

Benjamin/Judy Rubinstein, 7/24/89 #76, #77

WH: ...you were both born in Vilna?

JR: Not Vilna. Lithuania...Calderhea...

WH: Did you have a brother and sister?

JR: Yes...they live in Israel. They left for Israel before the war...

WH: You parents didn't make it?

JR: They died before the war.

WH: ...(says hello to daughter)...do you have a son also?

JR: Yes...he's in real estate...

WH: What year were you born?

BR: 1906

JR: ...my husband is not in very good health.

WH: ...so, did you have brothers and sisters?

BR: They're all killed...my parents, they passed before the war.

WH: Did you (two) meet before the war?

JR: We are cousins...second cousins.

WH: ...you were married when the war broke out?

JR: Yes.

WH: During the war you were in the concentration camp?

JR: We were in the ghetto...Kovno Ghetto...than I went away and live with a Gentile.

WH: For the rest of the war. You were able to make it through...were you ever afraid?

JR: Yes...he (the Gentile) was a carpenter, and he made a double wall...and I had to hide when people came, and I used to go in that - and close myself in that -.

WH: ...is your daughter single?

JR: She is divorced.

WH: Your son is married...Jewish girl?

JR: Yes...

WH: Is she from an American family?

JR: Yes...(and they have) two children. A boy and a girl.

WH: Do you belong to a synagogue here?

JR: We belong to Beth El...Conservative, my son belongs to an Orthodox...her family belongs there...

WH: Were you brought up religious?

JR: Everybody was...but during the war, I lost my religion. My husband became very religious...so we comprise...we are Conservative now.

WH: So you made a compromise, you made it in the middle.

JR: Uhh (yes)...so that the children being counted as Jewish people, we joined (inaudible) I sent the children to Sunday School in the Reform Temple, and my husband used to go to the shul. But, my was Bar Mitzvahed in the Orthodox shul.

WH: So you were in the Kovno ghetto until?

BR: 1944 and then I joined the Partisans...

WH: Were you involved in the fighting?

BR: No, no. But I had a rifle.

WH: How did you meet up after the war?

JR: Through the Red Cross.

- WH: After the war, did you go to a D.P. camp?
- BR: Yes...in Berlin.
- WH: What year did you come to the United States?
- BR: In Christmas. '47.
- WH: Who made out an affidavit for you?
- JR: He had two brothers in Kenosha.
- WH: So that explains why you came to Kenosha.
- BR: That's right.
- WH: ...after the war, did you think about going to Israel?
- JR: Yes. We thought to go to Israel.
- WH: What happened?
- JR: We got tired. We were so tired from the concentration camp. And tired from living in a D.P. camp. And I had a child that died in that camp.
- WH: Your first child?
- JR: No. My daughter, then I had another girl, and then when we crossed borders, (inaudible) and we were the only Lithuanians there in the camp, and Lithuanians had a good name, when the Polish people had to go away somewhere, they brought all their -...
- WH: They trusted you.
- JR: ...jewels, their money, everything, they used to bring to us. And there was some Lithuanian girls that were with the Russian army, and they ran away...so, we took them in, we felt sorry for them...and one was a carrier of diphtheria, and we didn't know, and I just came out from the hospital. And my daughter - .
- WH: How old was she then?
- JR: ...She got whooping cough...she was 3 months old when she died...(because) when she (the girl we took in) took the child and wanted to help me, I was happy, and she kissed her, and I said,

“You don’t kiss a baby.” I never kissed my baby, kiss a baby on their behind, but you don’t kiss a baby in the face. I said, “Don’t kiss, don’t kiss a baby. ...later I found out that she was a carrier...and the baby died...so I was so tired out, that I wanted to have a home and a roof over my head. And we said wherever we’ll be able...to go first we’ll go. In fact we were Hebrew teachers in the camp.

WH: You were both Hebrew teachers?

JR: Yes...but we felt sorry after we came here. We were very sorry that we came to the United States.

WH: Could you tell me a little more about that?

JR: Because the source of life. We couldn’t find it, - and fit in ...you know ...the expression in America, “He’s worth a million dollars.” So people thinks he has money....I knew already how to speak English when I came here, but still I spoke with an accent...

WH: So you didn’t fit in with your brothers-in-law because they were American.

JR: They thought that people from Europe, that they were, like I got a sister-in-law that when she left Europe, Europe was different...now she ask me, (she) gave me a banana and she asked me if I knew how to eat the banana. That I have to eat the inside, not outside...we made a big mistake that we came to Kenosha...

I taught Hebrew school...they gave me \$15, four times a week I used to go into Racine. But then the children were terrible. There was no State of Israel. They only went to Hebrew school because their parents wanted them to. And because of the Bar Mitzvah...my first year, they paid me \$3 in the Temple in Kenosha but I took it to see how I do with my English... I taught there (Racine) four years, and the children are terrible. They’re only rich people in Racine, and very wild...so when I complained to their parents, they said, “They are all day in school, they have to let off steam.”...

WH: If you would have been an American, would it have been any easier?

JR: They don’t care...the American teachers didn’t care. If I would have a class from 5 children, I would feel terrible, if 5 children wouldn’t learn, I would feel terrible. But here, they don’t care. The parents don’t know anything, and the child (inaudible) goes up to Bar

Mitzvah time and says his part in Hebrew, which – many mistakes, the parents didn't even know, and the teacher said, "Oh, how wonderful! He did a good job!" And I can't do that...So, after four years I got another job...after I got \$15 an hour teaching in Racine, I took a job of seventy-five cents an hour in a dry-cleaning place...than I went down to American Motors, and I got a job, I was in the factory...on the assembly line...I made more money than my husband did...then they laid off all the women...(tape inaudible)...then I worked in a hospital...

WH: How long had it been since you were in this country?

JR: ...five years...I went to school...I got a degree. (tape inaudible)

WH: You seem like a very determined person.

JR: Yes. I am.

WH: ...what were your hopes, your expectations when you came here?

JR: I wanted to have a home, a roof over my head. And, of course, I didn't expect anybody – some people came, like the other ones, they came here, they came to Milwaukee, they came to New York, they helped them out. We didn't get help from anybody.

WH: Who helped them out?

JR: The Jewish - ...the Russian people that came in here. All the help that these people had! They gave them homes, they paid their rent, they gave them everything! And they had free medical care. I had to worry, I had a goiter, I had to have surgery. I couldn't do it, because what will I do with my kids? So I waited until we came to Milwaukee, after many years ago, when I had the surgery, then it wasn't okay, I'm hoarse, as you noticed. It was a complication. So, they get everything. They get a year free, medical help. They get hearing aids, they get teeth, they get glasses, and they demand! And they get it!

WH: Your friends, I mean, you came to New York then, if they came to New York, they got help from the HIAS, right?

JR: Yes, they did get from the HIAS...they did help a lot...but we didn't think to ask for help.

END OF SIDE ONE

SIDE TWO.

BR: ...I was in the Kovno ghetto...I escaped into the woods...and met the partisans in the woods...

WH: And that's how you made it. When you first came here to the United States, you came to Kenosha, what was your first job?

BR: My brother was in the liquor business (inaudible)...I was happy to get a job there. I was a partner there for 10 years.

JR: From 7 to 7 at night, and a very small wages, and no insurance.

WH: What was your salary?

BR: \$65 a week...

JR: Later he left and went over to American Motors. Thank G-d for American motors.

WH: ...do you feel that your brothers took good care of you?

BR: Yes! They did.

WH: ...than you got a job with American Motors...

JR: Yes. American Motors, and I thank G-d there were American Motors. We had insurance, health insurance. Can't go wrong by that!

WH: What was the Jewish community here like...how did they treat you?

JR: Okay. It's a small town. It was okay. Between your **work** you don't have time for a social life. If I work and I have children, and I have a house to take care of, I don't have time for a social life. The same thing when we came to Milwaukee. I only know people that I know them from the hospital. And I know them now, after I retired, I go with my husband to temple, so I know the people from temple.

WH: You don't sound like a very strong believer to me.

JR: No, I am not...how can you believe when you saw that what was going on. I couldn't. And I mentioned it still the other day, too. I had, it was a relative, it was my aunt, and my uncle's brother, they considered him a holy man. You know, that man didn't do

anything bad. He lived with my aunt and my uncle. In all his years, he was studying the Gemara and- ...looking where the Messiah will come...and he was putting on his tefillin and the Nazi came, while he was praying, and pulled his beard, and hit him, and he was bleeding. And I'll never forget that picture. And I said to him, "Just where is your G-d?" and he said, "Judy, how can you say that?" And when my son was bar mitzvahed, he was bar mitzvahed in the Orthodox shul, he used to put on that tefillin, and I couldn't stand it. I couldn't stand it. So, after a year I let them, and then I said, "It's enough! It's enough" Don't put on that tefillin." I would never forget that. That picture on that VERY religious old man. Of bleeding, and - you know, while he was -. And he said, "How can you say that? It's Messiah (siden? - needs translation)" He said, "Messiah is going to come."

WH: ...(inaudible and needs translation)...you mean that these terrible things have to happen, before Messiah can come. And what was your opinion?

JR: When I came to Kenosha, I told them...(inaudible) I went to the Reform Temple, and I said, I went to lectures, I want to find (inaudible) so he (the rabbi) lectured, and I say to him, "Rabbi, tell me, why did the six million die?" He said, "I don't know. I wasn't in Europe."

WH: That's what he said to you?

JR: Yes. And I said, "Rabbi, tell me another thing. How do I explain death to a child? - And tell me why...why, if there is no life thereafter, why is all this suffering?" So he said to me, "That if you can find heaven in suffering, like Helen Keller," I said, "You know what rabbi? Your religion is (?not?)phony. But I'll still send my daughter, to your Temple, because I want her to be with Jewish people. But it's not for me."

WH: Was he an intelligent man, this rabbi...?

JR: He was a rabbi. And I said, how do I explain death to my child, and he gave me books to read that explained the Orthodox way.

WH: And he was a Reform rabbi?

JR: He was a Reform rabbi. Because he didn't have an answer. So, there was no answer.

- WH: So, what do you say to people who say, “Listen, I know there’s no answer because we can’t understand G-d’s ways. What do you think when they say that? That it’s nonsense?”
- JR: What is G-d’s way? Why? Why? Why did all these people have to – I have an uncle, he was an angel. He was a mayor for the city. He did so much good to everybody. And they beat him up. And he died in front of all – (inaudible). Why? (inaudible).
- WH: ...you believed in G-d up to that point?
- JR: Yes. You couldn’t believe in G-d. How can you believe in G-d?...I go to shul because of my husband. He believes, and he enjoys the davening. And he’s a very sick man, and the only time that he’s alive, is when he’s in Temple. And I look at all these people, and I think, “they’re really praying!”
- WH: ...do you believe in G-d?
- JR: Yes.
- BR: Yes...(inaudible).
- JR: (inaudible) ...one of the things, too, that I quit my teaching, because I thought “What for?” (inaudible) “If I don’t believe in this, why should I teach?”
- WH: (inaudible)...”
- JR: (inaudible)...I felt guilty. Why did I survive and all the good people died? I felt guilty about it.
- WH: (inaudible)...so many people who died...
- JR: I’ll tell you, the riff-raff survived.
- WH: You mean in general.
- JR: Yes. (inaudible)...the good people couldn’t make it.
- WH: (inaudible)...do you think that what happened in Europe could happen here?
- BR: G-d forbid. I don’t want to think about it.
- JR: ...the Blacks (inaudible).



WH: You mean, there's a bigger Jew here.

JR: The Blacks. Where the Blacks will fight back.

WH: The average Gentile that you meet here in Milwaukee, do you think that they are potentially anti-Semitic?

BR: Oh, yeh!

WH: (inaudible)...when you came here...you didn't want to accept help, you didn't want to take charity (inaudible)...are you sorry now?

JR: No! We didn't do too bad.

WH: In what way?

JR: We are okay.

WH: When you look back on your life...what is it that you feel most proud of?

JR: That we helped ourselves, and were all the jobs, there isn't a job that you mentioned, that I didn't do in a lifetime. From the lowest to the highest. Everything. I was a teacher, I was in a – cleaning store, I was in a factory, but those years – I was a maid in war time, I was a (inaudible) shipper, the main thing I worked is a (inaudible) teacher. (inaudible).

WH: You were an educator.

JR: I worked in a bank. (inaudible)...in a shoe factory...I was in charge of it. (during the war)...

WH: What about the survivor groups here?

JR: That maybe was a mistake that we didn't join them...

WH: Then you would have had more friends?

JR: Yeh.

WH: ...(inaudible). Did they ever approach you to join them?

JR: No.

WH: ...you came here, and your life was very hard, you came to a small city, you came to Kenosha, you were the only Lithuanians here, right? So you had double problems. First you were from Europe, second, you were from Lithuania. Then you had a lousy job for a while, a good job, a bad job, this job, that job, and you had health problems, and would you say that you're happy that you came to America after everything?

JR: It's a good country. It's a nice country.

WH: What do you like about it?

JR: If you are not lazy, you can make a living. There are no gold on the streets like they say, - here people think there are - gold on the street. (inaudible) They only got to go and pick it up. But, if you are not lazy, you can make a good living.

WH: When you have free time now, what do you do?

JR: I don't have free time now. My husband's very sick...I used to volunteer in the clinic, and I enjoyed it. When he got sick I had to give it up.

WH: Did you ever visit New York?

JR: No...

WH: The day you left New York, - .

JR: I never saw anything from these United States - Kenosha and Milwaukee!

WH: That's all you know, Kenosha and Milwaukee?

JR: Jay. (inaudible)...I am happy to stay at home. They all look at me, because I stay...

WH: ...did you speak to anyone about the war...

JR: No.

WH: You don't talk to people about it?

JR: When I talk to somebody, then I can't sleep.

WH: Did you ever talk to your children about it?

JR: No.

WH: You didn't explain it to them? You didn't talk to your daughter about it? They never asked you?

JR: they know some of it. When we came here, (inaudible) nightmares, and I was sick, and I had pains...(inaudible)...I said, "I'm hurting (inaudible) I don't want to hear it! I don't want to see it! And I don't have to hear it."

WH: For the younger people today, maybe if they know, I'm not talking about Jews, I'm talking about Gentiles, maybe in some way it could help...do you think it does any good to educate people about what happened?

BR: I don't know that's here.

WH: ...(inaudible)...your daughter, she's married. Did she marry someone Jewish?

JR: Yes.

WH: If one of your children had come home and said they wanted to marry someone not Jewish, what would have been your reaction?

JR: My daughter is religious, she wouldn't do it. But I would mind. He would - .

WH: ...He wouldn't like it.

JR: No.

WH: ...when you vote do you favor one side...?

JR: Sure! We vote Democrat...

WH: And about Blacks, do you think they should have the equal rights? Do you think that they appreciate it?

JR: We wouldn't like to have Jackson...I vote with Blacks. I get along with them real nice.

WH: ...what do you think made it possible for you to go on, to continue living...to continue after all the terrible things that happened, and

after you lost your family and everything, where did you find the strength to go on?

JR: That is burning you! When you fall, you push yourself up, right?

WH: Where did you get your strength...?

JR: You have the zeal of your life is in everybody. Like I say, if I fall, I always get up (inaudible)...the zeal of life is in everybody. Why didn't people commit suicide? Why? Because it's a hoping, you know, (inaudible)...

WH: ...there is something that I think that Lithuanian Jews take a certain degree of pride in their culture. And that they were the seed of intellectual learning, aside from the Vilna Gaon.

JR: Yeh, we had like I say, Hebrew High Schools, we had all cultures...we had such a wonderful thing!

WH: What does Lithuanian culture mean to you?

JR: We were all educated, for instance when we came in the D.P. camp, who were the teachers there? The Lithuanian Jews. Because we had the education in the D.P. camp...

END OF SIDE TWO.

END OF INTERVIEW.