

Interviewee: Brauch Cohen

Date: November 20, 2012

Z- Talk to me about the first day of your life, where you were born, when you were born . . .

B- I was born in Romania, in Bucharest, October 15, 1919. I'm coming from a family very poor. My father was illiterate, didn't have no profession. My mother knew to read and write. She was the only one to keep us up to date on what's going on with the war by reading the newspapers. We were four children, three sisters and myself. I was the third one. I have another sister after me. So, but what my father could do without knowing how to read and write, working there and there, we never died of hunger. We were sent to school.

Z- In Romanian not Yiddish school?

B- No, no, Romanian. My parents talked Yiddish.

Z- And you talked Yiddish to them?

B- From time to time, but the language of our home was Romanian. As I said we were four children, two sisters older than me, one younger than me. One of the sisters learned how to be a dressmaker. She was very good at that. Other two didn't have any profession. They became . . . they got married and . . .

Z- And how many years of schooling did you have?

B- I finished my secondary school at that time, before the war started.

Z- Was your family religious?

B- Not . . . if you mean religious. Yes we kept the Shabbos Friday night. My parents used to go to the synagogue Saturdays, not always, but always on the holidays. The national [?] possibilities were very strict, very [0:03:31]. We never suffered of hunger. We were poorly dressed, but dressed.

Z- And you said you had the equivalent to high school?

B- Oh yes, I went to high school, yes.

Z- And what were you interested in studying?

B- Jewish history. Due to my uncle, my mother's brother, which was an intellectual, was an accountant by profession. He was director of one of the largest banks in Romania. And he was for me a model. He inspired me to continue to learn, to study. Because as I said my father was illiterate. We taught him how to sign his name. So

due to my uncle I . . . which was inspiration for me. In 1933, when Hitler came to power I was 14 years old, and I remember very distinctly that my mother called, told me “this will be the end of the Jewish people”, 1933. So this stays with me. Whenever I give talks to students I tell them the same thing which I am telling you now.

Z- So when did Hitler invade Romania?

B- No, Hitler didn't invade Romania, Romania was an ally of Germany. So anti-Semitism and anti-Semitic parties in Romania were there since I remember. Romania was quite an anti-Semitic country. There were close to 800,000 Jews in Romania before the war, out of which half of them were killed during the war. I was not in Auschwitz, I was not in all those camps, but what I went through the Holocaust years, it was enough to make me suffer as a Jew.

Z- So you were in labor camps or . . .?

B- I was in the forced labor camps.

Z- Forced labor, the Romanian army.

B- Yes, the Romanian army. As a matter of fact I wrote last week a few lines about that. I was mentioning that a Romanian soldier hit me quite . . . almost killed me. And I asked him, “What did I do wrong? Why are you beating me?”. And he said, “You are a Jew, and because you are a Jew you have to die, and I want to kill you”. That was his answer, he was a Romanian officer. So, in 1941, I believe, when Romania joined the German army . . .

Z- In '41?

B- In '41, yeah.

Z- And your family? Your mother? Your sisters?

B- My family, I tell you, in this portion in 1941, '42, '43, Romania was an ally of Germany. Jews were concentrated in armies and sent some of them in Transnistria, many. Close to 250,000 Jews, Romanian Jews, died in Transnistria.

Z- In where?

B- Transnistria. Did you hear about it?

Z- No I haven't.

B- Well, Romania was . . . You know where Romanian . . . the map was . . . near Russia. The border of Romania with Russia was the river Dniester –a huge, like a St.

Lawrence. So, Romanian Jews were sent over the Dniester, so trans-niester, this is how it became Transnistria.

Z- So that was Russia? The other side?

B- Yeah, yeah, and today it's something else, because Romania after the war had to give up portions of . . .the Dniestre became [0:09:27] Moldova, were taken away from Romania. My father was born in Moldova. My mother was Romania, if we can call like that.

Z- So did they survive the war?

B- Yes.

Z- Your sisters?

B- Absolutely. My family didn't suffer . . .no didn't suffer. We suffered plenty. But there was no send away from the place where [0:10:05] place. I was concentrated at the army and this is where I suffered, this is where I . . .

Z- You were drafter?

B- Oh, yes. As a Jew this is my Eastern Europe Holocaust.

Z- So when the war ended where were you?

B- In Romania.

Z- And what happened?

B- Well, it was a very difficult area. When the war ended I was 22, 23, something like that.

Z- So, you were 26.

B- Something like that. So I have very difficult things, to get a job of course. The Communist Party came to power during that period, and I didn't want to enter the Romanian Community Party so I had very bid difficulties to get a job. So I had to do all kinds of other works to be able to make a living and to help my parents.

Z- So when did you decide to leave?

B- Well, in the meantime I knew a very nice girl and we fall in love and we got married.

Z- When was that?

B- I think in 1948, something like that, '46.

Z- How old was she?

B- 16.

Z- And where was she in the war?

B- Well, she was also in Bucharest. So I did all kinds of work because to be able to accept a position you had to be a member of the communist party. I didn't want to join the Communist Party, so I did all kinds of work to be able to make a living.

Z- So after you got married what did you do?

B- In 1948 my wife gave work to our girl. I was then starting to take very seriously to get out of Romania, to go to Israel. So in 1950, I believe, we went to Israel.

Z- So you had a daughter, what was her name?

B- Malka. We called her Monika, but her name was Malka.

Z- So in 1950 you immigrated to Israel and ...

B- And I found a job right away as an accountant, 'cause in the meantime I had started to study to become an accountant. I was encouraged by my uncle, he was also an accountant. He was the director of one of the banks in Romania, in Bucharest.

Z- So did you go to school?

B- Before that I went I finished my high school.

Z- And then was this university?

B- Not in Romania, I study it via my uncle, accounting ... I got ...

Z- Certification.

B- Yeah, certification, I'm sorry. In 1950 we left Romania and we went to Israel. I knew Hebrew because I continued to learn the language, which I loved it.

Z- So you knew Romanian, you knew Yiddish, you knew Hebrew. Did you know English or French?

B- French a little bit.

Z- From school?

B- Yeah, yeah. But English I study in Canada. And coming to Canada, one of my main aims was to study, to go to university. So I went to Concordia.

Z- So why did you leave Israel?

B- Good question. My wife had a sister and parents, they made also [0:15:57] in Israel. They were not happy in Israel. They said at the beginning that they want to leave to go to Canada. I had a job, I had studied, I was very happy.

Z- Where were you living?

B- In Tel Aviv. But my wife insisted very strongly. She didn't want to stay in Israel without her parents and her sister.

Z- So your wife wanted to go with them. So when did you leave?

B- Being in love a took a decision which was contre-coeur, because for me Israel was my country. But I did it.

Z- So when did you leave?

B- I came to Canada in 1952, I think, something like that.

Z- And was your sister and her parents, were they here before?

B- No, they remained in Romania.

Z- No, your wife's sister.

B- My wife's sister came to Canada.

Z- Did they sponsor you here?

B- No, what do you mean sponsor? For what?

Z- Well you needed someone to . . .how did you come?

B- Well at that time there was no problem to come into Canada.

Z- So just you applied and . . .

B- I applied and we got entry. If I recall well I don't remember anybody sponsoring me, I don't remember.

Z- So how did you come?

B- We came by boat, yeah, I think we came by boat. We went to Europe, from Europe to Paris, from Paris . . . also by plane I think. Then . . . I can't remember clearly how it was, but we were three people.

Z- So it was you, your wife and Malka?

B- yeah.

Z- And what about your wife's family? They came after you?

B- They came after.

Z- So it was decided that you would go first?

B- Yeah, something like that. They were very close, so maybe a few months in between they came also.

Z- Did you leave Israel with money?

B- No. But I came here to Canada . . .

Z- You think you may have flown, did you come into Dorval? How did you arrive in Canada, do you remember?

B- Very vaguely, very vaguely. I must admit that my memory lately has become very weak. But we came to Canada and . . . I don't remember exactly. We were given places to live and I don't recall exactly how it was. My memory starts to play with me.

Z- So when you arrived here, you found a room?

B- Yes, we moved in a very small apartment, one room. As a matter of fact when my in-laws came, then we were six people.

Z- In that one room.

B- In one room. Well, it was the kitchen, and you'll excuse me, and the toilet, in the same room. As I remember very distinctly. My father in-law was a . . . mended women's clothes, and he found work immediately.

Z- Do you remember where that room was?

B- Where . . . In Tel Aviv.

Z- In Montreal?

B- Don't remember, sorry.

Z- That's okay. So did you find work immediately or . . . ?

B- Yes, I went to work quite soon. I knew already little English and French.

Z- Do you remember your first job?

B- Doing accounting.

Z- Here in Montreal?

B- Here in Montreal, immediately. I'm terribly sorry that my memory is . . . it's . . .

Z- Don't worry about it it's fine. I'll just keep asking questions.

B- Yeah, go ahead, maybe this will bring me . . .

Z- Yeah. And what did your wife do, do you remember?

B- She also worked for a very short period. I was very determined not to let my wife work, because we had a little daughter and I wanted her to be with the child. So I found jobs and I worked. I would say that we did quite well.

Z- Now, when she worked what did she do?

B- She was working, she knew very well friends, she knows very well now friends. So I think she got a job as a sales-lady somewhere, if I recall well.

Z- Do you think it would be possible if I interviewed the two of you together? I could call her and ask her?

B- Yeah, maybe her memory, it's much . . .

Z- Yes, but I'm also interested in her perspective. It would be different than yours.

B- Yes, of course, I understand.

Z- We'll continue and then I'll call her. Did you get any help when you first came here from the Jewish community?

B- Yes, I remember that, I don't remember the institution is still alive, because there are still people coming. But I remember they were helpful. I got a loan of a couple of thousand dollars, which I had to pay back of course.

Z- And the loan was for?

B- Just to add to my income, which was insufficient. So things are very vague in my memory.

Z- Did you make friends here?

B- Yes, my wife is a very friendly person. She is the one with the friends. I'm a little bit more aside.

Z- And were they Canadians?

B- Romanian, but of course Canadian, they were living here.

Z- But they were immigrants too?

B- Most of them were immigrants, yes.

Z- And most were Romanian?

B- Most were Romanian. We got good number of Jews, which came from Poland and many other places.

Z- So what did you speak to each other?

B- In the home, Romanian.

Z- And to your friends? Romania? Yiddish?

B- Yeah, Hebrew. My daughter spoke Hebrew beautifully.

Z- So you spoke to her . . . Is that her?

B- [showing pictures] This is my sister, and this is my little daughter. Then she . . . she worked for Israel helping youngsters.

Z- So what about religion after the war?

B- Well as I said, we keep a kosher home.

Z- Now?



B- Always. Friday night is Friday night. Saturday my wife will never do any work as such. Saturday was Saturday. Not religious, but traditionally she knew from her parents that Friday night is Friday night, Saturday is not a day of work.

Z- So was life easy here when you came? Was it hard? What was your sense?

B- I found work immediately here and I couldn't say that it was very hard life. We did . . . we were very careful with our expenses, but we didn't miss anything. My daughter went to school, you know.

Z- Did she go to public school here?

B- Yeah, yeah. Preschool, the preschool, I don't remember. My wife will be able to give you more details.

Z- When did you move to your second place?

B- I started to get a better pay, then we moved to somewhere with a room and a small kitchen. And so, as I said, I went to study, I went to Concordia. I got a masters degree in philosophy. So I'm writing from time to time and I'm publishing.

Z- Did you teach?

B- No I didn't.

Z- Did your wife go to school?

B- Yeah, yeah.

Z- When you first came? Oh yeah [looking at pictures possibly, or documents]. So how did she learn English?

B- By talking.

Z- Working, or on the street?

B- Yeah. Meeting people on the street, neighbors. She speaks very well French. Much better than me. Because that's from her schooling years . . .

Z- Yeah, in Bucharest.

B- Yeah. Her family was much better off than my parents, so they could afford to send to French school.

Z- Did you always work as an accountant?

B- I never did anything else. In the beginning I had to do all kinds of work until I would be able to establish myself as an account.

Z- And what was your first impression of Montreal?

B- Very positive. Very lively. No problems whatsoever.

Z- Was your wife happy with the decision to come here?

B- She was the one to insist that we should come because her sister and her parents went first and she wanted to be with her family. I think I mentioned that.

Z- You did, yeah. What about your family? Did they come here too?

B- Yeah, my sisters, my three sisters, all of them followed. So my parents remained by themselves in Romania.

Z- But you had your sisters here.

B- Yeah, I had my sisters here, yeah.

Z- When you first came did you have anything to do with the established Jewish community, or was it all with immigrants?

B- No, the established Jewish institutions helped me to find a job. But I never received from them and I never received financial help from the Jewish community.

Z- Why not?

B- Because I worked and we had enough. And I didn't think it's right for me, maybe to let people order that because I was much younger then to be able to do it by myself.

Z- And did you have anything else to do with them? Were they interested in the survivors?

B- I didn't approach them. They didn't bother me.

Z- Why do you think that was?

B- It was not . . .no reason at all. Why should they bother you? Why should I approach them when I don't need them?

Z- But just in general, you know, interest in the community?

B- Sure, sure. I was always tried to learn about the Jewish community and the Jewish history so . . . I started to talk about the Holocaust.

Z- But that was later.

B- Yeah.

Z- But what about in the 50s?

B- In the 50s I had worked and made sure that my family, my wife and my little daughter had enough. So I always found work. I never had to go to the Jewish community to ask for financial help, never.

Z- But was the established Jewish community interested in the Holocaust, or did that come only later.

B- No, no.

Z- Why do you think they weren't interested then?

B- It's a good question, but never came to my mind, to say "Hey look I'm coming from Romania, you know what it was there". Nobody asked me any questions regarding that, no. Besides I always maintained that I said the truth that I was not at Transnistria where people were . . .

Z- Yeah. What's been very interesting for me as I do these interviews and I read, is how the Jewish community, the established Jewish community, did not want to know what happened to the survivors.

B- I wouldn't put it this way, they don't want to know, I wouldn't put it this way, no. As far as I am concerned, they never asked me if I was in Transnistria, if I suffered, or anything else.

Z- But isn't that odd?

B- There were so many others, hundreds, people came into Montreal daily, suffered. I didn't consider myself to be a really Holocaust survivor. I consider myself a Holocaust . . . it was the year, but you know, depends how you define . . .

Z- I actually have a little bit of difficulty with the hierarchy of suffering. I have interviewed people who were in Auschwitz, Bergen-Belsen, so I have . . . and they say the same thing that you say, "no one asked". And that's the questions that needles me, "why did no one ask?"

B- I cannot answer your question, because I lived my life, I was interested in advancing. I was interested to make sure that my family has what we need. I was

interested in history, literature, Holocaust. So, I didn't go to the community and say "hey, you never asked me how I made it, how I survived". I'm sure I don't have anything here with me, of my work, you know, I publish.

Z- But as an intellectual question, you know you're a scholar, I'm curious why would you would think that –maybe interest is the wrong word – but there was little questioning or little probing of what happened in Europe during the Holocaust. Because I'm hearing the same story from everyone.

B- Yes, I agree with you. My suggestion is that the majority of the Canadian Jews, most of them were also newcomers. And everyone had his own problems. I'm not talking about those people, which were the establishment. Because I didn't meet any negative attitude, so that I went there and said, "Look I need to work, I need this". I never needed . . . I never went to find an obstacle of me advancing in my life, or needing to get a job. So I wouldn't say that I would have been much better of it the Jewish community would had helped me.

Z- But I'm . . . I guess what I'm trying to ask as an intellectual question, is why the established weren't more involved in knowing about the Holocaust, the community. You would think . . .

B- See as far as I'm concerned, I was not, as I said, in Auschwitz. I was not in other places like that. I was not even in Transnistria myself. I was, however, curious what happened and I studied it. So, my suggestion is that you should try to meet with Romania Jews which were there, and what were their way of rising or still staying, because the Jewish community didn't help. But [0:41:13] cannot say that the Jewish community didn't help, or that the Jewish community was indifferent to [0:41:24] needs, no. Like we say in Hebrew "[0:41:32]", that "I did it by myself".

Z- So you didn't want help?

B- No, I didn't refuse help. I didn't ask. I was not refused.

Z- Did you have other children? Just one?

B- I had one daughter and unfortunately she passed away.

Z- She passed away. Recently?

B- About 12 years ago. She had two boys, superb boys. That's hard pain, will never go away.

Z- Do your grandchildren live here?

B- Yes, and I have great grandchildren. [shows picture - possibly]

Z- Oh, very sweet. So what did your daughter do?

B- My daughter she studied, then 19 something like that, got married with a Canadian Jewish boy.

Z- Was that hard for you?

B- No. We were very happy she was happy. She had two children, two boys, very successful. One is [0:43:10] in Ottawa with [0:43:12], working in a large institution of economics, very successful. The other one is working here in Montreal with [0:43:27] company, with the television, the radio, things like that. Both of them are very successful and happy in their lives.

Z- Did your daughter study?

B- My daughter studied high school here, but that was that.

Z- Where did she go to high school?

B- I don't remember maybe my wife can give you a little bit more information.

Z- So did your wife go back to work after your daughter went to school?

B- No I tried to make us as independent as possible. No. My wife worked maybe two or three years.

Z- When you first came?

B- First came, maybe. I was of the idea that I have to be the provider.

Z- That was the norm. So you worked as an accountant until . . .

B- Until 22 years ago.

Z- When you retired?

B- Yeah, retired.

Z- And now you do research?

B- With Canadian Institute. I met Professor Plantz 24 years ago, while I finished my studies at Concordia. He is, today even, a professor at Concordia. And we met on the bus I think. We talked and I got interested in him and he got interested in me. He told me about this little institute which he just started then, to create, so, I joined him and since then I am with him on a volunteering basis. I never accepted any payment.

Z- But you like it.

B- Yeah, I like it.

Z- So how would you say the Jewish community is today with survivors?

B- I don't hear with them. I hear from time to time that they are not so . . . .

Z- They're not so . . .

B- Warm. It may be, again, if you really need, they found our that you really needed, I'm sure that they help. But I cannot pinpoint this, this negatively. I have very good relations with the Jewish community. As a matter of fact yesterday I gave a talk to students at the Jewish library, which is part of the Jewish community.

Z- How often do you give talks?

B- Well, whenever I'm called. I don't know if know there is a Holocaust memorial centre here in Montreal and it's a very engaging place, and among the ones which created this place. There are thousands of people meeting this . . . yesterday I talked to about 50 students.

Z- From Montreal?

B- From Montreal and the surrounding, yeah. I have a problem now with my wife. She wants me to stop talking.

Z- Why?

B- It's quite draining, you know. It brings me back. And don't forget I'm 93, when I started talking with Holocaust people I was 70.

Z- That's a lot of years, yeah. One of the things that I found with research this project, that a lot of people, because they really haven't talked about when they first came to Canada, it's nice, they're finding it's a positive to think back to those years and starting out with their family.

B- Absolutely. I wouldn't accept to talk with you if I didn't feel that this is something positive and good. You are not the first, which I am talking about it. If I have any copies of my articles published in the Canadian Jewish News . . .

Z- Yeah, I would love to have copies. So, any regrets about leaving Israel?

B- Yeah, very deeply. Very deeply. I would have, in retrospect, preferred to be there. To have my daughter live there. I am very pro Israel, very pro Israel.

Z- And your wife is happy with the decision?

B- Yeah, yeah.

Z- Have you gone there to visit?

B- Oh, yes. Now unfortunately the last few years it's very difficult for me to travel. So I regret.

Z- Are you still driving? Do you drive a car?

B- Never, I never bought a car, I never drove a car.

Z- How come?

B- I did not want to.

Z- So you do public transit.

B- Yeah, always. So many millions of people are going by bus, living this was. Why should I be different?

Z- I agree. So I think we're coming to an end. Any thoughts in general about that time period? Anything that comes to mind from those years?

B- I think I did what I have to do. There are certain things that I would like to continue to do, but I don't have, you know. . . like people have asked me "you were with Canadian Centre for Jewish Research?". I never accepted any payment for anything. I am here because I feel that this is what I want to do. I'm sorry, I realize I'm not doing anything the way I like to continue to do. I have less and less responsibility, which pains me. Maybe it's thinking, which shouldn't be like that, but I feel that at times I'm neglected, which pains me. That's like the French saying, "c'est la vie".

Z- So do you think you'll stop coming here shortly?

B- I wouldn't like to stop. I used to be in the office, this office, at 7:30 in the morning, and leaving this place by 5, 6 o'clock, depends. Now I am coming here at 10 o'clock and by 2-2:30 I clean up my desk. And I know that I am not doing anything which is really important or valuable, you know. I'm reading, I'm making some type of suggestion, if I am asked one. But it pains me that I am neglected, but like my wife says, "you have a place where to go", people that know me will give me a phone call from time to time. I receive books. I'll give you an example. I don't know if you know this author, two months ago he sent me 14 books.

