Phyllis Senese Interview 5.11.2019 (Part 1) – Defying Hatred Project

Stanger-Ross: So I'm here again. This is Jordan Stanger-Ross with the Defying Hatred Project, talking with Phyllis Senese. I always say "se-nay-zee" cause I come out with like an Italian --

Senese: It is and that's the Italian pronunciation.

Stanger-Ross: I can't remember if we went over this last time. Cause someone else was telling me that they say "se-nays".

Senese: "Se-nays" yeah. That's how it was pronounced in my husband's family to be more American.

Stanger-Ross: Ok yeah, there is that dropping of the vowel, yeah. On Ventura Way at our house in Victoria for a second interview around the themes of this project. So as I was just saying, we had a bit of a correspondence after the prior meeting that covered three topics that you wrote me about and we thought maybe we'd draw them into the actual recorded interview. And the first one, I guess -- well I don't know which one came first for you, but the part that was in the email that I saw first was about your own personal background with religion and your parents and how that relates to your starting to become interested in these topics.

Senese: My family on both sides originates in southeastern Europe in areas that are now part of Ukraine and Moldova. When my grandparents were born on my mother's side they were part of the Austro-Hungarian empire. Farther south they were part of the Ottoman empire. So my background culturally is that kind of eastern European melting pot of all kinds of influences. Most of which, for me, I experience more through music than anything else. Put on some Klezmer music or some Turkish music and I feel like I'm at home. In terms of religion, when my parents were growing up in the late 20s and 30s, people of eastern European background in Canada were among the unwelcome and they both faced a lot of discrimination in their personal lives. For my father's family they lived first in Saskatchewan and then in Windsor in fairly compact communities of other eastern European immigrants so that they had that larger culture to give them a bit of protection. But my father always felt that discrimination very keenly, so for him talking about the past was taboo. You cut it off, we're here in Canada and we're now something and somebody different. So I never got much family history from him.

[00:03:22]

Senese: For him I think religion was part of the experience of his family. My grandparents were both very involved in the orthodox church but I don't think my father -- I don't think it meant very much to him. At least he never gave any indication that it did in terms of how he approached religion or anything he ever said. It was something that you did, it was part of being part of that family. But I don't think he was deeply spiritual. I could be wrong but as I say he never talked about it so who knows. My mother's family was in the eastern Catholic church, the Greek Catholic church. She left that church as, I guess, in her late-teens, early-20s when she left home, and became an Anglican. Her sisters all left the Greek Catholic church and some became Roman Catholics, some became Anglican, they just scattered. Looking for a place where they

felt, I guess, comfortable. My mother was much more spiritual than my father, she was more attached I think to institutions and ritual than he was. And so for her the Anglican church had a kind of comfortable familiarity but also sort of more Canadian. But because of my grandmother who died when my mother was still quite young, my grandmother apparently had a very interfaith and ecumenical kind of viewpoint. When they got to Manitoba she wanted to live in Saint Boniface so that her children would learn French and have a bigger cultural experience than just living among other eastern European immigrants. Didn't work out that way, they ended up in East Selkirk, north of Winnipeg, in a very much eastern European kind of little community. But with enough people of other backgrounds to make it really quite interesting. And it's because of that kind of attitude, I think, of my grandmother's that my mother made a point of making sure that we knew about Judaism. And I always assumed that it was because of her ability to understand and accept the reality that Christianity was built on Judaism, that Jesus was a Jew. For her that was not a radical idea, that made perfect sense. So I was taken with other kids to the synagogue in Calgary to go on a tour and, you know, see the interior, learn about it, and that kindled an interest for me. That I guess went along with -- I think we talked about this earlier -- about my coming across pictures from Auschwitz as a child and not being able to comprehend what on earth was this all about and my mother trying to explain it to me. So I had this sense of Judaism being something familiar, something that was not strange or foreign from a very early age. And as is true of most people who have eastern European roots, there are some Jewish strains in my DNA. Presumably in my ancestry but I don't know where, I don't know when. I mean that's all in the past, it's all lost.

Stanger-Ross: I think you said you did a DNA test.

Senese: Mhm.

Stanger-Ross: So what motivated that?

Senese: Oh, curiosity.

Stanger-Ross: When was that?

[00:07:54]

Senese: About five years ago. Actually it wasn't the Jewish link that I was looking for, it was something even more interesting. In my mother's family, my grandmother and three of her children -- four of her children -- all have very specific eyes. Very Asian eyes. And we thought that that might have been a result of the long-term effects of Genghis Khan moving west, because he certainly swept through that area and controlled it for a while. So that was sort of a kind of interesting what if we're related to Genghis Khan. My daughter really picked up on that. She went to St. Margaret's school and they would have heritage days because they had so many international students. You know, "come in your national costume." My daughter went once as Genghis Khan.

laughing

Senese: So that was what we were curious about and as it turned out there wasn't much trace there. But there were all kinds of little traces but nothing specifically that would connect to Genghis Khan. So that's where the motivation for the DNA came from. But it just confirmed that there was a Jewish heritage that I think a lot of people in the family had suspected but didn't know about and that was just sort of there. And for me I found that even though my mother insisted my brother and I be brought up essentially in the Anglican church, I realised when I was 13 that I didn't believe it. And so from that point on, for a while, for many years, I was sort of questing for a religious home. Went to different churches, went to different synagogues, and in the end I found that I could stay for a while and eventually I had to leave. So for the last 30 years I haven't been going anywhere. I found that I didn't need to.

Stanger-Ross: That religious background, did that have an impact on your interfaith initiatives? Can you talk about your interfaith initiatives and do you see those as linked?

[00:10:44]

Senese: Not directly. I think the link there was more recognising that enough time had passed that -- and the mainstream Christian churches had themselves progressed enough that they were willing to engage in those kind of activities. I had thought for a long time that people of faith should be banding together, that if you could step back and look at the essentials there was so much common ground and so many contemporary issues that if they pooled together to deal with, there's a powerful force. But everyone was in their own little box. For example, early on in -- well, say the 70s and 80s in Victoria -- when there was a case of Antisemitic graffiti, it would always be noted and that's unfortunate, that's too bad. But there was no sense of other faith communities stepping up to do something. Now it's much more common and I mentioned to you that one link that became very important -- I wasn't part of it, I just knew about it -- was St. John the Divine church and the synagogue, congregation Emmanuel. So that in more recent times if the synagogue has been graffitied, people from St. John will come and help with the cleanup. When the mosques in New Zealand were attacked a few months ago, the mosque here, people of all kinds of religious and non-religious backgrounds came to make a chain around the mosque so that worshipers could feel safe, even in Victoria somebody's got their back. That would have not happened twenty years ago so things have progressed. I was trying to push it and I thought the Holocaust was an obvious way given the links between Christianity and Judaism which was something I taught in some detail in the course I did on racism and Antisemitism. It was something that churches were starting to talk more about themselves in terms of understanding the roots of Christianity and wherever I could get a platform I would give a lecture or a series of lectures. It was something that I was very much enmeshed in in my teaching and in this community work. So I organised series of commemorations of Kristallnacht on a Sunday close to the Jewish celebration, but separate. So that people could go to both. The first one was held at the Catholic cathedral and that was because I was friends with the bishop, Rémi de Roo. And he was a very enthusiastic supporter of interfaith initiatives and it was the thing he was doing and had been doing in his own work. He was also very close friends with Victor Reinstein, Sue Berrin. So for him it was a natural and he was a very enthusiastic supporter of the event. The next year we held it at the Anglican cathedral because, again, the Anglican bishop, the Catholic bishop, and the local head of the United church had been working together in tandem for a number of years on interfaith initiatives and in particular getting the centre for studies in religion

and society off the ground at UVic. So that was a collaborative project and for them it was natural to collaborate on something else. These events were well-attended and the participants included survivors who spoke about their experiences. We included readings in Hebrew, music. It was very broad but it focused on the Holocaust. There was not much mention made of other groups who had been persecuted by the Nazis and that was an issue -- I don't know if you want to pursue it now or come back to it -- but that was an issue that turned out to be very divisive in Holocaust initiatives here in town, was whether events should focus only on the Holocaust or whether the Holocaust was a way of opening up a bigger discussion.

Stanger-Ross: Yeah, maybe we'll come back to those divisions. I'm fascinated though by these events. How would an event like that have differed in its program, if at all, from the one that would occur in the synagogue for Kristallnacht?

[00:16:48]

Senese: It would have differed only in very small ways. It had become a tradition to read Leo Beck's prayer as part of the service at the Shul. We didn't include that in the other services but we read other things, poetry from the period, someone would read the 23rd Psalm in Hebrew. The music would be different. It would not be Christian hymns, we didn't do any of that, but it would be essentially secular music appropriate to the occasion. The year that we did it at the Anglican cathedral, there was a group -- I think they called themselves the Rainbow Choir, I'm not sure if it's still in existence -- but it was an LGBTQ choir that was fairly newly formed. I can't even remember now how I heard about them. But I got some contact information and asked them if they would come and sing. And they did. And I think they did that for two years running. So we were including other groups but not making them the focus yet of anything much.

Stanger-Ross: And who was involved in this? So there was you --

Senese: It was me.

Stanger-Ross: You.

Senese: Yeah. I was the one who was basically organising it. Because it was the one sort of initiative that we'd bandy about that I was really keen on and wanted to do. And since there weren't that many of us actually doing stuff, people said "fine, if you want to talk it on then do it."

Stanger-Ross: When would this have been?

Senese: In the early-90s. Early- to mid-90s.

Stanger-Ross: Ah.

Senese: So I would connect with whoever I needed to at a particular church and explain what I wanted to do and were they interested in hosting it. And I was never refused. In fact, because the chaplains at UVic were an interfaith group, as soon as they heard about it they not only

supported it but wanted to host it at their home church the following year. We did that for four years and then a group of people came forward and said we want to be involved, we want to make this bigger and this is really important. And at that point I was sort of facing burnout because of everything else I was doing. I was happy to have others come along and say they wanted to organise. The problem was that I think they didn't see it the same way I did and it became -- it lasted I think one more year and instead of being held in a church, the event was held at the Alex Goolden Centre. And then it kind of just disappeared and at that point I just didn't have the time or energy to try and take it up again.

Stanger-Ross: When you started did you take the program basically that Victor was using at Emmanuel and just adapt it slightly? Were you just familiar with what was being done at Kristallnacht and so you --

[00:20:57]

Senese: Yeah I was familiar with it because I had frequently participated in it, either giving a talk or one year I read the Leo Beck prayer. Mostly it was giving a small talk towards the end of the evening highlighting some particular historical theme relating to Kristallnacht. And the Kristallnacht, especially after -- I'm trying to think, was it after Victor left? Yeah, I think it was after Victor left, the program there went through a few years of different people trying different formats, different approaches, to see how it might work. With Victor it had been basically the same program outline and then different people doing different parts and different survivors speaking, that kind of thing. So it was similar but different. I wouldn't say it was just taking the program and adapting it. It was starting fresh and saying in this context, because I wanted the focus in terms of the audience to be more from the Christian churches and the non-denominational community and non-religious community. The Jewish community I thought knew what happened. But it was that larger community that needed to be drawn into this to not only get information they might not have but to become more emotionally invested in it. That this is not just something that affects just this little small community in our bigger community, this affects all of us. And one of, I guess, my hobby horses had always been talking about the Holocaust -- was that it is not sufficient to simply say, "oh the Nazis drove the Germans crazy and they had this aberrant period in their history and now it's all over," but that the whole world was complicit in what went on. That was the theme that I constantly stressed, is that we're all to blame in one way or another. And so it's a job of repair and reconciliation that is a long term project and a much bigger project than just saying once a year "oh it was too bad what happened."

Stanger-Ross: I think you mentioned in the email that the Kristallnacht events at that time were smaller, hadn't been growing, didn't have as much outreach dimensions as you might have hoped. Am I imagining that?

Senese: Do you mean the one at the churches?

Stanger-Ross: The one at the synagogue.

Senese: Um, the attendance there fluctuated. It depended I think to a large degree on who took responsibility or if anybody took responsibility for publicity, for making contact with local civic officials, with church leaders, community leaders to get them to come, with getting something in the newspaper to highlight the event. So some years the synagogue was packed to the rafters, you just couldn't squeeze another person in, and other years it would be just the main floor and there would still be seats available. So yeah it fluctuated but I don't think it was because there was a lack of interest out there. I think it was a lack of our ability -- because there were actually so few people doing any work, that it depended on whether or not anyone stepped up to take responsibility and then how well they did the job.

Stanger-Ross: So were the events at the synagogue mostly Jewish community or not necessarily?

Senese: Mostly Jewish community but there were always people from the larger community there. Not just politicians or civic leaders but there would be -- cause we would send out an email to all the churches telling them that this was the event and they were invited to come. How many people from other communities came would depend on, again, the publicity. The synagogue event was always in an evening and that may or may not have an effect on the number of people coming out. Being November the weather sometimes was awful so particularly older people would not come. The event at the churches was always on a Sunday afternoon. And again, depending on what people were doing. But we had very good attendance at the Emmanuel Baptist and Grace Lutheran are both fairly small churches and they were pretty full at both events. And at both cathedrals we had very large crowds. So they were well attended. I think there were people who wanted to know, wanted to come. Whether they came another time I don't know.

Stanger-Ross: And do you think that could have continued indefinitely the way Kristallnacht had or did it have a lifespan?

[00:27:29]

Senese: I think it could have had a lifespan of its own if it had been possible to get a sustained large enough group of people to work on that project. I think it would have also had a longer life if there had been people from the church communities who had wanted to sustain that, but all of these kinds of groups turn out to be very small in terms of the number of people actively engaged and there are so many things they want to do that there isn't enough time, there aren't enough people to go around and organise it and sustain it and to keep it going because people want to move on to something else. That was one of the biggest problems, I think, that the [organization] [redacted] faced was that there were so many good ideas of things that we should be doing but we needed to be in a city the size of Toronto with a comparable pool of people who had the time and energy to be engaged. But we didn't. And so events tended to be -- one year it would be event after event and wonderful. And then the next year we couldn't do the same thing, it would be just the basic service at the Shul. I think it's a common problem for any organisation.

Stanger-Ross: I don't know whether this will transition to the next topic or whether this fits also within those church events. You said among the organisers of those events there was some

discussion over whether the event should focus just on the Shoah or the murder of Jews or whether there should be other aspects of that history or other histories of genocide. So those were discussions that were happening within the group that you convened, among the folks who were involved in organising those events at the churches?

[00:29:54]

Senese: No because I was the organiser for those. I did ask -- I'm trying to think. I guess it was the service at the Anglican cathedral. One of the people who spoke was a woman, Japanese Canadian, who as a child had been interned. And she spoke about her experiences. That was a little bit of initiative to bring in -- and then when I did my talk I spoke about how --

Stanger-Ross: Do you remember who that was?

Senese: Midge Ayakawa.

Stanger-Ross: It was Mij. I was wondering if it was, okay. Then you were saying "your talk..."

Senese: In my talk I spoke about how the Holocaust is -- the centrality of it is the attempt to eradicate the Jewish community but that as part of that effort there were other groups that were targeted as well. And that even in Canada, beyond what was happening to First Nations, we were targeting groups. So she was going to be representing that. But that was a small part of the whole program.

Stanger-Ross: Did you ever bring First Nations into that discussion, into those events?

Senese: No. One of the very first events we did, really before the [organization] [redacted] as such was formed, took place at Vic High and it was an event that had Holocaust survivors paired with Aboriginal elders. They all spoke to the big assembly about their experiences and then the group was broken down into small study groups and each small group met with an elder and a survivor and talked with them. But there weren't strong connections built to the local Indigenous community which, looking back on it, I think is a shame. And I'm not sure there are links being built now. But that would have been another component certainly to bring in. In the events that we were doing at the same time for the high school, [redacted] gradually we brought more and more through the 90s and into the 2000s, we would bring more and more discussion into that event of the other groups in Europe that were being persecuted and then link it to Canadian examples to try and help students see that these events don't happen in isolation and the ideas that erupt in one place are not unique to that place but there are echoes of it all over the world. And that did create a lot of division. If we can segue to that.

Stanger-Ross: Mhm.

[00:33:34]

Senese: There were those who thought -- and I'm speaking now in the context of the [organization] [redacted] -- there were those who thought that the point of the

[organization] [redacted] was to only discuss the Jewish experience. And that to include anything else was to diminish and, for some people, it became even a question of disrespecting the victims. So there were people who began to drop out [redacted] in the late-90s over that issue.

Stanger-Ross: Which folks were dropping out?

Senese: The people who wanted the focus to be exclusively on the Jewish experience began to drop out because the -- you know, we never took votes on a lot of this stuff, it was discussion. But it seemed that the majority of people wanted to broaden the focus to put the Holocaust into a larger context. So there was that split. Some of that was generational. It tended to be people who were older and particularly survivors who thought that talking about anything else was somehow diminishing the importance of the Holocaust. And they just refused to -- they really didn't even want to discuss it. For them it was a black and white issue. Younger people and particularly those of us who were involved in education tended to look at it more from the perspective of "what is the opportunity here to teach about the Holocaust in this bigger context?" So that became I think a major dividing point. And as always happens in small groups a lot of that is exacerbated by personality conflicts. We dropped -- in the late-90s when we would have a meeting to discuss what are we going to do this year for this event or that event, we might have up to, oh, anywhere between a dozen and twenty people show up. Then it dropped off to eight to ten. And by the early-2000s it was just a handful.

Stanger-Ross: And that conflict was one of the reasons for the reduction in the number of people in the group?

Senese: That was one reason.

Stanger-Ross: And we're talking about the [organization] [redacted]

Senese: Right [redacted].

Stanger-Ross: [redacted]

Senese: That was one, I think it was a major one. But again I think personality conflicts played a big role. Another big factor was burnout or, in some cases, it was just people had been doing it for so long that they just couldn't do it anymore. For others the problem was that as Jews engaged in the community, the Jewish community, there was so much that needed to be done, there were so many other organisations that needed people to work on issues. People who wanted to get involved as local representatives for national organisations. They felt that was important and how do you divide your time up? So that became I think a major factor for a lot of people pulling back and eventually just not doing anything relating to the [organization] [redacted] because they were busy doing something else. It wasn't a case of withdrawing to do nothing. But how many ways can you divide yourself up when there are so many initiatives that need to be addressed and need human energy to do it? So that I think was another major factor.

Stanger-Ross: Did Zionism become an issue within the organisation?

[00:38:26]

Senese: No. Now for some people it might have but I don't recall any discussions about Zionism.

Stanger-Ross: For instance -- I don't know if it still does at the [redacted] events -- but were there discussions about playing or not playing Hatikvah as part of the events?

Senese: No. Hatikvah was usually at Yom HaShoah, at the cemetery. I don't recall it being sung at the synagogue. It might have been.

Stanger-Ross: And not at the high school events.

Senese: But not at the high school, no.

Stanger-Ross: Aha.

Senese: When we started [redacted] they were an all-day event and they were jam-packed with speakers, Holocaust survivors mostly. And for a number of years we had -- there were teachers in the high schools who were doing projects with their students relating to the Holocaust in drama classes. So we would have them participating as well, doing dance, doing drama. So it was a very busy program and as time passed we found that teachers were saying "we just can't take that much time away from class. It's great but our students can't sit that long." So we broke it into two half-day events and that meant your time became very much more limited. So the event tends now -- has for many years -- tended to be focused primarily on the survivor. They usually get about an hour for talking about their experiences and then doing a question and answer session with the students and that leaves a little bit of time for contextual talk which I often did. But because of the time constraint now it's mostly the survivor. And we're still able to get a survivor but the ability to do that is rapidly diminishing. So the program will, of necessity, be changing. Nobody knows quite how but it will.

Stanger-Ross: You talked about a division in the 90s and early-2000s between folks who had -- I want to find the right terms -- but who had a view of Holocaust memorialisation or education that it should focus more exclusively on the Jewish experience. That the leadership essentially, or the majority or the leadership of the [organization] [redacted], opted instead for a focus that was broader in outlook. Was there also conflict in which the leadership [redacted] was situated in the opposite position in a sense? Were there folks who wanted a broader, who wanted to break more with a tradition of focus on the Jewish experience than the leadership [redacted] was comfortable with? In other words, was the position of the leadership [redacted] in the centre of two more, let's say --

Senese: Opposing.

Stanger-Ross: Well more radical -- I don't know how to situate. Was it situated on one side where it advocated a broader approach and mostly was confronting folks who had a view of a more exclusive focus on Judaism or the Jewish experience? Or was it also situated in relation to other kinds of dissent that had other proposals in respect to how remembrance should operate?

[00:43:14]

Senese: No, I think the divisions were primarily exclusive focus on the Holocaust or broaden it to a larger context. The only differences were how would we do that? How would we broaden the context without diminishing the importance of the Holocaust? And it was mainly a question of who could we include, how would we do it? So for example, we would light memorial candles, six memorial candles representing the six million. Well let's light another candle for all the others. That would be one way of doing it. And then let's light a candle of hope for -- well, then should we have a candle for those who rescued Jews? So it was that kind of discussion. I don't think that ever reached the level that I would call dispute. But it was groping for how can we broaden it but not diminish the Holocaust as a Jewish experience. Who could we get as speakers? What should we highlight? Who should we highlight? And eventually I think we mostly did it through one of the contextual talks that was given as an event. That while the Nazis had this program to eradicate the Jews, the Jews were at the head of a list, a long list. So I would talk, for example, in my historical background about how when the Nazis come to power who do they go after first? They don't go after the Jews. They go after the socialists, the communists, the trade unionists, the intellectuals. People who could organise against them, people who could understand the implications. So you start eliminating who could organise against you and you start passing laws to isolate the Jews, to normalise exclusion. And how this is an event that takes place over time, it's not just one big explosion. So we kind of approached it in that way of "let's bring in the other groups by talking about the Holocaust in a larger context but keeping the focus on the Jewish community." It wasn't a satisfactory way of doing it but in the context of the [event] [redacted] where there is a time constraint that was one way we could do it. We talked about how at public events we could have speakers representing other communities, but as our human resources diminished our abilities to do these kinds of events diminished as well. So it never flowered the way it could have. It still can if there are people who are willing to take it on. But that's always the fundamental problem. There was another kind of dispute that -- really two kinds of disputes -- that occasionally intruded into the [organization] [redacted] but tended to happen more in the context of the synagogue. And that was a conflict between survivors as to who was a real survivor. People who had been in the camps -- there were some who had been in the camps who insisted that you were a survivor only if you had been in the camps. And this caused great offense and anger among those who had survived the attack on their village and then fled, many of them in Poland fleeing to Russia and surviving the war there. Sometimes in brutal conditions and persecution, sometimes joining partisan forces. So that was a real dispute and it affected the [organization] [redacted] only in a sense of "if you're going to ask so-and-so to light a candle I'm going to be offended or I'm going to be angry cause he's not really a survivor." Or "if you're going to let him light a candle because he's always rejecting me as a survivor." So it was that kind of thing. And then there was a dispute -- again it was more in the context of the synagogue but it affected the [organization] [redacted] too in a number of ways -- and that was a number of individuals, again it was a small number of individuals but very vocal individuals, who rejected the notion that non-Jews could talk about the Holocaust, that they had no business

talking about the Holocaust, that they had no experience talking about the Holocaust, and that they had no place in any kind of commemoration event or in the [organization] [redacted]. And most of us in the [organization] [redacted] who when we encountered these individuals just shrugged and "yeah, fine, I'm carrying on," but one of these individuals made a point of attacking one of our UVic colleagues who was speaking about the Holocaust at a public event. She's not Jewish. But he went out of his way to denounce her in this public forum. [redacted]. So those were little ripples that affected us in some small way but they were certainly important in the Jewish community. And that led to various splits, people leaving the Shul, joining other congregations.

Stanger-Ross: Did you ever take that to heart, that criticism?

[00:50:42]

Senese: No. Because the funny thing was one of these individuals in particular, I think he for some reason either didn't know I wasn't Jewish and just assumed that I was, or there was some other reason, but he was always seeking me out trying to suggest ways in which we could improve our program for this and that. I would always listen to him and then forget about it. But he never attacked me personally. But I heard a lot of his criticism of the notion in general that non-Jews had no place in -- I never had the sense that many others in the community beyond a small handful thought that way. I know from participating for years in the Kristallnacht event at the Shul and then at Yom HaShoah, I always had people who I didn't know personally but I knew they were part of the congregation, would come up to me afterwards and thank me for participating. So I didn't think that many people objected, but there were a few.

Stanger-Ross: I'm partly curious because I'm somewhat in this position in my own project that I do on Japanese Canadians, right. Do you think that your perspective or contribution as someone who wasn't from that identity group or that community, do you think you made a particular kind of contribution or you approached it in a particular kind of way that reflected that?

Senese: Hmm, that's a good question. Probably I did without really thinking about it a lot. Maybe I had thought about it and just it was so sharp in my mind. I guess it went back to that childhood question about how could this have happened? Who's doing this to these people? Looking at those pictures. My approach tended to be more from, I guess, the outside looking in. What was being done, why was it being done, who was doing it? But always from this larger context so that one of the questions that had been with me again since a very young age was the question of complicity. And so, when I talk about the Holocaust, it's not just what are the Germans doing but what is everybody doing? Why is Antisemitism such a profound part of western history? That this could happen in Germany, you know this modern sophisticated country, and all these other countries all over the world do nothing. Be bystanders. And so it was that perspective I think that basically shaped my approach in my talks, in my teaching, rather than I'm going to give you the Jewish experience, because I can't. I guess the only way I could -- the closest I could come to the Jewish experience is being able to say that I can compare the experience of being a woman to the experience of being Jewish or Black or Indigenous or whatever, because the way in which women have been treated historically, I can feel that. I've

experienced it, I know that. And in that sense I can have the slightest bit of feeling for what someone else has experienced although their experiences would have been far worse than mine. But only in that sense could I think -- and I don't really know anybody who would be talking about the Holocaust who was non-Jewish who would try to make it as though they had experienced it, as though they had really felt it and understood it. I think you can at an intellectual level but not at an emotional level. Only by some kind of rough comparison.

Stanger-Ross: I'm thinking about how you described both your parents as having described experiencing discrimination as eastern European --

Senese: Children of immigrants.

Stanger-Ross: Children of immigrants, yeah. I would have thought that maybe that would be another source.

Senese: I suppose it was. My mother had the experience of leaving home in East Selkirk -- I guess she would have been about 17. Going to Winnipeg to get work. They all had to leave school early because somebody had to be earning money. She went to Winnipeg and went to an employment agency, saw a job that she thought she could do, applied for it with her Ukrainian name. Which was Pitlowany. And she was told no, the job was filled. She went back the next day, the job still advertised. So at that point she changed her name as had her two older brothers, to Pitt. P-I-T-T. How much more English can you get? She got the job. So that was a story that we were told as kids over and over again, of, you know, this is what it was like. So that was I think a contributing factor to me and my brother in terms of how we saw other people. My father's approach to these kinds of questions was secrecy. You don't talk about where you're from, you don't talk about your ancestry, you don't talk about your origins. We lost as a result our ancestral languages because they were never spoken at home. And because my father was in the air force and we moved around so much, we lost a lot of the cultural. We were basically left with food. So yeah, that all played a part. But I think probably my mother was the biggest influence in terms of the way she was very open-minded about everything in the world. For her everything was a source of curiosity and interest. And if you want to know something, go find it out. If you want to do something go do it. If you want to experience something different, sure, go visit the mosque, go visit the synagogue. Don't just sit there. So yeah, she had I think a very profound influence. And that all came together and I think drove the kinds of questions that I was always asking in my teaching and my own research.

Stanger-Ross: I want to pause for one second --

--END OF PART ONE--

Phyllis Senese Interview 5.11.2019 (Part 2) – Defying Hatred Project

Stanger-Ross: Okay, so we've turned the recorder back on so I guess this is now the third taping in the interviews of the Defying Hatred Project of Phyllis Senese, by Jordan Stanger-Ross. I don't know if I said the date last time. What are we on here? November 5th 2019.

Senese: Yes.

Stanger-Ross: At her home in Saanich. So. We were just talking about whether or not to conclude this topic and we've decided that we will. One of my curiosities in entering this project was the current split within Holocaust memorialisation and educational activities in Victoria. Can you describe the split? First of all, maybe its origins and then what you think its causes and dimensions have been.

Senese: I think the best way to understand it is in the context of the question of leadership of the [organization] [redacted]. When we started out in the early-90s there really was very little in the way of formal structure. It was basically initiated and driven by Peter Gary, a Holocaust survivor, who had been speaking at schools but wanted something larger to be happening and this was his way of trying to create something bigger that would involve more than one school at a time. The emphasis was on education. When it became clear that something was being created there was a discussion about the need to create a Society in a very formal legal sense and that required the writing of a constitution. So a constitution was written with a four person executive and some objectives and all the usual things that you need in a formal society and it was registered with the province and with the federal government as a charitable organisation, which made it possible for the [organization] [redacted] to do fundraising and issue tax receipts. But through most of the 90s the organisation was run very informally and initially very collaboratively. We're talking about half a dozen people who would meet to sit around a table and discuss "how are we going to do this?" We're going to have this event for high school students, when is it going to be, where, how, etc. And we'd just sit and thrash it out. And then each person would go away and do some piece of work to make it all happen. It became very difficult I think because people had so many different kinds of commitments that they wanted to be involved in, it was always difficult to get a large stable group together to essentially run the [organization] [redacted] and what began to happen by the mid- to late-90s was the emergence of an individual who would say "ok I'm willing to be president." But then that individual would take over everything. "Oh, I'll take care of this, I'll take care of that, leave that to me." And it became a one-man show. In the one instance that this particular president moved, so someone else stepped forward and said "oh I'll take it on" and very quickly took over every aspect which made it easier for everybody else. One of the problems was that in that particular case, that was a very busy individual who began to fail to get things done. Sometimes important things like filing annual reports with the federal government. Completing the annual reports to the BC societies regulator. It became a kind of one-man show which was, I think, very dangerous for the [organization] [redacted] and I think it probably contributed to people staying away. Why join when someone else has got it all under control and doesn't want to delegate? So we arrive about 2005/2006 with the [organization] [redacted] essentially falling apart and only four or five people left who are willing to keep it going. And at that point the individual who had been the one-man show dropped the [organization] [redacted] for other commitments. That all meant that over time

the activities of the [organization] [redacted] were shrinking to basically the annual [event] [redacted] for students and the Kristallnacht commemoration at the Shul and Yom HaShoah at the synagogue.[1] The Shul had a basic program that Victor Reinstein had initiated and it became kind of a template that after a few experiments we went back to. Just this is the easiest way to do it. And the whole point was to have something that was simple, focused, and captured the need to commemorate the terrible event.

[00:06:29]

Senese: At the Yom HaShoah commemoration our one-man band leader had found a Yom HaShoah commemoration put together by some American Rabbis, it was a collection of readings from memoirs of survivors. So we began to use that and even after he left we kept using that as a template. And it made for a very long event and because it's in the open, because you have a sound system that's not necessarily very effective, I think people began to find it boring. So there was more discussion about "how can we change this, what can we do to make it different?" Well with four or five people doing everything it became very difficult if not impossible to rewrite the script. And I think that was what precipitated the last big dispute in the [organization] [redacted] which was over how Kristallnacht and Yom HaShoah were to be commemorated. A group of people had formed from the synagogue who approached us and said they wanted to help with organising Kristallnacht and making the event less rigidly bound by the old program. And we welcomed that and thought this would be great, you know, at last people are stepping forward, we need the help. The plea had been put out every year, "we need people, please come and join." Nothing much ever materialised. So when this group stepped forward there were about six or eight people initially, they were very much welcomed and we worked together to formulate a new series of things to do at the Kristallnacht service. Some of the ideas were theirs, some of the ideas were from people in [redacted] group, and it went very well. [redacted]

Stanger-Ross: That direction preserving its basic functions or going --

[00:10:31]

Senese: Well preserving its function of commemorating Kristallnacht and Yom HaShoah but throwing out the [rest] [redacted]. Within that group it seemed to me that there was a clear division between the man who was emerging as the leader and the others who were less interested in sort of the institutional side of things and really were just interested in commemoration and how to build something more meaningful. So even that group was divided. Events came to a head and in the last kind of acrimonious discussion with the leader of that

[1] Clarification: the Yom HaShoah commemoration took place at the cemetery.

group, those of us who were left in the [organization] [redacted] basically pulled out our constitution which said our first priority was education and at that point we said "if you want to do commemoration and not education, go do commemoration. But this [organization] [redacted] is about education." And that was what split that particular group away from the [organization] [redacted] and they took over the commemorative events at both the synagogue and the cemetery. And that's where things stand now. Some of that was driven by personality conflicts. But I really felt there was an undercurrent of something else going on in terms of taking over [redacted] for maybe the same mission but going in a different direction with it. Trying to recreate something that had occurred in another city with a bigger platform. After this split occurred I went to the next events at the synagogue and at the cemetery and felt very unwelcome and frozen out by members of that group. As the fight had become more acrimonious, other people had jumped into the fight who had not been involved at the beginning, so there were more people jumping in taking sides which kind of ratcheted up the animosity level. I felt that was at play when I went to the two events subsequently.

Stanger-Ross: Were the events different?

[00:13:43]

Senese: It differed perhaps in detail but not in spirit. But it had been a question of control, who's going to control this event. It was never said but the reality was there for all to see that by the time this developed most of the people involved -- most of the handful of people who were still involved [redacted] were non-Jews. Nothing was ever said but one's left to wonder if it was part of that old debate about whether Jews and non-Jews can approach the Holocaust together. I don't know. By that point I was so tired of the acrimony that in the end it didn't matter, a break needed to be made.

Stanger-Ross: I guess I've already asked a question going in this direction, but we were saying while we were on pause that these kinds of organisational or leadership matters deserve at least potential consideration. But I'm still searching -- and maybe it's just not there -- for any kind of difference in substance in how they envisioned that the Holocaust should be memorialised. You've just suggested one that might lurk beneath the surface, but in those discussions were there explicit divisions about the ceremonies themselves or about the educational content itself? Was there some difference that hinged more on how history was actually being told or explained in these events?

[00:16:03]

Senese: No, no. I don't think there were ever real issues of substance, it was who's going to control it. And whose vision of how it should be done is going to be the dominant one and that's where I think the personalities came in. Strong personalities on both sides. But particularly from the group that had approached the [organization] [redacted] wanting to change things. I think that was really the only substantive issue was who's going to control it, not a basic difference on whether the Holocaust should be central or part of a larger context. That never really entered into the debate. Because the commemorations, both at the Shul and at the cemetery, frequently mention in one way or another that the Jews were not the only victims. Their story is the central

story but it's part of a larger picture. That almost always gets mentioned. So it's not a question of substance, it's a question of who gets to make the decisions, who gets to spend the money. One of the biggest problems that affected the [organization] [redacted] I think was the ability of individuals in the leadership in the 90s to be able to secure federal and provincial funding through multiculturalism programs. So there were times when [the organization] [redacted] was awash in money and how do we spend it? We don't have enough people to organise the kinds of events that we could do with this kind of funding. And then that kind of funding dried up and we have never had a consistent fundraising model to follow to support the [organization] [redacted], so [it] [redacted] still runs basically on the money that was leftover from the heady days of government grants and the [rest] [redacted] basically pays for itself. So the [organization] [redacted] has very little left in way of funding but enough to keep going with the [event] [redacted]. So there's -- I think one of the -- you're right, the problem of understanding the history of any organisation is getting behind the scenes but once you get behind the scenes you're dealing with individuals, personalities, and really petty conflicts over small potatoes. Losing sight of the big picture. But I think that's human nature and every group is going to have it happen. Whether it's a volunteer organisation like this or any of the others or even a religious congregation. The same thing's going to happen there and the same kind of personality conflicts and pettiness will drive division.

[00:20:09]

Stanger-Ross: Ok, so now I think we are at the anything else we should touch on.

Senese: Well I did want to talk about memorialisation and commemoration. That I think was also an issue that... -- I think one of the problems is that memorialisation fits very well into the context of Europe and the building, the creating of memorials and local awareness of this has really jumped since the eyewitness program began at UVic where the students go to Europe for three weeks and see the memorials and talk about memorialisation. Here it's more difficult because what do we memorialise? What monument do we create? I was thinking about it earlier this morning, there is a memorial in the Jewish cemetery to the Holocaust and yet it's never the focus of any event. It's peripheral to the Yom HaShoah event. It usually is brought in only at the very end when people are invited to lay flowers or place stones on the memorial. But I know of no other event or no other time that it ever becomes a focus. It's in need of repair and refurbishment. So the one memorial in town is not getting the attention it deserves. And yet there is I think now more and more discussion of a feeling that we've got to create a memorial, we've got to memorialise it somehow. I think what we need to focus on in Victoria is commemoration. Constantly reminding the entire community that something terrible happened and yes it's getting farther and farther away in the past but if we don't remember we pay a terrible price. So I think in Victoria that needs to be the focus is commemoration. Within the Jewish community, within the larger community, together, separately, it can happen in a whole variety of ways. But I'd also like to see commemoration occur across group lines, where groups come together to commemorate each other's tragedies and I think we're seeing the beginnings of that. Things like the drive to recreate the Japanese tea garden bring the whole community into something like that. That's important. When we talk about commemoration it's going to create -- maybe not so much in the future, but in the past it has created the conflict between those who want to direct the events in a certain way and insist that the only authentic way to do it is with survivors. We've lost almost

every survivor now. There are those who have insisted in the past and are still insisting that only Jews can commemorate it properly, authentically. Only they have the right to do it. I don't believe that and I believe actually that that point of view is a denigration of the Holocaust. I think the whole community needs to take responsibility and commemorate it. How you do that is of course always the difficult question. I think some of these disputes might diminish in time because it was an older generation that was more concerned with questions of authenticity, "who's a real survivor, who isn't?" The division they want to create between Jews and non-Jews, I think that's passing but there will be other issues. Something else will crop up because it's human nature.

Stanger-Ross: Do you think those issues fade with urgency and attention to it? That is to say that as those questions fade in part due to distance from the event, just the event itself will lose salience.

[00:25:23]

Senese: It might. That's always the danger and you can certainly detect that in many places around the world now. I wouldn't call it Holocaust fatigue, I'd say it's more indifference. You know, "that's old news, what about some more recent catastrophe? We should focus our attention there." I think we have to focus our attention on all of it but then you're back into the question of how and that's where disputes will come. But I think that is a danger and it's certainly a question that's been preoccupying the [organization] [redacted] in the last few years. How are we going to do the [event] [redacted], how can we have a comparable impact on students without a survivor? Because that really, with the students, that has been the most powerful part, is actually having a chance to have someone standing there in front of you who looks like your grandparents -- more likely your great-grandparents now or your great-great-grandparents -- talking about what it was like to be a six year-old hidden in a basement. Hearing the Nazi boots overhead and peeing your pants. And having to stay there for hours until it was safe to come out. It's only when someone who experienced that tells that that it grips a student in a way that me telling them that story wouldn't. Invariably after the event officially winds down, the speaker, the Holocaust survivor speaker is swamped by students wanting to shake their hand. Not to ask them more questions but just to touch them. And we always tell them that as of today you are a witness now. You have a responsibility to talk about what you heard, what you saw, to remember this person. The program for the [event] [redacted] has on the back a picture and a story about a child of the Holocaust and whether or not they survived. You know, take that home with you, you're a witness to that child's story. This could have been you in another time and place. Can we keep that up when there is no survivor? I don't know. Putting on -- I mean there's enough video available and filmed interviews with survivors but it's not the same thing. So you'll have to redo the project in ten years and -- or at least that part of it.

Stanger-Ross: Yeah. Anything else?

Senese: Not that I can think of.

Stanger-Ross: Ok well thanks so much, it's been really interesting, wide-ranging set of three recordings I guess, one interview. So thank you.

Senese: Thank you. I'm glad to participate.

--END OF INTERVIEW--