United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Interview with Carla Lessing
June 28, 1999
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PREFACE

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Beginning Tape One, Side A

Question: This is United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Jeff and Toby Herr collection, and this is an interview with Carla Lessing, conducted by Joe Richmond, on June 28th, 1999, in the Lessing home. And this is a follow up interview to the Memorial Museum videotaped interview, conducted with Carla Lessing, in 1990. And the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum grateful -- gratefully acknowledges Jeff and Toby Herr for making this interview possible. This is tape number one, side A. Let's start just with sort of a brief overview of your experiences during the war, before we move on to -- to after the war.

Answer: Yeah. I was born, and went to school in Holland, in The Hague, and in August of 1942, my mother and my brother and I went into hiding. My father had already died, in 1936. We had gotten a place to hide through the Jesuit, of the Catholic church, who were working in the Resistance, and they found a place to hide in The Hague, with a widow who took in Jews in order to -- not necessary help Jews, but to help her to go to heaven. That particular hiding place did not work out, because the -- the lady was so in -- exceedingly anxious that her sons, who knew about that we were hiding there, told us that we needed to leave. They did tell us that we were found out, but that was not really the truth. So then we went from The Hague, again to the Catholic church, we found another -- not we found, but th-the Underground found another place in Delft with a Catholic

family with seven children in a very small, little whole downstairs, where it was the barber shop and the beauty parlor, and we were upstairs, and we stayed there. We were supposed to be staying there temporarily because it was not a proper -- not proper -- it's not a good place to have three more people in the house, and especially three Jews, because there were seven children, it was very dangerous for the whole family. We did stay there until the end of the war, because my mother always told them that she did not want to be separated from her children. So we stayed there until the war was over in 1945, May fifth, 1945. We --

Q: Wh-Who was it -- Who made up your family? How many -- it was your mother, and --

A: My mother, my older brother, and myself. My father had already died. My grandparents, who had immigrated from Germany, and my uncle, who had immigrated from Germany in the 30's, were hiding in the eastern part of Holland, but we did not know where they were hiding. There was a little bit of contact between them and us, through a third party, who supplied us with ident -- false identity cards. So -- But we really didn't know where they wer -- we didn't know where anybody was, really. We didn't know that my uncle and aunt, and their little daughter had gone to Westerbork, and then were transported to Auschwitz. My uncle went to Sobibór, we didn't know where anybody was. I mean, we only found that out later. So that was really my immediate family, my mother, my brother, and I, and my mother didn't want to be separated from her children. My brother, at the beginning of the war in 1940, was 14, and I was 11. So, anything else that you would like to know about this?

Q: Well, during that time, how much information could you get when you were -- when you were in hiding? I mean, did you have any sense of what was going on either in the world, or how dangerous it was for you at that time?

A: I found out later that -- I wasn't aware, I was kind of numb during the war. I found out later that my brother would go in one -- in the only toilet of the -- of the house, and apparently the neighbors had a new radio, and they were listening to -- illegally to -- it was called ra -- Radio Oranga, Radio Orange [indecipherable] was -- it came from England, and he knew -- he -- he would listen very carefully what they had to say, what was going on. He did hear a little bit what's going on. We knew that the invasion of Normandy, for instance, we were very happy, because we thought we would be liberated quickly. And we knew that they -- all they had -- all -- came all the way to Ireland, I mean Holland, and -- I mean, we -- we heard some stuff, but we didn't know really the -- the -- the -- the -- the scale of the -- of the war, and the destruction of the Jews. We would hear planes coming over, going -- the German planes going to England, and the English planes going to Germany to bomb [indecipherable]. We -- I was really pretty numb, that's really what it was, so I was -- I just was kind of waiting for it to be over, and took a long, long, long time. You have nothing to do, [indecipherable] happen. Nothing to do, so days were very long, and nothing happened, you know.

Q: Was that one of the hardest, the boredom?

A: No, th-the -- the hardest thing was really the fear. Boredom was -- somehow you -- you know, as a g -- as a girl I would -- could -- if there was some food, we could peel

potatoes, I could knit, I could read. We were keenly aware that we were very much in the way, that we endangered the people we were hiding with, that there was not enough food. That we had -- somehow there was a terribly -- disturbance in the family, that my hiding mother was extremely anxious, that my hiding father was the one who wanted this, who did this, with all his heart. So we -- we -- we kind of picked up constantly these -- these -- these cues, I would say, from everyone. The children were angry, the little ones were -- the young ones in -- in that family were not -- you know, they -- they couldn't play the way they would play before, or talk, because they had to keep this a secret that we were there. A family would visit, we had to quickly go upstairs to the bedrooms, and then be very quiet. So it was a very tense situation. I -- Boredom was -- I would almost say secondary [indecipherable] you know, it was -- it was really the fear that any of us would do the wrong thing, and then it would leak out that we were hiding there, and then we would be sh -- sent to the camps, and al -- and of course, my hiding father would be also picked up and sent to the concentration camps. We didn't quite know that, but we knew it was extremely dangerous.

Q: You often mentioned in the videotaped interview about Walter?

A: Walter?

Q: Mm-hm.

A: Walter, Walter Verhane -- see, in Holland, that -- the -- the young man, who between 16, and whatever, older, 26 or so, were sent to the camps -- not the camps, to the -- they had to go work camps, yes, work camps. And he was -- he was the one who was called up

to go to one of those work camps in -- in -- in Germany. He decided to go and not to go into hiding. And luckily he came back. That was one of the most horrendous things for us, because we knew -- we always suspected he had gone there because we were in the house, and that he really couldn't go into hiding, because, well, we needed to find another place, they would be looking for him. And after the war, we -- we always heard that he suffered terribly. It was very difficult to think about, always, that he went there because of us, and I never realized how long he was there, he was there from 1943 to '45. I thought he was there maybe for a half year. So many, many years are -- many, many decades after the war, I wrote him a letter, and asked him exactly why he had decided to go to a work camp, and then he wrote back that he -- it was adventurous -- an adventure for him. I don't know if he was completely truthful. He was a very religious man and he believed that he -- that he would be saved, that he would not get hurt or killed. He had a terrible time there. He was -- He was imprisoned there, I found out later. I -- I mean, I -- I -- I probably heard this all in 1945, but somehow I pushed it away, and he -- I found out later that he had been in a work camp, and then he said something that -- against the German nation, and somebody revealed that to -- I don't know to whom, and he was eventually taken to prison in Germany.

Q: Did you -- So, did you continue a correspondence with him [indecipherable]

A: Yeah, well, I go regularly to Holland, I mean, regularly every three years, four years, five years, and we always meet up. And he has done -- which is very interesting, he has made contact with other people who were in there, in [indecipherable] were in the same

prison, in the same workcamp, and they have a reunion, so they have done quite, you know, similar thing what we have done, kind of come out, and talked to others who were in the same situation, and he even wrote about it, and I have his -- his story. So --

Q: What was the name of his story?

A: I don't know. I re -- can't remember. I [indecipherable] can't remember. I don't know if he gave it a name yet, or -- but, you know, it's just a personal memoir.

Q: So what was the relationship like between your family and your hiding family? It was [inaudible]

A: During the time, it was very -- it -- very tense at times. After the war, we would -- we still -- we always go there, although my -- my hiding parents are dead now, but I -- when I'm in Holland, I always visit with them. My brother always sends them -- he's in Israel -- he sends, around Christmas [indecipherable] he sends oranges, or -- or grapefruits from Israel. We call at Christmas, and we call at birthday, to the er -- just the oldest d-daughter, not all -- not all seven of them, but one or two are -- have -- one -- one of the sons is very angry with us, because they thought that my mother was very rich, that she had a lot of money, and that she didn't give enough money for our hiding to her parents. My mother was very poor, she was a widow. The -- The other childs, that's the one, two, three, fourth oldest, and there is another one who also doesn't feel so comfortable because they think that, you know, he -- we should have given more money. We didn't -- My mother didn't have money, and they were paid very little through the underground, or through my uncle, who was -- he was -- as a fact, he was in hiding in -- in -- in the east of

Holland, and I think they sent like, only some money, cause he owned a factory. With the others, it's -- it's -- it's a pretty good relationship. We always have to be thankful for them because we -- now the children, you know, they -- they are aware that they suffered, too, while we were in hiding there, and the interesting thing is this happened very recently, I got -- for our 50th anniv -- wedding anniversary, we got a letter from the third oldest child, who is really -- I would almost say obsessed with the war. He reads everything, he talks second World War, and -- all the time, and he now has written -- he wanted us to read this during our party, but we didn't because we had to translate this, and it wasn't quite appropriate. But in the -- in this particular letter that he -- was sent the 10th of May, which was kind of interesting, this -- the war started in Holland, 10th of May of 1999, he sent this letter, and there was a paragraph in there which said that the children of rescuers were not recognized, especially not in Holland. And it just so happened that I know a psychologist in Holland, who had just written a book about the -- the selection, and dislocation of the children of rescuers. So, what I did, I put them in contact with each other, so that this man, who is in his 70's now, not well, can talk to this woman who just wrote the book. She is -- Her name is Luma Abbas-Amden, she's a psychologist, she has written quite a few books about rescuers. She was in hiding herself, was found, and went to a concentration camp, so she has -- she is very, very, very familiar with -- with subject, has done quite a bit of resear -- research. So, I hope it will help this particular man, Donald Prafana is his name. Maybe if he speaks to this Luma Abbas-Amden, maybe he

gets a little bit of validation, and a little bit of relief. So that's kind of right now my relationship with -- actually the -- only now with the children of my rescue family.

Q: Let's -- I guess let's -- let's go on to after the -- after the war, after liberation.

A: After liberation, that was very strange. We -- We had to leave there, but we had no place to go, we were in hiding in Delft, and we were -- returned from The Hague. So my mother found a place for me to stay with a -- actually, it was the hiding family of a great aunt of mine, who was an ice skater, I can't remember for how long, until she found an apartment, you know, she was given an apartment in -- in -- in The Hague. I -- I can't tell you how long, or -- how long I was there. The -- The only thing I remember that, it was a very strange family, and that for the first time, I saw somebody who used opium. Th--Th-The father in that -- in that household [indecipherable] can't tell you, it's the only thing I remember. He was addicted. That was like in May, June, of 1945. My mother found it very necessary that I would go back to school, and my brother went -- they tried to find work for him. He didn't want to go to school. He went and -- He went on hashava [indecipherable] from Israel. I don't know exactly what the dates were when he went. So my mother and I lived in the apartment, which was -- she had gotten apartment in a very bad neighborhood of The Hague, and eventually we moved to a better neighborhood. I did go to school. I went -- My mother felt that it was necessary that I would go to school with girls my age, 16 or 17 years old. So I went -- She got me -- and this is remarkable -- she got me into a school for home economics, which was kind of an -- kind of after high school you went there, and at night I went to evening high school. And then we found the

Zionist organization, and that's what we did in our free time, and that's where we found back -- actually we didn't find back, we found other people that were in hiding that came back -- back from -- from the concentration camps. I didn't find back my friends, my old friends from before the war, except one. So that was really my life after -- after the war. My mother tried to make a living, didn't succeed very well. She didn't have specific skills, she was -- I think she was selling some perfume, and stuff to stores, and then eventually she found a job as a manager in a clothing -- in clothing stores.

Q: Was everyone at that time trying to -- just go back to normal life? I mean, did -- did -- did it -- you know, like it could possibly be like [indecipherable]

A: We tried desperately to go back to normal life, but it was very difficult, because all around us, everything was different. You know, you always be -- you -- you know, just me going to school for home economics with girls who had gone [indecipherable] to school -- to high school. I didn't fit in, you know? In the evening school, the evening high school, I didn't fit in either. So, it was kind of an -- we tried desperately to kind of live a normal life, but I think in Holland, we couldn't really do it. There were too many -- it -- it -- it was just so -- it was such a destruction of the Jews that w-we constantly were reminded of it, even if you don't want just to really face it on, [indecipherable] see it, but we were constantly reminded of it. And my uncle, and my aunt, and my -- my cousins were -- were killed in a concentration camp. So, I didn't have family. My -- Luckily, my grandparents, and my uncles also survived the war. They were just caught maybe two days before the liberation, and they didn't know what to do with two old people. And my

uncle, they put him in prison, and then the Germans left, and so my -- then -- then they were freed. But it was just at the last moment that they were caught, and -- and like I said, the Germans didn't quite know what to do with them because the war was almost over. I- It -- What I remember, the best part of our lives was then the Zionist organization where we all came together with those who survived, and had weekends of -- you know, like camp -- like studying, and we danced, and we sang, and we talked every night. We all wanted to go to Israel. My brother was called up to go to Indonesia, because that's -- in 1946, they were going to fight to keep Indonesia at that time, the Dutch East Indies independent. And the Jewish -- many of the Jewish survivors, young men, didn't go, and they went on illegal alleyah to -- to Israel. And my -- So my brother left -- I guess it was in 19 -- maybe 1946, or so -- earlier than that, to southern France, and -- and then went, I don't know, maybe stayed there. The whole trip was like three months, and then he went on one of those boats illegally to Israel, and he was -- he was on the last boat that [indecipherable] was caught, but went all the way to Israel, and went into an -- in a camp. He didn't go -- The next boat went to Cyprus [indecipherable]. So he has been, since 1946 [indecipherable]. So -- So my mother and I were left. I met Ed in the -- in Zionist organization. He left in -- Yeah, go ahead.

Q: What was it about the Zionist organization that -- what did that do for -- for you, and -- and the other [indecipherable]

A: We didn't talk about it, wh-what it did for us was we -- we knew that we had the same experience. We didn't talk about it, but we knew, we -- it felt comfortable. It didn't feel

comfortable with the non-Jewish youngsters because they had -- didn't have such a disruption in their lives as we had had, and they didn't have so many losses in their lives as we had had. They said they suffered terribly in -- in -- in the war, but it -- they didn't quite understand what happened to us, that when you -- when we came out of the war, we couldn't go home, because there was no home any more. Our -- To go back [indecipherable] that it seems that as soon as we went into hiding, they emptied our apartment, and all the furniture, everything was gone, in no time. You know, they just emptied it out. So, we didn't have a place to go back to, so to be with them was wonderful, wonderful. And then the other thing that was wonderful, we had the Israeli soldiers, who were in the British brigade, came also to Holland, and they represented healthy young men who had fought in the second World War, and were not persecuted, and so they were like symbols of health, and -- and -- and was wonderful. And many of our friends went with them back to Israel. Some got married, they fell in love, got married, some married [indecipherable] you know, just to bring somebody into Israel without being -- I forgot what [indecipherable] in -- in the -- something that they were allowed to go into as well, so our friends also disappeared, you know, like my brother, he went illegally to Israel, so even in those times, people went -- left us. They kind of, you know they went to Israel, and -- and then I, like I said, I met Ed. Ed left in June of 1947, and we didn't quite know if we were going to get married, or not, but we were going to kind of see if -- the separation, if it lasted through writing. I completed my schools there, and I -- we got a visa for United States because -- very quickly, because my mother was

German born, and the quota for German born people was very low, compared to the Dutch, and I was underage, too, so I left for the United States in January of ’49, which was quite something, because we really didn’t want to go to the United States, really wanted to go to Israel, but I want to get married to Ed, so I had to go first to United States, before I could go to Israel.

Q: But you knew -- you -- you [indecipherable] United States, but you -- you didn’t think you [indecipherable] want to stay in Holland? Is that --

A: There was really very little in Holland for us. Looking back now, it -- it didn’t feel comfortable any more. There were very few Jews at that time. I don’t know what -- I don’t think we saw a future in Holland. Course you have to remember, the Zionists, so there was only a future in Israel. You didn’t even want to even consider that there was a future in -- in -- in Holland. And we would just go to United States to kind of go there, and then go to Israel, which we did in ’51. The period in -- in -- in -- here in United States, between ’49 -- for me from ’49 until ’51 was kind of strange. I don’t know. We got married six weeks after I came to the States, it was the smallest wedding you can imagine, there were -- you know, there were five people at this ceremony, with the justice of peace, and seven people at the lunch. Course we didn’t have -- everybody was poor, and we didn’t have family. Ed went back to work, he had a job there, I went with him to -- it was in Ossening, New York.

Q: What did you think when you got to the United States, [indecipherable] strange?

A: Strange, well, because I never really wanted to go, probably, and it was -- was kind of another disruption, and we really didn't want to stay, so it was like a vacation here, but not quite, because we had to live a daily life, and -- and again, I had a hard time connecting. I realize that now, I didn't realize that then. I wasn't like the other American kids who were 19 years old and had gotten married, I di -- hadn't gone to school here. I had a strong accent, I didn't know the ways of you -- you know the ways of the Americans. So it -- it felt as if I didn't belong, which I -- I didn't belong, really. I eventually went to work [indecipherable] to make some money, go to Israel. That felt a little better because I -- I worked, and my days were structured. I didn't work there very long. I was a filing clerk, I knew foreign geography, so I had a special assignment. Was -- I think at that time I always wanted to go to Israel, that's [indecipherable]. Also, my friends had gone there, you know, fr-friends from Holland. We went in 1951 to Israel, because Ed was about to be called up for the Korean war, and so he left before he got enlisted for the Korean war. I -- We arrived in late January of '51 in Israel, we went to the kibbutz where my brother was, and I felt really very good there. I had my first child was born in December of '51, it was for me a very good time [indecipherable]. I was a worker, a mother, and a member of the kibbutz. I had voting rights, which was very unusual as a woman. I fitted in. There were other people from Holland, which, you know, we had the little group of Dutch people, not that we always spoke Dutch, I don't think so, but we had the same background, so I was really appreciated as a -- as a worker, I was -- worked with babies, and with the toddlers, and I had my own group, and that was -- that

was a good time. Our child got sick, she had tuberculosis of the lymph nodes, here, lymph, and that was a horrible time, she was in the hospital for six months, and then she needed to be separated still from other people. That was horrendous. Ed was not very happy in -- in the kibbutz, it was very difficult for him to kind of fit in that -- in that kind of rigid structure.

End of Tape One, Side A

Beginning Tape One, Side B

Q: This is an continuation of the interview with Carla -- Carla Lessing, and this is tape one, side B. You were just talking about in the kibbutz that Ed was --

A: Right.

Q: -- less happy.

A: Ed was less happy. He had a hard time with -- like I said, rigid structure. Also, at that time, there was very -- what can I say, little chance for anybody to do any -- anything different than what you were assigned to do. To get, for instance, go to Haifa to take a painting course, I as -- I remember was somebody want to do that, that had to go through many, many people, it had to be okayed by the general meeting. I mean, everything was -- nowadays you could do it easily, you could go and study, but in those days it was a -- more of the pioneer times. So we decided to -- Ed decided really, and I kind of agreed, to go back to the United States for a couple of years, because E-Ed I think, might have been one of the very few people who had not one relative in Israel. I had, besides my brother and my sister-in-law, I me -- they had one child at that time, I had an uncle, a maternal

uncle and aunt, and a cousin in Israel. So I had a little bit of family in Israel, but he had none. So that was a difficult period because we went back, and that, of course, in those days, was very, very bad that you go back to the United States. You were kind of a deserter. And we couldn't go back to the States, because my daughter had had tuberculosis, we could go back to Holland. So we decided -- we couldn't enter the United States because she had had tuberculosis, we decided to go to Holland. And we stayed for one year in Holland, she was then healthy enough to go. The American embassy let us go, gave us a visa. The year in Holland, and that was in 1955 - '56, was kind of a vacation for us. We went to Holland knowing that we're not going to stay, we kind of enjoyed it. Ed went to work, I took care of our daughter. We had some old friends there, it was familiar, we spoke the language. And we knew it was only going to be a short period of time. So we arrived here in the United States in October of '56. Let's see, Ed had an -- h-his grandfather lived in Amsterdam, so we had a little bit of family in Holland when we were there. We arrived October '56, in the United States, again.

Q: At that point, were you thinking that maybe you would get back to Israel?

A: Yeah, we were going to go back to Israel in -- after a few years. I -- I -- I didn't really want to go to the United States. That never happened. He started -- Ed found a job here where -- in the neighborhood where we lived, in Dobb's Ferry. My daughter went to school, went to kindergarten and Dan was born in '58. Ed went to evening school, to Pratt Institute. So, we kind of led this normal family life, where the husband g-goes to work, and he went to school at night, and I took care of the children, and -- and we tried

to live kind of an -- a normal life, as Holocaust survivors. It was more normal than when we did not have children, because you know, you have to -- you have children, you have more contact with the other people, because the -- like my daughter went to kindergarten, and we met some other people whose children went to kindergarten, or she brought girlfriends home, and I met the parents, and so that was more often a normal life, although it was a difficult life, cause Ed was away a lot, going to school, and then that he had a lot of homework and so on. And we didn't have a lot of money, we had very little money. That time I see as -- it was kind of a good time, having th-the children, and having contact with other people. We then moved from Dobb's Ferry, actually to here. That was in 1963, Ed had just graduated from Pratt Institute, and my daughter went to junior high, and our son went to kindergarten here. And we were not involved at all with survivors, except my whole family. My mother was a -- is a -- you know, was a survivor, she w-worked in New York City, my in-laws were survivors, they lived in Springfield, Massachusetts. My -- My two brothers-in-law were, you know, they -- they went to college. Like I said, my children were surrounded by survivors, they grew up with survivors, that's -- was their family. I went to college too, in 1967, to community college, Westchester Community College, completed that, went to Mercy College, the Catholic College right near here, completed my Bachelor's degree. Trying to catch up, because I really wanted to do something, but I didn't have the degrees. Before that, I was an assistant nursery school teacher. I worked part time when Dan was five years old. So I worked from, he was five, '63 to I went to -- full time to Columbia School of Social

Work in s -- I worked for 10 years, ’73 I went there. So I worked for 10 years as an assistant nursery school teacher, because I didn’t have a degree. That was nice.

Q: Had you known for a long time that you wanted to go back and get an education, and the degrees?

A: No, not really. Actually -- Ash -- Ed pushed me, said “Why don’t you go to school?” And so I did, and I really enjoyed going to school, enjoyed very much going to social work school, although again, it was kind of -- I don’t think there was any survivor in my class. There were lots of young people who had gone to Ivy League schools, and I realized that my education was far less solid than their education, that my papers were not very well written. But at that time, I was very lucky, Columbia Unis -- University School of Social Work had never ax -- never had accepted ex -- very, very few older people. And when I applied, they had -- they had to accept older people, so I was accepted, with some other older people. I was already in my 40’s. So I was lucky at that time. Social work school was interesting, because I was placed in -- my first internship was in an Protestant foster care agency, and there was a woman there who was, I thought that she was a little anti-Semitic, and -- well, a lot anti-Semitic, and which happened, I would almost say to be true. She -- The -- I was in the student unit, and there were two Orthodox Jewish student -- social work students, and one was taking off all the holidays, and she was kind of punished for that, she eventually had to leave. And there were other things that happened that were kind of what I felt was anti-Semitic, and I feel very -- I felt very uncomfortable, and was about to quit, but I said, “I can’t. I -- I need to get a social work

degree. I must -- I must stay and -- and -- and conquer this." And I did, in a very -- it was, I felt, a very hostile environment. I finished the first year, but tha-that really was -- was very hard on me. The second year, luckily, I was placed in an -- in another place where there -- I had a Jewish supervisor, so she couldn't be anti-Semitic.

Q: Well, at that time, how much of your identity had to do with being Jewish, or being a survivor? I know you said that you didn't -- didn't have many survivor friends, you didn't really know, sort of, you know, you -- there wasn't a sort of community. How much was it part of your identity at that point?

A: I think I wasn't aware of it, that I -- it -- it was always there. I was always different, like I was saying to you, when I went to social work school, and all these young -- young s -- young men, women, who had gone to the very good schools. I mean, I had nothing -- and I was older. I had nothing in common with them. Even the ones who were maybe in their late 20's and early 30's had -- I don't think there was anyone who had gone through -- through what I had gone through. No [indecipherable] interest, somebody would say, you know, where you come from, I said from Holland, and okay so, interesting, I like Holland, I like Amsterdam. They would say to me, "People are friendly in Holland?" And you know, that was about it. People were not really interested, as I recall. I might also have given them messages that I didn't want to talk about it. So, it wasn't really -- it was a -- as you say, how much was my identi -- I wasn't so much aware of it, but it was always there. I always felt different. And if people were asking, and -- about maybe you know, where were you in the war, and in hiding, I didn't want to talk about it, because it

felt uncomfortable. It felt uncomfortable because -- and it -- over and over and over again, I noticed that when I started to talk about it, people became very serious, and some people kind of looked at me, and they became sad when I was talking about it. And I felt I inflicted pain on them, rather than not -- not inflict pain. That's really what I always saw when I would talk about it, and you know, when I would say, you know. If somebody would say to -- how -- "What happened to you when you were a teenager?" You know, "Were you allowed to wear silk stockings?" I mean, when I was a teenager, I was in hiding. I mean, or you know, it was such -- it was funny bizarre, if you know [indecipherable] these questions. I was glad to have socks, you know? So, how could I explain this to them, that you know, or that the main thing was that you know, in the morning that there was a piece of bread with maybe a little bit marmalade on it. That was -- That was wonderful, but going out --

Q: Tell me about within your family, with -- with your kids, and with your husband Ed, did -- you know, did you have conversations about --

A: About --

Q: [indecipherable]

A: Like I said, it was always there. I can't recall. I spoke less about it. When I took my daughter in 19 -- in -- when was it, 1976, how old was she then? Yeah, 1976 to -- to Israel, and then later on to Holland, and introduced her to my rescuers. I mean, there was always something going on, but it wasn't very open, you know? I introduced my daughter to my -- actually when we were in Holland the first time, she knew already my rescuers,

so -- and then we went again in ’76, we again mes -- met my rescuers. We t -- also took our son to Israel, and to -- to Holland, and all -- France. He also met my rescuers. So it -- it was always there, but it wasn’t -- we didn’t a -- they never asked, tell me now from the beginning, you know, what happened. There were little funny stories sometimes, that we talked about. The interesting thing is our son spoke at our anniversary party, and he kind of said that when he was a teenager, he realized that his parents were different from other parents. Something -- He didn’t realize when he was a kid, but he realized that we didn’t know a lot about baseball, or all these -- foo -- or football. He didn’t realize that, but later on he realized that we had a different history than his par -- than the parents of his American friends. So it was there, always, with our children, because not only that, my mother-in-law had been in Bergen-Belsen, and my father-in-law always kind of protected her, because she had been in Bergen-Belsen, she had suffered more than us. My father-in-law, and my brothers-in-law, and Ed were in hiding. My mother-in-law had suffered more than an-anyone else, so it was always there, it was kind of there, and -- but not a whole lot of -- talked about. The kids knew, and it -- it -- it was there, yes. You know, everybody had an accent, to start out with. You know, my -- my mother, my mother-in-law, my father-in-law, not my younger brothers-in-law. S -- He -- They knew they were children of immigrants, and -- and they were n -- interesting if -- is that my son’s best friend was a -- I don’t know exactly when his father came, his father was an immigrant. I don’t know if his father came in late 30’s or early 40’s. Father was originally born in Russia, went to France, and came here wh -- I don’t know if he was a survivor, but

maybe a refugee. My daughter's very best friend father escaped from Poland, came here the United States. I don't know ex -- he probably was a refugee. And so there is something that they got connected up with people who had a similar background. They didn't quite know, I mean, what it was, they just kind of discovered it later, that this was the -- the attraction, or the connection that they had with -- with their friends. My daughter, later on, when she moved up to -- near Peekskill, across the road was another family, a young family, and th -- and she was a daughter of a hol -- of hol -- two Holocaust survivors. Best friends still, today. So something is, you know, they get connected with people who have a similar family history.

Q: And when did that start to happen for you? When did you start to become more of a community of survivors?

A: Actually, in the early -- in the early 80 -- actually, probably late 70's, or early 80's, I become more aware that I was different, that I had been in hiding, and there must be a lot of people who were in h -- had been in hiding, right around here, but I couldn't get to them, and since I was a social worker, and was a group -- also a group worker, I said, I -- I should maybe get this support group together. And what I did was I called the Dutch consulate, and I knew that other Dutch Jewish immigrants were in -- had been registered there. And so -- And luckily, the woman I spoke to was a social worker, so she knew what I was talking about. And I ask her if I could send -- if she would send a letter from me to people she knew who had been in the war in Holland, Jewish people who had been in war in Holland, and if they would then contact me, maybe we could meet. And so I

started a support group, I think it was in 1982, of Dutch Holocaust survivors who had been in hiding. And the difficulty was that I th -- that we came from New York City, Westchester county, New Jersey -- I had k-kind of asked her to send letters to the me -- metropolitan area. And we met the first time was kind of an interesting [indecipherable] maybe 20 people in -- in New York City. We met, and there were older people who had been in hiding, and younger ones, like people who had been in hiding when they were in their 20's. And one man said immediately, he said, "You know, we don't need a group, we know who we are, but you youngsters, you were children and teenagers, you didn't ha -- you really didn't have an identity. You suffered more than we did, because we had an identity." And he wasn't so wrong, but I couldn't quite understand what this was all about. And so we met another two years with the people who were younger, because the older people said you know, that we don't want the group, and so on. We had this -- I had this support group with younger people who were children and teenagers in the war. And that was very interesting, only difficult -- we had a difficult time to find a place to meet, and -- and that kind of -- like I said, it was two years, that was until 1984. And so we had -- I ha -- I realized that y -- I found people I had something in common with. I think what -- maybe what I'm not talking about is that we really kind of led a so-called normal social life here, in -- in resh -- here in Hastings. You know, we went out, we had friends, we had dinner parties, but it -- it -- plus we were always a little different. It wasn't that we were completely isolated from -- from -- you know, from our neighbors, or the parents of our friends, or friends we had made on our own. But it wasn't like -- we didn't quite belong,

it -- I can tell you, we were at the dinner party, and people had invited some friends, and there were like a couple of couples, and there were two couples who didn't know each other, and then they found out that they grew up on you know, in the same neighborhood in the Bronx, and all of a sudden, they had such a strong connection, even, to you know, I don't know which one it was, Public PS whatever, and do you know that, you know, this one, and do you know that one, and what did you play in the street, stickball, and you know, we didn't do this, whatever they played. And I realized, I never can meet anybody who I went to school with. So these kind of things did happen, and I felt very kind of isolated, and when the -- when do I ever meet somebody I went to school with? So, I guess what I wanted to say to you is we kind of led an -- an -- a normal social life here, but felt different, because we had gone through the war. When we -- When I had the s- support group of Dutch Hidden Children, we had some connection, I had some connection. And in the meantime, I had become a Social Worker, and I was working as a Social Worker, and -- which was -- I -- I -- I loved my work, and -- but I didn't have the same background as they had, although, you know, I was very well integrated in my, you know, professional community, of where I worked, at work, you know, there was -- I -- I -- I felt pretty -- pretty comfortable there. Then, in ni -- 1980 -- 1990, we did our interview in -- in -- in Washington, and it's a very complicated story how we -- how they -- how we found them, and how they found us. We did go for a weekend to Washingt -- to be int -- to Washington to be interviewed, and I forgot ex -- was a terribly rainy day, and it wasn't in the museum yet, because the museum wasn't there yet, it was somewhere

else in the studio. And I remember that I watched -- watched Ed on a monitor, but not in the same room, and he watched me on a monitor, and we were completely wiped out after we had told the whole story. It was really from -- you probably saw -- you saw the video, so it was from early years, and then into -- into the war years. And we were absolutely emotionally exhausted. And that was really the very first time that I had told my whole story. I -- I even now get, you know, very moved about it, and I don't know why. So that was in 1990. At the same time -- at the same -- around that time, one of my colleagues gave me an -- he said, "You know, you might be," -- I had spoken with him, I guess, about my background. He gave me an announcement of an -- of a conference in -- in New York City, about the psycho-his -- the psycho-history association gave an -- an -- an -- an -- an -- an conference for children of the Holocaust. And it was -- he said, "You might be interested." So, I said, "Yeah, I might be interested to do that." So I went there, I took a day off, I went to that seminar, and there was a whole row of people there sitting behind a table, and -- and I was there, and I -- you know, somebody was going to listen to all these papers they were going to present. And I listened to the papers they were presenting there all about -- they were very professional and they had done a lot of research on children of the Holocaust. And all I heard was kids who had been in a concentration camp. And I, at one time I wanted to ask -- I ask a question to these professional people, was -- one was Judith Kastneberg, and some others, Eva Fogelman, and some others, and I ask a question, if they had done any research on children who ha -- children of the Holocaust who had been in hiding. And they said no, they hadn't, they don't have any data on that.

And somebody in the back heard my question, and came over to me, and she says, “You have been in hiding?” And I said, “Yes.” “You know, we are planning a conference for Holocaust survivors who had been in hiding, or children who had -- Holocaust survivors who had been in hiding, are you interested?” And I said, “Yes, I’m interested.” So, we exchanged telephone numbers, and she said, and there’s a meeting whenever, to -- in one week or two week. I went to that first meet -- for me that first meeting, of children -- wh- which was -- which was later called Hidden Children of the Holocaust. And they p -- were planning a conference from the Memorial Day weekend of ’91. And so I started to work with them, and I said, “You know, I’m a social worker, I can plan workshops.” And so I got connected to this group of people who all were -- had been in hiding, and -- and wherever, Poland, France, Belgium, not one from Holland. And we started to work on this conference, which was very intense, and regular, you know, meetings, and planning, and shouting, and arguing, and -- and was very interesting. And I started my work, getting workshop leaders together, I got -- you know, there were lots of people who had been in hiding, who were in the mental health profession, so I had no problem finding psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, in this country, or overseas, or in Holland, or in England, or in Israel, I mean there were lots of them. So I began my work with the Hidden Children, and in a ki -- in a sense, I found my community. I -- I did things I had never done before. I didn’t know anything about how to organize workshops, but I did. I -- I -- You know, we made all kinds of decisions about -- about the conference, how confidential it should be, who should -- what we -- we -- we planned workshops, we had

to give names, you know, we had to find out what was -- what would be appropriate workshop for people who had been in hiding as children. And we came up with all kinds of -- you know, we got some consultants, there's a psychiatrist in -- in Vancouver, who was a hidi -- had been in hiding as a child, who had been very involved in child survivors of the Holocaust, so we -- we contacted him, and we -- we got all the names for the workshops, and -- and titles for the workshops, really. We had to read up on it, you know, like abandonment, trust, you know, relationships, all these problems of -- of people having because of the Holocaust, and the experiences they went through.

Q: What was that -- What was that like to all of a sudden look at these issues in such an intellectual way, rather than just from your own, you know --

A: From my own exp -- oh, it was wonderful to do it in that way. Was great, I mean, I -- well, don't forget, I have been in psychotherapy -- I ha -- in -- in therapy since ni -- I was in therapy already since 1979. 1970, I had been in therapy, so I mean, I could look into -- intellectually in -- in a way that -- cause I had my -- you know, I had done some work in therapy. There was -- I think what happened that you felt kind of a little control, and a little power, to do it like that, you know. It wasn't that easy when people talked about it, you know, when other people talked about how they were abandoned by their mother, when their mother waved them goodbye, or when they were placed in a convent, you know, I mean that -- that wasn't easy to kind of listen to. But to plan it, wonderful. I still --

End of Tape One, Side B

Beginning Tape Two, Side A

Q: This is a continuation of the interview with Carla Lessing, and this is tape two, side A. And you were just -- actually, I want to backtrack just a little bit --

A: Go ahead.

Q: -- from where you were before, when you -- you said you did the first video interview, and that was the first time that you really told your whole story , sort of [indecipherable]

A: Chronologically, right.

Q: And -- And I wonder if you just could talk about that a little bit more, what that was like to begin to see that experience as a -- as a story?

A: You know, you talked about how was it intellectually, you know, you can do all these workshops, you know, that -- the titles of the workshops, and you can talk about abandonment, and all this kind of stuff, and the -- the interesting thing is that when I have written a -- a paper about the vanished culture of Holocaust survivors, and I was just going to be published this summer, and I write about it, that there are other therapies for Holocaust survivors, other than individual and group therapy. There -- Such as giving a testimony in a chronological order, not only that you're going to validated, but somebody is listening, and that your -- for whatever hours it is, to your story, rather than to just a brief segment, and -- but that you are being validated, that you go through it, that it is your story, that -- and not only I say that it is, you know, therapeutically very important for anyone to tell their whole story, chronologically, other professionals, I mean I -- it's not my inve -- you know, I didn't find that out, I -- I read that over and over again, from

other professionals. It is -- I didn't realize that it was so important. Not that I'm watching my video, I never look at it, I -- you know, but it's there, and we gave it to our children, as a document. And you can see I get -- every time [indecipherable] and I don't know why. Because I have kept it -- You know, one of the workshops we have, keeping -- keeping a secret, I -- I actually did the workshop, keeping -- keeping a secret, and this is what we really have done, because we wanted to lead a normal life. And we succeeded. You know, we had -- we had a family, we had children, we went to the PTA meetings, we went -- we went on vacations with our children, but there was so much else. So, I think that when I did this interview, in a sense, for the first time somebody listened, and asked me questions. Like I said, I was -- I s -- I was -- I was validated, it was -- it appeared to be a very important document. And when I so casually said, you know, they take a little s -- you know, a little piece out of, then put it on the -- I wasn't pleased with what they took out at the museum, but it's there, and -- and you know, when my -- my -- one of my daughter's friends went to the museum, and she said, "I saw your mother on the -- you know, on th -- on the -- on the video." Or -- And somebody else said, "I looked for you on the video." Something happened, something -- and like I said, something -- the story that I kept hidden all these years is now out in the open. So, I think that's important. It's -- It seems to be more important than writing it down, because when I -- when I wrote my paper, or -- or when I spoke, you know at some conferences about it, it isn't the same. It's not that I'm talking about myself in the paper, but it's about Holocaust survivors and their losses, and their -- the -- the terrible harm that it has done to people who have been

in the Holocaust emotionally, and how people have continuously to suffer, some more, some less, and you know, s -- most of us every day think about the Holocaust in -- in a very -- sometimes just a minute, you know, or -- or sometimes longer, but there's always a reminder, something. There's always in your life a reminder of the -- those years that we were in hiding, or even before. See, you must have seen in my video, that when I was in Germany with my grandparents, I already was persecuted there in a s -- in a sense, because I couldn't -- like [indecipherable] and my grandfather said, "Oh, you may not speak loudly, you may -- don't -- don't draw any attention to yourself." And I saw -- you know, I saw the SS already marching around. So I grew up with -- for a long time since 1936 until 1945. So I -- My -- My -- My whole life until 1945 was the Holocaust really, you know? So when it is -- when I gathered -- when -- you were asking about the video, I think it was very important for me, and that I had a -- like I said, it's been -- it's stored away, and I don't think of it.

Q: [indecipherable] just to know it's there?

A: No, I actually -- maybe to know that it's there. I don't know what's going to happen to it when I'm not here any more, but it's there. And -- And -- And there are so many [indecipherable] I don't know how important -- it's important for my family, my countrymen. We were a -- a -- I don't know if you know, we were also interviewed by Jane Marks, who published the book, "Hidden Children: Secret Survivors of the Holocaust." I don't know if you know that. And our stories is in that book, and -- and people read our story. It's -- It wasn't so intense as the one in the -- you know, in 1990.

This was after the conferences she did this. Actually, in February of ’91, I was interviewed by New York Magazine, and I also told my story there, and it was published in the New York Magazine, with five others who were in hiding. That wasn’t as important to me as the -- as the video. You know, it’s -- it’s -- I’m in a magazine, you know, so -- and my story is in there, so people read it. It didn’t have the depth of it, you know? Because he edited it, of course, a lot, you know?

Q: [indecipherable] the whole story from beginning to end?

A: Now I don’t know. I -- I don’t -- I don’t know exactly what it is. I -- I guess I don’t want to minimize this, but I guess the video makes it more real, because I’m there, I’m talking. But it is printed, it’s kind of I have given it away, you know? And -- And the person who interviewed me, and edited it, it becomes more her story. I don’t know, I -- I did something with it that I don’t know I want -- I don’t know what I did with it. It’s really what -- what -- what this video did for me. Is there anything else that you [indecipherable]

Q: Well, a couple other things just in terms of how, you know, as you look back on your experiences, and how it shaped who you’ve become now, in terms of things like, let’s talk about religion, first off. I know that in your video interview you say, one thing that I thought was very interesting, about how proud you were to wear a yellow star, and to be Jewish.

A: Mm-hm.

Q: And --

A: Not Jewish as a religious person, Jewish as [indecipherable] people. One experience I remember is that when I was in hiding in the second -- with the second family, maybe a year into that, so let's say that 19 - 1943 - 1944, at one time I realized I don't understand that I -- I, or any -- or my mother, my brother, had to go through this. Cause we were kind of innocent people, we didn't harm anybody. And if there was a god, why -- why did He do this? Why did He do this to us, and to the other Jews? And in particularly there was round -- when we -- we -- before the war, there was a Jewish family around the corner, they had two very small children, babies, and they -- somehow we knew that they were not in hiding, I don't know why, but that they were shipped -- that they went to -- to the camps, and I just could remember these little girls, and [indecipherable] what happened to them, and -- and you know, that they would not sleep in their own beds, and they would be somewhere in -- in Westerbork, and I don't know what would happen to them, we didn't quite know what happened to them. These little kids, you know? Horrible, when I think about it. So I -- I -- At the time when I was in hiding, I think about [indecipherable] of God. Why, why did He put us here? I mean, in hiding, we afraid every day for your life, and for the other people's lives. So, I kind of said, I -- I don't es -- I don't believe there is a God. And I still don't -- I mean, I'm still struggling with this in a sense, because I don't know how this all happened around me. But we are not religious. We celebrate Hanukah, and Pesach, and Rosh Hashanah, mo-more as a -- as a tradition, and as ee -- having a Jewish identity, not necessarily religious identity. And we were also [indecipherable], so we got kind of an -- a different identity. When you go to Israel, you -

- you don't need to be religious to be Jewish. So, our children were not Bar Mitzvahed, and Bat Mitzvahed, we have never belonged to -- to a temple, we are not affiliated. But when my mother -- before my mother died, I went to a - to the temple down here, it's a Reform temple, went to the rabbi, if he wanted to do a service, and he said yes. And when my mother died, I went down there, and he did the service -- graveside service, you know? So there is some -- I think it is more -- my Jewishness is more connected to tradition, and to the Jewish people, rather than to religion. I went a little bit to Hebrew school in Holland, but that was not a very good experience, because my mother sent us to shul on the holidays, and she usually didn't go, and -- and it was very boring, and it was all in Hebrew, and we didn't understand anything, and -- and -- you know, the men were there, and the women were upstairs, and it was not a good experience. So, I guess you get the picture.

Q: How about in terms of your [indecipherable] family, and -- you -- you talked a little bit today about the importance of having, you said, a normal life.

A: Oh. I think what we all -- most of us who went through the war wanted to lead a normal life, which meant getting married, and having children, although there are many -- quite a few hidden children who never got married because they're -- they [indecipherable] had a terrible hard time with relationships. With -- I got married when I was 19, and -- and I think that's the most important thing, to have a family lead so called a normal life, have -- our -- both our children got married, they both have two children. It's amazing. I mean, that -- that this happened after we were not supposed to be here. So

when -- when we had our anniversary, and yo-you know, months ago, there were our children and our grandchildren. Unbelievable, you know? So I think that's -- th-the -- the accomplishment that we -- I'm most proud of. And they seem to -- a little -- I'm -- our children are affected by our Holocaust experience, they seem to be managing quite well. My daughter is married for 23 years. Our son is married for 10 years, more than 10 years. So somehow we have instilled in our children that family is important. They're good parents, they are extremely good parents, sometimes a little too permissive, but they're good parents, they love their children very much. And you see it every day, you know? They -- So, I think that that's my proudest accomplishment.

Q: Is there anything else that you would want to add?

A: To what? To family?

Q: To everything.

A: Oh. Oh, the -- you want to know a little bit? How much more do we have?

Q: We -- We have enough time.

A: Well, the -- the -- the mo -- the other important thing is that -- I was telling you about working on the Hidden Child conference, and that we did have the conference, and it was an incredible success. We had -- We had expected 300 - 400 people, there was 1600 people and we didn't know what to do, the people in the workshops, that were like workshops -- 75 people [indecipherable] you know, the workshops [indecipherable]. But it was such a success, and it changed many people's lives, including my husband's, which you probably will hear on tape. It changed because people found each other,

connected with each other, and what we did after the conference, we started support groups, and I'm still running a support group here in Westchester county. We just had a meeting yesterday. So that's from August of '91 until now, is eight years, we run -- once a month we have a meeting. It's not always easy, but we do have a meeting, and I have been working since then for the Hidden Child Foundation, which is the organization, and in the last few years since I retired from the clinic, and I only working part time at night, private practice, I am working with Holocaust -- needy Holocaust survivors. What I'm doing is trying to help them connect with resources, financial or psychological resources, so that they don't continue to suffer unnecessarily. And that keeps me quite busy. I go once a week to New York City, and I work with -- I -- with agencies, or with the Holocaust survivors. They don't [indecipherable] to have been in hiding, anyone -- anyone who was in concentration camp, or child of Holocaust survivors who are needy for whatever, psychological services, or financial services, I will connect them up with whatever is available. So, that fills kind of, my life. This is not all, you know, because I s- spend about two -- two and a half days in my private practice. I have my family, whenever they want to come over [indecipherable] we always there. But it is a major part of my life to be involved in Holocaust survivors, and their -- their needs, or just maybe a party or an -- an -- like we had yesterday a brunch, where people get together and connect, because that's really one of the most important things for the survivors, to connect with others. So -- Because, for instance, with hiding, we understand what it means -- when I talk to somebody else who has been in hiding, I know what it means to

be -- have been in hiding, and have your schooling interrupted, your family life interrupted, your friendships interrupted, everything interrupted, I never was normal again after that.

Q: What -- What is it about you and your husband that have led you both to become so involved in this way, where others may -- may not?

A: Well, Ed wasn't involved in the planning of the conference. I did -- I kind of dragged him along. And then he got involved very much when -- with the sh -- with the Shoah Foundation, when he started to do the interviews, he got very involved, which is only I think the last three years or so. I don't know -- I am involved because I think I can contribute. It's my community. Although socially we don't get together, it's -- it's an interesting contradiction. I can work with them, but socially, you know, with a few, but not with the whole -- with all the people that I am in contact with. I can only -- it -- it -- it feels -- it feels good to -- to do this. It -- I ha -- kind of -- I can contribute because I'm a social worker, ca -- ca -- I can do the work, it's not difficult for me to do this. I -- I can't really tell you why -- it -- it -- it just -- that's what I need to do. I can also tell you that I never was a member of any organization before this. I never was a member of Hadassah, I never was a member of, like I say, of the temple. I never was a member of any organization before I got connected to the Hidden Child Foundation. I didn't belong, I didn't feel comfortable, I -- I me -- I mean, I am now a member of the Clinical Social Work Society, I go to their meetings, but it's not the same, it's a professional organization. So, I guess that's where I feel I belong.

Q: I thank you very much.

A: You -- You're welcome.

Q: Okay.

A: [indecipherable]

Q: Okay, and that concludes the interview with Carla Lessing.

End of Tape Two, Side A

Conclusion of Interview