

**Mister Radio**  
**May 1, 2024**  
**Conversations With The Author**

TRANSCRIPT

**Music:** (ULULATION)

**Marshall:** You're listening to Mister Radio, and I'm your host, Marshall.

**Handler:** We ended up four days and four nights in a train that was closed, running, very fast. And if someone died there, their body was never removed. And if someone had to give birth there, because Mother Nature has her own agenda, it happened right there between all the people. And finally when the train stopped and we were just pouring out of that train, all I could see is barbed wire for miles and miles, and men and women were separated, and one minute I was together with the women of my family, and the next one I found myself alone in the middle of Auschwitz.

**Interviewer:** How old were you?

**Hellen:** I was 15 years old.

**Marshall:** That was the voice of Helen Handler from Phoenix, Arizona, who for decades was known as the voice of strength and remembrance in the Phoenix community. In 2014, the book "The Risk of Sorrow: Conversations with Holocaust Survivor, Helen Handler", was published by Valerie Foster, a retired high school teacher who met Handler when Foster invited her to speak in her English class.

“The minute I saw her, I felt like I had known her forever. It really was one of those rare, immediate bonds.” Foster said in a 2014 Jewish News interview. They met once a week for two years, so Foster could preserve Handler's testimony in written form. And today, it is my honor to introduce my guest, Valerie Foster. Welcome to the show, Valerie.

**Foster:** Thank you, Marshall. It's a real pleasure to be here.

**Marshall:** In in doing my research for this program today, I discovered kind of to my surprise, well, I'm not sure if it was to my surprise when I, when I was growing up in the fifties, my father would have me watch video newsreel footage on the television of bodies in Auschwitz being put into mass graves. But other than that, I don't recall having any education about it outside of my family. I didn't have any high school courses in it. And I didn't know of any high school courses in it, and I didn't have anything in college either. And I was surprised that only about 20 states have official high school curriculums for the Holocaust. What, what led you to teach about the Holocaust?

**Foster:** Yes, and, and, it is taking us way too long to, to require the curriculum, but we are getting there. When I first started this project I think there were only six, and now, as you said, there are many more, but we are only halfway there. Ironically, I am an English high school teacher, English teacher. And so this didn't happen within the history curriculum. I had a colleague who I admired greatly and she encouraged me to teach a tiny little book by Elie Wiesel called “Night” to my high school seniors and I avoided it for a long time because I was afraid of the subject. I was afraid that I couldn't handle it, or my students couldn't. I was afraid that maybe they wouldn't

even care. But I finally taught it, I started teaching it, and I watched that transformation in my students thinking and feeling and it was, it was just so transitional for me and I realized that even though I had avoided this, I even taught “Dante's Inferno” rather than the Holocaust, I realized that really it's the most important subject to teach, and it can be done within the literature area.

**Marshall:** How did you come about having Helen become a guest in your classroom? Did you have other guests before her?

**Foster:** You know, I didn't. I was teaching night, and one of my, a lot of times I get my best ideas from my students, and one of my students Rochelle Penia, she had just heard Helen speak at another community event, and she suggested that we have her come to our class.

I wasn't able to get Helen until the following school year, but we struck such an immediate bond, a connection when we first met. And I then had her come every semester. My husband would drive out to North Phoenix to, you know, provide the transportation and then take her back home. And she and I just really, there's just something out there in, in the universe that put us together because it was most unlikely. We were completely different as people, different generations, cultures, religions, even geographical area, Phoenix area. And, and yet she asked me to write her story after I retired from the high school scene and, again I, I was very reluctant. I didn't know if I could succeed, but she was someone you just couldn't say no to. And it, it took five years before our book was published by Albion Andalus Books. And, it, it ended up being a very providential meeting.

**Marshall:** Well, you answered my next question, which

was that you decided that she asked you to write her story. What exactly was involved in that process? First of all, you didn't live right next door to her. So, how did you go about doing this?

**Foster:** Well, that's a great question. I, I, Decided that we, we decided that we would meet every Tuesday, kind of, not "Tuesdays with Maury", but it was my Tuesdays with Helen. And we would meet at her condo every Tuesday from 10 to 12. For a period of time, I then went on to teaching at a community college. So, I had to really fit that in, but it was a commitment. And I took notes, I recorded her. And this, this part of it took two years to just have these conversations. And then when I felt like I had enough to capture this I had actually, by our second meeting, I had envisioned the entire book. I knew exactly how it would look. I wanted something that people like me, who are afraid of this subject, would still gravitate to. I wanted something that was up close and personal between two women just having coffee every week. And I wanted something that would extend beyond her Holocaust experience to capture a lifetime experience and how that shaped her worldview, how that formed her, how that damaged her. And so I, I just thought as a very comfortable, most of the time, conversation between two women. And that I had to take everything that I had taped, and Helen didn't speak linearly. So, but the reader needs to follow it that way. So that became quite a job in itself of just transcribing all of the tape recordings and cutting and pasting and color coding and I used to call it verbal spaghetti because I had to then just sort of weave the narrative, you know, cohesively. So it was quite a project, just that section of it.

**Marshall:** One thing that I was curious about, first of all, All of your sessions were very intense, and I can imagine

the session where she's talking to you about standing in front of Mengele, and she either goes left or right. From what I understand, unless a prisoner was sent to the gas chamber, they were given a tattoo, and yet Helen didn't discuss this at all. Did she not have a tattoo? Was that ever discussed?

**Foster:** Yes, I asked her about that. She, and often my, my students would ask her too. She didn't receive a tattoo because it was late enough in the war that they weren't doing that anymore. They couldn't keep up. So that was not atypical for that point in the war, in the camp.

**Marshall:** In addition to having discussions about what she went through, you also had a lot of literary discussions with her. And one that I'm curious about was that you were talking about Viktor Frankl's Logotherapy. For those of us who aren't familiar with Logotherapy, could you explain that a little bit?

**Foster:** I will, and I'm so glad you mentioned that because it is so valuable. After my students read "Night" and met Helen and so forth, then we expanded my classroom to include looking at journal entries and other primary sources and so forth and I then taught my students Viktor Frankl's "Man's Search for Meaning". Frankl was another Holocaust survivor and with a very dramatic story. Every one of them is different and every one of them is important. And he was a psychiatrist and he developed from his experience this concept of logotherapy. And it's a very interesting, because it gets very complicated, so I'll just kind of simplify it for everyone out there, that, , it really comes down to what keeps one alive, what keeps one going. And a couple of things emerged. If you know what you're staying alive for. If you have a reason, that can be everything. For him, one of his was staying alive to see his

wife again. She had perished in the Holocaust. But in, in, in his mind, that's what he focused on. And also his work. And if one can focus on a reason to live, that's everything. The other aspect of it is, if we know that there is an end point or we tell ourselves there's an end point to this. For example, if I am as Helen was at some point having to stand on a box for 24 hours. In the mind, if I know how long I have to do this, I have a much greater chance of doing it than if it's just interminable. So, sometimes the mind can, for survival, create these limitations or boundaries so that we can keep going. And this is partly what Helen did too. She stayed alive for her family, even though all nine of them died, perished but she stayed alive for that and she also kept sort of playing with her mind and telling herself, now this will sound odd, but she would say, this isn't so bad. Well, of course it was. She knew it was, but we have a lot more control over our thinking than we know that we do. And Frankl's work really was extraordinary in, in what can, enhance one's chances of survival. That's a real short version of it.

**Marshall:** After experiencing everything that she experienced, she then moved to the United States and eventually became a pretty successful entrepreneur. Do you, do you think she ever had any idea that, that she would end up being successful like this?

**Foster:** I don't think she had any idea of it when she was liberated at the age of 17. She was completely alone. She had no home, she had no money, no family, and she's a teenager, and she made her way through eight countries, and eventually in Phoenix, as you said, and, and she ran a drapery business here in the Phoenix metro area, metro center. I don't think she envisioned anything for herself because she suffered terribly from survivor's guilt, and so it was difficult for her to envision anything positive for

herself, but what she was certain of was. I can do this. I can, I can stay alive. I can do this too. So it really is that resilience that I think she, she had absolutely no doubt about by then, but it was never a matter of having any grandiose visions of her future because that was always impossible.

**Marshall:** As I mentioned early on in the, in the interview, , these sessions were pretty draining for you. And at one point you, you talk about driving home on the highway and turning on Led Zeppelin. And I was just wondering. Was that a subconscious group that you picked? Because as I recall, Led Zeppelin had a German Zeppelin on the cover, the Zeppelins were military...

**Foster:** Oh, I hadn't thought of that. Yeah.

**Marshall:** I'm one, I was wondering if that was a subconscious thing. How, how were those drives home?

**Foster:** (laughs) You know, it's interesting. It was about a 45 minute drive and in a way that was really, good, I'm glad she was that far away because going I had to psych myself up and then coming back I had to bring myself back down and come into my reality in my life and like I said in some cases I went right from there to teaching an education class at Chandler Gilbert Community College. So, it really was a good opportunity for me to drown it out. On the way to her place I would play classical music because classical music for me is, it's very peaceful, but on the way back, as far as the Led Zeppelin, that was really more of a, a random choice. I think I just turned to that kind of a station, and that's what was on. I didn't have any Led Zeppelin CDs, but when it would come on or anything like it, it's It's more of a broad category. It really helped me because it was so jarring. It just sort of like, it

just sort of washed my brain out. And as I mentioned in the book, there was one day when I, and I can get emotional talking about it, when I just had to pull over and stop in a little cafe somewhere because I didn't, I was too upset to drive and I knew that wasn't safe. So, yeah, it's, it took a lot out of me, but it also gave me so much.

**Marshall:** Now, throughout the book, on occasion rather, Helen is trying to convince you to visit Auschwitz. Have you ever done that?

**Foster:** No. I have not. She did ask me, and she said, I'll pay for everything, I, you know, I really want you to, to go, and I have several friends and colleagues who have been, and I thought about it for months, and finally I had to come to terms with my own weakness, my own limitations, and so as you know in the book I, I mentioned to her finally, I just can't, I can't, I, I'm, my legs couldn't get me there, and she said, , she was as kind as could be, and she said, and I understand, that's because, that's where my family died. And I said, no, that's because that's where my friend suffered. And she was so generous. She said, you don't have to be to go. She says, you've already been there for listening to me every week for actually it ended up being seven years altogether that we, we visited each other that way. She felt like I knew it better than some who have been there. I subsequently, just a few months ago in fact, watched a fabulous tour of it, sponsored by the United States Holocaust Museum, and it was very powerful for me, and I felt like I have to do this for her, but I was, otherwise I, I just know myself, and I couldn't.

**Marshall:** In addition to writing your book, in 2014, you also produced a film titled "The Power of Memories Surviving Auschwitz". And in it, David Kader Previous President of The Phoenix Holocaust Survivors'



Association and Professor of Law at Arizona State University made the following observation, let's listen.

**David Kader:** To my knowledge, Helen's experience, as is true for many survivors in Europe, well, even those that didn't survive, is both typical and unique. at the same time. My experience with my parents and survivors is every story is, I'm getting goosebumps just summarizing, is amazingly specific and it's almost to dishonor them to generalize, but there is a pattern that is somewhat common and it has, and Helen was captured in that pattern, which has to do with Um, uh, segregation, in other words, ghettoization, moving people, uh, apart from the regular national population, wherever they happen to be, Czech or Pole or Hungarian or whatever.

**Marshall:** do you agree with Kader's observation that Helen's experience with both typical and unique?

**Foster:** Oh, absolutely. And you know, I've, I've followed a lot of other survivor stories in, in different formats and. That's what's so extraordinary to me. In fact, I have a new, if I may mention this, I have a second edition of this book coming out in a few months. I have a new publisher, Black Rose Writing, out of Texas. And this gave me an opportunity to write an epilogue and also include a fabulous teacher and student guide and reader's guide, discussion guide that was prepared by a colleague of mine. And in the epilogue, I'm able to kind of talk about that, that every single story, there are threads of commonality between each of them, whether you were in camps or you weren't. But, each one is different and unique and needs to be captured. I, I really believe that hers is very dramatic. She had so many moments in the camps when she really shouldn't have been on this earth

and different little as you know, different little miracles happened that were so dramatic, extraordinary and they kept her going. But I absolutely agree with him. He's, he's dead on. He knows his stuff and, and he was born in a detention camp. So he comes at it firsthand.

**Marshall:** How do you think Helen's conversations with you changed your life?

**Foster:** Changed my life or her life?

**Marshall:** Your life.

**Foster:** Oh, in so many ways. One of the ways was that in everyday circumstances, you know, there are times when I just think, Oh, I can't get through this, or this is unbearable, or this is so uncomfortable, whatever, we all go through that, and that's normal, and that's okay. But then I will very often think of Helen, and I'll just think, you know what, I can do this. Because she was such an inspiration to me. It also forced me to examine my own religion. I was raised Catholic, but I've fallen by the wayside in recent years and at a certain point I had a real turning point in my experience with her where I realized that You know, I have, I've just tried to cling to nice, neat packages in all my thinking, in all my beliefs, and because I've been afraid to take a look at real life sometimes. And so, that was enlightening for me. I also gave me the courage to have these conversations. You know, we, the, the title comes from her prayer book, which was one of her first of many gifts to me, and the quote I had found absolutely at random is, "To enter into any relationship, profound relationship, is to run the risk of sorrow". So it really taught me that even though we risk sorrow when we have these big conversations, we really need to have them because the fact that I had these conversations with

her led to tremendous enlightenment and a deep friendship and love and joy. And so I guess one of the things I learned is that I'm not one for chitchat and it's really important as we're doing this more today, Marshall, it's really important to have these substantial conversations about the very things that make us uncomfortable because we take a greater risk if we do not.

**Marshall:** To sort of summarize what you just said, you sent me several excerpts from the book that you read for us, and I just would like to play one of them for our audience now.

**Foster:** Every day of her life, Helen's thoughts dwelled in the house of the Holocaust. I, however, had the luxury of diverting my attention, through my nicely-ordered, well-educated, middle-class, suburban existence. I had raised three wonderful children, found happiness in marrying my beloved, carved out a satisfying career. Why, before meeting Helen, I could go days without thinking about the Holocaust. Even years. She could not go a minute. Her faith was complicated. I thought mine was simple. It wasn't. Although in different realms, Helen and I both ask, Why me? Why did I survive? Why do I have to visit this reality? We both feel guilt. We both wrestle with accepting the fact that the answers may not be coming, at least not in this life.

So, were my conversations with Helen expanding my faith or contracting it? What is faith unless challenged and re-examined?"

**Marshall:** I know you sort of covered that, my next question before I played that, but are you still facing these questions about your faith today?

**Foster:** Well, I know this might sound a little cliché, but

you know, so many people today will say to you, I'm not religious, but I'm spiritual. And that defines me precisely. I've always seen myself that way. I struggle with organization. I struggle with dogma, but I feel like my spirituality and my connection to my God is stronger than ever, and I'm comfortable with that at, at this point.

**Marshall:** I realize that you're coming out with a new book in, in a couple of months, but have you ever considered doing an audio, an e-book, electronic audio book of your work?

**Foster:** I would love to do that, and I have a few readers who continue to ask for that because they're audiophiles, and I am too, I've really gotten into audibles. So I would really love to do that, and the good part is that the publisher that I'm now with, they are very strong on an e-book, I mean, I'm sorry, an audible book version. So once it gets to that point, they will be working too vigorously to get it out in that form. And I'm really excited about that. I probably would have done it earlier, except that, you know, this is so predominantly a conversation. And so there are two voices and that kind of complicates it. But I think it also lends itself beautifully to that. And I would love to see that happen.

**Marshall:** In the last few minutes that we have, would you like to plug your current project again?

**Foster:** Yes, I would, I would be delighted. This, the book is, the title is going to be shortened slightly, but it is "The Risk of Sorrow, Conversations with a Holocaust Survivor". It'll be published by Black Rose Writing, out of Texas, and I have another award winning memoir, believe it or not, called "Dancing With a Demon", that chronicles my family's experience with my daughter's eating disorder, for

which she is fully recovered, so it's a very inspirational book. So I'm, I'm still busy with both of those and anyone is, , is, You'll have no trouble finding me online, but they're welcome to email me at valeriefos, as in Foster, at gmail.com. And I'm happy to reach out to readers, and particularly educators, because this is an extraordinary book to use in the classroom. It really transcends, you know, all kinds of, oh, apprehensions about teaching it. It really makes it reader friendly from 7th grade on. So I'm very excited about the second edition of the book coming out soon.

**Marshall:** Okay again.

**Foster:** And I'm on Facebook. I'm on Facebook under The Risk of Sorrow.

**Music:** (ULULATION fades in)

**Marshall:** Okay, again, we've been discussing "The Risk of Sorrow" with my guest Valerie Foster, and I'm so happy that you were able to take the time to speak with me, and I hope to hear from you again real soon.

**Foster:** Thank you, Marshall. It was a real pleasure. I appreciate it.

**Marshall:** You've been listening to Mister Radio, and I'm your host, Marshall. Special thanks to Anthony D. Fusco, Jr., Associate Director of Education at the Arizona Jewish Historical Society. This program was written and produced by Marshall. Mister Radio is available wherever you get your podcasts, including iTunes and Spotify. Subscribe to our podcast and leave us a review and don't forget to tune in for another episode of Mister Radio.

**Music:** (ULULATION fades out)