

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

**MEMOIRIST:** ILONA HERCZ GOTTLIEB  
**INTERVIEWER:** JOHN KENT  
**LOCATION:** ATLANTA, GEORGIA  
**DATE:** SEPTEMBER 19, 2008

**INTERVIEW BEGINS**

<Begin Tape 1, Side 1>

**John:** OK, it's September 19, 2008. We are in Atlanta, GA. Let's start with your original name, and when and where you were born.

**Ilona:** My name is Ilona Gottlieb and I was born in Budapest<sup>1</sup>.

**John:** When?

**Ilona:** 1918.

**John:** What was your name originally?

**Ilona:** Ilona Hercz.

**John:** Who were the other people in your family?

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<sup>1</sup> Budapest is the capital of Hungary. On the eve of war the Jewish population was about 200,000. Hungary's antisemitic laws, modeled after Germany's Nuremberg Laws, hit the Jewish community hard. In 1940 Jews were sent to forced labor. The Hungarians never established a formal ghetto but did force the Jews to live together in communal houses. The Germans invaded Hungary on March 19, 1944 and immediately began deporting Jews. They started with Jews in communities outside of Budapest and in Transylvania and territories taken from Romania. When those towns were '*Judenrein*' (German: Jew free) the Germans turned to their final task: emptying Budapest of its Jews.

**Ilona:** I didn't know my father. He died before I can remember. So, my mother raised me. She was a seamstress. She worked very hard, day and night, that she could give me the necessary things. I have good memory that how she tried to raise me.

**John:** Do you know how your father passed?

**Ilona:** She never talked about it, so I don't know.

**John:** What were their names?

**Ilona:** Josef Hercz. No. Josef Gruenberger. My mother when I was eight years old she married a train conductor and his name was Hercz. He adopted me, and so from now on my name was Ilona Hercz. That's how I went to school . . . high school and finishing school.

**John:** Any brothers or sisters?

**Ilona:** No, I am the only one. And I always envied big families because I was lonely.

**John:** Describe your memories from your earlier days, like the 1920's.

**Ilona:** Well, what I remember . . . everything . . . where we lived it was cold water and I always wished that if I only can have hot water to wash myself, it would be great. We never had that, so my mother had to warm up on the stove the water. Had a big bath and put me in it, and that is how she washed me.

**John:** Was the family kind of poor, or . . .

**Ilona:** Very poor, very poor. Sometimes we didn't have much to eat. It depends how much work she had. When I grew up, Hitler had already occupied Poland and the rest of the countries. When he came to . . . I met my husband . . . I went up to my aunt in New York. I rented a place in the theater where they had an orchestra, and that's where I met my husband. We didn't have money, so we couldn't get married. His parents weren't well off so he also didn't have any . . . He played in the beginning in an orchestra, in the theater orchestra. He didn't make much money, so he told me that he can't marry me because he has to help his parents. So I rented the concession in the next . . . where they play motion pictures and where they have (vaudeville) sketches, and he played over there. I rented the place over there for a coatroom . . . for to put their coat . . . and it cost a lot of money, so I borrowed money.

**John:** What was his name?

**Ilona:** Alexander Gottlieb.

**John:** When was that when you met him, and . . .

**Ilona:** I met him before the war, and . . .

**John:** You were what, 19 or 20?

**Ilona:** I think I was 16.

**John:** Oh.

**Ilona:** We fell in love and he wanted to marry me. But he didn't want his parents to know, that is why we eloped. He wanted to help his parents, and they wouldn't take money from him if he married me. Meanwhile Hitler was coming toward Budapest, and I . . .

**John:** Maybe to go back a little bit earlier, before Hitler. You were about fifteen or sixteen when he got into power?

**Ilona:** I was 16 when I rented the wardrobe. I had two of them, one in the city and one in the outskirts of the city. I had several employees, who helped me. But his parents had no livelihood so I offered them to go into a partnership. So, one of the (unintelligible) . . . they joined me, and we both had income.

**John:** How did your mother feel about you getting married so young?

**Ilona:** My mother didn't know, I didn't tell her. I still lived at home and I didn't tell her. She knew that this is serious, and that I am going to marry him. That's what she knew. One of my cousins was the witness in the wedding, in the office, you know, where the city employees are.

**John:** Why was there such an urgency to do it and not wait a few years?

**Ilona:** Because we loved each other, we wanted to be together. That's the only way we figured it out we can do it. Then Hitler came and meanwhile he joined the girl orchestra. He was the leader of a girl orchestra. They went to Switzerland<sup>2</sup> then. My brother-in-law came to my house and told me that he (Alexander) had to go to Cuba . . . because he was going to get an

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<sup>2</sup> Swiss officials, wanting to restrict immigration, negotiated with and approved of the Germans' decision to put a red 'J' in the passports of Jews in 1938. Further, although Switzerland did allow the entry of about 25,000 Jews they also rejected more than 30,000 Jewish refugees at the border, although they knew that their return usually meant that would be sent to labor camps. The Swiss government publically apologized on March 8, 1955 for their role in marking passports.

affidavit to go to Cuba. That uncle told him he was going to marry there a rich girl. He (Alexander) didn't tell him that he was already married, so it couldn't be done. But when he (found) out he was angry at me, and he didn't send me the affidavit. So the last ship left from Hungary, and I couldn't go on. We were separated seven years. I went to Switzerland first to meet him-that was my honeymoon. Then I went back to New York. (NB: This has to be after the war when she rediscovered where he was.)

**John:** Let's go back a little bit before the war. What do you remember before Hitler and the Nazis and the whole thing started? What was normal life like in the early days?

**Ilona:** It was very frightening. I heard that this Swedish diplomat, Wallenberg came to Budapest and he was going to give out an affidavit that I didn't have to go to the concentration camp. So, I set out . . . I went to the city. I was living in the outskirts of Budapest. I set out to go to see him. So, I was walking in the inner city. I passed the Hitler *Jugend* house. I saw a guy with a bayonet and the Hitler *Jugend* uniform there. I wanted to pass by, and he stopped me. I wore the yellow star, so he knew I am Jewish. He stopped me and said, "What's the hurry? I have to take you up to the office and they have to talk to you." I thought, "If I go up, I'm never going to escape from here." So, in my luck, a truck came . . . came to the house, they delivered something. It was a Hitler *Jugend* house and they were delivering something and I sneaked out from the side of the truck when it came in . . . he was busy talking to the driver . . . and I sneaked off, and I ran. I heard a bullet pass me; he shot after me. And . . .

**John:** Were those Germans or Hungarians?

**Ilona:** No, those were Hitler *Jugend*.

**John:** Germans who came into Hungary?

**Ilona:** Yeah. They shot after me. But, I ran faster, so I escaped, and I went to see Wallenberg. I got the *Schutzpass*.

**John:** What do you remember about the conversation with him?

**Ilona:** I couldn't . . . he only spoke German. I took German in the school, so I wasn't perfect. I explained to him that I need that because I have a mother whom I have to support. He understood me, so he gave me the *Schutzpass* [protection pass]. Later on the . . .

**John:** Arrow Cross.

**Ilona:** Yeah. They tear it up. They said to me, “See how much it’s worth? That’s how much it’s worth.” They [tore] up the *Schutzpass*. So I managed to get that and I went home. Life was very hectic; we had to give everything to the Germans. I had to *schlep* my radio to the house and give in everything. That’s all I remember, and . . .

**John:** Maybe go back a little bit. During the 1930’s, before the war actually started, how did life change, after Hitler, his influence started . . .

**Ilona:** Very little to eat. I had a gold bracelet and I had friend, a Catholic friend. I asked her to keep it for me. I gave it to her. When I came back from the concentration camp, she gave it to me. That was the only thing I had.

**John:** How did the changes affect your parents throughout the 1930’s?

**Ilona:** Well, we didn’t have much to eat, and we were mostly starving.

**John:** Even before the war?

**Ilona:** Even before the war, yes. They took everybody, all the Jewish males. They took them to concentration camps.

**John:** Do you remember how the neighbors, the non-Jewish people around you, how, did they treat you . . . and how . . .

**Ilona:** Well, I knew only one friend in the house where I lived, and they were very nice to me. They tried to help me, but they couldn’t do very much because they would get into trouble, if someone found out that you help a Jew. Everybody was frightened.

**John:** Were all your friends and playmates Jewish then?

**Ilona:** Well, yes. We had very few non-Jewish friends.

**John:** So, when things were getting worse and worse, what did your parents say about it? Was there any plan, like what should we do now?

**Ilona:** My mother tried to shield me the best she could, but she couldn’t do much. We had very little to eat, and we feared for our lives. Every week something else . . . we have to do this, we have to do that. We [were] left with nothing. They took whatever was worth of something. If they wanted something they took it.

**John:** So, what did you and your husband, during the late 1930's . . . ?

**Ilona:** He went with the girl orchestra to get a job, to go to Switzerland.

**John:** When did he leave?

**Ilona:** He left before the war started, and then we didn't have a honeymoon. We just got married and he left. My brother-in-law came to me . . . and he told me you have to go down because Alex wouldn't go if he doesn't see you. He [got] the affidavit from his uncle from Cuba. He didn't want to acknowledge me or do anything with me.

**John:** Was there any option for you to go to Switzerland with him?

**Ilona:** No, it wasn't, because he left with a girl orchestra and that was a contract, and I couldn't go. But later on I went to Bern on my own, and I met him. I persuaded him that you must go because you had no life, nothing to which to look forward if you come back to Budapest. So, he went finally and I cried on the train because I felt that maybe I should have gone with him anyway. I went back and I wanted to tell him that I [wanted to] go no matter what . . . but I couldn't find him. So, I went back to Budapest and he went to Cuba.

**John:** What was he like in those days?

**Ilona:** He was young, he was vibrant, he was a very good boy. We loved each other.

**John:** What were you like?

**Ilona:** I was . . . I was presentable . . . everybody said that I looked like Verna Loy. I don't know how, but that's how they saw me. I tried to, you know, dress nice, and he had a sick mother who was in the mountains because she had diabetes and I went, when I was free, I went to see . . . I tried to make a point that I see her every week. So, I went to visit her, and we wrote to each other.

**John:** When you were in your late teens, early twenties, did you have any plans or any desires for your future? What were you expecting?

**Ilona:** After Hitler, we lost every desire to live. We were very frightened. Before they took us to Bergen-Belsen<sup>3</sup>, they came to . . . Wallenberg went to a house close to where I was living in

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<sup>3</sup> Bergen-Belsen was a concentration camp near Hanover in northwest Germany, located between the villages of Bergen and Belsen.

Budapest to negotiate for the Jews for setting them free. It didn't work out. They were all sent off, and we were standing in line, you know, they captured all the Jews. I was with my mother, and I told her that you go home, she didn't want to, she wanted to be with me. They took us to the train station, and the negotiation didn't work out.

**John:** When was that? After you had met with Wallenberg, or before?

**Ilona:** No, that's after Wallenberg.

**John:** When did you meet with him and get that paper, that pass?

**Ilona:** Oh, I met [him] before the war. The Hitler *Jugends* were there already in Budapest.

**John:** So, Wallenberg was in Budapest . . .

**Ilona:** Yeah, he was in Budapest. He was in a house nearby me, where I lived. They negotiated for hours and hours and we stood in line, and they . . . and when the negotiation failed, then they took us to the train station. Wallenberg came out, and he [spoke] to us in German, and he said, "Just be brave, you're going to ride this out, and everything's going to be alright, don't worry." But, of course, they took us anyway.

**John:** So, did you ever get into one of those safe houses ever?

**Ilona:** No, and my mother could have stayed there and she didn't want to, she wanted to come with me. So, she did come with me. They took us to Bergen-Belsen. A couple of weeks later, when we were there, they brought a girl from the other *lager* and that was, uh, how you call that girl, Anne Frank, right? They brought Anne Frank. I didn't know [that was] Anne Frank, but later I saw it on television, when I came back and everything was alright, and I thought, "That's the girl who was in my bunker. She was upstairs and I was downstairs."

**John:** Had you met her at all?

**Ilona:** Yes, I did. She was very sick and very skinny. They had another girl with her who carried her. They both came to our barrack in Bergen-Belsen. Very soon after that, they took her to the infirmary, and she never came back.

**John:** How did you . . . you and your mother went together . . .

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**Ilona:** Yes.

**John:** How did you get to Bergen-Belsen?

**Ilona:** Oh, we were tortured. When we arrived, they took us to a bunker . . . sort of like a bunker, and it was . . . it was something on the top, you know, the previous transport was on the floor. They swept them out, naked, and I thought that, "This is it." They are going to put us to death." When I . . . when they started, I thought that the gas was going to come and we would all be dead. I just said a *Shema Yisrael*, I don't know, are you Jewish? Yeah?

**John:** So, you knew about the gas chambers?

**Ilona:** Yeah, I knew because the previous transport was on the floor, naked, and they [swept] them out and they put them in a wagon, naked, and it was terrible. The worst thing in Bergen-Belsen was the smell of flesh in the air. Every day they take a wagon full of naked people to the infirmary [crematorium?]. It was terrible. We didn't know when we were going to be next. I mean . . . every minute they had the counting [roll call], we had to stand outside in the cold, and they counted us.

**John:** Do you remember when you got there approximately?

**Ilona:** No, I don't.

**John:** What season, hot, cold?

**Ilona:** It was cold.

**John:** So, was it end of 1944?

**Ilona:** Yeah, end of 1944.

**John:** How long were you and your mom still in Budapest before you were taken away?

**Ilona:** Oh, I was born there, and my mother also.

**John:** But the transports started like March or April, something, like that . . .

**Ilona:** Yeah.

**John:** So how long were you still surviving before you were taken away?

**Ilona:** Maybe six months.



**John:** Do you have any memories of those six months when you were still in the city?

**Ilona:** It's fading away already. I remember very intensely their capturing me and taking me to Bergen-Belsen, and the starving. They had one, once a day, a white carrot.

**John:** A carrot?

**Ilona:** Yeah, a white carrot, the thick one, [NB: I think she means a rutabaga, which is white or yellow and looks like a very thick carrot] and they cooked that and we got once a day, watery and inedible. The bottom was alright because the bottom had more substance. But when you were at the beginning of the line to get the food, it was like water.

**John:** Was your mother with you?

**Ilona:** Yeah, and I was worried about my mother because she lost so much weight, and I was afraid that she wasn't going to make it. So, I went to the head of the counselors [NB: *kapos*] and asked them to help my mother. She got a couple of potatoes . . . she made up a stove, and she cooked them in the camp. So, that's how she survived. She got home before I did, because the Red Cross picked her up. Somehow they took me to a Russian hospital, and I was afraid that they weren't going to let me go. So . . . in pajamas I left the hospital. I sneaked off and I went on the train, and I tried to get back where I was to find my mother. But I couldn't find her, I . . .

**John:** How did the two of you get separated?

**Ilona:** I got sick, I had high fever. They took me to a hospital that was a Russian hospital.

**John:** She couldn't stay to wait for you?

**Ilona:** She couldn't, no. She had to go back to the camp. She didn't stay with me in the hospital. So, we got separated. I cried all the time because I didn't know what happened to her. She didn't know what happened to me.

**John:** What condition were you in at liberation?

**Ilona:** I was in very good condition until the last time they decided to take us to Theresienstadt.<sup>4</sup> They gave us some injection, and after that injection – I don't know what it was

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<sup>4</sup> The Theresienstadt (Terezín) "camp-ghetto" near Prague in the present day Czech Republic was opened in late 1941 and existed until May 1945. In the course of its existence, approximately

– typhus or what, I had high fever, and I got sick, I couldn't continue. So, they took me to the hospital.

**John:** So, you were OK, sort of, in Belsen, until they took you to the other camp?

**Ilona:** No. I was on my feet. I went with them on the train. They [NB: the Allies] attacked the train, they bombed the train. We all ran out onto the field. The bomb was falling down and it was terrible, it was . . . we tried to hide, but many people got hurt. And I don't remember how we got back to the train, and they didn't take us to Theresienstadt after that. They gave up.

**John:** What other memories do you have of Belsen of those few months?

**Ilona:** Well, we had to go out every morning to gather . . . that was a special camp, but we had to work. We had to go out every morning and stay in line. They counted us . . . the counting was all the time. The weather was cold, and we were miserable, hungry, and lost.

**John;** How did the other prisoners relate to each other?

**Ilona:** We tried to help each other, but not much we could do. Like when someone gets sick, they took them to the infirmary [crematorium?], and we never saw them again. That's what happened to Anne Frank.

**John;** How much was the Jewish life still going on?

**Ilona:** Oh, in the neighboring camps, they were all [unintelligible] . . . and they *davened* and tried to survive. Without eating and with the cold weather, not many could. You had to be durable. And when I was young, I was OK, but . . .

**John:** What did Jewishness mean to you when growing up?

**Ilona:** It meant a lot. I was always going to the synagogue every High Holy Days. My mother was religious, and she believed in God. She tried to send me to Hebrew school, and . . . that's about all.

**John:** And your stepfather, what was his attitude?

**Ilona:** He was a train conductor, he was Jewish, but he didn't really keep anything.

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140,000 Jews from Germany, Austria, and about one third of the Jewish population of Bohemia and Moravia were sent to Theresienstadt.

**John:** What happened to him during that whole war period?

**Ilona:** Oh, he died.

**John:** When did he pass?

**Ilona:** He passed away when I was in high school.

**John:** So, that was back before the war, in the thirties?

**Ilona:** No . . . in the thirties, yeah.

**John:** Do you what happened or why he died, do you remember?

**Ilona:** No, I really don't. Maybe he was just too old.

**John:** It must have been horrible for your mother to lose two husbands.

**Ilona:** Yeah. Well she still worked. She was a seamstress, and she worked very hard with the sewing machine, you know.

**John;** So, after the war, did you and your mother find each other?

**Ilona:** Yeah, after the war, she was already in Budapest when I got back and I didn't believe it. When my husband came, I just couldn't believe that I see him. [Ilona produces a photo album] My daughter put this together when I was in the ninetieth birthday, that's my husband and me in the front. She got those pictures from the albums.

**John:** How did you know that the war had ended?

**Ilona:** Oh, they announced that we were free. Then we waited until the Red Cross picked us up and took us to where we lived.

**John:** How did you react when you heard that it's over now?

**Ilona:** First, I couldn't believe it because I thought that I was going to die over there. But then they took us to Budapest and I met my mother. That's all I wanted, and I heard . . . oh, my brother-in-law heard that I was in Bergen-Belsen through the Red Cross, they . . . it was in the paper. My brother-in-law . . . my husband was looking for me all over in Germany. He went to Bergen-Belsen too, but I already left there.

**John:** Was he in Switzerland the whole seven years?

**Ilona:** No, he was in the army, he was . . . Eisenhower. (phone rings in background) What was I saying?

**John:** I was asking about your husband. He was in Switzerland for a while with that orchestra, what did he do?

**Ilona:** He was in Bern. I went down to see him and I persuade[d] him to go to Cuba. We understood that he was going to send me the affidavit. But he couldn't do that because his uncle didn't want to have me, he was angry at me. He thought that he was going to marry a rich girl. It didn't work out, so he felt cheated.

**John:** Where was your husband during the war?

**Ilona:** During the war he was with the army. He was in D-Day.

**John:** Which army?

**Ilona:** The American army.

**John:** How did he get to America from Switzerland?

**Ilona:** When I went down there, I persuaded him to get the affidavit, so they sent him the train ticket and everything, his uncle. He went to Cuba from Switzerland . . . he went to Cuba. He tried to work in Cuba to send me the affidavit, he couldn't do that. He didn't make enough money. He tried to play in any orchestra, yeah. And . . .

**John:** Then he became a soldier in the . . .

**Ilona:** Anyway, we were separated for seven years. When, finally he came to Budapest in an American uniform. I couldn't believe my eyes that I really see him. It was wonderful to see him.

**John:** He was a part of the D-Day invasion?

**Ilona:** Yes. He volunteered for everything. He made friends with the secretary of Eisenhower. Whenever a plane was available he sent Gottlieb to go to look for me in Germany. So, he went all over. He even went by bicycle to a concentration camp, because my brother-in-law wrote to him in the paper . . . it was that I am in Bergen-Belsen. So, he went to Bergen-Belsen, but it was too late already, I left there.

**John:** So, how did you and your mom live when you reunited?

**Ilona:** The same way we always did . . . The very few things we had.

**John:** Your apartment was still available?

**Ilona:** Yeah. We got back the apartment, and . . . and she was working, she was sewing.

**John:** Was any help available?

**Ilona:** I don't even know. I think the Jews tried to organize the thing, but not much help. I know in the summer time they sent me to a camp. When you don't have money you rely on the organization. They had that and they sent me to a camp. Then I went to high school and finishing school. That's it.

**John:** So, your mom was working. What were you doing once you got back home?

**Ilona:** I was studying, going to school.

**John:** You continued your high school.

**Ilona:** Yeah.

**John:** Was that a Jewish or a public Hungarian school?

**Ilona:** Public school, and once a week I went to Hebrew school.

**John:** So, you finished high school?

**Ilona:** Yeah, and one year of finishing school, shorthand and typing.

**John:** When did your husband find you, finally?

**Ilona:** Much later on, when the war was over. He came to Budapest. When he got there, I just couldn't believe my eyes. What I went through . . . I thought I'd never see him again. When he came, he wanted to take me with him to America, of course. We couldn't get the papers. The Russians were everywhere. We got to the train station and they tried to help us. There were a couple of soldiers. They lent me their coat and I, laid down on the bench. They said to him, "That's a sick soldier over there." So, they didn't pursue it. [NB: I think this translates into: Ilona went to the train station with Alexander and his American soldier friends. There were Russian soldiers all over the station. They loaned her one of their coats and she laid down on a

bench. The American soldiers explained to the Russian soldiers that she was a sick American soldier, so they left her alone.]

**John:** What country were you trying to get to then?

**Ilna:** I was trying to get to America, because meanwhile . . .

**John:** I mean to get out of Hungary, where were you going immediately?

**Ilna:** First, Switzerland, then to get back to the troops where he was stationed, I don't know where. We went to Paris first, and then we went to . . . I was there for maybe two hours. I saw the Seine [River] and the *Arc de Triomphe* and that is all. Then they stationed the battalion to Germany . . . they sent it. So, I had to go with them. I ate with I don't know how many thousands of GI's. I was the only girl. (laughing)

**John:** Did your mom leave also?

**Ilna:** No, she [was] left behind. She was possessive but she wanted me to survive and have a Life, you know? So, I wrote to her, but I wanted to go with my husband . . . I wouldn't want to go back to her in Switzerland. I couldn't do it.

**John:** So, you had to leave your mom alone?

**Ilna:** Yeah, the Red Cross took care of her and took her back to Budapest. Finally the Red Cross took me to Germany . . . no, to Hungary.

**John:** So, how did you and your husband get out of Europe finally?

**Ilna:** Oh, he was in uniform and they passed me off as a sick soldier. They didn't ask for any papers . . . the Russians. He took me where his battalion was, and I remember eating with them. I was the only girl. It was weird.

**John:** Did you also have a uniform?

**Ilna:** No, but they tried to give me boots. The Americans were very good to me. They tried to dress me up, I had nothing.

**John:** So, did he have some kind of paper to allow you to go to the United States, or was . . .

**Ilna:** Yes. He got it from Eisenhower because the secretary was his friend, and she helped him to go all over in Europe, she helped him to find me. Everybody was around him when he

told his story. He said they all loved him because my brother-in-law sent packages and everybody was invited. But they couldn't find me. In the end, we [found] each other in Budapest.

**John:** What was it like back in Budapest after the war, you know, with other people around you and so on?

**Ilona:** Life was hectic, and they didn't have much to eat, but at least they had a home, they tried to put some normalcy in their life.

**John:** Do you remember how the Hungarian neighbors reacted when they saw some Jews returning?

**Ilona:** Some of them were very good, some of them were still anti-Semites, you know. I had a very good friend who saved me a couple of pieces of jewelry. Then she gave them back to me when I went back. She was a widow, her husband died, and she had a little baby.

**John:** Do you remember how you felt at that time? What did life look like to you?

**Ilona:** It wasn't normal, it was out of the ordinary, I don't know. We didn't have much to eat, and we had to fight for every penny. It was very hectic and my mother didn't have much work. That is all I remember.

**John:** So, how exactly did you get to America? Was it by boat or plane?

**Ilona:** Oh, it was wonderful . . . from Bremen I came for an army boat. Only soldiers came. And the girls, the [unintelligible] were so good to me, they tried to give me everything. I didn't have anything to put on . . . but they gave me a uniform, boots, they gave me everything.

**John:** Where did you and your husband settle when you first got here?

**Ilona:** Oh, he had a friend in the East River who was in the cleaning business. He had an apartment on Riverside Drive. He gave us an apartment over the factory. That was my first home in America. Then I had a baby . . . my son is a doctor . . . and I had a little girl, and this is my fifth great-grandchild. (laughing) Fifth!

**John:** Fifth.

**Ilona:** My granddaughter finished Harvard Law School, I'm very proud of her. Things settled down and everything would have been alright if we could have been together, you know, but

they are so far away. My granddaughter married a rabbi, that's the rabbi over there. They had their fourth baby. I have five great-grandchildren and four grandchildren.

**John:** So, how was it in the early days, building a family and living a normal life after all that you went through?

**Ilona:** It was strange. I really had to learn everything.

**John:** Like getting used to a new language and a new culture, everything.

**Ilona:** I learned English through the radio. It was hard. I should have gone to school when the kids were in school. I am not a good speller, and I should have pursued it. But I was so busy because I left with my left side paralyzed from Germany. When I escaped there wasn't any doctor, nobody treated me.

**John:** What exactly happened to your left side?

**Ilona:** I really don't know. Before we left Bergen-Belsen, they injected us with something, and after that I got sick.

**John:** And that's what caused the paralysis?

**Ilona:** Yeah, something caused it, I don't know.

**John:** They never told you what the shot was supposed to do?

**Ilona:** No, they . . . they told us because we were going to Theresienstadt. I don't know what kind of injection it was, but after that I got sick. I had high fever and I . . . that's how I got to the Russian hospital. I was worried that they were going to take me to Russia.

**John:** Who was in charge . . . who did the shot?

**Ilona:** Oh, the Germans.

**John:** So, that was still during the war, not . . .

**Ilona:** Yeah, during the war. Before they packed us up and they put us on the train.

**John:** So, the liberation was in Czechoslovakia.

**Ilona:** Somewhere in between Theresienstadt and Bergen-Belsen, on the field.



**John:** Well, talk about the good times, once you started your life. Let's get to the happy part of the story now.

**Iona:** Oh, the good time was when I, after the starvation, I went back with them to Paris, and I saw, what is that holiday, when everything is turkey . . .

**John:** Thanksgiving?

**Iona:** Thanksgiving. It was Thanksgiving. I never saw so much food! I had a wonderful dinner, or lunch, or whatever it was. It was all the food! I didn't know what to eat first! I never saw so much good stuff.

**John:** So, how did you adjust to living a relatively more affluent life in America after most of your life had been poor?

**Iona:** I love America. It's very easy to get used to, to the good things. The bad thing is that you have to fight. But, my husband worked hard. (Interruption from someone in the room) It was wonderful to see all that food. And all the soldiers were eating. I never saw such a good food! Oh, my, gosh, it was another experience.

**John:** What was going on with your mother after you had left? Let's fill in her part of the story.

**Iona:** After I left, I got pregnant, and then I went to Germany. At first in Paris, that was Thanksgiving. Then the battalion was stationed in Germany.

**John:** Did your mother ever leave to come over here?

**Iona:** Yeah. After the first baby, my mother came out. We sent her an affidavit, and she helped me because I couldn't use my left hand . . . I didn't know how I am going to manage with the baby. I had to figure it out, how to put it first on my arm and to help me that way. It was very hard. But it was a joyful experience, anyway.

**John:** So, your mother came?

**Iona:** My mother came and helped me. She bathed the baby and she helped me with everything, yeah.

**John:** The Americans around you, how did they treat you?

**Ilona:** Oh, they tried to give me everything. They tried to pamper me, they were wonderful. Yeah, they tried to help me put up a new life. After we had the apartment on Riverside Drive, then we went to live . . . they put money together, and we bought a house in Long Island, Astoria.

**John:** How many kids did you have?

**Ilona:** Two, a boy and a girl. And I had one abortion.

**John:** And the names of the kids?

**Ilona:** Dr. George Gottlieb and Janet Gottlieb. My granddaughter from my son married a rabbi and she graduated from Harvard Law School. She is a lawyer. Now that the kids have grown up, they are eight years old, the oldest, she goes back to work. Otherwise she stayed home. I was so proud of her because she's a wonderful mother.

**John:** How do you suppose that the whole war experience affected you?

**Ilona:** It affected me every way. I didn't [have] my best life. When I was healthy and fairly presentable, I spent it alone. I went to visit my mother-in-law in the mountains for her diabetes. That was my life and I didn't know any other. When I came out with one hand, I had a lot of difficulties. I couldn't function right.

**John:** What kind of treatment was done over the years to try to improve it?

**Ilona:** Oh, they tried to help me. I've always gone to doctors, always. My son is one-in-a-million, he really takes good care of me and he gets the best doctors for me. Nobody can help me.

**John:** Did they ever figure out what exactly was injected?

**Ilona:** Injection? No, they never did.

(Inaudible discussion on the side about German archives)

**John:** That's true. They might be able to find out what that was, if that was an inoculation or . . .

**Ilona:** Maybe they can help me, I don't know.

**John:** How have you passed on this whole story to your children?

**Ilona:** I didn't, that is why I contacted Anna because I want them to know. It shouldn't go without notice, you know. I want them to know, because they say history can repeat itself. I hope not because that was a horrible thing.

**John:** So, you hadn't told them much over the years?

**Ilona:** No, I didn't tell anybody, no. My daughter wanted to write my story when she was in college. She was working all the time. When she was five years old, she took me to a corner furrier and I admired that jacket over there. She said to me, "Do you like it Mommy?" I said "Yes." She said "When I work, I buy it for you." And she did.

**John:** Did you associate with other immigrant survivors after you came here?

**Ilona:** Not really, it made me nervous. They have every Monday a meeting, coffee and I don't know what. I never go.

**John:** I mean, back in New York, or . . .

**Ilona:** No, over here.

**John:** I mean, during the late forties and fifties when you were building your life did you . . .

**Ilona:** No, I was much too busy, you know. With one hand and taking care of a family, I cooked every day. No, it was hard. Now I can't do anything. I need help, so I have a girl for two hours. I can't put on my shoes. My feet are all frostbitten from the German lineup. We always lined up, they always counted us. I didn't have the proper shoes or the proper dress, so it was terrible.

**John:** Did you ever go back to Europe again?

**Ilona:** I went back, when did I go back? Yeah, I went back with my husband, yeah.

**John:** Where?

**Ilona:** Budapest. I had a couple of cousins there.

**John:** So, what was it like to walk those streets again?

**Ilona:** Strange. The Hungarians are very . . . they're not good citizens. When the Germans came in, they were Germans. When the Russians came in, they were Russians. They weren't

much help. You found maybe one or two persons who were willing to help you, but you can't make friends. I think that's the story of the Jewish life.

**John:** How did the war affect your mother?

**Ilona:** Oh, she was alright. She came out, she helped me, and she was wonderful. Without her I couldn't have two kids.

**John:** Did it change your attitude about Jewishness or what it meant to you?

**Ilona:** Yeah, I was bitter.

**John:** Like how or why?

**Ilona:** Because I had to go through all this. The best years of my life, seven years I was alone. Seven years is a very long time to be alone.

**John:** You didn't understand why it was happening?

**Ilona:** No, I [unintelligible]. He went to work, and he couldn't get a job over here. The union didn't want to accept him. You had to know people, and he didn't. You need connections.

**John:** Are you angry more at the Germans or Hungarians, or who? Is there anger?

**Ilona:** Yeah, there is anger. I decided during the years, I had so much fun with the kids, and I'm so proud of them. They're all college graduates, they're good kids. They didn't smoke, didn't party. My son, when he was growing up, he needed money to take out a girl, he didn't have it. So, he went to work for a butcher, and he delivered meat, got tips and that's how he took out girls, yeah.

**John:** When the Holocaust started becoming a more public topic, when movies and documentaries and stuff started happening, what was that like for you? It was sort of private for 20 or 30 years.

**Ilona:** It was frightening. Every day they came out with something, and the loudspeaker, you know, always announced that this is what the Jews must do or must not do.

**John:** I mean here, in the seventies and eighties, when all the documentaries started coming out, and the whole issue of survivors became more known.

**Ilona:** I always wanted to write a book. I always wanted my life story, for the legacy of my grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Now I am very grateful, that I can do it.

**John:** Had you done any other . . .

**Ilona:** No, I never did anything. I told you, my daughter wanted to write my story, and she said to me, that is going to be a bestseller.

**John:** When the Spielberg interviews were being done ten or fifteen years ago . . .

**Ilona:** Oh, they didn't let me do it. My daughter said, "Mom, don't do it. I'll do it for you." But I get tired of waiting, you know?

**John:** Your kids didn't want you to do it?

**Ilona:** My daughter wanted to do it herself.

**John:** You've forgotten a few details?

**Ilona:** I've forgotten a lot already.

**John:** Well think now, finally we're doing this: Are there any other memories, or other images that come back to you?

**Ilona:** They will come at night when I go to sleep. If I have any, I'll call you. Leave your number, OK?

**John:** It'll be good to get it down, so your kids and grandkids can hear about it.

**Ilona:** Right, right.

**John:** Do you have nightmares about the past?

**Ilona:** Yes, I do.

**John:** Like what? What kind of memories are there?

**Ilona:** A German hit me when I tried to steal a couple of apples. That was after the war. We stayed somewhere and we were hungry. I was elected to go to the garden to steal some apples. The German came out and beat me up.

**John:** What other moments of the greatest danger happened, when you were the closest being killed?

**Ilona:** That's when we were in the bunker, that was the closest and I said *Shema Yisrael*. Instead of the gas, water came down. I believe in God, that God helped me because the previous time when we went there, we saw all the naked bodies on the floor. They swept them out and put them in the bag and took them to the incinerator. The smell was terrible.

**John:** Can you describe the camp a little bit more? What do you remember about what it looked like, the set up . . .

**Ilona:** We didn't have anything to eat, everybody was dreaming of food. At night one started to say, "Do you remember this dish? How did we do this?" That was torturing.

**John:** Were the women and men kept in separate parts of the camp?

**Ilona:** No.

**John:** Could you talk to each other?

**Ilona:** Yes. Every minute there was a lineup. We had to stay outside. My feet are all frostbitten. It is something you really don't want to remember. They're asking me here, how did I get like that? I don't like to talk about it . . . it is torture for me. I'd like to forget about it.

**John:** What would you hope your kids and grandkids learn from all this?

**Ilona:** I hope that they don't have to go through what I went through, mainly because they say history repeats itself. That is what I hope.

**John:** What personal qualities do you suppose helped you get through that? What kept you going?

**Ilona:** Well, one thing, I wanted to be with my husband. That kept me alive and kept me going too.

**John:** Is there anything else you'd want to add for right now? Anything else we can talk about.

**Ilona:** No, I don't think so.

**John:** Well, thank you for being willing to go through all that horrible history.

**Iona:** Thank you for coming out. I really appreciate it. I need this for my granddaughter and great-grandchild. I want them to know what could happen, because they always say history repeats itself. I want them to be ready for it. I wasn't

<End of interview>

Cuba Family Archives

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