United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Interview with Irene Salomonawicz Fleming
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PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of a videotaped interview with Irene Salomonawicz Fleming, conducted by Joan Ringelheim on May 16, 1996 on behalf of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The interview took place in Washington, DC and is part of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's collection of oral testimonies.

The reader should bear in mind that this is a verbatim transcript of spoken, rather than written prose. This transcript has been neither checked for spelling nor verified for accuracy, and therefore, it is possible that there are errors. As a result, nothing should be quoted or used from this transcript without first checking it against the taped interview.

IRENE SALOMONAWICZ FLEMING
May 16, 1996

02:01:09

Q: Good morning, Irene.

A: Good morning.

Q: Tell me what your name is and spell your original last name and where and when you were born.

A: I am, I am born in Poland and my maiden name was hard to spell -- Salomonawicz -- and now I am Irene Fleming.

Q: And what year were you born? When?

A: '21.

Q: And the date?

A: February 5, 1921.

Q: And you were born in Lódz?

A: Yes.

Q: Can you tell something about your family? When --

A: It was a traditional family -- [coughs] -- excuse me. We had a very good life. My father owned a factory. It was in the family for gen -- a few generations, and my grandmother and then my grandmother took in her two sons -- sons-in-laws -- into the business. We went to private schools. We had governesses at home. We had a good life.

Q: And what kind of business was this?

A: Manufacturing textiles. You came into our factory naked, you got out dressed up from toe to head -- from head to toe, yeah.

Q: So, it was, it was clothes?

A: It was underwear, yeah, and fabrics and sweaters and bathing suits. You were dressed when you left the place.

Q: Did you go there very often?

A: Quite often I sneaked in, you know, and picked up what I liked and then brought it home and gave it to my friends.

02:03:01

Q: And you had a brother?

A: I had a brother, yes.

Q: How much younger was he than you?

A: Four years, four years younger than I was, and his dream -- my father wanted him to eventually take over the factory -- but since he was a little boy he was signing his name "Dr. Salomonawicz." He wanted to be a physician and he became one after the war. He studied in Germany and became a physician.

Q: You said you -- this was a traditional family. Were you very religious?

A: No. Just traditional. Very Jewish-conscious. My father was a Zionist and he was in very good company with a lot of very nice people.

Q: And what sort of friends did you have? Did you have a lot of friends?

A: Oh, yes. We had a family, and, you know, when I was growing up life was different. People were caring and people cared about each other. If somebody got sick, the whole neighborhood would come to see if they can help. It was different. Now, everything is gone.

Q: So you enjoyed your childhood?

A: Oh, yes, I did have a wonderful, I had a wonderful childhood.

Q: Did you like school?

A: Yes and no. If I liked the teacher, I liked the school. I, I would be a good pupil in his or her class. If I didn't like the teacher because I didn't like math, I was lousy at it, I just didn't do it. I was very bad at it. I had to have always tutor, a tutor to tutor me math so I can go from one grade to another.

Q: What classes did you like?

A: Oh, I liked, I liked humanistic. I liked history, nature, and languages. This I liked. I was good at it.

Q: Can you describe for us what a private school would have been like in, in Poland. Was, was this Jewish and non-Jewish?

A: No, this was a Jewish school and the name of the school was The Friends -- Friends of the of the Jerusalem University. The Friends organization still exists. They were the first ones to build on Mount Scopus, and this was the school. What was -- we had to wear uniforms so you didn't have jealously because there were quite a lot of kids that were from poor houses and they came to school for free and we didn't, they didn't want distinctions. And we had wonderful teachers on the faculty. The faculty, most of them had Ph.Ds. We had wonder -- the teachers were different. They were so committed to their pupils. They, even if you were a dumbbell they just want to, to get it into your brain, to, to get something out of you. They tried to get something out of you. They cared. Today, you know, it's just another salary.

Q: Were you part of any youth groups growing up?

A: In school we had all kinds of youth groups that we belonged. As I said, it was a Jewish Hebrew school, a Hebrew School. We had wonderful teachers. Probably you know, you heard about Itzhak Katzenelson[1] and Max Braude was the director of our schools. There was one girls' school and two boys' schools. And we had wonderful teachers and we had -- it was like a family. The whole school everybody knew each other.

Q: Can you describe your, your mother?

A: My mother was a career woman. Very bright, very intelligent. She was fluent in five languages. Very pretty woman and she was running -- my father was traveling a lot and my mother was running the factory. So, she was, she was always away, busy. Friday night we would be together.

Q: Is that unusual, to have a wife doing that sort of thing?

A: No, it wasn't, really. Where I lived there were a lot of women that helped their husbands in business or having their own business. I don't know, but we didn't have such gender differences because a woman was a woman. She had her brain and she used it as much as she could use it. Nobody wondered -- we had so many women doctors and dentists and lawyers, so it was nothing special. Nobody even thought about it.

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[1] Katzenelson (1886-1944), poet and dramatist in Hebrew and Yiddish.

Q: In the, in the early 30s in 1933, when the Nazis took over in Germany, did you hear about it and what did you hear?

A: We, we listened to radio, you know. We had radio and then we had the news and the movies. We used to go a lot to the movies. You knew what's going on. You read the papers, but the real shock we got in '39, when they brought the German refugees to Zbaszyn and the people were lying there. They had no place where to live. It was a small place, and I remember my father was a group of other people, manufactures, they got together took food and clothing and drove to this place to supply the people.

02:09:09

My dad used to come home and say, "My God what an awful place. God should really have mercy on us because this is not going to be fun." I saw these people how they struggle there. It can happen to anybody.

Q: Were you worried?

A: Not really, you know, when you're young you look through different, you look like through pink glasses at everything. Nothing is really bad enough when you are young. You can withstand everything.

Q: Somebody offered to marry you, somebody named Hugo Dietzel?

A: Dietzel, yes. He, he used to work for us also. He was connected with my father in business. He was a German -- Volksdeutscher.[2] It means of German origin. And he, he was like a member of our family. Very -- we were very close and he wanted to marry me,but I would have never married out of my faith. This is the way -- I, I felt very strong about it.
And then when the war broke out, he took over all the, all the merchandise we had in the factory and he's supposed to pay us. He never did. After the war I met him. I introduced my husband to him and he was charming, but became very, very well-to-do because he married the Bürgermeister's[3] daughter of Munich. And he brought a lot of wealth with him. When he started to talk about Germany losing, he moved to Germany and made all right. He passed away a few years ago.

Q: What happened when the war broke out to your, to your family, to the business, at first?

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[2] Ethnic German (German)

[3] Mayor (German)

A: At first, friends came. There was an exhibition in New York in '39 I think and friends of my father's business associates, they went. They came over to my husband -- to my father and asked him why doesn't he go to this, something is brewing here, something is going to happen. And my father said, "I'm not going to leave my family behind and, and go anywhere." He didn't go. The people who went saved their life. They spent the war years in the United States. My father in the beginning he still ran the factory -- it was going. And then we had to close so this Hugo got all the stuff.

02:12:15

He got it. And he came to our house, to our apartment. We had an apartment and closed it up and chased us out. They wanted us to wait until they will get a lot of people together and they wanted to take us somewhere. And a friend of mine came into and saw us standing there and waiting. "Why do you wait?" I said, "They told us to wait." [She said] "Don't stay here, run away." So, we left. Just the way we were standing we left and went to the place that became later on -- we knew it was going to be the ghetto. The old part of town where the cemeteries were and very poor people lived in this area. They didn't have any facilities and this is where we went into. My father's uncle had a factory there, a marble factory for buildings, you know, for stairs, for all kinds of monuments. So, we lived in my uncle's house until they closed the ghetto.

Q: And the whole family, your brother, your mother and your father were there?

A: Yes.

Q: And when they closed the ghetto, then what happened?

A: Then my parents moved to a room, to one room with a lady with two children. They lived in this room. It was just divided. A sheet was hanging there and this was, this was the room. They didn't have their privacy or anything, but this is how it was in the ghetto. There, there were so very little places to live and they had to stick all these people in, into these places.

Q: Now were you in that room with your father and mother?

A: In the beginning, yes, because I was married for a few months.

Q: How did that happen?

A: When, when we knew that the, when the Germans came into our town, everybody was running away from them towards Russia. And I wanted to go but my parents said, "You are -- what do you know about life? You were never on your own. You are young. Where are you going to run?" I said, "I will get married and I will go." And the fellow was my father's age. A nice guy, very nice. I got married but I wasn't material for a wife. I was a

spoiled brat and I thought everything has to come my own way. And so, we married. My parents were against it but finally I, I had my will and I got married.

02:15:01

It didn't work out. He was a nice guy. He treated me like a china doll and I was a spoiled brat. Finally we parted very good friends. He became very friendly later on with my husband that I married and he started going out with my cousin and they were until the last moment they were together. He didn't survive. She is alive in Israel.

Q: So did you get a divorce from him?

A: Oh, yes, I had a divorce. I had to have a divorce.

Q: So it was a marriage in the ghetto. Did you have a ceremony?

A: In the -- yes, we had a ceremony and we had also a divorce. It was some -- I'm telling you -- it was some big commotion about this, this get.[4] They have to write it with a pen, I think you know, you know the pen they write it with. It's not really a pen, I think, it's from a turkey or something, the feather. This is with what they write and when they make a little mistake the whole thing is gone. Did you ever see such a pen? You never saw it? Interesting, very interesting.

Q: Why did you think you wanted to get married?

A: Because I wanted to go to Russia and then my mother said to me, "Irene, you want to go and leave us behind? How could you?" And when she said that to me I said, "All right." So, here I was stuck with a husband and, and I didn't go anywhere. I was with my parents. We all lived together with my parents and then it just didn't work out.

Q: Did your mother, did your mother take valuables from your original house before you went into the ghetto?

A: When the first of September, when the Germans invaded Poland, my mother went to the safe and got out some jewelry that was in our family for a long time. You know, when the first boy was born, they would make a peedyon ha-ben,[5] you know, and they would put on a, on the scale the child and on the other part of the scale the jewelry on the right. This is what the jewelry was for. A lot of it, yeah. She took it, we had, we had it in the ghetto.

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[4] Divorce (Hebrew)

[5] "'Redeeming one's first-born'" ceremony held in synagogue on or after the 30th day from the birth of a first-born son.

And the, this was our last supper this jewelry because the next -- we had to leave the ghetto next day on a transport. So we gave away to a friend this bag of jewelry and he gave us a duck or a goose, I don't remember, a loaf of bread and a big salami. And this we shared, the whole family.

02:18:04

This was our last supper.

Q: This was after the evacuation from the ghetto, the end?

A: No, no. We were in the ghetto but, but we were in one building that used to be a hospital during the ghetto time. They took us from out everywhere we lived and we had to go to this hospital and stay there and we were there for a few weeks. I don't remember how long but next day we had to leave so we exchanged this, this jewelry. Listen, we didn't know what's going to happen next and this was our last supper.

Q: Did you feel that, that this could be your last supper?

A: We never know, we never knew what's going to happen next, you know. This is really why I got married so young because people were asking me why did you get married so young. I said I didn't want to die a virgin.

Q: So you had some sense that, that life was fragile.

A: It was premonition. We knew if people can be so cruel, anything can happen. There was no consciousness anymore left in people. Cruelty and brutality. We lived every moment and we didn't know what the next moment will bring. Nobody knew.

Q: When, when you went into the closed ghetto, when the ghetto was closed, were you in that apartment sharing it with this other person or --

A: No, you mean if I lived with him before that? No, no such a thing didn't happen before when I was growing up. No, we -- after I got married I lived with my parents. After I got married, he lived with us.

Q: And, and when the ghetto was closed, did your father get a job and you got a job and your brother?

A: Everybody had to. Everybody had to work. And as I told you my brother was graduated high school in, in the ghetto was a group of, a lot of young people went to school and he

got a very good position in a, this food distribution store. And they called it Kooperative,[6] and Rumkowski[7] gave it all his pupils. As I told you he's very fond of his children.

Q: And you knew Rumkowski?

A: Oh, I knew him since I was a little child because he used to come to us all the time to our house.

Q: And how do you remember him prior to the ghetto? Do you have strong recollections?

A: Yes, he was a very benevolent man.

02:21:00

He was an -- he loved the children. It was a model orphanage. The kids were doing all kinds of works, you know, crafts and arts. And for every holy day we would get a little gift that the kids made. My father was supporting him so we knew, we knew, we knew him and he knew us.

Q: Did you have some relationship with him? Did you talk politics with him?

A: Yes, I did, because I belonged to this Revisionistic/Jabotinsky[8] organization and he was just the opposite. So, every time he would come to, to us and he would say, "Are you still Zionists?" I said yes. Even in the ghetto he remembered that.

Q: Did you actually talk about it or he simply, he simply knew you were a Revisionistic?

A: He knew I was a kid and he was an older man and we, we talked. I stuck to my guns. I was very, very sure that I knew what I want.

Q: Were you surprised when you came to the ghetto that he was the, the head of the Jewish council?

A: I don't know if I was surprised. He was very active in, in the Jewish community and he was before the war very well respected. The Germans came in, they took the influential

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[6] Cooperative (German).

[7] Mordechai Chaim Rumkowski (1877-1944), chairman of the Judenrat in the Lódz ghetto.

[8] The Revisionists, a group consisting of maximist political Zionists, was founded by Vladimir Jabotinsky (1880-1940).

people that were left there. First of all, they took them away. So, we didn't have leadership. I, I wasn't surprised, no.

Q: What was your first job in the ghetto?

A: I was working in a factory that, a rubber factory that produced rain coats for the German Army or whatever it is.

Q: And what was that like? You were with about 200 women?

A: Oh, more than that. Young girls.

Q: What was your day like?

A: Oh, we came early in the morning to the factory and we were, we were sitting there until the evening and working, working hard. It was hard because you used a lot of chemicals there and the fumes, it wasn't very good for you working there, but we had to.

Q: Did you eat there?

A: Yes.

Q: Did they have lunch?

A: Every factory -- almost every factory had a kitchen. They had the soup kitchens and every worker was getting soup. This was the only warm thing I think that we had because you didn't have facilities where to cook even.

02:24:02

Q: How old would you be in 1940, '41?

A: I was, when the war broke out I was 18.

Q: So you were about 19 or 20. Are you having dates, are you having -- or a social life?

A: Oh, yes, you know. Young people, youth doesn't care. They make from the worst situation good ones. There were romances going on, there were -- we had a very rich cultural life. We had an orchestra, we had theater. We had, we were busy -- culture. We had schools, underground schools that we always took lessons and learned something new. We had wonderful teachers. All my teachers were with us, almost all in the ghetto. So, we had good teachers.

Q: Do you remember being frightened?

A: Oh, yes, this -- we were always frightened. We were like frightened animals in a cage. This is what we were, caged animals.

Q: Did anybody ever talk about escaping?

A: There was no way escaping. Escaping where to? You see, if we would have connections with population, the rest of the Polish population it was a different story, but the ghetto was divided. We had a bridge going from one side to another but the trams were going along the ghetto and the Poles would make fun of us. They looked at us and made all kinds of awful, awful gestures. So, how -- we, we couldn't connect with anybody. We had no one to connect with.

Q: Were you hungry?

A: All the time, all the time, yes. We, we had such a small -- and you know -- a growing young person needs their food more probably than an older person and we didn't have that. You didn't have that, what we know now about proteins. Didn't have those things. We didn't have fruits. We were lucky when we got some potato peels, then we were lucky because you made a big feast out of it.

Q: So, what, what do you remember eating most days?

A: We, when we were getting some flour, were trying to make -- you wouldn't believe how people were so -- they were discovering a new way of cooking because from nothing we made something.

02:27:12

I didn't know how to cook. I never learned it from my mother because she didn't know how to cook, so I never learned it. But in the ghetto after we got married with Bert I started to experiment and somehow I managed. Listen, it didn't matter anyhow whatever we ate it was just to stuff our stomachs, not to go hungry.

Q: Was there a black market in the ghetto?

A: Oh, yes, there was always a black market in the ghetto, yes.

Q: And where did that food come from actually?

A: There were people that were smuggling in. There were smugglers in the ghetto that brought in all different kinds of stuff and there were people that were selling. It was like a bartering business, you know. They smoked, so they would give away their last piece of bread to get a smoke, to get a cigarette.

Q: Did, did you smoke?

A: No, no. I never liked the smell of it and I, I was very athletic and I didn't smoke. My mother didn't smoke and I was copying my mother and in a lot of ways, I'm like my mother, most of the ways.

Q: Did you do sports in the ghetto?

A: Oh, yes -- in the ghetto? No. My sports was going to work and coming home.

Q: What were you doing before the ghetto? What sports were you doing?

A: Tennis, I was very good in athletics in school. I was the captain of my, of my school and we were playing not baseball but basketball and all different kinds of -- I was very good at it, jumping and so on.

Q: Was there a lot of gossip when you were working in the factory? Were people talking with each other or --

A: People were talking. You knew everything. You know, when something happened everybody knew. In two minutes everybody knew. It was a very close society, you know. You were close but you knew everything was going on.

Q: Did you read the newspaper that came out?

A: Oh yes. I always read. I was a, a reader.

Q: Was this a daily newspaper or a weekly newspaper?

A: I don't remember. I couldn't tell you. I only know that my professor, when I was born, he was publisher of this paper, Professor Rosenstein. I have a picture of him.

02:30:01

I told you that I got these pictures, I have a picture of him too, but I don't remember. It was -- I told you a lot of things I forgot.

Q: Was there any kind of medical care?

A: We had, we had hospitals, but people were afraid to go to hospitals because you never knew when the Germans will come in and take everybody out and just get rid of them. But we had hospitals. We had good doctors.

Q: Did you ever get sick?

A: Oh, yes. Once I had to remove, no I had to remove the tonsils so I was in the hospital for two or three days.

Q: That was pretty old to have your tonsils out?

A: Yes, yes, but all the unusual things happened to me all the time.

Q: Now, what happens in terms of work under those circumstances? Do you lose a food ration if you're in the hospital?

A: I don't remember. I don't think so because it was given out I think on weekly basis if I'm not mistaken.

Q: And how long did you work in this factory? Do you remember?

A: About it must be two or three years. I think two years, I'm not sure about the dates anymore.

Q: Do you remember the deportations in 1942?

A: I remember that they came to, to the houses, surrounded them and directed everybody out that they could lay hands on.

Q: Were you ever in danger, do you remember?

A: Yes, I, I was, I was a few times in danger.

Q: Can you tell what happened?

A: Yes, they were, they were surrounding, they were surrounding this place where I lived and they were grabbing people. I don't know how, how somebody hid me somewhere. It's so vague. I don't remember. I told you I don't remember a lot of things, but I know somebody saved my life. Oh, I know, I know. There was I told you outside, outside of the ghetto there was this big, factory, straw factory and other factories. And when the Germans announced they are going to grab people, they wanted a transport, Bert sent me with a friend of ours, the one he lives, he's in Canada now, the same fellow, to hide me in one of the factories there because people weren't coming to work. They weren't working. It was -- the Germans wanted everybody to stay home so they have it easier, to grab us.

02:33:05

This fellow took me to this place called Maryzin, part of the city, and hid me until it was over. I was, I was in the factory. I was, I was, I think I was the only person there. There was no one there but me and this young man was with me that brought me over there and when it was over they let us know. And this, oh, I was sure I was going to be finished this time.

Q: What did you think was going to happen?

A: I thought the Germans will get me, and we didn't know what they were doing with us. We knew it was nothing good. I knew it's not going to be a party for sure. Now I can laugh.

Q: How were your parents doing during this period?

A: My father had a good position. He was in charge of a Kooperative. Rumkowski gave him a privileged job because, you know, he never forgot that my father supported him and so on, and my mother was an instructor in a underwear factory. She knew the business. This was her business so she was an instructor. And so, but it was hopeless for my father. He just, he couldn't adjust to the conditions. He was killed after the war, the third of May '45, he was on the walk, and they took a transport and wanted to bring them to the sea and drown them there. He couldn't walk so he was shot. My brother was there too, and my father said to him, "Run for your life, just leave me alone here and save yourself." Pushed him away and my brother ran for his life. And since I know this story of run for your life, I ran for my life every night because I have always these nightmares and I scream, "Run, run for your life." That tells me I don't, I don't remember he told me, "Run for your life."

Q: That happens very often?

A: Quite often, very often, yes.

Q: Now, when you say that your father -- your mother obviously seemed to adjust a little more to the circumstances?

A: My mother, yes, she was a strong woman, a strong personality, yeah. She adjusted. She survived with me. She was with me in the concentration camp. And because of her I was alive because I think I was giving in.

02:36:01

I didn't feel like living anymore when we were in the concentration camp and the allies were bombing. I prayed to God that the bombs should come and get us because we were so sick of living.

Q: Did you notice that a number of men that were in a similar position to your father also had a, I don't want to say, an inability to adjust or it was difficult for them to adjust to, to such a situation?

A: I don't know how somebody else felt. I know how my father felt. He was world -- very worldly, very sophisticated man and had such plans for his children for the future, for a good future, and this is what happened. He was very depressed and disappointed. He didn't fight enough to survive. You had to fight for your life.

Q: Tell, tell us about meeting Bert.

A: Oh, as I said, I was married for a few months and was dissolved of the marriage and I was living with my parents. I worked on the other side of the bridge. Bert's office was there on the, on the other side and I, I saw him quite often and the corners of my eyes I saw. I would never turn around. A lady didn't turn around, but I, I saw him watching me and looking after me. I could see it. And one day I came from work going home, he was walking with his secretary and his secretary knew me because he used to work for my father before the war and I knew they were talking about me. I knew it. And then this fellow came to, to, to my parents house and said Irene, he wanted a date with me. I was, I didn't, I was very blue and I had enough. I didn't want anymore to go out. My mother said, "Don't sit home. You don't sit shee'va.[9] Go out and meet people. Don't just go to work and come home." And I did and I had this date with him and I came hour earlier because I didn't want to go to this date. And my mother pushed me, she said, "Go" I said, "Mom it's so late." "See if he's there it's fine. If not you come home." We knew it was curfew after a certain hour, I don't remember what time it was you couldn't walk anymore. So, it means I would be stuck on this date and won't be able to go home. But I went, an hour late, and he was just turning around to -- he didn't wait anymore and he was walking and he saw me. So, we went to his boss. He said his boss is sick, has a cold and we went there and my girlfriend supposed to be the date of his boss. We come, we come there, he -- and Bert opens the door and greeted me and I don't know when he greeted me, I said "This is it!" And I had to stay there. My girlfriend wasn't there, but it turned out that my girlfriend was this fellow's date and Bert was playing violin. He has a lovely voice and -- yes, he has a lovely voice -- he was singing and we were talking. And I was -- he knew my life story already from my girlfriend, everything. I didn't have to tell him anything, but in the morning I went straight to work. It was few blocks from where he lived. And this was, is it. This is how we started dating. About ten months later we got married.

Q: Then your life changed dramatically then after meeting him?

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[9] The seven obligatory days of mourning for the deceased's next of kin (Hebrew).

A: No, it didn't. No, it didn't because Bert even though he was in a privileged position and he was getting special food, extra, he sent it to my parents, yeah, and there was a girl who used to work for him and she had tuberculosis. He took her in. She was with us all day long. At night she went to her family and he didn't want her to work. She had to take it easy so he made her life easy. She survived. She lives in, in Sweden.

Q: Now, during this ten months, shall I assume that you're living with your parents?

A: Yeah, I was. Oh, sure. Oh yes, sure I lived with my parents. There wasn't such a thing as -- you know. There was respect.

Q: Did you know Bert was going to go to your parents and ask them -- ?

A: No, no, no. I didn't know, because you see he had an older sister, she wasn't married yet. So, when we were talking about, you know, getting -- the second day we met, he told me you are, you are going to be my wife. I said, "Oh, no. I had a bad experience and I'm too young now to go through it again. I don't, I don't know what's going to happen." And he said to me, "Even though I have an older sister but you are going to be my wife." This was the second date we had.

02:42:00

And so, we courted for a while and 10 months later we got married. We were together a few months when the evacuation came and -- oh -- this was awful. We met 10 months after the war. I found him 10 months after the war.

Q: Did you know his sister?

A: Oh, she was with me in the concentration camp.

Q: When did you meet her in the ghetto? After you met Bert?

A: Yes, sure, I didn't know her. She didn't want me to marry Bert. She was very much against it. "Oh, my, my brother is going to be married to some divorced woman." She was, she was giving him trouble. So, Rumkowski didn't know about whom they're talking, so he said -- and Bert went to Rumkowski to ask permission to marry me. He said I want to see your future wife. I want to see her because your sister is so much against it. And when I came to him, he invited me to his house. I came here and I thought he would go ballistic. He saw me, he says, "You are the one?" I said yes and I told him the story why I separated from the other one. And he said, "All right you will get married. I will give you away, and I will give Dora some sermon." And he told her, he told her.

Q: Was that typical that people would go to Rumkowski and ask for permission?

A: No, no, no, no. It wasn't typical. We had a Standesamt,[10] you know. We had a civil office where you got your, like you get your license here, it was the same thing. But she was against me marrying her brother. He was the apple of her eye, you know, and she -- he -- thought no one was good enough for, for him, but Rumkowski told her different.

Q: Did she adjust?

A: Oh, yes, she did. Listen, she survived because of me. We were in Ravensbrück and it wasn't fun and I really took care of her there. I took care of her and she came out of it, but she didn't live long enough.

Q: When you got married, where, where were you married and when?

A: In June, June 27, '43, and it was a place where Rumkowski was giving marriages because Jews weren't allowed to get married and you didn't have wedding bands. They give you a handkerchief, you know.

02:45:00

But there was this place that he was giving people away and we married with 18 or 19 people. I have part of the picture, a few couples with me. I have it, I told you, yeah. This is where we got married. On a honeymoon we didn't go, I assure you.

Q: Was there a small party after?

A: It was, no, Dora gave for my parents and her, her family dinner. This was it. There was no party.

Q: And then you had an apartment together you and Bert?

A: We had a room and a tiny kitchen. It was like a divided room with a kitchen. One little room, one little room.

Q: Tell me, how did -- no I'll get back to that. Did you change jobs after you married Bert from the rubber factory?

A: No. I was very low. I mean lying low. I didn't make any waves. I was very -- I socialized very little because after I got -- we knew, knew what was going on, how the people felt so, so, so we didn't socialize too much. Bert had a group of people, a few couples. He was the only bachelor, and we met with these people. We played a lot of cards at times, and we read a lot, but I didn't know many people. Every-everybody knew me because, you

[10] Civil marriage ceremony (German)

know, they knew my family. We, we didn't, we didn't do anything special because like life was so hard and when you, when you came from work you wanted to relax and take it easy. You never know what's going to happen next again. And we, we had always surprises.

Q: Like what?

A: Like, like they would surround at any time at will every place, every house and direct people out. We never knew who was next on the line. No, we didn't know that. And life was very iffy.

Q: Did you have dealings with Germans?

A: No, I didn't. The one German that supposed to pay us for, and I was waiting every single day for weeks at, at you know, we had a gate on the Baugehirn.[11] This is where the whole brain of the ghetto was sitting, you know, the president Rumkowski was there and his secretary and the Germans had their people sitting there.

02:48:02

This is where every dealing went through. I was waiting at the gate because he promised he will pay us so much merchandise he took and we could live nicely because we were hungry. I saw him few times pass by in a Droschke.[12] Do you know what a Droschke is? A horse and a carriage, but he never gave us a penny and when I met him after the war in Munich, like nothing ever happened. “Oh, Irene, he showed me this big apartment house he owned and on top of the roof he had a swimming pool.” And he said to me, "Irene this all could you be yours. You didn't want it.” I said, "No, I wouldn't and I still don't want it.” But he never, never gave a penny back. Bert wrote him a letter that she -- he -- should at least compensate my mother. He begged me not to tell his wife anything and I didn't. He married a very lovely woman and this is it. The end of the story.

Q: Was it noisy?

A: Where?

Q: Where you were living.

A: In the ghetto you mean?

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[11] Headquarters (German)

[12] Horse-drawn carriage or hackney (German)

Q: Yeah, in the apartment.

A: No, no nobody made noises. Nobody had the energy to make noises, really.

Q: And when did you read?

A: Whenever I had a chance I always read. I always do.

Q: And there was a library in the ghetto?

A: Oh, yes. We had -- I told you that we had a very, very big cultural life. A lot of people were ingenious, really very talented. We had very talented people.

Q: Did you work on Sunday or Saturday?

A: We worked every -- I think we didn't -- I don't know, I think we had Sunday free. Don't quote me, I don't know for sure. I don't remember, but I think we had Sunday free.

Q: Do you remember if you were doing anything in particular on that day?

A: Yeah.

Q: Were there chores?

A: I don't want to tell you what we did. You know what we did? We were picking the lice out of our clothes and trying, you know, to keep clean. Very hard. It was very hard.

Q: Could you wash your clothes?

A: In the ghetto yes, but when we were in the concentration camp, we couldn't. But we did -- you know what I did? We had this metal pieces coming wrapped in brown paper and we had to take off the paper and wash these pieces of metal with sudsy water.

02:51:00

So, after we did that, we took the, the pail in the toilet, you know, in the cabin, close up and get undressed and wash with this garbagy water. And then I had only one pair of pants. This was it. No bra or nothing. So, I would take off the pants, wash it in this water and guess what I would do. I was working at the, at the press. I would hang the pants under the table and the heat of the press would almost dry it. It was half dry. I would put it on again and this is the way I kept clean.

Q: This was at the camp?

A: This was in, in, in the work camp, yes.

Q: You didn't work at the rubber factory the whole time you were in the Lódz ghetto?

A: No, no.

Q: Where did you --

A: I went to the housing department. A friend of my first husband, a very close friend was in charge and it, it didn't work out with me. I was in this factory and as I told you a lot of chemicals, and I was very allergic to it. So, the doctor gave me a testimony -- a testi -- how do you say it --

A: Permission.

Q: -- to change and so he took me to the housing department. I was working there.

Q: And what did you do?

A: Oh, we were, we were designating footage, you know, in one room to people whoever needed a place to live. They came and we had to investigate how many people lived there and so on and this is how they got their apartments where to live.

Q: This must have been a difficult job.

A: Oh, yes, it was, it was. Everything was difficult in the ghetto and in these awful times.

Q: Did you sleep okay?

A: I can't tell you that. I don't remember. I don't know. Nobody, nobody slept well, I guess, because it was always in the back of our minds that we don't know what's going to happen next. You couldn't plan it. It wasn't a normal way of living.

Q: Did you think about the future? Did you think about this ending and the war ending?

A: As I told you when you are young you are very optimistic. We were optimistic at one time in the ghetto. We were very -- we were in love, you know, and we were talking about things but we didn't believe we going to make it. Nobody did believe that we were going to make it.

02:54:00

Q: Was it strange for you and Bert to have this ring with the cyanide in it?

A: No, no. We knew, we knew that we didn't want to go any more through torture and we knew what these people are capable of. So, Bert was prepared, but my mother one night when we were asleep she cleaned out the rings. We still have some left over in this ring.

Q: So you told her you had these rings?

A: My mother knew everything about me. I had a very close relation with my mother.

Q: How old was your mother in relationship to you at this time?

A: My mother was, had me when she was 24 years old.

Q: So, she was a young woman?

A: She was after the war in her 40s. A young woman, a pretty woman, too.

Q: Did you want to give the same cyanide to your mother and father so that they --

A: No, no, no. I could never do that. I could never carry that in my heart that I would do any -- any -- anything wrong to my parents. No, no.

Q: No, I meant if they wanted an opportunity.

A: They wouldn't -- they didn't want to. They didn't want to. As I told you, I survived because of my mother, my mother. I gave in. I threw in the towel. I didn't want anymore to go on and my mother would slap me and say, "You will see Dad and you will see Bert and you will see David." She said, "Just don't give in." And she kept me going. She kept me going. I didn't want to, you know, we had -- when they bombarded the Allies, the camp, we had to go in, into, go out and we go into the ditches, the anti-aircraft ditches. In the beginning we did it with my mother, and later on we didn't do it anymore. We didn't go out. We were staying where we are, were, and I said, "Whatever happens, happens to me, Mom, if you want to go." My mother was with me. She, she -- somehow we made it.

02:56:28

End of Tape #1

Tape #2

03:01:00

Q: Irene, when you were working in the Housing Department and had to give out --

A: Assign.

Q: -- assign apartments, was it more difficult when the new transports were coming in since you were so overcrowded to begin with. What, what was that like?

A: It was hard because here you, came, you had transport came of very special people. Bright, intelligent, educated, very well to do, they came here to this, to this miserable place and they had to get adjusted. Was very hard for them to get adjusted. Then you didn't have apartments, you would give them some space, but you couldn't pick people that have something compatible and you know this was tragedy, tragedy. You didn't talk the same language. They couldn't communicate with us. They spoke Czech. We spoke mostly Polish, mostly Yiddish, all the people spoke so it was very hard on, on these people. I felt sorry for them, not for myself because we had a roof over our head, they didn't.
And when they got these rooms, it was one tragedy after another. They were dying out.

Q: How did you decide where to put people?

A: We tried, we tried to get people from the same cultures, from the same background. It was, it was a humiliating time, a humiliating experience. Beautiful people, we had Professor Caspari[13] that was one of the first cancer researcher. He lost his life, too.

03:03:08

Q: Did you have a, a card file of where people were living?

A: Oh, yes. It was very, very orderly. Everything was just like clockwork, unbelievable how everything worked the way it's supposed to. Yeah, we had, we had -- everybody was registered.

Q: And they couldn't move unless --

A: No, no where could they move? They needed space where to live, and space was precious.

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[13] Professor Wilhelm Caspari (1872-1944), renown cancer researcher and bacteriologist.

Q: In that kind of a situation where people are living under such tension, yeah, with so little food and under difficult apartment situations, was there a lot of fighting and arguments?

A: Not really, not really, because we all were in the same situation and we all had to do our best to get along. Life was miserable enough without having any kind of fights, you know, and wars and stuff like that. Everybody had to try and they did, they did. My parents, we lived when I was at home we were four people before I got married and there was a lady from Vienna, German speaking with two children in the same room divided by a sheet. So, people had to make their best. They had to try very hard and they got along. I know my parents became very friendly with this lady and tried to help her as much as they could.

Q: You had said that there were, there were a lot of affairs going on?

A: Yes, life was going on. And life is one big affair, right.

Q: Do you think it was more so in some ways because of the circumstances?

A: Yes, because people did things that they would probably have never done ethically or morally. I know when I was growing up nobody heard about somebody living together and not being married. It was just unheard of. Such a person would be ostracized, I know for sure. People did that in the ghetto. They had no choices and besides the circumstances, you know. Maybe he had a better apart -- room -- than I have, and maybe he had a better job than I had so there was a lot of marriages that could never happen if not these circumstances.

03:06:00

Because very young girls sold themselves to, to old men. What was it? It wasn't love.

Q: So they could have a better circumstance?

A: Sure.

Q: Were the men in better working positions so that they got better apartments?

A: No, no there was, there was absolutely no -- any specific, you know, nobody as I told you, it was tough enough and we had to get along and gender didn't mean a thing. Women were working. Whatever they could do. Naturally women cannot do physical work the way a man can do so but everybody was working. Otherwise they couldn't survive. They wouldn't get their rations. They wouldn't get their food.

Q: No, I meant you mentioned the fact that some young women would go with much older men that under ordinary circumstances they wouldn't, so it must be that these men could provide something. They had an apartment?

A: Some, some of the girls needed a father image. They were left alone. Their parents were taken away or died away and here somebody's lost and there is nothing worse than loneliness and they were lonely.

Q: Was that the, one of the biggest frights for, for all of you, to be separated?

A: Yes, I think so. I think so.

Q: Could you talk about Rumkowski threatening, threatening you and why he would get angry with you?

A: Yes, he knew me quite well, since my early childhood, and he knew me. I had a big mouth. And Bert, whenever we knew that there comes evacuation or they called it Razzia,[14] when they surrounded the houses and, and took out the people, when we knew about it Bert was sick. He wasn't sick. I told him you are not going anywhere, you are staying here. Let your partner go. I wouldn't let him go. It happened a few times that whenever something was, Bert was sick. So, Rumkowski called me and in Yiddish he said to me I'm not going -- you want to tell in Yiddish -- he said to me I'm going to send you with a broom to sweep the, the streets because I know it's your head and you stay out of it and if ever happens I send you with a broom. He knew, he knew it was my idea.

Q: Now, now you didn't want Bert to go?

A: I didn't want him to, to be responsible or have part on something that we don't know what's going to happen. This is what happened. It was a good intuition of mine.

03:09:01

Q: So, he never participated in deportations?

A: No, he didn't. No, no, no. Every, every factory when there was an evacuation, everybody had to give a list and they gave lists of people that they couldn't use in was because, you know, everybody was registered -- even the little children. So, every, every factory was really responsible for the people that went. They had to give names. They had to give people.

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[14] Raid (German). The Fascist term for a roundup of people, often Jews. Used by Nazis in relation to anti-Jewish Aktionen.

Q: A terrible responsibility.

A: Terrible, the worst.

Q: Do you know whether people refused to do it?

A: Not that I know, not that I know. I wouldn't know.

Q: Do you remember the times when they took the children after Rumkowski gave that speech?

A: I didn't hear -- the first time I heard this speech was here when I saw the movie here. I never heard it, but my family was involved too, because my uncle had two little girls and they took the children. They took the girls. My aunt wouldn't go with the children. My uncle said he wouldn't let the children go alone. He doesn't -- we didn't know where they were going, but he didn't want them to be alone without somebody of parent, of a parent and he went with them. He went to Auschwitz. Later on we found out. He never made it.

Q: But the mother didn't go?

A: No, she didn't survive. We never heard from her again after the war so we don't know. But usually the mother was the tigress. Usually the mother was the one that was there for her children, especially a Jewish mother and here she didn't want to go so my, my uncle went.

Q: When, when they did the deportations and the evacuations in the factory and the houses, was there a particularly horrible atmosphere in the ghetto at these, at these times?

A: It was a panic, sheer panic. People were running like -- did you ever see a mound -- this is the way it looked, the ghetto looked, everybody was running. Everyone was running aimless. Nobody knew where they are going. There was no place to run and hide but people were scared.

Q: Were you ever on a list before 1944?

A: On what list?

Q: A deportation list, or was there not a list?

A: There were no lists. They, they grabbed people at random.

This is what I said about the Razzia. They just came, surrounded the place, and went from basement to attic and took everybody out whomever they could get and this was the way. They threw them in, in the pickup trucks like, like a piece of merchandise.

Q: Did you see these?

A: Some of them I saw, some of them I saw. I told you I was hidden and I saw them coming with the truck and picking up people and then the truck left.

Q: Did you have nightmares there?

A: Where?

Q: In the, in the ghetto?

A: It was one big nightmare, the whole ghetto.

Q: So one didn't distinguish?

A: No, it wasn't a real world. It was a night -- big, big night -- scary nightmare.

Q: Did Bert tell you about the radio reports, the underground radio?

A: I knew it, I knew it because this oral surgeon, this friend of ours, he was very technical. He could do anything with his hands and one day I come into the room and I see they're listening. I said, "Bert you're going to pay with your life." He said, "What does it matter? This way we, we could give people hope." They were spreading whatever they heard. Nothing about out lives. Only the western front, the eastern front, you know, Russia and the Allies and so on. This we knew. We knew exactly because they were listening.

Q: Did they ever hear the reports from the Polish government in exile from Britain and what they were doing on the radio then?

A: No, no, no. They just had reports were approaching our midst because they were already liberated in I think in '44. The Lódz ghetto was way before us liberated. I think in January of '44 and we were liberated in '45 in April. They were liberated by the end of '44, the Lódz ghetto. The end of '44 beginning of '45. This was they ended. We still had a year to go.

Q: What was that last deportation? You were on the last deportation?

A: We, we were on the last deportation. Bert went to Koenigswusterhausen with the men and the women. I went to Ravensbrück.

03:15:03

Q: And how long were you there?

A: They sold us after we came in Nov -- October. I was there maybe three weeks. They sold us right away. They put us out naked in November and the young Germans came to look us over, the transport, you know. The only thing was missing they didn't look at our teeth because they looked everything over. It was a very nice transport, young women, professional young women. And they sold us so we went to this working camp from Ravensbrück.

Q: Did they select some people out from your group or did you all go?

A: Older women with a few children went to the camp Bert was where the men, where Biebow's[15] people went -- Biebow's camp. This is where they went. And the young women, that we were, we were staying there and sent to, to the camp to work.

Q: What was the name of the camp?

A: It was, first we were in Ravensbrück and they sent us to Tzana Arado. There was this airplane factory, Arado, this is where we were.

Q: What, what do you remember about Ravensbrück? Was this -- you were there for a couple of weeks?

A: I was -- what can I tell you? They also had crematorium also there. They, they did check us out. We had an obstetric doctor. You know, I was -- they knew very little because they were checking me out and injecting something. I don't know what it was and I heard one woman talking to the other, "Oh, she's a virgin." You see how little they knew because I was already a married lady. They, after the war, I had problems conceiving and my brother told me that the, the obstetrician that checked me out, a friend, said that I need a miracle that I will never make it, they exper -- because of the experimentation. It took me a long time. It took me over a year and, and running from one doctor to another and a miracle happened. I conceived.

Q: So, they injected you with you something?

A: Yeah.

Q: More than once?

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[15] Hans Biebow (1902-1947) was the head of the Lódz Ghetto administration

A: Once, once when we first arrived. They shaved everybody's head. I wasn't shaved because before we left I said to Bert, you know if they have to do the job I better do it by myself and had a crewcut like a boy's cut. So, they didn't touch me.

03:18:03

Q: Before you left Lódz?

A: Be-before we left the hospital, you know. We were in a hospital together, like a camp, before they sent us out on the trip. So, I, I told you we had the last supper there and I cut my hair so short, they didn't touch me because everybody was bald. They, they really cut -- shaved -- them.

Q: Where did you get that idea from to cut your hair?

A: I don't know. I told you I lived by my intuition most of the time, not by my wits, by my intuition. I has a terr-it scares me sometimes because sometimes things are going to happen and I know in advance. I saw it and I lived it and I keep on telling Bert, "Listen to me because every time you listen to me you know I'm right," and now he, we had to wait so many years for him to find out that I'm right, the intuition.

Q: When you got to Ravensbrück, did you begin to find out what had been happening in the, in the camps?

A: Yes, you see, we were privileged. We lived on the gypsy block, 2,000 gypsies and they were so proud being German gypsies, they treated us to cruelly you wouldn't believe it. You know Paroe. they said he never went to the bathroom, the same happened to us, because as soon as we would go to, to do what we had to do, they would, they would drag us out. They would never let us go to the toilet. So, when we came to the factory, you know, every morning at 5:00 o'clock in the morning we were already walking for miles to go to the factory, this is where I washed, I told you, and this is where we did what we had to do because we couldn't do it in Ravensbrück.

Q: Could you speak with each other, they gypsies?

A: I spoke German so it was no problem. You had an advantage if you, if you could communicate. It helped so much more. My life was really saved by Princess Potocka, a very known Polish family. She was a young woman of 30 that time and she was working with us in the factory in Arado, and she had an, an affair going with some German Meister[16] or something. He was in charge, a German fellow, and then one SS woman

[16] Master (German)

from the kitchen, she was in charge fell in love with her. She was a very attractive woman and brought her over to the kitchen, wouldn't let her go anymore to the factory.

03:21:05

So I became the mailman. It, it isn't funny because I paid almost with my life once, but I was getting letters from her to give it to him. Before I went home in the evening, he would give me a note for her and I would stick it somewhere, you know, and every night when I came to the camp I would have a big bowl of very thick soup and I would share it with my mother, with Bert's sister and another young girl was very sick -- heart condition, I would share it with her, too. She passed away a few months later, but she saved my life. I mean, all right, I did a job for her but for until the liberation every single day I came I could count on a good soup and I think this kept me going.

Q: Was the work hard in Zana, in the airplane factory?

A: Yes, it is hard because a little woman sitting with a, with a air hammer, which you know the body goes and the whole thing goes, it is hard and I wasn't the best worker, either. Yes, it was hard, but I was lucky. I really was. I was lucky the fellow that was in charge of where I worked, a German also, he was very nice to me, a married man, middle age, and he felt sorry for us so this poor women coming here and struggling. He would bring me a butt of a cigar, he would bring me from his wife a pair of pants. At least I had a pair of pants to change. He would make me a comb so my hair started to grow out. I could -- he was really nice, nice to me, wonderful. With this butt, you know, I could get two pieces of bread for that. And this is how I survived. After the war we said thank you to him.

Q: And now you were injured in some way in Zana, is that right? You had blood poisoning?

A: Oh, I have -- see this? A souvenir for life, yeah. From this metal, I got probably a, a cut and I had poisoning and there was one SS woman, young we called her Snow White because she was so charming and so gentle with us. She had to watch over us, you know, so we don't escape or anything else, and she went with me with when I had this in three places at the same time I had this blood poisoning.

03:24:01

She took me to, to a doctor that came with us on the transport, a young Jewish woman, and she took the tweezers, just pulled it off. Opened up the -- and I don't know how it healed. It took a long time, you know, complications, but it healed. It seems that a young person can survive everything. So I was lucky that people took to me and I was lucky. I was really lucky.

Q: Were you ever hurt or beaten?

A: No, I wasn't.

Q: Not your mother?

A: My mother was, I wasn't. My mother shortly before the liberation when the Allies start to bomb, people got very uneasy, very nervous. The natives, the natives, and they took out Hälftling,[17] we were Hälftling, you know. They took us out, they took the women, which didn't go to the factory to dig the anti-aircraft ditches. And I don't know what happened. My mother didn't move fast enough. They beat her up, but how -- I didn't believe she was going to make it. She was all over black and blue. But they didn't touch me.

Q: How do you account for your mother's spirit and her ability to keep you going?

A: I, I thought, I thought that, I always thought that she was a very smart woman, very bright woman. She was a young woman, after the war she was in her beginning 40s but people were always, all the people coming for advice to her because she was that kind of a person that everybody liked her. She corresponded with the whole world. The letters she was receiving even after she passed away and the pictures and so on. I saw it. She was a strong personality, you know and the chance of survival was much better than somebody that is very frugal, you know, frail.

Q: And she was really important to you?

A: Yes.

Q: Tell me about the -- I don't know how to -- we use the word liberation but it's such a long process. What, what are you thinking of?

A: I think about that you are never liberated. I'm going to freak out I know it. Can we stop?

03:27:01

Q: Irene could you describe the period of time when it looks as if the war is going to be over, what we seem to be calling liberation. What went on?

A: We didn't know when it's going to be over until the moment it was over, because here we were in this working camp. It's true that they didn't, they didn't do anything to us. They didn't rape us. They didn't -- we were caged and went to work and came from work and we didn't know until the 26th of April '45 when we saw the women SS and the men

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[17] Nazi term for persons incarcerated in a concentration, slave labor, or other type of camp (German).

packing stuff and going away. Suddenly we saw everybody is running and we didn't budge. We didn't move because where could we go. To whom could we run? And this is how we found out about the we are free, free to what?

Q: What did you do during the bombardments?

A: I was lying on my with, with my mother on the bunk. We, we didn't move. In the beginning we did, but later on we didn't even move. We didn't have the energy. We were walking for hours every day. We didn't have clothes. We were wearing like blue jeans uniforms, not even with long sleeves, you know. We didn't have anything. It was cold and, and we were hungry and we didn't have any, any hygienic possibilities, you know? They gave us a very watery, like a Kamillentee[18] soup. You know, I used it to wash, I didn't eat it. This was only to drink, but I needed it to wash. We didn't, we didn't know what was going on until we saw it.
Then when everybody was running, the people started to look for food. They went to this factory restaurant they went, and they had a warehouse full of food and they start to grab it and eat it and there's so many got dysentery and all kinds of -- and I was just the opposite. I was organizing the food and giving it away to everybody. I couldn't eat. I didn't need to eat anymore.

Q: Who were the soldiers that came in?

A: We had the Russian soldiers that came in.

Q: Were they kind?

A: Very much so. To us they were, you know, like people say, they were raping -- they didn't have to rape. The German women were standing in line to be, to be raped, to get a bar of chocolate or some cigarettes.

03:30:03

They didn't have to rape. In any case, we were ten women in a, in a house after the liberation when they starting shooting everybody. I was the youngest woman there and all these ladies with their daughters, they wanted to, they wanted to run with me. And the Russian soldiers, they were fighting. It was on the Elbe River, the fighting going on. This is where we were located and they, they told us not to go in groups because the Germans will think it's military and they will start shooting so I ran and all these people ran after me and we came to a small town already Russian occupied. I went to the Kommandant[19] and he gave us a house of a German doctor that run away. He gave us a soldier to stay all

[18] Chamomile tea (German)

[19] Commander (German)

night long to, to watch over us so I can't complain. We were very -- I was very lucky. We were lucky. We always had nice people to take care of us.

Q: And you didn't know what was happening to Bert or where he was?

A: No, I didn't, I didn't know. I didn't know. They told me that he's dead and I didn't give up. I was looking for him every where. After the war I told you we were in this small town on the Elbe River, the Commandant made me a translator, you know. German, I spoke already English and Russian and we didn't have -- it was like a hole in the wall. It was far away, we didn't have any, we didn't have anybody to communicate with and one day a young man, 18 years old, comes to our door. He's, he's looking some place to live, a young boy, a Polish boy. So, my mother said to me, "You know Irene, we will take this boy in." Maybe somebody would take care of David. We did. It's a long story. Through him I found Bert. And Dora, Dora was with us. Bert I found through him, through this young boy.

Q: How?

A: He was, he spoke fluent Russian. He came from the Russian part of Poland, you know. Speaking Rus -- speaking, they spoke Russian, and the boy made accqua-acquaintances and we were close to Berlin, very short distance to Berlin and he would go to Berlin.

03:33:02

He was smuggling. I was working for the commander and I had to go and buy pro -- get provisions for the commander and I did it. So, to the commander went a part and a part went to our house where all the ten of us were living. They had, I ate with the commandant, it was a group. And one day this -- Genneg(ph) was his name -- came home and he said there is a nunnery and they have men, they are all swollen up from hunger after the concentration camp. He's very sick and they don't have enough food for. So, my mother started to make packages. We had plenty of food and this Genneg took the bicycle and every day he delivered the food. Came a time when he comes and he says he's all right he's going back to Lódz and he wants you to, to write down your names and where you are and I said to my mother, so we write. He will throw it away some place. Mother says, "But it doesn't harm you to write it down," so we did. He went to Lódz, he put it at the town hall and my brother was there with a friend and the friend says, "Look, this is your mother and Irene here." He knew where to find us and he found us. This, this was he found us. The men survived and he was grateful and, and he gave me a chance to find my brother. And then my brother they, they started him to get involved, you know to translate and so on and I started and he told me that he heard that Bert was alive. He didn't know where but he knows he's alive. So, there is nothing for me to do here anymore, I'm going to look for him. Went to Berlin, got the papers because at that time -- Germany was divided already, English zone, American zone and so on -- got the papers and I brought over the first transport of people from Berlin to the English zone, 60 people

of us. We come to Brunswick, this is two hours from Han-Hannover, I think a short distance from, and I am at the railroad station with Dora and I said -- my mother was left behind with my brother in this small town -- I said we have to get on this train no matter what. And as we talk a young man comes over and he recognized me and I said you know I heard that my, my husband is alive but I'm looking for him.

03:36:02

So he says you know I have to tell you something. Your husband is an angel. Why? He was working in the town hall, Bert, voluntary, and this man, it was curfew after the war. Certain times you couldn't move around and you needed papers, identification. Bert wrote him out the papers and gave him everything and he wanted to give him money. So, Bert says when I do for someone a fa-favor I don't take pay for it and go and Gesundheit.[20] I met this fellow at the railroad station and he told me where Bert was. I knew where he was. So, we got on this train at four in the morning. You know people were hanging on trains. You didn't have a regular, you know -- it was right after the war. We got there to Hannover and then the experience how we met it was just unbelievable. But it's a long story, too long. But we met. I found him.

Q: Then what did you do?

A: And then, Dora thought I didn't have feelings because when I saw him not one tear came out of my eye. I was just like a, like a piece of ice. I couldn't, I couldn't comprehend and I didn't believe it's real because every man I saw on the street I thought it was Bert. Well, but then two days later, I got very, very sick. The reaction was delayed. It came later, so, yeah, then we started our life.

Q: You stayed in Hannover for a while?

A: Four years. '49 we left, '45 we met, August '45 and in '49 we came to the United States.

Q: Was that difficult to be in Germany for those years?

A: It was very difficult because every stone was full of blood and we knew it, and we, whenever we looked at a German we thought maybe you were the killer of my father.

Q: Did you want to come to the United States?

A: Yes, yes, we wanted to. We wanted to come to the United States.

Q: So, were you trying for four years to come?

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[20] God bless you (German)

A: Yes, we registered and then we, we waited for better times.

Q: Were, were you both able to speak English at this time?

A: Yes. Oh, I didn't tell you this most important thing. When I met Bert I didn't speak German, and he didn't speak Polish and we communicated in English. And my wedding band and his was inscribed in English.

03:39:01

I wrote him down for better and for worse and he wrote me down forever yours, and the two rings survived, yeah. My daughters have one and the other one has the second.

Q: Now had you both learned English prior to meeting?

A: Oh, yes. Oh, sure. We grew up with learning, with languages. I told you I loved languages, and they came very easy to me.

Q: And what was it like for you when you came to this country? Was this, was this difficult?

A: Sure it was difficult because we didn't have anybody. Bert started to work the second day we came here. He started to walk the waterfront of New York and he saw help wanted. So he was sweeping -- with all his education he was sweeping the floors. Six months later he was the administrator of the place, of the factory and he stayed there for a while. They wouldn't give him a break. He wouldn't get paid right for what he was doing. He quit.

Q: Did you work?

A: Oh, I worked, I worked all the time.

Q: What did you do?

A: I was a buyer, department stores.

Q: So, you picked up, you picked up where your parents left off?

A: I don't know, you see, when I went to Queens I took merchandising and so to be a buyer you didn't need a degree. You didn't need to be educated. You had to have your common sense and, and know what you were doing, but they sent me there and I started to work in this firm and I worked all this, through the different stages because we were moving a lot. Bert was traveling and we were moving. We went to Scranton. We were in many places.

Q: Did people ask you questions about your life during the war or did they ignore it?

A: Nobody asked me, and I never answered until now.

Q: Do you think people learned?

03:42:00

A: No. I told you about our friend in Munich. When we saw him last time and we were talking he said you know Irene, these Germans, our people didn't learn yet. They didn't learn from all the experience and it's so true. Nobody learned because we thought it was going to be a great world that people learned from their mistakes and it's going to be a good place to be alive and live and -- but look what happens. It's worse than before the second world war. All the signs are there. All this hatred.

Q: So, it's very frustrating?

A: It is, it is.

Q: Even if one tells the truth?

A: Pardon me?

Q: Even if one tells the truth.

A: Yes, because a lot of people don't believe you. With all the signs, with all the corpus delecti,[21] they have everything there and the people, the soldiers, the American soldiers that came into these places and smelled the stench and, and saw this, this cruelty and people still deny it, and they're young people. The future leaders of this country...Don't make me cry again.

Q: Is there anything that we have forgotten to talk about that you'd like to talk about?

A: No, there's too much to talk about that you couldn't -- you could spend the whole few days talking about it.

Q: Why do you want to talk about it now?

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[21] Body of the crime (Latin)

A: Because, because, now that we are here. That people are denying the Holocaust. No, you just can't let it because the, the future generations have to avoid anything like happen again, and it can happen anywhere.

Q: Is there something particular you'd like to say to your children or to other people's children who might watch this about your life and about your experience?

A: Oh, my life is not extraordinary. It's just a life of one of the six millions or more, and what would I want to say. Just watch out because you have to be very vocal. You just can't go and talk or mix in or, or, or getting assimilated into this everything will work out. It won't. You have to work for it. You have to do something about it to make it a better tomorrow.

Q: When you look at contemporary history now with Rwanda and Bosnia do you, do you wonder if civilization can ever change? Does it depress you?

A: It's -- I think that people can change. People can change, but what we lack is leadership. You need somebody to look up to. This is how it used to be with the movies, you know, young people I remember when I was young you went to a movie you had an idol. People that did good things and, and they were heroes. What kind of heroes do we have today? To whom could we look up to? Do you know someone that you can look up to?

Q: Do, do you understand why people sometimes criticize Rumkowski? He has -- do you think it's totally inappropriate?

A: I think it's inappropriate because I can be objective about it. I saw everything happening. I lived through it. If not him not one person would survive from the Lódz ghetto because it would be annihilated in '42 they want to do it. So, he started to deal with them. We give you anything you want, workmanship. We have good workers in every field. Give us food. And he was stretching the days, stretching them, and because of him a lot of people survived. But you know, every -- a lot of people have grudges. You do something good for them 10 times, 11 times you can't -- you make an enemy. The 10 times are forgotten. This is why I, I think it is disappointing but what can I say? Who am I to say anything? Nobody can judge. Nobody can judge that didn't live through it.

Q: Thank you.

A: Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

03:46:57

End of Tape #2
Conclusion of Interview