

# **United States Holocaust Memorial Museum**

**Interview with Sylvia Zelig  
April 21, 2015  
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## PREFACE

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## **SYLVIA ZELIG**

### **April 21, 2015**

Julie Kopel: My name is Julie Kopel and I am interviewing Sylvia Zelig. The date is April 21<sup>st</sup>, 2015 and the interview is being conducted for the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. We are in Cedarhurst, New York. Hi, Sylvia, how are you today?

Sylvia Zelig: Fine, thank you

Q: Thank you so much for agreeing to conduct the interview today. I'm going to start off with some basic family and prewar and childhood questions. Can you please tell me your name at birth and please spell it for me.

A: Sylvia Zelig. No it was, Sylvia Sternbaum. S-T-E-R-N-B-A-U-M.

Q: And Zelig is your married name?

A: My name is Zelig, Z-E-L-I-G.

Q: Where were you born?

A: I was born in **Chernivtsi**, Romania.

Q: And what was the date of your birth?

A: January 28<sup>th</sup>, 1932.

Q: Can you please tell me a little bit about your family?

A: We had a very nice family. We were very close. It was always, was in walking from my house to my grandparents only a few houses away. And everything was right there. It was called

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**Synagogy strasse.** And it was like the Jewish, everything was Jewish there. And I remember all the stores, everything. Everything. I keep comparing still today. When I have like Saturday afternoon, I sit by my living room table and I'll think of home. My best thing was thinking of home, how it was. I tried to go the streets were I went to school, when I went to my grandparents, the synagogue, everywhere. And that's my fun today.

Q: Can you tell me about your parents and whether you had any siblings?

A: I have one sister. She's four years younger than me. And she lives in Florida.

Q: Did you have any siblings before the war? Additional siblings?

A: No. Just one.

Q: Where were your parents from? And what were their names?

A: My parents were from Chernivtsi. My mother's name was Regina **Haflet**. And my grandfather was Marcus Haflet.

Q: Your father?

A: No, my grandfather.

Q: Your grandfather. And can you tell me about your parents' roles in the household. Like what were their occupations?

A: My father was a butcher, had a butcher store. And my mother, her name was Regina and she was always helping him.

Q: What was the religious life like in your family?

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A: My father wasn't very religious. He lost his father when he was six years old so he wasn't -- he didn't know much of religion. He had to start working already to help his mother.

Q: And what about your mother?

A: My mother, they were religious. They only lived a few, it's maybe three blocks away from us. So I was always there.

Q: You're talking about your grandmother?

A: My grandparents from my mother's side.

Q: But you lived with your mother and your father in their home.

A: Yes.

Q: Was your mother a more religious person than your father? What kind of religious rituals if any did you practice in your home?

A: Not much.

Q: Not much, ok.

A: Friday night the Sabbath and the holidays.

Q: And the holidays. So you went to synagogue in the town?

A: Yeah. The synagogue was only maybe three blocks away from us, a beautiful big synagogue.

Q: Do you know anything about your family's political affiliations?

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A: No.

Q: Any organizations that you can think of that they were involved with?

A: They weren't.

Q: You had mentioned that your grandparents were also living in Chernivtsi. Were there any other members of your extended family who were living there as well?

A: Yeah, a few blocks away my father's mother lived. And every time I came to her house we came the -- a few cousins.

Q: So there were aunts and uncles also?

A: Yeah.

Q: Living in Chernivtsi?

A: There was one aunt. My mother's sister. She went with us to camp together.

Q: Tell me a little bit more about anything you remember about your childhood before the war. Just some examples. Like what was your daily life like? Did you go to school?

A: Yes. I went to school and 1940 when the Russians came in I was eight years old and I went to Russian school for a year.

Q: So before the Russians came you went to a Jewish school?

A: No. Romanian.

Q: Romanian, secular school.

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A: Yeah.

Q: So you went to school with Jews and non-Jews.

A: Yeah.

Q: What language did you speak at home?

A: At home we spoke German cause it used to be Austria in 1914 was Austria. There, then the Romanians took it over. So my mother went to school it was German school. So we spoke German at home and Jewish.

Q: Yiddish.

A: Yeah.

Q: What about at school?

A: Romanian.

Q: So you knew three languages at the time.

A: I also had a rabbi who came to teach me Yiddish at home.

Q: Yiddish or Hebrew?

A: Yeah, both.

Q: Both, ok. Describe a typical day for me, from waking up. Then what did you do?

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A: I went to school and then I came home. I came home and I was with my sister. My mother wasn't home. She was with my father in the butcher store.

Q: Did your sister go to school with you?

A: She did go, don't think I remember. She was still young.

Q: She was how many years younger than you?

A: Four.

Q: Ok and do you remember any friends or any hobbies that you liked to do?

A: Yeah I had a lot of friends there and, but I had to take care of my sister. I took her and we went to the tramway, the trolley car. I had one aunt lived on the beginning of Chernivtsi and I had another aunt from another uncle who lived the end of Chernivtsi so I used to take the trolley car and used to go and then –

Q: Back and forth, right.

A: They had a little farm so we liked it and then we went to the other end, out of town and it was very nice.

Q: Do you remember what your home looked like?

A: Was very nice. Right before the end of the war, my father bought a beautiful new bedroom set. I remember it was 36,000 **Leu**. That was a fortune. It was beautiful.

Q: This was before the war started?

A: Yeah.

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Q: Do you remember any sort of anti-Semitism before the war?

A: No. Not really.

Q: So the Jews and the non-Jews got along well in the town.

A: There weren't too many non-Jews on our street. The only one was like the maintenance for the buildings. There were a few buildings together. One near the other and we were here. And I didn't have any gentile -- only in school.

Q: So you had Romanian friends in school that you got along with.

A: Oh yeah.

Q: Did your parents have anything to do with their parents?

A: No.

Q: How did you become aware of any sort of German presence?

A: The German, first we had the Russians. That was 1940. Before they came in was bombings. They used to come and bomb even in the day time. And we used to sit, all the close relatives and the friends we used to sit in one room and watch and pray that the bomb doesn't fall there.

Q: Did you know anything about the war before 1940?

A: No. No.

Q: You don't remember your parents talking about what may happen.

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A: Nobody knew anything and the Russians were there for the — everything was, you know the Russians, for everything you had to have a card. You know to stay in line you could get it, whatever you needed, even bread. So a year went by and the Russians went away. They said they'll be back yet.

Q: Take me back a little bit. Do you remember when exactly the Russians came into your town. What time of year was it in 1940?

A: I think it was like in spring.

Q: So they stayed for, from the spring of 1940 to the —

A: But they took away the men. They took them in the army. They claimed them.

Q: The men in your town.

A: Yeah, not including my father. And my father said I will run away. I will be back in two weeks. He said. Of course we believed him. And they went away, the Russians so what happened when the Russians. One morning we woke up. A neighbor knocked on our door. And yelled Regina, Regina. The town is burning. And it was dawn and we went out in the yard and we looked around and all we saw was fires. The Russians threw in grenades and the old places, like government places, banks. All the things that they wanted to destroy, they did. So the neighbor, was yelling and he said to my mother Regina. We are leaving. We are going. We are not staying here. We're going with the Russians. My mother said I'm not going anywhere. My husband said he's coming home in two weeks. And she said I'm not going anywhere.

Q: So there are people who left your town to go with the Russians.

A: Yeah, including my uncle and 19 year old uncle and his girlfriend they ran with the Russians too.

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Q: And any other members of your family also? Any of those cousins or aunts or grandparents that we spoke about?

A: No. so this neighbor said Regina we are going. Samuel told me to take care of you so she said but he also told me he will be back in two weeks. So I'm not going. The two of them, he and his wife went. They were married for many years. She couldn't have any children. That time she was pregnant high. And they started to go through the water in Poland, from Chernivtsi and Poland with the Russians. The Germans came and they shot her in the stomach. She fell in the water dead. So he pretended he was dead too and he fell next to her and after that when they left he got out so he went with them and he didn't go.

Q: This was your uncle.

A: No, a neighbor, just a neighbor.

Q: So you stayed behind with your mother and your sister, waiting for your father to return.

A: And he did. After three weeks, he came back home. But in the meantime the Romanians and the Germans came back.

Q: This was when. Do you remember?

A: It was still in the spring.

Q: Of 41?

A: One.

Q: This was after the Russians had stayed for a year. Now the Germans were coming in, in 41?

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A: And the Romanians came back. And if you think the war was bad, what they did to us. They came in and they took the men to work, told them to work. So they – that was like four or five days after they were in. They yelled at, all the houses everywhere men come out to work.

Whoever is not going to come, whoever is going to hide we're going to kill the whole family.

Q: Let me ask you something. Can we go back for one minute. You had said that some of the men in the town had gone to go train with the Russian army?

A: Yeah.

Q: Had those men returned to their families already?

A: No.

Q: So they were with the Russians.

A: They had gone with the Russians.

Q: So some families were still present in Chernivtsi without their fathers?

A: yeah.

Q: Ok. When you say that the Germans and the Romanians wanted to pull the men to come work, those were the ones who had not gone with the Russians.

A: Yeah. So they called out and if they're not coming to work, if they are hiding they'll kill the family. I had a beautiful cousin. I had a lot of them, but this one in particular, he was like a Schwarzenegger. Gorgeous like 19 year old and he was hiding in the attic and his mother was afraid for her life so she told him to come down and go. And that . . . And my father and the men from our buildings there didn't go because my mother, the lunch wasn't ready so they were waiting for my father to go together. After he ate they walked up two blocks and some soldiers

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came and they said we have enough men already. Go back home. They were lucky. They were only two blocks away from home. So they were in anyway. So all the other men, they took out of town. At the end of town they put them in the line around and made a big line all around. They made a big hole. They dig their own holes and then they shot every penny they took out. They put them like a lawyer, a doctor, a somebody young and good looking. And they took them out. They put them as the ten and they shot them straight into there.

Q: To the hole that they had dug.

A: Until they were left only there was a few. Then they said you can go home. So on the way they were shot. They were soldiers with guns and they shot them. I had a few cousins shot on the way home. Two brothers, cousins. One was a teenager yet. And one was married. And it was very sad.

Q: That was that first day that they called them to work. The men.

A: Yeah. So they made it. Then after a few days they made a ghetto.

Q: Let me go back for a minute. When the Germans and Romanians first came, what kind of special restrictions did they put on you? Were you forced to wear a yellow star? Were you prohibited from going certain places? Did they take away property? Anything like that happen?

A: They made the ghetto after a few days, they made a ghetto and we were lucky. It was on our street. So we had some families staying and they lived with us.

Q: So you were able to stay in your home?

A: Yes. Yeah. And we only had one bedroom. A big bedroom and a kitchen. And that was it. So we put some in some of the relatives and my grandparents, they lived there. They had a big house. And they took in a lot of -- they had a three floor big house and downstairs stores, that belonged to them. And they had three small houses. One was a smoking house. They smoked

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meat. Cause my grandfather was a butcher too. And one house they made like pickles and apples and pickled sauerkraut. Made all pickled stuff. For the year. You know they cooked that. We were sitting home.

Q: So these places were all within the ghetto.

A: Yeah, and we were allowed to go out only two hours a day with the yellow star of David. From ten to twelve.

Q: You were allowed to leave the ghetto.

A: To go out, yeah.

Q: Tell me more about what happened in the ghetto. So –

A: Well we didn't have much. Nobody had anything. But my father had a lot of good friends, gentiles, who he was dealing with buying cows, buying and selling and he used to sleep in their houses. They were good friends. So they came and they brought us whatever you want.

Q: Your family's non-Jewish friends?

A: Yeah.

Q: So they came inside the ghetto?

A: Oh yeah.

Q: And brought you things?

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A: They brought a lot. So they brought us bean sacks, full big sacks, you know how they were there, big sacks, barley, beans, cornmeal, whatever you want, potatoes. And we were standing in front of our house and we were giving out to neighbors. They were – what did they need our

Q: And the Germans didn't care that this was going on?

A: No.

Q: You said you took in other families to live with you in the ghetto.

A: Yeah.

Q: So it was cramped. But you had a lot of food because of your friends.

A: Yeah and we used to see people going to the trains every day to go to the camp. They were taken from the ghetto and they told them well tomorrow you're going. Take whatever you can carry. And you know like Fiddler on the Roof. That's how they were carrying to the train. They didn't let you in all, to take all of that. So you had to leave it, right there by the train stop.

Q: How did they notify people that they had to get ready for deportation?

A: The soldiers came and told you the night before. You're leaving tomorrow.

Q: They would knock on your door, one by one.

A: Yeah.

Q: Did they come to your home?

A: We didn't go for a while. We were 11 months in this ghetto, home. We couldn't go til November.

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Q: So you knew other people who were being called.

A: We saw it every day.

Q: I see. And where did you think they were going?

A: They told them they were going to work. They told everybody they were going to work.

Q: Did people believe them?

A: (pause) I don't think so.

Q: But they still went because they didn't really have a choice.

A: They had no choice.

Q: Were they taking full families together or were they calling the men or other people?

A: No. Families.

Q: So it was by households.

A: Yeah. Whoever was in that house. Time to go. They went.

Q: Do you remember anything else about the ghetto that you want to share?

A: They made, they brought boilers, big boilers and they made us throw in our clothes. They made a lot of things uncomfortable. First of all we couldn't go out, only twice a day. And one night, we were in bed already. Somebody knocked on the door. It was a Romanian policeman

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and a German. The Romanian came on a motorcycle and took my father out, in the pajama. He took him a few houses away to his best friend. He wanted to kill him.

Q: To your father's best friend?

A: Yeah.

Q: So they took your father to his best friend's house?

A: He knew the policeman was good friends with my father. And he knew that they were good friends. He said that when they left and the Russians came in, he was throwing stones at the Romanian police.

Q: You mean at the end of the war?

A: No in 41.

Q: Oh when the Russians left?

A: Yeah.

Q: When the Russians left.

A: When the Romanians left, he met them in 40 when the Romanians left. He threw stones on the Romanian police. So he wanted to kill him. So he brought my father along to see him kill his best friend.

Q: Did they kill him?

A: No. He talked him out of it. He gave him some money. Romanians you could buy off.

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Q: He bribed them.

A: Yeah he bribed them and he let him live.

Q: And then your father came back to your home?

A: Yeah, he brought him back.

Q: For the people who didn't have non-Jewish friends who were bringing them food, was there enough food to go around?

A: No. You got whatever they gave you. Whatever you could get in these two hours. Whatever they had in the stores, you wouldn't have the money. The money changed. Here was Russian money. There was Romanian money.

Q: So where did you go when you had those two hours free?

A: Where did we go? Where was there to go in two hours? Just visit the family and see the grandparents and see some friends.

Q: Weren't those family and friends in the ghetto?

A: Yeah we were in the same street.

Q: But you said you were allowed to leave the ghetto for two hours.

A: Yeah.

Q: So where did you go outside of the ghetto.

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A: What would we do? Where would we go? Nothing special. Just with friends, at home the friends were more than relatives here. They were very close. When it came to a holiday my mother was baking for two weeks to send to everybody.

Q: Anything else about the ghetto that you can remember?

A: We were afraid always that we will be next.

Q: Next to be called for deportation. So you lived in the ghetto for you said ten months.

A: Eleven months.

Q: Eleven months.

A: Yeah.

Q: And then what happened?

A: Then they, our train came. (sigh) And we went. They took our stuff too and we went to the train.

Q: Who came to your house? They came the night before to tell you.

A: Yeah.

Q: Who?

A: The Germans and Romanian both.

Q: Romanian police.

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A: Yeah, both. And they came to the train. We went inside like packed like sardines.

Q: Your whole family? Your parents, you and your sister.

A: Yeah and the relatives that were with us too.

Q: Grandparents, aunts, uncles.

A: Yes. And my mother's sister. She was with us. She wasn't with her parents. She went with us. But we all went. We were in the same train. They took away all the jewelry that you had. The earrings, everything. If you had golden teeth they knocked them out. And we went on the train. We must have gone two days and a night. When we came, we went to **Mogilev**.

Q: Hold on. Tell me more about the train. Was there any food or any water? Were you able to stop?

A: No water, no water. People were crying. And throwing up and it was hot inside. You couldn't sit. You have to stand.

Q: What month was this?

A: November we went.

Q: 1941.

A: One. Yeah.

Q: You didn't have any luggage with you?

A: Yeah, yes.

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Q: You did? You had a little bit of luggage?

A: Yes, we did. And we had, we put on a few blouses so we would have – at least we know we have them on us.

Q: Did the train stop at all in those two and a half days?

A: Did they – they stopped but what was it. They didn't let you out.

Q: So you were on the train without getting out for two and a half days?

A: Yep. And then we came and we were already in Mogilev.

Q: Mogilev.

A: With the train and the **Nyesta**, it was called the Nyesta where the water was. It ran over and we were walking in the mud up to the knees. And you put in a foot, you could hardly get it out. We were marching a whole day.

Q: Once you got out of the train what happened?

A: Yeah. We were walking.

Q: With your stuff?

A: With the luggage.

Q: Who was overseeing you?

A: The Germans and the Romanians too, both. And we were walking. And old people they couldn't get their foot out –

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Q: Of the mud.

A: They were shot and left there. And we were walking until night. We came already there where we were supposed to cross the border. Mogilev already, to Mogilev. And we went with a small boat. They were sending us over. Was a big school, an empty school on the other side and that's where they took us all.

Q: How many people were with you?

A: A few hundred.

Q: A few hundred?

A: Yeah.

Q: Same people who were on the train with you.

A: Yeah.

Q: So you got off the train. You walked for a long time in the mud in Mogilev and then you came to an abandoned school.

A: In a boat.

Q: On a boat, across the water and you came to a school.

A: Yeah, then they put all of them whoever came from the train went there in that school. My father took two valises and he went out. He wanted to get us out of there because they were going to send us to some camp from there in the morning. So he took us out of there. And he found a Russian Jewish couple who rented us a house they had.

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Q: So they just let you leave, the Germans?

A: They didn't let us. We snuck out.

Q: You snuck out? In the night time?

A: Yeah, just us.

Q: You, your father, your mother and your sister.

A: And my aunt.

Q: So the five of you?

A: Yeah.

Q: So you snuck out from the school in the middle of the night?

A: Yeah.

Q: And your father found a Russian Jewish couple.

A: A nice couple yeah. They were butchers and she had on a mink coat. You can see she was a rich, the nail done, the hair done. You should have seen how she dressed.

Q: Your father didn't know them beforehand?

A: No.

Q: He just somehow –

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A: He just found them on the street there and she rented us the house. The house had one big room. How should I say? Like a large living room.

Q: And your father had money to rent at this point?

A: We all had. It wasn't just us. We wanted to bring in the relatives so he rented the house and he went back and he kept on bringing the relatives from there.

Q: So he snuck out your other relatives from that school?

A: Until we were like 60 people. Relatives.

Q: And the Germans and the Romanians didn't notice them missing.

A: No because there were so many more there. So we all paid them. Everybody still had some money hidden. And we all paid the house. The house was one big living room.

Q: Where was this house?

A: In Mogilev.

Q: In the town.

A: Yeah. And there was one big room and there was a kitchen with a bake oven. There were three more rooms, little rooms so we took one naturally and some other couple, some other family took one little room, another one. And a lot of them were in the big living room. So we all lived together and during the winter we got cholera. And that killed a lot of people.

Q: Who were living in the house?

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A: Yeah.

Q: Relatives of yours?

A: I had my uncle, my mother's brother gorgeous looking, 26 year old married man, but no children and he was in the 15<sup>th</sup> day of \_\_\_\_\_. The 15<sup>th</sup> day if you live it through you stay alive. Otherwise you're dying. So he was dying and my grandmother was holding him on her lap and she wouldn't let him go. She put her hand in his mouth like to open the \_\_\_\_\_. She got a hepatitis. Not hepatitis. What is it? Gangrene in her arm and they wanted to cut it off. He died anyway. They wanted to cut off her arm. She wouldn't let them and she died too.

Q: So the conditions in the house were not good and that's why people got sick.

A: No, every year there is cholera there. Even gentiles, I think get it too. So almost half died. They'll come a wagon there, they throw them down on the wagon and pull them away and that was it.

Q: Did the rest of you have food in the home?

A: Uh. My aunt wanted to get married. She was of age for that and she went with a guy so she made drapes from yarn. She crocheted them and she took them along with her. And she'd take a piece of paper and pulled some of the yarn off and dangled out to the gentiles and change it for something. A little bit of flour. That was the first year but for three years I never saw sugar, butter, milk, eggs. I hardly ever saw a piece of bread. And they used to go, the Germans used to go on practically every day by the houses and pick people out and by us there was always – that's why now I have to have my shade up. I can't stand it down because it was always down so they wouldn't see us to come in and take us out. We were always standing with our knapsack on the back, ready to go.

Q: Were you pretending to be not Jewish or did you just, you were just hiding?

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A: They let us be in the ghetto there. They let us go around in the ghetto. They were just picking up people to send to –

Q: So the home that you were renting was in the ghetto.

A: Yeah. The following year we didn't have any more money so she threw us out.

Q: The lady who was renting you the house?

A: Yeah.

Q: How long did you live in the house?

A: Over the winter.

Q: So you arrived in November and you stayed through the winter, for how long?

A: Until the summer and we didn't have any more money. Half of the people died. So that was it. And they were rich people and do you know who let us in? A gentile. Let us into their little houses. Their houses consisted maybe two rooms. And the floor was mud. No bed. We were sleeping on the floor.

Q: Was this still in Mogilev?

A: Yeah. We only had one coat, my mother's coat left to cover us all. All five of us were sleeping on the floor.

Q: This was outside the ghetto?

A: No, that's in the ghetto. The whole camp was a ghetto.

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Q: It was a camp or it was a –

A: It was a camp, a labor camp. They took the men away to work every day.

Q: Take me back a little bit. I'm just a little bit confused. When you arrive into Mogilev with the Romanians and the Germans, they tried to take everybody on the cattle car to a school. You escaped from the school and ended up renting a house in the Mogilev ghetto, right. At the end of the rental period because you had no money left, you found a non-Jewish family to take you in.

A: Yeah.

Q: Where was the camp?

A: There was no more Romanians there. They were the Germans, the SS and Ukrainian police.

Q: And they set up a labor camp in the town?

A: Yeah. We could go free there. It was a ghetto. It was only from our people, nobody else there. But they put us all or they left us all and from there they take the men every morning to work. By bridges, building bridges. My father used to come home. He was a strong man, a butcher and when he came home he couldn't even walk into the room. He was so beaten and no food, no water. They couldn't give him much. He couldn't even go into the room. We had to help him. And the next morning they came again to get him.

Q: From the non-Jewish person's home?

A: Yeah.

Q: But they didn't make the non-Jewish people go to work every day?

A: They had their life.

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Q: You were just living with them?

A: Yeah. They gave us the room. They were in the back. Had nothing to do with us.

Q: But you were living there without paying rent.

A: Right. They let us. The Jew threw us out and the gentile let us.

Q: Every morning your father had to go to work.

A: Yeah.

Q: And then he would come back.

A: And in the summer they used to take him away for a few months too. And didn't bring him home til it got cold. And we were alone.

Q: You, your mother and your sister.

A: And my aunt. They used to go looking for potato peels and that's what we put on the little stove there that we had and everybody got the same share, potato peels. I once had an abscess. See, I have the mark here. I had an abscess. I couldn't open my mouth. It was all swollen. Where are you going to get a dentist here? And a neighbor saw my father, our gentile neighbor and she said to him. Your daughter wanted to burn our house. She was looking for something to make trouble. So my father said to her, how can you say it? My child is inside sick. She can't even talk. She didn't want to believe it. She came in and she looked at me and she saw, yeah. She went into her house and she put something together, some of their remedies. And she came in and she put it on my cheek. After like an hour, the whole thing popped out, the whole pus. And she saved me. She hadn't said it to my father, I might have been dead. And didn't get the tooth out until we came home. After the war. They also took us. We heard that they were taking people

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away so a gentile friend of my father's, he always made friends with the gentiles. And he put us in a little room like a quarter the size of this one and it had sacks with sunflower seeds. It was supposed to be for the soldiers, for the horses. So he let us in. He said you will be safe here, as soon as they stop taking people I'll come and get you out. So we were sitting there and we ate sunflowers. How do you eat it without drinking and we didn't have no drinks. Four days we were there.

Q: Just with the sunflower seeds.

A: Yeah. And they were taking people and they took us to a camp that was called **Skazinetz**. And they said from there you'll never go out. Nobody ever returns from there. They took us there, a few hundred people again.

Q: They called you for deportation?

A: Yeah.

Q: From the ghetto camp labor camp in Mogilev.

A: To Skazinetz.

Q: Skazinetz. And how did you get there?

A: They took us there. It was walking. And they –

Q: All of you, your whole family?

A: Everybody. Hundreds of people again.

Q: So people left in the town of Mogilev to Skazinetz.

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A: Yeah, the soldiers took us there and they had big buildings. Buildings were made. They were empty, no doors and no windows. Nothing. Just rooms. One after another there. And people just sat down there. Everybody took a place. They took a place and my uncle took some, how do you say it. That you make houses. How do you say?

Q: Wood?

A: No, not the wood. The

Q: Bricks?

A: Bricks. My uncle took a few bricks and he made a little stove on the window. And he took some, and closed up the whole window so it wouldn't be so windy. Everything, it was cold.

Q: What month did you –

A: That was like in 42.

Q: 42 in the fall or the winter?

A: No it wasn't cold then, yet. But we were supposed to stay there for long. So my uncle made that little stove but nothing to cook. They gave you a meal at night. So they used to bring you out every night and count you. And every day people died and the soldier would say "still too many left". Every day he'd say, "still too many left". They gave you, the food was a cup like when you wash your hands it was water and a split pea was swimming in there. (laughs) That was your meal. And a little piece of bread. That was it. So my father was a butcher. And there was a small little house there. And in there was the soldiers were eating there. So there was a gentile Ukrainian and he cooked for them. He was a butcher too so my father went in to him and told him he was butcher and he'd like to help him. And he did. And he gave us stuff to cook on the little stove. He gave beans. He gave us a little meat too and he helped us out. And after like six weeks, he wanted to help us to get out. No, not six weeks. A few months. He wanted to help us

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to get out of there alive. So he took me to his house and he had children and he had a daughter my age too. So he gave me her clothes and I got dressed in her clothes and he gave me a bucket with milk and we had to go back to Mogilev. He was going to take me and then he was going to bring my mother with the rest of the family.

Q: He was going to take you out of Skazinetz.

A: Yes.

Q: Back to where you had been in Mogilev.

A: Yeah.

Q: To sort of escape from the camp.

A: Yeah because they said from here nobody escapes alive. They gave us little pieces of soap to get the shower and it said pure Jewish fat.

Q: Were people working in this camp?

A: No. They had no strength.

Q: You were just sitting in the abandoned buildings all day.

A: Yeah.

Q: With no food.

A: Yeah.

Q: And no water and no sanitary conditions, nothing.

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A: So he gave me the milk I had to carry on my back. We had to walk 30 miles. We had to walk through a airport, with Germans. And we went and he brought me there to Mogilev and he put me there in the ghetto. The Jews were there, in a building. There was a building there but it was people from – but I didn't know them.

Q: Is this back where you had been before?

A: Yeah.

Q: The same part of town.

A: Yeah.

Q: And there were still Jews left there who hadn't been deported?

A: Yeah. They couldn't deport all of them. So I was there. My mother was supposed to come in a few days. She didn't come for six weeks. And I was all by myself.

Q: Where were your father and sister?

A: There.

Q: Back in Skazinetz.

A: Yes, they were all still there.

Q: So just this man that your father had befriended and he gave you his children's clothes and brought you alone.

A: Yeah.

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Q: Out of Skazinetz.

A: A few days later he was supposed to bring my mother and the rest of them. They didn't come for six weeks. I was all by myself there, between strangers. I walked there but I had no shoes and I got stuck, stung by a piece of glass in my foot. And I'm sitting there on the stoop crying for somebody to take it out. And that's how they didn't come for six weeks. Yeah.

Q: Did somebody help you with the glass in your foot?

A: Yes, somebody walked by and helped me. People were kind. Everybody was in the same situation.

Q: How old were you about now?

A: When I was liberated, I was 12.

Q: But this was before liberation. So you were about 11.

A: 11. Yeah.

Q: You were alone there for six weeks. Waiting for your family to join you in Mogilev.

A: And then when they were leaving the -- we were so hungry, I had pores on my hands. I had pores running from my ears that are pink from malnutrition. My father goes one day and he sees somebody with a horse. And the horse is struggling. It's laying. It was shot and the owner was sitting next to him, a Ukrainian is sitting next to him. So he said if you give me the skin and the head I'll give you the meat. So my father comes home. He tells my mother. This is the story. I found a horse and you will make hamburgers. She said I am going to eat a dead horse meat. She said no way. So he said, yes, way. He said you don't want to eat it, you don't have to but you have to save the children. So he brought the meat and a lady gave her some garlic and my father

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gave her some meat too. And my mother made hamburgers. And that's how we started on the horse meat. The Germans were going away and they left the horses just walking all over. And so they would take my father and a friend take a horse and kill it and we had what to eat. When the Germans were leaving the bombings were coming you know all the time. And they were leaving and they would come in the afternoon and look in the rooms and ask how many people are here. So we would say five. They'd say well, another eight can go in there. And they came in and they stayed over until the next day and they can go when it got light again. And they went away again. They were going forwards and the Russians were coming. They were behind them. And it was war. It was fighting. You saw the **Katyushas**, everything. And they had in the church, they had machine guns to kill us all. But the partisans came in and they didn't have time to do it. Yes, it was tough.

Q: How long were you in Mogilev once your family came back from Skazinetz?

A: Another few months.

Q: That was during that period is when you survived off of the horse meat?

A: Yeah. The horse meat, yes.

Q: Were you with any relatives besides your parents, your sister and your aunt? Or had everyone else, you know --

A: No, we tried to be together. Not many were left. I lost my grandparents both of them.

Q: In Skazinetz or before that?

A: Before. And aunts and uncles and cousins. I lost a lot, I lost a lot of people. It was very hard.

Q: So you were back in Mogilev til 19 --

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A: 44.

Q: So you were there?

A: And the Russians took away the men again.

Q: So the Russians came into Mogilev.

A: They were there. It was the Nazis. Not the Russians, the Ukrainians yeah. So then they went away. It was the Germans again and (pause) they took away the men. They took them in a \_\_\_\_\_ I recall that and they trained them and they were going to take them to white Russia to rebuild Russia. Imagine people from the war, they would take away and if you saw what those people looked like.

Q: You're talking about after liberation?

A: No when it was – before the liberation.

Q: Before liberation.

A: My mother wanted to go home to see who was alive, where we could go, what there was at home. So she left me and my sister and the planes were coming at night, bombing. The planes were coming bombing and here I am with my sister alone. No, who could she help me.

Q: So your parents had gone.

A: My mother. My father they took away. But my mother went –

Q: When was this?

A: In 44, when it was already liberated.

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Q: Ok so let's go back a little bit. Talk to me more about liberation. How did you know that the war was over?

A: Was all the fighting and the fighting was going on. We were on the hill. We saw all the fighting going on.

Q: In Mogilev.

A: Yeah. The planes were coming day and night and we were scared. Yeah.

Q: Who liberated you?

A: The Russian partisans. They liberated us.

Q: Ok and when that happened did you get some food? Did you –

A: No. From them, no.

Q: You were still living the same way.

A: Same old way. So my mother went back home and my father was with the, in the **Koserna** [ph] there but he would go at night and he would go, pretend to go for water. The pails of water you has to bring there. He would pretend to go for water and he would come stay with us whenever he could. So that night the planes are here and they're bombing and I'm here with my sister all by myself. And I was crying. I was pleading oh dear god, let me see my mother one more time. And she came back and we tried to go home our self. They wouldn't provide for us a train to go home.

Q: How did she get there? Your mother?

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A: She asked every gentile who went with her a little horse and carriage. Whenever they went they gave them a lift and she got there. And then she came back and that's how we got home.

Q: She came back to collect you and bring you back.

A: Yeah. But it was terrible. We went more than two weeks we went home and in the garden we were sleeping. We didn't go into a house anywhere. Nobody took us in.

Q: How did you get there? Also by collecting rides from whoever would give you?

A: Yeah in the day time. At night we were sitting there under a tree hiding there and sleeping there, outside. For almost three weeks.

Q: Cause it had taken two and a half days to come by train.

A: Yeah.

Q: And now you were going back.

A: And how, you can't walk. You have to ask those and they were generous but at night we were sleeping outside and the planes were coming. It was very scary. And then when we came home they didn't let us in. The Russians were there.

Q: In Chernivtsi.

A: Yeah. They were there already back. And they wouldn't let us in. And my mother had a bottle of vodka. So she gave to them the – so they let us in.

Q: Into your home, your old home?

A: Into the city. A home I didn't have. We came home. We didn't have anything. Nothing at all.

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Q: And your father hadn't yet come?

A: No. No, this time he didn't run away. This time he was there, stuck in Belorussia. He was working. And a funny thing is when he went, when they took him there, they came, the planes came to bomb and he didn't have his boots on and without his boots he had frozen feet. So without his boots he wouldn't go anywhere. So he didn't leave the train and the Germans came and they bombed at night. Most of the people from his train were killed. And because he didn't have the boots on he didn't go. And he stayed alive. A lot of people we didn't know who was alive. From his train they were all killed. But there were some left still but not even half of the people. But then me, my mother and my sister and my aunt, we had to look for a place.

Q: In Chernivtsi.

A: Yeah.

Q: This is in 44.

A: Yeah so we found a little apartment. It was in front the door and we had a basement and a kitchen and we covered it with a blue carpet because the Russians were going and taking single women away. And send them to Russia. That was after the war at home. So we had my aunt. She was single and we had three cousins that were single. So they lived the next two houses away from us. But in the day time they came to us in case they come and want to take them away. So they – and as soon as we heard knocking we took up the little carpet and they ran into the basement, hiding.

Q: So you had cousins that had survived also?

A: Yeah.

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Q: But they were with you all along the way or you discovered they were alive after you came back to Chernivtsi.

A: Some of them we found after. Yeah. This is the way of the life with the cousins. And we tried, we tried to make a little business for us. And remember the man I told you, my neighbor who was shot. He came home with a new wife, a Russian.

Q: He was the one whose wife was pregnant and they shot when she was pregnant.

A: Yeah he came with a young wife home. They made him blind. They found him and he was blind. And he made a little factory down the hill and he made salamis, even though he was blind. He could tell you how much meat was there. And he had a helper and he made salamis and I was taking a few pounds of salamis on my back and go for a few miles and try and sell it in the stores. So we could make a few --.

Q: Where were you living at this point?

A: We were living in that little room there, that one.

Q: That you rented?

A: Yeah. Yeah.

Q: You, your mom and your sister.

A: Yeah. It was tough but then again we made more, more, a little more money. And we made a little grocery. My mother and her sister in law and we sold and we made money. And then my father came home and he made a factory. He made money. And we would buy golden coins so we could go when, in case we have to go away. In the meantime, somebody found out that he

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came on that strange name back from Russia, not his real name. So they came to look for him. The KGB came to look for him. So his workers were working at night, not in the day time.

Q: Why did he come back with a different name?

A: He couldn't get a passport in his name so you needed you know in Russia everything had to show your passport. Somebody told on him and they came looking for him so he lived upstairs and downstairs was his aunt living so he used to sit by his aunt downstairs. One Saturday they came and they found him, arrested him and my mother went to the jail to pick out his clothes and his underwear was full of blood. They beat him and somehow he found a cousin, from our cousin. He had a cousin that she was one of those like on 42<sup>nd</sup> street the girls. She had an officer she knew there. We had golden coins. He gave to her and she sneaked him out at night. So we made passports and we ran away to Poland. And we came to Poland. We were in a kibbutz in **Bratislava**. In a kibbutz. And from there we went to Germany to look for relatives.

Q: Why Germany?

A: Because that's where they went to. They went to there to the DP camps. I had found our cousins and –

Q: From Chernivtsi in the beginning of the war. They had survived and went to displaced persons camps?

A: Yeah. After the war, that's where they could go. They went to look for relatives too. And that's how we were in one **Gabersee**, a beautiful place there.

Q: In Germany?

A: Yeah. We were there a few months and then we went to Bergen Belsen where I met my husband.

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Q: Another DP camp?

A: Yeah.

Q: What were the conditions in these DP camps? First in Gabersee.

A: It was very nice. It was a place there for officers. And the cousin the uncle for my cousin was the police chief.

Q: You came there with your whole family?

A: No, I found them there.

Q: With your mother and your father, your sister.

A: Yeah.

Q: So through Poland, from Romania to Germany

A: To Germany.

Q: How did you get there? How did you travel?

A: With buggies. Just like that, yeah. So then we were in that Gabersee and he took us in. We got clothes, we got everything because of that uncle who was the police chief.

Q: In Gabersee?

A: Yeah. And then we were there a few months and then we found out that we had a relatives closer than them in Bergen Belsen. So we went there. And that was until we went home already. We were in Bergen Belsen.

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Q: And what was it like there?

A: Nice too. We were in a kibbutz there too.

Q: A kibbutz?

A: A kibbutz and there was an American who came and taught us trades. You know you get out the young people and my husband was a teacher, dental mechanic.

Q: How did you meet your husband?

A: In the dental mechanic place. He was my teacher.

Q: He was your teacher?

A: Yeah.

Q: When you were learning a trade?

A: So in the morning I was learning sewing and the afternoon I was taking dental mechanics.

Q: In Bergen Belsen?

A: Yeah.

Q: And you were how old now?

A: 17. No, 17, I was married already. No, when I came to Bergen Belsen I was 15.

Q: How long were in Gabersee for?

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A: Not very long.

Q: But you were in Bergen Belsen for a few years?

A: Yeah, from 15. I was 17 when I left. I was married at 17.

Q: In Bergen Belsen?

A: Yeah.

Q: With your parents and your sister there as well?

A: Yeah and we had other uncles and cousins that were there.

Q: And you got married in the camp?

A: Yeah.

Q: Can you tell me about that?

A: It was very nice. I had a big wedding. My husband was also a policeman there. We had a very big wedding. My father was making a lot of money with – he was roasting coffee and that was a big deal in Germany after the war, coffee. And he and a cousin and a uncle were three partners and they made a lot of money.

Q: What did you and your new husband do next?

A: We came to America in 1950. I had my baby here.

Q: How did you get to America?

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A: From the Joint.

Q: The Joint Distribution Committee.

A: Yeah. And my husband also had an uncle here and cousins.

Q: And you came by boat?

A: No I came by plane cause I was pregnant. So I came by plane.

Q: What about your parents and your sister? Were they still in Bergen Belsen?

A: Yeah, they came after with the boat.

Q: So you came on a plane with your husband?

A: Yeah.

Q: And you were pregnant with your first child? And where did you come in, in the US?

A: We lived on 86<sup>th</sup> street.

Julie Kopel: Ok Sylvia, We had left off and you were arriving to the US with your new husband and you are pregnant, leaving Bergen Belsen. And where did you arrive in the US when you came by plane?

Sylvia Zelig: 86<sup>th</sup> Street they had the hotel for the newcomers. And we stayed there about a month. They sent us to look for apartments.

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Q: Did you have family that had already left Europe and come to the US? Or did your husband have family?

A: My husband had family from before.

Q: From before? Ok.

A: Yeah, many years ago so we went to visit them.

Q: In New York?

A: Yeah. They lived on Stanton Street.

Q: The Lower East Side?

A: Yeah. I remember I came there. Was a Tuesday, Uncle Milty was there.

Q: So you came and you lived in an apartment on 86<sup>th</sup> Street?

A: For about a month. Then they sent us and we got an apartment in **Magel** Place in Washington Heights. We rented there a basement apartment with my parents, all of us. And we lived there and –

Q: So your parents came afterwards?

A: Yeah.

Q: And met you in New York?

A: Yeah they came. Two weeks after they came by boat. So we were in Magel Place and then

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they were taking to the army again the men and of course we didn't want my husband to go so our uncle told us to buy a farm so we sold out a lot of things that we brought from Germany, like a beautiful dinner set, a Lenox. And we bought the farm. It wasn't actually ours. It's, my father and a partner. And my husband worked on the farm.

Q: Where was the farm?

A: Middletown, New York. But I hated it. I was used to a lot of people talking. I was very lonesome on the farm. I had nobody.

Q: Had you already given birth to your child?

A: Yes. We came in January 19 and she was born February 21<sup>st</sup>.

Q: You had a daughter?

A: Yeah. So on the farm I just hated it. It was too lonesome. I was used to people so we sold it. And we came back to Washington Heights. 2440 Amsterdam Avenue. And it was very nice there. We lived until 55. My husband worked in **Elmont**. He was a knitter. He couldn't get a job as a mechanic because they gave it to the veterans. So he got a job as a knitter and made a good, good living. And we moved in there in a garden apartment. Until now, still lived there. Hated to

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Q: Hated what?

A: I, it's been too long. I've been there 60 years. And there are no Jews left.

Q: So you had another child after your daughter right?

A: Yes. In 1953, my son was born and he was born in Jewish Memorial Hospital, 196<sup>th</sup> street. My daughter, they took me to a city hospital. I didn't know where they were taking me so they

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took me to the city hospital. I was the only white woman between 20 people in one room. And then she comes in to interview me the next day. Somebody from the Joint. And she's asking me, are you married? And I'm looking at her. I didn't know how it's going on here. Half the population is having children without their father. And I said what do you mean, am I married?

Q: You had a son and a daughter and you lived in Washington Heights for all those years. What was it like to adjust to a normal life after the war?

A: Ooh I can't tell you. When I came here and I went into the grocery and I saw in January the salad, the radishes and all the greens. Oh, it was. Or when I saw a chicken you didn't have to pluck and – already challah out. I had to do that all myself there. I knew how to make the noodles, everything. Made it myself there. So it was a pleasure. It still is.

Q: You continued to live near your parents and your sister?

A: My sister lived near my parents. Wherever my sister moved, my parents moved because she could drive a car. Now.

Q: Had she been married also after the war?

A: Yeah, she's married and she has two children too. She lived in Spring Valley. But wherever she moved, they moved. They had take-out places everywhere and on Austin Street and Glen Oaks and Plainview. Everywhere they had, they make good stuff. Nobody makes like today they don't make the same way.

Q: What was your life like after the war? Did you return to your religion? Did you go to work? What was your life like? How did you find the strength to continue after you had experienced all of that?

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A: During the pregnancy with my daughter I got gallstones. So I found out right after I had her, I had little gallstones. So we lived on the farm and the doctor had to come give me a morphine shot. In 1958, I got ulcers. Yeah. I think had to do with the war. And in 1995 I had cancer.

Q: Sorry.

A: I had ovarian cancer. The doctor told my daughter I had three months. The surgeon told her I had three months and was in fourth stage. So it was a struggle. I had chemotherapy, seven sessions chemotherapy and then it was very hard. My husband took good care of me. It was very hard. And I was supposed to have an eighth session and I said my doctor well where's today my session. He said you had enough poison. And he said I'll do everything for you to help you. He was an Israeli and he was good to me. But when I was finished, two months later after the chemo I couldn't do anything. I was going from the chair to the bed from the bed to the couch. That's all, couldn't do anything. So two months later I said to the doctor, Dr. **Helman**, how come I can't do anything. It's two months later. He said your body took a lot of poison. Has to wait a few months. So my daughter, we went to a conventional doctor, \_\_\_\_\_. And he prescribed for me vitamins and then he said you have to take a bottle that'll be \$44 a day. You have to buy about 40, 50 bottles you'll need. But you don't have to buy them one time. So I said listen I can't afford, I said being on social security said I can't afford that. So we went home. My husband came Friday to pick up the vitamins. He said Mr. Zelig, if you want your wife to live, you'll go home. You'll take out the card and you will charge for ten bottles and then they will send you. He said in two weeks she'll feel better. In five weeks she'll feel great from these bottles. So my husband came home and told me that. Course he'll take out the card and charge. So I ordered and I said to the guy who I ordered from, I said what could there be in an eight ounce bottle that should be \$44? He said 25 pounds of soy beans. All kinds, all different brewed many ways. It'll heal your cells. The cells that the chemo killed. It will heal them. And it was like that. After a week I went to shopping with my husband. Three years later I asked my surgeon. He said I have three months. I said did you think I would be here today? He is looking at me and really and at my daughter and you could say that now, so he said to me is it maybe the 60 dollar a day vitamins that you spent? So he believed after that. He believed it. And if it wasn't for that I would not be here.

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Q: Do you have any grandchildren?

A: Yes. I have seven grandchildren. My daughter has three. My son has four. He has two sons and two daughters. And she has this comedian here and one daughter in Israel and one daughter here. And I have 14 great grandchildren.

Q: That's wonderful. Did you ever return back to Romania after?

A: No. I would have liked to.

Q: How do you think your war experiences sort of affected the way that you raised your family?

A: I don't think they liked it that much. I tried to not to be like my parents cause my mother was always with my father helping him. You know I don't even remember her holding me once and feeding me as a bottle. And I said to myself there were no bottles then. How come I don't remember that?

Q: So you wanted to be around more for your children?

A: Yeah. And my father used to beat me.

Q: Do you ever have any dreams about your experiences?

A: Oh yes many times. Many times. I'm telling you, I could tell you every store on the block. We had opposite the street we had a little grocery. You'd go in and buy ten **deka** of butter. There was no refrigerator. And some olives and something to eat for breakfast. Was so nice. The next building to us was a bakery. It was the most delicious bread and rolls and Kaiser rolls. Oh. Every store. The following house was a, where they made, they called it **crachas**. The sodas. You can't find one like it. In here like there. You can't. And the following house was like a bakery. You'd

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take Friday the Challah there to bake, the **cholent**, the things to bake there. I remember was under, on the floor you had to find yours. Home sweet home.

Q: Do you have anything else you want to add? Any messages that you want to pass on to anybody who may be hearing this interview?

A: I hope you never know it. Remember I told you I forgot to say we used to melt the snow because they used to beat us. So we'd melt the snow and drink it for the water.

Q: At what point during the war?

A: All the time. In the winter that's what we would do.

Q: To get water?

A: Yeah.

Q: Is there anything else you want me to, you want to talk about while we're here?

A: Yeah. All the time when I didn't have anything to eat and now I have everything and you can't eat.

Q: You can't eat?

A: I have polycystic kidney disease. So I'm on dialysis three times a week and all the good stuff that you couldn't eat, that you see now. Oh, when I see it, a beautiful peach, what I would give to eat.

Q: I'm sorry.

## **Interview with Sylvia Zelig**

**April 21, 2015**

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A: All the good, whatever they tell you on the tv, it's good for your health. It's good for you, you can't have..

Q: Well thank you so much for giving your testimony today, Sylvia. I am glad we got to do this.

A: Me too.

Q: Thank you.

(end)