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Bernice Muler interview for The Survivors of the Holocaust Oral History Project

Bernice Muler

Barbara Turoff

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HOLOCAUST HISTORY
DATE OF INTERVIEW 8-21-84
TRANSCRIBED BY R. K. FEIST
WORD PROCESSING BY CANDICE S. KARSCH

JO Julie Orenstein
BM Bernice Muler

JO This is an interview with Bernice Muler by Julie Orenstein. It is August 21, 1984 and we are in the kitchen of her home.

BM I am Bernice Muler. My maiden name is Fogel (spelled by Bernice)

JO What is your age please?

BM I will be 59 on August 25

JO Where were you born?

BM I was born in a small town in Poland, Tomashant (that is what it sounds like) which is about 90 miles from Lublin (51.15N, 22.35E) which was then Middle Poland, (it is now Eastern Poland after the territorial adjustments of 1945).

JO Was it a rural town or was there industry?

BM It was a small town. It didn't have too much industry. There were merchants and farming in the surrounding area.

JO Do you know when or how your family came to be there?

BM Not really! When the war broke out, (in 1939) I was 14 years old. I didn't have any grandparents. They had already died. As far as I know my family had been there for years and years. This part of Poland through the years it was under Austria, under Prussia and under Russia (Poland was frequently divided and then "liberated" depending on Inter-European wars mainly between these countries. The borders did depend upon the fortune of war. Three of

these divisions occurred in the 19th Century). Then, in the 1930s it was Poland. That had actually been so since WWI in 1918.

JO Your family was there then for generations?

BM Yes! As far as I know, yes.

JO How many brothers and sisters did you have?

BM I had and still have one brother and one sister. I also had a half sister. My mother was my father's second wife. His first wife died very young. My father had a daughter who was the same age as my mother. This first wife had two grown sons and that daughter. When my father married my mother he was already a grandfather, and when I was born I was a ready-made aunt. I couldn't understand that for years. For the longest of time I called my sister "aunt". I just couldn't understand that I had an adult sister. As a matter of fact my niece was a mining engineer. At the time there were only two Jewish women in Poland who were mining engineers. I was kind of proud of that, but unfortunately they perished. We were nowhere around when that happened. They were deported to Majdanek (that was a camp just a little south of Lublin, an extermination camp).

JO Was this sister at home?

BM No. She lived in my home town when I was small, and then her brother got married and moved to a small town, Labawa, near Chelm (51.10N, 23.28E). Chelm is the city about which all the jokes (specifically jokes about the inhabitants not being very smart, as a matter of fact being very naive) are being told, jokes in Jewish folklore and Jewish-Polish literature. It is considered a town of fools. But it was a nice city. My half sister's husband had wealthy relatives in Chelm. He was the one who educated the grandchildren. They were all educated. There were two boys who were in the

technical field, something like engineering. The girl was also educated. I was the youngest of the three children of my father's second marriage. My brother was the oldest and my sister was in the middle. My brother is in Canada and my sister is in Israel.

JO So this half sister was in your town?

BM Yes.

JO Did you have any other family members with you such as aunts and uncles?

BM In my house? No. However we had a lot of relatives. My father was one of 13 or 14 children so there were a lot of uncles and aunts. In another small town nearby there were two sisters. One of the sisters died and the uncle married her sister. I had a lot of cousins and there were a lot of names which were the same as in our family. There were a lot of people called Sarah and a lot called Bernice. However, at that time they called us by the Hebrew equivalent of Bernice.

JO Was it kind of an extended family? Did you see each other very much?

BM Yes! Yes, we were close. As a matter of fact, my mother had very few friends outside of the family. You associated mainly with family members. She just had one or two neighbors and then cousins.

JO What happened to your father's first wife?

BM I truly don't know. I have no idea. I never inquired, I never was told. She could have died in childbirth, and the baby could have died with her, that was very common at the time because medicine was not so well developed. I really don't know. At 14 in Europe I was not all that sophisticated. There were really enough relatives around. I didn't really mature until I was an adult and by then my father was gone and I didn't inquire.

JO What did your parents do for a living?

BM My father was a small merchant. He was selling materiel such things as paint. My mother was helping him out in the store.

JO Was that something which your grandfather had also done?

BM No, not really. I think that my grandfather did what my uncle also did. It had something to do with wheat and a mill. They were making flour. This is something which my father did for a while as long as I can remember. However, my father was also the Vice-Mayor of the town after WWI. At that time he was a pretty well-to-do man because he was working for the City Government. They had what they called a troika with a driver. This is how he got my mother because she was half his age and I guess she was impressed. She didn't have a father. She was the oldest. At that time you needed a dowry to get married and she didn't want to take anything from her younger siblings. My mother's family had a small booth, a little store where they sold cigarettes and matches and things like that. My father passed by and he stopped to get cigarettes and saw her and sent a matchmaker. That is how it was done at that time. That is how they got married.

JO That was common use at the time.

BM Yes! Yes. He just sent a matchmaker who told her that she didn't have to bring anything, that she could just leave everything for the brother and sister and that he would take care of everything. For a little while they were well off but then the money changed and times changed and everything which was left was an amount of paper money with which you could paper the walls. It wasn't worth anything. It was a change of government, a change of regime. You can call it a depression or whatever (Germany had a rate of inflation in the 1920s that was staggering and the French Franc was collapsing in 1926).

J0 So your father was politically active?

BM No, I would not say that he was politically active. He was an official. You know a mayor does not necessarily have to be a politician (in Europe mayors, especially of small towns and cities were usually appointed). This is what his work was.

J0 Was it an appointive job?

BM I don't know if he was appointed or elected. All I know is that is what he was and my mother had a document, my sister must still have it, from before WWI which stated that. She kept that all through the trials and tribulations we went through. My sister has it because my mother made her home with my sister in Israel. I don't know what happened to that document, even later on, when times were hard. The money he got wasn't much but education in our family was very, very important. No matter how and what, there was always somehow money found for day school. After school we went to public school (she probably had it turned around). I went for a couple of years to something called Bat Jacof which here would be called Beth Jacob; that was a Hebrew School. You had to be a good student to get permission from the Public School to attend that.

J0 Was that education somewhat similar to what your parents had?

BM My parents were well educated in Yiddish. They both spoke some Russian and some German. My mother spoke Polish very well, extremely well. She could have passed for a Polish woman. My father spoke Polish with an accent. You see, he could not manage the "R's". He sounded like most Jewish people.

J0 He had a Yiddish accent?

BM Yes, he had an accent.

J0 Was Yiddish spoken in your home?

BM Yes. Yiddish was always spoken in our home. However, as I was growing up and went to school, I am ashamed to admit it today, but I was ashamed of Yiddish. I refused to speak Yiddish. I would speak Polish and they would speak to me in Yiddish. My father would, jokingly, kiddingly call me "Shikse" (that is a derogatory name for a young, non-Jewish woman). I was a child whom he got rather late in life. He was 52 years old when I was born and he treated me more or less like a grandchild. I could get away with murder; that is with him, not with my mother. However, certain things were understood; we didn't go out. I wasn't old enough, but my sister was 16, she never went out with a non-Jewish person. That was understood.

JO Were your parents very religious then? Were they orthodox?

BM Yes! Yes.

JO Did you live in a Jewish neighborhood pretty much?

BM We lived in a mixed neighborhood. We lived in a neighborhood which was very much mixed and that is what saved us from a lot of problems because the Poles are Anti-Semitic but they were neighborly. We were good neighbors. So they kind of protected us if there were any pogrom (an organized massacre especially of Jews; the term originated in Russia) which would start. They would say: "Don't bother them; they are our Jews!" That is not very flattering, but at the time it saved us a lot of problems. If anything, under normal circumstances, they would have continued to do that for us, but later on when that happened under the Germans, we found out that it wouldn't help at all. The Germans started against everybody.

JO Did your family keep kosher (meaning eat according to the dietary laws) at home?

BM Yes! Really.

JQ Did they attend the synagogue on the Sabbath?

BM My father went Friday night and on the Sabbath morning.

JQ Did he take your brother?

BM My brother had to go. He did not go willingly! That is after his Bar Mitzvah (the religious coming of age of the Jewish male at age 13). Then things were pretty similar. He didn't like to carry his prayer book. They bought him a pocket sized prayer book. He also had to pray every morning while laying on the phylactery (the square leather box containing slips on which are written certain scriptural passages. Two such boxes are tied on during morning prayer by orthodox Jews with leather straps, one on the forehead and one on the left arm near the heart). He would actually cheat a little bit and just make the marks and have a book, a novel or something. I would cover up for him, even lie for him if my father would interrogate me. My sister didn't cover up and she got hit a couple of times. I was always sticking up for him.

JQ Your brother was Bar Mitzvahed?

BM Oh yes, my brother had his Bar Mitzvah. However girls were not Bat Mitzvahed. That was not the custom (In the last 30 years of women's rights and obligations, Jewish women have added the ceremony of joining the Covenant to their achievements at least in some phases of Judaism and now can be counted among the required 10 people to make a quorum to say certain prayers.) up to the last 20 or 25 years.

JQ Did your parents speak any other languages than Yiddish and Polish?

BM Some Russian and some German (this was discussed earlier). My mother picked up languages quite easily and I believe that I take after her. When we were in Russia, she spoke beautiful Russian. Then she could read and write

Russian. Even when she was already an older person and she went to Israel she got to understand Hebrew pretty well. She didn't speak it that well, but she could understand it quite well.

JO Did you also understand the languages that well?

BM No, no, in Poland I knew Yiddish and Polish. My Polish was better than that of a lot of Poles who were not Jews. I was an excellent student. Learning just came naturally to me, as a matter of fact in 1938, in sixth grade I won a trip to Gdynia (54.32N, 18.33E) on the Baltic sea. This was a free trip which only three people from the whole school could take each year.

JO That was because you were a good student?

BM I was a very good student.

JO Were your parents pretty well off?

BM No! No. Far from well off. When I was growing up things were pretty hard. However, as I said before, somehow they found means. My brother went to something like Hillel Academy here in Dayton (Jewish Day School which is both Primary and High School). That was a school which was only for boys. My sister and I we got a private tutor to teach us. We called him a Rabbi, although he was not an ordained Rabbi. (Actually a "Rabbi" means master as well as Jewish teacher as well as an ordained cleric). He came a couple of times a week. He taught us to read from the table, not the meaning of what we were reading, just to read and to pray in Hebrew. Then we were sent to a teacher to read and write letters in Jewish. That came in extremely handy in later years when I had to correspond with people who didn't know another language. As a matter of course a lot of my friends are surprised, being that young when the war broke out, that I know it. Even now, some American born people bring letters in Hebrew and I read them and translate them for

them.

JO Did you go to Public School at all?

BM Yes.

JO Was it run by the State?

BM The Public School? Yes. The Public School was compulsory, up to the 7th grade. You started at age 7. I started a little earlier. They tested me, my sister was in school already and I wanted to go badly. I believe that they waived their requirement by a few months. After the 7th grade it was like High School but you had to pay. I was enrolled and in 1939 I was supposed to start in it (that was probably in September when the war started), but I never got to it because the war broke out just as school was supposed to start. That was another struggle which I had. I did have the certificate because I was a good student, but I had to fight with my parents, especially with my father, since we had to go to school on Saturday. Finally it was understood that I would attend classes, but not take any notes. Then I was going to use the notes which Gentiles (Christians) had taken, some of my Gentile classmates. He consented to that. However, it never materialized. The fight was for nothing.

JO Did you have mostly Jewish friends, or mostly non-Jewish friends?

BM My friends were mostly Jewish. However, we were in very good terms with our neighbors. Some of our neighbors had farms and in the summer I spent a lot of time in the fields. At the time we didn't call it baby-sitting, but my sister and I would kind of take care of the little ones. In return they would just give us all the fruit and whatever we could want or use. We were quite neighborly. They would always, on Christmas Eve, they would invite us to come and see; of course we could not eat there (because they did not cook

along Kashrut lines). They would invite us to come in to see their Christmas trees. As kids we were very fascinated and we would get to pick apples. They had decorated their trees with cookies and apples. Candles for decorations were quite different. Sometimes we would sneak in there a couple of weeks before and help them make a picket chain. We were fascinated with that. We were good Jewish kids, but this was something we liked.

JO Did they have any interest in Judaism? Did they ask you a lot of questions?

BM They knew pretty much about our religion. They did not ask us any questions but they know about our holidays, and all that. There was a little boy whom we took care of. My father used to bring people, just naturally, people came from small towns, on Saturdays. These people didn't have a place to eat. To bring somebody home for Shabbat meal was a big mitzvah (a commandment which Jews should fulfill). The little boy was really proud to be with us. He obviously knew about our religion. He would say: "There goes Bronje!", meaning me since they called me Bronje, "Dad and a Jid", that meant a Jew. *Jid* to Gentiles was an expression like what "Kike" is here. But you know that my father was my father, you know and the other person was the "Jid". There you see the difference, there was Anti-Semitism.

JO That was even amongst your neighbors?

BM Oh yes! Oh yes. They wouldn't show it personally but they would speak about "Jews" like that. I had close friends in school, you know that, I always had friends, even the mayor's daughter was a friend; she was my good friend because she needed my help with lessons and homework. I was invited to her house. She would say things that disturbed her about Jewish people, but she would say: "Oh, you are not like that Jewess!" meaning "You are

like one of us!" That made me even angrier than if she had said something about me; however, that is what she said. You know that we were the minority and you had to accept it.

JO It showed a lack on sensitivity.

BM Yes, but the teachers were horrible also! I remember, it must have been the last year (at that time the Germans had begun to make their demands which ultimately led to the breakup of Poland including their propoganda aimed at Polish citizens that all the problems, including the economic recession, were caused by the "Conspiracy of World Jewery") during which I went to school in Poland, in 6th grade, none of the Polish Christian kids had done well enough in a Polish language test to get a "5" which was the highest grade, meaning excellent. I know that I deserved such a "5" but the teacher didn't give it to me. So I stood up for it. The teacher said: "You are not getting a "5" when none of the Polish kids are getting that grade!" So I said: "What do I care if they don't know? I know that I deserve it!" I said that because I knew that I was good and I hadn't made any mistakes in my work. My spelling was good. I was good in literature. So I started to cry and he sent me to the principal. At that time I was very spunky. I was tested. I sat by myself in the classroom and given a test by another teacher. He had to give me the higher mark because, as I knew, I deserved it. I never expected anything from gymnastic classes because I was lousy in gym and I was lousy in music, I can't carry a tune. I know the notes, I always had a "4" because they didn't want to spoil my grades, as would have happened with a "3". Life in Poland was, as far as I remember it from the point of view of a 14 year old, hard. It was harsh, but it was very good at the same time. It was family oriented. We never lacked any people for the

Holy Days. We always had a full house then. There was always someplace to go on a Holy Day. All the kids, and in all the family there was always one or two of the same age, who enjoyed being together. The neighbors also had kids our age. That was the time when you started being aware of boys but not really getting serious, but just getting aware. We were cute, smart and happy!

JO So you liked your schooling?

BM Yes. I loved school! My dream was to be an interpreter or a teacher. Now my daughter is a teacher, instead of me.

JO I want to ask you a question which I asked your husband also (that is Ben Muler whose interview is in the WSU-JCC Holocaust archives). You both refer to the Polish people and then to your family as Jews and yet, in both cases, your families had been in Poland for generations. Did you feel that you were different, that you were not from Poland?

BM Not then! However you are speaking to us at a different time and at a different age. If you had asked me then and by myself, at the age of 14, "Who are you?" I would have said "I am a Pole!" Now, however, I think of myself as Jewish first. However then, I knew that I was Jewish, but Jewish was the religion. Mosaic as religion was on your passports and on your other papers. At the time, no, I would have thought of myself as Polish. For me, Poland was my dear country, my great country and it was "Polashka the Great" and "Golushka the Great"! No, I did not feel anything other than that, that is why I called for the grade to be adjusted, because I was not foreign and the teacher had the nerve to say that. If he had found an excuse, such as that I had made a mistake or whatever, I wouldn't have said anything. My language was just as good as anyone else's. As a matter of

fact no one, except my father, because he wore the Jewish clothes, you know that long coat of the Hasids (the long, black coats usually worn with stiff black hats used by Jews of that particular sect), none of us "looked Jewish". I know that we didn't act as if there is any such thing as typical Jewish people of Eastern Europe. Maybe some acted a little differently but we didn't! If I liked somebody, the religion didn't make any difference! But we knew that when it came to serious boy-girl relationships that wasn't done. We heard about the boys and girls when somebody did get out of their faith, their parents considered it as a tragedy as if the parents buried their child. We knew that, but personally, if I liked somebody, and my Polish friends knew that I wouldn't eat certain things and that I would eat others, something like let's say an apple or other fruit. No, at that time I didn't think of myself as Jewish first. However, if you ask the question for now, Yes! Now I am aware, even here in the U.S., I think as a Jew first and then as anything else. I love this country, and I think that I am just as American as anybody else, even if I didn't come over on the Mayflower (the sailing ship Mayflower brought the Pilgrims to Plymouth Rock of Cape Cod), however, I think of myself as Jewish first.

JO Was the synagogue, in your neighborhood a big social center for the Jews?

BM No! No. There were a lot of little synagogues. My family belonged to some of them. I don't even remember which ones they were. They were different; there were synagogues of that Rabbi and of this Rabbi. Then there was a big synagogue where we always went on public Holy Days when the Gentile children, those of the Greek Orthodox went to their church and the Roman Catholics went to their church. It was beautiful. It was like an elaborate sanctuary here. The members were mostly doctors and academicians. They

would attend that and they would even come by taxi, or car and park a little further (pious Jews are not supposed to ride on Holy Days). In the small synagogues it was unheard of for anybody to ride on the Holy Days or on the Sabbath. Not that there were that many cars, but some people had horses and buggies. Some had drivers. We just walked to the synagogue. (Synagogues in Europe were not social centers)

JO So the people who drive were really not keeping the law that closely?

BM They were not, we called them assimilated Jews. They thought of themselves as Poles first and Jews second. Some of them still did. They had the hardest time when Hitler came because they just couldn't reconcile this idea with what they had thought. There were a lot of German Jews who were driven out of Germany into Poland, after Hitler assumed power. They still considered themselves the higher elite and they considered themselves Germans. When the Germans came, they were the first to go. They really had a hard time.

JO What kind of activities did your parents enjoy? Did they go to the theatre or listen to music?

BM No! My father would not go to the theatre. That was not written in the religion. My mother probably would have, but out of respect for my father she didn't. I remember that one time she took us to the circus. That is the only time that I remember such a thing. We used to go on picnics. Otherwise everything was just around family. We would travel 20 or 30 miles to visit other family members, but otherwise we were just around the home. They worked very hard. Saturday was the only day on which they could rest. So they just rested. My mother used to like to read from the book, religious stories. These were not written in Hebrew but in Yiddish. She

used to like to read that. She used to like to read period. All through the week she never had time. We didn't have a refrigerator and you shopped every day and you cooked every day. She also helped in the store and with three children and the washing and ironing, remember that there was no wash and wear. So they were pretty busy.

JO Were they politically active at all?

BM No! Not to my knowledge.

JO Now going back to the time when your father was Vice-Mayor. Wasn't it unusual for a Jewish person to hold such a job?

BM No, no, no. It was a privilege! It was a privilege and he did a lot of good in this job. He used to like to travel around. To this day I don't know how he went about it. It was very hard to get out of Poland for a man, I have been told, at that time. He would change the mayor's name to a female name and they would dress him up as a woman and, somehow, get out. I have a book which came out after the Holocaust, you know every city has its own books, and my father is mentioned there.

JO You have indicated that you had as many Gentile friends as Jewish friends?

BM Not as many, but I had some, Yes! First of all we didn't go to school on Saturday and we were dependent on the Gentile kids to get the assignments for us. We used to go to school for six days. Some of the Gentile kids were jealous of us that we got to get by with going to school only five days. Sunday was their Sabbath. We got Sunday and we got Saturday. Most of the time they were pretty understanding. Since a good portion of the kids were Jewish they would not cover the most important subjects on Saturday. For some reason, which I don't remember we always had Math on Saturdays and I would just get the assignments in it, and do them.

J0 Do you remember when you first heard about Hitler and the NAZI movement (the political party which Hitler lead until 1945 was the "National Socialist German Worker's party" and was abbreviated as NAZI)?

BM Yes! I was still a child and some kids came to school who did not speak any Polish. We were told that they were refugees from Germany.

J0 Do you remember what year that was?

BM That must have been in 1936 (Hitler became Chancellor of Germany in 1933), maybe 1935.

J0 Were these Jewish children?

BM Those were Jewish children who were driven out of Germany. Maybe they had relatives who took them in because most of them stayed closer to the border with Germany, unless they had a special reason to go further. Maybe they had relatives in our town. I started asking my mother and my aunt, telling them that some children came and that they seemed like intelligent children but they didn't speak any Polish. They spoke German. German is very close to Yiddish and, you know, we could understand them. My mother said that Hitler is the leader of Germany; she explained who he was and that he was driving the Jews out. She said that we should be kind to them and help them out if they needed any help, such as with Polish. That we should help them out. I had a girlfriend who was also bright and we helped those poor little girls. There were two little girls and I don't remember if they were sisters or cousins. They were in our class and we would help them. That was about the beginning of the school year but they being children and as children they picked the language up very quickly so by the end of the year they were able to look after themselves and they were fine. That was the time when I started to hear about Hitler. By 1937 or 1938 we were, maybe,

not all that sophisticated and mature as far as sex goes, as kids are here, and some other thing also, but we were pretty deep for little kids, looking back now, we were. We read a lot and we wanted to understand. I even remember that we formed a little group which we called the English Club and we taught ourselves English. We did the same thing with German and we called ourselves the German Club.

JO Just to learn the language.

BM Yes, just because we wanted to. The Summer of 1939 an older fellow, he was actually a young man, he taught us English. By that time I belonged to an organization, a Jewish organization, which I had joined at the age of 13. At 14 you could join another and the only reason I chose the one rather than the other was because of the uniform. I wore the uniform.

JO What kind of an organization were they?

BM They were Hashomer Hazair & Hashomer Habat, that was Hashomer left and Hashomer Right (the latter was the Hassidic movement). There also was a Bund which was Mosha Shavez (transcriber is not certain of this spelling) this was a Socialist organization. I don't remember if there were any more.

JO Were they all Zionist (i.e., promoting a return to Zion i.e., Palestine)?

BM Yes, they were all Zionist. We also knew about Palestine. As a matter of fact a cousin of mine, he is now in Miami, FL, he went with a bunch of young people, Chalutzim (meaning field workers, i.e., those who went to Palestine to work the fields). They were chopping wood. I was fascinated, wondering, why would they be chopping wood? They were actually trying to get enough money to make Aliyah (this means literally "to go up" which means "to go up to where the Torah is" i.e., to Palestine) to Palestine. He lived there until 1965 and then he came to the U.S. with his wife so I knew about my

cousin going to Palestine. I knew what Palestine was and I knew about who Jabotinsky was. I think that for a kid my age I knew pretty much.

JO Did your parents agree with you belonging to this organization?

BM Yes! We never did anything without their agreement! Well, I guess I shouldn't say I didn't do anything, I am sure that my brother did a few things, after all he was 19. However, me being 14, there wasn't anything. The reason why I didn't do anything was that they supported me.

JO So they were not against you joining?

BM No! No! No. They were very Jewishly oriented. Listen they were, maybe, not active Zionists but I am certain that, in their heart, they were Zionists. As a matter of fact, when my mother who lives in Israel now, she came to the U.S. a couple of times and I wanted her to stay here very badly. She said: "No! All my life I dreamed of dying in the Holy Land and now, in my old age, I am not going to settle here."

Here the side of the tape was changed and obviously a portion of the interview was lost.

JO When were you first aware that Hitler was actually coming to Poland?

BM I really don't know. I just know that all through the summer of 1939 the area was full of talk about Hitler and about the war. (At Easter time in 1939, Germany had gotten away with completing the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia and then Germany started applying pressure on Poland to obtain control of Danzig - called Gdansk now, and of a "land corridor" between East Prussia and Germany proper.) They were talking that people should have gasoline and food and that we had to secure the windows better.

However, nobody really believed that anything would happen (France and England had pledged themselves to assist Poland and they were negotiating with Russia to provide even more support). Then the war broke out! Then everything went so fast that it seemed that something had dropped on our heads. The fear was so great and then they (meaning the Germans) marched in. By the time they got to us (Bernice was in East-Central Poland) people were fleeing. People were coming through our town and they were carrying, already at that time, what they could. At that time there weren't yet any extermination camps! It hadn't started yet! The young boys were being dragged to the front for the Germans to use as cannon fodder, so that when they would shoot they would shoot the Jewish boys first, before they would be hit. When I get excited, even now, I forget certain terms. They were hacking off peoples beards (obviously meaning the full beards which were the identifying marks of Hassidic Jews due to a religious prohibition against shaving) just for the heck of it. There was a man who probably, today, would be in an institution; he used to expose himself. He was a Jewish man. We all knew that he was not right in his head. He never bothered anybody, but he would just expose himself. At that time we were just aware of it and our parents told us to stay away from him. There was a woman who used to go around and kind of sing to herself. I guess she also was mentally sick. The first thing when they came in was that they just shot the two of them on the street. At first we were hiding when the war started and the bombs started to fall. Our parents sent us away to some farmers, my sister and I. We were there in some barn, because they said that they were going to bomb the cities. We felt that they wouldn't bomb the farms.

J0 The first thing which happened was that the refugees came through?

BM The first thing we knew is that people were fleeing! Refugees were coming through! It started when the German people were driven out, that is the Jewish German people. They were driven out of Poland. I am sure that the adults knew more, than what any mind absorbed because what is on the mind of a 14 year old is a little different. Even my sister understood a little more since she is 2 1/2 years older. I am sure that my brother was quite a bit more aware of things. As soon as the Germans came near our city, my mother packed a backpack for me and all of the money we had in the house was divided amongst the five of us. She gave my brother some and he got ready to go over to the Russian border. (Just before the German attack on Poland the Russians and the Germans had negotiated a pact. Many of the parts of this pact were still secret during the time Bernice talks about, but it did allow the Germans a free hand to attack Poland). My mother wanted him to escape and we wanted him to escape because we were more afraid for the boys (up to this time the Germans had interned just about only boys and men below a specific age), because we heard that the boys were being taken into the army. Then we heard of atrocities. They my sister and I and my mother, we were carrying on and we were crying just as soon as he has gone. We didn't want him away and we didn't know what was going to happen and where he would be. He just went away with a number of boys. For some reason the girls, all the girls, would go also. Very few families would allow a girl, a 14 year old girl, and a 16 year old girl, to go unless they would have known of the danger which you know about today. Furthermore, very few 14 year old girls would venture out. I was like a Tomboy. My sister was kind of quiet and shy. It would not have occurred to her, even if she had thought that it was going to save her life, she wouldn't have gone. So my brother went

first. Then, little by little we knew more and more because I remember that we were afraid. We were just as much afraid of the bombing, of the war and not as much of Hitler's action per se (at the time many secret orders were not public knowledge). We were afraid of the soldiers. We were afraid of the Germans. Soldiers came in and we didn't know if they were German soldiers or if they were all soldiers who did things during a war which normally were not done and would not happen. We were scared to death! In the area where we were, first the Germans came in. They were with us for a few days. That was enough. It was already the beginning of being very scared (even if many facts were not know, rumors were afloat by September 1939, including some propaganda stories of the Germans and known deportations of Jews of Polish origin residing in Germany).

J0 Is that when they shot those deranged people?

BM They shot at people and they dragged people around and they were picking people up. They were going into stores and just helping themselves, to whatever they wanted. If somebody said something like: "Please! Why are you doing that?" They would just hit, especially if it was an older man with traditional Jewish clothes. When they came in, riding motorcycles, my father, my sister and I were watching them. They were coming in! They had already occupied our small town, so it was theirs. A soldier leaned over toward my father, my father had a beard, and he gestured not at the beard but something implying: "I am going to cut your throat!" The gesture he made was one which everybody understands. My sister was trying to get my father to go into the house. We were leaning against the post outside the house. This kind of thing was going on for a few days and then the Russians came in and the Germans went back. The Russians were with us for a few

days. I had heard from some people that the Russian soldiers were terrible, however, at that time, in contrast to what happened later on when they were marching on Berlin, this was in 1939 and they were very kind. They were very kind to us. One day, after they had been with us for about three or four days, in the middle of the town there was a big square with a bell - if they wanted to call the people together for some reason, you know the telephones were not working (people, generally, did not have telephones.) like here so that was the best way to call the people into the square - so they called the people into the town square and they announced: That they (the Russians) had to leave. That the river Por, which was the dividing line (the line obviously set up by the secret provisions of the Russo-German pact of 1939 which freed the Germans to invade Poland) set up by an agreement with the Germans dividing Poland. At that time Germany and Russia were friends. In 1939 the Russians and Germans were not at war. They said that whoever wanted to leave our town could come with them, especially Jewish people. They knew what would happen. They said that the door was open to whoever wanted to leave, they they would provide trucks and give 1/2 hour for the families to get ready, and to gather the things whichever they wanted to take. They said that we could cross the border and go with them into Russia. Then it started! People were running back and forth. They were scared. They didn't know what to do. My father refused to leave. He said: "I am an old person, an old man. What can they do to me? What can the Germans do to me?" Then he said to my mother: "You are going! Take the girls, if you want to go, go! The war will be over in a couple of weeks, or a couple of months, then you can come back." We cried since we didn't want my father to stay behind. He had a sister who lived,

not too far from us. He went to her and asked her if he could stay with her. I am always blessing her wisdom since she said to him: "No! You have young children, you have a young family, you ought to be with them, you go!" I think that in the back of his mind was the fact that his daughter (the one who was as old as Bernice's mother) was in the part of Poland which had been overrun by the Germans already; that there was no way that he could say good-bye to her, to see her to send word. He was hoping that things would get normal and maybe that he could be with them until we would come back. However, that sister of his said: "No! We are staying. We are older people. We have no young kids. We are staying. We don't have the stamina to pack up and go, but you have to go. Your wife and daughters want to go." So he came back and he said - her name was Rebecca - "She said that I should go also." We had in the meantime already packed and left everything of his. We took off the mirrors and put them down on the floor, so that they wouldn't break, and all that. We took what we could and we went. We went to Vladimir Volynski in the Ukraine (Bernice does not pronounce the double name, however, she gropes, on the tape for something after the Vladimir so that appears to be the only town in the Ukraine to be the likely subject. It is located at 50.51N, 24.22E.) My mother had a brother there.

JO Did you know where your brother was at this time?

BM My brother went to Rava-Russkaja (50.13N, 23.37E). That is the town where he went. That was the destination where he went. That was the closest point (which was felt to be in Russian hands). We weren't sure. We hoped that he got there. When we came to my uncle's two Russian lieutenants were there because, in Russia, if you had two or three rooms, every person is entitled to so many square meters and, if you had more than that they would

assign anyone to occupy the excess room, because of the housing situation. By the way, on the road, while we were traveling with the trucks, the drivers were very kind. They had big loaves of black bread, and they wanted to share the bread and some jam with us. We had things but we had to pack so fast. We just threw in some clothes and some possessions which we could. We buried some things which we were afraid to even take, because maybe the soldiers would take them from us you know.

JO How long were you being driven?

BM Not too long because it wasn't that far. However with stopping constantly, I would say maybe 10 or 15 hours. Under normal circumstances it should have taken maybe three or four hours. You know that was because of the war and because the roads had been torn up.

JO Were there mostly Jewish people who left?

BM Yes! There were very few Communists, (until 1938 the NAZI's vehement persecutions of all the people who were suspected of Communist ties had been far more bloody than that of Jews. The early concentration camps were set up for Communists and suspects of Communism) Polish Communists. I believe that cured them from being Communists, when they got to Russia. That is the best way of curing someone of Communism. I always say that they should send them to Russia, and they would change their mind. We did get to my uncle's but we couldn't stay with him because, as I said, he had some other people staying at this house. So we went ahead to a location which they had set up for refugees in a school. My mother became sick. We send word of that to my brother, and my brother did come.

JO Do you know how many people left with you?

BM I would say maybe a third of the Jewish population. Now this is the sad

part: everybody could have gone! The rich people did not want to leave their possessions. The poor people, for some reason thought: "Where will I go? What will they want with me? Who is going to bother me?" A lot of young people earlier, they had just gone on by foot. Some took advantage of the transportation which was being provided. However, quite a few, even in comparison with other towns which did not have the facility of transportation, did go to Russia. Quite a few from the small towns did also go to Russia. Some of them were sent to Siberia, and died there. Some died because there was a war and food shortages and disease. They didn't make it. However, comparatively, quite a few from my home town made it, at least in so far as we know today, from other similar towns. They just lost everybody from some towns, they just perished. From those who stayed behind nobody, but nobody survived. We really didn't know about others, such as I have a cousin who also went at the same time, not to the same destination, not to the same town. My uncle, from another little town he left and we didn't know where he went. He is alive today but my aunt died a few months ago in Israel, but he and his children are alive. Just these few people who went to Russia survived. Of those of my family who stayed behind not a one survived, not a one survived the concentration camps. Nobody! I have another cousin, she is a second or third cousin, she is the head nurse in one of the hospitals in Israel. She survived in Russia and all of her family perished, except that her brother, I believe survived. Some neighbors of ours survived, however, also in Russia. From my town of those who stayed behind only three people, to the best of my knowledge survived. That is out of twelve thousand people, there are maybe two thousand left.

Here the first interview stopped and Bernice and JO never did manage to get together for the second interview which carried Bernice forward from her arrival in the Ukraine in the fall of 1939, to her settlement in the Miami Valley where she lives with her husband, Ben Muler. Ben has been interviewed and this interview is in the Wright State University Living History Archive. Ben and Bernice met because they were both deep in Russia, in the Ural mountains where Ben worked with Bernice's brother, at the end of 1941. It appears that, after the German attack on Russia on June 22, 1941, the Russians evacuated many Jews, including refugees from Poland to places deep in Russia including the Ural mountains where they were assigned jobs.