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Helen Abramovitz interview for the Emmanuel Ringelblum Collection

Helen Abramovitz

Julie Orenstein

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Helen Abramovitz
7/30/84
by Julie Orenstein

TO THE READER:

THIS IS A SUMMARY OF THE INTERVIEW. WE HAVE ATTEMPTED TO REPRODUCE THE CONVERSATION IN NARRATIVE STYLE, HOWEVER IT IS NECESSARY FOR THE TAPE COUNTER NUMBERS TO CORRESPOND WITH THE SUBJECT BEING DISCUSSED AT A GIVEN POINT ON THE TAPE. FOR THIS REASON THE ORGANIZATION OF THE MATERIAL RETAINS AN ELEMENT OF THE "STREAM OF CONSCIOUSNESS." WE APPOLOGIZE IF THIS IS CONFUSING.

FOR SPECIFIC REFERENCES, PLEASE REFER TO THE INDEX WHICH FOLLOWS THE SUMMARY.

ANY OPINIONS EXPRESSED IN THIS SUMMARY ARE THOSE OF THE INTERVIEWEE.

Helen Abramovitz

Begin Side One

Helen Hoffman Abramovitz is 57 years old and was born in Liberatz, Czechoslovakia, where she lived until she was 11. Her father came to Liberatz after graduating from medical school. Her parents were married in Vienna. Both originally came from the Austrian-Hungarian Monarchy. They had come to Czechoslovakia in 1918 after leaving Bohemia where their families had lived for generations. Her mother was a doctor which was uncommon for a woman. Both her parents studied at the University of Vienna. Her maternal grandfather was an attorney and her paternal grandfather was a businessman. The maternal grandparents were very much assimilated. The paternal grandparents were raised Orthodox, but abandoned it later in life. Her parents were not very religious; only her father attended services and then only on the High Holidays. She was the only child, but she believes that if she had had a brother he would have been bar mitzvah. Helen had religious education after school. The religious school was run by the Jewish community and Hebrew and Jewish History were taught there.

German was the language spoken in her home. Her parents also spoke Czech, French, and some English. Her family was upper-middle class. Most of their close friends were assimilated Jews. She described her parents as members of the Intelligencia and said that they seemed to feel that religion was for the uneducated lower classes. The local synagogue was not a social or community center and she was not sure if it had a school or not. Her father was a member of B'nai Brith where he attended lectures and social events. He also belonged to the Medical Society. There were not many cultural attractions in Liberatz, so they often attended the theater in Prague. Liberatz was an industrial town with textiles its major product. Helen's parents were liberal politically and supported the Czech government. At that time in the Sudetenland it was dangerous for Jews to

be Socialist. She describes her childhood as lonely. She was the only child of older parents who separated when she was 10. They were very demanding of her and she was not the obedient child her mother had hoped for. Her mother was 35 when she was born. They didn't have any specific goals in mind for her, except that they wanted her to go to college and did not want her to be a doctor. Her parents travelled a good deal and enjoyed outdoor sports like skiing and swimming.

Helen went to public school with 4 years of religious school. For her first 4 years of school she attended a German school in the Sudetenland, until it was no longer safe for Jewish children to attend German schools. After that she went to a Czech public school. The German school had been a private school and she was dismissed. She did not speak Czech and had to learn it quickly. After the day's classes were over, a teacher was provided to give religious instruction to the Jewish children. Helen left the German school due to anti-Semitism and she stayed away from German children. The Czechs were against the Nazi Party and were not anti-Semitic. All of the Jewish children were in Czech schools. Helen remembers being frightened on the street and of old friends who would no longer speak to her, although she never saw or experienced any violence.

Her family was surprised at the escalation of anti-Semitism. Her mother had already moved to Prague when the Anschluss occurred. It was generally known that the Sudetenland was next on Hitler's invasion list. Helen remembers feeling that Hitler was going to invade immediately. She had come home from a visit to Prague and heard Hitler speak on the radio. The family maid was to have some friends take her to Prague in 1938. Her parents had separated in 1937 and she had stayed with her father. The two moved to Prague in 1938 and soon after that visas came through for Helen's

father and herself. Helen wanted to stay with her mother, so her father left without her. She went to a Czech school during 1939, but still knew that she would leave at some point. Her father had been putting money in Swiss banks for several years and was able to get his furniture out as well. It was less difficult in Czechoslovakia and the Sudetenland to get belongings out. In 1938 he left Prague for New York. In 1939 Helen's mother tried to renew Helen's visa and was refused, so Helen left for the United States on March 3, 1939. Her mother took her to Paris and then to Lorraine to catch a boat. Her father met her in New York. Helen's mother stayed until 1940 to see that her mother and sister escaped. Both had visa applications for the United States and Australia. Helen's mother's sister and brother ended up in Australia where they had business connections.

During the time Helen spent in Prague life was normal. She spoke Czech well and there was no indication that war would begin so soon. When her mother left in 1940 she was able to bring all her possessions with her. Helen's maternal grandmother was in a B'nai Brith home for the aged and had to be left behind. The people living in that home were all sent to Theresenstadt.

An acquaintance of Helen's mother's was to have accompanied Helen on the boat, but she was too seasick to be responsible, so Helen was on her own. Her father met her when she arrived and she found that he had learned to speak English well. Helen feels that she was never in enough danger to experience a change in her perception of herself as a Jew, although such a change did come later when she was in college. She went to services on the holidays in New York, just as she had often accompanied her father to services in Prague. Her mother never went. Her family was assimilated to the extent that they had Christmas, but her father was proud to be a Jew.

When she lived in the Sudetenland her greatest fear was of being killed. This kind of fear was not a part of everyday life, however; it was directly connected with the broadcasts after the Anschluss which led her to believe that Hitler was invading immediately. In Prague there was no anti-Semitism and she felt safe. There she was preoccupied with what was happening

to her parents and with her school work which was demanding. In her spare time she enjoyed playing with other children. She had several friends in Liberatz who were older than she was and who fled to Israel in 1938. She wanted to go with them, but her parents wouldn't allow it. Most of her other friends went to New York. Most of her friends' families had made plans to escape. Her father was not concerned about his relatives because they had made advantageous marriages and his parents were already dead. Helen was not aware of the concentration camps, so they were not among her fears.

Helen's father's brother was single and disappeared during the war. His cousins had converted and either stayed in Czechoslovakia or went to England. Helen visited Liberatz 10 years ago and felt that they did not want to be visited. In Czechoslovakia it was safer to convert. Her mother's family went to Australia except for some cousins who came to the United States.

Helen's parents divorced in 1941. They lived in New York for awhile until her father took his license exam and came to Ohio. Both spoke English well, in fact Helen's mother was a linguist. Helen's mother took her license exam in 1950 and got various jobs including school housemother, private masseuse and hospital housekeeper. In time she remarried and opened a practice, something Helen's father had never allowed her to do.

Helen was sent to a boarding school where her mother had been a summer camp doctor. She was able to get a scholarship. Her father remarried and became a successful dermatologist. Her mother had a hard time because she had never practiced and had to return to school. She had been a pediatrician, but became an internist in Philadelphia. Her practice was never successful, so she closed it and became a school physician. Subsequent to that she worked for the Bloodmobile until her retirement. She died last year at 92. She was never able to understand why Helen became religious; her lack of religion was important to her. Her Viennese contemporaries believed that only the lower class Eastern Jews were religious. There were many such Jews in New York who never practiced Judaism, but were forced to flee Europe because they were Jewish. Helen

believes they would all want to be buried in Jewish cemeteries, as her mother was.

During the first year the mother was in America she and Helen lived with Helen's father in an apartment. Helen did most of the housework. This was when she was 12. She went to a school in Central Park West, which was an American school, but which had classes for foreigners. She learned English by spending the summer with a Quaker family who spoke no German. Once she knew the language she tested out of several grades and entered high school at the Grove School in Madison, Connecticut, near New Haven. It was a small rural town surrounded by farms. She recalls that there was a good deal of fishing on the sound and that there was a tool and die factory. She said she felt equally as lonely as she had always felt. Her parents used her as a messenger, but other than that she felt she had escaped the influence of their negative attitudes and could be her own person.

Her father practiced medicine in Canton, Ohio, and then retired to Florida with his second wife.

Helen's experiences as a refugee were overshadowed by her parents' problems. She never suffered, was never without a home or clothes and she and her friends were never physically attacked.

She went to the boarding school for 4 years. It was a liberal school. Some of the students had emotional problems. It was very small, in fact Helen was the only student in her senior class and was sent to the school in town. The school staff were mostly assimilated Jews as were the students. After she graduated, Helen went to Columbus to attend the Ohio State University. She met her husband there. He wanted to work for a city and found a job with the City of Dayton. Helen went to OSU because her father was a resident of Ohio, so her tuition was lower. She married after she graduated and lived in Columbus for 2 years. Her husband wanted to work in the public sector and Dayton hired him as an engineer.

While she was in college Helen developed a desire to be more active as

a Jew. She took Jewish Studies courses and was active in Hillel. She attended a Jewish camp one summer. When she met her husband, Chuck, he was a strongly Conservative Jew who kept a kosher home. It was easy for her to learn to keep kosher because his kitchen was already set up that way and she did not know how to cook at that time.

End Side One.

Begin Side Two

Helen is now helping a friend learn to keep kosher. Chuck was already active at a temple in Columbus where he taught Sunday School. When they moved to Dayton they both taught at Beth Abraham. She taught arts and crafts and a class on ceremonies. Later she was co-principle of the Sunday School with Chuck, and after that she served as principle alone.

She has three daughters, one in Israel, one in Masseursetts and one in Michigan.

[The tape is off]

[Resumes]

Her oldest daughter married a Christian, though she remained Jewish and wants to raise her children Jewish. Because they live in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan this will be difficult for her. She doesn't keep kosher and her husband is not interested in converting. He may not want to raise the children Jewish. The middle daughter is in Israel. The youngest works in a day care center at Harvard Law School. Her husband works at Brandeis in the Institute of Modern Jewish Thought. They are very strong Conservative Jews. The oldest child is Orthodox.

Helen had no trouble fitting in at Beth Abraham due to her activities in the Jewish community at OSU. Her membership there was subsequent to her decision to be active as a Jew. She now attends regularly on Fridays. She and her husband no longer work there and don't attend as much as they used to because of their activities in the Jewish Federation.

When asked if she encounters anti-Semitism here, she says that for the last 5 years she has worked in a situation where she feels she must downplay her religion. If people ask her if she is a Jew she tells them that she won't discuss religion. She works in East Dayton and feels that her clients, who are members of fundamentalist religions, might make trouble for her. The children she works with don't make any connection between her trips to Israel and her religion. She was active in Christian-Jewish dialogs in college and feels that mis-information and insensitivity are the major causes of anti-Semitism. She found that when she spoke before Christian or mixed groups they seemed unwilling to listen

and learn from her. She would always try to teach some Jewish vocabulary, but found that her audiences still referred to the synagogue as a church. She feels that Christians have a lot of difficulty with the concept of Kashruth and the Jewish interpretation of what work is as related to what kinds of things cannot be done on the sabbath. She recognizes that even many Jews don't understand these things. When the interviewer pointed out that Midwestern Jews seem to have more trouble maintaining a Jewish identity, Helen disagreed. When she first arrived in Dayton she found that many of her Jewish friends were surprised that she had non-Jewish friends who were not simply business associates. This has changed in recent years with the migration of Jews to the suburbs, though Helen feels that there are still many Jews who have no non-Jewish friends and she often wonders if her Gentile friends will be comfortable with her Jewish friends when she invites them to parties.

End.

Helen Abramovitz
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Interview: July 30, 1984

Interviewee - Helen Abramowitz

Interviewer - Julie Orenstein

Typed-Maureen Barash

Julie Orenstein:

This is an interview with Mrs. Helen Abramowitz. This is Julie Orenstein. It is July 30, 1984. We are in the dining room of her home. What is your name?

Helen Abramowitz:

My name is Helen Hofmann Abramowitz.

Julie Orenstein:

How old are you?

Helen Abramowitz:

I am 57 (Fifty Seven Years Old).

Julie Orenstein:

Where were you born?

Helen Abramowitz:

In Nevarask, Czechoslovakia.

Julie Orenstein:

Did you grow up there?

Helen Abramowitz:

I lived there until I was eleven.

Julie Orenstein:

Do you know when or why your family came there?

Helen Abramowitz:

Yes. My father came there after graduating from medical school in Vienna. (48.12N, 16.22E). There was a good opportunity for him there to open a practice.

Julie Orenstein:

Did he meet your mother there?

Helen Abramowitz:

No they married in Vienna.

Julie Orenstein:

So your parents were from Vienna?

Helen Abramowitz:

No. No. My parents are both from what was then the Austrian-Hungarian monarchy. After 1918 it became Czechoslovakia. They were both from Bohemia. (This is the province which includes Prague).

Julie Orenstein:

Had their families lived there for generations.

Helen Abramowitz:

Yes.

Julie Orenstein:

So your father was a doctor? Did your mother also work?

Helen Abramowitz:

My mother was also a doctor.

Julie Orenstein:

Was that not rare at that time?

Helen Abramowitz:

Yes, very rare, for a woman to go to medical school.

Julie Orenstein:

Did she also go to school the same place your father did?

Helen Abramowitz:

Yes. At the University of Vienna.

Julie Orenstein:

So they had quite a lot of education then.

Helen Abramowitz:

Yes. Right.

Julie Orenstein:

Had that been in the family to have advanced education?

Helen Abramowitz:

Yes. Her father was an attorney. His father was a businessman, but he had had some training in accounting.

Julie Orenstein:

Had their mothers also had advanced education?

Helen Abramowitz:

No Neither of them.

Julie Orenstein:

First, since your parents moved away from the family home I will ask about your grandparents. Were they Orthodox?

Helen Abramowitz:

No. No. My mother's parents were very assimilated. They were what you might call ultra-reform. My father's parents, originally may have been orthodox, but they were not in later years, not when I knew them.

Julie Orenstein:

Your Parents, were they religious?

Helen Abramowitz:

No. Not at all.

Julie Orenstein:

Did they attend services on the Shabbat and the High Holy Days?

Helen Abramowitz:

Not on the Shabbat. Maybe three times a year. They considered themselves Jewish, but they did not practice in any way.

Julie Orenstein:

Do you have any siblings?

Helen Abramowitz:

I do not have any.

Julie Orenstein:

Just out of curiosity, do you believe that, if you had had a brother, he would have been Bar Mitzvah?

Helen Abramowitz:

Yes, I think so.

Julie Orenstein:

Did you receive Religious Education?

Helen Abramowitz:

Some. Yes.

Julie Orenstein:

What kind?

Helen Abramowitz:

From an after-school program. That was run during the school day by the Jewish Community. You know like the new law which got passed on the grounds of the school. I learned to read Hebrew and I learned a little Jewish History.

Julie Orenstein:

That was in the public school?

Helen Abramowitz:

It was housed in the public school, it was not part of the public school.

Julie Orenstein:

Were your school friends mostly Jewish.

Helen Abramowitz:

No. Not at all. There were no Jewish schools in the town I grew up in.

Julie Orenstein:

Did you have other members of the family living in the house, besides your parents.

Helen Abramowitz:

No. No.

Julie Orenstein:

What was the language which was spoken at home?

Helen Abramowitz:

German.

Julie Orenstein:

Did your parents know any other languages at all?

Helen Abramowitz:

They spoke Czech fluently, my Mother, at that time, spoke French reasonably well and some English. This is about all.

Julie Orenstein:

Did you think of yourself as among the upper class of society or middle class?

Helen Abramowitz:

In retrospect I would say, probably middle class! Upper middle class!

Julie Orenstein:

Your parents had non-Jewish friends?

Helen Abramowitz:

Yes.

Julie Orenstein:

Do you have any idea what percentage were Jewish?

Helen Abramowitz:

Actually most of the people they were close to were Jewish. They were also very assimilated. These were the people, who, in Central Europe, felt that if you had the intelligence you did not need to be religious. That was the Intelligencia's rejection of what was traditional orthodox Judaism, that is the modern version of orthodox Judaism.

Julie Orenstein:

They probably did not socialize much at the synagogue then?

Helen Abramowitz:

No. No. The synagogue was not a place to socialize. It was not a community center type of thing it was a synagogue, a house of worship. I believe that it had a small school with it. I am not sure about that.

Julie Orenstein:

What kind of activities or social groups did they belong to?

Helen Abramowitz:

They really did not belong to any group. My father belonged to B'nai Brith (a Jewish fraternal organization which exists also in the United States). I do not believe he went often, but he belonged.

Julie Orenstein:

What kind of things did they do?

Helen Abramowitz:

As far as I know, mainly social things. They also had some lectures, if I remember right. He was active in the medical society. My mother was not active in anything.

Julie Orenstein:

Did they go to the theatre or to the opera?

Helen Abramowitz:

No. There was not much of that in the town where I grew up. When they had the chance and they went to Prague (50.05N, 14.26E), they went to the

opera.

Julie Orenstein:

What was the town like that you grew up in?

Helen Abramowitz:

Light industry; it was a small town.

Julie Orenstein:

What kind of industry?

Helen Abramowitz:

Mainly textiles. It was mostly textiles there. As far as the cultural life is concerned, I really do not know. You know at the age of eleven you do not give that much thought.

Julie Orenstein:

What kind of political activities did you have? I realize that you were a little young for that. Do you remember any political activity on the part of your parents?

Helen Abramowitz:

My parents considered themselves liberal, very liberal. They went along with the very liberal orientation of the Czech government. It was not really safe in the Sudetenlandt (that was the area between Prague and Breslau centered around 50.30N, 16.00E which Hitler claimed initially from Czechoslovakia under the pretext that it had been settled by "ethnic Germans") to be politically active, as a Jew. You simply did not do that.

Julie Orenstein:

So they kept their sympathies a secret.

Helen Abramowitz:

Oh, yes! People knew who they were.

Julie Orenstein:

How would you describe your childhood?

Helen Abramowitz:

Oh. I was an only child of older parents. They had pretty much developed their own interests and really did not have much understanding for a child. My parents were not very amicable, as a matter of fact they separated when I was only ten. They demanded a great deal from me, and I got to demand even more of myself. It was not a very child oriented home.

Julie Orenstein:

So you were expected to perform in school?

Helen Abramowitz:

Yes - that is right.

Julie Orenstein:

Did you rebel?

Helen Abramowitz:

No. I performed in school. I think that I rebelled in other ways. I was not the most obedient child which my mother would have loved to have had. You know when you have your first child when you are thirty-five, you are not as elastic as, or as giving, or as mobile as when you have a first child a lot

younger than that. I think that I was difficult to raise and my mother was very resentful of that. She liked children, but I just did not fit that well that mold of the kind of children she would have liked to have had.

Julie Orenstein:

Did they expect talent from you, such as musical talent.

Helen Abramowitz:

Not really, no. They accepted that fact, that I was tone deaf, pretty well. They did not want me to become an actor because that was too hard a life. They wanted me to do well in school, and naturally to go through the Gymnasium (the high school to which you did not have to go in that area since the law required you only to attend school until you were fourteen years old) and then to the university. As to what I was going to do. Well, at age ten, you do not really worry about that, much. Well during the last few years in that town, they were involved with their own safety. It was very obvious that things were going to happen and my father was getting himself set up so that he could leave the country, which he did. He travelled a lot. He did quite a few things outdoors. He took me along for that. We went skiing and vacationing on lakes, and things like that.

Julie Orenstein:

Do you recall any special events.

Helen Abramowitz:

No. Not particularly.

Julie Orenstein:

You said that you had regular school and that you had religious training after that. How many years did that go on?

Helen Abramowitz:

Oh I would say four or five maybe. I attended a German public school for the first four years and then it was not longer safe for a Jew to attend German school. So then I attended Czech public school.

Julie Orenstein:

When you speak of German school, do you mean a school in another part of your town?

Helen Abramowitz:

No. The part of Czechoslovakia I grew up in is the Sudeten Land which is essentially a German speaking area. That was north of the border of Bohemia, up to the Silesian border. It included the mountaineous area called the Sudetes which provided a defensible buffer between Germany and Czechoslovakia. This was the reason why it was selected as the border when Czechoslovakia was set up at the end of World War I. A great percentage of the people living in the area were German oriented although they considered themselves Czech. The influx of the Hitler movement made it so that Jews just did not go to German speaking schools anymore. Actually, the German school was a private school, so that they had a right to say: "We do not want you anymore". This resulted in my learning Czech very quickly! I had to do that to attend the school. The Czech school was the public school.

Julie Orenstein:

So that is where you had your religious education.

Helen Abramowitz:

No. I actually had had that in the other school also (all schools, by regu-

lations, have to operate under the same set of rules), but now I had it in the Czech school.

Julie Orenstein:

This religious education, how did the government relate to that? Did they support it at all?

Helen Abramowitz:

I do not think so. I believe that it was supported by the Jewish Community, which sent a teacher to the public school building. Come to think of it, when I attended the German school, we had to go to a Czech school building. I do not know: the government may have supported it. I really do not know.

Julie Orenstein:

Were you aware of anti-Semitism in school?

Helen Abramowitz:

Sure. That was the big reason why we left the German speaking school.

Julie Orenstein:

Was it from the teachers or mostly from the students?

Helen Abramowitz:

No. It was rather subtle, but it was there and my parents tried to shield me from it. This was one of the big reasons why they took me out of there. However, you learned that you did not associate with German children anymore. Then you began to make friends among the Czech speaking population. These were the people who were not anti-Semitic, as a matter of fact they were anti-Germans who had gone toward the Nazi (National Socialists, i.e., the party formed and led by Hitler which took over the German government in January 1933) movement.

Julie Orenstein:

So in the Czech school, it was a little bit better?

Helen Abramowitz:

Yes. By that time the Jewish children who were left in my town - and I do not remember numbers - were attending Czech schools. We had gotten the word that we did not belong in the German school.

Julie Orenstein:

How did you feel about that?

Helen Abramowitz:

That is a long way back, you know. I can only assume to remember. I am not sure that I actually do remember. You know there was a good deal of fear on the street. There also was a good deal of fear from the people whom we used to know, who no longer talked to us. They actually went across the street when they saw you.

Julie Orenstein:

Were you ever physically attacked?

Helen Abramowitz:

No. I was never physically attacked. I never saw anybody being physically attacked. In our community, it was a matter of being ostracized.

Julie Orenstein:

As I talk to many people, most of them older than you, who were adults when that happened, they had such a long history of anti-Semitic acts against them that they did not seem at all surprised when it escalated to this. Did that apply to you?

Helen Abramowitz:

No. We were very surprised. I remember that by the time my mother had moved to Prague which was in the center of Bohemia, the Anschluss (the German army moving into Austria after civil unrest and a plebescite) had taken place with Austria and Hitler made it known that the Sudeten Land was next in his planned expansion of Germany. So it was just a question of time until he occupied it. So the drama which was involved, when I realized that he was going to march, is what I remember most, because I thought the march was going to take place immediately, so I had great fear. We had been in Prague for the weekend and I felt that I had to come back to go back to school. That Monday night, I remember it very clearly, Hitler spoke over the radio and we listened. My father had left word with our maid - at the time we had a live-in maid - that if Hitler had indicated that he was going to march into the Sudeten Land, friends were to take me back to Prague. Prague was still going to be free. This was in 1938.

Julie Orenstein:

Your parents separated in 1937?

Helen Abramowitz:

Yes, In 1937.

Julie Orenstein:

Your mother lived in Prague?

Helen Abramowitz:

Yes, in Prague.

Julie Orenstein:

You stayed with your father?

Helen Abramowitz:

Yes, I stayed with my father. Then in 1938, we all left the Sudeten Land and we all lived in Prague a while. (On September 30, 1938, the Munich accords were signed by Neville Chamberlain of Great Britain, Edovard Daladier of France, Adolf Hitler of Germany, and Benito Mussolini of Italy to transfer the Sudenten region from Czechoslovakia to Germany over the objectives of the Czech President Eduard Benes). My father had already applied for a visa to the United States. His and my visa came through, but I did not want to leave. I do not believe that he was too anxious to take me either. He left in 1938, with the understanding that they would extend my visa and that I would, eventually follow him. (On March 15, 1939, German troops crossed the Czech border at dawn. No shots were fired. Hitler was in Prague for a speech eight hours after the border crossing.) I was to follow him in the beginning of 1939. In the meantime, I stayed with my mother, in Prague. I went to a Czech school. I think those who thought and those who were prepared knew that it was only a matter of time. My father was amongst those people who thought and who were prepared. He had put money into a Swiss bank and he left, as he did. He was able to get most of his furniture out. He had a lot of very good connections, people who did a lot of this for him. People who packed the furniture to be shipped to America.

Helen Abramowitz:

Yes. Well I was not aware that things were going to happen that quickly. I do not think that my mother was. However, obviously, the United States government was, since they would not renew the visa. However in 1940, even a year later, my mother was able to get out (that however was much more difficult and dangerous since a shooting war was in effect since September 1939. Czechoslovakia was occupied by Germany, a warring nation, and steam ships were being torpedoed. United States passenger ships no longer sailed to Europe. Italian steamships sailed until June 1940 and the Trans-Siberian railroad operated until June 1941. Things were not that tough in Czechoslovakia until much later. My mother was able to send possessions out. In 1940 my aunt and uncle sent all their things to Australia (this may be slightly in error since Australia had entered the war in September 1939 against Germany, so the things may have left earlier), so they were able to get things out. I suspect that it may have cost them money, but I do not know that for sure. Now my grandmother did not get out. She was in the B'nai Brith Home for the Elderly and they did not get out. The whole home was apparently deported to Theresienstadt.

Julie Orenstein:

How was the boat ride to the United States? Were you alone or were you with someone you knew?

Helen Abramowitz:

My mother had made the acquaintance of a lady who proposed to look after me. You know, I was twelve. She was seasick all the time. I looked after myself pretty much. I guess being on the boat was just it. I am assuming that some people looked after me, but I am not certain. I was pretty big in size and pretty self-sufficient. So I guess I was all right. I was also pretty shy of people, so I did not let anyone do much helping. Actually, I let them do as little as possible. Well, I remember getting into this country and I did not know any English. While I was in Prague, I had studied a little bit of English, but you know how much do you learn in this short time. I was of course, concerned about that, but my father met me and so it worked out. By then he already spoke some English.

Julie Orenstein:

How did your perception of yourself as a Jewish person develop or change? Did you find yourself wishing that there was more religion.

Helen Abramowitz:

Yes, but not until much later. Not actually until I went to college.

Julie Orenstein:

I find myself wondering how this persecution changed your feelings. Obviously, I did talk to many people who had no conception of themselves as Jews, and then who suddenly find themselves suddenly faced with a very negative concept/changed.

Helen Abramowitz:

I guess I never experienced really that much anguish or danger that I really can remember it having much effect on me. Well, I remember that when I went into New York, and there I did not continue my religious education.

Julie Orenstein:

You did not?

Helen Abramowitz:

No. But we did go to synagogue for the Holy Days.

Julie Orenstein:

Was that the first time you went?

Helen Abramowitz:

No. I had gone in Prague. I went with my father on occasion. My mother never went, but I went with him on occasion. You see we were a totally assimilated home, with Christmas, the whole bit.

Julie Orenstein:

Did you ever attend church?

Helen Abramowitz:

No. No. They tried it themselves. My father was very proud to be a Jew. My mother never felt very strongly about it. It did not matter to her whether I married someone Jewish or not.

Julie Orenstein:

What did you think would happen if Hitler had overrun the Sudeten Land while you were there? What were your fears?

Helen Abramowitz:

I remember that. It was of being killed. However that was not part of your everyday life. It was kind of an instantaneous moment. I remember walking through the street, after we listened to the radio that night, and I remember distinctly worrying that the troops were coming. They actually did not come for another two weeks, or whatever. I have no sense of that kind of time. I was worrying how we were going to get out of the Sudeten Land in time. I was being concerned about being killed. But, when you go to Prague, where there is no anti-Semitism, that I experienced - you know that I really do not know whether there was or was not - I stopped worrying.

You see, when you are eleven years old you really are much more concerned about what is going on in your little world, where my parents were using me as a football in their marital strife, than about the real world. So these kinds of things were much more important. The emphasis on academic education was pretty hot and heavy and I worked hard in school. You know that I was in a Czech Grade School and then in a Czech Gymnasium which is the equivalent of a heavy duty high school program. I was working hard while thinking that that would influence my parent's concern for me, or their care for me. I played on the street with Czech children. We played regular children's games such as marbles, jacks, and so on. I had very few friends really. A couple of friends from Nevarask went to Israel. They were trained. I remember wishing that I could go. They were older than I was. There was no way my parents would let me go.

Julie Orenstein:

What year was that?

Helen Abramowitz:

In 1938 (after the occupation of the Sudeten Land).

Julie Orenstein:

So it was still Palestine.

Helen Abramowitz:

Yes. A couple of other friends, whom I was also close to, they and their mother went to New Zealand. Most of the others with whom I had any relationship with I met up with in New York. This was just a group of people who had decided that they knew what was ahead and they took care of themselves and of their families. That is what they did. My parents always lived a very self involved life, so they were not too concerned. I

know that my father was not too concerned about his relatives. He felt that they were safe. Some of them had intermarried and were very nationalistic Czechs and some of them had ties with some of the government bureaucracy and they believed that they would be safe. His mother and father, by that time, had died. He had a brother who was running the family business and who thought that he was safe.

Julie Orenstein:

He was taken away to a camp?

Helen Abramowitz:

I was not aware of that. I never knew.

Julie Orenstein:

So of your family, your relatives, your father's brother and his wife, or was it your mother's brother

Helen Abramowitz:

My father's brother was single and we do not know what happened to him or to cousins. Some of those who had converted are still living in Czechoslovakia. We went back, about ten years ago. We did not go to their homes because we were not sure that they wanted us to. We had received some input which implied that that was not such a good idea. We knew that they were there because we had met some who had emigrated to England and who had converted. Inside of Czechoslovakia that was considered to be safer. My mother's only sister and her husband and daughter emigrated to Australia.

Julie Orenstein:

So that was pretty much the family?

Helen Abramowitz:

Yes, pretty much. That was a very small family. There were some cousins who came to this country.

Julie Orenstein:

So then, by 1940, your parents were both here.

Helen Abramowitz:

Yes.

Julie Orenstein:

Your parents remained separated?

Helen Abramowitz:

Yes, as a matter of fact, they were divorced in 1941, I believe.

Julie Orenstein:

Did they both live in New York?

Helen Abramowitz:

They did for a while, then my father had taken his medical exams for his license and he moved to Ohio.

Julie Orenstein:

So he had a pretty good command of English.

Helen Abramowitz:

Yes Yes - (a command of English was required for a doctor to get his license) and my mother's English was not bad. She had studied English at home. She was a linguist. She was always studying one language or another. She was in New York for a while. She did not take her licensing exams until 1950.

Julie Orenstein:

What did she do until then?

Helen Abramowitz:

All kinds of things. She was a housemother in a residential school. She did private duty messages. She worked in a hospital administration for housekeeping kind of things. She finally remarried and decided that she did not have enough support and she really wanted to practice medicine. She had never practiced in Europe. My father would not permit her to do that.

Julie Orenstein:

That is interesting. You lived at your father's?

Helen Abramowitz:

Not really. While I was in high school I lived in a boarding school, because neither one of my parents really wanted me.

Julie Orenstein:

That was the time you came to New York?

Helen Abramowitz:

Well soon after that. When they split in 1941. My mother had been a camp doctor at the boarding school which, in the summer, became a camp in Connecticut. I got a scholarship to stay there. So I went to high school there. My father remarried. My parents were still using me as a go-between, you know the typical kind of divorce proceeding.

Julie Orenstein:

So your father returned to life as a doctor rather quickly.

Helen Abramowitz:

Yes.

Julie Orenstein:

He did all right financially?

Helen Abramowitz:

He did very well. He was a dermatologist and apparently a good one. He did very well.

Julie Orenstein:

It sounds as if your mother went through some rather hard years.

Helen Abramowitz:

Yes. Very difficult years. You know, for her to go back to school was a real feat. She had been away from practicing medicine. In this country she turned to internal medicine, since she felt that she was too old to do pediatrics. She never built up a very good practice. She was living in Philadelphia in a neighborhood that was not very conducive. She also did not want to push that hard. She did all right. Then she finally gave up the practice and was a school physician for a long time. Philadelphia

schools at that time had about thirty schools, involving so many days a week so she had several schools to which she went. Later she worked for the Red Cross Blood-mobile. Then she finally retired, and a year ago died at the age of ninety-two.

Julie Orenstein:

Yes. A long life.

Helen Abramowitz:

Yes, She never could understand what it meant to be Jewish. She never could understand how I had become more religious. She never could understand that. She was very resentful of all that, for a long, long time.

Julie Orenstein:

Her lack of religion mattered to her.

Helen Abramowitz:

Yes. To her, in the same way as to many of her contemporaries to be religious was for the lower classes. It was the Eastern European Jews who were religious and they were definitely lower class people.

Julie Orenstein:

The ghettoized Jews?

Helen Abramowitz:

Yes. You, could find hundreds of Jews of that type. In order to live they had to get out of Europe. I can tell you that much. That was the case whether they wanted to be Jewish or not. There was no way of hiding it, but being Jewish, being actively Jewish, not really. I think that they all wanted to be buried in a Jewish cemetery and those kinds of things.

Julie Orenstein:

Was your mother buried that way?

Helen Abramowitz:

Yes. Yes. She was buried with her second husband. He was also a Viennese Jew. We saw to that. You know that that was important to us.

Julie Orenstein:

That was not necessary to your mother?

Helen Abramowitz:

Yes. She wanted to be buried in a small community (the name could not be understood by the transcriber) she had a lot of attachment to. So that is where they were buried. Now there was not any question about that.

Julie Orenstein:

Did you live with your father after you arrived in New York?

Helen Abramowitz:

Yes. My mother was there for a little while, after she came to the United States.

Julie Orenstein:

Did they live together?

Helen Abramowitz:

In the same apartment. There were also other people living there. My parents were from the "Free Thinker School".

Julie Orenstein:

They had attachments?

Helen Abramowitz:

They had their own attachments. I just think they could have all done better without me around. But what could you do. When I first came to the United States I lived with my father. I was his housekeeper and I took care of things.

Julie Orenstein:

Then you went to boarding school?

Helen Abramowitz:

Not for another year or so.

Julie Orenstein:

Did you go to school while you were living there.

Helen Abramowitz:

Yes.

Julie Orenstein:

Where was that apartment - in Manhattan?

Helen Abramowitz:

Yes. In Manhattan. On 91st Street and Central Park West. That was a really nice neighborhood at that time. I went to an American school. At that time they had classes for foreign born however, I moved up pretty quickly. My father had the good sense during the first summer I was here to send me to live with a family for a month - a family whol,r4 a teenager so I would not speak anything but English. Within that month, I spoke English. After that I was able to do well in school. Coming out of a good European school, you know a lot more than you do here. I got out of eighth grade at the same age as anybody else. They just took me along then. I started high school in New York (at that time the New York school system had the reputation of being a top notch system, if not the very best in the United States, then nearly so). They had special high schools for gifted students and for special interests for which you had to pass stiff entrance tests. Then I went to the boarding school.

Julie Orenstein:

What was the boarding school called?

Helen Abramowitz:

Grodes School (At least that is what it sound like).

Julie Orenstein:

Where was it located?

Helen Abramowitz:

In a very small town. Up in Connecticut, not far from New Haven.

Julie Orenstein:

What kind of an economy did the town have? Was it mainly the school?

Helen Abramowitz:

No. It was not the school. It was very much in a rural area. The name of the founding physician was on the sign.

Julie Orenstein:

Was there any industry.

Helen Abramowitz:

A very small kind of machine tools, tool and die shops. I do not know why they ever located a school there, except that it was nice country. In that respect they took over some buildings.

Julie Orenstein:

I think that they often have a boarding school where the parents like to vacation. Did you feel abandoned?

Helen Abramowitz:

Yes I guess so. All my life I felt that way, at least all my youth I did. My parents did all kinds of crazy things. "We did not do this, so you do not get to do this..", you know that kind of thing.

Julie Orenstein:

To get you to behave?

Helen Abramowitz:

To get me to do whatever. If I did not do right or my father's messages to my mother did not bring back the right answers there were repercussions. There were all kinds of things like that. Examples were: "Tell your mother that and "you tell your father that he promised me that" I was better off being where I was, at least at boarding school I could be a person, not just a pawn. I think that they were very unhappy people and always had been. My mother was always a distant kind of lady, at least toward me. I never got close to her. She told me that not too long ago, shortly before she died that during the last six years I behaved all right. When you are fifty-seven, that is something since it means that for the first fifty years of your life you were not behaving properly. My father was a very bitter man. He did not have much to be bitter about. We lost contact. At least he used to keep up contact with us pretty much until he retired. He had been practicing in Camden, Ohio. When he retired he and his wife moved to Florida. He left some possessions at some flea-market so that if I wanted them to set up housekeeping with my mother, I should go and get them or something of the kind. When I got there they did not have them. That was kind of the nature of things. So in a way whatever I experienced was more intrafamily rather than the external, the fact that I was a refugee which had the most effect on me, on my growing up. We did not really feel that much. We never went hungry. We never went without clothing. (Note that she never lived in an area under the authority of Germany, she took refuge from what was anticipated, once Hitler overran her homeland). We never went without shelter. We were never physically attacked, in any way, or even imposed upon. The people we knew closely, all were also safe. So this is different, a lot more tangential than you could imagine. It never took on the reality it took on for other people.

Julie Orenstein:

What was the school like? How many years were you there?

Helen Abramowitz:

Four. It was a very liberal school. It was mainly for children with emotional problems. It was rather small. There were not more than forty children there. I also got a good education, a very good education. I spent the last year in town school, that meant that I walked to school, since they did not have anybody else who was a senior. However, those were the years where high school was overly decent.

Julie Orenstein:

It was very small.

Helen Abramowitz:

Yes, very small.

Julie Orenstein:

Was it an all girls school?

Helen Abramowitz:

No it was a co-ed school. The staff was essentially Jewish. But, again, totally uncommitted. They were Jewish. It was totally unrelated to Jewish life in any meaningful way' yes, in any religious way.

Julie Orenstein:

How about the students - were they Jewish also?

Helen Abramowitz:

Yes, they were for the most part. The ones whom I remember were. But you know again it was the same kind of story. They came from very assimilated families who sent their children to boarding school, that was the thing to do. This happened to serve some other needs. Whether they were Jewish or not did not really matter all that much.

Julie Orenstein:

How did you come to Dayton?

Helen Abramowitz:

He had a job in Columbus, after we were married and he wanted to go into some kind of public sector. The City of Dayton offered him a job.

Juli Orenstein:

Where did you meet him (obviously meaning her husband).

Helen Abramowitz:

At Ohio State. (The main campus of Ohio State University is located in Columbus).

Julie Orenstein:

You came to Ohio State after the boarding school?

Helen Abramowitz:

Yes.

Julie Orenstein:

Was there a reason?

Helen Abramowitz:

Well, my father was a resident of Ohio. In those years that made a lot of difference. Tuition was reasonable. I tried to get into Antioch University

(the main campus is located in Yellow Springs, Ohio) but neither my husband nor I, we did not make it. My father would only pay for tuition in a state school, and my mother was in no position to pay.

Julie Orenstein:

Did you get married after you graduated?

Helen Abramowitz:

Yes.

Julie Orenstein:

Then you came here.

Helen Abramowitz:

He was in Columbus for two years, he was working there for a large engineering firm. By that time he had made the decision that he would like to go to work in the public sector. He was particularly interested in working for a city. He applied for a job with the City of Dayton. He got the job and so we came.

Julie Orenstein:

When did you experience your renaissance of Jewish feeling, actually it was not even a rebirth but the individual birth of feeling.

Helen Abramowitz:

Well, while I was in college pretty much. I had no ties at home. I went to every club I could go to and I went to every class I could go to. I learned Hebrew. I did not know that much. I got a scholarship to a Jewish camp. That lead from one thing to another and when I met Chuck, who was a very strongly conservative Jew, very committed. It was either, or. He came from a Kosher home and that is how he wanted to live. It was the matter of making the decision that that was OK.

Julie Orenstein:

That was difficult. I kept thinking about living Kosher and decided we could not possibly do it.

Helen Abramowitz:

I never said this but really, it is not all that difficult. If you have never kept a house and if you are starting over at his apartment which was already Kosher. So it is just the matter of learning some technicalities on the use of some details and stuff.

[Here the side of the tape was changed and some part of the interview was lost in the process..]

Helen Abramowitz:

Who knows what tomorrow will bring, right now.

Julie Orenstein:

You had no trouble fitting into synagogue life? I am asking this because I was not raised Jewish and I am finding that I would have trouble working with children. Obviously, I would not know what to teach them. However, you had no trouble making up for the fact that you had very little background.

Helen Abramowitz:

Not really. I think I can attribute that to the fact of having started in college to find out about things, on my own, before actually becoming active in a synagogue or temple. So that there was not the transition to

temple membership or synagogue membership, that did not happen until later. I believe that that eased things. Somehow I found the need to be more Jewish. I do not remember, as a child, what my needs were. I remember the few times that my father took me to the synagogue I liked being there. However, my memories of anything actively Jewish were nil. We never observed any holidays that is any Jewish holidays.

Julie Orenstein:

You now attend services regularly.

Helen Abramowitz:

Yes. I am not as active any more since I worked there. That is neither one of us. My husband is very active in the federation, at this point. I also do some work there. I am not as active at Beth Abraham (that is the Jewish Conservative Congregation of Dayton of which Helen and Chuck Abramowitz are members) any more or reasons into which I will not go now. ("Federation" means the Jewish Federation of Greater Dayton.)

Julie Orenstein:

The thing which I am now curious about is to know whether you encountered any anti-Semitism here, in the United States.

Helen Abramowitz:

Having worked where I work during the last five years, I have been very careful to play down anything - and I am not saying that I am hiding - it has to do with the population I work with, but my religion was never a subject for discussion. When clients would ask me I would say we do not discuss it; I do not think that it is appropriate. The eastern population, at least the ones I worked with, is pretty willing. I know that in some situations, with some clients who are fundamentalists, it would have been a real issue, so I thought that it would be better not mentioned. It really was not appropriate.

Julie Orenstein:

I shake hands with some Presbyterians. Some would not.

Helen Abramowitz:

Exactly. Exactly. The children who, even though we go to Israel every year, and they know that we went, do not quite make that leap. I just let it go at that. I encourage joining and I am pretty active in Christian-Jewish dialogue situations. I believe that anti-Semitism is based on a lot of misinformation, a lot of insensitivity. However, I am not sure that we can equate that with anti-Semitism.

Julie Orenstein:

I have the feeling that the fundamentalist population does not really understand until you begin to develop what a Jewish person really is.

Helen Abramowitz:

Yes. You know that a lot of insensitivity, comes from a lack of listening. I do not know whether it is anything beyond that.

Julie Orenstein:

What do you mean by that; lack of listening?

Helen Abramowitz:

After you work with it, with a Christian-Jewish group, or with a non-Jewish group and you talk. I have done a lot of speaking for Beth Abraham. Every other day there is another group coming through. The main thing which I try to teach them, is that they can learn some of the vocabulary of the Jews. You know that it is pretty easy to say that - this is not a church but a synagogue. No-way. We deal with it and with these kind of things.

It is just terribly hard for people to understand. It is not a question of Kashrut or even the concept of the Shabbat, of not working. The concept of what "Not-Working" means, you know what is work. In the extreme, that turning on the light is considered work, is a concept that is really hard for people to understand. You try to interpret it as much as you can, it is just hard to understand...having so little experience. No. I have not found any real anti-Semitism. A lot of Jews say: "I can not understand why you do this, that or the other thing. Really what difference does it make."

Julie Orenstein:

I find that to be the big difference between Jews in the midwest and on the east coast. Here there is so much self depreciating humor. I hear more Jewish jokes from Jews here, then I hear from any one else. On the east coast it bothers me because any one would tell a Jewish joke.

Helen Abramowitz:

Yes.

Julie Orenstein:

So there is a big difference in the midwest of even the Jews perception of themselves.

Helen Abramowitz:

Yes. I think that that is very true. I think that the Jews here have a much harder time. I like it much better. I know that when we first started being more active, the idea that you had non-Jewish associations outside of business was very very hard for people to understand. They just were not comfortable.

Julie Orenstein:

This was here?

Helen Abramowitz:

Yes. It has gotten better.

Julie Orenstein:

With people at Beth Abraham.

Helen Abramowitz:

With a lot of our Jewish friends and acquaintances. Such remarks as "Oh, you have non-Jewish friends? My goodness".

Julie Orenstein:

I know that up to a few years ago this area (the area close to Good Samaritan Hospital but just south of Salem Avenue) here, was just about all Jewish. Was this a fact?

Helen Abramowitz:

Not all Jewish, but heavily Jewish. You know, at that time the Jews lived at this end of town. However, I am talking about even the time before that. My husband and I had moved in the non-Jewish community. They were accepting of us. If he does not eat meat outside of the home, that is no problem to order a fruit plate. However, if this happened in a Jewish group, that always was a big issue. You know, I am talking about that kind of thing.

Julie Orenstein:

Would any one in the Jewish community of Dayton think of this? I have no sense of the Jewish community.

Helen Abramowitz:

Oh, there was a very strong kind of interphase.

Julie Orenstein:

Do you think that it was the migration out to areas of Englewood that changed that? I know that Beth Jacob is completely moved (Beth Jacob moved from Kumler Avenue in Daytonview to North Main Street, just South of Westbrook Road in the late 1970's, but of course, not all the congregants moved and certainly not all at that time).

Helen Abramowitz:

That had a lot to do with it. Other Jews moved south. I am still not sure how many social friends people have who are not Jewish. I still think that they are a pretty small "number. We have rarely gone to a home, a Jewish home, for a social occasion that there was a mixed group.

Julie Orenstein

That is very interesting.

Helen Abramowitz:

Even those people who have non-Jewish friends will think "well, you know, is this person going to be OK, comfortable with everybody else who is coming?" Not because the host has the problem, but because of the guests.

Julie Orenstein:

Well, I think that this is a good place to stop.