

# LIFE AFTER

STORIES OF HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS AFTER THE WAR  
THE HOLOCAUST

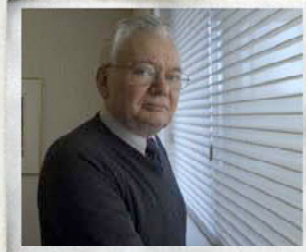


UNITED STATES HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM

# LIFE AFTER

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THE HOLOCAUST

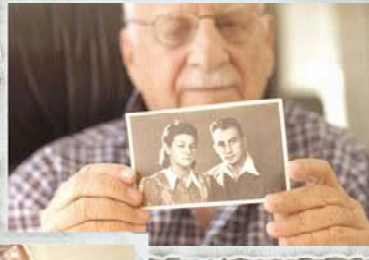
SURVIVORS



**THOMAS BUERGENTHAL**

Born: 1934  
Birthplace: Czechoslovakia

3-9



**ARON DERMAN**

Born: 1922  
Birthplace: Poland

**LISA DERMAN**

Born: 1926  
Birthplace: Poland

10-17



**REGINA GELB**

Born: 1929  
Birthplace: Poland

18-25



**BLANKA ROTHSCHILD**

Born: 1934  
Birthplace: Poland

26-32



**NORMAN SALSITZ**

Born: 1934  
Birthplace: Poland

33-40

## THOMAS BUERGENTHAL



### INTERVIEW WITH THOMAS BUERGENTHAL

**NARRATOR:** The Netherlands—February 27, 2001.

**THOMAS:** We are at the International Court of Justice in The Hague in my office at the court. Ahm, on a very sort of (*laughs*) dark, dreary day...

**NARRATOR:** Judge Thomas Buergenthal is well known as a leading advocate of international human rights law, and for his pioneering work in international law. In March of 2000, he was elected the American judge for the principal judicial organ of the United Nations—the International Court of Justice.

**THOMAS:** It's a court where you deal only with disputes between states. So, for an international lawyer like me, this is a dream court and a dream come true. It's like being on the Supreme Court of the United States. This is the court that determines what is and what is not international law. Not that we're that important but in terms of those of us who believe in international law and practice international law, this is the Mecca to which you look. I should tell you that the notice to me that I was going to be the nominee of the United States for the Court, came to me while I was... had just done a visit to Auschwitz, my second visit, and I was in Cracow, had just come back from it, in the evening, in the hotel, when I received the call from the legal advisor. So, it was very special.

**NARRATOR:** Buergenthal's first visit to Auschwitz after the war was with his wife, Peggy. He returned again, close to the 55th anniversary of the day when, as a 10 year-old, he left the camp on a forced march. It was one of the infamous "death marches" that the retreating Nazis forced on most concentration camp prisoners, rather than leaving them to be liberated by the advancing Allied forces.

**THOMAS:** It was easier when my wife and I went, because it was summer and it was easier to take. When we were there on the 20th of January 19... of 2000, it was just as it was, as I remembered it in terms of the cold. The road was all ice. And all I could think about was, "How did I ever survive this?" Because I was dressed in the heaviest jacket with sweaters, with hat—and I was freezing! And I was there as a child with a little blanket and thin prison uniform and—and I made it. It's... hard to believe. [*Thunder is heard, then sounds of war.*]

**NARRATOR:** Those prisoners from the Auschwitz men's camp who survived the death march, ended up in the concentration camp Sachsenhausen, near Berlin, Germany. In March, Thomas entered the infirmary, where two of his frostbitten toes were amputated. In April, when the battle over Berlin had already begun, Sachsenhausen was evacuated, and Thomas was left behind with the other prisoners who couldn't walk.

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**THOMAS:** The next morning I got up, and it was very, very quiet except for the shooting coming closer. I crawled out, went out and looked up and saw in the entrance of the camp, over the entrance on the inside— they always had a machine gun mounted with SS guards sitting on, and there was nobody there, the machine gun was empty. I came back and told people. Of course, nobody believed me (*laughing*) that this was happening. And then we just waited. And the shooting came closer. Then we began hearing small arms fire and suddenly sort of, I think it was in the early afternoon... the camp had a big bell in the middle of this field, and a Russian soldier was ringing—was driven in with a jeep and was ringing the bell saying, “You’re free.” You know when I see pictures of people who were liberated by American troops, by British troops, they were liberated. We were sort of... there were none of these scenes as far as I remember. The Russians just told us, “You can go.” I mean, we felt a great sense of relief, because we expected to be shot. But I didn’t have any sense of the tremendous joy that other people must have experienced. I was alone in many ways. I think if my parents had been there it would have been different.

**NARRATOR:** Thomas had been separated from his parents for several months. He was taken in by members of a Polish Army unit under Russian command. The soldiers assumed that he was a Christian Polish child. And Thomas had experienced enough discrimination to know that it was not safe to tell them that he was Jewish and from Czechoslovakia. The Polish he had learned in the ghetto of Kielce and in Auschwitz proved good enough for his new comrades.

**THOMAS:** They made me a small uniform. And I had shoes. They even gave me a small revolver—not a revolver—automatic pistol. I had—they had found a circus horse some place, a pony, and— because much of the army was still horse-drawn. They had— supplies of the Russian and Polish army was still brought in by horse— drawn carts. There was a lot of horses. And I had my horse, and I could keep up with the soldiers. And I had a wonderful time. (*Laughs.*) The strange thing is that the sort of— the absurdity of it, the comic aspect of it never occurred to me as a child. And, you know, at the same time I—all of this I thought was going to lead to my being reunited with my parents. And I never even thought that this wasn’t going to happen. This was all part of a process. And in the meantime I could eat, and I no longer had to be afraid, and I had fun.

**NARRATOR:** The soldiers fed him vodka to stimulate his appetite. They also shared bacon and bread. For the 10-year-old, none of it seemed out of the ordinary.

**THOMAS:** And I think it has a lot to do with having, being a child and taking a lot of these things for granted. This is life, and this is what happened. One day you don’t have anything to eat, and the next day there’s suddenly food. What I remember though is that I for years afterwards would always think that you should always eat before you did anything of importance because you never knew when you were going to eat again.

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**NARRATOR:** Only one of the Polish soldiers, a Jew himself, found out that Thomas was Jewish. Eventually, he made arrangements for the boy to be taken to a Jewish orphanage. In 1946, his mother tracked him down, and Thomas was smuggled to Germany to be reunited with her. They settled in Goettingen, his mother's hometown. And suddenly, life took on different shades of normalcy. Going to school, catching up...

**THOMAS:** With my mother we discussed—there was a lot of reminiscing about the camp and you know, “Where was this and that. What happened...?” The truth of the matter is that we often laughed about things in retrospect, about things that happened that were funny, about this or that that happened. So ahm, the human spirit—you couldn't take all of this, if it were only reminiscences about all of the terrible things. I saw the fact that I survived as a victory, that we had won over them. They wanted to kill us and we made it; we didn't give them the joy of killing us. So there was a tremendous sense of satisfaction, that of survival, unlike what one reads now that people supposedly feel bad that they survived and others didn't. We never had that feeling. Neither did my mother. Because my mother survived. I mean, we felt very bad that, for example, my father didn't survive. He died just shortly before the end of the war. But we never felt that—guilty about the fact of surviving. On the contrary.

*[German reporter heard in background, “Goering ist gefragt worden, ob er hören kann.]*

**NARRATOR:** In 1946, at the war crime trials in Nuremberg, 19 out of 22 German war criminals were convicted. Twelve were sentenced to death.

*[1946 sentence is read “... The International Military Tribunal sentences you to death by hanging...”]*

**THOMAS:** The first, almost first English words that I remember was “by hanging.” I remember listening to the radio when they—when they announced the sentences. And we were, we were listening to that and with sort of, with joy... And sitting on the balcony on a Sunday and seeing the German families taking a walk and my father hadn't come back. And at that point, you know, the desire of sort of seeing—when I first came back I would love to mount a machine gun on that balcony and shoot all of them. But then you realize that, you know these are people you don't know whether they killed your father. Most of them probably didn't. And you make friends. And you find for example, we lived in the house with somebody, who ah, a Catholic family that had actually helped the Jews in town, and had been in danger themselves. And so you—the sort of abstract hatred becomes transformed into the fact that they're human beings regardless of whether they're Germans or not Germans. And not every German was guilty.

**NARRATOR:** The only Jewish student in class, he never experienced antisemitism, yet never felt quite comfortable either. In 1951, Thomas left for America.

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**THOMAS:** We were on one of the troop carriers, the transports, the Liberty boats. It was the SS *General Greeby*, I still remember the name. And I think it was a 10-day trip from Bremerhaven to New York. With a lot of refugees, people from all over... from Eastern Europe.

**NARRATOR:** His mother had decided that the 17-year-old should broaden his cultural horizon and his academic opportunities. He was to stay with her brother and sister-in-law in New Jersey and return after a year.

**THOMAS:** And it was a very scary experience, except that I knew I was coming to live with my uncle. And in that sense it—and I was young, so it wasn't as scary as what it must have meant for a lot of other people. It was strange. We got on the boat and people were told they had to scrub the decks, paint the ship, and do all these things. But they needed people who could... announce—make announcements in different languages. And so, I volunteered for that (*laughs*). At least it kept me above deck, which was nicer then, because the ship was very crowded. But arriving in New York, you know... and we set—We actually arrived in the evening, so we weren't unloaded. I couldn't disembark until the next morning and to see New York with all the lights and everything was... quite... in some ways exciting, in some ways it brought back memories of the past. When I saw the lights, I thought of the crematories in Auschwitz.

**NARRATOR:** Living with his uncle and aunt in Paterson, New Jersey, was not a problem.

**THOMAS:** Oh no, I got along wonderfully! They are wonderful people. And they had... they were not well off, really. My aunt worked in a textile factory at the time, and my uncle in an aircraft factory. They had a little daughter there. When I came, they didn't really have an extra room for me. But they... they shared everything with me and took me in. Ahm, and really were my parents for that period of time.

**NARRATOR:** He went to high school and made friends. Yet again, a sharp division between the past and the present remained.

**THOMAS:** Nobody really wanted to know in those days about the past. Nobody asked. They wanted to know where I came from, what I did. But it went sort of... It was like asking "How are you?" you know, you don't really expect to get an answer. No, really, there was no great interest in finding out. It was just "Here is somebody new. He's come to America and he is now our buddy." And that was it! But no interest. Ahm, even my uncle and aunt—my uncle comes from Goettingen, my aunt from Berlin—they had a club of basically German Jews who'd come from there. They took me in, but nobody really asked where I was or cared. That came, I think it much, much later. They were just too busy making a living. And life was pretty hard. They had come, like my uncle and aunt, during the depression basically. It wasn't easy. It wasn't an easy life; they came with nothing.

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**NARRATOR:** Thomas too was busy getting on with his life, college on a full scholarship—New York University Law School—Harvard Law School. Citizenship in 1957—marriage two years later. He never returned to live in Germany, but he remained in close contact with his mother until her death in 1991. At home, Thomas focused on his three sons who were born in the early '60s. At work, he was drawn to international law—a discipline of little interest to most American law students and lawyers at the time. He was also interested in human rights law, a relatively new discipline.

**THOMAS:** I don't know, I've often been asked, well, is it my experience that drove me to it. I'm never quite sure. Ah, but what I think is true is this: that I felt from my concentration camp experience where we always looked to the U.S. and to England to save us really, that in a situation where one was in trouble from a human rights point of view, one couldn't rely on the domestic scene, on the domestic environment, and you had to look—you had to have some international mechanisms that could protect you. Really the Universal Declaration of Human Rights had been adopted in '48, but nothing much was happening. And then in the early '50s the European Convention on Human Rights came into being, and I was fascinated... wanted to see how did this work, really. Is there a chance that this might prevent what I went through? And that began to interest me. But it wasn't only human rights. It was also—and this is fascinating considering where I am today—what also interested me was international tribunals. I was interested in compliance mechanisms. How international institutions can have an impact on states and on individuals and protect individuals.

**NARRATOR:** It was the Inter-American Court of Justice in Costa Rica that provided Buergenthal's first real experience in this fledgling field. One of the first members of the court, he spent 12 years laying the groundwork for a human rights tribunal, which today is playing an important role, particularly in Latin America. Under Buergenthal's presidency, the court rendered a landmark decision; it awarded compensation to the families of victims of "disappearance" in Honduras—people who were kidnapped by government forces, murdered, and their bodies hidden.

**THOMAS:** So, it was a—terrible experience in one way, and a gratifying experience in the sense also of laying the foundation for the law on that subject and also establishing the principle that the government has responsibilities and has to compensate the victims. You have a sense you've done something.

**NARRATOR:** In Costa Rica, he also met his second wife, Peggy—an interpreter of Peruvian and British descent. And a divorced mother of two. With Peggy, he talked extensively about his past. More than he had with his children when they were growing up.

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**THOMAS:** We have great disagreement in my—about that in my family. My kids will say to me sometimes, “Why didn’t you tell us that?” And I will say, “You guys were never interested in hearing anything about it!” Now, I don’t know who’s right. But I, I thought that I tried to tell them. And we’ve speculated, my wife and I, about it. And her sense is that the kids thought it was so painful that they didn’t want to hear about it. And that’s why they didn’t ask. And I took that to mean that they were not interested, and that they were in fact interested. And she has some of that... talking with them. But, it’s quite clear that they know much less about my background still than they really should. Although what is interesting now is that my youngest son has begun to be very—now that he has his first child, very interested in family roots and backgrounds and has asked my uncle who is in his late 80s now to put together an album. And had asked me to do that. So, there is interest... Ahm, but it’s, it’s sort of interest on the run.

**NARRATOR:** The same man who unflinchingly studied and prosecuted human rights abuses against other people has difficulty looking at representations of his own past.

**THOMAS:** It’s strange, because in many ways, memories fade... At the same time, the emotional impact today is much greater. I also think we get softer in our old age in terms of one’s own experience. But—you know, what is interesting is that while memories of details fade, what doesn’t fade is the memory of the episode as a whole. And I wish I could—I could have the poet’s soul to write about it, ah... to capture that. Because I think... I’m not sure that one—that that is coming through in the literature. I don’t know, as a matter of fact I haven’t read any books about the camps. I can’t. I can’t go to movies that show it. I never could. I had wanted to take my children to the Holocaust Museum. And I realized I could not do it. I wouldn’t be able to last.

**NARRATOR:** But his work with the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Council and its Museum dates back to the late 1970s. From 1997-99, for instance, he was chairman of the Committee on Conscience.

*[Recording of Buerghenthal’s introduction is heard: “Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. I would like first of all to welcome you to the Museum and to this program on Kosovo: Options and Obstacles. This program, as you know, is sponsored by the Committee on Conscience. The ah— Council of the Museum is the governing body of the Museum. And the Committee on Conscience is one of its principal standing committees. Through the Committee on Conscience, the Council seeks to relate the suffering of the Holocaust to contemporary genocides and crimes against humanity. For who better than the victims of the Holocaust...” recording fades out.]*



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**THOMAS:** The Committee on Conscience was something that was very close to my heart. Because I feel very strongly that the Museum shouldn't be just a cemetery. The Museum has to be a living organism that tries to make sure that these things don't happen again. And that means also speaking out to—where other crimes against humanity and genocide are being committed. We have an obligation as survivors and we owe it to the people who died, to make sure that these things don't happen in other places. And so, and that was really the function of the Committee on Conscience. And that I felt... that I found that was really worthwhile and very important.

**NARRATOR:** In addition to teaching and writing landmark books and articles on human rights law, Buerгентhal has been a key member of several international bodies, including the United Nations Human Rights Committee, the Truth Commission for El Salvador, and the Claims Resolution Tribunal for Dormant Accounts in Switzerland.

**THOMAS:** What is impressive about it is not my career. I mean that—those things are often happenstance than anything else. But what is significant about it...this is an example of the fact that one can overcome certain... not I personally, but that we can overcome some of these murderous things that have happened and still be able to work for a better world! That to me has always been the sort of significant aspect of my activities. I spoke once in Germany, I think in connection when I got the honorary degree. And I said, "It's so wonderful when you think that when you go down the Rhine and when you remember that the Rhine was reinforced on both sides between France and Germany with canons, and today you don't even need a passport!" There's tremendous things that have happened that should give us a sense of optimism. Yet, you know, the cynics keep saying, nothing is changing. Lots of terrible things happening. But a lot of good things have been happening, and that—that should inspire people to want to do things.

**ARON DERMAN**

**LISA DERMAN**



## INTERVIEW WITH ARON AND LISA DERMAN

**NARRATOR:** March 1947. The SS *Marine Shark*, a refurbished army transport vessel, on another trip across the Atlantic Ocean. Among the hundreds of European refugees on board were Aron and Lisa Derman.

**ARON:** Now if you would like to find out what kind of a ride we had with it... (*Lisa: Oh...*) It was real, real hard. Small boat they gave us and a boat with no facilities. No, the conditions were not too pleasant. With bunks. And it was all stormy, and all of us were sick. And Lisa was...

**LISA:** I was deathly ill for seven days. The women were separated from the men. And most of the women in my cabin were Italian wives that were joining their husbands. And when the boat—when it was so rough on the sea, everybody went down to pray. I was so sick, I have not been able to go down to pray. So they screamed at me that I am anti-Christ and that I am going to bring down the boat. And they really dragged... tried to drag me down! I was so sick and I wished death on myself. I said, after all of this that I went through in life, now this? When will it ever end? When will it ever end...

**NARRATOR:** Six years earlier, in 1941, they had met in the ghetto of Slonim in Poland, where the Germans had forced all of Slonim's Jews to live. Aron was 19, Lisa 15. Both had survived a massacre that claimed the lives of more than ten thousand of Slonim's Jews; Aron and his family by hiding outside of the ghetto; Lisa and her sister by finding shelter with a Polish Christian woman. In June of 1942, after another massacre in which almost all of Slonim's remaining Jews were killed, Lisa and Aron escaped the ghetto together. They sought refuge in the Grodno and Wilno [Vilna] ghettos before escaping, in 1943, to the Narozh forests of Belarus to join one of the partisan units. For one year, they took part in sabotage and armed combat missions against the Germans. Tended to the wounded and the sick. Stood guard in sub-zero temperatures and dreamt of going to Palestine. Scoured for food, and sang partisan songs around the fire.

*[Sound of partisan song ("Zog Nit Keyn Mol") is heard.]*

**NARRATOR:** (*Translates*) "Not with lead was this song written, but with blood; it wasn't warbled in the forest by a bird. But a people, trapped between collapsing walls, with weapons held in hand—they sang this song."

**NARRATOR:** Revenge was a powerful motivator for survival.

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**ARON:** We had had very strong emotions, and ah—I didn’t think twice to be able to go in there and fight, and if you would kill some of the Germans. And we felt—we felt that finally it came the time, and now we were masters of the situation and we had a chance to kill some Germans, we did.

**LISA:** In the war this is really regardless of what your thoughts are about other people. It’s either the Germans or us. And there was no question that all of us by this time lost all of our families. And it was such a tremendous pain that still was so fresh...

**NARRATOR:** When their unit met the Russian army some time in June of 1944, it was a day of mixed emotions.

**LISA:** Because when all these units came together, there were other people that we know that were in different units. And, “Oh my God, you survived!” And, you know, you fell on people and kissing them and hugging them. But, you know, a lot of people at the very same time said, “Oh, but look at, look at my parents, my sisters, my brothers, nobody survived. I have absolutely no one.”

**NARRATOR:** But the war was not over. Russian commanders ordered all surviving partisans to the front. Aron and Lisa secured a special permit that allowed them to return to Slonim briefly, before they were supposed to join the rest of the partisans.

**ARON:** Well, when I came to my hometown in Slonim, I stayed there for only a few hours. Because immediately I found out that nobody is alive and I couldn’t find anybody. Only thing, I met up with one Jewish fellow... and he was telling me that nobody—no Jews are here in the whole town. And we had a city or a town of maybe 20—22,000 Jews. And here you come in and nobody is there. It’s undescrivable. You’re coming to... I don’t know, you’re coming like to a cemetery. You’re not coming to any place. And it’s very, very painful. It was one of my worst days coming in. And that’s why I never went back, ‘cause the memories of what’s left over is unbearable. So, you’re better off you don’t touch that ground.

**NARRATOR:** Meanwhile, Lisa went to the house of the Christian woman who had provided shelter for her and her sister three years earlier.

**LISA:** So, I went to tell her that I survived. So I came to her house. We knocked on the door. She opened the door, and I was so grateful that she was alive and that she still lived there... And ah—and she said, “You were a child when you left my house. You look so grown up.” She kissed and hugged and cried, because I told them my sister did not survive... She didn’t know there were any Jews at all that survived.

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**NARRATOR:** They didn't return to the front as ordered, but headed for Bialystok instead—a city that served as a center for refugees.

**LISA:** There was immediately a committee and the Joint Distribution [Committee] from America established a kitchen where survivors came and got food. And there were lists of people on the walls. Whoever survived signed his name and he signed he's looking for families, looking for so and so. It was so beautiful to see the camaraderie, how people tried to help one another. And—and how people cried when they found somebody that they knew—not only relatives but friends, remote friends, people that lived in the same town in the same shtetl and such. Now some of the people that were with us in the underground, were in Bialystok, too... So, everybody drifted, and your friends became your family. It was your extended family. You were like brothers and sisters. Whatever they had to eat they shared with you. You did the same with them, in clothes or in anything.

**NARRATOR:** They got in touch with the Beriha, an organization formed by Jews who had survived the war. Its goal was to help other surviving Jews get out of Eastern Europe and into the West, from where they could ultimately make the—"illegal"—journey to Palestine. Aron and Lisa became two of the hundreds of thousands of Holocaust survivors who were helped by the Beriha. First stop, Hungary.

**LISA:** We were taken to the magnificent synagogue in Budapest; we were provided there with lodging. Everywhere we went, we met the Beriha. The Beriha arranged it in such a way for us that we did not have to be on our own. So, we felt very free in Budapest. We walked around. We were exploring. We even tried in—to go in a restaurant to see what kind of food they eat, and what is it like. But we didn't stay there long.

**NARRATOR:** Next stop, Graz, Austria

**ARON:** From there we had to cross part of the Alps.

**LISA:** On foot.

**ARON:** On foot. We had to go to Treviso, Italy. And we crossed the Alps. We had Jewish Palestinian guides. They were scouts helping us to cross. But you had a feeling that you had somebody taking care of you. Yeah, it was a good feeling you had.

**LISA:** And also it was very exhilarating because some of the people, the guides that were doing it, were Palestinians, Jews that came from Palestine. Who would ever think that people from the ghetto will meet up with Jews from Palestine?! And the idea and the thought were so tremendous, you never thought about the danger.

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**NARRATOR:** On the other side of the Alps, members of the Jewish Brigade—part of the British army—waited with trucks and food. Lisa and Aron went from Treviso to Bologna to Modena to Florence. In Florence they began receiving packages with food and clothes from American relatives.

**ARON:** You didn't need much.

**LISA:** We didn't need—our needs were just minimal. We enjoyed the freedom. The beauty of the country and the people. And it was warm, you didn't freeze. And it was beautiful.

**NARRATOR:** After several months in Florence, in the spring of 1946, they moved to Rome. Stayed with an Italian family. Got married in Rome's majestic synagogue. Learned Italian. And enjoyed life in a big city.

*[Music is heard. (Verdi, "Un ballo in maschera." 1948 recording.)]*

**ARON:** We were introduced to art, going to museums. Then we were introduced to opera. All of a sudden we liked opera. And music. We used to walk around during the evening, during the night, it was a free place for us. We used to go to sleep two, three o'clock every morning! Stopped in cafés. We didn't have the money to spend in cafés, so we stayed outside and listening. And it was a joyful time. A very joyful time!

**NARRATOR:** When they received requests from American relatives to come to the U.S. at least for a visit before going to Palestine, they agreed.

**LISA:** And finally, we sort of were approaching New York. The ocean wasn't so rough. And Aron came down and he said, "Go down, go down, go down" and—and "come out. Maybe it's—so many people already are out looking, looking out."

**ARON:** People are getting dressed up (*Lisa: People—Oh yes, yes...*). Whatever they had. I mean, they got dressed up and here we're coming and we're seeing the shores. It's the evening, so you see the lights. And then you see, after you come closer, and you see the cars, one after the other going. That was like a miracle. That was something like... we saw movies before, but that was something like from... we couldn't believe that's—that's happening, you're coming to the shores of New York.

**LISA:** It was a huge place with thousands, really hundreds of people to meet. Seemed like a whole city came down. Maybe there were other boats, too, that arrived. And um—my family in New York, my father had two brothers and a sister in New York, and they came to meet us...

**ARON:** Two aunts, my aunt and your aunt came...

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**LISA:** Aron's aunt from Indianapolis, my aunt Blanche from Chicago, and also my cousin that I knew that left for the United States in 1938 came...

**ARON:** to the boat...

**LISA:** So many of the relatives... Can you imagine? When you came from such devastation where everybody was killed and you fell into arms of your own blood, your own relatives. That just was so warm and so wonderful. Until this day I think about it— I think about it how wonderful it is to have family...

**NARRATOR:** Did they speak about their wartime experiences?

**LISA:** Do you know, in New York, I only... we only told them when they asked about people if they survived. We only told them that. They knew that we survived and sort of... And I—in a short way we told them that there were steps of survival, that Christians helped us, that we were in the underground... liberated... and then we had to go through borders. But not in detail, no, no...

**ARON:** They were afraid to hurt our feelings. They thought that if they'll start talking about it, they don't know how we're gonna react. (*Lisa: Exactly...*) So, they felt better they're not going to touch it. Whatever you want to say, you'll say. And little by little you... (*Lisa: You revealed some of it.*) You revealed some of it. But they didn't press to anything. And we weren't maybe so anxious to tell 'em all the details. But ah... soon, they found out.

**LISA:** And they kept on telling it over and over again, this is America... this is America... this is America. Things will be different here, things will be good.

**NARRATOR:** After family visits in New York and Indianapolis, they decided to settle in Chicago— in a Jewish community that was proud of them. Part of that pride stemmed from Aron and Lisa having spent much of the war not in a concentration camp, but fighting with a partisan group.

**LISA:** In fact, I have to tell you, that some survivors have told me that—that the neighbors and Jewish neighbors, not Christians, Jewish neighbors, would not let their children play with this survivor's children. And ah— they felt very bad about it, very bad about it. They were not accepted. But, because at that— very early not so much was known and not so many people spoke up, so there was a feeling that the people that were in the concentration camps, there was something... they survived... I don't know, doing what? Eating other peoples' flesh? Or, they are terrible...? I don't know, they are—I really lack to come to the bottom of it why, but it's the truth. That's the way it was. I did not meet up with it at all. I did not meet up. And in fact, everywhere that we went we were sort of quote/unquote like "elite" of survivors.

## ABOUT LIFE AFTER THE HOLOCAUST

## STORIES OF HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS AFTER THE WAR

**NARRATOR:** Trying to make a living. At first, Aron worked in a steel mill, where the pay was good but the co-workers unsympathetic.

**ARON:** Yes, yes, yes! They'd say, "Why are you here? Why didn't you go to Palestine?" And then all different kinds of remarks, make fun of it, make fun of the gas chambers. And you could feel it. I had a hard time to cope with that. I used to say back. But to a certain extent, you were afraid. You were afraid. So, you couldn't start up a fight. You were the only one Jew in the whole job! You didn't have any sympathy with every—anybody to stand up for you. I had a hard time to cope with that. And I didn't stay there long. I stayed—about six weeks I worked. I said, I didn't come to America to live antisemitism.

**NARRATOR:** Temporary jobs as a shipping clerk...

**ARON:** And all minimum wage, 90 cents. And I could see it's no future.

**NARRATOR:** Doing piece work in a sweat shop—sitting next to a friend, but with no time for talk.

**ARON:** This picture I can never forget in my life. Here's 100 degrees. Flies all the way around, and I'm working on a machine, and he's working on a machine. And here a fly, he goes like this (*claps*)... and sewing with the machine. And I say come on! (*Laughs.*) It's not for me... He doesn't have a minute time to talk to me! He said, "We'll talk later." It was 12 o'clock, I went out for lunch and never returned. I never came back. You see, it was not for me.

**ARON:** You're still dreaming about going back to Palestine—going to Palestine. But now—that was '47. The borders were still closed. You couldn't come into—you couldn't get a visa to go to Palestine, 'cause the states—the state was born in 1948! So by that time we were already a year and a half, two years living in America... So, little by little you get used to it and you stay. And—and you stay!

**LISA:** And then in 1949, our son was born. And then in '52 our other son was born...

**NARRATOR:** Seizing opportunities and ready to take financial risks, Aron tried to establish a business, dry goods store... army surplus store... sporting goods store... Finally, in the early 1960s, a men's clothing store brought financial security and satisfaction. The store, "Howard's," was named after their oldest son. Lisa raised the children.

## ABOUT LIFE AFTER THE HOLOCAUST

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**LISA:** When the children were little and small I felt that my place is home with them. If we live to have children I really felt I have to be with them and protect them and give them absolutely everything—all the love and affection that I too received as a child. I grew up in a loving family that—with a grandma, with all the love and an aunt that lived with us. And when they started going to school I became involved in the PTA and I wanted to know exactly how they were doing and how they were doing and what. And then they were going to Hebrew school. There were sessions, and I'm driving them to school and driving them to school. We always tried to instill them with positiveness. I mean, what kind of a positiveness when you talk about killing and gassing and maiming and all this? We come to it and to say that with all of this terrible things that went on, there were still good people. Look, there were two outstanding Christians that saved your parents. So it's your—You sort of have to search. Within searching you will find good people. And try to emulate the kind of good people that you can find. The second thing that they learned from us, what is it that's important in life? That it's not material things. And ah—I said look, look, your father and I came to America and we picked up... We got educated on our own. Even though we had help from the family and everything. And we lived to see the State of Israel established, which to us is a tremendous, tremendous source, really an emotional source, a psychologically and everything—it's great! Don't despair. Handle right. Don't make—don't overdo that everything is a tragedy, that the ceiling is falling... Look, I said, what we went through! And because I expect you to do it, see—see the positiveness in everything—they do. They are positive people.

**NARRATOR:** All three sons became medical doctors—neurologist, internist, and plastic surgeon.

**LISA:** And neither Aron or I ever felt guilty for surviving. And other people have a guilt. I don't know why, but they do.

**ARON:** Many times we talk to each other, and we wonder why...

**LISA:** why people are guilty...

**ARON:** why people feel guilty. I—I don't know.

**LISA:** But it's a fact.

**ARON:** It's a fact.

**LISA:** I know that my parents, most of all, most of all in their life wanted us to live! If only I could tell my mother that I survived, how happy she would have been to know that I survived. My father, too. That's all he wanted us is to live, is to live. So why should I feel guilty?



# ABOUT LIFE AFTER THE HOLOCAUST

STORIES OF HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS AFTER THE WAR

**NARRATOR:** Speaking about their experiences and teaching the Holocaust to young people, has become the overriding passion in their lives. Both are active members of the Holocaust Memorial Foundation in Illinois. Both are sought out as speakers about the Holocaust, and especially the Jewish Resistance. In 1993, the Derman family went on a trip to Poland—accompanied by over 100 high school students.

**LISA:** Friday morning we went to Lublin. We went to the famous Yeshiva in Lublin and then from there we went to Majdanek. On the way, the children just came from America, you know, with these big boom boxes, throwing candy and having fun. Which, I mean, it's expected of teenagers, why not? Do you know, when we left Majdanek, it was such a silence on the bus. They were cradled in—their heads in one another, in each other, without a sound. They were so taken and so affected. And ahm... they were different people. They were different people when they left. They became so caring, such wonderful people while we were there. How they cared for us—and how they truly lived through this entire episode with us.

**ARON:** We went to Auschwitz, Majdanek, and Treblinka. And ahm... we gave them lectures for five days. And we spent all the time with them. And we felt that we, we accomplished something. It was worthwhile for the kids to learn special from survivors.

**NARRATOR:** Today, Aron and Lisa remain close to their sons and eight grandchildren. And they continue to teach about the Holocaust. Guiding classes through the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, for instance. Here, children help search for the name of the second Pole who helped Lisa and Aron during the war.

*[Background noise: audio from Museum exhibits.]*

**BOY:** Oh, I found him!

**LISA:** You found him. This is the Christian that saved nine Jews, Aron and myself among them. And when—we'll come back here again, I will tell you how he saved me. Tell you for you to remember, righteous people... that risked their lives to save others. Why did they do it? Why did they do it? Because they were moral people.

**BOY:** The moralist of the moral... to help.

**LISA:** The moralist of the moral, yes. And also they followed their heart, what their conscience told them to do. Not what the Nazis told them to do. Love thy neighbor! Do not kill! And they did it at a great risk of themselves. You will hear how—what it took for them—for him to save us. And I hope that you as you are growing up will emulate these people, will walk in their footsteps and be righteous people. And together we will maybe be able to build a better world! And when I will be here no more that you will remember what I told you and you will be my survivors and my people—to speak on my behalf. A promise?

**BOYS:** Yes. Yes.

## REGINA GELB



### INTERVIEW WITH REGINA GELB

**NARRATOR:** Music and photographs play an important role in Regina Gelb’s life.

**REGINA:** I just took out my album from our trip to Europe, specifically to Poland in 1980. And I’m looking at the pictures that were taken on our visit to Frederic Chopin’s birth place in Zelazowa Wola, which is slightly north, I think. Near Warsaw, very near Warsaw. And it’s amazing how vivid the memories of the lovely, lovely music that was played at... at the cottage. Later on, of course, after the Zelazowa Wola, we went...

**VICTOR:** What was the name of that park?

**REGINA:** Lazienki Palace. That’s an old palace.

**VICTOR:** Oh, the name is the same as the palace?!

**REGINA:** Right.

**VICTOR:** I remember when we sat there, and we were enjoying a concert...

**REGINA:** Yeah. Yes. And the piano was placed... on this..

**VICTOR:** beneath the statue (*Regina: statue*)... And the statue is of Chopin.

**REGINA:** Right. Right.

**NARRATOR:** The purpose of Regina’s first trip to Poland after the war, was to introduce Victor, her American-born husband, to the cultural heritage she loves so deeply. And to her painful past.

**REGINA:** Ah, you asked me about the pictures of my family—from before the war. Of course, I have them. And it isn’t because I took them out of Poland, no. They were sent to us from Israel. Because my mother was quite involved with training the pioneers for—for pioneering in Palestine. And subsequently these people settled in the old Palestine. And my parents used to send them pictures. Well, after the war, we were very, very lucky that some of these people whom we located gave us some of the pictures of— from my childhood, which I would otherwise never have.

**NARRATOR:** Born as Regina Laks in 1929, raised in Starachowice, an industrial city in central Poland, the daughter of Pola Tennenblum, an active member of the Zionist movement, and Isaac Laks, an engineer in the lumber industry, and the youngest of three girls.

# ABOUT LIFE AFTER THE HOLOCAUST

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**REGINA:** The three sisters. The older sister Anna, Hania. The middle sister, Krysia, Chris. And myself Renia, Regina. Of course, we are a very close family. We always have been extremely close. And—because we survived the war together. And the fact that we were never separated during the war, which is almost—incredible. It just absolutely was a miraculous thing that we were never separated. We were very close then, and we are very close now. And so are our kids.

**NARRATOR:** Hania was the academically gifted, the family “genius.” Her test scores were so high that she became one of only a handful of Jewish students allowed into an elite Polish gymnasium in Radom. Before the war, Hania tutored fellow students in French and Latin. During the war, when Jewish children couldn’t go to school anymore and the girls were kept inside for safety, Hania became a dedicated teacher for her sisters and a few friends. Krysia, the middle sister, was strikingly beautiful yet industrious and down-to-earth. It was her practical intelligence that helped save them later, when intuition and fast decision-making counted most. And Regina—thin, outgoing, curious. Nickname: “the information agency.” Together, they survived three difficult years; first, in a forced-labor camp in their hometown; then in Auschwitz-Birkenau; briefly in the concentration camp Ravensbrueck in Germany; and finally in the small labor camp Retzov, a subcamp of Ravensbrueck. When they were liberated by the Russian army in April 1945, the sisters were 21, 19, and 16 years of age. They decided to return home. Slowly making their way by train, still in their Auschwitz clothing. On the train, near the Polish border, they were approached by a Jewish soldier in Russian uniform.

## INTERVIEW WITH REGINA GELB FOR THE UNITED STATES HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM’S ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION.

**REGINA:** So he says, “You’re one of those camp people?” So we said, “Yes.” “Where you going?” “We’re going back to Poland.” “Where in Poland?” We said, “Starachowice.” “What kind of town is it?” Whether it was a big city, which of course it wasn’t, because the population was 30,000 and that’s no big city. So when he found out, he says, “No, you should not be going back to the small town, because they will not welcome you. They will think you’re coming to claim your property or whichever it is, and a lot of people returning from camps are being killed now. So, you are better off going to one of three places. Warsaw, Cracow, or Łódź.” He said, “Warsaw is all bombed out. Łódź has a very good Jewish agency set up. Best thing for you is to go to Łódź.” And we decided, “Fine, so we’ll go to Łódź. But where do we go?” And he says, “Well, I have a sister there,” and he gave us the address. He says, “You go to her. Ring her doorbell and tell her that I send you. And there’s a Jewish agency and you can register and—and from there on, you’ll be all right.” Which is exactly how it was and this is my—

# ABOUT LIFE AFTER THE HOLOCAUST

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May, 1945, now. We came, and she had a lot of people—lot of people sleeping on the floor, sleeping on the stairway, all over the place. And the next day we went to register.

**NARRATOR:** The sisters checked every day for registered survivors returning from camps.

**REGINA:** Now things were coming out in the open, about what really, truly happened. And it was incomprehensible. And to look for individuals, that was totally out of the question. But to look for people who were part of a group was easier, because genocide was predicated on mass murder, you see? So, if you were in the Ostrowiec group, you went to Treblinka, you see. If you were in another group, you went to Majdanek or Belzec.

Here is another picture, which I have... which shows my mother's side of the family, which was quite extensive. Because there were nine children. And when they grew up, of course, they all had children. So, the family was very large. In this picture I have my mother's oldest sister, Fela Kronenberg with her husband. My mother's sister Anja. Regina and Roosia. My mother's brother, Moishe. And the Kronenberg's two sons, whose name was Bernard and Henrik. And, of course, except for my uncle Moishe who emigrated to America, this, everybody in this picture was annihilated in the Holocaust. Plus—and this is only one daughter. Now, just multiply it by nine and you will get the idea of how many people in that family perished in the Holocaust.

**NARRATOR:** The sisters learned that their father had been murdered in Auschwitz, and that the transport with their mother on it had gone to the killing center Treblinka. But they also found out that their father's brother survived and was in Łódź. And since uncle Alexander had hidden assets, he was able to provide them all with a comfortable place to live.

**REGINA:** We had a very good life in Łódź, in the sense that it was sort of like catching your breath. And we lived... Yes, I picked up as if I really belonged there. I really truly fit right in. I really fit right in.

**NARRATOR:** While her sisters went to work, Regina kept house and got herself admitted to high school.

**REGINA:** And ahm, was a very interesting period of my life, because you see, I actually didn't finish elementary school, you see? But, because I was taught, right through the ghetto time, which was seven days a week, 10 hours a day, I knew French, and I knew Latin, and I knew grammar, and I knew history, and I read Tolstoy, and—and I did all these things, which I would never have done, except the books were in the house and that's what we studied from. And my sister Hania, being the best teacher I ever had, which—it's a fact... I had this fantastic education.

## ABOUT LIFE AFTER THE HOLOCAUST

## STORIES OF HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS AFTER THE WAR

**NARRATOR:** In early 1946, the family situation changed. The older sister, Hania, became engaged, and moved with her fiancé to Warsaw to study diplomacy. The middle sister, Chris, also got engaged—to Miles Lerman. Uncle Alexander left for Sweden, where he had found his wife.

**REGINA:** But Miles was now my guardian, you see? He married Krysia and I said, “Well, now you have a wife and you don’t need a fifth wheel into the—to the wagon,” you know? He said, “No, no, no. That’s not how the way it’s gonna work.” He said, “No, that’s the way we’re going to work it, that until you get married, you’ll stay with us.” (*Sighs.*) I was trying very hard not to be a burden, you know, in any way. But they were both very busy. He was working; she was working. Somebody had to run the house.

**NARRATOR:** Miles Lerman also lost most of his family, and he and Krysia decided to build a new life in America, where Miles still had an aunt. Regina, of course, would come with them. They made their way to a displaced persons camp in the American zone of Berlin, Germany, and registered for visas. Like most DP camps, camp Dueppel in Berlin-Schlachtensee was comprised of former German military barracks.

**REGINA:** I have the pictures of the barracks. The barracks were not much to brag about. They were, I think, some old leftover army barracks or whatever. But when you’re young, and you come back to living a life of a young girl, who cares if you live in a barrack or if you live in a palace! Because, as you could see from the album, ah... we were celebrating different holidays. For example, Lag B’Omer as you could see, we’re all dressed in school uniforms, which is a white blouse and a navy blue skirt. We went to somewhere out—it was an outing, like a picnic type. And here you have another picture of another picnic, specifically with my class. And some of these people are still around, and we’re very good friends. This is a picture in the class room...

**NARRATOR:** There were children of all ages and nationalities. Camp survivors as well as refugees and Polish Jews returning from Russian exile. Many of them were still undernourished, and they received special meals that to Regina’s delight included chocolate treats. The educational fare in the camp included theater trips along with Hebrew and English classes, biology, and physics. For entertainment, there were outings and dances, where the bands played American pop songs of the 1930s.

**REGINA:** And, of course, to this day every time somebody plays very old records and they play one of those, I never associate it with America. Because I really learned it in Berlin! (*Sings.*) “Kiss me once and kiss me twice and kiss me once again... It’s been a long, long time... “I’m sorry, I can’t sing, because I just had a cold. So I have a scratchy voice...

## ABOUT LIFE AFTER THE HOLOCAUST

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**NARRATOR:** Regina's DP camp experience differed sharply from that of many older survivors.

**REGINA:** I wasn't shy, and I wasn't reserved, and I wasn't suspicious, and I wasn't cynical. I haven't lived yet! I wanted to live, you know? Anybody was wonderful. Everybody was wonderful! Everybody I met was great! And they were going out of their way to... make us feel that we're children still, you see? That really did it. That really did it, because I was sort of pretending I was grown up when I was in Poland, and I was accommodating myself, and I was adjusting. But here I was just a child, and it was perfectly fine, and I got chocolate for it. So, you see, that really was the so-called smoothing over. And ahm... when we came to America, now then my child—not my childhood, but my young life really started.

*[Steam-boat signal.]*

**NARRATOR:** The SS *Marine Perch* arrived in New York Harbor on February 11, 1947—and Chris, Miles, and Regina were welcomed by Miles Lerman's aunt, who had sponsored them. After a few days in her home, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee helped them find an apartment. The Joint also helped get Regina into a school outside of her regular district: Thomas Jefferson High School in Brooklyn's East New York.

**REGINA:** And that was a—a blue collar Jewish neighborhood when I came in. And the school had very high academic level, because all these kids were what you call "eager beavers," you know. To get out of the—of the working class, you know. Alfred Kazin and all the writers and all kinds of important people came out. They went through this—living in that area and they broke out to greater things. Now, when I came to Jefferson, that was more or less the tempo of it, you know, you carried on.

**NARRATOR:** Apart from its high academic standards at the time, the school also had a newly established program for refugee children. Once a day, they would meet for an orientation class that covered basic English skills, provided evaluations of the students' academic skills in other subjects, as well as teacher advice and support. Equally important, "basic English" class familiarized the students with American customs and democracy.

**REGINA:** So when I came here, and I told you, I found out all these things, that you are free to read the paper and you are free to express yourself and you can get up and disagree with your teacher in the classroom and all these things that you could do that were absolutely—that they had no repercussions—that you weren't going to be shot or killed or sent in the prison, or whatever. That was—it's like an explosion of the mind, to me.

*[Sounds of Regina rummaging through her collection of buttons.]*

**ABOUT LIFE AFTER THE HOLOCAUST**

## STORIES OF HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS AFTER THE WAR

**REGINA:** If you allow me, I'll just look through this bunch of buttons, I have this whole bag here, you know. I don't even really know what is here, except that I dumped them all in one place so that they wouldn't be scattered. Now, let's see what I have. I have my senior button from Thomas Jefferson High School, 1949. Orange and blue, the colors of the school with two faces, boy and girl looking at each other. Really charming. This probably sounds awfully childish and all that, but I think this is the most precious thing. And I keep it and I'm not going to part with it! So, back it goes into the box with the buttons...

**NARRATOR:** Regina excelled academically. Became friends with teachers and students. Took on part-time jobs. She didn't talk much about the war.

**REGINA:** So, all this really, to just sum it up, didn't—this life in Jefferson did not fit with sitting there comparing notes, "Did you go to Auschwitz?" "No, I didn't go to Auschwitz, I went to Ravensbrück." That was past, that was water under the bridge, you know? Most of these kids went to college and graduated from college. So that you see, we were more or less on that same level of—of trying to get on with life in an—this new way, excelling educationally, find a place in this new world. And who wants to talk about this old stuff?

**NARRATOR:** Privately, the 18-year old mourned her parents.

**REGINA:** I always missed them, you know, I always missed them. I grieved for the fact that there was no cemetery that I could go to. But mother went to Treblinka and father perished in Auschwitz, so where is the place? There is no place.

**NARRATOR:** There is no exact date of death either. Regina joined a group of other survivors from Starachowice who had determined October 27th—the day when their hometown was cleared of Jews—as the official date for a commemorative service, a Yahrzeit.

**REGINA:** Prayers were said. And then the morning prayers were said. And then there was coffee and cake and so on, a little socializing. So we did that once a year. And so that was the official mourning, but of course, I missed my parents a whole lot. But you know, I was thinking about it. If I were still in Poland, I probably would have missed them much more because they were—they fit into the—into the setting. Here, I was sort of on my own, you know? I had Chris and Miles, of course. But after they moved away, I was really on my own and I knew that I absolutely cannot depend on having my mother help me out or my father help me out, you see?

## ABOUT LIFE AFTER THE HOLOCAUST

## STORIES OF HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS AFTER THE WAR

**NARRATOR:** When Chris and Miles moved to New Jersey, Regina remained in Brooklyn and went to Brooklyn College. Then the Cold War Era began, and Indiana University needed a native Polish speaker to teach Air Force officers conversational Polish, in preparation for their jobs as attachés in Eastern Europe. Regina became an instructor in Bloomington, Indiana, and finished her BA in social work there. She appreciated life in the American heartland.

**REGINA:** It was most rewarding as a final—it's a trite word, Americanization—but I was taken in to—to what this life was. In other words, now—not that I was done with Europe, you know, I can't be done with Europe, is like I can't be done with my right hand, you know—but I finally got into the spirit of the country and of—oh, I got involved, and I already had my ideas of politics and all this. It really, absolutely coalesced. It really got together. It, it formed into a, a unit.

**NARRATOR:** Before she left for Indiana, Regina met Victor Gelb, a young Jewish American. It was 1950 and Victor had been drafted into the Korean War. However, he was stationed in the U.S., and came to visit her in Bloomington when on leave.

**REGINA:** Since we're rummaging through the albums, I just came across this old album where I have some of Victor's old pictures from home. Here he is in his uniform. He went to a private military school up in Ossining, New York. Doesn't he look spiffy here? Wow! All these buttons up and down. Isn't that cute? And this, I think, is his picture from Junior High School. Very sweet boy. He always was a sweet guy. First of all, he always had manners. And he's very considerate, and very... He's quiet by nature, but very profound and very devoted. And, of course, he made only the best father on earth and the best husband. So, I'm very lucky. That's absolute fact.

**NARRATOR:** Regina and Victor got married in 1953 and settled in New York City.

**REGINA:** Originally I really wanted to do social work. I really truly did. For many reasons. One of them being the fact that I did go through the Holocaust and had I not been helped as a child I really wouldn't have survived. And I really felt I owed this goodness to other people and I ought to reciprocate. However, by the time I came out of college with an idea of going to graduate school for social work, the system changed, and I did not like the way the system was oriented toward... taking away the responsibility of the people to... to shift for themselves. Rather than helping them being on their own feet, this was a system now that was going to provide and provide and provide.



**ABOUT LIFE AFTER THE HOLOCAUST**

STORIES OF HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS AFTER THE WAR

**NARRATOR:** Regina found other shortcomings in America. On one side, the anti-communist excesses of the McCarthy era. On the other, the anti-authoritarian chaos of the 1960s counter-cultural movements. Her ideal was a democratic society, ruled by law, in which she could raise her children to be open-minded, yet disciplined. When her two boys Harry and Paul went to elementary school and on to high school, Regina served as vice president in the parents' associations. Helping to set up library programs and fighting for high academic standards.

**REGINA:** The kids were very much oriented to—not so much to succeed as to broaden their horizon. We did a lot of very interesting things. Kids used to go to summer camp, to the Boy Scouts for a month. And then we used to go traveling together, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, Canada very often. All the way to Indiana to revisit my school.

**NARRATOR:** Harry is a lawyer in New York City—Paul a landscape designer in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Both are married. Both have two children. Regina became an accredited member of the American Translators Association. She worked as an interpreter, did commercial translations, and translated Polish books and Polish materials for books.

*[Music.]*

**NARRATOR:** Every major holiday still brings all three families together. Chris and Miles and their children from New Jersey; Hania and her children from Canada; Regina and her children.

**REGINA:** I was so lucky to come here and to be a young girl in America, you know? I was just so lucky. And a lot of people who came, who weren't that much older, maybe 10 years older, they already had to go to work and they already had to struggle. They could never go back to school, you see? Or maybe they came with a child and it was—I came a young girl, like a—like a young horse, you know, ready to get out of the stable and run. I was just like that, you know? I was like an eager beaver. I was willing and ready and everything was a lovely, nicest experience even if it wasn't so nice. I thought it was great! Everything I did, everything—every summer camp, every babysitting, every this and that and the other thing. Everything was wonderful, because it was a new experience, you see? And it really took me away from—not that it took me away... it was something I didn't yet experience, you know. I came here, I hadn't lived yet. So everything that I lived was great! And—in true fashion, it—it really was. I mean it was not an exaggeration, because all the things that happened to me, everything was sort of by chance, people—you know, I got a job to support myself by working in the ORT. I didn't look for it; they looked for it. I got a job to teach in Indiana. I didn't look for that. You know? You see what I mean? Every time I do something—I was asked to do it or something and it turned out a fantastic experience. So, that's fine.

## BLANKA ROTHSCHILD



### INTERVIEW WITH BLANKA ROTHSCHILD

**NARRATOR:** San Diego, California. It's Passover—a holiday that conjures up memories of another country and another time.

**BLANKA:** My mother and father were ahm... nonobservant Jews. However, the tradition was kept up. We went for all the big holidays to grandparents who kept the Judaism alive. And they were religious. They were not orthodox, but they were religious. I will never forget the Seders, the warm feeling of being with all my family—and with strangers. Because we always... My grandparents invited strangers. This was a tradition. From orphanage; soldiers who were of Jewish origin who did not have a place to go to. And they had a cook and a serving maid. And there was a long, long table laid in with this food. And the people and the happiness and the lights because my grandfather always said, "Let there be a lot of light, it's a holiday." So, all the lights in all the rooms were on. It was such a wonderful, happy feeling.

**NARRATOR:** Blanka Rothschild, née Fischer, was born and raised in Łódź, Poland. As an only child she was especially close to her mother and grandmother. Her father died before the war broke out.

*[Hitler's voice is heard, "Since 5:45 a.m., we are returning fire." Crowd responds, "Heil!"]*

**NARRATOR:** The Fischers were forced to move to the Łódź ghetto in the winter of 1939/1940.

*[Goebbels' voice is heard, "I am asking you, do you want total wār?" Ecstatic crowd, "Yes!" Marching is heard.]*

**NARRATOR:** Four years later, the family was separated and Blanka was deported to Ravensbrück, a concentration camp in Germany. After a few weeks, she was transferred to Wittenberg as a forced laborer in an airplane factory. It was here that a German supervisor beat Blanka so viciously that she suffered broken ribs and permanent spine damage. When the Allied Forces closed in on Wittenberg in April of 1945, the Germans deserted the camp and the women broke free. Propped up by friends and in spite of her pain, Blanka ran towards the advancing Russian army and into the line of fire.

**BLANKA:** As a matter of fact, one of the girls was hit. Ahm—you just didn't have time to look! You were running. Like an animal. The first Russian was of Asiatic origin, because his face, the features were Asiatic. And he was very dirty. I remember his big black leather boots. Filthy uniform. He was the liberator. And we thought we should kiss his boots.

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**NARRATOR:** They were given something to eat; salty, pickled herring.

**BLANKA:** And, of course, we became very thirsty. There was no water. The pipes were broken. And they told us to leave. You have to understand the circumstances. The Russians were fighting. It was just unbelievable. I didn't see anything there of... of normal food ration or even lazarette, Red Cross. But they had some bandages. And they gave me the bandages, and I was bandaged around my body to hold my ribs.

**NARRATOR:** In the nearby fields, they met two Polish men, who had also survived as forced laborers. Together they continued their journey.

**BLANKA:** My friends helped me. We reached the first house in the village. The roof was gone from the bombardment. We went to the basement. The basement was very well prepared with food and sleeping equipment. We lay down. We ate, we lay down and the very same night, two Russians came and raped two girls.

**NARRATOR:** Blanka escaped the same fate, because one of the Polish men covered her with blankets and sat down on top of her for the entire night.

**BLANKA:** This was my liberation. Very bitter. I was petrified of the Russians now.

**NARRATOR:** Blanka moved into a nearby house, occupied by former French prisoners who agreed to protect her.

*[Collage of radio announcements: British reporter, "This is V-Day in Germany." Churchill, "Victory of the cause of freedom." Stalin's voice over a Russian victory song.]*

**NARRATOR:** On May 8th, the German forces surrendered. The war in Europe was officially over. However, the circumstances made it difficult to know where to go. After several weeks, Blanka decided to join a group of men and women who were walking to Poland.

**BLANKA:** A human being is very strong, unbelievably strong...

**NARRATOR:** In search of family members, she made her way back to Łódź.

**BLANKA:** And—our house was standing. And the so-called superintendent was still the same one. And when he saw me, he thought that he... that he saw a ghost! He said in Polish, how come I survived, why did I come back. This was the greeting I received. When I wanted to go upstairs to our place, our apartment, a large place, the people wouldn't let me in.

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**NARRATOR:** She went to the nearby offices of a Jewish aid organization, where lists were posted with the names of returning survivors. Only one name was familiar—that of a girlfriend who had survived the war in hiding with her husband. Blanka went to stay with the couple for two weeks, but didn't feel comfortable in Poland.

**BLANKA:** I just didn't feel welcome. My—my Poland was not my Poland anymore. And, I decided to move to Berlin, because I was told that they had Displaced Person camps run by the Allied forces. And I thought maybe somebody survived there!

**NARRATOR:** Postwar Berlin had been temporarily divided among the Allied powers into four zones: American, Russian, French, and British. While the Displaced Persons camps, also known as DP camps, were under control of the military authorities, care of the DPs was primarily in the hands of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration, known as UNRRA, and international refugee organizations. Blanka arrived by train and made her way to the nearest camp, which was located in the Russian zone. Conditions were crowded and daily life regimented.

**BLANKA:** We were given places to sleep. We were given food. And—ah, I was grateful for the help. But I didn't want this type of... I wanted privacy. And ah—I don't remember too much about it. Maybe because I'm getting older. Things are sort of slowly blending and disappearing. Ahm, I'm trying to remember the good things. And I'm trying to maybe subconsciously forget the sad things. Maybe this helped me to live.

**NARRATOR:** Early on, deliberate forgetfulness was a survival tool for Blanka. One memory she has tried to erase from her mind is the image of her emaciated, dying mother whom she found in the liberated concentration camp Sachsenhausen, near Berlin.

**BLANKA:** And she was in Oranienburg-Sachsenhausen hospital, but she died. She was completely... *(her voice trails off)*... I saw her. I don't even want to think about it, because that's a terrible memory.

**NARRATOR:** Desperate for a semblance of normalcy, Blanka bribed a German policeman with the precious whole bean coffee she received from a Jewish relief organization. She wanted him to register her in the American zone, where officials might be able to locate her distant relatives in the U.S. And he did. Again, she was moved into a DP camp. Again, it was a difficult experience.

**BLANKA:** People were very enterprising. They were used to the conditions. They had friends. They were going to Poland. They were bringing goods back and forth to Breslau... Wroclaw. I could not partake in any of this. And all to me was very strange. I couldn't eat the way people were... buying something, sitting at the table... and talking about business. I was lost! I didn't feel good! I wanted to be in a room of my own. I wanted privacy.

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**NARRATOR:** The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, one of the main agencies aiding Jewish DPs, helped locate Blanka's relatives in Detroit. In the winter of 1946/1947, Blanka crossed the Atlantic Ocean on the SS *Marine Marlin*, a troop transporter. The trip took over two weeks and was beset by storms and rough seas. The ship was damaged, and Blanka, who along with the other refugees was traveling in the lowest quarters, had to walk in water for days.

**BLANKA:** When we arrived and we left the boat, we didn't go to Ellis Island. We went to a pier. There were benches, long benches. And there were letters above, alphabetically: A, B, C... And they told us to go to a letter that was corresponding with your last name. Since my name was Fischer, I went to letter "F." And I was sitting there. And people were coming and picking up their relatives or friends. And I was sitting and sitting and sitting... And, finally, I saw a gentleman, very distinguished looking gentleman walking by with a photo, ahm, showing that picture. And when I looked at the picture, I said in Polish, "This is my grandmother."

**NARRATOR:** It was the son-in-law of her grandmother's half-brother from New Jersey, who had come to pick her up. Her grandmother's sister in Detroit who had sponsored Blanka's emigration died one day before the steamer finally arrived. Since that family had a funeral to attend to, Blanka was to stay temporarily with her great-uncle.

**BLANKA:** And we reached his place in ah—Paterson, New Jersey. It was Paterson. And his wife also spoke Polish and German and was the most wonderful, wonderful lady who made me feel good, warm. She hugged me. She kissed me. And that's what I needed. That's what I needed. I didn't need any material things. I just wanted to be loved, to belong. And that was the beginning.

**NARRATOR:** After the funeral, the relatives in Detroit invited Blanka to come and to stay. But she didn't find much warmth in this family, nor an understanding for the financial independence she craved. She got herself a menial job in the Polish section of town, saved the money, and returned to New Jersey, began training to become a baby nurse, worked hard to improve her English, and made new friends.

**BLANKA:** What I wanted next was to have a child. I wanted to show Hitler that the seed survived. And I wanted a child the worst way. The doctors told me that it would worsen my condition. It would throw me off. But I felt that it was worth it. Ahm, I had—some ribs were damaged... broken. And the spine... It didn't show when I was clothed, in clothes. But when I was undressed, you could see sticking parts of it... And I was very self-conscious about it. It was very unconventional in those days to have a child without a husband. I got married to a man who is a very nice man. We both are of the same religion. We are both very honest. We are both civically minded

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people. We both love music, different kinds of music, but music. But we are very different. We are very different people, intellectually. I got married and I immediately, the next month, I got pregnant. I wanted it. And I wanted a daughter, because I always felt that a daughter will be close... closer than a son. So, I was lucky because I do have a daughter who is very close to me and we are very fortunate. We nourish each other. From the very beginning on, my entire life centered around this child. I lived on a fourth floor walk-up apartment in the Bronx. I had only one bedroom. And the bedroom belonged to her. We had a convertible in the living room. I tried to dress her the best I could. I tried to read stories, sing songs, teach her, expose her to music... I—I delighted in bringing her up. It was... my life changed. I was very grateful. When the baby was born, I used to... It was hot. We didn't have air conditioning. New York can be very cruel in the summer—the humidity. And we walked to the park at night. Nobody was afraid. It was a local park. And all the other mothers with their babies were there. And we were sitting at night not being afraid. So, we formed very close friendships. Not one of my friends there was a survivor, strangely enough. One was Italian. Conny, adorable. And three others were Jewish. We played mah-jongg, I remember.

**NARRATOR:** Her husband, an inspector for General Dynamics, made a modest living.

**BLANKA:** If you don't have much and your friends don't have much, you're not unhappy. You have food. You have clothes. You—As a matter of fact, we were—when we played—once a week, we used to put, I don't remember, 50 cents or 75 cents on the side. When we had enough money, all the couples went to the theater, because we loved theater. Ahm—financially, I was not in a position to—to do things that I would have liked to. I would have liked to go to a good university. I thought that I had enough brain to do it. But my health was precarious.

**NARRATOR:** And still is. For many years now, Blanka has had to wear a full body brace, living in constant pain. But her motivation to give something back to the country that had adopted her, made her an active volunteer, pushing a library cart through a hospital, and helping teachers in her daughter's school. Blanka's daughter Shelley remained the center of her life. And Blanka made sure that Shelley was allowed to pursue her educational ambitions, a master's degree in Shakespearean literature.

**BLANKA:** My husband used to laugh. He said, "What you will do with Shakespeare?" He said, "How about a little typing on the side?" And she said, "But I love it!" So, I said, "Well, she loves it—so she has to do it. She has to be happy, to do what she likes to do." And we sent her to England to Shakespearean Institute. And—whatever you learn, it's your gain. It's a wonderful thing.

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**NARRATOR:** In the mid-1970s, when children of survivors began to form groups in which they could share their experiences and support one another as members of the “Second Generation,” Shelley did not join.

**BLANKA:** I asked her about it. She said, she lives with it. Seeing my body it reminds her enough of Holocaust. She could not associate with a group and speaking about it. It hurt her too much. She always knew that I was a survivor. Her father was not. But I was a survivor, and I never made a—ahm, secret out of it. I did not tell her in the details, the gory details of what went through. I didn’t want to go overboard. Because this was a child. I didn’t want to poison her mind. I had to find the middle road for her to grow up to be a bright, open-minded person. But I wanted her to know because this was the legacy! She was entitled to know where her mother came from, my background. I wanted her to be proud of it, which she is. At the same token she resented the people who caused my... my affliction, my being disabled as a result of the tremendous beatings that I was getting. She could not accept it. And I tried to temper her dislike—more than dislike, her hatred into ahm... into understanding that people are people. There were people who were good.

**NARRATOR:** Blanka began speaking about her wartime experiences in the early 1970s. Out of a strong sense of obligation to those who perished, and in response to a general public which was now more interested in the Holocaust than it had been in previous decades.

**BLANKA:** I am there on one purpose only, to tell people, oh not my personal story but to spread my message. And my message always was one “Let’s tolerate one another. Let’s learn about each other.” And I always say that, “People, take this with a grain of salt. You don’t have to love one another, but tolerate one another. Learn how to live together.” The population is growing fast. The earth is getting smaller. We’re flying from one place to another in few hours. If we won’t learn how to get along, we will perish!

**NARRATOR:** First, she spoke to American-born friends, women’s groups and churches in San Diego, where she now lives. Then in state schools and universities. But she pays a price.

**BLANKA:** The price is—my health. My innermost feelings... my... my dreams... my nightmares. But you have to decide is it worth it? I lived with a sense of guilt all my life. I felt that maybe I wasn’t the one deserving to survive. Maybe I wasn’t worth it. There were so many people in the family who were much more deserving to survive, and I was chosen to be the one. You live with this guilt always. So, old age is... it’s not so sweet. The only sweetness is the family. My granddaughter’s name is Alexis Danielle. She was born in 1978. She’s the joy of all our lives. She’s beautiful in and out. She’s bright. She is in her first year of law school, wants to study environmental

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law. Her parents are very, loyal wonderful couple. I was very lucky that my daughter married a man who's a wonderful husband and father, and provides cultural background. They do go to theater... Alexis is very well rounded young person, as is my daughter. I believe in some sort of Supreme Being, but I couldn't define it. I did not have Hebrew education. Neither did my mother. Ah...I, I'm an extremely good Jew at heart, because I believe in the commandments... And if you follow the commandments, you're religious. Ahm—my father's idea was more philosophical. He thought that God surrounds us. That God is everywhere, in every human, in every living tree, in the nature. And ah—I sort of adopted this. However, in camp I was questioning, "Where is this supreme being, where is God, what's happening?" These are human beings who are doing this to other human beings. Therefore, is there a God? The questioning—long time. I slowly returned to the faith. I'm not a temple-goer, but I feel that I'm a good Jew, because I observe the commandments. I will not steal. I will honor—unfortunately, I don't have parents, I'm an old lady myself. And ah...I tried to bring up my daughter in this spirit. And my daughter did not have bat mitzvah, but my granddaughter did. So, it's like coming back. The circle is repeating.

**NARRATOR:** Six years of war life; over 50 years of postwar life...

**BLANKA:** They are two different lives. There is no comparison. There is nothing that I can say—I can weigh one against the other. The six years of imprisonment were—German word "Ewigkeit," "eternity." These years now—especially now that I grow older—passing by very quickly, too quickly. I want to live long enough to see my granddaughter graduate. To see good things. To see her get married, and then I will be completely happy. To hear from people again, "I have listened to you and I appreciate it. I learned something from you." That would be wonderful. It would be something... fulfillment.



## NORMAN SALSITZ



### INTERVIEW WITH NORMAN SALSITZ

**SALSITZ:** I was born as Naftali Saleschutz. But during the war I had a few other names.

**NARRATOR:** Assuming false identities was a key to survival during World War II for Naftali, the youngest child of a well to do orthodox Jew in Kolbuszowa, Poland.

**SALSITZ:** My name, for instance was, Tadeusz Jadach

**NARRATOR:** Masquerading as a non-Jewish Pole in the Polish underground, when he wasn't accepted as a Jew.

**SALSITZ:** Then also it was, Anatoli Szczerbakow, which is a Russian name

**NARRATOR:** When he joined a Russian partisan group with false documents.

**SALSITZ:** Then it was Tadeusz Zaleski

**NARRATOR:** In the Polish army after liberation, when it was still not safe to be openly Jewish.

**SALSITZ:** And when I came to America, I got back to my real name Naftali Saleschutz. But for America, the Saleschutz was too long. People don't have time to spell. Everybody asked, "How do you spell it?" So, because I had a brother in America, and his name was Salsitz, so I changed it to Salsitz. And Naftali they thought it was too Jewish name, so I became Norman which I'm sorry 'til today, because I like Naftali much better than Norman. And this is how I remain.

I survived for two reasons... One was when my father was killed, he yelled, "Nekamah, nekamah, nekamah." It means, Revenge, revenge, revenge. Take revenge.

**NARRATOR:** On April 28, 1942, Norman's father was taken from their home and shot in the yard by the Gestapo. Hiding in the neighbor's attic, Norman saw and heard everything.

**SALSITZ:** It is now 55, 60 years later, I still hear his... his screams. This was one that gave me strength. I have to live. Because I was the youngest. I was the only one to pay back. Pay back for my five sisters! Pay back for my... the sisters' husbands. Pay back for my nieces and nephews! Who would pay back? So this means that they were killed and nothing will happen to the people who did it. So, this was one legacy that it gave me strength. The second one was when my mother was taken away to Bełżec with my five sisters to be killed in Bełżec, she somehow gave to somebody a letter, and I got the letter from this person. I was this time in a camp. And she wrote to me,

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"You are my ninth child. You are the youngest. You are young. You are strong. You are smart. If somebody will survive, you will survive." 'Cause she believes that somebody will survive. She said, "After the war, go to your brother," because I had a brother in Palestine, "go to Palestine. Go to your brother," I had a brother in America, "and tell the whole world what the German murderers did to us!" So this is the reason that after the war I started to tell, even in the beginning people didn't want to listen. But I spoke, and they thought I have an obsession. Some people didn't like it. Later, 20 years later, people started to realize and they listened. Books came out. Movies came out. But I started to speak the first minute I left Poland, and I told the stories. And people thought that it is something wrong with me.

**NARRATOR:** Norman was part of a Polish partisan unit in the woods near his hometown of Kolbuszowa when the Russian army liberated the area.

**SALSITZ:** I was liberated in the beginning of August 1944, and I right away wanted to go to the army, because I figured if I survived the war I have to fight the Germans and this was my aim...

**NARRATOR:** Still living under a false Polish identity, Norman joined the Polish army.

**SALSITZ:** So, I was in this time we call it "Informacja Wojskowa," which means this was the political unit in the army.

**NARRATOR:** By January of 1945, he was stationed in Cracow as Head of Security for the county. His job, to help reestablish a civil government there. One of his main duties was to investigate ethnic Germans, who had gained favors from the Nazis, and to rid the government of Poles who had collaborated with the German regime. When Norman met Felicia Milaszewska, the secretary of a German construction firm, he assumed that she was one of these collaborators. He soon learned that Felicia was Jewish. Her real name was Amalie Petranker. She had survived the war by using a false Polish identity and played a major role in saving Cracow from destruction. Just a few days earlier, by accident, Amalie picked up the phone when the head of the German combat unit in Cracow called to give an order: to blow up the dynamite columns that had been secretly built in Cracow by the German firm she worked for. Instead of relaying the order, Amalie sent a warning to the Polish underground, the AK or "Home Army," of which she was a member. When Amalie met Norman, she gave him access to the blueprints for the dynamite columns. They soon found a way to help each other and other Jews who had survived the war.

**SALSITZ:** You couldn't buy food, and people didn't have food. So I used—and we had everything, because from the army we had everything. And I used to send to her every day bread and salami and butter and other things.

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Now, when the people who came out from hiding, they find out that there is somebody who survived and she is Jewish and she has food. And she was glad to give it to them. Also I gave her a lot of clothing. And she used to distribute to the people who came back with, with their... concentration [*camp*] clothing. They didn't—it was winter! Because this was in January or February, it was very cold. So, I gave it to her and I was very happy and I was very happy I could do it—unofficially.

**NARRATOR:** This was one of the happiest times in Norman's life. He was now a man of some power who could finally do something for his people. Norman and Amalie got married under their Polish names, because they learned about Polish Jews who survived the war and returned to their hometowns only to be murdered by some local Poles. And because working closely with military and government personnel had convinced Norman that antisemitic sentiments were still a reality. He concluded that it was not safe to be openly Jewish.

**SALSITZ:** And I wanted to leave, because I saw, even now, I have a good position and everything, but I had to masquerade. Why do I have to hide my identity? Why do I have to be Tadeusz Zaleski? Why can't I be myself?

**NARRATOR:** They both knew that the longer they stayed in Poland, the harder it would be to leave. Norman, who had been a Zionist from boyhood, worked secretly with the Bricha, an organization which helped to smuggle Jews out of Europe and into Palestine. They first fled to Munich, Germany. Under the British Mandate, emigration to Palestine was still restricted for Jews. So, their journey would have to be illegal. While they set an escape plan in motion, they also registered for a visa to America, where Norman had a large family.

**SALSITZ:** We said, which one will come first, Palestine or America? If America comes first, we go to America. And from America, we can always go to Palestine.

**NARRATOR:** In January of 1947, the Liberty Ship SS *Ernie Pyle*, set sail from Bremerhaven, Germany, to New York City.

**SALSITZ:** It was a terrible storm and the ship, the boiler, everything broke, and we almost drowned. The people, the men were in the basement, there were maybe 201 in this hole. Now, the women were 20, 25 in a cabin. We were very, very angry that the German people who went to America at this time, because a lot of Germans went to America—they had family here—they had the best cabins, because they had money to pay. They were sitting and eating and drinking and dancing and we were laying like—like dogs in... so this was very, very unfair. And I was so sick, I was laying outside on the deck. And I prayed to God that the ship should sink. I couldn't take it. So, then later the night before, somebody said, "Tomorrow morning, we arrive in America."

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So, as sick we were, everybody dragged out the best suit with the best coat, and we were... and we waited—half a night we waited, staying on the deck waiting for the Statue of Liberty. And when the Statue... when we saw the Statue of Liberty, everybody from us started to cry.

**NARRATOR:** At the pier, they were met by Norman's older brother Albert, who had immigrated before Norman was born. Al provided shelter, but the welcome was not as warm as Norman had hoped.

**SALSITZ:** See, my brother took me to his home. And I stayed with my broth... He had his own house, and I stayed with his house two weeks. After two weeks he said that I have to look for an apartment, because in America two weeks is enough... But, I—we found an apartment. It was very hard to find an apartment. So an Italian man took us in in his apartment. He had a small kitchen, and he had his bedroom. We had the living room, we slept there. Then later, he left for Italy. And—I remember his name was Rosario. He left for Italy and he said... He gave us over the apartment. It was very hard to find an apartment.

**NARRATOR:** After Amalie got her permit as a Hebrew teacher, the two of them lived on her salary.

**SALSITZ:** See, would I come straight from a concentration camp, I would be very happy, because I would have enough to eat, I wouldn't be chased. But I already went through a period after the liberation 'till I escaped... I became already—I had a chauffeur. My wife had a cook. And I have a bodyguard... and I was—and I was admired, and I had a position. I don't know—So, then after this, when you came down—I fell down so drastically to America that I was nothing! What do you mean, nothing? I didn't know the language. I didn't know the people. I didn't have a trade. I didn't have a job. This... You became, you became worthless.

**NARRATOR:** Again, Norman turned to his new-found family for help. Again, he was disappointed.

**SALSITZ:** And there was one cousin, and he... and they had the largest silk company in the United States. Lining for fur coats, silk. They were very well known. And so, I went to the... to them Sunday morning to the father to ask for a job. He said, "Well, I'm retired, but my son is the owner now from the hou—from the business, you go to him." They had about 300 people working there. I got dressed in my best... a European coat, a European suit, and a European hat... So, he looked and looked at me. And he took out a wallet from his pocket. He took out a 100 dollar bill and put it on the table. And he said, "Take it and get off my back." And when he said this, naturally I didn't take the hundred dollars. Now, tears filled up my eyes. Now, I couldn't... I couldn't answer anything, and I couldn't cry. So, I didn't take it. I run out and I was staying in the hallway. And I was crying. I was 27 years old and I was crying. A man goes through, and he says, "Hey, Mister, what's wrong?"

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What's wrong?" So, I said to him, "Are you an American Jew?" He said, "Yes." So I said, "You know, you should've been in Auschwitz to be killed," to him. So he said, "Why are you cursing me?" he said...—because I said to him, "Why should my father be killed because he's a Jew and you live here and you have everything?" I didn't know what I'm saying, it was so... So he said, "Hey, why you're cursing me?" I said, I don't know. He said, "You know what? You ate lunch?" I said, "No." He says, "I want you should come with me. I'm going to eat lunch." So I went with him... So I told him the story.

**NARRATOR:** Joe Siegel was the second stranger who provided help. He was in the remnant business and gave Norman his first American job that paid a living wage. By day a peddler. By night, a member of various underground organizations training for armed combat in Palestine.

**SALSITZ:** And then one day, one day I came there and they said, "Well, Sunday morning your transport is going." And I came home and I said to my wife, "I'm going." And she said to me, "If you are going, you must know one thing... You are going, but you cannot come back to me. I will not wait for you. And I don't care what. Because I know you'll go and you'll be killed. And I lost too many people in—in Europe. And I don't want to have that. So, you can go, I cannot stop you, but you cannot come back to me."

**NARRATOR:** Bitterness and thoughts of suicide.

**SALSITZ:** Who had to go to Israel to fight, if not a survivor of the Holocaust who was 27 years old, and especially when I had the schooling, what the Russians gave me, the schooling, so that I could... So even 'til today, I always say this is my biggest regret.

**NARRATOR:** He didn't go then, but in 1949, after the War of Independence, the Salsitzes were on the first plane to Israel.

**SALSITZ:** The family was waiting for us... my wife's family, my brother's family. And they took us home. And they were very happy that naturally it's the first time that my wife saw her grandmother after the war. That she survived and my brother with the children. Now, we came... We wanted to remain. And we said we have nothing in America. We—I make a living, but we have no ties. So we said—I said I always wanted to live in Israel. My wife wanted to stay because she had there a sister. And her sister was starving. She had a farm, and they didn't have what to give to eat to the chickens. It was—it was terrible. I don't know if you know what means *tzen'ah* [austerity]? *Tzen'ah* was a time that everything was on cards, you couldn't buy this, you couldn't buy this. And the people didn't make money. It was a very terrible... because they had all the new immigrants. There was no industry. So we—so

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the family got together and they said, "You came too late." "Why too late?" "Would you come when you wanted before the war..."—I could be very important in the war. They didn't have professional soldiers. I was. And I wanted to fight for Israel, but the war is ended. And everybody—"So, what will you do? You will come over here and we will have two more mouths to feed. We don't have food. And what will you do? You are in America. You established yourself a little bit. You're making out all right. You go back, make money, send us the money." So, I bought 100 dozen children's socks and two suitcases. And I paid—I paid two dollars a dozen. And I went to Jersey City. Everybody had children, and I sold them for three dollars a dozen. Three dollars a dozen was cheap, but I made a dollar a dozen... And I sold in one day 100 dozen children's socks. And I made 100 dollars profit. When I made 100 dollars profit, this was the first day, I remember, so I said... People used to say that in America, money is laying on the street. It IS laying on the street, but you have to know how to pick it up. I said, this is for me. This is my country. If I could make the first day 100 dollars a day, so I will remain a peddler. And started to sell socks, then underwear, then dresses, then curtains and I wind up—and... with furniture. I sold only furniture. I had a warehouse. So, this was the beginning of being a peddler. So, I was about 10 years—10 years a peddler 'till I became a builder.

Then later, when I started to make a living and when I went to Florida, and this I will never forget, and my wife went to Miami to buy a pair of shoes, and we go and we went into a store and I wanted to go to the bathroom and I see it's written for "Whites" and "Blacks." I wanted to—I couldn't believe it. I couldn't understand that in America... So I went back and there was a full—the store was full with people. And I started to yell—again, I talk a lot... So, I started to yell, "Don't buy here shoes! I wouldn't let you buy shoes." And she asked me "Why?" And I said, "Go and you will see! There are two fountains, two toilets... What do you mean this is for 'White' and 'Blacks'? You cannot—you cannot buy here." And I pulled her out, and she didn't buy the shoes. See, at this time for me the... we called them 'negroes' in this time, that they suffered and I could see them as I was second class citizen in Europe! So, this was very, very, very... it was terrible for me. Naturally, I have a lot of complaints to America. But we are allowed to have complaints. I can speak up!

**NARRATOR:** In 1956, Esther was born, their only child.

**SALSITZ:** Now, when Esther was born so I think everything was completed. Because wouldn't I have a daughter, my life wouldn't be worth anything. Because why did I survive? To have a continuation! The Jews lived for so many years, and I had to have a continuation. Now she—I have a daughter, she has three grandsons. So, it means that Hitler didn't win the war. With me he didn't win the war. Because his—to win the war it means to

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destroy every single Jew. And with me, he couldn't do it.

*[Norman sings, "Shlof mayn kindele, shlof mayn yidele, shlof mayn kindele, shlof."]*

**SALSITZ:** When she was small, she was very unhappy, because she always asked question, how come all her friends have grandparents, have aunts and she doesn't have. It came Sunday, they came to visit. So as a matter of fact, she had a friend across the street and they... she had two sets of grandparents. So, she asked "How come she has two sets and I don't have even one?" So, naturally, we told her that they were killed. "Where are they?" "They are in Heaven..." I spoke to her about the Holocaust, but I think that I ah—I spoiled a lot, because I started to talk to her too early. I started to speak to her when she was small. She knows that from since she was four, five. And then she was so fed up that she tried to push it away. And then later, when I did with the grandchildren, she told me the same thing, not to try to spoil it, and not to try to influence and talk so much about it when they are too small.

**NARRATOR:** His office displays a lifetime of achievements. The family tree, Norman and Amalie—Esther who is now a lawyer in Boston and her husband Bruce, who is a recognized AIDS oncologist at Harvard—the three grandchildren; photographs of houses built by Norman's construction firm, three published books and proofs for the next two to come, a large cassette collection of Jewish music, plaques and acknowledgements from the various charitable and Holocaust organizations he has served, B'nai Brith, Israeli Red Cross, Israel Bonds, and United Jewish Appeal.

**SALSITZ:** See, I'm in the United States almost 50 years. Fifty or more... from '47 ah... more than 50... I never dreamt about the United States. Now I went through, I have my life here and family. And you always dream from your life. I never had a dream about the United States. Always when I have a dream, it's always a dream from home. Before the war. Dream from the Holocaust. I live with the past. And this is very—It's not good, but I live with the past. All right, luckily, my wife is also a survivor. Would I have an American survivor probably... we couldn't live together... an American person. Because I don't think that somebody would take it. Ahm, but with her, she has the same problem as I. When she dreams she dreams also about her family, about her youth...

**NARRATOR:** In the evening, the 80-year-old Norman records songs, which, at 8 years of age, he harmonized with the Cantor in Kolbuszowa.

*[Norman's cassette playing.]* The last time we sing it was the year when Kolbuszowa was destroyed in 1942. Since then, we sing it in our temple in Beth Am, which I also harmonize it with the cantor. *[Singing from the cassette.]*

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**NARRATOR:** The songs are to be used for choir practice in his temple, as teaching tools for schools, and for his own grandchildren.

**SALSITZ:** I'm very proud of our heritage during all the time, of the religion and the history. But, I stop a little when it comes to God. I stop, because I have questions. I don't know if I believe in God or if I don't believe in God, I don't want to think about it, but if I believe, I'm very angry at him. Because if—like they say, if he ruled... runs the world, if he rules everything, where was he when they pushed in 4,000 people in the gas chamber in Auschwitz? And the crying and everything... He didn't hear it. If he didn't hear it, and he didn't help, so probably he could not help. And if he could not help, well, who needs him? But I—But this is—But Esther is more religious than we are. Because she doesn't have this experience... And I told her, if she will have children and the children will go to a religious school, I will pay for it. And I do. For all the three children. They go to Solomon Schechter, I pay for it. So, I am very, very proud what the Jews accomplished.

America took me in and nourished me, brought me back to health. And America did everything for me that I never dreamt that America would do it for me. When I see an injustice and it's done in America, I feel very bad, because I feel it is *mine* and it shouldn't be an injustice. In Poland, everything they did, I had to take it for granted; this is the way it should be. But not in America. This *my* America. The same thing it's *your* America. Who are the Americans? *We!*



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THE HOLOCAUST

BEHIND THE SCENES

JOAN RINGELHEIM



NEENAH ELLIS



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**JOAN RINGELHEIM** is Director of Oral History at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. After receiving a Ph.D. in philosophy from Boston University, she taught philosophy for 13 years. During this period, two major foci emerged in her teaching and research: the Holocaust and feminist theory. Together they opened up a new area of investigation—women and the Holocaust. In 1982-83 she received the American Council of Learned Societies Fellowship and a Kent Fellowship from the Center for Humanities at Wesleyan University and a grant from the New York Council for the Humanities to produce the first conference on women and the Holocaust.

**NEENAH ELLIS** is a journalist and author. She has produced documentaries and reports for National Public Radio, the Discovery Channel, and the National Park Service on a myriad of subjects both domestic and foreign, historical and contemporary. She has been the recipient of two radio production grants from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and has received the prestigious George Foster Peabody Award three times. She is also the author of *If I Live to be 100—Lessons from the Centenarians*, a *New York Times* bestseller. Since 1994, she has conducted oral history interviews for the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and visited with all the survivors featured in “About Life after the Holocaust” to consult with them about how best to tell their stories.

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## INTERVIEW WITH JOAN RINGELHEIM

**RINGELHEIM:** You know, when the Museum was in process, they were doing two things. They were creating—producing interviews in order to create an archive as well as to be able to use interviews in exhibitions, because I think that the Museum felt that it was very important to have individual stories not simply to have a grander picture of the Holocaust or the way the historian tells the story, but rather how individual people tell the story, because they felt that individuals coming to the Museum would need to hear the individual story, that that would make the Holocaust more understandable. Because the individual story is different from...than what you get when you do the macropicture. It gives you another insight into experiences, because there is no one Holocaust story, and this individuation of the story helps you to understand that. That you can't just make these huge generalizations and know that everybody experienced the same thing, because they didn't. And you only get that through oral history, and I think the basic reason why we do it. We're lucky enough to be able to record these interviews. We can't do it for historical events so many years ago, that we don't have that kind of a record. So even with all of the problems that you get in oral history, namely there are memory problems—there are lapses in memories, people make mistakes—still there is something about that personal story that gives you a dimension you can't get in any other way.

With all of its shortcomings, there's something very important in that personal tale being told in the way that an oral historian can get it. Most of us never sit with someone for five or six hours where they're only interested in listening to us. So you get a very different feel of a person, because you get so many different dimensions of their lives. So it's very important to have that as a record.

Let me just add one more thing to that. The oral history is not a refined record. A memoir is very refined. There's also something very raw about the oral history, which I think also makes it compelling. As much as memoirs are very compelling, the refinement of the writing and the editing of the writing is very different than what you will see on the screen or listen when you hear an oral history. So it becomes extremely immediate, I think.

I think there's something very special about stories, which is why novels are so important to people. And although historians can often write good narratives, often they don't and people don't tend to read a lot of history, but they identify a great deal with the personal story of somebody, and when you watch an oral history or you watch portions of an oral history, it brings out the event in a way that you can identify with that most people can't identify when they read a book, or even when they see some documentaries. But, the documentaries that have personal stories in them are extremely compelling. And so, I think the few places that we have in the Permanent Exhibition where we tell those stories is very important.

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Historians can dismiss oral histories, a lot of historians find using oral histories extremely difficult, so sometimes the dismissal has to do with the enormous amount of work you have to do in order to get some things out of an oral history. And I think historians are looking for different things in writing their books or their articles. They are looking for factual records, more than they are for personal insights, and you don't get that much factually from an oral history. What you do get is a personal insight and a personal experience, and if the historian is not going to write about that, they're not going to want to watch.

The Museum wanted to create an archive. That was from the get-go. It is true that in the beginning, a lot of these interviews were thought to—that they would be part of exhibitions, which they often are. But, we've also created perhaps the second largest archive of oral histories in the world. We have over 8,000 testimonies now and we ourselves have created, produced about 1,800 interviews. So it's a very important site for both scholars and students and filmmakers to come, and when there will be no survivors left, it's these kinds of archives that will make a difference.

We do oral histories in a formal way. We don't do oral histories with just our family members. Because many of us, either don't have family members who are around or they didn't experience the Holocaust. We do it with people who are essentially strangers. So the question is, what do you do within the context of your family? And maybe it's very important, that people think about, we like to hear the stories of our family members but we often don't record them and don't have them in some formal way. And we do have guidelines that can help people to create oral histories and even if they're not professionally done, they can be very important, even just inside a family. So, I would hope that people might look at our Website and take some direction from those guidelines.

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## INTERVIEW WITH NEENAH ELLIS

**NEENAH ELLIS:** Interviewing survivors is very difficult, but also very rewarding as a human being. Because you prepare yourself by reading about their lives and reading about the times in which they experienced and reading about the experiences they had. But actually sitting with someone for hours on end and looking into their eyes and feeling what they feel is pretty difficult, because most of the time, these people went through horrible experiences, and their memories of them are quite good. Exquisitely detailed sometimes. And they often have so much difficulty telling those stories, because, maybe they've never told them before and now they've decided at this later stage of their life that it's time to tell the story and they don't want to but they feel compelled to, so there's that tension. And you feel all of that during the course of those hours that it takes. So, it's difficult, but the reward is a deep kind of emotional understanding of what these people experienced as best as they could describe it. And, it makes history come alive. To me, sometimes I feel like I've been where they are, and I often have not, and of course, my understanding is minute compared to what they went through. But I have a sense of it. I come away with a feeling that I can at least empathize with them, if not completely understand, as a human being. So, they're extremely rewarding and extremely difficult. Then, next day, I usually feel pretty wiped out.

**JOAN RINGELHEIM:** Do you remember your first interview?

**NEENAH ELLIS:** I think I do. It was a video interview. It was a woman, but I don't remember her name. She had come in from out of town and she was pretty chipper as I recall, and a lot of people are when they start out. They think, this is gonna take 40 minutes, and we'll be in and out. And then when they realize that you really want to know everything and that you're willing to wait for the really hard stuff to come out. I remember experiencing that wait and knowing that it, sort of anticipating that it was going to get harder and harder, but never having gone through it and being very nervous because I knew what was coming, or I thought I knew what was coming. And I also remember how close I felt to that person when it was over. A person who I'd never met before and when the interview was over we hugged and felt like we knew each other for a long time because you make that connection really quickly. I'm sorry I can't remember who it was, I can remember her face and I can remember her voice. And it was unlike anything I'd ever done before, and I'm a professional reporter. I never had an experience like that.

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**JOAN RINGELHEIM:** And was that because it was the Holocaust or it was because you were doing a different kind of an interview?

**NEENAH ELLIS:** Both. I think it was both, because we went to some very difficult emotional places and also the length of time. I think the combination of the two things made it a very powerful, strong experience for me. Very memorable. As a reporter I had never done interviews that long. I mean, that one could have been three hours or more. Many of them are. So it was a kind of shocking thing for me.

This was different from doing interviews actually, because the interviews were already done. It was kind of fun because I love looking at peoples' pictures, and I didn't have to worry about the tape recorder and we could just chat and tell stories and wander. And they would bring out these photo albums, and I would start looking and asking them to tell me stories about the photographs, and it was really fun, because photographs prompt people in a way that sometimes questions don't. And so when you see pictures of their parents and their siblings and their house and the people who... their teachers and their whole lives in front of you. You see how the faces are the same. I think the photographs that were most moving to me were the survivors as children with their parents because those were the most moving photographs for them. They always wanted to show you, "This is me when I was three with my mom." And that's the deep connection that they lost. It was easier than an interview in a way, because we could jump around and change the mood and go to nicer, more fun times, but all the elements of an interview were there, it just wasn't chronological, and we could laugh, and the whole mood was much more enjoyable for everybody, I think.

**JOAN RINGELHEIM:** So, I want to ask you about the specific times you had. Just sort of characterize each of these different people that were profiled.

**NEENAH ELLIS:** Regina Gelb has meticulously recorded her life in albums. She took me into the backroom and the bed was covered with great big leather-bound photo albums. Must have been a dozen, I think. And they were all in order. The captions were written, and so it was very easy to go through with her and pick photographs from different periods of her life. She enjoyed showing the photographs, too. They filled her with happiness, somehow to be able to share it, and I think that shows in the pictures we see of her. She's got a lot of good memories of her coming to New York. She was quite young when she came. She was with all of her sisters, and the photographs reflect that. She has photographs from her high school days, the pins that she collected. She was exuberant as a young woman, and she's exuberant today.

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Norman Salsitz has photographs that he took of his family going back to his childhood. He had a camera in the ghetto and recorded voraciously. He had a sense of history and wanting to record what was happening. So he has volumes and volumes of photographs. He documented his life from the time he was about 13 years old to the present. It was very absorbing, very interesting to go through the photographs with him. He also has, in one of the back bedrooms of his house, a gallery of photographs of all the members of his family and his wife's family that were lost in the Holocaust. Portraits of people that cover a complete wall of a bedroom. So, keeping these photographs, the photographs are artifacts to him, they're a way to remember and a way to make sure that other people never forget what happened in the Holocaust. They're extremely important to him, as important to him in a way as his story. His photographs are tangible to him and sort of proof that all of this happened somehow. It's all very real to him. The past is very real to him, partially I think because of the photographs. I think that's clear from looking at the photographs we have.

Blanka's (Blanka Rothschild) the only survivor of this group that I corresponded with by e-mail before I went to see her. So by the time I got there, I felt like I had a nice relationship with her, very friendly and very open. When I got there she had brought out her photographs. She had quite a few as well, and it seemed like she was very eager to show me the photographs of her granddaughter. As I recall, Blanka didn't have as many photographs of her past as many of the other survivors did. She had one photograph of herself and her husband on their wedding day and not very many more of herself before that. But you could see the light in her eyes and the joy that she got from her granddaughter, and photographs of her granddaughter from the time she was born, through school, law school, and now anticipating her granddaughter's marriage. Her daughter dropped by while I was there, so we had a little almost like a reunion, with people I didn't know. That's kind of not surprising. You get close to the survivors very quickly when you know that much about them and when they open up the way she did and the way most of them do.

When I went to see Aron (Aron Derman), his wife Lisa had passed away. I never met Lisa Derman, and he was still grieving that loss very deeply. It was difficult for him to even look at the photographs with me. He brought them out in boxes. They weren't organized in any way, but he handed them to me and said, "Take what you want." So I would go through them and look and ask him, "Who was this?" and "What year was this?" So I was able to collect quite a large group of photographs, but it was really hard for him. It was a very difficult day for him, because it was painful for him to look back and see those pictures of his wife. He was very proud of her, of the work they did together. They had a very close relationship and a very interesting story, but it was all very raw for him, very, very raw.

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Thomas Buergenthal is a judge in the World Court in the Hague and kind of tough to get in touch with. But, we were able to meet with him here in Washington, D.C., when he was back on a visit. He has a very upbeat way of telling his story. Partly, because he was so young during the war years and his memories are a child's memories, and he describes his experiences with some fondness, strangely. But when you hear his story you'll understand why. It was quite a pleasant kind of time to spend together and he's quite meticulous in his memory. I think that his post Holocaust interview reflects that.

**JOAN RINGELHEIM:** What is it that you gain from doing these interviews?

**NEENAH ELLIS:** There's a lot for me personally in doing these interviews. I'm not Jewish, my family's not Jewish, and so on the one hand it's a very firsthand history lesson for me. I didn't hear these stories growing up. I didn't know that much about the Holocaust until I got to college. There weren't very many Jewish people even living in the town where I grew up, so I came to this without a lot of preconceived notions, I think. It certainly has changed my life in a very deep way to meet these people, to hear their stories, to realize what they went through, to feel the feelings that they felt. I had no idea. History books have no way of conveying human emotion in this way. I feel like a witness in a certain way, all these stories, and very privileged to have people tell them to me. I'm a journalist, so asking questions comes naturally to me, but this goes beyond journalism and beyond history in a certain way, to a deep human experience that should not be forgotten.

**JOAN RINGELHEIM:** Has it ever been a problem for you that you are not Jewish? Have people questioned you?

**NEENAH ELLIS:** I think there were one or two occasions when I could see this little flicker go across people's eyes that said... sort of a flicker of disappointment, because they didn't think I could really understand and they may be right. In many cases, I think it makes them tell more. It makes them provide more context, which I often need. I don't think it has hindered me, and I hope it hasn't hindered them.