

Speaker 1: As part of the University of Michigan's bicentennial celebration, the U of M Library brought StoryCorps to campus to capture personal stories of the people who make up the University's rich history. With all the films, novels, and memoirs about the Holocaust, we almost take for granted that stories from survivors have always been recorded and preserved for history. But forty years ago, when Psychologist and U of M Lecturer, Hank Greenspan, began interviewing Holocaust survivors, that wasn't the case. In fact, Greenspan discovered that most survivors only really talked about what happened during the war with each other. For our latest installment of StoryCorps, Dr. Greenspan sat down with his former student and friend, Ariana Headrick, to discuss his life's work and why teaching the Holocaust through survivor's experiences is still so important.

Ariana Headrick: So, I guess we'll start with the big question, how did you become involved in interviewing survivors?

Hank Greenspan: It started by accident really. I was working with another project, another psychological project as a research assistant interviewing people about moral dilemmas. And I would interview this guy, this was in 1971 in the Boston area, and after ten minutes into the interview, he said, "So, would you like to hear some real moral dilemmas?" And I said, "Yeah." And he said, "Well, when I was in the ghetto, I had to decide whether to stay with my family or to try to get out of the ghetto, which would be putting your life in jeopardy, and join the Partisans in the forests, the people who are fighting against the Germans during World War II." A Jewish guy, a Jewish family. And his family, knowing by then pretty much what the fate of people was going to be, were encouraging him to leave, but he chose to stay to be with them.

They all ended up at Auschwitz. They were all killed. He, of course, survived. And what would've been a two-hour interview ended up being ten hours or so. And one thing that he said to me, which was a real surprise at the end, was that I was the first, quote, "American," I mean, he was an American citizen but meaning born in this country, born in the US, with whom he'd spoken about his experiences during the Holocaust. Now, here we are 25 years after liberation, after 1945, and I'm the first American with whom he'd spoken. That was amazing to me. But I was to hear it a lot over the next several years, that, for the most part, survivors did speak amongst each other quite a bit about what happened during the war, but rarely with an "outsider," with someone. And they weren't, frankly, asked that much, and that has a lot to do with why they didn't speak much about the war. There was not anything like the kind of interest that's developed since.

Ariana Headrick: Right. So is that what made you continue to pursue that?

Hank Greenspan: It was a part of it. I guess part of it was a kind of calling, or, I don't know, scoop doesn't seem the right word for a context like this, but the sense was, this was work to be done. I mean, if people hadn't spoken in some detail, what did that mean? But the real reason that I kept going all these 40-some years is because

of how much I was learning from the survivors, about everything. And so, whatever else, I considered these folks my teachers about lots of things.

Ariana Headrick: What kinds of things did they teach you?

Hank Greenspan: Yeah, life, basic life things. I'm a psychologist, as you know. And while you have to know history in order to do these interviews, my interest is what most people I think want to ask survivors, which are things like, how did you get through? How did you get up in the morning? What do you have faith in? Humanity, divinity? Do you hate the Germans? What do you think about the future? So a lot of the things that I ended up talking with people about had to do with these very basic things. For example, one man said that along with luck, which every survivor emphasizes, what helped him survive was the fact that he knew his mother loved him. He remembered that; he still belonged to someone in memory. I mean, she was dead already but, in the midst of a world in which everything was conspiring to say, "You belong nowhere," including to this planet, he remembered his mother's love for him and that helped him get through.

Agi, whom you know, Agi Rubin, is my beloved friend and teacher. We wrote a book together, my surrogate sister, mother, you name it. A close, close person, remembered, among other things, finding, in Auschwitz, as she was sorting the clothes, she found some of her cousin's clothes and in there was a photo of a favorite cousin of hers. She took the photo and she hid it in her shoe and she kept it with her throughout the war. And, as she thought about it in our interviews, she said, "This is just this little fragment," she would say, "of being part of this family. And my relationship with Bayla, was his name, and again, being part of something, other than that hell, was key in what got me through."

So, among other things, it was what I was learning about what helps one get through "tough times." Nothing compared to that but tough enough times. A sense of connection in relationships and memories of relationships, being loved, belonging. So, it goes on from there, we take our whole time, so many life lessons.

Ariana Headrick: So the things that you were focusing on, like relationships and stories, that sounds like it came a lot from your background as a psychologist?

Hank Greenspan: Yeah, I think so. You know, in the seventies, nothing like now, interviews with survivors were quite rare. I mean, they were not the big archive projects that we now have, which meant that there was no format that was obvious. Oral history existed, but essentially the survivors and I winged it, which was in retrospect really good, cause we could make it up as we went along and make up an approach as we went along. And my approach, and the survivors involved, not single video testimonies as we have typically now. Probably 99% of the projects, two to three hours in front of the video camera, end of story. I met with people as often as it seemed mutually useful to do, which could mean several times or a period of weeks, months, years. Now, that's a natural thing for a psychologist

to do. I mean, it never, frankly, occurred to me that one would be able in a really useful way to talk about experiences like this in a single two or three hour session.

So that was a kind of natural thing but it was also encouraged by the survivors. They said, or often some version of it, "So, you'll come back next week, we'll talk some more." Yada, yada. I said, "We will." "Yeah, let's do it." So it came from them, and I guess, it came from my own inclinations. I will say, we don't get it. Even now, even after all these years, there's a lot of psychological stuff about survivors. But I still say that psychologists, including me, have much more to learn from survivors than the other way around. And honestly, the early work kind of was honest about that. They said, how can people go on and have these rich lives and, at the same time, have these nightmares and these hauntings, and these periods when it's like, they're still back there.

I think of survivors as jugglers. As one person said, "There's more than one world in this world." And survivors have life after, life before, life during. In other words, very complex lives, which they juggle in memory. I'm not so sure that's that untypical. You know, we think in terms of everyone has their own life and their own life story. Maybe we have several life stories, maybe all of us do. But survivors have it in spades. So it's part of what I also learned.

Ariana Headrick: Wow. So how did you take what you gathered from those experiences and translate it into teaching and a course? And just four months of ...?

Hank Greenspan: Indeed, like the course that you took ...

Ariana Headrick: Yeah. Right. Exactly.

Hank Greenspan: ... where you know, from the inside.

Ariana Headrick: Yeah, yeah, so I was in it.

Hank Greenspan: You know what that's like. But, as you know, there is a cliché about these experiences, which is that it's impossible to understand. It's impossible to know. We should just be silent, we should just be quiet. We'll never understand. And, you know, there's a level at which, of course, that's true. We can't, thank God, most of us, put ourselves in the role of people who've gone through hell of that scale. It's true. Well, you can understand up to a point. And what I do in the course is I try to work with normal, everyday experiences, as a way of moving toward those. For example, we talk about trauma. Thank God, most of us haven't experienced anything like that kind of trauma. However, most of us have had at some point in our lives, real nightmares, I'm talking, that happened during sleep.

Now the essence of a nightmare is not only the terrifying thing happening, the guy chasing you, the car's about to go off the cliff, but it's helplessness in the

face of that terrifying thing. So we know that from our experiences with nightmares. Luckily, we wake up, and we discover, whew, it's "just a nightmare." But that particular helplessness in the face of imminent destruction is very similar in feel. So what trauma is, when it isn't a nightmare but it's a lived nightmare. So we use experiences like that in order to approach some of what survivors describe. There are many other examples, but you know I see among students there's a, if I can say it this way, a cliché that learning about this history will somehow inoculate and will somehow lead people to prevent it or to work against it. I don't believe that.

In itself, learning about this history, it informs those who are open and already informed, I think, to a certain extent. You know, where we just had the Nazis' march in Charlottesville and we see this stuff going up all over on campuses, hateful Nazi stuff. Those people know about history. You don't talk about blood and soil, if you don't know about the history of Nazi Germany as they did in Charlottesville. So these people learn from the past in order to repeat it. Not in order not to repeat it, but in order to repeat it. So learning from the past, in itself, ain't going to do it. Most people are never going to be Nazis or frankly victims. We're all bystanders, always in the world. So all kinds of hell going on. That's who ultimately makes a difference. There'll never be a shortage of haters. There'll be a shortage of killers. So the issue is, what else happens? What do the people next door do? What do the people in the neighborhood and the community do? What do the relevant governments do? That's what matters in terms of outcomes.

Speaker 1:

That was Psychologist and U of M Lecturer, Hank Greenspan, talking with his former student and friend, Ariana Headrick. These interviews were recorded by StoryCorps, www.storycorps.org. For more from the series, visit arts.umich.edu/storycorps.