

Micha Menczer Interview 3.7.2019 – Defying Hatred Project

Stanger-Ross: I start all the interviews by saying who we are and where we are in case this gets separated from our form. How do I pronounce your first name?

Menczer: {*phonetically*} Mee-sha

Stanger-Ross: And your last name?

Menczer: Men-sur.

Stanger-Ross: Micha Menczer and Jordan Stanger-Ross and we're at 737 Transit Rd in Victoria, Micha's home, for an interview for the Defying Hatred project on July 3rd 2019. Thank you.

Menczer: Ok.

Stanger-Ross: This will be a conversation that will follow your direction, and we'll talk about three main topics. Usually start with biographical discussion, just where you come from, how you ended up working in the area of Holocaust memorialisation or education. The second is talking about some of those details of the activities that have occurred in Victoria. Our third topic is on the level of ideas, what you think Holocaust education is for and how it should be conducted to achieve those aims. If we start, how did you end up in the business?

Menczer: Ok, you let me know if this is too much or too little and time and all that. So I'm a child of survivors which is probably the main reason. My parents were both from the province of Bukovina. They were born and it was part of Austria and after the first world war it became Romania. They lived there, they were both from around Czernowitz. My father was from a small town called Strogenitz where his family had been for a long time, and were well respected and I think a reasonably well to do family with some property on the main street. I know my grandfather after whom I'm named had a dried goods store. I think they were quite wealthy in my great-grandfather's time and when it go all divided up, my grandfather after whom I'm named, was not very aggressive, didn't care -- but they lived well and my mother's family was from another little shtetl around Czernowitz called Suceava and they were -- my grandfather was a rental farmer, a poor farmer and had a large family but they really valued education. My uncles became engineers and one graduated from medical school and one was a professor, and my mother even graduated from business school. So I don't know how they did it but that's what they did. They were all there in the war. My paternal grandfather and grandmother both passed away beforehand. My parents were married in 1935. In the winter of I think 40, 41, they were deported to Bershad in the Ukraine.

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Menczer: I'll go back. My mother had a very good job. She was the executive secretary for basically a baron's family with large landholdings. So she had really quite an exceptional job for

a woman and a Jewish woman in that era. And my father had a very good -- cause he ran the store, my father -- any political acumen or interest I get I get from my father. He was an active writer, I think he was an active Zionist. The store was just his day job to allow his writing and his other interests. They had a very good life and they probably could have avoided deportation because of my mother's employers connections. They were still well respected. But when this was offered to her -- as my mother has told me the story -- she said "well, what about my family? my father-in-law? my brother and his family?" And they said "we can only protect a few people, it's very dangerous and we don't even know how many." So she said "well, it's either all of us or we go together." So they were deported to Bershad, my parents, my aunt and uncle, and their teenage daughter. And my grandfather, I think my maternal grandmother had died before the war. Perhaps other relatives, but those are the central ones that I know. My father's best friend is the other name that always comes up in the story.

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Menczer: They were transported by foot, by railcar, and my mother basically said "I work here, they're talking us to a work camp, I'll work there." I think my uncle who is a history professor had a different kind of sense and he essentially I think gave up. So there by railcar and by foot, and it was winter, it was pretty harsh, and he died en route or very soon after. He basically gave up and succumbed. And the first winter was very very harsh, as my mother's explained it to me, and a lot of people died from malnutrition and the elements. They were taken to a ghetto in Bershad and they were all crammed into a ghetto that probably could have housed -- I don't know the number's really -- but probably could have housed 1,000 people. But there were 10 and 20 times as many people. So there was rampant cholera and typhoid in the first winter, and malnutrition. It wasn't an extermination camp in the terms of the better-known Auschwitz and the other camps, but people were -- you know -- if there was any disturbance people were taken out and actually killed. My father's best friend was the head of -- I think it was called Judenrat or a local council -- my father was on it trying to manage stuff and his best friend was the head and I guess they were pushing a little too much. I remember the story my mother told me was that one time they came looking for Michael Shrentzel was his name -- name's are important -- and they said "if you don't tell us where he is we'll start shooting children. We'll start shooting people and children. So he turned himself in and he was taken away and never seen again, so I presume he was killed. They were in the camp I believe three and a half years. It's so fundamental but I'm not really sure of the liberation dates. But I think about three, three and a half years for sure. They survived a lot on my mother's strength. My father was a very intelligent man, a very good man, a very kind man. My mother was a pragmatist, so she was basically the person who helped the family survive. She would go to -- two of my uncles were not deported, they were in the big city of Bucharest and no one had denounced them. Quite an interesting story, one of my uncle's lived next door to a church, to a priest, and the night when the Ukrainian Iron Guard came and said "are there any Jews in the neighbourhood?" the priest looked them straight in the eye and said "there are no Jews here." So my uncle survived and he managed to find someone who was travelling, it was part of their work, and probably paid them something, but you can't measure this in money. You're risking your life, and he brought some food and smuggled it to the wires as my mother called it. And my mother was the one who went out at night and risked her life and once in a while got some food. And so they survived. My uncle died en route and my grandfather died the first winter and Shrentsil died and I'm sure other cousins that were more distant.

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Menczer: After the war they made their way back slowly to Bucharest. My father survived and they hid him a lot. He was more sick, he got sick. But he survived, and they hid him a lot because as the war was being lost and the Ukrainian guards ran away, they also left while the war was still on because the Russians were advancing. And if my father had been there they would have taken my father into the army to fight. So they left and they over a couple of months straggled their way back and ended up in Bucharest with other members of the family from other parts of Romania who were deported to a camp called Mogilev. My mother's brother and her nephew and niece -- two brothers, and four nephews and nieces. They all ended up back in Bucharest. This wonderful picture of all of the brothers who weren't deported, the three brothers who weren't deported, and then my mother and father and aunts and uncles. Two aunts and uncles and another brother and that's a nice picture on the steps in Bucharest about 1947. Then everybody dispersed. Two of my uncles went to Israel and two of my uncles went to South America. My parents came to Canada where her two brothers had come in the 20s, so they sponsored them. They waited a year in Paris and en route to Paris, as an interesting little side story, the boat stopped in Israel. They went I guess through the sea and into Marseille and then went up to Paris. When they went into Haifa my father's nephew and niece who were already in Israel and his brother and sister who were early Zionists all came to see him on a boat. My father wanted to jump ship and my mother said "it's 1948, we've just come from war." War was on the horizon so they didn't stay in Israel and they ended up coming to Canada. They came to Canada in January 1949 and I was born in November 50.

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Menczer: I was I think somewhat of a miracle baby. My mother was 43 years old. She went to the doctor because she felt she had the flu and was feeling sick and was throwing up. The doctor said "well, you know, maybe...Have you had your period recently? Have you had your cycle?" She said "no, I really can't, I'm malnourished and probably early menopause as well." Let's see anyhow. And here I am the kind of porcelain child that was born at that time. So that's a bit of the -- if there's more detail you need I can tell you -- but that's a bit of the overview of how they ended up in Canada.

Stanger-Ross: Did you have siblings?

Menczer: Nope, I was an only child. My mother went to work two weeks later. My uncles had a -- as was classic in the 50s -- a family clothing store and my mother was skilled and went to work as a bookkeeper, sales, everything-kind-of-person. And my father also had a second store and he went to work a little later also managing. They opened a second store in Ottawa. So that's where we were, this fairly tight-knit family. It's an interesting -- I know your audio can't see the picture, but it maybe tells you all you need to know about my father. There's my favourite picture of him, probably taken in the mid-1950s when we went up to Ste. Agathe which was outside Montreal which was a resort area. It's a picture of my father standing next to a sign that says "Christian clientele only." That was my father, after what he survived and come to this great country -- this was the sign and I think he was making a statement there. So that's a favourite picture I keep.

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Menczer: There's a lot of sadness in that because when I was about five, my father got sick and he was diagnosed with a brain tumor. They did surgery -- I think I was about five years old at the time -- and surgery at that time was like chainsaw stuff. He had a Dr Wilder Penfield who was probably the godfather of surgery. So they did that surgery and that was obviously a major blow to our family and he got better and he recovered but after about three years later the tumor came back. It was aggressive and he died just after I was nine years of age. I didn't know much about that because at that time you sort of kept kids away. So it was kind of one more tragedy and difficulty that my mother had to bear. So I was basically raised by my mother from nine. My mother lived till -- she died in 1982 when she was 75. But she got, you know -- I'd finished law school by then and actually had just a couple of years of practice under my belt so it gave her some satisfaction to see that. But it's quite sad. That's how life goes and she was an amazing woman and she would have loved my life here, she would have loved my life there and she just didn't work out that way. And you can't...that's just how it was.

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Menczer: Mostly what I know about that period in my parents' lives came somewhat from my mother. She didn't sort of hide it. But it wasn't an omnipresent -- at least consciously. I think certainly subconsciously and operating under the surface there was a pretty big message of basically, you know, don't fuck up. I've got enough on my plate having gone through this and now I'm a widow. Just be a good boy, and that was at a minimum an unconscious message that I picked up. Be good in school, don't get arrested. All down the line. Which I mostly did. That aside, I'm not minimising it, that's a piece, but it wasn't -- I've got friends and I've spoken to them, that are children of survivors where there's this sort of heavy weight in the household. You knew Giddy and Giddy and I became quite close friends in a short time. We were only friends, close friends, for about a year and a half before he passed away. He would tell me about his experience and it was this sort of constant black cloud over the table, from his father. Shattered by it. That wasn't my experience. My mother did absolutely her best and at the same time she didn't shy away from talking about it at an appropriate time, whether we were watching something on television or whether there was something that came up, she would tell me something. She would tell me the story. So I thought that part was certainly a healthy way in which she didn't bury it, and yet she didn't bury me with it. The other elements, I think it was -- I don't know, I'm not a psychologist -- but I think it was as much or more than the fact that my father died. You know, just when you're starting to get -- here was this miracle of life after what they'd gone through and then just when -- it takes several years to get... -- just when they were getting their feet on the ground and adjusting to this boom, you know, this incredible tragedy hits. So I, you know, admire and love her and feel sad about that. So some of the information I have is from her.

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Menczer: The other great source is, I told you, my mother's niece was deported with them as well. Her father died early on in the process and her mother kind of went into more of a shock. She was a young woman and she had this teenager. Her husband was a bit older and, yeah, it was

just her own emotional makeup. So my mother basically cared for -- Nelly was my cousin. And they all survived together as a teenager. And then Nelly went with her mother to Australia where an uncle sponsored them and she met an American medical student and ultimately married him and moved to Cincinnati and had a family. We're very close with Nelly. And her mother came later and actually lived with us in Ottawa for a couple of years, waiting for her American papers. But we always stayed very close.

phone buzzes

Stanger-Ross: Sorry, I have to check this just in case Ilana gets called to a birth. But that is not that.

Menczer: So, Nelly was very close with my mother and very close with me. She lived until...10, 15 years ago. We were very very close and she came to visit a lot. And even after my mother passed away we stayed really close. And she told me a lot of these stories and stories from before the war about what a rich life it was. She was a young teenager, about 13 or 14 or so. It was so great to go to her cool aunt and uncle and hangout and then with her friends. I actually have some taped interviews with Nelly that I did in Chicago that I just found. So that's kind of a bit of the background and the source of information I had. My father did some writing. He wrote some short, like, vignettes in Yiddish and translated them and got help translating others. Those are really interesting and I've used those in some of the commemorations that I'll tell you about.

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Stanger-Ross: A couple of the people I've talked to are children of survivors also. Although in some senses it doesn't directly -- well, I think it does relate to what I'm doing. I've sought to understand how that awareness was experienced. You've given a sense broadly of that, but I guess I try to get my head around it. There's a sense of your family's history and then a sense of this world event that comes into view -- "oh, okay I'm connected with this major historical tragedy." Do you recall what it was like as a kid, what your consciousness was?

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Menczer: Yeah, I think I had some consciousness of it certainly 'cause it wasn't hidden. I've had friends where they didn't even know, their parents wouldn't even say anything. Some didn't even know or acknowledge they were Jewish, it was so deep the trauma. That wasn't my experience and at the same time I wasn't immersed in it and living in it. I don't even know if my parents were at Yom HaShoah commemorations, you know. That's not part of my awareness. I think my parents were overwhelmed with sort of the new life. My father did some writing I think still. So my kind of consciousness was, yes, this happened. But it happened and it's done. It happened and it was terrible and it happened and nothing more. I didn't have a great connection to it until I was -- probably almost in my later 20s. I went to Israel for the first time when I was 22 and met -- most of my father's family is in Israel. So I hadn't met any of them really other than one distant cousin from my Bar Mitzvah in the States who came. But I hadn't met any of them and they're all in Israel and I went there and I met his brother and his sister and my first cousins who were all a generation older than me because my parents were old when I was born. My second cousins are

my contemporaries and -- wow, you know -- this was me and who I am. I went to the Holocaust museum -- I can't remember the name at the moment, my brain...So there was a greater consciousness there and really I started to get, I think, more connected. I had a friend in Ottawa, a friend called Bernie Farber who actually became very involved with Congress and this in Toronto and a very big advocate and this became his life. He was a social worker. We became friends and we hungout a bit and one time he said "why don't you come to this meeting? We get together as children of survivors." "I don't know, that's not really my thing," you know. I don't know if I said it, "I don't need the therapy." He said, "no it's not like that, we just kind of get together and come, you know." He was my buddy and we used to hangout and do crazy stuff so I thought "I'll go and I'll try this potluck dinner." I went and I think that was a big change for me because all of a sudden I went and we each introduced ourselves and a bit about our background. All of a sudden -- wow -- I was among these people who understood.

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Menczer: I didn't have to explain, you know. They really understood when I -- they understood. They were like me. They were, you know, different of course and most of them had much more stable, parents were younger, they came, parents were still alive, probably better off financially, all those things. But it didn't matter. They got it. That I think was a trigger for me and that must have been in the late 70s, early 80s probably. Maybe early 80s. So it became -- we'd regularly get together. I became a little more active in the Yom HaShoah commemoration there.

Stanger-Ross: This is in Ottawa?

Menczer: In Ottawa. I remember reading one of my father's stories at the Holocaust commemoration and printing it in the Jewish bulletin. The equivalent of -- well, they don't have them here but the one in Vancouver, the Jewish Review. I remember my father printed one of his stories, the Seder, in the loam hut of a Seder they had when they were straggling back from the camp in the Ottawa Citizen, about 1957. I have a copy of that. So my father was active during that time, but it didn't connect as a young child. In the early 80s, that was a trigger. I remember going with Bernie and a couple of other friends -- two other friends -- to New York, there was a big conference of Holocaust commemoration second generation. It was the first time I'd gone to anything like that. It was wonderful, it was overwhelming. It was amazing. We marched on the Paraguayan embassy. They were harbouring a war criminal, you know. It was such an eye-opener. So I think those were the times where it really came into my conscious, my late 20s and 30s. I maybe had a little more growing up and a little more -- but that's when it really started and it never really changed from that.

Stanger-Ross: This wouldn't have been a topic you encountered in school in Ottawa.

Menczer: Nope, no. I have no sort of memory of it ever being mentioned in school. Even in high school. I liked history, I was a history major when I went to university. Obviously I knew there was a war, obviously I knew there was a Holocaust, but it was one line. I have no recollection at all, I have no recollection of being bullied or attacked for this. I do have a recollection of when I was young, my parents spoke Yiddish in the house and spoke with accents and took a while to get English. I remember crossing the border once and saying "well, I'm Canadian and they're

born somewhere else." Being very -- ashamed's not the word, that's wrong. I had no shame about it. But just, this was very different, and this was new. But I don't remember anything of that. Any real negative thing. It's more that what I do remember is when he died all of a sudden I was different than everybody, you know. I didn't have a father and all those things. That's what I remember but I don't remember anything that really sticks in my mind that was either negative or a positive.

Stanger-Ross: Were you part of a Jewish community in Ottawa?

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Menczer: Yup, we were part. We belonged to a synagogue, an Orthodox synagogue, the main one. My father liked to go when he was sort of convalescing, he liked to go during daily services and so. They had a Mincha and Maariv, and between Mincha and Maariv, it was classic, they stayed there and did a little bit of study and they had an associate Rabbi and my father liked that because I think he was quite intellectual. I used to go with him and that's quite a fond memory, going with him and sitting there and hearing them arguing in Yiddish. So I still speak some Yiddish 'cause I learned it. We were associated with that but we weren't terribly connected cause it really was sort of, you know -- I was going to say classic 1950s but it still exists in some Synagogues where there's a real hierarchy based on money and all of those things. My parents didn't sort of buy into that at all. My father liked to go during weekdays and I don't remember weekends. So we were connected to the Jewish community and we were part -- my parents are buried in the Jewish cemetery in Ottawa. I had my Bar Mitzvah there. So we were connected but we were sitting in the very back rows *laughs* of this very big synagogue and the Rabbi was, you know, he wasn't a Rabbi for all the people, let's say. He did his job and he was there and he did it. But there was no sort of emotional connection and I wasn't particularly fond of him.

Stanger-Ross: Was the Holocaust a topic at the synagogue or Hebrew school?

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Menczer: To be honest, I don't remember. I mean it must have been, something around Yom HaShoah. I went to Cheder, I didn't go to day school, I went to afterschool Cheder and had a wonderful teacher called Jacob Gordon who was legendary and he trained me for my Bar Mitzvah but I don't -- there must have been something but I honestly don't remember. Obviously it didn't leave a big impression. In my secular school, same thing. I have no -- it's interesting that you ask, that I have no recollection of anything. From either one, which is quite astounding when I look back sort of fifty, sixty years ago. But, I mean, isn't that a bit of a paradox? It was so close in time to the war yet there was...I don't remember anything. So there was so little education, so little memorialisation when it was so close. And now as it's getting -- I don't think it's just my consciousness. I'd be interested in that aspect of other research that you see. I don't know if it's just my consciousness but I'm a sample, you know, and I was engaged in school, I did well in school, so it wasn't as if I was kind of a slacker. I couldn't have been stoned at that time at the back of my high school class. I was engaged, I was active, I was successful at school, so I was aware of what was going on and nothing sticks at all. One thing I'll tell you though about how my mother raised me, and even when my father was alive. As I said we weren't well off, we

weren't homeless or anything, but we were poor and I never lacked for anything materially at all, so it's a tribute to them. We had an apartment and there was an extra room in the apartment so we lived near the university so right from a young age, from as long as I could remember, there were roomers, we had someone renting a room there. And right from the beginning -- I remember this, you asked me what I remember about memorialisation: nothing. But I remember this: we had when my father was alive, an old lady who was a Quaker. We had a Gypsy who was living there -- "gypsy"...a Roma, known as Gypsy at the time. We had students. A student that I remember. And then after my father died we continued this because we needed money as well. We had right off the boat an east Indian student from Gujurat living there and we had a German fellow living there for a while. And on and on and on. Probably the most difficult roomer there was there was this rich kid from Montreal, right, who was spoiled and just a real challenge. Not a challenge, but you know what I mean. Didn't really engage much. Then my mother moved. She got a small war reparation, bought a small house years later, and she still had a roomer at that time. And she had a black student living there too, a west Indian student still when we were living near the university. Then when she moved out to the suburbs it was a little harder to get a student, but she had someone. So there was this rainbow of people living there and the 50s, you know. You're a single woman, you have a stranger from India come and live in your home. My mother looked like she didn't understand. That's what I remember and that's what I talk about if I talk about this. It's amazing to come from that experience and be truly colour blind, in all aspects. It became a part of the family, whether it was a medical student from Newfoundland who lived with us or a chemistry student from Gujurat, or a German who was a traveller who lived in Canada for six months to save some money and travel around the world some more, or a Roma, you know. All ages, colours, beliefs, and this was normal. One the one hand there was no real education about this and on the other hand my education was in the home about the way we had to act which I thought was extraordinary from someone who had been through that experience, to not have the bitterness. My mother had friends who were Germans in Ottawa, and we'd hangout with the kids and I think she sewed or something, I can't remember the connection. It wasn't like this was her best friend, but these were just people they knew. I knew the kids, I remember going, hanging out with the kids, hanging out with the family sometimes. So I thought that was, looking back at it, a tremendous capacity that my mother had. That's a roundabout way of saying not much in school but a lot in life in the other way about lessons of kindness and generosity. She spoke often about the people who were kind to her, the man who came to the wire and risked his life to bring them food. She spoke about that more than she spoke about those who came and took my father's friend away and killed him.

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Menczer: In hindsight you'd wish you could go back now with the knowledge that I have now. She died when I was 31. 31 I was still pretty immature I think, even though I was a lawyer who had done some big cases. It's not about that, it's about growing up and so I was just beginning to get engaged in this a little more and so, yeah, if I had my kind of perspective now it would be wonderful to have this conversation with her now. It's just one of those things. But, yeah. So that was that part of my life.

Stanger-Ross: You were describing in your 20s and early 30s, you started to connect with other children of survivors and you went to a couple of these events. What followed from that?

Menczer: I was quite involved with the second-generation group, as I say. We went -- maybe half a dozen of us -- went to New York and partied and went to the meetings and just had a great time and I thought wow. I was really inspired by all of this. I'm pretty active, I think I got involved with the more formal community stuff, I don't know if I was on a board yet. But I spoke at one of the commemorations and read one of my father's stories when I was still in Ottawa -- must have been the early 80s. Then in '84 I met a woman from Vancouver and moved to Vancouver. We were here for a year while she finished school and then we travelled for a year. Then we came back and settled in East Van in the fall of 86 and I became involved -- I don't know how soon after, but certainly within the next year -- I became involved with the Holocaust commemoration activities in Vancouver. I think I sat on the board one year of the VHEC. This was just getting setup. I'm an organiser by default sometimes. But they'd had a pretty moribund second generation group going -- it seems I get attracted to things that are moribund and try to reinvigorate a bit. So I got involved with that group and got some energy going around it and we got together and looked for the same kind of thing. Building on the experience of Ottawa, it wasn't a therapeutic group. There's a place for that, but it wasn't where I was at. I don't think I've ever -- a little bit when I've done some therapy about just life issues, it's come up as a component of that. But there are a lot of other issues about which I think are more dominant. Well, I wouldn't say more. That was a big issue in terms of shaping who I am and the working through the bumps and bruises we all get when growing up. Certainly that was a big piece but an equally big piece, if not bigger, was being so much younger than everyone else in school. Like finishing high school when I was 16 and starting second year university when I was 16 and graduating law school when I was 22 and having my law office when I was 24. That was a much bigger issue about not fitting in and not being emotionally ready to do what I was ready academically to do. Those two were kind of the big piece, that was a big piece, so it was just one piece so it came up a bit in that. So the group in Vancouver was also as much an activity and, not commemoration based, but active with activities. We'd bring in speakers. I remember Saul Rubinek is a family friend from Ottawa, we grew up with the family and Saul had written a book. I don't know if you know who he is. But his parents had been hidden during the war and Saul is an actor and became a reasonably well-known actor in Hollywood and Canada. So he wrote a book about his parents' experience and then he made a movie for a half hour TV show that -- I can't remember what it's called -- but it was about -- he made a movie and then brought it down to 30 minutes for like a serious half hour documentary type of show. Like *The Nature of Things* except about social matters. It's quite well-known, I've forgot its title now, about his parents. I contacted him in Toronto and said come to the West Coast sometime. So he came over and he talked to our group and we watched the movie and had a discussion. SO organised things like that and got involved with VHEC. So that's what I did in Vancouver, so that's how it carried over and did that for several years, about 4 or 5 years with the second-generation group.

Stanger-Ross: Do you recall what was compelling to you about continuing to get together with second generation folks?

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Menczer: I think the experience of them understanding. In an analogy, it's kind of like what I'm going through now. My wife passed away in December and I have good friends and people I know, everyone is supportive, the community's supportive, but the ones who really get it and the

ones who really understand, you know, I met a friend in a support group I went to when my wife was dealing with cancer and he was the same. He lost his wife two months later. I would be the same, empathetic and caring, but the ones who have gone through it really kind of understand and really get it in a way that people are fortunate not to get it until it happens. It's neither good nor bad, it's just the way it is. So I really do accept all the support and kindness that I have, and it's wonderful believe me. And the ones who really get it are the few people who live it. I think it was the same here. Being with people who had lived this experience. And their experiences were different and some were much more severe, some were much more hidden, some were in between, and just sharing that and learning that people had gone through what I'd gone through with different experiences was really interesting to me. And comforting as well to just be able to talk about this and share in an environment where you're not -- it's like the grieving thing and you wonder how many times people need to hear this over and over again, what I'm really going through and someone was going through it they get that you do need to say it and it does need to be heard. So the same thing with the Shoah stuff. When people, you know, "wow, it's terrible, how did it happen, we're supportive and we're empathetic. But again? you want to talk about it again? And you want to tell the story again?" You know, that kind of thing. I think that was very compelling to me on a personal level, on an emotional level, that this was not only a safe place but a place that was really wanting to hear and share that experience and I could offer the same to them. Not only to validate it but to say that this is a place and if people didn't like it they stopped coming.

Stanger-Ross: So I guess you had started to feel a need to share or hear those kinds of --

Menczer: Yeah, I think so. Yeah. I think I saw it as a way of sharing my own experience but also I think of honouring my parents experience. I think it's really important -- in a roundabout way I'll either say it now or say it later. I think it's really important that people know. My parents, my family lived through this. If I don't speak of it and I don't tell people about it, I'm not honouring that. I'm not honouring the victimhood. I'm honouring the difficult experience and the strength. I can't do much to honour the now other than recounting that story for them and those who died. I think I felt that way back then, that I'm proud of my parents and sad for what they had to go through but so proud of them. And the enormity of it, just it always strikes me when we start to talk about it, how rich and full that life was for Jews in Europe. My family is a microcosm of it. My parents had a great life, they both had good jobs, they married late, they didn't have kids, they wanted kids, it didn't happen that way. They had good friends, they'd hangout with their friends, they'd have parties, they'd go to cafes, they'd talk about their ideas. What a rich life. There was music, there was literature, there was art, and all of a sudden, you know, after hundreds of years of that, it's gone. It's just in a span of, what?, you're the historian. 35 or early 30s. Ten, twelve years? Fifteen years? All of that it's just like you've excised the whole -- it's a whole different world. And then everyone is dispersed around the world. My family is dispersed all around the world and not together. The enormity of that still overwhelms me. And so I don't know, my mother was always very big on family. When I went to Israel, "you didn't look up your 14th cousin?" You know. I translated that. So that's part of why I think -- maybe this fits a little late -- but that's part of why I do what I do. I'm just still trying to understand the enormity of the loss. Not just numbers of 6 million. And I'm not trivialising that number. Families lost many more members. I can't even comprehend that being a part of it. But the enormity of the whole sort of societal, social, economic, political, liberal, medical -- just the

whole thing is just gone. You don't put Humpty Dumpty back together again. And everyone's all around the world. I just think it's important to remember that and not just get -- I think it brings the numbers to life when you talk about that and you realise that these were 6 million but 6 million people with lives, and 6 million individuals. And those individuals were in music, they were in literature, they were in art, they were in medicine, they were in architecture, and they had lives and they had families.

[00:44:55]

Menczer: That's the enormity of the loss I still can't comprehend.

Stanger-Ross: So we're in the 80s in Vancouver and you're organising second generation --

Menczer: and VHEC. So then I -- let me fast forward into the 90s. So that was late 80s and 90s and that continued on. Then I started digging around and a couple of my father's other stories showed up and I translated those with my cousin in Israel. I was there and she had them and we sat down and did some translation and then I decided I wanted to start putting together and -- as I say, I'd seen my cousin Nelly in Cincinnati and we were at a wedding and decided well, you know, there's all this stuff going on with the Spielberg project and archiving and I decided I wanted -- I did some audio tapes of her. She came to visit in Vancouver and I did a couple of audio tapes, cassette tapes, of her telling these stories again 'cause I realised she was the last real link. My parents both gone, my family in Canada didn't know anything about it 'cause they'd come in the 20s, and they were all gone, so now it was the kids who were even more remote from this. I wanted to know so I interviewed Nelly. It must have been the early 90s, early- to mid-90s. I had two cassettes which I managed to salvage and got them more recently switched over to junk drives and transcribed, so I have those interviews filling in those gaps. And then in the mid-, late-, mid- 90s, we were in Chicago at a wedding and my cousin did a video interview just talking with Nelly in the hotel room. I have those, I just found those as well. So I think that's what I was doing. I was starting to -- "ok, I want to gather this stuff while I still have some resources." I have a suitcase with sort of a bunch of papers from my parents, documents. I started going through them and they had just set up the Holocaust Education Centre in Vancouver with whoever was before me -- Creeker, I forgot her name but she was a lovely lady. I went to see her and I gave them the documents, so I have all sorts of bits and pieces of documents. Identity papers. I have some letters that were sent by my family before and after the war. They were in German and I got a friend in Vancouver -- a woman called Helen Waldstein, I don't know if you ever met Helen Waldstein. Wrote an interesting book called *Letters from the Lost*. And I saw Helen Epstein in Vancouver in the 80s and she wrote the book about the children of the Holocaust. It was the first book, the first sort of seminal book that was written about me. We went to see her and I remember -- I went with my ex -- there was this older woman standing beside us and all of a sudden she just starts to shake. We started talking and comforting her and we became dear friends, called Helen Waldstein who has a very interesting story to tell and has written a couple of books and is an academic. So I started gathering some of this stuff. That was my activity in the 90s. I found these extra stories and not all of them are translated and I went to the VHEC and asked for help and a fellow called David Shaeffer and a woman called Sheila Barkuski and a man called Shia Mozer translated these stories for me. There are about half a dozen, eight more in Yiddish and a few letters. If I have a regret it's that I didn't take more time

to go and sit with them while they were doing it. It would have been a wonderful experience. So I just saw the product. But I got to know David Schafer who was a child of survivors from Bukovina. We became friends and he had a really amazing story to tell me. One of the papers I gave him to translate was a letter and it basically said my father had been a teacher in 45 or 46, for two or three months after the war. It was kind of a letter of certification or something. I never knew this, I just never knew this about my father. I asked David about it, I called him I said "I've never heard this. Can you tell me about this?" He said "well, that's what the letter said but I have something even more to tell." "What's that?" "Well..." And he goes on and on about -- the war was over but people were straggling back but still behind the fighting lines caught between leaving camp and getting back home cause the war was still on so they'd stop in these abandoned villages for two or three months until it was safe to go ahead. In this one village there a bunch of little kids like him running around -- he was a teenager -- and a bunch of the adults decided they should put together a makeshift school. This was a letter testifying that my father had been a teacher at this makeshift school. Out of all the stories I've never heard this. Well, how do you -- it's just a one-page letter. How do you know all the details? He says "I was one of the kids at that school." He didn't know my father but this was the time and the place. So there are all these threads and that really intrigued me. So I became friends with David and Seedy and I actually recorded David like this telling his story and a piece of it. I've got that transcribed too. That was sort of my, I guess, activity in the late turn of the century. We moved to Victoria in 2010. Valerie came out to Vancouver in 2005. So in that first kind of decade this was more -- I was doing a bit more of this. Again, in hindsight, I'm not driven really and I'm not super focused in a positive way I mean on something. I like doing things but I do them at my own pace. In hindsight I wish, wow, I wish I'd kind of done more. I wish I'm not the sort of dive-in -- I never got a graduate degree cause we would have had to write a thesis and that. I don't know. That's just not something that is easy for me to do. In hindsight I wish I'd investigated a little more. Even now I see David maybe once a year, once every two years. Why don't I go in and spend more time to do this while there's a living resource? There was a woman who wrote a book about Bershad that my cousin Nelly gave to me. One day I thought I'd call the publisher and sure enough she was still alive and I actually spoke with her on the phone and she writes about the camp where my parents were. It doesn't mention my parents but one of my father's cousins who was a doctor there and we had a talk and I just filed it away. Then I thought "why don't I just get on a plane and go meet her?"

[00:52:28]

Menczer: I still have a lot. So I have all this, all these pieces. And I'd like to put them together. It's been on my mind for a while. It really is, as I work less, to put it together. Book is too big a word but just put it together for history and for any of my family that's interested and more just to have cause I have a sense -- I mean if I don't do it nobody's going to do it. So I have these interviews with Nelly, I have this stuff with David Schafer, I have these letters that were written, I have my father's stories. I have an interesting parallelism story about a Seder we did in Nepal that paralleled my parents and my ex wrote a beautiful story about that that was published in a couple of places. So I have all sorts of pieces that I want to kind of put together in a way. So that kind of brings it a little more up to date. When I moved to Victoria, I wanted to stay in touch with this -- but it's a big adjustment, we were both 60 when we moved here and that takes a while to get involved. I got involved with Emanu-El and I knew they did commemorations so I'd go to

the Shoah commemorations and it was done by the [organizers, who included] [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] a professor, I forgot her name.

Stanger-Ross: Phyllis?

Menczer: Phyllis. And I went there -- I don't know of this is moving into the next component but I started going there. We moved in summer 2010 so maybe I went for Kristallnacht, I'm not sure, but certainly to Yom HaShoah in 2011 I started going. I went a couple of times and it was sort of -- first of all, it was sad. There were like 30 or 40 people there. After going a couple of times it was the same. Kristallnacht, there were images of skeletons and crematoria. Yom HaShoah was heavy, sort of graphic readings. And a pretty right-wing sort of message about it all. It was us against the world. It just...But you know, that's what it was. Others were doing it. I became friends with Giddy and we talked about it a little more and he said "it's really important to try to the change this. This isn't what it means to me, it doesn't sound like it means to you. We're losing it. People are not going. It's a Shanda, it's a shame for what our families experienced." And so I thought about it and so got involved with the [organization] [REDACTED] and I went and met with [REDACTED] [existing members] and basically joined on their board. [REDACTED]

To become a member you had to be accepted by the existing members. Well the [organizers] [REDACTED] were very resistant to add more people. Well how do we know who's coming on and maybe people have to fill out an application form with their experience and their interest. I got really annoyed and said "well what do you want Julius to say? "Howbout my experience, I was in Bergen-Belsen, how's that?" "What do

you want Nathan to say, that my father was a survivor?" What do you want Robert to say, "that we escaped by the skin of our teeth?" You know. These are people, they don't have to prove. So it basically deteriorated and I stopped and a group of us got together and decided to do the commemorations. It turned out to be -- I wondered, well, what's it going to be like. Is it going to be difficult? We're going to do it anyhow. As it turns out it was quite painless because they didn't want to do them whether they were burnt out or they just didn't want to do them. [REDACTED]. I just said we're going to do this and you do what you want to do. But they said "oh no, we don't want to do this. You handle the commemorations." And that was it, we haven't had really anything to do with them. But it was a very unpleasant experience and really counter-productive to my view of what Holocaust memorialisation, commemoration should be.

[01:00:24]

Menczer: I can now tell you about what we did do and that perspective. That's another piece. [REDACTED] It was just a very painful experience and very counter-productive and I just -- I'm glad it stopped when it did. I couldn't really deal with it anymore and I don't think it was helping the objective. Other people have different perspectives, that's fine. So in 2015 I guess -- I think Kristallnacht was the last one we did together in 2014 [REDACTED]. Because we also decided to -- you know, my perspective was to reach out. To make connections with Hillel house and Carmel Tanaka was there and she was very dynamic. So that's where we got the young people involved to hand out programs and participate. So I had to mend some fences there and then reaching out to other components of the community. So the perspective of those of us who got together and ultimately called the Victoria Shoah project and the initial ones were me and Elisheva and Robert and Nathan and Michael.

Stanger-Ross: Michael?

Menczer: Tripp. And Rick Kool. I think that was the original kind of cohort. I think Giddy might have been there really at the very beginning, but he got sick in the fall, I think, of 2014. And then passed away I think in February 2015, I don't think it was 2016. I lose track of those years. But anyway, he was not -- yeah. The first Yom HaShoah was dedicated to Giddy the very first one in 2015. So I think that's the timing of it. So we talked about, you know, our ideas and perspectives at the beginning and didn't want to be too hierarchical and so we were together a very flat organisation -- if organisation is a pretty loose term for what we are. I like to call it a cell but Robert used to get annoyed when we'd call it a cell. So we talked about it and we all shared the same sort of perspective and the perspective is this in a nutshell, it's summed up in our mission statement as well. But this perspective is that it's not all victims, that there is incredible resilience and strength -- all the stuff I've talked about, that there was a life before, you know. The Shoah is not just about the 6 or 7 year period where the 6 million Jews were killed, or the leadup to it from Kristallnacht. It's not just about that, it's about what happened before, during, and after. The way it was being done in the forum was just focusing on those dark years. And it's like there's nothing before and nothing after. The before and the after are critical to understanding not only the Shoah but understanding who we are and why we are and what we do

and what we do going forward. And we all shared that perspective very much. So that was the first thing we all shared as an ideal.

[01:04:02]

Menczer: The second thing was, "it's not just us." I'm still sort of struggling and with all of the stuff going on now about the missing and murdered women, you know, it's a genocide and what does genocide mean and this big debate. It's tough and I haven't sort of sorted it all out, separating my emotional reaction to this. This is unique in history and you dilute it by calling other things, but wait a minute, there are others. But we all shared the idea that it does not dilute the enormity of the Shoah by recognising there are other people under attack too. And the way you deal with that is not to build walls and be insular, and them and us. The way you do it is build bridges. So we took that perspective and worked it into the philosophy behind our programs that you reach out to the broader community, it isn't just getting forty Jews in a room. That you reach out to all of the political, legal, law enforcement. Faith groups, community groups in the community. And you engage them in this and say we're all in this together and it's the old story, they came for the Communists and I didn't stand with them. This is about us but it could equally be about you. And recent historical events and all historical events, that's what -- so we took an active or conscious reaching out. So that was the other piece that -- those I think are two of the main kind of components and it's proven to be very sort of -- there aren't adjectives, successful isn't the word. But you know, it's proven to be a very productive and meaningful way of doing this. As you've seen we get, the Shul is packed. We probably get 150-180 people for Kristallnacht and we probably get 120-140 people for Yom HaShoah from across the spectrum. Young, old, we have the Premier come, we have the Chief of Police always come, we have, you know, bishops come, we have the Imam come. It basically is on the calendar for all the components of Victoria. And the media pays more attention. It's always in the newspaper now, they did a TV interview this year. They interviewed Julius and me for the local news. So it's in the consciousness of the Victoria community. And that's really good.

[01:07:04]

Menczer: To me that's a tribute to our parents, it's a tribute to my father, it's a tribute to my mother. My mother did not see us and them, she saw people. To me that's the greatest protection that you can have when you know your neighbour. So my uncle in Bucharest knew the priest next door, you know -- there are good priests and bad priests but was a true man of faith and realised the darkness and evil of what was going on and said "no there are no Jews here." That's cause he knew his neighbour. Rabbi Harry is a great person to be involved in this because he has tremendous outreach to the other faith communities and all the communities. So that's the approach that we've taken and I think it's been a good and healthy one and I also believe in sort of keeping it dynamic. You came to the potluck -- I remember that from Vancouver. If I work with Indigenous communities -- food is the great thing, whether it be a Jewish community or Indigenous community food is the thing that brings people together. So you also have to -- when you go to these events and they tear at your kishkas, as my mother would say. We haven't done anything afterward -- it's just something about what do we do, where do people go, you know. Usually I'll get together with Elisheva or something, we'll go for a lunch or a coffee or something. You can't have this emotionally charged -- well you can, you do -- but this

emotionally charged event and then go home and watch the basketball game right away. You gotta wait half an hour or something. I like doing the potluck because it's serious, it's emotional stuff, but I also think it's important to get together and share food -- exactly what we did. So that's a piece of it all too, I mean, I was given life and life is a lot of things. It's not to forget but it's also not to be trapped in that. At the beginning you asked me about what it was like growing up and it wasn't about not knowing and it wasn't about not acknowledging it, but it also wasn't about being trapped. And I kind of feel the same about this. It's just come together really, really well. I dropped out for a year, my wife was sick, and you know, it's not about one person and I never think it's about one person. I never believed that and we never acted that way. I'm a pretty good coordinator and just following up and that. But everyone else -- that's the other reason. There's always been a different facilitator. Maybe someone's done it twice or something, but for the most part, you know, it's been everyone. Robert's done it, Esa's done it, Rick's done it, Julius has done it, Peter's done it -- I'm missing someone. Nathan is the only one but he doesn't want to. And I've done it. So, it's also about that. It's about keeping it dynamic. I'm sort of, I think -- Giddy would've been happy with what we've done with it. I didn't do it for Giddy's memory but he was the inspiration for sure. I think it's evolved in a really good way. The potluck this time, there were new people who got more involved. Francis was here, a couple of people couldn't come. The thing I think about now -- and probably this is your next piece -- is, okay, what now?

[01:11:05]

Menczer: So there are two pieces of what now, because this has been, I don't know, a good five or six years for me and I tend to run a kind of cycle like many people. It's been a pretty big piece of my volunteer commitment and so it's time for the succession, for someone else to take greater roles or more people to take greater roles. So there's that piece: thinking of the group itself, both in terms of age and just involvement now. It's wonderful now, I have Francis, someone with lots of energy and who's learning and some young people so I think we're conscious of that in kind of a -- I won't say a subtle way -- but just in a conscious way. The other piece that I think about a lot is -- we started to talk about this and I'm sure as an academic you're aware of it -- so the survivors are fewer and fewer. The survivors and the child survivors like Julius, I mean the war ended 75 years ago so it doesn't take a lot of math to know that there are fewer and fewer. The ones that are there are very aged or infirm or were very very young when it happened. SO you have the Juliuses, you have David Schafer who must be in his mid-80s and he was a teenager and there's Rob Waisman, a couple of others. But they're in their 80s now. So it's not going to be long before they're not available. So what do we do now? Even the second generation, most of us are getting Canada Pension Plan. I'm 68, going to be 69 in the fall. People are in their 60s. Rick is a contemporary. Look around, even the young spries like Nathan, they're in their 50s. So that's what -- there's time there but in a blink of an eye we're going to be -- okay, second issue. Now it starts to get very remote. I just think of the immigrant experience when you look at language in the immigrant. I speak some Yiddish cause of my parents but if I had kids, probably a few swear words that's it. I look at the Italian immigrant experience, I have Italian immigrant friends. First generation, second generation understood, kids, pfft. Grandchildren don't. Indigenous, same thing. It starts to get very remote from the experience so how do we -- I see a couple of challenges -- how do we deal with that reality to keep it dynamic and informative and sufficiently real? The second part is there's a new generation where commemorative events where you go there and however you do it, that isn't the way they do things. You educate

differently and you commemorate differently. Through social media, through other forms. So I think if we're going to keep this alive and dynamic and real we have to think of creative and new ways to teach the experience and whether we call it the lessons -- I don't really like that, it sounds too... -- but you know, to teach the experience and to use that to benefit our community and society, larger society, because you're not going to be able to do it the same way, you're not going to be able to do it by publishing *Zachor* out of the centre once a month with stories. You're not going to do it by having two commemorations a year, as good as they can be, it's not going to be enough. So those are the two kind of challenges that I see and we've started to think about it. I was really excited about this idea that Zelda came through play, an education in schools, something interactive, something -- I keep using the word dynamic, but it's not static. The event was not static, memory should not be static, so the commemoration should not be static otherwise it will be lost and it'll die. Then what kind of tragedy is that? It's tragedy upon tragedies. Tragic that it's happened, in a way it's even more tragic that you lose the memory of it or you lose the opportunity to, at least -- you'll never stop it -- but at least give people a "wait a minute," you know, and stop something before it gets too terrible. There are white supremacists now but they're not dominant. Part of that is you keep the consciousness of what history has taught us and not become a victim of history. So I think that's the challenge that locally we have at the VSP and I think people are aware of it and quite creative and it's also a challenge nationally and globally frankly. It's a scary world out there. Every day I pick up the paper and it's another right-wing, uber-nationalist government coming in. Not just in Europe. In Quebec. It's pretty thinly veiled. You're a history professor, I'm not telling you anything you don't know. You probably know more than me and could articulate it better than I could. But it's a scary world, it's changing. The politics of Israel doesn't help this in that way. It kind of feeds into that model, except it's Jews. So you get attacked from all sorts of -- you get attacked from the Antisemitic attacks and then from the progressives [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]. And how do you say "well look at the terrible things that were done to us" when you have the symbol of our people, our country, as doing terrible things to other people. But we don't talk about that. We also consciously -- I guess this is the other piece that's useful maybe in your research to know -- I think we made a pretty conscious decision when we got together with the Shoah project that the politics of Israel and that and the politics was not part of what we're doing. We all have our views. You got a little hint of my thinking of it, but that's not what this is about. I think that was too much of what it was about, the way it was being done before. It diverted from the importance of the message because if you're talking about, "well we have to..." I support Israel. I love Israel, I love the country, I love my family there, I don't support the government, I don't support the politics. But I love the country, it's not a question for me and I don't engage in a lot of political discussion on Israel because it doesn't give me anything or it doesn't have anything to give me beyond a discussion -- my take on it is I love the country, I believe and I totally support the country and I love the people. I completely don't support the government and what they're doing, I think it's wrong. Beyond that I don't have too much more to get involved with. When you start mixing the two and that was happening, I don't think it's helpful for what you're doing because it becomes an Israel message rather than a Holocaust commemoration message. It's about commemoration, education, and protecting as best we can through that education the reoccurrence of something of that magnitude. That's the way I balance and think about it in my kind of world view and from my experience. I feel like I have a license to talk about these things and say some of these things that are hard because I'm the child of survivors. I can speak about reaching out to other people and I can speak to

acknowledging the racist and hateful attacks on other groups because that was my family. For someone telling me that "well, wait a minute, it's about us." Well, I'm us. So part of us feels very much this way. You hear it from Robert, you hear it from Nathan, you hear it from Rick, you hear it down the line, you hear it from Julius, and these are people who have -- no one needs to tell me about the propriety -- I shouldn't say that, I won't be so arrogant and say no one needs to tell me, but I don't listen very much.

Stanger-Ross: *laughs*

Menczer: That's not right either! You know what I mean. I listen to what people say but I'm not sort of projecting my ideas to an experience that isn't mine. It is my experience. So I can hear what other people say and people might have different perspectives. Maybe I can learn from them and that's fine but I can say something like this because my parents went through this, I went through it as a child of survivors. So I do feel legitimacy in what I'm saying because it's coming from the experiential experience. It comes from a father who after that could stand in front of a sign that said "Christian clientele." Not a sign that says "only Jews and we gotta build a wall." From a mother who took in whoever came and seemed like a good person, and didn't say "wow this person's a German, they caused my family terrible stuff, they killed my father, they killed my brother. This person is a Roma, you should be afraid of this person because of, you know." That wasn't my experience and there's not enough gratitude I can give to my parents for instilling that in me. It's hard to understand how Jews who have been the subjects of attack can see the answer as building walls and excluding others.

Stanger-Ross: I have one really narrow specific follow-up but I'm going to leave that one 'cause I want to stick with some of the bigger things that we're talking about and come back to it. So, I guess one question I have of a broader scope is around the aims of the memorial events that you help to organise, are those aims -- you've talked about a couple of different aims. One is to honour your parents and other survivors and victims. Then another is oriented towards the politics of today. I feel like you've articulated that so I won't urge you to rearticulate, but I'm wondering how a future concern about Antisemitism fits in relation to, say, these other --

Menczer: Yeah. I think it's very present in our minds and our consciousnesses in planning it. If you look at the sort of talks or the introductions of facilitators there's always a reference to what's going on today. Whether it's Pittsburgh or smaller events such as defacing synagogues or whether it's the mosques -- that's not Antisemitism but, you know. It's very real, it's very present in today. I think there's very much a consciousness about it. I think we don't try to make it the sole focus. So there is a consciousness about it, and there's also a recognition of other attacks, and the idea of building bridges and standing together when hatred is directed at any group. One of the most powerful pieces that we've done is talk about this window that Carmel did and we had representatives from the political leadership, the faith groups, and the law enforcement groups all putting pieces back rebuilding this window, it was like a big puzzle, with about eight pieces. It was very symbolic because at the time of Kristallnacht these were all the groups that stood by. And now you have this repair of these same groups putting it back together. And same thing the pledge of mutual respect and support was developed with Rabbi Harry in our group. One of the most powerful moments was the next year when we did it and we had all these representatives, from the Premier down to the faith groups, the police chief, we had Indigenous

leaders there, all standing up and reading this together. That didn't happen in the 30s. If they'd all stood together Hitler would've been certainly there, but he would have never come to power. I won't say never but it would've been much more difficult for him to come to power to do all the terrible things that the Nazi regime did. So I think Antisemitism is very much a part of it and maybe it is a challenge and it's good to be reminded of this and not to -- I don't know another word for dilute -- but not to...What do you do when you take one experience and you transpose it onto another?

Stanger-Ross: Conflate?

Menczer: Yeah. Not to conflate it with the Muslim attacks and attacks on Muslims or the attacks on LGBTQ community. It's not conflating this that it's all the same. They're not all the same. It's funny cause as we talk about it it's kind of counterintuitive to the message, saying they're all the same. Well they're not all the same but the common theme is hatred directed at a group because they're the other, as Eli Wiesel -- was that he? It shows you the limitation of my scholarly depth in this. But the common thread is people were attacked and families were attacked for who they were or what their religious or political beliefs were, and if we can stand together to resist that I think in some ways that's the best defense, to get to know your neighbours. So within that framework or that superstructure is our particular attention to Antisemitism and I hope we don't lose that and maybe it's a good reminder that maybe we have to come back to thinking is it enough, are we conflated, diluted, that message -- it's become a mile long and an inch deep. That's the way I talk about support for Indigenous issues in this country. I think it's a mile long and an inch deep. It's like the carbon tax. It's like the environment. Everybody says "yeah it's terrible, it's a crisis, we've got to do something, but when you have to pay more than your Netflix subscription to remedy it no one wants to do that, or 75% don't want to do that.

[01:28:33]

Menczer: The Holocaust, the Shoah was directed at Jews. 6 million Jews were killed. All the stuff I've talked about, a whole society of hundreds of years in Europe were destroyed, families were strewn all around the world. I don't think there's been anything of that enormity, certainly in modern history. What happened in Cambodia was terrible and there are elements of that that are the same. But the enormity of that, that was largely political. This is religious, racial, all of those things. The Rohingya -- you can go on. The Hutu and the Tutsi, you know. It seems like there we go again, lucky as Jews, we got it all. So I think it is unique and I don't think certainly in our work we ever forget that. But I don't think we should lose that. The other piece is as I'm thinking about it, the other theme is that these are real people. We, a lot of the time, try to find the stories of real people. I've read my father's stories and there were readings from some diaries and some poems. We have the young people doing the readings and so by giving it a human face you get past the -- no one can comprehend 6 million, I can't comprehend 6 million people dying. Not even Toronto has 6 million people. Does that mean you put Toronto and Vancouver together? Or Montreal? You think of the enormity of Toronto and that doesn't even cover it. All those people are wiped out, all those people are gone. I can't imagine that. So when you bring it down to this was this person, this was their story, this was this young girl who wrote this, this was this man who was in the camp, this is what he wrote about that. So it's finding that sweet spot where you recognise the enormity of the events and the tragedy of the events while humanising it to add the

individual. And then you add the other layer of, okay, and then there were others, and there were others today. So it's trying to give the proper proportion and balance to each of those components which are all valid but if one gets too big -- you know, I spoke about my concerns about [phonetically] roy-thew-stan, well it was too big about our experience and our tragedy and Antisemitism today. That's all it was about. At the same time, if you make it all about what's going on in the world today and every group today, you're not doing sufficient justice to the Shoah part of the Victoria Shoah Project. So it's good to have ongoing reminders and it's why I think it's good to have fresh energy in our group, it helps do that, so we don't get -- we have different points of views. You have very political sort of points of view from one of the active people in the group and so it's always tempering that while being respectful and figuring out, "okay that's good." We don't have a really strong view about what you're saying, if we're going too far this way. I think that maybe part of our reaction to what was being done before was so far out of balance on one perspective that it was only about us and only about Antisemitism and we've got to be vigilant and protective. In also trying to balance it we've got to be sure that we're not so far away from the other. Again, I keep saying, you're a history professor, you know that. History goes from one extreme just to the other. It comes back and politics and history work that way.

[01:32:55]

Menczer: It's a good reminder and, yeah, I encourage you to remind us if you see this drift going on.

Stanger-Ross: I am interested personally, as I've mentioned to you, this split that you've described. You've probably described it quite fully in some respects. I think you have done this but I want to make sure to ask how you would characterise that other approach [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

Menczer: [REDACTED]

Stanger-Ross: Okay -- how you would characterise their approach or the ideas that animate it. I guess with some folks maybe this is a leading question. I think I asked Rick in this way, if you were trying to take a sympathetic view of the ideas that animate that approach, what are the ideas?

Menczer: I think they want to make sure that people remember how graphic and brutal the events were. That because the number 6 million is sort of incomprehensible, that if you show people corpses stacked up on palettes and if you show people crematoria, then it's like "oh my god, these were humans and they were turned into skeletons. They were starved, and then they were burned or they were gassed alive." You know, the images of the cattle car. My parents were in the cattle car. So my sense is they believe, and genuinely believe, that this is the way to remind people of the brutality of the Shoah and what led to it and the brutality focused on primarily the Jews, and the brutality of it and to shock people into saying "never again" because it was so brutal. I never had that discussion with [REDACTED] but, as you asked me the question, thinking out loud the way I do unfortunately -- it would be better if I thought first and then was out loud more often! But that's just the way it is. My guess is that would be

one of the reasons. Numbers are meaningless and when they see the graphic images this will remind them of how terrible it was. I don't know if they are looking for people to feel guilty or just vigilant. I would hope vigilant more than guilty. So I'm guessing that's what it is. The [event] [REDACTED], I haven't been more than once, maybe twice. It wasn't so good the second time. Once in Vancouver I went several years and I accompanied a survivor sometime cause that's the model they use, and I felt those were tremendous, those were great and they were packed and engaged. The ones I went to here, and we're a smaller community as one person coming, the last one I went to was -- kids just weren't engaged at all. I know Robert's gone to those kids and felt very strongly that this is not working at all. So I think that's a part of it too, giving that the best of intentions. Because I do believe that [they] [REDACTED] have good intentions. I respect how hard they worked for so many years to make this happen. So I respect that, I appreciate it. I think it's kind of losing its impact. Even Willy Mays had to retire. I'm not saying they have to retire but, you know, people come along. Sometimes it's better -- like if Willy Mays retired a couple years before he did so that you're not a sort of old broken down centrefielder as opposed to this extraordinary athlete that was magical. I think people still remember that, you tend to forget the last couple years. I respect what they've done, I have no question as to their sincerity. [REDACTED]. But you know, business is business and this was kind of business. I didn't ask him to be my friend. This was business, we had a shared idea and it was challenging to work together, that was the interpersonal part. I think it's important to be able to work together to attract people and to keep it going. I think it's important to work together. But I think their motives have been very good, I think they've done incredibly hard work, I think they've been deeply committed, and I think they believe this is the way to do it.

Stanger-Ross: Here's my more narrow question about the Shoah project. I was there in 2017, I want to say, and you talked about the packed room and all the representatives and so on. Was that immediately the case or did it build? What was the experience when you were like "what?!".

[01:39:29]

Menczer: Good question. I think the first year we did the first one was Yom HaShoah at the cemetery in honour of Giddy. A lot of people from the community came out 'cause it was in honour of Giddy and I think we invited the broader community. There was a good turnout then, I think it was a very powerful programme. And then, I don't know -- I think I did the first, I think I facilitated that one. I think Kristallnacht, I think Elisheva did it. Again, it was a good turnout. I don't remember at what point -- it's interesting, [phonetically] Dahvee Olo [Davjola] will know cause she has the records, it would be a good question to ask her. When did we start...Francis Aknai the shulright has the database to end all databases. CSIS would be well advised to get in touch with Francis. She would send out notices but at some point I decided I would just write invitation letters to all the political leaders, to the chief of police -- like write personal letters cause you know you get a notice and your EA reads it and sometimes it gets to you and sometimes it doesn't. But a letter has a little more impact. You write your standard letter then you spend an hour cutting and pasting addresses and names and you make sure you don't write to John Horgan and say "dear Christie," you know. So I sent out personal letters and I think that had some impact. I had a friend who was a retired journalist and one of his friends is an editor with

the Times Colonist, I met him at a lunch thing. Really nice guy, pretty low-key. So when it came time I just called Bruce the editor, you know, "hi, I'm Mike's friend." "Oh yeah yeah we had a nice chat." I said "I'm involved with this and we send the community notices, but do you think you might get a reporter who's interested in doing a bit more of a story?" And he said "yeah let me just check in" and I got a call from -- I forget his name now -- and he wrote a story and he came for a year or two and now they write stories all the time. And now the TV. So I think it slowly built but it didn't take long. It didn't take long to hit 100 people. I don't think it took long. And then Rabbi Harry who is this incredible outreach person in the community. You build bridges and I asked Harry, "why don't you reach out to the interfaith leaders? You're on the interfaith council, why don't you see if they'll come?" Reached out to Hillel, talked to Carmel who was tremendous, and all of a sudden there were eight or ten Hillel students handing out pamphlets, active and involved and, you know, Carmel built the window. You reach out to Hillel, you reach out to Helga and Charlotte, you get the university involved. So you've got the interfaith community through Harry, you've got the academic community, you've got the student community involved, you send out letters and you see what happens and none of that was being done. I think it happened pretty quick, you know. The first event, because it was Giddy, I think a lot of people from the Shul came out and then when they saw what the event was -- remember people had been coming, but when you get sort of pounded with these numbing images, it's like "what will I do tonight? Will I go to this or will..." you know. Maybe I'm being a little frivolous but I think that's frankly what it came down to and when people saw, "wait a minute, there's music at this event and it isn't necessarily dirge music and people are talking about something that's relevant to my life and to today." There's a different tone. People became curious and then we became I think part of the fabric and then rebuilt the relationship with the Shul and people got energised. So I think it happened pretty quick, I think by the second or third event we were sort of getting there. And then the events of the surrounding world, you know, also highlighted the people. I didn't go, last, I didn't go to Kristallnacht because I was at home but that was right after the Synagogue shooting and so people wanted a place to go. So it also becomes a place to go to be together when -- and that was really the proximity of it, it was eerie but it's also a place to be together when that happens. When there was a mosque, the shootings at the mosques, it wasn't Kristallnacht but Harry engaged and Rick had engaged so when it came time for this they came because they knew they were welcome, they knew it was a bond and a friendship in place. I think the building of those pieces and those relationships also contributed to the higher attendance and then the politicians start coming. And when the politicians start coming and they see, "wait a minute, the faith leaders are here, their communal leaders are here, the police are here, there are 150 people here, I better be here." They came and not just cause of their political attendances, you know. Rob Fleming came with his kids, all of them when it was just Rob Fleming in the back row and the MLA Carol James would always come. Lana Popham would come with Sam and John Horgan came and Andrew Weaver comes, and on down the line. I'm embarrassed, I stood beside some of them and I said "oh yeah nice to meet you." "Hi I'm so and so." "Oh hi I'm Lisa Helps, I'm the mayor." Oops -- I mean I don't even know who some of them are but they all come. You just invite them and some will come.

Stanger-Ross: So what did that feel like or what were the discussions within the Shoah project group? You had this acrimonious start, you launched these things, and then boom.

[01:46:15]

Menczer: It was great. People felt really good. I think it creates a really good feeling because people feel like -- well, they don't feel like, they're actually doing something. We try, and if we're not we really need to be reminded, we're trying to walk the talk. In other words, if this is what we believe then this is what we try and do. I think people felt good because it felt like we were walking our talk. It was resonating and so people felt very validated, for "yeah, we're not wrong." This way of teaching about the Shoah, of engaging, is working and it's working much better than what had been done before and that creates a much safer environment for all of us in the community, so I think people felt really good and had fun doing it. There's very little acrimony within the group. It's quite wonderful. It is a group with different personalities -- we've had some discussion about Hatikvah, we have quite different views about whether Hatikvah is appropriate at these events or not. But we work those through in a way that nobody got up and left in a huff, it was respectful and came to a place where we'd reached sufficient kind of consensus. The classic consensus: "well, I may not agree but I'm not going to..." you know.

Stanger-Ross: Which was not to do Hatikvah?

Menczer: Not to do it, no. I don't think we do it at all. We've played a couple of times the Bergen-Belsen one when they liberated the camps. There's a BBC recording which I think is incredibly powerful, when the survivors come out and it's the survivors singing Hatikvah. We've done it at Kristallnacht I guess and to me it was quite beautiful, with the whole Shul singing Hatikvah as this powerful moment. Others in our community don't feel so comfortable with that because it's not about Israel and it's not about Hatikvah. So we've had that discussion and we haven't done it for a couple of years and I'm trying to remember at which event it might have felt more appropriate than the other. But it's sort of off the radar now. Maybe some people don't come because we don't. We get letters or emails, people saying "well, why'd you do this, you didn't do this, you're talking about attacks on gays and lesbians and what does that have to do with the Shoah?" But not a lot, I think overwhelmingly we get very positive feedback and a few classically predictable voices are saying, you know, and I say that's fine. But no I think people feel really good about it and they keep coming. You saw, there were a dozen people for the potluck. Probably three or four others that probably certainly would've been here, whether for being away or blah blah blah -- you know, legitimate reasons, it's not for lack of interest. So I always thought we need a core of about a dozen. We have a couple younger people who are very active, but Carmel moved to Vancouver -- you could get her a job at the university and she could always come back, you know. We need a Carmel back. She drew in her gang of friends, about half a dozen people. We always have the Habonim Dror connection but that's the piece where I think we'd like to see and keep it engaging enough for them. They always participate -- a fellow called Jake Sherman who was at the university was involved with us for a while and he's moved to Nelson. It's hard to compete with being a ski bum in Nelson. But he stays in touch, so you just keep the lines of communication open. I'm a little disappointed cause we tried to reach out and tried to have Hillel engaged as it was but it sort of didn't materialise which is okay. It's different leadership and it's not bad, it's just that Ora is doing the stuff she does and has good ideas and good intentions but it never sort of materialised. Things will start to come around. I think that's the one piece that's important. Also finding new ways to do education and to do commemoration is also -- and I think that's what is part of also -- I used the word dynamic again. I think it's a dynamic group when you have it in the consciousness. Zelda sees something and says "hey, this would be a great fit" and meets Rachel Ditor and Rachel's got a real background in this and

Rachel says this would be great and comes to us and we say "wow this would be great." So when it's in the consciousness of people opportunity arises, and I think success is opportunity meeting good fortune. That's kind of very exciting and the archival project, we kind of wanted to do that. We never had much money and we didn't need much. It was always a struggle and Peter said "well, why don't I write something to the Waldman foundation." All of a sudden, we get \$1500 from there and we put in another, we got something from Federation two years ago that we didn't get last year because they like to move it around. This year we put something in and we got more than the first time. But we're using that. So to me that's sort of proof that wow, there's recognition of what we're doing and we're doing it right and it's supported. Now this archiving that Davjola is doing, there will be a real -- I kind of gathered it sort of haphazardly on my computer by event and tried to gather all the stuff, but now it's going to be done properly and the website will be built up. So there will be a continuing resource for students and academics and the public to actually see. So it won't be lost and it's in a modern kind of format. I think those are all really good steps and our group should be really pleased with that. It is everybody, you find ways to engage people. Joseph Shepherd took care of the audio for five years -- that's way outside of my skillset and it ran smoothly. Then Nathan took it over. My kind of approach is if you're going to do something, if people are engaged, then they will be committed to it and they will own it. If you're going to do it, you say "okay well I'll do everything and you just do this." Then it's not successful. So I always when organising, I'll say "let's move the facilitator around, it doesn't have to be the same person all the time." Because everyone can do it and they're all of a sudden engaged in it. The music, we have continuing links with different musicians in the community so they're engaged with it. So it's all part of the education process cause when they're there, when the musicians are there, they're hearing everything else that's going on too. So it's other ways to reach out when you engage -- the window we did it for two years and it's a tremendously -- well, when you invite the Chief of Police to do the window he's doing that but he's also there and he hears and then he comes back. He's come every time too. Del Manak come every time too and knows the people. Chief Ron Sam came from the Songhees and I'm sure he's never been to an event like this. We invite Andy Thomas too and once he came and they come and I know Ron, we do some work for him. I called him and he said yeah he'd come. I asked "will you participate to do this?" and he did. I sat with him. People are blown away by hearing this because all they've heard is 6 million, all they've seen is bodies in crematoria. To come and hear the stories, to hear Jordan give a historical perspective about what this means and the work you're doing in a modern world. To hear Julius' first-hand story. To hear things that were written by children. To hear a story that my father wrote while he was experiencing this. You know, in an environment where you've got their attention and then to hear this beautiful music that takes your breath away. We've had Orlee -- I don't know if you know Orlee -- Orlee Salamber-Albee I think her name is. An Israeli woman who's a post-doc and a researcher at the university, has this voice that just stops you, this incredibly crystal clear voice. And then Neshamah did a beautiful song last year -- I'd never heard her sing. And now this woman Annabel just appears out of the ether and has this beautiful haunting voice and has her own stuff. These people just keep kind of surfacing and if they have a good experience working with us, or participating with us, and they see how vibrant the commemoration is, then they're engaged and they'll come back and they'll help with everybody there. I guess it's about creating something that's vibrant, alive, and meaningful. If you do that everybody who's there will take something away from it and will come back and will remember it. Young, old, Jewish, non-Jewish. I think that's I guess -- when you talk about it and when I think out loud, when I think about it I think that's also another piece.

We never sat down and said "okay, let's create a vibrant event so that all this will happen." We sort of pooled ideas in an open and I think pretty healthy discussion way because we have some strong voices in our group and some strong opinions and all valid opinions, but we kind of work it out to get a programme, and when we do that you get the synthesis of all these ideas and I love that. That's the way I try to work in my professional voice. It takes a little more time and a little more patience, but if you can do that the rewards are great. And I think we've been able to do that. I think the big challenge is now "okay let's find new ways to do this, let's find new ways to keep it vibrant, let's find new ways to keep it dynamic, let's find new ways to engage people and get this message across." So I think this play is really good, we've always talked about doing something between events. We sponsored a movie at the Jewish Film Festival and then had a panel discussion after. We scrounged together a bit of donation to do that. So we've done like that, but I think this play is our first major other initiative. And that's great, that will spawn its own sort of support. In a way I'm really pleased the way it's evolved. It has been I think five years, it's really grown. Let's not get kind of complacent, let's keep it dynamic and vibrant and get some more people and some more energy in and then be a happy elder spectator to just kvell. I'm really -- again, no adjective -- pleased, satisfied, lucky the way it's evolved. It is certainly the vision of all those who control the project. When we got together at our first sort of potluck to say "okay what do we want to do and how do we want to do this?" If someone had told us five years later that this is what would be happening, I think we would have been very happy with this. I think people are quite pleased and they're still coming back. Even Joseph Shepherd who kind of withdrew and other priorities came up for him, I checked with him when I got back involved and no there was nothing wrong, just other things came up. I invited him to potluck and he would've come, but they've got health kind of issues, and he was happy to re-engage with the group. You don't have to be working, you put in several years of just making this run. When I kind of coordinate or organise something, I don't have to be kind of super controlling to do everything. I'm really happy I find Joseph, I say "okay Joseph, can you do this?" He says "Yeah I can." I say "okay that's fine, you call me if there's a problem." I don't have to be sitting on his shoulder and I think that makes my life so much -- there's enough that I worry about. You know, you've organised events, you worry about everything. There's enough to worry about that I don't have to worry about all those things. So you get people and then they feel -- people have to feel an ownership, a commitment, that they're being valued and heard. I think it's both as our cell has evolved and as the commemorations have evolved, and sort of as the next stage as more of this outreach is coming along, I'm pretty happy with the way it's coming along. I think it's a big challenge what happens next. I think the passage of time, the pool of survivors and even children of survivors, diminishing. Just the nature of my generation -- we're not old but we're moving on and a new generation, there's a lot more going on for them. There's a lot of competition so just being able to find ways to reach out and to teach and to learn and to honour, you know. It will be a challenge but I think it's good. Challenges make people think.

Stanger-Ross: Great. I think you should be proud of what the group's accomplished. Before we end, is there anything else that you want to make sure you say?

Menczer: No, I think it's great and thank you for taking the interest. I don't know you well but I'm getting to know you a bit and I really was knocked out by the talk you gave at Kristallnacht. I'm not an academic but I admire the work you're doing and I think it's great to do and I think it will be a tremendous resource for students and the public to just learn this and I'm happy to be

able to contribute to that. I hope that's helpful and I look forward to seeing the final result of the final report and study.

Stanger-Ross: Great, thank you.

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