

Unauthenticated

Interview Alma Goldberg

Date of Interview

Site of Interview Here

A: Whatever you want.

Q: Suppose you start with your name...

A: My maiden name is Bessler, B-r-e-s-s-l-e-r, Alma.

Q: Date of birth?

A: Was March 22, 1930.

Q: And you were born where?

A: Czernowitz, Bukovina. The street, I remember the house, the street, Hormuzacki Street. Let me spell that. H-o-r-m-u-z-a-c-k-i or k-i number five.

Q: How many brothers and sisters?

A: Just one sister.

Q: And you were the older sister?

A: Yeah, we're two and a half years apart.

Q: What's your sister's name?

A: Lydia. Born Bressler, now Goldring.

Q: So we have Goldberg and a Goldring?

A: Lots of gold in my family, right!

Q: What was your father's business?

A: My father was in the men's and ladies' stockings; importer and retailer. He had one of his stores, I remember the name. It was a brand of silk stockings called Areca, A-r-e-c-a. His name was Rudolph Bressler. My mother was Jeanette Bressler. J-e-a-n-e-t-t-e. My mother was born Herzog.

Q: Related to Theodore Herzog?

A: No, but they were -- somebody told me in Israel that there's a Rabbi Herzog, comes from the same town that my mother originally comes from, Radautz, Romania. There may be something there, I don't know. I never pursued it. There's no one to ask anymore.

Q: Right. You mentioned that your father had four stores?

A: He had two manufacturings of berets in two prisons, one was in Seerbu and the other one was in Berzowa.

Q: So prisoners actually produced these berets?

A: Yeah. The berets, they were -- I mean -- the schoolgirls used to -- not the Jewish ones because. Before the war, I guess the beret with the number here and then that what he manufactured, just the berets. He imported lingerie and stuff from Germany before the war. He was 18 years old.

Q: How old was he when he started his family?

A: He started his family -- my parents were married in 1926.

Q: Were you a religious family?

A: Very traditional, yes.

Q: You observed the Sabbath and --?

A: Kashrut. And my father was a big soccer fan. They won this thing with Macabee. In fact I remember every season, all the players that came in, who were invited for lunch in my house. Because he didn't have a son, only two girls, he used to drag us every Sunday to the soccer game. That would bother the hell out of me.

Q: These were the Jewish soccer leagues that played?

A: And the non-Jewish. I think they were all Jewish. From Poland, the soccer players came, from all over. He was a very avid, ardent fan.

Q: He didn't play, just as a fan?

A: Yes.

Q: Did your mother work in the house?

- A: Yeah. Legal secretary as a young girl.
- Q: She was? Did you live in a home or an apartment?
- A: In an apartment.
- Q: What do you remember about that apartment? About the size or --?
- A: Being afraid. Not very large. There was a living room and dining room. There was a large kitchen. We had a maid in the little, olden days, who slept in the kitchen on a cot. Separated like this and there was a large bedroom and the living room had a sleep couch, something like that. That was in Czernowitz. Then my father bought, built an apartment, bought it. We never took possession of that because we fled. I mean everything started to happen. Nothing came of that.
- Q: So he eventually bought the building?
- A: No, in a different location. But we never did get to live there. When we started to furnish and they were finishing it, we were not allowed any more.
- Q: What kind of schools did you attend?
- A: I went to a kindergarten, there was a Romanian school. It was, you know, not a Jewish school. Then I started primary grades there.
- Q: Also the Romanian schools?
- A: Yes. Herescu School was the name of it. H-e-r-e-s-c-u.
- Q: Did you also go to Cheder?
- A: No, we had private teacher at home. It was hard because like I said, the Romanians were not big fans of the Jewish people and so there were no Jewish teachers per se. Especially for girls, but we had a teacher come to the house, to teach us. A Jewish teacher, named Mr. Clipper. He always had an onion and some bread in his pocket and when we didn't read it right, he'd hit us with the ruler.
- Q: Oh, really? And the onion and bread was just for him to munch on?
- A: Right. That was standard equipment for Hebrew teachers.
- Q: He taught you just Hebrew or also Jewish history or studies?
- A: Both.

Q: How many days a week would he come to your house?

A: In the beginning, twice a week. But then when things got bad and we couldn't go out or to school for that matter, he came every day. Then in the morning and there was a group of us, children who didn't have to go on the street. You know, they were skipping on the fences to come. He would teach us Hebrew and Judaism and his daughter would give us classes so that we could -- we were not allowed to go to school. Math and geography and Latin, oh God, I had 12 years of Latin.

Q: What do you remember about any favorite subjects you had in public school?

A: Mostly recess. I don't know. Not really. I liked history and I liked geography and I hated math.

Q: Do you remember any incidents of anti-Semitism from the other children, the Romanian children?

A: Oh, yes. We used to come home from school when we were little. My mother came -- brought us and then picked us up. Afterwards we'd come home on our own. We were beaten up every time we came home. We were beaten by the Christian boys who came from school at the same time. Used to throw stones and I remember I had a friend who was the priest's daughter that lived next door. She used to go with me and sort of like try to protect me and chase them away. But yes, there was spitting and stone-throwing and "dirty Jew" and that kind of thing, that was the order of the day.

Q: You lived in an integrated neighborhood?

A: Yes. We had the Greek Orthodox Church, the prominent religion in Romania was Greek Orthodox. The church was right across the street from us and the priest's daughter was a very good friend of mine. We played together in her house, in my house. He was very kind because when they came to take us away, many a time he would shield us. I remember the daughter's name but I cannot remember his last name. Irina was her name.

Q: What was it?

A: Irina. I-r-i-n-a.

Q: That's a very Romanian name.

A: Well, it's Irene actually.

Q: Right.

- A: Irina. And then we were not allowed to go to school any more, you know, the Germans --- So we didn't--we had these lessons at home.
- Q: Do you remember what year that was? Or how old you were when you stopped going to school?
- A: I guess eight, I'm not sure. I have such a mixture in my head of Bucharest, Romania and ---Cuba.
- Q: Right. I can check it.
- A: Czernowitz and Cuba. Anyway, I must have been eight or so.
- Q: What do you remember about -- did somebody give you a reason why you weren't going to school any more, do you recall?
- A: Yes, because we were Jews. Wait a minute. I did one year of what they called lyceum a high school, one year.
- Q: Gymnasium?
- A: Gymnasium. One year and it was a Jewish school. It was Hoffman, Hoffman Lyceum. I don't know if I finished the year or not. In Czernowitz. I don't remember if I finished the year or not. I know that because I had a number here and I had a beret with a number here.
- Q: I see. So that was a private Jewish school?
- A: Yeah. Hoffman, it's called. I don't know if I finished the year or I didn't finish the year. I don't know that. But that's about it. The rest I took -- we were being taught. Every neighborhood tried to have somebody nearby that could go without going out on the street. So that's how we learned and we came after the war in Bucharest. I was, I did an exam. I was admitted into high school. It was really individual teaching and she was very dedicated, this woman. She was the daughter of ---.
- Q: This was Mr. Clipper's daughter?
- A: Right. And she was very dedicated and she was determined to teach, for us not to be without schooling. We did that. I didn't like it but we did it. But then there was nothing else to do. Because we couldn't go on the street anyway so we did that.
- Q: Were you a well-to-do family before the war?

A: I would say yes, I would say yes. So many standards of well to do. We were very comfortable, let's put it this way.

Q: Would you take trips at all in the summer months or --?

A: Yes, yes. We used to go to --.

Q: Carpathians?

A: Yes. We used to go to --. First of all, as little children we went to a place called Kimpolung which was in the Bukovina. Then later on we became more sophisticated. That was from Bucharest. Czernowitz, we went to Kimpolung which was in the mountains. We had sort of like an efficiency and my parents went for bath. My father came on the weekends, something like that.

Q: A spa of some kind or --?

A: I don't know, yeah, more or less, yeah. My mother went for this bath. Once she took us to -- I was very little. She took me to Czechoslovakia, to Prague. What was the name of it? Some resort, I hated it. I cried because I couldn't take those - - the smell. She took me with her into this, like a spa. They were taking these mud baths and the mud things -- I hated it. I only got to go once. After that we went to Kimpolung, you know, a lot of people were there. We had a river, in German it's called the Prut River, we used to go every day there. In the summer, whenever there were no threat of pogroms. Every -- I remember distinctly, I don't know with what, whether there was a real schedule, every two months, every three months, but I know that every once in awhile, when the rumor came out, we had to go in hiding. That was before anything else.

Q: You'd pretty much lock yourself in the apartment and ---?

A: No, no, no. We went -- this guy hid us.

Q: I see. And the pogroms were committed by Romanians?

A: Romanians, Ukrainians, the Cossack group. I am \_\_\_\_\_.

Q: Would they go as far as to kill Jews?

A: Oh, sure. They would go so far as to take a rabbi and take hair by hair, pull his --- . That's what happened to Rabbi Mark, Cherna's rabbi, temple. It was the Germans afterwards. First thing they did. It was a plaza like; it was a big temple. It was an orthodox; we didn't know anything about conservative or reform then. So the women's balcony was up there and the men were down there. It was a very beautiful plaza and they went in and they made all the Jews dig a grave.

They took Rabbi Mark and they absolutely tortured him, shot him that he fell inside the grave, inside that pit..

Q: In the plaza, this was?

A: Yes. The Germans did that and a few other people from the synagogue. Then they liked the way that this came out so they went from house to house. I remember on four occasions, my father was already standing, was all the men together. Something always happened and I cannot give you an explanation. Somehow, that they were saved. Either somebody called them away or something, I don't know what it was but it was dug. The hole was dug in our garden and my father was standing around. My mother and my sister was sitting there, you know, from the window. Only the men. Something happened, either with the war, I don't remember what it was but somehow he was saved. His father died like this too. So error and fear is what I grew up with. Possibly I can't remember because of that; I thought I pushed it out of my life. There were better times when we came to Bucharest. As I said before, my mother -- my father -- my relatives actually in Bucharest decided that -- little by little to bring us out of there. Because Czernowitz was very bad. My mother got somehow a certificate that she needs an operation in the capitol, in Bucharest. As two minors, we went with her.

Q: She didn't need an operation, this was \_\_\_?

A: No.

Q: A fake?

A: Right. We got there and it was great. We couldn't go out because they were looking for people from Czernowitz to re-deport them. So we were hidden for a good three months in somebody's house until that thing blew away, whatever it was. It took my father seven months to walk from town to town; from the northern Romania into the capitol, Bucharest. He arrived almost before the Germans started to bomb. That's how we were reunited and we had four years of constant bombardment in Bucharest.

Q: In Bucharest?

A: Yeah. So we were going constantly --. There was a big, big building. One of the biggest, where my aunt and uncle lived and we were with them. I don't know which bomb was it, the British or the American took two stories off that. We were under -- well they were building, the building was already done with, what is it called? not for bomb, for shelter, was an air raid shelter down there. We practically lived there because it was -- in the morning, the British, then the silver, the Americans came; then the Russians. So we were back and forth, back and forth. At least they didn't have time for the Jews. A lot of people were killed in

shelters because the bombing it had to be. It was such a mixed feeling. We knew the bombs, they coming to bomb; but we were happy they were coming. So a lot of people perished in the -- Jews and non-Jews, I imagine.

Q: So those four years, you pretty much stayed in your aunt and uncle's home and didn't venture out much?

A: Yes, yes, uh-huh. No, I remember going to, on the corner there was a movie, Ingrid Bergman and -- what was the movie? I just saw it on television recently -- I never saw the end of that movie until we got to Italy. It was -- the bombs were coming so I didn't see that movie.

Q: I see. So you were at the movies and you had to leave?

A: Intermezzo. Well the alarm was sounding. There was pre-alarm that went when they left Italy. The pre-alarm they had to evacuate the movie immediately. So we had only about a block to go. My sister and I never saw the end of it until we got to, I think, America or Cuba, the end of the movie, Intermezzo. Then we did our - - after that we did our equivalency, we went to school.

Q: In Bucharest?

A: Bucharest.

Q: In Bucharest. What kind of school did you go to? When did you start going back to school?

A: After I -- they hold an exam for those, the equivalency. I was taught at home; so were many others. We went into junior high school. The junior high school and high school and I got my baccalaureate. What is it called? Finish of high school, the big exam. There was an oral exam and a written exam. The oral exam -- they were communists, of course, and you couldn't say anything about ---. You had to say, you had to lie. They twisted history a lot and you had to go along with that, otherwise they failed you. And it was a very tough exam, a whole day exam. I remember my mother fasting on that day because we knew we were trying to get out and she wanted me to have that document with me. I passed it and then there was years until we got the visa for, the transit visa for Hungary and Austria but the exit visa expired. So we went for two years until finally it happened. We took a lot of our stuff, like some china and some crystal that were in the family for a long, long time and we shipped it to Israel to my aunt. That's how come I have these -- whatever pictures I have. Because when we left Bucharest, we were told that you'll come crawling back and you don't even need anything to take with you. They examined my teeth and the hair for diamonds and for whatever. My father buried a lot of stuff. They now have a refrigerator factory there so there's no chance of going to get that. We came out and went to Switzerland first and my father got some money out from what he had long before the war. If we didn't



have that money, we could never have made it. We bought some clothes and we tried to go to consulates, to get a visa. Switzerland only gave you so much stay and you couldn't stay any longer and they would not prolong it. So we came to Italy. In Italy we went to the American embassy and they informed us that we can't get a visa. We lived in Italy for eight months.

Q: Where in Italy?

A: In Milano. We traveled through a lot of this -- whenever an embassy was. There was a question of Costa Rica or Cuba or Venezuela or whatever. My father, deep inside him, was hoping that the Russians would go away and he would be able to go back.

Q: To Czernowitz?

A: No, to Bucharest. Czernowitz is gone. Was given away. He never told us when there was a boat. Finally we got a visa to Cuba. According to my father's cousin in America; he said that's the closest, forty minutes. So you wait a couple of weeks and then you'll come here. A couple of weeks turned out to be ---.

Q: It was 40 minutes between Cuba and the U.S., right?

A: So we chose Cuba. We went to the Cuban embassy in Italy and we got our visa. Then he was holding off. Every time we go to check when there's a boat to Cuba, he said, there's no boat to Cuba. He thought maybe they'll go away, maybe we'll be able ---. He just ---. We wanted to go to Israel and we were advised not to. We went through a lot so much already and I mean, '48; the State was born in '48. This was '47 and there was a lot of things going on there and so finally, he couldn't hold anymore and we took a boat. We went to Cuba. We had falsified papers in Italy, I want you to know, from the Romanian government --in-exile because we only had a visa for 30 days and it came, what, eight months we stayed there. So they kept falsified on our passport, that we have. We got a Cuban visa and a false Romanian visa. Even the language was not correct because they were a government-in-exile. They forgot how to speak Romanian from King Michael's. So we got our Cuban visa and we came to Cuba. We stayed in Cuba and waited and waited.

Q: The entire time, trying to leave Cuba?

A: Yes. Right. No, we didn't. We couldn't get a visa. My father was -- how can you sit in a hotel. How long can you --? My father went into business. We had an apartment. I was working, my sister was working. I went to business school and learned steno and I was a secretary in six languages.

Q: You're living in Havana?

A: In Havana, yes. And so is my sister, import/export companies. We were very happy. My parents suffered and they, I mean it was hot. The hurricanes, they're - - besides when an American visa comes. We go.

Q: What year did you go to Cuba, what year did you leave Europe?

A: Left Europe in '47.

Q: Do you remember the exact date?

A: No, I remember we got --- no, I don't remember the exact date. We got to Cuba in 1948, the hottest year, the hottest summer, well, it was all year around. The biggest hurricanes, that was Cuba. Then we came here to the United States and my father again went into a different business. He -- his cousin was in knitwear so he worked with him for a while and then he opened a wholesale store, down on Ludlow Street. He was selling to stores and he was manufacturing himself. In other words, not manufacturing but contracting; sweaters and all kinds of knitwear. Then he had a heart attack and died.

Q: How old was he when he died?

A: Fifty-eight. My mother was 67 when she died five years later. It's just, you know you go through so much and you -- she just couldn't live without him. Of course, my sister and I ---. My sister lives in Florida, in Miami Beach. She lost her husband. Suddenly for -- a very, very strange --. There were 14 people in cases like this in the world. He was number 15, he had cancer in his heart, can you imagine that? They removed almost half of his heart and they replaced the wall with woven, imitated --. He lived for a year and a half. I met Charlie on a blind date. Never knew what a blind date was, always wanted to know. Because in Cuba, there were 8,000 Jews in Cuba and everybody knew everybody, if not intimately, but of everybody. Nobody knows what it means to have it like that, that was it. Now are you going to behave Charlie or do you want me to talk for you or what? {Male voice: I'll do my best}. Pull yourself together and just. You ask your questions, he'll answer, how's that?