

UNC World View  
Connecting Conversations: A World View Podcast

Episode 2 – Shelly Weiner – A Hidden Child of the Holocaust

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Interview by Charlé LaMonica, Director of UNC World View

**Charlé LaMonica:** Welcome to UNC World View's *Connecting Conversations*. My name is Charlé LaMonica and I'd like to thank you for joining us this year. The year of the pandemic. It's also a year in the United States and around the world that we're commemorating the 75th anniversary of the end of World War Two. A few months before the war officially ended on April 12, 1945 in Germany, General Dwight Eisenhower ordered American units in the area to see the concentration camps firsthand and for German civilians to be brought in as well. Eisenhower wanted Germans and Americans alike to see with their own eyes the crimes that had been committed so they could deliver their own accounts of history for all times so we would never forget. Individual stories of these times are preserved for all. So today, in K-12 schools and colleges and universities, curriculums are written and we know many lessons are being delivered to share these stories.

However, we know that even with that commitment. According to a 2018 survey 41% of Americans and 66% of millennials say they don't know about the Auschwitz death camp. Forty-one percent of millennials believe 2 million or fewer Jews were killed in the Holocaust and it was six million. Twenty-two percent of millennials say they haven't even heard of the Holocaust. Over time, many reporters and educators have said it's hard to tell people to never forget when they haven't heard. So in thinking about this, I looked at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum to see what they identify as main questions to pose regarding teaching the Holocaust and they state number one: why should students learn about the Holocaust? Two, what are the most significant lessons gleaned from the Holocaust? And three, what are appropriate readings, images and films to convey these lessons today? Today we will address these three questions during our podcast episode, "A Hidden Child of the Holocaust." Today we welcome Shelly Wiener. A woman who was born in Poland, hidden as a child during the Holocaust and now makes Greensboro, North Carolina, her home.

Welcome, Shelly. It is such an honor to have you join us during this UNC World View podcast and to learn about your personal experience as a hidden child of the Holocaust. I know you've spoken hundreds of times throughout North Carolina and beyond and we appreciated when you presented at World View programs the past couple years. Most notably at the Richardson lecture last June. And now we have an opportunity for our listeners who have not met you to hear your story as a person who experienced the Holocaust. Please share with our listeners what happened to you and your family when you were only four years old.

**Shelly Weiner:** Thank you very much. Yes, I will be glad to share my story, what happened during the Second World War, when I was four years old. I was born in a town called Rivne and our family had lived there for many decades and the town was about the size of maybe Greensboro, but we had about 25,000 Jews, and they were well integrated in that community. So I had a very lovely childhood 'till I was four years old. Well, the Germans came into our town in 1941 and immediately they started passing laws telling Jews that they could not do certain things, they couldn't go to certain places. And my first memory is of my mother—who did not look—oh, everybody had to wear a yellow armband with a Star of David on it. My mother who was very fair of skin and hair did not look [like] what Hitler considered a Jew to look like. And they came from a large family. My mother, there were seven brothers and sisters, my father had seven brothers. And so, my mother would put on her raincoat and go to the market and shop for the family because Jews were not allowed to go to the market. And I remember standing by the window and waiting for my mother to come home. I knew even then, that if someone had recognized her—a neighbor—they would turn her in and I would never see her again.

Well, what happened next was that they put the Jews and ghettos. “Ghetto” is a small area where they put a lot of people and they ring it with a fence, so you can't get out. And I was in a room with the 20 other people that I never met. And my mother would go out to work. She was worked in a factory for the Germans and she left me there. Anyway, one day, one of her Polish neighbors told her that there was going to be this aktion and aktion was at that time where they rounded up all the Jews and they took them and they dug trenches, and they shot them. Well, my mother got us out of there that night. I don't know how. And we went to a village where her sister, my aunt lived. Anyway, that same day they rounded up 17,500 Jews. They walked them probably about five miles to the village of Sosenki. They dug three trenches and they shot them. Among those was my entire family. My aunts, my uncles, my cousins, my beloved grandfather.

We got to the farm. My aunts lived next door to the farmer and my mother was begging him to hide us. It was very difficult for non-Jews to help Jews because the neighbors would always be informing on them. And if the Germans found that you were hiding Jews, they would kill your entire family and confiscate all your property. But this farmer had at home, he had a 16-year-old daughter and an 18-year-old son. And the other thing I found out when I went back to visit was if you turned a Jew in, you got two pounds of sugar from the Germans. So it was a very anti-Semitic place. At any rate, we got to the farm just as this farmer's son had come home too. What happened is that the Germans could not fight a war and get rid of the Jews and all of Europe—kill all the Jews in Europe—without the help of the local population. And so they would throw out pamphlets in the villages and ask people to come and do work in the city. Well, this farmer's son, he wanted to make some money. So he and his friends went to the city and the work they gave them was so horrific. They were asked to collect the bodies that didn't fall into the ravine, into the ditch, and throw them in the ditch. Well, they ran away from there and came home through the woods. And on the way back they decided they were going to

form a resistance group to do whatever they could. When he came home, it was just the same time that my mother was begging this farmer to hide us. Well, he was the one that convinced his father that he had to do it. And so his father, they made a hiding place for us above the barn in back where they kept the hay. The space was very small and there were four of us. It was my mother myself, my aunt and my cousin. And the space was small, we could stand up and we could—you know we couldn't really stand up, but it was at the eaves of the barn. Food was very scarce, it was very cold in the winter and very hot in the summer—we had very little ventilation. We had to talk in whispers. We couldn't go outside and play and being a little girl I would always beg my mother to let me go out. There were several incidents where we were almost caught and it was a miracle that we weren't. Once the farmer told us that they knew we were there—the Ukrainian police—and they were coming to get us. And I don't know what possessed us, but I was five probably, my cousin six. We begged our mothers not to just go down quietly, but run into the woods and hide. There was a backdoor to the barn and that is what we did. We hid in the woods. The whole night was very scary, very frightening.

But something diverted them and they never they were looking for us for a while and then they were gone. The farmer came and got us and he couldn't take us back to the barn, but we hid in the wheat field. The wheat field was high and for three days we were there without water, without food. It was extremely hot. My aunt got very sick. And any rate, the farmer came back and found us. He was calling us and we came out and they never came back to look for us. We don't know what happened. So it wasn't safe for us to go back into the barn. The farmer was tired of the Germans coming and taking all his wheat, and produce, and corn and so forth. So he dug a hole underground like a bunker and put his produce there. And so he said, "I'll dig another hole for you and you can stay under there." So they dug another hole for us, just straw on the ground. It was very dark. And that's where we were, we were in the barn. Totally, we were in hiding for 28 months.

I don't know how much more you want me to go on.

**CL:** This is a story that's so hard for so many of us to even digest what you went through. And it's so very personal. When did you begin telling your story?

**SW:** Well, when we came to the United States in 1949 after the war. We worked our way from Poland to the American zone in Germany. And when I came here, my father's cousins brought us over with his uncle and I wanted to have a normal life because, you know, I never had a friend. I never had a toy. We used to play with a straw. That was our only toy we had—and our mothers told us stories. So when I came to the United States, I was 12 and I wanted to be normal. So my aunt put me into the seventh grade, I didn't speaking English. But within six months, I learned English and I had friends. And people were nice and so I never really talked about my story. And nobody asked.

Well, when I moved to Greensboro and 1972 I had three daughters. My youngest daughter, she was in the seventh grade, and she says, "Mom, you won't believe what they teach us about the Second World War. There's one paragraph in our textbooks. Would you come to my school and tell your story?" And that's when I started talking about that. Now I feel a responsibility to tell my story for those who cannot speak for themselves. And hopefully it makes an impression as to what a cruel government can do. Because, as you well know, the Holocaust was the policy of the German Government. Their policy was to get rid of all the Jews in Europe: old, young, babies, everybody. They wanted a *judenfrei* Germany. So those are some of the reasons why I speak to schools and teachers.

**CL:** And as we're thinking about the many different ways that the Holocaust is taught in schools and materials, we know that there's lots of resources now that are accessible to teachers, but what would be one thing that you would want to make sure is underscored for students today?

**SW:** That's a difficult. There's so many things. One of the things that I tell students in particular is that number one, the Holocaust would have never happened if good people had spoken up. And the other thing is the appreciation. We all have to appreciate the other and learn to live in this world with kindness. To me that's the one thing that's very important. I've taught that to my family and I believe that that's because atrocities are going on in the world right now. Look at Syria. Look at Myanmar and all these places and the world hasn't learned a lot from the Holocaust. And I think that it needs to if we're going to continue in this world. I always say, "Look, there are very kind people in this world too and you need to focus on it."

I wouldn't be here today if it weren't for the Polish trip family and their bravery and their kindness. I mean, I can't imagine doing what they did. So there are people in this world who will speak up and who will take chance to save other people.

**CL:** Shelly, I can't thank you enough for sharing this part of your life. And I know that there is a film that's a documentary that we'll link to this podcast that goes into more detail as well. But just hearing these few minutes, spending these few minutes with you and hearing your story will make such a big difference to the people that are able to listen to this podcast and hopefully reach more students and learn more about the bravery of the people that saved you and your family and also your bravery for continuing to share your story, which I'm sure is very painful to share. So I wanted to thank you so very much for your time.

**SW:** Don't thank me. I just wanted to add one other thing. We're all locked down and pandemic and it's not easy, but I think this is wonderful. For us to be able to live in our own homes to not have the fear of someone coming to kill you, to have food—most of us—on the table and all these electronics and whatnot. And it's a time to really reflect. And people who have families should take this opportunity to really get to know each other because it's a wonderful opportunity. And we should not

look at this—yes, I know people are dying, and it's a terrible thing. But we can always find something good in every terrible situation. So thank you for having me.

**CL:** Thank you so much, Shelly, for sharing this very personal story and your insights into how we should really view the world today. We appreciate you, we appreciate your commitment to making sure those peoples whose lives were lost continue to have meaning, not only as we look back in history, but as we really look forward to creating a better future. I also want to mention to everyone who's listening that teaching and learning resources, including the Centropa documentary film of Shelly Weiner's story, will be posted to the UNC World View website. So thank you all for joining us today, thank you again, Shelly. For UNC World View *Connecting Conversations*, this is Charlé LaMonica. Until next time, goodbye.