

Interview with Charlene Schiff  
March 2, 1993  
Alexandria, Virginia

- A: My name is Charlene Schiff. I was born in Horochow, Poland, December 16, 1929.
- Q: Can you tell me your name then?
- A: Yeah, my Hebrew name was Sulamit Perlmutter and my nickname was Musia.
- Q: Musch?
- A: No, Musia.
- Q: Oh, Musia, okay. And Horochow?
- A: Horochow.
- Q: Horochow. That's right outside Lvov?
- A: It's about an hour's drive from Lvov. It's a small town.
- Q: Can you tell me a little bit about growing up in the town?
- A: Yes, I can tell you all my wonderful memories. I had an idyllic childhood. I was surrounded by love. I had two wonderful parents and one older sister. She was four years older than I. We had a very good relationship. My parents were both educators. My father was a university professor in Lvov.
- Q: What was your father's name?
- A: Simeon. Simcha, Simeon, Simeon Perlmutter, Simeon.
- Q: And he was a university professor in Lvov?
- A: Yes. That was a state university.
- Q: What did he teach?
- A: Philosophy. My mother did not teach but both of them were civic leaders in town and I would like to bring out the fact that they were leaders not just for the Jewish community but for the entire town as well. What hurts so now in retrospect is that when we needed help no one extended a helping hand to us. Our neighbors and former so-called friends turned against us. My childhood was very, very happy. I know my father had five sisters and a mother who emigrated to America and he was in I guess, in the process of arranging for us to join them in the United States when the war broke out. I don't know why he was the last one to emigrate but I understand from -- also in retrospect that it was because these were women, sisters, and he decided he would take care of them first even though he was somehow in the middle. I don't know the actual chronological years but unfortunately we never made it. Ironically in 1939 he

was offered two tickets, two invitations to the World's Fair in New York and he refused. He asked for four and of course they didn't give him four so we never did make it or he never made it. My childhood was very, very happy. I remember a big house. Our house was always filled with people. In those days or at that time we'd have like meetings and concerts, poetry reading.

Q: At your house?

A: Yeah and all these many students of his would come and it was a very happy house, home, and I think that's what gave me strength to survive in a way because I did have a very solid background of love and security.

Q: When did you start going to school?

A: Well, my father was a believer in education, obviously, and we had tutors from the time I was four years of age and that's when we started and then I guess to regular school I started at around six.

Q: You went to public school?

A: Yes, I went to public school but we still had private tutors for Latin and for German and piano music.

Q: So you knew four languages then?

A: No I really didn't. I was not a student. I was more of a tomboy. My sister was very musically inclined. She played the piano, she played the violin beautifully and she continued. I played the piano but I really didn't give it any of my soul or anything. I liked to play and run around and just do the normal things.

Q: You said you were a tomboy. What did you mean by that?

A: Oh I would climb trees and do that sort of stuff.

Q: Around the town was there a lot of lakes and streams and things to play with?

A: No, there was a river and I remember once, as a matter of fact on my fourth birthday there was a party and at that time, it's very hazy, but we did not live in a big house on the fashionable street. My father and I walked along the river, on the banks of the river and that river played a very important role in my life. I looked over to the other side and I said, Papa is that America on the other side and he tried to explain that it was not. There was one river. There were two ponds and there was a great big, it's not a forest -- what do you call -- like a park but filled with trees and all and that park or on the edge of the park lived a lady who owned an awful lot of land and she was the, like the (I don't know what you would call it -- the word escapes me now) but she was from nobility, Polish nobility and she was like a princess. And she lived, she was an old lady at that time; she only had some servants and all who tended her. But she lived right on the edge of that great big park and it was like a palace. And then we had like a mayor's house, the Starosta and all these people used to come to our house, the mayor, the Polish priest and the Ukrainian priest because our town was partly Polish and partly Ukrainian and partly Jewish. In our house everyone met on an even status and it was very interesting. I mean I took it for

granted. My friends were Polish, Ukrainian, Jewish, and I really even though you're not asking me, I never felt any anti-Semitism in my childhood. There probably was some but I never felt it personally. And when I think of it now it was probably no small achievement that my father was a professor at a state university as a Jew and to me it was a given. That's the way it went on. My mother did an awful lot of philanthropic work in our town and I remember they organized camps in the summer time for needy children, Polish, Jewish, Ukrainian and there was always an awful lot of activity and it was a very happy home. I mean there were many things. You talk about being a tomboy. I was the bane of my sister's existence. She was four years older and I always wanted to do what she did. Of course she resented it. One time we had they call it a frete pian so it's not really a piano I guess but something like a piano in a salon, in the living room. One time I got hold of some paint and I painted the keys. I was punished for that but I did it so she wouldn't be able to play. Those are the things I remember from my childhood.

Q: How large was the town approximately?

A: Twenty, thirty thousand, just about that.

Q: So it was a good size town. It wasn't a small town?

A: It was a small town, yeah, but it was a very typical shtetl as they call it.

Q: Was there a large Jewish community there?

A: Yes very large and very active, large, I don't know probably several thousand Jews and there was a Jewish day school they called `Tarbut and there was a society, I guess, the Kahila that governed the Jewish community. There were several different synagogues. There was a rabbi and that's it.

Q: Were your parents religious?

A: They were traditional but they were quote emancipated unquote. They were not very religious, they were traditional. I knew who I was, I knew my identity. We observed all the holidays and that's another thing I remember. Once before Passover I was given a little Star of David and a gold chain and I lost the Star of David and there were about twenty people at the table and this is like a big dinner at Passover and everybody was made to crawl on the floor to find my little Star of David which they found. But I don't remember going to synagogue every Saturday. No, we didn't do that.

Q: Can you tell me a little bit about -- you know as much as you can remember -- about the invasion of Poland by the Germans in 1939?

A: Well before the Germans invaded my town the Soviet Union took over because Poland was partitioned in two. The eastern part of Poland became the property of the Soviet Union and we fell into that category. So in 1939 when the war started September 1, 1939, the Russians came in. They came in with their tanks and with their soldiers.

Q: Did they come in on the first or did they come in a few weeks later?

- A: They came in maybe a week or so later and I remember long, long processions. At that time we lived in a big, big house on the main fashionable street. Litsa Miskawicha and I remember long hordes of refugees coming from the other part of Poland trying to get away from the Germans and we didn't understand what was going on. They came in with tanks and with soldiers but very little bloodshed. There was a lot of chaos but pretty soon things became again sort of normal. I personally did not realize what was going on. I knew there was a change of government. The emphasis in my life was that the language, the formal language became Russian instead of Polish. But again that was not much of a problem because in our area everyone was either bi or tri-lingual. It was a little difficult in the beginning. A lot of people lost their jobs and all. My father did not. They kept him on and he continued in Lvov. There was one change which I just realized a few days ago. He used to also teach in Kracow, I don't what do you call it, as a visiting professor and that stopped. Well it stopped obviously because the Germans took over. But other than that our life did not change that much.
- Q: You stayed in the same house?
- A: We stayed in the same house. You see we were not materialistically, we were not rich or we were not -- I guess my family was part of the intellectual group in the town so our life has not changed much. This went on for not quite two years. Our schools didn't lose a beat. The only thing is that the official language changed into Russian.
- Q: Were you taught Russian in the schools?
- A: Yes.
- Q: And were the businesses in the town nationalized, that kind of thing?
- A: Well you know what was happening and again this is all in retrospect which I didn't realize. Some people would disappear in the middle of the night and not be heard from again. And these were probably the people that they considered capitalists. These were business people who owned businesses. Yes, I guess the businesses changed hands so to speak and all of a sudden there was a shortage of one item, two items, three items. Yes, definitely, the whole picture of the town did change.
- Q: Can I back up just a little bit before the invasion? Do you remember your father, your family in general being concerned about the Germans coming to power, the Nazis coming to power and becoming more powerful?
- A: Well, I don't know. This was not discussed in front of me but I know my father had a fantastic library in his little office in our house and now and again they would have meetings and they closed the door. A lot of people would come, a lot of his students and they would talk and then I would never see them again. And then I found that a lot of them emigrated in a clandestine way illegally. And a lot of them ended up, many as a matter of fact, ended up in what is now Israel and some of them ended up in the United States. And some of them we never heard of again. But yes, there were many discussions and there were concerns.
- Q: Now you said something about earlier when we spoke about trying to get out and go to the United States your father.....

A: Yes, my father.....

Q: When did he try to do this?

A: Well, it seems like all my life there was talk about it but I know that at one point, I don't know exactly, I think it was 1938, we all had to go to Warsaw and be interviewed or something and this was part of the process of getting ready to emigrate to the United States.

Q: But the papers just didn't come through before the invasion?

A: I don't know what happened but apparently so, unfortunately.

Q: Was there anything, you know you talked about your life under the Soviets when they came in, I there anything else that strikes you about the Soviet rule about anything that you could remember that was very striking to you?

A: Well, I guess going to synagogue was a little more -- I mean it became less frequent. It didn't affect any of my immediate friends so I am very hazy about it and I know that it was difficult and I know that they probably nationalized the businesses and all but from my own personal point of view I cannot relate to it too much.

Q: You made mention about the synagogue. Was there a conscious effort by the authorities to discourage religious practices?

A: I don't know, I'm sure it was but it was done in a very subtle way and I think my father was conscious of it and probably cognizant of it that he is not supposed to go to synagogue too often.

Q: You said he was allowed to go to Lvov. Do you remember if he was allowed to travel freely in that way back or forth?

A: Yeah, he was traveling back and forth but I don't think we traveled anywhere else.

Q: Why don't you tell me a little bit about when the Germans invaded the Soviet Union?

A: Well, that happened in the summer of '41. Again I guess Hitler and Stalin, or Hitler decided to break his agreement with Stalin and he started pursuing his evil plans by occupying the territories first of Poland and then going on to Russia. The Germans came, again it's almost like out of nowhere, again with tanks and their soldiers were much -- they were dressed sharp, they looked sharp. To me it was an event of change, but in a way exciting. It's hard to say that but it was. They came in and we didn't know what to expect. I know my parents were very depressed but they did not share these feelings with us openly. Again we saw a lot of refugees, as we call them now, people going with the Russians. Why we didn't do it, I don't know. I'm sure it's very difficult to make decisions like these when you have a family, when you're on your own. I want to track back and I think that my father was an ardent Zionist and I think that we didn't go to America for two reasons and this is my conjecture. One, the authorities and the red tape was absolutely awful and took a long time and secondly my father's heart really didn't belong there and yet being a family man with two kids it was difficult for him to make a decision to do what he told his students to do and a lot of them did then. They went to Israel.

- Q: Do you think he was advocating for many of them to leave?
- A: Oh, I know he did because we made a trip to Israel in 1985 (decade is unclear) or so and I met some of his students. They organized an evening to honor the memory of my parents, especially my father, their mentor, and they told me that.
- Q: Did they remember you?
- A: Yes, they remembered me as a little pain in the neck. Yes, they did. And I remembered some of them. Yes, my father was really an ardent Zionist. I didn't realize then, I didn't know that.
- Q: Did you know much of his activities in that vein?
- A: No, I know he was preoccupied with education and all. He had a number of doctorates from different places and that was his life. But the rest of it, no, I did not know. He was a wonderful father, he was very stern. There was discipline. We did not speak at the table until he spoke. But that was all right, we didn't know any different so that was okay. I think I digressed from something that you asked.
- Q: No, that's okay. We can get back to it. I've got a couple of other questions but I wanted to step back just a little bit. I asked you about the invasion, the German invasion, but I wanted to step back just a little bit if I could. Before when we talked about how your father had discussions with students and other people about Germans, the Nazis coming to power and that kind of thing.
- A: Yes, I think so because there were all sorts of newspapers and the radios and the political situation was discussed constantly.
- Q: Do you, now this is an interesting question because many people at the time especially historians speculate that some people in the Soviet Union may not have known or tried to play down the fact that the Germans were going to invade. Do you remember if your father was concerned about that?
- A: I don't know. I think he was always concerned with the world situation and they always, I mean at these discussions and these gatherings political situations were always discussed whether it was a concert or poetry reading or so but yes it was always discussed.
- Q: When the invasion happened in June of '41 do you remember how long it was after the invasion started that the Germans came into your town or arrive in the area?
- A: I would say within a week, not any longer than that. There was no bloodshed or anything. They just came in. In the very beginning, I don't know if it was the same day they marched in or the next day, all the Jews, right away they zeroed in on the Jews, we had to meet at the marketplace and right away they started with their decrees to strip us of all material possessions slowly but very systematically. The first request was for the Jews to give all the gold, maybe all the silver, all the radios, everything that had any material value, carpets, Persian carpets, you wouldn't imagine, furs, fur coats, all sorts of things we had to bring to the marketplace, or whatever, I think it was the marketplace, the Germans took that. And that went on for about a

week. Then they went around with a list of people which tells me that the local inhabitants had to give them that list.

Q: Somebody had to give them that list.

A: That's right. They didn't know the names and they went for specific men. These men were all the leaders, the Jewish leaders in the community. And of course my father was one of them and they took him away. Just like that.

Q: And that was within the first week of them being there?

A: Within the first week or maybe the very beginning of the second week, that's it. There was so much chaos and so much confusion. I don't recall but every day since the Germans came in was just like a nightmare in the beginning and that was not even the real nightmare. But that's the way I lost my father. They came in. He saw them; he tried to run out through the kitchen, through the back way and they were in the back there with the Ukrainians and they grabbed him and that was that. The rumor had it that these people, the leaders of our community were taken away and sent to Dachau. Now I find out that there was a big question mark. Some people told me that it's probable that they were all executed right there and there's supposed to be a mass grave which I never got to see upon my return trip in 1988. Or some of them did go to Dachau. I searched in Dachau for any sign, lists and all. I could not find anything and I still to this day, I do not know how or when my father died. After they took away the leaders of our town which was a very organized plan to just cause chaos and confusion once the leaders were gone. Then they, I don't know the sequence, the chronological sequence, but they burnt all our synagogues and they gathered, we had to be there to watch it, every Jewish person.

Q: ...was taken out to watch it.

A: ..to watch it. They burned all our books of prayer, our Torahs, everything. And they did that in one day. Then we went home. Everyone who was fourteen years or older was ordered to work. In the morning they would gather in a certain place, my sister and my mother. I mean it was such a stupid, useless...most of the work was useless. My mother was digging ditches and things like that. My sister at that point was also digging ditches. Then, after a little while, every day there were different decrees and different orders, loudspeakers. Before the ghetto was organized, one day a van pulled up in front of our house and several Germans came out and they came up to the house and asked where my father's library was and my father had a rare collection of first edition books and I mean that was his life's hobby (all the little money we had I think he spent on the rare books) and they knew about it. How did they know about it? Somebody told them.

Q: And these were Germans who came?

A: Germans, yes. And they cleaned out his library which was stacked. My father's library was a place where we had to wash our hands to go in. We were not allowed to touch the books without his permission. He really had a fantastic collection. But anyway they took it all, packed it in boxes.

Q: This was after he had been taken away?

- A: Yes, that was after he had been taken away. And they gave my mother a receipt. They thanked the gnaidika frau. They thanked her yet and they drive off.
- Q: At this point in time not long after the invasion do you remember if there was a differentiation between what we might call like German soldiers and maybe Nazi troops, that kind of thing? Do you remember that at all?
- A: No.
- Q: They were just German soldiers?
- A: They were just Germans to us.
- Q: Do you remember when the Germans actually came into the town, were there people who were happy to see them and not just because they were fascists but maybe against the communists or that kind..?
- A: Oh yes, they were greeting them with flowers, yes.
- Q: There were a lot of people in town doing this?
- A: Oh yes, they were lining the streets with flowers and applauding, yes. Then after another few days there was an announcement in the middle of the day. That day nobody went to work because every day my sister and my mother were told to meet at six o'clock in the morning to go to work and they would be herded back in the evening. That day no work. I don't remember but in the morning, maybe ten or eleven o'clock there were loudspeakers going around and announcing the fact that we have to meet in the marketplace within an hour and we can take with us what we want to take, what we can carry with us and that's what we did. We grabbed whatever we could.
- Q: Do you remember what you took?
- A: Yes, I remember what I took. I also remember that my mother had enough foresight that we had some gold coins and a few rings. I mean not much because we were not a family that was very materialistic. But she sewed into our clothing and to each my sister and myself and her own clothing some of the jewelry into the linings. She said you never know. This is for a rainy day. And so we grabbed the clothing, the coats and whatever. I don't remember what else we grabbed but some pillows and blankets and we went to the marketplace.
- Q: And that was in the center of the town?
- A: Yes, and there we were marched into a very poor section of the city, of the little town and we were assigned a place to live. Our place was one room and we shared it with three other families. Mostly there were women and older men because the leaders were taken away, about three hundred of them or so. And that's the way the ghetto was formed. The ghetto was surrounded by a high fence that was finished off with barbed wire and there were two gates, one in the front and one in the back. Everyone who entered had to have a written permit. In the morning the people who worked were marched out and they were marched back in in the evening. The place was guarded by Ukrainian militia. There were very few Germans in the

ghetto. They were on the outside mostly. That's when our nightmare really began. The rations were very meager but if on didn't work, there was no ration. So I did not receive a ration and my mother and my sister had to share. I mean they didn't have to but they shared their rations with me. In the beginning people still managed not to give all their material possessions to the Germans so there were some opportunities to barter on the outside and bring in some milk and bread and what have you. And that's the way we survived. My mother and a few other of the women organized a clandestine school for children like myself because we were really left with no supervision and nothing to do and they managed to get some school supplies from the outside by trading rings or gold or whatever people had. So for a while we had a wonderful school in the evening in the ghetto. We, I mean kids, really looked forward to it. They read books and we sang songs and we colored and did all sorts of little stupid things just to occupy our minds but it was very good for us. But it did not last very long. After a few months that sort of dissipated and it disappeared because people didn't have any more to trade for supplies plus the fact that winter set in and there was a lot of cold and illness and starvation and mostly everyone was just concentrating on being able to survive. In the ghetto we were ordered to wear a Star of David, a yellow patch, on the front of our clothing and on the back of our clothing. Even within the ghetto you couldn't move without having that patch. It was a very difficult thing and even as young as I was I realized that we were separated from the rest of humankind because we were different. We were not as good as anybody else. And that's a very demoralizing thing to live with. Most of all I think we were preoccupied with being hungry. Hunger is something very hard to describe. It's so paradoxical now. Everyone is on diets and we say we mustn't eat so much, cholesterol, what have you. But real hunger is so painful. It absorbs or it takes over your entire being. I don't remember what I ate yesterday but those years are etched in my memory. They were indelible. I remember I was so hungry that I would do anything to get something to eat. So many times even though I promised my mother I wouldn't do it, I would sneak out of the ghetto.

Q: Did a lot of people do that?

A: Many of the children did it because my age or even younger, the ones who didn't work, there was nothing to do all day long and all you could think of is how hungry you were. And so we did. We had an ingenious, as a matter of fact two places in the ghetto where we dug holes and camouflaged them and that was not through the gates so we would go out, sneak out and try and beg or barter for some food and then we'd go back the same way. It was difficult and we were very obvious. We were recognized that we were not the same as the people on the outside because our clothing and we were dirty and we were unkempt and all that but we didn't care, we were so hungry. And some people on the outside, I say the outside, the Ukrainians and the Poles were good to us. Others were not. If you were caught on the outside it was punishable by death. I did it a lot of times and I was not caught. I'd bring an egg home to share with my family. I would bring a slice of bread or something like that. One time I did go out and I managed to get two eggs for a little ring and I got it out of my clothing and I was getting back and I was almost at the place where I would crawl in the hole and get back and this Ukrainian militia man caught me. He started yelling at me and he searched me. I had a dress with puff sleeves and I put one here and one in here. He found the eggs and he threw them on the sidewalk and made me kneel down and rub my face in the eggs and screamed at me and said get back where you belong and I don't want to hear from you anymore, I don't want to see you anymore. So I guess he was a gentle person because he could have killed me. He didn't. But I didn't give away the hiding place either. He marched me to the gate and pushed me in and that was it. I had scrapes on my face and whatever but that didn't count. A few days later as a

matter of fact a dear friend of mine, she was about eleven a little older than I at that point, and she went out and she got a loaf of bread and she never made it back to the ghetto and they shot her right on the spot and they dragged her body right into the ghetto and they wouldn't allow the burial committee, because they had a committee for that, they wouldn't allow them to bury her for a week.

Q: As a warning?

A: Yes, there were so many not warnings but I mean sadistic things. One time, I mean I could go on for days, one time there were three fellows who made their way from work, young fellows as a matter of fact, and they tried to escape. And they caught them, three young fellows, I knew one of them, I didn't know the other two and they gathered us, the market wasn't part of the ghetto, and they made us watch when they hung them, three and then they let them hang there for several days. And each day the people who would go out to work had to march around.

Q: Pass by them.

A: Yes, to watch. These guys would stand with whips and if your face was down they would smack you so you would look up and watch the hangings, kids, everyone. When we got to the ghetto my mother still continued digging ditches but my sister managed....

Q: That was the work that she was doing outside the ghetto?

A: Yes, supposedly building roads. All she was doing was digging ditches, covering one ditch and then digging another ditch and covering the second ditch. That's all they would do.

Q: They were keeping them busy, basically.

A: Yeah. But my sister managed to get into an old warehouse. These were mostly young women who were knitting and crocheting clothing articles for the soldiers on the front. That was a very good job because it was indoors so that was good. But I remember one day she was not feeling well. She couldn't go to work so it was decided that I would take her place. So I took her card.

Q: How old were you at this time?

A: About eleven. But people didn't care as long as I had the papers. All the Jewish people knew but nobody would say anything. So I went there and they showed me where her seat was, the bench and I don't even remember what she was knitting. It wasn't crocheting, it was knitting, a scarf or a sweater. No, it couldn't have been a sweater because I wouldn't know how to do that but a scarf I did know and that was it. And I started knitting and all of a sudden I felt someone was looking at me, watching me and there was this mean looking German going around and just looking. And he stood behind me for a while and observed me and apparently I wasn't doing it fast enough or whatever and he got very angry with me. He started screaming dunner vetter and started cursing. And I didn't answer. I kept doing what I was doing. Finally I didn't please him obviously. He grabbed the needles out of my hand and stuck one of them in my finger and this is what it is now. I passed out and that was my experience taking my sister's place. In the beginning of the ghetto there was like a little hospital. And there was still one doctor left. And I remember his name, Dr. Grossfeld. He tried to do his best to help people but that again didn't last long. Pretty soon there was no more hospital, there were no more supplies and he

disappeared. That's another thing that was happening in the ghetto. Every now and then at no specific time for no reason obviously a van would come or a big truck and they would grab people just....

Q: Just indiscriminately.

A: Indiscriminately, babies, little kids, old people, anybody. They would just grab them, put them in the truck. And you never heard from them again. Dr. Grossfeld disappeared in one of those actions where they would come and just grab people indiscriminately. That's why there was also such a demoralizing feeling. One never knew, I never knew if I would see my mother and my sister again because these actions could occur during work or after work or before work or anytime. And that uncertainty too was very, very difficult.

Q: If you weren't going out and trying to get food or something how did you spend your days in the ghetto while they were at work?

A: Just sitting or walking with my friends and talking about food. That was all we talked about. At that point somebody asked me, well didn't you talk about your Dad. He was taken. Well, my mother was really in retrospect when I think of it a phenomenal person. She never let us give up hope. She would always talk about plans -- how we would celebrate when Daddy came home. I didn't think it was that unusual but she turned gray overnight when they took my father away. Overnight. She woke up -- she was completely gray. I guess she knew deep in her soul that my father never would come back. Yet she wouldn't let us give up hope. It was a very difficult time. But again when I look at it from today's perspective it wasn't so bad for me because I still had my mother and my sister. At that point their love and our caring for each other compensated for all the physical atrocities, and they were atrocities. We were cold; we were hungry; we were not well; we were uncertain of our tomorrow. It was almost as if you lived in suspension from day to day. And that's the way we coped. It was really terrible when you think of coming from a fairly advanced civilized life to living in one room with three other families, sharing the whole house, that was a big -- I think a three story house, we share one bathroom and one kitchen for the entire house.

Q: Do you remember how many people were in the house?

A: I would say at least a hundred.

Q: And you had one bathroom and one kitchen?

A: Yes. But anyway life went on. Winter came and that was very difficult. There was no heat; there was no warm water. There was as a matter of fact very little water, even cold water. People started dying, people disappeared in the actions and in early spring we got a new decree.

Q: This would be in 1942?

A: Yes, early spring of '42. We were ordered to move again. Grab what you can whatever you have and meet in the central place. That was not the marketplace but in the ghetto. What happened was that they decided our numbers had dwindled and they didn't need such a spacious place as we had there and they moved us to a smaller ghetto and that was really one of the shabbiest parts of town. Nobody lived there for years. However there was one redeeming

feature in that new ghetto. It was again surrounded by high fence and barbed wire and all these goodies. But one side of the ghetto was right next to the river and our assigned place to live was in the little shack right on the river and that was not fenced in. It was really even worse and smaller than the place we lived before but it was on the river and it was important to us.

Q: Why was that important?

A: Because it was open and it wasn't guarded. My mother was rather happy with that. When we moved we were again with different people and again there wasn't enough room to sleep us all on the floor so we had to build like bunks so there were three in a row stacked up. And then life went on again the way it was before except that there was much more chaos and people became more panicky and even though we had no outside knowledge of what was going on, no radio, no newspaper, no mail, we were completely cut off from the world, the people who were going out to work would gather some information, rumors from the outside. Somehow rumors begin to float in the ghetto that they were going to kill us all soon. There were also visible signs. There were more Ukrainian militia in the ghetto and there were more Germans within the ghetto, too. They would just march around with their high boots, all dressed up and spit when they'd see you and make you walk on the road not on the sidewalk. And then my mother apparently, I don't know if she started earlier, but that's when she shared it with my sister and me, that she started looking for some places where we could hide. For a long time she said she couldn't find, make any connection on the outside. Finally one day in the spring she came back and she was very excited. And she said she found two places. She couldn't find one hiding place for three but she found two. One farmer was willing to take two people, obviously for money and another one was willing to take one. And there was her Solomon's decision -- who will go where. Well my mother decided since my sister was four years older than I she could manage by herself and my mother and I would go to the second place. The farmer who agreed to hide my mother and me was known to us. He was on the other side of the river and before the war my mother would get, many times she would get dairy products, milk and cheese and butter from this farmer's place and it sounded very logical to me. How she did connect with them I don't know but she did. She was not happy but she was satisfied that she was able to accomplish that. And we just waited for the time that she would say when we should do it. And that time came in early August.

Q: Of 1942?

A: Yes. One day in the morning or the night before my sister packed her little bundle. My mother helped her. In the morning we said our goodbyes and we were making plans how we'll meet after this horrible time was over. I never saw my sister. She went to work in the morning and that was the last time I saw her.

Q: Was the plan for her to go from work?

A: From work to the hiding place, yes.

Q: Do you know where her hiding place was supposed to be where she was going to?

A: I know it was right on the outside of our town and then the farmer was supposed to come and pick her up from work. It was not in Skbelka which was the place my mother and I were going to hide.

Q: Now Skbelka is a different town from....

A: Skbelka is a little village.

Q: Across the river from your town?

A: Across the river from my town, yeah. She left. There were several days my mother didn't hear anything. She was satisfied that everything went well. Then she said the time she'll let me know when it's time for us to go. Meanwhile there was a lot of commotion in the ghetto, many more Germans. They were coming and going and it was evident that something was going on. So about a week, I don't know exactly, but about a week after my sister left she came home one day from work and we ate our meager supper and she told me to put on two of everything that I had the best which wasn't that much left. I remember I had some high top shoes that you don't wear in the summertime but she said put them on. She packed a little bundle of stuff for herself and a bundle for me. She kept repeating giving me directions of how to get to the farmer's place on the other side of the river.

Q: Were you going to go together or separately?

A: Together. At night when it got dark. You see there were no guards or anything so that was very good. Otherwise we couldn't have gotten out of the ghetto. So when it got real dark she took my hand. We just walked out. We didn't say anything to the other people. But everybody had different plans. Whoever was left was going their own way and everybody was confused. There was not a good relationship. It seemed that nobody knew what to do and everybody wanted to survive. They tried to hang on to life whatever it cost. And so we left and we walked into the underbrush, the bulrushes and all.

Q: Now did you have to climb out of your window or something like that?

A: No, no.

Q: You just walked right out and right to the river.

A: Walked right out. That little shack was right on the river. I guess the Germans felt very secure. Where would we go? Into the river? And so we started walking towards the river and all of a sudden shots rang out. It was so still. It was very, very quiet and so we couldn't move. The shots were sporadic but it lasted almost all night. And so we were stuck. By morning many other people had the same idea as we did.

Q: To get down to the river.

A: That's right, so every....

Q: You were still in the underbrush at this time?

A: We were in the river but it was it was shallow. We were covered. It was thick underbrush, these bulrushes I guess and all sorts of things where you could hide. But by morning a lot of other people kept going into the river and by that time machine guns were going full blast all the

time. There were these screams and shouts by the Ukrainian militiamen and this is something I can't get rid of that sound and of that phrase and they kept screaming; village ????. Meaning crawl out Jew, I can see you. Most of the people came out. We didn't. We stayed there. That lasted a whole day and by night when night fell the machine guns were going full blast. We couldn't move. And so we stayed there. I remember my mother gave me that soggy bread that she packed and it tasted awful and she made me eat it. She said I needed the strength. We spent another night in the water and the next morning there was fire and there were screams and I heard babies crying and I guess the time they were liquidating the ghetto. I can't say the water turned red but it should have because the machine guns were going again full blast all the time and we stayed in that river. I kept dozing off and I know we stayed in the river for a number of days but I don't know exactly how many days. But one moment I opened my eyes and my mother was gone and I really became panic stricken and I tried to rationalize that I probably fell asleep and she had to make her way to the farmer's place and I would have to find my way there by myself to join her. And then all of a sudden everything got quiet. There was no movement, nothing. And I stayed until dark and then I made my way across the river and I walked. I remember walking, walking for so long until I came to the farmer's place, to the barn. I'm sure I must have been a sight, dirty and wet and the dogs started barking and the farmer came out. It was just beginning to -- daylight wasn't -- I mean it was dawn and he came out in his coveralls and I asked him if my mother was there, He said no. I said well I'll wait until she comes. He said what do you mean you'll wait, you will not wait here. I said you did agree to keep us here for a time, I didn't know for how long. He said well, I changed my mind. It's too dangerous. I said well, just let me stay until my mother comes. He said you can stay the day, I'll give you something to eat and at night when it gets dark you better leave or I'll report you to the authorities. And I was just bewildered at that point but it was very ironic because I noticed he wore my father's gold pocket watch with the coveralls

Q: That's what your mother probably paid him....

A: I'm sure that was part of it, I'm sure. But his wife gave me some soup and some food. I wasn't even hungry at that point. I stayed in the barn until it got dark and they gave me some bread and an apple. I remember and they told me to leave. And I was so I guess bewildered and really panic stricken. I didn't think straight and I walked on the main street of that village. Anybody could have seen me or caught me but I was lucky. God was with me I guess if there is a God. And I walked all the way on the main street of that village until I came to an open field where we lived. It's agrarian, it's the breadbasket actually of Ukraine so there were these lush wheat fields and I spent the next two days in a field just sitting there like in a stupor. By that time the bread was gone and the apple was gone and I just didn't know what to do and my mind refused to give up. I felt, I don't know how to say it, but I felt as if I had let my mother down, that I dozed off if she had to leave me and now he's looking for someplace for me because he refused to give us protection. And so I decided then that my only way to live or to survive is to find my mother and I felt that I have to go and look for her. Our area has many forests so I decided then and there -- it was still early fall -- that I have to go from forest to forest until I find her. And that's where my odyssey really starts. I started going from forest to forest and I walked and walked and the illusion when you look at something -- I mean my geography wasn't any good but I soon learned south and north and east and west. You look at a forest and it seems it's so close and you walk and you walk and it's not there. I walked all night and I tried to rest in the daytime. But meanwhile I needed to eat, too. So I would try to go to little villages in the outskirts and grab something from a garden or something and that's the way I survived the first months. The first months were also -- several things happened that were horrible. In the very

beginning I would come across stragglers like myself from different ghettos because apparently Hitler liquidated all the ghettos in our area about the same time. I would find other people in the forests who were in similar situations. They were looking for their loved ones, they were looking for friends or whatever. And so I tried to get information about my family. Nobody knew anything and I didn't know anything about theirs. One time we were on the edge of a forest and there were seven of us from different places. There was a mother and a baby and two boys and two women. Anyway there were six other people and we were sitting and trying to get information from one another. And all of a sudden a bunch of kids from the neighboring village spotted us and they started yelling at us. "Jews, Jews." There was remuneration for reporting a Jew, however small it was. And they ran back to the village and we realized that soon somebody's going to come after us. We were sitting on the edge of a forest. This was -- there are different kinds of forest -- this one had very little underbrush. There was no place to hide except climbing up a tree which wasn't the smartest thing to do. But there were huge haystacks in the field so we ran to hide in the haystacks and somehow for an unexplainable reason we all ended up in the same haystack, all seven of us. I don't know what the haystack looked like on the outside but I'm sure it wasn't very difficult for them to realize where we were. Pretty soon we heard voices of the villagers and the kids and they came back, they came there with pitchforks. They just made a game of it and they kept pushing the pitchforks into the haystacks. That went on for hours it seems like. It was in the afternoon, late afternoon. And pretty soon it was quiet and I heard a lot of commotion around me. And when it got real quiet I waited, I think it was the middle of the night when I crawled out.

Q: Were there people still in there with you?

A: No.

Q: You were alone at that point?

A: I don't know. It was quiet; it was completely quiet and I crawled out and there were six bodies lined up, their clothes gone, their shoes gone, mutilated; couldn't recognize them except the baby because of the size. Baby was on the chest of the mother and I was the only one who survived that massacre. I don't know why or how. I don't know, maybe I was in the middle, I don't know. And I stayed there for a while. I didn't even cover them with leaves or anything. I just walked away. There were many incidents like these. And this went on for three years. The winters were very difficult because it was not only hunger and thirst, it was cold. And the snow, footprints would show in the snow. Dogs would give you away if you go close to a village or to a barn. I tried, in the winter I tried to go from barn to barn and to keep warm or I would crawl in, they have these, they were not haystacks but where they kept, where the peasants keep the potatoes. It's like....

Q: Potato cellars.

A: Something like that. It was just awful. It was not only the hunger and the cold. It was being alone and sometimes not hearing a human voice for weeks at a time. It got so many times where I just didn't even care but I kept getting my strength from the fact that I had to find my mother. I never found her. And then apparently I got very sick and I was like in a little grave covered with leaves in the forest and the Russian soldiers found me there. I don't know how long I was there and they took me to some hospitals and they nursed me back to health. My quest, my search for my mother continued and when the war was over I went back to my home

town. I found that there was one other person who survived. She was an older woman. As a matter of fact she is here in America. She lives in Duluth, Minnesota. And other than that there were no other survivors. I mean there were people who made their way illegally during the war but the survivors from the ghetto were just myself and this other woman. And when I got back to my hometown I didn't learn much except that somebody denounced my sister and they tortured her and they humiliated her. They paraded her on the main street in the nude and then they murdered her. And that must have happened very shortly after she left. I never found out what happened to my mother and I don't know for sure what happened to my father. You know the horrible feeling -- there is nothing tangible for me to mourn. When someone dies you have a cemetery, you can go and put some flowers and say a prayer. I have nothing. And to this day it seems, I know it's ridiculous but when I walk and when I see someone -- my father was about 6'4" and my mother was almost 6 foot tall --and when I see someone of the build and height, people remind me of my parents. I have to run in front of them and look back to see it's not them. And then I made my way. I kept still looking for my mother and everybody said all survivors or people who survived are going to Germany. So illegally from what became the Soviet Union again I went through Bratislava and Vienna to Germany. That's the way all the survivors went. When we came to Germany there were lots of people, all sorts of people there. The ironic thing was that these people were survivors like myself, the remnants. And there were people who were running from the consequences of their collaborating with the Germans and so we all ended up in the same DP camps and that was very, very difficult. But finally they did separate us. And then even though we, as a survivor and as an orphan at that point, I still had to wait three years.

Q: You were about sixteen, seventeen years old at this time?

A: About fifteen, yeah and I still had to wait three years to be able to go to the United States.

Q: So you lived in one of these camps for three years?

A: I lived in different camps, yeah. And the last camp I lived in is in Benzheim which is near Stuttgart near Darmstadt and I managed to go to the University of Heidelberg. How they accepted me is beyond me because I didn't have any formal education.

Q: Past when the war started, yeah.

A: Yeah, but I took some tests and I think they felt sorry for me so they admitted me. And I went there for two reasons: one, I wanted to get some education and number two, I thought I could get a student's visa to get to America. Well, the visa that I did get, the permanent visa came earlier. But it was three years that I had to wait.

Q: So you came to the United States in '48?

A: 1948, yeah.

Q: Did you have relatives? You did, that's right, your aunts?

A: Yes, yes. There was one aunt, the one in Columbus, Ohio and my father's sister. She's the only one who's still alive now. And she took me in. I came in like on June 25<sup>th</sup> and I think June 26<sup>th</sup> she sent me to Central High. I didn't speak a word of English and I hated the world and I hated

myself but it was the best thing they did, tried to give me some education. And then I met my husband. He was called back into the service and guess where his first assignment is?

Q: Germany.

A: That's right, you're right. And I refused to go until I became a citizen, an American citizen. And then I went back and it was difficult. That's my life in a nutshell. For many years I didn't speak out. I told my husband, I told my son but my family, the few who were still alive didn't want to hear about it. And it was difficult for me to talk about it so I didn't. But then in 1983 there was a gathering here in Washington and I went to that gathering and something in me, I just sort of awoke and I said I'm ready; I have to tell my story. I have a mandate. I felt as if I have a mandate to speak for all these and I call them martyrs not victims who never had a chance. And I'm their spokesperson. I have to speak out and tell the story because I don't want the world to forget. And yet I sometimes, I haven't done it in recent months, but I was speaking at the Capital Children's Museum about a year ago and there was a class of -- I think -- fourth graders which is quite young and you speak in not very severe terms to children that age. But they came with several chaperones and one of the fathers who was a chaperone came over to me after my presentation and he says Mrs. Skiff...I says Schiff -- yes, Mrs. Schiff come on, admit, it's all a figment of your imagination. So that's where we are today. And I feel, I mean that I do have a mission and I try. It's not getting any easier for me but I feel that I do have to do it. I have to tell people what happened and maybe we'll learn something from our past. But apparently we haven't learned very much. Look what's going on in Bosnia. Look what's going on in Somalia, Sudan, the Soviet Union. People are hungry for power and there's so much hate in this world. I don't know how we can get rid of it -- intolerance, hate, I don't know. So this is my dilemma, what I have to live with. Do you have any questions?

Q: No, I think I'm done. Thank you.

A: You're welcome. Thank you.

(The tape then resumed)

Q: Your father was....?

A: One of six and he had five sisters who ended up emigrating to the United States.

Q: All of them emigrating?

A: Yes. I'm not sure if they married here or they married in the old country.

Q: And moved?

A: Yes. I think they all came either with getting ready to marry or already married. He also had a mother. My grandmother on my father's side died in 1942 I'm told literally of a broken heart because her baby boy never made it out of Poland. I know that my father had several doctorates from Switzerland, from the Sorbonne and I'm not sure about Heidelberg but I mean I know he had several advanced degrees from different places. What was puzzling to me then I understand now. None of them were from Poland. In Poland apparently there was a quota and he had to go elsewhere to get his education. My mother I know was a teacher but she never

actively taught.

Q: She was trained as a teacher?

A: Yes but I don't remember her being a full-time teacher. She was always involved in other things.

Q: Do you remember how old they were in 1939 or so?

A: My father would have been in his late thirties and my mother would have been in her mid-thirties. I'm not sure.

Q: The reason I ask is because one of the few parts of key information that we do need for the ID is a picture and the date of birth.

A: I'll have that and I don't know it.

Q: We can approximate. We can say circa a certain time.

A: I see, yeah but they were youthful. My mother came from a village. She was not from Horochow. The name of the village was Luczyce.

Q: Luczyce and that's in Poland?

A: Yes. It wasn't very far from Horochow apparently. And my grandparents on my mother's side had a huge farm and we used to go there sometimes in the summer, I remember that.

Q: Did she have brothers and sisters?

A: Yes, my mother had two brothers and one sister. I also remember my great-grandmother on my mother's side. Miriam was her name, Grandma Miriam. She was 113 years old when she died. And I said she had long blond hair. I'm sure it was long gray hair, but she still had her own hair, I remember that.

Q: Do you remember where your father was born or where his family was from?

A: I don't know. I think they were from that place, from Horochow, yeah.

Q: But they were definitely from Poland?

A: Yes, definitely Poland, yeah. And his father whom I never met, I never met my father's parents, but his father apparently died early when my father was young and he was a Hebrew teacher to the Jewish kids in Horochow. You want to hear something funny? When I came back in 1988 my husband and I talked what would I find and he tried to warn me not to be disappointed and what have you. And then it was sort of like an afterthought he said well whatever they did to the town, the ghettos were erased apparently I don't know I haven't seen it now, but he said at least the river, you'll show me the river which was so important in your life. Guess what? They diverted the river. When I asked I said I want to show my husband the river they said no more river, no more river. The river's name was Bezimyenna and Bezimyenna in Polish means

no name. And I mean no name and they did away with it.

Q: No place either.

A: No place, that's right, yeah. And another thing was when I told the story of the haystacks to my son and husband they didn't say anything. Then when we drove to my hometown from Lvov all of a sudden my son gets so excited. He says, oh look what is that? I said it's a haystack. He said that's a haystack it looks like a house. They never had the heart to ask me because here haystacks are pretty small and there they do different kinds but these haystacks were so huge they were almost like a barn, so big. He says now I understand. I never had the heart to ask you how could seven people hide in a haystack. That's about it.