HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

IDA ROKITA

Transcript of Audiotaped Interview

Interviewer: Bernice Zoslaw
Date: 1978

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IR - Ida Rokita[1] [interviewee]
BZ - Bernice Zoslaw [interviewer]
Date: 1978

Tape one, side one:

BZ: The following is an interview with Miss Rokita, a survivor of the Holocaust. Miss Rokita, when and where were you born?

IR: I was born 1930, in Poland. It's a small town about 50 kilometers of the German border, from the German border.

BZ: Did you speak German, too, in that case?

IR: No, no then we talked at home Yiddish, yeah, but German I learned after the war.

BZ: …oh.

IR: …when we came to Germany. In 1946 we came to Germany.

BZ: Please describe your childhood and family life. Was your family religious?

IR: Well, like all Jews in Poland-- first of all, I cannot tell too much about my religious childhood, because I was only nine years old when the war start and I don't have too much of a religious childhood-- I mean, religious education. No, I don't, because I was raised in not-- in a-- not in normal environment. Is it good?

BZ: Mmm. Yes. Right. You don't know whether your family belonged to any Zionist organizations?

IR: Oh, my father yeah.

BZ: Oh yes.

IR: Oh yes. My father and my mother, but when the war start, everything stopped.

BZ: Yeah, oh yes. But I am ask-- before the war.

IR: Oh yeah, I'm sure…

BZ: Was your father religious?

IR: Oh sure!

BZ: Oh yes. Yes, he was religious.

IR: Oh yes. My sister belonged to Hashomer Hatzair…

BZ: Oh yes, that was a Zionist organization.

IR: …a Zionist organization, yeah and-- but not me. I was still too young.

BZ: You were too young.

[1] Married name is Baum.

IR: I was still too young.

BZ: Yes, yes. How many were in your family?

IR: Two, me and a sister...

BZ: Two girls.

IR: …my older sister.

BZ: Did you ever experience antisemitism before the rise of Hitler?

IR: It's like-- it was like this. My father had a business, a small business, and it was-- most of the time it was open at night. And I remember as a child-- I remember the Kristal Night, yes, I do.

BZ: In Poland.

IR: In Poland, yeah, because when Hitler came to this whole business in Germany and these religious Jews, they came to our store after or before the first *minyan* wintertime, or summertime, and they talked politics, and my mother used to wake us up to go to school, you know we came downstairs through the store, and I still remember everything was then the talking-- yes, the talking about Hitler and what's going on in Germany and how the ship with this-- what was it?

BZ: The St. Louis.

IR: The St. Louis and how it-- I remember everything, yeah. I remember the first day of the war, 1939.

BZ: Were your neighbors in Poland antisemitic before the war? Did you ever-- or don't you remember-- did you ever experience antisemitism from your Polish neighbors, or did your family ever talk about that?

IR: In Poland, what I can recall as a child in Poland before the war is in our city we had a big park, a huge, beautiful park and with a beautiful river and a beautiful tennis court, but on Sunday I will not dare to go to this park, you understand.

BZ: Yes, you were not permitted to go?

IR: It's not that I-- I will not take the chance.

BZ: Because-- was it because they came out of church with the Germans that they heard, was that what it was?

IR: Yeah, yes, because they came from the church and they went for a walk and here I am, I would come home, I had *tzepalach*, you know what *tzepalach* are?

BZ: The braids.

IR: Yeah. I would come home without them.

BZ: Oh my goodness.

IR: Yes, yes.

BZ: They would cut them off?

IR: No, pull, pull…

BZ: They would pull them off?

IR: Yeah, this-- the little children-- not the big ones.

BZ: But the little children…

IR: The little children, yeah…

BZ: …would pull your braids.

IR: Yeah, they would call me *Żydówka* and pull me for these, how do you call it.

BZ: Would you translate that, *Żydówka*?

IR: *Żydówka*, it's a, it's a Jew.

BZ: Jew. And they would pull off your braids?

IR: Yeah, yeah. Therefore I would not dare

BZ: You wouldn't dare…

IR: …on a Sunday, I will not dare.

BZ: And that was young children?

IR: Yeah, yeah. That's what I can recall as a child from children not from big people. You know, as I am telling you, you know, I was still too young.

BZ: But yet you had no faith that the big children-- the big people would protect you?

IR: No, of course not…

BZ: That's what I mean.

IR: …of course not, yeah.

BZ: So actually it was…

IR: I was not afraid of their mothers. I was afraid of the children.

BZ: Yes, but you didn't think that their mothers would run to protect you.

IR: Of course not, of course not.

BZ: So you were aware of antisemitism…

IR: Yes.

BZ: …and not just from the children?

IR: Yes.

BZ: Did you or your family-- well you were too young-- but did your family make any attempt to emigrate before the war?

IR: That was my father's dream, yes, always.

BZ: Oh. To go to Israel?

IR: Yeah, yeah, and I don't know for-- after that's what my mother always used to say after they got married they got papers to emigrate to America. And somehow it didn't work out, with the grandmother, I don't know, yeah because my mother was the oldest and to leave. Some—it didn't work out. But my father always dreamed to go to…

BZ: Always dreamed to go to Israel

IR: Yes, yes, oh yeah. And that's what kept us through the war. Someday, someday…

BZ: You believed that there would be Israel.

IR: …someday, we will go to Israel to Palestine, some day. That's what keeped us on the go-- yes. Such, such terrible six years. It was unbelievable. It's impossible to describe.

BZ: Please give the date and describe the Nazi invasion and the conquest of your community.

IR: Well, but that's what I remember. I was-- it was a beautiful day September, 1939, and I was standing outside on the pavement of-- next to my grandmother's house.

BZ: And what was the name of your community? I know you said that it was so many kilometers from the border. What was the exact name.

IR: Makov…

BZ: …Makov…

IR: Makov, Mazovyetsk [also know as Maków Mazowiecki[2]], yes. And I was standing outside, and I didn't know what happened. All of the sudden, bicycles may—in the hundreds, bicycles and the war was already about two weeks how the war was going on and the *Polaks* and the Germans were fighting over Warsaw, the capitol of Poland and here they came with bicycles.

BZ: The Germans came with bicycles?

IR: Yeah, yeah.

BZ: Not motorcycles?

IR: Bicycles, on bicycles, bicycles. They came in a few hundred soldiers on bicycles and I run and I was watching as they passed me and passed and they-- I don't know where they went-- and I run into the house and I start to holler Bubba, you know, Bubba or Mommy, "Germans are coming," and everybody run out and we were watching these bicycles passing by. And that's how they took this city, without one shot, just on bicycles, they came in. No resistance, nothing. Nothing whatsoever, nothing whatsoever. And that's how they occupied our city. Right away we knew what will happen.

BZ: To the Jews.

IR: We knew right away they don't have to tell us, because we knew right away. And right away the next morning, the next door to us was a photographer, a Jew. And he lived in a big apartment house, but the owner of this house was a *Polak*, not a Jew, and he rented an apartment in this downstairs, the first floor, and he was not a photographer. Right away, the next day, it came order, you know, right away the Gestapo settled somewhere, and right away ordered this photographer has to be thrown out of his apartment and they are making their offices over there.

BZ: The Germans are making offices.

IR: The Germans, yeah, yeah. And the whole apartment building was thrown out-- the people, yeah and they made the headquarters.

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[2]Is 45 miles north of Warsaw. During WWII it was under the administration of East Prussia, according to Columbia Lippincott Gazetteer of the World, p.1125.

BZ: The headquarters?

IR: The headquarters was next to where my grandmother lived. And I remember, I remember this, how my aunt, her name was Adella, she was the youngest sister of my mother's, and this German came with a few dirty socks.

BZ: A few what?

IR: Dirty socks.

BZ: Oh, socks?

IR: Socks.

BZ: Oh yeah.

IR: Dirty socks.

BZ: Ahah. Dirty, dirty socks.

IR: Dirty, dirty, yeah.

BZ: They were dirty.

IR: Dirty, yeah. A few pairs.

BZ: Ahah.

IR: And she was-- somehow I stand outside. And he came over to her and he said, "Hey, *Jude,* wash me this sock.

BZ: Hey, Jew, wash me these socks.

IR: Yeah, yeah, "Hey *Jude*," yah. And she refused. She says, "I will not wash your socks." He said, "You will, someday, you will."

BZ: Mmm.

IR: And right away, it was that the Jews cannot get out from the houses. And I don't know a week later or two weeks later, I really don't, I don't remember, but anyway, let's say a week later, this *Stadtkommandant*, their *kommandant* of the city, because every city got a *kommandant*, he made the *Bekanntmachung*, that means you know, posters all over the city

BZ: The posters all over, yeah.

IR: Yeah, that every Jew on Saturday morning has to come on the churchyard, because he will held a big meeting for us. Then everybody went, because, listen, you don't play around with them-- order is a order, you have to obey. Everybody, everybody, picked himself up, small children. It was cold because it's the end of September, the beginning of October, you know, it already starts to get cold.

BZ: Yeah.

IR: Yeah and we went on this churchyard and this-- he was such a little man. I remember it was a small, little man. He was one in 10,000,000 Germans. One, you can say a decent German.

BZ: A decent German.

IR: And he's not-- he was not afraid to say what he said. And he told us like this straight, "*Juden* [Jews], run away from here. Get lost from here…"

BZ: It's over.

IR: …yes, "because you are losing, you are losing everything. You'll be cheaper than a dog. You'll be cheaper than a mice. You are losing any right to breathe. We'll give you wagons and horses. And go to your brothers Russians."

BZ: Go to the Russians.

IR: Yeah, "Because they are open the borders, they are let you in and save yourself." But we did not believe. Who could believe that he is telling us the truth and people were afraid to go with the Germans, with their horses and wagons. Some went. I don't know if they made it to the German border or not. I don't know, but some people made private horses and private buggies.

BZ: [unclear]

IR: And they put as much, yeah, of their belongings and yeah. And my father took a private horse and a private *goy* [non-Jew], you know a private wagon and we crossed the Bug [river], and we came on the Russian-- we came to Bialystok. And from Bialystok, yeah, Bialystok, what's the second city I don't remember. We, we crossed-- oh, it took us a few days.

BZ: To get there.

IR: Yeah, and I remember how we crossed the Bug. Because…

BZ: Did you…

IR: …Poland-- in those days Poland was cut in two, you know half Poland was German.

BZ: And half was Russian?

IR: Yes, half was Russian, yeah.

BZ: Yes, yes.

IR: And we were caught on the German, on the German side.

BZ: Yeah, but you went over to the Russian side.

IR: Yeah, yeah, yeah and we crossed. But it took us, I think it took us about eight weeks, maybe 10 weeks. We still stood with the Germans.

BZ: Mhmm.

IR: Yeah and we saw was going on and my father always used to say, "I don't trust the Germans. I don't trust the Germans. I want to be 1,000 kilometers away from the Germans."

BZ: Is that right?

IR: Yeah, he always used to say, "What farther from the Germans we are better off." It's like something told him inside.

BZ: That the Russians were better.

IR: Yeah, yeah.

BZ: Did your whole family go-- your grandmother?

IR: No, no…

BZ: And…

IR: No, no, no unfortunately not.

BZ: Your mother and your father…

IR: Yeah.

BZ: …and your two sisters?

IR: It's like this, why did not my grandmother and the rest of the family went with us, because my mother had a younger brother in the Polish army and he was fighting, I don't know where, you know, because-- after all, Poland had to have a little bit of an army, and he was a soldier in 1939 in this Polish army, and my grandmother did not want to leave as long as her son will come home, and then they'll go together. You understand? The meantime, we left, my mother, my father, me and my sister we left. We took a chance and we went. See.

BZ: [unclear]

IR: Yeah. Without a future, without nothing, just, just, we run for our lives. Yeah, and somehow the Germans opened their border and they let us through, but not everybody was as lucky. Not everybody, some, some-- depends who was on the post. You know who…

BZ: On the post, yeah…

IR: …was on the post over there. The soldiers…

BZ: …whether they would let you go…

IR: Yeah. Some did not let you go.

BZ: They didn't let you go.

IR: Yeah, they killed on the border.

BZ: [unclear]

IR: It depends, it depends. But somehow we had good soldiers and they let us through a kilometer further it was the Russian border, you know because the kilometer between this border and this…

BZ: Yes.

IR: …it's no man's land…

BZ: Yes. Right.

IR: …see. And that's how we came, and over when-- as soon as we crossed the Russian border, right away a truck was waiting.

BZ: They were waiting for you.

IR: Yeah, a truck was waiting and he put everything, our *pushmates,* you know.

BZ: Is that right?

IR: Yeah, and whoever came, and they took us to Bialystok.

BZ: Russia provided for that?

IR: But-- Bialystok, Bialystok is Poland…

BZ: Is Poland…

IR: But it belonged to Russia.

BZ: … but belonged to Russia because they have a pact.

IR: Yeah, yeah.

BZ: Hitler and Stalin had a pact and they carved up Poland.

IR: Yes, yeah, yeah.

BZ: But the Russians provided that there would be a truck...

IR: Yes.

BZ: [unclear]

IR: Yes, yes, yes. And when we came to Bialystok, schools were prepared and public buildings were prepared where we could sleep over, and we were in Bialystok I really don't know, a month or two a few weeks. I really don't know.

BZ: Yes, you were very young?

IR: Yeah, because in 1940, we were already Russia.

BZ: You were already in Russia.

IR: Yeah.

BZ: 1940.

IR: 1940, we were already Russia because they, they-- Russia made a choice who wants to stay in Poland can stay, but who wants to emigrate to Russia can. In 1940. My father said yeah.

BZ: That he would emigrate to Russia.

IR: Oh yes-- away from Germany, away because he doesn't know. Someday he said it will cool down, we'll come home. But let's get further away from there, and he registered.

BZ: Then, did he become a Soviet citizen?

IR: Yes.

BZ: Oh, he became a Soviet citizen.

IR: Yes, yes.

BZ: Yes, yes. I see.

IR: That's why we were not in the, in the…

BZ: Siberia.

IR: …in Siberia, no…

BZ: Yes, ones who wouldn't had to go to Siberia.

IR: Yeah, yeah.

BZ: Oh, I see.

IR: And this is another question. This is another story between the people they refused to get Russian citizens and people they-- who with good will got Russian citizen. That's a big difference between these two kinds. The same Jews from the same Poland. We run the same way but we went two separate ways. We went-- we end up two separate ways.

BZ: But you made a decision at that point?

IR: Yeah, yeah.

BZ: I see.

IR: My father became a Russian citizen because he said I am a guest in somebody's country and I had to do whatever I'm told to do and I cannot make my own conditions. You understand?

BZ: Yes.

IR: You understand? And these Jews they came to Russia, and Russia opened the borders, they let them in and then they said, "Oh, no I'm not becoming a Russian citizen." Then Russia cannot trust them, because listen, I helped you and let you in and you say no? And you start to make [unclear]. Then they had to concentrate them in special places because Russia did not trust these Jews. That's why they end up in Siberia.

BZ: When you say, [unclear], what do you mean, make conditions? What are you saying, when you say they start to make [unclear]?

IR: Because they refused to get citizens, and they start to criticize. Russia is a dictatorship, you know. For instance, in America, let's say, it's not allowed to deal with dope and you know if you deal with dope, with narcotic and you are caught, you know what's to be expected. You'll go to jail or whatever, but you'll know. In Russia it's the same thing. It's a dictatorship; it's not allowed this, it's not allowed this, it's not allowed a lot of things. Then be careful, keep your mouth shut and do what you are told to do, then nobody will bother you. I'm telling you, nobody will bother you.

BZ: While you were still in Germany, I know that the German asked your sister-- told your sister to wash his socks-- your aunt…

IR: It's my aunt. Yeah.

BZ: …your aunt to wash his dirty socks and she refused and he said in time, she would. Other than that, were the Jews singled out for-- you said you stayed in your house for two weeks. Did you stay there-- before you emigrated to Russia, you said, you were in your house for two weeks and then the commandant called a meeting. Were you-- did you have to stay in that house or did you stay in the house because you were afraid?

IR: Sure, yes, out of fear.

BZ: Yes, I just wanted to clarify that.

IR: The fear, of course. The fear came so naturally. Nobody had to tell you to be afraid. It came so naturally, because the only sin what we committed is that we are Jews.

BZ: You knew what was going on in Germany…

IR: Yeah, that's…

BZ: …you knew every-- you knew what the situation was?

IR: Yes, that was our only sin and the only crime we are born Jews. It's not because we are do this or we did this. No nothing, it's only because you are *Żydówka*.

BZ: Did the Jews help each other when you got to Russia, or was the-- or did the government take care of everything, you know was there some sort of self-help?

IR: In Russia, you mean, we came to Russia in 1940. And they greeted us like the best guests. They gave us two weeks in the best restaurant to eat and they settled us

between people, you know, whoever had the extra room, they gave a family to live until we will settle ourself. And we took passports for five years. We became Russian citizens with no problem.

BZ: What was the passport then for five years? Were you citizens for five years?

IR: No, in Russia that's the way it is.

BZ Oh that's the way it is.

IR: Every five years you renew, even the Russian citizens by themselves. That's the law over there. I don't know how it's now, but that how it was then. And after-- we became *Pycckhh* [Russian: pronounced rawen] and I went to school and my sister…

BZ: Did you speak Russian? Did you have to learn Russian?

IR: Yes. Yes, yes. I went to school. I finished Russian school, high school, sure but it was interrupted 1941.

BZ: Because of the war.

IR: Yes, but-- in our family was a little bit, you know, it's [unclear]-- after all it's still Russia, you know, yeah. My father got a job. He didn't have any trade, because he was in his small business in Poland and he became a waiter. He became a waiter and he starts to see what's going on in his restaurant. He starts a little bit to talk and a little bit to criticize because he considers communism should be a brotherly love and he was expecting too much out of communism and here he saw that communism isn't the way that he imagined. He starts a little bit to talk. 1940, the second day of Passover, two o'clock in the morning, boom-boom in the door, boom-boom. My mother woke up and opened the door, and NKVD came in. Do you know what NKVD is?

BZ: Is that the secret police?

IR: Yes. Two or three, I really don't remember. And they said, "We want just to search your home. To search your home." "Well, what are you looking?" my mother asked him? He said, "We are looking for gold." *Nu* [well], my mother took out her earrings and her rings, you know. He said, "No, not this gold we are looking. We are looking for golden dollars and golden rubles." Then she said-- we really didn't know it exists such money-- he said, I don't know, never mind they had to search. And they searched 'til about four or five o'clock in the morning. Everything was upside down and they said to my father, "Mister, *tovarisch*" you know, *tovarisch* means comrade, "Please come with us. You don't have to get dressed. You'll be right back." Then, my father was in his underwear, and but fast, fast, fast he took his pants on and he went to the police with them, and they said, "Don't worry he'll be right back." He didn't come back. He was away for two years and he got…

BZ: Two years.

IR: Yeah, he was away for two years and he got eight years.

BZ: He got eight years? For talking against the government?

IR: He didn't talk.

BZ: No, he was just…

IR: He, you know, a word here.

BZ: [unclear]

IR: Yeah. Here a word. He didn't like it here. He didn't like it. He didn't criticize, because after all, he was careful. But-- unwillingly sometimes, you can't help yourself, you know, yeah, but even this was too much.

BZ: Where did he go?

IR: You understand?

BZ: To Siberia?

IR: Oh no, he was in Kamchatka. It was where the white big bears, white polar bears are.

BZ: The white polar what?

IR: A bear, a bear, yes. I really don't know where he was, but that's what he used to say. He was in Kamchatka. It's an island I think.

BZ: It's an island?

IR: Yeah. It's near the ice sea. It's up, up-- further than Siberia. It's colder than Siberia. I have to find it out on the map.[3] I really have to take a look.

BZ: Was it like a prison? Was it like…

IR: It's a camp, yes.

BZ: …like a concentration camp.

IR: Yeah. And he was there two years, but he was freed in 1941, as a Polish citizen he was freed.

BZ: A Polish citizen?

IR: Yes, because it was a general, General Sikorski, and 1941, he wanted to form a Polish army to fight against Germany. Then Russia freed-- my husband knows better this history, because as I am telling you, I still was too young. I was 11 years old. But I remember this General Sikorski, and he made an agreement with Stalin, with the Russian government, that he'll make from the Polish citizens that run away to Russia in 1939, he'll make them together and he will make one army together with the Russians against the Polish [she probably means Germans]. And where were these all Polish citizens? In the camps.

BZ: Yes.

IR: In the jails, in the camps, you know. And that's how my father got free in 1941, because of this General Sikorski.

BZ: To fight in the Polish army.

IR: Yeah. But they didn't draft Jews, anyway, in Russia, the *Polaks* didn't draft Jews.

BZ: The *Polaks* didn't draft Jews [unclear].

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[3] Mrs. Rokita probably means the Arctic Circle or the North Pole.

IR: No, they didn't want Jews in their army. See, in Russia well. But it's how we found-- but in 1941 we were already not in this place where we used to be because we ran away already because the war start. Oh, I am going from one piece to another.

BZ: That's alright.

IR: Yeah, yeah.

BZ: By all means, go on.

IR: In 1941 when the war started between Russia and Germany, we were in White Russia. In White Russia, it's not far away from Vitebsk. Then my mother took me and my sister and then we start we run to the railroad. And on the railroads-- Russia, come this, there were trains, all kind of trains and to get on such a train, it was not, it's not so easy, because 10,000s of people and somehow we got on the train. And this train started to go and we went maybe for six weeks.

BZ: On the train.

IR: Yeah. No food, no money because it came so suddenly, and it came so fast and to hear you talk, you know, here you have a declaration of a war. When the declaration of the war came, again, I was standing outside of my house-- listen, where we lived in White Russia and it's a picture that is impossible to describe. It's impossible to tell, because this Russian people were called out of their work, straight from their work. They were called straight from their fields. You know, the *kolhossin* [phonetic], these farms. They didn't have time to go home to tell their wives they are drafted to the army. I got a pile of letters to mail because they were running to this where they were called, to…

BZ: To the front?

IR: No, to this, when you have to admit yourself to the army, how do you call it.

BZ: Report for duty.

IR: Yeah, over there in this office, yeah, where they are called. And I was standing-- I don't know, it's like a destiny, I don't know. I got such a pile of letters. In the last minutes these men were writing a few words to their wives, that they are called to go to the army, that they are drafted, and that they are not coming home, and I put all these piles in the mailbox. It was in 1941, and a week later, a few days later, we were already by this railroad fighting to get on a train to-- further away deeper in Russia. And we came to Ural [Mountains].

BZ: Jural?

IR: Ural, Ural.

BZ: Ural, ahah.

IR: But I don't remember what's the name of the city was, Omsk or Tomsk. I really don't remember[4]. [Tape one, side one ended.]

[4]Both are cities in Russia, east of the Urals, but she probably means Omsk, which is closer to the Ural Mountains.

Tape one, side two:

IR: Yeah, we were there in this, on Ural [Mountains]. It-- we were about for no more than two weeks, and my mother said-- it was just me and my sister and my mother, because we didn't have-- the father was not with us then, yeah-- and she said she doesn't like this place, because it was the end of the railroad line. It was no further where to go and she says, "If the railroad stops here, it-- she doesn't like it. Then we have to go back." You know a railroad all of it has to have a continuing…

BZ: Yes, right.

IR: …you know. Whenever it happens you have to run further but if the railroad she says, stops here, uh-uh, she says no, somehow we have to make it and run somewhere back. But it was not easy, because it was the end of the line and it was no communication whatsoever, you know. And we had to wait maybe a week for the next train to come to go back, but we wait. We were on this railroad station and we had to wait whatever comes first and we went on the train. You know, you didn't pay tickets on those days, because it was a chaos, a chaos and whoever get on a train, he went on the train.

BZ: Did you eat?

IR: Oh, that's a whole story about eating. My mother is always-- she likes linen. Wherever she goes and whatever she has, her best investment is linen. And if we had something to eat, she always sold a sheet. A sheet or a pillowcase you know, because from a sheet you can do anything, a dress and a blouse, whatever you want to. From a sheet you can do, from a pillow case you have-- for a small child you can do anything, you understand? And in those days it was a biggest m*etsie* [bargain], a piece of fabric.

BZ: Oh, yes.

IR: You understand?

BZ: People needed it.

IR: Sure, yeah, to cover yourself.

BZ Yeah, yes, yes.

IR: Yeah. And that's how we survived.

BZ: Oh I see. She was…

IR: No money…

BZ: …no money, but she had linens.

IR: …linen, linen, yeah, that's how we survived. She picked as much linen as she can. Linen pillow cases or covers or whatever. You know?

BZ: Yes.

IR: But it's fabric. She sold a few linen, she made a few rubles; we bought something to eat and we went. And we went and that's-- until we came-- oh it took a long time to-- because Russia is big. Until we came to Tashkent in Uzbekistan and Tashkent was overloaded with people. They did not let down from the trains nobody anymore and then we had to go further and further until we came to Bukhara. And Bukhara was

already overloaded. Then we came in a smaller city, to Karshi and that's where we came down. And that where we stayed for six years.

BZ: You stayed there for six years.

IR: Yeah in Karshi, we stayed six years.

BZ: You mingled with other-- I mean, the Jews…

IR: Yeah, yah.

BZ: …everybody lived together?

IR: Yeah, it was terrible years, hungry years, people were dying under the trees. Just they went and sat down because hunger. It was '43, '44, it was a bitter war under Stalingrad. It's not only we Jews that starved, the whole nation starved.

BZ: And they burned the fields, didn't they, they burned so the Germans-- didn't they bur-- wasn't that the policy of the Russians, the Russians?

IR: Yeah, yeah, yeah, when they left a city…

BZ: [unclear] that's right.

IR: …they burned the fields.

BZ: So the Germans wouldn't have anything.

IR: Yeah, yeah, yeah. And we stood in Karshi, until 1946, from 1941 'til 1946, and April 13, 1946, we left Russia and we came a year after the war we came back to Poland. And how we found my father, it was a bureau, such an office in Kwibishe [phonetic], that whoever was looking for somebody he wrote to this office in Kwibishe [phonetic]. It took time, a long time, but somehow they found you. We wrote over there that we are looking for our father, and our father wrote that he is looking for us, because he was not sure if we made it in 1941 out of Vitebsk or not. You understand? Because he left us there.

BZ: Yes, he left you there. He wasn't sure where you were.

IR: Because, when the war began, he was in jail.

BZ: Yes, yes.

IR: He didn't know, but still he was looking for us. He found us.

BZ: What did he do then? Was he in the Polish Army because you said the Poles didn't want…

IR: No, no, no.

BZ: So was he in the Russian Army?

IR: No, no, no, my husband was a Russian soldier.

BZ: Your husband was a Russian. When your father was in jail and they let him out, it was supposed to be to join the Polish army. What did he do?

IR: When my father came in 1941, '41, yeah 1941 or 1942? I really cannot tell you. Let's say, in the end of 1941, he was so fat, like a balloon.

BZ: From the concentration camp?

IR: No, he was not fat-- he was blown up with water. When he came to us he couldn't bend down. He was not fat because he was overeating. He was like a balloon.

He was blown up. You put a needle in his stomach and he'll burst, and slowly, slowly he came down, but he cannot work. He couldn't work, my father, and he did not work. I'll tell you why, because he always said when he'll go on a government job and then if he works he has to steal something, because only from their salary you cannot, you cannot live. You have to bring something home, whatever you do, wherever you work. And if he, God forbid, has to get caught again and to make through again what he already went through, he'll not make it. That's why he was afraid to take a job. You understand?

BZ: Yes.

IR: Therefore, my mother took my sister-- I was a school-- I was a regular school child. I-- because I still was too young, because when the war stopped, I was only 15 and my sister is older four years than I am. Then my mother-- 1941, '42, she saw it's no way. My father was afraid, and she sent my sister in a bookkeeping school and she finished six months a course, and she got a good job and she worked. My sister was 17-- how old was she, I don't know, 17, 18, 19, how old was she? And she supported us. And again, my mother had a business with sheets, she had a business with sheets, with linen. If sometimes she had an extra few rubles, she bought a linen, she bought a sheet. You know, if somebody sold, she bought. She had always a reserve. And she always helped herself with--. Yeah…

BZ: That's very wonderful.

IR: Yeah, yeah. And we need something, even to support the six months that my sister was in school, she support with the sheets.

BZ: The sheets. Did she have anything to do with the linen business before?

IR: Never, no, no, no.

BZ: Your father didn't have a linen business?

IR: No.

BZ: This was just her own idea?

IR: Idea, yeah.

BZ: That she always loved linens and she could use them.

IR: Yeah, and this was the best article, the easiest article to sell.

BZ: Yes, because they were light to carry and you could sell and everybody needed them.

IR: Yeah, and you can do everything from this. Whatever you need you can do from this.

BZ: What did you father do when he got out when he was supposed to go into the Polish army? Where did he go for those about four years?

IR: He was home, very sick.

BZ: He was home, but you weren't with him because you were going deeper into Russia? When Russian police came and took him away and they said you'll see him, you didn't have to put many clothes on, he'll be right back. I thought he was in a camp for two years.

IR: Two years.

BZ: And then where did he go? That's what I am trying to get at. While you were going deeper into Russia, where was he?

IR: He was-- I don't know where he was. During those two years that he was away from us, he was eight months I think, he was eight months in our city in jail. They forced him to sign that he is a capitalist, that he is an exploiter and that he's anti-communist, and he's an enemy of communism, and he was a big capitalist in Poland, and he didn't want to sign it, because it was not true. He was a plain Joe trying to make a living but after all, he signed.

BZ: Your life was more important than that.

IR: Yeah, he signed all these accusations. He signed. And after he signed then they sent him away already to a camp.

BZ: They sent him away, yes. But maybe I misunderstood. I thought that when he went away for the army that…

IR: This is after-- when they-- when he got free.

BZ: Yes, after two years.

IR: Yeah, after the two years.

BZ: That's what I was trying to figure out where he was when you were going deeper into Russia?

IR: I don't know, I don't know.

BZ: You don't know, so you didn't locate him until the end of the war? I mean, he never told you.

IR: No, no, no. We located him in the middle of the war.

BZ: Oh, you located him in the middle of the war.

IR: Sure.

BZ: That's what I wanted to know. Oh, so then you were all together again, but he was all blown up like a balloon, so at that point he couldn't work anymore?

IR: He couldn't work and then the malaria starts to bother us.

BZ: Malaria.

IR: The malaria start to bother us. The malaria stood with me for three years. I had malaria three years, and I was yellow like a lemon and skinny with a blown-up stomach, like, you see in Vietnam. These black children all over the world, how they advertise how hungry they are. That's how we were, and on top of that, the malaria and the malaria is like this, about-- because in Asia, over there, it is terrible hot. You know, it is a tropical climate and about two o'clock-- twelve o'clock, noon, twelve o'clock we know already we are waiting already for this, you start to shiver cold. Then whenever-- first of all you were afraid to go anywhere-- but anyway, in case you were somewhere, you straight you run home. And we came home my mother start to put blankets on me, but it didn't work anyway.

BZ: It didn't work?

IR: No, no. Two hours it shakes with you, and you are out of your mind, because you are powerless, and then a heat comes over the body and it keeps about for two hours, and then it lets you go until the next day at twelve o'clock.

BZ: And everyday you suffer for four hours?

IR: Yeah, yeah, yeah. And no-- it's no medicine for this. No medicine.

BZ: It just has to run its course.

IR: Yeah. You have to run away from the climate. And on top of that malaria, I got typhus. And my sister got bitten by a scorpion.

BZ: Were there lice there?

IR: Yes, oh yes, lice and-- I really-- the conditions, how the Uzbeks are living. They don't live in houses.

BZ: The Uzbeks.

IR: No, they don't live in houses. They don't heat their houses with wood. No, they heat their houses with manure. I used to run after the cows. The cows didn't have what to eat, but I used to run after the cows.

BZ: To get the manure.

IR: With a bucket and they made in my bucket. We used to fight for this, children you know, summertime, sure. And then I had to steal from the-- whenever I saw a horse eating, I steal away the hay, it's a sin, but I did it…

BZ: But you had to eat…

IR: …I steal away from the horse. Yeah, and then I cut with a scissors this hay and with my feet I mixed this manure with the hay, and I make, how do you call it?

BZ: Cakes.

IR: Cakes and I put this on the walls, and the sun dried it and then we took it out and we made-- we had with what to heat our houses. And it's not houses, the houses is made from mud.

BZ: From mud? Like huts.

IR: From mud, huts yeah, yeah. If it's a good rain, it falls down, you know, it wash away. Yeah, if it's strong rain it washed away. You have to build again, and that's how they lived in Uzbekistan. I'm sure it's the same way now, too.

BZ: Very primitive.

IR: It's not only primitive, poor. Very, very poor.

BZ: Were they kind? You were different, surely, than they. So, did they act as though there was difference? You know, did they help you if they could?

IR: Yeah, yeah, the Uzbeks are like Arabs. They are Muslims. They were on *tsures* [problems] by themselves.

BZ: They had their own problems, but they didn't seek to inflict more on you, like the Poles did?

IR: No, no, no.

BZ: There was no antisemitism.

IR: No, no. I went to school and nobody bothered me because I am Jewish, because I was hungry and he was hungry, this [one] was hungry. You understand? And on my way home from school-- oy God-- our hut was on such a small hill, you know. And when I used to go from school, I used to watch the chimney. If I saw a smoke out of the chimney, I was sure I'll come home, I'll got something to eat. My mother will prepare something. But when on my way home from school, I did not see this smoke out of this chimney, forget it.

BZ: You knew you were all [unclear].

IR: Yes, yes. We had to wait for something else to happen from somewhere, something else will come. And what was our meal, do you think? My mother used to buy a kilo flour and over there there is no water, like here from a pump. You have to go to a river and this is not natural rivers. This is canals the water comes with the mud together, and if you went with a bucket, you had to bring the water tonight, tomorrow you can have a little bit clean water. Three quarters of this water was mud and on the top there was left a little bit water, and that's what we used. That's what we drank. You understand. For instance, she bought a kilo flour and she made it for 10 portions and she used-- mixed with a little bit water. You know what a pita is?

BZ: That they have for falafel?

IR: Falafel, yeah. That's how the Uzbeks, they have pitas over there too. My mother had a few pitas. She made a pita of four portions. And she gave a little bit flour and water-- like how do you call it?

BZ: Like paste.

IR: Yeah, and that's how we survived. But it's amazing-- you know in 1945, in April or May, May 10? When was finished the war?

BZ: The war…

IR: I really don't-- May 10[5], or something like this. You know, a few days later, all over was bread.

BZ: All over? Just a few days later, is that so?

IR: A few days later-- we don't have to stay in anymore lines and fight.

BZ: Is that right? There must have been plenty around? But they just weren't giving-- you know, they just were rationing it.

IR: I used to wake up eleven o'clock at night, eleven o'clock at night because my mother didn't have the heart to wake me up and go and sleep outside in the line. Because we had to get coupons 200 gram bread for a person, and you have to sleep in the line all night.

BZ: There's a line.

IR: There's a line over there. A line is thousands of people. And in our town, was maybe four or five that they sold us bread on these coupons. I used to wake up at

[5]V-E Day, which marks the official announcement of the end of WWII, was May 8, 1945. The unconditional surrender was signed on May 7, 1945.

twelve o'clock at night and my mother didn't, because you know, she didn't have her heart, but it was my responsibility. My sister had to go to work tomorrow.

BZ: So you felt responsible.

IR: My father was a sick man, a very sick man. And he was-- emotionally, he was afraid. He was afraid to open his mouth. He was just afraid.

BZ: He suffered.

IR: Yeah, and I had the responsibility. I was the one. They didn't give bread everyday. Let's say, two or three times a week, see. And I slept in the lines, and in the morning, you had to fight for your life to keep your line because…

BZ: [unclear]

IR: Sure. This was my assignment. It was a terrible time, it was a terrible time, but at least when we went to bed to sleep, you were not afraid to be awakened at night that it will be a selection, left, right, left, right, you know.

BZ: Yes, you didn't have that [unclear] out of Poland, right.

IR: Yeah, like in a concentration camp. We were far away from the bombs. Far away from the whole business. We were deep in Russia, very deep in Russia. But the war reached us in another way.

BZ: Oh, with the shortages and starvation…

IR: Shortage in everything.

BZ: Yes, oh yes.

IR: In everything, see. But when the time came for instance, in summertime, watermelons, honeydews, wheat. Who had a lot of money he can make himself a big storage with wheat. Well, what is wheat? Wheat is the life, you can't-- because Uzbeks they have stones, primitive with the hand, like this, and you make your own flour. Who had a lot of money, who bought himself a few bags, these, you know how do you call it, sacks?

BZ: Yes, sacks.

IR: And he can make storage, as much as he can. And who hadn't it's--. My father's brother died of hunger; he had a hunger of death. He was a young man; he was a single man. He was about 33, 32.

BZ: So he came to Russia when you people went.

IR: Yeah, yeah. He died just from starvation. He couldn't take it. Oh, I remember-- oh, before he died, I saw him. Oh, you know how it's, oh. It's terrible. But he died, he was a young man. And his name was Moishe. Well, that's it. What else?

BZ: Did other people come over with your family? Did any of your father's other family come over with you?

IR: We me them in Russia.

BZ: Oh you met them in Russia.

IR: We met them [in] Russia. My father's brother and sister and my father's mother.

BZ: Oh, your father's mother.

IR: My *bubbe*, yeah, and another brother, but he died.

BZ: Did the others survive?

IR: No, my father left two sisters-- two sisters and a brother-- in Poland, by the Germans. They remained in Poland. They did not run away. His oldest brother and two younger sisters, but this grandmother of mine and the sister and two brothers, they were still single at home, but I don't really know how they came to Russia, because they didn't run with us together. We met them in Russia, but somehow we met them.

BZ: But did they survive in Russia other than that boy that died, Moishe? Other than Moishe.

IR: Yeah, no, my father is dead already, but he still has a brother and a sister.

BZ: But your father was alive after the war?

IR: Yes, he died in Israel and my mother died in Israel, too.

BZ: He died in Israel. How about your grandmother, did she survive, too?

IR: No, she died right away, as soon as she came to Russia. She saw it's not kosher and she has to eat *treyf* [non-kosher food]. She couldn't take it. She was with a *sheytl* [wig], *a frume yidene* [a religious Jew], you know, well Russia is for her-- her son has to kill a chicken for her. She will eat this chicken, otherwise no. She couldn't take it. She got a heart attack or something, I don't know. She just couldn't take it, and she was young, about 66. "It's a *treyfene medine* [non-kosher country]," she said. It's not for her. She died, I think, in 1940. *Bubbe* Rita. Yeah.

BZ: And how about the other ones besides Moshe, did they survive the war in Russia?

IR: Yeah, yeah.

BZ: Oh, they survived the war.

IR: Yeah, my father still has a younger sister and then another brother.

BZ: Did they leave Russia, too, after the war?

IR: Yes-- no, not with us together again, not with us together.

BZ: But, they did leave Russia?

IR: Yes, they did leave Russia.

BZ: Did they go to Israel?

IR: Yes.

BZ: Oh, they all went to Israel?

IR: Yes, they are in Israel now.

BZ: They're in Israel, I see. How about those people that remained in Poland. Did any of those people survive?

IR: I don't know. When we came back to Poland, in 1946, my father went to his city to take a look, what was left?

BZ: Yes, yes.

IR: And when this Polish-- *Polaks* they saw that he came. "Oh!" they start to yell at him, "A *Żyd*, a Jew!" Oh, it was a surprise, that still a Jew is alive. And he got so scared, he took the first train and he came back to Krakow. And a few weeks later, it was the Kielce pogrom. The pogrom, the Kielce pogrom[6], it's a very famous pogrom, about 40 or 50 in one night, Jews were killed. They just got crazy, the *Polaks*. They just got crazy and they made a real pogrom. Yeah, then my father said, "Oh, oh. No. Poland is not for us. Poland is no more for us. It's nothing left, it's nothing to look for." Then was illegal *aliyah* [immigration to Israel], to Germany, to the American zone, because Germany was cut in four, you know.

BZ: Yes, right, yes.

IR: Yeah, and then we-- in 1946, summertime-- it was summertime-- we went to Kielce, and we went to Czechoslovakia and we crossed the border. It was a forest. And we had to walk nine kilometer to cross this Czechoslovakische border. On our way to this border three Jews were carried back dead. Because they were caught somewhere, I don't know. Three Jews were caught. Somebody carried them three. And somehow we made it, a group, you know. It's the *Sokhnut* [Jewish Agency of Israel] they worked in Poland to bring the Jews to Germany.

BZ: To bring the Jews to Germany.

IR: From Poland, whoever wants to get, yeah. In Krakow, we were only 10 weeks, that's all because my father didn't want to stay anymore in Poland. No. We came to Austria. We came to Czechoslovakia. From Czechoslovakia, a train took us to Austria; everything was prepared you know from these Israelis boys, yes, they prepared everything. We came to Austria. In Austria we came to a camp. We stayed a few days and we were starving. We were just starving. It's no good. Then my father said, "It's no good, I didn't come here to die for starvation again." And we took a train and we went to Germany in groups, you know, groups, yeah, and we went to Germany and we came-- and in Germany we were1946 to 1948.

BZ: Were you in a displaced person's camp?

IR: Yeah, yeah, DP *lager* [camp] yeah, DP. And in Germany I got married.

BZ: In Germany you got married?

IR: Yeah, I met my husband in Germany, in 1948 I got married.

BZ: And your husband had gone into Russia, too, at the time?

IR: Oh, he has a different story. Oh, he'll tell you a story if you want to listen.

BZ: Yes, yes.

IR: He was drafted in Russia, and he was not in the Polish army. He was in the Russian army. He was a real Russian soldier, on the first line, yeah. And he is very proud of it, because he knew why he is fighting, and what he is fighting for. He was wounded four times.

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[6]July 4, 1946. At least 42 Jews were murdered and over 40 injured. (Holocaust Encyclopedia: ushmm.org).

BZ: Mmm.

IR: Four times wounded.

BZ: So you went to Israel?

IR: Yeah.

BZ: And you say all during the war, that's what you lived for, to go to Israel?

IR: Yeah.

BZ: You knew that Israel…

IR: We came to Israel in 1949. January 12, 1949.

BZ: You never doubted that Israel would become a state. You never doubted that?

IR: Well, we were in Germany when the state of Israel came out. How we celebrated!

BZ: During the war, during the war, you never doubted that Israel would become a state?

IR: No, yeah, yeah, that's our hope.

BZ: That's what kept you alive?

IR: Yes, and let me tell you something else. While we were in Russia, [unclear], in Russia, it was no religious-- as I am telling you from the start, from the beginning-- it was no religious or Jewish upbringing, you know. I was raised. I knew very well the Russian constitution, all that, and the history and everything. I was a very good student in the Russian school, and I had no whatsoever a Jewish education, not at all, because it's nowhere to get it. But still listen, my mother-- first of all, she talked to us [at] home only Jewish, that's first of all. And sometimes I came home disgusted, hungry, crying. This insulted me. They insulted me, they hit me, you know, it's only children. Then my mother always used to tell me, "Honey, it's goyim, what are you expecting of them. You are a Jewish child, *a Yidish kind. Vos vilstu fun di goyim*[7]*?*" Someday the war will end, and we'll go home. And with God's willing, we'll go to Palestine, and you are a Jewish child. It's only *goyim* [non-Jews]. And that's how she insert in us a feeling. She did not let us forget that we are still Jewish. You understand? She couldn't give me the *alef-beys* [alphabet] in Yiddish, she couldn't teach me. She couldn't teach me *davenen* [pray]; she couldn't teach me Jewish history, because she didn't know by herself you understand, but still the feeling that you are still Jew-- and that's what is keeping me till now. I don't know how to *daven*. Because for-- I know good Russian, oh yes, perfect. I talk English, but how to *daven* I don't know. I pray to God with my own words with my, in my own prayer, but if I open a *Siddur* [prayer book], I'm lost. I'm not ashamed-- it's not nice for my age not to know it. But in this age, to start to learn it's ridiculous.

BZ: But you believe in God.

[7]a Jewish child. What do you want from the non-Jews?

IR: Sure. My home is a religious home. I keep strict kosher. We light candles every Friday night. We sing *zmires* [Sabbath songs]. My husband makes *Kiddush* [blessing over the wine]. My husband goes to the synagogue, and I keep a kosher a really-- I can say a kosher home. And my children are brought up-- perfect Jewish children. My grandson talks Yiddish. I talk to him Yiddish.

BZ: So then, with you, it wasn't just a nationalistic idea of Israel, it was still the religious idea?

IR: It is inside you, you know.

BZ: Yes, yes.

IR: It's inside you.

BZ: With all your suffering, and everything the Jews went through you still believe in God. You know, it wasn't just a nationalistic homeland, it was everything.

IR: Sure, it's our future.

BZ: [unclear] and God.

IR: Yes. It's our future. My parents were here three years ago, before they died, they were here and I made a proposition maybe they would like to stay with me here, and my father said, "Uh-uh, no way."

BZ: They would stay in Israel.

IR: Sure. They were here ten weeks and they went back. A few months later they died and that's besides the point, but no way to stay here.

BZ: So you were in Israel about 11 years?

IR: Oh, no. We were in Israel about 16 years.

BZ: I thought you came in 1957?

IR: We came '65.

BZ: Oh '65, oh I see. And what made you decide to come here?

IR: This is a health problem, you know everybody has another reason and we didn't come here because we didn't like, God forbid, Israel or something. Israel doesn't bother me. But my husband, he can't stand the sun. He has suffered with the kidneys-- kidney stones-- and he has with his eyes. He is allergic to the sun.

[Tape one ended.]

Tape two, side one:

IR: He suffered with his eyes, he suffered about seven years and all kind of medicines. My husband has here a sister and a brother, but he used to have only a sister, the brother came later. And she used to send him all kinds of medicines from here what we couldn't get from Israel, cortisone and penicillin and everything, but nothing helped until the doctor told him, "Listen, you have to leave the country. Go to Europe, go to Norway, go to Denmark, go away somewhere in a cold climate." But we cannot go back to Europe. No, No. Europe is not a place anymore for us. And therefore, my husband has yet a sister in Philadelphia. And instead to go to Europe, or somewhere else, we came to the United States, and that's why we are here already 13 years.

BZ: Even though you were not a national and you came in and people were starving, you were never resented because you came in and were taking a share of the food, and so forth? This was never…

IR: No, not, as I am telling you, I never had to do-- I personally-- we personally, anyway, where we were, we never had to do with Ukrainians or with *Polaks*. We were surrounded with real Russian people and a Russian is something else and the government is something else. And the government and the politic and a Russian-- it's three different things. A Russian by himself is a warm-hearted good man, you understand?

BZ: A good person.

IR: A good person. He'll share with you the last bite. He'll open his door and he'll let you in and he'll help you as much as he can. I'm talking about the Russian; don't confuse the Russian with the Ukrainians.

BZ: Now, you attribute this to the church, the fact that Russia was never Catholic?

IR: I don't know. When we came to Russia, there was no church at all.

BZ: No, right. It was communist, yes.

IR: Right. The churches were made for libraries, for horse stables. They made horse stables out of the churches.

BZ: But I mean, you think that their mentality is different because…

IR: Yeah, yeah, yeah it's different. A Russian is of a different [unclear].

BZ: Made of different stuff.

IR: Different stuff, yes. That's why all pogroms never occurred, never happened, deep in Russia. All the pogroms, all the troubles, all the *tsures* [trouble] all the killings were in this part of Europe. In the Ukraina, in Poland in Czechoslovakia, in France, Hungaria, Germany. It's only the Catholic countries. That's where all the trouble for Jews were and are.

BZ: But you felt that where there were Greek Orthodox, where the church was Greek Orthodox deep in Russia that there was never…

IR: Never, never a trouble, never in the history that you will read, or you will hear, that there was a pogrom or killing or their chasing or their prosecution occurred deep somewhere in Russia. Never, never because they don't know about it. It's different all these kind of accusations, it's only-- how do you call this part of Russia? I don't know.

BZ: That's the Pale of settlement. I think that's called the Pale, the Pale of Settlement. That border there, where the Jews used to live. It was called the "Pale of Settlement," with the Ukrainians and the [unclear]…

IR: Ukraina and Poland, yeah, I don't know how you call this part of Europe.

BZ: Isn't it the far eastern…

IR: No, it is all Europe. This whole piece of Europe, on this side, it's like a bunch of-- a bundle of small countries.

BZ: I think that's-- I don't' know what it's called.

IR: All *tsures* came only from here, not from Russia. My husband lost his parents, he lost in the Holocaust, and he lost two sisters, but how the parents were killed, he thinks it was an *Aktion*. You know what *Aktion* is? They fell in-- they dig their own graves. They prepared their own graves.

BZ: They were shot.

IR: Yeah, they shot and they fell in, yeah, and a sister. But one sister somehow, she ran away, then she was about 19 and a Ukrainian family on a farm hide her and they kept her during all the years of the war, about until two weeks before the war. And one day Russian partisans came. Partisans came and they were Litvian [Lituanians]. And they were dressed in Russian uniforms and they said they are Russian partisans, and these people, the farmers, they trust them and they asked if they had some Jews what they are hiding. They said yes, we have a girl here, because they trusted them. They thought that Russian partisans came, and as soon as the sister of my husband came out, because she was glad to see Russian partisans, you know, and right away they didn't say a word. They killed her in front of the house. And after they killed her, they told them they are not Russians. They are Litvians. They are dressed only in the Russian uniforms.

BZ: They were probably going about from place to place.

IR: You can be sure. They are finishing the job, maybe it's not enough Jews were killed. They are fulfilling their job. Yeah, that's it. I don't know too much about the partisans, because-- only what I read. I know in the city where my husband lived-- over there is forests, oh, big forests you can get lost over there, and that's where the partisans lived.

BZ: In Poland?

IR: In Poland, in Ukraina.

BZ: Whole families sometimes lived there.

IR: Camps-- the Germans were afraid to get there. The Germans were afraid to get into this forest.

BZ: Sometimes, the Jewish partisans would take families in there.

IR: Yes.

BZ: They would take care of old people and children…

IR: Yes, they made bunkers under the ground.

BZ: Yes. They took care, they took care of the old and the young.

IR: As much as they could.

BZ: As much as they could, yes, they did.

IR: And if they had to run from place to place, then they run-- a big forest, an old, big forest. This was a good hiding place.

BZ: The Germans were afraid of the partisans?

IR: They were afraid of the partisan people, yes.

BZ: Were they afraid of the forest themselves, you think? Because they, I guess they just didn't…

IR: Well, a German, by…

BZ: …they weren't used to living in forests.

IR: A German by himself, is not a big hero.

BZ: He's not a big hero anyway.

IR: If he has somebody with him to show how to go, where to go and then he is a big show off.

BZ: Yes, that's right. How do you find life in America? Do you find your Christian neighbors are accepting?

IR: Yeah, I have a-- my next door neighbors, my neighbors as much gentile neighbors I have here, they are wonderful, really wonderful. Because what I found out is American Gentile, born in America, one generation or two generations, he is a different person. He has a different attitude. He has a different understanding, and he accept a Jew in a different way, but not Europe, not a Europe Gentile. A Europe Gentile, he is poison. He is poisoned. He's different. He looks at a Jew different, and he laughs at a Jew different. It's a different mentality. He was raised different. He looks different. He sees things different, but American Gentile, he is wonderful person.

BZ: Is that right?

IR: Yes, and he's easier to cope with him. Sometimes you meet a stupid-- what can you help, an illiterate, but what can you do, but if you meet a person, for instance, my neighbors here. I have here a neighbor from Brazil and I have an Italian neighbor-- wonderful people, really wonderful understanding people. Very nice people. I don't feel like I have gentiles neighbors.

BZ: Then democracy works?

IR: Yes, listen, there's all kinds of fish.

BZ: Yes, right.

IR: All kinds of people.

BZ: But, you just feel that old hatreds don't really carry over.

IR: Not from this type of Americans, no.

BZ: If they were educated here then…

IR: Born here, educated here, and even if their parents are European, it's different children, too.

BZ: It's different children, too.

IR: It's still something in them.

BZ: There's still some poisoning? Yes.

IR: Yeah, it's not some poison. It's a lot of poison, because these children are going back to their old countries to visit their uncles, grandmothers and they are coming back to the United States, and they are already poisoned from this all kind of visits. But American children they don't have to visit family over there; all their family is here and they don't know what's going on there. It's a difference.

BZ: Are you bitter, Miss…

IR: Rokita. Well, bitter, of course, I'm bitter. It's not only I am bitter, from my nature I am not a bitter person. I'm not a bitter person. I wonder, I just question and wonder how, why, my goodness how. That's all. For instance, today I discussed with my husband and yesterday I was in company with an old man, and he was in Auschwitz, and he told us how in Auschwitz it was like this. When from Red Cross somebody came to visit this death-- this concentration camp-- the death camp and he left this camp with the impression that these people are in a paradise, because in the front was a garden with flowers and the barracks were clean and the concentration men-- it's not only Jews. It was all kinds of personalities. They were dressed in their uniforms, you know, black and white, and more or less they were fed. The music was playing and with this information, when Red Cross came to visit, he went away with the best impression. But two kilometers from Auschwitz were holes with 10,000s skeletons. And the ovens were bursting with fire, burning. And the Germans had a *norma*, a schedule, a schedule everyday 6,000 people has to go to the oven.

BZ: And for the most part, they were Jews. The Jews were singled out.

IR: Yes, sure, sure. Auschwitz was most of Jews, and the work was done quiet, peaceful, with music, that's what I'm wondering. I'm not bitter. I just wonder how can the mentality from-- what kind mentality the German used? How they could cheat the world, and to cover up so beautiful, everything? You understand what I mean?

BZ: Yes, yes.

IR: That's what is wondering me. It's not a question of bitterness.

BZ: No, you are just wondering how…

IR: It took a few years to break the people, to make them for-- to nothing, and then they send them to the oven. Yeah, but in United States-- it can happen again, and this time it was the Jews and the next time you'll never know who the victim will be. Because these kind of rats they can pick up on anybody.

BZ: That's right. Do you feel that the Holocaust should be taught?

IR: Oh, yeah, oh yes. Definitely. Taught and told and repeat, sure because this is something given to the world. It's not only given to us. The Holocaust is given to the whole world, you understand. Let me tell you something. I was with my husband once by a rabbi, not the rabbi from a synagogue, a *rebbe*, if you know the difference between a *rebbe* and a rabbi. A *rebbe* has a sitting and you know, and we believe in him and we go, like to a psychiatrist, if you need something, a problem to solve. Sometimes you have a problem with yourself, you know. And once I went with my husband in Tel Aviv and I went to this *rebbe*, Yunkele; then he was maybe 90 years old, when he died he was 92. When I went, I was sick, you know, this doctor didn't help me. My mother said, "You know what, go to a *rebbe*." "Okay." Went to a *rebbe* and he gave me a *brokhe* [blessing] what can he do. He not give you medicine. And we sat with him and we talked, until my husband asks him, "*Rebbe*, why, why?" He says, "Well, of this question, you cannot get an answer, because this is such a question you will not get an answer." But he said, "Here is like this, take a big fire. If it's a small fire and it comes a big wind, then the fire is blown out. It's dead. But if it is a big fire and it comes a big wind, the fire gets bigger. That's he said, "It's a *pintele yid*." You know what a *pintele yid*?

BZ: The sparkle of Jewishness.

IR: The sparkle of Jewishness. If you have a small sparkle in your *neshume* [soul], in your soul, and there comes a big wind, then it blows away, but if you have the biggest sparkle in your *neshume*, and it comes a big wind, the fire gets bigger and you are getting a better Jew.

BZ: That's beautiful.

IR: That's what the *rebbe* gave us. That's his answer, and I told to a lot of people I told this. Because it makes sense.

BZ: Yes, because some people lost their religion.

IR: Yeah, because most-- a lot of people say, "oh, if God let this happen, [unclear] *yo, farshteystu mikh?* [yeah, do you understand?], yeah. But it's not, that's not, it's not the solution, it's not the answer. We are still Jews and we are still here and we are the only nation, the only people on this earth-- we are carrying only his name. Without other…

BZ: Intermediaries.

IR: …yes, pluses, we are the only people that carry only his name and God forbid we disappear, there is nobody to carry his name. That's why we still have to be here, without us there is no world. Because after all, according to the statistics what the world say, we lost-- we are a small nation. That's why for us 6,000,000 is a lot-- it's more than a lot, but let's figure it out. We didn't lose a lot because statistics says how much people lost in the Second World War, 50,000,000-- 55,000,000. That means they are killing each other more, they are killing us. They have the same God. It's same Jesus Christ and the same church and the same Pope, and everything the same, and they are

killing each other. We are just caught in the middle, but actually, it's a war between them.

BZ: The killers in the camps were Christians.

IR: Sure.

BZ: They went to church on Sunday, and they were Christians. And this is a problem for Christianity. It's not in the teachings-- find out just where it started. [unclear]

IR: Where did I stop, I really don't know. I was in Gratz College once for a lesson, and this Dr. Margolies gave us once he explained us what is the difference between Judaism and Christianity or any other religions. What is this to be a Jew? Well, he said for instance, take Polish people. Take a Black with a Polish people, or German people or mixed, whatever. One is Catholic and one is Protestant, one is Baptist. They are the same nationality. Two *Polaks*, he's Polish and he's Polish. This is a Catholic and this is a Protestant, and when their children have to get married, there is a mixed marriage. Two *Polaks* in a mixed marriage, and this one doesn't want to go to this church and this one doesn't want to get married in this church. That means the religion doesn't have a foundation. It hangs in the air. It has nothing to hold on to, but if you are a Jew, automatically you don't have to say you are a Polish Jew, or you are a German Jew, or you are an American Jew, just tell I am a Jew. Automatically, you belonged to one God. You belong to one country, this is Israel. And one thing what belongs to you is the Torah, the Bible. And the only language we are talking we talk, the Jews, is Hebrew. We don't talk different languages. Hebrew is our language that means as we have roots-- we know where we belong and from where we are coming, but nobody in the whole world can compare to us. For instance, we have here once a guest, and he is a-- I think he is a Hungarian Catholic, or something. I think he is a Hungarian Catholic, but he is a very smart boy, very young man, but he is a searcher. He's asking questions. He's looking for answers and once he was by our house, and he asked me, "What is a Jew? Please explain me, what is a Jew?" How can you explain what is a Jew? It is ridiculous, especially to a Gentile in five minutes, yeah. Then I said to him, "You know, sir, let me tell you a small story I wrote[8] once in a book. This is not a legend. This is not a story. It's is a fact. In Poland, they have the noblemen, that is a lot of ground belongs to them. They are very rich, and in Poland there was a Graf Potocki, *graf* means like a knight, and he had an only son, his heir, and he sent him to Paris to study. And he was a very educated and intelligent young man, this young Graf Potocki. One time he came home for vacation. *Nu* [so] his father wanted to make a big feast, in honor his son came home. And he invited the rich men, the rich owners of the land and he made a big-- to drink and to eat and to be merry-- in his palace over there where he lived in Poland. And about whom can you make fun of the most? About the Jew. And he called his Moishke, every rich landowner had his own Jew that he take care on his rent or his bookkeeping, you know. And he

[8]It appears the interviewee intended to say "read."

invited his Moishke, his Moishe. And says to him, "Hey listen, Moishe, I have a party and you have to make a little bit *frölich*-- how do you say this in English…

BZ: Make it lively.

IR: Lively, merry.

BZ: Yeah, merry.

IR: Yeah. Then you have to dance, to sing and make fun of yourself, and let's laugh. Let's have a good time. Well, Moishe came and he saw he's in big trouble. But what can he do? He starts to sing *Shma Yisrael*, and he starts to sing and he starts to dance. The more he dance in the middle of the room, more the big people, the rich people start to drink, more they drunk. They got more drunk and later on, they start to beat him up. They start to beat him up. They put him on the floor. They humiliated him with mud, and they make out a mess out of him, because they were drunk. They didn't know what they were doing. But it was Friday afternoon, and they were already good [and] drunk, and they stopped beating him up and this young Graf Potocki stood near his father, and he was watching the whole, the whole…

BZ: Proceedings.

IR: …the whole proceedings and he was observing what's going on here. Well, after the feast was finished, everybody lay drunk on the floor. They throwing up, you know, drunk people-- this Jew picked himself up because Friday afternoon and he went home. What can he do? He went home. Well, Friday night this young Graf Potocki, he was wondering what happened to this Jew? How he'll behave himself? How he will react to all this humiliation, to this beating up, to this dirt, to this cutting him down, cutting him small, after all, how? Well, he went to his home and he hide himself under his window, and he wanted to see through the window what's going on in the living room over there. He looked into this window; to his surprise he see the candles on the table and the wife makes a blessing over the candle and this Moishe dressed in this *shabesdige kapote* [Sabbath kaftan], in this Sabbath uniform. You know what a *kapote* is?

BZ: Yes, yes.

IR: It's a black…

BZ: [unclear] kaftan.

IR: …a kaftan, yeah, yeah, in his Sabbath *kapote*, with his head [unclear], washed clean and he makes *Kiddush* [blessing over the wine], and he blessed the wine and he makes a *brokhe* on the *challah*, and he blessed the *challah*.

BZ: The bread.

IR: Yeah. And he sung *zmires* [Sabbath songs]. You know, Friday night you sing *zmires*. By the end when the meal was finished and everything was sung and everything-- he stands up and he puts his hand to the heaven and he blessing God, "Thank God that I am a Jew. I am not a *goy* [non-Jew]." After such experience this man had, he thanks God that he is a Jew, he's not a *goy*. Then, I asked this man, are you ready to be a Jew?" He said, "No, not yet." "So, whoever gets to blame and whatever trouble

there is in the world, the Jew is to blame. Are you ready to be blamed for everything what's going on in this world?" He says, "No." He said, "No." Well, I said, "But we Jews, we are born Jews and we are dying Jews, and will not denying and we are accepting whatever it comes with this." On the other hand, it's the same thing, I had the same experience. A girl, a young gentile girl was in my home and she asked-- I was sitting with my husband together by the table, and I don't know, you know, if a Gentile comes to a Jew right away they have to ask questions. It's like, they are looking for answers and she asked me, "You know, Mrs., how come take, one Jewish family and 10 gentile families, and if you compare this Jewish family is still richer than these 10 gentile families. Why? My husband explain it to her why. He said, "Listen, I was hired in a big company here, and as long as they didn't know that I am Jewish, they were willing to help me and they were willing to show me, but after a few days, they ask me to which church I belonged. He said, "I don't belong to any church because I am Jewish." Right away, the next day he found swastikas in his lunchbox. Swastikas over his bench where he works; and it's a big factory with big presses and he was afraid because they can make an accident, and you know, it's no monkey business with such kinds of people. Then my husband had to quit. Now, he says to her, "Listen, if these gentile people would accept me working together with them, I would be one of them. I would make the same salary. I would not be richer. I would not be poorer. I would be the same thing like they are, but they did not accept me. It is not a difference, if I work here or if I work there, any place wherever I go, I will be Jew. But it's hard. Then I am forced to go and make my own business. And I am forced to hire such people like you are. That means you are forcing me to get rich. You are making me rich, and when my children are grown up, I teach them. Please, Jack. Please Norman, don't go to these factories work, be a doctor, be a lawyer, be whoever you want to be, but be your own boss. Don't work with these bums. And later on the gentile world is complaining, why we are richer and why we know better. We are more educated because you are making us doing this. You have to realize this." She looked at me and it made sense to her. And on the other hand, even if my husband was a worker, he came home Friday with his whole check. I cashed the check in the bank, but you told me yourself that your father is an alcoholic, half a check was lost on his way home in the taproom, but this same half check what your father left in a taproom, this half check in my home went to the bank, and by the end of the year, I saved a few dollars. And in your home by the end of the year the taproom made business on your father. Why are the Jews richer, only because they know how to live. They don't spend. They don't drink. They enjoy living. They work and they spend. If a husband works and he makes a living, he enjoys to buy his wife a fur coat…

[Tape two, side one ended.]

Tape two, side two:

IR: How did I stop.

BZ: The fur coats.

IR: Yeah. If a husband works and he makes a living and he wants his wife to have a fur coat. Why not? He works for it. He didn't take from anybody a penny, and later on the Jewish women are accused they are wearing only fur coats. I don't have a fur coat. I have a fake fur coat. I don't have diamonds, but in the end, nobody gave it to me. I bought it. I worked for it, believe me, I worked for it. Well, that's it. It's a question.

BZ: How many children do you have?

IR: Two.

BZ: You have two children?

IR: I have a daughter and a son.

BZ: Your son is a teacher and your daughter is a bookkeeper.

IR: Yes.

BZ: Do you feel because of your suffering, having had to leave your home in Poland and because of your losses, do you feel that your children are more sensitive than other children that do not have your background?

IR: First of all, I-- we talk in our home Jewish. And it is already awareness of being what they are, and I don't know how religious-- what kind of a religious upbringing I gave them. I don't know how much, because I don't have it too much, as I told you in the beginning, but I certainly implanted in them the believing in God, and they are Jewish. They cannot eat whatever now…

BZ: They are limited to food, yes.

IR: Yes, they can't no. My daughter, God bless her. She cannot go in a supermarket and buy because the chickens over there are cheaper. She will not swallow it. It will not go through her throat, no. She goes to a kosher butcher and she buys kosher meat and she makes it kosher at home, yeah, yeah and that's how she is raised. That's how my home is.

BZ: And your grandson goes to Hebrew day school?

IR: Yes.

BZ: So, you are very interested in seeing that the religion is carried on?

IR: Yes. As I am telling you, I don't know how strict religious I am. This is-- because there is no limit to this, but at least I tried my best. I did my best and we like it. We just love it.

BZ: And your belief in God never wavered with all the troubles and the starvation, your belief in God never wavered?

IR: Yes, God is always with us.

BZ: With all the-- with the starvation and the deaths and…

IR: It doesn't matter. God is always with us and in us, and we never denied him God forbid. And God helped us and that's why we are here. Thanks God, we are making a living. We are working very hard. My husband works very hard, seven days a week, 14 to 15 hours a day, and that's true, our God is true. And I work with him, but we don't complain, we don't complain, and that's it.

BZ: Thank you.

[Tape two, side two ended; interview ended.]