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## Lillian Wajc Stello oral history interview by Ellen Wilson Klein, November 17, 2009

Lillian Wajc Stello (Interviewee)

Ellen Wilson Klein (Interviewer)

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**Ellen Klein:** Today is November 17, 2009. I'm here today with Ms. Lillian Wajc Stello. My name is Ellen Wilson Klein. We are in St. Petersburg, Florida, in the United States of America. The language we'll be having in this interview today will be English, and our videographer is Jane Duncan.

Tell me first a few things: tell me your name. What was your name at birth?

**Lillian Stello:** My name at birth was Sarah Wajc, W-a-j-c.

EK: Great. And you had your name changed, so tell me what your name is now.

LS: My name now is Lillian Stello. The reason they changed my name because of the war. They didn't want to, you know, have Sarah, so they changed to Lillian.

EK: Why didn't they want that?

LS: Because it would sound Jewish. It's a Bible name, Sarah. That's why they had to change, you know? And then my father's name was Lipa (inaudible) Wajc, and my mother was Berkovitz, Eva—Chava Berkovitz, and they changed to Eva, Eva Wajc, yes.

EK: And do you know their dates of birth?

LS: Their birth, no, I don't know, because I was too little. You know, I just remember some things, that my parents both wore fur coat with the muff, and with the hat. I had everything when I had my parents.

EK: Tell me your date of birth, and then tell me a little bit about your life.

LS: My father was a very talented man. He knew to draw beautiful. He had the great voice. And he sang for weddings sometimes, but this was not his profession. He just did that for people, you know, and he played soccer too. He was very nice man. My mother—he was a businessman that owned, like, department store, you know?

EK: And this was in what city?

LS: In Leszno. This was thirty kilometers from Warsaw. Today they call it Warsaw.

EK: In Poland, okay?

LS: In Poland, yes. They had a big business. My father was a businessman, very smart man. My mother was a smart businesswoman. I think that their store came from my mother's side, yes, and she had a lot of sisters that were very close. They do for each other everything, you know? And my mother was a young woman, and she went to buy shoes for her sister's kid, and this way she lost her life because they load them up in the cars, you know, those cars, and they took them to the gas chambers. They just closed this street and everybody had to go—my father tried to pay a German man money, but it was too late.

EK: And where were you when this happened?

LS: Excuse me?

EK: Where were you when this happened?

LS: I was with her sisters. The sister who she took the kid to go buy the shoes, I was with them.

EK: And were you an only child?

LS: Yeah, I was the only one, yes. And up till then I had a good life, up till I had my parents. But later my life changed to terrible, you know, and sometimes they asked me to go to the broken up stores and go look for food. I was very little, but I had blonde hair and blue eyes and the Germans didn't think I was Jewish, you know? But getting back when my mother died, I stayed with her sisters.

EK: And where was your father? Was he with you?

LS: My father was in hiding someplace, but I was with her sisters and, you know—I was with the sisters. And then I went to my father's sisters, you know? I stayed with them.

EK: What made you have to leave your mother's sisters?

LS: Because they couldn't—they were in the bad area, you know?

EK: Okay.

LS: I don't know how I—and this was in the beginning, when they came to Leszno, the Germans. We went up to the attic, and my father and his brother and his brother-in-law, they tried to go away and the Germans were shooting, but my father was a very smart man. He escaped, but the other two died, because we never saw them anymore. I guess they killed them, you know, and we were in the attic.

So then we went to stay with the Polish lady. We went to the Polish lady, and she had an apartment in the basement. All of a sudden, my father showed up, showed up and—because the Polish lady went to Leszno and the people said that nowhere is my father. He was hiding then. But we went to Warsaw then. We were in Warsaw, but he was in Leszno, hiding with some Polish people. And then, you know, somebody told my aunts that he's alive, so my aunts went and got me back; they sent me to my mother's sister.

EK: Okay. So you had been in hiding with them, the Polish lady. Was that with your aunts that were your father's sisters?

LS: Yes, yes.

EK: Okay.

LS: I was with the Polish lady. We were living—there was a room in the basement. In the beginning, we were three children and two aunts, five. Five; and the Polish lady and her grown son, so it was seven; and then my father came. It was eight. My father stood in the door because some of the Polish ladies had over there, like, potatoes in the basement, so they keep cool—potatoes and onions, whatever—and they used to go to see; if something rot out, they would throw it out. So at night they used to come down to the basement, and my father stood in the door. When he heard somebody come down, he shut the door and told everybody not to talk.

EK: Okay. Tell me about where you were staying in the basement. Tell me about where you were staying in the basement. What do you remember about that?

LS: Yes, in the basement. We were in the basement, living this—the room was in the basement. And before ghetto Warsaw, we prepare. My father dug out in the basement a hole, and all of a sudden they said that women to go to the church and men to go fight ghetto Warsaw.

EK: Okay.

LS: So my father went to fight ghetto Warsaw [as a] *partisani*, and we—when this broke off, that fight, we went—he dig up in the floor, and we went down there. We were sitting there, like we were five people over there, in a very little place, and we saw the Germans run through the window in that room, but they didn't see us because we put—there was a bed over there.

EK: Over the hole?

LS: Over the hole was a bed, and some stuff laying. But you know, when you dig up in the basement, the thing was just, like, wet, like—

EK: The wood?

LS: The wood was wet, and there was big spaces where they broke off. And my father dig up, and thanks to them—to him—we were alive, because the Germans were running through that room from the street down through the window. And they were screaming “*Hier raus* from here! Get out from here!” But we had no place to go, so we stayed over there.

EK: You must have been so frightened.

LS: Excuse me?

EK: You must have been so frightened.

LS: Yeah. We’re not allowed to talk, we couldn’t talk. There was no water to drink or nothing to eat, and the Germans were back and forth in that room. You know, they were checking out, and we saw them but they didn’t see us. Later we went through the other places where was not a room, where the potatoes—it was a box made, like a wooden box, and there were potatoes there, two boxes, and they were like this across. And my aunt—she stayed in that box, my aunt; one with her daughter in the other one. They stay in the—lay in the box and cover up, I guess, with some blankets. But they put me across the window, you know? Funny thing, if they come in or they hear somebody, you know, is I am there.

And my—there were—excuse me. There was another aunt over there with us, and her name was Dorca. Dorca, and she had typhus. So they put her on that side, but she was not hidden or nothing like this. But she was very sick. She was, like, dead. But me, they put across that window in the back, you know?

EK: And no one saw you?

LS: What?

EK: No one saw you?

LS: No, just one. They catch my cousin one time, went to the other, the other side of the rooms in the basement, and they saw her and they said they’re gonna throw grenades, because they thought they saw some people. So they’re gonna throw grenades, you know.

So that time my aunt went out and look—she looked for—she went to a church, or—she went in the street and the bullets were flying so bad that she—it ripped her coat, the bullet, but it didn't kill her and she came back.

She met some man, *partisani*, and this *partisani*, she did tell him that only was two women and two children. She didn't include me. You know, she didn't include me, but she told me I should go and see there, she wanted me to stay with that lady with the typhus so I could make her—that's what she said, so I could make her, give her some food, maybe, or something. But she said there were two women and two children, and can you take us someplace so we survive? And then when the man came in, she told me to go and ask him if he could take me too, you understand me? But after then, she didn't mention my name to the man.

EK: Was this before or after they sent you into the Warsaw ghetto to stay with your aunt?

LS: This was before.

EK: Before, okay.

LS: Yeah. No, no, no, yeah, before they sent me—no, this was after. This was after. You know, because they sent me to the ghetto to my mother's sisters, my aunts and the lady, the Polish lady, where she was hiding, because we were paying her.

EK: I see.

LS: Yeah. She sent me with her to go to my mother's sisters, because they didn't want to take care of me, you know? So they send me to the ghetto, and there I lived with my mother's sister who worked for the Germans. She was a seamstress. She was sewing Germans' uniforms. So they send me over there.

When they found my father, when the Polish lady saw that my father was alive, they said to him, "We know where your sisters are." So my father arranged for a German man to bring me back to them, and he came back. He paid a German man money and the German man; they were workers going from one site. You know, a group of people, you could see over there.

EK: Yes.

LS: In the picture. There was a group of people every day going to work.

EK: Okay.

LS: They were all lined up, and I was very little. He paid a German man, my father, money, to bring me back to the other side.

EK: Okay.

LS: Where I used to be with them before they sent me to the ghetto.

EK: Back to the Polish lady.

LS: Yeah, back to Polish lady.

EK: What do you remember about being in the ghetto with your aunt?

LS: Oh, what I remember is we had one room with a little desk, where we could put some stuff in, like some food. There was no table. The room was very small. But my aunt was very good to me. She would go to work to sew the uniforms, and she would sometimes be allowed to take me.

EK: Okay.

LS: Other times, I had to stay in the room—

EK: By yourself?

LS: I was—yeah, by myself. And she told me, “If the Germans knock on the door, please lay down. Don’t move, make believe that you’re dead, that you’re dead.” And that’s what she taught me, you know? And sometimes she took me to the factory and I would go under—the sewing machine was dug up, and she would hide me over there. The other

times they would bring the little kids, like kindergarten, and they would say, “Give us Polish books to work on,” and when the Germans were doing the inspections, they said to us, “Let’s change the books. You speak German. You remember that.” And they told us—and the Germans were asking if we know in German, talking German, you know what I mean?

EK: I do.

LS: And that’s what it was, but my mother’s aunt was very good to me, you know? Like my father’s aunt, like I told you before, you know, they said there were two women and two children they didn’t want to take me with them. They were thinking to leave me there with that woman. She was in a coma. She didn’t know nothing, you know?

EK: Uh-huh.

LS: But the men—the *partisani* man said to me that he would take me too, you know?

EK: You asked him?

LS: Yeah, I asked him, and I was the only one who could walk, because my cousins had bad arthritis and they couldn’t walk. I walked, but I have arthritis very bad now from sitting in the basement, because there was *glina*, you know, something. Not sand, dry, but there was something like, you know—

EK: Like clay?

LS: Clay, exactly.

EK: Okay.

LS: Clay, and the *partisani* took us to his place, but there were two places over there. And the next place they kill everybody. The Germans found out and they kill everybody. Part of that place, we were two and a half flights under the ground.

EK: Where was this? This was Warsaw?

LS: Warsaw, yeah.

EK: Okay.

LS: Two and a half flights under the ground we were.

EK: And this was in a building in Warsaw?

LS: This was in a garage. Upstairs was a garage.

EK: Okay.

LS: To fix the cars.

EK: Okay.

LS: They didn't know that we were downstairs. Nobody knew.

EK: And what did they do? They dug a hole into the ground?

LS: Yeah.

EK: Okay.

LS: Two and a half flights under the ground, yeah. And this was on a river like. There was a river. So you know when springtime the water was coming up and we were sitting in the water. It was terrible. You could come up—we never see daylight for, I think, two and a half years. We didn't know daylight, you know? It was we set over there, and the *partisani* sometime come up and bring us some food, you know, something to eat.

EK: Were you in there with your aunts and cousins by yourself?

LS: Yeah, I was with—

EK: Or were there other people there with you?

LS: We were just by ourselves.

EK: Okay.

LS: Two aunts and three children.

EK: Okay.

LS: And he would come out with the rowboat. You know, you couldn't get there any other way but with the rowboat unless you opened the factory floor.

EK: I see.

LS: You know? It was a steel floor, you know, in the—they were fixing cars and buses and stuff like that. Yeah.

EK: So what did you—what was it like where you were staying there under the garage with the spring of water?

LS: Yes. We tried to pump it out sometimes. We tried to get it out, but in springtime it was terrible, you know? And we stayed there till the Americans came, the Russians came out and, you know, let us out. That's what. But like I say, the worst thing really—you know, there was no food, no water to drink. We putted out a rusted out can. That's all we had to get some water. But in the other place, we did this when we were hiding in the room in the basement. We putted out the rusted out can, but some of my cousins passing by and say they're gonna throw the grenade, so we had to run away from there.

EK: In the Polish lady's house?

LS: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Yes. So this was very difficult thing. But I remember my mother had a store and she was a good businesswoman, very good, and everybody liked my parents. They were very nice people. They were well to do people.

EK: Were they religious?

LS: Oh, yeah. My mother was very religious. Good you asked me that question. She would not open the stove on Saturday, you know? She wouldn't cook, you know. They were very religious, yeah. I have to say that. But, you know, I grew up in a home, in the orphanages. After the war, my aunt send us to orphanages where it was supported by the American Jews, and—

EK: In Poland?

LS: In Poland. My first orphanage was Swider.

EK: Okay. Do you know how to spell that?

LS: Swider, S-w-i-d-e-r, Swider.

EK: All right.

LS: My first orphanage. I went over there, and over there one time a lady took a couple kids and she went to Russia. She took the kids and just went away with them.

EK: They were not hers?

LS: No. This was orphans. But she took them and went to Russia.

EK: And you were there after you were liberated, because—

LS: Yes.

EK: Because your parents didn't come back. Your father from the uprising—

LS: Yes. My father had a pink ribbon. I never could forget that. He said that he will put on me when the war ends, but he never came back. When I was a child, I wouldn't eat my food and leave it for my parents. I was saving it for him. And I was very little then, but I ask every time when my parents gonna come, when they're gonna come. You know, my mother was very good to me. She always make sure I always had everything, you know? She worked hard, and my father too. Even those years women didn't work, but my mother did work, you know. And that's when—and then I went to an orphanage, this Swider—

EK: And your aunt sent you there?

LS: Yeah, my aunt sent—she, and my two cousins, we three was there. And she sent her daughter too, you know, and—

EK: Why did they do that? Do you know?

LS: Excuse me?

EK: Do you know why they felt they had to do that, to send you both to the orphanage?

LS: Three, three of us.

EK: Three of you.

LS: Yeah. She sent three of us because she got an excuse that, you know, it's a better life than here in Leszno. It was a lot of anti-Semitic people, and you know we couldn't go to school. It was scary a little, so she sent us over there so we would have—it was much easier for her too, I guess. But my aunt sent her daughter too over there, and we were three, so we stayed that orphanage in Swider. Then we had to transfer—

EK: How old were you? Can I ask that? How old were you at that point, because you were three, right, when the war started?

LS: Yeah.

EK: Mm-hm.

LS: I was two, I think.

EK: Two when it started for you. Okay.

LS: And when I went to the orphanage, I was seven.

EK: Okay.

LS: I think seven or six. Six, maybe.

EK: Okay.

LS: No, seven, seven when I went to the orphanage. You know, and over there, we had counselors. We went to school in that city school, in the city schools, but we came back home to orphanage after school. We had a lady we did homework and she helped us, and everything was with a ring. To go to sleep with a ring, get up with a ring; it's like a military thing, you know, everything you have to do there. And we had—we had a nurse in charge, a lady. We had counselors.

EK: How did they treat you? Were they kind to you?

LS: Yes, believe it or not, a lot of them, because I listened and I did whatever they wanted. They were very nice to me, really nice. I think some of them tried to adopt me, but my aunt wouldn't give up; she wouldn't give up because she felt she had somebody who could do the work, you know? Whatever she said, "Do the work, take care, do," because her daughters didn't, you know, they were pampered, so their life was different than mine.

I was the Cinderella, and my aunt told me I had to get up an hour before school to get ready those two to school. I had to wash their clothes. They wore long hair, so I had to get

up, braid their hair, get them ready to school, because I was the only one who didn't have the mother. My older cousin had the aunt, because her mother died before the war and the aunt took her in, so it was like her daughter. So both were like daughters, and all the work I had to do to stay in the home.

Every time, we had—different people had to get up for—one person had to get up four o'clock in the morning to do the—smear the bread, go to the kitchen to prepare for breakfast. Four o'clock you had to get up. So my aunt went and she told the teacher that my cousins, they're weak and they can't do that, but I should do three weeks. I had to do this three weeks. Each kid did it one week.

EK: I see. In that orphanage? Everyone took turns.

LS: In the orphanage. But she said that her daughter, she was weak, she couldn't do it.

EK: And you should do it for her.

LS: I should do it for her. It was me doing everything. Even after the war when we came to Leszno, I had to go to our well. I was six years old and get, I think, water, you know, get the water, and I had to walk a couple of miles with the pails of water. But my cousins, no, they didn't have to do it.

EK: Were you older than they were?

LS: I was older than them. From one I was older four months; from the other one, six months older.

EK: Okay.

LS: So she said that I'm older and I have to do that, you know?

EK: I see. It must have been very hard for you.

LS: Excuse me?

EK: It must have been very hard for you.

LS: Yes, it was very hard, and she always said to them they should stay away from the well, not to go up close to the well, my cousin. But it was all right for me to get the drink, you know, from the well, the water. Then I had to put my pail, you know, and then I carried them two pails home with water. Yes.

EK: And this was to the orphanage?

LS: Yes.

EK: Okay.

LS: This was in the beginning, before the orphanage.

EK: I see, okay.

LS: Before the orphanage.

EK: How long were you in this orphanage? How long were you in this orphanage, do you know?

LS: In the orphanage, I was—I went to Israel. I think I was eleven or twelve, so I was in the orphanages till then. See, the orphanage, I went from one to another because they closed up a few of them. So I moved from one orphanage to another. From Swider, I went to Otwock.

EK: How do you spell, do you know?

LS: O-t-w-o—Otwock—c-k. Otwock.

EK: Okay.

LS: I went to Otwock, and I stayed there for awhile, and they transferred the kids to Srdborwinka.

EK: Okay. Do you know how to spell that?

LS: Srdborwinka, S-r-d-b-o-r-w-i-n-k-a.

EK: Okay, thank you.

LS: Srdborwinka. From there, from Otwock I went to Srdborwinka, and this was my last orphanage because they tried to ship us to Krakow. Do you know Krakow?

EK: I do, yes.

LS: Yeah. They tried to ship us to Krakow, and this was too far for my aunt to come to see us. She would come to see us sometimes every two weeks, sometimes every week.

EK: Okay.

LS: She would come to see us, but when I was in Otwock and was a very nice home and, you know, and sometime when—excuse me for the expression, but there were bathrooms, you know, like, for the children to go, and they were—the bathrooms like we have here. And I looked, and I always worried what I'm gonna do when I get older, and I said, "I hope I could further to pay for a small place like this was, and I could only put something to sleep and I'm gonna be hanging my clothes from the ceiling."

EK: This is what you pictured for yourself.

LS: Small, just small like that was. I said that would be—I could make it with that, you know? I could make it with that. And in the home, sometimes [in] summer they sent us for a vacation to Ciechocinek, or to the—Ciechocinek—and send us for a vacation, or sometime to the water—where the water was. You know, like, beach area. For the summer, they'd send us sometime for a couple of weeks or for a month.

EK: The other children from the orphanage?

LS: Yeah, yeah. Each kids went different place.

EK: I see. With families? Did you stay with families?

LS: No, we stayed in a home for children.

EK: Okay.

LS: And this principal liked me. The head man, he liked me very much and I got sick over there, so I had to be quarantined, I remember. And again, I stayed in that room. They quarantined me, and I stayed in that room and I was thinking how I'm gonna make it when I get older, where I am gonna go, you know? And I was thinking, "Oh, I wish I had a little place to go to." But you can't worry about it, you know? I worried the man was so nice. The main man in the school and that vacation place, he was very nice.

And one of my cousins went with me and the other one they sent in a different place, but my aunt always worried about her daughter to have me. She wanted because I'd be the Cinderella for her. She always worried that and I should be with her. I was supposed to go with the other girl because of my health, what I needed, but she talked to the counselors and they changed me to go with her daughter. But for my health, I was supposed to go someplace else, but she knew that her daughter can't be alone, you know?

They kept me—I was like a mother at age six years old. I was taking care of two kids, you know? I had to comb them, wash their laundry, dry their hair, wash their hair—they had long hair. I had short, but they had long. Do everything for them, because they were too helpless. I think they're helpless even now. You know, it shows—you know, the Jewish religion says, when you're seven or seventy, you're basically the same.

EK: Tell me about that.

LS: Yeah. You know, you're always the same. You don't change. Your character is built when you're seven years old, and later. And then I went to orphanage. I stayed there, I think, till maybe ten or eleven, eleven years old. And then I went to Israel.

EK: Tell me about that.

LS: With my aunt.

EK: Tell me about that.

LS: My aunt put us in an orphanage there again. It was a *mossad* [institute].

EK: Okay. Where were you in Israel?

LS: At Neve Hadassah.

EK: Okay.

LS: It's close to Netanyah. I stay over there in a school, would work half a day and learn half a day. Yes, and work half a day, learn half a day. Sometime we had to work twelve hours because there wasn't—we needed money. The home needed money. So we work in a kibbutz. See, what I was doing—my job was I work in a laundry, hanging and ironing laundry. I work from I guess eight o'clock till one o'clock, from eight o'clock to one o'clock. I work in the laundry. It's very hot to stay in Israel in the summertime hanging the laundry, and that's what I did for the kibbutz. I had to go to work to the kibbutz. And later, we came and we study in the afternoon. We came, we wash up and we go to study.

EK: What did you study?

LS: We study, like, regular classes. You know, we studied arithmetic, we study Tanakh.

EK: It was a religious kibbutz?

LS: No, it was not religious, but that school that is required. We studied Hebrew. You know, believe it or not, I forgot Hebrew. I'm fifty years in America. I bet you if I went for a vacation, but I'm reading my work that I went to nursing school for babies, and I can't read it and I can't understand it. I forgot it. I learned in America Jewish.

EK: I see. Tell me about that.

LS: Yeah. I learned—I got lost in New York in a subway and I didn't know how to come back. And I couldn't speak English, so I asked like it was in New York and the people helped me, and this way I got home. I learned from my husband's family Jewish and from people, my friends were talking. But when I came to America, I spoke only Hebrew.

EK: And you were a nurse in Israel, yes?

LS: Yeah, I was a nurse in Israel, a baby nurse, means from maternity up to kindergarten, yes. Sometime in the summertime I had fifty-six babies, all by myself at night. I liked to work at night because I was giving private lessons to a kid during the day.

So I teach him arithmetic, I teach him, and I did this during the day, and the man was baking, so he gave me bread, he gave me bread and I teach—I had two kids. His was a daughter and the other lady was a boy, and I teach them both. I was very good at arithmetic all the time, so I was teaching this, you know, mainly and other thing, and that's what I got pay is bread. So at least I had something to eat. But during the day I went to nursing school and I was making salary, but I had to pay my aunt for room and board, I pay her, and the little was left I had to buy some clothes.

EK: How old were you then?

LS: I would say twenty, nineteen. Nineteen.

EK: Okay. So you worked on the kibbutz all that time until you went to nursing school?

LS: In the kibbutz, I worked in a home. I worked in a kibbutz. So we were up till then—no, we were in a kibbutz—I mean, in a home. I think we came to Israel when we were twelve years old, eleven, twelve years old. Then I went to the kibbutz, to the *mossad*, and this was the orphanage, and sometime I work in the kibbutz. I walked to the kibbutz to go to work, because we work in a kibbutz, and some of us work in the home, you know? But we all had jobs. So I was—when I left the home, the orphanage, I think I was sixteen or seventeen.

EK: Okay.

LS: Yeah, when I left then and went to nursing school, you know? And I had so many babies when came June, July and August, the most babies. I work in Hadassah Hospital in Ramat Gan.

EK: Yes.

LS: Yeah, Beit Hayeladot in Ramat Gan. I work, you know? And then I got paid, but of this, you know, when it was slow, we get—they don't take you permanently. Just, you know, you work a year and then after a year they don't want to give you permanent because they have to pay different, you know?

EK: I see.

LS: So they don't want to do that. But then I was there in a home till sixteen. Then I went to the nursing school, a baby nurse back home. I was a baby nurse and from the nursing profession, I lived. Later I came to my aunt, I live with her, and I pay her room and board, you know, for the home, for that apartment. And at nineteen, my cousin, who was—my cousins were married. They introduced me my husband.

EK: Okay. Tell me about that.

LS: They introduced me my husband, and I think in maybe three or four days we were married.

EK: So he came to Israel for the wedding and that's how you met?

LS: No. He just came to see his family.

EK: I see.

LS: He came to see his family. And they introduced me him, and I married him in no time because there was nothing to lose, you know?

EK: Yes.

LS: Yes. My aunt who I lived with, she would take Valiums a lot. You know, Valiums and stuff like this, and she just want to sleep all the time. She eat and go to sleep. And she lived on Valium. You know, a pickle jar—like, you know, that medium one, the glass one; the big one, glass one—would be that she had half of it Valium, you know? That's why she carried on every time, because I guess she was nervous or whatever, you know, taking that Valium, you know? But she was married once before, before the war, but her husband died during the war and she never remarried.

EK: And your husband was from the United States?

LS: My husband was from New York, United States. He came to visit to Israel, Tel Aviv.

EK: And did I read that he was a Holocaust survivor, also?

LS: Yes, yes. Yes, but my husband had a business and he passed away with—there was a hold up in our business, you know, and this way he was—he passed away.

EK: I'm sorry.

LS: Yeah.

EK: I'm sorry.

LS: And he died, and when he died was terrible for me, the worst thing in my lifetime. I didn't want to live with my husband, because I just had two little kids. One was four years old and the other one was four months. So it was such a tragedy, that I couldn't believe that could happen, this. I just couldn't believe that my husband would leave me alone, you know, but it was not his fault. But at that time, I was thinking that he left me alone to struggle, and I had these two kids and my—I had a very good friend and she would always come at night and sit with me. She was wonderful. I don't remember her name.

EK: But she helped you.

LS: She helped me. She sat and talked with me. I was scared to be in the house, that they're gonna come up and kill me, you know? But she came up every night, she stayed and she talked to me and we were talking and I told her the last time that I'd been moving to Florida, you know, and I said anytime you want to, you will come, but I lost her and I just couldn't—don't remember her name or nothing, yes.

And I always told her to come, but when my husband got killed, I was in a terrible situation. Terrible, bad. I was a widow about ten years, and I heard people introduce me [to] their brother, their—anybody, you know? Introduce me, because they want to be nice to me. And, you know, I was a widow ten years almost—I think ten years I was a widow, yes. And later on I found another profession, you know, and I become a—

EK: Okay.

LS: Okay, and I become a dancer.

EK: To support your family.

LS: To support my family. My boyfriend, I told him what I—and he said that he thinks is the best. He was very good to me, but I don't know, it just—I couldn't decide to get married. I was very scared that I'm gonna lose my home. You know, I had my own home already. We just moved into the new house and my husband—we live over there, I think four months or so, and my husband got killed. So I was afraid to bring a new man inside the home was very difficult, and I decided not to get married.

But as time passed away, you know, I got very lonely. My life got lonely because the kids went to school. Before the kids was with me, you know, because they was little. But later when they went to school, I was very lonely. And matter of fact, one lady told me, she said to me, "How can you be lonely with all the people in the audience?" But I was lonely, because the people were there, there were couples and I see a lot of couples, and when I did my show and everything else. So I had to go to my hotel room and I was still alone, you know? So it was a very lonely life, you know?

And I had friends. Like I said, my friends introduced me to this, to that one, but I was afraid that it maybe don't work out, and to take a chance again, no. And then I met my husband. I got to a point where I needed somebody for my children.

EK: And we're coming to the end of our tape—

LS: What?

EK: We're coming to the end of our tape.

LS: Okay.

EK: Can we stop and then we'll change tapes and then you can tell me more?

LS: Okay.

EK: Okay.

***Part 1 ends; part 2 begins***

EK: This is Ellen Klein, and I'm here today, tape two, with Mrs. Lillian Stello.

LS: And getting back to my aunts in Leszno, you know, my cousins and my aunt slept in the middle of the room. They put me in the room, but there was no heat over there, and I had to—but I cover myself, you know, over the head, you know, and I stayed in the room where there was no heat. But my aunts and my cousins, they slept in a room where the room there was a little oven and the room was hot. So I got—I was really like Cinderella, only to go to work. They used me.

But therefore, I learned to work, and later in life, my aunt said, "How can you get married if you work like ten men? One man wouldn't be enough for you, because you're always working. You won't sit down." You know, like, when I cook my dinner, I give everybody to eat, my husband, my children, everybody ate, and by the end I sit down to eat by myself, you know? But I see other people don't do that, you know what I mean? I give my kids—I make sure everybody had enough food, everybody ate okay, and by the end I sit down and ate whatever was left, you know? That's what I consider a good mother, don't you think so?

EK: I think so.

LS: Yeah. But, you know, when I was growing up, my aunt, I never asked—I went to refrigerator to get my food. I asked my aunt if I could have some food or if I could have this, you know? Because I had no nerve to ask, I mean, to take anything without asking, you know? And still I was, she was—she treat me horrible, yeah, and I'm surprised, that was my father's sister, you know? She didn't have good communication with my father, therefore she let it out on me, you know? I mean, because when my father was hidden with her by the Polish lady, they'd always argue. She was a little jealous, because my father had the big business and he was an important man in town. Everybody loved him, you know? So she kind of didn't get along with my father, therefore she gave me a tough life. Sometimes she would call me names, stuff like that. My life was terrible, just terrible.

EK: You had so much loss as a little child and growing up, and to have lost your parents and then later your husband.

LS: You know what would give—my aunt teach me. She said every time I'd have to take care of my cousins. Therefore, when I grow up, I always took care of the people, and whatever is left, it's me.

EK: I see.

LS: It's always taking care of others. Right now I have apartments, and I always think about my tenants. You know, bring them food, cake, bread. Anything I could get, I'd bring it to them and I'd give them. I get from Valentine from my friend. His name is Ralph Carroll, from L.A., and he sends me a big—like you bake a cake, a big thing of chocolate for Valentine's Day, like that. And this was ten pounds of chocolate, so I take a big knife and I cut it in pieces and bring to my tenants. Yes, and we have that. But I bake, I don't know, maybe a half a dozen or more cakes a week and I give it to people out.

EK: You made one for me today, didn't you?

LS: I hope you like it.

EK: Of course I will.

LS: Yeah, I made it special a little, you know? And so I hope you like it, and I gave, I gave out to my tenants when I come in there. Oh, and you know whom I like? I like Home Depot. Home Depot is a wonderful company, just great. Very helpful, the people

are very friendly; they will teach you everything if you want to know. And who is a good company, too? Sun Bank. This is nice people, too. They know you, they know—it's personal.

EK: And you're very involved in your community.

LS: Yeah, yeah.

EK: You take care of the community, I see that.

LS: I bring cake to Sun Bank, I bring cake to Home Depot, and fruit and Christmas gift, you know, and they're very nice to me. They know when I come to Home Depot I have work and I have to get the parts really quick and go, and they will take care of me right away, you know? Like, I came in with my plumber, and he sees everybody says, "Hello, Stello"—they call me Stello. "Hello, Stello. How are you?" And he says, "Lillian, you're like Jesus Christ in the Home Depot. Everybody tells you hello," you know what I mean?

EK: Yeah, it's amazing.

LS: Yeah, yeah.

EK: You've had such a difficult life and to have turned out to be such a wonderful person.

LS: Yeah, my daughter knows—you know, my daughter, if she don't want—if she says she has to wait in line, she says, "Send my mother. She'll get it right away," you know? I mean, you know, you have to be nice to people. My daughter, she never has time, but she really don't—because when you're a woman, you go to work, and she brings work home. After hours, she still works at home, but she tells me three hours. She brings suitcases, four or five suitcases home and she sits at night and does them.

Therefore, I have to play with the little baby when she was little, because my daughter couldn't do it. So I come there, like, five o'clock and I leave at ten. My granddaughter, she was so good to me. She take my keys and hide them so I can't leave. And one time she hide the keys and I couldn't leave. I had no keys to go home. We have to wake her up because she went to sleep. She hid my keys. I had no keys. And she look for me.

When I used to leave, I would sneak out and she'd look for me in the closets where I am. She look, she look under the bed because she loved to play with me. We would run around the house. She chase me, I run, she chase me or we go upstairs to the bedroom, her mother's bedroom, and she do cartwheels on the bed, you know? And she do, and I pretend I was scared for her to do the cartwheels. Oh, she was—and you know what? We dance. She like music, so when she was a little baby, we dance, you know? She never, she always wanted me there. She was unbelievable.

But now she grow up, she had a bat mitzvah, and I can—I don't have—they have so much homework. She goes to [a private school in St. Petersburg], and a lot of homework. Oh, [her school] gives so much homework, you can't believe it. Yesterday, my daughter said—she called me late at night. She say, "We're still sitting doing the projects."

EK: So they're hard workers, just like you.

LS: Yes. Yeah, both of them. I mean, my granddaughter, if she don't understand something, she will go up to her father or mother, and she studies. The mother ask her questions and she gives answers. They study every night till late at night. There's no TV. I tell you, [her school] is unbelievable to give all that homework. I never—

EK: One day she's gonna be able to see this.

LS: Yeah, yeah.

EK: Along with the rest of the world.

LS: Yeah.

EK: What would you like her to know? What would you like her to know about this experience? What would you like to pass to your granddaughter?

LS: Yes.

EK: And what would you like anyone who's watching this to know?

LS: What I would like to know—to let them know that [Mahmoud] Ahmadinejad, whatever his name, the guy from Iran, he's just a sicko. He's a very sick man when he says there was not Holocaust.

EK: Yes.

LS: There was a Holocaust, and you know what? I hate to give somebody a wish like that, but I would like him to go through, maybe he could understand that, that miserable man. And I hate for him to see him in the U.N., you know, the way he acts. I'm glad the Americans walked out and the other—all those countries walked out when he did his speech, you know?

EK: Yes.

LS: We shouldn't listen to his speech. He's an ignorant man, you know?

Let me tell you, when I was in the home, we went for a trip to Galil [Galilee], and we went—you know, years back, they didn't have the buses like today. We went with, like, a vegetable truck; you know, open truck with a blanket over it only. We went to see Galil, and we were at that time twelve years old, I think—yes, maybe even twelve or fourteen. And four kids—while we were driving on the highway, there was shouts coming from Syria up on the hill, and four kids got killed, because the bullets—luckily, the driver went—because he got injured, glass in his face and everything. He drove in right away. We went to the Ashkelon, I think, police station; you know, we went to a police station and they helped us out and then right away send in the military and that side of what it was. But four kids, could you imagine? They went through the war, but they got killed in Israel.

EK: Oh.

LS: Yeah. He could have killed all of us. If the driver got disabled, we all die.

EK: Right.

LS: But the driver proceed, no matter how he was injured.

EK: I know that you told me that you feel very safe living in the United States.

LS: I think the United States is God's country. That's the best country. Very safe. President [George W.] Bush kept me very safe for eight years. He kept me very safe. I bet you he didn't sleep a lot of nights, worrying that what's next, like the 9/11, you know? Innocent people went to work and their life was gone. They never made it. You know, he kept me safe and I want to thank him.

I did write letters. He invited me for his inauguration, but I couldn't go because I was by myself, you know, and I didn't have somebody to go with me, you know what I mean? But I—first of all, America gave me so much. There is nothing to say. I was a widow. I think America helped me to grow up my children, to put food on the table. They gave me—I could kiss the ground here. They gave me so much. They gave me a job and I could send my daughter to a good school, give her food.

Sometimes I didn't sleep but two, three hours. I had three, four jobs, you know, to go from one to another. But work doesn't make anybody sick. Work is healthy for you. You know, it's all right, but at least I could go out and give my kids a life and I could help people. You know, like when I give the people stuff, when I bring them food or stuff, I send to the military gift packages, you know? I love my U.S. military. I love them very much, and I wish they keep safe. When I see things happen, I'm very upset, and the reason—think what happened in Fort Hood, in Texas, was very upsetting to me, you know? A lot of people died with no reason.

But still, America is the best country. There's no country like America. I will never go to visit any country, because I could visit America, and others discover the beautiful things what America could give me, do for me. But I have to give something too. I have to give back. You can't be a rake, always raking to you. There is no rake. You know, you have to give, and you always get paid from up there. I tell my friends, because I give you something doesn't mean you have to give me. No, I get paid from up there.

EK: I don't think anybody could ever accuse you of being a rake.

LS: Yes. You know, I'm not a rake, and I feel guilty. When I take something, I want to give back. You know, I want to give back. I don't know, but I feel if people have less than I, I shouldn't be taking. They tried to give me, but, you know, I should give them something, you know? Like my tenants, sometime, you know, they say they have a birthday or something, you know, and I always try. But I don't wait for a birthday. Every day could be birthday, you know what I mean? I don't wait for it, you know?

In America, anybody to complain about America, forget it. I don't know how you can. You cannot complain about America. You have your freedom. Sometime I feel we have too much freedom, you know? And America takes care of their citizens best they can. You know, you're always gonna get have your rights. You always have your rights, you know? I mean, how can you complain, you know, if you have—now, it's hard to get a job, but if you really want it and you apply yourself, you can get a couple of jobs. It's not enough here; you go to the other place and get a job. But you could always work.

When I was going to nursing school in Jerusalem in Bikur Holim [Hospital], I had my practice over there. Practice after my school was *Beit HaChayot* in Jerusalem, WIZO [Women's International Zionist Organization]. And I want you to know that sometime when I didn't have money for soap, toothpaste and something to buy a little bit of clothes for myself, I babysit.

I went out—this man and woman, they had three children that were sick, that had a cold. They were sick and they came into the nursing school. There was a watchman, was a doctor. He went for medical from being to our school for doctor school, and he was watching his work, to watch the nursing school. He sat by the desk and he was—so nobody could come in, and somebody came in, asked for a nurse, this man and woman, and he said, he said, “Who can you recommend?” And this girl was not there, but she was, you know, a show off girl. So he recommend her, but she was not there, and he asked me if I liked to go to work. I said sure, I'd be very happy to go.

So this man got me and I was babysitting for him, and the next time he came in to look for me and this doctor told him, the medical student told him, “Yes, that girl is now back,” and he could get her. He said he didn't want her. He wanted me. So I got the job to work for him, and I got few *lira* to go to buy myself, you know, some clothes and toothpaste and soap. I spend my money, and you know what? I was babysitting all night and from day, their home. To the Bikur Holim I walk, and I work the whole day. I work a whole day. I was not tired. And then I got back to the school, I crashed, I went to sleep. But I worked, the whole night I babysit.

You know what was babysitting? Babysitting was cooking the food for the children, washing their clothes, taking care of them, reading them books. You was occupied. Not that just babysit and they sleep, because they were sick, their cough. So give them medicine, wash their clothes, do everything. Not like here. You go babysit and you're sitting, you know? No, it was not—but the man every time come in and he said he wants me to babysit his kids. He didn't want to change. See, he knew I was even sewing the clothes for the kids. Yeah, I was sewing their clothes. And that's what I learned to work, and I learned good habits, you know. That the only way you're gonna make it, you have to work. Yes, that's what it is.

But I'm thankful to America. Everything what I have and everything that—this is only America did it for me. I am grateful to her, because I could work in another place and I would have still nothing. I still will—and people will take it away from me. America took nothing. You know, I lost my husband, but it's not fault of America. I can't blame America for it, because America gave me the chance to grow up my kids, send them to good schools.

If you want to work, you could do it. You just have to work and apply yourself and try to do, to think you really—the best you—this is the best you could do. I sleep when I can sleep; I work when I can work. It's never—but it's a job waiting. That's the first thing. And when it's time left, I take a shower and go to bed. Yeah.

EK: Thank you. Thank you.

LS: America, I want to thank you for everything. You're the best. You're the best for people who want to work. You're the best for people who want to accomplish. The people who came to America, it's because they were—they had no future in their country. They tried to work, but they couldn't get a job or nothing. But when work is there, you work. You work, and you could accomplish. Everything I have, I thank America.

EK: Well, thank you. Thank you for sharing today.

LS: Yes, yes.

EK: Thank you. We're very grateful.

*End of interview*