United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Interview with Joyce Mizrachi
July 23, 2009
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PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of a recorded interview with Joyce Mizrachi, conducted by Peggy Frankston on July 23, 2009 on behalf of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The interview took place in New York, NY 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.

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JOYCE MIZRACHI
July 23, 2009

Question: This is the **United States Holocaust Memorial Museum** interview conducted by **Peggy Frankston**, with **Joyce Mizrachi** on July 23rd, 2009, in **New York City**, and it's for the **Rivesaltes** Internment Camp Memorial Museum. Thank you for coming today. Would you introduce yourself, please?

Answer: Okay. My name is **Joyce Saltz Mizrachi**, and I was born May 13th, 1941. We're not quite sure; my mother says I was born May 11th, but she wanted me to have my own birthday, so it became the 13th. My name was then given as **Josefina**(ph). Why, we don't know. I was – never was explained, except my mother did tell my father to tell them that my name was **Judith**. He did what he wanted, and I became **Josefina**(ph) for nine years of my life. I don't remember **Rivesaltes**. I was born in **Rivesaltes**, but I do not remember anything about it, of course. I know my mother left **Rivesaltes**, and I stayed. I was the excuse for her to leave, and she always told me that I'm the one who saved them. The ta – I don't know how long I stayed – can you stop it?

Q: Sure. Do you want us to put your glasses on the table?

A: No, I need a prop.

Q: Okay.

A: I don't know how long it took for her to get me back, but I know I must have been about one – one and a half? One? I'm not sure. I have been trying to get information, but I haven't gotten anything so far. I do have a booklet that was given to my mother when they brought her – when they brought me to her, and it has the pictures of the women who – the nurses who took care of me, who were Swiss Red Cross nurses, and some pictures of different periods, which I still have. We – after ri – **Rivesaltes**, we went to **Tres**, and there I have very few memories. The first memory I have is not feeling well, not being able to speak, and my mother going back and forth. I think it's my mother. And there must have been a little mirror, because I remem – that's the only thing I remember, and I know I was very young. And then I do remember **Tres**. Not **Tres**, **Marseilles**. We went to **Marseilles**, it was the end of the war, and there were a lot of air raids, and we used to go to shelters. The one I remember particularly well was the time I locked myself in the room, and the air raids went on and my mother went hysterical and my father had to break open the door. I remember getting a good spanking for that later, and I remember we did go to the shelters. The shelters were very frightening, because they were very dark, to me at the time, they were dark and cold. And I always cried. So there was a gentleman that I remember that we always used to see. His wife was blind. That I still remember. And he taught me how to – taught me different songs. And

that, I guess, stopped my crying, which became a pain in the neck to everyone else. I remember that. And I remember the different things. I remember being very spoiled by a lot of very different people. And I never had what my sister and brother had. I never remember hunger, because I was never hungry. I was frightened because no matter how young you are, people's emotions do – do penetrate, and fear is very, very noticeable and affective. It affects you. So I was always frightened of that. I was always afraid of being taken away. The other thing I remember is that I guess it was – it was a big Catholic organization, and in **France** the nuns had very big headdresses. I don't know the order, but I remember we used to get hot chocolate there, or something like it. And my mother – I was so s – very afraid of my mother leaving me, and being very – screaming very badly. Those are the things I remember, being very frightened. So remember being in back of a woman, because **Marseilles** was a very, very rough city, at that time especially, because it was near the waterfront. And walking – and we were walking behind a couple, and she had her bag over her wrist, and somebody just cutting the bag off. And she stood there with just the strap, screaming, and we were not far behind. I don't know if my father was there, because he usually was very good at running after anybody who was – had to be caught. And that always, always stuck in my mind. There was a couple who wanted to adopt me, and my mother said, no way. It was a friend of

theirs, I – I don't know, they just figured my mother had two children and they had none, and times were very bad. And she said, probably, I don't know who they were. I know my friend – friends of ours that still live in **Brussels** told **Lucie** about it when she was in **Brussels**. I don't know who it was, someday I'll go, in the near future, because they're rather old, and I have to go and see what they know. Then I remember coming to **Belgium** after the war, going to school. Things were very tough in **Belgium** after the war. Work was very difficult. The anti-Semitism was horrible, very, very strong. I went to school in yeshiva, but because I was very rambunctious, not the greatest student, because I couldn't care less, and I didn't like it. There was an orphanage nearby of all the kids that had lost their parents during the war, and they were sent to **France** and from **France** they were going to be sent to **Israel**, eventually, or some other place, or stay in **France**. And that made me very frightened. And ultimately my mother was asked to find another school for me, because I was such a wonderful child. They were thrilled to see me go, and I was thrilled to get out. And the next school I went to was an all-girls school. It was not a Hebrew school, it was very – it was mixed. Very few Jews, and I was one of them. And the antisis – anti-Semitism was very much felt when I was told, it's a shame that they didn't get you too. And I didn't know what they were talking about, because my parents never spoke about it, not in front of me. My father never spoke

about it til the day he died, til he had **Alzheimer's**, then he went back through everything. So he never spoke about anything. But I never understood what she was talking about. It was – it was tough. Then we came and what we did for entertainment was we went to the movies. And I decided that, since I entertained everybody anyway – I used to put on accents – I had to do that, I felt, because everybody was always so grouchy, and that made them laugh. So I entertained. And coming to this country meant that I wanted to know where **Hollywood** was. I was nine on the boat, and it was – I was thrilled. I was thrilled to come, til I came and I didn't particularly care for it. I was very homesick, I missed my friends. My parents did not talk about their experience when I was young in front of me. It was all kept very quietly. We came to this country, and my father, who did not want to come, only wanted to go to **Israel**. My mother refused. She said that she was not going to have us taken away any more, and he had a choice. He either could come – because she had one sister left, that lived here – he had a choice; either he came with us, and she was going and she was taking us, or th – he could go and he'd never see us again. So she blackmailed him into coming, which wasn't really the best thing for him, because he could never adjust very well to this country. She loved it. And every day I thank her. She did speak about it, ultimately, but he never, ever, ever spoke about it. I never knew he was in the resistance. I never knew that he had

gotten people out of the camp, because he was a plumber, and he knew the underground works, where he had to fix things, and that's how he got people out. I never knew all these things. Everything about him was a mystery, yet he was a wonderful father. He was wonderful when we were little, because he managed to play with us like a child, and have the most wonderful stories for us. She – my mother was very depressed for most of the time that I remember when I was sma – young. I remember her crying a lot. I remember her when her niece's birthday and her nephews, or whoever, always having – we didn't have very much money, but she always managed to get flowers next to their picture. And I always think – I always thought, I don't get flowers on my birthday, or anything like that. Why do they? I always had a feeling – well, it's my own insecurity, but I was always afraid that she was not my mother, because I used to think, if you – she got me out when I was one or two, how did she know it was me? Who told her it was me? Children change. How did she know? We stayed at the **HIAS** when we came, and that was really a shelter. It was a lot of different people from a lot of different places, and it was very much like a shelter, today, I would imagine. There were cots. And my aunt felt that that really wasn't proper for me, and I stayed with her. And I was – as I said, I was always very – my sister and brother do not want to think that I experienced anything. If I say I remember something, they're very fast to either say,

no you can't, you're too young. They – it's a form of protecting me, but it's the way they were.

Q: Sorry, that's my phone, sorry about that. I'll shut it off.

A: Shall I wait?

Q: Excuse me.

A: For me the **HIAS** was very exciting, it was very different. And I thought, oh, what a different place, what a different world. But I soon – and then we moved to **Riverside Drive** and I went to school. But there were always things lingering, there was always this heaviness that I remember. When I went to school, high school, there were a lot of – which was **Washington Heights**, there were a lot of refugees there, and it's funny how you click. And that's what you do. Even later on you do. And the frightening thing was, one of my friends found out when she was 16 that that was not her parents, they were aunt and uncle. She was put up as a child. And that reinforced my feeling that, oh I – I know she's not my mother. And I remember thinking – and I know, because I was such a difficult child. I was difficult also because she was 43 when she had me. I was not exactly what you call a planned child. And I remember thinking, yeah, if I'm gonna have a kid, I'm gonna have somebody like you. Til much later in life that I realized she is my mother because I look just like her. But that could be with adopted child as well. I am ju – I am very

much like her, and I know, I know that who – that I'm not. Not that it would matter anyway, after a certain age. As a mother she was a fantastic mother. She let me live and be who I am, which is more than I can say for a lot of children of – who are survive – children of survivors. Because they burden – there is a burden on you. There is a – a very heavy burden on you that you have to protect, even when it comes to your siblings, and you cannot do certain things that would upset them too much, because they were upset enough. But all in all they were – she really did a phenomenal job. She is the reason why we're alive. She is the one who masterminded everything. But a lot of it was also a lot of luck, because she was stopped by Gestapo, and she was – and he looked at her and he said, I will let you go this time, but if I catch you again, you will not survive. So things like that did happen. She did not – one thing she did teach me, was not to dislike anybody for anything that happened before. And that I'm thrilled about, because I do have friends that are everything different. As I said, she didn't put all the ugliness on me, but unfortunately we do that ourselves. I don't – I'm very careful who I speak to about it. I don't watch any movies with anyone around me, that pertain to the Holocaust. And you get your own things that you have to live through and work through, but I didn't have the hardship that they had. For that, I'm lucky too. Okay. And that's my story.

Q: Thank you. You are happy that came to the **United States**, and you have a life here. What you talked about, talent for entertaining, and – that might have come from the need to –

A: Of course.

Q: Can you tell me one of the things you – what your career was, what – what you did?

A: I was a lab technician, hematology lab technician like my sister, because my mother wanted me to do that. But when I – as soon as I made a little money, I went to tech – I went – decided to try to do acting, cause I did it all along. So I went to – had a wonderful technique teacher, **Anthony Menino**, have you ever heard of him? **Anthony Menino**? And then I went to **Herbert Berghof** studios, and I studied with **Bill Hickey**(ph). And I did plays. I did different things, nothing major. Then I got married and for some reason I thought that if I had children I had to be with them, which was stupid. But I also didn't have the need that I had before. I'm sorry I didn't pursue it more, but there were obstacles when I did. My brother, I remember telling my father, you have to do something. She can't go to acting school. You know what's in acting schools, they're all sick. And a few other things. And my father smiled and let him talk and he says, you do what you want. And I did, and it was wonderful, I loved it. I really enjoyed it. And I always said someday I'll do it

again, and I just – I've done small things, but nothing like I really wanted to do. That's my fault, no one stopped me except me. But I found that it's a great thing to do, especially when I was little, because it really made life so much more bearable. I used to go to the movies, watch what they did and I copied the whole thing. The only thing that I remember that really I'm thrilled about, when my father was in the hospital, when he was – had **Alzheimer's**, and he was pretty bad, I said, do you know who I am? And he said yes – and this didn't happen very often – you're my child. I remember how you – and I – I remember all the accents you used to do. And one of them was the Hungarian accent, and of course we spoke Yiddish. So it was an imitation of the Hungarian Jewish neighbor, and he found it very funny. And strange, when he was very ill, different things did come out, like sleeping with his shoes, because he'd have to run and hide, used to tell us to hide. But that was – you know, with every hardship and with every horrible thing, there is some good, and there is some nice things that you can remember. For the longest time I couldn't think of my father because I didn't want to think of him that way. Took a long time, and now I can think of it, and I can think of the nicer parts. For someone who did so much good, sad to think that that had to happen. But, you know, we're not privileged. The only way I found out about his family was that we found a cousin in **California** who was really – who's like my third cousin or second cousin. And she

knew all about his grandmother and his – and my grandfather. I had no idea about them. I had no idea about anything. I found out that my great-grandmother had a school for girls and taught them how to read, in a ghetto structure. But I never knew all these things. I never knew anything. It's almost like being adopted, when you don't know who your grandparents are really. You don't know – you don't have any aunts and uncles, you don't have any cousins. There's no one there. The reason we're so close is because that's it, that was what we had. That's who we had to rely on, that was it. There was no one else. And then we came to this country and I had an aunt, and she had – but her children were much older than – because she was my mother's oldest sister. And she decided that we were too European, she really didn't want too much of us. She was a little mentally deranged. And we didn't see her that much. So there was never anyone until I got married, and I did marry into a very large family, and I found that very, very comforting, because my children always had cousins and friends and – and the whole thing. And it was lovely.

Q: Thank you very much.

A: You're welcome. Very three different personalities though.

Conclusion of Interview