

Sonia Weitz Radio Interview, c. 1989 (Donated by Jacky Ankeles, Host of North Shore Issues)

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[Jacky Ankeles] (0:00 - 0:41)

Good morning and welcome to North Shore Issues, WBACH's public affairs program, where we focus each week on news items and issues that are important to people in different communities of the North Shore. I'm Jacky Ankeles and with me today is Sonia Weitz, founder and educational director of the Holocaust Center of the Jewish Federation of the North Shore in Peabody. We're going to be talking about the issue of anti-Semitism, talking specifically about the recent incidents of anti-Semitism in Marblehead and Swampscott and about the work of the Holocaust Center.

Sonia, it's a pleasure to have you here at WBACH this morning. Welcome. Thank you very much.

[Sonia Weitz] (0:41 - 0:42)

Thank you for having me here.

[Jacky Ankeles] (0:43 - 1:29)

Sonia Weitz is a resident of Peabody and has been devoted to educating people about the Holocaust. She is a survivor of five Nazi camps.

Sonia, just for me to say simply that you survived five Nazi death camps seems like just words, just a relating of a fact. There's no way to attach the horror and the anguish to the weight of that fact. When you tell people your story and the stories of countless others in your teachings, how do you get across the atrocities, how bad it was, how can you possibly relate to people what went on?

[Sonia Weitz] (1:30 - 3:27)

Well, it's a very difficult subject to deal with. It is unspeakable and unthinkable and we do have a problem conveying any part of the horror. I have a secret weapon.

I very often cop out and read a poem. I do that when I can't confront the memory like the day when my mother was taken from us and we never saw her again, when I speak about the children, the million and a half of Jewish children who were destroyed. And so I very often read a poem and allow the audience to absorb and think about as much of this unthinkable as they can.

And I'd like to share a poem with you that I usually begin with.

Come, take this giant leap with me into the other world... the other place where language fails and imagery defies, denies man's consciousness... and dies upon the altar of insanity.

Come, take this giant leap with me into the other world... the other place and trace the eclipse of humanity... where children burned while mankind stood by, and the universe has yet to learn why.

One other thought that usually follows that is that I try to point out that normal standards don't apply to the Holocaust, that it is a whole other universe, that we have no vocabulary to express it. In fact, normal words like cold or sick or suffering simply don't have the same meaning.

[Jacky Ankeles] (3:28 - 3:51)

Sonia, the great Nobel Peace Prize winner Elie Wiesel was silent for 10 years before he was able to speak about his experience. And then, of course, when he broke his silence, he wrote prolifically about the Holocaust. Do you find that the survivors that you have come in contact with want to talk about their experiences or prefer to bury their memories?

[Sonia Weitz] (3:52 - 5:01)

The answer is both. Some speak and some will not. Now, my sister, with whom I survived, the only other member of my family, in fact, out of 84, only she and I survived, she does not speak publicly. I do.

And so, in one family, you have both. Elie Wiesel has often said that silence is probably the only response to this history. I agree, except that I have such a problem.

It's a dilemma. It really is. We struggle with it all the time.

Not to trivialize, not to, which of course brings us to the films and all this the visual things on television today, which are not accurate very often and not documentary. However, perhaps silence is the right, the only response. But how do we dare not to speak?

And I find silence impossible, but I do struggle with how much, when, where, how do we talk about it?

[Jacky Ankeles] (5:02 - 5:35)

Sonia, it's 44 years later and you have now to deal with what is called neo-Nazi groups, anti-Semitic vandalism in the North Shore community. The popular rock group called Public Enemy Number One makes blatant anti-Semitic statements. The skinheads, some will deny this, but they have the reputation of being strong perpetrators of anti-Semitism.

What does this say to you, 44 years later, when you're confronted with not one, but many factions spelling anti-Semitism?

[Sonia Weitz] (5:36 - 6:58)

It's really the ultimate abomination. It truly is. All these years later and at times we pat each other on the shoulders and we think we're doing something right, and then I'm beginning to feel that we take one step forward and two backwards.

But still, again, I am usually optimistic and my cup is usually half full. I feel that we have come a long way, certainly in the last 20-25 years, especially in Christian-Jewish relations, especially in the response to racism and anti-Semitism. I think we're much more aware, I

think we are much more, the community knows that we are not alone, that is the Jewish community, and we do have many Christians around us who care, who care deeply.

The police, all the other Jewish organizations, and non-Jewish, and I'm sure we'll be talking sooner or later about the Christian task force on the North Shore. I find that I get very discouraged and I begin to wonder, have we learned anything from this history? And then I look around me and I know we have, and I don't feel that I am as alone as I was 50 years ago when it all started.

[Jacky Ankeles] (6:59 - 7:32)

Sonia, in the winter I interviewed Rabbi Abramson in Beverly after his temple, Temple B'nai Abraham, had been desecrated. One of the things we talked about was whether or not Jews should make too much or too little about the incident, or any anti-Semitic incident, and he spoke about the two schools of thought on that, and I think you started to discuss that. First, wanting to call attention to the incident or not wanting to make too much of it.

I'd like to hear what you have to say a little bit more about each way of thinking.

[Sonia Weitz] (7:33 - 8:31)

Well, there's no doubt in my mind, I've never been so sure of anything in my life as I am about that. The one and only response is to report and to make those around us aware of what's happening. The time of sweeping things under the rug is over, and it never worked.

It really never worked. I think that you hear more about these ugly happenings because we are more aware, more is reported. I don't believe that there is more of it around us.

I feel that hiding it, that not reporting it, erasing these horrible signs of the walls is very counterproductive. I believe that when the community unites against a small group, and let's not forget that these are small groups of bigots, then I think we have a very good chance to fight against it.

[Jacky Ankeles] (8:31 - 9:47)

Just a reminder, you're listening to North Shore Issues on WBACH 104.9 FM. I'm Jacky Ankeles, and with me this morning is Sonia Weitz, founder and director of the Holocaust Center of the Jewish Federation of the North Shore in Peabody. Sonia, in July, just a few months after the Beverly Temple's desecration, Temple Emanuel, the Reformed Synagogue in Marblehead, and the nearby Jewish Community Center were desecrated and vandalized by anti-Semitic graffiti.

The Beverly incident got a lot of press and subsequently a great amount of support was rallied by the community. Many people, and as you mentioned, not just Jews, the Christian community also was very supportive, and they expressed their outrage about the incident. Now the Marblehead incident was, seemed to be on an even larger scale in the degree of vandalism, the media coverage, and the ensuing outrage and community support.

It all just seems to be growing and expanding in every direction. Have you been satisfied with the handling by the media of anti-Semitic incidents, and have you been pleased with the outpouring of support from the community?

[Sonia Weitz] (9:47 - 11:27)

Yes, yes to both questions. I think the media has handled it very well. I think the police has been most responsive and concerned, and of course the community was truly magnificent.

It's too bad that we have to have these agonizing occurrences before we come together, but really it was most rewarding to those of us who work in the community trying to reduce the anti-Semitism, the racism, the bigotry. I think the community responded in just the right way. Of course it took the leadership of many people.

Rabbi Shapiro was wonderful. He still will not abandon the thought. In fact, this Friday night there's another service at his temple.

Cardinal Law will be there, and many other concerned Christians and Jews. I think the community responded magnificently. I also feel that the media, the police, you see, it does not happen overnight.

Now the Holocaust Center has participated in many events. We've had police workshops together with ADL, Anti-Defamation League. Last year we had a conference that we co-sponsored with ADL.

Not just the police. This time we had the media and the superintendents of schools, and so you see combining these people in leadership and the people who deal with the public really bears fruit. I think the awareness is there, and I think the reaction was very proper.

[Jacky Ankeles] (11:28 - 11:37)

Now what measures do you see being taken locally to deal with the issues of anti-Semitism besides the work of the Holocaust Center, which we'll talk about in a few minutes?

[Sonia Weitz] (11:38 - 12:40)

Well of course we are very fortunate on the North Shore, besides the Anti-Defamation League, which is always, it's a group that's always on top of anything of that sort. We have a Christian task force that was created several years ago. It's a group of concerned Christians who determined that anti-Semitism, racism, is their business, and so when something like that happens, they are the ones who will help clean up, who will help to report it, who will help to pursue the investigations.

The very idea that these people, mostly clergy, speak in their churches Sunday morning about the problem and then encourage their congregations to join a rally, such as we had in Beverly and then this summer in Marblehead, has to make me feel optimistic about the future.

[Jacky Ankeles] (12:41 - 12:52)

So Sonia, what about punishment for the vandals? It seems like the pressure really has been put on the police in Marblehead and Swampscott to catch the vandals. If they're caught, what then?

[Sonia Weitz] (12:52 - 14:02)

It's interesting, this has been, I've been struggling with that. Something occurred to me during the rally and I voiced that in an interview, I forget with whom, the point that yes,

education for these people, if they're, you know, whether they're young or mature adults, mature quote-unquote, I think education is very important. However, just education alone is not enough because we've learned through the Nazi experience that many of Hitler's henchmen had PhDs and in fact Dr. Mengele had two doctorates, so that education alone is not enough. You have to learn to be human and then of course that goes into a whole philosophy. Are we born human? Do we have to learn to be human?

But to get back to the perpetrators of these crimes, and they are crimes, I had a thought that a trip to Auschwitz would perhaps teach these people a little something about men's inhumanity to men and in turn teach them maybe something about learning to be human.

[Jacky Ankeles] (14:05 - 14:26)

Sonia, Swampscott High School was also the victim of vandalism and anti-Semitic graffiti. Hate mail arrived at Temple Beth-El in Swampscott in August on the heels of the Marblehead incident. How common is something like that, hate mail?

What does the Anti-Defamation League say about that?

[Sonia Weitz] (14:28 - 14:38)

Well again, there are two ways of looking at it. I think that there is not, it isn't that, the fact is not that there is so much more of it. I think more of it is reported.

[Jacky Ankeles] (14:40 - 14:47)

So if someone witnesses or finds anti-Semitic vandalism or graffiti, what should they do?

[Sonia Weitz] (14:47 - 15:00)

Well, I think there are a number of things you can do. You call the Holocaust Center, you call the ADL, you call the police. The thing you don't do is erase it and hope that it will go away.

[Jacky Ankeles] (15:01 - 15:08)

We'll continue our discussion about the issue of anti-Semitism with Sonia Weitz of the Holocaust Center in just a moment.

[Chamber Brass of Boston] (15:13 - 15:35)

Hello, we are the Chamber Brass of Boston. Be sure and tune in to WBACH this Wednesday night for Look Who's on the Radio, when we'll be performing in the studios of WBACH. So please join us, the Chamber Brass of Boston, this Wednesday night at eight o'clock here on WBACH 104.9 FM.

[Jacky Ankeles] (15:39 - 16:00)

We're back now on North Shore issues. I'm Jacky Ankeles talking this morning with Sonia Weitz of the Holocaust Center of the Jewish Federation of the North Shore in Peabody.

Sonia, let's talk now about the Holocaust Center. Can you tell us when you got the idea for an organization and how did you actually get started? What's the center's history?

[Sonia Weitz] (16:01 - 16:56)

Well, actually for me, I got started on my personal voyage of being a witness, if you will, when the revisionist books started coming out. There is a group of historical revisionists who claim the Holocaust never happened and that nearly drove me up a wall in plain

language and I found that my response would be to speak up. Shortly after that, I became friends with Harriet Wacks, who's a teacher, very concerned human being, not a survivor, not even a child of survivors.

The two of us conceived the idea of a resource center on the North Shore. Eventually, after many tries for funding, we were embraced by the Jewish Federation of the North Shore and we are funded by the Federation and by our membership.

[Jacky Ankeles] (16:57 - 17:02)

Now, could you describe what the Holocaust Center does? What does it offer? What's available?

[Sonia Weitz] (17:02 - 19:29)

The Holocaust Center offers, first of all, we have a media center. We have films, videotapes, a very respectable library.

We have over 800 books now on every subject on the Holocaust, from survivor's accounts to historical books, references and researchers, and people come in all the time to take advantage of the resources. We have a speaker's bureau of survivors, historians, clergy, one generation after children of survivors. We have awareness sessions for schools, for community organizations.

We have a very, very important oral history project. When you asked about survivors speaking up, I was going to bring that up because now time is growing short. We're getting older.

In fact, I'm one of the younger survivors and survivors have this compulsion now to speak up, and so we have joined Yale University in a very important project of oral history. We're very fortunate to have Zellie Kaplan as a chairperson of that event, of that project, I should say. We have conferences.

We coordinate conferences for clergy, human rights conferences, Jewish Christian team conference, media, police, superintendents, survivors, so that we are a resource center primarily. We do not actually do teacher training that we leave to Facing History. Facing History is the National Foundation that now reaches about 450,000 students in about 46 states, and it has really worked very well for the educators and for the students.

The other thing that one of the big projects that we do every year is the annual community-wide commemoration, Yom HaShoah, Holocaust Remembrance Day, and we have lectures, discussions, films. There's a candlelight ceremony, and each year we've brought in five to eight hundred people, and so the community has an opportunity to remember together.

[Jacky Ankeles] (19:31 - 19:51)

Sonia, could you talk about how children and young people figure in here? First of all, do you see any kids or teenagers who want to help you with your work, maybe after they've taken that Facing History course? Do young Jewish teenagers feel the importance of this kind of work?

[Sonia Weitz] (19:51 - 21:26)

I think yes. I think teenagers do want to learn about that history. I think not just Jewish teenagers, but all young people.

I think there's so much prejudice and scapegoating and stereotyping around us that this history is really a lesson for the future, and so when we read about a Vietnamese boy being abused, whether it's in a school or on the street, there are many ways that you can relate this to the history of the Holocaust. Also, we are trying to teach them that if we don't learn from it, we may just repeat those lessons, and we do often bring in and teach about the Armenian Genocide. The Armenian Genocide occurred during the First World War, and Hitler supposedly told his henchmen that he can get away with it, because who today remembers the Armenians?

And for us in Peabody, it's brought home very definitely, because Peter Torigian, the mayor of Peabody is Armenian, Armenian background. He's been very generous to us, and that's why we are housed in a public school with the generosity of the school department. You had to get that in.

Of course, we are very grateful. And so we do teach the lessons of history. The Holocaust is so well documented that it would be really unforgivable not to teach about it.

[Jacky Ankeles] (21:27 - 21:40)

Sonia, what about, how do you teach the horrors of the Holocaust to young children? And is there a different approach when you're teaching a group of only Jewish children, as opposed to a group of children of all different religions?

[Sonia Weitz] (21:41 - 23:08)

Well, I think it's very important to remember that the Holocaust is a Jewish tragedy, but it happened in a predominantly Christian world. And so it is a Jewish tragedy, as I said, a Jewish catastrophe, but the lessons are there for all children. And I don't think that the response is all that different, unless the Jewish children happen to be from survivor families.

Some Jewish people feel that we are all survivors, whether we were there or not, because to lose six million people is, of course, genocide, and every family was affected in some way. Teaching children, we prefer not to deal with under the seventh grade, but there are now books and ways of dealing with much younger children. There are books that are proper for five, six-year-olds, and there are ways of teaching about it.

In general, we never teach the horrors. We try not to show films like Night and Fog, unless the students or the adult students have been into this history for about six or eight weeks, because to horrify is to numb the mind, and it's very difficult to deal with it. There are other ways of teaching and many, many resources to do that.

[Jacky Ankeles] (23:09 - 23:40)

Sonia, how do you undo prejudice? Now, a nice easy question. If you reach the children at a very young age, maybe you can keep their minds open and clear of prejudiced attitudes towards not only Jews, but any minority, but you can't get away from the fact that many children have learned to be prejudiced from their parents.

You can try to teach them, and then they'll go home and listen to their parents, who may themselves be extremely prejudiced. How do you deal with that?

[Sonia Weitz] (23:41 - 24:43)

It's very difficult. I think that perhaps the first step, and I think we're bringing that out in that Human Rights Day in October, I think the very first step is perhaps confronting your own bigotry, because I think if we're honest with ourselves, we are all prejudiced and bigoted in some ways. And it may not be, someone said you can't legislate morality, but it's true.

It's just that maybe we cannot change, but if we confront it and we realize that it's someplace deep in our hearts. Father Bullock, who teaches a lot about the roots of antisemitism, has been quoted as saying that in the warmest Christian heart, there's a cold spot for Jews. Now I like to think that I know my friends, that I know Christians who don't have the cold spot, but and perhaps if they do, they're truly trying to get rid of it.

And so confronting your bigotry is probably the very first step.

[Jacky Ankeles] (24:44 - 25:30)

Just a reminder, you're listening to WBACH 104.9 FM. I'm Jacky Ankeles talking this morning with the director of the Holocaust Center of the Jewish Federation of the North Shore, Sonia Weitz, here on WBACH's public affairs program, North Shore Issues. Sonia, a little farther away from home, nevertheless appropriate to discuss, in the news recently there have been stories about Poland and antisemitism.

What is the status of the situation with the moving of a Carmelite convent from the site of Auschwitz? Could you explain what is happening and what should happen in your opinion and according to a written agreement? And why is this the cause of controversy?

[Sonia Weitz] (25:31 - 29:12)

Well, as a survivor, I can really speak about that from my own feelings. First of all, let me start out on a positive note. Coming here this morning, I heard that the Vatican was going to become involved in this controversy, which is very encouraging, and hopefully they will find a way to move this convent.

And hopefully we can go right back to some of the building of the wonderful bridges that we have between Jews and Catholics, and we have. Twenty years ago, this whole controversy would not even have been possible because we didn't talk to each other. I feel very strongly about it.

I also feel very strongly it has to be moved. I think the agreement has to be honored. I also feel that the nuns who are now in that convent, the convent which incidentally is the building that housed the cyanide that was used in killing all these people, the nuns I think meant well.

I truly would like to believe, and in fact I'm quite sure that they didn't realize how painful to someone like me the very thought that there is a convent, that there is a group of people particularly under that 20-foot cross. And I wrote to Cardinal Law recently, and I said

something to the effect that that symbol, the cross, just casting a shadow on the graveyard of my people literally keeps me awake at night. It's that emotional.

And I think that the Christians, the Catholics who participated in that agreement understood that the character of Auschwitz must not be changed, that there should not be one particular group praying. It must be left the way it is, and it must be left for the future, for posterity, if you will, for history, for the victims. I guess there's another point that is painful and often misunderstood, especially with the Polish people.

They suffered greatly. And as Elie Wiesel has said, not all the victims were Jewish, but all the Jews were victims. We were killed for no reason except that we were Jewish.

Every group that suffered under the Nazis, it must not be minimized. I mean suffering of all these people, and there were almost 20 million people who suffered. There were millions of others besides the Jews who were killed, who suffered, who were victims of the Nazis, especially in the camps.

But as Cardinal Law said, when we were in Auschwitz together in Birkenau, which was the death factory of Auschwitz, he said that this evil must be remembered. All the victims must be remembered. But what was done to the Jews was an unprecedented kind of evil.

In fact, he said that in that place, in Birkenau, he felt that every human being should feel Jewish or cease to be human. And so I feel very strongly about the convent being moved, and let's resume all the wonderful things that are beginning to happen between Catholics and Jews.

[Jacky Ankeles] (29:13 - 29:48)

Sonia, I wonder if you would talk about your thoughts regarding the Middle East situation. Now, Israel has taken some controversial and sometimes unconventional action in the course of events in the Middle East. Many people look upon Israelis with admiration, and some look upon them with outrage.

Can you put your finger on any one thing that would both clarify Israel's position and explain why this country should remain a friend of Israel's?

[Sonia Weitz] (29:49 - 31:40)

That's one question you can't answer standing on one foot, really. First of all, there's such a double standard when it comes to the Middle East, specifically to Israel. And I could go on for hours, this is in my other life, my second most important subject besides the Holocaust. I'd like to speak about myself personally.

Before the darkness, before the Holocaust, I remember my parents trying to get out of Europe, trying to get out of Poland, and to make it a brief statement, there was no place for us to go. There were immigration rules that were incredible in the free world. And there was no Israel for us: The British would not let us. We were trapped, and we were slaughtered. In fact, after the war, the Nazis found it much easier to come into the country and other free nations than the survivors did. And what I'm bringing out is that, when you have no place to go, you are a condemned trapped people, Israel is there to stay, Israel would have happened anyway, would have been reborn, had there not been a Holocaust. I

personally would not want to live in a world without Israel. In fact, next week I am on my way—I have children there, two brilliant grandchildren —I feel that we do expect more of Israel than any other nation. Israel is at war-has been for 40 years. And I really feel that it is very, very important to learn the history of the Middle East before anyone dares to condemn any action on Israel's part.

[Jacky Ankeles] (31:41 – 31:46)

Sonia, would you read us another poem, and tell us when it was written?

[Sonia Weitz] (31:47 - 33:20)

Well, I chose this poem because it speaks about what else was lost, and it was really inspired by Kitty Dukakis on that pilgrimage. She was sitting in Treblinka, another death camp, and she said something to the effect that the enormity of the tragedy hits you when you think about what else was lost. And those are my thoughts. And I think perhaps when you are not so tired, and you have time, just think about what I'm saying.

*A million Jewish children and their children's children ...
Unthinkable numbers
But what hurts the most Is the haunting thought
Of what else was lost
And how do we ever
Begin to mourn
The generations
Never to be born,
A leader of man.
An heir to a nation.
A builder.
An artist.
A healer.
A clown.
The cures undiscovered
The music unwritten
All the dreams undreamt
Or shattered ... or broken ...
Unimagined treasure
The losses unmeasured
Unwept for
Unspoken.*

[Jacky Ankeles] (33:21 – 34:34)

Sonia Weitz, thank you so much for joining us here at WBACH today and for speaking about the issue of anti-Semitism. It's a very painful issue for some and yet, the goal must be to enlighten people, to make people aware of what has happened, what is happening, and what should never happen again. Thank you, Sonia.

I would like now to give people the address of the Holocaust Media Center. They are located at the McCarthy School, 76 Lake Street, Room 108, in Peabody. And their phone number is

508-535-0003. Just a reminder that the views and opinions expressed on North Shore Issues are not necessarily the views and opinions of WBACH, its management, or its sponsors. If there's a subject or an issue that you'd like us to consider for a North Shore Issues program, drop a note to us at WBACH, W-B-A-C-H, 8 Enon Street, that's E-N-O-N, North Beverly, Massachusetts 01915. And we invite you to join us at this time again next week for more North Shore Issues.