

## U.S. Holocaust Museum Memorial Oral History

Maria (Doninska) Shenfield, Dr., was born in Łódź around 1928 to middle class, non-religious parents. Her maternal grandparents came from Lithuania, married unusually without a matchmaker; her grandmother was Nehamma Katz. She doesn't know the origins of her paternal grandparents, Aaron and Bodia (?) Doninska. Her father was an accountant. Her mother was born Sonia Katz.

She first witnessed anti-Semitism on a national holiday, May 3, during a demonstration by far rightists. Her father survived the immediate German invasion by going to Sesch (?). Though her father sent for them, Maria, her mother and aunt went to Warsaw, and eventually on to Russia meeting her father there. They traveled through Minsk and onto Stalingrad, settling in Rostov (?). When she first heard of the gas chambers on the radio, she thought it was Soviet false propaganda. After her father died of TB in 1942, her mother contemplated suicide, but persevered. They made their way to Molotov near the Urals, and were robbed by Jewish robbers in route, posing as partisans. Maria and her mother remained in the area until the war's end. Maria talks at length about her activities and living difficulties during the war. She never met any observant Jews during this time.

When she first heard of the gassing of Jews, she couldn't believe it until she later visited Poland. Maria resisted returning to Poland after the war as she worried that the schools would be inadequate, but eventually returned to Silesia, and then on to Łódź. They discovered alive her mother's brother, Shashlik, there though they had thought him dead. During a visit to Warsaw, they visited the Jewish Committee on a lark to check for mail and found word of relatives in Belgium with whom she re-connected in 1946. Maria and her mother arranged to go there, but decided to stay in Poland as they didn't know French and Maria was finishing her studies, receiving her medical degree in 1952. She describes her university experiences during the second tape. She went to work in a teaching hospital

In 1953, she met her husband and had a civil marriage in 1954, having her first daughter, June, in 1956. Her husband edited educational films. Around this time, Polish anti-Semitism began to rise again from government actions in Poland creating concerns about their safety. Encouraged by her husband's friends, they left for Australia on the *Aurelia* after a nine-month hiatus in Paris to obtain their papers; they were accompanied by her sister-in-law and her husband. She took medical refresher courses at Melbourne University where she was treated well. Her husband died in his sleep in 1964 at age 43. Her mother died peacefully shortly before turning 95, one of her only relatives to die in her own bed.

Before separating from her second husband after an unhappy 23 years, Maria re-visited Poland in 1976 with him. She still saw vestiges of anti-Semitism but little remnants of Jewish culture. She returned again around 2000 visiting the large Jewish cemetery in Łódź. She also saw more Polish interest and more acknowledgement of the Jewish experience. Maria remained not particularly religious though she belonged to a few Jewish organizations. Maria closes by summarizing the lives of her mother's family (Katz) shown in a 1905 photo and providing a message to her grandchildren.