

THEY CALLED

by Sharon Weisz

I once had an obsession with “Schindler’s List.” I had, of course, read the book and knew about the local retailer who inspired Thomas Keneally to write it. I followed the making of the film through newspaper stories, and 1993, the year the film was released and would subsequently win the Oscar for Best Picture, was also the year my sister Robin and I took our mother on a roots trip to Eastern Europe that she finally agreed to after years of not so subtle prodding. Dad had passed away two years earlier, and, one day she surprised me with a call to say she was now ready. I’m grateful because a scant four months after our return, she would suffer a massive stroke that would have put an end to ever making the journey.

Our trip took us to the places of her youth—Budapest, Vienna, Prague—and of course her home town of Munkacs, aka Mucachevo in Russian, the language of the area that is now Ukraine, and also to Dad’s hometown outside of Satu Mare in what is now Romania. Mom drew the line at Auschwitz, offering “been there, done that” as her reason, so Robin and I we added that side trip, leaving Mom behind in Budapest for some 36 hours. We took an overnight train, arriving in Krakow as the sun came up. After our gut-wrenching visit to Auschwitz, our guide showed us Krakow, pointing out the main square where, only days earlier, the final day of filming for “Schindler’s List” had taken place.

When, concurrent with the release of the film, director Steven Spielberg announced the formation of the Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation with a mission to interview the world’s remaining survivors, I made it my mission to have Mom interviewed before it was too late.

I remember her interview vividly. Mom was wearing one of her favorite dresses, selected after months of wearing only track suits and comfortable shoes required for her physical therapy. She sat stoically on the couch in the living room, willing herself not to slouch despite the left side paralysis. She answered the interviewer’s questions quietly, with little emotion, laboring with the details of oh so long ago that were somehow embedded even though she probably couldn’t have told you what she had for breakfast that morning. Strokes are funny that way. Sadly, the assigned interviewer had a cold that day, and her coughing can be heard throughout the final product.

I came away from the experience with the mantra of “I can do that” and proceeded to sign up for the next training session. In my career in public relations, I had once been responsible for creating an electronic press kit to use to promote the new album by a client of mine. I had carefully prepared my questions for the interview with him that would follow a massive orchestral recording session. But when a famous friend of his crashed the recording and later plunked herself down next to him for the interview portion, thereby hijacking my carefully made plans, I needed to quickly pivot. I figured if I could navigate that situation, I could do this too.

Training began in early 1995 at a conference center in Burbank. The first session was on a Sunday. Several of the key players were introduced to the packed room and their roles explained. Then a giant bear of a man stood in front of us and began to tell his story. A native of Croatia, he said he was 10 years old when he and his mother were

put on a train to Auschwitz. Because he was tall for his age, his mother told him to say he was 16 when he was asked. That lie saved his life. He finished his harrowing tale by saying that he had made it his life's mission that the world should never forget what happened. "So I made some movies..." he said quietly. "The Tin Drum," "Sophie's Choice," "Schindler's List." His voice trailed off. His name was Branko Lustig, and he shared the Best Picture Oscar with Steven Spielberg as a producer of "Schindler's List" and helped him launch the Shoah Foundation. He only gave his own testimony when the Foundation had reached its initial goal of interviewing 50,000 survivors.

While I was still in training, I received a call from one of the Foundation's coordinators with a request. Steven Spielberg was making a documentary using excerpts from some of the now many survivor interviews that had been completed, and he wanted to use a clip from Mom's interview in the film. It was called "Survivors of the Holocaust." I gave them a provisional thumbs up, but said I should run it past my mother. After all, she should have some say in the decision. Although her stroke had left her physically diminished, her mind and her humor were still intact. When I explained the situation to her, she was quiet for awhile, and then she said: "They called. They called. When I came to Hollywood, they said 'don't call us, we'll call you,' and they called." I would tell that story at her funeral a few months later and received the laugh I had hoped for.

I would go on to conduct about a dozen interviews with survivors of varying sorts, most in Los Angeles but some during my various international travels for work. Among them, I interviewed a woman who witnessed Kristallnacht first hand, a man who as a teenager participated in the play presented in Terezinstadt to the International Red Cross to show how humanely the Jewish prisoners were being treated there and two of my own relatives, one who had been a hidden child, who entrusted me with their testimonies.

The final training session took place in June of 1995. As I drove home that night, I called my mother to check in, and she told me that a package had arrived from the Shoah Foundation. I told her it was likely the videotape of her testimony, and we made a plan to watch it together. She critiqued her performance and gave it a passing grade. A short time later, she would have another massive stroke that left her in a coma, after which she would pass away. I believe she decided that she had left her story behind for her grandchildren, and there was nothing more she needed to do.

The following year, my nephew's teacher at his Jewish day school in Houston decided to show "Survivors of the Holocaust" to the class to commemorate Yom HaShoah. At the appropriate moment in the film, my nephew shouted out, "That's my grandmother!" Another student retorted, "No it's not." A fight ensued that resulted in a trip to the principal's office for all involved. When my sister came to pick up her son, the teacher explained what happened in a slightly condescending "boys will be boys" tone, to which Robin defiantly declared, "But that IS my mother in the film!" Requisite apologies were made all around. And Mom would have been proud.