

My name is Norma Stern. Today is July 28, 1988. I am here to interview Sabina Hershaft, who is a survivor of the Nazi Holocaust. I am doing this under the auspices of the Oral History Project, Jewish Community Council of Greater Washington. The Hebrew translation will be done by Marin Ortega, and the Polish translation by Alex Hershaft. The purpose of this interview is to add to the oral history of the Nazi Holocaust so that through this living memorial, future generations will know what happened. With this knowledge, hopefully we can prevent any such occurrence in the future.

This is Norma Stern.

OK. What is your full name?

Sabina.

And your last name?

From house?

[SPEAKING POLISH]

Ah, Hershaft. Sabina Hershaft.

And what was your--

OK, what was-- what is your name?

Sabina Hershaft.

OK. And what was your maiden name before you were married?

[SPEAKING POLISH]

Where were you born?

[SPEAKING POLISH]

And what year?

In the 1980s.

What were your parents' names?

Maks Mendel and Rachel.

And Rachel?

Rachel. Rochel.

OK. Did you have brothers and sisters?

Yeah. And--

What were they--

--one sister and one brother.

What were their names? Mine brother is Yitzhak. And the sister is Lily.

Lily. OK. Was your family religious?

No.

Did they go to synagogue at all for the holidays.

[SPEAKING POLISH]

Sometimes, maybe.

Sometime. [SPEAKING POLISH]

Big, big.

Big holidays.

Was a big holiday at one time.

Did you speak Yiddish in your household?

No, I speak Polish.

Polish.

My grandmother. But I understand Yiddish.

Was your family Zionist?

[SPEAKING POLISH]

Yeah.

Did you belong to any Zionist organizations?

No.

Did you live in Poland the whole time before the war? Were you in Poland that whole time?

Yeah, yeah.

[SPEAKING POLISH]

What kind of education did you have?

I have education only--

[SPEAKING POLISH]

[SPEAKING POLISH] gymnasium.

Finished high school.

[SPEAKING POLISH]

And the university.

OK. Did you live in a Jewish area in Warsaw?

Yes. Yes. I go in gymnasia in [? Juif. ?]

A Jewish--

Jewish.

--gymnasium. What was your father's occupation?

[SPEAKING POLISH]

He was a building administrator, building manager. Superintendent.

[SPEAKING POLISH]

He also had a travel agency.

And your mother, did she work?

[SPEAKING POLISH]?

No.

And what was your occupation--

Mine?

--before the war. Did you work?

I studied.

You were a student.

I was studying. Mm-hmm.

Did you have any antisemitic experiences before the war?

I see much, but I, no. Because the gen don't-- they think I am a Jew.

They didn't think you were Jewish?

Yes.

Did your parents face antisemitism? Your father?

[SPEAKING POLISH] antisemitism?

I think not much, because he was a--

[SPEAKING POLISH]

[SPEAKING POLISH]

He was wealthy.

OK. Were you married before the war?

Yes.

What was your husband's name?

Jozef. Jozef. Jozef.

And did you have children before the war? Alex?

Only.

OK. What did your husband do?

My husband was a-- [SPEAKING POLISH].

He was a scientist, a chemist.

Did you ever consider leaving Poland before the war?

[SPEAKING POLISH]

No.

[DOORBELL]

OK.

OK.

Before the war, they lived in the Soviet Union for a while. And then they came back after the revolution.

Oh. Was this when you were married, or before you were married?

No.

Oh, your family.

When I was a little girl.

Uh-huh. Your family moved to the Soviet Union. Why did they move there?

Hmm?

[SPEAKING POLISH]

[SPEAKING POLISH]

Because her father had business interests with the Soviet Union.

OK.

That was not Soviet Union. That was not Tsar.

It was Tsarist Russia at the time.

OK. OK. Did you move back to Poland before the revolution?

[SPEAKING POLISH]

[SPEAKING POLISH]

After the revolution.

After the revolution. Is that why your father left Russia?

[SPEAKING POLISH]

Yes, it was.

Because [INAUDIBLE] kill him [? and we, ?] actually. Because [INAUDIBLE].

Because they would have killed him otherwise.

[SPEAKING POLISH]

Because he was wealthy.

[SPEAKING POLISH]

OK. What do you first remember about the Second World War?

[SPEAKING POLISH]

[SPEAKING POLISH]

It's difficult to say.

OK. Did you have to move from your home in Warsaw?

[SPEAKING POLISH]?

Yeah.

You had to move.

In the ghetto.

Did you--

I was for ghetto. I must go in ghetto.

You were outside of the ghetto.

[SPEAKING POLISH]

Did you live in a house or an apartment before the ghetto?

Apartment.

When the war began, was there rationing of food?

[SPEAKING POLISH]

Tak.

Yes.

Did you have to use a special Jewish identification, a special card or anything like that? No. Did you have to wear the Jewish star in the ghetto?

Jewish star?

Yes. Yes, you wore the star.

[SPEAKING POLISH]

Yeah, [SPEAKING POLISH]

Ah, yeah, yeah. In ghetto.

In the ghetto. Was your husband able to work?

[SPEAKING POLISH]

Tak.

He was still working? Was he able to work as a scientist?

[SPEAKING POLISH]?

Nie. [SPEAKING POLISH]

No, not in the ghetto.

In ghetto? Mm-mm. In ghetto, who work another work.

He couldn't work.

She said another worker.

Another worker. OK. And what did he do?

[SPEAKING POLISH]

[SPEAKING POLISH]

She's not sure, but I think he was-- had something to do with food stamps. Rationing cards.

How did you get food in the ghetto?

I have food.

You had food.

[SPEAKING POLISH]

She had food because her father had prepared stores of food before they walled off the ghetto. Her father was already living in the ghetto before the ghetto was created. And also, if you recall, we had that maid named Juliana. And she was able to bring food from the outside.

OK. Were there health problems in the ghetto?

[SPEAKING POLISH]

Yes.

Much.

A lot. Could you explain--

Hunger.

Hunger.

Lots of hunger.

And how about diseases?

Hmm?

[POLISH]?

Yes. And then the [SPEAKING POLISH]

Her husband was ill with typhus also.

[SPEAKING POLISH]

Typhus.

Typhus. What year did you have to go into the ghetto? Do you remember?

[SPEAKING POLISH]

[SPEAKING POLISH]

[SPEAKING POLISH]

[SPEAKING POLISH]

I'm learning things I didn't-- apparently, she did not move to the ghetto because of the Germans. But the house where we were living before, which was outside the ghetto, had been bombed by the Allies. So she then moved in with her parents who were living in the ghetto. So when the ghetto was walled off, we were already in the ghetto. And that's why she doesn't remember.

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

Not in ghetto. But it is bombed.

It was bombed. So probably about 1940.

[? From parent ?] before ghetto.

Were are you allowed to have radios in the ghetto?

[SPEAKING POLISH]

No.

Did some people have them?

Yes.

They did have them?

[SPEAKING POLISH]?

Secret radio.

Secret. Much secret.

Very secret.

Very, very.

Was there a black market for getting food?

[SPEAKING POLISH]

Yes.

I think so. I don't know because I don't see this, but I think, I heard.

Were there newspapers in the ghetto? No. Was there a Jewish police there?

Yes, there was.

What did they do?

[SPEAKING POLISH]

[SPEAKING POLISH]

[SPEAKING POLISH]

[SPEAKING POLISH]?

Tak.

[SPEAKING POLISH]

Yeah.

She says they helped the Germans to round up people.

Was there--

They had a certain quota. They were given a certain area, a certain quota of people to bring to the transports.

[SPEAKING POLISH]

They were decent people, but they were trying to save their own lives.

Could you tell me a little bit how your maid helped you?

Yeah, Juliana [SPEAKING POLISH]?

She was a Russian. And [SPEAKING POLISH]

[SPEAKING POLISH] Ruski?

[SPEAKING POLISH] Ruski, tak.

She was a Russian and belonged to a Belorussian society.

[SPEAKING POLISH]

[SPEAKING POLISH]

[SPEAKING POLISH]

And they worked with the Germans.

[SPEAKING POLISH]

[SPEAKING POLISH]

Tak.

She went to the Germans, and she told them that they-- she had no home.

[SPEAKING POLISH]

[SPEAKING POLISH]

[SPEAKING POLISH]

OK. She went to the Belorussian society and told them that she had no home, and that her only home was with my grandparents, my mother's parents, and that if they didn't get her a pass to go into the ghetto, that she would throw herself into the river, the Vistula River.

So they, since they were collaborating closely with the German authorities, they were able to get her the pass.

Vlasovtsy [SPEAKING POLISH]

Vlasovtsy?

Vlasovtsy.

Vlas--

Vlasovtsy. That was the name of the society.

Vlasovtsy.

The society?

The name of the Russian. Because they think when Germany come in Russian, they come to be in Russian.

[SPEAKING POLISH]

[SPEAKING POLISH]?

[SPEAKING POLISH]

Oh, OK. They were expecting that when the Germans conquer Russia that they would be in charge.

OK. Was there a Jewish Council, a Judenrat who organized?

Judenrat, there was.

What did they do in the ghetto?

[SPEAKING POLISH]?

[SPEAKING POLISH]

They received the instructions, orders from the Germans, and they executed them.

Were you able to leave the ghetto.

[SPEAKING POLISH]?

[LAUGHS] [SPEAKING POLISH]

She couldn't, but she did.

How did you leave?

[SPEAKING POLISH]

[SPEAKING POLISH]

[SPEAKING POLISH]

[SPEAKING POLISH]

[SPEAKING POLISH]

[SPEAKING POLISH]

[SPEAKING POLISH]

[SPEAKING POLISH]

Juliana, was caught and taken to the Umschlagplatz. And she escaped, because there was a point reached when the Germans no longer recognized documents as being valid when they needed to fill their quotas. But she escaped.

And my mother's mother told her that she should no longer come to the ghetto because her life was in danger. And Juliana said that she would leave, but only if she could take me with her. [POLISH]

He was a little--

He was a little boy.

[SPEAKING POLISH]

[SPEAKING POLISH]

Hmm?

[SPEAKING POLISH]

Tak. [SPEAKING POLISH]

She took me and gave me up to my aunt who was living outside.

And how old was he then?

[SPEAKING POLISH]

[SPEAKING POLISH]

[SPEAKING POLISH]

Mm-hmm.

[SPEAKING POLISH] Magen David. [SPEAKING POLISH]

[SPEAKING POLISH]

Magen David [SPEAKING POLISH].

OK. What happened was that when she took me, when Juliana took me to my aunt, my aunt was part of an underground

Polish resistance organization. And they had access to false documents. And they procured identity cards for my mother and for my father which were then smuggled back into the ghetto.

And then my mother and my dad, then, there were detachments of Jews who were taken out under strict guard outside the ghetto for work. And she paid off the leader of such a detachment to take her with the rest of the detachment. Once they were outside, she just took off her armband. And she had the identity card, and she just moved away. And my father apparently left the same way. [SPEAKING POLISH]

[SPEAKING POLISH]

She wants to know how much detail you're interested in?

[SPEAKING POLISH]

Whatever she wants to tell us. Whatever she remembers.

[SPEAKING POLISH]

Tak? It's a long story. Long story.

I wanted to know if you ever left the ghetto secretly before you got the documents? [SPEAKING POLISH] ghetto
[SPEAKING POLISH]

Nie.

No.

No. OK. And, OK. So do you want to tell us anything more about how you left the ghetto?

You want? It is a long story. [LAUGHS]

[SPEAKING POLISH]

[SPEAKING POLISH]

[SPEAKING POLISH]

[SPEAKING POLISH] [LAUGHS] [SPEAKING POLISH]

[SPEAKING POLISH]

OK. When she went out, my aunt was in a country-- I guess this must have been summertime-- with her son. And so she wanted to come back to the city because it was getting, I guess, fall. And when I came out, she took me to the country with her. And then, when my mother came out, she was going to take her to the country as well.

Then, when it was time for my father to come out, she said that there was no more room for my father. So my mother said that if there there's no room for my father, then she won't go either. [POLISH]

[SPEAKING POLISH]

OK. This was quite an emotional scene. And at that time, in my aunt's apartment, in addition to my mother and my aunt, there was also a young officer who was sent by the Polish government in exile to train the Polish resistance fighters in the woods.

[CROSS TALK]. Excuse me. How did your aunt get to live outside of the ghetto? How come she was outside the ghetto?

[SPEAKING POLISH] I know the answer to that. [SPEAKING POLISH]

[SPEAKING POLISH]

Because she was-- she had Polish identity cards. She had married a Christian, and she was not known to be Jewish.

Mm-hmm. And what year was it that you left the ghetto?

[SPEAKING POLISH] ghetto?

[SPEAKING POLISH]

In the fall of '42.

[SPEAKING POLISH]

When you were in the ghetto, were you aware--

[SPEAKING POLISH]

Oh. When you were in the ghetto, Were You aware of any partisan activities?

Hmm?

[SPEAKING POLISH]

Nie.

No. [SPEAKING POLISH]

[SPEAKING POLISH]

This young officer then intervened and said that I give you the word of a Polish officer that I'll take care of your husband. And then my aunt said to her that if he gives you his word, then you have nothing to worry about.

So--

[POLISH]

Did your husband stay in the ghetto? Did he stay in--

With me.

Well, he left shortly after her.

He left after.

Short after me. A couple of days.

Oh, OK.

[SPEAKING POLISH]

[SPEAKING POLISH]

Hmm? [SPEAKING POLISH]

[POLISH]

[SPEAKING POLISH]

[SPEAKING POLISH]

[SPEAKING POLISH]

OK. So he located my father with families of some Polish officers who were taken prisoner--

[SPEAKING POLISH]

--and whose sons he was training, and told them that my father was a very important agent and that they shouldn't ask him any questions.

Hmm. [AUDIO OUT]

[SPEAKING POLISH]

Was this in the country that your father was, that your husband was taken?

No.

No.

He give in Warsaw.

In Warsaw. So he was now in--

I go to country.

And you were in the country.

Mm-hmm. OK. With your son. OK, where did you live in the country?

[SPEAKING POLISH]

[SPEAKING POLISH]

[SPEAKING POLISH]

[SPEAKING POLISH]?

Nie. [SPEAKING POLISH]

She doesn't remember.

[SPEAKING POLISH]

Did you stay--

[SPEAKING POLISH]

Were you in someone's house?

[SPEAKING POLISH]?

[SPEAKING POLISH]

At the farmer's house.

Were you able to get enough to eat there?

[SPEAKING POLISH]?

Tak. Yeah. [SPEAKING POLISH]

She was trading. She had--

[SPEAKING POLISH]

Yeah, I think what she was doing is-- [SPEAKING POLISH]?

[SPEAKING POLISH]

[SPEAKING POLISH]

[SPEAKING POLISH]

[SPEAKING POLISH]

[SPEAKING POLISH]

OK.

[SPEAKING POLISH]

[SPEAKING POLISH]

[SPEAKING POLISH]

[SPEAKING POLISH] Ah, there were apparently some people who were making it their specialty to loot Jewish homes after the Jews were being taken away. And they were just taking all that loot. And there was apparently a market where they were just selling it in bulk. And my mother would go and collect these things, and repair them, and wash them, and iron them, and so on, make them usable again. And she would then walk from village to village and sell them to the farmers.

Was this, these Jewish possessions, were they in the country? Were they taken to the country?

[SPEAKING POLISH]

Nie. [SPEAKING POLISH]

This was in Warsaw.

[SPEAKING POLISH]

She would get these in Warsaw at a very cheap price, and then she would take them to the country.

So you were traveling to Warsaw?

Hmm?

Yes.

You traveled to Warsaw?

Yes, she was.

Yes.

Did you go by train to Warsaw?

By train.

By train.

Yes. I have the-- [SPEAKING POLISH]

She had false identity cards.

[SPEAKING POLISH]

Did the farmers who you stayed with, did they ever suspect that you were Jewish?

[SPEAKING POLISH]?

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

[SPEAKING POLISH]

[SPEAKING POLISH]

Tak, tak. [SPEAKING POLISH]

She was telling the farmers that these were belongings of wives of Polish officers who had fallen on hard times and who needed to sell these things. And she would actually sort of take orders for specific things. And when she would go to Warsaw, she was able to actually match the requests of her customers.

Was your son with you at this time?

Nie.

Were you afraid of being caught on your trips?

[SPEAKING POLISH]?

[SPEAKING POLISH]

She was.

[SPEAKING POLISH]

[SPEAKING POLISH]

[SPEAKING POLISH]

[SPEAKING POLISH]

[SPEAKING POLISH]

[SPEAKING POLISH] It was coming around wintertime. See, it was legitimate for strangers to be in a country during the summer. But he was suspicious for city people to be on a farm in the wintertime. So as winter fell, it was becoming more and more dangerous.

And she had a friend in one of the villages who was the organist in the village. And he told her one time that he was talking to one of the Volksdeutsches who was living in the village, and who told him that he thought that my mother was Jewish. So this organist told my mother about it, not because she suspected her of indeed being Jewish, but because he wanted to advise her to hide the merchandise, because if they had found merchandise, they would have imprisoned her because it was illegal to trade in merchandise. [SPEAKING POLISH]

[SPEAKING POLISH]

[POLISH]

[SPEAKING POLISH]

[SPEAKING POLISH]

[SPEAKING POLISH]

[SPEAKING POLISH]

[SPEAKING POLISH]

[SPEAKING POLISH]

[SPEAKING POLISH]

[SPEAKING POLISH] Ah, when my mother heard this, she came back home that evening. She went straight home and told our landlady to take her to Mszczon³w, which was the village where the farm was located. And the woman, without asking any questions, told her son to hitch up the horses and take her. She obviously understood what was going on. We took all our belongings.

Then, in Mszczon³w, she took a she was able to catch a surrey-- well, another cart, horse cart, to Zyrard³w, which had a train station.

[SPEAKING POLISH]

And finally, at midnight, she caught a train from Zyrard³w to Warsaw with me. And then she waited in a train station

until the curfew was over, and called my father, and said that she needs a place to stay-- that we need a place to stay.

I think I told you this story when you were doing my interview. It turned out she found out later, after the war, when she went to visit, that the Gestapo came about an hour after we left.

[SPEAKING POLISH]

[SPEAKING POLISH]

[SPEAKING POLISH]

[SPEAKING POLISH]

[SPEAKING POLISH]

[SPEAKING POLISH]

OK. We need to step back a little bit. In the meantime, my father, who had been placed with these women, he was making himself useful by teaching these youngsters sciences while they were-- in conjunction with their military training in the woods. He was teaching them sciences, since they were not able to go to school. And--

Was he in Warsaw?

Yeah. And he was very well liked by the mothers and the kids. And at that point, one of the Polish policemen, who was friendly, came and told them that the house was being under observation by the Germans. And so they all became concerned about relocating my father, because they had this idea that he was somebody very special.

So the father of one of the kids, who was a general in the Polish army, took him in. And then eventually the observation was dropped. And so they wanted him back. But the general said, no, he must stay with me.

So then, when she called and said she didn't have a place to stay, my father called these women and told them that she was a relative who needed a place to stay. And so we stayed with them.

[SPEAKING POLISH]

[SPEAKING POLISH]

In that same apartment house, on the third floor, there was a man who was going to play a major role in our lives. His name was Wodzinowski. And the people on the second floor basically matched him up with my mother. And he fell in love with her. And they liked Russian music. He was a little unusual. A little strange.

[POLISH]

[SPEAKING POLISH]

They became good friends. He was a financial director in the municipal government.

[TELEPHONE RINGING]

[SPEAKING POLISH]

[SPEAKING POLISH]

[LAUGHS]

[SPEAKING POLISH]

The municipal government was run under the German authority, but it was run by the Poles. And the Germans didn't really know what was going on. So the Polish infrastructure used that to hide their prominent Polish nationalists because they were protected by virtue of working for the municipality. So there were a lot of people hidden in the infrastructure of the municipal government. [SPEAKING POLISH]

No, I just want to know, when did you come back to Warsaw? When was this that you came back?

[SPEAKING POLISH]

[SPEAKING POLISH]

1943.

[SPEAKING POLISH]

And was your son with you?

Yes. So, to go after the-- [SPEAKING POLISH]

Nie.

[SPEAKING POLISH]

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

At that time, the Germans were taking a lot of hostages. And whenever there was any kind of action against the Germans, they would shoot a number of Poles.

[SPEAKING POLISH]

[SPEAKING POLISH]

[SPEAKING POLISH]

She was afraid that her husband would be among these hostages.

[SPEAKING POLISH]

So she asked Wodzinowski whether he could sign up her husband as a worker, an employee.

[SPEAKING POLISH]

The employees wore a special cap, and they were exempt from being caught as hostages.

[SPEAKING POLISH]

They would create positions. They would make a scene that they would have something fail, and then they would blame it on shortage of manpower, and they would create new positions.

Did they know your father was Jewish?

No.

Did they suspect?

No.

No.

[SPEAKING POLISH]

They'd advertise in a paper, and candidates would show up.

[SPEAKING POLISH]

[SPEAKING POLISH]

[SPEAKING POLISH]

It was A. Matter of life and death.

Yes, it was. [SPEAKING POLISH]

She said that my father was her cousin.

[SPEAKING POLISH] And [SPEAKING POLISH]

So he had her make photographs, my father's photographs, for the identity card.

[SPEAKING POLISH]

When he saw the photographs, he said, I know something. But I don't want to tell you because I don't want to upset you.

Who said this?

Wodzinowski.

[SPEAKING POLISH]

I said, please tell me.

[SPEAKING POLISH]

And he said he has Jewish eyes. I recognize that.

[SPEAKING POLISH]

So I said, I am relieving you of your promise in that case.

[SPEAKING POLISH]

But, he said--

[SPEAKING POLISH]

--he'll do it anyway, that he's not doing it for my mother. He's doing it for my father.

[SPEAKING POLISH]

After that, my father was able to move around freely.

[SPEAKING POLISH]

Wodzinowski.

[SPEAKING POLISH]

The women were jealous because she would come to visit my mother and not them, and he would lock the door and play Russian songs.

[SPEAKING POLISH]

No, [SPEAKING POLISH].

[SPEAKING POLISH]

And that rumor started that maybe she's a Jewess.

[SPEAKING POLISH]

When he heard this--

[SPEAKING POLISH]

--he then turned to the director of housing.

[SPEAKING POLISH]

They told him that it was the wife of an important Polish officer who needed a place to stay.

[SPEAKING POLISH]

She got not just a room, but a three-room apartment.

[SPEAKING POLISH]

Telephone, furniture.

[SPEAKING POLISH]

How long were you able to stay in Warsaw?

I was not-- [SPEAKING POLISH]

Nervous in that apartment. And as I was cleaning up, I noticed movement, [SPEAKING POLISH].

[SPEAKING POLISH]

[SPEAKING POLISH]

[SPEAKING POLISH] Kennkarte. [SPEAKING POLISH]

One time, when she was cleaning the apartment, she found an identity card where the picture looked Jewish.

[SPEAKING POLISH]

When the Russians were near Warsaw-- [SPEAKING POLISH]?

[SPEAKING POLISH]

[SPEAKING POLISH]

[SPEAKING POLISH]

So she met the custodian there one day, and they became friendly, and the custodian told her how there were several Jews in apartments there, and how they were taken away and beaten.

Yeah. [SPEAKING POLISH]

There was a Volksdeutsche there who had denounced one of those Jewish families. And he had suspected that we were Jewish too. And the custodian told him that he has a vivid imagination and that he suspects everybody.

[SPEAKING POLISH]

The moment she heard that, she decided to leave immediately.

[SPEAKING POLISH]

Couldn't anywhere else in Warsaw, because she would have to change registrations, so they could trace her.

[SPEAKING POLISH]

So she left and went to a village named Mlociny.

Mlociny, next to Warsaw. [SPEAKING POLISH]

And thought that since the Russians were already very close, that in another month they would be taking over.

[SPEAKING POLISH]

About 30 kilometers.

[SPEAKING POLISH]

Took a few things in a suitcase, and said that because I'm not feeling well in the city, that she's going to visit relatives in Zyrard³w.