OLD LIVES, NEW LIVES: SOVIET JEWISH WOMEN IN MINNESOTA

Interview with Esther Shor

Interviewed by Linda Schloff and Felicia Weingarten

Interviewed on April 11 and 12, 1991
at the Saint Paul home of Mrs. Shor

Note: Mrs. Shor spoke a mixture of English and Yiddish. In order for the interview to make sense, some liberties were taken with the translation. ( ) indicate where English words were added by interviewer, Linda Schloff in order to make Mrs. Shor's answers more intelligible to someone not familiar with Yiddish sentence construction.

LS: The first thing I want you to tell us is your telephone number. That's an easy way to get started, isn't it?

ES: 698-8699.

LS: And what is your birthdate, when were you born?

ES: May 10, 1917.

LS: And where were you born?

ES: Riga, Latvia.

LS: And was that an independent republic in 1917?

ES: It was Russia.

LS: And how long did you live in Riga?

ES: Until I came here.

LS: When did you come to America?

LS: The next thing I wanted to ask you about is very shortly, or compactly, your education. Let's start with high school.

ES: It's eleven years of gymnasium.

LS: And after the gymnasium?

ES: Medical school.

LS: How many years did you attend medical school?

ES: Four, until the war.

LS: The next question has to do with your occupation. Were you a physician during the war or were you a *feldsher*?

ES: *Feldsher* is a doctor's assistant and is a higher [more skilled and responsible position] than a regular nurse in Europe. I worked in a *Bikur Cholim*, in a Jewish hospital, practicum, *Bikur Cholim*.

LS: Then your title was *feldsher*, is that correct?

ES: Yes.

LS: And then, during the war?

ES: Until the war was beginning, and then I was in the army.

LS: You were drafted into the army, into the army medical corps?

ES: The first three months in the *partisans*.

LS: And then you were in the Russian army?

ES: Yes.

LS: What organizations were you active in in Riga?
ES: Betar Trumpeldor.

LS: Which is a Zionist revisionist...

ES: Jabotinsky group.

LS: Right.

ES: All our family, our children, all seven children.

LS: When did you get married?

ES: In 1940.

LS: In Riga?

ES: Yes.

LS: Where in Riga?

ES: My husband is a second husband.

LS: Yes, I know. Did you get married in a synagogue?

ES: Oh yes: chupah, synagogue. I have my pictures.

LS: What was your first husband's name?


LS: And what did he do?

ES: He was an engineer...

LS: An electrical engineer?

ES: Yes.

LS: What happened when the war broke out?
ES: He was killed in the war.

LS: In the beginning?

ES: In 1943.

LS: Did he also join the partisans? You said you were a member of the partisans.

ES: He was, yes, at first, but I couldn't find him [unclear], when he was separated.

FW: Esther, where was he killed, did he die fighting in the partisans or in the Red Army?

ES: In the Red Army, in 1943. Partisans was (lasted) a very short time, for three months. Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia came to the border, to the Russian border.

LS: Essentially, the partisans got pushed back into the Russian border?

ES: Yes.

LS: What was your mother's name?

ES: Chaya, Chaya Riva.

LS: And what was her maiden name?

ES: Tsiser.

LS: And your father's name?

ES: Abram Levin.

LS: Do you know when your mother was born?

ES: No.
LS: Do you know about how old she was when she died?

ES: Everybody, the whole family, was killed in the Holocaust, 47 people.

FW: Approximately what year?

ES: In 1942, I think.

LS: Were they taken to the camps?

ES: There was a camp, Meshbark Camp, a special camp from(near) Riga.

LS: Did you have brothers and sisters?

ES: Six, with me, seven.

FW: How many brothers and how many sisters?

ES: Three brothers and four sisters.

LS: Could you just give me their names?

ES: Yosif, the oldest, Chayim and Yehoshiva.

LS: And your sisters?

ES: Shoshana, Aviva and Bella.

LS: Now, the last thing on this page was, how many children did you have?

ES: One son.

LS: And his name was?

ES: Gregory.

LS: And when was he born?
ES: 1953.

LS: What sort of schooling did your parents have? You said that you went to a gymnasium. Did your parents also go to a gymnasium?

ES: My father had a shoe store. My mother was a doctor, a heart doctor.

LS: So your mother went to a medical school?

ES: Medical school, yes. And my dream was too.

LS: And your father?

ES: My father had [unclear], but he had a shoe store in Riga.

LS: And where did you live in Riga? I assume in Riga—and pardon my ignorance—there were neighborhoods where poor Jews lived, there were neighborhoods where middle class Jews lived, and there were neighborhoods where wealthy Jews lived. Is that so? How would you describe your neighborhood?

ES: Not rich and not poor, middle. It was a hard life, it was not easy for Jewish people.

LS: Did you live in a home of your own or did you live in an apartment?

ES: We had a wonderful apartment.

LS: How many people lived in the building?

ES: It was three buildings with a courtyard.

LS: So how many families lived in each building?

ES: One, but until the Russians came to the house.

FW: One in each apartment. She is asking how many in each unit.
ES: One.

FW: How many floors?

ES: Six.

FW: And how many on each floor, how many doors?

ES: Two on each floor.

LS: So there were twelve families in each building, approximately.

FW: In the basement also?

ES: Yes.

FW: Probably, twelve to fifteen in each.

LS: And were they all Jewish?

ES: No. Latvian, German. Jewish people there were two families.

LS: Did everyone get along pretty well?

ES: Yes, until the Russians came. It was before, in Latvia.

FW: You mean, until 1941, till the war broke out.

ES: Yes.

LS: Your parents, where had they been born?

ES: My father was born in Belorussia, [the town of ] Borisov.

LS: And your mother?

ES: My mother in Latvia.

LS: So why did your father come to Latvia to live?
ES: My father? Why he came to Latvia? To my mother, maybe.

LS: I noticed that all your sisters and brothers--sisters in particular--had Hebrew names.

ES: Because all our children received education only in a Hebrew school, in a Hebrew gymnasium. Hebrew was the language for our children, for my brothers and sisters--everybody understood Hebrew. In the family--Yiddish.

LS: You spoke Yiddish at home? You spoke Hebrew at school? And Latvian on the streets, right?

ES: Yes.

LS: And did you also learn German at school?

ES: German, yes, and Yiddish and Latvian. No Russian.

LS: How many children went to this particular school?

ES: Everybody, all children.

FW: No, two hundred, one hundred? How big?

ES: In our gymnasium? The building, it was seven floors, but office and a lot of...

FW: How many children were in your class?

ES: In our class was 37.

FW: This is approximate, eleven grades multiplied by 37.

LS: Was the whole philosophy of the school Betar or were there other Zionist [unclear]?

ES: It was a Zionist gymnasium. Of course, everything from Palestine. When I came to Palestine I knew all corners.
LS: What about the religious aspect? Were your parents at all religious Jews? How did they celebrate holidays? Did they go to the synagogue?

ES: All the holidays: Seder and Chanukah...

FW: What about Kosher? They kept Kosher?

ES: All Kosher. A week before, two weeks--

LS: The whole house was being turned upside down. I am talking about Passover.

ES: We got tired...

LS: ...tired from all the cooking...

ES: Meshugah (crazy).

LS: Tired from all the craziness.

FW: Did they take a streetcar on Saturday and write on Saturday or were they Shomrei Shabbat.

ES: No, Shabbat is Shabbat.

LS: Shomrei Shabbat means that they didn't drive, they observed...

ES: I had a zayde (grandfather), a rov(rabbi), a gaon (learned man) but not in Riga, but in a small town in Latvia.

LS: OK, your grandfather was a rabbi...

ES: It's not a grandfather; it's my mother's cousin's father, but they grew up together.

LS: And he was a great scholar? OK. Did anyone else live in your apartment, besides your parents and the seven children? Were there any grandparents living with you or any servants?
ES: My grandparents were not in Riga.

LS: Were there any servants?

FW: Did you have a maid in the house?

ES: Sometimes, once a week or twice.

LS: As far as your parents' friends, were they people of the same economic level as your parents or did they choose their friends according to their Zionism? Who were their closest friends?

ES: The same. Sometimes not Jewish too, some came to our house. We had a very close friend, a German family, a very-very close, and when we got married, they gave us a gift--apartment in their building.

LS: A German family gave you an apartment?

ES: Yes. And brought us from Paris very special curtains and a big-big China service. Oh, he was like a father to me.

LS: What did he do?

ES: Buildings, [unclear]

FW: He was in the construction business.

LS: How did your parents become friends with them?

ES: They had a big-big factory. My father had a shoe store, and not only a shoe store--it was bags and plastic things, leather goods. Very close friends.

FW: Was he a Catholic or a Protestant, this German friend? What religion was he?

ES: I don't know, but it was an excellent family.
LS: Did you always go to school that had only Jewish children? When you were young, when you were eight years old, were all of your classmates Jewish?

ES: Yes, yes.

LS: Did you have any non-Jewish friends?

ES: After the war at work I had a lot of non-Jewish friends, but until the Russians came, we didn't.

LS: So while you were growing up, all of your friends were Jewish? Is that correct?

ES: (Yes) Only in the organization and in school.

LS: Did you belong to any organizations that had non-Jewish people?

ES: No. It was only Jewish organizations.

LS: What sorts of clubs did you belong to when you were growing up, besides the Zionist clubs? Did you go to summer camps?

ES: From our organization.

LS: From your Zionist organization?

ES: Yes. Camp and school--Hachsharah (a Zionist youth organization)--only...

FW: It was organized by your school?

ES: Yes.

LS: That's very interesting. You were planning to make Aliyah to go to Palestine? Is that what you were thinking?

ES: I never dreamt of America.
LS: But you said you went to Hachsharah. That prepares people for life in Palestine. Were all of your friends planning to go?

ES: Sure. I was with my father three times.

FW: Your father was in Palestine three times? He went to visit and came back here?

ES: He was president of Keren Kayemet (Jewish National Fund).

LS: How would you describe Keren Kayemet?

LS: Jewish National Fund. And he was the president?

ES: In Minneapolis you have Keren Kayemet.

FW: In Riga and must have gone to Israel obviously to represent it.

ES: And all Jewish families had a blue box with a white Mogen David (star of David) to put money in for Keren Kayemet.

LS: Right.

FW: We grew up the same way.

LS: When you went to the university, that was the first time you had classes with non-Jewish, is that correct?

ES: In medical school?

LS: Yes.

ES: Yes. With non-Jewish, a lot.

LS: Did that seem strange to you? And how did that go?

ES: Not bad.

LS: Did you make any friends there?
ES: Yes, sure.

LS: Tell me about your wedding, your first wedding. You told us about your German friend who brought drapes form Paris and a China set. How many people came to your wedding?

ES: Maybe sixty.

FW: Where was it, in your house?

ES: The wedding?

FW: The chupah?

ES: In a social hall.

LS: That's the way it was here too, for many years. And the meal was there too?

ES: But the chupah was at home.

LS: Oh, I see. So the wedding ceremony itself was at home, and then you went to a social hall. You had dancing afterwards?

ES: Dancing and big tables.

LS: Do you remember what was served at your wedding? What the food was?

ES: Jewish food.

LS: Tell me what it was, what sort of food?

ES: It was tsimmes with chicken, salad, gefilte fish...

FW: What about ptcha--jellied calvesfoot?

ES: Oh ptcha...

FW: Herring?
ES: Herring, marinated...

FW: And *schmaltz* herring also?

ES: [unclear] In Latvia was the best fish--smoked fish--the best, sprats...

FW: What about lox?

ES: Not lox but caviar--red and black. It was not a problem. Not only at my wedding, but in Riga.

FW: A lot of nice food? And you had bakery and wine?

ES: Bread--I don't know--maybe thirty kinds of bread.

FW: And wine, vodka? And sweets?

ES: Wine. Yes.

LS: Sounds like a beautiful wedding.

ES: Wasn't a problem. The same like here. *Halvah, figen* (figs) *boxer*...

FW: St. John's bread...

ES: *Taiglach, eingemachs, ingbalach*...

FW: *Ingbalach*--I think from carrots, sugar, ingber...

LS: Where did you live? Did you live in the apartment that this German couple gave you?

ES: The apartment that the German gave.

LS: How big was that apartment?

FW: You mean he gave it to you free to live in?
FW: How many rooms did you have?
ES: Four.
FW: And a bathroom?
ES: Big-big windows.
FW: Bathroom also? Toilet and shower?
ES: Everything, bidet. You don't have it. And when I asked here, "Where's the bidet?" nobody knew. How to live(without a bidet)?
LS: How can we live without a bidet? You're right. [All laugh]
LS: When you got married, were you done with medical school?
ES: Yes.
LS: And you were working in Bikur Cholim hospital. Is that correct?
ES: Yes.
LS: And were you happy with your work? Did you enjoy what you were doing there?
ES: Very much. It was my dream.
LS: How many years did you work in the hospital?
ES: From the time I finished my school until the war was beginning, I think, a year and 2 months.
LS: And then the war broke out, in June 1941? Once the war broke out, did you go immediately to join the partisans?
ES: Yes, [Maybe the third day they asked everyone (to join), not just me.

FW: Esther, when the war broke out, the Russians pulled out, right? The Russians left Riga? Who came in?

ES: The Russians... [End Tape 1 Side 1]

[Tape 1 Side 2]

FW: Let me ask you a question: in 1919 Latvia became independent and became a separate state, without the Russians?

ES: I don't remember, I don't know...

FW: By 1939 Latvia was taken over by the Soviets; in 1941, when the war broke out between the Nazi Germany and Russia and the pact was broken, Latvia became occupied by the Nazis.

LS: Let me go back a step. In 1939 did the Russians occupy the country?

ES: In 1939? To us it came in 1941, but I think in Poland, in Lithuania...

FW: In Poland and--I am not sure about Lithuania--in Poland the Nazis came and it was the first country to fall. They came in September of 1939. In Lithuania, Latvia and Baltic nationality countries, they occupied in 1941, when the Nazis broke the Non-aggression Pact with the Soviet Union.

LS: What I meant to ask you was when Latvia lost its independence in 1939, did it appear to you that the Russians were in charge, between 1939 and 1941?

ES: I don't know. Once they occupied, I remember...

LS: When you say "they," you are talking about the Nazis, right?
ES: No. In 1941, the Russians.

LS: The Russians occupied? So that was a time of great change. But then, when did the Nazis come?

ES: The Nazis came before the war was beginning in... 1942. In the beginning, from 1942.

LS: What happened in 1941--this is the way you remember it and this is what I am going to put down--when the Russians came in, then what did you do, when the Russians occupied the country?

ES: It, we were afraid to sleep that night. We were afraid of going to Siberia.

LS: You were afraid to go to Siberia?

ES: Because my father was president of Keren Kayemet, our children, everybody in Betar and Trumpeldor, and we lost our freedom, we lost it, I remember, in one night, and some...

LS: A knock on the door?

ES: Yes, very, very frightened.

LS: People were taken away to Siberia?

ES: Because every night somebody was gone.

LS: Somebody was gone? They were sent to Siberia?

ES: In Siberia, in prison. Wake up--somebody, our neighbor, wake up--somebody, a good friend...

LS: I see, they were disappearing. What did the government ask you to do? Could you fight the Russians? Did people go to the forest and try to fight them?

ES: When they met the Russians, some people were very happy.
LS: Sure, there must have been many communists in Latvia too.

ES: And songs and dance and everything, but some people were very afraid.

LS: What did you do those three months--we are talking about the three months when you were with the *partisans*. What were the *partisans* doing?

ES: Three months? I was in the hospital, the same thing.

FW: Esther, in summer of 1941, the Russians were still in Latvia. What were they doing? Trying to stay and fight?

ES: In the three months, what were the Russians doing? Who knows what but they tried to stay and to live and not to mention [Yiddish].

LS: (translating) "Trying to make people unhappy?"

ES: But everybody was afraid something...

FW: When do you remember the Nazi army, the German army, coming in? Were you there, in Latvia when they came in?

ES: When the Germans came in Latvia, I wasn't in Riga, we were in a *partisan* group.

LS: Where was that?

ES: If I had stayed in Riga, I wouldn't be here and talk to you.

LS: Where were you? Were you still in Latvia or were you in Russia by then?

ES: In Latvia, places, in the small, small towns, in the forest. Only in night time we had a chance to go. After that we left there and in Lithuania and in Estonia. And from that point we came to the Russian border--Leningrad.
FW: Did you understand that they went through Lithuania and Estonia, and from Estonia towards the Soviet Union?

LS: Right. And then for the rest of the war you fought in the Soviet Army and you were a *feldsher* in the Soviet Army? Is that correct?

FW: On Russian territory.

ES: Under Leningrad, there was a town [unclear] and in this town I lost my mind--I was sick, you read it.

LS: Yes, I have read it and actually I guess I am a little more interested now in what happened after the war. So I am not going to make you suffer through the war again. Did you come back to Riga after the war? When did you come back to Riga?

ES: I came back in 1948.

FW: Alone or with your husband?

ES: In 1948 I came back from the army.

FW: Alone? No husband? Were you married to Isaak?

ES: I married Isaak in 1951.

FW: In Riga?

ES: In Riga. But until 1948, I was in Romania, in a hospital.

FW: Working?

ES: Yes.

FW: What city?

ES: I was in Romania, in a big city... I was in a lot of cities but the last time in a big city on the border from Bessarabia.

FW: Iassi?
ES: No. Ships to Israel were going...

FW: Constanza?

ES: Constanza.

LS: And you worked in a hospital there? Why did you decide to go back to Riga?

ES: There was a man in Romania and he asked us, families from Riga, Jewish people, he asked us to go to Palestine, but I was thinking maybe somebody, maybe somebody is alive from our family, and I must check.

LS: You had to check it out. So you went back and...

ES: And after that I couldn't leave anymore.

FW: You couldn't travel any more. She couldn't leave, she was not permitted to leave.

LS: Did you find many Jews alive?

ES: I found Jewish [people]. Somebody was in the army too, and somebody I met in Hungary and they were back in Riga, and somebody from other cities, but from people who were in Riga, nobody was alive.

FW: What she is saying is that there were Hungarian Jews who were in the Red Army and passed through Latvia and there were people from other cities and places in Riga, but from the pre-war Jewish population she met very few if any.

ES: [unclear]

FW: She is saying that she was in many places.

LS: So you were stuck there, and what did you work at in Riga?
ES: When I came back, the first time [Yiddish]

FW: (translating) At first she was just crying.

ES: The second, I received from voenkomat [district military headquarters] a room in a big building, it was an apartment--one room.

LS: What is voenkomat?

FW: It had to be a central office that was in charge of dispensing apartments, and you had so many meters per person. [See above; voenkomat had control over the distribution of housing to military personnel.]

LS: You got one room, and did they find you a job?

ES: In this building, in this apartment was a family from Belgium, a consul in Latvia, and they got my parents--my brothers and my sisters--they were my parents...

FW: You mean that they were like your parents to you? They were Christian people?

ES: Yes. Not these people [Yiddish]

FW: She said that if it weren't for that Belgian couple, the consul and his wife, she would not be alive.

ES: They gave me my life back. Like a daughter, because I did not have (anything) to eat and not clothes, not a thing because I came with a small bag.

LS: You came with a small bag from the army and you had nothing of your own?

ES: Yes, and I got very,very sick with encephalitis.

LS: You were sick or they were?
ES: I got sick.

FW: When you came back to Riga, you became ill?

ES: Yes, from all [Yiddish]

FW: From all the troubles.

ES: Sometimes you ask me something or sometimes you give an address, and I remember they gave me an address where they gave furniture, and I can't remember. It happened now too, a moment and I can't...

FW: How long were you ill?

ES: I was very, very sick, a funeral, and the people gave me my life... a month or two.

LS: Life goes on no matter how awful it is, it goes on, and you are here and you are here as living evidence of that. Once you started feeling better and you had to look for work, who found work for you or did you find work for your yourself?

ES: When I got better, in maybe one block there was a clinic from our building...

FW: ...a clinic for the neighborhood, a medical clinic for the area?

ES: Yes, like United Hospital, but not so big. It was one block from our building.

LS: Were you assigned to work there or what?

ES: There was a Jewish head doctor--now he is in New Jersey. He cam a year ago maybe, and I send him very often money because a wonderful family, a wonderful person, a head in our clinic, and he made me happy [Yiddish?]

FW: She was very sick but he took her into the hospital...
ES: ...and he did everything for me.

FW: And you sent the money to him while he was in Latvia?

ES: When he came to America--it was a year ago maybe--I have letters from him.

LS: Tell me, when you came back, the Russians were firmly in charge and Latvia was a Russian republic?

ES: Yes, it was Russian, but he did for me everything.

LS: So he was able to work around the system?

ES: Yes, and I began to work and back in the university, without exams--it was a law when you were in the army, you don't need exams.

FW: Entrance exams were waived.

LS: Why were you back in the university?

ES: Maybe one year I was in the university, but I couldn't study. My head was completely, after encephalitis...

LS: You couldn't concentrate any longer? But did you continue working at the clinic?

ES: (I was an) Excellent worker, they wrote me a letter (saying), one more hard worker, one more [Yiddish--smart] and one more person who is responsible I didn't meet in my life...

FW: He never met in his life who was as responsible and smart and as good a worker.

ES: Not to respect you, I can't.

LS: I would assume that there were no more meetings of Zionists by 1948 or were there? Russia recognized the State of Israel, but were there Zionist groups still in Latvia?
ES: No more Zionist groups, no more Zionist organizations, and everybody, the rest of our people were in prison, in Siberia, who died in Siberia, and they don't have all papers from our names, nothing, but people, Jewish people who knows--Felicia was in Betar, I was in Betar, for example--and you never were sure that these people, they wasn't K.G.B.

LS: Did you have to join the Communist Party? Did they put pressure on you to join the Communist Party?

ES: Never. It was my good luck because seventeen years and more I worked in this hospital and everybody [unclear] you must be a communist leader because you are a hard worker and I read a lot about medicine, about heart attack or with kidneys or some [unclear] I was preparing...

FW: She did a lot of papers and talked about different illness...

ES: About sickness, and so you must be a communist.

FW: A man who was a deputy, a head, insisted that she join the party when the head doctor Sokolovsky was gone.

LS: So you joined?

ES: Every time I answered, "I am not ready." (He would say,) "You were in the army, you are an excellent worker, you are [unclear]. How come?" (I answered,) "I am not ready for this. I will do everything..." but I was surprised that in the hospital from Red Cross...

LS: You were a president of Red Cross?

ES: Yes, please I will do it. Our hospital had [unclear]

FW: She was representing the workers who worked in the hospital.

ES: But when I left, they gave me a special cup...
FW: But she kept stalling, that's what she is saying, saying she is not ready to join the party.

ES: A special 12 cups..

LS: Oh, they are very lovely, with a red cross in the center?

ES: Yes.

LS: It's a beautiful cup, Esther.

ES: Not one cup, but twelve and everything.

LS: But why didn't you join the party?

ES: They weren't sure that I was going some place. I told them I had to retire, I am very tired, I'd like to be retired, it's enough, but they didn't know that I am going to America.

FW: You didn't tell them?

ES: No.

FW: It wasn't safe to tell them.

ES: Oh no.

LS: But why didn't you join the party?

ES: Why? Because in (the) time from (I was in) the army...

FW: She got to know them very well. (said ironically)

LS: And you didn't like what you saw?

ES: You'd like to hear a small story? For example, one day came three people--two people, two men--to the hospital. One was *polkovnik* [colonel], a big man, and one [Yiddish - common man].

FW: He was an orderly and he came as the *polkovnik's* adjutant.
Adjutant, and he was with all [Yiddish - friendly with the staff].

The adjutant he was...

...with all [unclear], and after that [Yiddish - it turned out that the one cleaning shoes was] a K.G.B. general.

They made the adjutant, the one who cleaned polkovnik's boots, they made him a general in the K.G.B.

And the polkovnik, (was a)nothing..

...he stayed the way [unclear]

Do you understand it? The one who cleaned the shoes asked me, "How's your opinion of Olga Makshanova, is she a good worker, is she politically correct?"

He asked you about other people?

Yes, and Olga--her father was a communist, a leader, her father was a general--she was a communist leader, she was the oldest nurse in the whole hospital, but he had to ask about Olga. But Olga, he asked about me. I am from Latvia, I am not Russian citizen, but I am an enemy.

So what you could not stand was the underhandedness and the deviousness?

He was asking Olga about her and her about Olga.

And there was a Jewish head doctor, and he told me, "Fira, do you understand what's going on?" And I said, "Thank you, I understand very well." An he told me, "you are very, very smart, and I am glad for you."

So you had to speak a certain language and keep your mouth shut?
ES: And it was more, more... But I understood what's going on with Russian K.G.B. and only somebody to put in prison, and a lot more.

LS: Surely they wanted a lot more, so that's why you didn't want to join the party?

ES: Oh no, no. I had a lot of tsuris (troubles) because of them because "why you don't like to be communist," but I gave my word, no, and no, and no. Sometimes, all my years, all the time, I was thinking to go to Israel. When they asked me--in all papers, when I wrote, I wrote that my oldest brother is in Israel...

FW: Wasn't that dangerous for you because when they knew you had somebody...

ES: In all papers, because I prepared this and some time I had to go to Israel. To whom? Why? I had my oldest brother. My oldest brother was killed, but my girlfriend's husband is Yosif Levin too, from Dvinsk, from Dauvgapils, and we went together to Hachsharah, and his wife came to us to visit the family and I talked to her and [Yiddish- told them to pretend that] Yosif is my brother [unclear].

FW: I am going to say that Yosif is my brother because they had the same last name.

ES: And the K.G.B. when they asked me to come to K.G.B. one time, they asked me, "Why are you not going to Israel? You have a brother in Israel." "Yes, I have a brother but [unclear]" "Why your brother can't come to Riga?" These questions. I was in K.G.B.

LS: How many times were you brought to the K.G.B.?

ES: In K.G.B. I was one day, but they came to the clinic a lot, a few times...

FW: To spy around?

ES: Yes, in the clinic, a head doctor, it was a Jewish woman and a leader from the Communist Party in the office, and they asked me to come [Yiddish]
FW: And they said you were not bringing up your son correctly? Why?

ES: Because I wrote letters to my friend in Israel, and you don't like to be in the Communist Party. I told them for my son I am responsible--it's my son, not yours.

LS: Were you afraid of them?

ES: Yes, and one time I had a phone call--they knew very well I worked in the afternoon, after 2 o'clock, one day and one day in the morning, but I was home, "I am polkovnik from K.G.B. and I'd like to see you." [End Tape 1 Side 2]

[Tape 2 Side 1]

LS: ...you being asked by the K.G.B. why you were bringing up your son the way you were, and you told them that your son was your business, but you took a terrible risk in keeping letters going to Israel.

ES: And they asked me why I wrote letters to Israel.

LS: And you told them?

ES: I worked with this doctor seventeen years, side by side--this Dr. Rappaport, she visited us this summer... [?]

FW: Baumgartner. You mean Dr. Rappaport was one of your former bosses?

ES: She was one of my friends. I worked with her--she was a surgeon...

LS: Was she a member of the Communist Party?

ES: She is in Israel fourteen--no, seventeen years.
FW: You told me she came to visit.

ES: Yes, and I worked with her seventeen years, side by side, and I wrote her letters. The KGB asked why (I wrote) letters to these people?

LS: So you wrote letters because you worked with her and she was your friend?

ES: Yes.

LS: I want to go back a little bit. You told us before, at the beginning of tape A, you remarried in 1951. Obviously you were picking up the strands of your life again. Can you tell us a little bit about how you met your husband, your second husband.

ES: I met his brother in the army.

FW: They were Romanian Jews, right?

ES: Romanian Jewish, and then I met him in an open train, wounded...

FW: These were trains that carried wounded army personnel.

ES: And I helped him...

FW: She was changing his bandages...

ES: And he gave me the address from his brother and sister.

LS: And where did they live?

ES: They lived in Central Asia.

LS: You never went there, did you?

FW: What part of Asia?
ES: Near Tashkent, Yangiyul, it's a small town.

FW: Where is Tashkent? Is it Uzbekistan?

ES: Yes, Uzbekistan.

LS: Did you go there?

ES: They gave me their address. I wrote him a letter that I met his brother and he was very badly wounded, and after that we corresponded.

FW: When did you first meet him?

ES: When he was back in Bessarabia... Maybe in 1950.

FW: When they came back from Uzbekistan to Bessarabia? Was it in Constanza?

ES: It was not in Constanza, in Belgorod-Dnestrovsk, not far from Odessa, on the border.

FW: On the border between Bessarabia and the Soviet Union?

ES: Because we were going with a *parom* [ferryboat] from Odessa to Bessarabia.

FW: What's a *parom*?

ES: A ship...

FW: Barge?

ES: Barge. [see above]

LS: Was this a holiday for you then?

ES: No, they asked me to visit, they sent me money for a ticket...
LS: ...and you went there. And is that when you decided to get married?

ES: And I met my husband, and then he came to Riga and we got married.

LS: You got married in 1951, as I recall?

ES: Yes.

LS: And when was Gregory born?

ES: 1953.

LS: Was that your first pregnancy?

ES: No, second. I was pregnant with(by) my (first) husband in the war and I wrote about...I lost ...

FW: Miscarriage? You had a miscarriage?

ES: Yes.

LS: And this pregnancy, as I recall, was a very difficult pregnancy for you.

ES: Two years in bed.

LS: Who took care of the baby?

ES: My husband. [Yiddish]

FW: (translates) "He shakes over Gregory." (He trembles with love.)

LS: Gregory is everything to him, that's what you mean? When your son was growing up, obviously, he grew up in entirely different Latvia than you did. What sort of school did he go to?

ES: In a Russian school in Riga and a Russian university.
LS: Did he go to a gymnasium also?

ES: You can't go to a university without a gymnasium.

LS: Did you have Jewish friends after the war? Who were your friends?

ES: My friends were my relatives.

LS: Your closest friends after the war were your relatives?

ES: Like relatives.

LS: They were like relatives? But were they actually related to you by blood?

ES: Strange people, but very, very, very close.

LS: Who were they?

ES: From the army--five years in the army together.

LS: Were they Jewish?

ES: Yes, Jewish. A family from Riga--mother, she was a dentist, and she became (had) her graduation in Paris before the war and her husband was a pharmacist in our hospital, a son--a lawyer--he was in the army shtab [headquarters]...

FW: He was a member of the staff...

ES: And a daughter--a nurse--and their family was my family, and my mother and father, and my sister, and my brother because we went through the same thing.

LS: Were there any others?

ES: [unclear] the same thing--Latvia, enemy--not people, not Russian people, not communists. And two more--one woman, she was in the
pharmacy too, and her husband, an architect from Riga. And a girl, a nurse from Dnepropetrovsk, she was in Riga, to us she came...

FW: A Jewish girl?

ES: Yes, Jewish.

FW: Or Russian?

LS: So you accepted her even though she was Russian?

ES: Yes. And a doctor from Rostov...

FW: A Jewish doctor from Rostov?

ES: Jewish.

ES: And their parents from Rostov, they dreamt to go to Israel in war time, during the war.

FW: Did they go?

ES: No, how?

FW: I mean, after the war.

ES: [Yiddish]

FW: They said, it's a curse, "The hell with them, how do we get out of here and go to Palestine," but in Yiddish it sounds so wonderful.

ES: We got the closest...

LS: Your closest friends were Jews and had lived through the same terrible experiences as you. Did you have any Latvian friends?

FW: Latvian Christians? Did you have any friends among the Latvian Christians?
ES: A lot. In Moscow. In Moscow, three. One more in Armavil. It's not far from Baku. An Armenian doctor from Armenia. He knew the French language excellent and [Yiddish]

FW: And he disliked the Russians just like all of them did, the Soviet Russians.

ES: So when he called me here, it's not two years ago...

FW: Where from did he call?

ES: From Armenia.

FW: From Baku?

ES: Yerevan. And one family more from Yerevan called me.

FW: Also Armenian?

ES: Not Jewish. And they were very in love with us, with our family, and now every January 1, for the New Year's, they sent my girlfriend in Riga packages--wine, the best of fish, with the best of [unclear]...

FW: ...in memory of their friendship. There was a friend of hers in Riga, and in memory of the mutual friendship, they send lovely food packages from Armenia.

LS: How did you meet these Armenians? Were they working in Riga?

ES: From the army. I had worked together with him in the army.

LS: Oh I see, so it's the army experience.

FW: But Esther, after the war, when you came back from the Soviet Union, back to Riga, were the Christian Latvians your friends or did you stay with Jewish people.

ES: No, not Jewish also. Like sisters. And Olga--you remember what I told you--she was near Saratov in a small, small village, and she
had a very hard hard time--her husband [Yiddish]--deserted her, and I took her to us to Riga.

FW: Was she a communist because they came to ask you, her father was a communist--was she a communist or not?

ES: Oh yes, and I found for her a job in a sanatorium very close to Riga, and she got a very good apartment, and she was the oldest sister [head nurse] in the sanatorium. Not Jewish, (but) very close.

LS: When you came back to Riga, what was the basis for your friendship with Latvians who had stayed in Latvia during World War II? Was it because you worked in the same places or was it because you both felt the same way about the Russians?

ES: We worked together, our sorrows together, I was wounded and for six months I was in a coma, and they [unclear] me. And in one place [Yiddish--everybody slept on broken tables] And all memories, it was a very difficult time for us, a very hard time, and we got like sisters and brothers. The war experience, and then when we came to Riga, a little experience with Jewish questions, with Russian... we got very close.

LS: So your major problems were with the communists, right? That was the enemy?

ES: Yes.

LS: What sort of apartment did you live in after you got married and after Gregory was born? Was it difficult to find a place to live?

ES: In this same apartment that I told you I received, with the Belgian consul, in this same apartment, in this same room--14 square meters. It was... [shows the size]. One room. The Belgian consul left [Yiddish]...

FW: ...they suffered a lot and they eventually left.

ES: From the Russian government they finally received a visa to Belgium, and they left.
FW: But why did they have trouble? He was an official, he was an official consul?

ES: He was a consul in Latvian time.

FW: Before the war?

ES: Before the war.

LS: He was a Latvian?

FW: Ah, he was a Latvian who was a consul to Belgium, not opposite. We misunderstood. He represented the old government. That's why he had all the problems. He was finally permitted to leave.

ES: And then came other people...

FW: All in that one room?

ES: Not in one room--in one apartment--it was five rooms in the apartment.

FW: And one kitchen?

ES: And one kitchen, and one toilet, and in every room were other people. In one room next to my door, three people, but they lost their son too. In the other were two, but children--twins--they are now in Los Angeles...

FW: She had twins who live in Los Angeles, so four people lived in one room.

ES: And one kitchen and a wonderful life. (ironic)

LS: When you got married and your son was born, was there three of you living in one room?

ES: In one room, but believe me, it was so nice and clean, and when my friend, polkovnik from the army, came [Yiddish]...
FW: She pointed out to her daughter, "Tanya, open up the closet, look at the order and learn."

FW: Esther, did you have a bathtub with a shower?

ES: Yes.

FW: They had a tub and a shower.

ES: But not every time was hot water.

LS: For how long did the three of you live in that room?

ES: After [until] Gregory was six, I think, and then I changed the apartment for two rooms.

FW: Was it easy to get those two rooms?

ES: Oh, easy. [ironically]. In the same house, in the same building, in the same corridor, but my door was here and the next door. How it was easy is a very long story. "Ah, you don't like because I am a Jew! OK, I will call Voroshilov. And Voroshilov was a general in the Red Army, I gave him help." It was not right. I had nothing to do with Voroshilov. He was in the army, but he was the head in this time, [Yiddish], and I told them, "Voroshilov"--shh-shh-shh - and they were scared.

FW: She did not know the general and she did not do anything for him, but in order to get the apartment she said that she knew him, and they were impressed by the contact and by the name, and when she mentioned the name and how close she was to the general, they signed the permission for the larger apartment. [ES continues to talk throughout this.]

LS: You mean at first they didn't want to give it to you because you were Jewish?

ES: Yes.
FW: But you asked them?

ES: They don't have it and they don't have it...

FW: She said, "You don't want to give me the apartment because I am a Jew?" They didn't answer. And she said, "Well, I have a friend who is General Voroshilov." They got impressed and frightened and immediately gave her permission.

ES: I took from them keys, "Please call Voroshilov."

FW: She bluff ed. Esther, you've got a lot of nerve and courage.

ES: I knew the apartment is free and nobody living there, but they wanted money from people, but not from me, but they had people, with their stories, and everything was clear for me and I was sure that the apartment was not for me. And I was so shocked, I was so upset, "OK, you don't like to give me the apartment because I am Jewish? Call Voroshilov!" And they knew that I was in the army and everything.

LS: What was it like sharing the kitchen with four or five other families?

ES: In the other apartment it was better for me because the rooms were bigger but otherwise (it was) terrible.

FW: Did you have your own kitchen in the two-room apartment, in the new one?

ES: One kitchen, one toilet...

LS: For how many people?

ES: Five families.

FW: Esther, in the first apartment...
ES: In the other too. And when I had worked and I needed to prepare something for supper, on the same stove was a big pot with laundry. And in the bathroom [Yiddish]

FW: ...she hung up a new towel, and when she came back, somebody used it. It was filthy.

ES: An old woman, a very good old woman. Don't throw everything in toilet. Bones and everything in toilet, and the water came all over...

FW: They plugged the toilet because they threw bones and whatever else.

ES: It's hard to explain. I don't know how I am now alive.

LS: It's very interesting for Americans because we've never had to deal with those problems. Generally, most of us don't have to deal with those problems of so many people sharing facilities. Let's talk about your first apartment.

ES: Very nice. I respect all people because I worked in the clinic with very hard patients, with very sick patients, and [unclear] is in my blood--not because I am a very good person--it's in my blood to respect all people. I never waited for somebody to wash the kitchen, the toilet, and all the time, my husband, me, and sometimes the old women needed something in the store, and my husband bought it for them. I was very good with them. But changed [Yiddish]

FW: (translates) "Nothing is permanent, nothing is forever."

ES: One woman--a very nice and good woman, a Latvian, the other woman she was her sister but all years in Leningrad, and she didn't leave Leningrad...

FW: She lived through the siege of Leningrad...

ES: ...and she was very nice but old and sick [Yiddish]. (She passed away) And to the other woman came her son with a wife, with a small child, together, and her child [Yiddish]
FW: Did you understand what she is saying?

LS: I understood everything. "Very common, low-life..."

FW: And her daughter from her first marriage came also--not a very pleasant person--and a very large family--simple and rough people.

ES: In the other room was a woman, a real communist and she was a very special person, but before, in 1917-18 she ran to Russia--she was a Latvian communist--and in Russia they took her in prison because from Latvia...

FW: ...she was suspected as a spy. Why did she leave Latvia and come to the Soviet Union? But after, in 1941, when the Russians came, she came back in Latvia from prison, and she was a very [unclear] person, but she had a son and her son was a drunkard. He drunk with every.. when he found something alcoholic, he drank. And I remember, when I worked with my nevropatolog

FW: She worked in the department of neuropathology.

ES: One time, one week, she was in [unclear] and her son came to us as a drinker...

FW: He came to the department as a patient because he was an alcoholic, and Esther was helping the doctor whose hand was in a sling.

ES: A young boy, fine and good looking, and after that, in a year, they came to us in the apartment... [End Tape 2 Side 1]

[Tape 2 Side 2]

ES: ...a very nice [unclear], two children, [Yiddish, translation by FW] he used to beat her up...

FW: So there were already five persons in that one room?
ES: Yes, and then when he beat her, the children ran to us, in our apartment. I locked the door because [Yiddish, translation by FW] they ran for shelter to them. It was very [Yiddish- lively].
(Ironically)

FW: She says it was lively.

ES: After that he was very [Yiddish- angry], he wrote a letter that Esther Shor, they have on TV Israel, she likes Israel, and [Yiddish- I don't know what he wrote], and they asked me to come again.

FW: So he said that she was watching TV concerning Israel and she liked Israel and she doesn't know whatever else he made up and told them. And they called her in.

ES: And after that was a mishpat between his wife and his children.

LS: What's a mishpat?

ES: To a judge.

FW: Mishpat is a hearing.

ES: And he told the judge (about me), "It is only a woman whom I respect. She grew up [raised] our children."

LS: So what did the judge say?

ES: Why did you write the letter to the KGB? (He replied) "Oh, she is an excellent person. You can't find better person. She grew up our children."

LS: Oh, she raised...

FW: Who said that?

ES: Pyanitsa!
FW: The drunk who wrote that letter denouncing her said that she's a wonderful woman. Why did he say that, Esther, because he was sober?

ES: [unclear] the children, two boys.

FW: I don't understand.

ES: Because she has to work, the mother.

FW: But Esther, explain it to us, why on one hand he would denounce you to KGB...

ES: They wanted to send it out (away) the father because he doesn't give (because of his treatment of his) the wife and children...

FW: Oh, I see, they wanted to take away the children.

ES: Yes, from our apartment and...

LS: Now Esther, you got pregnant, you were working, you had to stop working, right? Is that correct?

ES: After that then Gregory was born.

LS: Did you go back to work after Gregory was born?

ES: Sure.

LS: Did you work full-time or part-time?

ES: I was for three years, a year in bed, two years [Yiddish]not too well...

LS: But then, when you went back to work, eight hours a day, four hours a day?

ES: From nine to two, from two to eight.

FW: Different shifts.
ES: But then I got the head of a medical station, I was by myself, my own boss and when I needed it...

LS: You took off? You said that your husband was very helpful to you. Was he unusual? Did most husbands help out as much as your husband did?

ES: No, never men can do the single thing right.

LS: So you think that he was really...

FW: Special.

LS: He took care of Gregory, he fed him, diapered him?

ES: he washed all clothes, everything.

LS: Did he shop for food?

ES: Everything.

LS: When you got better...

ES: When I was a little better, I was sitting by the stove and cleaning it sitting down.

LS: And then, when you went back to work...

ES: [unclear] (shows the scars on her thigh.)

FW: You must have been in a shock, you were wounded, right? Shrapnel.

ES: And now I can't stand on my feet.

FW: She says even now it's hard for her to stand a lot, so you can imagine what it was like after she was wounded.
ES: And after this, the whole body with clots, and a clot in my lungs, and then I was not alive (conscious). It was after Gregory's...

FW: After Gregory was born you had blood clots in the lungs?

LS: I am also curious about whether he went to a nursery school. When we think of the Soviet Union, most women think that at least in the Soviet Union there was daycare available.

FW: A creche, a place where they bring children when the mother works. Did he go to a special place so you could go to work. And Isaak had to work also. So where was the baby?

ES: The baby was with us and one time we changed.

FW: So you worked at different times, and he was always home, either with you or with Isaak.

ES: And one time he was, it was nothing regular, two children...

FW: The neighbors' two children. The drunkard?

ES: [unclear]

FW: What neighbors?

ES: Two boys from Los Angeles, there was neighbors...

FW: Oh the twin boys. And they came to stay with you also?

ES: Yes.

FW: And you took care of them? Why didn't you send your child to a daycare center?

ES: You can't find a place.

FW: Oh I see. It was crowded.
LS: So it wasn't easy to find daycare. And the parents of the twins, did they take care of Gregory sometimes?

ES: Sometimes a neighbor did from Leningrad.

LS: OK, so you sort of traded off and you managed somehow to take care of Gregory until he started. Did you ever find a place for him in a daycare center or did you have to juggle things around until he started school.

ES: No, he wasn't in the daycare.

LS: And how old was he when he started school?

ES: Seven.

FW: And before seven, preschool?

ES: And before seven, six years, and then seven years school.

LS: Then, when he went to school, did they always say, "There's the Jew. Did you feel that his teachers said, "There's the Jew."

ES: In school? Maybe two teachers, English teacher was Jewish...

FW: Did the teachers say to Gregory, "You, Jew."

ES: In school, not only to Gregory. It was a lot of people.

FW: Who said it to the children, the teachers or other children?

ES: Was two teachers who were anti-semitic,, not everybody. There were nice persons.

FW: She knew all the teachers, and there were some nice ones, some not so bad too that she knew were not very kind or nice to the Jewish children.

LS: Were there many Jewish children in the school?
ES: A lot of the Jewish children.

FW: And what was the situation between the Jewish students and the non-Jewish students? Were they friendly or not?

ES: Very. The children were very friendly. But Misha Vandas [?]--remember Vandas--

FW: Yes, I do.

ES: He was in school together with Gregory and one dentist came to visit...

FW: That's not what I asked. The Jewish children were friendly. But I am asking, were the Latvian, not Jewish students...

ES: No, they were close to each other, but you find hooligan say Zhid.

FW: You could find hooligans who would say "dirty Jew."

ES: It is up to the family how they...

FW: ...raise their children.

LS: When Gregory was growing up, I am curious to know, on the one hand it was dangerous for you to talk too much about being Jewish, on the other hand, you're Jewish to your very roots, how did you bring him up?

ES: It was very hard time because in our apartment we don't have to talk Yiddish--we couldn't--five neighbors, the only Jews were our family. First of all, it's not nice because they would...

FW: They would think that you are talking about them if you spoke in another language.

ES: Yes, not nice, and the second thing, we were afraid.

LS: So when you were in your own apartment, your own room...
FW: Did you speak Yiddish with Isaak in your own room?

ES: Yes. Not often, not all time, but sometimes we spoke Russian.

FW: But not to Gregory? With Gregory only Russian?

ES: Yes.

LS: Not Latvian?

ES: No, Russian.

LS: Why not Latvian?

ES: I don't know. I'll tell you the truth, I don't like Latvian and Gregory didn't.

FW: And the language of instruction in schools was Russian, not Latvian? It was very resented by the Latvian people.

LS: I would imagine so. That's why I would think that there would be friction.

ES: Because [unclear] are only Russian.

LS: Around you were only Russians?

ES: Yes, and we didn't need Latvian in this time.

LS: Were there any synagogues open in Riga?

ES: In Yom Kippur, Rosh Hashannah...

LS: You went to the synagogue on holidays?

ES: Yes. [Tape stopped]

LS: Today is April 12. We are back at the home of Esther Shor to recap what Esther told us yesterday. It's as though she had at least five lives: the first life was before the war and her first marriage;
the second life was during the war when she had this incredible experience of suffering and made friends who are life-long friends. She said that she came back to Riga in 1946, not in 1948, and she spent a year and eight months at the university and then she got sick and had to discontinue her studies. Her next life that she wants to tell us about--and this is sort of going back--was the friendships that she formed at the clinic where she worked. Go ahead, Esther.

ES: In 1948 I began to work in a clinic. It was (served) a big district--like Eagan, in this district was one clinic and a lot of ambulatories, small ambulatories--small medical stations--but our clinic was the big clinic for everybody. A lot of factories had medical stations from our clinic and schools--three, four schools--and everybody from our clinic had a position in the schools, in medical stations, in factories, and voenkomat...

FW: for the military forces, a special station, so they come in and get treated.

ES: You have a son, and the son is eighteen years or sixteen years before. You have to check his health to prepare for the army. When I was in the troops, in the war, they sent me, as a delegate to this station for one day a week, and here I find a lot of people in our clinic who remained from Betar.

LS: I see. So you rediscovered your old friends from your youth.

ES: Yes. Because I didn't know any person. I couldn't find it in the street, who is alive and who is not alive. But usually all people from our organization were in this district, and I did a lot of good things. Because they wanted to make Aliyah...

LS: And this was between 1948 and what?

ES: It was, maybe, between 1950, 1952, and this time when Stalin was killed. It was a hard time, when Stalin died.

FW: Stalin was alive. This is the time when the doctors' plot...
ES: Yes, and for the Jewish doctors was [Yiddish-a dark world]---and everybody was afraid to talk to each other. A Sanitar--she changed the linens in clinic...

FW: nurse's aide...

ES: ...said, [Russian]--"Dirty Jews, they should all be slaughtered." It was a hard time for all Jewish doctors. And you asked me about nurses, we had two nurses only Jewish, with me three. One nurse was a head of the medical station in a factory, a communist, but she had her family in Israel, [Yiddish- from the days of the Palestine Mandate].

FW: She was shaking with fear because she had family in Israel.

ES: One nurse, a Jewish nurse, she came from some city in Russia and with a Russian man, and she was a great communist, and everybody was very afraid for [of] her. And me. I became a lot frank, and everybody from the doctors was my sisters. But a sister, like a good sister.

LS: So you banded together?

ES: Yes. And this time from Stalin's plot was afraid and only in our home we met each other. After that, a year, two years, three years, and everything was OK, Jewish people, Jewish doctors were alive. (The story) that the Jewish doctors killed Stalin (disappeared), and then the atmosphere began to be quieter. And why (were there so many) a lot of Jewish doctors, because our district, in our clinic, the most Jewish had a doctor, second had a doctor, Jewish eye doctor, Jewish surgeon--three Jewish surgeons--and Latvian too, and some Russian. With some Latvian doctors we were very, very close, but not with Russian doctors.

LS: Are you saying that you were close to Jewish doctors and you were close to the Latvians, but you were not close to the Russians?

ES: Yes.

LS: Were there any Russian Jewish doctors there?
ES: Jewish from Russia? From Russia was not Jewish. Somebody was from Russia, but he got with us together...

FW: The Russian doctors were non-Jewish.

ES: Very nice people [Latvians]. They were against the Russian government and the Russian head doctor--(he was) political, in every place was a political [information Soviet?] and when the KGB people came and told me my son was not (didn't have) a good upbringing, he (the doctor) was there, KGB and our head Jewish doctor, a woman, Zina.

LS: Now, this is the way I understand what you are saying. Every place that you worked or your children went to school had somebody who made sure that you were politically correct. So when you were accuse of not bringing up your son properly, that is as a good communist, there were several people who were on this committee--somebody from your hospital?.. Is that correct?

FW: One KGB, one woman...

ES: For more people, for many people!

FW: She was not the only one. So there were three people present. One of them was a Jewish woman physician, one was a KGB, and then?

ES: Each hospital, each factory, [unclear]

LS: But who was the third one?

FW: The third one was the head doctor who was not only a physician head of the hospital, but he was also--it's a political appointment--he had to be a trusted Communist Party member.

LS: The next thing I wanted to ask you is, I wanted to know about your friendships. You said that you sort of recreated these friendships from the Betar you knew, but tell me something about,
did you get together after work and when you met at home, what did you do?

ES: First of all, I helped the children, the boys, I kept the medical cards in my bag...

FW: What boys, the boys who came to the station to be examined?

ES: Yes, because they dreamed to go to Israel, and when they got into the army...

FW: She took their cards and instead of putting them in the file, she kept them in her purse to keep them from being drafted into the army.

LS: But there was no possibility to go to Israel, was there, during these years?

ES: Of course, why not. Somebody was going.

LS: In the fifties?

ES: No, it was later.

FW: It was later, after Stalin died, it was later.

ES: Yes, Stalin died and the Aliyah was begun.

LS: And it was possible to go to Israel?

FW: Dribbles.

ES: Yes. From Poland came a lot of people and they got married.

FW: What she is saying is if a Latvian citizen married a Polish citizen, Poland let out their Jews--there was never a stopping after the war, they wanted to get rid of them--so there was a trickle, not from the Soviet Union, but from the republics, like Latvia, a dribble, after Stalin's death. If I recall correctly, he died in 1956. Esther, Stalin died in?...
ES: 1952.

FW: No, I don't think so.

LS: We'll have to check it out later.

ES: I know, in 1952 was [unclear] the Jewish doctors.

FW: There was the doctors' plot. So, probably in 1954.

ES: In 1952 was the story with the doctors.

LS: What else did your group do?

ES: What with this and this family and mine, doctor surgeon from Israel, we wrote to the U.N...

FW: Was it Dr. Zilberberg that you spoke of?

ES: No, Dr. Rapapport, my friend from Israel. Adela [?] met here and she knows...

FW: Was this a man or a woman?

ES: A woman with her husband. And she was a surgeon in our clinic, and they were the first people who wrote to the U.N. to protect the Jewish people and why the Russian government does not give a chance to go to Israel. It was very, very dangerous. And they went to Moscow in foreign minister house and in all foreign ministries, and not (only) one time, and they made strikes...

LS: Is this in the fifties?

ES: It was after, in 1964-65.

LS: You had a pretty rich life within this Jewish group and you kept your hopes for going to Israel.

ES: And I met everybody from Betar who was alive.
LS: I just had one or two questions of a totally different nature. I hope I am not wrenching you out of context, but because you were a *feldsher*, we were curious about Soviet health practices, for example, we know that there wasn't too much contraception available. [End Tape 2 Side 2]

[Tape 3 Side 1]

ES: Abortion in our country wasn't a problem.

LS: Was abortion the only [means]? 

ES: Sure.

LS: There was nothing else available?

ES: No. And it was a very hard time one could find people, women who had one child, two children--not more.

LS: After the war, when you were pregnant, was there a problem getting enough vitamins, enough milk, for instance?

ES: Everything was...

LS: You had everything that you needed?

ES: Yes, just after the war was everything, no problem. Everything was full.

FW: And when did it become difficult?

ES: I think in 1967-68. I hear one thing in the stores, [Russian: "Dirty Jews! Don't give them anything!"] "For them there is place in Israel."

LS: So this was the aftermath of the Six Day War.
ES: It was the first feeling for Jewish people to run from there.

LS: I was a little curious about health care for pregnant women.

ES: Wasn't a problem. Every month, whoever works in a store for groceries or in a restaurant, every month they came to be checked in our clinic.

LS: What happens after the baby is born? Were there monthly visits?

ES: Yes. The women [received] six weeks vacation until the baby was born and two months after.

LS: And then you had regular care afterwards?

ES: Yes. No, some people had parents, somebody [Yiddish-grandmother, grandfather], but you asked me about Gregory. You know the family Ezras?

FW: [unclear first names]

ES: ...cared for Zhenia with Gregory together and then worked, she took care of Zhenia and Gregory.

LS: I see. You switched off daycare.

ES: It was not...

LS: One of things I wanted to ask you was what happened during the time of Stalin, and you have already gone over that--how difficult it was for Jews--they were absolutely petrified that they were going to be taken away. Was there anything more you wanted to add?

ES: Everybody was so happy inside, but everybody was afraid to be happy the first time.

FW: You mean when he died, at first they were afraid to show their joy that he died.
ES: Yes. They didn't know who was coming after Stalin and what could happen to us. It was so terrible.

LS: The other thing that I was really interested to find out is that you kept people in Latvia, or at least your group kept their hopes for going to Israel alive during this whole period and what you did, and how long could you keep out the draft cards so that men were not taken into the service. How many months could you keep them in your purse?

ES: Two days was checking they held from the boys and after the end of the day, I took from the place. The card was in our clinic...

FW: But how long could you keep it?

ES: Only for the two days when they were checking.

FW: After the check-up, you had the card, you put it in your purse. What did you do with it? That card that you took home with you?

ES: It was in my purse [Yiddish]

FW: How long?

ES: Two days, not more.

LS: Now, Felicia, tell us exactly how long.

FW: When the Jewish boys would come in for a several hour check-up, after the check-up she would take the cards home for two days, and after two days she returned them to the file in the office.

LS: And does that mean that the boys were never called up into the service?

ES: Maybe in two years again.

LS: So it saved them for a number of years.
LS: The next thing I wanted to ask you, were you aware of the 1956 war, when Israel and France and England invaded Egypt, the Suez Canal? Were you aware of that? It was the same time as the Hungarian uprising? Did you know that Israel went to war in 1956 when you were living in Latvia.

ES: We knew everything about Israel because we had a radio, a special radio. My husband, Isaak, was in this special factory for radios, and we heard everything about Israel, about every step what happened in Israel. But nobody had to know about it.

LS: Was there any anti-Jewish feeling in 1956, the way there was in 1967?

ES: Jewish feeling?

LS: Not Jewish feeling. Against Jews?

ES: Anti-Semitism was in all times. When everybody was sure that nothing happened with the doctors, and the doctors were not guilty, but not everybody [Yiddish]

FW: (translates) "Not everybody had the brains to realize that this was a plot." Esther, when you were listening to the radio about Israel, did you close the doors and the windows so it was a secret?

ES: Yes, because everybody had neighbors in the house and it was a terrible thing.

LS: And you could trust your friends, right?

ES: Oh, sure.

FW: Esther, the two Jewish people, the two Jewish women who were communists but had mishpucha (family) in Israel, did you trust them or not? The one was Russian, and one was Latvian, and they were both communist.
ES: I didn't trust nobody but our Jewish doctors, not everybody. One doctor, radiologist, she was a very good woman, very smart, she is now in New York and her family, but she wasn't, "Oh Israel, Israel..." [Yiddish - I knew enough not to talk to her].

LS: You spoke very little to her?

ES: Yes. But she was a very good but [Yiddish]. One nurse in her office, Nina, she was from Poland and her sister lives in Poland, and she was visiting her sister...

FW: Jewish woman?

ES: Yes, Jewish woman, but we didn't talk to her because the [Yiddish-doctor was with her in one room] the doctor here, in one room.

FW: Whom didn't you trust, the Jewish woman from Poland you did not trust?

ES: No. And a doctor, she is now in Chicago, we are very good friends, we was the head of physical therapy and she was the head in town too, a big doctor, and very good friend, but I didn't trust her. But after then, we understood that she is a wonderful woman and a wonderful Jew.

FW: She did not know her well, so she did not trust her. After a certain period of time they learned that she is Jewish and she is to be trusted. One suspected the other--you had to be very cautious.

ES: A dentist, a young doctor--Shimon Chaikovski, he is in New York and has a big clinic for himself, a young doctor, and he had to learn (teach) us once in a big political instruction. And the political (KGB) doctor was a meshuganah, (crazy). When she was very sick [Yiddish-she had a child], the same age as Gregory, (she said) that the Zhidy [Yiddish].

FW: (translates) She said that the dirty Jews ate all our lemons because she gave birth and maybe she wanted lemons whatever.
ES: Then Shimon Chaikovski reads the stories once a week on Wednesday before we start to work. It was 8 o'clock until 9 [o'clock]. And what is going on in Israel and here in America, and after that I go over to him [Yiddish]

FW: After the political instruction and all the propaganda against Israel and the U.S. and all that political garbage and pep talk, he would whisper to Esther, "The hell with all them, they should be scapegoats for all the Jews and they should be [unclear- go to hell]."

ES: And when he called me sometimes and sometimes I called him in the office [Yiddish]

FW: And when he would meet her afterwards, he would say, "Well, we pleaded for a kaporeh (scapegoat) and we've got it."

LS: So you found your humor in this life. There are two other areas I want to ask you about before we sort of get to America. You've already told us a little bit about the way feelings changed after 1967, and the Jews were all made scapegoats, right?

ES: After the war in Israel, when Israel was winners, we had a big ball, a party, in the house of Dr. Rappaport...

FW: Esther, tell us, the Jews were joyous and happy, that's understandable. What did the non-Jews say after Israel won the Six Day War?

ES: Latvian people were very glad, but the Russian [Yiddish]

FW: The head doctor who was the bitch--she was not only a physician and a head doctor, it was a political appointment--she spied on them and then she would denounce them to the K.G.B.

LS: But at this point, the Jews were not afraid to have a party. That's a difference, isn't that?

ES: No, it was in a house, in Rappaport's house, [unclear] and one is in Israel and [unclear]
FW: You have to understand something that it is very much a thing in Eastern Europe to celebrate birthdays and party, so having a party would not be suspicious. They obviously did not announce the reason for the party. You said it was a birthday party?

ES: Yes.

FW: You pretended.

ES: Once the doctor from K.G.B. asked me, "You have a party on the day Lenin died?" First of all, I told him I never read in any place that you have to mourn, and the second one, in the middle of the week I am too busy for parties. Then I had a party sometimes Sunday, maybe May 10 when the war was ended.

FW: Esther, I don't understand. He asked you why you had the party?

ES: You have a party on the day, why on this day?

FW: Why did you give that party on the day of Lenin's death?

ES: I asked him, "Who told you [Yiddish-such a crazy thing] because in the middle of the week we never have parties and we meet each other only on November 7 or 8. [formerly, the biggest holiday in the Soviet Union --October Revolution anniversary]

FW: So that party that you gave to celebrate Israel's independence was on a weekend?

ES: Sure. Not only me, a lot of people here, he asked the same question.

LS: I asked you yesterday about the time when Gregory was going to school, and you said that there was some anti-Semitism but you could handle it and had problems with the Communist Party because you weren't considered to be a fit mother since you were not bringing him up as a good communist. What happened when he got older? I know that in Russia, for instance, Jews have trouble getting into universities.
ES: When he got older and finished school and he had to begin his studies at the university, a friend came to me, a Russian engineer, and he was in a commission at the university, and he told me, "In this day when the exams began, there would be a representative from K.G.B. Don't do this."

LS: What do you mean "Don't do this?"

FW: Don't take the exam on that day.

ES: Take Gregory in Daugavpils, another big city, and the first three course [years] they have the same university (as at Riga), and after the three courses they send everybody to finish the university in Riga.

FW: They have the same three courses [years] at the university in Riga, the same obviously curriculum.

LS: Did he go several years in Daugavpils?

ES: Three years. I took Gregory with me in Daugavpils and found a very good friend who saved my cousin's life in Holocaust.

FW: You found a friend, a Latvian friend? Who was the friend?

ES: A Russian person, an old person, he saved my cousin--his name was Gregory too--he was my mother's cousin, and after the war, the cousin helped a lot this Russian family, and his son was a university leader--a teacher and [Yiddish -rector], and [he said] "Fira, don't worry, your Gregory, only he needs good marks, not more.

LS: Tell me about the friend who warned you about the K.G.B. When did he become your friend?

ES: He was a big architect, he was the husband of my friend, a Jewish woman...
FW: He was not Jewish, this architect? And he was a member of the acceptance committee, commission which decided who will be accepted and who will not.

LS: OK, so the husband of your friend.

ES: I had a lot, a lot of friends.

LS: You had a lot of friends, but one needs friendships to get along.

FW: Friendships are always good. Linda, in this country they are not a life line. In a country where you need proteksia--nepotism...

LS: Felicia has just given me this quotation to read, "The good that is in you is the good that you do for others." It's true, but Felicia has said friendships seem to be far more important for existence in Eastern Europe.

ES: Because their son was in my district too and I did for him the same thing.

FW: The system still exists. All of the Soviet Jews who come here will tell you, and I've known about it for years.

ES: I did a lot of good things and people did for me.

FW: They would not manage if it weren't for this system.

LS: Right. Now we are going to get to when people like you started to think about leaving? Why did you decide it was time to leave?

ES: That is the question. Why I didn't I get married until 1951? I had a lot of friends and I could get married.

LS: You couldn't gotten married earlier?

ES: But I was afraid about the people--maybe they have families, maybe they can't...
FW: She was afraid to get attached to someone who perhaps wouldn't or couldn't leave.

ES: I decided I had to be alone; otherwise...

FW: ...and free, otherwise she would not be able to leave.

LS: But then you decided you couldn't leave and that's when you got married?

ES: The first time we couldn't leave and when they began the Aliyah, before I gave a pledge that when I can help people I needed to be here, I must be here.

FW: She felt that she should not leave immediately because there were people who needed to be helped.

LS: When did you and your husband decide, "It's time to go."

ES: My husband was, it was very hard with him. He is not active, in these questions he is quiet, a big difference with me.

FW: He is more passive.

ES: But my first husband I was lucky in all respects. (Referring to second husband), I loved him, he's a wonderful husband, a wonderful father, a wonderful grandfather, and a very good person. But otherwise, we are like night and day. And I was not lucky with him because [Yiddish]

LS: What you said is "it's better to have a man who would hit you now and then but who is energetic."

FW: So your husband was too mild and too passive.

ES: Too quiet and not active in nothing.

LS: So when did you decide, it was your decision evidently?
ES: But when other people left from Riga - Zilberman, Rappaport...

LS: When did they leave? When did Zilberman and Rappaport leave?

ES: I think Dr. Rappaport maybe twenty years, seventeen maybe years.

LS: Did they leave after the Six Day War?

ES: Yes.

LS: OK, that's when the Aliyah (moving to Israel) started.

ES: I don't know, maybe not.

FW: She doesn't remember. It had to be in the seventies, right?

ES: About seventeen years. What year was it?

LS: It's about 1973 because this is '91. It's in the seventies.

FW: Yes, because you see, I remember the first Soviet Jews came out to the U.S. in '72, a tiny trickle. It had to be after this.

ES: What year was it twenty years ago?

LS: '71.

ES: In this time. Everybody...

LS: You say everybody?

ES: No, from the clinic, the doctors, not everybody, but my friends from Betar.

LS: The ones who had the Zionist background?

ES: Yes. And I did everything for them that I had to do.
LS: What is everything?

ES: For some a note that he is very sick, for somebody else, a note that he has lung disease. I can't explain how many good things, what they needed for Aliyah.

FW: Esther, you had the power as a feldsher to do those things?

ES: I had the power. First of all, I was the head of the station, then I had my doctor friends, and they were like sisters...

FW: So you could ask your friends to do favors?

ES: Together. It was gripppe [flu] time and I was going to sick people, and [one of] these sick people he wasn't sick. He had to go Moscow for documents, and I gave him a bulletin (note or excuse) that he is sick with gripppe for five days and renewed it.

FW: ...certificate that they were not well and they could be away from work for a few days.

ES: And when they left, everybody [Yiddish-began to ] ship packages from all towns...

LS: They sent packages to you?

ES: I didn't know who or where, from Belgium, from London, from New York, from Israel.

LS: What were they sending you, packages of what?

ES: Fur, fur coats...

FW: Not sending, they sent them when she was still in Riga and they were already abroad, and they sent to her in Riga gift packages.

ES: The best clothes, the best [unclear]--no, the government in Riga [unclear] and I had to run--from all cities, from all countries.

LS: Did the packages get to you?
ES: Yes.

FW: You are saying that it wasn't good for you to get so many packages?

ES: Two, three, four, but what they did when my friend, Dr. Rappaport, David with Deva [?], they left a [Russian: a document authorizing her to receive all packages addressed to them] when they left and received a package to give it to me. [End Tape 3 Side1]

[Tape 3 Side 2]

LS: ...were delivered to you, but when did you finally decide to go?

ES: When Gregory finished the university, it was in 1977, I think, and then they asked Gregory for [unclear]

FW: They wanted him to go in the army.

ES: They sent a povestka [notice to report to an army recruiting station]. [show her reaction]

LS: You started to tear your hair out?

ES: It was the worst, but everybody in the station from the troops they knew it.

FW: On the war station, where she was working, and they knew her.

ES: I came to the station, not where they check [unclear] but their station. It was nearly to our house, the house where all the military people were, and I brought this paper and I told them, "You ask my son Gregory to come, but he is not home. After the university he is going to be [unclear] Tbilisi on a trip." "OK, [Yiddish]."

FW: He wrote on his application that he is gone.
ES: And in this time all documents... station from the troops, but in the station in the office.

LS: You went to the office and said, "Gregory isn't here, he is on vacation in Tbilisi." They said, "OK." They went home, and then what?

ES: And in this time all papers that I needed to leave...

LS: You got them together?

ES: A lot, a lot of papers. And Isaak was afraid--my husband--how and all. (I said) "You like to stay here, in Russia? Please stay." And Gregory is the same person like my husband, very honest, very quiet, very--you don't know Gregory?

FW: A little bit.

ES: "Mama, I'm afraid." He was in Komsomol, otherwise you can't go to the university. How can I handle it? And a new place, a working place. Before he was in an office, architect's office after the university, and after then he wanted more experience and [worked as] prorab--it's the oldest in civil construction outside...

LS: It's civil engineering here.

ES: Yes. And I was very afraid for this job because a [Yiddish-drunkard will kill him].

LS: You thought it was too dangerous, people up above [unclear]

ES: Very dangerous...

FW: ...because people drink and they come drunk to work and she was afraid that somebody, drunk, deliberately or not, would throw something down.

ES: Everybody drinks a lot. And he had to sign all papers from the people--it was maybe twenty people [he supervised] [Yiddish-all drunkards] he was very afraid.
FW: He had to have a permission, he had recommendations from twenty persons, and she was worried because most of them were drunks.

ES: In Russia, for a prorab next is prison.

FW: She said that in the Soviet Union, working in this particular way, it is almost as bad as going to prison.

ES: Because you are worker and you give your time, but who knows what he signs, nobody knows.

FW: And then you are held responsible.

LS: So he was afraid to leave, your husband was afraid to leave, but you got all the papers together...

ES: Yes, and go ask out from Komsomol...

LS: ...asked permission to leave...

ES: ...had to be a meeting of all Komsomol boys, but Gregory had good friends and it was very quiet, and he received papers that he was out of Komsomol. He was quiet, everybody...

FW: ...they liked him.

ES: Thank God, from Komsomol I have a paper, here is a paper from Komsomol. The second from working place. The head was Jewish, and he felt very bad, he worked maybe a year in this company--not a full year--to come and to ask for, but this Jew was very smart, and Gregory came to him, he asked Gregory, [Yiddish]

FW: (translation) He was a very smart man. Gregory felt badly because he only worked there less than a year, but the man was very smart and he didn't wait for Gregory to say anything. He said, "Look, do you want a paper from me so that you can go away?"
ES: And why he has a feeling, because two-three times Gregory opened the door and some people were inside, once he met him in the corridor, "I'd like to talk to you."

LS: OK, so he knew something was on his mind. But what about you?

ES: [Russian] Comrade Shor, do you want to leave?

LS: What about you at your place, at the clinic?

ES: And he gave him the paper that he needed...

FW: Which I don't know whether you realize what a big thing it is and how dangerous this was for the man who was doing it.

ES: But was Gregory [Yiddish-only God knows the truth]--he was very afraid to ask, he was a just child...

LS: Now what about you?

ES: (I said) My dear friend, I am very tired, I'd like to be retired.

FW: To whom did you say that, to that political...

ES: No, no, to my head. And the political [unclear] she is not against because my age came and I had to be retired.

LS: How old were you?

ES: (They said) Fifty-five years you have the right to be retired. But give us your word that you come back.

LS: What do you mean that you come back?

ES: Sure, that I come back to work.

FW: But if you were retired, how could you come back to work?

ES: Why not? I can be retired and receive my pension and I can work and to receive medical person...
FW: Oh I see, officially you can retire and you can still work.

ES: Oh yes. Without you (it will) be very, very hard. OK (I said), give me a chance to rest a little. And there was some meeting and a lot of gifts and a lot of good words, and I received my papers and I was a retired person. I didn't need anything, not papers, not from work.

LS: And your husband, was he also able to retire?

ES: He gave me from the factory--he was retired but he worked too--but it wasn't a problem. We took all papers in AVIR.

FW: It's the emigration department.

LS: And how long did it take before you got permission to go?

ES: Six weeks.

LS: That was quick.

ES: But it was hard time, I can't remember how many times it was but the hardest time I had because they tried to do something in AVIR, they knew that I am going and K.G.B. here and in AVIR.

FW: The moment you applied, not only the emigration knows, but the K.G.B. knows. You're a marked person.

ES: A person, a famous person...

FW: Persona non-grata...

ES: ...and one day somebody called me, "Hurry, your son was in an accident in the bus today, hurry, maybe he is dead. Can you imagine for a moment what happened to me?

LS: This was just malicious?
ES: [Yiddish-My heart started pounding]--I was alone at home, Isaak was not home, I [Yiddish-ran to] in all clinics, you know, I came in [Russian] trauma clinic, and everybody knows me and I know everybody. So many years, twenty-four years, it's a lot. What happened? What happened to you? Gregory, Gregory, Gregory. Can't find him, we don't have Gregory. And they called Red Cross--because Red Cross has all names from accidents--(they reported) no accidents today, nothing.

FW: Who called, who was the person who made the original phone call?

ES: Somebody from K.G.B. [Yiddish-who tried to give me a heart attack].

LS: They were simply malicious.

FW: I heard somebody from the Soviet Union told me years ago that they received a call that their son was killed, not giving the name or anything.

LS: I can imagine what you went through.

ES: [Yiddish]--It was summer time, very hot, July, I think, in one dress, everything was in my... Gregory [Yiddish-I suffered so to bear him]--and I lost Gregory.

FW: I don't know how to translate it--To have him it was so hard, she had with blood to have him.

LS: And then you left and you went to Italy?

ES: I didn't trust nothing and nobody. I got to the Red Cross by myself and in this building was Gregory's work place and Gregory's engineer, the head, asked 'What happened to the people? What happened to the people?' And somebody told him, "Gregory Shor, Gregory is our engineer, our prorab." And he went back to his work. One door was Red Cross and one door I didn't know, and he called the place where Gregory worked. "Is Gregory there?" And somebody answered, "sure, he is here, and Gregory talked to him." And he told
Gregory, "Talk to your mother." I don't remember. Nothing, what happened. "Gregory, Grishenka..." I don't know, I can't remember what happened. And they gave me valeriana [tincture of valerian], everything for my heart, and my hair was... my face... It is Russian, Russian.

LS: That's a Russian thing to do?

ES: And when Gregory came, I was sick after that I don't know how long.

LS: Let's go on to a better time. You finally left. You had a lot of heartache leaving, but then, when you left, you took off from Riga, from the airport there, where did you fly to?


LS: And how long were you in Italy?

ES: In Italy, a few months. And in Italy I helped a lot the Jewish people. In Italy and in Vienna too--with medical care and with language. They didn't know one word, only Russian. And I met a lot of people, German...

LS: Do you speak German?

ES: Yes. And Yiddish, and I helped a lot of people.

LS: When you left, were you planning to go to Israel, when you left Latvia?

ES: When we left Latvia, we knew it that we were going to America. No from Italy, from Italy--from Riga we didn't know.

LS: Why did you decide to go to America and not Israel?

ES: Because my friend from the war came to Italy and he knew how much trouble I went through in my life in all the years and I lost my
whole family and I had only one son, and his two friends were killed in the war...

LS: This friend lived in Israel, right?

ES: Yes. Two boys, twins. And he told me that I had trouble enough in my life. I'll not be able to go through so much worry...

LS: ...that you would worry too much if you went to Israel. It would drive you crazy.

ES: Yes. Save your son, you must save your son.

LS: Were you disappointed in not being able to go to Israel?

ES: Only this, only about my son, because it is all that I have in my life. Forty-seven people I lost.

LS: You can't sacrifice him too. So you decided to come to America?

ES: I decided to come to America, I didn't dream for golden business, for money, I never dreamed for, I knew it that I will have a very hard life, but I did everything for my son.

LS: Why did you decide to come to Minnesota?

ES: With us was a boy, a friend of my son's, and he was going together with us to his aunt, and his aunt was here, in St. Paul. And the aunt was a sister of my girl-friend, of my neighbor, I had lived with her in one apartment all the years.

LS: I see, so this Gregory's friend travelled with you and he was going to his family and you knew this family pretty well, so you decided to come here too. When you first got to Minnesota, who took care of you? Who met you at the airport?

ES: It was in winter time, January 17, and the family met us.

LS: What's their name?
ES: Ezras.

LS: The Ezras met you, and then where did you go to live?

ES: In this same apartment from the first day we came to this apartment. They prepared the apartment for us.

LS: Who's they, the Ezras?

ES: Ezras, yes.

LS: But who paid the rent?

ES: Everything from the Jewish Family Service, they received from the Jewish Family Service.

LS: I see. Did the Jewish Family Service come to the airport also?

ES: No.

LS: So when you came to this apartment, which is in Maynard Drive, in Sibley Manor, off the West Seventh in St. Paul, what sort of furniture was there in it?

ES: There was a small sofa, a broken sofa and a few chairs, and a matress with a dresser, and in the refrigerator was meals, groceries, and linens were prepared.

LS: And when did somebody come to visit you? Did somebody come from the Jewish Family Service to visit you, to see how you were getting along?

ES: It was a very hard time in winter, everybody was out in Florida, and Jewish Family Service hadn't volunteers, and we had no volunteers, but one man came to learn [teach] us English, but it wasn't the right time to learn--we had a lot of problems.

LS: When he said he was going to teach you English, was he going to teach you in the apartment or take you to classes?
ES: The first day in the apartment.

LS: But it was too soon for you, is that what you are saying?

ES: Too soon for us.

LS: When you saw this apartment, was this apartment larger than what you had in Riga, was it smaller, was it better, was it worse?

ES: The same apartment without furniture, it was a big apartment.

LS: I am not understanding you. Did you have more rooms, did you have the same number of rooms in Riga as you had here?

ES: In Riga? No. Two rooms the last time, before leaving, two rooms.

LS: So you had two rooms and...

ES: But in a beautiful house, a beautiful building, and high ceilings and big windows, and beautiful walls, and a very good building.

LS: It was an elegant building?

ES: Elegant building, yes. The first times here was very, very hard to live...

LS: This building is adequate but it's not beautiful.

ES: Yes, yes.

LS: You've made something beautiful out of this, but it's not a beautiful building.

ES: I have this feeling like I live in a house like in Riga a [Yiddish]...

LS: A communal bath? That's what it reminded you of?

ES: But I was lucky. I never complained. I was lucky because I was without neighbors, without Russians (i.e., not in a communal apartment). I was the luckiest person.
LS: Did your neighbors come to visit you? Did you meet any of your neighbors here?

ES: In Riga?

LS: No, here.

ES: The family Ezras.

LS: That was the only family you knew.

ES: Yes, we were very close.

LS: Where did you get the money to buy groceries, for instance?

ES: Groceries they prepared from Jewish Family Service.

LS: But after one week?

ES: After one week? No, there was more than one week of Jewish Family Service money.

LS: For example, did they take you shopping? Did they take you grocery shopping?

ES: Yes.

LS: For how many months did they do this or how many weeks?

ES: I don't remember. We received, I think, for three months, everything, and after that I received SSI--Social Security check. I have a little work.

LS: What sort of work do you do here?

ES: I took care of people.

LS: Did you take care of older people or babies?
ES: Older people, and all the money I paid in Jewish Community, in Jewish United Fund.

LS: You started donating part of your earnings?

ES: Yes, and in Jewish Family Service. Fifty dollars, twenty-five dollars, and in Jewish United Fund more, a hundred dollars, fifty dollars, and I paid up all money in HIAS in New York.

LS: All the money that they spent for you to come here?

ES: Yes.

LS: And how much money is that? [tape stopped] So you paid HIAS back for your daughter-in-law and for yourself?

ES: Yes, every month.

LS: When you came over, were there other Russian families arriving?

ES: Yes, sure.

LS: How many other families came that year, do you know?

ES: I don't remember. One family in Minneapolis, I think.

LS: And in St. Paul, were there others besides you?

ES: Not in St. Paul, to Minneapolis she came with a son. We met each other in Italy.

LS: What I am trying to get is that there was no large community effort to help people once they got here. The Jewish Family Service, as you say, helped you for three months...

ES: Two months before was a family from Riga, but I didn't know them.
LS: So when you got here, you were sort of by yourself, right? Did you start going to English classes?

ES: Maybe in two weeks.

LS: And where did you go? Did you go to the International Institute?

ES: Jewish Community Center.

LS: Who else was in the classes besides you?

ES: People who came before me, a year, two years. And they were not happy with me in one group because I came only just now, but the teacher told them [Yiddish]

LS: He said that she has more knowledge in her little finger than you have in your head. I see.

ES: He was an old man, I don't know, his nephew has the Chateau Nursing Home.

LS: So you and Isaak and Gregory all went to class? Or did Gregory start to work?

ES: No, Gregory, at the university.

LS: And what was he taking at the university?

ES: When he had to begin work as an engineer, he must have a second degree.

LS: And who paid for that?

ES: Jewish Vocational Service. He became (received) a loan and I began to work...

LS: First of all, did you say that they gave him a loan?

ES: Yes. [End Tape 3 Side 2]
ES: ...why you did, why you are mishuginah (crazy).

LS: OK, Esther Shor was showing me her receipts from HIAS, Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, and they are the people who spend the money for the transportation. Esther has paid in full for the transportation for the three people in her family and also for her son's fiancee Marina, and she is saying that some people who have spoken to her think it's foolish to pay back HIAS, but she feels that it is necessary so that other people can also have transportation over. Esther is a life member of Hadassah, which costs $250, and she is a member of Na'amat, which is a women's labor Zionist organization, and she has made generous donations to the Jewish Family Service, to the United Jewish Fund, and to the Jewish Community Center. She is really a model for the Jewish community, and she has done this through the earnings that she has received caring for elderly people in this community. And you were saying that you first started out working one day a week. And who found you the jobs?

ES: Some from Jewish Family Service, Joan Bream, and people.

LS: I see. So you were doing something that was very needed in the community and you were getting some money. How many days a week did you work?

ES: Some days two days, sometimes a week but I gave a pledge to God--a little for me and the rest for Jewish organizations.

LS: So it's sort of a 50/50 deal--50% for you and 50% for Jewish organizations. You said you got some help from the Jewish organizations here like the Jewish Vocational Service helped Gregory and Jewish Family Service helped you, the Jewish Community Center has...

ES: Yes, the[unclear] program...

LS: ...and then you and your husband got social security...
ES: ...social security about my health.

LS: How old were you when you came here to America?

ES: I think I wasn't sixty-five when I came.

LS: So you were a little younger than sixty-five when you came, and did you have any expectations when you came to America, did you say that the Jewish community was going to be like the Jewish community that you knew in Latvia? What did you think this community would be like?

ES: She reads something she wrote earlier. "The lessons of World War II are now understood much better. Separated and assimilated Jewish people suffered because they had no protection and no defense against anti-Semitism, and we must be all together now.

LS: So you felt that the Jews in America have to all work together?

ES: Yes, in one community and to be ready for everything.

LS: But my question is, when you came here, did you find that sort of community or were disappointed in the community you found?

ES: I think from the first two-three days, the Jewish community was for me our home.

LS: After the first few days you really felt at home here?

ES: Yes. I began to read Yiddish books for people and they liked it very much--my reading, my Yiddish, and I got together with people...

LS: Did you have trouble getting together with American Jews?

ES: No, no trouble, because I have my Yiddish, I have my Hebrew and a little English, and my feeling was it is my home and my brothers and sisters and I have to live here--I came not to be a guest. Therefore it was me not hard life, sometimes if not for my English, my bad, broken English, I had a feeling I was born here.
LS: That's very interesting. Why do you feel that you were born here?

ES: Maybe because I grew up in an atmosphere with Jewish people--I don't know, it is true but I don't know why. I feel it's my home.

LS: That is pretty remarkable. Most people who were born some place else don't feel that way. When you look back, how do you think the Jewish Family Service could have been more helpful to you? What could they have done that they did not do?

ES: In the beginning it was very hard time because it was winter time, a lot of snow and no volunteers, but I didn't complain--everything was good and I was lucky that we had a home and without K.G.B. and without Russian neighbors, and I think our family was delighted--maybe not my son because for him it was very hard, without friends, he was alone, very lonely...

LS: ...for his girlfriend...

ES: No, she wasn't here, she came later, she came in 1981.

LS: But he was lonely for her, right?

ES: Yes, always he was very, very lonely. And I was very worried for him, but as far as me, in the right place, I feel in the right place, but the only thing is my language was very bad.

LS: I know that a lot of people who came here went to other parts of the country, where they had better friends or better relatives or better working conditions. Did you ever think about moving once you came to Minnesota?

ES: No, he hasn't, nobody.

LS: Did you think about moving some place else: to California, to New York?
ES: No never. I was too tired from all my life to move and to think about... Riga is a beautiful city, a wonderful city, and St. Paul is like [Yiddish -provincial]----but I was very lucky to rest from all of my hard life.

LS: After you came, did many Soviet Jewish families come after you?

ES: I think [so] but I wasn't in contact. I don't remember, I don't know who came.

LS: Did you see them at the Jewish Community Center?

ES: It's the same feeling--I lived in Riga and you in America--I have with you something to do, the same thing was for me.

LS: You have your life. Weren't there clubs at the Jewish Community Center for people who had come to America that you belong to? Did you belong to any club at JCC?

ES: For me was very good my Yiddish club and I enjoy this club and people liked it very much when I read to them, and I became [made] a lot of friends.

LS: So you didn't need the new immigrants? You became friends with the Americans?

ES: Yes. And after that the newspaper in 1981... [tape stopped]

LS: We are starting again. Esther has shown us a little clipping about the newspaper that is published at the Jewish Community Center, called What's NU, that she writes a column of Yiddish jokes which suffer from being translated into English. The point of it is that Esther didn't have to rely on making friends with the new Soviet immigrants--she made friends immediately with Jews who had been here in America since the turn of the century because of her excellent Yiddish and because of her Jewish background.

ES: And it was wonderful in this group, where everybody respected me, and I am lucky.
LS: You said that Gregory had a much harder timer. How many years did he have to go to the university?

ES: I don't remember--maybe two years.

LS: But he had a girlfriend in Russia?

ES: Yes. She is a family from us, in our family.

LS: You mean she is related to you?

ES: Not much but...

LS: ...a distant relative?

ES: Yes.

LS: So he had trouble making friends here and getting started?

ES: Yes, it was a hard time for him.

LS: Was he able to find a job?

ES: Arthur Wirtschafter--he is an architect too--and he helped us with Gregory a lot.

LS: Is he an architect in Minneapolis or St. Paul?

ES: Yes. And the family helped us very much, and we are very thankful. He helped Gregory with everything.

LS: How did he find you or how did you find him? What was the connection? You can't remember that? I was wondering if the Jewish Family Service told him?

ES: I think so.

LS: When did Marina come?

ES: Marina came in 1981.
LS: Did she come by herself?

ES: Yes.

LS: OK, and when did they get married?

ES: They got married in 1982.

LS: And when was their first child born? What's the name of your granddaughter, your older granddaughter?

ES: Emily.

LS: And when was she born?


LS: So you became a grandmother, right? How often do you see her?

ES: Every day. She is our [Yiddish]

LS: (translating) She is the eye in your head, yes. She is everything to you.

ES: It is so important to us because we didn't have anybody. The other Russian families have big families and a lot of friends, but we are alone, and it's therefore very important.

LS: You have a remarkable ability to make friends in America, but there are differences between the friends you have here and the friends you had in Riga, right?

ES: We hadn't volunteers but we found a family, Mastbaum, and they helped us a lot.

LS: How did you find the Mastbaum family?

ES: I was babysitting in one house, and it was a year after Mrs. Nobles' husband's death and I was babysitting for her granddaughter
and all friends of Mrs. Nobles came to their house for supper on this day...

LS: This was on the anniversary of her husband's death?

ES: Yes. And I met the Mastbaum family.

LS: What's their first names?

ES: Allen and Helen, and they helped us very much with a lot of nice things. I didn't know how to write a check, I didn't know how to buy a car. They gave a spare car, and after that I paid up. They helped us with the wedding for my son--I didn't know Mr. Libman, I didn't know how I can plan in the Temple Aaron with the wedding--everything they did for us. And as long as my eyes will open, I remember this family and I am going to help this family with everything. I never forget goodness.

LS: So these people really helped you. They showed you--in America they say "They showed you the ropes." They showed you how to do things.

ES: And I received a good volunteer, Mr. Mastbaum.

LS: Did you learn how to drive? Who drives in the family?

ES: My husband.

LS: Do you drive?

ES: No.

LS: Did Isaak have trouble learning how to drive?

ES: I was very lucky that Isaak learned very fast to drive, and he learned [taught] Marina--my daughter-in-law--to drive, and therefore, I have a more interesting life, with my job and with my life in the community and where I need, and he is a good helper.
LS: You have close friends here, but when you think about your friends in Riga, your women friends in Riga and you think about your women friends here, is it the same?

ES: I have a lot of friends in Israel, in Riga and here. They are very close to me, everybody is close, but sometimes I feel I have something to say for my close friends, for girlfriends, and I get very, not upset, I need somebody—not with everybody I can talk everything, it's not nice—you must have a very close friend from long years...

LS: Do you have that here, in America?

ES: [Yiddish]  

LS: (translating) "You have to eat a pound of salt"--you have to really share hard times. And do you have close friends in America?

ES: In America, yes, I do, but they are not here.

LS: But they are not here, in Minnesota?

ES: Not in Minnesota. They are in Los Angeles now, the Ezras family. It is the sister of my girlfriend.

LS: What about going to the synagogue here?. When you first came here, did you look for...

ES: I go every Friday, usually every Friday except when something happens with my health or with my husband's health, but it is the Jewish community, the synagogue, and I love very much...

LS: Which synagogue did you decide to go to?

ES: Temple Aaron because I am not an Orthodox. I am a good Jew and I have a good Jewish heart but not too much, but I respect everybody—I respect Orthodox, I respect everybody, all religions, but my feeling about Temple Aaron is more, I have good friends in Temple Aaron, I like chazonim, (the cantors) I like the rabbis, I like the people.
LS: Did you use the public library very much? Once you started speaking English better, did you go to the library?

ES: When I am with people, I had not had a chance to learn English because I was very busy: I had to help, I had to pay up all the money to HIAS and United Council and all places, I had to help my children, because Marina, my daughter-in-law, she studied five years in the university...

LS: Here, in America?

ES: Yes, in University of Minnesota, and she is a programmer, and each book $60, $30, and I had to help.

LS: So you didn't take English lessons very long, did you?

ES: No, no classes, only those two weeks with an old teacher. I became experienced only when I talked to people, when I heard somebody. I read a lot. I help with What's NU because I write and I read all the time.

LS: Do you ever go to the public library?

ES: I don't have time for that, but I have enough books here. I decided from the first day to have the Jewish World, the newspaper, from the first day, because I like to know what's going on in the Jewish community here in St. Paul and in the Twin Cities. And I have the English paper, Pioneer Press and all magazines that I see from receive from Hadassah and Na'amot and I read everything.

LS: I had another question, about health. You were talking about at your clinic and I was asking about pregnant women, and you said they came in once a month at the clinic and they had baby check-ups once a month. Here, in America, it seems that the health care is so expensive. What do you do about finding a doctor? Or who found you a doctor when you got here, to Minnesota?

ES: What belongs to me, I have social security and I have a special card.
LS: Are you satisfied with the health care you are getting?

ES: It's enough for us. I am a medical worker and a doctor's assistant, but I don't like too often to be a patient. [Yiddish]

LS: Oh, you just keep quiet, ah? But wasn't it difficult when you first went to a doctor and you didn't speak English? Who helped you?

ES: The first time was with Nina... Russian woman, she works at the Jewish Family Service, and her husband was the head of vocational...

LS: The head of the Jewish Vocational Service? And he retired? I can't think of his name.

ES: She was with us with first time, and after that all doctors understand me and I understand the doctors because I have experience in medicine, and they like to talk to me, and I am going with my husband--I never use any special people, I never use cars from Community [Center]...

LS: Nina Lasoff...

ES: Yes. She was very kind to us and she respected us very much and she helped the first time, and after that I did and I do by myself, and I feel very good.

LS: So you are not complaining about the care you are getting?

ES: No, never, no complaints.

LS: Do you think it's better or worse than the care that you would have received if you'd stayed in Riga?

ES: Why do I have to bother people when I can by myself.

LS: Has Gregory made American friends now?

ES: Oh, he has a lot of friends, no problem.
LS: It sounds to me as though you are perfectly content here, in America, but what about, when you look at people who aren't Jewish, your neighbors here who are not Jewish, the people you meet...

ES: Neighbors, all neighbors were non-Jewish, and the first year, only this year, they have two Russian families as our neighbors, but until this year, nobody, only from United States.

LS: Did you have good relations?

ES: And we were very close to each other. They helped us and we helped them. They have a lot of problems with their health, and one person was twice a war veteran, and he has a lot of trouble with his health, and I care for him, and his friend, a woman, she was to us like a mother, we have here a wonderful time with these people.

LS: Have you had any feelings of anti-Semitism here?

ES: The best neighbors and the best people.

LS: Have you had any experience of anti-Semitism here, in America?

ES: Sure.

LS: Where? I am talking about you personally. Remember you said in Riga you were called zhidy, you were called "dirty Jews," in Riga, right?

ES: Non-Jewish?

LS: Yes. Here, in America, has anybody...

ES: No, we have friends here from Riga, a couple, Latvian. They came to this building...

LS: Are they Jewish?

ES: No, and they got (we became) very close friends. Ten years we spent together and you can't find a place... [End Tape 4 Side 1]
[Tape 4 Side 2]

LS: Did you say you've gone traveling with them around Minnesota?

ES: Yes. He is an excellent driver, and we went to South Dakota, to North Dakota, to all places, to all corners.

LS: You've gone up to Lake Superior?

ES: Yes. Saturday and Sunday were days out of town.

LS: That's very interesting. What do you miss about Riga?

ES: I don't miss [it]. I love Riga but I don't dream to come again. I am afraid to go back.

LS: You wouldn't want to go back there?

ES: Maybe when not Russian government, I'd love, I might. Sometimes I have a dream that I am in Riga and every time I lost my pocket [book], I lost my documents, I can't come back home to the United States, and I was so tired from everything in the morning. When I opened my eyes and saw I am here, Thank God!

LS: What a terrible nightmare, to be stranded in Riga without your documents. Tell me a little bit about why you joined the Russian choir, you know, the Russian choir that you belong to at the Jewish Community Center?

ES: It is a very important program for the Community Center and I understand that I must help in the Russian choir and therefore--and my voice is not a bad voice--and I know that they need me.

LS: What sort of music do you sing?

ES: Yiddish, Hebrew, Russian, English. I tried to help with Yiddish in the group because not a lot of people there understand Yiddish well and I translate Yiddish words and Hebrew words. Before, a lot of
people from the Russian choir said, "We're Russian and we need to sing only Russian songs, but it's not true--we're from Russia but we're Jewish people and we must know Hatikvah and America The Beautiful and English to make people who hear us happy, but a lot of people did not understand the first time.

LS: Are there any other people in the choir from the Baltic states?

ES: No, I am the only.

LS: So you feel that you are pretty different from those other Russians?

ES: Yes, every time I feel the difference.

LS: That your background is far more Jewish than theirs and they are lacking in the same sorts of feelings that you have?

ES: Yes.

LS: Who comes to hear you?

ES: Sometimes we are singing in the Community Center for parties, for Pesach, Passover parties, and Hanukah, and in Temple Aaron and Mt. Zion we are going to sing, in Jewish Community Center in Minneapolis, in B'nai Emet, Beth El, in all synagogues.

LS: Any non-Jewish places?

ES: In non-Jewish places too, a lot. When Scheibel was...

LS: Jim Scheibel, our mayor of St. Paul?

ES: Yes, we sang in State Capitol. It's very interesting.

LS: How do people respond? Do they clap a lot?

ES: Yes, very interesting.

LS: I am just about finished now. Did you become a citizen?
ES: Yes.

LS: When did you become a citizen?


LS: I see. So it takes five years?

ES: Yes, five years.

LS: As soon as you could, you became a citizen?

ES: Yes. And they asked me, "How come that you know everything from all laws in America and so soon?" I told them, "I read a lot; it's interesting to know everything." It's my country now.

LS: It's your country, right. It was interesting you say, "When I come home," you were talking about America. But you've also visited Israel, right?

ES: Yes.

LS: How many times?

ES: Three times.

LS: And you have this person who you signed up as your brother in Israel and many, many friends who saved the wonderful photographs that we've seen. Have you made any friends with the Soviet Jews who come?

ES: Close? No. Now a family came here, in this house, she is a cousin of Sandy Lowenthal's--she is the president of Sholom Home (auxiliary), and we became more close when she called me now and got her driver's license.

LS: She's got her driver's license. Is she different from the other Russians?
ES: She is an honest woman.

LS: In other words, you sort of feel as though many of the Russians who come here have grown up under a regime that taught them to take as much as they could and not give back.

ES: One more woman, she was here, in this building, now she is on Cleveland--it's Inna Braginsky's mother--I became more close too, but I respect everybody...

LS: I understand, but there is a big cultural difference between the way you were brought up. They don't have a sense of the Jewish community.

ES: Yes, but I respect everybody--everybody is for me very important, a brother and sister--Jewish.

LS: Sounds like they have to be taught how to be Jewish. This is one last thing I wanted to record. We were looking at some photographs of your first marriage and you look so sad on those photographs, but you told us that before your wedding you had gone to a fortune teller and the fortune teller had told you that you will cross an ocean and that you will have a second marriage, and the fortune teller told your husband that he would cross an ocean and there would never be a second marriage for him, and this was preying on your mind during your wedding and you were unable to smile. It's good not to know what your life will be like, but you've had four or five lives and you have survived them all, and we are happy that you have found your home here, in Minnesota, because you have enriched our community tremendously. There is nothing you have not belonged to with all of your heart. You are not only our member, but you are a member who contributes money and time and energy to everything you belong to. You're a real model, and we thank you very much for this interview which has lasted almost four hours. Thank you, Esther. Is there anything else you want to say.

ES: No, thank you.