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Summary

This interview was with Rona Zinger who was born in 1943 in Lithuania in the Kovno (Kaunas) Ghetto. The interview is difficult to follow since Ms. Zinger keeps going back and forth chronologically. Her father, Shmuel Rosenthal, was a headmaster at a Sholom Aleichem school in Kovno and her mother, Rona Shmuel Weiss, was a kindergarten teacher at a Montessori-like school. Rona's father was born in 1903 and grew up in hardship becoming an orphan in his teens. Her mother came from a middle-class family that lost everything during the Depression. Rona also had a brother six years older. There was a flourishing Jewish culture in Kovno but neither of Rona's parents grew up observing Jewish laws or rituals. Rona had a maternal aunt in Paris who survived the war, and Rona kept up contact with her after the war.

In August 1941 Rona's parents and maternal grandparents were put in the Kovno Ghetto. Her parents established an underground school there and were also active in underground activities. Her father was good at fabricating documents and secreting children out of the ghetto and placing them with non-Jewish foster parents. Such was the case with Rona when she was born in 1943. At first hidden, Rona was taken out of the ghetto and placed with a foster family. The family loved Rona and even after the foster parents separated her foster mother took care of her and believed that both Rona's biological parents would have been killed. As it turned out Rona's biological mother was taken to the Stutthof concentration camp near Danzig (Gdansk) and died there, probably of Typhoid. Her father, however, survived Stutthof and Dachau and returned to claim Rona after the war, probably in 1948.

Rona, called Lily by her foster parents, thought of her foster parents as her real parents, so the transition to joining with her father and older brother, who had also survived with another foster family, was very difficult. Her brother held her responsible for their mother's death, and her father, traumatized by his experiences during the war and frequently sick, was unloving and yet very dependent on Rona. Nevertheless, he wrote about his experiences which Rona was never able to retrieve. When Rona was sixteen, she reestablished contact with her stepmother. A few years later, Rona married someone who her father and brother disapproved of. They did not attend the wedding, though her foster mother did. Several years later, Rona came to agree with her father's opinion of her husband, and they divorced after having had a daughter and son. Although the interview does not discuss why, how, or when, Rona and her husband and children apparently immigrated to Australia (Melbourne?) in the late 1970s.

After Rona immigrated to Australia she lost contact with her father and brother though she maintained contact with her aunt in Paris. Her father died in 1984, but she did not find out until much later. Rona returned to Lithuania in 1995, 1998, and 1999 hoping to find out more about her mother and how she died and where her father was buried. She was unsuccessful finding out about her mother, but she was able to find her father's grave and improve its condition. She also visited her aunt in Paris and was able to get some pictures of her mother.

In 1995 and 1999, Rona attended two Children of Survivors Conference. The first one in Los Angeles was particularly helpful and meaningful to her. She not only met others from Lithuania but was able to form a close bond with these other children of survivors. When asked what she took away from her experiences as a child of survivors Rona replied that she admired the people who risked their lives to save Jews. These were true human beings.