

HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

MYRA DAVIS

Transcript of Audiotaped Interview

Interviewer: Marcia Goldberg
Date: October 16, 1999

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Gratz College
Melrose Park, PA 19027

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MD - Myra Davis [interviewee]

MG - Marcia Goldberg [interviewer]

Date: October 16, 1999

Tape one, side one:

MG: My name is Marcia Goldberg. I'm going to be interviewing Myra Davis. Today is October 15, 1999. We are at the Rickshaw Reunion¹ at the Holiday Inn in Philadelphia, PA and this is tape one, side one. Will you tell me your name?

MD: My name is Myra Davis.

MG: And what was your maiden name?

MD: My maiden name was Heller.

MG: Was your first name Myra?

MD: No, it was Miki [phonetic].

MG: Was that your proper name?

MD: No, it was...

MG: I mean your real name?

MD: No, just people knew me by the name of Miki Heller. That was like a nickname.

MG: And where and when were you born?

MD: I was born in Kovno, Lithuania, July the 12, 1936.

MG: What was your father's name?

MD: My father's name was Franz Heller.

MG: And your mother?

MD: Fanny Heller.

MG: Was there any other members of the family?

MD: Grandparents and an uncle.

MG: Were you the only child?

MD: Yes.

MG: And where were your parents from?

MD: Lithuania; my father was Viennese, but lived in Lithuania.

MG: And your mother?

MD: Was born in Lithuania.

MG: Were your parents religious?

MD: Not particularly.

MG: Were you affiliated with the synagogue?

MD: My grandparents were, but my parents were not.

MG: And what was your family's economic situation?

¹Rickshaw Reunion - a meeting in October 1999 at the Holiday Inn in Philadelphia of refugees who found refuge in Shanghai during World War II.

MD: Somewhat affluent.

MG: What did your father do?

MD: He was import/export in fabric.

MG: So what was your life like in Vilna?

MD: Not Vilna...

MG: In Kovno, sorry.

MD: ...Kovno. We-- I had a governess that brought me up. We had a cook in the house. We had a rather very, very beautiful apartment, up-to-date and modern until the Russians entered Lithuania in 1940 and we had to vacate our apartment because we were too few people in the space that was allotted, and they moved us into a different area and much smaller quarters.

MG: What about your father's business?

MD: That became a problem since we did not speak Russian and then there came out a law stating that he was a Czechoslovakian citizen who never accepted Lithuanian citizen, and the law came out that either you leave the country or accept Russian citizenship, and at that point it was difficult to leave Lithuania because most places were occupied by the Nazis at that point, and there was a Japanese consul in Lithuania by the name of Sugihara who gave out visas for money, although he claims there was no money, but there was money being exchanged. And you had to stand in line because there were a lot of people wanting the same type of visas to vacate and we were going to Curacao with the visa, originally through Japan. So we traveled through Siberia, through Vladivostok and on to Japan, and in Japan we were there for approximately nine or 10 months.

MG: Excuse me, I want to go back a moment. When you got the visa, do you know how much your parents had to pay?

MD: No, I'm not aware of that.

MG: But you know they had to pay money?

MD: Yes.

MG: How old were you?

MD: I was almost seven.

MG: Do you remember your reaction to the fact that you had to leave?

MD: Yes, I didn't wish to leave. I was very close to my grandparents and my governess that I had from elementary but I had no say or choice, so you do the best you can and accept the fact that you have to go.

MG: Were you in school at the time?

MD: Yes, I just started Lithuanian schools I think, first or second year I don't quite remember which.

MG: What port did you leave from?

MD: We left by train from Lithuania through to Moscow.

MG: Now who were you with other than your parents?

MD: Oh there were a lot of people like ourselves, lots of family, friends from Lithuania and a lot of Polish people that were in Lithuania that had the same privilege of leaving the country.

MG: Did your grandparents go with you?

MD: No.

MG: What happened to them?

MD: Well they said, you guys go and if you tell us that it's good where you're going we'll follow. Needless to say, you know what followed.

MG: Did you ever find out what happened to them?

MD: Yeah, we did hear that they were killed by the Lithuanians before the Germans even entered the country. I had an uncle that was at that time 28 years old and a grandmother and a grandfather.

MG: Now getting back to the trip, you left Lithuania by train. I interrupted you but continue. From there...

MD: We were in Moscow for three days and then from Moscow we traveled to Vladivostok which was the border and there they bequeathed us, the Russians took our wares, a lot of our wares.

MG: What had you taken with you?

MD: Oh my mom had some fantastic jewelry, and it was hidden in her coat pocket, and they got to it. I had a little chain with a locket that my governess gave me as a farewell present and they just ripped that off of me, and I was hysterical when that happened.

MG: Were your parents able to retain any money or jewelry?

MD: Thirty-nine worth of carats of diamonds my father had hidden which they never got to.

MG: Did your-- were your parents able to take any furniture or send anything?

MD: Oh no, absolutely not. Just clothing and some money that was hidden and jewelry. My mom had some phenomenal jewelry and then of course whatever-- the law was that whatever you're wearing you're allowed to wear but that was not true. The minute they spotted it they took it right off of you.

MG: Now where did you go from there?

MD: We traveled by a barge or if you could call it a barge, horrible, little, rinky-dinky little ship to Kobe, Japan.

MG: How long did that take?

MD: Oh, I think it was three days of horror. There wasn't a person that wasn't sick on that thing.

MG: Was it crowded?

MD: Yes, like cattle. Disgusting conditions.

MG: And how long did you stay in Kobe?

MD: About, I think it was about nine or 10 months.

MG: What was that like?

MD: That was good, I can't-- I went to a school there that was a French nun school. That was the only school that was available other than Japanese, and we had a nice apartment, as I stated my parents were rather affluent and so there it was fine, this was before the war. This was before American and Japanese war broke out, so you lived a very comfortable life if you had the money.

MG: Did you know that you were going to have to leave there?

MD: Oh yes. We knew that was a temporary situation. We were hoping that we could leave from there to go to Curacao where our visas were, but that didn't happen because the consulate said there you'll accomplish your mission a lot better if you go to Shanghai where it's a metropolis and more-- things can be accomplished much quicker, so that's where we went. That was just a transit visa to Kobe.

MG: So when did you arrive in Shanghai?

MD: I believe that was 1941, I think at that point.

MG: Do you remember what month?

MD: I think it was in the fall.

MG: It was before the war broke out?

MD: Oh yes, oh yeah.

MG: What happened when you arrived in Shanghai?

MD: There again, being that we had some money we lived in the French section of Shanghai...

MG: When you, when you arrived, were there any people there to greet you, was there any organization that helped you locate?

MD: Not that I can remember, no. We were in the French section, we had lived in a very beautiful apartment that was rented by a White Russian. He rented some rooms out. It was in a beautiful neighborhood, and I was enrolled in the Shanghai Jewish School which was on Seymour Road that you'll find as you speak to other people was very, very well known. The Shanghai Jewish School was run by British Headmaster and teachers and it was a very fine school.

MG: Was it your parent's choice to live in the French Quarter?

MD: Yes, it was very, a very nice area.

MG: Did you know anything about Shanghai before you left?

MD: No, not at all.

MG: Did you have any problems with food or sanitation?

MD: Not in the French section, there, if for money you got honey.

MG: Did you ever experience any antisemitism or discrimination in Shanghai?

MD: No, none, none.

MG: Now who did you mingle with?

MD: The people that were on our ship, the people that came from our town; there were lots of friends of the family and their children, and basically that was it.

MG: What about the Sephardic community?

MD: We really didn't mingle with them.

MG: The Chinese?

MD: No.

MG: The Japanese?

MD: No, that's before Japan took over Shanghai. This was before time 1940; when they took over that's when things changed.

MG: When was that?

MD: I would say closer to '41 if I recall correctly; and you had to register at that point...

MG: What year did you arrive in Shanghai?

MD: '40.

MG: In '40?

MD: '40.

MG: ... '41? Okay, '40.

MD: And in '41 the Japanese occupied Shanghai you could go back in history when they occupied China. And being that we were Jewish we had to register and leave the French section and were put in a ghetto area in a given area of the name by Hongkew.

MG: Now were all the Jewish people placed in there?

MD: Most of us, some did not. If you arrived by a certain date beforehand you did not have to. After a certain date, you had to. If someone arrived I think before the Japanese, you know, way before that time, and there were quite a few that did not have to, and there were other reasons that people got out of having to go to the ghetto. What they were, exactly were I don't remember.

MG: So when you moved into the ghetto, what were your living conditions there?

MD: Well there again, the fact that we had money we were able to not have to go to a camp which a lot of people had to go because they had no other choice. We rented an apartment from a family that lived downstairs and we lived upstairs. It was very primitive. It was horrendously, poorly done. We all lived in one room, and there was no facility for the bathroom. They had like a wooden tub and you had to fetch hot water from a place where they sold hot water. There was no refrigeration, you had to fetch ice from a certain spot and you'd carry it in every day if you needed ice. And we lived in a lane where there was mostly all Chinese people. A few of us were immigrants that lived there and many times when it really rained or the weather was bad, you had to put a pot or something because it was dripping from the ceiling. So it was not the best conditions, but it still was better than being in a camp with like a barracks, I would describe it, where people had bunks and had to share one big room with maybe 20 people and so on and so forth, family.

MG: Was there a problem with food?

MD: If you had money, no.

MG: Cooking?

MD: You managed; you had coal stoves where you, you, you know you got the fire going by, with a fan, you know, you got the fire going and you were able to cook.

MG: What about your schooling?

MD: Well, when I lived as I said in the French section and went to the Shanghai Jewish School which was very well known and a wonderful school run by the English people, we had an English headmaster. Once we had to go to Hongkew-- there were two schools, one was the Kadoorie School and one was the Freysinger School. My parents chose for me to go to Freysinger because it was closer to home. It was a private school, very small and that's where I went for a while until the time when the bombs where the Americans were bombing Shanghai, and my mom was-- the school was really closed at that point, because there was no school.

MG: How old were you when you moved into the ghetto?

MD: I would say I must have been eight, eight, closer to nine maybe, eight-nine years old and that vicinity.

MG: So how much schooling did you have?

MD: Oh I had to learn English to begin with and that's where I learned in the Shanghai Jewish School when I was there. At that point when I left there my English was acceptable, and I must have gone to Freysinger maybe two years, roughly two years...

MG: Did you have any friends, any playmates?

MD: Oh, absolutely, yes, yes, friends that I chose to have as friends.

MG: Tell me about your father and what type of work did he do?

MD: That was a problem. My father at that point was 36 years old and could not make a living, and was selling his wares that we left home with, and that he just couldn't cope with at all, and that one day, December 31, 1944 he had speculated in some gold buyers and the market went way down, and he lost quite a bit of money, and committed suicide on that day. I found him.

MG: Could you tell me the circumstances?

MD: I found him hanging.

MG: Were you alone when you...?

MD: Yes, I was alone. My mom was not home at that point. She actually was in a coffee house with some friends, and I was there and she said, "Go tell Dad I will be home within a half hour or so." So I went home and that's when I found him.

MG: What did you do?

MD: Well the people downstairs, that lived with us downstairs were almost like second parents and took charge until my mom came home. Then I knew things were very bad. My dad is buried in Shanghai, a Jewish cemetery, they have a synagogue there, with a rabbi. Our means of support was dwindling of course all together, and my mother

needed to find some way of making some money, so she kept house for a very prominent surgeon in that time, his name was Dr. Flathouse [phonetic]...

MG: Was he Jewish?

MD: Yes, he was in the ghetto. You couldn't leave the ghetto unless you got permission to leave, and that's basically how I raised myself at that point. When my father committed suicide I was 10 ½ at that point, and the people downstairs were especially good to me and I'll never forget them. They're in Israel now and I visit them.

MG: What were their names?

MD: Roughouser [phonetic] and Goodheart [phonetic], so there was a daughter and husband living on one level and parents were downstairs and we lived above them.

MG: Did you have any interaction with the Chinese?

MD: Not good experiences.

MG: Well, what were the experiences?

MD: I can recall my mother sending me to the food store one day for a loaf of bread, and I was walking home from the bakery and the loaf of bread under my arm, and they, they were very quick the Chinese. You got to watch them, they grabbed the bread right out of my hand. I was petrified, scared to death and we daren't say anything or antagonize them because they are like flies. They surround you like ants. They're just so, you don't speak Chinese especially, you know, they're-- you're afraid of them because you're outnumbered and there's so many of them all over you. It is best to keep walking and just pay no attention.

MG: Did you have contact with them in your daily life?

MD: No.

MG: And what about...?

MD: Nothing.

MG: What about the Japanese?

MD: Well the Japanese, a lot of Jewish people didn't make it out of the ghetto because you needed permission to leave the ghetto and Kobota I think his name was, he was a horrible individual. If he didn't like the way you parted your hair, he would put you in that jail that he had there on the premises, and there you perished because you got all kinds of diseases.

MG: Did you have any contact with the Japanese yourself?

MD: Not me.

MG: What happened after your father died as far as your food, supplies, your...

MD: Well as I said my mother worked for a surgeon, and she got paid for her working, you know, and that's how we lived, from that.

MG: Once the school was closed what did you do every day?

MD: What did I do? Well, I was an adult at that point already.

MG: How old were you?

MD: I was 10 ½, 11 years old and it's not like the same in the states. I had responsibilities, I was told to shop, to do whatever I had to do, the chores. My mom was not home, therefore I was on my own, and had friends and you do some reading, we certainly had no television, we had no radio, we had-- you went with some friends in the area, occasionally, you know.

MG: Were you involved in any organizations?

MD: No.

MG: Any sports?

MD: Not at all.

MG: And how long did this continue?

MD: Well the war ended six months later and my whole life changed after that. My mother got a job and in the biggest PX in the officers' club and she met a very, very fine Jewish colonel and he took over for us. He brought us to the states, he adopted me, sent me to the American school, and was transferred to Beijing, China which we followed him in '46 and things became a lot better.

MG: Let me go back.

MD: Sure.

MG: When-- during the war, now after your father died, did you ever, do you remember any of the bombing that took place?

MD: Yes, absolutely.

MG: Tell me about that.

MD: Okay. The Americans bombed us and where the ghetto was there was a lot of industry obviously and they were trying to get to that industry by factories, whatever, I don't remember exactly, an ammunition factory, and when the sirens were going at night we ran to a jail because it had, wasn't far from our house, a big jail and it had an underground type of safety area, and this is where a lot of us ran to until it quieted down, and I can recall, this is funny, one night the sirens blew and Mom said, "Let's get going, Let's go," and I was in my nightgown, I didn't have time to get dressed, and I thought I had something hanging on a hanger, so I grabbed the hanger, I figured I'd be able to dress on the way, and there was nothing on the hanger and I'm running just with a plain hanger to this jail where we all thought that was safe and that, that's about it.

MG: Were there other bombings?

MD: Yes, it also hit a Jewish camp and killed a lot of our immigrants, a lot of Jewish people.

MG: Was there anyone killed that you knew?

MD: Yes, some friends of my parents, yes.

MG: During the time that you were in Shanghai did your parents or did you ever attend synagogue?

MD: Oh yes, there was an Orthodox synagogue and on High Holy Days we always attended the synagogue wasn't too far from us, it was more than walking distance plus you didn't have cars but you had rickshaws, you know. Yes, of course.

MG: When your mother married, did you move out of the area?

MD: My mother married in the United States.

MG: Oh. So when did you come to the United States?

MD: 1947, October 1st.

MG: How did you leave Shanghai?

MD: By ship which took three weeks to get to San Francisco.

MG: Now how was that arranged, that you could leave there?

MD: My father got all the documents in Washington.

MG: When you say your father...?

MD: My stepfather.

MG: What was his name?

MD: David Bare [phonetic].

MG: So...

MD: That was my name. As a matter of fact, I changed my name to Bare.

MG: Well you-- he arranged for you to leave then?

MD: Yes.

MG: And he was not your stepfather at the time?

MD: No, but my mother left as a war bride.

MG: Even though they weren't married?

MD: Yes, a war bride that's you know, not married. He got all the documents in Washington. As a war bride you could bring your bride over, there was a law regarding that and I came on a visitor's visa, and I was allowed to stay in this country for six months. Then my, my stepfather-- I can't even say that word, stepfather because he's so good to me-- took me to Montreal, Canada and brought me in on the quota system, because it was easy to get the quota in Canada, and I was there for one day only and headed back.

[Tape one, side one ended.]

Tape one, side two:

MG: Tape one, side two, interview with Myra Davis. My name is Marcia Goldberg. Mrs. Davis we were discussing your coming to the United States and going to Canada, coming back, and what happened then?

MD: All right and then since my stepfather who was a colonel in the United States Army, we were transferred to Fort Jackson, South Carolina. That's where my half-brother was born.

MG: Now when did your mother marry?

MD: October 12, 1947.

MG: And when were you adopted by your father?

MD: In South Carolina through the legal courts and documents.

MG: And where did you live after that?

MD: We were in South Carolina till 1949 and I went to high school there, in Columbia, South Carolina for two years. After that my father got orders to go overseas to Europe and that was 1949 at that point, and we was stationed in Linz, Austria, where I graduated the American Dependent High School in 1950. At that point, my father being so good to me said, "Take a year off. Let's go traveling." He took me to Paris as a graduation present in 1951 for two weeks. I went to Venice with three of my friends and Switzerland, and after the first year I decided I got to do something more than that, and I speak foreign languages; I got a job with the United States Government as a translator.

MG: Where do you live now?

MD: I live in Florida.

MG: Where?

MD: In Boca Raton, Florida.

MG: Are you married?

MD: Yes, for 45 years.

MG: What is your husband's name?

MD: Arnold Davis.

MG: Do you have children?

MD: Yes, I do. I have two children, I have a son, my son will be 41 next month, and I have a daughter that's been married 15 years and she's 37.

MG: Do you have grandchildren?

MD: Yes, I do. I have a grandson, 11 ½ and a little granddaughter of 8.

MG: Did you ever go back to Shanghai?

MD: No, I have no desire to.

MG: Why is that?

MD: I don't like the Chinese people that much, I don't have fond memories, and I see no reason to go back.

MG: Did you ever go back to Lithuania?

MD: No.

MG: Do you have any desire to return there?

MD: Eventually it kind of would be nice to see where my roots began, and if I, you know had the opportunity I would not refuse.

MG: When you reflect back on your experiences in Shanghai, how do you think it's affected your life?

MD: It matured me very quickly. It showed me that material things are important to have, otherwise you suffered a lot more, and I've made some very good friends, the ones that traveled with us through the years and at this particular reunion I've met them again-- very pleasant.

MG: Thank you very much.

MD: You're very welcome.

[Tape one, side two ended; interview ended.]