Hear My Story: Bob Mermelstein transcript

**Lisa MacVittie** 00:00

I'm the last survivor of the Holocaust in our family.

**Jackie Congedo** 00:04

Behind the words pictures and artifacts in the museum are people whose stories of survival and hope come alive to inspire new generations of upstanders. One by one, these stories stir the soul.

**Al Miller** 00:18

Can there really be hope for us?

**Bella Ouziel** 00:20

See, mine is 40018, my sister was 40017

**Jackie Congedo** 00:28

Holocaust survivors, their descendants, liberators, champions of justice and courageous upstanders ask only this - hear my story so that the lessons they teach will echo for generations.

**Elisha Wiesel** 00:41

 I will never meet someone else like my father, but there are many of us who, if we come together, can keep his voice alive.

**Jackie Congedo** 00:48

These stories will change you. They will move you to action, inspiring the best of humanity every day.

**Trinity Johnson** 00:54

I'm Trinity Johnson. In this episode, you'll meet Bob Mermelstein. Bob is the child of Holocaust survivors. He tells the story of his mother, Joan, a survivor of Auschwitz. Joan wrote a book about her experiences before her death in 2008 today, Bob shares his mother's story, keeping her legacy of resilience and hope alive. Bob, thank you so much for joining me today for this conversation. I

**Bob Mermelstein** 01:31

My pleasure.

**Trinity Johnson** 01:31

I have enjoyed learning your mother's story through your eyes and keeping her story alive. And I hope we'll also have a little bit of time to also talk about your father today as well. To get us started, I want to share a quote, because your mother was so eloquent and such a beautiful author, writing her experiences, and at one point she said, "Remembrance serves many purposes. It is important to look back, not only to the endless path of Jewish martyrdom, full of persecutions and death, but also to the rich lives that our relatives and ancestors lived." So before we really dive into her story during World War II and especially the Holocaust, I wanted to just ask share some of the memories of your relationship with your mother and really just who she was as a person, because she was such a wonderful educator and just eloquent author.

**Bob Mermelstein** 02:26

I regarded my mother as a saint, Trinity. Can't think of anyone else that I've interacted with in my life who was closer to that description as a saint. She was very selfless and really sacrificed for the sake of myself and my younger brother also I... treated me as an adult, I think even in childhood so forth, was very encouraging with me as I pursued, you know, school and my careers, when one sign that we were very close after I moved to Cincinnati to take my first job at Procter and Gamble, my mother wanted to join me. My mother, father and brother followed me to Cincinnati less than a year later,

**Trinity Johnson** 03:22

I admire the close relationship you have with her, and I know when you speak to students and on behalf of our speakers bureau, that beautiful relationship that you too had really shines through. So thank you for sharing.

**Bob Mermelstein** 03:36

I'm glad it does, and I'm, you know, really continuing her mission, because it was truly a mission for her to to want to speak of her Holocaust experiences.

**Trinity Johnson** 03:49

When did you realize she was a Holocaust survivor? Was she very open with you as a child, or

**Bob Mermelstein** 03:55

She was, which isn't always the case, as you know, I was... this was preschool for me. I remember sharing with my mother that friends of mine, my playmates, boys and girls, had grandparents who were coming to visit them in our in our apartment building in New York City, and I asked my mother, I must have been three or four years old, why I didn't have grandparents like they did. And I and then that's the point where my mother started telling me, and I know she was frank. I'm not sure how much she told me at that early age, but I did know that I lost my my both of my grandmothers during the Holocaust. It turns out that both my grandfathers had died prior to World War II, but, but both my grandmothers perished. Then I learned about a host of other relatives too.

**Trinity Johnson** 05:03

Well, let's go ahead and go back in history, but really, before we get to the Holocaust part, tell me a little bit about where Joan was from and what her pre war life was like,

**Bob Mermelstein** 05:17

Sure, and as I describe in my presentation, it was a very happy life growing up for my mother, she grew up in small village. It was actually a farming community. Turia Bystra was the name of the community, and that was it later became Czechoslovakia. Actually, my mother was born in 1917 and Czechoslovakia hadn't been created quite at that time until the close of World War I, a year later. So that region was part of the Austro Hungarian empire, which dissolved. They were on the losing side of World War I, and shortly after that, Czechoslovakia was created, and the section that my mother lived in, and also my father, for that matter, they were from a district on the southern tip of Czechoslovakia, And that region is now part of the Ukraine. It was absorbed by the Soviet Union in 1947, I think. And then when the Soviet Union broke up in 1991 that area reverted to Ukraine. So she was the youngest of 12 children, and her mom was already a widow when she was born, she my grandfather, my maternal grandfather died just before my mother was born of pneumonia. So and they had a 100 acre farm, which included fruit orchards, livestock and the older children were helping out on the farm. They also had some village local, local people in the village helping the farm. And my grandmother was managing this, but she was not from the farm. She was really a city girl who married her husband who took her to the farm. She was a literate person, very religious observant Jewish woman who learned how to run a farm, so forth. My mother had her chores, but she was also into academics. She did very well in public school, won a won a medal, the Tomas Masaryk gold medal, which is only awarded to one student in every county or district, because people had noticed how well she did in all subjects but particular languages which she wanted to major in later some of some more important people in the town got her into a high school, which women from that town did not go, did not advance into high school and then later on into college. So she was a sophomore in college at the time that the troubles started occurring in the late 30s.

**Trinity Johnson** 08:51

And when those troubles started in the late 30s, How did life start changing? Did she talk about how things progressed to eventually them being put in the ghetto as a family? How did things change?

**Bob Mermelstein** 09:07

Yeah, well, a few years before her family was herded into into a ghetto, life changed when Hungary, which was a border nation and an ally of the Third Reich, Hungary decided to annex that section Ruthenia, or it's also called Carpathia. They annexed that area, and immediately Hungarians swarmed into the area and replaced all the officials. They replaced the military, and they started carrying out the orders of the Third Reich, and very soon afterwards, Jewish people were not allowed to practice in their profession. They were expelled from schools. That's when my mother was kicked out of college. There were curfews. They were not allowed to own radios. They were not allowed to go into parks, theaters, public transportation couldn't use any of that, so, so right away, most Jewish people were confined to their homes without the ability to to even work, especially not to interact with Gentile people in the area. So, so, so this was a gradual change, and then also Jewish people who had migrated from Poland into that area were picked on first and brutalized. Started, and some and probably even slaughtered because they couldn't, because they were the recent immigrants to the area, but before long, all Jewish people had to provide documentation to show that they had been living in the area for more than a generation, and documentation like that was hard to come by. And so, so life beginning in like 1938 or 39 had was becoming unbearable for Jews in that region, and it wasn't until 1944 that, that Jewish people were displaced from their homes and forced into ghettos. So we're talking about five years, maybe five to six years before that, when life started becoming very hard and very depressing.

**Trinity Johnson** 12:10

What did she tell you about the ghettos then, because I know being part of the Hungarian deportations in 44 that May through July, it was very swift, and I think when we get to that point, as terrible as all the persecutions were, and the limits and really revoking even basic civil rights for that many years was unbearable, but it probably provided somewhat of a oh, we're still here. We're still together as a family.

**Bob Mermelstein** 12:45

Yeah, at least for at least the women were, Trinity. I forgot to mention that men of working age, I'm not sure of the age range, but certainly men over the age of 18 at least, were drafted into the Hungarian army at first, and then into labor camps, and that took place in the late 30s. So by the time of the the ghettos, there were very few men indeed around and Jewish men around. You're You're right. Things happened quickly. It was around Passover 1944 which would have probably fell in April that year, a sheriff showed up at my grandmother's house and gave, and at the time, most of my mother's older siblings were married and living out of the house, or they had been picked off into into labor camps. The men were, but, but so the only so my grandmother and my mother and my mother's next oldest sister were the only family left in that house, but a sheriff showed up and told them that they had one hour to take essential belongings and to to follow them. I'm not sure what what vehicles they used to transport them to a ghetto in the county seat, Uzhhorod. They had converted a cement factory into a ghetto, and so they had rounded up hundreds of Jewish people to live in that ghetto, and that that so, so my my mother, was with her mother and her her sister, Helen, but that was just for about one month, because in May 1944 that's when they had to board a train to go to Auschwitz.

**Bob Mermelstein** 12:50

And at the time that they were in the ghetto together, did your mother ever say that, you know, we hear that there were rumors, right? Did they think that they were relatively safe, or was there always this impending doom that that they knew deportation was coming, or was that an utter shock as well?

**Bob Mermelstein** 15:26

It's an interesting question, because my mother, my mother, never spoke of that. I don't think they had any wild ideas of what was in store for them. I know other stories at ghettos and other regions where, when the deportations to camp started, people, some people look forward to that. They thought that things would be more pleasant than than being in a ghetto. But my mother never elaborated on what she thought lay in store for her when she had to board the train. It was a three day journey from that cement factory in Uzhhorod to to Auschwitz, and it was in a cattle car where a good deal of the people being transported didn't didn't make it out alive, out of the car, because there was no food.

**Trinity Johnson** 16:41

Did she ever talk about her arrival to Auschwitz?

**Bob Mermelstein** 16:47

Oh, she she remembered clearly when the train had stopped and where German guards were shouting at them to to get get off the train quickly, to throw your suitcases in a pile on the side, and then to line up for Dr Mengele's in... quick inspection. Dr Mengele would, would size up a person getting off the train and point to the left, or point to the right where they should go, and then one one side was to be to be killed in the in the showers, and, you know, in the to be gassed and then cremated. And that's where my grandmother wound up going to that to that line,

**Trinity Johnson** 17:55

so... your mother and her sister, Helen, were were selected for labor. And

**Bob Mermelstein** 18:03

yeah, they...They were selected initially, initially for life. My mother would have been, let's see, this is 1944 she would have been 27 at the time, and her... Helen was maybe 29 and and I would ask, what would occur inside Auschwitz and my mother talked about, chiefly about early morning lineups, where everybody was had to stand in line early in the morning for a count, a head count, that took quite a long time. And then the awful sleeping arrangements, where, where there were bunk beds, and there might have been four or five women squeezed into a bunk, where one or two people should have been, you know, two people at the most just terrible conditions. But apart from that, there were, there weren't, there weren't many work duties in that particular part of Auschwitz to do. And it wasn't very long before my mother was given a towel and a bar of soap and told to line up in front of... and there was quite a long line, a line for the, quote, showers, which were the gassing stations, and she and his sister were both on that line. And if it were not for a limousine that pulled into the camp while they were standing online, they would have gone into the gas chamber. But but... out of the limousine stepped a stepped out a German industrialist, or he had, he was in charge of a textile factory, and he was looking for more labor, more people to up, more slaves or prisoners to work in his textile factory, and he saw the line, it was right by his car, and he said, can't I have you know these women here? And that's how my mother and her sister wound up leaving to go to this textile factory, which was inside a different concentration camp called Gross Rosen. I think that was in Germany. Auschwitz was in Poland,

**Trinity Johnson** 20:49

yes,

**Bob Mermelstein** 20:53

and that was the second of three camps that my mother spent her time in. And the concentration camps experiences took about 11 months to about 11 months from May 44 to April 45

**Trinity Johnson** 21:12

Right, and so from she didn't stay in Gross Rosen for very long, she eventually ends up being liberated at Bergen Belsen. Can you take us through kind of those last few months of her experience?

**Bob Mermelstein** 21:24

Yeah, well, actually, I think the camp where she stayed in the most was her second camp, Trinity. Gross Rosen, my thanks to the fact that my mother was fluent in five languages in her 20s, and there were Jewish prisoners operating the text of the sewing machine, the industrial sewing machines and so forth. And they came from a variety of nations, and my mother could understand most of those languages, because Slavic languages were were similar, and my mother knew German too. So she was made an interpreter so she didn't have to work as hard on the sewing machines. And then she was promoted to a foreman, where she would go to all the each of the individuals, and convey what they had to do, what they were making that day, probably uniforms. I think my mother said that these were uniforms for for the German soldiers. And so she was probably there from, well, the summer to the winter of 1944 and she, she was, maybe you've heard of the expression the death march. In the... in the winter of 1944-45 which was a very bitter winter in Europe, by this time, the Allies are advancing onto Germany from different directions. We're talking about British forces, American forces and Russian forces all converging on Germany. And so it was time for Germany to start retreating, even their concentration camps. And they didn't want, I guess they didn't want their concentration camps in Germany to be discovered. So they ordered a mass evacuation of Gross Rosen, and prisoners marched, initially by foot, from Gross Rosen to Bergen Belsen. The majority of those prisoners did not survive that March, and at the very end, even the Germans or ordered cattle cars to to transport them on the last leg of that journey to Bergen Belsen. So my mother got to Bergen Belsen, probably in January or February of 45 and and by that time I uh, order had broken down, and when there was a lot of sickness, typhus, cholera, dysentery.

**Trinity Johnson** 24:34

And even more overcrowding, because as a lot of these camps are taking the prisoner population back to Germany, it's even more overcrowded.

**Bob Mermelstein** 24:44

Exactly Trinity, and there wasn't even any room inside some of these barracks for the extra prisoners who arrived. But when the weather started warming up in March, probably the prisoners were. Sleeping outside in the fields. And that's how the British forces found them on April 15 when they arrived at Bergen Belsen.

**Trinity Johnson** 25:15

And so your mother was still with her sister, Helen upon liberation.

**Bob Mermelstein** 25:21

Yes, she was... my mother at the time, was so weak and emaciated that she was not even able to stand, so she was laying down in the fields. Her sister was a little bit better off and was able to walk. And and just be like the morning of the liberation by the British forces. Some of the prisoners started shouting that the Germans had evacuated, and they were they were gone, and immediately there was a raid on the on the cafeteria, or the the dining halls so forth. But would you believe that the Germans had poisoned the food in the dining halls before they left? And my mother's sister Helen, and others who who saw the possibility of eating, you know, they got sick and and died. My mother stated that in the book. And I always and at first, I was skeptical that that had occurred. But another local child of survivors, Ray Warren, checked that story out. His mother had been at Auschwitz too, and he had heard the same thing. Ray researched that and found that to be true

**Trinity Johnson** 26:56

Well, and also in that immediate post liberation stage, when people's systems were not also prepared for or being able to ingest a larger amount of food. Many survivors, unfortunately also died from overeating.

**Bob Mermelstein** 27:15

Yeah, and I was aware of that, and that's what I thought may have gone on, but I'm sure that was operative as well, because my mother had said that the the British started setting up nursing stations and so forth to care for the patients. But at first they they, they had little experience in dealing with emaciated people, and started serving regular meals and that that didn't work, so they had to start with broth. And, you know, just simple things that you might get in a hospital recovering from an operation or something like that.

**Trinity Johnson** 27:58

And, and that liberation... post liberation stage, and really, as survivors are recovering. A lot of times, the stories we hear really focus on getting better in order to go home and see who's left. And so a lot of the focus tends to lie on that latter half of the journey of trying to get back home see who survived. But your mother was in such a weakened state that they I was hoping you could share a little bit about her recovery, only because I think most people don't really grasp how difficult that back to health journey aspect of the story was, and I know your mother really struggled with that.

**Bob Mermelstein** 28:40

Yeah, I'll start by saying that the even the British who were treating the survivors of Bergen Belsen, they realized that a lot of the care was beyond what they could do right there in this field hospital that they had set up. So they worked with the Swedish Red Cross to evacuate prisoners that the survivors who were the sickest, and they were evacuated by ship to Sweden. And I read that there were five ships that actually evacuated the prisoners between, let's say, May and July of 1945. My mother was on board one of those, one of those ships. And in addition to having typhus and perhaps dysentery and cholera too. My mother had amnesia, almost total amnesia, where she did not remember where she was from. She did not remember her relatives. She. And in Sweden, she, she was hospitalized for between six months and a year, and and my mother remembers discussions between Swedish officials talking about repatriation of the survivors back to their countries and but my mother couldn't go through that. She didn't remember anything about her life and that. And it's remarkable that my mother's memory finally recovered to where she remembered all these details, that she, she could put down in her book, because she had quite a good memory afterwards.

**Bob Mermelstein** 30:14

Does she have any memories of any of the people who cared for her in those days? Or was her amnesia and really just her recovery so overwhelming?

**Bob Mermelstein** 31:00

She didn't talk much about her time in the hospital, except to say that she was very complimentary of the medical staff and and and the hospital and so forth. And then when she was well enough to leave the hospital, Sweden assigned her to a convalescent home situation, so she was doing rehabbing or convalescing in a group home with factory work nearby and a lot of her co workers were other survivors, other Jewish survivors from Bergen Belsen as well. Oh, incidentally, my mother also remembered on the day of... this is still while in Bergen Belsen, before she got to Sweden. The the head of the Swedish Red Cross, Count Bernadotte, who was related to the King of Sweden, but, but he was in charge of the Red Cross. He personally came to Bergen Belsen, grabbed the loudspeaker and he he greeted all the the prisoners and told them that the Swedish Red Cross was prepared to work with them and to help them recover, and so forth. He was probably speaking in German, and coincidentally, about 50 years later, in Cincinnati, the two sons of Count Bernadotte were in Cincinnati to receive medallions from Hebrew Union College. And my mother was a presenter. She didn't she was just in the audience, but wound up saying that she knew their father, and they asked her to come up to present awards to the to the two sons of Count Bernadotte.

**Trinity Johnson** 33:17

It's amazing. How did your mother end up deciding to come to America, and ultimately, Cincinnati?

**Bob Mermelstein** 33:26

Yeah, this was interesting. My mother was introduced to another Jewish survivor in Sweden who knew my mother's family. And word got around she did not live in the same city in Sweden, so my mother took a train, and there were pictures in her book, my mother took a train to meet this woman who helped her with her recovery from amnesia by telling her where she where she lived, who her family members were. And this woman remembered that my mother had an older sister in New Jersey, or at least in Greater New York City. So soon after that, when my mother got back to her convalescent home and factory, where some some of the her co-workers were gradually leaving to go to the United States, sponsored by relatives and so forth. And my mother spoke to one of these co-workers and asked if, if she could help find my mother's older sister, Ida. And this woman followed through. And there was an ad placed on the radio on a Jewish radio station, a Yiddish radio station in New York City. And this was not unusual at the time, where you had people looking for families in the United States. These are refugees looking for family members. So my mother had an ad placed about herself looking for family members, and a distant relative of my mother's, who from from my mother's hometown in Czechoslovakia, and who was living in in Long Island or right in New York City, heard that ad on the radio and knew of my mother's sister and and knew what city she lived in, Lakewood, New Jersey. And so they drove on a Sunday morning in 1946 they drove to Lakewood New Jersey and and told them about the ad. And shortly after that, my aunt Ida began corresponding with my mother in Sweden, and I donated a bunch of letters to the Holocaust center about five years ago, because I inherited a pack of about 40 letters because so my aunt kept all those letters from my mother and gave them to her daughter, who gave them to me and and so Ida and her husband Sam sponsored my mother's my mother's arrival In to New York City in the fall of 1947 and she flew by plane because ships were on strike. My mother had a dream that she reports in her book, and this is before she even knew, even before she had her plane tickets to the United States, and she thought she was going by ship, but in her dream, her sister was wearing a 1940s pilot gear, you know, with the helmet and goggles and so forth and and her sister was telling her that she would be coming to the United States by plane.

**Trinity Johnson** 37:29

It's quite a premonition. So what did she say of her arrival to America, and you know, starting her life anew, now reunited with her sister, Ida?

**Bob Mermelstein** 37:41

Well, she was glad that her sister wasn't living in New York City itself, because I think the sounds and the smells and so forth were a little too much for oh, they were overwhelming for her. But her sister lived about 50 miles away in a rural community, and it was, it was quiet and so forth, and, and my mother picked up English very well. It was her eighth language. I think by then, she learned Swedish and in Sweden and and she went to night school. She wanted to become an American citizen. She lived with her sister and brother in law for a couple of years, like from 1947 to 49 and then passed the citizenship test and started looking for work in New York City. But I'll tell you this. I'm not quite sure this was in the book, but my mother was interested in writing a book about her experiences in the Holocaust in the late four... in the late 40s, but she was discouraged by relatives, by friends, by her night school teachers, because the mindset was so different back then. Even psych psychologists back then, this is 75-80 years ago, they subscribed to the notion that the best way to heal yourself is to forget about the past, to just look beyond that, to the future and and not discuss, you know, just bury your past experiences. So my mother went with the flow. After all, she was just 30 years old when she came to the United States. So so she put aside that idea about writing a book for a generation or for a little bit of time.

**Trinity Johnson** 39:45

She was determined, and her book is wonderful, so I'm glad she went back to that. Remind me what the title of your mother's book is?

**Bob Mermelstein** 39:53

Out of the Ashes. Out of the Ashes.

**Trinity Johnson** 39:56

So at what point did she meet your father? Who was also a survivor, correct?

**Bob Mermelstein** 40:03

Yes, my and my father was from that same district. Actually, they probably lived maybe 25 miles from each other. My father was 11 years older than my mother, but my father knew of my mother's older siblings because, you know, it wasn't, you know, these were small communities, and they knew each other. And my father also had a job in a wine wine and vinegar company, and he would ride bicycles to his customers to deliver stuff and to take orders and so forth. So my father was he knew my mother's older siblings. My mother knew of my father's family, but they met for the first time in Manhattan, in lower Manhattan, at a Friday night Shabbat dinner party in lower Manhattan, hosted by people they both knew in common, and that was in 1950 where she met my father and they were married in 51.

**Trinity Johnson** 41:18

So it must have been love at first sight. So I know your mother was very forthcoming with with her experiences and sharing those with you. You know throughout your life, what was your father like? Did he share his experience, and if so, can you briefly share what happened to him and how he ended up in America as well?

**Bob Mermelstein** 41:40

Yes, very briefly. So my father would have been in his late 30s at the time where men of his age were being drafted into labor camps. My father didn't think it was a good idea, and he didn't go willingly. He when his name was called in the public square and so forth, he never answered. He never acknowledged his name. But eventually it became dangerous, because he was one of the few men around, and he felt he would be turned in by by people in the town and so forth. So he he voluntarily submitted Himself, and so he was part of a slave labor camp built, doing construction work, building bunkers for German soldiers... for Hungarian soldiers actually, in the Transylvanian region, in the mountainous region of Romania, I suspect, and but my father claimed that the Hungarian people in charge, the Hungarian military, was not as brutal and abusive. He does have a he did have a scar on his face from a whipping he got, but he said, in general, they weren't put as pushy. The Hungarian people in charge of the slave labor unit didn't have production quotas and very little actual construction work got done. The prisoners didn't feel like building those bunkers, and they weren't being forced very, very much to do that. They were liberated at the end of 1944 my father did go back to his hometown, found that his house had been possessed and they weren't giving it up. But interestingly, my father found four nieces and nephews of his who had also who had been in concentration camps and who had come back, so they they my father, uh, acted as their guardian for a while. Those nieces and nephews eventually went to Palestine. My father stayed around for like from 1945 through 48 in the Czechoslovakian area. He was riding the railroads, buying and selling goods, you know, like eggs might have been available in Warsaw, but not in Bucharest, and it was really black market. You know, he would deal with foods and cigarettes and so forth. But eventually he went to Paris, France with a good friend. One interesting thing was that my. Father had a discussion with one of my mother's brothers in 1945 after the war was over, and this brother had come back home and and my father knew my mother's brother, Shia and and he said that he was going to remain in his hometown. He was a blacksmith, and if you remember from my presentation Trinity, my mother learned that most of her siblings perished in the Holocaust. They had spouses and kids and they they wound up being gassed and cremated, but she wasn't sure about this older brother, Shia, and when she came to the United States, got off the plane at La Guardia Airport. She she had a poster with a huge picture of her brother, wondering if people could identify her, and it was my father who wound up telling my mother where my her brother was. My father knew that information when they were dating.

**Trinity Johnson** 46:15

So how did your father decide to come to America?

**Bob Mermelstein** 46:19

He was on a waiting list. His his best friends had a brother in Bridgeport, Connecticut who was willing to sponsor both of them, but they were on a waiting list, and it took two years for both of their names to come up. But so they, they were, you know, the there were quotas on how many people could immigrate from which countries, and so forth. And it took two years. So he came to the United States three years after my mother came.

**Trinity Johnson** 47:03

I want to switch back to your mother, because even though she was discouraged to speak about her experiences and write about them, initially, there was something that eventually does kind of force her hand and really sets her on a completely different path of Holocaust education and sharing her experiences, and that was in the face of Holocaust denial. Can you tell us about that experience?

**Bob Mermelstein** 47:28

Well, my my mother was a news junkie. She would get her news from television and radio, and she listened to talk radio as well, and she heard Holocaust denial deniers expressing their opinions on the media. And my that outraged my mother, as it did lots of other Holocaust survivors. And so with with that in mind that not only reactivated her interest in writing a book, but she be. She started with her the synagogue she belonged to Northern Hills synagogue where she spoke to her Rabbi, who allowed her to speak about her experiences, to the Hebrew school class there, and then later on to the entire congregation. This is in Cincinnati, in Cincinnati, yes, and this was in the late 80s, but I remember helping her with a manuscript. This was a prelude to her book. And this was in 1984 it was about 20 type pages, double spaced, and I, I edited and and put it together. And that was her first attempt, and she and at the time, she thought that would be the final product, but later, she she passed it to friends of hers, and especially at Northern Hills synagogue, and a couple of them urged her to to do more than that, and to to write a book where, where it would include her, her life growing up, and her life in the United States afterwards. So that's when she she wrote her book in 2002 I think.

**Trinity Johnson** 49:42

It's very interesting that you were along almost that whole path of being aware of her story, both from what she verbally told you, but then intimately involved in the manuscript that eventually would become a book, and now you share her story as part of our speakers bureau.

**Bob Mermelstein** 50:00

And I was also involved in the dissemination of her manuscript too, with copies going to Holocaust museums in Israel in United States, copy to Hebrew Union College. This is before the Holocaust and Humanity Center existed.

**Trinity Johnson** 50:18

So Joan says, and I think this is such a perfect encapsulation of really her spirit, she says, "We were forced to live with the memory of experiences that cannot fully be described or comprehended. It would have been easy to despair, but instead of succumbing to bitterness and hatred, we survivors in this nation created a record of determination and accomplishment." And so I think, one that speaks to also written very beautifully, as we know, because she was such an incredible author, it's a testament to her spirit. And so you were part of that whole kind of process of her really coming to terms with her experience, and then sharing that outwardly. And I just wonder what it means to you to be able to now keep her memory alive and share her story in a way that once she had shared so so powerfully with you, so that inherited kind of legacy of remembrance and Holocaust education. What does it mean in this moment for you...

**Bob Mermelstein** 51:24

I think, I think it's the best way for me to be honoring my mother like that, something I did recently, and again, I was thinking about my mother. I recently joined Northern Hills synagogue this summer, this past summer, and reconnected with a lot of my mother's friends who are still members of the synagogue, people, some people whom you know, like Sonia Milrod, Henry Fenichel and and also some people who helped with the production of my mother's book. My mother self published her book and needed assistance with embedding photographs and the word processing and the and the production of the copies and so forth. And she got that from about five or six close, close friends at her congregation. They're still in the synagogue too, so and on the anniversary of her death, two weeks ago, I led services that day at Northern Hills synagogue, and I also got an aliyah. I got called for an honors to the Torah and and the person who is acting as gabbai at the bimah just said a lot of nice words about my mother, and probably half of the congregation remembered my mother from the old synagogue, which was located in Finneytown before, before they moved 20 years ago.

**Trinity Johnson** 53:15

So it sounds like it means a lot to you to remember your mother in this way and teach others through her story and the connections in the community sound incredible. When did your parents come to Cincinnati?

**Bob Mermelstein** 53:28

They came in 1973 in the spring of 73 my father and my brother separately traveled to Cincinnati by bus for for brief stays with me in Cincinnati. I gave them tours and so forth, and they liked what they saw. My mother came sight unseen, and yeah, I'd found them a three bedroom apartment my College Hill.

**Trinity Johnson** 54:01

I think it's incredible to have their legacy and their stories, both represented here in the museum, but then also through you sharing their story and and also being so fondly remembered within the vibrant Jewish community that we have here in our survivor and descendants community. So I just want to thank you so so much for being my guest today and keeping her story alive and allowing us to continue sharing that story with others. So thank you so much, Bob.

**Bob Mermelstein** 54:32

Sure thing, glad to be a part of this. And yeah, it's it's extremely important that the next generation of Americans know more, know more about this, because studies show that there's a gap, a knowledge gap.

**Trinity Johnson** 54:52

That's what's so important about our work together, truly.

**Jackie Congedo** 54:58

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