

June 2010

# Ruth Lebowitz oral history interview by Ellen Klein, June 30, 2010

Ruth Lebowitz (Interviewee)

Ellen Wilson Klein (Interviewer)

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## Scholar Commons Citation

Lebowitz, Ruth (Interviewee) and Klein, Ellen Wilson (Interviewer), "Ruth Lebowitz oral history interview by Ellen Klein, June 30, 2010" (2010). *Digital Collection - Holocaust & Genocide Studies Center Oral Histories*. Paper 174.  
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Digital Object Identifier: F60-00031  
Interviewee: Ruth Lebowitz (RL)  
Interviewer: Ellen Klein (EK)  
Interview date: June 30, 2010  
Interview location: Redington Shores, Florida  
Transcribed by: Mary Beth Isaacson, MLS  
Transcription date: December 21, 2010  
Audit Edit by: Kimberly Nordon  
Audit Edit date: December 22, 2010  
Final Edit by: Dorian L. Thomas  
Final Edit date: January 24, 2011

**Ellen Klein:** Today is June 30, 2010. I'm Ellen Klein, and I'm here today with survivor Ruth Lebowitz. We are in Redington Shores, Florida, in the United States of America. Our language is English, and our videographers are Nafa Fa'alogo and Richard Schmidt.

I'm Ellen Klein, and I'm here today with Ruth Lebowitz. Today is June 30, 2010. And this is tape one.

Okay. So, Ruth, will you tell us your full name?

**Ruth Lebowitz:** Yes, my name is Ruth Spingarn Lebowitz. My maiden name was Spingarn, and my married name is Lebowitz.

EK: And how do you spell those?

RL: Spingarn is S-p-i-n-g-a-r-n. Lebowitz is L-e-b-o-w-i-t-z.

EK: And do you have a Hebrew name?

RL: My Hebrew name is Ruth. What is interesting is that when I was born in 1933, in Breslau, Germany, this was right after Hitler had come into power there. And he made it a requirement that all Jewish females be given the middle name of Sarah on their birth

certificates. So, it says on my birth certificate that my name is Ruth Sarah Spingarn, and it really wasn't until many, many years later—in fact, I was doing a college application, and my father saw me filling it out and he said, “Why are you writing Ruth Sarah?” and I said, “Isn't that my name?” And that's when I found out that that was not the name that was given to me by my parents, but by the Nazi government.

EK: I see. Okay. And what were your parents' names?

RL: My father was Bruno Spingarn; my mother was Hedy Spingarn.

EK: Okay, and when were they born?

RL: My father was born in 1897, and my mother was born in—let's see, 1910.

EK: Do you know the dates or the months?

RL: My father was June 2, 1897; my mother was November 9, 1910.

EK: And your date of birth is?

RL: November 2, 1933.

EK: Thirty-three [1933], okay. And you have two siblings, no?

RL: Yes, I do. I have a sister, Eva, and her name is Eva Rose; she had a middle name. She's a year and a half older than I am. And I have a brother, Karl, and he has no middle name, but his birth certificate says Karl Israel Spingarn, because Jewish males had to have the middle name of Israel.

EK: Okay. And do you know their dates of birth?

RL: Yes. My sister was—is (laughs)—May 7, let's see, 1930. And my brother is February 19, 1931.

EK: Okay. So, tell me about—

RL: Whoops, I'm sorry. I'm sorry, that was wrong. Nineteen thirty-five; he's younger than I am.

EK: Okay. All right. So, tell me about your childhood.

RL: Well, I grew up in Breslau, Germany. By the way, that's no longer Breslau, Germany; it's now Wrocław, Poland, because after World War II the city was given back to Poland as part of the Potsdam Treaty, and this was a part of Germany that was back and forth between Poland and Germany. Now, I have heard that if you go back to Breslau, everything is in Polish; it's no longer in German. But anyway, that's where I grew up. It was, back then, a very cosmopolitan city. It was one of the largest in Germany, and my father had a really large business there. We lived very, very comfortably. We left when I was five, so my memories of a lot of things are very sketchy, but I do remember that I had lots of aunts and uncles and cousins. It was a really very happy home. We lived well. We had lots of family gatherings and parties, and these are the things that I remember.

As far as, well, the horrible things that were going, I was very much protected by that. My sister, who is a year and a half older, has a lot more memories than I do because she started school there and had some horrible experiences. I was very much sheltered by that. For years, my sister Eva totally would not talk about anything, and I pieced things together bit by bit. But my childhood experiences were really very good ones.

EK: And what kind of work did your father do?

RL: He had a tobacco, cigarette, candy wholesaling business. It was a pretty large business; it was the largest in eastern Germany at the time. That was what he did.

EK: What do you remember about him? What kind of man was he?

RL: Oh, he was very kind. He was very much a family man. Afterwards, when we moved to the United States, he was really very, very busy. He bought a grocery store in a small town in upstate New York, and it was open six days a week. He was there twelve hours a day. My sister and my brother and I all worked in the store, which we were not too thrilled about, but there we were. It just—he became really very busy, but still, I have very good memories of him.

EK: Tell me about your mother.

RL: My mother died in Germany in 1937. She developed a cold, it turned into pneumonia, she had complications, and then, because she was Jewish, she was denied medical treatment. And so, she died. It was quite traumatic for me. I was, well, about three when she became ill; I was four when she died. It was something that was really hard for me to accept, that all of a sudden, she wasn't there anymore. I kept expecting that she would come back and say, "Here I am! I'm fine!" but of course, that never happened. Oh, as time went by, especially when my own child was born, I kept thinking about really what I had missed, that I didn't have a mother when I was growing up. And I think my sister was affected that way, also. She once wrote me, "I so wish that Mother was here, so she could really know how happy I am now."

Anyhow—yeah, my mother died, and shortly thereafter, my father left the country. He left because he had a friend who tipped him off that he saw his name on a Gestapo list, and that it was unsafe for him to stay. So, my father was able to be smuggled out of Germany. He was able to buy forged papers, and that was what made it possible for him to leave. So then, when he got to the United States, he was able to send for my brother and my sister and myself, and also my mother's aunt, who had been taking care of us all of this time. Most of my relatives, my aunts and uncles and cousins, just were scattered all over. They started calling and wiring my father to please help, because you couldn't get into the United States without proper papers, without visas. So, without those, most of them did perish, and that was something that haunted my father really forever, that he was not able to bring out more. As I said, he had a large family; he had a lot of brothers and sisters.

One of my aunts and uncles and my cousin went to Shanghai, because that was—China was a country where visas were not required to get in, so there were a lot of people who went there. They went to Shanghai, and then when the Japanese occupied Shanghai, the family was put into an internment camp, where his parents died of typhoid. He was there by himself as a teenager, and then after the war my father was able to bring him to the United States.

EK: What was his name?

RL: Claude Spingarn. He's retired in Arizona now, and he speaks at gatherings and talks about his experiences as a Shanghailanders. They have frequent get-togethers and reunions of the people who were in Shanghai during the war. I have another aunt and uncle who were sent to—well, they went to Holland, but they weren't safe there for long because

when the Nazis occupied Holland they were rounded up. My aunt was sent to Theresienstadt; she actually survived. My uncle died there. My cousin, Hans, survived, and my father was able to bring him to the United States. He died a few years ago, but he actually was reunited with a young girl that he had met in Holland fifty-five years previously, and they were able to get together and that was really a happy occasion for everybody. I have another aunt and uncle who went to Palestine, and one of my cousins was an officer in the British Navy. His younger brother, my cousin Johannan, was in the Haganah, then was in Israeli intelligence.

I mean, I could go on and on with my family, because each of them really has their own story to tell. Most of my aunts and uncles perished.

EK: And all of these that you've been telling us about were siblings of your father, right?

RL: Yes. Yes, yes.

EK: And how many siblings did he have?

RL: You know, honestly I don't remember. I really don't.

EK: That's okay.

RL: My sister knows all of these. She can tell you all of the family history. But I just have vague recollections.

EK: That's all right. So, tell me about—tell me a little bit about religious life before the war, and a little bit after. Were your parents observant? What do you remember about Jewish culture and about socializing as you were growing up? Tell me a little bit about the communal aspects.

RL: Okay. Well, in Germany, I know that we were very much a part of the Jewish life there. We belonged to one of the synagogues there, although I don't really remember that much about it. I do remember that on Friday nights when we lit the candles that we had to pull all of the drapes and the curtains, and we had heavy drapes put in. I didn't know why, at the time. I mean, this is part of my finding out bits and pieces afterwards, because nobody told me. They just told me, "Don't go near the window, and don't pull on the

drapes.” It was my sister who told me afterwards it was because they didn’t want anyone to see that the candles were lit on Friday night.

My sister, when she started school, went to first grade in Breslau. She went to a Hebrew day school, until it was burned down. It was a new synagogue there, and there was a Hebrew school attached to it. She did tell me, years and years later, about going there one morning and seeing everything burned. The outer walls were left, but the roof was completely gone. She said that she will forever remember that sky that was there, where the big hole was. She said that she remembers that there was a big pile of books burning in the courtyard, and two SS men were dragging out the rabbi, who was her teacher, and he was beaten and bloodied. It was quite a horrible sight.

She said that, after that, they went to school in an abandoned aircraft carrier—hangar, I mean—and they were there until it was too dangerous. There were two Jewish schools that were using that hangar. Her school was there for half the day and another school was there the other half, and they would have older children looking out to make sure that nobody was following them. She said that they were also taught different phrases in three different languages, so that if they were stopped by anybody who was asking them where they were going, they would have appropriate comments. They were taught that, and she really has horrible nightmares about that, thinking about, well, what happens if somebody stops her, and what will she say and what happens if she has the wrong answer. I didn’t know any of this, at the time. She never told me, until so many years later.

EK: Do you remember what the phrases were? Did she tell you what it was?

RL: No. It’s very hard to get her to talk. She really won’t, and just at times she’ll tell me bits and pieces. But no, I don’t know. She also said they took different routes to school, because they didn’t want anybody to notice that there were groups of children coming the same—you know, coming and going the same way. So sometimes, it took hours to get back and forth, and finally they just stopped because it got to be too dangerous. That was her experience of first grade. I was home having fun. Nobody told me a thing. So, our experiences were completely different. Anyway, that was Breslau.

EK: Now, once your father left, and he left you with your great-aunt, how long were you there? What was that experience like, and what do you remember about that?

RL: What I remember was that after—well, yeah, just before he left, he arranged for us to go to camp in Switzerland. We were there for several months; I don’t even remember how long. It was really a beautiful camp. We went skiing. I hated it. I hate the idea of going there, and what I remember is giving my father a very, very hard time. I remember

he sat next to me on the train, I was crying the whole way over, saying, “Why do I have to go? What’s going on?” Afterwards, I just thought, “Oh, my God, what a hard time I gave him.” I really didn’t understand. I didn’t know what was going on. Anyway, we were there for a while, and then—

EK: Tell me about that. Where was this in Switzerland? Do you know?

RL: No, I don’t. I don’t.

EK: What do you remember about the camp? That’s a long time to be there.

RL: It was difficult, because I wasn’t used to a regimen. I mean, I was used to pretty much coming and going as I pleased, and you know, we had to have meals at a certain hour and go to bed at a certain hour, and I just had a very difficult time getting used to it. I was forever having to go the bathroom in the middle of the night, and we weren’t supposed to get up, so one of the older children would take pity and lead me to the bathroom because I didn’t know my way there, or I didn’t know my way back. To me, it was really a horrible experience, but it was probably not a bad experience at all. But that was—

EK: So, who came to get you from camp?

RL: My great-aunt.

EK: Okay. And then you went to stay with her, and she was living also in Breslau?

RL: Oh, yes. Yeah, uh-huh. Yes.

EK: And then how long were you with her, then, and tell me about that.

RL: It’s one of the things I don’t remember. Really, I don’t.

EK: And she travelled with you?

RL: Yes, she did. Yeah.

EK: So at some point, then, you received permission to leave.

RL: Oh, yes, yes. My father was able to arrange for visas for us. He just regretted that he couldn't get more, but he was a recent immigrant himself, so that there was very little that he could do for as many people as he wanted to. But he was able to arrange for our passage, and then we sailed.

EK: And what do you remember about that?

RL: It was a great trip. Again, my experiences were really, really good.

EK: When did you leave?

RL: It was actually September 1939, a week before Hitler invaded Poland. And so, ours was the very last ship that was allowed to leave Germany. So it's amazing timing, as far as I'm concerned, because any later and we wouldn't have been able to go. Also, just a few days after we got to the United States, I started school, because September was a new school year. We settled in a small town called Brockport, New York, which is between Rochester and Buffalo. My father had really spent a lot of time looking for a safe place for us, someplace where he could make a living. There was a grocery store for sale there; he bought it, and that was where we went.

EK: What do you remember about that first day of school? That couldn't have been easy.

RL: No, it was very—it was very strange. I was really very bewildered, not knowing the language. Actually, we had been preparing in Germany by learning English—I mean, we knew we were coming, so we were learning English. So, I was able to know a little. There were things, though, that constantly bewildered me, and I really had no one to ask at the time things were happening. For example, the school was an old building, and the bathrooms were in the basement. So, whenever we went to the bathroom, the teacher would say, "We're going to the basement." It was years before I realized that the word for "bathroom" was not "basement"! And then, also, I was just learning to read then, and I would read everything in sight and I'd look over in the newspapers, and they would have basement sales and I just was totally bewildered. What on Earth is this? You know, things like that. It was difficult.

But a big plus for me was it was first grade, I wasn't older, and so we were learning to read. That was a big saving grace. The way that they taught reading then in first grade was with flash cards, you know, Dick and Jane and all that stuff. I really was very good at it, and so people were constantly bringing in people to watch me read. I had no idea what I was reading, but I knew all the words, so that was good.

EK: What was it like in the community, to come and to join another community? Was there a Jewish community then in the town?

RL: No, there was not. We were the only Jewish family. It was a small town, about 5,000. However, it was a college town, so that made it quite interesting. But still, in all, I always felt very alienated. In general, people regarded us as German enemy aliens, rather than Jewish refugees, and growing up I could never understand why they didn't realize the difference, but there it was. My clothes were different. I wore typical European things, the woolen stockings that little girls in Germany wore, you know, that nobody wore in the United States. So, it was not particularly easy.

EK: Did you have friends?

RL: Oh, yes. Yeah, yeah.

EK: And how were the teachers with you?

RL: Some were very good, some weren't. I really took it in stride. I thought, well, that's the way it is: some teachers are nice and some aren't. My sister, who was two years ahead of me in school, was much, much more sensitive to that. She really felt in many cases that she wasn't treated very well. Eventually, what my sister Eva did is become a bilingual teacher and administrator in the Los Angeles School District. She was in one of the worst neighborhoods in the city, but she loved those kids, she really did. She emphasized—she realized how they felt, and she was bound and determined, she always said to me, that nobody in any of her classes would ever go through what she went through. So, that was a big success for her.

EK: That's very beautiful.

RL: Well, let's see, what else can I say?

EK: Tell me about your life, then, since.

RL: Since? Well, okay. Well, I grew up in Brockport. I also went to college in Brockport, became a teacher, and moved to New York. That was where I met my husband; my husband's from Brooklyn. We got married and settled in Queens, New York. I have one daughter. We have been quite happy and then, ten years ago, retired to Florida. My husband passed away last year. He was ill with Parkinson's, so he is no longer here. But in general, life has been good. My daughter lives in Orlando; she's married and celebrating her twenty-fifth anniversary next month. And my granddaughters both go to Florida universities, and one of them is graduating next month. So, things are good. My brother became an engineer and moved to California, and had really a very successful career. My sister, as I said, was in the Los Angeles school system. So, I'm glad that my father lived to see all of that.

So, right now, I'm a volunteer at the Florida Holocaust Museum, and this is something that I really feel I have an obligation to do just for my family, for all of the people who perished. I really think that this is a remarkable opportunity here, to tell the story and to let future generations know what happened. So, I'm really grateful to you for this opportunity.

EK: Thank you. Thank you.

*End of interview*