

**THE WILLIAM BREMAN JEWISH HERITAGE MUSEUM  
ESTHER AND HERBERT TAYLOR  
JEWISH ORAL HISTORY PROJECT OF ATLANTA  
LEGACY PROJECT**

**MEMOIRIST:** MIRIAM MOTYL FISHKIN  
**INTERVIEWERS:** SARA GHITIS  
 RUTH EINSTEIN  
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<Begin Disk 1>

**INTERVIEW BEGINS**

**Ruth:** This is the Esther and Herbert Taylor Oral History Project of the Breman Jewish Heritage Museum. Today is December 8, and we're in Atlanta, Georgia with Miriam Fishkin. [We] thank you very much for allowing us to do the interview.

**Sara:** What year?

**Ruth:** Two thousand ten. Thank you Sara . . . with Sara Ghitis as the interviewer.

**Miriam:** My name is Miriam Fishkin. I was born November 10, 1930, in the city of Pruzhany.

**Sara:** Could you spell the name of your city please.

**Miriam:** P-R-U-Z-A-N-Y.

**Sara:** Where is Pruzhany?<sup>1</sup>

**Miriam:** Pruzhany is [in] eastern Poland.

**Sara:** Where is it today?

**Miriam:** Today it's not Poland any longer. Today it's Belarus or White Russia.

**Sara:** What were the names of your parents?

**Miriam:** My mother's name was Bluma; my father's name was Mayer.

**Sara:** Any children in the family aside of you?

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<sup>1</sup> The Russian and Belarussian name is Pruzhany. In Polish it is Pruzana. It is the county seat of Polesye District, Poland. After World War II it ended up in Belarus. During the war it was in *Reichskommissariat* Ukraine.

**Miriam:** I have myself . . . I had two sisters . . . we were three sisters: Esther, Riva and Miriam . . . it's me.

**Sara:** One of the sisters is a twin?

**Miriam:** Right. Riva is my twin sister.

**Sara:** What kind of city was Pruzhany in the years that you were growing up there?

**Miriam:** Pruzhany was a beautiful town. It was full of culture. There were many schools . . . there were Polish schools and Hebrew schools and Yiddish schools and newspapers and libraries.

**Sara:** What was the Jewish population in Pruzhany?

**Miriam:** I do not remember. I think it was 10,000,<sup>2</sup> but I'm not absolutely sure. In order to really . . . I could . . . if I would research it, maybe I could [find] out what the Jewish population was. For whatever reason, I think it was 10,000. I'm not sure though.

**Sara:** What kind of work did your father do?

**Miriam:** My father was an accountant. He was an accountant to private companies, and he was also an accountant when we lived in Poland . . . which was called *kasaskarbova* [Polish: sp: 3:20], which meant something like the Internal Revenue . . . he was . . . we were Jewish and not too many Jews that worked in Polish institutions. But my father was a decorated soldier from World War I. Being [that] he was a decorated soldier, therefore he had different privileges.

**Sara:** What standard of living was he able to provide for his family?

**Miriam:** We were upper middle class, we were . . . my mother didn't work. My mother had a maid. She had help because we were small children . . . we were twins, my sister and I, and there were . . . my parents went to theater . . . whenever theater came to a small town . . . there were traveling theaters. They read books. My father had a short wave radio . . . I'm going back many years . . . then we had . . . I had my grandparents in Pruzhany . . . my grandfather and my grandmother. I had aunts and uncles and cousins.

**Sara:** What was Jewish life like particularly in your family?

**Miriam:** In my family, it was . . . there were variations. My mother was more of a Zionist. My father was a patriot in the country that he lived in. But he was . . . my father was secular. He was not a religious man. My mother was more traditional, even though my father came from a very . . . an Orthodox religious home, but he himself was secular. But my mother was . . . I remember

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<sup>2</sup> At the beginning of the war there were about 4,200 Jews in Pruzhany although Jews from the surrounding area and towns were pushed into the ghetto established there, totally about 18,000 at its height.

my grandfather . . . in my grandfather's house there's a big portrait of Dr. [Theodor] Herzl.<sup>3</sup> He was a Zionist. Always when I walked in . . . it was a large portrait of Dr. Herzl. I vividly remember that.

**Sara:** You said your father was a Polish patriot.

**Miriam:** Yes.

**Sara:** What do you mean by that?

**Miriam:** He wasn't a Polish patriot, what I meant . . . he was patriotic, he fought for the country . . . World War I. He was drafted, there were no voluntary soldiers . . . I don't think so, not to my knowledge. But he felt because he loved the country he lived in . . . until 1938 actually, Jews lived very nicely in Poland . . . 1938 or maybe 1937 . . . it is with the transformation in Germany, when Hitler came to power. It influenced other European countries, and it does influence Poland a lot. It surely and slowly became more antisemitic, especially when we had a Polish leader by the name Marshal [Jozef] Pilsudski.<sup>4</sup> I think he died. Don't forget, I was very young. I remember when he died though . . . must have been in 1937. I don't want to quote years because I was very young . . . I think 1937 . . . under him Jews really had . . . lived very nicely in Poland. But once he died, German influence . . . Nazi influence came into Poland, things begin changing. You felt antisemitism, you felt bigotry. They were boycotting some of the Jewish stores. They would open . . . I remember they opened in Pruzhany . . . they called [it] a *corporativa* [Polish: 7:55: sp], which is like a department store of some kind. It was opened by Poles. It was said that to boycott all the Jewish stores, not buy there. You begin feeling the oncoming of World War II somehow. I always felt it some, as young as I was, that the atmosphere was changing.

**Sara:** What kind of education were you receiving before . . . you were very young I understand?

**Miriam:** Yes, we went to Polish school until 1939. Then Hitler invaded Poland and then came the Hitler and Stalin pact.<sup>5</sup> [As] I lived in Eastern Europe, so my part of Poland was occupied by

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<sup>3</sup> Theodor Herzl was the father of modern political Zionism. In 1896 he published *The Jewish State*, in which he advocated the establishment of a Jewish state.

<sup>4</sup> Jozef Pilsudski was a revered Polish statesman who was the head of Poland from 1926 to 1935. His title was Marshal Pilsudski and many credit him with Poland becoming independent between the wars.

<sup>5</sup> The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact was a non-aggression pact between Germany and Russia signed August 23, 1939. Russia, which had a treaty with Poland to defend it if it was attacked, reneged in secret. Russia agreed to stand aside if Germany attacked Poland and not declare war on Germany. In return Russia would get the eastern half of Poland as a gift after the invasion. Hitler, knowing that he wasn't going to have to fight Russia if he invaded Poland, invaded Poland just one week later.

the Soviet forces. Therefore in 1939, it became [the] Soviet Union. We were under the occupation. From there, I don't know why, but my parents took us out of the Polish school. We went to a Yiddish school . . . that's from 1939 to 1941.

**Sara:** I want to talk a little more about your family life before the war. Do you have memories of Jewish festivals . . .

**Miriam:** Yes.

**Sara:** . . . Passover?<sup>6</sup>

**Miriam:** Yes.

**Sara:** How did you celebrate it?

**Miriam:** With Passover, I remember we got together with my grandparents and my aunts and uncles. Also, where we lived there was . . . we lived in a house. We didn't own the house, but my parents rented that house. I remember the landlord [of] that house, when it came Passover . . . he was Jewish, most of the people there were Jewish . . . he would make a big Passover *seder*<sup>7</sup> for all the neighbors. What's very memorable to me . . . for years I thought, after they . . . who drinks the wine that comes in?

**Sara:** Elijah . . .

**Miriam:** . . . Elijah . . .

**Sara:** Prophet Elijah.

**Miriam:** . . . Prophet Elijah. For years, as a little girl, I was sure that he came in and drank the wine. It was beautiful.

**Sara:** Did you have occasions when the family assembled for a Jewish . . . ?

**Miriam:** Yes, yes.

**Sara:** . . . who's sitting . . .

**Miriam:** *Rosh Ha-Shanah*.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Hebrew: *Pesach*. The anniversary of Israel's liberation from Egyptian bondage. The holiday lasts for eight days. Unleavened bread, *matzot*, is eaten in memory of the unleavened bread prepared by the Israelite during their hasty flight from Egypt, when they had not time to wait for the dough to rise. On the first two nights of Passover, the *seder*, the central event of the holiday is celebrated. The *seder* service is one of the most colorful and joyous occasions in Jewish life.

<sup>7</sup> Hebrew for "order". The ritual meal eaten at home on the first and second nights of Passover. The family meal is accompanied by the retelling of the story of the Israelites' exodus from Egypt.

<sup>8</sup> Hebrew for "head of the year", i.e. New Year festival). The cycle of High Holidays begins with *Rosh Ha-Shanah*. It introduces the Ten Days of Penitence, when Jews examine their souls and take stock of their actions. On the tenth day is *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement. The tradition is that on *Rosh Ha-Shanah*, God sits in judgment on

**Sara:** . . . who's sitting around the table . . .

**Miriam:** . . . my parents . . .

**Sara:** . . . in your mind's eye?

**Miriam:** My parents, my sisters, my grandparents. My mother was busy cooking and baking. My father was busy working. He worked very hard, he was a busy man.

**Sara:** As secular as he was, did they say *Kiddush*<sup>9</sup> on *Shabbat* [Sabbath]?

**Miriam:** For some reason . . . Friday nights, *Shabbat* . . . my mother would light the . . . *bench* [Yiddish: light] the candles. She would have a Friday night dinner. I those days, I don't remember my mother going to *shul* [synagogue] on *Shabbat*. European women didn't. But *Rosh Ha-Shanah* and *Yom Kippur*,<sup>10</sup> we all went.

**Sara:** What synagogue would this be? What kind of . . . ?

**Miriam:** I don't even know the name. I don't remember.

**Sara:** Do you . . . .

**Miriam:** It's a smaller synagogue.

**Sara:** . . . do you remember the address of your home?

**Miriam:** Ulica Pachivitsa, siedemnaście . . . which means 'Pachivitsa Street, 17.' [NB: Spelling of street name is phonetic: 12:20]

**Sara:** What was the house like?

**Miriam:** It was like a one family house with a very pretty . . . we have a big backyard, a large one. European . . . we had big gates, very tall gates in . . . I think most European countries . . . I don't, anyway . . . I can only say what we had and that backyard was so tremendous. We used to play . . . I used to play, my older sister and her friends . . . Riva and I . . . my twin sister and I . . . we used to follow them . . . like little girls . . . follow the bigger sister. We used to play volleyball. Then I used to go bicycle riding in the backyard. I remember my father had a man's bicycle, a big one, but I couldn't reach the saddle . . . what I used to do, I used to take his bicycle and go under that frame and peddle it and ride round and round and round. This is how I learned to ride [a] bicycle.

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humanity. Then the fate of every living creature is inscribed in the Book of Life or Death. These decisions may be revoked by prayer and repentance before the sealing of the books on *Yom Kippur*.

<sup>9</sup> Hebrew: 'Sanctification.' A blessing recited over wine or grape juice to sanctify the Sabbath and Jewish holidays.

<sup>10</sup> Hebrew for "Day of Atonement." The most sacred day of the Jewish year. *Yom Kippur* is a 25 hour fast day. Most of the day is spent in prayer, reciting *yizkor* for deceased relatives, confessing sins, requesting divine forgiveness, and listening to *Torah* readings and sermons. People greet each other with the wish that they may be sealed in the heavenly book for a good year ahead. The day ends with the blowing of the *shofar* (a ram's horn).

**Sara:** Did you have non-Jewish friends?

**Miriam:** Yes! When we went to Polish school we had non-Jewish friends. In fact, I remember where there was one girl whose father was a Russian Orthodox priest. I went to school with her. I was once invited to visit them. I went to play . . . dolls . . . girls played dolls or little games of some kind, like maybe domino or things like that.

**Sara:** What is your first memory of things changing?

**Miriam:** My first memory of changing as I told you before . . . I felt that changing in 1938, with the incoming of antisemitism. I felt that. I felt it in school . . .

**Sara:** What . . .

**Miriam:** . . . in the Polish school.

**Sara:** . . . What happened?

**Miriam:** I remember there was a Polish little boy. I was playing on the street. We had trees on the street. He said to me in Polish, “You’re a Jew.” But, you see . . . if I’ll tell it to you in Polish, it sounds [derogatory] . . . I told him something derogatory in Polish to get back at him.

**Sara:** What else happened?

**Miriam:** We felt it. Then in 1939 with the incoming of war, when Hitler invaded Poland . . . then . . . my father was born in western Poland, so he had family here. My other set of grandparents lived in western Poland, in the town named Gostynin.<sup>11</sup>

**Sara:** Could you spell the town?

**Miriam:** I’ll try, G-O-S-T . . . let me write it down, it’ll be easier for me when I write it down . . . G-O-S-T-Y-N-I-N. Just write it the way I say it, yes. That town . . . it’s a city, it’s nice . . . even Pruzhany wasn’t a town, it was a small city. In fact, in Polish it’s called, “*Miasto Pruzhany*”, which means a city. ‘*Miasto*’ is a city. A village is not a *miasto*. So is Gostynin a city. There’s small cities and then there were villages and then . . .

**Sara:** You said your father went to the city Gostynin?

**Miriam:** No, no, he came . . .

**Sara:** . . . he came . . .

**Miriam:** . . . he was born there.

**Sara:** . . . I’m sorry, yes.

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<sup>11</sup> Despite all the spelling the correct spelling is ‘Gostynin.’

**Miriam:** But in 1939, he had two younger brothers . . . he had his parents there, he had family there. They were running away because Gostynin was occupied by the Germans in 1939. They were coming to eastern Poland and they came to live with us. They lived a short time with us. Then they were also picked up . . . I think in 1940. They . . . because there they were called [Polish word?: 17:25] . . . [it] means they were people that run away from bad conditions. What do you call these people?

**Sara:** Fugitives?

**Ruth:** Refugees.

**Miriam:** No, refugees.

**Sara:** Refugees, not fugitives.

**Miriam:** Refugees. They were refugees from western Poland. What happened once Pruzhany was under the Russian occupation . . . the Soviet government . . . had put on loud speakers that all the people that came from western Poland should register [and] they'll give them passports . . . they'll give them permission to stay. But what actually happened, once all these people had registered, then eventually they had picked them up, just as they picked us up, and they evicted them from wherever they lived. I really get . . . they took them to Siberia. Yes. Something I wanted to express, they . . . I won't.

**Sara:** What do you remember about changes in your life as a young girl once the Soviets arrived in your . . .

**Miriam:** Yes.

**Sara:** . . . city, where you . . . ?

**Miriam:** I went to a different school. Then I remember my parents, they had to . . . it was a shortage of bread and people had to go stand in line. Certain things couldn't be gotten any more . . . in reference of food or there was nothing to buy. Stores were . . . closed. You just could feel the atmosphere of war I always though.

**Sara:** What about language? You spoke Polish?

**Miriam:** I spoke Polish and I spoke . . .

**Sara:** But when the Soviets came . . .

**Miriam:** I didn't speak Russian. My mother spoke fluent Russian.

**Sara:** But in school?

**Miriam:** The school went from Polish to Russian. But we quickly . . . because it was in September when it was time to go to school [and that] is when Hitler invaded Poland, so that [in] September instead of going to the Polish school, we went to the Yiddish school. But that . . . it was under influence of the Soviet Union. I remember we were forced to wear a red tie and white blouse . . . the little skirt you wear. They were called the *Komsomol*.<sup>12</sup> They forced you . . . they forced the parents to . . . you [were] forced to do it, you had no choice.

**Sara:** Did your parents attempt to explain to you what was going on?

**Miriam:** Yes, but . . .

**Sara:** What did they tell you?

**Miriam:** I, frankly speaking, I don't know why . . . I myself always knew. I'm very intuitive. I must have been born with it. So . . . without their explanation . . . I could tell what's going on. Actually parents tried not to talk too much to their children. It really lasted from 1939 to 1941. We were young . . .

**Sara:** Now you say . . .

**Miriam:** She probably communicated more with my older sister . . . [my] mother or father. No, they did not discuss the politics or the ideology, whatever it's going on. No, they did not discuss it with us. But I knew it.

**Sara:** How was their attitude towards the Jews?

**Miriam:** From the Soviets?

**Sara:** Yes.

**Miriam:** The attitude . . . there's one thing . . . officially in the Soviet Union, you are not allowed to discriminate against Jews. Officially you do not! But Stalin had killed millions of Jews, but also non-Jews. But basically if they . . . whoever was antisemitic was antisemitic, whoever was not, wasn't. The occupation of the Soviets did not change the local people's attitude. The attitude was the same. This is as far as I can remember.

**Sara:** Do you remember specific episodes, anecdotes and things that happened to you during the Soviet occupation?

**Miriam:** Yes . . . basically what they did . . . they had forced their military . . . under occupation, you have a lot of military . . . We had a tremendous military outpost on the outskirts of Pruzhany, so there must have been tons of military there. What they did . . . they had forced

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<sup>12</sup> A Russian Communist youth organization. They had a uniform.

local people . . . we had two pilots and their wives . . . they took . . . you had to give up one room or so or whatever, and they lived in our house. They were basically nice. We were little girls. They would come over and touch my nose. They called me “*kudnosaya*” (sp) which means something like that . . . I can’t even explain it to you in English what “*kudnosaya*” means.<sup>13</sup>

**Sara:** A “cute little nose.”

**Miriam:** A “cute little nose.” Especially my sister and I . . . we were the only twins in Pruzhany . . . the only set of twins. In those days, people didn’t have too many twins, twins was a rarity. Of course, triplets was a bigger rarity, but . . .

**Sara:** Did you have to feed the pilots?

**Miriam:** No, no, no, we had no food! No, [we] did have to give up his room, things like that. They were military people . . .

**Sara:** How was your father doing with his profession?

**Miriam:** All right. He had harder times once the Soviets came. He lost his job because he worked for [a] private enterprise. He worked for a large company which was a slaughterhouse. I don’t remember whether the slaughterhouse . . . before the war was a private enterprise . . . must have been a private enterprise . . . but once the Soviets came . . . there was no private enterprise any more. They took everything over. They took over the slaughterhouse. So, of course, my father lost his job. I remember for little while, my father went work for a building<sup>14</sup> . . . hard work because he couldn’t get . . . there was no private enterprises until . . . it takes under any occupation . . . it probably takes a while until the government sets in, and they settle a little. Then eventually, in fact, he told me once . . . he enjoyed working very hard . . . all his life, he worked mentally, so physical work was good for him. He enjoyed it . . . as long as he worked.

**Sara:** We haven’t talked about your mother. How did she cope with this situation?

**Miriam:** At the beginning, she was fine. But then my mother really had gotten sick. She had sort of a nervous breakdown. She couldn’t have the maid anymore. She couldn’t have the “*Wasserträger*.” You know what a “*Wasserträger*”<sup>15</sup> is? Someone who . . .

**Sara:** . . . brings . . .

**Miriam:** . . . because we didn’t have water in the house . . . you pull on the . . .

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<sup>13</sup> “Snub-nosed.”

<sup>14</sup> In Eastern Europe, there would be a caretaker for each large building. He was the janitor and manager in general for all the residents.

<sup>15</sup> “Water carrier.”

**Sara:** . . . running . . .

**Miriam:** . . . we didn't have running water in the house. But she had a man that used to bring water from the well and all these things. She got sick. It was a little hard on us. But until then, my father had . . . through sources, he had gotten back to the slaughterhouse in accounting . . . because people knew . . . he was very well-known in Pruzhany. There weren't too many accountants in that city. He was well-known. He worked so we had to eat, went to that school again. Then something happened at work. I don't know if it [is] that important . . . actually, this was the catalyst of why my mother, my two sisters and I survived. Unfortunately, my father perished in Auschwitz-[Birkenau].<sup>16</sup> Where he worked, there was a CEO [Chief Executive Officer] . . . the big shot who ran the company. He decided to embezzle money and he wanted my father to cover for him. My father said, "I will not." [The CEO] was a Pole. I remember him: tall, very antisemitic on top of it, but he was a Communist. That's why he had gotten that position . . . under the Soviets, if you're a party member, you get all these higher positions. But my father said, "I'm sorry, I will not cover for you. I'm not stopping you from . . . if you want to steal, you can steal, you want to embezzle . . . but I cannot do it for you. I will not do it. I am an honest man. I have honor and integrity. You want to do it, fine." But he [the CEO] kept on doing [it] and finally he got caught. As big a Communist as he was . . . in any country . . . once he was caught embezzling money and stealing, they arrested him. He was on trial and my father was forced to open the books. Even if he [didn't] want to do it, he was forced to do it. He had to appear before the judge. I don't know what they did to that man, but at that trial . . . my father was well-known . . . that man knew about my father . . . he said to my father, "You didn't want to help me, so I am going to send you to Siberia." [The CEO] is the one that sent the KGB<sup>17</sup> . . . He [my father] was a Polish patriot. He fought in World War I. In World War I, the Polish army had kicked the Russians out . . . if you know [the] history of World War I. They kicked them out of eastern Poland, so therefore, he [my father] became an enemy of the state [under the Russians]. The fact that he was a drafted soldier and he had to fight because if you live in a country, you have to fight for it, whether you want to or not . . .

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<sup>16</sup> Auschwitz-Birkenau was a complex of camps: the Main Camp (Auschwitz I), Auschwitz-Birkenau and Monowitz (Auschwitz III).

<sup>17</sup> Note: Throughout the transcript Miriam refers to the KGB as the KBG. Where 'KBG' occurs, it has been changed to 'KGB.' However, that is not even right as the KGB did not come into existence until after the war. During the war it was the NKVD. However, the references to the KGB will be left but should be taken as the NKVD by the researcher.

**Sara:** Because . . .

**Miriam:** . . . and people should.

**Sara:** . . . because you were under the Soviets, right? That's why he became an enemy of the state.

**Miriam:** Yes, because . . . we are still under the Soviets.

**Sara:** Yes.

**Miriam:** Yes. At that point, I think he lost his job.

**Sara:** Now your father . . .

**Miriam:** That was already 1940.

**Sara:** . . . your father went into hiding . . .

**Miriam:** Yes. What happened in 1941 . . . that lasted until 1941 . . . the 20<sup>th</sup> of June in 1941, they came five o'clock in the morning . . . three KGB men came to the house about five in the morning. They knocked on the door . . . my mother opened . . . she got better by then . . . she opened the door. They told her, "We have to search your house." They searched the house. They found my father's picture as a Polish soldier during World War I. Supposedly that was the evidence . . . why they evicted us, why they . . . not evicted . . .

**Sara:** Deported . . . ?

**Miriam:** . . . deported . . . why they were deporting us. Then they said to my mother, "You pack your belongings with your children." I remember Esther started crying and then . . . we packed up. My mother was well, but not that well yet. They put us on the military trucks. They drove us to a place called Linowo . . . this was a big, central railroad station . . .

**Sara:** Linowo?

**Miriam:** . . . Linowo . . . Oranczyce they called it in Polish. It had two names . . . you see that part of Poland was Russia . . . it was Poland, so many things had two names. I was too young to realize, but I . . .

**Sara:** How old were you at this time?

**Miriam:** When this happened? Ten years old. In 1939, I was nine years [old]. I was 10-1/2 actually . . .

**Sara:** When you were deported.

**Miriam:** . . . ten-and-a-half in June. I was born in November of 1930.

**Sara:** So they put you on trains . . .

**Miriam:** When we got there, there [was a] long tremendous train waiting. They were called cattle trains . . . they put us on the train . . . on the train we met another family, a Polish family, in the same car.

**Sara:** What, what was the train . . . the inside like? You call it “cattle trains.”

**Miriam:** Yes. The inside [of the] train was like that. There were two tiers of bunks on one side, and two tiers of bunks on the other side. Two families slept on one bunk . . . a bunk, that’s what you call it right? The other family was on top, and two families on the bottom. The same thing over there [on the other side]. As far as I can remember . . . there was toilet facility right near where I slept. Not running water, just a place where you had to go to the bathroom. We . . . the four of us, my mother, three sisters . . . and then there was another family next to us . . . some kind of a person with his family . . .

**Sara:** What about food, were you fed?

**Miriam:** Yes. They would give us soup and some bread and water. Many of the families that came brought some food with them . . . some food. We didn’t because it was very confusing . . . you don’t expect something like this to happen.

**Sara:** What were you told? What did they tell you?

**Miriam:** We were told . . . they came in and they said, “You have to pack because we are resettling you. We are resettling you into another city.” That’s it.

**Sara:** What was the trip like? The trip . . . how was it?

**Miriam:** The trip lasted a whole month. That was on the 20<sup>th</sup> of June . . . by the 21<sup>st</sup> of June Hitler invaded the Soviet Union.<sup>18</sup> He made a sneak attack on the Soviet Union. As we were traveling already . . . even a little bit away . . . we were in Minsk, I remember . . . there were already German airplanes flying over Minsk, which is the capital of White Russia. As we were traveling, war was raging already. Twenty-four hours later, my town of Pruzhany was occupied by the Germans. I have to go back a little bit. The reason my father was not home [was] because that man had warned my father that eventually you will go to Siberia . . . so he was aware of it. Then . . . I don’t know who, I don’t know when, and I don’t know how . . . but somebody had tipped off my father that we will be [sent] to Siberia. What he did . . . he decided to go into hiding thinking that if he will not be home, they will not touch us. But as destiny wanted it I guess . . . in fact, at one point, I remember . . . [although] I’m not 100 percent sure . . . that they

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<sup>18</sup> The actual date of the invasion was June 22, 1941.

did send one of the KGB men to the headquarters . . . telling them, “She’s not a well woman with three girls, and the man is not home.” I think he came back and said, “No, you’re being resettled.” But my father went into hiding and 24 hours later, the Germans came into town. They occupied Pruzhany.<sup>19</sup> Then somebody told my father . . . I still don’t know, this is hearsay I know from people . . . that he came back . . . the Germans were not there yet, [and] he surrendered to the Russians. What they used to do . . . they used to put them in jail in Pruzhany. So that I assume . . . this is something . . . I can picture what happened . . . that if he came let’s say eight hours later, and he was in jail . . . then 24 hours . . . whatever hours later . . . Germany declared war. They . . . it took the Germans probably one hour to cross the Bug River to reach Pruzhany.<sup>20</sup>

**Sara:** Tell me the name of the river.

**Miriam:** Bug.<sup>21</sup>

**Sara:** How do you spell it?

**Miriam:** B-O-G. It was near Brest-Litovsk . . . the Polish called it ‘Brzesc nad Bugiem.’ I always have to deal with two names.

<recording pauses momentarily, then resumes>

**Miriam:** My father’s name was Mayer Motyl . . . Motyl you spell M-O-T-Y-L . . . My mother’s name was Bluma Talmo. Talmo . . . you spell it T-A-L-M-O.

**Sara:** Miriam, when you were told by the authorities that you had to leave . . . to be resettled, what were those moments like when you had to prepare . . . what happened?

**Miriam:** I remember that Riva and I went to the yard . . . my older sister and mother had . . . I was . . . there’re certain things that I’m not absolutely sure . . . I remember that I went to the back. We walked out of the house . . . I remember walking out of the house . . . my older sister did walk . . . but she had asked . . . the KGB man . . . she wants to see her grandmother, her grandparents . . . they sent one KGB man with a rifle [with her] to see my grandparents to say goodbye. Esther, my sister . . . went. She came back and then . . . one of the neighbors came,

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<sup>19</sup> Actually the Germans invaded the Soviet Union on June 22. They occupied Pruzhany on June 27. So there a few days in between, but not many.

<sup>20</sup> I think what Miriam is trying to say is that they were deported on June 20<sup>th</sup>. Her father was in hiding so he did not accompany them. Someone told her father that the Germans had invaded. So believing that the occupation by the Russians would shortly be over, so he came out of hiding. The Russians imprisoned him. If Meyer thought the arrival of the Germans would be his salvation, he was terribly wrong because when they arrived on June 27 his custody was simply continued, but this time for being a Jew, not a capitalist.

<sup>21</sup> The correct name of the river is River Bug.

and Esther was crying. She said to her, “Don’t cry, Esther, you’ll never know who’ll be better off.” Because the atmosphere was . . . we were occupied. Hitler was on the other side of the Bug, which is the river. That’s what she said to Esther. We didn’t know. I remember . . . just confusion, really confusion, you just went . . .

**Sara:** What did you take . . . when you packed?

**Miriam:** What I thought of it?

**Sara:** No, what did you take . . . what did you pack? Because it seems to me that . . .

**Miriam:** I’ll tell you, that’s very important. Shortly before the war, my father went visiting his parents in western Poland. That was really shortly before the war, it must have been in 1938 or the beginning of 1939 . . . I think the end of 1938 maybe. It was very fashionable in Poland [in] those days . . . they used to make . . . Poland is a cold country . . . it’s cold there so they . . . make sheep’s coats [sheepskin coats]. They were embroidered sheep’s jackets or sheep’s coats. My father came back from western Poland from visiting his parents, and he brought Riva and I two sheep’s coats, embroidered, black inside . . . beautifully embroidered. They were long because we were little . . . we were always little . . . the sleeves were long, and the coats were long. Those two sheep’s coats helped us survive Siberia.

**Sara:** What happened with the coats?

**Miriam:** The coats . . . we did bring them to the Caucasus. In Siberia, don’t forget, there were a lot of bed bugs and lice and these creatures like fur. As clean as we tried to be . . . it had nothing to do with cleanliness . . . we slept on mattresses made out of straw. Straw attracts . . . bed bugs . . . all over Europe was . . . especially in Siberia. When we came to the Caucasus, which was a warmer climate, we hardly needed them. But once, right when the war ended, and we were ready to go back to Poland . . . in the Caucasus [in] 1945, we threw them out. They were ragged already anyway, but as a souvenir we couldn’t take them with you . . . they were full of bugs.

**Sara:** Let’s go back to your trip going to Siberia.

**Miriam:** Going to Siberia . . . we were watched by the KGB being that [the] Soviets were [at] war with Hitler, they [the soldiers] were much more lenient, even the KGB soldiers that would watch us. In my car, there was my oldest sister Esther, and there was a family of three girls . . . where the youngest one I went to school [with], but they were Polish, Christian, and two girls,

Rema and Tamara (sp), I remember, they were my older sister's age. They went to *gymnasium*<sup>22</sup> together. These two girls . . . the soldiers already . . . once they delivered us to Novosibirsk they went back to the front. They knew that they'll never come back, most of them were killed. They went to battle, and so they were lenient. They would take my sister and the two girls . . . they would give us a little bit more soup and . . . a larger piece of bread and water. They would stop . . . because most of the transports [loaded with soldiers] were going west . . . going back to Europe . . . to fight, and we were going . . . eastward to Siberia.

**Sara:** Were you ever told why you needed to be resettled?

**Miriam:** No, never.

**Sara:** So you tried . . .

**Miriam:** They just simply said, "You have to get your belongings because [Russian phrase]" [46:42] which means, "We're resettling you."

**Sara:** You arrived in Novosibirsk . . . what was it like?

**Miriam:** Novosibirsk. We arrived and everybody went down . . . [they] took us off the train. A big *plashatka* [sp: Polish: 47:00] which means a "big field" . . . an "open field" . . . and whatever belongings everybody [had]. . . Over there we met hundreds of people, not only Jews, [but] non-Jews. I remember sitting there 24 hours. I don't know . . . my older sister remember[ed] differently, but she's gone. About 24 hours I'd say . . . until they decided . . . whom to send where. So . . . they decided they would send us . . . to what they call a "*lesopeelka*" which means a village . . . a "lumber village,"<sup>23</sup> where they produced lumber. Siberia is big in wood, and they put us on some kind of a boat . . . with other many people . . . because once you [are] in Novosibirsk . . . we were near the Ob . . . River Ob . . . and from Novosibirsk to where we went, you can only go by water. There's no land transportation.

**Sara:** The name of the river is Ob.

**Miriam:** . . . Ob.

**Sara:** . . . Ob.

**Miriam:** If you look at the map, you'll see. Then . . . on that boat with many other people . . . we slept on the . . . we didn't sleep . . . I don't remember how long it [took]. It probably must

<sup>22</sup> In Europe in general a *gymnasium* is advanced secondary education, comparable to advanced high school or college preparatory high schools. In Poland specifically it was a middle school (junior high school) for pupils aged 13 to 16.

<sup>23</sup> This area of Russia is heavily forested. There aren't a lot of large cities or towns, but dotted all over the landscape are what are essentially villages or factory villages set up around saw mills.

have taken a few hours, maybe a half a day. We were then . . . there was a city [called] Kolpashevo where . . . did we land in Kolpashevo? . . . I'm not too clear about that. But anyway that day we came by boat to Togur. The name of the village was Togur.

**Sara:** T-O- . . . ?

**Miriam:** T-O-G-U-R . . . I suppose . . . Togur. It's a big village and everybody was working at this lumber factory. They produced lumber for airplanes . . . lumber for the war to build tanks, airplanes. Most of it was labor . . . slave . . . forced labor. My sister was forced to work at that lumber factory.

**Sara:** How old was she?

**Miriam:** I was, let's say, 10 and . . . she's five years older, so she must have been 16, or six years older. There's one thing about my older sister, she wouldn't tell you her age. She must have been about 16 because she went to *gymnasium* . . . maybe 17 . . . either 16 or 17.

**Sara:** . . . is this city close to a big forest?

**Miriam:** No, it's a big village. The forest . . . you have to walk to the forest . . . you walk. It's a city pretty close to another city. It's not really . . . they didn't call it a city, they called it "*poselok*," [which] means a village. It was not a city.

**Sara:** In Russian.

**Miriam:** In Russian. Kolpashevo was a city. I walked there, it was about . . . I don't know, seven kilometers. I used to walk there with my mother. That was a city and this is where the harbor was. I don't remember whether we landed at that harbor and we were driven to Togur or whether we simply landed at Togur, because Togur was also . . . everything [was] near water. You couldn't go anyplace there . . . in fact, what my sister did there . . . where produced lumber . . . there were big barges parked near that factory. They were loading this lumber on the barges. Then they went to all kind of producing factories all over Russia or wherever they went.

**Sara:** The job your sister did was related to loading?

**Miriam:** . . . loading lumber.

**Sara:** What did you do? What did you and your twin sister . . .

**Miriam:** My twin sister and my mother . . . first of all, they settled us in a little house where three families lived. One family there was a husband and wife, and I think, two sons. [There was] one large room, maybe as large as this, maybe a little larger. We shared that room. We slept on one-half of the floor, and they slept on the other half of the floor . . . with belongings

what we had. We were there for . . . if you had to go . . . even in the winter time if you have to go to the bathroom, you go into the snow. That was the conditions we lived under.

**Sara:** Your older sister was working. What about you?

**Miriam:** We are settling in. We didn't do anything. We came . . . first of all, we came there in July, I think. There was no school. The schools there probably start in September or so.

**Sara:** Your mother?

**Miriam:** My mother meanwhile . . . she wasn't that well yet . . . but she . . . being with her fluency in Russian . . . we simply didn't do anything at the beginning. They gave us a ration [of] bread. My sister went to work immediately. We stayed there for maybe, I don't know, maybe six months or four months. Then they kept moving us for some reason . . . they found another living quarters for us, which was a long kitchen and a big room, where also three families lived there. Then they moved us to another place again . . . a long kitchen and again three families lived there. As we kept on moving . . . my mother still wasn't that well . . . Maybe I should tell you that episode. On the third housing where they moved us . . . I don't know what happened, but I was already probably 10-1/2 . . . maybe close to 11 . . . what happened . . . I suddenly fainted. I passed out. My mother seeing me passing out, screamed. Until this day, there was nothing wrong with me. I don't know why, since then my mother got well . . . interesting phenomena.

**Sara:** Do you remember what was in your heart as a little girl going through all this trouble . . . these difficulties? How did you feel?

**Miriam:** I felt bad! But you know what I think? I was always a dreamer [and] maybe that helped me under conditions that were not so good. I somehow always dreamed . . . it's not fun . . . that things may get better. Then once my mother got better, she began . . . then they couldn't force my mother to work because she wasn't well. That was to our advantage. Everything in life sometimes has advantages. Being so she was well again, then she went out of the house . . . she used to speak Russian. She met some Russian people . . . there were Polish people also that were sent to Siberia. Everybody was looking for food. Then I don't exactly remember how . . . that idea came to my mind, but she probably came . . . she was smart. The Polish people . . . they used to try to sell a blouse or a gold watch or furs . . . to sell . . . there were many Russian women there . . . there were very few men. All the men were gone. They were all gone to their army, to war. Many of them had good positions. They had access to flour, to salt, to sugar . . . again

bartering clothes for food. Being . . . the Russian women will not trust these Polish women. First of all, their Russian wasn't good, [but] they trusted mother. My mother became the in-between, she would . . . they would ask mother if she knows someone that wants to buy the blouse or the watch. Then mother would say, "How much do you want." She would say . . . let's say she wants three pounds of flour. Then that woman wanted the watch and she had access to flour. Mother would say that she wants five pounds of flour . . . it was three pounds for the people that wanted . . . this is how we managed to survive.<sup>24</sup>

**Sara:** Where did your mother learn to speak Russian so well?

**Miriam:** Oh! My mother spoke fluent German, she spoke Russian, she spoke Polish [and] she spoke Hebrew too. She comes from an intelligent home, she went to school . . . she used to read German books and Russian books . . . she comes from a home . . . My grandfather was very worldly. He was also a *talmid chacham* [Hebrew: "wise student"]. He read the *Gillem Tayre* [sp: 58:35] on top of it. He comes from that kind of family.

**Sara:** Where did you go from there?

**Miriam:** From Siberia?

**Sara:** From that city, from that locality?

**Miriam:** That locality . . . we stayed there in that house . . . again they moved us. They moved us twice more. From there they moved us to a place a little bit further from the village. That people . . . that part of Siberia had, they called them . . . these are the natives . . . the natives there, they called them 'Chaldonne.' They were like Eskimos. They looked like Eskimos.

**Sara:** Chaldonne?

**Miriam:** Chaldonne. They looked like Eskimos. They were the free people. They were not the people that were sent from other parts of the world to Siberia. The Russians had the free . . . the free were the ones that were not punished yet. We were called "*Silný*." "*Silný*" means . . . help me out with that . . .

**Sara:** Exiled?

**Miriam:** Exiled. There were the exiled and the free. The Chaldonne, they were the free. Most of the other population in that village were the exiled, even the Russians . . . they were exiled let's say 50 years ago [when] we came there . . . they were still exiled, they were never free. We

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<sup>24</sup> Apparently Miriam is saying that her mother acted as an interpreter and broker between Russian and Polish women for purposes of bartering. For her services, she would get part of the barter, such as part of the flour.

wound up living in a little space of room . . . the four of us in that place. That was already closer to 2-1/2 years. [In the] meantime what happened . . . once the Russians needed the second front, evidently the Polish government in *absentia* which was [in] London I think . . . were demanding that they knew that hundreds of thousands of Polish citizens are in the Soviet Union . . . they demanded that Russia . . . that was their condition . . . they fought Hitler together that way . . . that they were all . . . given back the Polish citizenship. We were amongst them because we were Polish citizens.

**Sara:** Now at this point you were in what place?

**Miriam:** Still in Togur. Still in Togur. We were there about 2-1/2 years. Two-and-a-half [years] and then 1-1/2 [years] in the Caucasus, which consists of four years. I thought we were there five years, but actually we were altogether four years.

**Sara:** For what reason were you moved to the Caucasus?

**Miriam:** Yes, in the Caucasus . . . already we moved . . . we lived in another place. Horrible place . . . just horrible. A place . . . in America sometimes maybe they have a place like that where the street people live . . . what do you call these homes?

**Sara:** Slums?

**Miriam:** No, it's like a building, but there are many separate . . .

**Ruth:** Homeless shelters?

**Miriam:** . . . homeless . . . something . . . they're separated with walls. Everybody shares one kitchen. Everybody . . . some people . . . we were thrown in there. But there were many Russians there and many . . . I don't know what brought them . . . but we were there a short time. But then from there . . . Chaldonne . . . from these natives . . . I have a cute story for you. My sister and I had a good laugh over it. They had a cow [and] they had a little house. They used to . . . on the window . . . that thing in the kitchen window [a sill] . . . they used to put milk in glasses. They would make sour milk out of it or they would make something because it was theirs. We didn't have that. I remember my mother went some place and they weren't home. Riva and I were home. I don't remember what time of the year it was. We're looking at that cream . . . we didn't have milk or cream for four years already . . . for 2-1/2 years . . . we never . . . we didn't have it. Riva and I said, "Before the milk settles, let's take a spoon." We took a spoon . . . but not with the spoon, with the other end. "Let's dunk it." Dunk the spoon . . . little spoon that way and lick it. I did it with one spoon, and she did it with the other spoon. We had a taste of the milk that we

had all our lives before the war. That's my criminal behavior! One day . . . so many years after, I said to Riva, "Do you remember?" We had such a laugh over it. If I tell you . . . because in order . . . once it sets that you can tell, so before it sets the criminal mind of a child, you dunk it and you lick it. From there we went to another horrible place. Meanwhile, they were demanding all Polish citizens out of Siberia. They put us on . . . I don't remember whether they were regular trains or still cattle trains . . . but different conditions, [a] different atmosphere. They were long, long trains . . . God knows how many cars. We were traveling towards the Caucasus.<sup>25</sup> We used to stop the train . . . stop in the field. They allowed everybody to go out and make fires and cook . . . if they had something to cook. At that time, my older sister met her husband. Because in that long train . . . we didn't know about it . . . there were many Orthodox Jews that were sent to Siberia. Amongst them was a group—a *rosh yeshiva*, a big rabbi, and his *talmudim*.<sup>26</sup> Amongst them was Yankel, my sister's [future] husband. There were many boys. Once my mother sees Jewish men, ones with a beard . . . she runs over . . . "Warum komen Yidden?"

**Sara:** Which means?

**Miriam:** "Where do you Jews come from?" She began talking and . . . right away, she came back [and] she says to Esther, "Come." She dragged Esther. She said, "*Bocherim*" . . . good looking *bocher* [Yiddish: boy] . . . *bocherim* [Yiddish: boys] . . . young men. She introduced herself. Then Riva and I went over, but we were kids. My mother . . . the main thing my mother wanted is for Esther to get a *chassen* [Yiddish: husband] . . . to get a boyfriend . . . to get a husband, not a boyfriend. They didn't talk boyfriend in those days. Anyway . . . but that guy, Yankel . . . she [Esther] was a very pretty girl. He fell for her . . . he did.

**Sara:** They were on the same train?

**Miriam:** They were on the same train, different cars. They exchanged addresses. At that point, I think, we knew where we're going, but he made sure he knows. They went to a different place . . . who went in the Caucasus . . . will end up [in] Communaia Balka [sp]. That was agricultural . . .

**Ruth:** *Kohlkoz.*

<sup>25</sup> The Caucasus is a geopolitical region at the border of Europe and Asia and situated between the Black and the Caspian Sea. It is home to the Caucasus Mountains and is separated into northern and southern parts.

<sup>26</sup> *Rosh yeshiva* is the title given to the dean of a Talmudical academy (*yeshiva*), or Jewish religious school. His students are *Talmudim* (students of the Talmud).

**Miriam:** . . . not a *kohlkoz*.<sup>27</sup> *Sovkhoz*. The difference between a *kohlkoz* and *sovkhov* is the *kohlkoz* you only get paid with what you produce. *Sovkhoz*, you get paid with money.

**Sara:** It's like a cooperative.

**Miriam:** Like a cooperative . . . like a *kibbutz* or *moshav*.<sup>28</sup>

**Sara:** How would you spell 'sovkhov'?

**Miriam:** *Kohlkoz*?

**Sara:** *Sovkhov*.

**Miriam:** *Sovkhov*. "S-O-F-H" . . . *sovkhov*, just spell it the way I say it . . . *sovkhov* . . . because it has a different spelling in Russian.

**Sara:** So you went . . .

**Miriam:** We came there, and then they put us into little *zemlanki*. 'Zemlanki' means "little huts" . . . little houses made out of clay, made out of . . . the Caucasus did not have lumber, woods. Those were the steppes.<sup>29</sup>

**Sara:** . . . steppes.

**Miriam:** . . . steppes. Flat. In fact they grew honeydews . . . watermelons . . . red [and] yellow honeydew with . . . they grew . . . but we couldn't eat them. We worked on them though . . . but because we worked on them, we find a little honeydew <Miriam imitates breaking the melon open over her knee> over the knee and we ate them! Then we worked with Russian women. We also worked in the fields. We planted corn. We harvested the corn barefooted in the field. It got to a point that I developed ulcers on my feet . . . but what happened there, it was a little easier. The bread there was horrible . . . you couldn't eat the bread. But we managed . . . we used to wear something . . . the Russian women . . . they always would steal things from the field because they weren't given enough . . . if they wouldn't do it, tons and tons of food was left on the field. They didn't have labor. They didn't have [a] labor force. The men were gone, so we

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<sup>27</sup> A *kohlkoz*, and its close cousin, the *sovkhoz*, are large collective farming communes. They began in the Soviet Union after the October Revolution of 1917. In both cases, individual farmers were forced off their land and the state appropriated it. Thereafter they lived in the commune and got paid a share of the farm's product and profit according to how many days they worked. The peasant could have a garden on about one acre of land to feed his family, although it was inadequate. The rest of the product was sold to the government for very low prices. A *sovkhoz* is very similar but the workers did get paid a (very low) salary.

<sup>28</sup> An Israeli cooperative settlement consisting of small separate farms.

<sup>29</sup> An ecoregion, usually characterized by grasslands and shrublands. It is not quite wet enough to support a forest but not dry enough to be a desert. The weather fluctuations can be extreme between summer and winter and day and night. In Russia, the area is called the "Great Steppe" and is in the southwest and neighboring countries in Central Asia stretching from Ukraine in the west through Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan to the Altai, Koppet Dag and Tian Shan ranges.

worked there. My mother somehow had produced some kind of a meal . . . she got . . . you could feel the sand [in it]. We used to . . . make flour out of the corn. We were there a year-and-a-half. Then my mother again there . . . she met some Russian intellectuals. My older sister . . . she's very skillful . . . she used to knit and sew. She would fix things for the Russian women . . . alter . . . we would get food for that. This is how we survived for a year-and-a-half. Then [at] the end of the war . . . 1945 in May . . . we were allowed to leave Russia. I don't remember . . . it's funny that some things . . . just escape me. On which train we went . . . on regular trains I think. From there we went to Poland as Polish citizens . . . we went to Lodz.

**Sara:** What did you find in Lodz [Polish: Łódź]?

**Miriam:** In Lodz . . . big city . . . it was an industrial city before the war . . . I found many, many, many Jews. There were all these many Jews that came from Poland . . . that were in Siberia, in Kazakhstan, or Uzbekistan. They all came by trains to Lodz. They needed housing . . . they gave us temporary housing into the ghetto . . . Lodz ghetto . . . it wasn't . . . it was cleaned up.<sup>30</sup> But they didn't have enough housing to take all these Jews off the train. For a little while we lived in a little room in the Lodz ghetto. I could smell . . . you could feel . . . I always had that . . . something I don't know wrong with me or right with me . . . but that's what I always did. I remember we went to the KGB headquarters in Siberia, in Kolpashevo, because we were supposed to go . . . we also went to Tomsk. I got so many stories . . . my God . . . anyway we were supposed . . . we went to get permission. My mother and I went to the KGB headquarters, and nothing came out of it. Nothing came of it.

**Sara:** Permission for what?

**Miriam:** . . . permission to get out . . . to go from Togur to . . . we were supposed to . . . [the] children . . . we were supposed to go to Iran, Persia. I don't remember . . . some kind of a concoction somebody made up . . . they would take the children out of the Soviet Union and bring them to . . . I don't know how . . . it never materialized . . . We did go to a city [called] Tomsk. There was a woman . . . she was in charge of it, so we went on the boat again from Togur . . . from Kolpashevo to Tomsk. I slept on the boat . . . I slept on the hard floor there. We

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<sup>30</sup> The Lodz ghetto, the second largest in Poland, was located in the poorest area of the city (renamed Litzmannstadt by the Germans) and was walled in. At its peak it held some 200,000 Jews. The ghetto was liquidated in July 1944 when the last of the Jews, including Chaim Rumkowski, the elder of the *Judenrat*, and his family were sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau and murdered in the gas chambers. A few Jews were kept behind to loot the ghetto buildings of any remaining valuables. The Soviets liberated the city of Lodz in January 1945. It makes sense that refugees, Jewish or otherwise, would be put in this area after the war.

were there maybe three days. They took us to an orphanage. My mother let us go . . . I don't know why she did it, but she did. We were safe. We were there for two or three days.

**Sara:** But now you are in Lodz.

**Miriam:** Yes, and then we came to Lodz. This is a side story I'm telling you. Lodz . . . we were there just a few days or maybe a week. Then my sister, Esther, got married. My mother moved in with them. They found a little, tiny apartment in Lodz. My sister Riva and I went to . . . the key to it is to join organizations . . . there were especially Zionist organizations. My sister Riva and I joined *Mizrachi*<sup>31</sup> . . . they called it a '*kibbutz*.' But there were all kinds of organizations: *Hashomer Hatzair*, *Mizrachi* . . . you know about it, right? All the [unintelligible: 1:14].

**Sara:** How old are you by this time?

**Miriam:** Fifteen . . . in 1945, I was 15 going on 16. We were there, and this was all temporary places to live in until . . . evidently with the help of American Jews or the UJA [United Jewish Appeal] or other Jewish organizations . . . to get Jews out of Poland. Many people . . . we wanted to go to Israel, but Israel was still under the English mandate.<sup>32</sup> We couldn't get there even though I had an uncle there. My sister, Esther, meanwhile got married, and she left Lodz first with my mother. She went to Prague, Czechoslovakia. They lived on the outskirts of Prague in . . . [a] place called Dablice. Then about a few months later, *Mizrachi* . . . all the children from the *kibbutz*<sup>33</sup> . . . they made a special train, not only from *Mizrachi* . . . from other places. They put us on . . . regular trains. We were going to Czechoslovakia first. We wound up also in Dablice. This is where we met mother. At that point, mother joined my sister . . . my twin sister and I. From Dablice, Esther first went to France, Paris. We were in Dablice, I think, [for] six weeks. Again from Dablice . . . that was the plan . . . we went to Strasbourg [now France]. Nice regular trains . . . no more [cattle or freight] trains. [On] the other track of the train you see

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<sup>31</sup> Overall *Mizrachi* is a religious Zionist organization founded in 1902 in Vilna by Rabbi Yitzchak Yaacov Reines. Its youth movement, *Bnei Akiva*, became an international movement. *Mizrachi* believes that the *Torah* should be at the center of Zionism and that Jewish nationalism is a means of achieving religious objectives. *Hashomer Hatzair* is a similar Zionist youth movement except its political ideology is socialist.

<sup>32</sup> Mandatory Palestine, officially Palestine, was a geopolitical entity under British administration. It was carved out of Ottoman Syria after World War I. British civil administration in Palestine operated from 1920 to 1948. It was formalized with the League of Nations' consent in 1923 and contained two administrative areas. The land west of the Jordan River, known as Palestine, was under direct British rule until 1948, while the land east of the Jordan was a semi-autonomous region known as Transjordan under the rule of the Hashemite family. It gained independence in 1946 as Jordan.

<sup>33</sup> A *kibbutz* is a collective community in Israel that was traditionally based on agriculture, although today they are also based on industrial plants and high-tech enterprises. *Kibbutzes* in post-war Europe were collection and training places for Jews wishing to move on to then Palestine, later Israel.

British soldiers speaking English to you. It sounded to me like they had potatoes in their mouths. I didn't speak English. They see little girls . . . they wave. We came to Strasbourg. We lived in Strasbourg for a year. In Strasbourg . . . there were again. . . *Mizrachi* . . . they found housing. The Strasbourg Jewish community was great, they helped a lot. They gave . . . in Strasbourg we learned [the] *Tanakh*<sup>34</sup> and we learned . . . I took some little biology courses. We were supposed to go to Israel so maybe [I] learned first aid or something. We used to *daven* [Hebrew: pray] . . . it was Orthodox, but modern Orthodox. I used to play volleyball there . . . with the boys. For about a year, we stayed there. We were . . . if I tell you if I had two dresses [it] was a lot. Impoverished completely. From there . . .

<End Disk 1>

<Begin Disk 2>

**Sara:** The last time we talked, you were leaving . . . it was the end of the war . . .

**Miriam:** . . . and coming back to Poland.

**Sara:** . . . and coming back to Poland. You were traveling to Poland,

**Miriam:** Yes.

**Sara:** . . . by train.

**Miriam:** Yes.

**Sara:** . . . you told a story of how you ran into a group of religious . . . young people.

**Miriam:** . . . that I have to . . .

**Sara:** . . . backtrack?

**Miriam:** . . . backtrack because that was coming from Siberia to the Caucasus. At that point, we were liberated citizens already. We were Polish citizens so we were treated as such. We had the freedom to . . . when the train used to stop frequently because some tracks were taken up with army or with military . . . we had to wait. Everybody would come out of their car . . . the train cars. They used to . . . stop in an open field usually. In fact, in the one of their . . . I remember that open field because going to the Caucasus, we were told . . . we were sort of traveling on the side of Stalingrad. If you look at the map . . . there were raging battles on that field. Where we stopped . . . then everybody came out of . . . trains . . . people . . . there were a groups of people . . . families, and they made fires.

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<sup>34</sup> The Hebrew Bible. A canonical collection of Jewish texts corresponding closely, but not identically, to the Protestant and Catholic Old Testament.

**Sara:** But you said you were in the vicinity of Stalingrad?

**Miriam:** This is only . . . I am not absolutely sure, the only thing I remember [is] that on that field . . . you could still see a head with hair . . . skeletons. Those were ravages of war . . . ravages of war. I'm sure there were battles [there] because that part of Caucasus was actually occupied by the Germans. But they were there a short time and then they were pushed back. After they were pushed back . . . I don't know how long after . . . maybe a month or two or three, I have no idea, I have no knowledge of it . . . they made . . . we were able to leave Siberia. It was organized. Who organized it and what [or] how it was organized, I have no knowledge again. I was too young. I don't know, but I'm sure it was all done with the authorization of the Polish government. [Of] that I'm sure, because at that point, they were fighting side by side . . . even the Israeli brigade . . .

**Sara:** The Jewish . . .

**Miriam:** . . . was fighting . . .

**Sara:** . . . the Jewish Brigade.

**Miriam:** The Jewish brigade<sup>35</sup> . . . at that point, the Jewish Brigade from Palestine was fighting in Italy side-by-side: Americans and Poles. Italy was the . . . I remember because I have an uncle of mine that had survived—my father's youngest brother—he . . . I told you that two brothers came . . . when the war in 1939. When Hitler invaded western Poland, they came to eastern Poland. They stayed with us, and then they . . . the Russian government had picked them up and exiled them to Siberia. We never met after the war.

**Sara:** What were . . . do you know their names?

**Miriam:** Sure. Shalom Motel and Judah Motyl [sp]. They [are] dead now. Then he fought . . . in fact, he was fighting in 1939 with the Polish Army against the Germans. Then while he was being in Siberia and the Polish citizens were liberated, he joined the Polish Army. He wound up in Italy . . . fighting in . . . they were fighting . . . there was a . . . they were . . . I forgot the name . . . maybe I'll remember it later. Anyway he was fighting there.

**Sara:** But let's go back to the story, okay?

**Miriam:** Going back . . . I really go back and forth like that. It's not good. Anyway, on the way from Siberia to the Caucasus, everybody was able to go down, and they made fires. That group

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<sup>35</sup> A military formation of the British Army that served in Europe during World War II. The Brigade was formed in late 1944 and its personnel fought the Germans in Italy. After the war, some of them assisted Holocaust survivors to emigrate illegally to Palestine.

of men—that was a *yeshiva* [Jewish religious school]. We didn't know it was. After when we met them we find out. The whole Bialystok *yeshiva*, they were picked up . . . the Russian government picked them up, and they exiled them to Siberia. Then when all the Polish citizens were liberated, they were liberated and they were all together. It was a group of *yeshiva bocharim* [Yiddish: boys] . . . young men. . . the *rosh yeshiva* [head of the *yeshiva*] and his wife and two little girls, I think.

**Sara:** Who approached them?

**Miriam:** My mother. We go down and suddenly my mother sees . . . I don't know it's from here to there . . . I don't know the destination . . . a little further. . . she sees a group of men and amongst them one bearded Jew sitting . . . and young men with *kippahs*.<sup>36</sup> My mother was excited . . . we didn't see a Jew . . . know about it. She ran over to them and she says, "Where do you come from?" "*Waren komen Yidden?*" . . . in Yiddish. There was a group of men . . . see my mother running back. My mother knew she had three daughters . . . Riva and I were pipsqueaks. My older sister . . . my mother . . . in Europe people, women always thought of a *shidech* [Yiddish: wedding]. She immediately said, "My gosh!" She came [back and] she said, "You'll never know! I met a group of Jews there!" She grabbed my sister [Esther] by the arm and says, "Go!" We went there. She was a very pretty girl, Esther. Mother introduced herself again and Esther . . .

**Sara:** How old was your sister at that time?

**Miriam:** She must have been about 19. I think she was 19.

**Sara:** She grabbed your sister . . .

**Miriam:** She talked, "Let's go, Esther! Look I met a whole group of Jews there!" My mother had something in her mind already . . . not Esther. She took Esther by the arm and went . . . she introduced herself . . . "Where do you come from?" They wanted to know where we came from . . . we'll call him Yankel because that was his name . . . they were all impressed, a lot of them. They all liked her. They lived there in Siberia. They never saw a Jewish girl for maybe three or four years. Here they see a Jewish pretty girl. [Yankel] was very aggressive. He went to my mother. He says, "Where . . . ?" As we were traveling, we knew that we will not wind up in the same places. We came to a point . . . I think it was city . . . Blagodarnoye [now in Armenia].

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<sup>36</sup> Jewish men cover their heads during prayer with a small skull-cap called a *yarmulke* or *kippah*. Orthodox Jewish men wear it at all times to remind themselves of God's presence.

Over there . . . they were sending everyone to different places. But this Yankel, he took my mother's name and Esther's name. At one point they knew where they're going and where we were going. Then it started . . . corresponding.

**Sara:** Why was he the one picked? How did this happen that he was . . .

**Miriam:** . . . there was . . . some of them were not . . . a little shy maybe . . . he just liked her, . . . he was always a very assertive . . . assertive guy. When you see there's so many boys, and one Jewish girl . . . there was another guy that really fell for my sister too, but [Yankel] took over. He just took over. That's what happens in life.

**Sara:** There was . . . they communicated how?

**Miriam:** They're communicating by mail. Then he said that he maybe can come over . . . we were already . . . he made . . . he had a special permission . . . you have to ask for permission to travel in the Soviet Union. He came from where they were, we were in Communaia Balka [sp]. I have no idea where they were. I really don't know.

**Sara:** Where were you?

**Miriam:** Communaia Balka, Communaia Balka<sup>37</sup> was the village.

**Sara:** The village was in . . . ?

**Miriam:** The big city was Blagodarnoye.

**Sara:** This is in what country?

**Miriam:** That's the Caucasus.

**Sara:** You know what . . . was it Russia?

**Miriam:** It's Russia!

**Sara:** It's Russia . . . you are still in Russia.

**Miriam:** It's all Russia, everything is Russia ., . .

**Sara:** Inside Russia.

**Miriam:** . . . until 1945. Everything is Russia. Actually the Caucasus are . . . Andy [sp: 9:46] was very nice. He took a map . . . the Caucasus are not that far from Chechnya . . . Chechnya was in the news. That's Russian Georgia.

**Sara:** Today it's Georgia.

**Miriam:** No. That part of Caucasus is not too far from Georgia.

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<sup>37</sup> I couldn't find a Balka anywhere on any map. There is however a Balakan, Azerbaijan just across the border from Armenia. Both are considered to be in the North Caucasus.

**Sara:** I see, but it's Russian,

**Miriam:** It's in the vicinity someplace . . . if you see on the map.

**Sara:** It's Russia today.

**Miriam:** It's Russia, still Russia. That is still Russia. But if someone doesn't know Caucasus, if you tell them that it's in vicinity [of Chechnya] . . . why, because Chechnya was in the news. Everybody knows about it.

**Sara:** Yes.

**Miriam:** The Russian Georgia . . . everybody knows about it. That gives them an idea.

**Sara:** That's the story of how your sister . . .

**Miriam:** My sister met her husband, right. Then we all traveled to Poland. Then we were all back yet.

**Sara:** How were you . . . how was the trip to Poland?

**Miriam:** It was nice. We were liberated . . . it was after the war was over . . .

**Sara:** By train?

**Miriam:** Yes, by train. I think it was a passenger train. It's funny that . . . certain things I can't remember, but I'm sure it was a passenger train. I had asked my older sister when she was still living . . . it was exactly a year today that she died . . . she died last year on *Hanukkah*.<sup>38</sup> I was visiting my son for *Hanukkah* in Maryland. I knew she was sick. It was during the storm last year when we had no way of flying in and flying out. I was stranded in my son's house. I couldn't even go to her funeral. She died at *Hanukkah*. It was the unveiling last week. I couldn't go there. I had foot problems.

**Sara:** So, going back to your story . . .

**Miriam:** Yes.

**Sara:** . . . where did you arrive in Poland . . . what was the first city?

**Miriam:** All right, in Poland . . . then we went . . . this is . . . they met there and already while they were in the Caucasus, he decided that he wants to become engaged to her. These are Orthodox people. I think that my sister went to where he was staying with a group of the *rosh yeshiva*. There's a woman amongst them . . . "*gemacht a vord*" . . . they call it. They made a

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<sup>38</sup> Hebrew for 'dedication.' An eight-day festival of lights usually falling around Christmas on the Christian calendar. Hanukkah celebrates the victory of the Maccabees in 165 BCE over the Seleucid rulers of Palestine, who had desecrated the Temple. The Maccabees wanted to re-dedicate the Temple altar to Jewish worship by rekindling the *menorah* but could only find one small jar of ritually pure olive oil. This oil continued to burn miraculously for eight days, enabling them to prepare new oil. The *menorah* with its eight branches commemorates this miracle.

sort of agreement . . . if you know the Orthodox . . . the first thing they do is they “*machen a vord*” . . . you know what that means?

**Sara:** Yes . . . the word . . . a “*vord*” . . . it means a “word.”

**Miriam:** A word, yes! They make a . . .

**Sara:** . . . commitment?

**Miriam:** . . . how would you put it in English?

**Sara:** . . . a commitment.

**Ruth:** . . . engagement?

**Sara:** A commitment.

**Miriam:** A commitment. A “*vord*” is a commitment . . . not engagement yet. After the commitment comes the engagement and after the engagement comes the wedding.

**Sara:** You arrived in Poland.

**Miriam:** We arrived in Poland in Lodz. We were temporary housed in the old ghetto that was during the war . . . didn’t have enough housing. But it was clean . . . they cleaned it up . . . but you could still smell that atmosphere of the ghetto. But we didn’t stay there too long. We must have stayed there, I don’t know, maybe a month, maybe less.

**Sara:** By now, it’s what year?

**Miriam:** 1945 . . . May of 1945.

**Ruth:** Miriam, I’m sorry to interrupt. While you were in Russia, did you hear about what was happening to the Jews of Europe?

**Miriam:** Yes. When we were in Russia at the beginning we didn’t hear. We knew what Hitler was doing to the Jews in 1939 when . . . even though we were occupied by the Russians, by the Soviet Union . . . we knew what he did in the western Poland. Then we knew what Hitler did from 1933 and up in Germany because the influence of Jew hating . . . or antisemitism . . . was sort of flowing from Germany to Poland. It became more antisemitic, it was much . . . until 1939 . . . what Hitler did [was] he played nice with Poland while he was building his war machine, and then he attacked her. In fact, it was in 1938, I think . . . was it [Hermann] Goering<sup>39</sup> or one of his

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<sup>39</sup> Goering was one of Hitler’s inner circle. In World War I he was an ace fighter pilot. He became a member of the NSDAP from its early days. He was wounded in 1923 in the failed coup in Munich led by Hitler known as the ‘Beer Hall Putsch.’ In the Nazi administration he was the commander of the *Luftwaffe* (German air force) in 1935. He held this position until near the end of the war when he was disgraced because of the decimation of the German air force by the Allied forces. He was also responsible for the economy in the buildup to World War II. In 1941 Hitler appointed Goering as his successor, but after his fall from grace, in the last days of the Reich, Hitler selected

patsies that came hunting to Poland? Poland has *Bialowieza Pushcha* [Bialowieza Forest]<sup>40</sup> . . . is a forest and they have these strange animals. He came hunting and the Polish government accepted him. While he did that they were building the war machine to attack Poland. They really [unintelligible: 15:11] . . . that's what they did.

**Sara:** Did the thought of going back to Pruzhany cross your mind?

**Miriam:** No. I'll tell you why. Pruzhany was already . . . was not Poland anymore. Pruzhany was still under the Soviet Union occupation. Pruzhany is Belarus [now] . . . it was under the Russian, under the Soviets. We were going out of Russia. We wanted to go out of Russia . . . not to stay. There was nobody left we knew in Pruzhany. The main reason [was] because it wasn't Poland. Perhaps if that would [have been] Poland . . . maybe we would have go[ne] . . . but no Jews . . . really, very few Jews that were exiled were going back to the occupied Russian territories.

**Sara:** When did you find out what happened to your father?

**Miriam:** All right. It's very strange. Shortly before the war ended . . . my mother was very good in corresponding . . . she used to write letters. Then . . . but I have to tell you this story. Shortly before the war ended, I used to dream a lot . . . maybe [in] situations like that, many people dream. One day I had a dream. I had a dream that someplace in Pruzhany . . . somebody told me that my papa . . . my father is dead. But, of course, that was a dream. Shortly [after], when my mother had gotten a letter from . . . we traveled from Pruzhany to Siberia . . . I have to track back a little bit with a family . . . I told you, they were Christians, they were Poles. Their father was a conductor on a train. We were coming back . . . my mother knew them very well. In fact, the youngest girl of theirs, I went to school with . . . my mother probably wrote a letter. She had gotten a letter from Demski [sp: 17:45] that my father . . . then when we came to Lodz . . . we met some people that survived . . . exactly the timing how . . . I don't remember . . . But when we came to the United States, we met many people from Pruzhany that survived. Amongst them was my uncle by marriage who survived. He was in Auschwitz with my father . . . Polonski [sp: 18:19] . . . he was the one that I have on pictures.

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Admiral Karl Donitz instead. Goering was captured, put on trial in the Nuremberg trials in 1946, convicted, and sentenced to be hung. Goering, however, had managed to smuggle a cyanide capsule into the prison, which he took, committing suicide before he could be hung.

<sup>40</sup> An ancient woodland that straddles the border between Poland and Belarus in the area of Brest and Bialystok. It is one of the last and largest remaining parts of the immense primeval forest that once stretched across Europe. Now it is a wildlife preserve.

**Sara:** He . . .

**Miriam:** He told us. He even told me . . . my father was a very healthy man. It's very funny that very healthy men did not survive. It's a very, very interesting theory about it . . . and the weaker men did survive. I remember my father eating lemons . . . he was healthy man.

**Sara:** So what . . .

**Miriam:** . . . what happened? He [her uncle] told me that . . . reading autobiographies from survivors I know . . . he told me when they got sick with dysentery . . . my father had gotten sick with dysentery in those conditions . . . what the Germans did . . . they just threw them out into . . . first, I think . . . they managed to take him to a hospital. Many of them tried not to go because from the hospital they were sent to Treblinka<sup>41</sup> or to the ovens. That's what happened to my father.

**Sara:** Your father died of dysentery?

**Miriam:** Right, he died because he was . . . he wouldn't have died of dysentery probably . . . but he had gotten sick with dysentery.

**Sara:** Yes.

**Miriam:** But maybe . . . I don't know exactly how it went there, but the fact is that he perished in Auschwitz-[Birkenau]. My uncle survived . . . he . . . was a tall, good looking man . . . when he saw a touch of blood, he would faint . . . and he survived. It's an interesting phenomenon. I don't understand it, but I'm sure . . . people do research and things like that. I did hear that the stronger man sometimes did not survive, and the man that wasn't so strong . . . because he wasn't so strong . . . he was sick more times, his immunity was built up. It has something to do with medical science.

**Sara:** Let's go back to Lodz. You were talking about being in Lodz and where you stayed while you were there.

**Miriam:** Yes, we stayed in those housings a short time. Then we had to . . . we were uprooted, impoverished, and mother went to live with Esther. Esther got married in Lodz. He [Yankel] immediately made sure that he wanted to marry my sister. They made a small wedding.

**Sara:** How did you support yourselves?

**Miriam:** Riva and I went to a *kibbutz* . . . *Mizrachi*.

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<sup>41</sup> Note: Miriam is using the word "Treblinka" as an iconic word for "gas chambers." Prisoners in Auschwitz did not get sent to the Treblinka death camp if they got sick, they were sent to the gas chambers in Auschwitz-Birkenau.

**Sara:** A *kibbutz* in . . . ?

**Miriam:** . . . in Lodz.

**Sara:** . . . in Lodz.

**Miriam:** In Lodz. They created organizations, they called it *kibbutz* . . .

**Sara:** Who founded it? Do you know who founded those?

**Miriam:** I have no idea. I don't know. I was 15 going on 16 . . . boys, girls . . . it was May . . . summertime . . . we arrived . . . the first of May we arrived in Poland. We entered the *kibbutz*. I used to work . . . you had to do things in *kibbutz*. I worked as a waitress . . . they fed us! I volunteered as a waitress . . . with Riva. We were there . . . I think from May until the early fall, I think . . . or middle fall.

**Sara:** Did you get any instruction?

**Miriam:** Not in *Mizrachi* . . . they used to . . . *Chumash*,<sup>42</sup> *Tanakh* . . . concentrated on religion. Not that much because more instruction we had in Strasbourg . . . arriving from Poland to Strasbourg [France].

**Sara:** In this place, in this *kibbutz* . . .

**Miriam:** *Mizrachi*.

**Sara:** . . . did you have to observe religious . . .

**Miriam:** Observe religion, yes. *Shabbat* . . . Friday nights we sang *zemirot* [Hebrew: special songs in honor of the Sabbath] . . . we sang songs.

**Sara:** Were the boys separated from the girls?

**Miriam:** Not in *Mizrachi* that much. The Orthodox organization was . . . I forgot the name of it . . . they were totally separated.

**Sara:** But you say "*Mizrachi*." Was this a *Mizrachi*?

**Miriam:** It was really a *Mizrachi*.

**Sara:** What you called a '*kibbutz*'?

**Miriam:** They called it a '*kibbutz*.'

**Sara:** But it wasn't [in] Israel.

**Miriam:** In Israel they call it a "*kibbutz*."

**Sara:** But it was a *Mizrachi* organization?

**Miriam:** Yes, *Mizrachi* . . . they called it "*Torah v'avodah*" . . . was the name of *Mizrachi*.

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<sup>42</sup> The *Chumash* is another word for *Torah* or the Five Books of Moses of the Hebrew *Bible*.

**Sara:** Which means “*Torah*...”?

**Miriam:** “Work and Study.”

**Sara:** How long did you stay there?

**Miriam:** Until we went to Czechoslovakia . . . a few months?

**Sara:** What made you go to Czechoslovakia?

**Miriam:** Oh! We wanted to go out of Poland. Every Jew that came after the war . . . back from Russia, wanted to get out of Poland. Very few stayed. I don’t know anyone, but perhaps there is a few that did. Many of them went to Germany. Many of them had to cross the border from Poland to Germany illegally . . . when some of them did. You probably know the stories. But we went legally.

**Sara:** How did you manage to leave?

**Miriam:** . . . Poland?

**Sara:** Yes.

**Miriam:** What happened [was] that we stayed . . . then my mother and my older sister [Esther] and her husband [Yankel] went to Czechoslovakia first. They were affiliated with the very Orthodox organizations because my brother-in-law was a rabbi and he was an Orthodox man . . . the *Agudah*<sup>43</sup> . . . you probably know these names, right? *Agudah* was very Orthodox. The *yeshivot* . . . there was a *rosh yeshiva* living in Brooklyn . . . came to America shortly before the war . . . he was the one at this big *yeshiva* in Brooklyn [who] was responsible to bring my sister and brother-in-law to America. But at that point . . . you have to leave Poland. How do you leave Poland? You need permission to leave Poland. Therefore at that time, even [though] it was Poland, Stalin had a big influence over Poland at that time yet. In fact, in Lodz I used to see Russian military walking on the street. The only way [we] got permission is through organizations. Who was responsible? Many organizations in America were also responsible. They were supplying the money, the means to feed and transport all these Jews. Those were all survivors. Many of them went to Germany. They had those camps in Germany, after the war. I was never there.

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<sup>43</sup> A loose organization of ultra-Orthodox Jews in the United States. The original movement was established in Europe in 1912 by some of the famous Orthodox rabbis of the times. It grew during the 1920’s and 1930s to be the political, communal and cultural voice of most of the ultra-Orthodox Jewish community, including in the United States.

**Sara:** Do you know what organization made it possible for you to go from Poland to Czechoslovakia?

**Miriam:** If I know exactly, no. I know that I stayed in *Mizrachi*. Partly it was between Israeli Zionists . . . Zionist organizations, [of] that I'm sure. Because the idea was for us to go to Israel. So then they made sure . . . to go out of Poland again you have to organize. Everything has to be in an organized fashion. So the entire *kibbutz* . . . they organized. There were few children that had mothers. My sister [Riva] and I had a mother . . . most of them had no mothers, had no fathers. They were [sole] survivors. Many of them were hidden children. Many of them were hid by Polish people . . . many of them were hidden in various ways. There was a little girl with me. Her name was 'Basha.' [sp: 27:54] She was petite, like me, maybe a little smaller. She was hidden by a Polish family. They used to keep her in a big trunk during the day . . . a dowry<sup>44</sup> trunk [like] they used to have in Poland . . . the big ones. During the night, they would let her out . . . that's how she survived. So there were many children [who] survived in many, many, many ways.

**Sara:** So where did you go in Czechoslovakia?

**Miriam:** We came to Czechoslovakia . . . they settled us in a place on the outskirts of Prague called Dablice. Just spell it the way I say. Dablice.

**Sara:** What kind of place was it?

**Miriam:** It was like a . . . they had housing . . . see what they did . . . I don't hardly remember it . . . it was like a village on the outskirts of Prague. Wherever they can find those organizations . . . my sister and her husband and my mother were there, too . . . from Lodz. But they went before us . . . they must have went about two, three or four weeks before us. They were there . . . they used to find places to transport all these survivors out of Poland. So that was a chore. So everything was temporary because from Czechoslovakia we went to Strasbourg [France]. We must have been there about six weeks or four weeks. My mother was there with my older sister and her husband, but they already had papers to go to France . . . Paris. Again, who supplied [them], who was behind all this? American organizations. HIAS [Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society].<sup>45</sup> There were other organizations,

<sup>44</sup> A dowry is the money, goods or estate that a woman brings to her husband in marriage.

<sup>45</sup> HIAS was founded in 1881. Its original purpose was the help the constant flow of Jewish immigrants from Russian in relocating. During and after World War II, they had offices throughout Europe, South and Central America and the Far East. They worked to get Jews out of Europe and to any country that would have them by

**Sara:** The Joint?

**Miriam:** . . . Joint Distribution<sup>46</sup> and *yeshivoh*, for the religious people. So they went.

Everything was on the way to America or on the way to Israel . . . out of Poland, out of Europe.

**Sara:** Did the thought of going to Israel cross your mind?

**Miriam:** I always wanted to go to Israel. My idea was to go . . . I always had that strong feeling . . . because of my grandfather. I remember I told you that. But I had a mother and my older sister and her husband . . . they decided they go to America . . . because the Russians . . . first of all, we couldn't go to Israel at that time. Palestine was under the English mandate. They wouldn't let us in anyway. My mother had a brother in Israel. We would have to wait a number of years in France in order to get to Israel. Then in the interim what happened . . . Israel had begun working towards its independence, but that took a number of years.

**Sara:** How did you get to Strasbourg?

**Miriam:** In Czechoslovakia we stayed . . . my mother joined us in Czechoslovakia because my sister had left for France. She was with us and then all that *Mizrachi* . . . the *Kinderheim*<sup>47</sup> . . . organizations of the children, they made sure that we have to go further. Czechoslovakia<sup>48</sup> was a temporary state.

**Sara:** A transient place?

**Miriam:** Yes. They put us on beautiful, very lovely passenger trains in Czechoslovakia. We went to Prague, I think, that time. I did go to Prague. We used to go visit in Prague . . . beautiful city . . . and from there we went to Strasbourg. In Strasbourg, they found housing. It's a big house . . . actually they claimed that German military were housed there during the war when they occupied Strasbourg. Of course, they were kicked out of there. Strasbourg had a beautiful Jewish community, and they did a lot for these refugees. We were refugees, literally refugees. So they housed us. That was also called *Mizrachi Kinderheim*. That was a *Kinderheim* [children's home].

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providing tickets and information about visas. After World War II, they assisted 167,000 Jews to leave DP camps and emigrate elsewhere.

<sup>46</sup> Formal name: American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee. Commonly called it the "Joint."

<sup>47</sup> German. Children's homes, protector, or orphanage. There were many of these in post-war Europe to care for orphaned Jewish children.

<sup>48</sup> Czechoslovakia was established by the Versailles Treaty after World War I. During World War II it was occupied and divided. The Germans split it into Slovakia (an ally of Germany) and the rest was merged into the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia in the Greater German Reich. After the war the area was taken over by the Soviet Union. On January 1, 1993 Czechoslovakia peacefully split into the Czech Republic and Slovakia.

**Sara:** Children's home.

**Miriam:** Children's home. In French they called it . . . I gave a picture to the Breman<sup>49</sup> where I'm there with a few other people. On the back of the picture, I don't know if you saw it there . . . you did? . . . what does it say?

**Ruth:** I don't remember exactly what it says.

**Miriam:** So, they have it there.

**Sara:** Is it "OSE"?<sup>50</sup> "OSE"? Is that an organization called "OSE"?

**Ruth:** No. I don't think so.

**Miriam:** No.

**Sara:** It's not "OSE," okay.

**Miriam:** No, no, no. I have a picture . . . they were . . . you see after the war, they were constantly taking pictures of survivors, constantly. I think I had to . . . I was downstairs, I was coming up the stairs . . . I see there's a photographer taking pictures [of] a group of people. Then he said, "I want you here." So I stood . . . I was a kid . . . if you look at the picture you'll see. I think I still have the copy of it. I actually gave them the original they wanted. I was nice about it. Where was I?

**Sara:** You were in Strasbourg in this big house,

**Miriam:** In a big house. Over there . . . they gave . . . *madrihim*<sup>51</sup> . . . people that took care of the younger children . . . most of them were orphans. There was a doctor and wife and two children that were hidden during the war in Poland, so he also went. He was the one that I took a few . . . a number of biology classes because they were getting us ready to teach us first aid. Everything was geared going towards Israel. Then we started . . . they taught us *Tanakh* . . . *Shabbat* was . . . Friday night and *Chumash* and a little Hebrew. So whatever I know, I know from there. Then we used to play . . . they had volleyball games . . . boys and girls . . . it was a modern atmosphere. We used to play volleyball. Cold winter days . . . we used to take cold showers . . . they didn't have hot water there because the military was there supposedly. I used to take cold showers in the winter, but when you [are] 16 years old, I guess it doesn't mean anything.

<sup>49</sup> MMF 627.001

<sup>50</sup> *Oeuvre de Secours aux Enfant* (OSE). A French Jewish humanitarian organization that saved hundreds of Jewish refugee children in Vichy France during World War II.

<sup>51</sup> Hebrew: counselors, those whose guide.

**Sara:** How long did that last? How long?

**Miriam:** A year. We were a year in Strasbourg . . . we came into Strasbourg, that's was 1945, then it was 1946 until 1947 . . . until October of 1947. We must have come during October . . . I don't know, middle fall or early fall. We came to Poland in May of 1945, the first of May. We came . . . it was around the Jewish holidays, so it's something like middle fall. Then a few weeks later, we went to Strasbourg, and we were there a year. In the meantime, my older sister went to America with her husband. She was constantly writing mother letters, "I miss you. Why don't you come?" We couldn't go to Israel because they wouldn't let us in, so my mother decided that we're going to America. I was very rebellious. I was very upset for a while because I wanted to go to Israel, but . . . I loved my mother and my twin sister . . . we went to . . . so from Strasbourg, we went to, to a place called Chateau Fleury-en-Biere.<sup>52</sup> That was a place on the outskirts of Paris again. They were always housing these refugees . . . not in cities, you can't do that in the city . . . they were in the hundreds, thousands of them. That place, there were all . . . mostly Orthodox *yeshiva bocharim*, and married young couples mostly. Some mothers that survived . . . most of them that survived were young. The reason we had a mother [was] because we were in Siberia. Here and there a mother survived Auschwitz or so, but most of them were young. So we stayed there a number of weeks until October of 1947. We . . . my brother-in-law, my older sister's husband . . . made out papers for us so we can come to America. In October we went to Marseilles [France].

**Sara:** The two of you?

**Miriam:** No, the three of us! My mother . . .

**Sara:** Your mother was still with you.

**Miriam:** . . . my mother . . . at that point . . . from Dablice on, my mother was with us. She was with us in the *Kinderheim* in Strasbourg. She used to help in the kitchen . . . all these women did some kind of work. The children were studying . . . we were studying, playing ball, singing. It lasted a year, and then everybody went to different places.

**Sara:** So you . . .

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<sup>52</sup> I think this is what she is referring to. It is on the outskirts of Paris and is technically a community. The only thing there is a huge chateau. I don't know if the chateau itself was used for temporary lodgings after the war (it would be big enough) or it was just the area around the Chateau.

**Ruth:** Miriam, when you came to Lodz . . . after you were liberated in Russia and [learned] the facts of the Holocaust and what had happened to your people, to our people. in Europe became completely known to you, what was your reaction?

**Miriam:** My reaction was . . . first of all, I felt extremely lucky because I had a mother. Most of them had no parents, so there was a time . . . for a longest time, I considered myself . . . I didn't consider myself as a survivor. I thought how lucky I was that I didn't go through that hell, even though I went through a hell, not in the way they did . . . bad times, but not that kind of hell. So I considered myself extremely lucky. I didn't consider myself 100 percent lucky because I missed my father. So when I looked at these orphans . . . very few had moms, maybe a few had a father that survived, maybe . . . most of them had no one. I was considering myself very lucky. Knowing . . . it was hard . . . we were . . . life was hard . . . extremely hard. But I did consider myself lucky, that I can tell you. There was a time that I would say, "I cannot be a survivor. I didn't go through that kind of hell." My hell wasn't strong enough in comparison with their hell.

**Ruth:** How have your thoughts change about that or have they?

**Miriam:** I began feeling . . . sure, I'm not a concentration camp survivor, but I am a World War II survivor. I survived by very sheer lucky chance, so I am a survivor. My grandparents were killed, my aunts and uncles and, most of all, my father was killed. I'm an orphan. I'm half an orphan. I had to go to work at an early age . . . work very hard, struggle. My father was . . . I felt my father, I missed him. I didn't have him. I lost him at age 10-1/2. At that, I came to the realization that even though I didn't go to a concentration camp, but I did go through so much. But there's no comparison, so I felt lucky that way.

**Ruth:** The other question that I had . . . we were just speaking about. . . that you were becoming a teenager and a young woman . . .

**Miriam:** Yes.

**Ruth:** . . . while you were in Russia without . . .

**Miriam:** Yes we came back [to] Lodz. There were boys and there were girls. I was, as I said, a late bloomer so I was aware of a . . . I could have a crush on a nice young man . . . maybe in a different way, in a very naïve way . . . I was aware. But it was difficult for me. Then I grew up without a father so it was difficult for me. Growing up with my mother, my two sisters . . . thinking of one thing—to survive. Sure I was not in a concentration camp, but actually we were always thinking just to survive . . . so thinking about a boy [and] a girl . . . that part was not here

yet. But once we came to Lodz . . . it took me, as I was a late bloomer, it took me . . . I was a little . . . I was introverted. I was an introvert . . . people don't believe it, but I was. Or maybe you can call it shy. I was not too aggressive yet. Some boys and girls related differently, but it took me a while. I had high moral values. I had all these things in my head. It's not . . . I don't regret about it, no, I'm proud of it . . . but that's the way I was. That's the way I was. I used to like a boy . . . but I was never too aggressive, no. It's good to be a little aggressive, it took me while though . . . it took me a while. But I secretly . . . secretly, I would have a crush, A or B or C, but never, never express it. [I was] a dreamer.

**Sara:** This was while you were still in Europe, before you came . . . you're describing the person . . .

**Miriam:** . . . in Lodz . . .

**Sara:** . . . you were . . .

**Miriam:** . . . in Lodz. Then . . . that . . . it was even in Strasbourg too. It persisted . . . for a while. In Strasbourg . . . I wish I was different, thinking back but . . . you can't go back. Then, we came to the United States . . . but I was still my own . . . even though I have a lot of people liking me. I was pretty, cute . . .

**Sara:** So you . . .

**Miriam:** . . . finally, I met my husband. I had . . . really I had a lot of boys before him . . . *bashert* . . . everything, these things are *bashert* [Hebrew: fate, destiny]. Now you see Sonia and my son David . . . I have two grandchildren of whom I'm very proud . . . David and Sonia. I'm a proud mom and a proud grandmother.

**Sara:** So let's pick up the story a little earlier. You say you went to Marseille, and from there you sailed . . . ?

**Miriam:** Yes, we sailed [in] a boat . . . with . . . in fact, that was a Russian boat, called by the name *Rucia* [sp] *Leningrad*.<sup>53</sup> That was the last boat that really was sailing [from] Marseille [France] to America. In fact, they claimed that that boat used to be a German boat, but the Russians had captured it. It must have been a military boat. Of course, we didn't have first class. My mother and my sister Riva . . . any of these refugees didn't . . . but there were passengers that were . . . we met some American passengers that came in 1947 to France to Paris, and they were sailing back to America. In fact, amongst these passengers was a woman from Chicago . . . she

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<sup>53</sup> No way to trace this ship name.

happened to be a Jewish woman, whose son had volunteered at age 17, when the war was still . . . shortly before the end of the war. They had decided they didn't want him to go. He insisted he wanted to go. He went and he was killed at the very end of the war. She was in France . . . I think it was Normandy maybe . . . anyway she came to see his gravesite. So she was going back to America on that boat. She was a very sick woman . . . she got seasick, extremely sick. I didn't get seasick for some reason.

**Sara:** So how were you feeling during this trip?

**Miriam:** Trip? The trip was good. Riva and I . . . everybody was sick, we did not. There was a young boy on the boat . . . we were both on the ship together and his father and sister . . . survivors . . . Jewish boy. I sort of developed a little crush on him. His name was Benny I remember. A nice boy. But anyway . . . there were Russian sailors on the boat. My mother said, "Don't you dare speak Russian there because we'll go back to Siberia."

**Sara:** How long was the trip?

**Miriam:** I think it was 10 days or 12 days. Cross[ed] the [Strait of] Gibraltar,<sup>54</sup> I remember . . . it was . . . just a one or few days storm there, but it was nice. Many people got very sick. Riva and I, we had fun, yes, young kids. It felt . . .

**Sara:** Did you . . . ?

**Miriam:** What I felt? We felt alone . . . my mother wasn't a strong woman . . . she still wasn't strong. We're going . . . there was . . . I couldn't think of anything. I was young . . . in many ways naïve. I couldn't picture what America is all about . . . I couldn't picture. We came to New York harbor. Then my older sister and her husband came. They picked us up. I had no vision . . . really. I don't remember having a vision. The only vision I had [was a] vision of freedom . . . that was my vision . . . free. What I'm going to do, how I'm going to do it, no vision. But . . . once we came . . . you sort of . . . maybe sometimes [when] you're young, you dream a little, but then you go down and come back to reality. Reality was a little grim because we were poor. We had nothing, absolutely nothing. We stayed with my older sister. I immediately decided that I had to go to work. My twin sister . . . we stayed a few weeks with my older sister . . . then . . . they had two bedrooms and a kitchen.

**Sara:** Where was it? Where were . . . ?

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<sup>54</sup> Marseilles is a major French seaport on the Mediterranean. To get out of the Mediterranean you have to pass through the Straits of Gibraltar which is a narrow passage that separates Spain from Morocco in Africa.

**Miriam:** Borough Park<sup>55</sup> . . . because my brother-in-law was a rabbi. He already had a little pulpit someplace there. Then my mother decided it's time for us to just move out . . . so we moved to a one-room apartment. We rented a room on Ocean Park Way, I remember. From there . . . we finally . . . it was very difficult after the war to get apartments . . . impossible. You had to really *shmeear*<sup>56</sup>. . . you had to give people under the table to help you. If you knew a janitor someplace or a superintendent in a housing apartment, you have to give him money so if somebody moves out . . . so it was difficult. We . . . finally, my mother . . . she was very good that way . . . she found a little apartment on McDonald [sp] Avenue. It was near the tracks.

**Sara:** How did you deal with the language?

**Miriam:** It was hard. I spoke Yiddish. I didn't know one syllable of English, not even one. I spoke Yiddish. Then we went to night school immediately . . . evening school at night, learning English. Over there you meet all these Italian boys and girls and Jewish boys and girls . . . they were all . . . right at the war . . . there were so many of them . . . young. I remember the Italian boy running after me and speaking Italian. It was funny . . . when you're young . . . even though I had probably two dresses all together and a pair of shoes to wear. But slowly . . . and then immediately . . . I have . . . one of the women told me in my sister's house in Borough Park . . . all these women . . . they were in love with President [Franklin] Roosevelt<sup>57</sup> after the war . . . these were women my age that I am now, probably. She said to me, "There is a place" . . . they used to have small little factories in Borough Park. Where does a refugee girl go? In a factory to work. Don't speak English . . . don't have any skill, don't have a trade, don't have a profession. She says, "There's a place here I want you to go. You tell him that you have experience." It was a terrible thing for me to do. "Otherwise, he will not hire you." But I wanted to make \$1, so I went. They were doing sewing on a machine . . . on a Mellow machine<sup>58</sup>. . . special machine . . . [making] children's clothes. I came, he interviewed me, and he spoke Yiddish. He said, "Do you have experience?" I says, "Yes." She told me to do that that was lesson number one. I was . . . never thought to do it, but in a time of need, you do sometimes. So he hired me, and he put me on the machine. Then he comes over and stays behind me. He says, "Tell me, you didn't really

<sup>55</sup> Sometimes spelled as 'Boro Park' by its residents.

<sup>56</sup> Yiddish: to smear, grease. In other words, she had to bribe them. In slang it means "a batch of things that go together." Also spelled '*shmeer*' or '*schmeear*.'

<sup>57</sup> The 32<sup>nd</sup> President of the United States and a central figure in world events during the mid-twentieth century, leading the United States through a time of worldwide economic crisis and war. Popularly known as 'FDR,' he collapsed and died in his home in Warm Springs, Georgia just a few months before the end of the war.

<sup>58</sup> A manufacturer's name. The machine was an industrial sewing machine.

have experience, did you?" I said, "No." He said, "It's okay." I worked there for a little while. They used to . . . it's a special machine . . . it cuts and it sews at the same time. So I accidentally cut a little garment, a little baby tee shirt, "My God, what do I do with it now?"

**Sara:** Do you remember how much they paid you?

**Miriam:** Maybe \$1.50 an hour.

**Sara:** What about your sister? Did she also go to work?

**Miriam:** She did too . . . my twin sister, yes. She . . . at that time, she went to . . . worked at a brassiere factory. So first I worked there, and then . . . she went . . . I don't know how she got there. But from there, what they used to do . . . they kept me for a while . . . then they laid me off. When he laid me off, they told me to go to collect unemployment.

**Sara:** How old are you by this time?

**Miriam:** Eighteen. No language, shy, so I went to an employment agency. There was a line. I don't remember exactly what I did, but anyway, finally somebody . . . gave me another [job] . . . also working on a machine doing brassieres. My sister went to Best Form Foundation. I don't know . . . if you were in the States, you would know about it. It was a well-known brand, Best Form Foundation. It was actually [owned by] an Orthodox Jew, living in Borough Park . . . modern Orthodox . . . he had a big factory. So finally my sister wound up there. I worked with . . . a smaller guy in Borough Park. I remember when I worked for him for three days, I said, "Don't you want to pay me?" He said, "Sweetheart" . . . he said [it] in Yiddish . . . "You know you have to work a week. Friday is payday." I realized . . . I think he did give me something for the three days. I had no money. Then we went to work for Best Form Foundation. My sister [Riva] married three years earlier than I did. So she . . . about two years . . . then we went to school. We met boys and girls, Europeans, all survivors. Then they used to make . . . in New York they used to make dances . . . a dance, a party specially designed for refugees . . . young [people] . . . there were so many of them, young boys and girls.

**Sara:** Were, were these Jewish organizations?

**Miriam:** No, I don't know who did it. I have no idea who did it . . . [the] dances. No, I don't think so . . . maybe it was . . . a Jewish guy decided to make money . . . you have to pay when you go . . . they [cost] \$1, but you still have to pay. He realized . . . maybe the idea came from the organization . . . being there's so many young girls and boys . . . they have no place to go, no place to meet. They need a social life. Even if you work . . . it came Saturday, Sunday . . . they

wanted them to meet, so they had these dances created. Actually, at that time, I remember even college boys and girls . . . Americans used to go to dances, it was very popular. I don't know whether you know about it . . . to go to a dance. Today you meet on the Internet. Those days, they didn't meet on the Internet, they went to dances. But where do I . . . go? There were American dances and there were European dances. I once went to an American dance, without my English. There was a guy . . . comes over to me. He speaks to me, but I'm a dummy, I don't speak English. Even though they used to like me . . . they were nice, they were good. But most of the time we went European dances. We met people from Poland . . . girls, boys . . . this how my sister [Riva] met her husband . . . my twin sister . . . he survived Auschwitz. He was a survivor . . . young, good looking man . . . and they got married. Meanwhile, I was still working at Best Form, but I was . . . I got married. I was slow. I was always slower, I told you that. She got married earlier . . . I had time. I guess [if] my mother wouldn't have pushed me a little I would still be single. I was . . . never rushed for some reason, maybe because I was a little insecure, I don't know. There was so many factors working in that head. I worked it all out, finally, eventually . . . but it took time.

**Sara:** So you got married?

**Miriam:** Yes, and had Sonia. Then I had David.

**Sara:** Before, in those early years in this country, what was your emotional state? How did you feel? Were you . . . I know you said you were a shy, quiet person, but were you optimistic or did you carry something heavy in your heart because of the experience?

**Miriam:** I had . . . I took care of my mother . . . so I had mom. I helped my mother a lot. Then at night school, I met a very nice girl . . . she had survived in the partisans with her family. They didn't live too far from us. I developed a beautiful social life with them. She had a father [who] was an accountant. We had so much in common. Beautiful girl. She had a brother, she had a married sister. They all survived. They had a tremendous story to tell, but . . .

**Sara:** So what kinds of things did you do socially?

**Miriam:** Socially . . . we used to come together and laugh and sing and talk. [We] used to go to a movie . . . go to a dance, and then go to work! [I] didn't have money to go shopping . . . then had a little money. My mother would go shopping with me and buy a pair of shoes, buy a dress. We were poor.

**Sara:** But going back to my question, how did you feel inside?

**Miriam:** Inside? I wasn't happy.

**Sara:** You were not?

**Miriam:** No.

**Sara:** You said you helped your mother.

**Miriam:** Yes.

**Sara:** You supported her?

**Miriam:** Go to work . . . work very hard. I always said, "If Hitler wouldn't come to Poland, this thing wouldn't [have] happen[ed]." Then I had Sonia. I had responsibilities . . . at that point already, I married my husband, and [we had] opened a business.

**Sara:** In New York.

**Miriam:** In Brooklyn.

**Sara:** In Brooklyn.

**Miriam:** In Brooklyn, yes.

**Sara:** What kind of a business?

**Miriam:** A shoe business. We sold shoes. I went to work. I worked with him. I always worked . . . come home, took care of Sonia, took care of the house, cleaned and cooked and worked. At that point, I . . . used to go to the library with Sonia. I read books even before that with Sonia. I always had . . . whenever there's a guy or a woman came selling books, I would buy them. But even before I was married and my mother . . . they used to sell *World [Book] Encyclopedia* . . . my mother bought it. I used to sit and read it. This is how I developed my knowledge of things, by reading, by listening.

**Sara:** When you became a mother, at what point did you start sharing your story with your children?

**Miriam:** Never.

**Sara:** Why so?

**Miriam:** Nobody did. You speak to most survivors . . . those years . . . nobody shared stories.

**Sara:** How do you explain that?

**Miriam:** How do I explain this? I'll tell you. This is the way I see it, I can only take it from what . . . I went . . . I know from most of them . . . when we used to get together. . . survivors, we used to talk a little bit, not much. The people that I made friends with . . . that was the . . . my best time of my life . . . because it was a family. They were nice. They would come to my

house . . . but, very seldom . . . actually those people [who] were in the partisans. There was a, a film about the partisans . . . the Bielskis<sup>59</sup> . . .

**Sara:** Yes.

**Miriam:** . . . they were with Bielski . . . that particular family was with Bielski. I remember once I was there . . . I used to come there very often and spend time with them. They said, “This is Mr. Bielski.” To me, Mr. Bielski didn’t mean anything.

**Sara:** So you met him?

**Miriam:** I saw him for a moment. It didn’t mean anything to me until years later. What we concentrated is [on] now and the future. The past was in the back yet. The past . . . when you go through all that most survivors did . . . it is because of Spielberg, that all this came. Spielberg came quite late. When’d he come, five years ago . . . six years ago?

**Sara:** More like 10 years ago.

**Miriam:** More like 10?

**Sara:** About.

**Miriam:** All right, the way I know it . . . could be . . . all right, but up to the 10 years ago, nobody talked about it.

**Sara:** So . . .

**Miriam:** Busy, busy . . . don’t forget that after the war came another life: marriage, children. That created other struggles, other situations. Some lives went smoothly . . . not everybody’s life went smooth.

**Sara:** Sonia was your first child.

**Miriam:** First.

**Sara:** Then came your son.

**Miriam:** David came eight years later.

**Ruth:** I’m sorry . . . was your husband American or was he a survivor?

**Miriam:** Survivor.

**Ruth:** Also Polish?

**Miriam:** Eastern Poland.

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<sup>59</sup> The film is called *Defiance*, starring Daniel Craig as Tuvia Bielski. The Bielski brothers—Tuvia, Alexander, Azael (Zus) and Aron—were Jewish partisans who rescued Jews in the area of Novogrodek and Lida in German-occupied Poland. In addition to fighting the Germans as partisans the brothers sheltered and ultimately saved 1,236 Jews by sheltering and protecting them in forest camps during the war. It is not clear which Bielski brother Miriam met as at least two of them lived in the Brooklyn area: Tuvia and Zus.

**Sara:** What were your dreams for your children?

**Miriam:** Education, without my . . . with the little English I knew, I used to go with Sonia to the library at a very early age. Then [I went] with David . . . buying books, teaching them. They went to school . . . Sonia went to school. I used to help her with the little French I knew . . . practically nothing . . . but whatever I knew I did . . . with English, that wasn't . . . was a little better improving. But she . . . I never . . . I taught my children to learn by themselves. I would listen to her. If she needed something to memorize in French, she would ask me to . . . so I would . . . as little as I knew . . . I knew what she was saying. I knew whether it's right or wrong. I did it the same thing with David in Hebrew. Then David I sent to the *Yeshiva* of Flatbush.<sup>60</sup> I sent him to a private school. But Sonia went to school . . . school [was] so beautiful, the public schools. But David was born in 1962, and by the time he needed . . . he had to go to school . . . public schools were not that good any more. I was determined to send him to a private school to get it right. Sonia had a beautiful education. She learned French at an early age. Public schools were good, but not when David had to go to school. My concentration was to . . . I concentrated on educating my children . . . to educate my children.

**Sara:** What about Judaism?

**Miriam:** Me?

**Sara:** For your children. How important was Judaism?

**Miriam:** Absolutely important. Everything was for my children.

**Sara:** You came here in 1947.

**Miriam:** Yes, at the end of 1947.

**Sara:** [In] 1948 Israel gained independence.

**Miriam:** Yes.

**Sara:** What are your memories of that . . . ?

**Miriam:** I was sad. I was happy and sad.

**Sara:** In what way?

**Miriam:** In what way? That I wanted to go there, and I didn't go there . . . because I wanted to go there the worst way. I was . . . when I came to the States, I was rebellious. I gave my mother a hard time. She wanted to go here but . . . I have no regrets.

**Sara:** Did you go to a celebration?

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<sup>60</sup> The *Yeshiva* of Flatbush is a modern Orthodox private Jewish day school in Brooklyn.

**Miriam:** When the State . . . oh sure.

**Sara:** Where did you go?

**Miriam:** I don't remember . . . in 1948?

**Sara:** Was there a community event?

**Miriam:** New York is not like Atlanta. First of all, women don't go to the synagogue there . . . *Yom Kippur, Rosh Ha-Shanah, on Sukkot*<sup>61</sup> . . . Jewish holidays, we go to the synagogue. But even the Orthodox women didn't go . . . the men . . . so celebration . . . most of the celebrations were in Manhattan. We would go . . . I don't exactly remember. Don't forget, in 1948 I worked. . . I was a year in the country. But I was sad . . . the fact that this is where I wanted to go . . . I couldn't go because they wouldn't let me in. A year later, exactly, that's right.

**Sara:** So you worked in the shoe store . . . ?

**Miriam:** Yes.

**Sara:** . . . for several years . . .

**Miriam:** . . . many years . . .

**Sara:** . . . many years . . .

**Miriam:** . . . many years.

**Sara:** After that, you had another job?

**Miriam:** I always worked. I always worked.

**Sara:** What work did you do after . . . ?

**Miriam:** When I didn't work in the shoe store later on. . . [in] later years?

**Sara:** Yes.

**Miriam:** Always selling . . . I worked for a company called "Labels for Less" in Manhattan. I used to sell lady's wear . . . always in sales. I was good! In fact, after that I'm going to show you something . . . after we'll talk.

**Sara:** You moved to Atlanta . . .

**Miriam:** . . . in 1996.

**Sara:** What made you come to Atlanta?

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<sup>61</sup> One of the Harvest Festivals. It is seven days long and comes after the ingathering of the yearly harvest. It celebrates God's bounty in nature and God's protection, symbolized by the fragile booths in which the Israelites dwelt in the wilderness. During *Sukkot* Jews eat and live in such booths which gives the festival its name and character.

**Miriam:** Sonia. By the time I . . . had some surgery in New York. I don't want to talk about it. I'm a cancer survivor, you know that . . . colon. But thank God, that happened in 1990.

**Sara:** So you came . . .

**Miriam:** So I . . . as I said . . . even though we survived, and we had the [unintelligible: 1:13:55] . . . but this is another era . . . a different life, nice things, bad things, all kinds of things. Another struggle, another hopes . . . different.

**Sara:** But you worked here also.

**Miriam:** Yes. I worked there for "Labels for Less." I came to Atlanta. What made me came . . . it was very cold in New York . . . the winter of 1996 was horrible, snow up to here [Miriam indicates her neck]. I had to shovel snow. I had the house and I had to go to work . . . travel from Brooklyn to Manhattan. I traveled 1 hour and 15 minutes every day, even in the coldest of winter. I said, "That's enough." I would talk to Sonia . . . Andy would come on the phone. He said, "Good for you. I told you to come to Atlanta." So finally . . . it wasn't an easy decision . . . to uproot yourself again. I came here because of Sonia. By then David was married. David was in Maryland. So what I used to do . . . I would shuttle from Brooklyn on holidays . . . I would go to Sonia, and then I would meet David at the airport. I would come here. One year I would go to David and one day I would shuttle here. I was a frequent flyer with Delta. I kept on flying. I wanted to see my children. Until the winter of 1996 . . . was brutal. I was getting a little older. It was time to move on. I decided to move. Then I thought maybe I [would] retire because I had surgery in 1990 . . . then I just did [retire]. So I thought I'd retire . . . so I moved into this house!

**Sara:** Where you are living now.

**Miriam:** I told Sonia, "I don't drive . . . it's a problem."

<Recording temporarily stops, then resumes>

**Sara:** Miriam, for many years, several of us have been trying to record your story. You were not interested or didn't feel like doing it. What took you so long?

**Miriam:** It's not that I wasn't interested. I didn't have an easy life . . . after the war too. So, it's hard . . . it's difficult. I had another heavy surgery here in Atlanta. So it was . . . it simply was difficult. But now that I'm always alone . . . I always, I don't sleep good because it's all in my head . . . so I decided . . . it's good to get it out a little bit.

**Sara:** You have also started talking at the Breman Museum. What has your experience as a speaker been like?

**Miriam:** As a speaker there?

**Sara:** Yes.

**Miriam:** First off . . . I never thought I could speak, that was number one. That was my problem for many, many years. Maybe I lack a little confidence . . . that's what it was. I never thought . . . I didn't like my accent, number one . . . I didn't like to hear myself speak because I have that accent. So that maybe prevented me many times. I then didn't know I could speak . . . that I can. As I realized that I speak well, so the first time was the hardest one. It's very funny . . . even at the Breman . . . when I first start up . . . it's very hard for me . . . the beginning, to collect my thoughts. So I'm sort of stumble a little bit, but as I get into it just flows.

**Sara:** What feelings come with the experience?

**Miriam:** I don't know. I have certain things . . . I used to . . . Sonia said, "Mom, you always . . . every time you speak, you speak differently." That's true. I don't speak from a teleprompter . . . I speak from the heart, from my head, so it's all accumulated there.

**Sara:** Does it give you satisfaction?

**Miriam:** Yes, it does. In the beginning . . . I shiver a little bit because I'm . . . a little "scaredy cat." But once I get into it, I'm fine.

**Sara:** Are there any questions from the students . . . ?

**Miriam:** Yes.

**Sara:** . . . that you remember that . . . ?

**Miriam:** One had asked me, "Do you hate the Germans?" I told them, "Historically and psychologically, hating someone is very bad. It's not good for the hater especially. It destroys the hater, not the one that you hate. So I do not hate them. I [dis]trust them sometimes, but I don't hate them, no. Hate really . . . even historically destroys the people that hate." That was my answer to them.

**Sara:** Any other questions you remember?

**Miriam:** One had asked me, "If you . . ." . . . that was the last time . . . "if you would wish for someone to come back . . . for anyone to come back from the Holocaust . . . people that you lost, who would you wish to come back?" I told her, "All of them."

**Sara:** If you were asked to pick one person?

**Miriam:** . . . the one person would be my father, but really all of them. I lost my grandfather, my grandmother, but my father.

**Sara:** How important is Judaism to you today . . . being Jewish, or having the generations that follow you to stay Jewish?

**Miriam:** I'm proud of it. I'm really proud being Jewish . . . with all that, I'm very proud. I was always proud. There are good Jews and there are bad Jews and there are all kinds of Jews. But as a whole, it's a beautiful people.

**Sara:** Israel . . . where does Israel fit in your . . . ?

**Miriam:** Israel fits into my mind every time. I went twice to Israel. One in 1967, after . . . no, in 1968, after the 1967 [Yom Kippur] War<sup>62</sup> . . . exactly a year after, [I] went to Israel. I remember when we came . . . when we landed . . . I was trembling. I was trembling seeing for the first time in my life a red beret soldier,<sup>63</sup> a Jewish policeman, a Jew . . . a taxi driver, a Jew . . . everyone Jewish. Jews were considered . . . in Poland . . . a Jewish soldier . . . Jews were in the Polish army . . . but Jews couldn't defend themselves. Jews, if you slap them in one cheek they'll give you the other cheek . . . that wasn't anymore. I was proud. I was so proud of the state of Israel.

**Sara:** Miriam, what do you want to tell future generations based on your life and your experiences?

**Miriam:** What I want to tell the future generations . . . what my father had told me . . . my father had wrote a letter before the ghetto was liquidated.<sup>64</sup> He gave that letter to a Polish [man] . . . by the name Demski. The same family that we were [with] in Siberia . . . in fact I have that letter. In that letter, my father is saying goodbye because . . . he knew that . . . at that point . . . that we were in Siberia some place. He's saying goodbye and stating finally . . . his legacy to me and my twin sister: "Study hard, work hard, have dignity, have integrity. Whatever you do . . . you do with total honesty." That's what I would tell the young generation to do. Study hard,

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<sup>62</sup> The Yom Kippur War, 1967 (Six-Day War) was fought between June 5 and 10, 1967 and involved Israel and the neighboring states of Egypt, Jordan and Syria. Israel launched surprise air strikes against gathering Arab forces. The outcome was swift and decisive. Israel took effective control of the Gaza Strip and the Sinai Peninsula from Egypt, the West Bank and East Jerusalem from Jordan, and the Golan Heights from Syria. Israel later gave the Sinai back to Egypt.

<sup>63</sup> Israeli paratroopers and special forces units wear a red beret.

<sup>64</sup> During the war Pruzhany in Poland, now it is in Belarus. About half the town's population were Jews (4,200). The Soviets occupied Pruzhany in September 1939 and several Jewish families were deported to Siberia. The Germans occupied the town on June 23, 1941 and on August 10, 1941 they were pushed into a ghetto. By September 25 the Jews from the town and other towns in the area had all been relocated to the ghetto—about 18,000 in total. In March 1942 Jews from towns in the area were also pushed into the ghetto. There was a resistance movement in the ghetto and some Jews fled to the forest to fight with the partisans. In a census taken on November 1, 1942 there were nearly 10,000 Jews still alive in the ghetto. On January 28, 1943 the ghetto was liquidated and by the beginning of February all had been sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau in four transports. Only two hundred Jews survived.

work hard, have integrity, honesty. Never to lie, never to cheat, and never to discriminate. That's what I would tell this generation.

<Tape is interrupted, then resumes>

**Miriam:** My descendants, my grandchildren, the same thing . . . exactly the same thing as I tell all the children, and all the people.

**Ruth:** Is there something that you would like the world to understand from your experiences, or the Jewish people more as a whole?

**Miriam:** What I would like the world to understand [is] that the Jewish people are a people like any other people. They want to live, they want to laugh, they want to work, and they want to do as anybody else. They are a good people. I never understood why the non-Jewish world doesn't like the Jew. I could never understand it, never. The Jew brought so much to this world. I remember a Polish little boy . . . shortly before the war . . . [who] called me, "You dirty Jew! *Idq do Palestyny*" . . . it means "Go to Palestine." It must have been in 1938. I knew very little. I knew about Palestine, about Dr. Herzl . . . but very little. I was young. I was eight years old. I need a tissue.

<tape is interrupted, then resumes>

**Miriam:** I was eight years old! He said, "Hey, dirty Jew . . . "*Brudni Żyd idq do Palestyny*" . . . go to Palestine."

**Sara:** Now?

**Miriam:** Now they want them out of Palestine.

**Ruth:** Maybe that's the lesson. We can't win.

**Miriam:** No.

**Ruth:** Is that the lesson? No, it's not the lesson?

**Miriam:** It's unfortunate. I worked with a girl . . . she said to me . . . not Jewish . . . she said to me, "Miriam, you come from good people." I told her, "I know."

**Ruth:** Miriam, is there anything at all that we haven't asked about or any memories that come to your mind or anything else you would like . . . when I was going to get your tissue, I walked by all these beautiful pictures of your grandchildren and your children . . . what does it mean to you to have survived . . . ?

**Miriam:** To see . . . it means a lot to me . . . it means that God meant for me to survive and to prosper in my own little way and to bring a generation and that generation for another

generation. I have two generations here in the United States. I hope to God there'll be more generations.

**Ruth:** Miriam and Sara, thank you very, very much for agreeing to do this interview. It was a long time coming and totally worth every . . .

**Miriam:** It's not easy. Look, there're so many stories . . . you can't . . . you just can't do everything, you can't. I tried to condense it as much as I can . . . you can't actually express everything anyway.

**Ruth:** Thank you.

**Miriam:** Some things are very private.

<End of Disk 2>

**INTERVIEW ENDS**