

## **RG-50.407.0245**

### **Summary**

Helen Burstin was born on October 11, 1932 in Bialystok, Poland. Had a younger brother. Father, Shimshun, and mother Chaya Rabinovich were both teachers. Family long time residents of Bialystok which was 70% Jewish. Maternal grandparents and other family members lived a few streets away. Went to a summer house 6 weeks a year. She mentions being stoned by Polish children. When the war started, her school became Russian. The Russians "destroyed Bialystok." Many refugees in Bialystok were sent to Siberia or Kazakhstan. Her uncle had paperwork to go to Palestine but did not go and later died in Treblinka. On 6/20/41 Russians arrested her father and her mother was told to pack up. Her uncle tried to bribe the secret police, but Helen and mother sent east by train and then horse cart to a camp in Russia. They were put in barracks and did their cooking outside. Mother put to work in a brick factory. They stayed in the camp for 6-8 weeks and then were "liberated" and went to live in a nearby village where they stayed for 5 years. She went to school and learned Russian as the only Jew in the school. It was a hard life, but fewer diseases due to the cold. Mother worked in a coat factory. They were aware of battles for Stalingrad and Leningrad, but little else. She learned how to spin wool and make socks and picked berries in the summer for the government. No running water or electricity and mother affected badly by malnutrition. At war's end they learned that father and brother were put in the ghetto in Bialystok and later died in Treblinka after liquidation of the ghetto in 1943. Helen and mother given Polish passports and went to Lodz for 3 weeks. They learned that the Russians again had destroyed Bialystok and there were very few Jews left. Those that remained were guarded to prevent Poles from attacking them. "Constant fear" of Poles. She did return to school, apparently in Bialystok until they left for Paris where they lived for 7 months waiting for an Australian visa. She wanted to go to Israel to be with Jews but could not get there. They traveled to Australia with several hundred Jews on an Egyptian vessel. Ended up in St. Kilda near Melbourne for 5 months. Mother worked 3 jobs. Helen had to learn enough English to move to a regular school and later worked in a clothing factory. She married her first husband at 18, but he died of cancer after 3 years. Has a second husband and 3 children. Mother lived with them for quite a while. She and husband worked together as accountants for ~30 years. She has a strong feeling for Israel. Feels a bit more antisemitism now (2002) but feels much safer than Europe.