Bluma Shapiro (2005)
Interview 1

Interviewers: Kathleen Andersen, Rachel Mirsky, Sam Miller

Kathleen Andersen: This is Bluma Shapiro. Of course, you know I'm Kathleen, and thank you very much for letting us come here and talk to you today. And could you tell us your name, when you were born?

Bluma Shapiro: My name was exactly the same, Bluma. My maiden name is Erenkranc, E-R-E-N-K-R-A-N-C.

KA: I'm sorry. Can you spell that for me again?

BS: E-R-E-N-K-R-A-N-C.

KA: Thank you. And where were you born?

BS: In Bialystok, Poland, Bialystok.

KA: Bialystok.


KA: Okay. And you were born in what year?

BS: 1923.

KA: And what was Bialystok like when you were little?

BS: Well, Bialystok had 100,000 inhabitants of which fifty percent were Jewish, and it was scattered all over the city. And it was a textile center, the second biggest textile center in Poland, and it was on a route between Germany and Russia because they had to pass through Bialystok. That’s why it developed so much as a textile center. There were a lot of working people because of the textile center. There were many factories producing leather and all kind of different kinds of work, a very well organized workers’ union because of those centers that were there. And the city was, as I say, fifty percent Jewish, but it had a very remarkable Jewish appearance. Jews were very active there and there were many schools, of course. There was even a Jewish gymnasium. It was a rare thing in Poland at that time, which, by the way, later was closed, but while I was growing up, it was still there. It had many schools and many youth organizations. There was no television of course--don’t forget at the time--so we'd spend our time in different
kinds of organizations, very much Zionistic, you know. And of course there were others as well--
Socialist parties and Communist parties. It was illegal, but it still existed because of the workers.

KA: The organizations for the Communist party were illegal?

BS: It was illegal. In Poland, it was illegal. In my time, it was illegal. And well, that's about, you see the character of the city was a very nice city, a lot of greenery, a lot of parks. There was museums. There were a lot of hospitals, very good ones, very famous doctors, especially ophthalmologists. From the little towns surrounding Bialystok would come and be attended by the doctors. And, as I said, parks and very, theaters, and even an opera. Of course, it wasn't a steady play, but we had operas that showed and gym. It was surrounded by a beautiful forest and the youngsters very often, you know, would play cooties, who's cool.

KA: [laughs]

BS: And we'd go to the forest. Does this give you a picture of the city?

KA: Yes.

BS: It was called Bialystok because there was a so-called river in quotation marks. It was a little thing.

KA: [laughs]

BS: And it was called Bialy, so it was Bialystok, you know, was that river. And it's just--it was surrounded, as I say by little towns and the youth really, it was little town and villages would come to the schools in Bialystok, so we had a lot of influx from the surrounding cities, the towns rather, and villages.

KA: When you were growing up, did you have brothers and sisters?

BS: I had five, we were five siblings. I had a sister and three brothers, and they all passed. I was the youngest one and a little spoiled because--I'll give you the picture because my youngest sibling, my youngest brother was 13 years my senior.

KA: Wow.

BS: So can you imagine that at six I became an aunt?

KA: Wow.
BS: My oldest brother got married and he had a baby, so I became an aunt, and my friends used to tease me, you know, "Bluma's an aunt."

KA: [laughs]

BS: But we were a very close-knit family. Of course, none of them lived together with my parents. When they got married, they had their own places and they had children already, and as I said, none of them survived. And you want to know what my father was doing? My father was a partner in a small bank with some more independent people, you know, and that's what they were running. My brothers were--one of them worked for the government doing numbers with my husband, with my father, and my youngest brother was very religious. See, he was also running a store, but it was selling yeast, so he was the manager of that, and my sister, of course, had no occupation. She got married, and she got married to a young man whom she was very much in love with, I have to say, and he was an engineer mechanic.

KA: How many nieces and nephews did you have?

BS: I had--my oldest brother had two children, a boy and a girl. My middle brother, my loving brother, had one girl. My sister had a boy, and my youngest brother didn't live to see his child born. He was born after he was drafted into the army and he never returned, and that child died in the ghetto.

KA: Did you actually go to school with your nieces and nephews? They were kind of close in age.

BS: Yes, as a matter of fact, as a matter of fact, my oldest niece went to the same school that I went and again, was all kids would see she's, like it was when you were a very good student, your name was on that, was advertised on the board, and he says, "Look, aren't you ashamed? Your niece is the best student in the--"

KA: [laughs]

BS: But, yes, so this is--we were for two years actually, I was with my oldest niece in the same school known as [Polish name]

KA: Did you like school?

BS: I liked some subjects very much, you know, when I liked the teacher.
**KA:** [laughs]

**BS:** Yes, I, I was very much inclined for science subjects. You know, when I was in the fourth--it would be here like in the tenth grade--and then the school had changed. The last two years--we had school six years and six more, twelve years of schooling. So six years was like elementary and then it was like middle school and then was high school, so the last years of high school was changed and became like a [can't understand] you know. You will call it probably college preparatory schools. So those two years, the last two years, you could choose. You have humanistic subjects or science subjects. I went into science subjects. My aim was to become a chemistry engineer, you know. Of course, I never got to because the war interfered. So I liked, I liked very much physics, chemistry, math and languages. So we had, in school we had Hebrew and German and Latin besides Polish which was the main language spoken, the language.

**KA:** Did your family speak Polish at home?

**BS:** No. We spoke Yiddish at home, but I spoke more Polish, you know, because with children, with my friends and so forth, but in the house we spoke Yiddish. You know, Bialystok is located in the east part of Poland and the Jews in that part of Poland were occupied until the First World War by the Russians, so they spoke more Russian than Polish. And I'll tell you a little--it was an anecdote. Maybe it was the truth. Our mayor of the city used to say his heart breaks when he hears on the streets of Bialystok spoken Russian because the older generation, that's what they were taught, so they spoke Russian. So their Polish was not so very good, almost as bad as my English, but it was okay.

**KA:** But they didn't teach Russian in school.

**BS:** No. Oh, no. You know, it's a terrible antagonism between the Russians and Poles. If Poles would rather German than Russians even, especially Communist Russians, and through most of its history, Poland was occupied the Russians, this eastern part especially, so there wasn't a great love between the Poles and the Russians. Not there and not later. I mean I was growing up when there was a Communist regime. It was the Soviet Union and there was no great love between them, really not. And in 1940, 1939 when there was that pact between Hitler and Stalin, my part of Poland was occupied by the Soviet Union, the Red Army, and yes, they liberated us from everything we had. There was the liberation, you know. My father lost his business and everything just--life changed completely and then, as I say, my brother that I loved so much, he was arrested because he was too weak for the blood. He was sent up to Siberia. I will come to it. I will tell you about it.

**KA:** Your mom and dad, what do you remember most about being a little girl and being with them?
BS: My father was very, very touchy about me, you know. I'll tell you, when I was coming, I was very active always my life. I couldn't sit still, you know. So when I would come from school sometimes and just lay down, so my father would say to mom, "Something is wrong. Something's wrong with the child. She's laying down," you know.

KA: [laughs]

BS: So he was very, very devoted father and we went, you know, you would call it now Modern Orthodox. We went extremely Orthodox, but Modern Orthodox, everything, and he was a very devoted father and so was mother, too. We were very close, the whole family. Even my sisters-in-law, brother-in-law, we were very, very close. The children, you know, I remember that when my sister-in-law, my oldest sister-in-law, would say that she'd rather go shopping with my mother than with her own mother. So it was a very close-knit family, as I said, and I remember the holidays at home when we conducted [can't understand] Sometimes we had guests as well, and he was always, you felt that you've been taken care of. You felt it, you know. It was just like tangible, the care that your friends gave you. And we were controlled, much more than the youngsters are nowadays. We had the curfew. We had to be home in time. We could not entertain boys in the house. Neither could we go to visit in their houses, you know, so it was always in groups. I think I had a very happy life, very, what have you. Maybe when you're young, you know, you always, and then, as I said, there was no pressure of some sort. The only pressure you had was school, and then the entertainment that we had, were exposed to, was movies, theater, and in school you have dances. I didn't invite--it was a coed, the school that I had attended, yet you would invite some students from other schools as well and mingle with them. They would be invited as well. And then the organizations, very, very active. The youth in Bialystok was very active in different kinds of organizations--Zionist organizations.

KA: Was it a private school?

BS: My school is a private school, yes. It was a private school. It was hard for Jewish children to attend government schools. It had to be a very, part because it was free, so your income was then controlled, but it was really hard, unable to go into the private school, and secondly, we were Jewish. You know, in Poland it wasn't very pro-Jews, so there was a quota, and so most of the children could afford to, as a result, middle and upper class was going to private schools.

KA: So before the war in Poland you experienced personal things that--

BS: Anti-Semitism you mean?

KA: Mmm hmm.
BS: No, I personally did not. As a matter of fact, I had very close friends that weren't Jewish. I even, even went with my friends to church. You know, that's something special took place like, you know, you had christen, you christened your child or a wedding or G-d forbid a funeral, so I would go with them, not that my father approved of it, by the way.

KA: [laughs]

BS: But I was going because they were close friends of mine, and to-- I personally did not until 1936. In 1936, the Premier of Poland died, Kościelkowski, and he was a very, very tolerant man and, of course, in '36 was also the influence from Germany. Hitler was already in power, and that influenced the Poles against the Jews, of course, and we had different slogans and you don't buy from Jews and why couldn't the Jews and you--it starts to feel a little tight is the truth. However, as I say, I personally never felt it, you know, but I saw that happening. I did see it happening, yes.

KA: Did you have a best friend growing up?

BS: Did I have a best?

KA: Like a best girlfriend.

BS: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Definitely. Not only one. Two. Two, three, very close and even in the ghetto we stayed together and we had classes. Our professors, of course, were also Jewish and they were in the ghettos, so they arranged for us to come and study because we didn't finish. The war broke out and interfered with our finishing school, so, yes, we were, yeah, oh, yeah. Especially in the ghetto we became very, very close because there wasn't much to do, and we had to-- took walks afterwards, but on the weekends we would get together and I would-- Accommodations in the houses were very small. I'll give you an example, [can't understand] was in history. The apartment that I lived with my parents--there were three of us, right?--and when the ghetto was made and my sister and my sister-in-law and brother had to move from their places into the ghetto, so they come and live with us, so it was-- The living room was turned into a bedroom and all that stuff, so we used the ghetto, sleep in the beds and entertain ourselves, the young people.

KA: So the house that you grew up in when you were little became a part of the area that--

BS: Yes.

KA: --that they turned into the--
BS: Yes, the house that, in 1939 already we lived in this house, and in ’41 or ’42 it became part of the ghetto, our house, my parent's house, but not my siblings' houses, so my sister and brother-in-law and my brother and sister-in-law and my other brother and his wife, and even his wife's parents, had to move into the house. My oldest brother moved into his in-laws. Also, their place was—the place where they changed the place with no Jews, they gave them their apartment, their house. It was outside of the ghetto and they changed the house inside, so he stayed with them.

KA: So you had yourself and twelve adults and then all of those children.

BS: Well, that wasn't so bad yet because as the ghetto was taken, made smaller and smaller, people got taken out, and the streets of the ghetto were taken away, we had more people coming here, so in the end when the ghetto was liquidated, we had about 25 people in the same quarters.

KA: Wow! What was the house like when you were little?

BS: Well, we had, I had my room and it was a living room, a dining room and kitchen and two bedrooms, so it was, everything was converted and everyone was sleeping on the floors and so forth and so on while the ghetto was being closed so more people could come in and keep—the streets were taken away and that's, that's what it was. It was a certain amount of [can't understand] I don't remember how many millions was processed. It was a lot. So many [can't understand] So that's what it was.

KA: And it was '39 that they changed--

BS: ’39 the Soviet Union occupied this part of Poland.

KA: So the ghetto wasn't established?

BS: Oh, no, 1941, when the war between Germany and the Soviet Union broke out, the Germans occupied our city. It was September the 1st the war broke out. The Germans attacked Poland, and September the 8th they rode and marched into Bialystok and the Russians were out. So this is when all the stories have started. How the ghetto was built maybe a month later, or six weeks later. Then there was the proclamation that all the Jews have to be concentrated in a certain, in a certain part of the city which normally would house 10, 15,000 people, now 50,000 people were living in those, in that part of the city. Of course, it wasn't long that the 50,000 became smaller and smaller because there were different round ups and the people were taken out, you know, but this was it and then the ghetto was built, and of course the Jews had to provide war as well as material. And the ghetto was surrounded by a fence that was built [pause] a wooden fence. On top it was wires and they had two exits, entrances, in the ghetto. And it was a militia, Jewish militia, inside of the entrance.
KA: I'm sorry. A Jewish?

BS: Jewish militia man and I believe, a soldier outside of the ghetto always with a gun, with a machine gun. And as the ghetto was built, before the ghetto was built actually, already different kinds of restrictions took place as far as the Jews are concerned. So the first thing was, of course, the Jews were to wear the yellow star with the named Juden, Jew, front and back. If somebody was caught outside without it, he was shot on the spot and it happened. And you couldn't walk on the pavement. You had to walk in the middle of the streets. You couldn't go into the park. You couldn't see the--it was, there was an order said "Dogs and Jews are not allowed," you know. And we, and of course immediately there was a shortage of food. We were assigned very little rations, so in order to somehow supplement, we used to go out and work for the Germans in order to have some kind of contact with the non-Jewish populations, and would take out their tablecloth or pillow or anything else, you know, to exchange for some food in order to eat in the ghetto.

Also, people were working through the ghetto because some factories, textile factories and letter factories, remained within the ghetto, so people were working there already. And we were rather anxious to go out because of the contact with the non-Jewish population. And then when the ghettos closed and you couldn't go out anymore by yourself, you had to go in groups. So I was working in a group that was working in a painter's firm. The men, of course, with the paintings and the women would clean up afterwards, and we were both in a group accompanied by a soldier with a machine gun and dogs who were taught to kill, and they would bring us and take us back. So when we came back to the ghetto, you know, the Germans knew that we are smuggling in some food somehow, so very often you were searched at random. And two cases that I had witnessed was when we went into the ghetto and the German was searching one woman and she had some eggs in her underwear. Of course, she was found out. She was beaten, made to drink it, and they killed her right there and then. Another incident was when a man had some oil. It wasn't very small Mazola oil. They made him drink it. It was machine oil, and she was also killed there.

And at one time I came in. You know, they had organized a Jewish council. It was called the Union Rot, a Jewish council, in order to be [can't understand] Jewish population in the German occupants, so they needed workers and they, to the Jewish council. It was in the center of the ghetto. Remember, Soviet Jewish councils, they were all prominent Jews--rabbi, and the [can't understand] and so forth. And at one point, you know, I came back from work with my group and across from the Union Rot, from the Jewish Council Building, and when I inquired what is happening, three people were hanging, and they said they were caught with smuggling in some sunflower seeds. They were working in a plant. It was making oil from sunflower seeds, and they were caught with some of the sunflower seeds and this was the punishment.
And, of course, roundups comes. They took place in ghettos, I mentioned before, and they had people that were taken out on Wednesdays and on Thursdays, and then we had this special kind of-- 2,000 Jews were rounded up and taken out on a Saturday, called them the Saturday Jews, and this time they made it a little different because they asked for ransom. You give them the ransom, then the Jews will be free. Needless to say that anybody who had anything of value still, you know, like ring or bicycle or radio, whatever it was, brought it to the Jewish council in order to ransom the Jews. Well, the ransom was paid, but the Jews never returned. You know, like killed the same Saturday on the outskirts of the city. And such roundups took place constant. That's why the ghetto was less population and more people into the same quarter because as the population grew smaller, streets were taken off from the ghettos and made smaller and-- Well, I'm already in the ghetto. Is that what you wanted me to be talking about?

KA: Well, I don't mean to jump around, but I wanted to go back and ask again about when you were younger, if you don't mind, sorry.

BS: It's okay.

KA: I didn't mean to--

BS: It's fine. I'm very proud of my age because I wasn't supposed to be here, you know, and I'm still here.

KA: [laughs] Very thankful. When you were talking about being little and when you would come home from school then you would be tired and you would lay down, and your dad would be concerned about you. It sounds like you had a very special bond. Aside from just normal every day homework and those kinds of things, do you have special memories about things that the two of you got to do together?

BS: With my parents? Yes. Yes. Well, it's from the syna-- when the holidays come along, I would go to the synagogue with my father. Of course, it wasn't customary for women. Now all women go to the synagogues, too, you know, but it wasn't customary in Poland.

KA: So how did you get to do that?

BS: I just went with my father, not with my mother.

KA: Oh.
BS: I went with my father, ended up staying there with my father, and I liked it very much staying there. And my father was very respected there, you know.

KA: So it was the custom that the women didn't go?

BS: No. Not like here that every Saturday the women go and the sisterhoods, you know. It wasn't that. No. The women would go only on the high holidays or when there was a memorial of somebody who passed away. Otherwise, they didn't go. No. It wasn't customary at all. And I would go with my father. And when something was taking place in the city, like a fair or something, I would go with my brother.

KA: Mmm hmm. [laughs]

BS: As a matter of fact, my parents never went to an interview, you know, when the teacher was calling for an interview. It was always this one brother who took part in my schooling and all that. And even his wife, when she got married, she also got involved with me. You know, she was teaching me different songs and all that and spoiled me some more. You know, I was really spoiled. I really was.

KA: That's good.

BS: [laughs] I know, but you know, the war made me grow up very fast and not getting spoiled, very fast. So I had, I had wonderful memories in the home. It was, as I said, they were all older than I. If somebody declined to give me something, it was--if I wanted to get to the movies, I'd say, "I need a dollar." I didn't work. It wasn't customary for students to work as it is here, and I would go to my father, and my father, "I want to go to the movies."

He says, "You went last week. You can't go this week." So I would go to my brother.

KA: [laughs]

BS: And if my brother said no, I go to my brother-in-law, you know. So I always had my way. I really did.

KA: Did you really like to go to the movies?

BS: Oh, yes. I loved to go to movies. Oh, sure. And, but another thing. We couldn't go to the movies but on the weekends because of school. Friday night, Saturday. That's the only two days that we could go to school because we had school on Sundays. That was before the Russians came. That schedule has changed, but I'm talking about the time when it's Poland, so we used to
go to the movies. Maybe Saturday night you go, very often had dances in the schools, different schools, so we went, go in there. And in the afternoon or in the evenings, we would go, not too late in the evenings. Again, it was curfew. We had to be home not later than 11:00, and not because it was fear like you're afraid to go out. No, it wasn't. It was you had to come because school started at 8:15 so you had to get up in the morning and go to school.

And then my grandmother lived with us for a time, and of course I was just spoiled, you know. I couldn't give my mother pleasure that I'm eating breakfast.

KA: [laughs]

BS: So my grandmother would bring me some [can't understand] say, "I'm not going to tell your mother. Go ahead and eat."

KA: [laughs] Whose mother was she?

BS: My mother's.

KA: [laughs]

BS: She was, she was always, a very smart woman and loved me a lot. Again, she would say, "Don't sell yourself cheap. You are too beautiful. You're too smart. Remember this." [laughs] And my grandmother--

KA: Did you have a boyfriend then?

BS: Only one?

KA: Several?

BS: Yes, I had boyfriends. Yes, I had boyfriends. Yes, I had that, too. Unfortunately, none of them survived. Oh, one did. He was, they were sent off to Russia when the Soviets came. He was also [can't understand] They sent the whole family off to Siberia and he survived, and then after the war, 1946, 1945, they returned back to Poland. But by then I would have met my husband, so, so it was just in the past, and I visited him in Israel.

But we had a very--we had a very beautiful life as young people. We had no cars and no televisions, and yet it was--

KA: Wasn't there radio?
BS: Yes, but we read a lot, an awful lot, which I still do to this day.

KA: Did they have radio programs?

BS: Yes.

KA: Or was it--

BS: Radio programs, music.

KA: News.

BS: Yes, news, yes. And papers, of course, newspapers, a lot of newspapers in Yiddish and in Polish, you know. And if you knew Hebrew, it was in Hebrew, too.

KA: What did you usually do with your mom if it was just the two of you?

BS: With my mom? Well, my mom wanted me to learn how to cook, how to be a housewife, so my grandmother would say, "Leave her be. When the time will come, she'll know."

KA: [laughs]

BS: I liked places on Easter, on Easter holidays, if I know if you're familiar with it that you have to change dishes and all that. You know about it, Rachel?

RM: You mean Pesach.

BS: Yes, Pesach.

RM: Pesach. No, you said Easter. I was like--

BS: No, not Easter, Pesach.

RM: Yeah, I was like--

BS: So we had to change the dishes. I loved to do that. I was just--I loved to help my mom put out the dishes, take them there, arrange and put out the Pesach dishes and set the table. I liked a lot to do that. I didn't like to stay in the kitchen and cook. This I didn't, and as I say, my grandmother would always stick up for me.
KA: [laughs]

BS: She said, "Let her be. When the time will come, she'll know."

KA: What kind of food did you have for the holidays?

BS: The same kind we have now! We had the gefilte fish. Ever heard of that?

KA: Hmm, hmm. I've heard of it, but I haven't really had it.

BS: And we had chicken soup with matzo balls, you know, and we had *tsimmes* which of course you don't know what it is. This is a sweet dish--potatoes and flour and prunes and carrots and onions and you put a little piece of meat in there, and it was delicious. It gives you heartburn like--

KA: [laughs]

BS: And, because prunes, and all the wines, and we had mead at the time. It was very popular for *Pesach*.

KA: What was that that was popular?

BS: Mead, it was M-E-A-D, Mead. It came back now. I see it sometimes in the stores. But this was done home. Mother used to do it, as well as the matzo, you know. We used to bake it ourselves. It was not [can't understand] we can order and it was done there, and it was a wonderful time, *Pesach*. I loved it. Still do. I like the holidays very much. So we used to go to the bakery and bring back, and eggs galore! All we had to eat on Passover is eggs.

KA: [laughs]

BS: So, and you know, everything has--you couldn't go to the store and buy like pickles or horseradish. You had to make these yourselves, so I used to help them because I loved *Pesach*. It was a beautiful time. The whole family would come together, and the children, it was just-- Yes. It was wonderful. This is what I did with my mom, you know. And of course shopping and go to the seamstress. Again, you didn't go to the stores to buy ready-made clothes. You had to go to the seamstress and have things done for you. That was my mom's job to go with me to the seamstress and make clothes.

KA: Did you have favorite clothes?
BS: Yes, I had one coat. It was so--I liked it so much. You know, we had uniforms in school. So the coat was a navy coat with a fur collar of fur, and when I was transported from the ghetto, you were not allowed to have fur. Jews were not allowed to have coats with fur, so we put dark material to cover it, and when I was going through the transport and sent away I took that coat. And then I came to the camp and I had that coat. My classmate had gotten that coat. You know, you couldn't get what you wanted. You had to drag whatever they gave you. She happened to get in that coat of mine and I, Rachel. I said, also a, Rachel. I said, "Rachel, this is--" She goes, "I know it's your coat, but it's warm."

KA: [laughs]

BS: Oh, she was just as spoiled as I would be, I suppose, but that was my favorite coat because it had so much memories. I went out with my friends to the movies, especially with my boyfriends that you asked me before, and it was just one of those things, yeah.

KA: When you would go to synagogue with your dad, what was the synagogue like?

BS: Nothing like the ones here. As I said, there were no women so the men were just, and in the center was-- Have you ever been to a [can't understand] synagogue? So in the center, you read from the Bible, from the torah, and there was always a rabbi, always, and the rabbi did not deliver sermons, but somebody else, one of the congregants, would deliver every Saturday another sermon. And come holidays like Simchah Torah, you know when you go around with the Bibles, with the torahs, walk around, and then girls were allowed to come, too, and have this flag with an apple inside and a candle in the apple and go marching around the synagogue, the center, and the bimah, which means where the torah was read, was always in the center. Here, it's only done in Orthodox shuls, synagogues, but in Poland, it was, every synagogue had we called the bimah which is like a stage. It was always in the center. And then there was the Western wall. You saw "Fiddler on the Roof?"

KA: Mmm hmm.

BS: Remember the Western wall was very honorable to sit there, so my father had a seat, and it was for a whole year it was all the family's seat, so when the boys grow up, my brothers, they would join the same place, stay there. And I can see it just now, the center of it, and all, as long as I can remember, my father went to the same synagogue. We moved from different places in the city, you know, far away from the synagogue. I used to go to synagogue. As a matter of fact, September 1st, September 8th of 19 was when the Germans marched in. It was just Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year's, and my father was coming from shul. He says, "The Germans
are already in the city." So he was coming from the synagogue. You know, they were already in the city. In one day and they were there. It was just--you just didn't believe. Well, that was in '39. Then they left, and they came back in 1941. In '39 they were just for a few days because it was the, they had the pact made with the Soviets. Why don't you sit down? Is it, are you okay?

**Sam Miller:** I'm fine.

**BS:** When they showed me the way up through the Soviet Union and German, the eastern part of Poland would be under the Soviet's occupation. It was somehow under Germans. So they came into Bialystok for a few days. Then they were out and the Soviet Union came in. Red Army came in and, as I said, liberating us from everything is good. So I remember my father came and he says--this summer, in July and August we were in, we were on vacation and we used to rent a place in the woods not far from the city, and I'll tell you something about it, too. I had a bicycle, and one day from this place--it was called [can't understand]

**KA:** I'm sorry. Say that again.

**BS:** [can't understand] It's not important. So the whole bunch of us, the youngsters--we were all 16 years old--and we decided to take a bike ride to the city, and I did, too, but the story was just reversed. You see, here you go to vacation here, you want to lose weight. G-d forbid you should gain weight.

**KA:** [laughs]

**BS:** And in Poland it was just the opposite, you know. You went on vacation to gain weight, so I was never big, you know. I was very small, and I went on the bicycle and the roads took me out to the town. Then we came back, a whole bunch of us, and everyone, my father says, "No more bicycle for you. You're losing weight. You never eat."

**KA:** [laughs]

**BS:** "No more bicycle."

**KA:** Defeating the whole purpose of the vacation. [laughs]

**BS:** That was the end and no bicycle anymore. But then when the Germans came, the ransom. They take my bicycle [can't understand]

**KA:** You said that synagogue there, the synagogues there, didn't look like the synagogues here.
BS: Well, it wasn't this elaborate.

KA: It wasn't?

BS: No. Generally, the people in Bialystok were poor people, especially in, they called it [can't understand] in the eastern part of Poland. They were rather poor, you know, and the rabbi also was poor. I really don't know how he sustained himself because--well, in the high holidays we'd make like an appeal for the rabbi and people would donate money to sustain the rabbi. It wasn't as elaborate there as it is here, you know, the chandeliers and the seats. It was very simple. It was very simple, but it had the flavor of being holy. And people were talking with one another and children were screaming, running around, you know, and it felt at home. It felt at home. It was like my rabbi here says, "Shush!" No. The children were screaming and going. It was just, it was just pleasure. It was all very, very domesticated, you know. It was nice. And I'd like to go again. The reason for us going to--the girls, the girls used to meet the boys and the boys used to go with the parents. That's how we met the boys in the synagogues.

KA: So would you sit with your dad through the whole service, or was there--

BS: No.

KA: It was more of a social--

BS: Not necessarily. It depends. Depends. If somebody there was they liked, they stayed.

KA: [laughs]

BS: It was very hard because it wasn't close to the house, but we were used to walking, you know. You walked to school. We used to walk everywhere. There was no such thing as getting a bus ride to school, G-d forbid. In Bialystok, the winter was very cold, you know. We had a lot of snow. It was low temperatures. We walked to school. And we used to wear like knee highs, you know, and our knees were red from the frost. It didn't matter. We just got used to it and that's what it was. It was normal. So I walked the whole time. There was no fear that something will happen to me if I'll go home by myself. But we usually went in groups, you know, a lot of girls, boys, were just walking around in the streets.

KA: So your father always went to the same synagogue, but there--

BS: The same.

KA: --were others?
BS: Oh, yeah, there were many. It's where 50,000 Jews lived. But another thing I want to tell you that there was no Reform movement at the time. Before the war in Bialystok there was no Reform movement. They were ultra-Orthodox and now we'd call them the Modern Orthodox. We also didn't have any--I don't know if you're familiar with different movements in the Jewish religion--the Hassidic. Ever heard of them?

KA: Yes.

BS: Well, our city didn't have any.

KA: No?

BS: Not. The eastern Poland didn't have any Hassidic. It was central Poland, south, you'd see them dressed special, you know, but not in our city.

KA: Why do you think that is?

BS: I'll tell you why. This is something that goes back into Jewish history. The part of Poland that I come from and some of the northern parts of Poland, northeast of Poland, was occupied in the 16th century by Lithuania, and the Lithuanians were very much progressed in secular literatures and secular culture. And the seculars, of course, were always antagonistic against the very Orthodoxy, so this part of Poland, they rather we call ourselves progressive, you know, because, as I say, it was influenced by the Russians and Lithuanians. They were called Litvaks, actually. You know, they call them to now. You hear, oh, you're from [can't understand]. You're a Litvak. You're from Galicia, call somebody a Galiciano, you know, because that was empire, the Hungarian-Austrian Empire, and they were much more, shall I say, educated because of the empire Prussians and Lithuanians were not. You know, Russia was very, very important, so this is where it comes from. So the very ultra-, ultra-Orthodox, like the Hassidim, didn't feel comfortable, so they didn't come. So they were settled in Galicia, which is the southwest, south of Poland, and the center, the capital. I never saw a Hassidim until I came to America.

KA: Wow.

BS: Because we didn't see them, and again, we didn't travel as much as you travel here, you know.

KA: That's just not how I imagined. [laughs] When you--you had said that you had a lot of activities. With no TV and those kind of things, there were a lot of activities, like not just free time to play and time to do homework, but organized--
BS: Yes, organized activities.

KA: --like lessons.

BS: Like I said, we belonged to an organization. It was like scouts--you know the scouts-- and we used to come there and we had classes in Hebrew and Palestinigraphy, you know, talking about Palestine. At that time there was no Israel. Talking about Palestine and the aim was to go to Palestine, you know, to settle in Palestine. So this is what our aid taught us about--the geography and the history, and there again, there was coed, girls and boys, so we had dances. We had shows. We put on shows. And then on certain holidays we used to have a fire and singing different kinds of songs, you know. We were very busy. We really were busy, and really enjoyed our youth I suppose. And besides that, the school, too. The school also provided dances and shows and choirs, and then we had different, different [stammers] circles. We had a German circle and a choir circle and a geography circle. We met after school, after classes, and we would do something. Like in geography, we would organize to go into a village and learn about the village, how it came to be or how a city came to be. Or we'd go, we'd go, in social studies, we'd go to factories. We also had [can't understand] and learn what's coming there, and then we had to report on it, you see. That's is what teachers, probably geography teachers, talk about. And so we were very occupied. The school kept us very busy and then the organizations, as I said, that we belonged to. It wasn't--I don't think there was one young person who didn't belong to one of the organizations. There were plenty of them, you know, and always fighting with each other, too. That was the Jewish way. And you know--

KA: [laughs]

BS: That's true. That's how it was. We always fight. My organization is better than yours and all that. And it was, it was very--we were occupied.

KA: What organization--

BS: Besides television.

KA: What organizations did you belong to?

BS: I belonged to a Zionist organization that was a rather religious organization because I belonged to one that wasn't religious, and my youngest brother found out about it. He said, "Uh, uh, can't go there."

KA: [laughs]
BS: So I went to an organization that was more religious. And again, [can't understand] was coed, so we had dances and shows and we learned the language and all this, all this aimed for Palestine. You know, everything that we were doing was connected with Palestine.

KA: Was that in your plan then when you were a child that you would go there?

BS: Oh, yes, we dreamt about it. It had to go. Oh, yes. And one of my brothers went and then he came back because my parents said, "Come back! Come back!"

KA: Wow!

BS: Because there was, very close family, very close. They said just--I don't know. Maybe it was, maybe it was bad. Maybe if he would have not come back. He would stay in Israel, maybe survive, but then again, people got hurt in Palestine at the time, too.

KA: What did he think of it?

BS: Who?

KA: Your brother when he came back and told you about it.

BS: He loved it. He loved it. He said, "I'll never forgive you for making me back here," to my parents of course. And at the time when he went, my parents and myself were visiting my aunt in another town and he wrote. He wrote, no telephones. He wrote that he's going to Israel, to Palestine at the time. My mom packed everything and whoosh! Went back to Bialystok.

KA: To try to stop him.

BS: He's not going, but he still go. He said, "If I don't like it, I'll come back," so she bombarded him with letters and right away, they should bring him back. Tell him I'm sick so he'll miss [can't understand] He came back. He came back. He wouldn't hurt my parents. He had tremendous respect, you know, with the parents. You wouldn't sit down before your father sits down. Even start eating before your father starts eating, and the best piece of meat was for your father, you know. That's how it was, so there was no-- We never questioned it because that was, that's how it has to be. Even later on, you know, when my sister got married and my brother-in-law would come to the house, father was the first one. And if my father says, "We don't bring this kind of food in the house," it wasn't brought. So it was a tremendous respect for the parents and respect for the grandmother, of course, too.
KA: Did you have a favorite relative growing up?

BS: Did I? Well, I just told you, one of my brothers. He was my favorite.

KA: I’m sorry. I was thinking about maybe your aunt because you had mentioned her.

BS: Yes, I did have an aunt, but she didn't--none of my aunts or uncles lived in Bialystok. They lived in different cities. As I told you, we were visiting. We visited one aunt in [can't understand] and then I spent one vacation with my aunt in another little town, and she had three boys, so that was also very training for me to go and spend time with three boys.

KA: [laughs] They were older?

BS: Cousins. One was older. One was younger. One was just a little tiny boy, so it was a lot of fun. It was a lot of fun. And as I say, my parents trusted me to go there because they knew that even in my wildest dream, I wouldn't do anything to hurt my parents, you know.

KA: How did you get there? Was that far?

BS: By train, by train. Oh, yes. I mean, considering Poland it wasn't close. It was several hours of train, and I came back and they spoke a different dialect. When I came back, I absorbed their dialect. I was only there for two months and I came back and I spoke their dialect. You know, it was something, and my sister was at that time also in a resort place and I came back. I stayed with her. She says, "What's happening to you? What kind of language you're talking?"

KA: [laughs]

BS: But I absorbed--I just learned the-- I liked it so I absorbed the language. And, as I say, we were occupied really. We didn't need any [can't understand] We read a lot. We had to read for school, of course, and then for the pleasure of it, spending time in the library, you know.

KA: Did you have favorite things to read then?

BS: Romances. What else?

KA: [laughs]

BS: On my own. On my own. Of course, I had to read school, literature. But it was novels and romances of course. And we were very romantic anyway.
KA: Rachel just wrote, when you walked down the street, what did it look like?

BS: The streets?

RM: Around the random streets maybe. I don't know, with the butcher next to the--

BS: No. This is another thing. The shops, butcher shops and groceries--they didn't look like today's markets, well, because nothing was pre-packed in the groceries. It was big bags with sugar or flour or whatever, and they put it in the bags and weighed it, and this is how you took it home. And you had no delivery. You had to take it home yourself. And there were certain sections of the city where there were all the stores, and there was the groceries there, the food stores. There were sections of the city where you put manufacturers. You had certain cities where it was just dishes, let's say, you know, which you had to buy. And there was markets, like flea markets here. It wasn't flea markets, but there were markets, you know, open markets where you-- And there were butcher stores, but chickens you bought in the market, and you know what? Live. Live chickens.

KA: So you would pick, or your mom would pick--

BS: Yeah, you'd pick a chicken and blow the tush to see if it's fat enough because it had to be a fat chicken.

KA: Wow!

BS: It's not what it is now, you know. Now you throw away the fat. Now you had to look. If the chicken was fat, you bought it. And then you took it home. It was a live chicken yet. You took it home. Then you had to take it to the slaughterer, to the kosher slaughterer. He would kill the chicken and then you have to pull, clean the feathers off yourself.

KA: So you had to do that.

BS: Me, no! Uh, uh, uh.

KA: [laughs]

BS: My mom used to do it all.

KA: So you ran other stuff in and got out of the kitchen. [laughs]
BS: Right, or other people. A gentile would come in and do that, too, not only for us. She would do for the whole yard of many people living there. They were all tenants and she would clean them herself and then she would come and clean up the chicken. And then when a holiday was approaching, like Pesach or Rosh Hashanah, you would buy, let's say, a turkey, and you would raise the turkey and feed the turkey in order to make her full and full of cheer, you know. It was just the opposite what you have now, but I think it was the same thing in America in those days, that the fatter you are, the better it is. If I was the way I am now, you know, my mother would say something is wrong with the baby. We have a child. We have to go to the doctor. She's so thin. Maybe she has diabetes or TB. Why is she so thin, you know, so that was just the-- The attitude was completely different. The mentality of the people was different, but the shear, oh, yes, very important, and come in deep Pesach, Passover is come, so right at Hanukkah with the six weeks before Purim, six weeks before Passover, you started to collect the shear from the chickens and make schmaltz out of it, you know, and then we used it in chopped liver and everything. Didn't use oil, only chicken fat. Used chicken fat. Can you imagine that?

KA: [laughs]

BS: And it was, the skin of the chicken, you know, becomes very crusty. We called this grivinis and it was so good, but it could kill you.

KA: From cooking it or from just sick?

BS: From rendering. When you rendered [can't understand], the skin gets very, very crispy. As you know, anything can feel, and this was the best thing of all, come from home and take rye bread, put a little chusnick on it and put this grivinis. Oh, my G-d! Heaven.

KA: What was the second thing you put on the rye bread?

BS: Garlic.

KA: Oh. [laughs]

BS: We rubbed garlic on it.

KA: Um, sorry.

BS: It's okay. Take your time.

KA: Turn my notes over. [pause] Um, never have my notes.
BS: It's okay.

KA: [laughs] Um, I--

BS: Take your time.

KA: I just love to think about what it was like for you when you were little and have, you know, think of the town being the way that you described it and riding your bike and your friends and-- Did you have a favorite toy when you were a little girl, like a doll or--?

BS: No, I didn't have a doll. I don't recall having a doll because I was the doll.

KA: [laughs]

BS: That's the thing. All my siblings being so much older, they just played with me, so much so that they broke my arm. They were throwing me around themselves--

KA: [laughs]

BS: --and they broke my arm, and what I liked to do, you know, be like the center of everything. Being spoiled as I was, I wanted to be the center of everything. Even if my sister was much older than I. In company, she would put me in a chair and I would sing.

KA: Ah! [laughs]

BS: Then I would like, you know, put a nice little dress on and I would-- I would sing and performing for her friends.

KA: So you liked to be the star.

BS: I liked to be in the center. Everybody would look at me and say how beautiful I am, how wonderful I sing and all of this. I had a waist like nobody else, but that was besides the point.

KA: [laughs] What did you sing?

BS: All the songs I knew. I, I have a memory, a very good memory. I remember songs like, you know. I'm mixing here, we had a place in Florida and we were going, people together driving the car to Florida, and anybody said I would have a song for.

KA: [laughs]
BS: And he says, "How come you still know so many songs?" Well, again and again, you see, I speak six languages, so if I didn't know it in English, I knew it in Polish or in Russian or in Hebrew or whatever, so I remembered all the songs that I knew when I was young, you know. And as I say, we entertained ourselves with those songs. We would get together and everybody was singing and playing cards. And when a birthday come up, yes. You say you had toys. No. Jewelry. I loved jewelry, so when my birthday came along, whatever I found in the house I put on me.

KA: [laughs]

BS: A thousand bracelets and watches and necklaces and earrings, everything put on because it was my birthday.

KA: [laughs]

BS: So I don't recall ever having something special. We didn't have any pets. We had no pets in the house, no. I really don't recall anything special that I was very devoted to as a toy, no. It was rather a book that I liked. I liked Dumas' an awful lot, Dumas' books, so like *Count of Monte Christo*.

KA: Oh.

BS: And the humorous books, so this is what I liked a lot. But there were cards. We played cards, you know. Also in the house. My parents' friends would come and play cards. My sister's friends would come and they played cards, and I was watching it. They wouldn't let me watch them because they were afraid I'll tell whatever, about their hands, but this was a lot of fun for me, too, to sit with the elders and watch them play, and that's how I learned, too. So we had a lot of activities in spite of not having television, you know. My grandchildren ask, "What did you do? You had no television. How did you go? You had no cars." We managed. We managed very well.

KA: What were your--did you parents spend a lot of time together, the two of them?

BS: Oh, yes.

KA: When they had the chance to do that.

BS: Oh, yes. Mom was home. Always. Mom was a housewife, a house. It was [can't understand], but it was in the house. And then another thing, you see. We had the main meal. It was 3:00 in...
the afternoon, so my father would come for dinner. So dinner was ready for 3:00 and then he would go back and come back. 7:00 was already just like we had lunch or something very light, and then when we went in the summers, we went, as I say, to rent a place, some place in the woods or in a little village, and you know what? In those villages they, because they were complaining that I'm so thin and so skinny, so we used to go to the barn where the cows were and the peasant was milking the cow, they drained just a little straight from the cow. It was warm yet. Can you imagine that?

KA: [laughs]

BS: No, you can't imagine that.

KA: [laughs]

BS: It was like the--yes. So when you drank the milk straight from the cow because it was warm. It was good for you. Now it has nothing to do with this. When we came to America, we hardly knew the language, no special occupation, so we bought a farm. We bought a chicken farm. KA: Oh.

BS: Chickens, you know, you can speak any language. They understand.

KA: [laughs]

BS: So we bought a chicken farm around Lake New Jersey, and I don't want to skip everything else, but we had a cow. We had a cow. I never saw live cow in my life except when I went to drink the milk from the cow, you know, so I was afraid of the cow. But my sister-in-law and brother-in-law, she had already a little boy three years old and another two families also had children. So I was the one who had no children, so I had to go milk the cow. So my brother-in-law kept her and I sat on this little stool with a pail to milk the cow, and not a drop of milk came out, but it was full with my tears. I cried so badly.

KA: Aah.

BS: Is says all my education and all that I have, I have to sit and milk a cow?

KA: [laughs]

BS: And that was the end of the cow.
KA: Really?

BS: We sold the cow because of the cow.

KA: Darn cow.

BS: But that is not a very, you know, ménage. That was later of course. And, again, when our cousins came to visit us and the saw that we're drinking the milk straight from the cow, not pasteurized. G-d forbid! We drank it from the cow. We didn't know the difference. It was milk. We took it and drank it, made butter out of it, not pasteurized, nothing. You know something? We survived, too.

KA: Yeah.

BS: It didn't kill us.

KA: How did your family celebrate Hanukkah?

BS: Oh, every single day we would get presents. Every single day, light the candles and the children would sing and my great, my little nephews and nieces would come and we'd open the presents. They weren't as elaborate as I give now, my grandchildren, you know. It was five cents or ten cents, you know, or a special date with some cookies or candies. And every single day will come to the house. My father would say the blessings on the candles and they sometimes let them lead them, when they got a little older when they could do it, and it was a big, big thing, not as big as it is here in the States. Hanukkah became a colossal holiday here, and I think--of course, this is my private opinion--because it comes at the same time as Christmas and the children shouldn't feel left out. It wasn't like that in Poland. It had nothing to do with Christmas, nothing to do with--it was not as elaborate. In the circle, in the family, we'd come, light the candles, sing little songs and make, mom would make potato latkes, and what else was very customary to eat? Just potato latkes, I think, and the children helped light the candles and sing the blessings of the candles, but that was it. And we would get presents, little tiny things, and that was it. Every holiday was celebrated, but not as elaborate as it is here.

KA: But traditionally, Hanukkah is the gift-giving holiday?

BS: No. Actually, it's not.

KA: No?
BS: It is the renewal. Hanukkah means to renew. Hanukkah in the bible means to renew the house and this is what it was. We renewed the temple because when the Maccabees had won, they threw everything out. It was sacrilegious, and they renewed the temple. That's what Hanukkah is. Now you buy a new home, you say a certain blessing. [Hebrew], means renewing of the house, but not giving gifts. Not in the torah. That was--

KA: So that's the Americanizing.

BS: It was influenced. That was influenced by Christmas so they wouldn't say we were left out.

KA: They were concerned about you being too thin. Did your dad let you fast on Yom Kippur?

BS: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. After I was 12 years old, I had to fast. It was such a wonderful thing, too, you know. I felt so grownup. Yes, I did fast on Yom Kippur. I still do. Yes. I fasted on Yom Kippur. That had nothing to do with being thin. My grandmother was a sick woman. She was old and even the doctor told her to take a grape or something when you are [can't understand]. This is when we went to the synagogue, you know, on the high holidays, and she wouldn't. She wouldn't take anything.

KA: What were your dad's parents like?

BS: I never knew them, no. I never knew them. The only grandparent that I knew was my grandmother. This was mother's mother. I never knew my parents.

Bluma Shapiro: They, you know, see, my whole family comes from actually from a little town because Rashofdovsky. This is where we visited my aunts as I mentioned, and there was a colossal fire in the city during the First World War, so they left the city and came with--all my siblings were born there. I was the only one that was born already in Bialystok because it was after the war. They were all born there actually, so I never knew my grandparents but my grandmother. The only grandmother there.

Kathleen Andersen: What subjects did you study in school? I know you started to tell me.

BS: Well, we had math, physics, chemistry. Then we had Latin, German and Hebrew. Math, of course, and that's it. Right? That's all the subjects. Geography. Now it's social studies, but we had history separate, geography separate. It wasn't under--there was no such things as social studies. We had geography. We had history. And, yes, that about covers it, right? Yes. We had a lot, a lot of poems that we had to know by heart. That's what exercised our brains, you know. Those poems I still remember and by the time--
KA: Can you tell me one?

BS: --we're reciting them. [laughs] Tell it German, these German poems, you know, and Polish poems. You wouldn't understand the poems.

KA: You're right. I wouldn't.

BS: No, and, well, it was a great, a demand from us to remember, a lot of kids to remember, and I was in a [can't understand] school. I was a good student and my closest girlfriend was a little bit, was math, and I was very progressive in mathematics and I had-- I was sort of like the--I don't know how you call it here. We called it [Polish word] of our math teacher.

KA: Oh, the teacher's pet.

BS: The teacher's pet, right. I was the teacher's pet. So I will take a bench there with [can't understand] you know.

KA: [laughs]

BS: So when my best girlfriend was sitting next to me--the seatings in the classes were a big table and three children at the same table with three chairs, and everybody had like an open drawer to put your stuff in. And she sat next to me and she says, "He can't make me. I don't know how to do this math." I will do it for her and listen to that. I really had a nerve, I come to think of it, and write down on my paper. I didn't have time to finish. I had a headache. I couldn't finish it.

KA: [laughs]

BS: And I got away with it, too.

KA: [laughs] You think your teacher knew that you were doing hers?

BS: Well, she knew that I know the subject, but no. I don't know. He never let me know. I don't know whether he knew or not. Yeah.

KA: Did you get to play, like play ball or go swimming--

BS: Yes.

KA: --after school.
BS: Swimming, no. Swimming was dangerous. I was the youngest child, you know, so it was
dangerous for me to go swimming. So I didn't go swimming, but we went to-- What did you ask
before?

KA: Play ball.

BS: Yes, yes. In school. We had play, we had gym, you know. In gym we played, well, softball.
We played soft--there was no baseball in Poland, didn't know about it, and this was called two
fields, so we had to throw the ball. Volleyball. We played volleyball, too, and then we had gym,
classes with gym, of course. And we learned how to ride bikes in school, too, and then had
choirs, too.

KA: You learned to ride bikes in school?

BS: Yeah, yeah, in gym. Gym classes would have that, and then we had shows, which consisted
only of gym, with exercises, a whole show we put on.

KA: Yeah?

BS: Oh, yeah. It was beautiful. I was in it, too. It was very nice, and I stayed in the school and it
kept us busy. We were anxious to go to school, you know, because it was so many things taking
place there besides teaching and learning there, and the satisfaction if you fooled the teacher, you
know.

KA: [laughs]

BS: This is normal in every school I'm sure. So--

KA: What did you do in the show?

BS: I, in gym show? Oh, I was one of them who--we were building a house, but in exercises, you
know, and I was one of the pillars.

KA: Yeah?

BS: Yeah. This was very nice. And not only did we do that, but we put it together with a poem,
and every participant had to say a part of this poem. It was in Yiddish, and you know what? At
my wedding night I recited the whole poem.
KA: Really?

BS: I remembered it and I recited the whole poem. Yeah. That was at the wedding, you know. That was a gift. My husband liked it so he says, "Why don't you recite?" And there was an ex-teacher of mine also came to the wedding. He came from Russia and he was present there, and he says, "If you remember that poem, why don't you say it?" So I did. I was again in the center, you know.

KA: [laughs] That's good. You had said that there was a gymnasium.

BS: Yeah.

KA: I didn't realize that was popular.

BS: Oh, yes. We had clubs, athletic clubs [can't understand]. And as a matter of fact, it's such a small world. Two years ago there was a gathering in Washington at the museum, you know, the Holocaust Museum in Washington, and we went there. My whole family came over, too, and every city had a sign on it. That's for seating, some tables, you know. Of course, Bialystok had a sign, too. Everyone walking around looking for Bialystok to sit at the Bialystok table, and there was a woman sitting there and she says to me, "I'm from Bialystok."

So I said, "Absolutely. I come to sit here in Bialystok." And we started to talk. It came out that she was a sister of my friend. And of course she asked me about how she perished, and this woman left Bialystok as a gymnast to lead Palestine at the time.

KA: Wow.

BS: Can you believe that?

KA: That's wonderful.

BS: And we met. Now we're in contact. She lives in Chicago now. We are in contact, but this is what it was. It was natural in many clubs, many gym clubs, and youngsters were very much involved in that. Football was very popular. Soccer you call it, you know. It was very popular, and we, the girls, would come and watch the boys play, too, the soccer, and you know, root for them, for the ones that we wanted to win. Yeah. It was, it was a lot of ball playing. Volleyball was very popular with the girls and football was very popular with the boys. And then we had another play. It wasn't softball, but it was two fields. It was called two fields. You had to knock the ball into your opponent, you know, and that was boys and girls played that. It was all in the curriculum. That was all part of--
KA: Sounds like dodge ball.

BS: I don't know.

KA: Where you hit--

BS: I don't think so.

KA: Well.

BS: You have to throw the ball and knock out--

KA: Into the other person.

BS: --your opponent, yes. But it was two groups. Well, maybe that was it, and, as I say, soccer was very popular among the boys, and we used to go to them. It was usually, in the forest was the play. The fields were there and we used to go walk. It was quite a walk, too, but who minded it? We had to see the boys.

KA: [laughs]

BS: So we used to go and watch them play and root for them, for the ones that we wanted to win. Sometimes it was funny because my school boys were playing against another school boys, and my boyfriend was the other school boy. Who do you root for? Which one?

KA: [laughs]

BS: It was a conflict, you know.

KA: [laughs]

BS: Conflict, you don't know who to root for, but it was a lot of fun. Well, when you're young, everything is funny and good. No problems. The only problem was school. You have to be good at school. That's all.

KA: What was dating like?

BS: No tete-a-tete. Always in groups, in the organizations.
**KA:** So you wouldn't--

**BS:** Well, four of us or six of us, three boys and three girls, would come together to one house and we'd have--like on Hanukkah we used to do later when we were a bit older. We used to go into one house. Every year somebody else would make it, and we played different games, boys and girls, and then if you were lucky enough, I'm going to take you home, you know.

**KA:** [laughs]

**BS:** And Hanukkah is very cold and snowy, so some incidents that I remember. One of my friends, not a boyfriend, but a friend, he lived across the street from me so we were walking to the house where the party was to take place. I had boots on, but he carried my fancy shoes.

**KA:** Ah!

**BS:** So we came to the party. Of course, I changed it. There I met somebody that I liked very much, so I made him take me home. So the one that took my shoes was very insulted.

**KA:** [laughs]

**BS:** But he brought me them. It wasn't nice. I had to go home with the same one, but I didn't. So just little incidents like that, you know. So, and then that one that took me home, he became my boyfriend. My dear sister-in-law used to say, my second sister used to say, "Which one are you going to marry this time?"

**KA:** [laughs]

**BS:** "Have you made up another one that you're going to marry?" So it was a lot of fun. And as I said, we didn't miss television. We didn't miss cars. We managed beautifully, managed beautifully. A lot of social, socializing, you know, took place.

**KA:** What kind of card games and other games did you play?

**BS:** We played kalooki if you call it here. I still do.

**KA:** I don't know that.

**BS:** Coke, rummy, bridge. That's what kalooki is now. And we played canasta, which I play right now. Poker. And there's 21, but there was a different way of playing it. It was played in a whole group of people and my parents played it very often. And we had direct king. It was a wonderful
game. Nobody plays it here, so when we got together with our friends, and also, so to speak, the green horns that came from other cities.

KA: [laughs]

BS: We call ourselves the green horns, so we played that [can't understand] operator, so that was a very nice game. There was another one that is an American game, but nobody plays it here somehow. It's called casino. Have you heard of it?

KA: It sounds familiar, but when I was little we used to play games at my grandmother's and she was very good at those and I'm not.

BS: [can't understand]

KA: We lost it when she passed away.

BS: That's what my grandchildren say to me, too. "You play so much. Of course we can lose." And now my, when I play with my children, I play, now, I play progressive. It's a very nice game. It is a lot of times you can spend the whole evening playing that one game.

KA: [laughs] What do you do?

BS: It's called progressive because at first you have to be able to go down with six cards, and then it's seven cards, and then it's eight cards, and then it's nine cards, and then in the end it's all, the whole hand has to go down. But it's very nice. It's nice to play with at least three people. Now today I played rummy bridge. Also four people will play. We have a steady game. Also green horns. We play together. Four girls. We play that, yeah. And tomorrow I'm going to play canasta with another group of people, not green horns. We play together. Four girls. We play that, yeah. And tomorrow I'm going to play canasta with another group of people, not green horns. I only play when--so I got to know them and we play that. But canasta I learned in Florida, actually. I didn't know that. But we played games. Direct kings is a beautiful card game, really beautiful, but you really have to know how to play it to remember the cards because only 32 cards play from seven to ace up, and it's very nice, very nice game. But unfortunately, nobody to play with. The men used to play, played with the men, you know, couples, all gone. So, and that's what we played too. As youngsters, we played too, and our parents, they did, too. They had circles and they used to play cards. They used to come together and have a tea, you know, the same thing as we have here when you get together. You play cards.

KA: So how did you know if a boy had a crush on you?

BS: How did I know? Oh, I knew.
KA: But I mean, did he like pass you a note or sneak you a gift--

BS: No, but I knew, special treatment and he would bring me flowers, you know. Or when you go out with friends, we would go out to a movie, right? Four of us, two boys and two girls. The boy that let's say had a crush, as you say, always used to, "You want some candies?"

KA: [laughs]

BS: He buys some candy in the movies, you know, hold my hand, you know. So, it--somehow you knew. Don't you know it?

KA: But I just thought--I mean, there's not a lot of finessse. There's not a lot of like slipping it in secretly in a group. You know, it's more kind of--

BS: Tete-a-tete.

KA: In your face. [laughs]

BS: No, it was in groups, and you know, if you don't know it, somebody will tell me, "Bluma, look at him. He's crazy about you."

KA: [laughs]

BS: This other one, here. I don't want him. I don't like him or I do like him. You know, it depends. And the girls, you know, and there was no jealousy between the girls, either, somehow. Normally we survived. Isn't that, two girls would like the same boy. Isn't that something? It didn't happen, just my try, not from my environment. It never happened that she would say, "I like Nathan." That was my last boyfriend. No. You like him. You can have him.

KA: [laughs]

BS: That was it. That was it. I had some heartaches, too, you know, when you like the boy and he didn't like you. That also happened. Happened to me, too. And then he would slip some notes like, he was the one that I'm talking about, also perished, so he would come to the house to help him plan, so I helped him plan, and while I was helping him, I would put something in between, you know, for him to say, "Well, then come tomorrow. Go to the movies," or something like that. You find a way to let him know and vice versa. He'll find a way to let you know. But it was all kidding, all kidding. I had again him, but we couldn't be out too late and we could never visit a boy in his house. Never. We would talk about it. You would go in the vicinity of his house.
KA: [laughs]

BS: Maybe he'll come out and we'll be able to see him, you know. It was us. You think of place if you want to, you know. You think of a way to become very original and you can arrange things if you want to. So that's what it was. Or we had, let's say it was my birthday. Never invited boys to your birthday, so we would come back, you know, organization, and put something from the girls that came. As a child, it was toys, put it in his coat.

KA: [laughs]

BS: It's from Bluma's birthday, let's say, you know.

KA: Hmm, hmm.

BS: So he knew that I was thinking of him.


BS: Oh, my G-d, those things, you know. One of my boyfriends at the time, he had an older brother, and it was maybe a difference in two years, but they dressed alike and they had their coats in the wardrobe in an organization, and it was I who put something from my birthday, put it in the brother's coat.

KA: Oh! [laughs]

BS: It was something. That was very embarrassing. What can I tell you? But I got over that, too.

KA: Well, you have a very good sense of humor.

BS: Thank you.

KA: So I'm sure--

BS: I think it helped a lot in life. It helps a lot. You have to. You have to have a little sense of humor. With all the atrocities that I've been through, you know, and it helped. You don't dwell in it, you know. You have to go on and I am a cockeyed optimist, too. You know that term?

KA: [laughs]
BS: It's true. I always see the sunshine. Very seldom do I see the clouds, and if I do see it, I don't talk about it, so it helped me a lot, you know. With everything that happened. It was horrible times in Auschwitz, and hungry and naked and what have you, and sick. I would say, "Thank G-d that my parents were killed before they had to go through this because I'll be killed, too, but I have to go through all that." And my parent didn't. They already at peace. They are now at peace already. Good. So you know, this was my attitude all along. This, never had to go. They really actually never thought they would survive, they would come out of it. Never. And if you would tell my parents that of all their children, I would be a survivor, never know that. Never know that.

KA: Because you were the--

BS: I'm the spoiled little thing, the pampered little thing.

KA: Little doll baby.

BS: Yeah, and I survived, so it was mentally to survive. And this is why I never say no if somebody wants to hear about atrocities that had taken place about my life because I think this is, this is the reason that I survived. Maybe my siblings would not be able to convey the whole life that I do. That's why maybe G-d made me survive, and I truly believe in that because I haven't done myself, to help myself from here to there. Nothing. There are cases people run away, run, jump from the cart and fought for a piece of bread. Stole from one another in the, the inmates in the camps. I never did that, and yet I survived. So this is what I did maybe. I have to do it. It's not easy. It's not easy, but I have to do it.

KA: Back to the earlier times, do you know--I mean, obviously we've talked about your mom's mom and that you dad's family was from a different area of Poland.

BS: Oh, no, from the same area, but not from Bialystok.

KA: Right. So your mom's family was from that other area also.

BS: Yes, yes, yes.

KA: Do you know how far back generations your family is from Poland? Do you have any--

BS: I'd say it's far, as far as you can name. The only thing is that I very often wonder if the Erenkranc is a real German name. It's not spelled that way. If it's spelled German, it's like Erenkrantz, you know, like it's called a--I can't translate to you. It's a--the Romans were wearing something like that on their heads and made from laurel.
KA: Laurel wreaths?

BS: A laurel wreath, and this is what this it is. It's an erran wreath. Erran krantz. Erran is Anna. Krantz is a wreath. So this is where it comes from, so I--but then again, you cannot--I cannot say that it comes from Germany because, you know, after Napoleon's times when he conquered Poland on his way to Russia, you know, in history, Jews did not have a last name. They were called by the son of, like Ben Gurion, if you know the names. Ben is a son of Gurion, his father, and that's how the Jews were going, by the name of the fathers, like ben, or bat, which is a daughter. And Napoleon came. He ordered for the Jews to, to get family names.

KA: Surnames.

BS: So you have like Schneider, which means a tailor. He was a tailor so he get the name Schneider. Schuster which means a cobbler. He got the name Schuster. Often towns, like you have, say Poland was the, Warsaw was a Polish town. He lived in Warsaw, say Warshovsky, means the son of Warsaw. But this is how they just changed the names, so I presume that this name, the name that we had gotten could be like, something like that. Maybe somebody in the family. I do know that my mother's name comes from a city in Italy. It's Padua. You know Padua was the first university ever built in the city of Padua in Italy, and my mother's maiden name was Padua. So that's--maybe somebody, I suppose maybe during the Inquisition the teachers were persecuted in Spain and in Portugal. Many of them had settled around the Mediterranean in which time, I suppose, they traveled farther north and they came to Poland, became the name of Padua. They didn't live in the city of Padua at the time. I really don't know how many generations back they came from Poland, but as far as I know they were talking home sometimes, and the brothers of my father who were older lived still in this same town where my father was before, and they also carried the same name. They never changed it. So, it wasn't customary like here. When the Jews came here to America, they changed their names. First of all, it was the pronunciation. You know, they couldn't pronounce it. I had friends who came here. Their name was Ckakotsky and nobody could pronounce it, so they changed it for Tucker. But in Poland you continued with the name. And curious thing, when they came to America and they were on the boat, they called names out to come off the boat, and everybody was gone already and they were still in the boat. So the clerk says to them, "How come you're still on the boat?"

He said, "You never called my name."

"What is your name? Dakoky?" They called Dakoky. His name was Ckakotsky. C-K. You know, it was Ckakotsky. So he said, "Oh, Dakoky, okay." So he came off of the boat. So when he came off they changed it to Tucker.
And they made different jokes about it, too, like a man came here from Poland and didn't understand any English. Asked him, "Where are you from?"

He says, "From a very poor country," but he said it in Yiddish. Almond. His name was Almond.

KA: [laughs]

BS: So they already done Almond and he's up to now his name is Almond. The children carry on the name Almond. That's what his name is. Or they can make, Ferguson, very, here very popular. It's all the same story. "What is your last name?"

He says, "fer gessen."

KA: Which means?

BS: Forgot. I forgot.

KA: [laughs]

BS: So fer gessen was Ferguson.

KA: [laughs]

BS: So the same stories with different names. It's the story of the spelling. They couldn't spell it, so it was Ferguson, fer gessen. You'll also find out that my name's Shapiro now, right?

KA: Hmm, hmm.

BS: And in Philadelphia they call it Shap-I-ro. It's spelling with an I, it's Shap-I-ro. When they spell it with an E, it becomes Shapiro, but I spell it S-H-A-P-I-R-O. They would call me Shap-I-ro. Like in Florida, for instance, they called my Shap-I-ro. I never responded to it--

KA: [laughs]

BS: --until I find out that this is how they pronounce it. So you know, in America language is different and it's the story with the spelling. Nobody knows how to write anything if you don't spell it because everybody spells it in a different way. You pronounce it differently, but in Poland it was just-- Polish is a, is a hard language in pronunciation. Of course, Polish and Russian are Slavic languages because they have so-called, they call it [can't understand] Can you say it?
KA: No.

BS: I know [can't understand].

KA: The only thing I can say in Polish is [Polish saying]

BS: [Polish saying] That's good. I like it. Means I like. But this is easy because there is no sound like sch, sch. We have, in all the Slavic languages you have that and it's very hard to pronounce, so, but still we pronounced it, you know. And it's--I work now with the Russians because I speak Russian. So I work now with the Russians. For them it's very hard to speak English, to pronounce it. It can tend to, you know, English is a very hard language because you read it different, pronounce it different, you spell it different. They can't understand why they say knife. Why is there a K in the beginning? Me. What do you need with me? K in the middle. You know, and some things like that. Sometimes you spell it as an I. Sometimes it's an E. What's going on with this language? It's hard for them to learn. So the same thing is worse. It's hard for Americans to learn all the Slavic languages because of the sch, sch. It's hard. Can you say [Polish word]?

KA: [laughs]

BS: Never.

KA: What does that mean?

BS: [Polish word] Post guest. The post.

KA: The post like the post office?

BS: No, the box, post, box, the box.

KA: Oh.

BS: [Polish word] is a box. [Polish word] is a post.

KA: I'd be lost. It would be bad.

BS: And [Polish word]

KA: Can you say it again?
BS: [Polish word]

KA: [tries to pronounce, laughs] No.

BS: Can I pronounce the H the right way? I can't pronounce it, either.

KA: No?

BS: Comes everything out but the H.

KA: [laughs]

BS: But somehow they understand me, you know. Somehow they understand me. And Strolla is a B. It's harder yet, isn't it? Try it. Rachel. Strolla.

Rachel Mirsky: What's the-- Strolla?

BS: A B, a B.

RB: Strolla.

BS: No, Sch-trolla.

RB: Where did you hear the B?

BS: Something like that. [laughs]

RB: I don't even hear the B. I can't even hear it.

BS: Yes. This is a B. Everything, a bumblebee or whatever. It's hard for Anglo-Americans to speak Polish, Russian, Slavic. When I was in Czech, I understood them perfectly. Knowing Russian and Polish, I could understand Czechs, you know. I couldn't talk too much, but I could understand them. This is very similar, you know. Although when I was in England, they couldn't understand my English.

KA: [laughs]

BS: It's not English. It's American. I said, "Fine! That's a compliment."
**KA:** [laughs]

**BS:** That was when I came to the States, I went through with my thing and just jumping from one thing to another. Is it okay? When we came to the States, and before we came, I took a course of English, six weeks. My teacher was a Hungarian in Germany and she taught me the Queen's English. So, when I came to the States, I was the one who had to translate for my whole family, you know. I understood everybody who was talking. They didn't understand a word I was saying, nothing at all. I said, "What's happening? I understand so well."

**KA:** [laughs]

**BS:** So that's why I went to the chicken farm. The chicks understood perfectly.

**KA:** [laughs]

**BS:** That was why.

**KA:** It's just that darn cow.

**BS:** That's the cow. I was--that was the cow. That was the end of the line. That was my chance to come to Baltimore, that's all, and meet a lot of new people.

**KA:** Well, thank you very much for having us.

**BS:** You're very welcome. I'm very, I feel very good about it if you want to know. It's very important. There's a new generation growing up. We are getting older and very few of us are left now, you know, and with us gone, who will tell you the truth? This is what happened. About 25 years ago I hadn't spoke, maybe more than that. I never spoke about my experiences to my children, to my husband, to my friends, my acquaintances. Never spoke about it. And then, if you remember, the Northwestern professor who wrote about the Holocaust never happened, and then they called me from the Baltimore Jewish Council that there will be a panel on television and they would like for me as a survivor to be there, one of the panelists, and I said, "No. I can't go on television. I will cry and break down. I cannot do it."

Well, talked here, talked there, and this and this, two days, and finally my husband said to me, "You know what? If you don't go and tell them the truth, who will? And if you break down and you cry, so you will. So it's okay, too." And this is how I started to talk about it. I could not bring myself to talk. Even now, I can't talk to my friends just like I talk to you now. Only, they find out. My son found out by experience because he was in the audience when I spoke to a school. When he was in the audience, that's how he found out about my experiences. And then I had so
many videos done already, so he has all the videos. He shows, shows it to children, whatever. By the way, any of you watch *The Survivors Among Us*?

**RM:** I saw it once.

**BS:** You saw it once.

**RM:** I saw it a while ago.

**BS:** Yes, so.

**KA:** Are you on that?

**BS:** Yes, but the thing is, you know, I gave you the--

**KA:** [laughs]

**BS:** No, I'll give you one of the discs. I'll get it from the Baltimore Jewish Council and when you come next time, I'll see that I have it and I'll give it to you. You all have DVDs I'm sure, so I'll give you the disc and you can watch it. It's really very revealing, you know. You know, I'm in it, too, yes. So, yesterday my son was here and he says, I said, "You handle, give me." So I gave it. I had two of them. I gave. That's okay. I'll get some more. It's no problem. We'll meet next week, right?

**KA:** Wednesday, the 28th.

**BS:** Yes, next Wednesday.

**RM:** We're meeting Wednesday.

**BS:** Yes. I'll try to get ordered through Baltimore Council and get some more discs and you can all have it. Okay?

**KA:** Thank you very much.

**RM:** Thanks.

**KA:** Thanks for letting us be here.
**BS:** You're very welcome. And as I said, I really feel very good about it, that you show the interest, that you want to know, and I think that Dr. Salpert is doing a very good job doing this, very wonderful. It's good, very nice. It has to be done. You can have the pen.

**KA:** Oh, thanks. Did he do your Shoa Foundation interview?

**BS:** He do it? No. No. It's somebody from Pennsylvania because I did it in my son's house for the Shoa.

**KA:** Oh!

**BS:** So a Pennsylvanian interviewed me, and all those tapes and all this, DVDs out with my son because I don't have to have it. I know that. So the children have it. It was once, he made use of it. They had an exchange student from Germany a few years back, from Stutthoff, and she had no idea what it was in those days. Must have been about, I'd say, about ten years ago, and she knew nothing about the Holocaust, and when she watched one of my films and it was very good. She had to know about it. So they did. They watched it. And I'm really grateful to you.

**KA:** You're very generous.

**BS:** That you really want to know. Wonderful, to all of you, and I'll try to get you some of the discs so you can have it and when you feel like watching it, you may watch. It's interesting, you know. It's all Baltimoreans, survivors, and different kinds of survivors. You have some kinder transport and people who had run, jumped out of the train and all that, and I was the one from Auschwitz, you know. I survived.

**KA:** Well, I found you, just because I got so tongue tied when we were on the telephone and I thought I needed to reassure myself, and I found this about you.

**BS:** Yeah. Where did you find it?

**KA:** The Shoa Foundation.

**BS:** Oh, yes. Wonderful. Good. Very good. So now I can say it, you know everything about me.

**KA:** I know nothing. [laughs]

**BS:** It's okay.

**KA:** I know nothing.
BS: It's okay.

KA: Less than nothing.

BS: Can I offer you anything, a drink, or I have very sweet cantaloupe. You can't say no to everything. For heaven’s sake!