

**Mary Hermanowski**

**Tape 1**

**August 19, 2013**

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### **Abstract**

Mary Hermanowski was born July 11, 1931 in Poznan, Poland as Maria Lutvika (?) Szrajer. Her mother was strict and her father who was in the import-export business was her pal. Her parents had Jewish ancestry but her mother was Roman Catholic and her father was agnostic. They lived in a seven room apartment with a housekeeper and had a car. A week before September '39 they tried to escape to the east by driving to Warsaw where they stayed a short time before they proceeded to Lvov. On the way, a German fighter bombed them and the Russians took away their car. They rented a room in a widow's house in Lvov. Mary had completed two years of schooling in Poznan and here she had one year at a nun's cloister. The Russians were deporting all immigrants but Mary's mother had a paper indicating she required a hysterectomy so the family was not deported. Then they returned to Warsaw where they lived with the grandfather. In '44 Mary had rheumatic fever so was sent to the aunt's flat in a villa outside of Warsaw. Soon her mother joined her but her father and uncle remained in Warsaw and were picked up and deported to concentration and work camps, respectively. After the war, Mary and her mother returned to Poznan where they received a letter from the father living in Sweden where he went from Bergen-Belsen. Mary and her mother left Poland in December '46 and went to Sweden where Mary attended a 2-year commercial gymnasium. In '51 they left Sweden and moved to Queens in the US where Mary obtained BA and MA She worked in math and computers. She got married in '58 and had two children.

### **Summary**

00:00 Mary Hermanowski was born July 11, 1931 in Poznan, Poland as Maria Lutvika (?) Szrajer to Yenina Landowska (?) who was born around 1898 in Warsaw and Ludwig Srajer from Woodsh (?). She was an only child. French and Polish were spoken at home. Her father was in the import, export business, mostly of threads. People thought of him as a lawyer. He graduated from the Moscow Conservatory in piano but did not finish polytechnic. He was crazy about cars. Her father had an office where packages were delivered and sent. Her mother helped him. Before marrying, her mother had the right of signature in a bank where she worked.

05:00 Her mother was an unusual character. She was extremely bright, very determined and knew what she wanted. If Mary did not do what her mother wanted, she made things difficult. Mary's son considered the grandmother was like his mother and cried when she died. They both loved each other. Her mother was not Mary's best friend and she issued orders. Her father was her pal and he tried to make up for the fact that she was an only

child. He tried to be her playmate and she went to him when she needed someone to confide in. Her mother was Roman Catholic and her father was agnostic. Mary's parents were not from Catholic families but from Jewish families. Her mother's ancestors had converted to Catholicism. Mary was buddies with her mother's father who spoiled her and she did not know her other grandparents.

- 10:00 She remembers her wonderful childhood room. Her father's family had a toy factory and she had lots of dolls but only played with games. Her room had a terrace door which was covered with heavy felt in the winter. There was a pretty white and blue tiled oven and they put coal in the bottom. Mary lived in an apartment building in a residential area. Her apartment had seven rooms. A housekeeper lived with them. Mary felt the family was well-to-do. She had no cousins to play with. They lived near a park where they went daily to play with a pair of twins her age but bigger and taller. They were bosom friends and she had two girl friends so she always had someone to play with. Mary had two years of schooling. She was eight when war started and about to enter third grade in a private Catholic school. She attended a Catholic school because it had an excellent reputation. Her mother was not very religious. Mary remembers the buildings and has a photo of them. She remembers her first grade teacher as being short, smiley and pleasant. She liked attending school as her goal was to have higher education. She liked math.
- 15:00 Her parents got along and the home atmosphere was pleasant. The family talked at the dinner table, sometime on patriotic topics. Later, Mary asked her father why he did not leave as he knew what was happening. They had moved to Poznan due to a relative said it was a good place for the father to have a business and he would help him. The father had returned from Russia after World War I and found himself cleaned out of possessions as his relatives left him nothing. Mary knew a few of her father's cousins. The cousins had mixed marriages of Jewish and non-Jewish. The family considered themselves Polish. The father held driver's license #7 as he obtained it right after World War I. He used a car for his business and belonged to an automobile club where he took part in rides. He and his wife's brother-in-law won the biggest award for driving from the southeast corner from Dabchick (?) to Vidiemin (?) which took 20 hours.
- 20:00 Mary was taken for local rides and was permitted to win the rally. The prize depended on what she would find. It might be something in a tree or a house. It was a lot of fun. Her mother was not interested in this activity and preferred having a dress made. A week before September '39, her father packed them up and they drove to Warsaw where the father's sister lived. Her father did not like his sister nor did Mary who thought her stupid. They stayed in a hotel. The aunt had a daughter and an older son. They felt this was an emergency measure as thought they should go east. Mary's parents were upset and nervous.

- 25:00 They just stayed a short time and the Russians took their car along the way to Lvov. They got to Lvov and thought they would go through Lithuania to Sweden to get to the west. Her father had cousins in Sweden and got himself a ticket to Mexico but not for Mary and her mother. On their way to Lvov, they saw German fighter planes attacking cars on the road. Her mother grabbed her and took her out of the car and threw Mary in a ditch with the mother on top of her. They were not harmed and returned to the car. Meanwhile Ukrainians tried to attack cars with pitchforks.
- 30:00 Their car was taken away before they reached Lvov. They went to a small town to buy gas and the Russians saw them. Mary has a photo of an elegant street where a Russian family walked. In front walked a Russian in an inelegant uniform and hat and behind him were two children and then the wife carrying coats and paraphernalia. These Russians robbed an underwear storage facility. Before the war, nice ladies underwear of artificial silk was made in Poland. Children ran after the people wearing elegant day clothes. Lvov was full of churches of many denominations and the children ran into them and hid. Mary's parents rented a room from a university professor's widow as the son was in the military and his room was vacant. This gave the widow some income. Mary's family fled east to get away from the Germans as they felt the Russians were not as threatening.
- 35:00 Their room was in an old-fashioned apartment house next to a park with a big hill. When there was bombing, Mary's mother pushed her into the stairway down to the basement. The bomb hit the park and the house went up and came back down. Mary did not know if the father's Jewish background influenced him to go east. Earlier, her father planned to move to the Riviera and should have done so though the idea had nothing to do with the war. They thought the Riviera would be a nice place to live. Her father obtained a job translating at the university. The family went from a large apartment down to one room. Mary did not bring any toys with her. She had a game that someone gave her at the beginning of the war where you moved numbers around to form a sequence. Earlier, a toy with a light bulb was given to her whereby you press a button and it lit up. She thought it magical and was disappointed when she opened it up to find it ran by a battery and wires.
- 40:00 Mary attended a Catholic school for a year in Lvov at a cloister run by nuns. Her teacher was friendly with her mother and they both taught her Polish spelling. Mary loved the teacher. She was in 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> grade. She had no one to play with. Her mother stayed home to cook and clean and she needed a hysterectomy. For this reason, they were not deported to Russia like the others. Her mother had a paper indicated she required the surgery so they were left alone by the Russians. Their landlady was not deported as only refugees were deported. The landlady's name was Dada and she cared for her friend's two children

- 45:00 Mary saw soldiers on the street but they did not worry her as her parents spoke about remaining and not being deported. Her parents were nervous. Her mother went out and her father was still her playmate. Since they no longer had a car, they walked. Mary did not see Polish soldiers in Lvov. They had left Poznan a week before the war and the only military they saw was the plane on their way to Lvov. They thought they would flee to Romania and regroup in Italy. Later they learned that the Germans attacked Russia and returned. Her father decided to return to Warsaw. It is a large place so you can disappear. Mary does not recall her journey to Warsaw. They stayed at her mother's father's small apartment which he rented when he moved to Warsaw from Poznan. He lived with his second wife. Mary's family remained about two or three years. Her father tried to earn an income. Her mother made hairnets so she earned a small income. Mary was 10 years old in 1941 and 13 at the time of the Uprising. She was more aware of her surroundings. Mary had rheumatic fever in 1944 and was quite sick so went to the aunt's apartment in a villa outside of Warsaw to recuperate until after the war.
- 50:00 Her mother had her operation and her parents lived in the villa. Her father was able to obtain potatoes, flour and oil and made variations of recipes with the three items. Every day they ate something different. Food was a problem. Mary was able to attend the nun's school by providing sacks of flour and potatoes for the Jewish girls they were hiding. There were no other schools in Warsaw so she had to keep her attendance a secret. Their only equipment was a small blackboard. The school had many children. They had lost some of the Jewish girls. All of the girls and nuns were killed during the Uprising from a bomb. It was called the Smatrick Santé (?) Convent. Before she and her mother left Poland, they visited her favorite teacher who was in Poznan and did not recognize Mary as the war affected her.
- 55:00 Mary believes her parents were in the underground but they were careful of their movement because of Mary. Her parents were not concerned of their Jewish background. Her mother thought she looked Semitic and was afraid that she would be stopped on the street by the Germans. Her father was circumcised and in danger of the Germans pulling down his trousers but still went out in the city. Her mother was afraid to go out but the father said they must continue to live and take a risk. The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising in '43 must have been known by the smell of the fire. Some Poles joined the Ghetto Uprising but had no armaments to help. Mary feels that she was shielded from the actions as she was a child.
- 60:00 Her convent school was not in the center of Warsaw. Her aunt had rented the top floor of a villa because of the uncle's craziness. He had lung problems as a child and still thought he was sick as an adult. Mary's mother arrived at the villa on the day of the Warsaw Uprising. Her father and brother-in-law remained in the apartment and were arrested. The brother in-law was sent to a labor camp and the father to a concentration camp. No

one was left in Warsaw. Her aunt tried to get into a transit camp to find her husband and Mary's father but did not succeed. The father ended up in Bergen-Belsen.

65:00 It was a special time of worry as they had little food and were worried about the Russians going after females. They had relatives who were an aristocratic family and lived on a farm near Warsaw so had food. Mary thinks of the Polish colors red and white when she thinks of them as the daughter wore a red dress when she rode a white horse. Poznan was not accessible to them as it was part of Germany. Later they moved to Poznan as Mary's mother wanted to find the father as she figured he would look for them there. Mary's relationship with her mother changed when there was just the two of them together. She became softer and less strict. It was the two of them against the world to find the father.

70:00 A year or two ago her uncle started a fire in his apartment in Warsaw and burned all the pictures of the relatives. The war passed them by. The Russians came and went west and they had a Communist Polish state. The Russians who occupied the city seemed to be wild creatures, not normal. She would peek at them through the window curtains as they set up camp in an empty area with room for three or four villas that were not built yet. It was a beautiful piece of land with flowers and the Russians ate whatever was growing. They did not come inside their house and one day the Russians disappeared. Her mother and aunt went looking for their possessions in Warsaw. Her mother decided it was time to return to Poznan in case the father was there looking for them. Her mother secured three jobs to support them. One was in a bank. They could not return to their old home as four families lived there. They lived in a room in the aunt's apartment until the father got them to Sweden.

75:00 Mary's father got to Sweden from the concentration camp and wrote to them in Poznan. The mother replied and the father got them two visas. They left Poland in December '46. She had attended a public school where over half the students were over 20 as schools were closed during the war. The mixture of ages was a problem. She was 14 in the 4<sup>th</sup> year of gymnasium. She was able to advance as was given private lessons at home when there was no school available. She had two years of school to complete when she left Poland. It was 2 and ½ years since she had last seen her father. She recognized him as he was the same except for his grayer hair. He had time to recuperate from the concentration camp. They did not talk about his experiences but he was the same pal.

80:00 Her father felt there would be no more Poland for 50 years and he was correct. He did not want to wait for a new regime as he knew the Russian Bolsheviks. He could not return to Poland as it was not the Poland he was used to. They remained in Sweden for four years as her father had a heart attack and needed to recuperate. She learned Swedish but now does not remember a word. Mary learned it so they would not know where she came from. She had Swedish friends and enjoyed being a student there. Her problem was that gymnasium lasted four years and they did not think they would remain that long.

Her father found a 2-year commercial gymnasium for her to attend. There she studied accounting and business law. They left Sweden in February '51. Mary first met her husband in Sweden as he was in her group of Polish friends. She thought he was interesting but he would not look at her as though she was a kid. They came to New York City. Her father only obtained part-time work as he had a heart condition. Mary worked for the Swedish-American Line and her mother worked so they managed. They settled in Rego Park, Queens where they still live. Mary worked at Atlas in Rockefeller Center for five years. She met her husband again in '54 and decided he was the guy for her but she had to rearrange her life.

85:00 They got married on August 16, 1958 and had two children. Mary worked and never stayed home with her children as she had to support her parents. When she arrived in the US she tried to get into Barnard but they did not accept displaced persons so she attended Hunter College after passing their exam. She studied business law as already had some credit. Her father suggested she study statistics but she was not interested in it and took math as her major. Her teacher suggested she get a job in the new field of computers. Remington Rand had an opening in Brazil but her mother did not want her to accept it as the country had a disease

90:00 Her friends helped her obtain a position at a research company on Union Square. There were scientists working there including nuclear physicists. Mary used a calculator to assist them in their work. Later she did mathematics for a group of two nuclear physicists. Mary thought the director a genius. He sat with his back to a high window and she thought he would fall out. He always wore the same pants and shirt so his boss kept clothes for him in case he had to attend a meeting. He left for IBM to do calculations. Another worker kept a dog at his feet which he continually petted. The company moved to the Island and she did not want to follow them. Now the company is closed. A colleague suggested she contact Brooklyn Polytechnic as they need someone to run a computer so she did and got the job. Mary obtained her bachelor's in '56 and got her MA in '57 or '58 from NYU.

95:00 One year she was in charge of 400 students at a school that was part of Long Island University and also ran their computer lab which was open 24 hours a day. Mary did not find it hard to adjust to the US as foreign languages were easy for her so she easily learned English. When she lived in Poland in the 30s, it was a rich country and her parents were successful and made money. Suddenly it all ended and they never returned. They survived the war as they followed her father's maxim: "to survive" one must take care of their health first and money second. If you worry about money, you won't survive. If you lose money, you can make it again.

98:00