BRIGITTE STEINER (née ECHT)

DANZIG/CANADA

WORLD WAR II

Interviewed by

Renia Perel

&

Reva Hollander

(July 18, 1991)

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Interviewee: Brigitte STEINER (S)

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Interviewer: Renia Perel (P), & Reva Hollander (H)

P: Thank you for coming down and giving your testimony of your survival. Where were you born, Bea [Brigitte]?

S: In Danzig-Brösen; it was a suburb to the main city of Danzig [now Gdańsk, Poland].

P: And how many children were there in your family?

S: We were three girls, ah...a sister two years my senior, and later on, a younger sister seven years my junior.

P: So, you were the middle child.

S: Right.

P: [laughs] Ahha? And, and who, how many members were in your family, like, did you live with your grandparents or just your mom and dad, or...?

S: We lived with my grandmother whose home it had been originally before my grandfather passed away. Um, my grandfather, Max Cohn, eh...was killed in the First World War, and my grandmother kept the store up and the home, and brought up her only daughter, Meta.

P: So, your mother's name was Meta?

S: Meta.

P: Meta Cohn?

S: That's right, and then she married Otto Echt, eh...who then

took over the business and became the owner of the establishment.

P: And, and what kind of business did, did your parents have, originally your grandfather's?

S: Eh...it [was] a rather large department store when you consider the times. It was a complete, um, lower ground floor of the building and my father particularly looked after the drugs and solutions, eh...and the rest of the store had just about everything: clothing, eh...hardware, shoes and so on, and my mother and grandmother helped in that part of the store, plus quite a few sales people.

P: How large was your staff? Do you remember?

S: Um, I remember...

P: [not clear]

S: I remember, in particular, two ladies and two men but there might have been more that I don't really recall.

H: I just wanted to get the spelling of your mother's name.

S: Meta, M-E-T-A. [shuffling of papers in background]

H: Okay, and Meta?

S: Cohn, C-O-H-N.

P: Right.

H: Oh, C-O-H-N, okay.

S: And grandfather's name was Max, and grandmother's name was Rosa, Rosalinde actually, but, everybody called her Rosa.

H: R-O-S-A?

S: R-O-S-A.

P: We will take the time to spell the name.

S: Um hmm.

P: R-...could you spell...

S: R-O-S-A.

P: Rosa.

H: Okay.

P: And, and ah...your grandfather, Maxwell, or just Max?

S: Just Max.

P: Thank you. [pause] And ah...how did your grandfather die? Ah, when you said 'in the war', what kind of war was it?

S: The First World War.

P: And what army was he with?

S: German.

P: So, was he a German soldier then?

S: Not nec...actually a fighting soldier; he, he helped the wounded, and doing evacuating [of] some of the wounded. He, himself was shot and tuberculosis set in and, ah...he was eventually sent home to die. He died a week after arriving home.

P: Um hmm. How old was your mother when, when this happened?

S: I think she was in her early teens, maybe fourteen or something, in that area.

P: So, that was in 1918, about twenty years...

S: Yes, during that time span.

P: Ah ha. So, so she was a real brave, eh...girl?

S: It was a hard time, yes.

P: Your grandmother and your mother. Haha, both, haha, um hmm. So, describe your childhood. What was it like?

S: Um, my childhood, in the beginning was really quite happy and secure and, ah...we felt loved and wanted and really had all the comforts we could wish for. There was nothing that didn't come our way if we wanted it, eh...we as children were exposed to cultural things, we went to Jewish things, we went to, um, plays and theatre for children, children's plays, um, and it was really [clears throat] a happy time. And yet, we suddenly became aware that something was changing.

P: And when was that?

S: Eh...this was particularly when I started school which was, um, about 1934-45. Eh...and since my older sister was just two years my senior [clears throat] the two of us would be best friends as well. We would protect each other, we would discuss things, we would look out for each other and so we finally became aware that whenever relatives came to visit, everybody would talk in very subdued voices and something was not right. And we discussed it among ourselves and decided that although well-brought-up girls do not eavesdrop and listen, we should find out what is going on, eh...because we did not want to trouble our parents and ask a direct question. And we then realized then [that] there was a bad man by the name of [Adolf] Hitler who was making Jewish lives miserable. It wasn't too long after that, that we noticed it at school as well. Eh...our school friends who had been very nice with us and very friendly suddenly would not include us in their games; would not even walk home with us anymore. They would cross the street to be away from us, and

eventually, eh...they would not even sit close to us in school because they didn't want to be 'contaminated'. Um...we kept these things to ourselves because we didn't want to worry our parents. It appeared they had enough worries as it was, eh...but then something happened which almost had a little bit of humour in it. Eh...a new teacher came to [our] school, eh...who was a very dedicated, a very conscientious believer in Hitler and the new "Aryan race" and she explained to the children what a wonderful time it was in their lives and that they should be particularly happy and proud to be part of this "great Hitler movement," and that Hitler was creating a new "German race" to be blond and blue-eyed and to be strong and masterful and she decided that she would show them an example, and she said, "Yes, children, I will show you what the real German girl should look like," and she looked across the room and her eyes rested on my sister who was very blonde and had blue eyes. And she said to my sister, "Little girl, come up the front and let everybody see you." My sister hesitated because we were aware [of] what was going on and she did not want to be one of the 'Hitler girls'. So she didn't move, and the teacher again beckoned her and said, "Come up and let everybody see you, because this is such a thing to be proud of. You should be very willing to do this." At which point the other children were starting there sort of loud whispers of "Jew! Jew! She's Jewish." So, the teacher felt a little bit embarrassed and had to save face somehow, and [she said] "Oh, one minute children, one minute, let me

just take another look. I think that maybe I have made a mistake because the hair is too light, the eyes aren't that particular blue that we really want and when I come to think of it, the nose is too short." So, of course, with this little story, my sister came home and it became a little bit of humour that was the centre of conversation for a long time to come. And, then, not too long after this episode, um, something else took place. We noticed, for instance, that the lighting on the outside of our house was always kept very dim and we asked our maid at the time why this was and she said, "People are wanting to come to speak to your parents but they don't want to be identified and seen. And that is why the lights are dim." And almost nightly, somebody would come to speak to my father. He would be ushered into a little room which we called [in German] the 'Herrenzimmer." I think the equivalent would be...

P: This is the men's room...

S: The men's room or the study or something to that effect, where they could close the door and...

P: Ah, the actual translation of the 'Herrenzimmer' is, while I said the 'men's room', but it really means the 'men's study' because the men's room, in English, means a bathroom.

S: Yeah, you're right. Eh...so they, again, my sister and I took turns in trying to listen [to] what was going on and different people would come to tell my parents to save themselves, to get out, to leave, that terrible times are coming. Eh...and each time my parents would say, "Oh, we are

so respected in our little Brösen. Everybody loves us," which was quite correct, eh..."no one would ever hurt us," which also was quite correct but as it turned out, that when they wanted to abuse us, they had to bring people in from outside who were strangers. However, ah...one of these people who came to the house after dark was our school principal.

P: Which? Of the Jewish school?

S: No, of the school where the children were...

P: The public school?

S: Yes, the public school; this was before I went to the Jewish school. Eh...he came and, ah, he told my parents that not to send us to school anymore. That he could no longer guarantee our safety and terrible things were happening and worse [things] were going to happen, and he can't tell us what it is but he knows it will be so terrible that he would prefer for us not to go anymore.

P: Could you put this in the time-frame for the record that...what year you are speaking...1938?

S: This would be about...

P: And your year of school?

S: No, this would be about '35, '36.

P: So, so all this is already happening...

S: Oh, yes...

P: In 1935, '36, and you were about six, seven years old? You were in grade one or two?

S: I was in grade two.

P: You were in grade two.

S: Um, just as a point of interest, this same principal survived the war, and later on, when I became an army nursing sister [in the Canadian Army] and was posted in Germany, I looked him up and he welcomed me into his home very warmly and I really enjoyed seeing him again. But, at any rate, to go back to the story, eh...we did not go to school anymore, my sister and I, to that school anyway.

P: The next day, you mean, or, or...?

S: The next day, we stopped.

P: Could you give us the name of the...

S: The principal? His name was Mylinsky.

P: The first name?

S: Eh...well, all I know was Herr [Mr.] Mylinsky. I don't know what his first name was.

P: Mister?

S: Mr. Mylisky. M-Y-L-I-N-S-K-Y, Mylinsky. Eh...and so, as I say, we didn't go to school, but in the meantime, my father's brother, who had been a teacher in the higher learning institutes, eh...resigned from his position there and opened a school for all the Jewish children.

P: That's Mr. Echt?

S: That's Samuel Echt.

P: How do you spell the "Samuel"?

S: Samuel. S-A-M...Samuel.

P: Like in English?

S: Yes. And he, he became the principal of this school for Jewish children and, ah, as you may recall, he was also the

one who was very instrumental in saving things from the Great Danzig Synagogue, and in taking two transports of his school children over to England to evacuate them. But at this point, it was just the elementary school and it was a wonderful place, really, because we felt safe and secure and we all shared the same, eh...problems. Inside, always we were together; outside, eh...we were not too safe and my uncle very wisely would not let all classes be dismissed at the same time, so that there wouldn't be too many children on the street at once. And at this school, we also, being a Jewish school, we took part in everything towards holidays and religious studies and it was a happy place. There was one problem, however, because the school was very centrally located in Danzig, it meant children from all other areas close to it would come to it; therefore, many of us had to take a streetcar. I had to take a streetcar, eh...which was fine as long as the streetcar was empty, I could sit. But if the streetcar was filling up, um, I could no longer sit because no one was allowed to sit close to me, being Jewish, and, therefore, I would have to stand on the outer ledge of the streetcar and to me it is still a miracle that I never flew off, because it was not the most safe place to be standing.

P: And was your sister in that school?

S: No, my sister went to another school that was opened up for Jewish high school children, called the Rosenbaum School.

P: Spell it, please.

S: R-O-S-E-N-B-A-U-M, Rosenbaum.

P: Rosenbaum School.

S: High school.

P: And was there a name for your Jewish elementary school that you went to?

S: I don't think there was a particular name; it was just the Jewish school.

P: Ah ha, and, and was this a special building designated, made for it?

S: Yes, it was a special building for it, one, it seemed like an old, old house because we had to walk upstairs and downstairs and the various classrooms were located. There was one other problem: to get to the streetcar. Eh...[coughs], at no time could I take the same street twice in a row. Eh...I had to, to travel different [streets], walk to the stop [along] different routes because, eh...boys from the "Hitler Youth" [Hitlerjugend], who, of course, are issued a big knife as soon as they enter school, which I called a dagger, maybe it was a dagger; it was a fairly large sharp-pointed knife.

P: Please, just take one...stop for a moment and describe that particular 'Hitler Youth' because that is important.

S: The Hitler Youth, yes...

P: And then go on to your story...

S: Yes, as soon as a child, eh...entered school...

P: Which is how old? Six?

S: Which would be either five or six, depending on how their birthday fell, they would then have their little uniform and

this big knife and they would also have a lot of indoctrination going on to tell them of this 'wonderful' Hitler movement and that anybody who was against this Hitler movement could be harmed or killed, in which case they would rise that much higher in the school system as well. Whether they were dumb or intelligent as far as their academic things went was immaterial. In fact, if a parent would so much as say to their children, "Oh, please don't go to that organization, it isn't good for you. These people are not doing you any good," that child would report the parents and the next day the parents would be taken away and killed. This gives you an idea...

P: This really happened?

S: Yes, because the neighbours, we had neighbours, who told the children, she had two boys, and she told the boys, "Please, boys, please don't go," and she was crying so hard that she came afterwards to my father's store for comfort just to tell him the situation. And, ah...shortly after she left my father's store and went back to her house, and we could see her front entrance; the Gestapo entered and hauled her away and she was never heard of again.

P: So, it was the mother, but the father was left?

S: No, the father they got later; they got him at another time when he was home from work.

P: And what year? The time-frame is...

S: This is all in the same time-frame.

P: In 1936?

S: '36.

P: They already did that, killing of...

S: Yes...

P: Of people...?

S: Yes, eh...in fact, I can't remember now if it was the same family or not, but I think it was, the man had to, he was travelling on his bicycle, he had to go through a wooded area, and he was murdered on his way home. Eh...so these boys, of course, were wanting to get ahead in their rank, shall we say, and importance, so they were quite, quite willing to chase me and run after me, and try to hunt me down.

P: So they knew who you were, that you were Jewish...

S: Yes, because in a small...

P: So, this was a definite relation to you, so when you were saying that there was a difficulty in getting to the streetcar, now perhaps you can return to that. What was the problem? What the problem was.

S: The problem was that these, these boys with their knives, and they even got themselves hunting dogs, big shepherd dogs, eh, to help to hunt me down. And the moment I came out of my door, I had to look right and left and even though I saw nobody in the beginning, as soon as I started walking, there they were and I would have to run [down] different streets, different alley ways, trying to escape them and get somehow to school.

P: At seven or eight, were you about seven or eight?

S: I was, I wasn't quite eight. I was seven.

P: Seven, seven years old. That's a big responsibility.

S: Well this...

P: How did you feel inside? I mean, weren't you...

S: Well, you know, you...

P: Frightened?

S: Sort of, yes and no. It was so much part of our lives by this time that I kind of took it for granted. Eh...the Brösen, of course, I knew, so, therefore, if I had to run great distances to get out of their way I could still find my way back to the streetcar stop. But if the same thing happened when I came out of school and I was in the city of Danzig, which was not that familiar to me, I would sometimes be running into so many unknown streets that I would find myself lost. And, there again, I had to evaluate the situation and wonder, "How am I going to find my way back? Who can I ask?" Because [if] you ask the wrong person and I might as well be dead. So, at this early age even, I learned to read peoples' eyes. I would either hide into a door frame, you know, on a door or behind a fence and I'd just stand there for awhile and watch people going by and I'd look at their eyes. When I think of it now, I think there is a saying which says, "The eyes are the mirror of the soul." I didn't know that saying then, but I think somewhere I must have known that because I would look at the different people and finally I [would] decide, "I think that one might be okay," and I must say, I always got, excuse me, always got a kind-hearted person to be

sure. Sometimes they would just direct me, but there were also times when somebody would very protectively put their arm around my shoulder and say, "I will take you there." So, um, it is obvious that I survived that part of it. And, so this continued. This was part of our lives, until something else happened.

P: I just want to also ask you, before you go on, I mean, as we are now older and we are parents, and even some of us grandparents, how did your parents feel, like, about sending you to school, knowing that there is so much danger.

S: They didn't. they didn't...

P: They didn't realize?

S: We did not tell them. We knew they had enough troubles of their own. They knew they couldn't go certain places, but they always felt that we were small, we were young, maybe we weren't as molested. And we never told them. If we wanted to talk about it at all to anyone, I would talk to the maid we had at that time, and her name was Anna. And she was a wonderful person. I could, I could talk to her about anything and she would clue me in on what to expect or what to do and how to do it, and she was really one of the most helpful people at that time. And my grandmother had, um, also was a very wise lady. And she would always say, "We hope, that in your life, you will always be able to afford a maid and servants, but I still would like you to know how to do all these things." And, we always helped the maids with what they were doing. And it was to me a pleasure to help her with the

dishes, because she was always telling me little things, you know, little stories, and once we knew we were coming to Canada, she had many stories about the [Native] Indians and the "Wild West" and the, um, the "Banks of Newfoundland," and, ah, you know, things like that.

P: So, she was more of a...like a nanny?

S: Eh, yes, she, I think so. She, she was just a friend as much as she was a maid. And ah...

P: Was she American, or...?

S: No, she was actually from Poland. But she had a sister in Danzig and so she came to visit her, and then she came to work for us.

P: And she must have been educated...

S: Yes.

P: To know about the "Wild West."

S: Yeah, I think she had seen movies because many years later, while [when] I was already in Canada, I went to see a movie and it was the exact story of the "Grand Banks of Newfoundland" that Anna [Okroy] had told me, that many years ago. So, I think she must have gotten some things from that.

P: Well, perhaps then you can now go back to what you were to say.

S: Oh, yes...

P: I wanted to know your feelings about your parents that...

S: My parents...we did not tell them. Then, I was coming home one day and, it's funny, we may have been young but we had an inner instinct that told us things that I don't think you get

when you're growing up in a peaceful situation. Already, while I was on the streetcar, I got an eerie feeling that something was wrong. There was no indication, because the streetcar was empty enough that I had a seat, and then when I got off the streetcar, again the streets were quiet...too quiet...and something, something just was not, not right, I felt. There weren't even the boys around to chase me with their dogs.

P: What time of year, or just a year time-frame?

S: The time-frame...it, it must have been in the fall, because I know I had a jacket on.

P: Of 19...

S: Of 1937.

P: Oh, we can correct it later.

S: We can correct this. Um, and, the closer I came to my street, the stranger it seemed, because no boys were chasing me. The streets were almost empty, which was quite unknown of after school. It should be bustling with everybody around. Eh, and when I came closer to the house I saw what had happened. The windows of the store had all been smashed. There were already wooden boards boarding up the windows. Eh, I tried the door and the doors were locked. I looked in, and in the store the only...the only store [door] that had a glass window was the drug and solution area, and I looked in there and everything that could be broken was broken, so that it was very wet from the stock bottles of the solutions and it was just devastation. So I walked very quietly into the house because

I really didn't know what to expect and as I went in our maid put her hand to her mouth and said, "Shhh, and don't trouble your parents. Something has happened." So she told me the Gestapo had arrived, tore up my father's certificates and permits to keep medications and drugs and then accused him of not having certificates and permits to carry these drugs and had taken everything and smashed it to pieces, closed the store and that was it. And they also told him that he had to report to the Gestapo the next morning. Well, this in itself was another anxiety because anybody who was ever asked to report to the Gestapo was a matter of saying good-bye. They were never seen again. So, my father called all, all relatives to say good-bye and the relatives sort of advised him, "Save yourself, get out, go across the border. Do something!" And he said, "No, I will go because if I don't go they will do something to the family. We have enough family around." So he went and as he entered in the little, what would be like a little porch before going in, eh...there was a Nazi there in uniform but my father recognized him as having once been a good customer and was most likely in uniform because he had to be to save his own life and he whispered very quietly to my father, "No matter what they ask you, your answer is "No!'" So, when my father went in he was...they talked to him about this incident of...

[End of tape 1, side 1]

Interviewee: Brigitte STEINER (S)

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S: So, they wanted to know if my father wanted to press charges and my father said, "No," and they let him come home. So then, he had to phone everybody again and say, "I'm back. I'm alive. I'm here." But, I think that was the turning point when my father realized he's going to get out, he's going to leave, he's going to save the family. And, so he, he applied to various places to, to get out.

P: Ah, what I wanted to ask you, when you weren't sure about the date, if that was at the same time as Kristallnacht?

S: No.

P: No. That was just an individual incident.

S: Yes.

P: All right. You can fill in maybe later if your father was a chemist, or...?

S: Yes, my father was a chemist [pharmacist] and during this episode he was quite badly cut on his hands and face and so on from the smashing glass. Um...

P: All right, so now you...we will go back...

S: Go back to...

P: Go back to the story where you started to say that your dad could see what's coming and he decided to get out. Now

maybe you talk, if you know anything you can tell us about how, how the plans were proceeding...

S: Were proceeding...

P: And what opportunities there were, as you know it.

S: All right. Ah...one, of course, listened to their friends and anybody who had information would come and give you whatever there was to be known and some friends we had who were somehow, um, not necessarily friends, but acquaintances of the Canadian consul, came to my father and said, "You know, you might qualify for Canada," because we had, besides our store, we had a very, very large garden. Eh...it was almost like a park; there were fruit trees, there were vegetables patches, there were great paths and walkways lined with gooseberries and raspberries, and currents, and things like that. We had...of course there were flowers too, but there was enough to show that we knew how to do gardening, for instance, and doing vegetables. Also, when the times were getting worse and worse, my father got a cow and a goat so that we children would not be deprived of milk and dairy foods, cheeses, and so on when we were no longer allowed to go to the stores. And, even though it was on such a small scale, somebody felt the consul may consider us to qualify for Canada. Although, as you know, Canada was not too willing to let Jews in, as the book, "None is Too Many," revealed. But there was also a time when somebody pressured Canada enough that they said, "Okay, we will let

[the] farmers in," because they figured all Jews are professionals and merchants and there wouldn't be any farmers. However, eh...the Canadian consul came, looked things over and said, "Yes, I will give my recommendations. You don't have very much but it shows that you would know if you immigrated as a farmer how to take care of cattle, how to till the soil, and so on. We will give recommendation." But, my father wasn't satisfied with only one opportunity. He also applied to Argentina and then he also applied to Australia [and Israel]. It happened that some government official in Australia was a relative; maybe a distant relative, but a relative, and we...

P: Of father's? Father's relative?

S: No, it was from my mother's side, and we wrote to him and we got an answer that [stated] "Send your application, I will sign it." But the morning on which he was supposed to sign it, he had a heart attack on his way to the office, so the forms were never signed, so that [prospect] was eliminated. Um, so, with the thought that we, um, were going to go to Canada, probably, we decided that we should go to East Prussia to say good-bye to my father's family. His father was still alive...he had brothers, sisters and their spouses and children, Um, we went to East Prussia, my mother and my father and I...

P: What was the name of the place?

S: The name of the place was Fischhaussen.

F-I-S-C-H-H-A-U-S-E-N.

P: So, that was still 1937, or 1938?

S: This has now become '38. We went, and again, troubles. We were stopped at the border; you see, there is a border because that is Germany and we are Danzig. Danzig was supposed to be a "free city," so to speak. Um, when we got to the border, ah, my parents and I were taken out of the bus and we were taken into an examining room. My father and mother both had to strip naked, um, I don't know who, a doctor of sorts came and examined my father and they brought in a gynecologist to examine my mother. They cut most of the clothing to bits. The hems were taken out, the soles were taken off the shoes. My mother, who wore sort of a corset, it was even cut apart to take out the, what do you call the stiff...

P: The bones?

S: Bones, to see what might be hidden, and of course, knowing the problems we would never take anything that would not be allowed because there was no point taking the risk. They didn't get around to me too easily because I had to stand there while my mother and father were being examined. I had to stand outside while they went through our luggage. Knowing that we could probably not go into a restaurant for our lunch, we had taken some sandwiches with us and these sandwiches were also taken apart; the filling in the sandwich, we had some salami on them I remember, lovely salami. They took it off and scraped the

Schmalz off and looked through it, the bread, with a flashlight and then eventually just threw it in the garbage. They looked through all the luggage and in so doing they came across my autograph book, I don't know if kids still have autograph books, but this was very much en vogue [in fashion] because we all knew that many people we will never see again and we would like to at least take a little memento and there was my autograph book with...it just happened that the official opened this autograph book and came upon the little verse my grandmother had written in. I'll try to translate it if I can. It's something to the effect of...

P: Say it in the language it was or...

S: In German? Okay, I'll say it [recites in German].

P: Now you can translate it...

S: Literally, it means that "If somebody is poor or sick or in need and needs your help, you should lend a helping hand because you should not ask for his rank or his religion because he is a human being like yourself." So I think when he saw this and realized what he is doing, and maybe he still had a conscience; he slammed the book shut and put it back in the suitcase and closed up the suitcase and never touched me.

P: Do you still have this autograph book?

S: Yes, do you want it?

P: Oh, yes!

S: I should make a little note what to bring.

P: Okay.

S: Something I have left out which I think I should add here, because I think it is significant in a way. I can't remember the exact time-span; I think it was around '36. I started having great abdominal pains. Again, you don't trouble parents; they have enough troubles, and I kept it to myself. I would go off in a little corner by myself and moan and groan a little bit, and then when I was feeling better I'd come out. And this was fine. I think I hid it well enough. Except once. My cousin came upon me; it was a cousin that I went to the same school with; she was the daughter of my Uncle Samuel. She came upon me with a stomachache and I made her promise not to tell my mother, which she promised. She didn't tell my mother...she told her mother, and her mother told my mother, and finally I was summoned and I was asked, "Have you got pain?" I had to admit, "Yes." So the [my] parents of course wanted to know how severe and how often and all the rest of it, and I think they more or less figured it might be the appendix. At any rate, they realized they must get permission for a doctor. You couldn't just have any doctor; it had to be someone that you were allowed to have. And along came this doctor. I remember his name very well, but I don't know whether it should be written into the records. His name was "Christian Poller." I think it best not [be] mentioned because, who knows, what connection...

P: Okay...[tape temporarily turned off]... What was the name of the doctor?

S: "Christian Poller." I would say write it as it sounds; I don't know.

P: P-O-L-L-E-R?

S: Probably. That was his whole name. Not..."Christian" wasn't his first name. It was Christianpoller, the whole name.

P: Oh, Dr. Christianpoller.

S: Yes, Dr. Christianpoller.

P: So what about this doctor? So you needed a doctor. You mean they had a special doctor at that time?

S: My father had...

P: You mean in 1936...for Jews only?

S: Yes, he had to go to the Gestapo and ask who is allowed to come. And they told him this fellow and that's the one we called.

P: Ah ha, so he came...

S: Is it [the tape recorder] on already?

P: Describe...

S: So, he came and um [clears throat] he examined me and he said to my parents, "Well, she's got something wrong with her kidneys. Give her good hot compresses on the abdomen." My grandmother particularly was quite alarmed because hot compresses...you don't put on an abdomen that someone may think is an appendix. [door chimes in the background] So, my grandmother questioned this. She felt she is old; if he

wants to beat her up, she has lived a longer life, it is better for her to make the query than my parents. And, um...

P: So, what did she say?

S: And he shoved her aside. He said...she said, "Doctor, it sounds to me like there may be a possibility of the pain being appendix. Is, really, a hot compress indicated?" And he shoved her aside and said he's the doctor here and hot compresses or nothing and he left. My parents were a little bit apprehensive about this and they didn't put hot compresses on. They just gave me a very lukewarm hot water bottle just so that I would feel someone's doing something because there was nothing else to do. And the pains would come and go anyway so that was that. But my aunt and uncle, the Samuel Echt family, decided that since I'm going to the school in Danzig, it might be better, since I'm not so well with these pains, to stay with them and go to school from there, so I wouldn't have to take the streetcar. But the first night I stayed there my cousins found me in pain again and my aunt was summoned and asked, "What I'm [am I] supposed to do?" And I said, "Mutti and Papa don't think I should really be doing anything because the doctor said hot compresses and they don't think it's the safe think." But my aunt, being a very obedient person, said that if a doctor says, then that's what you do, and I got a hot water bottle. The pain subsided and I became very sick, because it was pretty obvious that the

appendix had ruptured. The next morning, my mother was called and my mother then called the doctor and they both came to my aunt's house...

P: What kind of doctor? Another? Not the same...

S: Yes, the same...yeah, that's the only one we could call. The same one.

P: Ah ha...

S: And he came and he said, "Well, we might as well take her to the hospital, and off I got taken to the hospital. I remember being taken into the operating room and told to lie on the operating table. But, being the well-brought-up children that we were, I, at least, took off my shoes so I wouldn't dirty up the sheet lying on the table, and that's all I remember...I don't remember undressing. I don't think I even was undressed. And they operated but didn't bother sewing me up again. They [must have] decided, "Why suture up someone who was dying? Just a waste of sutures and a waste of time." And I wasn't moved off the table either because, why bother? My parents were told to go home and take comfort in their other children because this one would not come out of there alive, and that was that. But I lived. So, finally, they had to put me into a bed and, even at that time...

P: And you were still not sewn up?

S: No.

P: And you were operated on?

S: Yes, they didn't sew me at any time. Six weeks later they

pulled the two ends of the wound together and stuck a piece of adhesive over it and sent me home. But, at this point, if anybody came to visit me and brought me a candy or something that was wrapped in tinfoil or something of that nature, there was quick to be a nurse to come and take the tinfoil away and say, "We need all this aluminum to send to Hitler for making ammunition." So, when I reported that to my father, if anything came into my room that had these valuable coverings on, he took them home and he said that the ammunition that Hitler will make will one day kill us. So, this was not to remain there for them. Eh, another thing that happened that I have not actually mentioned to anybody before but I think maybe I will mention it here. Eh, because of the situation, my parents decided that they would hire a private nurse so that somebody will be there to look after me because it was pretty obvious that the nurses didn't want to [be] bothered with a Jewish kid.

P: Unsewn and untreated.

S: Yes, really, untreated. This...the nurse was really only there for the night, really, and she was in a little ante-room so she could hear me but not right there where I could really see her, but she would be able to hear my call. And it was at that time that I was suddenly floating on the ceiling. I looked down and wondered why did the rest of me not come up to the ceiling, because here I was, floating, and wondering what this nurse...because my

parents had told me there would be a nurse at night looking out for me. I wanted to see what this nurse was like before I called her...whether she was really kind-hearted enough to come. And, I saw her in this little ante-room, a little room, in front of the ward and I noticed that there was a little light on and she was embroidering a cushion-top and the pattern of the flowers she was embroidering on this cushion-top were the same pattern as a tablecloth my mother had made, and I figured that, if this person could have the same taste in patterns as my mother, that she must be okay. So, I went back to my bed. And, the next morning, when my parents came to visit, my parents came and said, "The nurse is wondering whether she is really required because you haven't called her all night and she thinks maybe there is no need for her." And I assured my parents that I will call her the next night if I need her because I have found that she was having the same taste in flower patterns to embroider as Mutti, and when my parents mentioned this to the nurse, the nurse was absolutely astonished, because she couldn't understand how I could know what she was embroidering. And I never, never told anybody that I floated up on the ceiling and [had] seen her. So, whether it is because I was that sick or whether it was that I was that sick and that close to death, I don't know. But I know I saw her embroidery and I know I was up on the ceiling. [long pause] [I know] this little story may sound strange to others who are hearing

it, but it seems pretty obvious that I must have gone outside of my body and floated 'cause how else would I have known what the nurse was embroidering?

P: This is really an amazing story. That's a story of a miracle, and self-preservation.

S: Yes.

P: Because a miracle in the sense that, that this person was kind in reality and maybe...and self-preservation...what was it that made you...

S: I had to...

P: Visualize and see it.

S: I had to make sure she was okay. And she, she stayed for a few nights and then she wasn't needed anymore.

P: You were only seven then. Were you seven? That was in 1936?

S: Yes. This became 1937 now.

P: How long were you in the hospital, do you know?

S: I was six weeks...

P: They kept you six weeks?

S: Six weeks, and then they put the two sides of the incision together because it was still gaping open and they stuck a piece of adhesive on and sent me home and my father bandaged me every day and changed the dressing because it was still draining.

P: And being a registered nurse, I don't wish to put words into your mouth, you know better, so would you please tell us what happens when a person has a ruptured appendix.

Isn't there peritonitis, or some kind of an infection? You, you can explain that...

S: Yes, it's a...

P: Is there a temperature, so describe your condition...

S: There is a temperature. There is also peritonitis and a lot of pus formation and all this, and looking at the situation now, I think they did me a favour not suturing me up. Because, had they sutured me, all this drainage would have stayed inside with no place to go, but the fact that they kept me open, all the drainage could seep out, and even though it left me with other complications, such as adhesions, an so on, at least the pus had a place to go. So, in that respect...

P: So, from a medical point of view, that was a miracle too.

S: Yes, you might say. There was obvious[ly] something I was yet expected to do in life, to be saved. Um, that was just a little detour we took from our talk of trying to immigrate. Now, I think maybe.

P: Well, now we are returning to the time of...

S: To the time of father's...

P: The time of father making inquiries and you enquired from a relative in Australia and this was unfortunate because the relative that was connected to the consulate died or became ill of a heart condition and...

S: He died.

H: So, was that Australia, or...?

P: Australia, yes...

H: Or Argentina?

P: Australia.

S: So, Canada was the place...

P: So, the alternative now is just...

S: Canada.

P: Canada, but there was another place you were considering. A third place.

S: Argentina.

P: Yes.

S: And that didn't come.

P: That didn't come through.

S: No, I think I, I started mentioning that we went to, to East Prussia, to Fischhausen, to say good-bye to my relatives.

P: Right. Now you know...

S: There...

P: That you're going to Canada?

S: Yes.

P: You did get the permit?

S: Yes, but not...we didn't know what ship to take yet. We just knew that we could go to Canada.

P: Okay, we didn't get that part...

S: No, but that will...

P: About getting official permission.

S: But that will come in a minute.

P: Oh, okay.

S: I need to...

P: You are now going to East Prussia.

S: To East Prussia.

P: To say good-bye to [your] Dad's relatives.

S: Yes. Generally, when we went to my grandparents' place in East Prussia, eh...there would always be, it's customary to always meet the coming guests. But, this particular time [sirons heard in background], there was no one to meet us, and that already spelled a little apprehension that something was wrong. We, we walked towards the house and as we got a little closer, one of my aunts came towards us and said, "Don't be alarmed at what you might see, but things aren't too good in the house." And she prepared us as to [for] what had happened. Apparently, the night before, the Gestapo arrived in the wee hours of the morning, smashed everything that could be smashed: dishes, furniture...

P: In their own home?

S: Yes, they came with an ax and a crowbar. They smashed the windows, they smashed the furniture, even the piano, the dishes. About the only thing they left untouched were the cooking pots; because they were metal they didn't break. Ah...they were, they were all in a pretty apprehensive and scared condition but we assured them that once we get to Canada we will get permission for them all to follow us. And, in a way, it made them feel a little bit more at ease, knowing that they had an opportunity to get out. But, as it happened...

P: So, you were now arriving into their home...

S: Yes.

P: Have you seen it with your own eyes, the destruction?

S: We didn't even have a place to sit.

P: You saw it with your own eyes?

S: My two...my parents and myself, we were the only three who went and there, there wasn't even a place to sit.

P: Oh, your other two sisters didn't go?

S: No, only one child was going to go and the others, the little one, was too small and my older sister had school, she was, I had not been well, you see, with my appendix, so I was out of school, and I was able to go. Um...so, apart from that, there wasn't too much about the trip, just to say good-bye, to have them write into our autograph books and to assure them that we would get them to come to Canada. And, as it happened, we did get the permission for them to come, there were ten members of that family, and we sent the permission in for them to come and they left everything and went to Hamburg, to the harbour, to catch the ship to come, and [but] the ship had left a few hours ahead of time, knowing war would come soon, and they were left at the harbour, sitting on a bench and got nabbed by the Gestapo and thrown into Theresienstadt concentration camp, never heard of again.

P: What was this, your uncle?

S: That was my grandfather, my father's, my father's three sisters, brother-in-law, brother and wife, and two

children. And, of course, we were, we were quite upset when we got home and were more concerned to get out. But again, the problem. It seemed to be life was full of problems. Eh...we had...

P: Hold it one second. When you sent them the requisition for these ten members of the family, did you send it from Canada already?

S: Yes.

P: Oh, so you were already in Canada?

S: That's the only way we could...

P: You haven't arrived to Canada yet.

S: No, but I just mentioned that this was going to come.

P: Oh, I see, that this...

S: No, we haven't come to Canada yet. This was where another problem came in. Although we had permission for Canada, as yet, we didn't know what boat, and we didn't know from where. And my mother's passport was running out. And it was pretty obvious there would not be a passport re-issued, so we had to...

P: Who issued the passport to you?

S: Danzig.

P: Danzig. And why was father's passport valid and mother's wasn't?

S: Mother's was running...I guess they got it at a different time...

P: I see...

S: And mother's was running out but grandmother's and

father's were still okay. So, the only thing we could do was somehow get across the border to Poland. Eh...and we heard that there would be a small freighter which would leave Poland...Gdynia...and we would be able to take that little ship to Hull, England, and take a train from Hull to Liverpool and then from Liverpool we would go on to Canada, to Halifax [Nova Scotia].

[End of tape 1, side 2]

Interviewee: Brigitte STEINER (S)

Date of Recording: July 18, 1991

Ident. Number: 015-3

Track Number: T2-S1

Interviewer: Renia Perel (P), & Reva Hollander (H)

P: You were telling us about the itinerary. How you did finally decide to go to Canada?

S: In order to leave, we were starting already to make preparations. My father arranged with different people who had worked with us, or for us, to have some of the furniture, or some of the dishes, and some of our personal belongings and just what to do and that one of our former hired help, probably Anna, the beloved maid, would go to the Gestapo the next morning after we would have left and sign us out, so to speak. Because you had to register in and out if you went anywhere and we were afraid to do it ourselves in case they would stop us. So, she was assigned to do this. In order not to attract too much attention, we were all going to leave the house at different times in twos, and ones. First, my grandmother and my younger sister, I don't think I really mentioned her too much. She was seven years my junior and she was only three years old and she very much resembled Shirley Temple at the time.

P: What was her name?

S: Reni...Renate, and we called her Reni...R-E-N-I. And, so my grandmother and Reni took the streetcar to the train

station and from there on to Gdynia [Poland] where friends awaited them and took them to their home. Several hours after that, my older sister and I left. I have to tell you a little thing at this point about my older sister and I.

P: What was her name?

S: Marianne, and we called her Nanna. N-A-N-N-A. In those days, when little girls certainly didn't wear slacks for warmth, we wore these thick, woolen socks or stockings to keep our legs warm. Grandmother very nicely knitted them always for us and we wore them happily, except for one pair. It was already knitted with wool of the present time, which was rough and hard and itchy, and we just didn't like it. My sister and I were pretty close in size so we could wear each other's things and these stockings would pass between us. She wore them a few days and then I wore them a few days, but we really didn't like them. So, just before we were leaving the house for the last time, my sister and I looked at each other: "Let's get rid of these stockings!" We didn't want to take them with us and we hid them under the mattress and took off happily. This [was] one way [reason], I think, we didn't mind so much leaving the house. We left something behind we didn't want, and we went by streetcar and we took the train station, to the train station...took the train to Gdynia and that was the two of us. Many hours later, my mother followed and my father spent the night in my Uncle Sam's, Samual Echt's home, and in the wee hours of the morning he

left and at least we were completed, our family, in Gdynia, where we waited for our ship.

P: So, the boat was actually prearranged?

S: Yes.

P: You knew there was an actual freight train...

S: Freight boat.

P: To take, to take you somewhere...a freighter.

S: This little freighter didn't have many passengers. I think there were only about a dozen, maybe fifteen of which we already made up six, so it was a very small group to travel. Eh...we...

P: Was this a Polish freighter? Do you remember?

S: Yes, it was called "Llov" [Lvov].

P: Ah...

S: With two L's...L-L-O-V, I think.

P: Now "Llov" is L-W-O-W. [Polish spelling]

S: Yeah, maybe that was it.

P: That's L-W-O-W...that's the name of this ship?

S: Yes.

P: The Polish name because I come from that province [a former province in Poland]...

S: So you know...

P: That's why I know how to spell it.

S: Right.

P: I'm not being...

S: No, no, that's fine...

P: Editorializing. [laughs]

S: No, that's okay. Eh...and we went onto this boat. It was my, my sister's thirteenth birthday.

P: Thirteenth birthday...

S: While I...

P: Nanna's?

S: Nanna's. While other girls in other countries might be celebrating a Bar or Bat Mitzvah, eh...we celebrated leaving, to freedom. Eh...but, eh, it was just, you know, saying good-bye and everything. We didn't really think too much about the birthday, and we had said good-bye to our friends and we were already on the boat when suddenly there is a greeting being called, "Hello! Hello! Girls, girls, wait. Here I am with a big surprise for you." It was Anna. "I have something wonderful." So we, we were really surprised. We thought it was a gift for my sister because it was her birthday. And she came, they had been just ready to pull up the gangplank but they allowed Anna on because of her having this wonderful surprise, and she, first she hugged us and [said] big good-byes and happy birthday and all the rest of it, and then she says, "And the big surprise, you wouldn't believe what a wonderful thing. Look what I found under the mattress!" She produced these hateful stockings.

P: [laughs]

S: "Oh," she said, "the Canadian winters are so cold you're going to need them." And the two of us were just devastated. We didn't want these stockings, and I looked

at the steps that are going up on deck and my sister, I realized, was looking at the same steps leading up to the deck, and we took the stockings politely and thanked her, because that's what well-brought-up children do, and thought that she was being very thoughtful, etc., etc., and then when she went to say her good-byes to my parents, we dashed up on the deck and we fired these stockings into the sea and hoped it would keep some fish warm because we sure didn't want them. And, soon after that, we started on our way, but we still didn't feel very safe until we had crossed the Elbe River...the Elbe, E-L-B-E.

P: Elbe.

S: Elbe. Eh...when we, once we crossed that, we figured we were in peaceful...

P: Weren't you going through the Baltic Sea and then...

S: Yes.

P: And then down along to the...

S: Remember we had to...

P: The north.

S: Yes...

P: To...

S: To England.

P: To England.

S: Once we had passed into more peaceful waters, the captain rang his little bell and summoned everybody to the dining room and we sat there according to seniority. He was at the head of the table and then the crew and the

passengers. And they produced a birthday cake with thirteen candles. Our friends had baked [it] and given it to the cook and had told him that not to bring it forth until we all felt we were safe, and so we celebrated and had a little bit of a birthday there, and certainly one to remember. Otherwise...

P: I feel like, I am sorry that I'm also involved in this story, that I am celebrating the birthday party and I want to say "Happy Birthday!" Excuse me for this interlude.

S: There wasn't too much that stands out on that trip beyond the fact that we were going towards our new adventure. We were...

P: Please name the day of the birthday.

S: The birthday...the 16th of February.

P: 19...?

S: 1939. We arrived in Hull, took a train to Liverpool, and in Liverpool, we had three days of a lay-over in a hotel to await for the bigger ship by the name of 'Andania'.

P: How do you spell that?

S: A-N-D-A-N-I-A, which would take us to Canada. Being in the hotel was, had a few funny episodes too, which I think I should mention one of them. Of course, things were very different in England, to what we had been used to, and the first difficulty I ran into was going to the bathroom. In itself, that doesn't sound like a big thing. I went particularly to wash my hands before lunch and in Danzig, I was used to the door handle that turned downward, you

know, the kind that turn down to open and close a door. And here I was in the bathroom, washing my hands, and the door had closed upon itself and when I wanted to get out, I was imprisoned. I couldn't get out. I pushed this door [handle] down and it didn't open and I thought, "Well, maybe in a different country things are backwards," so I pushed up. But again, it wouldn't budge. I turned it sideways; nothing happened. Oh, I thought the Nazis had followed me and I was imprisoned and I was going to stay here forever until I starved to death.

P: In Liverpool toilet...[laughs]

S: In Liverpool toilet. And I didn't know what to do with myself. I wondered which way would be the most dignified way to, for them to find me. Should I sit or stand or lie down or what was I going to do? Maybe, in the meantime, my parents would have been imprisoned in a different room. Who knows? And then I suddenly heard my sister calling. And I said, "Nanna, I am here; I am locked up; I am imprisoned and I can't get out!" And she ways, "Where are you, what kind of a room is it?" Well, she eventually located the room from the voice and I said, "I'm in the bathroom and the door won't open." And she said, "But this is a friendly country. You have to come out." And I said, "I don't know how." So she says, "I will try." So, she did the exact thing that I had done...up and down, sideways... nothing happened. She says, "I will go for help." So, she went for help and with hand gestures and a little bit of

English words that she had learned, she found some maid, or somebody from the staff, and tried to tell them that I was, you know...

P: Locked in the bathroom.

S: In the bathroom. Eventually, she took this lady by the hand and dragged her to the door and tried to tell her that I could not get out. I was there. And the maid turns the knob and looks at us as if to say, "You foreign children must be awfully dumb." But I had never known a door [knob] that turned, so by this time we were very much relieved to be...[laughs]

P: Let out...[laughs]

S: Let out, and out of captivity. By that time, lunch was well over, and I had certainly lost my appetite. I sure didn't want anything after that. I was just glad to be out again. And so, when the three days were over, we found ourselves on the big boat, 'Andania', which was wonderful, really. There wasn't really entertainment for children, but we made our own good times, and on the boat was a Japanese man who had been in Germany, studying to be a doctor, and was leaving for home because it looked like there were bad times, and, of course, we children were very much intrigued with the kimono and so on, and I think that gentleman was very much intrigued with us because there weren't very many children on board and my little sister was, was so cute. As I said, she looked like Shirley Temple, and one day he gave her a little doll

which she kept for a long time...I think he must have made it himself. Meanwhile, we, we were always sitting there observing him and making up little songs and little verses and it was really quite a lot of fun. And one day, I went up on deck...my father was up on deck...and, I don't know, he must, he was watching the sea that surrounded us and he suddenly looked and he said, "You know, the Gypsies told me this." So, that intrigued me and I said, "Tell me papa, tell me, what did they tell you?" And he said, "You know, many, for many years the Gypsies used to come on sort of a visit once a year to our area..."

P: In Danzig?

S: In Danzig, and Brösen, long before Hitler and, because we were the largest store there, they would always come and my father, being very generous, would give them a few coins and wish them well and send them on their way, and they would always want to read his palm, but he said no, he didn't believe in that sort of thing and...but then one year they came again and after my father had given them the coins, they said, "You know, I think this year we would like to read your palm. If not for you, then for us. You have always been so, so generous with us that we want to know whether all will be well with you because we know bad times are coming." So my father thought, "Well, I'll humour them." They said, "This is our last year...we won't be coming again." So my father figured he would humour them and he said, "Well, okay." And the lady pulled out a

hair [from her head] and laid it on his palm and he [she] said to him...

P: She pulled out father's hair...?

S: No, her hair...

P: Her own, a woman?

S: One strand of her hair and laid it on his palm and she said, "This terrible person that will come to lead the land will also be very bad for you. It will...he will be so bad that you will develop stomach ulcers and, eh...[and] I will tell you that you should get out and save yourself. You're going to [be] very reluctant, but eventually, something will happen which will make you realize that you should take your family, and you will have three daughters by that time. You take your children and your wife's mother and you will flee across a large body of water to a new land, and you will not be in the same business that you are [in] now. You will be working on the soil on the sand and the land, and you will be speaking a new language, and you will work very hard but you will save your lives." And my father said, "You know, I never thought of that incident until now because here we are, we are crossing this large body of land [water] and we are going to Canada where we are going to farm.

P: You mean, crossing the large body of water?

S: Water...

P: That's for the typist...

S: Yes, large body of water to a new land where we will farm

the land. I guess that's...

P: This...

S: The end of this, my immigration.

P: This is amazing and, so you must have been intrigued with this story by your father.

S: Oh, yes, because I, I really felt they must have known something that eventually came about.

P: Came true...and you must have been close to your dad when he wanted to divulge these things.

S: Well, I was the one near him when he made the statement, so, therefore...but I think, in some respect, I was always my father's favourite.

P: Ah ha, it's, it's also sometimes you think that maybe because you were ill during the time...

S: I think so...

P: That they may have lost you that you were not so much the favourite but the child that was [had] miraculously survived this illness?

S: I think, I think probably because of having to bandage me and keep me, you know, in better health, gave us a certain closeness, because he was, he didn't show favouritism. I just always had a feeling that I was a little closer to him.

P: Yes, because that's something...that survival element that he helped to save you and you were saved...

S: Yes...

P: That had a close...

S: I think that could...

P: And so now you are...did you know where you were going? What Canada was? Had you any idea geographically?

S: We, as children [clears throat]...I think my parents did...

P: Or did you think of it as America?

S: No, but I, I thought in my childish mind that the borders were very close. If I feel like going to America I just walk, across, you know [laughs], and if I wanted to see another part of Canada I just walk there. The fact that Canada was quite as big as it is and that sometimes there would be miles upon miles between one farm and another farm was something I didn't quite comprehend until I got there.

P: So, father basically got the consular permission to come to Canada because he was a qualified farmer?

S: Um hmm. That's it.

P: So, so, how were they settling you? As a farm hand or as a farm...I mean, how was this...?

S: No, we had to, we had to somehow show or give evidence that we had sufficient funds to purchase a farm. That was one of the...

P: Conditions...

S: Stipulations. And when we came, of course we were coming absolutely on our own, into a strange new land without language, without anything, and we...

P: Did you have any financial means?

S: Yes. We couldn't really bring it out as money, but we had transferred money to Switzerland and we had brought some things with us. When we arrived in Halifax, suddenly a voice says, "Familie Echt," in other words, [German for] "family Echt," and we thought, "Oh my, my God, [the Nazis] they've caught up with us at last and here we thought we were safe." And, it was a lady and a gentleman who worked for the Immigration [Department] and they had our list on their name [our name on their list] and if they knew a Jewish family was coming they would greet them and see if they could be helpful. They said, "Don't be alarmed. We are Landsmann [Landsleute]. We are here to help you." And, um, they asked, you know, sort of [clears throat], sort of what, excuse me a minute [sips beverage]...they asked if we had anyone to help us or if they could be helpful or what could be done to assist us. And we mentioned to these people that we have to be a farmer and we have to settle on a farm and they said, "Look, don't be hasty...don't buy the first farm you see...and don't buy unknowingly. You don't know these areas. We will help you." So, they, um, got us in touch with a lawyer, and between this gentleman and this lady...oh, maybe you'd like the names...Noah Heinish was the gentleman...

P: Please print it, they...

S: Heinish, H-E-I-N...

P: Noah is...

S: N-O-A, Noa [Noah] is his first name...

P: A man, this is a man...

S: A man...Mr. Noah H-E-I-N-I-S-H.

P: So, he is German descent? I sounds like...

S: Yes, but in Canada for...

P: He could speak...?

S: He hadn't spoken German for years and years and it was just refreshing again learning it sort of, and refreshing his memory. He was helpful and the lawyer's name was Kanigsberg. Robert...

P: Mr. Robert...

S: Mr. Robert K-A-N-I-G-B-R-G [Kanigsberg]...

P: ...G-S-B-E-R-G.

S: Yes. He was, he became, I think he became a judge. He was quite a prominent lawyer at that time and they sort of settled us in a Jewish hotel and, the name of the hotel was...um, wait now, I should remember that [Shofer Hotel]...

P: In Halifax?

S: In Halifax. It'll come to me again. I, I can't...it'll come to me...in this hotel [called 'Shofer Hotel'], and we were there for several weeks while these people placed ads in the newspaper and actually drove my mother and father to these various farms who answered the ad, and made sure that we got a farm that was, firstly, not over priced, that it was one near a good highway so we wouldn't be too isolated, and also, that it should be a place that will accommodate these, our other ten relatives who will be

coming, because, at this time, we still thought they were all coming. And we settled finally...and the lawyer, of course, was then helpful in getting the deed and the sale, and so on. Remember, all this for no pay. All the driving to these many places, all the legal things...

P: All the volunteer work...

S: All this was volunteer, and we remained friends throughout our lives, really.

P: How far from Halifax was this farm?

S: We finally settled in Milford Station which was forty miles from Halifax.

P: Mil...

S: Milford, M-I-L-F-O-R-D...

P: Station...

S: Station.

P: And this is like a...

S: In Nova Scotia...

P: A village or a town...?

S: A village, and it was about forty miles from Halifax and so, when Jewish holidays came, we could still go to synagogue to Halifax, so this was fine. We children went to school and ah...

P: In the Milford Station school...

S: Yes.

P: Public school.

S: Yes, it was really a country school. It had only two rooms; one room from grade one to five, and one from grade

six to eleven. It was nice...a very friendly place and we quite enjoyed...

P: Were you accepted by the folk...?

S: Yes.

P: You felt accepted by the people?

S: Not only accepted but they were all very interested, because up to this time, there had not been much association with refugees. We were sort of among the first. Did I mention that we landed on the 6th of March?

P: No. Landing in Canada?

S: I think I marked it on the, on the sheet.

P: Yes.

S: Sixth of March.

P: Landing in Canada, March 6th...

S: 1939.

P: 1939.

S: Farm work was fairly difficult, mainly because it was such a large farm that it required help, but it was difficult to get help because most of the young men had already joined [the] army, navy or air force and were not available. So, we children had to help. I milked up to...and we didn't have the machinery that the modern farm would have...I milked up to ten cows and I was then ten [eleven] years old.

P: You milked ten cows yourself. How many cows did you have?

S: We had about twenty-five...twenty-five milking and then we had a few extras that were either heifers or dry waiting

calves and so on.

P: So, you milked ten cows in the morning or just...?

S: In the morning and at night, twice, morning and night.

P: And did you milk by hand or...

S: Yes, by hand...we didn't have a machine.

P: So, you had a stool and a pail...

S: Right.

P: And...

S: Each cow had a name; we had our favourites...

P: Ah ha, and who milked the other fifteen?

S: Well, my father and my sister. Mother, basically, looked after the chicken and the fowl and...

P: Did you have geese, and ducks...?

S: Yes, geese and turkeys, and ducks, everything. In fact, we became sort of the main supplier of, ah...fowl for the Jewish community because we would have the rabbi come out to slaughter them kosher and my mother would, well, we all would pluck and clean and she would take them into town. This was quite, quite good. [pause]

P: So, the milk you supplied to the dairies.

S: Yes, we would put it into large milk cans and take them to the end of the highway and the big milk truck would come and gather them. [pause] Try to think of what else is of interest there. [pause]

P: Well, it's not relevant to the story but we could maybe at this time, after forty years respite, compete in cow milking because I also milked cows.

S: Did you? How many?

P: Four, so...anyway, you have, you have more experience than I have.

S: Something...I just thought I might mention one other thing that we could put in somewhere, or other, my father, as one of his hobbies had kept pigeons and these proved to be...

P: This is in, in Danzig...in still...?

S: I'm going back to Danzig...

P: Pigeons...a hobby...

S: It was a hobby. He kept these pigeons and they became very valuable in sending messages. For instance, if my father had to go somewhere and we thought it might be a little bit dangerous, he would take a pigeon with him and when he got to a certain point prearranged at home, he would let a pigeons fly out and return home, and we knew if a pigeon with a red ribbon or a green ribbon on its leg arrived, we knew my father had arrived at a certain point. And this we also did when we went to East Prussia that time. Because, otherwise, they would not have known at home whether we had arrived safely there or not, because we certainly wouldn't...

[End of tape 2, side 1]

Interviewee: Brigitte STEINER (S)

Date of Recording: July 18, 1991

Ident. Number: 015-3

Track Number: T2-S2

Interviewer: Renia Perel (P), & Reva Hollander (H)

P: We are now returning back and Bea [Brigitte] is telling us about her father's hobby...and how he devised a system to allow the pigeons to fly home and the various colours of the ribbon would tell the family whether they are, whether he is safe or not.

S: As I mentioned, we took a pigeon with us on our trip to East Prussia that time, and as you probably realized, we obviously had to let the pigeon fly home just prior to reaching the border because we could not take the risk of having the customs official find us with a pigeon in our possession.

P: So, what colour of ribbon...

S: That I don't recall. That my father looked after.

P: Ah ha, so when...did he continue this hobby in Canada as well?

S: No.

P: When you were in Halifax?

S: There was very little time for hobbies. It was basically work.

P: Ah ha. But it was profitable. Were you able to survive as a family on the income that was generated?

S: It was not...

P: Generated from the farm business?

S: It was not easy. People were actually very kind-hearted. The same gentleman I mentioned before, Noa [Noah] Heinish, had a clothing store and anytime there were some clothing that perhaps had been in the window and on display and couldn't be sold, he always gave it to us. Whether they fitted or not really didn't matter because we could do some alterations for ourselves and so we managed with what people gave us...with the milk we sold, but also we supplemented by selling the chickens and the geese and ducks, and my mother made cheese and we had the eggs, and so on, and that all helped.

P: Did you make butter too? Did you churn butter?

S: Yes.

P: You had a butter churn?

S: Yes.

P: We will do that too...I know how to churn butter. [laughs]

S: It's not all that easy with pasteurized milk...it's better with fresh. [long pause]

P: All right. Now, well, you are now living in Canada, and how long did you stay on the farm? And how...and then lead on to your graduation and your schooling, and your marriage, and your own family.

S: Okay.

P: Tell us about that.

S: We went to school in Milford, and...

P: What was the name of the town?

S: Milford.

P: Oh, sorry.

S: Which was not...there was nothing too eventful except for the fact that I was in the process of learning English and when I started the grade, I was making such marks as five, and ten out of one hundred. Since I didn't know what the questions were asking, I couldn't very well answer it [them]. The only subject that I was able to make an actual passing grade in was arithmetic, because you can count the numbers that were written down in German and the answer would still be the same. There was no problem. But, by the time the end of the school year came, I led the class with the highest average and I continued that until my schooling was completed.

P: There was no special English classes for you?

S: Oh, no.

P: So, how did you, ah...get help? You had a dictionary...

S: Just by using...

P: A dictionary or, or just on your own?

S: Just on your own. After awhile, the words just came and I used to read a lot, and even if I didn't necessarily know how to translate a word, I could get the thought of the sentence by the connection of the words in the sentence, and after awhile, it just came that I didn't have to do any more translating; I understood what I was reading and [what] I was doing...eh, at the...of course, in the

meantime, war came and, um...

P: When you talk 'war came', what war do you mean?

S: Well, the Second World War, eh, and ah...we had to always report to the police once a month.

P: Once...?

S: Because we were, after all, foreigners. They realized that we were Jewish and were, therefore, not going to be against our new country, but they couldn't make exceptions. We have come from Germany, or we have come from Danzig, therefore, [we had] to report once a month so that they know we were still where we were. The police of course understood...

P: When you say police, you mean the R.C.M.P., or the police?

S: I think it was the R.C.M.P., yes...but they were, they were so nice about all this and they realized how busy we were, and how hard-working we were, that if they were on a duty call at any time and going past our farm, [they] would come in and sign our papers to save us the trip going in...which was rather nice.

P: Did you all have to go at the same time?

S: No, my father.

P: Only father...head of the household...

S: Head of the house. During this time, because we couldn't really do anything for the war effort except supply them with food, um, we, us, um...gave our names to the local minister and to the Jewish community in Halifax, the same as other people did, that if there was ever a service

person who needed a little bit of leave or a place to stay, while they were off their duty shift, they could come and have a whatever...leave at our place. Many did this because the servicemen would sometimes be helpful even with the farm work when you were short, and we got quite a number of different people; some were from England, some were from different Canadian provinces, and so, one day, again this Mr. Noah Heinish, who was a very prominent person in the Jewish community [clears throat] phoned us and said, um [pause]...he's listening...phoned us and said, "We have here a young air force boy who has been sick and is able to leave the hospital but he's not really able to go back to his regular duties and he lives in Vancouver, which is too far to travel. Could we send him to your farm to recuperate?" And my parents said, "Well, sure, it's fine." And Mr. Heinish said, "Now," looking at his watch, "I think we can still get him on the three o'clock Acadia bus, if you will be down at the end of your lane to stop the bus and tell this...tell the driver that there is someone who needs to come off, to come to you...that's, you know, the way to do it." So, my parents sent my sister and I to the highway to stop the bus and we said to the driver that there's an air force man who is supposed to get off here, and off comes a certain Robert Steiner.

P: A certain...?

S: A certain Robert Steiner.

P: Robert Steiner...

S: And he did look sick. He was thin and pale and really looked like he needed to recuperate with good home cooking and good care. And so we took him up to the house and delivered him to mother and grandmother. And then my sister and I went about doing our own chores. I was at that time fifteen and my sister was seventeen. And I know this isn't the way things are now, girls of a much younger age are aware of the opposite sex, but I wasn't in the least bit aware. Obviously he liked me but who would know that? In fact, when he followed me bringing the cows home from the pasture. I finally said to my sister, "What does this man think I am? Does he think I can't [clears throat]...does he think I don't know how to bring the cows home...that he has to follow me? And she said, "Well, maybe he's just bored." But, anyway, eh...he followed me about wherever I, I went and then finally he went to, um, overseas to England and was wounded there. And, while he was wounded there and in the hospital...oh, I forgot to tell you about my Uncle Sam [Echt] taking the transports of children to England...but anyway...

P: Oh, you will tell us later, just finish this.

S: We'll tell you that later...eh, we had given him my uncle's address in England that should he arrive close to there that he cold contact him, and he did, and Uncle Samuel and one of my cousins came to visit him in the hospital there. And before too long, he was evacuated and

sent back home.

P: Home...

S: Home to Vancouver, with the thought of wanting to get back to Nova Scotia when he got around to it, but these days don't always come that quickly. In the meantime, eh...I joined the army. I went to nursing school.

P: This is during the, the war. How old are you now [at that time]?

S: Oh...

P: When you are eleven years, are you a registered nurse now, or not?

S: Oh, in the meantime...let's go back to...in the meantime, I finished my school and I took my nurse's training at the Halifax Infirmary [hospital].

P: And how old...how many years...

S: Three years.

P: Did you spend there?

S: Three years...

P: So you are now seventeen?

S: So...seventeen plus three [clears throat].

P: Twenty years old...

S: Twenty years old, and um, and...let's see, after my nurse's training, I worked, um...yeah, I worked in Camphill Hospital in Halifax.

P: Camp...

S: Camphill Hospital, in Halifax. I worked at the Allan Memorial [psychiatric hospital] in Montreal...

P: Ell...?

S: Allan, A-L-L-A-N...

P: A-L-L-A-N.

S: A very terrible place, ah...in Montreal, and ah...did I work anywhere else? No, that was it. And then I joined the army.

P: So, what year did you join the army?

S: I joined the army in 1954...in April, 1954.

P: Ah ha...this is long after the war?

S: This is now after the war. I have already forgotten that he was visiting.

P: Haa...I see...

S: Um, I join...I was in the army in '54, and in 1957, I had...let me think now, was it 1957...1958...in 1958 I had been sick with surgery that still goes back to my Germany surgery...

P: The appendix.

S: My appendix...and ah...because I had leave, but not enough to go all the way to Halifax, because I was stationed in Calgary, eh...I went for a little sick leave to Vancouver. [pause] I looked the Steiner name up in the phone book and actually saw it and phoned Mrs. Steiner, eh...who invited me, eh, to tea. But, before I could accept that invitation, I was back in Shaughnessy Hospital and they, in turn, sent me all the way to Halifax. Meanwhile...

P: Is this Mary Steiner?

S: This is Elsa Steiner.

P: No, then I don't know her.

S: Um, meanwhile, Mrs. Elsa Steiner wrote to her son, Robert, to tell him that I had contacted her and he didn't want to lose me again. He wrote to the farm, but my parents, at this time, had already moved to Halifax...

P: They retired from the...

S: Yes.

P: From the farm business.

S: From the farm...had already gone to Halifax, and the letter got lost.

P: Oh dear.

S: I recuperated from my sick time and was transferred to Germany with the army, and he wrote once more, to my parents, and they sent that letter to Halifax, to Germany, which I received. And...

H: How did he find your parents then?

S: To the old address on the farm.

H: Oh, so this letter didn't get lost?

S: No.

P: Ah, okay...so this letter was forwarded...

S: Yes.

P: To the parents, and the parents...

S: Sent it on...

P: And the parents forwarded [it] to you...give you...we are just restating the facts.

S: Yeah.

P: And the contents of the letter, and what you thought.

S: And the letter was just that he was wondering how we all were and that giving us a little bit of a history of what he had done with himself and what he was doing, and [that] he would be very pleased if I would receive notice of him having written and possibly his address so I could write to him as well, which I did. He promised that he would describe the many lovely places that he sees in his travels as a geologist and would I, in turn, describe the places in Europe that I see on my different trips.

P: So, he was sort of "pen-palish" a little bit?

S: Yes, and that is absolutely all I did. I would describe a place if I visited it and said good-bye, signed my name, and sent it off.

P: And no "love"?

S: No, no because it was just an acquaintance...you don't, I mean, this is not modern times, I don't think I even said "sincerely." I think I just signed my name.

P: And, what about him? Did he sign "sincerely"?

S: Oh, no...he signed, he signed...at first he was a little more cautious, but eventually he signed it a little bit more than I thought was appropriate.

P: And what did he say? What was that...inappropriate signature?

S: [pause] I don't know..."affectionately" or "fondly," or... eventually it was "love." Oh, he, he had a habit of saying "luv," L-U-V...like a slang "love" which wasn't exactly [static noise]...

P: And you took notice of that too?

S: Yes, of course. Um, then he encountered a bear one time, while he was going on a geological job, which he had to kill or be eaten, so he took the skin to the taxidermist and had it, had it made up into a rug and he sent it to me, and he also...

P: To Germany?

S: Yes, and he also, he sent me...to Germany, a nice booklet he had made up with pictures and little commentaries of places he encountered on his trips, and when I showed these to my colleagues of course they raised an eyebrow and started singing, "When there's springtime in the Rockies..." and I was furious. Why should somebody attach something to an innocent pen-pal? I don't know...it was innocent on my end, but, across the miles, he had other plans. And so...

P: And the friends got it but you didn't.

S: No, I didn't. And so, when my matron added an extra year to my overseas time, he wasn't going to wait to pop the question another year and he popped the question by letter.

P: So, when you say 'matron', explain it for future...

S: Matron?

P: For future generations.

S: Oh, matron? Oh, a matron is...

P: What the matron is...

S: A matron is basically what I think is called a civilian

hospital's the 'Director of nurses', the head of all the nursing staff.

P: And you were stationed in Germany...your duties were nursing duties?

S: Yes, my duties were nursing the soldiers, their families and staff, whatever happened to come up.

P: And she extended your stay in Germany?

S: She extended my, my time for a whole, for a year.

P: And, and you wrote him about that?

S: Yes, I said, eh..."I have to..." and that was just too, too much, so he...

P: So he wasn't going to take that?

S: No, so he popped the question and ah...

P: What did he say?

S: Um...

P: Dear, let's hear it...

S: I can't even remember...[she turns to her husband] You remember what you said? I can't remember. But he made some comment of wanting to spend, ah, his life with me or something to that effect, and I wrote back and I said, if this is, ah, if this is a proposal then he'd better think again because I have, I have not always been well and I would not want to burden a husband with a sick wife. And he wrote back and he said, "And you could be in a wheelchair and I would ask the same question." Well, I told him, and that was his answer, so then he wrote to my parents and asked for my hand in marriage and my parents

were quite willing, so they made...because I had this extra year overseas, they made all the preparations for the wedding, including invitations and what not, so that, when I would come home, ah...we would have the wedding shortly after arrival because I only had two weeks of disembarkation leave, and, of course, once I produce my marriage certificate, then the army would have the proceeding to give me my discharge.

P: Release you from the contract?

S: Yes. So, when I finally came back, I flew with the military flight to Ottawa. He was in Ottawa waiting for me, and then we travelled by train from Ottawa to Halifax and were married.

P: Okay, so tell us...

S: This was 19...this was 1961. Our wedding date was the 9th of July 1961, and ah...shortly after that, I, I got my discharge and came to Vancouver to live permanently.

P: Had he already resided in Vancouver before?

S: Yes.

P: And this is where his parents were?

S: Yes, right.

P: That's where he was born?

S: No, he was born in Vienna, and came, strangely enough, he immigrated in the same year as I was born, 1928.

P: Ah...so, now I would like you to tell us just a little bit like when he met you in Ottawa.

S: When he met me in Ottawa...

P: Yeah, the greeting, the reunion...because you haven't seen each other for so long.

S: Right.

P: How was that? Describe it.

S: It was...

P: The way it was...

S: The way it was is that...having been in Europe for three years, coming back, Canada was very, very strange, in a way. We first...no, first we took the transportation that was provided for the military, um, from the airport to the city of Ottawa. Of course, I guess you would have to know me to realize that I have always been a little bit on the shy side and to have a kiss or a hug in public was a definite no-no. And I kept him at my arm's length because there was going to be none of this in public, with all my military, some of them patients...seeing this was absolutely out! However, I appealed to the...whoever the officer was at the time that, since he is a friend...

P: He wasn't the fiancé yet?

S: Well, he really was because we were going home to get married, but I wasn't going to tell them this.

P: I am making a joke...

S: I [asked], "Since he was a friend, would he be entitled to take the same transportations with me?" And they said, "Well, sure." So he came on the same bus with me and after we got to the city, we then went to get his luggage, at the hotel, at which time he presented me with my ring.

P: Well, tell us about the ring.

S: It was a lovely ring. Actually, it was the engagement ring. It had two pearls and two little diamonds on it. Actually, the wedding ring I brought. I wrote and I said that "I think [that] the gold in Germany is so nicely manufactured," would he like me to get the wedding rings there? He said, "That sounds like a good idea." I said, "You have to, you will have to send me a string, knotted, so that I would know the size to give them, and they could hardly believe the big size that I was requesting because he does have big hands. But, they made me write back and check that this size was actually correct. And when they made it, I asked them to put in it, inside, our wedding date and I would have his initials and he would have my initials in the ring. And, then we went to...

P: You are now in the hotel?

S: The hotel, but we left the hotel, and...

P: I'm still waiting for the first kiss...

S: Oh, no...[laughs] I don't know.

P: Or a hug.

S: I don't think that came at all until after we were home, and properly engaged. No kissing before our engagement! My goodness, I wouldn't even let him hold my hand before [our] engagement. Gracious sakes! Those are old-fashioned times you wouldn't get anymore.

P: Okay, well, we want, we want the future generations to hear the way it was...

S: Yes, well, we then went to a restaurant and had a coffee and this was a terrible surprise to me, because I suddenly realized how different the ways were between Germany and Canada. We didn't even start our coffee and we had the bill placed beside us, whereas in Germany, you have your coffee and you can sit over one cup of coffee a whole day if you want to, and meet your friends or have a discussion or whatever, and you don't get your bill until you ask for it, because a bill is so-called, an invitation to leave. And here the bill comes and I said to him, "I'm not ready to go yet." You know? But anyway, he clued me in that we were in Canada. This was...then we went to the train and came home and of course everybody was at the train station to meet us. Still no kiss. I kissed my parents but no kiss!

P: And your sisters were there? Both of them?

S: Yes, they got a kiss.

P: How old is your little one now?

S: My little one now? Oh my, she was born in '35...what does that make her? [pause] Thirty-five? Um, fifty-six? No, no, forty-six? Whatever, she...

P: Thirty-six... [In 1961, she was twenty-six.]

S: Thirty-six [twenty-six]. Yeah, they were there and they had, between them and my parents, absolutely everything was arranged for the wedding. The only thing we had to do is go for our [marriage] license and to pick out the flowers. And that was it. So, when the wedding actually took place, it was almost like a combination of welcoming

home party and wedding, because there were people there I hadn't seen for many years, 'cause I'd been away.

P: So, where was this, in a synagogue?

S: In Halifax at the Beth Israel Synagogue.

P: In Halifax?

S: In Halifax. It was a nice afternoon wedding and I wore my sister's wedding dress, although I had it cut a little shorter...not ankle length because it was afternoon, and we thought a shorter dress would be more appropriate...and it was really, really nice.

P: And what did your husband wear...the groom?

S: He wore a dark suit and, and I shall have to bring the picture...oh yes, I brought some pictures to see of the wedding and that...and that is basically.

P: How many people, were there a lot of friends?

S: Oh, I said to my parents, a small wedding, and they decided that after eliminating as many people as they could, they couldn't eliminate anymore and there had to be about two hundred people. So, it was quite...

P: It was quite a large...

S: It was big, but not big by the standards of that time. Medium would have been five hundred to one thousand, but I kept things small, small...and not evening, because neither one of us dances. In the evening, you more or less have to have dancing and that means sort of...and we didn't want alcohol, and things like that because since we don't drink, we didn't feel we wanted the day with

drinking. But it was lovely, it really was.

P: So, now you got the first kiss.

S: Then I got the first kiss...but just a little peck...in public. [laughs]

P: And now you moved back to Vancouver, after the wedding?

S: Well, after the wedding, we came to Vancouver, but when, when my...no, first we toured Nova Scotia a little bit. My father gave us his car and we toured Nova Scotia because Robert had never seen any part of Nova Scotia before, and we really saw a lot of...

P: Being a geologist, I mean...

S: Oh, he had to look at everything that was remotely like mining and minerals, but even the tides and everything was of interest to him. Then I came with him...I came back to Vancouver but then I had to go back when my leave was up until my discharge was final. And then I came back again.

P: Where did you...

S: My discharge was here, here in Vancouver. But, in between, having been here after the wedding and my discharge, I was in Gagetown, in New Brunswick.

P: For how long?

S: Four weeks maybe? Something like that.

P: Four weeks, and ah...now you are living in Vancouver. Are you still in the same residence?

S: No, we, we built our house...

[End of tape 2, side 2]

Interviewee: Brigitte STEINER (S)

Date of Recording: July 18, 1991

Ident. Number: 015-3

Track Number: T3-S1

Interviewer: Renia Perel (P), & Reva Hollander (H)

P: Please continue now, your life in Vancouver, your married life.

S: Yes, we now lived in a panabode house on half an acre of, um, of ground with many orchard trees: apples, pears, plums, nuts and so on. In case anyone doesn't know what a panabode is, ah...it is a home where the logs fit into each other and it's built without nails, so that you get the same log that is outside, you also get on the inside. It gives the home an atmosphere of great warmth because, ah, of the wood effect.

P: How do you spell that, panabode?

S: P-A-N-A-B-O-D-E. Um, it is, it is a large home and really geared for children so we always felt we wanted many children, although I had been told that, because of the surgery, the original appendectomy in Danzig, that I would not have any children, we had decided to either adopt or have foster children, or whatever. However, following another little bit of surgery, I queried with the doctor whether this might have done something which would enable us to have a family and he didn't think it was so. He had me come back quite, quite often to listen for bowel sounds

because a lot of the trouble was with the bowels, and so it was surprising when he suddenly heard a little fetal heart, and he went about doing the various tests even before telling me what he suspected because this was just too unusual to be possible, but, sure enough, our Rebecca was on her way. And it took our Rebecca eleven months to come. Because of this past surgery, I was really quite unwell; I had lost about twenty-five pounds, although she weighed seven and a half, and was quite normal, which the doctor did not really think was possible, but it was, and the fact...

P: So you were actually pregnant?

S: For fourteen, for eleven months, so when she was born she was always quite mature and actually started speaking when she was seven months old and by the time she was a year old, I held conversations with her as we went walking or playing, as though I was talking to a school child.

P: Ah...this is Rebecca?

S: This is Rebecca. She is still a very intelligent, bright person, and she is now living in Japan and she is twenty-eight.

P: Oh, congratulations! I'll just point out that this is another miracle...it is so unusual. Most children are born after nine months!

S: Yes...

P: How is that possible?

S: Possibly...probably the way it's explained is that I was

in such a [noise on tape]...I was in such bad health, shall we say, and had gained so little weight that most obviously she was too small in weight to have survived had she been born in nine months, so probably by waiting the extra time, she was stronger and able to survive. But, even though we had this one child, we still didn't know whether it would be possible to have another, and even if we did, maybe there would be too many years of interval between them and we were certainly not teen-agers anymore. We were...I was at that time thirty-five and my husband was seven years older, so, again, I phoned Children's Aid and said, "I know we have one child, but I would be very happy to adopt another." And it seems as though this child was meant to come to us because when I phoned, the social workers were all in conference, discussing one Mark Stephen...Mark Stephen, who was having a difficult time in his foster home because the foster mother was not very nice to this baby. He was three months old and very much neglected by this woman who wanted blue-eyed, blond [haired] children, and he was very Sephardic-looking. Ah...so because of this...

P: What means 'Sephardic-looking'? Explain.

S: Ah, a little on the, on the olive-skinned, dark-eyed, dark-haired side, let's say, like a Spaniard or [an] Italian. Ah, so when most people have to wait a long time for an adoptive child, we didn't have to wait very long, because they wanted to get this child out of the home he

was in and we got him very readily. It was the 13th of Mar...the 13th of May, um, 1967, and he was three months old.

P: I forgot when Rebecca was born...

S: Rebecca was born the 1st of September '63. [pause] And so Mark came to us as a very neglected, sickly child who had been fed nothing but skim milk and drugged, so he wouldn't cry and bother the foster mother and after he came and I fed him, and made him comfortable, he slept from two o'clock that afternoon until the next morning, and I thought I had killed my new child because he didn't wake until so many hours went by, but he was well-fed and satisfied, and within a short while, he was gaining weight, he was up to his, his potential, but he still had a few physical problems that this lady had caused him in that his one leg was shorter and his head was sort of a wry neck; his neck was twisted because he had had his bottle propped and never moved. So, I, ah...

P: And what about his leg being shorter? Was he born like that, or was he...?

S: No, he [it] was from positioning...the position the woman had him in. So, with my nursing knowledge, I did a lot of physio with him and it wasn't too long afterwards that we went to see the orthopedic doctor and he said, "There is no need for you to bring him back anymore; what you are doing is far better than what I could do for him." And, within...by the time he reached his birthday, you couldn't

even tell that there had ever been a problem.

P: The first birthday you are talking about?

S: First birthday.

P: And, what about his neck?

S: Fine...no problem, and he is a very intelligent boy.

P: Athletic?

S: Yes, very athletic.

P: I just said it intuitively.

S: Yes. He's very...he a very...

P: You would probably guide him to that...[laughs]

S: [laughs] Ah, what I didn't know was that when Mark came to us, I was indeed expecting Emily.

P: Oh!

S: So, I, I asked Children's Aid whether the coming of another baby would make any difference in keeping Mark, and they said it was up to me. So we now had Rebecca and Mark, and Emily on the way. But I didn't know it would be a girl, so I asked Children's Aid to keep their eyes out for another child for us to even out the balance, should the coming baby be a girl, then save us another boy; should the coming baby be a boy, save us a little girl, and so Emily was...was she a year old? She was about a year old when Paul arrived. And it was wonderful when the phone rang and said, "Your baby has been born, you can come and pick him up, and you didn't have nine months of agony." It was a very happy event. And so Paul's birthday is on the 16th of December, in '69.

P: And, and Emily's?

S: Emily is the 17th of March '68.

P: 1968. So Paul...?

S: Paul...16th of December '69. So they are basically a year apart. And from then onward, we had, we also had various foster children. I finally didn't bother counting anymore, but we had somewhere in the vicinity of forty.

P: Forty?

S: Foster children.

P: Foster children. And this is in the home that you built...

S: Yes.

P: Out in Tsawwassen [south of Vancouver].

S: Yes.

P: How many bedrooms do you have?

S: Um...six.

P: Six...so you were well prepared...

S: Well, the foster children were usually infants and babies, or I should say, babies and toddlers, so it wasn't too difficult to put up an extra crib somewhere. Sometimes the house had as many as nine children and it was, was always quite a happy household, and with the, with the large property that we have, it's half an acre, and lots of fruit trees, as I mentioned before, there was never any problem in having the children well fed with either the fresh fruit in the summer or the canned fruit in the winter. And when we went shopping, we shopped with two carts...one filled with children and one on my back, and

another shopping cart for groceries, which our dad very kindly always drove us to and from. I'm sure we attracted a lot of attention.

P: [laughs] What a wonderful story! What a wonderful person you turned out to be.

S: Well, as I said, I, I felt that the reason I was saved, there must have been a reason for me to accomplish something that I was meant to do. Maybe this was it.

P: Well, that certainly is one of it [them].

S: And then once our children grew up to be school age, I, I presented...

P: When you talk about the children, you mean the four of your own?

S: Our four own. I presented the situation to them and I said, "Now that you are all school-aged, you may decide. Would you like for me to go back to work so we have a little bit of extra for something special, and you each do an extra chore, or would you like to have mother home all the time and just carry on as we are?" And they all opted for me going back to work. And by doing that, we managed to go to Disneyland [in California] and to Hawaii.

P: Yearly, or just...?

S: No, no, just once. Twice to Disneyland and once to Hawaii. And then, of course, there was the education and so on, so no one really had to do without anything that was important. [pause]

P: So, you feel that, I mean, that you have contributed in

many ways, to the country that has allowed you to find the freedom?

S: I think so.

P: [laughs] That's a great contribution to humanity, not just to Canada, to help other children who are in need, especially infants and toddlers...

S: Well, many of these children...

P: That can't speak for themselves.

S: Many of these children were, you might almost say handicapped because of their situations. They were many times from homes where the parents drank or they were in homes where they were abused, so they needed a home that was a little bit more stable and stimulating to them. And, at that time, I was also, I believe, the only foster mother who had nursing experience. So, we got a lot of children that needed nursing care...either post-operative children or children who had handicaps or defects, that nobody else felt confident enough to look after. [pause]

P: What a wonderful example your story is...

S: Thanks...

P: For Canadians, just listening to it and I am very inspired.

S: Oh, thanks...I was going to go back and tell a little tale about a big dog, when we were on the farm.

P: But, we mustn't forget your uncle too.

S: Oh, my uncle...yes...shall we do...?

P: And the big dog, whichever comes first...

S: Well, the big dog [story] is shorter, so I'll tell you the big dog story first. The Nova Scotian winters were severe. They were very cold and very hard, and one, one day, after a really bad blizzard, there stood this enormous dog by our window and, of course, we children felt he was hungry and we begged our father if we couldn't let him in to get warm and to feed him. But, my father said that "We mustn't do it right away because the dog obviously belongs to someone and if we take him in and he doesn't return to his home, that would not be the kindest thing to do...to wait a little while and if he doesn't go, then we could do that." Of course, the animal didn't go home and we were allowed to let him in, and we were allowed to feed him, and the animal stayed with us. And he was absolutely wonderful. He was enormous...he was huge. I don't know, there were several breeds in the dog but he was as big as a small horse. And, because he stayed with us all winter, of course he learned German commands as well as English, and he was quite bilingual. Um, and then when spring came, and the weather warmed up, we were doing all the spring clean-up and one of us, I think it was myself, actually, I took the big broom to sweep the porch and when the dog spied the broom, he took off and never came back. So, we figured, "Well, maybe because it's spring." I didn't realize it was the broom. We figured because it was spring, he would have gone home. And then summer came, and towards the end of summer, many farmers sell off some of

their extra cattle because they haven't got enough room in the barn, and my father was wanting some extra milking cows and he had heard this particular farmer had some cows to sell, so he decided to stop there. And he went down and he had to open at this big gate to go in, and as he did so, from nowhere came this enormous animal and leaped at him and he said he could have said his 'Shemah' [his last prayer] and thought, "Well, this is the end of me," when the dog put his two paws around his neck and licked him, and my father realized it was the dog from the winter, that had stayed with us, so he spoke to the dog in German and they were, of course, immediate friends again, and the dog was as happy as can be. And, suddenly the farmer and his wife come running in great alarm, thinking that this dog, which is real guard dog, and they saw him jump on my father's throat, they were afraid that the dog had killed my father, and they came running and said, "This has never happened before, we can't believe that this animal let you pass onto our property." So, my, my father said, said to them, "Was your dog missing during the winter months?" And the man said, "Yes, he drank out of one of the milk pails that we were just milking and I got so mad I took the broom and beat him until he ran away and never came back until spring." And my father said, "He spent the time with us." And then he spoke to the dog in German and he obeyed, and the man realized that the dog understood. And it made the business transaction of buying the cow very much more

favourable because this dog would probably not have survived the harsh winter had he not come into our house.

P: So, now this explains your sweeping the porch...

S: The porch...

P: And his escaping...

S: Because of the...

P: Of the broom...

S: Right...

P: Because he was beaten.

S: Yes.

P: He must have been a very intelligent dog...

S: A very, a really intelligent, nice dog.

P: Well...

S: Now, now we must get on with my uncle's story...

P: Yes, you wanted to mention how, when Robert, your present...your husband, not present...your husband...when he went to England, you gave him the address to go and visit your uncle, when he enlisted into the, in the air force, or he was in the...

S: He was in the air force...

P: He was.

S: But that is...that comes a minute later. First, my uncle has to get to England.

P: Right, so that's what we want to know.

S: My uncle...

P: His name...?

S: Samuel, Samuel Echt.

P: Echt.

S: And I will speak of him as Uncle Sam.

P: Yeah, Uncle Sam...

S: Uncle Sam...

P: And give the date when you are start...when you are referring to [him].

S: Uncle Sam had been the principal of this school that I attended to...

P: The Jewish school...

S: After I couldn't attend the ordinary public school, and he was very close to all the school children. He felt very protective of them. He was also, in spite of the bad times, um, still respected by the various people in the Gestapo, ah...because most of them had been his students at some time or other, but they could not...

P: Was he teaching in a public school system?

S: No, he was a teacher in higher school [post-secondary].

P: In higher schools, sorry.

S: So, even though they had to, when anybody noticed, not be nice, if they got him alone they were still his students...

P: In private, they were...

S: And very much respectful to him, and so my uncle took the chance of going to the Gestapo and asking whether it might be possible for him to evacuate a shipload of children to England.

P: And what year is this?

S: And this was shortly after we had left, so it is somewhere...

P: 1938...

S: In the early [part of] 1939.

P: Early '39.

S: '39. So, um, my, my uncle got this permission and he took, I think it was around seventy-five or eighty children to England, stayed long enough to make sure that each found a foster family to stay with, but he had to return because his family was still in Danzig.

P: His own, private family?

S: His wife and children were still in Danzig and he didn't want to endanger their lives by staying away, so he returned back to Danzig, but he again went to the Gestapo and asked if he could not take another load of children because there were so many that had to be turned away. And they said, yes, he could. And, in that second transport, he took his wife and his children as well, and when he got...

P: He did not intend to return, obviously...

S: Ah...it was questionable. I think he, being a very obedient person, he might have, but he couldn't because war started. Ah, so there he was...

P: When was that? This was March 1939? Do you have an idea what date...?

S: Well, whenever war started. September [1939].

P: September 3rd [September 1, 1939].

S: So, this was ah...

P: 1939.

S: Somewhere in late August or early September.

P: Well, it could have been [in] August, then...

S: August, that they would start. By the time they'd get to England it would be several weeks later, of course. Ah...when they arrived, it was not that easy to get people to take foster [children] of a foreign kind.

P: And how many children did he take this time?

S: Again, the same amount.

P: About...

S: About seventy-five or eighty. He could not find enough people wanting to take children because Britain itself was evacuating their children out of the cities.

P: Yes, there was bombing in London...but no, not yet.

S: Yes. So, my uncle went to see what could be done about it, and the British government gave him a large building which he formed into a hostel where he kept most of the children himself, and he and his wife, my aunt, took care of a great number of these children that he evacuated.

P: And this was in London?

S: No, this was in Birmingham.

P: In Birmingham. And what is the name of your aunt, because you know...

S: Oh, Hella, H-E-L-L-A.

P: H-E-...

S: L-L-A, Hella.

P: Hella.

S: Um, and after, after the war, many of the children found a relative that they could go to. My aunt and uncle, and the children, went to New York after the war.

P: How many did he take with him? His own, or...?

S: Just his own.

P: Just his own. How many children did he have?

S: He had ah...he had three children.

P: I mean, did your uncle have...

S: Also three girls, also three girls. Um, I might also mention...

P: These are your first-cousins?

S: Yes. I might also mention, at this point, that it was the same uncle who was very instrumental in saving a lot of the artifacts and the holy objects from the Great Danzig Synagogue, and um, these were also sent to New York at the time, so he was able to identify many pieces and be helpful in the display of them, because they have never left New York except to visit for short periods to other places to other cities in Canada and the States.

P: And so this was...your uncle was instrumental in, in helping to transport the original shipment before the Great Danzig Synagogue was destroyed?

S: Destroyed, that's right. [pause] This, this exhibition...

P: That, I suppose is a story in itself?

S: In itself, because the exhibition was held in Vancouver, and there is a lot of write-up on the subject, because of

that.

P: So, do you think that people could refer to material because it, locally in Vancouver, because of the Danzig exhibit was here, was held in Vancouver?

S: Yeah, I think so.

P: Do you remember what year that was?

S: Ah, I can't remember. I think it was two years ago...? I think about two years ago...two summers ago. [pause]

P: 1989?

S: Yes, yes, I think that was, that was it. [pause]

P: That's another story.

S: That's, that's a story [in] itself.

P: In itself...

S: I think probably, that's probably all.

P: And when your uncle came to New York, it was my understanding that there was a fire...? [pause] It is my understanding that there was a fire at the, where these objects were held, and some were destroyed, or were most of them saved?

S: I didn't hear this. I don't know.

P: All right then. Well, now that we are now here, and we know about your life, we would like to...you to tell what your feelings are in retrospect, when you look back to what happened during the Holocaust and, and how, what your views are on it now. Obviously, you are telling us the story so there must be a reason.

S: Well, I think it probably helps others who have never

experienced anything but a very peaceful, loving home with security and comfort on the outside as well as in. It may be difficult for them to understand that other people may have had a childhood of...a little bit different, and this may explain that there are other, other ways and other times that have created the past that is about to be forgotten if not recorded. [pause]

P: Thank you for, for this wonderful testimony about your life and your family life. If there will be any additional questions when we type it out and edit, we will be in touch with you for more explanation, but for now, we will leave it at this point and both, on behalf of myself and Reva, we thank you very kindly for this wonderful interview.

S: Thank you for asking me.

[End of interview]