EI-972
ROSE KORCARZ LAITER
BIRTHDATE: MAY 15, 1935
INTERVIEW DATE: NOVEMBER 20, 1997
AGE AT TIME OF INTERVIEW:
RUNNING TIME: 2:00:53
INTERVIEWER: PAUL SIGRIST
RECORDING ENGINEER: PAUL SIGRIST
INTERVIEW LOCATION: MAPLEWOOD, NEW JERSEY
TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: TAPESCRIBE
TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY:

POLAND, 1951
AGE: 16

SHIP: THE GENERAL STUART HEINTZELMAN
PORT:
RESIDENCES:

SIGRIST: Good evening, this is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is Thursday, November 20th, 1997. I'm in Maplewood, New Jersey. I am here with Mrs. Rose Laiter. Mrs. Laiter came from Poland. She arrived in the United States in November of 1951. She was sixteen years old at that time, and she was detained at Ellis Island for three weeks. Present also in the room are Mrs. Laiter's husband, Maurice, also born in Poland, but not—not an Ellis Island person, and Mindy Haikman. And Mindy and I have been in Maplewood all day and it is now nearly six o'clock in the evening and we're going to interview Mrs. Laiter about her life. Anyway, thank you for letting us come out. Can I begin by asking you your birth date?

LAITER: My birth date is May 15, 1935.

SIGRIST: And tell me where you were born.

LAITER: I was born in Grodzisk, Mazoviecki. That's twenty-eight kilometers outside of Warsaw and my maiden is Korcarz.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that?

LAITER: K-O-R-C-A-R-Z.

SIGRIST: And can you spell the name of the town where you came from.

LAITER: Okay, Grodzisk, G-R-O-D-Z-I-S-K, Mazoviecki, M-A-Z-O-V-I-E-C-K-I. It's Mazoviecki, but it's Mazoviecki.

SIGRIST: Is that the province?

LAITER: Yes, uh-hmm.

SIGRIST: I see. Um, tell me a little bit about the town itself. What you remember about the actual town.

LAITER: Well, I truly do not remember much of the town until that fateful day when the first bomb, that September fell on our—on the corner of our house and we—frightened as animals, we ran to the basement.

SIGRIST: September of what year?

LAITER: It was September 1939.

SIGRIST: Is that your earliest memory?

LAITER: That's my earliest memory and the minute that bomb hit, it did something to me. It's as if I just didn't feel a child anymore. I just felt that we have to obey orders. We have to listen. We have to be quiet. We—we—no one can see us. No one has—you know, we just have to go into hiding immediately. I—that's the kind of feeling I remember. I have a poem here which will sort of describe to you my feelings as a child of four.

SIGRIST: Would you like to read it for us now?

LAITER: Sure.

SIGRIST: Okay, go ahead.

LAITER: Reflections of a Child at War, by Rose Laiter. When I was four, I was a child at war. I heard the bombers roar and I was a child no more. Our house was shelled with a heavy bomb and mom and dad ceased to be calm. The Nazi soldiers marched up and down with rigid faces all over town. There was fear and sadness everywhere, with panic

and confusion filling the air. We were forced to march in threes and fours, 'til we reached our destination, the Warsaw Ghetto. We escaped in time, avoiding to be gassed. If you want me to tall you how, well I'd rather forget. I've known hunger. I've known pain and I walked barefoot in the freezing rain. I'm grown up now and not a child anymore, yet I've lived a thousand years since the time I was four. I've searched for reasons why, why all the bloodshed had to be, and in all the time I still fail to see. Maybe the world will find the answer some day and justify to me clearly why, why it had to be that way. I often dream of how my childhood might have been, and I quickly wake up, Oh, my God, could it happen again? How I wish each day for all children far and near that their childhood be spent in freedom with no fear. For to live in fear the way I did as a child, boy, I'm so grateful just to be here and alive. [tearful]

SIGRIST: Thank you. [pause]

LAITER: So these were my early recollections of a child. When they marched us into Warsaw, they designated a certain area where the Warsaw Ghetto's about to be, and we were allowed to come and go with armbands on our arms, with the Jewish star. My grandfather had said—my father had said he thinks this—this German is going to—is very—is going to finish us off, but my grandfather said, "Oh, you're young. You are impulsive. Wait it out. You'll see. They'll go away, just like they did in the First World War." But my grandmother said to us, "Run children run," and I thought that she was playing a game with us, like she used to play because my grandparents had orchards in Poland. And she said, "Don't listen to grandpa, to Zadie, run children run." And where we come from, you know, you were not disrespectful to your elders, but my father dared to be disrespectful and we made an attempt and one by one he smuggled us out from the area, so nobody would be—will suspect where he's taking us, and we had a store in Grodzisk of food—of all kinds of foods, all kinds of specialty items, and at the end—and the farmers used to come and shop in our store and they used to buy sometimes on consignment. So when the war broke out and they used to throw rocks and "Don't buy by Jews," and all this harassment that began, my father decided not to collect some of the money from some of the farmers. And my grandfather again got angry at him. "What's wrong with you? Collect the money. They owe it to you," and my father said, "No, I have a feeling I'm not sticking around, just in case we'll be some place in that area. Maybe they'll give us some shelter. Maybe they'll give us some food." So this is how he wound up not collecting the money.

SIGRIST: Let me ask what kind of a store this was.

LAITER: It was a store of foods, flour, sugar, all kinds of groceries. Herring, all kinds of herrings, all kinds of—because those were very—in Poland, you know, Schmaltz herring was a very—a very delicious appetizing meal and the farmers used to come and they loved it because they used to cook herring with potatoes and that was their main staple. You know, this is what they loved. So it was that kind of store. All kinds of candies, soap. I do not remember canned food, I'll be honest with you, but I don't think they had any canned food. Maybe they had it in jars, but I don't remember. I remember the candy. The candy jar because my—my fingers used to dig in once in a while for a candy, you know.

SIGRIST: Do you have other specific memories about that store? Things that you enjoyed doing or remember experiencing as a child concerning that store?

LAITER: Well, the—the stairs—the store—the store was on the first floor and there were stairs going up to our apartment and I remember that and my grandmother, my Bobba Leah—you know, her name was Leah, she's the one that raised us because my mother was in the business and all the love and all the cuddling and all the stories and all the fun memories I have with my grandmother, with my Bobba. And other than that, my memories start at age four, but all those horrible things that I saw along the way, like when we marched in Warsaw and they were bombing Warsaw, there were dead horses everywhere and dead people everywhere and—and one of my uncles wasn't sure should he hide with us in this building or in the other building. And he ran across the other building and a bomb fell on that building and killed him instantly. So I remember that. I remember that.

SIGRIST: Let me—I just have a couple questions to ask—

LAITER: Sure.

SIGRIST: Before we get you on the way to Warsaw.

LAITER: Sure.

SIGRIST: First of all, tell me why your family was in Grodzisk—is that the—

LAITER: Grodzisk.

SIGRIST: Grodzisk. Can you tell me how the family ended up there in the first place or why was that the family seat?

LAITER: Well, it was from tradition, I guess. It started with—with a family—with my great grandparents and it just continued and we were content. We were happy. My—my grandparents on the other side had orchards and they also had horses and they also had wagons and they all—they were business—business people. My—

SIGRIST: Those are your—which—

LAITER: This was my mother's father.

SIGRIST: Your mother's father.

LAITER: Yeah, Yakow. [PH]

SIGRIST: So it was your father's father, the Bobba Leah?

LAITER: My—my father's mother was Bobba Leah, right.

SIGRIST: Father's mother, right. Excuse me.

LAITER: Mother was Bobba Leah, right, and my—my grandfather on my father's side was a tailor.

SIGRIST: Tell me about your childhood memories of that—that [unclear].

LAITER: Oh, yeah, that—that is—I think this will be a first. I remember we used to walk all—by the way, I have three sisters and we used to walk to—to my grandparents' because he was a tailor and he let us each try and thread his needle for him because his eyesight was failing him. And I remember I was sitting on his lap and he was giving me a chance to thread his needle and all of a sudden, he bent down and he fell off the chair and I thought that I lost the needle, that's why he went to look for it. And when I—when we bent down, he died that—that moment. So—

SIGRIST: Can you talk a little bit about how his death affected the family?

LAITER: Well, you know, losing a—a person such as my grandfather was a great shock and a great loss because the elder—the elders in the family were the matriarchs. You know, they knew everything. They—it was a very close knit family and then all this happened. So it became, should we or shouldn't we? The panic was—was everywhere. It was—

SIGRIST: Prior to—to—to being brought to Warsaw, can you describe for me when you lived above the shop?

LAITER: Uh-huh.

SIGRIST: What memories do you have of the actual apartment that you lived in?

LAITER: Oh, I remember a big kitchen. I remember two big bedrooms. I remember that, and a big stove where every Friday my Bobba Leah used to put in a chalent. Chalent is a—well, let's see now. It's a—

SIGRIST: Can you spell that, first of all?

LAITER: Chalent, my good—okay, C-H-A-L-E-N-T. Chalent.

SIGRIST: Which—is that Yiddish?

LAITER: That's Yiddish.

SIGRIST: Yeah.

LAITER: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Is that what you spoke?

LAITER: Yeah, Yiddish. Uh-huh. And—and then we had a very special area where the children were playing because we were all small. My oldest sister at the time was already ten. My sister Sarah was eight. My sister Sarah was eight. My sister Jean was seven and a half, and I was four and my sister Phyllis, the youngest, was two.

SIGRIST: And—and you started telling us about Bobba Leah putting the ch—ch—

LAITER: Chalent, yeah.

SIGRIST: What is that?

LAITER: Okay, it's a pot filled with meat, potatoes and beans, and it's covered and it's put into the oven for the whole night with coals, and in—the whole night the aroma was magnificent. Absolutely magnificent, and then the next day when you opened it, it was puff potatoes and meat and beans and it was really a delicious—when you ate that, you were full for two days.

SIGRIST: What other memories of the apartment itself do you have?

LAITER: Well, I remember we had—that my parents got for a wedding present, velvet bedspreads. Wine red with embroidery, and—and they had beautiful beds with beautiful headboards and a beautiful closet. They didn't have—you know, like today was—a closet was specially made for their wedding. It was cherry mahogany.

SIGRIST: A freestanding piece of furniture.

LAITER: A freestanding piece of furniture. There was nothing built in. What else do I remember? I remember the candlesticks that my mother used to light candles Friday night. I remember the—

SIGRIST: What other pieces of furniture?

LAITER: What other pieces of furniture?

SIGRIST: Yeah.

LAITER: Believe it or not, you know, since there was no—everyone didn't have their own bathroom, you know. It was a bathroom in the hallway where we shared with other—with other families. So we had a special—a special bench with beautiful curtains on it and this—these were our potties. You know, when we were little. I remember that, and we each had our favorite potty, which was—yeah. [Laughs] Other than that, we were marched out of Grodzisk. As we were marching to—you know, on foot. You know, the Germans used to whip the people that couldn't walk fast enough and there was blood everywhere. So this is in my—this is in my nightmares. I wake up screaming at night when I talk about it.

SIGRIST: But you're doing a good job before you went to Warsaw, too. You said you didn't remember anything. You really remember quite a bit. As a child, prior to the Warsaw experience, is there a toy that sticks out in your mind? Or a gift that you were given?

LAITER: Well—well, not really because we had the raggedy—rag dolls, you know, made out of rags that Bobba Leah made for us, and these—these were our toys and we used to play just in—in the store. You know, lining up the candies. Lining up the—the—they had all kinds of delicacies that they were selling, you know. Playing outside, jumping rope, which—playing ball. Other than that, my childhood was stopped right there because my doll was lost on the way to Warsaw. So I had nothing.

SIGRIST: You mentioned a couple of times Bobba Leah, who is your father's mother.

LAITER: Uh-hmm.

SIGRIST: Can you talk about her role in the family?

LAITER: Her role in the family was truly a joy to behold. I mean, the fact that she raised all four of us and she did it with love and devotion and never complained. I don't ever remember her complaining. Maybe I was too young, I don't remember it, but her arms were always around us. I mean a hug was always there, available when you needed it. Of course, my father adored her, you know, because she was such a special lady and—

SIGRIST: What was her relationship like with your mother?

LAITER: With my mother pretty good because she allowed my mother to—a head of—you know, ahead of her time, to be in business, while my grandmother raised her children, which was the—nowadays I think a lot of parents would—would cherish that.

SIGRIST: What was something that Bobba Leah enjoyed doing for her own pleasure?

LAITER: Playing with us. Taking us to the orchard.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about going to the orchard?

LAITER: Orchard, picking the apples. Throwing the apples. Then we used to bring them back and Bobba Leah used to bake apple—apple cake. I don't remember we had pie. It was cake. We called it cake. And eating apples and it was special because we picked it, you know, which was good. She was just there unconditionally.

SIGRIST: And where was her husband, your father's father?

LAITER: Well, this is the—this is the grandfather that died with me in his arms.

SIGRIST: Oh, with the needle. I see.

LAITER: With the needle.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh.

LAITER: We thought that he dropped the needle and it wasn't—he died on the floor and all of us thought that he dropped the needle. So all of us went scamping looking for the needle, but it wasn't the needle.

SIGRIST: Prior to going to Warsaw, what information can you give me about Jewish religious practices? Prior to that experience?

LAITER: Well, everyone was kosher. Everyone went to temple. The men went Friday night and then Saturday morning. Saturday, naturally, we were dressed in our very best because that was the day where you—where you showed off, you know, your nice clothing. You had to have a Shabeas dress. You know, either in the summertime I remember we had those fluff, floral short dresses with the bouffant sleeves and little aprons over it, embroidered. And—

SIGRIST: And you called it a Shabeas?

LAITER: Shabeas. Shabeas. Shabeas, Saturday.

SIGRIST: Saturday. S-H-A-B-E-A-S.

LAITER: Shabeas dress, right, and—and—and then—and then during the week life went on, like—

SIGRIST: What about in the house? What—what—how did you observe your religion in the house?

LAITER: In the house?

SIGRIST: Yeah.

LAITER: Well, we didn't—we didn't make a fire in the Saturday—on Saturday. The store—the store was closed. The store was not open on Saturday and it was just a day of rest. My parents needed it desperately and we just romped around like children would. It was nothing extraordinary, except it was loving and warm and life was sweet. And the fact that all four of us came out, quote, normal, I went into study early childhood only for that reason. That I wanted to find out what makes a child go through all these horrors and still grow up to be, quote, normal. And—[phone rings-talking in background]

SIGRIST: Do you want me to pause it for a moment?

LAITER: Pause it for a moment. Maybe you should close the door?

SIGRIST: Oh, it's all right.

LAITER: It's okay? All right. All right.

SIGRIST: I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about the relationship between the Jewish population and the gentile population prior to the Warsaw experience? What you may remember as a small child.

LAITER: Okay, as a small child, very good. We played outside with the other—the Polish children. There was never any kind of resentment, any kind of—natural, like children, you know, sometimes would bicker, but other than that we—we looked forward to go out and play with them, with each other. But when the war broke out, everything changed.

SIGRIST: Were there distinctions between what occupations Jews had and what occupations gentiles had in this town?

LAITER: Not really. Everyone had their occupation. Like my father was a tailor. My grandfather was a—a farmer and a businessman. Polish people did basically the same thing.

SIGRIST: You had mentioned the farmers earlier.

LAITER: Yeah.

SIGRIST: I'm just curious if they were all gentile, you know—

LAITER: All gentile. The farmers.

SIGRIST: Gentile peasant farmers.

LAITER: Right, right.

SIGRIST: Or if some of them were Jews, too.

LAITER: No, they were gentile, right, and when we escaped the Warsaw Ghetto, they gave us shelter. Some of the—some of the Polish farmers gave us shelter and sometimes we were hidden in haystacks. Sometimes we were hidden in barns and sometimes the Gestapo was on the lookout because there were—they were giving out a certain amount of money to give out a Jewish person. So if we couldn't stay in the barn, we couldn't stay in the haystacks, we couldn't stay in their houses, we retreated to the woods, and we already had ditches there and branches. We already established a lifestyle of—of cat and mouse.

SIGRIST: Let me ask you two more questions before we get you on your way to Warsaw.

LAITER: Uh-hmm.

SIGRIST: Your father's name?

LAITER: My father's name was Maurice. In Poland his name was Moshe. The Jewish—

SIGRIST: Can you spell Moshe, please?

LAITER: Yeah, M-O-S-H-E.

SIGRIST: And what do you know about his family background?

LAITER: His—

SIGRIST: His growing up.

LAITER: His growing up?

SIGRIST: Yeah.

LAITER: Basically the same. Being down to earth, being honest, hard working. Being grateful for what they had. I know now there's a discussion why didn't the Jewish people leave Poland or Europe earlier? But there was no need to. Everyone was content in their own way. There were no millionaires, but we were comfortable.

SIGRIST: Tell me about your father's personality, as you remember it as a child?

LAITER: Oh, my father. First of all, I was the apple of his eye. I like to think that way. I was the middle child, by the way, so—

SIGRIST: Was it just the three sisters?

LAITER: The three sisters, but I have a brother who was born after the war.

SIGRIST: I see. When you say you were the apple of your father's eye, give me an example why that—that was.

LAITER: He always said that if there's something to achieve, my Roisala will achieve it. Roisala, my Rose will achieve it, you know, and he never doubted that—that I couldn't. He said that whatever I set my mind to, I could do it and it was truly his inspiration that—you know, it's—it's when you bring up children and you give them this inspiration and you motivate them and you say like the little engel—engine that

could. It happens. It can happen because it becomes internalized and you—my father died as a young man because he died a year after we came to America.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about his personality.

LAITER: Soft spoken. Hard working. Sincere. Loving. He was a great father, except he had no luck in his life, which—which was difficult, you know, as we were growing up. That we couldn't have all his guidance all the time because we weren't together all the time. But I certainly have fond memories of him.

SIGRIST: What did your father enjoy doing for his own pleasure?

LAITER: Well, naturally his work. He was an expert tailor because when we came to America and we worked—by the way, I worked in a sweat shop, too, on working papers.

SIGRIST: Great. We have a long way to go before we get [unclear].

LAITER: I know that. [Laughs] But—

SIGRIST: But I'm looking forward to hearing that.

LAITER: Oh, you're looking forward to that. And if—when my father finished a piece of work, like a coat or a suit, it was perfection. Now that I look at my husband, you know, he—he is the perfect figure to wear an excellent suit, you know. When I see him wear a good suit, you know, I say my father would have loved admiring this on him because it looks so great on him because he was that type of meticulous type of a tailor.

SIGRIST: How did your father—this may seem like a—seem like an obvious question, but how did your father learn his trade?

LAITER: From his father. That's it, from his father. Interesting. I never even—yeah. From his father.

SIGRIST: Was there anything that your father taught you how to do?

LAITER: Yes, how to sew. Believe it or not. [Laughs]

SIGRIST: You remember him doing that?

LAITER: Yeah, I remember.

SIGRIST: [unclear] a little bit.

LAITER: I remember. When he—when we came to the displaced persons' camp, it was already after the war. I mean, I know I keep going back and forth. He—first of all, we haven't been to school yet, so that's—I don't know if we can stop there or go—

SIGRIST: No, I'm interested in the story.

LAITER: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Go ahead and tell the story.

LAITER: So when we came to the displaced persons' camp after the war, we hadn't been to school yet, but I understand a lot of volunteer teachers came to America. Just like they have today the—what did President Kennedy? The—

??: Peace Corps.

LAITER: The Peace Corps. That's how they had in the '50s, in the '40s and '50s, where they came to the displaced persons' camp and they set up classes. And they set up classes in the morning, in the afternoon, in the evening and once I tasted the joy of learning, I was in the morning classes, in the afternoon classes, in the evening classes. I was everywhere. I finished elementary school in four years. [Laughs]

SIGRIST: Tell me about how your father taught you how to sew and what you remember.

LAITER: So—so when he—when people, you know, found out that he's such a good tailor, they brought him—a lot of people got material from America to make a suit. So if there sometimes was a—something to be finished, you know, so he used to say to me, "Come, sit next to me. Let me see if I can teach you a nice stitch." You know, and truly after just once, I knew exactly what to do, how to stitch it. How to sew it and it was a pleasure because he expected perfection and I truly got it. It was really great. So to this day when I have to do any kind of mending, he's in my soul.

SIGRIST: Thank you. Tell me what your mother's name was.

LAITER: My mother's name was Chaja Chana. Here in America they called her Helen.

SIGRIST: Helen. Can you spell—

LAITER: Chaja Chana? Okay, C—

SIGRIST: Is that Yiddish or—

LAITER: Yiddish, uh-huh.

SIGRIST: Yiddish.

LAITER: C-H-A-J-A and Chaja—C—and Chana, C-H-A-N-A.

SIGRIST: And what was her maiden name?

LAITER: Her maiden name was Waicer, W-A-I-C-E-R.

SIGRIST: And what do you know about your mother's background [unclear]?

LAITER: My mother's background—well, my mother had a very, very sad childhood. Her mother died when she was very young and her father—her father remarried to a very sad woman that didn't know how to give love, and the children really suffered as a result of that. And so she grew up quickly and she got an education in Poland. She attended the University.

SIGRIST: What do you know about her experiences?

LAITER: Well, she—she married very young. That's where her education stopped and then she went into the business.

SIGRIST: Tell me about her—what you know about her education.

LAITER: Oh, her education?

SIGRIST: Yes.

LAITER: I would say would be equal to high school and first year college, I would say.

SIGRIST: Did she—were there any stories that she would ever tell about that experience?

LAITER: She—she absolutely relished the—you know, the idea of telling how a lot of rich men, you know, really gravitated toward her because she was educated. She was very, very bright. Spoke Polish fluently and, you know, to speak Polish, you have to speak with—with gram—

grammatically correct. It has to be. If you're speaking—in other words, they determine whether you come from a big city or outside the city or the mountains, how well you speak the language. It has to be grammatically correct.

SIGRIST: Instant class distinction.

LAITER: It's class distinction right there.

SIGRIST: Yeah.

LAITER: Right there.

[END OF SIDE A, TAPE 1]
[BEGIN SIDE B, TAPE 1]

LAITER: Um, my mother was a hard working woman. She had that business going with such precision and she enjoyed what she was doing, and they—and they made an excellent living.

SIGRIST: Did she have a particular role in the running of the business?

LAITER: Yes. She was—

SIGRIST: What was her job?

LAITER: Her job in the business was to order and to make sure what's needed, what isn't needed and what goes and what doesn't go. She knew the ropes. She knew the ropes of the business, while my father was doing his tailor work and then, you know, helping out in the business.

SIGRIST: Let me just stop this for a moment?

LAITER: Yeah, just let me—[tape off/on]

SIGRIST: We were talking about your mom.

LAITER: Okay, my mom. My mom was—

SIGRIST: Personality?

LAITER: Her personality traits? Very strong. She knew what she wanted and she knew how to go about it, and when my mother talked, we listened. That's the way it was. Mother only has to wave her finger, say, "Now, look. You better behave." It was—

SIGRIST: Is there a story you can tell me about a time you didn't behave?

LAITER: Well, as—as children, naturally—

SIGRIST: Specifically.

LAITER: Specific—no. Well, going down to the store too many times, probably grabbing some candies. Probably and—but she knew we were in good hands upstairs, you know, with grandma, with Bobba Leah and—but she was a strong individual and if—and if I'll tell you what she went through during the war, you will see what a strong woman this—this person was. How she survived. She always used to say that she was the—she was the general and we were her—her soldiers. That's why we survived. It's true. We all cooperated because there were times where we were subjected to—to very, very difficult situations. You know, hiding and being quiet and—and truly escaping hazardous situations and not saying too much to anybody, and to stay out of stranger's ways, and to—so that's why she said she was the general and we were her soldiers.

SIGRIST: You told me the story about the bomb hitting the corner of the house.

LAITER: Uh-hmm.

SIGRIST: Pick up your story there.

LAITER: Okay. We were marched into Warsaw and, you know—

SIGRIST: Describe that process, what you remember.

LAITER: Yeah, it was a—they told we are to be outside and lined up in the street within a matter of a short time and we are only to take a small—a small bag and what we're wearing.

SIGRIST: And who are "they" specifically?

LAITER: They was the German soldiers with the high black boots and their whips in their hands and their bayonets on their shoulders. And we were ordered out of our houses to line up and to start marching.

SIGRIST: And as a child, what do you remember about the process of actually marching?

LAITER: Well, we got tired very fast. Elderly people got tired so they were beaten. Naturally, everyone tried to drag somebody else, and it was

very painful. Very painful, very scary and the next thing I remember is marching into Warsaw where they were bombing Warsaw. And as I said, there were dead horses and dead people. We didn't know which basement to run to, but—but there were—what's amazing, when we—the basement we got in, they had masks. You know, the—the sterile masks so that we won't get—we—we—they put masks on us. So somebody must have been already in charge of saving some people. And as I said, my Uncle Beryl, which was my mother's brother, wasn't sure which building he wants to hide and he ran across the street and the building was bombed and—

SIGRIST: How long were you organized by the Germans? Because you talked about Uncle Beryl running into a building.

LAITER: Yeah.

SIGRIST: I assume you're no longer organized by—

LAITER: No.

SIGRIST: By the Germans.

LAITER: Well, then—well, the Germans started the organization. They said, "This is the—this is your—this is the time you can go out. This is the time you can't go out. This is the time you can do this. This is the time you can do that." And it became very rigid. It became very frightening. It became—people were beaten up for no reason at all. They took all the men to dig ditches. They took them away from their work and to dig ditches and the reason my father was so perceptive is because he came back from one of the ditches the following day and he said, "Those ditches they dug yesterday, they buried children," and he could swear they were half alive because there were fingers moving and he has a feeling that this German is going to do the same thing to us. That's when he had the argument with my grandfather. My grandfather got very annoyed with him why he didn't listen to him, why he insisted on being so impulsive, and one of my cousins survived. My cousin Gutta [PH] and she lives in Israel and she ran into him in—in one of the concentration camps. I imagine they were marching them already to the showers. They must have been because they pulled her out with three other girls to clean the assessment's offices, and she ran into my grandfather and my grandfather recognized her and he said to her, "If you ever run into Moshe," you know, to my father, "Please ask him my forgiveness. That he was really," because where we come from, if you told somebody "You're impulsive and you're immature," that was an insult. "Please ask him to forgive me. That he had the right idea."

So she told us that after the war, when we met in the displaced persons' camp.

SIGRIST: Interesting, all these little crossed lives.

LAITER: I know. I know.

SIGRIST: Um, you—when you were originally brought to Warsaw, you were brought into what we know now as the Warsaw Ghetto.

LAITER: The Warsaw Ghetto and there were no gates yet. There were just a designated area where Jews were allowed to stay.

SIGRIST: And how long did you actually stay there before the next chapter?

LAITER: Well, we stayed there quite a while, where they're beginning to put fences around. We stayed there quite a while.

SIGRIST: What is quite a while?

LAITER: Well, as a child—you know, as a child, if this was September, we stayed, you know, it was already getting hot, you know. So it must have been towards the summer already and children were disappearing left and right. They were rounding them up, the assessment, the Germans and naturally shooting them or disposing of them in those ditches where the Jewish men were digging. And at one point they had an announcements, "Please, we set up a center for your children to come and get milk and bread. Come bring your children," and my father said, "I smell a rat. I am not bringing the children." So again he had an argument with my grandfather. "Your children haven't eaten in so many days. They need some milk. They need a good piece of bread. Take them," and my father said, "I think the German is about to give my children bread and milk. I am not taking them," and sure enough, the people that took their children to that center were never seen again.

SIGRIST: Tell me what you remember as a child about the every day life in the Warsaw—in the Warsaw Ghetto. The living arrangements and—

LAITER: Well, the—right. Well, things are becoming—became scarce. There wasn't enough food to eat.

SIGRIST: Where did you live exactly [unclear]?

LAITER: Well, there was—it was in a building and everybody already had a room in that building. And we slept already, you know, on floors

because there were no beds for everybody and the rumors were such that everyone was petrified of what's going to happen the next day. They used to round up wonderful people and beat them to death or make them pray to God and say, "Pray to God, you'll see he's not going to help you." You know, just to prove the point, you know. People—then the next morning we were just in the streets sitting like—like frightened animals, you know, and just watching the world go by. People were being beaten. People were—were walking with—with their belongings in their hands. It was that kind of a—of an atmosphere. It was no longer—now that I think back, it was no longer life as it should be. It was beginning to deteriorate.

SIGRIST: You mentioned your father was sent out to dig.

LAITER: Right.

SIGRIST: What was your mother doing during this time?

LAITER: She was with us. She was with us and—oh, what she did when she—when we—when we left Grodzisk, she put lots of layers on her body and I remember she used to go out to the farmers and barter some of her fine clothing, which—which I'll never forget and at one point, she went to barter one of her silk dresses that she had for Shabbat, for Saturday, and she walked in and a dog attacked her. I was with her at the time, by the way. The dog attacked her and took out a chunk of her arm right here. A chunk, and we were no longer allowed to go to a hospital, so a doctor who was very—he was very sympathetic to the Jewish people, operated on her in a basement and she had—he took a piece out of her hip. She had a piece and it was placed into her arm and he stitched it up and it was—it was incredible, you know, that this is what she talked about all her life. That how did she survive that? We were no longer considered as normal people. We were no longer considered worthy of a doctor. We were no longer—we were no longer considered as human beings and—and the children were no longer feeling like children. It was—now that I think back, it was very, very sad. Now I've lived through my life through my children and my grandchildren, which is very special.

SIGRIST: Where did your food come from when you were in the ghetto?

LAITER: Well, from bartering. From bartering. Yeah, my mother truly bartered away a lot of her fine stockings, her fine underwear, her fine blouses. My mother was a well-dressed woman. She had fine clothing. And from bartering, yeah.

SIGRIST: Did the Germans provide any food for the residents?

LAITER: Well, there was—there was a kitchen, soup kitchen, where they gave soup which was more water than anything else in it, and a piece of bread. That was basically the staple that they gave.

SIGRIST: Were there any educational opportunities, perhaps organized by the Jews themselves for Jewish children in the ghetto?

LAITER: Yeah, the Jews—the Jews organized in the basements educational situation. You know, praying, learning the—the Hebrew alphabet, learning the Hebrew vocabulary, but it was very limited because there were no textbooks. There were no notebooks. It was done underground. It was done underground.

SIGRIST: Did you experience any of that while you were there?

LAITER: No, I didn't. First of all, I was too young to—to join in a group like that and second of all, my father was afraid to let us be in a group like that because if someone told on that group, then they came and they killed everybody. So, no, we didn't.

SIGRIST: Does anything else stick out in your mind that we haven't talked about about the time that you spent in the ghetto?

LAITER: Basically, sadness. Basically, hunger. Basically, cold. Basically, feeling—feeling sad all the time. There was nothing to laugh about. There was nothing to sing about. There was nothing—and the atmosphere was such that it just jelled together with that type of feeling.

SIGRIST: How many family members are with you at this time? Your mother, your father, you—

LAITER: My sisters.

SIGRIST: Three sisters.

LAITER: My grandfather and a few cousins. Quite a few cousins and aunts and uncles that were with us. My mother's other brother, Ella Waicer, which has two sons in Canada. He passed away.

SIGRIST: Your Grandmother Leah, was she with you?

LAITER: My Grandmother Leah with us.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh.

LAITER: Yeah, uh-hmm.

SIGRIST: So it's fairly—a fairly sizable family.

LAITER: Family.

SIGRIST: Unit.

LAITER: And there were cousins and aunts and uncles, you know, all around, and everybody sort of prayed for somebody—for everybody else, but it was just a very sad time. Very sad and then our shoes, we outgrow out shoes. So now we walked half barefoot. Then we outgrew our clothing, so a sweater became a scarf and one blouse became a rag over here and the other one became a rag over here, and we were in rags already because we outgrew everything. It was already—and it was just a very difficult time. It's hard to believe that one nation can inflict such pain and build factories for sheer—for the sheer reason of genocide, of killing another human being. And the world stood still.

SIGRIST: Describe for us how it came that you would leave the ghetto?

LAITER: Well, my father saw that they're building those gates around, the fences around closer and closer.

SIGRIST: That's right, because you said while you were there was prior to the building—

LAITER: Prior, right. Uh-huh. Prior, right, right and that's when my father smuggled us out from the ghetto, one by one. Took us to the farmers.

SIGRIST: Can you describe your experience?

LAITER: Well, one day we—first of all, you know, they put him on the sanitation department so as he walked, you know, with his garbage can, you know, I was like half in it and half outside of it, you know and around—you know, it was like a kid, you know. So this was my experience that my—my hiding was that garbage can, you know, where he took us out. And he took out the others because at one point you could walk—two people at a time could walk. Could walk, but you didn't have to—it wasn't good to look suspicious, where you were going, you know. And once we got out, outside Warsaw, a lot of farmers helped us and—and before we knew it, we ran into a

group of partisans. You know, underground. You know, the partisans.

SIGRIST: Describe for us on tape what the partisans were.

LAITER: Oh, they were a group of people of all ages and they said that they have all kind of information that they're gassing people and burning people and we need to make an attempt to travel further and further. And I guess we traveled so far, we traveled to the Russian border and we came to the Russian borders, they arrested us. [Laughs? Cries?] Transferred us to their country.

SIGRIST: Is there any specific happening, event that—

LAITER: Oh, yeah.

SIGRIST: That occurred when you were going that sticks in your mind?

LAITER: Oh, yeah. So a train was supposed to arrive and take us to the Russian borders and the train arrived and people came out of the woodwork from the woods, and—and hopped on the train that there was no room for anybody. I said, "What are we going to do now? They going to come back and shoot us here. What's going to be now?" But we retreated. We went back to the ditches, into the woods and we hear airplanes in the sky and they were German airplanes and they bombed the train and not a single person survived the train. There were bodies all over with blood and guts hanging on the electric wires. It was a scene that if I live to be a hundred, I will never forget and we were—when we—when we—when we—because they said there's—we saw there was no room for anybody else on the train. We said, "Wasn't that a miracle? We could have been on that train. That would have been the end of us." So there were many times where we came close call, you know, to—to being caught or to being shot. We heard shots all the time. All the time and some people thought they want to run back, so they were shot. And used to have to maneuver and scheme how to stay out of—of the fire because you didn't know who was shooting. There were no maps. There were no radios. There were no—but—but some of these partisans had radios and I understand they did a lot of—a lot of underground work because later on when I read, you know, as I matured, you know, that they were bringing the Xylon B, you know, to gas the people, you know, a lot of the partisans bombed some of those trains, which perhaps a few of us survived as a result of that.

Then we came to the Russian borders. They arrested my father. We didn't see him after that for—

SIGRIST: How was it that you finally got there? How did you get—

LAITER: Oh, by—on foot. On wagons, on—it's insane, absolutely insane how we got there. Insane. And when we got to the Russian borders, it was my mother and the four of us.

SIGRIST: What happened to the rest of the extended family?

LAITER: Well, some of them were shot. Some of—a lot of them were shot. A lot of them decided to go back.

SIGRIST: Back to?

LAITER: Back to Poland.

SIGRIST: Back to Poland.

LAITER: Back to Poland. But little did we know that by the Russians arresting us, that they saved our lives. But what happened was—that was already 1942 and it was a hunger beyond anybody's imagination.

SIGRIST: Do you remember how you felt as—as a child, you're seven years old at this point?

LAITER: Uh-hmm.

SIGRIST: About what it felt like to be arrested by the Russians?

LAITER: Frightening. The fear was—we were constantly shaking. Then from malnutrition, all of us looked like—[Laughs]—like hell. But I developed, you know, the Biafra disease, you know, with the large bellies and the—and my skin got infected and blood. It was an infection, you know, and my sister Sarah, you know, when I wrote in my thesis—I'll have to read my acknowledgement in my thesis. I think that should be part of that, too. She was the one that—because only the sunshine was, you know, soothed me because I was skin and bone and—and sick and she used to make sure I don't fall asleep. So she used to, you know, nudge at me. "Wake up. You're not allowed to fall asleep." My mother got a—a job in the bakery.

SIGRIST: This is in Russia?

LAITER: This is already in Russia.

SIGRIST: When they arrested you, where did they take you?

LAITER: Who knows. They took us to outside of Uzbekstan.

SIGRIST: What—what was the living arrangements?

LAITER: Living arrangement, hot. [Laughs] The country.

SIGRIST: Well, I guess what I'm going for is was this some kind of an organized camp?

LAITER: No, it wasn't an organized camp. It was just—it was just people living in—in--in small houses and huts and farmers and there was one big bakery because in 1942, everyone got three hundred grams of bread, and the bread must have had in it sawdust or some kind of sand in it because it weighed a ton. So your three hundred gram bread looked like this, this little.

SIGRIST: You're gesturing about six inches.

LAITER: Yeah, I'm gesture—about six inches, that was it. Right. But they gave everybody the three hundred grams of bread. They didn't make an exception, and nobody was shooting at us. They needed that bread should go to the front. Well, you know, what happened, you know, when the Germans came close to Russia and it was wintertime and the Russians needed their bread to go to the front. But thank God, they have very cold winters and that's I think what saved them because the Germans were not used to such a bitter cold winter. But anyway. So they gave my mother a—oh, one other thing I have to tell you which is while we were in the woods. My mother said to us, "Don't eat any kind of berries. They might be poison," and motioned her finger at us, and we listened. But there were several days where we couldn't get out to any kind of fields, you know, any kind of barn to steal something from their garbage. You know, we were starved. My sister Phyllis must have been colicked because if she didn't get something, she cried nonstop.

SIGRIST: You're saying colic, right? Colic.

LAITER: Colic.

SIGRIST: C-O-L-I-C.

LAITER: Right, right, and she said, "I am so hungry I'm going to eat those berries," and I said, "Mother said you cannot eat those berries because they might be poison." So here I am—what, she was already five? I was already seven give or take, and I said to her, "I tell you what. First of all, stop crying because somebody hears us,

they're going to shoot us. So you have to stop crying. But I tell you what, let's watch the birds get at the bushes and if they're able to fly away, that means it's not poison." Now, I think to myself, where in the world did I get such an idea at the age of seven. I must have been a perceptive child, now that I think back, you know. And I said to her, "Don't eat those berries until those birds fly away." Well, the birds flew away and both of us attacked those berries and we ate ourselves sick. We had a tummy ache for days and everything else that went with it. The pain was so severe that even if there would be feed, we couldn't eat it. That's how sick we were.

So then when my mother got this job at the bakery, she used to bring home—she used to take a few pieces of bread from the bakery. Well, I don't—they called it stealing. I don't call it stealing. I call it survival. My mother took a few pieces of bread in her pockets to bring home to her children. I don't think anybody could call this stealing. And—and one day they caught her and they said to her, "You have two choices. Either we send you off to Siberia. You're going to rot in jail, or you give up two of your children to an orphanage." And now that I'm a mother myself, how does one make a decision like that? Well, my uncle was with us, my mother's brother and he—he suggested that perhaps you should give up the two younger ones, and guess who were the two younger ones? Rose and Phyllis. We were the two younger ones. We were the corabund. [PH]A corabund is a sacrifice. We were the sacrifice and we begged and we pleaded, we're grown up and we know everything and we can do everything. It was decided that she should give us away. Can you imagine in your wildest dream to be—to be given away to an orphanage? [crying]

Well, they took us to the orphanage. They left us there and my mother promised us that she'll come and get us, but the time was endless. The time just—you know, for children time doesn't mean anything and Phyllis, they wanted—I went to see—I'm just—did you see Annie? The opening with the steel cribs? That—that was the same and she wouldn't let go of me. She got hold of my thigh and held onto it with her nails and she wouldn't let go of me. So they picked us up and threw us both into one crib. There and they shaved our heads because there were lice and there was sicknesses. So they had to. So we huddled together in that crib for months. [blows nose] Sorry.

SIGRIST: That's all right. That's fine.

LAITER: But then my mother had an idea. They wouldn't let us out. After a while they wouldn't let us out. Children were dying. Every night they used to take out children in sheets, dead children because they were dying from scarlet fever. And they wouldn't let us out because they—

they were afraid we will spread the disease to the whole region. So my mother had an idea. She still had one lipstick left from Poland. Everything else was bartered away. So she came to see us and she took the lipstick and she rubbed it into our faces and she dragged us both into the office and she said, "Look at them. They're burning up from high fever. You don't let them out, I'm going to write to Stalin myself." That's the type of woman my mother was and my mother screamed and yelled and she said, "You better let—if they're going to die, I want them to die in my arms. I don't want them to die here," and they opened the gates and they let us out. Heaven on earth.

SIGRIST: That's a good place. We're going to just pause for a minute.

LAITER: Sure.

SIGRIST: And I'm going to put another tape in and we'll keep going. So we're signing off on Tape One, which Rose Laiter.

LAITER: Okay.

SIGRIST: On November 20th.

[END OF SIDE B, TAPE 1]
[BEGIN SIDE A, TAPE 2]

SIGRIST: Okay, we're now beginning Tape Two with Rose Laiter who came from Poland in 1951 when she was sixteen. We're in Maplewood, New Jersey. Mindy Haikman is with me. This is Paul Sigrist.
Mrs. Laiter, you just told us how your mother got you in a rather ingenious way out of the prison in Russia. Tell me what happened next, once you were released?

LAITER: [clears throat] Once we were released, we were just street kids. We lived in a hut where the rain came in every night.

SIGRIST: When you saw a hut, can you be more specific?

LAITER: Yeah, it was made out of—out of clay, like sand and clay and like the Flintstones. [Laughs] The Flintstones. I know, I'm glad I can laugh. And we were half barefoot and half naked, but we had three hundred grams of bread, which was—which was a survival staple.

SIGRIST: Where was your father during this?

LAITER: Well, they arrested my father.

SIGRIST: But he obviously was not with you.

LAITER: He was not with us all this time. No, no. No, he was not.

SIGRIST: At that time, did you have any idea where he was?

LAITER: No, we had no idea where he was. We had no idea if we ever even meet again. So—

SIGRIST: What about your grandmother or any of the other members of the family?

LAITER: Oh, they all died in the gas chambers.

SIGRIST: But I—when you're in Russia.

LAITER: Yeah.

SIGRIST: It's just you and your three sisters and your mother.

LAITER: My mother. My mother.

SIGRIST: As far as you remember—

LAITER: And my uncle. My Uncle Ella.

SIGRIST: Your mother—is that—

LAITER: My—yeah.

SIGRIST: Mother's brother?

LAITER: My mother's brother. Right, right.

SIGRIST: Is he living in the hut—the hut with you?

LAITER: No, he's living in a separate hut.

SIGRIST: Okay, but he's there.

LAITER: He's there, yeah. Yeah, yeah.

SIGRIST: Actually, before we pass on the—the orphanage, are there any other things that stick out in your mind? I mean other than the sadness, of course, of the situation?

LAITER: Uh-hmm.

SIGRIST: But I mean some of the specifics of that experience?

LAITER: Well, it was a time of sadness again, but it was in a different way. We didn't hear anybody being shot and we just struggled and—and functioned. It was a functional existence. It was an existence. In the wintertime, if we ventured outside and came back in, we had to put our feet into cold water because otherwise they would freeze. We huddled together. We—it was just a time of—of existence. It was nothing else. Sadness and existence and—and dreaming, will we ever have a piece of bread? Will we ever see a whole loaf of bread? Will it ever be in our lifetime again, a whole loaf of bread? Will we ever be able to sit down at the table and have a dinner? Remember how Bobba Leah used to serve us dinner? And it was just a dream. It was thinking that it will never, ever come to pass again.

SIGRIST: Did any of the other children who were in the orphanage make an impression on you for one reason or another?

LAITER: Oh, sure, because they were all—we were all—we all looked alike. Our heads were shaven. We were all—all skin and bones and we were all—all huddling one another. They each had separate cribs, but my sister Phyllis wouldn't let go of me, so we—we huddled together. She wasn't going to let go. If not, she put on her crying and boy her crying did it. So it was a time of sadness, a time of sheer existence, a time of pure—like there was no hope. But yet, there were moments where we were hoping and the fact that we remembered some of the nice things when we were little, I think that gave us hope. And hope is truly a most wonderful, wonderful—[sighs]—ah glue. Wonderful sweet glue, sweet honey that—that keeps your—keeps you going.

SIGRIST: What about some of the employees and staff, did any of them—do any of them stick out in your mind for any reason?

LAITER: Yeah, they did. As a matter of fact, the director of the bakery. After we came back from the orphanage, we started speaking Russian very well and we started speaking Uzbeck, the Uzbeck language very well and we were singing with the other children, so we picked it up quickly. So he used to come and bring us pieces of bread if we sing a song for him. So we look forward him to come, you know. You know, with the huts where—so he has pieces of bread so we're going to sing some songs for him and we're sure to get a piece, which—which usually was—was so. And that was something to look forward to. And then all of a sudden we heard the war is over. People were

dancing in the streets and people were celebrating and people were delirious, you know, of—and I understand that Poland had some kind of an agreement with—with Russia that they need to release their Polish citizens, and they put up trains, loads, and we got all—they released some of the prisoners, so they released my father. So we found our father and we got on the trains. You know, arrangements were made and we traveled back to Poland and we came to—you know, to several—to several German towns and then several Polish towns, but they finally let us out in Schtechine. [PH]Schtechine, which was one of the towns they let us out. When they let us out in Schtechine, the pogroms started. In other words, the hooligans that didn't finish off the Jewish people during the war, made it their business to finish us—to finish them off now. And progroms means that attacking and killing and robbing. It was free for all.

So by that time they sent from Israel, you know, to organize kibbutzing. You know what a kibbutz is? A kibbutz is a—a children's home and it could be an adult home where you worked together and everybody—and nobody collects a—a—you can have everything you want, but you don't collect a salary. In other words, it's a commune. That's a kibbutz. Look it up one day. You'll—you'll find it interesting what a kibbutz is. And they wanted to save the children, to bring the children to Israel because we—the Jewish people decided they no longer want to be a gypsy nation and it's time to leave the soil that robbed us of our integrity, of our human—of our property, of our—of everything. They robbed us of everything. So they said up kibbutzing for children, kibbutzing for adults.

Now, in kibbutz, when you live in kibbutz nothing is yours. Everything is ours. So my mother—we were in a children kibbutz. My parents were in an adult kibbutz. So they came to see us one day. They had visitation rights. They could come and see us. So they come to see us and the—the director of the kibbutz said, "I will take a look and see if our children are ready to see you," and she went in to get us. So my father says to my mother, "Did you hear what she just said? She says she's going to see if her children are ready to see us. We just took them out of Hitler, out of the Holocaust and now they're—they're her children?" So my mother says, "You're imagining. She didn't say that." Well, my father said—knocked on the door, said, "Excuse me. Would you come out for one minute. Would you repeat the phrase which you said to me when I said 'We're here to see our children'?" She said, "Surely. I said 'I will go and see if our children are ready to see you.'" Well, my father blew his top. "They're your children? After what we just went through, they're your children? I want my children out," and he made a big fuss and they wouldn't give us even our clothing what we had, and they brought us out into the waiting room and they gave my father his

children. We were in a sundress and sandals. That was our—that was it.

Now, we go back to my mother and father's kibbutz and they won't let us in. Why? Because their children are in this kibbutz and they're being taken to Israel, so they can be the new immigrants. The new builders of Israel. So my father said, "What do we do now? What's going to happen now?" and I want you to listen to my mother's strength. And my mother goes up to the director of the kibbutz and she says to him, "If my husband and the children are not going, nobody's going," and there was like a big yard, you know, with a big gate. And she spreads her arms out and stands by the gate, "No one is going, if we're not going. You're not going to leave us here to be butchered by the pogroms." So the director wasn't going to make a fuss. He said, "Two people just bowed out. I can give you their false names. Write it down. You're going to be someone else and your husband's going to be somebody else, but what are you going to do with the children?" So my mother says, "Don't worry about my children. Just give me those two names to be on the list," and we get to the—to the border and naturally it's a Polish border, and they call out my mother's name and my father's name, you know, the false names and a tail of four kids are following and he says, "Stop! You are not going. I only called two names. Where do you think you're going with four more people?" Well, this is where my mother's education and intelligence and fine Polish came in handy, and she walks up to him and she says to him, "I literally would like to call you Your Majesty. Why? Because only a person with such majestic features and skills would be given such a job, and you should know that children under eighteen do not have to be on any kind of list. They're not adults." "All right, go! [unclear]" [Laughs]

So now we left the Polish soil. We no longer have to worry now that someone's going to come and gas us and burn us and kill us.

SIGRIST: This is a good place. Can I just back you up a little?

LAITER: Sure.

SIGRIST: I wanted to get the whole story out before I backed you up. [Laughs] Because it's a good story. I want to back up actually to the end of the war because we sort of glossed over that.

LAITER: Uh-hmm.

SIGRIST: I mean, you mentioned it but we didn't really talk about it and of course that's a significant event.

LAITER: Uh-hmm.

SIGRIST: You mentioned that there were people dancing around. You mentioned that your father was released. Can you be any more specific about that?

LAITER: No!

SIGRIST: Experience.

LAITER: No, he just showed up and he said "They released me, and I came looking where I knew there were a lot of Polish refugees, and luck was with you and I found you." The entire survival of—of any one of us is pure luck. Pure coincidence. Pure. Because we weren't on that train we weren't killed. Because we weren't in that ditch, we weren't shot. Because we didn't move the other way we weren't shot. Because we didn't—because we escaped the Warsaw Ghetto we weren't gassed. It's pure divine intervention. I can't think of anything else because six million and five million other people—it wasn't just the Jewish people that died. There were others that died, also, and we have to remember them, too.

SIGRIST: Of course, you're a little bit older at this point.

LAITER: I'm a little bit older. I'm a little bit wiser.

SIGRIST: Do you remember how you felt going back into Poland, as a child at that time?

LAITER: Okay, when we entered Poland, a lot of our friends decided to go back to the town to see if they can—well, they thought they can recoup something and few of—two of our neighbors were shot on the way in. They were afraid they're coming to claim their property or whatever. So we decided we are never going back there, but my two sisters went back to Poland two years ago and they went to the cemetery and guess, out of all the monuments that were knocked down, my grandfather's monument was the only one standing. And my nephew went with them and he said Cadish. [PH]Cadish is the—is the remembering of the death. He said Cadish in front of the monument, which was I mean a great grandchild. So that's like a chain of—of survival that we have not been eliminated. We are alive and the chain will continue.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about life in the kibbutz.

LAITER: Oh, in the kibbutz. [Laughs]

SIGRIST: To completely change gears.

LAITER: They made it so delightful for us. They—

SIGRIST: Oh, I didn't realize that there were kibbutzes in Europe. I thought that—that was such an Israel or Palestine—

LAITER: Well, if you have a chance to—to—to do a little research, you will see that they were.

SIGRIST: Yes.

LAITER: Life in the kibbutz was wonderful. We—

SIGRIST: What was—first of all, what was the structure? Was it [unclear]?

LAITER: The structure was a big yard and a house, like a two-story house and seven, eight children slept in one room. [Laughs] Hey and we were singing songs and eating together and dancing together the Hora. [PH]It really a life—it was a time that if we ever craved our childhood, this was the time that it had emerged and we wanted to go to Israel, but of the events, you saw what happened.

SIGRIST: Do you remember a song that you sang in the kibbutz?

LAITER: Oh, sure. [begins to sing Hava nagali [PH]] [Laughs] Yes. Yeah, naturally and it was—and if you—have you ever been to Israel? Okay, if you ever go to Israel, you must visit one of the kibbutzine. You must. First of all, you will see what—if that's the life you chose, what a wonderful place it is today to live on a kibbutz because not—not it's just that you don't draw a salary, but you are given vacations. You are given your own house. You can travel all over the world. You can travel to pick any doctor you want. In other words, the kibbutz takes care of their own. It's a communal living, but you must visit a kibbutz because you will be astonished that how—different people chose a different lifestyle.

SIGRIST: When you look back on the time—the—your experiences in the kibbutz in Poland, prior to going to Palestine—

LAITER: Uh-hmm. Uh-hmm.

SIGRIST: How do you look back at that time?

LAITER: That—well—

SIGRIST: You've been good at sort of summing up your emotional responses.

LAITER: Yeah. Right, right, right, right.

SIGRIST: What was your emotional [unclear]?

LAITER: Well, my father put it to us like this. "Let's plan to go to America. If we go to America, your dreams will come true. This is the place to be. This is the place to go. This"—you know, and it's true. America is the—is the Cinderella fantasy to every foreign child. You know, they say that money is everywhere, but they don't tell you you break your back picking it up. [Laughs] But it's still, it's the greatest country in the world. It has given me another chance of childhood, another chance of an education, another chance—[clock chimes]

SIGRIST: We're just going to pause for a second. [tape off/on] Well, no, actually I'd asked you about your time at the kibbutz in—

LAITER: Poland.

SIGRIST: In Poland. When you look back now at that time, what kind of emotional response do you have?

LAITER: Well, it could have been—it could have been just as wonderful, but not as—as wonderful as it is here because people did struggle when they came to Palestine. They had a most difficult time, you know, with the bombings and the—and the hatred and all that. But by coming here, our emotions were healed. We were given another chance. I mean, I went—I worked in a sweatshop during the day, went to high school at night, finished high school and then met my husband.

SIGRIST: What do you remember, before we get—

LAITER: [Laughs]

SIGRIST: Let's get you to Palestine first. What do you remember about going from Poland to Palestine, how you got there?

LAITER: We didn't go to Palestine.

SIGRIST: You didn't go? Oh, I'm sorry.

LAITER: We didn't go.

SIGRIST: Oh, all right. Well, then that—

LAITER: We went to Germany to the displaced persons' camp, but the people that went in the kibbutz in the Poland went straight to Palestine.

SIGRIST: I see. I misunderstood that.

LAITER: Right.

SIGRIST: I see.

LAITER: But my husband's brother, if I may incorporate.

SIGRIST: Sure.

LAITER: Forged his father's signature. He was fifteen at the time and he went on the exodus and his name is Aaron, but he changed his name from Laiter to Leshem, you know, Israeli name and he went on the exodus and he was part of everything wonderful that happened to Israel. He married a sabrah [PH], which is an Israeli born girl. He has three children and now he's a grandfather of three.

SIGRIST: And spell his name for me please?

LAITER: Okay, Aaron, A-A-R-O-N, Leshem, L-E-S-H-E-M. [clears throat] And he's extremely proud of the land of Israel and so are we. We're extremely proud and we help and—and pray and donate as much as we can to help because to us it symbolizes that we're no longer a gypsy nation. You see, the Israeli Jew is the type of Jew that we need to respect. They give everyone the respect, but they demand respect in return. No longer going to the slaughterhouse like our forefathers did during the war. Only because they were fooled by a false type of euphoria, a false type of psychological warfare, a false type—they—they conned the people. They said, "You'll be relocated and if you pay more—if you give up more of whatever you own, you will be sent to a better concentration camp. You will have a better life," and once they got there, everything was taken from them and they were gassed and burned. So Israel has a new type of Jew now.

SIGRIST: I misunderstood. I thought that that's where the family was getting ready to—to go. So I'm sorry. Pick up the story from then leaving Poland and going to Germany.

LAITER: Okay.

SIGRIST: Did you know you were going to a displaced persons' camp?

LAITER: Yes.

SIGRIST: Yes, okay.

LAITER: We knew that. We went to displaced persons' camp. We were in Saltsburg in Austria first. Then we were put up in tents outside of Austria because there were quite a few survivors. And then we were sent to the—to Germany to Vetsler, Vetsler, Germany where was a displaced persons' camp. First there were the American soldiers and then when they were liquidated, then they put us, the displaced persons, people there. And that's where I first started school and from there we came to America.

SIGRIST: Can you elaborate on any of your experiences in these various displaced persons' camps?

LAITER: Sure.

SIGRIST: What sticks out in your mind about—

LAITER: First of all, we were—we were with all—with our kind of people. We were—

SIGRIST: Meaning?

LAITER: Meaning we were all survivors. We all suffered. We all had so much in common that no one was highfaluting or anything. We were all on the same—on the same level.

SIGRIST: Were they all Jews?

LAITER: They were all Jews.

SIGRIST: All Jews.

LAITER: All Jews, and we established like a small little Poland. We had a—we made a temple. We went on Sabbath to the temple and then the Americans helped us a great deal. Then the UNRA. Have you heard of the UNRA?

SIGRIST: Explain it for us.

LAITER: The UNRA. UNRA. It's—it's an acronym. Moshe?

SIGRIST: Well, that's all right. Just keep talking.

LAITER: Moshe?

SIGRIST: What was it that they do?

LAITER: That was an organization from America. Moshe, what does UNRA stand for, honey?

??: United National Relief Organization.

LAITER: Organization. Thank you, hon.

??: Agency.

LAITER: Agency. Thank you. Then there was, what, the Hias?

??: Yes, that was their—the Jewish part.

LAITER: The Jewish organization.

SIGRIST: [unclear]

??: The joint distributing.

LAITER: The joint distributing, distribution organization.

SIGRIST: And what do you remember about your interaction with members of these various agencies?

LAITER: Well, it was heart warming because they always gave us something. Whether clothing came from America, we were asked to come and pick out a coat or come pick out a pair of shoes. They always gave us something, which was delightful because we had nothing. [Laughs] My father also had a sister here in America that came before the war, and she sent us papers to come to America, but when we went to apply to go to America, my father was—had—we were all sick during the war in the woods and he must have contracted some kind of a tuberculosis. He must have and they found a spot on his lungs and they wouldn't let him come with us. But by some special persuasion, they let us come, but little did we know, we arrived to America and there is Ellis Island and they caught that spot on his lungs and they quarantined us on Ellis Island II. Which one faces the Statue of Liberty?

SIGRIST: Well, the island—the island is quite large.

LAITER: Yeah, yeah, so which part—which building faces the Statue of Liberty?

SIGRIST: The hospital section.

LAITER: The hospital, that's where we were.

SIGRIST: Faces actually the side of the Statute.

LAITER: And they quarantined us and we were told, if in three weeks his spot gets larger, he needs to be deported. So we already decided we're not going to let him go back by himself. We'll all go back. We'll live through—

SIGRIST: Before we get to Ellis Island, tell me a little bit about displaced—

LAITER: Persons?

SIGRIST: Person's experience because obviously you're in different places. You're going to—

LAITER: Right, uh-hmm.

SIGRIST: Countries that, you know, how did you feel about being in Germany?

LAITER: Well, we felt very, very uneasy being in Germany, but being in a confined camp, you know, and with the UNRA keeping an eye and the Hias keeping an eye and the Joint Organization keeping an eye, but the rumors were constantly flying. "They're just keeping us so that the Germans can come back and finish us." You know, so this was type of a—but when we had time to—to—not to think about it, we had a good time. You know, just socially was great because we all used to congregate in somebody's room. There were fifteen people living in one room. We lived fifteen people in one room with three closets separating the room, as big as this. [Laughs] And it was fine because nobody was shooting at us, nobody was gassing us.

SIGRIST: What about food, how were you fed?

LAITER: Well, food they gave us potatoes and onions, bread and oleo margarine, which tasted I swear to you, just like the gasoline when you change the oil. My—my aunt had eight children. She lived in Reading, Pennsylvania, and this I'll make real quick.

SIGRIST: This is your father's sister?

LAITER: My father's sister, the oldest sister. She came here before the war and after we survived and we came off Ellis Island—no, no, after we survived and we were in displaced persons' camp, her—her children gathered clothing and they put—made packages and they sent it to us. One day we get a letter and it says, "My dear brother, I—I know that if you don't send me a thank you note, I don't mind, but would you have your children write a thank you note to my children because they're packing such beautiful packages for them. Just to tell them thank you." We never received anything. In the deep displaced persons' camp, the—the—the main officer—the main director of the post office, his mother-in-law's name was Sarah Korcarz and my oldest sister's name is Sarah Korcarz. So when the packages came, we didn't even know that he was taking the packages, but when my father went to pick up—they gave us a DP card, displaced persons' card was your ID card with your picture on it and how old you were and so and so. So my father brings home the DP card and my father at that time was only forty-three and he sees that his daughter, Sarah Korcarz is sixty-five. So he goes back and he said, "I think you made a mistake on my daughter's DP card, would you please change it?" and they said, "No, we won't change it. Maybe there was a mix up because there's another Sarah Korcarz. We must have given her the teenaged card and your Sarah got her card." So that's when my father went to change the card, he realized that he's the director of the post office and he said, "Yeah, we took all those packages. We thought it was for us," and by that time the camp was liquidated already. There was no one to talk to, so when everybody had chocolates and all kinds of goodies and packages and clothing, we were starving all over again and eating oleo margarine—oleo margarine with stale bread. So that was our lot.

So when we came here and my aunt came to take us off from the boat and they said "Nothing doing." You're being quarantined in Ellis Island.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about getting ready to leave to come to America?

LAITER: It was a very difficult time because we were ready prior to that to go to Canada because my uncle, my mother's brother, was already in Canada and we wanted to go to Canada and be with him. But we came to the—to the port of Bramenhoffen and prior to that, the coal miners were—were asked to come and work in Canada. So at the same time, their wives and the children came as we came. So they got priority to get on the boat to go to Canada, and our visa expired by that time, and they wouldn't renew our visa. So we went back to the displaced persons' camp.

[END OF SIDE A, TAPE TWO]
[BEGIN SIDE B, TAPE TWO]

SIGRIST: Because you're a young lady at this point.

LAITER: Yeah, I'm already fourteen, fifteen.

SIGRIST: Do you know how you felt when that happened?

LAITER: Very discouraged. Very rejected. Very confused. Very sad. Very—there were a host of feelings that—that because is there no end? Is there no end to this suffering? And that's when we applied to go to America with my aunt's papers. So we came to—to America, Ellis Island.

SIGRIST: Wait! Wait! I know you want to get us to Ellis Island. [Laughs]

LAITER: [Laughs] Ellis Island, right.

SIGRIST: Prior to leaving Europe—

LAITER: Uh-huh?

SIGRIST: You said it was a difficult time, this whole business with Canada. What did you have to do before you could get on that ship to come to America?

LAITER: Well, what did we have to do? Pass a physical, make sure that we're not Communists, make sure we're not liars, make sure we're not thieves.

SIGRIST: And how was that done?

LAITER: They had a group of people that truly investigated you. So we were not liars. [Laughing] We were not thieves. We—we weren't robbers, but the visa expired and we went to renew the visa and the doctor said, "Suffer a little more in Germany." A German doctor. These were his words to us. And back we went to another displaced persons' camp and from there we applied to go to America and then they wouldn't let my father go through, but for some divine persuasion and—they let his papers through, but they held us up in Ellis Island.

SIGRIST: Did you leave from Bremmerhaven?

LAITER: No.

SIGRIST: When you finally—

LAITER: Oh, wait a minute? For America?

SIGRIST: Yes, when you finally—

LAITER: To America? No, no, we left from Munich.

SIGRIST: Oh, from Munich.

LAITER: Munich, uh-huh.

SIGRIST: Okay.

LAITER: Are you familiar with it? I'm a walking—I'm a walking history book. [Laughs] If I had to pay for all these travels, I don't think I would have enough money. [Laughing] You're so cute. I love your hair.

??: [unclear]

LAITER: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Tell me about what you brought with you. What did you have that you could take with you to America?

LAITER: Believe it or not, a rolling pin. Would you believe it? Pots and pans, thinking that they don't have pots and pans in America. [Laughing] My brother was five at the time.

SIGRIST: That's right, we didn't even talk about that.

LAITER: Yeah, he was born in Vestler in 1947.

SIGRIST: All right, that's one of the camps, Vestler?

LAITER: One of the—the first camp, Vestler. Uh-huh.

SIGRIST: 1947.

LAITER: And what happened was, how was he born? We—my mother thought she was—she was thirty-nine at the time already, almost forty and she thought she was change of life and here she wasn't feeling well. She went to a doctor and the doctor said, "You have a tumor and we need to operate." So talking to somebody else, they

said, “You know, there’s a retired doctor in Giesen.” Giesen is the town of doctors, just like Rochester is here. Giesen.

SIGRIST: Can you spell Giesen?

LAITER: Yes, G-I-E-S-E-N.

SIGRIST: Thank you.

LAITER: Germany and he’s retired, but he still does evaluations. Check with him. What have you got to lose? So my father and my mother went to Giesen and he gives her a checkup and he said, “Yeah, [speaking German] That is a live tumor,” and they went in January and he said, “You’re about five or six months pregnant,” and my brother was born in April, April 16th.

SIGRIST: What was his name?

LAITER: His name is Harold. Harold Jack, yeah.

SIGRIST: Okay, didn’t want to forget it.

LAITER: No, mustn’t forget him.

SIGRIST: All right, so you took the rolling pin. You took the pots and pans.

LAITER: Pans.

SIGRIST: And you started to say that your brother—

LAITER: Was five.

SIGRIST: Was five.

LAITER: So we had a little bathing—bathing tub. We took that, too, in case there’s no place to bath. [Laughs] [unclear] And a few of our really such—and we had no money at all. We had a quarter to our name, so when we got to America, my father went and bought my brother a Coca Cola for twenty-five cents. That was the end of our money. Pththth….excuse me.

SIGRIST: How long were you in Munich prior to getting on the ship?

LAITER: Quite a few months.

SIGRIST: Quite a few months?

LAITER: Uh-hmm.

SIGRIST: What—what was happening during that time?

LAITER: Well, they had—again, they had to—now the American Consulate has to reevaluate you. If you're not a Communist, you're not a thief, you're not a burglar, you're not a killer, you're not a—what else is there, God in heaven? All those things, and if you didn't lie. If you told the truth and interrogation.

SIGRIST: And where did you stay while you were in Munich?

LAITER: They had barracks. Barracks in one of the camps in Munich. Barracks, also. Also, a camp.

SIGRIST: And what—what memories do you have of—of those few months in Munich? What sticks out in your mind? You're—you're sixteen years old.

LAITER: Well, we were able—yeah, sixteen years old. We—we went into town in groups, you know. Went into a movie. Wow, you know. We saw the American films, you know, Paganini. This was in the—in the '50s. In the early '50s with Stuart Granger. Did you ever watch those movies? The English movies? Yeah, those were—Humphrey Bogart's movie. You know, that.

SIGRIST: What did America look to you like, from watching these movies?

LAITER: A—a promise of everything that life can give.

SIGRIST: But—but how did—how did American life, if it looked different to you by watching these movies, what—what kinds of impressions are you getting from watching American movies?

LAITER: That everything turns out wonderful. Everything turns out great. Everything is like a dream come true and I remember looking out the window through the—they had windows in them. We used to press our noses against the window looking at the Statue of Liberty. We used to see people, you know, on the Island walking with small children and we said, "Wow, how they're lucky. They didn't have to go through what we did. They're in America. We're just seeing it. They might not even let us stay here. How can they pull the dream from under our feet?" This is what we dreamed about. This is what we hoped for, and it's—it's a shame we didn't have a tape recorder at that time to record our feelings and emotions of teenagers.

SIGRIST: Which are very different—

LAITER: Very different.

SIGRIST: From looking all back in retrospect.

LAITER: Very different.

SIGRIST: You're in Munich for a couple of months. Tell me what it was like when you saw the ship for the first time?

LAITER: Well, it was General Stuart. It was an army ship.

SIGRIST: Had you ever been on a boat—

LAITER: No.

SIGRIST: Or a ship of some sort in your life?

LAITER: No. No. It was an army ship and we trusted it. Because it was an army ship, it has to be good. Little did we know it wasn't stabilized and we got on that ship and we were all sick beyond anybody's imagination. It took us two weeks, ten days. More than ten. Eleven, thirteen days, something like that to get here.

SIGRIST: Tell me what you remember about being on the ship and the voyage.

LAITER: On the ship. Well, again, hopes and dreams. So even if you were sick, those hopes and dreams overpowered.

SIGRIST: And what did you do while you were on the ship?

LAITER: Well, we helped out in the kitchen. We helped serve. We helped the sick. We made ourselves useful. We didn't just sit around and do nothing. We helped clean the ship.

SIGRIST: Were you paid for this?

LAITER: No. No. No, we were not. We were just happy that they're taking us to America.

SIGRIST: Can you describe the accommodations on the ship where you slept?

LAITER: Well, we were down—down, all the way down in the—where the walls were iron. Iron walls like the ship. There was no wallpaper.

[Laughs] And—and it was the time of the year where there were a lot of storms and it was really, really shaking us up.

SIGRIST: What time of the year is that? What month?

LAITER: It was December. It was December. Or was it November? December because we got here December—the beginning of December I think. No.

SIGRIST: You have it on your form.

LAITER: Yeah.

[INTERVIEW ENDS ABRUPTLY HERE]