# United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

## Interview with Ruth Alper
## December 22, 1999
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# PREFACE

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# RUTH ALPER
# December 22, 1999

Beginning Tape One, Side A

Question: This is the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum volunteer collection interview with Ruth Alper, conducted by Esther Finder on December 22nd, 1999 in Rockville, Maryland. This is tape number one, side A. What is your full name?

Answer: Ruth Hagan Alper.

Q: And what was your name at birth?

A: Ruth Hagan.

Q: When were you born?

A: February 18, 1932.

Q: And where were you born?

A: I was born in Marktberg, Germany.

Q: What were your parents' names?

A: Bertha Weisenberg Hagan. Isaac Hagan.

Q: Did you have any brothers, sisters?

A: I have a brother two years younger, Max Hagan.

Q: What do you remember of your childhood in Germany? Can you tell me about your home?

A: I -- we lived in an apartment on the second floor. There was a -- a hill there. We had a small car with a rumble seat and sometimes we would dra -- ri -- get a ride in the rumble seat. And I was -- I lived near my aunt and uncle, Esther and Herschel Hagan, and I played with my younger cousins, Manny and Jackie. And I remember going down to -- with my brother down the apartment steps and we went into the car and started the car and somebody saw us and stopped

us cause we were rolling down the hill, he had released the brake. And I -- oh, I started kindergarten in regular school, and a few months after I was in the school the teacher called my mother in and said, Frau Hagan, this is not my policy, but your daughter can no longer stay in this public school, she has to go to a Jewish school. So I went to a Jewish school with a Jewish teacher. And he was there for a few months and then one day we went to school and he was no longer there, he had gotten papers to come to America. So there for awhile I was out of school, there was no school.

Q: Was your hometown a -- a large town, or was it small?

A: I would say it's a medium size town and it was an industrial town. There were a lot of factories there.

Q: Was there a large Jewish community there?

A: I don't know. We had Jewish friends and we did go to synagogue, so there were some Jewish people there, but I don't know whether -- the extent of it.

Q: Did your family have a long history in Germany?

A: They got -- they left Poland in 1919, so they were there from 1919 to 1939. They were never allowed to become citizens, you had to be in Germany 30 years before, so they were statenloss; people without a state. My father always went to work, he did selling house to house, bought things at the wholesale place, sold them and made a living, cause we were never deprived of anything, we had food and clothing.

Q: Do you know why your family moved from Poland to Germany?

A: Yes, they moved there because of economic reasons. They were very, very poor, and my granduncle, at the age of 15 was caught playing cards, and then he said he never wanted to stay in that place because of this [indecipherable] and he -- he left very early to go to Germany, and

then came to America. He then grew up, b-became a good businessman in Detroit, Michigan, and he was the man that signed the affidavits for us to come here, that if we couldn't sup -- if my father couldn't support us, he would support us.

Q: Do you know where in Poland your family is from?

A: Nowy Zandak.

Q: What work did your mother do?

A: My mother was a homemaker, but my father always had a paperwork that had to be done, and she helped him with the accounts. She spoke a good English once we got to America. My father always spoke all the languages that he had ever encountered, Polish, German, Spanish, then English, so that he never -- he went to business, but he never got the hang of the language the way my mother did.

Q: Was your family religiously observant?

A: Yes, they were. They -- we lived -- I couldn't go -- do anything on Saturday. I went to -- well, in Miami I went to Hebrew school and then stayed home on Saturday. A-And we observed all the holidays and we were kosher at that time. Mostly we were Orthodox.

Q: When you were a child growing up in Germany, did you have a favorite holiday?

A: When I was growing up in Germany -- we didn't do much about Hanukah, as I wa -- Passover, because we would all get together, with the fam -- with the aunt and uncle and my cousins.

Q: And what language did you speak in your home?

A: German.

Q: When you were a little girl, did you experience any anti-Semitism, other than what you mentioned to me in the school, did you, in your playtime with your friends, anything like that ever experience anti-Semitism?

A: No, not that I remember. Not in Germany, no.

Q: You ever see Hitler or -- or the Nazis in your travels?

A: No, I didn't see Hitler, but I was there Kristallnacht and we went out on the street and saw all the windows had been smashed and there was glass all over the streets. So that was my memory of the -- of the beginning of the bad times.

Q: What can you remember about Kristallnacht? Did you know what was happening during the evening?

A: A wa -- there was a -- a neighbor who said we shouldn't go out at night the night of krysta -- the night before Kristallnacht because something bad was happening. So he was trying to warn us about something like that. So we stayed in. Then the next day we did go out and walked around and saw the destruction. And then that morning my uncle was arrested and sent to -- Ben Bruner, that was my uncle, he was arrested and sent to a concentration camp. He later got out because my Aunt Esther bribed one of the Gestapo people to get him out so he could come to America with us.

Q: Before Kristallnacht had there been any mention of your family going to America?

A: No, because my father was against going. He said that this would pass, that it's not as bad as people were saying. But my Aunt Esther, younger than my mother, she was the motivating factor. She said to my mother, pack the suitcases, pack the boxes, we're leaving. And my father came along with us, even though he felt that it would not be so bad. There were people in my family who left earlier. My Uncle Beryl was in Detroit already and of course grand-uncle Jassie

was in Detroit. But he had gone much earlier, for economic reason. Beryl went because he realized things were getting bad.

Q: Is there anything else that stands out in your mind about the time up to Kristallnacht, from your childhood? Any other memories?

A: No, I can't remember anything that happened.

Q: When your family decided to move, how was the move explained to you?

A: Well, my mother was very capable of taking care of us, and she said we were going to have an adventure, and we would be going halfway around the world. And so I felt as long as she felt it was an adventure, I was going to go along. And she made it easy for my brother and myself. We didn't worry. They were very worried, but we didn't, as children.

Q: Were you aware that they were worried?

A: Yes, I realized that things were getting tense, and that Esther and Bertha and everybody was anxiously preparing for this trip.

Q: Did your parents have any trouble getting out of Germany?

A: Well, they got the affidavit from Uncle Jassie in Detroit. The -- the hard part was that my grandparents wouldn't come. And so they left them in Hamburg, Germany, and my two aunts and my mother, they had to say goodbye to their mother and father, and that was very difficult. And my mother really never got over it, I don't think Ceeta ever got over it either. They went to Poland, and we have letters from Poland where they're living in an apartment and letters that we sent and packages that we sent were opened up and -- by the censors and money and food was taken out, so that they would get a little bit of what we had sent, but not very much. And that happened through 1940 -- '39 - '40 - '41, then '42 we had no more correspondence, they died.

Q: Do you remember what arrangements were made for your departure?

A: This is hard to believe but my aunt contacted a rabbi and he -- you couldn't take much money out. And she gave him our money and for every 14 marks that we gave him, she met him in Belgium, he gave us back a dolla -- a mark. So we had little money as we left Belgium, and there were people who got off at Belgium and I remember waving goodbye to friends and then we never saw them again, and then we continued to Cuba.

Q: So your objective was Cuba?

A: No, our objective was United States of America, but there was a quota system in America, we couldn't get in. In fact, the arrangements we had to make to go to Cuba was that we were going there on vacation, which is what we said on the papers, going on vacation.

Q: Since you were going on a vacation, as you said, were you able to say goodbye to people?

A: Yes, we said goodbye to our friends who lived in the apartment house. And of course my close relatives, very fortunately were able to come with us. Uncle Ben, who was in the concentration camp, my Aunt Esther bribed a Gestapo and they let him out. Her story is that Hitler was willing for Jews to leave if they could get out somehow, and we -- she went ahead and got the papers and we -- as we said, a -- a vacation to Cuba, but our intention was never to stay in Cuba, to come to America.

Q: Were there any last minute glitches before you could leave?

A: No, other than saying goodbye to my grandparents and having them go to Poland, which was the first place that they went.

Q: You mentioned that you could not take out a lot of money.

A: Right.

Q: What could you take out of Germany? What -- what did your parents take and what did you take?

A: My parents took out a sterling silver set co -- silverware. A big sewing machine, it's a -- was a piece of furniture, and a beautiful sterling silver candelabra and I have the candelabra, which I will give to my daughter so that she will know that this is something else that she can take with her. I don't remember what I took. I -- all I remember was wearing a short dress, but most of the time that's what I wore, dresses. I don't remember toys or anything like that.

Q: What did you most regret leaving behind, for you personally?

A: Having to leave my school, and the people that I knew in school. That was all.

Q: When did you leave your home?

A: 1939.

Q: Do you know the date?

A: Perhaps January, 1939, cause I feel that we were on the ship in February, and took a few weeks, we had to go to Hamburg and make arrangements for my grandparents. They did get an apartment in Poland, but --

Q: How did you travel from your home to Hamburg?

A: By train, we went by train.

Q: How old were you at the time you left your home?

A: I was seven years old.

Q: When you get -- when you got to Hamburg, how long were you there?

A: We were there a few weeks, until we got on the ship, and the ship was the Oronoco and a -- my cousin says that after we were dropped off in Cuba by the Oronoco that the next time the Oronoco sailed, it was torpedoed. So I don't know if we have any record -- we don't have any records of the Oronoco, I thought maybe the Holocaust Museum might.

Q: Do you know what registry it [indecipherable] under?

A: No, no, just the name, that stuck with me.

Q: Let's stay in Germany just a little big longer --

A: Right.

Q: -- we'll go back to the ship. You mentioned saying goodbye and then leaving and going on the ship. Did you have any problems at all actually leaving German territory?

A: Not that I recall.

Q: I asked you if you knew what registry the ship had, was it German registry, or was it other than German registry?

A: Well, it had a Spanish name, the Oronoco is a river in South America. I don't know if that had anything to do with it.

Q: When did you realize that you were no longer in German control?

A: When I was on the ship. And there, life was somewhat normal. My parents and everybody got very seasick, but I didn't. So I continued eating and running around the ship.

Q: Can you describe the ship a little bit to me? Tell me how large it was, at least how large it seemed to you as a seven year old?

A: Yeah, right. It seemed like a very large ship, and we ate at a dining room table like you would, I don't know like a cruise liner, but to me it was a large ship and we had room to run around on the deck and my brother and I played on the deck. Oh well, my Aunt Ceeta, the younger of the three sisters that were coming over, because it was such a rough voyage her baby could not keep any food down and died on the ship. And I remember this, he was buried at sea, and my Aunt Ceeta never got over that. That was a trauma that stayed with her all her life.

Q: Was the child sick before the voyage?

A: No, child was alright, but he was s -- it was a boy, six weeks old, couldn't hold the food down. So became, I suppose seasick like the rest of the people and died from dehydration.

Q: Can you tell me what the cr -- the crossing was like for the adults? From your perspective, what could you see the adults going through?

A: Well, they were worried about what life would be like, they would talk about the language. My mother and my aunts started studying English, since that was our destination, in Germany. So they were studying even onboard, when they would sit out on the deck. They had their English-German dictionary and they would try to converse with each other in English. And then of course there was the problem of learning Spanish, which I don't think they studied until they got over to Cuba. So a lot of the time they were talking about how we would make a living -- how they would make a living and how they would get along with the language. That was the main topic of conversation.

Q: Besides your family [indecipherable] who were the other passengers?

A: I mentioned that there were some friends of my family that were left off in Belgium, so they were refugees like us. Seems to me that they -- it was a boatload of refugees, people who were fleeing from Europe because they knew it was bad.

Q: How long was the crossing?

A: Seems to me it was two weeks, but they had to stop the ship because of some problems, mechanical problems, so we were on the ocean for awhile. And then that was repaired, so it took about two weeks.

Q: And besides running around the deck with your brother, what did you do during those two weeks during the day?

A: I do remember now we brought some books, so I was reading and that was in German, cause I was trying to learn a little English also, but that -- I didn't learn too much there. I learned more when I came to the United States. Played with my cousins because we were all very close together. My father and my uncle were brothers and my mother and my aunt were sisters. So two mothers, two women married to two brothers -- two sisters married two brothers, so my relationship with my cousins were double, very close, almost like brothers and sister. I was the only girl, everybody else was a boy, so I had a very close relationship with Aunt Esther because she always wanted a girl.

Q: When you were on the ship, what were your expectations for when you land?

A: I was hoping I could make some friends in Cuba and learn the language. And I did, when I got to Cuba, I started learning Spanish, spoke German. I started studying English with my mother and my aunt there in Cuba. They would sit in the park while we played, and studied. And of course then I started learning English. So at that time I was trilingual. That didn't last, but at that moment in my life I spoke three languages.

Q: How long did you think, you and your family, that you would be in Cuba?

A: Oh, we just thought it would be about six months, but then it turned out that we had a longer wait and we didn't get in til a year and a half later. And we were in this country, in America, must have been at the beginning of 19 -- at least the middle of 1941, cause we moved to Miami, and then my father and my mother moved to Saint Louis for six months. They thought they could earn -- he could earn a better living up there. But that only lasted six months, then we moved back. But we have letters from my grandparents and my aunt who stayed in Poland addressed to us in 1941 in America, to -- in Saint Louis.

Q: Tell me about your arrival in Cuba. What was that like?

A: We arrived in Cuba. Battista was very good to the Jewish people. Seems like Cubans didn't have any feelings of anti-Semitism. They did put us in a camp. Not a concentration camp, but a camp to hold us until we could get settled in the country, and treated us very nicely. There was food morning, noon and night and they treated us to something that was their delicacy, but we didn't like it, was fried bananas. And we stayed there a few days and my Uncle Jassie, the one who signed the papers, he was living in Detroit, and I understand now he sent money to us every month, to mine -- all three families, so that we could survive in Cuba. The story I got from my father was that he immediately went to work, which he did, and earned money so that we could be supported. But he had help. But he did go to work, went to work on a bicycle in Cuba. Carried around the package that he was selling from door to door.

Q: What was he selling?

A: Dry goods, clothing, women's clothing, men's clothing. Anything you wanted, he would get. And I made friends with a Cuban family who lived -- we li -- got an apartment. It was around a courtyard like they have in Cuba so that the -- we were living indoor outdoors, cause of the warm weather and made friends with a mother and a daughter. The mother was lovely to me. The daughter and I became very good friends. She made clothes for me and her daughter, same kind of dresses so we looked like sisters when we went out. Very nice people, but I lost contact with them. Went to Cuba, learned Spanish. Went to school in Cuba, learned Spanish.

Q: You said that you were going to Cuba, quote unquote, on vacation --

A: Right.

Q: -- or holiday, whatever, that's what you told the German authorities. Was there any problem with your staying with respect to the Cuban government? Did they give you any -- any hassles for staying?

A: No, they seemed to know that -- what the reason was and they allowed us to stay there without any hassles. In fact, some of the people on the ship that we made friends with stayed in Cuba until Castro came in, because they began to make a good life, right there. So that we had some friends that stayed in Cuba.

Q: Tell me about starting school in Cuba and where you were in Cuba.

A: Well, it was near my apartment because I -- I could walk to school. And of course it was very strange because I wasn't speaking anything at all, I couldn't understand anything that was going on, so I kept quiet. And then, after a couple of months I was able to begin to speak a little. And the children were nice, you know, you could play on the playground without talking. And then I picked up some words, and began to have some friends with them, especially that little girl who lived near the apartment. And she was in same class I was in, so we had friends in -- I had a friend in school and I had a friend at home besides my brother and my cousins. We were always close, my brother Max, Manny and Jackie. They -- they remained in Miami, I moved up here to Baltimore.

Q: Were you near a -- a city?

A: We were in Havana.

Q: Were there any other refugees in the school with you?

A: Yes, there were three or four other children, who might have been -- I -- I think they were on the boat with us, on the ship. And they had the same problems I did trying to learn to understand what the teacher is saying because they spoke only in Spanish. And somehow we picked up the language, I think more from the children than from anything else. And then we were able to use our knowledge to get some of the work done, but never as good as the children who were born in Cuba.

Q: In what ways was your life in Cuba what you had expected it would be and what ways was it very different?

A: Well, they didn't seem to have any winter, it was warm all the time, whereas in Germany, of course, it was a different kind of climate, we were cold in the winter and hot in the summer. And so we wore less clothing and Batista, who was the dictator at the time, he was -- I think he thought of the Jews as a middle class, because he didn't give us any problems. If anything I think the Cuban government helped us get settled into the apartment. And there were some agencies that provided us with food at the beginning, until we got settled.

Q: Aside from the refugees, people who perhaps came on your ship, were there other Jews around in Cuba?

A: Yes, there were some Jews in Cuba. They were of European extraction, though. Some of them had come there earlier, 10 years earlier than we did and they had established themselves and were doing well economically, so that we did meet some of them.

Q: Was there a -- any kind of Jewish community in your -- in your area of Havana?

A: There was a Jewish community, small Jewish community, but I don't remember going to synagogue, so I don't know. We may have and we may not, I just can't remember.

Q: What Jewish traditions could you continue to observe in Cuba?

A: Oh, well my mother kept kosher, and we observed the Shabbas in -- in the apartment, in the home, so that I couldn't go out to play on sat -- I could go out to play, but I couldn't go to the movies or anything like that. So it was the food and observing the Sabbath.

Q: What about holidays?

A: We celebrated them with my family that came over. And we lived together. There were several apartments in this complex and so we all lived near each other, because I would play in

my apartment and then run over to my c -- c -- to Ceeta and Uncle Ben's apartment and to Esther and Herschel's apartment. So we were very close in that it seemed almost open air like. I think the doors were kept open most of the time.

Q: Was your mother able to get kosher meat and other foods?

A: As far as I know she was, so there must have been a kosher butcher shop.

Q: While you were in Cuba, were you aware of what was going on with the S.S. Saint Louis?

A: No, we did not know about the Saint Louis. I did not know about that until later on. Til I came to America and I -- til I got older. As far as I knew -- as far as I was concerned everybody who wanted to come could come over.

Q: So you never met anybody who had been on the Saint Louis?

A: No, I never did.

Q: We're going to pause so I can change tapes.

A: All right.

End of Tape One, Side A

Beginning Tape One, Side B

Q: -- the S.S. Saint Louis, and I wanted to continue along that line. The other refugees that you met, were they people who had just been on your ship, or did you meet anybody who had come in any other way?

A: Some of them were people we had made friends with on our ship and there was one family we met who had come there in probably 1931 or even earlier, and he had a s -- he and his family had established themselves. And their children were born in Cuba, so even though -- they were from Vienna, but he was a man who knew early on things were not good. So it must have been

like, maybe late 20's. So we were friends with them. Other than that, I can't remember who else we were friends with.

Q: So all the refugees that you knew, you knew from the ship?

A: Right, yes. That's right.

Q: Were you able to get any religious education in Cuba?

A: No. I don't know if we tried, but my mother knew it would be hard for me just to learn Spanish. And then, we were also trying to learn a little English. So she didn't put me in Hebrew school at that time.

Q: You mentioned several times that you were still getting letters from Europe. Can you be a little bit more specific and tell me what was in the letters that you were receiving while you -- if you can remember, while you were in Cuba [indecipherable] what you were hearing in those first months after [indecipherable]

A: Yes, life was very hard for my grandparents in Poland and my aunt. They were very close to each other and they took care of each other. My grandmother was always -- had always been sick and we were sending packages over to Poland and the censors would take out money and food so that finally when my grandparents got a package, it had been opened up and only small amount of what we sent was -- was there. They always talked about the fact that they weren't hearing enough from my Uncle Beryl, who was established in Detroit, that he wasn't writing enough, whereas my -- Bertha and Esther and Ceeta, my mother, my two aunts who were with us in Cuba wrote to Poland a lot and sent a lot of packages over there. And we heard from them in 1939, 1940, 1941. In 1942 they -- that stopped, we didn't hear -- of course [indecipherable] already.

Q: Were there any additional attempts to get them out of Europe?

A: My grandparents didn't want to come to America. They were afraid there would be no synagogues. They thought they were too -- they were probably my age which -- the age I am now, and yet they thought they were too old to travel across the ocean. I don't know why -- well, Aunt Ella felt a very si -- as all of the sisters did, a very strong connection to their parents and she stayed with them. So that was the reason, I think, that she didn't come, cause she was devoted to her parents.

Q: Where were you -- if you remember the details -- where were you when you realized that the war had begun and Germany had attacked Poland?

A: I -- when I was in Cuba we heard that Hitler had gone into Poland, which was a great deal of discussion in my household about what would be happening to the parents since Hitler was marching into Poland. And we were very worried for them, concerned that they would lose their lives, which eventually they did, cause we never heard from them after 1942. So we were -- a lot of talk about what -- what could we do and it -- I don't know, just seemed at that point we couldn't do anything.

Q: You heard about it in your home. Did you hear anything about the war in school?

A: No. Oh, we had a radio, so I heard a lot of things on the radio, we heard a lot of information on the radio, but I don't remember discussing it in school.

Q: Did your parents ever explain what was going on in Europe to you, or did you just hear them speaking with other adults?

A: Mostly it was what I overheard them talking about with each other.

Q: You mentioned the letters that you were getting. Other than the letters, did you have any idea what was happening to the Jews in Europe?

A: Yes, when we -- of course, Esther knew, and Bertha, my mother, that when we were in Germany, that things were happening to Jewish people, Jewish people were being arrested, we saw that. My uncle was arrested, sent to a camp, and my, of course, the teacher left. So we knew things were happening then. We didn't know the extent of it. We didn't know about the millions of people who were going to get killed. We just knew that Jews were in trouble, and so we had to get out, even though it was a terrific decision on their part to leave the country that they had known and to move halfway around the world.

Q: You also mentioned that you heard about the war on the radio. Do you happen to remember the radio reports and if they were objective, or if there was some kind of bias one way or the other?

A: I don't know, I just remember they saying that Hitler was marching into Poland and that things were terrible for the Jews and for the Polish people, because they were being, I believe, bombed by the planes. So that as far as I knew, it was an accurate account of what was happening.

Q: At any time during your stay in Cuba, did you personally experience any anti-Semitism?

A: No, I didn't. No, no anti-Semitism towards me. I don't want to jump ahead, but in Miami I did.

Q: Did anybody in Cuba ask you about your life in Germany?

A: Yes, my -- the woman and the daughter who we befriended. They wanted to know about our life in Germany and we told them we had -- had -- had to leave because of Hitler, as a result of the plans to put Jews into camps. We knew that, we just didn't know that they were going to be gassed. Like you know, you go to a camp, maybe you get out. There were people -- my uncle says that he was taken from -- well the night -- the morning of -- after Kristallnacht, he was taken

on a train, he and three others in a cattle car and they -- they were going over rivers, so they thought they were going to be dumped in the water. Then they were released on land -- not released, but taken out of the cattle car, and they were on -- on safe ground, so they were happy just to be alive. They didn't know if they would live through that experience of going -- then they were taken to a camp, and he had to stay there for awhile until my aunt -- Aunt Esther bribed the Gestapo to get him out.

Q: Do you know what camp and do you know what the bribe was?

A: The bribe was money, I don't know the camp.

Q: When you think back -- back about your time in Cuba, what are some of your happy memories?

A: Well, I remember walking by -- near Moro castle, which is near the waterfront. And there were parks there, we would go play in the park, my mother and my aunt -- aunts, both of them. The three women, who were sitting and studying English so that when they got to this country they would -- and they had studied English in Germany so they would be able to speak when they got here. And my father and my uncles, they went out to work, so we would see them in the evening. I remember being out of doors, playing around the palm trees. That was a happy time with my co -- mainly with my cousins and my brother.

Q: Is there anything else that stands out in your mind about your -- your time in Cuba?

A: No, except that we were looking forward to leaving, even though it was a pleasant time in Cuba, we really were anxious to get to America.

Q: Were you too, you also were anxious to leave?

A: Yes.

Q: And altogether, how long were you in Cuba?

A: About a year and a half.

Q: And how did you manage to leave?

A: Well, the quota for Jews coming into America, we were then included in that quota, I don't remember what the quota was. And we came to Miami and Ceeta and Uncle Ben went to Detroit. I think we landed in -- in Miami by boat and we stayed in mi -- in the Miami area, northwest section of Miami and Ceeta and Uncle Ben took a train and went to Detroit because her -- their brother was in Detroit and had established himself in business, he ran a five and 10 cent store. So that -- and that was where their uncle was, the man who had provided us with the papers to come to America. If we couldn't make a living, he was going to -- he was going to help us live.

Q: Do you remember the trip from Cuba to Miami?

A: No. For some reason I can't remember it. I just remember coming to Miami.

Q: Remember your first impressions of Miami?

A: We got a house in the northwest section of Miami and my mother and father and myself and my brother, my aunt and my uncle and my cousins lived together in a house. And they were very busy going away to work, and nobody had time to cut the grass. There was an old car in the driveway, we played cops and robbers there. And it was a Christian area and the teachers were very religious, there was a lot of Jesus and Christmas songs and there was some anti-Semitism from the children towards me. Some -- one of the boys gave me sign of the finger cause I was Jew girl. And that was in Miami. We stayed there for awhile and then moved to Miami Beach, which was filled with Jewish people so we didn't have that much anti-Semitism after I left Miami.

Q: How long were you in Miami before you went to Miami Beach?

A: Let's see. We were probably in Miami for about two years. I remember they put me back in the first grade, even though I was at this time about nine, because that was the policy, that if you didn't speak the language, they put you back. Finally my mother, who was quite retiring and shy, but she did go to school, she said, my daughter is nine years old, she really belongs in another grade. So they put me up to third grade, and then I progressed from there. Lived in Miami for two years, then I went to -- we moved to Miami Beach, lived in an apartment. We lived in an apartment there.

Q: Let's stay in Miami just a little bit. You were already in this country when a lot of things had been changed in the war.

A: Right. Well, I was here when Pearl Harbor, when they dropped -- when the Japanese dropped the bomb on Pearl Harbor, so we were glad then that Roosevelt had America go into the war with the allies. That was a big turning point for us, we felt that that was one way -- we even hoped that my grandparents and aunt would survive somehow, because now the Americans were going to help us defeat Hitler. So was a joyous occasion when we learned that America was going into the war.

Q: After Pearl Harbor, did you experience any anti-foreign sentiment, or any increase in anti-Semitic feelings?

A: Oh let's see. That would still be in Miami and it was some anti-Semitism fr -- shown from the people, but there were organizations there also because they wanted to help us. My teacher asked me to come out into the hall and she said would I would want a Thanksgiving basket. So I went home and asked my mother and my mother said no, we didn't need it, we had enough meat of our own. But they were looking to help. They knew we were refugees, obviously. So there were

people in Miami who were trying to help us. But some of the children got -- were anti-Semitic and they got that from their parents.

Q: Did any of the children ask you about your previous experiences in Cuba or Germany?

A: No, they didn't.

Q: When you were in Miami, were you and your relatives the only Jews around?

A: Yes. Somehow we got into a neighborhood that was the -- so it was just the four -- the four adults and the four children living together in the house and we were the only Jews in that area. It was northwest section of Miami which at the time was a Christian area. There were Jews living in Miami, but not the area where -- where we got the house, where we rented the house.

Q: While you're in this rental house in Miami, what Jewish traditions did you still retain?

A: We were able to keep up the tradition at home, as we had done in Cuba. We celebrated the holidays in the house. And since we had -- were fortunate enough to come out as a family -- we had the two families and always celebrated together. Mostly it was Passover. Hanukah was not such a big deal as it is now. I don't remember going to synagogue in Miami. Probably didn't start that til Miami Beach, which was a few years later.

Q: Were there any specific problems other than the ones that you mentioned, you know, learning the language and you know, being put back in school? Did you have any other problems adjusting to life in the United States?

A: Well, I felt strange, different, because I was -- wasn't speaking English the way the other boys and girls were speaking, so I tended to keep quiet until I was talked to, and then I would answer haltingly, because at that time I really wasn't conversant in English, I was just learning a few words and phrases. So I felt s -- like a stranger in the Miami area. And that took probably the whole two years I was there.

Q: And how were the adults progressing with respect to making a living and getting used to the culture and language?

A: Interestingly enough my father and uncle went out and went to the wholesale houses, got some dry goods and started selling it from house to house. They even had opened up a store in -- not too far from the house. But that didn't work out, they couldn't make enough money on the store so they closed that. But they continued making a living going from house to house. And as I said my Granduncle Jassie had sent money in Cuba so that our income at that time was supplemented by him. … We didn't suffer too much in Miami, I mean the -- we were able to -- to live from day to day until things got a little easier.

Q: Tell me about the move from mia -- Miami to Miami Beach and how that affected your life.

A: Well we moved from the house to -- my father and my uncle didn't get along too well living together. They had some pretty bad fights living close quarters like that with the family. Then we moved to Miami Beach and we each lived in separate apartments in separate apartment houses and that worked out. And there again my father and my uncle did the same thing, they went out to -- well, they had connections already in the wholesale houses, bought -- then they bought a car, each of them had a car so they could drive around the greater Miami area, cause they went back to business in Miami, just a ride across the causeway. And I started going to school in South Beach elementary school and things got easier for me because I had learned the language. There was no anti-Semitism in Miami Beach because a lot of the people were Jewish. And there we did join a synagogue, Beth Jacob synagogue and I went to Hebrew school. And there we were able to live the Orthodox life that we had in Marktberg, Germany. Going to synagogue on Saturday and my brother even led the children's service. He had learned the Hebrew well enough that he could do that. And we made friends in school, and the school was close -- the South

Beach elementary school, the school was close enough to the apartment, we would just walk back and forth and see our friends in school and then play with them after school.

Q: With the move, and now living in a community where there were more Jews, did any of these children ask you about your experiences in Germany or in Cuba?

A: No, the children didn't. The teachers did. They were interested in what I had experienced. And so I would tell them about it, but the children weren't interested in my background. And at that time I was able to communicate with them so that I wasn't -- I must have still spoken with an accent, but it didn't seem to affect the relationship I had with them, we were just friends. And they accepted me as I was. And then we were all Jewish, so that helped.

Q: What did the teachers ask you, and what did you answer them?

A: Why -- well, they knew why I left Germany, how it was over in Germany, and I told them about Kristallnacht and having to leave Germany, having to leave my grandparents and they were very interested in that part of my life. Later on [indecipherable] when I was in eighth grade I helped my parents -- I knew the language by then so well that I helped my parents study for the citizenship, and -- I went over the questions with them, which was hard for my father. My mother could do it. Questions, you know, about American history. But then, of course, I was learning -- at that point I was learning about American history, and one of the teachers even asked me to write a report on my experiences. So I did, and I read it to the class, and then on the intercom. An-And that way the children knew, because they wanted them to know what was going on over in Europe. But the children themselves weren't that concerned about it. They were interested in surviving themselves.

Q: After you read your paper, did -- nobody asked you anything? None of the other children?

A: Yes, of course, after I read the paper on the intercom people came up to me and said, how long have you been here and what was it like. So then they did show interest. But the first step was the teacher asking me to write about it, to talk about it.

Q: At the time you were writing and reading your work, what was going on in the world at that point in time?

A: Let's see [indecipherable] the year. I think by then the war had ended, so that I was reliving some of the history that people had gone through that these children and -- and these teachers didn't have -- really weren't involved in very much. I mean, luckily they were able to go on with their own life. Course there were young men who were dying over there, but most of the people just went on with their life in -- in Miami Beach. There was no big concern except war bonds and some rationing, things like that were going on. And in Miami Beach the soldiers were being trained for the American army, so we would hear them marching through the streets of Miami Beach. That was during the war. So I must have written the composition towards the end of the war, 1945. And we did invite soldiers over to have Passover with us. So we were able to do that, to share whatever we -- my father made, with other people.

Q: During the war years, how closely did you follow the news of what was happening in Europe?

A: Again, it was through the radio. We would sit -- all of us would sit around the radio and listen, especially when President Roosevelt talked, so that we could hear his fireside chats, and he would tell us about what was happening in the war. And the radio -- and the news, we would listen to the news, we were very much concerned about what was happening in Europe, how Hitler was going through the European countries. We were very upset and concerned about that. All through the ray -- mostly through the radio, I don't even remember the newspaper so much, just listening to the radio. That was our connection with the world.

Q: Did you ever hear any anti-Semitic statements on the radio?

A: No, I did not.

Q: After you moved to Miami, did you have any contact with any other refugees in Miami or Miami Beach?

A: I -- no. There were -- no, the friend al -- I don't know if we made any friends in Miami those two years. It was all business and going to school. In Miami Beach then we made friends with people who had lived in Miami Beach. They were not refugees, they were Americans, people who come -- lived in America.

Q: Was there anything about the way the Americans were responding to the war that surprised you?

A: It was surprising that people here could go on so easily with their life when there was so much destruction going on over there, going on with their lives here. But then in a way so did we. We were lucky and we started living. The only connection we had was the letters to Poland and back. That's what made us aware of how terrible things had progressed.

Q: Do you remember any of the details of those letters?

A: They were always happy to hear that we were doing well in America. Didn't hear much from Uncle Beryl and der -- my mother's brother was Jassie, Uncle Jassie, didn't hear much from him. They -- we wrote that things were hard here to get started. They wrote back that everybody in America from Europe gets started as a shoeshine boy but then works themselves up into big business, so that it would -- since we had to travel halfway around the world they said that we could -- that they figured we would do alright and we're just lucky to be here. And they were getting along okay, day to day. Not enough food. If somebody left a little bit of food over they told them, of course, as we did over here, eat it up because -- well there you didn't know if you

were going to get any more food because things were being -- w-were really tough in Poland. So they wrote about their hardships and they were always happy to hear from us, about the progress we were making.

Q: Did you get the sense from those letters that they were holding back and not telling you everything?

A: Yes. Because they were kind of -- somewhat happy that w -- they were getting along day to day, and I suppose not to worry us, not to worry my mother and my aunts.

Q: What else stands out in your mind about those years when you were in the United States and the United States was at war with Germany?

A: We were so worried about what was happening to the people in Poland. We never really knew after 1942, so that was a constant worry about what was happening to the parents, what was happening to my aunt. And that was a lot of the things that we were talking about around the table, concern for the relatives who had -- couldn't get out, or had decided not to get out and then at this point couldn't get out.

Q: Where were you when you found out the war was over?

A: I was in Miami Beach and just [indecipherable]. And at that point then we started contacting the Red Cross, but they never could find out what happened to my parents -- my grandparents.

Q: Were you at home when you heard about the end of the war, or were you at school?

A: I believe I was at home. We were jumping for joy. I remember hopping up and down, saying it's ov -- finally over. And my mother and -- my father wasn't home -- my mother and my brother and I were hugging and kissing and happy that it was finally over, hopefully that we could be -- find some of those relatives who had left but who had not left with us, but we could never do that.

Q: When did you begin to realize the full extent of the genocide?

A: It was after the war that we started realizing that so many people had died in the ovens that we were just astounded. I mean, we thought perhaps they'd be arrested and kept for a few years, but never that they -- anybody was put into the ovens and killed like that. So it was about 1946 - 1947 that we began to realize the extent of what had been happening over there and how fortunate we had been to get away.

Q: And how did you learn about all the -- the deaths over in Europe?

A: When we contacted the American Red Cross and as far as I know they never could trace what happened to my family, so we just assumed that they died. We don't know exactly how.

Q: Do you remember how the American media reported the news of the genocide?

A: They -- they talked on the radio about Jews having been killed. I don't remember that I -- I knew any numbers, like what you heard later on about six million Jews. I just knew that a lot of Jews were being killed.

Q: We're going to pause so I can change tape.

End of Tape One, Side B

Beginning Tape Two, Side A

Q: This is a continuation of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum volunteer collection interview with Ruth Alper. This is tape two, side A. And we were talking about how you came to realize the full extent of the genocide, and I'd like to continue with that. I had asked you how the news was being relayed to the American population. I'd like you to continue to speak about that.

A: All right, we heard a lot of it on the radio and we did go to the movies and we would see the newsreels and see what had happened and it was horrifying to see the actual pictures of the cons -- concentration camp people who had been just down to a shell of a person. So that at that point after the war, we realized more how horrible and how horrific the whole thing had become. And we never did find out what happened to my grandparents and my Aunt Ella.

Q: How did the American population sitting next to you watching the newsreel, how did they react to this news?

A: They were also horrified when they saw what had happened. They were just -- it was unbelievable, the slaughter and the inhumanity that had occurred. So a lot of the people that we were friends with -- and they were Jewish, but they had been American Jews so they didn't have to go through what we went through, but they just thought it was the worst thing that they had ever seen in their whole life and they'll probably never see anything so horrendous again.

Q: Did you ever get a sense from the non-Jewish American population how they were reacting to this?

A: They were -- they were also horrified, but it hadn't affected them as badly because many of our Jewish friends had family who had gone through some of these times, so they were more inclined to feel the horror that had occurred, whereas some of our American friend who were not Jewish heard about it, but it wasn't as hurtful as it was to us.

Q: Did any of your loved ones or former neighbors or friends, any of them survive?

A: Well, the friends that we saw in Belgium, who left the Oronoco in Belgium, we never heard from them again, so as far as we know they were sent back to Germany and died there. I don't know of any survivors after that.

Q: Did you follow the Nuremberg trials?

A: Yes, I felt that it was important for those Nazis who had incurred this wrath on us that they should be punished for what they had done. So that I felt the Nuremberg trials were justified and I felt that they were something that brought it home more to Americans than we had known before.

Q: Did you feel there was justice at Nuremberg?

A: Yes, I did.

Q: Did you follow the debate on the partition of Palestine?

A: Yes. We were very anxious that those Jewish people who were trying to get into Palestine were having problems on the ships, so that we could identify with that because we had been on a ship also. Luckily we were able to get off the ship, but we were really concerned that those people who were leaving a Holocaust area would again meet such determination not to be able to come into a country where they might be able to have some freedom of expression and perhaps no anti-Semitism because it was ga -- we were hoping that it would become a Jewish state.

Q: Have you ever considered moving, you or your parents, your family, ever considered moving to Palestine?

A: No, and we had my Uncle Ben's family, who had go -- his brother had gone to Palestine early on, before Ben. Ben said he never considered going there because he had a -- he was a tailor and he was working in Germany, he didn't see any reason to get out. That was in the early 1930's,

then later on when we all left, well that was -- he was imprisoned. There went the -- his income and whatever there ha -- whatever reason he had for staying in Germany was absolutely gone.

Q: Do you remember the Eichmann trial?

A: Yes, I do. And I felt the Israelis were right to convict Eichmann of these terrible crimes that had been committed against humanity. I felt that he had gotten what he deserved, even though they were all saying they were just following orders, there is a time when people have to consider that they are murdering women and children and men who had no other reason for being killed except for the fact that they were Jewish.

Q: Can you recall the reaction of some of the Americans around you to some of these events like the Nuremberg trials and [indecipherable] and then even the nur -- the Eichmann trial [indecipherable] in American media. If you -- if you could kind of tell me how it was presented and how it was received by the American public?

A: Well, the people that I knew felt that these trials were justified because they had also heard about the horrors that had gone on so that they felt that these trials were necessary, that the state Israel was necessary and they even felt that if it hadn't been for the Holocaust there might not have been a state of Israel. But people were feeling so guilty about what had happened that it was time that the Jews were able to develop a homeland of their own so that if God forbid this ever happened again, perhaps then people would go to Israel to be somewhat safe. And the people that I knew felt that the Germans needed to be executed themselves as a result of what they had done during the war.

Q: The Eichmann trial came in the early 60's. Was there any sense that you could detect from Americans that perhaps the war is over [indecipherable]

A: I detected that with some of the -- th-they're trying to get some Nazis who are living in Argentina and in South America. So I have ha -- I got that sense from some of the Americans that I knew that it was old history, these are old men, they shouldn't be bothered any more. But we felt that it had to be because they had lived through that time and they knew exactly what was going on. They all knew.

Q: Tell me about the education that you were ultimately able to get in the United States.

A: Well, I went to South Beach elementary school. Then Ivan Fisher Junior High and then my senior high school. Then I went to University of Miami where I met my husband, who was born in Manhattan, New York. And I got my Bachelor's degree there. And we got married, lived in Miami for awhile, then my husband got a job in Towson, Maryland and taught at Towson University, which is a suburb of Baltimore, and I moved with him. I had taught in Miami, I taught elementary school in Miami. I took off for about seven years to raise my children til they went to second and third grade and then I went back to school, taught school in Baltimore, got a Master's and credits beyond that.

Q: Where did you get your Master's degree?

A: Towson University.

Q: And how many children do you have?

A: I have two children, a boy and a girl. They're both married and they have two children, boy and a girl.

Q: What did you tell your children about your childhood?

A: I told them that I had been in Germany, and my trip to Cuba. The one who is very interested in this now is Rebecca, the 11 year old granddaughter, who goes to Hebrew school in Potomac, Maryland and they're doing a good job there about educating the children on the Holocaust. So

she -- and she interviewed me just two days ago, also had a list of questions for me. And then I gave her one of the sterling silver pieces of sterling that my mother had brought over so she could bring it to Hebrew school and share with the class.

Q: In what ways do you think your experiences in your childhood have affected the way that you raised your own children?

A: I wa -- well, on a personal point of view, my mother was ahead of her time in that she knew psychology before psychology was in -- she felt that positive reinforcement was very important in bringing up children. So my brother and I both feel confident about ourselves, and I tried to do that for my children. So that's a personal point of view, that I brought them up in a positive way. They did know my history as they were growing up, I never hid that. I did feel that I didn't suffer as much as my mother and my aunts, but I told them about what ha -- about my background.

Q: Do you speak publicly about your experiences?

A: No, I have not done that.

Q: Have you ever been interviewed before?

A: No, I haven't.

Q: Why are you willing to do an interview now?

A: I was persuaded by Amy Rubin at the Holocaust Museum. I explained to her that I didn't feel that I had suffered like other people. I wasn't sure that my story was as important, and Amy Rubin said that that was -- it was a legitimate reason for being interviewed.

Q: Do you belong to any survivor groups?

A: No.

Q: Have you ever returned to Germany?

A: I did return to Germany, but I didn't go back to Marktberg. I went on a trip to s -- to hear opera and to see some of the other coun -- parts of the country. I did feel uncomfortable with people my age because I always wondered, what were you doing during the war, you know? Who was putting us to the prisons and the camps and all that horror.

Q: How did the Germans react to you?

A: I -- I didn't tell them about my past, so as far as they were concerned, I was just a tourist.

Q: What have we not discussed in this interview that you would still like to -- to talk about with respect to your experiences as a result of the war?

A: Well, the important thing was the trip over from Germany to Cuba, the fact that Aunt Ceeta lost her baby, never told her boys who were born in America that they had a brother. The fact that my mother never got over the fact that she had to say goodbye to her mother and father on the dock at Hamburg. She always had that in the back of her mind and as a result of that, she had some mental problems. Esther did not, her sister. I think it was as a result of that but maybe she would have had it anyway, but it -- you know, she was just devastated and felt guilty that she left, went on with her life and left her mother and father to die in Poland. And then my Aunt Ceeta we -- on her tape she said that she couldn't talk about it either, going over it, so she said, and we said -- and we parted, is what she said. So the loss of my grandparents and my aunt and uncle are the things that I feel the most.

Q: Is there anything about you and your experience that your family and friends don't know that you would perhaps like them to know?

A: We, over the years have made many friends with people who are not Jewish, especially the professors at Towson University. There were only a few Jewish. So once I -- we became friends on an intellectual and a social basis, I would bring up the fact, number one, that I was Jewish, so

that they could see that Jewish people are people of quality also, and then I would tell -- oh, I remember sitting -- I wou -- when I taught school at Franklin elementary school, which was in northern Baltimore county, sitting around the table and talking about my Aunt Ceeta losing the baby. And these were people who did not know too many Jewish people, there was an area at that time who didn't have Jewish people there. And everybody around the faculty table just stopped and listened. And I felt I wanted them to know that was me, so they could have a little understanding of what some people had gone through.

Q: Is there anything else you'd like to add before we conclude?

A: Well now that we've done the interview I'm glad I was interviewed and I hope this helps to keep the history of the Holocaust alive so that it will never happen again.

Q: Well, thank you for doing the interview today, and this concludes the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Ruth Alper. Thank you.

End of Tape Two, Side A

Conclusion of Interview