

NPS-80

LAURA STERNBERGER PREIZLER

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ORAL HISTORIAN'S NOTE: Mrs. Preizler is the wife of Albert  
Preizler, Interview NPS-79. Paul E. Sigrist, Jr., Director of Oral  
History,

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NASH: Today is December 27, 1974. I am speaking with Mrs. Laura Sternberger Preizler, who came to the United States from Czechoslovakia in the year 1947, and at that time she was seventeen years old. I have forgotten how to pronounce the name of the town that you came from, so why don't you say it again and tell me something about your childhood there.

PREIZLER: The name of it is Kostrinia. It is a very small town,

well, we were located in the Carpathians actually. It is beautiful mountains, it was a beautiful place and where you would really like your children to grow up. We had no movies, we had one school, one station, that was right near us, and most of the town was farming. The peasants were farmers. And then we had maybe two stores.

NASH: What did you family do?

PREIZLER: My father was a tailor. And altogether, I think there were about fourteen Jewish families in that town. For three years I went to Czech school, but then the Hungarians took over, they occupied our town and I went to a Russian school.

NASH: Do you remember the day the Czechoslovakians came to town and what it was like?

PREIZLER: Not the Czech, you mean the Hungarians.

NASH: Hungarians, right.

PREIZLER: Yes, I remember very clearly. I don't remember the date, but the year was 1939, I think '39 because I was about

nine years old. And, of course, we were all very, very happy to see them come because my mother was Hungarian and she thought they were wonderful people and unfortunately it just didn't work out that way. I seem to remember more happy times in my Czech life than in my Hungarian time.

NASH: You told me before how the languages that you spoke kept changing where you could speak them. You want to just review that again, what you used to speak and then what you did speak?

PREIZLER: Well, my main language was Jewish. At home we only talked Jewish. My mother would talk Hungarian so I would start to understand the Hungarian language. Outside the peasants were talking Russian, it's Ukraine Russian. And when the Hungarians came in, of course, we started to talk Hungarian again. And although the Czechs that I was talking, went to Czech school. And then my main language became really Russian and Jewish because outside in school we were talking Russian and inside the house we were talking Jewish, but, of course, then we talked Hungarian, Czech we were afraid to talk, so that language

we didn't speak anymore.

NASH: How long had your family been living in that town?

PREIZLER: Oh, all their lives as far as I know.

NASH: I mean before that, your ancestors or your grandparents?

PREIZLER: Well, I think one of my grandparents came from Poland, but my mother's side family, I think had been there, as far as I know about ancestors, they were all from the same, about, not the same town maybe, but the same, in the Carpathians, around that place.

NASH: And as a Jewish family, how was it before the Hungarians took over?

PREIZLER: For me as a child it wasn't so bad. I don't remember much. I remember pleasant time. I seem to remember more when the Hungarians were in already because it was getting closer to the Germans. Then I remember my brothers always coming home crying because I would be running to my parents to come because they would be

always persecuted.

NASH: Yes, persecuted.

PREIZLER: Persecuted by the children from the school.

NASH: This was during the Hungarian period.

PREIZLER: Yes, because the Germans really weren't there yet. Well, I know that there was more anti-Semitism as far as I remember on my own, through that time than through Czechoslovakia.

NASH: You were there when the Germans came to the town? What happened when the Germans came, they came after the Hungarians, is that right?

PREIZLER: Yes, the Germans came in 1944, April, 1944. the 14th. I remember clearly. It was the day after Passover. Well, they were there really before, no, no, no, that's when they took us away. They were there about ten or fifteen days before. And, of course, then we already had no freedom and we had to be very careful. We had to use red

Jewish stars as a Jew to be recognized, and of course, I would be afraid to go out. And then we were just taken away, our whole family, everybody from the town, all the Jews.

NASH: Where were you taken?

PREIZLER: First for four or two weeks we went to a camp, then we were taken to Auschwitz and that's when I was separated from my family. And after Auschwitz I went to about three more camps and the fourth in Baden (?) I was liberated by the English.

NASH: I want to ask, you know, something about how you managed to survive, how did you keep yourself going and alive?

PREIZLER: I have been asking the same question myself because I don't know, I just feel like the whole thing was, I was just numb, I just lived from day to day in the way it came and just tried to survive whatever, live through the days and suddenly I was liberated. And I was alive, but actually I almost died after liberation because I got very sick. I had typhus and many different things. Then

they came to ask us where we want to go once we got a little better and I really had no place to go, I never thought of going back, that was out of the question. I was sure I lost my whole family and never even thought to go look back that maybe anybody went back. As a child, I remember my mother always saying, "The day the war is over, we are all packing and going to the United States," because her brothers and sister were here. So when they asked me do I want to go home or to Sweden, and it sounded so nice Sweden, I decide to go to Sweden. They didn't ask about the United States so I just took Sweden.

NASH: Did you ever try to find anybody in your family?

PREIZLER: Oh, yes. As soon as we were liberated we were asking questions. Whoever came in new transport or anything. Then when I came to Sweden I wrote letter to the United States to look for my relatives here and from, maybe they heard someone, and then finally, let's see, 1945, I was liberated, in October I heard from my relatives. And a month later they heard from a brother of mine and they sent me a telegram.

NASH: Where is he now?

PREIZLER: I had one brother, he is here. He's also here. We met here after 1947.

NASH: What was it like when the English, can you describe how it happened, when the English came to the camp?

PREIZLER: Let's see. I just remember everyone was screaming and yelling and we thought the war was over, but then a month later I found out it wasn't the war over, we were just liberated because we were liberated in April exactly a year after, April 14, 1945. And we thought the war was over because we, but then we found out another time there was yelling in May the war actually was over. Well, there was no word of it.

NASH: What were your feeling towards the soldiers when you saw them, the English soldiers?

PREIZLER: We were just happy to see them. Unfortunately, they gave us so much sweets and that's when we all got very sick. After that I don't remember very much because we really were very sick of malnutrition and all the (?) very bad.

NASH: But why didn't you stay in Sweden?

PREIZLER: Well. first of all, I wanted to come here very badly. My relatives found me, as I said before, and they sent the papers for me and I had (?) first and (?) different places (?) wonderful people (?) to us, very nice, until we got well then we had a choice to go to work or to school. The younger ones as I, we had our own school, we had the education that we missed the year, whatever we were away from home. And I just wanted a home and I was hoping to find it here. And lime I said, as a child I always thought only about America and then my brother. of course, was coming here too, so there was no question for me to go anyplace else but here.

NASH: What was your trip like?

PREIZLER: I was sick for fourteen days. Well, we had--I think the name of the boat was Ginsberg and it was the last trip because after this it couldn't make another one. We also had a bad storm and I understand that was the last trip the boat made.

NASH: Were most of the people on the boat refugees?

PREIZLER: No, no, I--this was a private boat. There was one other girl that I met on the boat who was a refugee, the others were just regular passengers.

NASH: Who paid for your ticket?

PREIZLER: My uncles. They wanted me to come out and they felt they wanted to pay for my trip.

NASH: So what happened when you got off the boat?

PREIZLER: Oh, I was like a lost child. I was waiting for my relatives and, of course,--

NASH: Where were you, in Ellis Island?

PREIZLER: No, no, we came down to New York, now New York, and of course, my relatives were here waiting for me and to me it was America, that's all. And we went by taxi, I came to my aunt's house and that's where I lived until I got married.

NASH: Where was that?

PREIZLER: Brighton Beach. And I went to school also, to night school.

NASH: Would you like to talk about your first, you mentioned something before about your first impression of New York.

PREIZLER: Well, like I said, we went in a taxi, I think it was a taxi, I know it was a car and my uncle didn't have a car yet. And it was a beautiful day, April 22, but it was already a windy day and when I looked out of the car I was really very surprised because all I saw was papers flying all over the streets and I was very, kind of, disillusioned by it because, of course, now I realize that it was a very windy day and (?) now some, some of the cities are not so clean in New York and when you come from a country like Sweden, it's a beautiful clean country, really. So that was my first impression, the flying paper.

NASH: Was your brother waiting for you, was he here by the time you got here? No. When did you first see your brother?

PREIZLER: My brother came in June.

NASH: And you went to see him at the boat?

PREIZLER: Yes.

NASH: Can you describe that?

PREIZLER: Well, if I didn't have a picture of him I wouldn't have recognized him because he grew so much.

NASH: How long hadn't you seen him?

PREIZLER: Three years, more than three years. He seemed to me like a little boy when I left him, then he just grew up. To me it was just wonderful. It was a miracle to see him again and to meet somebody from the family.

NASH: Well, did you find life here different for a woman than, you find being a woman here different than what you might have expected where you grew up?

PREIZLER: Well, if I would stay where I was born, definitely different. I would have never had a life there as I am having here. I have opportunities and life and everything. It's much, much different and much, much better. If I would have stayed before the war, before any of the things would be happening then, it's definitely different here.

NASH: Did you ever meet any older Czechoslovakian immigrants? Did they seem different from the people that came here many years before you did?

PREIZLER: Not really, the only ones that, actually are my relatives who came out here before. And then one of my uncles came out on the last, he was on the last boat 1938, before Hitler. Otherwise most of the people from Czechoslovakia that I met were my, I mean not my age, I would be one of the younger ones because not many of us survived this age. Not because we wouldn't have, they didn't give us the opportunity, they would kill the youngest and the oldest children, the older people and the young children. So most of them would be in their middle twenties, that time.

NASH: How do you think you escaped, did somebody help you?

PREIZLER: No, well, I was tall for my age so they didn't think that I was just fourteen. I guess I was lucky, one of the lucky ones. There were a few twelve, well, in my camp I think we were only about three or four my age and younger. Maybe two were twelve years old, otherwise they

were mainly in their twenties, and one old lady we had, that's all.

NASH: Well, when you came here, as your husband said, you pursued your Jewish traditions, were there other parts of your heritage, you know, being well, Czech or Hungarian or coming from also a Russian area, New York has so many different people and so many different traditions, did you find other things that were familiar to you?

PREIZLER: I don't understand. You mean, here in this country did I find?

NASH: Yes.

PREIZLER: Yes. Well, most of the people that I met have my tradition and have the same beliefs, some more, some less, some of my relatives who went through what I did stayed Orthodox religious. And other ones about the same.

NASH: The synagogue that you went to when you first came here, where were most of the people from that were in that

synagogue?

PREIZLER: They were from right out here.

NASH: Not immigrants?

PREIZLER: No, not immigrants, no. We were just, as my husband said, a few our age that we met at the beach and, you know, somehow you find each other. And then we became a group and just about six or seven of us together and otherwise, then we just kind of separated and everyone went on their own. We got married and we have mixed friends, Americans, in fact, more are Americans.

NASH: Was life in Brighton Beach alien to you or did it seem kind of familiar in a way?

PREIZLER: Oh, no. It was entirely different, entirely different.

NASH: What were the different things, what seemed very different?

PREIZLER: Well, it is hard for me really to, see, I left as a child

so my life there was entirely different than my life here so I really don't know how it would have been out there.

I know that it would be, I mean, entirely different here than in Europe. As I said before, if I would have stayed in that particular one town.

NASH: So by this time you spoke Russian, Czech, Hungarian, Yiddish. Swedish? Some Swedish?

PREIZLER: Just a few words of Swedish, almost.

NASH: How did you find learning English?

PREIZLER: Oh, I didn't find it hard at all really. I learned some in Sweden. I school we learned Hebrew and English, by the time I came here, I don't think they could sell me really anymore, I couldn't speak it, but I could understand it. Then I went to night school. I also went a little bit, getting (?) high school. I came in april so I think I went in May and stayed till June, whatever was the end of the term, to high school. I thought it was wonderful and the kids were just wonderful, the American children here. I mean, they were not children,

they were seventeen, sixteen years old, and the teachers were very nice. There everyone tried to help us and really were just wonderful.

NASH: And so you met your husband in 1949. How did you meet your husband? I'm sorry, in 1947.

PREIZLER: No, we met in 1947.

NASH: Right.

PREIZLER: At a temple through friends. And we just became friends and then we started dating as he said, and decided to get married. And we lived in Brooklyn until fifteen years ago and then we moved here and bought a house, and children, and lived happily ever after as they say.

NASH: Do you have any contact with people in Europe now?

PREIZLER: Right now, only in Israel. Everyone else, I just have one family left in Russia, the others all came out. Some came out to Israel and some came out to this country. Five years ago they came out. There's no one left.

NASH: Do you write to the family in Russia?

PREIZLER: Now I don't, but I hear the news from his brothers here so once in a while he gets a letter, we hear from each other, but not too often. He is the only one left.

NASH: How are they related to you?

PREIZLER: My second cousin. We all come from the same town. We were brought up together. As I said, he is the only one left out there, no one else. I don't know why they ever went back there anyway.

NASH: But they chose to go back.

PREIZLER: Well, there was--well, it's a big story. It's the whole family. They happened to survive the Nazis and they all never came out of Europe so they stayed there.

NASH: They never left the Soviet Union?

PREIZLER: Yes, they were hidden I understand, in Budapest, that's

seven of the family. And then they went back to Russia and they just stayed, but the rest of them came out, the sisters and my great aunt and uncle. They came to Israel, and now there is just one that, as far as I know, he is the only one that is left out in Europe. I never even considered going back, never. I wanted to go for a visit, but now I hear what happened, I wouldn't even want to see, so I am not anxious to go back either.

NASH: Have you ever gone to Europe since you left? When you first came here, you said you met a lot of young people in Brighton, in Brooklyn, who maybe came from the same situation that you did or at least your husband did. Did you talk among yourselves about what you had just been through?

PREIZLER: No, we never did, never.

NASH: Were you aware that you were not talking about it, I mean did you have a sense of controlling yourself from speaking about it?

PREIZLER: No, I just, I don't know, we just never even thought of it. Never mentioned it, I don't think we ever mentioned it, I really don't remember, but I know that my husband he never did and the others either. I talk more about it

now with my cousins or, then in the beginning. I don't think in the beginning we ever talked about it, we just didn't want, I suppose, to think about it.

NASH: Oh, you were just mentioning to me about when you were in the camps, that one of the things you did to survive, you knew you had to stay healthy. What did you do?

PREIZLER: Oh, you mean, I pinched my cheeks to look red. And (?) appeared we were biting our lips to make our lips red and stretch our (?) to look healthy. This way we knew that we won't be picked, that was in Auschwitz actually. They would always check, come check through and when you realize what it was all about, you were trying to do those things.

NASH: You said that there was one german soldier in one of the camps who was kind. Where was that?

PREIZLER: (?) we had one, I remember he happened to be very nice, an older soldier. And then we were taken to Badenbazin, of course, we didn't know, and he was coming with us and we kept on asking always, "Where are we going?" He said, "Don't worry, everything will be alright." And it took us quite along time to get there and finally when we

arrived, when we were walking to the camp we noticed the chimneys, of course, we all got very frightened because it looked just like in Auschwitz. So we all turned to him and said, "Oh, now we know what you meant, it will be alright. You brought us to kill us here." He said, "No, no, don't worry. You will see everything will be alright." We didn't realize at that time that we were going away from their enemies, of course, not ours. And I realize now that he knew that we would be probably liberated in a few days, and that's what happened about ten days later. I never saw him before, but I always think of him because he was very gentle and very nice. And I have a feeling they killed him before they--

NASH: Who did? The English?

PREIZLER: Well, not that anyone was killing anybody that I know of really, but, you know, when I read about after the war whoever, when they found the Nazis and all, you know, I hope he was not one of those because he was alright.