

OK. Irene, you were going to [INAUDIBLE].

It's a very broad question, but I will try to narrow it down a little bit by really saying that my entire life has been affected by what happened to us in Auschwitz. And even to this day, my life is still affected by it.

It was not an easy road for me to get to the Slotkins. We kind of glibbed over it here. But I had stayed with other people first. And then other people who, for whatever reason, it didn't work out. And those are all personal rejections. And me and my self-image was extremely, extremely poor. And when I finally did get adopted by the Slotkins and they did-- they went out of their way to do everything within their power to try to make life more normal and to make me happy and to buy me things.

But the honesty of it was that we never spoke about what happened to me. And so I began to even doubt what-- is this what really happened to me? Why isn't anybody talking about it? And I began to be very ashamed of what had happened to me. In fact, I was so ashamed that I would not wear short sleeves because I have a number on my arm. I didn't want the children asking. And if I did wear short sleeves, my mom went out and bought a special cream that we would put on every day.

I also was aghast at the life in America. After all, Auschwitz was a very strict-- in Poland, where I lived with the Polish lady, was a very strict Catholic upbringing. If I was two minutes late from school, I would get whipped. I came to America, and the children were shouting out in the classroom to the teachers. They didn't do their homework. They were running around. I could not even fathom this. How could you dare?

I could not believe it. I was a very regimented child. I did everything that I was told. I remember one day-- I must have been already in eighth grade. And I actually came to class late. And I remember having to go to the principal's office. And I was like, oh my God. I didn't know subsequently that the principal said it was the happiest day of his life that he had seen me do something normal. [LAUGHS] But my whole life has been like that. I've always felt just a little bit different and not quite with it.

During that time where you were growing up together in the same house, you didn't speak of it. And yet, you felt like there was something, something being hidden.

I-- go ahead and finish the question.

No, no. Go ahead.

No, we never spoke about it there. Though there was the bond. I knew I had a bond with him. And I remembered things from when we were little. Things we did with our parents. Going to the park, and Rene dropping my doll from the window and breaking it, and other nice things.

We never, ever spoke about what had happened to us separately in Auschwitz. Partly, I think, because of the atmosphere in the home not to talk about it. And partly, maybe we just didn't know how to talk about it. And so nothing was ever said. And for that reason, I think in many ways, we didn't grow up close. Rene kind of had his friends and his things, and I had my things and my friends. We were very different. And we didn't really have a very close relationship at that time. We are much closer now.

When did you finally talk about it? When did the--

We finally first spoke about it, believe it or not, in 1985. And that occasion was triggered by the fact that we finally discovered that we were not the only twins to survive Auschwitz. Up until then, we believed we were the only twins to have survived. So that's what triggered it. And we found other twins, that there actually was a twin organization called CANDLES. And they were sponsoring a reunification in Jerusalem and to bring Josef Mengele to trial. And that's when we started speaking.

Now, during the years preceding that-- say, the 10 years preceding --there was beginning, people were beginning to speak, the media were beginning to speak of the Holocaust. And by that time, I suspect-- well, maybe you didn't quite have children then, but you were adults. Did you not even speak with then? Did questions ever come up? Were you--

Yes. You were right. By the 1980s, people were talking about it. And in fact, I think in 1982 was the very first reunion of Holocaust survivors in Washington under the auspices of Benjamin Mead. And it was there that another twin by the name Eva Kor decided to seek other twins. And that's how 1985 came into being.

But until then, we had been invited to this reunion in Washington and so on, but I had no interest in going. Because one of the things was that as I was growing up, I heard other adults and even some adult survivors saying that I could not have survived Auschwitz. They actually denied my very existence because they said no children survived Auschwitz.

And the second part of that-- and if she did survive Auschwitz, then how bad could it have been? I mean, she was just a child. When in reality, the trauma was the greatest on the children because we lost our childhood. We lost our childhood. And so I was not keen to be with other "older" Holocaust survivors. And it was only when we heard that there were twins and I figured they would be closer to our experience and closer to our age that we finally decided to open up and go and join them.

I guess what I'm trying to get to-- but even during that time, did you not speak to each other about it when you were having-- when all this was, you didn't ever sort of verbalize this shared experience to each other?

Before we went to the first reunion of twins in Washington, which is early part of '80s, I don't recall speaking to Irene about it still. Because we were still going in our separate directions, separate lives. We were married and we had our own sets of problems to deal with. It was only '85 when we first really, really opened up and talked to each other and I guess then to the world also.

I must say something now. Today is December 10, 2002. And as I was driving here, I was thinking to myself, why are we doing this? Why are we recalling these events? And it came to my mind that we have to. There's such evil that exists in the world today still. So apparently, nothing was learned from that lesson.

We are now learning from another lesson, the 9/11 lesson. Even though 12/7 was just three days ago. Did anybody even mention it and talk about it? No. So I felt sort of required. I just had to-- I have to do this for the future. For my children, for my grandchildren, for the world, period. I'm sorry. I went off on a tangent on this.

I'm glad you said that.

And again, in addressing why we never really did talk about our experiences at all until after '85. I, however, had made an attempt-- this is, again, when Lori, my oldest daughter, questioned my number on my arm, I did tell her that-- as smart as she was only about four. And I just tried to explain to her that something very bad had happened and people were marked with numbers.

And so well, my mom overheard me. And I got-- why did you have to tell her that? Why do you have to even talk about it? And again, I got that thing like, am I supposed to all my life be ashamed that I went through this? So again, in the best of intentions. But it was wrong. My children have to know that this happened. And their children are going to have to know, so--

OK. Thank you.

We're going to record the sound to the room for about 20, 30 seconds.

So if you just sit still for 30 seconds.

Room tone.

End room tone. Half of it was airplanes.

Listeners also. Let's do Rene first

OK.

Rene, we need you to just listen to Irene, who's going to tell us some stuff.

We need a reaction shot, in other words. So I just need you turned towards Irene, listening.

Hi, Rene. Are we having fun yet?

[LAUGHS] Almost.

What should I tell them? I'll tell you a very sad story. Do you remember one night when I got lost going to the latrines in the barracks?

Yes.

And I was so bereft and I thought I'd really be in trouble. And hands were pushing me away.

You couldn't find your bed.

I couldn't find my bed. I was so confused. And then finally just before dawn, some kind lady allowed me to share her bunk. That was--

It wasn't yours? You don't recall?

No.

I couldn't find it.

So somebody was nice, even there? Good deal.

Yeah, I have some of Irene listening. We probably should just get one more.

OK.

Yeah, so. Now you need to tell her something.

Do likewise something.

Driving here, I was going through my head one of my-- all these thoughts came to mind. One of them was the significance of the numbers. They reduced the population to animals, like we mark cattle with numbers or signs or whatever. And then after we were marked, gave them freedom to treat us the same way.

To treat us like animals, yeah.

Well, I hope not happen again.

I hope so too. It doesn't look like-- it looks like the world is going there again, don't you think?

Probably.

Wow. [INAUDIBLE] nothing [INAUDIBLE]