

**EI-228**

**ESTHER MUHLBAUER WEBER**

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**POLAND, 1948**

**AGE 10**

**PASSAGE ON "THE MARINE MARLIN"**

**PORT: BREMERHAVEN**

**RESIDENCES: POLAND: MIELITZ**

**US: WILLIAMSBURG, BROOKLYN**

LEVINE: This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service and it's October 15th, 1992. I'm here in Lawrence, Long Island, New York with Esther Muhlbauer Weber, who came from Poland in 1948 at the age of ten. I'm very happy to be here and I look forward to having your story on tape.

WEBER: How do you do. I'm happy that, I'm happy to have you.

LEVINE: Why don't we start by your saying your birth date.

WEBER: Okay. My birth date is September 28th, 1937. I was born in Poland and, to a, I'm Jewish. And my parents, when the war started, actually the war, the situation was getting

worse for the Polish Jews, my parents gave me to very good friends of their's who were Christians. And my mother and father had brought me to them and they told them that I was in their hands and they should keep me and if they didn't survive, they should just take care of me and have me and raise me as their own. I never saw my mother after that again, and I don't remember my mother because I was about three years old, something like that, two and half, three years old. And my father, I remember my father came to visit me during the night one or two times and told me that I should always remember that I'm Jewish but I should never allow anybody to ever know that I was Jewish because I would be killed for that reason alone. So, from the age of three I knew to keep that a secret.

LEVINE: What was your father's name?

WEBER: My father's name was Henry Muhlbauer.

LEVINE: And your mother?

WEBER: And my mother's name was Dora Silverman Muhlbauer. And she didn't survive and she was, I, as a said, I don't remember her because I never saw her after that again.

LEVINE: What were the names of the people whose care they left you in?

WEBER: It was family by the name of Byk. B-Y-K. They were a large family

living on a large farm and they were wonderful to me. And they made some false papers for an aunt of mine, the false documents, which everyone in those years had to have because at any given moment the Germans would, you could be riding a bus and they could be stopping at a bus stop and inspect everybody's documents coming off the buses. So, if you didn't have a Christian, a document that you were Christian, they shot you, they killed you right on the spot. And that's how my mother was killed. She was on a train going to Germany. They were promised work in Germany and one Polish person had reported her to the Security Police, that she was Polish, and they killed her right there. (Telephone rings.) That's the story that I was told by people who were witnesses. And that's (telephone is still ringing)--

LEVINE: Well, what was your life like on the farm for those, let's see, it was five years?

WEBER: My life on the farm was wonderful and I was very happy. These people loved me and they were wonderful to me. And they took care of me. (Telephone is still ringing.) I went to church. I was in a choir and I was very happy to be raised as a Christian. I knew all the prayers and I remember feeling that what's the big deal about being Jewish. If they're killing the Jews, I just wanted to be Christian for the rest of my life. I didn't want to be Jewish anymore. And, what happened, eventually, was that a, I was out in the fields with the cows, watching the cows grazing and, this was a farm a few miles away from my original home, and some teenage boys had seen me in the fields and they reported me to the police. And they reported the Polish family, that they were keeping a Jewish child. And so, what happened, that following day they got a notice from the police that they would be killed and I would be, they would kill me and

them if they don't get rid of me within twenty-four hours. So they had to, I remember they hid me, that night they hid me in the barn between the animals and, in the middle of the night, they took, they put me the next morning or, at dawn, they took me on a train to Warsaw, which was the capital of Poland. And there they found my aunt, whom they originally made papers for, so they knew where she, she was the only one that they knew to get a hold of and they brought me to her. She was, at the time, a teenager herself, about seventeen. And they said they can't keep me. Her name is Eva Murkrebs, today, Eva Muhlbauer Murkrebs. She's my father's sister. And they brought me to her and they said, "You have to take this child." I was five years old. And, "We can't keep her anymore because she'll be killed and we'll all be killed." So, we did. And they were crying and they were, I remember they were very, very attached to me. They loved me and they were good people. They were good people.

LEVINE: Do you remember this incident of being brought to Warsaw?

WEBER: Yes, of course. That's what happened and then I came to my aunt. And she really did not want to take me because she was fearful of her own life. She was on the run all the time but she had no choice. There was no one else. My father couldn't be found at that time. It seems my father was out in the fields with the, just, out in, hiding out somewhere. And then I continued, we continued during the war, running from one place to another, from one city to another.

LEVINE: You and your aunt.

WEBER: Me and my aunt. And, almost at the very end of the, 1945,

when the war was over, the Germans were still collecting people and sending them to concentration camps. And I was, at one point, on a line going to a concentration camp, being led to a concentration camp. And it was already at the tail end of the war. And I just, I must have been about eight years old at the time. And I saw ahead of me, I don't know if it was real or imagined, a fire, like flames. And I panicked and I just ran off that line. And I could have been shot by the police. But I started to scream. I said, "I'm not going." Suddenly my aunt disappeared and I didn't see her. It seems she escaped somehow and she felt that whatever would happen would happen, but we weren't going to go with that line. And I was beaten by one soldier kicked me and threw me aside. And, I guess, he saved my life because he just cursed me out and said, "Get the hell out of here!" And I was screaming and crying and I was hysterical. But he let me run away. And I just ran and ran and ran into the fields. And, eventually, when the line went on, I found that I was on a farm, in a farmer's house, and my aunt had hidden out there, my aunt ran away and I ran away, and that's how we were saved from going to a concentration camp.

LEVINE: And you found each other?

WEBER: We found each other afterwards. Then, within, I don't know the time span, because I don't remember that. But I remember the Russians, the Russians liberated us, the Russians came into Warsaw. The Germans were shattered and

without shoes, without, and ragged, and they were running. They were trying to get away from the Russians and the Russians were chasing after them. And I remember the Russians coming into Warsaw liberating the city. And, from there, after the war--

LEVINE: Well, let's just go back a second. What was the name of the town where you started out, where you lived with your mother and father?

WEBER: With my mother and father? I was born in a town called Fanggluvka. It was a farm. I don't know, exactly, the details. But my father's family lived in a town Mielitz.

LEVINE: Can you spell it?

WEBER: M-I-E-L-I-T-Z. And that's where the Byk family lived. And so my father brought me to them. And that's where I spent a few years on the farm with the family, with the Christian family. And then I lived the rest of my life in Warsaw, which was the capital. By the way, when they were rounding up the people at the end of the war, almost at the end of the war, to send them to the concentration camp, it wasn't only Jewish people that they were rounding up. They were, at that time, the line that I was on was the people, the intelligentsia, it was called. The people from the town, from Warsaw, because they did not want those people to survive to be able to testify what had happened. The farmers they left alone, but the city people they were trying to get rid of because they didn't want them to testify. And so we were part of, my aunt and I had lived in Warsaw. They didn't know that we were Jewish, but they were still taking us to a concentration camp, simply because we were from Warsaw.

LEVINE: I see. What was it like when you and your aunt were together, hiding out for those years?

WEBER: Well, those were the years that I was in Warsaw and we were constantly being bombed by the Allies, I guess. I don't know who it was, the Allies. We were constantly in and out of shelters. The city was bombarded. But I was living, actually what, I was with a, in Warsaw I was living, my aunt was living with a Gentile family and she was working for them. And the husband, well, they knew that she was Jewish. And they were keeping her there and they were, because she was paying them rent and even though she had documents, I think that wife, the husband knew my aunt was Jewish and I think they knew each other from before the war. His wife did not want us to be there but she didn't have much of a choice because he insisted. So, she was not very nice to me. She would torture me practically.

LEVINE: In what way?

WEBER: She would force me to, she would give me food to eat. If I didn't eat the food then, she wouldn't give me anything else for the rest of the day or 'till the next day. Then I had lice in my hair, so she shaved off my whole head of hair and it was the summer time, I remember. I was embarrassed. I had to, I was walking around bald and the children would laugh at me. And one time I ran away from home and I ran into the woods. We were living not too far from some woods and I got lost in the woods. And I was afraid that, as a child, I was afraid the wolves would eat me because there were stories about the Black Forest of Poland and that there were wolves and gypsies

living in the forest. And I got very frightened, so I ran, I came back home. And then my aunt didn't have too much of a choice, because she would go to work in the morning and come home at night and whatever complaints I had, I had to live with them because she didn't have a choice and I had no choice and we had no other home. But eventually we had to leave this home and go on to, and we were just wandering around until we were taken, were being taken to a concentration camp. We were rounded up. All the Polish people from Warsaw were being, started to be rounded up. And we just kept going. I don't remember all the details but I remember constantly moving, constantly on the go. I was never in one place for more than a few months, a year.

LEVINE: You must have had quite a bond with your aunt. Could you describe her or just say a little about your relationship.

WEBER: Yes. Well, she was very, yes, I'm very close to her. She's alive today and she lives in Howard Beach, New York. And they've, she and her husband survived the war. And she was really, like my mother. She was my surrogate mother. And she was single at the time and she suffered a great deal wherever she went because she had this five year old child with her, dragging, five, six years old. People used to call her a "whore." People thought that she had an illegitimate child with, they thought she was Polish and she had an illegitimate child with a Jew. And they called her all kinds of names because she had no husband and here was this child. She told me to call her "Aunt," but there were many times that I called her "Mother" and many times I called her "Aunt." And people really didn't know what the relationship was and she was a young woman at the time. And it was very difficult for her but she was very, very, a very brave woman and a very quick, sharp thinker. And she would make her moves on

the spur of the moment and, I guess, that's what saved out life. When she ran off that line, she bribed, what I found out later, was, what happened was that she had a ring that she bribed one of the Nazi soldiers with. She gave him her ring and he turned the other way and told her to go. And she got off that line and escaped. And she felt at that time that, hoping that if I didn't see her, I would run looking for her, which is what I did, because I didn't see her and I saw this line moving on and I said I'm not leaving without her. And I started to scream and, I don't know, maybe it was the same soldier that knew and let me escape. Could have been, too. I don't know exactly, you know, those details. But that's how we escaped. And the war ended and we were free.

LEVINE: Did you go to school at any point, before you left--

WEBER: No, at that point, I had no school, no schooling. The only school that I had was the church, when I lived with, in Mielitz, when I lived in, with the Christian family, with the Byk family. I learned my prayers and my formal education, in fact, I think that my moral standards today are coming from the church (she laughs) not from my Jewish background, but rather from my Christian background, because I remember learning you have to be very good. If you're not good, you have to go to confession, and you have to, and you will, there's a heaven and hell, and you'll be punished. And I was very afraid of being punished so I was very good. I was a good child. (She laughs.)

LEVINE: And what were the Byk's like, Mr. and Mrs. Byk?

WEBER: I really don't remember. I really don't remember them at all. They were kind and they really risked their lives to, to take care of me, to take me. But they did love me and they wanted, it was my father left me there to be their child. And they treated me like their own. They were very, very, very broken up about having to let me go at that time.

LEVINE: Did you ever see your father after that?

WEBER: Yes, at the end of the war, when the war ended, what happened was all of the families wound up going back to their original towns to see who was left alive, who survived the war. So my aunt took me. My aunt and I went back to the original, to our town, to where the Byk family was. And she brought me there and the first place I went to was the church. (She laughs.) And that's where I remember reuniting with my father because my father came back and he found, that where he found me, on my hands and knees praying. And we were reunited and then my father started the process of leaving Europe. And from Poland we went on to Czechoslovakia, across the borders. And from Czechoslovakia we went to Austria. We were there for a while, and then from Austria we went on to Germany. And, in Germany, I lived for about two years, what is it, about, about three years. I think we went to Germany in 1946, no, about two years, between '45 and '46 I went to Germany. And then my father put me, they were, what was happening at that time was that they were sending the Jewish children, the children were leaving, the quota, the American quota was allowing children in first. So they put me on a children's quota as an orphan. So, the, I don't know if it was the HIAS or, I really don't know which organization took care of this. But I was put

on an orphan's quota and I left Germany before my father or my aunt.

LEVINE: Was your aunt with your father and you when you were in Germany?

WEBER: When we went to Germany, my aunt, my father and my aunt and uncle; my aunt got married in the camp in Germany. There were camps, D.P. camps where we lived. And so my father and my aunt and uncle and I were there temporarily. And then they registered me on this children's quota, somewhere, and then I left. And the camp that we were at was Landsberg, L-A-N-D-S-B-E-R-G. In fact, it was infamous because Hitler was once imprisoned in this town. There was a prison in Landsberg, and before he came into power. And, from there I went on to another city via Munich, to a city called Prien, P-R-I-E-N. It was a little town in Germany and there was like a hotel there where we lived waiting for our quota to come up. And I was the youngest child to be in that hotel. There were orphans, but they were teenagers, seventeen, eighteen. I was ten, so I was, and they were, I don't know, from what I understand, they were all waiting for their quota and they were all teenagers without parents. And I was amongst them. And I left Germany in 1948, from the port city of Bremen, Bremerhaven, it was called in German. I spoke German fluently. I spoke only Polish and only German and Yiddish, but I never spoke Yiddish because even after the war when I would talk with my father and my father would be, would speak Yiddish to someone, I'd be petrified and I would ask him not to speak Yiddish because I was afraid that they would kill him. And this was, I couldn't transfer the freedom, after hiding out and hiding the fact that I was Jewish, to, you know, to actually understand that we were free now and that we could, actually, it was a very dangerous time. There was an awful lot of anti\_semitism going on

after the war, as well, in Poland. Because I remember, going back now, I remember there were pogroms by Polish people after the war. The Jewish people would have a wedding. I remember we went to, there was a wedding. I was a little girl at the time and we were at the wedding, and some hooligans, some Polish kids came in with guns. And they lined us all up in the hall, in the wedding hall, against the wall and they were going to shoot us. And some men, including my father, ran to the roof of the building and they started to scream for the police. And the police eventually came and saved us. It wasn't organized but it was going on. So they were killing Jews after the war, the Polish people. So, but there were, you know, there were wonderful, wonderful Polish people that saved many lives, many children. And, people are people, I guess. And, unfortunately, man's inhumanity to man goes on 'till today. And I always taught my children, later on, that it doesn't matter who you are, if you're black or white or Jewish or Christian, if you're a decent person, you're a decent person. And that's all there is to it.

LEVINE: What was it like being with your father, because you didn't know your father until he came for you after the war?

WEBER: Well, I felt like a little child. My emotions and my feelings came back to him. I felt, I was very happy to be with him. I loved him. He was very kind to me. He was a very kind person. He never discussed too many things. He had a great difficulty with me because I was always wearing a cross and I was always trying to convince him that we should go to another town where no one knows us and escape and convert to Christianity. And he would promise me, okay, we'll do it next time, next month. And, because I couldn't understand that there was any big deal about being a Jew. And I was still trying to save my life. And I still was very afraid, this was after the

war. (She clears her throat.) And he didn't even begin to try to explain to me, at that point, who I was or what. He just kept telling me, promising me, okay, you know, we'll do it, you know eventually, at some point. I guess, and, uh, what I was always afraid, what I do remember now that I was always very fearful of him disappearing. Every time I wouldn't see him, I was always watching for him to come back because I was afraid he would leave me again and not come back for me. And eventually it happened again because he went off to Israel. He sent me on to America and that's another story, I came, after I came here, he was supposed to follow. And he waited in Germany for three years, for his quota to come up. And during those three years, my mother's sister had gone on to Israel and she wrote him letters to come to Israel and they would get married and eventually bring me to Israel. And so he went on to Israel and married her. And I stayed here in America. So we were separated for the next sixteen years, and I hadn't seen him. So that was another separation. There were always separations. That I remember.

LEVINE: Was your aunt related to your father or your mother?

WEBER: She was my, oh, my aunt that I was with was my father's sister. And she was in Germany with us for a while after the war and then, I was the first one to leave Europe and then my aunt, my father's sister, the one, Eva Markreb, she came to the United States i think in 19--, about two years later. 1950 she came to the United States.

END OF SIDE A

BEGIN SIDE B

LEVINE: Well, now, did the Christian religion, was that something that sustained you in any way or that you thought about through all this running and hiding and feelings of terror? I mean, was that, was that a big part of your thinking about things?

WEBER: No, I just felt that, as a child, I was even in the midst of war, I was always free. I had the freedom that children in concentration camps didn't have. So I was, I always felt, in a way, that I was in control of my own life. In control that I could do something (she clears her throat) to escape. And I guess I played with the children wherever I could find children to play with. I was a child, I thought I had a normal childhood. I didn't know that it wasn't a normal childhood. I mean, I would walk in Warsaw, I would walk in the street and I remember seeing bodies, dead bodies in the street. And the only thing that affected me was that I would see flies all over. And I would try to shake off those flies. I couldn't understand why that person wasn't moving to shake off the flies, that the flies were itching. That I remember; it's one of the things that I always, I guess, you know, they were influences on my psyche eventually. But, and I saw all kinds of things as a child but I thought they were normal. I didn't understand that, the only thing that I was very frightened of was the bombs falling, the fires in Warsaw, the houses, we were being bombed constantly. But there was one instance when we had to be, when I was with this Polish family that didn't treat me very, I don't know their names, and this woman, this woman was very mean to me. I was so afraid of her that we were once in a shelter, we were being bombed and we had to go underground to a shelter. And I had to go to the bathroom and I couldn't hold it in, so I

was so afraid of making, you know, dirtying myself or, that I ran upstairs to go to the bathroom, upstairs in the house, and all the bullets and all the bombs were falling all around me. But I went to the bathroom. And that was, my fear of her was more than my fear of, I didn't even think about the bombs falling and the house collapsing, but I was afraid of her. And so that was--

LEVINE: Well now, how about, what ship did you travel on to the United States?

WEBER: I was on a small ship. It was called Marine, the Marine Marlin.

LEVINE: And it was in steerage? I guess there wasn't steerage at that point in time.

WEBER: There was. I don't know, well--

LEVINE: Were there a lot of people down in the hold, in the bottom of the--

WEBER: Yes, yeah, I know there were beds, they were like bunk beds. So there were a lot of people in one big room.

LEVINE: In one room.

WEBER: If that's what steerage is, I don't know. And so that's the way we came over. And the trip took about fourteen days. And it was a small boat and I remember looking through a port hole and the waves were over the port hole, so it was like hitting a mountain. I mean, the boat was really rocking and I was all alone and I was ten years old at the time and I was very frightened of the boat going under. I didn't know what was going to happen. That was a very unpleasant time in my life. It was a very fearful time in my life. To go, to make that journey. And, I mean, I knew some people (she clears her throat) some people on the boat that were with me in this home, in this hotel, in this hotel where we were waiting for our quota to come through. And so some of them sort of took care of me and watched over me. But there was one point where everyone was seasick and I was still walking around. (She laughs.) And I was the only one on the boat. And I went up on, I didn't understand that you can fall off the boat! And I went on to the deck because at that point I got seasick. So I went up on the deck and the boat was just rocking back and forth and there was a terrible storm and I really could have fallen overboard easily. But I came back, you know, I saw that it was slippery and rocky, so I got off the deck very quickly and I came in, inside. And then we had one close call on the boat where we almost hit an iceberg. We were almost at the end of our destination. We were making a stop in Nova Scotia. And then there was a whole ruckus going on on the boat and we, I heard about this, and I found later on that there were two women that were stowed away on the boat and they found them--they were stowaways--and they found them and they took them off the boat and they were shipping them back to Germany. They were two German women. And we heard later on that they had syphilis and that's the reason that they were being sent back, besides which they didn't have papers or a quota. They were just trying to come to America. I, of course, didn't know what syphilis was, but they told me it was a very bad disease.

When you have sex, which I didn't know what that was either. (She laughs heartily.) But, anyway, what I was very impressed with when I heard this was, I was very frightened because I said to myself, "My goodness, we, they came all the way across the ocean and they survived the trip, and to have to go back to Germany at the end of that trip." And I was afraid that, we were all afraid that there, we would come to America and someone would find something wrong with our health or papers or something, and we'd be sent back at any given moment.

LEVIN: Had you heard about Ellis Island before you actually went there?

WEBER: No, no.

LEVINE: Do you remember coming into the New York harbor?

WEBER: Oh, yes. It was the most impressive thing that I could remember. We landed, it must have been, maybe, five, six in the morning because I remember it was dawn. I remember it very vividly. It was the most beautiful sight that I had ever seen. And I knew that I was in America and this was going to be my home for the rest of my life. And this was my final destination. That was my feeling, I remember feeling that way. And I just saw this beautiful statue. This lady with the light in the harbor. That was the first thing that we saw and everyone was excited and, you know, everyone ran on to the deck to see the port. And I remember

seeing millions of lights and movement, like sparkling lights. Actually, they must have been traffic that I saw, and sky scrapers with lights and big, tall buildings that I had never seen before and lights. And just, I felt that this was a new home, a new world for me and it was, and I was going to live there the rest of my life. And this was, and I was never leaving this country again. And that was my impression as a child.

LEVINE: And how did you get to Ellis Island? Do you remember going there?

WEBER: Well, when we got off the boat, I only remember we got off the boat and, actually, I had gone through many medical tests in Germany and we were vaccinated, and I was constantly--I remember constantly being sent by the organizations or whatever, constantly being sent to doctors and having medical exams. And when we arrived, and the thing that stood out, there was a lot of talk about TB, that if you had TB you couldn't go to America. If you had something wrong with your eyes, you couldn't go to America. And I, my health was good, but I was always afraid that there would be something that they would find with me that I couldn't go to America. And I, you know, very much wanted this, wanted to go. And when we landed, when we arrived in the harbor, and we came off on Ellis Island, all I remember was the very large hall, with benches and hundreds of people, thousands of people, what

seemed to me full, packed with people with valises and little tags. I had a little tag with my name on my clothing. And we were being processed at Ellis Island and we were lining up. We were lined up and they would look at our papers and check us to make sure that everything. Actually, I wasn't checked medically anymore, only my papers were checked. I had no further problems. And someone, I don't remember how I got there but someone took me from that boat to, onto an orphanage. There was a home for orphans in the Bronx somewhere. And I lived there for about two weeks. And, actually, I came to America, I didn't know who, whom I was going to live with and who was going--I knew I had some aunts and uncles that were going to meet me. But I was confident, I was confident in someone taking care of me, some organization taking care of me. I didn't know exactly what processes were going on, but there were processes going on, whether it was Jewish, the HIAS. I believe they were the ones that had taken care of this. And then an aunt and uncle came to that home and they took from there to their home. And I lived with them. They were strangers, it was an aunt and uncle, it was my father's uncle that had taken me out of this home and taken me to his house.

LEVINE: So your father must have corresponded with him?

WEBER: My father, my family that was here in the United States corresponded with my father and there were contacts with the family here. And, as a

matter of fact, when I arrived to the United States, the first time that I had seen a picture of my mother was when I came to the United States, because my parents, my mother, my parents had sent a wedding picture to the family here in the United States. So they had a wedding picture of my parents, which my father didn't have, and everything was destroyed in Europe. And I never knew what my mother looked like until I came to America and I saw this picture that was given to me when I came here. So that was, uh, as I mentioned before, when I was, during the time that I was living in Germany, right after the war, I had never seen a black person in my life. And the first time that I saw a black person was in Germany and they were American soldiers. And they were wonderful. And the first time I came in contact with any Americans, actually, was in Germany. And they were just very, very sweet and very kind people and they were battle-weary, and they were in uniform and they were always giving us oranges and chocolate and chewing gum. And I remember they were singing. The first songs that I remember was (she half sings) "Hey Barbarebba." (She laughs.) That was one and "Chattanooga Choo Choo," and there was certain, and "You are My Sunshine." Those are songs that I remember from 1945 that they were singing all the time. They seemed to be very happy, very outgoing, just wonderful people. And many of the German ladies wound up marrying a lot of soldiers. And then we would see, as a child, I remember seeing some black babies. And they were so cute! And it was so unusual for us because there were no black people in Europe until World War Two. And that's the first time that, you know, there are many people in living in Germany with, you know, with German wives and children and families, but that wasn't the case in 1945. This happened after the war.

LEVINE: And what about your first few days in America? Do you remember

them and do you remember things that struck you as different or what your impressions were?

WEBER: Well, I was in a, I was in one place, in a home, in the Bronx. And it was commune style, you know, you ate together with everyone and slept together with everyone. And we were all sort of parting ways because everyone, some were going to Chicago and some were going to Texas, and some, and these were places that I was just hearing for the first time. And, of course, for me, I hadn't, I also, I arrived here without the language. I didn't know any English. I only spoke Polish and German and when I came here, and Yiddish. But I didn't know English. And they told me as soon as I would go to my family, I would be registered in school, which I was, and they put me, and when I arrived to my aunt and uncle's house, Seiden, their name was, his name was Victor Seiden; they're not alive today; Victor and Sarah Seiden; S-E-I-D-E-N. And they had two children, a boy and a girl, Evelyn and Nathan. And I lived with them and they registered me in school. It was in Williamsburg. We lived in the Williamsburg Project at the time. And they put me into, the school put me into the fifth grade, according to my age. And I just had to learn English and reading and writing and arithmetic. And it turned out that I wound up; English was my best subject. (She laughs.) Spelling and English was my most interesting subject and I was very anxious to learn the language. So much so, and, actually, I lived with an American family because they were here, they were born here and they, their parents came before World War One. And we spoke English immediately. Never spoke any other language but English. And today I don't know a word of Polish. I forgot my Polish completely, which I'm kind of sorry about because it's nice to know another language. And, of course, when I hear it spoken, it doesn't sound like Chinese, but I really don't know the

language. I guess because I wanted to be so American and I wanted to go into the American system so completely, and I did. And I loved America and I loved the music and the freedom and the happiness, the light air about America. It wasn't heavy. It wasn't depressing. It was uplifting. That's about the feeling that I could say about America, that I always felt it was like a breath of fresh air. It was uplifting. It was a happy place to be.

LEVINE: And how long did you stay in school then?

WEBER: Well, I lived in Williamsburg for a couple of years, about two or three years, and then I went on to another family. My mother's, from my mother's side, my mother's brother took me for a few years to his home. My family sort of divided me up between them (telephone rings) so I was never in one home for too long. Then I lived on the East Side with my aunt and uncle--Silverman, Ted Silverman; they're not alive today; Fanny and Ted Silverman. And then from their house, a few years later, I moved on the Bronx (she laughs) to another family; Molly and Max Greenspan. Molly was my mother's sister. So I lived with them, with her and her husband for a while. And they were all, they all sort of divided, here was this child who came from Europe whom they didn't ask for, they weren't, they were not wealthy people. They were all struggling. My family, I don't come from a wealthy family. And it was very difficult for them. They were trying to make ends meet with their own families. I understand that today--I didn't understand

it at the time I was growing up--but, at some point, when I received this letter that my father was going on to Israel to get married and he would send for me, eventually, when things settled down. But things never really settled down because that was during, he went there in 1948 and there was the War of Independence and all the problems that happened in Israel, he felt that as long as I was safe in America, he wasn't going to send for me to come to Israel. He didn't know what, exactly, was happening here but he felt that I was at least safe and fed and had, you know, a good home. And I went through high school and I just, at some point, made up my mind that, well, I'm going to make it and I'll educate myself and I'll grow up and I'll get married and have a family. and I did get married very young, my husband, when I was seventeen. I was still in high school and we got married two years later.

LEVINE: And what's your husband's name?

WEBER: Oh, (she laughs) him!. My husband's name is Irwin Weber.

And I was seventeen and he was eighteen and a half when we met. And he was an all-American boy. I guess I never went out with European guys because, I guess, I wanted to leave the past behind me. And, he was American and hardly even knew that I wasn't American born because I spoke English perfectly and I was very with it and very happy. And we got married two years later. I was nineteen and he was twenty and pretty young for those years.

And he's a good guy and he wanted to give me a home. And he probably wouldn't have gotten married so young, but he knew that I needed a home and I was living, at that point, oh, at a certain point, I left my family in the Bronx and I went to live with when I graduated high school. After I graduate high school and before I got married, I moved out. I took a, rented a room, a furnished room with an old family; my girl friends's grandparents, who had an extra room to spare. And I, at this point, went to work and I paid for my own rent and I lived with this family until I got married.

LEVINE: We're getting close on time here.

WEBER: Yeah.

LEVINE: So, maybe if we can just, you could give me the name of your children, the names of your children.

WEBER: Okay. I'm married now thirty-five years and we have three children. My oldest is my son, David Weber. He's thirty-four. And my daughter, my next-- Oh, he's married and to Aviva; his wife's name is Aviva and they're married, at this point, about eleven years. They have three children. I have three beautiful grandchildren; Daniela, who's seven and a half; Avie, who's six and a half, no, almost six, what am I saying? And the baby, who was just born, his name is Amir Schlomo and his English name is

Joshua and he's fifteen months old. And my next one is Michelle Weber, who's right now presently living in Israel for a year and a half. She's not married. She's a graduate of Columbia. She's got her doctorate, Ph.D., in Industrial Psychology. And she'll be coming back. She's worked for NASA for a while. And, hopefully, coming back to find a job in America. She took a leave of absence for a while. And then my next child is Debbie Weber Schreiber. She's twenty-three, twenty-two, she's going to be twenty-three. And married to Michael Schreiber. They got married last June and they're living in Manhattan on the West Side. And, thank God, (she laughs) a happy ending.

LEVINE: Well, just before we close, is there anything that you would say, looking back on a tumultuous beginning to your life and coming to this country (Mrs. Weber clears her throat), the Christian beginning and the--

WEBER: And the Jewish ending. (She laughs.)

LEVINE: And now being Jewish. And, I'm also curious about when you saw your father, after all this. But, if you just maybe make any closing--

WEBER: Oh, when I saw my father again. Yeah, that's another historical moment. I was living in Far Rockaway and I was twenty-six and a half and I got a letter from my father from Israel that he was coming to meet my husband and my family. I had two children at the time, David and Michelle. Debbie wasn't born yet, the baby.

And, he came and here I was, I said to my husband, "Guess what, my father is coming." And here was this total stranger by now. I last saw him when I was ten. And I was going to see him again, I was twenty-six and a half. He was such a stranger, so much so that I took a picture of him to the airport, to Kennedy Airport to see who this man was. And I told my husband, and some family came with me, and I told them to look for a thin, tall man. Well, here was this short, little man coming off the plane (they laugh) and I looked at him. When I last saw him he was, I was very small and he was very tall and now he really wasn't so tall. He was a short man and here was my father. And, again, all the feelings came back again. I had forgotten him and I sort of, I didn't have any feelings one way or the other, but when I saw him again, after sixteen years, here was my father. And all the love and all the emotions that I, guess were buried, came up again. And we were reunited and we've been travelling back and forth to Israel to visit him and we've kept a close contact with Israel. And, through him, I've become involved with Israel. And I loved it and we've been going back and forth. But, if we have time--

LEVINE: A quick, any kind of closing statement.

WEBER: I basically feel that the strength is in the person and if you want to survive and make a life for yourself, you can't look back and you can't; you have to look forward and you have to say, "Well, this is, this is what I want out of life. I want a healthy, normal life and I want a future for myself." And you have to build on that. And you have to use whatever you can to go on with your life. You can't let yourself go under because of situations that weren't good or, I knew all time, people would tell me, "If you don't behave yourself,

you'll be sent back to Europe." And nobody wants you and nobody asked for you and nobody-- And I knew I wasn't wanted and I knew, but I said, "Well, I'm going to grow up and I'm going to make something of myself. And I'm going to prove to the whole world that I'm worthy of surviving." And I feel that I've survived and I've been a better, I do a lot of organizational work, a lot of volunteer work. And, I guess, part of the reason I feel this way is because there were people who helped me along the way and, now I feel, that it's incumbent upon me to help others.

LEVINE: Wow. That's a great place to stop and I want to thank you for a very, very interesting, moving story.

WEBER: Thank you.

LEVINE: This is Janet Levine. I've been speaking with Esther Weber. It's October 15th, 1992 and I'm signing off.

END OF INTERVIEW