

INTERVIEW WITH ZELDA LIEBLING

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ZELDA: ...and one boy wrote me a note saying "Thank you Mrs. Liebling for coming to speak to us about that." And then he said when I'll grow up, I'm going to be a composer, and in parentheses, a music writer, in case I don't know. And then he said and I'm going to...(tape shuts)...In some kind of major, I don't remember. G major, I think. And it's going to be all about how you escaped and how you survived. The boy became...he wrote it when he was eight, nine years old. He became a composer. He does compose music. As a matter of fact, he did some kind of liturgical music for the Temple I used to belong to. So I met his mother, and she was telling me all these stories. I said, you know, I have a letter from him. She said, oh mail me, but mail the copy. So I mailed her and I never heard from her. I understand that he was taken by the Lubavitcher, but the very, very rightist Lubavitcher, and he really...

INT: Went that direction.

ZELDA: It's a pity, because he was really a very, very powerful...?

INT: I'm going to just start by giving the date. This is Juliet Spitzer and I'm talking with Zelda Liebling on April 9, 1998, pre-Pesach crazy rush. I'll just start with your nuclear family, just some identifying information about your family, your name, your age, currently, right now, today.

ZELDA: My name is Zelda Liebling. I was born March 24, 1918, which makes me exactly 80 years old. My husband died in October, nine years ago. I live now by myself, alone. I have two children, Mordechai, who lives in Philadelphia and has four children, and Lynette, who lives in Boston, married with two children.

INT: And your husband's name was?

ZELDA: My husband's name was Joel Liebling, known as Lolo. He saved my life during the war, and we came here to America in 1947. We went via Paris. We lived in Paris for a year waiting for a visa to come to America. We came in 1947, Friday before Labor Day weekend. It was a very, very sad coming to America because the boat that we came in...it was an Italian boat, but because Italy still wasn't exonerated for the wrongdoings during the war, the boat was under a Polish banner called [name of boat] for a Polish king, and somehow things weren't right to begin with. The boat docked in Brooklyn but the people were taken to Ellis Island, most of us. Only the American citizens because it was actually the first time the American citizens went to Europe to see what was going on, especially in Paris. They got off the boat. Everybody else was sent to Ellis Island, and so we stayed in Ellis Island like a week almost. That was quite a traumatic experience. I have never forgotten it. And then finally my family got a lawyer and got us off, my husband and myself.

INT: We're not going to go in any particular order. Would you mind telling me about the Ellis Island experience?

ZELDA: As I said, we came on Friday afternoon, before Labor Day weekend. We were all sent to Ellis Island. The weather was bad. It was a stormy day. Two things I have never forgotten. I never drink Pepsi Cola again in my life, from that day on. They gave us Pepsi Cola, and I always identify the smell of Pepsi Cola with the smell of Ellis Island. The women were in one room and the men in the other one. The food was rather bad, and also, we got our dinner like three o'clock or so because the workers were picked up at Ellis Island and they were taken to the shore, so I don't know whether to Brooklyn or Manhattan, I don't know. But anyway, the workers came in the morning, and because they wanted to get off as soon as possible, they fed us the dinner at three o'clock. And it was again, a horrible way for me to stand there. I thought we were already out of all that bad situations.

INT: Lining up.

ZELDA: Lining up and eating and all that. We stood there in lines with our plates, waiting to be given the food. Very early. As I said, about three o'clock was dinner time, and that made me feel very bad. As I said, the drinking was the drinking from that Pepsi Cola. I have never forgotten it. The smell of Pepsi Cola can throw me off, to the very day, 51 years later. And also, to sit there and watch the Statue of Liberty, which was to us the epitome of liberty, of freedom, beauty, and here you sit in an institution and G-d knows what's going to be, what's going to happen. You know, we heard all the stories, people being sent back. It was quite a traumatic experience.

INT: Were you allowed contact with the men?

ZELDA: Well, when we got off the boat...when we came in first, my cousins came to greet us, thinking that they'll take us home, but then they found out that we went to Ellis Island, so naturally they right away got a lawyer but nothing could be done. It was the weekend until a few days later. So they got us into a hearing there, on Ellis Island, and we were allowed to go home. We went, and then the next day we came back for our possessions. Half of it was gone. Somebody helped themselves to it. So that was also...but coming in was more...and then to see my cousins there waiting for us, and just waving to them. The thing that you waited for so many years to happen, and after all that, you had to go to Ellis Island. And the fear that they may send you back.

INT: So this is an experience...

ZELDA: It's an experience that made a big impact on me. It took me quite a few years to shake it off. And then we had hearings a couple of times, hearings until we got our first green card. Our first paper, the green card, took quite a while. And all that going back and forth to all kinds of offices was also traumatic. It was also painful. But these things pass by.

INT: It's interesting that that's what really strikes you when you talk about your life.

ZELDA: It's still a very memorable experience. As a matter of fact, I wrote a letter to the authorities that they have now in Ellis Island. I went there with a group to see it, and I picked up some papers and wrote to them. I never heard from them. I don't know why.

Maybe because I didn't write anything favorable. I wrote my feelings and the experience there.

INT: Let's fast-forward just a bit, and then we'll go all the way back. Tell me, if you can, about your life with your husband and your children in terms of your work life and your religious life. Let's just get a little picture of your nuclear family.

ZELDA: As far as religious goes, it took me quite a while.

INT: What was your affiliation?

ZELDA: My background wasn't...First of all, I grew up without my father. My father died when I was three years old. There wasn't a real orthodox, rigid life like you hear about in people from...I come from a small town of Poland. It's now small in the territory, as Poland would go, as cities would go in Poland. The city is called Czortkow. It's in Poland. It's what you call Galicia, in the real heart of Galicia. So I didn't grow up with a very rigid, orthodox way.

INT: How did your father die?

ZELDA: He was sick. When I was three years old, before the war.

INT: You had how many siblings?

ZELDA: I had two brothers and two sisters. We were five children and I was the youngest.

INT: So you had two brothers and two sisters, all of them older than you.

ZELDA: Yes. I was the youngest one. And then when I was 10, 11 years old, my oldest brother died. He had probably cancer of the bones.

INT: How many years older than you was he?

ZELDA: He was 10 years older than I.

INT: What were their names, your siblings?

ZELDA: My oldest brother was Tzvi.

INT: And your maiden name?

ZELDA: Finkelman. My second brother was a year younger than my oldest brother. His name was Chaskel. And then was my sister Zanka, and she was also a year younger than my youngest brother. And then my sister Hodel, which was three years older than I. She was born in 1915.

INT: And her name was what?

ZELDA: Her name was Hodel, like the one in Fiddler on the Roof. As I say, financially we were okay. We all went to school. And then when my oldest brother died--he was 21--my younger brother became like the provider of the family. My father left a business of building material, like a lumberyard, and my grandfather worked at it and then my brother took over. We all went to school. My older sister went to a special school, like fashion design, and Hodel and I went to high school, which is called gymnasium in Poland.

INT: Did your brothers go to *cheder* or no?

ZELDA: If they did, I don't remember. Probably yes, but I don't remember. As far as my religious education, we went to Hebrew school.

INT: After gymnasium?

ZELDA: After school hours. We would come home one o'clock or two, and in the afternoon, four to five or four to six, whatever, we went to Hebrew school. For many years, all of us, the three sisters. So we all got a good Hebrew education.

INT: Was the gymnasium...were there many Jews there?

ZELDA: No. If there were three, four Jewish girls, three, four Jewish boys in a class, it was a lot.

INT: Did you experience any anti-Semitism in those years?

ZELDA: Oh, you grow up with anti-Semitism. That's a part of your life after a while. You know that certain days are worse than others. In school, you knew that you have to work very hard. In order to get good marks, you had to be twice as good as non-Jews. There were professors--we called them professors in high school--there were teachers that let you know immediately your place, you're Jewish, so remember you have to be very good. You have to do your work twice as much as anybody else. We knew it. There were some teachers that weren't so bad and some were. And G-d help us if we had a Jewish teacher. That was the worst. In gymnasium, they bent over to be good to the other students, and they just ignored you completely.

INT: Were there many Jewish teachers?

ZELDA: There were a few. Every year, naturally, it varied. We'd have three Jewish teachers. Math was a Jewish teacher. Chemistry I had a Jewish teacher, and then there was a subject religion, religious instructions or whatever you call it. So I had a teacher also for that. As I say, about two, three teachers during the year.

INT: It's safe to assume that you were an excellent student, right?

ZELDA: Yes, I was. I worked very hard. I worked very, very hard. My sister had less of work because she was more of a...she was better in math than I, so she had less work. I always worked and I worked very hard.

INT: Was that something that was expected of you at home?

ZELDA: Oh yes. Oh, oh. I laugh because I saw, I think, David Brenner, the comedian, was on television one day, in the evening I think it was. I think it was Joan Rivers. And she asked him whether he's also mechanically inclined, like the guy that was before him, and he said what? Not a Jewish boy. My mother said hammer? No. Book. That was exactly my life: book. You couldn't sit and watch television or you couldn't sit and just do nothing.

INT: Were your parents well educated?

ZELDA: My mother?

INT: What was your mother's name?

ZELDA: My mother's name was Libka. She was, as of those days, yes. She went to school. My father...he was, but I don't know. I was three years old. But my mother was, and she read a lot. There was always a lot of reading going on, grabbing from each book.

INT: In Polish, primarily?

ZELDA: Yes, primarily in Polish. We also read later on in German, but mostly in Polish. My oldest sister was already in French, but my sister and I and my mother only in Polish. This is where one of my friends is hysterical, when I tell her that I read Shakespeare in Polish.

INT: It's funny.

ZELDA: But that's what I learned. Especially then, when I went to college, I majored in literature, in European literature, so I read everything in Polish.

INT: When was this?

ZELDA: In 1939, the Russians...the war broke out in September. And then the Russians and the Germans met and they signed a pact. Stalin and Hitler signed a pact. According to that pact, the part of Poland that I come from, which is the Ukraine, went to Russia, and the Russians occupied until 1941, when the pact went out and Germans occupied again the whole Poland. So in 1939, it was exactly the time to go to college, to register. I went to Lwow. In Poland, only the big cities had colleges. I went there and went to college. It was called Pedagogical Institute, and I majored in European literature. After a few months, everything was into Ukrainian language and Russian as a language too.

INT: How was that for you?

ZELDA: Ukrainian was no problem because we always had in school the language, because the population was Ukrainian. The Ukrainian population was very big in Poland. Those were the ones that were the worst. Anyway, so I went to college. In 1939 I signed up. In 1941, we were having the last...I'm not sure, maybe 1940. Summertime I worked

with children. I came home, and I got the job, working with children. In 1941, in June, we were ready for the last exams. The bombs started falling and Germany occupied at that time the whole territory of Poland, and naturally they went further to Russia. I come from the very east, the southern east section of Poland, completely at the last point between Russia and Romania. The question was: we have to get home.

INT: How far was Lwow?

ZELDA: Quite far. I had to get home. Right away, the Jews were not allowed to go on the train, and a lot of my friends start walking. It took them a few days. But I couldn't walk because I had sent...my brother-in-law came to buy something and I gave him all my possessions. I was just left for a week or so, for the last exams, so I took all my shoes and the winter stuff and all that and he took it home. I was left with a pair of sandals and high-heeled shoes that I was going to the prom. So I couldn't go home. I didn't have shoes to walk. So I was waiting. And here, it was getting worse and worse. Jews couldn't walk, and if you were caught in the streets...I really didn't know how I'm going to get home. But my brother got someone, a truck driver, who was coming to that town, to Lwow or something--I don't remember--and he paid him a big sum and he took me.

INT: A non-Jew?

ZELDA: Sure. The same guy who a week before drove all the Jews to the grave, to a mass killing. I don't know how lucky I was. He took me home. When he brought me home...and it was a horrible thing. My hometown was beyond recognition and they were already talking about the ghetto. It was very much at the beginning. It was maybe three weeks later, and they were talking about the ghetto already. We were wearing those bands with the Star of David on it. It was already a disaster.

INT: Were your other siblings at home with your mother?

ZELDA: My older sister was married at that point, with a child, and my brother-in-law was taken with the Russians. He was a doctor so the Russians took him right away with them, so he was in Russia. As a matter of fact, he's still alive. Yes, it didn't take long and we were put into the ghetto, my mother, my sister...

INT: This was in your hometown?

ZELDA: Yes, in my hometown.

INT: Was this a shock to you? Had your family heard about things happening elsewhere?

ZELDA: The question always comes in, and it's very difficult to explain that no matter how much you heard and no matter how much you knew, you didn't believe it. You always thought how bad could it be. So that was one thing. Also, you believed in your own way of smoothing down things. You know, I figured I'd go to work. I know languages. But it didn't work this way. Nothing helped. Once you put on that white band with the star on it, nothing mattered anymore, not your education, not how you looked, whether you looked Jewish or you didn't look Jewish. There were a few people that

didn't look Jewish. What do I mean didn't look Jewish? It's like blond hair, blue eyes. I didn't. They ran away and somehow they survived. But they had to be very lucky, very bold.

INT: Before we get to those years, I want to just get a better sense of life before the war. You were mentioning that because your father wasn't living, your house was not orthodox in a way that it would have been had he lived.

ZELDA: Probably. I don't know. Maybe not.

INT: What was the religion like in your home? Did you have a kosher home?

ZELDA: Oh yes. Kosher home. Very much so. My mother went to synagogue every Saturday morning, but we went to school. Whether it was in the beginning or gymnasium or college, we went Saturday to school. So that was it.

INT: Did you have Shabbat Friday night in the home?

ZELDA: Yes. My mother lit candles naturally, and there was kiddish. Passover was very, very strictly observed...very strictly? But, you know, you had a kosher home. You changed everything. You cleaned.

INT: Did you go to school on *Pesach*?

ZELDA: We didn't go to school on the High Holidays. Passover we did go to school. Maybe not the first days, but then we went to school. But it's always very funny that the most homework was on the holidays.

INT: My next question was did you find...

ZELDA: Yes, you had to make sure that you speak to a non-Jewish friend to get the homework, because that's what usually happened.

INT: Did you have many non-Jewish friends?

ZELDA: Yes. We had...especially I had, because we didn't live in the city. I lived in the suburbs.

INT: And so people were more tolerant in the suburbs? Why would that...

ZELDA: I don't think more tolerant, but...we had non-Jewish friends. My sister had, I had.

INT: Because you lived...

ZELDA: Because I lived in a place where, at one point, I think we were the only Jewish family.

INT: So you didn't live in a typically Jewish area.

ZELDA: I never did. No. Not until the ghetto. We had non-Jewish friends, went out with them.

INT: Would they come to your home?

ZELDA: Yes. They would come to my home and I would go to their homes.

INT: Did you maintain any friendships past the war with these people, or during the war?

ZELDA: During the war, yes. Past the war, no.

(END OF TAPE ONE, SIDE ONE)

(TAPE ONE, SIDE TWO)

INT: So you really didn't maintain friendships with these people?

ZELDA: No. First of all, my last two years in high school, I wasn't in my hometown. I went to another town for my two last years in high school, which are the seventh and the eighth grade.

INT: Did you board with another family?

ZELDA: Yes. I moved to another town, the very funny town that everybody mispronounces *Buczacz*.

INT: Why did you go?

ZELDA: Something happened in this high school. My sister was very upset about it. This is still in the high school, in Poland, you went for eight years of high school. After the fourth grade of primary school, you could go to high school, or after the seventh grade of primary you could go to the fourth grade of high school, and have the fourth, fifth, sixth, seventh and eighth. But that's what they call the old system. Two years after I graduated, the system was changed, but that was the old system. Then after the last year, after the eighth grade, you had to go to all the tests, and it could happen that you were a very good student all the eight years and you failed the final test, so you have to wait another year and go through it again, all over again. It was a written and oral. It was like math you have to do, and Polish grammar and Polish literature.

INT: So you had to wait a whole year again until that exam was given?

ZELDA: Correct. And it was an exam given all through the district, the same questions. So you had a language, which you picked, either French or German, Latin or Greek. I had Latin and German. And you had math and you had geography or something else. Five subjects you had to have. Anyway, as I said, my sister was a very good student and something happened at the exams and she failed, and it was a tragedy. People commit suicide because of that. It was a terrible tragedy. You wasted a year if you want to go to

college. At that point, Jews couldn't go to college. There was a quota. So it was very upsetting.

INT: This was your oldest sister or Hodel?

ZELDA: My middle sister, Hodel. She cried a lot. It was a tragic situation. And I said uh-uh, I'm not going to that school anymore. So I went to another town and stayed with some people.

INT: Was that a hard decision for your mother, to send you away at that age?

ZELDA: Oh sure, sure. But I wasn't far. I lived with a nice family, a family that the man was teaching math in high school.

INT: A Jewish family?

ZELDA: Yes. I stayed with them for the two years. I really made friends with them. They all were killed. So I was like out of my friends, and then I went two years to college, so the four years were different. I didn't keep up with my friends. But when we came out of hiding, when we were liberated by the Russians, March 24, 1944...

INT: On your birthday.

ZELDA: Yes, my birthday. I always say I was born twice. So anyway, we got out of where we were hiding, my husband and I, and eight other people, and the town that I was born in, my mother was born in, my grandmother was born there...it was a very old tradition in our family. I couldn't knock at a door. I didn't know anybody. Nobody would want me when we were liberated. It was a horrible thing.

INT: So you did go back or you didn't go back?

ZELDA: I never went back.

INT: You just knew that there was really no way you could go.

ZELDA: When we got out, we lived there almost a year, because you couldn't go anywhere. Don't forget, we were liberated in 1944. The war was over in 1945. The Russian Army advanced.

INT: So you were liberated at the time that Hungary was being invaded.

ZELDA: Yes, correct. 1944. And that was very early. My friends--that I made friends here--were still in concentration camp in 1945, and not until May, 1945 was it over, and we were liberated in 1944. We had our difficulties naturally, but as far as that...So that year we had to be in town. There was no way to travel.

INT: I need to figure out a little bit more chronologically. Your area was invaded in...

ZELDA: 1941, by the Germans, June, 1941.

INT: And you eventually made it home from school.

ZELDA: From Lwow to my hometown. Right.

INT: And soon thereafter were put into the ghetto.

ZELDA: Absolutely so.

INT: When you were put into the ghetto, this was not in your neighborhood where you were living?

ZELDA: No.

INT: You were put into the “Jewish area.”

ZELDA: Yes.

INT: And who was with you at that time?

ZELDA: At that time? My oldest sister went with me to the ghetto. My middle sister was still alive and she went to the ghetto. My brother went to the ghetto, my mother, my sister and her child, because her husband was gone.

INT: You were 23 years old.

ZELDA: Yes.

INT: And your siblings were that much older, as you said. What was your mother’s attitude at that time? What was her reaction?

ZELDA: My mother was about the strongest woman I have ever seen in my life. She kept us together. She was like the glue that kept us together. Any bad situation, she always finds somehow to tell us it’s going to be okay. As a matter of fact, when we had to pack and go to the ghetto, you only could take that much with you and no more. How my mother decided what to take and what to leave...how did she know what was needed?

INT: Were you relying on her, even at that age, to make those kinds of decisions?

ZELDA: Yes. You do make decisions if you have to...

INT: But she was still the mother who would tell you, the daughter, how to do and what to do.

ZELDA: Absolutely so.

INT: So you weren’t really an adult, independent, at that point.

ZELDA: No. Though I was away from home that many years, but still...

INT: But in the family system.

ZELDA: Oh yes. And my middle sister too. And then, my brother was taken to a camp.

INT: From the ghetto?

ZELDA: From the ghetto. We called Fernitens Lager, destruction. Complete destruction camp. Worse than concentration camp, because very few people survived that. And the worst thing in these camps was the idea of giving up. If you didn't fight...

INT: You mean resistance? Emotional resistance?

ZELDA: Yes. If you didn't...just the idea of letting the lice eat you. If you didn't clean yourself, if you didn't keep warm in a way you could only do it...once you gave up, that was it. You become a zombie without any fighting strength.

INT: Particularly in that kind of camp, as opposed to others?

ZELDA: I don't know in other camps. I think it was, but especially in these camps. It was very prevalent. And when we finally got him out of there, his will was gone. He was the head of the family for so many years. Don't forget, he started very early to be the head of the family, at 17 or so. He was the one that just followed orders, go, stand, when we got him out.

INT: How did it come to be that you were able to get him out?

ZELDA: You know what *protectia* means? It's as today as it was always. And you bribe a little bit, here, there. We finally got him out. But mostly it's who you know. So we knew someone who helped us get him out.

INT: A non-Jewish person?

ZELDA: No, it was Jewish people who knew who to bribe. You always had to know who to bribe. And we bribed somebody and he got out. The name of that place was called Kamunka. Very few people came out of it.

INT: How long was he there?

ZELDA: He was there only a few months, but it was enough to break his spirit completely.

INT: And he was then brought with you into the ghetto?

ZELDA: And from there he came home, but you couldn't stay home. He got into a camp that was like a working camp, and his fiancée was also there, in that working camp. They got someone, a Polish man, who promised to hide them. That was my mother.

INT: Your mother arranged for that?

ZELDA: Yes, and my brother and his fiancée. And my sister, my middle sister. The man was going to hide them.

INT: How was it that you and your older sister were not...

ZELDA: He then let the authorities know and they picked them up and killed them. And then my sister and I got into another camp. It was a working camp. It was called [name of camp]. It's like the military authorities. And we worked, my older sister and I, together there. Only women.

INT: With the child?

ZELDA: No, the child was with my mother and my other sister. First my sister's very good friend, non-Jewish, took the child, and somebody squealed on her and she brought the baby back immediately.

INT: What was her name, the child?

ZELDA: Leah.

INT: And how old was she?

ZELDA: She was born, believe it or not, 1939. She was three years old. This Polish woman told my sister that if she wants, she'll take her to Krakow and there she may have some relatives who will keep her, and my sister didn't want to send away her child. And then when they picked them all up, they killed the child too.

INT: How did you learn about that?

ZELDA: From other people who were there. Only one survived. She didn't run away as much. Then she was hiding because they were saying that she was the lover of that Polish guy. The Polish guy who kept them for a while was her lover, and that's how she survived. And then she disappeared. She just ran away and disappeared. Somebody saw her in the States, somewhere in New York or so, but we don't know because she disappeared. And my older sister and I went to that camp. It was military authorities. We were cleaning. Soldiers were coming, only for a while, staying in the military zone and went further or so. So we were cleaning before they would come and after they left, cleaning up all the garbage.

INT: And you were housed there?

ZELDA: No. We were housed in another place. We were taken every morning back and forth.

INT: So you were already in some kind of camp at this point.

ZELDA: We were in camp, right. Where the school used to be.

INT: The gymnasium?

ZELDA: The public school. So we stayed there. That's where I met my husband. My husband was the dentist.

INT: At the military base?

ZELDA: At the military base. And also in that camp that we stayed. So my husband was there.

INT: So you were telling me about the camp that you were able to...your sister...

ZELDA: My older sister and I went to that camp.

INT: And your husband was a dentist there.

ZELDA: Yes. How we got into that camp, that was very desirable to get into that camp, because you had some kind of a protection.

INT: Can you tell me the name again?

ZELDA: [name of camp]. So as I said, we were cleaning the barracks, the military barracks, after the soldiers were there. It was in the morning, like seven o'clock, we went there, and by six, we were taken back into the camp, but my husband stayed in camp because he was the dentist.

INT: For the soldiers?

ZELDA: No, for the authorities in camp, for the German authorities in camp. We were there a year, no more, and June 1942 we were awakened in the morning and we were called out to the yard, a tremendous yard. We were maybe 3000 people or so. And it was also a place where all workshops were settled there. It's like the tailors and shoemakers, and they all worked for Germans and the Germans could come and have their work done. And the *lager fuhrer*, the oldest in the camp, who was Temonic, a Czechoslovakian guy, he was coming into the dental office and his father. He had a father there too, and my husband was, I think, making some dentures for the father, and for him too, and that's how he knew my husband. As I say, in the morning we were waking up and all sent to the yard, and when we came there we realized we were surrounded by Gestapo. There were maybe like 40 or so Gestapo there, and the dogs, and we were told to lie down and whoever picked up his head, he was shooting. Just like that. He walked around and with machine guns they were shooting at people. Unbelievable. Anybody who picked up their head was shot. And then he took out a few people, and my husband starts pleading with him. He took out my husband because the teeth weren't ready yet. They took out my husband, and my husband started pleading for me. We weren't married--one didn't get married in all that--but somehow he let me go. But I saw my sister being clubbed to death, and I was left alive. We were maybe 20 people at that point, alive, and the rest, whoever wasn't shot there on the spot, were put in a truck--the trucks were standing outside--and taken. When we were liberated in 1944, we went up to the cemetery and the

graves were pointed out to us. There were people there in that mass grave that weren't even shot at all. They were buried alive. So that was...It was June 1943. As I said, we were maybe 20 people who survived. We went back to that big room and we sat there, and my husband said we're running away, and I said where are we going to run? And he said he always thought of it, and there is a place that he talked to a woman, that in case of a mass killing like that--it's called *aktion*--we would be able to come in for a night or two to sleep or just to gather our forces and go someplace. Don't forget that at this point, I knew, I thought I knew, that my mother and my sister and the baby and my brother were alive. So when we got into that room, my husband said we're going. Once it gets a little dark, we are going out. At that point, the town was declared *Judenfrei*, no Jews allowed. Anybody had the right to kill a Jew in the street if they'd see one. So that's where we were going. And we are in camp. How do we get out of camp? It was only a few hours after that mass killing. So it was June 16, a very bright night, a full moon. We can't take anything with us, so whatever we...we put on a few articles of clothing. The guards around the camp are drunk, so we walked out and as we walked out of the gate--let's presume here is the gate--we walk out, and as we went to turn right to go to that place that my husband knew the women--it took us a few days--the *lagerfuhrer*, that Temonic walks in. He was bloody, absolutely bloody. He was still in the same uniform that he was killing people. Terribly drunk. Absolutely drunk. He saw us--it was such a bright night--and as they say, G-d closed his eyes or something. We passed him by. He didn't even see us. And we walked. It was very dangerous to walk, terribly dangerous to walk, but we got there. That place that was supposed to be for one night became a place for a full year, 10 months, from June to March 24. And that's where we were hiding. 10 others. Eight other people, 10 people.

INT: Eight people were there already?

ZELDA: They were coming. Later on somebody else came. One told the other one, and once they came in we would never let them go out because they may tell someone. So it was still people of different ages and different backgrounds and different educations. It was difficult. It was very, very difficult. There were days that we almost killed each other, literally. There was one woman there who was never happy. Always fighting, always unhappy, always angry, screaming, and we were not allowed to talk loud, nobody should hear us from outside. It was a little room and the window was covered. It wasn't exactly a very safe place, but we survived in a strange, strange way.

INT: Who were the people who...

ZELDA: Two sisters who were once upon a time...actually, it was built, that bunker, by a guy who was a bricklayer. My husband and somebody else knew about it, and from that it became that this one brought his fiancée and the fiancée's brother brought his fiancée. And that's how we were hiding there. Two sisters who used to work for Jewish people, and one had an illegitimate child who was always a bullet in our throat. It's very strange how we survived these things. The people, who built beautiful, beautiful bunkers that were 100% proof, didn't survive, and we did. It's whatever you call luck.

INT: I'd like to ask you about that. How do you account for all of this?

ZELDA: Surviving...one survived, one didn't. Circumstances played a big role. Circumstances. Your will, your strong will. My brother lost his will. Strong will. Forceful. Forcefulness played a big role. And luck. When we came to America to a new start, and my husband and I walked, and the light would change, and one of us would be on the other side. You know, like you cross and the lights change and I remained here, there. We used to say to each other, you see, this is the difference between living or dying. That's all there was to it. My husband once, he was in the office and they came and they took his partner, and he, stupidly, as they opened up the door, he went behind the door and that's how he survived.

INT: A child's trick, wow.

ZELDA: ...under the bed, and that is so typical. This is so typical. And that mass killing that we were in June that I told you about, the camp, one week the ones that he pulled it. It was known that most of us will survive maybe that one, but the next one is going to be, because all the people then were sent to...those that didn't run away that night like my husband and I did were sent to another camp. Out of all these people, only six of us survived. I think that I and another friend are alive and that's it.

INT: What was your relationship to G-d at that point?

ZELDA: Didn't play any role. Nothing. Not at all. I don't remember anything, believing or not believing.

(END OF TAPE 1, SIDE 2)

(TAPE 2, SIDE ONE)

INT: It wasn't an issue, your faith?

ZELDA: No, not at all. You know, when they called us out to the yard that I told you and they told us to lie down, the order was to lie down and put your head down and to keep it down. We were lying there and I remember there was some...not sand, but dust, and I was doodling with my finger without any thought in my head. If anybody was, what were you thinking of? Absolutely nothing.

INT: Were there times when you called out to G-d in your heart, the next night or the next day?

ZELDA: The only time when we were hiding, I was praying to G-d at least the little child, my sister's little girl, should survive.

INT: You mean on behalf of her?

ZELDA: On behalf of her. And that's about it. Otherwise I really...look, I don't think that we have any relationship with G-d at this point. There was so much going on. There was such bitterness. There was such pain. Absolute pain and uncertainty. I think if we said G-d, please help us, but it was more of a tradition than a deep belief. And then first

we were almost a year in Poland until we could leave, and then we were a year in Paris, and then when we came here and I saw people lighting candles and all that...I couldn't do it. Just couldn't do it. It was too much of a reminder of better times, of peaceful times, of family life. I kept on saying it would be more painful to light the candles than not to, so I didn't do it. And also observing the holidays was painful, because that was like opening up the wounds with the family, with holidays, with tradition, with all that. So for a long time we didn't do it until Mordechai really grew up a little bit, that we started doing it again, lighting candles and observing the holidays and Shabbat and Passover and all of that. So it took a while.

INT: So you took a break.

ZELDA: It took a while.

INT: Before the war broke out, would you say that you independently observed holidays? Did you light your own candles when you were away?

ZELDA: No.

INT: So it was really the mother's...

ZELDA: The mother. Girls didn't do that. I never did that. I know the only thing I did on my own, because I said *Yizkor* since I was a little girl.

INT: For your father?

ZELDA: For my father. So I always observed that and I knew it by heart, so even when we were hiding I said it. That's deep tradition. And at that point, I also believed, and I still do, in the hereafter. That's something I keep as my own belief strongly. I think it's because I want to believe that something remains. It's not just they we're here and they're gone and that's it. We were a very close-knit family, maybe because my father was buried so early. My mother kept us very much together. My mother didn't have a family. There were two sisters and a brother were here in the States, so when my father died, she remained with her own children. Naturally with my father's family, but that's never the same. It was her own children. So she kept us very much together. I must say that I grew up not missing a father. Not at all. My sisters maybe and my brothers did, but I didn't. I had a nice childhood. I never thought of myself less than my friends who had fathers, so it wasn't like I missed something in my life, maybe because I didn't have it. Maybe that or maybe my mother was so strong and so beautiful that she gave us the love of parents. But to this very day I don't think that I missed. My mother was strict. It was a European upbringing. *Achtung*, I call it *Achtung*. I remember Mordechai once came from school later, and I said where were you? He said I talked to Jane. This was in high school. He said we have a lot in common. We have strict parents, European parents. He maybe forgot this, but I remember. You didn't feel the same way?

INT: Sure. Although in the scheme of things, my parents were well adjusted and really did well emotionally, I think, but they were far stricter than any of my friends' parents,

except for a non-Jewish friend of mine whose parents weren't European. He also had a strict upbringing.

ZELDA: That's known as a European upbringing. That's what we were told. I told my children once...we wore uniforms in high school, in gymnasium. It was springtime and I opened up my coat, and one of my mother's cousins saw me and somehow--I don't know how she saw my mother before I came home--I don't know how it happened, but I came home and my G-d, did I get it. How does a girl walk around with an open coat? It's not allowed. You bring me shame. So here you are. I told my children that before the teacher walked into the class all the students got up, and the teacher sat on a platform.

INT: A different world. You met your husband at the camp. How was it that the two of you connected and when did you get married?

ZELDA: I went with an aching tooth.

INT: So it was a patient-doctor relationship.

ZELDA: Yes. I went with an aching tooth and he fixed it. We went to a man who wasn't even a rabbi. He was like a *dayan*, you call it, like the secretary of the rabbi. He gave us the...he officiated.

INT: In the camp?

ZELDA: Not camp. At that point we could still go out. At one point you could go out. After you came from work you could go to the ghetto. My mother still lived in the ghetto so I would go out and go to see her, and then it became strict and they wouldn't let us go to the ghetto anymore, and I once was beaten because I went to see my mother and we were caught. Not even the *lagerfuhrer*, but his help. It was a Jewish man. He put us all into a jail that was down there in the cellar, and that's where he kept us.

INT: So when you were put in that cellar...

ZELDA: The four of us: me, a young boy, and two other people. The young boy got it most. They really beat him up. They really beat him up. To me he said okay, smile and tomorrow you're going to hang. I don't know how it happened that they let us go. Sometimes things happened in a very, very strange way and you can't even explain it. As much as I recollect, in the morning they let us go to work and that was it. All these things happened in such a strange way.

INT: Haphazard.

ZELDA: Yes. Even recollecting them, I wonder. I once said to someone watching a movie, a documentary about Poland being invaded by the Germans, and the marching and marching and marching. You probably saw all these movies. And I sat there in such disbelief. How on earth did I survive all that? How on earth did we, those few people that survived, how did we do it?

INT: Have you over the years read and watched films?

ZELDA: Oh yes.

INT: So you haven't avoided it?

ZELDA: No, I didn't avoid it. I never avoided it. I read so many books on it. I still read. No, I never avoid any movie, any documentary. Some books I don't like. I never liked Sophie's Choice. Hated the movie passionately and didn't like the book.

INT: What do you mean you didn't like it?

ZELDA: I didn't like it because it wasn't true. It was not authentic. I also dislike very much Lovers and Other Enemies. I think it was awful. Of all my friends, of all my acquaintances of survivors of the Holocaust, I never met anyone like that.

INT: So it paints a sort of abnormal picture.

ZELDA: I get angry. I get upset about it because it gives us a strange name. I didn't like the book Children of the Holocaust, the one that Helen Epstein wrote.

INT: Because?

ZELDA: Because it was also not authentic. I met the woman anyway later on. I had my reservations about her too.

INT: Can you talk a little bit more about that?

ZELDA: I remember Mordechai didn't like the book at all. He felt very, very bad about the book. Did you read it?

INT: I did.

ZELDA: And how did you feel about it?

INT: I remember reading it as a first year college student, and it was the first time that I realized there were other...really realized there were other children of survivors. Not that I recognized my parents in any of the profiles, but it was helpful for me to note that there were extremes. My parents were not extreme.

ZELDA: Why didn't I like the book? Because...and then I met the woman and I didn't like her either. Why I didn't like the book is if somebody reads a book like this, he identifies every, every survivor with that and I don't think so. Naturally there are. I know all my friends' children and I think they did a beautiful job in their life. Sure, some are, but so are American children or any other child can have problems here, not to be a child of survivors. Maybe children of survivors have an added dimension of life because they grew up with stories of horror, and it has its toll on them too, but with all that they're

very normal and they function fine and they do beautiful work and they have families and all that. So I was very unhappy with it and I was angry.

INT: Did you see the movie Shine?

ZELDA: Yes.

INT: What was your feeling about that?

ZELDA: Also, again the same thing. Why did he have to be a survivor, the father? Why do they make it so...

INT: That was my reaction as well. That was my reaction as well.

ZELDA: But that didn't make me as mad as some movies, or that book, Singer's book and the movie then. That made me so angry. I walked out of that movie and I felt like standing there and screaming, please, don't make it like we all are crazy people. We have our pain and we have our sleepless nights but...I was just telling someone a story. Susie and Mitchell were sitting here on the couch Sunday, and he was like falling asleep and she was holding his hand, and it reminded me of a very strange situation. We were hiding already and the 10 of us had five beds. It was a very, small little room. On this side of the wall, there were platforms or something, so one couple lived on the bottom, one couple on top. The other wall also two couples. And one was just one couple. My husband and I were sleeping just one couple with nobody on top of us. Anyway, at night we were asleep, and as I told, we were not to talk loud because somebody may pass and hear us or whatever, so we whispered. And all of a sudden my husband started to scream in his sleep. So I squeezed his hand, and as I'm squeezing his hand he screams louder. Finally I shook him. You know, when you don't know what to do? Finally I shook him and he woke up. It turned out that he was screaming...he was trying to run away and he was caught by a Gestapo man, and he held his hand, so the more I was squeezing, the more real the dream became and that was such a...It's a good thing that I stopped squeezing his hand and I shook him.

INT: Did you have sleep interrupted by memories a lot?

ZELDA: Oh yes. Oh yes. For a long, long time. Not now anymore because my pain and my grief and my loss was then greater when my husband died, and my husband's death was like a stronger pain at this point.

INT: So sometimes it almost took precedence over the other?

ZELDA: Definitely. Until such time, I was grieving for my mother, for my sisters, brothers, the child, and my friends. And then my husband died and that became stronger, and I started grieving for other things.

INT: About your husband?

ZELDA: My husband.

INT: So it didn't reawaken any war-related things that were really related to your husband.

ZELDA: No. Grief and pain of losing him. But until my husband died, we used to have those dreams. It's strange how whenever we got together, friends, no matter what we were talking--we could have told jokes and talked about movies, shows, books--you mention in, somewhere along the line, there was always coming back to the war years. Always.

INT: Were most of your friends survivors?

ZELDA: Not now anymore. Not now. But for a long time yes. And then when I moved in to New Jersey in a little town called Caldwell--we moved there in 1971--I became very much involved in volunteer work. First of all, I worked for the Temple, the synagogue, and I became president of the sisterhood, and then I got involved very much with Brandeis-Women Committee for Brandeis University, and then I became very much involved with the Soviet Jews, the ones that came from Russia, because I speak Russian. So I became a translator and all that. I worked with American people so I became very good friends with other people. I still keep my friends, my friends from way back home. I have two friends from way back. One who went to school with me and others. They're very close friends, but I also have friends that were born here in this country.

INT: I'd like to talk about first going to Paris and then landing in New York, and how your life shaped itself that way. Before we do that, though, how would you describe yourself, up to the point of going to Paris? What would be your self-description?

ZELDA: First, I was very much attached to my family. I wasn't a person, I was a part of my family. I was a daughter and I was a sister, very strongly. Especially a daughter. And then I became a wife, and I relied very much on my husband in many ways, though he always said that as far as strength when we were hiding...my husband used to say that he drew strength from me because I was very calm. We were once almost discovered. The boy who was one of the sister's son, illegitimate child, he went to work for a German official and being that his nature was stealing, he stole a beautiful attaché case without realizing that there were important papers in there. And what he did when he brought it in...he threw it into our place. The guy came with a dog. Now, we were in that little room and the dog starts sniffing. Somehow, the woman threw a bone to the dog and that's how we survived. We heard the dog. We heard him speaking German. We heard him walking around. My husband loves to tell the story how I was sitting and knitting, not missing a stitch. That's how calm I was.

INT: Was that always your nature?

ZELDA: Probably. And then it was just the opposite, and then I became this...It's funny. When we were liberated, it was just different.

INT: Can you tell me a little bit...

ZELDA: At such a time, I knew that I had to rely on something, and that was my strength. My husband had different strength. He was strategically strong. He always thought of...that's how he thought of building that bunker. That's how he thought of running away. But when it came to really...to deal with it, I was much stronger. He said he was lying there and shaking. Our position was only lying. There was no room for us to walk around. So he was shaking, and I calmly was knitting away. And then, I guess, when we came to the States, I started getting nervous. I think so.

INT: How did you express your nervousness, as you call it?

ZELDA: I always wanted to do my best, and coming here I felt inadequate. As a matter of fact, when the kids left...there's a difference between Mordechai and Lynette, 10 years. When Lynette finally went to college, I went back to school and then my husband got sick and I couldn't do it. But I always felt that I could have done much more with my life than I did. I wanted to be a teacher in the worst way. I was, right after the war in Poland. I think that's what I felt like. But until such time, first of all, you asked me to describe myself. It was probably because I didn't have a father that I became very, very, what they used to call stuck-up. I walked like this and I behaved like that. I guess I wanted to show everybody that if I'm not better than you, certainly I'm not less. But I think we all were like that. My two sisters were like that, especially my older sister. So I think that that was also the tradition, maybe, or the feeling that no one is going to pity me. I didn't know why I'm doing it. Now I think so. But I did it. I was always walking like this and thinking of myself as...And then when I married my husband, he was just the opposite, friendly and giving. Mordechai is very much this. My friends always say that Mordechai is exactly like my husband, that friendly kind, that giving, that embracing everybody and kissing everybody and that kind of good-hearted, good people. So he changed me. He changed me. I became more friendly. I don't know whether giving or not--probably was--but friendlier.

INT: Where was Joel from?

ZELDA: He came to my hometown when he was like seven, eight years old. He was born in a different town, but he grew up in my town.

INT: Was he much older than you?

ZELDA: Five years.

INT: And did he have siblings as well?

ZELDA: He had a sister, an older sister. She was also killed in the war, very much in the beginning. And my husband's parents were both alive and they both were killed a week before we went into hiding, because he thought that they'll go with us.

INT: Did he know that they had been killed?

ZELDA: Yes.

(END OF TAPE TWO, SIDE ONE)

(TAPE TWO, SIDE TWO)

ZELDA: When Czortkow became Judenfrei, no Jews allowed, so that's when they were taken away and killed.

INT: How did you end up in Paris?

ZELDA: When we were liberated, we lived in Czortkow for a year, and then we went...a law came out that all these people who were citizens of Poland can leave this part of the Ukraine, which became part of the Soviet Union, and can go back to Poland, to the part of Poland which was once upon a time Poland but then German, and those citizens of Poland can go there. So we left the Ukraine and we went to that part of Poland. Brotswirth. It was once upon a time Polish and then it was German. So we went there and we stayed there for a while, and then we started looking into going to America, because as I told you, my mother had two sisters and a brother here, a big family, and they were very anxious to have us. And you couldn't go from Poland there. One was telling the other one...the rumor was that you could get a visa to go to America from Paris, so we went to Paris and we got a permit to stay in Paris for a while. After a few months you went to renew it, and we stayed in Paris a full year.

INT: How did you live?

ZELDA: My husband started working a little bit.

INT: As a dentist?

ZELDA: Yes, as a dentist for somebody. And the HIAS helped, the organization. We would go to that kitchen to eat dinners or whatever, and my husband worked a little bit and that's how we lived.

INT: You spoke French?

ZELDA: I learned to speak French. I did a good job on it. I'm sorry I forgot it. The other day I met a guy at the airport and he had difficulties to explain himself, so I helped him out a little bit, but it's not easy anymore. It's 50 years. When I came here, I had to put all my attention to English.

INT: Was that hard for you? It wasn't hard for you, was it?

ZELDA: No, not hard.

INT: Your English is excellent.

ZELDA: Thank you. No, no, it wasn't hard at all. I took some English right after the war, so that was...In Paris I went to school in Berlitz, and I learned English and also French.

INT: When you finally were released from Ellis Island, how did your life progress from there?

ZELDA: My cousin took me to her house.

INT: This was in Brooklyn?

ZELDA: Brooklyn, right. She took me to her house. We lived there for six months. Also, we had another story. My husband came here as a student.

INT: Before the war?

ZELDA: No, when we came.

INT: Oh, that was the way he entered the country?

ZELDA: Yes. He came as a student. So in order to get the green card, we had to become some kind of citizen, and the best way was to have a baby. It's not anymore, but it used to be a law that once you have an American born child you also become a citizen. So that's what we did. I had to become pregnant, and I couldn't. It took me a nice few months to become pregnant, but once I became pregnant we got our green card. And my husband couldn't practice dentistry. He had to go through all kinds of schooling again and all that and we couldn't afford it, so he went to work. He never was a dentist here in America.

INT: What kind of work did he do?

ZELDA: My cousins gave him work. They were Breakstones.

INT: Dairies?

ZELDA: Jobbers what you call. They were selling Breakstones all over Brooklyn and all that. Distributors of Breakstone products. So my husband worked with them and we had a grocery and then he went to sell, and then he had laundries all over New Jersey. That was good.

INT: So you experienced a socio-economic change after the war.

ZELDA: Oh yes. Oh yes.

INT: Both of you.

ZELDA: Yes. Yes. At first it was difficult. I remember one guy seeing my husband at work and saying Doctor, what are you doing? But he didn't mind. It wasn't like...we took it as a change, a complete change, and we did our best. My husband wasn't miserable because of that.

INT: So he was fairly flexible.

ZELDA: Yes. And then we were very, very happy with starting a family and all that. It was worthwhile. You know, your parents probably felt the same way.

INT: Sure.

ZELDA: You build your own family and that's yours.

INT: How would you describe your relationship with your husband during those years of first coming to the States and into early young family?

ZELDA: 100% incorporated. At first we had the work and we had the grocery and we worked together. I helped. And then when he went into selling, I did the books. As a matter of fact, I went to school to learn to do bookkeeping, because in Europe...once you go to gymnasium, it's humanistic. It has nothing to do with business. So I went here to school, evening classes I took in Brooklyn, in Jefferson High School. You lived all your life...

INT: I lived some in Philadelphia, some in New Orleans. My parents live in New Orleans, and then back in Philadelphia.

ZELDA: That's unusual.

INT: It is.

ZELDA: Are there any survivors in New Orleans?

INT: My father's cousin. There are a few, very few.

ZELDA: When we moved to Caldwell we were the only family. That's why I made friends not...

INT: Outside of that community

ZELDA: When we moved in there, we were the only family. Then it turned out that one guy was married to an American woman...but he wasn't even a survivor. He was in Russia. And that's it. No survivors there.

INT: So you were very connected and you had a shared vision.

ZELDA: Very much connected. We never...like some of our friends were very miserable because also another dentist couldn't work so he was very miserable and they were talking about going back and all that. No, not my husband and I. First of all, also, we had a very nice support with my family, my cousins. We moved in to their house. It was very lovely. It was funny because my cousin's daughter is my age, and we're friends to this very day. Very close. We keep up. We're more friends than relatives, that kind of relationship. Very, very much so. So it was no bitterness, none whatsoever, and I supported my husband fully for all he wanted to do. I have no regrets. The only regret is that my husband should have lived.

INT: So yours is not the case that the war pushed you together and it was just a circumstantial relationship that had no reason to be other than the war. Yours was really...

ZELDA: No, no, no, no.

INT: There was a reason you were together.

ZELDA: Oh yes. Oh yes. And built on trust and love, very much so. I think trust was most of all. I learned to depend on my husband fully. I even have, to the very day, I say that if something bothered me, I said something I shouldn't have or I did something, I told my husband and that's it. I got rid of it. It's not my problem anymore. So to the very day, I miss that very, very much. I miss him very much but I also miss that sharing very much.

INT: You mentioned that he took ill at some point.

ZELDA: First he had the bypass, and that was quite a while ago. That was many years ago, like 20 years ago, when it wasn't perfected yet, and it was seven hours. It took a long time for him to...So that was the first. But then he survived that one, and then he got cancer. Cancer killed him within six months. It was operated the 10th, March 10th. He had cancer of the testicles. And March 10th the first time, March 17th the second time and he died October 28th.

INT: How did you survive that?

ZELDA: As Mordechai says, strength. How do you survive? *Ain bereira*, I guess.

INT: But you don't seem...

ZELDA: It takes a while. It takes a long time. Sometimes it still hurts like it happened today. But you keep on going. I think it's an inner strength that helps, and then, as they say, *ain bereira*. During the time of grieving, you have a few eye-openers. I went to a store to buy a dress and I said to the saleswoman...she showed me this and that and I said no, I want black. She says why and I said because my husband died a few months ago and I'm in mourning and I only wear black. And I probably started to cry. And she looks at me and she says what do you think, you're the only one? The art of surviving. She said I was left without money. I have to go to work. So at least my husband left me very well provided. Very well provided. So that's something to be grateful for. And with good children, understanding children. So that helps.

INT: Tell me about the way your family grew. First you had Mordechai and you became citizens and you were both working and then Lynette was born.

ZELDA: We always felt good about ourselves, being together. We always felt good about our children. Naturally there was a big difference between ages. Mordechai was 10 years and four months old when Lynette was born. How it happened...it just didn't. Neither my husband nor I were very much into making it back, making more money,

making...not at all. Mordechai grew up in Brooklyn, in a quite, I would say, middle-class neighborhood. I would even say like a lower middle-class neighborhood. Lynette already grew up better. As you go, you improve. Lynette grew up...and then when she was six years old we bought one house, and then when she was 12 we bought a bigger house. Mordechai was already, when we bought the first house, Mordechai was already in college. I remember when he came. We moved in May to the new house, and he came home the end of May or June. He was in Cornell. He didn't know where to go (laughter). That was funny. But I remember also we were still in Brooklyn when the mailman--it was a Jewish mailman--brought an acceptance from Cornell for Mordechai, and he said uh-huh, uh-huh, refugee to Cornell!

INT: He probably held it up to the light.

ZELDA: They knew. He said, oh, refugee to Cornell (laughter). We always talked about it with my husband. It was a big achievement, but he was so good in school. He was so marvelous. I remember he was in a very well known high school in Brooklyn. Once upon a time it was Erasmus Hall. The name even sounds so good. Anyway, I got a call from school that the principal wants to talk to me. I got dressed and walked, it wasn't far. I walked to school and my heart was in my throat, and as I walked I said I'm Mrs. Liebling, Marvin's mother. Marvin was his name. And he said to me, you know we have a genius on our hands. I didn't know why. He had 165 I.Q. And he started giving me all that pep talk. I always tell the story that I didn't walk home, I flew home (laughter) in a cloud. And then Lynette repeated the same thing. She skipped the third grade. She went from the second into the fourth. But on their own. I didn't have to push them. Lynette had the motto on her door in her room, Richer than I you can never be, I have a mother who reads to me.

INT: That's lovely.

ZELDA: That's what you call *nachas*, right?

INT: That's right. That is *nachas*.

ZELDA: All the way through.

INT: How would you describe your relationship with the children growing up?

ZELDA: Two years ago, my very good friend's husband died. He was a young man, in Caldwell. I was driving from Princeton, where I live now, to Caldwell, near Princeton. It takes about an hour or so. I was going to the funeral, and I was saying to myself...or thinking of her children. This friend of mine had three children. I was thinking to myself, do I have good children? When you ride yourself in a car and going especially to a funeral of a man that I liked a lot and we were very close, and I start reflecting myself upon the question and saying what does it mean good children? What's the criteria by which you go? Is it children that call Mommy every day good children? Are children who send presents to Mommy good children? What do good children mean? I didn't come to a conclusion, but I think that I have good children. They understand me. I think they love me. They respect me. Sure, I have my difficulties with them, because we think sometimes

a little bit different. I'm 80 and they are much younger. Especially Lynette is 39 now. It's a generation gap. Also, though I live in America longer than I lived in Europe, I'm still European. So that could be it. But otherwise, I think I have a nice relationship with my children. I think so. I think we respect each other for what we are.

INT: You mentioned that when Mordechai started going to school, Hebrew school, is when you started back lighting candles and bringing Judaism back into your life. What was that transition like and how now do you relate to Judaism? How has that changed?

ZELDA: My friends called me more Jewish than anybody else. I don't know now. My religion is deeper than it was. Yeah, I could say deeper than it was. My observance of the holidays and all that is as Jewish as could be. I wouldn't say very religious, but I respect my Judaism as such. I repeat, I'm not deeply religious. I'm not. Do I believe in G-d? Yes. Do I love Judaism as such? Yes. I love Yiddish, very much so. I taught myself how to read Yiddish from the Hebrew that I know, and I'm giving classes in Yiddish literature.

INT: Now?

ZELDA: Yes, now. For the women that belong to Brandeis. I do it in Florida and I do it here. That's all self-taught, Yiddish literature. We didn't know much about Yiddish literature, not in Europe.

INT: Was Yiddish spoken in your home?

ZELDA: Yes. We spoke Polish, but Yiddish...my mother put a big emphasis on speaking Yiddish to my grandfather. My grandmother died when I was little. My other grandmother didn't live with us, my mother's mother, so when she came to live with us when she was already an old lady, she had Alzheimer's so there was no special talking to her. But my grandfather was in the same town, my paternal grandfather, and my mother put a big emphasis on speaking to him in Yiddish out of respect. So I knew Yiddish, but now I learned to read Yiddish. So that connects a lot with my Judaism. I would call myself a religious woman. I'm not orthodox. I never was. Rina asked me the other day...last year I think she asked, Grandma, what temple do you belong to? And I said conservative and she said oh, Grandma, aren't you ashamed? Your son is so much into reconstructionist. That was last year or two years ago that she said that to me. But I always belonged to conservative.

INT: That's where you're most comfortable.

ZELDA: Since I'm here in the country, and especially when I lived in Caldwell more so.

INT: I question a little bit backward, although it's forward to. You mentioned in passing that your town was filled with Ukrainians, and of course they were the worst, which is pretty much commonly accepted.

ZELDA: The only thing is that the two women who kept us alive were Ukrainian.

INT: That's important to note.

ZELDA: I call them our two angels.

INT: Did you keep in touch with them after the war?

ZELDA: Yes, we did. Yes, we did. We rewarded them.

INT: Do you have feelings about Germans per se?

ZELDA: Strong feelings. Strong, very strong. I wouldn't buy a German product if I know it's a German product. I wouldn't buy it. Yes, I wouldn't buy a German product because it's unnecessary. Why should I support Germany if I could buy from others?

INT: How about Polish products?

ZELDA: Yes, I'll buy Polish products. It's very different. People are very surprised that I would buy Polish products, but Polish is my country. The woman that works for me can't get over how I still speak Polish and I wouldn't even mix in a Russian or English word. It's pure, pure Polish. I'll recite Polish poems and I know a lot about Polish literature. It's very strange, but I have no...I have my feelings, my hard feelings. I have my sad memories, but the Poles as such didn't do me that much harm as the Germans did naturally, and some Ukrainians. But I grew up there. That's my...

INT: Have you been back?

ZELDA: No, I've never been back. I never went back and I have no desire. None whatsoever. My friends went back. I have no....not at all. No desires. Let me remember what I remember. I don't want to go back at all. First of all, I couldn't go. I don't think...it's the Ukraine now and I can't go, but I have no desire. None whatsoever. What for? A graveyard.

INT: I'm conscious that it's late. Are you doing okay?

ZELDA: Yes, I'm doing fine.

INT: We have a question about faith, tradition and identity. You pretty much wrapped it up that nothing was changed so drastically. There was a low point but...

ZELDA: No, nothing drastic.

INT: You resumed pretty much where you had left off.

ZELDA: Yes. I still believe in hereafter. I don't believe in reincarnation. I don't know what I'm going to come back as.

INT: This is one of my big fears.

ZELDA: (laughter) There was a young woman who used to say my mother will come back as a vacuum cleaner. (Laughter) I thought that's the best description of her mother

cleaning forever. But I do believe in the hereafter, as I told you, because I don't want to...

(END OF TAPE TWO, SIDE TWO)

(TAPE THREE, SIDE ONE)

INT: What would you say, in reviewing your life, were your happiest moments and your most difficult moments?

ZELDA: The most difficult moment was to accept, when we were liberated, that no one, none of my family...It took me years. I used to walk around and look around if I would see somebody. That was the most difficult year. And also, we were a very close-knit family, as my friend once said to me...I told you I have one friend who went to school with me. She also had two sisters. She said when she was hiding. She said if I thought that they were not alive...I knew I'd survived, but, she said, and I was thinking of you, she said to me. I wondered if you would survive, if you would come out and find anybody. The irony of it is that she found her two sisters, and at one she's angry to the very day.

INT: She's angry with one of her sisters?

ZELDA: Yes. She's not in touch with them. I think the other one died. But anyway, just to give you an idea of how close we were. That was a horrible, horrible moment. It's very difficult to accept that. For years and years I kept on looking around and still hoping.

INT: When did you give up hope?

ZELDA: Years after, when we came here to America. A few years after. And then some people told me that they were there when they went in the end. My sister I saw, the older sister.

INT: Did suicide ever occur to you?

ZELDA: No. I don't think so. No. You lived with such hopes. I hoped. I don't think so. You asked me about my happiest moments. I think it would be at my children's weddings, their achievements in school and all that. I think those were happy moments in my life, very happy moments. We had like 16 friends, 16 families. I think it was 16 but maybe only 12, I don't remember. We would go to the mountains in the summertime, the bungalow colonies and all that. There was one bungalow colony that we all went together and nobody else.

INT: One extended family.

ZELDA: Yes, extended. Until the very day. We spent happy summers together with very little. None of us made it, because once you started making it, you didn't go there. You bought a condo on Florida. (Laughter) We were all on the same level in finance, and then

some make it bigger. Mordechai also remembers these years. Good childhood. Good times.

INT: How would you say that the influence of your upbringing as a child helped you cope with the struggles in your life?

ZELDA: Maybe because I grew up with believing in myself. Really, the struggle during the war, is my life with my husband. He really helped a lot. I knew that I had full strength in his support and his striving for life. He knew he's going to survive. Very positive thinking, and he was a cockeyed optimist if you ever saw one. Ultra. So that helped, I must say that. We did it together, but it was also his strong belief in a better tomorrow. He didn't give up. And also because, as I said, my mother taught us a lot about life and about being strong and striving for better. That, I think, helped a lot.

INT: Positive thoughts.

ZELDA: Very positive. My mother was a very positive person.

INT: Would you describe yourself as an optimist?

ZELDA: No. But my husband definitely was.

INT: Would you describe yourself as a pessimist?

ZELDA: No. I don't think so. I don't think so. No. I'm somewhere in between, if there is such a thing (laughter).

INT: There can be, sure.

ZELDA: The pendulum doesn't swing this way or that way. Somewhere in the 12 o'clock or so. Somewhere in between.

INT: How do you explain the *Shoah*? How did it happen? How did things get so out of hand that the world got to that place?

ZELDA: There were signs of it, but we didn't want to read it. There were definitely signs of it. I found a letter written by my older sister to my aunt here in America, and she writes in it that a lot of clouds are gathering over our heads. So there were signs. Even when we read that...a lot of us couldn't do anything about it, so just flow with it, go with the flow, but those who read the signs well did something about it. They ran away or went away. They did something about it. I don't think it came suddenly. It came suddenly upon us, because we didn't see it, but for those who saw the signs it didn't come suddenly. People often wonder why Poland was the most. First of all, Poland had the most Jews. Also, there were Jews in Poland...no place else, I don't think, had Jews who really stuck to the old way of life more than any other way, more than any other place.

INT: There were more in Poland that did.

ZELDA: Right. I don't think that Hungary...maybe Romania also, but the Polish Jews stuck very much to the old ways, tradition. The old people in Poland didn't speak any Polish. They spoke only Yiddish. Hungarian Jews spoke Hungarian.

INT: Never Yiddish.

ZELDA: And the Polish Jews spoke Yiddish. As a matter of fact, my mother went Shabbos to the synagogue, and if I came in to be with my mother a little bit, these ladies wouldn't let me speak to my mother in Polish. It's a *shonda*, you know. You don't speak in the synagogue, Polish. That kind. That's how it was.

INT: And because of that life, that made Poland more susceptible and more hated?

ZELDA: That's what I think. Maybe because the Jews had such strong ties to Judaism, stronger than any other country, Poland was more hit by it. That book came out a year ago, that book...

INT: Goldhagen?

ZELDA: Goldhagen. Hitler's Executioners. In it he also writes about Poland. But then again, the Germans were also willing executioners. He found willing executioners in every country. He came...also France and also other countries. Poland maybe more.

INT: Do you think it could happen again? Obvious question.

ZELDA: I'm afraid yes.

INT: You think it could happen in the United States?

ZELDA: Maybe not as much in the United States because...though the anti-Semitism is great here in this country. Maybe not here so much because there's so many different nationalities and different ways. Maybe. But I wonder if anybody in America would be willing to keep Jews for 10 months or a year hidden.

INT: You wonder skeptically whether they would?

ZELDA: Yes.

INT: What makes you say that?

ZELDA: Because I don't know who would keep hidden Jews for a year and take their dirt out and feed them and lead a very, very strange life in order to cover up to have 10 people hidden in such horrible circumstances. I wonder. I don't know. I wonder.

INT: Because your image of Americans is...

ZELDA: Somebody asked me what prompted these people to hide Jews. Not the love for Jews, right. What? First of all, it's naïveté.

INT: On the Ukrainians' part?

ZELDA: Yes. They thought it's a day or two or three or four or a week.

INT: And once they were in it, they were in it for the long haul, whether they wanted it or not.

ZELDA: Right. I always say--that's a funny thing--the book that came out While Six Million Died, and Roosevelt didn't do anything about it. Unwillingly and unbeknown to himself, Roosevelt helped us because a lot of these Ukrainians thought that Roosevelt is Jewish. It was a Jewish name to them.

INT: Self-protection.

ZELDA: The second thing they thought was that they're going to be rewarded in America, in the world, because they kept Jews. They were told so, so they believed that. That helped a lot. And also, they got paid for it.

INT: But back to the States, your feeling is that...

ZELDA: I don't know that much of the States. I know only here, the eastern part. I don't know what's going on in the West, in the Midwest. Like that guy who came to Europe, they asked him about America and he said I'm a New Yorker, what do I know about America? That kind. That kind.

INT: So do you feel that they're not naive enough to do such a thing or they're not good enough to do such a thing?

ZELDA: I think that they're not naive. They know what's going on, first of all. And then, I don't feel that now these people do these things, that people can live a double life and keep someone hiding. They're not being motivated maybe. And then again, I hope we don't need.

INT: Amen. How were you greeted as an immigrant?

ZELDA: Here in America? Well, it's funny. I always say that first I was a greener cousiner, then I became the continental cousin (laughter). If that describes it...First of all, I spoke English when I came, so when my cousin's friend came in and she said, "ain't she nice", I said speak to me with the king's English. That's what I said, literally. "That ain't" didn't go well with me. (Laughter) That became a joke of the family, the greener cousiner. I was greeted fine. As a matter of fact, my cousin's husband was so interested in what was going on in a very elegant way, that we were sitting evenings and talking, and they asked questions and he wanted to know more and more and more. It was good for me, because that time I poured out my heart to someone who really wanted to know. He didn't know anything and wanted to know, and that was great for me. I was greeted fine.

INT: It's such an important point that you make, that there was a need on your part to purge, in a way, to retell everything.

ZELDA: Because until such time I was only with people who knew, and you can't compare suffering but then again, some of my friends were in concentration camps, in Auschwitz and so on. But there is no comparison because we had our problems.

INT: But the need, both for you to talk and to know, that someone wants to witness.

ZELDA: Very, very much so. He wanted to know and he was very compassionate about it and understanding, and that was a very good thing.

INT: Did you notice differences in your friends, among survivors, those who held on and didn't have an outlet like that?

ZELDA: I know someone who didn't want to talk about it at all.

INT: And was she able, or he able to move forward, do you think?

ZELDA: Yes. Also, it happens very often in family, two survivors married with different experiences and they had difficult times to tell it to the children because they had different...those who survived in Russia, let's presume, and those who survived in concentration camps or lagers or whatever. They had difficulties and they kept to themselves. They didn't tell the children anything. I had friends who, till the very day, don't talk to the children about it and I think it's definitely wrong. Definitely. I don't like that expression, "I want to save my children from pain." Come on. This is ridiculous.

INT: When did you start talking to your children?

ZELDA: At an early age. Very early age. Very early age. I remember, again in that bungalow colony in the summertime, we would sit down and tell our experiences, different people, different ways. We would get together in one bungalow, 10 of us, five of us, six of us.

INT: With the children there?

ZELDA: And one day we were in my bungalow and I was sure that Mordechai is sound asleep but he wasn't. He must have been at that time nine or 10 years old, because he read already The Diary of Anne Frank. In the morning he said to me, you know Ma, that Helena's story--one of our friends--is much more...means much more to me or something like that, I don't remember, than the diary of Anne Frank. Sure, because Helena was...he could walk with Helena and Helena's children and there was that Helena who lived through...She was 10 years old when she was taken to concentration camps and she survived different camps and all that, and to him, her story was like he touched it. It was reality. Anne Frank was a book, but Helena was reality.

INT: When you told Mordechai about your experiences, do you think you were telling them so that they would know you or so that they would know what the world was like?

ZELDA: You know, it wasn't premeditated. It wasn't like I told them because... I told them because it's part of my life. I remember distinctly--I wonder whether Mordechai remembers it--we had a friend who had a mother and he said Mommy, how can a grownup man have a mother? So naturally he had to know the story. Why does this have a grandmother? Why does this have a cousin? A grownup man has a Mommy? That was to him like... He was shocked. That's how he grew up, and you probably had the same experience.

INT: Yes, I have similar experiences.

ZELDA: So you understand that. If you will ask me what motivated me to tell him the story, or my husband, it was a part of our life, like you tell your children when you went to school or something about your young years or whatever. That's how we told them. I never thought of not telling them, of keeping it away from them, and they grew up with it. Whether they had nightmares or not... I remember Mordechai, telling him the story, that he once stayed up at night and he wanted to see a cold night, how he would survive. Naturally he went back to bed because it's only when you have no place to go that you stay there.

INT: Do you have any global understanding of human nature vis-à-vis the Shoah? People are good, people are bad, people are...

ZELDA: How did Anne Frank say at the end? I still believe in the goodness of people. So do I. So do I. You still find people that are very good at heart and try to help you, and on the other hand, you will still find people who are mean and angry, even among us and even among the survivors, you will find all kinds of people. Some take religion, some became more religious, some became less religious, some don't believe in anything anymore. Whether they would have been like this without the Shoah, could be. I don't know. It's not easy to... Human nature is such that you wouldn't know whether the war really made them like this or they would have been like this without the war. It's hard to say. Naturally it had its impact on everybody, but whether it's completely changed nature, I don't know. Once I was told that I'm trying to see the good part in everybody. Probably I am trying hard to always find something good. My oldest brother was very smart and he left me with a good attitude. He said, don't expect too much and you'll never be surprised or disappointed. That's it. Don't expect or you're disappointed.

INT: I have one more question for you and then I'll let you go. What role has Israel played in your life, if any?

ZELDA: We were talking about going someplace, leaving Europe and going someplace. Naturally, Israel came into the picture but we dismissed it because I had a lot of family here, cousins and all that. I still have my two aunts and my uncle and all their children. So Israel was... But we followed the development of Israel naturally. We were very close. And then the first time we could afford to go to Israel we went, and every year after.

INT: That did become a part of...

ZELDA: That became a very big part of our lives. Going to gymnasium in Poland, you couldn't belong to any Jewish organization.

INT: So there was no Zionist youth group.

ZELDA: My husband did, but not me. I couldn't go to that. If you belonged...it was either school or Jewish organizations. The only one organization you could belong to is the Scotch, but that was a no-no for Jews anyway. Only Polish people belonged. It was for boys and girls separate. No Jewish organizations, so I couldn't belong to any. I was brought up in a Zionist home. My sisters and my brothers very much so. And then as I said, every year we went to Israel, year after year. My husband went for the 25th anniversary. I didn't go. Mordechai was that time in Israel, on the 25th, and my husband went.

INT: You didn't go?

ZELDA: I couldn't go. I was after a hysterectomy. It was too soon for me to go, so my husband went and met with Mordechai there and really celebrated and took pictures. Such an excitement, a tremendous excitement. If he would be alive, we would go the 50th. Right after my husband died, I went also once to Israel but it wasn't the same. I wouldn't go there anymore, not by myself.

INT: Is there anything else that you'd like to add?

ZELDA: I'd like to add that I hope my children grow up in a more peaceful way and they wouldn't have such painful memories. I hope they grow up Jewish. Thank G-d they do. Naturally Mordechai, without any doubt about that. I hope I was a good mother for them, my husband and I, that we left some good legacies to them.

INT: Thank you.

(END OF INTERVIEW)