

INTERVIEW WITH RITA RAPPAPORT

JANUARY 6, 1992

TRANSCENDING TRAUMA PROJECT
Council for Relationships
4025 Chestnut Street
Philadelphia, PA 19104

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INTERVIEWER: Interview with Rita Rappaport, a child survivor, January 6, 1992. I'm going to take down some basic information first. Address I know is Ballyheather. And what's the street name again?

RITA RAPPAPORT: Waldron Park Drive.

INT: I won't be writing through most of it. Just for this part, okay?

RITA: Haverford, 19041.

INT: And your phone number?

RITA: 896-5933.

INT: Okay. And your age?

RITA: 54.

INT: Date of birth?

RITA: 5/27/37.

INT: And place of birth?

RITA: Vienna, Austria.

INT: Which was where you were living before the war?

RITA: Yes.

INT: What I'm going to start with are the backgrounds of your parents, their families, and go through their lives, and then through yours. Okay? So let's start with your father, and what do you know of where he was from, and what his family was like, and his parents, the number of children, their economic background. Do you know much about him?

RITA: Somewhat. My father was an only child. He was a barber. He had a shop in Vienna, Austria. According to what I've been told, connecting to the barber shop was a beauty salon for women. My mother, even though she was a legal secretary, helped him out in the beauty salon whenever she could. I don't know much about his grandparents.

INT: His parents.

RITA: His grandparents, I don't know too much about. I know that she, or his mother was very, very protective of him, and when he wanted to get married, I guess all mothers sometimes feel like that, no one was ever good enough, you know, for him. But they finally did get married.

My mother, I believe, is one of four children; there was a brother and two sisters. One brother escaped to England. She never saw him again. He lives in Essex.

INT: Do you know why?

RITA: Pardon?

INT: Do you know why she never saw him again?

RITA: She never saw him again because once she got to America I think she was more frightened to get on a plane. Also she worked. She didn't want to take an infant with her. When it was time that she could go, she was too frightened to go. She would hear from him all the time. He never married. When I got married, we sent a telegram ahead, and I thought I would meet my uncle who had, since I remember as a little girl, would always send me a bottle of Chanel perfume every year. But somehow he was connected with a lot of politics in England, and when I got there on my honeymoon, the telegram, from what I understand, was still under his door, unopened. He was out of town. So I never got to meet him myself. Since then he died.

Her sister had gotten married after my mother and I came to America, and they stayed there. They all perished together. Her mother, her father, her sisters, my father and my father's mother and his father. I'm sure there were many other aunts and uncles and cousins that were there that I know very little about. I think mainly because they were only really married three years before we came to America. In '39. I think he knew from what I can gather, he must have known something when we got on the ship -- which was the Aquitania, which I didn't know until much later was the last ship to leave those shores -- that something was brewing, because he gave her things to take back, or with her on the ship to come to America, and the kind of things he gave her, were not the kind of things you give to someone if you feel you're going to see them again. As it happened, they never saw each other again. They wrote to each other until war broke out, and then everything after that was censored that came through, as far as the letters were concerned, or postcards.

I think it was a dramatic experience for her, because I remember once we got to America, she didn't know the language, and the only place she could work, even though she was a legal secretary in Vienna, because of the language barrier, there was only one place that she could go, and that was working in a factory. Working in a factory meant that they had to start at 7:00, 7:30 in the morning, so I was put into a Red Feather organization, which I believe today is still operating, but it's operating under the name of Paley.

INT: What do you mean, "Red Feather"?

RITA: Red Feather, it was a Jewish organization, I only remember that it said Federation and there was a red feather going through their emblem, and they had pins like that, too: whenever from the nursery we would go anywhere, we had the pins on us. I still remember the first, well, today I guess you would call her headmistress, her name was Mrs. Freebon, and I was the only child that was there very, very early in the morning. The nursery was set up originally, I believe, for working mothers, as we have today. But these were working mothers, and most of the, well I would say the majority of the children did not have fathers. But I had this little black man that would pick me up at 6:00 in the morning -- snow, sleet, rain, it didn't matter -- and he would walk me to the Red Feather organization house, which was about three, three and a half blocks away. And I would have breakfast all by myself. And I wasn't allowed to leave anything. I had to finish my milk. Of course we had a red charm that went down into the milk, and if you finished all the milk you got the red charm.

And the other children arrived, I'd say, about 8:30, 9:00. We played, we had a beautiful park across the street. The teachers, from what I can remember, were wonderful. I don't ever remember feeling lonely there. I had lots of friends. We had nap time, we had lunchtime. Sometimes I remember vaguely I had dinner there by myself because the hours that my mother worked were different.

INT: Was that "by myself time" -- the breakfast time and dinner time -- hard for you?

RITA: It was hard because I didn't understand why I was here. Why I was there. Later on, they tried to explain to me that it was an honor that I should be there all by myself and all these teachers were around me. That I had all the attention at that time, and I grabbed at it. I think it was very hard because the other children had time to spend with family. Where I did not have family. I saw my mother maybe five minutes in the morning, and by the time I got home -- and again this little black man used to take me home -- if it was early enough, there was dinner, and then of course bed right away. I remember her having migraine headaches as far back as I can remember. And she used to walk around with an ice bag on her head and a towel around her head, and I would think, all these pictures that I drew and saw in the nursery with feathers from Indians, all she needed was this feather. And she had to stay in a dark room. So pretty much, I really didn't know her. I knew her, but I didn't know her. She gave me as much of her time, and I knew that she loved me and I loved her.

There were a lot of times in there that very well-meaning friends now I would presume, would tell her that she could not, or wouldn't be able to raise me. That maybe it would be better if I went. I don't even know if there was adoption at that time. I don't even know if there was the word "foster homes." I don't even know. But it was the kind of thing maybe you should give her to someone else to raise for a while, and she would never do that. This was her hold in life. She didn't have anything except me and the letters. So I remember later on thinking if I ever had children of my own, no matter what I would be doing, I would be home with them, for them.

Homework was a very big thing for her, when I did it. She always seemed to smack me on my left hand with a ruler. I wasn't allowed to make mistakes. She made sure she never hit me on

my right hand because I could work with that hand. But I realized later on that when I learned, she learned, and that's how she learned the language.

INT: Let me stop you here and go back again. To the time before you got here. And because it's an important backdrop to what came after and what was her heritage, or what she lost, you know, and...So you said, I know your father had a shop, and when they were married she would help him some. And you said he was an only child, and his mother was very protective of him. Do you know anything about his parents who were in Vienna? And do you know anything about their religious affiliation, or their economic situation? Or the kinds of people...

RITA: They were not rich, but they were not poor.

INT: What kind of work did your grandfather do to support your father when he was growing up?

RITA: I don't know that. I wish I did. If I probably went back in the records I could find it. But somehow I think that she was also, his mother was a very dominating woman, because the stories later on came out with, on their honeymoon, she called my father and said she was very sick and she wanted him to come home. So they cut their honeymoon short and they came home. They lived in the same house, from what I understand. The shop was downstairs. The beauty salon and barber shop was downstairs from...

INT: His parents' home.

RITA: And they lived there with them. With her, or together.

INT: So perhaps that was your grandfather's business as well?

RITA: I don't ever remember them talking about him working in that shop. I know that I, from what I hear, I was always in the shop, in a playpen. They watched me, I never had baby sitters. I was the only grandchild, so I had plenty of people that could watch me, but I was right there. And like every other European child at that time, I was fat, you can't believe that, but I was fat with rosy cheeks and very curly blonde hair.

INT: Do you have pictures?

RITA: Yeah. I was just the little pride and joy.

INT: Were your grandparents involved religiously, do you know?

RITA: They were very religious in their Jewish heritage. My father went to synagogue ritually. My mother, I would say they were, well, back then it was only Orthodox, with the tefillin and the tallises, and their own prayer books. And they were very, very religious at the time.

INT: So your mother's family's also from Vienna?

RITA: Yes. They were there.

INT: And they were also involved with a synagogue.

RITA: I think she was born in Russia, and then she migrated. And they were around.

INT: So you don't know much about your father's father.

RITA: No.

INT: Your grandmother was the dominating force.

RITA: That's why I heard about her all the time. I could probably find out. There is someone around that I could ask.

INT: Who's around?

RITA: They had, my mother had friends that she knew in Austria that came to America before we did, and they live in Wooten Beach, Florida. He recently passed away, but she is still alive. And it seems, she's like my last link. She was at the wedding. She remembers my mother pregnant, so I promised her this year I would see her. And as I haven't gotten there yet.

INT: So your mother stayed in touch with her?

RITA: Oh, yes.

INT: And they saw each other?

RITA: Constantly here.

INT: So they were in Philadelphia already.

RITA: They had been in Philadelphia. They lived in New York most of their lives, and they retired and went into Florida.

INT: So your mother stayed in touch with them in New York. That she could handle in terms of visiting and calls.

RITA: Yes. I used to go with her. So I used to call her my Aunt Rose.

INT: Did your mother relate to them like family, since they were the only ones left?

RITA: Yeah. I would say so. There was, I only have one cousin here. Her mother and father sent the affidavits for the three of us to come. But in '39 a quota was already closed, and my

mother and I were the only ones that could get onto that ship. And of course at that time some people felt that this was it, and other people felt that there'll be another ship, another time. But those quotas never opened again. And from what I hear, some other children on the ship, myself included, were the only ones that were not seasick on that trip. So the only thing my mother used to talk about that trip was I was always sick. But she felt better when she saw the Statue of Liberty coming into New York like that.

INT: That was very brave of her, of them, to separate at that time. Did she talk about what it took to make that decision?

RITA: She didn't want to go without him, without her husband, or my father. But I think it came, the strength came from getting me out. The fear. It was almost like an unspoken type of fear, that if you don't go now, you're not going to go at all. And then again it was: "Don't worry about it. Go. I'll get there." Because actually, even though Hitler was already into Austria, there was no war. It was a kind of takeover. Nobody was wearing Jewish stars, nobody was coming after anybody. It was just a very quiet undercurrent, and a lot of people, I would say from the studies and from what I hear, a lot of people believed what they heard, or they wanted to believe it.

INT: That everything would be okay.

RITA: That everything would be okay. That everything that this maniac said was going to be just fine. And there were some that didn't believe, that were frightened. And I think the people that were frightened got as many people out as they could, as quickly as possible. We got out in '39, but yet I know people that went to America five or six years before I even got here, and I was surprised when I heard that. My question at the time.

Well, we had the affidavits, we came. Some thought they were coming for a visit, and they would return. But they couldn't return either. I think it took a lot of guts. I can only say guts, because that's the way I look at the whole situation now. If anything today goes wrong in my life, I look back at her, and I say, this woman not only had guts, but she survived it all. And if she can do it, what are my problems compared to that? Or what she went through?

INT: What else do you know of her background? Also from Vienna?

RITA: She loved to dance.

INT: What did she tell you about her parents and her life?

RITA: Very different from parents here. It was a very strict upbringing. She said that her father would only have to look at her, or her brothers and sisters, and they would go under the table. There was no such thing as raising your hand. She told funny stories about one day she saw a little goat, or a little lamb, and she brought it home and tried to hide it. It didn't hide too well, and her father just said, "This can't stay here." And they cried. All he had to do was say no, and it went. Together she said that the family, the children would try anything together, but alone

they were afraid. It was a complete respect. They didn't have to, mothers and fathers did not have to say things twice. It was said once, and that was it.

INT: And her father made the decisions, it sounds like.

RITA: The fathers made the decisions. Mothers cooked. Mothers made clothes, mothers did everything. But it was the father's decision.

INT: What kind of work did her father do? Your grandfather.

RITA: Good question. I draw a blank. And I know that she's talked about it. And I sometimes wonder, because in the telegrams that I've gotten, there is nothing about her father or her mother, so it sort of makes me feel that maybe they weren't alive when I got here. That's another thing I can find out in Florida.

INT: So by the time your mother got on the boat, perhaps her parents had passed away?

RITA: Probably. Because I don't have any letters from her parents. I have it from her brother and her sister. My father. I don't have any letters from her mother and father. As a matter of fact there are no letters from my father's mother, either, but that's not unusual. He talks about in his letters, the business is going all right, meaning probably the business he kept with the barber shop. And...

INT: And he doesn't mention her parents.

RITA: No. He does mention her sister, that they went over to see them after they were married. They're doing fine. It's sort of reading between the lines with the letters, which I have.

INT: Did the letters try to be reassuring: "Don't worry, I'll be joining you," or...

RITA: No. No. It was never a statement of "I will." It was always "Hopefully, we will." And a lot of it, you could just look at them and see they were censored out. They had to be very careful of what they wrote. You could see from the day it was mailed how long it took for it to get where it was going.

INT: Because it was already under Nazi rule, right?

RITA: And war still hadn't broken out yet. But they mentioned nothing about Jews being rounded up. But you knew, you heard, and it was just a matter of time. But she kept working, and I kept...

INT: Let's go back. So your parents were involved with the synagogue, Orthodox, and probably comfortable, you would assume, your mother's life growing up, and her four children, and she was the second of the four?

RITA: She was about the third, I think, because she had one brother that was younger, that was still there. The older brother was the one that escaped. And then her sister was younger than she was. So she was the second. Right.

INT: What else did she tell you? What else are the stories of that time? She loved to dance. Did she dance? Were there parties? What did she tell you?

RITA: The dancing, well, the Viennese waltz, going to the opera houses and going to all the waltzes. She loved to dance. And this was her life. She had a lot of friends that they did nothing but go out, and when they could go to the operas and go to the Viennese waltzes, and everyone was all dressed up, and it was a time of happiness. Every Friday night...

INT: Was it separate for the Jewish community, or they would mingle with...

RITA: Yes. No, they wouldn't mingle. Completely Jewish. But at the opera houses it was a mingling, because they were the big ones. And they tried to get there once or twice a month, to go to these big Viennese waltzes, where the entire orchestra was of fifty, sixty people there. A lot...

INT: Did she go to a Jewish school?

RITA: There was all Jewish children. A lot of boating. On the water, in the water, or whatever. Picnics. And it was always with family, even though it was together with friends. The family was always together. When I was born, it was together, no matter what. She came. I just came along like a little piece of baggage. I think it was just a happy kind of life. They worked, they ate well, and of course in those days everything was made by scratch. You went from stall to stall to buy what you wanted to. The men congregated. I don't know if they...Oh, horse racing. That's what he loved to do. My father loved to go to the horse races. And I remember now, telling me that. And me, who can't even get on a horse. But I can dance. (laughter)

There was a lot of talent within the family. If this one couldn't dance, they could draw. If they couldn't draw, they could horseback ride. There was always something going on. Friday nights, ritually, it was a ritual to sit down. You had your matzo soup, and you had your matzo balls, and you had your chicken, and it was a whole ceremony. Came Passover, any religious holidays, it was a very big deal. It was a big synagogue. And they congregated a lot within the neighborhood. And everybody sort of helped everybody else. It was just a very happy time. Everyone was just happy with everyone else. And of course, never foreseeing that anything could break anything like that up.

INT: So she reported fond memories.

RITA: Oh, yeah.

INT: Of life at home, and good memories of her parents and...

RITA: Not of her mother-in-law, but...The mother-in-law was always there, but I don't think that's changed today. You just try and acclimate to situations. And evidently she did a pretty good job. She was short, but I always used to say, "You weren't so short, Mom." I used to look at her wedding pictures. She said, "No, I stood on a box." I said, "Oh, I see."

INT: Did she talk about any problems in life before the war?

RITA: I think the only problem that she had was her mother-in-law, who wanted to really not only rule my father, but her, and then of course when I came along. But I guess every mother with her grandchild wants to. But, as far as problems, no. I think that if she had any problems what happened later on in life overshadowed any kind of problem.

INT: How would she have described herself growing up? What kind of person was she?

RITA: Outgoing, but always a lady. Always a lady. She tried to raise me that way. Did a pretty good job. Respect. Very respectful.

INT: You said she was frightened. To fly, and things like that.

RITA: Here, when she got here.

INT: Did she say she was frightened as a child, or...

RITA: No. First of all, I don't think anyone in those days really flew.

INT: No, but you could have a kid, some kids are just more frightened and shy.

RITA: No, she was just afraid to fly here. I know that she was a tremendous swimmer, over there, and yet, put her in a pool here, and she can't swim. So things just happened. It's just a block. It's a mental block, I think. And because she couldn't swim, and she was frightened of it, I never learned how to swim. So it was a continuation of that.

INT: When she would tell you the stories of the dances and the opera and the boating...

RITA: She would cry.

INT: So it was with sadness.

RITA: Oh, absolutely. She, I don't think there was a time that she would, well, of course later on there was a television, and she would hear the orchestras from the Academy. And we used to go a lot. And it was a happy occasion until halfway through and then she would just start to cry, because she remembered. And I didn't know whether that was good or that was bad. Because here she loved to listen to all this music. Everything was very classical. I don't ever remember her talking about upbeat kind of music.

(END TAPE ONE, SIDE ONE)

(TAPE ONE, SIDE TWO)

RITA: We used to get tickets for the Academy, and of course the operas, besides just going to Viennese waltzes and dances. They went to tremendous trouble to get tickets all the time to go to these operas. And it wasn't until I was older, when I used to take her, we used to go together. She knew all about these operas, and I would say, "I don't understand one word." And she said, "It's all right, it's all right." Because I don't think any of the operas were in German, I mean, they were all in Italian. Some of them were. But when it reached the United States, they were never in English. So I said, "Well, thank God I understand German. I can understand what's going on."

INT: Was that your home language? German?

RITA: Yeah.

INT: When you were young?

RITA: She didn't know any English when she came here, so she learned when I learned. I used to say to her, "Don't talk German to me." Because I was in the nursery, and everybody was looking, "What is she talking?" So it was an embarrassing situation, because I was trying so hard to learn English, to understand, and of course, as a child it's so much easier to pick a new language up than when you're older. But sometimes, she understood every word, but to get it out...so of course the English, the German, and the Jewish all came together.

INT: So she spoke Yiddish also.

RITA: Yes. From here.

INT: Was that from her childhood?

RITA: No. It was German, but I think she learned a lot of Jewish here when she got to America.

INT: From her friendships?

RITA: And yet, I remember she still used to get the paper delivered, I think it was called the Aufbau at that time, or whatever it was, and it was written all in Hebrew. And she could read that. And then there was a German paper also that she used to receive in the mail. Because at that time, she just couldn't read.

INT: So it was Hebrew or Yiddish?

RITA: Well, Hebrew. But then, she could write Hebrew, but not the dialect in Jewish as we would see it today. But yet if they, if she would receive letters, they were written in German. Later on she was able to decipher some words in Yiddish, and they were written. I could never do that. I did it while I was in Hebrew School, but I could still probably today pick up a few words in German, mostly because any other language, especially German, is spelt phonetically, so it's just sounded out.

INT: Because she, you said, was a legal secretary. So she was educated to what level in Europe?

RITA: She...

INT: So that was post high school.

RITA: Yeah, she finished high school, and I don't know whether their education was further along than ours was, but she went right into a law office and became a secretary and just learned on the job. And I guess then, for me, she always wanted me to have a white blouse on and a black skirt to go to work. A white collar worker. And I guess that's what she did, and it was a very, very respectful job. I just didn't want to do that all the time. But there were times when I, you would catch her and she would just cry. I think, for the life that she left behind, and what could have been. And sometimes I wondered if she was really happy that she survived.

INT: How do you know that? Did she say that out loud?

RITA: There were times when she was older where she would say, "I don't know why G-d let me live." And it sort of made me feel she would have, she wanted to be with him, and then again, she would say, "But then you would have no life." So again, it was sometimes, it made me feel guilty. It was like: Did she stay alive and want to stay alive because of me? And then I sort of went around a circle with it and thought to myself: No. Because when she got on that boat she had no idea, none, that she would never see anyone again." So those thoughts came later on.

She never dated. Not even after she knew my father was dead. It was like a deadness in her.
[break in tape]

INT: You were talking about not dating.

RITA: She didn't, she never ever was interested in dating anyone else. I mean, this was her, she felt that her lot in life was to raise her child. And of course later on, if somebody did want to date her, I can't remember who, she used to tell me later: "I could never date anyone, because you used to say to me, "I don't want another Daddy." I don't know why I said that. I never knew my first father. But I think it hurt her when I was young, when I would come home from the nursery and say to her, "Why don't I have a Daddy? Everybody wants to know why I don't have a Daddy. Do I or don't I?" Because as you grow older, I truthfully to this day can't remember my father holding me. Maybe under hypnosis it would come back.

INT: You were young.

RITA: And yet there were dreams, and...

INT: You had dreams?

RITA: I had dreams. I was in a cage, and this was in a speech too, and my mother, and at the beginning she never liked to talk about it. But I had dreams of being in a cage and people banging, and it would get worse as I would get older.

INT: Tell me more about it. They were recurring dreams?

RITA: Yeah. They were recurring all the time. It was as if, first of all, when war broke out, we had air raid drills, and we didn't have venetian blinds or anything. We had shades. And they had the air raid wardens on the outside, and there was maybe, there were flashlights outside. All the lights went out. But there was some flickering lights that came into the bedroom. And sometimes it was a dream, and sometimes it was a real, I was up, thinking about the dream, because we had today, they're expensive, brass bedding with poles. When I had them, they were iron. And the reflection on the wall, it looked like prison gates, and it reminded me of the dream, I could not get out of this cage. And I would, in the dream I would hear this banging, constantly, and then I would be screaming. And then I would wake up, and I just couldn't imagine. And I would ask my mother, and she could not even come close to explaining what it was.

And then, as I got older and read up on things, and as things became clearer, it was me as a child in a playpen. And the banging I heard were the Nazi boots coming into my father's shop. And they pulled all of the wiring out of the walls. He was not allowed to have the shop anymore. And if he was, it was just to accommodate who they told him to accommodate. The woman's shop they couldn't accommodate at all. So that took care of the bar part of it. It was the playpen that I was in. Of course wooden, or however they had playpens, and of course those big boots. And I was so little. I mean, all I heard was the noise. But it was a frightening kind of thing that stayed with me. And I often think, well, I guess you really can go back and have dreams when you're two years old and you don't even realize it.

There was a lot of whistling sounding, I guess they were the trucks that were pulling up all the time. A lot of tremendous amount of crying and running, and my mother did explain that. She said it was every time you had these tanks, they weren't even tanks, they were big trucks that would come in, and everybody would run to their homes, and stay inside, pull all the shutters. And there were loudspeakers all the time. And not music. Telling people what to do. That's what she did say.

INT: How long did these go on in your life? These nightmares?

RITA: I was almost a teenager. I was almost a teenager. They didn't come as often, but every once in a while. But I sort of understood what it was by then. So it wasn't as frightening, but if it was a dream, it sort of started the same way, but things kept adding to it with what my life was

at the time I was having it. And then it got to a point where, "I don't understand this dream." I mean, all of a sudden I was seeing a nice handsome boy coming into this dream that I just met maybe three days ago, what is he doing? And then when I saw him I said, "You're bad because you're in my bad dream." But they finally, you know, subsided, and I think once I really understood what it was, I had to come to terms with the idea that I really had the dream, and I had to come to terms with I was so young that I remembered that part of it.

My mother really never talked too much, I don't think she knew too much. She only knew the heartache of the people that she really now, I know, probably thought she would never see again. Even...

INT: How did she find out about your father's death and her brother and sister, and the other...

RITA: At that time, I think Federation had a thing called the HIAS that were tracking, and one day -- and I remember because we lived in a place called Strawberry Mansion -- and I was in the third floor, we lived in two rooms. And I was skipping down to the first level, and there was a mailman was there, and he said, "I have a telegram for your mother." And I said, "Well, she's working." I don't remember what I said, but I said, "I'll hold it for her." And I didn't open it. And when she came home I gave it to her, and that's how she found out. They listed my father first, and then her sister, her sister's husband, and it said that, well, they all read the same, it said, "First they went to Theresienstadt, and then into Auschwitz, and death was by gas."

And I don't know, after she died and I found all these papers, it was very difficult for me to translate them, because now it wasn't just "liebe Ida", it was a lot of legal words in there. So I didn't know whether I wanted to know what was in them or not. I had them transcribed. I haven't looked at them since the first time I had them transcribed. And it's almost nine years in February. And there was a discrepancy in there, where they mention my father and somehow in one of the legal papers it says that he survived. And he died from the elements on a train leaving Auschwitz, on the same train I believe the Elie Wiesel, or somebody, one of these other men with the books...

INT: It was on a train, or a march?

RITA: It was a train that came in, and they put all of the survivors on a train, and it was very cold, and they said he died from the weather, or the hazardous conditions there. And to this day, I haven't followed it up. I mean, all my life this telegram was telling me one thing, and now, all these years later, it's telling me something else. They contradict each other. There are other documents that tell exactly, not to the day, but approximately when he went into a gas chamber. I don't have anything on her cousins, or anything else. But I do have of her sister and her brother. That I have.

INT: And so that must have been when you were seven or eight?

RITA: Well, it was after the war ended.

INT: So it was after '45, but it must have taken some time...

RITA: It took a lot of time, I would say a good four to five years after that. I have the telegram. I can always look it up.

INT: So you were...

RITA: It's a tracking.

INT: You were ten or eleven years old before she found out for sure...

RITA: For sure. And it was, it was just not a slight migraine headache that week. I remember for weeks she did not go to work. I was the oldest one, by the way, that stayed with Paley, or the Red Feather. I started school there, elementary school. This was uppermost. I had to go to school. And I really wanted to mourn or cry with her, because by then I knew that I did have a father, but he was just so far away, and he was in this war, that I now was hearing about, reading about, listening to the radio, and when President Roosevelt came on, it was like everybody just stopped, the whole world stopped. Today they wouldn't stop so fast. It was, you just hung on every word. And she wouldn't let me mourn with her.

INT: How did that happen? She read you the telegram?

RITA: Yeah. Well, actually she read the telegram and did not read it to me. I picked it up and I read it. I did not understand it. Because it was in German. It was giving me a name of Theresienstadt that I couldn't even pronounce, and Auschwitz, I didn't even know what it was. And it took, I think, a long time until it came out in the papers on what had happened over there and six million Jews and I'm realizing that hey, this is my family. This is my father.

INT: So it sounds like you had to put it together yourself.

RITA: I did.

INT: She didn't sit down and...So she went into mourning in a way that was different than her sadness before. So she must have suspected since he didn't get in touch with her after 1945...

RITA: I think she wondered. A lot of people, well, it was the kind of thing that she, we lived in a neighborhood where there were other families in the same predicament. There were husbands and wives together, but there were brothers or sister that were not together. And she saw that some of them did come back, numbers and all. She also, she kept her hope up, that one of them would have survived, because they were young enough. The old ones they didn't keep. She felt because he was a hairdresser they would keep him. But she went into mourning and I don't really think she ever came out. To the day she died. She had happy moments in her life, but I don't think she ever fully recovered.

INT: Do you remember weeks when she was not at work and at home, sort of hiding?

RITA: For the first, I would say after the telegram, if I can remember, she didn't go to work. We're talking about, this is no migraine headache. I mean, we had a, in those days you didn't go to the doctors. The doctors came to you. It's house calls that we would love to have today. The doctors were across the street. And they would come and they would give her a shot. And she would be in the dark for weeks at a time. When I look back and I think to myself, I really got up and went with this little black man. I mean, I did that. I went to the nursery, I went to school. And for the first time I knew that I didn't have a daddy. All this time I knew I had one, he wasn't there. It was, I think if I look back into my first year of school, maybe, maybe one other person, I'm not even sure, was in the same category as I was. I only remember I was the only one that didn't have a father, other than friends that I had whose mothers divorced, and I didn't even know what that word meant then. But they still had another father, who they called a stepfather. And now I went to school knowing full well that I didn't have a daddy. I just didn't have one. He was killed. How he was killed, at that time I didn't even realize.

INT: That time you're talking about around ten, eleven.

RITA: Yeah. It was also a bad time for me because a lot of kids are, they can be very vicious. I know that now, through my own children. They would come up with, "Well, you really never had one anyway. You just said that." And now I look back and say, "I probably would have said the same thing." What do they know? They knew nothing. They knew probably less than I did. You heard a lot of talk in the neighborhood, and you know, children, they grasp, and it frightens them. And of course the waiting was just, people just waited. They waited for the mailman every single day. Telegrams came by mail. It just didn't come with a man with a little bicycle that came along. And my mother still continued to work.

INT: So she went back to work?

RITA: She went back to work. The only time I ever saw where she worked was at Christmas. And she would take me. Because I didn't have school. And she worked in a factory, it was union then, and all her factory workers would chip in money, and every year I got a doll. And I only got the doll if I was able to sing White Christmas. And I didn't know what that was. I just felt it was just another song. So I would sing. At that time, she was very proud of my singing. And she was telling me I got this from her sister, or some aunt, or, that kind of talent. So I would sing for them. And later on, I think to myself, "Why do I sing this White Christmas?" I did not know that there were other people in the world that were not Jewish. We lived in a completely Jewish neighborhood.

INT: But you went to public school. With other Jewish kids.

RITA: I went to public school with all the Jewish children. We had black children by the time I reached junior high school, and they were wearing crosses, and I had to ask. I thought, oh, they just believe in this and we believe in that. Okay. Fine. It took me, when I think about it, I was maybe in my twenties before I realized that there was something else besides somebody being

Catholic or Protestant. I mean, a person wore a cross, that was it. It just took such a long time, sometimes I said, "Was I that stupid?" I didn't understand this.

INT: Well, it sounds like your mother didn't sit you down and explain things to you.

RITA: No. It was very difficult for her to talk about it. I think that when she started to say anything, it was more an answer to a question that I had. I had to do a lot on my own. When we moved from one place to another...

INT: From where to where?

RITA: We went from Strawberry Mansion, where that was the first place that we lived, and we moved to West Oak Lane. And she was uncontrollable at the time. Constantly having crying spells and within a month's time, the doctors said, "Well, she's just having a nervous breakdown." And they put her into a hospital.

INT: How old were you?

RITA: I had graduated high school and I was, I wanted to go to college for dress designing. Well, the money wasn't there. So I remember working for Drexel Institute of Technology in the hydraulics department and trying to go to college at the same time. It didn't work, because my mother was so sick. But...

INT: So you were about nineteen?

RITA: I was about eighteen, nineteen years old then.

INT: And you moved from Strawberry Mansion to West Oak Lane. Why did you move?

RITA: Well, I was like a white goddess by the time I left there. The neighborhood was getting completely shot. The doctors were all out. So my mother and I moved.

INT: So did you then arrange for the move, or she was...

RITA: No, we went to see an apartment...actually it was a private home that was converted into two apartments.

INT: You did it together.

RITA: We did it together.

INT: But she was in bad shape at the time.

RITA: She was in very bad shape right after the move. And they took her to the hospital, and in a way I thought I was very lucky, because I was only getting paid once a month from the college,

so I was able to have these envelopes set up for rent and for this, and for food. And I was by myself.

INT: For how long?

RITA: Over two months. I was allowed to see her once a week. She didn't know who I was. [break in tape] The doctors at that time explained that she had a nervous breakdown, and I just asked them to just explain what this whole thing was in kindergarten language and they tried to explain to me that finally, number one, the move broke her security. And all these things that she kept hiding inside of her, she blocked them behind a door, and all the good things she thought about. And what they were trying to do was open up this door and let her see what all these bad thoughts were so she could handle them. I don't know if they would treat her today. I don't know if I would let the treatment go on today. I didn't know enough. But they gave her shock treatments. And I watched one. I will never watch one again. She did not know who I was, and I think that was the scariest part of all. And I thought, "She'll never come out of this."

INT: You mean after the shock treatment?

RITA: Yeah. It was just a shock to me because no matter whatever happened in my life, or in her life since I was a little girl, I knew that she would never let anything happen to me. It was like going to New York to visit friends, and we would go on, what do they call it, BMTs, RITs, subways, sometimes she would get lost. But as long as she held my hand, I knew I was okay. I knew that. So I thought, "Nothing can happen to her, because if something happens to her, I don't know where I'll be. I don't know what I'll do." I didn't even realize I had my own strength, that she put that survival kind of thing inside of me.

By then when she got better she was supposed to continue with psychiatric help, or have a psychologist or psychiatrist. She never did. She was wonderful the first couple of months she was home. I mean, it was like dealing with a child. And I was very careful. I already had stopped working at Drexel Institute. I knew that I couldn't do that anymore.

INT: Because it was too much time away from the house?

RITA: It was just too much time, not only away from the house, but I couldn't go to college and the job at the same time. It was just too much for me. I knew I couldn't handle it. Some people are scholars all their life. I'm not.

INT: Because of you, or because of you and her? Was there something in the care she needed, that...

RITA: No, she was fine.

INT: She went back to work?

RITA: No, she went back to work part-time. But I knew that I would also have to work, because there was rent to be paid, things to be paid. I knew that. Even though the union took care of a lot of things for her, I knew I would have to go to work. So I did the only thing, it was the summer time, and I just took a job very close by in Germantown as a dance teacher. And for the first time, she didn't like that.

INT: What do you mean, "For the first time"? The first time in your life you did something she didn't like?

RITA: I did something she didn't like as far as a job is concerned. I was now out of the white blouse and I said, "But I'm okay, I'm fine." And that's not a respectable job. And it's funny, because to the day she died, she never saw me dance professionally, ever. She couldn't bring herself to do that. And yet the money was made there. She was very jealous of the owner, who had no children, and she sort of said to my mother, "I don't ever want you to worry about her. She's going to be fine. I will watch her." She didn't like that. We were fine.

INT: Did you feel at that time, or did you feel at any time before that, that you were taking care of her, also? That yes, she was your mother taking care of you, but that you were...

RITA: Yes, but I could never let her know that.

INT: Throughout your life.

RITA: Yes.

INT: How did that work? Could you describe that to me?

RITA: If I would bring home a paycheck, the entire paycheck went to her, and I'd say, "Look, Mom, you just hold this, because if I have it, I'll just spend it," which I knew I wouldn't have anyway. So I would have enough money for the week. I went out, I bought a car. A brand new car. And I put it, I bought a car and I bought a stereo, I remember. And I put it on a monthly payment, and she got crazy and in German she started screaming at me, "As long as I'm alive, we're not paying these banks!" Instead of having what was then three years to pay it off, she got rid of it like within six months. And, "Don't ever do this again," but, she didn't drive, so now I drove to the market, to the laundry, I mean, we didn't have washers and dryers then. She would listen to her music. We didn't have a phone or television until much later. It's amazing how I remember my first phone number, and nothing else.

INT: How old were you?

RITA: I was eighteen, nineteen.

INT: When you got your first phone?

RITA: I think my first phone.

(END TAPE ONE, SIDE TWO)

(TAPE TWO, SIDE ONE)

RITA: ... Bride's birthday party, with all her friends. I'm glad I did that for her. I had a big shiva for her funeral, which was very, very nice. But then, it gets...

INT: I mean...

RITA: Peace, but it was very tough for me. I mean, I knew she was sick, but she was here. I took her to the hospital. And where she was, every year they would take them in for blood tests, for this, and one of the nurses called me and said, "She has some walking pneumonia," which is not unusual for her. And then on a snowy night, it was the second night, I remember, of The Winds of War. And it was icy as could be out there, and I had a feeling, that they called me and said, "Your mother took a turn for the worse." And I saw her, no tubes, nothing. And she was dead by the time I got there. So I think she was dead when they called me. They just didn't want to say anything.

INT: So how did...

RITA: She just had, I was, I went into shock. I think now I know why people bury people in the Jewish religion the next day, because they wind you up like a little soldier and whatever they tell you to do, you do. You have no time to think. And...

INT: And considering you were so close...

RITA: It was, I think it hit me when I came home after her funeral. I was the only one sitting shiva. Nobody else. I was it. And I think, my blood line, done. And I was okay for about a week, and then it started to set in, and then I was a mess for about the next month or whatever it was. The kids were very good with me. They would see to it that every time they came from school they came over to me and stayed with me, held me up more than anything else. It was twelve feet of snow out there, so I only had one night when all these people would be coming. But it was a loss, I don't think I'll ever get over that particular loss. I know the children, no matter what, they went to her grave and on her marker is my father's name. Because there is no marker. Just "Wife of," and I have his name down there. But we go in the spring time, we don't go on the day that she died. Mother's Day, if we can. But usually a day or two before. I never like to subject the children to that, because they have a mother, too, so why make it a sad day for everyone on that day? But I would say she was the only grandmother they really knew and remembered. They remembered my husband's mother a little. My daughter does. But she was Memom to them, and they remember. But I think the most difficult part was telling them, because they just talked to her, and to try to explain death, and how, and it's hard.

INT: How did you deal -- I have to go back the next time you talk about teenage years and dating and all of that -- but how did you deal with the loss of the sense of security? You know,

"If my mom's holding my hand, I'm always safe." And that stays with you. Even with a husband and kids.

RITA: True.

INT: Was that part of coping with losing her? Or that changed for you already?

RITA: It had changed a little. But it wasn't so much that she was holding my hand. I was holding hers by then, and as I said, I tried not to make her feel that I was. But I was. And it's just not easy. I mean, I don't think anybody that's lost a parent. I tried hard, I didn't take one picture of her down. I kept it up. Because I knew if I took it down I'd never put it up again. But it was, I think any child that's lost a parent feels that. But I guess for me, for so many years, and what the woman went through, I have to sort of turn all the tears into smiles, and remember that no matter what, she did it all for me. She taught me how to survive anything, whether I knew it or not. And it only comes to a head when something drastic happens in my life, and I think: "I'm never going to live through this." And I do. And I do. And I look back to her and I say, "Thank you."

INT: Thank you for...

RITA: For not letting me fall apart. For making me understand this is what's happening today, and this is the way I have to handle it. If I have to make this decision, I'm going to make it.

INT: So you're saying that even though you saw her fall apart, so to speak, with the breakdown, or the crying, she somehow said to you, you can handle it?

RITA: She made me understand that I could handle it. I think that what she went through for the breakdown was much worse, because I'm not receiving telegrams about someone being gassed somewhere. I receive other telegrams.

INT: Are you saying it's by her example, or was it an active process? Did she give you pep talks?

RITA: No.

INT: So it was just by her example, by watching her cope with what she had to cope with.

RITA: Exactly.

INT: Even though at times she did fall apart.

RITA: Oh, sure. I think we all fall apart. The thing is I learned that I was allowed to fall apart. I was allowed to yell. I was allowed to get upset, which for 26 years I was not to do. You just don't get upset. Well, I learned that it's okay. If I want to yell at my kids, if I want to cry, I can do that. I'm allowed to do it!

INT: It doesn't mean you're weak.

RITA: Right. So once I got that into my head it sort of, that was another decision I came to.

INT: That came after her death.

RITA: After. But it relates itself.

INT: Absolutely.

RITA: It just related itself because she sometimes, if she would be crying, she would try to hide that fact. And I'd say now that I'm married, I'm not allowed to cry. I don't want anybody to see me cry. And I get my daughter and she's young, she goes outside, she falls down, and I say, my God, she must have hurt herself. She's bleeding. She comes into the house and then she cried. My son, no matter where he fell, he cried where he was. And then somebody said "Boys don't cry," and I gave him a pep talk. I said, "Oh, yes they do. Yes they do. You're allowed." So it sort of taught me that if I don't feel like doing anything I'm not going to do it.

INT: But you're talking now about the freedom from something.

RITA: Yeah, it gave me...

INT: But she taught, with her you didn't cry to protect her. You agree with that.

RITA: Right. And she did the same thing for me.

INT: And then you continued living that way until one day you said, "Well, this doesn't work so good, I'm human, too." So you were taking something off at that time in your life.

RITA: True.

INT: I'm not too far from this experience myself. (Laughs) In understanding, different stories, but similar emotional means, so that was really changing something.

RITA: Oh, absolutely.

INT: Now I can cry, now I can fall apart. Now I can...but, that comes later, you said. That came later.

RITA: That came later after I made my break, which I don't think I ever could have done.

INT: Except for...

RITA: Hello? I think that once the decision was made, I already knew that I could do, I already knew that I could cry. I already knew that I could yell. I already knew that I was being controlled, and I don't have to be controlled. That I could, if I wanted to, make a decision.

INT: What do you mean, "Once the decision was made" you already knew you could cry?

RITA: What I meant was, I knew that after 26, 27 years of marriage, I wanted out. I, he brought it on, I brought it to the surface. Because I was so very well controlled, and I really think he saw this, maybe with my mother, whatever. He could do anything he wanted to. After all, my mother did anything she wanted to. He did anything he wanted to for all those years, and I was just sweet me. And I thought, no, no more. So...

INT: Do you regret that it came so late?

RITA: Yes. Absolutely. But then again...

INT: Did your mother call it? Did your mother see it?

RITA: My mother called it from the day I said, "I do." (laughs)

INT: Not before? She didn't try...

RITA: No, she never tried to talk me out of it. She just said, "Why?" And I think that also with the children, there were times, very early on, that, not that I was strong enough to do anything about it, but I wanted to do something. And I said, "No, I can't do this. I'm not going to leave my children without a father. It's just not going to happen." And after all when they were young, the custody, I just forgot about it. And time just goes on and on until you get to a point where you say, "I've got to be nuts." Or, "I think I'm going to go out and find someone, which he would never let me do, to see if I'm really on track, or I'm way off base here." It took nine months.

INT: Would you say who that was?

RITA: A psychiatrist. But I was told by my doctor to do that. I mean, I was physically and mentally drained, even though, don't ask me how I went on day by day. I guess it's routine, so you just do it.

INT: You had a role model for that, too.

RITA: I finally after nine months, he turned around and said to me, "I have to dismiss you. You know all the answers. Now it's up to you to make the decisions."

INT: So you got the help your mother never got.

RITA: Never got.

INT: And which you didn't get for a very long time, for the same reasons, you don't go to mental health people?

RITA: No. I think she would have gone if I knew at the time how desperately she needed it, which I didn't know. I thought it was financial. Well, it's really a financial drain on you. But for me, I knew that I needed, not just a friend, I just needed someone to say to me, "Go." And my two medical doctors said, "Go." I went. And it was strange because the first couple of visits it was just a complete breakdown, crying, and I was so embarrassed, I said, "I promised myself I wouldn't do this," and he said, "But you're allowed to do it. You're allowed. Who says you can't." And I looked at him and I said, "Well, I never could." And he said, "Well, go ahead." And I thought, I'm spending a fortune and I'm sitting here crying I could be outside in the hall.

INT: How old were you? How long ago?

RITA: About two and a half years ago.

INT: So it wasn't after your mother died that you felt the need.

RITA: No. I felt the need a long, long time ago, but I was programmed to say, I was told that you don't need it. I'm the only thing you need. I believed. Just like these people, these stupid people believed, in the Holocaust. I believed. Gullible. So I went along. But when I realized, no, something is just definitely wrong here, and if it's going to be my fault, I'd better find out all by myself, because he's not going to let me do this. Well, I found out that nothing. I really was taking 100% blame. Honest to goodness 100% blame. Well, I found out that that's not true. That I did nothing wrong.

INT: In your marriage.

RITA: In my marriage. For the reasons that I wanted to leave, or whatever. But once I found that out, I had to believe it, and that took another couple of months. More than a couple. And once I made the decision, it took me twelve hours. And of course, I blew him away. And to this day, he doesn't, I don't think he really thinks that it's happening. And, but it's happening. I'm not rushing. I'm not, it's not the kind of thing where there's a man waiting out that door that I'm running to. That's another thing that I have to work through. Because he did me a very good turn to the point where I don't even want another man. I don't need another pair of socks. I'm fine with the six dogs. But I think when you're ready, you're ready. If I'm not ready, I won't be ready. And there are times where I say, "Am I going to be just like my mother? Living alone the rest of my life?" But it pops up every once in a while. It's just normal. I think about these things. One doctor said to me, "You're probably jumping around for joy."

INT: Do you think you would have -- this is a totally hypothetical question, maybe there's no answer -- but had the crisis come earlier, when she was still alive, do you think you would have moved to end the marriage while she was alive?

RITA: No.

INT: Why not?

RITA: I think it would have, she would have had another heart attack on it. Just the fact, and again I think she would have liked me to make the move, if she did not have to answer all the questions that would come up from it with her friends, because she, like I am, my daughter's pregnant, I have to answer questions from her. Not that it's anybody's business, but that's normal. I don't think I would ever put her through what I had to go through the first six months of this filing. I just couldn't do it.

INT: So you would have known what you wanted, but you would have...

RITA: I would have waited. I always said that. I would never, and I know as much as she would want it to happen, she would not want it to happen, for selfish reasons. European selfish reasons. Because once you make your bed, this is it. Okay. That's fine. But I waited an awfully long time afterward, too.

[interruption]

INT: Should we call it quits today and make another time?

RITA: I just hope I can give you what you need.

INT: Absolutely. How do you feel about it?

(END TAPE TWO, SIDE ONE. TAPE TWO, SIDE TWO IS BLANK)

(TAPE THREE, SIDE ONE)

INT: February 21, 1992. We're looking at documents that her mother had, which you didn't see until after her death, is that...?

RITA: That's right. None of this. What I'm looking for is, these were all ironed. (going through documents)

INT: I know I asked you the last time we met why you think she never showed any of this to you, including the photographs, and it's hard to answer.

RITA: Very.

INT: When you found them, did they seem like, protected in a special place?

RITA: Yes. They were all folded up, and I had to iron them out and put tape on them. I tried to read as much as I could, and then there were a lot of words that I just didn't understand. So what

they did, this is a marriage certificate, I believe, January 6 of '35, or is it a birth certificate? Yeah, this is my father's birth certificate. No, wait, this is my mother's father. This is my mother's mother. This is my father's and Tony's father. This is an aunt in New York. It's a marriage certificate.

INT: Who translated for you?

RITA: A school, believe it or not. I think these are checks, and now we'll get into the...these are originals.

INT: These are the letters, personal letters?

RITA: Yes.

INT: Were they translated for you?

RITA: Yes. They're all translated.

INT: What, you also said last time that not much was said because of censorship?

RITA: Yeah, you just sort of read between the lines on this, but the translations...

INT: Did they have family news?

RITA: Yes.

INT: Did they tell each other about who was...

RITA: Married. This is from her brother. Now these are the translations. No, these are some more papers that contradict what happened to him. More, more, more. (going through documents) This is her citizenship.

INT: And then you were naturalized automatically with her, right?

RITA: No.

INT: You had a separate process.

RITA: I didn't know that I had to have a special process until I tried to go to Canada as a teenager. And you only became in those years, from what my understanding was, that if a father became a citizen, the children became a citizen. Not the mother. Because there was no proof of death. After five years that she was here, she became a citizen. This is the Austrian citizenship of hers. This is money. This is a copy. Here she was writing to someone. These are the translations. I really should be hooked up with...Here's the certificate of death for my father.

INT: The Law Institute did this?

RITA: Yes.

INT: Certificate of death. (long pause) Okay. So this is her statement that he was presumed dead because he could not be found.

RITA: Right. There is a religious body community, Council of Jewish congregation, Czechoslovakia. These were the attorneys that were trying to find that information. This is the court decisions.

INT: They even have his transport number.

RITA: Yes. Now this is another thing. This is the decision, the date of his death to be October the first, 1944. And you'll notice, this is the contradiction. What I'm looking for is the translation to the letters. You just have to take this home and read it through.

INT: And how did you treat all of this when you found it? Did you translate it as soon as you could, did you hold it for a while? Did you read it, and re-read it?

RITA: No. I was in shock. And I tried very hard to translate it myself. I was able to read the letters. I tried to transcribe the letters and put it on tape. And I realized there were some words in there that I couldn't do. So I had to hand it over. So this is a translation. Of course, I know what these words mean. Like, this is from my father. Which is a letter that's in there. And what they're doing is question mark. He always used to call me "Mamele," so that was the closest they could get to what that meant.

INT: Because you remember, or your mother told you?

RITA: My mother told me. I could just read it. Because the correspondence was still here. '40 and '41, and then after '41 there was nothing. None of the letters, anyway. So this is a letter from my father that we'll hook up to the original. This is from her sister. This is from her sister and, no, I'm sorry, this is from her brother Ziggy, who also died in a concentration camp.

INT: So what was the nickname? Nishtrum?

RITA: I would have to look. It must refer to a little girl. I'd have to look at the actual letter. Because they spell phonetically.

INT: Right. Were you named Rita in Austria?

RITA: Yes.

INT: So you kept that name.

RITA: Yes. This is from her brother Ziggy. There are pictures that go with this. And this is from...

INT: Okay. I'll have to read this calmly.

RITA: Yes. I can only tell you that from the time it's been transcribed, I've never read them.

INT: Your parents died in the same year. When did your mother die?

RITA: It'll be nine years next month.

INT: Right, so they died in the same years.

RITA: This is a court decision that sort of go against these big legal papers. This is from the State Board in Vienna. And the decision came down in December 20, 1967.

INT: That what?

RITA: That he died from the elements, which, this is also from her brother.

INT: I wonder if they even had access to the German documentation? A lot of that stuff was locked away.

RITA: Well, the lawyers that she contacted got as much out as possible. But the legal letters are transcribed in English.

INT: So you were how old when she was doing the search? It lasted for many years, obviously, but you were old enough to understand.

RITA: Yeah. The search started from the highest, I believe, after the letter. Because it was saying, I think the search started because she got some sort of letter stating that if there was a business in Vienna and she was involved in business, or her husband had a business, there was a certain amount of money that was due her from the HIAS, and that's how you'll see all these little money things.

INT: But she didn't talk to you about this, did she? She didn't say, "I got another letter..."

RITA: No. I knew there was a search going on as far as the money was concerned. But never with the letters. I only knew about one postcard which I have in my scrapbooks. And I never knew there were any more. Ever. What I'm looking for is the transcripts; I'm looking for the transcripts of their findings.

INT: Who's "they"? HIAS?

RITA: HIAS. They translated it in English. They did a, it was all typed. Why can't I find it? Maybe I'm just not looking too well.

INT: So you found the papers, you said you were in shock, how long did it take between that time and making a contact for transcription?

RITA: Within six months. I mean I really, well, when I originally found them within the first week, I just sat down and tried to do it, and I couldn't do it. I couldn't do it.

INT: And it must have taken a while.

RITA: A long, long time. First we went to New York, to see if the family could do it for me, or his side of the family. And they could read it, I'm sorry, they read it all in German, and I tried to get it down in English, and I couldn't. We all tried, and it didn't work. It was just too much. Too many words...

INT: Once it was transcribed, you read it and then put it away?

RITA: No.

INT: What happened?

RITA: I think I read it, I didn't read it. When it was brought to me, they read it to me.

INT: The Law Institute.

RITA: The Law Institute. My cousins were here. They read it. And after that I never looked at it again. It was too heart-rendering for me.

INT: Right. About a year after your mother died, would you say?

RITA: No. I would say within six months. It was very fast. It was just very fast.

INT: And what was your response at the time?

RITA: I cried, and I didn't want to read it again.

INT: When was the next time you pulled this out, when the museums came to you?

RITA: Yes. But I didn't do anything. I let them look at it. They told me what they wanted, and I said, "No, thank you." And that was the end of it. Are you holding it? Maybe. What's in that envelope?

INT: This is mine. It must be.

RITA: I can't imagine. I know there's a lot of long documents. I could have another file on it somewhere. See, I think I tried to tape one letter, then blank. And I just couldn't do it.

INT: What's it like now to pull it out again?

RITA: Well, I really don't want to read it.

INT: But you want me to read it.

RITA: Yeah. You can take it and read it.

INT: How did your husband react to any of this?

RITA: He didn't. He didn't.

INT: But he did have strong feelings about your family's connection to the Holocaust.

RITA: Yeah. I think at one time I was asked by the Israeli, I don't even know what it was at that time, but they had wanted me to go to Washington or something, where they had all the survivors come together.

INT: It was a gathering. They had just started to do it.

RITA: And I didn't do it. I was just, I was leery. I don't know if I would even do it now, because you grow up with the fact that somebody tells you, that your father died in this way and now somebody tells me in a letter that no, he didn't die that way. He died this way. And I said, "Now, do I really want to go to Washington and find someone to tell me that yes, he did live, or he didn't live?" It was very scary. And I think, I don't think I could do that by myself. Within the documents it states that he was on the train with some Nazi hunter that we know today. I think that if I would talk to someone like that, and say, "Yes, he was on the train with me, and I know some people that could help you," that would be a different story. But to stand there, with a sign, not knowing, that would be more disheartening to me.

So I don't know, I would like to really live with the memory that, maybe it's not what I would like to think, it's just that from the day of that telegram to the day that I found these letters, he died one way. Now do I want to know that he died another way, which means to me, was he tortured even more, to live through all of that, and finally get to the point where he escapes and gets on a train, and then dies on the train? I don't know which is worse. In my own mind. And I think about it, and I think about it, and sure, I would love to find somebody that knew him, that could tell me about him, all through those years. But I think that's an awfully long search, and before you do that, I would have to find out if it's actually true that he was on the train with this man. And this is a very famous man, evidently, that he was on there with. And I've been in his company. But he's been up on a dais, and I've been down here, and...

INT: Do you mean Elie Wiesel?

RITA: Yes. I think that's who they're mentioning in here. In that one little line in here?

INT: No. I was just skimming.

RITA: But he's up on the daises, and he's surrounded by hundreds of people, and here I am. "Can you help me?" Now, I believe he's an intelligent man, and he's going to have to remember this one name. And if I would ask and he would say, "No, I don't remember," it's like, well, where do you go from here?

INT: Do you know if, have you registered your mother and her information with the National Association of Survivors? They're setting up a registry of all the survivors' names.

RITA: Not that I know of.

INT: They want to have a documentation of all the survivors' information. For its own sake. It's not really research, but it's really for its own sake.

RITA: That would be nice. That I wouldn't have any objections to. But...

INT: But it's really tracking down your father's story. So that's painful for you.

RITA: I think that if I could just put myself again in the third party, and say, well, gee, maybe I'll just be a writer and a reporter, and I'm going after this information, it isn't going to hurt until the time comes that I find out. I can go ahead and I can do that, because I'm strong enough to do that. But where is the starting point? Sometimes it could take you ten years. And I don't know if I want to do that. How much hurt within that ten years? How many let-downs, where you get a lead and...

INT: And you're saying it's not that important, that specific fact, in and of itself.

RITA: I'd like to know. Because I think if I would know, then there would be the people that I'm talking to, would have known him. Where else would I get that information? Which is a nice thing to do, or to know someone that knew him through those years. And then again, maybe they don't want to talk about it. Because they also survived that. But it's, where do you start? And then can you take the let-downs of it? I don't know.

INT: I guess the safest thing to do would be to write Elie Wiesel a letter, and do it in a less personal face-to-face way. From what I hear, he does respond to all his correspondence.

RITA: Well, maybe when you read this, you'll have an idea of what...(laughs).

INT: When the museum came looking at the documents, did they ask you to support the museum as well? Were they looking for that?

RITA: No. Not really. I think it came through, when they transcribed it, that's when it came, what information, or what documents does she have, to see if we could have it for the Jewish Museum, and I said, well, I don't want to let go of them that quick. I just got them in my hands. I mean, I was afraid to iron them out, that something would happen to them. And amazingly, the ink didn't run, nothing. She just had them all folded very carefully, in a small envelope. And that's when I realized that we'd better look at every little thing in this apartment. So...

INT: So it's still painful. It would not be...

RITA: Oh, absolutely.

INT: It wouldn't be a chosen...to just open it and read.

RITA: No. I think that if I did it, it would be the start of something I would really follow through and go all the way with.

INT: Did you ever do it with your children, once you got the documents? Did you sit them down and say, "These are part of Grandma's history"?

RITA: Yeah. They were young. And they believe fully that there was a Holocaust, and they know the story, but to rehash it, they've done it so many times. They've heard me speak so many times.

INT: Did your mother talk to them? Did she feel it was important?

RITA: No. I think she answered questions if they asked her about their grandfather. She would just give them straight answers. She would not go into any details with them. I really don't think she knew all the details. They were very contradictory, so I think she held to the story of what, she couldn't understand, and neither could I, how a telegram could come with a number and the exact date, and from Theresienstadt, into how, and then all of a sudden, I mean, how do you mix records up like that? I could readily see that they might have kept him alive. They had an occupation that they could have used, young, strong...even my, even her sister, and her husband, but now they don't mention anything about them. I don't think she really went in for that. She just wanted to know about her husband.

INT: These are photographs from her life and your life?

RITA: These are early photographs that she has. This is her mother, her father.

INT: This is also what you found after she died?

RITA: No, this we had.

INT: Oh, this was available to you.

RITA: Yes. These pictures were always available. This is her mother, her father. This was her youngest brother.

INT: Is he the one who went to England?

RITA: This is the one who went to England. Joseph. This is her sister's wedding picture, after she left.

INT: So this must have been mailed to her.

RITA: Yes. My father.

INT: So this picture you had, you knew.

RITA: Yes. This was taken here. This particular picture was on one of the passports, I believe. And this is in Vienna. She was only eighteen then. See, they wore fur coats at eighteen here.

INT: Absolutely. She looks very glamorous.

RITA: This was...I don't even know. These are smiling. But this was my mother's father. And this is my mother. And her sister and the two brothers.

INT: All lost, right?

RITA: All lost. All lost. This is the youngest brother. The one that she...this is also the...It's me. Fat, curly hair as you can see.

INT: Gorgeous! (laughs) Well, you have a Polish housekeeper. What do they say if they see a thin child?

RITA: I don't know. They've never seen a thin child yet.

INT: They get worried.

RITA: This was in America. This is all in America. They're all me.

INT: Did she like to dress you?

RITA: Oh, yes. Most of it was made.

INT: She liked to do that. Did she like to dress herself?

RITA: Yes. But everything was made. Initials on everything.

INT: So when did she start you with dancing lessons?

RITA: She never did. It was just a natural thing. This was all a natural thing. She tells me. That's my cousin, that's me.

INT: And this is you?

RITA: They're all me.

INT: Different look to you. Do I recognize this? Who's this?

RITA: That's my husband. Now we're getting to Tracy. But she does mix them up, so I don't know. That's my mother. These are pictures.

INT: This is what, high school?

RITA: This is seventeen years old.

INT: This is high school graduation.

RITA: Yeah, this is prom. My teeth never changed, but we never had the money for my teeth. I finally got them done.

INT: When you did the modeling shot, was that with some intention to model?

RITA: No, it just fell in. She always used to love the long curls and the ribbons.

INT: This is prom, or...

RITA: That was going to a wedding. Do those children look like me, I ask you? One face. This is her brother in England when he got older. This is her album.

INT: You said he never married, right?

RITA: No, he never married. Just cards she kept. And I don't know what this is. Again, I remember like it was yesterday when this picture was taken.

INT: This is professional, or home?

RITA: This is professional.

INT: So she would take you to the photographer? What, like once a year?

RITA: Oh, once in six months, like I took Tracy. Once in six months she would go. She told me she can't iron today, but I taught her early. I don't know what happened.

INT: Did your mother put the pictures on the wall, or send them to relatives, and...

RITA: Yeah. She had her own album from the wedding. Very Orthodox.

INT: This was your wedding?

RITA: Yeah.

INT: Where was it?

RITA: B'nai Jeshurun. This is all from the wedding. This is all really fun. And she saved everything.

INT: Is this her?

RITA: Yes.

INT: And who is this?

RITA: That's my cousin Artie. His wife's mother and father brought us here. I really have to look for the other transcripts. They're around.

INT: So was Sam the youngest in his family?

RITA: He was the last one getting married, so they crowned both mothers.

INT: So you were 26, and he was older?

RITA: Seven years older.

INT: 34?

RITA: Yes.

INT: It doesn't look that way, here. How did you meet?

RITA: While I was dancing. (laughs)

INT: Did he come?

RITA: No. I was working at the RDA club, a Latin show, and he saw me there. And he just asked for a date, and I thought, "What does he want from me?" Not that I was half undressed. I felt like I was in armor, but he did.

INT: So what, did he hook in that you were Jewish and you knew that he was Jewish?

RITA: Oh, yeah. It was the kind of club where, you know, and somebody must have told him that she doesn't date anyone that isn't Jewish. But, I might have them in the safe right here. Let me just look for you.

INT: On some sort of recent data about your life and your kids, that you told me the first time that you met, but I didn't have the tape recorder on. Like, you have two children, how old are they, and...your daughter's older, right? How old is she?

RITA: My daughter's 25. And my son is 21. I'll be a grandmother in the next month.

INT: Oh, yeah. Soon. Everything's going well?

RITA: She just had a shower, yeah. Things are going well. They're good kids. As kids will go. You try your best. What can I tell you? I'm very proud of both of them.

INT: You told me your son was a tennis instructor, and wonderful with kids, you were saying?

RITA: Yes. He is also a pro-tennis player.

(END TAPE THREE, SIDE ONE)

(TAPE THREE, SIDE TWO)

RITA: ...workout with a half-dozen children.

INT: Why do you like that especially?

RITA: I like it because all the kids are, it's not one to one, all the children are out there, and he handles them. He's patient. If a little kid misses a ball, it's not the worst offence in the world. He really takes his time. He doesn't say, "Oh, you shouldn't have done that." Where he really goes over, and sometimes the kids will, they'll start to cry, like anything else, thinking they failed. And he really is really good with them. He's very patient. He should be as patient with me. (laughs)

INT: A mother's lament.

RITA: I think that's why we're mothers. Because, you know, they're allowed to not be so patient with us.

INT: He's living on his own.

RITA: Not really. He works in his dad's office. I see him every day, if not every other day. Sometimes I tell him to take a vacation, and he's gone for about a week. Because when he comes home it's like a war that hit the house, with all his boyfriends.

INT: Use some adjectives to describe him.

RITA: Flirt. Woman's man. He loves the girls, and the girls love him. Polite. This is all to the girls now. We're not talking about to the mother. No, once in a while he'll give the mother a compliment, and you're wondering, well, what's going to come next? I've taken him many times as a date, formally, and he knows just what to do, when to do it, how to do it. It's surprising, so I think to myself, I must have done something right. He likes getting dressed up. I think he just loves people. He's very well aware of his Jewish heritage. How far he'll go with it, I don't know. I don't think it stops him from dating anyone. That's not the first question in his mind. I just swallow and accept it. I think, both children know how I feel about it, but you do the best you can, and you hope for the best. And hope that your teachings are well enough.

INT: Tell me about Tracy.

RITA: Tracy is quiet, reserved, got a stubborn streak in her. Does what she wants to do, when she wants to do it. She's not afraid of work, school, excellent. I couldn't ask for a better student in school. But through her second year in college, she felt that she just didn't want to continue, for whatever reasons that she gave us, and for whatever reasons were in her mind. And it was fine. I just don't believe in forcing them to go to school, but I thought that it was a disaster, because I really wanted her to finish. But she did all right, and she headed her own company for a while. She had another company in Florida that she ran. She's very careful, as far as friends are concerned. She picks them, and she's loyal.

INT: So she likes business.

RITA: She likes business. Now she's going to have this baby, and I really don't think she knows what's ahead of her.

INT: Nobody knows! (laughs)

RITA: She thinks that this is just going to be another little business that she's just going to take care of, you know. But I think that's why mother's disappearing in March. She doesn't care a lot about tangible things. Money for her is to do with when she really needs something. It's not the point where, well, I think today I'll just go out and go shopping and spend. This is not Tracy. She only wants what she really needs. And her needs are not that great. She's very plain. She doesn't like makeup. She doesn't like fancy, fancy clothes. She's not into name clothes, but she likes good things. She, homemaker she's not. I don't know why. They both know very well how to do everything, and it's just, well, if I don't have to do it, then I won't do it. But of course, if I don't have to do it, I won't do it either.

They both went to Hebrew School. She was bat mitzvahed and he was bar mitzvahed, and to the extent where I did not want them to just go in and memorize what they had to do. I had hired someone to come in and teach them to be able to read and to translate. And I know that if you don't do it constantly, you lose it. But I find that the holidays, she can, and so can he, pick up a

Hebrew book and read it. I don't know about translating it now, too well. I couldn't read one today. Not one "alph-belef," or whatever.

INT: Who do they take after?

RITA: Who do they take after? I have to say that they take after me because they were with me longer. From morning, noon and night. When it comes to business or anything, they take after their father. He's a staunch believer in business and how it should be done, without taking a lot of chances. So they're both pretty good at sizing up people. I've yet to learn that. (laughs) I just take people at face value and say, "Whoops!"

INT: Would you say you're naive?

RITA: When it comes to people, yes. I'm learning, though. But I think it's my nature. I just don't look at the bad in people right away. If I think there's something bad, I say, "No, it can't be." That's not right, the first shot out. But I have learned that there are a lot of people that I've been very, very good to, and it's just a disaster. It's been a turnabout for me. And it's very disheartening when that happens. Very, for me. Like, why couldn't I have seen that? I could look for it.

INT: Did your, do you think it was a carry-over of your mother's philosophy, of seeing the good in people, different from her?

RITA: No. She was very alert, and watchful. And she often would say to me, "You trust too many people." And I'd say, "Well, I like this person." "No, I don't like this person." But I think that with my mother, if they didn't dress right, or if they dressed with a little too much makeup, she didn't like that person. Just like with my dancing. You don't do those kind of things. You go to the office from nine to five, and you work, and that's it.

INT: It's amazing that you had an entire life that you loved, that you almost kept secret from her.

RITA: She knew, but she never went to see it. She only knew what people told her, or what I would tell her, and I didn't want to tell her too much because I wanted to do it. But I still incorporated it with what she wanted me to do, which is what I was trained to do. So I had...

INT: Which was...

RITA: Just working in an office. So I just decided well, if I loved the music and the dancing so much, I'll just work in an office in a dance place, which I did. And I was very well compensated at that time for it; I loved it. I still love it to this day. I could be as tired and as out of it, but if you tell me let's go dancing, I'm there. That'll revive me again.

INT: Do your children have that love?

RITA: My son does. They both trained at an early age with me. But as she got older, she was too shy for that. He on the other hand, still dances, but he will not admit to the dances that he knows how to do. I mean, how could you admit to your friends that you know how to do a tango, and a samba, and an English quick-step, and a bolero, and...

INT: It sounds like he, this is over-simplified, but, he sort of took on your more outgoing fun in the world, and she took on the more reserved, quiet, thoughtful part of you. Is that fair?

RITA: Oh, sure. She goes one step further. I usually will think about something, and walk through it. And come to one or two decisions on letter Z at the end. So any one of Zs will be okay. She only needs one Z. She wants one Z at the end, and that's it. There's no changing. So I learned, I learned to laugh, let it roll off my shoulder. Because at that age, they have their own opinions about everything, and I don't, sometimes I forget, and I'm a mother again, I can't help doing that. I can't help saying, "Well, where are you going? Will you be out all night?" Still? I said, "Yes, you're under this roof. Still."

INT: You have talked about what I'm going to call a sort of Jewish journey, which took a lot of turns in your life, and before your mother went through her emotional difficulties, you said basically you were traditional, traditional synagogue, traditional Sabbath, basically.

RITA: Well, in the very beginning it was basically very Orthodox.

INT: And that continued until emotionally it was harder for her to function?

RITA: Yes.

INT: And you were a young adult, right? You were about twenty?

RITA: Yes. I was working at a college at the time. And because she needed the money, I'm sure it was the money, she had to work overtime on Saturdays, so it sort of, the Sabbath went down the drain.

INT: And she needed a lot of care.

RITA: Absolutely. So I remember I don't know how old I was, but the candles were not lit anymore on a Friday. But yet, we still went to synagogue and we still kept our holidays. But of course in the neighborhood where we were, there were only Jewish people.

INT: Did you associate with the kids in the synagogue? Were they your friends? You were in public school, right?

RITA: It was a public school, but the same children that went to public school did go to synagogue. The only difference was that I think I was the only one that went to a Yizkor service. The nurseries were there. They were all Jewish. But when you're in a neighborhood like that,

you grow up with the same friends. I still have those friends to this day. I've been through their before, their durings, their afters, and all over again. I was there when the children came. So it...

INT: And this was your first neighborhood.

RITA: This was my first neighborhood, Strawberry Mansion.

INT: When the Sabbath started to change, and the candles weren't lit because of the financial pressures, and the emotional pressures, did the two of you ever talk about that? Did you talk about the change in religious practice, and what it meant and...

RITA: I was still not allowed to write on the Sabbath, even though she didn't light the candles, because when she would come home on a Friday it was too late. But she never did any cooking on a Saturday. The only thing at that time that changed, she just didn't light the candles. Then later on she said something about later on, you shouldn't light the candles if there's not a man in the house anyway. I remember that, and I thought to myself, but you've been lighting them all these years. But in those days they didn't light two candles, they lit three. I still have the menorah, not a menorah, a Friday night candle like that. And when my children were very young, I did light candles on Friday. I don't even remember when I stopped. I think primarily when you moved, we moved into a neighborhood like this, or even Cherry Hill...

INT: How old were the kids, and how old were you?

RITA: About eight. The children were about eight years old. No, my daughter was about eight, he was about four or five years old. Everything that happened to those children was on Saturday. Football practice, dance, this, whatever. And I didn't let them get involved with too much, because there were children in the neighborhood. And I just wanted them to get the feeling that they could go out and play on their own, where they didn't need a constant, regimented, every single day you have to have baseball, football, dancing class, piano lessons. It was just too much. They had no time to play. So they went out on Saturday. Well, when I was a little girl, how could you go out and play on Sabbath? You just didn't do that.

INT: Did your husband bring with him a traditional background to the marriage? Did he want some...

RITA: Well, no. He was brought up very Orthodox himself, and I think he would have kept High Holidays, because his family was very Orthodox, but if I was not, he would have gone along with whatever I do. I find that anyone that I have ever talked to, it's the wife that keeps the religion in the house. If she's cooking something on a Friday night, like soup or challah, every Friday night, she's doing it. The family is going to go along with that.

INT: So how did you think about the change, or what...

RITA: It was so gradual, that...

INT: Over time.

RITA: Over time.

INT: And a lot of it was living in this area? There was no synagogue per se, or...

RITA: There was Main Line Reform, and that was the only synagogue that I knew of when I came here, and that's where I sent the children. The rabbi is marvelous. To this day, he's wonderful, but I've never gone to a service. Because that's too much of an extreme for me. And I did explain to him, and he understands it. Going from an Orthodox synagogue, to a Reform synagogue, the first time I ever walked in there, nobody was wearing a tallis, nobody was wearing a yarmulke, I thought to myself: I must be at a meeting. (laughter) The service itself was beautiful, because I understood it. And the young people that were in there, it was wonderful, because I guess some of them never went through Hebrew School. I can remember going to synagogue and a rabbi talking in Hebrew and I didn't understand one word he said.

INT: Who was your rabbi growing up?

RITA: Rabbi Pickles. And before that it was, oh, I was so tiny, a Rabbi Rabinowitz, or something. It was on 33rd street, a very big synagogue. When Rabbi Pickles moved, he moved to West Oak Lane, but he still married me. But I liked at one time going into a Conservative synagogue where it was both, and there wasn't any that I knew of, and I didn't know anybody up here. So they went ahead. They weren't too thrilled with it. I mean, they went, the children. They weren't too thrilled with it.

INT: Was your mother upset that it wasn't more Jewish education, or...

RITA: No. They did have the education. It was there. From beginning to end. He didn't skip anything. They had to learn how to read Hebrew, they had to learn how to write it, they at times had to transcribe it, but if you went to, because the school, the Hebrew School, is a separate entity from the synagogue. I learned that when I wanted to complain, I can't go to the rabbi part of it, you have to go to the school. It's different.

INT: So it sounds like it wasn't a decision, that you said, "I don't believe in this kind of practice, I believe differently than when I was growing up, I'm going to do it differently," it just sort of...

RITA: It just sort of fell in.

INT: It just came with the lifestyle changes.

RITA: I found that at dinners, at holiday dinners, the children were going to read, or they were going to do something. It was the same. Just because they were going to a Reform synagogue, nothing changed, except that they really understood. Because it was done, the language was Hebrew, but it was English as well. And at that point, I didn't care. I didn't care if it was English, as long as they learned. Because I could only give them so much in that kind of education. I

wasn't trained for it. I was only trained the way I was trained. And when I trained them, and each time the generation changes, they're going to change it again. So I wasn't disappointed in that.

INT: Do you have any regrets about it?

RITA: I think the only regret is that if I would have found a Conservative, they would have been more attuned to what was going on. If I would say to them...

INT: Was Har Zion not a possibility?

RITA: Har Zion wasn't here. There was another one way up on Montgomery Avenue that I didn't even know about. But I realized that if I was saying, don't forget such and such a holiday is coming, oh, yes. Passover. That's the one when we don't eat bread, right? Oh, okay, we have a dinner two nights. Oh, we have to do a service. You know, it wasn't an excitement type of thing, where in my day it was so exciting. Everybody would get together and do this whole play, you know, for hiding the matzo. It's not like that anymore, and yet you still do it. And I love it. And I do make it, whereas if everyone is sitting here, whether they're Jewish or non-Jewish to make them all understand that this only comes once a year, let's have a little respect for this kind of religious type of ceremony. And everybody just comes right into it.

They know that they go to the cemeteries once or twice a year. They know. It's inbred in them. I'm not saying that their children will be the same. I don't know.

INT: Do you worry?

RITA: A little. But I feel that it's inbred in them enough, but I don't think it will be, just like my mother it was more, with me it was less, so it becomes less. And I hate to see that happen, but they're adults then. I know that when they come to this house, it will be the way I want it. And I think that when they're that young, they do come to this house. They're not ready to give big dinners for forty people or something. I wasn't either at that age, or later, I should say. I'd rather be in my thirties before I did that.

INT: Right. But faith in G-d seems strong for you. It's all through your statement.

RITA: Oh, sure.

INT: For your kids, too?

RITA: I think so. I don't think they like to admit it. There are times that I don't like to admit it, but...

INT: Admit that you believe in G-d?

RITA: No, the belief is there, but the...and what will happen, it's almost like sometimes I have to stop and think and say, you only pray to G-d when you want something. And lately within the last year or two, I try to stop and pray to G-d to thank Him.

INT: Do you have any conflict with your belief in G-d and your knowledge of the Holocaust?

RITA: No. At one time I could say, well, if there was a G-d, why did He let this happen? I don't do that anymore.

INT: How did you get past that?

RITA: Because I realized they were human beings that were doing it, and not G-d. And there was a time where I would, if things were happening to me, that were bad, and I can't say I still don't do it. I stop myself, and I think, well, why am I stopping myself. I say to myself, well, I guess whatever hurt I'm going through, and whatever suffering I'm going through right now, maybe G-d wants it that way. Maybe He feels I have not suffered enough. And then I think, what am I saying? But that does come to mind every once in a while.

INT: Is that something that you heard, is that something that your mother may have said?

RITA: No. No, it's something that I sort of remembered way back when we learned about the ten commandments. Before they even came off our mountain or our hill, where G-d only steps in if He feels that you've suffered enough. If you've been through all of this, and then he's going to give you exactly what you want. Somehow that, I might be saying it wrong, but every once in a while, when something so drastic happens in my life, I say, now what? Didn't I suffer enough? And I'm thinking, I guess I didn't. When is enough?

INT: But that doesn't sound angry. Is it angry?

RITA: Oh, no, it's not angry, because inside, I really, I really say to myself, there are people, very intelligent people, that just went down the wrong road. I say that about your criminals. I mean, when I think of some of the criminals that have been put away in jail, or been put to death, even Hitler, after a while he became a maniac, but just think what he could have done, if he went down the right road. Most of your masterminds are not stupid. They just don't know where to channel it. So how can I blame G-d? These were human beings, they channeled, and stupid people believed them. I'm not, I can't stand here and say I would not have believed Hitler. I wasn't old enough. But there were a lot of people over there that did. And I wrote about that.

INT: Anyway, hold that thought.

RITA: Yes, I'll hold it.

(END TAPE THREE, SIDE TWO)

(TAPE FOUR, SIDE ONE)

INT: ...1992. As I mentioned before, I read the documents, the ones I could read, and I was struck by the letters from your father and how much affection and kindness, and reference to G-d, and hope, there was in the letters, but how tenderly he spoke to your mother and to you through the letters. And when, towards the last letter, when the bureaucratic mechanisms still hadn't worked, and he was asking your mother to do one more thing, how apologetic he was to her through all of that. You look sad when I say that to you.

RITA: I was very sad when I first found the letters.

INT: Yeah, I'm sure.

RITA: It was a shock when I found them. I only thought that I had one postcard that was written to her. It was on her birthday, and in it he just sends me a million kisses and hugs, and he called me Ritale.

INT: How old were you when the telegram came?

RITA: Well, let's see, now. I came here when I was two. I would say this was about a year after the war ended.

INT: So '46.

RITA: I was born in '37.

INT: You were nine years old. In that time, did you ask your mother about mail, or anything, or you were silent about that?

RITA: Well, I had not known about the letters, these letters at all. I was probably too young to even realize she would get mail. But no, I didn't ask her. I only knew that, or was told, so I believed it, that he was away fighting a war.

INT: That's what she told you?

RITA: That's what I was told. Which wasn't so far-fetched. I mean, they were over there, and that's all we really knew, and that's all she really knew. That he was over there, whether he was fighting the war, I'm sure she didn't know. But she knew that he was incarcerated somewhere. So I never really questioned it. When the telegram came, I was aware that the telegram came. And she read it in German, and I understood, but I didn't understand just where they were, or where they were killed. I never heard those words before. And I think it was the first time for her, too. It wasn't until later that we realized they were concentration camps. But at least I knew then that I had had a father, but I didn't have one anymore. That was devastating because you go through life in America, even when you're in a nursery school, where everyone I think I knew,

had fathers. I don't remember anyone else having a father that was across the seas. If they didn't have fathers, either they were at that time divorced or separated, or they were killed, or in a war, too. But not the same way. They were all born in America. So it was a devastating thing for me to go through school, I remember as a little girl, saying that I had a father and I sort of couldn't prove it. I had a picture. I think today it would be harder to convince people that you have a father and they live home. Because today there are so many single mothers that...but again, the children, they don't need to prove it. But with me it was different.

INT: But back then, it sounds like your mother protected you from the process. She didn't say, "I'm searching for Daddy, I'm writing to this, I'm doing that." She did that all by herself.

RITA: No. All by herself. She had friends that she knew in Vienna, some lived in New York, some had migrated into Philadelphia, but their husbands were here. But they were here longer than she was. They had jobs, they spoke English. I think they took her through the process of who to contact, and I'm sure that the HIAS did everything they could at that time. I think they were the only ones, other than the Jewish Federation, no, I should say Red Feather.

INT: And it sounds like you protected her, also. I don't know how conscious that was, but...

RITA: Yes. I knew that I was her pride and joy. I knew, even to this day, although she's dead, I knew that there would be nothing I would ever do to purposely hurt her. I protected her when she came in to the nursery school. And she knew maybe four words of English. And I would find myself saying, "Mom, don't talk German. Talk English." And she'd look at me and say, "Well, I can't." So I didn't like her to come in. Because I was learning so beautifully, and then of course, the minute I entered first grade, she just learned right along with me. But she still insisted on talking German to me, which I think is good. I realize now, that the other language is picked up early.

INT: But you didn't come home and say, "Where is my daddy? They have daddies. Where's my daddy?"

RITA: I think when I was very young, I remember questioning her. And she couldn't really answer me. She didn't really answer me. She would just hold onto me. And I found that when I asked her, it upset her. She started to cry. So I didn't want to do that to her, so I backed off. I don't remember ever pushing. If I did, I don't remember that.

INT: Well, you probably didn't.

RITA: No, I don't think I did. I knew she was going through other kinds of pain, migraine headaches, where she'd be out for days, in the dark room. She used to say, if you put a feather in this dishcloth around her head, it was terrible, forgive me mother, or I would put a feather in her cap, she would look like an Indian, with the ice bag on her head, and if it was getting too rough, the doctor used to come and give her shots.

INT: Did that scare you? Seeing her that way?

RITA: When I was small, yes. I resented it later on, because I couldn't bring anyone into the apartment. And we had two rooms and a bath, but I couldn't ever bring anyone up, because I knew she needed quiet. But I think as sick as she was, I can remember like it was yesterday, she always wanted to know where I was going and what time I was coming back. It's a lifeline. She was really afraid that somebody was going to take me, or I was going to run away, I guess, I don't know what that fear was, but I was the only thing that she had. And she wouldn't let up.

I had to have, I wouldn't say the best clothes, but I always had to have the right kind of clothes. If not, she'd make it. The hair had to be just so. It was something, I think back later on, when I became a teenager, when I got married, she would say, "It wouldn't matter how much money I was making, I wanted you to look like everybody else." Which I did.

INT: That was important.

RITA: That was very important to her.

INT: And important to you.

RITA: To me. Yes.

INT: To fit in, to feel comfortable.

RITA: But I never had any problem with that.

INT: Did you have to, when she would suffer from the migraines, help her out and give her some food and...

RITA: I would have to help. The only thing I really could do was clean, make my own dinner, because when she got into that kind of thing, she could not eat. But I would watch it. I would get her ice, chop the ice, because they didn't deliver ice cubes then. But I remember many, many days where she would go to work like that, because they were on time cards then in the factory, and you're making eighteen dollars a week, and twenty, or whatever, and I realized the only time I would have my mother with me, full time, is when I was sick. And I played at that a couple of times. And then I couldn't play at it anymore. She knew. But I felt bad when I got sick, because I knew that she would come home from work, and take care of me, and that was the only time I was allowed to listen to the radio. We didn't have television then. With the green hornet, and the creaky door, I was allowed to do that when I was sick. And I guess in those days we had more childhood diseases than we have today.

INT: Sure. And you stayed home longer from school.

RITA: I stayed home longer from school. And there were no tutors that they sent out. But I guess, but all the children were like that. Very few were lucky enough to have maids.

INT: But she didn't complain when she came home.

RITA: No, never.

INT: She did not pressure you and say, "Now I'm losing money, and..."

RITA: Never. Once a year at Christmas time, she would take me, dress me all up, and would take me to the factory where she worked, and I had to sing White Christmas. And after I sang White Christmas, I used to get a doll. And everybody was there. Whether those people that were there didn't have children at my age, I don't know. I never saw another child. I was put up on these big high tables where they would cut the material out for suits or whatever she was making, they were making at the time, and I would have to stand up and sing White Christmas. And everybody applauded and I didn't understand, because, how come I didn't sing White Christmas in the house? I mean, it was a completely different religion. But I remember getting the dolls. And she would stand there and watch me every year, put my two fingers and pop the eyes out of the doll. So I had eyeless dolls that said "Mama." That I remember. And every Christmas I think about it. It was an experience.

[Interruption]

INT: At this point I'd like to go back to the present. We talked about your children the last time we met, and sort of skipped over the earlier years of meeting your husband and the marriage, and the relationships, etc. So I'd like to go back to that, and then come into the here and now and talk about your philosophies of life.

So but going back, to sort of track your personal history, you did mention that you met your husband at a club, is that right? Or a party?

RITA: A club.

INT: And would you tell me something about that, and how your relationship with him began, and what attracted you to him, and him to you, etc.?

RITA: I was working for a dance studio at the time. I was a secretary. And on my spare time I worked as a professional dancer at a private club in Atlantic City at the old, (when I see it now, it's all ripped down, it makes my heart bleed) the President, the Old Chelsea, which was very kosher. We ran a lot of champagne hours. One day, while I was doing a show at the RDA, someone introduced me to my husband.

INT: "A show" means performing, or teaching?

RITA: Performing in the clubs. I never much cared, or never did, forget about caring, I never dated anyone that I met in any place that I worked in. Not that we were not covered. We didn't look like we were covered. But we had so much armor on our costumes. I mean, you just didn't drink any water, because you didn't want to have to go to the bathroom. But somebody

introduced me to my husband and I said, "Hello," or whatever, and I just said I don't think I will ever date him. I never dated anyone that I met at the club because the first thing that came into my mind was, "Now what could he want from me?" I mean, I'm up there doing a mambo, or a tango or whatever, and it wasn't the best of circumstances to meet someone. But he was persistent, so I did date him.

INT: Persistent at other times?

RITA: He would call at the office or, and I was just coming off of a heavy relationship, so I really didn't want anything more right then. So I treated it with, "It was nice meeting you," and that was it. But he was persistent. So I went out with him, and...

INT: You were how old?

RITA: I was 24.

INT: And he was...

RITA: Seven years older. (laughs) It was nice to have somebody older for a change. It was always the same or younger.

INT: The younger relationship was with a guy your age?

RITA: Yeah. About two years older than I was. I think the relationship went on for about two years. I met him, he was not divorced yet, he was going through a divorce, but I found his family were the most Orthodox I had ever met in my life. I mean, I know when I came to America we were very Orthodox. But as the years went by, we became more Conservative. His mother was a highly Orthodox woman. So at least I know the man was Jewish. I mean, this was nice to know. He got his divorce. I went with him a little over two years before we got married. And...

INT: What was the basis of the attraction to each other? What did you see in him, what did he see in you, do you think?

RITA: Well, I thought, we won't go back through all these years now, but at the time I found him to be very compassionate, feeling, would let me voice opinions. Which was very rare for me. I was never allowed to do that, even with my mother. I could voice the opinion, but her word was the final word. I found him to be caring. He was good-looking, which certainly didn't deter from the relationship. At first, I didn't know whether he was attracted to me because of where I was and what I was doing, that he saw what I was doing. I remember at the beginning, I took it a little easy. I just did not accept all the dates. I was a little worried about why he wants to date me. But later I found out that I was sort of the exact opposite of this wife that he was married to.

INT: Opposite in what way?

RITA: He found me not to be cold. That whatever he said, I would listen to. I was very, it could come from what I was doing, or places that I worked. I was a regional secretary for Arthur Murray for about eleven years. So I really travelled with him. But I was very personable with people. People and I always got along. I sort of had the knack of bringing people out. And if I didn't I knew eventually it was not me. It had to do with another party. Not that, you always would like to think that everybody you meet and you talk to, like you. I would go around thinking everybody likes me. And you grow up to feel, well, some people don't like you for their own reasons, whether they just don't like you, or they're envious. A lot of people were very interested in my background when they found out where I was born. It's the kind of a thing where they ask. Like going through geography, like, "Where do you come from and where were you born?" "Well, I was born in Vienna." "What? How?" And I very lightly skimmed over it. I didn't feel that it was important to say everything. But of course they do.

I remember my husband asking me, "Well, do you have brothers, sisters?" "No." "Mother?" "Yes." "Never been married before?" "No." Standard questions. Whether he found that intriguing, I don't know. But he treated it with kid gloves.

INT: So he found you warm, and that you would listen to him kindly, or respectfully, or whatever.

RITA: Yes. Of course, if I look back now I realize that he was listening to me, but, and of course, you get all kinds of signals, you're just too young, you just don't know. If things still, he wanted it his way. And of course I fell into that mold, not even knowing it, because of my mother. Because I didn't want to upset an apple cart, whatever she wanted me to do, even if there was a fight involved, I ended up doing it because I felt guilty not doing it. But you brush those things aside. But we got married...

INT: So you're saying, he saw in you someone who would sort of be accommodating, and demonstrative, and go along with him, and...

RITA: Entertaining people. I mean, wherever he wanted to go, I would go. He was very nice to my mother. I think the family was giving him a hard time, because I never dated anybody that was married before, let alone getting a divorce, yet. So we had to weave through all that. And I felt it worth fighting for, which I did. And...

INT: His family accepted you?

RITA: Uh-huh. I had no problems.

INT: And your mother accepted him?

RITA: No. (laughs) She accepted the idea, finally, that I was going to marry him. I don't think in her lifetime that she accepted him fully. She didn't like, at times, the way he spoke to me. People in her time didn't talk to other people like that. She, too, grew up with whatever your

husband says, you do. And I fully believed that when I got married. I didn't have any other kind of vows to take. I took the ones that say: Obey. I mean, this was it. I didn't realize, though, how much I had to obey, because I think when you grow up without a father, or a mother that has to work, and you're out there in the nursery schools, you don't see them that often, you tend to think for yourself, and then I found myself feeling guilty, for thinking for myself. I shouldn't be doing that. So it's sort of like, when I went to New York with her, if we got onto the wrong train, as long as she was holding my hand, I knew that I couldn't get lost, because she would see to it that I would get there. The end result would be there. So I guess I went into the marriage that way, too. It was like, my mother took care of me, and now I got married and now my husband is going to take care of me.

INT: But even for her, his manner of talking to you was too much. A little too much.

RITA: Yes. She didn't like, she never did, it never changed, she found that the conversations that he had always dwelled on money. How much he had, how much he made, she found, or felt that he could be a little more respectful when he walked into a home, when he saw her. "Hello, Mom, how are you?" It happens sometimes; I would say the majority of the times, it did not. And I tried very hard when she would come to the house, to keep everything on a very even keel. I would never, ever, in my life, want her to hear the way he would sometimes talk to me. It would hurt me for her. So, and I think he knew that. So he would go along his merry way, and purposely say something, knowing that I would not say anything. I would just let it ride by. I just felt she had gone through so much in her lifetime, and she had never dated, that I don't want to add any more aggravation. I just wanted her to see a very happy home. And she saw it, but Mom was too clever. Mothers, I think, are.

INT: I know.

RITA: What's next?

INT: Okay. So you were talking about her reaction to him. And I guess what I would like you to talk about is your perceptions of your relationship with him, and how things progressed through the years, and what you thought, and what you felt, and how you coped, and what you thought he might have been thinking. I mean, you were married for how many years before...

RITA: I was married 26 years.

INT: So it's really the story of 26 years.

RITA: I would say within 26 years and two children, he became more powerful. Not only in his strength, but in money. It became his first priority. Everything else took second. Of course, if one of the children got sick, or whatever it was, he was right there. But as soon as he saw that they were better and it wasn't serious, he went back to whatever he had to do.

I think I can sum 26 years into what made me finally make this break, which is not that I thought about it, just for two months, is that I realized that somewhere along the way, and I know this is

standard talk, I lost me. I felt completely and utterly controlled. And I didn't like to be controlled.

INT: When did you realize that?

RITA: Oh, I realized that probably in my 20th year of marriage, but I worked on it, and the more I worked on it, the more it just didn't happen. It was, it was fighting, it was, then it was okay again.

INT: So for 20 years, you didn't have, you didn't feel controlled. You weren't aware of it, or...

RITA: I was aware of it, but I didn't know how drastically I was aware of it. I found that I never ever had to say to my children, "Wait till your father comes home." I was the disciplinarian at all times. I believed in that. He was there, with his checkbook, or whatever, when they were young, when there wasn't so much power, and there wasn't so much money; yes, there were weekends, there were times spent with the children. You went to playgrounds, you went to Disney World with them. But...

INT: Would you say that that was a happier time?

RITA: I think that when people don't have so much money, and they don't have the power I think that goes with it, I think you're happier.

INT: So it was happier for you, and you were happier with him.

RITA: Yeah. There were other things. Sam decided that he would like to have other sexual partners. And that went on for a good fifteen-something years. And I just, I did look the other way. I can admit that now. Mainly because I sort of said to myself, it doesn't touch me, and it's not touching my children. But I also felt guilty, because I felt it was my fault. And because Sam is so controlling, and I say is, not was, is, and he has that kind of charisma with people with so much money can handle it, he refused to let me go for help. Because when I realized, maybe there's really something wrong with me, there has to be, he never let me go. He didn't want anything to ever be on record. And little did I know that these things that are on record never come out. They're all confidential.

INT: So you would say to him, did you admit your knowledge of what he was doing?

RITA: No. No. I'd hint at it. I hinted at his little affairs. And he laughed and said, "Oh, you're just crazy." But he has always, and to this day, has considered me, and I say that now, because I know through therapy what's happened, a cold frigid bitch, and he had no qualms about saying that in front of me or anyone else.

INT: For many years.

RITA: For many years. He had, I believe when Tracy was about a couple of months old, he had an abscess fissure, that he was taken into the hospital with. And he had a certain bed made for him that was very hard for him. I just couldn't sleep in that bed, it was impossible. So I just stayed in the baby's room for a while, and around that time, also, I found out about an affair he was having with someone. I just couldn't bring myself to get into that bed anymore with him. And I really thought by the time Will came along, I was going to really take off. I had had it. There were two or three affairs down the road.

INT: So just give me, was that six years into the marriage?

RITA: That was already six years into the marriage it was happening. But things held me back. Number one, he threatened that they would take my child away from me. The second threat was, "Your mother will have a heart attack." That threat I knew would happen. I mean, in her world, and of course, the way she brought me up, and in my world, you get married for better or for worse, no matter what, you stick with it. And I thought, well, this is the way it's going to be. There was no one at that time that I could talk to. No one. There were no doctors...

INT: Friends?

RITA: I think the closer the friend was, the more I didn't open up to my friend, because they saw something entirely different. They saw that I was living in a larger apartment, Rolls Royces started to drive up. It was very difficult to admit a failure that I felt that was mine, entirely. There was no 50/50 or 40 whatever. It was mine. I believed it.

INT: So he was acting this way because something was missing in you, wrong with you...

RITA: That's the way it went. And it went on, and it went on, and the affairs went on, and then when I was married about 22 years, no about 23, close to 25 years, my children gave us an anniversary party. And at that time, right around that time, he was having a heavy affair. And I knew that somehow this would have to resolve itself, because this was now touching me, and it was touching my children. The absolutely, he went open with it in the city. He didn't care who knew.

INT: And so your children knew. For the first time?

RITA: My children knew for the first time. So I heard. Now I just recently found out that my daughter knew about two others, and never came out with it.

INT: So you're talking about children who were then teenagers?

RITA: Tracy was about 22. 21, 22, and Will's about three years younger than she was. And of course he didn't, he wasn't around too much, because he was in Sarasota for high school, and he was in Boca Raton College, so it really felt to me and my daughter, even though she was in Florida, but she was the one. I sheltered her, and I sheltered him from it. Because I really didn't

know what I was going to do. And she had called me once in Florida and she told me that she saw her father and she saw her. And here I was.

INT: Before the party.

RITA: No, this is after. This is after. And here it was Thanksgiving here, and I went to Thanksgiving dinner with my son, and he was on the island or Florida with her. And I think that's what broke the straw on the camel's back for me. But I knew that before I could do anything, I would have to see someone, because I was losing weight, and that's always what happened to me, if I would be aggravated with anything. Whether it was this, I call it, mental abuse, I wouldn't say that I was physically abused, perhaps maybe three or four times through the years I've been married, but I just take that with a grain of salt. I mean, he wasn't out to kill me, I hope. And the children were witnesses to that. And that's when they were much younger. But I knew that I needed some kind of professional...

(END TAPE FOUR, SIDE ONE)

(TAPE FOUR, SIDE TWO)

INT: So you still thought it was your fault, and you wanted...

RITA: I always thought everything was my fault. And no matter what, I could be right about anything. I was usually right when it came to children, but when it came to anything else, I was never asked. What I mean by that is, I never knew that he bought this house. He just bought this house. I didn't know about it. He came home one day, he said, "We're moving." I said, "Oh, that's nice." I cried for six months in this mausoleum. There wasn't anybody living here. He bought a place in Florida.

INT: When was that?

RITA: About eighteen years ago.

INT: So it was early. The kids basically grew up here.

RITA: Oh, sure. I had to school here, everything.

INT: What upset you, being away from your friends? Continuity?

RITA: It was uprooting the children, more or less. He always, always, through all the years, had always said, "I wish they would meet somebody Jewish." I finally screamed at him one day, "You know Sam, you wanted them to be Jewish children, you never should have moved them out of Cherry Hill. You brought them into a WASP neighborhood. They went to school. She was the only Jewish kid in her class. Who do you want her to meet?"

INT: And he never realized that...

RITA: I think, I don't know if I've ever said that to him, that's his fault. He didn't think about that. So we switched Will from school to school here. He's not a student. [break in tape]

I could never, all the money at my disposal, which he said was at my disposal, I still had to ask for everything other than if I was going to the market, or if I wanted to go out and buy something. If I would ask, I found out years ago, if I would ask, he would say to me, "Do you really need it?" And that sort of put a damper on everything. I said, "Oh, my God, I'd better not do this." I never realized, or in my subconscious, just how wealthy the man was, and even though he tried to tell me, I'm sure it was a hundredfold more. But he kept me at a level, I mean, you could put me against the wall and say, "Well, how much does the business bring in every week?" I don't know. I think, again, subconsciously, I didn't want to know. I think he would have loved for me to come in and again work in that office, and I just didn't want to do it.

INT: Why was it better not to know?

RITA: It was too complicated. If I would know, then I would feel that I would want to put my input into something, and it would be taken as nothing. If he came home and asked me something about it, I finally realized and would say to him, "I don't know why you're asking me. You're just going to go ahead and do whatever you want to do." So if he was in a quandary about anything, my favorite line to Sam was, "I have faith in you. It'll be fine." And it was.

You live in a house for eighteen years, the house has never been decorated. At the beginning, the excuse was, the children will ruin it. I don't know what the excuse was later on. But I don't remember the children ruining anything in this house.

INT: So it sounds like he was...

RITA: Very domineering.

INT: Generous and withholding, depending on his mood, or whatever.

RITA: He was very generous, charity-wise, in any way, but I think the children and I would have liked him to be more generous with his time, and the feelings that he showed for them when they were very young. It would have been nice if that feeling kept going. I feel that they did have an absent father, many, many times.

INT: Did they express that?

RITA: Yes. To this day. Tracy more than my son, Will. I tried very hard, and still do, when I even filed for divorce, I made it very plain to both children, "This has nothing to do with you. It's just between your father and I." And they were old enough to understand what I was trying to tell them. "No matter what," I said, "your father loves you, and you should continue loving him, respecting him." Will tried, and he tries now. My daughter has her own war with her father. And it hurts me when I think about that, because, which I've already said to her, that I would

have given anything to have a father, even if he was mad at me all the time, or even a grandfather now. She's very, very strong. I think that she has a lot of Sam Rappaport in her and doesn't even know it. She's the dominating one. Where at times now, she tells me what to do, and I have to step back.

INT: Would you say that over the years, before you finally decided you needed to do something, between the time you said, "Maybe I should get out," and didn't, until the time that you did get out, that there were happy times and sad times, did it ebb and flow, times that you felt closer to him, and times more distant, times loving and times angry?

RITA: I don't think you can be married that many years, and not have happy memories as well. I just, I knew that if I stayed with him, and that would have been a very easy choice for me to do, it would just go on as it did, and probably have gotten worse. Because now he was flaunting someone. He was rubbing my nose into it. When I finally got the right help, it took a long time for me to believe what these doctors, and it wasn't only one, were trying to bend to my brain. And it took a long time, because you've got so many years behind you, thinking one way. Where they would finally come down to it and say, "Rita, there is no such thing as a cold, frigid bitch. There are poor lovers." And that whatever fear that you had, which was the kind of fear, that if sex was brought up to me later on in life with my husband, I would start to shake. Because it was always painful. There was never any romantic, or romance in this. It was just a duty that I really felt, if I said no, I would always know when there was someone else. But I said no more out of not wanting to go through that anymore. That pain. I felt completely drained, disintegrated almost, after an act like that.

The sorry part about it, even going through therapy is, it will probably, I wish I had that many years ahead of me. I wish, perhaps, I did it much earlier. Because children are affected no matter what age. It will probably take much longer for me ever to have a relationship with another male. I've got a long way to go with that. Because no matter what I know to be true, it's very hard to have another male and just go into a relationship, without being afraid. And that's what he left me with.

But if I look back, and there are times, I look through albums, I look through affairs we went to, I was very happy. I think that at that time, I could actually say to myself -- of course the doctor would say, "No, no, no, you can't go through life like that" -- I said, well, I did, I would go through life being very happy, going to the affairs, going to the speeches, answering the questions, because I was very good at it. And I thought: if I could just do this, and stay away from this horrible sex, I'd be fine. Well, that's not normal. I knew that. And I was trying to block all of that out. And I realized that this whole thing was not my fault. And here all these years I was blaming myself. Thankfully, I didn't raise my children that way.

INT: Which way?

RITA: I never put any kind of fear into them, as far as relationships were concerned. The only kind of fear I put into them was to be very careful with what you can get today. I mean, but he never had those conversations with his daughter. I was the one that taught them about sex. And

no matter how much I detested the act itself, I just turned it around and made it very beautiful for the children. I didn't want them to be afraid of it. I wanted them to be afraid of what it could cause. What your outcome would be.

INT: Was it that bad for you since the beginning, or it just got bad as the problem...

RITA: It was bad. It wasn't as bad, but it was bad from the beginning, and I just thought, well, you know you just think of crazy things. Well, after all, he was married for thirteen years, and he got married to me, and to him it's like picking up his fourteenth year of marriage. For me everything is very new. Well, maybe this is the way it's supposed to be. We didn't talk freely about those things then. But only in the last, what, five, ten years, are all these things coming out where you're free enough to talk about it. And I listen to it and I thought, my G-d, I'm really not alone in all of this. It's around.

What tomorrow will bring, I don't know. But it was a very, very, hard, very hard decision for me to make, to break that.

INT: How did you cope for those years? One way you coped was by thinking it was your fault. So, I guess you beat yourself up.

RITA: Oh, yeah. I excused his affairs with that. Because I said, "Well, I can't expect him to be a monk." But he was mean with it. He just, if I said, "I know about this one and that one," he'd say, "Well, what do you want me to do, live like a monk?" And that made me feel bad. That was another guilt trip I went on. "You don't want to do anything." All right, in his estimation, I wasn't doing anything. But I was busy all the time.

INT: You had happiness with the children?

RITA: Yes.

INT: And as you say, the speaking, the involvement with the community...

RITA: Yeah, I was always involved in something.

INT: And you could experience happiness. You could sort of switch the channel and say, "I feel happy now."

RITA: It's very easy. It's called being a good actress.

INT: Well, I'm asking how real it was. I realize for the outside world you looked fine.

RITA: I looked fine.

INT: But inside of you...

RITA: It was terrible. It was almost like being an alcoholic and trying to hide it. Or something like a drug addict, or something. And very few, very, very few, I can name on one hand and have enough fingers left over, that saw it, that realized, and wanted me from a long, long time ago to seek help. Or they tried to help me. Because there were one or two I could talk to about eight years ago, or whatever. And whatever I was told to do, I did. Well, it would always backfire. Because it wasn't me. I mean, I couldn't take myself personally and turn myself over in eight hours, or twelve hours. Oh sure, you could say, "Okay, tonight I'm going to do this." Well, you go ahead, and you go through the steps, and you realize you're not doing this freely, you're doing it because you set it up to do it that way. Because I felt I was going through a play. And the ending was not what I wanted. It just wasn't there. And I think that if he hadn't flaunted this last little thing in front of my children, I still might be with him. The break for me was the hardest thing I ever had to do. I loved that man, no matter what. But his conception of love was entirely different. It was obey, and do, and it wasn't in my book anymore.

I can't say that I just grew up. I feel like I'm still developing. But I felt that I don't want to use anything for a crutch. I don't want to say, "Listen, I've been through enough as a child. My mother's gone." And that was another reason. I just stayed where I was because of my mother. She died nine years ago, and I still was here. But I didn't want to say, because of my mother, and because of my childhood. I just wanted things to be quiet. I mean, what goes on in the outside world, when you get dressed and you're in front of all these people, and the flashbulbs are going, that's another person, even though it's me. You can block out the rest of the world, because you're there. As I said, I feel like you're on stage. Because I was a professional dancer, I could just slip right into that. But I could not slip out of one personal feeling. I was too soft.

Where he had mentioned, for many, many years, "Well, Rita, you do have one thing. You have a good heart." And if that was a crime, because it seemed to be, that's what he would throw up, I didn't think that was a crime. And I think I did that because it was replacing what I wasn't getting. I could not sit down and have a conversation about my feelings, and get a response, even if his response was not what I wanted to hear, but to actually pull it apart and talk about it, and see where those feelings were coming from, I couldn't do that. I couldn't do that.

INT: Because he wouldn't listen, or you couldn't share it?

RITA: No, he wouldn't listen. I couldn't share that with him. If I would try it, and if the phone would ring, he would never say, "Let it ring. This is more important." Or, "I'll call you back, it's business." And the mood was lost. I didn't want it anymore. It took so long to get me to that point, where I wanted to even talk about it to him. And I think when I served he just said in front of my daughter, "Your mother wants a divorce. I don't want one." And of course I always knew why he didn't want one. He doesn't want to split his empire up. But that didn't even enter my head. The money part of it did not enter my head. I wanted to not have the knot in my stomach. I wanted to be able to breathe. And I wanted to be able to say what I wanted to say, without someone saying to me, "You're stupid."

And he told my daughter, "Well, your mother doesn't like sex and I have to have sex every day, twice a day." And I'm looking at him thinking, "The man's 62 years old, come on." But I'm

thinking. I'm not even going to voice that opinion. But Tracy went around and said, "Well, why wouldn't you want a divorce?" I mean, she knew, and it was the first time that she voiced her opinion on it, and she will say whatever she wants to, at any time. It doesn't matter who's there.

INT: But it was the first time she said it to him. It was after you decided to divorce.

RITA: Yeah. He already had been served.

INT: So she confronted him with the knowledge that she knew.

RITA: I think he knew she knew. He had to see her down there. And I think what, another thing that was really bad is the girl was married. The girl was Tracy's age. So she would, she did say one thing, probably erase this one. She said, "Dad," -- quietly -- "it's like fucking me. How does it feel?" I mean, you know, my mind went when she said that. But I knew what she was trying to say. But she went through a whole thing with, the girl is married, she just had a baby, and they're still together. So it wasn't the kind of fly-by-night kind of thing, where this is one week, and that's the end of it. It went on for over two years. And I had known exactly what was happening for at least nine months, and I couldn't do anything about it. I wouldn't do anything about it, until I got myself back; mentally, physically I was a wreck. But that's how it hit me. It isn't so much what he did, it's how he did it. That's where it was.

INT: And you're saying it was with cruelty.

RITA: Oh, yeah. It was no, I can't do this to my wife. I just didn't deserve what he did, especially when his first wife did it to him and he got rid of her. So history repeats itself. I, on the other hand, I wouldn't even think about a thing like that. I mean, you're married. I have no, I mean, it's happened to me, where I've gone out and done speeches by myself, or I'm in company with other men, and yeah, they'll flirt, and I'll be very nice, but that's where it ends. I mean, even if I, which I did, look, I married very happily, and that's it. And they would back off, and yet be very friendly with me. It wasn't like I'm stringing them along and now I'm telling them. They knew up front. And anyone that knew me, knew that. So...

INT: Were the kids supportive?

RITA: Very. I told my son that I would not do anything and tell him, or call him on the phone and tell him what I would be doing. He knew that I was coming to a decision. I said that I would tell him in person. Which I did. I flew down and told him. And the only thing he said to me was, "Look, Mom, I just want you to be happy." And that's both children.

INT: Did they know you were unhappy before?

RITA: There were times. They would find me. If he would come in, or she would come in, and I was sad. I never liked to cry in front of the children. I guess they would see it, and they would say, "What did Dad do now?" I would say, "Nothing." "Come on, Mom." Before it was my mother. "Did Mom upset you?" But I felt a very, I don't think I'll ever find a loss like that

again. If God forbid, one of my children, but when my mother died, I felt a loss that was the end of the bloodline for me, and I remembered that it was my son, and Jessica Savitch, when she was alive, and my daughter, who held me up at the funeral. Not my husband. There were times when Tracy went into the hospital for operations. I had never, ever heard from him, where he would put his arm around me and say to me, "Don't worry, honey. It's going to be all right. " Never.

INT: So you really stood on your own.

RITA: Yeah. Even though I knew that nothing would happen to me. He was there to sign the check or...

INT: It's like being strong and weak at the same time.

RITA: Yes.

INT: Because you had to cope with everything all alone.

RITA: Everything.

INT: You couldn't get out from under his control. What did Jessica say? Your childhood friend must have seen your unhappiness.

RITA: She would talk to me sometimes, but again, Jessica was going through a bad time herself. Her husband had just committed suicide. She didn't know what the hell she was doing in her career. She was dating Gary Hart, who was here, and she didn't know whether she could do that and continue her career. She went through a lot of things. Jessica's only here sitting shiva with me. Jessica would come in for one or two days when she was all riled up. And she loved Sam, and she loved me. And of course when Jessica was around, I really didn't have those kind of problems. I didn't have the verbal abuse, or the, I just didn't have that. So to someone else who was looking in, oh, this is wonderful. But I've learned that if I see a marriage that is perfect, I think to myself, it is not perfect. The marriages that you see when they're bickering at the table, or whatever it is, but it's cute, you know this is very normal. But for someone who is constantly "honey," and "dearing," and, I mean, they protest too much, or whatever the word is. So I'm always leery about things like that.

Is the girl afraid of him. And I've been out with many couples, where I find if I'm with a girl alone, it's wonderful. You're with the husband, they shut up. It's almost like they're afraid to say anything. And many times I would be places, and I was in a conversation, somebody asks me a question, I'd answer it, and he would kick me under the table. And I think to myself, "What am I saying wrong now?" And I thought, "Well, I'll hear about it later." And I'd hear about it. And it was nothing. It was nonsensical dribble. Just that he was in control. He never used to do speeches. I did speeches. I got standing ovations, he decided to do them. So...

INT: Do you understand him based on his background?

RITA: Yes. I think his father was very much like him. Again, his mother, I don't know if it was an arranged marriage or not, but she came in from Russia or somewhere, and then the father married her here. But for all the time that I knew his father, he died the year we had our honeymoon, we got married. But for those two years prior to that, the way his father treated his mother, I would say, dear G-d. I mean, it wasn't too nice. It just wasn't too nice. I felt he treated her like a little rag. Afterward, when he died, and as I say she's very Orthodox, her crutch was the synagogue. And she died, as a matter of fact, going to a synagogue. She dropped something, and she was going to do something to do with the stone. But you just feel that if someone comes out of that kind of environment, out of Brooklyn with a lot of kids living in small apartments, he had no right to turn around to me later and say, "Did you ever think, when you were a little girl, that you would be out of that basement, cellar apartment, and look what you have today." And I used to say to him, "And where did you come from?" But that didn't matter. It was as if he gave me and did for me. Otherwise, I wasn't any slut on the streets somewhere, but he would like to have thought that.

INT: So he's one of many children?

RITA: One of six. Six, five. Large family.

INT: And you say the family was supportive of you. And still are?

RITA: Yeah. I mean, this just happened, two weeks ago, three weeks ago, this shower, and they were all there. There's another bar mitzvah in March, and his father's sister, and his brother's, I'm sorry, his father's brother's wife. They told me straight out that I don't want to stay with him. That he's gone a little bit too far this time. So this is the second time they come to me, and we go together. We sit together. I think they're all very polite to him. I think all people are polite to him. I think that a lot of people are intimidated by him. And in turn, there are a lot of people that meet me, that have never met me before, that feel intimidated by me, thinking that high society, their nose in the air, which is. Thank G-d I didn't change. I think that if I would have changed, it would have been harder for me.

INT: When you finally broke through, and got the help, and decided, did you begin to share with friends, did you begin to open up and confide and get support?

RITA: Once I opened up, they opened up, and I found out things that I had guessed at, but didn't know. And it made me feel better that I did make the break because it was almost, most of the reaction I got, throughout the entire city, not one person asked me why did I file. They just said, "Well, I'm glad you took a stand," or, "It's about time." Nobody every questioned on why. They all knew why before I even knew why.

INT: Were you upset that they didn't say anything, they didn't encourage you?

RITA: No. I think people that do that, it's like an interference, because they don't really know what I'm thinking. I very easily could have just said, "Well, we have an open marriage." And

went along. But I don't think I could have lived that way. So, and I probably would be here another 28 years, if he didn't flaunt this thing, where it hurt me and the children and all the relationships that we made. I mean, you just don't do that.

INT: But you're glad now.

RITA: Yes. There is no question about it. There are times when you get a little soft and you look back, and you go and they say, wait a minute. And if you do, do you want to go back to this? I said no. So that sort of...

INT: So tell me the process of finding yourself, and what have you found?

RITA: Well, I found out that I can make decisions. I found out that I certainly, well, I could always balance a checkbook, but I can certainly live very nicely, and I'm not afraid to stay in the house. But just making decisions, even big ones, by myself. Eating when I want. Drinking when I want. Even smoking when I want. It's just a freedom that I feel inside that I don't feel like whatever I do, if I'm dropping something, I can't say, oh, hurry up before he comes home and sees this. It's my mistake, and I have to deal with it. If I say something wrong to someone, and I realize that, I'm sorry for it. And I say I'm sorry. It's difficult still to say no, if I'm asked to do something, and I know that I've got so many things going on. I can't say no. Sometimes I find myself saying, "I have a doctor's appointment, I can't go." But how many doctors can you see in one week? (laughs) But if someone asks me for dinner, or if they want me to go for a weekend, I know that even though I'm saying I can't make it for a very valid reason, I could do it if I wanted to do it. And I didn't have to ask permission. If I want a certain outfit, I could do that, without thinking, "Oh, G-d, it costs so much, the credit card, he'll kill me." They're normal feelings. Not that I couldn't do it before. It was just a little more restrained. Because I didn't want to feel guilty about doing this.

My children, my son, can come into the house on a Sunday with a group of friends, and go downstairs and play pool. They can walk through the house, I can have company for dinner, without hearing, "Would you please tell them to either leave the house, or be quiet? I'm sleeping." Well, that can go on all day. They have to tiptoe around. Or, "Could you stop the dogs from barking?" Well, I can't stop a dog from barking. So now, and it's much easier. The tension is off completely. I think the proof is that I gained what, ten, fifteen pounds, in two years. I haven't gained weight. I was 98 when I got married, and I was 98 when I filed for divorce. The only thing is now I have to buy a new wardrobe! (laughs) I'm the only one that gained weight and was happy about it.

Even when I got sick, and he knows what buttons to push. "Oh, honey! Is there anything I can get for you?" And I said, "No." You get sick, you get sick. You go down, you get your tea, you take your medicine, when you're real sick, you pick up the phone, you call the doctor. He comes. He doesn't come, you get in the car and go. So it wasn't like there isn't anything I've come up against where I absolutely would say to myself, "I can't do this, I really need Sam to do this for me."

INT: So you can manage your life.

RITA: Oh, yeah!

INT: You can make your decisions.

RITA: I mean, I did it before I married him. That's what I lost. And I've got a long way to go.

INT: What else did you find out about yourself?

RITA: That I wasn't ugly, that I was still talented. That I still could do the things that I once did, that I was told: Don't bother. We can have these things done. Well, meanwhile, they were never done. But I don't panic anymore if the water heater goes down, which it did. Just order another one. I need an electrician, you have to pay for him, I don't have to wait for two months. They come in here, and they do it. They're just things that I think, the little things that I learned. I learned that if I put my mind to it, and I hate to do it, I hate to cook, but I did cook all those years. I wanted to make something new. I made it. I didn't have to hear, stop trying. If it came out bad, it came out bad. I'll never do it again. I learned that I can hire help by myself. Without this tension of, if he found something wrong, he wouldn't tell them. I had to tell them, well, I didn't know what was wrong.

(END TAPE FOUR, SIDE TWO)

(TAPE FIVE, SIDE ONE)

INT: Your talents.

RITA: My talents.

INT: What are they, what do you do with them?

RITA: What do I do with them. My mother tells me I take after her sister, the one that died. I love working with my hands. It could be anything. Anything from sewing on the machine to sewing by hand, to needle-pointing, to making lamps. You name it. Half the things you see in this house, I've made. I love art. I love teaching.

INT: Teaching what? To whom?

RITA: Anything. Well, I taught dancing, before I was a teacher, I mean professional dancer. I like the idea of teaching.

INT: Do you do it?

RITA: I don't teach anymore. I still dance. If I'm not dancing out, I like to put the old tapes on, from the old music. I just don't like disco two hours at a time. It makes me, the same beat makes

me crazy. But I go from one to the other. But I can waltz through the house, or dance in the kitchen, the dogs are watching me.

I taught in this house anything from knitting to needle-pointing to crocheting. The girls used to get all together. I always felt I was a better teacher than I was a doer. But no, they tell me you're not. I'm not.

I like, well, I'm very coordinated, so I like to coordinate everything in the house. Like I would do this whole thing for her. I've done that here. Everything has a place. I just keep myself busy. I don't think there's anything that I haven't tried, even art work. I haven't taken classes in it, because it interferes, if I was leaving the city, or whatever it is.

The sports, I'm not too good at. I don't swim. I float. I don't play tennis. I can hit the ball. My children do that. Which I'm happy about. Usually if the parents can't do it, the children can't do it. I made sure my children can do everything I can't do, like bike ride, roller skate. I can't do any of those things. I like to go for walks.

INT: Do you feel in the world? Do you feel content, satisfied?

RITA: At times. But I think there's a lot more that I haven't even touched. But it's been a long time.

INT: What do you see in the future? What roads do you want to travel?

RITA: I think I would like to travel again. I like travelling. I don't know if I can, on such long excursions. But there are places I would like to see, or places that I'd like to go back to. I see that if possible I would like to move to a smaller house, but with everything that I have here, I don't think that I could go to anything, like a two-room apartment anymore. I like the freedom. But I don't need a 34-room house. I've got a grandchild coming, so that's something to look forward to. It's another life. I don't know. I think that I just have to take it day by day and not look too far into the future. I'd like to, if I'm starting something today, just finish it. I don't think I've reached any of what I consider goals. I think that if you don't have something afterward, you might as well lay down. You sort of never reach, even though you think you do, there should be something beyond that. And if my goal was to take every one of these rooms and furnish it out by myself, I might as well stay here for another twenty years. (laughs). I don't know. It's a decision, or these decisions I really don't think about too much. I know what I would like to do next week, or next month. I know that I want to go to Florida next month. I know there are things that I have to take care of down there. Who knows? While I'm down there something else might crawl into me.

INT: Do you enjoy going there?

RITA: Yeah. Well, I don't enjoy the winter here. I never did.

INT: And you have friends there that you connect with?

RITA: Yeah. I have bridesmaids there, as a matter of fact. But we all, they all have their own condos down there. And we do connect. And even though they live in the city, in the summertime I do not see them as much as in the winter. Because it's always breakfast together, and dinner together, and on the beach together. And we laugh together. Which to me is the best medicine in the world. I haven't been able to laugh for a long, long time. So we just laugh about the past, the present, even the future sometimes. But it's a good feeling, that you don't rush back for this or for that.

INT: And your kids know you're okay. They don't worry about you.

RITA: Oh yeah. They worry, like if I'm upstairs, if I'm not in the den at night and I'm upstairs lying in bed for some reason; last week, it got very cold, and I didn't feel well, so I went upstairs. Immediately, "Mom, are you okay? Do you feel all right?" I said, "Well, I have a cold." "Do you need anything?"

INT: But they're not worried about you making it?

RITA: No.

INT: You're okay, and being happy, and...

RITA: I mean, they both really have said, not anymore, but in the beginning, "Do you think you'd ever go back with Dad?" And I say, "I don't think so." And they gave me the impression that they would be very unhappy if I did, because I would not be happy. And they know...

INT: Kids are wiser.

RITA: Very. And they know that the happiness, of course, for my son right now, money's a big thing. He's twenty-one years old, he dates, but I think the way he talks is that it has to be more than this, than just signing a check, and that's Sam's power. And my daughter's come to say that she doesn't care. Other people have made her worry. I worry about her because she never had to ask for anything. It was just there. I've never asked for anything except my car. How do you explain to a child, "Well, you never asked for anything because I already knew what you wanted, it was there for you"? She doesn't know what it is to have without, or be without, and yet she's very good with money. She's not a spendthrift. And that doesn't come from me. Because when I was out with her, I was spending for her all the time. But she's her own woman now.

INT: How do you see her as a mother?

RITA: Strict. Strict. I hope she has a child like she was, an angel. I hope she doesn't have a child like Will was. He didn't shut his mouth. Cried. She still has it with him. It's drawn them closer, though. I find that they can sit, and they can talk. And I don't interfere, at all, unless I have to. Unless I know that there's something that's going to happen, and I better get in there.

INT: Can I ask you a little bit about her situation? Should I turn it off?

RITA: I think so.

[break in tape]

INT: Just a broad open-ended question, about as you look over your life, and your childhood, and her legacy, how would you describe the sort of impact of your mother's experience on you? The good of it, and the bad of it.

RITA: Well, that's a big one. I think the good of it for me was being able to really be a little bit more compassionate and understanding when people have a problem. More so, the impact comes up with one word, and it's like survival. I mean, she taught me to survive anything. And when I get down in the dumps, and I look back, I say, my mother did this, and she did it alone. And she taught me. And I find I'm doing it alone. And I'm happy that she instilled that into me.

[break in tape]

RITA: The bad part. I think the bad part was, and it's really not a failing, I think it is just a feeling that she had, that she never opened up and told me what her feelings were, or let me see what was happening in her life with the very beginning with my father, and even after we knew he was dead. She let me just go along. And all the feelings were later. But I can understand it. It's hard to open up to your children, or let them see that you're hurting.

INT: Because the belief is that you're protecting them. What you're doing is keeping them in the dark.

RITA: And I do it, without even knowing it. It's an instinct.

INT: Protect them.

RITA: Right. I'm glad that I do have documents, letters, which make it better for me to understand. It wasn't until recently when I started to delve into this, maybe ten years ago, that I could say, I was born in Vienna, yes, I came out of the Holocaust, and understand exactly what I was saying. It wasn't like a survival because I was there, but it's the same thing. I think that children, mothers, or whatever, that were here and left people there, went through just as much. I mean, just thinking about it. Physically they didn't do it. Mentally we went through it. And sometimes mentally is worse, because you just don't know. You are, you feel so helpless, that there's nothing you can do to help.

INT: And for some people, guilty.

RITA: Yes. Well, I've gone through a guilt period there where I sometimes went through where I'd say, why were my mother and I saved? What purpose? I mean, I have to be here for a purpose, what is that purpose? Beside your children. Is there another purpose? And you never

find the answer to that. Maybe someday. Or if you always, when I grew up you were always reading something, or the rabbis were always telling you how much pain you have to go through in order to be accepted. This was in Orthodox. And I thought to myself...

INT: Accepted...

RITA: Suffering. Like G-d has a certain way of making you suffer to see how much you can handle. And I would say, maybe I didn't suffer enough. Maybe that's why things are happening like it is. And then I say, no. You talk to yourself. No. But...

INT: Well, what did you believe when you thought that way, was the end result of the suffering?

RITA: There never was an end result.

INT: So it wasn't suffering to get something.

RITA: No. No. I think if, like in Tracy's case, when she went through that back operation, she was laid up pretty much for close to two years. And I would say sometimes, the child has suffered enough, G-d. Let up a little bit. But...

INT: So you believe in G-d.

RITA: Oh, yeah.

INT: And you talk to Him.

RITA: Oh, sure. I think sometimes it wavers a little bit, when I hear of all this killing, and all this destruction, and yes it is true. When you think long and hard enough about the Holocaust, I say, my G-d, if there was, why did He let all this happen? And then again, I'm not G-d. I always was taught G-d has a reason to do everything. It would be nice if I could deviate Him a little bit on certain things, but G-d, you have to take it with faith. And I think there are times where I say, no, there's no G-d. But that doesn't last too long. I feel that at times I do use it as a crutch. I find that I don't thank Him enough. I'm always talking to Him when I need something, or something goes wrong, and I try very hard to sometimes just pray, or do things that have nothing to do with asking. With thanking. We forget. I don't think He forgets, but we forget.

But as I look back on my life, I can't say it was a disaster. I can't say that. I think that she gave me all the love, all the protection, that she was capable of giving. And she was 100% right when she said, "Wait until you have your own." We never think that way, but it's true. I just try to keep her memory alive, and sometimes I do things and say, "My mother would enjoy this." So it isn't sometimes just for me.

INT: So you don't fault her for teaching you to be taken care of by your husband, which led to the...

RITA: No. Well, by taking care of, she was not around, really to take care of me. I faulted her no more at one time because for eight years or more, from 6:30 in the morning until 5:30 in the afternoon I didn't see her. I was in the nursery. As a matter of fact today I think it's called Paley. And I don't know how many more alumni there are, but I'm it, when I go. And I realized that it wasn't her fault. She had to go to work. So I made myself a promise, if at all that I could keep it, that when I had children, I would not work. I would be here for them every single second of the day. When they go, when they come.

INT: And that gives you satisfaction.

RITA: Yeah. I was here, so I couldn't say to myself, well, my children did this, or they did that because I just wasn't around. I was around. I don't know if the same things would have happened if I wasn't around. But she wasn't around for me, and what she did, was teach me to do these things by myself, because she wasn't around. And even though I thought I lost that, I know that once that's instilled in you, it will come back. I've learned that in the last two years. Sure you make mistakes, and I feel like a little girl again. But I can reason it out. I don't jump to the conclusion right away. I think it out this time. So I don't fault her at all. I think that she had a lot of guts to do what she did in a strange country with no one here. And there was a lot of pressure on. You can't raise this child. But she did.

INT: What do you think is important to do, vis-à-vis the Holocaust, and society, in terms of education, or memorial, or writings, I mean, what's your view on that?

RITA: I think that these children today learn about the Holocaust when they're too old. I compare it now with Haley that just died. I compare it with Martin Luther King. I mean, you've got children in kindergarten going through Black History Week. And they're educated for one week on nothing but their heritages. We're not. I'm sure, I told you before, you can open up an encyclopedia and find all you want about black history. You can't find that word, the Holocaust in that Britannica.

INT: Well, groups have worked on Holocaust curriculum for state schools. People have worked on Holocaust curriculum for Philadelphia schools. There's the memorial every year. There's the museum now in Washington, etc. What do you think about all of these things?

RITA: I think it's great, but I don't think in schools, it isn't something they have to do. They're given a choice. It's a one-day holiday. I don't know of any school that takes a kindergarten class, or a first grade class, to the Wall.

INT: Which wall, what do you mean?

RITA: Not a wall. We have a statue we put up, as a matter of fact, in Center City.

INT: Who's we?

RITA: My husband and myself.

INT: The memorial statue.

RITA: Right.

INT: You supported that financially?

RITA: Yeah. Sam and I put it up, and then mostly, it's all our financial. And of course, they marked it all up on time, we had to go down and do it all over again. I guarantee you no kindergarten, no first grade, I don't think a fifth grade student knows what that is.

INT: You're talking about generally non-Jews, or you're talking about in the Jewish schools?

RITA: All schools. You could talk about a Jewish school. The Jewish school knows that this week is Black History Week. Talk to any child, they're going to tell you that. I know when I go out and I talk, I don't give that kind of a speech, it's like that, but it's on their level, it's the first time they ever heard about it.

INT: Are you talking about Jewish kids?

RITA: Jewish kids. In schools, but not in the Akibas. And I don't know what they do there.

INT: There's a lot of education.

RITA: In the Akibas?

INT: In the Jewish day schools.

RITA: Right. But you're talking about normal schools. They're educated about Lincoln. And I know every year, for Martin Luther King. It's not one day. It's a whole damn week. Okay. Fine. That's wonderful. But what about the rest of it?

INT: So you believe it's important for society in general to know about the Holocaust.

RITA: Of course!

INT: And Jewish people in specific.

RITA: Absolutely.

INT: Do you see knowledge of the Holocaust as being important to Jewish identity?

RITA: Absolutely.

INT: Is it part of Jewish identity, and in what way? What do you think?

RITA: I think that if you're Jewish, somewhere, if you track your roots back far enough, they had to cross the Holocaust in some way. If they crossed it, it's part of their history. Somebody back there knew about it. They were alive when it happened. If they didn't pass the information on, the children who were here figured, "Well, we were born in America. We don't know anything about that." But I think I could take any Jewish family, and we're not tracking back that far, and find someone in that family.

INT: So what do you think happens to that family, when they pay no attention to the Holocaust?

RITA: I think they lose a lot of their heritage. I think that all of a sudden if a child is learning something later on in life in school about the Holocaust, that child will say, "I never heard of that. There's no such thing." Why wouldn't he say that?

INT: Even among Jews, you're saying.

RITA: Even among Jews. I think there are very few, I think they are coming out more and more now, even the survivors of the concentration camps are willing now to talk, a little. Some of them will not utter a word. You wouldn't know it unless you see the numbers on their arm. Now if they don't want to talk about it, and if they don't want to tell about it to anyone, they're not going to tell their own children, or their grandchildren. They probably don't even watch anything. Now I don't watch it, because I feel that half of it's fiction that they put on there. Unless they're going back on a documentary. Now, you take a child that's over five years old, and sit him in front of a screen with that. He's going to look at it like a Frankenstein movie.

INT: Well, they're not ready at that age for that.

RITA: But if you're going to tell them a story, anything from Shakespeare, you can make a child understand it, if it's written in their language. If you come down to their level. And if it has to be a book in cartoon form, they're still watching comics Saturday morning. A five-year-old? How about a four-year-old? They know what's going on. Somebody's hitting somebody else. If you bring it down to their level. I'm not saying do a whole documentary for children, but how does a dog or a child know its name? You keep repeating it when they're young. They don't understand it yet.

INT: And you think this is crucially important?

RITA: I think so.

INT: For the...

RITA: I did not, if I didn't tell my children that they were adopted, how crucial that would be later on. I believe things like that, that's a secret. That's a dark secret that everybody will find out eventually. Same thing with the Holocaust. And I think the later it is, the more of a shock.

And then they have every right to say, "Why didn't you tell me?" From the day they were born, that word, adoption, was in the vocabulary, as part of a story, every single day, and how did I do it when they were old enough? I did it through the dogs. We're going to go adopt a dog that doesn't have a home.

INT: I did it through the Superman story.

RITA: Whatever. You do it through the Superman story because that's the level that you're on. Now they have Sesame Street for G-d's sakes. Sesame Street did a thing for Black History Month. Whatever, whether it was ten minutes. Well, who are they dealing with in their audience? They have to still talk about murder, or hurting someone. I find today power, they give it to the boys. They absolutely let boys today think it's wonderful to harass girls and tease them. It happened to me. Running around the schoolyard. Boys catch girls. Stupid game. In reality, it's harassment of the girl. Me they harassed because I'm still wearing an undershirt. I never developed. But I think the earlier you do it, then later, if you add to it, it's not a shock. How did I know about it? I learned later. But because everybody in the neighborhood was there, and everybody talked about it, I think I knew about it earlier, but didn't understand it was me, it was my father. So, and again I don't blame her. That's the way they did it. But today, if I got married today, I'd be out of that damn situation in a year. Because you talk about things. I don't think you're ever too early to learn. I just think, they say that you're never too late to learn, either. But later on, you've learned so much in your whole lifetime that it's sort of hard for you to believe someone telling you this big story about the Holocaust. "Where were you all my life? I never heard anything about this." And I hear it. "There was no such thing."

INT: From?

RITA: Adults. Children. Teenagers.

INT: And that frightens you.

RITA: Yeah. I think that if it isn't put as part of history, and a lot of teachers don't like it, we'll lose it. And a hundred years from today when they say it never happened. It never happened. Who's going to be around? It might be taken out of the history books. Who knows?

All I know is that when Will went to school, I bought him a history book, I mean Daniel Boone was a very big thing to us when he went to school. That's a whole chapter. One paragraph. There's too much to learn. Well, I think the wives of the presidents and how they died are much more important than Daniel Boone. The priorities are all screwed up.

INT: Now your children learned by talking to your mother, right?

RITA: Talking to me.

INT: Because they were close to her, right?

RITA: Yeah. They learned it from me, but not in a scary way. I didn't want them to think that somebody would come and grab me away. And then they spoke to their grandmother about it. I was more verbal than she was. She just said, "Yes, it's true." Because they will come and ask, "Well, why don't I have a grandfather," and it's almost like trying to teach a child about death. I think I had it easy. I had dogs. They built their own cemetery up there. If that's the way it has to be done, because I know children that had never had, they don't know from this close death business. And how do you explain it? So I used my dogs, or the birds, or whatever I had. There is always something flying around.

INT: Have you ever thought of getting more involved, on an organizational level?

RITA: I was always involved on an organizational level. Whenever they needed me, I was there for it. But it wasn't one particular thing I was involved in. I don't think there's a charity in the city that I wasn't involved in. And I had to split...

INT: You mean Holocaust education, or Holocaust memorial, or...

RITA: No, I never got into it. At one time my cousin was writing children's books for pre-school and then went into first, second grade. And I watched all of the pictures come up, more like sketching, and every once in a while I thought, "What a hell of an idea to put into a charity thing," and then we did. We put it into a coloring book on a certain disease. And it was brought home to the children, in wheelchairs and all. And then I thought, "Wouldn't it be nice if you had one on the Holocaust like this, but don't make it so yucky that you wouldn't..."

INT: You don't feel compelled to do it yourself.

RITA: I could probably do it, if I could set my mind down to it. I think what annoys me...

INT: Because you're very passionate about it. You're very passionate about how you think children should learn about the Holocaust.

RITA: I just think children should learn. Children have no conception at that age of hate. They only know how to smile, how to cry. How to love.

INT: If they're in a loving environment.

RITA: Yeah.

INT: And not an abusive environment.

RITA: Well, that you can spot right away. Sometimes, and you really have to be educated to know. I'm not that far educated. I mean, I can see an unhappy child, but you can't show me a four-year-old or a five-year-old that doesn't love cartoons, or being happy. You give them a ball, they're happy. They're not old enough to know how to hate like that. Even in an abusive situation, I don't think it's hate. I think it's fear. Because they want the love of that particular

parent, and I think they might go through a very big guilt feeling. They're wrong. That's why they're getting hit. I mean, what else is going to enter their mind, but it's fear, it's not hate. You become afraid, first.

INT: Are you an optimist or a pessimist?

RITA: A little of both.

INT: Are you trusting, or non-trusting?

RITA: I trust too much. Much too much. Much, much too much.

INT: Do you see the world as good or evil?

RITA: I see it getting eviler. I think basically, people, the people that I know, basically everyone wants to be good. I think that they get caught up in things that they don't understand, and their thoughts become very evil. I don't know if they carry through. The ones that do, I don't even want to know. But they're just caught up. Maybe they just want to do this evil to be recognized. They're not recognized if they're good.

(END TAPE FIVE, SIDE ONE)

(TAPE FIVE, SIDE TWO)

INT: Feelings, thoughts, philosophy? What do you think?

RITA: Well, I know when I came down by plane, I cried when I saw all those Jewish flags flying. And then I got a little upset, because I came out of the plane, and all you see on the top are these young kids with machine guns pointing at you. I found it to be --it's been a long time -- I found it to be modern, I found the people to be very happy there. I don't know how happy they are right now with this influx of all these new people coming in there. I think that Israel can really stand, of course without the United States, I don't know how fast they would stand. I don't think that they get as much support as they should. I think they get enough money. The country is self-sufficient. I've never seen anybody up here can put vegetables into sand, and make them grow. But they do. They have that. The people that live there that are born there are very devoted to Israel, and they don't want to leave. Do I want to live there? No. Would I like to go there? Yes. If I could make a trip there two or three times a year, I would do it. They have more help and more support out there than, everybody there knows about the Holocaust.

INT: Did you go to Yad Vashem when you were there?

RITA: I was everywhere. They did not have any of the walls up, they didn't have any museums up.

INT: So this is a long time ago.

RITA: It's a long time. 28 years ago. But I still go through the slides, and I still look at them. I marvel at what they did, and hence, what they did. I think the country has a tremendous amount of control. Just this last thing that happened last year, with the bombings and all that. I don't know if any other country would have held back like that. I guess they're used to it. And they live with it day in and day out.

INT: Crucial for the Jewish people to have Israel?

RITA: Yes. I remember looking at a map, it wasn't exactly a map, it was a card. And it was a completely white-faced card, and on the right-hand corner, it was a cut-out. I mean, I think it was the size of my thumb. And when you opened it up, that cut-out was Israel. And the rest of it was the world, and it sort of made me feel like, this little spot, and they don't leave it alone.

So I don't think that today, the American Jews, the children, unless they're forced to go when they're thirteen, on their bar mitzvah, they have no interest in going. To Israel. I'm not saying on going on a trip. If they were going for a purpose. They're not interested.

INT: Do you know about the March of the Living? Where thousands of Jewish teenagers go to Poland for a week, the memorial, Yom HaShoah, the Holocaust...

RITA: From?

INT: From all over the world, and many from America, many from the Philadelphia area. There's another group going this April. They go on the memorial day for the Holocaust, spend a week at the memorial sites of the concentration camps, and then they spend a week in Israel.

RITA: I don't know if I'm up for that. I don't know if I'll ever be up to that. I know we'll have a lot to do with the tennis, Maccabi games, and things like that. And you see all these kids with the Jewish stars on them, from all over the country, which is nice to see.

INT: I think the last question for the tape. How do you feel about going through this process? How do you feel about this interview, what do you think about this project?

RITA: I think it's great. It's wonderful.

INT: You feel okay having gone through it?

RITA: Sure. I love things like that. I just hope that it does what it's supposed to do. Time will tell with that. And time will tell with me. (laughs)

(END TAPE FIVE, SIDE TWO)