

Interview with Irena Frisch
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Teaneck, New Jersey

My name is Irene Frisch. My maiden name used to be Bienstock. In Poland it was Irena Bienstock. I was born on May 3, 1931 in a small town in Poland. The town was called Drohobycz. I had a very nice childhood until the war. I grew up as the youngest of three children of Izrael and Ewa Bienstock. My father was in thread? business. He was a very prosperous businessman who was quite known in the town, who had many friends. I don't say it was a poor family and it was very privileged, rich life. I am here to tell you my story because I feel I owe it to Frania Osobkowa. Her maiden name was Babecka. She was a very proud Polak, a Polish woman, very devout Catholic, the most beautiful human being I have seen in my life, good and selfless and helpful and it is her that I am thankful, that it is for her that I am here today to tell my story. Frania worked in our house as a housekeeper. My mother hired her when she was very young and she came to work for us before I was born. She took care of my older brother, of my sister and then eventually with me. It's time to say that at the beginning she didn't like me because she resented having to take care of three children. She knew all her friends had only two children to take care of and here she is, stuck with three children. My mother understood that she was very devoted to us so my mother didn't want to lose her and after a time she hired somebody else to take care of me. But after a while she got very careless and we never could have anybody, and Frania, of course, she was not educated, she didn't know how to write or to read. She was a very intelligent woman and today when I see the children are insecure and have to go to psychologists, I am thinking how lucky I was to be brought up by a woman who had so much common sense that we never had any security problems. We always believed that we were the best, smartest and most beautiful. Frania believed this and she instilled it in us. And I am very grateful to her for many, many things in my life. During the war, we were not, in the beginning, we were not really touched with that. She was already a mature woman and she lived outside of our house. Her husband went to war and she did not have any children and she was working menial work in a factory and when the time came that my parents saw that there was absolutely no way for me to survive, that as a last resort, they sent somebody ahead and asked her if she could help out. And she said, "Naturally, I expect to take care of them. And if you are not here after the war, I will have her christened and she will grow up as my child".

I know how to pray in Polish because of the prayers more better than I know my own prayers. She taught me I -- know it all -- I know about holidays. I spent with her two and a half years. I remember we didn't have much to eat, we were very, very poor because my mother did not have any -- she eventually took in my mother and my sister. We didn't have any money, we lost everything and we had to live on the little money that she was earning in the factory which maybe would have been enough for one person but she had to feed four people on that. Most of the time we were hungry. Frania went to a neighbor and was offered a cup of tea with a lump of sugar. She would sneak the sugar in her pocket and bring it home. My mother and two children; I wonder if I could do it for my children.

Basically, even today I believe in providence and I believe in things that happened because they were meant to be. I do not believe too much in praying. I have seen many times in life that things have been just because probably God meant it so or whatever we call some kind of spiritual power. It is interesting how we were rescued by Frania, how Frania came into our life. When my mother was a cucooman, she helped me find my other brother, and he was a little chubby, cute baby. Once she took the baby in the carriage and went to park. On the way to park, she was stopped by a young peasant girl, who like most of the peasants in Poland, was wearing a long skirt in front of the wading pool and she was very poor and she was barefoot. She stopped by my mother's carriage and she said, "Oh, what a beautiful baby you have there!" Naturally, each young mother thinks that her baby is beautiful and she was very flattered and she says really because it was a boy so my mother told her. And she said, "Can I stop and play with him a little bit?" And she took the rattle and was playing and my mother saw that she liked the baby. She told her how old she was, maybe fifteen or sixteen years old and my mother said what are you doing here and she said you know, I come for the employment and my father died very young and I was working for the priests, I was ---. She started to work when she was five years old in the little village and she was minding the geese. The priest had some geese so he took a five-year old girl and gave her a stick and she was minding the geese. And then as she was growing up, she was promoted to more important jobs. She was helping in the kitchen, and in the gardens and when she was sixteen years old or fifteen, her mother said for her to start making some real money. Because in the village, she could not make any money, she just worked there and she got food. They were poor people with many children so food to feed a child was a treasure. So when she was like fifteen years old, she came to us. She said, "I came here, I told my mother -- I came here to look for a job". What do you want to do? "I would like to care of a child, help in the house". So my mother said come to me, you have a job. She had a little kerchief and in her kerchief, she had (????????????????) . So, my mother brought her home, people didn't ask for references like people ask today and they gave her a bed. She was very happy to take care of the baby, mostly, it was more to it. She was very good to him and from my parents, it was very thoughtful that they could realize that we had more help in the house. But she really took care of my brother and then my sister and as I have mentioned before, I came along. I don't think I was really _____, it was not the style of middle class, upper class people to have three children. It was stylish to have one or two but when I came along she was very mad that she did not really want to bother with me too much so my parents had to hire somebody else, you may remember. I was told many times about this, my brother and sister used to tease me, Frania doesn't like you like she likes us but eventually she did love me as much as anybody else. So when I came into hiding, she took me from ghetto, as I mentioned to you, she came at night, she took me out and we went walking and we went singing the carols and even today I remember the carols and I love Christmas like very much. As a matter of fact, the first Christmas after I married, already, in the United States, I was with my husband our first Christmas in Atlantic City and I said _____ because I don't believe you -- the Catholic religion. Today I am a practicing Jew more or less, and I said to my husband we have to go to services so, my friends, Christmas as a married woman, I went with my husband in Atlantic City to Christmas Night which was not as meaningful as it was in

Poland but she took me out of the ghetto on Christmas Night and she took me to her house and took very good care of me. And gave me very much love. Then she thought I am not happy, I was missing my parents, so she brought over my sister and my mother. She could not do much for my father because she did not have much space in her apartment. We were lucky to meet my father after the war. Most of my friends, my Jewish friends, did not survive. I had very wonderful friends from before the war that didn't survive the war. Since Frania was basically a very poor woman and did not have much money, she lived in a very small apartment. It was one room, that was living room, dining room and everything and a small kitchen and there was no place for us to hide--- it was very starkly furnished, she had the bed, one bed, she had the sofa and she had a closet, but this -was it, a small closet, a table and four chairs. There was not much room for us, no place to hide. But in Europe, the bed was fixed with all kinds of pillows, and covers and then you had a big, long bedcover and the bedcover would go to the floor. When I was alone, for a while, I would get along without my mother and without my sister, I was spending all my days underneath the bed. I was not allowed to move because neighbors shouldn't hear. It was an apartment, not really, the apartment she lived in, she shared with another family so there was not even a wall between the two apartments. It was one big apartment broken into two or three, and they were separated by a door so on the other side of the door there lived another family. If I would move during the day and the neighbors knew that Frania was at work, it would be very suspicious so I was not even allowed to cough, not to breathe loud because on the other side of the door there lived a family, there lived an older woman who was all day at home and she would have noticed that something is going on in the apartment. They all knew that Frania is at work so I practically stayed under the bed most of the time. However, I suppose, maybe, at one point the neighbors grew, somehow, suspicious. Maybe, they didn't grow suspicious, maybe it looked so. There was a point when I was _____ with my mother and my sister and we found out that the ghetto is being liquidated. It means that all the Jews from ghetto have been killed. Frania, in the evening, went to the bathroom or something, which was on the outside of the porch and she started to talk to a neighbor and the neighbor made some comment about the Jews being killed and the neighbor was not very sorry about it, no, and the neighbor said to Frania, "Do you know what? Some of our people are stupid enough to help the Jews?" She said what did that mean. "Some of our people are hiding the Jews!" Now, you can imagine. Frania came home and we had altercation, we were close enough. We got very upset and Frania said to my mother, "I had a feeling that she suspects something". Maybe she didn't suspect, maybe it was just a general statement, but Frania had a plan. So the next day she decided she's not going to work. Somehow she notifies the place of work, there's no telephone so she notifies the place of work and she says "I'm not coming to work today. I have to take a kitchen day", or whatever she made up. She told her neighbor my house is really so neglected, I have to take general cleaning, make general cleaning ... She opens all her windows, all her doors and started to tear the apartment apart, cleaning. She wanted the people to see, to come in, to be able to come in to the apartment and to see that she really does not have anyone. So, as evidence, we have to go from under the bed because it's too dangerous. She put my mother in a closet. She put my mother in a closet which looked like today's armoire and my poor mother was sitting in that closet, my mother was a tall woman, taller than I and I am not a small thing. My sister and I were stuffed in a

box. The box looked like a huge suitcase, not a suitcase, a chest, some kind of chest that was really given to her by my parents. My father was bringing furs?? His merchandise from the groat in that chest. My sister and I, we were sitting, like forged together in that chest, an she opened a little bit the cover and put something, some food, we should not choke on it. We cover and we were sitting there for two hours rigid, not being able to move. Finally, after Frania made big order in the house, airing, took the beds apart, took the mattresses outside so the people could see and neighbors came in and 'Oh, Mrs. Osobkowa we have never been to your room'. So she showed her apartment, the mattress was out and the bed was empty. Nobody could even believe that there was --- that some things were ---. She was very resourceful and a very intelligent woman to do that. It was month of the infidel??

I remember another incident when she came home in the evening from work and was completely pale. We could see that her face was white and she said, ---. My mother said, "Frانيا what happened? It seems that you are very disturbed." Frانيا said, "Yes, as I was coming home, I passed by the market". It was the main place of the town so for Drohobycz, it was like a market place. "And you know what I saw? They caught a family of Jews that were hidden by Polish people and they hanged them in the marketplace. Together they were hanging. The Jewish people together with the Polish people". So my mother said, "You know, Frانيا, I feel so sorry for you". So she said, "Don't feel sorry for me". She had two big pictures of saints, Maria and Jesus. She too the big picture of the man, holy picture and hung it over my mother's sofa. She going to take care of it. This today when I travel with my husband, I always come in a town, I always go to church. And I always give money and I always take a candle and light it. She believed, my good friend.

I could tell you many more stories about Frانيا's generosity and beautiful hands. I remember one day when we went to sleep. We were very poor, we were very hungry. We had nothing already to sell and we went to sleep often, very hungry. We didn't _____. And at night, we hear somebody moving around. I open my eyes and see Frانيا shaking and she says, get up. I say, what is it? She says, I don't know, I couldn't sleep. I cooked something. I found some black flour in the kitchen on cupboard and I make little dumplings and I put a little saccharine. Come, we'll all eat together. She woke up my mother and my sister to share the food with me. Then came Christmas and we wanted to do something for her because she was believing in Christmas and it was important to her. We knew that it is important and we also knew that she was deprived of many things because she had to share everything with us. So I remember my sister was quite resourceful and found some old pajamas or whatever and made a little baby dress out of it. She was a young girl, but very dainty. She made some little things. We gave it to Frانيا and she went to the market. She sold it. She had a little money. I still remember the little apron or dress that my sister made or maybe it was a baby dress and an apron. She was like fourteen -- or fifteen years old girl but she was very good with her hands. We had a little bit money and Frانيا bought some flour, maybe some pottery. I don't think we had _____ money then. And then we went to another baking, cakes for her. The cakes were a sort of pancake. We cannot remember. We didn't have yeast, so we couldn't grow. We put some kind of powder. I remember when we often would take

the _____ to bite. They were flat. They were not good. We pretended that they were cake. It was Easter. She came from the church. In Poland, it is very important to bring the food, the priest should bless it. She took the food cakes to church and the food cake was blessed. And we pretended that everything is good and delicious. We actually started like that. Then, the Russians were coming closer and closer. We never knew what is going on outside. Naturally she didn't have a radio. She couldn't buy a newspaper because it would be suspicious. People, her neighbors, knew that she did not know how to write or to read. So she would come up with a newspaper, it would have to be everything we did had to be very calculated. But we heard some noises, we heard like shooting, artillery going. One day, the Russians came to the town and we were liberated. We went out. She did not want ever mention, her neighbors to know about it because I am embarrassed to tell you that many of the neighbors were very anti-Semitic and many said that it was good that the Jews were killed. So she did not want to antagonize the neighbors so we came out. And we couldn't come back to the house because we did not want to embarrass her in front of her neighbors. I don't remember such a great childhood. We had very bad experience because the Russian soldiers were not nice to us. They say to my mother, you must have done something wrong. You must have collaborated with the Germans. Otherwise you wouldn't have survived. We were expecting so much sympathy from a _____ after the war and we were all the time planning what the whole world is going to try to compensate us for our experience. This came from the Russian soldiers and they said, when my mother told them she was Jewish, "You must have collaborated with the Germans. Otherwise ---" So, you know, we had double problems, you know. So we found some other Jewish family and we stuck together for two days until we found some kind of an apartment. We had nothing to eat, we had no food, we had no money. My mother found, met someone, an old friend, also a Jewish woman, who unfortunately lost her two sons and survived with her husband in Poland. And when she told my mother of the two children, she gave her some money. She had some money left. She gave my mother money and said go and buy meat for you, buy some bread. And very soon my mother got to Frania and was working _____. She got a job in a dairy of some kind of, not factory, but they were doing all kinds of making or producing their product. And whenever she could steal something, she would bring it to us. Then she never stopped caring.

What I wanted to say, that eventually we left Poland and in 1949 or 1950, we left Poland and we went to Israel. As I mentioned before, I am the third of three children. And we are only two today. I had a brother who was five and a half years older than me and in the beginning of the war, he got sick and due to bad conditions, he could not be properly diagnosed. Just today, I talk to my sister, and we are wondering what really happened to him. I have a feeling that he had walking pneumonia. He was fourteen years old when he died, at the very beginning of the war. It was a terrible tragedy; it was the first time that I encountered death. In the time later, it became a daily trend. I have seen it so many times that ---. But it was the first time, it was a terrible tragedy, _____ of all families. Needless to say, Frania was shattered, almost unbelievable, as my mother. They went together to the funeral and they were both crying like they both loved him very, very much. She still, to the end, always talked about him. It was her baby, it was the baby that changed her whole life. This was the baby, that because of the baby she

came into our family. The baby was fourteen years old. He was very big, he was very tall, he was a huge young man, to have him for her baby. Many times later, my mother said, you know, Frania, it is a good thing that he died. Because if he didn't die, he would be killed. This one got killed, and this -- most of his friends got killed. And Frania would say, no, I would never let him be killed. I would have prevented it. So, we were left in the ghetto with our parents. In 1945, one year after our town was liberated, we still did not live together. Frania was still embarrassed that she saved Jews. She came to our house only in the evening, people shouldn't see, but we were in constant touch. We had seen that? Over time, Polish people would be evacuated to the new Polish territory and we all left Poland. We considered ourselves Polish citizens and all Polish citizens left. Only the Ukrainians remained there. We were traveling in very primitive trains and it took a long time, four weeks, until we arrived at our destination. Many, many times that she was traveling with us together, we were already together, and one more thing. People came from concentration camps and people told us that they saw my father in Auschwitz, in Plaszow, in Bielitz, in Germany, in different concentration camps. There were even some people who said that he was dead. There were some men that came to my mother and said, "You are a widow. Why don't we get married?" Men _____ who loved their families. My mother was not interested in getting married again and we were going to Poland and we were sure that my father is dead. One morning, on the train, I was sleeping, as usual, next to Frania, and she woke me up. She said, "Look, who is here!" I had a pet name that they called me at home, when I was a little girl. She always called me by that name, a funny little name and she called me by that name. She shook me and said, "Look who is here." Here I see my father stepping in front of the train, in front of our compartment, tall and handsome and dashing through the train, well dressed, with a big bag and I thought I see a ghost. I was screaming and I was petrified. I jumped on him and he was there, he was real, he hugged me and he kissed me. A few minutes later, I say, "Daddy, what do you have in that bag?" Because I remember when he was coming from all his trips from the road, before the war, there was always most beautiful gifts for us. Believe it or not, he was not sure that we were alive. Somebody had some vague rumors that we were alive but he attributed them to _____. He had very fancy raincoats for my sister and for me, blue raincoats and they were in that bag! So when I opened the bag, here was a gift for me. He had prepared just in case he needed them. We were reunited with Father and for the next few months, my father, every day after business, he was taking home, closing the door, closing the windows, and my father would tell us horror stories about concentration camps. Horror stories. The last year, I went for a visit to Poland and from Cracow, I took a tour, a bus to Auschwitz. When I was walking through Auschwitz, it seemed to me that I was there before because I saw all the places that my father was telling us. What happened here and what happened there, for a month, everything he walked, _____. He was telling us how this died and how that died and how this died and all the people that we knew, young boys, young girls, people, how -- what people went through, he sat every evening and we were listening to him talk about the problem. So when I came to concentration camp, to Auschwitz, I felt I know all about it, no doubt about it. It was not me talking.

Anyway, we lived in Legnica and I went through high school there. Right after the war, in Poland, also my father was a good businessman and financially we were doing okay.

But it was terrible and I could not _____. But somehow people manage and people look always for the good things, for the nice things, but there weren't very many people that were nice to us including a principal of Gamati who made up his mind, Professor Bodola -- he must be a dead man now because it was in 1946 or '47, that I went to this man. He decided that he does not know the Jewish kids in the high school, he was principal. And my father who was an educated man, told him that I knew how to talk to him and tells him that he will go to the Ministry of Education, of Department of Education in Warsaw to find out why I can't be admitted to this high school. So, he admitted me because he had no choice. But for two years, he made my life miserable. I cannot even begin to tell you and I don't know how I wanted so much to go to school. I know my kids never wanted so much to go to school and they had not the condition. It was the most important thing for me to go to school. Maybe because I missed it so much, I wanted to be part of -- have a normal life. So Professor Bodola was a principal of that high school, and was teaching classes and I was starting humanities in high school and I had every day from eight to ten o'clock, Latin. Every morning from eight to ten, he had the _____. No matter what I did, no matter what I say, my father hired a private tutor and the private tutor said to my father, I don't know, I cannot teach her any more because she knows almost as much as I do. But in the class, I always got an F. At one point, I was translating something, I don't remember and there was a word, tyrum?? _____ is a _____. So somebody said, have you ever seen a lamb?. I said yes, where? I said, in a meadow??? No answer. Sit down. And for two years, for three semesters, which was three quarters, I was getting an F and I was sure that I am going to fail. If you get one respect ?? So we had a very good _____. One day Mr. Bodola was removed. Apparently he did some other things that were not right and he was removed. And we got a new principal, Professor Kaploski. Somehow, I couldn't do anything wrong for him. I stopped studying at all. I sneezed, I got an A. No matter what, you know. It didn't do me any favor because I stopped studying completely on the subject he was teaching us. He taught us philosophy. I got A whatever I did so kind of feel in life, got to give you on one hand, taking away with the other hand. So whatever Bodola did for me, Professor Kaploski did the kind work. Recently I found a girl who is the late? Grown woman who lives in Mineka with a lawyer and she was one of the very few girls in high school who was a nice girl, it didn't bother her that I was Jewish, we talked together. After many, many years, I picked up, I found her. Maybe, I'm helping her a little bit. She wrote me a letter that she never knew that our friendship meant so much to me. She apparently looked at me as an ordinary schoolmate. It was very important that somebody in those days treated me normally. In the winter of 1949, the Jews were allowed to leave for Israel. My family decided to go to Israel and my parents offered Frania to go with us. They promised her, there were ways, with money you could arrange all kinds of -- an arrangement could be made, to transfer her to Israel although non-Jewish people were not allowed to go but we could have done it. She refused to go. She said, "You know I'm going to miss you very much but this is my country, this is my language, this is my religion, this is my priest. I go to church, I understand what the priest is saying, I belong here." So we left but we were heartbroken; we cried for months, all of us. We went to Israel, we would write the letter, it was very different. In Israel, in 1950, it was very difficult to live. The colonial?? Situation was very bad -- no food, nothing. The country was very poor. We didn't do too well. Then my sister got married

and she passed _____. We went to school, we studied, we went to the university but my sister we were sending Frania every cent we could spare, all countries from Israel. Some money, very little, we didn't have much. But I remember that one of the first lessons she was to give, "Now that you are in Israel, don't send me any more money. Your husband does not know me. It is not fair to him, he should send me money. I am a complete stranger." I don't think a mother could write a letter like that. She was not a wealthy woman, we left her provided but it was years, took her years, she was on and off. We always writing to her, we always send whatever we could. I came to the United States 31 years ago but I was always in touch with her, sent pictures, she sent pictures back. We sent packages to her and always she would say, please don't send, maybe your husband will be unhappy, maybe you will need it. She never took advantage of our situation but we did help her out. Eventually she took in, she was a very loving woman, she had a brother who had children and the brother was a poor man so she adopted one of his daughters and raised her as her own. She needed somebody to give love to. About 15 or 16 years ago, I found out that actually people in Gradzanowo, Poland were many _____.

I think you know what this time that you should be right. We bought a ticket, we split the money, my sister was in Atlanta, Georgia that day. We put together the money, the ticket was quite expensive; maybe it was 16, 17 years ago, we sent the ticket. Frania took the airport in Stupeka _____. She did the airport. When I left Poland, I was 18 years old. Here I am, a woman in my forties with my husband. I see that the aged woman, very, very, she was very worn out, I had never seen so many wrinkles in my life, came out of the gate and I came over and I said, "are you Mrs. Kobach?" She say, yes, yes. It looked like her. And I said it is me. Naturally we hugged, we kissed, we cried. She came to my house, she take tea. I must tell you what a great, generous woman. She came with a fruitcake, there was a china set for me, one for my sister, God forbid anybody should be jealous. There was a dancer? For my daughter, there was some kind of toy for my son. There were cufflinks for my husband, she didn't have that kind of money. _____ She came, a gallant woman with gifts, she cooked, she baked. I took her to the church on Fifth Avenue. Then she told me, you know, I still don't tell my friends, my neighbors what I did. She had all new neighbors and friends, she lived in a _____ I'll give _____ to confession. I thought, please my God, where am I going and who invited me but otherwise nobody knows. She was a woman in her sixties at the time. I never knew her age. But she had hard luck, as I mentioned she had started working when she was five years old, I took her to a department store and I dressed her, I bought her everything, shoes, stockings, dresses, coats, everything from A to Z. And each time, I brought her things, try this, try this, she'd say, please don't do it, your husband may get upset. I don't want you to do it. You have children, what of them. You keep the money for yourself. You have young children, you will need the money. She did not want to take a thing. The same thing with my sister, She takes three weeks with me and three weeks with my sister. She went to the church St. Patrick's a great pavilion and she said Gee the church is bigger than all the churches put together than I have seen in my life. I think this was the highlight of her life. Then we asked her to stay with us because we really loved her and we would have taken very good care of her. We asked her to stay a time. We lived a quite comfortable life, nothing special, but comfortable, not bad. There would be room for another. She chose not to. She says, you know, how would I go to church? How

would I understand what the priest ---. I said, Frania, look how many churches we have here. But she said, do they understand what the priest has to say. How will they go to confession? No, it is not for me. So she left. We kept in touch. She had the niece who would write the letters for her because she could not write, she was only signing the letters. And then one day, _____. We had the letter, she died. Then we got pictures of her already dead, all dressed up, the cemetery, the grief, the eternity, so this is the end of a beautiful relationship. Every year, I don't know exactly the date, I go by the church, I donate money. I am in touch with the niece. I send her some money. As a matter of fact, this week, I got a letter from her thanking me for the Christmas gift which was some money. I have seen that the niece be comfortable and the niece opened a little business and she wrote a letter to me. I opened my own business. I think this and my house is all thanks to you.