

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

MEMOIRIST: IRENE HERSKOWITZ YABROW
INTERVIEWERS: JOHN KENT
RUTH EINSTEIN
LOCATION: ATLANTA, GEORGIA
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INTERVIEW BEGINS

< Begin Disk 1 >

Ruth: Today is January 7, 2011. We are here in the apartment of Irene Yabrow in Marietta, Georgia. John Kent is the interviewer. This is an interview for the Esther and Herbert Taylor Oral History Project of The William Breman Jewish Heritage and Holocaust Museum. Thank you both for being here today. Let this commence.

John: Let's start with what your original name was at birth and where and when [you were born].

Irene: It was Irka Herskowitz. [I was born in] 1935 [in] Lodz, Poland.¹

John: Spell your name.

Irene: H-E-R-S-K-O-W-I-T-Z . . . I-R-K-A

John: Who were the people in your immediate family that you grew up with?

Irene: I grew up with my mother and father, grandma and grandpa then.

John: And their names?

Irene: Henry—**Heniek** really—and **Karola** was my mother. My grandma was Leah and my grandpa was **Zedye ben Zion**. I had a sister named Adele. She was older than me by five years.

John: What memories do you have as a young girl?

Irene: My father was a prominent hairdresser. We had our own home. We had maids. We had even toilet facilities. We were very prominent people. I remember when the Germans came . . . they took us out of our home.² We went into the Lodz ghetto.³ My father kept the hairdressing

¹ Lodz [Polish: Łódź] was a large textile manufacturing city and Jewish cultural center about 75 miles from Warsaw, Poland.

² The Germans invaded Poland on September 1, 1939. The Germans occupied Lodz on September 8, 1939 and renamed it "Litzmannstadt."

³ On December 10, 1939, a ghetto was established in Lodz. The living conditions in the ghetto, including food rations, were very poor because the ghetto was hermetically sealed. The mortality rate was very high. Waves of Jews

salon. For a while we worked in the salon, my sister and I. We were allowed to go back and forth. We stayed for a while at the ghetto. In 1940, we escaped to Russia [Russian-occupied Eastern Poland]. My father then went into the Polish army.⁴ My mother, my aunt, my grandma, my aunt's three children, and her husband, we all went to Russia over the border. Whoever went was fine. My grandpa, my aunts, my first cousins . . . except for my uncle—he survived—everybody else was killed in the concentration camps.

John: What memories do you have of Lodz and the ghetto during the period?

Irene: The only memories that I have . . . I was about four or five years old . . . was the soldiers there. We went there . . . it wasn't used to having the maid give us breakfast and having the luxury and being scared. My mother was a very beautiful woman and even one of the soldiers told her, "Get out of here. Take your kids and run." She listened. Whoever did not listen to her died. Most of us that did leave for Russia survived.

John: Do you remember the feeling in the air for you as a little kid?

Irene: It wasn't pleasant because the men were being beaten up. The kids were left alone and we always used to hide most of the time. Somehow they let us—my sister and I and my mom—go to the beauty parlor, to the hair dressing salon, to help out because my father still worked there and the soldiers used to come in. [He] owned it but then they took everything away when we ran away.

John: What do you remember about how you were all able to actually leave?

Irene: I remember in the middle of the . . . when we were outside, my mother said, "Get up. Be quiet." We all just left and went over the border into Russia. Once we got there, they [the Russians] shipped us to Siberia.⁵

from the surrounding area and Western Europe were pushed into the Lodz ghetto making the total number of Jews who passed through it at over 200,000. Deportations began in December 1942 and, by August 1944, the ghetto had been completely liquidated.

⁴ After the German invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, the Soviet Union reestablished diplomatic relations with the Polish government-in-exile. In July 1941, they agreed to grant amnesty to many of the Polish citizens (including Jews) who had reached the interior of the Soviet Union and were interned in Soviet prisons and labor camps. The Soviet Union also agreed to the formation of a Polish Army under a commander appointed by the Polish government-in-exile. Thousands of Jews from the masses of Polish refugees, deportees, and prisoners of war joined the Polish Army under General Wladyslaw Anders.

⁵ Siberia is an extensive geographical region in Russia that extends eastward to become what is often referred to as 'North Asia.' It is a sparsely populated area with long, cold winters. Siberia has been a part of Russia since the seventeenth century. The majority of Soviet forced labor camps (Gulags) in the 1930's through 1950's were in remote areas of northeastern Siberia. The labor camps were used as a form of political repression and prisoners were often worked to death. In 1940 (one year before the Germans commenced their program of extermination), Soviet ruler Joseph Stalin ordered the deportation of at least 200,000 Polish Jews—including thousands of Jewish refugees

John: How far was Lodz from the safe border?⁶

Irene: That I don't know, but nothing is that far apart there. I know it took us days to get out of Lodz. Once you got out of Lodz, you didn't have that problem. The Germans were not yet that far in.

John: Do you know if you had to wear any identification, yellow stars, or passports?

Irene: No, we did not wear yellow stars. We took everything off. That, I remember. We did not.

John: Nobody would have known who you were if you had got stopped?

Irene: No.

John: Was the ghetto sealed up?

Irene: It was closed. You could not come and go. You were allowed to come in and out but you were not [able to say], "I don't feel like staying here." You were not allowed to just [say], "Okay, I'm leaving."

John: They kept track of who was going to work and coming back?

Irene: Yes.

John: They would know right away that your family didn't come home?

Irene: Yes.

John: What do you remember about the trip away from there then?

Irene: Nothing. Most the time we were running, getting out, and going fast. There were really a bunch of us. Once we got into Russia, the Russians picked us up. Then they took us into Siberia to a place where they gave us housing. I remember mom had to work. Mom went to

who had fled from German-occupied Poland—from Russian-occupied Eastern Poland. They were sent to Siberia, central Asia, and other locations deep in the interior of the Soviet Union. Many died in appalling conditions in Siberian Gulags, where they were forced to work excessive hours in extreme cold and little food. Those Polish Jews who were not deported by the Russians were not spared misfortune, however, as the majority were killed after the Germans invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941.

⁶ The "safe border" refers to the demarcation line between German- and Russian-occupied Poland. Both the Russian and German armies invaded Poland in September 1939. On September 28, Germany and the Soviet Union reached an agreement partitioning Poland and outlining their zones of occupation. A demarcation line for the partition of German- and Russian-occupied Poland was established along the Bug River, between Krakow and Lvov. It is estimated that the number of refugees who crossed from the German-occupied part of Poland to the areas annexed by the Soviet Union totaled about 300,000. The Russians left the border freely open to traffic until the end of October 1939. From then until the end of 1939 a small number of persons still crossed the border. After that, it was completely sealed. Some refugees still attempted to sneak across the heavily guarded border, often at great danger. Those caught trying to cross between occupation zones or trying to flee without papers faced arrest and arbitrary violence at the hands of both Russian and German border guards. The demarcation line would remain in effect until June 22, 1941, when the Germans invaded the Soviet Union in a military campaign codenamed Operation "Barbarossa."

work. My sister went to a . . . because she was older . . . like an orphanage. She stayed in the orphanage and I stayed with my mother and then . . .

John: What was your dad doing?

Irene: He was in the Polish Army. He was gone. My father was gone.

John: Do you remember, did he talk to you all about what he was going to do and why?

Irene: No, he joined the army. He and my two uncles joined the army, the Polish Army. They were fighting. I did not see my father until 1945 in Germany. I'm going ahead. In Russia, my mom . . . as I said, she was gorgeous . . . and the man abused her, not abused her. She had a man and then I had a [half-]sister and a [half-]brother. They are six years younger than me but it wasn't from my father. I wound up in the orphanage too because they want my mother to work more hours. They didn't want her to have three kids with her. I wasn't treated right and my uncle came. My other uncle came and took me out because it was really bad in the orphanage. Then I stayed with my mother.

John: How did your mom explain to you that she has a new husband or . . .

Irene: No husband . . .

John: . . . or a new partner?

Irene: When you were that young you didn't realize it. You have a sister and brother. They were born a year and a half . . . a year after my father . . . I was born in 1935, so my sister and brother [were] five years, six years younger . . . so you figure that . . . you don't know.

John: Was that a Russian person or another . . .

Irene: It was a Russian person. That's why, when you see a picture of my sister and brother, they look totally different then we do in the family, but I love them both.

John: You and your first sister were in the same orphanage or different ones?

Irene: Same orphanage. She was a dancer and entertainer. She's gorgeous. She stayed there. Then from there, we went to Shymkent⁷ and Tashkent.⁸ Now it's [called] something else. We were put on cattle cars and sent there to work in the coalmines. It's now Asia, right on the Mongolian/Asia boarder. That I remember, everything there. We lived in little huts.

⁷ Shymkent, known until 1993 as Chimkent, is the capital city of the South Kazakhstan Region, the most densely populated region in present-day Kazakhstan. Following the Russian Empire's conquest of the area in 1864, Shymkent was a city of trade between nomadic Turks and sedentary Turks. There was a gulag (forced labor camp) located near Shymkent, and many Russian-speaking people came to the area via imprisonment.

⁸ Tashkent is the capital and largest city of Uzbekistan. In 1865 it was conquered by the Russian Empire and witnessed major growth and demographic changes due to forced deportations from throughout the Soviet Union. It is located in a major coal basin and is approximately 130 kilometers (80 miles) south of Shymkent, Kazakhstan.

John: What kind of work exactly was going on there?

Irene: Coal mines.

John: And in Siberia, before you left?

Irene: There my mother did all kinds of work. I did not work in Siberia. When we got from Siberia to . . . they shipped us because there was no food there. They shipped all the Jews really out of Siberia further inland. They were afraid. The Russians were not mean to us, don't get me wrong. They shipped us to . . . it's called Tashkent and Shymkent. Now it's . . . what is it called now? I forgot, but I can look it up. There we lived in those huts like what they live now in Egypt. When I was in Egypt recently it reminded me. [They were] made out of clay with the straw on top. There was my grandma, my mother, my sister and brother, my other sister, and my aunt with her three kids. I think the whole room was a quarter size of this [room where the interview is taking place] and that [was] with the dogs and cats. That's what we ate.

John: What were you doing all day?

Irene: At that age, I was seven years old. We worked in the coalmines. I helped my mother in the coalmines. We had to work.

John: What were you doing?

Irene: Pulling out the coal onto this and whatever.

John: At seven years old?

Irene: Until 1945 we did that there. But we survived.

John: You spent four or five years over there?

Irene: Three-and-a-half, almost four years over there.

John: Was that an actual city or were you out in the countryside?

Irene: Shymkent, Tashkent . . . what is it called now? But if you look it up . . . but since all this change was . . . That's what it was: Tashkent and Shymkent. First we went to Tashkent or Shymkent . . . It's coalmines. That's near Mongolia. Then when the war was over, again we were put on cattle cars and brought back to Poland. When we got back to Poland—my mother, and again my grandma was always with us, and my aunt, and her three kids . . . because my father and my uncle were in the army. [When] we got back to Poland, there was absolutely nothing there. Our beauty parlor was gone. Our home was gone. Everything was gone.

John: Do you know if your mom expected to meet with your father again or did she think he might have died in the war?

Irene: No. Then we found out through . . . somehow the American Consulate [knew] that my father is alive and in Germany. It wasn't that easy. We tried to get from Poland to Germany but we were not allowed to. Again, my mother—smart cookie—got us through the . . .

John: The check point?

Irene: . . . the borders. We came back into Germany to a displaced person [camp] where the Americans . . . They sent us to Lampertheim [Germany].⁹ That was near Mannheim [Germany].¹⁰ That's where they found out my father was there. When my mother came with us to Lampertheim—which is a two-hour train ride to Mannheim—my father thought that we were dead and we thought my father was dead. He had very bad TB [tuberculosis] and he was sick.¹¹ He was in a sanitarium. He met a German woman and they lived [together] . . . When my mother came back, he didn't want to live with her.

John: Did your mom's second partner go with you?

Irene: No. Whoever my mom had the kids with, we don't know. He probably just raped her or had sex with her. Hello. Goodbye. It wasn't a love affair. That was in Siberia.

John: When they [your mom and dad] meet . . .

Irene: That was a lot of problems. There was this woman; her name was **Eva Balkler**. It is amazing what you remember. My mother took me with her to his house. She says, "What are you going to do? Are you going to support the kids or not?" She never told him that the kids, my sister and brother, were not his. My father never knew. He thought they were his real children . . . his children. She did not do a nice thing. She picked up a big vase and hit him over the head. He wound up in the hospital. My mom was a nice mom, but not a nice mom. That was the story and then they . . .

⁹ Lampertheim was a small Jewish displaced persons (DP) camp that was located in a small town on the bank of Rhine between Mannheim and Darmstadt in the Frankfurt District of the American occupational zone. It opened on December 15, 1945, primarily to provide additional space for refugees from the over-crowded Zeilsheim DP camp. At its peak in 1946-47, Lampertheim housed 1200 Jewish DPs, mainly from Poland. Lampertheim closed on May 24, 1949. In comparison with other camps, the inhabitants of Lampertheim were relatively well off. They lived in requisitioned private houses in the village. The camp organized its own civic administration, with thirty unarmed policemen and uniformed fire service. There was a post office, which operated as a tracing bureau for missing relatives of the camp's community. Doctors, who were at the same time DPs and residents of the center, operated the health center in the camp. The camp had a strong orthodox community and maintained a developed religious life, with a synagogue located in a converted private house, a kosher kitchen, and a *Talmud Torah* (religious elementary school). There was also a newspaper, a Hebrew library, culture house, a theatre group and a small orchestra. The camp also ran a secular elementary school and a kindergarten. A summer camp was organized for the children during the holidays.

¹⁰ Mannheim is a city in the southwestern part of Germany.

¹¹ Tuberculosis is a potentially fatal contagious disease that mainly affects the lungs. It can usually be cured with antibiotics.

John: What was it like for you to see your father again after half a lifetime?

Irene: We didn't know [him]. It was my father. My mother was with us all our life and she sacrificed a lot; so, you stick up for your mother. Then we went back and forth in Germany. That was the misery of my whole life.

John: Tell us . . .

Irene: That's when I did black marketing so we could eat. We were living in Lampertheim. My sister got married to a concentration [camp] survivor—a nice guy—and they left for France. Then, they came back from France. No. They got married and stayed. My sister stayed for a while. I stayed with my mother. Then I did black marketing and I met somebody. We were both on the same train and we jumped off. We did not want to get arrested. That was . . . his name was Willy. When my mom came to the [police] station to get me out, I said, "Mom, he helped me off the train. Why don't you help him get out?" and they met. That was the whole story. We had to . . . the American[s] closed the whole [camp at] Lampertheim. We were sent to Ulm [Germany].¹² My mother and I and the twins were sent to Ulm. My sister already was married so she didn't go. She went to Paris [France] with her new husband because he had family there.

John: Do you remember his name?

Irene: **Sam Besserman**, my brother-in-law. He just passed away four years ago. [He was a] great man. We went to the concentration . . . we went to Ulm. In Ulm, my mother already knew Willy. She says, "I'm going to leave you here. You'll be safe with the two kids." I was 11 years, 12 years old and the twins were six years old because there is a six year difference. This was a displaced person [camp] while we were waiting for quota to come to the United States.¹³ My mom went to Lampertheim, to [unintelligible, 19:00 sounds like "Valtov," maybe Voltho] Lampertheim. She stayed with Willy then. He was a wonderful man. I can say that. He stayed there. They both stayed. I was terribly abused by two Jewish . . . our concentration camp survivors. They said, "If you say anything, we are going to kill your sister and brother." So I did

¹² Ulm is a city in southwestern Germany on the Danube River. Immediately after World War II, it was in the American zone of Germany and housed a series of Displaced Persons camps.

¹³ The 1924 Johnson-Reed Act had cut immigration quotas to admit fewer than 6,000 Polish immigrants into the United States per year. From 1939 to 1945, the quota for Polish immigrants admitted into the U.S. had increased to 15,000 per year. Immigration restrictions were still in effect at the end of the war until President Harry S. Truman issued an executive order, the "Truman Directive," on December 22, 1945. It required that existing immigration quotas be designated for displaced persons (DPs). While overall immigration into the United States did not increase, more DPs were admitted than before. About 22,950 DPs, of whom two-thirds were Jewish, entered the United States between December 22, 1945 and 1947 under provisions of the Truman Directive. The Polish quota between 1945 and 1948 was 17,000 a year. Congressional action to increase immigration quotas did not come until 1948.

not say anything. You went through a lot. That is when you were raped and abused for almost a year. I'm sorry. I never said . . .

Then my sister came to say goodbye because she got the quota to come to the United States with her son and Sam, her husband. When she came I said, "Please get me out of here. They are killing me." She made my mother take me back where she was with Willy. Willy was very sweet to us—to me and the twins—and we stayed there. He had a brother that was a real Nazi. He was, his younger brother. He started beating me up for no reason because I didn't want to listen to him. I was very defiant. I was on my own all the time. I did everything on my own. I was very independent, until this day. I never told Willy because I didn't want to upset him. That's when my father took over. He met a wonderful woman. I used to work for her in Mannheim. I used to go to them every morning and learned how to sew clothes. She was a dressmaker. Then after a while, our quota came and we came to the United States.

John: Just to go back a little bit to the DP camp. Was anybody in charge there taking care of the kids?

Irene: The Americans . . . no, nobody. I was taking care of the kids.

John: You were 11 or 12 years old?

Irene: Twelve years old. No, there was no such thing. We all lived in a big room like this, with curtains . . . divided. I remember the little butter or the little food we had we used to put it on the window to keep it cool. No, there were no . . . The Americans were in charge but they never came [to check on us]. They made sure we had food and things.

John: There weren't nurses or anybody monitoring things?

Irene: No, nobody, not in 1945 and 1946. No, not in the DP camp. It was like barracks we lived in.

John: Do you know anything about those two guys who attacked you?

Irene: No. It's just like you wanted to get it out of your mind. One was . . . I even forgot their names. I can't think of their names. Maybe if I think hard. There were two men and . . .

John: How old were they?

Irene: They must have been early thirties. They were not young because otherwise they would have been dead in the concentration camp, and they were not in their sixties. They'd be dead, too.

John: Do you remember what country they were from?

Irene: They were Polish. They were from Warsaw [Poland].¹⁴ That I remember. But I don't know their name[s] and it took maybe two months, three months. They came in later. I was there for at least six months; but they came in a little later. They came in just before . . . that's when I came. I said to myself, "I can't. Don't do it." We lived there for a year . . . six months, eight months . . .

John: Is there anything more you are willing to say about that? I mean, I don't want to push you that much.

Irene: No. That was it. Whenever they felt like it because . . . Most of them were couples there, or husbands and wives with their kids. But I was the only one. We were there—my mother, me, and the kids—but, she left to go back to her boyfriend.

John: How was there any privacy in a place like that? How could any . . .

Irene: There was just curtains. People didn't care. You know people.

John: You weren't allowed to scream?

Irene: No, no screaming, no nothing. They knew when to do it. But they didn't . . . it wasn't like every night, every day, or whatever. Somehow they knew. One stayed out. One stayed in. It was never together. Remember those people went to work, too. We all were waiting for our quota to get to the United States. It was freedom. There was food. It was Ulm. I don't know if you know . . .

John: Were there any adults there who befriended you or tried to help you along?

Irene: No. It was like everybody is on their own. Everybody was afraid of each other. Some were let right out of concentration camps. Some were coming from like we came. Nobody trusted anybody. You left something out, you were afraid it was going to be gone in an hour.

John: If they see a young girl crying nobody would come to you?

Irene: No. Everybody mind[ed] their own business. I was 11, 12, or 13. Yes, about 12 or 13.

John: How did you get through that? How did you stay strong if nobody was backing you up?

Irene: You just stay. You just stay and you survive. I think that was the worst. The hunger in Russia, the hunger there . . . but after the war, then going back to Germany, back to Mannheim, and my mother living with her boyfriend. He was like . . . I was just with my stepfather. He was with my mother for 51 years. He was 20 years younger than my mother when they got married. I just went there. I did his house again. Helped him out. He says, "Why didn't you tell me"—

¹⁴ Warsaw is the capital and largest city in Poland, located on the Vistula River in east-central Poland.

because we were even talking—“about what Werner did to you?” I said, “Willy, what good would it have done? Where would we have gone? We had to be on the run again?” The years are messed up on me a little now.

John: How exactly did that phase of the DP camp end?

Irene: The DP camp that my sister came and we went back to my stepfather, Willy’s house—that’s what I call [him]—in [\[unintelligible, 27:08 sounds again like “Valtov,” maybe Voltho\]](#). We waited there until 1945 to come to this country. We lived there for three years.

John: 1945?

Irene: No, I’m sorry 1951. I’m sorry. From 1947 [or] 1948 . . . to 1951 I lived there, in Germany.

John: Did you have any contact with your original father at all?

Irene: Yes. I was the only one who went back to Germany and buried him. My sister, my brother . . . nobody else.

John: When was that?

Irene: Six, eight years ago.

John: You kept in touch for 50 years?

Irene: He came to this country. He did not like it. He married a German woman. She converted to Judaism. She was wonderful—**Johanna**. She was good for my father. But, my father was a selfish man, too. After he made a little money, he came to this country for visits and brought gifts to everybody, which was fun. He came [and] stayed here a while. He didn’t like this country. He went back to Germany. When he got very sick, I started going there. I vowed never to go back to Germany and I did not go back. Everyone went on trips to Germany. I never went back to Europe till he got really, really sick. I put him in a home in Frankfurt [Germany].¹⁵ I promised him I would be there four [or] five times a year. I flew there four or five times a year. Then they called me and says, “Pop doesn’t feel good.” I went and stayed four weeks in the nursing home. He died in my arms. I buried him and that was the end of Germany. I will never step foot there again.

John: You mentioned Jewishness a couple minutes ago. How was Jewishness a part of your life growing up?

¹⁵ Frankfurt is a central German city on the Main River.

Irene: My mother and father never believed in religion, in Jewishness or anything. When I did marry, I married a Jewish man. We always celebrated holidays—all the whole holidays. My kids went to Hebrew school. As a matter of fact, my two boys went to private Hebrew school. I was never kosher.¹⁶ I believe. I'm not one to go to the temple and pray, but I believe. I'm Jewish and that's it. I will not preach, "You have to be Jewish." You do what you want, but I am Jewish all the way.

John: During the period in Siberia and then later on, close to where the coalmines were, was there any kind of Jewish cultural life or anything like that?

Irene: No, nothing.

John: Just survival?

Irene: Just survival. We were happy if we survived [and] if we got food. My grandmother says, "Eat it. It's good." Then when we found out we ate a dog. That was not so good, but we ate it.

John: In 1951, you finally got the quota approved?

Irene: I came here January 13, 1951. It's gonna be . . .

John: How did you come across?

Irene: On the *SS Sturgis* an American . . . troop boats.¹⁷

John: It was your mom and two siblings, three siblings?

Irene: The three of us came over, just the three of us. Then we lived . . .

John: Then your sister stayed behind in France?

Irene: No, my sister came ahead of us to [the] United States. We came here. Right away we had an apartment because my grandmother was here already and my sister was here.

John: Where exactly?

Irene: Brooklyn [New York], [on] Flushing Ave.¹⁸ We lived here. My mother then went back and left me again with the twins. This time she went back and married Willy and brought . . .

¹⁶ Kosher is the set of Jewish dietary laws that dictate how food is prepared or served and which kinds of foods or animals can be eaten.

¹⁷ The *USS General S. D. Sturgis* was a transport ship built for the United States Navy in World War II. In 1946, she was transferred to the U.S. Army. Between 1946 and 1951, the ship made 21 voyages between Germany and the U.S. with displaced persons from Europe. In addition to its many trips to the U.S. with displaced persons, General S. D. Sturgis also delivered refugees to Australia, Argentina, Canada, Brazil, and Venezuela.

¹⁸ Brooklyn is one of the five boroughs of New York City, in the state of New York, in the United States. It sits on the western end of Long Island and is connected to Manhattan by the iconic Brooklyn Bridge. Since the late nineteenth century, Brooklyn has been home to a significant percentage of New York City's Jewish population. In 1950, the Jewish population of Brooklyn was 950,000.

then he came to this country. The kids lived with Willy and I lived with my sister, Adele, and Sam, my brother-in-law. They are great people. They're really good people. Then I got married to an American. I met an American man and we got married and had five kids.

John: How did you meet him? What was he like?

Irene: I met his sister on a blind date. She says, "I have a brother. Would you like to meet him?" and I met him.

John: His name?

Irene: Eddie. Ed.

John: What was he like?

Irene: He was a sales man. [He was] very nice, very Americanized. That's what I wanted. We got married.

John: What year?

Irene: Oh, my G-d . . .

John: How old were you?

Irene: I was just 18. I had a kid a year later.

John: About 1953?

Irene: Yes. Those dates . . . I don't even have pictures. I am not a picture collector or date rememberer. Then I had five kids with him.

John: All their names . . .

Irene: The oldest is Anita. Then came Marty, Phillip, Simone, and Alicia. I have nine grandchildren and they're wonderful. Except some of them you want to take their heads and . . . but grandma can't say much.

John: What are some of your memories of the early days in Brooklyn and getting used to the United States? Did you know any English at all yet at that point?

Irene: No. I came to this country in January thirteenth. I was allowed to go to school just for less than six weeks. When I turned 16, I had to go to work.

John: What languages did you know at that point?

Irene: I knew Polish and German. The whole thing . . . I never stepped one day in my life into a school. I've never been in school at all. That's my regret. Whatever you see here, whatever I have, I earned it myself. I educated my kids almost all by myself. I read like crazy, but I never

learned to write or spell . . . it's just like a block. I could have any jobs in the world if I knew how to write.

John: Talk about that first job and continuing on from there.

Irene: My first job here in the United States was behind the counter, where we used to live, as a coffee [house] . . . in the luncheonette in Brooklyn, on Flushing Ave. From there I went and worked in a brazier factory packing braziers. I saved up enough money and I went to beauty culture school. I worked as a hairdresser. Then I got married. I still always worked because my husband never made enough money and I wanted better things for my kids. I never worked and left the kids. I always had the kids in the house and worked with them. Then I opened [a] day camp in New York, upstate New York. My husband was a schoolteacher and he worked in a day camp for the summer. With five kids, we couldn't afford [it] on a teacher's salary. When I got divorced from him, I took over the day camp. That's when I was a very successful businessperson, not to sell. We got divorced, but we are very friendly. He is married to a wonderful woman and we've no hard feelings or that kind of a thing.

John: During those early years in New York, did you have much contact with other immigrants and survivors and that whole subculture . . . ?

Irene: No.

John: . . . because Brooklyn would have had an awful lot of them.

Irene: My sister, she goes to all these Holocaust survivor's meetings and does all this. I'll be honest with you, I don't want to remember all those things. I want to forget. I want to go to a football game, or basketball game, or baseball game and enjoy it and take my grandchildren than go to a . . . I know we all suffered. I'd rather do volunteer work. Whatever I have, I always give it to somebody that needs something. That's how I do it. I know we all suffered, but I don't have to go to a Holocaust meeting and sit there and cry. I'll cry in bed alone. Maybe I am wrong.
<interview pauses, then resumes>

John: What were you able to take away from Europe? Your original belongings, pictures, and things like that?

Irene: Some of the pictures must have been my grandmother and my mother took. Some of these pictures that I have are after the war. I have no idea. My mother and grandmother must have taken them with them from Poland to Russia and then brought them back because that one picture [of] my uncle and my aunts. She died in the concentration camps.

Ruth: What was her name?

Irene: **Lodja.** I don't know. That's my mother's sister. She had twins. They would have been my age. They were killed in the camp, too. They didn't want to leave.

John: Did you go back to Lodz then before you went to Germany?

Irene: We went back after . . . in 1945 when the war was over. They put us on the cattle cars and send us back to Poland. They said, "The Americans will take care of you." We got back to Lodz but we had nothing there.

John: Was the apartment gone? Were there other people living there?

Irene: The house was gone. The beauty parlor was gone. It was either bombed or destroyed. That's when we went to Germany and when we came to Ulm. From Ulm, the Americans sent us to Lampertheim then back to Ulm.

John: Going back to what you were saying at the end of the previous tape about not wanting to associate with survivors and not dwell on it, what did it mean to you that you were attacked by two other survivors? Did that change your sense of the whole thing?

Irene: No, I don't think so. I think they were just as much trying to get their life together. Who knows? Who knows what they went through? I don't know what they went through. They might have gone through worse than I did. At least I had water and food. I wasn't beaten up by the Germans. They probably figured, "Okay, let's have fun."

John: Did either of them ever talk to you about anything at all?

Irene: No. It's like was coming to them or whatever. Break even. It's . . . you have to feel sorry sometimes. When a woman gets raped, she sometimes feels sorry for the rapist. Maybe I caused it. Not I caused it. You know she caused it. I don't know. At that age, what do you know? You're 12 or 13. What do you know? You're a little kid, yet you are a grown up. You went through so much in your life.

John: How did your mom react when she learned maybe years later?

Irene: Nothing, unfortunately. I finally, after all this time, told my kids about it last year or two years ago. But nobody ever knew.

John: I may be moving ahead to slightly happier things. That whole issue about not having an education and not maybe starting it up here, how did that decision happen? Or, was it even a decision?

Irene: I had to go to work and somehow it's like a mental block. I taught myself how to read. You talk to me about politics or sports or what's going on in this world, I will know as much as a college professor, maybe even more. But sit me down and tell me to write a letter or write an address or write a recipe, it's just blank. I tried it every way. I can't. Maybe that's why I have such a good memory. If someone said, "Go there and there, and pick this up," I never write anything down. I will remember. When somebody calls me, "Meet me at two o'clock on December this." I'm there. But to remember how to spell 'house' . . . I don't know why. It's embarrassing.

John: There just wasn't time with five kids to raise?

Irene: Maybe if I went to school. It's never too late. Every year I said, "Now I am going to do it." I never do it. That holds me back from a lot.

John: What would you have wanted to do if you had more time and resources? Was there anything you would have wanted to get good at?

Irene: I would do different kinds . . . If I knew how to write really well and not make mistakes, I would probably do some great volunteer work where you're not ashamed to say, "Oh, I don't know how to spell this." Instead, I do volunteer work, but I do it differently. [If] I know somebody's sick, I will go to their house. I will cook for them. I clean, I'll shop, [and] that kind of work. But I would have probably worked with an organization or something. That's what I miss.

John: How long did you stay in New York? That phase? Originally how many years were you all in New York?

Irene: From 1951 to . . . I moved to Atlanta when I was 58. I'm here now almost 18 or 20 years.

John: About 1993?

Irene: O. J. [Simpson] trial.¹⁹ I moved here about [that time].

John: What brought you to Atlanta?

Irene: Four kids and eight grandchildren.

John: They had moved here?

¹⁹ Orenthal James "O. J." Simpson, nicknamed "the Juice", is a retired American football player, broadcaster, and actor. In 1995, he was acquitted of the 1994 murders of his ex-wife, Nicole Brown Simpson, and Ronald Goldman after a lengthy and internationally publicized criminal trial, the *People v. Simpson*.

Irene: One-by-one, four of them moved here and one daughter stayed in New York. Now she has adopted a little girl, so I go back and forth. We have a little one there. She is six years old. All of these here are much older.

John: What has your life consisted of here in Atlanta?

Irene: I used to work and do decorating. I have a friend that has a shop, a restaurant. I go in there once in a while and work, help him. Right now, my daughter needs me. She had major surgery. I had a camp that I always went back and forth. [I] worked on it from February to September, in New York.

John: That is still in operation?

Irene: Yes. I had to be there. I had a girlfriend. Her name was Ruthie. For four years, I took care of her. She was dying of Lou Gehrig's disease.²⁰ I stayed with her in New York and did everything back and forth. That's so funny. I have no pictures of anybody—but there's one picture on the refrigerator and that's of her—in the whole house. She passed away. That part of my life went with her.

Ruth: Irene, your mother may have . . . I don't know how to put this delicately. I think some people would have perhaps differing ideas about her judgment in leaving you and putting her needs above yours. If you couldn't use her for a role model with your own parenting, how did you structure your own parenting after having two parents that may not have gotten the great parent award? How did you decide how to be a parent and what you wanted to teach your children?

Irene: That's a great question. My mother never won the award for the best mother in the world. I just made up my mind that my kids come first. I'll be honest with you. I was married for 30 years. It was not the best marriage but it was the best front I ever put up. My kids came first and my husband did come first. There was always meals, there was always . . . We might not have had much money but we always had a meal time, television time, sports time, not the greatest vacations, but it was always with the kids. It was always family. They are now the same way, the five kids. I said to them, "This is the only thing: you have to be a mother and a father first before you give them the material things." I just have that feeling because maybe I didn't

²⁰ Lou Gehrig's disease refers to a disorder called amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, or ALS. ALS is a rapidly progressive, fatal neurological disease that attacks the nerve cells responsible for controlling voluntary muscles. The disease is often called "Lou Gehrig's disease" in honor of Henry Louis "Lou" Gehrig, a famous American Major League Baseball player who died from the disease in 1941.

have it, I didn't want my kids not to have it. I am always there for them. My daughter was sick, I got on a plane and I was there for three months for her. I give up anything for my five kids, anything.

John: It seems the majority of survivors married other survivors. It's a little bit less common to marry an American. How much was he able to understand your background and your reference points?

Irene: He understood. He was very . . . he understood. He knew I was not in the concentration camp. He knew what I went through but I never dwelled on it. I never said, "Oh, I went through this and this and this and that. Leave me alone." Never. I never said this to my kids, "Eat this. I never had food." That was my problem, not their problem. He understood. He was a great father. He was a good husband. I can never say not. He was a good man, but it wasn't there. When the youngest said, "I'm not going to college. I'm getting married." I said, "Okay," and packed my little suitcase. I walked out and left almost everything to him with the pension. I didn't even have a credit card.

John: Liberation day for you?

Irene: No, it wasn't liberation. It was just, "Okay, now you find your niche." I took the camp and I made a good life out of it. Everything was okay. Now, I'm here. It's kind of lonely but I have the kids. They are all growing up, the kids, my grandchildren here. The one that is the youngest lives too far away.

John: In the beginning, even before the interview we were talking about politics and modern life and stuff like that. It sounds like you have a lot of opinions . . .

Irene: I do.

John: . . . about things considering your past. Do you just want to elaborate a little bit on that, on how you see things?

Irene: I see things. I might be the only Jewish Republican out of New York. Not Republican. I don't mean it that way. I believe the government is there and it should protect us. I do not believe the government is there to give me three years of unemployment. That's how I believe. I believe whatever you have . . . whatever you see here, I earned it. I worked for it. I believe everybody should work. We should help people but I am very anti- certain things. I'm not discriminating against anything. In my family, we have mixed marriages. We have everything. My little granddaughter's . . . I don't know whether she is from Mexico—she's adopted—or she's from

Guatemala. We . . . I don't care. You have to be self . . . I'm 76 years old. I don't ask anybody. I go everywhere myself. I went in the car, went to Florida to see my . . . But people are too much for handouts and for things. Maybe I'm wrong.

John: It sounds like you didn't get a whole lot of help either in the DP camps . . .

Irene: No, nowhere.

John: . . . or the transition phase . . .

Irene: Not even here. Now I know a lot of people getting a lot of money from the German government, from other governments.²¹ There are other people that need it more. I don't even bother. I got the \$2,000 that my sister insists, "Go get it." Otherwise I wouldn't have even known about it because I don't mingle with the . . . I don't even know there are so many Holocaust survivors or people here.

John: Was there any kind of assistance in New York when you first came over? Like local Jewish organizations or anything like that?

Irene: No, my mother went to work. I went to work. We right away went to work. I was 16 and I wound up . . . The day I turned 16, I went to work in that brazier factory. Then I worked in the luncheonette and I saved up money. [I] went to beauty culture school [and then] boom, back to work.

John: It sounds like you still have a pretty negative feeling about Germany? You said you never want to go back again?

Irene: No, I'll never go back. If my father wouldn't have gotten sick and didn't want to come to this country. My sister and brother didn't . . . They went there in the beginning. Then when he got really sick and everything, I went for the first time to visit him. I saw how he lived and all that. I stayed, put him into the home, and I promised him, "I will be back." That's when I started going four times a year. [I] became a frequent flyer. Tickets were easy. I stayed with him. They called and says, "Dad is not doing well." I didn't know it was going to take six weeks. I stayed until he passed away. Otherwise he had nobody there. [I] never went back [after that].

John: How come that attitude about Germany? I mean the obvious reasons . . .

²¹ In 1952, the government of West Germany reached an agreement with the state of Israel and the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany to pay reparations for material losses and injuries incurred during the Holocaust. Three separate German laws, known as the West German Federal Indemnification Laws, were adopted in 1953, 1956, and 1965. They further provided for compensation in the form of one-time payments and monthly pensions to Holocaust survivors. In the years since, other agreements for reparations have also been reached.

Irene: Because it's not good memories. I think it was all with my stepfather, Willy's brother, and with those two guys. And there's something, too . . . when you see those 85 [or] 90 year old Germans walking in the street, it brings back to some people the memory. It's, "How many Jews did you kill? What did you do?"

John: Do you have any sense of roots with Poland?

Irene: No.

John: Polish culture?

Irene: No. I came to this country and I just said, "This is it." It's a great country. I would not give it up for anything in the world. The last few years I have been traveling everywhere. When I come back, I say, "There's nothing like here." Give me a quarter of this room, I [will] live here, before I live . . . It's great to see Italy, it's great to see Spain, and this and that, but when I came back from Alaska that still was the best trip. That's about all. I just hope to G-d that my kids and my grandchildren, everything be good for them. Maybe next year I learn how to write.

John: Anything you can think of . . .

<interview pauses, then resumes>

Irene: When I came here in 1951, it was January. It was kind of cold and we arrived. It was great. We came to Brooklyn. It was just amazing to see all that. I love Brooklyn. Then I lived on Stanton Island.²² That's where my son was born. It's just one of the greatest places in the world: New York City. I traveled all of about 30 states at least and lived in some of them. It's the greatest country. I would not give it up for anything in the world. I love Atlanta and my kids are here. It's a great town. That's about it. There's nothing—if anybody listens to this tape or ever hears it—there's nothing in the world like this country. Whether you like the government or you don't like the government, you are the people. There is nothing better. It's your choice who you vote for. Just go out and vote. That's what's important.

Ruth: Did you have any communist propaganda when you were a child in Russia? I mean, that was when . . . in the 1950's, children were being inundated here [in the United States] with the mirror Cold War propaganda.²³ Did you have to wear red scarves or anything?²⁴

²² Staten Island is one of the five boroughs of New York City, in the state of New York, in the United States.

²³ The Cold War was a prolonged state of tension between western democratic nations like the United States and the communist Soviet Union and their respective allies. It was waged on political, economic, and propaganda fronts and had only limited recourse to weapons. It began at the end of World War II and ended around 1990.

²⁴ This is a reference to the Young Pioneers, which is a communist youth organization. Children in the organization wear a red scarf or neckerchief.

Irene: No. Because we were in Shymkent and Tashkent, which I don't remember what it is now. Over there, we were just working. There was no propaganda there. Maybe Moscow or Leningrad or Stalingrad, those cities. Those were big. This was poor as poor could be. All you saw was huts. There were no homes, no things. There was no propaganda there. Then we came straight to Poland and Germany. In Germany, there was no communism there because the Americans were there and we were mostly in the DP camps.

Ruth: Have you ever given much thought to the fact that you are probably one of very few Jews your age that survived who was born in Poland and whether that has had any impact on your world view or you own view on yourself?

Irene: I think there were more than a few of us that did survive. It all depends. I am thankful that I just came to this country. That's all I can say. I have no desire . . . maybe I would travel back [to Poland]. I only went to Germany because of my father. I will never go back to Germany, even if I won a free trip. I'm sorry. It sounds cruel, but this is my country. That's all. I'd fight for it.

Ruth: How did you become Americanized after being basically a poor, oppressed child laborer in Russia and coming to America where there is so much of everything? How did you make that transition to being American? How did that all work?

Irene: I worked hard at it. I tried. I had a few businesses that I started. I had my own . . .

Ruth: As a child, you were still so young when you came here. What was that like to be, as you said, an old person because of all your experiences but everyone else your age were just children?

Irene: I think it's the survival. It's just like you have to survive. That's what I tell everybody. Get a life, don't ask people. If you can't do it for yourself, nobody's going to do it for you. I knew if I'm not going to do it myself, nobody's going to do it. I couldn't rely on my mother. I couldn't rely on my father. They didn't care. At 16, I was on my own in this country, too. I married my husband and I worked, too. [I] had five kids and I worked. I've been working all my life till even now I work. I'm supposed to be today working in the flea market at Scott's Antique.²⁵ That's where I was supposed to be today, selling jewelry. But you know people. I

²⁵ Scott Antique Markets is a monthly antique market in Atlanta, Georgia and in Columbus, Ohio with vendors offering heirloom furniture, antiques, collectibles, and knickknacks. The show bills its events as the world's largest indoors antique shows.

think people don't know how to survive until something bad hits them. That's my . . . maybe I do need to sit down on a couch and talk to somebody someday about all this.

John: It does seem like you had to be a totally self-reliant person. Even among survivors, it seems like you had it more where it was just you.

Irene: It was always me. I never . . . gave it to my kids [or said], "Alright, come on, do this. I can't cope with it." I always coped with everything. I always did everything myself. Sometimes they say, "Come on, let us do it for you." I say, "No, it's okay. I can do it." That's always been me. I was always very independent. Like everybody says, "How could you drive to Florida at your age by yourself?" [It's] very easy. You get in the car, you put the radio on, you listen, and you drive. That's it. Give me Super Bowl tickets and I would drive to Texas now.²⁶

John: Is there anything else you can think of you would like to pass on? Someone will be watching this in 50 or 100 years. What would you want to tell the future? What should they learn from everything you had to go through?

Irene: Be a fighter and don't rely on . . . Fight yourself. Do it as much you can yourself. Don't cop out. Don't take a pill if you have a headache or you're depressed. Go out and do something for somebody else. You'll see there's worse. You're worse [better] off than somebody else. I didn't like that I had to give up my beautiful place in Buckhead and move here.²⁷ No, but you do it.

John: Over the last 65 years, have you ever fantasized about meeting those two guys again?

Irene: No.

John: What would you tell them? What would you do to them?

Irene: It would probably be the first time I would kill somebody and it's not worth it. I want to live for my grandchildren and see them be married. Or my two boys now graduate college.

John: I think you answered the question.

Irene: I want to see my kids graduate college. I am not going to waste my life on some idiots in jail. I'm sorry.

John: Thank you for telling us a painful story.

²⁶ The Super Bowl is an annual American football game that determines the champion of the National Football League (NFL), the highest level of professional American football. Super Bowl XLV was played on February 6, 2011 at Cowboys Stadium in Arlington, Texas.

²⁷ Buckhead is an area located northwest of Downtown Atlanta with gracious homes, elegant hotels, shopping centers, restaurants, and high-rise condominium and office buildings. Buckhead is a major commercial and financial center of the Southeast, and it is the third-largest business district in Atlanta, behind Downtown and Midtown.

Irene: No, we survive. Thank you. I hope it worked for you guys.

< End Disk 1 >

INTERVIEW ENDS

Cuba Family Archives