

You all right? Yeah.

I do.

OK.

OK. This is a United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Mrs. Mary Hermanowski on August 19, 2013 in Jamaica, Queens, New York.

Yes.

Thank you, Mrs. Hermanowski for agreeing to speak with us today. It's late in the day, but we are thrilled that we're still going to have an opportunity to talk.

Great, I'm happy.

OK.

Rolling.

All right, so I'm going to start the interview like I did with your husband a little earlier. Could you tell me when you were born-- your date of birth, that is-- where you were born, and your maiden name?

Ah, July 11, 1930-- what?

1930?

One.

Or 1931?

'31.

1931.

In Poznan.

In Poznan, Poland.

Poland.

And what was your name at birth?

Well, it was spelled in Polish. Maria Ludwika--

Ludwika.

--Szrajer.

Szrajer?

Right. S-Z-R-A-J-E-R.

Did you have any brothers and sisters?

No.

You were the only child.

Yes.

Aw. And what was your mother's name?

Janina Landowska.

Landowska?

Right.

Was her maiden name?

Right.

Do you remember when she was born?

She was born-- Oh, my god.

1898.

1898? Is that what the year would be?

Where do we have that information?

It doesn't matter. It doesn't matter. We have it in our documents. I'm just asking now so that I get an orientation while we begin the interview at the beginning. Your father, what was his name?

His name was Ludwig.

Ludwig.

But on this side of the Atlantic, he was Lewis.

Lewis. OK. So in Polish, he would be Ludwig, and his name was Szrajer.

Right. Are they both from Poznan, your parents?

No. My father was from Lodz. And my mother was from Warsaw.

And you grew up in Poznan?

Yes.

OK. Can you tell me what was your first language at home?

I'm sure it's Polish. But French was there, pretty close.

So it was bilingual, French and Polish.

Yeah.

What was your father's profession?

My father had a business, ran a business. Everybody thought he was a lawyer. He was a graduate of the Moscow Conservatory in piano.

Oh.

What else? There's one other thing.

He was going to polytechnic.

But he never finished the polytechnic. It didn't work. No. And he was crazy about cars.

OK. So your father had his own business.

Yep.

What was the business in?

Export-import.

Was it consumer products?

Yes. I think it was almost exclusively threads.

And did he have his own store or did he sell to stores?

No, no, no. He had an office. And he would deliver some packages.

And your mother, she helped him in the business or not?

Yes.

She did. She helped him.

My mother, before she married, she worked in a bank. And she had this right of signature for the bank. And then she helped him. My mother was an unusual character.

Tell me in what way.

Now I realize how extremely bright she was. Very determined. She knew what she wanted. And God forbid I wouldn't do exactly what she wanted. But our son considers her his mother. He loved-- When she died, he sat crying. He said, "I lost my mother." He loved her. And she loved him. So she was a funny cat.

Well, that's beautiful, because there are many children who don't know their grandparents well. And to have a grandparent who was such an important part of your life is a true gift. How was she with you? Were you frightened of her when you wouldn't do-- or was she your best friend?

She was not my best friend, right? Wojtus?

Well, I guess what I'm trying to establish is what kind of relationship did you have with your parents-- with your father

and with your mother?

She was the one issuing orders. And I better listen. And my father was my pal. And my father was trying to make up for the fact that I was an only child. So he tried to be a friend, a playmate.

Were you able to confide in him?

Yes.

So any kind of troubles you had, any kind of thoughts or secrets--

I went to him.

You went to him. OK.

A typical daughter-father relationship.

Yeah. Tell me what religion were your parents?

My mother was Roman Catholic. My father was-- what do you call it? Neither. Nothing.

He was agnostic?

Agnostic.

He was agnostic.

Yeah.

Were your father and mother both from originally Catholic families?

No.

So tell me about that.

My father was originally from a Jewish family and so was my mother.

I see. But she actually converted.

No, her father or even before that. The conversion happened much earlier.

For her?

Yeah.

OK. Into Roman-- And for him?

For him, he was an agnostic. He didn't care.

I'm asking about your grandparents. Were they?

I don't know them. I don't know what's going on. And neither did he.

I see. So you didn't know your grandparents very well?

No, the only grandparents I-- parent-- I knew was my mother's father.

I see.

That was the only one I knew. And we were the biggest buddies in the world.

Did he spoil you?

Oh, yeah. As much as he could.

OK. What do you remember from your childhood in Poznan? Do you have an earliest memory?

I remember my wonderful room with all-- I remember how the furniture was arranged. I remember I had-- well, you see, my father's relatives had a toy factory. So he's got all these dolls. And I didn't like dolls. I never played with dolls. I played with games. And so I had a beautiful shelf.

And that particular room had a terrace, small terrace. So I had a door to the terrace, which in the winter was covered with a pretty heavy felt, because it was cold. But I had a-- Oh, what do you call them? What they used to use to warm a place.

You mean those coal ovens?

But they were not coal. No, they were made out of the--

Clay.

What? No. Kafle.

Oh. They were ovens that had tiles? ,

Yes, tiled all the way up.

And down.

And down. And on the bottom, you--

You put the coal in.

--put the coal in.

Yeah.

And it was very pretty. It was white and blue. And stuff was nice.

So you had a pretty room?

Yes.

What kind of a house did your parents live in? Was it an apartment building?

Yeah.

OK. Was it in the center of town?

No.

OK. It was in a residential area of Poznan?

It was a residential area.

Was it a large apartment?

The apartment itself had seven rooms.

That's rather large.

You bet.

Yeah. And did anybody else live with your family besides yourself and your mother and your father?

Yes, we had the-- [SPEAKING POLISH]

A maid?

A maid. A Maid, a cook all in one person.

A housekeeper.

Housekeeper.

You had a housekeeper. Would you say that your family was well to do?

Yes.

OK. So materially, you didn't ever feel a lack for either food or clothing or toys or anything like that?

Nope.

OK.

A lack of things, only if my mother decided I shouldn't have it. Then I didn't get it.

Got it.

That's the only way.

Well, what about friends? One of the hard things for only children is to have-- Did you have cousins to play with or neighborhood kids?

No, I didn't have cousins. First of all, there was a park right near where we lived. So I went to that park every day. And I had a pair of twins who were my age, but they were bigger and taller and everything. I have pictures of them. It's so funny. They were my bosom pals. I had a couple of girlfriends too. But I always had somebody to play with.

And they were neighborhood kids?

Yeah, pretty much.

OK. And tell me a little bit about school. How many years of schooling did you have in the 1930s?

Two.

Only two. You finished two classes?

I was only-- I was eight years old when the war started. So I was six. I went to grade 1. I was seven. I went to--

Grade 2.

--grade 2. And I was about to start grade 3.

Was it a private school?

Yes.

OK. What kind of school? Was it a Catholic school, for example?

Yes.

And why were you sent to a Catholic school?

Because it had an excellent reputation.

Was your mother very religious?

No.

OK. So she identified herself as a Catholic, but she wasn't very practicing?

No.

And your father was neutral, completely neutral?

That's right.

Do you have any memories of those first couple of years in school?

Oh, yes.

What was it like?

I remember the buildings. But I have pictures of them. More recent. I remember that the first class teacher, she was kind of short and smiley and pleasant. They're pleasant memories-- very pleasant.

Did you like going to school there?

Oh, yeah.

OK.

Because you see, my aim in life was to have higher education.

Even at age eight, you knew that this is what you wanted?

Yep.

Were there certain subjects that were your favorite subjects?

Yes.

What would have that been?

Math.

Math. At home, what was the atmosphere like at home?

Very pleasant.

Your parents got along?

Oh, yeah.

OK. It was a love match?

Yes.

And did they talk about the wider world with you? I mean, you were a child. Or did you hear conversations?

Well, I think-- that I don't remember that well-- but I think there was talk about this kind of stuff at the dinner table.

Between them? About politics--

Well, they let me take part in it.

Oh, they did?

Yeah.

So in some ways, they treated you like a grown up.

Yep.

Did they talk about Poland's leaders? Were they very patriotic people?

I should say yes. Yes.

Why would you hesitate a little bit?

Because I later on I kept telling my father, "Why the hell didn't you leave? Why didn't you move. You knew what was going to happen." But they wouldn't do it.

You said that they were not born in Poznan, yes?

No.

OK. What had caused them to move there?



A relative. A relative that I remember my father telling me that a relative when he-- He came back from Russia after World War I, found himself completely cleaned out of anything he possessed. The relatives beautifully left him with nothing. And a relative told him to move to Poznan. It's a good place to start a business and that he was going to help him, which he indeed did.

Was this an uncle or a distant--? Did you know the person?

Yes, I was familiar with the person. Yeah.

OK. Because it sounds like you didn't know many of your relatives outside of your grandfather.

No, I did, because my father was friends with a lot of relatives. So I knew two or three of his cousins. I knew a couple of his friends. I knew people.

And were they-- I'm sorry that I emphasize and keep going back to this, but were they Jewish or were they Catholic?

They were both. They were this, this, and this.

OK. So there were mixed marriages?

Mixed, yep.

But did they all consider themselves assimilated into Polish society? Did they consider themselves Poles?

Poles rather than Polish society.

OK. They consider themselves Poles?

Polish. They were Polish.

[PHONE RINGS]

OK. Let's break for a second.

Yeah. My father was crazy about cars.

Did you have a car at home?

Oh, yeah. I think his driver's license was number seven or something like that.

For the city?

No, no, no. For Poland.

Oh, my God.

After World War I.

Oh, my God. He really did like cars.

Yes. And he traveled. Well he used them for business. But he belonged to the automobile club. And he used to take part in rides.

Oh my.

Just before the war, he won the biggest Polish ride like that. It was from the southeast corner to the northwest corner.

Like from Zamosc to Gdynia?

No. From Zaleszczyki to Gdynia. Yes.

Wow, I wonder how many hours that took.

That probably took something around 20. And he took with him his brother-in-law.

Your mother's brother?

No, my mother's brother-in-law, who was an idiot. I don't know why he took him. I have no idea. But he didn't spoil the whole thing, which was important. But then he took me for most of the local things.

Did you like riding with him?

Ooh! And he let me win most of them.

So were these races?

Rallies. They called them rallies.

I see.

Did you win according to speed?

No, according to what I found.

Oh, so it was along the way, you would find markers of some kind.

Yeah, there was something up in the tree or there was something someplace else. Or there was some sort of a house that didn't belong there. Something like that.

That sounds like great fun.

Yes.

Did your mother ever take part?

No. My mother was not interested in that. My mother went to get a new dress made while we did that.

OK. So they talked about important things and serious things at home.

[PHONE RINGS]

Oh, yes.

OK.

[PHONE RINGS]

She what's-- What did you do to your finger?

Nothing. I'm just holding it.

Oh.

So they talked about serious and important things to you.

Yes, they did.

Did you have any sense of the nervousness that so many people had at the end of the 1930s? Did you have any sense, even being a small child, that there was this place called Germany to the West and Soviet Union to the East?

All I know is that a week before September, I guess--

1939.

--my father packed us up, and we drove to Warsaw, where his sister lived-- a sister he couldn't stand. But being a gentleman, he'd never throw her out of the house. But he used to give her such a hard time.

One thing you ought to enjoy. She wanted to know what he was going to do with her or something when they came back from Russia after World War I. He said, "No problem. I'll put you in the post office on a chair. You'll stick out your tongue and people will wet their-- wet their stamps." That was my father with his sister.

I don't know if she would have appreciated that humor. Did she?

Yes, because she considered that as an expression of love.

Aw.

She did that all the time.

Did you like her?

No.

And why not?

She was stupid. She was very stupid.

But the place that you moved to in Warsaw, was that her house or a family house or a family apartment?

No, I think we were in a hotel or something. I don't know. I don't know if it was her place or not. She had a daughter. And the daughter was a pain in the neck all her life. Unfortunately, she's gone already. So I should not be too nasty about her. I love her oldest son. We were big friends.

So because she lived though in Warsaw, your father decided to move there? Is that right? Or to just go there?

No, this was just as an emergency measure before we-- I think he realized he has to go east. And that was the way to go.

Oh, I see.

So did you think that you'd be returning back to Poznan or not?

I don't think I even gave it a thought.

Your parents, did they seem particularly agitated or this was just a normal kind of well, one time we go here. Another time we go there.

No, they were quite upset.

OK. How did that show itself?

Discussions.

They were nervous?

Yes.

Do you remember where you were when the war broke out?

I think we were either in Warsaw or we were already traveling east.

So you only stayed a little bit in Warsaw. You didn't stay long?

No.

I see. And did your father give you any reason why you would have traveled east rather than stay in Poznan?

I don't remember.

OK. Where did you eventually end up?

Lvov. In Lvov.

And did you go by his car that he used to go--?

Well, he lost his car. It was taken away from him at a certain point. The Russians took it away.

That's after you got to Lvov or before?

Before. We were trying to get through to Lithuania.

[PHONE RINGS]

But on the way--

Hang on. Every time you hear it, we cut. Why were you trying to get to Lithuania? Do you remember?

To get to Sweden to get to the west.

I see. As a transit route?

Yes.

And I think there were-- my father had a couple of cousins who managed to get to Lithuania to Latvia, Estonia, or whatever and managed to buy a ticket to Mexico.

I see.

But we didn't.

OK. So you leave Warsaw. Do you think it was within a week or two of having just stayed there? Do you remember how long you stayed and then moved on or not?

No, I don't remember.

OK. When was the first time you saw any foreign soldier? Was it a Russian soldier, Soviet soldier, or German soldier?

I saw a German fighter plane attacking the cars on the road. And what my mother did-- this was typical of my mother-- she grabbed me out of the car, ran into the ditch on the side of the road to have me fall there and put herself on top of me. He flew over and didn't shoot us.

And then she went back to the car with you?

Yes. And we continued.

And this was the first sign that you saw that here's something foreign in my territory, in my world?

I presume-- I presume it was. Yeah.

OK.

And then of course, while this was happening, the Ukrainians were trying to attack all those cars, pretty rich cars, with pitchforks.

Were the Ukrainians within Polish territory?

Yeah, yeah.

OK, so the eastern part of Poland, you must have already been in that section?

Yep.

OK. And you saw some of this?

Yep.

And did they succeed in attacking the cars? Did they succeed?

Well, not that I saw, but I'm sure they did.

OK. That must have been a little scary for a kid.

Oh, yeah. I was never very brave. I was always scared of something.

Aw. There was plenty to be scared of. You say that your car was taken away at some point even before you reached Lvov. Is that right?

Yes.

How did that happen? You weren't there?

I was there, but I don't remember.

So it was like you were driving along in the car--

No, no. We were in a small town or something. And we couldn't either buy gas or somehow or other. And the Russians were there already.

So you saw them in that town?

At that point, yes. And then I saw them in Lvov. And that I remember, and I'll never forget it as long as I live.

So tell me what you saw.

The picture was that on one of the most elegant streets there walked a Russian family-- first the soldier with his stupid uniform. And their uniforms were so kind of inelegant. And with the hat, with the two kids. And behind him a few steps was the wife with all the coats and all the-- All the things was behind him, carrying all their paraphernalia.

Their belongings?

Yep. Oh, and she-- what they did was when they arrived in Lvov, they robbed a magazine of Polish made underwear.

You mean a store.

No, I think it was a magazine someplace.

So a journ-- like a magazine?

No, no, no.

So what's a magazine?

Storage place.

A storage place.

A storage facility.

Yep.

OK.

And because Poland was making very nice underwear--

Ladies underwear?

--ladies underwear-- before the war. And it wasn't silk. It was artificial silk of some kind. And all of a sudden, all these wives were wearing this stuff. And the kids were running after them and laughing at them.

So in other words, they were taking like night dresses--

Yeah.

--and wearing them as regular day clothes?

Elegant day clothes-- long, beautiful. And Lvov was full of churches. Big churches, small churches. They were all different denominations. So the kids had plenty to run into and hide and look from behind the thing and laugh.

And not get caught in other words.

That's right.

Where did you settle then in Lvov? How did you eventually get there? Did you have to take a train? Did you walk?

Well, I don't know how we settled in Lvov. But we were able-- I don't know how my parents did it. They were able to rent a room from a widow of a professor of the university. The professor had already passed away. But his son was now a big to do. But he was drafted or something.

Into the Polish military?

Yeah. So she had a room. And she rented us the room. She didn't want to be by herself. And she wanted some income.

Yeah. Tell me, why do you think your father went east rather than west-- not when you were an eight-year-old child but afterwards? What was the reasoning behind that? How did you explain it to yourself?

What do you mean? We were fleeing east.

But why?

Germany was-- Germans were not our friends. They would arrest us.

Because?

We were Polish. The war was on.

And the Russians were not as threatening?

That's right.

So you felt safe when you went to Lvov.

Not really. A funny thing happened when we went to Lvov. This woman that we rented the room from lived in an apartment house, an old-fashioned apartment house, that was sitting on a street right next to a park. At Lvov is full of hills and things. That park at that point had a pretty big hill. And as my mother was pushing me into the stairway to go down to the-- oh, what do you call it-- basement, a bomb hit the park, that hill. And the whole house kind of went down and then back up again.

Oh, my God.

That feeling I remember.

How odd? That it could go down, yes. But that it would kind of rise once more?

Yep. It went down and back up.

And you felt the movement?

Oh, yeah. When I asked why did your parents go east, I was trying not to ask a leading question. And now I will ask the leading question. Could it be that your father figured because he had a Jewish background someplace felt that truly he

certainly wasn't safe in the West and would be safer in the East? Do you think that had anything to do with it? Or that didn't play in the reasoning at all?

I don't know.

You don't know.

I don't want to guess.

OK.

All I know is that he later on kept talking about the fact that he had a much earlier plan to move to the Riviera and he should have moved earlier. But that's all I heard, remember.

Just to get out of Poland?

To live permanently.

Yeah. And that wasn't connected with the war or any of those events?

No, no, no. It would have been a nice place to live a beautiful life.

OK. When you were in Lvov, did your parents have, do you think, enough money to be able to buy food, support themselves?

No, they didn't. So my father found himself a job of translations at the university. And there he had quite a bit of work. So I know that would've been an income. Otherwise, I have no idea about money.

Did it look like things were a lot tighter at home at that point?

Sure, because from a large apartment and servants and all this, we're down to one room.

Were you able to bring any of your toys with you, any of your games? Or you had nothing?

No, I don't think I even bothered.

OK.

There was a game that somebody bought me in the very beginning of the war that I lived with.

What kind of game was it?

But what would we call this? Wojtus, you know what I'm talking about? Wojtus?

He doesn't.

Huh?

He doesn't. He doesn't know which game.

Yes, he does.

Oh, he does. OK.



I think he does.

Can I say?

Yes, you can say.

It's you have lights, ball light bulbs. Ball light bulbs. When you press certain things, they go a certain way. And she was believing that this is very cool.

OK.

Oh, no that was the earlier.

And then she found that this is not good, because she opened up the toy and found that there's battery and everything.

Yeah, that-- [SCOFFS] Was I upset.

Ah, I'll repeat this so it'd be on tape. That earlier when you were younger, you had gotten a toy that had light bulbs that would light up in certain ways when you pressed a button. And you thought it was miraculous.

Right.

Yes? And when you opened it up and saw that it was run by a battery--

And wires. I was very disappointed.

It takes the magic out of everything.

Yep.

Yeah. But that's not the toy you're talking about?

No. [SPEAKING POLISH]

Wojtek?

I don't know the name of it. But you move the 10 points, let's say, until you have the proper sequence-- like 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10.

It was a thing of this size. And you moved numbers.

Oh. Oh, yeah, yeah.

With one empty spot.

I know that. I don't know what to call it either, but it's a very-- You move them around like squares. And they're not in a sequence. And you put them in the sequence.

Right. That's what I was--

Well, it shows your math proclivities.

Yeah. That's what kept my mind kind of from going nuts.

Did you go to school in Lvov?

Yes.

For about a year. I was able to go to a-- cloister school.

So a Catholic school again?

Catholic school, yeah. The nuns were run-- It was close and it was run by the nuns. And that's where my mother met this teacher. And she became very friendly with her. And that's where the two of them decided to teach me Polish spelling. And indeed they did. I don't think I ever make Polish spelling errors.

It was that good.

But that's from then.

That's from then, from that good teacher.

Yep.

And this was as you were a third grader. Did you like the teacher?

I loved her. And I was what grade? I suppose third. Third, fourth maybe.

Was there any one to play with there?

Not really. No, not really.

And your mother, I take it, must have stayed at home? Or did she also work when you were in Lvov?

No, she stayed home. She had to cook and clean. And she had needed an operation.

What kind of operation did she need?

A hysterectomy.

So she needed to recover from that?

That's right. And that's why we were not deported to Russia like all the other people who fled east. Most of them were deported. But she had a piece of paper that she needs that surgery. And the Russians saw that. They left us alone.

What happened to the lady whose apartment you were renting a room from? Was she deported?

No, because she was local.

They were deporting people who came from the west.

Do you remember anything about that? Did you see any of these things?

I saw it all. I remember the woman. I remember what she looked like. I remember-- she was taking care of her girlfriend's two children who were grown-ups at that point. And the woman was beautiful. And I remember her. I remember her name was Dada. I used to remember her last name. And I don't remember anymore.

Do you remember anything from those deportations that you so luckily missed at that time?

No, because I was not involved.

So you didn't see soldiers coming in or trucks on the street with people?

Yes, but it didn't apply to us.

OK. So it didn't register with you?

Nope.

OK. Did your parents talk about it?

Oh, you bet.

What are some of the things they said? Do you remember?

What what?

What are some of the things they said?

I don't remember.

You don't remember.

It was a question of being able to stay and not having to be deported to Russia.

And so can I assume they lived in a kind of state of constant nervousness?

Yes.

Did their personalities change?

No.

So your mother still was the strict one and your father still was your playmate?

Yes.

But he was without a car now?

Right.

So he couldn't take you any place?

Well, we used to walk places.

And so how did life continue for you? Did you see any Polish soldiers in Lvov?

No.

Nothing?

There was no such thing.

OK. Through those travels-- I'm going to go back a little bit-- when you leave Poznan a week before the war happens and you have the German planes shooting on a car on the road and you get to Warsaw and then you go further east.

No, that was between Warsaw and Lvov, the German plane.

OK, so that happens between Warsaw and Lvov. And you're on your road east, did you ever see any Polish military at all?

No.

You never saw any Polish soldiers?

They just didn't exist anymore. And they were fleeing. They were fleeing to Romania. They then regrouped, I think, in Italy.

This is stuff you learned later, most likely?

Yeah, sure.

Yeah. OK, so how did life progress for you and your family in Lvov? What happened after that?

Well, eventually, my father decided we have to go back to Warsaw. What?

1941 attack of the--

Germans, right?

And they took Lvov from the Russians.

OK.

And my father decided it's time to go back to Warsaw.

Oh, I see. So first the Germans attack the Soviet Union?

Yeah.

And you saw German soldiers in the streets? Did you? You don't remember.

I don't know.

But your father then says, "Time to go back to Warsaw."

Yeah.

And you did?

Yes.

OK.

In as large a place as possible to disappear.

OK. And do you remember anything of the journey?

No.

OK. Where did you end up in Warsaw?

In a small apartment that my grandfather had rented when he moved from Poznan to Warsaw.

And this would have been your mother's father?

Yeah.

OK. And you stayed with him?

Well, there was a wife, who was like his second wife or something like that. We stayed there, but I don't remember much.

Did you stay there for a long time-- in this apartment in Warsaw?

I think we stayed there until the Warsaw Uprising.

So quite a long time-- three years.

For two years, three years.

And how did your parents occupy themselves during those two or three years?

Oh, they were trying to make money in all kinds of ways. My mother used to make some sort of hairnets. That didn't bring much income, but it brought something. What my father did, I have no idea.

You were growing up though. You were no longer eight years old. In 1941, you would have been 10. And then by the time of the Uprising, you would have been 13. You're a young adolescent teenager. Were you becoming more aware of what was going on around you?

Oh, yes. And you see what happened was that I got rheumatic fever in 1944. So I was quite sick. So my mother's sister had a floor, I think, in a villa outside of Warsaw. So they moved me over there. Then I stayed there until after the war.

Oh. What did you eat? I want to go back to Lvov. How did you feed yourselves? What kind of food did you eat?

The only thing I remember from Lvov-- that when my mother had that operation, my father and I ran the house. And my father was, as you heard, a corker. So he was able to get potatoes someplace. We had potatoes. We had onions and some oil. And he made different variations--

From those three things?

--of those three. And every day we ate something different. Oh God.

But with all of those things? I mean, one day-- oil, potatoes, and onions. The next day-- potato, oil, and onions.

Yes.

Things like that?

That was my father's system.

Well, clearly then, food was a problem?

Oh, yeah.

And did it continue to be a problem when you got to Warsaw?

That I don't remember. I remember one thing. I'm not aware of one thing. The reason they got me into the-- The nuns ran a school.

Convent.

What?

A convent?

Yeah. Was because they were hiding Jewish girls. And what they needed was food. So the way to get your kid there was to provide like a sack of flour, so many potatoes, and stuff. So that's where I went, because there was no way for me to go to school. There was not--

And this is in Lvov or in Warsaw?

Warsaw.

In Warsaw. And did they teach you anything there in the convent?

Yeah. There was whatever it was. It was whatever the curriculum was.

Was it like your husband's situation where you had to kind of keep quiet, that this wasn't a real school?

Oh, yeah. We had to have these-- [SPEAKING POLISH]

Tables.

No. Wojtus, what is it?

Some kind of a certificate or something?

No, no, no. Things you could draw on with a--

A tablet of some kind.

Yes.

Like a small blackboard type thing?

Yes, yes. That's the only thing we could use, because we had to erase it in case.

I see. Were there many other children at the convent?

Oh, yes. Quite a few. And most of them were the Jewish girls. They were saving Jewish kids. And then when the Uprising came, they were all killed-- because it was bombed and that's it. They all went.

The nuns and the girls and everybody?

Yep.

Who was the name of the convent? Do you remember?

Zmartwychwstanki.

Zmartwychwstanki?

Zmartwychwstanki. I had my special favorite nun there that I was able to-- That was the only person I visited before mother and I left Poland after the war.

What made her special?

I don't know. I just liked her. And by then, she was in Poznan. So I went to see her. But by then, because of everything that was going on, she lost her mind a little bit. She was not normal. So I'm not sure that she knew who I was when I went to say goodbye.

How sad.

Yeah.

Tragic.

But that's the war. That's the way things went.

Did you get any sense that your parents were involved in any underground activity at all.

I think they were, but they were being careful having me. They didn't have as much freedom of movement.

Than if they hadn't had a child?

That's right.

And I want to go back to a question about your father-- maybe even your mother, I don't know. Do you think they felt a special fear that their Jewish background could come to the fore somehow, that they could be exposed, that generations back--?

I don't think they even thought about it.

OK.

Right, Wojtus?

Now, I think her mother did more Semitic look than her father. And she was constantly afraid they'd suddenly stop her on the street.

She was?

OK. I'm going to repeat--

See, I didn't know.

--what your husband said-- is that he thinks your mother had more of a Semitic look than your father.

She thought so.

She thought she did. And she was very afraid that she would be stopped on the street.

If that's what he says, he should know.

Did you know your mother-in-law? Did you meet her?

Oh, yeah.

Yes.

OK. And so she would tell--?

And her father was-- I'm not sure about-- he was probably circumcised. And the Germans would stop if they would see Semitic face, they would stop and pull down your pants. I want to see who you are. If they found that this was the case-- [CLICKS TONGUE]

OK, I'm going to repeat what you just said. Your husband is close by, and I want to repeat what he said. Your father probably, he says, was circumcised.

Yes.

And then one of the dangers he would have had is Germans often would stop men on the street or boys on the street and order them to pull down their trousers to see who they were. And if they saw something like that, then they're in danger of being shot.

Yep. But he still did go out. He did go to different places in the city. I remember him even-- I refused to go. I was afraid. I didn't want to go. He said, "Look, we have to live. Let's try our luck."

So he was taking risks.

Yes.

Did your parents ever talk with you about what was happening to the Jews in the Warsaw Ghetto? Did they ever mention something like that going on?

Do you think they did?

They must have because there was the Uprising, the Jewish Uprising in 1943. The whole Warsaw was hard to breathe, because of the fire, because of what was going on. Everybody knew that something is going on.

OK. What your husband says is that he thinks that--

I think he's right.

--they must have been speaking about it, because during the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising in 1943 there was fire. It was difficult to breathe.

Not join. Nobody join--

Not the Warsaw Uprising, the Ghetto Uprising.



Nobody joined that.

No, not joining it. They heard about it.

They knew about it.

Yeah.

That's wrong too. There were Polish guys who joined the resistance of the Jews, but they were very few. This wasn't a mass help, because we didn't have armaments. We didn't have possibility to help Jews.

OK. Your husband's saying that there were some Polish guys, very few, who did join the Ghetto Uprising. But not in a massive way as there weren't armaments. There wasn't any way to really help.

That's right.

Yeah. So do you think that you were kind of shielded from these things? Did you feel nervous yourself?

No, I think I was shielded.

Yeah?

Being a kid, I was shielded. Yeah.

OK. Was the convent where you were sent, was that outside of town?

Pretty much.

No, it was in town.

It wasn't in town. Zoliborz.

That's right. That's town. That's part of the city.

Yes, but was it sort of a suburban area outside the certain--?

It's like Queens in relation to Manhattan.

So you're saying it's like Queens in relation to Manhattan? I guess I'm just trying to get a sense of whether the location of the convent would have been part of what helped shield you.

No.

No.

No. No.

Germans usually didn't go to convent because I don't know why.

OK. So you got rheumatic fever. And then you were sent somewhere else? Is that right?

I was sent to my aunt. My mother's sister was renting the top floor of a villa outside of Warsaw. It was mostly because of my uncle, who was-- [WHISTLES].

A little crazy?

Yeah. He always thought that-- He had lung problems as a youngster. And he was always worried about his lungs. So I think that's why she rented that--

Place.

--place. And it came in handy, because I had to recuperate.

And was it then good for lungs, actually?

Yeah.

And do you remember when you were sent there? Was this in '43 or '44?

This was just before the Warsaw Uprise.

So you were living separately from your parents?

Well, my mother was able to get there the day of the Uprising. So I was with my mother the full time, but not my father. He went to concentration camps and stuff.

Tell me what happened with your father.

He was arrested like the rest of the population.

Well, do you know the circumstances and the details of how this came to happen?

Not really.

I don't know what was happening to the population. I know my aunt--

[PHONE RINGING]

Excuse me please.

--tried get into one of these transit places to get him out. And my mother was very upset because it was dangerous to do that. And she never managed anyway. So eventually he ended up in Bergen-Belsen, which was the worst camp there was.

But I want to go back a little bit. Your mother comes on the first day she manages to get to you. But your father doesn't.

That's right.

He stays in your apartment in Warsaw.

Right.

And he is then arrested with lots of other people.

Right.

Rounded up with lots of other-- You don't know how or where or--

We don't know.

--anything like that. But how did you find out that he was arrested? How did you find out?

Because there was nobody left in Warsaw. They didn't leave anybody.

Do you remember the neighborhood that you lived in in Warsaw?

Yeah.

What was it called, that he would have been located in?

Wojtus, what was it?

Same as I was. It was three blocks away.

OK, what was it called? I'd like to say it.

Kolonia Staszica.

Kolonia Staszica. So from Kolonia Staszica, the apartments were being emptied out.

From everywhere.

From everywhere.

I think that's where her father was arrested like I was arrested. But he was not as lucky as I was. He was sent to concentration camp. And I was sent to labor camp.

OK. So what your husband is saying is that he thinks that your father was arrested from Kolonia Staszica the same as he was. But he was not as lucky as your husband--

Yes.

--in that he was sent to a concentration camp, not to a labor camp.

Yes.

And was he sent directly to Bergen-Belsen? Do you know?

No.

Where was he sent first?

Could it be Neuengamme?

No, I don't think so. It was some other place. I don't remember.

So you don't know. Even now you don't remember.

I'm not sure. My mother knew.

So in other words, what I'm surprised by is that you found out that he's rounded up. So that you aunt wanted to go into a transit place to try and release him. That means somehow information got to you.

Yes.

OK. And do you remember how you felt when they told you your father has been arrested?

It was-- Remember, I was what? 13.

13.

It was a very special time. There was the Russians to worry about. If they found a female someplace, there was a huge problem. There was really very little to eat. There were all kinds of problems. And then these-- relatives of an aristocratic family that lived nearer to Poznan had a small-- The family had a small farm. And they were farming it, because it gave them some food and stuff. So they had a white horse. And their daughter managed to get a red dress. And all you could see was her on a white horse, because it was the Polish colors.

Red and white. This was in--

1944, '43, something like that.

But that's far away in Poznan?

No, that was just near Warsaw.

Oh, I see.

Poznan was not accessible to us, because it was considered part of Germany.

I see. I see.

Later on when my mother was hoping to connect with my father, as soon as she could, we moved to Poznan, because she figured that that's where he would be looking for us. And indeed--

He did.

--he was.

OK. But let's stay back in Warsaw. She's there, succeeded to be with you. Your father's arrested. You somehow find out about it. But you don't remember that circumstance of finding out. But essentially, your pal is no longer around.

That's right.

The strict one is there. But you're--

Yes. But our relationship with my mother changed a lot.

In what way?

Because we were just left the two of us. So she was more-- She was softer. She was less strict and stuff. And it was like the two of us against the world. Then mostly to find my father. So it was a different attitude.

Well, it also suggests to me-- and I don't want to put words in your mouth and interpret it in the wrong way-- but you weren't completely alone.

No.

That is, you still had one parent--

Yes.

--to be able to hold on to, and a strong parent at that.

Right.

And so it wasn't like your security was completely shattered.

No.

OK.

And then there was my aunt, and there was her husband thinking he has problems with this lungs. Oh God.

So you had characters in your family in addition to this context of war.

You know what he did now, about a year or two years ago? He started a fire in his little one-room apartment in Warsaw and burnt all of my pictures of the other relatives.

Oh.

What am I going to do? Kill him?

No, of course not. Of course not. But people do very inexplicable things sometimes.

Sure and you have to know when to get upset and when to just let it go.

That's right.

So tell me, how did things progress for you and your mother? You were in this villa.

Well, the way it worked out for us was that the war sort of-- passed us by. The Russians came, and then they went to west. And I think we had the Communist Polish state, right?

Yes.

So in other words, did you feel that-- you talked about a fear of the Russians coming and being a woman and how you're in particular danger.

That's when that happened, because they sent in these totally wild creatures. They didn't seem to be normal people.

And you saw these?

Yeah.

You such people?

We were looking from behind curtains and windows.

Did any come to your apartment?

First of all, there was no apartment.

The top of the villa?

This villa-- No, they-- They were a little afraid of that, I think. So what they did was in the front of the villa for quite a while-- There was enough space for three or four villas that was supposed to have been built before the war. They weren't. It was a beautiful piece of land full of flowers and things.

Oh, wow.

And that's where they settled.

Set up camp?

Pardon?

Did they set up camp there?

Sort of. And they ate whatever grew there. Whatever was growing, they eat.

And they didn't approach the villa?

No.

Then you saw them kind of like in the distance?

I saw them from behind curtains in the window. Why did that happen? I don't know. Whether they were afraid that there were Polish people with guns. I don't know.

Did they stay there long and then move on?

Yes. And then all of a sudden, they disappeared.

OK. And do you remember what it was like when the war ended? Do you remember the war ending?

I don't remember like how we found out, whether it was radio or-- I don't know.

Or a neighbor--

How did we find out?

--could have told you or something?

Well, my mother found out. My mother and my aunt maybe went to Warsaw looking for some of their possessions. I don't know. I know that my mother decided that it was time for the two of us to go back to Poznan, our hometown, just in case my father shows up or looks for us.

And you did that?

Yep. And then when she get to Poznan, it turned out-- well, since most people knew her-- she got the bank job. She got another job. She had three jobs.

Oh, my goodness.

Supporting us.

Did you go back to your old home?

We couldn't because there were four families living there. But we could go to my aunt's apartment, because it was much smaller. And we managed to get a room there.

And you stayed there for how long?

Until my father got us to Sweden.

When did he come back from the camps?

Well, he got in touch with us--

In Sweden.

I don't know. Huh? From Sweden, but when?

He ended up in Sweden, like I did. And from there, he start looking and found out that they are alive.

OK. So your husband says that from the camps he got to Sweden and then started searching for you--

Right.

--and found out that you were alive and you were in Poznan.

He sent a letter to Poznan. And then my mother answered him.

I see. So you haven't seen him yet?

No.

OK. And were you able to leave to go to Sweden, or did he have to come get you? How did that happen?

No. No, no, no. He had to buy visas from somebody.

For both of you?

Yep.

OK.

This was already the Polish communist setup. So it wasn't that easy.

What year did you leave Poland to go to Sweden?

'46.

'46.

December of '46.

So you still lived in Poland for a year and a half after the war ends.

And I went to school.

Do you remember what it was like?

Yeah.

It must not have been a Catholic school anymore, was it?

No, it was a public school.

And did it differ at all?

No, it was like it used to be before, except that more than half of the students were over 20, because those were the girls that couldn't go to school at all during the war. They were the local girls. So it was a problem, because it was a mixture.

And what grade when you went to school in 1945 to 1946, that school year, and then the second fall?

That was the fourth year of Gymnasium.

For you?

Mm-hmm.

So the last I remember is that you went into third grade in Lvov.

No, no, no. That was much younger.

Yeah, you were much younger in Lvov. And then you had some schooling in the convent.

That's right. And then this was-- here, it was after the war. And I was 14. So it's the next--

But did you jump from let's say fourth grade in elementary school to the fourth year of Gymnasium without having any formal education between them? Do you know what I'm asking?

Yes. I'm not sure. How could I have jumped?

She told me once that she was going through private lessons, private education at home. And she had many, many years was behind. But this education at this time was for everybody. All those people who lost four or five years of education, they had to catch up. And that's they push, push.

OK. I'm going to repeat that on tape. Is that your husband says is that you told him at one point that in those years where you couldn't go to school formally, you had some private lessons at home.

I don't remember that.

You don't remember that? OK. But that after the war just as you said--

Then I was able to catch up.

Catch up. Catch up and finish at least the fourth year of Gymnasium?

That's right.



OK.

So what was left was two years of liceum. But by then, I left.

OK. And so that's the first time you saw your father in 1946.

Yes.

Probably two and half years--

Right.

--since the Warsaw Uprising. What did he look like? Could you recognize him?

Sure. He was the same. His hair was grayer.

OK. So he also had time to recover from the concentration camps.

Yes.

So he probably didn't look as bad as--

That's right.

OK. Did he talk about it at all, what he had gone through?

That I don't remember. I don't remember.

Was he the same pal that you had before?

Yeah.

Yeah?

And all I know is he came, he looked around, he met with people, this and that. And then he said, "There's no more Poland for 50 years. It'll be 50 years before there's Poland again." He was right to the day, because it took 50 years then for this current regime to come into existence.

Amazing that he had that kind of foresight.

And he said he was going to wait for it there, because he had known the Russian Bolsheviks from over there.

So clearly he didn't want to go back to Poland. The idea was to get you two out.

He said he couldn't. This was not a Poland he could go back to.

How long did you stay in Sweden?

We ended up staying in Sweden for four years, but that's because he had a heart attack and had to be cured from it.

Did you learn Swedish?

Yes. I don't remember a word.

I spoke Swedish so they couldn't recognize where I was from. And then the Swedish now is [WHISTLES] gone.

It happens. It happens.

It obviously happens. It happened to me.

Did you integrate? Did you have Swedish friends?

Yeah.

Did you like your time in Sweden?

Yeah.

Sweden is a nice country to be in, especially if you're a student.

You went to Swedish schools?

Yeah.

OK.

What happened was and that was a problem my father had-- Gymnasium in Sweden was four years, especially for foreigners. And he figured four years we don't have, because we should be able to leave for the United States sooner.

So he was always looking at it as a stepping stone?

Yes. And then we found a two-year commercial Gymnasium. And that's where I went. So I learned my Swedish. I learned my accounting from there. I learned quite a bit of business law there too.

And when did you leave for the United States?

We finally left in February of '51. Finally.

Where did you meet your husband?

Over in Sweden. He was traveling in the same Polish group. And I always thought he was a very interesting guy, but he wouldn't look at me. I was just a kid. And he had nothing to do with kids, right, Wojtus?

He is diplomatically not saying anything.

That's right.

And when you came to the United States, where did you come to? What part of the States?

New York City.

And you stayed here, then?

Yeah.

OK. Did your father find work?

He found some part-time work. He couldn't do anything more because of his heart. I found work with the Swedish

American Line. And my mother found work with some sort of a business outfit. So with the two of us working, we could manage.

You could support the family?

Yeah.

And what part of New York City did you end up moving to?

Rego Park.

Rego Park. So since you came to the United States, you've lived in Queens?

Yes.

Your whole life.

But I worked in Rockefeller Center by Atlas. You know where Atlas is?

Mm-hmm. And how long did you work there?

Five years.

Five years. And when did you meet your husband again? Was it in the mid '50s?

When did we meet again?

In 1954.

In 1954.

1954 he came. Yeah, and when he came again, that's when I decided that's the guy for me. But it took me a while to rearrange life for it to become a reality.

But it happened, yes?

Yes.

I was married at the time to the other woman.

Ah, I see.

There were kinds of complications.

OK. And when did you get married? What year was that? It was--

'58.

'58?

1958. And you have two children?

Yep.

OK.

It was-- August 16, right?

Yes, Mary.

August 16, 1958.

Right.

OK. We're coming close to the end of the interview. I want to ask a couple of general questions.

OK.

Number one, is there anything that I have not asked you about that you would like to add to your story that should be part of it?

With the fact that I worked-- that I never stayed home with the kids. I always worked, because it was a question of supporting my parents. And don't put it in there. But we had a big fight.

Cut.

Did you study in the United States? Did you continue your studies?

Yes, because when I came-- Yes, that's funny too. I went to Columbia.

University?

Yes. To enroll. But in those days it wasn't the University. It was Barnard. And they said they don't accept displaced persons.

Really?

Yep. So I turned around, didn't see anything, and went to Hunter College. And Hunter College said, "Sure, any time. You just have to pass an English exam." So I went to take the exam. I passed it, and I was in.

What did you study? What was your major?

Well, then it was to prove what I have from Sweden and I wanted those credits and all that. So I studied business law or some such stupid thing. And then my father said go to statistics. It's sort of meshes in. But statistics and I don't get along.

So I ended up being a math major. And when I was about to finish, the chairlady of the math department, a wonderful lady, said, "Don't worry. There is a new field. I'll get you a job." And that was computers.

No kidding.

Yep. That was a funny thing too, because she was in touch with Remington Rand. They were the earlier ones on the computers. And she was going to-- There was an opening in Brazil, I believe. My mother didn't like the idea at all. And then it turned out that the guy they sent from here got-- oh, some nasty disease, whatever it is. So that was that. And what happened?

Oh, and then you had finished and there was a job opening in Brazil. The guy got sick.

No, that fell through. And what was I doing then? Then how I got that job, I don't know. Through friends. Maybe also through a Hunter or whatever.

There was a company, a research company, on Union Square of all places that it was four and three or however many scientists. Four were busy with-- Three were in nuclear physics. The others were in-- starts with a P. What were they doing?

Do you remember?

Well, anyway.

I don't know what she's talking about.

What? Do you know what I'm talking about?

No.

The job on Union Square. Larry.

Well, I don't remember his name.

OK.

Yeah, they needed people to sit at the calculating machines and calculate their research problems. So I did. Eventually, they assigned me to a group of two people who were doing nuclear physics.

Oh my goodness.

And big deal-- math is math. And the guy who ran this was a genius. He sat with his back to a window. But this is Union Square. That window is really high. So he always complained because he said I'll defenestrate. He was going to fall out. He had one pair of pants and one shirt. He painted his house in it. He went to Florida in them and so forth. So the big boss ended up keeping clothes for him.

Oh my God.

But he had to send him to IBM to do some calculations.

He was a character?

Oh, yes. And brilliant of course.

He couldn't think without his dogs. And he--

What?

--had to go with them.

And he always had a dog with him your husband says.

No that's not the one.

That's a different one.

That's not the one. There was another one that had a dog under his feet. And he had to be able to-- play with his-- fur.

And if he couldn't, he couldn't work. But no, that was--

So it sounds like--

--another one.

--you had quite a bohemian crowd amongst those statisticians--

Yes.

--and nuclear physicists and all that.

And then, unfortunately, they moved to the island. And I wasn't going to travel to the island. Thank God I didn't, because the company as such didn't last very long. So one of the girls that I worked with there before heard that Brooklyn Polytech needed someone, because they finally decided to install a computer. And they needed someone to run it. So that's how I moved.

And when did you get your master's degree?

NYU Courant Institute.

What year?

I don't remember.

OK.

Wait a minute. '56, I got my master's. So this must be '57, '58.

Oh, so you got it kind of back to back?

Yeah.

OK. So is there anything else you'd like to add to your story?

Just the fact that there was a time when I was in charge of 400 students--

Wow.

--per year. The way this worked out--

This was in a different-- This was CW Post College.

That's right. I went there--

To CW Post after Courant.

--which is part of Long Island University. And I was running their--

Computers.

--computer-- What do you call them?

Lab?

Lab.

A computer lab.

Which disappeared very shortly after that, because they became cheap enough and everybody had their own.

Yeah.

So that's where we had to have that open almost 24 hours a day.

So that the kids could use it?

Yes.

Students could use it.

Yeah.

Well, did you have the same kind of reactions and difficulties that your husband did in adjusting to life in the United States?

No.

No. For you it was easier?

Much easier. Well, I had-- language was easier. For me, English was no problem. And that was a big deal.

Yeah. What would you want people to understand about your early life and how it shaped you? How do you think it shaped you?

You mean in the '30s?

I mean going through the war years.

No, I would start with the '30s.

OK.

I was in a Poland that was a rich country, a country that everything worked very well and stuff. My parents were successful and making money. And then all of a sudden it all went [BLOWS AIR]. It never came back to that.

Well, Poland wasn't rich at that time.

What?

Poland wasn't rich at that time.

Was not rich?

No.

But in her life, yes.

Yeah.

They were well to do. And yet you survived it. And all three of you made through the war.

That's right, because what my father used to-- His maxim was "you have to survive." You have to take care of your health. Money comes second. You don't worry about money. He kept saying, "People who worry about their money and do everything they can to save their money usually don't manage to go through." But money is money. If you can keep it, fine. If you can't, you make it again.

Thank you. Thank you for sharing that.

You're welcome.

And this concludes the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Mrs. Mary Hermanowski on August 19, 2013. Thank you very much.

You're more than welcome.

And thanks to both of you for having us here for so many hours today.

Oh that's OK.

You could stand it. We are at least at our territory. You are not.

I feel very--