

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Interview with Raya Markon
November 27, 1989
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PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of a taped interview with Raya Markon, conducted on November 27, 1989 on behalf of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The interview 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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RAYA MARKON

November 27, 1989

[Transcriptionist's note: background noise on audiotape.]

Question: ...7th, the interview of Raya Markon. Would you tell us where you were born?

Answer: Born Magid (ph).

Q: Would you tell me your name please?

A: My name is Raya, Markon, born Magid (ph).

Q: Magid (ph) in which country?

A: In Vilna, Poland.

Q: Okay. In what year please.

A: I was born in 1911.

Q: Tell me about your parents. What were they like and what was it like growing up there?

A: They were, my father was a graduate of the teachers' college but his profession was in insurance. He was a, an, I think when I was very young he was employed but when I was already of school age, he had his own business in insurance.

Q: What was the town like for you as a child? What did you do?

A: Oh it was a beautiful town. Vilna? Are you at all familiar with history of Vilna? Just the fact that we had a French school and German school, Polish, Russian, Hebrew and Yiddish schools, just to give an idea of the culture of the city. Vilna, I mean everybody knows that was the, the center of Jewish culture. _____. As a child, my first schooling at a very early age was Hebrew which unfortunately I abandoned, my kindergarten, until the age maybe six or seven which I don't remember too vividly was Hebrew, which unfortunately I abandoned. And I attended a French school until the age of 16. From ten to 16. From the age of seven to ten I attended a Russian school. In Russia, _____ in Russia. From ten to 15, 16, I don't recall exactly, I attended a French lycee. Subsequently, I attended a evening course for six months in order to be able to attend a Polish school to get a baccalaureate. To catch up. So I'm a graduate of a Polish high school with

what you call a baccalaureate. I also attended the Polish university for one year in Vilna to study romance languages, French, but then I, I left it and I went to Toulouse, France.

Q: Why did you go to Toulouse?

A: That was the trend because I felt that the studies of literature wouldn't give me any tangible, practical education to earn a living and that was the fashion. So I went to a _____ in Toulouse, France which I unfortunately did not complete because I came back home. I seen my father was not feeling well and my mother requested me. So and I started working, I started . . .

Q: So where did you work?

A: I worked for four years at the Association of Lumber, of Pulp and Lumber Exporters which was an association of people where, how would I say, specializing in selling forests and pulp. They were mostly quite wealthy Jews and the impression it left on me that most of the ones they used to come to the meetings wear fur-lined coats and when I came to America I never liked mink. I could look at mink because the wealthy Jews had mink-lined coats. It stayed with me.

Q: Where did you live in Toulouse? What was your daily life like?

A: Well in Toulouse, it was a very pleasant student's life. I, I boarded in a private home with, I had a roommate and it was quite nice. And the school unfortunately somehow didn't give me too much and I left after one year and went back home and started working. And that's where I worked. _____ 1930, 1932 to '36, I was working in Vilna. I had a very good job as a secretary in that association and besides I used to, I used to take some English in a evening school just to improve my, just to, not to be bored, always worked. I, the life in Vilna was quite pleasant. It was a very cultured city. It was, we had _____ theater, _____ there was the Jewish theater that used to come. The Vilna Troupe was very famous. I used to ice skate, I used to ski. It, it was, it was a pleasant life, I would say Vilna was a very cultured city.

Q: When, when did you first, what happened at the outbreak of the war with Poland? Do you remember it?

A: At the outbreak of war, you see I was very lucky to return to Paris after the Treaty of Munich in 1938. I was married, well I, I skipped a period.

Q: Please.

A: I was married after I worked at the Association of the Lumber Exporters from '32 I think to '36. And I went back to France. I was engaged in '30, end of '36 and I went to Paris to get married. My, my late husband was originally from Vilna and his sister was a graduate of the same high school than I was. We were quite friendly. But I met my husband in Paris on one of my trips and we were married in '37 in Paris at the, at the synagogue _____ which is very famous synagogue, by the rabbi, by the grand rabbi of Paris. Rabbi Onleebear. And we also had a very prominent relative in _____, I have his postcard. He was sculptor Ironson (ph) was very famous in Paris at the time. His sculpture was on Shonzayleezay (ph) but he also was famous for his bust of Lenin and Tolstoy. And this is his postcard in French to us.

Q: I will read it later . . .

A: Yes, I understand _____. This is important because he was trying to help us to get out.

Q: No, this is extremely important. We will read it and translate it later.

A: Yeah. Well I can translate it for you.

Q: Okay. Alright, so you married, what did your husband do?

A: My husband at the time of our marriage was working, he knew Russian and French and a little English and he worked for a technical publishing company at _____ in Paris, France. But his first job, he was an agricultural engineer. He was a graduate of University of _____ Agriculture. And his first job in Paris was Ironson (ph). He worked for the Russian government in, in buying agricultural implements for the Russians. That was his first job. And his second job when we were married, he worked for the, the _____ as a translator since he knew English and Russian and French, so _____. When we were married, that's what his job was.

Q: What, how long . . .

A: I also worked, I also worked. I worked quite soon, also for Ironson (ph). I got a job as a secretary for a orphanage. I used to be the secretary of the meetings. There was a quite famous under the auspices of the _____ France. And that was _____. I went back on vacation

back home for a few weeks and then I came back in '38 just before the Treaty of Munich. I was back like . . .

Q: What happened after that, after you had come back to Paris?

A: Well after I came back to Paris I worked and my husband was mobilized into the French Army. He was a French citizen, he served in the French Army before. And he left Paris September 2nd to go to the Marjoline (ph), he spent a whole year at the Marjoline (ph) and he was very lucky because he did have two permissions. He had two leaves and he came, he was mobilized in September 2nd and he came on a leave January. That was his first leave.

Q: January of 1939?

A: Nine, right. '39 yes. And then he went back and he was extremely, extremely lucky to have escaped _____ when they retreated before the Germans came in. _____ whose name I also know, Delaytouche (ph), he really escaped from the Germans. And he joined me, I, I lived through the exodus of Paris, _____ was a friend of mine who also was a Gilner (ph) and I was very lucky because he had to, he took a friend of his and me into his car and _____ the exodus of Paris for eight days. From Paris to Toulouse.

Q: Tell me about that as much as you can remember.

A: Well, well we, it, first of all it was a mutual, my friend who was, a friend who was courting all my girlfriends, he was a known bachelor and he was in business of radio parts. So he had a _____, with a broken spring on the front seat, and I never have forgotten because I had a, a heavy, from Algiers, a blanket _____ so I went back home at the last moment because the springs on the seat were so uncomfortable that we couldn't have possibly sat on this and I ran back and that was the only item that I saved from my apartment because . . . and we lived for eight days in, in _____ in schools and I don't where on the road. And we headed for Toulouse, France where we settled and many months later, I don't remember exactly but my husband joined me. I, I escaped from Paris two days before the Germans walked into Paris. _____.

Q: I'm sorry.

A: And the, in Toulouse, I was lucky because . . .

Q: Wait, 'scuse me, could you hold it for a minute before we get to Toulouse?

A: Yes, yes.

Q: Tell me what Paris was like two days before the Germans marched.

A: Well, it was panic because some people were lucky to take, who, who had the, how would I say the foresight and they went by train south, they escaped, and it was, it was panic. I, oh yes, one night I would like to mention to you I used to have a cleaning woman. Because I worked so I had somebody come it twice a week I think, or maybe three times, I don't recall. And it turned out that she was a German spy. My cleaning woman in Paris was, turned out to be a German spy. _____ It was really frightening.

Q: How did you find out?

A: Oh, from some neighbor in the same building, _____. And the, you see, this _____ from, and then we were, as I say, my husband was very lucky. He spent on the Marjoline (ph) about ten months but he had one leave. His first leave was in January which we were lucky to spend together and the second leave when he was on the train, he got an order to come back to the front. And he had a, a written leave, he could have proceeded farther but he obeyed the order and that saved his life. So after and I was lucky to go to Toulouse because there was an old friend of mine from the times of college days and I had at least a shelter where to be for a few days and then I was refugee in the countryside. And when my husband who was demobilized in Germany in the countryside and he worked on a farm tending cows, the, it was for a, for awhile in the, in that estate and later on he got himself a job in Toulouse and we went back to Toulouse and that's where my son is born.

Q: Tell me about Toulouse now. This is . . .

A: Well it was very hard because, but he, my husband, after he was demobilized it was lucky. He got a job. He worked for a, for a factory that manufactures shoes as an accountant so that's how we lived through and I also got a very little help from a American cousin just a few times, they send us some money. And I also, that period, I was corresponding with my sister who was still in Vilna through a friend of mine who was in Switzerland. My closest girlfriend came to visit me in Paris

after the Treaty of Munich in '38 and she became very ill in Paris. To such an extent that she was bedridden three months in my apartment and I was almost ready to take her back home. She had no parents, she had just an uncle who was a lawyer in Vilna. So she was all packed to go back to Poland and then she became very ill. So doctor operated on her and the operation wouldn't heal. She was very, very sick. And I knew a lot about a professor in Switzerland who was a very famous specialist of tuberculosis and my husband wrote a letter to him and he told us to bring her. That was Christmas Eve, '39. And I, and I, she was packed already to go to Vilna to her uncle but I took her to Switzerland and she was, that was, she was also, her name also was Raya and we were the same age. We graduate from the same high school in Vilna. And we were, had a lot in common. She had no, no parents. Her mother was dead by that time and she lived with an uncle in Vilna who was a lawyer. Anyhow, I took her to Switzerland and she was bedridden for three years and she recovered and she went to, to Geneva I think she went. And she met a fellow, she married and she lived in Israel. And she, and she had a fairly decent life after that because _____. And I escaped from Paris June 2nd I think, 1939. Just a few days before the Germans marched in. And we headed with these friends, these two friends by car for eight days to Toulouse. We slept in schools, we slept on the, in, on _____ and it was not _____. And how did I, I _____ my husband? And then my sister-in-law joined me. My sister-in-law who was a graduate, she was very bright and she was a graduate from the College de France de Paris _____. But then my husband, thank God, came, he was demobilized and we started, we lived first in the country. He was tending cows and doing other things on a farm. And then we moved to Toulouse where he worked as a, in accounting, a factory, a shoe factory.

Q: How long were you in Toulouse?

A: In Toulouse we were, I will tell you. I escaped from Paris in '39, I was and we left for America in '42.

Q: So you were in Toulouse all that time.

A: Yes, three years _____. My son was born in Toulouse.

Q: And, as, by 1941, what was it like for you in Toulouse? What were you doing there?

A: Well, well, my, my son was born and it was very hard. I got a couple times some money from America from my cousins and my husband worked as I told you as an accountant and we made the ends meet. It was not easy and simple, nevertheless we had an apartment where I even could give room to a friend of mine, to a school, an old friend of mine, to a girlfriend. And we managed, I even had a little help too because I didn't have enough milk to feed my child. I had some help from a next door neighbor who, I would pay her but she helped me with, because we had no running water, you know how it was during the war. Life was very hard but still we survived better than _____.

Q: What was it like for you as Jew in Toulouse at that time? Being a Jew with papers as a Jew?

A: Well I must confess that we didn't feel it too much because my husband was a veteran of the French Army and he had a job for a French firm so we personally didn't feel any, persecution. The, the only time I started feeling it when I, we got American visa and we applied for the visa of exit. And my husband visa of exit was turned down three times. They refused it. And then I think, pregnant with Daynya (ph), I went to Vishee (ph) France to plead my case because there was no reason for them to refuse my husband's visa of exit. He was a war veteran. He served ten months on the Marjinoline (ph) and it was just through anti-Semitism and persecution. So I was extremely lucky. It was like a miracle that I succeeded in getting the visa of exit.

Q: How did you do that? Who did you talk to?

A: It was, it was, it was providence. It was real providence. I came to, to Vishee (ph) with 1000 francs which I don't, cannot evaluate the value and I had two packs of cigarettes were very valuable in those days. And I went to a little restaurant for lunch. I didn't, I am a talker so, so I spoke to somebody in the restaurant and I told him what I came for and he directed me to whom to go to. That was already a miracle, _____. And I came I, I saw the minister _____ and I explained to him and I just had learned of my mother's death, just a few months ago. And the night before I went to see the, no the next day, I had a dream which I have never forgotten. My mother came to me and told me that _____ and I woke up in cold sweat and it was that feeling, I went for the second time to see the, _____ and he _____. And it was like, it was just a

miracle. I would like to read this postcard. Was written by Nomer (ph) and Son who is a very famous Jew is called _____. Lenin is in the museum, Lenin. And who was a prominent citizen of Paris, who was my husband's relative. And he was trying to get us to come to, to America but he said he can, he can bring us only to Santa Domingo. So it was really a miracle and there were another incident after I had all my papers and everything, a woman whom I asked to watch over my valise took her, took my valise instead of hers and boarded another train, in Vishee (ph). I was hysterical. I started screaming, somebody told, told, oh, she's on another train. Anyhow, I went through her, _____ my experiences, but I, I got the visa and we sailed for, through Spain and Portugal and we sailed to America and we came to America in '42. November, '42. I was pregnant with _____.

Q: Where did you live once you arrived?

A: When, the first few weeks we lived at the cousin's house, the first maybe two or three weeks. And then they helped us rent an apartment, a one bedroom apartment, upper, upper West Side. Do you know New York at all? We lived on the upper West Side, very close to _____. And my husband started working about ten days after. It was not easy, _____. And before _____ our family couldn't financially help us because one of my cousins who used to be very wealthy lost all his money and the cousin who paid for our trip to America _____. But my husband started working very soon and it was a struggle and, but I was lucky that I used, was able to get at least _____ from my sister who was in Vilna _____ under the Germans. _____. And my, my later sister was very educated. She knew eight languages. That's through the, the eight language she learned already when she came to Cuba. But she knew German, French, Russian, Polish, Yiddish, Hebrew and. . .

Q: You had, how many sisters did you have?

A: One.

Q: One sister. So this one sister stayed through the Vilna . . .

A: Yes. Ghetto.

Q: Ghetto. She went to camps and then went to Cuba.

A: That's right. And then came to America. From America she couldn't remain because she arrived in America with a girlfriend who helped her a great deal in camp. The other, the other friend. My sister was as I said, a linguist and the other one, a graduate of a very good trade school. She was a very good seamstress. That's what kept her alive and helped her to help my sister. That's how they survived. They were very devoted to each other. So when they came to America, they, my sister could have somebody marry her fictitiously so she could remain. But the other one couldn't get it and they went to Cuba and they suffered _____ Cuba, for three years they suffered from the climate, atrocious. And finally, they came back.

Q: Okay. Is there anything you would like to add?

A: Well I, I really don't know what _____. This is a letter that I have from my sister in Polish where she says that she's more miserable there than she was in concentration camp. That's how miserable she was in Cuba because of the climate. Yes. She was highly educated.

Q: Thank you very much.

A: And, and also this, here I have, in Paris, after I reached Lisbon, trying to tell her that I would try to do everything possible for them once I get to America. Unfortunately, they suffered a great deal under the Germans _____ in France. So there was nothing really, _____ I don't see.

Conclusion of interview.