

Rachel Goldfarb

Tape 1, Side A

May 20, 1997

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Abstract

This interview begins when Rachel Goldfarb was hiding in the Bialystok forest with her mother and got liberated by the Russians. They were afraid to stay in their hometown which was anti-Semitic so went to Ben Bocher (?) and lived with other Jews. On New Year's Day 1945 when Rachel was 14 they joined a working train which stopped at places which her mother helped repair. They ended up at Lublin where the Haganah tried to organize both their daily living and their way to Palestine. Tired of waiting and having some money, they joined a group going on foot to Czechoslovakia and Budapest over the Alps to Italy. They were happy to be greeted by the Hebrew Brigade unit of the British Army stationed in Bologna and were given new clothes. The Italians were very friendly and gave them housing and the HIAS had a kitchen to feed the refugees. The British blockaded their ships so after waiting 2 and ½ years in Italy to go to Palestine, they discovered relatives in Washington, DC and waited in Bari before emigrating there. Rachel quickly learned some English in her aunt and uncle's grocery and attended school nearby.

Rachel discusses her experience adjusting to the US. In Washington, DC she entered Eastern Junior High where she was three years older than the other students. Her teachers helped her learn English and motivated her to excel. In 1948 her mother moved to NY to secure a position with the garment industry so Rachel followed her and entered high school there. She lived with a cousin and worked part-time painting piggy banks and later as a cashier for Miles Shoes. She passed the New York Regents exams and graduated high school with the help of her teachers. Besides the students, Rachel had another social group of those her age who had also been in Bari, Italy and had similar Holocaust experiences. After graduation, she returned to Washington, DC which she preferred over New York and obtained a position with the Probation Department of the District Court. Her mother returned to live with Rachel as Rachel's salary covered their living expenses. Rachel became a citizen, married a fellow Holocaust survivor and they had two children. Her mother moved out and obtained a position in Hecht's bakery. Rachel obtained her teacher's certificate and taught a short while and later did volunteer work. She has a sense of belonging when she visits Israel.

Summary

00:00 Previously Rachel made a videotape and this interview starts with her liberation. At the time of liberation by the Russians, Rachel was hiding in the forest at Bialystok with her

mother. They knew they were liberated when someone reported that the Germans were gone. She and her mother went to the town of Dakshitz (?) where they had lived prior the war to see if anyone returned but none had. Everyone else did the same. Her mother worried that if they spent the night there, they would be killed as the Belarus (?) population held the German sentiment that all Jews should be killed. They went 30 kilometers to Ben Bocher (?) where all the Jews lived in one house. They shared their room with another mother and daughter. Others from smaller townships came there, too, and they felt safer to be with others in the same situation. Her mother enrolled her in the Russian school. They knew the War was still raging as word came from the front that the Russians were doing well and some people had returned on the railway. Rachel was 14 in 1945. She had been out of school for several years.

05:00 She had started school early as at age three she was reading her own story books. She was put in formal schooling at age five where she was advanced in math, reading and writing. She had a private tutor in the ghetto so had some education. She had no instruction for the two years when she was in hiding. There was a school in Ben Bocher (?). She had been exposed to informal education in geography and history by different adults as she had traveled all over Europe. Wherever the survivors gathered, they taught the children. When they reached Budapest, Haganah was the active Jewish organization which had an impact on the creation of the State of Israel. They tried to get the children to be productive and active citizens. Rachel did not live with her mother in Ben Bocher as the children lived separately from the adults. Her mother joined a working train on New Year's 1945 as water towers needed repair. Valuables that they hid with local people were returned to them. When they ran away from the ghetto, Rachel recuperated with a family on a farm and they fattened her up. Her mother hid some valuables with them and they returned them. Also, her mother retrieved the silver and gold jewelry that she had buried which they used to survive for the following year or so. They traveled on a train going toward the allies. Each boxcar was divided into four sleeping quarters and there was a wood stove in the center where they cooked their own food.

10:00 They brought potatoes and grain with them and received little rations. They saw a hospital train on the next track. A doctor from that train came and took their potato peels to make soup as they, also, had little rations. Rachel's mother worked whenever the train pulled into stations which needed repair. Everyone on the train was a worker. They were with another Jewish family (mother, father, and son) who had survived in hiding. In addition to the Jewish workers, there were non-Jewish men, some from Russia. None were from Belorussia as they were devoted Communists. A general hitched a ride in her boxcar so five people had to crowd in. There was great disorder. Trains moved whenever the tracks were free. Both their train and the hospital train stayed for days until they could move. Neither Rachel nor her mother experienced any sexual harassment. They traveled up to Southern Prussia which was being liberated.

- 15:00 The train workers had to clean up the railway station. There was no water on the train so they had to follow a path to get to it. A soldier got off the path and was blown to bits so Rachel was afraid to get off the train. When they reached the Prussian city, soldiers were everywhere. The soldiers went into homes and saw the residents had committed suicide and the bodies were booby-trapped so if the soldiers tried to remove them, they were blown up. Also, chandeliers were booby-trapped. There were mines all over the area near the trains. Some people from Southern Poland said that Jews had gathered in Lublin so Rachel's mother bribed the train manager that their boxcar would go there. They reached Lublin the end of March when the snow was melting and it was not very cold. They sold their sheepskin and fur coat for food. HIAS and the Haganah provided them with free shelter. The Red Cross was active there as her mother has an ID issued by them. The shelter was a cot crowded with others in a room. The Haganah organized groups they were trying to smuggle to Palestine. They separated the youngsters so Rachel was separated from her mother. She was placed in better living quarters than her mother. The children had organized supervision and schooling. Rachel was the youngest in the group.
- 20:00 The children were kept busy to prevent their becoming hooligans. Rachel's residence was a few blocks from her mother's. Her mother wanted her to participate so she would have more opportunities. Her mother had money so she became part of a group that was planning to go on foot on their own. They were just sitting and waiting and Haganah was not moving them. Her mother's group hired a guide to show them the way to the allies' lines. From Lublin they went to Czechoslovakia and then to Budapest. They slept in barns along the way and bought food. There were about ten people in their group. In Budapest they found a more organized group that had more support funds which were probably from the United States and South America. The Haganah had the biggest active force to move to Palestine but first they went to Romania as they knew people got across that way.
- 25:00 It was hard to move as the British saw what they were doing and prevented it. They crossed into Austria and the British sent them back into the Russian side. They realized that they could not freely cross borders. In Czechoslovakia they heard that Berlin was surrounded. On foot they crossed over the cold mountain passes to Italy and were happy to see Israeli flags and everyone thought they were hallucinating and pinched each other. It was like a mirage to see the tents with the blue and white flags. It was the Hebrew brigade unit of the British forces that operated in the Bologna area. The refugees' clothes were tattered so they were issued Israeli uniforms including shorts. The Italians were very different from the Byelorussians and the Poles so the refugees no longer felt that they had to run for their lives. They had heard of people running out in their night clothes away from the Poles who came with axes and 2 x 4s to kill them. It was a different atmosphere in Italy, very accommodating. They lived in Italian gentile homes

and in the First Army Quonset huts. The Haganah tried to transport them on the Adriatic or Mediterranean to get them across to Palestine. They all waited for a ship.

- 30:00 About 30 or 40 of them were placed on a truck to be taken to a ship but the truck broke down. It took a day or two to fix it and, meanwhile, they were housed in villas where they shared rooms. Food was provided as they had no more money. They stayed in Bologna. HIAS and another Jewish organization provided food and clothing from donations of US Jews. They thought they would have the opportunity to get on another ship. They were in the boot of Italy where there were three Santas (boats). The British were blockading them. From 1945 to 1947 they could not get on any ship. They lived in villas converted to boarding houses. HIAS and another organization that became UNWRA later had a kitchen that provided food for all the Jewish refugees. There was an Army outpost nearby where she saw Negros about six feet tall. It was the first time that she ever saw a Negro. He was very kind to her and gave her candy and ice cream. The place got organized and she attended school. The books were mostly in Yiddish with some in Polish and Russian. Now Rachel has forgotten Polish. She was permitted to take out one book at a time.
- 35:00 They had an organized school as text books were provided. Rachel learned enough geography and world history to pass the New York Regents Exam. They had no frivolous activities. Everyone who received money from the US shared it. Rachel is still friendly with a man whose brothers live here. One person who is now an attorney in New York received money and shared it. Rachel was able to attend opera performances and was able to learn to swim as they were on the sea. There was a winter resort that had a spa and dances on the terrace. She and her friends would peek at the dancers who were dressed up and learned how to dance by viewing them. Most of her group were boys with just a few girls. **Tape 1, Side 2** She enjoyed watching to see how others lived. A few villas were occupied by refugees. Most of the villagers fished and had olive groves and grew figs. The population was kind and helpful. Vacationers from Rome were friendly with the children. The children learned to speak Italian and visited the gentile vacationers in Rome.
- 40:00 Only displaced Jews from Poland, Hungary and Greece were there. She learned to play the mandolin from the Greeks and games and cards from all of them. Her mother worked in the kitchen. At first she was a volunteer and later got paid. Rachel learned to ride a bike. When the frontier opened, they could communicate with relatives who made arrangements for their kin to join them. Since her family could not make contact with anyone, they pushed for Palestine. They had no addresses for any relatives. They thought her father's sister and husband lived in DC but did not know how to communicate. They corresponded with those from their group who went to DC who gave suggestions how to communicate with their relatives. There was the problem of quotas. The Polish quota to the US was full so they could not emigrate. They had to wait

their turn. It was extremely difficult to emigrate in '46 and '47. They got on the list for Palestine but they needed a ship and bribes to exit. They knew people got caught in blockades and jumped ship and waded into Palestine only to get shot by the British.

45:00 Rachel's mother got sick and went to the hospital so they missed the Exodus. If they had made it, they would have wound up in Cyprus. Her mother wrote to the Jewish newspapers in the US, the Day and the Forwards. She was looking for her uncle. Her father's sister recognized the name and tracked them to Italy. William Gotkins and his wife found their relatives in this manner. Their aunt had lived with Rachel's parents before the War and they had corresponded. There was a month between communications as they went by boat but documentation finally went through. Rachel's mother was born in Russia and later it became White Russia. She and her mother went to the American Consul in Naples. After the Exodus interception, UNWRA divided people in Bari, a port. They were placed with those who wanted to go to the US in one cubicle. Those who wanted to go to Israel went to Milan.

50:00 The uncle sent them money and she enrolled in an Italian school in Bari to learn English. She learned to read, English grammar and phonetics. They spent 2 and ½ years in Italy. They came to the US on November 1st just before Thanksgiving. They were in a troop ship with bunkers. Her mother had a difficult crossing. She could not leave her bunk so Rachel brought her food. There were mostly Italians with just a few displaced persons on the ship. Rachel had mixed feelings about coming to the US instead of Israel. The US is such a large country so she could not find her friends who came here. She learned Hebrew when she was young as her father was a Zionist who founded a Hebrew school where they taught modern Hebrew like they speak in Israel. Rabbi Golinkin organized the school. At five years of age, Rachel enrolled in both the secular and religious school. The Rabbi and his family came to the US and his son lives in this area. They were amazed to meet Rabbi Golinkin at a function. Another coincidence was her governess' brother was the first person she saw upon crossing the Alps into Italy. He gave her a military issue Bible that was 3 inches thick, about 3 x 3 x 5 with thin pages.

55:00 She studied it to keep occupied. Rachel felt that going to Palestine was like going home so going to the US was only second best. When she got off the ship, she received a warm reception. They had been 3 days at sea when the ship listed from a storm and a fishing boat turned over. They pulled into New York at dusk and stood on the deck and she saw strings of lights which turned out to be cars. This was a novelty and seeing neon lights was an unbelievable sight. It was different from what she had imagined. Italy was progressive with running water but just one faucet unlike the faucets here. There was no indoor plumbing in Italy. They had a bathtub in Poland, a water pump, electricity and one of the few radios in their city. Poland was backward. Czechoslovakia and Italy were more modernized but a long way from the US. Her uncle and cousin met them in New York where they spent the night. The next morning they took the train to DC. New York

was busy and scary. When they disembarked, the first thing she saw was the Brooklyn Bridge which was very long and then she saw the Williamsburg Bridge which was also long.

- 60:00 The underground train surprised her as she was used to a steam train. Everything was exciting so the experience took away her fear. She was not afraid of things. They used hot plates in Italy and the electricity was always going out so she put on gloves and turned it back on. When she was in hiding during the Holocaust, she got separated from her mother in the forest. She did not know where the Germans were. She knew there were bears and wolves in the forest. Rachel came to a clearing and heard the Germans say, "Halt" (stop) and bullets hit the ground. Her mother called and she ran to her. Rachel did not expect to survive although she wanted to survive. Her life was not interesting. Her husband has a big family with relatives in their 90s. She feels the will to live is there and strong but people are unaware of it. Some people are afraid of cars in the dark.
- 65:00 Rachel arrived at 3rd and P at her uncle's grocery where her aunt and uncle worked long hours. They were up at 5 AM and closed at 10 PM. They were born in Poland. Her uncle came to the US at age 16 and promised the aunt, age 14, that he would send for her and he did. She was 16 or 17 when she arrived. Her father paid her passage and she went to Cuba as she could not enter the US so the uncle went to Cuba to marry her. She was ill during the crossing from Cuba to the US. They had 3 daughters, the eldest was 6 months younger than Rachel. Rachel was welcomed into the family. The store was busy.
- 70:00 Her 16-year-old cousin was dressed in a shirt and jeans and Rachel was given similar clothing and a pair of loafers. She could read but could not understand their different dialects. Rachel learned words by the customers pointing items out to her. After Thanksgiving, Rachel's uncle took her to Wisconsin and O and enrolled her in a private religious elementary school there and told her to speak English. She was accepted and by the end of January she learned enough to communicate and write. The classes had some Hebrew but were mostly in English. Rachel found sentence structure and grammar to be difficult. Then the elementary school said she learned enough and she enrolled in junior high.
- 75:00 She was 17 by that time. Her uncle took her to the Rabbi who said that she could go to an Americanization school where English is taught to foreigners or she could learn on her own. Her German helped her with some words and she learned a lot from working in the grocery. Her cousins spoke a bit of Yiddish and asked her to repeat everything in English. In Junior High, two teachers helped her; one was her homeroom teacher who she now sees in Hadassah. She was in a class with her middle cousin. Rachel was not afraid to walk alone from the store to school.

78:00

Rachel Goldfarb

Tape 2, Side 1

May 20, 1997

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Summary

00:00 This tape starts with Rachel discussing moving up from elementary to junior high and working hard on learning English. She was placed with a Homeroom teacher who knew Yiddish so this was helpful. Her English teacher had lost both sons in World War II so was sympathetic to her problems. She voluntarily met Rachel for one-half hour before class and instructed her in grammar and sentence construction. Rachel felt this teacher had compassion. Both teachers motivated her to excel and she felt that she could not let them down. Rachel was three years older than her fellow students. Everyone tried to make her feel comfortable and include her in activities. Only her cousin did not include her. At the end of '47 she turned 17 and they were 14. Rachel felt immature though in Italy she had danced with men of 20 and went swimming and to the opera with them. Since Rachel's cousin resented having her thrust on her, Rachel tried not to hang on. Gym was difficult as she had to dress and go out and play baseball, a game that she was not acquainted with. Once she swung so hard that she hurt her back.

05:00 If anyone made fun of her, she made fun of herself. Also, Shakespeare was difficult. When reading Julius Caesar, she was nicknamed Caesar. The women doing the translation helped her with her schoolwork. Rachel took some required courses, English and Civics, in summer school. In June 1948 her mother moved to New York where she found a job in the garment industry so Rachel went, too. It was difficult to find living quarters there. Her mother had a childless uncle married to a woman who was not helpful. Her father's cousins helped them locate an apartment over a pub so she was scared to go home at night. She attended Eastern Jr. High in Washington, DC. She was coached in civics in the summer to prepare for high school. When she registered for high school, the principal said that most students drop out at 18 so asked her why is she enrolling as school is hard. She was warned to beware of knives and that her lunch would be stolen. Rachel attended a school in East New York that a cousin had graduated from and had entered Hunter College. The cousin enrolled her in high school and made her two years younger, being born in 1932. This high school was in the cousin's district so Rachel separated from her mother.

- 10:00 Rachel's English was not up to par at that time. She could read, write and understand but not pronounce correctly. She was assigned to Ray Reed, a woman of German birth who came to the US as a child and said her sympathies were with Rachel and not with the Germans. She helped Rachel overcome differences in people and learned to assess them for their own nature. Ray Reed was her guidance counselor and Rachel's principal was Jewish so both were helpful. Rachel was assigned to two teachers in speech and elocution who instructed her voluntarily after school. They were older and were called back to work as men went into the service. Also, students were helpful. Rachel did not know about football, baseball and basketball which were required to pass gym. She helped others in swimming and math. She was able to take the Hebrew and European History Regents. Rachel had to study US History and typing and she worked 20 to 30 hours a week.
- 15:00 She obtained a job painting piggy banks as she had used a painting brush in her painting classes as a child. School had two sessions: 8 to 1 or 12 to 6. She was first placed in the second session and worked from 7 to 11Am, 4 hours a day for 5 days a week. After her first year at high school, she gained sufficient knowledge and worked as a cashier and bookkeeper at Miles Shoes for the summer. When school started she worked from 6 to 10 PM each evening Monday to Friday and weekends. She had some social life after school. Rachel met those who had been in Bari, Italy including the boy who had shared his money. Also, she met a girl who attended Americanization School and through her met others. Her social life was partly with them and partly with those from high school. The high schoolers were younger and Rachel felt more comfortable with those from Bari who shared her experiences. She pledged for the Honor Society and for different letters. Once she was required to dress up as a child and carry a lollypop and go to the Statue of Liberty.
- 20:00 Her cousins suggested that she learn slang. Rachel had to go to the football games and scream when the team got points. Sometimes she stood up for the wrong team. She never dated school friends and was labeled a snob as she went out with college boys from her outside group. Rachel thought pranks were silly. After two and one-half years in high school, she graduated mid-semester. Later she lived with her mother as, after the first semester, told the principal her situation and he said it was all right. Her mother did not have the desire to learn English. Rachel reported that she still is bilingual in Yiddish and English and can speak Hebrew. At that time, Rachel also knew Russian. Now she speaks English naturally without translating the words. She has a much cherished relationship with her mother and her aunt and uncle who were like parents. It did not bother her that her mother did not adapt to English. Her mother was a worker and independent in Europe but never got the same respect here.
- 25:00 Her mother is able to get along on her own with English but speaks Yiddish to Rachel as she is hard of hearing and Yiddish is easier for her to understand. Rachel graduated 15th

of 598 students but no one rejoiced though her aunt attended her graduation. Having graduated high school, Rachel was able to get a better job and help out more. Her mother was probably depressed and tired from work. No one made a fuss of Rachel's graduation. She was exhausted and her doctor told her to take time off. It was mid-semester so hard to arrange to enter college. She had a scholarship to Brandeis if she was willing to teach Hebrew but she wanted accounting. Rachel felt that she could not leave her mother and she had no money for college. Her cousin in DC was getting married and she wanted to attend the wedding though there was a job waiting for her at Miles Shoes headquarters on Wall Street. She went to DC and helped at the uncle's grocery and liked the customers who also liked her. One customer thought she might work for the IRS but could not as was not a citizen. Another customer suggested that the State Department was looking for Russian translators. She could not translate into Russian but got tested in translating Russian into English and was considered for a job.

30:00 She could not apply for the job as she was not a citizen. One must live in the US for five years before applying for citizenship. After two years, she could apply for intent on becoming a citizen. The customers, the Longs, liked her so much that they offered to adopt her. She obtained a position in the District Court as it was not Civil Service. She was a GS-3 and performed general office work and bookkeeping as did not know shorthand or typing. Rachel caught on quickly and went to Strayer College to learn shorthand. She did not like the size of New York nor its subway. She preferred the streetcar, greenery and lower rise buildings of DC. By working in the Probation Office, Rachel became interested in law and enrolled in George Washington University night classes. She worked under a special appointment and needed the sponsorship of three judges (Schwienhaut (?), Holtziff (?)). She was known as the kid as she was the youngest member of the staff. Then Rachel became a citizen. Rachel enjoyed working in that office. Her mother came and found an apartment as Rachel could support the two of them. Her salary was about \$2,500 to \$2,600 which was sufficient for necessities.

35:00 When Rachel lived with her aunt and uncle, her uncle banked all her money less daily expenses and money for school. When she moved to the apartment, he handed her a savings book with all her money that he had saved for her. Also, Rachel had saved money as she would walk when the uncle gave her money for the streetcar. **Tape 2, Side 2.** Rachel married a Holocaust survivor who she met when she first came to DC. She met him through relatives. When he arrived in the US in '46 he was drafted and served for one year and then was recalled for the Korean War. Rachel met him at the end of his tour when he was getting discharged. They met at a friend's party. Her husband is from central Poland. His family urged him to marry quickly. They married in June '52 and had a daughter in '54. After three months leave, Rachel returned to work at the Probation Office for one year. Her mother lived with her and was the babysitter. It was hard on her mother so Rachel went on leave and did not return to work.

- 40:00 Rachel had additional schooling and did volunteer work. Her husband had lost his parents and accepted her mother living with them. They found that they had different modes of life and could not live together. Her mother lived with Rachel for 15 years and went on vacation with them. Finally, her mother worked out her problems and loss of status and found a position at Hecht's bakery. She found this to be fulfilling as liked the customers and did not feel inferior. She had felt inferior working in the garment industry as she sold fabrics in Poland and in the US did the sewing. Rachel went to school and got a teacher's certificate and started back to work for two days a week and later for four days a week. She mostly taught history and some Hebrew. In Europe her family was very observant but here they were conservative and kept a kosher home. Her relatives did not keep kosher so she got used to eating nonkosher meat but did not mix meat and milk. She observes the holidays and has relatives over her house. Her husband's family is very close. They attend non-religious Jewish holidays at the husband's family's home. Six of eight members of his family survived.
- 45:00 Rachel's husband's mother is the only one left in Europe. Her husband came in '46 on the first transport from Germany as he had papers for the US from before the War. He was the youngest and they all feel like cousins in the family rather than distant relatives. Both Rachel's son and daughter are architects. Her son lives at home and her daughter in Potomac. Her husband worked in sales at Sears. At age five, their son sketched the Verrazano Bridge so his interest in architecture began early. Their daughter's advisor suggested architecture as she liked math and art and got her degree at the University of Maryland. Rachel always had two sets of friends: 1) special relationship with survivors, and 2) friends from neighbors, school and work. Survivors feel like family as they hold the same values and are like a support group, a second family. It is kinship beyond family. They are like sisters as they can share experiences that no one understands. Occasionally, they talk about the Holocaust.
- 50:00 They were celebrating Mother's Day with guests and her husband became emotional when they talked of the Holocaust. When they talked about Passover, her husband recalled hiding his bread at Passover during the Holocaust and intoned some prayers. He had been in camps and ran away from the ghetto but had no papers so hid in the ghetto. He has never been interviewed as he breaks down when talking of the Holocaust. The Department of Justice wanted his information and grilled him and since then he cannot talk of it. Recently she recorded her experiences during the Holocaust. She also recorded it at Brandeis. Rachel wrote books but she finds it easier to talk than to write about the Holocaust. She feels that a child's memories differ from an adult's. She played hop scotch and learned to knit in order to survive in the ghetto and taught it to her mother. Rachel also learned to spin wool so she would be worthy to live.
- 55:00 She feels that it is normal to forget old memories to bear it. She told her children about the Holocaust and they keep TV stories with Germans marching away from the parents.

Rachel feels that her family and youth were stolen from her. Her daughter is 42 and her son is 38 and there are no grandchildren but she enjoys her friends' children. Rachel has a friend, Regina Spiegel, who works in a museum and ten years ago she was active in Hadassah and the Temple. Rachel used to do door-to-door collecting for UJA. She stopped being active when she started to visit her aunt in the Hebrew Home. Rachel felt like she was on cloud nine when she visited Israel since she knows history and read the bible cover-to-cover. She felt like she was coming to a place that was alive and it was good to see the accomplishment of the Jews. In Israel, they would speak up if something happens. Having experienced life under the Germans and the Russians and experiencing life here in the US during the McCarthy era, Rachel felt like telling people to go to Russia and experience their doctrine.

60:00 Rachel believes that this country gives people freedom and opportunity with no wants as you can work, go to school and learn English. Freedom may be missed out if one keeps with traditions which belong at home. Rachel felt that she belonged in Israel, was part of a people. She feels like an American Jew and supports Israel but is an American. She is loyal to Israel and not disloyal to the US. Rachel believes that one should value what you have and do not let freedom slip away. Your life is as good as you make it yourself so take advantage of all that you have.

63:00