US Holocaust Memorial Museum
Volunteer Collection Interview

Rita Lifschitz Rubinstein
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Interviewer - Gail Schwartz

Tape 1 of 3, Side A - Rita Lifschitz Rubinstein was born Freyda Rivka Lipschitz on December 12, 1936 in Washkowitz, Romania. Her father Avrom Dovid Lifschitz owned a textile business. His two older sisters had immigrated to the United States after WW I. Her mother, Taybel Schaindel Meerbaum, came from a pious family. Taybel's father had a dry goods store and an apple orchard. Avrom's factory made peasant skirts and shawls on textile machines. He was very observant, was a prayer leader and a member of the burial society. He was drafted into the Russian army. In September 1941, the Jews were told they would be evacuated in 48 hours and to take what they could carry. Soldiers came to the house, and Rita and her cousin hid under a bed. Her mother begged the soldiers, but she and the children were forced to leave. Taybel took Avroms's suits and tallit, down pillows and quilts. They walked to the gathering place at the train station. Her uncle bribed a Romanian soldier, so the family could go to a labor camp. The train crossed the Dniester River and many children drowned because the soldiers threw them overboard since they couldn't be workers. Her mother begged a soldier not to do so, and he reassured her, saying he had a child Rita's age. They went to Shargarod in Transnistria, where the family of Yoshke Nusan Breitbard took them into their one bedroom house. Rita was with her mother, her grandmother, her father's sister and husband, and her grandmother's sister. Her mother didn't work because of Rita. Others worked in the tobacco fields. Two women from their hometown gave her mother work and paid her with a potato. Rita saw death and experienced hunger. After one year her uncle went to another camp. Her aunt asked her cousin to steal so they could have bread but the cousin wouldn't. Rita's grandmother died from stomach cancer in the house and she was buried in a shroud with soil from Israel. Rita watched the Tahara ritual done in the house. She remembers having a rag doll made out of straw and keeping clean by washing clothes in a river one and a half miles away. At one time, Rita fell in and her mother threw a sheet in the water for Rita to grab onto.

Tape 1of 3, Side B - Rita did not speak for three days after almost drowning, and a woman was brought in who broke an egg on Rita's forehead. She played with other children, using rocks as toys. She learned a little Hebrew in a class. She was always hungry and cold, and saw starvation and death and people begging all around her. She heard bombing and saw dogs chasing people. The night before liberation by the Russians in April 1944 they went in to a sub-basement of their landlord's. The Russians came and to her being liberated meant going back home and seeing her father, grandparents, aunt and uncle. They took the train to Washkowitz, went back to their house which had been used as a silo. Her mother asked to go into the attic to get family photographs. Rita lived in a room of her great-grandparents' house. Her uncle, Mendel Maklovich, asked a Polish friend, Mr. Schlitz, to make false papers. He did and made Rita two years younger as he said she was his daughter. Rita's mother and aunt found out the fate of their parents. The Ukrainians had come and taken Rita's father's clothes and furnishings. Her grandfather was butchered with farm implements. She found out that her father died on the 7th of Av and her grandfather on the 10th of Tammuz. Rita went to school, where she learned Russian and Ukrainian, recited poetry and had to kiss Stalin's picture. Then she left with her mother, her uncle and cousins on a three month journey to Munich, Germany. They hopped on coal cars of trains at night. They posed as Greeks and were searched by soldiers.

Tape 2 of 3, Side A - When they were in Shargorod, her aunt received bread for the family from Lutzi and Lydia, non-Jews, in exchange for dressmaking and tailoring. When they returned to Washkowitz, her aunt was hired for work which helped her get food for the family as they had no money after the war. On the way to Munich, they passed through Lodz, Poland and Czechoslovakia on a journey organized by Israelis. After constantly moving, they finally arrived at a DP camp, Feldafing, where they lived in barracks run by HIAS. She knew she would be going to the US or Israel. She went to a formal Jewish school and

studied Hebrew and history with wonderful teachers. Her mother married a survivor who had lost his family. Rita remembers the day Israel became a state in 1948. When she was ten years old a medical exam in 1947 showed she had TB in her lungs. She was sent to a sanitarium in Augsberg and left there by her mother. She was put in quarantine for nine months. Her mother wrote to their American family to send streptomycin. Rita had surgery to collapse her lung, but wrote calming letters to her mother. After three months her mother brought the streptomycin to the sanitarium. When Rita came back to the DP camp she found that her aunt and uncle and cousins had left for Israel. She took part in performances, sung in Yiddish and Hebrew and danced with one hundered other children, learned Polish from other "hidden children". They went on trips with teachers and madrichim from Israel where they picked berries and mushrooms in nearby woods. Even though the Americans were friendly and gave her chocolate, she continued to want to go to her "own" country, Israel. While in the DP camp the children spoke with each other about their war experience. There were weddings and she remembers it as a happy time. There was a bond between the young people as they had lost their grandparents and their childhood. She is still close to Ada Rosenberg who had hid in Russia and whose father was a journalist and to Rutka Kron who now lives in British Columbia.

Tape 2 of 3, Side B - Her mother lost some of her religious belief after the war. She couldn't understand how gentiles could do to Jews what they did. In September 1949, Rita and her family sailed on the 'General Hahn', an Army transport boat to the United States. She was sick on the entire voyage, When they landed in New York City and she saw the Statue of Liberty Rita felt so welcome. Her mother and father's relatives met them at the boat. They first stayed with her mother's sister in Brooklyn and after three months they got an apartment in Bensonhurst, NY. Her IQ test score improved after she learned English. Rita's step-father, Leo Neufeld, had lost his wife and son. He had been a businessman in Germany, but became a house painter in the US. Rita worked from age fifteen, then went to night school, student taught, and married in 1959. Only in college did friends ask about her childhood. Her husband, Nathan Rubinstein, was born in Poland near Warsaw. He, his parents and brother were in hiding in Russia. They came to New York in 1949. He was drafted into the army, later went to college under the GI Bill, and then worked in the Johns Hopkins Applied Physics Laboratory. Rita always felt a void not having a father and being deprived of a childhood, but she is not angry. She doesn't want her three children and grandchildren to have to go through war. She has a special bond with survivors but puts her experience in the past and is not bitter. She is thankful for what she does have. She tries hard to bond with her grandchildren because she didn't have any grandparents.

Tape 3 of 3, Side A - Her three daughters work as an industrial psychologist, a lawyer, and a nurse. She has eight grandchildren. Rita felt she belonged when she became an American citizen. She is glad she married a survivor because there is a special bond of understanding between them. She was a Yiddish music and Hebrew teacher at a Jewish school, and then became the principal. She is a Bar/Bat Mitzvah tutor and chants the Torah and Haftorah in memory of her parents. Her survivor friends are like family. At times during the Eichmann trial she felt guilty because she did not go through what others did. She has no desire to go back to Romania. She is proud to be an American, but is a Jew first. It is important to keep the memory of the Holocaust alive, to say to deniers it did happen. She hopes her children are proud of their heritage, will fight for the underdog, and always speak up. At the ceremony in the rotunda of the US Capitol it is overwhelming to see the flags of the liberators as it brings back memories and makes her think of why she survived. It feels good to her to see people of all walks of life at the US Holocaust Memorial Museum as there are important lessons to be learned. She is glad it is offered as a curriculum. She started a singing group and they perform Yiddish and Hebrew songs at nursing homes and at the Israeli Embassy.