

for some thirty-odd years before [and therefore wasn't in Europe when the Holocaust took place]. She had her own children and also comes from a very religious home, and my father was religious. He was a God-fearing, very pious man....

And somehow I never married. And I moved eventually to Grand Rapids, Michigan. I went to work for a man in a men's store, I remember, [in] 1948 for \$25 a week. Eventually became his partner, and then I bought him out. And I enjoyed working. I kept busy. I kept my mind occupied. I took up golf. And I keep busy. I'm a very hyper person—I gotta keep going all the time. And I'm retired now to Florida....

For the first thirty-five years I didn't speak about the Holocaust, but I'm committed [now] to bear witness to what happened for all those who died. And the fact that there are people—deniers, revisionists—who claim that the whole thing is a hoax, and they're doing it while survivors are still alive, I have to speak up. Even though every time I speak, it pains me.

And I've made up my mind to speak to the youth, the future generations. They want to know. They are our future historians. They are our future voters. They are our future leaders. It's important that they have to know about the Holocaust, that they have to study the Holocaust. The Holocaust is part of history. It's important to mankind to know what took place. God forbid that it should ever happen again. Maybe by [my] being a witness, [others] can become witnesses to avert a Holocaust like this from ever happening again.

Source: Mandel, David. Videotaped interview conducted by Elissa Schosheim, 1 February 1996. Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation, Testimony 11722.

15.3

"I Don't Know the Answer" – 1995

Excerpt from an Interview with Holocaust Survivor Peter Hersch

Peter Hersch was born Pinchas Herskovics in 1930 in Loza, a town that was then in Czechoslovakia and later was annexed by Hungary. In 1944, when he was thirteen years old, his family was deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau, where his mother and three younger siblings were killed. His father also likely died in Auschwitz. Hersch and his older sister were the only members of the family to survive the Holocaust. In the following passage from an oral interview conducted by the Shoah Visual History Foundation, Hersch recounts how a chance encounter delivered him from the Nazi gas chambers soon after his arrival at Auschwitz. This fateful event helped shape the atti-

Peter Hersch, Videotaped Interview conducted by Ruta Osborne, 2 July 1995. Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation Testimony 3658.

tude that Hersch has developed toward the Holocaust—a mix of wonder at the fact that he survived and incomprehension that people were capable of willfully wreaking so much death and misery on other people.

I was with my father ... and I don't know, somebody was watching over me. This woman walked up to me. And she asked me, "how old are you?" I said, "I'm thirteen." And she said quickly, she said "don't say you're thirteen. Say you're seventeen." And she was with the S.S. there, walking around, you know?

So I said to my father, "you know, she told me to say I'm seventeen." And he said, "say you're seventeen, if she told you." And that saved my life, you know, in a way, because they were walking around, the S.S., and asking "how old are you?" Everybody they were asking, you know? And they came to me, too. So of course I didn't look seventeen. I'm short, and I was with those clothes ... the [oversized] striped uniform. So I said I was seventeen. He looked me up and down and up and down, and he left me there, left me with my father.

So that was unbelievable. I mean, it was just luck that she walked over to me... She wasn't dressed in a uniform. She was walking around with these S.S. Whether she was [one of the soldier's] girlfriends—I don't know what it was....

What the Germans did to us, I can't forget. I cannot forget. And I still can't, for the life of me, understand how it could have happened. I cannot understand, and I—I don't know. I just don't know. Yet, I can't blame all the Germans. In the young generation, how can I say that it's their fault, too? I can't. But I've never been back to Germany since then, since I left.

I do want to, before I die, I do want to go back one day. And my sister wants to go back to Auschwitz to say Kaddish [the Jewish prayer for the dead] for my parents and my brothers and sisters because that's where they died.

I tried to survive—number one. I tried. I didn't give in. I never gave in for one minute. And I'm also lucky that I wasn't shot.... That I had this girl in Auschwitz coming to me and telling me to say that I'm older. Why would she say something like that to me?

So it's a miracle, anyway. I mean it's—I mean I don't know the answer. I don't know the answer. But I survived.

Source: Hersch, Peter. Videotaped interview conducted by Ruta Osborne, 2 July 1995. Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation, Beverly Hills, CA, USA.