

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Interview with Ellen Kaidanow
November 8, 2008
RG-50.030*0553

PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of a recorded interview with Ellen Kaidanow, conducted by Cecilia Curbow on November 8, 2008 on behalf of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The interview took place in Alexandria, VA 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.

The reader should bear in mind that this is a verbatim transcript of spoken, rather than written prose. This transcript has been neither checked for spelling nor verified for accuracy, and therefore, it is possible that there are errors. As a result, nothing should be quoted or used from this transcript without first checking it against the taped interview.

ELLEN KAIDANOW

November 8, 2008

Question: This is the **United States** Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with **Ellen Kaidanow**, conducted by **Cecilia Curbow** on November 8th, 2008, at the Child Survivor Conference in **Alexandria, Virginia**. Hello, Miss **Kaidanow**.

Answer: Hello.

Q: Thank you so much that you have agreed to give us an interview.

A: You're welcome.

Q: Would you please repeat your name and your date of birth?

A: Yes, my name is **Ellen Kaidanow**, that's my married name, and I was born in 1936, in June s – June 15.

Q: Where were you born?

A: And I was born in **Poland**, which is now the **Ukraine**, and the name of my city is **Dubno, d-u-b-n-o**.

Q: Okay. So, how old were you at the time of the Holocaust?

A: At the time I probably was like seven years old?

Q: And your family consisted of how many people?

A: Yes, we were a family of five, I had three sisters, I was the middle daughter, and my father was – name was **Joseph**, or **Jossul** in Yiddish. My mother's name was **Esther**. And I had a sister by the name of **Pearl**. I was the middle child, my name was **Shifra** in Yiddish, and then I had a younger sister that was **Bella**.

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Q: Did you attended a school at the time?

A: No, I never went. I-I was supposed to – I remember that I was supposed to go that year to school when the Germans came in. So I never actually went to school.

Q: Were your other sisters on –

A: The older sister must have gone to school, but I really don't know.

Q: Okay.

A: But I'm sure she did, because she was much older. Like, I was closer to the younger one, you know, and there was probably quite a few difference between the older and myself and my younger sister.

Q: And how – how many years are there in between your sisters and you?

A: I – I don't know, you know, I'm just sort of imagining that sh – the older one must have been like at least three years older, because I remember her – you know, being that I was little, I thought she was big. But the truth is, I don't know. And the younger sister was wa – not too – too much younger than I was.

Q: Okay, so wh-what do you remember about the **[indecipherable]**

A: About the home life I don't remember too much. We lived in a very beautiful street by the name of **Panienska**. And I know that the fi – people who know anything about **Dubno**, and if you tell them **Panienska** street, they know that that was a very beautiful street. My parents had like a little – I would say they called it a

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kiosk, like they was having candy and things like that. So my parents were hardly at home. But they had one of – a – a – a Christian, actually a Ukrainian woman by the name of **Lerna**(ph), and she was raising us. She was really more like my mother – like a mother to me than my own mother, because she was always with the girls, my mother was busy in the store. So, I loved her very much, and she loved the children. She was very devoted person to us. And in fact, she was the one that saved me, at the end. So, too much about the life before that, I don't remember too much. But I do remember when the Germans came in, and I'll never forget one of my cousins came and they said, you know, you have to leave your home, and we have to all move to a ghetto, which was a **Dubno** ghetto. And then wi – all of – the whole family, like my mo – I remember my grandmother was there and my father's brother also lived there, and they had many children, like at least four or five children. But I don't remember, you know, their ages or their names, I hardly remember that.

Q: So they were all gather at the ghetto.

A: And – and they – we were all in the ghetto, and la –

Q: Okay. Ah – hah – sorry, just have a quick question, sorry.

A: No, it –

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Q: How did you know that – I mean, you were seven years old, how did you know that this was the Germans? Did you also see local people involved in gathering Jewish people and taking them to the ghetto?

A: Well, to tell you the truth, I didn't see Germans until I was in the ghetto, and then I did see Germans. They used to come every once in awhile, they would say – you know, they used to call it an **oblava**(ph), which means like – you know, they would decide that they would – gonna come into the ghetto, and let's say, whoever was outside, they would kill. And I do remember seeing them.

Q: Did you recognize them in their uniforms?

A: Uniforms, yes.

Q: Okay. Were they a different color than other people? Was –

A: Well, it was the German uniforms –

Q: It was German.

A: I remember their hats, it was like a greenish uniform.

Q: Okay.

A: And, you know, people would alert us, so, the Germans are coming, so we used to hide.

Q: Oh.

A: Yeah.

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Q: So, the ghetto, how many people of your family do you – do you recall more or less? I mean, a – yo-you just mentioned that you met there your aunts and –

A: Yes, yes, there was –

Q: – cousins.

A: – well, I – as I said, I don't – I know he had a wife, and I know we had cousins, I don't remember how many and how old they were. But, you know, I know we lived in the si – all th – all in the same house, you know, in – in the ghetto. And in the ghetto, I don't know, I remember playing like outside a little bit with, you know, other kids. And – and then I also remember that m-my uncle and my father, they made like a hiding place. They called it a **schron**, which means like an underground bunker, I would say a bunker. And whenever there was rumors that the Germans are coming, or that the end was gonna come or whatever, we used to hide in that place. And once it was over, everybody came out. So I do remember that.

Q: And was it only your sisters and you that hid there, or was also the other –

A: No, e-everybody.

Q: – cousins, and –

A: Yeah.

Q: Okay, okay.

A: Everybody.

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Q: Okay, so others as well?

A: Yes, yes.

Q: Okay. So, what happened afterwards?

A: What happened afterwards, of course you know the life in the ghetto was a – pretty miserable. I remember even I – I – I'll never forget that one day we were outside and the Germans came, and I remember they took like a little kid, and they threw them in the barrel of water, like rainwater, you know, the barrels used to collect rainwater? And that image stayed with me for a long time. But what happened is, towards the end, I remembered also again, people came – well, first of all, you know my father was in touch with le -- **Lerna**(ph), that's the nanny that I was telling you about. And what happened was, the ghetto was built by Jews, and they were built by planks, you know, there were planks? And they like left one plank open, and she used to come and ge – bring us food. And one time she actually came and said that she wanted to take me, and you know, to save me, and – and – and so on. And she did take me out of the ghetto, I don't remember how, but I remember that my father was like crying when I left. And in the middle of the night, she took me to her place where she lived, not too far away from the ghetto.

Q: Do you know why – why you, and maybe not your younger sister, or your other sister, yeah.

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A: I don't know. I always wondered. I always wondered. That's something that I always, always have in mind, why me, you know? But I think that what happened, that it was circumstances, because we – yeah, I don't – I don't know really why. But the first time that she took me out, in the middle of the night, I sort of got – got scared, you know, that I'm away from my parents, so I came back by myself, I don't know how.

Q: How old were you still?

A: I'm maybe seven years old.

Q: Seven, okay.

A: And I came back and I still remember that at the ghetto gate, they used to have Jewish, I don't know, I want to call them policemen, but guards, let's say guards. And I still remember that one of them said, look at her, she's coming from the outside and she didn't bring anything. Cause all I did was, you know, just come home. And this **Lerna**(ph), who was the one that, you know, I was with, woke up in the morning and I was gone, and she was like really panicky. So she came to the ghetto and she said to my father, I don't know what happened, I don't have the child. And he said, don't worry, she's here. So that's – I remained in the ghetto with my family, until the very end when they announced an **akcja** – an **akcja** mean – meant that they were liquidating the ghetto.

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Q: This was in – was it years later, or –

A: Well, we were occupied in '41, and this must have been, I don't know. To – to tell you the truth, I don't know exactly whether it was a year or two later.

Q: Okay.

A: Whatever the ghetto, you know, that probably could be documented. But I do remember that somebody came to my father and said, listen, **Lerna**(ph) is at the gate, you know, because we were all gated in. It's not like today's gated communities, yeah. And they said, you know, if you have a – a child, just, you know, throw her out, like bring her out. So I remembered like they picked me up physically and brought me to the gate. By that time the Germans were already – they were on their way to come to liquidate the ghetto. And she was waiting for me, she took me by the hand like this, and we started walking, just walking. And I – I don't know, I was just very pliable, I guess, and this time I just went with her. And in fact, on the way – on the way, as we were walking, we were caught by the Ukrainian police, and we were taken into a pla – a room, and I remember sitting with her, just like today, like she was sitting and I was sitting. And the policeman was called away for some reason. There was a woman scrubbing the floor and she said, what are you sitting here? Go. He's not here, get out of here. And so she took me again by the hand and she – we walked out of there, which was again a miracle,

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I guess in Jewish you would say **bashert**. And we just walked and walked and walked until we hitchhiked. We hitchhiked, and she had a brother that lived on a farm, I don't know how many kilometers away, because I have no idea of things like this. We came to her brother, and I remember she put me up like in a part where, you know, nobody could see me. And I was there for maybe a week or so, I don't know how long either, because I have no – I had no perception of time whatsoever. And after awhile the brother said to her, listen, you can't stay here, because if they discover that you have a Jewess here, then you know what's gonna happen, we're all gonna get killed. So –

Q: Just a quick question again, sorry.

A: No, that al –

Q: Was this the house of her brother or were you in – in **[indecipherable]**. Was this a house, a farm?

A: It was a farm.

Q: It was a farm.

A: Definitely a farm. I'm – he lived there, you know, with his wife, I guess, and – and her mother was still alive, I remember that. You know, an older woman.

Q: So, were you allowed to go into all the rooms inside the house?

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A: No, I – I was just like – they used to say, like an **apprivichik**(ph), I don't know how to explain it, but they had like a wooden stove, and then on top used to be like warm, you know? And I remember s – being there, like cooped up, you know, hidden. And so she said, you know what? I'll go back and I'll see, because you know, she didn't know what happened. So I remember she went away for a day or so, whatever, I don't know how long it took. And when she came back she said, I can't take her back because nobody's there any more, they're all killed.

Q: So she went back to look for your family?

A: She went back to the family, to the ghetto, and the ghetto by that time was completely liquidated, nobody was there. So she came back and then she had another sister that lived also on a farm, but the farm was called the a **houtur**(ph) which means that it was isolated. It was like the farm, and then it was nobody all around, you know, not too many people around. So we stayed with that sister for quite awhile. And I don't know what I was doing, I remember going out with the cows, or with the horses and you know, li – she had one son, and it was very good to me. I would – never had any suffering, I never had – I was never hungry, because on a farm, you know? And this woman, **Lerna**(ph) who took me, she was like crazy about me, and I loved her so much, that she was everything to me, you know?

Q: Right.

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A: And I was very lucky, because I was beloved by her, so I didn't feel – I didn't feel like, you know, like I was trash and something like that. And I don't know how long we stayed there. We stayed there for quite awhile. And then she had another sister by the name of **Anya**, and she lived in the city, which was not any more the city of **Dubno**, but it was called **Rovna**. Was **Rovna**, let's see, what was it? No, not **Rovna**. I – I have to think of the name. In Russian it was called **Krasnoarmiisk**. But really, it was **Radziwillów**, you know, and th – when the Russians were there because it was constantly Russian, Polish, German, Russian. So it was **Radziwillów**. And there we had an apartment, and I lived with **Lerna(ph)** and her sister **Anya**. And in fact, you know, when the Russians came, they – the bombings were there and we were like in a – sort of in a bunker hiding from the bombs, and her sister was hit with the shrapnel in her arm; I was sitting right next to her. And I remember there was a certain flower on the table, that for years afterwards I couldn't – cause the mingling with the blood and everything, I couldn't smell those flowers, you know, like every time I s – had those flowers, I s – like nauseous. And you know, during the time, I can't like tell you everything. The way I went to church, and you know, wearing the cross and I used to play with the kids, and some of the kids said that I'm a – a – a Jewess, you know, and she denied it because she said that I was her child, that's how I survived, as a child of **Lerna(ph)**.

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Q: Were you – were you then raised as a Christian?

A: Yes.

Q: Okay.

A: Yes, but at night she used to remind me, because she was so wonderful that I can't even begin to tell you. And I didn't want to – I – be – be reminded that I'm Jewish, I really didn't want to, you know, but at night she kept saying to me, you know, I don't remember if she talked Jewish to me or something, couple of words, whatever. But yes, I was running around as a Christian girl. And – and, you know, so then after the war, when – not – it wasn't really after the war, it was just a time when our town was liberated. So I had an uncle, my father's brother, his wife and their son, they were saved in **Russia** and they lived in **Siberia**. So, they had written to our town, if there's anybody left from – my maiden name was **Leviatin(ph)** – **Lev -- Leviatin(ph)**, but you know, you have to s – in English it's **Leviatin(ph)**. So she had written to somebody, I don't know to whom, and they said they think that one child was left. And on that score, she came all the way from **Siberia**, and she met me. I was at that time running like to school, and she met me on the street, and she said, oh my God, you know, I'm – I'm **Janyet(ph)**, her name was **Janyet(ph)**, and – and I –

Q: She was their sister?

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A: She was my aunt through marriage. Her husband and my father were brothers.

Q: Okay.

A: And I ran away from her. I said, I'm not Jewish, I'm a Ukrainian. I'm – I – I'm a devoted – I even remember, because she reminded me. I didn't remember that, but she reminded me afterwards that I said, I'm – you know, like an – in Russian I said, I'm a **steeron(ph) kryinka(ph)**, which means that I'm a devoted Ukrainian, and I ran away from her. But she persisted and she came back and – and she took me back with her. And **Lerna(ph)** said the only reason she's giving me up is because she fi – felt that I would have a better life with them than with her, because they could give me papers and pencils and I could be educated, whereas she hardly had anything. So, my aunt took me, and she took me back to **Siberia**, to her. And I was devastated. To leave **Lerna(ph)** was like worse than when I left my parents, because, I mean, she was everything to me. And – and I stayed with them, and then when the Russians said that, you know, Polish citizens can go back, we all went back to – first to – was, you know a – a trip from **Russia** almost took a month, I remember. And we came to **Poland, Łódź**, and then from there to **Czechoslovakia**, from **Czechoslovakia** to **Germany**, and at that time we were in a **DP** camp which was called **Bad Reichenhall**. And that was in **Germany**. And there we stayed for quite awhile. And then my aunt, for whatever reason, she had a sister in the **United**

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States, so she said – you know, there was an orphanage called **preen** – **preenum**(ph) **kindsai**(ph) in **Germany**. And she decided to send me and her son, her own son **Victor**, as my brother to this camp, because she wanted us to come to u – the **United States**, where she had a sister. But unbeknownst to us – so we were in that camp for about a year, and finally, you know, our quota came through and I came to the **United States** on a boat called General **Black**, with my cousin, who was my bra – you know, like my brother. And when we got to the **United States** we discovered that the aunt who was supposed to be like everything to us, prepare a house for us and money and you know, all the things and take us in and blah, blah, blah, but she died away – she died three weeks before we came.

Q: Wow.

A: And – and she – they didn't want to let us know, you know? So, they had a daughter by berni – by the name of **Bernice**, she was sic – all of 16 years old, she was the one that took us, both myself and my cousin, my – **Victor**. And they lived in **Freeport, Long Island** at the time. Her f – their father was very busy, and it's funny – irony that he also had the – like a candy store, so he was busy night and day. And we remained with these – with this cousin, and you know, with all kinds of troubles. I mean, she liked me, she didn't like him, he had to go live someplace else. But eight months later, my – the same aunt, **Anya** and uncle, my father's

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brother, came to the u – finally came to the **United States**, and we sort of became a family again, whole again, and –

Q: With **Victor**?

A: With **Victor**, right.

Q: Okay.

A: You remember.

Q: Yeah.

A: And by that time, actually **Bernice's** father, by the name of **Norman**, he got us an apartment in the **Bronx**, and they registered me to school, to high school. I don't know, I – I think I lied about my age, cause my cousin was there, so I wanted to be in the high school too, and I don't know, they accepted me, don't ask me how, because I really did not have any education whatsoever. How I pulled through, I don't know, but I did graduate high school.

Q: You know roughly how old you were at that time?

A: When – when I came here to the **States**, I was like 12 and a half or 13.

Q: Wow. So six years of suffering, and then –

A: Pardon?

Q: Six years, roughly six years of suffering.

A: Oh, yeah.

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Q: Moving in – from one place to the other.

A: Oh yeah, right, definitely. I mean, and you know, I can't tell you everything. I mean, like, when I was with **Lerna**(ph), you know, we – I used to go to funerals. Now I think back of it, because you know, you don't think about those things. I remember going to wakes, you know, because the kids used to have – on a grenade, they would si – go on the grenade at – after the war, even, and blown up and then I used to have like nightmares, you know? Nothing, so then I – you know, went here to school, in – in the **Bronx**, **Taft** High School, I graduated, and right after that I met my husband, we got married. He was taken into the army after we got married, I was pregnant. So, my son was like – you know, we got an apartment, I was alone for nine months. When he came back, my son was nine months old, and he was actually born in an army hospital in – where was it? On **Staten Island**, **Governor's Island**, you know. And I – you know, I mean, you can't tell everything, but –

Q: No.

A: – you can imagine my feelings. I used to go to the army doctors, and I didn't know anything about children, cause I was never around children, I never knew anything about it. And I mean, crying like **Niagara Falls** every single day. And I don't know, somehow you survive, you know.

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Q: Were you afraid that something would happen to him, when he left to the war?

Or when he was enlisted?

A: You – you mean my husband?

Q: Mm-hm. Did you –

A: Well, na – yeah, well what happened was, we tried to postpone his service. We used to go to congressmen, and to the rabbi and everything to say that, you know, I'm alone and I'm with child and I can't be without him, but nothing helped. But the judge delayed it so that he was just away nine months. You know what I mean? Because by the time they process the papers and everything – he was stationed someplace in **California**.

Q: Okay.

A: When he came back, my son was already nine months old. And I don't know, slowly but surely, I mean, there's other things, you know. When we got married we lived in a one room apartment by other people, and you know, it's – all these things are – I don't know how important they are to this conversation.

Q: Everything is important. **[indecipherable]**

A: Well, you know. So, I lived with one family, and – and she was very mean to us, so we moved out and we lived with another family, and then finally we got our own apartment. And the other story is that, miraculously, I found my mother's sister here

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in the **States**. It's not that I found her. I remembered something, that there's an aunt in the **United States**, but I did not know her name, I didn't know – you know, **New York**, number one. There was no way for me to find out anything. But one of our landsmen, who came from our town, it was just this crazy, crazy thing. He was walking on **Pitkin** Avenue, and he was looking for somebody else. So they – he wa – went into a tobacco shop, and he was looking for a Mr. **Guyer**(ph). So he went in and he asked him whether he's related to other **Guyers**(ph) from – that were in **Israel**. So he said no, but then he asked him, where do you come from? And he said, I come from **Dubno**. And he said, you know, I have a niece that comes from **Dubno**, too. And the niece turned out to be my mother's sister. And she came, she really saved my life, because when I was all alone with my son, I didn't know anything about raising the kid. And she came and she stayed with me, and she helped me, you know, to tell me what to do and, you know, how to feed him and so on and so forth. And you know, from that time on, we – we sort of picked ourselves up. He came back and he worked in a bakery, then he had this own bakery, and that's – that's a – I'd – I think it's like – more or less, in short, you know.

Q: Yeah.

A: A short history.

Q: An amazing – an amazing story, really. During your –

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A: Oh, the other thing that I wanted to tell you, which I think is very important, because after our city was liberated, my mother had, you know, given a few things to a Czech woman, because I was like very peculiar, I had to sit in my own seat and I had my own chair and all that, and I wouldn't eat unless it's my own spoon. So, when she – **Lerna**(ph), the one that saved me, came to this Czech woman, and she wanted to say – to get some things that my mother left with her. She said, you better get out of here, or I'm gonna say that you have a chi – a – a Jewess with you. But the only thing that she did give me is the spoon, like a soup spoon, which I have to this day. And I don't know if you want to ask me anything else.

Q: Yes. I'd like to know if you ever went back to **Dubno**?

A: No.

Q: You've never been back.

A: No, I never went back, no.

Q: And wha – did you ever hear again from **Lerna**(ph)?

A: So this – from **Le-Lerna**(ph)? Since I married, forever, I've been sending her money and packages and we – I have beautiful letters from her, beautiful. And, you know, I was like – you know, we ourselves were very poor, I couldn't take her here, so I never saw her again. But we – I have a lot of correspondence with her, and we helped her as much as possible, and I have pictures of her. And what happened, she,

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of course, eventually passed away. And her sister **Anya**, with whom I lived towards the end of the war, the one that was hit on the shrapnel, when **Lerna(ph)** died, I became her surrogate, more or less, you know, sending her things. And now that she was passed away, I'm – to this day, in fact I have now a package again to send to her daughter. And the daughter lives in **Lviv – Lvov**, the u – the **Ukraine**. And she just called me the other day, so I've always been sending money, packages, and I've always been in touch with her.

Q: That's amazing.

A: Yeah.

Q: I have one last –

A: The only thing that I didn't do, and I really regret it, I guess maybe it's not too late, she was a Righteous Gentile and I somehow never went to **Yad Vashem** to report that.

Q: Well, you can still do that.

A: Yeah, I was gonna say that I could still do that. But, you know, being – we were young, we were s – you know, struggling ourselves, raising the children.

Q: Under such circumstances, yeah.

A: And I wasn't – you know, I wasn't such a big hero, you know what I mean? Like, I don't know, we just neglected it, I guess. But I didn't neglect her. I just

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neglected to, you know, make it – and I never talked about it, now fi – finally we talk about it. I never talked to my children, I have three children, six grandchildren, and I din – I did not like to talk about it. But I think now, sort of, I don't know, it's amaze – I'm amazed myself that I'm even talking.

Q: Thank you so much for sharing this with us. And –

A: You're welcome.

Q: – this concludes the **United States** Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with **Ellen Kaidanow**. Thank you very much.

A: You're very welcome.

Conclusion of Interview