HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

SARA MELMED

Transcript of Audiotaped Interview

Interviewer: Meta Jacoby
Date: December 13, 1989

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SM - Sara Melmed [interviewee]
MJ - Meta Jacoby [interviewer]
Date: December 13, 1989

Tape one, side one:

MJ: This is 12-13-89 and we are speaking to Sara Melmed. We are on tape one, side one. Sara, could you please tell me where you were born, a little bit about your family and how and how you lived?

SM: I was born in Poland.

MJ: Where?

SM: A small town near, it's like the State of Lublin, near Lublin.

MJ: Near Lublin?

SM: A beautiful small town. We had a, we had a very nice Jewish community, a nice family, and everything was going, everything was fine.

MJ: How many people were in the family, Sara?

SM: Just my sister and I.

MJ: Was she older or younger?

SM: She was older. And, when the war came, when they fir-, the first day my hometown was bombed, my sister was hit in the knee with a shrapnel from a bomb.

MJ: This is in September, 1939?

SM: September 7, 1939. And there were no doctors, no medication. Everything disappeared, so it's--she, she was a little, she couldn't move around, and she was terribly scared. She was scared, scared when she saw the Germans, when she heard planes. She wouldn't move out of the house. She was otherwise a beautiful, intelligent, lovely girl.

MJ: How old were you and your sister at the time?

SM: I was then 18. My sister was about nine years older.

MJ: 27.

SM: We had a nice home, nice parents.

MJ: Yes.

SM: Everything was fine. The war started September 1st, on Friday. The next Friday we were bombed, the city. The next Friday, the 15th, German armies drove in.

MJ: Okay. And what happened?

SM: Well, as they came in it was like the most terrible thing. Coming in, they got out of their cars, out of motorcycles and run to homes, grabbing everything they could. And whatever they couldn't grab, hitting people, grabbing. We had--on a closet, not a built-in closet, but, you know, European, and my mother used to make those *folyelum* [phonetic] bottles of wine and preserves and everything was in that closet. So when they came in, they looked at everything. They took everything. But these, they

couldn't take, so they took a rifle, and on the end of the rifle there was a stiletto, and he just, like this, swished over the closet. And everything was dripping and pouring. And it was like blood all over the house. And we couldn't--we were not even allowed to say a word. We just stood there, like.

MJ: Were your parents there?

SM: My parents, my sister, and I. I had a large family in that town. My father had--they were five brothers and two sisters, all married, all with families. And I stayed with the German occupational for two-and-a-half months. And every day you heard other atrocities. If you went out after the curfew, when it got dark--it was September, second half of September, and we had, what do you call from the outside, to close the windows? Covers?

MJ: Shutters?

SM: Shutters. And we had to go out, close the shutters. If somebody was late, a minute, two minutes, five minutes late, they were shot right then and there. Killing somebody was nothing. I had a friend that had--a very handsome young man, and he had a beautiful head of hair. He walked down the street once. A German officer stopped him. What he did is with the end of this stiletto he cut, took his hair like this, and chopped it off. It was degrading.

MJ: He didn't kill him though.

SM: He didn't kill him. He let him go. But he was afraid to go out on the street any more.

MJ: What, was there a particular--were the Jews treated worse, or the same than the Poles?

SM: Worse. Worse. There was no--and the Polish, the *Polaks* helped the Germans.

MJ: Oh, will you tell me about that please?

SM: Yes. I wasn't home then any more, when my husband, when my parents were taken out to a *lager,* camp. They went to Bełżec[1]. Have you heard of this?

MJ: Was that in the government general?

SM: It was Poland.

MJ: Yes.

SM: A DP camp.[2]

MJ: Near Lublin?

SM: Near Lublin.

MJ: Okay.

[1]Belzec was a labor camp until it became a killing center in 1941 – 1942. Mrs. Melmed states on her personal history form that her parents were killed in Treblinka, which suggests that they were deported before the killing apparatus was established in Belzec.

[2]Belzec is a town near Lublin in which a ghetto was created in 1940 and liquated in 1943. Jews were deported to various concentration camps from the Belzec Ghetto. Perhaps Mrs. Melmed means deportation.

SM: And people were taken there to just be killed. The minute my parents stepped out of the house, Polish people were there like, and a family moved in--immediately! They took over everything. So if somebody was hiding, the Polish people would bring in the Germans and point at them, "*Jude*," meaning, "He is a Jew." And a Jew was nothing. Killing a Jew was--well I stayed for two-and-a-half months, and I couldn't take it anymore. My parents didn't want to leave home.

MJ: Why?

SM: Because we had a nice home, and my father said, "I worked for that all my life. And we are now comfortable. And, it won't last long. It'll be over soon. If we move out, we won't have anything to come back to. We'll stay here and we'll watch everything."

MJ: What did your father do, Sara?

SM: He had, my father had a small factory. When you say factory here, it was a small factory that he made combs out of horns. You know what this is?

MJ: [unclear]? Yeah.

SM: And it was a good business. We lived nice. We weren't rich, but very comfortable.

MJ: You were middle class Jews.

SM: Yeah.

MJ: Was your family religious?

SM: Yes. My family was *Hasidic*.

MJ: Ah hah.

SM: But not fanatic *Hasidic*. My father knew his Talmud. He could learn, as we say in Yiddish, *a tikunt lerner* [phonetic]. You know what the expression is?

MJ: I think. I'm not sure.

SM: He knew his Talmud.

MJ: Oh.

SM: And so did the whole family. It was something that everybody--we thought everybody does know.

MJ: How much was the population of the town?

SM: About 10,000.

MJ: And about how many Jews?

SM: I think about half of it were Jewish. We had a very nice--and especially the young, my age, people. Beautiful group, of, groups of people--we--it was a nice life. And that's why my father wouldn't want to leave.

MJ: Now, after the occupation, when they actually were occupying the town, after the two-and-a-half months, and you wanted to leave...

SM: I left. I, when I started talking to my parents about leaving, a lot of people, especially younger people, were leaving. We had--my grandfather would come in, and we had a meeting, a session. We talked about it. And you know, I'll never forget.

My grandfather was, he was being too heavy Talmudic studies. He was the one that--and he said to my parents, "Let her go. Maybe she'll be the one among us to survive."

MJ: What about your sister?

SM: My sister couldn't, because she had, her knee wasn't healing.

MJ: Yes.

SM: So why did my father let me go, but I went, I knew exactly where I'm going. The other side of Poland was Russian, under Russian occupation.

MJ: Eastern Poland.

SM: Yeah. And we had, my father had a business with a certain man there, a businessman in Kovel, on the Russian side. And he gave me a letter to Joseph Shoychet. He was about the richest Jew in Kovel. And he had properties and he--my father re-, asked--oh what's the word I want--asked for an apartment. Mr. Shoychet was supposed to give me an apartment, and then my parents and my sister would come, and we'll wait over there for the end of the war. When I came into Kovel, and I went to the address where the Shoychets had their business, nobody wanted to talk about it any more. They disappeared over night. It was one of those Stalin times. The whole family, the business, everybody, and don't ask us. I asked a few people, Jewish people...

MJ: People that you knew, or were these...

SM: People that were neighbors...

MJ: Oh.

SM: Of the Shoychets.

MJ: Oh.

SM: Until one man called me aside, and he told me the, the whole thing. He said, "It is not healthy for us to talk about it. And we're not allowed to talk about it, and don't you go around asking. It's not good for you." So I had no place to go.

MJ: Would no one else help you?

SM: No, there wasn't; there was so many people coming from the west to the eastern part of Poland. Everybody was running. And there was no place. You know where I went? I found a place to sleep in the library, on a table. And this was my corner, and nobody took it away from me. How long can you sleep in a library on a table? I left home on the 27th of November. [banging in background]

MJ: What are they fixing?

SM: The heating system. Well, it's going to be an interesting tape. We'll have a little hammering in it [laughs]. That's all right.

MJ: I'm talking about the end of December, and the end, the winter of 1939-1940, was an exceptionally harsh winter. And the Russians started pushing; they didn't want people. There were all kinds of elements coming in...

MJ: Yes.

SM: Some not so good. I was politically, completely, completely naive, unaware. I didn't, I didn't know anything. It was just a storm and I was going with the

wind. So the Russians started, "Either you go home, back to the other side, or you register and go to Russia." The other side was impossible already, to go back.

MJ: Were you in touch with your family during this time?

SM: I had once, they said somebody was coming from my hometown, and they found me, and they told me, gave me a message. My parents want me to come back. It was impossible already. The borders were locked. Germans were there with dogs, and tanks and, and, and they were shooting on sight.

MJ: How did you know this?

SM: Well there were rumors.

MJ: Everyone knew...

SM: …we knew what was going on. People were coming in. So I registered to go to Russia. When I registered, I asked, "What am I going to do?" I was small and skinny, and not adaptable to any kind of work. I had just that summer, I had finished *gymnasium*. And this is all I knew.

MJ: [unclear]

SM: So I was told they'll find a kind of work that you'll be able to do. Okay. I was taken, *we* were taken, hundreds of us, hundreds and hundreds, some married people, some with groups. I was with a group that they sent to the Russian forests, very, very close to Arkhangelsk, m-, you know, the northern type? Northern, of Moscow. It wasn't Siberia. It was the, the...

MJ: The forest outside of Moscow?

SM: Not outside. Very far away north from Moscow.

MJ: Oh. What was, what is it close to [unclear]?

SM: Arkhangelsk, Arkhangelsk. I don't know how to pronounce it.

MJ: No, I've never heard it before

SM: Murmansk [located on peninsula north of Leningrad]? Have you heard of Murmansk?

MJ: What republic?

SM: *Vologodskaya Oblast* [province].

MJ: Okay.

SM: You wouldn't know about it. It's on the map, on the Russian map.

MJ: Yes. I only know the name.

SM: We were taken, given warm boots, a Russian jacket, and quilted pants and mittens, and I was to go out and become a lumber jack. I couldn't possibly do it. There were a lot of women, Russian women, working there. But they were six feet...

MJ: [laughs]

SM: Women, all over 200 pounds. They could, they could crush me. So what do I do? I told the leader of my group, "This isn't work I..."

MJ: Was the leader a Russian?

SM: A Russian, of course. "What do you wanna do?" I says, "I can't speak Russian, can't read or write. Let me learn." He gave me six months, which was a whole winter. He came in there in January, and until the snow started melting. And I was--I found another girl, sort of like me. We became friends and together we learned the Russian language. In six months we could read, write, speak...

MJ: How, who taught you? How did you learn?

SM: We learned by ourselves. We got in touch with the first grade teacher. She gave us paper, a notebook, a pencil, and a first grade book. When we finished the first grade, we went back to her. She gave us another notebook.

MJ: You went to second grade [laughs].

SM: And back to second grade, and so on. And when I was done, I could read. And I am, I'm a reader, which helps a lot learning a language. After the six months were up, I was offered a job in an office there.

MJ: Sara, excuse me...

SM: Yes.

MJ: May I just stop you a minute? There's so much, a little bit that I'd like to know about your background in Poland. Did your family or did you, experience antisemitism before the war?

SM: Of course!

MJ: Would you tell me about that, please?

SM: You didn't grow up in Poland without knowing antisemitism. They were full of it. And you know what else? We had neighbors. We didn't live in a ghetto. My parents, my father wanted a nicer house than the ghetto, with a garden. We lived among *Polaks*. When the Germans came in, we found out a lot of them were *Volksdeutsche*.

MJ: What does that mean?

SM: That meant they were Germans settled in Poland.

MJ: Oh. Oh. Which the Germans considered part of them.

SM: Yes. And when...

MJ: Remarkable.

SM: When the Germans came in, the German army, they put on hand bands that said *Volksdeutsche*. They were Germans! They spoke Polish. They also spoke German. Antisemitism was...

MJ: How were you affected?

SM: First of all you knew, on Christmas and Easter, keep the windows closed, and the shutters closed. Because when they were coming out from mass, from the churches, they were ready to kill everybody. The Church, the Polish Church, is unbelievable. They were so antisemitic. They were teaching them antisemitism. They were brewing it! And of course when the Germans came in, they had free hands. They--I personally was not that much affected by antisemitism, because in school they needed help. The Polish girls--and they called them a friendly, friendly helping--one student

helping another. So I was the friend helping out other friends. They needed me, so I was treated nice. But still, watch out. You had to be very careful. Anybody could just hit you for nothing.

MJ: Were your parents affected?

SM: My parents were affected during the war. My father wore a beard yet. And he wouldn't get out of the house, and he wouldn't shave the beard. My mother wore a wig, a *sheytl*. And she wouldn't get out of the house either. It was dangerous. She wouldn't take off her *sheytl*. This is, this is a lifestyle, and they wouldn't, they wouldn't change. And it was dangerous, very dangerous. You went out on the street, especially somebody with a beard, they would grab people to work, before, before concentration camps. Even when I was home, in the beginning, they needed people to put their ideas to work. So the more Jewish you were, the worse was the work was. Can we stop for a minute, please?

MJ: Of course. I'll stop right now. [tape off, then on] Do you feel better now?

SM: Yes.

MJ: Were any Poles willing to help in your little town?

SM: Not that I know of. You know, before the war Poland had built a factory, ammunition factory, underground. It was supposed to be the latest in modern warfare. A Jew couldn't get a job there, not even as a janitor. Nobody could get a job [unclear]. When the Germans came in, this was not bombed, because it was well hidden underground. They took it over ready; then they took Jews to work there.

MJ: Slave labor?

SM: Slave labor. And there were a lot of Jewish people working there during the war. They survived because they worked there.

MJ: They were not deported? They kept them working in the factory?

SM: Those who could work were not deported, but my parents didn't qualify to work there. They were--when I went home, my father was 42 years old. My mother was two years younger. But in the eyes of the Germans they were too young[3] to give a good day's work.

MJ: Too old.

SM: Too, I mean too old.

MJ: In the '40s, and late '30s.

SM: Yes. So...

MJ: Was, your town, was the Jewish community well-organized?

SM: Yes. Very nice well organized.

MJ: There was a *Judenrat*?

SM: Oh sure. Sure.

[3]It appears that Mrs. Melmed means "too old."

MJ: Did you, were you, were your parents part of it?

SM: My father *davened* [prayed] in a *shtibl* [small house of prayer used by *Hasidim*], not in a synagogue. But, for the high holidays like for *Kol Nidrei*[4], the high holidays, people, representatives of the *Kehillah* [Jewish community] would come into the house and invite my father to say *Kol Nidrei*. He was a very, very good *Baal Tfile* [prayer leader]. You know what this means?

MJ: Yes, I do know.

SM: So, it was an honor, and they--he was always invited.

MJ: Do you feel it represented the interests of the community, the Jewish community? How did your parents feel about the *Kehillah*?

SM: They were involved.

MJ: Good.

SM: Yeah. The *Kehillah* helped poor people out, and there was a *gemilus khesed*, which means if somebody needed money, they could borrow money without interest from the *Kehillah*. If somebody needed help they always had it. If somebody got stuck in *Shabbos*, for *Shabbos*, and they couldn't travel on *Shabbos*, nobody would travel, people would take them home for meals, accept people for *Shabbos*. It was such a beautiful--and then. My parents were *Hasidic*, but there were beautifully organized Zionist organizations.

MJ: Oh.

SM: All kinds. You know the, there was the *Mizrahi* and there was the, all the other Zionist organizations. It was a beautiful hometown, and I wish it were still there.

MJ: I'm sure you do. When, when the Germans were occupying, was there a *Judenrat*?

SM: There was one Jew working for the Germans. He was a nice person before, but I was told later by people from home, my own town, he turned against the Jews. He was, like, defected to the German side. He thought if he'll tell, supply information to the Germans, they'll let him and his family live. They didn't.

MJ: Was it a type of government? Was he in charge of anything, or was he just involved?

SM: He was, before the war he worked for the government, for the Polish government. He had some kind of a position, I don't even know what.

MJ: Civil service or something.

SM: Yeah. But when the Germans came, he sort of joined, joined them, and he spoke a very nice--he was more modern. He was clean-shaved, not like my father with a beard. And he sort of taught these Germans, was very well-spoken, and he wanted to get by.

[4]The service on the Eve of Yom Kippur.

MJ: Did they use this man, the Jew, in any form of government in the Jewish community? I mean was he in charge of anything?

SM: He was not--the Jewish community didn't trust him.

MJ: No. I'm so sorry, that I'm, I'm fascinated by your story and I should have asked you all the things about your *shtetl* before we got into.

SM: I...

MJ: So, can we get back now to...

SM: I have a cousin in Mexico. May I speak about him?

MJ: Of course.

SM: He was about nine or 10 years old when the Germans came into my hometown. He was a child, but he was a healthy, strong, quick child. And what does a nine-year-old know? When the Germans came in, they used him. They used him in my hometown; there were no telephones. He was a courier. He was dumb enough he couldn't read German. He could be trusted, and when they told him to run fast, he did. His whole family, they were seven children in his family, brothers and sisters, then his parents. They were, they were even, they were well-to-do, a well-to-do Jewish family. Before he looked around they suddenly disappeared. He doesn't know how. His family was sent away. He was the only one left. Then all through the war he was a courier.

MJ: In this town? In your hometown?

SM: And he survived. After the war the Red Heart came.[5]

MJ: Yes.

SM: And they sent him with an orphanage to Israel. He was very tall and skinny and stayed in Israel for I don't know how long until they took him in the Israeli Air Force. And he grew up there. He met a girl, an Israeli, a *Sabra*.[6] And they got married. And he didn't know much. He, he was in a, a world of his own. Then his mother's brother heard about him being alive. His mother's brother was in Mexico at that time, a very, very wealthy man, multi-millionaire. He came to Israel to see what's going on. He met him, his wife, by that time they had a baby already. And their Uncle Aaron offered, "Come with me to…

[End of tape one, side one.]

[5]It appears that Mrs. Melmed meant to say the Red Cross.
[6]*Sabra* – Hebrew for a person born in the state of Israel.

Tape one, side two:

MJ: Okay. Uncle Aaron.

SM: Uncle Aaron didn't have children of his own. He was married to a very fine American lady from London. And no family. They brought him, my cousin, his wife, she's a *Sabra*, and their little boy, Gary. They still live in Mexico. They had another boy in Mexico. They are now doing beautifully.

MJ: And you've seen them.

SM: I was there last winter.

MJ: How nice.

SM: And they are such beautiful people. He--we talked a little bit about his experiences there. And they, they are a beautiful family.

MJ: There are so many meaningful stories. Sara, can, we were discussing that you and another girl were allowed to take the time to learn Russian.

SM: Allowed to learn what?

MJ: You were allowed to take the time to learn to read and to write Russian.

SM: Yes. Yes.

MJ: Will you continue with that?

SM: When I learned how to speak, I didn't want to get stuck in that God-forsaken, very cold land. Winter, it was winter, dark. There was no daylight there. In summer, you know, the white night.

MJ: Yes. Like, I've seen them in Leningrad.

SM: They, they are beautiful, but I didn't want to be there. I didn't want to live there.

MJ: Was the industry of the town, you said, to be a lumber jack. Was it...

SM: Logger.

MJ: All forestry?

SM: Yes. Yes. It wasn't a town. It was rather a village or whatever. So I didn't, as I said politically I was completely unaware. I wasn't--I didn't know. Wherever you looked in Russia you saw Stalin, larger than life pictures, surrounded by children bringing him flowers. Stalin loved the children. I took my group, as I was the big leader...

MJ: How many were in the group?

SM: It was about 15 of us. There were a few couples among us, and singles, guys and girls. And we, it wasn't easy, but the snows were gone, and we got to Moscow.

MJ: You just walked away from the *shtetl*? How did you do that?

SM: Well, in Russia?

MJ: Yeah.

SM: No, we--it wasn't legally done. We snuck out, in the dead of night. And we, we got to a railroad station from there to Moscow.

MJ: You were able to buy tickets.

SM: Yes.

MJ: How, where did you have, where did you get money? How did you have money?

SM: We didn't have much money, but we got together, and somehow we got tickets to Moscow. When we came to Moscow, all of a sudden on the--we look around, and there is so much police on horses, and we were wondering. We didn't think they were looking for us. We didn't do anything wrong, did we?

MJ: Is this still 1939?

SM: No, this was 1940, I think. And all of a sudden that police on the horses inside the, the, the railroad station, and they're closing in on us. And we still didn't realize we are going, we are being arrested or whatever we did. When they came closer, they started asking questions. I was the spokesman. And I told the policeman, "We don't want to live there. We wanted." "What do you want to do?" "I want to go to school." Anyway, as we were speaking, I said, "May I go to the ladies' room?" Well, they couldn't hold me back, I had to go. I went, and it was, Moscow railroad station was gigantic. I was, for the first time there, didn't know my way around. But I found another exit from the ladies' room, got out on the street, and went to the first bus stop. And I asked, not bus stop, streetcar. I asked the, the conductor, "How do I go to the KBG [KGB]?"

MJ: Okay.

SM: [unclear]?

MJ: You were by yourself?

SM: I left my group there...

MJ: Yes.

SM: And I was going to, for help. And where do you go to for help? To the KBG, of course. And I found it. I found the KBG, the national KBG. When I came there there were two uniformed KBG men with rifles. "Where do you wanna go?" I says, "I want to go see the *Nachal'nik*." *Nachal'nik* meaning the commanding officer.[7] He looked at me like, he thought, "What, a nasty little kid. Is she crazy or what?" And I wouldn't go away. I said, "I have to see him. It's important." And they wouldn't let me in. And then, an officer, KBG man, walked out, and he says, "*Chto bylo,* What's going on here?" And I tell him. "I want to go see the *Nachal'nik*, and they wouldn't let me in. How come? Isn't this a free country?" So it was a free country; he let me in. He says, "You come with me." And I wasn't even scared! I hadn't done anything wrong, had I? As we walked to his office, I saw on the door, I saw who he was. He was the commanding officer. He got behind his desk. He gave me a chair, "Sit down." He took his gun out and put it on the desk, and I wasn't scared! I was telling the truth. I didn't...

[7]*Nachalnik* - Russian for supervisor.

MJ: What did you tell him?

SM: That, we were made to work there. We can't work there. I said to him, "Look at my hands. Can I be a lumber jack? Look at me! Will I ever be a lumber jack?" And we had among us, there were tailors that was badly needed in Russia. There was a man that was a shoemaker. There were teachers. There were barbers--people that could work at their trade profession, and they could be, they could do better than being a lumber jack.

MJ: Mmm hmm.

SM: He says to me, "How about you? What do you want to do?" I says, "I want to go to school." And he says, "Are you ready to take tests?" This was a time when my German came in handy. German was very, very important. They needed people that spoke German. I did. In *gymnasium* I took Latin. We started Latin from fifth grade, grade school [unclear]. Then I remembered it. Don't ask me a word in Latin now; I forgot it all. So he got on the phone, talked to people. We stayed in Moscow for a few days. We stayed in an old church that was made, the church was then, ah...

MJ: He went to the railroad station and picked up the rest of the group?

SM: No, he spoke to his people.

MJ: Where were...

SM: …they sent...

MJ: …where were the rest of the group?

SM: At the railroad station.

MJ: [unclear]...

SM: With the police [unclear]...

MJ: All that time you were still there?

SM: Yes. They were waiting what to do with us. They didn't know. From the railroad station I met them. He went with me in a truck, an open truck, and we got the whole group in. We were taken to an old church that at that time was a *Komsomol*[8] organization took it over. It was a club. This is where we stayed for a few days in Moscow. He told us, "We want you to know you are being watched day and night." We didn't intend to do anything wrong. He asked me where I wanted to go, where I wanted to go was the Ukraine, most, the southern climate, that's a little milder. For some reason I said Kharkov would be fine. We were taken to Kharkov.

MJ: All of you?

SM: All of us. We were given, all of us were given jobs.

MJ: How were you taken?

[8]Russian abbreviation of *Vsesoyuzny Leninsky Kommunistichesky Soyuz Molodyozhi*, English All-Union Leninist Communist League of Youth, an organization for young people aged 14 to 28 that was primarily a political organ for spreading Communist teachings and preparing future members of the Communist Party (Encyclopedia Britannica).

SM: The train. But we, we were told all through that time, "Don't try anything. You are being watched." We didn't intend to try anything. We were very glad to go to Kharkov.

MJ: Did they feed you, or did you...?

SM: We got rationing cards. Not too much, but you couldn't starve. When we came to Kharkov I was and that girl we learned with together, Masha. We got into a dormitory--four girls: two were there and the two of us got in together into one room. And we were to prepare for tests. We took the tests. We passed. And we waited, in the meantime, while waiting for the test, I don't know I must have been a complete--I wrote a letter to Stalin.

MJ: [laughs]

SM: Isn't it funny?

MJ: I think you're wonderful!

SM: No!

MJ: I do!

SM: I think I was dumb!

MJ: I'm thinking this is an 18-year-old girl!

SM: By that time I was 19.

MJ: Well all right. Nineteen, skinny little girl.

SM: Skinny little kid.

MJ: Plenty competent. [laughs]

SM: I thought, if anybody is going to help, Stalin will. Don't you think so?

MJ: [laughs]

SM: So I wrote to him.

MJ: I've written to Gorbachev, so I can understand you [laughs].

SM: I wrote to him, told him all about myself. I even told him how much, how tall I am and how much I weighed, so he would have an idea that I am not a lumber jack. I told him about, and if he'll let me go to school, and if I'm have the opportunity, I wanted to go--the Russian system I'm getting onto something else. The Russian educational system is different than here. When you finish high school, which is 10, 10 years all together, grade school, high school 10 years--after the 10 years, it's called *Vizeteleska* [phonetic] in Russian. Ten years of schooling. You can take whatever you--you can take, and you are being tested, and if you're successful, your tests are good, you can go into the line of specialty wherever you want to go in college. I was working in chemistry, biology, physics. I thought I wanted to go to medical school. I told Stalin so. If I'll go to medical school, when I'll finish don't you think I'll be more useful to your country than as a lumber jack?

MJ: [laughs] I love it!

SM: Well? When we went to, to the, for the tests--Masha and I--we passed the tests. We were given room and board, and I didn't have a penny to my name.

MJ: This is in Kharkov.

SM: In Kharkov. Right. We started school. And that was terrific. For every "A" on a test, we got a special card for a special dinner, excellent dinner. We worked our heads off for that.

MJ: [laughs]

SM: And we were told, "If you can't pick up a high standard of learning, high grades, that scholarship will be taken away." So...

MJ: Was she also…

SM: I thought...

MJ: Was she also studying for the same…

SM: …yes.

MJ: …medicine?

SM: We went together.

MJ: Pre-medicine, I would imagine.

SM: No, it was medicine. After four years you finish and you're a doctor.

MJ: Oh really?

SM: That's the Russian system. So, we went to school together. We lived together with Masha, the same, four of us. Two Russian girls, Masha and I, until, until the fir--we finished a year. In the summer the Rus, Russia, they give you vacation, but you had to work, especially people like us. We had to earn our keep. We had to get rationing cards. We had--we were living free, so we had to work. So we worked. And then, in 1941 again a war. Kharkov was bombed, the same night as Kiev. It's 100 kilometers apart, Kharkov and Kiev. Kiev was the first bomb, Kharkov was the same time a little later, in the same night. And it was time to evacuate.

MJ: Evacuate because you were Jews?

SM: No.

MJ: Evacuate because of the bombing...

SM: …evacuate because every organization, every factory, every school, every hospital, everybody was evacuated. So the faculty went, the libraries, the whole university, every department. The head of the department was in charge of the evacuation, of his department. We evacuated and wound up--evacuation took a long time, and the Germans were following our trail.

MJ: What, oh, the evacuating trail.

SM: Um, it was cattle trains, of course, until we stopped. Our train unloaded in Omsk.

MJ: How do you spell that?

SM: O-M-S-K.

MJ: And is that also in...

SM: Siberia.

MJ: Ah hah.

SM: This is after the Ural mountains, Central Siberia. And it wasn't easy, but yet, the climate was Siberia. When it snowed, we--the snow there is not measured in inches; it's feet. Ahh, very, very difficult. The living conditions were terribly crowded, because Omsk was at that time a small Siberian town that was not ready to pick up so many people, and so many factories. And we joined a university. We were two, three days, started school in September. We were prepared, and we knew exactly where we were registered, and start school.

MJ: That's amazing.

SM: Yes, it was amazing. Every factory was taken in and enlarged. It was amazing after four years in Omsk, when I left Omsk, it was a large, industrial giant, with fac-, big factories, tanks, airplanes, fields...

MJ: They did military manufacturing.

SM: Yes, this is what I am saying. Yes. They adjusted so quickly. They were, it was unbelievable.

MJ: How large was the migration? How many people moved into Omsk from, was it all from Kharkov? All, were--were the, the people that went to Omsk all from Kharkov or was there a so…

SM: No, they were, oh no. Moscow evacuated to Omsk, Leningrad. I had professors. I had a professor, a neurologist, who later became my doctor when I got sick. I forgot his name. He was from Moscow. Leningrad, Moscow, all of, all of the, the, western side of Russia moved to Siberia!

MJ: How were you housed?

SM: I was thrown in with a family, and I lived with that family.

MJ: They were not Jewish?

SM: No, of course not.

MJ: Did they know you were Jewish?

SM: I didn't discuss it. I didn't bring it up. I didn't talk about it. But they were nice to me. When they had bread, I had it too. I mean, I gave them the cards. When I got sugar, when I got candy on the rationing cards--the candies went for their children. They didn't ask for it, but I gave it. But the conditions for learning were much more difficult, because I was very far away from the university, and we would meet in a library, on campus. The campus was barracks. And we would meet in a library and study, because where I lived there was no room, no, the conditions weren't. And the winter of '42-'43 I got sick. And that was the end of my time in Siberia.

MJ: May I just go back a little bit? Were you ever asked to sign a repatriation questionnaire? Were you asked to be a Soviet citizen?

SM: I was automatically given a passport.

MJ: Did you have to accept Soviet citizenship, did you have a choice?

SM: No.

MJ: Could you remain Polish?

SM: No. No.

MJ: There was no choice.

SM: I was Polish on my passport...

MJ: Oh.

SM: It was written I was Polish...

MJ: Yes.

SM: But I, in Russia everybody has to have a passport.

MJ: Yes.

SM: You can't survive without it.

MJ: Internal passport.

SM: A passport will give you rationing cards. A passport will, you're entitled to things. You had to have a passport. And if you don't have a passport, you're in, you're in trouble.

MJ: Yes.

SM: I was given without being asked a passport. And somehow, I don't know, I lost it. I don't have my passport, the Russian passport.

MJ: But you lost it...

SM: I don't have it.

MJ: Years later, then.

SM: Yes.

MJ: Okay. Did--you were never asked to become a Russian citizen, though? Did you ever have to decide?

SM: No. It wasn't my decision. No.

MJ: Then you remained Polish.

SM: Yeah. That's why, because I was Polish, after the war was over, I could go and ask to be a repatriated. "I wanna go home," I said.

MJ: Did you have any contact with the Jews of Poland during the time that we've been talking about?

SM: In Poland?

MJ: Yeah.

SM: No.

MJ: No.

SM: No.

MJ: Do-, were there any Jews that you knew that went back to Poland--during the time, in Russia, were there any, any...

SM: Oh yeah.

MJ: What were their reasons for going back?

SM: Going home, getting out of Russia. Nobody wanted to stay there. Nobody. There were no Polish people that came in during the war years in Russia that

wanted to stay in Russia. Thousands and thousands of us going back home, but there was no more home to go back to.

MJ: Did anyone, did you ever hear from these people? Did anyone know what happened? Those that went back?

SM: Eh, I read the papers in Russian. I met people, when I came back, in Germany, I met people. I met a few people from my hometown that told me what, what happened.

MJ: This was later.

SM: After the war.

MJ: No, in, at the time, in the years that we're talking about...

SM: No. I had no contact with anyone.

MJ: Were, in the papers, in the Soviet press, was there anything about what was going on?

SM: Oh yes.

MJ: Well what did they say?

SM: All of it. There was a journalist, Ilya Ehrenburg, who was, have you heard of him? He had a column. He was on the front. I read his column religiously. And I think, I am not accusing him, but I think it was reading Ilya Ehrenburg that brought my nervous breakdown. I, I got sick.

MJ: Please tell me more about that. I do want to hear about this. Tell me more about what he wrote.

SM: Ilya Ehrenburg?

MJ: Yeah.

SM: Ilya Ehrenburg wrote--it was a daily column--exactly as it happened in Germany, exactly what happened in every camp, what was going on. He was, he was very good, describing everything. And because I had lived there for two-and-a-half months, with the German occupational armies, I knew he was telling the truth. It was not propaganda. And he was killed [unclear]. And this is how I knew what was going on in Europe, and what was going on in Poland, and I...

MJ: A daily column in the Soviet press.

SM: A daily column in the Moscow, *Moscovskaya Pravda*. You know what kind of paper it is. *Moscovskaya Pravda*. *Pravda* means "Truth."

MJ: Oh, *Pravda*. Is that what you're talking about?

SM: Yeah.

MJ: Yeah. *Pravda* is the…

SM: *Pravda*.

MJ: The Party...

SM: The Moscow, Moscow *Pravda*. It's the major...

MJ: Yeah...

SM: Main, main...

MJ: Yeah, I understand.

SM: Yeah. And this paper I had every day. And I knew what was going on.

MJ: And you, then you got sick.

SM: Yes. It just got me so, and everything together. The food, I was constantly hungry. Cold. In Siberia when I got up in the morning there was a barrel of water in the room where I lived. You had to take something heavy, break the ice, and get some water, wash your face. Brushing teeth. You shouldn't even ask about toothpaste, because toothpaste is for, for the bourgeois. And so is a toothbrush. So whatever, we used our fingers. If we had salt at the time, if we had baking soda, those weren't things that we had every day. Whatever was there. I lived in terrible conditions. And this happened on, on a winter night. It was a whole, an all-night study before finals.

MJ: In 1942?

SM: 1942-43. I don't remember whether it was December or January. And in the middle of the night we stopped, the four of us. And to break the, the study, we started telling jokes. "Do you know any jokes?" Yeah, just a break. So, everybody brought out his joke. Somehow somebody told a joke and it was very funny, and I laughed so much I put my head down on the table and didn't pick my head up any more. Then I had spasms, what do you call it?

MJ: Muscle spasms.

SM: Yes. I woke up the next day. I didn't know what happened to me, but the next day when I woke up I was in the hospital. And I, I woke up. It was 7:00. It was time for me to go. I had a test to take, and there was a nurse sitting with me. And, I was told I'm not allowed out of bed. I had epileptic attack.

MJ: Seizure?

SM: Seizure. And for three nights in a row at the same time I had the same seizure. And I was begging to get my clothes. I had to go back to school. And I was told on doctor's orders I'm not allowed out of bed. On the fourth day, my professor came. I always remember his name, now I forgot it.

MJ: You'll remember it. This is the neurologist.

SM: Yes. And he was a Jew. And he was an elderly man. For some reason he liked me. He must have felt sorry for me, I'm sure. And he sat down, and he talked to me and he told me--he called me *dyevochka*, my child. And he wrote, "You can't go back to school. You undertook much more than you are capable of taking, under these conditions. If you go back to school you'll be a cripple for the rest of your life." The central nervous system was damaged, I was told. Later, I went through six months without, I didn't work, didn't go to school, just to rest. And I got the rationing cards, which, only dying people get treatment like this in Russia. Later on I got paralysis of the vocal cords. And I couldn't talk. I could write whatever I wanted to say, but I couldn't talk. And that was the end of my college, but thanks to this professor, he got me into a

school for nursing. I went there for two years, no, a year-and-a-half, and when I finished, he gave me a job. And this was the good part of it. I came out, I was a good nurse.

MJ: This was in Omsk.

SM: All in Omsk. I stayed in Omsk until, until it was time to evacuate. [End of tape one, side two.]

Tape two, side one:

SM: And that, the doctor stayed with me and helped me, and he gave me--do you want me to warm up the coffee?

MJ: No, I'm fine. [noise on tape] It's my fault. I have to redo part of this tape. It didn't pick up what happened to you. Until we get to your husband and, uh, let's just let it run a little bit. [pause] Sara, you were telling me about, and we were off the tape. We're on the tape now. About this doctor who was so kind to you, and his family, he had a…

SM: Yes.

MJ: Would you describe his family please?

SM: They were the nicest people I knew in all, in all my travelings in Russia, very fine people. His wife didn't work, which was unusual. She was, she was an older lady, and they had a daughter and a son, both students. Fine, the only people, Russian people that I appreciated, I liked.

MJ: They really befriended you.

SM: Yes.

MJ: And you mentioned that they had food well beyond the rations.

SM: Yes.

MJ: Well, I'm a little interes-, I'm interested in what was typical of a day's ration?

SM: A day's ration was 400 grams of bread. Dark, wet, and it wasn't good bread. And it was 400 grams worth a slice, like, a brick, the bread was like brick. It tasted like brick. It looked like brick. And it was, like 400 grams.

MJ: Yes.

SM: A kilo of sugar a month. [unclear]

MJ: Was there any fat or meat?

SM: Oh, if they had it, we used to get bacon, a kilo a month. If they had it, and if they didn't have it, then you could use, or something like this which is not a nourishing it's not a--but when I started working as a nurse I was in good shape already. First of all, I, I got paid. I made 275 rubles a month. That was money that, and I had food free in the cafeteria there where I worked in the clinic. So I wasn't hungry any more.

MJ: Were there vegetables in the rations?

SM: Cabbage.

MJ: Uh huh. [unclear] cabbage.

SM: A lot of cabbage. Cabbage soups. This is the time I met my husband.

MJ: Oh, I'm most interested, but first, you also said this when we were off the tape. The seizures stopped. You regained your use of your vocal cords, and then you went to nursing school.

SM: Yes.

MJ: Now when did you do that?

SM: It took me six months.

MJ: Nursing school was only six months?

SM: No, no, no. To get...

MJ: Oh, to be well.

SM: Established. Yes. Because I was told my, the central nervous system was terribly damaged. It was like that of an old, old person. The, the, my nerves, and this was the whole problem. Then I got back to normal and I worked and, and as I said, I wasn't hungry any more, and I got 275 rubles a month. And I was in good shape, considering all the circumstances. This is when, I met my husband, on a summer day in a park. And there were concerts and dancing in the park. And I, I didn't--I took a book. I used to take a book and sit down on a bridge on a side, read my book and listen to the concerts. And it was a pleasant, spending a few hours nicely. I love to read. Reading to me is like a tranquilizer. I still do the same today. I read. I have to have a book, like, I'm addicted.

MJ: I do too.

SM: You do?

MJ: Yes.

SM: And my husband came over. He sat down. He looked terrible. He wore one of those military coats, a big coat, not one button on it, just a few strings, ropes to--he was wrapped around...

MJ: In ropes.

SM: He wore a pair of shoes that were falling apart, and he, under the shoes he had newspapers, and then kept those shoes wrapped with ropes. But into that rope there was a wooden big spoon, you know, like sometimes you use in the kitchen, a big mixing spoon?

MJ: Oh yes.

SM: And I asked him later on when I, I wouldn't talk to him. He looked like somebody you don't want to talk to. I said, "What's that spoon there with those ropes?" He said, "Well, if some thing comes up if I go somewhere and there is something to eat, I need a spoon." So he was prepared.

MJ: With his portable spoon.

SM: Yes. Wherever he went, he had that spoon ready. And, when I, we got to talk, and he asked me where I come from, and I asked him. When you started talking to him, you didn't notice those ropes and, and that coat, and he was then about 26, 27 and gray temples under that junky hat he wore. And he told me who he was. And he had the same background.

MJ: He was Polish too?

SM: Right. And the same kind of family, and he left his family too.

MJ: What, where was he from?

SM: He was from Kovel. But when I was in Kovel I didn't know him. And we got to know each other, and I could, I was able to help him financially. Like, I could bring him a piece of bread, and he never had enough. For him it wasn't enough, the 400 grams. It's a pound of bread. When the bread is heavy and wet, there isn't too much of it.

MJ: Yes. Was--he was working?

SM: He was working in a munitions factory that, I believe they were making tanks there or something like this. It was, he worked, you know, heavy work. And I was, as a nurse I was doing fine already. For the money I had I could buy warm clothes, on the black market of course. I could buy clothes, warm clothes. Everything was bought on the black market. There wasn't anything in the store. You couldn't go into a store and buy anything. They didn't have anything. And it's still this way.

MJ: Yes, I know.

SM: So we married in Russia, in '43, 1943, and I had, I told my boss, and by the way, my boss was a girl I went to medical school with. So we were friends.

MJ: Oh, you weren't working for the neurologist?

SM: No, no, no. I worked in a clinic.

MJ: I thought you were working for him.

SM: No, he gave me the job.

MJ: I see.

SM: Not for him, no, no. I used to meet him, I used to see him, but I wasn't working for him. In the clinic he gave me, he gave it to me because he said, "Here you won't go hungry. You'll have food." And I did. And plus I had three meals a day in that, in the cafeteria. I could spare bread.

MJ: And you were working for a, a girl who was a friend of yours in medical school.

SM: Yes. She was my boss later on.

MJ: And you were friends.

SM: And we were friends. When I told her I am getting married, she gave me a half day off.

MJ: A half a day [laughs]?

SM: A half a day. And my husband got a half a day off.

MJ: Did you have a religious wedding?

SM: No. No.

MJ: Was that possible?

SM: No. I didn't know anybody that was, I didn't know anybody. No Jews in Russia, in Omsk. I didn't see any. So, we were, you go to an office and they, the half a day we had, it was a honeymoon. The next day you go back to work. When we came back to Germany, we got a religious ceremony. We got, we married again. And my son was at our, our son was at the wedding. When it came time to come to America, the

American authorities wanted a marriage license. I didn't have one. So we married for the third time!

MJ: [laughs]

SM: …in a civil ceremony.

MJ: You mean you needed a license.

SM: Yes.

MJ: They didn't, I'm surprised you didn't get--the Soviet government didn't give you a license or had you lost it by then?

SM: I don't think we got a license. If this--in Russia you could go in and, you just register. It isn't much.

MJ: Mmm hmm. The marriage palaces[9] they call them.

SM: Marriage palaces.

MJ: Was it that way then?

SM: Yes, yes. And you go in, and you sign up that you are married, and that's it. And two weeks later, a month later, you go back and, I don't want it, or...

MJ: …you sign up...

SM: …I don't [unclear]

MJ: …you sign up for a divorce [laughs].

SM: You sign up for a divorce and you walked out of there divorced. So.

MJ: Where did you live? Were you, you and your husband able to live together after you were married?

SM: Yes. We got a room. One room. But we were lucky to get it.

MJ: Yes.

SM: In Omsk. And we worked.

MJ: What year did this happen?

SM: This is, we married in 1943. Our son was born in 1945. And I worked until three days before he was born. But when he was born, I didn't go back to work. I had no place to leave the baby.

MJ: Was there enough money to live on just with your husband's job?

SM: I did get a ration card, which helped. And we didn't need much money, as long as you had bread. This was the main, the main food, bread. And you don't need much. So we lived on what he had, and the beginning of 1946 we left to go home.

MJ: In all the time that you were in Omsk, you identified the doctor, the neurologist, as Jewish, and I assume his family was Jewish.

SM: Oh sure.

MJ: Your husband was a Jew. There must have been other Jews.

SM: There were.

[9]Marriage palaces - buildings throughout the former Soviet Union where civil marriage ceremonies are performed.

MJ: Did you, was your...

SM: Russian Jews did not come forth.

MJ: In Omsk. There were Russian, there were Russian Jews?

SM: Oh yes there were Russian Jews.

MJ: Was any attempt made to contact them, to, did they know that you were there?

SM: No.

MJ: That there were Polish Jews there?

SM: They probably knew, but they didn't, they wouldn't be bothered.

MJ: Was there a synagogue?

SM: I don't think so. I didn't see one. Not in Omsk.

MJ: You had a little boy.

SM: He was not, we didn't have a *bris* [ritual circumcision]. My son was, had a *bris* when he was three years old, in a German DP camp.

MJ: So, the Jews, the Polish Jews that you knew, that you identified as Jews, was there any, even a little bit...

SM: Camaraderie, you mean?

MJ: Even a loosely held organization?

SM: No. We were sort of spread out, and nobody knew from anybody else. When I came--when it came time to repatriate, and I came to--we had cattle cars, 30 people in a car. And we had a baby, a year old baby. Then I saw that we were about 1500 people in that train, going back to Poland. But when we came in to the...

MJ: Were they mostly Jews?

SM: All Jews!

MJ: Uh huh.

SM: All Jews. When we came into Poland, when we came into the Lublin area, we were told not to open the doors, and not to go out, because the, a Polish national army, they called themselves Polish national army...

MJ: Who told you? Who warned you?

SM: We were warned...

MJ: By whom?

SM: By the people that were in charge of the transport.

MJ: Who? Were they Soviet?

SM: Russian.

MJ: Okay.

SM: Russian. They knocked on every door and told us. The Polish national army is, and they were nothing but a bunch of hooligans. They were killing, they had pogroms...

MJ: This is in '45?

SM: This is in 1946.

MJ: In ‘46.

SM: Yes. March of ‘46. The beginning of...

MJ: May I just stop you for one moment, please? In all this time in Omsk, you were getting, you were getting news of the eastern front, from Poland.

SM: Yes.

MJ: Uh, rather, western Poland [unclear]. Through this, through the newspaper.

SM: The main, main information was the newspaper.

MJ: Was there any other source of information?

SM: If you went to a movie, there was, before the program...

MJ: A newsreel?

SM: A newsreel.

MJ: And film was coming out of Poland [unclear]?

SM: Films were coming, what was going on, when the Warsaw Ghetto was, you know, the uprising...

MJ: They were films that you saw in Omsk?

SM: Yes. Yes.

MJ: Amazing. What about news coming out of Ukraine, Kharkov, Kiev? Did you know what was going on, what happened to the Jews?

SM: Yes we did.

MJ: How did you know?

SM: Newspapers. Newsreels. And I believed them. Usually, when you read the Russian paper, you don’t believe. You have to take it with a grain of salt. You don’t believe everything. But here, I took everything they said, and the pictures and the newsreels, and everything that they told it to you as it was.

MJ: They reported on the...

SM: Everything.

MJ: [unclear] the killings, the [unclear].

SM: Oh, yes. Yes. Yes. Everything.

MJ: Did you know about Babi Yar[10]?

SM: Yes I knew about Babi Yar.

MJ: What happened in Vilnius [Vilna], with the Bavarians...

SM: Yes, and I knew, that they know, and I knew the ghettos, and, we knew, I read. I read. And I believed.

MJ: Yes.

SM: And it was the truth.

MJ: [unclear]

[10]Babi Yar - a ravine northwest of Kiev which was the site of the murder of half the Jewish population of Kiev on September 28, 1941 perpetrated by *Einsatzgruppe* (mobile killing unit) C supported by other SS and German police units and Ukrainian auxiliaries. (United States Holocaust Museum)

SM: Ilya Ehrenburg, as I said, travelled with the Russians around, so, and Russian journalists, came on then, were there were cameras, and they took pictures and sent them home, sent home films.

MJ: [unclear]. Then, and they distributed them.

SM: Yes.

MJ: Now, in '45, when the war was over, did you want to go back where you were from?

SM: Yes.

MJ: And, were you prevented from leaving at all?

SM: They tried to. First of all, I was told that, my son was born in a Russian hospital, and when he was born I got three, six diapers probably. Six diapers, three shirts, and a blanket. So it's their baby.

MJ: He's a Russian citizen.

SM: He was a Russian citizen. And they tried to prevent us from going back to, they tried to tell us, "There'll be other transports and you don't have to go with this transport." And I insisted I had to. This is, we went out with the first transport.

MJ: But it took a whole year to get a transport out.

SM: It took from the end of the war, 1945, oh until '46, in March, '46.

MJ: [unclear].

SM: No, not even a year. But, we got a very large transport.

MJ: Were you surprised to see 15,000 people?

SM: Yes. We didn't know...

MJ: It sounds to me like Jews were very careful in identifying themselves, or, not to identify themselves.

SM: Everybody was sitting in their own corner...

MJ: I see.

SM: Doing their thing.

MJ: Life was difficult enough.

SM: It was, but, it shouldn't--the Russian Jews were, were, I have no, no understanding for them.

MJ: Please tell me more.

SM: You couldn't have me work for a Russian Jew. I wouldn't do anything for them, because they don't deserve it. They were cold. They were egotistic. They didn't want to know anybody. And when people tell me how religious they became, no they didn't. It was a good way for them to, to get help and go to get out to America. That's the way I see it from what I remember.

MJ: How were you treated by the Russian people during this time?

SM: No problems. I had no problems with them.

MJ: Did others?

SM: I don't think so. They, the Russian people didn't have enough food either; neither did we.

MJ: Were any of the young men, did they go into the Russian army?

SM: Polish?

MJ: Yes.

SM: They didn't take any Polish Jews to the Russian army. They were not trusted. When I became a nurse, I went to register to go to the front. And they were very happy to see me register, and everything was fine, until I was asked where, and he was writing down my occupation, until all the question came, "Where were you born?" And I told him when I was born. He put aside his pen. That was the end of it.

MJ: But Kovel was not all Jewish. Were you asked what your religion was?

SM: No. I was asked where I was born.

MJ: And that indicated to him that you were a Jew?

SM: And that was, that indicated they didn't want any Polish people in their...

MJ: Oh, Poles.

SM: Poles.

MJ: Not necessarily Jews.

SM: Yes.

MJ: Okay. Now, you went, you left on this transport, back to Poland.

SM: We wanted to go back. We, we were coming back to Poland, coming back home. Since we couldn't get out in the Lublin area, we couldn't, the train didn't even stop long enough, and we were told as I said. "Don't get out. Don't open doors." The train was going farther. The train went to the area that, western Poland that used to be German. And this is where we unloaded.

MJ: How long was that train ride? All the way from Siberia.

SM: Mmm hmm [affirmative].

MJ: How long was that?

SM: The train ride was about five weeks.

MJ: Five weeks.

SM: With a year-old baby. And when we unloaded, it was a small Polish German town, was more German than Polish, with a lot of Russian soldiers. And, I went out a few days later, and found a job in a city hospital. Nurses were in great demand. And, and I got a job. I worked there, we came in, in April, end of April, towards the end of the, after a few months. At the end of the summer, I was approached in Poland, in the hospital, to join the Communist Party. And I didn't think of it. Went home, and didn't mention anything to my husband. Then, a week, 10 days later, I was approached, that approach was a little stronger. When I came home that day I told my husband already I felt, I can't handle it myself.

MJ: Who approached you?

SM: The head of the hospital, the, you know, people above me.

MJ: In authority.

SM: In authority. And I was promised, "First of all, you'll get a raise. You'll get better housing. You'll get the--." Oh, promises were made. After a while, the third approach was stronger. When I came home, I told my husband and that was the end of it. I didn't go back any more. What I didn't tell you is, my husband, after the war, in Poland, found his brother that he was--all through the war--he was sure that brother is dead.

MJ: Tell me more. Where did, how did they find each other?

SM: Oh, that was a story in itself. Our train stopped, and when we stopped and started unloading, my husband went to investigate, see. We were told, "This is the last stop. We will be unloading." And he went to look around to see what's going on, and somebody came to, I was, I still had a year-old baby. I couldn't run around. So I was in the train, in the car. Somebody knocked on the door, "Is there anybody from Kovel here?" People were looking for friends, for family. I said, "My husband's from Kovel." "Your husband's from Kovel? Who is he?"

MJ: But so were you.

SM: Well, no, I am from Kraśnik.

MJ: Oh, okay.

SM: My husband's from Kovel.

MJ: I'm sorry.

SM: He says, "Who, who is he?" And I told him my husband's name. He said, "Oh my God! His brother is here!" And, he ran away to bring the brother, and as my husband was coming, he accidentally, they met...

MJ: That's wonderful.

SM: On the street. And, there were crowds of people around them, and as they were, they cried...

MJ: Yes.

SM: And everybody around them cried. This brother, when he came to, was a head of a *kibbutz*, organizing the Jewish community. His brother was the head of the *kibbutz*, you know what a *kibbutz* is.

MJ: Yes.

SM: When we came in, he had an apartment for us.

MJ: Where was this?

SM: This was the part of Poland that...

MJ: Oh, that we were just speaking about.

SM: Yes.

MJ: Okay.

SM: Rifpa [phonetic]. He had organized people. There were a lot of people from Kovel there, and it was *heymish* [comfortable, snug] already. And it was good.

MJ: And all after this five-week train ride.

SM: Yes.

MJ: I can imagine.

SM: And my brother-in-law was clean. He had showers. He wore clean clothes. We didn't. Anyway, it was a great help for us to find him there, and things went well. Until, my husband told his brother what's going on with my job. I came home one day from work, and I used to go to work and take the baby with me. And they had for children a special...

MJ: Nursery.

SM: Nursery. I would go to work with the baby and come home with him. As I was coming home from work that day, there was a truck, a closed truck with--in front of the house where I lived. And I was coming in, before I knew it, I, I didn't know what was going on. The baby was in a stroller. The stroller was taken from me, put in a trunk, in a truck. The baby was taken. I recognized those *kibbutzniks*. They were friends. They took the baby, that's why I didn't scream, I didn't, and then two men took me, you know, like this, and two others took me into the truck. The truck was closed. My husband got in. My brother-in-law got in; he told the driver, "Go."

MJ: No explanation.

SM: No explanation. He couldn't. There was no time to talk. I was angry. I couldn't take nothing with me! As I was, we just went. It wasn't that I left a great fortune there, but...

MJ: It's all you had.

SM: I left just in the clothes I went to work.

MJ: What was the concern?

SM: The concern was that the, that there'll be problems with me, about not joining the--I didn't want to join the Communist Party, and they would get after me. Either they, I would go to jail, they would look for problems, things would change.

MJ: They were that insecure.

SM: Yes. And there was, the *Haganah*[11] was working at that time already in Poland. We--my brother-in-law never mentioned who his bosses are, who is helping. He never talked about it. Until now I don't know, but I know now it was the *Haganah,* the big army.

MJ: That's what I was going to say, [unclear].

SM: Yes. And they, they had people there. We went in that truck, I don't remember crossing through Czechoslovakia. There was a small town, and then it was Prague. In Prague we had a stopover for a few days to catch our breath. From there...

MJ: Where did you stay?

SM: There was a house.

[11]Clandestine Jewish organization for armed self-defense in Palestine under the British Mandate, that eventually became the nucleus of the Israel Defense Forces. (www.jewishvirutallibrary.org)

MJ: Oh, they had contacts.

SM: Yes. There was a house and everybody stayed in the same house. We didn't lose each other. We were one group together at that point.

Tape two, side two:

MJ: I'm talking with Sara Melmed, on side two, I'm sorry, tape two, side two. You know, I forgot to do this on the other one. I hope I don't make some transcriber crazy. I think enough. Please continue.

SM: Well, from Prague we went to Vienna, same truck, same people, and we were told, we spoke all these languages, but if somebody in authority or, or an officer of the law comes and talks to you, you're Greek, and you don't understand anything. You can answer in Hebrew a word or two, but not too much.

MJ: You probably had Greek papers, is that correct?

SM: No, we didn't have Greek papers.

MJ: Oh.

SM: But we were, it was a time when everybody got lost. Everybody was a Gypsy, homeless. So we came in to Vienna. We stayed in Vienna in the Rothschild's house...

MJ: Oh.

SM: For a week. Vienna was not beautiful then. It was right after the war. What we did in Vienna, we went to see the Blue Danube. Took a day, and we went because when you're in Vienna, not to see the Blue Danube. We took a driver, we took a day, we didn't have money, but it didn't cost all that much. We, we were low budget people. We didn't have much. We didn't need anything. But we wanted--I wanted--to see the Blue Danube.

MJ: Yes.

SM: What a disappointment!

MJ: It's not blue [laughs].

SM: It's not blue.

MJ: I know. I felt the same way.

SM: Just another muddy river.

MJ: Sara, I must ask you, you stayed in a Rothschild's home. And now, and the reason I'm asking you, well, would you describe, what is a Rothschild house?

SM: It was a transit house.

MJ: Was it a home of one of the Rothschild's?

SM: No. It was not...

MJ: Oh, okay. I was thinking, oh wonderful...

SM: Like you had an...

MJ: One of the Rothschild's were involved.

SM: What we did in the Rothschild's house, everybody took a bath.

MJ: Mmm hmm.

SM: We got a change of clothes. You should have seen the change of clothes! Ah! You know, the house dresses out of Woolworths, out of...

MJ: Yes.

SM: …bedding, probably 50 cents a dress. I was so skinny and small, I got a dress, and when I got into it I had room for two more people. So they told me, "Take the belt and tie it around you." Well later on it became my nightgown. But it was clean, and we had baths, and washed our hair, and we cleaned up. We stayed there for...

MJ: It was like a rooming house, this transit house?

SM: It wasn't a rooming house. The *kibbutz* had one gigantic room, with 80 beds, not beds, cots. Military cots...

MJ: Yes.

SM: In it, this was, our *kibbutz* still stayed together.

MJ: I understand.

SM: It was a *kibbutz*.

MJ: Oh...

SM: And the Rothschild's house was not a mansion any more.

MJ: I'm confused. I thought just you and your husband and brother-in-law and the driver left. Did the whole *kibbutz* leave?

SM: The whole *kibbutz*.

MJ: Okay.

SM: The *whole* kibbutz.

MJ: I see.

SM: Whatever happened--was there another *kibbutz*? I imagine, there was another *kibbutz* organized.

MJ: And the reason, all this was because of, of your...

SM: Because of problems.

MJ: Of your problem with the...

SM: They, they, foresaw problems.

MJ: Problems with the Communist Party.

SM: Yes. And we didn't want to go into deeper problems until I'm arrested, until, until something they'll, they'll be looking for things.

MJ: So how many people left all at once?

SM: In my group?

MJ: Mmm hmm.

SM: There was 80 of us.

MJ: Oh, you just mentioned that, sorry.

SM: And we stayed together, and from Vienna we went to Salzburg. Oh, we went in beautiful places.

MJ: Yes.

SM: Did you see *The Sound of Music*?

MJ: Yes.

SM: This is the house we stayed in.

MJ: Really?

SM: It was not a mansion any more again. It was a transit *lager* [camp]. But it was beautiful. The mountains, oh it was so beautiful. And my baby caught whooping coughs. That's why we had to stay a month there. We couldn't go into Germany. It was right--about four kilometers, we walked from Salzburg. We walked into Germany. Then we walked into...

MJ: What papers did you have crossing over these borders?

SM: No papers at all.

MJ: How did you manage?

SM: Nobody asked for papers.

MJ: Oh.

SM: But, when we settled in a DP camp, they came, the UNRRA[12] authorities, and they gave us UNRRA cards, with pictures on them. Those were our papers. Not until we came into a DP camp. The DP camp was barracks that be--during the war, for--before the war, it was an, a military base, an Air Force base. And the soldiers were living in barracks. Our *kibbutz* got the largest room there in a barrack, all 80 of us together with army cots. Then the UNRRA gave us, everybody got a blanket. Everybody got one set of linen, and a pillow. The UNRRA was a great help. The UNRRA came in the DP *lager*. They were feeding us. Then the Joint[13] stepped in. When we were already in a DP *lager*, the Joint. We got, from the Joint we got food: cheese, canned vegetables, canned soups. Everybody, every person got so much. And it was organized. Four years in a German...

MJ: Four years you were in that...

SM: Four.

MJ: In a room, with 80 other people?

SM: No. No. Not. Later on, we stayed in Ainring, until my daughter was born in Ainring.

MJ: Where is that?

SM: Ainring is about eight kilometers from Salzburg.

MJ: In Germany.

SM: In Germany, in the Alps. Beautiful country. Then we got a separate order. My family, my family meaning my husband, his brother, we found a cousin of theirs, and two children. One room, a little bigger than this room.

MJ: Four adults and two children.

SM: Yes. We had room. There was enough room. And when somebody, guests used to come. People came, used to come from America to check that the Joint, the distributions, how things are going. My brother-in-law was a controller. He used to

[12]UNRRA - acronym for United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration; founded in 1943 to provide relief to areas liberated from Axis powers after World War II. (www.holocaustchronicle.org)
[13]The Joint Distribution Committee.

bring guests home. They would come to our house for dinner. They stayed overnight. There was an extra army cot.

MJ: [laughs]

SM: And they had room too.

MJ: And did you cook?

SM: Yeah.

MJ: Individual cooking.

SM: Individual cooking.

MJ: Did you work, or did your husband work?

SM: I learned to cook. There was no...

MJ: No work.

SM: First of all, there was no work. Second, I had two small children and a large family.

MJ: Did your husband work?

SM: Yes.

MJ: What did he do?

SM: My husband, my, my husband was in the warehouse where they would, where they gave out the Joint, food. He was in charge of that.

MJ: He worked for the Joint.

SM: Yes. My brother-in-law was controller. He was in control-taking. It had to be under control. It had to be organized. So my husband made some money, not, not much. And my brother-in-law, they didn't make fortunes there, but we didn't need much.

MJ: What was--can you describe life in, at that transit camp? Were there schools organized? What was the social organization? Were there, was there any religion...

SM: There was no religion in the beginning. There was, we were all people like thrown in from everywhere. Our *kibbutz* was organized, but then we wanted separate rooms. We were a family.

MJ: Yeah.

SM: So, we got a small room. Children, there weren't too many children then. In the whole DP *lager* there were about 2,500 people. Maybe about 10 children. My son was one of them. The school, he was, well until we came he was about two years old until we resettled and there was a young woman, young lady that said, "I want to take charge of the children, of all of them. I'll take them together." And unger, hanger, you know where the planes are kept?

MJ: A hanger.

SM: Hanger.

MJ: Yes.

SM: Sorry.

MJ: An airplane hanger.

SM: Yeah. This is--if it rained, if the weather wasn't good, this is where she played with those children.

MJ: Was she a teacher?

SM: She was a teen, she was a young girl, and very young children. But a year later there came a teacher. He was with our *kibbutz*, but, it took him a long time--it took him about a year to--himself to get settled, and putting himself together. And he said, "Look. We're having so many children now. The children are growing up. They need an education. We need two rooms, and I'll take over." He was the principal. He was, and he took a few people with him. Those children started from first grade, even those that were older. My son was by then three years old, and when school started, they wanted him to go back to the playschool. And he'd say, "No! I'm not going to that baby school anymore."

MJ: [laughs]

SM: "I wanna go with where the grown-, with all the kids." So Sam Mazurek was a friend of ours. He was with our *kibbutz*. He says, "Why not? He's bright enough. I'll take him." He used to come every morning, pick him up, and bring him home. And he put him in first grade, gave him a piece of paper and a pencil, and he was telling us, "He's doing just as good as any other first grader!"

MJ: Ahh.

SM: He evidently did, because when we came here--in Pittsburgh--he started kindergarten for a short time, then into first grade, skipped second grade. He didn't go to second grade.

MJ: He'd been there already [chuckles].

SM: Ohh!

MJ: What was the social fabric like?

SM: We would get together. There was one room where people would get together and read, unofficially. It wasn't, it wasn't--Ainring was not organized. It was thrown apart. We were in the middle of nowhere. It was--Ainring was not even a city. It was an airfield. It was beautiful. The Alps were beautiful, but we were in the middle of nowhere, in the barracks. And we, everybody was hurting. Those were the first year, two. We were hurting. And everybody still was looking for families. And everybody was, it took a while. Then they took us out of Ainring. We went to *Lager* Lechte.

MJ: Where is that?

SM: That is near Landsberg. Have you heard of Landsberg?

MJ: No.

SM: You know where Hitler was…?

MJ: Uh-uh [negative].

SM: …he was a jail, and he wrote *Mein Kampf*?

MJ: Oh.

SM: …in Landsberg.

MJ: …that's where.

SM: In the Landsberg jail. We were about 12 kilometers from Landsberg, close to Munich. And from there we came to America.

MJ: Did you have any, any reason to deal with Germans at this time?

SM: No. But, if you met one, they never knew *anything* during the war.

MJ: They [unclear].

SM: They, they still don't, and they don't want to know. They didn't hear of them.

MJ: Yeah.

SM: Well, you had to sometimes go into a German store if you wanted to buy food. In *Lager* Lechte [phonetic] they started, the Jewish people started bringing in fruits and vegetables and they had stands and they brought in fish and meat, so we didn't have to go out to the German stores then too much. But we kept to ourselves. We didn't trust them.

MJ: Did you ever go back to your hometown?

SM: I didn't go back.

MJ: Did your husband?

SM: No. No. I was going, when we were in Poland, when we came to Poland, where, the first stop, where I worked, I wrote to the city hall in my hometown, Kraśnik. And I asked about my family. I got, I got a post card, a response. My whole family left the city, we don't know where they went. But the house of my parents is there, and it's not damaged, and it's to my disposition. I mean, you can come in and get anything. So, I said to my husband, "Look, we don't have anything. We can use the money. Let me go back. I'll sell the house and come back, so we'll have, have something." I took--spoke to my advisor, or, the head of the hospital, and I told him, "I wanna go home. I wanna sell property." And I got a few days' vacation. But, a day before I was to leave, there was, you probably haven't heard of that city--Kielce. Have you heard of this city? Kielce, in Poland. There was a terrible pogrom. And my vacation was cancelled, and my husband said, "You're not going." I never went, never. I wouldn't have gotten out alive anyway.

MJ: It was very dangerous.

SM: Yes. It was [unclear].

MJ: And you were going everything you had gone through, and then your husband also got [unclear]. Did he find out anything more about his family?

SM: Yes. Yes. Both brothers found out that they went to concentration camps and never returned.

MJ: Did they know which camp?

SM: They didn't. They didn't. I knew. They didn't.

MJ: Let me just check. Why did you want to go to America, Sara?

SM: Beg pardon?

MJ: Why did you want to come to America? Why America? [laughs] I wish that we could pick up the look I just got.

SM: [laughs]

MJ: [laughs]

SM: Because it's still, no matter what anybody people complaining and all it's the best place in the world. It is. And I was, we were all too, too tired to go to Israel. We realized we should, but we didn't have the strength, and we were tired, and we couldn't. So, it was decided...

MJ: What year did you come here?

SM: 1950.

MJ: 1950. Directly to Pittsburgh?

SM: Pittsburgh.

MJ: Where did, how were you received by the American Jewish community?

SM: Perfectly. How should I put it? We came into Pittsburgh on a very nasty, half snow, half rain day, cold, in April. Nobody, we don't know anybody. We don't speak the language. We're lost again. So, I look around and there is a booth that says "Information." I walk over and I speak German to the lady there. And she knew exactly who I was. We had buttons. She called the Jewish Federation, and they told her to call a cab for us, and give the cabbie the address, and they brought us here.

MJ: The Jewish Family Service?

SM: Yes. And we were told we have a right to go to school. My husband said, "I did not come to America to become a *shnorer*. I'll go out to work."

MJ: How many, was your brother-in-law with you?

SM: No.

MJ: Just you and your...

SM: My family.

MJ: Your family. Your immediate family.

SM: Yes. We stayed in a very, in a hotel that was not for us. It was, well, not the nicest place in the world and we wanted to get out of it. We found an apartment. My husband found a job.

MJ: Doing what?

SM: He was very, very handy. He was, he was good at everything. So he signed up when they asked him what, what profession, what he can do, he said he was a mechanic.

MJ: Mmm hmm.

SM: He wasn't.

MJ: Yeah.

SM: But he got a job working for PPG, Pittsburgh Plate and Glass. It was a good job, and then he became a head of a group and people liked him. He was a very, very kind person.

MJ: I'm sure. And knowing you, I'm sure.

SM: No, he was so much better than I am.

MJ: I'm not going to agree to that.[laughs] Did you become part of the Jewish community in Pittsburgh?

SM: The Jewish community in Pittsburgh for a while was sort of lukewarm. And since we felt that lukewarm, we didn't push ourselves. But now, the Jewish community in Pittsburgh, I think, is the best organized in all of America. Beautiful! They are doing wonders there. Everybody is like one family, with respect to everybody, with, with, there is, they, they got about 100 acres of land given to them by the, by a family, Pittsburgh family, the Kauffmans. They made it into a country club, with tennis courts, courses, and a beautiful swimming pool, and golf courses, and the community is one, big, beautiful family, and so much warmth, and so much, and they are so well organized. Pittsburgh, the Jewish community in Pittsburgh is now terrific.

MJ: But it wasn't then.

SM: It wasn't then.

MJ: Sara, I think we missed something. I think, it's my fault, we mentioned it and we got, we went down another path. Your daughter was born where?

SM: In Ainring.

MJ: Okay.

SM: That first DP *lager*.

MJ: Uh huh. So you had these two little children all through this time. That was [unclear]...

SM: But you know what? When we came here, those children were beautiful! I had so many compliments going through the American Consul, that he was supposed to interview my husband, and he, instead he talked with the children.

MJ: [laughs]

SM: And after he talked to them for about an hour, he says, "I'm not going to ask you whether you can read and write."

MJ: They were intelligent little children.

SM: He didn't even ask. He didn't ask. And the children were very, very well cared for. They were beautiful. They were nice. And thank God they're bright kids.

MJ: They were how old when you came here?

SM: Five and two-and-a-half.

MJ: I'm trying to picture, when I was a young mother, and I had to go about four states in a comfortable automobile on a highway. I felt, "How am I going to do this with these children?" I'm trying to picture what this must have been like.

SM: You know, the Russians have a word for it.

MJ: [chuckles]

SM: *Privyknesh*.

MJ: What's that?

SM: You'll get used to it. And you know, you can get used to so many things in life. And you have to be strong to survive. And you have to.

MJ: One, one other thing that I'm, I think I didn't check. The train you took from Poland to Moscow, could you tell me more about that?

SM: The...

MJ: You crossed, when you left your town...

SM: My hometown? I didn't take a train. We went two groups, I mean one group but two horse and buggies.

MJ: Horse and buggies?

SM: With drivers.

MJ: Ahh.

SM: Those drivers were people that knew the area, because we had to be smuggled out.

MJ: Were they Poles? The drivers?

SM: Yes. They were well paid.

MJ: Mmm hmm.

SM: For what they were doing. And it was a very good way for them to make an extra dollar. And they took the roads that the Germans didn't know. They were the smugglers. And we got, there were about 15 or 16 of us in the group. We had to have two of those horse and buggies. It wasn't a luxurious trip.

MJ: Oh, I'm sure.

SM: I'm very well traveled. I've been places, to so many places.

MJ: Then, how did you, you crossed, did you have to cross German lines? You must have.

SM: Yes!

MJ: How did you manage that?

SM: With those, those people that smuggled, the smugglers.

MJ: Then, where were you when you got a train to go to Moscow?[14]

SM: In Kovel.

MJ: Was that a problem?

SM: From Kovel, not to Moscow. I told you they took us into the, the jobs for lumber jacks?

MJ: Oh, yes, I'm sorry.

SM: To the forests.

[14]The interviewer is confused. Mrs. Melmed went by train from Kovel to Arkhangelsk, a lumber jack camp in Russia. She later left Arkhangelsk for Moscow.

MJ: Yes. Yes.

SM: This is where they took us by train.

MJ: How far of a trip was that then?

SM: Oh it was a very long trip.

MJ: How many days?

SM: It was about two weeks. We were in regular cars, railroad cars, but no heat. Absolutely no heat. The weather was unbelievable. As a matter of fact, two children, small children, died, were frozen to death one night in that train. No heat whatsoever.

MJ: Did you have food?

SM: They, not too much. We were given pieces of bread, and we were given boiling water from the locomotives in containers. So it was bread, bread and water. [pause] And going, coming back, especially, from Omsk to Poland--do you remember, have you seen *Dr. Zhivago*?

MJ: Yes.

SM: The train into the Siberian express? This is [unclear] worse.

MJ: [chuckles] Not the way you'd like to be [unclear].

SM: Yes. Yes. Not really.

MJ: Sara, is there anything that you would like to add that I didn't cover? Anything at all that you feel that should be included?

SM: Right now I feel a little bit talked out.

MJ: I can understand that. Thank you so much.

SM: You're very welcome.

MJ: I am going to turn this off.