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Sonia Kam, transcript only

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LB So you're teaching in your town of Mazir in a Jewish nursery school.

SK Yes. Then one night...

LB And the year is 1921.

SK One night, overnight, something happened, and a group came in, in a few towns and they killed Jewish children and Jewish parents. And they left a lot of orphans. All of a sudden. So we had to convert, there was a building...we had our nursery school near a building that used to be the Treasury department of the Czar's government. It was a beautiful building in a beautiful orchard. So we had to turn this building into an orphanage. They brought us children.

LB Who, they?

SK The government. Gathered them and they brought them to us and they say we must take those children in our home.

LB Now these were all Jewish children.

SK All Jewish children. So we opened a home and we started to gather...

LB Who's we, now?

SK The government, the Russian government and I, I was the one remained from the Jewish teachers from our town. I was the one and the sick girl. The sick girl died.. So I was the only one from my city. So when they needed more teachers I corresponded with two of the girls that I liked very much from that course and they came to our city and they helped us.

LB Now were these ORT girls, or were they Russian girls or what?

SK Jewish, Russian girls. They were all Jewish girls. Most of these groups are Jewish girls. Most of them. And it was also supported by the ORT. You know the ORT group. And we had to open a home. And since I was so good with children and the children loved me and I loved the children, I was appointed supervisor. And that's where I started to be a supervisor in 1921. And I had sixty children in my home. Well, it used to be nightmare. The children would get up in the middle of the night and scream, Mama, Papa and one little girl gets up in the middle of the night and says, I saw how a man cut off my mother's head. And that poor child had nightmares every night. And I had to calm them. So I moved into that home. I slept in that home.

And I was in charge of those sixty children. I had nine people working with me. I had a girl, she taught them Jewish and I had one, Russian, I was the supervisor. Then I had one that took care of the _____ in the _____ department. And I had a woman, a cook and I had a man that used to clean, like storage what you used to call..he used to bring in wood, winter...

SK LB What language did you speak to the children?

SK Yiddish.

LB It was a Yiddish speaking school?

SK A Yiddish speaking school. All Yiddish. And the children, every time used to, every day all the children used to come in...

LB Did you observe Kashruth?

SK No, vus far a Kashrath? (What do you mean, Kosher/) We served ham. We served what... We were getting food, everything by the Russian government and partly the ORT. Even the ORT supported, helped the children where they were talking Russian, mixed Russian and Jewish children. And every day they would bring me new children. Now one mother came ~~xxxx~~, if you heard there's a _____ colony right here, in the vicinity, a mother came to me and said to me, Her husband's in America and she has five children. I should please ~~take~~ take them in. I took in three children of hers and her oldest son was too big a child. She said, Let him just have food and he slept in the kitchen and he helped us to bring in wood and he helped us to clean the snow, and he stayed. Now he's a millionaire, here in America. And those children...

LB What was the age range of your children there?

SK The age range was from four, five, where are the postal cards? Here. That's what the children _____ in 1921.

LB Yes, but it doesn't say how old. They look up to...

SK Up to twelve. Up to twelve years.

LB Twelve. The boys look quite...

SK Twelve, thirteen years. And some children I have here in New York that I brought them. And I'm very friendly with them. One has a house here. Your mother knows them Dickens. And I went to their weddings, of course we kept up...

But then, one day, a friend of mine, a girl friend that used to teach gymnastics. She was a gymnastics teacher, here she is, she was a very good friend. She comes over to me and she says, Sonia, my sister employs a little girl for a maid to help out the children. She must have been about ~~sixth~~ eight or ten years old. Would you take her into the home. I said, Bring her. When I saw the child, I took her up in open arms. After the child came in, a few months later, she comes over to me and she says, Sonia, in Yiddish, would you take my sister in? She says my sister is older than I am, two years and she is a maid. She bakes bread and she does everything. This is her sister. She was older than her, two years. So this one must have been eight and this must have been ten. And I said, Bring her. Walks in a child with a young face, like an old woman, wrapped up in a shawl and she wouldn't open her shawl. And I spoke to her and I said, What's her name. And she tells me, Sadie. I say, Take off your shawl. I want to look at you. She says, No. Then I found out that she has chesovka, chesotka, it's from not uncleanliness.

LB Is it erysipilas?

SK Something. Yes. It's contagious.

LB Ringworm?

SK Like ringworm. Yes. And I looked at her hand, I got a fever. I said, O.K. Don't worry. I'll take you in. But before that you'll have to go ^{to} the hospital. ~~Yonxhays~~ we had, we used to call it the dispensary, by the home we organizaed one room isolated. And she had to go there to be treated and we treated and as soon as we gave her the medication and she didn't have to work hard, she became a normal child and she was very shy, never wanted to participate in any dancing, naturally the children used to dance, we used to sing with them. I have a singing voice. I used to sing with them. And I used to dance with them. It taught them children's dances. Then after a few months, that girl started to participate. Like this she was an old woman. And she was very, very happy and that's all she did is dance and dance and dance and sing. Other children, we had problems you know. We had a lot of problems. There are children in every home, that at night we had to go out, to the toilet, in winter time we used

to put there pails, where the children would do whatever they had to do and leave it and in the morning every child had to bring out the pail and clean it out. Some children didn't want to do it. As a matter of fact one of the boys that became very rich he was a very stubborn boy, but we made him do it and he did it.

LB

SK I worked there for two years. During this time I go back to my family. My father once went to shul while the Polacks were there. Going out from shul, a soldier came over to him and says, You must clean the streets. And he says, I'm not going to clean on Saturday. Tallis, he's wearing his tallis. So they started to, he said, We're going to shoot you. He said, You shoot me. You could do whatever you want. But ~~I~~ I will not work. So they gave two shots in the air. They didn't kill him but then they took the other side of the rifle and they beat him up very badly and he developed some kind of a wound...and I must tell you...I must have been different than all my sisters. And he was very sick and it didn't heal up, the wound, and he had to call a doctor, I tell you the story. I'm driving at something. And the doctor had to open the wound without anesthesia. And he was making a cut. And I'll never forget my father's yelling. And I had to stand there, helping. Well, I survived and I did it but then he started to ail, my father, and he was paralyzed, from here, he didn't feel anything. He was laid up in bed and begging God to take away his soul. He couldn't suffer any more because...

LB How old was he then?

SK He died at sixty nine, he must have been sixty eight.

LB So he was paralyzed from the waist up?

SK From the waist down.

LB From the waist down? From the beating?

SK Yes. It settled something...kind of...I don't know what was the matter...because he developed diabetes, that would never healed up. And I took him to a big city, to Kiev, to a professor and he says, Well, we can do nothing about him... But I must tell you, while I slept at home, at the children's home, I had to come

twice a week or three times a week to sit in the house, we used to take chances at night to help our father. He couldn't sleep. He couldn't stretch out his legs. So he would wake one child, Please stretch out my leg.

SK LB Your mother was not living then?

SK My mother was living but she was a sick woman and we couldn't bother her. And I don't have to tell you my father didn't feel anything...and I had to clean everything. And when I had to pick him up and clean like a child, I had to diaper him, he felt very badly. But I said, Pa, don't worry. I'm your daughter. And I did it without any resentment. And my sisters used to say, How can you do a thing like that? Clean up from a grown up person? Then I had to take out the sheets and wash it outside not to have the smell. Well, I did it to the last night of his death. I remember the last night he says to me, Oy, Sonia, I hate to bother you, but I can't help. And I said, Pa, I'm so sleepy. Well the next day he died. But he died he was conscious. We all stood by the bed. My mother and the four sisters and my mother asked him, Do you know who I am? So he went with his eyes to everyone, and he died. Well, it was a mercy death. I worked in that home and I was very well respected...

LB Now you say these were Poles that beat him up? Not Russians.

SK Poles.

LB And you worked in the school, in the home.

SK And I worked in the home and I was very young and I was very playful with the children. I went, I remember once, I used to be barefoot in summer and once a man came from some kind of ~~knights~~ higher education and he said, to a child, he wants to speak to the supervisor of the home. And they called me. He says, Are you the supervisor? I said, Yes. He said, You've been kidding. You're not the supervisor. You must be one of the kids. Well, I had to convince him that I am a supervisor and I did what I had to do. He didn't believe me. I loved the children. The children loved me very much. I must tell you there is a child once, that lived in Sunnycroft, and she reminds me, she says, Sonia, I'll never forget, she says, you used to take a group of children and treat us each marozhona, ice cream. I'll never forget the

taste. Even now, I remember.

LB I want to get to, what happened to you, your life in this home and then when you left and for what reason.

SK Well, I'll tell you. I'm not going into details, but naturally we had a doctor that used to come in, take the childrens and clothes, used to send from America, from the ORT. And, well, it's not important ~~to~~ to tell you that experience with the man that was in charge of the clothing. He happened to like me and he gave me the first preference. When it came, a shipment of clothing, he called me first then other homes. Sonia, you come and pick up something for yourself, and for the children. And I always had in mind the children first, then myself. And in some evenings, I remember I used to go out with men and with boys and my only conversation was my children. And one boy said to me, Don't you have anything else to speak about than your children? And I was very, to me, they were dear like my own. Now, when it comes...in 1923...

LB I don't want to rush you. You know we could sit here all day and it would be fascinating.

SK No. In 1923 we had a sister in America. My older sister, she's still alive in California, in a home. She wrote a letter in 1922 or 1923, that she wants somebody to come to America. And nobody wanted to go. My two older sisters were married. My younger sister was a devout Communist. She's the one that told me, How can I leave the country? So I said, I want to go. I'll go for a visit. They say to me, I don't think you're going to like it because you have a good position, a good name. I said, I want to go and if I won't like it, I'll come back. So, I started to work on papers to go to America. When my children found out they were very heartbroken but those two children, the two sisters, B came over to me and said to me, Teacher Sonia, Sonia, you're going to America. I said, Yes. Take us along. By the way, those two children had a mother, she was mentally ill. She ~~was~~ used to walk in the street. She was insane. And that poor mother used to come visit the children in the home and the children were ashamed of her, so they would put her in

corner and they would take out a plate of soup for her, and one of the daughters would comb her hair, wash her hair, because she was dirty and she used to want to hug them. And the younger child used to run away from her. And the older child had pity on her. And the children said to me, Teacher Sonia. You know our mother. We can't depend on her. We were raised by grandfather. We have a father in Canada. Would you take us with you to America? In Europe, those years... America, Canada, is on the border...

it's one country. It's just a different state.

Although I should have known my geography. And I said, Well I have my papers.

go to Chicago. My sister lived in Chicago. So they said,

Sonia, please take us. Teacher Sonia, we have nobody here. Our father is there in America and we'll have (it) better there. So I felt pity for them. I said, Allright find out your father's address. I didn't even know they had a father. I knew only the mother. So one day, took a couple of weeks, they brought me the address. I had written him a letter in Jewish, I wrote him a letter. And I told him, He left his children. One was a year, one was three years. And all those years she didn't correspond, he didn't send. But I have a chance to bring them to you. If you'll send money, I'll bring them. I'll work everything out. It didn't take long. He sent visas. He sent money for the children. Now I had to go to Chicago and here I have to go to Canada. So I wrote to my sister that I'm not going direct to America. I'm going to Canada. I'm taking two children along. And she thought that I'm taking those children to a man, that I'm going to marry him. Well, I started to work for the children to take them along and I don't have to tell you it's a long procedure and I had to take them to a doctor. The younger child was passed all right. The older child had trachoma. You know what trachoma is? I had to take her to Minsk. I left home. I took her to Minsk, and a doctor. He gave her medication and we cured her trachoma and I started out with those two children going to America. I want you to know, the day that I left Mazir, they made me, the government, I had a good name, made me a farewell party in one of the biggest clubs in the city and I told them I'm going to America for a visit and I'm going to promote the Russian idea among the children. I told them,

I had, although I wasn't a Communist I had to tell something. And ^{the} Jewish board of education gave me this, an album, with inscriptions from all the teachers and this is the top of the album. And this is fifty one years old. I polished it up today. It was black. And they hired for me, all the government gave me money for that, for my trip, because I worked for two years very hard and I said I'm going to take a leave for about six months. And they hired a carriage with two horses. And when I left my city, my mother was sitting with me in the carriage. My father was dead already and my sisters, and I want you to know, three hundred children were a procession in the back of me, walking to say goodbye to me. And I remember somebody passed and said, Who died? They said, Nobody died. Sonia Miniarovich is leaving for America. They thought it was a funeral. Well they took me till the bridge that crosses the Pripet and then I had to go to ~~exit~~ to the railroad to take the train and went to America. I first stopped in Riga. And in Riga I was supposed to get my transportation. In other words, ~~in~~ Riga was the transport...how do you call that town, that you, the Jews coming to Vienna now? The trans-? The place that the government allows you to go through...transit. I had to go through a transit camp in Riga. In Riga, in order to because in Riga there was a boat that you could go to London, I forgot which...should it be Baltic Ocean?

LB Riga is on the Baltic Sea.

SK Right. So we came to Riga in order to go ~~to~~ with the Baltic Ocean to Canada. Well I came to Riga and I was supposed to stay there a few days and continue.

LB You would go from the Baltic Sea, across the Baltic Sea...did you sail from London?

SK Yes, from Liverpool.

LB Then you went to London and you sailed from Liverpool across the Atlantic.

SK But I'm talking to go from Riga to go...

LB Then you have to cross the Baltic.

SK Well, in Riga I was delayed there for a whole month because the government, the Latvian government wanted to get benefit of the dollars. So they extra kept us there a month, everybody. They kept a month in order we should spend more money there.

We should be . We had to pay for our...and we had to live in our camp. They gave us there food. But it was horrible. So when I found out that I have to stay a month with the children there in Riga, I was petrified. I was almost ready to go back. And I remember I was sitting on a bed and we lived in a dormitory like.

LB This is the transit camp.

SK Yes.

LB And there were people other than Jews? All kinds of people?

SK All kinds of people. Mostly Jews.

LB And the year is what - 1924?

SK 1923. And I'm sitting on a bed and crying and both children on both hands leaning on me and crying too. And there passes a young man, I'm going to show you the picture, that was my first husband. And he was fascinated he says, I can't understand. She's too young to be the mother of two children. And the children cling to her like a mother. So he came over to one of these little girls, she had beautiful curls and started to play with her curls. She was a beautiful child. He started to talk to her, Why is she crying? Who is she? I didn't speak because I was very upset. And the children told him the story, that this is our teacher Sonia, in Yiddish, and we're going to America, and we have to stay here. So he says, So what? What are you crying, he says. Here I'm going to stay here two months. I don't even have a visa. I'm expecting a visa from my uncle. So we'll stay here a month. Well, eight o'clock we couldn't get out.

LB He was Jewish.

SK He was Jewish, sure.

LB What did he speak?

SK Russian.

LB He spoke in Russian?

SK Yes. He comes from Ukraina. From Altava. And I liked him very much. He was a very good natured and very ~~jugg~~ jolly, wonderful sense of humor. So once I got involved already with a boy friend I wasn't so miserable already. But he was very poor and I had money. He had no money. He had to get money from his uncle.

from America. We were given every day the same food in this quarantine in Riga. They gave us pickled herring and potatoes, but three times a day. It was terrible. And that poor fellow, he didn't have the money for cigarettes, he didn't have any money for food. So I used to buy, in Riga they have beautiful, all these smoked sardines and sprats and everything. I used to buy, and I invited him for dinner and we had dinner together. And I gave him money for cigarettes. Not thinking of.. I gave him money, he used to hire a bicycle to take the children bicycle riding. Well, the month passed, thank God. We started out. Started out to go to, we went to then we went to London and after I left this young man,..

LB Was your ticket already paid for?

SK Everything. This young man said, You see this girl Sonia. I'm going to America. I'm going to marry her. Well anyhow we came to Canada. I remember we came to Canada and the father met us. I brought the children to Canada and he was a very simple man, an older man. He had a shoe store and he was very happy with the children and the children were so attached to me, they wouldn't let me go for a minute. So he started to ask me, and I started to work, I want to go to America, to my sister. And they tell me, You have to be here a year in order to get permission to leave Canada to go to America. What am I going to do there a year? With an elderly man who is not my interest, not my caliber. I was very upset. Then my sister from Chicago I started corresponding with her, and I told her that I want to come to you. And she said, Why did you go to Canada? I told her I brought two children. They asked me to bring them to the father and I figured I going to save them. They have a crazy mother and what is there a future for them? I did it, a humanitarian thing but not realizing what's going to be the consequences. Well, I'll make a long story short, three weeks I was there, my sister came to Ottawa, Canada and we, she had friends ARRANGED on the border of Canada, Windsor with Detroit. There was going a boat, an excursion boat every Saturday, Sunday and Canadian and American passengers could go on. And she arranged with some friends that we're going to stay overnight. We went to Toronto. We stayed overnight. Then we went to Windsor and a little town

Sandwich and my sister dressed me up in her clothing and she says, You go first Sonia, on the boat. And there were standing the customs...she didn't tell me, otherwise .. Some people they asked for a passport and some not. Well, I started to go. My sister was in back of me. I said, Come on. Just like that. And they did not ask me. And I went on the boat. And my sister came on and says, Sonia, you're now in America. It was an American boat. We came to Detroit...

LB It sounds like Morris Fisher's story.

SK And I came to Chicago and I was miserable. I didn't go to work. I didn't go to English. For a few weeks or months I wanted to go home. I was very lonesome. So my brother in law says, Sonia, give yourself a time. One year. I promise you after the year, you'll go back. Well, after the year, I didn't go back. I remained there and this young man came, Yasha started to correspond with me. And in 1925 he came to New York. And in 1926 I married him, this man. But I was illegal, here. And the children corresponded with me. They were very lonesome for me. One of the girls came in New York, the younger girl. Then she met a, we married, my husband got her a job and she was working.

LB Now wait, before you get into this. I'm not sure we're going to have time for the children. But I am interested in something else. You married in about 1925?

SK 1926. February.

LB And you stayed here in ~~this~~ the States.

SK In New York.

LB In New York. You had three other sisters. One was a Communist Party member.

Why did she become a Communist Party member? Do you know?

SK Why? I'll tell you. She was a brilliant girl. She had two college educations.

Why she became a Communist, I don't know.

LB I mean, we could guess. But I just want to know if she ever said. What she thought.

Why she felt...

SK Well, she felt she was very revolutionary. She felt that under the Czar we were restricted to live in big cities. We were restricted from schools and the Russian

government, after the Revolution, promised equality. That people could be wherever they want. And they could go to school and they get free education and all that. And she somehow, I have different ideas of life. I wanted a piano for my children...

LB (Laughing) That's right. You were burzhui (bourgeois) and she...

SK Yes, I always... somehow, in my youngest years I always liked the better things in life. And to her, material things didn't mean anything. To me, it meant.

LB Now what about your other two sister?

SK My other two sisters got married. They were very...

LB One was in America then?

SK Well, that was the sister that left in 1907. I came to her. My other sisters remained there, of course, one lost her son in the second World War. And they had children and they...

LB Did they marry Russians or Jews?

SK Jews. All my sisters married Jews.

LB Did they stay Jewish? Did they feel Jewish?

SK Yes. Unfortunately they're dead already, two sisters. But in 1958 I went to Russia for a trip. And I went to Russia and I saw my sisters.

LB Which one?

SK Both. And the younger sister was in Leningrad and I went to see her. She was afraid to come to see me.

LB Was she still a Party member?

SK Yes. She's still now a Party member.

LB She's still there..

SK Yes. And I never saw her. After thirty five years being away from Russia, I went to see my sister. My two brother in laws and one niece came to see me in Kiev. They all spent with me a week. Originally, that was 1958, I wanted to go to Leningrad but they told me not, because my sister was afraid. And all those years my sister, for twenty years I didn't correspond with her directly. I had to write to Mazir and they sent it to Leningrad. But for the last ten years, my sister is very close to me.

I mean, we correspond and she wants to see me. Every letter...I got a letter two weeks ago is just heartbreaking. She lost my other two sisters and she has nobody. She lost her husband. She never had children. And now she wants I should come back to see her. ^{An} ~~The~~/other sister would tell you, The deuce with you, You didn't want to go see me. But I didn't feel that way. I made papers last year. My husband and I were supposed to leave October 8 for Israel...

(Tape ends)

Side 4

000

LB O.K. You were making plans to go to Israel...

SK Istael. That was in 1973 and I had a visa. All my papers to go to see Leningrad, my sister. After fifty years. And in 1960 war broke out in Israel, wo we cancelled our trip and I cancelled the Russian trip.

LB In 1960? Oh, you mean the Yom Kippur War broke out? So that stopped your going to see your sister?

SK Because we were very heartbroken and we came to the office that time to say, What should we do? We want to cancel our trip and the woman in the office said, That's all you can do is go home and pray for Israel.

LB So how were you going to see her? Was she going to come to Israel too?

^{LB}
SK No./You were going to go to Leningrad from there?

SK Right. I was going to go with my husband to Tel Aviv. Stay with him two weeks.

He would remain for a week and I would go for a week to Leningrad, to see my sister. I had all the arrangements paid off and I had to cancel them. Now, my sister...twice I sent papers for my sister to come to us. And one time she got sick she couldn't come. And I sent her, this winter, this spring rather, but then I asked her whether she's in good health, because if she would come here now, with hospitalization it would ruin me. So she wrote to me that she's not well physically and she can't travel so I said, Maybe I'll come to see you yet. It's fifty one years I haven't seen my sister. Now, I'll come back to the children that were in Canada. No, you don't want that...

LB No, I cant. I haven't the time. It's not that I'm not interested.

