

[SPEAKING POLISH] [SPEAKING POLISH]

Before the war, there were women who would bring in food from the country to the city. And there were-- so Juliana was dealing with them because she was doing all the food purchasing for our household. And so she couldn't take me there because they knew who I was. But once she gave me up to my aunt, she was able, then, to move in with them. And that's where she ended up. And the last time my mother saw her was when she took me away. And she hasn't seen her since.

She was in a house like I remember from family.

This family.

She was so good.

I think that was not uncommon in Poland. [HEBREW]

She was-- she was Russian.

[SPEAKING POLISH]

So with me, Russian. But when mine friend come from-- from the-- actually school, she want to speak Polish. She speak so half.

Half Polish, half Russian.

[NON-ENGLISH]

How many languages do you know?

[SPEAKING POLISH]

Yeah?

Yeah.

Polish, Russian, Germany, Italy, Hebrew.

And English-- six languages, my god.

Luck. Not English.

You know English a little.

I can't to give you only the five language for one-- English.

She would like to communicate with my daughter.

Yes.

Yiddish.

And you know Yiddish? Seven languages, OK.

She's willing to give them all up to speak to my daughter. Did you need any other locations?

Oh, no, thank you.

Saying that the--

She know that--

--the woman in the country--

--all the time, she know.

She knew you were Jewish all that time--

She knew, yes.

--that you stayed with her in the country?

He don't they told me.

But she didn't tell you. And she didn't turn you in.

[SPEAKING POLISH]

She was, in other words, protecting her all this time.

She protect me.

And that's why when my mother came and said, I have to leave immediately, there was no questions asked. She just woke her son up, said, saddle up the horses and take her. And the son said, what, now? You're crazy. And said, don't ask any questions. Just take her immediately.

Come people to her and told, oy, I think she is not a good. She's not-- no, no way. You fool.

She chased away people who were trying to tell her that you weren't good?

Try to tell her. Because she know you love-- [NON-ENGLISH].

You lie.

You lie. You idiot, you dumb.

You fool.

Fool. And I don't-- I don't know that she was all the time.

That she will.

It just wasn't spoken.

And she bring me mine-- all the things in Warsaw.

She worked--

Because I go away fast and with nothing. And she bringed me it all in Warsaw. He have freedom son in Warsaw, two sons, in Warsaw.

Was she someone you knew beforehand, before you went there? [HEBREW]

[SPEAKING HEBREW]

The penalty for hiding Jews was death.

[SPEAKING HEBREW]

[SPEAKING HEBREW]

[SPEAKING HEBREW]

She said that she didn't know the woman beforehand, that she just came to her because her sister had spent the-- or her husband--

Sister-in-law.

--the sister-in-law, her husband's sister, had spent the summer there just going in the country. And so that was how she came to her. She said, why don't you go there? They won't know anything. And it'll be safe.

And she was amazed by the fact when she asked the woman in the middle, at 8 o'clock at night, which was late in the summer, was asleep, to go, the woman didn't ask her anything. And she said, she wondered about that. And of course, it had never been spoken between them that she was Jewish. And she said, she really loved the woman. And the woman loved her because she really put her life in danger to take her in.

What was her name?

I don't-- [HEBREW]. I don't-- I forget. [NON-ENGLISH] [HEBREW]

[SPEAKING HEBREW]

[SPEAKING HEBREW]

She had three sons and a daughter. And whatever she said went in the home. She was the-- was the--

[SPEAKING HEBREW]

[HEBREW]

[SPEAKING HEBREW]

[HEBREW]

[SPEAKING HEBREW]

[POLISH]

[POLISH]-- carpenter.

Carpenter. [HEBREW]

She said, she was very, very intelligent woman. She sent one son off to Warsaw.

Her husband, husband. [HEBREW]

Her husband wasn't, I guess, much of anything. She had all the ideas. She sent one son off to Warsaw and paid for him to learn to be a shoemaker. And then he was able to open a store and did very well because there were no shoemakers around. She did the same thing with the second son, who became a carpenter.

And the third son stayed and worked with her. And she and the boy worked. And she said to him, and to the other sons, when I die, everything goes to the third one because he worked for you. So you could have this education paid for. And she made it all come out right, basically.

I bring when I come [HEBREW]

When she went into Warsaw to buy the-- buy the clothes which she then took into the villages to sell, she sent--

[SPEAKING HEBREW]

--the woman would send things to her sons.

Butter and-- And so she took it to her-- to her husband also

[HEBREW]

Butter and cream and sour cream and whatever was on the farm, I guess they could send.

[SPEAKING HEBREW]

She told her to call her son Janek when she came into Warsaw. And she would do that.

[SPEAKING HEBREW]

[SPEAKING POLISH]

[SPEAKING POLISH]

[POLISH]

[SPEAKING POLISH]

[SPEAKING POLISH]

[SPEAKING POLISH]

[SPEAKING POLISH]

[SPEAKING POLISH]

[SPEAKING POLISH]

[SPEAKING POLISH]

[SPEAKING POLISH]

[SPEAKING POLISH]

[SPEAKING POLISH]

[SPEAKING HEBREW]

She didn't tell the sons either that she was Jewish. She didn't tell anybody. But she herself knew.

[SPEAKING HEBREW]

Perhaps they would say something.

They're Righteous Gentiles.

Yes, you were lucky.

That's right. Is she listed, do you think? Is she among the people that Yad Vashem knows about?

Probably not.

[SPEAKING HEBREW]

She didn't know how to read or write. But she had a head on her shoulders.

[SPEAKING HEBREW]

When people would come by asking for food, she would-- The husband would take something and give it. And she'd say, is that enough for you to eat? And then she'd go and give more to the person that was coming.

I suspect there are a lot of cases like that that never came to light, never got listed, simply because no one reported them.

And the husband has TB.

He had tuberculosis?

[HEBREW]

He had tuberculosis.

Tuberculosis. [HEBREW]

He was spitting all the time.

And he was--

Running around?

--with him. When I go to Warsaw, I go to work to-- with this.

In order to get the clothes.

And he-- they love him. Of course, he was-- so as he come to me one day and tell me, Ima, a Jew. [NON-ENGLISH]. Because I must to send him-- oy-- [INAUDIBLE]. [HEBREW]

[HEBREW]

[SPEAKING HEBREW]

The catechism, must have been.

[SPEAKING HEBREW]

That's right.

No?

She said that she had to send her son to the church for catechism because it was the age that he was at. And the priest told him how good Jesus was. And so her son came back and said, Mom, can a-- can a Jew be a Catholic? I want to be a Catholic. And she said, she told him yes. She said, what else could I say?

I also wanted to confess that-- I wanted to go to confession and confess that I was Jewish. But fortunately, I told my mother first. She almost had a conniption right there.

[POLISH]

[SPEAKING HEBREW]

Secret, yeah.

Yeah, tell them that the priest was sworn to secrecy, that the priest wouldn't reveal anything that I told them.

[NON-ENGLISH]

But then I was-- I was pretty good in that respect. I was--

[HEBREW]

I knew that I had to follow her directions. And I realized that there was a certain code of conduct for survival and that it came from her. Even if I-- even if I was attracted to the Catholic faith, I realized that I had to heed her for my survival. So I'm just fortunate. Because I suspect very much that we wouldn't have lasted very long if I had confessed.

[SPEAKING HEBREW]

He was afraid that they'd go to hell because they weren't Catholic. So he wanted to make it right.

[HEBREW]

He would pray for them so they wouldn't go to hell.

For mother and father.

They thought you were going to go to hell.

And son.

OK.

He was--

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

Was so cold, so cold, we could-- we could give so.

No matter how cold it was, he would get down and pray.

For 30 minutes sitting in the cold for mother or for father.

As I was very compulsive about everything I did.

It had to be very confusing for children.

Yeah, well, not-- yeah, I guess. I guess it was. But I was very sincere about this. I got quite involved in the Catholic religion. It didn't last very long. But at the time, I was quite involved.

He was eight year, seven or eight years.

Yeah, well, it was-- it was a little confusing. But there were two very strong feelings. I mean, I knew that I-- that I-- that spiritually, I was part of the Catholic Church. But I also knew that physically, I had to depend on her for survival. Because, I mean, the memories of the ghetto were still very vivid in my mind. It was only a year earlier. So I knew that there was another part of life that had nothing to do with the Catholic Church.

Is there anything else?

Sure.

OK, well

And was, there was, there was. And now, now, I am old.

Now, we have to-- now, we have to look to the future, the present and the future.

Yeah.

It's like being born again. The big impression, I remember, when we went to Italy, it was-- even though we were in a refugee camp, it was quite a different atmosphere. Because there was no question of survival. And we knew that things would get better. There was no question that things would get better.

And there was no question that we would have food to eat and a roof over our head and that our life was not in danger. So it was quite a radical departure from-- even from post-war Poland. Because even though our life was not immediately threatened in post-war Poland, but it was the place where our life had been threatened until recently.

So that trip from Poland to Italy was very meaningful. It was kind of like going into a new world. Where-- and I remember one of my strongest reaction was that people actually lead normal lives-- I mean, going for walks. And they were walking hand in hand. And there were movies. And there were people sitting in cafes.

And I could not imagine how people could lead a normal life after what we went through. I just could not fathom that. It was such a shock. I guess it was some kind of a defense mechanism, that we felt that the whole world was concerned about us. And then we came out and I realized that they weren't.

That life had gone on.

Yeah.

How did you feel about coming to Israel and living in a Jewish state after all you had been through?

[SPEAKING POLISH]

[SPEAKING POLISH]

She felt very well. She had the usual reaction of people who immigrate to Israel that--

This is all mine.

--Jews are in unusual roles--

This is so just-- --including policemen and railroad conductors. And it felt good to see Jews in those unusual roles.

[HEBREW]

It's all mine.

[SPEAKING HEBREW]

She felt a bit of an outcast in Poland. But here, she felt at home.

All right. Good.

OK. Thank you very much.

This has been Norma Stern interviewing Sabina Hershaft about her experiences as a survivor of the Nazi Holocaust. This interview will be included as a valuable contribution to the Oral History Library of the Oral History Project, Jewish Community Council of Greater Washington.