HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

SONJA SAMSON

Transcript of Audiotaped Interview

Interviewer: Nora Levin
Date: June 3, 1985

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SS - Sonja Samson[1] [interviewee]
NL - Nora Levin [interviewer]
BL - Barbara Lerner [third person]
Date: June 3, 1985

Tape one, side one:

NL: Dr. Samson, I want to again thank you very much for coming this long distance from Princeton in order to make your story part of our Oral History Archive. Let's start, if we may, by asking if you could tell us a little about your beginnings, your background, place of birth, something about your family, where you were born.

SS: Okay. Let's begin with my name. I am named Sonja. I am named after my maternal grandmother, who died before I was born, and in the Jewish tradition, a child should be named after the deceased closest kin. Her name was Susanna, and my mother did not like that name at all. Now, how do we get to the name Sonja? My grandparents, on both sides, Samson, and my mother's maiden name, Hoffman, all were born and raised in a town in the northeastern part of Germany close to the ocean and adjacent to the Dutch border. The name of the town is Aurich, A-U-R-I-C-H. I met a cousin in the early 50's, the only time I went to Israel, whose name was, like my father's, Joseph Samson, and he said he had traced the family genealogy to the Samsons having originated in Italy, and moved northward in the 16th Century. And part of the family ended up in Holland, part of the family in Germany. This cousin, Joseph Samson, who would be a man my father's age, they were first cousins, his branch of the family ended up in Holland, and my family in Germany. My maternal grandfather, Aaron Hoffman, was also called Adolf Hoffman, went into an apprenticeship, as was common in those days, to learn to be a salesman. You know that they apprenticed for years. So, during the course of his apprenticeship, he met his wife, my grandmother, maternal. Her name was Hilda Loew, L-O-E-W. She came from a southern part of Germany. They married and they established themselves in the Saar, which is adjacent to France, the French border. They were very successful, both of them starting from zero, and took advantage, I guess, of the fact that this was coal mines, that's what the Saar was about, and ended up with a substantial department store, probably one of the largest in the region, in a town named Dillingen, the capital of Saar is Saarbrücken, and Dillingen is not far from there. They did so well that by American dollars, by American standards--and I can go back into documenting how I know this to be a fact--but apparently they were millionaires.

NL: First generation...

SS: First generation. Right. Accordingly, my mother, Carla Hoffman, was born in Dillingen, and so was her brother, who was three years older than her. His name was Ludwig, or Louis. Now, since the rest of the family, that is my maternal grandfather, Aaron

[1]née Samson.

Hoffman, came from Aurich, he had some five or six siblings who were all in Aurich. Thus, there was a lot of traveling up and back between Aurich and Dillingen. Thus, I assume that my mother knew my father from childhood on. My father's family, the Samsons, were quite wealthy, quite well-to-do in a profession that is not thought of commonly as being a Jewish profession, but they were cattle-raisers. They raised cattle and sold cattle--*Viehhändler*. Do you speak German?

NL: I read it. I read it. I understand some of it.

SS: So the Samsons, also, I think they are my paternal grandfather, Rubin Samson, has something like five brothers, all raised in Aurich. When my mother married my father in 1929, I think--I was born in 1931, they settled in Aurich.

NL: And you were born there?

SS: And I was born in Aurich. Now back to the name--I lost it! So, I was to be named Susanna after my father's mother who had died. My mother did not like the name. 1931, the 30's, was the height of the flourishing of Communism, especially in the Saar, among miners...

NL: Interesting.

SS: ...and my mother, being a rebellious lady, chose the name Sonja, which was a popular...

NL: But despite her upper middle class...

SS: Right! Right!

NL: ...rank, she had sympathy for the workers, the proletariat...?

SS: Right, right. And neither parents, my father nor my mother, ever called me Sonja, except when somebody was angry, then it was "Zonyal".

NL: What did they call you?

SS: Sonie. Sonie.

NL: Sonie. Ah, that's nice.

SS: So that was the only name that I really responded to. Sonja was always...

NL: When you were being scolded?

SS: Right, right.

NL: And what was their life like in the 30's? Was there a lot of labor discontent?

SS: Well, I wouldn't know. My, uh

NL: From what you heard?

SS: Let's go back to Dillingen then. My mother and her brother were said to be raised as spoiled brats. He was said to have been a playboy, and the reason that that has been for me personally, problematic, is that, on the one hand, no one close in family survived. I'm really the only survivor, with the exception of one cousin, first cousin, Samson, and his sister, who have followed the pattern. And that is, the pattern has been, any time I ever wanted to talk to any distant relative in the United States, or this first cousin, whatever they have to say is totally colored by still ongoing envy, resentment and jealousy. It's unbelievable, it's unbelievable. So that it's always been relatives of my parents'

generation, that is, their first cousins, you know, the other side, and whatever, and there's still, "Oh, we remember Aurich and the parties" and all that. But in fact, I promptly gave up asking them anything because, well, at the time, it was disturbing. As I look upon it now, I'm keenly aware of the fact that their profound jealousy, resentment, in spite of the fact that these people, my parents, they were in camps, they were slaughtered in Aurich, I mean in Auschwitz, and all the rest. None of that seems to have erased the intensity of their envy.

NL: Incredible.

SS: Yeah! This includes, by the way, my cousin Henry Samson, who is my first cousin, as I said. He survived in Belgium, with his sister. When I first moved to New Jersey, I contacted him, and all I got was in fact, in these photo albums there are photos of his sister, him and I as children, and the amazing thing about the photos--I look happy in the pictures, but they look surly. And he starts out with, "Oh, I remember when we went to visit you at your house in Aurich, how it was a big deal for all of us, you know, going to see Sonja and her family, and it was so wealthy, so opulent." And they just--in fact, they themselves, were quite well off.

NL: But you were a notch higher?

SS: I'm sorry?

NL: You were a notch higher?

SS: Oh, G-d knows, I was an only child and all that.

NL: But, I mean, the image of this wealth...

SS: Yes, yes. So, I decided, the hell with all these people. At some level, there had been some fantasy on my part about this cousin who lived in Edison, New Jersey, that it would be nice...

NL: Of course.

SS: But I'm not willing go put up with that kind of...

NL: Break down all of those old...

SS: Yeah, and to hell with it, to hell with it.

NL: Do you have any memories of your life in Aurich as a child, so up to six...

SS: Yeah, I do. I do. More than that, I think for a terribly long time, I had an incredibly reliable, clear, uncluttered memory for events, which I've lost. And part of the reason, I think, was that I had made a very deliberate and conscious attempt to remember dates, places and so on, because until 1946 or '47, I always thought I would see my parents again, and it was important for me to fill in for them everything that had happened to me, where I had been, and what I had done. So my memory is sketchy, but, nonetheless, I think at some level, it's relatively sharp. About my mother, I remember vividly her stories of World War I. I don't know if you want to go into that.

NL: Yes. If you don't mind.

SS: Not at all.

NL: She told these to you when you were a young child?

SS: Yes, yes.

NL: She suffered much?

SS: No. My mother, I think, in part, one of the reasons for the family's intense dislike of her, I mean, that they couldn't overcome it, aside from the kind of, you know, sociological perspective, one notch higher. I think, in fact, she was a very interesting lady. She was an exceptional woman in the sense that, well, she went to school in Lausanne, so she spoke French fluently. It's been put down as having been a finishing school, but you know, a school by any other name was a school. She once broke her arm during World War I, she remembers that--remembered that--and was in a rehabilitation center in which they, because the arm was stiff, they put it in some kind of machinery, you know, that bent the arm backwards and forwards. And there were all these miners with their injuries, and she said that she cut the fan belt that activated the machine, and the whole thing stopped, and everybody was delighted. Now, whether that in fact was true or not--how the hell do I know? But, it says something about what kind of person she was, or pictured herself. She told stories about how they used to play war, how buildings would come tumbling down. She remembered, she said, being gassed, you know, gas was being used, and said in case that ever happens, just urinate in your underwear and hold it in front of your nose--and breathe through it!

NL: Did it work?

SS: Apparently, apparently! But I've never forgotten that, you know?

NL: Quite a trick! Amazing. Probably an old wives' tale that worked.

SS: Possibly. There seems to be some notion that maybe it does. Anyway, she fought, as I do, the perennial battle of the bulge, that is gaining excessive amounts of weight, and dieting, and that is also quite apparent in the photos. You know, expansion and contraction. And I seem to have the identical problem. My father was an exceedingly handsome man. Again, the photos show that. A very bright man, a very brave man, and a man of character, and his motto was, "*Un homme sa parole*", which means, A man, his word. And, that's how he died.

NL: You heard that? You heard that phrase?

SS: Yes, yes. And he lived that, and he died that.

NL: You had a happy childhood, I take it.

SS: Extremely.

NL: Although you were alone, you had playmates, of course.

SS: No, but you know, that's an American *meshugas*, when you need playmates.

NL: Oh, sorry.

SS: Or when you need toys, or anything like that.

NL: How did you amuse yourself?

SS: You want to go back to Aurich...

NL: Just a bit.

SS: And I, sometimes, you know, the stories that one recalls best about oneself, have a way, just like my mother's story, of saying something about the person, and I think at some level, I haven't changed, or there's a part of me that's still that. In Aurich, where we had a house--it was a big house--because I did go there after the war. It was then occupied, by, I don't know, five or six families lived in that house.

NL: Huge.

SS: Yeah. And, you know, we had maids, and in Dillingen, I remember the chauffeur and his children, and the neighbors, and so on. But anyway, we lived--the house in Aurich was *am Hafen*, which means, I can't think of the word. It was on the riverbank.

NL: *Am Hafen*...

SS: *Am*--by *Hafen* means port, or bank, riverbank. And I remember one of my earliest memories was when I was about four years old. We left Aurich, I think, in 1936 or '37. I left in '36, so I was five years old, and joined my grandparents when I moved to Luxembourg. I lived with them for one year. My parents moved to northern France. But anyway, so whatever recall I have of Aurich has to be before the age of five.

NL: Yes.

SS: One story: This river which was in front of the house--well, there was the house, a road and the river, and that river always had logs transported, whatever, and that was forbidden. You couldn't go down, step down onto the river on the logs. Well, I did.

NL: You did.

SS: With the neighbor boys, and I fell in and I got soaking wet and I went home, and when I got home, I was first greeted by the maid, who asked me what had I done, and it was clear. She spanked me and put me to bed. My mother came home and asked, "Where's Sonie?" and the maid told her. My mother came upstairs, spanked me, and said, "Don't do that again." And when my father came home, late in the evening, he did the same story. So that was the only time I could remember three spankings.

NL: Three spankings How did you amuse yourself? Do you remember if you looked at picture books?

SS: I re--well, in part, there are lots of photos, you know, sometimes it happens that when you look at photos, they cloud one's memory, and it becomes fixed to a photo in part.

NL: I see what you mean.

SS: So there is the, you know, a sandbox, and stuff like that. I remember my mother, I think, loved to travel. She was a rather cosmopolitan lady and Aurich was kind of a dull dump and a hole, and so I recall frequently being on trains with her, visiting up and back. In fact, at times when I had the urge, or thought I should write a kind of autobiography, I was going to call it "Trains." There's so much good and bad, horrible and soothing in my life...

NL: In Germany, mostly? Or across the borders?

SS: Both. The across-the-border story with my mother was--and that I have a pictorial recall. We were crossing the border, my mother had smuggled something.

NL: This was already by '36, '37?

SS: No, no, this was also still before, after...

NL: You getting tired? You want to stop?

SS: No, no, no, no. Whatever she smuggled, I don't remember--whether it was French liqueur or French--God knows what, but at the appropriate time when the inspector came, I recall lying on the bank, on a, you know, the thing you lie down on in the train. It's interesting when I think back, German, French and English sort of--English is not the language that...

NL: That you remember.

SS: That I remember it in.

NL: You don't remember it in--you think of it in French or German.

SS: Well, as a friend once pointed out to me, in German I tell the truth, in French...

NL: You elaborate?

SS: No. In French, I lie, and in English, I intellectualize.

NL: Oh my, that' a quite profound statement.

SS: It is, because when I try--there are times that I sort of get external and out of touch, and if I want to get a sense of what am I really feeling, I try to think in German.

NL: Still that powerful pulse of the language?

SS: Right. But it's like layers, you know, like an onion. So anyway, on that train, I remember being awakened by the customs inspectors, as is--was customary--whenever you crossed the border, and just as he was looking through the luggage, I just vomited all over the place, and he ran off. This was one of my mother's favorite stories about me!

NL: Oh, my, that's marvelous.

SS: The other early story was in Dillingen, in my grandparents' department store--no, it wasn't in the store. I don't know, we were someplace, somewhere, in some town, some city. We were in a fancy restaurant, and the story that my mother told, and that a cousin who currently lives in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, confirmed, was that as I came back to the dinner table, I yelled with my most exuberant self, "*Mutti, Mutti, ich habe einen grossen Haufen geschissen*." Which means, "Mother, Mother, I shit a pile!" [laughter]

NL: That's a marvelous story!

SS: So you want to know about playmates and stuff like that...

NL: Well, that's the American bias. I guess...

SS: Well, it is an obnoxious kind of a bias, because we instilled in the kids that happiness is other kids to play with. And, you know, I didn't and...

NL: You were happy...

SS: ...and that wasn't part of my world, and when I was with kids, mostly it involved being in mischief, mostly for the reason of not being visible as a Jew. If there was something nasty to be done, which--it was a good cover up, and I was very deliberate and very conscious about doing that.

NL: Then...

SS: I can tell a lot of stories about that.

NL: Was there, then, a sense that you were not wanted there as Jews?

SS: No. I'm referring mostly later.

NL: Oh, later. But how about during this period up to the time that you moved away to Luxembourg? Were your parents involved in the so-called Jewish community at all? Did they go to *shul*?

SS: Well, you know, all the stuff that's been written about German Jews being so assimilated and all that, my family on both sides were very interesting. On the one hand, they were utterly assimilated. My father was a very successful businessman, got along extremely well with his customers, the peasants. They trusted him, both in Germany and in France, where he really worked for a very short period of time. They trusted him. He was sort of like his own veterinarian. He never needed the recourse of a veterinarian, and at the same time, they were Orthodox Jews.

NL: Is that so?

SS: Oh, yes.

NL: How many Jews do you suppose were in Aurich? A handful? Several hundred?

SS: It was a substantial Jewish community. It had a substantial *shul*, and just about in Milwaukee, in Chicago, in various places, there are a lot of Aurich Jews, and they flock together.

NL: Is that so?

SS: In fact, both in Chicago and in Milwaukee, two cousins who were brothers, Hoffmans, established their own synagogue to recreate...

NL: The German.

SS: The German...

NL: ...model.

SS: Right. So, I'm terrible about estimating numbers, but I would say a number of sufficient to found their own synagogue.

NL: And did you go to *shul* with your parents? Do you remember going?

SS: Oh, yeah. In Aurich, no so much. Well, yeah, I remember in Dillingen, where my grandparents were. I remember in Luxembourg. Again, about my mother--my father was Orthodox, didn't wear a beard, he didn't wear *peyes* [side curls], but he laid the *tefillin* [phylacteries].

NL: Did he? That's interesting. Totally assimilated man...

SS: And totally kosher.

NL: German.

SS: I mean, I remember a story onetime when he came home because he traveled during the day and came home late at night, so I knew him relatively less well than I know my mother. I remember him coming home and being really sick to his stomach, and what had happened is he had eaten at some peasants. And I don't know how it happened, because he was very cautious. He thought he had eaten pork, and he just spent the rest of the day vomiting.

NL: So you were raised very much in a Jewish religious tradition?

SS: Well, a crazy one, because of my mother. This crazy lady had five sets of dishes--*milchig*, *fleischig*, *milchig* and *fleischig* for *Pesach*, and *trayf* [dairy, meat, not kosher]. And whenever my father was away, she would ceremoniously pull out the *trayf* dishes. And we'd have *trayf*.

NL: Wonderful.

SS: But, she never contaminated the dishes. We always had two kitchen tables, two sinks, two everything.

NL: Two kitchen tables--that I've never heard of.

SS: Two sets of towels?

NL: Two sets of--two tables? Extraordinary.

SS: Yes.

NL: Do you remember any Eastern European Jews in the town?

SS: No, no.

NL: This is probably a little too far west for them, I would think they might...

SS: Right, right.

NL: Poland or Russia?

SS: No. And you know, as I mentioned, in Milwaukee and in Chicago, there is this whole colony of people from Aurich that I would have nothing to do with. I really don't like these people at all.

NL: Sometimes this syndrome is associated with a certain smugness, but obviously this wasn't true of your family.

SS: Ah, petty, greedy...

NL: ...provincial...

SS: The reason that my accent is as bastardly as it is, when I came to the United States in 1947, I was 16 years old. I came by myself to join these relatives, and, I had forgotten German, because it was important during the War in France that I do, but at home these people only spoke German, and when I spoke English, they corrected me with their German accent. So I came to Milwaukee to learn English!

NL: You were under many different contradictory influences.

SS: Yes. I came to Milwaukee to learn English, but instead, I had to learn German.

NL: Your English is fine.

SS: Thank you.

NL: Did you go to school in Aurich?

SS: No. I was under five. But, an interesting thing when I lived with my grandparents okay. In 1935 or 1936--I think, it was '35, there was the plebiscite, the Saar plebiscite, was it, do you know if...?

NL: '35.

SS: '35. Since my grandparents were from the Saar and yesterday when I looked through some of these documents for you, there was mention of that, too--apparently, my parents, during those years and even though they lived in Aurich, assumed or operated under a Saar citizenship. And since they opted--so during the plebiscite, as you well know--it meant that the Saar population could vote with it to become French or German, and, for all I know, the results were rigged in favor of Germany.

NL: Overwhelmingly.

SS: Overwhelmingly. Anyway, as people who had voted for France, they were given the option to leave, and it is under these conditions that they left, and I think that explains also, why the year.

NL: Excuse me. Why did they prefer France? Can you tell me that? Do you know that?

SS: I don't, except that...

NL: Well, Hitler was already in power.

SS: Hitler was in power. I have one memory of--well, my mother, by virtue of her Swiss schooling and Swiss--in the French Swiss-spoke French fluently, and so would have been Francophile...

NL: Oh, so they were obviously afraid of...

SS: They were afraid.

Tape one, side two:

SS: The one memory that I do have of Hitler was walking down the streets of Aurich with my mother. I might say that when I went back to Aurich in 1953, and I'll explain later my purpose for going, which was monetary, in my head Aurich was a small *Dorf* [village], you know, a little speck on the map! In fact, I was awed--it's a big city. It's a city.

NL: Of course it has grown.

SS: It has grown, but still...

NL: Do you remember it as a tiny place?

SS: Oh, yeah. In part, because, also, one of the early stories was an aunt who lived toward the center of Aurich, marketplace, and we lived, I guess, where the river was, more the outskirts of town. Whenever I didn't like things at home, that is, with my mother, I would just take off and cross town and go to my aunt's. All by myself!

NL: You were an independent child!

SS: Oh, yes, I was very independent.

NL: That's so much in conflict with the norms of that German-Jewish upper class, upper-middle class culture. Little girls just didn't do those things.

SS: Well, you know...

NL: ...did they?

SS: I have a feeling that this country's head is full of mushy stereotypes, which in fact, may or may not apply.

NL: But--you were unusual, weren't you? A girl of your age...

SS: I had an unusual mother.

NL: But most Jewish mothers weren't like your mother in Aurich.

SS: Right, right.

NL: So, you broke out...

SS: You asked me about toys--I remember the earliest toy that I remember. There were dolls, and as photos will attest to, I didn't like dolls. And there are pictures of me with dolls. Maybe you can find--I didn't like them. She gave me an erector set, and I loved it.

NL: That's interesting. I didn't like dolls either.

SS: But anyway, so the earliest early memory was walking down the streets of Aurich, the shopping center, with my mother, when all of a sudden there were all kinds of sounds, noises, and this was, I guess, Hitler coming through town with his entourage, and I remember my mother just pulling me and running into a store. And, again, unlike American brats today, one didn't say, "Why do I have to go with you, Mommy?" You just did it. You felt it, You did it. Maybe that's a difference. Children did not challenge...

NL: ...authority.

SS: ...the adults. That's...

NL: Can you tell us now why Mother and Dad, Mother and Father, separated from you in '35 or '36, and why you went to Luxembourg while they went to France?

SS: I--you know, at the time, 1936, I was five years old, so I was not privy to...

NL: Can you re-

SS: No, all I remember was that it was happy to be with my grandparents in Ettelbruck and my assumption--Ettelbruck is in Luxembourg--and my assumption would be that they wanted the time to resettle and get their affairs and everything in order. But, again, it was a happy time.

NL: It was a happy time?

SS: Sure. I was the first grandchild, much adored. I remember, you know, you asked about other kids. I always wore silk clothes, and always had something which I have thought since as being very neat--the underwear matched the dress. So that when the boys would flip up the dress, you know, it was all matching.

NL: Oh, that was real elegance.

SS: Right. And because my recollection of myself was that I was sort of, not a very neat little girl, whenever I got dirty, they changed my clothes and got me *angeputzt* [dressed up].

NL: In an ensemble? And where did Mother and Father go? What city of France?

SS: They didn't go to a city. They moved into a village by the name of Rocquigny, R-O-C-Q-U-I-G-N-Y, which is in the Ardennes.

NL: And Father planned to re-establish his business there, or...?

SS: Yes, he did. They bought a house and he had cattle and did the same thing he did in Germany. And judging by letters that I have, documents, which appear to be character references, apparently he did well, was highly respected and liked. And unlike her, he didn't know French and learned it. In fact, someplace I found a little book that he used to study French for vocabulary. So my stay with my grandparents was a happy one.

NL: And how long did you stay with them?

SS: I would imagine, I think it was about a year. But, you know, my parents would come and go and visit. The interesting thing is, again, keeping in mind that my grandfather was an Orthodox man. I remember him saying, and I remember going to *shul* with them in Ettelbruck, being very condescending of Jews who used organ music in *shul*, and he said, "When people listen to music, they don't pray." So he was against it.

NL: And you remembered that?

SS: Oh, yeah. To this day, I don't feel comfortable in a Reformed *shul*–at all. In fact, if anything, I would characterize myself as an Orthodox atheist.

NL: Oh! I wasn't prepared for that!

SS: I'm both. If I relate to anything Jewish, then the feelings are Orthodox tradition, and so on. Okay. Anyway, my one--I have many memories of Ettelbruck–but one I remember in particular was being in a religious Catholic, run by nuns, school. And

I remember that--it must have been at Christmastime, because there was the créche, you know, with the little porcelain Holy Family, and where the big treat was for every child to be able to hold the little Jesus--and I think I dropped it.

NL: And it broke?

SS: But...

NL: Were you punished?

SS: No...

NL: Or reprimanded?

SS: Not really. But it was understood that children are clumsy, or something like that, and you shouldn't do it, and I felt bad.

NL: Were there other Jewish children in the school?

SS: I don't know. I don't remember. That's the only...

NL: You don't remember feeling conspicuous as a Jewish child, especially?

SS: As a child, as I said, I was well-fed, well-nourished, well taken care of. I never felt deprived.

NL: But in the school setting?

SS: No, I didn't. But it occurred to me as an adult, reflecting upon that, apparently my grandfather foresaw something, or a lot, and that that was part of a kind of training he wanted me to have--to know how to get along with *goyim* [non-Jews].

NL: Aha! Or was it their adaptation?

SS: No, I don't think so. Remember, the man was an Orthodox Jewish man.

NL: He couldn't very well conceal his beard.

SS: He didn't wear a beard.

NL: He didn't wear a beard.

SS: None of them wore beards. Okay, to give you a sense of that--my grandfather died of illness in 1938. It was some kind of cancer, skin, excruciatingly painful, and, again, it's the same story all over again. I have one of the cousins who imported me, facilitated my coming to the United States, in Chicago, was a physician. And the same story--I couldn't get any meaningful information about my family. Now, I understand that what he died of was a kind of condition that is rare but predominantly found among Jews. And I mentioned that to a friend who's a dermatologist once, who could name it...

NL: And there is that pattern?

SS: There is that, and I forget what it was. Anyway, so he died of illness in 1938. He was transported from Luxembourg to a hospital in Strasbourg in France. That's also where he's buried. And my mother apparently had promised him that she would never smoke on *Shabbes*. And my mother, like I, or I, like my mother, was a chain smoker, and I never knew her to smoke on *Shabbes* or *Yom Kippur*, even after he died. You know, what I'm saying about this sense of...

NL: Yes, yes. Very strong sense of uh...

SS: Commitment...

NL: The appropriateness of these values.

SS: A commitment.

NL: A commitment. Yeah. Past death.

SS: Yeah.

NL: In Luxembourg itself, through the 30's--well, you were there only a year...

SS: One year.

NL: And you were a very little girl. You don't have any sense, either, as a result of your experiences at the time or what you learned about the situation later, were there any rumbling of neo-Nazism or Nazism...?

SS: I don't know.

NL: Were Jews suffering in Luxembourg?

SS: I know that my grandparents were absolutely, as you noticed on the photos, you know, they look upon me as the adored child. They were extremely proud of the fact that I learned to speak the Luxembourg, which is a *Plattdeutsch* [Low German], fluently.

NL: I see. You picked it up in that year?

SS: Yeah. And you know, this delighted them.

NL: There were apparently no ominous signs during that year--political signs.

SS: I'm sure there were. I'm sure that there were. I mean, I remember, that image is mostly in France, listening to the radio, I'm hearing Hitler blasting out in the familiar dog bark. Yes, I think that one sensed it, that it was there, but obviously at age five or six, I had no way, really, I don't think, of conceptualizing it.

NL: And so, after a year, Mother and Father then took you with them? Is that what happened?

SS: Yeah. Then I came to France, and I didn't know a damn word of French, so...

NL: You had to learn it.

SS: ...at age seven, I guess, I learned French.

NL: Best time in the world to learn a language, isn't it?

SS: Yes.

NL: You picked it up quickly, I'm sure. And what were some of your impressions of the French school? You were enrolled in a school, I suppose. Was that a difficult adjustment for you?

SS: It was difficult because by the time I got there, they were doing fractions that I didn't know. I didn't know how to do fractions. It was difficult because of the way the French do divisions, for example, is different from the way they do divisions in Germany. So it was difficult for my parents to help me, that kind of thing. But, then, that was good training. That became a way of life, because during the ten years that I lived in France, I once counted having attended something--I don't remember--I told you once--how many schools.

BL: Fourteen.

SS: For the ten years I lived in 14 different places, and I don't know, I was in school, I wasn't in school, you know.

NL: For how long a time were things relatively equable for your family?

SS: In France? Well, 1939, my father volunteered into the French army, so he left.

NL: Excuse me--as far as you know, out of some feeling of identification with the anti-Nazi cause?

SS: Yes.

NL: And/or a way of achieving French citizenship, or had he already acquired that?

SS: Oh, no! Come on! You know very well that you could be in France for 582 years and never attain French citizenship.

NL: But I thought service in the army accelerated that process. Anyhow, it's not relevant here at all.

SS: Maybe. No, I think more--for a long, long time, I was--I succumbed to the Bruno Bettelheims, and the Hannah Arendt notion of Jews being led to the slaughter like sheep, you know? And I really felt angry at some level, or anguish about my parents not having come to America when they had the money, about not having gone into hiding when they could have or should have. And yet, as I alone struggled through this, I returned back to: "But, who are these people, my parents?" That's what I said--"*Un homme sa parole*"--and I remember my father saying, "Why should I hide? God knows I am an honest man. Honest men do not hide." I mean, there was this kind of--at some point, I must judge it, and I put it down as a kind of naive, blind, you know, religion kind of thing. In fact, I was wrong. I was profoundly wrong. This man had principles. This man, at age 39, not knowing the language, joined the French army. He was ready for combat. Now, you want to play Tweedlededee or Tweedlededum: Did he do it to save the family, to get citizenship, whatever? He enrolled in the army in war.

NL: He believed in what he was doing.

SS: Obviously. Obviously.

NL: And the Bettelheims and the Hannah Arendts, I think, are doing an ex post facto sort of judgment. This is how I interpret it.

SS: Well, I don't like Bettelheim at all. I mean...

NL: But, your father obviously didn't want to change his whole system of values simply because the world was changing or seemed to have been changing.

SS: Isn't that the hallmark of a genuine Orthodox Jew?

NL: And this eternality of values, you see, he was committed to that.

SS: Right. But, I mean, you know, there was a story that you know better, maybe I read it in your book, about on *Yom Kippur*, how the Jews--it was the atheist Jews in Auschwitz who refused to eat.

NL: Yes. So Father enlisted. What was their life like let's say in '38 after Munich? Have you recapitulated that?

SS: Well, we lived in Rocquigny, in this *Dorf*. I remember traveling up and back to visit my grandparents in Luxembourg. My mother's brother married a Belgian lady, and they lived in Belgium.

NL: Did you sense any greater anxiety in your parents as the decade drew on? You were very young, of course, but do you recall any anxiety on their part--'38?

SS: You know, I don't know how to describe that. Let me try to formulate it. No, no. Let me try to describe that. I didn't mean to pass over. Among the very vivid memories, I mean so vivid, I can feel it, I can see it, was, I was three times in concentration camps with my parents, twice in Gurs, once in Rivesaltes. On each occasion, I can clearly see all or most of the other people about crying and sobbing and whatever. I have no recall, not a single one, of my parents behaving that way. I remember my mother organizing, carrying the big containers of food with somebody else, and whatever little pieces of solid there were in this soup, this slop, were at the bottom, and my mother organizing that whatever comes out of the bottom goes to the children first. The rest could be distributed among the adults.

NL: She was taking charge.

SS: Yes. So that--truly, how can I answer your question? I don't know that I can. I think that I do have some letters that my mother wrote to my father. They're written in German and I can't read German that well, but which do describe, I think, some of her struggles with trying to get monies or whatever.

NL: But in the pre-war period, you don't remember any growing anxiety about the place? I'm just trying, I'm groping for some understanding of why your father enlisted before France was involved.

SS: It was involved in '39. He enlisted in 1939.

NL: Yes, but France wasn't occupied, until 1940.

SS: Until what?

NL: Until 1940. Maybe it was the attack on Poland.

SS: Maybe.

NL: Because there was a technical alliance between England and France to support the viability of Poland. Maybe it was that. Well, it's not that important. Where did he go when he enlisted? Where was he taken to? Do you know?

SS: We looked at these documents last night, and it wouldn't be in here. Anyway, some camps--I had forgotten that--I had quite forgotten that--but he ended up in some camp, Saint-Just, in the *departement de Oise*, and from there, he was sent to Gurs.

NL: From the army?

SS: Yeah. See, here is a letter that my father had written *Monsieur le Préfet ? Pau* the 26th of August 1940. I don't know if you read French, but I can translate it for you. You know what a *préfet* [chief administrator] is. "I have the honor to present to you

the following facts: In April 1939, I had myself inscribed at the gendarmerie at the police, of Chaumont-Porcien, Ardennes, with the intent to enlist in the French army. The first September of the same year, I signed an engagement with the Bureau of Recruitment, [SS injects a few French phrases here and there as she translates] also in the Ardennes." Now, he was working, I think, on rewriting and rewriting this. Again, his French wasn't that good. "Following my internment the 5th of September 1939," you see, he said, in April he enlisted and in September, "following the decree taken against foreigners, I was interned in the camp of St. Just en Chaussée, Oise."[2] I never heard of this camp.

NL: No, nor have I. Not at all.

SS: "In order to then be sent, I became what they call *prestataire au travaux militaire étranger*," [service provider] part of the...

NL: Military...

SS: But you saw the photo, he was wearing a French uniform...

NL: Yes, but this is very, very interesting, the first time I ever hear about what is, in effect, the deportation to a camp before France was conquered, and this...

SS: There is one other reference to that--you know, until I found this, I thought I'd made it up. There's one other reference. There's a woman by the name of--and I don't have the book, I think my daughter has it, a woman who wrote children's stories called Sachs, S-A-C-H-S, who wrote a children's story called *A Pocket Full of Marbles*.

NL: Oh, yes.

SS: Do you know that?

NL: I just know the title.

SS: Okay. Now, she describes the story that was told her of a woman named Fanny Kruger, whom I know, who's in San Francisco, and her father too, according to the book, had joined this same outfit, *prestataire*, and he too.

NL: ...he, too, was sent to a camp.

SS: And ended up in Auschwitz. Right.

NL: This was long--not long, but it was a full year before the Vichy decrees--the *Statut des Juifs*–before the capitulation of the Reynaud regime, before Petain came on. This was an independent decision of the French government, and we know that they didn't--well, you know, Koestler's book, *The Scum of the Earth*, in which he talks about the camps in France that had been used originally for persons who had fought in the Spanish Civil War.

SS: Right. That was what Gurs was set up to be.

NL: And Gurs was one of those. We really--I really must find out what there was in the motivation of the French to deport people who were already in the French army.

SS: No, no, he wasn't deported...

NL: Well, it's a deportation.

SS: Well, it's putting them in a camp.

[2]St. Just en Chaussée is mentioned in *The Two Thousands*, a movie and a book.

NL: Well, it's an internment.

SS: It's an internment.

NL: Yeah, it's an internment. Obviously, they weren't acknowledging his commitment to the French army. That's something that I will certainly want to investigate. It is, because this is pre-Vichy, and...

SS: You know, I might comment on this. Before I called you, as I told you I--do you want to take that off?

NL: Let me just repeat for a moment. You were saying that Mother probably had some reserve or some savings so that you and she could manage without Father...

SS: You remember I said, well, because of the situation of the plebiscite, my grandparents, Hoffmans, as well as my parents, I think, were given some amount of ability to liquidate their businesses at a great...

NL: Sacrifice...

SS: Sacrifice, but nonetheless

NL: ...they...

SS: I don't think they were...

NL: ...were able to liquidate...

SS: They didn't get the full value, let's put it this way. While my father was in the so-called French army, I was with my mother in the village of Rocquigny, and here is a photo. This is my mother. These are French officers, and I remember that they came for dinner, and they seemed to be pretty chummy.

NL: You remember Father's coming home in his uniform?

SS: No, I never; no, he never came home.

NL: He never came home, on leave.

SS: No.

NL: For those few months.

SS: But then, in 1940, and you would know the date better than I, as I said, I forgot. After a while, I forgot all the dates. Sometime in 1940, there was the evacuation of northern France as a result of the Germans bombarding all of the towns and civilians.

NL: May and June of '40, I think.

SS: May and June of 1940. So when--that's when that part of France was evacuated, and, in fact, there's a French movie about that that begins with the evacuation. I think it was either "*Jeu de Guerre*" or, I forget which one, where most people fled on foot. Now, my mother and I took a train to LaRoche-sur-Yon, which is right here on the Atlantic Coast. In other words, we went from the Ardennes to LaRoche-sur-Yon, and this was the area that had been designated as the area of evacuation for people from Ardennes, okay?

NL: The French government authorized that, or arranged it.

SS: Whatever. Now, given a letter that my mother wrote, the last thing before I was separated from my parents, she wrote a will which is this: "Camp de Rivesaltes, on 13 September 1942, in which she indicates that the furniture was in LaRoche-sur-Yon,

which means that she must have had the opportunity to move all belongings from the Ardennes to LaRoche-sur-Yon. Because unlike the rest of the French population, I have no recall...

NL: You didn't walk, you were on the train...

SS: Exactly. And this document would confirm it.

NL: Um hm.

SS: Incidentally, you asked me how did I retrieve the photos. In part, it was through the person, the friend who had been entrusted with the furniture, which was put it in a storage...

NL: Container?

SS: Yeah. In LaRoche-sur-Yon, he sold everything but saved the albums.

NL: I see. He saved the papers.

SS: Okay. Then...

NL: Could we just step back a minute...

Tape two, side one:

NL: This is Tape 2, continuing an interview with Dr. Sonja Samson. We were talking about the evacuation from your home just at the time of the bombardments, probably in June, May or June of 1940. Do you remember the bombardments?

SS: No.

NL: You think Mother and you left before...

SS: I think so.

NL: ...that happened? She had some indication that there was danger?

NL: I think so. From Rocquigny, I remember that there was a neighbor, Breck, who was a garage mechanic. And I used to spend a tremendous amount of time watching him repair cars, and he was an elderly man, I guess...

NL: 40... [laughter]

SS: Not really, because he used to, yeah, well okay. He used to talk and tell lots of stories of World War I and the French were very much for World War I. That's hard to say, World War I. And it was very vivid. After the war, I returned to France in 1953. I returned to Rocquigny. I saw this man and was, when I told him who I was, his greeting was, "Oh, I thought you were all dead." And that was the beginning, middle and the end.

NL: Same thing happened in Poland. Yes, not much difference. So you don't remember any bombardment, and you and Mother took the train, whereas the other evacuees went by foot, or many of them did.

SS: Right.

NL: And so you think you left as a result of a government order?

SS: Or it may just have been foresight on their part. They had a lot of foresight, except, as I said, to come to America. But there is something to be said about their notion: you don't flee, you fight, and that seemed to have been my father's position.

NL: And then that comment made, which I don't think we have on tape. "An honest man is protected by God."

SS: Yeah.

NL: Why should he have anything to fear?

SS: Yeah. Only honest. "God knows I am honest, and honest people have nothing to hide." Right?

NL: Now, Father was still at Gurs when you were evacuated?

SS: No, no, no. As best as I recall, there were no news from my father. From LaRoche-sur-Yon--I'm trying to see, 1940, my mother and I were in LaRoche-sur-Yon. I wrote this sometime from memory. From LaRoche-sur-Yon, my mother and I ended up in Gurs in 1940.

NL: What about your life in LaRoche-sur-Yon?

SS: I remember living in a hotel. I remember eating lobster, and the goodies, *trayf* [not kosher]. It was an ocean city.

NL: Without the fifth set of dishes?

SS: Right.

NL: Did Mother seem to be somewhat relaxed? Do you recall anything about her behavior that was different?

SS: Somehow, as you ask, the word does not seem to relate to my mother. My mother was a funny lady, a very open lady, a very eccentric lady, a fun lady. She could be a very angry lady, but I'm not so sure about anything in between. That, of course, may be a function of my age. You know, I always felt very loved and protected and so on.

NL: And in a happy setting with her?

SS: Right. And all I remember really was that I was with her.

NL: Were there other children in the hotel? Were there other Jews in the hotel?

SS: I have no idea.

NL: You don't know.

SS: No idea. Anyway, let me talk about what I remember.

NL: Please.

SS: Rather than what I don't. My mother and I ended up in Gurs. As I mentioned, we had not heard from my father. As you well know, Gurs, like all the other camps, were sub-sectioned into islands, each one partitioned off. They called it--well, anyway, each one closed off with barbed wires, and whenever a new transport arrived, there were all kinds of communications going on, people across the barbed wire, separated by ditches. Asking, you know, names, who arrived and that's how we found that my father was in Gurs.

NL: My--and the first knowledge...

SS: Right.

NL: That he was, in about a year and a half?

SS: I would think so, unless my mother heard from him, then I would have had some recall of...

NL: The news.

SS: Yeah. I might add, in passing, and, you know, I guess, just for the sake of a description that you asked of what it was like and so on. I might add that my mother and father were--I don't think they had done anything formal, but it was understood that they were going to divorce. And this was true already when we lived in Rocquigny, and the man that she was involved with was a man that I recall. I have quite a clear memory of him, and I guess the interesting thing about that is that my father knew about it, but that through none of the ordeal, I think the last that this man was in the picture that I recall was in LaRoche-sur-Yon. I think, he was the one who oversaw the furniture and sold them to survive. He was a Jew, a man by the name of George Levy; he was a French Jew. But that had nothing with, to do with, you know, as there are in here letters that my mother wrote to my father. They wrote letters of mutual concern and caring, and certainly that was true

in the camp and afterwards, so that a divorce was a grownup issue that had no effect. Does that help to put in perspective what these people are like?

NL: Yes. I also am wondering if perhaps the imminence of the divorce might have had something to do with Father's decision to enlist in the army? But that's really irrelevant, I think.

SS: I think it would be irrelevant.

NL: Yeah, I think it's just a speculation.

SS: Even then it was 1939.

NL: Yeah.

SS: The man was 39 years old, and he's not a kid, on the rebound. You know, people didn't think that way in those days.

NL: Do you have any specific images of life at Gurs? Were you with Mother? Did you sleep in the same area? Was it a barracks-type of thing?

SS: Yeah, they were wooden barracks.

NL: Wooden barracks. Did you go there by train?

SS: We went there by train. Well, you see, because I went to Gurs twice. Let me get--maybe, we'll hold the detailed questions for a moment, and let me just give a brief chronology. From the camp of Gurs in 1940, we got out of Gurs, and up until '42, we lived in a village near Gurs, called Garlin. However, my father lived in a village not some distance away, where he had a small farm, and he commuted, that is, visited my mother and myself, on a bicycle. He had one bicycle, and I used to ride on the front thing of the bicycle. And I recall frequent visits, my father coming to visit, and my going there to stay with him. As some of these letters would show, where my mother wrote to him while I was there.

NL: So then he was released from Gurs, too?

SS: Yes, the three of us were together in Gurs, once we found each other. Okay.

NL: I see. once you found each other, you were together.

SS: We were together. And this was until August 26, 1942. August 26, 1942, was my mother's birthday, and for her birthday my father was coming to spend the day with us and bring a chicken or whatever, you know, to celebrate her birthday, which, again, is what I am saying about. Here are two people, who had in peacetime thought of divorce, and in wartime like, you know, it didn't exist. You know, it was there, but it wasn't.

NL: Yes. Take some coffee.

SS: Instead--that's all right. Instead of my father coming on that day, the 26th of August, a truck came with the French police and rounded up my mother and I and we were on our way to Rivesaltes.

NL: No warning, no preparation? Just a sudden.

SS: No. No, and again, my father was already on the truck.

NL: He was on the truck. They had picked him up?

SS: Yeah. If you look at the map, I indicated with an X, this is the general region where he was, so the truck, the truck must have come this way and from there we went to Gurs. Now, when you ask me about details of Gurs, obviously these pictures all merged between time one and time two.

NL: Time one was, of course, short and I presume...

SS: So was time two.

NL: I see.

SS: Time two we were in Gurs August 26, 1942; we were transported by train to Rivesaltes on September 13, 1942. And I think that a few days later--I would have to research it--but no more than a week or two weeks later, my parents were sent from Rivesaltes to Drancy. I stayed in Rivesaltes alone until I got out. Okay, so that's all of it, the chronology.

NL: What was life like even in the merged images that you have at Gurs? Did you have enough to eat?

SS: No, of course not. That's why I described my mother taking charge of the food distribution, which was mostly liquid slop with some solid stuff in the bottom. The barracks were wooden barracks, which had this shape going down and then fanning out on the sides, where you put your head to sleep and it was open. It was on the ground. I think there was some straw on the ground.

NL: Do you have an image of lots of people there?

SS: Oh, sure, all of the barracks were...

NL: Filled.

SS: Filled. I'll talk about how I got out of Rivesaltes, to say something about that in a minute. What else? Waking up very early in the morning. It was, I think, this must have been the first time I remember it being cold and wet and damp, and I remember waking up damp and wet. And achy.

NL: Achy.

SS: In fact, the pain was something like the arthritic pain I have now; maybe that's where I got it. I remember the toilets, which were sort of huge cylindrical cans. You know, you walked up some scaffolding, some scaffolding, wooden scaffolding and there were these cans that you shat into. It was a strange experience, certainly coming from a private bath, central heating and all the rest of it. But the most unsettling experience was having diarrhea, stomach cramps, and alleviating oneself and never being sure whether it was me or the person next door, and looking down and it was all warm shit, couldn't tell if it was you or somebody else. That kind of...

NL: How did Mother explain this move to you? Or don't you remember any discussion? Did you want to know why you were being sent to such a place?

SS: No, because I think in those days, adults didn't talk to kids. It was understood that when you talked about stuff and you made decisions, the kids were there. You heard and didn't barge in.

NL: You obeyed.

SS: It wasn't a matter of obeying. You had a certain kind of respect. These are difficult times. The adults have to make difficult decisions and they are doing the best they can, and you considered, I considered myself fortunate, you know, that it wasn't hush-hush and whispered, that the discussions were open, but you listened like a proper child that didn't have any wisdom or anything to contribute.

NL: And Mother and Father and you were together?

SS: Yes.

NL: In the same physical area? Did they have work?

SS: No.

NL: They didn't. Well, how did they spend their days? How did you spend your day? What would happen?

SS: Well, sitting in...

NL: Sitting in the barracks? Walking? Was there any way of walking?

SS: There was walking.

NL: There was walking. Was there...?

SS: But there was more of a tendency to stay close to one's parents.

NL: Did you have any visitors? Did any social agency people come to you with food or clothing...

SS: No.

NL: ...or medicine?

SS: No.

NL: Do you remember being examined by a doctor?

SS: No, nothing, nothing.

NL: Okay.

SS: Nothing, I'll tell you my Jewish agency stories. They are very bitter. Maybe I better move from Gurs to Rivesaltes. I remember the long train ride. I remember also going from the train into the trucks to go to Rivesaltes. Incidentally, there is one French movie that I saw recently that attempted to recreate exactly what was happening. What was the name of that movie? It was "Entre Nous".

NL: "Entre Nous."

SS: Did you see that movie?

NL: No, I don't think...

SS: The opening scene...

NL: The opening scene--Rivesaltes?

SS: It's quick, like, you know, two seconds. But it is Rivesaltes.

NL: I don't know if it has come to Philadelphia, but I certainly will.

SS: Well, it came to Princeton.

NL: Well, Princeton has the McCarther Theater.

SS: No, no, it was a real commercial shopping mall.

NL: Made in France, I presume?

SS: Yes, yes. Right, and the woman who produced the movie is the daughter, I mean, it's autobiographical, it's autobiographical, it's about her mother and father that she made a movie.

NL: It was very moving?

SS: Oh, yes, but there is a scene of Rivesaltes. I guess, she succeeded in attempting to an extent to recreating it. And as I recall, as I know, what I noticed most about the scene at Rivesaltes was the omission in the movie of the barbed wire.

NL: Just another question.

SS: Excuse me while I remember.

NL: While you remember.

SS: Rivesaltes was then in September, 1942. Rivesaltes, as you well know, is at the opposite, at the Mediterranean end of the Pyrenees. I remember it as being unbelievably hot. As I recall Gurs full of mud and nasty and cold and wet. You could never keep dry or warm. Rivesaltes the image was one of glaring, sun-beating heat, and there were a couple of sunflowers. I remember picking the seeds and eating those.

NL: Similar barracks?

SS: Yeah.

NL: And the same general physical condition?

SS: Uh-huh.

NL: And not enough food?

SS: Right. Hungry. Starving.

NL: Starving?

SS: Yeah, both, I mean, you know, this slop. It didn't do any...

NL: I'm going to take a minute. Let's speak now for a moment about your school experience.

SS: We will get back to the camp?

NL: Of course, we will.

SS: All right.

NL: You were at school in Gurs?

SS: Well, you see, when we got out of the camp of Gurs, we were in the village of Gurs, for a time.

NL: Excuse me for interrupting. Do you know why you were released? Or did Mother and Father arrange that with the authorities? Do you understand how come you were only there for a few months?

SS: Can you turn that off for a minute?

NL: Tell us now a little about your school life in the village of Gurs?

SS: All right. To date, I remember being in school in Rocquigny, which would have been 1939, 1938, 1939, learning French. No school, and then I think when I lived in Garlin, which was 1941, 1942, going to school there. Okay. I remember two things. I

remember one thing, number one, being a very good student. I read avidly; I read everything there was in the...

NL: Available.

SS: Available. Right. And the teacher befriended me. She liked me. In fact, some place I have a picture of her; her name was Mademoiselle Dominique. And it was the tradition for, I don't know what holiday, probably Bastille Day or one of those that the student who did the best, scholastically, was permitted to raise the flag.

NL: A great honor.

SS: And so I was designated to do that and the whole village got into an uproar about a Jew doing that. Now, this was 1941, '42.

NL: After the *Statut des Juifs*.

SS: Right. So I didn't do it.

NL: You didn't do it?

SS: No.

NL: The teacher had to back down?

SS: Right. Had to back down, right. The principal had to back down.

NL: But, you did get this feeling of support from the teacher? How about the other students? Do you remember any nastiness among them?

SS: No, no. In Garlin and the village of Gurs, which is at the foot of the Pyrenees, which is, you know, across the street from Spain, bullfighting was the big sport. So, they had these old bullfight arenas, somewhat dilapidated. I remember spending days playing with the kids in the...

NL: In the arenas?

SS: In the arenas, right.

NL: So, there was no persecution by the children, as happened elsewhere?

SS: No. As long as, and I think, that's what I alluded to earlier, which was as long as you went along with whatever the games were, the kids I remember, going off with some boys. Children also worked, like, tending to cattle, walking way off into, you know, the mountains and so on. And, I remember a boy teaching me how to make a flute.

NL: A flute?

SS: You know, whittling wood and so on. My mother was very, very ill. She, she, I think, must have had polyps in the uterus. Because she bled profusely, and required surgery, and I remember living there and taking care of her. And...

NL: Was she able to get hospital care?

SS: No.

NL: Who did the surgery?

SS: She didn't get surgery. She just continually bled.

NL: Just continually bled. And you tended her?

SS: And I tended her.

NL: And Father at that point was...?

SS: He lived. Ah...

NL: He lived apart?

SS: He lived apart, but then there had been another reason other than the separation, because I remember long periods when the three of us lived together and periods of separation.

NL: I see, separation.

SS: And, judging from the writings it may have been that he was looking about to find a place and so on. But, I do remember tending her. You know, I remember memories like her lying down and, of course, there was no plumbing, and using a bedpan, and I remember to empty it, and I remember one day tripping and...

NL: Spilling the blood.

SS: ...blood covered. And feeling bad about not wanting her to see it, because she felt bad. I remember cutting wood, you know, and going out in fields and gathering wood for heat and for cooking.

NL: Was this a hiding place?

SS: No.

NL: You were living there freely? But in very primitive conditions?

SS: Right.

NL: Farmstead, was it?

SS: Yeah, I remember various places. But back about this school.

NL: Yes.

SS: In France, they have the exam, which the English call the 11-plus. You take at age 11, which determines whether you can go on, pass the damn thing, you go on.

NL: To college?

SS: To college.[3] You fail it and you are put in a vocational track. I remember going to the major city, Pau. I think, it was Pau to take the exam, and it was a long ordeal, a long production. Excuse me, anyway I remember the day that the results were announced. My mother had sent me to the store to get something. I bumped into the teacher who yelled at me, "You passed, you passed," and hugging me.

NL: The same teacher who...?

SS: The same teacher, right. And you know, but the exams were done elsewhere, and they were sent from the Ministry and so the teachers had nothing to do with it. I remember after then, you know, we bade each other goodbye, the teacher and I and I am going on to the store, and the teacher yelled at me and she said, "But you live the opposite way. Aren't you going to run home and tell your mother?" And I said, "No. I have an errand. I have to go to the store." So, I went and did the errand, went home and told my mother all excited, "I passed, I passed," and my mother just looking at me with a warm smile, saying, "Well, I expected that of you." Okay.

NL: Of course. That's lovely.

[3]She means Lycée or College (private Lycée) which is the equivalent of High School.

SS: There is another story about my mother in the same village, in Garlin. And you asked about how did children occupy themselves. Well, we had a hunch some kids and I, and as I said, part of not being pointed at as a Jew or ostracized or whatever, was to share in whatever activities, mischief , and whatever went on. Anyway, that day some kids noticed two lovers who were walking down the road into the fields, and it was decided to follow them, which we did. We ended up in a field, and there were bushes and what not, and sometime later we saw these two young people having sexual intercourse, and we were gawking, and a lady showed up. And she screamed and yelled, "I'm going to tell the teacher. I'm going to tell the principal!"

NL: There were two of you or a gang?

SS: A gang. And so we ran like hell, and I came home all out of breath and looking terrified, and my mother looked at me and she said, "Good God, what happened?" And I told her, you know, exactly what I had seen, what happened, and she just howled. She said, "You don't think he was going to follow you and try to catch you, with no pants on, do you?"

NL: But you were then completely accepted by the kids?

SS: Right.

NL: Then, I gather you didn't wear a Jewish star and did Mother not wear a Jewish star?

SS: No. Now remember, this was in so-called unoccupied France.

NL: This was Vichy?

SS: The year is 1942.

NL: 1942.

SS: '41. '42.

NL: Did you hear about a man named Vallat V-A-L-L-A-T-, who was in a Commissariat for Jewish Affairs, who actually stood on principle about not, about refusing to accept the decree?

SS: No. I read about it afterwards.

NL: So, you weren't required to identify yourselves as Jews in any way?

SS: In fact, my parents did. There is a document here in which they did declare themselves as Jews.

NL: They had to register?

SS: Yes.

NL: The registration was something, but you didn't have the Jewish star. And do you want to speak about any other school experiences you had in the village of Gurs?

SS: I think there will be more as we go on.

NL: But, do you think the children knew you were Jewish? I mean, perhaps they didn't.

SS: No, you see, at that time and that's the cloak, the disguise, that I used later when I was in the French underground; they must have known because the incident about raising the flag.

NL: Oh, yes.

SS: But kids were aware of the evacuation of people from northern France, so that there were refugees all over the country, which was not specific to Jews.

NL: I also wanted to emphasize the point that Dr. Lerner was making, namely, that the arrests and the driving of the trucks, the repression, were all in the hands of French rather than German police?

SS: Right. They were French police.

NL: French police.

SS: I never saw a German in any of...

Tape two, side two:

NL: Continuing our interview with Dr. Sonja Samson.

SS: Okay. Now, let's go back to Rivesaltes.

NL: You were there just for a very short time?

SS: Right, with my parents.

NL: With your parents.

SS: And, then a short time alone. I think that the feeling of now, for now and what next may be worse, to me prior to that, that is, in Garlin, that feeling was heightened by--there was a girl, I remember. She was older than I in school. I used to spend some time with her, and her mother had recently died of illness. And she was in mourning, and she used to talk about her mother and how she missed her and so on, and I remember very distinctly at the time, going home with greater diligence, greater anxiety, to check up on my mother, the fact that it was a double thing, the fact that my mother was ill and the fact of camps looming about.

NL: The loss...

SS: Camps looming...

NL: Oh, camps looming.

SS: Sure. I had been in Gurs once before.

NL: But, I thought the fear that you, too, might lose your mother?

SS: Oh, sure. That was the point. That was the point. So that, you know, you asked me about memories as a child in the camps. Maybe, this is the part that, and the reason that I weathered it in the way that I did with my parents, my mother had promised me, and she had said, no matter what, under no circumstances ever will we separate. And she promised me, she gave me her word, and my mother was the kind of lady that, like my father, and he, too, that a promise is a promise and you just don't break it. So, I think that with that, my you know, being quiet and sensing, accepting the ultimate security for me and my world, was okay. I was with my mother.

NL: They will take care of you.

SS: I was with my father. It wasn't even a question of who takes care, but I will be with them. I will be with them together.

NL: Together.

SS: Right. And I think that, well, that this my befriending with this girl and obviously my hanging around with her, that was part of my way of dealing with--and her position, of course, was always, "You are so lucky, you still have your mother," and this kind of thing. But I think that what was in it for me was a constant kind of dealing with, "I've got my mother. She is there."

NL: A rock. Mother remained ill up until the time she was sent to Drancy?

SS: Yeah.

NL: Never got medical care?

SS: No, no.

NL: Did you hear at all from your grandparents?

SS: Yes, I'll get to that later. Let me first...

NL: Sure.

SS: Install myself out of Rivesaltes. Okay. On that day, there was early--I, okay, the rumors about being shipped out, about being transported, being deported, of course, were constant. And there was no real way of knowing which one was a false alarm and which one was the thing.

NL: These were rumors by the inmates?

SS: Yes, by inmates.

NL: Or others? Were you able to get any newspapers?

SS: No, nothing like that.

NL: Radio?

SS: No, of course not. You know, all you could take with you was, I think, was 20 kilos. You know, it was a suitcase, in which you typically took your blanket. I still have my woolen blanket...

NL: Let me interject again. Dr. Lerner was saying that at one point Mother prepared you in very hot weather with lots and lots of clothes. Was that when you left Rivesaltes?

SS: No, that's when we went. Okay. It's August 26. It's hot. For my mother to celebrate my mother's birthday. Okay. So the clothing that were packed in part consisted of the warmest you had. You know, it was anticipated by my mother obviously, that, you know...

NL: Things might get worse.

SS: Right.

NL: Or cold, certainly. So, you were speaking about rumors. Did you hear them as a child, too?

SS: Yeah.

NL: You heard Mother talking?

SS: Yeah. You heard adults always. You know, they say that we are going to be shipped off, and the only time that I remember my mother really breaking down and crying was when the rumor was that they were going to be sent to Poland.

NL: That scared your mother?

SS: That frightened her. And it's not clear whether that had to do with the old issue of the *Yekke* versus the *Pollack* or whether there was something, German Jew. I suspect that it was more some sense about things being bad.

NL: Very bad, The Jews, I think, even though they didn't know exactly what was happening there, knew that Poland was the last resort. Also, in Czechoslovakia, there was this terrible fear of being shipped to Poland, and the other side of this fear was that if they stayed with their countrymen, that they would be better protected. Now, I wonder if there

was any sense that you would be better off in France simply because you were French? But, maybe, you couldn't discern that.

SS: There was a sense, of course, of having chosen France as a country away from Germany, and, you know, my parents did a good job of acculturating in a lot of ways. Yes. But, I remember the night before, and I think the rumors must have been, the night before they were shipped off, rumors must have been much more intense, which led more veracity and credence to them. And, this I remember very clearly. And maybe this is what I am doing now, forty years later. I remember lying down, on the floor, on whatever it was, straw whatever, and fantasizing when all this is over, I will be in America, because my mother talked a lot about these relatives in America. So, I knew the names of all the relatives. I knew everybody's name. I knew everybody's character, I knew what they were like, from descriptions. And of--all I remember, like, a fantasy of my telling people in America what it was like. And, of course, the let-down, when I came to America and nobody wanted to hear. You know, leave the war behind and forget all that.

NL: But at that time Mother was thinking of perhaps America as an alternative to her or to you or to both.

SS: To everybody, I think.

NL: To everybody.

SS: I think, everybody saw that America was the place...

NL: Everybody was thinking...

SS: Right. For freedom, for liberty and so on.

NL: But, your parents did nothing as far as you know to...

SS: To implement that?

NL: To make this possible. They didn't apply to leave?

SS: Well, I don't know, because, again, in the letters there are notes that, letters that my mother wrote to my father when they lived in the different villages, involving many trips to the City of Pau which is a main capital. In Pau, also, there was a lady who was a distant relative of my mother's friend. She's a lady whom later I lived with, so there must have been attempts made. The letters, by the way, cannot be taken literally because there was always the danger of censorship and so on, so always...

NL: Coded?

SS: Yeah. But, anyway, the next morning we were awakened very early, it was still dawn, dawn is morning, and told to assemble at the main place in the camp with luggage and all, and you know, we formed these long lines, and the lines were alphabetical. And given that my last name is Samson, which is my maiden name, we were pretty much down at the end of the line. And even though my mother had promised and my father had promised, we would never under any circumstances separate, it was decided that I should stay and that they felt that by separating there was a chance that I could get out. So, I remember my mother going to one barrack where they had a representative of the Jewish agency, OSE [*Oeuvre de Secours aux Enfants*-Children's Aid Society]. And I remember

clearly this lady then coming back to where we were in line and saying, "I'm terribly sorry, I'm sorry," and I remember, she and my mother discussing, you know, "The barrack is full. We have no more room."

NL: For you?

SS: For me.

NL: That you have to leave with them?

SS: That I have to leave with them. Then, of course, I was terribly relieved. And my mother was terribly distressed. And, as I remember, the way it went is the authorities which again were French-uniformed men, had a table that they transported down the line, came and people went, you know, different places and just as they came close to S, either that same lady from OSE or another one said, "Okay, we'll take her."

NL: That is, keep you?

SS: Keep me. And I remember very--in a great hurry saying goodbye to my parents and them saying, "Don't worry. We'll see you again," and, of course, that was the last time I saw them. And I was taken by this lady into that place, and my memory is vague and yet very vivid, it's a very non-verbal...

NL: Do you remember the feeling?

SS: Yes, it's a very non-verbal going into that barrack and I--it's like I totally let loose and I ran away and they came and got me.

NL: You tried to run out of the camp?

SS: I tried to run back to my parents.

NL: To your parents?

SS: They were gone. They were gone. I wanted to go with them forever. Right. And I remember that the adults had to literally subdue me. I just remember being totally out of it, out of my mind. The closest, the next to closest that I can remember being totally out of control, crazy, I guess, more like a child having a tantrum. But it wasn't a child-like tantrum, I mean it was...

NL: The real thing.

SS: I mean, it was horror, it was pain. I remember, too, that my mother and I wore the same dress. It's a print I will never forget. It was a deep purple and there were little squares, little yellow lines, and she wore a dress like that and I wore the same dress. I have a photo of her and me together somewhere wearing these same dresses, and just going around frantically the next day and every day after asking people, "Did you see a lady wearing this dress?"

NL: Had other children been separated from their parents, too, perhaps at this time?

SS: Yeah, the barrack was full of children. I have no idea of when and how.

NL: Did anyone give you any comfort?

SS: The thing that I learned was, after I was separated from my parents, that the reason, you know, remember clearly, I mean, I clearly, clearly remember because it was

such an intense relief, such a weight off my shoulder, when this woman said there is no more room for a child, your child which, of course, I now have since looked upon with utter bitterness. You know, I don't even find words to describe it. There is a goddamned wooden barrack and, of course, there is room for one more child, there is room for ten more, there is room for 100 more. I might say sadly that that was just the beginning of the kinds of experiences that I had with Jewish agencies. I hate them. I hated them. I mean to this day I haven't contributed to a Jewish charity. I will contribute to Israel.

NL: Don't you know they have the same kind of agencies, some of the same kind of organizations there?

SS: I know, totally irrational. I'm sure that they did their goddamned best. That was my experience.

NL: Just one thing about this woman, about whom you feel so bitter and it's not...

SS: Okay. Just let me tell you the background.

NL: Sure.

SS: The background is, if you recall, there was a lady, let's give her a name, Paula, who was a distant relative of my mother's. Her connection was married, you know, the daughter of, I can give you the genealogy, but it is a distant cousin, who was also a friend, who had fled to France from Lithuania, and who was living in the City of Pau, and my mother used to see her and I remember seeing her. I remember this lady from Aurich. I remember her visiting us in Rocquigny. Paula's brother-in-law was a man named Dr. Olschwanger, who had gone to London, and he was sent, according to Paula, and I don't know if it is true, he was one of the founders of OSE. He was a physician. I haven't seen the name in writing, so I don't know.

NL: Can you spell it for me?

SS: O-L-S-C-H-W-A-N-G-E-R. Does that sound familiar to you?

NL: I have never seen it. No. It would be interesting

SS: But, anyway, Paula found out that we were in Gurs and then Rivesaltes, and Paula went and pulled all kinds of strings. From Pau Paula by then was in Montpelier. That's right, from Pau she went to Montpelier and in Montpelier, she found out we were in Rivesaltes. Maybe my mother was able to send her a postcard some time. She pulled every conceivable string to get my parents [unclear].

NL: I was wondering if that was in the Italian zone, but the Italian zone was closer.

SS: No, at that time the Italian business was much later. This was 1943. I think, the Italians did not occupy till--this is '42. I think, the Italian occupation was '43, wasn't it?

NL: After the Normandy--after the North African landing, November, '42, early '43. Yeah.

SS: So, anyway, because then I found a note.

NL: From her?

SS: From her, you know, to that agency in the camp trying to--that she had written to my mother: "Dear Carla and dear Joseph, I am trying to get you and Sonja out," and that's how come I got out of the camp.

NL: Through that letter. But it came too late to save Mother and Father.

SS: Right.

NL: Or, perhaps, it wouldn't have helped.

SS: Anyway, that isn't the point.

NL: But that letter helped you.

SS: That is not my focus. My focus was really--my profound bitterness, or maybe guilt, a lot of guilt.

NL: Of course. Because you survived.

SS: Because I survived. Because somebody knew somebody.

NL: The only point that I was going to make about the OSE woman was that she was, of course, behaving like a bureaucrat, thinking in terms of statistics, but also, I doubt very much if she knew what the destination of those transports was going to be. It's not even clear, according to some sources, and this is...

SS: Yeah, but I have a document here about my being released from Rivesaltes, which is on UGIF [*Union Générate des Israélites de France* French Jewish Council] paper, which gives the reasons for having liberated me from Rivesaltes, as *enfant abandoné*, an abandoned child. Which, of course, when I saw that, at the time...

NL: It disturbed you to no end.

SS: Yeah, my parents did not abandon me.

NL: Maybe that was a way of satisfying the Vichy government.

SS: I suppose.

NL: It's hard to fathom all these things...

SS: So, anyway, I...

NL: They went to Drancy. You heard nothing more from them.

SS: Yes, I got a postcard from my mother from the train.

NL: On the way to Drancy.

SS: Yeah, which said, "Sonja, we are fine. Everything is fine." And love, you know, kisses, whatever.

NL: It's not clear from the evidence that even Vichy officials knew what the destination of the transports from Drancy were, certainly not in '42. I'm not, of course, excusing this woman, but just saying that she may have, she may not have known what their destiny was to be.

SS: Okay. So...

NL: It was an offensive thing to say, of course.

SS: I guess not to say, to do. It was the fact that if it hadn't been for Paula's pull, I would have gone with you.

NL: Would have gone with them?

SS: I'm sorry, I'm not being very ...

NL: No, I--did you have any other encounters with Jewish Agency people while you were in the camps?

SS: That's why I want to go on. No, that was the only one.

NL: That was the only one.

SS: I remember that there was some Samson cousins who had come from Germany, who were in Rivesaltes, because I was sent to a different part of the camp and I spent a day or so, I saw them. I think, it was in Gurs the first time, I think, I was--there was an infirmary. I don't remember why I was there briefly, and in the bed my mother recognized a woman who had been a German movie star, Dita Barlow. But, anyway, I got out of Rivesaltes in a truck with the other kids, and our first destination was, either in Montpellier, in Perpignon, which is this major city, in a convent. And I spent a week in the convent. And that was probably the most unhappy time in my life. I longed, I longed for the camp.

NL: How do you account for that?

SS: Ah...

NL: Were they harsh to you? At the convent?

SS: I think, they did their best, but it was a convent.

NL: You had to wear a cross?

SS: No, there it was clear that we were Jewish kids, but, yeah, they were harsh. I mean, they had the kids, their own kids who were punished wearing donkey hats, walking about, but I think it was--while the camp had all the barbed wires and everything, you could see the sky and there...

NL: And you had your parents.

SS: They were humans. They were people in civilian clothes, and there it seemed like getting into a dungeon forever, that you would never get out of again.

NL: They had black habits on?

SS: Oh, sure.

NL: Well, that's very frightening to a child, isn't it?

SS: Yes, but you remember my experience in Luxembourg. My grandfather had prepared me for it. Living. Remember when I went to the nursery school in Luxembourg, and he had prepared me.

NL: Yes.

SS: But that was the shock. I think, it probably all piled up being in a strange place.

NL: And...

SS: Being removed.

NL: Being removed from your parents. That probably was overpowering.

SS: Right, it was. I got out of the convent and I got to a place called Palavas-les-Flots, which is a resort place on the Mediterranean, south of the city of Montpellier, and I think, I spent a couple of months there.

NL: Was that in a convent?

SS: No, no. That was under the auspices of orphanages. Under the auspices of UGIF and OSE. It was all children.

NL: What was your experience there?

SS: And that was...

NL: Was that a little happier?

SS: That was close to Montpellier, where eventually Paula came and saw me and I rejoined her.

NL: I see.

SS: Yeah, my experience there was hungry, starving.

NL: In the orphanage?

SS: Yeah, and in the mornings, seeing cans of empty food that the bureaucrats of the agency...

NL: Had eaten, but weren't sharing with you?

SS: Right. The only other memory I have of that, that was painful because all the kids there shortly after I got out, they were rounded up and shipped off. But there was a terrible storm one night, a terrible storm, I guess, a kind of tornado, like we have here, because I remember waking up in the morning, because I remember waking up in the morning with bricks on me on the bed.

NL: My word.

SS: Looking at the sky and I apparently was the only one who slept through it all. So, I think that's how I dealt with...

NL: Unpleasant things.

SS: Withdrawal.

NL: Go to sleep.

SS: Yes.

NL: Was there any schooling at the orphanage?

SS: No.

NL: How did you spend your time there, do you remember, any days that you recall, besides being hungry. I guess, that was...

SS: You know, these are the two, the only two images that I have. You know, the roof having caved in literally and, you know, watching *yenim* [them, the others] eat.

NL.: And you were there, you think, for a few months?

SS: Yeah. According to this, it was--no, maybe not. Yeah, it looks like maybe a month or a month and a half or something, not terribly long, two months...

NL: And from there you were trucked again or...?

SS: No, from there I joined Paula and her family.

NL: She came for you. Paula came for you?

SS: Yeah, and I stayed with her in Montpellier.

NL: And were there any children there?

SS: Yes, she had my darling, her son, who was seven years younger than I and who, when we used to fight, used to delight and console himself with the notion that I, that he was seven years younger than I, and that meant I would die seven years before he would.

NL: You would have discussions of that kind? That's typical of children, too. I remember thinking that about other children and about my mother, lamenting the fact that she was going to die much before I would. So, that's very characteristic of children, I think. Did you go to school while you were with Paula?

SS: No, but look it's 5:20, and, well, I don't know what do you want.

NL: Tell me a little about your life with Paula. Did you go to school in Montpellier?

SS: No. Let's see, we weren't in Montpellier very long. According to this, we were--no, November, I got to Montpellier and then we went to Vic-sur-Cére, which is in central France [north of Montpellier].

NL: She was moving, too?

SS: Oh, yes. They, she and her husband, remember she is from Lithuania.

NL: From Lithuania. So, she, of course, was a foreigner.

SS: Sure, and her husband, Leon, was from Poland. I can't remember from where. It doesn't matter. Memel? No, that Lithuania. That was Paula. He was from...

NL: Anyhow, they were on the run.

SS: They were on the run, so from Montpellier we went to central France and there we lived in a village, [might have meant to say "villa"] which we shared with another family by the name of Epstein. And they had, the Epsteins were a family of four. They had a son and daughter and the son, Roland, in fact, was mentioned in a book that I read relatively recently. He was also a member of the Underground and he smuggled children to Switzerland.

NL: The, the Scouts, Eclaireurs? Was he a member of the Eclaireurs?

SS: I don't know. I forget which book, relatively recently.

NL: Do you know his last name?

SS: Epstein.

NL: Oh, Epstein.

SS: Well, it was a book about the Jews in the French Underground, and he was mentioned in it. Anyway, we lived with them and shared a house. There was no food, you know, your question that my birthday present in 1943 was one egg. That gives you an idea.

NL: Were you getting any help at all from any of the farmers in the area? Did they help you with...?

SS: No, only, you know, you could buy stuff at a high price...

NL: If you had money?

SS: Yeah, yeah, [unclear].

NL: And Paula and her husband were living off what? Cash they got from selling goods, or did they still have some money?

SS: Yeah he traff...

Tape three, side one:

NL: We are on Tape 3, Side 1, continuing our interview with Dr. Sonja Samson. About trafficking in [unclear]...

SS: And Vic-sur-Cére, in this part, which is close to Aurillac, living with the Epsteins, there I remember going to school, and I remember walking some five kilometers to and from school. I don't have much memory or recall about school. But I mean, it was the usual, wherever I went to school, they had traveled a lot of ground that I had to catch up on.

NL: You were always behind, of course, in your studies?

SS: Right.

NL: Do you remember having any trouble studying or did you have enough light or were you able to get books?

SS: We used candles.

NL: Candles. Did any of the children give you any food, do you remember?

SS: No.

NL: Were they aware?

SS: There was a source of food on the way to school, which was swell. There was a factory there where they extracted the oil from walnuts, and they discarded this compressed walnut. Tasted awful.

NL: But you used to eat it?

SS: Awful. It leaves a terrible after-taste, but you could gorge yourself on the stuff and really get sick.

NL: No vegetables in the fields that you could...?

SS: No.

NL: That you could swipe?

SS: No. Also, it was winter to an extent. Anyway, from there we went to Chambéry in Savoie, and I remember one attempt with Paula, Leon, and their son, who always was seven years younger than I, trying to get to Switzerland. And I remember getting as far as the border, and I think that must have been the time when there was--when it switched from the Italians to the Germans, and the borders were closed and there was no way of getting to Switzerland.

NL: It would have been October, '43? The autumn of '43 Mussolini fell and the Italians were thrown out of the Riviera area.

SS: Must have been around that time.

NL: Winter, you said. So, you couldn't get through?

SS: Right. So we went back to Chambéry and in Chambéry there was a school, a boarding school, which used to be, structurally, was an old convent from the 15th Century or so, ancient place, which was a public school, because, you know, by then I was 12 years old, the public school in--there were none for that age in the villages, so a lot of the farmers

and peasants would send their kids to Chambéry, the capital of the region, and Paula and her husband lived, and the son, lived in the town of Chambéry in an apartment, and I stayed in the school, and the principal knew I was Jewish.

NL: What was his attitude toward you?

SS: Her. It was a woman.

NL: Yes.

SS: Made like she didn't know. But the assistant principal, I think, had some dealings with the Underground or something, so they were willing to hide a Jewish kid in the school.

NL: You were the only one, as far as you knew?

SS: As far as I knew, until one day, much towards the end of the war, there was another girl who sang, who had a nice voice. In fact, she was said to have a voice, she sounded like popular French singer at the time, Charles Trenet.

NL: Oh, I have some of his records.

SS: And she sang "*Bei mir bist du schain*."

NL: For heaven's--in Yiddish!

SS: Not in Yiddish, in French. It was translated in French. But there was something about the way she sang it, that a week later, I said to her, "You came from far, too, didn't you?" And she said, "Yes." That's the only time we ever talked. It was very dangerous in that school, because a dormitory is not like an American school dormitory. A dormitory there consisted of this huge dorm, I mean, a massive thing with beds one close to the other, and you ate and you slept with each other all the time, and certainly a lot of the girls did--there was a lot of prying. There was another, this was the *coll?ge*. There was another school, a *lycée*, in which several Jewish kids were reported to their parents by their classmates and were deported. So, it was very dangerous, and I had to account for Paula, who came to visit me and I pretended she was my mother, but she had a different name because she was remarried. I mean, I just concocted a whole story.

NL: You just fabricated a whole story?

SS: Oh, yes, I was very facile at that and never mixing up stories. I just kept it straight. So, it was in the boarding school that I really in part survived by hanging out with the more rebellious kind of kids, girls. It was an all girls' school. And engaged in mischief in the interest of, you know, "You are one of us," kind of thing, and that lessened the kind of questions, the probing, the questions. I remember there was one girl who was particularly, "acting outside" we would call it today, by the name of Maxine. And she was Protestant, and so we shared a lot in common because we were different, a Protestant in a totally Catholic country.

NL: Were you expected to adhere to certain religious customs?

SS: No.

NL: Say prayers and so on?

SS: No, it was a public school.

NL: But, of course, mostly Catholic.

SS: Yeah, the kids were Catholic.

NL: And were Paula and her husband also then required to falsify their identity?

SS: Yes, in fact, I...

NL: Make up stories...?

SS: In fact, I helped them invent a false name. I was good at that, also. I had a lot of special skills! Their last name was Slucki, Slutsky, in any other language. In French it was Slucki, S-L-U-C-K-I, and I invented the name Slushard because they hadn't thought about it. It's funny. There are some things you remember with a great deal of vividness. Because I felt that if they were arrested and the son, the boy was little, and if he slipped into Slucki, well, Slucka is, Sluchard is hard for him to say. Also, there is a Suchard chocolate.

NL: Very clever.

SS: So...

NL: Were you furtive about your behavior, or had you overcome that fear, that apprehension about your identity, so that you could move freely among the children?

SS: No, I was forever on guard. Forever on guard. I mean, including, with this girl Dora. Later, we became friends.

NL: The Protestant girl?

SS: No, the Jewish girl that sang "*Bei mir bist du schain*."

NL: Oh, the Jewish girl.

SS: We never talked. That was the only time we talked.

NL: And that was a very brief conversation.

SS: Very simple. I said to her, "You are from very far away, too, aren't you?" And she said, "Yes," and that was it. And she said, "Yes," and that...

NL: That was it. But, you got some food at this boarding school, finally, I gather.

SS: Oh, yeah. I remember every other day having noodles, pasta *vermicelles*, these little noodles, and you couldn't tell the noodles from the white worms. They were thoroughly intermixed. So we got meat as well. [laughter]

NL: Oh, my dear, my dear. You didn't get sick from all this, I hope?

SS: No, I was strong as a horse. I didn't get sick until recently.

NL: How long did you stay in the boarding school?

SS: Well, about a year. About a year. Okay...

NL : A long stay.

SS: Well, you know, at that time, of course, at age 12, one year is a twelfth of your life, and at 50 is one-fiftieth of your life, so a year seemed long, endless, very long.

NL: Very long. Yes.

SS: Things were very difficult in the school. There were the usual furloughs, the weekends going home, vacations, and everybody had a place to go home to. When you mentioned food, the French have a tradition called *go?ter* [snack], which is at four o'clock

you eat something. And, of course, since all of these were farm girls, they each had a little wooden box, with a lock, from home full with all kinds of goodies and, of course, I didn't have anything.

NL: Did they share any of that?

SS: Rarely, and when they did, I saved the food and brought it to Paula, for the kid, and didn't eat it.

NL: You went home every weekend?

SS: No, I could never sleep there. I could only go there and visit. You see, the whole idea of putting me in the boarding school was, in case their apartment would be raided, then they would only find three people instead of four. This meant, of course, that during holidays and such times I was all by myself.

NL: You stayed in the school?

SS: In the school, which was, I mean, it still is, an enormous convent, medieval, with huge arches, ceilings, and I don't know, about 40 feet high, or whatever, and that was scary.

NL: You were the only child left there?

SS: Right, and there was the concierge, who was a seedy kind of a character, and there was a huge wall around it. But the most dangerous part was oftentimes coming back to school at night, being followed by Germans, who were marching up and walking about the street.

Talking about food, you know, we had, as you know, there were ration cards for bread of which, of course, there was never enough, and I had found a bakery where there was a woman, saleswoman, who was very absentminded or whatever, so I'd always have the bread stamps in one hand and always--that was going on errands for Paula, and figured out a way of, you know, say, if it was 10 cents, have a dollar bill or whatever that required change, and of giving her the money, and while she counted and so on, and having, showing the money and the stamp, and while she was busy with the money, I'd hide the food stamp and get out that way without ever giving her the stamps and that's how we got our bread.

NL: She would never ask for it?

SS: I was able to distract her. But also having it ready in case it dawned on her that she didn't, hadn't collected the stamp, you know, "Oh, I'm sorry." It was at that same goddamned bakery that in back of me one day, two German soldiers looked at her in awe at her fingernails, which had dark red polish, and one saying to the other, "Oh, look at her *Blut*" [blood] with relish. And I swore I'd never wear make-up. I'd never wear--okay. What was difficult also was that Paula and Leon, by virtue of being hidden, they hid in a house, I mean, in an apartment in Chambéry on the second floor, but on the third floor, these were narrow round bat-like stairs, but upstairs lived a whore. So, there was constant trampling, and it was terrifying, because you always heard the boots going up and, of course, it was the soldiers going up to the whore and you never knew, you know, the knock on the door.

NL: Were they able to get out of the house at any time?

SS: They didn't. They didn't. They relied on me to...

NL: You brought food for them and messages, I guess, information, or whatever.

SS: Well, they could sneak out a little here and there, but I'd take Ariel, their son, out, which was an ordeal, because we got along fine until we were close to getting near the house. He really was a brat, and then he would let go of my hand and run upstairs and cry like I had done something terrible to him. Yet, the whole time we were out, we would sing, we would harmonize or whatever. I remember one time, walking home with Ariel. Chambéry is a medieval town. That's where the Duke of Savoie used to have their castle, whatever, and walking down one of these narrow streets, when all of a sudden I heard a bang and shooting and I saw a man falling dead. I was walking with Ariel, and I just yanked him and went all the way around and we ran and made it. Interestingly, this brat understood when things were for real.

NL: He did?

SS: Not a word. Not a word.

NL: Oh, interesting.

SS: Anyway, that part was difficult, was the having to go back to that dorm at night, and always being chased or followed or whatever by Germans. I was 12 and I was developed early, secondary characteristics, breasts, and so on, so that part was very difficult.

NL: Was there any adult there whom you liked, who liked you, who gave you any special attention?

SS: No.

NL: A teacher?

SS: The only special, the only attention that I got was for being a good student. You know, I always pulled that, and I got some attention for not being so good in gym. You know, you had to do gym.

NL: You had to do gym.

SS: But, no...

NL: And so, after a year, Paula and her husband and Ariel left this area? What happened? You said, you were at school for about a year.

SS: Chambéry got to be too hot a city for anybody, and so they found refuge in the mountains in Savoie in a castle owned by people who inherited the castle, and they hired out, he as a gardener and she as a cook. And then in May...

NL: And you, you went with them?

SS: No, I stayed in the school.

NL: You stayed in the school.

SS: I stayed in the school. Then, in May of 19--May 25, 1944, Chambéry, the city was bombed and, well, alerts were too frequent; I mean, hardly was there a night that you slept through. Most [unclear] there were alarms. You see, Chambéry, as you know,

was a strategically located city, because that was the crossroad between France and Italy. That's where the main railroad was and that was the beginning of the main thoroughfare between the two countries. So, I remember many times waking up when the rest of the girls came back up from having been downstairs in the cave, in the shelter and I...

NL: You slept through it.

SS: I slept through it. Or many times sleeping downstairs and mostly we slept standing up. But on that day the city was bombed, and the city was bombed badly. We knew it was the Americans who had done it because they had missed the main railroad depot. [laughter] The whole goddamn town was in flames.

NL: Let me interrupt you just a minute, please. Were you getting any news about the progress of the war during any of this time?

SS: No, no.

NL: Were any of the teachers sharing any of this with you?

SS: No, no.

NL: Singing "Maréchal, we love you."

SS: Right.

NL: Did you have to express your loyalty to Pétain?

SS: Oh, sure. In fact, there was an essay contest which I won. [laughter] It was an essay contest sponsored by Vichy by Maréchal Pétain. It had to do with something, write something about yourself, which I totally invented and illustrated and sent in, and I won the first prize.

NL: How did you fabricate this new identity? Do you remember how the story went?

SS: I think, I have the story someplace.

NL: But you had to express your loyalty?

SS: No, not in it, but that was part, to just participate in this literary competition. It was in itself an act of...

NL: Did any Vichy dignitaries come to the school?

SS: No, I think, they sent whatever it was, a book, a mention, you know, a shindig.

NL: Was there any underground rebelliousness in the school, that is, a pro-Allied, anti-German feeling that you could detect?

SS: None that I was aware of. None and, believe me, I would have known.

NL: Okay.

SS: None, none, none.

NL: Wasn't that the song "Maréchal, we love you"?

SS: Maréchal, *nous vous...*

NL: This was the heart of Vichy land? At least, this was the posture?

SS: Right. Anyway, the whole goddamn town is in flames.

NL: Right.

SS: And the Americans had done it again. It was interesting. By then we were able to recognize by the drone of the airplanes...

NL: Which plane?

SS: ...whether it was British or American. I'm sure I couldn't do that today. Also, the city for some reason, that was May, was depleted of water. Maybe it was a drought. I don't know. I just remember walking through the city all in flames and the usual question: Where the hell do I go now? Paula and Leon, as I said, were in hiding.

NL: Did you hear from them through any route, any passage?

SS: Well, sure enough, Leon came. He was a good man. He came and got me.

NL: He came and got you. After the bombardment?

SS: Yeah. He came and got me. He had heard the town was in flames and he came and got me and he told me that he had found a nice place for me. That this was a place in Savoie, in the mountains close to where he and Paula were hiding, and that it was an *auberge*, which was kind of a *pension* kind of thing, and that the lady of the house needed an all-around maid. And he had found me a place. So, Leon and I take the bus and we get to the place. You get off the bus and you walk and this is really isolated. In the mountain, a little road goes up, and as we get to the top of the road, I see this woman who looked like a formidable lady, and as I got to know her, of course, this was her typical posture with her hands.

NL: Hands on her hips?

SS: Her hands on her hips. You know, "What's this?"

NL: No nonsense.

SS: And looking and saying to Leon, "Is that <u>you</u> again, I told you I didn't want to ever see you again. What the hell are you doing here? Get away." And I don't know what I said. I must have said something, as she narrated it later. She liked me right away. She knew she couldn't stand him. She knew she didn't want any part of him. There was something about me that she liked and so in her grubby, gruff way, she said, "All right. Leave her here and you get lost and I don't ever want to see you again."

NL: And where did he go?

SS: He went back to the castle where he was in hiding. So, I am living now with this lady. Her name is Frazie and her daughter, her daughter was about 20 years old, and this is '44; I'm 13.

NL: 13?

SS: Yeah, I'm 13. And the house itself was built also in medieval times. The walls were made of stone, a meter and a half wide. Frazie was a fascinating lady and that could take a whole hour to talk about her, where she came from...

NL: She had tenants? Or...

SS: No, Frazie–I stayed, I was living there with her daughter, going into the fields, doing chores. There was no water. The well was a kilometer down, downhill, and you *shlepped* every drop of water on your back. You know, with a thing on your back and

two pails on each hand. And they had one on the head, on top. They were good at that. I couldn't do that. But, anyway, I knew something strange was going on in this house, because there were men that came and that went, and it took me two months, even though I slept in the same bedroom with Frazie and her daughter, Lucie, and we were together all the time and I spent a lot of time alone with Lucie. It took me close to two months to figure out that it was the Underground. I didn't know if it was the Underground or the French militia. That was difficult. But I tried.

NL: What clues did you have?

SS: "Oh, goddamn it, we haven't had meat in so long. I guess, if it weren't for the Germans, maybe we might have meat," they would say.

NL: Anti-German?

SS: "Maybe we might have meat." "I am not anti-German, but if it weren't for the war or something," you know.

NL: Indirect?

SS: Oh, very, very indirect, totally...

NL: These were young men?

SS: Yes.

NL: Who were coming and going?

SS: Yeah, and no matter what, I mean, I was smart and clever and so were they. The other part was Frazie's reason for not wanting anybody in the house. This went on and on and on.

NL: She knew you were Jewish?

SS: No!

NL: She didn't.

SS: Oh, I invented a new story for Frazie. It was after the war that I talked to Frazie.

NL: What identity did you create for yourself, do you remember?

SS: My parents got killed during the evacuation of France of Northern France. My father had been in the army and I guess, [unclear], you know.

NL: And you could be consistent? You remembered it to tell...

SS: As Frazie said after the war, it wasn't till after the war that I told her I was Jewish, it wasn't till after the war that I told Paula, who was five kilometers away in the village, that this was the French Underground. I mean I didn't trust Paula with that, and I didn't trust Frazie that I was Jewish.

NL: Remarkable, the skills you developed for survival.

SS: Yes.

NL: It is remarkable.

SS: Yeah, I wrote my Ph.D. dissertation, the first paper, on coping.

NL: Coping--you knew how.

SS: You know, that was before coping became a drugstore product. But, anyway...

NL: So, what were some of the other clues that you had that this was an Underground?

SS: Just to stay with that one trend of thought. Frazie said after the war, when I told her that I was Jewish, she was very, very hurt.

NL: That you hadn't told her?

SS: That I didn't trust her. She said I did a good job about my story. But she said there was only one loophole that if it hadn't been that we were so busy and so involved with, you know, survival, and more than that, the whole business of the Underground business, that what she noted, the one discrepancy that she noted--remember, this was 1944. My story was that I last saw my parents in 1940. And she felt that I had too much of a vivid recall. She realized, when she thought about it, which she really didn't allow herself to do much either, that that part didn't jibe. You know, a recall of two years versus four years.

NL: Four years. Interesting. She was a very alert lady, too, obviously.

SS: Very, very bright.

NL: What was this Underground doing?

SS: It was...

BL: She had a star, a *Michelin* star, for her inn, before the war, with no running water.

SS: One star, *Michelin*.

NL: Well, that's low grade, isn't it?

SS: To get any star in *Michelin* is good.

NL: Oh, is that so?

SS: You know, the number of one-stars in *Michelin*, a number.

NL: Excuse me.

SS: You know, the guide, the guide *Michelin*?

NL: The guide, yes. I thought, three or four would make it an excellent...

SS: Well, they only, they have one four-star, I think, in America.

NL: Oh, so one-star is very good.

SS: One star is in France.

NL: Without running water. Did she have good food?

SS: Yes. She was a superb cook.

NL: So, you were fed there, I hope?

SS: No, there was no food.

NL: This was...

SS: The star was pre-war.

NL: So, the eating was no better here?

SS: No, no, no. Except that there, you know, she grew vegetables and stuff, but, again, all the food there really went to serve to the men.

NL: What were they providing for the Underground?

SS: Oh.

NL: Arms as well as food or hiding places for them?

SS: No, basically, hers was a substation of the headquarters of the French Underground, the *Armée Secrete*. The link there were, was that, like one of the men, Jacques, who later married the daughter, Lucie, he was a parachutist from London, and up in the mountains, arms, ammunitions, and so on were parachuted, and so, her house was a meeting ground, a *liaison* from--and also at times they had a radio to listen to the messages, to get ready to...

Tape three, side two:

NL: ...role of the underground at this home. Were you privy to any of these activities?

SS: Well, when I finally established myself with the daughter first...

NL: Lucie?

SS: Yeah. I knew that I had to get through Lucie. And it was more that kind of strategy, more and more whatever current event was going on, to make a comment about it without acknowledging which side are you on.

NL: You were able to walk the tightrope?

SS: Right, and then, as I got to know Lucie better, and win her confidence, then I became a little more daring about making the kind of comment I made earlier about there being food if it weren't for the Germans, before, it would be: "It's rough that there is no food during the war." That kind of thing.

NL: That was the...

SS: That was a gradual...

NL: That was the extent of the shift?

SS: Oh, yeah.

NL: For instance, to me, that seems to be an almost imperceptible thing, but it spelled a great deal to you.

SS: And for her. First you say, "It's rough, isn't it, there not being any food?" And then, she would say, "*? la guerre, comme ? la guerre*." [Expression meaning "War is war."]

NL: So you went incrementally...

SS: Right. And then, went along with Lucie making more such observations. Say, the only car you would see down the road, down the valley, you know, up from the mountains, which as I said was the main highway between France and Italy, and then to say, "By God! A car! I wonder if that's a police. Maybe it is, police chief, I guess the French police, could be a French police. Could be the Germans. Could be the Germans.

NL: To me...

SS: Then, a week later, a month, you'd say, "Ah, Germans do have petrol. We don't." This kind of thing.

NL: Ah, that sort of differentiation.

SS: Oh, sure. Hey, your life is at stake. You don't babble.

NL: But for a 13-year old to have picked these techniques up, that's what's astounding.

SS: I should think that was true of most young people who survived alone, you know, the way that I did.

NL: Survival...

SS: You know, you put your foot in your mouth and you have no more head.

NL: And you learned that very quickly.

SS: Sure. Sure.

NL: So, you began to, then, share some of these subtle things with Lucie. How much time did you spend with her mother? How much conversation did you have with her?

SS: Not too much. Frazie was a relatively gruff lady and very...

NL: She was gardening and cooking?

SS: Cooking and tending to stuff and, of course, as I later learned, dealing with the Underground. But, you know, she is a peasant stock.

NL: Peasant.

SS: Frazie just died. She was in her 80's. She died last year.

NL: Not much communication?

SS: Well, after the war, yes.

NL: But I mean at the time.

SS: No. No.

NL: How did you spend your days?

SS: Work. Work. [laughter] Lady, you worked! I mean, there is no water, just the one that you *shlep* up.

NL: Did you--were you able to get into town at all, or were you confined to the house?

SS: There was no time for anything. When I finally, when I finally made contact with Lucie, it was an enormous relief. You know, part of what I remember was really being most concerned about sleeping with these people. My fear always was that I might talk in my sleep. And for some reason I was quite terrified of that. Apparently, fortunately, I never did. But that was nightmarish. That preoccupied me. And I had adopted a style as much as now, I babble a lot and I talk a lot and so on. I talked very little. I talked very, very little. And I never showed any feelings.

NL: How hard that must have been for you as a child!

SS: No. I guess I am trying to differentiate. When you--the places where you express sympathy are not places that hit me. In the same way, one day you said, "How was it about being in the camp after having been used to silk pillows and silk linens and so on?" Right? Well, these are not the thoughts that come. This is...

NL: But at the time...

SS: The thoughts at the time are very simple. Being in the new place, being in the camp as opposed to someplace else, you know, each new place there's an intense sense of relief. Once you get there, to size it up and to know where it is. This is it.

NL: To fit in.

SS: No.

NL: Not even that.

SS: To know that you can exist.

NL: To be.

SS: You can exist there. It's terrifying until you get there. To this day, when I travel--I went for a period in my life of really loving to travel. I don't want to travel right now. I still want to go back to Israel, visit Israel, but I've noticed when I travel, even if I have reservations of a place, a hotel, even if it is in the United States, I am fidgety and restless and uncomfortable until I am not in the hotel, but in the room. And I never eat breakfast, I never have, I mean, even as a child, all I remembered that I never ate breakfast, okay. When I travel, I am miserable until I have my breakfast. So, what I am trying to indicate is that the, the order of preoccupation, the concerns have nothing to do with what one thinks of...

NL: Normatively.

SS: Normatively or among Americans in particular. There's a sense of priority. One of the senses is "This place is the best place. The next one can only be worse." So, however, much of a rat hole or a cesspool the present is, it's one that you know. It's familiar.

NL: And you are alive.

SS: And you are alive in it. And it's endurable, and the terror is about the next one.

NL: Psychologically, having repressed all those "normative" feelings, the need to share and to express your fears and anxieties...

SS: I think, Americans have taught my colleagues, shrinks have taught that that is so important. At that time it wasn't important, no. No, you only talk to people about real issues. You know.

NL: Survival.

SS: For one suffered for others. So, there wasn't you know, "I feel." Who gives a damn how you feel. It doesn't matter how you feel.

NL: It's just--so very young. That's what's so gripping, 12, 13 years old. And coming out of a relatively spoiled, indulgent family. That leap into a whole different world--that's...

SS: Well, that's like, you know, we spent some time earlier, describing where I came from. And I think that was true of my parents. That while both came from great wealth and opulence, both were remarkably adaptive. Never complained, you know, never bemoaned...

NL: Very strong.

SS: And, as I said, that was what impressed me so in the camps.

NL: Could I, excuse me, go ahead. Please.

SS: Go ahead.

NL: Could I impinge for just a moment on private feelings now? Do you remember grieving for Mother and Father at all? After you got to Paula and after you got into the dormitory, or did you crush these feelings?

SS: You know, the strange thing about that is I never, to this day, I don't think that I remember not grieving.

NL: It was always there.

SS: It still is.

NL: It is still there.

SS: It still is. I think that in some major ways, I am a hopeless optimist about almost everything, and in an equally fundamental and major way, I am an extremely depressed, really depressed person. And I don't think the grieving has ever ceased. I think that the grieving never had anything formalized. And I think that as a result, the notion--okay, that what made the grieving so difficult was the fact that until the day that I got those papers that we discussed earlier, with some arbitrary date saying my parents were killed in Auschwitz, the fantasy that they were alive was very strong. It was lesser for my mother. I always had a kind of fantasy that because she was ill, that probably she was spared much of the nightmare and died because she was ill. But I always had the fantasy that my father, being so strong and so adept and having the skills and trades of a peasant who could survive anyway, that maybe he had been liberated by the Russians and he was still alive. The final realization that all of that was fantasy had nothing to do with some papers issued by some Nazis, Germans, but it really became concrete the day that I got on the boat in Sweden, in Göteborg, on the "Gripsholm", to come to the United States, and as I watched the distance between the land, Europe, and the water, the ocean getting wider and wider, that is when I really broke up. And that's when I, for some reason, that was a finale.

NL: The separation?

SS: That was it, yeah. But so, the problem was that, you know, people, when people kept coming back, not knowing, not knowing--I corresponded after the war with relatives in the United States, as much as I thought, badly as I told you, that's not--there is more about Jewish agencies, I thought the most remarkable people in the world were the Chicago Post Office.

NL: Strange.

SS: After the war I addressed a letter to my cousin, his name, Chicago, Illinois. And they delivered it!

NL: Oh, that is remarkable.

SS: I mean.

NL: I don't think it could happen today.

SS: No.

NL: The Post Office is much more efficient is those days. Well, if you are not too tired, let's just take another few minutes for your experiences with the Underground, after you gained Lucie's confidence and you were able to indicate where your sympathies were. Were you enlisted in some way?

SS: Well, by, you know, once I was accepted as a member of the family, as someone who could be trusted, and that you couldn't--you weren't trusted until you have

proved yourself. I mean, as much as the French are verbal and so on, it was a war. And words didn't mean nothing. It was deeds. And once I demonstrated that I was dependable, then there was no more problem. After the war, they said, all of them, that is, Frazie, Lucie, and Jacques, who was a young man, that perhaps one of the things among others that they best remembered about me was my sense of humor. That the most grotesque, horrible, miserable time, for some reason, I found something funny to say, to put it in perspective, and to laugh, and I think that--you asked me how did I survive, and I think that was part of it. Okay. What my major part of the war contribution specific to the Underground was the delivery of messages. As I indicated, because Jacques, who had been parachuted from London, and there was another man, a captain, who was the commander-in-chief of the region, who often came there, they received, they knew the code of the information that was transmitted from London, which had to do with the delivery of ammunition and stuff, in the mountains. So then, the object was to transmit the messages to the various smaller units along the way. And the main method of locomotion, I am thinking of the 2,000-year-old man, you know, the story about the 2,000-year-old man, and when he was asked which kind of locomotion did you use in those days and he said, "Fear. We ran like hell." It was bicycles.

NL: Bicycles.

SS: And knowing the mountains, you know, climbing up.

NL: You bicycled up those mountains?

SS: Bicycling up the mountains and also going up to the mountains to the farmers to get eggs. That was another, that was a neat trick, and I was not born and raised in the mountains. The shoes we had were wooden soles. And I am appalled by the current fad! Goddamn America! You know, these clunky wooden shoes. We had no leather. Try to climb mountains with these wooden cloppers, but, anyway, you did it mostly on your ass. That is, you go all the way up to the mountains, which was a four or five hour walk. Lucie showed me the way once.

NL: Once?

SS: Once.

NL: And you had to master it?

SS: Yes.

BL: And she showed you the way to get up a tree, too, but not the way to get down, and you figured that out yourself.

SS: So, you know, getting some eggs from the peasants, carrying them in the basket, and the idea was to get back down and you didn't dare break an egg.

NL: Of course not.

SS: You didn't dare. So, that's why I said you ended up with a raw *tochis* from sliding down. But there wasn't a broken egg.

NL: Did you meet any other young people who were involved in similar activities?

SS: It was not a social club.

NL: But, I mean, no other networks that you contacted.

SS: No.

NL: Because there was a very wide ranging network, and many...

SS: Right, but I assumed that because this was the headquarters, it was very isolated, and it was important that it be so. Anyways, how did we transport messages? There were two methods. Lucie happened to have a big mouth, and I don't mean it figuratively. I mean it literally, a big, oral cavity. And in those days in France, aspirin containers were flat little things, sort of oval shaped, you know, that you pull apart and put together.

NL: Yes.

SS: It's hard to describe it verbally. They were made out of tin or something. And that's what aspirin came in. Because she had such a big mouth, the message was housed in that thing, and she hid it in her mouth and she had practiced how, if necessary, she could swallow it.

NL: Swallow it?

SS: Sure. You didn't get caught with a message in your mouth. Not having a big mouth and, in fact, having a very small mouth, I mean, oral cavity, I invented a method of carrying the messages, which is, you take, I put the message in a container like that and attached the container to a wire so. On the container I made a hook like a nail bent around like that. I also had a cork. Anyway, take a cork, put a thing on it, put the message, remove the seat of the bicycle. Sorry, I'm thinking in French now. Remove the seat of the bicycle, then you have this long bar, right? Okay, put the message in there, top it with a cork, and the cork has a bent nail so that you can tip the bike upside down, shake it, it won't fall off. But if you know about it you can go down there and retrieve it and pull it up. That's when also it was important for me not to know German, because one time, on one of these missions on a bridge, the Germans stopped me and wanted my bike, and they talked about me and I could understand what they said and that was the scary part. The scary part was not just understanding what they said, but it was the fear that they would see that I could understand them, and to continue acting like I didn't understand them. I was just a dumb peasant kid. Since Frazie didn't know that I was Jewish and Lucie didn't know, they decided, Frazie decided it was important that I, you know, be communion. So, they understood about the war and all that and poor orphan, so I got private tutoring from the local priest, and with the local priest the difficult part was, I was supposed to be dumb, and, you know, all these terrible things that had happened, and I didn't know much about Catholicism. And he was awed, oh, yes. I have heard of Jesus and I knew the basic prayers. So, I became a good Catholic.

NL: Went to mass?

SS: Oh, yeah.

NL: Communion?

SS: Oh, yes, the whole bit. I still smell that holy water.

NL: The incense, the holy water.

SS: Yes.

NL: How long did you stay with Frazie?

SS: Till the war ended.

NL: And for this part of the country, when was liberation?

SS: We liberated ourselves, actually, August 22 through 24, 1944. Right. The war formally ended in '45.

NL: Paris was liberated, I think, in '44.

SS: Yeah, right. That's when we literally liberated ourselves.

NL: What was the signal for liberation? How did you know you were--the war was over?

SS: The same Captain Blanchard came in a uniform in a car.

NL: Revealed himself?

SS: And said, "You can put up the flag." That was also the day that I caught the man whom I later learned was the butcher of Grenoble, which is a city. Here is Chambéry. Okay. And Frazie's house was like 40 kilometers from Chambéry up in the mountains. Here is Grenoble. And...

NL: Do you remember his name?

SS: No, I have thought about it and, you know, I could ask, I could write to Lucie and find out. What happened on that day, as you asked, Blanchard came up in a car and again, that same top of the road, it was a dirt road, where Frazie's house was. By the way, Frazie's first cousin lived, had a house adjacent to her house, just separated by another little tiny road, but quite adjacent. Until the end of the war he didn't know whether it was the French Underground or the *milice* [militia].

NL: Extraordinary.

SS: You know, and as I said, I saw Paula once in a while, but I was afraid. I was afraid that if I let Paula know that I was in the Underground, and she ever got caught or her husband or her son, she'd sell out. And likewise I was afraid that if I got caught and Frazie and Lucie, that the price for harboring a Jew would be double, number one. Number two, they were quite anti-Semitic.

NL: You picked that up? It was obvious?

SS: It wasn't hard. I mean, all Jews have flat feet and long noses!

NL: But they expressed this?

SS: Yeah, they told jokes about it and they talked about Jews in that way, and when after the war, when I told them I was Jewish, the first comment was, "But you don't look it...

NL: Or, you're not like the others.

SS: Yeah, right.

BL: A white Jew. A wonderful phrase. A white Jew.

NL: So, then, your friend came up in a car and in uniform and announced that you could raise the flag.

SS: Right. And almost simultaneously or within minutes of his arrival, up the road came again, you know, we are standing at the house and here is the kitchen and you can look out and you can see what is coming up way down the road, what's coming up the road. Because the Germans apparently had been finally very suspicious of the activities. And we were slated to be...

NL: Erased.

SS: Oh, yeah, so we did a timely job. We did it before they got us. But the documents they found afterwards there was no doubt about it, that the house had been cased and they were just...

NL: And how long did you stay with Frazie after the war?

SS: Well, then, after the war I went back to my famous boarding school and then we moved up, but you wanted to hear the story about the last day.

NL: Yes, the last day.

SS: The butcher of Grenoble. So anyway, Blanchard came and there was, you know, embracing and shaking of hands and celebration and all that. When this man and this woman show up at the top of the road, you have to be Lucie or myself to be able to manage that road on the bike without getting off and walking. It's steep. They were pushing the bike and they looked dragged out, pretty *farshlept* and haggard, and the man said to Blanchard, that they had just left the Germans who had temporarily seized them, that they knew of important German documents that would be priceless to the French in the Underground, and what he wanted was a pass to get across the Underground line to go and retrieve these papers. And in the moment of the heat, celebration, Blanchard pulled out a pad of paper and was about to give it to them. They were all busy, I mean, they're French, and I watched and I didn't like these people and I didn't like what he was doing, and the best way to get to a Frenchman--I mean, I'm saying this because I remember that it was deliberate on my part, saying to Blanchard, the man also said that there were a lot of bikes down the road, and I said to Blanchard, "Look at this old rusted, rusty thing that I have been dragging for the work. I'd like a new bicycle. Why don't you instead of writing that thing to the man, why don't you let me go with him so I can get a bicycle." That's the only way to appeal to a Frenchman. They understand greed. [laughter] So, there was a chorus, "Oh, yes." By the way, my name, in keeping with what I said earlier, the name I made up for Slucki for Suchard, my name was Solange Sansont S-A-N-S-O-N-T, spelled in the French way. So my initials remained the same, and Solange, I told him, you know, nobody ever called me Solange. I was called always Sonnie. Now, we are back to the same thing. Again, I was afraid of slipping and, you know...

NL: No, it's very clever.

SS: So, the course then, was well of course, since I was entitled to my piece of celebration, of course, Sonnie should have a bike. The Germans stole a lot of new bikes.

"Go with the man and get a bike." And that is how, because I didn't trust him, this man and I embarked and we walked down the road and we walked and we walked and we didn't say anything. Nothing. And I took shortcuts, so that he couldn't find his way back. And we get to the main road, along the river, the Is?re, which is a major river again, that connects between France and Italy. And along that road, the road was littered, and I mean littered, with dead German soldiers. Many of them were young, they were all ages. And he got very frightened. It was a funny, strange feeling I had. I didn't hate them. I was no longer scared.

NL: It was the chief difference.

SS: That was it. There was nothing. I mean, how do you hate a corpse?

NL: And the man walking with you?

SS: He started shaking and probably got diarrhea.

NL: And what happened then?

SS: I didn't say a word. Remember I'm a kid. Here's this man and I said to him looking around, I said, "Monsieur, did you see enough?"

Tape four, side one:

August 4, 1985 (in Princeton)

NL: Now, continuing my interview with Dr. Sonja Samson, of Princeton, this is Nora Levin interviewing on August 4, 1985. All right, Sonja, if you will continue, please.

SS: Okay. As I recall, and I don't want to repeat myself, I left off at the place which involved a day in 1944, August 21 or 22 where, involving the butcher of Grenoble. I don't remember the details of what I said last time. As I recall, I left off at the place where this man came up the road with a woman. They were pushing bicycles. They looked disheveled and they knew for some reason--it wasn't clear then how--that the underground headquarters were at that house and also that Blanchard, the local, the captain of the local Underground, that is, the French *Armée Secr?te*, the Secret Army, had stopped by. His reason for having come was to simply tell us that it was okay to put up the French flag. The man approached Blanchard and said that he wanted a permit to cross the lines because, by now, all the lines were overtaken by the French Underground, that he knew where the Germans had hidden a substantial number of documents and that he could retrieve them and bring them back to the Underground and that they would be of great interest. Carried away by the enthusiasm of the day, the elation that it was all over, that we had won at least in that part of France, Blanchard pulled out a piece of paper and was about to write this man a permit. I didn't like the man and I didn't like the woman, and I barged in and I said that I had heard from talking to the man's wife briefly, that down the road there were many bicycles that the Germans had stolen and abandoned, and that I would like to go along with the man to get a bicycle. Blanchard and the other people who were there thought, of course, I was entitled to a bicycle. I had used this old clunker before and, certainly, the least they could do for me was to let me have a bike. So I said, "There's no need. The guys know me. There's no need for you to write such a permit. I'll get through. Don't write him one." So he pulled it back in. And the only reason that the son of a bitch didn't get, you know, a piece of paper that would have let him--a pass, pass is the word. Okay. So, I...

NL: How did he react? When you interjected yourself that way? Must have been furious.

SS: Possibly. He didn't show it; he looked very docile. If he had expressed any such, he would certainly have aroused suspicion, so he just responded passively and didn't say anything. So, it was decided that his wife, his so-called wife, looked also disheveled and tired and I suggested maybe she could stay behind. I didn't feel like struggling with two of them.

NL: Were you at all frightened?

SS: No.

NL: At the prospect of going off with them?

SS: No. No. It wasn't foolish, you know. It really wasn't.

NL: Well, you diverted him obviously from something quite nefarious.

SS: Yeah, that was...

NL: Very vital. But, now that you are with him, how did you feel?

SS: What was foremost in my mind was not personal safety. It really never was, but really the damage that this man could do. So we set off on foot. He and I, and we walked, and I took all kinds of shortcuts to go down the mountain and get over to where the main road was. I mentioned that before. That's the major highway between Chambéry and Italy. And it's Valley Is?re, the major river and we walked and we walked and it was August, and August in Savoie can be and usually is sort of like here, extremely hot.

NL: Was he menacing in any way?

SS: No. He walked somewhat stooped and somewhat frightened. And it was a very odd experience that he seemed throughout extremely docile. There were still fire shots that could be heard in the distance and he was frightened and I assured him. [laughter] I kept saying, "Stick with me and you'll be all right!" We walked, and we got to the major highway, and the highway was littered to the right, to the left, with hundreds and hundreds of bodies, of dead soldiers, German soldiers. That was a very strange experience. I hadn't seen many corpses before in my life. I had seen some, but not many, and it was very odd. It was very odd, the day before, these were the people pursuing us, these were the people who had frightened me.

NL: Did you feel some elation or joy at seeing them?

SS: That's what I am describing. I felt relief, that it was over. I felt pity. Here were these yesterday, strong healthy men who were savages, because the night before and every night up in the mountains you could sit there in the Alps and as far as the eye could see at night, you saw fire. You know what they did. They rounded all up the villagers, men, women and children, rounded them up in the center of the village and burned them. And we found out afterwards that our town was next. They had, they knew just about with certainty what we were doing. It was just a matter of one day or two. So, it was kind of shocking. I mean, that was yesterday and here it is today. I have often been awed about the fact that I felt no hatred. I didn't rejoice. I felt, I don't know, I think partly numb, partly tormented, and...

NL: Maybe even disbelieving? That there could have been such change in one day in your life...

SS: That, too, I think.

NL: What was the reaction of this man through all of this?

SS: I just looked at him and I said to him, "Have you seen enough?" And he said, "Yes." And he was shaking. I mean, he was shaking like a leaf. He was terrified.

NL: The world had turned upside down for him, too.

SS: He was terrified. And you know, again you could hear occasional shooting in the distance, and I said, "Come on, follow me. We are going back." And we walked

back and we never said a word. I never asked about papers, documents, nothing. By then I had figured it out.

NL: Now, when you say "back," you meant back...

SS: To the house.

NL: To the house. Right. He followed?

SS: To the house. He followed like a puppy. Now, once we got back, I called Frazie and I made it clear that I wanted to talk to her alone, quick. I said, "Frazie, something is wrong with this guy. Quick, did you check his bikes, did you check the luggage?" She said, "No." I said, "Do it." We did and, of course, he had all kinds of ammunition and hand grenades and God knows what, all kinds of stuff.

NL: Did he have any papers on him which she could check against?

SS: I think that she simply called Blanchard and the others and they came and got them.

NL: Arrested him?

SS: Yes. And three days later, we found out that he was the butcher of Grenoble. You know, Barbie was the butcher of Lyon. This was the butcher of Grenoble. There's more to the story. I'm giving a very abbreviated version.

NL: Was he ultimately tried in the French court, or did he also escape? Like Barbie did?

SS: I think no. I think that...

NL: What was his name, again?

SS: I don't know. I don't remember. And when I was back there, I meant to ask the people there. Someday I'll ask.

NL: But he was referred to as the "butcher of Grenoble."

SS: Right. Right. See, what I learned, and as I've mentioned to you, the current work that I do, I work as a forensic psychologist, and I have found that experience repeated over and over and over again.

NL: Which experience, Sonja?

SS: Yesterday's...

NL: Monsters?

SS: Nightmares, monsters, sadist, bully, once caught, I mean, they fall apart. Totally.

NL: What are the dynamics involved here? It's just that when they have power, they have murderous intentions? Or can be murderous. Once they lose their power, all their strength goes?

SS: No, what takes over is utter self-pity and only one thought: "What's going to happen to me? What are they going to do to me?" Which is all too frequently mistaken by psychologists, by psychiatrists and by the court, as representing remorse. And guilt. It's not. It's just whining self-pity. But I learned it then, and it's infallible. Interesting.

NL: Now, what then did you do after this experience? Do you remember? It's August, '44. Did you try to reach any possible living connections and contacts? Or were you so numb that you just wanted to stay put for a while? You were how old, at this point, by the way?

SS: I was born January, 1931. So I was 13. No, to me the war was not officially over. The end of the war had not, what is it? The treaty had not been signed, and I didn't really trust it until--when was it, May?

NL: May '45.

SS: Yeah, I didn't trust until that time.

NL: Did you see any acts of retaliation against any French collaborators in this period? Late '44.

SS: Somehow, I don't know quite why nor how I personally did not. But I heard and I read and, you know, the same thing that has been known, which is, you know, the shaving of the women's heads, or women who had collaborated with the Germans. It was...

NL: You may have been isolated from that...

SS: Yeah. But it was also, you asked about the butcher of Lyon, of Grenoble, I mean, and I think that they killed him.

NL: The French.

SS: Yeah, I think that the most expeditious justice was done on the spot. I think that, to a large extent, they weren't taking chances and they just killed him.

NL: So, you stayed on at the house for a while?

SS: And I returned to Chambéry to the boarding school.

NL: To the boarding school?

SS: Right.

NL: Were any of your former friends or contacts still alive there?

SS: If you recall, there was one girl who had hidden in the school.

NL: Right.

SS: Who was Jewish.

NL: Right.

SS: That I knew of.

NL: Right.

SS: I didn't see her again, no.

NL: You don't know what happened to her?

SS: I saw her again when I went back to Europe in 1953. I contacted her.

NL: So, she did survive then?

SS: Yeah, she did survive, and I think, her father survived or her mother. One or the other came back.

NL: What did you find at the boarding house then? Were you welcomed back?

SS: At the boarding school? It just continued like before.

NL: Did you feel any special protectiveness or tenderness toward you?

SS: I never acknowledged that I was Jewish.

NL: Not even after...?

SS: It wasn't over. It wasn't over.

NL: It wasn't over for you. So, you then continued with your classes?

SS: Right.

NL: Were you able to discipline yourself sufficiently to study again, or was it something of a relief to be able to do that, finally? Do you remember?

SS: I remember that, at that time, I think, today we would call it acting out, but you see, at that time, nothing had really changed. Food was still unavailable, and nothing had changed. Except for the fact that there weren't any Germans right there in town, nothing had changed. There was no sense that the war had ended. That only happened in May.

NL: So, you were still hungry very often, then?

SS: Oh, absolutely. Absolutely.

NL: Were you able to get food in some other way, other than through school? I think, I remember your saying you used to go, what, out to the country, out to the weeds, and forage.

SS: Right.

NL: Did you have to do that?

SS: After that, on extended weekends and vacation I would go back to Frazie. That's the lady of the Underground.

NL: Ah, yes, at the house.

SS: Right, and sometimes peasants would give me a piece of bread and so on. But I did join girls who were, it's called "going over the wall." The boarding school, I described that earlier, was an old convent with huge walls, I guess, about 12 feet tall, that surrounded it like a fence. And some of the girls had boyfriends and stuff that they climbed the wall and met. I decided to go with them. I was tired of being so good.

NL: Scaled 12 foot walls?

SS: Yes.

NL: This would have to be at night, I suppose?

SS: Oh, yeah. And on the other side we met boys, and I met up with a boy whose parents owned a vegetable stand. So, in exchange for a kiss, I got two oranges, which I took back and brought to Paula for her kid, for the boy.

NL: Both. You didn't keep any for yourself?

SS: No. No.

NL: Were you able to get something for yourself? You turned everything over...

SS: No, but that isn't the end of the story. Then, somehow, I guess, a neighbor or somebody who lived across the street--that's all I did. I mean I just went out for the walk. I don't know if I described, but life in that boarding school was quite hideous. I did mention a bit, I say, I used to daydream being outside?

NL: I think so.

SS: I did describe that. Okay. So that was kind of fulfilling my daydream. You know, the climbing over the wall and being outside.

NL: And did you make some close friends among the students with whom you could daydream?

SS: I did it alone. No.

NL: But, I mean, in your own life within this school, were there any friendships that were especially meaningful to you?

SS: None. No. It was all distant. You know. None.

NL: So, you didn't even have that compensation?

SS: No.

NL: Who were these other children? Can you describe them a bit?

SS: Yeah, they were--I guess that boarding school would be the equivalent of American high school. In the villages, say, for example, the village in which I lived, when I was in the Underground with Frazie, the closest school, grammar school, was five kilometers away. I had mentioned to you, I think, when I lived in central France, in Vic-Sur-C?re, walking approximately five miles to and from school. Those were the equivalent of our grade schools, but as far as the equivalent of high school, there weren't any except in the major cities. I guess, the *préfecture* was, which to be roughly translated, if one thinks of each French *département*, as equivalent to a state, it would be the capital. Even though it's not analogous because they are not independent states. But that's in, say, the *préfecture*, that is...

NL: Major city.

SS: The major city would have a high school. Now, it was public school and the citizens of Chambéry would send their kids to the day school. The peasants would use the boarding school. Is that clear?

NL: So, it was not private at all?

SS: Oh, no, public. So that all the girls, to answer your question, of course, in France they did not have coeducational education, so all the girls were peasants.

NL: Peasant girls.

SS: Peasant girls, primitive, very superstitious, and all the rest of it. We were caught. The other girls had climbed that wall many times. I did it once. And we were caught. We were caught and it became a big affair. The town newspaper had, you know, "Nuns escape from the convent," and it was sort of a scandal.

NL: You were punished?

SS: Paula was called in, and Paula and the director of the school went through their tap dance of hurt. "How could you do this to us?" I'd done it to personally to hurt them that kind of stuff. [laughter] "Of all people! After all we have done for you. We've saved your life." Endless, endless nonsense.

NL: Were you able to dismiss it, or were you badly hurt by that?

SS: Well, I'll give you an example. I had kept a diary, and I have never in my life, to the best of my knowledge to this day, have ever been jealous or envious of anyone, ever. Funny, that way. But it was a goddamn well written diary. I wrote well. And sometimes I am jealous to know that that thing no longer exists. [unclear]

NL: Someone took it or was it just lost?

SS: Oh, because when they found out, they raided all my clothes and all my belongings and they found the diary even though I wrote not too explicitly. But, nevertheless, I poured out how I felt about Paula, how I felt about the director and all the rest of it. It was rather transparent. So, after everybody had read it, when I got it back I just tore it up.

NL: Oh, they did return it?

SS: Yes.

NL: But it had been despoiled?

SS: It had been violated. And I've much regretted that many times.

NL: I can imagine.

SS: Because I think it had a kind of vividness and so on.

NL: Surely. So contemporary with the events.

SS: Right, right.

NL: Adolescent's point of view.

SS: Right.

NL: How else did they punish you?

SS: I was expelled.

NL: You were expelled?

SS: I was expelled and that meant living with Paula who was hysterical about what I had done. It was also at that time on the day--well, I needed to have my tonsils removed, because I kept getting recurring throat infections, and this was done sitting up in a chair in a physician's office. He sat there. I sat here, and the nurse held a big tray and to this day when a dentist has to insert a needle way back I can re-feel it, I get this horrible.

NL: No anesthesia?

SS: No, nothing. So not only that, but that bastard was elated at the size of my tonsils and insisted that I look at them. He had never seen them that big. So after that, I walked home. And Paula had to take care of me and, of course, our relationship was...

NL: Damaged.

SS: Very strained, to say the least.

NL: You never could recover whatever it was that you had before?

SS: I guess, maybe that wasn't...

NL: There was not much to recover.

SS: Probably. Thus, I remember the day of the declaration of the end of the war. I forget what day it was, June?

NL: May 8th.

SS: May 8. Okay, I'll accept that. I remember walking through the streets in Chambéry and people screaming and yelling and, you know, like the movies that you see about the end of the war.

NL: And you?

SS: First of all, I couldn't talk because I had my tonsils out.

NL: You were still suffering?

SS: And, secondly, I was just bewildered.

NL: What now?

SS: Yeah. It didn't mean anything. It was like an intellectual concept. That was some idea that had no genuine reality for me.

NL: Were you thinking at all about your parents?

SS: Never stopped. Never stopped thinking about them.

NL: Never stopped.

SS: In fact...

NL: Did you make inquiries in '44, '45 of anyone?

SS: Well, let me just--I wrote the diary basically, the diary basically--I took photos basically, did all kinds of things for my parents to...

NL: You took photos?

SS: Yes.

NL: You had a camera, then?

SS: No, but, you know, when people took a picture and you'd get one, you know, school pictures, you know, whatever.

NL: And you saved them?

SS: I saved them, right.

NL: So, they would know what had happened to you?

SS: Right, so that when you ask, did I think about my parents, I would say that on one level, I never thought about anything else. You know, it was like an omnipresent kind of thing.

NL: Did you ask about their possible whereabouts? Any people? Did you have any access to official agencies, government, municipal?

SS: I think that...

NL: Did you ask Paula, to--

SS: Sure.

NL: To intercede for you?

SS: To let the organizations know where I was.

NL: Which organizations?

SS: I don't know. I don't know.

NL: She knew you were Jewish?

SS: Paula? Well, she was Jewish herself.

NL: She was Jewish herself?

SS: Remember, she was very distantly related to me. Very distantly.

NL: So, she presumably contacted Jewish organizations?

SS: Right. One of the surprisingly painful experiences consisted of letters. I think I mentioned to you when I spoke to you before, there was a family by the name of Epstein that we lived with for a time. Roland, the son, was caught, smuggling children into Switzerland and I told you there was a woman, Latour, I think is her name, who wrote a book on the French Underground.[4]

NL: Anny Latour?

SS: Right, and she described Roland. She mentioned him. So Roland was deported but he was able, apparently, in the camps in Germany to pass for a Frenchman. And, I think, that he faked being an Arab, which he could. He had very black...

NL: An Arab?

SS: Well, to account for his circumcision.

NL: How clever! I've never heard of that.

SS: Sure, how do you explain that you are circumcised if you are a man. He had olive colored skin, you know.

NL: So many other Jews did, too. It's the first time I hear of that.

SS: Yes, he was a clever man.

NL: And the Germans believed him?

SS: Apparently, because they treated him as a Frenchman. I mean, not as a Jew. All right. So, Mrs. Epstein wrote me very moving letter...

NL: She wrote this to Paula?

SS: To me.

NL: To you in care of Paula, or to you? Your school?

SS: Yeah. "Dear Sonja, Can't tell you how overjoyed we are and excited and jubilant."

NL: This is '44?

SS: Yeah. "Roland came back." And almost, a sort of P.S., "I hope you will hear from your parents, too."

NL: One letter or did you get more?

SS: One letter.

NL: One letter.

SS: Then I had a...

NL: Did you write to them?

SS: No. What was there to write? I heard nothing. They hadn't come back.

NL: You didn't think, perhaps, the Epsteins might have heard something?

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[4]In Latour's book, *The Jewish Resistance in France (1940-1944)*, p.161, Roland Epstein and a group he tried to save are described. According to Latour, all were caught and arrested. Epstein was deported but returned (p.162).

SS: I was very arrogant and I figured that if my parents were alive, they would find me.

NL: They would find you?

SS: I wrote to the places where we had lived together, to tell them that I was alive and if they heard from my parents. I wrote to the family in America. I wrote and let it be known to all the people that I felt my parents would contact.

Tape four, side two:

NL: This is side two continuing an interview with Dr. Sonja Samson.

NL: About the Jewish agencies. You heard from none of the Jewish organizations? No representative ever came to Paula's?

SS: No.

NL: And inquired about you?

SS: No.

NL: Were there any local Jewish agencies?

SS: No. This was May. Shortly after that, Paula and her family and I moved to a suburb of Paris. They originally had lived in Paris. And they did not return to Paris, so we lived in the suburb of Paris. And you asked me, did I write, so I wrote. I had written to these relatives in the United States. Remember, I told you about the Post Office which delivered a letter addressed to my cousin in Chicago. No address.

NL: No address. That was all?

SS: Yeah.

NL: No further communication.

SS: They were wonderful in those years! They don't think like that anymore. I wrote a letter to Manfred Hoffman, Chicago, USA, and they got the letter.

NL: They got the letter. You must have been, you must have been so embittered by this total lack of care and concern about you? Or did you feel already hardened by the world, and not expecting anything more?

SS: No, I had never expected anything; I was simply, literally heartbroken from the day that I was separated from my parents and had no expectations of anyone else. They were good people.

NL: And you obviously thought then they might still be alive, or you hoped...?

SS: As I learned more and as I got more of these "Dear Sonja" letters, so elated, so excited, “Our loved one came back. P.S. I hope your parents will, too," You know, I don't know, how to say? I was pleased. Obviously, people who wrote, wrote about people that I knew, that I liked, cared about. As I heard more and more about what, about the camps in Germany, increasingly, I, at times, tried to prepare myself and console myself with the thought that my mother, as I had described, had been ill, and that perhaps she had perished en route and hadn't suffered in the camps. But until the day that I got on the boat crossing the ocean, coming to the United States, I must say, I maintained the fantasy that my father had survived. Maybe, he was freed by Russians, fantasy like that. But on that day, as the distance between the Old World and the New increased, I think that's when I had to come to grips with reality.

NL: What was your life like with Paula in the suburban home outside of Paris? Did you go back to school?

SS: Yeah, I went to the school there, but the most important thing in my life then was that I had a friend, I had a--I am sorry, I dismissed something because I was so focused when you asked a question, did I have any close friends in the boarding school? I said, "No." I did have one, but she was a day student. And she was a close friend, and her name was Fanny. She was Jewish, she was a Polish Jew. And I think that maybe the reason why did it slip me by, I think that Fanny was far more important to me than I was to her. She had an extended family with many brothers and sisters and a father and mother.

NL: Living in France?

SS: Yeah, living in Chambéry.

NL: I see. They were in hiding apparently.

SS: They commuted between Chambéry and Lyon, up and back, up and back.

NL: And survived?

SS: And survived. I think, all of them, in fact. The oldest brother was taken, was deported. He survived. He came back. Another brother was very active, I think. I'm not sure if he was in the Underground. I certainly know he was very active as a Zionist and he started--he was one of the people who started *Hashomer Hatzair* after the war in France.

NL: Do you remember his last name?

SS: Oh, yes. Szchulklaper.

NL: Szchulklaper.

SS: S-Z-C-H-U-L-K-L-A-P-E-R.

NL: Your friend, was she identified as a Jewish girl at school?

SS: No. No.

NL: She, too, had to pass as a non-Jew?

SS: Right.

NL: And there was no suspicion about her identity, apparently?

SS: No, in fact, it was interesting, she had a close friend who was non-Jewish, and they looked very alike. Fanny was sort of a, the face was sort of high bone structures sort of, probably, almost Asiatic origin. You know, many Jews have this--I suspect that that must have been her origin way back.

NL: Did you admit to each other that you were Jewish?

SS: Yes.

NL: You did?

SS: Yes. And I spent a lot of time with her, but, then, as I said, her family commuted up and back between Chambéry and Lyon, so she was not in the boarding school, in the same school, I mean, but as a day student. I could talk a lot about that, but let me focus on something else. Her brother, through Fanny, they went back to Lyon, and when I came to the suburb of Paris, we continued to write and that's how I got involved in *Hashomer Hatzair* through her, through her brother.

NL: I see.

SS: And there were kids my age who survived, I would say that a goodly number went into black market, into all kinds of stuff. "Hustling" is what we call it today. And I saw clearly that there were two possible choices available. One was to hustle, which is what Leon did, by the way. That's how financially so many survived the war. He trafficked in gold and all kinds of stuff. And the other was to be a Zionist. That seemed to be my style.

NL: Pure and decent, more hopeful.

SS: Hopeful. Constructive. Building, rather than...

NL: Building rather than negotiating.

SS: Yeah, and so I became extremely active in *Hashomer Hatzair*.

NL: In the Paris movement, or...?

SS: Paris. Yes, yes.

NL: You traveled to Paris?

SS: Yes.

NL: To meetings?

SS: On weekends, yes. From the suburbs to Paris the train was, I don't know, I can't remember, but maybe about 45 minutes, half an hour.

NL: Encampments, or just meetings?

SS: In summer, we had a summer camp, and in winter we had a winter camp. And in between I went around the Jewish neighborhoods in Paris and recruited little *Shomrim*.

NL: That must have been a more positive time of your life.

SS: Well, the nightmare was when the time came, all my friends, Fanny and then the others, through *Hashomer*, were talking after 1945, 1947, made illegal *aliyah* [immigration to Palestine], and I was a traitor. That was the hardest thing.

NL: They had to leave by way of Italy?

SS: I don't know. I came to the United States.

NL: You separated yourself from them at that point?

SS: Right. And...

NL: Were you pressured into going with them in anyway?

SS: No, I wanted to.

NL: You wanted to?

SS: You asked me what was there, what involvement, what emotional tie. That was it. I really wanted to. That was the only thing that had meaning to me. But there is a part in me that always has been the old German *Vernünftigkeit*. Do you know what *Vernünftigkeit* is?

NL: Responsibility? Duty? Doing the appropriate thing?

SS: Yes.

NL: The proper thing.

SS: Yes. It's interesting, you know...

NL: Even after all you have been through.

SS: In, in German you say to a child "*sei vernünftig*," which means "be reasonable."

NL: Oh.

SS: Literally, I think. But it's right what you said. In French, you tell a child, "*Sois sage*". *Sage* comes from...

NL: Wisdom.

SS: *Sagesse*. Wisdom, and in English, it's "be good."

NL: Interesting. You were the only one of the group that decided you just couldn't make that threshold of illegality.

SS: No. No. Nothing to do, God forbid. I had been illegal all these years. No.

NL: I'm stumbling here.

SS: No. Okay. Going to a *kibbutz*, I understood its profound limitations. Just remember, I had lived all those years on farms in villages; I knew farming inside out. I also knew that what I really wanted to do was to get an education, become educated. I knew that in France there was no way. I had no papers. I couldn't stay in France. I was not a French citizen. I was *apatride*.

NL: Stateless.

SS: Stateless, and you know, you can live in France for 582 years and not obtain French citizenship. But even if I had, with whom and where would I have stayed. There was nothing for me in France. There was no place, there was nothing. And so I thought, as I said, that was probably, that was undoubtedly the hardest decision of my life, which was that my plan was to come to America because I knew, I had read, that in America I could go, I could work and go to school, and my plan was to get a degree and then go to Israel, and I'd be much more useful and valuable to Israel.

NL: You were afraid, in other words, that going with the *Hashomer Hatzair* group you would become involved in building a kibbutz, working on the farm, and thus you would be deprived of schooling? You didn't think you could get any schooling in Palestine?

SS: Right. And at that time, it was realistic, wasn't it?

NL: At that time it was, of course, still very primitive and...

SS: It was 1947.

NL: Were there any agents coming in from Palestine, from Jewish Palestine, to try to convince you to go, or was the movement itself in a momentum of leaving? Did you have youth leaders?

SS: Oh, yes, *shelichim*.

NL: *Shelichim* did come.

SS: Oh, yeah.

NL: And they weren't able to prevail on you, obviously?

SS: I think, Nora, you don't quite get it. I didn't talk very much about these things to anybody. I mean, this was my private, my own struggle.

NL: Your evaluation of things. I see. I thought once in *Hashomer Hatzair* you could begin to share lots of private things.

SS: I did share, I did share my doubts and my struggle with Fanny.

NL: With Fanny.

SS: Yeah.

NL: Let's go back a bit because it would be interesting, I think, to hear what the movement meant to you while you were active between '45 and '47. Did it divert you? [clicking in background] So, Sonja, could you speak a little more about some of the activities of the *Hashomer Hatzair* group?

SS: Did I say that on tape about the fact that after the war, yes, I think I did, many people went, youth went into hustling and there was nothing for me in France.

NL: Right, but once you found *Hashomer Hatzair*, after you were in it for two years, very impressionable and important years, what did those experiences give to you?

SS: Give me a sense that there is life beyond destruction, that there is something that can be built, that there is something to look forward to, that there are ideals that are bigger than the individual. I became an atheist, I think, after I got out of the camp. If you recall, I had said, I think, had mentioned earlier that my father was a very Orthodox man and felt that he didn't want to hide because he had done no wrong, and God knew this. And I became very literal about it. If that's what happens, then God is wrong. There is no God. The hell with that. What *Hashomer* did was give me something that was a kind of faith, an organized system of beliefs. Even though, as you know *Hashomer* is...

NL: Left wing.

SS: Left wing.

NL: Secular.

SS: Secular, and it made it possible for me to integrate being a Jew and building. Does that answer...?

NL: Also, I wonder if you could help also to analyze your own feelings of Jewishness. Obviously, you had had to conceal your identity for many years. Did you not at some time before you joined *Hashomer Hatzair*, feel negatively about being a Jew, since Jews were suffering and you as a Jew were caused to suffer?

SS: No.

NL: You never did?

SS: No.

NL: Ah, that's interesting.

SS: No. I never denied to myself that I was Jewish.

NL: Not so much deny it, but...

SS: God, I wish I had been born something else?

NL: Yeah.

SS: No.

NL: Or that you didn't want to face the world as a Jew after all the suffering, nothing like that?

SS: No, it never occurred to me.

NL: Had you heard much about, or anything about the Zionist movement during the war, any echoes of the struggle to establish a Jewish homeland?

SS: No.

NL: That is, not until you came to this movement outside Paris?

SS: Right. Right.

NL: Do you remember the first encounter you had?

SS: No, as I showed you that picture of the first meeting, clandestine in 1943, all I have got is that photo and I have no idea.

NL: Where it was.

SS: Right.

NL: It must have been well outside of Paris? Just before you moved.

SS: I have to look up on the map where it was.

NL: And then your friend Fanny was with you in the movement in and outside of Paris? So, you had meetings and you had encampments and singing and dancing, I suppose?

SS: And seminars, and they were extremely important. It is through *Hashomer* that I met another friend that I really liked. Fanny and her family returned to Lyon, and they lived in Lyon. We only met when we had annual or semi-annual meetings. The rest of the time, then, I was with the Parisian area *Hashomer*. I met a friend there, also. Her name just fell out of my head. Regina. Regina was a student. Regina lived in one of these typical in-the-ghetto dwellings.

NL: In Paris?

SS: In Paris, which was a barren room, no plaster, just rough stone. Humid, damp, roof leaking, and so on.

NL: She was a Parisian Jew?

SS: Yes.

NL: She originally came from Eastern Europe?

SS: From Paris. But she was going to the university. And she took extensive notes from the lectures, and one of the things that I loved doing in the evening--I often spent weekends with her--I would stay up all night and read her notes on philosophy and loved it.

NL: From the university?

SS: Yes. Her notes.

NL: Marvelous.

SS: And loved it. Regina was older, I was 15 or 16, she was 18, 19. And that earlier I said, you know, my major reason for coming to the United States was to go to

school. That just knocked me out. That knocked me out, you know. All these notes. Well, of course, I didn't know it then. I understood that much later, but from *Hashomer* I learned all these wonderful things. I learned about Marxism, I learned about, you know, different theories and ways of putting the world together. I learned about sexuality. I learned about Freud, I learned about masturbation, I learned everything. I mean, it was wonderful. [laughter]

NL: A liberal education. The members were survivor children, for the most part, or did some of them have parents in France at the time?

SS: Oh, yeah, it was everybody, you know.

NL, A mixture.

SS: Yes.

NL: And what was the impact of the *shlichim* who came, the emissaries from Palestine? Was that a thrilling encounter for you to hear from someone who was actually on the land? Or were these French Jews essentially?

SS: No, I don't think they were, they--I don't know; some, I think, may have been *sabras* [native to then Palestine]. I don't remember.

NL: Do you want to speak a little about your feelings about a *kibbutz*, whether that attracted you, theoretically? Could you see yourself as part of it?

SS: As I said, theoretically, it attracted me. Emotionally, it knocked me out. I mean, I loved it. The whole idea, of all Jews, all people like myself, all my age, we had survived this nightmare. Again, this looking forward to building. And, I think, the first time, a sense of superiority. And I remember wearing...

NL: You felt this was a Jewish concept? Is that what you mean?

SS: I don't know. I mean, it was just so elevating, so exhilarating, that wearing the *Hashomer* uniform which was basically, you know, those workers' blue shirts. Maybe that's why I still like blue. I love blue. [laughter] I remember, I think in today's parlance one would call it "being on a high." And it was a high. I remember doing dumb things like when I took the Metro in Paris, I remember an old lady *shlepping* some bags, or whatever, "Let me help you, *madame*." You know, taking her bags and helping and doing. It was that kind of thing.

NL: High ethical concepts. And these people lived by them, it seems.

SS: And it was great. It was very, very exciting.

NL: Did you meet with other units of *Hashomer Hatzair*? Did you have a sense that it was large movement behind you, or...

SS: No, as you saw the different--I always say "No" when I mean "Yes." It's okay. You saw the photo of the *machane* [encampment] in Jura which brought together all *shomrim* from all over France.

NL: Oh, it was not just the regional conference, it was...

SS: How many kids do you think survived?

NL: Well, we know that Youth Aliyah took many, many thousands of children from all over Europe to Palestine.

SS: We are talking France.

NL: France obviously had, of course, there were other youth movements.

SS: That's right.

NL: So, quantitatively, there were perhaps many more.

SS: I'm sorry...

NL: Did you have growing reservations about the ultimate decision to go to Palestine? Or did it, did the decision not to stay with the group come rather suddenly, when the other kids had to make the decision to leave illegally? Do you remember that process?

SS: I was fearless, I think you got that. I was not recklessly endangering myself ever during the war or endangering anybody else.

NL: Yes.

SS: You know that's what we talked about earlier. About not letting Peter or Paul know that I was Jewish or the others know. I was in the Underground now. I was never afraid, so going on *aliyah*, you know, didn't bother me. That wasn't the issue.

NL: Excuse me. Maybe I didn't phrase the question. You ultimately decided to go to the United States, as you said.

SS: For the stated reason.

NL: For educational opportunity.

SS: Purely, and I was sure that once I obtained my degree, I would go to Israel.

NL: You would return, or you would go to Israel.

SS: Sure. Yes. It was a temporary--in my mind very much...

NL: This was a means to an end, going to America.

SS: Exactly. I felt very much that I would be vastly more useful to Israel if I had an education.

NL: And did you discuss this intermediate plan with the other folks in the movement?

SS: Only with one friend. I think, probably Regina, maybe two or three friends.

NL: And the other point in my question was: Did the group decide to leave for Palestine illegally suddenly, or was this a growing decision-making process?

SS: It was a growing. I think Fanny went to Israel a year later. We corresponded. I corresponded regularly with Fanny from, well, always in fact, because she had commuted, first between Lyon and Chambéry and then, when I lived in the suburb of Paris. I saw her again 1954 in Israel. It was an anguished reunion. It was pretty horrible for me. But up until then...

NL: She hadn't forgiven you for not coming, is that...?

SS: In part. The timing was atrocious. She gave birth to her first child, which was a terrible time. I went with my husband, who was a snotty American Jew. They

certainly didn't hit it off. And I was an outsider. I was American. I was all the things that they disliked.

NL: They had turned their backs on the diaspora.

SS: Right, and up until then Fanny and I corresponded very, very regularly and shared our torment. She was tormented about leaving France, going to Israel and, I think, that probably most people, most, I don't know what to call them, kids, we were kids. It also meant that after having survived the war, it meant turning your back on your parents for them. It was hard for the parents, it was hard for them, it was hard for everybody. There were many doubts. It was agony. But, to me, the agony was, of course, of a different order. I was a traitor and, additionally, I...

NL: Did they, in so many words, condemn you?

SS: Oh, yeah, oh, yes.

NL: Sonja?

SS: Yes.

NL: The whole group left as a group?

SS: No. Fanny, for example, went to Gvulot [alternate spelling: Gevulot] which is in the Negev. She married a man, a boy, then from Belgium. They were in various camps, *kibbutzim*, you know.

NL: But their departure from France...

SS: Was not *en masse*.

Tape five, side one:

NL: Tape 5, Side 1, continuing our interview with Dr. Sonja Samson.

NL: So they left in the middle of 1947 and...

SS: Uli was the first one that I knew who left. He was a survivor. He was the young man who played harmonica so beautifully, and by watching him I taught myself.

NL: Really?

SS: Yeah. Uli made a wrong turn when he got off the boat in Haifa and the Arabs assassinated him. I left France to come to America in April, '47.

NL: Excuse me. Sonja. Can we backtrack a little bit. You were living all this time with Paula?

SS: Right.

NL: And going on weekend encampments and so on.

SS: No, weekend to Paris mostly, to deal with the young kids, recruiting.

NL: Recruiting.

SS: And training them.

NL: May I ask, was she in effect still supporting you then, or was she getting some help from a Jewish agency?

SS: I don't know.

NL: To support you.

SS: I don't know. I don't think so. I really don't think so. I don't know, Nora. You know more about that than I, but, I didn't know anybody who got help from the Jewish agency. Let me tell you, I want to finish about *Hashomer Hatzair*. I don't like all these loose threads.

NL: Yes.

SS: One of the things that happened when I came to Israel and talked to the *chaverim* [buddies, comrades] that was startling to me was--I must say that I went to Israel and France, after having been in the United States in 1953 because I wanted two things before I could go. Number one, I wanted to have the American citizenship, and number two, I wanted to finish college. So in 1952, I obtained my BA and my citizenship, and then I started working and saving money for the trip. So I went in 1953. Very orderly. Then, I had thought and rethought this whole issue of Marxism. And I was especially appalled by the arguments and by the reasoning and by the thinking and, you know, I had a BA in 1952.

NL: This thinking of the *Hashomer Hatzair* people and their identification with the Soviet Union?

SS: In part, but also the level of argument. Biology was not my major, but I knew a lot of biology. In 1952 we still had an education when we graduated. And they were, you know, arguing everything, biology, history, genetics, whatever, from the Marxist point of view, and I knew that that was unacceptable. I mean, it defied all empirical

evidence, etc., etc. So it was very difficult. So, it wasn't just what I started about, having a sarcastic, snotty American Jewish boy for a husband but in addition...

NL: Your own development.

SS: My own development. I had totally outgrown that kind of thinking. And I saw what it lead. For example, on one *kibbutz*, we stayed in Gvulot, in the Negev, and they were planting onions. So I worked in the *kibbutz* and it was the way, the attitude. It was a fanatic way of planting onions. People lined up in different rows racing with each other and on and on and...

NL: Seemed regimented to you? And doctrinaire?

SS: And fallacious. I had lived in farms for a good part of my youth and childhood and I knew--and I had done hard farm labor, that you develop a rhythm, like, when you work in a factory. That's how I put myself through college in the United States, by working in factories. And I was working on piecework, you know, making tools and steel drills and so on and I was making good money, piecework, but you develop a rhythm. There was no rhythm. It was all running, competition, and so on and so, that what you said, that attitude permeated and...

NL: It was against your grain?

SS: Right. It was a travesty of what I felt farm labor was about and it was harsh on my part, I suppose, to think that way, but...

NL: Well, but you had undergone a considerable personal development and it was inevitable. Also, I imagine their rationalization about what was happening in the Soviet Union may have troubled you, too. They were very defensive about the Soviet Union.

SS: It troubled me a lot. Right. Right.

NL: For a very long time.

SS: You see, it was interesting, 1954 was the height of McCarthyism. When I went on that trip, I was looking for a place other than America. I was turned off by the McCarthyism in the United States, and my husband and I were certain that if we found a place we would stay.

NL: He was interested in the possibility of settling in Israel?

SS: He was interested in the possibility of resettling anywhere. And I found myself endlessly defending America.

NL: In Israel?

SS: In Israel, and I remember, I mean, that's when I first had this sense of democracy in the most profoundest of ways, and I remember endlessly explaining to them that McCarthy was a senator who was elected in Wisconsin and that it wasn't all America, and that, yes, yes, people like that, if they get enough votes, they can express themselves and some of it, it was wrong, etc. But I defended the principles, the system, and I found that as I traveled through Europe and Israel, increasingly defending America. That's when

I got a real sense of America. I really love that country. It was interesting. [machine off and then on]

NL: So you were then moving in the direction of coming to America, Sonja, and may I just ask this one other question about your relationship with Paula. Was it getting harder and harder for you to be with her? Was she resentful of having to care for you or being responsible? Do you remember any of that?

SS: Her husband, Leon, was always extremely decent towards me. If it hadn't been for Leon, I would not have been able to go to Paris to *Hashomer*. He gave me the money to go. I mean, it was trainfare and nothing else.

NL: Sure.

SS: But, yes, Leon was a very decent man to me. Paula retrieved her relatives. She had an uncle, her mother's brother, who lived in Belgium, by the name of Kubovitz, and I think, his brother was one of the early Israeli ambassadors.

NL: It's Kubovitzky.

SS: You're right.

NL: A very important Zionist.

SS: Yeah.

NL: Leon Kubovitzky. I knew him.

SS: Well, that was Paula's uncle.

NL: Strange.

SS: That's funny. How you dig up these names out of nowhere! I haven't thought about that in forty years. [laughter]

NL: So she was feeling what, better disposed toward you then?

SS: No, she had found her *mishpocha* and she would pack up "mine darling", her son, and go for prolonged extended visits and just commute between Belgium and France.

NL: So you were taking care of yourself?

SS: And Leon. I mean, I remember, in Montgerou [11 mi. SSE of Paris], which was the name of that suburb, there was, of course, no hot water. And there was no Kleenex, there were no disposable anything. And I remember some of the horrors of living involved the day that you had to wash handkerchiefs and you had--and I have always had a very hypersensitive gag reflex, and as I was half gagging and choking washing these handkerchiefs in a bucket with all--I get sick when I think about it, with the mucus and all, and like that. That reminds me: One of the worst things about living with *goyim*. This was, I was taking care of Leon myself. With the handkerchiefs. I don't know if I mentioned it; if I did, stop me, but living with *goyim* in Frazie's house, I remember there was no running water and we had to *shlep* the water, every God blessed drop of it, from the--about half a kilometer uphill. The source, the well, was way down at the bottom of the mountain. You carried it one bucket in each hand and one strapped to your back, and I got by with that because I was a kid and I wasn't a native, but they, in addition, had one bucket on top

of their head. That's why they walked so straight. I remember one day Lucie and I went down there and did the laundry, washed the linen, out of this cold water from the well, and then *shlepping* back up, and I don't know what happened. I must have said something funny and Lucie started laughing, and she tripped and she fell with the bucket with all the linens that had just been washed, and we were almost uphill, and we had to collect all the stuff, go back down and redo it. Anyway, the...

NL: So, you were helping to keep house for Leon then?

SS: Yes. I am going back to Frazie now.

NL: I understand.

SS: But I want to go back to Frazie because of the *goyim*.

NL: Oh, excuse me, yes.

SS: Okay. One of the things that, no matter how things were and how horrible and how awful and so on, I could tolerate almost everything. One thing that I really could not stomach, literally, was the fact that in those days, again, there were no disposables, but what did women do for menstrual hygiene? You had a rag, which was used, and then when the rag was dirty, it was soaked in a bucket of water. And the same *tepel* [pot] that was used for cooking is where the menstrual rag would soak. I mean, you would rinse it out a bit, and you know, coming from a kosher household, that was rough.

NL: Oh, my!

SS: The other thing that was rough was when it was cold in winter, how did you bathe? Well, there was, you know, Americans who collect these porcelain, what do you call these things? For washing bowls? [speaking in background]

NL: Sink. Tubs.

SS: No, no they are portable. Porcelain bowls that are portable, that you pour water in.

NL: I don't know what the technical name is.

SS: You see them in antique stores.

NL: Right, basins.

SS: Basins, yes. Right. Okay. So water would be heated on the stove which was, of course, a wood-burning stove, and I see nothing romantic about wood-burning stove, it's a pain; it's a *shlep*; it's a misery. So the warm water would be poured in the basin and Frazie got first turn and she would wash, and then Lucie, her daughter, would wash from head to foot in the same water, the same basin and, of course, since I was the low man on the totem pole. I would be third [laughter]. Remember, I was born and raised in bathtubs with running hot and cold water. Those things were difficult, very, very difficult.

NL: Aside from the hunger that you felt most of the time.

SS: Right.

NL: Never having enough to eat.

SS: Right. But that, you know, the French are unbelievably dirty and filthy, even when they have running water. They are pigs. [laughter] They invented nail polish to hide their dirty fingernails. They invented perfume to cover the stench. [laughter]

NL: That's unbelievable. What you had to endure. And, so, to come back to Paula.

SS: To Paula.

NL: You were taking care of Leon when she went on these expeditions to Belgium? You were keeping house for him?

SS: Sure.

NL: Washing for him, cooking for him?

SS: Sure.

NL: So, they were indeed not maintaining you. You were taking care of them in a large sense.

SS: Did I ever tell you how I learned about--or did I mention that on tape, I don't know, about the British landing? I'm sorry, the association is menstruation. During the war, God knows why, you know, expressions come about, and when in America women will use expressions like "the curse," "having the curse," the expression during the war for some dumb reason was "*Les Anglais ont debarqués*." The British landed [laughter], I never forget the day I bumped into Leon in the village, and he said, "Sonnie, Sonnie *les Anglais ont debarqués*!" [much laughter].

NL: That was hysterical. Oh, my! Yes, you want to say a few words about the Jewish...

SS: Yes. It wasn't until, once I made contact with the relatives in America that they sent and arranged for the paperwork for me to come. I don't know if I mentioned before, but I came on a special shindig for war orphans, on a special thing. That's how I was able to come in April '47, among the earliest post-war, I think. Then the Jewish agencies, I imagine, maybe my relatives in America must have contacted them or something, then they became very interested in me.

NL: Was this HIAS, do you know? Well, it's not important.

SS: I could look it up and see what I remember going to the office, the main office in Paris. I remember that they were giving to--as I mentioned to you earlier today, 1947 we were still starving in France. There was no food, none. And they were also having rations and food that they received from America, and one day I said, "How come...?" Paula said, "Ask 'em, ask 'em for condensed milk," and stuff like that, and so foolishly I asked, and the woman looked at me and said, "You, you're too fat. You don't need that." If you look at the photos of myself, I was exceedingly overweight, but that was from eating garbage, absolute junk. And so they felt I, food on me was wasted. That was one response. The other response was that the only thing that they really did for me, but, again, that was through the relatives in America, was to arrange for me from Paris. I took a train to Göteborg in Sweden to come to the United States, so I was under their auspices with a

group of other Jews, immigrants, for that train ride. But then they wanted to give me socks and all kinds of things a week before I went to America. [laughter] So, by America I could tell them how good they were to me, and I refused it. I came with one duffel bag, that's all.

NL: This was the experience of most of the other children, too, you gather?

SS: To the best of my knowledge, yes.

NL: Non-existent help?

SS: None. In fact, part of it was--I don't know, I got very bitter. You could see the director of the place and various people who worked there in an out of huge limousines, chauffeur-driven, etc., and it was that dealing with them was excruciatingly humiliating. It was a putdown. What they were doing was so transparent. Hell, I had survived. You know, I had survived the French Underground and so on. I could see what these people were doing. The last week indoctrinating me about what to tell in America about the wonders they had done...

NL: So, they should seem to be making a good impression.

SS: Right.

NL: You went on the "Gripsholm", I think.

SS: Yes.

NL: From Sweden?

SS: Yes.

NL: Did you know anybody at all on the ship?

SS: No.

NL: Not a soul. It must have been a shattering trip for you.

SS: It was an interesting trip. In Göteborg a crew of merchant marines from Sweden boarded the boat to rejoin their merchant marine boat in New York. So that was one set of passengers, aside from the handful of Jews. The other set of passengers were American war brides. And the two met on top of each other. It was a floating whorehouse.

NL: And you were witness to all of this?

SS: Oh, God [laughter]

NL: Did it upset you very much?

SS: Yes, of course.

NL: This was the first image you had of the New World, of America?

SS: Of what was going to America. And yes, here were all these war brides, you know, women from all over that American soldiers were going to marry. They were rejoining their husbands, new husbands.

NL: And committing adultery in the process?

SS: Unbelievable. I mean, it was grotesque.

NL: Were there any other young people your age?

SS: There were some. There was one girl in particular, as I look on that photo. It was, I think, I remember two girls in particular. It was really appalling because they were standing in line outside of the women's cabins. I don't know if that what you call

them, down below the deck, with the smell of coal. I loathe boats. And they were standing in line, and you could see them staggering out red in the face, huffing and puffing, and it was awful. So...

NL: You landed in New York?

SS: Excuse me. See now. There it was useful to feel part of *Hashomer*, part of Zionism, part of a purity, part of a, you know, a sense, "That's decadent, that's *goyim*, that's...

NL: You mean, this delineation between the Jewish world and the non-Jewish world?

SS: Sure. Sure.

NL: That's interesting. And you were presumably going to meet with your relatives and live with them? Was that your understanding?

SS: Well...

NL: Sonja?

SS: Um'm--whatever...

NL: In New York and Milwaukee?

SS: No, in New York I was met by a cousin of Paula's. She was a Kubovitzky daughter, Simone was her name, and her husband, Charles. So Simone was from Belgium, but she and Charles had lived in New York since before the war.

NL: I see.

SS: They were lovely people. I liked them a lot.

NL: They met you?

SS: Simone met me at the boat. And you know, I wasn't the only one. That was true of everybody almost, standing up high on the boat and there all these people on the pier. I remember, by the way, I described the distance between the Old World and the New, and as the distance increased, that's when, that was my coming to grips with the reality of the death of my parents. Seeing the Statue of Liberty, it was quite something. It was real, you could see it. And I'm not sure what it meant.

NL: Did you have a feeling of resurgence of hope? Of the future?

SS: Yes. Yes.

NL: That you were glad you had come?

SS: I wasn't sure about that. It was exciting. It was troubling.

NL: Any sense of adventuresomeness perhaps?

SS: I think I was scared. I was scared. I mean...

NL: Going into the unknown.

SS: Another language.

NL: Another language.

NL: You hadn't learned any English?

SS: No. I knew "yes" and "no."

NL: Oh, without a language.

SS: And "please."

NL: So did the Kubovitzkys then take you to their home?

SS: No. This was Simone, the daughter. Her last name was something else.

NL: They greeted you and then, where did...

SS: Simone met me at the boat, and I don't know, you know, by shouting up and back names, that's how we identified. It took some six hours to disembark and it wasn't Ellis Island, but for all practical purposes, it might have been. You know, I have seen photos of Ellis Island and these big hangars on the pier in New York. And the processing was slow. It took a whole day. And, of course, as usual, first class first, etc. I stayed with Simone and Charles and they had a little girl, Jackie. She was about four years old, she was a lovely child. She understood, she spoke French, they taught her French. So she taught me English in the two days and two nights that I spent there. And they wanted very much to keep me for a week. But it happened to fall shortly before *Pesach*, and there were the long distance phone calls to the relatives. I absolutely had to be there for *Pesach*.

NL: Chicago?

SS: Chicago, Milwaukee, the world. And they really wanted to keep me and I liked these people and I felt comfortable and I wanted to stay. But, we talked and *Vernünftigkeit* [good sense, rationality] had the best of all of us. "You better go," and I went. Do you want to hear about the ride from New York to...?

NL: If you aren't too tired?

SS: I get on the train--there were no plane rides in those days.

NL: Again, all alone?

SS: Yeah, well that I had got used to. But after hours and hours on the train, I remember when people said, "We're coming close to Chicago. We're coming close to Chicago," and everybody is excited and I look out the window and I broke up and I wept. I think, that's the first time ever that I cried publicly. I looked around--I expected, you know, I came from Paris, cosmopolitan city, I came from New York. Well, like all American cities, the outskirts are awful. I'd never seen anything like that. And I imagined that that's Chicago [laughter]. So, then, the relatives picked me up and there were two or three sets of cousins, distant cousins, and we went to Manfred's apartment. Manfred was a physician, M.D., Dr. Hoffman. Now I'm saying it like the French. You are supposed to say it like the German. And Manfred had his practice in his apartment, which was above some store or other on Devon Avenue.

NL: I don't know what that means.

SS: She knows what is north? [questioning Barbara Lerner] Devon Avenue is a busy street, commercial street, and their living room was the reception room for the patients, and the three of them, Manfred and his wife and their darling Howard, all shared one bedroom, and I slept in the examination room on one of those. [laughter]

NL: Was he still a struggling doctor, or were they just very poor?

SS: A stingy doctor. He still, in 1947, had bags of sugar hidden under his bed [laughter]. And coffee.

NL: Incredible.

SS: Okay.

Tape five, side two:

NL: This is Tape 5, Side 2 continuing our interview with Dr. Sonja Samson.

SS: So, he really meant it, which is absolutely awesome.

NL: Meant it when?

SS: When they asked me where did I choose to live, "by Milwaukee or by the doctor in Chicago." [laughter] I was clear. They lived like sardines. Of course, I would have preferred living in Chicago. How can you choose to be four people in that little bedroom? Anyway, I then also learned what the hurry was about my coming for *Pesach*. Harry in Milwaukee, his brother Manfred in Chicago, had founded their own *shul*, their own synagogue, like they did "by Aurich" in Germany, you know, German, Aurich-type services. And the big shindig, of course, was for Dr. Hoffman to tell the congregation about what a wonderful man he was and how he had imported me and make a big production out of that.

NL: So you had to be produced.

SS: In fact, four sets of relatives, Milwaukee, Chicago, in Chicago there was another cousin and her husband, and in Baton Rouge there was the fourth set, had split the fare to bring me over. The doctor was well-to-do, yes, he was. The cousin in Milwaukee, by now--they all started from scratch, true enough, or whatever they could bring over. The cousin in Milwaukee had a shoe polish factory. Doing quite well, thank you. They all did quite well, thank you. And they all started and made me feel indebted. I often had the fantasy of giving them each a fourth, a fourth, a fourth of the ticket. [laughter] So, our beginning was not too good. [Tape is turned off and on.]

SS: ...have trouble seeing at night?

NL: Not really, but I want to get going before it gets dark. So, Sonja, now would you be good enough to tell us a little about your adjustment to schools? Which part of the family did you decide to live with?

SS: Well, I decided, because it wasn't a decision. I mean, the situation was so idiotic, that I had to choose Milwaukee. And you wanted to know about my education. Okay. As I indicated, when I came I did not know any English whatsoever. Moreover, I didn't know any German any more.

NL: Really?

SS: Well, I hadn't spoken it in many, many years, number one. And number two, for me to know German during the war was very dangerous. In fact, there were a couple of encounters that I had in the Underground when I was carrying messages. In one instance on a bridge a German stopped me and looked at me and wanted to investigate my bike. I was carrying a message, and they were debating in German what to do with me, and so I had to pretend like I didn't understand it, and if they had looked at me, you know, I was passing as a dumb peasant girl, and that was one of the more frightening experiences.

NL: So you had to repress all of that?

SS: Right, and I had to look, you know, like a dumb...

NL: Peasant girl.

SS: Right, and yet I understood every word and they were really seriously debating and considering what to do. So it was very frightening.

BL: Whether to kill you or not.

SS: Yeah. But besides that and all the things, anyway, besides that, the issue was, you know, there was no opportunity to speak German. I was five when I had left Germany, remember?

NL: That's right.

SS: And now I'm 16. So, I arrived in Milwaukee in a 180% pure German-speaking household. There was Harry and his wife. There was the old lady and the old man, her parents, good *Onkel* Solly and *Tante* Meta and *es war alles Deutsch* [it was all German], and the child that they had produced between all of them. [laughter] She spoke better German than English, to give you an idea. She was born in Milwaukee.

NL: But spoke better German than English?

SS: Yes, so began a new war. I thought of it as a war after the war. If anything really killed my sense of humor, my optimism, my drive, it was Milwaukee. I simply was not prepared to undertake a new war, and that's what it was. They disapproved of everything about me. First of all, there was the French accent. I learned English of course, French was my language. I was never literate in German. So, forever, when I spoke English, they would correct my accent with a German accent. That's why I have a bastard accent, by the way. I had to learn German all over again, because that was what was spoken at home, and every time I opened my mouth in English, it was being corrected by a German accent. And they had come to America as adults, you know, in 1938, '39, '38. So, this is 1947, and they were not very linguistically inclined, so you can imagine.

NL: What about your schooling? Where did you go to school?

SS: That's where I'm going. So one of the things was, my idea was one thing: to go to school; their idea was to have a maid. And...

NL: To make you the maid?

SS: Right, and so first thing, they sent to me a place for new Americans, which was an evening course with adults, where they taught English, and I didn't want any part of that. None. They were all sitting there with their dictionaries, translating in and out. You know, all this nonsense.

NL: What disturbed you about that?

SS: That's not how you learn a language. I mean, I had learned, you know, different languages before and I knew that that was not the way. When you are in a country you speak the language with people, not with foreigners.

NL: This was translation.

SS: Yes, that's when--one of the things I did was, I went to the library and I got books, I knew the plot and in French like *Crime and Punishment* by Dostoevsky, one of

my favorite books, and since I know the plot I got the book in English. And I read it and I kept getting books where I knew the plot, so that wouldn't stop me, and I just kept reading in English.

NL: And you used a dictionary?

SS: Not at all.

NL: Not at all?

SS: No. Just read.

NL: Just read? And not understanding many of the words, but understanding the sense?

SS: I knew the plot. I had read Dostoevsky in French. I knew it.

NL: Also, of course, there is a great similarity between French and English.

SS: Right, anyway, so then came summer school. And I asked...

NL: But meanwhile, you had to do a lot of housework in the house?

SS: Sure. Yeah. Summer school. I found out there is summer school, and I told my cousins I wanted to go to summer school. Would they be kind enough to accompany me and act as an interpreter for the principal? So we went to the school. The high school there was Riverside High in Milwaukee. The principal was a man by the name of Mr. Schnecker. Milwaukee is a German town, you know. It was in those days.

NL: Yeah.

SS: And so, he asked me through my cousin what courses did I want to take. And I said, two courses in Physics, no, one course in Physics and one in Chemistry and one in English. And they argued, you know, they talked between the two of them, and I could understand some of it, but it was preposterous. You know, now I had to start with the first English. I'll take any English that you want. My idea...

NL: Yes, I was going to ask why you chose Physics.

SS: Because in Physics and Chemistry the key words are the same in English as in French.

NL: Aha!

SS: Right? And my idea was to be among English-speaking and to, as quickly as I could, accumulate credits so I could graduate and get a high school diploma.

NL: Were you able to get any sort of transcript from France?

SS: Didn't matter.

NL: Or, how would you become eligible for college? I mean, you didn't have any school records.

SS: Well, I finagled. I got an A in Physics and in Chemistry.

NL: Aha.

SS: I got a 90 out of a 100 in English. So, I went back to Mr. Schnecker at the end of summer school when I now could speak a little. The other thing is I immediately took a job. I worked, I forget what my first job was. I think, I worked in a bakery or a grocery, some place. Number one, I wanted money. Do you know that at the end of a

year-and-one-half when I left Milwaukee for Chicago, I had saved $500. To give you an idea in those days, babysitting costs, you earned 25 cents for the whole night.

NL: For the whole night?

SS: Yes [laughter].

NL: You must have worked many, many hours?

SS: Oh, sure. But anyway, when regular school started in fall, I went to see this nice principal and I said--and I took more advanced courses. The way in which I did it, literally in a year-and-a-half, was, I kept arguing with him, "How could you pass Physics if you didn't...?" and I took a course in Trigonometry. How could you pass Trigonometry, which I did with an A, without Algebra or Geometry, right? He said, "You can't." I said, "Then you can give me credit for that, can't you?" and he said, "I guess I'll have to." [laugher]

NL: I see. Had you studied some of these other subjects at that terrible school?

SS: Well, look, I did. I made a thing--during--I was born in 1931, arrived in Milwaukee 1947. During the--okay, during those years, I was in four different countries, 18 different places, 12 different regions, and 9 different schools, when I was in school. Most of the time I was not in school. I could read.

NL: But Trigonometry is a fairly complex mathematics.

SS: But you've got to read.

NL: Okay. I just think your mastering of English must have been phenomenal?

SS: No, I...

NL: Of course, it was!

SS: I--I...

NL: Well, you see mastery of English and a diploma and so on as a way of liberating yourself from this family, too, and becoming an autonomous person.

SS: Remember, my goal was to go and get an education and graduate from a university.

NL: So, you were highly motivated.

SS: And I found out that people in America graduate school when they are 18. When I was 18, I was going to graduate. And I did the same with college.

NL: Was there any person in your life during those years who gave you any sense of reinforcement or help? Or sustenance?

SS: I had one friend in Milwaukee, George. George was exactly my age, and George had survived Auschwitz. Except George was Hungarian. His English was awful. [laughter] I don't believe that Hungarians are capable of learning any language in the world. [laughter]

NL: He was struggling with English?

SS: Yes.

NL: So you were able to talk to each other about the war...?

SS: Not really. George talked very little about the war. George was busy finagling. George was going to make headway, and George was a very hedonistic man, and I always kidded him and I said to him, "George, you will either marry a blonde who looks like a movie star, or you'll marry a woman who's very rich." I saw him many years later in Chicago and George indeed had gone through medical school and he had wanted--he always talked about wanting to be an obstetrician. He liked the idea of giving birth after Auschwitz. Instead, he became a psychiatrist and he kidded me. He said, "Sonja, I didn't marry money. I married a blonde." [laughter] And he became a psychiatrist who couldn't speak English. [laughter]

NL: Well, it gave him a certain European quality which, I guess, has its advantages. So you prevailed on this principle to give you the necessary credits.

SS: He was a swell man.

NL: He was a sensible man.

SS: Right. He realized that I was stubborn. He always--he also appreciated...

NL: Of course.

SS: ...that I delivered what I promised.

NL: Did you get any help, any special encouragement from any teacher?

SS: Yes, there were two; one was a dumb teacher, Miss Dunway, who really was very nice, very sweet. She taught French. And she was very stupid. I conned her into giving me credits for French. And as a trade-off, I translated stuff for her and whatever. There was another teacher whom I really liked. Her name was Miss Zeman. And she had an advanced course, her creative English course, and I got into that, and there were very few students in that course. And she was nice. I remember she invited a few of the other kids and myself, you know, special group, Christmas Day at her house, and she had a car and sometimes she took me for rides. Yes, she was very good, very supportive.

NL: And so you got your diploma? And then decided to go to Chicago?

SS: Yes. Then I went to the Jewish Vocational Service in Milwaukee. And they had a psychologist. I remember her name, Snitson [or Slipson?], she was nice. She gave me a complete battery of tests. That's where I had my first exposure to the Rorschach. She gave me a Rorschach. And it's funny, after 20 some years of administering the Rorschach, that's what's so marvelous about that instrument, I can still--and, you know, having tested hundreds and hundreds of people--I can remember with great vividness some of my responses. It's a wonderful test.

NL: Extraordinary.

SS: Anyway, on the basis of that, they decided that I was highly motivated, I had a lot of good drive and so on, and that's the first time that anybody ever really helped me. They awarded me a scholarship, tuition scholarship to any university of my choice. I guess, I must have done pretty good on their tests.

NL: You must have been exceptionally well.

SS: They gave me a whole battery.

NL: Oh yes!

SS: So my choice was the University of Chicago.

NL: Aha.

SS: And I went to the University of Chicago, and I applied and they interviewed me and everything, and they accepted me. However, they said, under no circumstances, no way at all, would I be able to work and go to school, to the college. That it was much too demanding, and they wouldn't hear of it. So that was the end of that dream. I couldn't go to the University of Chicago.

NL: They couldn't give you any help, any subsidy.

SS: That was before affirmative action and, and packages. [laughter]. You earned what you got.

NL: Oh my God...

SS: So, that's how come I choose Roosevelt University in Chicago, which had a very good program. It was an interesting school. It was founded in 1946. It was the first university in the country that had, that eliminated all admission quotas. It was the first university in the country that admitted people on the basis other than quotas. It attracted professors from all over the country, because of that, and many of the professors...

NL: You mean, quotas or formal credits?

SS: No, no quotas.

NL: Quotas...

SS: Remember, in those days they had Jewish quotas...

NL: Oh yes.

SS: ...black quotas, green quotas.

NL: [unclear]

SS: Yes, yes, Roosevelt was founded on this concept.

NL: A liberal arts school?

SS: Yes. Many of the professors were working on their Ph.D.'s at the University of Chicago. Many came from all over the country to teach there out of ideology. And most of the students were the GI's.

NL: Ah yes...

SS: So it was an extremely exciting, good place.

NL: And they let you work.

SS: Of course, it was a semester system and, yeah, it was a great school.

NL: So you got your BA there?

SS: Got my BA there by working. I worked at several factories. I got fired from a few. I got fired from several. I worked for Eastman Kodak and I got fired because it was piecework and I exceeded--you know, they had a system of every week they posted how many pieces did everybody do, and I did more than the others [laughter] and the best of them.

NL: You were a rate buster.

SS: I was a rate buster! I didn't know that. I learned that.

NL: You couldn't slow down?

SS: I didn't know that. You know, I mean, the idea was to do as fast as you can and get more money.

NL: So management fired you or the union got you fired?

SS: God no, there was no union.

NL: Oh, that's right.

SS: So, I went from one factory to another. The last, you know, one was Republic Steel. I was making steel drills, that is, the tip of the drill on an enormous grinding wheel, you know, where you measure the tip with a micro somebody. And there I got very angry because I understood what was going on. The men working right next to me, the same huge grinding wheel, and it was very dangerous. One guy slashed his leg and almost cut it off. I mean, it was very dangerous. The men were making 75 cents an hour and I was making 50 cents an hour to do the identical same thing. Roosevelt University, then Roosevelt College, had started a Labor Education program. And their director, the first, one of the first early programs in the country, 1949, 1950. So one day, coming home from the factory in summer, in blue jeans full of dust and grease and all the rest of it, which wasn't done in those days--Roosevelt was located in downtown Chicago and women only wore skirts and blouses--in my *shlumpy* dirty jeans, I went up there and asked to speak to Frank McCallister who was the director of that program. And I told him that I wanted to work with him in unionizing that place. [laughter] So, he listened to me and about, oh, I don't know, a few months later, he called me and he said, "I've got good news for you and bad news. The bad news is, I don't think it will work to unionize that place. The good news, I need an interpreter." He had just gotten the business under the Marshall Plan. Trade union leaders from Europe were coming to the United States to study.

NL: So you had to interpret for them?

SS: He hired me as an interpreter. Now I was making *beaucoup* money. Wow, you know, and I got to travel around the country and it got to be a joke between us, because he would call me and say, "Well, there's a group of three or four, you know, and it's going to be on these dates. Can you make it or not?" He knew not to ask me. Of course, I would go any time. And I'd study around it and so on. Through that I met some rather marvelous people. I met one man, Beaubien [she pronounces it "Beaubain."], who had a position in France comparable to the one that occupied by Walter Reuther, who at the time was the head of the automobile workers, and so Beaubien and I became very good friends because most of the idiots in interpretation and translation would always say, "*Qu'est-ce qu'il dit, Madame, qu'est-ce qu'il dit, Madame*?" "What's he saying? What's he saying?" always afraid of missing a word.

NL: You let the conversation flow?

SS: Whereas with Beaubien, you know, he would let me ask the questions for him. He knew I would hit what he wanted to know. We worked out a very nice little thing

there. So I went with him and met Walter Reuther. He was a friend of Victor Reuther, who was in Paris, and I met the Detroit crowd and so on. So those were good years.

NL: Yes, yes. Those were the halcyon years of American trade union activity.

SS: Well, they were good years for me, too.

NL: They were good years for you, too.

SS: I was making a lot of money. [laughter]

NL: Well, thank you for that. Now, could we swing back, because I don't want to forget your interest in speaking about Grandmother?

SS: Before we go to my grandmother, I just would like to add with a note of sadness, I had over the years several times written a letter to the people at the Jewish Vocational in Milwaukee, and I never mailed it, the letter. But it was saying to them in the letter was, "Dear People, I think it's rather sad that you have never followed up on what I did with the scholarship..."

NL: They never did...?

SS: "...that you so generously awarded me."

NL: Ah, why don't you write that letter, and mail it? Wow! Mail it. Resolve that, find out what happened.

SS: They are all dead.

NL: Are they?

SS: Sure. Dr. Sheldon, the psychologist, was a lady then in her late 50's, 60's and all the people, I mean, they...

NL: Did they continue awarding scholarships, as far as you know?

SS: I have no idea. Whether I was the only one or whether there were millions. [laughter] Until the day I got my BA, I sent them, you know, the tuition thing, or the University did, and they paid.

NL: But no follow through?

SS: Never. I mean it's crazy. [laughter]

NL: It's really ghostly. Very strange. [pause] Do you want to step back to the story now about Grandmother, or can you think of other points in your experiences that you would like to comment on?

SS: Okay. Before we go on, I want to reflect on the fact that that is really how I learned English. I learned English by mingling with Americans. I learned English by thinking English. It's interesting. I can think of words when I learned them. I remember the first time that I heard the word "kids". And I had no idea what it meant. And then somebody thought of telling me "children." I knew "children" and not "kid" and so on. I never translated ever. The idea was to think in the language. And what I would do if I didn't know a word in writing or reading that was important, I looked it up in an English-English dictionary, looked up the word till I found the word, saw if there was a word that I understood. If I didn't, I would take that word and look it up and kept going. Sometimes

it meant looking up five or six words until I found one that I really understood, and then go back.

NL: So you never used a French-English dictionary?

SS: I bought my first French-English dictionary after I graduated, after I got my BA. That was my reward.

NL: Interesting. Did you listen to the radio, too? Did you learn some English that way?

SS: No, I only listened to classical music.

NL: Music.

SS: They didn't have TV in those days.

NL: Of course not.

SS: I guess TV would have helped.

NL: I know some Russian newcomers, Russian Jewish newcomers, learn English through television.

SS: I would imagine so.

NL: It's a good device. Now, Sonja, we can go back now a bit. Which grandmother is it you want to speak of? Is it mother's mother?

SS: Yeah, my father's mother died before I was born. I was named after her. I think that the story about my grandmother is too lengthy, the hour is late. It's involved. I would prefer to meet you again, or I'll make a tape and I'll mail it to you, okay?

NL: All right, Sonja. Now before we end, are there any thoughts you have about leaving some word for young people who will be studying this history, the history of the Holocaust, in future years? Any warnings or ideas that you would like to share with them?

SS: That's a lot in two minutes!

NL: No, not two minutes. You can take a while or do you want to think about that and also...

SS: I can start off the top of my head.

NL: Okay.

SS: That's a difficult question...

(The interview ended here. It was hoped that Dr. Samson would mail another tape, but she became ill. After numerous false starts, it was diagnosed as lung cancer of a fast ravaging kind. She underwent heroic therapies at Sloan-Kettering, but succumbed August 16, 1986. See letters dated April 25, 1986, and August 11, 1986.)