

Interview with Esther Lawner.

Series Survivors of the Holocaust—Oral History Project

Interviewer—Julie Orenstein

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Beginning—Tape One, side One.

Q: This is the first interview session with Esther Lawner. We are in the living room of her home. It is July 5, 1984. May I ask you what is your full maiden name?

A: Esther Klausner (?)

Q: And may I ask what is your age?

A: 46.

Q: What town were you born in?

A: I was born in Nowy Sacd.

Q: And could you spell that please?

A: N-o-w-y-capital S-a-c-d.

Q: And did you grow up in that town?

A: No, I didn't grow up in that town. I was two years old when the war (WWII) broke out and we left.

Q: And what year was that?

A: It was in 1937.

Q: Do you know when or how your family came to be in that town?

A: No, but I think they were there for several generations. Yah, I know that my grandparents lived there and, but I don't know...you know, since everything was interrupted we don't have pictures or anything. I have been -- No, I really don't know.

Q: And you told me that you had one brother.

A: Yes.

Q: Younger or older?

A: Older. Almost five years older than me.

Q: And did any other members of your family do you know live in your house before the war?

A: No. No. Just our immediate family.

Q: And you really remember nothing about your hometown. Do you have any vague memories?

A: No. No. I don't have any memories, except sometimes I saw pictures or stories that my parents would tell. Actually, I don't remember anything.

Q: Well, we'll go on what your parents told you then a little bit later. What was your parents' occupation? Did your mother work at all?

A: No, my mother didn't work. She was a housewife, well, I think she was helping my father and my father had a drug store. And I think she liked to help him in the store, but she had two maids at home, (chuckles) so she could do that.

Q: And was your father -- had your father been a druggist also?

A: Right, you got it.

Q: So it was...

A: Yah. So it was in the family. It started, I think, with my grandfather.

Q: And what kind of education did your parents have? Was your father apprenticed or did he go to school?

A: No, my father had -- my family came from very Orthodox Jewish family and my father had a Jewish education. I don't know if you are familiar, but he was educated...had a Jewish education. I think he had grade school, but beyond that he didn't go. I think he had tutoring mainly. He had tutoring. I know my mother had grade school, and beyond that they didn't go because they had to study and go to school on Shabbat, on the Saturday and they had to ride, they were not allowed to ride. They were strictly observant Jews and so they wouldn't. They did not go beyond that. That's the story I got from them.

Q: They stopped going to school altogether?

A: Yes. They had, I think, probably just grade school and they had tutoring. They had tutors coming to their home and tutoring them. But they had Judaic studies, you know, my father attended what was called (heider). It was where Jewish boys were getting -- Jewish education. Strictly in Judaic studies, that was the main -- this was the most important thing.

Q: And did your mother receive anything like that? Did women receive education?

A: I think, no, she didn't go to heider. Girls didn't go to heider.. She went to regular school, to a grade school where Jewish girls and the gentile girls were separated. They were not sitting together because it was unacceptable that Jews and gentiles were in the same together. So I remember some stories my mother was telling me that she was blonde with blue eyes and really she didn't look Semitic, she looked like a gentile. And so one time a new principal, or whoever came and he looked at the class and all of a sudden he saw her among the Jewish girls, he said to the teacher, "How come this Jewish girl is sitting with, uh, this gentile girl is sitting with Jewish kids?"

Q: So there was anti-Semitism?

A: There was a very big anti-Semitism in Poland, yes.

(tape is shut off)

Q: So your parents were tutored after grade school pretty much, and your father had religious education?

A: Yes, my father had religious education. My mother had religious education also after school like here, they have Hebrew school here for children who go to the public schools. She went to a public school. I don't know if my father went to a public school. I'm not sure. I think he may have gone to heider where he got Jewish education and he had tutors coming to his home to be tutored in math and language and history, but other than that, I'm not sure. I know that my mother went to public school.

Q: How in depth was his religious training? Did he study Torah, of course, do you know if he also studied the commentaries or how in depth that was?

A: No, I don't know. He wasn't too religious. He was not too -- he wasn't very religious, though how -- it was kind of like -- I don't know part of him that was brought up in that, but personally, I don't know how religious he was. He was never observant or religious.

Q: Do you have any idea if the anti-Semitism or the war affected him that way, if that was the reason?

A: I think it started even before the war. It was just him. No, it had not -- I think the war had no effect on him. Not to my knowledge.

Q: Let's see, you were Orthodox, so your father and brother attended a synagogue, right?

A: Well, see it all changed with the war, once we moved away. This is what it was before the war. After the war, even during the war, I don't remember observing anything. We were not observing anything because it was a matter of survival, I guess, and I don't remember observing anything. I think my brother was bar mitzvahed in Russia and -- but not formal Jewish education, no nothing. Everything was disrupted and there was not keeping kosher. I mean nothing. Absolutely nothing.

Q: It was too disorganized to...

A: Yah. For example, while we were in Russia, I know we had -- before the war -- I know we had - the house was kosher, I'm sure, and everything, all the holidays were observed, but as I was growing up, I don't remember anything of that. There were some rules, like there was never mixing dairy and meat products. There was never such a things like this, I thought that's the way it was done, you know, but I don't think there was really -- I don't think my mother really kept kosher because now I know what that is. I don't think she did.

Q: So as far as having the two sets of dishes. It is a very complicated process.

A: No, I know she didn't have it. I know that she had it -- it was all disrupted, it was -- it all was changed

Q: What was the principal language that was spoken in your home?

A: Polish...and Yiddish.

Q: Did you -- what percentage of both do you remember?

A: Yes. I was raised on Polish. My parents spoke between them Yiddish, especially so that we kids don't understand. They were speaking Yiddish and, so really I did not know Yiddish. My accent, my every language after that I learned after Polish, it was with Polish, so when I spoke Hebrew it was with a Polish accent, when I speak English, I think it's a Polish accent too. People who don't know Polish don't realize that, but yeah, Polish was my principal language.

Q: And did your parents speak any other language besides Yiddish and Polish?

A: German. German. I think my mother took German. No spoke German because - -my father did too, so they must have learned German. He may have learned

maybe from tutor, my mother learned at school, you know, German was a language, I think it was the second language in those days that they were studying. It wasn't English or French then, it was German.

Q: So it sounds as though your father -- your family -- was sort of on the better off end of society.

A: Yeah.

Q: The professional class.

Q: Business. They were not professional, but my father was in business. He was considered to be a well-to-do person. That's -- I just repeat what I heard at home. And so later on when we were in Russia and we had nothing and we were really starving, we never felt -- and I grew up never thinking that I was poor because we didn't have the mentality of poverty at all, even though we had nothing and there was no food. But everybody was in the same boat and I, now when I sit here "poor people" and I see poor. It was completely different. We didn't have the mentality of poor people.

Q: What kind of family did your mother come from? What did her father do?

A: He had wine store, I think. Wine seller. He was dealing with wine.

Q: So, a merchant?

A: Yes. Oh, yes. The whole family, everybody was a merchant.

Q: So, she was pretty much the same level as your father then?

A: Yes. Actually they are first cousins.

Q: Oh, is that true?

A: It is a common thing. In the family I think there were six cousins intermarried. And because you know there was no intermarriage uh...

Q: You mean between...

A: ...there was no such thing as intermarriage...

Q: Between Jews and gentiles?

A: Between Jews and non-Jews, it was unheard of. No. And so the people, the families were very close and it was acceptable, very acceptable that cousins married.

Q: Sounds like they didn't have much choice after awhile. The families were -- you have only a certain amount of population.

A: And also it was a very common thing. It was a very acceptable thing, I think among the non-Jews also.

Q: Did your parents pretty much socially only relate to other Jews or did they...

A: Absolutely. Only Jews. The only non-Jewish people that they had contact with were the clients that would come into the store or dealing with commerce when my father with the store would have to order products. This was the only contact with the non--Jewish world socially and -- it was a small town, a small shtetl. Although I hear it wasn't that small, and I think there were 50 or 60% of the population was Jewish and their life was strictly with Jews.

Q: Were they ghettoized in any way? Were they --was the Jewish population of the town forced to live in a certain part of town or did they live...?

A: Yes, uh. At certain time it was... they could live in other areas also. I don't know which year it changed but, yes, the Jews at the beginning, I don't know from what year to what year, they had to live in a certain place and after certain year they could move.

Q: This time when they could move out, was that a long time in the past or are we talking about something recent?

A: Not recent. It was before the war. I don't know what years, I think it was the end of the eighteenth century, I mean, beginning, of the nineteenth century, or I don't know exactly when, but I know that there was a poor section of town and my mother went on one of her visits when she came here and I started to ask her and she said that this was the section that in the earlier ages, uh, times, Jews had to live there and then as the wealthy ones move out to other places and the poor people still stayed in that same area, probably the ghetto.

Q: I guess you don't remember anything about what role the synagogue played in their lives. Did they say anything to you about that?

A: Yes. It was a very important role. My father was going every Saturday to the synagogue every Saturday. My grandfather was going every day, I think he was very -- both grandparents -- were very orthodox. The grandmothers were very orthodox and...the marriages were arranged.

Q: That's interesting.

A: The marriages were pre-arranged, my grandparents, I know that.

Q: Were they arranged by the Rabbi or someone else?

A: I think no, I think by the families.

Q: But through the synagogue in some way?

A: I don't think do. No, it was just that they were so close knit, it's nothing like today.

Q: They were just uh families, you know, and you just did --- I don't know. I'm thinking, well, my -- let's see on my father's side. I don't know how they met or what happened, but I know that on my mother's side, I know definitely it was arranged because my mother was telling me that her father was a Czech citizen, so they were traveling between Czechoslovakia and Hungaria and I think my great grandfather, yeah, I know that my mother's grandfather lived in Hungaria and she used to go visit him during the vacation in the summer she had. There were lots -- he was a very wealthy man and there were lots of cousins and all cousins and all the kids would come and gather in there. And so my -- her father was one of his sons, this grandfather's son. How did he go to Poland? It must have been prearranged. I don't know, but was were very orthodox very traditionally orthodox. They were not that much educated now, they did things without knowing why they do, but they did it. It's not like today when we want to understand everything we do and why we do it. I mean you have the laws and the religions and now we learn and now we want to know "Why do I do what I'm doing," but at that time I don't think many of them knew what they are doing except that's what you have to do, and that's what you do, and that's what you are supposed to do.

Q: So very little, little thought, no analysis.

A: Well they were just very orthodox and very uh...

Q: Do you know if your family -- what kind of cultural events they enjoyed? Were they musical or did they enjoy the theater?

A: I don't think so. Theater. I remember -- well, theater, when theater? See, until we came back after the war to Poland all these years were just a matter of survival, just to find enough to eat. There was no, you know, nobody was thinking of -- it was the war. The war was going on.

Q: But before the war did they...

A: Before the war I don't know. They probably Ouh they went to...you know I don't know. I never talked about it. You know I have been from a very young age,

quite a young age, separated from my parents and I chaneled my life in completely different directions from quite young age on.

Q: So they're different kind of people than you are?

A: In a way, yes.

Q: Do you know anything about their politics before the war? Were they involved at all or was the Jewish community very self-encompassing?

A: I know they were very conservative, very conservative people.

Q: Do you know what that meant politically at that time or...?

A: No. No I don't, except that uh -- I don't know if you are familiar with very orthodox Jewish people. Are you?

Q: Not really, no.

A: Their life is -- they don't have very much to do with the outside world. They observe the Jewish laws and...I know that I had one aunt who was a Socialist. I know that that, and she was a Zionist Socialist. She joined a movement, a Zionist movement and she emigrated to Palestine, what was at that time, and she was only --she was the one that survived because she wasn't with them, you know, she escaped, she left Poland in time. But the family was very much against it and they were so conservative and so observant and she just didn't want to have anything to do with it, she went completely the opposite way, so they almost wanted -- didn't want to have anything to do with her like uh...

Q: I think I see what you mean.

A: Yah. I can't find the word, though. Sometimes I have some words that I have in either language that I want. I know them and it escapes me in English. I sit and think and I know of in another language that word so I cannot say.

Q: Sometimes there isn't any word.

A: No, it's a very simple word that I cannot say -- they just wanted completely like give her up to-uh, oh you saw Fiddler on the Roof?

Q: Mhm.

A: When one of the daughters got married to uh...

Q: A Christian.

A: A Christian they were sitting shiva, they were mourning because like she was dead, well the same thing was with this aunt, this was my father's sister. That's almost how they treated her because she was a Zionist and she wanted to go to Palestine. That was a terrible thing to do.

Q: Do you know about what year that was that she left?

A: Mhm. I think she went in either '34, '5, or '6 maybe '36. '35 or '36 because I know that in '39 she was living in a kibbutz and married a Hungarian fellow, a fellow who was a Hungarian Jew who had immigrated, who was in the same organization she was. He emigrated to Palestine and they met and they got married and they wanted to visit their parents, both parents, his in Hungary and hers in Poland and they got caught in the war and they never saw her parents, my grandparents. Luckily somehow they could go back, but they almost didn't make it, they almost got caught and would have been killed like everybody else. They just in time escaped and went back to Palestine.

Q: Now when you...

A: She was the radical of the family. She was the only one.

Q: When your family left Poland, obviously the war had started and Poland had been invaded, but what specific things that happened to your family caused them to leave, do you recall?

A: Yes, I don't recall but I know that my father, my father did not want to leave. My father believed that it's not very serious and it will be over. My mother wanted to leave. She said, "Let's take the kids and let's run, let's go away from here." No. He didn't want to go, so she took me and my brother, she took some money and she left. Him with his lovely store and his lovely apartment and she just left. And she was with another sister-in-law whose husband did the same thing, he thought that everything would be okay. The two of them just left with the kids. My other aunt had twin boys. And these two women just left, hired some, a cab, a car, somehow they started to go with the flow of the people who were running away. and somehow miraculously after awhile my father saw what's happening and he saw that she means business, that she's not coming back and that things were really getting bad. He followed her, but it was miraculous how he found. I just don't know, because people were just -- there was such panic. And how -- somehow by asking other people and meeting people from other cities that knew her -- somehow eventually he found us.

Q: Do you know...

A: The other sister, the other woman, my aunt, couldn't take this hardship, so she went back with her two boys and got killed.

Q: Do you know how long it took him to find you?

A: No.

Q: Any idea -- was it a matter of months or...?

A: Probably months, I don't know how long.

Q: Do you know where you were when he found you?

A: Mhm. I believe the place was Stryl (?) I think so, maybe before. My mother was telling me something somewhere we had written all the places where we moved, one place to another. From one small community to another. At one point I remember my mother was telling me that I should have prepared. Now I wasn't thinking about it. I have it written because we were sitting and we wanted her to tell us everything my husband and I, we were writing. One thing I remember they were, they came to one city, town, a village, and somebody gave them one room and they just spread some straw on the floor and that's where we slept. And my father came and he was horrified to see what condition the family was in. Eventually we were in Russia.

Q: Now you were, you traveled with other people, other groups of people who were also leaving.

A: Lots of people went from Poland.

Q: And you went from Jewish community to Jewish community and found shelter with...

A: I imagine. I don't remember. I was only two or three. The war lasted six years, I remember things from Russia. Once we were in Russia I remember.

Q: How old were you when you finally got to Russia?

A: I don't know. Probably took us months. I'm not sure. I don't know. I never asked the question how long it took us. I know that we spent one year in Siberia and then the rest time in middle Asian Uzbekistan. In the Asian part of Russia.

Q: And you basically went that far.

A: And that's where we lived. And from that place I really remember. And I went to school, I went to first and second grade and elementary and I think I was there until the last years of the war probably from age three, four on. I remember things.

Q: Now, did you get to Siberia -- did you travel by car or by train? Do you know, or a combination of different ways?

A: Not car. Probably by train. Cattle trains. That's the way also we came back from Russia to Poland in cattle trains.

Q: Was this organized? Have your parents ever mentioned if this was organized for you or did you just sort of...?

A: Well, yes it was organized. All the Polish refugees, Polish-Jewish refugees were going back...

Q: I mean when you were going out there. Did your parents have to make arrangements to, to get the trains as they were going east, or was someone helping the refugees along in Russia, do you know?

A: (Laughs). Like they help here? (Both laughs) Refugees? I don't know, I doubt it. There must have been some Jewish, some uh, I know there must have been something. I don't know because I didn't really -- nobody told me.

Q: So you were three in Siberia.

A: Yes.

Q: And then in Uzbekistan when you were four. And that was where you went to school.

A: Yes, I went to school in Uzbekistan, Fergana was the name of the place.

Q: Can you spell that?

A: Well in Latin alphabet it would be F-E-R-G-A-N-A, Fergana. But how did we spell it? Its in Tashkent is the capitol of Uzbekistan so it was...

Q: Do you recall what your school was like?

A: Yes, I remember well my school. My school was a Polish school which was unusual because mostly there were, no, there was not, there was maybe one more Polish school for the older Jewish refugees. Polish, you know we were not Jews, we were Polish. We were Polish citizens. So there was one Polish school that was in our town, but I know this was very unusual. Most of the kids, most of the refugees were in Russian schools. They gave us, a part of the regular Russian school. We were separated, we had just like one small wing and I remember one time, I don't know what was going on most of the time, but one time the Russian kids were throwing stones at us. So one time I remember that, but...and we had our teacher. My teacher, do you know what was my teacher's name? Orenstein.

Q: Well, that's interesting.

A: That was her name.

Q: So, was she a German?

A: No, she was just like us a Polish-Jew, a refugee, and she had I think a little boy and he was younger than we were, but there were no classes for him so he just was coming and he was sitting with us. The classes were not very organized. I have even a postcard from that time and it is written in Russian though not in Polish. It's printed, very primitive, printed on a piece of paper, but it's in Russian. And I must have had as a second language, you know, Russian. But I did learn Polish, and Russian must have been like a second language.

Q: So this section of your school was specifically for Polish refugees and were you all Jewish?

A: Yes we were all Jewish. We were all Jewish. I think that there was maybe one child who wasn't Jewish that was a refugee. A Polish boy who was non-Jewish, but no other people that escaped -- the Jews were the ones who had to get away.

Q: Do you recall if this gentile boy got along with the other kids or was he isolated?

A: I don't think he was isolated. I think he felt like he was in the same boat with everybody. Of course being a girl I had just, I was around with girls, but I don't know if he felt isolated.

Q: So your earliest memories are from this time and from being in school and of being in Uzbekistan.

A: Mhm.

Q: Do you recall what your home was like? Do you have any recollection of your home?

A: Yah, I remember it and I remember it before I went to school. I know my mother and my father were both trying to work because, well there was simply no food and just our main thing that were craving was bread. Bread was very hard to get. And we had, there were rations of course, we had rations, everybody had rations, and it wasn't enough, so I think my father tried to buy some coupons on the market the black market and he was caught and he was sentenced and was in prison. He was in prison and this was very severe in Russia. It is a very severe offense when you deal with the black market. This was his big thing that he tried to buy some extra...

Q: Food.

A: Some extra coupons to get, you know, some extra food, some extra bread. Bread! Because that was the main thing there was just not enough. I remember very well, distinctly being hungry and just we were dreaming of the day we would be able to sit at the table and have enough bread to eat.

Q: Did you feel -- was there a lot of anti-Semitism at this time in the city that you were in?

A: I don't know. I don't remember that much. Well you know we were refugees. I just can imagine thinking now and knowing what's going on now and how refugees are looked upon and dealt with. Nobody is too kind to them, because they are some more mouths to feed and more people to eat and take away jobs and whatever, so I'm sure we were not, uh, I don't recall any anti-Semitism uh accidents, whatever...

Q: It was more of an attitude of you being Polish rather than you being Jewish. You mentioned the incident of the rock throwing...

A: Yah. This was one time at school. I, uh, you know mostly we were among our own, and the Uzbeks were -- they had their own life and their own society and we had our own and I was sick -- I got sick I got typhoid and I almost didn't make it. But there was a nice woman doctor who was a Russian-Jew and many Russian Jews during the war they had also to leave the cities and go and they were in Uzbekistan also. Even that I met here some people I met from Russia they told me that during the war they were in Uzbekistan. Or that they were natives born in Russia and Russian living in big cities and they had to -- the families had to leave and be in those -- in Uzbekistan. In the Asian part of Russia.

Q: Uh. Now I'm not really familiar, are the Uzbeks -- Asian in appearance?

A: They are dark. They kind of have olive skin. Dark hair, dark eyes. I remember them wearing their national costumes. They have their own clothes.

Q: Can you describe them to me?

A: Oh yes, the ladies have lots, I even bought, I have a kepah, you know what a kepah is? A Yarmulke. You know what a yarmulke is? The Uzbeks were wearing a type of hat -- the men. It is embroidered. That's what the men were wearing and when we learned that we are going back to Poland I asked my mother to buy one as a souvenir and I have it here. And it was made, if you look at it the inside is made from old pieces of dirty pieces of material because they didn't have soap. Outside it's embroidered and it was beautiful, but inside it has dirty pieces of cloth because it was done during the war and there was no

material, just scraps, from what I don't know, but it wasn't washed. But the outside is pretty because the thread is new, the embroidery was new...

(Long Pause at Beginning of tape).

...lots and lots of braids, I don't know how many; thirty, forty, fifty, very thin tiny, tiny braids all over.

Q: Kind of like what we call "corn rows" now, like Bo Derek had in that movies, uh, with the many, many small braids. Black women wear their hair that way now. I think.

A: Yah, except they're not as long. These women had -- it is very long and it's not curly. Their hair is not as curly as the black women.

(phone rings)

Q: So you were telling me that the hair is very long.

A: Yes, the hair is -- braids are very thin. It's very long, they are straight, they don't start -- they didn't start from here, they started rather from here.

Q: So the hair in the front was not braided, it was—

A: No, here.

Q: The hair at the nape of the neck.

A: They were divided here...

Q: Down the middle.

A: Down the middle. And the braids started from here, you know.

Q: Next to the ear and around the back.

A: Not from the top, no not from the top. And they were wearing very colorful, long dresses and the men were wearing those -- they were called tibitieka or kibitieka - - the hat that they were wearing. I think they are Muslims, many of them. I'm not sure. But uh, they were dark; they were more like, you know, they are not European-looking, not fair skinned. They are rather dark. Not black.

Q: So the Poles -- you Poles stood out physically from them.

A: Oh, yes.

Q: And you didn't dress like them.

A: No, we didn't dress like that at all. Neither did the Russians, you know, the other Russian people. This is their national dresses.

Q: Did they speak Russian?

A: I think so. They probably spoke both Russian and Uzbek language.

Q: But then Russian would have been the official language. Do you recall that you lived in the same home, or did you move from home to...

A: We moved. First one I remember is we lived in some place where there was no plumbing. We didn't have toilets. (Laughs). I saw a toilet for the first time in my life when I was -- after the war. And it was 1946 I think, 1946, when we went back to Poland. We used to go in the back yard, dig a hole and put a straw mat around it and this was our...

Q: Latrine.

A: Yes. And then we covered it with the ground and made another hole and another -- and put again the straw mat around it. (Laughs). We lived in one room. The floor was -- I don't remember if the floor was dirt floor? It was made from -- the house, whatever you call it, shack -- was made out of mud bricks. What was interesting is that for years and years I didn't remember -- you know I didn't see it anymore. I kind of forgot, and when I came to this country and I lived at some point in St. Louis and I met there a girl who was in the Peace Corps and she was -- where did she serve? Somewhere in Asia. OK, or maybe she visited. And she took all these pictures and slides. And all of a sudden I said, "My gosh, these are the same places like we lived in." All of a sudden I remember all that. And those -- they were huts made of mud brick. There was no plumbing. There was -- I think the floor was dirt floor. The furniture was very scarce.. We had two narrow beds. In one bed my parents slept and in one bed me and my brother were sleeping and it was so narrow that eventually I had to sleep on the table. (laughs) I was sleeping on the table, because I was the smaller one and my brother was -- and it was so narrow that when one turned around -- you had to sleep on the side because just there was no room more than that. So, when one turned the other had, you know, it woke up the other person. And we had a table, I remember, there was two, some type of wooden box that we were keeping our clothes in and it was locked. And clothes were (laughs) -- I don't know what we were wearing. I have no idea, I know we didn't have any. Oh, I know what we were wearing on, on -- as shoes. We didn't have shoes, so we were wearing those -- they were called tapechte and they were knitted they were made, you know, they were crocheted with one, uh, they were made I think from cotton and you know how much you can wear those, and the roads were dirt rocks, they were not paved. So when you walked in this on stones and on dirt roads (laughs) it doesn't last very

long. Most of the time they had holes. And in summer it was very hot because it gets very hot. I don't know how we managed. (Laughs).

Q: Yeah, it sounds so -- an incredible change for your parents. You know, you wouldn't have remembered earlier, but it must have been terrible.

A: That's when I remember -- and it's funny, I don't think about it, but when I start to think about it I ask, "What were we wearing?" and I remember those tapechke we were wearing. Uh, how long, I don't know. At some point things probably got better. I don't know, but my memories are of not having clothes, not having shoes and not having food. Then we moved to another place. This was already very fancy. How fancy was it? There was -- we had -- (laughs) there was an outhouse. We had an outhouse which was very primitive, but it was already -- and all the neighbors were using it, I don't know how many families. It was in the y(?) - in the back yard, so you had to go out and it was a courtyard and lots of people were using it. And I remember I hated to go there. It wasn't very clean, but this was already the luxury place. I remember we had one window in that room. It was also one room we had. I think we rented that.

Q: Was this a building with other dwellings in it, or was this again a single?

A: It wasn't -- it was one -- on one floor. Building? I don't know if you can call it a building. It was a shack. I wish I could see it again, you know, I really would like to see it.

Q: Do you recall how your parents found out they could go back to Poland?

A: As soon as the war -- I remember when the war was over there was a big, big celebration. I mean, people were going out in the street and just dancing and singing and of course, we were overjoyed. It was so -- it was spontaneous; everybody was delighted. And the next thing I knew is that I was told we are going back to Poland. And oh! Things in Poland were supposed to be fantastic. Everything in Poland was wonderful. (laughs). Which wasn't true, but that how -- what the stories heard and that's how I imagined it in my imagination, my child's imagination. There will be food, there will be candies! Will be so many candies that I won't be able to walk on the street. I'll have to push the candies (makes a swimming motion) on the sides. (Laughs).

Q: So they pretty much knew that they could go back after the war ended then?

A: Yeah.

Q: And you went to...

A: We never went back to the same place where we lived before the war. We never went back there, so I never visited or saw that place again. We came back -- you

know Poland was always divided between Russia and between Germany. On the east side is the Russian border, on the west is Germany. So Poland got back, after the war what was before earlier years was Poland. Was called schloss. In German schlessen. (She means Silesia). Where the border was, they got that part back. And that's where all the -- most of the refugees returned.

Q: You were pretty much sent back there.

A: Yes, we were sent. And it was a big city. We lived in Wroclaw what was called Wroclaw.

Q: Can you spell that?

A: W-R-O-C-L-A-W. And it was a German city before the war.

Q: And were they...

A: And then it became Polish after the war. It was in -- when part of the eastern Poland was annexed to Russia and they got some of the part that was on the west that belonged to Germany and that's the -- where we returned, what was called in Polish the "reclaimed land." Jene Robsiskane in Polish.

Q: And the people who lived there, did they feel that they were Germans or did they feel happy to be back in Poland?

A: The Jewish people?

Q: The, uh, the people who had lived there continuously.

A: The people who had lived there, they were thrown out.

Q: Oh.

A: They were kicked out.

Q: After the war?

A: Mhm. They were Germans. they were kicked out. And I remem (unable to complete word). As a matter of fact, I remember still some refugees, German refugees were leaving, the last, just like we were earlier kicked out.

Q: Going through the same thing.

A: They were going through that after the war. So I -- when we came, still in '46, there were some remnants and I remember them going and it was a very sad sight to see. How they were, you know, carrying their little belongings and most of the

people were probably poor people who couldn't escape earlier and they were just, uh. You could see old people and children and women carrying the little, uh, belongings, you know, with everything. The city was destroyed. There were blocks and blocks they were -- it was destroyed during the bombardment, during the war, and a great part of the city was destroyed. It was streets, streets after streets were completely destroyed and in ruins. Ruins and ruins. And we settled, we rented -- we moved -- first we got an apartment and we had to leave it, to leave the apartment because somebody -- it belonged to somebody -- it was promised to somebody else. And we moved to another apartment where we lived until the time that we emigrated

Q: Well, I think that's a good place to stop for right now.

End of Side Two.

Beginning -- Tape two, Side one.

Q: This is the second interview with Esther Lawner. This is Julie Orenstein. It is July 23, 1984. Let's see, the last time we talked we got to the point where you had just come back from Uzbekistan to Poland, but I didn't ask you very much about what your parents did in Uzbekistan. You said they both worked while they were there.

A: Mhm. They worked -- I, um, let's see. I don't really remember what they did. I remember at one time they were selling candies. Candies in a, like, a little cart on the street. But I don't think they did this all the time. Oh, I know. When we were -- when first we arrived in Siberia, my father was working in a lumber, uh, there were lots of forest and woods and they were just cutting all the woods and I guess in a lumber yard or something. I remember it was very hard physical work which he wasn't used to before, you know, he had a drug store and he was a lum-- so he was like working in a lumber yard. Very hard physical work. When they moved to Uzbekistan I don't remember what he was doing. I don't know what he was doing. At one point I remember they had -- they -- I remember my mother working, uh, knitting gloves for the soldiers at the front. They were big, big winter gloves. Heavy, very thick, you know, for the winters in Russia, very severe winters. I remember her knitting these and she was working very fast and she was, like, getting prizes because she was such a fast worker. The other thing I remember is, they were -- had this, like a pushcart selling candies. This must have been toward the end, but I don't know, I, if I remember any details, you know, I don't know if they had a job all the time.

Q: You mentioned at one time that the return to Poland was organized by someone who arranged the transportation I guess for large numbers of you. Do you remember anything about that? Who was in charge of it?

- A: No, except that we knew we were refugees and we knew we are temporarily in there and as soon as the war is over we will be returning back to Poland, that's all I remember. But how it was organized, and so, on I don't know. I remember the journey back. We were traveling in the cattle trains and I remember the long, long, long ride. I think it wasted, like, two weeks, I don't know how long. But we were just -- transportation was like cattle cars and we were just sleeping on...on...
- Q: On cots?
- A: No, cots are very luxurious.
- Q: Were they boards just kind of hung up?
- A: Yes, on boards they were right -- you know how they made it -- boards one on top of the other.
- Q: Uhm, almost like bookshelves.
- A: Like bookshelves. Deep bookshelves. And that's where we piled and that's how we...
- Q: Did you just sit on the floor?
- A: I guess so. Either we lied or we sat on the floor. It was a long ride. No, I don't remember any, uh, the doors were open and that's the whole time we had some light and I think, uh, I don't remember windows. I remember it wasn't very pleasant.
- Q: It doesn't sound very pleasant.
- A: Well, the spirit was good. I mean we were...
- Q: You were going home. You said last time that you had some very high expectations of going back to Poland: images of food and candy and having plenty of everything. It sounds as if your parents were also looking forward to it, but it also sounds as if it wasn't what you thought it was going to be. Did you find that it was better when you returned to Poland? That your life improved?
- A: Uh, when we returned I remember very vividly that we were driving into ruins. We are driving right to a completely destroyed city. And I was just wondering where we are to live because all we saw were streets after streets after streets after blocks and blocks of destroyed houses, burned down houses, big blocks because it was a big city. We arrived in the city of Wroclaw uh, it was a German city before the war and so it was completely destroyed. After the war Poland got this part of, um, it was like this city before to Poland and it was taken by the Germans and

after the war this whole part (Silesia?) was returned to Poland and so we were driving into the city and it was just terrifying. I thought (Well, that's how the whole of Poland looks, just burned down." Finally we arrived. I don't remember after that what happened the next thing I remember is that we had some rented apartment that we had to leave after awhile because somebody else was supposed to get it, and then we moved to another place, another apartment, and then we lived there until we made Aliyah to Israel.

Q: And what was your parents' reaction, do you remember? Were they as afraid and disappointed as you were/

A: Yes. Lots of sadness, anxiety, very, ud sad, ud. Sad. My parents were always sad. And, uh, I started to go to school. I was, I remember I was eight years old when we came back and I was sent to a school, to a Yiddish school. Where we lived -- where we found finally apartment, the city was not destroyed. There were here and there houses destroyed, but mainly there were still, you know, buildings. Where I went to school, the school where I went -- was sent -- was again in an area completely destroyed, completely burned down and it was like a ghost town and the school was there among all these ruins. I had to take two streetcars to get there and it was frightening. I had -- I went with my brother and he got mad at me one time and he told me he would leave me in the middle and I would have to get to school on my own and it was terrifying. It must have been, because I remember that very well. My father at some point went back to the city where we were born where we lived before the war and I wanted very much to go with him, but he would not take me. I was very bitter about it, to this day I am, because I wanted very much to go and see where it was that I was born. When he came back he had a breakdown, because -- of course, at that time they didn't know what it was, and he was not hospitalized, but he must have been very depressed and he was just in bed, and I remember him being sick and I cannot -- I think -- I'm sure it was emotional. And in later -- in later years when I talked to my mother she told me that she feels do terribly the first -- because when he came there was nothing, there was. Everybody was killed. His property was taken.

Q: When he went back, was that when he began to explore what had happened to your relatives?

A: At that time he must have had an idea before that, uh, what happened. They probably heard because people were alive from the city and they were also from -- in Wroclaw, and also in Russia we were with some people that were from the same place where we were, and they, you know, were were -- there was some communication, letters, I don't know exactly what they knew, but when he went back to Nowy Sacd I think he wanted to find out for himself and maybe mainly for the property, for his store and his apartment and I think they owned some buildings. Just wanted to know what happened to all this and they found out. I remember he was telling us this story, he walked into the -- his store and the lady was -- asked him if she can help him and he told her, "Well, this is my store," and

she said, "No. it no longer is yours." And, well, he was just broken up, you know, because nobody was -- everybody was gone, everyone was killed.

Q: Was there, uh, so the property was still there physically, it hadn't been...

A: Oh, yes, it was taken away, yes, by the government, it was confiscated, you know, it no longer was his.

Q: And what was the apartment like that you lived in after...

A: In Wroclaw? Um, it was an old building of apartments, uh, all the buildings they were only apartment buildings because it was an old city. We had one room, a bigger room, we had a kitchen with no windows. We walked in, we had a kitchen with no windows. We walked from the kitchen to the bigger room, that's where we had a table and one bed. There was -- then from this room you walked into a smaller room and there was one bed or two beds and from that room you walked into a little niched, like. It was dark, there was no window. There was one in each of the bigger rooms, there was one window to the street and, uh, that was it.

Q: And was this -- did this impress you as being a better place that you had lived in in Uzbekistan?

A: Oh, yes, it was a better place, but there was one toilet on the floor for all the tenants. I don't think we had a faucet. Did we have a faucet. I think there was just one. Running water was -- I can't recall if it was in the apartment or if it was also right next to the toilet, uh, the bathroom, the restroom, outside the restroom. Very primitive. The buildings were very old. It was an old city.

Q: Do you remember if you liked it there? You said your parents were sad. It must have been...

A: Not particularly. I knew that we -- we knew it was temporarily. We already applied for a visa to go to Israel.

Q: When did that happen? Was that very shortly after you arrived back in Poland?

A: That we applied?

Q: Yes.

A: No, because when we arrived in '46 Israel was not independent yet and you couldn't go because the British were in Palestine.

Q: How do you -- do you recall when you first heard about Israel, or when your family first began thinking about it?

A: Well, I joined a youth movement the Shomer Hatzair it was a Zionist youth movement. We were organized by uh -- all the Jewish youth was organized and there were several of them and one of them was one that I joined and my brother was also already in it. My brother made an Aliyah. My brother joined -- it was called -- they organized. I was small -- I was eight years old, eight, nine. My brother was thirteen,-- fourteen. And he joined -- they had -- they were setting up like a kibbutz and it was -- they were preparing for the youth of Israel and they all -- we all knew that that's where we were going

Q: And what year was this?

A: '46, '47. My brother went to Palestine in '47 and he left home and he was on the ship Exodus. And he arrived to Palestine I think in '47.

Q: And by that time you were already in the youth group?

A: Uh, yes, I was in the youth group. We were meeting one a week, I think.

Q: And were you also preparing to go to the kibbutz?

A: No, I was too young. I would have joined my brother, but I was too young, just eight to nine years old. Ten years old when he left, I think -- nine years.

Q: So you and your brother really thought about going to Israel before your parents did. Or was it sort of family thing?

A: I don't know. We didn't have family discussions, much family discussions. Uh, there was not much sharing. My parents didn't share much, you know, they just made decisions and didn't ask and that was it. There was not much discussions. My brother did not get along with my parents, with my mother, I guess, and he left, he just left when he was fourteen he left home. He joined one of these kibbutzim they were called I think. He stayed -- they stayed for awhile until they could leave to go to Palestine and he just happened to be on this Exodus, this ship in '47 that was -- I rem he - I remember that it was in the news and I remember getting -- we got a card from him and we knew that he was on that ship and we knew what was going on that they didn't reach -- when they reached they were sent back to Europe and all that.

Q: Now wasn't there a movie made about that ship?

A: Yes.

Q: I was wondering if that was the one.

A: Well, the movie was based on that, but there was also an authentic, uh, a documentary on that that I saw. As a matter of fact, here at JCC (Jewish

Community Center) they were showing it one time and my husband and I saw it and we saw there a boy that looked like my brother.

Q: Oh!

A: It was amazing. Because it was taken by somebody, by an American, I think. I don't remember his name. Meyers, I think he was just...

Q: Just on the way.

A: So, the journey. And when they came to Palestine, it was here, I saw it. It was my brother on the boat. The movie was based on that, on what happened to that ship.

Q: Well, that was quite an adventure.

A: Yeah.

Q: He finally did make it in then.

A: Yes, he made it and he was 17 when he came to Israel and, uh, he joined the air force learned a profession in the air force and married a girl whom he new since -- they were together on the ship and they were -- she lost her father, her mother was a widow, she lost her father during the war and she has a brother, there were two children. Her mother raised her. They were also in Russia during the war, the same -- very similar story and they met in that kibbutz, but were still in Poland. Her brother and she were there and they were all coming to make an Aliyah to Palestine.

Q: After your parents returned to Poland did they resume their religious activities, or were they able to?

A: Uh, on holidays we were going to a synagogue. I don't remember much religion. I remember eating matzot during Pesach. My mother was making wine because there was no kosher wine so she was making her own wine. We were buying the matzot. We ate matzot for Pesach but we were not a religious family. No, we were not religious, only we were Jewish, we knew we are going to Israel. There were anti-Semites -- there was anti-Semites around us. After one year of being in that school I changed, I went to a Polish school. I had a traumatic experience in the Yiddish school because I did not know Yiddish, my parents spoke to me Polish that was the only language I knew. I came to that school and I did not understand anything, I mean, I picked up something throughout the year. I learned some somehow. The atmosphere in the school was wild. All the kids were -- had no parents, they were orphans. Somehow they survived the war. I don't know. Many of them lost parents, uh, it was rough. It was very rough.

Q: Were any of these children people you had known in Uzbekistan or were you not...you weren't exactly shipped back in a unit.

A: No, there was be-friended one friend, one girl, that became my very close friend after this -- this was in the third grade. After that we both left the school. She went to another school closer to where she lived. I went also to a Polish school closer to where I lived so that it was walking distance and for her it was walking distance. And we kept -- we were friends -- we kept up our friendship. We belonged to the same youth organization we were meeting there and besides we were meeting on weekends. She was my close friend until we made Aliyah to Israel and they could not because her brother was a professor of -- he was professor at the university, he was teaching Marxism and Leninism, he was a big Communist and they wouldn't -- all of a sudden we wanted to make Aliyah to Israel they right away took his job they -- he was without job and finally he got a job in a high school. The reason he wanted to go to Israel was because he had -- his fiancé left for Israel and eventually they, they -- six years later they were allowed to leave, Israel, uh, Poland and I kept up with her, she was my friend. But, no, -- nobody that was in Uzbekistan that I remember. Maybe some older people, but I did not see them myself.

Q: So, the first school you went to was a Yiddish school?

A: Yes.

Q: And that was -- bad, uh, was that a private school?

A: I don't know by whom it was run. Might have -- must have been run by the Jewish community, I have no idea. I -- we were not involved in any communal activity, so it is all for me very vague. I don't know who was running that school. I remember the name of the school was named after Sholem Aleichem, the Yiddish writer, but who ran the school I don't remember.

Q: And then after that...

A: I went to a Polish school.

Q: And you were...

A: I was -- I was the only Jewish girl in my class. I became a better student because I knew already the language. I was a good student. I had friends, but I knew I was different. I was -- first of all I knew that we were planning to leave, we were planning to go to Israel. And there was religion in the class, they were at that time in Poland they were teaching -- one of the subjects in school was religion and it was of course Catholic religion. I was leaving that hour. I didn't have -- for me it was a free hour, that was it. There were some anti-Semitic incidents at school.

- Q: Mostly on the part of the students, or...
- A: Yes, from the students. Never the teach -- never on the part of the teachers. I had a picture. I had two pictures from Russia that were very dear to me because pictures somehow were important to me. We never had any. We left everything, when the war broke out my parents just fled. They didn't take any pictures, they didn't have any pictures from what I looked like when I was little. I had these two pictures that were taken when we were in Russia of my class, the children that I was with and I brought them to school to show to my friends and one of these boys was terribly anti-Semitic and I remember his name and I remember how he looked, he grabbed that picture from me and he tore it to pieces. And because he knew that these were Jewish kids. However I never complained about it. I didn't say anything to any of the teachers. I just tried to be very brave about it, but inside I was hurting terribly. I was very upset.
- Q: I guess it's hard to complain to the teachers sometimes, I got picked on in school sometimes, too. So, when did your family leave Poland? You left with your parents?
- A: Yes, in 1950, which was four years after we came back from Russia. Israel got her independence in '48 and, uh, it took two years for us to be allowed to leave.
- Q: Do you remember how your parents went about it, what the process was that they need to go through?
- A: It's funny; I tell you I don't know those things, sometimes I want to cry about it sometimes I want to laugh about them. We had -- I was -- I was -- I went on vacation with this friend of mine, the friend, her name was Rita? She and her mother and her brother were taking vacations every summer and one summer -- and she and I were going -- Shomer Hatzair had camps every year which we went to. My mother was always against -- my mother was very much opposed to me being in that organization. It was a Socialist Zionist movement and she was very much against that, it was too much to the left for her and I didn't know from beans, I mean, I had the fun! It was wonderful and I just had great fun there. Anyway they closed our -- the -- in '49 it became in Poland illegal to have Zionist organizations, they closed down all the Zionist organizations, so I couldn't go and there was one summer left before we made an Aliyah and she went to a resort and she asked me to come along and we -- I went with them, with her mother and her brother. While we were there my mother came, she told me we got a visa to go to Israel and it was a great joy, I mean, I was jumping to the ceiling I was so overjoyed. I was very happy. I didn't know my -- well, I did know my parents didn't want to go to Israel. My father -- my father wanted to go to America. My mother was Zionist. She wanted to go to Israel. I would not hear about coming to America, I did not want to hear about it. I said, "My brother is in Israel, that's where I belong, I want to go to Israel." As it turned out he just had dreams, he

didn't have anybody here to sign for -- to get papers. It was just a dream for him. But we didn't make it any easier for him to dream because I said, "You want to go to America, you go. The two of you. I am going to Israel." There was no doubt in my mind that I would go only to Israel. And so we went. We were allowed to take -- we had some big crate and we were allowed to take out belongings, but no money, no silver, no gold, no jewelry, nothing like that.

Q: Mhm. That's interesting.

A: Definitely. You could take just clothes and some bedding, (very bitter), that was all, nothing else.

Q: The government made you leave your money.

A: Yes. I mean we found ways. We didn't have much, anyway. What little that we had. I had a Mogen David I got for my 12<sup>th</sup> birthday, my 11<sup>th</sup> birthday, I think. I got a gold chain with a Jewish Star on it. This was the only gold piece that I had and it was, you know, the chain was thin, it was little, but I was not allowed to take it and we didn't have anything. There was a piece, maybe my mother had a wedding band, maybe, they had a coin. They bought, I think a golden coin and they made a ring out of it because you were not allowed to take this and they had, maybe like, \$25.00 They were not allowed to take this. So, you know, they made a coat for me. You couldn't just, there were no -- were not available, you made your own clothes, you went to a seamstress or to a tailor and you had your clothes made, so they made for me a coat, a new, brand new coat. It was the first new thing that I got. And they made big buttons, they were fake buttons and inside that button somehow we put the \$25.00 and my chain with my gold -- with my Star of David. It was pathetic. It was funny and it was sad.

Q: It's awfully cruel.

A: I was frightened because I thought that they will -- on the border they will ask me why my buttons were so big, why my coat is open. It was cool. It was November, in Europe it was cool and I had my coat open. I was afraid they would ask me why is my coat open. I couldn't button it up because the buttons were so huge, because they were -- inside there was this thing and I was petrified. My parents didn't explain to me anything, they didn't say anything. So I was like -- I was so afraid. But nothing happened.

Q: How old were you at that time?

A: I think I was twelve, 12 or close to 13. When we came to Israel. I was 13 so it must have been when I was about 13.

Q: Did your brother get any religious education, or was he bar mitzvah?

- A: I think he was bar mitzvah in Russia, but, uh, I don't remember much.
- Q: Did you receive any religious education?
- A: No. No religious education. I did not receive -- I received Zionist education -- I was indoctrinated into, uh, I became a Zionist, but religion, no, except I knew that I had heard stories about my grandparents, that they were religious and, uh, there was not much discussion. There was no -- there was never good communication between, uh, in our home between my parents and the kids. Not much communication.
- Q: Sounds like they were trying very hard just to keep their own minds on straight. It was probably very difficult for them. Uh, I wanted to ask you something else. Oh, what kinds of jobs did your parents have in Poland?
- A: After the war they opened a grocery store. They found somebody that they knew, I think, from the same place where they -- from the same city where we were from and they opened together a grocery store. After awhile they separated and they stayed in the store, the other family left the partnership and my parents owned it until we made Aliyah to Israel.
- Q: When you went to Israel did you go by boat?
- A: Yes, by an old boat that almost sunk twice. Again we were it was again like -- I read about those ships, later. I read about it. It wasn't a picnic, I tell you. It wasn't a picnic. We were again on those big -- they were -- what did they use? These ships were used for, um, they were not passenger ships. They were made, you know, improvised for the people to leave -- for the people that were going to Israel, they made -- again we were sleeping one upon the other -- on top of the other and it was miserable. Oh, it was miserable. We were seasick. Oh, were we seasick. Terribly. Nobody could eat anything. And we were introduced for the first time to olives. (Both laugh)
- Q: While you were seasick?
- A: Disgusting. It was a disaster, because it was almost like eating straight poison. The taste was awful. It was terrible. We were not use to olives -- green olives and black olives. All I remember from that trip was being seasick and terribly sick and just having those olives. Probably there was some other food, but the olives were so bad. I don't know what else we had to eat. It mustn't have been very much, but we arrived, we made it. And my brother met us. He was already in the air force and we were, uh, he was in a kibbutz, he was on a kibbutz and he joined the air force. He never came back to live with us. We were living in a Ma'abara. Do you know what that is?
- Q: No.

A: They were transient -- transit camps for new immigrants that came to Israel. We lived in tents.

Q: How long did that go on?

A: It was going on for a while. I don't know. I was -- I was miserable. I didn't want to be in the te -- first we went -- like there was a camp and it was like quarantine. It was in Haifa and just thousands, hundreds and thousands of people from all over the world were put together, from Africa, from the Arab countries, from Europe. Nobody could speak the others' language, nobody spoke Hebrew, everybody was speaking their own language, we were living in tents, it was hot, it was miserable.

Q: What was the food like?

A: Oh! It was bad. It was bad. We had American cheese, again they sent us American cheese which we never had before and it was awful, it tasted to us terrible. It was all new foods that we were not used to and it was difficult to get used to it.

Q: Did your brother visit you there?

A: No, he did not visit us there. He came to the -- he met us when we were still -- before we came into the port we were waiting -- we were in the port, but we didn't come yet to the shore and he came on a small boat to visit us and it was -- we were thrilled.

Q: How long had it been since you'd seen him? What amount of time had passed since you'd seen him?

A: Four years.

Q: Four years.

A: Maybe even longer.

Q: And you were...

A: Yeah, it was four years because it took so long. Somehow when you are a kid time stretches. It was like twenty years, it seemed to me like it was forever, but it was only four years.

Q: So it must have been very happy.

A: Yes we were -- I was very happy to see him. I was so proud of him. He was wearing a uniform. And we were very proud of him.

Q: After the camp where did you go?

A: I left the camp. I went to Youth Aliyah. Do you know what that is?

Q: No.

A: These were schools -- those were schools and dormitories for children -- for new immigrants and my parents still stayed in the Ma'abara in the transit -- in the transit camps, but I left. I went to a Youth Aliyah and I was 14 by then.

Q: Uhm, let me turn the tape over.

End Side One.

Begin Side Two.

Q: What city was the Youth Aliyah in?

A: it was in Magdiel.

Q: And what part of Israel is that?

A: Not too far from Tel Aviv. Central. The central part.

Q: And did you ever live with your parents again after that?

A: One year. I was there from 14 until I was 17. At age 17 I came home because this was -- you could be there only until that age. I came home for one year, it was, home and then I went to the army.

Q: I want to ask both what you did and what your parents did. I guess I'll ask you what you did first. What was the Youth Aliyah like? What kind of -- you lived in a dormitory, right?

A: Yes.

Q: With all girls?

A: Boys and girls. In rooms, we had -- we lived in, uh, they were not barracks, they were, uh, bunks, ok? We lived in bunks. In the bunks there were separate rooms, there were boys, maybe they had to-bunks, I think, maybe we were just divided by bunks and there were girl bunks and boy's bunks.

Q: About how many people to a room?

A: Four, five.

Q: And then you attended classes during the day?

A: Yes, we worked half day and we attended classes half day; four hours. I think, classes and four hours work.

Q: What kind of work did you do?

A: Uh, we worked in -- it was an agricultural school, so we had -- there was, uh, we had fields. I don't know what they were growing. I never worked in the fields.

(phone rings)

I worked in the kitchen, I worked in the clinic, they had a clinic, they had a nurse that was living in our school and they had a doctor that was coming, I think, once a week, uh, to the clinic. So I worked in the clinic, I worked in the kitchen, I worked also on the grounds of the school. We were tending to -- we were growing some flowers. I don't remember. We had some chicken, raising chicken, I think, and cattle. There was -- I think there was some cattle and there were some fields there were -- we were growing some -- I don't know exactly what and I think we worked also in orchards.

Q: So this was not a desert area then...

A: No, no, no it wasn't. It wasn't. it was an agricultural school. Really they -- it was meant to prepare people to, you know, for agricultural life. To join kibbutzim and become farmers.

Q: Did you go to school year 'round?

A: Yes.

Q: So it was pretty much the same schedule.

A: Yes, the schedule was -- we had a schedule, uh, in the morning we went to school. How was it? No, we worked in the morning and went to school the afternoon.

Q: What subjects did you learn?

A: Hebrew, math, science, all the academic subjects, the Bible, the Tenach, our history, all the subjects that are taught in high school.

Q: Did you ever visit your parents at all?

- A: Yes, we would get holidays. We were -- I don't remember -- we could visit, I think once or twice a year. I thought I would remember much more than what I do, somehow I don't know. Yeah, I'd visit with my parents. My mother used to visit me, occasionally.
- Q: Did you see your brother?
- A: My brother, sometimes. Not very often. I was -- what was I, I think I was 19 when he got married, yeah. Yeah, I was thinking, I was in the army. I was one year in the army when he got married.
- Q: Did you have any special friends at school?
- A: Yes, I did.
- Q: Girlfriends or boyfriends?
- A: Girl. Girlfriends.
- Q: Were they your roommates, or people that you met?
- A: They were my -- in my -- we were divided by age groups, you know, we had groups. There were kids, um, I think from nine years on, they had, so we were divided according to age and in our group, yeah, these were people, friends from my group, age group. My roommates.
- Q: And you worked together.
- A: Mhm.
- Q: Did you have your evenings free pretty much? Did you go into town at all, or do anything?
- A: Mhm, we didn't have money. Most of the kids were orphans. Either they didn't have parents or they had one parent. Most of the kids were from, you know, survivors -- children that survived. Also there were kids from Arab countries at that time, from Morocco, Iraq. As a matter of fact my best friend was from Iraq. Those were all kids whose parents had no means, you know, to give them a decent life and it was a very good solution for the children to be in a normal environment, because people were living -- at that time most of the immigrants from '50 -- I learned -- I was -- '51 I went to Youth Aliyah. But everybody was still living in magarot, in those transit camps in tents, so this was a very good solution for the kids while the parents were in the meantime getting jobs and possibly getting apartments.

Q: So did the school provide you with clothing and food?

A: Yes, they provided us with clothing and food and education.

Q: And it was free to your parents?

A: Almost free, yes, it was almost free. There was a minimal charge. Very minimal.

Q: So you were there three years?

A: Mhm.

Q: And then you went home?

A: Yes.

Q: What did you do while -- well, let me ask you first, when did your parents leave the camp that they were in?

A: I think that it was in '52 that there was a big flood. The rains were so heavy and they were just completely flooded.

(phone rings)

Q: There was a flood in '52...

A: Yeah, I think it was, yeah, the first year or the second year they were flooded and somebody nearby, near the Ma'abara ,near the, uh, near the camp -- some people just took them in.

Q: So they lived for two years...

A: And they rented, uh, uh, a small little apartment from them.

Q: And they lived for two years in the camp?

A: I don't know how long they lived there. I don't know.

Q: From '50 to '52?

A: I don't remember, you know, because I was at school. I was -- and, um, I don't know exactly how long they were there. A half year, or year. Maybe less.

Q: Did they have a way of making a living there or were they given money?

A: My father was still working in all kinds of odd jobs. At the beginning he worked at buildings, in construction, uh...

Q: After the flood, then, they were taken in by some people?

A: Yeah, and they rented from them a little, like, a -- what would you call it? Bungalow. A small, little, one-room -- I think it was a one-room. I think it was a little house, tiny house.

Q: And your father did the construction work there?

A: Mhm.

Q: Did your mother work at that time?

A: I think she got temporarily some job as a salesperson in a store. I don't know how long it lasted. I wasn't in contact with them all the time. I don't think there were letters. We weren't writing. I don't remember writing letters or getting letters at that time, so we -- I guess we just saw each other every few months

Q: Then when you went home were they still living in the bungalow?

A: Yes, but then they moved to Haifa this was in place Ramat Hasharoh and after that they lived in place Kiryat/Shaul. The Ma'abara, the camp was in place Ramat Hasharoh, it was very close by where they rented this little apartment and then they moved to Haifa.

Q: Did you work after you went back to live with them?

A: No, I went to school. I went to high school, finished the high school. I finished high school and then I went to the army.

Q: So you went to school in Haifa?

A: One year.

Q: Was that similar to high school here pretty much?

A: Yes.

Q: Did you have more religious education than we have here?

A: No, no, there was no religious -- it was not a religious school. I didn't have any religious education except that, you know, we studied the Bible, you know, the Tenach, but it was not, uh, we didn't, uh, the approach wasn't religious. It was a more historic approach.

Q: That's interesting. Were your parents -- were their religious activities any different in Israel?

A: No, just the holidays. They went just for the holidays. They went, to, uh, synagogue, but my parents were not religious. I have no -- after the war -- well for instance I remember I have no -- well they were kind of observing the holidays, but not really religious, no.

Q: I think what I've heard of Israel -- there's not a very heavy emphasis put on religion there.

A: That is true.

Q: So, let's see, you went to school, you lived with your parents for a year, then what made you decide to go into the army?

A: I had to. And I wanted to.

Q: That's right, women are drafted.

A: Yeah, at age 18, if you are not married, you go to the army.

Q: Is that for men also, if men are married they don't have to?

A: No. Men have to. Women don't have to.

Q: And what was life like in the army?

A: Well, you go first through the training period, and uh, I think it was five weeks. Between five and six weeks. I think so. What it was like, uh, it was rough at times it was good experience.

Q: How long were you in the army?

A: Two years.

Q: Did you do any traveling, or were you pretty much stationed in one place?

A: Yes, I was stationed in one place.

Q: Where was that?

A: Near Haifa.

Q: And what kind of jobs did you do? Did you work?

A: In -- I worked in the office.

Q: Did you ever see any action?

A: No, I didn't. No, in the evening I took classes. I went to school in the evening.

Q: What kinds of things did you take?

A: I took Early Child Education.

Q: Was that college level then?

A: I think so, yeah.

Q: So you wanted to be a teacher?

A: Not really. I really did not want to be a teacher, I just wanted to use my time to learn something, to just sometimes -- to use my time. In the evenings, you know, I was still young and I did not have any profession and I knew when I leave the army I will have to work. It was -- I really wanted to be a nurse. (makes a face of suppressed rage). But my mother would not allow me. And she was -- and she did not let me and she did not let me go into nursing school and -- At that time supposedly I had some health problem -- physical it was something with my -- oh, it was ridiculous, I knew it was nothing. They thought that I had scoliosis, which I did, but it was very, very mild, it's in a very mild form.

Q: What is that?

A: Scoliosis? What is it? It's a curvature of the spine. A curving of the spine. It goes like "S", but very mild. It can be very severe and some people have it very severe. But there are many people who have it in a very light form. I have it in a very light form. (In a sarcastic singsong). But the doctor said to my mother that I should not do any physical work, hard work and this was considered to be a very physical, hard work to be a nurse. Dumb. And so I wasn't allowed and this is what I really wanted to do so badly and I was not allowed to do it and my mother was very strong-minded woman and there was no support and nothing and I didn't do it. If it was today, I would sure do it. Well, it's unbelievable, I guess. So her decision was that I should be a teacher, uh, early education. I should take early education, uh, I should study and I should become a teacher which I never wanted to be. It was just my family. But I graduated, I got some education and it was very helpful to me in bringing up -- raising my children. I was very grateful for what I learned. I learned some psychology, which I never had any -- I did not know anything about it and it was very helpful to me, what I have learned.

Q: Uh. Let's see, your brother got married when you were 19?

A: Mhm.

Q: And you were in the army. That was your first year in the army?

A: Yeah.

Q: Were you very close with him at that time? Did you see a lot of him?

A: No, he got married young. He was, I think 23. He was sent to -- he was in the air force and after his two or two-and-a-half years of duty he kept -- he continued being he chose this as his career. And he was, uh, he was sent...

(phone rings)

Q: You were saying that he was sent?

A: He was sent to Burma when they set up their air force. I think it was in '56. Yeah, I think it must have been '56.

Q: Where is Burma?

A: Thailand...Thailand.

Q: So Israel was giving them help setting up their air force?

A: Yes. The Israeli air force was helping the Thailand air force set up their air force. And my brother was sent for a year.

Q: Was he married then?

A: No, he got married after he returned, after that year of service there he returned and he got married and now he has three children.

Q: Is he still in Israel?

A: Oh, yes. Yes my whole family is firmly settled in Israel, they would not leave Israel for anything.

Q: Even your parents changed their minds.

A: Yes, yes.

Q: Well I think I'll continue that later then.

Q: This is the third interview session with Esther Lawner. It is August 6, 1984. The last time we talked you were in the army and you said that your brother had gone to Burma to help Thailand form an air force.

A: Right. He was in the air force himself and they sent over ten guys from the Israeli air force to help the Thailand air -- to set up a Thailand air force

Q: Um, you were in the army for two years, then, from 18 -- 20?

A: Yeah.

Q: Then after you got out of the military, how long were you in Israel before you left?

A: Until '65, 1965.

Q: I wanted to go back and ask you just a few questions about Israel. Something that we touched on briefly last time was that Israel is somewhat less religious than most people in this country think it is. I think people in America view Israel as being a religious entity, but it -- and are very surprised when they go over and find that the people, especially a lot of the kibbutzes, are anti-religious. So you have an opinion on that as to why, why that might be the case?

A: Uh, there are different reasons. First of all, there are lots of religion, religious people. There are not religious people. The religious people live in their own communities where they can feel comfortable, where they don't have to see people who desecrate the Shabbat and they feel comfortable with each other. They all do the same things, they have the same lifestyle. So many, many tourists, maybe, don't go to these places, but there are parts of -- many, many religious people in Israel. Why those that are not religious became not religious, well, I can think about my own family and probably it's typical. Uh, my grandparents were very religious. They were so religious that they were anti-Zionist actually, when my mother was young and she wanted to study Hebrew, they would not allow her because that meant that she is plotting maybe to go to Palestine and to be a word Halutza, to be a pioneer.

(Tape is off)

Q: So, your grandparents were extremely religious and then...

A: Yes, and I know that before the war, my parents and my immediate family were also observant. They kept the Shabbat. But as soon as they left it all vanished, you know, it was a matter of survival and they were on the run all the time and they were refugees wherever they were and they were just cut off, everything, and they didn't keep it up. It was a matter of survival. I don't remember anybody from my childhood -- early childhood in Russia. I remember just like one family

that maybe were observant. Vaguely I remember something. Maybe they observed Shabbat, but everybody else was like us. I don't remember any religion. Except when I was little I was -- for several years I was still saying my prayer when I went to bed and I was saying a prayer when I got up in the morning. Then it vanished. It just -- I don't know when I stopped, I just decided I don't want to do any more and, um, that was it. I asked about a year ago, a friend of -- the mother of a friend of mine was here from Israel and she had the same background, religious -- from a very religious family. She herself -- the mother of my friend -- just went away from that and now our generation, we are kind of -- many of us are trying to go back to the religion because we feel we really have missed things

Q: So what you're saying is that, um...

(both talk at once)

A: Well I don't know. I have asked her. She was a survivor. She was in concentration camps -- I asked her -- and then she made Aliyah, she went to Israel, had two wonderful kids, one of the daughters was here for a couple of years, now she's going back. But I asked her -- I wanted to find out why our parents went away from the religion. I wanted -- because we never talk about -- and especially now that I am separated from my family, so that I have those questions I cannot ask them. And this woman, I asked her, "What happened? Why did you go away?" She didn't have a good answer, she said she does not know. That, uh, there was the war, there was a matter of survival and evidently people, maybe, thought that, well, God abandoned them. There is nothing, uh, nobody watches over them, you know. See what's happening. Many people had this reaction, however, there were many people who, because they survived, became very religious and in Israel, when people came after the Holocaust -- now those people who lived there for years there are those who are religious and those who are not -- are less religious. I have in my family this one aunt who was a pioneer who went to Palestine. She became very anti-religious. So I think "Why?" She saw the life of her parents. She didn't want to have anything to do with it. She wanted to build a new life, different. She came to Palestine when there was not much there and she was a pioneer. She worked very hard and met her husband and was living on a kibbutz and just -- it didn't -- religion doesn't mean anything for her. I never discussed it with her, why she did it, but, uh, I don't know. However, there are many people now, our generation and younger people, who are going back, going back to religion. They missed it.

Q: Yeah. What did you do after you got out of the military?

A: I was working as a kindergarten teacher for, I think, a couple of years.

Q: Did you mostly teach during the rest of the time you were in Israel?

A: No, after that I changed my vocation. I became an architectural draftsman -- draftsperson. (laughs)

Q: Did you need to go into some training for that?

A: Yes, I had some -- I had training. I took courses and then I learned also through just practice, by just working, then.

Q: And your father was working...

A: Experience.

Q: And your father was working in construction at this time?

A: No, this was just at the beginning. Later he was working -- he was working for somebody in, uh, different type of things and then they bought a grocery store and they had a small grocery store for years until my father died. And after a year, I think my mother closed it.

Q: Can you tell me about the events that led up to your leaving Israel, your decisions and changes in attitude that led to that?

A: The only reason that I left Israel is because I married my husband who is an American and he found life in Israel difficult and he didn't want to stay.

Q: How did you meet him?

A: At a party. Independence party that he threw. And I was really not invited to the party. Somebody else was invited and the somebody else brought, like, ten people and I was one of the ten. That's how we met.

Q: So he was visiting?

A: No, he was working. He came to Israel after he finished his studies. He got a job and he came for a year. And I think he was seven months there when we met. And then he stayed longer. He stayed about a year and eight months and we got married and, uh, he didn't want to stay.

Q: Was it hard for you to leave?

A: Yes. Mhm.

Q: Was it mostly because you were leaving your family, or did you feel you were leaving a commitment?

A: No, yes, not my family. I wasn't very close to my family, but I felt that I was leaving a commitment and a place where I really should live. What I should support, really. What I should be a part of and what I should support

Q: What did you -- did you have any preconceptions about America? What was your attitude toward going to America then?

A: No, uh, somehow I didn't think I will live here for my whole life, I just thought it will be for a number of years, but eventually my husband will realize that it is important to go back. But I was wrong.

Q: So what did you think of America? Where did you first arrive?

A: We arrived -- our first year was in Denver, Colorado. First we came here and we visited -- his family was from Dayton, so we visited a few weeks and then we went to Denver, Colorado, and my husband had a job and we stayed there for a year and we moved to St. Louis and we stayed in St. Louis for three-and-a-half years and then we moved we came to Dayton. We have been here 14 years. The longest in my life I lived in any place. Prior to coming to Dayton I was in -- I was no longer than three years in any place, I was wandering, but this is the longest I have been in any place in my life

Q: And so you thought of America as a temporary home?

A: Oh, I think it was very exciting. I was excited to come and to live here for a while. I liked -- first of all I love to travel. I love to see the new places and meet new people. I loved that. It's very exciting. But I think I wanted to raise my children in Israel definitely, I wanted to raise my children in Israel. And um...

Q: So that hasn't happened the way you thought it might?

A: In that -- in this respect, no, but I am trying, you know, as best I can to, uh, to give them the type of education that I was hoping they would have in Israel.

Q: When did you begin feeling the desire to return to a religious life?

A: I don't know if I have the desire to be very, very religious, you know, there are so many degrees of being religious. I don't know if you heard of Mea Shearim in Israel? It is a place where very, very ultra-Orthodox Jews live. Now I would never want to live this way. I couldn't. I just wouldn't want to. But when my kids -- when my first child was born, that's when I realized that I had to do something so that my child will grow up to be Jewish. And we started having Friday nights a little service at the table which is -- every Jewish observant family has it -- it is called Kiddush in the evening Friday nights. We started to do that. And at first it was very phony. Neither my husband or I had done this before, were not too much exposed to that, but we made the effort, we started to do it and

it became like second nature and the children grew up with that. They know that Friday comes, they are not going out, at least not before we eat and we have our little service. Our Kiddush. I like them to stay anyway, well my daughter is a teenager, so she knows I am not too excited when she goes out Friday night even after that, but on the other hand I don't want to pressure her, make her feel guilty, because she works so hard and she needs that recreation and just the circumstances are such that most of her friends -- most of them -- all of them-- she's the only one of all of her friends that has -- that we have that Kiddush in our house. The other kids are so used to, you know, not observing anything, so I don't want her to feel like she is different from the other kids. So we are trying as much, you know, to do at home as much as possible by sending them to a camp, Camp Ramah, which is a Hebrew-speaking camp and they're -- it's, uh, where they have learned a lot. Much more so than at home, or here in the city. And by sending them to day school and by discussing with them how we feel and what is important and giving them directions and telling them -- make sure that they know who they are and making sure that they know what is important to us.

Q: Have you found any kind of Jewish community in Dayton -- that there is a sense of community among at least of the Jews in Dayton?

A: Uh, yes, the Orthodox community which is very small, very tiny. The Orthodox community -- they are members of Shomrei Emunah. Its small, very small congregation.

Q: Is that the one that meets in a house?

A: Mhm. On Salem (Ave.), yes

Q: I don't know anything about them at all, except just the existence of the house. But they do live together in a neighborhood?

A: Yes, because they have -- because on Shabbat they don't drive and they have to be able to walk to the synagogue. So they all live in that area in Dayton View.

Q: But you haven't found anything that you can feel part of, or any kind of community spirit that, uh -- I'm asking this in a way for my own benefit, too, because I'm looking for the same thing.

A: No, I must say no. No, I have not found it and it's very frustrating to me. When holidays come we try to do it at home you know always have people in during Pesach and Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year. I'm trying to -- we are always are with people who feel and want to observe the way we do. Either we are invited to their houses or we invite them to our house. But on a larger scale, no, it's very frustrating for me.

End Side two.

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