD: I want to know  
12 right now about experiences. What can you remmeber  
13 in terms of your feelings about yourself, about your  
14 health, about just trying to keep body and soul  
15 together?

16 MRS. ISSEROFF: Body and soul  
17 together? In Auschwitz, I never thought that we'd  
18 come out; but once the Russians were coming near and  
19 they stopped the crematory and they stopped burning  
20 people, and then I felt that anybody who's going to  
21 survive, is going to come out, it's going to be a  
22 much better world. It just can't go on. I mean, if  
23 we could, everything will be okay. People would  
24 never let these things happen again. Things are  
25 going to be good. They have to be.



1  
2                   That is until I found out my father  
3 didn't come home. I wanted to commit suicide. That  
4 was one thing I felt. I really did. That was  
5 fortunate. The rest of whatever family was left,  
6 they hung on to me.

7                   My mother came from a very big family.  
8 We were twenty-two grandchildren. I was the only one  
9 that came home from a concentration camp. I have one  
10 more cousin who was in hiding. Twenty grandchildren  
11 were killed. My mother had sisters and brothers.  
12 They didn't come home. The two that came home were  
13 very, very loving and very supportive, and we were  
14 very close. And we came to the United States  
15 altogether.

16                   And to this day, our relationship is  
17 more like a sisters -- sisters than -- than -- even  
18 sisters aren't that close than my mother's sisters.  
19 They're not much older than I am, but the  
20 relationship was always -- they were like mother  
21 figures. They took care of me.

22                   But you didn't really think. It was  
23 just a daily thing from day to day. If, you know,  
24 you were starving, you were hungary, you looked at  
25 that piece of bread, if I eat it up now, how am I

1  
2 going to survive the rest of the day? Yet, you got  
3 it in the morning, a thin slice of bread with a  
4 little jam on it. First you used to get margarine,  
5 later on just beet jam. And you said, "Gee, if I eat  
6 it up, I'm going to starve a whole day. No, I'll  
7 save it."

8           You'd take a piece of it off, but you  
9 were so hungary, you ate it up. And then the whole  
10 day you went around -- they used to give you  
11 coffee -- coffee -- it wasn't coffee -- whatever. It  
12 was supposed to be coffee, and soup. And it was  
13 heavy and either pasternak or beets, pieces of beets.  
14 And in the beginning when we worked, it had horse  
15 meat in it; but later on, they didn't put any meat in  
16 it or anything. And for years afterwards, I couldn't  
17 look at pasternak or beets. But that was it. You  
18 figured, Look, just go on. You didn't -- I don't  
19 think you -- you functioned, your mind -- you didn't  
20 think of anything at all.

21           From the very beginning they put in  
22 something that nobody had their period. You had no  
23 period. And also I think they must have put  
24 something in the food, because if you were thinking,  
25 if you could think like a normal human being, how

1  
2 could you stay -- you know, stand it.

3 MR. ROTHCHILD: Might it have  
4 been that you were just on such a low caloric diet  
5 that the undernourishment and so forth interferred  
6 with --

7 MRS. ISSEROFF: I don't know  
8 caloric --

9 MR. ROTHCHILD: No, but I mean,  
10 do you think --

11 MRS. ISSEROFF: Possibility. I  
12 don't know. We were just like -- like tranquilized,  
13 like half-drugged. Like sometimes I sit and think  
14 you just didn't -- you just dragged yourself. And  
15 each time we -- they had selections like once a  
16 month. First of all, you went into the showers.  
17 They took your clothing in. To de-lice, they called  
18 it. De-licing. You know, you didn't have any  
19 showers, or anything. Once a month, you went into  
20 the shower. Like this, you washed yourself in cold  
21 water; winter in Auschwitz. So you stripped -- they  
22 stripped you and they cut your hair and they threw  
23 the clothes into big tanks and they de-liced you.  
24 You sat on the stone a whole night. In the morning  
25 you went to a--pel (phonetic). Stand in line and

1  
2 they counted you; hours till they counted you. And  
3 then you had to go to work from there straight. And  
4 that was it.

5 When, you know, the selections -- as you  
6 were de-liced, Mengele would come in and he would go  
7 throught and check to see who was already  
8 a--rus--sa--men (phonetic) they called it; in other  
9 words, skeleton. And you kept looking at each other,  
10 gee, do I look already like a skeleton? Do you think  
11 I'll be selected this time? And that's it.

12 But they stopped the burning in masses  
13 in October or November. I don't really know, you  
14 know, when they went into another -- who knew when,  
15 what; but they didn't burn you. And they held me  
16 over one day after the selection -- and I told you  
17 they took my blood, sent it to the soldiers -- and I  
18 came back.

19 MR. ROTHCHILD: Can you tell me  
20 how you are affected now by all of this? What kind  
21 of an impression has this left on your life in terms  
22 of your mental well-being, in terms of your physical  
23 health?

24 MRS. ISSEROFF: I think it's  
25 something that you'll never get over it emotionally.

1  
2 No way can you really escape it. Yet, you go on.  
3 It's buried deeper and deeper. But the affect is  
4 always with you.

5 I can tell you incidents. When my  
6 oldest child -- I remember buying her a pair of shoes  
7 when she was thirteen. She was graduating high  
8 school. She wanted high-heels. And I went out and  
9 bought it for her. And after that, I had the same  
10 nightmares again; that they're selecting her out, and  
11 she doesn't have shoes. I went away in high-heels,  
12 my first high-heels, and I ended up in Auschwitz with  
13 high-heels. And I was the first one not to have  
14 shoes, and I ended up with wooden shoes. If I would  
15 have gone with a pair of good walking shoes, I would  
16 have had, for a half a year, shoes. This way,  
17 high-heels fell apart right away. Even -- I was the  
18 first one to have wooden shoes. So at night I'd have  
19 nightmares, Ah, she's wearing high-heels. She has no  
20 shoes.

21 Or if I rememeber years later going once  
22 to the airport and seeing the big truck. My  
23 sister-in-law went to Israel. And I turned around  
24 and I'm starting to scream to my husband, "The truck,  
25 the truck." He said, "It's the luggage truck."

1  
2 I didn't see it as a luggage truck. All  
3 of a sudden, I saw the truck that used to take you  
4 after selection to the concen -- to the crematoriums.

5  
6 Somehow it's always there. And, of  
7 course, your children -- for years, I had nightmares.  
8 They were always taking my children away from me.  
9 They were always selecting them away. And I'd get up  
10 in a sweat. For years, I didn't go to sleep  
11 without -- just with one nightgown. I'd wake up and  
12 I always tell my husband, "Why don't I remember that  
13 I'm married; that I'm safe? Why it is -- why are  
14 they always taking my children away from me?"

15 And, of course, as time goes by, you  
16 make a life. You try to protect your children. You  
17 don't want -- for years I did not tell my older  
18 children until they were seventeen -- sixteen,  
19 seventeen. I never discussed it, even. Oh, yes,  
20 you -- yes, my mother's gone, my father's gone; but  
21 no details of anything, never. You want to protect  
22 your children. You don't want to expose them to all  
23 that pain.

24 MR. ROTHCHILD: How about  
25 physically? Are you physically well now or do you  
have medical problems as a result?

1  
2 MRS. ISSEROFF: I had -- what do  
3 you call it? I have arthritis. When my foot was  
4 frozen -- my legs were frozen. So I have arthritis  
5 which travels to my spine. Also, suffer again from  
6 migraine headaches. And it can be pretty rough at  
7 times, but you learn to live and cope. And I was  
8 fortunate enough. I have a wonderful husband, and  
9 the children are wonderful kids.

10 MR. ROTHCHILD: Tell me about  
11 some of the wonderful aspects of that that has helped  
12 you to recover and get a life going.

13 MRS. ISSEROFF: The wonderful  
14 things about it, I came -- I was very, very  
15 fortunate. I came to my mother's uncle through  
16 marriage, to Wilmington, Delaware. And a father  
17 could not be as good to you as he was to us. He saw  
18 to it that I had a beautiful wedding, and he helped  
19 us start -- make a start, fresh start for all of us,  
20 whoever came.

21 And I met my husband. And he helped us  
22 fix up an apartment. Then -- everything. Made me a  
23 beautiful wedding, catered, you name it, everything.  
24 And even after I had my first daughter, bought me a  
25 carriage and cribs and things -- all kinds of things.

1  
2 And emotionally, he was just like a father. He  
3 didn't know what to do for us.

4 And then I have my husband, who is very,  
5 very understanding and very wonderful. And the kids.  
6 And that helps. Good kids.

7 MR. ROTHCHILD: Okay. I'd like  
8 to speak to your husband and your daughter here.

9 How has this affected you? I mean, you  
10 were born in America. You really didn't experience  
11 anything like this. What affect does it have on you  
12 when you hear stories like this from your wife of an  
13 earlier part of her life?

14 MR. ISSEROFF: I'm in the  
15 education field. I teach for the public school  
16 system in New York. I also teach for the Tell-a-tora  
17 (phonetic) system in Long Island, New York.

18 I'm Orthodox, brought up in the  
19 religious way. And to me, it affected me in the  
20 sense that, number one, I think we always have to be  
21 on guard all over the world that we should not take  
22 our freedom for granted, our democratic way of life  
23 for granted.

24 It affected me that we support very,  
25 very oddly the existence of the State of Israel. We



1  
2 have family connections there, very deep family  
3 connections.

4           It affected me that I dislike anything  
5 German. I cannot stand to hear the German language.  
6 I cannot stand to buy anything German. I think if I  
7 would meet a Nazi in the street, I think I would go  
8 for his jugular vein. I would kill him on the spot.  
9 I really believe it.

10           That's -- I was traveling in Israel at  
11 one point. I went there for a couple of trips  
12 connected with education. And at one time, I  
13 remember going into Yad Vashem. I was there a few  
14 times. And this particular time, I just couldn't  
15 walk in. In fact, before when I walked downstairs,  
16 they had the pictures there, the exhibits of  
17 pictures, some of the same pictures they had of the  
18 ghetto and the burning. I thought that I was going  
19 to walk away, but I think I overcame that. But at  
20 that point, I just couldn't go in. I just completely  
21 broke down emotionally. And I just had to walk away.

22           I am very over-sensitive to being called  
23 a -- any anti-Semitic remark, I react to it. I  
24 wouldn't take it lightly.

25           And, of course, I'm sensitive to the

1  
2 fact that my wife did under -- did experience such a  
3 very traumatic thing in her lifetime. And that --  
4 tried to help her in living a life as Jewish Orthodox  
5 people with belief in the Hashem (phonetic). We  
6 cannot understand the ways of God; we cannot  
7 understand why there -- there are no answers to the  
8 questions that we can answer why this happened. As  
9 true believers, we have to accept what has happened  
10 and try to build from there. And you see that we go  
11 on and remember and we go on. And that's part of our  
12 belief, our religious belief, to go on and serve  
13 Hashem, and just doing what Torah tells us, to live  
14 our daily life and bring up a generation that they  
15 can carry on our tradition.

16 MR. ROTHCHILD: Do you think  
17 that this is something that could just happen to Jews  
18 or is there -- could Jews ever do something as  
19 Germans have done?

20 MRS. ISSEROFF: Never.

21 MR. ISSEROFF: That's a very  
22 hard question to answer. I don't think -- I think  
23 the Jewish way of life, the Jewish respect for life,  
24 the Jewish system of justice, it wouldn't let  
25 anything of this nature ever happen. In fact, I

1  
2 think if you look all through history, I think Jews  
3 were always in the forefront of helping other people,  
4 other minorities, to receive justice and freedom and  
5 fairness, even to this day.

6  
7 So I don't think that the Jews could  
8 ever, ever stoop to such a loss of civilized way of  
9 life.

6  
9 YARO ISSEROFF: Well, yesterday  
10 in school, you know, it was the first day of this  
11 convention, so my teacher was saying, "I want you to  
12 read an article tonight on the convention. It's on  
13 the front page."

14 So we had -- we started discussing it,  
15 you know, what it means. Somebody said, "Wasn't  
16 there something like this in Israel and everything?"  
17 So my teacher said -- her husband is also -- he  
18 teaches -- he said that when he was teaching World  
19 War II, he did like an interesting experiment with  
20 his class.

21 He asked all the students -- he said,  
22 you -- let's say you had gotten -- he went around to  
23 each one and he said, Let's say you were a general in  
24 the army. You know, you were -- let's say -- or it  
25 happened in America, you're a soldier in the army and

1  
2 you have orders from your general, you have ten  
3 prisoners and you're moving on now so you have to  
4 execute the prisoners. Would you carry it out, you  
5 know?

6 And then as -- you know, first it's with  
7 ten prisoners. Then you have to go in and kill a  
8 village of women and children. And he said most of  
9 them -- these are public school children -- and he  
10 said most of them said that yes, and, you know, there  
11 was orders. Well, it's orders from the general, so I  
12 would have to do it, you know, that's -- it's just a  
13 duty in the army. It's not like -- it's not like I'm  
14 going, I'm killing them. It's that's what I have to  
15 do for my job. And that's what most of them said.

16 But -- and she said, you know, "I want  
17 you to think about it. Would you be able to do  
18 that?"

19 And we said -- a lot of us said that  
20 maybe if it was -- like if it was people -- let's say  
21 it was Hitler, or somebody like that, who had been in  
22 charge, somebody who you had a reason to hate, then  
23 you could do it; but just plain women and children,  
24 they would never do.

25 And it's like -- the Jewish army in

1  
2 Lebanon, they don't -- you know, the soldiers, they  
3 don't kill the women and children. They just kill  
4 the head -- the Palestineans, the soldiers in war.  
5 Not like -- they don't go in and they don't rip up  
6 villages and kill them. But that's what the Nazis  
7 did.

8 MR. ROTHCHILD: I don't want to  
9 spend too much time on this, but I just want to ask  
10 one follow-up question on that.

11 How about if it were known that Jews  
12 were responsible, not directly but indirectly, for  
13 allowing those type actions to happen? How would you  
14 feel about that type of situation where Jews who were  
15 controlling an area were allowing one group of Arabs  
16 to do that to another and it was known policy and  
17 they had the ability to stop it and they didn't?

18 YARO ISSEROFF: Well, you know,  
19 you mean in Lebanon and everything. But I'm not --  
20 you know, I'm not exactly clear on what happened  
21 there, but --

22 MR. ROTHCHILD: Nobody is.

23 YARO ISSEROFF: Well, that's  
24 true.

25 But I'm pretty sure that the town that

1  
2 they went into, they allowed them to go into was  
3 hide-outs for Palestinians. And these Palestinian  
4 heads, they knew that Jews would not kill women and  
5 children. And they hid out their ammunition and  
6 their bombs and their soldiers, they hid them in  
7 these houses. So it was sort of a matter of either  
8 kill the PLO or let the women and children live. And  
9 that's like really -- if we would let the PLO live,  
10 then they're already in Lebanon, they would just move  
11 in and take over. They would bomb Israel.

12 And they were -- they were the ones who  
13 started this. It's not like we don't like Arabs so  
14 we'll go in and we'll kill a village of them; or hay,  
15 you know, let's get Jordan to go and kill Lebanon.  
16 But it's -- they started bombing us and if we -- we  
17 want to stand, we want to protect our people, so if  
18 the only way we can do it is to make some Pal -- is  
19 to make some Lebanese lose their lives, then, like,  
20 even though we didn't kill them, we're responsible  
21 for their lives, but -- but when it comes down to it,  
22 saving Jewish people's lives is more important than  
23 Lebanese people.

24 MR. ROTHCHILD: Have you ever  
25 heard your mother give a description of her

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experiences in Auschwitz?

YARO ISSEROFF: Never.

MR. ROTHCHILD: How does hearing this experience of your mother affect you?

YARO ISSEROFF: Well, I don't know. It's like I heard some of the stories, but not -- not really what happened to her; more like, you know -- maybe one or two of them, but nothing that horrible. But it's sort of -- you know, like it's hard to believe that it really happened. Like you know it happened, but it's -- how can anybody live through that if it happened. It's sort of like reading a book and saying, Oh, that's what happened, you know.

When you watch the news, you say -- one person was mugged in Central Park; they were stabbed fifteen times; and they died. And you hear -- over and over again you hear like that. And this is so much more times horrible than that and it's still hard to believe. And even something like that you can't believe. You say, Boy, I can't believe somebody could go out and just stab someone on the street for no reason. And here it's so much more terrible and just -- like it doesn't even penetrate.

1  
2                   And I think even the people that it  
3 happened to, when they think back, they think how  
4 could this have happened? How could people let it  
5 happen?

6                   MR. ROTHCHILD:     Would you and  
7 your sisters ever sit down and have a conversation  
8 about the experiences that happened to your mother?

9                   YARO ISSEROFF:     Well, I'm the  
10 youngest. And like my sister who is right before me,  
11 she's twelve years older than me. So it's sort of  
12 like them three and me, you know.

13                   So they're much -- they're like seven  
14 years apart and I'm twelve years behind them and  
15 eighteen years from the oldest. So, you know,  
16 they're always much -- you know, they're lawyers and  
17 doctors. I'm still in high school. So they're much  
18 intellectually higher. So maybe when they were at a  
19 point that they might have discussed that, I was  
20 still in diapers and everythig.

21                   So I don't know about my two older  
22 sisters, but no, I really don't think it ever comes  
23 into the conversation. If it does, it's just if we  
24 see something on the news or in the paper, when I'm  
25 talking to my sisters, Boy, it's hard to believe.



1  
2 And that's all that we say on it, like, I can't  
3 believe that it really happened. You know, we don't  
4 discuss the whole thing.

5 MR. ROTHCHILD: Do you think  
6 because this happened to somebody in your family,  
7 your mother, that there's a special mission or  
8 purpose that you have in life or something that you  
9 have to -- does this affect your life at all in the  
10 way you live your life or the things that you have to  
11 hold as high priorities in your life?

12 YARO ISSEROFF: Well, it's  
13 always been, you know, impressed upon me that  
14 children are the most important thing. And like my  
15 mother was telling how she lived for her father, and  
16 I know that I would probably do -- if I knew that one  
17 of my parents were going to be alive, then I would do  
18 the same thing. And, you know, that's why -- it's  
19 like -- I don't know -- it just -- it affects you,  
20 but I don't -- I'm very closed-mouth about it.

21 Like in class, if we ever talk about it,  
22 then everybody always says like -- I think I'm the  
23 only one -- I'm the only one in my class whose actual  
24 parent was a survivor. They have -- I think a few  
25 girls have grandparents or something, but I'm the

1  
2 only one who has a parent. And I usually don't  
3 volunteer the information. Usually somebody else  
4 will say, you know, Yaro, didn't you once tell me  
5 that? Or else I just don't volunteer unless my  
6 friend says to me, Will you open your mouth? You  
7 know.

8 And I don't know, it's just -- we had  
9 close friends of ours and family, we had a lot of  
10 deaths when I was very young, and, you know -- and, I  
11 don't know, just I have the fear of like -- I just  
12 used to try to think what would I do if that happened  
13 to me, you know, like what -- how would I react if I  
14 came home one day and, you know, nobody's here? You  
15 know, that's that. And like I really can't imagine  
16 it.

17 I really can't -- either of my parents,  
18 God forbid, if something ever happened to them, you  
19 know, I always have nightmares about these things,  
20 and I refuse to discuss death or anything like that.  
21 That's why if my mother would have volunteered the  
22 story, I'd never listen to it. No, no, I don't want  
23 to hear. And, you know, I'm just very shut-mouth  
24 about the whole thing.

25 MR. ROTHCHILD: Okay. Is there

1  
2 anything that anybody wishes to express before we  
3 finish the interview, or is everybody -- all right.

4 MR. ISSEROFF: Well, when we  
5 came to Washington, this really wasn't well planned  
6 out. I came home yesterday and we knew about this  
7 Holocaust survival gathering for a couple of days or  
8 so, maybe weeks. And the hustle and bustle of  
9 everyday life and your job and the kids and the house  
10 and responsibility to certain things logistically  
11 made it very difficult to plan to come here on a  
12 three- or four-day basis. And we didn't even know --  
13 didn't even plan to come down here. I thought maybe  
14 Monday I would be able to come down here for a day  
15 and I wasn't able to get away.

16 And yesterday I came home from teaching  
17 and when I walked in, I told my wife, I says, "You  
18 know, we should come down here. If not for  
19 ourselves, we owe a debt to those people who never  
20 made it out, to demonstrate our solidarity together  
21 with the survivors, because I'm sure whatever  
22 happened out here today -- we were out by the Capitol  
23 today -- is going to be televised all over the world  
24 in most free countries, and people are going to see  
25 that, are going to be impressed by the magnitude of

1  
2 what went on today and some of the words, to the  
3 point where, first of all, this survivors' museum,  
4 this Holocaust museum will get off the ground and  
5 will help to provide people with information that  
6 such a thing can never happen to the Jewish and to  
7 any people, to any people.

8 And so it really was a thing of the  
9 spur-of-the-moment. I came home. It took us an hour  
10 to get together our things. We left Far Rockaway,  
11 New York, at 8:35 or so. It took us four-and-a-half  
12 hours of straight driving till we came -- I had made  
13 a hotel -- a motel reservation. We arrived here  
14 about 1:30, twenty to two, and we're leaving back  
15 tonight again.

16 But it was very -- I -- my thinking was  
17 that it was our responsibility and duty to be here  
18 and just to be -- even for one day; that no matter  
19 what the cost to us in time and in physical --

20 MRS. ISSEROFF: Very, very  
21 trying emotionally, the thing. I always avoided it,  
22 because I find it terribly draining, and very, very  
23 exhaust --

24 MR. ISSEROFF: It wasn't, I  
25 think, until two years ago that my wife first, I

1  
2 think, realized the importance of putting this on  
3 film and putting it on tape. My son's father-in-law  
4 is a high school social studies chairman in a high  
5 school in New York City, and they're having a soc --  
6 a Holocaust studies. If you wanted to have somebody  
7 come down, an actual survivor, prevailed upon my  
8 wife, and that was the first time she came down  
9 before students of all backgrounds, ethnic, racial  
10 backgrounds, and talking to them. And I have on file  
11 their responses that she -- that they wrote.

12 MR. ROTHCHILD: I just have a  
13 little more tape, but I want to give you the last  
14 word here. What were you starting to say?

15 MRS. ISSEROFF: That I always  
16 avoided the subject, because I found it very, very  
17 painful. Till about five -- no, more, when she was  
18 five years old, so it's about ten years ago we went  
19 to Israel once. And there was a group of kids. And  
20 he noticed my tatoo on my arm. And he said to me --  
21 he start questioning me, tell me what happened there.  
22 What was it?

23 I said, "I'm sorry. I don't feel up to  
24 it."

25 He looked at me -- this was a

1  
2 fourteen-year-old child from Rochester. He says to  
3 me, "Mrs. Isseroff, I'm sorry, but you owe it to us."

4 I was taken aback. I says, "What do you  
5 mean I owe it to us?"

6 He says, "We were the new generation.  
7 You owe it to us. We have to know what happened so  
8 it shouldn't happen again."

9 Then it finally -- I realized that the  
10 child had a point. This was a thirteen-year-old  
11 child. And until then, I could never really bring  
12 myself to discuss it. It's too painful. It's very  
13 draining. This way, you try not to think about it.  
14 You can think of the unimportant things.

15 MR. ROTHCHILD: So until today,  
16 had you ever --

17 MRS. ISSEROFF: No.

18 MR. ROTHCHILD: -- gone over in  
19 detail what happened?

20 MRS. ISSEROFF: I never  
21 discussed it even with my children in detail. I  
22 don't. I -- it's -- I find it very draining. It's  
23 very -- it's there, everything is there. You don't  
24 forget anything. It stays with you. It isn't as if  
25 something -- oh, you'll forget it. You don't. It

1  
2 just gets buried a little deeper inside of you.

3 MR. ISSEROFF: Besides this  
4 tape, I've asked her to leave a tape, sit down and  
5 tape it up, because in fifty or so many years, later  
6 on, none of us will be around, at least they should  
7 know that such a thing happened; that there is some  
8 evidence, factual, tapped from people who were there  
9 who left evidence of what really happened, and that  
10 it should never happen again.

11 YARO ISSEROFF: We were also  
12 discussing in my class how some people are trying to  
13 deny today that it ever happened, and we were -- it's  
14 like -- it's amazing because people are still walking  
15 around -- I mean people -- there are other ten-,  
16 fifteen thousand here who came.

17 I mean, consider how many people didn't  
18 come from California, from all the way out West who  
19 didn't come. And this is just the people who -- from  
20 around here and a few from far away came.

21 And these people survived it and went  
22 through it. And people absolutely trying to say no,  
23 it didn't. Well, what are all these people doing  
24 here. You know, they just came for the fun of it,  
25 just to make up stories -- to make up stories about

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oh, yes, we went through it.

You know, it's really amazing how people can say that. People don't say that the American Revolution, the Civil War didn't happen. People don't say things like that, wars from years and years ago didn't happen. They don't deny those things.

But something like this, they try to deny it. And it's really, really amazing. And that's why it's really up to us to say no, it did happen. You know, people are around. And that in a hundred years from now when they look back at the records and they say six million, nah, they're exaggerating, you know, historians always exaggerate. That's why you have to leave something that says, no, they didn't exaggerate. There's hard facts that says that it's true.

MR. ROTHCHILD: So maybe the next time the subject comes up in class, you won't have to be coaxed to explain that somebody in your family is a survivor of the Holocaust.

YARO ISSEROFF: Maybe. I don't know.

MR. ROTHCHILD: Okay. Thank you very much.