

The Southern Institute  
For Education and Research  
at  
Tulane University

Presents:

STORIES OF  
HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS  
IN NEW ORLEANS

LILA MILLEN

LILA MILLEN WAS TWO YEARS OLD WHEN THE NAZIS OCCUPIED HER NATIVE POLAND IN SEPTEMBER 1939. WITH HER SISTER (ANNE LEVY) AND PARENTS, LILA ENDURED TWO YEARS OF TERROR AND STARVATION IN THE WARSAW GHETTO.

IN JANUARY 1943, WITH THE HELP OF A POLISH ARMY OFFICER, LILA'S FAMILY WAS SMUGGLED OUT OF THE GHETTO TO THE 'ARYAN SIDE' OF WARSAW. THEY SURVIVED THE LAST TWO YEARS OF THE WAR 'PASSING' AS CHRISTIANS.

WHEN WORLD WAR II ENDED IN 1945, LILA LEARNED FOR THE FIRST TIME THAT SHE WAS JEWISH. SHE WAS EIGHT YEARS OLD.

THIS INTERVIEW WAS CONDUCTED BY THE SOUTHERN  
INSTITUTE'S PLATER ROBINSON.

PR (PLATER ROBINSON)

LM (LILA MILLEN)

LM I was born on November 15, 1937, in Lodz, Poland.

*MAP OF POLAND, FOCUSING ON LODZ. 1:17*

PR So that's less than two years before the outbreak of the Second World War. And I wonder what your first memories are.

LM My memories of the war are I was two years old. Are very sketchy at that part of my childhood. However, I do remember, just having, not doing anything. Just sitting around a lot. It was chaos in house. We just didn't go any place. I stayed with my sister in the house all the time.

*PHOTOGRAPH OF ANNE AND LILA, THEN FOCUSED ON ANNE  
1:51*

PR Your sister being Anne Levy who was a couple of years older than you, and your parents.

*PHOTOGRAPH OF LILA'S PARENTS 1:58*

LM And our parents.

PR Ruth and Mark.

LM Ruth and Mark Skorecki. And when the war broke out everybody was very distraught, and didn't know where to go what to do. So my

parents were trying to find out what to do with us, since we were so young, and my daddy was very creative that he would hide us so we couldn't be caught because they were after children.

*SCHOOL PHOTOGRAPH OF A GROUP OF CHILDREN WEARING THE STARS 2:33*

PR Children particularly.

LM Especially children.

PR The Nazi leader Himmler said we must kill the Jewish children.

LM They wanted all the children killed.

PR The whole Nazi state, with many collaborators, was after you and the only thing that stood between you and them was the ingenuity of your mother and father.

*PHOTOGRAPH OF LILA'S PARENTS 3:07*

LM That's right. If not for them we wouldn't be here now. Because it was known fact they after children. They had to do something about us, so they hid us.

*MAP OF POLAND SHOWING LODZ AND WARSAW 3:23*

PR So from Lodz your mother took you to Warsaw. Your father had fled to Russia. He was soon to return. I wonder, can you remember scenes from the Warsaw ghetto.

*ZOOMED IN PHOTOGRAPH OF GERMAN SOLDIERS MARCHING PEOPLE*

*OUT OF THE GHETTO 3:36*

LM The ghetto was like very scary people always rushing. Bombs falling, they would light up the sky

*PHOTOGRAPH OF SMOKING GHETTO 3:49*

like it was just like lightning all over the sky. And people used to run, they used to run and hide wherever they could. And you just had to be prepared to run, once the bombs started falling, you never know what was gonna hit you on your head or whatever, so you had to get low and hide. We were hiding out, we were just running from place to place with my parents trying to find the right hiding place.

PR You were so young that you knew no other life, did you, than German occupation?

LM No.

PR Your father returns, he reunites with the family in December 1941. Do you remember when he arrived that day?

*PHOTOGRAPH OF LILA'S FATHER IN POLISH UNIFORM DURING WORLD WAR I 4:41*

LM I remember he came in, and my mother opened the front door, and I remember she just fainted, she couldn't believe that he came back, because nobody usually comes back from something like that. And he came in and she was telling me that's my father. I said, "Who is that man." She says, "That's your father." I said "No it's not," because I didn't remember him. I was so young when he left, that I did not recognize him or remember him, she says, "Yes, this is your father." I

kept telling her, “I don’t know that man.” She tried to persuade me that it was. Then he started giving that he brought with him, like candy, chocolate, bread, jelly, all kinds of things that he hid inside his clothes because he knew we needed food. And after a while he all these things he gave us, not having had before, little by little I got to believe my mother that maybe that it was my father, which it was.

PR And he gave small portions of the food, because he was fearful it might be too much.

LM From what mother has said he cut up little bitty pieces to give us so that we wouldn’t overeat. Because you know, when you overeat and you haven’t eaten for a long time you can get very sick.

***PHOTOGRAPH OF EMACIATED WOMAN AND TWO CHILDREN  
ON THE STREET IN THE WARSAW GHETTO 6:30***

And we were under nourished. It was very obvious, from looking at us you could tell that we didn’t have much food. Little by little we tried to get our strength back, because we didn’t do anything. No activities or anything, just sitting around. Not being able to go anywhere, not having enough to eat, after a while, we just sit there, nothing else you can do. But he tried to get us back on our feet, get us back to feeling like we were human, even though we couldn’t go anywhere, do anything, or play with anything, we didn’t even have any toys, we didn’t have anything to do. He wanted us to look more healthy than we did, and he managed to do that.

***PHOTOGRAPH OF MEN WORKING AT A GERMAN WOODEN  
SOLE FACTORY 7:25***

PR Your father got a job working in a German factory and because he

was such a gifted person, could do anything, it seems, with his hands, could create anything, he was admired by the authorities.

LM He was.

PR But he had to protect the children when he was gone, when he and his wife, your mother, when they were working, and so he fashioned a false bottom in a vegetable bin.

LM Well he made this vegetable bin that had I thought it was like old vegetables, onions and potatoes and carrots on the top. It was empty in back. And my sister Anne and I would hide back there during the day when they went work, and we'd just sit there. They were gone five or six hours at time at least. We'd just sit in the back, and we use to run back there if we heard noises coming up the steps. The Germans used to come with their boots, you know how they walk, and with their dogs sniffing. If we heard footsteps, we used to run in there real quick, and used to hide and keep quiet. And we were just trained to do that, so that's how we survived during the day.

PR Did they ever open the bin?

LM I think if I recall correctly they did come up there, but they never found us, because we were real quiet, we were just trained to be very quiet.

PR You and your sister looking at one another, speaking not a word.

LM Not a word. Everywhere we hid we couldn't talk, because you couldn't be heard. If anybody heard voices, they would be suspicious, so we couldn't be heard, until they gone and quiet. That's the way we had to survive during the day.

Now when my daddy went to work in this factory,

*PHOTOGRAPH OF A FACTORY WORKER BESIDE WOODEN  
STACKS OF WOODEN SOLES 9:30*

WOODEN SOLE STOREROOM WHERE ANNE AND LILA HID  
UNDER A FLOOR BOARD

he built under the floor, he built like a false piece of floor, a false bottom. And there was a hole under there that went into the basement and we used to go and hide in there.

*PHOTOGRAPH OF WOMEN WORKING ON WOODEN SOLES 9:50*

So my mother and daddy were there during the day working in this factory, and we would hide in there so they could watch us a little bit better, because they were right there with us.

PR And one time the Germans came with a dog when you were hiding in that false basement.

LM Yeah, they came in with the dogs. But somehow they didn't find us. It's a miracle they didn't.

PR The dog could smell you.

LM They could smell us but we were hiding some place where they couldn't get to us, so it's by a miracle that we're here. There were lots of experiences like that, very close calls. If it wouldn't been thought of the way my daddy thought of to hide us, we wouldn't be able to make it.

PR He was always a step ahead.

LM Yeah, always a step ahead.

PR Your mother, too.

LM My mother was always thinking of tomorrow.

*PHOTOGRAPH OF LILA'S MOTHER 10:57*

And that's what you have to do. I mean, you think about today, but then you say, "If it works today what am I going to do tomorrow? Can't stay here again because it's not safe." So you have to think of other ways, of another place, another place to hide, and that's how we went from day to day.

PR Your father arranged for y'all to be taken out of the Warsaw ghetto, hidden in garbage truck.

LM I remember getting up in middle of night. It had to be done at night at so nobody see us, and we had to go in this truck. And we had to lie down underneath a bunch of garbage or something. Anne and I had to lie down to get over to the Aryan side, and that's how we got over there.

**PR** Outside the ghetto, the “Aryan side,” where Poles were third-class citizens, the Germans ruled. But, yet, life appeared normal in comparison to the ghetto. And you found shelter with a Polish Christian family.

**LM** Yes, daddy and my mother found somebody to find us some shelter in this woman’s house,

*PHOTOGRAPH OF THE HOUSE IN WARSAW 12:12*

*PHOTOGRAPH OF ‘RIGHTEOUS GENTILE,’ NOW AN OLD WOMAN IN HER APARTMENT 12:21*

and there was a mother and a daughter they took us in and told them we were relatives coming to visit. We lived with them like relatives, like Christians. Me being younger, I lived like they did immediately. I thought I was Catholic like they are. Went to church with them, I had an Easter basket. I did everything they did. When you live that way, you have to have everything, you have to have the rosary, you have to have the prayer book, you have to have the beads. I knew those prayers by heart just like they did. So this was a time in my life where you influence very easily that age, that if you do that, that’s what you believed. And I believed until after war that I was a Christian. I didn’t know I was Jewish. My parents didn’t tell me I was Jewish, because they didn’t want me to say anything that would give them any suspicion of our family, because we were all living there.

**PR** So you did not have to lead a dual existence. You thought you were a Catholic girl.

**LM** I thought I was Catholic.

PR Now, believing in Catholicism, did that help you?

LM No, I don't know if that helped me, I didn't know any difference. I never practiced being Jewish, because I didn't get chance to practice to be Jewish. The war broke out before I knew how to practice being Jewish and how to practice being Catholic. I just did what they did.

PR That Polish Christian family helped you all greatly. And I wonder what your feelings are towards those people who can be described as Righteous Gentiles.

LM I have a lot of respect for them. I think they risked lives for the Jewish people. A lot of Jewish people wouldn't be alive today if it wouldn't have been for them.

PR A neighbor threatened you and to go to the lumber yard where your father built a small house, and there you lived.

LM Well, I think my parents thought it was too dangerous to stay there anymore, that it was time for us to leave, because they were afraid that we would be reported, and once you're reported, that was the end of it. So we had to go on, and go somewhere else.

PR Do you remember the end of the war?

LM It was 1945.

*PHOTOGRAPH OF THE FAMILY AFTER THE WAR  
ZOOMING IN ON LILA AND ANNE 15:08*

POSTWAR WEDDING SCENE IN LODZ WITH ANNE AND  
LILA,

## CIRCA MAY 1945

I was by then like seven years old, almost seven. I was seven. Everybody was happy. They were glad to be alive. We were as a unit, we were together. Mother, father, two children, which was very unusual, very unusual. Most of the people met on the way didn't have their siblings or their parents, or brothers or sisters. So we were very, very fortunate. They said the war was over. But we had nothing. We were absolutely stripped of everything.

**PR** The time came when your father had to tell you that you were not Catholic.

**LM** Well, that was the part that was very difficult for me, and I'm sure for them too. When the war over they told me the reason we had to keep hiding like that. By then I was seven years old, he thought I would understand, that we were Jewish. And they were trying to kill all the Jewish children, and adults, too, but mostly children, therefore we had to hide and live like non-Jewish people. And he told me that we are Jewish and I am Jewish. I said, "What is Jewish?" I had no idea. He says, "First thing we have to throw away the [rosary] beads, the crucifix. You have to throw away the Bible. You have to throw away everything that you believed in before. We don't believe in that because we are Jewish. We only did that because to save you we had to live like that." So it was one day he wanted me to throw it away on my own. Just throw it away. And I said, "No, I'm not going to." This is part of me. I lived with this. Now I knew how to recite the prayers and everything like everybody else did. He said, "No, you have to throw it away. We don't believe in that, we're Jewish." I argued with him. I said, "No." He said, "Yes, you are." And he just would not let go. He said I had to throw it on a fire, in a furnace, to see

that it burns, and once it burns, it's gone forever, and to prove to me that we are Jewish we didn't...that's not part of our belief, and I did.

**PR** At the end of the war, when you still believed that you were a Catholic girl, you were influenced by anti-Semitism of that time. And I wonder if you would describe that to us.

**LM** Well, there was a lot of anti-Semitism after the war. It was like you were always afraid to tell anybody you were Jewish. Because I had the feeling like I don't want to tell anybody I'm Jewish, because if they were after all the Jewish people, then they'll come after me now. You always had that fear, that if it happened before it can happen again. You don't tell too many you're Jewish. Only in America can you tell somebody, "I'm Jewish," and they're not going to make fun of you, and they're not gonna try and kill you, and they're not gonna try and hurt you. But over there, there was so much of that going on, that you just live with that fear all the time.

**PR** After the war, you were in a small town in Germany for a number of years.

### *PHOTOGRAPH OF LILA AND THREE GIRLS AFTER THE WAR 19:19*

**LM** After the war, we went to Germany, a town called Tirschenreuth in Bavaria. It was a place where lot of Jewish people went after the War, and we were staying in the DP camp over there. And while we were there you had to wait your turn for visas and get your turn to catch a boat to come to the United States, because we decided, my parents decided they wanted to come to the United States, not Israel. Anne wanted to go to Israel, but my father was too tired, he just wanted to come, he didn't

want to fight anymore. So they had to check us out, we had to go to doctors. It took us four years before we could get a boat to come here, they had a lot of people besides, Anne and I both had to have our teeth fixed, glasses, we were malnourished. They didn't want anybody coming here unless you were in perfect shape. So it took us four years. Stayed in this "DP camp" in Germany before we could catch a boat, a military boat to come to the United States.

*PHOTOGRAPH OF FAMILY ON THE SHIP* **20:37**

**RUTH, ADAM, AND MARK SKORECKI ON SHIP EN ROUTE  
TO NEW ORLEANS, NOVEMBER 1949**

My daddy said he wanted to come to the United States, because he just felt like he suffered enough, and went through enough, and he wanted to come to the United States.

**PR** Ironically, when you arrived in the United States, your boat docked at the Poland Avenue Wharf.

**LM** We did, we did.

**PR** When you arrived to New Orleans, in October 1949, it was Thanksgiving, and one day when you came home your mother said there was a photograph from the newspaper, the Times-Picayune.

**LM** I came home from school and there was a photographer from the Times-Picayune and he wanted to take my picture. At the time I had long pig tails, and I said I guess so. It was about Thanksgiving, and we'd never had a turkey before. He was asking me questions about what I think about Thanksgiving turkey. Well, I never heard

of a Thanksgiving turkey. So he says, "Well, let me take your picture by your bed." So my instinct, automatically, I knelt by the bed on my knees and prayed like this for Thanksgiving. Everybody said, "Why did you kneel down and pray like that to take a picture?" I don't know. I just, I thought that's what I was supposed to do. And by the way, the teachers in my school were just, I can't even praise enough those teachers, they were just wonderful. We came here, we didn't know the language, we were like really, really, starting from scratch, and my teachers were wonderful, they stayed with me after school, they brought me books, they were just fantastic. Trying to catch us up to the grade we were supposed to be in.

**PR** How did you tell children about your early years under the Nazis?

**LM** They know where I came from. They know what I went through. They know my childhood. I didn't have a childhood. They know that. I didn't really sit them down and talk to them. They just know where, my background. They know more now than they did when they were younger, 'cause they're older. They can understand it better. But I really never wanted to, I wanted them to have a childhood like Anne and I never had, so I really never burdened them with any of those terrible, terrible years that we went through. Now they know, because they're old enough to understand. Looking at my children and my nieces, there's no way I can imagine them having to go through what Anne and I went through because it was not very easy time.

**PR** Your relationship with Anne is special beyond special. She was four and a half years old, but she was your guardian.

LM Well, she wasn't only my guardian, but she was best friend and still is.

*PHOTOGRAPH OF THE TWO SISTERS 24:07*

because we only had each other, that's all we had.

PR You told me once that Anne was always the brave one, that you were always the 'scaredy cat.'

LM Yeah, Anne was always brave. She used to run in the dog house and play with the dog. She was just more tomboyish, I guess than I was. I was always more afraid than she was. She more likes my daddy, and I was always more like my mother, I think. And I even had the fear here too, when I came here, too. It takes a while to get over it. I always thought somebody was chasing me, coming to get me, or my kids, so I had a hard time with it.

PR And there was one time here in New Orleans, long after the war, when you were an adult, you had children, and you were at a friend's house, and you were playing a Chinese game.

LM I was already here a few years, I was married by then, had a child, and I was even afraid when I had my first child, that somebody was coming to kidnap her. I had a very bad incident about that. Somebody was knocking on the door, it was late at night, and I went into hysterics. I thought they were coming to kidnap. It took me a long time to get over that. Of course, it wasn't anybody, they had the wrong house. But I didn't know that. Anyway, I was in my friend's house playing this game, it was a Chinese checker game and we heard this knocking on the door, banging with their fist, is what the Germans used to do when they

came looking for Jewish people. My instinct was to jump in a closet. I got up and went in her closet, in her broom closet. I got so scared. There were five of us. Everybody says, "Why did you jump in the closet?" I said, "I don't know." Nobody else jumped in the closet. Nobody else went running. Only I did.

**PR** It was a reflex.

**LM** It was, yeah. It was automatically. When I heard that banging noise on that door, go hide. So I did. But I guess in the back of your mind, things like that just stay with you. You just can't get over them. Certain things you just can't get over. That's one of them.

**PR** You survived a war of destruction. A million and half Jewish children were murdered across Europe. In Poland, even more than 99% of the Jewish children were killed, and I wonder what message you would like to extend to young people today, here in our community about that time, and that place.

**LM** Well, I think that that era should not be forgotten and I think more and more young people, I don't think the young people are aware of what happened in that time in the world. Because, you tend to be, if you're nice and safe in a place, you don't think of what's going on somewhere else. Young people should be aware that these things happen and should learn a lesson from it, and it is all part of history.

**PR** And what is the lesson?

**LM** The lesson is that sometimes it's not what you do that you get that you get punished for, but who you are.

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