

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Interview with Helena Swierczynska
November 8, 2008
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PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of a recorded interview with Helena Swierczynska, conducted by Stephanie Blyskal on November 8, 2008 on behalf of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The interview took place in Alexandria, VA and is part of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's collection of oral testimonies. Rights to the interview are held by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

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

HELENA SWIERCZYNSKA

November 8, 2008

Question: This is the **United States** Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with **Helena Swierczynska**, in **Arlington** – I'm sorry, in **Alexandria, VA** on November 8th, 2008. And the interview is conducted by **Stephanie Blyskal**. Good evening, thank you for letting us interview you. Can you start out telling me your name at birth, and where you were born?

Answer: My name is **Helena Swierczynska**. I was born on the April 2nd, 1943, in **Poland**, in the place called **Mielitz**(ph). I'm not positive, I'm not sure hundred percent that this is exactly where th – I was born, but that's what is in my birth certificate. My family was in hiding. Year 1943 was the worst year for Jews, ever, in **Poland**. Until today I don't understand how my mom could afford to get pregnant, you know, during such a horrible time. But anyhow, she had the baby in hiding. Most of my family was hiding in the – the – in the barn. The family lived in a small village. We had a little bit of land, couple houses, nothing big. But enough, big enough to be hated by all Polish neighbors. So my family, which means my grandmother, my grandpa, and bunch of cousins, they were hiding in the barn – paying, of course, huge money for it. And my mom had me that summer, I don't know where, and with help of midwife. Well, the midwife, she was Polish, and she didn't want to have a Jew – Jewish baby, you know, for longer than few hours. So

she kept me actually one day after I was born. And then my mom, you know, after delivery, she was sick, not able to – to do nothing. So my two uncles, my mom's brothers, they came to pick me up. It is very important to understand that I was one day – one day old. My – my mom was the only daughter, and she had four brothers. Two of them, they took me from that midwife, to the place that the family was hiding. And I was crying and crying and crying. By the way, I just learned this all few years ago. I had no idea what happened to me. But my uncle who – who was about to die, finally he felt that he needs to tell me something. So that's how I learned, you know. Today I am 65, and I was probably about 60 when the – you know, I learned what happened to me. So anyhow, I was crying, I was screaming. Probably I was hungry, I was wet. And all those people hiding there were scared that, you know, they gonna be killed because of me. So my grandma, according to my uncle, my grandma decided that I cannot be with them. She came up with an idea that she'll – they will put me on – on the ground where people walk by a lot, and somebody will see a crying baby and will take the baby. That's what she was hoping. Well, nothing like this happened. They put me on that frozen ground. It – you know, the beginning of April in **Poland** – I don't even think it was April, cause the – there is no certain date, you know, that's – probably it was in March, because it was very, bitterly cold. So they put me, you know, on that cold ground, you know, and they were looking through, you know, sort of the hole in the wall, looking at me what's gonna happen. And people were walking – were walking by, and nobody

stopped. Nobody stopped. I was screaming like crazy, they were crying. Finally, after I don't know how many hours, my grandma said no, I – I cannot do this. She decided, you know, to take me back and when night came, my two uncles took me – still, you know, screaming, to the house of the lady, very simple woman, who was apparently mentally sick and nobody talked with her. People were scared of her. So she was without of contact with – with anybody. And her house was on the – on the skirt of that village. They took me there, cause they thought, she's alone, maybe she will take the baby. So one year old baby – I mean, one day old baby – this is very important and that's why I repeat it, you know, they put me on her steps. I was screaming. She opened the door, she saw the baby, she took me in. So this was '43. I was in her house until '45. No idea how – how – what happened during this time. I might suspect that when I was crying, she was beating me up, because, you know, she was scared, too. So, actually – okay, of course, there was no milk. I was feeding, you know, with potatoes and water. I don't know how this happened that I survived. It's – I've talked to the doctors, they say they never heard about such a thing. But anyhow, what happened during these two years, my mom, of course – my father was in a forest, hiding there. And my mom was very depressed. She was 19. She lost her baby, which she never touched. She didn't have parents and family. So she, one day she decided to go where they were hiding to see her mom and her dad. And the people who in the meantime took over our houses, our land, these people saw d – her going there. And they let know to the police – Polish police, which was

working very close with Gestapo, and th-the Germans came, killed almost everybody immediately. My two uncles, they were not there, they were hiding in the fields. So my mom, apparently that they – they didn't kill her at once, but she was hurt badly. And a few years ago, I went there. I was told not to by many people, because the people living there, they remember the family. They stole everything which belongs to us, and I was told it's dangerous to – even to be around, especially that I look hundred percent like my dad, so I am very easy to recognize. But I did, I go, I did go there. And I saw – I met li – a lady who was – I was just asking million questions, you know, and just between one sentence and the other, she told me about my family. I couldn't believe my ears, but I – I didn't even ask about the family. But she started to say, oh, we've had the Jews, you know, here. There were parents and five kids, you know. There was one – one girl and four brothers. And that girl, she had a baby that's – the lady is telling me, you know, I am standing in front of her. And – and she says, but that baby for sure didn't survive, she says. And she says, I will never forget the scene the day they killed all – all that family, you know, hiding there. And she was not killed immediately, but she was hurt badly. And she had the long hair. They grabbed her, you know, for the hair, and they were dragging her through the main street of that village to the nearest forest. And they then – she was killed there. And that woman tells me, you know, I – this – I – I can see like today, you know, that blood, you know, behind this woman. She had no idea who she talking to, and I had a dilemma, you know. I – I wasn't sure – I mean,

that was no time to think it over, but I – you know, I wanted to do something with this, so before I left, you know – I was with my husband, by the way, he is Polish, and he was shocked even more than I was. And my husband says, let's go, let's go, don't – don't stay here. But before I left, you know, I ask her, do you know whom you're talking to? And she says no. I said, I am that baby, and I survived.

Q: Wow.

A: And you have my houses, my land and everything. You will never, ever be with – in peace with this. That's how I left. So, you know. But going back, okay, so – so I left. I mean, I lost everybody. I had only my father and two uncles. My father survived the war, he was in hiding in the forest. And he, right – you know, when – when war – you know, was over, the Russians came in, because I'm talking about eastern –

Q: Right.

A: – **Poland**. So first, you know, they didn't see Americans, they – they saw Russians, and the Russians, you know, came in and my father somehow was able to get in touch with my – one of my uncles, and he knew where I was, you know, in which house you know, I was, you know. He knew I survived. So, it was – he came in the evening. So, he decided to wait until the morning to pick me up, you know, take me from there. And one of those Polish people, you know, who – I can say it, they killed my family, okay, saw him, and they got scared. So, what they did, they killed him, just from outside of the house through the window. He was shot and

killed immediately. My uncle who was with him, he saw it, he run to the street, and the – the Russian tanks, you know, were coming, you know. He stops one of the tanks and he says, oh, th-th-th-the Pol – Polish guy just killed a Jew, you know? And that guy, the Russian guy says, do you know who, exactly? My uncle says, yeah. My uncle, the one who told me this story, which I was waiting, you know, 50 year – 60 years to hear. And he said, yes, I know. Show me. Well, Russians killed the guy, you know.

Q: Wow.

A: Just like this. So, okay. So I had two uncles, young men. Because you know, four kids, my mom was the oldest. So my mom was like – more like a mother to them, okay? They – they came to pick me up – well, actually, they – he told me with this – I'm gonna tell you a lot of bitter words about Jews. I'm sorry.

Q: Mm-hm, it's fine.

A: But my uncles, you know, they didn't take care of me. He told me that when he came, you know, to see me, you know, I was behaving like – like a little animal. I was hiding everywhere, I – I didn't let anybody to come close to me. I was – you know, sick. Later, you know, I – I – you know, the doctors discovered I had tuberculosis, I am surprised only tuberculosis, you know. And I didn't speak. I – I ha – hardly walk. I was – I was just like, you know, like animal. So he was not even able to – to come close to me and touch me. So they left me. They left me and this woman, she didn't want me. I don't think she ever liked me, but you know, it was

something human in her that she took me in. But anyway, as soon as it was possible, she put me in the orphanage home. It was '45 -'46, a lot of anti-Semitism in **Poland** til today. So, I started my second holocaust, which I am very disappointed, you know, like **[indecipherable]** you know, you talk a lot about, you know, what happened, how was the war, this and that. Nobody talks about people after the Holocaust. People – especially about the people who were still in **Poland**.

Q: Right.

A: And had to face, you know, another holocaust, another hatred, another anti-Semitism.

Q: Can I just stop you for one minute –

A: Yeah.

Q: – and ask you one question. What di – you have no memories of being in this house with this woman –

A: No.

Q: – who was taking care of you?

A: No.

Q: What – and we're probably going to get to this, but what do you think your first memory was? What's the first thing that you remember as a – as a child?

A: The – the orphanage home.

Q: Mm-hm. And where – where was that?

A: Hoo. How many, you should ask.

Q: How many were there?

A: Seven.

Q: Oh my.

A: Yeah.

Q: So where did you start out?

A: So, I was in orphanage home in **Kraków**, in **Zheshuv**, in **Kielce** and **Radom**.

Q: Right. So – so when s –

A: They seventh – you know, the thing was, nobody wanted to adopt me. Ah. And my uncle, my beautiful family, they just escaped **Poland**. **Poland** was a dangerous place to live, so they just escaped, they left me. Like piece of nothing, garbage.

Q: How –

A: Little girl, completely unprotected, with nobody.

Q: Right.

A: And they – first they went to **Breslau**, [indecipherable] then from there to **Germany**. From **Germany** to **America**. And I was still alive, one orphanage home, second, third, fourth, fifth. Many, many kids were adopted. And I remember nobody wanted me. I was ugly. I know I am – I am good looking now. I am like a, you know, wine, which you know, ge – as more is – older it is, is better, yeah. I am somehow – yeah, I am kind of attractive woman comparing my age, of course. But, as a – as a child, I was ugly, and I didn't speak. I hardly walk. I peed in my pants, you know, until I was probably 11 or 12. Scared to death, and physically sick. So, it

was – it was very difficult, and this I remember. Seeing, you know, a lot of kids, you know, going with the other families, and I was still there. And because, you know, it was after war, you know, lack of money and this and that. So they were closing one home and open another one, and they were transferring, you know, kids.

Q: Right.

A: So that's how, you know, I was traveling. And one day, I was seven years old, look how many years I've – I – I was there, came the man, by himself. He was looking for somebody to adopt. He was by himself, without a wife, which was stupid, because that kind of decision should be, you know, taken by both parents. But, you know, she probably told him, well, whatever you do, you know, I agree. So he saw me, he was very good man, and he said, her. So to – they adopted me. Unfortunately, she disliked me from the first moment she saw me. Actually, you know, now, looking you know to the back from the perspective, all the years of experience and, you know, knowledge, I got about life, about people, I think she was mentally sick. And her behavior, you know, is really difficult to explain. But I know it now. As a little kid, you know, I just felt, not only not loved, but just – you know, being hated, you know. Very scary thing to somebody like me, who hardly survived.

Q: Right.

A: Anyhow, he was wonderful guy, but he was weak man, and she was the one with – with the pants, you know, so they both were communists and she was, as I say, more red than the red flag. So maybe that's why I never enrolled in communist party, and everything which goes with communists, you know, is, you know –

Q: Right, mm-hm.

A: – against what I believe in. Because I dislike her with all my heart. So this was my third holocaust. And she hated me that much, that finally it came to the point that I had a choice, to get married with whoever and then get out, or just to go on the street.

Q: Right.

A: So, you know, I got married.

Q: How old were you?

A: 19. And the guy, he knew I was a Jew. I knew nothing about my family. What I told you now, I learned few years ago. I knew nothing, zero. I knew I am a Jew.

Q: Right.

A: That's all.

Q: Did you have – still have your birth certificate with you, did you have paper –

A: I never – I ne –

Q: Like, how did they know your name, how did they know –

A: I had zero documents. All I have is one picture of my dad, that my uncle gave me, nothing about my mom. And my birth certificate was written after the war,

wher – and th-there – there is, you know, a note, parents un – unknown, you know.

So actually, I'm not certain of the day, I'm not certain on the place, you know. It's just – it just a – a document –

Q: Right.

A: – means nothing to me.

Q: Did your uncles – when – your uncle when he dropped you off at the orphanage, or however you got there, he gave you your information?

A: No, no –

Q: No.

A: – no, no. What happened with them, th-they f – they came to **America**, and before they came to **America** they – they started to make money in **Poland** selling this and that, you know, it was popular then. Popular way to make money. But anyhow, no, actually they like crossed me out. And I didn't know –

Q: Right.

A: – about them. I – I didn't know nothing, until one day – one day. My oldest uncle, he was about to be called to **Korea** in '53. And he was afraid that he might not come back. So he decided to look for me. I mean, it was something, you know, he was, I guess, afraid to face the God. He started to look for me through Red Cross, because they – first, you know, they contact the – the orphanage ho-home they know I was – that – that address changed and changed. They went through Red Cross, and finally he was able to find me being adopted to those people. The name

was **Zyro, z-y-r-o**. But I just got married. So, sort of like he wanted to do something for me. Actually, it was too late. And –

Q: I – I guess I'm wondering how the people at the orphanage knew who you were. Like, how they knew your name, how they knew when you were supposedly born.

A: They probably called – they – they gave me the name, and you know, it was following – following me from one place to another.

Q: So, they si – they probably knew your last name.

A: No, no, no –

Q: No.

A: – no, no, no.

Q: No?

A: Because you know, that uncle I'm talking about, he's the one who told me –

Q: Right.

A: – this whole story a few years ago, before he died. And he didn't know my name, and nothing. You know, I was just born.

Q: Right.

A: You know. They w – they all – I mean, th – th – my uncles, they were young men. And I am surprised that – which I told him, cause I am very open person, you know, and if I have something to say, I do say, no matter what. And I told him once, I asked him, how could you leave such a little baby after this all, and just escape, you know, to – how can you, you know, leave like this, with this knowledge? He

said oh, you know, we were so young, we – we win – we knew we had – we have to escape. What do we do a do – what do we – we do with such a baby, you know, we – we – we wouldn't even know what to do. And I said, hey, people you know, go to concentrate camp, you know, go t – you know, to air – anything and everything, the family is together. We – the – people were dying because they wanted to be together. So there is no way, never ever, that I can understand and forgive. And I told him this. I told him this. So – but anyway, so I – I knew I have a family in **America**, okay? Well, I thought they, maybe they – they can help me, or whatever. Well, the life in **Poland** was not easy. One thing I have to say positive about my step-mom. As bad as she was to me as a mom, she was very demanding in terms of education. She pushed me hard, so I had to go, you know, higher and higher and higher. And this is something that, I have to admit it, I have because of her. How much I need it, I don't know. Well, definitely it's useful, but anyhow, with my first husband, I – I had the first son who died shortly after was born. It was sort of pathology you know, probably, it doesn't matter. But it still hurt, you know. Then, I had another son, and my son, **Robert**, he's gonna be 40 in few days. He's everything I have. So one day, I, before he graduated from the high school, I send him to **America** for a vacation, to see the friends, and – and he fell in love with **America**. He got crazy about **America**, you know, he loved everything here. He begged me, Mom, I love this country. Do whatever you can, come here and we will stay here. Well, you know, I have only one son, and as I say, nothing else matters in

my life. So I said okay, I'll try, I'll see. Took me three years to get Polish passport, because it still – we had the communist.

Q: Right.

A: Communist there, and ma – I was constantly told by – by the authorities that I'm too high educated, I'm needed in **Poland**.

Q: Right.

A: So they didn't want me – they didn't want me to – to – to leave **Poland**. So my son was here for three years by himself, calling me constantly, spending all the money, you know, he was able to make, you know, on the phone, see, it costs fortune then. And he said, Mom, if you don't come, I'll come back. So I, you know, put myself, you know, on – on my – you know, almost upside-down, you know, and finally I got the passport, and I came here. I was hoping that my family, my two uncles, they will help me, if not for myself, maybe for their parents, or maybe for their only one sister. Stupid me. Nothing. And because I came, you know, for a visit, I had no papers, no green card, no driver's license, nothing. So, I had to start from the scratch. My son, he is a genius. It's out of question. It's not because he is my son, and you will understand why, I'll tell you. I know when mom talks about own child, mom thinks it's – his child – her child is the best in the world. I'm not easy to – to praise anything and anybody, I am very difficult, you know. But my son surprises me every single day of my life. He never went to college. He doesn't have any degree, all he's got is high school. Because when I came ho – here, he was

working in a factory as, you know, it was a – a – I don't know how to call it, steel, you know? Steel, they – they, you know, were – were processing, you know, out all you know, like iron and everything. So, he had to work physically, you know. They didn't have proper equipment, so mostly he had to, you know –

Q: Manual labor.

A: – put manually, you know, tons of things, you know, into the press, which his back is hurt and there will be suffering until the – the last, you know, day of his life. But he loved **America**. As of me, I started to clean the houses. First, I was stupid enough to rich to Jewish people. Not far from where we were renting an apartment, there was a synagogue.

Q: And where were you living at this time?

A: **Skokie**

Q: Mm-hm.

A: And, you know, I know nothing about religion, about Jews, ye – you know, there are – there were no Jews around me. **Tabula rasa**, if you know what it means.

Q: Mm-hm, right.

A: So, but I did go to synagogue, and I talked to the rabbi, and I told him my story. And I said, rabbi, I – I'm not looking for you to give me the money, what I need is a job, any job, simple job, because we have no bread –

Q: Right.

A: – on the table.

Q: And this is the 1980s?

A: This was the beginning of 90 – 1990.

Q: Okay.

A: Mm-hm, because I came to **America** it was in September '89. So it was a couple – couple months later, okay? And what the rabbi said, oh, he was touched of course, he was touched. It's hard not to be touched by this story, the story of, you know, one day old baby left alone. He said, well, I don't have a job for you, but if you want you can clean my house. And I said okay, I will do that. And you know what? I did clean his house, took me over 10 hours. He paid me 40 dollars, and I had never, ever seen as dirty, filthy house in my life. Never before and never after. They had like five cats or something, you know, the cobwebs. That stuff from the cats, you know, underneath of the beds. I couldn't believe that the house could be that dirty, you know. That's how rabbi helped me. Well, actually, he cured me. I never, ever went rich to Jews. Never. And you would not talk to me today, if not one friend of mine. She – she tries, you know, to bring me, you know, closer. But I'm still in denial, you know.

Q: Right.

A: There's too – too many bad things. And the funny thing about Polish people, you know, is they – first of all they think, you Jew? Oh, you must be rich. That's one – one thing. The second thing, you Jew? Ooh, Jew – Jewish – Jewish organizations, they help. They give you this, they give you that. Bullshit, I'm sorry to say it –

Q: That's okay, that's okay.

A: – but please to understand, this is what is in my heart. It's not true at all. Nobody helped me with the green card. How I got the green card? I, you know win – I – I – I mean won, in a lottery.

Q: Right.

A: Me. I'm not lucky person, I won. For me, for my husband and for my son, we got green card. But anyhow, **America** – **America** is my **furt(ph) kolokowst(ph)**. Very difficult country. Not for young people. For my son, he loves **America**. He's actually American. He speaks like American you know, no accent, nothing. He just absorbed everything easily, immediately. For me, I was 45, between 45 - 46 actually. Start from scratch, learn English, go so much down from where I was, was almost impossible. My son – my – my husband followed me – my second husband, because the first one, I, you know, divorce after 11 years. It was – was always very difficult for me to – to divorce husband, because you know, I – I was doing everything possible to keep the family. But, he was nobody. I mean, nobody. He is still my son's father. He is zero. One day, finally, you know, when the laugh was over, he told me, you dirty Jew. So I divorced him. It was very difficult, he didn't want to give me divorce. He fight it. Maybe he loved me, but in the way, you know, I could not accept. My son was four years old. And remembering the background, you know, where I'm coming from, it was so dif – so – so important for me to be f –

for my son, you know, no matter what. So I, you know, I met another man. Of course Polish too, because as I say, no –

Q: Right.

A: – no Jewish in **Poland** at all, and in **America**, I don't have Jews around me.

Q: Right.

A: You know, I live in a neighborhood, there are no Jews. No synagogues, nothing, and not that I care, you know, but that's how it is. So, my second husband, he – he is a good man, but **America** was too much for him. He followed me, he followed me up here, and he couldn't stand **America**. First of all, he was not able to learn English, so for him, very good engineer, somebody really important, **V.I.P.** in **Poland**, and suddenly here, nobody. And it's not that he didn't try. I know he was trying hard to learn English, he just was not able. So, one day, it was 10 years ago, he told me, **Helena**, I can't stay here. I want to go back. And he said, you should go back with me, because **Robert**, my son, you know, he's gonna hav – have own family, and you know, besides, you work too hard in **America**. And in **Poland** you gonna be a lady. You may do nothing, or a little. What I was doing here, you know, after cleaning, I was taking care of old people. Then I, when I got green card, my first job, nursing home, I was cleaning after dead people. That was my job. For almost two years. And one day, my supervisor – I wa – I was part of housekeeping department, my supervisor realized that, you know, I am worth much more, and I'm able to be in charge of people, and this and that. And he might get some cash, you

know, for me, if he finds me a job. Which I had no idea, at the moment. He asked me if I want to be a supervisor. And I said, I'm too old. I was like 48, you know. He says no, that's the perfect time, you know. So, I was a supervisor, it was next step. Then, account manager, then manager. So working hard and hard and hard, I got somewhere. With pretty mo – pretty good money. But I lost my marriage, and my husband, I divorce him, because I told him, you know, you have to be here or there, you cannot be little bit here, little bit there, you know. And he said, I can't.

America is not for me. And I said, look, I cannot, you know, leave my son alone. He's got nobody. And – and that's how it ended up. My son, when he was 20, that place he worked, you know, at, a couple American guys, they offered him, they – you know, they realized that he – he is very talented [**indecipherable**] I mean, I – it's – you know, I have no answer for this, because the guy, whatever he touches, it's superb. If he cooks, it's, you know, superb cooking, you know, it's – I – I don't know. I – I – I didn't teach him, you know. Whatever he does, he just – he does excellent job. And he's very handy in terms of electronic, and cell phones. So they, together they started cellular phone dealership, 20 years ago. He was 20 years then. In the meantime, one guy got killed in motorcycle accident. The other one, something happened, so in the meantime he just – he is alone, he is the only one. And this company is still alive. This company goes through, you know, hard time, like – like whole – whole economy, you know, but we're still in business.

Q: Hold on for one second. **[tape break]** I want to go back to your adopted parents, if it's not too difficult for you. Did – did they want you to change your name, did they give you their last name? Did they ask you to sort of take on their identity as a family?

A: Oh yeah. Being adopted in **Poland** meant that, you know, automatically, I had their name. So, actually, th-there was no-nothing which would show that I was adopted, okay? I had a new birth certificate with their names as mom and dad. So that's how it is. They both – they were Jews, but they never talked about this, and it was like a – something to be ashamed of, you know. They never admitted to anything from this area, you know. Just – they were very much involved in what happened in **Poland** they – those years, and I am not proud of it, because my step-mom, she was teaching – I don't know how to say in English, but you know, probably **Marx, Lenin** –

Q: Mm-hm.

A: Okay, this –

Q: So, she was teaching communist –

A: Communist –

Q: – history, communist theory?

A: Ideology. Oh, that.

Q: Ideology, yeah, okay.

A: So, she was very, very difficult and, you know. And he was working for the – for the government, so they were – you know, they were very, very much involved in what was going on. And they were close-minded in terms of ideology. Everything was stupid, you know, and worth nothing, only – only this. He died first, due to cancer, throat cancer. I loved him with all my heart. I was taking care of him until, you know, he – he passed away. She hated me, she was kicking me out, she didn't want me to take care of him. And well, you know, she was kicking me out through the door, I was coming back through the window, because he was so sick that I – I had to wash him, you know, feeding him.

Q: How – how old were you?

A: He was 70, it was 25 years ago –

Q: Okay.

A: – he passed away. But I promised to myself that I'm not going to do it to – to her. Because I told her, if you are a human being, you have to let him die in peace.

Q: Right.

A: She knew what was wrong with him. She knew that there is no cure, that he has to die. We didn't even – we d – we only didn't know when.

Q: Right.

A: Okay, because there is no doctor who would tell you exactly when somebody will die, okay, and regardless, you know, her ego was stronger. So, I told her, if you will not let him die, give hi – give him that comfort, you know, of dying in peace, I

will pay you back, and I will never, ever take care of you if – when you need it.

That's what I told her. And that's exactly what happened, because when she was dying, I paid people to take care of her. But me, by myself, I didn't touch her.

That's how I could, you know –

Q: Right.

A: – pay her for – for that hell, you know, she, you know, had for him.

Q: Yeah.

A: So that's all about my – my parents, I can tell you.

Q: How – you said you – you visited synagogues. Have you ever – I guess the best way to ask this is, what is your feeling about being Jewish and – and religion itself?

Do you see that as – as part of your life now, or have you ever had a con – a relationship with – with Judaism as a religion, or is it just –

A: You know, when I – when I came to **America**, I was not religious at all, because my parents, you know.

Q: Mm, right.

A: Communists, they – they don't believe in – in God, and you know, in anything, so –

Q: Right.

A: – actually, I was raised without of – any religion. As of, you know, Jewish religion, my uncles, you know, when I came here, he – they did nothing to bring me close to this religion. So for me, I don't go to synagogue, very seldom. Her

grandson, he had the Bar Mitzvah, you know, I was there. But I always, you know, I feel like, you know, like – like I'm watching something from outside, you know.

It's too late for me to be involved. It's just too late. It's not that I am in denial, you know –

Q: Right.

A: – but you have to be raised to understand – I am open to anything and everything, you know, that's how I raised my son, you know. We – we don't have a borders, you know, in terms of religion, and you know, in terms of everything, you know. We have to be open and understand other people who think maybe differently. But no, definitely, you know, I am not – my heart is not there.

Q: Did – did you, when you came to the **United States**, and obviously you did have discussions with your uncle, even if it was late in his life, did you see them at all when they were here? Did they live near you? Did you try to –

A: Very seldom. Okay –

Q: – did you try to contact them?

A: Very seldom, okay. The one – th-the oldest one i-i-is dead, and he died like maybe five years ago. The o – the other one is alive, but we d – we don't live close, you know. He o – of course, he – he lives in very, very rich, you know, area. I, by myself, live in very beautiful area, and well known, if you know **Chicago. Saint Charles** is extremely, you know, beautiful place. A lot of antiques, you know, and it's more like, you know, you in the country, you know, but when you s – when you

tell people that you live in **Saint Charles**, they say oh. Well, I'm there because my son –

Q: Right.

A: – did th-that – that far, you know, that's why. And we stay very close. But my uncle, you know, he – he must feel guilty, very guilty, because every holiday, Jewish holiday, they want me to come over. Regardless I like it or not, you know, I have to be with them. Maybe this is one of the reasons that I don't like these holidays. Because, you know, if you, for a whole year, you know, show no heart, no – not – n-no interest in – in somebody's life, and twice a year, you know, you want to show other people that you are a good family, you know. I mean, it's wrong, it's false, it smells. You know, it's fishy. I don't like it. My son hate it. I – I go. I do it for my mom. And besides, what I'm doing now is for my mom.

Q: Right.

A: I don't do it for your museum; which I admire, of course, your job. But I think that because maybe it's funny, you know, I'm not religious, but I do believe in God. I do. I have to believe in something, you know. Otherwise I will be dead by now. I believe in God, and I think that my mom, which I don't know, and a poor, little girl, I mean f – somebody who – who was not given that chance to touch their only child, you know, that she deserves something from me. So, being alive, and having the chance to talk about everything what happened, that chance she never had, you

know, give me a privilege, you know, and that's why – that's why I called **Shoah**, you know, one day. Only for this. I mean, I – I have no other reasons.

Q: Right.

A: I want my mom to know that I am alive because I do have something, you know, to do for my family, my – my grandpa, my grandma, you know, to do something for them. And I'm trying just, you know, to be okay with myself, that's all. Not much.

Q: No-o, not at all.

A: A lot. As of my son, my son, he doesn't feel that he's a Jew. He completely and definitely he knows where I come from, and as of religion, he's far away. His wife is American Italian, and she's not religion too, but – but still, you know, it's far. But for my son, my son, he loves me more than I can explain it to you, because – not that he's my son, you know, but what we went through, both of us, and that I never quit on him. He – he recognize this, and he is very thankful. And I can tell you one thing, okay, which might make you think. When I had that interview with **Shoah**, you know, they told me to turn off the phones. It was in my house, and my son, he calls me hundred times a day, Mom, what are you doing? Wh-Wh-Why you doing this, where you going? Whom you're going with? Do you have to go? You know, you – it's that kind of – I – he – he thinks that because I never had a family, he thinks that he is my – my both parents together. He feels that he has to take care of me. He – you know, he's now okay with this, you know, **Washington** stuff, because she's with me, and – and he – and he trusts her.

Q: Okay.

A: But when I go by myself, he is – he is shaking, you know, that something might happen to me. That's what sh – he is afraid. I understand it's not good, and I'm not happy about this. But that's the point, you know, that we both came to, you know. But anyhow, this was the mo – he knew that I h – I have this interview at home, he knew. And my both phones were disconnected. He was nervous, you know; it took few hours.

Q: Right.

A: So he, when he couldn't reach me, you know, on the phone, he came to the house. The lady, I – I forgot her name, but anyway, suddenly we – we heard the knock on the door. I didn't want him to be involved in this – in this interview, you know. I don't – I'm not that kind of mother, that I don't think that – that kids have to take your – all the burden, you know. I mean, everybody has own life, own responsibilities. I didn't want him to be part of it. He's got enough. But he walked in, so she said, oh, as you're here, maybe you want to say something, because we are very happy when we can talk to second generation, and maybe you – you have something to add to what your mom said. And I can see my son, you know, walking up the stairs, I had a townhouse, you know, on – on the upper floor. And he was walking up the stairs, he – he said – he – you know, jeans, and not dressed up, nothing, completely, you know, out of the blue. And he said, okay. And he – in the end of everything, he just said few words. And he said – you don't even know **Ida**,

because I didn't tell you. He said, this is my mom. And he said, this is – that I am here, as you can see me, it's only in hundred percent because of her. He says, this is the best thing ever happened in my life, that's my mom. That's what – how it was, I mean. So he knows, and you know, he – he understands. He – it's not that he wants himself to be [indecipherable] you know, my – my Jewish, you know –

Q: Right.

A: – part of my life, because he knows I am a Jew, and I don't – I – I don't – I'm not going to say different. But he – he looks at, you know, Jews, through me. Okay, unfortunately the family, you know, didn't do a good job. And he is far away from everything, which he's supposed to, you know. He not supposed to – oh, let's say this way. So, my son, my son, as I mentioned to you, he's gonna be 40 in few days. And I am very proud of him, I really am. Without a college degree, he managed, you know, to – you know, get to the point that not many people in **America** are able to get. And I was able to not only survive, but take care of myself. The – the bad part is that I am alone. But – but I – you know, I'm okay with this, you know, because I – I know how to support myself, and I have him, and the – we live very close. And every time I need him – you know, we work together, so I – you know, I am with him 10 hours a day, but still he – he would never go to sleep without of calling me and asking me, Mom, are you okay, are you – do you need something, and you know. And always, if anything happened, he would never, ever let anybody to take me to the airport, never, ever.

Q: [coughing] It's okay.

A: He would – he would – it might be nervous. He would, you know, if there is – sometimes people, you know, offer me, you know, you can go with me. No, no, no, no, no, I take Mom, you know. Even t – even coming here, you know, I – I – I was offered by her, you know, to come to her house, and then we could go together.

Q: Right.

A: No way, no. I'll take Mom to the airport, I'll pick Mom from the airport, and wa – I know he's counting hours, you know, for me to come back. He needs me because you know, I work with him, and I take care of money. If I'm not there, nobody does my job. One day – and I'm gonna have a pile, you know, waiting for me, you know, to be taken care of. So, he is – he – he depends on me, and he – constantly he tells me, Mom, I would be nobody without of you. And I am blessed, you know.

Q: Yeah.

A: So that's the story, no matter how much group of Poles, you know, wanted me to die, kill my family and no matter what happened with me through all those years, I'm not only alive, but I am – I can – I can say I'm successful, you know. I'm on my own. I got enough money to, you know, do this and that. And what I appreciate the most in my life is that God gave me opportunity to be part of my son's success. You know, that my work for him let him go furth – further and further, you know. That – there are not too many moms who can say it, you know. And, you know, I –

I am just a part of – of his huge success, and I am proud of it, you know, and nobody's gonna take it away from me.

Q: Congratulations.

A: That would be all.

Q: Congratulations.

A: Thank you.

Q: Thank you, and thank you for letting us interview you. This is the end of the interview with **Helena** – and I'm going to s-say this right – **Swierczynska**? Yes. On November 8th, 2008, in **Alexandria, Virginia**.

Conclusion of Interview