United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Interview with Miriam Lewent
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PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of a videotaped interview with Miriam Lewent, conducted by Linda Kuzmack on October 20, 1989 on behalf of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The interview took place in Washington, DC and is part of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's collection of oral testimonies. Rights to the interview are held by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

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MIRIAM LEWENT
October 20, 1989

Q: Would you tell me your name please?

A: My name is Miriam Lewent.

Q: Where were you born?

A: I was born in Poland--Zamo__--1926. June the 26th, and the year is 1926.

Q: Tell me about your family, the time in Zamo__.

A: Well, we have... we are three sisters, two brothers, mother and father. And we...when the war started, we went away from our town, Zamo__, to a small town. And that's where we got caught by the Russians...Russian Army. And we went there...from there we went to another town, and we went to...

Q: Back up. Hold it. Back up. Hold on. Back up. You said you went from Zamo__ to another town, and that's where you were caught. What do you mean you were caught? What happened?

A: Well, we...you see Poland was divided...half Poland and half Germany. We were...I mean half Russia, half Germany. We...I was born on the German side; but we wound up on the Russian side. And we had it very bad, because we were a big family. We had no food, nothing. So we tried to get back home, which what belonged to the German side. At that time, the Russians took us. There was a lot of people like me. They took us all; and they packed us in trains, you know--not passenger trains--and they took us to Siberia. Thousands of people, you know.

Q: Tell me about the trip. Describe the train and the trip.

A: Well, we...we were particularly living at that time, waiting until we get home in a temple... A lot of families--about 20 families--living in one little temple waiting for a passport to go home back. But one evening--night rather, middle of night, the Russian Army came in. And they just start to wake everybody; and said, "Get up! Get up! Get up!" And they just took us in trucks. And they took us to the trains, and we were closed in. And that's it, until in the morning when the trains started to roll. So we rolled for six weeks. And we passed into each step of the Russian country, which was... It was cold. And all of a sudden, we wound up in Siberia-- where there was no... I mean, the train ended. This is it. Because in the meantime, we were so many people; and the sanitary things were so unsanitary. There was no place to go to the bathroom or anything. And we had three children got sick... My niece--my sister's daughter--at that time she was about 3 years old. She got also sick. She was among the three children. And by the time we stopped at the end, two children died in the train. And my

sister's daughter, my niece, they took her off to a hospital. We couldn't go no place, because we were waiting for the child. So we were left near Tomsk, which was Siberia. And we worked there; and we got the rations, bread. And...

Q: What kind of work did you do?

A: I worked...I was cutting trees. In order... Anybody that didn't work, didn't get a ration of 400 gram of bread. So, of course, every...even though I was young; but I had to go to work in order to get my ration. Ration. How do you say it? Ration, ration of bread. So I went to work in the taiga--you know, in the woods. And we were cutting trees, you know, by hand. Cutting trees, putting trees together. And that's how we earned our bread and water.

Q: How did you live?

A: Well, we lived... You see, they had those wooden houses that their prisoners lived. So they took them someplace else, and they gave those houses to us. And, of course, we used to cut our own wood for heating the house--which was one house...was one big room, and like two families would live. So we would build, like against the wall, benches; you know, from wall to wall. And we slept one next to another. First of all, it kept warm; and it saved room, because there was no room. And there we would go...like we would melt the snow for cooking. Cooking consisted of... I mean, if you got a pound of uh corn kernels, so we used to grind it and it became flour. And you boiled the water. So...in order it should be a lot. I mean, it was like 20 people; and everybody should get a spoonful. So it got thick. And you know, you would just look at; and it should get thicker and thicker, you hoped. If you didn't add water, so it got thicker. And everybody would, you know, just get a spoonful and eat. And that's what kept us going...kept us going, with the hope that some day, you know, that the war will finish and we'll go back to Poland. Hoping! But when we got back to Poland, forget it! We didn't even go even to our town. We didn't go.

Q: Let's hold Poland and stay in Siberia. We have time.

A: Yah. Well, Siberia, we worked. A lot of people...we didn't have any meat. So a lot of...when the sun went down, the light disappeared, they got blind. I mean, from lack of vitamins, I suppose. If you don't eat meat, you don't have some kind of vitamin and you get blind. So as soon the sun would set, they would get like...and they would walk around like mummies. And they would say, you know, "Please take me here..." And young people. But they didn't have the meat. They didn't have all those vitamins that one needs. And my brother was like this, you know; so we had to take him. But during the day, he was all right. The minute it got a little darker, forget it! They went blind. I don't know what it was...what would you call it. But that's what happened. And, of course, what, uh... You know, it was very cold there. And in the summer and the spring, like we would go in the woods, there was a lot of... We had to wear veils over our faces, because there were big mosquitos. And if you got bitten by those mosquitos, a lot of people went crazy. Crazy, simply crazy; because I don't know what they had in them. So they gave us masks, and that's how we used to go to work.

Q: How were you treated by the population?

A: Well, uh we were not harassed, because... Well, first of all, we were like in a camp. It was only people that were taken, like myself, from...you know, from Poland or whatever. And they put there. And we didn't see too many people that lived there, because all we saw is the one that _____. How do you say it? I forgot. My husband tells me. (Laughter).

Q: Prisoners?

A: The prisoners. Prisoners, that's right. So we would see the prisoners when they came from a different prison. And my father used to cook the water for them, you know. It was a job. The cook had water. So he used to cook the hot water, and he used to put them with a cup; and he used to give each one a cupful of water. I mean, that was the disgusting thing. Just that, water--to share water. And you would get a piece of bread, and you would soak it; and they would eat it. So these are the people actually we saw during the day. And at night, we used to be among ourselves. Family would always sit and dream and hope and pray that some day this will end, and some day we'll go home someplace.

Q: Were you all together?

A: Yes. Yes. We were all together; and with barbed wires, of course, you could not say, "Oh, I don't like it here and I am going to go to a bigger town." Of course, you couldn't do that. We didn't run off. As a matter of fact, my brother did. My brother was very strong, young. And he did try to go away to a bigger town. They did catch him. They did bring him back. I mean, they didn't do anything to him. They just committed him to a crazy hospital. They told him that he is crazy, because he decided to run away. And that's it.

Q: What happened to him in the hospital? Do you know?

A: Well, they kept him and they gave him some medication. And he did play along. He was very smart. He said, "Listen, if they think I am crazy. First of all, it keeps me out, you know, from the taiga, from the cutting the wood. So let me be crazy." And then if... Later on, he went back to the... I mean, they let him out. I mean, they didn't harm him or anything. They didn't physically abuse him. No way. But it was not a place for us to be. In a...in a way, it was good for us. We didn't know at that time; but, you know, fate works in different ways.

Q: Did you have much contact with Russian guards? How were you guarded?

A: Well, uh there were not too many guards. There were just only by the main gate. Because behind you were the taiga, were Siberia. You couldn't run there in the woods. Where you gonna go? You gonna die there with the wolves. So the only thing, you had the front; and the front was the Russian guard. And that's about it. And you had no money. You couldn't go no place. So you just had to stick to one place with everybody else.

Q: How long were you there?

A: We were there for about a year and a half. And then when the war started between Russia and...and Germany, that's when they liberated us. And they told us we could go wherever we want to go; but they told all the young men--the Polish, we were Polish citizens. So they told them they could register and go with the Russian Army--as a Polish citizen with the Russian Army--to fight against the Germans. Which my two brothers did. And we went to Kazakhstan, which is a warm climate. Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan is near Iran.

Q: How did you get there?

A: Well, we... At that time, we had some...they did... The Red Cross said...being we were Polish citizens, they did send us some sugar, tea, flour. So, of course, we didn't need it. My mother sold it. And for this, we got money to get tickets to get out of there from Siberia. You know, just to get away. Food was... You know, food was... You know, you could get a little hungry; once you get out of the place that you don't want to be, you could always pick up something...did something different. So we got there in Tashkent, and we worked very hard. Which we didn't need any clothes. We didn't need any shoes. We didn't need anything. And we waited there for the war to be over and to go home again.

Q: What did you do? You didn't just...

A: Well, there was also a big community. Because a lot of people... My family, we always stuck together--my sisters and brothers. But my brothers were not with us, because they were in the Army. So it was easier, because we didn't need so much room, so many shoes. Because my brother once worked in a bakery; so he used to work at night. So we had only one pair of shoes. Being he is a small guy, I was always his size, even though he was older. So he used to sleep during the day; and I would work, use his shoes. Then at night, I used to sleep and he would take his shoes. So...but I used to work. We used to cut saxaul (ph) all day. Grows a certain branch over there, it's called saxhaul (ph). And this is like corn, you know. So we used to cut it for a price, you know, for the government. And they used to give us--not pay, you know--the bread...300 bread...300 gram of bread 200...400... And that's how you survive. And then when my brother went in...like when he was in the army... So he went in like to Germany, he would send a package to us. It was already after the war. So we should survive. So he would send shoes; so we would sell it and just wait for that moment to go home. And we always sell the things in order to get the money, to always have money to go home.

Q: You could save money?

A: Well, we could...just for the train ride; because they wouldn't give it to you. So instead to buy a pair of shoes or a coat, or even something eat good, we had to have the money to get home.

Q: What were living conditions like in Tashkent? Where did you live?

A: Well, we had a...those house... We built our own house, so to speak. You know, we would dig earth with straw and--yah, cow manure. I mean, manure from a cow. And you step on it...you know, with water. And then you make forms, and you make brick from it. And this would lay like maybe 4 weeks in the sun...in the sun... Being as tropical...you know, tropical climate, it dries. And this was...we made bricks, and we would build a house. And then we would make a room...a house...a room. That's about it. And then we would make a roof from the straw. And that's it. So if it got cooler, we would sleep inside; but during the summer, we would sleep outside on mats, straw mats. Because natives even there, that's how they live. The Uzbeks, that's how they live. They sleep outside. They eat on the ground. So we tried to imitate them.

Q: Speaking of the Uzbecks, what were your relationships like with them? The Russians? What was the relationship with the Uzbeks?

A: Well, we didn't see too many. Not in the beginning. Well, the Uzbeks are... Well, first of all, we did not understand them; because they did not speak Russian. We spoke Russian. They don't. And they are very family-oriented. So they were together, and they were farmers. And they grow over there melons, all kind of melons. And we lived on the melons. We did get a little piece of garden, and we used to grow melons. And uh that's how we lived. They showed us. They were very nice to us, the Uzbeks. And they showed us how to grow, because we didn't know about it. And here again, we waited to go home. (laughter) It was one line, but then they started... A lot of Russians came when Germany started to come into Russia, you know. They started to occupy Russia. They had a lot of Russia people coming from Kiev, [from] Moscow. They used to bring the women, the children; and the men used to go to the front. So that's when we saw a lot of Russian people there. But everybody was hungry there. Even they were hungry. Because there was not too much. There was... Everybody had to stay with that 400 gram of bread, even the people that were born there. And that's sad. So that's what it is. But, of course, what my husband went through... It's... You cannot... But we had, because every time like... You know, every time my sister, she would have a dress. And then she would see--because she was the oldest--she would see that us kids that we were hungry or something. So she would take off that dress and go on the market. And sell it, and get--sell it for bread, not money. And bring home a little bread. So then, after a year and a half, there was nothing to sell no more. And she got... (Laughing) You know, she was left with her petticoat, so to speak. But, Thank God, we all survived. I...my sisters and brothers live in Brooklyn, and we are happy to be in America. What can I tell you?

Q: Tell me about the end of the war. Your parents were with you this whole time?

A: Yes, we were all the time together. All the time.

Q: How did they fare with all this travelling?

A: Well, of course, it was my parents were not old. They were older; but those years... You know, European people, they were not as old in years, but they looked older. It was...it was very hard, because they had to constantly take care of children. We were young children. But we tried to uh help them out as much as we could. Because uh, you know, they couldn't work. So we did work. We...my sisters ...my...whatever we could. Even to go out to dig a ditch or pick cotton. We used to pick cotton. Or do something. Just to earn some money. And like the mother: you do have respect for your mother and father, you know. They were home. Even though my father, when we lived in a place where there was a lot of Jewish people, he would teach them Hebrew. He would teach them Jewish. He spoke very good Russian, very good Polish. So he would [teach] the younger people... You see, we always somehow wanted to learn, no matter how. Not myself just. I think all the Jewish people are like this. No matter where they are, and what kind of thing, they always... something, you know. But among other things, you have to learn something, too--about the world, about books, about this. So my father had a job. A little job. Let's say, if I had a child and I wanted him to learn Jewish--because there was no facility otherwise--so I would give him a piece of bread, a pot of pickles, or whatever. And he would teach the children. So he got himself... He loved it. And he was very proud of it; because when he used to come home, he said, "You know, this child, he is so smart. He will someday be a good Jew." You know, he predicted it. And uh that's how we survived, and again hoping to go home. (Laughing)

Q: One more question. Was there in Tashkent... You're a small group of Jews. Did you form a sort of a mini-Jewish community?

A: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. We did. There weren't too many. Must have been around maybe 30 families. You know, but each family had 3 or 4 children. I mean, my father and my mother was a family; and they had 5 children. Or, like my brothers weren't with us because they were in the Army, you know--with the Russians in the Polish Army, fighting with the Russians against the Germans. But, of course, we formed _____. I was only 15. We formed...we were singing, we were dancing. I used to... I mean, I would have a pair of slippers made. Over there, you don't go in the store and buy. Somebody made a pair of slippers. Which is... I mean, like ballet slippers--no bottom or anything. But this is gold. I mean, this was something to have! And I was young, and I used to love to dance. So during the day, I would walk around barefooted. I would not use my slippers. But that's the slippers I would save for my...at night, to go dancing with my friends. We would sing Jewish, Polish--because this was my language at that... I was educated in Polish. And uh we would try to stick together. You know, you just wait and maybe... You know, and people would have some news what's going on. Of course, basically, you would talk about the war, what's happening. And then, later on, you got to know and to learn that people are being killed.

Q: How did you hear it?

A: Pardon me?

Q: How did you hear it?

A: Well, uh I don't know. People used to come, like the Russians with their... Now I know. The people that came from Odessa, [from] Kiev--the Russians. Because they were evacuated to us, to Tashkent. They brought them over. So they would tell us what's happening. A lot of the Jews was among them, and they would tell us what was happening there. What...no paper or anything. The only thing is we knew that uh if you read... I mean, there was no radio. There was a radio like the main radio on the street; and if you walked, you listened. I didn't know anybody that had a radio. No way.

Q: Tell me about the end of the war. What happened to you?

A: Well, the end of the war... As I said, my brother was in the army. And at that time, when the end of the war, he just hit Breslau, which is Wroc_aw. Just Germany occupied by Poland, a piece of Germany that Poland took. And he was there. And he send us tickets to go home from Kazakhstan. Go home to Poland. Uh we should come home. And, of course, we did go home. I mean, you know, it took us a long time. Months and months, by the time we get a visa. But being my brother was in the army, so they kind of had a little of respect for it. And when we got there, my brother was... Uh, we wanted to go to Poland where we were born; but along the way, you found out there is nobody there. My brother wrote us a letter that there is nobody there. "Don't even go there. You will just get sick. Don't go there." And he [was] stationed in Breslau. So he got us an apartment, and he... That's where we came, to his...to his apartment. From Russia to there. But along the way... I mean, we stopped coming from Russia to Kiev because we had...because this was Ukraine. Then we went...from Kiev we went to Lemberg [**NB:** Lwów]. And uh we waited on the trains, you know; because you had to have clearance to go through. So you have to get some water. And the trains... I mean, it was not the trains...trains... It was a very uncomfortable trains. So if I would go down for water, to get from the pump some water... First my father would go down. And my father wore a beard--Jewish--so he encountered some unpleasant, you know, talk about him. So they decided, being I looked more like a Christian, not a Jewish... So I was sent out, and I would hear... They would say, "Well, Russia is giving us Jews and we are giving them coal." You know Russia took out all the coals from Poland, and they send in the Jews to Poland. So we decided this is it. We are going to go to America. And my mother had a brother...a sister here. And we started to find out where she was. And finally, we did. And with God's help, we came here. And I love every minute of it. God bless America!

Q: Tell me about how you met your husband.

A: Oh, when I got here in July... Of course, he had to go to work right away to get something. I went to work, and then... I don't know. Must have been fate or something. I decided to go to a school, where he lived near the school. I didn't know about it. On 90th Street [and] Broadway. And I lived in the Bronx, and I worked in Manhattan; but I went to school to 90th Street. Why? I don't know what made me do it. So I went there. And, of course, he was in a different class and I was in a different class. We were young, and we got to know one

another. And that's how love started. (Laughter) Something, I don't know.

Q: Okay. Thank you.

A: You're quite welcome. Thank you. Nice meeting you.