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[Transcriber's note: This interview contains graphic descriptions of rape.]

Tori Lockler: Today is April 8, 2010. We are with Sara Hannah Matuson Rigler. My name is Tori Lockler. We are in Sarasota, Florida, in the United States. The language of the interview will be English, and our videographer is Jane Duncan.

This is tape one. My name is Tori Lockler, and we are here with Mrs. Sara Hannah Matuson Rigler. Ms. Rigler, if we can start by having you tell us your date of birth and where you were born?

Sara Hannah Matuson Rigler: Okay. I was born November 21, 1928 in Shavel, Lithuania. Shavel is Yiddish, and in German we would say Schaulen, and in Lithuanian we would say Šiauliai. Lithuania, which is a little Baltic country. The neighbors are— Poland is to the south and Latvia is to the north, and to the east is Russia.

TL: Okay. Thank you. And can you tell us a little bit about your family: your mother, your father?

SR: Yes. I had a mother and a father and an older sister, three years older. Her name was Hannah, and Hannah was born in Israel. My mother had nine brothers, and she was the tenth; she was the daughter. The story is that when she was born, they didn't tell anybody for about a month because they were afraid something would happen, because she had nine brothers.

And then, when my mother got married—my mother was a very, very beautiful, bright woman. She finished University of St. Petersburg at age twenty, in languages, and she married my father, Samuel Matuson. He came from another town. It was a match—a match made. He was well-to-do and she was very pretty, and they travelled for their honeymoon around the world. And then they came to Israel and they settled: they bought a house in Israel and settled because they wanted to live in Israel. And my sister Hannah was born in Israel in 1925, 1925 in Tel Aviv. And then, my grandmother wrote to them that all her life she wanted a daughter, and where is her daughter now? In Israel.

So, my mother picked herself up with Hannah, and Hannah was six months old, and she came back to Lithuania hoping that someday, she'll go back, because if you're born in Israel you are like a citizen until age eighteen. And, of course, that never happened. My father came later, because he got very sick with typhus. They have in Israel which they call the *khamśin*, which is like hot air is coming from the desert, with bugs and all that, so he was very sick. When he came finally, he was on a boat that was sinking. So, in the book, maybe that was like—you know, it will be a sinking life or something.¹ But anyway, he came back and my sister was six months old. That was before, but she was already older.

They never got back to Israel, and they settled in Lithuania, in Shavel, which was actually the third-largest town. I mean, we only had 30,000 people, but for Lithuania that had 2 million people, that was the third-largest. And we had 30,000 people in Shavel, and 10,000 were Jewish and 20,000 were Lithuanians. So, it was really a very—I mean, when the holidays came, and most of the stores were owned by Jewish people, everything was closed. And we had many, many synagogues. I thought we only had one—we used to go to a very big synagogue—but my girlfriend Nesse [Galperin Godin], a girl that I know, she said no, we had about ten synagogues.

The main town was Kovno, and that was—I mean, we would say like Washington here. And then it was a town called Memel, but that was a disputed town: it used to be Germany, it used to be Lithuania. And then was Shavel, and Shavel was mainly an industrial town. We had a very, very big leather factory, and shoes—*batas*, which the man was a millionaire, really, there, Mr. Frankl. By the way, he came to America and he died penniless here in America.

And my father went back to Lithuania, my mother came, and they settled here. His business, he had—he got into this cigarette business. He was a jobber for kiosks—I don't know if you know kiosks: the small, like, stands, you know. Yeah. And then he also was a

¹ISR is referring to her memoir: *10 British Prisoners-of-War Saved My Life: Sara/Hannah Rigler's Gift of Life* (2007).

partner in a store that sold galoshes—I still have an envelope with the name, Matusonas—galoshes in, like heavy felt, boots, you know, for the winter, because the winters are pretty cold there. Eventually, he and my uncle, my mother’s brother, they had a leather factory called Progress, and that was in like 1936 or something that they opened that up. I don’t remember exactly when.

TL: And what did your mother do?

SR: My mother did nothing. I mean, she was—my mother was, as I said, she read a lot. She was involved in organizations. You know, she—with the household, even though she had help; she had a cook and a maid. But still—I don’t know, she was busy, I suppose, cooking or doing or something. This organization, that organization, you know she didn’t work. She read an awful lot. She was really—they used to call her the “walking encyclopedia.” She knew everything.

TL: And what are some of your earliest childhood memories from Shavel?

SR: Well, the memories were that—really, we had a very nice life. We went to school six times a week: Saturday we didn’t go to school. I went to a private Hebrew school, and our education was on a very, very high—I don’t know what you’d call it; (inaudible) or something. I’ll tell you later how high it was when I came to America. And we went to school, as I said, six times a week.

We were marked daily, in a day book. The markings were, you know, one to five; five was the highest: five, five minus, four plus, four, three was so-so, and two was failing. So, first we entered kindergarten—it was a Hebrew kindergarten—and after that we went to the *gimnazija*. That was from first grade through eighth or tenth grade. When you finished a unit in the *gimnazija*, you went into college for two years, and that was like a four-year college already. So, it was really—we studied. I mean, I only went to school till age—I was born in twenty-eight [1928] and the Russians came in in forty [1940], so at age twelve already we took algebra and geometry and trigonometry, and languages. I knew German. Of course, everything was in Hebrew. Yiddish we spoke, Lithuanian—you live in Lithuania; and of course we took Lithuanian because even though we were in a private school, when we took a test you had to take our test, but you also had to take, to matriculate, the Lithuanian tests, to satisfy.

And we had a lot of, like, festivals, where everybody participated. You know, like the whole town participated someplace. So, we used to train and they used to train, and then we’d get together. And we wore a uniform to school, so that nobody knew who had or who didn’t have money. Our uniforms were brown, brown dresses in the wintertime and a

black apron, if it was like a festival or a holiday, so you had white cuffs and a white collar. And in the summertime we had a blue skirt and a white top. Right near our *gimnazija* was, like—the wintertime for gym was an ice skating rink, so we went ice skating. So, we learned how to ice skate, and it was figure skating and all that, and all kinds. We learned—I mean, really, we learned a lot, and it was nice. In the morning you went out and you walked, and you picked up this friend and that friend, and then you had a shortcut and then go to school, and coming home you would saunter.

As I said, we were marked daily: every day they used to mark all the subjects. As I said, 5 was the highest. Everything was 5 by me, except in discipline I had a 5 minus, because apparently I wasn't so good. I used to stop at my father's—I mean, they had the factory that we used to talk a walk on Saturday, because you can take a walk but you can't ride; my father was very, very religious. So we used to walk to the factory and he used to tell me about how leather is made and so on. But I used to stop and show him my marks every day, and then I would go home and do homework. So, it was a full day.

TL: And you said your father was very religious, so at home—

SR: Very religious, yeah.

TL: At home, you—can you tell us about some of the memories you have of religious holidays?

SR: Oh, yeah. Well, of course—and you know, even though we were a third in the town, a third Jews, most of the stores, as I said, were owned by Jews. So, when it was a holiday, the stores were all closed and everybody was all dressed up and going to synagogue. You knew it was a holiday. And the Lithuanians were our neighbors. You know, there wasn't—did you feel anti-Semitism? Not really, not really. Like, we lived in a house that was four tenants, and there was a super to take care of the four tenants. And we had gardens, and I had my own garden that I used to plant sunflowers. I have a picture with the sunflowers. And I used to have radishes and scallions, what else? Not tomatoes, just radishes and scallions. And we used to—it was a nice childhood.

On Passover, once I got a bicycle. I don't know if you know—if you (inaudible), you find it. So, my father was very afraid to get us a bicycle, but I wanted a bicycle. And our streets were not paved: it was stone, you know, cobblestones. But I used to ride that bicycle. I was really a tomboy. I used to mainly go with the guys. So I had like three or fellows from my class, and we used to go out to the airport and go on narrow roads. When I think today, I say, "My God!" There were steep drops on both sides, and I used to

go up with the boys, three boys or something, and used to ride up and down. My knees were always full of scabs and so on.

And in the summertime, we were off two months—two months, I think—and we used to go away to the seashore, which is—the name of the place was Palanga, and it was right on the Baltic Sea. So, we used to leave Shavel and go to one station and then take a bus to the other one, used to take along bedding and the whole thing, and there we would rent a couple of rooms. My sister and I had one room—I think they had outhouses, I think—and my mother and my—I had a cousin that was very, very beautiful. Actually, she was the prettiest girl in Lithuania, Liuba, and she was already like fifteen, sixteen, or so. She was already, you know. She spoke languages, she played the piano. She lived not far from Palanga, so she used to go away with us. My mother and she had one room, my sister and I had another one, and they were like friends, you know, talking about boyfriends, about this. You want me to tell you about Palanga?

TL: Please.

SR: Palanga was right on the Baltic Sea, and you had a routine there. We used to go away like for two months, used to go to the sea. It was the Baltic Sea and the water was warm, so you had like nude bathing for women, nude bathing for men, and then for everybody with bathing suits. And they have dunes; you know what dunes are? It's like little mountains from very pure sand, and so you used to lie behind the dunes and sun yourself.

So, the routine was in the morning, my mother would go to the market and buy all kinds of fruits, because we had a lot of luck; we had very, very good fresh fruits, so she would buy like ten different fruits. And then we would have breakfast, and then we would go to the beach, and then would come back, lunchtime. But lunchtime you ate out; you made arrangements with the hotel. And my mother used to check out if the hotel was clean, the chickens were done properly; she's going to the kitchen to check them. And then we would go home and go to sleep, and she would take a long, long walk, I don't know how many miles or kilometers, what they're called, and then she would wait for us in the park. And my sister and I would have to have a cream, something very heavy, to gain weight—not milk, but the top of the milk—with chocolate. And then we would meet my mother in the park, and they had the orchestra playing.

Then we would go up the very tall mountain, which was called Birutės Kalnas—*kalnas* means “mountain” in Lithuanian. I don't know—Birutė was a name; maybe she died there or whatever. And then we would go down to the beach and walk all the way to the beach and back to our place on the beach. On the way, we would pass a place called Prie Jūros. Prie Jūros actually means in Lithuanian “near the sea.” And there was like a big—I think it was like—not a hotel. You could go in and have a drink, but you have to be old

enough. We weren't old enough. So, I used to look through the windows and say, "Someday, I'm gonna go there and dance." We used to jut out to the sea. But my cousin Liuba that I said was very pretty, she used to be there. She had many boyfriends.

Then we would go to the bridge. There was a bridge jutting out into the sea, and people used to swim; used to go take a walk there. And then, on the way home, we would stop, and they had very good smoked—well, (inaudible)—it's flounder, smoked flounder, and it would smell. You know, it was very fresh. You would pick up a flounder and have tomatoes and cucumbers, and that was your supper: real fresh fruit and vegetables. And at night, again you would take a walk. I mean, it was like—and then we had Prie Jūros, which is like a concert hall, and would walk.

My aunt, who married my uncle, she had a brother; I think I write about him. His name was Lazar. He was the tallest man in Lithuania. He must have been six feet six [inches] or something, because when he used to come—he lived in Memel, so he used to come to Palanga, and we would walk down. My mother used to say, "You know, Lazar is in town," because his head was literally that taller than everybody else, and you would know that he's in town. I'm mentioning him because I'll talk about him later, how he died. He was blond, spoke only German, blue eyes, and he was—I mean, you would never say he's Jewish; you would definitely say he's German. That was my aunt by marriage, her brother. And my mother would say, "Oh, Lazar is in town," because he was that much taller.

And we would stay there about two months or something, and then we would go back to Shavel and start the fall. So, that was the routine. And life was—I used to imagine myself and say, "Someday, I'm gonna go to America"—I mean, just on a visit, and I would wear a light blue gown on the boat. Don't ask me why light blue. You know, it was like going to America—you know, for a trip. And as a matter of fact, my mother was supposed to go in 1939 to visit her brothers, because she had four brothers in America and she hasn't seen them in a long, long time. She wrote to them—I have her letters, because one of my uncles gave me the letters. She was supposed to go in 1938—thirty-nine [1939]—but already there were problems. She was gonna go with Liuba, with my cousin Liuba, and she decided not to go. You never know how life plays out, what happens.

TL: And can you tell us what your relationship with your sister was like?

SR: Oh, I was a nuisance. She had lots of friends. She was very—she was like quiet, and beautiful, blue eyes and black hair, and she had a lot of friends. Me, I had Nesse and others; but I was the wild one, and she was a lady. She used to have friends coming to the house, and they would dance, prepare themselves for a dance. And I used to budge in there, so they used to literally take me by my feet and hands and throw me out from the

room. (laughs) I was a nuisance! And oh, my God, I can't wait to grow up and be like them and go to dances. It was like something to look forward to—but never happened, of course.

TL: And can you tell us some about your friends?

SR: Oh, yeah. I had my friend, Nesse. Her mother had a milk store. I mean, I remember her mother so well because we used to go into the store. It was freezing, because she was selling butter and cheese and—not pot cheese, but it was a cheese that was so rich and tall. It was called *tvorok*, which it's a Russian word. But it was just delicious. You used to go to the shop every day for fresh butter and cheese, because we didn't have refrigeration. We had like a cold storage, like in the house; it was a window that came out outside, and I think the bottom was cement or something, so that was your cold storage. We didn't have refrigeration, and even our stoves were old-fashioned, like they had rings. You know, you used to take out the rings, small rings. So, I was very close with her, and she had a shortcut to go to my house.

And then I had another friend, Miriam; she had very heavy braids, and her mother used to stand there and braid her—oh she had, I'll tell you, such a terrible death. Braid her and she had this—I think I write about her. Her mother used to say that I'm gonna be—I didn't think of myself as pretty. I thought only my sister's pretty. And she used to say to me, "Sara, you're gonna be a very pretty woman." And her name was Edelstein. I said, "Why do you say that?" She said, "You have dreamy eyes." So, I used to walk around with my eyes half closed, because after all, she said that I'm going to be pretty.

Because I didn't think of myself as pretty, and you know, my mother had like what she called us—you know, she would call us—and sometimes she used to call me *meeskite*, which is in Yiddish "ugliness." I don't know why she had—you know, you don't—as I said, I was a very good student, and sometimes you want to negate certain things. I don't know. But somehow, I didn't think of myself as pretty, because my sister Hannah was beautiful: blue eyes and dark hair, and she was popular and had friends.

But I was friendly with Nesse and then this Miriam that I used to help her with her homework; she wasn't doing so good. And then other friends, we used to—when we went to school, we used to pick up one friend and another friend. We used to, like, go in bunches to school. But you know, we were pretty young.

There was one incident that—we have two movies in town, and there was one movie that would only let in if you were older. So, it must have been a sex movie; I don't know. It was from Poland. So, we couldn't buy tickets Saturday or Friday, so we used to send my

cousin Liuba to get the tickets—she was older—and then we would go Friday night to the movies. I saw the movie, I still remember it today, because a woman went—she was pregnant, obviously, and there was a boyfriend and the boyfriend had somebody else. But we went to the balcony so they wouldn't see us, because we weren't allowed to be there. And then she came down from the mountain: she had a baby. So, I said to my cousin, "Where was the baby?" because I didn't know. I thought the stork brought me. And she said, "When you get older, I'll explain it to you." But I was thinking, she goes on the mountain and the next thing there's a baby. I was sort of enamored with that, and I still remember the movie (both laugh) even so many years ago. So, that was—I don't know. The days just—played and this, played all kinds of tricks. We were just kids growing up.

TL: Thank you. You mentioned a little while ago that you didn't really remember anti-Semitism in the town.

SR: No, no. As a matter of fact, like we had the Hebrew school, and then we had a Yiddish school. The Yiddish school, they would speak Yiddish. So, those kids used to harass us, because we spoke only Hebrew, and they thought, "What, are you exclusive?" So, they used to harass us. But I don't remember the Lithuanians—even though we went to school—I told you we wore a uniform, which was brown and a black apron. But when we finished, we still had to take tests from the Lithuanian school in order to matriculate or graduate or something. But I never got to that part.

TL: And as we get closer to the time of the war, do you remember any rise in anti-Semitism, or even in concern, in your town?

SR: Well, what happened is—I mean, one incident—not an incident, but I write in the book about it. Right across the street from us lived a very poor family. Their floors weren't even floors; it was like dirt and stone. But they used to make brushes—that was their business—by hand. But you also used to sell—what do you call it? For the schools, you used to sell—notebooks. I was gonna say in Hebrew *machberet*. Note paper, you know. So, I once bought something and it had a stain, and I was meticulous about my schoolwork.

We lived on the second floor and you had a banister, so I never walked down the stairs. I used to go on the banister, fly down. And we had doors that were swinging doors with glass. So, I opened the door with my hand, and I cut through my hand. I still have the cut. And I come home; I said to my mother, "Look, I'm bleeding." So we had a doctor living in our house and we went in, and he put cotton on it and I went off to tell my friends about I cut my hand, or something—a big incident, you know, to get—what do you call it? Sympathy. Sympathy.

So, I'm going, and meanwhile my father wasn't talking to me at the time because it was a Friday night, and he was reading a book or something. And I scared him, so he stopped talking to me. I think I write in my book about it, that my father was once injured by the Russians, and that the Cossacks were shooting at my father. My grandfather stood in front and he took the bullet, so they killed my grandfather and my father was alive—I mean, he lived, but he was very leery of the Russians because we had the Cossacks and they used to—they were very anti-Semitic.

So, my father wasn't talking to me, but my mother called him to tell him that I cut my hand. So he was looking for me all over, and they found me, and they took me to a doctor. I still remember the doctor's name, I didn't write it down (inaudible). Would you believe it? He was Lithuanian. And it was a Sunday—he was actually not working—but my father called him and he saw him. And when he saw my father and me, he hugged my father and he said, "You just found a daughter," because the cut was like a millimeter from the heart artery. I mean, I still have the cut there, you know. And then they took me, of course, to the hospital, and I still remember the anesthesia because I felt like they were squeezing me into a cone and I was screaming; my father fainted. And then after that—I loved being sick, because I was walking around this, you know, and they drove me to school every day. So, that was, you know, an incident that happened in my youth.

But I really don't remember anti-Semitism. We had—the super, you know, he lived outside and he had his apartment, and his apartment was part of another part where our laundry used—I mean, the laundry at home was a big thing. It was a two-day business, because you boiled it and you washed it and you ironed it. I mean, the maid used to work for two days on the laundry, because everything had to be starched. It was like—which we don't do today. So, I remember this incident, you know, so it's like I was found, you know, once, my life.

But all this went until—actually, the factory—my father had these two stores, and he was doing very well. But my mother's brother wanted to get into something, so my mother talked my father into going to the leather business. But that already happened quite late. I don't know whether it was thirty-five [1935]—no, thirty-five [1935] or something, quite late. But Saturdays, when we take a walk, we used to walk to the factory, which was like a couple kilometers out of the town, and he used to show me how the leather is made because you have to boil it, because you get the skin, so you boil it and you press it and you stretch it and all kinds of things. But he didn't know too much about it, but he did it for my uncle because my uncle had three boys, twins and then another boy, older. And my mother talked my father into going into the factory, which wasn't such a wise decision, but that's what happened. And that was till 1940, and then, of course, the Russians came into Lithuania: they invaded Lithuania.

TL: So, up to the point that they invaded, had your family or those that were close to your friends, your friends' families, was there any rise in concern about what was going on, about the war, about—?

SR: In Poland, because in Poland, already the war was on in thirty-nine [1939]. Actually, a lot of Polish people came to Lithuania. We used to call them refugees, and we absorbed them. They told what's going on in Poland. But you know, we didn't believe it. We just didn't believe it. I suppose—look, I was a kid, you know. Kids are not—you don't discuss anything in front of kids. But in thirty-nine [1939]—I believe it's thirty-nine [1939]—my father went to Hamburg, to Germany, to buy a machine. He went to buy machinery for the factory. And this was thirty-nine [1939]. So, it is so difficult to understand it or make sense of it. As I said, kids were not—adults spoke; the kids were not there. Not like today, where the kids are a part of many things; it wasn't like that.

So, we didn't—and then, the Russians were taking our bourgeois, which is like wealthier people, to Russia—to Siberia, actually; they wound up in Siberia. We were packed, completely packed, because already they were bombing. And my uncle and his three kids were taken—this is my father's partner—and they never came for us. They never came for us, and we couldn't understand it. What happened, we found out later, was that the workers liked my father—(phone rings)

Bill Rigler: You gonna pick that up, honey?

SR: Bill, you pick it up!

BR: I don't have the phone here.

SR: Go into the bedroom.

BR: What?

SR: You don't have to tape that. (laughs)

So, where was I? Yeah, they took my uncle and the three kids, and we were waiting to be picked up and they never came for us. So, later on, we found out that the workers in the factory signed a paper that my father was a very good boss and they shouldn't take him.

So here, being good didn't work out, and my uncle with the three little kids went to Siberia, survived the war, and everything's fine and they are well, and came back from Siberia. One lives here, one lives there. You know, you really—you think being good is—you know, you never know. One cousin of mine is in Los Angeles, the other one is in Israel—two are in Israel—and everything's fine and they survived the war in Siberia. And my cousin said it's the best time he ever had in his life.

TL: Wow.

SR: He said it was wonderful.

TL: Oh, that's interesting.

SR: You know, so it's—I mean, they were sent away all the way there, and they worked. They lived in one room and they went to school. And they never came for us.

TL: And that was immediately after, or was that before the occupation?

SR: That was right before the war.

TL: Okay.

SR: Like, we went and we gave them all kinds—we used to bring stuff to the train. And my aunt, she's the one that had the tall brother, Lazar. He went and he brought stuff for them and everything. That was—so, you know, you really never know. Something can be a tragedy, and all of a sudden it turns out that this was good. And all the people that went to Siberia survived.

TL: Survived.

SR: Yup.

TL: Can you tell us a little about when the Russians came?

SR: Yeah. When the Russians came in, which was in 1940, what they did is they took away our living room. It wasn't—it was a living room/dining room. So, they took away a room, and we had a family living there, a husband and wife. His name was Alexei Alexeyevich; they go by the name and the name of the father. Alexei Alexeyevich, and she was Zoya Maksimovna. And eventually she had a baby, and her mother came to live with them. Of course, we were kosher; they were eating pork and all this, to the chagrin of my mother. But they were very nice people. Alexei wanted to learn German, so I was teaching him German. And also, there was a man across the street—you know, you never know how life plays out. There was a man across the street that came from Germany, and he needed a livelihood, and my mother recommended him to teach our Russian—German. His name was Mr. (inaudible). And he was Jewish, his wife was German German, and they had two kids, a boy and a girl. So, he used to teach him and I used to teach Alexei.

So the mother came, and then one Sunday, all of a sudden, the planes were flying back and forth. It was like three or four days after the echelon—echelon is like many trains—left for Russia. We didn't know where they went, but they went to Siberia. So he came, and it was a Sunday morning. He said, "Oh, maneuvers!" So, being he was a pilot, he went to the airport, and then he came back. He said, "*Voïna*." *Voïna* is in Russian "war." The war was on. So he said they are gonna leave and go to Russia, and he asked us whether we would like to go with them.

Now, my father was just out of jail like two weeks. My father says—there's an expression in Jewish that you don't go from fire into water. Fire is no good; water you drown. You don't go from fire into water. And my father says, "At least Germans are an educated lot. The Russians are barbarians," because he never told us what happened in prison. He was there six months, for nothing.

TL: I was gonna ask what he was in prison for.

SR: For six months, and we had two trials. We had one trial—but one trial we had a regular lawyer, and then somebody suggested to us that we should—and he got two years in prison. What happened is the bookkeeper made the books to look as if my father took out 30,000 litv—you know, in leather, for that kind of money. For that kind of money you would really need a train. So, he just, you know, cooked the books or whatever. And he was a bookkeeper that my mother gave a job to, that needed a job. So, of course, my father was in jail, and we had three trials. My sister used to go there to the trials, and he had gotten two years. But then we had an appeal, and he finally got out.

But my father—now, my father was born in 1895. So this was 1940, so he was forty-five years old: a young man. He looked like an old man. And he never told us what happened.

And when finally—so, Alexei Alexeyevich with his wife and mother-in-law, they ran into Russia, and my father said, “We are not budging. We’re staying here and we’re waiting for the Germans.” And so we stayed.

The war started on Sunday. By Thursday, the Germans were in Lithuania. It took four days, four days. And once the Germans came in—it was a Thursday—within one day, we had to put on the yellow star, right away, in front and in back. You couldn’t walk anymore on the sidewalk; you had to walk in the gutter. Right away, you were an *Unmensch*. *Unmensch* in German is you were not a person anymore. And that’s when my father told us what happened in jail, that he didn’t see light for six months because our jails were—you know, like jails here, with windows, with beds. The Russians took out all the beds, closed all the windows, and people slept only on the floor. We used to stay nights to bring him—it was Passover, so we had hard-boiled eggs and matzah and all that. Like, we gave him a dozen eggs; he got half an egg. And the men came—I mean, he was only forty-five. He was an old, old man.

So, we stayed. The war started on a Sunday. Thursday the Russians were there.

TL: The Germans.

SR: I’m sorry, the Germans were there.

TL: Okay. Okay.

SR: And by next Sunday, which was three or four days later, they came and they collected all the men. And they took my father away; and Lazar, the one I told you, this tall blond guy; and both rabbis. We had two very prominent rabbis in town, [Avrohom] Nochumovsky and [Aharon] Bakst. I mean, world scholars. And they took all the men away, most of the men, and we never saw them again. But, in the meantime, a man came to live in our house, and he looked like Hitler. So, everybody used to say, “At Matuson’s house, Hitler is living.” He looked just like Hitler. And he told us that he will get my father out of jail.

So, we waited, and in the meantime the ghettos were formed. Now, the ghettos were formed in the end of town that was the poorest end. No running water, no toilets—you know, like outhouses—shacks, really shacks. And what they did is they took the people from there and they gave them the apartments of the Jews, and the Jews moved into the ghetto. We had two ghettos: one was called Kaukas and the other one was called Traku. And we are waiting for my father. In the meantime, the ghettos closed because there was

no more room. I mean, people lived five people in a room, six people in a room. And whoever couldn't get into the ghetto was put into the synagogue. After that, they burned the synagogue with the people. So, we are waiting, but if anybody took you into the ghetto, you could go into the ghetto.

TL: You mean somebody that's already in there?

SR: That lived in there, right. So my sister's girlfriend, her father was the head of the ghetto. I mean, he wasn't a nice person, but he was the head of the ghetto. And they said they'll give us a bed. So, I don't remember very much, but I think a man that had a horse and buggy came, and my mother was—we were packed up yet from going to Russia. So, my mother took whatever—I don't know what she took, pots and pans and some clothes or something—and he brought us into the ghetto, this Mr.—what was his name? I think Mr. Fulman was his name. He has a horse and buggy. And we went into the ghetto, and we had this cot for the three of us—a cot, one cot.

TL: One cot.

SR: One cot. In the house of the man that was the head of the ghetto, and he had two rooms. In one room he and his wife slept, and that's where you could cook; there was a stove. And the other room had three beds: his daughter, the mother's father, and one cot they gave to my mother, my sister, and me, the three of us to a cot. It was a terrible place for us, you know. So, my girlfriend Miriam that I knew, she said that I could come and sleep in her house, so I used to go to sleep in her house and my mother and my sister and were one cot.

TL: In the cot?

SR: Yeah. And I didn't realize that the old man—maybe he was senile, I don't know. He used to pee on my mother every night. And all this I found out later on, and you know, when I think about it, I'm so—you know, it's so sad.

So, we were in that ghetto two years. I don't remember a thing. I really—my friend Nesse said, "Don't you remember? We went to school; there was a school that they formed in a basement, and they would teach us." I said, "Nesse, I don't remember anything there. The only thing I remember is the hanging." Two years in a ghetto, and I don't remember. Actually, I remember my mother washing my sister's—she had her period. The people there had a garden. Nobody gave us food. I learned quickly how to knit. I knitted a whole dress for bread. We were starving. Nobody worked. You know, I wrote in the book that

my sister was raped. It was—but I didn't know about it, because I was at my girlfriend's house. So, we had a third bed.

But then, as I said, one incident I remember—two years in the ghetto, I don't remember. I remember actually two things. One is I remember the hanging, because everybody had to watch the hanging of the man that brought in the bread (inaudible). And everybody had to watch it from both ghettos: what happens when a person brings in bread. And the man was very brave—his name was [Bezalel] Mazovietzki—and he pushed away the chair himself. So, that's the only thing, and everybody just let out a big cry, you know, it was terrible.

And then, I remember I used to go to sleep at my friend Miriam's house, and they had food; sometimes they used to give me food, because the father worked. But we were there two years. And then, they sent out a lot of people to dig turf, and they sent out some other forced laborers to work on airports or something. So, they closed that ghetto, and everybody had to go to the other one, Traku.

TL: I was just gonna say, the ghetto that you were in first was?

SR: It was closed.

TL: But what was the—that one was?

SR: Kaukas.

TL: Kaukas.

SR: That was called Kaukas. Actually, the name came from the place where it was, Kaukas. And then we—so then I went to—we were in Traku. In Traku—

TL: Well, if we can take a break for just a minute so that we can start our next tape, we'll

SR: Okay.

TL: Then we can pick up with Traku there.

SR: Okay.

TL: Okay.

Part 1 ends; part 2 begins

TL: This is tape two. We are with Mrs. Sara Hannah Matuson Rigler. My name is Tori Lockler.

Ms. Rigler, before we ended the last tape, you were just beginning to tell us about the second ghetto that you were in, Traku. Would you start there?

SR: Yeah. So, they closed the Kaukas ghetto, and we went into Traku. When we came into Traku, we were really like everybody else already, because we lived right near where you used to go out to work, near the gate. And we had two beds, so my mother and my sister—we lived in somebody's kitchen. And then—and Mr. (inaudible), the man that my mother gave this work for, to teach German, he was the head of the ghetto. His wife was German, as I said, and he was Jewish. He had two kids. I forgot the girl's name; the boy was Fritz. And he made sure that my sister and my mother were working. They were making brushes.

And I used to go to clean the house of the head of the ghetto; his name was Mr. Shleff. I suppose you spell it S-h-l-e-f-f. And that was right near the ghetto, so he used to—every morning he used to come to pick me up and take me to his apartment, which was like a five-minute walk or ten-minute walk. I would clean, and after that he used to go with a white cloth to see how I cleaned. And I had to light the stove—you know, they have the old-fashioned stove that you light and it heats up and the bowl is warm. You know, they called every woman Sara, and every man was Abraham. And my name is Sara, so he used to say, “Oh, Sara, after the war you're gonna thank me, because I taught you how to clean.” And also, they used to—they had a warehouse there where they had onions and other things, but I don't remember them ever giving me any food or anything like that.

And I worked there—the first ghetto was formed in forty-one [1941], it closed in forty-three [1943], and we were there in forty-three [1943] till forty-four [1944], July. And there I remember my sister had some friends there, and—I don't remember. I think the brush factory was outside; somebody used to come and pick them up and take them to where they're making the brushes. So, we're already like everybody else, so that was,

you know, nice. The one thing happened is that I got diphtheria. To get the injection, my mother had to give him a diamond ring, because there is a—whatever; antidote or whatever. But I recovered very quickly from the diphtheria.

The big thing that happened there is—so, I used to go to work every day, and one day Mr. Shleff said to me—I told you they called all the women Sara. And he said to me, “You know, Sara, you’re gonna see something very beautiful today.” And he locked me into the attic. It must have been a two-story house. So, he locked me into the attic, and the window looked right out at the ghetto because it was right there, like a block away, two blocks away. And what I saw was this was the day that they took away all the children and all the old people. So, they brought trucks, and in the back was like tarpaulin—you know, like a cover on the truck. There was—what do you call it? To climb up, they had a

TL: The ladder?

SR: Huh?

TL: A ladder?

SR: A ladder. And they took the kids, and they threw them in like baggage. And the old men, old women, they pushed up; they pushed them up. And this is what he wanted me to watch. And there was such screams going on that I could hear it—I mean, two blocks away—and this was something that I don’t think I’ll ever forget my whole life. It was so—it was just terrible.

And then, that night when we came to the ghetto, of course you found a lot of mothers that went away to work: the kids were gone. As a matter of fact, my friend Nesse, her father was gone; they took her father. Her father was a young man, but he couldn’t see. He was injured in an injury, so they took him, too. And there was such wailing going on. The women were crying for their kids, and they were looking and they figured maybe a kid has hidden someplace. A few kids did hide in attics or in basements or something, cellars. But it was such—and after that, you never saw a kid again in the ghetto, you never saw an old person again. And it was such a—because kids, you know, bring life. So, that was the big—the children’s—I think the date was June. I have it in the book. I don’t want to quote a wrong date. But that’s when they took away the youth and the old people.

And then—and the war was coming, sort of. The front was moving. Had we stayed—and this was June. I think it was June 1. I have the date in the book. Had we stayed there till August, I think, the Russians came in. They recaptured Lithuania. But what happened is—they say, and I really don't know about it. They said that Mr. (inaudible)—there was one track that was left open from Lithuania, and they say that he bribed somebody that they should take out—it was either going to the military or the Jews, and he bribed somebody they should take out the Jews.

So, they told us on a hot July, they said we should all get packed; we're going to a new ghetto. And this was in July. I don't want to quote the wrong date, but it was July 1944. And they packed us in. They said, "Be ready within a day. We're going to another camp." So, another place. So my mother, you know, the bedding, and we had a leather coat and the leather shoes, and we put on two, three dresses to have it for another place. And 5,000 people left the ghetto, 5,000 people. Not one person ran away. And the Lithuanians were standing on the side of the road, and laughing. You know, taking out the Jews.

We walked a whole day. It was hot, and the baggage on your back. What I remember is we were so thirsty we started drinking water from puddles on the floor. And, of course, you peed; you couldn't go anyplace. And we walked a whole day, from the morning, and at night we came to a place which we didn't know where it was, but it turned out to be where they had the trains. You know, the—

TL: The train station?

SR: No, it wasn't a train station. It was where they had—you know, they put us into—what do you call those things, the trains there?

TL: The cattle cars?

SR: Huh?

TL: The cattle cars?

SR: Yeah, the cattle cars. Yeah. And my mother was sitting on the bundles, and the first thing she fainted, so I was looking—I ran around looking for water, you know, where I can find some water for her. We stayed there a whole night, and in the morning they pushed us into the trains. I mean, how many people were in a train I don't know. I don't know; it could be forty, it could be fifty, it could be thirty. I don't know, but people with

the bundles and everything. And people get sort of mean—you know, it's hot, and there was just—they had a pail in one corner to relieve yourself, and somebody put some sheets around it. Very, of course, primitive. You sat on the bundle, and it was dark, except the only light we had was—in the train, you have the windows on top, the little ones. So, we wouldn't know when is day and when is night. And twice, they opened up the train, and we could relieve ourselves outside and they emptied the bucket. And then, you know, I don't know whether we got a piece of bread or not. I really don't remember that. And how many days we were there? Somebody says five, somebody says six; I really don't know.

And then we came to a place that I can still the sign, and it said Tiegenhof, T-i-e-g-o-f-f [*sic*], Tiegenhof. It was a big sign, in green. They told us all to get out, and take the luggage what we brought. We're going to the new place. And they put us into half-trucks—I don't know if you know the half-truck? They're open, really. It's small, like you can only—you stand. It's open. It was a very short distance, but we didn't know where we were going. And the next thing, we came to a place—it was dark already. And all of a sudden, you saw people in black—that was the SS—with dogs, and screaming and yelling. They kept saying, "Men to one side, women to the other side." Well, we were three women. "Men to one side." And people started yelling for their children. "Let's be together, let's not separate." But they separated the men from the women. And actually, we had arrived at Stutthof, but we didn't know that.

What they did is they—you know, I can see it so clear. I mean, this was forty-four [1944]; it's now how many years? I can see it like it was yesterday. We got out. It was—you know, the lights were going back and forth. It must be—I don't know; the searchlights or whatever they call that. And it was dark, and all the guards were in black, and dogs were barking. They said for us—they separated the men from the women and they told us to sit, and we were sitting on sand. They said, "In the morning, we'll tell you what to do." But we didn't know where we were. And then, what I remember is we were sitting, and my mother still had my father's diamond watch. She was putting—I don't know where, but she was putting thread around it and burying it in Stutthof, in the sand. This is the watch that we used to say, "Who's gonna get it?" you know, my sister and me.

And in the morning they came, and they told us we should all go into showers. We didn't know anything about crematoria. We didn't know anything. Actually, Stutthof did have a crematorium. But, you know, you have to have luck. The Red Cross was coming to see the camp, and they needed people that were still alive because when we came there, it was almost empty. And my number—they didn't tattoo numbers; they gave us, like—it was a piece of cloth. My number was 58,384, which means before me there were 58,000 people that were there. And the only thing that we saw there were mountains and mountains of shoes. You know, that was the only thing that was left. But we didn't know about ovens or anything. And there was baby shoes and all the shoes—shoes, but

mountains. I'm talking about as tall as buildings. As a matter of fact, you go to Auschwitz now; you see the shoes, already green and so on.

And then they told us we should go into the showers, so we went in. Somebody said that we were examined by a doctor. I don't—by a doctor or nurse or whatever, internally. I don't remember. So, I think if something's very unpleasant, you probably block it out. I don't remember. And they told us we'll take a—we took off all our clothes, the leather coat and everything. We put everything there. And with everything, you need luck. We weren't so lucky. I got a dress that was, like, white, with red and pink and green stripes: a summer dress. And on the back of the dress was a big Jewish star in red paint—but big, like the whole back. And then I got a pair of—the shoes were like—not shoes, but like you step into it. We called it *klumpès*; it really wasn't shoes. And my sister got a thin dress, and my mother got a thin dress. Now, you know, it's very hazy, but they say that we were examined, which I don't remember. And we got out, and we were all wet because it was a cold shower. We couldn't even recognize each other.

And then they put us in barracks, on straw. And actually, you saw that people didn't live there. They weren't there, but we didn't know. So, we were on the straw, and then we got food I think three times a day. They used to serve you from a very big cauldron, like pot—it must have been half the size of this room—and it was water with cabbage leaves. And three people—water, cabbage leaves, and in a red metal bowl. And three people had to have from this same bowl. And then, the German—you gave back the bowl to him, and he used to throw it at you like a target, the bowl—you know, to hit you.

I don't know if you saw the movie *Snake Pit* [1948], but there was a movie, *Snake Pit*, and sort of it reminded me of *Snake Pit*; but that was a movie. But it was like a mental institution, something, and just—you weren't any more like a human being. We had to go to the bathroom at the same time, and the bathrooms were like lined up, like—I don't know, maybe twenty toilets. Not toilets, just seats. And you had to go together. And it was very hot, and we stayed forever and ever on *Appel*. *Appel* is where they check you. They counted us and counted us again, and counted us and counted us. That's called *Appel*.

We were there, and the Red Cross must have come and checked it; I don't know. We stayed there for—I don't know, about two weeks. The only thing that we got is I told you the water with the cabbage leaves. I think in the morning they gave us coffee, but I don't quite remember that. But we didn't—it was very meager. And then—

TL: I was just gonna ask you—it's not that you didn't recognize one another. Did they—

SR: No, it's just that—you know, all of a sudden your hair was wet, and you came out, and all the clothing. You know, as long as I was with my mother and my sister, we kept together. And then, we were right—it's near Danzig. Stutthof is near Danzig. We were right there near the water, so then they took us out in little boats, like a little bit bigger, maybe, than canoes, because I think we were about six people. And they took us out into work camps. Actually, we were in about five work camps, but I don't remember the name. The only one I remember is Baumgarten, which was the first camp.

And we lived in a tent. You know when the kids go camping? I don't know, one or two kids? We were ten people to a tent like that—ten women, five and five, on the ground. We had a tin for the food, and they gave us a blanket so we slept on the blanket, covered the blanket. We were digging ditches for the German army. They had to be like six feet deep. I think it was—the ditches were, you know, like where the army can hide or something. I don't know what they call them. So, we had to dig with pickaxes, you know, because it was hard ground, so my sister and I used to use the pickaxes and the shovels and my mother used to shovel from further on, the three of us.

We were in five different camps: the only one, as I say, I remember is Baumgarten. I don't remember the names. One of the scary things, to me, was we didn't have outhouses or anything. But there was a very big hole, and around the hole were, like, four—the wood, you know, and you sat on a piece of wood which was about five or six inches wide. And I used to say, "Please, God, don't let me fall into this sewer." And the whole thing used to stink, you know, everybody went there—and of course we didn't have paper, so we used to use a leaf. You know, one can't really imagine such primitiveness. And I used to say, "Oh, please don't let me fall into this sewer."

In the morning, we got bread and coffee; for lunch we got soup, hoping to get better soup; and at night we got again bread. One bread was for ten people, and we used to watch the person that cut the bread, that every piece should be even. You know, you really don't—can't imagine today that hunger, to what degree you get really—you're not even like a person anymore. So, we were in five different camps. The last one—oh, and we were plagued by body lice. I don't know if you ever heard of body lice. They're big and they gnaw at you. So at night we had like half an hour, so we used to call it delousing. We used to, you know, take it off your clothes, just in your hands, kill it, because they used to eat you alive. It's really—one cannot imagine such. You know, you go down.

And then, the last camp was Tiegenhof, and that was already a—it was getting cold. We started out in July, you know. July, August, September, October, November, and in November we were in Tiegenhof. And it was cold. Oh, we got a coat. When it got cooler, we got a coat, and again you had to be lucky to get a good coat. I had a spring coat, and I even knew whose it was: somebody from my hometown. I knew whose coat I had. My

sister had a coat with no lining, and my mother had a dress coat that you use over a dress, to throw over, which is not really a coat.

And the girl that gave out the coats was somebody from my hometown. I think I write about it. And I call her Miss Mean, and somebody said to her, because she's alive, and said, "You know, Sara wrote about you," and she made some kind of curse word. She had my mother's coat. She wore my mother's coat. My mother had a coat that was a black coat with a fur collar, and they used to make it where you could wear the fur collar this way, you could wear it this way, you could wear it up and down, you know. And she had black boots, and she has, you know, dimples in her cheeks. She used to look at this German with such love. And you know, here she's dressed with this warm coat and the boots and well fed, and I used to say, "God!"

We used to sit on the floor hungry, dirty, filthy. You know, one cannot really imagine to what state you get. You go down. You're not really—in German they call it an *Unmensch*, which is you're not even a person anymore. And then, the winter is coming, and the Russians are pushing the front. While the Russians are pushing the front, they are taking us deeper into Germany. They named it the death march. I don't know who named it or why, but I can see why it's called a death march, because we started out, we were about 900 women. After a month, we were about 200 or 300.

TL: Wow.

SR: And people died on the way, people were shot. Somebody said that the Germans were taking us to save themselves, to go deeper in Germany. I really don't know the logistics of it, what it was. But somebody named it a death march, because this is where—as a matter of fact, my girlfriend from school, whose father was the assistant principal, died. Her name was (inaudible). A friend of mine, Ruthie and I got a piece of bread to remove her body from the line and put it on the side.

You know, a person's—you can see a person's soul in their eyes. I don't know if you know that. And there was one man that had such kind eyes. I think if I would see him today, I would recognize him. When we passed one town, he said to me, "Little girl, I can save you. My family lives right here, and I can take you to my family." So, I said, "I have a mother and a sister." I must have been very small, you know, or sad-looking or whatever. So, I said, "I have a mother and a sister," so he brought us a bread. My mother gave us a little piece of bread, for me, for my sister, and she slept on the bread and somebody stole it. It was like you lost a fortune. I mean, one cannot imagine. I used to dream that if I'll ever have bread, I don't want anything else in my life. So, we went on, and somebody stole the bread.

And then, we came to one place, and they said we have about another thirty miles to go. My mother still had the diamond ring. Now, I used to dream that if I'll ever have bread to my heart's content, I'll never want anything again, just bread. And I said to my mother, "You know, give me the ring. I'm gonna get us bread." We were—I can't even describe to you how pitiful we were, to risk your life for a piece of bread. So, I took the ring, I went out of the line, and I went into a barn. A man came and opened up the barn, and I said to him in German, "Here's a diamond ring. Bring me a bread." He said okay, but he came back with the police, and the police said, "What are you doing?" I said, "I came for bread." And they said, in German, "Don't you know that you are dirtying our *Judenrein* town?" *Judenrein* means this town is clear of Jews. "And you're dirtying it."

So, they started chasing me, and I knew if they catch me, they make like an example of you, so they would kill me. You know, and my mother and sister are there. And people were watching the march, you know. On both sides, people were lined up, all dressed, watching the march—a lot of people. So, this was really a decision that was, like, without thought, you know. I remember it so distinctly. I separated on my right, two people, and I ran behind them. I figured I'll take the police with me, the posse, and they'll go and they'll take me there and they'll kill me, but my mother wouldn't see it.

So, I was running, and nobody from the people watching said where I went. And then, I don't know, but I saw a barn, so I ran into the barn and I laid myself down in the trough. You know, in a trough, where the cows eat. And I was waiting for them to come and get me, and nobody came. I'm lying there, I really don't know how long it was, but I'm lying there. Nobody came. And eventually, a man walked in, and I said to him, "Hey, I'm here," you know. I assumed he was German. So, he said—no, I said, "I'm hiding here." He said—oh, he spoke German. He said, "They're not looking for you anymore," and that was Stan, Stan Wells. But I didn't know his name.

And the first thing he did is he brought me food: he brought me bread and soup, you know, and I just ate like—I was swallowing everything. And he said—and we spoke German. They were taken, actually, which I found out later, prisoners in France in 1941, so he spoke already German; this is 1944. And I said—he brought me food the first thing, and he said, "We will think what to do about it." And there was a girl there, Anna, working also in the barn, and she was a forced Russian laborer who came from Russia to work there. I mean, not to work there, but she was in a camp.

And then he said—when I went in the place, a Mrs. Binder lived there. And he says, "Listen, I am here with nine other men. I'll go tonight. We will discuss it, what we can do to save you. And in the meantime, Zoya"—that's the other girl—"will go to the Russian camp and see; maybe the Russians are willing to hide a Jewish girl. The only thing is, you have to live through that night." So, he brought me more food, and of course if you

don't eat for months—I got very, very sick with diarrhea. I was going with the horses, and maybe the cows; there were about three cows there. You know, they have the kerosene lamps, so he took away the kerosene lamp because, he said, “Mrs. Binder comes to check if he feeds the cows, because she doesn't believe that I feed the cows. So, she comes every night, so just know that she's coming. But I'll take away the lamps so she wouldn't see you.”

From that moment, I remember every, every minute. I was sitting there. If I could paint, I could paint what the barn looked like. And I'm sitting there, couple of chickens there and three cows, and I'm sitting. I said, “What happens if nobody wants me? What am I going to do?” And I always pray to my father when I'm in trouble, and I must have fallen asleep, because all of a sudden—and I was wearing clogs. I told you we had clogs. All of a sudden, I hear, (inaudible), which means—she's cursing. “Where's the lamp? Where's the lamp?” I don't answer, I don't say, and she left the barn. And, in hindsight, I figured—I think at that point I gave up, because otherwise I would have gotten off and gone outside, you know, so she wouldn't find me anymore if she came with light. She never got back. It's like—you know, with everything, you need luck, which we call in Yiddish *mazel*. You need *mazel*, luck. Never came back.

And in the morning, Stan came, and Zoya came, and Zoya said the Russians don't want any part of a Jewish girl. And Stan said that they had a meeting, he's there with nine other men, and they all decided that they will try to save me, because they are locked in a *stalag*, in a room. But to the left of them was a barn, and in the barn were like a dozen horses, and they had straw upstairs. You know, you had to walk up like a little staircase, ladder. And he said they made a hole in the straw, right next to their chimney. One of the guys that ran away from another camp was in the house, and he'll keep the chimney going so I'll be warm. They'll bring me there, and then they'll decide what to do, and they'll hide me. So in the morning, when they go to hang out their wash, they'll bring me food; and at night, when they go to pick up the wash, they will bring me more food.

So, that day, a man came by the name of Willy, Willy Fisher at the time, and he had a big coat, an army coat. He said, “Put it on,” and he gave me all kinds of instructions which I comprehended, but I just didn't follow. He said, “Don't walk near and don't walk this,” because you couldn't walk with a woman, if that's what I looked like, I don't know. But he gave me all kinds of—“Don't do this, don't do that.” But he really took a chance, really. He writes in the diary about it; that's how I know. And they brought me, and somebody was watching out and having the fire going, and they brought me to their place.

They brought me up to the place and they took off all my clothes; they gave me something else, because I was full of lice, and I had a very big hole in my knee, and I had a hole in my leg, on my foot. So, they had a medic there, and he brought me, I think,

some red salve or something. I was very, very sick, too, because from eating; but there were a dozen horses there, and I went with the horses. So, they brought me down. Willy I never saw again, and Alan, Alan Edwards, came once and he introduced himself. He brought me the food. He was like their *bon vivant*, you know; he used to go out, used to sneak out at night, I don't know, to girlfriends or whatever. But he used to stay with me every night so I wouldn't be alone. And, oh, I thought I was in love with him. (laughs)

I think I told you I thought that—when I came to America, I thought Gregory Peck was gorgeous. I thought he was gorgeouser. (both laugh) He was even better looking than Gregory Peck. And he was very kind, and he used to stay with me the whole night so I wouldn't be alone. I don't think the other guys knew about it, because he was a runaround so they thought that he's going to girlfriends, but he was very decent. And eventually he went and he stole for me a pair of shoes. Oh, people were very much afraid of the Russians, so they were running away from the Russian front going deeper into Germany. So, you used to see wagons full of clothing and all that, so they stole for me a maroon coat—Alan stole it, actually. A maroon coat, and a sweater to cover my dress, because the dress had this big Jewish star that they couldn't take out, and they brought me a pair of shoes and stockings. And Alan came every day.

And then, one day they decided that I should meet all the guys, so they sawed through the grates there—because the place was gated, you know—and they pushed me through and I met all ten men. Each one gave me a little present, and they were making plans what to do in case they take away the horses and the straw. So, they decided they'll build a double wall in their room, and when they go to work they'll put me into the wall, and when they come back they'll take me out. So, I was with them between two or three weeks, I don't exactly remember, but definitely two weeks. But already, you know, I was myself. It was very boring, of course, in the straw, but I was playing mathematical games and kids were playing hide and seek, where they used to jump over me, because I was right near the chimney. And then I went on to see them, so we made plans like that.

And then, one day—one evening, Alan came, and he said—oh, I gave myself a name, Sonia; that doesn't sound so Jewish. And he said, “Sonia, we are leaving tonight, and you have two choices. One is you can go instead of Stanley, because Stanley is staying in town; he's not going anyplace. You can stay—you can go with us as Stanley; we'll dress you as a man. Or, I made arrangements with a Polish boy that I told him I have a girlfriend, and she's Lithuanian, and he has an extra bed in his room. So, you can sleep there, and he'll bring you food every day because the war can't last longer than two weeks, three weeks tops. What do you want to do?”

I said, “I'm not gonna go with you, because I don't want to jeopardize your safety. I'll wait for the Polish boy to come, and I'll stay there.” I don't how I even make such a decision. And I had to leave the barn that day, because they were taking away the horses

and the straw. They were evacuating deeper into Germany. And it was getting dusk, and I remember going to sleep, but I couldn't sleep. I said, "Maybe I'll wish myself dead, and I'll die." And then I would get up, I pinched myself, I said, "But I'm not dead, I'm still alive." And it's getting light, and I know that the man is gonna come for the horses.

So, I left the barn. I was never in that town before. And on my way, I met the man that was taking care of the horses, because I knew him; he didn't know me. And then they stopped me, and I said, "I'm rushing to work." I was never in that town. I don't know how I found my way back to Stan's farm, because I figured Zoya—maybe now I look human, she'll take me to the Russian compound. So, I really—I feel that maybe my father was guiding me, because I was never in that town, I never saw it. I really don't know how I found. And I came to—and I saw Zoya, and she said—I said, "Zoya, this is me, Sonia." She said, "Oh, my God, you look normal!" I said, "Zoya, will you take me tonight to your compound?" She said, "Sure, but you have to wait for me to finish work, and I'll take you with me. I'll tell them I have a friend."

Okay. So, I had to wait for her a whole day, and I went outside and I'm looking through the town, and it was all just little houses. But there was one beautiful red brick house. I said, "Maybe I'll go and get work." So I go, and I go in and I knock on the door and I said to the man—his name was Heinrich Binder. I said, "Do you need any workers?" He said, "What can you do?" I said, "I can milk the cows, I can feed the pigs, and everything." He said okay. So I go, I tell Zoya, "Zoya, I'm gonna be at Heinrich Binder's; that's where I will stay." So I go, and he says, "Oh, and I have a place for you to sleep. There's an empty bed upstairs in the attic; you can sleep there."

And the first job he gave me was to sort out the potato cellar. After the winter, they get rotten. And I remember that cellar so well. It was a small cellar, and he told me to take the rotten potatoes from here to put it there, and the good ones here. And Mr. Binder was very, very tall. His name was Heinrich Binder. And he comes down—and I told him I was Lithuanian. He said, "Sonia, you're not Lithuanian." I said, "What do you mean I'm not Lithuanian? Of course I'm Lithuanian." He said, "The Lithuanians don't speak such a German. Your German is so perfect. You must be the Jewish girl we lost in town three weeks ago." I said, "Me, Jewish?" He said, "Yes, your German is perfect." And I looked around, and I said, "What's gonna be, he'll kill me? Nobody will even know." I said, "You know, Mr. Binder, you're right. I am the Jewish girl."

So, he said, "Listen, my wife is already in Cologne," Köln, and that was liberated by the British. He said, "I'm not gonna stay here to wait for the Russians. I want you to"—he was the head SS man in that town. He said, "I want you to write me a note in Yiddish that I saved your life, and that will save my life." So I wrote him a postcard in Yiddish that Heinrich Binder saved my life, you know, da-da-da-da, and he was good to me and he didn't give me out and all that.

And then, that night when I went to sleep, I slept in the attic next to the boy that was supposed to pick me up. This Polish boy—Alan worked in that farm with the Polish boy, and the Polish boy—I said to him, “Why didn’t you come to pick me up?” He said, “I overslept.” I mean, it’s such—you know, that if you make a movie, you can’t believe the coincidence, how that worked out. And I stayed in that farm for two or three—of course, I didn’t know how to milk the cows; he taught me how to milk the cows, feed the pigs, and all that. And I worked with this girl, Annie, that was quite anti-Semitic. She used to say to me, “Sonia, you know, we lost the war, but we did kill out all the Jews.” I said, “You’re right.” She used to share that little tidbit with me.

And then came—the front is moving, and all the Germans are petrified of the Russians, so they are moving deeper into Germany. So, what they did is they took the workers—the Polish, the Lithuanians—to drive their wagons, because the men weren’t there anymore. I organized—I don’t know, about we were five or six boys and girls: Lithuanian, Polish. I mean, I told them I was Lithuanian. They wouldn’t know. And we stayed to wait for our friends the Russians. And the town, Groß Golemkau [Gołębiewo Wielkie], went three or four times from—I don’t remember who wore white camouflage and who wore green, because the Russians were there and the Germans were there.

We were in a cellar, maybe six or eight kids. I mean, when I say kids, you know, youngsters, late teens. The bombardment was absolutely unbelievable. It was still—I mean, the artillery was dragged by horses. They used to drag the artillery, I don’t know if you saw, and then they shoot it up in the air. I mean, very primitive. I don’t know, after about—I don’t know how long, but finally the Russians are there, and I figured, “Ha! The Russians are there; I have nothing to worry about,” you know. And I go and I find the head Russian, which is in Russian *nachal'nik polkovnik*, with all his titles. And people were not hiding, but saving their furniture in the basement from the bombs from the artillery or something.

And all of a sudden—and we were in the cellar—I can see it so clearly. There were tables and there were chairs and a chifforobe. And, all of a sudden, he’s chasing me, and I said, “Why the hell is he chasing me?” He’s chasing me and I’m jumping over one chair and another chair and the table, and I’m going and going. And he says to me in Russian—I told you I speak Russian fluently—“*Devochka*, I want to marry you!” *Devochka* means “little girl.” “I want to marry you!” I said, “You do? Do you love me?” He said, “Ask me anything.” I said, “Don’t touch me.” He said, “Okay.” I really feel that my father was there.

And he writes three notes, one to his mother in Moscow, and one to his sister in Leningrad, and one whoever is going to see me, that I am the bride of *nachal'nik*

polkovnik, with all his titles. And he sends me away (inaudible)—(inaudible) means away from the front—with his attaché. I'm running, and—not the bombs, I don't know. The artillery is falling, and I'm running from him, from this. I figured nobody can touch me, of course, with this note. So, I come to the next town, and you always go to, like a headquarter. So, I go into the headquarter, I figured, with those notes. I showed them my notes, and they said, "Oh, he took up with the enemy," and they arrested me as a German spy, the Russians.

So, I was under house arrest for I don't know, four or five days, with other men, and we went with the bathroom with a guard, and they interrogate you only at night. So, they interrogate me with cocoa on the table, and I tell them my story and I keep repeating the same one over and over. And they had witnesses that worked with me—witnesses!—that I spied with them. You know, what Russians can do—I mean, I don't know whether Americans do it, too. You know, they can make you to be anything that you don't even know that you are. And then, after about three or four days of interrogation, which they only interrogate at night, he said to me, "You know, nobody can go through what you just told me and live. So, I think you should write fiction, because your mind is so active. You should write fiction." And I was released.

I was released into a room, you know, where to sleep. It was a house, and there was an old cook, and he said to me, "*Devochka*," which is little girl, "are you all right? Did anybody harm you?" I said, "No, so far I'm okay." He says, "Well, those men are not men anymore. They are animals." And then he—and at night, they told me to sleep in a room, so there was like a double bed and there were two men there, and women, and then there was another one. I slept—I slept myself on a cot, and they said, "Don't sleep on the cot. Come into bed." So, I figured, "Oh, my God, that's all!" so I told them that my stomach hurt. In Russian it's (inaudible), which means going to the bathroom. But there wasn't a bathroom, there was an outhouse. So, I stayed the whole night in the outhouse, and in the morning I came and the cook said to me, "Are you all right?" I said yes. And one Russian wanted I should clean his room, another one wanted I should clean, but I said, "I'll clean the room if you get out of it."

And then, I finally—you know, I walked and walked and walked. I walked out; they released me. I walked out, and I was walking towards Poland. I came to a town—I don't even know the name. I don't know whether it was Toruń or someplace. And I met actually a Jewish man. I remember he fed me tea with milk and bread and butter, and then I went to sleep. It was all bombed-out buildings. I mean, there wasn't a building that was standing; everything was bombed out. And he said that he'll send me back with the mail. He used to do the mail, and they did it first by truck, and they would go to a station. I said okay, and he got in with me to bed. I was wearing—completely dressed. I still had the ring, and I still had the underpants from the concentration camp, which was flannel pants. And there was in the other bed was a man and a woman. They said, "Look how nice they

get along.” I said, “So go there.” (laughs) You become—through all this I was very, very lucky.

And then a man in the station came, and he said he’s the head of the station and I should go with him; he’ll show me how to go to Lithuania. So, I went there. I mean, I’m saying it’s ironic; thank God nothing happened. And he shows me I can go this route, this route; here’s a map on the table. And then—and I’m wearing my coat—he throws me on the couch. I figured, “What the hell does he want?” And all of a sudden, a door opens and two people walk out, Germans or Polish, I don’t know. They’re wearing long nightshirts with hats on their heads, and they said, “The *kurwas*”—you know what a *kurwa* is? The prostitutes. “First they come, and then they yell.”

So, I pushed him away, and I jumped out the second floor and I went back to the station. A young boy was sitting, and he said, “Did they try to do anything to you? Sit near me, I won’t touch you. We’ll wait for the train.” Anyway, it took me—that was January, February, March, April, May. It took me between two and three months to get to Poland, which today takes about two hours or three hours.

TL: Wow.

SR: We used to sleep in—oh, finally, I don’t know when, I met two other girls, which I was so happy. One was from Kovno, another town, and she was married before the war; and a Polish girl, Anna. We travelled; the three of us travelled together. We used to lie in stations on the floor waiting for a train to come. And the Russians used to come to check passports. Who had passports? Nobody had them. So then they would take you to their headquarters, and there the Russians used to rape you. I mean, it was really like no man’s land. And I thought that just I saw it, but a few things that I want to read out loud, for the record, because I think it is so important. It’s not from me; it’s from Willy’s diary.

But, as I said, it took me three months, and we went with such—but I was with this girl, Sonia was her name, her real name was Sonia and Anna. Anna was a young Polish girl. She was going—she lived in Bialystok, so she was going to Bialystok. And I’ll just say one incident, where we went in; they were checking our passports. We didn’t have passports. And it was like a big auditorium: there were many benches. And Sonia went in first, and she got out and she said, “Don’t ask.” So I go in second, and the guy said to me—first of all, he goes if I have any armament or something. He said, “Do you want to go to Russia”—no. “Do you want to go to Lithuania or to Siberia?” There was a saying in Russian, *Siberia tak’zhe russkoï zemle*, which means “Siberia is also Russian ground,” and Lithuania was under Russian. So he said, “Well, do you want to go to Siberia?” I said okay, and I pushed him away and I ran out. And then Anna went in, and we waited for her maybe two—she went in and he raped her on the table, and then she became pregnant.

We traveled like—it took us two hours to get to Bialystok, and she said that she felt that she was pregnant, and she went to Bialystok. It was such a—you know, I was so lucky. I was so lucky. And of course I had Sonia with me, and she said, “Look, Sara, whatever happens, I was married before the war.” So, this was January, and I came to Bialystok—February, March, April, May. The war ended in May; I came in April. It took us three months, which today takes like two, three hours by train or something, four hours. So many incidents happened.

TL: Well, if we can take a break here and then we’ll pick up with our next tape—

SR: Yeah, because I really want to read just from Willy’s diary, because it’s so important because whatever I say, it gets, like, reinforced, which is I think very important for anybody that doesn’t read the book just to know it, you know.

TL: Yes. Okay. Okay.

Part 2 ends; part 3 begins

TL: This is tape three. We are here with Ms. Sara Hannah Matuson Rigler. My name is Tori Lockler.

And Ms. Rigler, in the end of our last tape, we were talking about the three months it took to get to Poland. Before we talk about what happens when you get to Poland, I was wondering if you would go back just a little and tell us about some of the characters—the people, the family, the friends—that we’ve heard about and what happened to some of them.

SR: Okay.

TL: So, I thought maybe we would start with your friend Miriam.

SR: Yeah. Miriam and her mother were in a camp, and a German shot a—I think they call it a tomtom gun. I don’t know what it is, but it exploded in their bodies, into pieces. The mother and Miriam were killed. After the war, her father, who had a very bad heart, survived, and he came to America and he stayed with a friend of mine who was with me in camp, Ruthie. And she said that—it was Miriam Edelstein. And she said, “Mr.

Edelstein would like to talk to you,” because Miriam and I were good friends. I got on the phone, and I said, “Mr. Edelstein?” and she said, “He can’t talk to you; he fainted on the phone.” And I never talked to him again. So, what happened to Miriam and her mother: they were in a camp, and the man shot a tomtom gun or whatever that is, and it exploded in their bodies and both of them were killed in that camp.

And then Lazar Penn—that’s the one that looked German; he must have been six feet six or whatever—he was in jail. They took him with my father and all that. And somehow or other, there are a lot of pictures from the jail where they showed the two rabbis on a wagon, and then they show Lazar in the back because he’s like three heads taller than everybody else. So, in many books you see it. And then the last time—and then we went to Vilnius, which is a town that was the head town of Lithuania, but now it’s—I don’t know it’s Poland or Lithuania.

So we went there to a museum, because they have very—a museum of memorabilia in Vilna, Lithuania—Vilna, Poland, Lithuania, wherever; it goes back and forth.² And there they had also a picture of Lazar, as a matter of fact, digging his own grave. And he was with my father, which is in a town near Shavel where we are in Kužai. When we went to Lithuania on a trip, I said to my husband I have to go to Kužai to see it. They somehow or other had Lazar, because I think they wanted to show—he looked so non-Jewish, and they show him digging his own grave. And also, they have a picture of the (inaudible), the shed, where they got undressed. They got undressed, left the clothing, and then they walked and they killed them near the pit. When we went to Lithuania, there are three pits; only one of them is covered. The others are open, open pits with all kinds of dirt and water and so on; they’re not even covered. But somebody paid to cover one pit, and a monument is standing there. That’s in Kužai; that’s a small town near Shavel, near my town. So, that’s where they killed all those people: my father, Lazar.

And we went to—Moscow has a very famous museum. It’s a synagogue and a museum, and in the museum somewhere or other you see Lazar’s picture. It’s like you can’t believe it, that he was shot. He’s tall, he’s blond, blue eyes. And the woman that took us around told some kind of story about him, and I said, “Lady, I know this man very well. I’ll give you his name, I’ll tell you who he is, where he lived, where he was born.” And I told her about who Lazar Penn is, because she was saying something, made up a story, and I told her and she said, “Write it to me.” So I wrote it to her because he is—somehow or other they are using him like—not a model, but that even somebody looking like this was killed, because he could have easily, easily passed as a German. So, that’s what happened with Lazar, but he was killed in jail. And I told you what happened to Miriam and her mother.

²Vilna was in Poland during World War II. Vilna, or Vilnius, is in current day Lithuania.

Who else? Liuba. Liuba, my cousin, was in Vilna. She spoke English and, of course, Lithuanian and German and Hebrew. She worked for a German man, and he said to her, “Listen, the Russians will be here by tomorrow, or today even. Go in and”—I don’t know; it’s called a *malina*; it’s probably like a hole you go into and you hide. And she went in, and he said, “It will be safe for you.” So she went in there, and a German passed by and threw in a grenade. That was the last day before liberation, and she was killed. So, that was the end of Liuba.

TL: And I know you said that—you talked about the last time you had seen your father, and about the fact that you felt like he guided you through some—

SR: Yeah, I feel that like—you believe in something, and I had so many close calls, and somehow or other I came out all right, whether the Russians or the Germans. So, I feel it was my father’s—in Hebrew we call it *skhut*, which is my father’s—I don’t even know the English word for that, but it’s like he felt one person should be alive, because I think he was like a holy man. So, maybe it’s just for my own—like, if I have to talk to somebody, I always talk to my father.

TL: And can you tell us—when you were on the death march, you were with your sister and your mother. So, I know that after you escaped and after the British prisoners of war helped you—(coughs) excuse me. Your intent at that time, if I’m right, was to get back to Lithuania.

SR: Well, our intent was to go back to Lithuania because we thought we would find the—because we didn’t realize that the Lithuanians killed all the Jews before the Germans even told them to do it. We were not aware of it. And people started saying that—actually, percentage-wise, I think it’s 7 or 8 percent that Polish Jewry survived. In Lithuanian Jewry they say it’s about 3 percent that Lithuanian Jewry survived, because the Lithuanians killed most of the Jews. And when you go to Vilna you see this picture, actually, from my father’s town, from Rokiškis, where girls—mainly girls—are all undressed, naked, and there’s such fear in their eyes. I mean, you can feel for them because they know they’re gonna be shot any minute. You know, if you start thinking about it, it’s—you can’t even comprehend it all. Here you’re standing; you’re gonna be shot any minute. And yet—did I give you the wrong page?

There’s one page that a man from Vilna, there is—in Vilna there is a forest; it’s called Ponar. And in Ponar, which is—right now it’s a forest, but people used to be able to play there and all that, but now it’s off limits; you cannot play. And in Ponar, there are three big holes, like big, big holes, that the Russians used to store, I think, oil. And now, the

Germans used it to kill the Jews.³ Three big holes. I think maybe one or two people escaped from Ponar. It used to be, as I said, a forest, but the forest now is off limits for playing. You see those three holes that the Russians were storing oil, and then when the Germans came in they used it to kill the Jews. I mean, you couldn't escape from Ponar, because it's a big hole and they threw you in there.

I have a letter that was written by a man on his way to Ponar, and he threw out the letter hoping that somebody will find it and give it to somebody. And he's talking about the atrocities of the Polish people to the Jews. I have a page—in Vilna, I took a picture of this page, which is written in Lithuanian and when I came back to America I gave it to a friend of mine who speaks Lithuanian, and she translated it for me in English. I don't read it, because you cannot read such atrocities out loud. You have to read it to yourself, because what they did to little Jewish girls, what they did to the women, what they did to the men—I'll give you one page; I have it printed out. And I never read it. This is something you have to read to yourself, because I think that nobody heard of such atrocities. And the man wrote it in 1944, on his way to Ponar, hoping that somebody will pick up the letter and give it to somebody, and it's in the museum in Vilna. As I said, it's in Lithuanian, and my girlfriend translated it for me in English. It is such horrors. I mean, bestiality. What they did to little girls, what they did to the men, it is something that—I have to find the page; remind me to give it to you. I usually carry it with me, and I just give it out. I don't read it; I can't read it.

TL: At what point did you find out about what happened to your mother and your sister?

SR: When I came to Bialystok. I came to Bialystok maybe two or three days before the war ended in May. They had a curfew: six o'clock you had to be back. I stayed with a man who was a shoemaker, and he had an apartment there. There was one girl, this Sonia or something; she was already married and I was single. I stayed with him, because most of the buildings were bombed out. Everybody got some kind of a job. I got a job—I was making soapsuds in a barbershop for the men to shave. So, the man had a barbershop, and he had like divided it in like two thirds and a third, and behind the third was a Primus. You know what's a Primus? You can cook in it: it has a fire underneath. It's like an old-fashioned—you know, you put in a little gasoline or oil, I don't know, and then you have a fire and you cook underneath. So, I used to make a meal for him and for me, and I used to make the soaps that he's using to shave. And then, when they took—and I slept—this barber—I think he was a barber. He was very good to me.

³The Ponary (or Paneriai) massacre, in which 100,000 people, mostly Polish Jews, were murdered by Germans and Lithuanian collaborators. The massacres began in July 1941 and continued until August 1944.

As I said, there was a curfew, six o'clock. There was a girl there, Hanka, so she slept with him, which was fine, but he watched over me like a piece of gold. And then, the barber, when they took Berlin, everybody was running to Berlin to get rich. And then they used to come back from Berlin with watches from here to here—don't ask me, you know—and sell it. But everybody was running to Berlin. So, one of the men that used to come into the store to shave or something, he said, "What are you gonna do when the barber leaves?" I said, "I don't know." He said, "You know, you can come and cook for me, and you can sleep." I said, "Fine." And he was from Lodz, and he was a very nice man. His name was—I write about him in the book. He was really very good to me, and he fed my girlfriends; he fed everybody. And he used to go to Lodz to do business, and then he would give me the money and I'd stick it under the mattress. But the house was completely bombed out. You couldn't get into the house from the front; you had to go from the back, because the first two floors were all demolished, and you had to go outside like on made-believe steps. There weren't steps into the apartment. I mean, everything was bombed out. It's so hard to—I can see it before me, but it's so hard to comprehend.

And then they came down from Israel, and they were collecting the girls and the boys to send them to Israel. So they collected all—they came from the government, from Israel. We had two rooms, one room like 150 girls and the other room 150 boys. We slept on cots, you know, together. And then they said they're gonna take us to Israel. So, we were in Bialystok, and then from Bialystok we went to Germany, because from Germany you had to go to Italy, and from Italy you could go to Israel. So, we were on our way to Israel. We went in animal trains and all that, but of course we were free already. We passed Belgium and Holland and all countries, and they told us not to talk, of course, Yiddish or any—so we used to speak Hebrew or Lithuanian or something; nobody understands it. I remember I came to one town, Bendin [Będzin]—I don't even know where it is; I think in Poland—and I met the first black man in the bathroom. He was cleaning or selling sandwiches. I got so scared: I never saw a black man before in my life, except in the movies.

And then we came—I came to St. Ottilien [Archabbey, in Germany], which was a hospital, and I was there for about two or three weeks. I was sick. We didn't have any clothes or anything, so we wore only pajamas. That's all we had, these pajamas. A friend of mine told me her brother was in Munich already, so he got a navy skirt and a pink blouse, and whoever had company would put on the skirt and the blouse so that you would look presentable. But I have pictures from there, and we're all wearing pajamas, in St. Ottilien. And then we had the six-month course to become nurses, because they had all the people coming, the refugees from the camps, and they wanted Jewish nurses. So, I had a six-month course in nursing there in St. Ottilien, and eventually I came to America. If there was a hard way and an easy way, I found the hard way. I mean, you read about it, how I came to America. (laughs) I did everything the hard way.

TL: I would like, actually, if it's okay, for you to tell us a little bit about that story, about coming to America.

SR: All right. The Lithuanian quota was very, very small. I suppose I can talk about it now; it's already legal, I mean, so many years. The Lithuanian quota was like two people a month or something, and somehow or other I couldn't wait to come to America. My uncle wrote, "Just come! Just come!" So, my father's friend came to St. Ottilien, and he said, "You know, there is an organization called Vad Hazalah," which is a Hebrew name for an organization for help. *Vad* is an organization; *hazalah* is to help. He says he's involved there, and rabbinic students can go without a quota. "So, you'll get married to a rabbinic student, and when you come to America you'll get divorced." He said he wants \$500. So, I wrote to my uncle, who lived on \$1000 a year—a poor farmer—and he said, "Just come." Okay.

So, I told him it's okay, and I used to go to Frankfurt; the organization was in Frankfurt. I was in St. Ottilien, which was near München, so I used to go by train a whole night, in a dark train: a cold, dark train, a whole night, to go to Frankfurt. Anyway, they paired me up with a guy that they felt would be all right. And then, finally, the papers came. Had I waited, I would have gone a week later or something, without any complications. So, I finally came to America in August 27, 1947. I came in America—

TL: With the rabbinic student.

SR: Huh?

TL: With the rabbinic—

SR: Yeah. Right, right, right, with the idea we'll get divorced as soon as we can, and I'll pay him the money. And then, I found out—so, I didn't even introduce him to anybody. Then I found out that they told my uncle, who lived on \$500 a year, that if he doesn't give them—I think \$1800; he lived on \$1000 a year—\$1800, I can't come. So, he went, he borrowed money, because he felt so guilty by not doing more for my family before. So I said to my uncle—I said to them, "Why did you charge my uncle money?" It was paid by HIAS [Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society], the Joint Distribution [Committee]. They said, "We ask, and if they give us, we take." And that was a religious organization. That's when I became irreligious, because I said, "Religion—they're using it as a pretext. I don't like using religion in such a way." And it took me—I was very lucky.

As I said, I was very lucky that my aunt's brother knew a guy that was doing divorces in Reno, Nevada. It took me two or three years to get a divorce in Reno, Nevada, and lucky that a lawyer, Ypsilanti, he did it for free as a friend. But I still owe him \$150. I paid him up through \$350. I was a waitress in my uncle's place, and I waited myself on fifty people. They used to pay me, I think, \$2 a week for breakfast, lunch, and supper. So, I paid up \$350; I still owe the \$150. (laughs) I didn't have it easy. (laughs) I didn't have it easy, no. But you know, if you come through hard times and you come through it, it's then sort of nothing fazes you. "Oh, I can do it," you know. Yeah, I waited on all those people. They paid me \$2 a week for breakfast, lunch, and supper. It took a long time. I got the divorce. It was okay.

TL: And what else after you came to—

SR: America. So, I came to America. I stayed at my aunt's sister's house. The daughter went away to college, so I stayed there. I came—it was near Midwood High School. I went—I came in August of forty-seven [1947], August forty-seven [1947]. In September I started school. I didn't have any English at all, but I had the most wonderful, wonderful teachers. They stayed with me after class, they helped me, they taught me, and I finished Midwood High School in three terms. I didn't have school from—you could say from 1940, because the Russian school was terrible already. Nineteen forty, so I didn't have school for seven years, and I finished Midwood High School in three terms with an academic diploma. Three years of Hebrew, two years of German, and intermediate algebra, because we took it already at home when I was a kid, and science, and I finished in three terms, even not having school from forty-one [1941] till forty-seven [1947]: six years. So, our schools were really advanced. The kids used to help me with social studies. I had a man, Mr. Blake; he taught me math and Hebrew. I took the Hebrew exam. It was really—I had such respect for teachers that I wanted so much to be a teacher, but at that time you had to have perfect diction; you couldn't have an accent. Now if you can understand the teacher, you're lucky; but at that time you had to have perfect diction, and I couldn't be a teacher.

But I went to Brooklyn College for one term, and there I took science. And the GIs were coming back. I took science, and then I was supposed to go—I think in the book—I was supposed to go to Mount Sinai, and the nurse that interviewed me in Mount Sinai, which is a Jewish-supported institution, said to me—a German nurse—"How come everybody died in your life?" And I said, "I must have been lucky." And she said, "You know, we have a quota for Jewish nurses." This is Mount Sinai. I put in the letters in the book, because these were such terrific letters from the principal from the school and so on. Flora Shore, who was in Midwood High School, she was an angel. She was the dean. She used to have a sandwich waiting for me every day in the teachers' cafeteria for Hannah, and she said, "This is your sandwich, so at least you have supper." She was wonderful.

So, I was very fortunate at Midwood High School, and then I went to Brooklyn College one term, and the GIs were coming so I took science because I could get a scholarship to go to medical school. But I opted to go to nursing school, so I went to a Jewish hospital in Brooklyn. And Flora Shore, the one that was so good to me in Midwood High School, she lived nearby, so I used to go there Friday night for dinner in her house. And my family was—I had a cousin in Philadelphia. Maybe I shouldn't even say it: she had seven mink coats, I think. She introduced the refugees—at that time, they used to call us refugees. She introduced the refugees to her friends, and she bought me two dresses. I still remember: a green dress and a black dress. And I never saw her again. From Philadelphia, but she used to come with her daughter for dates to New York.

The last time I saw her was at a wedding, and she said to me, “Sara, how many facelifts did you have?” None. She said, “Oh.” She had so many of them. She looked like Hedy Lamarr at one time. But so from family, I didn't have—in Jewish we call it *nachas*, which means joy. Except for my Uncle Joe; he was so good to me. But you know, you come through hard times, you learn. You get stronger. What else do you want me to tell you? What I did with my life?

TL: Yes, please. Where would you like to start, here?

SR: Yeah, you know, when I came to America and all that. And one of the things I started looking for the Englishmen, to thank them. I was looking, and the only name I remembered was Alan Edwards, so I wrote to every Alan Edwards in London. I didn't realize they were poor and he lived all the way—I don't know, wherever. So then, I finally wrote to the British War Department. Somebody gave me the idea to write to the British War Department, and I wrote to them. They wrote me back a letter, what is my claim? They were afraid that I, you know, was claiming something in the war: you know, children or something. I said, “No, I just want to thank the people for saving me.” So they gave my letter to Alan, Alan Edwards or somebody, and one said to the other one and to the other one, and that's how they started sending me little notes.

And Willy, the one that wrote the diary, they haven't seen at all. They didn't know anything about him, what happened to him, because apparently, you know, with Willy, he was a communist, and he was gonna live in Russia. So he—when he was liberated, he wasn't even going back to England. He was going directly to Russia. And he was on a train going to Odessa with 500 Russians that were liberated by the Russians. He couldn't understand that the people were so petrified to go home. They said, “They're gonna kill us all,” and he said, “My comrades are not gonna kill you.” So, when they came close to Odessa, he said many of them jumped into the water and drowned, killed themselves; and others, he said, were just—and they kept saying to him, “They'll kill us, they'll kill us.”

So when they came to Odessa, they killed all of them except for him. The Russians killed their own people. They said, "If you did not bother to run away from Germany, you're not a good citizen." So Willy turned around and went back to England. They took his diary. He went back to England, and of course he got drunk and they picked him up someplace; I don't know where. And the people were coming back from the front, from Japan there, and he saw all the casualties so he sort of snapped out of it. He rewrote the diary then. And then—he saw such atrocities, you know, that the Russians committed, even before; he figured it's not for him. That's not the communists that he's looking for. Why he was a communist is beyond me. I don't know. We never—he was supposed to come here to visit us, and that's when he passed away.

But yes, I would like to read—I mean, do you think now I should do it?

TL: Can you just give us the context of the diary?

SR: Yeah.

TL: So it was—you said that he had it in—

SR: Yeah. The diary he wrote from the time he's seeing the death march, and how it affected him. And then he wrote about—actually, he started I think from the death march, because it had such an effect on him. And yet, when I met him—I only met him—he took me from Stan's farm to their place, and I never saw him again. But you know, sometimes it takes a man something to get out. I corresponded with him till he died, and we became very close through the letters, and I met him. Our son Lionel went to visit in England, and he travelled with him; he travelled with him through England, which was very nice. So, all this is in the letters, and I was very, very anxious to really publish the diary and the letters because the diary is such an important document, because people said it never happened, and here's a man that wrote it in forty-five [1945], had nothing to gain, just a bystander, and we don't have bystander testimonies or something. And here's a man that is a communist, and he writes what the Russians did when they came to Poland—which I saw in my travels.

I mean, they used to line up a woman in a barn, and they used to rape her till she was dead, and then they would leave. We once—I mean, it took me—I was liberated in January; January, February, March, April, May. It took me three months to get from Danzig—near Danzig, actually—to Bialystok, which is probably today three hours by train, or four hours. I saw—I mean, they used to line up women in a barn and just rape them until they were dead. It was animals, absolutely animals. And Willy writes about it, and it's so difficult for him because he was a communist, and he's adoring the Russians

and he sees all this. But I was very—it wasn't difficult for me to write about it, because thank God nothing happened to me. So I suppose if it had happened to me, you know, I couldn't write about it. But I saw it happening, but I was really fortunate. I really feel that my father was watching over me, or somebody was watching over me, because the incidents that we had—we hid in trains and they dragged us out.

I mean, I'll just describe: once we were—you know, they used to come and ask us for documents. How did we have documents? We didn't have documents. So Sonia and I and Anne—her name was Anna—we were all three we didn't have documents. They took us into a place; I can see the place. It was a big hall; must have been an assembly hall or a church because there were pews all around. Sonia went in first, and she came out and she said, "Sara, don't ask." I go in and he said to me, "Do you want to go to Lithuania or to Siberia?"

Now, there's a saying in Russian, *Siberia tak'zhe russkoï zemle*, which means "Siberia is also Russian ground," you know. So I tell it to him, and he said, "If you're not good, you're gonna go to Siberia." I said okay, and he starts checking me. I said, "What are you checking me?" He said, "For guns." So I pushed him and I ran out, and then Anna went in. And Sonia and I were sitting—it was a big school hall, I mean, many pews, and we were sitting near the wall—I still remember it—leaning on the wall. Maybe it was half an hour, an hour. And Anna came out: he raped her on the table when she came out, and she became pregnant. Because we travelled with her from there—it took us three months, I told you, so when we got to Bialystok, she said, "I'm pregnant."

And we came to one town—I write about it—where the town was completely empty, except for cats. And the cats, you know, when they meow they sound like babies. And all the buildings were completely bombed out: there wasn't a window standing. Each time we heard the cats, we thought somebody was walking, so we kept going from one building to another one—through the windows, not through doors. There were two seventy year old spinsters in town, and they were constantly raped—seventy year old spinsters. And here we are, the three of us, three girls.

We slept on one mattress, and it was Sonia and I and Anna, and a Russian came and he started up with this Polish girl. And I didn't know anything about sex, I really didn't. I was stupid, you know. And Sonia was already married, I told you. I became hysterical—I mean, not laughing—so he took out his gun and he said, "I'm gonna kill you." And Sonia said, "Shut up." I couldn't stop. It was like—it was like a nervous thing, something. Right next to me he had intercourse with her. I didn't even know. I never knew about it. That's when we got food; otherwise, we didn't get food. As I said, the town was completely empty, except for cats and those two ladies, seventy year old spinsters.

When we came finally—we came to Bialystok, but it took a long, long time. As I said, I was very lucky. In Bialystok—I think I told you what I did. I was making soap in a barbershop, and then when he left—the war must have ended, because everybody was running to Berlin to get rich. So he went, and then I worked for a guy. I was cooking for him, you know, for food. And then they came from Israel and they collected us, and they took us to like a kibbutz-type setting. I don't know, we were like 150 kids, boys and girls. I remember we lost two of them: one had cancer of the eye, a young girl—I have a picture of her—and somebody else. We slept in two rooms: one room was all boys, one room was all girls. And then we all got scabies. You know what scabies are?

TL: Mm-hm.

SR: And that itches you, and they used to put a salve on us, a yellow salve. Yeah. And then we came to St. Ottilien, and that's when I—I was in the hospital a while, and then we had the course—I think it was a three-month course or something—and we became like practical nurses so we could take care of the patients. I didn't put in the picture of the nurses, I don't know why. But we graduated, and then we took over the patients there. And then I was anxious to go to America, and I came in August. As I said, there was a hard way and an easy way; I found the hard way to come. What else?

TL: Well, if you will—now that we know where the diary came from, if you will read for us the pieces from the diary?

SR: Yes. Yeah, I'll just read a few pieces. One is—and this is May 21, 1968, and this is Willy's first letter. "My dear Sara: A friend of mine, browsing through the Sunday newspaper, saw an article reminiscent of something I had once told her of a poor kid and her extremely brave attempt to save herself from certain death, and decided to cut out the article and give it to me. The result of my reading it was, believe it or not, to make the miserable cold day into perhaps what was the sunniest, and certainly one of the happiest, of my life. I am by nature pretty hard and insensitive, but I must confess I do know now what tears of happiness mean.

"My joy at your being alive and well, and being transformed from that tragic waif I once met into what your photograph shows, a very beautiful and obviously very happy woman, in some measure made up for all the guilt I felt at being unable, or perhaps too cowardly, to do or risk more for you than we did, for I have never got over the feeling that we perhaps should have taken you with us. How you eventually made your way I do not know, but then I do know the very knowledge that you did so has brought me a happiness I have seldom known. Thank you very much indeed.

“You probably do not remember me personally, but I was with Alan Edwards, hiding as you were, but under easier circumstances, with the girl who is now his wife. I have been out of touch with them for some years, but due to you, I shall get in touch with them again. Perhaps you will be interested, if you can read the aged scrawl in the diary I wrote at the time. Actually it was written up between late May and June while travelling on a Russian train from (inaudible) to Odessa, from notes I had made on the back of photographs and odd scraps of paper. It will not all be accurate—your name is Sonia, not Sara—and some was hearsay or secondhand, but I think the salient features are accurate of the part that concerns you.

“I do not know your address, but will ask the reporter of your story to forward it to you. The story was in the Johannesburg paper, in South Africa.” I don’t know how. “May I say once more, thank you so much for bringing such happiness and joy to at least one rather pudgy, balding, elderly old man. Yours very sincerely, Willy Fisher.” And he sent the diary.

And then—and I’ll just read a few snippets from the diary, sort of to verify it. The first one—(shuffles papers). You know what the diary looked like? Can you see it from there?

TL: We’ll also show the picture afterward.

SR: Oh, you’ll show it, okay. And this is—wait, I just want to—“God punished”—this is the twenty-sixth of January. It was 19 degrees, and it was 1945, January. “God punished Germany. Never again will I help a German; never again will I speak well or defend them in speech. I have seen today the filthiest, foulest, and most cruel sight of my life. God damn Germany with an everlasting punishment. At nine AM this morning, a column struggled down the road towards Danzig, a column far beyond the words of which I am capable to describe. They came struggling through the bitter cold, about 300 of them, limping, dragging footsteps, slipping and falling, to rise and stagger under the blows of the guards, SS swine, crying loudly for bread, screaming for food. Three hundred matted-haired, filthy objects that had once been Jewesses, not even people anymore.”

And now it’s January 27, and it’s 15 degrees, bright. “More Jewesses in similar condition to yesterday. Stan comes to me after dinner and tells me a Jewess has got away, and he has her hiding in cow’s crib. I suggest moving her to loft over camp: plenty straw, and the chimney from our fire will keep her warm. I arrange to take her to the camp. Wait till nearly dusk and go to Stan’s farm; he hands over girl. I tell her to walk five paces on the other side and speak to no one. She is crippled, too frightened to understand me, grabs my arm,” and then he says that I tried to kiss his arm. I can’t even read it out loud, you know, because I can’t believe that I came to such, you know, to what—denigrated. I

mean, you become like—and then, as I said, Willy was—I'm going to take a little water here. Willy was a communist, and he believed in them.

And then he writes about the Russians, what they were doing to the women, and he writes here, “Women all clean out at night to the woods, but many are still being raped even in daylight. One woman, three months with child, raped thirty-two times in first day. At night more Russians arrived, and as the mother protested, she was shot through the head—unfortunately, not killing her. A father had shot his fifteen year old daughter, who had been tied to a wagon wheel and raped innumerable times.” And this is what Willy writes, what he saw in Poland. And it's so important, because here's Willy, a communist, who believed in them, and he sees all that.

So, it's such an important document, as far as the diary: the death march, as far as what he saw in Poland, because most people speak about liberation, they talk about the American liberation, which was a good liberation because they took care of the people, they took them to hospitals; the same thing with the English liberation. But most of the camps were liberated by the Russians, because they were in Poland, and somehow or other nobody writes about the Russian liberation of the camps. And this is so important, because Willy, who is a communist, writes about what his own friends are doing. So, this is such an important document, I feel.

I got—he sent the diary without a return address. It was so fortunate that it came, even, to me. We had it transcribed, and the original diary is in the museum in New York. Of course, I have the diary all in full in the book, which I feel it is such an important document. With all the naysayers and so on, here's a document written in forty-five [1945], which is such an important thing for history.

TL: Yes. Thank you.

SR: Yeah.

TL: Okay, so I think maybe what I would like us to do, then, is just talk a little more about how you stayed in touch with some of the British prisoners of war who saved you. We've heard a little bit about Willy, but if you'll just tell us like what you've done.

SR: We stayed in touch, and I looked for them and I found them, and then we had a big reunion in England. I think it was in 1971. They were all—we were stuck on an airplane, and I came a little late. They were all a little bit tipsy. But we have a beautiful picture together with the ten men, and they always called me their little sister. So, we got

together in that, and then eventually they had a film done by Esther Rantzen. It was a surprise to them. They said that they were gonna film prisoners of war, but actually I came incognito, and then they brought me out. And what's her name—the one, the original in—oh, God.

BR: (inaudible)

SR: Huh?

BR: (inaudible)

SR: The opera, *The Phantom of the Opera*, Sarah Brightman sang to me. And they said, “How would you like to see Sara?” and they said, “Sara?” and all of a sudden I come out onstage. It was Esther Rantzen did the program, as a surprise, and five of them were there. Willy wasn't there; he was already—he passed away. No, he was there, I don't know; he wasn't there, though. But three of them, or four, and it was really very nice.

And I kept in touch with Willy till he passed away, with Alan I wrote, and I used to write to another fellow, but he couldn't write; his wife used to write, so I kept in touch with her till she passed away. And now the only one that is still around is Anne, Stan's wife, which is his second wife. She has a little hard time writing, so I call her on the phone and we have a nice chat over the phone. They all came to Israel; we had them and we took them around, and we planted a tree. There is Avenue of the Righteous in Israel, and we have a tree planted right near where there is from Denmark a big, big tall vase. So that's my mark, right near the vase, and there is a tree for the ten men. We had them in Israel, we took them around.

So, it was very nice, and I always think—I mean, how many people would do it, and whether people would risk ten people to save one person. I mean, I always say, “Would we do it?” I don't know. It's just—you know, one shouldn't be tested on that. You know, you don't know how you'll react. But I think what they did is something so brave and so nice and so good, so to me they are truly righteous people and they belong in the Avenue of the Righteous.

TL: Well, thank you very much. Thank you for sharing your story with us.

Part 3 ends; part 4 begins

TL: This is tape four. We are with Ms. Sara Hannah Matuson Rigler. I am Tori Lockler.

So, Ms. Rigler, if you will tell us now some about what you did after you came to the United States, and what your career has been, and some about your family life?

SR: Okay. Well, when I came, of course, I went to school. I thought maybe I'll go for medical school because I could get a scholarship, but it was a little bit too much, you know, studying and so on. So, I went back to the Jewish hospital in Brooklyn and I got another degree, my nursing degree. I became a nurse, and the day after I finished I got married. Of course, I mean, I was dating quite a bit because I didn't have money and I had to eat. So, my dates were my meal. I became very—I don't want to say aggressive, but I had a lot of dates because I didn't have any money. (laughs)

Then I was in the Jewish hospital in Brooklyn. I finished on the thirteenth of September; on the fourteenth of September, I got married. I lived with—first I lived in the hospital, and then, when I—where was it? I went to Rose's. I'm just trying to think in the sequence. While I was in school yet, I lived with my family. The dean from the high school—I didn't talk about her. Flora Shore from Midwood High School was very, very good to me, and she made sure that I ate every day. She used to buy for me lunch in the teachers' cafeteria, and that was Hannah's lunch, and it was always waiting for me. She said she felt at least assured that I had one meal a day, which was my lunch. And I lived in one place, and then I lived in a rooming house, and all the GIs were coming from the war.

I finished Midwood—in Midwood High School, the dean of the girls was absolutely wonderful to me, Flora Shore. Apparently, I did quite well in school, and I finished in February of forty-nine [1949]. I could go to Mount Sinai Hospital, but when I came to Mount Sinai with very good recommendations, the head nurse, who was German, said to me, "How come everybody was killed and you're alive?" And this was Mount Sinai Hospital, in New York. And she said, "We have a quota for Jewish nurses," and they didn't accept me.

So I waited another term, I went to Brooklyn College meanwhile in that term, and then I went to the Jewish hospital in Brooklyn—which was near Flora Shore, too, and I could go Fridays to her house. So, I had a home to go to, and I had Rose and her, so I felt very fortunate in a way. I was very lonesome, because most of the—all the girls there had families, in the hospital, and they would go to the family for the weekend. But I sort of made Rose and Flora my family. For the summer, I still went to my Uncle Joe to wait on tables, because I owed somebody money that I had to pay back.

I finished in September of fifty-two [1952]. I finished September 13, and I got married September 14 to Bill. Bill was a very nice guy, and I loved him, but he was poor. We didn't have an easy time of it—I mean, I'm talking about monetarily. He was a lawyer, but he was making \$25 a week. When we got married, his boss got us an apartment, which was \$75, and Bill says, "How am I gonna pay?" so he said, "Okay, I'll give you \$75 for the week" so we could pay the rent. It took a while. I made it sort of that I won't buy anything on time. We only buy what we can afford. And we had to help Bill's parents, and that was—it's not that Bill asked me, but I felt this was obligation. He had very, very nice parents.

And then I finished school and I went to—in the nursing school I started working as a nurse, first in a school, and then I gave birth to Lionel and then to Gail. But somehow or other, I got involved also in the community, in the PTA and other organizations, and I said, "Let's see what one person can accomplish or do." I got involved with Soviet Jewry [Movement], because at the time, we wanted to get out—the Russians were jailing the Jewish—they were prisoners of conscience, actually. It was Ida Nudel and [Natan] Sharansky, who is now an official in Israel. So we marched for them, and we used to go in the middle of the night and travel to Washington in the middle of the night and go around the White House and protest. We had Bella Abzug helped us, and then Liz Holtzman, and there were other—oh, God, he was a Senator; he was very, very active; I think from the State of Washington. But we had good people.

I got in and I sort of liked politics. It was an interchange with people, and in politics you really can accomplish a lot, because you're not one person, you're representing a whole group. And I found myself that I was pretty good at it. Eventually, I ran for district leader, and I became district leader in Brooklyn, for the 44th Assembly District. I represented—I think I had 40,000 or 45,000 constituents. I really—I was good at it.

I always say, "Just point me in the right direction; as long as I have the direction, I'll get there." And we did quite a bit, because our neighborhood was going down. We had many boarded-up houses. We went and we got—it was—we rejuvenated Brooklyn, which was really going down the drain. You know, there are shortcuts in everything. I knew the—he was the planner for New York, and we got somebody's plan and we used somebody's plan, and we got it done. I mean, Brooklyn was going to the dogs. We had houses that were completely boarded up, and people were leaving in droves. And then we started rejuvenating, just street by street, and it's really started flourishing.

We started the Flatbush Development Corporation, which is now over thirty years in existence; it still exists, and it helps people with housing another things. So, it was a very nice accomplishment, and you feel good about it because you do something really worthwhile. And then we had kids that didn't have room to study, mostly minorities, so we opened up our club to the kids. We called it—and the lady that was like in her

nineties, Hazel Weeks, so we called it the Hazel Weeks Academy. We gave her the honor for that. We used to have teachers and kids from college helping kids with homework right after school, so that they had a place to go. We used the club, we used our club.

And I started the first senior citizens' center in Brooklyn, which was sort of a coincidence because I was walking, and a man said to me—oh, we had our club, and I said to the people, “You know, I'll buy you a coffeepot. You put in money for a Danish, and you come and you socialize and play cards or something.” So, I'm standing on the street corner or something, I don't know, and somebody said to me, “Where's that card game going?” I said, “The card game? I don't know,” and he gives me the address of our club. And I said, “A card game?” I go up, they are gambling, so I call my assemblyman. I said, “Mel, they're going to arrest us. They are gambling in our club!” (laughs) And this is when we got the first—and our temple needed money, so I went down and I said, “Would you like to have a senior citizens' center? You'll get money from the city,” and I made—we call it in Hebrew, in Jewish, the *shidduch*, made the marriage. And we opened up the first senior citizens' [center] in the synagogue. I knew a woman that was a district leader, and she wanted to become the head of it. Her name is Lenore Friedman; I think I write about her in the book. And Lenore is now in charge of all the senior citizen clubs in Brooklyn.

So we started something and we gentrified Brooklyn, and it was very nice that they are still in existence and going on now after thirty years or something. So, that was one of them, and then the Soviet Jewry brought out Sharansky and Ida Nudel, and we opened up the gates for other people. I ran the—we called it the March of the White Flowers. We made white flowers to bring out the Soviet Jews. So, it was little things.

And as district leader, you can really accomplish things if you're not looking for yourself, you know, because we really had some bad issues—the housing was going down—and we really did a lot of coming back, sort of. We opened up places, and it's very satisfying—I don't know, not satisfying, but you feel good that you had a hand in something that was very positive. Did homework with the kids. I mean, now it's somehow or other they have more of it, but we were sort of like novices, okay. And you meet a lot of people, and as a district leader, you know, you represent 40,000. It's a large constituency, and you say, “Look, I represent so many people. That's what we need; that's what we want.” So, that was good.

And then I went back to school and I got my bachelor's degree, and then I got my master's degree. One of the professors said, “You should get your master's.” I said, “I have enough with the bachelor's.” He said, “No, get your master's,” so I got my master's degree. I went to work for the Board of Education. That's when they started the PSATs, so I was the first one to deal with the PSATs. Being that I was a district leader and I knew everybody in Albany, I represented the thirty-two districts, because in New York we have

thirty-two districts. So, I was working on the PSATs, and then I went in and I was doing—I was feeding homeless people from the Board of Education, so I did all the contracts for the homeless and the senior citizens and the daycare centers. I went to check the schools for the food.

They called me, they're checking—what did they call me? They had a name for me, because—the tasting. “The tasting supervisor is coming,” because I used to go into the school and say, “How is the chicken nuggets today?” She said, “You think I would eat that so-so-so?” I said, “You wouldn't eat something and you're feeding my kids?” (laughs) “You're feeding my kids? Let me taste it.” I said, “It's really good; you should taste it, and that's what you're feeding my kids. So, just remember.” So they used to call around and say, “The tasting supervisor is going around.” I sort of tried to make it so that it would also be a little fun for me, what I'm doing.

So I finished up there, and only—I couldn't get a raise, though, because all the wages were frozen. But this is what they called me, the tasting supervisor. I think I worked for the Board of Education for fifteen years, and I really wouldn't have a pension if not for my friend that said, “Don't you think?”—her name is Edith Everett. “Don't you think it's about enough for you to work for nothing? How about working?” So I started out, I think I was making \$18,000 a year. They froze the things. But it's very nice to getting your pension once a month; it comes in very handy. Each time I get my pension, I call Edith, I say, “Edith, because of you I'm getting my pension.”

And I made two very good friends, Edith and Lottie Nola that I met on a trip to Washington. We were going for the Soviet Jews, because we used to go in the middle of the night, meet someplace, and then go to Washington and march around the White House. “Let out the Soviet”—not the Jews, but the people that were incarcerated, like Sharansky and Ida Nudel and people like that. So on the way going, she told me her life story, Lottie, and on the way back I told her my life story. We talk to each other twice a day, every day. It's more than a friendship; it's almost like family. So, it's what you make with your life, you know, from things. I like people that are genuine, that are real and good people. So, that's how you pick your friends, because I don't have family, but my friends became my family.

What else you want me to—?

TL: Well, maybe before we finish up, do you want to tell us a little bit about your grandchildren?

SR: Okay. My daughter got married a little bit late, (laughs) but we have two grandchildren. One is Matthew. I think he's Matthew from my maiden name, Matuson. And my daughter's named from my mother; my mother's name was Gita, but she's Gail. And Lionel Samuel is named for my father; my father's name was Samuel Lionel, so he's Lionel. At that time, I didn't want Samuel. Now he said, "Why didn't you name me Samuel? I love it!" So, I said, "Switch it!" The grandchildren, one is twelve and one is fourteen, and they are good, good kids. My daughter is doing a wonderful job with them. She is—they go to homeless shelters and work, and they work with kids that have issues. They go and help them bowl and go with them. So, my daughter is doing really a good job with the kids, which I'm very proud of.

And Lionel is married to—she's married to a very nice man. As a matter of fact, tomorrow is her anniversary: she'll be married sixteen years. And our son is married to a lovely woman who works with—I think with mothers and children with problems. She's in Yale; she has a Ph.D.; she's a professor there, also with problem children or families. And our son, Lionel, has a law degree and another degree, but he's trying now to place homeless people in Hartford, Connecticut, into homes. He'll take on all kinds of issues. He once worked for the miners in West Virginia. They said, "How does he know about miners?" so he went down to the shafts to see what it's like. And then if anybody got sick or something, he took them into his house (laughs) and they stayed there. So, this is our two kids, Lionel and Gail. We take great pride in both of them, and of course the grandkids are good kids.

You know, what else?

TL: Well, I guess my last question—I don't want to put you on the spot, but do you have any last words for the next generation?

SR: Well, I'd like to quote my father, where he said, "If you do something for somebody"—I don't know whether I said it before—"you really are not doing it for them; you're really doing it for yourself, because you feel good about it that you did something worthwhile." Hopefully, if there is somebody that I can help or something, I really feel good about it, that I have that much—I don't want to say influence or power, but that I can do something nice for somebody. It's really doing it for yourself; it's not doing it for them.

And of course, I have never lied in my life, because my mother used to say that a lie has short legs; it comes out, because if you tell the truth it's always the same thing. And my mother had all kinds of sayings. What I remembered I wrote it down, because she had such wonderful sayings. I mention her quite often. I feel very bad about my sister, very bad. I even once had a dream that I gave her my husband. I said, "You know, he's a good

man, and he'll be good to you. I can always get another one." And I think about her very often, and as you know, I took her name. I think about her, as I said, very often, what it would have been like.

The last—what I can leave is that I really feel that you can do almost, I mean, whatever you want. I mean, like I would like to sing. I don't have a voice; I can't sing. But if you set yourself and you have a destination and you know where you're going, you really can accomplish maybe not the best, but I think you can accomplish whatever you set yourself out to do, and then you get the satisfaction that you did it. As my mother used to say, we have two eyes. With one eye, we look up; it can always be better. And with one eye, we look down; it can always be worse. It's really you have to find the best in everybody and in everything. I'm still working on it, but you try to. It's just as long as you have good health. I mean, that's the only thing I ask for is good health, so that I can carry on.

People shouldn't be discouraged. I mean, not everybody's a genius or something, but there is something that somebody can always do; even if you go and you help somebody across the street, you already did a good deed for somebody that has difficulty in walking. Or carrying something: you helped them. It's not big things, but in small things, that you can really do, and you feel good about it when you go to sleep. You say, "You know, it was a nice day. I did this for this one." Not just for yourself, but for somebody else. And I think by giving of yourself to somebody, you receive. You really feel good about it.

I had a surprise last year. They honored me as the alumna for Brooklyn College. They called me up, they said they read my book, and they chose me to be an alumna. I really didn't expect that at all, but somebody read my book and she thought that I should be honored as an alumna of Brooklyn College. That was an unexpected honor, sort of.

TL: That's wonderful.

SR: Yeah. So, anything else?

TL: I think that's everything. Again, thank you so much for sharing your story and opening your life to us.

SR: Okay.

TL: Thank you.

SR: You're welcome. I hope many people listen to it and can learn a little something and benefit from it. I really hope so, because it's easy for me to talk, but I feel if I'm not gonna talk, who was there—somebody can say, "I heard it. I know about it," but I was there. So, I think it's very important for survivors to share whatever they went through so that people can know about it, because atrocities like this, they're happening right now in Darfur and others. But I feel Darfur is terrible, but it's your own people are doing it to you. And this, this was done by somebody else. But this is—somebody becomes heard, and I think he or she should be so happy to be heard and do something for their own people, to help them. I can't understand—I mean, how much money can you amass, or how much can you—what are you gonna do with it? You gonna take it with you to the grave? I can't understand that. And this, to me, is always such a—I just cannot fathom, and I can't understand that, that anybody could be like that. I mean, I would be so happy to get elected and just do something for my own people and feel satisfaction.

TL: Thank you.

SR: Okay.

End of interview