

Summary of Oral History: Interview with Masha Pupko Bernstein

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Masha Pupko Bernstein de Cohen, born in Vilnius (today Lithuania), October 21, 1937. Her mother was Shura Bernstein Rapoport Soloveitchik and her father Simon (Sioma) Pupko Cunitza. Her father's family owned the Pupko brewery – founded by her grandfather Melech Pupko – in the city of Lida (today Belarus). She lived in the brewery with her family, her paternal grandfather's family, her grandfather's brother and sisters, and her uncle's family. She had six cousins in total: one lived in Belgium with her father's sister, and the other four lived in the brewery: two were older than her and two younger. Her maternal grandfather was a pharmacist and lived in Niemenchin (Lithuania).

During the war, a German engineer named Lochbihler was in charge of the brewery. Her family was not sent to the ghetto because her father and other 40 workers were considered essential to the brewery. They were exempted from wearing the star of David.

One day in 1943, the Germans took her family to a train. The people in her train car – which included her uncle and aunt, her cousins, the town's butcher, and the barber and his family—decided to escape. Mike Stolovitsky, the brewery accountant's teenager son (who was living in New York at the time of the interview), opened the door of the train. They escaped and walked in a forest until they reached the Bielski partisans' camp, where they were for around a year. She and her family lived in underground cabin number 11. Her father made soap. The Russians liberated them in 1944.

Masha and her family went back to the brewery, hoping to find other relatives. Her uncle was looking for his daughter Noya, who was never found. Her grandfather, the pharmacist, had been killed in the forest with her mother's half-sister, but her mother's step-mother survived. [Masha's mother lost her mother when she was nine months old and grew up with her grandparents].

They were in the brewery for around two months. After that, her family and her uncle's family left Lida to go to Bucharest, Budapest, and Prague. Her father did not want to stay in Eastern Europe and wanted to go to Belgium. After the Americans entered Italy, the family went to Rome. They lived in a room in Via Muzio Clementi, 81, rented by Ms. Rossa [Rizzi]. In Rome, Masha went to a public school and sang in a church choir. She had a friend in a building across the street, Maria Luisa D'Auria, who would become a nun at Castel Gandolfo. The UNRWA helped her family while in Italy.

At the end of 1947, Masha and her family moved to Belgium, where her father's sister used to live. They found her father's brother-in-law, who had been in England during the war, with his son Anatol, who had been hiding in a farm with a family during the war and survived. At the time of the interview, Anatol was living in Brussels and had married the daughter of the family who saved him. In Belgium, Masha's family rented another room in a house in Stockel colony. She went to a Catholic boarding school.

Masha's family left Belgium to travel by plane to New York, where one of her mother's Lithuanian maternal uncles lived and had a store in the Empire State. Masha's family were in New York for around ten days. After that, they traveled by plane to Mexico, arriving October 21, 1947. Her father had a second cousin in Mexico City [Dacia Darson/Dawson?]. At the beginning, Masha and her family lived in Pachuca Street and, after that, they rented a place at the intersection between Mazatlan and Montes de Oca Streets. Her father would get citizenship under President Diaz Ordaz.

She studied at the American School in Mexico City. A friend of hers, [Jack Biner] – from the Abrasha Biner's family – introduced her to a group of Hashomer Hatzair. Another friend, [Froite?] Derechin took his sister, [Frida Valestein/Wallerstein], and her to B'nai B'rith, where Masha was elected president of the women section. Victor Cohen – who would become Masha's husband – was president of the men section.

Their financial situation was not easy at the beginning. Her father sold spare parts in Veracruz. With time, their situation improved and her father opened a petrochemical factory and a poultry farm. Her father later sold the farm and concentrated on the petrochemical factory, where her husband Victor also worked.

She met Dunia Wasserstrom because her father knew Dunia's husband. Dunia used to teach French, and Masha went to her home to speak with her. Dunia told her stories about the French resistance.

Masha's mother was interviewed later in her life for the Spielberg project. Her father died in Brussels, on one of his trips to Belgium.

Masha has three children: Rafael, married to Batia Fux; Michel, married to Carola Fux, Batia's sister; and Rachel, married to [Yaniv Dagan]. She has eight grandchildren: Natalie, Vanessa, Samantha, Alexis, Victor, Alexandra, Simon and Paul. At the time of the interview, she had been married for 62 years.