

ELIZABETH WOLAK (née WALDMAN)

POLAND/U.S.S.R./AUSTRALIA/CANADA

WORLD WAR II

Interviewed by

Renia Perel

&

Arthur Wolak

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Interviewee: Elizabeth WOLAK (W)

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Interviewer: Renia Perel (P), & Arthur Wolak (A)

P: My name is Renia Perel, I am interviewing Mrs. Elizabeth Wolak. We are here at her home at 483 West 39th Avenue, in Vancouver, and her son, Arthur Wolak, is also present here, and he is assisting in every way, both his mother and myself, and he is keeping track of the tape deck. Good morning, Mrs. Wolak. How are you?

W: Good morning, not bad, the weather is fine.

P: Are you ready?

W: As much as I can be.

P: Well, then let's begin. We want to know your story, where were you born, and how you survived during the war, and how you came to Canada, and all about your life. So...ah...where were you born?

W: I was born in Kraków, Poland, on the 5th of October 1923. Kraków is the ancient capital of Poland, a city of monuments, churches, and historical buildings. We lived on Jagiellońska Street, that is quite close to [the] famous Jagiellonian University, in the centre of the town. My father, Leon Waldman -- it's pronounced "Valdman" in Polish, you would pronounce it "Waldman" in English -- was a dentist. So, our life was quite good I would say.

My mother, Salomea Mund, was a daughter of a watchmaker and jeweller, who had a store in the middle of the city, as well. I was the only daughter. Both sets of my grandparents were Orthodox, and so was my mother who kept her kosher kitchen all the time.

P: Even during the war years?

W: The war years were not spent [at home] in Poland, so you couldn't do this. That was the only time she didn't. When we came back to Kraków after the war, the story started again, with the dishes and everything else.

P: Oh, that's very interesting.

W: Well, she came from a very Orthodox family.

P: Um hmm. Could you spell for the record the name of your father and the maiden name of your...

W: Of my mother.

P: Mother.

W: Okay. Now, Waldman is spelt W-A-L-D-M-A-N, that was the father. Mother's maiden name was Mund, M-U-N-D. Anything else?

P: Thank you.

W: Now, my mother's father, Herman Mund, was a very important figure in the synagogue which we all attended. That was the "Stara Bóznica" in Polish, the "Old Synagogue," situated in the old part of the city, the Jewish part of the city, Kazimierz. It was built in 15th-16th century [and is] one of the oldest. As far as I know, the German people were holding a museum there or something of that kind. [During the war,

the Nazis used it as a warehouse. After the war it was restored and became a Museum of Jewish History and Culture in 1958.] It's still there. It's not ruined.

We all attended the synagogue on all holidays, and I remember us walking there, back and forth, it took us about an hour one way, because nobody would go by any vehicle on a holiday. The grandfather was quite important there. I don't really remember what function he had, but he had a certain function. Now, he was...he had a little blond beard, clean cut, I'll show you the picture, and, in spite of being Jewish, he had a watchmaker's store in the middle of the city on Sławkowska Street, one of the main streets. My grandmother, Ann Mund, was always wearing a wig, a 'sheidtl', until the war time. I remember her replacing it with a little handkerchief when we were in Russia, otherwise she was wearing [the 'sheidtl']. When we came back, I don't think that came on again. Well, when we came back [to Cracow after the war], all the Poles were different, they were changed, so one had to be very careful.

My grandparents, Nachum and Amalia Waldman, the parents of my father, lived in the suburbs of Kraków, [in a place called] Kobierzyn, and they had a small grocery store there.

P: You spoke about your maternal grandparents so beautifully, and you began with your father's parents, could you continue.

W: My father's parents, as I said, they lived all the time at the suburbs of Kraków. Ah...my father had one brother and one sister, one older sister, who lived with her husband in

Germany, Köln am Rhine [Cologne], and she arrived to Kraków in 1938 after the "Kristallnacht" ["Night of Broken Glass" November 9-10, 1938], when they [the Nazis] pushed them [the Jews] all away. Otherwise, I remember her coming [to Kraków] visiting us, only. My father's younger brother was married with one child, he lived in Kraków. We quite often visited the grandparents [in Kobierzyn], especially in summertime because it was nice out there.

As far as my other grandparents...my mother had two older brothers, one, Ferdinand [Mund], Marysza's father, he was a bookkeeper by profession, but he, as far as I remember, he had a store, chocolate store, ah...that was a franchise of Domański, beautiful chocolates, right around the corner [from] where we lived. He was killed during the war. Her...my mother's younger brother, Henryk [Mund], had a shoe store on Zwierzyńska Street, which was in the middle of the city as well. They had two children, and the whole family perished during the war.

My grandfather [Herman] Mund, passed away in 1930, and my grandmother continued managing the store with the help of her younger son.

P: When you said that your grandparents, ah...your paternal grandparents lived on the outskirts [of Kraków], could you spell that name for us?

W: Yeah, the village, I would say it's a village, was called Kobierzyn. It's K-O-B-I-E-R-Z-Y-N. It was very close to Podgórze, closer to...part of Kraków. Maybe I should have

mentioned that my grandfather, the one that lived there, ever since I remember he was an invalid, in an, in an invalid chair moving around with both legs amputated.

P: Oh...

W: Why it was, I can't remember. But I just remember, like [in] a picture, him with a long beard and travelling the room with the chair. Both grandparents perished during the war, and I have no idea how.

P: So, how did ah, ah...a man who was an invalid, can you imagine? in Poland, in a village, manage to educate his son to become a dentist who was your father. Do you know anything about that story?

W: I am afraid, I can't answer this. I don't know. I know my father was very independent himself, and how he got the means to do it, I don't know.

P: And [in] which university did he study? Do you know where he got his, ah...the license?

W: No, I do not know. We tried to find out now and we can't find out anything, so I don't really know.

P: Ah ha.

W: Well, being brought up in Poland, I wasn't free to ask my parents many questions. It was not polite to ask all these questions, and nowadays it's different because my [younger] son loves to know everything and asks me all the questions. Maybe I wish I should have done it too, but we never did that.

P: Um hmm, so they lived by the standards of society.

W: And very strict, the life was very strict, I was kept, I was brought up very strict myself, and I think maybe it was right. I don't regret it.

P: By 'strict' what do you mean? Explain how, ah...the lifestyle...

W: You can't go out whenever you feel like it, you can't come home whenever you feel like it, you have to be there whenever you are told to be there. Whatever I was told, I did. I was a very obedient daughter.

P: That's beautiful, so that's a good example for your own sons.

W: I think so.

P: [laughs]

W: They can't complain.

P: Um...were you a happy child?

W: Yes, I definitely was. My father had quite a good income, ever since I remember he had a car, and we were going away every weekend somewhere. He was very involved in sports, and I, when I think about it today, it's quite, it seems to be quite unusual that being a Jew, he had a function in the Executive of a football club, very famous "Cracovia," which is not football here, it's softball, but it was football...

A: It's soccer, soccer.

W: Soccer, right. So, he was involved in being on the Executive Board for many, many years, and I wonder today how did it happen? But he had many Gentile friends, and he was always very well liked, so he was always among them.

P: Was the sort of upper-class profession that maybe gave him

the access? We can only assume I suppose, or...

W: Maybe, [or] maybe just his personality which was wonderful.

So, he used to, during the weekends, he used to take the car and go. If they were playing a game somewhere beyond Kraków, we went along, so I had a chance to go.

P: Excuse me for, for being so excited and impressed, you mentioned having a car as if it was a daily possession.

People hardly had money for a spoon or a plate to eat off, and sometimes they just shared one bowl. How is it that, that you had a car, really a car?

W: I didn't think it was anything unusual because, as I said, my father had a very good profession, and ever since I remember, he had a car and drove a car himself, he was very mechanical and he could attend to all the needs of his car himself, so I didn't find it unusual. But during the war, when the war broke out, then we found out what it means to have a car. Of course I was not driven to school myself, never such luxury. He was busy.

P: So you walked to school.

W: Oh yes,

P: [laughs]

W: I walked, or else I took a cable car, depends. May I say something about myself now?

P: Oh, absolutely. [laughs]

W: I attended elementary public school named 'Jadwiga' for the [14th-century] Queen of Poland, that I remember, and I had to walk about twenty minutes to school, a very good one. Then I



was admitted to the state [public] all-girls high school named 'Adam Mickiewicz' [after the famous Polish poet]. Now, that...that was an unusual thing. One had to have an entry exam, which I passed with flying colours, and I still remember that it stood out, my exam paper, because I had green ink in my pen, and it really stood out, and I was admitted. For a Jewish girl to be admitted to that one was not an easy thing. There were only two of us in the class including me.

P: Two Jewish girls.

W: Two Jewish girls in the class.

P: And how big was the school...?

W: Well, in the class...

P: I see.

W: The class was about forty people, a big one.

P: Um hmm.

W: The school was big. It's still there, it's a very, a very good...

P: And this was a school...

W: And that was a public one, so we had uniforms, we were not allowed to walk in the evening in the centre of the city on the ["Linia] A-B" street, which was right in the centre. We were not allowed to walk in the evening there. It was very, very strict.

P: Um hmm.

W: So, this is another thing that's quite significant these days.

P: Where was this space that you were not allowed to walk? As students?

W: That was the very centre of the city, the Marketplace, because this was the 'fashionable walk' in the evenings for everybody, so we were not. Now, the school itself was on Starowińska Street. It took me, oh, about half an hour to walk there. It was closer to the Jewish Kazimierz district. Now, we had regular Hebrew lessons conducted by Rabbi Dr. Schmelkes once a week in the afternoon, and we attended them together with some other girls from another school, high school, to form a bigger class. I would say he was a very good teacher because I remember that when I started working in the synagogue in Australia, my Hebrew was right there.

P: Really, so you had Hebrew class...high-school Hebrew?

W: Yes, and the mark from the class was put on our certificate [report cards], so that was quite a legal thing.

P: So...

W: When the other [Christian] people had religion [religious instruction], I went out of the class.

P: Did you graduate from this 'Adam Mickiewicz' high school?

W: Now, by the time the war broke out, I finished my first four grades of high school. What was left were two last grades of so-called Liceum, and one of them I did in Lvov during the war. So that was all I did in this one. Now, every year, I was a straight 'A' student, and every year I was inscribed in the 'Golden Book' [in Polish, "Złota Księga"] of this school, so my name is still there.

P: Oh, fantastic!

W: Maybe I should mention that I started playing piano at the age of six, and of course I had to practice every single day, my mother supervised that and I am very thankful for this. So at the...in the high school, I had to take part in all the performances, either playing, or singing, or dancing. Oh, that was an extra-curricular activity. Then I was the head of the 'German Circle', as my German was very good then, and at the same time I had private teachers coming home teaching me piano. I remember the first one was a man. Later on I had a woman [teacher] whose brother was a viola player, and I remember that my first appearance on stage was when I was turning pages for her, she accompanied him, at his recital in a big concert hall. I was as nervous as I could be if I would have played myself, but it was a good experience.

P: Wow! At ten, at the age ten?

W: Well, maybe at the age of ten, approximately.

P: So, you could read music to turn pages for a concert.

W: Well, I was, I was quite a good pianist myself...

P: That's fantastic.

W: And she thought I was good enough to do it.

P: Fantastic. No wonder, she gave you double confidence.

Speaking of your education, may I ask I am just curious to know and I am sure everyone else will be, how, where were your beginners' Hebrew. Was this by private tutoring at home? Or how was that?

W: There was no private tutoring at home. There was only [Rabbi]

Dr. Schmelkes giving me the Hebrew education.

P: Oh, from the beginning in the Jagiellonian.

W: No, that was, that was at the high school [on Starowińska Street].

P: At the high school.

W: And that was the only Hebrew that I have taken as a language tutoring, but as far as I remember, both my parents were quite good at reading Hebrew because we had...we attended all the main [Jewish] holidays, we attended together with my grandparents. I remember the Passover. Every year we were all, the whole family was gathered at my grandfather's, Mund, house, and he conducted the Seder. And I remember that everybody was able to read Hebrew quite well. When he died, my Uncle Ferdinand [Mund] was the one conducting the service [at Passover] and still at my grandfather's, grandmother's house. The whole family was there.

P: I would like to know about, if the seniors in your family, your grandparents and whoever came by, spoke Yiddish, because you haven't mentioned, you mentioned about Hebrew, if they conversed among themselves or...in Yiddish, or what language did they use to communicate with one another?

W: All of them used Polish, and I would say that it was quite obvious being, living in the middle of the city, you had to, there was no other way. I know that they knew Yiddish because sometimes I heard it in between at home, but it wasn't used [very often] and I don't know any Yiddish. I was not taught any Yiddish.

P: But German was spoken.

W: German, yes.

P: As a language.

W: Oh, yes, of course. We all knew German, I was learning my German in high school. I know my mother knew German quite well because, during the First World War, they [the Mund family] were all living in Vienna, I think, and she received [part of] her high-school education in Vienna, and after she came back to Kraków she [completed high school and then] did two years business college. So she had her education, but being a wife of a dentist she did not have to work at all. I don't ever remember her working.

P: Um hmm, thank you.

W: Eh...I forgot to mention that in my high school I had a nickname, "powaga klasowa," which in English you would translate into "the serious one in the class," because I was very serious and I hardly ever laughed, so it stood out probably. Maybe I stayed the same way through my whole life.

P: Well, you had a triple curriculum: the regular, the Hebrew, and the musical. So...

W: It never seemed too much.

P: [laughs]

W: It was fine, and it stayed this way right through. I was always used to doing a lot, so, that was fine.

P: Oh, you still do. [laughs]

W: I still do that, and I don't think I could do otherwise.

P: So, what happened, like, when did the critical time occur

when we come to the period of the war, and what did you hear, and what were you aware of, and tell us about that, how it came to pass.

W: Of course, the critical time was the outbreak of the Second World War, and I remember it quite well. We were at home hoping that, of course you could hear [on] the radio that everything was getting worse and worse, but we were hoping there would be no war. But on the 1st of September 1939, we woke up in the morning with the first alarm and the first planes shooting in the air, when the Germans came and were sending bombs down. My father immediately decided that we have to pack a few suitcases and he shipped us, by car of course, to the grandparents, to Kobierzyn, because he thought that the German people will not waste their bombs on villages, but on the city. He himself stayed at home working. I think we were there for about a week,\* and, no, there were no bombs in that place. But this was more to the west [of Kraków], so when we heard already the German artillery coming closer then of course we panicked, and, ah...we were in touch with my father all the time, even if he wasn't there...

P: By phone or...?

W: By phone, yes. Now, his sister, who, as I mentioned, lived in Kraków since 1938...

P: What was her name? I forgot.

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\*Nazi Germany attacked Poland on 1 September 1939; the Germans took Kraków on 6 September. We fled eastwards just in time.

W: Rosa Alster. She forced my father to run away. "You have to go, you have to leave." So, one day he arrived in a car, took us, we only passed through Kraków picking up my [maternal] grandmother whom my mother did not want to leave without her, and we went to the east. Our destination was Lublin because my father had some friends there, but that was quite a trip. We mainly drove at night because during the day the German planes were above, sending bombs down and shooting people. I remember one particular day, when we were driving during the day, and the [German] planes came over, everybody ran out into a ditch, hiding so they don't shoot us. All the roads were full of people, either with cars or with horses or walking, who were running away. But the [German] planes were going very low and shooting people, so when we were in the ditch all we did was pray.

We arrived to Lublin and we stayed at our friends' house, but I think it was only a couple of days or so, because it was just the worst bombing we could experience, so we spent the whole time in the shelters, and we decided to leave. We were going down to Rovno...

P: Eastward, is that it?

W: Eastward, yes. When we came to Rovno, at the same time the Russians were coming from the other side occupying Poland. Now, that was the agreement between German and Russian people to occupy half and half, on both sides [Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact], and we found ourselves under Russians [Soviets] all of a sudden.

We stayed in Rovno a few good weeks I think, I don't remember quite well, but I remember one incident. The Russian officers came in the house and requested my father, who had a car, to drive them to a certain destination under, of course, under revolvers [at gun point], whatever.

P: Under threat.

W: So he drove them. He drove them, but he was afraid very much that they would kill him there, or do something. He ran away. He was able...when they got out, he was able to run away with the car and came back. He came back home but he was afraid to keep the car because they would come for him. So he was hiding and the car was hiding in somebody else's house, so we decided we are leaving.

P: So this is Rovno now, when you say 'back home'?

W: That was Rovno, yes, that was Rovno. Oh, we were not back home [in Kraków] until after the war. So we decided we have to leave, and we went to Lvov, a bigger nicer city, where my father was able to start working as a dentist again. He had no equipment but he met his colleague who had the equipment with him. So they were in partnership and they were working there. In Lvov I was able to attend the high school again. I think I must have missed the September and I must have started a little later but that was another interesting experience, a very good high school [called "Gimnazjum i Liceum Prywatne im. J. Słowackiego we Lwowie"]. I learned two new languages, Russian and Ukrainian, there. I was a straight 'A' student, receiving a "Pokhvalnaya Gramota" [Ukrainian,



"Honour Certificate"] which I have with me...

P: Which means?

W: That means like an 'honour list' or whatever...

P: Student.

W: I was an honour student but ah...my [younger] son finds it quite interesting because the document has got a picture of Stalin and a picture of Lenin on it.

[End of tape 1, side 1]

Interviewee: Elizabeth WOLAK (W)

Date of Recording: February 26, 1995

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Interviewer: Renia Perel (P), & Arthur Wolak (A)

P: Alright. So you got 'Pakhvalnaya Gramota'? That means an 'honour student' [literally 'honour certificate'].

W: Quite a document, something to show my children, because for some reason I have it with me. I don't even know how it survived.

P: Ah ha.

W: Now, I was able to finish the school year in Lvov, and in summer 1940, there were rumours going around all of a sudden that the Russians were deporting men. Coming at night, taking men, and deporting them in[to] the centre of Russia. So what we did, we shipped all our men that lived in our apartment, that was my father and his partner, we shipped them to my friend to sleep over there, and that was for about three nights. On the fourth night, all of a sudden, the Russian people arrived, the [Soviet] military, at night, and took us all. Took us all, told us to pack our things, and shipped us all. The neighbour, who knew where my father was, immediately let him know that we were taken, and he [my father] reported in the morning to the train station. The train was still there, we were taken to the trains, and asked them to [allow him to] be united and

let him go with us. They permitted him to go, and we were all put together in ah...animal carriages because...

P: Cattle cars?

W: Cattle cars, right. Quite a lot of people in one car, and we started our travelling. We didn't know where we're going...

P: Were you allowed to take your things with you?

W: Yes, we were allowed to take whatever we had. We didn't have much at that time, but whatever we had we were allowed to take, yes.

P: You didn't have the car anymore, of course.

W: Oh no, the car was sold. As far as I remember, in Lvov, my father got rid of it and sold it. We didn't need it there and it was better not to have it.

P: So you are talking now about the period, ah...that you were under the Soviet regime.

W: Oh yes, we definitely were.

P: So it was the Soviet government that deported you on this...

W: Oh yes, we were deported by the Soviets, right, and the whole train was under military guard. We were not allowed to get out of the [train] car at all...

A: This was in June?

W: June 1940, yes.

P: And...tell us about the journey and where you stopped.

W: We travelled for about a month, so we knew we were going deeper and deeper in Russia, nobody would tell us anything

where we were going. That was on purpose of course. They took us to a...centre of 'Mariyskaya Oblast', that was the Mariyskaya Republic [Mari Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, in western Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic] not far from Kazan, I know now where it was, and they took us to a forest [labour] camp. We were provided with barracks to live, and everybody was forced to go and work in the woods.

A: This is north of the Volga?

W: That was near, not far from Volga River. I worked with my young girl friends all the same age...I was around sixteen or so, at that time. So in the...early in the morning, we were getting ready, we were taken by a horse into the deep forest and given our saws and our utensils to cut small trees. We were working at the repairing of the road. The road was used by the Russians who were going with their cars [trucks], whatever it was, taking lumber down to the river, it was a small river [Kokshaga River], and all we did was cut the trees down, sawing them, and repairing the roads. It was very hard physical work for a young girl. And I remember that my grandmother was very worried about my hands at the time, and made me some big mittens out of old towels and I wore them all the time, because [I thought] maybe one day I'll play piano again. All my girl friends were laughing. But it was true. I needed my hands back again years after. So I was able to preserve them in quite good condition.

Now, when we had a break during the work, I remember, we were sitting down to have a sandwich that we took with us, but we were always looking around if any of the Russian soldiers won't come out and scream at us. So it wasn't so peaceful afterwards. The...my father was not working in the woods. Physically he was unable to do so. We had some doctors coming in who were attending to some people and ah...telling them, "You have to go to work," or "You don't have to," or "You're not allowed to work," or whatever. He was not supposed to work physically because the doctors decided he couldn't, and so was his [dental] partner who was with us there. They were both relieved from physical work, but since [many] people were refusing to go and work physically, they wanted to make them, so they staged quite a 'performance'. They staged...

P: Who staged the 'performance'?

W: The Russians that were...

P: The [Soviet] authorities?

W: Yes, that were in charge of the whole camp. They staged a trial, and at this trial my father and his partner were both forced...both told that they have to work and if they don't work they will be imprisoned. And they were sent to a jail for three months, and it was done in order to frighten all the other people and make them go to work.

A: A 'Gulag', was it?

W: Yes, I think so. He was sent away, we were never told where he is gone, [n]or were we ever allowed to

communicate with him, so we had no idea how it was. But when he came back, after three months, he looked so terrible. I have the pictures. He had a long beard, he lost an amount of weight. I don't think he wanted to talk about it, how it was there, because he was reluctant to talk about it. It was very bad.

P: He was afraid, I guess...

W: Yes, I think so...

P: He was tortured maybe?

W: Oh yes, he must have been...

A: [By the] N.K.V.D.?

W: Yes, N.K.V.D.

P: And did he ever mention which prison he was at?

W: No, nothing.

P: No, nothing.

W: We have no idea.

P: I guess he learned his silence.

W: Yes, the less you talked the better. Ah...they [the N.K.V.D.] were harassing people anyways. Even before he was taken to the, to the jail, we were harassed. Every night, we never knew if, at night, somebody won't come and call him to the office to interrogate. So the people were harassed all the time. They were only very nice to my grandmother. I remember, every morning the N.K.V.D. man comes in, "Hello 'Babooshka', how are you?" in Russian. That much she understood. She was the only favorite. Otherwise...now, my mother was sick all the time. She was

spending most of the time in bed because there was something wrong with the legs and her circulation, so she couldn't work at all, and they [the N.K.V.D.] did not insist on that. They were after the men.

I forgot to mention why we were sent to the centre of Russia. We were considered to be 'political prisoners' because we all lived before [the outbreak of the war] on the other side [in Poland], which was occupied by Germans now, and they did not trust us. That's why we were sent as 'political prisoners'.

P: On the 'other side', you mean of Poland?

W: Of Poland, yes, of course.

P: Before it was divided.

W: Kraków being on the other side which was occupied by Germans.

P: Thank you.

W: Maybe it would be of interest, when I was working in the woods we had sandwiches with us, but for drinks we needed water, so we used to dig out a hole in the ground and drank the water, green water, with frogs or whatever was in it. But that was the water we had to drink. As far as the sandwich, the everyday bread was black. It was black in colour, and I remember when we later on brought some bread with us when we came back to Kraków people could not believe that you could eat anything like this.

P: What do you think was in it?

W: I don't know. It was brown bread but it was baked in such

a way that it was like a stone. It was bad, but...now, we had to buy our food. When we worked, whichever way we worked in there physically, we were paid some money and for this money we were able to buy in a local little store the most important things. Not much, and we didn't have much money to buy for.

P: The items that you bought, could you count it [them] on your fingers? I mean...

W: I would say; we only bought food, nothing else. There was nothing else and we were not allowed to leave the camp at all. We were supervised very strictly.

P: Um hmm. So this was...

W: And of course we were afraid.

P: This was a government store then?

W: Oh yes, a little store just for buying the bread and stuff like this, oh yes.

P: So you were...

W: We were treated as prisoners-of-war. We were there for about two years. In 1941, Germans invaded Russia...at the beginning of 1942 we were released from the [Soviet labour] camp, and we were allowed to move to some cities because that was restricted where. My father decided we better move to the nearest capital of this particular republic, the city of Yoshkar-Ola. Well, we call it a city, but the whole city had two brick buildings and the rest was wooden, small ones. One brick building was a library which was a beautiful building, and I was able to



work there later. My father was able to work in his profession. He had no equipment of his own but he got into partnership with one of the Soviet dentists and worked with him together. Later on he earned enough money to buy his own equipment.

I remember the severe winter in that particular area. Where he worked was about a distance of about half an hour from where we lived. We lived with some local people, having one room there, and sleeping on our mattress on the floor. I was...I remember I was carrying some food to my father in the middle of the day and I had to pass an empty area. It was very, very cold, I was completely wrapped up, even my face, and when I came in my eyelashes were completely white, it was so cold. So I have no idea in temperature how much, but it was severe cold. So, in this [time], of course, I wasn't working at all, only my father. I was rather at home doing some...

P: This was during the winter in '42-'43?

W: 1942.

P: Um hmm.

W: And the winter was severe, otherwise the climate was alright during summer.

P: The distance that you describe, half hour, was this by transportation, horses...?

W: There was no transportation.

P: So you walked?

W: Walking, walking distance. We had no transportation there.

We walked everywhere, but it wasn't such a big town, so it didn't matter much. Just the winter I still remember. I started working myself in the public library that I described before. It was April 1943 when I got the job as a librarian, without any training before. They trained me there. This was a very nice time indeed. I worked there till 1946. I was taken to work in a "Obrabotka" [Russian "processing"], that was a department where all new books were coming and we were cataloguing the books. You had to have a knowledge of some German, and some other language as well. So they used this, otherwise they trained me in that [profession of library science]. That wasn't that difficult, and I enjoyed working there. My immediate director of the department was an older professor, university professor from Odessa, who was exiled there. He was very nice, very nice, very cultured, and it was a real pleasure to work there. The director of the whole library was a 'Mari'. Now, this was in Mariyskaya Republic ["Mariyskaya A.S.S.R." within the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic, located in the upper Volga region between Kazan and Gorki], so they had local people, beside Russian people, they had local people, 'Maris'. They have their...beside, they all knew Russian, but they had their own language as well, 'Mari' language. No, this I never mastered.

A: Not Slavic.

W: Not Slavic at all. No, no. The director was a very nice

man and actually I got the job because of my father. He befriended my father and took me there. The name of the director was [Mr.] Vinogradov I remember. Maybe I should mention the way we lived there. As I said, we occupied one room in the small house of some Russian people. The owner of the house, she was a lady with her daughters, she was a teacher. The daughters were all educated. The oldest daughter was an engineer. She had a baby, but no husband that I know of. And the other two daughters were still studying in a high school. One interesting incident, the mother, who was a teacher, was against the Russian [Soviet] regime, in a way, and she was quite religious and prayed. The Russians were against religion...

A: Soviets.

W: Soviets were against religion and the oldest daughter denounced her mother [to the local authorities] that she was praying. This was typical of a family, Russian family at that time. So you were afraid of saying anything at all.

P: In front of your children.

W: In front of your children, that's the way it was. Now, coming back to...to maybe my father, I should mention that he not only worked privately as a dentist, but he was a dentist for a [Soviet] military factory evacuated from Leningrad [St. Petersburg], which was besieged by Nazis. The factory was evacuated to Yoshkar-Ola and they employed my father as their dentist, but of course he was very

friendly with the people that were coming to repair their teeth, but he was never told, and we never knew what they manufactured and what they were doing in that factory.

That was all secret, military secret.

In our town, Yoshkar-Ola, spells 'Y-O-S-H-K-A-R, dash, O-L-A', there were many Polish people, mainly Jewish, that came from the [labour] camps. So, they formed a 'Związek Polskich Patriotów' [Polish "Union of Polish Patriots"], a 'Soyooz' [Russian "union"] of Polish patriots. They opened a school for Polish children, a Polish school, and I was employed there as a singing teacher conducting a choir of children, that was an elementary school. That was going on for quite a while. There was one lady among the Polish Patriots who was a ballet teacher. She formed a ballet from older girls, about my age, and the ballet gave several performances in the local theatre. I was delegated to have a speech, so I had [to give] a speech in front of the curtain before the performance started explaining what was done, and how [it] was done, and all that. That was quite pleasant.

P: This was in Russian?

W: Oh, that was all in Yoshkar-Ola, oh my speech was in Russian, of course, but my Russian was very good all the time I must say. My father caught the language from reading the papers, and I helped a little because he never had any formal lessons, but his Russian was quite good. He caught a lot by ear I suppose, because he communicated

with all the people in Russian quite well.

Now, beside my job as a singing teacher, I was delegated by the 'Soyooz' [Union] of Polish Patriots to broadcast on the local radio station, once a week, news in Polish, so...this of course was not a paid job, it was voluntary work. I remember, the director of the Union of Polish Patriots was inżynier [Polish "engineer"] Frommer. Now, they were with us, him and his wife, at the same [labour] camp. I remember...I forgot to mention that when I was working physically in that camp, at the same time I was taking French and English lessons from Mrs. Frommer, so I was able to exercise my mind as well, and, of course, that knowledge of languages I could use later on.

Germany was defeated in May 1945, and I remember very well the day when the war was finished. The radio in our house was on all the time. It was right above my bed, and at six o'clock in the morning, I was awoken by the speaker on the radio that the war is over. Of course I was the one to wake up the whole house. "The war is over, it's all finished." Later on, somebody from the Polish Patriots knocked on the window to tell me that I have to be out and we are going to take part in the parade. There was a big parade of the people, all people from the city with flags. All my young friends were, we were holding little Polish flags, and all the Polish Patriots were together marching in that big parade, celebrating the end of the war.

P: This is wonderful. This is just...

W: That was quite significant.

P: Yeah.

W: We were very, very happy that the war was finished.

P: You must have been. Were you shouting, were you elated?

W: Oh, we were screaming. I remember, we were singing a Polish, some anthem when marching, and screaming and shouting. It was...everybody was jubilant. We hoped we would be allowed to finally return to our city [of Kraków] and to Poland.\* Well, that didn't take place until about March of 1946, when we were officially informed that we are allowed to travel back to Poland, in a very organized fashion.

One day there was a train ready for us at the train station, and at a given time we were to report all there with our belongings. My father at that moment had a broken leg in cast, I can't remember how it happened, but he was in a cast and he could not walk at all. So I only remember that we put him...it was March, deep winter. We put him on a slay and we pulled the slay over to the train station, not [by] ourselves. We were accompanied by a group of friends, Russian friends, who were seeing us off, and we were driven to the station, we were given the cars, again

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\*We heard that Kraków had survived. As the Red Army began its offensive, the fleeing Germans had decided to blow up the entire city with its historic buildings; the city was to share the fate of Warsaw. The Nazis did not succeed, however, because the Soviets took the city from the west, surprising the German troops who expected an attack from the east. The central switch controlling the mines was disconnected, thus saving Kraków from complete destruction. Only the bridges over the River Vistula had been destroyed by the Germans at this time.

the cattle cars, to travel back. It took us a month to travel back to Poland, travel back to Kraków. But it is quite another story how the travelling went on.

We were provided with some big shelves on which we could sleep. We were not allowed to leave the cars again. They were...[Soviet] military's taking charge of that. It was quite cold. We had a very little iron stove in the middle of the car, and somebody was on duty every night to take care of the...

P: Fire?

W: Of the fire so it was [kept] warm at the same time.

P: It was like a thermos or a flame?

W: No, no. That was a little stove, not for cooking, but...

P: No.

W: Just for keeping us warm, and the fire was burning there.

I remember one incident. We had a nun with us. She said she was a nun. She was not wearing any clothes of that kind but we knew. She was on duty that night with the fire, and by mistake, she put some gasoline [kerosene] in the stove and a fire broke out. We could have been finished. My father woke up and he jumped off his shelf with the cast and saved her and saved us, with blankets to [for] putting out the fire. But that was just one incident. Nothing happened to us, we quickly opened the door and we were saved.

[End of tape 1, side 2]

Interviewee: Elizabeth WOLAK (W)

Date of Recording: March 19, 1995

Ident. Number: 024-2

Track Number: T2-S1

Interviewer: Renia Perel (P), & Arthur Wolak (A)

P: Today is Sunday, March 19th, 1995. This is tape two, side one of Elizabeth Wolak's story of survival, before, during, and after the Holocaust. Present with Elizabeth are Renia Perel, myself, and Arthur Wolak, her younger son. Elizabeth, the last time you were telling us how you rejoiced when World War Two ended, and your journey home to Kraków, Poland. Now, would you please continue telling us about your arrival there, and what transpired since.

W: Well, you realize we're still in the train. The journey took us a month. In April 1946, we arrived at the Polish border and some Russian officers, Russian custom officers came in and we were thoroughly searched. They were always afraid that we [would] take some stuff, some things out of Russia.

The train was supposed to go through Kraków to the west [of Poland]. A couple of days before we reached Kraków we found out that the train will stop in Płaszów, which is one station before, but will not stop in Kraków because they [Soviet authorities] wanted to prevent people from getting out, but rather, take them to the west [western parts of Poland]. So, of course, we were very frantic,



very nervous [because] we *had* to stop [in Kraków].\* In our...in our carriage [train car] there was another family that wanted to stop in Kraków and get out, and in some other ones [train cars], there were a few other families [who also wanted to get off at Kraków]. Ah...they had to all get organized, they collected some money, went to the [train] engineer [and] bribed him to stop in Kraków for ten minutes, and let us get out quickly. Yes, he stopped for ten minutes, just ten minutes, so he avoided any trouble [for himself], and we were so organized that the people that stayed in the carriage [train car] were throwing our stuff out [through the side door], while we got out. It was quite frantic. But we were there [in Kraków].

In Kraków, through some of his friends, my father was able to find a large apartment on Krowoderska Street. Before he opened his private [dental] practice again, he was advised to change the [family] name. We changed our name officially [from Waldman] into Wiśniowski. Only later on I realized how significant it was with the terrible anti-Semitism left by Nazis. We found out that all the members of our families, on both sides, were killed [during the

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\*The postwar Polish government wished to re-populate the new provinces in western Poland, which formerly belonged to Germany. But since we were from Kraków, that was where we wished to return.

Holocaust], except my [first] cousin Marysza, and her mother Lidka. During the Nazi occupation, they were living on papers, in Lvov, under the name 'Rudzki'. My uncle, Marysza's father, my Uncle Ferdynand [Mund], was denounced by somebody [as a Jew], taken away, and killed. They [his wife and daughter] survived.

P: Excuse me, may I...would you like to spell 'Krowoderska' Street, and your last name that you changed to, 'Wiśniowski', and maybe Marysza's [assumed] last name?

W: Okay. 'Krowoderska' you spell, K-R-O-W-O-D-E-R-S-K-A. Now, the name we changed into was spelled, W-I-Ś-N-I-O-W-S-K-I. And the [wartime] name 'Rudzki' was, R-U-D-Z-K-I.

I visited my old high school [on Starowiślna Street]. The principal, Dr. Maria Dobrowolska, was very happy to see me alive, and she advised me how to go about completing my graduation certificate.

I entered the Jagiellonian University in September 1946. Encouraged by my English teacher in Russia, Mrs. Frommer, I decided to study English philology. My father's dream used to be for me to become a dentist [like him], but that was not what I wanted. At this particular time I was allowed to do the way I felt. So, I entered the university and at the same time, I entered the [Kraków] Conservatory of Music to continue my piano, singing, and pursue my conducting. I wanted to make up for all the time I lost. I don't remember if I mentioned that since the Frommers [had] settled in Yoshkar-Ola [in Russia], I was able to

continue my English and French lessons there. So, I was ready to enter the university.

I was very busy with my double studies, spending half a day at the conservatory, and the other half at the university, and of course studying at night. One of my professors at the university was Jan Stanisławski, famous for his Polish-English Dictionary. During my last year there, he recommended me as an English teacher to the wife of the Russian Consul in Kraków. She was studying English by correspondence through the Moscow University and she needed assistance. Of course, she did not know any Polish. So with my Russian and English I was able to help her. I found it quite interesting, except I had to go for the lessons to the [Soviet] consulate and I knew that all the walls had 'ears'.

Through Professor Stanisławski's recommendation again, I got another job as a translator in "Redakcja Głos Anglii," that's the "Voice of England," that was the editor's office of the paper, weekly newspaper, published in Polish language in Kraków for the whole country. I worked there until the paper ceased its publication.

I graduated from the conservatory in 1951. There were fourteen of us, the first postwar graduates. I was the only one graduating with honours. Six months later I submitted my master's thesis at the university, finishing as "Magister Filologii Angielskiej," that's Master of Arts in English.

By the way, I should probably mention that my conservatory had some famous people there. The famous pianist, [1949] winner of the Chopin International [Piano] Competition, Halina Czerny-Stefańska, played for us on a daily basis. Then a renowned composer, Krzysztof Penderecki, graduated [from] there two years later than I did. After I finished I was still taking piano master classes with Professor Jan Hoffman, a juror of Chopin International Competition. My grandmother, Anna Mund, who survived with us throughout the whole Russian ordeal, lived with us upon our return to Poland. She had two brothers. One, Siegfried Kaufer and his wife lived in Vienna, and were killed during the [Second World] War. The other one, Heinrich, or Henry [Kaufer], was able to emigrate from Vienna to New York before the war, settling in Brooklyn with [his wife Amalia], his two daughters, and one son. After our return to Poland, they were sending us parcels with clothing and some so-called luxurious 'delicacies' like coffee, tea, chocolate and so on, that were not available in postwar Poland.

I was very close always to my grandmother. Before the war she was taking me to different spas during the vacation. I remember Truskawiec, which is now Ukraine. She passed away in 1952, at the age of eighty, and a year later, my father died suddenly of [a] heart attack, at the age of fifty-six [almost fifty-seven].

Shortly after my graduation in 1951, I was offered a job

at the Kraków Philharmonic, called [in Polish] "Państwowa Filharmonia Krakowska," as an assistant conductor of the Boys' Choir. I worked there with Professor Suwara, with a big choir of 120 boys, for many years.

With that choir we won the national competition three times, travelling to Warsaw and Poznań. At the same time, we both, with Professor Suwara, organized a large girls' choir of over [one] hundred girls, in the Youth Culture House. So we were able to combine them for special events. The most prestigious one, where we were specially invited, was the opening of the "Palace of Culture and Science," [in Polish] "Pałac Kultury," in Warsaw. [Then] the largest, and the ugliest building in Poland. It was built by Russia...it was Stalin's 'present' to Poland. Our 250-voice choir of youngsters opened the ceremony. All dignitaries were in attendance, including the president. Besides that [work at the Philharmony], in 1957, I started in the evening teaching English at Kraków Polytechnic ["Politechnika Krakowska," Kraków Technical University], and I had special courses for the professors during the day. In 1958, I was made the head of the Artistic Department of the Youth Culture House, in Polish, "Dom Kultury" [on Krowoderska Street, in Kraków].

My future husband, Dr. Edward Wolak, called 'Fred', I met in summer 1949, by coincidence. My father was staying for a few days in Krynica, a famous Polish spa, and asked me to join him for three days when I was off work. I went by

train where I met Fred's brother. When we arrived in Krynica he was met by Fred at the [train] station, and we got introduced. On the following day I met their parents as well.

Fred lived in Szczecin where he was the Director of Anti-Epidemic Services for the northwestern Polish province of Szczecin, being in charge of public health there. His parents and brother had a business there. They were able to emigrate in 1949. Fred was not allowed to leave because of his position. He would come to Kraków on business quite often and he became a frequent visitor in our place. My parents liked him very much. He finally was granted permission to emigrate in 1950. He suggested then that we get married and leave together, but I said, "No," [because] at that time I was in the middle of my double studies and I was very determined to finish. But he had to leave when he had the chance. He joined his parents in Vienna. They went to Canada at the end of 1950. He went to Israel for some time, then back to Europe.

He came to Canada at the end of 1951. In 1952 he married a nurse whom he knew in Poland. After they got married in Vancouver, he opened an antique store because he could not practice medicine right away. Later on, he worked in St. Lawrence Sanatorium in Cornwall, Ontario, for some time, but as he got divorced in a few years, he went back to Europe where he studied at London's Royal Institute of Public Health, and worked as a Clinical Assistant at the

[London] Institute of Psychiatry. Our correspondence resumed.

P: And that means you were still in Poland?

W: Oh, I was still stuck there. Yes, I was still in Poland, of course. Fred wanted me to come for a visit to London, so we could meet again. It was very hard to get a visitor's visa from Poland, so he convinced his friend, an older English lady, to send me an invitation to visit "my aunt," that means her. I got permission to go for a visit, and in December 1959 I travelled to London.

I lived in an apartment that she was renting, "my aunt." Fred and I visited all the attractions of London together. We were attending regularly Friday night services in a Temple, a Jewish Reform synagogue, with an organ [which] I liked very much. I spent five weeks there, walking all over the place for miles. We decided then that I will try to get out of Poland, together with my mother, to Australia where we could get sponsored, and then Fred will join me [there] and we will get married. Fred saw me off at the train station in London to return to Poland. I felt like going back to prison. If not my mother, who stayed in Kraków, I would have never gone back [to Poland] again.

P: Can I interject here? That means that you were in love?

W: Yes, I was, of course. The best proof is...

P: I didn't hear you say it.

W: Well, I don't speak about things like this, but ah...I

would never even consider [marrying] anybody else.

I was put on the train, I had a sleeping compartment on the train, and the train was crossing the English Channel on the ferry. In the middle of the night I was awakened by the French officers, who took me off the train and told me I was not allowed to enter France that way. It turned out this was Calais, and my ticket was through Dunkirk. But I was in a sleeping compartment, what difference did it make? It did for them. I was with a Polish passport and that's how I was treated. They put me on the English boat to go back to England and change for the right train, crossing the Channel once again. The English authorities were much nicer to me.

After returning to Poland I was followed around for several weeks by [the Polish] secret police, like [the Russian] K.G.B., as I was in the West.

P: But that wasn't really the K.G.B. itself. Was this the Polish police?

W: It's hard to say who followed because I never saw them, I felt them.\*

P: I see.

W: But it continued. I was also forced to resign from my position as Director of the Artistic Department of the

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\*I learned that while I was away in England there had been official enquiries to my superiors as to my whereabouts. The Polish security service, "Urząd Bezpieczeństwa," known to every Pole as the U.B. or Bezpieka, was everywhere, and was very powerful.



Youth Culture House. I didn't mind because we [my mother and I] were preparing to leave for Australia. But it was not so simple. They [the Polish authorities] did not want me to leave. I was a professional, educated by them, and they didn't like educated people to leave the country.\* Finally I got permission to leave when I stated I was joining my fiance to get married. But then the next obstacle began: my piano!

After I graduated in 1951, my father had asked me what I would like as a present, a diamond ring or a grand piano. I answered, "A piano." So he presented me with a Blüthner concert grand and since that time I had two pianos, so I had to sell my upright piano and I applied for the permission to the Ministry of Culture, for permission to take my grand piano with me. Until the very last minute they were holding me from leaving. They did not want to let an instrument like this out of the country. Finally I was granted permission [to take my piano with me] but I had to pay a very high tax for the privilege.

P: [pause] Excuse me, is this the piano I am looking at?

W: Yes, this is the piano that travelled around the world and if I wouldn't have this I wouldn't be able to work at all. So I was very fortunate in being able to take it with me. Leaving Poland with my mother, we were assisted by [the] American Jewish organization, HIAS ["Hebrew Sheltering and

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\*Post-secondary education was free in Poland.

Immigrant Aid Society," a Jewish immigrant and refugee service]. We travelled to Rome where we had to wait a few days for the boat. And then we took a big boat, "Oriana," from Naples to [Sydney] Australia.

A: And this was in 1961?

W: 1961, that's correct. When we entered the boat, a letter from Fred was there, wishing us a happy journey. It felt very good. I was going into a totally strange and unknown destination.

The boat went through the Mediterranean Sea, through the Red Sea, stopping in the port of Aden [Yemen], and through the Indian Ocean, we stopped at Ceylon, Sri Lanka today, south of India. It took us four weeks, but the trip was very pleasant. Well, I didn't have to think about what's awaiting me there, I just took every day as it went [came]. On the boat I met a retired Australian teacher, a lady, who told me what to do in Sydney and how to apply for a job upon arrival.

We arrived in Sydney and I followed the advice of that lady, and a few weeks later I was employed by the Education Department of the State of New South Wales as a Special Music Teacher for a junior girls' high school. Of course, my English was the advantage. It was very hard work. It took me about an hour to get to school by bus and train. The school was situated in the slum area, so the element to deal with was very difficult. Nonetheless, I was able to get good results, running three choirs and

developing their appreciation in [for] classical music. Beside that, a few months later I was offered a job as a choir director in the Reform synagogue, Temple Emanuel, North Shore.

During all this time, Fred had gone to [West] Germany, seeking compensation for his wartime sufferings under the Nazis. While there, in Germany, in summer 1960, he worked in a psychiatric hospital in Hamburg, and later, as a bacteriologist in a laboratory [also in Hamburg]. His [restitution] court case in Germany was successful, and he was granted a monthly pension on account of his health. In 1962, he went back to Canada, and in January 1963, he arrived in Sydney, Australia. We were married on the 21st of February 1963, in Temple Emanuel, officiated by Rabbi Brasch, originally from Germany. My choir and my soloist sang at my wedding. Our honeymoon was a short trip to Canberra, the capital of Australia. Fred found the climate in Australia very hard to take, and we decided to move to Canada.\*

While going through medical examinations and x-rays necessary to obtain a Canadian visa, it turned out that my enlarged thyroid gland was endangering my health and had to be removed. We decided to do the necessary operation right there in Australia, and it was successful. A few months later I suffered a miscarriage. We came to

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\*My husband had received his Canadian citizenship in 1957.

Vancouver in September 1963. My mother decided to stay in Sydney. There she had many Polish-speaking friends, and her knowledge of English was very limited.

[End of tape 2, side 1]

Interviewee: Elizabeth WOLAK (W)

Date of Recording: March 19, 1995

Ident. Number: 024-2

Track Number: T2-S2

Interviewer: Renia Perel (P), & Arthur Wolak (A)

P: Interviewing Elizabeth Wolak, tape two, side two.

Continue.

W: In Vancouver we were staying with my in-laws for a couple of months and looking for a house at the same time, with a big enough living room to hold my grand piano that was on the way. It travelled with me to Australia, and now it was supposed to come to Vancouver. I was advised to open a studio and teach privately. Since I found out I was pregnant it seemed to be quite a good idea.

My son Richard was born by caesarean, in June [3,] 1964, and four years later, my second son, Arthur. I was 44½ at the time.

In October 1964, I was approached by the Director of [the] J.C.C., Jewish Community Centre, to organize the first Jewish adult choir. The group had thirty-five members, and we sang in Hebrew, Yiddish and English, taking part in different celebrations of the Jewish community. We took part in Kiwanis Music Festival competitions, placing first in our category twice in a row, 1965 and '66.\*

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\*In his book, *Pioneers, Pedlars, and Prayer Shawls: The Jewish Communities in B.C. and the Yukon (1978)*, author Cyril E. Leonoff wrote about the Jewish Community Centre choir's achievements (p. 212).

In 1972 we made an album, "Beloved Songs of [the] Jewish People." A year later I was approached by Temple Sholom to organize a choir there, and in 1975, by Schara Tzedek Congregation.\* So that for a while I was running three choirs at the same time. In 1974, I took a few education courses at U.B.C., receiving a teaching certificate giving me rights in teaching in [the] B.C. school system, but I never did. After the certification I taught English [as a Second Language] at two courses for new Canadians.

P: And where did you teach?

W: The courses were under the auspices of the [Vancouver] Community College, in Vancouver. Because of my growing private music class I had to stop [teaching English]. I worked with the large Jewish Community [Centre] Choir for ten years. The Temple [Sholom] Choir for nine years. At the end of 1981, I organized my own smaller choir named, "[The] Shiron Singers," and it's still in existence. In 1986 we performed, with "Shiron Singers," at the Expo ['86] and in 1987 we produced a [cassette] tape ["The Shiron Singers: A Jewish Choral Group"]. At the moment we are still in operation performing regularly in Louis Brier Home, that's the hospital [and retirement home] for Jewish people, and the Institute for the Blind [CNIB] as well as at the different other community events.

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\*As Schara Tzedek is an Orthodox shul, I could not direct this all-boys' choir in the sanctuary on the bimah, but rather trained them in another room in the synagogue. They then performed without direction.

In March 1992 I was honoured with a few other women survivors for my years of service to the Jewish community and the community at large, by the Lubavitch women's organization, "N'Shei Chabad."

A: And what was the occasion?

W: They were celebrating the "Week of the Jewish Woman."

I have to go back now. My husband had to have regular yearly x-rays because of his war-time tuberculosis. In 1966 the x-rays showed some dark objects. He [Fred] was advised to operate by his doctor, there was suspicion of cancer. It was a very difficult decision, our son was only two years old, but the decision was made and he had an operation removing three-quarters of his lungs.\*

A: One lung.

W: One lung, yes. He was very lucky because it was malignant. My second son Arthur, was born on May 31, 1968. Ten years later, in 1978, my husband became very ill, was hospitalized, and passed away in December, on December 14, 1979, on the eve of Khanukkah. I was left alone with my two sons, they were 15½ and 11½ years of age then.

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\*During the war Fred had worked as an epidemiologist in the Lvov Ghetto where he himself contracted tuberculosis, among other diseases, while treating those afflicted. A non-smoker, he developed lung cancer at the site of the old tuberculosis scar on the upper lobe of his right lung.

In 1983 we were all able to visit Israel, and they met some members of my husband's family and my second-cousins. Unfortunately I developed a slipped disk [in my back] on the way, so I was unable to see the country at all. All my relatives were visiting me there while I was in bed.

A: These were two second-cousins.

W: Two second-cousins, and since that time they both passed away.

In 1988 we made a trip back to Poland. The boys wanted to see the place I was born [Kraków] and the university my husband [attended], and I attended years later. At that time Poland was still under the Communist regime, but they were able to meet my cousin Marysza and her young family in Warsaw.

While visiting Kraków we all witnessed a very unpleasant [anti-Semitic] incident. We were standing at a taxi stop in Kraków waiting for a taxi when a large chartered bus arrived full of Khasidic Jews, American Jews. The bus stopped and some people got out. At the same time several Polish people came out of a nearby restaurant, some intoxicated and started abusing the Jews, making rude anti-Semitic remarks. You can imagine how we felt with my cousin. We understood it all, and I was glad that my sons did not understand Polish at the time.

A: These were expressions [that] you hadn't heard since before the war.

W: Oh, this was something I was not used to [hearing]



anymore, so it was a very unpleasant situation.

P: Was it just that you felt glad that your sons didn't understand Polish, or was it...?

W: I was very happy they did not understand anything, later we explained to them what was said.\*

P: Well, I wanted to know whether you were glad that they were not living there, and living in Canada.

W: Oh, I was very happy, of course. And I was very happy I wasn't living there anymore. When I explained to my sons later on, and they found out [exactly] what was said, how it was, all they wanted to do is leave [Poland] and go home. We shortened our stay in Poland by a few days because we couldn't stand it anymore.

A: Also there was no food to eat at that time.

W: There was nothing to eat. What they were...

P: Did you feel hurt?

W: Very hurt, and so was my cousin. Oh, we just could not stand [it] after what happened there, we just couldn't stand it.

P: Can you imagine...

W: But she was living in Poland, she had to face it all the time. I didn't I was [living] here, free. She wasn't.

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\*However, even though they didn't completely understand what was being said, my sons did understand what was going on because of the wild and angry gestures and high-pitched voices.

P: 'Here' meaning 'in Canada'.

W: In Canada, yes. Now, my sons still live with me in our house. The older [one], Richard, has his own wholesale clothing company, and the younger one, Arthur, graduated from the University [of British Columbia] and is going to start an M.B.A. program, in a month. I still teach privately piano, singing and history of music, conducting "The Shiron Singers" Jewish choir as well.

P: Thank you, Elizabeth, for your both painful and joyful story of survival, and you brought us up-to-date. I was very moved by what you said, and I want to ask you now a question...I'm sure Arthur joins me in thanking you, but in looking back at your life what do you have to say to the future generations about the Holocaust and all of the things that happened to the Jewish people?

W: What stands out in my mind would be that I was able to survive, not being under Nazis, being in Russia. But when I came back [to Poland], I realized that the anti-Semitism that stayed in Poland was even greater because of [the] Nazis, and it's still there. If we wouldn't change our name after coming back, my name, as it was before, would not be able to appear on any posters. I was working in [the Kraków] Philharmony [and] many posters were [put up around Kraków] in connection with concerts. The name Wiśniowska was perfectly Polish. Besides that, the people in [the Kraków] Philharmony did not know I was Jewish. I never said anything, I don't think I would be able to have

the post I had. So, when I wanted to go out of Poland, to Australia at that time, I could not stand it anymore, being under false pretenses, and it was bothering me. I wanted to be free of it. I wanted to be openly Jewish. And that was what I...these were my feelings at that time.

P: So you felt the persecution really drove you out...

W: Oh, definitely.

P: Of Poland.

W: Definitely, I could not stand it. The people didn't know I was Jewish so everything was fine, but it was camouflaged, it was not real.

P: Thank you, Elizabeth, for your encouraging words, and for the knowledge that you provide for the future generations. Thank you very much.

[End of interview]