

Interviewer:

Good afternoon, sir. Today is the third of August, 2015, and I'm sitting here with Mr. Michael Berenbaum. Welcome, sir. I'm glad you could be here with us.

Michael Berenbaum:

Pleasure to be here.

Interviewer:

Could you please spell your last name for our transcriber?

Michael Berenbaum:

Berenbaum, B as in boy, E-R-E-N as in Nancy, B-A-U-M as in Michael.

Interviewer:

Thank you, sir. Sir, can you tell us a little bit about yourself; about your childhood, what your parents did when you were growing up?

Michael Berenbaum:

Let me begin with I was born in 1945, and I was born into an intensely Jewish community, an intense Jewish community, and born into a community and I was educated in New York Jewish parochial schools. We were educated in Hebrew, and we were educated in a very peculiar form of Hebrew, in what we would call a Shakespearean Hebrew, so we spoke Hebrew in the following way: If your heart inclineth in my direction, would you kindly indicate to me, thy humble servant, what is the proper path upon one should tread to reach his anointed destination? That's how we asked how to get there. Our teachers turned out to be either Holocaust survivors, or refugees from Europe just before the war. We didn't know it then.

We only heard words - camp, death, children, murder - and we were given the feeling that we who were raised on whip cream, ice cream, and cottage cheese would never be able to make it up for the world that had been destroyed. I grew up in an intense, in a German Jewish community, German refugee Jewish community in which many of the people had escaped in 1938 and '39. They were mostly in the diamond business, and because they were in the diamond business, they had portable wealth. If you owned real estate, for example, or a department store, if you were a lawyer, if you were a doctor, you weren't portable. If you owned diamonds or were in the diamond business, you could put your wealth into your pocket, into your mouth, into a condom, and you could escape. And they were trying to recreate in the United States the world that they had left behind.

My father was American, and for my father, the most important part of it is he came over as a very young child - 7, 8, 9 years old - and he came over to the United States, and for his generation, they wanted to Americanize. They wanted to speak English without an accent. They wanted to participate in the United States. They wanted to play baseball. Where we grew up, basketball was the urban sport, and handball was the urban sport. And my dad had been a World War II veteran, so he'd seen combat. He was in the Army, went through North Africa and Italy, and we grew up on war stories. My mother also was born in Europe, but came here at 6 months, years of age, so for her, America was not something she acculturated to; it was something she grew up with and the like.

We did not have anybody in our immediate immediate family who was killed there, though my grandfather had a brother who served, who had been incarcerated in Auschwitz, and my father had two cousins whom he brought over to the United States who had also been in Auschwitz. And they were considered in those days not survivors but refugees. Two of his cousins essentially were able to recreate a new life in the United States. My grandfather's brother was never liberated, meaning he was physically liberated, but he wasn't spiritually or psychically liberated, and that was a little bit of the third rail of experience. Don't go near, don't ask, don't tell.

But that's the world in which I grew up, so I grew up with the Holocaust in silence. And the irony, of course, is that I've spent my career - primarily by accident, but also by fortune, I've spent my career transmitting what I learned in silence into an American idiom, so it could be spoken to the whole world.

Interviewer:

Okay. Tell me a little bit about your schooling, then; college and how you become the artist you are.

Michael Berenbaum:

I went to, I had a parochial education through high school. Went to New York yeshivot, which were Hebrew-speaking. I then went to Queens College and majored in philosophy, and was working on a question in ancient history that turned out not to be an ancient question, but a contemporary question. I was working on a question, why did the Jews not go out of business after defeat? Of all the ancient people, the Jews didn't go out of business after they were defeated, exiled, humiliated, had their land destroyed, and they were sent away. Why did they survive when many of the ancient peoples who faced defeat never survived? Somebody turned to me and said, "You're not asking an ancient question, you're asking a contemporary question." I said, "Look, I'm an ancient historian now; what the hell am I interested in these contemporary questions?" I began reading Holocaust literature. He turned me on to Holocaust literature. And I realized that the question I was asking was a contemporary question, because in terms of Jewish history, the most interesting question in terms of Jewish history is why in 1945, after such a massive defeat, didn't the Jewish people go out of business? Why did they not only not go out of business, but they doubled down, as it were, by creating Israel, and they doubled down by preserving Jewish identity in a world in which they could've easily acculturated and assimilated into American society, because we were breaking barriers at that point? And then as luck, fortune, and perhaps a bit of skill, had it, I ended up being asked to work on telling the story of the Holocaust to the American people in the most prominent place you could imagine - in the heart of our nation's capital. And shaped an American story of what had been both a European event and a Jewish event.

Interviewer:

What was your biggest stumbling block? In developing this story, did you have anything that was difficult?

Michael Berenbaum:

Everything was difficult. Number one, we had a philosophy of museum-making, and it's a philosophy of museum-making that we've continued with. The idea is that there are three modalities of storytelling in the modern world. The first modality of storytelling in the modern world is the novel. The problem with the novel is that it's an individual experience, not a collective experience. You sit down, you read the novel, and it's something you do in the privacy of your home, at your desk in your office, et cetera. Second modality is a movie or TV series, and what that is, it's a collective experience. The third, ironically, is a museum, but there's a difference between a museum and a movie. A movie has moving imagery and a captive audience.

A museum has captive imagery and a moving audience. In a movie, the only choice you have is to sit there and pay attention to what the director wants you to see. You can talk, you can kibbutz, you can do anything else, but essentially, you have to see what the director's putting forth to you, and in that way, it's a structured experience. In a museum, because of the fact that you move from place to place to place, it's an unstructured experience in which you are the author of what you experience. You pay attention to that artifact, you pay attention to that movie, you look at that caption. You're shaping the experience. That's why many people don't know what to do in a museum. So the first question is what story do we tell? The second question is - and I always say museum-making has to answer some very basic questions.

What, where, with what, and how? What do you have to say? What's the story you want to tell? Where do you want to tell it? And where is important, because the place from which you remember an event shapes how you remember it. There's the great psalmist, and it's a popular song, "By the rivers of Babylon we sat and we wept as

we remembered Zion. You remember Zion differently by the rivers of Babylon than you do in the destroyed city of Jerusalem. You remember the Holocaust differently in Washington than you do in New York; in New York than you do in Berlin; in Berlin than you do in Jerusalem; in Budapest than you do in Warsaw; at Auschwitz than you do at Majdanek. And the place shapes it, and then the question then becomes with what, which is what materiality do you have?

And part of what we had when we built the Holocaust Museum was we were doing, negotiating with Eastern European countries just as Communism was about to fall. They had built their entire careers, and their entire life, and their entire future on the idea that the Soviet Union was a dominant power. They were desperate for an American connection. They were probably anti-Semitic enough to believe that Jews controlled America, and we were wise enough not to dispute that. So what we did was we came with an American project on a Jewish subject, and then they gave us the materiality with which to tell the story. So we were able to tell the story of deportation around an authentic railroad car. We were able to tell the story of the concentration camp within a rebuilt barracks of Auschwitz that we had taken from Auschwitz, brought to the United States.

We were able to tell the story of the confiscation of property with 5,000 shoes. We were able to tell the story of crematoria with a fabrication from the original; a glass facsimile, a fiberglass facsimile from the original of the actual gas chambers. So we had all of the authentic materiality. Plus we had one more thing which is very important, and important to this whole history program, which is the single most important thing. We had the voices of those who were actually there, and they could provide not only what, where, and the factual historical, but they could provide the ethos of what was involved. Now, that capacity we're not going to fully understand for centuries.

Let me explain it this way: imagine the foundation of Christianity is four narratives of the life of Jesus. Now, imagine if we had the capacity now to access all of the people who had heard Jesus preach and teach. Imagine if we were not only to speak to four disciples, or the four authors of the gospel, but to his baker; to somebody who worked with his dad; to somebody who knew his mother; to somebody who had taught him. Imagine how real that material could be if you had access to not only the shaped narrative, but the rare raw material of that narrative in which you could understand it.

We Jews celebrate Passover, and we retell the story of the Exodus. Imagine - and that's a 3,200 year old story. Imagine now if I could speak to someone who was actually a slave in Egypt; imagine if I could stand with somebody who went to the desert for 40 years; imagine if I was able to speak to somebody who had actually heard Moses. Now, 2,000 years from today, 3,000 years from today, we'll have access to this type of material in a manner and a means in which you can literally understand what it was like to be there. Eli Wiesel once said, "Only those who were there will ever know." And then he said, "Those who were there can never tell." I've always agreed with the first part of his statement, and not with the second part. Those who were there have told it, and those of us who were not there can learn how to listen intelligently and powerfully to what's being said, and what's also not being said.

And therefore we have gathered raw material which will allow a historical event to be transmitted for generations, and whose importance we will not understand for generations, as it becomes accessible to future generations.

Interviewer:

Wow. So with all that, with all these records, with all this material that you talked about, how do you deal with folks who deny that this event happened?

Michael Berenbaum:

Let's begin by saying Holocaust denial is not a real phenomenon; it's a political phenomenon. So I've dealt with it in my career in the following ways. Martin Buber, who was a great Jewish thinker, said that what you have to do is you have to elevate a need before you respond to it. If you respond to the Holocaust denial on the level upon which the question is being asked, you're going to end up in the gutter. But if you begin

to raise the question, then you can respond to it differently. So I was telling a story earlier today. In 1981, there was a fear that Holocaust denial would be taking off, so we asked ourselves the question, who are the great witnesses to the Holocaust? One of the great witnesses to the Holocaust were the liberators. We therefore drew together a conference of Holocaust liberators.

Now, those liberators included American soldiers, but also Soviet soldiers. They included people from France, and from England, and from South Africa, and Australia. They included people from Great Britain. And the idea that Brezhnev's Russia, Brezhnev's Soviet Union and Reagan's U.S. military would be able to have a conspiracy that would create the Holocaust became absurd. You had all the raw material of those who were there. You had soldiers who were Officers; you had soldiers who were enlisted men. Remember, we had a segregated Army, so one of the first groups to come into camps after the immediate liberation were the African-American soldiers, who were serving in a segregated Army, who were given the - I guess I can say it here.

You've heard the word - the shit work, the sanitation details, and there was a lot of cleaning up to do in these camps. And therefore when we began to bring these liberators, we began to understand the whole range of experience. We not only understood the perpetrator. We now understood the victim; we now understood the liberator. And remember, the war was coming to an end. Our great image of the end of the war is that soldier, that sailor kissing this beautiful woman on Broadway, but for survivors it was a bittersweet experience. Sweet because death was coming to an end. Bitter because for the first time they could begin to feel, and the moment they began to feel, they began to feel the emptiness of the world that had been destroyed. They had no homes to go back to. Many of them experienced the death of their children, the death of their parents, the death of their spouses.

The destruction of their entire universe. So for them - and during Auschwitz, you couldn't feel. Only on liberation did you begin to feel, and once you began to feel, then all the pain came in. And for the American soldier, it was a thoroughly different experience. This was not the exhilaration of victory. This was confronting something that was enormously frightening. People who didn't look like human beings, who were virtually destroyed, and the fighter had to become a healer. The guy who faced an enemy then had to grapple with the idea of how do you heal in the aftermath? How do you reach out to people - people who frighten you because they've been destroyed; they've been shattered?

And consequently, those soldiers didn't have the sense of the exhilaration of liberation, but the burden and the responsibility of grappling with these people who were barely alive, who were barely human. In the British soldiers liberated Bergen-Belsen, 13,000 people died after the liberation; that's how far gone they were. The American soldiers had to confront what this was. When Eisenhower went in, he said, "American soldiers may not know, may be complaining they don't know what they're fighting for. Now they'd God-damned better well know what they're fighting against." And consequently were able to do that. Another example: we had a pseudo engineer who denied the nature of the fact that the crematoria could do what they were designed to do. We had a researcher then who found the documents for the creation of the crematoria in Auschwitz. He found those documents in the Moscow archives, and he found even the architectural plans for those creation and the way in which they were working. Now, that enabled us to understand a whole range of things about the destruction process that we never understood before. Mundane example, difficult example. The architect goes through this, and he sees that for 35,000 people they developed 70 latrines. Me, it didn't mean a damn thing; you, it may not mean anything; to an architect, that means an awful lot, because architects build stadiums, architects build football fields, architects build basketball stadiums.

And they understand precisely what the needs are for 35,000 people, the needs for

latrines, and if those break down, they understand, for example, what happened at New Orleans after the collapse of water and power. So what he came up with is he came up with an understanding of the physicality of dehumanization. The physicality of dehumanization was resulting in the plans, and any mediocre architect would've understood that you're condemning these people to live in their own feces by virtue of the way in which you're designing the camp. Any architect would've been able to read that. It then explains what they were doing. Another example - we were doing some research, and somebody argued that - Zyklon B is the chemical which was used to destroy - could not physiologically do what the claim was being made that they did.

So went to leading scientist on gas warfare, and we said - and I could prove to you in documents a) that Zyklon B was purchased; that there was correlation between the purchase of Zyklon B at Auschwitz and the use of Zyklon B to kill people, and the number of people killed in any given period of time. I could even prove to you that there were S.S. who delivered and dropped the pellets down the openings, but I had no idea what the physiology of death was. I'm not a scientist. I work with historical documents; I'm not a scientist. So we went to a scientific team, and they gave us the physiology of what the Zyklon B did, and we then began to understand the issue. But we didn't answer it here; we answered it here. So how do you answer Holocaust denial? First of all, you try to expose the politics behind it.

Usually it's a combination of racism and anti-Semitism; some of it is also the fact that the Holocaust gives Hitler a bad name. Without it, Fascism might be a pretty good system. That's not me speaking, that's those speaking. So you answer that in the way in which you try to do it, and then what you try to do is you try to make sure that you've answered the scholarship, or the pseudo scholarship with real scholarship - documentation. And then you get the absurd thing where - let's take the most recent absurdity. The Chancellor, the President, the former President of Iran, Ahmadinejad, denied that the Holocaust happened. Chancellor of Germany, the President of Germany, said, "The Holocaust happened. We know. We did it. And the only way we could develop our future is by admitting what we did in the past."

So what does the Iranian President know, or the Iranian former President know about German history that the German Chancellor and the German President - who should be denying the Holocaust? The world's absurd. If anybody should deny the Holocaust, it would be the President of Germany and the Chancellor of Germany, not the President of Iran. The President of Iran, ironically, didn't even know that his own country had an honorable record during the Holocaust; no Jews were killed there. It was used as a way station to get Jews to go to Palestine and to save them. So therefore when you look at his form of Holocaust denial, it clearly had nothing to do with the past. It had a little bit to do with his own desire for its repetition, and a lot to do with his politics relating to Israel, so you respond to that. I make it a principle, point of principle, which is sometimes controversial, not to debate Holocaust deniers. And the reason I do that is because I think I'm fairly smart, and I think I could hold my own in any debate.

But the idea if I debated them would be the following: that even if 99% of the people said I won the debate, 100% of the people would say, "Whether the Holocaust happened or not is now debatable." And therefore I don't appear on a panel with them and I won't debate them. I will respond to their - quotation marks - to their scholarly claims.
Interviewer:

Very good. Now, let's flip that, and talk about why is the Holocaust important, or genocide important for future Army Officers to understand, or to study?

Michael Berenbaum:

Yeah. Let me tell you, answer that, in a backhanded way. I wish it were unimportant. My dream in life would be to have what I teach to be irrelevant. Why would I like it to be irrelevant? Because if it were irrelevant, it would mean it could not happen again, and it was not going to happen again. What for me would be the ideal ending of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum would be to say, "Look how stupid 20th century

humanity was, and look how immoral 20th century humanity was. They divided the world by race, they divided the world by religion, and they committed unspeakable and horrendous evil of an industrialized scale and a massive scale. We could never do such a thing.â€

The terrible truth is that the â€œwe,â€ 21st century humanity, can do such terrible things. Why should U.S. military know this? Number one, because U.S. military has to understand that itâ€™s living in a world in which lots of the battles will no longer be major wars, but minor skirmishes, or seemingly minor skirmishes, involving tribal differences of race and religion, of ethnicity, involving modalities of genocide. And the Holocaust and its methodology will be a temptation, and therefore they have to understand how to intervene, how to intervene effectively, how to create a civil civic society. We in America have to understand how not to divide ourselves so that such divisions could take place in our society.

And how to behave ourselves in such a way that we retain the civic fabric of our own society, including, by the way, the very basic elements of the American genius. What is genius about the American system of government? We have separation of powers. We have checks and balances. We have restraint on the power of the State, including, by the way, the power of the military. You guys cannot use all of your power, certainly not domestically. We also have the notion of certain inalienable rights. So as long as America remains faithful to the American vision - and thatâ€™s not easy. As long as America remains faithful to the American vision and to the American form of government, lots of bad things can happen here, but nothing on the scale of genocide.

Nothing on the scale of the Holocaust. So why should the military do that? a) Because of the nature of the world. b) Because the Holocaust was a manifestation of Western civilization, even in its modality of industrialized killing. c) Because youâ€™re going to be fighting, weâ€™re going to be fighting genocide light or genocide-like battles in the forthcoming future, and we must understand that we have to struggle to live in that type of world and understand it. Furthermore, it imparts - the Holocaust plays a very interesting role in our society. We live in a world in which there are lots of sense that values are relative. We donâ€™t know whatâ€™s good, we donâ€™t know whatâ€™s bad. Weâ€™re living in changing mores, in changing norms.

What does the Holocaust represent? The Holocaust represents for our society absolute evil. If we donâ€™t know whatâ€™s good, we do know whatâ€™s bad. This was evil at its apex; evil at its most extreme manifestation. And consequently, by understanding what gave rise to that, even also how you combat and how you deal with that, then we can understand in a deep way how you create the touchstone, the foundation stone of values. And I can show you that in let me give you one simple example. Nuremberg Trials, which held the leaders of Nazi Germany accountable, had a subset of trials. One subset of trials was the doctorsâ€™ trial. Doctors performed all sorts of medical experimentations at Nuremberg - during the Holocaust - and at Nuremberg, they were held accountable. The judges came up with a very interesting thing. Judges, before they rendered the decision, came up with ten principles of medical experimentation. They set new norms for the society. The first principal was something that we deal with every single day in the hospitals, which is called â€œinformed consent.â€ Before a doctor does something to me, I am entitled to be informed of what is about to be done, and to consent to it. A patient has the right to stop treatment whenever the patient wants. All of these are principles that come out of Nuremberg, with the idea that they violated the most extreme, and consequently we have to create norms in our society with it. Letâ€™s look at military norms. Interestingly enough, it is not sufficient to follow orders.

To say, â€œI was following orders,â€ when orders, the military leader must understand, the military leader must understand when orders are legal, when orders are not legal. And there is a sense of individual responsibility, so your responsibility as an individual soldier is not merely that â€œI was given an order, and therefore I carried it out.â€ But the order

must have a sense of legality to it, and a sense of principle to it, and therefore there is a restraint on the action and individual responsibility. We're also having something emerge right now in a trial that in one sense, the trial is absolutely absurd. In the other sense, it's one of the most important trials we're having, taking place in Germany today, which is the German courts made a decision that in certain concentration camps, if you were present, you were involved in a conspiracy to murder.

Let's take a camp like Treblinka. Camp like Treblinka had 900,000 people killed in 13 months of operation. Had a staff of 120, of whom 30 were S.S., 90 were Ukrainians. The very idea that you were part of that means that you could be held responsible for conspiracy to murder. Now, what makes that interesting now is it means that future people who are going to be involved in genocide are going to understand that they may be held personally responsible for participating, merely because they're on the scene and they were involved in a conspiracy that led to the murder of thousands and tens of thousands. Which puts people on notice that you can't do that; you can't stand idly by. Silence or inaction is not sufficient; you have to do something affirmatively that's affirming a new value. So I think it has vast implications for our society.

I wish it didn't. I wish we lived in a world in which we could look at this as absurd, obscene, impossible. But that's not the world that we live in. The world we live in shows that genocide is a temptation and a possibility within our societies.

Interviewer:

One of the things that you said about that reminded me that one of the things we are trained as Army Officers is when you get an order, is it legal, is it moral, is it ethical? And it has to stand up to that, those three criteria; then you can act. So how does studying the Holocaust or genocide teach us about understanding how societies view or create the enemy?

Michael Berenbaum:

Look, it teaches us a number of things. It teaches us, first of all, you create someone as the other. You then create, in addition to creating the other, you create somebody as demonic. You presume for a moment that getting rid of that person is the answer to all your problems. In Germany, for example, the Jews were regarded not only as the other and the outsider, but they came to be regarded as a cancer on German society. Now, let me be blunt, and let me be graphic. If I would've walked into a room, and go over to a woman, and cut off her breast, I would be regarded as somebody who maims. If I'm a physician in a white coat, and I say, "I regret to tell you that you have breast cancer, and I must perform a mastectomy.

I'm a healer." By the time you have defined the outsider as a cancer on society, regard their elimination as an essential part of the national salvation, then murder becomes an act of healing, and not an act of murder. And consequently, we have to avoid that all the way through. When I teach in the History of Religions, I teach something that's quite remarkable. Roman Catholicism, in the aftermath of the Holocaust and the leadership of Pope John XXIII, said, "We want to make sure that our religious teachings do not allow the Jews to be demonized in the future." So what was the essential demonization of the Jews? The essential demonization of the Jews is they were accused of the murder of Jesus, of the crucifixion.

1965, 20 years after the Holocaust, "Nostra Aetate" is issued by the Vatican Council, which says that since Jesus died for our sins, the actual cause of the crucifixion was not the Jews, but was human sin. If we weren't sinful, then there'd be no reason for Jesus to die to offer us salvation. They transformed religious teaching in order to what? To make sure that the Jews were not regarded as demonic and other. They changed practice. They eliminated certain Scriptural readings on Good Friday. They changed the nature of the service to eliminate the message of perfidious Jews. And they did the basic act of transformation and repentance, to make sure that they could not scapegoat the other. So what do we have to do?

We have to, first of all, regard the other not - and they started regarding the Jew not as

other, but as older brother. By the way, older brothers sometimes you have tension with, you know? Not everybody loves their older brother. But older brother is not a demonic connotation; older brother is something dramatically different. So therefore we can understand that there are ways of going about it to make sure that we do not alienate the other by finding a sense of commonality between human beings. There are ethical values. There are religious values. The religious values is the idea that all human beings are created in the image of God. The ethical value that's so essential to American society is the idea that people are born with inalienable rights to life and liberty.

And we also have a foundational document of George Washington, who says, "It's not a matter of tolerance, but it's a matter of natural rights." That we are founded on the idea that human beings have basic rights; that's an awesome principle. It's a deeply and profoundly American principle, and it's a profoundly moral principle. Notice I left out the Holocaust is not about the natural right for the pursuit of happiness. Life and liberty is sufficient. We can learn pursuit of happiness by other events in the world.

Interviewer:

Now could you talk a little bit about the American Army experience as liberators, and what can we learn from that? What do we still need to learn from that?

Michael Berenbaum:

Okay. First thing that's said about the American Army as liberators is battle-weary veterans came upon the camps, and they saw a world that was radically different than the world that they had seen. They thought they had seen the worst. They had seen buddies die. They had killed. They had seen others killed. And then they came upon this world, and they really discovered what was unique, and what was absolutely profoundly evil about it. Secondly, it showed us that the Army is called upon for multiple tasks. The Army immediately after the liberation of camps was called upon not to fight, which it had been exclusively trained for, but to heal, to offer medical services. To offer also little things. Let me give you an example. American soldiers were deeply generous and grateful. They saw starving people, so they emptied their knapsacks. They gave them chocolate - Hershey bars. They gave them stuff from their rations. They didn't understand that these were people who hadn't eaten in five years, and consequently sometimes when they gave them rich material, it killed them. And the people who gobbled stuff because they were hungry were then writhing in pain, because their stomach could not absorb it. And then they had to go the long and difficult journey of allowing people to heal, and to trust again. Let's give a simple example.

One survivor remembers when fruit was put out. He said, "When did I learn the Holocaust was over?" He said, "I was standing in a chow line, and they had an orange and a banana. And I said, "Can I have one?" And the guy said, "You can take all as many God-damned oranges and as many God-damned bananas as you want." He said, "Then I understood I didn't have to hide food, because I would be able to eat tomorrow." That's rediscovering trust in the world. So the soldier may come upon situations in which he or she is called upon to do something radically different than anything they were trained for. And they also had to be trained - they also had to - they weren't trained.

They had to come to terms with their own humanity, and with how to share some common humanity with people who hadn't experienced that. A little woman described, she said, "You know, the great moment of healing was a soldier turned to me and said, "Will you show me the other ladies?" She was in a slave labor factory. And she said, "He opened the door for me, and he said, "Will you precede me?" Nobody had done that for six years - the simple gesture of "ladies first" she regarded 50 years later as the single moment of her return to dignity and humanity. And all of that, the American soldier was called upon to do.

The American soldier was then also called upon - look, you had bad instances also.

There's a famous story about in retrospect, a pathetic but a funny story, in which one of

the Commanders - I leave him nameless - was complaining, "Why the hell are the Jews in these barracks urinating and defecating in the halls?" And then a Chaplain said, "Well, if you provided them with latrines, they might know where to go to the bathroom." They then installed Porta-Potties, and all of a sudden, the camp got cleaned up. Cause they had never dealt with these circumstances before, and consequently they had to innovate, they had to create, they had to figure out a way of grappling with this stuff. Soldiers, unfortunately, the - and you guys know it better than anybody else. War, by its very nature, is thoroughly unpredictable, and nobody can imagine the full range of what's going to happen. And you are called upon to be imaginative, and creative, and responsive, and courageous, and smart. And that sometimes calls forth the best from us, and sometimes it shows where we fail.

Interviewer:

So with a lot of these survivors that lived through such an awful experience - and you mentioned yourself, your great-uncle, who you said he was freed but he was never liberated - how did they deal with P.T.S.D. after they came back?

Michael Berenbaum:

You know, let me tell you a Biblical story, and then tell it to you in a different way. Story in the Bible I never understood. Story about Lot and his wife and daughters. Sodom and Gomorrah. Lot and his daughters and his wife flee Sodom and Gomorrah. By legend, his wife turns back, she turns into a pillar of salt. His daughters go on, and they think they're the last two women on earth, and the father's the last man on earth, and they seduce him. They get him drunk, and they seduce him, one after the other, and they produce two great nations. I read this story as a kid many times; didn't understand it, scratched my head. And then I worked on the Holocaust, and I seen; now I understand it. If you turn back too soon, you're paralyzed by grief. When you look back on an event, if you look back too soon, you're paralyzed by grief, and you turn into a pillar of salt, which is in tears. You have to get on with the bloody difficult, compromised, almost impossible business of building life again. Lot's daughters thought they were the last two women on earth; their response is not to say, "Okay." Their response is, "We got to create new life." Many survivors, in the immediate aftermath of the Holocaust, a marriage proposal sometimes could sound like this: "I'm all alone, you're all alone. Let's be alone together. I have no one, you have no one. At least now we'll have each other."

Many women felt, wrongfully ironically, that the Nazis had put something in the food that forced them to cease to menstruate, and therefore they were desperate to prove that they were women again, therefore to get pregnant. And they brought children into the world. The irony in the aftermath of the Holocaust was that the single largest increase in population occurred within displaced person camps. The perpetrators were not reproducing themselves; the victims were recreating life. For many years, they were afraid to look back. During the day, they could be normal; at night, they were haunted and hunted. They then discovered something else, and only with great, great, great difficulty.

They discovered that survival itself confers no virtue, but what you do with survival can make all the difference in the world. By that, I mean survivors have, in the last 30 years, transformed their experience of suffering into a tool to plead against indifference, to plead for engagement and involvement, to enhance human morality, to argue for human decency. And they've transformed the accident of their survival into a moral mission, to bear witness to the past, and also to impact the present and the future. Do they suffer from post traumatic stress syndrome? Absolutely. But when they use what they've been through as a tool for healing and for education, for producing tolerance, for enhancing human decency, they've discovered how to make use of the past in such a way that it justifies the accident of your own survival.

A lot of post traumatic stress syndrome is not only what you saw, and what you experienced, but why is it that I survived and my buddy did not? Every survivor will use a four-letter word to survive survival. Three of the letters are U-C-K, but the first letter is L.

And by that, they're partially right, because what they know is that somebody smarter, wiser, more worthy, and stronger, didn't survive because they were in the wrong place at the wrong time. But nobody survived without skill, and nobody survived without having taken certain steps to ensure their survival. The best, by the way, may not have survived, so everybody lives with something called survivor guilt.

The interesting thing is that one of the paradoxes of the Holocaust is that the innocent feel guilty, and the guilty feel innocent. There's a vast literature of survivor guilt; there's no great literature of perpetrator guilt. There are very few articles about perpetrators waking up in the middle of the night screaming, saying, "What the hell did I do?" But there is a vast literature of survivors saying, "I feel guilty. Why did I survive when somebody else did not?" And consequently you battle with post traumatic stress syndrome, and they battled it at a very different time than we battle it now. They battled it in an America that was forward-looking, and that didn't want to look back on the past. In the 1950s, General Electric's slogan was "Progress is our most important product." They were told, "Everybody had problems there."

Otherwise, you wouldn't have come to America. Once you come to America, you look about the future, not the past. You look forward, not back." And when they wanted to speak, they found that people were not interested in listening. We are now more sensitive, but the other part of it which they also share is the loneliness that's involved in that. Now they had a couple of benefits with the loneliness. Number one, many of them married early, and therefore they were alone together, and sometimes they married fellow survivors precisely because they didn't have to talk. The second is because of the way in which they immigrated, they were in a certain sense of community, where everybody knew everyone else and everybody knew what their experience was. Consequently, they didn't have to talk.

Sometimes it could remain in silence, but they also had the advantage, and everybody knows the only way to deal with post traumatic stress syndrome is to confront it and get it out. Otherwise, it will - the unspoken, the unsaid, the untouched will eat you up alive inside; and we're more skilled at identifying that today than we ever were before.

Interviewer:

And so that goes back to one of the things you mentioned at the beginning of the interview, when you said you grew up in a community where it was the silent issue, that was always ever present, but was silent. And so as you bring out the story, do you see any - what's the relationship between history and popular culture, and how you can tell the story without sensationalizing it?

Michael Berenbaum:

Okay. Let's go with a couple things which I didn't say, and most important thing for us with oral history. Survivors had an incredible piece of luck. When they were ready to speak and America was ready to listen, inexpensive video equipment became public and available. You no longer need to work with massive amounts of film; you can work with - first it used to be the battle between Beta and VHS, VHS and DVDs, and look at what you have available now to record. So anybody can become - and today we know everything's recorded, because anybody with a cell phone becomes a photographer and a motion picture maker, et cetera. So that's number one. Secondly, in the '70s, the sense of what would play to mainstream American culture became larger.

"Roots" was a product of 1976-'77. "The Holocaust" played the docudrama "The Holocaust" played in 1978. Three out of four Americans saw "The Holocaust," part of it. All of a sudden, everybody was interested in the survivors story, and all of a sudden, somebody who had been ignored became important. And that's precisely at the point - it was 33 years after survival - it was precisely after the point where they had recreated their life, rebuilt their families, rebuilt their communities, and they were now prepared to talk, and we were now prepared to listen. So they were validated.

Look, one of the great transformations in military life that I experienced in my generation is the way in which we treated American soldiers after Vietnam, and the way in which we treated American soldiers after Iraq and Afghanistan. After Vietnam, we blamed the soldiers, not the political leadership, and consequently soldiers were regarded with distrust, and not celebrated for their dedication, for their service, and the like. And therefore, the devaluation of national service became prominent. One of the nicest things that happened from 1991 onward has been the fact that if we have quarrels with the policy, it's a quarrel with the leadership, and not with the soldier.

And soldiers therefore feel validated, and feel appreciated. Let me touch on one thing we didn't touch on, which will help you with oral history. The greatest film on the Holocaust that was done, documentary film, was a film called Shoah, by Claude Lanzmann, based all on oral histories. Let me tell you a couple things about what I learned from Lanzmann.

Lanzmann asked questions very carefully. Let's give a simple example. In the first stage of killing were mobile killing units, sent out to go to towns, villages, and hamlets to murder them bullet by bullet, town by town, village by village, person by person.

A man was then sent back on Einsatzgruppen 1005 to dig up the bodies and burn them.

They were under the command of a man by the name of Paul Blobel, and they were to dig up the bodies and burn them. A man came upon the body of his mother and his sister.

Anybody else would've asked him, "How did you feel?" At that moment, he would've broken faith. Now, that's a normal question; it's the thing that you'd be most curious about, I'd be most curious about. Why would he have broken faith? Because the reality is when a man comes across something like that, he builds a stone wall. He can't feel. The only way you deal with that is you shut down all emotion. Lanzmann asked a much crueler question. He said, "How did you recognize them?"

And before the question is answered, in the response of the man, thinking about it, visualizing it, you see all the expression of feeling, because the only way he can answer that question is by going back there. Now, let me give you a comparable example when I ask people about background. If I ask you to tell me your story, you've told me your story of background, you've told your story of background a thousand times. Let's remember when you went out on a date, somebody says, "Tell me about yourself." You have a rehearsed narrative; doesn't tell the whole thing, but it tells a lot.

And you decide, "How candid am I going to be? How candid am I not going to be?" Right? Tell me about your background. What a good oral historian will sometimes do is to surprise you on that. Take me to your home, and take me to your room. Describe your room. Now, the only way you can describe your room is to remember it, right? Is to see it pictured in your mind. Where was your desk? Where was your bed? Did you have a television? What was on your bookshelf? Where did you read? Where was your lamp? Where was your closet? What was in your closet? Or let's take another example, in which we'll describe lots of things. Take me to the most important meal of the year at your home.

Now is that going to be Christmas? Is it going to be Thanksgiving? Is it going to be Rosh Hashanah? Is it going to be Passover, for a Jewish family? Where did your mother sit? Where did your father sit? Who was around the table? What was your role? You'll all of a sudden discover the difference between women's roles, and men's roles, and all of that, and the only way you can answer that question is not by giving me a rehearsed narrative, but by telling me what? Brand-new stuff that you're thinking of. Now, you're going to be wrong in certain details, but you're going to all of a sudden evoke a whole range of things. And part of what you present when you ask questions that way, is you not only get the information, but you get the ethos of the information, which makes the stuff come alive. And that's a key gift of oral history.

Interviewer:

That's a great technique. Yeah, that's pretty powerful.

Michael Berenbaum:

Now again, you know, let's take a military situation. If you ask to describe the event, that's one thing. But if you ask, "Where were you? What was your assignment? What were your orders? What were your tasks?" Right? Describing a situation is going to be giving you the large vantage point. Asking you the very specifics is going to have you recreate, relive, re-experience the whole range of things. The answer will be far richer and more dramatic.

Interviewer:

Wow. That's a fabulous technique. How can you convince people that the Holocaust is not just a Jewish issue, that it's a societal or a human issue?

Michael Berenbaum:

You know, in one sense - let me tell you what we're aiming to do, okay? And here I'm going to be philosophical and theological. There's one Jewish story that has made it for centuries now to be a Jewish story that's also a universal story. It's the great Biblical story of Egypt, the Exodus, the Promised Land; the journey in the desert to the Promised Land. Particular story, but I can ask you about your life. Tell me, who is your Pharaoh, and who is your Moses? What is your sea? What's your journey to the Promised Land, and what's the Promised Land? Everybody understands those questions.

Everybody who's had the mildest touch with Western civilization. And what's the impact in the Bible of the story of the Exodus? The impact in the Bible of the story of Exodus is to treat people with dignity, not to enslave them. To be good to the stranger, the orphan, the widow, and the poor. Not, for example, to take a man's tools away from him so he can't earn a living, even if he owes you a debt. To provide for human dignity and human decency. What the Holocaust, if it's used properly, and history gives you instances to be used properly - what it's designed to do is to make sure that essentially it's used to tell the story about enlarging human decency and human dignity.

Deepening human responsibility.

Providing protection for the individual, no matter what they are - the outsider, the stranger, the widow, the alien, the other religion - against bullying, or against a whole range of things. The Holocaust by its very nature involved 12 years, 24 countries; the entirety of Western civilization, including Western industrialization, Western culture, and Western religion; Christianity and Judaism; and all the elements of the like. It is a Jewish story, but not only a Jewish story. It's a universal story, and in its most greatest manifestation, if we succeed, it will become like the Biblical story without the religious connotations, in the sense that people will understand all the elements of it, and see it as a call to action, and a call to enhance human dignity and human decency.

So it's not only of particular interest to Jews. It's of great interest to anybody who's been part and parcel of Western civilization, and in our interconnected world, it means anybody who touches on our civilization, and that's everybody.

Interviewer:

Okay. Now, as we're moving away from World War II years, and we've seen other genocides - Cambodia, Bosnia, Rwanda, even some of the things that are going on in the Middle East now - how does all that relate back to the Holocaust?

Michael Berenbaum:

I wish we had an easy narrative. The narrative the survivors wanted was the narrative of "never again." And the narrative of "never again" was the Holocaust happened; it never should happen again, not to Jews, not to anyone. The reality is we have it happening again and again and again, but we shouldn't say "never again" and "always." We should say that, number one, we have a greater consciousness of it. In certain respects, we have intervened and stopped genocide; in other respects, we failed. Failed dramatically - Rwanda's the best example. We've also understood things differently, you know.

20 - it's actually 30 years ago now, when we were in the early stage of the formation of

the President's Commission, later to become the United States Holocaust Memorial Council, we had the idea we were going to establish a Committee of Conscience to warn the world when genocide occurs. But we understand that genocide is not about conscience; genocide is about the willingness to undertake action to help the oppressed. And we understand the restraints on undertaking action to help the repressed. Jim Baker - and I'm not being politically critical - Secretary of State Jim Baker said in Yugoslavia and Bosnia, "We don't have a dog in that fight." Bill Clinton sent troops into Rwanda to bring Americans out, but not to stop the genocide, and Rwanda was a primitive genocide. It was done almost by machete, in a very primitive society where that could've been stopped.

We see the implications of acting in Sudan. We see the implications of acting in Darfur. We see the crazy implications of acting in Syria. And we understand that it's not about conscience; it's about national will. I believe we need an international will that says that there is military intervention when there is genocide of a certain sort, and that that is not an American intervention, or an American intervention alone. I think nations have failed. I think we're failing humanity in this, and I also think - and you guys are going to be at the forefront of it - we have to think what effective action can be, because sometimes action triggers genocide.

I mean we're seeing now the impact of the Sunni-Shi'a divide, magnified because we thought we could solve one problem, and sometimes history is what you call a Whack-A-Mole. You solve one problem, and three more, five more pop up, and you're in a difficult situation. So the one thing I do know is that indifference will not work, and pretending it's not happening will not work. And the other important thing is that we need people who are willing to be rescuers, who are willing to be messengers. I mean let's think. The Darfur situation, you know, one of the columnists of the New York Times, a fellow by the name of Nicholas Kristof, has written column after column after column after column after column calling our attention to Darfur. So we can't say we don't know. And our moral implication is we have to become like him, which is we do care. I taught with the late, great Jan Karski, who brought word of what was happening during the Holocaust to the West; told the story. Told the story 254 times in 1944-45. He said, "I wanted to tell the story when there was still time to save the Jews. I told the story; nobody was interested in saving them." But at least he told the story. So we need to be vigilant on this, we need to be active on it, and we need to recognize that our major institutions have failed on this.

Interviewer:

What is the most dangerous area in your view right now?

Michael Berenbaum:

Most dangerous area in my view right now is the Middle East. And the irony of the danger is there's multiple religious warfare, and the problem, the difference between religious warfare and political warfare - and it is a major difference. In political warfare you can come to certain forms of compromise. In religious warfare, each one believes that they have God on their side, and because they have God on their side, compromising with the other, with the anti-god, with the demonic, with the Satan, with the Christ-killer, with whatever have you, is impossible. And look what we have; we have Jew against Muslim. We have Muslim against Christians, Muslim against Muslim, Sunni against Sunni.

And even a division now between how intense you are in your devotion; how much you're willing to have secular influence, how much you're not willing. How much you're willing to be open to the world, how much you're willing to be closed to the world. If I could have a magic wand, I would love to see people who are as passionate in their moderation as the extremists are in their extremity, in their extremism. I want to have passionate moderates. And the problem with most moderates is that they are compassionate, but they don't have anywhere near the energy of the extremists, because they don't believe how important their own role is.

Interviewer:

Now with that, how do you combat something like ISIS, or al-Qaeda, or something, a group like that, without vilifying them?

Michael Berenbaum:

You know, it's very important - let me go back historically, okay? Some of the people that I know survived because they could distinguish between individuals, even those perpetuating evil, perpetrating evil. And they understood that people had different degrees of dedication, different degrees of humanity, different degrees of conscience, and the like. We have to understand not only the nature of what we face, but also the individuals who are facing it, and be able to break off elements. There's an article in a newspaper in which a guy is saying, "You know, Hitler had a police state, and Iran is a police state." Well, you can say, "Absolutely." But, you know what, there was a difference between Hitler's police state and Stalin's police state. Between Khrushchev's police state, between Ahmadinejad's police state, and between Rouhani's police state. And if you don't understand that difference, you're not understanding a lot of what is possible. ISIS has multiple forces, and we have to understand, some part of ISIS also, because we're facing a novum in this reality. A novum we only faced a little bit when we faced the Japanese. Which is - and we normally do this in a crazy way, which is that we sometimes call these people cowards. The normal definition of a coward is somebody who quivers in the face of death, not somebody who welcomes their death in order to inflict damage.

We don't know fully, and understand fully, the motivation of people willing to give up their lives willingly in order to inflict damage on the other. That goes against lots of our preconceived norms. You know, when Kennedy and Khrushchev were facing off, we had the great advantage, which is that Khrushchev believed only in this life, and Kennedy seemed to be having a pretty good time with this life. No great desire to end it, even though he died, he was murdered shortly thereafter. We don't know what it is to have people who welcome a culture of death. Thankfully, we in America don't welcome that, don't really understand that culture of death. In fact, if we have anything, we have a culture that denies death; that tries to push against it. So our responsibility is to understand, how do we do this without demonizing them?

In the same way, in the older generation, that if we treated the Vietcong all as one, we didn't have an appreciation for the diversity, divisions, and everything else. If we demonize them, then we ended up with body counts, and body counts did not lead to winning wars. They led to something else.

Interviewer:

Sir, one final question. What was your role in 1967? You mentioned it a little bit, and I think it's very important.

Michael Berenbaum:

Story about '67, which is - I'm a committed, deeply committed Jew, deeply religious Jew, though not an Orthodox Jew, but deeply religious. And the reason I'm not Orthodox is because I'm sort of not a fundamentalist on anything, including even stuff I deal with, grapple with fundamentally. I'm a little bit too skeptical for all of that. I was coming to my senior year in college, about to graduate, when the Six Day War looked like it was about to break out, and I had a terrible sense at that point that the Jews could not withstand two defeats in one generation. We were defeated in the Holocaust.

Even though there was survival, the overwhelming experience, two out of three Jews in Europe were killed. The Jewish people, Jewish communities were decimated. If the response to the Holocaust was going to be decimated, it was going to be overwhelming, and I didn't want to be a bystander to Jewish history; I wanted to be there. So instead of going to my college graduation, I went off to the war, and I'll tell you a story, which is fun. I'll just do it because it's a humorous story. My best friend, one of my very good friends married a woman who was in charge of putting together a list of volunteers. So whenever I speak in their area, they come to see, and I say, "I'm very happy to

see my friend David here, but more importantly, I'm happy to see his wife Judith, who was the single most important woman in my life in the transition from boyhood to manhood.

So everybody thinks in sexual terms, and I said, "But I can tell, I'm going to tell you the story." And everybody's beginning to get a little bit worried and horrified. I said, "She was in charge of the list of getting volunteers to go, and I was on the last plane that went to the Six Day War. I could drive a truck, and I had gotten an international driver's license before we went off. And the Israelis had mobilized in '67 all men between the ages of 18 and 45, so the entire collection team of garbage drivers and the like were all mobilized. I took a bunch of American kids, and we organized a sanitation system for Jerusalem, and I drove a garbage truck. And in fact, the fun thing was that I took the garbage truck home at night.

And after the war was over, and if I was going out on a date, I would take my garbage truck to pick up the young lady. Well, we organized the garbage truck, and we organized the garbage delivery system, and in fact, we ended up cleaning up some of the rubble of the Six Day War, and also when they expanded the area around the Western Wall, we took away the rubble. And I used to have a funny discussion with the Mayor of Jerusalem, the late, great Mayor of Jerusalem, Teddy Kollek, and Teddy Kollek was Mayor from '65 to '93 - great, great Mayor. And he would always say to me, "Berenbaum, you could've really had a career."

Interviewer:

[Laughs] There's no better way to end the interview than that. Sir, thank you for coming in and talking with us.

Michael Berenbaum:

My pleasure.

Interviewer:

This was incredible.

Michael Berenbaum:

Thank you.