

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Children of Holocaust Survivors Project

Personal Experience

O. H. 600

ROCHELLE MILLER

Interviewed

by

Karlyn Bennehoof

on

November 2, 1983

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

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INTERVIEWEE: ROCHELLE MILLER
INTERVIEWER: Karlyn Bennehoof
SUBJECT: B'nai B'rith Women, Holocaust, anti-Semitism
DATE: November 2, 1983

B: This is an interview with Rochelle Miller for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program on Children of Holocaust Survivors, by Karlyn Bennehoof, on November 2, 1983.

I just want to start with some basic background of your own life, where you were born and what your childhood was like?

M: I was born on May 29, 1956. I was born in Youngstown. I basically had a normal childhood. To be quite honest, I didn't know anything about my father's past until I was much older.

B: Where did you go to school?

M: Liberty.

B: Were you educated in religion?

M: Yes. In third grade I started going to Hebrew school and Sunday school.

B: What synagogue?

M: I started out with Children of Israel and then I switched to Emanuel.

B: When did you get married?

M: I got married three and a half years ago, March 23, 1980.

B: What is your husband's name?

M: Sam.

B: You have one child so far, Brian?

M: Yes. At the end of May we're expecting our second.

B: When did you find out about your father's experience?

M: Basically not until I was in sixth grade did I really know what was happening. I started questioning him because in Hebrew school we started learning about the holocaust. That is when I started getting interested in his background and mine.

B: How much do you know about that experience?

M: He wrote a book and through the book I learned a lot. I questioned him also.

B: You learned basic facts in sixth grade and Hebrew school?

M: Yes, that's basically when I started. My father never brought anything up to us when we were younger. I'm sure it was a difficult thing for him to talk about.

B: Did he ever purposely avoid talking about it or was it just never brought up?

M: I don't think it was brought up. He probably felt we weren't ready yet, so he just never discussed it with us.

B: What was your initial reaction to finding that out?

M: It was very upsetting because it's hard to imagine somebody you know going through experiences like that. It was very upsetting. It's a very emotional subject for me still today.

B: When you were a child did you ever experience or see any anti-Semitism at school or in your neighborhood?

M: Not too much. I don't know if this is anti-Semitism, but a lot of times school would start on our high holidays and they wouldn't switch the day. A lot of the people that I've been around really don't know too much about the Jewish religion. A lot of people more or less question me about being a Jew.

B: With your children how are you going to handle the fact that their grandparent was a survivor?

M: I really haven't thought about it all that much yet. I think I'll wait until they're old enough to understand. I would like to discuss it with them before they hear about it in school.

B: Do you think it's a common attitude of many children of survivors that they're going to go ahead . . .

- M: I can't talk for a lot of people because of how the world is changing. I know I will definitely discuss it with my kids and whoever else would want to know anything about it.
- B: Do you think that since your father was a survivor of a concentration camp, has that made any differences in your life emotionally or psychologically?
- M: When I was younger I don't think it did. I don't think I understood what happened in his life. Now that I'm older I understand that things were a lot different than a normal household. I think I was a little bit more emotional. I just think of my father as somebody special and I really respect him.
- B: In what ways was your household different than someone who hadn't been through that?
- M: I think my family knew what had happened to my father and I think religion meant more to us than a lot of other Jewish homes.
- B: How do you think it's going to affect your children?
- M: I would hope that they would become aware and not just take the holocaust for granted. I think it's important for them to understand what really happened. I heard it firsthand from my father and hopefully he'll be around to explain it to my kids.
- B: One thing I wanted to ask you about was this revisionist historical movement where they are denying that the holocaust was any different than any other war and nobody was trying to do genocide. For you and I, we know better. For your children, they'll know better, but what about kids who don't have first-hand access to this, who are going to be reading books like this, what about them? How can we do anything to combat this movement?
- M: All I can say is that the people who have survived this tragedy should be asked to speak at schools. I don't even know if that is going to help. The way the world is now, people just believe what they want to believe. I don't know if they do place evidence into history books if it is really going to make a difference. I think it is important to get people to speak to our youth and to the older people that just don't believe. I think it is history and should be known to the world.
- B: All we can do is hope that the next generation is intelligent enough to see through.
- M: I think that it will happen.
- B: You yourself were affected by this knowledge about your father.

Your children, undoubtedly, are going to be affected by it. How long do you think that effect is going to continue in the generations of the Jewish people?

- M: Hopefully forever. It's hard to say with intermarriage now. I don't know if people really care about religion that much to learn about our past. I think it's important for people not to be narrow-minded about it.
- B: You say you hope generation after generation is going to be affected by this. A lot of people would make the argument-- why do you want to keep bringing up such a morbid subject? Why do you want to keep putting this on your children?
- M: First of all, I have felt the holocaust can happen at any time to any community or religion. We shouldn't forget what happened and hopefully if it happens again we will fight back and not sit around and pretend that nothing is happening. I feel very strongly that it definitely could happen again. I think it is really important that children know and understand.
- B: Do you think if it did happen again it would be easily recognizable? One of the things about Hitler was that people didn't realize, they didn't believe that this could really happen until it was way too late.
- M: I think it could happen the same way again. I think we know more today and that if the signs would ever come out again that different organizations would inform the people of the community. I definitely think the people of the community would fight back in whatever way they could.
- B: Since we are aware of it we have this precedent now that we can look at and recognize the sign. We are more aware, but the way the laws are in this country, free speech and all of the freedoms are so well protected. Groups can put out propaganda and be protected. Given that situation would it be easier to combat that kind of thing or possibly harder since we're aware we want to, but we're being held back.
- M: It might be more difficult because of people's freedom of speech and the propaganda that is totally outrageous. I think a lot of the organizations can fight back by the same type of truth. We have all this propaganda, but there is no proof. Hopefully, people will be smart enough to not believe everything they read.
- B: What kind of effect do you think the holocaust has had on people other than the Jewish people?
- M: I really can't answer that.
- B: Do you think there is any meaning there for all of humanity?

- M: I think so because the holocaust didn't only happen to Jews. It happened to gypsies and Christians and other groups. I can't understand how people can't believe what had happened. I told most of my non-Jewish friends about it and it was hard for them to believe, but they believed it. People have to be sensitive to other people's histories. After explaining what the holocaust meant, my friends better understood what the Jews went through.
- B: How did your friends react to it?
- M: Most of them couldn't believe it. Because my father had written his diary, it helped me out because a lot of them wanted to read it and did. Others just questioned and couldn't believe that anything like that could have occurred. They were stunned. It was hard for them to believe, but there was written evidence that it really existed.
- B: Why is it so much more significant for the Jewish people than it is for other people, even though many others were involved? Why is there so much more significance here?
- M: Because there were six million Jews slaughtered for no reason and we want our religion to keep populating as much as everybody else's. Something like this, if it would happen again the same thing would happen and it would knock our religion off the face of the earth, and that would be terrible. I think religion is a beautiful thing, no matter what religion you believe in. I think that the Jews were picked on from all these other religions. All of a sudden these terrible things happened to them, and it seemed like for no reason at all. It's important that we stick together and understand what has happened in the past and just never forget it because it can happen again.
- B: Six million Jews died and six million non-jews died, what is the difference between the six million Jews that died and the six million non-Jews?
- M: I'm looking at it in a more prejudice way because being raised Jewish all of my life and really loving the religion, I would never want to see anything like this happen to anybody. I think in a lot of ways we were just picked on as a people. It seemed like the six million non-Jews were many different religions and we were like six million strong just blown off the face of the earth.
- B: We're talking about a type of genocide again.
- M: I think so.
- B: I think you're saying that is the difference. Thank you, very much.