

Interviewee: Musia
Date: March 27, 2013

Z- I'd like to start with those early years before the war, and just spend a little bit of time during the war, and then we will focus on after the war. So you were born . . .

M- So I was born in a small town in Poland. I was the only child and the only grandchild. Okay, so, obviously had a pretty beautiful pastoral childhood—full of love, adoration, attention, praise, and the good things that the child . . .

Z- When were you born?

M- 1930. 1930, which I don't know what kind of a time it was. Time for the Jews was getting worse and worse in Poland. Then of course when the war broke out . . .

Z- Okay let's go back. What did your parents do?

M- My father was a businessman, my mother was a very traditional housewife. My mother was the lady of the home and house. And my father was a businessman even though his education was in another direction, but he was in his father's business.

Z- Which was?

M- Flourmills.

Z- And where was that? Where in Poland?

M- It was [0:02:37:].

Z- And was that a small town?

M- Small town. And then he acquired also a flourmill in [0:02:45], which was also not a metropolis, but a little larger, I suppose.

Z- And did they have money, your parents?

M- Well they were . . . I don't think . . . I mean it's all in retrospect, because as a child nobody confided in me about all these matters of money and economy, but we were comfortable I'll say, quite comfortable. I mean I don't remember as a child ever . . . I don't know if my needs were so modest, but I don't remember ever wanting something that I couldn't get. First of all, as I said, because I was the only one. We were like comfortable upper-middle class I would say. If you want to classify.

Z- Were your parents educated?

M- Yeah.

Z- Both of them?

M- Yeah, both of them were educated. And because it was in a very small town, they were kind of part of the upper crust of that town. Everybody knew them. The family was in that town since, I think, 17th century—my father's ancestors. His mother came from Eastern part of Poland, but when they got married she came to my father's town.

Z- Do you know the root of your family? Like before 1700s?

M- No, I don't know. I wasn't busy with genealogy at nine, which is when the war broke out.

Z- So what was your name?

M- Speitzizen [? spelling].

Z- Speitzizen, like iron?

M- It's a difficult name and it's a hard name. Speitzizen, the origin as most of the Jewish names was either German or town or mountain, whatever. Speitz [?] is spear, and izen [?] is island, so an island spear.

Z- So there could have been, way back . . .

M- I don't know, I don't know. No, they were kind of gentle folks. My grandmother was the only grandmother I knew with the kind of attributes . . . She was playing the piano and read French romances, and was quite a [0:05:24]. Spoke a splendid German and French. So it was a . . . more acculture— . . . not totally. . . but my mother's family was Hasidic, and ultra-religious. My paternal side was not.

Z- But it was highly cultured.

M- She was . . . yes and they would, and I mean she would go to synagogue and light candles on Friday, but there was non of that, as I say, zeal, religious zeal that my other side of the family had.

Z- So you were brought up playing piano . . . or?

M- I was brought up . . . I didn't reach the age of the proper young lady grooming and raising . . . because the war broke out when I was still a kid. But I was brought up . . . see Poland was a caste society, very snobbish caste society. So I was brought up . . . but not with the . . . no governess. I had a nanny, and there was a maid, and a woman doing other work, like a washing woman or something. That's a different way of life. There's many things that I take for granted that my mother never had; like cars, phones, cell phones, whatever. But without the maid, who was without the maid? It was a different . . .

Z- So you said your mother came from a Hasidic family, so was there some conflict for her to marry your father?

M- There was no conflict. I think she was an ideal handmaiden. She adored my father. My father was king in the house. She didn't have conflict which would be in the area of . . . conflict between what my father wanted and what she wanted.

Z- No, conflict between her parents to marry someone who wasn't Hasidic.

M- No, they left town . . . as a matter of fact after the war I met someone who was a distant . . . who was relative on my mother's side. I never knew them, because to me it looked like they were all in costume, with the [0:70:53] and the whole kind of ultra-religious thing. I had never seen that before. So I used to see them and shy away from . . . like some extra-terrestrial. But they tell me that, they said, "Oh, Sonia got married and she became a goya. They took her away to this goya . . ." because compared to the atmosphere in which she was raised . . .

Z- So Sonia is your mother?

M- I don't think she suffered from it. I mean she was kind of traditionally Jewish, doing again the things like lighting candles, and keeping a, so-to-speak, superficially kosher house. We never had pork, but when the word was out that ham is good for you, she was worried my father is in the flourmill with the dust, so ham should buy for him, from what I remember. So it was that kind of . . .

Z- So how old was she when she got married, or had you?

M- Must have been 25 or 24.

Z- So you were 10 when the war broke out so you were still in elementary school?

M- Oh yes.

Z- And so what happened then?

M- Then we left because . . . I won't go into all the historical stuff. The Russians were going and the Germans were coming, and the German were going and Russians were coming. So when that sort of thing was established, that our town was to remain with Germans, we went East, to my mother's folks, to where she came from, which was subject to the Soviet takeover. We went there and from there we went to Lwow, which is like got several names. [. . .] So we went to Lwow and the Soviets were there and it was fine. There was not hardship for me until the Soviet-German war. Then from there we were chased into a ghetto.

Z- What year was that?

M- The ghetto was in 1942 in Lwow, I think. Or maybe earlier than that, '41 maybe. The war broke out in '41, right, in June '41, the Soviet-German war. Soon after that they created a ghetto in Lwow, so that's when we went in.

Z- Then what happened?

M- Well that's when there was the first major so-called action, which is like when they cleaned out the city. I mean there were over 100,000 Jews in Lwow, and after the two weeks after of that clean up job there were 18,000 left. So you can see the enormity of the rate. And the SS took away my mother, and a week later they took me away and I came out of there, the [0:11:58]. And I came out telling the commander that I was taken by mistake because I'm not Jewish.

Z- Did someone tell you to say that or you just . . . ?

M- No, I wanted out. First when I came I thought that I would find my mother there, but then I realized that this was only a transit camp, and that she wasn't there, and my father was on the outside, so my main objective was just to get out. And the guy actually, the guy gave me a hint, the commandant. He said, "Anyone who has a foreign passport or any Aryan, any non-Jew who was taken by mistake please step forward with your documents". Well documents, I was what 10, 11 years old . . . and there is a certain fearlessness that comes to a kid who doesn't editorialize but just acts. So I ran over and said that I'm not Jewish and that I was taken by mistake because there was a raid and I wanted to get some stuff off Jews. And lo' and behold he turned to the soldier and says—

Z- –So were did you go?

M- I went back to the ghetto. The ghetto was still there, my father was still there. I went back at night, it was about 12 o'clock at night. And when I came my father said, "That's it, you've written your scenario, you're not going to the new ghetto that they are creating this moment. I'll get the documents for you and you're not Jewish. You said so yourself." And that's what happened.

Z- So how did he get documents?

M- Well I can't get into that involved story, because either you need volume or a chart that doesn't make any sense. But anyhow I ended up in Warsaw at 12, with a document, with a false name, [0:14:09], a Christian name, and walked around and looked for a place to go to work or something, like as an au pair or as a helper with children. They rejected me at places, and one day took me. So I was working in a Christian home.

Z- Did they have any idea that you weren't Christian?

M- Are you kidding? No, then I wouldn't be here.

Z- So you spent the war . . . ?

M- Yeah, I spent the war . . . not in one place. I was going from place to place, but it didn't matter.

Z- So 1945, where were you at the end of the war? Or '44 in some places.

M- That's all together a non-telling story. I don't know. I collapsed when the thing was finished, and no longer the stimulus of survival as an active . . . as an activity. All the steam went out, all the air went out and I don't know, for about a year I still [0:15:22]. I don't know about liberation, I don't know how it happened. I remember it was '46 or something and I came across somebody who told me.

Z- So where were you?

M- It was somewhere around Warsaw.

Z- So what did you do? You were what 16 then? '46 you were 16.

M- It was '45 when the war was over, or where I was it was even before '45, it was the end of '44. So I was 14, 15. I drifted. I drifted and then again I found some Jews. I was very reluctant to join at first, but eventually did.

Z- So how did you get involved with Canada, to come over?

M- Later, by sheer chance I discovered that there was an aunt of mine that survived and that she was in Germany. And I sent a wire and she came to fetch me in Poland, from Poland to a DP camp. And then I started a normal life, in a DP camp where you could just hibernate, nothing was demanded of you.

Z- And what year was that?

M- It was '46.

J- That camp was in Germany? The DP camp.

M- Yeah, DP. And it was engrained kind of that . . . to study, to study, to study. Lenin said, [0:17:22], that's how my father . . . I mean this emphasis on education was always enormous. So the first thing I did in that camp, I went into town. The Germans were in pretty bad circumstances, pretty strange time, it was before even [0:17:43] and [0:17:45] and the currency was no currency, very bad condition. So I started to investigate in town, in [0:18:00], if there's anyone there who was a teacher. I found two university professors and I asked them if they would teach me, and they said, "yes, be glad to." I mean get a few bucks.

Z- And who paid for it?

M- I paid for it. How . . . my aunt at the time, money was no money. I mean you paid, you brought some café or a piece of chocolate or things they couldn't get. They didn't even want money.

Z- So you bartered with food or . . . ?

M- Yeah, and sometimes I paid, but money was small money. They were very good. One was teaching me natural sciences, and the other one humanities. And I used to go down every morning and stay 'til about 7:30 at night. And then they had established, the Ministry of Health and Education in Germany, established the . . . it's called [0:19:06] commission, which meant they granted matrics to people from I think Poland, Russia, Hungary. Those were the three languages that you could do as language. The exams were written in German, but the language exam, I mean, so you didn't have to pass German, but you could to Polish or . . .

Z- What language did you speak at home? Was it Polish or Yiddish?

M- No, only Polish. That's what helped my to survive. I had an impeccable Polish accent without any Jewish infiltration.

Z- And your parents spoke Polish to one another?

M- Yeah.

Z- They didn't speak Yiddish?

M- They could speak Yiddish. I know that sometimes if they didn't want me to understand they were using some language.

Z- Do you understand Yiddish now?

M- Now I do because my husband is from [0:20:09] and his father spoke a miserably fractured Polish, which I'm not a very tolerant person when it comes to the word. So I preferred listening to him speak Yiddish than speak a bad Polish. So I listened to him and I learned, I mean, you know, it's limited.

Z- Did you know German? Did you learn German? When, in Germany?

M- When I was in Germany I just learned orally more than anything.

Z- So you took these matriculation exams?

M- I did.

Z- And that gave you equivalent to high school?

M- No, matriculation, I went to university with that. I went to the Frankfurt [0:20:59] University. I wanted to go into medicine, but of course they didn't have room. The university was bombed. So I went into chemistry for the first semester, then the consulate called me, see if I want to go to America. And that's how I found myself here.

Z- The Canadian consulate called you or the American?

M- No it was . . . who called me at that time? It was the American consulate, they were creating a special quota for war children, war orphans, up to the age of 18. And that I qualified if I want to go. Obviously I wasn't going to stay in Germany for life. So I said yes. I registered and then they told me there's some new restrictions in immigration and I have to have been in the American zone in '45 in order to qualify and I don't qualify. I said, "I didn't ask you, you called me. What do you want?" . . ."Okay, but you can go to Canada". That was the consolation prize. "There's a Canadian representative here if you want to talk to her." So I went to talk to her, she said yes. So they transferred to Canada.

Z- What was that interview like? Do you remember?

M- Which interview?

Z- When you spoke to the Canadian . . . I guess it was the Congress people?

M- It wasn't an interview, it was just she called me, "Where were you born? Where you have your birth certificate? Would you like to go to Canada?" And then I think there was some restrictions in the Canadian . . . ultimately it was the Canadian Jewish Congress in on the act. And they called me, "Wanna come? We have this special camp, orphanage in Germany." It was somewhere near Heidelberg. So I went to that orphanage and from there they took us to Bremerhaven, put us on the ship, and that's it.

Z- Where is Bremerhaven? In Germany?

M- Yeah.

Z- So there was a ship going from . . . ?

M- It wasn't a ship for us, I think it was just . . . we were 43 kids in a cabin.

Z- Do you know when that was?

M- Yeah, sure. I arrived here 1948 at the end of June.

Z- To Halifax?

M- Yeah.

Z- So you were 18 then?

M- Yeah. Not quite, because there was a limit. I had to be younger.

J- You were under 18 for sure. You made sure you were under 18 [laughs].

Z- You're one of the few people I interviewed who came on the orphan program who actually qualified [laughter all around].

J- You didn't have to lie.

Z- So you were 43 orphans so-to-speak, right. How many of them were women, girls?

M- I think . . . look, we were 40 . . . we couldn't have slept all in one cabin if we were co-educational. We must have been all girls. They wouldn't put us together with boys to sleep.

Z- I don't know.

M- Oh come on. That would be too generous an offer.

Z- All I know is that the majority of them were boys.

M- Don't forget that there were two orphanages, so-called. There was Priene, which was near Munich, and there was Aglasterhausen, which was near Heidelberg. Aglasterhausen was not Jewish, it was mixed. And it was under pretty strict rules, run by Ms. Green. I would have took any couple curses [?], we all hated her.

Z- Why?

M- She was a miserable character, gratuitously, she didn't have to be. She was, I think, a professor or somebody on staff at some university in California or Florida. . . she was ugly to begin with, that was the first thing. No easy to forget. She was fat and ugly and sloppy looking.

Z- And Jewish?

M- No, I don't think, Ms. Green, she was not Jewish, I don't think so. Don't put all the blames on her. So I remember that whenever we . . . something, you'd say, "Alright if you don't do it, I'll see to it that they call you upstairs." Call you upstairs is almost like being called to the Gestapo, that's like what it's like to be called to her office. Which is ludicrous. A children's orphanage, war orphans, they should be afraid. And on top of it, she married some absolute jerk, like a down and out Polish Jew, whose name was [0:26:50]. Him I hated altogether.

Z- So they ran the orphanage?

M- They ran, yeah. I was there just for a few months, I mean waiting for transport to Bremerhaven. But it was a very different law there than in Preine. It's possible that in Preine they were mostly boys. In our place it was mixed, and, as I said, Jews represented the minority.

Z- Did you make good friends? Any friends there?

M- Friends like school friends, not deep friendships.

Z- Were you prepared in any way to come to Canada? Or was it just waiting for the ship?

M- I wasn't prepared and nobody was prepared. We had a guy from the agency here who was supposed to take us, and I don't know, the rumor was that he was a terrible philanderer or whatever, so he got lost in Bremerhaven, so instead of taking us . . . got away to some German Fraulein. And here, the ship they are calling us to get on, he's not there. So we came alone, the sheep without a shepherd.

Z- Oh boy.

M- This was funny, we came to Halifax – walking around it was kind of raining, like drizzling.

Z- Welcome to Halifax [laughs].

M- What are we going to do now?

Z- So no one welcomed you?

M- We walked out and we're looking. If they had welcomed, they would probably wait for this fellow, what was his name? Abe Ram. So, Ram's not there [laughs]. So, I see a couple, explicitly gentile looking, like kind of tall, blonde, not an incline of anything Jewish. But I see that they're cruising, making circles and looking, and we are sort of circling. So I decided to approach them, and in German, [I] didn't know any English at all, and they didn't know any German, so they answered in some sort of pigeon Yiddish, and I was speaking to them in German. It turned out that they came to meet us.

Z- And they were from Halifax?

M- Yeah, there was like, what's his name? Adorable couple, I think that she . . .

Z- Yeah, they did ask for volunteers, right, from the community.

M- She was from Montreal originally, Barbara Flanders, and his name was Goldberg, and they had a men's store in Halifax. Extremely nice. They made a party for us at their synagogue in Halifax. They escorted us later to the train, and there, there was somebody ready to take us to Montreal or wherever we were going.

Z- And that was 40 of you who came off the ship?

M- Yeah. Yeah.

Z- And how long where you in Halifax? Overnight?

M- No, I think over the weekend. Yeah, because I remember there was one Hungarian girl among us, Rene, who was very religious. And I remember she comes over to me and says, "Musia, what do you think I should do? Tomorrow is the Sabbath and we are on the ship." So I'm looking at her and thinking is she for real? I said, "No Rene, I think God orders you to jump." [laughs]

Z- So you had no religion in your life at this point?

M- Not really, not as such. No. I didn't have the . . . I had some friends, kids who came from much more assimilated and acculturated homes, but had the sense of religion or nationality or belonging. I don't remember suffering under that kind of yoke.

Z- Did you speak any French?

M- No, I didn't speak English or French when I arrived.

Z- So just Polish and some German?

M- And Russian.

Z- And Russian.

M- Yeah.

Z- So you get to the train and someone from the Congress is waiting for you, do you remember who that was?

M- Where?

Z- At the train station in Halifax.

M- I know that we were taken by Goldberg, and oh he was a sweetheart. There were some boys, but they must have slept somewhere else. He walked over and put in every boys' pocket a bank note and said, "Treat the girls on the train."

Z- Aww.

M- That kind of a guy. Very nice guy. And of course they requisitioned me immediately. They said, "You're staying in our house." Because the kind of the whole local gentry divided the kids, everybody took a couple of kids to sleepover. I stayed at the Goldbergs.

Z- So when did you arrive exactly, in Halifax? June?

M- June 18th, 19 . . .

Z- 1948?

M- Yeah.

Z- And when is your birthday?

M- My real one is in May. [0:32:51] was in September, so consequently all my papers are [same as 0:32:51]'s birthday.

Z- So you're just a few months younger.

M- Yeah.

Z- Was it hard going back from Helena to Musia? Or . . . you know was that transition . . .

M- What do you mean?

Z- You were Helena for a number of years, 3 years, right?

M- Yeah.

Z- That's a long time in a young girls life.

M- Yeah. I don't know that I consciously took it as playing a part, but I had no problems responding to Musia. I had problems when they called me Miriam. I never turned around, I never thought it was me. But when Musia came back, I had no problems. Just as I had no problems going to church.

Z- As Helena.

M- And I had no problems not going to church and going to synagogue. Some friends that I know had big problems. They couldn't stand going back to being Jewish. When they married a Jew here and they had to go to synagogue, it was torture.

Z- Just to go to do religion, or to be Jewish?

M- I don't which it was, I know that they were tortured.

Z- Okay, so you're on the train to Montreal. Was it Montreal? They decided you would go to Montreal?

M- They asked us in Halifax.

Z- Where do you want to go?

M- No, they offered Montreal, Toronto, Winnipeg.

Z- And not Halifax?

M- No.

Z- Would you have stayed in Halifax?

M- I don't know, but nobody asked. At that time those were the three cities that they were. . . but they had to have an administration ready to receive us, I mean . . .

Z- So what happened? You chose Montreal?

M- Yeah.

Z- Because?

M- Because I liked the name. I remembered reading a book about Canada, which had Montreal in it. Winnipeg, I never even heard the name. Mind you, the kids in Winnipeg, John Hirsch went to Winnipeg. He would have never made as quickly a career in a big city, he'd get lost like the proverbial small fish in a big pond.

Z- Whose this?

M- John Hirsch, he became the director of Stratford . . .the . . . Very, very talented guy.

M- And you were friends with him?

M- No, I met him, I wasn't friends . . . He went to Winnipeg, we hardly ever met.

Z- So you were on the train to . . .well everyone went to Montreal, you had to go together, right. So what happened when you got to Montreal?

M- Well here we were met, we were met at the railway station by Dr. Rosengarden, whose a wonderful woman, and we were taken to a reception centre . . .

Z- On Germain's [sp ?]

M- On Germans, and they had like open evenings, when people were coming to look us over or whatever, and . . .

Z- Talk to me about that a little bit.

M- Well look, you could [0:36:36] if you wanted, but I think in many cases it was a very sincere thing. 1948 is not 2013. It was a short while after the shock. The people, even the ones that say they didn't know anything, did know obviously. So some came to maybe find someone who comes from a town near theirs. Maybe something to bring back from there life, maybe . . . you know, nostalgia. So very positive feeling. But I remember writing to my aunt who was still in Germany, that I felt that I was [0:37:23].

Z- Can you translate that?

M- Yeah, show biz, or like window dressing piece, not for sale. Because in Germany, before the currency changed, the stores didn't sell anything, money was no money. So there were things in windows and it was always writing [same as 0:37:23], not for sale. And me, whenever somebody came and showed some interest – I guess because I was shinning more than the others, I spoke Russian, German, Polish, many of these kids couldn't speak one language decently, I mean, they survived somewhere in hiding or in a forest or whatever – so if they showed interest, Dr. Rosengarden came, "I'm not ready to discuss her." So she's keeping me for better things.

Z- So what did she have in mind?

M- To find a home.

Z- But not to anyone who came by.

M- that's right.

Z- So she was actually being very . . . fussy.

M- Oh, yeah. Oh, no, no.

Z- But you were 18, you could have lived on your own, right?

M- Look, this was the law: they had to place us all. Either place us . . . there were two kinds of . . . There was the free home and there was the paid home. In the paid home the Congress was paying for your boarding room. In a free home, after you were sort of given some IQ tests, which couldn't have been verbal because we didn't speak the language, but after . . . and after it was decided we were university material, so we were designated for the free home. And the free home meant that it was the people who were comfortable enough to request one of the kids without any . . . you would have to pay for them. And the Congress was paying for the first year tuition and then the next you would have to arrange . . .

Z- Okay, so the free home wasn't like a fostering or an adoption? It wasn't adoption?

M- Adoption was not anything compulsory, it was totally voluntary, and they decided that . . . certain individual situations.

Z- Yeah, my understanding is they had a very hard time finding free homes.

M- That's possible that they were harder. The other ones you paid for and the kids would go to some trade school or something to facilitate being employed and earning some money.

Z- And so where were you placed?

M- Well of course they placed me in a free home. Okay, I went to a free home. I didn't like it [laughs].

Z- Do you mind talking about it?

M- No, no, I didn't like it, I stayed for about six weeks . . .

Z- Where was it?

M- In Montreal.

Z- But where?

M- What do you mean?

Z- Like was it in Mile End? Outremont?

M- It was Upper Westmont. I didn't start life many Jews here on St. Urbain. I started Upper Westmont.

J- You started at the top [laughs].

M- Yeah. They were nice, but it wasn't for me and I knew.

Z- Why wasn't it for you?

M- Well they were totally different culture. Where you don't do this because it's not done, well I would like to know why it's not done. I was the contrary child who wanted to know. Since I was that size, my father taught me Ask, don't accept anything. I was brought up with a very high standard, intellectual standard and expectation mixed with incredible love. And that's why it went over. I didn't feel that I have to be on a couch because my father when I was six years old told me, "Why didn't you look it up in the dictionary, but you come and misspell a word?" I'll never forget that I came and asked him, I said that my mother is

reading her books.” So usually [0:42:22] in Polish, there’s a word, [0:42:25]. And I was a little parrot, and always fascinated by language, so I’d listen and get these words, but they were just oral and I was just a kid. So I said, “[same as 0:42:25]”. And my father said, “Never do that. Never use a word unless you know exactly . . . and go to a dictionary.” [. . .]

Z- So let’s go back. So you go, you’re on Germains at the Herzl centre . . .

M- It was personal reasons, I left . . .

Z- How long were you there?

M- About six or seven weeks.

Z- No, on Germains, before you were placed.

M- Oh, no, about a week.

Z- Only a week.

M- Yeah.

Z- So when did the name Miriam come into play?

M- The name Miriam, right after I came they were marking down, registering us, and said to us, “so what’s your Jewish name?” I said, “In don’t know, my name was [0:43:44] during the war, and Musia at home, and my Grandmother that I was named after was Miriam or Mariam something like that.” They said, “That’s what it’s going to be, now that you’re in Canada.” So they marked it down, but I never responded to it.

Z- So what does your passport say?

M- Miriam! That’s how they registered me the minute I came.

Z- So it does say Miriam. So after a week you went to this home on Rosslin. And you weren’t comfortable. Did they ask you anything about . . .

M- Yeah, but that’s not the reason. I wasn’t comfortable because they were the sort of no discussion, stiff upper lip, they were German Jews. They were more German than the Germans in . . . behaviorally. And I knew that it would only come to eventually friction. If I leave right away there will be no friction. And that’s exactly what happened.

Z- Where did you go?

M- I told them that I have to wait for my aunt who is coming from Europe. They were going to the seashore and they wanted me to go with them. I said I couldn’t come. She was not a

stupid woman, she understood. Because when I told her, “no I can’t because I have to wait for my aunt.”, She looked at me and she said to me, “You’ll be here for a few years, you’ll come to the conclusion that we were one of the nicest people that you did meet in Canada.” And I say, “I don’t need that conclusion later, I know it now.” So she sensed that my issue was heard, better that way then . . .

Z- Yeah, what did you do?

M- By that time I went . . . because I was no longer at the centre, but I was going to the Y on corner of Mont Royal and Park Ave. and I met people, so there were several people who said, “Well, anytime you want to come and live with us . . .”

Z- And they were survivors too?

M- No, there were some survivors, there was a woman who was not a relative, but her sister was married to my great-grandfather’s bother. And since my great-grandfather was a big [0:46:27], so she says when she found out that I came here from Europe, she came to the centre to look me up, and kept in touch. So I went to live there. Not permanently, but for a time.

Z- And where did she live?

M- On Park Ave.

Z- And Mont Royal, or near the Y, or?

M- Not far from the Y, around Fairmont and Park Ave.

Z- And what was it like then?

M- Oh, it was fine. Lovely old lady.

Z- And she was single at that time?

M- She was widowed already for a hundred years.

Z- And no children?

M- Yeah, she had children, they were all married.

Z- Okay, so you stayed with her and did what?

M- For a few months. And I went to business college. I refused to go to university, they all thought I was crazy.

Z- Why did you refuse?

M- Because I didn't want any handouts. I told them, "I'll go to University on my own time."

Z- And what about learning English?

M- Like this. Wherever I was, I mean, if you're in the country . . . I never took any English courses as such, that's a simple thing to say for a person who has a PhD in English Literature, but I never took any [laughs]. . .

J- So you never went to the JIAS courses, the evening courses?

M- No.

Z- How come, do you remember why? Not interested?

M- I don't know. When ever I went, I felt that it wasn't for. That kind of group arrangements weren't for me. They didn't have any selected groups that would be more or less on the same . . . with the same capacity for absorbing that I had. So there was a lot of dead wood there, and sitting there I would only be smug, you know, didn't make sense.

Z- So you learned on the street.

M- Yeah, on the street, and on my own, reading.

Z- So how long did it take you to learn?

M- Well I'm learning . . .

Z- But how long to be, you know, to be able to converse on the street?

M- When I went to the business college, also I could communicate. I mean joke of jokes, my certificate, okay, whatever I acquired in my typing skill, but for shorthand they gave me 99%. I thought it was a biggest joke. I don't know the language. But I had a very good memory. I had a phenomenal memory when I was younger. So that's why learning for exams or for anything was always a play for me.

J- So you learned typing and you learned shorthand?

M- That's right.

J- And anything else at this business college?

M- Whatever in that business college, I don't even remember, it wasn't a big intellectual challenge I can tell you.

Z- And it was all women?

M- No, it was the Outremont Business College. And because it wasn't a challenge, so I was a star there, any job that they offered, the teacher would say, oh no, that's not for Ms. Eisen, she's too good for that.

Z- So they shortened your name to Eisen.

M- that's right.

Z- So you became Miriam Eisen.

M- That's right. So they said, "That's not for . . . Ms. Eisen is much too good for that, I wouldn't let her go to a place like that."

Z- So then what happened?

M- Then I was sort of coasting along. Then I found a job. I begged them to let me go after 6 months, because the course was supposed to be for a year, and the Congress said that I'll stay a year. And I was not going to waste time, I said, "I want a job." So they let me go to work.

Z- What did you do?

M- I went to work as an assistant bookkeeper, very nice job.

J- Where was that?

M- It was men's clothing on Park Ave, near Park Extension, Samuelson's Ltd. [SP ?]

Z- Samuel and sons?

M- Samuelson.

Z- Do you remember how much you got paid?

M- No, I don't remember, but I'm sure that he [0:52:26]. The boss was a very bright guy. He was a lawyer who took over his father-in-law's business, bright man.

Z- So how long were you there for?

M- I was there for about a year I guess.

Z- And you still lived with the woman on Park Ave.?

M- No, no, no, I moved with other people, to friends.

Z- So who were your friends?

M- My friends here?

J- At that time . . .

M- At that time there were usually people who also came from Europe. A couple of girls, a couple of boys, there were always boys around. But . . . friends, usually very nice people. I don't pick non-nice people, or at least I won't stay friends with them.

Z- How did you meet them? Just here at the Y?

M- No, mostly from the Y. We had dances there every week and meetings. And at that place when I was living there she said I can't go there because, "I wouldn't have you. . . When you live with such and such you can't go to Park Ave." You would think it's a red light district.

Z- This was on Rosslin, the German couple on Rosslin?

M- Yeah.

Z- So they were controlling.

M- Yeah, but controlling in a sense of somebody . . . there daughter was raised that way and it didn't bother her.

Z- Did they know your background? That you had been independent since you were 12?

M- Well they should have known. Obviously they knew my history. But the woman . . . was not an evil woman. I remember later when I said that, "Now I want to go to McGill", and she was in that committee approving scholarships . . .

Z- This was the woman whose house you went to?

M- Yeah, that's right.

Z- So when was this?

M- Oh I was gone already a long time from there. But they told me, says, "I don't think she's going to support you because you left, and I think she was a little cross, she didn't want you to leave." I said, "On the contrary, I think you are wrong, she may be cross, but it's not going to interfere with her judgment." And when she feels . . . [0:54:15] she was the first one that came out, she says, "I don't care what she what she wants to study, give her any of the scholarships she wants . . . is brilliant." And I counted on her doing that, that's why I say

she's not a bad woman. It's different culture and it wasn't for me, so if I had stayed there would inevitably be friction.

Z- So how long did you stay on Park Ave. Where did you go after? You said you lived with friends?

M- I stayed with my friends until I got married on Cote-Saint-Luc.

Z- So when did you get married?

M- Yeah, it didn't take very long. I got married in 1950.

Z- So you were 20?

M- Yeah, that's right.

Z- So how did you meet your husband?

M- At the Jewish library.

Z- Is he also a survivor?

M- No, no, his family survived in Siberia.

Z- His family . . . pardon?

M- Survived in Siberia.

Z- Siberia. But they were immigrants after the war too?

M- Immigrants yes, but there were not in Germany, in German, in the government.

Z- Yeah. So you met him at the library.

M- Yeah.

Z- And when you got married where did you live?

M- When?

Z- 1950.

M- 1950, December.

Z- And where did the two of you start out?

M- Oh, we started out . . . real brilliant idea [laughs], started out with his family, two brothers, and two parents. Only a stupid little goat like me could do that [laughter all around].

Z- [laughs] I think most people did it. Where did they live?

M- They lived in Snowden on [0:56:13].

Z- Okay, in 1950?

M- that's right.

Z- And what did his father do?

M- His father was retired prematurely. He was an engineer and obviously he couldn't start working here as an engineer, he was too old for re-training, but . . . he retired and well . . . they're both dead, mother and father, and one brother is dead, the older one.

Z- So how old was your husband when you married him?

M- My husband is about 6 years older. He's from 1924, I'm from 1930.

Z- And what was he doing then?

M- He had to work, I mean . . .

Z- But what did he do?

M- He was working in the place that he bought.

Z- Which is?

M- Canadian Hat.

Z- Canadian Hat?

M- Yeah.

Z- So he was just . . .?

J- The manager? He owed it? He was a owner?

M- He's the owner, yeah, he's the sole owner, yeah, has been for 55 years.

J- But he was a partner?

M- No, no he would tell you he was sweeping floors. Maybe in the beginning he did. Didn't know the language, he knew French though.

Z- Is he Polish?

M- Polish, yeah.

Z- So he knew French and . . .

M- He had an uncle in the States . . . I'm going to soon throw you out, it's 4:30, someone's coming . . .

Z- Okay.

M- He had an uncle in the States who was in the [0:58:00] business. So when they came, uncle Herbert came and placed all three boys in [same as 0:58:00] businesses. Liam, my husband, in Canadian Hat, the other one in [0:58:15], the third one somewhere . . . The other two didn't stay, and my husband stayed, so he worked inside and he became the manager, became a buyer, and then started to sell on the road eventually for them. And then ultimately the three brothers sort of didn't enjoy great serenity and peace between them and wanted to put the place up for sale, and said he would be the most logical . . . he said, "logical, yes, except I have no money." So . . . but he took it and paid out, it's been quite successful ever since.

Z- Okay, since we have a short period . . . so you moved in with his family, and you worked as the assistant bookkeeper, so how long did all that last?

M- [laughs] Well what it seems like and what it was, is discrepancy. We moved and we got married December, and I think that we moved out July or August, so a few months.

Z- Where did you move to?

M- An apartment, in Eugene, Sherbrook and Wilson.

Z- And you continued working?

M- Oh, yeah.

Z- For how long?

M- I continued working until . . . until I was pregnant with Susan.

Z- Susan is your first one?

M- That's right.

Z- And when was she born?

M- '54

Z- '54, so it was four years.

M- Yeah.

Z- And you wanted to work?

M- Oh, yeah.

Z- Did you have to work too or . . . ?

M- Well we could have made ends meet, but it would be very tight because the other two brothers weren't very forth coming with their support and [1:00:14], so it usually fell onto my husband's shoulders. So . . . couldn't make it on one salary.

Z- So were all your friends survivors or from Europe at the same time?

M- No. No, they were miscellaneous from the beginning. I made Canadian friends.

Z- You are one of the few people, that I've talked to. I've talked to 23 people and you're the only one who has said that.

M- Look, my closest friends here in Montreal was Irving Layton, that's since 1958 until he died.

Z- You studied English with him at Concordia?

M- I never studied actually with him. I often audited his courses, but I didn't study with him. But we had our Martin [?] talks, daily studies [laughs]. And many other friends, I mean they were as mixed as anything. There were some survivors, and some of them dated back to the early days when you first arrive and it's all [0:01:35], you know, so you're both in the same situation and it brings you together. But then everybody goes off in his own direction.

Z- So '54 you had a child, you stopped working.

M- Oh, yeah.

Z- And then what happened?

M- Then I started taking the evening work, one course. I got credits for my German studies, and started to take like, as a part time student, one or two courses.

Z- In what?

M- Whatever was available if you registered as . . . McGill didn't have any extension courses at that time, it was at Concordia, Sir George, which was a night university. Then before I know it I sort of accumulated 20 or something courses, which would have entitled me to a BA except I didn't pick what I was supposed to, I just picked what I felt like.

Z- And they were all in Literature or Arts or Science?

M- Very little science. Science was only when I found out that I had to take some compulsory.

Z- But you were good in science.

M- I wasn't having a great interest in it. I was mainly literature, history, philosophy, psychology, and social sciences.

Z- And do you only have one child?

M- No, I have . . . my son was born '57.

Z- And so when did you go back to school fulltime?

M- No, actually I never went fulltime, but I would take, when the kids started school or even kindergarten, then I would take two courses in a semester, so that speeded it up. And then I got my BA, then I got my Masters at Sir George, in English Literature. And I started to teach . . .

Z- When did you start to teach?

M- You know, I really don't know the date—never remembered that. But then they started a comparative literature department at McGill, which never really took off the ground and was always in the embryonic stage, if I was describing, it's going to be a stillborn baby. But they recruited me actually. They said that I would be an ideal student because it's unstructured here, and I can take courses in various departments, and do my own curriculum and write my honor papers and whatever. So that's what I did, and that's where I got my PhD in Comparative, at McGill.

Z- And what was your thesis on?

M- Then I was going fulltime . . . I didn't like McGill as much as I liked Sir George, in those days. It was a much more lively school. And that's the story.

Z- So did you get help from anyone?

M- I don't know what you call help.

Z- In terms of financial, psychological, social . . . ?

M- No, my social worker was always complaining that I never showed up for council. No, because things were going relatively well. I had good friends, I had no problem making friends and getting people sort of on my side. Of course you get assistance, if you have friends who like you and respect you, that's a help in itself.

Z- What was the role of the social worker? I'm very curious.

M- I don't know, I didn't avail myself, she was a very nice woman. What was her name? I think I met her once or twice, and whenever she would see me in a public place, says, "There she is! The one I was telling you about, the one that never comes." Her name was Ninton [sp?].

Z- Did people ask you about the war years?

M- Some did. Some did . . . And some, in the beginning, got some answers, others didn't anymore because it was frequently followed by some completely imbecilic remark, "You know we didn't have it so good either, you couldn't get enough sugar, or enough meet." So at this point, "Why don't you keep your mouth shut."

Z- Did you talk to your kids about it?

M- No, not in a deliberate, explicit way, like sit down and let's talk Holocaust. They know much more than I even expect. Because my daughter suddenly out of the clear blue . . . I'll see a column . . . I remember many years ago she wrote a column saying, "So and so says he would like to be Jewish, a real WASP, you'd like to be Jewish? Why? Because we all talk with our mouth full? Because we talk and eat at the same table? What does he know about other things? What would he do with my mother's lost childhood?" So these remarks would come out. But I never really volunteered, I was always ready to answer questions when they asked, and in sections they know. Like my son frequently . . . "what happened when you lost a job? What happened when somebody suspected you or looked at you and you got worried that they may inform?" So I would sit down and tell him, but that's about it. They're very well aware.

Z- Did you talk to your husband about it?

M- Oh, yeah, but also . . . Look, when they came, the Spielberg thing, to show all this, okay it's supposed to be for the record, so he did the interview, for 4 hours or something. So that's like for the record. Yes, I want the story to be told, not mine only, but the whole story to be told. Like Primo Levi says, sometime he feels that the only reason he survived was in order to tell the story. And he's got a point. Don't see many other valid reasons why the Lord would make me survive.

Z- What about religion now? Or with your children?

M- Oh, my religion is a very portable religion [laughs] . It's not a heavy cross that I ever carry, that's why I use the word portable advisably. Because I couldn't call myself an atheist because I do address some creation, it's not anthropomorphic, but I do address. I don't believe in afterlife, but I talk to my father, so that's why I say I don't have a clear answer for that. I'm a religion person in the sense that some of the very secular people define it by saying, "if you care about people you're religious." That's a very loose definition. But I'm not an atheist, at best maybe agnostic.

Z- Did you bring up your kids Jewish?

M- Oh yes, oh yes. No, I never had any problems with being Jewish, except with the Nazis . . . I sent my kids to Hebrew school, day school, not just afternoon school. Robert finished [1:10:46], Susan didn't want to go to high school there. She says, okay, she wants to go to non-segregate . . . And I also thought it was not good. She went to West Hill and she retained the same circle of friends that she would have in a Jewish school. So, you know, you can't organize this the way that you want it.

Z- Did you talk English to your husband at the beginning? Always? When you first met your husband did you speak English to one another?

M- In the beginning I think we spoke more Polish to each other. But very gradually English took over as a main language at home.

Z- And now it's only English?

M- Only English, yeah. Because now the kids, those brats, I mean they learn to understand even though they don't know Polish. If I say something in Polish, they let me know that they know what I said.

Z- So, when you think about your experience coming here, what sticks out for you?

M- All positive. All positive. I couldn't have chosen any better. In retrospect I can also . . . Let's say I was in . . . when I was in a DP camp we lived in a building which was a so-called kibbutz, which wasn't really a kibbutz, and they had the idea bent from there, and they approached me to go. And I said to my aunt, "I think I want to go." And she says, "Musia, you suffered enough, you don't want to go into insecurity, you need a rest now." I didn't realize but if I had been there there's no way that I wouldn't be very actively involved, no question about it. Here it was like a bomb, nobody expects anything of you, gives you all the feeling of safety, serenity, and doesn't expect anything. The first time I realized I can go out for a walk and I don't need my papers with me was a revelation.

Z- So that was freedom?

M- Yeah, but it was freedom without sort of a military rule.

Z- Did you feel you had to get married quickly?

M- I must have. I must have. I don't know, I just think back now, but I must have thought that I want to have like my wall where I can put the nail in and hang up my picture, and have my home, which I didn't have since I was what, 12. So it's . . . I didn't give it much thought until my husband . . . I had other boyfriends before. I had boyfriends as soon as I came here, after a week, we were going steady. We were Romeo and Juliet of the newcomers.

Z- What happened?

M- We went out for over a year, and I got mad at him. [laughs]

Z- You fell in love with someone else.

M- No, that didn't happen. I just got mad at him.

Z- Oh you got mad at him.

M- "Get out of my sight." Actually, he died. He was the most brilliant of the kids, of the orphans. He graduated from McGill with a traveling scholarship, not just a gold medal. His gold medals, could have paved the room with them. Went to MIT, got a chair at the MIT before he finished his PhD there, physics, nuclear physics. Oh man, he was the president at the Bell . . . the research laboratories. They never had a Jew come anywhere near that level. Brilliant. Brilliant.

Z- Were you friends later?

M- I was friends until he got married and she was so insanely jealous if he spoke to me that . . . hey, let's leave it. When he went to MIT he never came back here, I mean he was coming back to see me, but . . . he married a Boston girl, very nice girl, I don't know . . . I was history. At the time I had two kids. When I went to his wedding, I went with my two kids. I don't how you'd be jealous, it was ancient history. He was a very nice boy. Unfortunately, I think that his playing around with all these physics had something to do with his premature myeloma.

Z- Could very well have.

M- Yeah. So that's . . . but I never thought at that time that I was going out with [1;17:15]. And he was also under an assumed name in Poland. He had a very similar history.

Z- So there was a real comfort.

M- A great deal of comfort. We understood each other in shorthand.

Z- So did you ever date a Canadian Jewish guy?

M- I dated a couple of Canadian Jewish guys, I wasn't really lucky with those, they were mostly boring. Compared to guys like [1:17:15] or the other one, Stephen, who I was dating later who was also from Poland, they were very blah.

Z- How so?

M- These guys were much more exciting. Just so happens coincidentally that the ones I went out with were very interesting, and the others were more who would make up their minds that they are going to get a date with me, so keep calling, calling, and sometimes eventually I would go out with them once.

Z- And nothing?

M- No, no.

Z- So do you think it was important for you eventually to settle with someone who was from Europe?

M- No, never thought that. Never thought that, but it worked out like that, so maybe it was.

Z- Yeah, that comfort of familiarity.

M- Maybe it was, without my realizing it. Oh, I had a lot of male friends, Canadian Jewish. For a while I was like . . . most of my friends were artists, poets mostly, verbal, not so much visual. And many of them Canadian Jews, and very good friends, those that are still alive, to this day.

Z- So who was Stephen? He was another person you dated?

M- Yeah, not very long. After [same as 1:17:15 sounds like Yannick] went to Boston, I dated him. He still didn't get married. My husband says it's because of me [laughs].

Z- And he's from Europe, Stephen?

M- Stephen was also from Europe, and another Stephen is local. That Stephen, the local one, has been married a few times already and divorced, but the other one never married. No, I had very interesting man friends. I had a wonderful father, so that's why my attitude to men was always . . .

Z- What was your father's name?

M- Koper

Z- So Susan was named after your mother, Sonia?

M- Yeah.

Z- And Robert?

M- Robert, well . . . not going to call him Koper, he would marry me.

Z- It's kind of a cool name.

M- No, but it's a . . . his middle name, Kenneth, you know used the first letter. My father hated his name, that's why I wouldn't . . .

Z- Isn't Koper in Yiddish, like one of the herbs you put in . . . like dill.

M- Koper in Polish. K-O-P-E-R. No, that's wonderful, freshest smelling thing is koper, dill I couldn't cook without it. But no, my father never forgave his mother for naming . . . "What are you naming?" "It's an ancestor that died." "What do I care about that?"

Z- So in terms of the home, you ran the home? You managed the home?

M- Yeah.

Z- You took care of everything in the house?

M- Yeah.

Z- Did you work with your husband at all? Did you help him out?

M- I don't think he would like, I don't think I would like it.

J - So that was a smart thing [laughs].

M- No, we are too . . . We are both pretty strong characters, and I'm more open-minded than he is. He's very determined, if you want to put it delicately. So if he's got a certain idea about something, I would never contradict him. One person had to be boss, ludicrous, there's no such thing as 50/50, I don't believe in it at all.

Z- But my sense of you is that you are fiercely independent.

M- I am independent.

Z- And you were always?

M- Probably, probably. I couldn't always express it . . .

Z- Because?

M- No, during the war years.

Z- Oh, no, I'm talking about here.

M- I'm independent, but I'm open at the same time. Really I think my best quality is that I'm a learner. I'm a very eager learner.

Z- Yeah. So one of the things I'm looking at is for a lot of people when they first came it wasn't easy, and even as you say, you know, it wasn't easy . . .

M- No, transferred into a completely new country, new language.

Z- And without anything, and work, and friendship, and grieving, you know. So we know the end gain, the end gain that survivors that came to Montreal were, most, not all, were very successful. You know, if you measure success in terms of owning homes in cote-saint-luc and going to Florida, and sending their children to university, right, all these are factors for success. And I'm interested in showing that, you know, it just didn't happen.

M- No, of course not.

Z- And a lot of other people I interviewed said, like you, very little help. So if you think about it, how did it happen, right? Where was that transformation? Like what was it about you and your husband that made it happen?

M- I think if you want to put it in a aphoristic, condensed way, it's like Nietzsche says, "What doesn't kill me makes me stronger."

Z- That's very good. I will use that.

M- This is the way I see it as an answer. But many crushed under it. It's not a Pollyanna story.

Z- Oh it's not a Pollyanna story, that's the story I want to say, that it's not a Pollyanna story.

M- I know some that were really crushed by the experience. Couldn't forget, couldn't forgive, couldn't forgive themselves, couldn't live with their guilt, couldn't get out of the cycle.

Z- But they were successful from an outsider's perspective.

M- Until they committed suicide.

Z- Yeah, I know, and that's what's fascinating . . . [phone rings]

M- That's why I say that, you know, if it doesn't kill you, it may make you stronger.
[answers the phone]

-End of Interview-