

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Interview with Elizabeth Strassburger
October 31, 1997
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PREFACE

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Transcribed by Jenny Soenksen, National Court Reporters Association.

ELIZABETH STRASSBURGER

OCTOBER 31, 1997

Question: This is the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Volunteer Collection interview with Elizabeth Strassburger, conducted by Margaret Garrett on October 31, 1997, in Rockville, Maryland. This interview is part of the museum's project to interview Holocaust survivors and witnesses who are also volunteers with the museum.

Tape number one, side A:

Q: Name at birth?

A: Elzbieta Lusthaus.

Q: And the date of birth?

A: May 15, 1938.

Q: And place of birth?

A: Krakow, Poland.

Q: Would you talk about your childhood?

A: Yes. My parents were living in Iwonicz, which is a spa in the mountains. My father was a physician, and he and my mother had been married for two years when I was born. They were very happy together, they were looking forward to my birth, and things were pretty idyllic. In 1939, the war broke out in Poland. The Germans invaded Poland, and my father, being a physician, had to join the Polish Army.

Before he left for wherever he was going to be sent, he went to say good-bye to his parents, who were living in Lwow. At that time Poland was partitioned, and Lwow was

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in the Russian sector, and where we were living was in the German sector. And when he tried to get back to us, he was taken as a prisoner of war to Siberia. When he didn't come back, my mother became very worried. But she was a very strong and resourceful woman, and so what she did was she sold everything she could in the little town, because I think we were probably one of the few Jewish families; there may have been one or two others. And she went to Tarnow, and Tarnow was where her mother was living. And so where does a young woman who doesn't have a husband with a small child, go? Back to her own mother, and we lived in Tarnow. And when I did the show interview, I didn't know that we were in a ghetto, but I found some papers of my mother's which said that we were in a ghetto. Part of the time we lived in Tarnow with my grandmother, and then we were taken to the ghetto. And my mother was allowed to go out and work for the Germans. My mother was a pharmacist, but I don't know if that's what she was working as. I remember when they took my grandmother. I was probably about three years old, I remember when she went. And from my mother's papers I learned that she was concerned that they were going to do another transport with young children. And so because she was able to go out, she had connections, and she found someone who sold her Christian papers, so that we went to a place called Milanowek Potashawol (phonetic). I think it was probably around 1943.

Q: Now, this was in '43, and so you would have been five years old?

A: Yes. It may have been '42. I have pictures of myself in Tarnow in '42, so I would assume it was either '42 or '43 that we went to Milanowek.

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Q: And you had different names on the papers?

A: Yes. My name was Barbara Stachura and my mother was Maria Stachura, and we lived with a lady by the name of Mrs. Gesia, which is a diminutive of Genowefa Bandyrowa, and her two daughters.

Q: And how did you find them or how did they find you?

A: They were friends of friends of my parents. Somehow they had no connection to us but they were willing to hide us, and so we lived with them until the end of the war. And at times I lived upstairs with my mother, at times I lived in the basement. I was usually drugged when I was put in the basement because it was a dangerous time and my mother had access, I guess, to medication. At times I was allowed to play outside, and my best friend at that time was Wisia, and Wisia was the younger daughter who was nine years older than I, so she was probably 14 or so, give or take, and she was my best friend, and I'm still in contact with Wisia.

Q: Now, backing up, some of this story has been told to you?

A: Yes. Yes.

Q: What is the earliest thing that you remember?

A: I don't remember my father, obviously; he left when I was 16 months old. I certainly remember my mother. I remember my grandmother, and I remember the Germans taking her. That's a very, very vivid memory for me. I know there was a place that had stone seats, and my mother had always said to me if anything bad is happening, you go

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into this place and you hide under the seat. And when they took my grandmother, I went and I hid under the seat.

Q: This was in the town?

A: No, this was in the ghetto.

Q: Okay, in the -- okay. Okay. So you remember that?

A: I remember that. And I was three, probably three or three and a half. And I don't remember going to Milanowek, but I remember living there. I remember the house, I remember the room that we had. We had a very, very large stove which had tiles on it, and that was the only place that you got warmth.

Q: So you and your mother had a room for yourselves?

A: Right, right.

Q: And did you spend all of your time in the room, or did you live with the family?

A: We lived with the family. The house was just partitioned into lots and lots of little rooms, and there were lots of people living there. People were coming and people were going. It was also the headquarters for the Polish Underground, and there were little eagles on the windows, and when it was safe, they flashed certain colors, and there was a cupboard with a false back. I mean, this was a very exciting place in which to be. But I thought I was Christian. I went to church; my mother never went to church. I never questioned that.

Q: Who did you go to church with?

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A: I went to church with the Bandyrowa family, with my best friend Wisia and her mother and her older sister, and at times I went to school.

Q: So that's something that you just always did, and it --

A: Oh, absolutely.

Q: You didn't think anything of it?

A: No. I was getting ready for my first communion, I was preparing; I mean, this was it. And the Germans were there and everybody hated the Germans, and there were secrets, but in those days, unlike now, children didn't question. If the parents said this is what's going to happen, that was it. Sometimes my mother would go away for days at a time, and I never questioned. If I asked Wisia, she would say I think your mother's working in a different town, or the Germans are looking for people, and she was hiding, or whatever. And there were other people in the house that were hiding, so it was not anything alien in any way.

Q: And what was your understanding of what the other people were doing there?

A: There was a war going on, there were bombs falling, people's houses were being destroyed, people's families were being killed. People shared. You know, if you had food, you shared it with other people; if they had food, they shared it with you. I remember being hungry. There wasn't always enough food, but we grew vegetables, and we had milk that was brought in, and we did the best we could. But everybody shared, and it was war, and there were bombs falling. There was very little meat, because all the

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meat went to the front for the soldiers, and the Germans were taking a lot of stuff. And everybody hated the Germans. I mean, that was a common thing.

Q: And do you remember hating the Germans?

A: Oh, absolutely, absolutely. And there were times when my mother would put me to bed and she would tie up my throat, and she would put carbolic acid around, because the Germans -- that was a smell that you used in hospitals, that was a smell that you used to disinfect. And they would come and she would say krank, meaning sick, and she said we'll pretend that you're sick. Period. And if they asked me questions about my father, I knew my father was in Siberia, and that was a positive thing, because obviously if he were in Siberia, he was pro-German, and we were, you know, just a good Christian family whose father had been taken away by the Russians. Then after the war ended, and the Russians came in to liberate us, then my mother said now we can't tell the Russians that Daddy is in Siberia.

Q: So you were about seven then?

A: The war ended in '45. I guess, yeah, probably around seven. So now we're going to tell them that he's in a concentration camp or a labor camp, and that was okay with me. I mean, I was a very good child and I did what my mother told me. There was not a question of saying why or, you know, there was a war and people were getting killed, and I didn't want to be killed.

Q: Do you remember being afraid that you would be killed?

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A: Oh, yes, because the bombs were falling, and for years afterwards when I saw planes, I would expect bombs to come. Even when I was -- you know, after we had left Poland, I was very, very scared of bombs and the noise and planes going over, because that's what planes did in Poland during the war, they dropped bombs.

Q: You said that you spent some time in the basement. Was that when the bombs were falling that you went to the basement?

A: Sometimes, also sometimes when they were looking for Jews, and my mother looked very Jewish. I guess I didn't, although when I talked to Wisia when I did the show interview, she told me that one of the things she was supposed to do was to keep me dirty, and so when I played outside with all the children, I was always covered with mud because I wasn't blond, and everybody else was blond. And that was fun, too. I mean, imagine being a little kid and your big sister puts mud on you and your mother doesn't say anything about it, everybody thinks it's cool. So that was kind of a fun -- fun part.

Q: So Wisia was nine years older than you?

A: That's right.

Q: And she was your best friend?

A: She was my best friend.

Q: She looked out for you?

A: She looked out for me, exactly. Exactly.

Q: Were there other children in the house?

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A: Some. Actually, the caretaker who lived in a little hut near the house, who was responsible for taking care of this house, had I think ten or eleven children. There were seemed like zillions of children, and we all played together. We tried to lead as normal lives as possible. Sometimes we went to school, sometimes we didn't.

Q: What made the difference whether you went to school or not?

A: Depending upon what the situation was in the neighborhood. If the Germans were coming, then school was not in session. If we needed to hide, we hid. But nobody questioned, everybody hid, everybody did what they were told.

Q: And what kind of school did you go to?

A: I went to Catholic school with the Sisters of St. Ursula, the Grey Ursulines, and I finished -- I don't think I even finished second grade.

Q: And did that seem natural to you, to be going to a Catholic school?

A: Well, I was Catholic. I was Catholic. Of course. I went to church, and I prayed, and I prayed that my father would come home, and I prayed he would be there when I went to do my first communion. And I know now that if anything had happened to my mother, that this family would have kept me.

Q: And you would have stayed?

A: And I would have stayed, and I would have been a good Catholic girl.

Q: What else do you remember about that time?

A: Flowers on the trees, fruit on the trees, you know, that we ate. When the Russians came in to liberate us in '45, they came and they took over the house, and they wouldn't

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allow anybody out. And we had a woman who delivered milk, and she had to go and deliver milk but they wouldn't let her leave, and I remember she tied I thought they were sheets but it turned out it was a rope, and she went down the rope, through the bathroom window, and everybody thought that was a really interesting kind of a place. And I remember when the Germans were leaving as the Russians were coming, and everybody was cheering because they were leaving. And there had been some German children in the neighborhood that were pretty nasty, and they were fleeing with their families, and that was kind of nice, too, because they were doing what we had been doing, and now we were sort of on top and they weren't. And the Russians were nice, and they were giving us food and stuff.

Q: The Russians were nice?

A: Very nice, extremely nice. They came and they liberated -- liberated us, got rid of the Germans. And then we left shortly after that. Now --

Q: So there was no mistreatment from the Russians?

A: Oh, no, not at that point. I mean, we left within a couple of months of when the war ended. My mother and I were taken by -- Wisia's father was apparently in prison, the Germans had imprisoned him, and when the Russians came, he was released. And so he drove us to the Krakow area, and my mother put me in a convent and she went looking for family, and of course she found no one.

Q: She put you in a convent?

A: Right.

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Q: What were the circumstances in the convent?

A: She was -- I was still one of -- I was one of the young children, and I had to go to school. And the school was in a convent, and this was a different set of nuns, different order of nuns. I don't know how you would translate that into English. They were called Prezentki, and maybe I can find out.

Q: Now, were you still being considered a Catholic child?

A: No. At that point, when I -- when the war ended and the Russians came, my mother told me we're going to tell the Russians that Daddy's in a German camp, and I want you to know that we're not Catholic, that you're Jewish. And I was horrified, because I -- you know, I was into the dogma, and into the teachings of the Catholic church. And I went to talk to my priest, and my -- and I said I'm not Catholic, Father, I'm Jewish, will I burn in hell? And he said yes, go away. And that was a pretty horrifying kind of a thing, that was pretty awful to be told that, because I had been -- through no fault of my own, all of a sudden I had changed. But when we -- when we left to go to the Krakow area and my mother said I'm going to put you into school so you're safe, she's said you're still going to have to pretend that you're Catholic.

Q: You were horrified when the priest said --

A: Yes, absolutely.

Q: -- you're going to burn in hell?

A: Of course.

Q: Did you talk to your mother about it?

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A: Yes. She said well, that's what they think, but that's not what we think.

Q: And then how did you feel?

A: I was confused because I hadn't really met any Jews. I didn't know what Jews were like. But before we left Milanowek to go to the Krakow area again, my mother said we're going to go see if we can find any of our Jewish relatives, and then you can see how nice Jews are.

Q: When your mother said you're a Jew, what did you think that meant, being a Jew?

A: It meant that I was the awful person. You have to remember this is in the early '40s, where the Polish Catholics thought that the Jews had crucified Christ and they were awful people and, you know, there was a lot of antisemitism in Poland. You know, I can -- speaking as an adult, I didn't know that then, but they were the bad people. They were the people that the Germans were taking away because they were so bad.

Q: So you had picked up that --

A: Oh, oh, yes.

Q: -- from other kids?

A: Oh, sure, oh, sure. Yeah.

Q: And then you were told you were one now?

A: Right. It's an awful feeling.

Q: So when you got back to Krakow, your mother said you had to be in the convent for a while?

A: Yes.

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Q: And how did that feel to you?

A: Well, my mother was looking for relatives. I was hoping she'd come back with a whole lot of relatives, and we'd all live together happily ever after. But she never found any relatives.

Q: Did she find what had happened to the relatives?

A: After the war there was a book published of survivors, and nobody that she knew was in the book, not even my father. So she assumed he was dead and she had to make a life for herself, but she wasn't going to stay in Poland. There was no point to it.

So she got us smuggled out by Russian guards in crates of china. Again, I was medicated, and I was put -- china was put in there, then I was put in there, and then straw on top, or maybe the other way around, and we went over the border to Czechoslovakia.

Q: Now, how did she arrange the smuggling with the guards?

A: I don't know. I don't know. I assumed she paid them. I assume she had money saved.

Q: But she never told you?

A: I never asked. You know, it was something you didn't talk about. I don't think I ever talked to my mother about what had happened until maybe when we got to the United States, and she was always very reluctant to talk. It was not a pretty part of her past that she wanted to discuss. So I never really knew. But we went to Czechoslovakia, we lived in the fields.

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Q: Now, before that, did you know that you were going to be drugged and put into a crate?

A: No, but I'd been drugged before, and my mother said you're going to take this medication, you're going to fall asleep, and when you wake up, we'll be free.

Q: And is that what happened?

A: Yes.

Q: So you did remain asleep?

A: Oh, yes.

Q: The entire time you were in the crate?

A: Yes.

Q: Where do you think she got the medication?

A: She was a pharmacist.

Q: Oh.

A: My mother was a pharmacist by profession.

Q: So she had access?

A: Yeah.

Q: And knew something about dosages?

A: Yes.

Q: And so she was in a crate, also?

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A: She was in crate, I was in a crate, and there were apparently other people in crates, because when I woke up, we were all standing and they were all -- there were several of us.

Q: So the journey was from Krakow to --

A: Czechoslovakia.

Q: Where in Czechoslovakia?

A: I don't know. But it was very close to the Austrian border, because then we went to Austria, and we wound up at a place called --

Q: So before that, so you woke up and you were out of the crate --

A: Right.

Q: -- when you woke up, and do you remember that?

A: Yes. Yeah, I remember. We were in a field, and we ate potatoes. And then we started walking, and part of the time my mother carried me and part of the time I walked.

And we wound up --

Q: You were with your mother and some other people?

A: Yes.

Q: Was there a guide with you, do you remember?

A: I don't remember. You have to remember, I was seven years old. My mother said we're walking, we walked.

Q: And getting over being drugged?

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A: I had been drugged before. It was only you were woozy for a while and you were kind of confused, but she was there, and she was always there, so whatever she wanted was okay with me. And then we went to Vienna.

Q: So you walked from a field in Czechoslovakia?

A: Right. To Vienna.

Q: You walked all the way?

A: We may not have walked all the way to Vienna. I'd have to look on a map, I guess, to see where, but somehow we wound up in Vienna.

Q: And you did a lot of walking?

A: We did a lot of walking, yes.

Q: Okay.

A: And in Vienna they had a place called the Rothschild Hospital, which was sort of a transition point for people. I remember we slept in a big room with all girls and all women, and the men and the boys slept in another room, and we got meals and we got clean clothes, and we were sprayed with DDT in case we had lice or whatever.

Q: Do you know who sponsored this place?

A: I think UNRRA.

Q: Okay.

A: And we were there for maybe a couple of months, I would think, until something was arranged for us. My mother was looking for relatives and couldn't find anybody. But thinking that my father was dead, because he hadn't been in the book, either, she decided

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that we would go to Israel. And so we joined a camp for children in Germany, orphaned children going to Israel.

Q: Wait a minute. You're in Vienna, and your mother decided to go to Israel. So how did you --

A: She -- I would assume that UNRRA helped her go, you know. This was just a transition point. People didn't stay there for an extended period of time in Vienna.

Q: Do you remember going from Vienna to Germany?

A: Yes, and we went in a truck; I'm pretty sure we went in a truck. And we went to a camp for Jewish orphans, and there were hundreds of Jewish orphans, and there were grownups who were taking care of them. There were teachers and there were doctors, and there were people who did things.

Q: So your mother was in the camp with you?

A: Yes. She got a job as a pharmacist, and we were going to go to Israel where she hoped maybe she had relatives there. And we were in this camp probably for about -- from the point we left Poland until we went to Italy was six months, about, or maybe -- maybe less, even. But we were in this camp, and they were getting ready to get a ship to take us to Israel, and a medical commission came through the camp to check the camp to make sure that all conditions were good. And my mother recognized one of the doctors in the commission, and, you know, they hugged each other, and he said oh, my goodness, you're alive. And she said this is my daughter. We both survived, and my husband didn't. And he said oh, no, he's alive; he's in Italy. So he sent a telegram to

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Italy, and the next day an ambulance came, because if you're a doctor, that's your mode of transportation. And I met my father. I was eight years old, and I met my father for the first time.

Q: Wait a minute. You were in the camp in Germany?

A: Uh-huh.

Q: And your father was in Italy?

A: Right.

Q: And so he contacted your father?

A: Right.

Q: And then you and your mother went to Italy?

A: Correct.

Q: And how did you get from the camp in Germany to Italy?

A: By ambulance.

Q: Oh, you went the whole trip from Germany to Italy --

A: Yes.

Q: -- by this ambulance?

A: Right.

Q: So he got the ambulance?

A: Right.

Q: For you --

A: Yes.

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Q: -- and your mother to travel?

A: Right. And he had -- he had been in Siberia, and he said the only reason he survived was because he was a doctor and they needed him to take care of the prisoners. And so he would get better rations and better clothing, even though he lost several toes, you know, to frostbite. And then there was an amnesty in Poland -- in Siberia, and the nonpolitical prisoners were allowed to join the Polish Army fighting with General Anders with the Allies, and he joined the Army. They went to Egypt and they fought against Rommel, and then they went to Italy and they fought at Monte Cassino. And then, you know, he obviously got permission for us to come. And then we were in Italy for six months, and then the Army went to England.

Q: You were in Italy for six months?

A: Right.

Q: And your father was in the Army?

A: Right.

Q: In Italy?

A: Right.

Q: Where were you and your mother living?

A: With him.

Q: He had a house or an apartment?

A: He had a hut or whatever those things were in Italy. Maybe he had an apartment.

Q: So you just moved in with him?

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A: Yes.

Q: Do you remember that?

A: Yes. In fact, I had pictures of that. You know, we'd go swimming to the beach, we toured --

Q: We, you and your mother and father?

A: Oh, yes, oh, yes. You know, the war was over by that time, and the Army still hadn't been demobilized but the war was over, so this was a miracle that we had survived, it was a miracle that he had survived. So I guess there were other people there with families.

Q: And did he also have to work during this period?

A: Oh, yes, I mean, he was still --

Q: He was working?

A: He was still working, but he got time off.

Q: So you would spend part of the day with your mother?

A: Well, I would spend some -- you know, there was a school I went to. I was learning Italian, I was playing with the Italian children.

Q: What was the school that you went to?

A: It was an Army school for children.

Q: Okay.

A: Of the people that were still in the Army. And then the Army went to England, and my father continued to work as a doctor, and everybody had families.

Q: So your father went to England, and you and your mother went also?

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A: With him, yes. Yes.

Q: And where did you live in England?

A: In England we lived in a place called Bedlington -- no excuse me, Morpeth. No, maybe -- it was a little place between Bedlington and Morpeth. It was called Hartford Bridge, and there were all the people that were there with the Polish Army was there, and there I went to English school. And I went to --

Q: With English children?

A: With English children. And then I passed an exam, and I went to grammar school.

Q: Now, did you know English when you went to England?

A: No. No. But I learned it very, very quickly.

Q: But you just started right off in school?

A: Yes. Yes.

Q: And learned English as you went along?

A: Yes.

Q: And you were then about eight?

A: It was -- I can tell you, it was December of 1946 that we arrived in England.

Q: So you were about eight?

A: I was eight. And what they did was they assigned an English girl to me in the class, and she and I sat together, we had double desks, and she would point at things, and she was sort of my mentor. And I would point to this and she would say table, chair, and that's how we learned. There was no bilingual education.

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Q: Were there other refugee children in this school?

A: Yes. Oh, yes, oh, yes. Certainly.

Q: And who were your friends?

A: The refugee children, and also some of the English children that I went to school with.

Q: And at this point where was your confusion about being Catholic or Jewish?

A: Well, in the German -- in the camp in Germany I had started learning about Judaism. I had trouble with the writing, but I learned the concepts.

Q: With the Hebrew writing?

A: With the Hebrew, right.

Q: Now, where did you learn about this and learn the writing?

A: In Germany, in the camp for Jewish orphans where we were.

Q: There was a school there?

A: Yes.

Q: Or this was informal teaching?

A: Oh, no, no, no, no, no. It was very formal -- it was a very formal camp. These were children that had lost their parents, they needed structure, so we had school, we had play time, we went on trips. I saw my first elephant in a zoo there, I rode a horse. I mean, we were -- we were in heaven, we thought, considering what we had all gone through in terms of deprivation and having lost families and not being able to eat and being in hiding. They were really worse than I was; at least I had one parent. You know, many of them had none.

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Q: So in that camp you were learning some Hebrew, and you were with other Jewish children?

A: Yes.

Q: And how were you feeling about it at that point?

A: Well, we were -- you know, they didn't have horns, you know. In Poland the concept was the Jews had horns. They were very nice people. The adults were very nice.

Maybe the things I had learned as a child were not exactly true, you know, I didn't know.

But, you know, at the age of seven or eight you don't really have to make decisions; you can wait and see what happens when you grow up.

Q: So then when you got to England, you were in a school that was not a Jewish school?

A: Right.

Q: And how was that for you?

A: It was okay. I mean, that was the third religion, it was Church of England, and the principal said if we -- spoke to my parents and said if I didn't want to attend the services, it was okay. And my father said no, you know, I want her to be exposed to all religions, it's okay. So you know, they would have a prayer, and you didn't have to pray if you didn't want to, you could just stand and bow your head and say your own prayer or whatever.

Q: What had your parents' religious practices been before the war?

A: My father apparently came from an extremely orthodox family. My grandmother had shaved her head and she wore a wig. My mother came from a very observant family, but

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not to that extent. So but they both had strong traditions. And they continued, you know, when we had our own home, they continued. And Judaism is a religion that you can practice in any way you want, to any degree you want, so it's very permissive in that way.

Q: So you were going to school with the Church of England?

A: Yes.

Q: And your parents were observant at home?

A: To some extent. We didn't eat pork, you know, certain things that we didn't do. But when you're in the Army, you can't always do exactly as you want. We were still in the Army. And then the Army was demobilized, and then my parents had to make a decision as to what they were going to do. And my mother had discovered that her mother's sister, her great-aunt, was living in the United States, and she was willing to bring us to the United States. So we came to the United States in 1951.

Q: So you had to wait several years?

A: Five years.

Q: Was that for a quota that you had to wait?

A: Apparently. Then they passed some special law that allowed us to come to the United States as -- you know, we were stateless, and we were allowed in. And my great-aunt and uncle guaranteed that they would take care of us and support us. And we were healthy.

Q: So you had been in England for several years?

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A: Five years.

Q: Five years?

A: Right.

Q: In England?

A: Right.

Q: In one place, in one school?

A: No. I went to -- first I went to elementary school, and then in England when you get to a certain age, you sit an exam, and if you pass it, you go on to -- there are two tracks, there's a commercial track and then there's a college track, and if you pass the test, you go to a grammar school, it's what's called grammar school. And I was fortunate that I passed. And so I went to a school where I learned Latin and French and algebra and geometry. And then when I came to the United States, they said oh, you're 13, you're going to 8th grade, and it didn't matter that I'd had French and Latin and geometry and algebra. And I was bored, very bored.

Q: So you were academically very ahead of American children?

A: Yes, yes.

Q: How did you feel about leaving your situation in England?

A: Well, this was the first time I'd really had a family. My parents had decided to do this. My mother was happy, my father was happy. They felt there were more opportunities in this country, so we came here.

Q: Were there any things that were hard for you to leave?

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A: Friends. My friends, the people at school. Yeah. We liked England. I liked England very much. Even the weather was okay.

Q: So you came to the United States?

A: Yes, we came to Newark, New Jersey.

Q: Is that where your --

A: That's where my great-aunt and uncle were living. First we lived with them.

Q: Do you remember your arrival in the United States?

A: Oh, sure. Came on the Queen Mary.

Q: And what did you think of the voyage?

A: It was lovely. We had wonderful food and we had nice cabins. There was entertainment on the ship. I mean, I didn't come to Ellis Island in steerage, I came on the Queen Mary. It was very nice. And our aunt and uncle were there, and they took us to their house. They had a huge house. I had never seen a house that big. Now that I look back, it's probably smaller than the house I have now with my husband, but, you know, it was immense. There was food and there was everything. And it was wonderful.

Q: So you lived --

A: We lived in Newark with them briefly, and then my father had to pass his medical boards, so he had to go back to school and, you know, kind of take a course to sort of review things. And then he passed his boards, and then because we weren't citizens, he couldn't practice in either New York or New Jersey, so he was offered a chance to work

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in Maryland. And so he came to Maryland a year ahead of us, because I was in my last year of high school and they didn't want to move me again, you know, I'd been moving around so much. And so in 1955, we moved to Maryland.

Q: How was high school for you as --

A: It was simple. It was very simple. In fact, what I did, I went to two summer sessions and I repeated the stuff that I had taken in England, and at least I did it for six weeks instead of, you know, six months. So I graduated in three and a half years.

Q: How was it as far as making friends?

A: Well, I was a rarity, I had an English accent and I had, you know, a different life than they had had. They had lived in one place. They had had friends in one place, and, you know, I was sort of different, so I made a lot of friends. It was kind of nice.

Q: And did you have refugee friends?

A: No. No. No, we lived with my aunt and uncle, and then we had our own apartment. Then when my father was studying and then he had to pass the boards and he had to do an internship for a year, and my mother worked. My mother worked to support us, and I did the housework. So everybody had their own jobs. So I really didn't have that much time. I'm sure there were refugees in Newark, but I mean you didn't walk around and say are you a refugee. My mother had friends from where she worked. My mother worked in a bakery and my father was away for part of the time because he had an internship in Bayonne, New Jersey, which was nearby, and then we went to Maryland.

Q: And your mother or your father, did they have any refugee or survivor friends?

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A: My mother found cousins that were here, and then she found her best friend, who was living in Brooklyn, someone with whom she had gone to school in kindergarten and elementary school, and they were overwhelmed that they had found each other. And this friend had a daughter exactly my age, one month younger, and we've been friends now since 1951, and we still maintain a friendship, which is kind of nice. Even when we don't see each other, we still have history together, you know, that we can pick up as we go.

Q: Did you know her?

A: No.

Q: Before you came to the states?

A: No. No, she had been in hiding, also, and they came to the United States earlier, and her father had been killed, also -- had been killed, you know, in the war.

Q: So you moved to Maryland?

A: Right.

Q: With your father?

A: Right.

Q: To this area?

A: We lived in Carroll County, and my father was a psychiatrist in a mental hospital. We had a house on the grounds. And unfortunately, he died in 1960. So --

Q: He was fairly young?

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A: He was 60 years old. My mother was 48 when he died. And so he died, and my mother decided to go to New York because the house where she lived came with the job. And so within six months she had to vacate the house. So she came to -- she went back to New Jersey to her friends at the bakery, and she got a job at the bakery again. And I was married two years later, so I stayed in Maryland with my husband.

Q: Now, when your father died, were you living with your parents?

A: Yes. Yes.

Q: So you had to leave the house, also?

A: Oh, yes. Oh, of course.

Q: So in 1960, you would have been 22?

A: Correct. Yeah.

Q: We're missing a space here. You graduated from high school?

A: Oh, I'm sorry. Oh, and then I came to Maryland, and I went to college, I went to the University of Maryland.

Q: Okay.

A: And then I graduated from Maryland in February of 1959, and I got a job working at the hospital. And then I went to graduate school for a year. I was training as a social worker, and then my father died. And the hospital had -- they gave me a stipend, which meant they paid me a full salary while I went to graduate school. I worked for three days a week and I went to school two days a week, to graduate school at University of Pennsylvania, and any holidays that I had from school, I had to work. And then when

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school was over in -- no, excuse me. Then when my father died, I owed the hospital a year of my life, you know, I had to pay back essentially by working, and so they -- I decided since I was getting married anyway, that I would drop out of graduate school and I would pay them back the year, because in case my husband got transferred somewhere, then I would want to go with him. So by then it was -- we were married in 1961, and we lived in Maryland, and my husband worked for the National Bureau of Standards, and I finished graduate school. And then I had a car accident where I broke my neck, so I was --

(The recording ended at this point.)

(New recording began.)

MS. GARRETT: This is a continuation of a United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Volunteer Collection interview with Elizabeth Strassburger. Tape number one, side B.

Q: When the tape was cut off, you were talking about moving to Syracuse with your husband.

A: Right.

Q: And your two children were born there?

A: Right. But prior to moving to Syracuse, I did eventually go back to graduate school, and I did get a master's degree in social work. And I worked for almost a year for Montgomery County, and then we went to Syracuse, and my two children were born there, and I went back to work as a social worker. And after being in Syracuse for about

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eight years, we moved back to the Maryland area, and we've been here ever since.

That's been since 1970.

Q: Was your husband a survivor?

A: My husband came here at the age of 2. He was brought over here by relatives from Pittsburgh, but -- and he was born in Germany, but he came here before the war actually started. So even though technically by our museum standards he is a survivor, he doesn't feel that way because he really doesn't remember anything that happened prior.

Q: How do you think all of your experiences as a child affected your subsequent life?

A: You know, I never thought about it very much, because it really wasn't the "in" thing when I was growing up. People didn't talk about the war, and people didn't talk about the atrocities and whatnot. And I guess it was not until maybe the mid '70s when a friend of one of my friends with whom I worked was writing a book about children of the Holocaust, and my friend Joan said would you talk to Ina, Ina Friedman. And the book is called Escape or Die. And she said would you talk to her, because she's really interested in your background. And I had to talk to my mother, because I couldn't really put my finger on things, and my mother didn't really want to talk about it. But I did remember, and so I talked to Ina, and Ina wrote the book. And the tapes of that are at Yad Vashem, and then she sent me the book. And I don't know if my story was all that interesting, but I was very organized, because the way she's written it is pretty much exactly what I said to her. And then I continued working. My children grew up, and my daughter is married. She's a physician and she's married to a physician. And my

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son is visiting me now, and he's in the music field. I've been married for 36 years to the same man, which is kind of nice. And in 1994 I retired from my job with Montgomery County. I had been a therapist with emotionally disturbed children, and I went to work as a volunteer. And it's very, very meaningful for me to work as a volunteer, because I feel I survived, and so I have to give back. And I work in the Department of Collections, which I think is the best department in the whole museum.

Q: Why do you think that's the best?

A: Because the people are just the most giving, caring, talented people I have ever met, and they're so dedicated. And my boss, Susie Goldstein, is just a gem. She's a young woman, she's my daughter's age, but she's so brilliant in terms of what she knows. And we collect artifacts, you know, we get them from people, and we catalog them. And a lot of the things are Polish documents and Polish postcards and Polish diaries, and I translate those because my Polish is still pretty good. I speak well, and I read well, but my writing is atrocious, because, as I said, I only went through second grade. And I think I'll work at the Holocaust Museum until they carry me out, because it's just a very, very nice thing to do.

Q: How did you decide that you would like to work there?

A: I think once the museum opened and when I stopped working, I knew that I wanted to do something, and I wanted to do volunteer work, and this seemed to be just the right thing to do.

Q: And is most of your work there translating?

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A: I translate, I type, I file. I do whatever, whatever they ask me to do, but my primary job is translating.

Q: And how much time do you spend there?

A: At this point I'm going one day a week, but when it gets warmer I think I will go two days a week. And now we survivor volunteers are going to be involved with the Kovno Exhibit.

Q: With the what?

A: Kovno.

Q: What is that?

A: Kovno is the Jewish ghetto in Lithuania. The exhibit is opening the 19th and 20th, I believe, or the 20th and 21st of November, and we're going to be involved in making sure that the survivors of the ghetto get to the museum and the busses take them, and then have a hospitality suite that we're going to have for them. There were a lot of survivors apparently that are coming to this exhibit.

Q: And this project is being done, did you say, by the survivor volunteers at the museum?

A: Oh, no, no, no, no, no, no. We're going to be just helping. Oh, no, this has been a several-year project that's been going on.

Q: So the survivor volunteer group at the museum --

A: Right.

Q: -- is especially active --

A: Yes.

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Q: -- in this project?

A: Yes. We're going to be the hosts and hostesses that are going to be welcoming the survivors of the Kovno ghetto. And it's just for the opening, it's just going to be for the two days of the opening.

Q: Could you say something about the survivor volunteers as a group at the museum?

A: Yes. We started meeting with Martin Goldman, who is a gem, and we're discussing issues, things that concern us and the things that we'd like to see happening in the museum. I guess we'd like to have a little bit of a voice in what's going on, because once we go, you're not going to get any more survivor volunteers, we're it, we're the end. And that's the other group that's so very dedicated, that I am so impressed with, is how dedicated the people are, and you know, we talk and we're kind of a support group to each other, which is kind of nice, too.

Q: So you're a group within a group?

A: Yes. Yes.

Q: Are there other survivor volunteers in the collections department?

A: Yes. Yes, there's -- we come on different days, so I don't really know them, but there's a woman who translates French, and there's another woman who translates Polish, and she goes to the Linthicum, which is the warehouse for the collections department where we have a lot of the artifacts there, too, and she translates. She just doesn't like to come downtown, so she prefers to go to Linthicum.

Q: So you have a lot of feelings about your work with the museum?

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A: Oh, yes.

Q: And the museum itself?

A: Oh, yes. I think it's a wonderful thing. It's very special.

Q: What about in your personal social life? Are you involved with survivors?

A: Not really. I don't know any survivors. You know, my friends are from my work or my husband's work. We play bridge. We play bridge with the same six couples for 25 years, we play duplicate bridge, we meet at each other's homes, and we're sort of a tight group. And then I have friends from my early days, from college, and a lot of my sorority sisters are living in this area. And in fact it's kind of cute, but one of the young women in the collections department is a sorority sister, you know, 30 years apart, but still we laugh about it that we were in sorority together.

Q: So your friends are mostly not --

A: Right.

Q: -- survivors?

A: Right. I mean, I don't -- if they happen to be survivors, that's fine, but I don't think I look for survivors. Most of the survivors that I've met are at the museum.

Q: And do you see people that you work with at the museum outside of the museum?

A: Not really, but we're going to because we're going to have to plan all these things for the opening of Kovno, so we're going to be getting together as a group and discussing how we're going to do these things.

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Q: And what about being Jewish? The last we talked about that in the interview, you were still a child. What happened to that confusion?

A: Well, I'm very -- I'm Jewish. I'm Jewish. I get -- I still get a fuzzy, nice fuzzy feeling when I go into a church, and I've gone to weddings and I'm very comfortable in a Catholic church. But I'm Jewish and my children are Jewish and my son-in-law is Jewish. When my daughter was married, I had no family at the wedding, obviously, so I really maintain my husband's family. He comes from a very large family with lots of cousins and aunts and uncles, and I maintain that relationship. And my daughter's in-laws are really fantastic people. Their name's Herskowitz, and they've sort of adopted me so I feel like I do have a family, which is very important. And I wonder what would have happened if there had been no war and if I had lived in my cocoon in Poland. My parents came from well-to-do families. We had lots of servants. We had, you know, everything that we could desire, and we lost everything.

Q: What do you imagine would have happened?

A: I guess we would have stayed there. My father was, you know, a physician in the spa. Probably would have traveled, probably would have gone skiing in Switzerland or whatever, and I wouldn't have had these experiences, so I guess everything happens for a reason. But my mother was a very strong woman, obviously, because she saved us, and my mother always said if you have something, if you have money or whatever, you need to spend it, because if you don't, the devil comes and takes it. So you really need to enjoy if you have things.

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Q: And have you lived by that?

A: Yes. Yes. You know, we like to travel, and we go skiing a lot, and we have a good time.

Q: And what about your Jewish religion as far as involvement in a synagogue or observance of holidays?

A: We observe all the holidays, and if Ellen, my daughter's mother-in-law, does Rosh Hoshana, then I do Passover, or vice versa. We do a lot of things together. That's very important because it's family, you know, it's more than just observing a holiday, it's family. You don't have to go to synagogue, you can just feel it in your heart.

Q: So that has evolved for you?

A: Yes.

Q: Into something meaningful?

A: Yes.

Q: And what about having children? What was that like for you?

A: Well, my children were luckier than I was. They had two parents all the time. Even when we moved, they had two parents. You know, they're very, very nice young people, so I guess we've done a good job.

Q: What --

A: I'm looking forward to grandchildren someday.

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Q: What was it like for you when your children were the age that you were when you were in the ghetto and in hiding, and they were having a life very different from the life that you had?

A: I didn't -- you know, I didn't even think about it. Having children was such a special miraculous kind of a thing, and watching them grow and do all the things, and taking pictures of them and just enjoying everything they did. I did -- you know, I didn't really compare. You know, they went to Hebrew school and they had Bar and Bat Mitzvahs, and they grew up to be nice people. That's the most important thing. The past is sort of a prelude to the future, I guess. You can't dwell on it because you can't undo it, you can't do anything about it. I think it's made me a stronger person, but if I could change it, I would have rather not had that kind of a past.

Q: What have I not asked you that I should have?

A: I don't know. You're very thorough. I don't know.

Q: Is there anything else that you would like to say or anything else you would like to talk about?

A: No, I guess I would just encourage people to come to the museum, because it's a very special place.

Q: Okay. Well, thank you very much for your contribution and for giving your testimony today.

A: Thank you.

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Q: This concludes the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Volunteer Collection interview with Elizabeth Strassburger.

Conclusion of Interview