Rubin Sztajer (2004)
Interview 1

Interviewers: Andria Scott, Shana Lieberman, David Harazduk

Andria Scott: This is going to be interview 1 of 3. This is going to be our pre-war interview and he has signed the consent form and it is February 22nd, 2004.

Shana Lieberman: Okay, so I’m Shana. I’m doing the pre-war interview and today is actually the 23rd, not the—okay, so we’re going to need you, for the camera, to state your name and all of that.

Rubin Sztajer: Right. My name is Rubin Sztajer, and I was born in Poland. I was born on February 28th, 1926 in a little town called Klobuck. It’s the southwestern part of Poland.

SL: Okay. What was it like there, what were your parents like, what were their names?

RS: My parents’ name was Izhrak, Isaac here. My mother’s name was Hendel. And I and we were 3 brothers and 3 sisters, and my memory goes back way back. It goes back, I would say about 75, 76 years ago remembering not pleasant moments. Not pleasant times, but a lot of sad and hard times. And the reason why I say that is because I go back when I was 7. I remember when I was sitting on my father’s lap on Passover and we conducted the Seder. Someone threw a rock through the window. It was a very common thing for kids, Polish kids—Christians, that is—to throw rocks at us. We were very, very good targets. I was brought up with it. I lived with it. I think some would say I breathed that stuff, and since that stuff don’t go away that easily, they stay with it, it—with me, would stay all my life. I come from a very poor home. Food was something that—we were raised practically on, I would say, bread and potatoes. A piece of meat was a luxury. A piece of cake was a luxury and candy, once in a while I had got a candy.

SL: What kind did you like?

RS: Candy?

SL: You don’t remember? Okay.

RS: Any kind of candy was—tasted good, didn’t matter. I wasn’t very particular yet about what kind of candy, as long as I could get it.

SL: I know how that is. [laughs]
Rubin Sztajer Interview 1

RS: My father had all different kids of jobs. He ran a Mikveh, which is a ritual bath that the Jewish people, before the Sabbath, they go and just like—it has to be water that is filtered from a well, not from pipes like we have it here, and what they do is they go and get into it and just like, submerge 3 times and that makes them like, they’re cleansed for the Sabbath. Women do that, too, and you know, so he ran that on Fridays. Thursdays, he went out and he caught fish. Unlike here, where you go and you throw a fish rod and you catch a fish or a net, and it’s usually in oceans, in large waters. There, we had a lot of ponds and we used to go there on Thursday and used to catch those fish, primarily cod. Was very popular, and he brought them home and set them on a string and made sure that those fish are alive. Once they died, they were half price. Here, we don’t buy live fish. We buy them after they’re dead. There, they had to be live. And then Friday morning, my mother was selling it, and my father was at the ritual bath [indistinct].

During the week, he did all kinds of jobs to earn us money and keep us going. I started school—Hebrew school when I was 5 years old. It was, for me, the whole time throughout my—before the war began, it was school, school and school. Morning, noon and night. Every day from the first 3 grades, I had public school in the afternoon and Hebrew school in the morning. And after the 4th, 5th and 6th grades, it reversed. Public school in morning and Hebrew school in afternoon. Some days, when there was no public school, we had Hebrew school all day.

SL: Okay.

RS: So really, there was never any time when we could go out and play. Matter of fact, I still don’t know how to swim because, first of all, there was no waters to go out to, no swimming pools, and even I had to, there was no place to go. We have a little stream, maybe 6-8 feet wide and somewhere else was even less. So I remember when I was a little boy, maybe 6-8, we used to go in there and used to—whenever we had a little time and just go in there, took our clothes off and just went in and came out. The clothes that I had—unlike here, clothes were always made, custom-made. The tailor made the suits, the shoe maker the shoes and then there was a… shirts were handmade, everything was handmade, and in order for me to get the piece of clothes after I was about 8, 9 years old, I had to earn it. I had to go out and push carts. The merchants, they needed some flours—a bag of flours. I went to the mill and got a bag of flours and pushed the cart around, and brought it and used to get a nickel or a dime. And I saved it to have some money. In the summer time—actually, around Passover, which is April-May, I took off my shoes and didn’t wear them at all except for the Sabbath because you have to wear shoes. That’s how we lived.

Life was a very very hard thing in the small town. There were some people that had their little, had a lot better than I did, but for me it was, it wasn’t easy. We had a reunion for my town in Miami beach about 22 years ago and we got together, of course, because we hadn’t seen each other for so many years. We were little. When the war broke out, I was 13. And there were 2 girls and we introduced ourselves, “I’m so and so from...” and there were 2 sisters and they said,
“We are”—I forgot the name—“we are from”—we had that little ice cream stand and when she says, “The kids used to come there, their tongues used to hang out,” and I was one of those kids because ice cream was one of those things I didn’t get. A fruit, if I saw a tree and was lucky enough fruit fell down, I got it. My parents couldn’t afford it. We take a lot of things here for granted. We don’t know any more what poverty is. Back there, we went to the farmer and got the milk. Because of dietary laws, we use our own pots and we brought home the milk and our mother boiled it and then we took—skimmed off the top and use that for butter. When I hear people talk about poverty, I say them—I say, “They don’t know what poverty is.” Really, it’s…

At 7 years old, I started public school. Being in Poland, we started at 7. Here, it’s 6. I never walked to school because, again, they taught Christian kids to throw rocks. They would do it when I walked. All the Jews lived in the urban area because of the being afraid to live in the outskirts where we would be even bigger targets for them, whether to harass us or bring us down or beat us or throw rocks or whatever. We lived among us, our own, and felt a little safer. Every home had [chalice?] because, again, for fear they might throw rocks through the window and such. And it was permissible. The police looked away. There wasn’t a law that you didn’t do it like the Nazis had. But, if I went to complain, I complain to that policeman saying this kid threw the rocks.

And when I started school every day, I didn’t walk. I ran, because I was in the outskirts of town of village, sort of, and once I got into the classroom, I would never leave because—we did not have indoor plumbing, we had outhouses and we did not have any paved playgrounds. They were dirt playgrounds, and if I would go out onto either, they would throw a handful of dirt in my face or a rock or something, so I was scared to go out. Once I got in that classroom, no matter how badly I needed to go, I would never go out. And then after class, there was just a—you could see the Jewish kids were the first ones to get out and run, run home. I don’t know, it’s a—it was tough. It was tough.

SL: So was everyone pretty much separated? There wasn’t really anybody that actually—for lack of a better way to say it—knew how to act towards Jewish people, was there anybody who was actually kind and friends with the Jews?

RS: I’m not saying they were all that way. Unfortunately, I never met one.

SL: No?

RS: I’m sure that there were some that didn’t carry on that way. Some maybe had some sympathy, but I never met one. I cannot go and say there were, but I cannot go and say there weren’t either.

SL: Right, yeah.

RS: So, I don’t want to lump everybody in—paint them with the stroke of one brush.
SL: Right.

RS: But I don’t know of any.

SL: Okay, so when you did go outside and have a bit of free time, what did you do?

RS: I didn’t have time.

SL: Not at all?

RS: Never. Never any time. The only time we had was Saturday afternoon, but if you’re observant, you cannot do a lot. You cannot go out and play, which is forbidden. The Jewish religion forbids you to do anything that that isn’t... anything that’s work, and playing is work. And we went out and went out and my parents took a nap in the afternoon because they... the week, they worked very, very hard and didn’t have any time. And on Saturday afternoon after we had dinner, came home from the synagogue and my parents came home, I went to Hebrew school. I came home, we had dinner, and then we went out a little bit and they were—they, they took a nap.

And we lived in a home—in the beginning, kind of a new house—and I remember, I was a little boy, we had one room. I didn’t know how many were there. We were born already then, but before the war, our apartment was 2 rooms. My whole childhood, I never had my own room. I never slept... had my own bed. We were teamed up—paired up, 2 of us. I was always sleeping with my father and my 2 brothers together, one of my sisters and mother and 2 sisters. We had 2 rooms and 4 beds, and we did not have mattresses like we have here. Matter of fact, even today whenever I go into bed as I do every night, I just stretch out and pull the covers up to my chin and just feel and stretch out and feel so good about it. That’s something I never had for so many years. Especially during the war.

SL: Yeah.

RS: So, I know my father used to come in Friday night after we had dinner. Came from the services... he had these stoves made out of tile and what they did, we put in some, we heated, we burned some coal and put the coal in and then closed it tight so it just smoldered for quite a while and they used to—the tile used to warm up and that’s how we heated up the rooms. So he used to sit there for an hour or 2 or whatever and that was his only pleasure, probably. Only relaxation that he had. He used to sit there and just have a little shot of vodka and sit and just warm his bones, and it was something that he did every Friday night.

SL: So your family was very religious?

RS: Yes, we were very religious. We had a—my parents were very, very observant. Are you Jewish, anybody?

SL: Yeah. [AS makes nonverbal response.]
RS: You're not? I didn’t think so. [laughter] But anyway, I’m just asking, you know. Religious. Food that we have here in the stores, even with the K and the U and all of that, my parents would never eat. It wasn’t kosher enough.

SL: Wow.

RS: Do I need to tell you any more? They were very observant and they observed to a T. Before Passover, it took my mother about 6 weeks to clean the rooms, make sure there’s no chametz.

And I don’t know, it’s... the memories I have from childhood, having parents, caring, good-loving parents... but other than that, there was really nothing I could really say something great happened to me. Never played with—toys were nonexistent. We had 1 bike and my older brother, he was in charge, so in order to get permission from him, I could have gotten too close to God in getting him to allow me to ride the bike. I don’t know, it’s... I’ve never done that—talk about my childhood. I’m much better at talking about—‘cause I’ve done it so many times—about the war years. Either when you consider the childhood before the war or for as long as I was home with my family at home together, but I really can’t say that there was a childhood, and I don’t mean—my parents did everything they could with what they had. Unfortunately, we didn't have much, had very little. And there’s so many things that kids here take for granted. I wish that I could go into every child’s mind and tell them how lucky they are, how fortunate they are, not only being born here, but also having what they have. It is unbelievable.

SL: You say you had 3 brothers and 3 sisters, did you say?

RS: We were 3 brothers and sisters.

SL: Okay, what were they—

RS: My father was born in 1900. I don’t know the date. My mother was born in 1902. In Europe, we were all born in homes and we had midwives and what happened there was that the—where I come from—and what happened there is the parents, after they had their families established, they went down to city hall and registered. And what I said like in the beginning… I had 3 birthdays. I thought my birthday was February 28th, 1926, which makes me 78 at the end of this month. Matter of fact, it’s this next weekend. I went back to Europe and found the birth certificate. “Born January 25th, 1925.” I can’t be that birthday, because my sister was born in ’24. We’re all 2 years apart, and then after the war, my brother made me younger. He said being 19—he made me 16 because I was as close to dying as anyone could be and still be here to talk about it. He made me younger so I could be a—get some medical assistance. So he made me October 1st, 1928. So whenever anybody says, “When you born?” I always tell them, “Whenever you want to, I have a birthday coming up, you can give me a present.” [laughter]

So, with social security, I’m older. With my driver’s license, I’m younger, and somewhere between, I’m the right birthday, so... but, it’s only a birthday.
SL: Interesting. Did you have a favorite holiday?

RS: A favorite holiday... it’s customary in Jewish religion that, for Passover, you get a new garment and Rosh Hashanah, New Year’s—Jewish New Year’s, you get a new garment of some sort. It makes you feel that you are—I don’t know, makes you feel good. It’s a custom, a tradition. Not here. Here, you go out and buy something when you need it. We could not do that. We bought when we had the little money or just to have so that we could be able to show our friends or neighbors that we are somehow... not of age, but in style.

A favorite holiday would be Hanukkah because you got a little gift, and it wasn’t a gift like here, it wasn’t toys or money or, maybe, money candy. And we used to sit there and play the dreidel. I’ll explain later what a dreidel is.

SL: Oh, I know what it is. [laughs] I’ve got one in my coat pocket right now that I never put away since then.

RS: Ours were the Hebrew, the Hebrew letters only. So it’s... but, that’s about the only time we had—in terms of customary, you know in Poland, which is coming up, you give gifts. And there were a lot of dirty tricks played on that holiday of giving gifts. If you didn’t like someone, what you did—and I know people who’ve done it—what you did was take a box and put a couple mice in it and send it over. [laughs] They open up the box and boom! There was a little humor, too. There was a lot of humor, too, because we didn’t know any better.

What we did not have—which is important—we did not have the communications that we have here today. We—I had not seen a newspaper until after the war. I didn’t know what that meant. There was one radio in town and when the war broke out, we went to listen to the radio—it was a drugstore, we had one drugstore, and he had a speaker outside and we listened to it. I didn’t, but anybody that wanted to.

We did not have any indoor plumbing. It was outhouses. We had one bulb in each room, a little bulb, and that only—we got that around 19—I don’t know, I guess 1936, ’37. Before that, we had these lanterns with kerosene. We did not have any gas as we have here, and we, of course, there were no cars. There were a couple buses in town that I know that they used to go from one city to the other, but mainly we used to have these horse and wagons and people used to get one and get from one place to the other as transportation. In the winter, there were no cars, no nothing. No buses. There was only horse and wagon or sleigh. We used to transport with that a lot. I don’t know what else I can talk about. Have any other questions?

SL: We’ve got a lot. What were your brothers’ and sisters’ names and birthdays?

RS: My—I don’t know their birthdays. I know the years. My brother was… we were all years apart. My brother was born in 1922, his name is Sam—English name is Sam. My sister is alive and is in Florida now. My sister’s name is Gussie. She’s ‘24. Matter of fact, we’re so close
together, our birthdays, we know—we think we do, mine’s February 28th, hers is March, March the 1st. This year, it’s 2 days apart, but otherwise it’s one day—I mean, 2 days. This year and otherwise, it’s 1 day apart but 2 years different. Then I had a brother of mine, he was born in 1928, his name is—I guess would be Joseph. Hebrew name is Yosef. And then I had a sister. She was born in 1930 and one in 1932. They’re over there in pictures. Bring the pictures up. Bring that over, I want to just show you. Take that, that off. [David Harazduk gets up, grabs framed picture from wall and gives it to RS]

Here are the pictures of my parents. These are the last pictures, the only thing I have… any visual thing, and my 2 sisters and 1 and my 2 younger sisters and my younger brother. In all, 5 perished in the Holocaust. My father was 42 the last time I saw him. My mother was 40. And my younger brother was 14, and the 2 sisters were 12 and 10.

SL: Let’s see. [indistinct] What were your sisters’ names again? Did you tell us their names?

RS: Gussie, and the 2 little ones, I didn’t. One was Charnia, C-H-A-R-N-I-A, and the little one was Brandl, B-R-A-N-D-L, something like that. It’s a Jewish name and...

SL: Okay. So you went to both Hebrew school and public school?

RS: Yes.

SL: Okay.

RS: I went to Hebrew school and public school and both of them ended for me in 1939 when the war broke out.

SL: Okay.

RS: I did not—I, that was when my education ended. In Poland, it wasn't like here you—

[tape skips]

RS: —education was very important. It was not in those days. My parents planned for me when I was probably born. My brother, my older brother, was a tailor. He, he studied tailoring. I was supposed to be a furrier. They were hoping someday we could both merge and open up a little business, and my younger brother was in shoemaking—of course, he never had the opportunity. None of us did. Parents planned, but somehow it never worked out… I don't know.

SL: Did you have any friends in the neighborhood?

RS: I had some friends, but they weren’t like... again, here, you, you have time to go out to do things with friends. Yes, I had some friends, but it was more of a… acquaintances, because we never had time to spend time together. We didn’t play. The only thing we used to do was go to each other’s room and do some homework. And we would play a little then because with a
Hebrew one and a public school, we always had homework. We didn’t come home—I didn’t come home. Some days, Hebrew school started from 8 to 10. Came home, [technical glitch] had an hour, we had dinner—in Europe, dinner is noon time, lunch time, unlike here. It’s better because you don’t go to sleep but have a full stomach. And then we went back to Hebrew school till 3:30 and didn’t get home until 7:00. So what time did you have, we have, there was no time.

And then Monday morning, both Hebrew and Public school. We did not have any Hebrew school on Friday but we did have some on Saturday and always Sunday. So our schedule was always full of learning, studying, and Hebrew school wasn’t easy, of course, no school is easy. But, when you have to have 2 of them, you have a lot of homework, and we didn’t have computers.

**SL:** Uh oh.

**RS:** [laughs] So, but, somehow we managed. We survived. That isn’t the big city, it was the small city. Big city was a different life. There were more—there were people, some professionals, there were a lot of merchants, and there were a… there wasn’t as much poverty in the big city as there was in the small town. It was a bigger variety of places that you could go and find work, where in the small town, you were very limited. So we had, so—my father, he had no profession. He had to take whatever was available to him and there wasn’t much of anything.

**SL:** Did you feel like there—that you liked Hebrew school or public school, one of them better than the other, or were they just kind of...?

**RS:** I don’t remember. I remember it was instilled in us—education—that when we were born that—my parents planned, as I did with my children. They were born and I planned for them what they learned to do. They’re gonna get an education. And when they are finished high school they are going—