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I'm Bea Stadtler. Today we're interviewing Miriam Wexberg, a Holocaust survivor. The project is sponsored by the National Council of Jewish Women, Cleveland Section. Miriam, thank you for coming and being with us today. Tell us something about yourself, your name, age, work, where do you live, marital status, children, how many do you have, what do they do, and where do they live?

I am married to Philip Wexberg, who is also a survivor. I am a homemaker presently. I did spend quite a few years working. I graduated from John Jay High with a bookkeeping training. And we have two children, Marcia and Steve. Marcia is a lawyer in Philadelphia, and Steve is a pediatrician at Cleveland Clinic. My husband is an electrician. I have been in the United States since 1946. Philip came here in 1949. We were married in 1950.

OK. Can you tell us where you came from? What was the town like? What was the Jewish and non-Jewish population like and how many of each?

I come from Poland city of Lwów.

Lwów-- can you spell it for us?

In Polish, it's spelled L-W-O-W. In English, it's L-V-O-V. My father had a store where he sold notions. My mother was a homemaker. Occasionally, went to the store to help my dad out. I went to school. I have a sister. We lived in the same apartment building as my grandparents did and had a very close association with them.

I went to a school that was mostly non-Jewish. Antisemitism in Poland was a very common occurrence. I lived with it daily, at school and at play. Religion was taught as a subject in public school, and when my non-Jewish classmates had the subject, the Jewish children left the classroom and stood in the hallway.

When the class was over and the children emerged, I was often called Jew, and I was spat upon. My relationship in class was close with another Jewish girl. When I did develop closer association with a couple of non-Jewish children and sometimes went over to them, I was never let into their homes. The girl would come out, and we would stay outdoors, walk up and down, but I never had contact with their parents.

You actually weren't allowed into the houses.

No, I felt that I was rejected. Every so often university students would go through the business area of the city, where my father had his store, and would smash and break the storefronts of Jewish stores. At a time like that, my father would quickly pull down the grates and run into adjacent gate, where he would hide until the barrage was over.

I was constantly seeing graffiti on all the buildings "Jew to Palestine," "Not a Penny Into Jewish Hands," "Beat the Jew." And that was the environment I lived in.

Lwów was a town in Poland, right?

It was a town in Poland at that time.

It was--

Today it belongs to Russia.

It was a big city or--

It was the third-largest city in Poland then. In 1939, when Germany and Russia signed an agreement of non-aggression, Poland was partitioned, and my city then was in Russian hands for two years. And at that time, the Jewish population in Lwów swelled to 150,000 people, and that included the influx of Jews from Western Poland, the area that was already occupied by the Nazis, and they hoped to run away from their wrath.

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What was the population generally in Lwów?

I really don't know what the population was--

Jewish population?

--Jewish population before the influx of the refugees. When the agreement between Germany and Russia was broken and the Germans came to our city, the Ukrainians joined with their forces and played a very important part in the destruction of the Jewry in my area.

On the day that the Germans entered, my father came home with a wound in his head, blood streaming down his face. The Jewish children were forbidden to go to school. Ordinances for Jews not to enter parks, for Jews to wear white armband was a blue star on it were issued.

I remember standing on a street, waiting for a streetcar for a very, very long period of time. Five or six would pass by, and each said "Juden Verboten," meaning "Forbidden to Jews," until finally there was one that had no sign in it.

The months that the Germans entered was a horrible month. Many Jewish leaders and Jewish people in general were jailed. Many beatings by the incited mob occurred. Ration cards were issued. I stood in lines to receive the little bit of flour and sugar and discovered that the non-Jews were receiving larger portions of food than the Jews.

I saw my mother take off her ring and carry it to a place of-- a collection point where the Jews were requested to turn in their jewelry, supposedly for a ransom for some Jewish figures that were taken into the prison. My family suffered its first casualty. My uncle, a father of two children, was taken out of his apartment at night and never seen again.

I remember trailing my grandmother up the staircase. She was pulling on her cheeks and invoking the name of God. Our family underwent a very swift deterioration.

Just a second, can you tell us how old you were and how old your sister was at this time?

Yes. When the war started, I was 10. The time the Germans came, I was 12. The Russians were in our area for two years. My sister was six years older than I was, so at that time she was 18.

My father and my sister joined a street cleaning crew, where they were given portions of soup, and my father started bringing the soup home. And when they discovered that he was bringing the soup home, they threw him out. My mother was trading clothes, pieces of furniture for bread and other foods.

My grandmother and grandfather, who lived upstairs, thought that perhaps if they go back to their town of origin, which was a small town further away from Lwów, that perhaps the rest of the Germans would not reach them there. So they dressed themselves as peasants and on a wagon drawn by horses, at night, they went to the city of their origins. And we never saw them again.

Miriam, can we just go back for a minute to the time before the war? Did your family have non-Jewish neighbors? I know you went to a school where there were many non-Jews.

Yes.

How did you get along with them? And what was kind of a typical day? And what part did religion play? Did you belong to a synagogue, to a Zionist organization? What language was spoken in your home?

All right. My parents spoke to each other Yiddish, and they spoke to their grandparents also Yiddish. And I know it from hearing it. I myself spoke to them in Polish, and they spoke to me in Polish. We went to Polish schools, and our Polish was very fluent.

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And I would say my grandfather's Polish was not as fluent as mine because he used it less. My father was a self-taught person and spoke several languages, and he was very fluent in Polish. But yet the language at home between them was Yiddish.

I don't know how belonging to synagogues was in Poland. I don't know that you actually paid your dues yearly like you do here and belong. But my parents in High Holidays-- they went to a shul that was a prestigious shul in town. And that's where they went for yontif now for the big holidays.

Otherwise, they went to-- it wasn't even a school. It was like a shtiebel, a room, and that's where they went to pray, which was just two or three houses away from us, where the area people prayed.

And did you belong to a Zionist organization?

No, I did not belong to a Zionist organization, and I often-- I think now that, had I belonged to the Zionist organization and was imbued with stories and our heroes, that during my ordeal it probably would have helped me to sort of--

--overcome--

--draw the courage from these people. But I did not. I was not brought up zionistically.

OK. Were you a healthy youngster? Did you have any special interests?

I was-- as far as I remember, yes, I had no health problems. I loved to sing, and my father would copy songs from street singers. It was very popular in Poland for students to go from court to court or on the streets with their instruments and play music, and he would copy songs, words to songs from them, and bring it home. And we would spend hours sitting on the balcony with other kids and neighbors and sing.

And we had a beautiful garden, which was my grandfather's, and an orchard in the back of the house. And this custodian of ours, whose name was Marcin, came to Lwów with my grandfather. At one time, they all moved from that small town to this big house and big city.

And when the Russians were there-- Marcin was communist. When the Germans came, Marcin got to be a Nazi and took that beautiful garden from us. And we could not use the soil for nourishing ourselves with whatever would grow there. So we lost that.

You had vegetables in the garden, and fruits?

We had vegetables and potatoes and corn and things that we used each summer for--

--food.

--feeding ourselves.

And the first that you were really aware of the problem of the war was when your father came home or was it before then even?

Well, we were afraid of the Germans. We were glad that they stopped when they stopped. We were glad of the agreement between Russia and Germany. My father had three sisters in Vienna, and I remember a postcard from one of the sisters that was very upsetting to my parents. And they knew that horrible things are happening in that area of Poland, so we had a notion that when the Germans come, things will be bad. But we didn't to what extent.

The Ukrainians, though, were almost as bad as the Russians-- as the Germans. They were--

I would say worse.

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Worse. They were very brutal.

They were very brutal, and they were the ones that walked with the Germans to pull the Jews out of their homes. And they performed atrocities on the Jews.

After my grandparents left, their daughter, one of my mother's sisters, would go into a-- there was an old lady living in one of the apartments, and my aunt, Lila, would go into that lady's room every day. She was very old and feeble.

And Lila would take care of her, wash her, and give her her food. And she probably received some food from her too, and she was hoping that when she is in that Gentile apartment she would be saved from the roundups that the Germans periodically--

--ordered.

--ordered. And one day, the Germans came, went right upstairs, pulled her out of there. She was the only person that they took that day, so I'm convinced that someone pointed her out.

Our condition kept getting worse and worse. We had nothing to eat. There was no more-- there were no more things to trade. And my father went into depression. He went to bed and stayed there for days on end.

I was walking around with a button in my mouth. My mother would send me to our Gentile neighbors to ask for potato peels. When I brought those, she would grind them and made patties. But then there were no potato peels either.

And when we would run to hide when we thought the Germans were coming, my father wouldn't leave the apartment. He stayed in bed. He made us put a lock on the outside of the door. And at the very beginning, they did not break into the homes, so he was safe for a while.

One day, a German and a Ukrainian came to the apartment and ordered us to leave the apartment. My mother started begging for some things, a few pieces of the beds and some other things. And we moved out the very next day into an enclosure at the end of the courtyard where my grandfather at one time kept horses.

Our original apartment was taken over by a Volksdeutsche-- that is a person of German ancestry-- who just threw us out. There was a Ukrainian and this person, and she liked the apartment. And they told us to go, and we had to go.

And you couldn't take anything with you or very, very little very little.

Very little, very little. The roundups were constantly upon us. My sister was blond and blue-eyed and did not look Jewish. And she would get up in the morning and go into the city, to the sections of the city where she thought no one would recognize her. And she would walk the streets all day.

My mother and I would hide. Of course, we always hoped that in the evening, my sister will return because sometimes these people did not return. During the intense roundups, they would just get you on the street, and you never came home.

Where did you hide?

My neighbor, our neighbor-- Mrs. Schneider was her name-- had a cellar underneath her bedroom. You opened a flap. There was a staircase that descended into the cellar. Mrs. Schneider worked.

She was Jewish?

She was Jewish, and she worked. She went to work every morning. But she let my mother and me into her dwelling, and that's where we would go. We would descend the staircase daily. And she would take a pitcher

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with some gruel, and we sat there in the darkness.

In the evening, you would come out?

Well, not always in the evening. We sat, and we heard-- because they did enter the dwelling. And we heard noises, and we heard the boots. And then when it got quiet and we figured they already inspected that area, my mother would come up and lift the flap and listen.

And when she thought they were gone and it was quiet, we would come up for some light and air. And when we heard noises, we would go down again. And one day, we came up for air. It was already towards the evening. Mrs. Schneider was back from work. And we came up, and we sat in her little vestibule.

And suddenly, we looked towards the gate down the courtyard, and there was a German and a Ukrainian. We had no time to run down to the cellar. My father was there too. He ran out into a stable, and my mother and I ran into a pantry that Mrs. Schneider had right near there. And we scooted down, and they saw us.

The Ukrainian went to pull out my father, and the German pulled my mother and me out into the courtyard. The German asked my parents if I was theirs. My mother and father answered at the same time. She said no, and he said yes. I imagine that my mother said yes because she hoped at that instant that if she says no perhaps he won't take me. The Ukrainians slapped my mother on the face. She fell to the ground.

She picked herself up, and we were let through the courtyard into the street. There was a throng of people walking down the street being with Germans and Ukrainians on--

--both sides.

--both sides. And as we were walking, I was hanging on to my mother's hand. She kept saying, pull off your band, pull off your band. And I started pulling off my band, and I slipped it into my pocket.

And then she kept saying, run. She kept saying, run, run, run. And as we were walking and approached a side street, I let go of her hand, and I turned into that street. Nobody followed me.

That's how she saved me. I knew I couldn't go home because of the roundups, so I went into a field where I used to sled and play, a grassy area. And I laid down in the grass, hoping to just spend the time there and go back when it gets dark.

A group of kids discovered me and started screaming "Jew, Jew." And they ran away, and I knew that they were going to get someone. And so I picked up and started walking, and I stumbled upon a church.

I sat behind the church. It was very quiet there. And I sat there for many hours until it got dusk. And I came home. I came home, and I went straight to the janitor's dwelling. This janitor, Marcin, had a wife who was a very good woman. She was very pious.

And my mother had very good relationships with her, and somehow, in my child's mind, I expected them back. And when I sat in Marcinova's place, she told me that she was very, very sad and told me that she saw my parents being loaded on platforms at the end of the street.

I went back to this stable that we lived at and waited for my sister. My sister came back, and I was very glad to see her. Had she not come back, I would have been all alone and certainly would not have known what to do.

From then on, as long as the roundups took place-- it was a period of two weeks at that time-- we would get up in the morning and go to walk the streets of Lwów. We left the gate, and each of us went in an opposite direction. I looked Jewish, and she did not. And we could not walk together.

As I was walking in a non-Jewish section of the city, this one day, suddenly, I saw a German and a Ukrainian-- they always walked in pairs-- coming towards me. I knew I couldn't run. I had to keep on

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walking towards them.

They stopped me, and the Ukrainian asked me in Ukrainian, are you Jewish? And I said no. And he asked me, can you pray? And I said, of course I can pray. I spoke a good Ukrainian then. He did not ask me to pray. Had he asked me, I couldn't. And that was another close call for me.

My sister knew somebody who knew someone else who transported Jews for a fee to Warsaw. She gathered up whatever else there was, sold it, and gathered up enough money to pay this man to get us to Warsaw.

We boarded the train in the evening, and at the time, I knew only two faces. They were afraid to tell me things because I was a child and because I looked Jewish, and they were afraid if I know details, probably under torture I would reveal them.

And her friend's name was Irka, so I knew Irka, and I knew my sister. We got on the train, and we spread into different wagons. And when we got to Warsaw and I came out on the platform and searched for my sister, suddenly I realized that there was a group of people huddled together. And I realized that this man, Tadzik, brought a group of Jews to Warsaw.

We were led into an apartment in Warsaw and stayed for the rest of the night. At dawn, we were asked to leave. We left very quietly and singly, and we were on our own.

This was after the Warsaw Ghetto was established.

The Warsaw Ghetto was in existence.

And you were--

We were not-- we were on the Aryan side--

--Aryan side, yeah.

--and posing as non-Jews. My grandfather had a partner with whom he owned the building involved together who had a daughter whose name was Zosia. Zosia left for Warsaw as an Aryan at the very beginning. She also looked Aryan, blonde, spoke a good Polish, and she more or less established herself in Warsaw.

My sister obtained her address from her father in Lwów. And we came to Warsaw. She started searching for her. She thought that she may rely on her help in this strange city that we were at. When she went to Zosia's address, Zosia was no longer there. Her room was ransacked, and she had to leave the place.

When we left this building that we were brought to when we just came to Warsaw, we went into a shabby hotel, the three of us. I was told to stay in bed with my face towards the wall so that if someone opens the door, they will not see my face. My face was Jewish.

And my sister and Irka went to look for work. They found some work in a factory, where they were making matches, and I stayed in the room with my face to the wall, didn't stay there very long. One day, there was a knock on the door, and they hollered for me to leave.

Very cautiously, I went through the hallway downstairs out of the building. When my sister and Irka came back, I was standing out there. There was-- the Germans surrounded the building and pulled out some Jews out of the building. They boarded up the hotel, and we stood there, again, not knowing where to go.

So we went to the railroad station, and we huddled together and spent the night, sitting there, surrounded by other people coming and going and Germans coming and going and very, very frightened. And my sister kept on looking for Zosia, and one day, she stumbled upon her in a marketplace.

Zosia wanted to see me badly, but I could not come near her. So they created a plan. My sister and I got on the streetcar. My sister sat in front. I sat in the back. My sister got off. I got off.

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And Zosia stood in the gate of one of the buildings, behind a glass door, and I walked up and down so she could see me without having physical contact with me. She was very close to my family and knew everybody well. She was at my mother's wedding, and she had this longing of seeing someone from home.

My sister and Irka found a place for me with a family who had a child who needed someone to do house chores and take care of the child, and that was the first place where I was to be a servant.

How old were you, Miriam?

I was then 12, 12 and a half. I didn't stay there very long because they started saying that I'm Jewish. The neighbor came to the people that I was-- whose house I was employed, and the minute I heard them whispering, I knew I had to-- I knew they were talking about me, and I had to run.

And Zosia-- through my sister, Zosia found a place for me. She was pulling us out of these situations, my sister, too, from one place to another without ever having contact with me. And I was told, go to such-and-such place, which I did. The woman's name was Janczewska, and I became a servant at Janczewska's.

Janczewska had two stores. In Warsaw, she had a vegetable store with produce, and she had another store in Otwock, a store with porcelain. I would get up with Janczewska at dawn every morning and go with her to the market, where she would shop for vegetables.

She would hire a rickshaw. The rickshaw was loaded up with the vegetables, and I would sit-- her rickshaw was a large box. It was like a bicycle, but it had three wheels. And the rickshaw-- the box sat on two wheels. That was loaded up, and I went on top of it. And the guy carried me to the store, where we unloaded the merchandise.

Then I went back to the apartment. I cleaned the place. They lived on the fourth floor. I carried coal from the basement in buckets and did whatever she told me to do. She had a store in Otwock that she also delivered merchandise to.

Now, where was Otwock?

Otwock was a small place, a country-- a small town. It was famous for bass, and people would go there after illnesses to recuperate. It was very, very pretty place. And she would shop for porcelain and various gift items, and I would carry these large packages, deposit them on the train. There was a regular train running between Warsaw and Otwock. Otwock was the last station, and--

About how far away was it from Warsaw?

It took about an hour.

An hour.

And on the way, there were various little municipalities where people would get off. A lot of these people worked in Warsaw and commuted to these small towns. And I would load up these big boxes into the platform of the train and was constantly aware of being observed.

I walked with my head down. If somebody stared at me, I would leave this compartment and go to another one to lose the person. And then I would come back, and when we got to Otwock, I would pull the packages off. Then somebody would come from the store, and we would take it into the store.

This is the same store with the vegetables?

No, this is in Otwock, and this is the porcelain store. And I carried the porcelain--

Oh, I see.

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--to Lwów. In Otwock, behind the store, Mrs. Janczewska had an old mother living in one room in the back of the store who kept an eye on the store. When I got to Otwock and we unloaded the merchandise, I usually stayed with her old mother.

I cleaned the store. I cleaned her place. I carried the water from the well and washed the laundry in a big tub, no washing machines. And Mrs. Janczewska's old mother was very antisemitic.

She constantly cursed the Jews, and I shivered. She stood over me and hollered when I peeled the potatoes and the skins were more than paper-thin. Back in Warsaw, Janczewska had one little boy.

What would-- you'd stay in Otwock for, say, a day or two days?

No, I usually stayed longer because I cleaned, and I washed for her. And sometimes I stayed several days. Sometimes I stayed a couple of weeks. But there were times when Janczewska would send her little boy and me to Warsaw-- I mean to Otwock. And then I would stay longer. Her mother was old and feeble, and for her son, it was a vacation. So I stayed there with the little boy and did the chores.

When I returned to Warsaw, one day I took the little boy, Wojtus, I took him out for a walk, and I stumbled upon a wall and realized that that was the ghetto wall. I also, in the course of my shopping and bringing groceries up to the apartment-- I saw Jews being walked out.

I suddenly realized that we are right on top of the ghetto. I saw Jews being marched down the street, and I was on the street. And my reaction was-- I was petrified, and my reaction was to just disappear, just go and-- go away, hide. So I would quickly enter a gate and stay there until they were gone.

OK, let's hold it, and then we'll come back in few minutes.

Sure.

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