

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

**Interview with Ruth Salton
October 10, 1990
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PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of a videotaped interview with Ruth Salton, conducted by Linda Kuzmack on October 10, 1990 on behalf of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The interview took place in Washington, DC and is part of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's collection of oral testimonies. Rights to the interview are held by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The interview cannot be used for sale in the Museum Shop. The interview cannot be used by a third party for creation of a work for commercial sale.

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RUTH SALTON
October 10, 1990

Q: OK. We're on. Would you tell me your name please?

A: My name is Ruth Salton.

Q: Where were you born and when?

A: I was born in Berlin.

Q: What year?

A: In 1927, January the 22nd.

Q: Tell me about your family, about your parents.

A: Well, my father was born in Poland and in the '30's they sent him back to Poland when the Germans started being a little bit more active. They made him leave Poland and he went back to...and they made him leave Berlin and he went back to Poland to the little town of _____ where his mother's mother still lived. And we lived in Poland and until the war started. In 1939...

Q: Let's let's hold it just a minute. Before we go to '39. OK. Tell me about your childhood then. Uh you you really grew up in Poland.

A: I really grew up in Po...yes, in Poland and I went to school, to elementary school and my father was a working man for kind of like ____ business. Had something to do with lumber, you know. My mother was a housewife. We had a nice apartment and we had a grandmother and and and my mother's sisters and the whole family who lived within walking distance of each other.

Q: Where was...did you go to school?

A: I went to elementary school and finished seventh grade in _____.

Q: What was the town like?

A: It was...it was, you know, it was a a medium-sized town and it was like a like a county seat or something like that. There were lots of Jews, very poor Jews. A few who had businesses and lived a little better, but the majority of the people were...lived in one room apartments. A religious community, not very assimilated. It was the part of Poland that was kind of Polish-Russian, not Austrian-Hungarian or German so they were not assimilated as much. There were in the town maybe ten families that were very assimilated. There was a rabbi and another rabbi and it was very very orthodox and

oriented in very kind of orthodox religious way. I was too young to really take any active part in in in the life of the town, you know. I went to school in the morning and came home and, you know, did my homework and had a couple of little girl friends and, you know, boys didn't come yet into the picture, so you know...can't tell you very much about it. I can tell you that each holiday we got together with my grandmothers, you know...tradition was a big thing, you know. My grandmother had a business. She was supplying dairy to the army. So she was well-off, you know. So we kind of always gathered in my grandmother's place. Other daughters and kids, you know, and us, you know. Father did not do too well, financially I think, you know. What I can remember, you know, we had a nice apartment like two rooms but I don't think there was wealth, you know. I think he had...he struggled a lot, you know. First, you know, he was he lived in one place and then, you know, he kind of couldn't establish himself when he was sent back to Poland. So Grandmother helped and whatever, you know. The families kind of lived together.

Q: When did things begin to change?

A: For me personally, you know, some time after the holidays, our Passover holidays in 1939, my aunt came from Warsaw. And my father sent me to live with her for a while, you know. I finished elementary school. There was no question about going to college because there was no money, so I lived...I went sometimes in May to Warsaw in 1939. In September the war started. Then, you know, lasted the whole month until, you know, until the Germans really came in Warsaw. The family _____ four months. In that apart...in that apartment, you know, uh we all lived in the basement and every morning you had to, you know, go up and every evening go down into the basement until the bombardment was over, and I stayed with them until in the '40's. In the fall in the '40's. And there was a janitor in that house who offered, you know, that I should move in with their family and live with them. In the meantime, you know, they started...other people started moving in. It's up in the in the district where later on the ghetto was. The street was called _____. And when they started really giving a very hard time to all the Jews and beating and and resettling, the people started moving in. My aunt bought me a ticket on the train and said go home. So I was on the train traveling from Warsaw to _____. Sometime...half-way they stopped the train. They said all the Jews off. And they gathered us all in the station...it was a railway station. A tall guy, a Polish railway worker, came over to me, took my hand to walk me out, and and maybe about half-mile from the station there was three big buildings like apartment buildings where railway workers probably lived, you know. And he took me to the apartment. In the apartment there were maybe twenty other Jews, so he kept us over there like some of them he kept like a week, two, two days, five days and slowly he and his wife took them through the fields and tried to help them go on, get out of there. He kept me six weeks I was over there, and one day he said it's time to move on, and he took me through the fields and I walked like miles and miles...I don't even know what direction, you know. Some people gave me a ride, you know, and I told them where I want to go and finally I came to the city where I wanted to go home to _____. I came over there. There were no Jews. I knew I had an

aunt, my mother's sister, in _____. So I walked to _____. You know, on the way I asked where to go and since I was little blonde girl and uh nobody really suspected that I'm Jewish you know. Because nobody in all these people who gave me a ride, you know, asked me where you want to go, and I said I want to go there, to _____. They took me. They they...nobody suspected I was Jewish. I came to _____. Was nobody there anymore. My aunt was, you know, was a wealthy woman. She had businesses. It's a small town. She had a big...and for that time a brick house was a big thing, you know. She had a big house. The house was empty, you know. Some Poles lived over there and they were not there anymore. So I went back to _____, and I remembered that while my grandmother, you know, had the dairy, she used to also to deliver some stuff for a hospital, you know. I remembered that man who was in charge in the hospital is a doctor, so I said I'll go over there, you know, and I'll tell him who I am and maybe he can tell me something where they are, because I didn't know where anybody is, was, you know. So I went to the hospital and he was very nice. He put me in a bed, you know. He said pretend that you are a patient and that you are sick. We will try to see your your family is in Rawa Russkaya (ph). This is...next to _____ was Belzec (ph), and next to Belzec, maybe twenty miles, was a city, the Rawa Russkaya. He let somebody know...I don't know how...by peasants or who sent somebody, that I am in the hospital, in his hospital. Then my mother and my two sisters are now in Rawa Russkaya. You could not get through Belzec anymore, so she came...she got some peasants to help her and she came for me. She came to the hospital, and she smuggled me through fields into Rawa Russkaya.

Q: How did she do that? Tell us about...

A: She she had, you know...Rawa Russkaya was a little village. It was in the fields...miles and miles of fields. And she paid some peasants who lived over there, and they brought her in, you know, into the city. She came to the hospital and picked me up and through fields and and forests and _____, you know, we went back. We hadn't seen a soul over there. There was not a German or or Poles. Just the peasant and my mother. And she walked me back to Rawa Russkaya. Next day, you know...they lived in a, you know...they they really came from _____ to Rawa Russkaya and they didn't have apartment or anything, you know. They didn't have money, so the Jewish community over there gave an apartment in somebody's basement. Next day there was a knock at the door. The Russians were there. And they took the whole family in about whoever was, you know, about five hundred families from or maybe more...on a on a train and shipped us off to Siberia. We were in Siberia on the Mongolian border in the Tigress (ph) in the forest as prisoners. We were over there until 1943, '44, when General _____ who was in in England in the made...you know, they had made a deal with the Russians and they kind of liberated us from the Tigress and sent us into the little town.

Q: OK. Before you were liberated, uh but you are being shipped to Siberia...can you tell us about the trip to Siberia and then we'll ask you what it was like there?

A: The trip took us five weeks in cattle cars without food, without water. Once in a while they stopped the train...didn't let us off...just brought in some herring, some water, some bread...maybe in the whole five weeks maybe six times. People were hungry, dirty. The trip was absolutely horrible. Absolutely horrible. And then they took us, you know, to...it was a little town and they put us in trucks and drove us into the woods, into the forest. There was nothing there but these tremendous trees. It was...the Russian Tiger (ph) is unbelievable because the only thing you have over there is trees and was not a house. We had to build our own barracks, and they had..._____ couple of day commandant and some others who oversee us. We could not leave the place. It was not fenced in or anything. But where would you go? There was a village about five or ten miles away, but you couldn't leave without having a permission to leave and at the...what we had to do over there is get up every morning and cut down trees, cut the trees down into one meter blocks and pile it up in the forest. And for this you got the ration bread, just bread. Was hunger. The families built like a barrack and each barrack was divided into tiny little places. You lived on the floor. It was cold. The winters were horri...winter was...we were one winter there...absolutely horrible. The snows went up six, seven feet and uh was was bad. It was bad, you know. And we thought that when we came...if we're ever liberated of these these miserable forests, we'll have stories to tell, and fortunately when we came back after, you know, the war ended...they let us go back to Poland. On the way back, you know, once we crossed Ger...the Polish border, the Russian-Polish border, the Poles started, you know, wanted to dynamite the train. And, you know, everybody had to get off the train. The train was escorted by Russian military. We had to get off the train. It took them hours and hours until they cleared what they were _____ and we came into Poland and nobody wanted to go, you know. They took us to a town with the name of _____. It used to be a German town and when belonged to Poland. We didn't know what to do with ourselves, so I joined the kibbutz.

Q: This is after the war?

A: That's right after...around '45. I joined a kibbutz, the _____. This is...and I was in the kibbutz for a while. I was working and get...you know...wanted to leave to go to Israel. That was the purpose of joining the kibbutz.

Q: What was the kibbutz like?

A: It...the kibbutz was really a transient place where people came, stayed a while, worked, and from there tried to leave to go to Israel. It was not a kibbutz like you have in Israel which you work and you establish a life and you're...it was really a place where people, Jewish people could come, be safe. The place where they gathered. There was a Jewish community center, but it did not have the the facilities to accommodate people who came into town, Jewish people, because where would they go. So I I was in that kibbutz for a while, and then somebody came to me by the name of Andre _____ (ph), and said, you know, you better come and join us. And I joined the Brichah (ph). And they sent me to Lodz and to Warsaw to be trained, you know...tell me what to...what I'm going to have to

do and things like that, and my main job was to try to find children and bring them to _____, to the kibbutz. And from there, we put them on trucks into and tried to smuggle them in through the Russian border into Berlin.

Q: Tell us about uh some of the children and some of the things that you did in the Brichah.

A: Most of the children that we gathered were orphans. They were children who Jewish families left either with neighbors or some other Poles or people who wanted to make some extra money from the Jewish families, kept the child through the whole thing. You know, once the war is over and they can dispose of the child or send it back or and get lots of money paid for it, if they can track, you know...lots of Polish people came to us with these children and demanded a lot of money. Others wouldn't give up with the children. Some adopted them. The others had free labor and most of the children didn't really know that they're Jewish. We had to find out. There were different ways to find out. We used to come to a town and, you know, pretend that they are Poles, and go to the inns and sit and drink and eat with the Poles and joke around about the Jews and here and there you could hear a rumor from...somebody say...hey, you know these five kids of these and this and this family were all blond but there is a black one over there too. I bet you she's Jewish. Or I'd bet you he's Jewish, so we kind of found out this way how the kids are, where they are, what they're doing, and tried to gather them in order to send them to Israel.

Q: How did you get them...how did you go about getting them?

A: Getting them to Israel?

Q: Physically get them out of the families first?

A: Well, most of the times we came and negotiated. We paid money. We gave jewelry. Sometimes even you had to just grab them, just kidnap them. I hate to use that word, because it's really not kidnapping, you know. It's getting back what was yours. Now let's pause. (Pause)

Q: It's OK. (Pause) It's OK. Take your time. (Pause)

A: Anyway, we gathered them to the big building to the court in the center in the building was like a square. The front part had a big gate, and we had guards over there because it was dangerous. The Poles didn't let us be. One night we had seventy-five kids, and we kept them in the back of the building, because it was like a square and Polish hooligans or whoever, you know, attacked the building with guns and was shooting and stones and the police was right there on the corner. Nobody came out to say a thing. It went on for hours, and everybody was scared and the children were scared, you know. There was screaming and crying and really, you know, we didn't know how to keep these kids quiet. They were really scared of this all the shooting. That's what happened...it happened not only

once...many times, so next day we used to take some on trucks and drive them down to the border. Normally there were Russians on one side and Germans on the other side. Means to either pay off uh with money, bribe the borders, guards, you know, to let you through. On the other side there were Brichah from Germany who took them over and they took over...they continued on the other side and we went back. And uh this lasted and maybe about two years and one day they came, the Polish police came and said they're looking for a little blonde with a blue cape and you see, the Brichah the Brichah had it's quarters on top on the fourth floor and the guards sent up somebody and said, you know, that they're looking for me. So they got me out and they put me in truck and I went into Germany and I went to Germany and I reported to Munich. It was the Brichah and of course I worked over there and my job was different. My job was to find new ways to get...this was illegal...to get people through the borders, through the mountains into Austria and Italy, and from there some oth...some other people came. Well...

Q: Tell us about those trips, or one of those trips.

A: Us...usually, you know, uh we waited for the night. You know, we...I'll give you one example...we were in _____ and we had to find a way to get people through the mountains, the Alps. So at night there was me, two other guys, one Israeli, one German Jew young man and another girl, and we were pretending that we are hiking and got lost in the mountains. To find a better way, a route, so if, you know, that will, you know, we could smuggle through people. And after a couple of weeks we established the route. We marked it and and it was a place from where me could smuggle through the people into Italy and into Austria.

Q: Can you...as it were, take us on one of those journeys? What, what did you do?

A: Well, we..whenever, you know, the trip was scheduled to go through the mountains. We had a building over there where we stayed. A truck used to come with seventy people, eighty people, husbands, wives, children, luggage, packages and we used to take them climbing up the mountains and it was terrible. People couldn't...it's hard for older people. It's hard for little kids. Not equi...not really too many children that to climb mountains, you know, you really have to equipped for. You have to have the proper clothing. You can't carry anything. On the way they left their...they used to carry suitcases with these pots and pans, with everything, you know, hoping that they'll come someplace and have something, you know. They have to leave everything. They used to climb up and go through the route that we have established before, that we cannot be caught by the by the police, by the guards, by the border guards, and on the other side the others took them over and we went back. This we did three times a week, four times a week, whenever it's nec...was necessary. I became a good mountain climber. (Laughter)

Q: What was it like for you, doing all this?

A: I think it was the most gratifying time in my life. I find still now...I came to New York to some affair a couple of years ago, and a young woman by the name of ____...I forgot her last name...came over to me and says, I know you. You know, when my mother and father and my brothers cross the border, you took their jewelry to have it saved, and smug...smuggled it through into Italy. We'll never forget it. I mean it was the most gratifying time in my life and now it's different, you know. Now...but at that time there was nothing. No future. It was worthwhile. Then we came, you know...I was in Germany and then liberation...after liberation we still had some work to do and I was, you know, in the Brichah. It was attached to the Jewish agency in Munich, so I was still...they kept me a little bit busy still and then I came to Frankfurt and final got to Israel, but while I was in Frankfurt I have a chance to apply for to come to the United States, and everybody said why not. Try it. What can you lose? So I applied, you know, for immigration to the United States, and I went to Israel. One day I had a telephone call...if you want to go to see the United States, now is the time to go. And I had a boyfriend in Israel, but he said go, you know, so you'll come back in a couple of months. I mean such chances not everybody gets. So I came to the United States and I met George. And I didn't go back. And a year later we got married, you know, and George was a television repairman. I mean he had no education. He had sev...four years of elementary school in Poland when the war started. He he was in the Army. They drafted him, and when, you know, when ____ four years and we got married and we decided, you know, we had the choice of staying in New York and doing what everybody else does...uh he wanted to go to school, so he said fine. He went ____ to Syracuse. He used to...we lived in Rome, New York, and he went to Syracuse University and I had my kids and we stayed over there for ten years. They were good years. Hard but good and safe. And then he was, you know, invited to come here by the Department of Defense and we came to Washington.

Q: Is there anything you want to add to this story or any comments you want to make?

A: It's good to be alive and it's good to live. And I don't think we should forget but we shouldn't live in the past. That's it.

Q: Thank you very much.

End of tape #1

Conclusion of Interview