

Jewitnamese

Nhi Aronheim May 19, 2021



Nhi and Jeff Aronheim on Vietnamese New Year, 2020. Photo courtesy of the author

I never heard of the Holocaust, or Judaism, until my junior year of college.

I didn't know a Jewish person until I met my now-husband of twenty-plus years.

It might be astounding for a Jew to hear of someone who would be unaware of the existence of the Holocaust. In one part of my memoir, *Soles of a Survivor*, I share the story of how a clueless teenager adopted into a Christian household in the South relishes being Jewitnamese nowadays.

While I was growing up in Vietnam after the Vietnam-American War, the Communist government did not allow its citizens to listen to any foreign news. We would be arrested if we were accused of listening to news other than what the Communist Party allowed. My days were filled with information about how great Ho Chi Minh and the Communist Party were, and how horrible the Americans were for occupying Vietnam. There was not much diversity in my beloved country. Practicing religion and listening to the news about the outside world were prohibited — some of the reasons I never heard of the Holocaust.

When fighting for daily survival, I could not think of anything else. The oppression under the Communist government was unbearable, which led to my escape from Vietnam; I trudged through the jungles of Cambodia as a twelve-year-old with a group of strangers, seeking the Promised Land of America. My quest for survival through the Cambodian jungle eventually led me to a boat that took me to Thailand and an orphanage where I lived for two years until I qualified for refugee status in order to immigrate to the United States. After my arrival as a refugee, I was adopted into a Christian household in the South. I was overwhelmed learning a new language and culture in my new country, along with some of the most essential things for daily survival. As a result, I did not have an opportunity to learn about other faiths during that period.

I eventually learned about the Holocaust during my junior year of college when I attended a school program in France. During that time, I traveled to a few concentration camps and learned about the horrors that the Jews endured.

Several years later, I met and fell in love with a man whom I later married. He happened to be Jewish. In fact, he was the first

Jewish person I had ever known. Back in 2000, Asian-Jewish marriages were extremely uncommon, especially in the Virginia boonies where we got married. We weren't going to have a preacher or a rabbi perform the ceremony. At the time, a Reform rabbi would not even consider marrying an interfaith couple like us.

Thankfully, my soon-to-be husband never pressured me into converting to Judaism and I loved him for it — he knew using that tactic had no chance of success and would probably push me away. He did request that I agree to teach our children about Jewish faith and traditions. It wasn't that I opposed the idea of converting to Judaism; rather, conversion had to be real, from the heart. Otherwise, it would be empty and meaningless.

I could relate to this history of loss, hope, resilience, and survival against all odds.

Within months of our wedding, I honored my commitment to learn as much about Judaism as I could so I'd know how to raise our family when the time came. I read many books on the subject and asked my newlywed husband about his faith, culture, and tradition. I signed up to take an "Intro to Judaism" class and my husband agreed to attend with me, which I really appreciated. And then something amazing happened. As I got deeper and deeper into the teachings, I was amazed — astounded, really — that there were so many similarities between what the Jewish people had gone through and what the Vietnamese people had to endure. They were also immigrants who endured the worst persecution and suffering imaginable — never giving up hope that someday they would enter the Promised Land and begin their new and better lives. I could relate to this history of loss, hope, resilience, and survival against all odds

After studying Judaism for four years, I'd made friends and participated in many different Jewish community events. While it had started as something that I had promised my husband I would explore, Judaism became something I embraced and felt from the heart, leading to my desire to convert.

During the conversion process, the rabbis really want to make sure that you're serious, and one of the ways they do that is by rejecting you three times. I knew it was a tradition and happened to everyone who expressed a desire to convert, but knowing your rejection is preordained doesn't make it easier to take.

My husband and I looked around for the right synagogue. There were a number of synagogues in Denver, some Reform, some Conservative, a few Orthodox. We decided to join one of the Conservative synagogues because I liked the people I met. Upon hearing about my desire to convert, the rabbi asked me if I had taken an "Intro to Judaism" course. He then told me that I would need to turn my home kosher, which was a major issue for me.

To keep a kosher home meant adhering to dietary requirements outlined by traditional Jewish law. I could already hear the arguments my husband and I might get into if I messed up this kosher law and mixed meat with milk or used the wrong utensil to cut something. It seemed like a minefield of potential marital conflicts awaiting us. Many Jews I knew didn't have a kosher home, and I knew that I would not be keeping one either. I looked at the rabbi and said, "I could lie to you — and myself — by telling you that I would turn my home kosher, but that would be extremely difficult, as I've spent a lifetime eating food that is not kosher."

The rabbi frowned and told me to find a Reform synagogue "down the road" that might take me. Rejection number one.

It was frustrating to feel like I wasn't being taken seriously, even though I knew that converts must go through the rejection process. I had, after all, taken my Judaism studies quite seriously. I was not going to be deterred, though. I continued to go to services at the synagogue and stood out like a sore thumb because I was the only Asian person there. I would often see the rabbi, and though he didn't say much, I could tell that he took note of my presence and the fact that I had not taken his sugges-

tion to go to another synagogue.

While it's true that my initial motivation for exploring Judaism was because the man I love was Jewish, it had evolved into more than that, and become something I felt in my heart.

Months later, we wanted to go back to the synagogue for a second meeting with the rabbi. Before the meeting, my husband told me that he did not think many Jewish leaders would want to have kids who didn't belong to the community just because their mothers weren't Jewish — especially when interfaith marriages comprise over 50 percent of American Jewish marriages since the 1990s. Perhaps the rabbi might not be so quick to dismiss me the second time, if he knew I was pregnant.

Not wanting to start off the conversion process by lying to the rabbi about having a kosher home, I addressed this concern by telling him that we had made some adjustments and would be committed to having a kosher home. The rabbi gave me a pointed look and said that I didn't need to convert to participate in the Jewish community. Perhaps that comment was the second of my three rejections. My husband then mentioned that I was extremely committed to the Jewish community and that I wanted to raise our kids as part of the Jewish community. At the mention of the word "kids," the rabbi looked up and said that he'd work with me on my conversion.

Because I had already spent years studying Judaism and was an active member of the community, the process of conversion was relatively quick once the rabbi agreed. The day of my conversion, I was called before the *Beit Din*, a rabbinic court comprised of three people: the rabbi, and two other observant members of the synagogue who are knowledgeable about the conversion procedure. The three of them sat behind a small wooden table facing me, the rabbi in the middle, and the other two members on either side. I sat across from them, knowing that my husband was waiting for me just outside the room.

The rabbi asked why I choose Judaism. I responded that I was not brought up with organized religion. But I have always wondered if there was something more out there, something bigger than myself. And when I read about the struggles that the Jews had gone through, I saw parallels with the experiences I had lived through. People in my home country were persecuted. I had to flee my homeland, and I found myself in a country where I looked different and was discriminated against because of it. While it's true that my initial motivation for exploring Judaism was because the man I love was Jewish, it had evolved into more than that. It had become something I felt in my heart. I was dedicated to raising my children Jewish, in a Jewish home. It was not only what my husband and I felt was right for our family, but what was authentic for us.

Our conversation continued for about another half an hour, with the rabbi asking me questions about my commitment to Judaism and the Jewish people. I answered truthfully and from the heart. When the meeting with the *Beit Din* was complete, it was time for the mikvah ceremony, one of the last steps in my conversion process. This immersion was a symbol of transforming from one state to another — in my case, becoming a Jew. My husband came with me, though he would not be present during the immersion; only the mikvah attendant would be in the room to watch me submerge. She showed me the preparation room where I had to shower first and then wrap myself in a towel. I would fully submerge myself in the mikvah three times.

I followed the attendant into the room, both the floor and the walls covered in earth-toned tiles. The pool was rectangular and small, very simple. There were three steps leading down into the water and a metal hand railing. I slowly walked down the steps into the mikvah. I lowered myself into the water. Once submerged, I lifted my feet off the tiles so I was fully suspended for a moment, floating weightless. I did this three times. And then—I arose from the water, a Jew.

Based on my experiences living in Vietnam, my adoption into a Christian household as a child-refugee, and my conversion to Judaism, I've learned that it doesn't matter what religion we belong to — life becomes much more meaningful as long as we radiate kindness, generosity, and a willingness to help the people we meet in our lives.

Nhi Aronheim stands at only four feet, nine inches tall, but her story is immense. Several anthologies, including Kentucky Women: Two Centuries of Indomitable Spirit and Vision, and a documentary aired on PBS, Vietnam 101, have profiled her harrowing journey as a child refugee who escaped war-torn Vietnam in search of the American dream. Nhi worked for four years as a telecommunications consultant, during which time she met and married a Jewish man and converted to Judaism in 2004. Nhi has two beautiful children who she has raised to embrace Vietnamese and Jewish cultures. After transitioning to sales and marketing in the mortgage industry — where Nhi worked for over sixteen years — she retired from the mortgage industry as a marketing specialist at the age of forty-one to have opportunities to pay it forward. Next to her family, Nhi's passion is to make a positive difference in people's lives. She volunteers as a mediator for courts and the Better Business Bureau in Colorado, in addition to being an interpreter. Wanting to improve her public speaking skill, Nhi has been an active member of Toastmasters for over five years where she has held positions as President, V.P. of Public Relations and V.P. of Education for her chapter.

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