

INTERVIEW WITH RITA ROSS

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**Transcending Trauma Project
Council for Relationships
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INTERVIEW WITH RITA ROSS

INTERVIEWER: So now we are meeting Rita Ross, who is a survivor, as well as a child of a survivor. And Rita, tell us a little bit about yourself today. Where you live, how old you are, your birthday and so on.

RITA: My birthday just passed. It was February 2nd. I'm 59 years old. I live in Wynnewood, Pennsylvania, which is a very lovely suburb of Philadelphia.

INT: And your address is?

RITA: It's 1220 Drayton Lane, in Wynnewood.

INT: Your phone number?

RITA: And my phone number is 642-2247, area code 610. I'm married, and I have five children.

My first, my two older boys are adopted. They were my husband's children, and their mother died. Actually, she was also a Holocaust survivor. Their mother died at the age of 28. And I was a school teacher, and I met my husband through one of my children, who was my student. And we got married after a two-week courtship.

INT: Two weeks?

RITA: Two-week courtship.

INT: You got married in two weeks?

RITA: Uh-huh.

INT: My goodness.

RITA: And we've been married for 31 years. (laughs) I will not say it's been all blissful, but it's been more blissful than miserable, and we had three **more** children. So I now have four boys and one daughter. My kids have all finished college. I have a son, my oldest son, my husband's son is an attorney, and my second son works at Blue Cross/Blue Shield, and my daughter just finished a PA program, Physician's Assistant. I have a son Kenny, who's 29. He is the vice president of Barney's, and my youngest son, David, is 25, and he...well, he is a school teacher, but at this point, he wasn't making enough money as a school teacher in California, so he became a parking lot attendant, and a surfer and a skier. (laughter) And I'm very proud of him. I'm glad that I raised one kid who's a free spirit.

INT: Okay. And you teach school yourself.

RITA: I teach first grade at Solomon Schechter. I've been here for about 19 years. I'm an **avid** musician. I take piano lessons, and I give piano lessons. As you can see, I have two pianos here, so I spend a lot of time playing the piano, when I have free time. I also take care of my mother, who is a survivor. She's going to be 87 on her next birthday. And she lives in an apartment in Merion with a companion, but I kind of look in on her three or four times a week. I take her shopping, to the doctors, and stuff like that.

INT: So if you could go back in time to some of your earliest memories, and you grew up where?

RITA: I was born in Austria, Vienna, and my earliest memory of the Holocaust, really, well, actually my earliest memory is of my father leaving our house in Austria. He was packing up to come to the United States. My father had a visa. And this was in 1939. My mother did **not** have a visa. And I had a brother. So there was my brother, who was eighteen months younger than I, and my mother and myself. My father came to America...

INT: And you were how old?

RITA: Three.

INT: You were three years old, and you remember him packing up?

RITA: I remember him packing up and leaving. And I remember then we went to Poland to stay with my mother's family. My mother is from Poland.

INT: So this would have been in what year?

RITA: 1939.

INT: In 1939, oh.

RITA: We went to Poland to stay with my mother's family there. My mother was the youngest of eleven children. There was a lot of family there. It was a **very**, very wealthy household. Many servants. There was a factory on the premises. And my brother and I just moved right in and stayed there with aunts and uncles and cousins. We stayed there for about two years or so, and then it became **very** bad for the Jews in Poland. And my father, in the meantime, got to the United States, and sent my mother all kinds of papers and other things there, lots of papers and lots of safe kind of identity. So let's see how to tell the story.

Well, we were in Poland, and one day we just left our house. A truck came by, and my mother, no, she changed our names. You know, I took on the name of Maria, and my brother took on a Polish name also, Tanek (?), or something, and we went and we stayed, and we kind of hid. We hid in Cracow, with people who would put us up. Christian people who put us up.

INT: And what was your last name?

RITA: My last name was Schmelkes. [spells it] But in Poland, when we were running, we changed our name to Kovalchek. And we kind of spent a night here and a night there. My mother paid people to put us up for the night. And that's what we did.

INT: And the household just sort of split up like that.

RITA: Yeah. Everybody ran in a different direction.

INT: Everybody went in a different direction.

RITA: Some people stayed.

INT: So you were, by this time, you were five years old. Do you remember any conversations, do you remember...

RITA: I remember being terribly frightened. I remember the Cracow ghetto **quite** well. We, well, before that, let me go back a little bit. The town that we lived in in Poland before we all split up was called Wielczka. That was a salt mine town. A lot of salt mines. We had relatives, uncles and aunts, well, mostly uncles who disappeared.

INT: Spell it.

RITA: Wielczka? W-i-e-l-c-z-k-a. There were people who disappeared in our lives. In **my** life. And nobody told me what happened to them. And I remember just wondering. There was a lot of, a lot of sadness suddenly. Um, my mother would kind of go away for the day. I never knew where she was going, and she'd come back late in the evening, and they don't really know what she was doing.

INT: You never asked.

RITA: I never asked. I would stand by the window and wait for her to come home, and worry, you know? I remember as a young child, I'd stand with a photograph of my mother. I pasted it on the window, and look and watch, wait for her to come home. And kind of will her to come home, and she did.

In the meantime, my father was **desperate** to get us out of Poland. And he was in Philadelphia at the time. I don't know the exact chronology of this, but I know he went to Town Hall, and he took an old Bible, and he had a chemist compound an ancient-looking ink for him, and he wrote a family tree in Yiddish on the front of the Bible, which was the way people recorded births years and years ago. He went to Town Hall with this Bible and said that his father-in-law -- which was my mother's father -- needs a birth certificate for social security, could she please give him one? So she typed up a birth certificate with my mother's maiden name on it, Reuben Perlberger, my father's, my **mother's** father, and my father sent this birth certificate to my mother. So when we were

finally picked up by the Germans, my mother showed them this birth certificate, and they interned us in a prisoner of war camp. So we did not go into a concentration camp. It was just a lucky break.

INT: And this said that you were born where?

RITA: That my grandfather was born in Philadelphia. Now, I remember we got, when we got picked up, we were just running from one place to another in Cracow. And we got picked up and taken to Montelupe (Montelupich?) prison in Cracow. If you saw "Schindler's List," there was a scene there of Montelupe. I remember that prison **very**, very well. It was a **huge** building with big black, it looked like large trash cans on the window, you know, so you couldn't look out. You were fed once a day. No, actually twice a day. In the morning you got a bowl of coffee and a piece of bread. And then at night you got a bowl of some kind of a soup. And we stayed there, I don't know how long. Maybe three or four weeks. And then the Germans came, and they took us out. They took all the Jewish people out of Montelupe. And they just made up these two lines. You go here, and you go there, and you go here, and you go there. My mother, my mother is **very** Aryan looking. My mother is, at the time she was tall, blonde, blue-eyed. Very, very Nazi-looking woman. You know, not your typical Jewish-looking person. And she walked in with some kind of false security, and she showed her papers to the Nazi, and she said, "I'm an American citizen. My father was born in Philadelphia," and, "Go in that line over there." So we ended up in a little camp, a prisoner of war camp, Libernau, with American prisoners of war. And Libernau, the name of the town. The camp had been a mental institution, still was an operating mental institution, and that's where we stayed, until March of 1945. Where we came to the United States, as exchange prisoners of war, and we were detained on Ellis Island, and...we had no papers whatsoever.

When we got to the United States, we were, just, you know, people without a country. So they sent, and the United States government was very good. The war was still on. The war was still raging. We came as exchange prisoners of war, and they sent us to Canada. And we immigrated through Canada.

INT: What was your father doing all this time?

RITA: My father was working in a factory.

INT: And he was unable to save the money to bring you over?

RITA: Oh, he, there was no way to bring...money was not the problem. They wouldn't let us out. They wouldn't let us out. We were stuck there.

INT: So even though your father was here, they still sent you to Canada.

RITA: Yeah. But it was after we were here for a year. Let me show you. This is the letter my father got from the State Department. The date here is very hard to see. Over here, February 6, 1945. My G-d, it's fifty years to the day! Yes. (pause)

INT: This is a letter that says you have been released by the German government in exchange, National Supreme United States and Germany. Now your parents were unable, or they were able to correspond during...

RITA: Yes.

INT: They were.

RITA: Yes. I have some letters, my mother has the letters. I'll get them.

INT: Do you have a sense of how your parents made decisions, how they decided, he should go, he should leave you.

RITA: Oh, that was an amazing, an amazing story. My father was a very strong person. A realist, a pessimist. And he was humiliated in Poland and in Germany. He was a very proud man. And he knew he could not stay. He just couldn't stay.

INT: What did your father do?

RITA: My father was a factory worker. My father worked in an insurance company in Austria, but he came here, and he didn't have any kind of profession or anything, he worked in a factory, in a sweater factory.

INT: And who did he have, how did he get the visa to come to this country?

RITA: He had gotten the visa before he even married my mother, before he even **knew** my mother. He applied for this visa.

INT: I see.

RITA: This is the thing we have from Canada, the papers we have from Canada. This is the affidavit of, a passport (inaudible)

(pause)

INT: And you were already about what, nine, eight?

RITA: I was eleven years old.

INT: Eleven.

RITA: Mm-hm.

INT: And your parents corresponded. The decision was your father had this visa, he should go, he should get out.

RITA: Yes. He knew that there was no other way to save us.

INT: Mm-hm. And so, and they made this decision that you should go back to your mother's family.

RITA: Yeah, because Vienna, the Anschluss came to Vienna, Hitler came into Vienna.

INT: And do you have a recollection, when your father was there, what it was like between your mother and your father, what their relationship was like, what the family relationship was like?

RITA: Well, my mother was the youngest child of eleven children, from a very, very wealthy family, as I mentioned before. She had been indulged, and she always had servants. And she was amazing. My mother's strength is amazing. She pulled it together. She took her two babies -- because we **were** babies. I was three, and my brother was a year and a half old -- and somehow through sheer strength of character, she saved us. She took such good care of us. It's amazing. It's amazing. But my mother was totally and completely subservient to my father in every single respect, my mother...and when she came to this country, she gave up all, she had all this independence and this responsibility for us during the war, and when she came here, she gave it right back to him. My mother, my mother was **very** much in love with my father. It was a very strong love, attraction. A lot of corresponding, as much contact as possible. My father sent us packages. There were a couple of years there that my father didn't know where we were. Didn't know if we were alive or dead.

We got into the camp, the camp of Liebenau was administered by the Red Cross. They notified my father that we were alive. And he started sending us packages, taking care of us as much as he could on his end.

INT: And this camp was, where was this camp?

RITA: Liebenau. (spells it) And it was in Germany.

INT: It was in Germany. What part of Germany?

RITA: It was near Ravensbruck. (inaudible)

INT: And so you had your father's strength and his cleverness, and your mother's chutzpah?

RITA: Survival. It was really her will to survive. My mother was just really, just wasn't going to give it up. A lot of people gave up. A lot of people, it would have been a natural thing to give up. I mean, you know, all my mother's siblings, now, my mother, as

I said, was the youngest of eleven. There were two sisters and one brother who survived. Actually three sisters: my mother and two sisters, and one brother survived. The other siblings all died. There were two nephews who survived. And that was it. And the rest of this **huge** family, died. Now, it's not because they gave up. They just didn't have the luck. It was just...just the luck of the draw. You were standing in the right line at the right time. You got saved. It was that arbitrary.

INT: Well, it was arbitrary, and yet your mother, by her looks, and by what she said, got herself into the right line. I mean, she was lucky that it happened, but she attributed it to...

RITA: She was so scared. She was shivering on the inside. **So** scared on the inside.

INT: Now did you know that **then**? You didn't know it then. And what was the communication like between you and your mother when you were in this...

RITA: My mother kept reassuring us. My mother kept telling us that we're going to find our father, me, we're going to live happily ever after, we're going to have a wonderful life, and she kept this **real** optimistic kind of a picture of how wonderful it was going to be, and there was never a doubt in my mind that we were going to be reunited with my father.

INT: What was life like in the camp?

RITA: It was wonderful. (laughter) It was wonderful. There were lots of children there, American and English children. There was a school to go to. We played a lot, and we had a lot of freedom.

INT: And your mother, what did she do?

RITA: My mother was sick most of the time. My mother was in a sick room facility. My mother had terrible ulcers, and my mother wasn't even with us. She was in a separate building. So I was kind of in charge of my brother, who was younger than I. I was, I was seven years old, and I used to take care of my brother. But there were people there looking out for us. There were adults looking out for us. But basically, it was this very, a...it sounds crazy, but it was not a bad childhood.

INT: And this story about your grandfather having been born in Philadelphia, was that one that got, did you know that that wasn't true?

RITA: I didn't know anything about it. I had no idea that there was such a story. I found out about the story years later when we came to this country.

INT: And so you didn't know why you were in this camp.

RITA: No. On our way to America. That was kind of the whole thrust of life was that it was on our way to America. So on our way to America we stopped at this camp for a couple of years.

INT: How many people do you think were in this camp?

RITA: I don't know. My mother would know. Maybe 150.

INT: And do you know how many camps there were like that?

RITA: I have no idea. As far as I know, I have never met anybody else who'd had this kind of experience. When we got to the camp, we went back to being Jewish. Now, while we were outside of the camp, you know, in Poland, we had Christian, you know, identities.

INT: And do you remember what your mother said to you about that?

RITA: Yep. She said, "You are no longer Jewish. You're Christian." And I remember my reaction and my brother's reaction. I was delighted. I joined everybody else, finally, and I've always wanted to be Christian, and I loved it. We went to church, and I was Christian. My brother, now my brother was just a little kid, he was maybe two years old, he cried, he said, "I was born a Jew, and I'll always be a Jew."

INT: So how long do you think it was that you lived sort of camping out, being hidden by people?

RITA: Well, it was at least a year. I remember one horribly cold winter. I know we left in August. It must have been about a year.

INT: And then you were picked up. What happened?

RITA: We were in a, one of the people who was hiding us, she told on us. And they came through the house, Polish people, and they started negotiating for money, and things like that. They took my mother's, my mother's identity papers, you know, Polish identity, you had to have an identity card with your photograph on it. And my mother and my aunt were there. And they were giving jewelry and bracelets, and whatever they had, you know. And they left and we got picked up.

INT: Do you remember that?

RITA: I don't remember being picked up. I remember the men and the negotiations. And I remember my mother being distraught that they had her photograph, and I couldn't understand why she was so upset, I said, "You can have another photograph made any time. Don't worry about it." But I remember suddenly we were on a, we were (inaudible)

INT: Do you have any sense of any anti-Semitism?

RITA: In Poland? No. Some. Not directed at me, though. At my cousins. They would grab my cousin. My cousin was dark, she was my age. She had dark hair, and she looked Jewish, and these Polish people would stand on the corner and point and say, "Little Jewish kid." And run and grab us. But it was mostly directed at her. Life was always (inaudible)

INT: And your father, what did he look like?

RITA: My father was dark.

INT: He was?

RITA: Yes. My father was dark and he looked Jewish. I'll show you a picture of what he looked like when we came to this country. This is my father, my mother, my brother. My brother's dark. My mother looked like this.

INT: Mm. And what was that like for her? I mean, was she grateful that that's the way she looked?

RITA: Sure, I'd say that. It certainly contributed, we would not have made it if we looked...

INT: And do you have any memories of, you were so young, it's true, but -- of what life was like with your mother and father when they were there?

RITA: I don't have memories, but I do remember that they talked about a very beautiful life. It was very idyllic. My parents were very much in love, and they had a very nice lifestyle, lived in a nice apartment, and my mother had a beautiful Bechstein piano that was very important, and she had that piece of furniture before she had any furniture, she had that instrument, I should say.

INT: That was confiscated.

RITA: Oh, of course. Everything was. Everything. That's the only, you know, memories I have.

INT: And then when you moved to Poland with your mother's family...

RITA: ...there were so many people there. And we were the two favorite people, my brother and I. Because we were the youngest children of the youngest child. And we were indulged and if there was a piece of chocolate, or a piece of candy, or anything that was good, we used to get it. In fact, we had nicknames. We were called "Booby" and "Maidie." Booby is little boy, and Maidie is a little girl. German. And that's what we were called. Little girl and a little boy, and like the whole village knew it.

INT: And so this was in 1939.

RITA: Yeah.

INT: And things got increasingly worse. But you don't have any recollection in Poland of the anti-Semitism.

RITA: Not directed at me. I had a recollection of fear. But not anti-Semitism.

INT: And how were decisions made in your mother's family, about who should go where, and who should do what? Do you have any remembrance of what that was like?

RITA: No. Where to go? You mean like where...

INT: When the household broke up.

RITA: Oh, okay, when the household broke up, there was a foreman that worked in a factory there, you know, my mother's factory, and he said that, he told his wife that my mother was his sister, and that he was bringing us from some kind of a village, and she, I remember her. She was a wonderful woman. She took us in. This was like a long-lost sister, or sister-in-law, and we stayed with them for quite a while. And then she was scared. Her name was (inaudible) She got scared. I think in Cracow. We stayed in the apartment, and then...

INT: Did they survive?

RITA: Yeah.

INT: And how do you spell their name?

RITA: That's a toughy. K-a-t-u-c-z-w-y-k, or something like that. My mother was in correspondence with them.

INT: So you were there for maybe six months.

RITA: No. Not six months. Maybe three months. And we had nothing to do, you know? It wasn't like we went to work. We just kind of wandered around. And then when we left there, it was one-night stands. We were hidden in a furniture factory for a while. A Turkish man, I think he was Jewish. A Turkish Jew, had a furniture factory, and we hid in the furniture factory. And I remember being **very** sick, with a very high temperature and hallucinating in that factory. There was not enough to eat. Then we went into the Polish ghetto. And we stayed there in one room, oh, my G-d, in Cracow. There must have been maybe twenty of us in one room. And I remember there was one bed. And we took turns sleeping in it. Some would sleep for half an hour, then they woke you up, and it was somebody else's turn to sleep on the bed, otherwise you slept on the floor. It was very crowded conditions.

INT: And how long were you there?

RITA: We were there, I don't know, maybe two months. And then we left there, and I don't know if we went to (?) from there. Maybe we went to (?) from there. I don't have (inaudible)

INT: Do you remember your feelings?

RITA: Yeah. I remember I was afraid. Until we got to the camp. In the camp, I lost all my fear. I felt totally safe. But I was scared. I would hear, my mother tells me I was a little girl in Austria, and I would hear Hitler on the radio, you know, and I used to stand by the window, and I got scared. I was so scared. **Overwhelming** fear that something bad is going to happen.

INT: Did you know anything then, that was bad was happening to anyone?

RITA: No, no.

INT: You never saw.

RITA: I saw, later on I saw. I saw, they used to take Jews in these open trucks, you know, pick them up on the street and just throw them in the trucks, and we had like a Jewish girl who worked for my family. We would call her Nanny. A sixteen-year-old girl. Bella was her name. Loved her. And I remember we were walking on the street in Cracow, and my G-d, I saw her on the truck, and I started pulling my mother, "Look, Ma, there's Bella! There's Bella!" And my mother pulled me away. They would have picked **us** up. But I remember feeling to this day this terrible sense of guilt, you know, that I kind of abandoned this person that I loved. She was on the truck, she was being taken away. And I saw that. I saw, in front of the ghetto, I saw I believe an officer...this Nazi, or Polish man came up and (inaudible)

INT: So you never wore the Jewish star? You never...

RITA: We passed.

INT: You passed.

RITA: We passed. And for the longest time I denied having been affected by the Holocaust at all. It's only been very, very recently that I've begun to talk about it. I said I just had a childhood like everybody else's.

INT: And what do you think it was? That let you...

RITA: A couple of things, first of all, I read a book by Brian Weiss called "Many Lives, Many Mountains." It was a book about past lives, and I got involved, interested in past life regressive therapy. And I went to a past life regression specialist, and told him about my fears. Now I've had residual fears of the Holocaust, Holocaust-associated fears all my life. I just didn't realize that they were connected with the Holocaust. For instance, I

was **all** my life, I was afraid that somebody would steal my children. That I would lose my children. So I would never let my kids go to school. I had to drive them. I had to wait for them and bring them home. I wouldn't let them walk over to the library. I had this idea in mind that the world is **not** a safe place. And kids **always** disappeared. And I thought that everybody lived this way. I thought that the responsibility of a mother was to feel this way. And protect her children from **everything**. And this was just fine and dandy until my kids reached adolescence, and then it hit the fan. I mean, they were not going to sit around the house until I would take them places. And it was a **dreadful** period in my life. Their adolescence. Cutting this...this cord. This control cord.

INT: Where was your husband in this?

RITA: He wasn't that way. He had a tough time with me. He really did. Because, and to this day, I worry when they come home.

(END TAPE ONE, SIDE ONE)

(TAPE ONE, SIDE TWO)

RITA: ...associated this kind of fear about my children, with a past life. I thought I'd lived in a different era sometime, maybe three or four hundred years ago, and I had suffered some big losses. So I went to this very interesting man, John Amarosa. This past life, he said to me, "You know, with my history," he said, "You don't need a past life regression therapy. You're a Holocaust survivor." I said, "Yeah, but it never really affected me." He said, "You would have had to have been deaf, dumb, and mute, and out of it. Of course it affected you." We started working on the Holocaust. And this was about a year and a half ago.

INT: How did you find him?

RITA: How did I find him? Oh, I was taking a course in past life at Lower Merion High School. And I asked this woman who gave the course if she knew any past life regression therapists, and she said she knew him. And coincidentally during the summer, we were vacationing in North Carolina, and I picked up a North Carolina newspaper, and there was an article about him. So when she said John Amarosa, I said, well that sounds good. (laughs) And I went to see him.

INT: And he's here in Philadelphia?

RITA: He's in Paoli.

INT: And how long did you spend in therapy?

RITA: Um, about, all told about eight months or so. But they were very long sessions, they were two-hour sessions and hypnosis was involved. It's very interesting, but it's not a past life. Which I have not shaken, by the way. The anxiety.

INT: Do you expect to?

RITA: Yeah, I keep hoping.

INT: It'll just go away?

RITA: I can't say. I mean, it just does not really go away. I would have thought that when my kids grew up I would have gotten rid of it. But it's no better. Actually it's **worse**, because they're more independent now.

INT: Mm, mm, well, let's go back if we might, to, you were in Canada, and how long were you there?

RITA: Oh, just one week.

INT: Oh, and then you came to the United States? Just that quickly?

RITA: Yes. Just that quickly. We stayed with people that we knew from the camp, from Liebenau. We stayed with that family. And then we came here.

INT: And so you were reunited with your father.

RITA: Oh, sure.

INT: Do you remember that?

RITA: Being reunited with my father the first time? Yes, very, very much so. We were on Ellis Island, and my father had gotten this letter that we were coming. And they took us to a place, Columbus Circle, an immigration center. They called my father in Philadelphia, and said, "Your wife and children are here. Come right now." He came right from the factory. Because that's where he was. That's where he was reached. He was reached at the factory. And you can imagine. I mean, we hadn't seen each other, or he hadn't seen us in six years. Six years! And I took one look at him, and I said, "This is **not** my father." Not my father. My father was a handsome prince, and this was an ugly man. And I wouldn't talk to my father for weeks. We were reunited, we were living together in an apartment in New York, we were (quotes), supposedly this was living happily ever after, and I would not look at my father, I wouldn't talk to him.

INT: Do you remember what you were thinking?

RITA: I just didn't want to be near him. He was not my father.

INT: He was ugly. He didn't look the way he looked when you remembered him.

RITA: He was not ugly. (laughs) But you know, in my mind, he was just an ugly, he was just a regular ugly man. And I was embarrassed by him. I was embarrassed to be

near him. I was uncomfortable. I had such fantasies about what life was going to be like, and it was...

INT: And how did your parents deal with this?

RITA: Well, my father claims this was the smartest thing he ever did, was he left me alone. Figured I'll come around. And I guess I did.

INT: And your mother?

RITA: She left me alone. My mother gave right in to my father. She laid all her tsuris at my father's feet, and she let him handle it, and that was that. We were, the United States was still engaged in war with Germany at that time. And Japan of course. And when we went to school, the kids taunted us and said we were Nazis because we spoke, you know, I spoke with an English accent, because in the camp, we were taught by English teachers. British.

INT: And where did you settle in New York?

RITA: Washington Heights.

INT: Your father had been in Philadelphia. He relocated?

RITA: He relocated.

INT: And he found a job.

RITA: Found a job. But my father was **never** well-employed. My father went from job to job. He would get a job and lose a job, and it was a **real** struggle. Survival was a **real** struggle. Really hard. And my father is a very religious man, and then he, you know, started putting that religion on us really heavy.

INT: And what was that like for you?

RITA: I took to it better than my brother did. But, my father judged everyone by their religion.

INT: That's interesting, because you said that your brother was the one who said, "I'll always be Jewish," and you were just as happy not to be.

RITA: But I was more compliant. And my brother was more rebellious, I guess. But it was...religion really became a focal point in my father's existence and it was just...We went to yeshiva, and my father was a torn man, you know. He wanted us to be educated, but on the other hand, if you get educated, you can get assimilated. And of course we did become assimilated. I mean, his nightmare came true. Not assimilated in terms of not being Jewish, but we are not observant Jews the way he was. I keep a kosher home, and I

light the Sabbath candles, and I keep the holidays, but I mean, we're not the kind of Jews that my father was.

INT: So you were eleven when you were reunited?

RITA: First reunited at age nine. Stayed here for a year, and then, I came here, actually, it's funny. February's a funny month. We were on the boat coming to the United States on my ninth birthday. We were united at the age of nine, and then I guess we stayed here for two years, then we went to Canada, and came down for one week. 1947, right. We came in '45, and then '47 we went to Canada. Went on the train.

INT: But you were living with your father for those two years.

RITA: Yes. Yes.

INT: And you were living there in New York?

RITA: In Washington Heights, right.

INT: And then somehow or another, in order to become American citizens, you had to go to Canada, and then...

RITA: Immigrate as Canadians. Spent a week in Canada. Such a sacrifice. My parents had to cough up the money for that trip.

INT: And then what's your recollection then, of growing up, and your parents as you were adolescent, and after all beginning to move out a little bit on your own perhaps?

RITA: Well, it was tough. It was tough. My parents had...you know, different kinds of standards, and I don't think they were quite sure themselves exactly what they wanted. They wanted us to have the education but my father wanted me to be religious girl. They wanted us to have a profession, but on the other hand, he wanted me to get married young, and quickly have a family. You know, so he was kind of torn.

And then I was chomping at the bit because I had this musical talent that I wanted so badly to promote, you know, and they let me have it. I found a piano, I went to somebody's house and played on the piano, and she said, "You can have the piano, if you move to your house." So that was a dream come true. And I got the piano. And then when I had the piano it was like a **whole** new world opened up for me. That was the end of all this other stuff, the religious stuff, you know (laughs) it was all over.

So I got a scholarship, you know, from my piano teacher. And I went to, instead of going to a yeshiva high school, I went to music and art, and I majored in music, and I majored in music in college, and it was just, I was not going to be the, you know, the Hasidic wife.

INT: And so you graduated from Queens College in what year?

RITA: That's a tough one. Wait a minute. There was a whole bunch of stuff in the interim, you know, before I graduated. I, my father, I went to Queens College for...till I guess my junior year. And then I got married. It was an arranged marriage. (laughs) I married a rabbi, somebody I did not want to marry. But I was twenty and a half years old, and my parents got scared that I'd never get married. So I got fixed up with a different kind of guys, and I married this guy who I did not want to marry, but I married him. Also wanted to get out of the house. My father was very autocratic. Very. It was a Victorian kind of a household. I had a midnight curfew. It was just...it was **very** hard to live at home. And I figured, well, at least I'll be out of the house.

And I married this man. I stayed with him for a year and a half. He had a **complete** mental breakdown. It turns out he was a schizophrenic. Came home one day he was absolutely nuts. Said the Communists are after him, and he tried to call the White House. Eisenhower was the president, and he was **absolutely**, he was really nuts. His parents were first cousins, and their, they had seven or eight kids. Four of them had this serious, serious bouts with schizophrenia. So my father said, "Well, you can't stay married to him. You have to leave him." So dutifully, like the good daughter that I was, I came home, and lived at home again, and this guy disappeared, and I couldn't get a Jewish divorce. It was a whole song and a dance, till we located him, once, like in the middle of the night, kidnapped him and got him to give me a Jewish divorce, literally.

INT: Well, what was that like for you, living with this man who was...nuts?

RITA: It was awful, but I was in a very heavy state of denial, you know? I mean, I was **raised** with denial. I was raised that the war was okay, and that I was going to be in America, while all the Jewish people around me are dropping dead, I'm gonna go to America and meet my father, who was a prince on a white horse. And so it was very easy for me to...

INT: And you continued with your piano studies, you continued...

RITA: No. I stopped for a while. And then I came home. I came home to my virgin bed. And to the virgin laws, you know, after having been divorced. I had to be home at midnight. It was, it was just awful. That's when I first went into therapy. When I was 22 years old. Went back to school, finished college, and then I got a job, and I moved out. I moved in with a roommate. And stayed with her until I met my husband. And got married.

INT: In two weeks.

RITA: In two weeks.

INT: What was it like when you met your husband?

RITA: (snaps her fingers) It was love at first sight. (laughs) I was going with another man for a long time, and he went away on vacation, he didn't want a commitment. It was

just like 1995. (laughs) He didn't want a commitment, and I wanted to get married. At any rate, I was a school teacher, and it was the last day of school. This wonderful little boy in my class, Joseph Ross, his grandmother, who was raising him, came to school to get something or other, and she asked another teacher if she could give my phone number to her son who was widowed. And I thought about it, and I thought, "Well, you know, why not?" I went out with my husband. We realized we had the exact same taste in music, and we had just, we felt like we had known each other all our lives. So I went out with him July 5th, and on August first we got married. (laughs) Honest. (laughs again)

INT: And what else did you decide? Same taste in music, and what else?

RITA: We just got along well. And he was easy to be with. You know? Well, I guess he was much more indulgent than anybody I'd ever met. And he was very generous of himself, you know? Very giving.

INT: And what did he do?

RITA: He's an engineer. And I have to tell you, I really did fall in love with his brain. He is a genius. And people, I think everybody has a price. I think my price is brains. There are women who will get married for good looks, and will get married for good dancers, and good personality, and a lot of money, or whatever. I really always loved brains, you know.

INT: Where did that come from?

RITA: My father. I know my father respected (inaudible). And I thought, well, this is a prize. This man knows **everything**. I'm going to bring home the prize.

INT: And how long had his wife been dead?

RITA: Three years.

INT: And she had an illness?

RITA: Yeah, she had cancer. She had been dead for three years, I was divorced for three years. It must have been more than three years. Four years. Three and a half.

INT: So you were how old?

RITA: I was 27 when I married him. And I was, stayed with my husband, I married him, the first one, at age 21, I stayed with him till 22 and a half, and then it took a year to get a divorce.

INT: And so what happened when you brought this man home?

RITA: Oh, my parents were delighted.

INT: You brought him home, you were already married?

RITA: No, I brought him home, we were engaged.

INT: (laughs) How long did it take for you to be engaged?

RITA: Well, we went out three or four times. I had gone to the Caribbean on winter break before that, and he said, "We're on our third date, so let's get married." I said, "Sure, we'll get married, and we'll go to the Caribbean on our honeymoon. That's a great place to go!" Well, that's it. I was kidding. I didn't mean it. He came the next time, he had tickets for August 1. He said, "We have to get married before we can go." And I thought, "What the hell. I'm going to the Caribbean one way or another!" (laughs) So we got married.

INT: So you went home and you said, "This is the person I'm marrying, and we're going to the Caribbean."

RITA: Yeah. And our plane leaves at noon Friday, so we'll have to get married in the morning, or something like that.

INT: And that's what you did.

RITA: That's what we did.

INT: And what did you hear from your parents about all this?

RITA: They were happy. Wonderful, wonderful. Well, my father gave him the interview, you know, and realized that this is truly a genius. And that was that.

INT: (laughs) It does read like a fairy tale. I mean, it sounds like a fairy tale.

RITA: It **was** like a fairy tale. It really was. It was wonderful. The boys, my two boys that I adopted right away, they were thrilled to death. They got a mother, my in-laws were delighted. They got somebody to take the kids off their hands.

INT: And your mother-in-law even picked you out.

RITA: My mother-in-law picked me out. And it was good. My father-in-law was wonderful. He was so nice to me. I often said if my father-in-law had been my father, I would have been, I don't know...president of some big corporation. He was so encouraging and so positive. My father put you down a lot. My father, you know, put me down a lot.

INT: But you grew up a lot of years without your father there to put you down.

RITA: Right. Right. And that was another thing that came out in the past life therapy. That probably that's what saved my (inaudible)

INT: And your mother wasn't even there. She was in the hospital.

RITA: My mother was in the hospital. I had this whole, you know, self-reliant attitude that I could do anything. And I did. I could do a lot of things for a seven-year-old, you know? I took charge of my brother. I raised him. Like when my mother came to this country, she gave it all up to my father, and my father was brutal, my father was brutal. He was physically abusive.

INT: To your mother.

RITA: No. To my brother, and to me. And he was unrelenting. When he made up his mind, it had to be his way, or you had to do it.

INT: And where was your mother's place?

RITA: My mother stood by and let it happen.

INT: And how did you feel about that?

RITA: I was **furious**. I felt betrayed, and I felt there was no one left to trust. No one but myself. And you know, this also contributed to this person who is so controlling. If I couldn't control it, I couldn't trust it. And that was part of the way I raised my kids. You know, you don't go there. This is not safe. P.S. I've got a kid who surfs all day, every weekday in this big California surf, and he skis dangerous mountains, and my other son, I mean, my kids just...they didn't buy into this protective mother.

INT: And where was your husband in all of this?

RITA: What do you mean? What parts of it? He was in and out. Oh, did he support my protecting...he kind of let me "raise the kids," and when I got panic-struck, he tried to talk me out of it, because I wasn't getting my way, anyway. He gave them much more freedom than I did. But I guess, you know, with five kids, we were so busy raising them, we just didn't stop and think of is this good or is this bad. We just did it. We just raised them. You know? My husband kind of gave in to my...I was the teacher, so I was the educator. So he really did let me have my way.

INT: And what did he give your children?

RITA: Oh, what did he give them. Well, you mean, he gave them a lot of material things. A **lot** of time and affection. A **lot** of time. Played ball with them for hours. Took them swimming, took them fishing, took them, Saturday and Sunday was my day off. I mean, he took the kids, and I would practice.

INT: And you play now, just for yourself, or you...

RITA: Well, I teach. And I really play for myself, and every now and then we have a recital. (laughs) And I play there. But I'm not a professional, but I sure do enjoy it. So, and that was what my husband did. He gave me the opportunity to play. Or at least to maintain whatever. I mean, he talked me into this piano. I didn't really want to buy it. He talked me into this piano, I really didn't want it. (laughs)

INT: Why was that?

RITA: Well, I had another piano, and this piano just appeared on the market, and it was an expensive piano, and I said, "I don't need it." This is a Baldwin brand, and I had a generic brand. And he said, "That's ridiculous, you should have it. You should have it, you should definitely have it." And I'm not sorry I have it. I'm delighted. But like, he would indulge me that way.

Another thing that I made of the Holocaust, is this thing, I don't want to have too many things. And this is a real bone of contention between my husband and myself.

INT: And what's that about?

RITA: I don't want to have more than I can pick up and run away with. I don't like...My husband goes shopping, he buys food, he fills the cabinets, and I feel I'll never eat this before I die. (laughs) You know. I don't like to have too much stuff. He likes to have a lot of things. That's why he needed the second piano, for instance.

INT: And his first wife was also a Holocaust survivor.

RITA: Yes. She went to a convent in France. She was French. And she was saved by the nuns. And came here with her sister, there were just these two girls that survived. And she developed cancer; she died a horrible death.

INT: And you were interested in being, have you been interviewed before?

RITA: No. But I did write an article for a magazine when I was in college.

INT: Do you maybe have a copy of that?

RITA: I'm looking over here because...I know I had it. (pause -- goes to look) In fact, I have a whole bunch of stuff here that you are welcome to. (Pause, going through papers) This is interesting. I'll have to xerox for you. Oh, here are copies of letters that my mother gave to my father in Germany. October 15, 1943. This is a letter to my father. And this is a copy of the outside of the envelope. Here is a letter she sent to my Uncle Kurt who was in England. This is, my name is on the return address, because everybody in the camp was allowed to have just so much writing. You know, you were allowed to

write one letter a month, so she would take my letter, and write the letter of course. Here is a letter to my Uncle Kurt, in German. This is a letter March 26, 1944. (pause)

INT: And this is a letter that was written...your father's name?

RITA: Alexander, Alex.

INT: But this was to Kurt.

RITA: Kurt is my uncle.

INT: Your mother's brother?

RITA: Brother-in-law.

INT: Your mother's brother-in-law. And he was in England? And how did he get there?

RITA: He went to England and his wife went to Belgium, and France. That was my mother's sister.

INT: And they both survived?

RITA: Yes. They're dead now, but they survived. Here are their letters. Oh, I was looking for the article. I will have to xerox the article for you. (pause)

INT: So you know that the purpose of this research project is a two-fold one. One, it's called "Transcending Trauma." How did people build a successful life for themselves after the war, not how they survived, because in many ways you had to be lucky. But how were you able to build a successful life for yourself after the war, and how were you able to transmit Jewish identity to the children?

RITA: Well, I'm afraid I was not very successful with transmitting Jewish identity to my children. My two older boys, who were not born to me, I mean, I gave all my kids the same background, the same family life. In fact, you know, the two older boys went to Israel. One went for a year, and they went to Jewish camps. My other kids also went, they went to Camp Ramah. Kenny went to Solomon Schechter and Camp Ramah for a number of years. They were all bar mitzvahed, and they were all exposed to the same Jewish experience. Kenny is, definitely does not feel himself, oh, he **feels** himself to be Jewish, but he has **no** desire to stay, to marry a Jewish girl, or to raise his children Jewish. He really like wanted to shirk that.

INT: And how do you explain that?

RITA: I don't know. I think, somehow I feel, somehow it's bound up with my survival. I know so many survivors whose children have done this. Whose children have disclaimed, done something to reject their Jewish identity, such as marry out of the faith.

And have no desire for...he's living with a Gentile girl, and they're engaged. You know, I've asked him, would she consider converting. He said, "I would never ask her to."

INT: How do you feel about it?

RITA: (sighs) Well, Kenny was a difficult kid, and I will accept my kids no matter what. I think I've made that kind of peace with myself. I won't sit shiva and I will accept it. And my father's probably turning over in his grave. He would never have accepted it. But I can't see myself giving them up for the religion. I'm sorry that they've chosen that path, and I don't know what I could have done differently.

INT: But your children, you say, are different in their belief.

RITA: In their religious belief? Well, they don't feel a kinship with the Jewish people, I don't think.

INT: But your adopted children do.

RITA: Yeah.

INT: Have you thought about why that is different?

RITA: I have no idea.

INT: Did you ever discuss that with your husband?

RITA: Well, actually my husband said, "You know, well, they met Jewish girls so they..." And it may be the case. Although Joe, my oldest one would never have dated a Gentile girl. And my daughter's dating a Gentile boy now, although she says it would be very hard for her to marry him. Because he's not Jewish. Basically, that's what's holding her up. But she wouldn't consider asking him to become Jewish. She said she just had a talk with him yesterday. She said she was going to go out with other people. Go out with other people, so possibly there's some chance. So maybe there is some Jewish identity there.

INT: And your husband, what are his feelings about this?

RITA: My husband, well, my husband, you know, we had a hard time raising the kids. Kenny put us through some **murderous** times, our son Kenny, the 29-year-old.

INT: Why is that?

RITA: Well, in junior high school, at about age 13 he got involved with drugs, and he got into some **serious** trouble. He got caught at the Bala Cynwyd, well, first he went to Akiba, and he didn't like it, so he went to public school. He went to public school, he got involved with drugs, and we tried to recycle him and put him into another school, so we

put him into the Haverford School. He got drug involved there, got kicked out. He was sixteen and there was no school that would take him, so we got him into a school in Center City, and he got worse and worse and worse. Finally, he dropped out of high school, and it was awful. And he was only fifteen years old, and he was staying out all night, and he was bringing characters into this house and anyway, he...we finally put him into a rehab place, we put him into a hospital setting in Washington, D.C. and I won't say they cured him, but they kept him for six months, and when he came out of there, he managed to finish high school and to finish college. And after that I felt, you know, I don't have much control over him. This kid was a household word everywhere. He passed out at school. He was almost dead at Bala Cynwyd school. His friends, when he passed out, his buddies hid him. They didn't want the school teachers to find him. So they took him and hid him in the locker room. And when we finally got him to the hospital, he was practically dead.

INT: What was that like for you, to have lived through the Holocaust...

RITA: It was **worse** than the Holocaust. That was **my** Holocaust. That was it for me. I felt I was dead. And I mean, everybody knew about it. And the phone was jumping off the walls. All the people who had ever said hello to me in the supermarket said, "I heard your son overdosed. Is he all right? Is there anything I can do?" You know, I was inundated by these curiosity seekers, you know, who wanted to know, "Is it really true? Is it really true?" Everywhere I went people said, "I heard that..." It was a **nightmare**.

(END TAPE ONE, SIDE TWO)

(TAPE TWO, SIDE ONE)

INT: Rita Ross, and today's date is March...

RITA: Thirteenth [1995].

INT: I'm wondering, the dog is all right? Yes?

RITA: The dog is fine. This is not even our dog. It's my daughter's friend's dog.

INT: Okay. So this is the second tape, and where we left off on the first tape, you were talking about your youngest son, and your own private Holocaust with him as a teenager.

RITA: No, that was not my youngest son, that was my fourth child. That was the next to the youngest.

INT: That was the next to the youngest. So that was not the one that I interviewed. The one that I interviewed who is the surfer is the...

RITA: Youngest.

INT: Okay. All right. Well, five children, I got...

RITA: I get mixed up, too. (laughs)

INT: And we got to the end of the tape, and I don't know if I asked you the question, if while this was going on, if you ever spoke to him about the Holocaust, or if he had any information about it before that experience.

RITA: Are we talking about the son who was in all the trouble?

INT: Yes.

RITA: He had information about the Holocaust throughout his growing up years, yes. So he knew about it.

INT: And since that time, now you had said that he in fact went to a...

RITA: A day school.

INT: A day school. And since that time, have you talked any more...he's now how old?

RITA: 29.

INT: He's 29. So that's fourteen years ago or so. Have you ever talked about what that was like and how that related to your experience of the Holocaust?

RITA: No.

INT: Because it was interesting that you used, you said, "This was worse than the Holocaust," for you.

RITA: Yeah, right. No, I never discuss it with him. He does not want to talk about that. So whenever I bring it up, he kind of puts a stop to it. He says that I overreacted, he won't talk about it with me at all. **Ever.**

INT: Are there any other topics that are taboo, or that's the only one?

RITA: That's probably the only one. Incidentally, he is a **rabid** conservative, and I see I've checked myself off as a real independent liberal type. So he really is quite a rebel.

INT: Uh-huh. So we talked a little bit about then your raising children. And...I don't recall that we actually discussed whether the affect of the Holocaust on you had any effect on how you raised your children?

RITA: No, we didn't discuss that, and it had a very **profound** effect on how I raised my children. In fact, I still have remnants of it with my grown children.

INT: Could you talk about that?

RITA: Well, I was very fearful. I was always afraid I would lose my children. I wouldn't permit them independence. I used to drive them everywhere, pick them up. If it snowed, I would pick them up from school. I wouldn't let them take buses. I was **extremely, extremely** fearful for them and overprotective of them. And I can still spin right into a panic like I did this morning when I was looking for my son, and my daughter said to me, "What do you really think happened to him? I mean, if something had happened, you would have known about it, so why are you doing this?" But I go into this obsessive panic in worrying about losing a child. And that's really directly related to the Holocaust.

INT: And...but you've changed, because now here you have this free-spirit son, even though you panic, he's doing all of these -- we do have him on tape -- all of these wild things, and twenty foot waves that he's surfing in and going into jungles and so forth.

RITA: I think it's a reaction to my fear. I think every one of my children took a different pathway (sighs) to assert their independence as a reaction to my fear.

INT: Could you sort of go one by one?

RITA: Okay, I'm going to start with the three children that I had, you know, naturally, okay? My daughter COSRA, very independent. She can fix a car, (laughs) she can drive a truck. I mean, she's driven cross-country. She's not your usual, you know...I don't want to use "Jewish princess," but she's not your usual middle-class kind of a kid brought up in the suburbs. You know, in this kind of affluence. She's very, very independent. Very strong, opinionated. She takes tremendous risks. High-risk person. Does mountain biking. **Very** few women do mountain biking. Is a, you know, competitive runner. Will go into programs, that if she wants it, she gets it, even though she was advised against it, attempting the education that she attempted, she went ahead and did it, and she succeeded.

INT: What is that?

RITA: A physician assistant. Even though she's dyslexic, and she was learning-disabled, she really achieved a great deal by just sheer force, so she was not willing to give up. So I think it was almost in defiance of my saying, you know, "Do the right thing, become a secretary. It's safe. Get married." You know, (laughs) "Marry a doctor." She said, "No, I'm going to be the doctor." You know, she just, that was COSRA.

And Kenny, Kenny did all the rebelling in the family, but I think he bought into my fear more than any of my other kids. Kenny was very fearful, and as a result of the fear, I think the fear scared him, so that he had to try drugs, and try tremendous defiance, get himself kicked out of school, get into trouble, pierced his ear, the first kid in the neighborhood to do that. Got kicked out of school, did I mention that? Anyway, yeah, he

did get kicked out of school. Then he dropped out of private school. And he got himself into all kinds of trouble.

INT: And what was happening to you during this time?

RITA: I was in pieces, but I was holding together. The thing is that I did manage, you know, by, I don't know, tenacity, the will to survive. I really sat down and I figured out that I could not raise him the way he was. So I would...I had to find a place for him, and I did. I literally got on the telephone and called the United States looking for a school that would accept him. A boarding school, any kind of thing, and we did find one for him in Washington. And we sent him there, and it helped.

INT: It was a boarding school, though.

RITA: Mm-hm. It was a psychiatric boarding school.

INT: And how long was he there?

RITA: He was there, gosh it's exactly, he went in March. He was there from March first until the end of August.

INT: How is that different from the Devereux school?

RITA: This is not a school for retarded...Devereux handles a much wider group of kids. They have a lot of retarded kids.

INT: As well as emotionally disturbed?

RITA: Yeah. This was strictly for emotionally disturbed and drug abusers. Washington, D.C., the only place that will keep these kids in a locked-up facility where they can't sign themselves out. The only place in this country. A lot of kids who were children of ambassadors, a lot of, you know, upper-class kids who got themselves into trouble. And our insurance company picked it up. Otherwise we could have **never** paid for it.

INT: And how long was he there?

RITA: About six months.

INT: And he does not talk about what that experience was like?

RITA: No. All he will tell me is that I should have never put him in there, and if his life had been ruined, he would have said that's why I ruined him. But he's very successful now. He joined the Marine Corps after he graduated from college, and he's the only Jewish Marine, tried to pass himself off as a Gentile, because it was more expedient, and he just did. Very successful.

INT: He tried, or he did?

RITA: He did. He did it.

INT: Passed himself off as a non-Jew.

RITA: Right. In the Marines. And he was **very** successful in the Marines. He was, you know, made a leader right away. And it's a **tough** course. When he got out of the Marines, I stopped worrying about him. Because I went to the graduation, and I saw what they had to go through, and I thought, I don't have to worry about him. He's okay. And indeed, I was right. (laughs) He is **okay**. He really is.

INT: And what is he doing today?

RITA: He is a management trainer for Smith, Barney. So he trains, he's the youngest they've ever had. He's 29 years old, and he has every six weeks he gets a new group of recruits, people who have been presidents of their companies that have gone out of business. He trains 45, 50-year-old people who are looking, you know, trying to get into management at Smith, Barney. So he's the one who devised the course, and he's teaching the course, and he is very, very successful. So that's him.

And then there is David. And David is a risk-taker, because I tell David, "Don't ever, ever, ever take a risk." He's my baby, and I wanted him, to protect him and keep him safe. In fact, he went to Hilltop, and one day he was going off to school. He was leaving after me. I leave for school earlier than he does. And he was lying in bed, and I said, "Now, David, it's raining, and there are leaves on the ground, so when you leave the house, you be very careful. Wear your seatbelt. Don't drive quickly. Don't put your foot on the brake real fast." And he looks at me, he says, "Mom," he says, "How about if I just stay in bed all day, and that way you won't have to worry about me?" And I said, "Well, that sounds good." And he said, "And I won't even go downstairs for anything to eat because I could slip and fall down the stairs." (laughs) He kind of gave me back, you know, what I was telling him. So...but I think he's been a reaction to my fears as well.

INT: So all three of your children that you bore, no matter how hard you tried, they all reacted, rebelled against that, and they've also been very successful in their rebellion in some way. And how do you explain that?

RITA: They're stronger than I am. (laughs) I guess you just really can't control another person's destiny, you know? And fortunately, they were healthier than I was. Their attitude is a healthier attitude. They figured, "Let me conquer it." I don't know why they succeeded in it, but they did. It's remarkable.

INT: So they developed their own coping skills, which was to confront whatever it is, whichever way it came. And you've had to survive that.

RITA: Yeah. (laughs)

INT: And what's that been like for you?

RITA: It's an adventure. It's a **real** adventure.

INT: How do you think that you adjusted to that?

RITA: I'm still adjusting. I haven't adjusted to anything, you know? (laughs) What makes you think I've adjusted? I'm not adjusted. I am adjusting. I've had a **lot** of therapy. A **lot**.

INT: And that's been helpful to you?

RITA: It's been helpful. It's given me a lot of insight. I mean, I realize that when my kid goes surfing, he's not doing it to upset me, he's doing it because this is his mission. I don't view myself as the victim, like I used to.

INT: What propelled you into therapy?

RITA: Oh, I went into therapy when I was a very young woman, before I got married. Basically I was not happy at home, you know? My father was a very, very Orthodox, women were not, on one level we were encouraged to do certain things. You know, I was encouraged to go just so far, but then I couldn't cross over. As soon as I had to cross the boundary of the Orthodoxy, well, that got in the way. I was encouraged to take piano lessons and practice and play, and when the competition took place on a Saturday, well, I could just get up that far, and then I couldn't compete on a Shabbas, you know what I mean? So I was encouraged to develop my mind, but you couldn't go that far educationally. You could just go, you know, there was no question that, going to law school, or going, I was programmed to be a teacher, a school teacher. Fortunately, I love teaching. But if I would have wanted anything else, it would have been out of the question. And that attitude was always there. So it was...and then my father was very autocratic and a very difficult person. So as soon as I started earning money, I went into therapy.

And then in my marriage, my kids gave me enough, plenty of grief, and a lot of questions. I had a lot of questions: am I doing the right thing, am I raising them right? So I went into therapy. I had some very good therapists, and some not so good ones.

INT: Did you especially seek out any therapists who particularly worked with people who were Holocaust survivors?

RITA: No, not at all. The Holocaust never even entered my conscious thinking when I was looking for therapy. In fact, I always felt that the Holocaust did not affect me **at all**. I thought that I had a very nice childhood.

INT: You felt that way.

RITA: Yeah. I felt that I had a wonderful childhood in Germany during the war, and I did. I kind of block out all the fears, and all I can remember is a tremendous amount of independence. It was my brother and I against the world, and we took care of each other.

INT: So that coping skill of blocking out painful things, does that still work for you?

RITA: No, not at all.

INT: It doesn't work anymore.

RITA: Not at all.

INT: When did that stop working?

RITA: I guess when I became a mother, I think. Most of all, it started when my kids became teenagers, and I realized the dangers out there, and little, the tiny amount of control. And I had no control.

INT: And your husband, where was he in this?

RITA: My husband is a genius. He's...he does his thing. (laughs) He was unconscious for twenty-five years. He was, you know, he said, "Anything you want to do." You know, he went into therapy with me. But I don't think it made a great deal of difference in his life. He's very satisfied with his life. He's one of the **happiest** people I've ever seen. A man of incredible talents, **many**, many talents. And...that's him. You know? He does his thing. He loves the kids, they never really upset him the way they upset me. I think it was my job in the family to worry. His job was to say everything is okay.

INT: What has this process been like for you? I mean, after the last time that we spoke, did you have, did it awaken any thoughts, or revisit, or bring up anything for you, or did you have any further discussions with your mother?

RITA: No, my mother, you know, I had to encourage my mother to do this. She wasn't sure that she wanted to. Only because she was afraid she'd get tired, and I kind of encouraged her to do it. I talked with my mother a little bit. I had a very, very long conversation with my mother two years ago about the Holocaust, because I was writing this little history up about our wartime experiences, so I needed her help in that, so we had a pretty long discussion about it. That was the extent of it.

INT: And then you remember her being much more, having much more bravado than she remembers.

RITA: In Europe. But as soon as she came here, she handed the **entire** bravado, and everything that went, all her identity over to my father. And he changed everything. He changed her completely, and she permitted it.

INT: It was probably a relief. (laughs)

RITA: Well, it might have been, but it was **awful** for my brother and me, because we lost this loving, gentle, brave, protective parent. And what we got instead was somebody who complied with my father, who was autocratic, and harsh, and punitive, so, and my mother just silently sided with him. So where we felt protected during the war, we felt abandoned **after** the war.

INT: It's a switch, isn't it?

RITA: Isn't it? Yeah. It's a switch. My mother **never** took a stand after we came to this country.

INT: And so, did anything new come up for you, or any memories, or any new thinking on your mind?

RITA: Not really.

INT: No. You've told your story many times?

RITA: Mm-hm.

INT: In connection with...

RITA: Well, I teach in a Jewish day school, so when we have a Holocaust day, Yom Ha Shoah, I tell the children about my growing up in Europe during the war. And I try not to, I don't frighten them. I mean, I tell the kids the story. You know, "I had a childhood just like your childhood, only it took place during the war. I had dreams and aspirations, and wanted to grow up, and do the things that you want to do, only I did it at a time when there was a terrible war going on and people were being discriminated against and killed because of their beliefs." You know, that's the way I tell the story. And I read a story to the kids. We talk about it. I change it, I vary it a little bit. But I tell them about the war. I have **excellent**, excellent memories, so I remember, I remember, you know, the steps that led up to the, to come into this country, you know.

I remember, I was a very young child, I never looked Jewish. So the Polish maid used to take me to the movies in Cracow. You weren't, Jews were not allowed to go to the movies. But I remember the movies. I remember going with her into the movies, because I had blonde hair, and that was okay. And I remember the movie. And I remember there was a song that they were singing that I knew, and I joined right in with everybody, you know, with the screen, singing. So I kind of had that freedom to move around in Poland.

And then the next scene that I see is a dining room table, where they were taking first, the Poles came and appropriated all the fur coats for the army, and they were just throwing these fur coats across this table, you know. This one's fur, and that one's fur. This was a

huge family. My mother was the youngest of eleven children. And quite a few of them were there, outside of Cracow in this little village, which my grandfather's estate was on. So I remember them taking all those furs.

And then I remember my mother disappearing for **long** periods of time.

INT: Yes, that was on the tape. The early tape. Did you ever talk with her about that, or where she was?

RITA: She was looking for stuff, you know? For papers, to get us out. I guess she was looking for a method of saving us. And then the next thing that we knew, it was August, it was in the summertime. There was a man. One of the workers from my grandfather's...my grandfather had a tannery that supplied leather to the Polish army. Everything was army, Polish, Polish army, you know. It was a **huge** enterprise. He was a very, very wealthy man. There was a lot of money there. One of the workers came and picked us up.

INT: Yes, you said, and took you home. And his wife...

RITA: No, his wife was okay with it, but then she did think it was dangerous, so we did leave, and we started going from house to house until we were picked up.

INT: Now what effect do you think that your not looking Jewish -- certainly it saved your life in many ways, you and your mother -- it seems as though your children have used that as well when they've needed to.

RITA: Yeah, it's true. Kenny in the Marines. And David, I don't know if he mentioned to you that part of the country that he lives in really is, there's a tremendous neo-Nazi movement there. Did he mention that?

INT: Mm-hm. Not too far from where he is.

RITA: Uh-huh. And he was working at a restaurant, did he mention that to you? Well, he was working at a restaurant, and he heard people talking, you know, some of the bosses, the other waiters, whatever, talking about the dirty Jews and everything. And he said, "Watch it." He said, "I'm Jewish." And they said, "Like hell you are." And he says, "I **am** Jewish." And they didn't believe him. But he quit the job. He felt really uncomfortable there. So...he views himself, he's more consciously Jewish than Kenny, who never talks about it.

INT: But do you think the fact that you survived partially because, well, the work that your mother certainly put into it, but also the fact that you and your mother did not look Jewish, that has had some effect on the way your children choose to live their lives, or how important being Jewish is? What effect did that have?

RITA: It's hard to say. My kids are so liberal about this Judaism thing, that means so much to me. I don't know if it's just me, or if it's everybody who looks blonde and blue-eyed feels this way. You know? Sometimes I look, I teach in a Jewish day school. I keep repeating that, because this does bear on it. I look at some of the kids in my class, the dark-eyed ones, and I look at the, and this is recent. I would say this is since I saw "Schindler's List," and since I read the book. I look at them and I kind of say, "Well, you wouldn't have made it. You wouldn't have made it. You wouldn't..." And these are all kids I **love**. I have to tell you I **love**, I **love** teaching. And I **love** my kids. I have this little guy in my class, Jonathan, dark as can be. He's so learning-disabled you could die from him. He can't sit for two seconds, he's so hyperactive. He hums. He's got these black eyes and black hair and black eyebrows. On a little kid, that's unusual. And he is **so** bright, and he is so enthusiastic and everything. And sometimes he looks at me, and he starts to explain with his hands and he goes on in this huge vocabulary, and I look at him so often, and I think, "You would have never made it in Germany. You would have gone, you would have been the first to go." You know, and it's a real pang in my heart. I kind of feel almost guilty.

INT: Do you ever talk about this to your children?

RITA: No. I really can't. It's too scary. It's kind of a trip. I'm afraid to lay that on them. You know what I mean?

INT: So there's a protectiveness of not wanting them to hear too much of your feelings or your thoughts?

RITA: Well, I don't want them to feel guilty. See, they keep telling me, "You make us feel guilty." Whenever I say to them, "Look, we survived, and you take Judaism so lightly. So many people died for it, and you take it so lightly. You could take it or leave it. You could date so and so, you could...Don't you understand?" (laughs) You know. And they say, "Stop laying this guilt trip on me," and they kind of cut me off.

INT: Why is that a guilt trip?

RITA: Because they feel that I, I think that they feel that I'm trying to make them feel guilty and stay Jewish through guilt.

INT: Are you?

RITA: I don't know. Maybe. I don't know. I kind of feel...

INT: It sounds to me more like what you're saying is a responsibility.

RITA: I'm not secure with it.

INT: In what you believe or what you feel yourself?

RITA: Somewhat, maybe. Maybe I feel that they...you know, I'm constantly evolving. I'm constantly questioning my beliefs. My father, well, when we were in Europe, it was a **big** bonus not to look Jewish, and I was happy not to look Jewish. I was happy not to be Jewish, because when I wore the cross and I went to church, and I wasn't Jewish, nobody bothered me. And that was **great**. So that was good. Then we came here, and we were told, you're supposed to love being Jewish. Up until (laughs) we came to America, we were trying to pass ourselves off as...

INT: And you were how old now?

RITA: Nine.

INT: You were already nine.

RITA: We were trying to pass ourselves off as Gentiles. Now we come here, we're told, "You're supposed to love being Jewish. You're supposed to hate the goyim. They're the cause of all our troubles." My father constantly would drag out pictures of his parents and he'd say, "See these? These people would have been alive if it wasn't for the goyim." He wouldn't let me have a Christian girlfriend. I mean, it was, you were supposed to hate them. Well, I couldn't bring myself to hate them, because I had not, nothing had happened to me, you know, from the Gentiles that I went to school with, that I knew, you know? So I couldn't bring myself to hate them. So I used to have to sneak them in, you know what I mean? I used to have to tell my father I was going to a Jewish girl's house, if I was going to go to a Gentile girl's house, because then I was thirteen years old. I got invited to my first boy/girl party by this girl in my class, Jewish girl, Alice Miller, and there were going to be Gentile boys there. Jewish and Gentile, it was a sixth grade party. I guess I was twelve. Party for sixth graders. My father wouldn't let me go. So there was all that resentment. I kind of made a vow to myself. I would never do this to my kids. (sighs) So, maybe I went overboard the other way. But they did all receive a Jewish education, and the holidays were celebrated, and we belonged to a synagogue, and I light Shabbas candles, and we sing, and we have a Seder, and we have Chanukah. I mean, there was never a question. There was **never** a choice. But...

INT: But something got translated. (laughs)

RITA: Something got mixed up. (laughs) Some wires got crossed.

INT: And your husband, what kind of stand does he take?

RITA: Well, my husband comes, my mother-in-law's claim to fame is that she is born an American girl. Born an American girl, and she still made a bar mitzvah for her boys. She speaks no Yiddish. She...called Passover Easter, and Christmas was the holiday that she celebrated. And when she would fast on Yom Kippur, and my father-in-law would fast on Yom Kippur, they used to give my husband money to go to the Chinese restaurant. He was a big boy, past bar mitzvah age. Go to the Chinese restaurant and eat, because she didn't feel like cooking a meal for him on Yom Kippur. So though he had a

bar mitzvah, he never fasted on Yom Kippur till we got married. And he was what, 32 years old when we got married. 31, 32.

INT: His first wife was also Jewish.

RITA: Uh-huh, but they didn't affiliate. They had a Christmas tree. They had a Christmas tree.

INT: I can still find out what that's about when I interview him.

RITA: If he'll tell you. (laughs) He might not tell you. So you know, they didn't keep kosher, and they didn't do anything. In fact, my mother-in-law said, you know, the two boys that I adopted, my husband's boys, and she said something, "Well, they'll have to hang up their Christmas stockings. I guess they'll hang them up tomorrow." I said, "There are no Christmas stockings here." She says, "What do you **mean?**" I says, "We're not going to have Christmas." And she said, "Well, how are the kids going to feel if they don't have Christmas?" I said, "I don't know. How every Jewish kid feels when they don't have Christmas. They're not going to have Christmas." So I remember she came for a visit, and she brought them Christmas stockings with stuff in it, in them. So. But it didn't move them. Because those two, now those two are very Jewish. And married Jewish girls.

INT: Why do you think that is?

RITA: Search my head. I can't tell you.

INT: And you haven't asked them actually.

RITA: No. They married Jewish girls, they keep kosher, they keep holidays.

INT: It is interesting.

RITA: Isn't it, though? I don't know. I've spoken to so many people, and I think I mentioned this to you before. Holocaust survivors whose children have intermarried, whose children have left the fold. (pause) Joe was looking to hear from you. (laughs)

INT: Yeah, I will call. And Joe is, which one is he?

RITA: 38. He's my oldest.

INT: He's the oldest. And I will call him. He's 38. And the next one down is...

RITA: The next one is Steven, and I didn't give you his telephone number, because Steven is not speaking to me. Steven did an interesting thing at his wedding. Though I raised Steven, I got him when he was five years old, and at his wedding, he and his wife did a crazy thing. They told the rabbi that I was not his mother. I had adopted him, and it

came as a total shock at the chuppah. The rabbi said, "Steven Ross, son of Paulette and Daniel Ross." And I was terribly hurt. And all my friends who were sitting there, you know, kind of gasped, whoever heard it, whoever was paying attention. And after the ceremony, Steven's wife's relatives came over to me and started calling me Paulette. They didn't realize that I was Rita. And it was very hurtful, and I confronted that with Steve after they came back from their honeymoon. I told him it was very hurtful, I don't understand why you did it.

At any rate, there was a big falling out. She got very angry, his wife, and she ran out of the house, and that was it.

INT: And how long ago?

RITA: That was a long time ago, about eight years ago.

INT: And there's been no...

RITA: There's been contact. When my father died, there's been contact. They came to the shiva, to the funeral. And I've attempted reconciliation several times. My husband attempted reconciliation. And sometimes they'll come, you know, and make an appearance, and I'm just not ready to...(sighs) I'm afraid to open myself up again. I mean, when she had a baby, when they had a baby, I ran to the hospital, and I was very excited and thrilled, they called me to tell me. And I got into trouble for that. You know. (laughs)

INT: What?

RITA: Well, they thought I shouldn't have come to the hospital to see the baby, that I was intruding on them. I just never knew, only me, not my husband. I just never knew what I did. I asked them, you know. I said, "Look, I'm opinionated, I'm strong. If I've hurt you, and I might have done that, and I'm sure I did, tell me what I did, so at least I get a chance to learn from it, say I'm sorry, tell you I'll never do it again. Give me another chance." And they kind of said, "No, you know, if you don't know what you did, when you figure it out, you'll know what it is." It's been eight, nine years, I still haven't figured it out.

INT: And nobody knows.

RITA: Nobody knows. Nobody knows. Nobody knows. My mother-in-law doesn't know, although she's on good terms with them. Joe doesn't know. Nobody knows.

(END TAPE TWO, SIDE ONE)

(TAPE TWO, SIDE TWO)

INT: Painful.

RITA: It is painful, it is painful, but I've adjusted to it. And actually I don't think about it so much. I've stopped obsessing on that.

INT: They live here in Philadelphia?

RITA: Lives in Havertown.

INT: Lives in Havertown, and you always include them, and they sometimes come.

RITA: Sometimes. I don't really always include them. I've stopped. There were some very hurtful things. We have a condo in North Carolina, and we gave them, told them to use it for their honeymoon, and stuff like that. And they drove down there, and they loved it, and we use it sometimes, and they, you know, it's there. We went down to North Carolina one summer, I had asked the kids, you know, because we were speaking to each other at the time. It was not **warm**, but we were talking to each other. And I said to Steven and Marlene, "When do you plan to take your vacation?" And they said, "Well, we don't know. We're not sure, because Steven just started a new job, so we really don't know." So I said, "Well, let us know."

So we get down to North Carolina, I come home, and find out that Steven and Marlene were not at **our** condo, they rented another condo, and they were down there at the same time that we were there, and they just wouldn't tell us that they were there. So it was so weird. I said, "I don't **need** this. I can't play this kind of game. I mean, you know. I don't want it." So I have stopped really communicating with them very much.

INT: And your husband?

RITA: He doesn't communicate with them. They don't call him. He doesn't call them.

INT: And his feelings?

RITA: He can't stand them. He has much less tolerance for them than I do. I feel like we will get together again at one time. At some time. I think that we'll get ready to do it. But he says he doesn't want to have anything to do with them. He feels very badly, very much rejected by them, and he's pissed. You know, like a man.

INT: With him it's bottom line.

RITA: That's all. You don't want me, I don't want you. You know?

INT: Do you ever think that any of this has anything to do with Holocaust...material?

RITA: (Sighs) Not really. Not really. No. So that's him. Now COSRA is the next one, that's the one with the dog, that you just met. She's waiting to get a job.

INT: She's the P.A.

RITA: Yeah. Looking for a job.

INT: And she is dating someone who isn't Jewish, but she's...

RITA: No, she was, and they broke off. And religion was the issue. So now she says she's only going to go out with Jewish guys. Tee-hee. (laughs)

INT: How old is she?

RITA: Thirty.

INT: She's thirty.

RITA: Up until this guy she was saying, it doesn't matter. Religion isn't everything. We can adjust. My children will always be Jewish, you know, that kind of stuff.

Kenny is the next one, do you have him down there? No, because he doesn't live here, he lives in Connecticut. He lives with a Gentile girl, a Catholic girl. I have to tell you, she's a lovely girl, and I love her, but she's not Jewish. And she won't convert, and he won't ask her to convert.

INT: And does he ever come in? I mean, like David, like I caught David?

RITA: Yeah, he'll come in for the Seder. He'll come in for Passover.

INT: How long will he stay, because we'll be in Colorado for the Seder. We take our Seder there.

RITA: I don't know. But he's...he'll come back.

INT: So if he comes back...

RITA: I'll call you.

INT: Let me know.

RITA: Definitely. And David, you know David.

INT: And I know David. David was **very** interesting, and I was anxious to hear what David had to say after we spent the hour together.

RITA: Yeah, he had a good time.

INT: I had a very good time with him.

RITA: Yeah, he had a good time. He enjoyed it.

INT: Did he have any thoughts or questions or anything that surfaced?

RITA: No, not really. You know, he kind of left right after that, so we were busy packing and talking about, you know, what time is your plane and all that kind of stuff.

I had an interesting Holocaust experience with David when I picked him up at the airport. Did he mention it to you?

INT: Well, I don't know what you're talking about.

RITA: Well, I have **always** had this fear of getting to an airport to pick up my child, and my child doesn't get off the airplane. This is the reason I went into past life therapy. I thought I had a past life in which I went somewhere, waiting for the person who was supposed to either pick **me** up, or I'm supposed to pick them up, there's always this anxiety, if I'm coming in from out of town, I'm visiting someone, and my husband has to pick me up, what if he isn't there? Or if I have to pick somebody up at the airport, regardless of which of my children it is, on the way to the airport, I start working myself into this panic, and then by the time I get to the airplane, I am a basket case.

Well, with all the good therapy, and the past life therapy and everything else, I've let that go. David is coming home this past visit. I have it down on the calendar, it's February 16th, or whatever it is. I get down to the airplane, my daughter takes me, drives me down, because somebody has to park, and somebody has to meet him at the gate. I come there, the airplane comes in, there is no David. (laughs) So I go crazy. I run to the airplane, I said, "Is everybody off the airplane?" "Yes." I say, "My son was supposed to be on the airplane." Well, they can't tell me anything. They don't know. He's not here. Go down to Continental, there's nobody there. There's nobody at the Philadelphia airport to ask. I go down to the ticket office. I say, "My son was supposed to come in; was there a delay in Cleveland?" "No, there was no delay. The plane actually got there early." "Well," I said, "did he purchase a ticket?" So they look on the computer, yes, he had a ticket. I said, "Well, was he on the plane?" They look in the computer, no, he wasn't on the plane. "He was not on the plane in San Diego?" No, he was not on the plane in San Diego, so I said, "Well, where the **hell** is he? What happened to him? He's 25 years old. He can't get **lost**." Well, maybe he had an accident on the way to the airport and missed the plane. Well, that was wonderful, but he would have called me if he was alive. It was just that...(sighs)

Finally the guy at Continental says, "Well, let me check a little more." So he checks a little more, he says, "Your son was on the red eye. That means he's leaving on the sixteenth, not coming in on the sixteenth. He's leaving tonight, he'll be here tomorrow morning." (laughs)

INT: But you see in fact, you told me he would be in on the seventeenth.

RITA: I had on the calendar the sixteenth.

INT: Well that may be when his plane was leaving, but initially you had said the nineteenth, and then I wrote over it, and you said the seventeenth.

RITA: No, no, no. Oh sorry, no, no, the seventeenth was a Friday, because he came in on a Saturday. Okay? I told you the wrong date.

INT: Mm-hm. So he actually came on the eighteenth is what you're saying.

RITA: Yep.

INT: Well, that would be right, because, yeah, that's right.

RITA: How do you like that? (laughs) But it was, it was something I almost had to let out. I don't know. Maybe it was done intentionally, I don't know. Not intentionally, accidentally on purpose.

INT: By whom?

RITA: Me.

INT: You mean you heard it on the eighteenth, and you...

RITA: No, no, I knew he was leaving on the seventeenth. His ticket came. His ticket was on the seventeenth. He said seventeenth. But he was leaving at 11:00 at night. How could I expect him to be **in** on the seventeenth if he was leaving at 11:00 at night from California? But the man at Continental said this happens all the time. That's why he knew to check the red-eye.

INT: And so then what kind of a discussion did you have then?

RITA: Well, I told him, but he knows, David knows, oh, we've talked a lot about the Holocaust, David and I, actually. He has often told me, "Look, don't expect me to curtail my activities so that I can fit in with your concept of safety. It's not my fault that you went through the Holocaust," he's told me. "It's not my fault that you had separations at a young age. I can't make it up for you. Don't expect me to do that." He's told me that many times.

INT: Now, has he learned this in therapy, or this is something that he has come to...

RITA: He's come to this on his own, I'm **sure**. Because his therapy was very adolescent, involved kind of therapy, you know? I guess with experimentation, that kind of stuff. I was really not very much involved in his therapy. I mean, it was, you know, when he was in therapy, it...it all revolved around him. It didn't revolve around the anxieties that I felt for him and stuff like that. When I was there, and when he took his therapy alone, I don't know what went on.

INT: Well, this has been...a very rich experience speaking with you.

RITA: Thanks, thank you.

INT: And your mother, who is a charming, lovely lady. I was only worried that I was stressing her too much, that she was over-tired. So I did leave and we have just a little bit more to do.

RITA: She enjoyed talking to you also. She enjoyed the companionship, and she enjoyed relating the story, you know.

INT: And she did know that I was coming here this week.

RITA: Yes, she knew that you were coming here.

INT: And although she complains about her memory, it's not as good, she seems very sharp to me.

RITA: Her memory's good. (laughs) Her memory's better than my memory. (laughs)

INT: Is there anything else that you would like to tell me? Is there anything else that you can think of in all the things that we've talked about, that are in connection with our study, which is called "Transcending Trauma," which is the ability to build a successful life for oneself after having been through the trauma, and also to transmit Jewish identity. Certainly your Jewish identity was transmitted in a very strong way to you by a father who was rigid in his beliefs. With your children, it's been a little bit different, even though you lived your religion strongly. So is there any comparison you could do, or any insight into that?

RITA: Let me think about that, and I'll get back to you, because that's an interesting question. I've never, I've never attempted to answer that. I've never groped with that.

INT: Nothing that comes to you off the top of your head.

RITA: No, but it will. (laughs) It will. I'm a slow thinker, and I'm sure it will come to me. I'm sure it will. There are a lot of things. I'll tell you one Holocaust thing I do. And my husband irritates the daylights out of me. He likes to buy a lot of stuff, and I only like to have enough to take with me in case I have to run away.

INT: Yes. You've said that.

RITA: Oh, have I said it?

INT: Yes.

RITA: I don't **want** a lot of stuff. I don't want collections. I don't want to have too much stuff. I just, I don't need very much, I keep saying. He'll buy us up a lifetime supply of pretzels because they're on sale, you know? I only want enough to get me by.

INT: So there's sort of an almost, "I might have to take flight at any moment"?

RITA: Yeah, when I go into a movie theater, the first place I look are for the exit signs. I've always got an excuse ready in case somebody stops me for something. Did my mother mention the fact that she would never stay on the same street; if a policeman was coming down the street she'd cross the street and go the other way. Because she was afraid of the police. In the United States. Oh, because, and during the war, the police would come take you, and take you away. That's what the police did. They took you away if you were Jewish.

INT: So part of our study as well is resiliency, and how people were able to build successful lives after the war. Now it sounds as though, from what you're telling me, she just sort of handed her life over to your father.

RITA: Absolutely.

INT: And yet she was exceedingly resilient in that she started to give piano lessons and became very, very successful in that. She had strong training, and yet she apparently had good enough people skills as well.

RITA: Mm-hm. But that was a matter of survival again. So when it came to surviving, because my father wasn't making a living. But, he told her how to spend, she was not allowed to spend her own money. If she went out and bought a coat without him, he said, "Sure, now that you're making money, you think you can do anything you want to do. I don't like that coat. Take that coat back. We have to go together." You know what I mean? He wouldn't give her anything.

INT: And what effect did that have on you?

RITA: It made me **crazy!** It made me **crazy**. And I'm so fortunate, I'm married to a man who's exactly the opposite. He doesn't care **what** I buy -- as long as I get it on sale. (laughs) He doesn't care, he's **happy** when I shop. He doesn't want to drag along with me.

INT: You know, it's, when I listen to your tape, and I remember my reaction to your saying that you met and you were married after a two-week courtship. Did you decide the first day that you met that you were getting married?

RITA: No. I had no...he...he proposed to me. I was going out with somebody else. He went on, this other guy went on vacation. He was dilly-dallying, this other man, and he went on vacation, I went out with my husband, two, three, two days later he wanted to marry me, and I laughingly said, "Oh, yes, I'll marry you, because I want to get back to

St. Martin. I was there over winter break. It's a wonderful place to go. We'll go there for our honeymoon." I was **kidding**. He came for the next date, he said, "I got the tickets, we're going on Friday. But we have to get married first." I said, "What are you, nuts?" He said, "No. You said you would get married if we could go to St. Martin's for a honeymoon." He said, "I've got tickets for August first. We have to get married." So we got married.

INT: How did your mother...

RITA: She was thrilled. They loved him. They were so glad to get me off their hands, you have no idea.

INT: How old were you?

RITA: Twenty-seven. Shhhhh. (Laughs) But I was divorced already. I was damaged goods, you know. I was married before that.

INT: Did you tell me about that?

RITA: I think so, yeah. I married a rabbi. I think so.

INT: Tell me again.

RITA: At the age of twenty I was fixed up. I married a rabbi, lived in Kenosha, Wisconsin for a couple of months. I realized that something was wrong with him, but I didn't realize it was him. I thought it was me. He was a "schiz." I didn't tell you that? His parents were first cousins, and they had all these children that were "schizy."

INT: Yes, I do have that.

RITA: So they were thrilled that I got married to Dan. (pause)

INT: Well, you've had an interesting, full, interesting life.

RITA: (laughs) So far.

INT: And you've retained your sense of humor through it. How did you do that?

RITA: Sometimes it's a debit, a sense of humor, you know? Because sometimes I try to be serious, and people laugh. They think everything I do is funny. I don't know how. I don't know how. My son, Kenny, is very funny.

INT: You don't seem to take yourself too seriously.

RITA: Well, maybe that's it. But it's good. I mean, I enjoy a good laugh -- everybody does. I'd much rather see you smiling than see you looking sad. So I guess, maybe that's

maybe the way I present myself. I also present myself that way to the class in school, you know, because that keeps them interested. And that's nice.

INT: And where did that come from?

RITA: I don't know. I have no idea.

INT: I mean, I'm wondering, did your mother present that face to you?

RITA: No.

INT: Or did you do it to try to keep her cheered up?

RITA: Well, I might have done it to keep her cheered up. I also realized that people are much more involved with you if you're funny. So it's kind of protection. You know?

INT: So you developed that kind of a...

RITA: Sort of a farmer. And it's good. I like it. (laughs) It feels good.

INT: Well, I know that you have some time constraints as well. So do think about the transmission of Jewish identity and how it happened for you, and for your children, and perhaps we can get together and finish up, even right on this end of the tape, and meet again.

RITA: That sounds good.

INT: Good.

RITA: Well, thank you very much. I certainly enjoyed this.

(END OF INTERVIEW)