

## Remembrances of a Child Holocaust Survivor

*Transcript of “Remembrances of a Child Holocaust Survivor,” by [Harold Kasimow](#), the George A. Drake Professor of Religious Studies Emeritus, Grinnell College. April 28, 2022.*

Henry Rietz:

[inaudible 00:00:01]. Good afternoon, everyone. My name is Henry Morisada Rietz, and I welcome you on behalf of the co-sponsors of this event, friends and colleagues in the Religious Studies Department, the CRSSJ, Chaverim, Department of History, Department of Russian, Central European, and Eurasian studies, Peace and Conflict Studies, and European Studies.

Henry Rietz:

We are humbled today by the opportunity to hear Professor Harold Kasimow share his remembrances as a child Holocaust survivor on this Day of Remembrance, Yom HaShoah. Dr. Kasimow is the George A. Drake Professor Emeritus of Religious Studies here at Grinnell College. Originally from Poland, Dr. Kasimow earned his bachelor of Hebrew letters from Jewish Theological Seminary, where he was a student of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, and an MA and PhD from Temple University.

Henry Rietz:

He's a leading authority on Heschel's thought and a world-renowned scholar on interreligious dialogue. He's the author of several books, including *Interfaith Activism: Abraham Joshua Heschel and Religious Diversity*, *The Search Will Make You Free: (I couldn't bring all of them) A Jewish Dialogue with World Religions*. His edited books include *Pope Francis and Interreligious Dialogue*, *John Paul II and Interreligious Dialogue*, *Beside Still Waters: Jews, Christians, and the Way of the Buddha*, and *No Religion is an Island: Abraham Joshua Heschel and Interreligious Dialogue*.

Henry Rietz:

His most recent book published last year is entitled *Love or Perish: A Holocaust Survivor's Vision for Interfaith Peace*. When Professor Kasimow first came to Grinnell in 1972, the Religious Studies Department had one

professor, Howard Burkle, teaching courses on philosophy and religion and the Christian tradition, Dennis Haas teaching the Hebrew Bible, Christian scriptures, and other biblical studies, and Professor Kasimow was charged with teaching everything else.

Henry Rietz:

In addition to classes on the Jewish tradition, he developed an introductory course on major Asian religions and taught upper-level courses on the Tradition of Islam, Tradition of Buddhism, Modern Hindu Thought, the Holocaust, and also co-taught with Sandy Moffett in the theater department, the Human Image in Modern Drama, among other courses.

Henry Rietz:

When I was an undergraduate at Grinnell, I was a student of Professor Kasimow. I took the Jewish Tradition, Traditions of Islam, the Buddhist Tradition. He was also my academic advisor who, when I was aspiring to graduate school and engaging in interreligious dialogue myself, wisely counseled me that I need to learn more about my own tradition first. Although we spent a unit in his Jewish traditions class on the Holocaust reading works by Rubenstein, Fackenheim, Wiesel, and Wiesenthal, Professor Kasimow did not talk about his experience of surviving the Holocaust.

Henry Rietz:

As I, and I know many, many other alums will testify, when one takes a class with Professor Kasimow we engage in rigorous academic learning, but we're learning from a truly authentic human being who inspires us not only to love one's neighbor, but also to love the stranger. So it's with gratitude that I introduce to you Professor Harold Kasimow and invite you to, today, be his student.

Harold Kasimow:

Thank you all for coming. I'm especially grateful to Henry Rietz for organizing this event. I'd also like to thank Cheryl Fleener and Rabbi Susan Miller for the work that they did to promote my talk. Now, I know that there are people here who have read the newspaper last week and, also, there's some people I know who read Defying Darkness in the Grinnell Magazine, which was the first time that my story was written by Jackie Stolze.

Harold Kasimow:

It was written about three survivors connected to Grinnell, and I was one of them. So because of that, I want to tell you a little story. It's about a professor of religion who goes to Japan to give a lecture. He has an interpreter and, after two minutes, he stops. The interpreter says to him, "Go on. Go on." So he speaks for 15 minutes. He stops. The interpreter says one sentence and then says, "Go on. Go on." This happens again after 30 minutes and then after 45 minutes.

Harold Kasimow:

And then he finishes his talk after an hour. The professor's just amazed. He says, "What did you say to them?" And he said, "Well, the first time, I said, 'He didn't say anything new.' The second time, I said, 'After 30 minutes, he still didn't say anything new.' The third time I said-

Speaker 3:

Try this here. See if that helps.

Harold Kasimow:

"I don't think he's going to say anything new.' When you finished, I said, 'I was right.'" So if you have the fact that many people have read about the paper and the Defying Darkness, you'll have to forgive me if I don't say anything new.

Harold Kasimow:

I think those who know me know that I'm not a specialist in Holocaust studies, that until I came to Grinnell in 1972, I had read very little on the Holocaust. Until recently, I rarely spoke about my own story of survival. My memories of the Holocaust never really go away. I live with my memories every day of my life and with the painful knowledge of the one million Jewish children in Poland in 1939, I'm only one of about 5,000 who survived.

Harold Kasimow:

So we all have scars from wounds that are forever in the process of healing. Surviving the Holocaust is not the end of the Holocaust. I know that my children are also affected by this experience, although I've rarely spoken to them about it. Before I tell you my story, it'll be brief, I want to reflect on a

few of the best-known Jewish survivors who have written on the Holocaust experience.

Harold Kasimow:

I repeat again, my specialty of study has been comparative religion with special focus on interfaith dialogue, which I believe can further the cause of peace, understanding, and human dignity. For me, interreligious dialogue is a path to overcome tolerance and create a more peaceful world. I agree with my teacher, Leonard Swidler, from Temple University, who's still teaching full-time at 93, that humankind is faced ultimately with two choices. It's a name of a book, actually, dialogue or death.

Harold Kasimow:

I also agree with the words of the founding Christian thinker, Hans Kung, who stated quite a while ago actually in many places that, "There can be no peace in the world without peace among the religions, and no peace among the religions without dialogue among the religions." Human rights activist, best-known Holocaust survivor, a world-famous author and teacher, Elie Wiesel, who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1986, stated that interreligious dialogue, "is the only answer," not only one of the answers, is the only answer.

Harold Kasimow:

For Wiesel, the most important issue in the world are indifference and hate. The issue of indifference is perhaps more than any other issue with which he struggled all his life. In his novel, one of his early novels, *The Town Beyond the Wall*, he stated, "This was the only thing I had wanted to understand ever since the war, how a human being can remain indifferent."

Harold Kasimow:

I know that Wiesel was asked by one of his students, what is his core mission in life? He said, "I am a teacher first, and teaching is the last thing that I will give out." His major goal was to teach his students not to be silent. So he himself not only spoke and wrote, but he also acted. He believed that, "Action is the only remedy to indifference." He once told one of his students, "Teaching is a form of activism."

Harold Kasimow:

I want to read one passage from Wiesel's book, "Night." I think it's probably one of the best-known books on the Holocaust and probably the best-

known book of the 57 books that he wrote about his experience in Auschwitz and Buchenwald. it was published in 1960. When he first submitted it, he was told, "Your book is morbid. Nobody wants to hear your stories." So he had problems getting it published.

Harold Kasimow:

But then in 1960, Hill & Wang gave him a \$100 advance. In three years, it sold only 3,000 copies, but by 2006, it had sold a million and was translated in at least 30 languages. As a way to introduce the topic, I want to read a passage from the book which describes his reaction upon arriving in Auschwitz. I think he was about 15 years old at the time, that camp near Krakow, which is a major symbol of the Holocaust, where more than one million people, mostly Jews, but many others, were gassed, burned, and turned to ash.

Harold Kasimow:

Here's what Elie Wiesel wrote in Night. "I should never forget that night, the first night in camp, which has turned my life into one long night, seven times cursed and seven times sealed. Never shall I forget that smoke. Never shall I forget the little faces of the children whose bodies I saw turn to wisps of smoke beneath the silent blue sky. Never shall I forget those flames which consumed my faith forever. Never shall I forget that eternal silence which deprived me for all eternity of the desire to live. Never shall I forget those moments which murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to dust. Never shall I forget these things even if I am condemned to live as long as God Himself, never."

Harold Kasimow:

Wiesel said that he had to write about the Holocaust experience, "not to divide people but, on the contrary, to bring them together. Not to inflict suffering but, on the contrary, to diminish it. Not to humiliate anyone but, the contrary, to teach others to humiliate no one." This is end of quote. "We must let go of hatred." Wiesel felt that what happened once could happen again. He was one of first people to go to the border in Thailand and Cambodia.

Harold Kasimow:

Many Holocaust survivors feel an obligation to bear witness. I've often read that some survivors lived only to bear witness. The great fear was that no one would survive to bear witness to the Holocaust. As a Holocaust

survivor, I also felt that I had a responsibility to tell my story with the hope that such an event would never happen again, that the air would never be so soaked with blood. But I also felt it should be told by people who were older than me and who remember their experience much better than I do.

Harold Kasimow:

I also imagined that no one would believe my story or would want to hear it. Of course, I knew what had happened to me, but until I came to Grinnell, I'd read very little Holocaust literature although I had many opportunities to do so, especially when I was a graduate student in the Department of Religion at Temple University in Philadelphia, where Franklin Littell, a Methodist minister, was considered one of the founders of Holocaust studies.

Harold Kasimow:

He graduated from Grinnell College, by the way, and was teaching at Emory University in '59. He may have been the first person to teach a course on the Holocaust. But I actually don't remember him teaching a course on the Holocaust at Temple at that point. And then I think Brandeis and then it began. But all through my years at the seminary and graduate school, nobody was teaching courses on the Holocaust.

Harold Kasimow:

Littell's deep involvement with Jews and Judaism began after witnessing a Nazi rally that he attended in 1939. When Hitler appeared, Littell walked out. In his 1975 book, *The Crucifixion of the Jews*, that's the title of the book, is a plea for the Christian community to wrestle with a centuries' long tradition of antisemitism and with the moral challenge by the Holocaust. His book makes it clear that many of the Nazi leaders had attended some of the best German universities.

Harold Kasimow:

I learned not so long ago that during the 1930s, America's leading colleges and universities, including Harvard, Columbia, University of Wisconsin, Minnesota, they forged friendly ties with the Nazified universities, inviting top Nazi officials to campus. They also participated in student exchanges with German universities that had already expelled all of the Jewish faculty members. We know that in May 1933, German student organizations began book burning at their universities. When I read that, I remembered

Heinrich Heine's statement, "When people begin to burn books, burning people may soon follow."

Harold Kasimow:

My parents never really spoke about our experience to me and my two older sisters. We were there with them, but they knew that there are many, many questions that I have now that I've never asked them. They would only discuss it with other Holocaust survivors. The first person to whom I told my story was actually Professor Emil Fackenheim, who was arrested by the Nazis on November the 9th, known as Kristallnacht, Night of Broken Glass, and was sent to Sachsenhausen concentration camp.

Harold Kasimow:

Fackenheim came to Grinnell in 1972. It was my first year. It was the Gates Lecture. He spoke on the commanding voice of Auschwitz. In his talk at Grinnell, Fackenheim stressed that the voice of Auschwitz commands that, "Jews are forbidden to give up on Judaism because that would give Hitler posthumous victory." I'm not going to quote him at length. He was the first person I sat down, South Lounge maybe or at the coffee house there and I told him my story.

Harold Kasimow:

He said in his talk that, "We're commanded to remember the victims of Auschwitz, lest the memory perish. Forbidden to despair of men in the world and to escaping in their cynicism and other worldliness, lest we cooperate in delivering the world over to the forces of Auschwitz." Finally, "We're forbidden to despair of God," and so on. He said, "In ancient times, the unthinkable Jewish sin was idolatry. Today, it is to respond to it by doing his work."

Harold Kasimow:

I can't go into detail on my own problems with Fackenheim, but that's another talk. Fackenheim and Wiesel are the two best-known writers on the Holocaust who are known as Holocaust theologians because of their stress on the Holocaust as a unique event. Both Fackenheim and Wiesel viewed the Holocaust as something radically new and without precedent in the history of Judaism.

Harold Kasimow:

The most significant fact about the Holocaust for Fackenheim is what it does not have in common with other cases of genocide, namely, that the Wannsee Conference, which took place in January 20, 1942, 15 high-ranking members of the Nazi Party decided that not a single Jew must stay alive. Every Jew was to be murdered. That was decided in this very beautiful place, which I had the chance to visit not so long ago. This beautiful place outside of Berlin that they came to implement was called The Final Solution of the Jewish Question.

Harold Kasimow:

Fackenheim and Wiesel know that millions of Christians were also murdered by the Nazis, but they claimed that only Jews were singled out for complete eradication. Wiesel said, "Not all victims were Jews, but all Jews were victims." Now, there are many Jewish thinkers who have problems with the Holocaust theologians. Their shortcoming, according to the critics, is that they deal with the Holocaust as if there had not been other tragedies in Jewish history.

Harold Kasimow:

For some Orthodox thinkers especially, Auschwitz is unique in the magnitude of its horror, but not in the problem it presents for religious faith. Professor Jacob Neusner, a conservative rabbi, one of the best-known scholars in Judaic studies, he only wrote 1,000 books. It's true. I know actually where he sent them. He sent them, I forget the country, to be sure that it wouldn't get bombed or anything like that. So he sent them outside the United States.

Harold Kasimow:

In this article, *The Implications of the Holocaust*, I claim there's no implication. None for Judaic theology, none for Jewish community life, which was not present before 1933. In fact, Judaic piety has known all along how to respond to disaster. That, of course, is a different topic again. So it was not until the 1980s. As Professor Rietz said, I was teaching other major religions except for Christianity, but I finally agreed to teach a course of the Holocaust as a special topic.

Harold Kasimow:

I made no claim that I was a Holocaust expert. But at that point, I knew what some of the insightful historians and theologians were telling us about this event. I already read a little bit about Wiesel, Fackenheim, Rubenstein,



Berkowitz, and many others who were writing at the time. I began to see more fully the magnitude of this catastrophe because, up to that point, I only knew what happened to me.

Harold Kasimow:

At the same time, I also realized I would have to live my life without being able to answer some of the major questions arising from the Holocaust. Perhaps any explanation is beyond human understanding. I offered this course only twice because I found it very depressing, frankly. At least I think it was a worthwhile course for me and the students, but it was just I didn't want to make it into a permanent course, especially a topics course I could only teach twice during my time.

Harold Kasimow:

It was painful to teach that course. I don't remember if I told the students at that time whether I was a Holocaust survivor. I found that what makes it more so frightening is it was not done by a group of deranged men, but by ordinary people. Among the leading Nazis were those who had MDs, PhDs, and law degrees, including Martin Heidegger. However, I did begin to devote about two weeks to this topic in my Introduction to Judaism course because I realized that it is part of Jewish history, and I must not forget what's happened to the Jewish people and to the world.

Harold Kasimow:

It's our responsibility to see that doesn't happen again. We must always remember that the six million Jews, including one million children, actually it's a million and a half children. That's a million children in Poland, but the total, the estimate's a million and a half, were not the only victims. There were at least five million non-Jews, including Roma people, homosexuals, Jehovah witnesses, and perhaps as many as three million Polish Catholics, including many priests and nuns who were exterminated by the Nazis as part of the Nazi effort to purify humanity.

Harold Kasimow:

We also now know that Heinrich Himmler had a plan to eventually exterminate all of the Slavic people. We also know that I think there were 2,500 Polish people who were killed because they tried to protect Jews. It was not until 2001. I'd already traveled to many parts of the world, I have to say, by 2001. But this was the first time I attended a conference on Holocaust survivor in Vilnius, Lithuania, and not before 2004, before I

spoke in public for the first time about my experience at the request of my dear friend, Brother Wayne Teasdale, at the Parliament of World Religions in Barcelona, Spain.

Harold Kasimow:

So by that time, 2004 was also a year that I traveled to spend a few weeks in Poland with the Jesuits. I've given many lectures, but I don't think I spoke about my Holocaust experience during those lectures. The first time I spoke about it and wrote down a page or two was actually because when Teasdale asked me to do it for a book that he was writing.

Harold Kasimow:

Okay. Now I'll tell you my story. I was born in 1937 in the shtetl, a small village not far from Vilnius. Vilnius was then part of Poland. Now it's the capital of Lithuania, which at that time was part of Poland. On July the 2nd, just before my fourth birthday, the German army took control of our village. We lived under a traumatizing German occupation until April 3, 1942 when a priest informed my father of a massacre of the Jews in a nearby village. This was our last chance to escape, and we did.

Harold Kasimow:

All the Jews were taken away soon after July the 2nd. In fact, pogroms started a bit before and Jews were killed before that. The reason we survived, I guess, is that the Germans picked five families to stay in that town. We were in Drysviaty at that point. It's right near Turmantas, where I was born. They left five families in Drysviaty, which is just, it's right near Turmantas, it's now part of Belarus, to work for them.

Harold Kasimow:

Since my father's father was a farmer, my father was a fisherman, so they needed fish. So they left these five families to work, to remain alive, meanwhile. But my father knew at the time most of the Jews in that area. In that entire area, it's around near Vilnius, were actually shot by bullets, the few million before the Final Solution came. The decision was made that a few million Jews were shot by bullets mainly in that part of the world. I think only maybe less than 10% of the Jews survived in Lithuania.

Harold Kasimow:

Now, I have been in contact with people in Lithuania and they have been in contact with people in Belarus. They sent me the document, not only the

document of the five families, so I have the names of those five families with the children's names and so forth who were left to work for the German army. Okay. For the next summer or so, we escaped. So then maybe one night when my father escaped, he took one other family with him. I think it was a man, woman, and a child, a girl. I think that the woman and the child survived. I don't think the man survived.

Harold Kasimow:

My two older sisters and I, we hid in barns and attics and many other places, helped by farmers in the area who risked their own life to help us. When we all became sick with terrible coughs and could no longer hide near any home, my father dug a ditch in the forest where we stayed for five weeks. I have a vague memory of seeing a bear in the forest. I really do. I don't think I created that. I probably didn't tell my mother because she probably would have yelled at me for walking away too far from the ditch where we were hidden in the forest.

Harold Kasimow:

I guess that's when my father went out. Now the main part of my story is the 19 months and five days before the war ended. It hadn't actually ended, but it pretty much ended for us in our part of the world in the Vilnius area where my father excavated a large pit underneath a stall in the barn that was next to the house of Wladislaw Piworowitz, who was a very poor farmer. My father had a lot to offer him at that point still and actually promised to give him his two houses that we had.

Harold Kasimow:

We shared an underground hideout, which we called the grube which is Yiddish for hole and kever, Hebrew, I guess it means grave, with frogs and worms. Inside the grube, there was a small hole dug into the dirt that served as our toilet. We covered it with straw to block out the stench. My father also dug a tunnel from the cattle barn that led to the potato cellar of the farmer. He was the only one. The hole we were in and the barn was covered with boards or straw. But my father could crawl out into the potato cellar and he could leave at night.

Harold Kasimow:

He was the only one who ever went out. He worked with many people when he was a fisherman. I think he was sort of in charge of the fishing operation. So there were many people who were willing to risk their lives to help him

and give him a little bit of extra food. I mean mostly we just had ... Yes, the farmer who hid us was very poor, but we had potato peels and things like that, potato cellar. If my mother had a piece of bread, I kissed my mother's hand.

Harold Kasimow:

The entire time, we were in the dark. We didn't wash. We were infested with lice. That was pretty dangerous, too. We were in constant fear of being discovered by the Nazis and others who would turn us into the Nazis. There were many occasions where we came very close to being killed. But one occasion especially, I guess my parents told me that. I don't remember that. But a group of German soldiers with a dog passed the farm. I don't know if the dog began to bark or to dig, but at that point, which must have been '43, '44, they weren't searching for anybody anymore and they just called the dog off.

Harold Kasimow:

We left the grube. I don't know the date, the end of July or early August, I think, because that's when the German army started moving out. When we came out of the grube, there was still fighting going on. When we left, my mother, my sisters, and I were sitting in the forest. We were sitting under a tree. My father went ahead to explore the situation. Suddenly, we heard a strange sound. We moved from the spot, assuming that something had happened to my father. A moment later, a rocket hit the tree where we had been sitting. So the noise actually was a rocket hit a horse.

Harold Kasimow:

Nearly all my relatives, including my mother's mother with whom I had a special relationship and I look at her every night, pictures of her, were murdered during the Holocaust. We were liberated by the Russians. Ultimately, we somehow made it back. There was fighting going on. We were marching with a group. There was still bombings going on. I was given to understand that, at that point, the Germans were just sixteen-year-olds that they had sent out to that area that were still fighting.

Harold Kasimow:

But we made it back to Turmantas, which was now under Russians. We stayed there for approximately I don't remember how much, but we were there for perhaps almost a year in Turmantas before my father made the decision to move to get out of Russian control. I remember one night

crossing the border at night. On our way to a major town from where we were in Turmantas, our wagon was separated. Our train was separated from the other wagon, and a group of Polish men came trying to break into our wagon.

Harold Kasimow:

That I can almost remember because at that point I must have been, let's see, I'm trying to think. I'm trying to get the years straight, '45 or so. So I was eight, nine. My father was standing with an iron in his hand. Also, his younger brother was with us. His youngest brother survived. He was a partisan throughout the war. He was able to climb out through the back of the window and bring the police. They came and said, "Break it up, boys." So we survived that.

Harold Kasimow:

And then we had to cross over the border. I guess it was into Czechoslovakia. I remember at night. That would not have been so dangerous anymore. But I remember the night that we went over. We were on the American side. We stayed in [inaudible 00:38:01] for a while. That was our first DP camp. That's where that's where Pope Benedict was for a while, prisoner of the Americans for a while. And then we went to Bad Reichenhall, which was a big DP camp, for three years, from '46 to '49.

Harold Kasimow:

I was very small and was fainting and with other issues, but I survived. In fact, on the ship we came, we arrived on August the 23rd, but it was a pretty rough trip from Germany to the United States. Everybody was sick one day. I was the only one who went to have breakfast. I had an orange, which may have been the first orange I ever had. I don't remember oranges. I don't remember anything when the Germans came. I don't remember that. I was told that I had hidden under something, but I don't remember that.

Harold Kasimow:

My memory begins when we left Turmantas in April 1944. That's when my memory begins. So the major experience was that time we were hiding. I know there's somebody who knows about this book. My older sister, who's four years older than me, wrote a book called *The Portrait of a Holocaust Child*, which talks solely about those 19 months and five days that we spent in the grube. As she was older, things were really so tough. She tried to swallow a good number of buttons to commit suicide, but she survived.

Harold Kasimow:

So I just want to say something about my most important teacher, a few other things. I think that my experience of, I realized that later, I guess, as a child survivor of the Holocaust had profoundly affected my life, which I've pretty much devoted to the study of the major religions of the world. I think it may have influenced me to become engaged into religious dialogue as a path to peace. I don't want to see any more children lose their childhood.

Harold Kasimow:

As things are happening right now, I've been particularly attracted to saints, spiritual men and women of great compassion who are not preoccupied with themselves, but with the suffering of other human beings and don't adjust to violence. They dedicate their lives to bringing compassion to the people of our planet. I've been fortunate to meet a good number of extraordinary men and women from different religious traditions. I believe they've had some impact on me.

Harold Kasimow:

Foremost among them is Abraham Joshua Heschel, whom I first met at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York when I was 19 years old. I was attracted to him. I mean he had a brilliant mind and he was a real mensch, which is Yiddish. It signifies someone who's truly human, a compassionate human being of dignity and integrity. A mensch is a person who combines, in my interpretation, compassion and passion for truth.

Harold Kasimow:

At that point, when I was 19, I wasn't an outstanding student but, for Heschel, I stayed up all night to be prepared for his class. There's something about him that moved me. Today, Heschel's admired as the greatest spiritual Jewish teacher and activist of the 20th century. He's best known for marching with Martin Luther King from Selma to Montgomery to protest the humiliation of African American citizens.

Harold Kasimow:

Heschel's experience of the Holocaust is certainly one of the reasons for his social activism. He lived in Germany from 1927 to 1938, where he experienced racism and often pointed out how violence towards others begins with words. His daughter tells us that, "He used to remind us that the Holocaust did not begin with the building of crematoria and Hitler did

not come to power with tanks and guns. It all began with uttering evil words, with defamation, with language, and propaganda."

Harold Kasimow:

Heschel didn't blame God. He said, "God didn't do it. Human beings did it." For Heschel, God is the God of pathos who cares and participates in human suffering and, therefore, was there in the Holocaust. Now in recent times, I don't know if anybody has seen there's just a film that came out by Martin Doblmeier, a new documentary called *Spiritual Audacity: Abraham Joshua Heschel's Story*. It's been shown recently on TV.

Speaker 4:

On PBS.

Harold Kasimow:

On PBS, yes. On the other hand, with Heschel, and this is really my interpretation, couldn't totally give up the idea that God could have intervened in the Holocaust. I think he struggled with this terrifying question his entire life. But that's just the different scholars interpreting very differently. He never focused on the Holocaust. His students were surprised, in fact. But we do find in his writing many statements on which we can discern its profound impact on his life.

Harold Kasimow:

In the 1967 interview at Notre Dame University, he stated, "I am really a person who is in anguish. I can't forget what I have seen and been through. Auschwitz and Hiroshima never leave my mind. Nothing can be the same after that." In one of his most important essays, *No Religion is an Island*, Heschel defines himself as a survivor. "I am a brand plucked from the fire in which my people was burned to death. I am a brand plucked from the fire of an altar of Satan on which millions of lives were exterminated to evil's faded glory."

Harold Kasimow:

So at this point, I've spoken to many survivors, and I've read a number of survivor stories. What I hear them saying above all things is, "Don't hate. Love life, and fight for the rights of members of all faiths." Most survivors that I have met continue to struggle for peace and never give up hope that one day it will come. I have a few, but maybe I'll just read one or two very

quick stories. I found a book called Hasidic Tales of the Holocaust by Yaffa Eliach, who was actually born near Vilnius.

Harold Kasimow:

Now, she was a Holocaust scholar, teaching the Holocaust all her teaching career in Brooklyn College. She included many interviews with many Holocaust survivors, Hasidic. Here's one with a rabbi. He survived the death camps. His wife and 11 children were murdered by the Nazis. He made the following amazing statement to Yaffa Eliach. He said, "The biggest miracle of all is the one that we, the survivors of the Holocaust, after all that we have witnessed and lived through still believe and have faith in the Almighty God, may his name be blessed. This, my friends is the miracle of miracles, the greatest miracle ever to have taken place."

Harold Kasimow:

One more story also from her book. I think it's from her book. I'm not certain at the time. But it's a researcher who was doing stories on the Holocaust. He met a rabbi who had been through the camps and who miraculously seemed unscarred. He could still laugh. He asked him, "Could you see what you saw and still have faith? Did you have no questions?" This is what the rabbi, the Holocaust survivor, replied, "Of course, I had questions, but I said to myself, 'if you ever ask these questions, there are such powerful questions that God will send you a personal invitation to heaven to give you the answers.' I prefer to be here on Earth with the questions than it heaven with the answers."

Harold Kasimow:

I could tell you more stories. I just want to read one brief passage from an interview, one of the last interviews that Heschel had about two weeks before he died with Carl Stern, who I think he was an NBC correspondent. Carl Stern said, "I know you have a message for young people. What is your message for young people?"

Harold Kasimow:

This is what Heschel said, "I would say let them remember that there's meaning beyond absurdity. Let them be sure that every little deed counts, that every word has power and that we can, everyone, do our share to redeem the world in spite of all absurdities and all the frustrations and all the disappointments. Above all, remember that the meaning of life is to build a life as if it were a work of art. You're not a machine, and you are



young. Start working on this great work of art called your own existence."  
Thank you very much. Thank you.

Henry Rietz:

Would you like to take take a few questions?

Harold Kasimow:

Yeah, absolutely.

Henry Rietz:

Thank you very much, Professor Kasimow. What a powerful story, speaking what is really unspeakable. Thank you for sharing with us and all of that-

Harold Kasimow:

Thank you for coming.

Henry Rietz:

... wisdom and compassion coming out of that, which is astounding to me. Professor Kasimow will take a few questions if folks would have them.

Speaker 5:

How many of these presentations have you made? How many presentations have you made similar to this?

Harold Kasimow:

Similar to this, very few. I can tell you the very first presentation I ever made was in ... I made one in 2007 for a Yom HaShoah, but I really didn't speak about my ... I actually spoke just about Heschel a little bit. It wasn't anything like what you heard today. I don't know whether I took a minute to tell my story or not. That was in Illinois. Well, I did a very brief, but it wasn't really ... I mentioned a few things when I did the thing at the Parliament of World Religions in Spain.

Harold Kasimow:

And then I only began to really do presentations in 2014, when in Des Moines, they created the Holocaust Memorial Committee, which I am a member. They invited me to give a talk during Yom HaShoah, but I didn't speak. I didn't give the talk that I gave to you. I did it on Jewish responses to the Holocaust. So it was all the Orthodox views and so on. Well, I did

some of Fackenheim, Wiesel, and then ... But since that time, I've given a few. I don't know.

Harold Kasimow:

Maybe I feel a responsibility to do it and decided that because in 2018, I was still working on Pope Francis. I was still doing interfaith dialogue. But then I made the decision that most survivors are dying. There's only, as far as I know, one public survivor in Des Moines, one other one, who survived Auschwitz. He's 10 years older than me. But I had a responsibility to do it. So maybe I don't know. I've done maybe 10. But similar to this maybe, I'm trying to think, at a few Catholic universities usually and the Yom HaShoah in the quad cities mostly.

Harold Kasimow:

So I've done quite a few of those, maybe a dozen. I don't know. I've actually now, as I keep remembering, I did a number of high schools, but it was different talks than what I just did. It was very brief. Just this last week, I did a few Zooms to eighth graders. I just spoke to them. I didn't use a text because I could just tell them stories, answer questions. They asked really good questions and so on. Actually, I've been reading more about the Holocaust materials now and decided that any energy that I have left, I would make a presentation, just tell my story instead of reading, which I'm still very enticed by. I do keep reading about Buddhism and so on. Go ahead.

Henry Rietz:

You're first and then Monte and then Jill.

Speaker 6:

Thank you so much for speaking with us. I wanted to ask if your family ever made contact again with the farmer whose farm you were staying at.

Harold Kasimow:

There's just so many questions. My father knew everything, my mother, too, but my father more. But I never really asked. We just never spoke about that. So I don't know if we made contact. But when we moved back to Turmantas, we were only ... It's right across the river. What helped to save us is that my father's a fisherman. He knew the major lake there, the Drysviaty. It's called the Drysviaty on the Lithuania side. It has a different

name on the Belarusian side. But they're 10 miles from where we were hiding, which is now Belarus.

Harold Kasimow:

I was in Lithuania now a number of times. You can't go to Belarus without special stand. Even though I was 10 miles away from where I was hiding, I have never been there. But I've had some contact. The people in Lithuania in recent years, I've been in contact with people in Lithuania. They were in contact with people in Belarus, and they even sent me the picture of the house and showed me the house and how nice it still looks and that there's a teacher who lives in that house with his ... He seems like a retired teacher.

Harold Kasimow:

But otherwise, there's just all these questions that I don't know because I didn't ... My sister spoke a little bit more to my students, but she doesn't have that information either, I don't think.

Speaker 7:

Thank you for ... Is it coming through there? It's coming through. Okay. Well, yes, thank you for sharing with us today. I'm disturbed that there apparently is an increase in antisemitism. How do you deal with that?

Harold Kasimow:

There is an increase in racism and antisemitism. I've had that question before. You wouldn't be surprised because it's been going on for a while. There's been a very large increase in this last year or so. People have asked what specific action or work people can do. I wrote this out to myself once to say that everyone has to find his or her own way to fight hatred. Holocaust survivors are especially affected by this. You should know because when you think of the children hiding in the ... It reminds me of I'm not the only one who was in a grube. A lot of people were in cellars and grubes who survived.

Harold Kasimow:

So some may want to speak to their family and friends about this. Some teachers may want to devote more time to teaching about the Holocaust. Some interfaith activists may want to march. All of us should carefully examine how our hearts desire us to act. But whatever we do, we must act in a way that would bring joy to other people. Of course, a lot of people, I'm sure, are making donations. But If I can take a minute, it reminds me of

another story. Some can't even do that. But it reminds me of another story from Yaffa Eliach, who met this survivor.

Harold Kasimow:

This is a true story. He was a rabbi. He was a very prominent rabbi in Germany, and he used to take a walk every Saturday afternoon with his son-in-law. He had a habit of saying hello by name to everybody that he encountered and their title and so on. As he walked out of town, he always met this farmer, Herr Mueller. He always say, "Guten Morgen, Herr Mueller." Herr Mueller would always good-naturedly answer him, "Guten Morgen, Herr Rabbiner."

Harold Kasimow:

This went on for a while. Then the war started. Mr. Mueller donned a Nazi uniform, and the rabbi ended up in Auschwitz. He was standing in a lineup and he was hearing a voice going by, "Right, left, left, left." Right was to work yourself to death, and left was to go to death chambers. The rabbi who was just barely alive, but he heard that voice and it just sort of came out of him. He said, "Guten Morgen, Herr Mueller." Herr Mueller said, "Guten Morgen, Herr Rabbiner. What are you doing here?"

Harold Kasimow:

A faint smile came over the rabbi's face. The next day, he moved him to a different camp where he was able to survive. The rabbi said to Yaffa Eliach, "Never underestimate the power of a good morning greeting."

Speaker 8:

Thank you for sharing all of this. It's wonderful. You mentioned that your own family doesn't know a lot. Did you share this with your wife, your own children at some point in time?

Harold Kasimow:

I don't share that very much, no. I think they know quite a bit, but I don't know which daughter may have driven me once to a talk and attended my talk. I've noticed some interest in my daughters. I didn't mention after the war, the main thing I remember after the war is when we had Shmerke Kaczerginski was one of the most prominent poets and writers, head of Vilna literary society who survived the war. He came to visit us in Turmantas. That's the one thing that I remember about Turmantas.

Harold Kasimow:

He wrote a book called *The Destruction of the Jews in Vilna and Surrounding Area*, and he took a testament from my parents, which is actually my sister's book. I never had the book. One of my sisters had that translated. But my youngest daughter made a point of getting that book. I know it's now being translated into English. But basically, we don't really talk about it. I know some families that ... But that would not be me. The Holocaust survivors, especially in the early years, there was very little ...

Harold Kasimow:

My mother's first cousin was Shmerke Kaczerginski. I mean, here, he wrote this book in '48 maybe. It's mostly Yiddish or Russian. In America, there was almost nothing until the '60s. People didn't really speak about that until the Eichmann trial. Elie Wiesel began to write. Fackenheim began to write. *The Deputy*, the play in New York came out, which I happened to see because I was in New York in the '60s. And then more and more materials came out.

Harold Kasimow:

But in general, there wasn't that. It was people, Holocaust survivors. Now there's just hundreds of diaries, but mostly they didn't start talking about it until they turned 80.

Speaker 9:

Are you Jewish? I had a wonderful German Jew from Munich, a professor for my first class in German. I dearly loved him.

Harold Kasimow:

I'm sorry. I didn't get that clear.

Henry Rietz:

They're asking your faith, if you're Jewish.

Harold Kasimow:

Yeah. Is there any question about that? There's a very interesting phenomenon going on in Poland. Now I've made many trips to Poland. The guesstimated number of Jews in Poland is about 5,000, but people think that there are actually about 20,000 Jews. Let me just tell you two quick stories. One is [inaudible 01:06:12]. My interpreter when I was traveling to

Lublin actually to speak about the Pope John Paul II, but anyway, my interpreter was a former nun.

Harold Kasimow:

I don't know at what age and I don't remember at what age she found out that her father, who was still alive, was actually Jewish. He'd just never told them. But there are a lot of people in Poland who didn't want their children to know that they had at least one Jewish parent. She wasn't a nun at that point, but she had been a non for many, many years. She was my interpreter.

Harold Kasimow:

The more fascinating story in Lublin, I met a priest who actually he was born in '43 just a few miles from where I was born in the Vilnius area. It was about north. We were about 100 miles or kilometers from north of Vilnius where we were born. So his parents gave him, when he was born, somehow they were still alive in '43 and they gave him to their friends who were Polish. The parents did not survive. His parents never told him that both his parents were Jewish.

Harold Kasimow:

But he had some suspicions. Occasionally, some kids would say to him, "You look different." His father said, "Don't listen to those kids." When he was about 18, he told his father that he wanted to be a priest. His father said, "You? The life of party, you want to be ..." He didn't want him to be a priest. And then his father died and he still didn't know his real parents. But before his mother died, she finally told him. So by the time I met him, he already knew his ... He had met his Jewish family that survived and so on.

Harold Kasimow:

He's still a Catholic priest. He's teaching at the Lublin University. I think he moved to Israel now, actually, because he's retirement age. It just happened I know a lot of these stories because when I was in Japan and the chief rabbi in Japan, by the time I went to Poland, this was 20 years later. This was 2004. Now he was chief rabbi of Poland. So we had many discussions. He was telling you how many people are coming forward to talk to him about their Jewish roots, that they're finding out that they have a Jewish parent.

Henry Rietz:

One more?

Harold Kasimow:

Okay.

Henry Rietz:

This will be the last.

Speaker 10:

I need to repeat my question. Professor, apparently you met some famous religious leaders as part of your research. Are there any that stood out to you or that you got any particular insight from that you could tell us about?

Harold Kasimow:

Yeah. I'm afraid many of them are not with us anymore because, remember, they were my professors. So when I was 19, they were at least 30 or so. Abraham Joshua Heschel, so now you can see the films about him and many books being written all the time, was my major influence, I would say. Temple University, the founder of the department, Bernard Phillips was very influential. He was a member. He really believed that if you want to know religion, you have to enter it fully.

Harold Kasimow:

So he had traveled to all the countries. He lived with DT Suzuki for a year and wrote *The Love of Zen* and his own articles on Suzuki and traveled to Muslim countries. So he entered into the religions really fully. He was a major influence on me. He was a perennial philosopher. He believed that ultimately, at the very deepest level, all the mystics teach the same truth. There's all these differences, but that would be exoteric. But on the deepest level, there's some internal truths.

Harold Kasimow:

I've met some now. If you go to Benedictine University, Peter Huff just published an incredible book called *Atheism and Agnosticism*. He's the missionary. He's a professor, but he runs the mission there. I strongly recommend that book. It's an amazing book. So even today there are many great teachers. I can think of Peter Huff, easy to remember, Benedictine University, *Agnosticism and Atheism*, which just came out about a year ago.

Harold Kasimow:

My friend, Wayne Teasdale, who is a Catholic monk, but also sort of in the Hindu tradition in a way. So many of my people that I've encountered belong to more than one tradition, sometimes two, but sometimes even three, if they affiliate with three traditions. I think maybe many people know the name, Huston Smith, because he had a connection. I mean his book sold in the millions, *The Religions of Man*, it was originally called. Maybe some of you took a course in religion were probably exposed to that book. I guess he was a committed Christian, but he practiced Muslim practices.

Harold Kasimow:

The book that I edited with one of my closest friends and his wife, John Keenan, Linda Keenan went to Grinnell. Both of them outstanding Buddhist scholars, the book, *Beside Still Waters*, it talks about Jews and Christians who have been enormously enriched in their understanding of Judaism and Christianity by their encounter with the Buddhist tradition. They didn't become Buddhists, but they feel that that has totally transformed their life, this encounter with ...

Harold Kasimow:

In these difficult times, there are many people who are doing Buddhist meditation as a way for at least for a few moments to escape reality, I don't know, to go into reality. So those are just a few. There are many, many more. My friend, one of the major spiritual teachers that I know in Poland was a former Jesuit, Stanislaw Obirek. He's still Catholic. He left the Jesuits. They silenced him because he said the Polish people worshiped John Paul II. And then he remained silent about a year or two and then decided that he didn't want to remain silent anymore. So I certainly recommend his writing translated into English. Okay. I'll stop there. I think that's enough.

Henry Rietz:

Thank you, everyone, for coming in. Thank you, Professor Kasimow, for the gift of your thought. [inaudible 01:16:13].