Ruth Emmerman Peizer Transcript

RUTH EMMERMAN PEIZER: And I have your letter here, which was very nice.

PAMELA BROWN LAVITT: This is the oral history interview of Ruth Emmerman Peizer. Today's date is Monday, June 18, 2001. It is 2:30 in the afternoon. We are in the home of the Peizers at 9830 47th S.W. in West Seattle.

RP: In West Seattle.

PL: In West Seattle. And this is Pamela Brown Lavitt. I am the oral historian for the Jewish Women's Archive's Weaving Women's Words project in Seattle. And just so that I have your permission, I just want to check. Do I have your permission to record this interview?

RP: Sure.

PL: Wonderful. So I wanted to begin by asking you a little bit about your family history. Where would you begin?

RP: Well, where do I begin? In Chicago?

PL: You can begin there.

RP: Right. I was born in Chicago, Illinois, to some very wonderful parents whose name was Avram and Rivke Immerman. I must say that their name is really Immerman, spelled with an I – I-M-M-E-R-M-A-N. And somewhere along the line, and I'm not very proud of this, when I was a teenager, I decided that “Emmerman” would sound better than “Immerman.” And why my folks allowed me to do this I will never know. But I somehow just switched the I to an E and it became “Emmerman” and all of my certificates are Ruth

Emmerman. And now as an adult, and a much smarter one, I say to myself, “Where did I get the chutzpah to change a name that was Immerman to Emmerman?” But my folks went along with it. I was an only child. That doesn't mean that I got everything I wanted. But in those days, my father was a watchmaker and worked very hard for his living and I grew up in Chicago in an apartment. Didn't know the difference between a weed and a flower until I came here to Seattle. But that's where I grew up, in Chicago. My father was a Yiddishist, so was my mother.

PL: Can you describe what that means?

RP: Yes. My father, as I said, was a watchmaker. My mother was a homemaker. My grandmother, my bubbe [grandmother], lived with us. This was my mother's mother who thought that I could do no wrong. It was unconditional love with my grandmother. So she lived with us. My father, I would say, was a socialist and worked 12 hours a day. So on Sunday he would go to a Jewish Community Center where they would have lectures in Yiddish and I remember being taken there – I might have been seven or eight years old – to the lectures with my dad. And of course they enrolled me in a Yiddish school when I was about eight or nine, and I continued through Yiddish school up through mitl shul, which meant I graduated from the high school. I first started out at the Arbeter Ring, which was definitely a socialistic organization. Then when I was about 11 or 12, I was so fluent in Yiddish that they promoted me to a much higher grade where I suddenly found myself with 15 and 16-year-olds, and socially that didn't work out too well because I was only 11 or 12. My folks thought I would be happier at the Sholem Aleichem Institute, so they transferred me from the Arbeter Ring shule to the Sholem Aleichem Institute where my teacher was Dr. Chaim Pomerantz, whom I dearly loved.

PL: Could you spell his name?

RP: Pomerantz? Chaim Pomerantz. P-O-M-E-R-A-N-T-Z. I continued on at the Sholem Aleichem Institute, which meant after school I would attend twice a week during the week

and again on Sunday, and there we studied Yiddish language, Yiddish literature. Obviously I learned to read and write and I was fluent in that, and also history, geshikhte in Yiddish. We presented many plays where I was always a star because of my fluency in Yiddish. We even had a radio program [in Yiddish]. There was a radio program at the time in Chicago where they would ask our class to come and either recite poetry in Yiddish [or read from a play]. And at one time it seemed like we almost had a—what do you call those things that you have on the TV? A program where—an ongoing presentation of—wasn't just poetry but some dialogue in Yiddish [like a soap opera]. So I remember that very well. It was so exciting to go to a radio station, and – of course, there was no television – actually speak into a microphone. So for a teenager that was a big deal. And you should pardon the expression, there was a little bit of “ham” in me, so I always had the lead in every play that we had and I enjoyed that too. Had some really big productions as I think about it. We had the JPI which is the Jewish People's Institute in Chicago.

PL: What was that?

RP: The Jewish People's Institute? It was like a Jewish Community Center where they had lectures in Yiddish, and I remember that when I graduated from the elementary school of the Sholem Aleichem Institute we had a big graduation [ceremony]. It was Hanukah and I was the narrator for [the play] “Hannah and the Seven Sons.” There was a play and I was the narrator. And then, I hate to say this, but since they called me the valedictorian, I gave a speech.

PL: In Yiddish what do they call a valedictorian? Is there a word?

RP: I really don't know. But all I know is hot a greyse declamatzie [I had a big recitation]. I had written my own speech about how important the Yiddishe shule was to me and what it meant to study Yiddish and to be part of the Jewish community, and I was only 13 at the time. And I must say that my father and mother hobn geklibn nakhes, they were so

proud. They were sitting there in the audience kvelling. And there were several hundred people. So that sort of stands out in my mind.

PL: Can you tell me a little bit about what it meant to be a student going to Yiddish shul – the Sholem Aleichem shule – within that Jewish community of Chicago?

RP: Yes. Well actually, my family lived in a non-Jewish area and, oh Pamela, I still remember the cold, cold winters where my mother, allev a sholem [rest in peace], would walk with me as a 10- and 11-year-old. It was a good two miles, possibly even more from where we lived in an apartment. And we had to walk. Nobody drove me and if we didn't walk, we took the streetcar and we'd have to wait for the streetcar to come and it got very cold in Chicago. And I still remember my grandmother who would rub my feet that were like two pieces of ice. [She would] take my shoes off and rub my feet between her hands to warm them up because I was so cold. Gee, I had forgotten that. So twice a week, Tuesday and Thursday, I would attend the Yiddishe shule, and during the winter, as I said, we either walked or we waited for the streetcar, and it was not too comfortable. Gee, when I think of the difference now. We're driving our kids all over. We didn't own a car. So that's the mode of transportation that we had. [It] was a streetcar or you walk. That was my childhood in Chicago. And let us not forget the Yiddishe Teatr [Yiddish theatre]. We had wonderful talents like Maurice Schwartz, Molly Picon, some of the great, great Yiddish actors and actresses would come to Chicago where we had the Lawndale Yiddish Theatre. Again, it was out of our area and we had to take the streetcar, but my folks always included me in viewing these performances. Of course I had my crushes on the various good-looking actors. Leon—what was his name? Lilly Lilliana was his wife and Leon Liebgold, they were a couple. He was very good looking and she had a gorgeous voice and wonderful actress and he too was very talented. I had a real crush on him as a 13, 14-year-old teenager. And now when I think these teenagers have crushes on some of these rock stars. But anyway, those were my crushes, people in the Yiddish theater. Yes, I have some wonderful memories of the Yiddish theater.

PL: Tell me. Share some of them with me.

RP: Well, Leon Liebgold and his wife, Lilly Lilliana, who had come from Poland, were the stars very often in some of these plays. Molly Picon of course was wonderful. Maurice Schwartz was a classic. And I saw all these people as a young teenager. Made quite an impression. And of course many of these plays were tearjerkers. So we'd leave the theater with swollen, red eyes. But they were wonderful, wonderful, wonderful stories and very well acted.

PL: Now at this point was it only theater or did they show films before?

RP: No, it was only theater.

PL: Did it consider itself—

RP: Live theater.

PL: Live theater. Did it consider itself part of the vaudeville or art theater tradition?

RP: Art.

PL: What did that mean to you, that difference?

RP: It was mostly live theater that I saw, not—oh, how about Menasha Skulnik? Oh, what a talent he was. He was wonderful. One of the funniest comedians. I do have some of his records now. But he was really great, really great. So, it was mostly art theater. There were a few musicals. You know, there was always a little music but not the musicals as we know them today. These are mostly live theatrical productions. Very well done with some very fine talents and some of the great Yiddish actors and actresses of that time.

PL: Were you the only 13-year-old in the audience? Were there other children?

RP: Probably. Probably. There might have been maybe one or two. But yes, most of them were adults. But being the only child, who knew from babysitters? So my folks [and I], we'd all get on the streetcar and go—

PL: So you spoke Yiddish.

RP: —to the Yiddishn teatr.

PL: So you spoke Yiddish in the home.

RP: Yes, because my grandmother lived with us and we spoke Yiddish in the home. And my Yiddish probably at that time, I must say, was probably more fluent than now. Because now, I mean, I speak Yiddish [only] in class. But when I'm conversing at home with my family, it's in English. But when I was growing up, it was all in Yiddish. Yiddish was my first language. I think I really learned to speak English when I started school.

PL: Did you speak Yiddish on the streets as well with your family?

RP: No. Oh, on the street? Yes, with my family? Yes. But obviously I spoke English with my friends. But yes, and I started Yiddish school when I was about eight or nine.

PL: Were there other options for you to have gone to a public school and do you remember that decision?

RP: Oh, I did go to a public school. I did go to regular public school and after public school I attended the Yiddish shule, which was probably from about 4:00 to 6:00. That's why it was so cold, because in the winter coming home at 6:00 was very cold. So that was a long day for me.

PL: Now you said that your parents had socialist leanings.

RP: My father did, yes, because he worked very hard, 12 hours a day. This was before the NRA. Worked in a jewelry store, local jewelry store that was also owned by a Jewish employer. We of course subscribed to The Forward, and The Forward was a connecting link in the Jewish community. I'll tell you a very interesting story about that. But yes, [my father] worked 12 hours a day with a one-week's vacation in the summer and Mr. Neumark, his employer, would say to him, “Immerman, we want you back here on Saturday because Saturday is our very busy day so your vacation will be cut short by one day.” And in those days, you did what the employer said because he had a wife and a child to support. So his vacation was from Monday to Friday. He had to be back on Saturday because it was such a busy day. And of course his one day, which was Sunday which he took off obviously, that's when he would go to either hear a lecture in the morning or we would go to the Yiddish theater in the afternoon, or we'd have company over. And we always lived in an apartment, never in a home – I mean in a house. It was our home of course but it was an apartment. And it was quite different from Seattle. Very hot in the summer, very cold in the winter.

PL: Can you tell me a little bit about your parents and where they were born?

RP: My mother was born in Riga, Latvia, and always, always bragged about what a beautiful city it was. And she was right. It was a city of culture, a city of beauty, and I did visit it, as you know later on. So she was born in the big city of Riga. My father was born in a smaller town which at that time was called Vindau.

PL: Can you spell that?

RP: In Yiddish, Vindau, it was like V-I-N-D-A-U. I think that's a German way of spelling—thinking about it. And now it's called Ventspil. V-E-N-T-S-P-I-L. I visited there a few years ago. My grandmother (and I will show you something of interest about that) was born in a little town called Sabile. S-A-B-I-L-E. So you see they were all born in Latvia.

PL: Not related to tsibele, for the onion? [laughter]

RP: No, no, Sabile. I never thought of that. No, it's Sabile, S-A-B-I-L-E. And I did visit her birthplace. So they were born there and my grandmother was one of many, many children. [phone rings; break in tape] My grandmother was born in Sabile. She was one of many children, my grandmother. My mother was the only child. But my grandmother had many siblings and I have [a picture of a family] tree here and it really branches out with all these people living in various parts of the world. So this was my childhood, growing up as an only child. By the way, never enjoying that. I always missed having a sibling. [phone rings; break in tape]

PL: So can you tell me a little bit about your parents? Can you describe their backgrounds, religiously, educationally? When they came to America? All that.

RP: Okay. My father—gee, this is such an interesting story, I don't even know where to begin. My father—these candlesticks that you see there, they were his mother's. And I'm named after her. Her name was Rochel. My father left his home quite early in life and of course wound up in the Russian Army and was in the trenches there. Later he met my mother in Riga, fell in love with her, and they got married in a place called Libau, L-I-B-A-U. Married there in Libau. My mother also was an only child. My father had a brother whose name was Benjamin, a sister whose name was Molly. These two emigrated to New York. He had three other sisters. Two of them I believe were killed in Russia. The other one died of some complications from a tonsillectomy here in America. And her name was Chana, and our daughter is named after her. As a matter of fact, I came across a Russian letter written by one of his sisters who talked about how wonderful it was to live in Russia and of course it was translated for me and we know differently. But that was kind of interesting, and by the way I have that letter. So that my father had these siblings and he was a watchmaker and studied watchmaking in Europe and was an expert watchmaker. One of the finest people I have ever known in my life. I was very

close to him and had great respect for him because of his menschlikhkeit.

PL: Can you just translate what you mean by that? I know what you mean by that.

RP: Yes, he had compassion. […] He was “colorblind.” To him a person was a human being whether he was Black or White or green or purple or whatever. I remember vividly his working in the jewelry store when a Black woman, one of their customers, whose watch he had fixed, came in and asked if she could use their toilet, their bathroom. And being a human being, he saw nothing wrong in that so he said, “Sure.” I remember this, as a child, I must have been maybe ten years old, when he came home and he was so upset because his employer said to him, “Immerman, I don't want you ever letting a black person into our bathroom.” And my father said, “This is a customer of ours. This is a human being. What difference does it make whether she's Black or White?” And he said, “Our bathroom is just for us and we don't want any Black person in there.” And my father was deeply hurt. Deeply insulted. I remember him discussing that at home. So at the very early age I was given a very good education of knowing that first of all we're supposed to be decent human beings. And so, of course, as I grew older I respected my father for thinking and feeling that way.

PL: Were there other examples where he inculcated you with those kind of values?

RP: Yes. We had a very good family friend by the name of Sarah Black. They had known each other for years and years. And Sarah Black lived way out on the South End of town and we lived on the Northwest side. And if you know anything about Chicago, it's a long distance. Very far. It would take without a car at least an hour to an hour and a half on the streetcar. When Sarah Black got sick one time there, I remember my grandmother used to come. At that time she wasn't living with us. She had remarried and she was living in her own apartment, but she would come, say on a Thursday, and my mother and she would bake challah and bagelekh and all kinds of goodies for Friday night. And my father, even though he had to be at his work which was at 9:00 in the jewelry store, would

leave early in the morning on the streetcar and go from our house. [He traveled] on the streetcar for a whole hour or possibly more to deliver these baked goods to our friend and then took that streetcar to go back to work. So I don't know of how many people would do that.

PL: What was his religious background?

RP: By the way his name was Abraham. His religious background was he was very much a Jew. He wasn't terribly religious because he had to work on Saturday. After all, Mr. Neumark said that was the busiest day and my father had to make a living for his family. In those days, women stayed at home and they didn't go to work, that is outside of the home. But then my mother had her mother living there too so my mother would do the cleaning, my grandmother would do the cooking and they had their little arguments, mother and daughter. But my father was there working every day from 9:00 to 9:00 at night and of course Sunday was his day off. I would say he was pretty much a socialist because of his having to work [so hard]. He always felt that the worker was getting the short end of the deal, which he, I'm sure, was. I remember that at one time he voted for, maybe a couple of times, Eugene Debs, because he was a socialist.

PL: Did he belong to any organizations or go to any—

RP: The Arbeter Ring.

PL: —fraternal lodges?

RP: Yes, he belonged to the Arbeter Ring. Of course when the high holidays came along, we always attended services, and that was the Lincoln Park shul, which was not far from our house. Probably a good walking distance of maybe eight or nine blocks. So we never, never missed a Kol Nidre [service]. Never missed Yom Kippur, and never missed Rosh Hashanah. So the High Holidays, we always went to shul. And of course it was an Orthodox shul where the men sat down below and the women up above. And of

course my grandmother lived with us and we had a strictly kosher home. So I knew the difference between milkhik and fleyshik and all this and of course Friday night was Friday night and candles were lit and let's see what else? And as I say Sunday was really used for cultural things like a lecture or the Yiddish theater or company at home.

PL: Let's talk a little bit about your—

RP: And of course there was always Pesach and I have very fond memories of that, the sedorim.

PL: Well go ahead and tell me about that.

RP: Yeah well, I was kind of a skinny kid and didn't really eat very much but at a seder I ate like a horse. I don't know where I packed it in but everything was wonderful in the seder and I remember helping serve the chicken soup and the kneydlekh and my father of course was always at the head of the table and I remember giving him the hesabet [pillow for the leader to recline on], and so I have very fond memories.

PL: Who came for seder?

RP: Well since we had such a small family, it was my father, my mother, my grandmother and I, that was our family. And then we always had friends, their friends.

PL: What kind of foods do you remember that were served? Anything particularly—

RP: Oh, gefilte fish. My mother made the most wonderful gefilte fish which I make now. They were great cooks, my grandmother and my mother. It was chicken soup and kneydlekh and brisket and gefilte fish and all the traditional foods.

PL: Was there any secret to her gefilte fish?

RP: No. But do you know what my mother was an expert on was teyglekh and to this day, people are making her teyglekh.

PL: Now I'm not sure I know what that is.

RP: Oh, you don't know what teyglekh are? Some people make teyglekh that are just dough boiled in honey and they call that teyglekh. But hers were the size of golf balls that were wrapped around fruit and nuts. They were the size of golf balls and boiled in this hot honey. And they came out golden and they were so beautiful. To this day, I don't know if you know Dorothy Becker? Well Dorothy Becker is still making my mother's teyglekh, and every Rosh Hashanah she will call me. We used to be very close friends but somehow you know people drift apart. But we're still friends and every Rosh Hashanah she will call me and say, “Ruth, I want you to know that I made your mother's teyglekh today and I put them in this beautiful crystal bowl and they are beautiful.”

PL: Now, when do you eat them?

RP: Usually, Rosh Hashanah when you want to have a sweet year, you're dipping apples in honey or you're making lekakh, honey cake. You eat them usually at that time. But my mother used to make them for friends – for weddings, for bar mitzvahs, whatever. So she would make them for friends because it really was a specialty. And to this day, we have friends like Dr. Abby Franklin who still remembers my mother's teyglekh because she was here [in Seattle] for a while.

PL: What do you think about your mom when you think about the teyglekh?

RP: Well my mom was a very modern woman. I mean she didn't hesitate to tell me all about menstruation and all when I was ready for it. She was very modern and she could take an off-color joke as easily as anybody. All I can say is I remember she used to write a lot of letters for her friends who were illiterate. Like there was this woman who came from Vitebsk who had friends that she wanted to write to in Europe and didn't know how

to write Yiddish. And so she would come to my mother and my mother would write Yiddish letters for her. My mother also helped me a lot with my Yiddish kompezitzie. When I had to write a composition in the Yiddishe shule, my mother was great at writing. She had beautiful handwriting and she had some wonderful thoughts that she could put down on paper in Yiddish.

PL: Such as?

RP: Well, maybe I just got my writing ability from her and my daughter, who is a writer. So maybe it runs in the family. I never really thought of it. But yes, she used to help me a lot with my Yiddish compositions. She had a beautiful handwriting and she did go to night school to learn English. So, I remember that. My mother was literate. Both my parents were very literate. They read a lot. They spoke several languages. They spoke obviously Yiddish. They spoke German and they spoke Russian and they spoke Latvian. And when they didn't want me to understand, they would speak in Latvian because I could understand their Yiddish. Now people speak in Yiddish so their kids won't understand it. But like if I was naughty, and my father would give me a potch in tukhes, my mother would say, “Nessit vinim,” which I remember was “Don't hit her,” “Don't spank her.”

PL: That's in Latvian?

RP: In Latvian. Yes, “Nessit vinim.”

PL: Do you remember any other phrases that they used?

RP: And what other? Nessit vinim and there was another phrase in Latvian that as a matter of fact I was just sharing with some of my Latvian friends here. Nessit vinim was one and I can't think of it offhand now. But also they would speak Russian and I remember my mom used to call me a krassavitze, which meant beauty. I mean they thought I was—well I was kind of a pretty little girl. So she would always call me a krassavitze, which is “a very beautiful girl in Russian.”

PL: Your parents spoke so many languages and your mother was literate, which I think was very unusual.

RP: Well she went to the gymnasium in Riga.

PL: Tell me a little bit about her life in Riga.

RP: Well let's see. She was an only child. Her father and mother were divorced, which I thought was kind of unusual at that time. But apparently, my grandmother was a very giving person. I mean, if she loved you, you could have killed somebody, she would still love you. So her love was unconditional. And so she had, as I told you, a lot of siblings. And from what I understand, they had a general store where they sold linens and men's clothing and whatever in Riga. So she would give her relatives presents. And her husband was not that generous so I guess they had many quarrels and eventually they separated. So that my mother really didn't have much to do when she got older with her father. And she and her mother, my grandmother, were very close. And that's later on that she met my father and they got married in Libau and my grandmother was accepted by my father as his own mother because his own mother died at a young age. So my mother—both my parents were literate people and as I say could speak several languages which were Yiddish, Latvian, Russian and German.

PL: When did your parents and how did your parents decide to come to the United States together? What impelled them?

RP: Well as I told you, my father had been in the Russian army. I do know some stories where somebody who was very Orthodox in the army wouldn't eat bread on Pesach and my father went to all lengths—I don't know what he had to do to go and get matzo for this particular person, which he did. As I say, he was a very wonderful human being. How did my father and mother meet?

PL: Decide to come to the United States.

RP: You'll come to it later. Oh how did they come to the United States?

PL: Do you know why they decided?

RP: Why? Well, because it's the goldene medina.

PL: The golden land.

RP: Yes, the golden land. Obviously life in Europe, in Riga wasn't that good. My father was a watchmaker.

PL: When did your grandmother come with—

RP: They came together.

PL: Okay. Why Chicago?

RP: Why Chicago? Well first they came to New York. Then there was some cousin who was in New York that greeted them there. And then they came to Michigan which was where my mother's uncle, my grandmother's brother, whose name was Moshe Kahn. He had come—well he had gone from Riga to Johannesburg, South Africa. A lot of people from Latvia and Lithuania went to South Africa. Well from South Africa [he] came to America and settled in a little town called Bay City, Michigan. My father and mother came from New York to Michigan where my grandmother's brother was. He had a general store there by then. And my father said – my father, who was such a Yiddishist, and interested in what was going on in the world and certainly in the Jewish world – said, “How could I live here in this little shtetl where there's only goyim [non-Jews]?” He heard from somebody he knew in Chicago that Chicago was a big city, lots of Jews, lots of Jewish culture. So they moved from this little, little town in Michigan to Chicago. That's how we wound up in Chicago.

PL: Can you describe the neighborhood that you grew up in?

RP: Yes. Again, it's my mazel [luck] to always live in a non-Jewish neighborhood. We lived in a non-Jewish neighborhood. Right across the street from a big church. And I used to watch marriages, weddings every Saturday afternoon in that big church. For a little girl to see all these people all dressed up, it was really something. So that's how we ended up. But you know what is very interesting about my father is, as I told you, he left his home quite early and he traveled to Warsaw, Poland, before he met my mom. And this is an extremely interesting story because in Warsaw, Poland—because he did a lot of traveling—in Warsaw, Poland, I guess he'd learned to be an apprentice as a watchmaker. Well in Warsaw, Poland, he met a man by the name of Yitschak Warshal.

PL: Can you spell that?

RP: W-A-R-S-H-A-L. They have a Warshal Sporting Goods here. He met this man named Yitschak Warshal, who was of course much older than he. And he was such a nice person, such a nice young man, that this Yitschak Warshal wanted my father to meet his oldest daughter whose name was Sarah. And my father really didn't care for her because I think he had already met my mother in Riga. So he had no interest in her. But this Yitschak Warshal was very nice to my dad who was a young man and traveling, obviously didn't have very much. And my father went back to Riga and, as I said, married my mother in Libau. But he never forgot Yitschak Warshal who was very hospitable to him when he was in Warsaw. So when he came to Chicago—this is unbelievable. When he came to Chicago, as I said, everybody subscribed to The Forward. Anybody who could read Yiddish. He finally settled in Chicago and when he remembered Yitschak Warshal, he put an ad in the paper, in The Forward, saying, “Avraham Immerman is really interested in knowing where Yitschak Warshal might be because he remembers how hospitable and warm he was to him in Poland. And he would like to know where he is now.” He had a feeling he was in the U.S. Would you believe that shortly after that Yitschak Warshal's brother, whose name at this point I can't remember but it doesn't matter, he saw this ad in the paper, showed it to Yitschak Warshal who was here in

Seattle, Washington, and said, “You know, there's some young man out there in Chicago who wants to know where you are.” And Yitschak Warshal said, “Oh my God, Avraham Immerman? That wonderful young man? I must write to him.” And they started a correspondence between Chicago and Seattle, Washington. And I remember as a little girl Yitschak Warshal and his wife, Freida, came to visit us in our apartment in Chicago. It happened to be Tisha B'Av and they were extremely Orthodox – that is Yitschak Warshal was. So they fasted that day. And that made quite an impression upon me.

PL: Why?

RP: Because we didn't fast on Tisha B'Av. My father fasted only on Yom Kippur but not on Tisha B'Av. So I remember that was Tisha B'Av and Yitschak Warshal and his wife were in our apartment and they came to visit and they had this wonderful communication where all these letters were going back and forth from Chicago to Seattle. And as Yitschak Warshal's grandson who came to study medicine in Chicago, and he was told [to] look up the Immerman family because they're good friends of the Warshals. I was in high school and this young man was going to medical school. And that's who I married. So it is because of Yitschak Warshal and The Yiddishe Forward that connected these two: my father and his grandfather. When he grew up, went to the University of Washington, came to Chicago, said, “Look up the Immerman family. The Immerman family had this little girl who was going to high school.” And going out with a medical student was quite a yikhes [“feather in my cap”/pedigree] And so many years later, maybe quite a few years later, we got married.

PL: Wow.

RP: And it was only because of The Yiddish Forward.

PL: Did The Yiddish Forward serve in any other way as such a pillar of your life?

RP: The Yiddish Forward, I can remember my father actually walking and reading the paper [at the same time] because he had very little time at home. And they would say, “You know, you're going to get yourself killed.” He would actually be reading the paper while walking home for lunch. Yes, he'd come home for lunch because it was like a matter of eight blocks from the jewelry store to our home. So he'd be reading the paper while walking or he'd be reading the paper on a streetcar. Always reading The Forward.

PL: What about you? Did you start reading The Forward at some point?

RP: Well of course. I went to the Yiddish school so—probably not. Probably when I was a teenager I would. I would read the “Bintl Brief” which was the “Dear Abby” of that period. And I could read by the time I was a teenager. By the time I was 12, 13 years old, I was able to read fluently.

PL: Can you describe your relationship with your mother and grandmother a little bit more?

RP: Mm-hmm. My grandmother, as I said, had unconditional love. So whatever I did was right. So sometimes my mom and my grandmother would argue that maybe I wasn't so right. But for my grandmother, I was right. So it was those little things. My mother, I must say, was a very outgoing person and quite modern and as I said didn't hold back on sex or menstruation or anything like that.

PL: What do you remember about those conversations?

RP: Well that we were very open with one another. That I could tell her anything and she would tell me anything.

PL: So for an example, Ruth?

RP: You know, there was no bahaltene zakhn – no hidden things. She was very open with me about everything. Possibly even more than I needed to know. And also I think I was old before my time because I was an only child and 12-, 13-years-old, my mom thought so much about my so-called “wisdom” that she would ask me for advice. She would sometimes say to me, Rokhele, we need a new dining room set. So come with me and help me choose it. And she always took me shopping with her. I hated it because it was, you know, a kid sitting waiting for her to try on this dress and that dress and in those days they wore corsets, so I'd go with her to buy a corset. So those are some of the things I remember. So yes, my mom would ask me for my advice in many, many areas.

PL: She was an only child, as were you.

RP: Yes, yes.

PL: That's something you have deeply in common. Did she talk to you about that or—

RP: Yes. She missed—by the way, she did have a brother that was born, oh, when she was probably 15 or 16 years old. But in those days, their circumcision methods were pretty awful. In those days, the mohel who did the circumcision—in those days they would actually suck up the stuff in their mouths and he must have had infected teeth or something and the poor child died shortly after his circumcision. So my mother always missed having a brother. She was a good 15 years old when this happened. So she remembers very vividly losing a little brother because of that. That was really an unfortunate thing that happened. So my grandmother lost a little baby boy. Which made my mom an only child, and she never really liked that. But I liked it even less. I was a very sensitive child, and music, even to this day, does something to me emotionally. So I can remember many times sitting in a living room, listening to some very beautiful classical music and suddenly being moved to tears because I didn't have a brother. I didn't have a sister. And I missed it.

PL: Was it by intention that you were an only child?

RP: Yes, because my mother always said that she had such a terrible time in delivery with me. I remember I was born in a hospital named Michael Reiss. And she said her doctor – she didn't like her doctor. Whatever, I don't know. But she didn't want to have any more children. And I think she was really afraid to have any more children because she said, according to her, the delivery was a very unpleasant, painful delivery. So I remained an only child and really to this day wished that I had a sibling.

PL: Did you ever talk to her about this?

RP: Oh, many times. When I sit and cry there when I hear this music and she'd say, “Rokhele, vos veynstu?”

PL: “Why do you cry?”

RP: Mm-hmm. And I'd say because I wish I had a brother or a sister. And maybe because I didn't have siblings, I always, always had a lot of friends. Because I remember in the Yiddishe shule, I had a lot of friends. I always had a lot of friends. But I do remember missing a sibling.

PL: Did that instill any fear in you about childbirth?

RP: Never. I always said, “Once I got married I was definitely, if it was going to be at all possible, I was never, never going to have only one child.” I always, always wanted to have more than one child. And I'm so glad I have three.

PL: The neighborhood that you grew up in Seattle—

RP: Oh, I didn't grow up in Seattle.

PL: I'm sorry. In Chicago. Erase that. Did you interact much with—you said you had a lot of friends. Did you interact much with the children in your neighborhood or were they mostly—

RP: Oh yes. I interacted with everybody. There were a lot of Greeks that lived there. There were some Jews. There were always, I mean, in my high school, there were at least a third of the students were Jewish. Yes, we had a neighbor on the same porch with us who was Greek. His name was Tony. I used to play with him. As a matter of fact, the Warshals, over here in Seattle had sent my mother a beautiful string of pearls. And I was just a kid. And I was playing with Tony, who was one of our neighbors, and for some odd reason I got into that string of pearls. I couldn't have been older than eight or nine, maybe even younger. And somehow the pearls became marbles. One Sunday, my mom – we were going to go to the theater or someplace – and she's looking to put on her string of pearls. And she couldn't find them and maybe found a few throwing around somewhere. Finally I admitted that I was playing with them. I do remember my father giving me a spanking at that time. He couldn't believe [it]. Not only was it the fact that it was a material thing but that it came from Yitschak Warshal (!) who he regarded with such esteem that how could you have done that? Well to think of it now, it was kind of a crummy thing to do. So I got my first spanking because I ruined my mom's string of pearls. Played with them as they were marbles with Tony. But I also had Jewish friends and I can remember when I went to elementary school, it was my grandmother who would stand there waiting for me to come back for lunch and walk me back home and stuff like that. So it was my grandmother, my mom and my dad that I grew up with.

PL: Did Jews and non-Jews interact in those neighborhoods? Are you living in an integrated neighborhood?

RP: Yeah, well, there were Italians and Greeks and the Jewish people lived closer to the park but we lived closer to my father's work which was like about seven or eight blocks

away. And that's why when I went to the Yiddishe shule, we had to take the streetcar there, because to walk would have been really very far. It could have been maybe two-and-a-half to three miles, or maybe even more. So I would say and again we lived in a non-Jewish neighborhood. But there were always—in Chicago you say “non-Jewish” but, look, we're always the minority. But yeah, I had a Jewish girlfriend who I still correspond with now who lives in Los Angeles. Her name was Molly Simon at the time. And she—oh my God, she remembers something. You know there are people who—what shall I say? There are people who remember everything that happened in high school. And then there are those of us who have traveled and who have gone onto higher learning and the memories of high school are sort of faded. I mean sure I can pick up what we called “The Log,” the book. But because now I'll talk to this same girl, Molly, and she'll say to me, “Oh don't you remember the twins,” and “Don't you remember so and so?” And I'll say, “No, I don't remember them at all.” But Molly hasn't had—well she's done traveling, yes, I don't know, somehow we grew in different directions. And she remembers everything and everybody from high school. I do not. I just remember a handful of people.

PL: Well, now I'm going to make it hard for you [laughter] because I want to ask you a little bit about your public school experiences. Where did you first go to school?

RP: Okay. My first school was called Chopin Elementary School, which was very close to where we lived. I recall you had to cross Western Avenue, which was a very busy street, and they had guards there. But my grandmother didn't trust the guards so she was always waiting there for me to come home safely. So that was when I was a little kid. And of course I went to—when I was nine, I started the Yiddishe shule. So that was my elementary school, which was Chopin. And we went through to then—that time we had Tuley High School. But before we went into the third and fourth year of high school, we went to what was called Sabin, which was a junior high school. And we went there after we graduated from elementary school, we went to Sabin for two years. And when we were juniors, transferred over to the big school which was Tuley High School. Well, would

you believe – and I can't remember what year that was – that Tuley High School had a big fire. Luckily that fire happened on a weekend. If it had happened during the week there would have been a lot of casualties. But it happened on a weekend and I still have, I think, a science book that was ruined by the water. So yeah. So what happened then was for a while we had to go back to the junior high school because the Tuley High School had to be taken care of after the fire. So I graduated finally from the Tuley High School. So there was Sabin Junior High and then Tuley High School. And you know who else went to Tuley High School? That famous writer. Is it [Saul Bellow]? Who was that famous writer? I can't think of his name right now. But [Dr.] Gil Roth, who lives down the street here, also went to Tuley High School. So he would remember.

PL: What would you say were your most formative experiences in your public school education? Were there any teachers that you considered particular role models or activities that enthralled you?

RP: There was one teacher that I couldn't stand. Her name was Miss Needham.

PL: Can you spell that?

RP: N-E-E-D-H-A-M. She taught algebra and geometry and to this day I don't know my algebra and geometry because I hated her so. Why did I hate her? Because she struck fear into all of us. She was one of these old maids with her gray hair pulled back in a bun. The typical—did you know that in those days these teachers could not marry? I didn't know that. But many of our teachers were unmarried. They were old maids. They were into their 50s and 60s and they had never married. Their profession, their life, was teaching. So this woman wore the typical Oxford shoes, you know, that you'll see in the cartoons with the gray hair pulled back with the bun, with the glasses. Now it's fashionable but I still don't like those round [wire-rimmed glasses]—like I told Myra, I said, “They look like my grandmother's glasses – with the round glasses.” This is what she looked like. And every time I went into her class, my heart was going like this. She would

embarrass people. She would bring them up to the board and just embarrass them in front of the whole class. She was terrible, just terrible. And as I say, I owe it to her the fact that I know my math but not geometry or algebra because that's what she taught. So that teacher I could live without. Then there was a teacher by the name – a Jewish teacher who taught French – and her name was Miss Dubow. Also an old maid.

PL: How did she spell her name?

RP: D-U-B-O-W. So she taught French. And then there was a Mr. Greenberg who taught art. But that might have been over at the Herzl by now. But anyway, high school was okay. My favorite subjects there was always humanitarian stuff, you know, the humanities. Math was not my thing nor was science, but language.

PL: What languages did you take?

RP: Well in high school it was French, but then when I went on to Herzl College, City College, it was German. And the reason I took German, I must tell you, because it was so easy for me. I mean I would get an “A” without even blinking an eyelash because of my Yiddish. Of course the grammar was quite different. But her name was, again, an old name, Miss Oettershagan. This was Herzl City College. And I took German from her and I just breezed through that.

PL: What was it like to be a Yiddish speaker and to be taking German. They are pronounced very differently. There's no Hebrew. So tell me about that. How did you switch gears?

RP: So first I graduated from high school. And by the way I must tell you about my wonderful friend whose name was Eunice Kukee, spelled K-U-K-E-E. She was my best friend in high school. She was very tall, she was about six feet. And she was very bright. She also played the violin in the orchestra and she was my best friend. So I remember when I graduated from high school, walking down the aisle with her, and so that was a

very pleasant memory. Then we had a choice of going to City College. There were three city colleges: Wright [College] was on the North End, Herzl was on the West Side and Wilson, I believe, was on the South Side. Well since we lived in the goyishe neighborhood which was Northwest, I could—the one going out to Wright was quite far away, although we did try that. But that was much too far. And again, there was no cars my dear, we just went on streetcars. We had to take entrance exams. So even though I took my entrance exam at Wright, it was just too far to go there on the North End. So I switched and I went to Herzl which was on the West Side.

PL: Who was Herzl named after?

RP: The Herzl City College? Was named after Herzl, Theodore Herzl.

PL: Can you tell me a little bit about that? You have Wilson, Wright and Herzl?

RP: And you know it's interesting but my life seems to revolve around Herzl. I came to Seattle and I became a Herzl member in our congregation. And yes, and I went to the Herzl City College in Chicago. I don't know how they came up with those names. One was Wright, W-R-I-G-H-T. And that was on the North End, quite far from our house. Herzl was on the West Side, which incidentally was a Jewish neighborhood because that's where the Yiddish theater was, that's where the JPI was. And that's where they had something like maybe ten, 11 different synagogues. Would you believe that on Rosh Hashanah, all these people would start coming out of the various synagogues? I mean it was amazing for me especially because we lived in the Northwest side which was a goyishe neighborhood. But my grandmother finally wound up on the West Side.

PL: So did you choose to go to Herzl because that was where the population of Jewish students went?

RP: No, I chose to go to Herzl because that was the closest to my home. I still had to take two streetcars to get there but it took less time than to go to the others.

PL: What were the expectations within your family around women's education?

RP: Interesting question. Even though my father and mother were very literate people, here I was, like 17-and-a-half pushing 18, because I had skipped a little bit so I was not quite 18. But anyway, say 18. They said, “Why do you want to go to college?” These were literate people. These were people who spoke several languages, who were fluent in Yiddish. Who saw to it that I was fluent in Yiddish. “Why do you want to go to college?” And it's interesting that you ask me that. And I said, “Because Eunice is going to college, this one is going to college, and if I don't go to college now, I never will. Other things will come up in my life and I won't be going to—this is an opportunity for me to go to college.” And they said, “Well you know, we really can't afford it.” And I said, “But this is a city college.” You know what the fee was? I think it was like $6 for a [semester]. We were on a semester basis. “Six dollars?” They said, “Well you're just going to get married and have children. Why do you need to go to college?” And I had to really put up, not a stiff fight, but put my point across that, yes, this was the time for me to go to college – at least to the two-year city college which really was not expensive. And my books were all, you know, I bought them secondhand books. So yes, I had to fight for that.

PL: How did you convince them and how long did it take?

RP: Well it didn't take long. Because they loved me so much and they respect that—my mom was asking for my opinion when I was 12, so certainly when I was 18 she certainly respected my opinion. And I said, “I graduated from high school. This seems normal now to go into college. And I want to go.”

PL: What did you want to—

RP: So I finally did make it to Herzl. And, as I said, went to Herzl because it was the closest, even though I had to travel on two streetcars to get there.

PL: Did you go with a clear intention as to what you wanted to do with your life?

RP: Yes, I was always interested in social work. And there again [my folks asked], “Why do you want to be a social worker? You're going to have to go to all these poor homes and you'll have to deal with Blacks and this and going to those horrible neighborhoods and it won't be safe for you and you're always going to see poverty” and all this. “Why do you want social work?” “Because,” I said. “I'm interested in human behavior. I would like to help some of these people. And that's what I'm interested in.” I wasn't interested in science. I wasn't interested in math. My good subjects were language and social sciences.

PL: Was social work a field that you were encouraged by the schools to go into at that time?

RP: To go into the poor areas, helping out with underprivileged children and people on Medicaid or at that time they used to call it “relief.” They used to call it “relief” actually. They wouldn't say, “Are you on Medicaid.” Now it's Medicaid. “Are you on relief?” And I would be sent to those homes to check out their status – how many children, what their income was, stuff like that.

PL: Did they teach you—

RP: And my folks said, “Is this what you really want?” And I said, “Yes.”

PL: So for how many years did you take coursework in that subject area?

RP: Two years. In other words when I went to the city college, I studied—obviously you had to take entrance exams, so I had English and German and social science. What else did I take? Several social science [classes]. Oh, and psychology. Yeah, stuff like that.

PL: Did the history of Jane Adams and Hull House factor in here at all?

RP: Well, I knew about that and of course I knew the work that they were doing and I was interested in that.

PL: How did you know?

RP: Oh yes, I also had to take science. I had to do that. Oh I hated it. Physical science. Physical, oh yeah. Yes, yes. I didn't do well in that at all. But I did do very well in the other subjects.

PL: So you said that social welfare was called “relief” at that time.

RP: Yes, they'd say are you on relief?

PL: Who was on relief then? Who did you see?

RP: People who were very poor. For instance, I remember so distinctly we were living in an apartment on Oakley Boulevard and this Jewish family in the next apartment building were so poor that they couldn't afford a radio. And oh, the name was Brenner and they had a son and a daughter, they were very bright people, and the son was very interested in opera. So he would have to come to our house to listen to the opera that we'd have on radio on Saturday afternoon. So I remember that these people were so poor that they couldn't pay their rent. And I'll never forget the fact that they were put out on the street. All of their belongings were put out on the street. And I remember my family helping them. But you know, the girl's name was Frances Brenner. She lives in New York now. I did meet her several years ago when I was in New York. Very bright, very bright woman. She was bright then too. And her brother wound up in the theatre. He was a tall lanky guy and he had a role in Fiddler on the Roof when it was here in Seattle many years ago when [Jacob] Adler played the part of Tevya. And his name, I can't remember. I think his name was Morris Brenner. But he was a tall thin guy and he played, what was he, I think he was the mail carrier in this production here. But so I remember it and they were on relief. So you ask who was on relief? People who were out of work and couldn't afford to

pay their rent. And so they were on relief. Whereas my father, thank God, was a watchmaker, and even though he worked for someone else and made the huge amount of, in those days, which I think was like $40 a week. That was a lot of money. Well not a lot of money but obviously enough to pay the rent and see that his wife and child were clothed and fed and we never had a car but we always had enough to pay the rent and to pay our bills and frankly to go to the theatre. And by the way I want to tell you about my marvelous father. He used to work Monday through Saturday fixing watches and selling watches. But if he had a friend who had a broken watch, they'd say, “Immerman, I have a broken watch, could you fix it for me and how much would it be?” And he—so we had in our kitchen—in those days even in the apartments they were big kitchens—he had a special watchmaker's desk. It was sort of a high one. Have you ever seen them with the black? And I remember my father having this black thing that he put on his eye to be able to see—I still have the tools here—to see these watches. There were no [watches] with batteries [then]. When he cleaned the watch, he would take apart the entire watch, clean every part in it. And when he cleaned your watch it will run forever. The money that he would get from his friends for fixing the watch he would give to tzedakah.

PL: What does that mean to you?

RP: Ah! That's fantastic. He was such a mensch [good person]. Unfortunately he died too young.

PL: When did your father pass away?

RP: In December of 1944.

PL: And how old?

RP: Fifty-two. From a metastatic melanoma. So please be careful in the sun.

PL: Do you want to pause for a minute, Ruth?

RP: Pardon me?

PL: Do you want to pause and get a tissue?

RP: No, no. I was just fine. It's okay. He died at the age of 52 from a metastatic melanoma. And I remember seeing this wart on the back of his calf as a child when we'd go to the beach. It was right on the back of his calf. Who knew from cancer? Who knew from melanomas? Who knew from any of this stuff? So he went to the Arbeter Ring doctor. You know they had coverage at that time. And he went to the Arbeter Ring doctor during his lunch hour. The doctor scraped it off, did not send it to be analyzed. And years later it came up in his inguinal area as a malignant cancer. And that's what he died of. But it all started from an abnormal looking wart on the back of his leg. Now I know.

PL: Did you go to the Arbeter Ring doctors as well as a child?

RP: Do you know, I was never sick. [laughter] Can you believe that? I mean now, these kids are having ear infections every montik un donershtik [Monday and Thursday]. I think I had one really bad cold where I was laid up in bed with a sore throat and I had some doctor come to the house, made a house call. That was the only time I remember going to the doctor. Sure they took me to the dentist to take care of my teeth. But who knew from earaches? I was such a healthy kid that I remember I must have been about maybe 13 or 14 when I really had a bad sore throat and I was laid up in bed and the doctor came and I don't know what he did for me but I was, that was the one time I remember being sick and having a doctor making a house call.

PL: Were there any folk remedies in your home that you remember your grandmother prescribing?

RP: Oh maybe the hot, horrible stuff that they put on your chest. You know, what was that awful Vick’s stuff. But other than that, I didn't have any ear infections. My grandchild has an ear infection. Every montik un donershtik, he's got another ear infection. All I

know is I was one healthy kid. Thank goodness because I don't think my folks could have afforded too many medical bills. But my father was the only breadwinner as I said. And he worked six days a week. My mom was home. She had her mother there who helped out. And sometimes maybe too much help because two women in the kitchen, not a good idea.

PL: I think we're going to have to pause because this tape's about to run out.

RP: Okay.

PL: So let's switch tapes and we'll continue.

[END OF CD 1]

PL: We're continuing with the oral history interview of Ruth Peizer and this is minidisk tape #2. So you were saying about your father being a role model.

RP: Yes. He was truly a mensch in all that it means to be a mensch. He was compassionate. He was generous. He was thoughtful. He was kind. He was a loving father and a loving husband and a loving son-in-law. And you know years later, when I met people who knew him, they'll say, “Your father was a jewel amongst jewels.” And that's a really good feeling.

PL: Do you remember your father's funeral?

RP: Very well. Very well. We always celebrated his birthday on December 25th, which obviously was Christmas.

PL: Why did you say that—

RP: Because his birthday was December 25th. He died on December 21st of 1944 after a long illness. Suffered terribly with this cancer. At that time they didn't have

chemotherapy. He did have surgery but it didn't help. The way I found out about it was after I graduated from Herzl I got a job with the American Service Bureau and that was an interesting thing too because I was hired by a man named Mr. McKenzie who I think at one time said the only reason he hired me was because I had a Jewish mind and because I would work out well in that particular position because it required a lot of memory work. It required being on the ball and knowing exactly what to do with all these details. And he felt that someone with a Jewish mind could do a better job.

PL: What was the—

RP: If that isn't what – [discrimination] in reverse? Anyway, I learned that later from the woman who was telling me what—she was leaving the job and so she was training me and she said, “Mr. McKenzie told me that he felt you would work out well in this position because you're Jewish.”

PL: Did you take that as a compliment or was it somewhat of an insult?

RP: Well I took it as a bittersweet kind of thing. I thought, that was a heck of a reason to hire me, because I'm Jewish. It's sort of insulting. It's also antisemitic almost. But I felt gee, I'm so glad I'm so smart that I can do this work. I'm so smart, and I guess because I'm Jewish I'm supposed to be so smart. Well good. I know I can tackle this.

PL: So if I can interpret it a little bit, Ruth—

RP: You know, it was sort of a mixed feeling. It was very mixed but I thought that there was obviously some antisemitism there.

PL: But if I can interpret what you're saying, are you also saying that you took it as a compliment and in many ways you started thinking of yourself as having a Jewish mind as a result?

RP: No, no, I just thought, well, it's nice that he thinks because I'm Jewish I'm so smart. And frankly I think, and I was grasping what she was telling me. I mean what it involved was this was an insurance investigation bureau. Do you ever remember the name of Arthur Godfrey? Before your time, okay. He was a big personality on radio. And so he applied for insurance, or other people applying for insurance. And when you're applying for insurance you have to be investigated – your financial status, your health status, your social status. I mean you could be a criminal. So it was my job to handle the territories of Southern Wisconsin and Northern Illinois. So we had representatives and correspondents in all these little shtetlach, in all these little towns and cities, big cities. So as I say, I was responsible for the correspondence from the southern part of Wisconsin and the northern part of Illinois. The southern part of Illinois was handled by our St. Louis office. So it was quite a responsibility where I had to investigate or contact these various correspondents in these various cities and request reports on these various applicants for insurance. Then I had typists in the office who would type up the reports. So it was my job to write the letters, to do the first part of it. Then when I got the reports from these people, I would hand it to the typists and they would type it up. Mr. McKenzie was the general manager. This was called the American Service Bureau, and we worked for the various insurance companies. They would hire us and pay us a fee. Of course I worked on a salary. Mr. McKenzie was the general manager. Our home office was upstairs in the Carbide and Carbons building on Michigan Avenue, which was a very prestigious office building on the Magnificent Mile in Chicago. And so Mr. McKenzie was there for a good couple of years and then he retired and Mr. O. V. Elder took over, and he was a sweetheart. He was a really nice person to work for. And again, I was his right hand.

PL: What factors influenced your choice of work given that you were studying social work at Herzl?

RP: Well, I obviously couldn't qualify for a social work position because I didn't graduate. I didn't get my degree in social work. I had to quit college in two years and my social work

degree. I would have needed another two years.

PL: What do you mean you had to quit college in two years?

RP: Because my folks could not afford it anymore. They said two years, genug!

PL: [translating] “Enough.”

RP: I mean I had to fight for the two years, remember? I had to really tell them how important it was for me to go onto college.

PL: How difficult was that for you to end your college experience two years into it?

RP: Well, you know what? You just accept it. Your folks are in a position where they can't afford to send [you]. I could have gone onto the University of Chicago. But that would have required my going to the South End, which was quite far, and would require, let's face it, money. And my folks didn't have it.

PL: So how did you make a decision to get the job that you obtained?

RP: I just applied. How did I get the—I applied somehow. I can't even remember how. I applied for this position. It was the American Service Bureau. Was it through a placement bureau or something like that? And they sent me for an interview and I obviously did well in the interview. As I say, Mr. McKenzie hired me because he thought I was so bright for many reasons. And I had my references from college and the fact that I was Jewish, you know, impressed him with the fact that I must be great.

PL: Were you the only Jew that worked in that office?

RP: I was the only Jew that worked in the entire organization.

PL: Of how many people?

RP: Well they had the home office upstairs, way up on the top floor. We were on the seventh floor I believe. And how many workers did we have in our office? We had typists. We had probably about eight typists and I was the only one in charge of, as I say, these territories. And then we had men who would go out to be the reporters – like if people were applying for insurance in Chicago. These were reporters who worked in Chicago and they would come in with their reports. And the various typists would type up their reports. But my reports—and yes, I was the only Jew in the entire organization. And so we had, what, about maybe half a dozen men reporters and about eight typists and Mr. Elder who was the general manager and I was the only Jew there. And upstairs they had the other people. They might have had 15 or 20 people up there.

PL: What's the significance, if any, of your being the only Jew in this office, in this organization?

RP: Well because Mr. McKenzie hired me.

PL: Were there holidays that you had to take off? And how did people respond to that?

RP: Let's see. I obviously took off Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Those were the only two holidays that I would take off.

PL: What about the work culture?

RP: Obviously I didn't have to work on Saturday, on shabbat. So I worked Monday through Friday and I would come in at 9:00 and leave at 5:00. And again, no car, so I took the streetcar back and forth.

PL: How much money did you make?

RP: At that time, let's see. That was in the ‘40s. Oh, what was it? Maybe $45 a week. Something like that. Yes, it was considered quite good in those days because let's face it,

you could buy a loaf of bread for what was it, I don't know, a dime or whatever. It was very reasonable. I do remember our first apartment when we were married though. Oh, that was something else.

PL: I think we're going to get to that after we talk about your marriage.

RP: Yes, okay.

PL: But I want to ask you a little bit more about the expectations around your earning money at this point because your parents it sounds like were having difficult times.

RP: Well, my father was the sole supporter and then he was getting sick. You see, this was in the ‘40s already. So when we found that he had this melanoma, I mean, there was no work. Period. Because he died in ‘44 after suffering a good two years.

PL: Did you contribute—

RP: That was a terrible time. Yes, of course. Of course. Somebody had to help pay the rent and it's really quite different from today's world.

PL: How so?

RP: Well, I don't know how it is in other people's families but in our family, of course, thank goodness, we are in charge, we pay the bills, we don't have to, thank God, have to ask our kids, as a matter of fact our kids get help from us. But yes, when my father got sick—I mean the thought of college is—you know, you forget that. You just go on out and help certainly support yourself and help in the home too because my mother was not qualified to go outside to work. My father was sick. He worked part-time when he could. And then when the cancer really acted up, it was really oyf tsoris – it was really bad.

PL: Did you caretake him? Or how did your family deal with his illness?

RP: It was very difficult, my dear. My mother was—well she did have many things wrong with her, maybe a little bit of a hypochondriac too. She ultimately died of a heart condition. She was a very—how shall I say this? I'd say she was very open and she depended upon my father a lot. She depended upon me a lot. So, when I was in my office and I called the doctor to ask what were the results of my father's test – and I remember so distinctly that I was told, and this was the day of Yom Kippur, the day of Kol Nidre. And I was leaving early. But first I found out what my father's results of this test was: that this was cancer. This was the real thing. So can you imagine, a young girl—what was I? About 19, maybe I was pushing 20—going home with this very heavy heart, knowing that I just heard my father has cancer. Tonight is Kol Nidre. I shall never forget that. I came home. I did not tell my mother because I knew that my mother would immediately tell my dad, “My God, Avraham, you've got cancer.” I didn't want my father to know that. So I kept it to myself. And that night, we all went to Kol Nidre. And I remember looking down from the balcony, I was up there with my mother. And I remember looking down to where my father was because we could see him. It was pretty much like the Ashkenazic Bikur Cholim here. You can look down. And I could see him standing in his seat near the wall, standing for Kol Nidre, and he was in pain. He was in great pain. And I could see him leaning against a wall. I could see him holding onto his tallis. To this day I cry whenever I hear Kol Nidre. Because I knew then that he didn't have long for this world. And I didn't tell my mother. And I kept it from my mother all this time because I didn't want my dad to know this. Somehow I felt that it was like giving him a death sentence and I didn't want to do that. Right or wrong, you know it's possibly wrong when we look at it now. But my husband, who was an intern at that time and interning very close to our house, managed to do that on purpose. [He interned at] Norwegian American Hospital because he was so in love with me, he didn't want to go far away. So anyway he was there. That's another story. But anyway we went to Kol Nidre services that night and I as a young girl knowing that my father had cancer, really bad cancer, and kept it from my mother. However—and then he needed radium treatments and my

mother's uncle, Moshe Kahn, who I told you was the one was the one in Bay City, Michigan, he came to live with us at that time because he was divorced from his wife and so my father got him a job in the same jewelry store. So he would help my father get to the jewelry store and anyway then it got to the point where my father couldn't work anymore and he was very sick and he died on December 21st, 1944. And my mother, finally I had to tell her and she went berserk.

PL: How long after did you tell her, Ruth?

RP: Oh many, many months. I just could not bear to have her know because I knew she would go to pieces. I just knew she would go to pieces. And she did, she did. When she realized that she was going to lose her husband, she literally fell apart.

PL: How were you prepared emotionally to deal with that secret for so many months? These are your parents, you're the child.

RP: And the only child. And nobody to share it with except for my so-called boyfriend. Of course I had another boyfriend too. But yeah, that was the only one I could share it with. And finally, of course, I had to tell my mother and she took it very badly. And you know, I don't know whether or not my father ever [really knew] because I think after a while he went into a coma. But Sam and I would sit on his bed and he would say, he'd say over and over, he'd keep repeating, in Yiddish he would say, “ikh vil nor eyn zakh”– I only want one thing. And frankly I think he wanted me to marry Sam. Because he was very proud of him because he was the eynikl, the grandson of Yitschak Warshal.

PL: Let's talk about that a little bit. Let's talk about when it is that you first met Sam. You talked about the story of him showing up, but tell me, when's the first time that you met your husband-to-be?

RP: I was going to high school. I was still a high school student. I think I must have been in my junior year, and this really nice young man with a full head of hair comes to medical

school. And he's told to look up the Immerman family.

PL: What's his name?

RP: What's-his-name?

PL: No, give me his name. [laughter]

RP: Oh, his name is Sam Peizer. He is told to look up the Immerman, not the Emmerman family but the Immerman family. And I remember I was pretty popular and I was on the phone at the time that he came to our house, which was an apartment building. I'm on the phone, talking to another boyfriend and suddenly this guy appears and my folks open the door for him and he comes in and then I get myself off the phone and I say, “Well, we have a visitor.” And that's how I met this young medical student. And I said, “Oh, you know, my grandfather” and all that stuff. And of course Bill Warshal was his uncle, and Bill Warshal had visited our home as well. So yes, it's a gantse mishpokhe [big family] here with the Warshals. [laughter] So that's how I met Sam Peizer. He came to the house that one evening and I was on the phone—had to get off the phone in order to talk with him. And that's how I met him. And my father and mother were so taken with this poor medical student who was, nebekh [attitude word: feeling sorry for someone], living in a rented room somewhere, some awful place. Do you know that this wonderful, wonderful husband of mine took a picture in front of a beautiful apartment building and sent it to his folks saying, “I live here,” when he was actually living in a crummy rooming house, some awful place but it was near the medical school. So—

PL: Where are you at this point in your life? It sounds like you were quite actively dating.

RP: Oh yes, oh yes. I had two boyfriends.

PL: Were they Jewish boys?—

RP: Oh yes, oh yes.

PL: —non-Jewish boys?

RP: No, no. I didn't go out with non-Jews.

PL: What kind of things did you do with your previous boyfriends?

RP: Well, wait a minute. This was a boyfriend that I met when I was—oh, I didn't tell you that while I was going to school, I also got [laughter]—I was 16 years old and I wanted to make more money so I applied for a job at Goldblatt's Department Store which was also within walking distance of my house, which was next door to where my father worked. Newmark's Jewelry Store was here. Big Goldblatt's department store was here. And I got a job at the age of 16 selling hosiery. At that time, I was making 25 cents an hour and I would be very thrilled to spend a whole Saturday standing on my feet, running like crazy, selling hosiery. That was just when nylons came into being. For 25 cents an hour—remember you take two cents off for social security. So I would go home after an eight-hour stint with $1.98. That was a lot of money. And I worked on commission. If I sold more, then my—whatever it was allowed there—then I would go home with maybe $2.50.

PL: Did you have to display the hosiery in the store yourself?

RP: You bet. And I got very good at putting my hand through and showing how sheer it was. And then of course when nylons came, that was a whole new thing. But yes, they were silk hosiery and rayon hosiery, and I was so busy. Oh, and I lied about my age because I was not quite 16 and I said I was. And that was the only way I could get a job. So yes, I used to sell hosiery every Saturday and I'd get down there, maybe at noon, and work until 9:00 selling hosiery. And it wasn't like Nordstrom's, here, but they had various counters here, there, wherever, and you were just all over the place and you had your register here and then at the end of the day I'd go upstairs and hand in my whatever I

had to hand in [the money from my register] and collect my money. All of $1.98.

PL: What did you do with your money?

RP: I saved some of it. I helped. I saved probably most of it and bought whatever I needed. I can't remember. It was $1.98, my God, what did I do with it? I spent it on what I needed.

PL: Social life?

RP: Social life was great. I always had a lot of friends and my mom made me a Sweet Sixteen party which was a surprise party and I came home one Saturday night, the whole apartment was filled with a whole bunch of friends. And that was my Sweet Sixteen party. And two of my friends met there, a girl and a boy. Gershon Heller, who was with my Yiddish shule, he met my friend Mary, and they have been married all these years. I don't know what's happened now, but they were married for a good 50 years. They met at my Sweet Sixteen party. Yeah, I can't believe that.

PL: What kind of things did boys and girls do in those days socially when they were on a date?

RP: Well first of all, there were evenings when I'd be with my shule friends. What did we do then? We would listen to music. There would be a lot of dancing.

PL: What kind of music? Do you remember?

RP: Dance music. Not rock-‘n-roll. Dance music like swing maybe. And but then I also remember a teenager, at times, we'd have parties and we'd play “spin the bottle.” And wherever the bottle landed, that's the one you wind up kissing. So there were kissing games but nothing more than that. Or dancing with electricity that might have been dimmed. But very nice music. And of course we all had our crushes on the various guys

and gals or whatever. And oh, there were a couple of fellows in my Yiddish class. One was Harry Sello, good looking guy. Another one was Julius Lebow, also a nice looking fellow. All these people went on to become professionals. And then I had a very good friend by the name of Shulamit BenAmi who I still correspond with and who lives now in New York. She married somebody from our high school. So yes, I had wonderful friends.

PL: I'm going to talk a little bit Ruth, with—

RP: And that's what we did on dates, by the way. The most we ever did was kissing. That's it.

PL: Before we get to your courtship with your husband, let's backtrack a little bit. I want to talk about your Jewish education because you've mentioned it a couple of times and we haven't really explored it and it sounds like you had sort of two lives you were living in a sense: one in the public schools and one in your Yiddishe shule. So tell me about your Jewish education. Where did it begin, and the name of the school?

RP: Okay. Well, it started out at the age of about nine. I think I was almost nine years old when my folks enrolled me in the Arbeter Ring shule. What was his name [Mr. Carson]? I remember my teacher limped, and at this point I can't remember his name but he was a fine teacher. And so I was enrolled at the age of nine. And I was taught the Hebrew alphabet. And I was taught to read and write. But I progressed so quickly because we spoke Yiddish at home, that I was so fluent in Yiddish and my Yiddish was really very, very good.

PL: But you didn't read the Yiddish language up until that point?

RP: No, not until I was nine. I didn't know the Hebrew alphabet or anything. So when I went to the Arbeter Ring shule, I learned the Hebrew alphabet. They taught me to read and write. We talked about politics.

PL: Such as?

RP: Well, it was socialistic. To this day I remember singing the song: [singing] “Mir zaynen kinder ale glaykh. Mir zayen ale eyns far eyns. Nishto keyn oreme keyn reykhe. Mir geyen”…yadda yadda dada. So that's “The International.”

PL: What does that mean to you?

RP: Well at that time it meant a Yiddishe lid [Yiddish song]. But later I realized it was socialistic, almost communistic.

PL: Can you translate it loosely?

RP: What, the song that I just—“Mir zaynen kinder ale glaykhe,” we are children all the same; “Nishto keyn oreme keyn reykhe,” there are no poor ones or rich ones; [singing] “Mir zayen kinder ale glaykhe. Nishto keyn oreme keyn reykhe. Mir zayen ale eyns far eyns,” we're one for one another. Yeah so it's very much—there's no difference between the rich and the poor. We're all the same and everybody's got to be equal.

PL: Did that ideology penetrate your learning?

RP: Well yes, at that point, it was a wonderful way of thinking that all men and women are equal and nobody should have more than the other and equality for everyone, whether it's money or whatever. Everything is equal, for everyone.

PL: How did that kind of education compare to what you were learning in the public school at the time?

RP: Well what was I learning in the public school? I was learning reading and writing and they didn't talk politics in a public school. I was learning the basics. But in the Yiddishe shule was where you really thought of politics, of human behavior, of equality, all this. And of course, yeah, it was a whole. And of course living in the kind of home that I came

from, which was very progressive, really, and certainly one for equality. And certainly generous. As I told you, my father would give to charity the extra money he would make from fixing your watch or somebody else's watch instead of keeping it for himself. Which he could have used. He would give it to someone who needed it more. So growing up in that kind of an environment, maybe this is what instilled in me the need for social work or helping out the poor or whatever.

PL: Do you remember other formative experiences going to Yiddish school? What kind of games did you play? Or did you discuss Israel at the time?

RP: Not really because it was only when I got into the Sholem Aleichem Institute that they were more Zionistically inclined. But at the Arbeter Ring, it was specifically socialist.

PL: Was Israel referred to in positive or pejorative ways?

RP: When I got to Sholem Aleichem Institute? As I say, I got there when I was a young teenager. I must have been about 13.

PL: Were these the only Yiddish schools that you had an option to go to in Chicago?

RP: Yes, yes. There was only the Arbeter Ring and the Sholem Aleichem Institute. Whereas up in Canada, you know, they had the Yud Lamed Peretz [Y.L. Peretz]. But in Chicago, it was just the Arbeter Ring shule and the Sholem Aleichem shule. Sholem Aleichem Institute is what it was called. And as a matter of fact I still—maybe in a second, I'll bring down some of the books from my Sholem Aleichem Institute.

PL: Describe your experiences at Sholem Aleichem Institute. Unless you wanted to continue with that thought.

RP: Well no. Obviously I was a newcomer when I came to the Sholem Aleichem Institute because I had to transfer. Because I didn't fit in socially at the Arbeter Ring shul because

I was placed in a class with 16-year-olds. And I was 12. So you know there's a big difference between 12 and 16. I mean these guys were already dating and doing whatever. Oh, by the way, I also went to camp. I went to Arbeter Ring Camp when I was 12.

PL: Oh I'd love to hear about that.

RP: Oh, that was wonderful. That was the Arbeter Ring Camp which was out of South Haven, Michigan, called Benton Harbor. They had a wonderful camp there with regular cabins. Or they were not cabins but they were like dormitories – long deals where everybody slept right next to each other. And what was her name, that famous dancer? She was a famous dancer. Well, anyway, these were our counselors. So my folks had enough money to send me to camp, which was my first experience at the age of 12. Now we're sending our kids off when they're eight and nine. So that was my first experience going to the Arbeter Ring Camp and that was a wonderful experience because we slept in these long dormitory kind of buildings. And I remember the campfires where we sang songs like [singing] “Arum dem fayer, iz alzding”—what is that? “Arum dem fayer, iz alzding liber.”

PL: [translating] Around the fire is—

RP: Everything is better. Yes. “Arum dem fayer, iz alzding liber. Di nakht iz tayer. Mir zingen lider.”

PL: [translating] “The night is dear and”—

RP: “Di nakht iz tayer. Mir zingen lider” — “yes, we sing songs.” “Un az der fayer vet farshloshen vern” – “when the fire will be dimmed.” “Un az der fayer vet farshloshen vern, veln mir” – oh, “we'll have “khaloymes with the shteyn” or something like that.

PL: What does that mean?

RP: I have it in my tape to my grandchild. “We'll dream of the stars and we'll have beautiful dreams.” Khaloymes. Kholem.

PL: Kholem.

RP: Kholem is dream and khaloymes is the plural, dreams. So that was a very wonderful experience to be in camp for probably only two weeks at the most. And then they had the other session coming in. So we could afford two weeks of camp.

PL: Would you say that what was Jewish about that camp, what was Jewish about that camp other than the fact you're speaking Yiddish?

RP: Yiddishe lider, Jewish songs. Jewish games that we would play as kids I guess.

PL: What kind of Jewish games?

RP: Well it was all in Yiddish. Everything was Yiddish. It was mostly as I recall, every night we'd have a campfire and we'd sing all these beautiful Yiddish songs. And then I remember they put on plays and we had counselors who were at that time 17- and 18-years-old. And I can remember some of them making out while we kids were supposedly sleeping. And there was one—and I'm trying to remember their names, and it will come to me one of these days. See, I'm not a Meta Buttnick with that kind of—but she was a famous dancer. “Malaguena.” I remember that she would dance barefoot and I was so impressed with her barefoot dancing to “Malaguena.” And she was at that time maybe 16-, 17-years-old. She was one of the counselors for the girls. And her boyfriend—the one they were making out with – was also, he became a famous person. And they were, as I say, they were much older and they were counselors and doing their thing [Pearl Lok and Shimon Rabinovich] .

PL: Did the camp have a logo?

RP: Did the camp have a logo? It was the Arbeter Ring Camp. No, I can't recall that. But it was just a group of Jewish kids who spoke only Yiddish. There were Yiddish programs, Yiddish plays, Yiddish songs, everything was done in Yiddish.

PL: Could you distinguish between the different Yiddishes at that point?

RP: At that point, no.

PL: Everyone sounded the same?

RP: Everyone—well some spoke better than others.

PL: What about the Hebrew?

RP: I happened to speak fluent Yiddish. The others might have spoken a broken Yiddish.

PL: What about the amounts of Hebrew in Yiddish?

RP: Very little. There was very little. And when I was graduating already, they were beginning to introduce Hebrew and I was already in mitl shul [middle school]. This was in the high school. Yeah, in our next session I will make it a point to show you some of the pictures with some of the books. And by the way, we put together a book, by the way. And there it was, “Rochel Emmerman.” And I wrote about the Yiddishe shule. We all added to this book. We all submitted various compositions, stories, poems that we did at the age of 12, 13-years-old. There was really—we have quite a—yeah, come to think of it, that's nothing to sneeze at, you know? That was a beautiful book that was put together and I'm going to find it for you.

PL: What would you say the lifelong impact of having gone to Yiddish schools and Yiddish camps has been in your life?

RP: I only went to the camp once. That was all we could afford. Oh, Yiddish has opened so many doors for me. It has been such a wonderful, wonderful—it just has been a wonderful thing for me in my whole life. And even my family. My kids have learned from it and have certainly been enriched by it. And I honestly feel that my life has been enriched by my Yiddish education. Because number one, it's opened so many doors for me. Wherever I've traveled I was able to use my Yiddish. To this day, if I can't pronounce a certain word, say a medical word or something, I'll write it out in Yiddish. I mean because it's so phonetic. You can write anything out in Yiddish because it's phonetic. So basically, yes, it's had a tremendous impact in my life. It has enriched my life to a point where I really feel I would have been much poorer if I didn't have this wonderful Yiddish education.

PL: Can you—I'd like to return to this when we talk about your teaching at the University of Washington.

RP: Oh, that's quite late.

PL: Yes. But I want to ask how you have witnessed changes in attitude around Yiddish. Given that you grew up in a Yiddish home where it was encouraged to speak Yiddish, that you mentioned that Hebrew was not encouraged at one point and then it was encouraged, could you give a sense of the arc of that?

RP: Well you see, Hebrew—not too many people spoke or even thought about Hebrew because this was before Israel. Before the birth of Israel. And let's face it, Yiddish is a thousand years old. So Yiddish was the means of communication amongst Ashkenazic Jews. Hebrew? You read Hebrew in the prayer book. If you could even read Hebrew in the prayer book. And I'll tell you the truth, a lot of those women going to those—I assure you there were some who were holding it upside down. I mean they didn't read Hebrew. They were just there to schmooze. Their husbands maybe knew the Hebrew because they were taught, in Talmud Torah or whatever. But the girls? “Who needed to teach

girls?” “They're just stupid.” “They're going to get married and have children.” To this day we had an Orthodox family here. We begged her to send her kid to Hebrew school with our kids. She says, “What does she need Hebrew?” Good, the boy was sent to all kinds of very, very off the wall Hebrew schools outside of the city. But the girl knows nothing about it. So she married a non-Jew and now the mother is complaining that her daughter is married to a sheygitz. I said don't call him a sheygitz. He's a nice human being. He's the father of your grandchildren. So I can't buy that. But at any rate, no. Hebrew, nobody thought about Hebrew. This was before the birth of Israel. So yes, when I was getting ready to graduate from the mitl shul, my teacher decided to bring in a little Hebrew – to bring in some Hebrew words and so I began to read a little Hebrew. But Yiddish was definitely the focus.

PL: Did women pray in Yiddish?

RP: Sure. They had the tkhine.

PL: Tell me about that.

RP: Well, yes, the women had the tkhine where they prayed in Yiddish and it was very beautiful too. Yeah so the women had the tkhine to pray in Yiddish.

PL: Were you introduced to that by your mother?

RP: No, no. My mother had a kosher home. She lit the candles on shabbat. You know, we had all the traditional foods and all. And we only went to shul on the High Holidays because let's face it, my father worked on Saturday. So I can't really say that they were shomer shabbat. How could they be?

PL: So where were the tkhines introduced here?

RP: And my mother wouldn't know about the tkhine. When? When I went onto higher learning. When I went onto higher learning I realized that there was a Yiddish prayer book for women and it was the tkhine.

PL: And this wasn't introduced to you at Sholem Aleichem.

RP: No. Not at home. And it could have been maybe later on as I was graduating in the higher grades. But my basic learning at the Sholem Aleichem Institute was literature. A lot of literature. I had all of Sholem Aleichem's books here. By the way, my father managed to buy all the books through The Forward, I remember. And so I have all of Sholem Aleichem's books here and so a lot of focus was on reading, writing, poetry, literature and geshikhte, history. All studied in Yiddish.

PL: Were there any alternative graduation ceremonies for girls?

RP: No. Everybody was together. Boys and girls graduated together.

PL: Did they call it a siyyum or some other word?

RP: No. Mir hobn ale graduirt fun der zelber klas. Es iz geven “a graduatzie.” [We all graduated from the same class. It was “a graduation.”]

PL: A graduation.

RP: Yes.

PL: Just like they would in an English school.

RP: That's right. There was no separation of boys and girls, and of course no bar and bat mitzvahs.

PL: And did you see other friends going to shul that were not Yiddish learners who were getting bar and bat mitzvahed?

RP: Yes, there were some friends of ours whose kids were bar and bat mitzvah. But you know, this was a rather interesting thing. My father was such a Yiddishist. Hebrew was not a spoken language. So he would say—we'd go to somebody's bar mitzvah. The kid would get up there and do his thing, like you know, “Today I'm a fountain pen” or something. And then we'd leave there and my father would say to me, “Du veyst, men ken a ferd oyslernen tantsn.” Because this boy, whom I—

PL: Translate that.

RP: Oh, “you can teach a horse to dance.” And to him, what was important was the fact that I could continue speaking the Yiddish that was spoken at home and throughout a thousand years. That I would be familiar with Y.L. Peretz and with Sholem Aleichem and with all the great writers – Morris Rosenfeld, who you know was the sweatshop poet. He wanted me to know about all these great writers. He wanted me to know Yiddish theatre and know all about the great artists in the theater. He wanted me to know Yiddishe geshikhte, not necessarily the religion of it, but to know what has happened. And certainly, recent Yiddish, Jewish history. What was going on perhaps with the Jews in other countries. He was a very worldly person and into this world, not so much—and by the way, yes, he would keep yartzheit. Why? In memory of his mother. In memory of his father. Not because it meant so much to him religious-wise but this was something he had promised his mother or his father to do that he would keep their yartzheit.

PL: At your Passover—

RP: So he always kept yartzheit and went to shul by the way.

PL: At your Passover seder did you say, “Next year in Jerusalem”?

RP: Oh yes. Sure. Always.

PL: What did that mean for you since he was a Yiddishist in the here and now?

RP: Well he also believed that we should have a country of our own too. The here and now? No, we always said, “Next year in Jerusalem.” And it was a very traditional seder, very traditional, with all the songs. And you know, I still can hear him singing “Chad Gadya” and that's why Pesach to me is the most important Jewish holiday.

PL: Did you sing Yiddish songs during Passover?

RP: Over at home? No, we sang all the songs from the Haggadah and most of the Yiddish songs that we sang were really at camp and shule. Certainly we'd have records of Yiddish songs but the Haggadah was definitely Hebrew. But getting back to the bar mitzvah, so my father would say, “Ask that bar mitzvah boy what he knows about being Jewish. Does he know any Yiddish? Does he know any literature? Can he read Yiddish? No, they just taught him his part of the parsha [weekly torah portion] of his bar mitzvah.” And he said, “Next year, ask him. He might have forgotten it.” And I can remember him saying that to him this was not truly Jewish education. This I definitely know. To him, he'd say, “Men ken a ferd tantsen lernen” – “You can teach a horse to dance.”

PL: When you remember the first time, or did you—

RP: That's why he'd say, “Your Yiddish is more important.”

PL: Yes. [laughter] When did you remember a time when you were embarrassed about your Yiddish? Do you remember anything?

RP: I was never, never embarrassed.

PL: Or someone tried to make you feel embarrassed about it?

RP: Well, you know, sometimes when I was a little kid, like maybe nine or ten years old, my father would be reading The Forward on the streetcar. The Yiddish Forward on the streetcar. I'd sometimes look across and say, “Gee, I wonder what those other people are

thinking. He's reading this foreign paper." But I was a kid. I was what, didn't have any seykhl.

PL: Which means?

RP: Seykhl? Common sense. Which is a good Hebrew word. But as I got older, I could only take pride in the Yiddish because I realized the pleasure I got out of it. I loved the Yiddish theatre. I thoroughly loved it. I love listening to Yiddish music. I love—I would go to listen to Yiddish lectures. There was a Dr. Lorber who would speak in Yiddish every Sunday morning my father would take me when I was older, about 14, 15. I would go and listen to Dr. Lorber's lecture on some world event. All in Yiddish.

PL: When you met your husband, did he share in this Yiddish world with you?

RP: We would take him to the Yiddish theatre, which he just loved, and he loved Menasha Skulnik. To this day he talks about those wonderful Sunday afternoons when my folks would treat him to the Yiddish theatre.

PL: So he spoke and understood Yiddish?

RP: He understood. He does not speak it. Well, I mean, he knows a few words but he could understand it.

PL: Can you tell me about your courtship that led up to your decision to get married?

RP: Oh my God. That's a lange mayse [long story].

PL: Do you want to start with that the next time we begin?

RP: Perhaps. Because I don't know what your time is here, but that really is very involved.

PL: I think we'll pick up there when we return.

RP: Yes, that's very involved. I can't tell you how involved, but it is, because I had a major decision to make.

PL: Well we'll start with that. [laughter]

RP: Yes, yes.

PL: And thank you Ruth for the beginning of our interview together.

RP: Well, look, it's been a pleasure sharing all this with you, and I thought of things today that I'd hadn't thought of in years – certainly my childhood.

PL: Okay, we'll stop there then. Thank you.

[break in tape]

PL: We are continuing with the oral history interview of Ruth Peizer. This is Pamela Brown Lavitt, oral historian for the Jewish Women's Archive's, Weaving Women's Words Project in Seattle. We are at the home of Ruth and Sam Peizer, at 9830 47th S.W. in Seattle. Today's date is August the 6th, 2001, and we are continuing on minidisc #2. So we left off, Ruth, you were going to tell me the story of how you met your husband.

RP: Okay. My father left Latvia and traveled to Warsaw, Poland. There, he met an elderly gentleman whose name was Yitschak Warshal. This Mr. Warshal was very taken with my father, who was a very nice young man. And I believe the story goes that he even wanted to introduce my father to his oldest daughter whose name was Sarah. But my father was in love with my mother, who was still in Riga, and so he was not interested in having any further introductions, and he went back to Riga and they were married in Libau, Latvia. When he came to the United States, my father always remembered people who were nice to him. And once they settled – they came to Chicago and as immigrants, you know. It wasn't all that easy, but once they were settled and my father got a job

working as a watchmaker at Newmark's jewelry store, he remembered this very nice man named Yitschak Warshal. And at that time, The Yiddish Forward was a connecting link and so he decided to place an ad in The Yiddish Forward saying, “This is Avraham Immerman who is interested in knowing where Mr. Yitschak Warshal might be living. He remembers him from visiting him in Warsaw, Poland, and would like to reconnect.” Not long after that, Mr. Wolf Warshal, who was apparently a brother of Yitschak Warshal, happened to see this in The Yiddish Forward and called on his brother Yitschak and said, “Yitschak, there is a man out there in Chicago by the name of Avraham Immerman who is wondering whether or not he could reach you somehow and wants to connect with you.” And Yizhak Warshal said, “Oh my God, Immerman!” Now you know his name was Immerman, with an I. “Oh, er lebt nokh? [He is still living?] Oh that's wonderful, I'm so glad to hear from him.” And a correspondence started between Yitschak Warshal here in Seattle, Washington, and my father in Chicago, Illinois. And these letters went back and forth and then I remember during the 1933 World's Fair in Chicago, Mr. and Mrs. Warshal came to visit us. And oh, my mom and my dad didn't know what to do for them. They just rolled out the red carpet, they were so happy to have them there as visitors. Mr. Warshal was a very Orthodox man and I remember it was Tisha B'Av, and it was the first time that as a little girl I realized that very Orthodox people do not eat on Tisha B'Av; they fast. And so that was my first experience with that. Of course my folks fasted on Yom Kippur but I don't think they did on Tisha B'Av. And they started this ongoing relationship between the Warshals and the Immermans. Many years later, Yitschak and his wife had already passed on, but the name Immerman was still known in the family here. And when Sam Peizer traveled to Chicago to go to medical school, since there was no medical school here at the University of Washington, the family told him to look up the Immerman family in Chicago. Which he did. And when my father heard that, oh, Yitschak Warshal's grandson was here in Chicago, again, out came the red carpet, and he was invited to dinners at our home – Friday night dinners, Sunday afternoon dinners. He was invited to join us when we went to the Yiddish theatre. That was the first time he ever saw

Menasha Skulnik. And introduced him to some of the greats in the Yiddish theatre. And Sam Peizer was then a medical student and I was still a high school student. And then of course as the years went on, he courted me. And I had another boyfriend but eventually Sam Peizer became my husband. So it was really through The Yiddish Forward that connected his grandfather with my father and mother and the one that Yitschak Warshal wanted to introduce him to was Sam's mother, Sarah.

PL: You mentioned I think on tape last time that you had a big decision to make.

RP: Oh yes, yes. So you want to know that? I knew Sam Peizer, right? I was like a junior in high school, and he was going to medical school. And it was a great yikhes you know, for a young high school kid to be going out with a medical student. And he brought me to some of his fraternity dinner dances and it was fun. As a high school kid. However, later on I think I must have been a little older, like maybe 17 or 18, when I met this very handsome young man named Dan Nast.

PL: Can you spell his last name?

RP: N-A-S-T. Also met him through a friend of my mother's. I believe their name was Steinberg, and as a matter of fact I think they even lost a son on Iwo Jima. But through them, he was staying with these people and he was going to the school of optometry at that time. And they said, “Oh, the Immermans have a very lovely daughter.” So he got on the phone and we talked on the telephone. He sounded very interesting. And he said, “I'd like to meet you sometime.” So I was at that time, as a 16-year-old—no I was really about 16 years old, not quite 16, when I got a job working at a department store named Goldblatt's. And what was I doing? I was selling hosiery. And in those days, in that department there were many counters to sell hosiery and it was just when nylons came on the scene. So there I was, a young teenager, selling hosiery, the only reason I got the job was because I lied a little bit about my age. I wasn't quite 16. But I told them I was. And at that time I was making all of 25 cents an hour. So for the eight hours working at

Goldblatt's, I would then start at noon and work until 9:00 and go upstairs and pick up my paycheck, which was all of $1.98 because two cents went off to social security. So there I was. I had talked with Dan Nast on the telephone and he said, “I'd love to meet you” and I said, “Well, I'll be working at Goldblatt's next Saturday. So if you want to come by there, I'll meet you.” And he said, “Well what do you look like? And I said, “Well, I'm sort of short, blonde and a little heavy.” I was really brunette, tall—not tall but my height or taller than I am now—and quite thin. So I really didn't think he was going to take me seriously. And there I was, working really hard, trying to sell because if I sold more than a certain amount I'd get commission. So I was selling as much as I could and, as I say, pushing the new nylons that were on the scene. And it was getting to be about 9:00 and the store was open until I believe 9:30 and Newmark's jewelry store was right next door to this department store. And so there I was. You can imagine having worked for eight hours. I was dressed in just ordinary clothes, my hair was probably not the way I would want it to be and I was tired. Even at that age, I was 16 years old, I had put in a good eight hours of work. Running around, not standing behind the fancy counter like they do at Nordstrom's maybe, but running all over the floor. And all of a sudden, I see this very debonair young man come by. His hat just tilted a certain way. And he was very good-looking and very sophisticated-looking. And he comes over to me and he says, “You must be Ruth Emmerman.” And I looked at him and I thought to myself, “Oh my God, what a way to meet a guy for the first time.” I was a wreck. I said, “Don't tell me you're Dan Nast.” He said, “Yes. I just thought I'd come by and see who this short blonde was.” So at that point I was almost speechless and I said, “Well look, I've got to count up my money here and go upstairs and get my paycheck and I'll meet you downstairs here when I'm through.” So that's what we did. And when I came down he said, “I'd like to take you out somewhere,” and I said, “Well, in those days, you just didn't take off without telling your folks.” So I went next door to my father'—well it wasn't his jewelry store. He was working there as a watchmaker. And I said, “Papa, this is Dan Nast and we're just going to go out now.” He said, “What, you're going to go out? I've got to meet this fellow.” He was out of the store.

He said, “I want to see him. You're not just going to go out with a stranger.” So I brought him into the store. I introduced him. I said, “This is my father. This is Dan Nast.” And my father wasn't that happy about my going out with someone he didn't know, and it was a little embarrassing too, to get your Papa's okay, you know. After all, I was such a big shot. So he said, “Well, all right.” I said, “Don't embarrass me, everything is fine. He's staying with the Steinbergs.” So we walked. Who had a car then? So we walked from Goldblatt's and Newmark's about seven or eight blocks to my home where I changed my clothes and freshened up a little bit and combed my hair and looked a little more civil. And we walked to the streetcar. He didn't have a car. Certainly I didn't. I wasn't quite 16. And we took the streetcar to what was then known as the 5100 Club where Danny Thomas was starring and starting out his career. And Danny Thomas was wonderful. He put on a performance that lasted about two hours. And he was the best that I had ever heard. He told these very famous stories of his with the various dialects. He was a tremendous talent. And that's where we were, at the 5100 Club, having a Coca Cola for 25 cents each. This was my first date with Dan. And it just so happened that that evening, I met a lot of my friends there and they came by our table – “Hello Ruth” and this. And so he saw that I had a lot of friends. And then he'd walk me home. We walked to the streetcar and then brought me home. And that was my first meeting with Dan. And of course, he came by a lot and it just so happened that I wound up then with two boyfriends: Dan Nast and Sam Peizer. And I'd go out with Sam Peizer sometimes. I'd go out with Dan Nast sometimes. And by the way they knew of each other. And this thing went on and after all I was only 16. So I was dating them and going to high school and then graduated. And so I knew these people and it just turned out that I went on to college and Dan was still there. And then Dan went into the service and he was stationed in San Antonio, Texas. And Sam was always there because he managed very cleverly after he graduated from medical school to get an internship at the Norwegian American Hospital which was all of about seven or eight blocks from my house. So he managed to get the internship there and he would come by very frequently. And Dan would write to

me from his army camp every day. So I had a stack of letters from Dan and I was going out with Sam. Then Dan came in on furlough one day and took me to this very lovely—it wasn't a night club it was just a lovely place to have dinner and dancing, and Sam had taken me there a few weeks before. But I didn't say anything to Dan of course. He took me there and that's where he presented me with an engagement ring which I accepted because he was really—well he was good-looking and he was good company and I really suddenly felt that I liked both of them. So I accepted his ring, came home that night, and my folks of course were very close to Sam Peizer, not only because of his grandfather and grandmother, but they liked Sam. He was really a heymishe guy. And was down to earth and [had] no pretenses. Dan was a little bit more aloof—put on a more sophisticated air, where Sam was like an old shoe. Dan would very often stand in front of a mirror with me and say, “Gee, don't we make a handsome couple.” Whereas Sam would never say that. He would always think, “I'm gorgeous” but he was just ordinary. So when I came home and I told my mother—it was like 2:00 in the morning or maybe 1:00 in the morning, she was in bed. And I said, “Mama, Dan gave me an engagement ring!” And my mother's first words were, “Un docterim varft men funem fenster?” [laughter] In other words, “You throw doctors out of the window?” Because after all, wasn't it a Jewish mother's dream that her daughter should marry a doctor? And she said, “Docterim varft men funem fenster?” So then when I went and told my dad, he was a little more diplomatic. And he didn't say anything. He was just very quiet. And so there I was with an engagement ring from Dan. But when Sam Peizer heard about it, he went ballistic. So I said to him, “You know Sam, I've always been an only child and I really don't like the idea of having to be home alone at night when you go out on night calls or house calls, and Dan is this wonderful guy and I really think I love him and so, you know, let's just end this.” And he said, “No.” He said, “Who would you recommend that I go out with of your friends?” Well, he was such a nice guy I really wanted the best for him, and I said, “Well let me think about it.” But in the meantime I said, “Please don't come by here anymore and give me a chance to concentrate on Dan.” Dan, of course, went back to his army

base in San Antonio because this was during the Second World War and the only reason Sam was deferred was because he was going to medical school. He was really a second lieutenant in the infantry but the Army deferred him to go to medical school because they said they could use him more as a doctor than as a lieutenant. So Dan went back to the army and I had his ring, and Sam was very unhappy and I said, “Please don't come by.” So what did Sam Peizer do? He would walk by my house every day. And it almost reminds me of the Yiddish folk song, “Reyzl,” when he looks up and he whistles to Reyzl. But at any rate, he didn't do any whistling but he would talk with my mother and he would cry on her shoulder and he would say to her, “I love her so much and now she's engaged to Dan.” And I really, oh—and then he'd cry on my mom's shoulder and my mother said, “Well, you know, it's really her decision and all this.” So I was engaged to him for—I don't know how long, I can't remember at this point. And Sam kept after me. He wouldn't give up. He was very persistent. And then my father got very sick with his metastatic melanoma and those were very tough days. He was very, very sick and he was going for treatments and this Moshe Kahn used to drive him to the doctor for the treatments. And he was getting worse and worse. And I remember going to Kol Nidre—well, I was working in my office at that time and I called the doctor to find out just what the prognosis was and they said, “He has a melanoma and this is very serious.” So I was the one as a young girl to carry this burden because my mother I knew would immediately tell my dad. And at that time, I felt that this was like a death sentence and I wanted to protect my dad from that. And I knew if I told my mom who was very, very upset over this, and just seeing her husband so ill. But I didn't want to tell her that it was a metastatic melanoma, which obviously killed him. So I didn't tell her that and I kept that to myself. And when I think back now, it's quite a burden. So as I say, Dan was back at camp, Sam was at Norwegian American Hospital and Sam would come whenever he could and he and I would sit by my father's side on the bed there and be there with him. And it got to a point where at one point my father would almost always say, just repeat all the time, “Ikh vil nor eyn zakh” [I want only one thing]. Which I feel now he wanted me to marry Sam. So there

was Sam. He was on my doorstep. And Dan was in Texas, in San Antonio, Texas, and he would write me every day and call me every Sunday morning. So both young men were very much in love with me and I had to make a decision as to whom to marry because Sam promised me the world and Dan wrote me every day and called me every Sunday. And so when he heard about my father, he actually went—almost could have gone AWOL. He just picked up and left the camp and flew to Chicago just to be with me for a couple of days. I don't think he really got that much permission. He took a big chance doing that. And I remember his coming in through one door and Sam left through the rear door. And so he was there for a couple of days and then went back to camp. And there I was with a ring and Sam was on my doorstep every day. Every time he got away from the hospital, he was there and he was very supportive. So I had to make up my mind. Who am I going to marry? And finally Sam said, “I'll become a dermatologist. I won't have any house calls. I'll do anything.” So I made up my mind that Sam was such a nice guy and we always had a lot to talk about and he really was heymish and down to earth. It was interesting, we'd go say to dinner, the waiter would ask Dan Nast, “Your name?”—

[END OF CD 2]

PL: Continuing with the oral history interview of Ruth Peizer, and this is minidisc tape #3, and it's August 6th, 2001. So you were saying when you were out to dinner.

RP: Yeah, whenever we'd go out to dinner, if the maitre'd would ask what your name was, like for the reservation, Sam would always say, “Peizer.” And he was really a physician and surgeon. When I would go out with Nast, with Dan Nast, and he was an optometrist – where you know the education doesn't come near the education a physician and surgeon has – he would always say, “I'm Dr. Nast.” So he liked the title “Dr.” and he was very proud of it and I guess as an optometrist he had every right to use it but he always made sure that you knew that. And I thought about that a lot and I

thought that Sam was so down to earth and easy going. So I had to make up my mind and I decided that Sam would be the one I'd marry. And I had to send the ring back to Dan. He was quite heartbroken but that was that. And I went on to get married to Sam and that was my—a big decision. Because not only did it affect my life, it certainly affected two other people's lives and the lives of our future children. So that was my big decision as a young woman. And of course now we'll be celebrating in October our 55th wedding anniversary. But I did see Dan about 20 years ago. I went back to Chicago to visit some old friends and I stayed with a girlfriend of mine who is married and she had her home in the North End, and I thought, “You know, after all these years, I was married for a long time and had three children and was very stable and lived in this house.” And as Sam was driving me to the airport I said, “Oh my God, I forgot my glasses.” So he said, “Well there's an optometrist in Chicago that you can always call on.” So I thought, “You know, I just might do that.” So when I was staying with my friend, whose name was Ravel, I decided to call Dan Nast at his office. And this was many years later. I already had three children. I forget what—well, no, my daughter was already a teenager and so they were close to teenage. And Alan certainly was. So I called him up. It took a lot of guts. And I called the number. I looked him up in the telephone book and he answered the phone and he said, “Dr. Nast speaking.” And I said, “Dr. Nast, this is Ruth Emmerman Peizer.” And for a few minutes, I thought the man had dropped dead or worse than that he didn't remember me anymore. [laughter] So after this poor chap came to, he said, “Ruth? What are you doing in Chicago?” And I said, “Well, I came back here to visit some of my old friends and you're one of them.” And I can't remember what day it was, and I said, “And I thought maybe on Wednesday you might take off and we might have lunch together.” So he said, “Well, let me talk to my wife first and perhaps we can all have lunch together.” I said, “That would be lovely. I'd love to meet your wife.” Well, he called and we arranged to have lunch the next day. Well, the next day, I must tell you, my friend went out someplace. She had to go someplace. But I got dressed like you wouldn't believe. I was quite thin at that time, and I wore something that was very, very becoming.

And I must say I looked pretty good. And I thought, ”Gee, I wonder what he looks like. I hope that he doesn't look that great.” But when I saw this Lincoln Continental drive up, and he came to the door, and he was just as good-looking and sophisticated-looking and charming as ever. I thought, “Darn.” [laughter] But you know, little greying at the temple. Very nice looking. And we met and we went into the car together. He said, “Where would you like to go for lunch?” And he came, incidentally, alone ¬– did not have his wife with him. So I said, “Well I don't know. I've been out of this city for so long that I wouldn't know where to suggest. You just tell me where we should go.” So we went. He said, “Well, let's go to this particular”—and he named the restaurant. But I knew from earlier in the morning that my host and hostess were going to take me there for dinner that night. [laughter] But I didn't say anything. So we went to this place. We had a very nice lunch. I brought pictures of my family and my husband, and I showed him pictures of Sam and the children. He did not show me a picture of his wife. He did tell me about his two children. One is a son and one was a daughter. And I believe the son had a learning disability. And that was another reason that I thought of [when I had to choose], because he had a brother who had a learning disability and was not quite all together. He had a brother and a sister, and he was the youngest and he was charming and he was very debonair. So I showed him my family. I told him that Seattle is a lovely place and that I was happy there. And we had lunch. That took about two hours. And we talked about his two kids, and I think his wife was in the travel agency business. And then after a couple of hours, he brought me back to where I was staying and we said goodbye and we finished by simply saying, “Well, you know, Dan, society frowns on having two husbands, so I had to make a choice.” And that was that. He went his way and I went back to where I was staying. And I must say it was quite an experience. And of course, I have not seen or heard from him again although I did hear about him. His first wife, unfortunately, had cancer and I think she had an amputation of a leg and then later she died, because we had a mutual friend and I heard this through a letter. And before she died, she made him promise that he would marry her best friend—

PL: I want to get back to you.

RP: —which he did. So that was the end of Dan Nast.

PL: That's an amazing story. I want to get back to you, however. Tell me what happened leading up to your wedding and what your wedding was like.

RP: It was nothing like what the girls are having these days. Nothing. My father was dead. My mother was still in bereavement. He died in 1944, December, just a few days before his birthday. And it was a very cold, cold wintry day when we buried him. And I was married two years later to Sam of course. And my mother said, “Well, since your father is dead, you should have a very simple wedding.” So I did. I had a very simple wedding. I did not have a wedding gown. My dress was an off-white sort of a champagne with some beads on top. I still have it hanging in the basement somewhere. And I made my own little headgear which had a little veil that matched the champagne-colored dress. And it was very simple and we had it at the Sheraton Plaza in a room there at the hotel. And I arranged it all because my mother was still grieving over my dad's death which was two years before that. My husband's parents—his father, I guess, didn't feel that he had the time to come so only his mother came.

PL: What does that mean, Ruth?

RP: [whispered] I means she was a self-centered woman.

PL: But the father didn't come.

RP: Well he had a business and I guess, I don't know. They're weird people. So she came alone. And I must also say that Sam's relative, Freddy Myers and her husband Julius Myers, they were on their way to New York so they did stop in Chicago, and they did come. And as a matter of fact, they gave me a set of aluminum cookware, and I still use the Dutch oven to make chicken soup and to make teyglekh. Two or three times I

made teyglekh. But they came and I'm still in touch with Freddy Myers who now lives at the Summit. She just turned 91.

PL: Who married you?

RP: A rabbi by the name of Abramowitz. And what happened that night was, oh my word—oh, my life is full of—Moshe Kahn, who you have there, that was my mother's uncle, my grandmother's brother, and he was going to pick up the rabbi from where the rabbi was staying. And he was going to bring him to marry us. In the meantime, they had an accident on the way. Nobody was really hurt but it obviously delayed the ceremony. So we dealt with that and, as I say, I had the simple wedding where I wore this very simple dress and I was—[phone ringing; break in tape]. Who walked me? Who escorted me to the chuppah? I know this is not according to Emily Post but since I did not have my father there and I don't have any brothers, I insisted that I have the two people who meant the most to me: my mother and my grandmother. So they were the ones who escorted me to the chuppah. I didn't have any bridesmaids. I didn't have all of the frills that most girls have today. And as far as my husband's mother was concerned—I'm trying to think who walked her. I think she walked alone. And I want to mention that the day before she had come with only a black dress. So the day before my wedding, I had to go shopping with her to find a dress that would be more suitable. And I must have spent all afternoon shopping just exhausted because she didn't like this and she didn't like that and she wanted—anyway, so I went shopping for a dress for her and that's how we married. I was escorted by my mom and my grandmother and I don't know who escorted—she just walked alone with her son.

PL: Upon reflection, did you feel a sense of disappointment that you didn't have a more joyous, frivolous, large white wedding gowned wedding?

RP: Of course, of course. I would have wanted that. But my mother felt that since my father wasn't there, it shouldn't be that joyous. So we had a very simple wedding

ceremony with a beautiful chuppah, and in the adjoining room we had a reception where my husband's best—well, one of his friends from medical school was apparently his best man. But it was a very simple, simple wedding, and we had something there. Remember we had a very nice wedding cake and it was a very simple reception with probably about maybe 75 people, 75 or 80 of our friends. And that was it.

PL: Was it a kosher wedding?

RP: Well, it was just a sweet table kind of thing.

PL: What does that mean?

RP: Well it means just cake and cookies and coffee and tea. And I think there must have been some wine. And as I say, when I say simple I mean simple.

PL: Did you have a honeymoon?

RP: Yes, we did have a honeymoon. We stayed overnight at one of the hotels. You know, this was during the war so all the hotels were filled and it was pretty hard to get a hotel room. So we stayed, I think, at—I forget the name of it now. But we spent the night there. Then we drove to—we had a car, a used car. I think one of my husband's aunts gave it to him because that was a car that belonged to one of his favorite uncles who had been killed in the war. And so she let him have this car. We drove that car on our honeymoon but first we stopped to see my mom and my grandmother and my husband's mother who was staying with my mother, who had put out the red carpet for her. By the way I did my own packing for my honeymoon. Everybody else was busy talking and my mother was busy entertaining her so-called makheteneste [Sam's mother]. So I was busy doing my own thing. I remember one of my girlfriends from Los Angeles [Eunice] called me to wish me well. And yes, so we took off on our honeymoon and we drove from Chicago to a place called Edgewater, Mississippi. [phone ringing; break in tape]

PL: Edgewater, Mississippi.

RP: Edgewater, Mississippi.

PL: Why there?

RP: The reason we went to Edgewater, Mississippi? Because it was down South and we really wanted to go to Florida, but my husband was working for Dr. Rundstrom.

PL: Can you spell that?

RP: Rundstrom? R-U-N-D-S-T-R-O-M. And Dr. Rundstrom said, “No, Dr. Peizer, you can't get away for two weeks for a honeymoon. You'll take ten days and that should be it.” And my husband obviously didn't want to lose his job, just getting married, so he did what his boss told him. So we drove to Edgewater, Mississippi, which was closer to Chicago, and didn't get to Florida. And it was a lovely place. Very nice. A very nice hotel and had a nice pool and it was right on the Gulf there. But what was very interesting was just before [our wedding] my husband had an impacted wisdom tooth, and his good friend Bernie Aarons, who is no more, he was the one who gave him a shot of penicillin because he had this infected wisdom tooth. Well, driving it took about, I don't know, two nights and two days to get to Edgewater. From driving—and you know you get a shot in the tush. So when we got to the Edgewater Gulf Hotel there's my new husband in his white pajamas lying in his bed – because there were twin beds – lying in his bed and he had an infection where the shot was given. And I will never forget him lying on his tummy, his face flushed and he said, “Nobody would ever believe this came from an infected wisdom tooth.” [laughter] So there he was.

PL: So what did you do in Edgewater, Mississippi?

RP: Well in Edgewater, Mississippi, we swam in the pool. And we were only there a few days. And then we spent a few days at Edgewater, Mississippi, which was very nice. It

was a nice hotel, had a nice pool and we had our dinners and breakfast there. And then we drove to New Orleans which was not far away. We drove to New Orleans, and I must say that we had a very bad experience there. My mother had given us some money for our wedding and it wasn't much, maybe $300 or $400, and we had that as our wedding gift from her. So we were young and naïve and we stopped on the road, and there was some sort of a zoo of some kind. So we went in there to check that out. And by the way, that was the first time that I experienced drinking fountains that were only for Blacks and for Whites. I saw what the South was like at that time. And we stopped [to see the zoo]. But as I say, we were young and naïve and didn't realize that this had something to do with gambling. And he said, “Well you know, if you try this, you try this, you'll win so much money.” So we tried that and we won some money. And he said, “Now you see? If you try more, you'll win more.” And the result was that we lost the $300.

PL: I'm not clear where it is that you are.

RP: We are on our way from Edgewater Gulf on our way to—this was in Biloxi—on our way to New Orleans.

PL: Was it a casino? Was it a—

RP: It wasn't a casino. It was just a roadside kind of thing. And it was great for suckers like two young people who didn't know from zoo, literally. And so we lost the $300 and I have never gambled again. We did have a funny experience in Las Vegas with our children but that's another story. So we went onto New Orleans and we ate at the famous Antoines and it was such a thrill to eat some kind of fish in paper, whatever, parchment. And you know, I was a fairly young woman. I was about 22 I guess. And so we spent some time in New Orleans, and then we drove back to Chicago because my husband had to be back to work at Dr. Rundstrom's office.

PL: When did you get pregnant?

RP: Oh, I didn't get pregnant for a while. Why? Because I said, he always wanted to come back to Seattle. And I said, “I don't want to shlep a baby all the way from Chicago to Seattle.” So I worked. I continued to work in my office on Michigan Avenue in Chicago, which was a very prestigious building—a very prestigious organization even though they never hired Jews, I was the first Jew that they hired because I was supposed to be so smart because they said I had a Yiddishe kop [Jewish head/mind]. And so I didn't want to shlep a baby from Chicago to Seattle. So, well, we did decide to come to Seattle, which meant leaving my widowed mother.

PL: When was that?

RP: We were married in October of ‘46, and this was I think August or September of ‘49. So I had worked all those years in Chicago getting up early in the morning and trudging to the bus, which was a good 5, 6 blocks away. And believe me, walking in the snow and the sleet was no fun. But I would do that every morning—walk to the bus and get on the bus and go to my office and come back and put together a tremendous dinner. How I did it I'll never know. But I felt that in order to have a decent dinner, you have to have an appetizer and a salad and a main course and side dishes. And then my husband would take off for his evening hours because he had his own private office in a place near Chicago, which was called Austin. It was in Chicago, where he had office hours from 7:00 to 9:00. Because in those years, in Chicago, if you really wanted to make a living, you did have to have office hours in the evening. So that was another reason, my husband said, “Oh, if we come to Seattle, I won't have any evening hours. I'll just work during the day.”

PL: Was it unusual to have a two-working family, a two-income household?

RP: In those days?

PL: For a woman to keep working after a marriage?

RP: Well I sure did.

PL: Was it necessary or did you do it for your own sustenance?

RP: Oh no, it was necessary. I mean I had the job when I graduated from college. So I had the job then. And when I got married I just continued on, I didn't have any children, so I continued on working at the same place. And yes, the money came in handy. I think it was all of $40 a week.

PL: Was that that you made a conscious decision, you and your husband, to hold off having children. Did you do that through abstinence, did you do that through birth control, how did you make that decision and take it into your own hands?

RP: Well we did it through birth control.

PL: What kind of birth control did you use?

RP: Condoms.

PL: Were there other—

RP: I've never used any other birth control.

PL: Is that right? Why not? What was available?

RP: Well I don't think the pill was available. Frankly, I didn't want to mess around with it. I said use your condom and that will be fine with me. So we just didn't have any children. Because it was—I definitely didn't want to be burdened with having to shlep a baby, which was rather ironic because ultimately I had to do that on the way back.

PL: So tell me what led up to that.

RP: So we didn't have any children until we came to Seattle and it was very, very traumatic for me to leave my mother. Because she was a widow and I was her only child. And it was tough. And when I think of what—well anyway, there's no sense comparing.

But I left my mother and it was very hard but I went with my husband because you know that thing about “Where thou goest I goeth” and all that. So I left her and my grandmother.

PL: Did you feel any eagerness or desire to go to Seattle? Did he make it attractive to you?

RP: Well the only thing he said is, “Look, we're going to have a wonderful life there. I will not have evening hours there. Life in Seattle is easier than Chicago,” because at that time it was a bit of a rat race, and it still is. According to Vadim last night. He said, “You know, I'm here in Seattle, people walk slower, people take time to say hello, people are so friendly. In Chicago, you're constantly going. You're constantly running.” He said, “I like the way people drive here,” because you see he's lived here and he now lives there. And he says people even walk slower here. So Sam said, “I won't have evening hours. Life will be easier. It will be easier for me.” And I thought, “Well, if it's going to be easier for him it will be easier for me too.” So that's what made up my mind to go.

PL: Where did you settle in Seattle?

RP: In West Seattle. We settled, first we stayed with his folks until we found a place of our own. [break in tape]

PL: So you were telling me a little bit off-tape about your relationship with the makhetonim [in-laws] out here. Can you give me a sense of what happened? You don't know anyone out here when you arrived in Seattle.

RP: We arrived here in Seattle in 1949. We obviously had no place to live. So we stayed with my in-laws for about a week or two. We received a very cool welcome. When I think of opening my home and my hearts to my daughters-in-law now, I certainly didn't have that experience. So Sam and I were pretty much on our own. We went out looking for a place to live and a place to practice medicine. We drove in one direction. We drove in

another. And finally I said to Sam, “You know, you always talk about a place called West Seattle where Dr. Jacobs practiced. Why don't we drive there and see what that's like.” So we drove over to West Seattle and we sort of drove around, reviewed the situation and we noticed that there were about 16 family physicians practicing in West Seattle. And Sam said, “Well there are already 15 or 16 – or 16 family physicians.” And I said, “Well it looks like a nice area, and if 16 family physicians can make a living, 17 family physicians can make a living.” So that's when we rented our first office on California and Alaska—

PL: Can you describe—

RP: —which was upstairs on the second floor.

PL: Can you describe what Seattle in general and West Seattle specifically were like back then?

RP: Oh yes. Seattle was a very provincial town. Here was a girl coming from a big city like Chicago, where I had attended concerts and ballets and the Yiddish theatre and Yiddish schools. And there was so much Yiddish in my past and there was nothing of that kind here. There wasn't even a decent restaurant. Not that we had the money to go to one but at that time Seattle had these liquor laws where liquor was not served on the premises and if you did want liquor you had to bring your own bottle. So it was “bring your own bottle” to many of these places. If you were going to, say, any kind of a family affair or any kind of an affair. If there was liquor at all, you would have to bring it yourself. So no liquor was served on the premises. So there were very few restaurants. And it seemed like such a provincial town to me. It seemed so small. Sure it was pretty. It had lovely scenery and of course I had to get used to all the hills because Chicago was so flat. So it was a provincial city. There was nothing really very interesting here. We did manage to rent an office for his practice and we also rented a one bedroom apartment. It was sort of a duplex kind of thing, which was just a few blocks from his practice. And I

always felt that it would be nice for my husband to be close to his work.

PL: What about your aspirations at this time for yourself?

RP: Oh, it all had to do with my husband and his practice. My aspirations, I gave up my job in Chicago where I had a very interesting job, and I had a beautiful send off by my boss and by the people I worked with. They took me to the Pump Room and gave me some lovely gifts and were sorry to see me leave. And to this day, I still correspond with. Well, I did correspond with two of the people there. One has passed away. And I still correspond with my good Greek Orthodox friend, Angie, who lives in Covina, California. So I left all that behind. And the most important and traumatic experience was leaving my mother behind and my grandmother.

PL: Did they ever come out and visit you?

RP: Oh, yes. They came out the first year that we were here. So we rented this duplex which was one bedroom, a tiny, tiny kitchen, and a living room and a bathroom of course. That was just about five minutes from my husband's office, and that's where he started his practice. The West Seattle Hospital was right across the street from his office. I remember my mother coming out to visit. She actually scrubbed his office floor before he opened. And she said, “And you should open your office on a Tuesday because dinstik iz a mazeldiker tog” – “Tuesday is a lucky day.” Something in Judaism that says Tuesday is a lucky day and she felt that way so we opened our office on Tuesday. But before that, my mom who was fairly young then, she came and she scrubbed his floor and Sam still remembers that. And I was his receptionist.

PL: So you worked—when you say “our office,” you really mean our office.

RP: Oh yes, it was definitely our office. I got up and went to work with him and I was his receptionist and I sat in his small reception room where there were probably, oh, maybe four or five chairs. And I had my desk there. And I would lead the patients in to see him,

into his two examining rooms. These people did not know that I was his wife and so many of the patients would come out and say, “Oh, that doctor is so sweet. If he gave me sugar pills, I'd feel better.” So I was very proud that this doctor was my husband.

PL: Why didn't you tell people that you were his wife?

RP: Well I don't know whether he wanted that. He wanted them to feel that I was a paid employee, and I think later on they did know, some of the patients, the regular patients, knew that I was his wife. But this was an office that was upstairs. [phone ringing; break in tape]

PL: So what would you say—you described the roles that you shared between you and your husband, both at work and at home.

RP: Okay. I worked in his office and he was usually through at around 6:00 or 6:30 and in this particular building they also had some residents living there. And I became pregnant. I worked there until—well we came in ‘49 and my first child was born in July of ‘51. So I worked all that time until I was in my ninth month of pregnancy and couldn't fit behind the desk anymore. Even though I carried very small, it was time to retire. But our relationship was wonderful because we never argued. We worked very well together. I would only say to him, “You're taking a little more time than you should with your patients because there are a lot of people waiting out here for you.” So I'd go in and knock on the door and say, “You've got lots of patients out in the waiting room, you'd better hurry it up.” So that's the only thing we had to do there. And then I remember when I got pregnant, I had a very nice pregnancy but I couldn't stand the smells. [phone ringing; break in tape] Yeah, so I'm pregnant now and it's finally—I'm in my ninth month and that it was time to quit and [Sam] hired another receptionist. We had, as I say, this small apartment and I gave birth to my first child on July 13, 1951, and that happens to be Alan who is now an attorney.

PL: How was your first child birthing experience? Was it a difficult birth? Was it an easy birth?

RP: No. It was kind of an interesting thing. It was not an easy one. Dr. Charley Fine was my obstetrician.

PL: Can you spell his last name?

RP: F-I-N-E. He was at that time the leading OB-person in town. He was Jewish. And it seemed like all the Jewish women were going to Dr. Charles Fine. He was a very nice man, may he rest in peace. But when I heard—when I was in my eighth month, I was sitting in his office, and I heard him say on the telephone, "Yes, tell her I'll deliver her baby at 5:00 this afternoon." So after I heard that, when I went in to see him I said, “I didn't realize that you can make an appointment to have a child, a baby. How do you arrange that?” He said, Well, I do a lot of”—oh, what do you call that again [inductions]? He said, “I do a lot of my deliveries between 5:00 and 6:00.” I just had a senior moment. He said, “I do a lot of inductions. I induce a lot of my patients.” And I didn't know too much about that. And I said—so after I was through with my visit I went downstairs where Sam was waiting for me and I said, “You know Dr. Fine induces a lot of his patients.” And he said, “Oh really? Hmm.” And he wasn't too happy about that. And then in my future visits with him, he said, “Oh and Ruth, you're very small and you are going to have a big baby.” So that kind of scared me a little bit. “You're going to have a really big baby and you're very small.” So when the time came for delivery, it happened to be a very, very hot day in July. My mother came out about a week before that from Chicago to be with me. Because really, I had nobody here to give me a helping hand. And I went to the hospital. Both my mother and Sam drove me to the hospital and Dr. Fine was there, and this was sort of late at night. And he said, “Oh, it looks like you're going to stay here. I'm going to induce you. You'll have your baby tonight.” So I stuck my head out the door, with the white thing around me, and I said, “It looks like I'm going to stay here tonight.” And my

mother—he drove my mother home and Sam came back to be with me in the delivery room and Dr. Fine delivered my baby who weighed in at six pounds, seven ounces—the smallest baby of the three. However, bless his heart, he did a real good hem-stitching job on me. And I couldn't sit for months. I was sitting on a donut. You know those rubber donuts? I was so uncomfortable, very uncomfortable. And he kept me in Doctor's Hospital for a whole week. In those days, [they] kept me for a whole week. Now they send you home as soon as you give birth or close to that. I was completely knocked out. I didn't know, oyf velkhe velt ikh bin – I didn't know what was happening. I woke up and they brought the baby to me and next to me was another woman who had also given birth and she was already sitting up and writing out announcements and I was flat out. I was like in another world with all the anesthesia that they had given me and the stitches were awful and I wasn't a very happy camper. And by the way, he said that I had lost a lot of blood. They were ready to give me a—

PL: Transfusion?

RP: —transfusion. And it was very uncomfortable experience. I was there for a good week. The bris was held in the hospital room. And my husband did not want to wake his mother and father during the middle of the night to tell them of this wonderful thing that happened because Alan was born at 3:56 in the morning. So he waited until a logical hour and called them around 8:00 or 9:00. And that was that. And a week later, we had the bris for him in the hospital, and I was very weak and they wheeled me out in a wheelchair in the solarium and my mother had made her famous teyglekh and we had some close friends, a few people that I knew here. And that was my son's bris.

PL: Was there an opportunity or a thought about having a bris in a shul? Were you affiliated in any way at that point?

RP: We were affiliated shortly after that, I think, with Herzl.

PL: Was it common practice to have the bris in a hospital?

RP: Well, yes. Some people had it in the hospital. Others had it at home. But I was very weak. I was so weak sometimes that I couldn't even hold the pencil to order what I wanted to eat on the menu. It was—

PL: What do you think happened to you, Ruth?

RP: Well first of all I think that Dr. Fine put in more stitches than I frankly needed. But he said, “You'll thank me someday.” I told him, “I'm very uncomfortable. I'm in great pain.” My husband was there by the way and he said that he did a very fine hem-stitching job. I must have had 50 stitches. It was crazy. So anyway, as I said, I was there for a whole week and I was very weak and I came home not feeling all that terrific However, I was able to get into my clothes immediately. My regular clothes. I had gained very little weight and I was able just about two or three weeks after I gave birth to go to the Aqua Follies.

PL: What were the Aqua Follies?

RP: Oh, the Aqua Follies were wonderful. They were held at Greenlake and it was a water ballet with music and comedians and clowns jumping in the water. But it was mostly a water ballet with these beautiful swimmers to beautiful music. And as a matter of fact they had it I think a couple of years ago again. They used to have it every year at the Greenlake. So I hired a babysitter for 75 cents an hour from a very fine agency and left her with my three-week old baby and I got dressed in my regular clothes and I fit into them perfectly and by then I was myself again. And we went to the Aqua Follies. And then of course we came back and I took on the role of motherhood.

PL: Well, speaking of motherhood, what were your expectations and attitudes about motherhood?

RP: Oh, I loved the idea. I really did. And I must say that as I look back upon those experiences, having my three children, it was probably the nicest years of my life. As a matter of fact, I kept somewhat of a – not a diary but some kind of a journal where I would jot down some of the kids' clever sayings or some of my impressions, some of my feelings – and it wasn't long ago that I read some of them to my adult daughter. And as we read them together, she said, “Mom, you really enjoyed being a mother.” And I [said], “Yes, I did.” Because I was able to instill my philosophies, my feelings into my children and I was always there for them.

PL: What was that philosophy, Ruth? What would you say it is?

RP: Well, even to this day, Ross, my grandson, wrote me a letter from camp. And I had written him first, saying his sister had just come back and I wrote and said, “Oh, I'm sorry the weather hasn't been as nice as it was for Larissa” because it started out a little cooler a couple of weeks ago. I said, “I hope the weather warms up for you while you're at camp” because he's at Camp Solomon Schechter. And he wrote me back saying – a lovely letter – “Dear Grandma and Grandpa, I was sorry I missed your birthday barbeque”—because Alan and his wife had a barbeque for us on a Friday night at his home. And he said, “I'm sorry, and as far as the weather is concerned, weather really doesn't matter as long as you're with your old friends and you're having fun with them.” And I wrote back immediately and said, “You're so right. First of all, thank you for your warm letter, Ross. And yes, Ross, you are so right. Weather really doesn't matter. It's the people in your life that makes you happy. That's why I am so happy when I see you.” So you see, I'm interjecting my thoughts, my philosophy, that I do feel it's the people in your life that really matter.

PL: So what kind of people did you surround yourself with in early motherhood?

RP: Oh, very nice people. We lived in Fauntlee Hills. We first had that apartment, as I told you, that little duplex, when he opened his office. And then when Alan, I think—gee, I

can't remember the exact year but we were then looking for a house to buy because we were only renting then. And we were looking for a house to buy and we looked at something that was near Lincoln Park but then I said, “No, there's too much traffic here. I don't think we should buy here.” And we finally decided to buy one of the homes in Fauntlee Hills which was just being built up and developed. And it was a Mr. Webb, a Swede, who was putting up these very well-built brick houses but it was in the process of being built and so we were able to buy a house there that was not quite completed yet. So I had my choice of color and wallpaper and whatever and fixtures. And so it was kind of a nice experience to be in the creative part of it. And that was fun. I enjoyed that. And that was when Alan was a little baby.

PL: When did you have your second child?

RP: But that was then, in Fauntlee Hills. Again, we bought that house for $18,500. I can't believe it. But we didn't have any landscaping. And so it was Alan, as he grew up, who knew every botanical name of every flower. Because let's face it. In Chicago, I didn't know from gardening. And I became a great gardener here in Seattle and I loved it and so my next door neighbor who was much older taught me all the names of all these plants and shrubs and we were able to do our own landscaping. And so Alan, as he was growing up, and he was only like three years old, knew every botanical name of every plant. It was really quite interesting. But that was a wonderful time because we all kind of bought the homes at the same time. We were all putting in our yards at the same time. And our families were growing at the same time. And of course the school was right down the hill so there was no busing. There was—the children came home for lunch every day. And opening day of school, everybody was dressed up in their finest clothes and we were all out there taking pictures. And it was just a fun time. It was a very nice neighborhood where you didn't have to close your doors, the children all played together and nobody looked into what you were cooking that day but we all respected our privacy yet we were all very good neighbors. And we were the only Jewish family on the block

until later when another Jewish family moved in.

PL: Did that make any difference?

RP: No, it was very nice to have another Jewish family there called the Birulins.

PL: Can you spell their name?

RP: B-I-R-U-L-I-N. And their son and their daughter became very good friends of our youngest son and our daughter.

PL: How would you say that you and Sam shared child rearing roles and household duties and things like that?

RP: Oh, very interesting. Sam was very busy. He was one of the busiest physicians in this area. He and two others. There were many others but he and two others were the busiest physicians in West Seattle. They were very popular and he was very well liked and so he had a very nice practice. So he did his work in his office and he came home quite late, like 7:30, 8:00 for dinner. The children were my sole responsibility. So I was the one in charge of everything that had to do with the children. The only time that Sam participated – and I must give him credit for that – is that he took care of the night feedings when the babies got up at night. Why did he do that? Because he's such a sweet guy and he said,

“I have been trained in my internship and getting up in the middle of the night to deliver babies that I can do it easily and I can fall asleep as soon as I hit the bed again,” whereas once I was up, I was up for the night. So he did me this big favor and I will always be grateful for that. That whenever the children needed a night feeding, he got up to do it. But that was the only time that he had anything to do with the children.

PL: What about discipline?

RP: I was the disciplinarian. However, when the kids got older, especially with his oldest son, Alan, when he became a teenager and he had his own mind and his own way of doing things, Sam seemed to think that because he was the father, Alan had to do it his way. And I many times would take him on the side and say, “Alan has a perfect right to do it his way and don't impose yourself on him.” He'd say, “Well I'm his father, I know better.” “No, you don't. He knows what he knows and you can guide him but please don't impose your thoughts and your feelings and your whatever on him.” And that's where we disagreed.

PL: I was going to ask if there were any other major disagreements or contrasts in your childrearing.

RP: No. Other than that, he was more than happy to have me take over the household responsibilities, the children. Now I see fathers reading to them, raising them, whatever. I had my system of feeding them, of bathing them, of reading to them, and finally singing to them, “Rozhinkes mit Mandlen” [Yiddish song, “Raisins and Almonds”] which meant lights out. That was a whole system of mine and all he did was sit in the chair and read his paper.

PL: So can you describe a typical day in the Peizer household with family?

RP: Well, with all the three children now?

PL: Yes. And bring us up to date with when your other 2 children were born.

RP: Okay. Well Alan was born on July 13, 1951. Then my husband was called into the Korean service, the Korean conflict.

PL: What year is this?

RP: Oh, and that was a very difficult time in my life.

PL: Why so Ruth?

RP: Why? Because you see he was not involved in the Second World War because he was allowed to finish medical school. His time came when the Korean conflict came on. And that's when we were here in a small apartment in Seattle and Alan was only not quite a year old. So if he was born in ‘51, this was in ’52. My husband got a notice saying, “Dr. Peizer, you are now requested to join the Army.” So he was captain in the medical corps. and what I had to do then was pack up all of our belongings—and it was a very difficult time because I had nobody here in Seattle with whom I could stay or get any support. My husband was being taken away and sent overseas. My only alternative was to return to Chicago with my one-year-old child.

PL: Had you spoken to your in-laws about it? Or at that point there was a distant relationship.

RP: It was a very distant relationship. Very distant.

PL: Were they unhappy about your leaving for Chicago?

RP: They had nothing to do with us.

PL: So you went to Chicago.

RP: Yes. They had nothing to do with us. As I said, we had a very cool reception to put it mildly. So it was Mrs. Esther Katzman, allev a sholem [rest in peace], who kind of took to us. She also lived in West Seattle. And knowing that I needed help, we had to get out of our apartment, much of our stuff was being stored. So she came and she took Alan out of my way and she took him for a walk somewhere in a stroller and cleaned my refrigerator because I had to leave a clean refrigerator when we left. And yes, and we had to come to Chicago at that time. However—that's right. And so my husband was called into the service and he said to me, “You know Ruth, being that I'm older, I've been practicing,

they won't—they'll send me in the back someplace, in the rear.” Because he was being sent to Japan. So we went to Chicago and I remember staying with my mom and Alan was in his crib there. We rented a crib. We put him in the crib and that night Sam had to report to duty. And it was kind of a cold day and in the middle of the night, Alan stood up [in his crib] as a baby. And here we were in the same bedroom together. And he stood up as if to say goodbye to his Daddy. It was almost eerie. And so my uncle Moshe Kahn, my mother's uncle, Moshe Kahn, who was also living with us because my dad had passed away and he needed a home and my mother needed to have somebody there as well. They had two bedrooms and she was an only child and she had never worked before but now she had to go to work. And he helped with some of the expenses. And he needed a home too. So he drove us to where Sam was being picked up. But that was such a miserable night and it was beginning to snow and whatever. So we had to come back [to the apartment] and then go back again. And I think at that time he took a cab to go back because it was the middle of the night. But it was at that time that Alan stood up as a one-year-old child, out of the clear, just to look at his Daddy and say goodbye. So Sam took off to be flown out to San Francisco and from there to Tokyo. And he said to me, “Don't worry. I'll probably get stationed in Tokyo someplace or even if it's Korea I'll be in the rear somewhere.” Well lo and behold, he writes me a letter and it says, “I'm a Battalion Aid surgeon up in the front lines.” Right near the front lines. And he was the first one to see these battered, horrible casualties. So he was right there in the Battalion Aid Station where these poor kids, and they were young kids who were brought to him first to take care of them. And he would treat them accordingly. And those that were really in bad shape who needed to be hospitalized were sent to the rear. So it was a matter of counting points. If you were up at the front lines, you were getting four points a month, which meant that you'd come home sooner. But if you were sent further to the rear, you were getting three and two points, which meant you'd come home later. So in a way, it was good and bad. You had the danger of being up at the front lines but you were getting more points. However, after a certain number of months at the front lines, he was moved

back to the rear where he was a regimental surgeon. And he was the whole time a captain in the medical corps.

PL: How long was he in Korea?

RP: Thirteen months.

PL: How did you deal?

RP: Oh, it was very difficult. Very difficult. However, there he made friends with a very fine surgeon. Is there a dish there?

PL: Oh, I'm fine.

RP: There's a dish there. He made friends with – and I do want his name mentioned – Dr. Weldon Thyberg.

PL: Can you spell that?

RP: T-H-Y-B-E-R-G. A very, very fine surgeon, much younger than my husband. And they became very good friends. To this day, we are friends with his family. Unfortunately he has passed away. But to this day, his wife and his children are my friends, are our friends. And we see each other—as a matter of fact, his oldest son now is a, well, he's a minister. He's not called a minister, I guess, but he's here in Olympia, has a congregation there. But at any rate, these Thybergs were very good friends and whenever we visited San Francisco we stayed with them. Whenever they visited Seattle, they stayed with us. So he met Dr. Thyberg in Korea. He was there for 13 months and then he was returned to the States and finished off his tour of duty along with Weldon Thyberg, Dr. Thyberg, they were both finishing their tour of duty here at Fort Louis. So that's where we met the families. When I went to pick up my husband, who was returning from Korea, he wore high boots and all dressed up in his uniform. And Alan, who was just a little baby, thought

that the mailbox was Daddy because he always saw me throwing letters in the mailbox. So every time he would walk by a mailbox, he'd say, “Daddy.” Well he came with me to pick up Sam at the airport in Chicago and he was afraid of him because there he was with his boots, with his uniform, and he looked so, you know, strange to him that he kind of cowered away from him a little bit. He got used to him after that and it was very nice to have him come home from Korea in one piece.

PL: Was there any thought given the fact that you had returned to your mother—what were your thoughts about returning to Seattle?

RP: Oh, you mean I was in Chicago.

PL: After the war.

RP: Well, while my husband was in Korea—you know, being in Chicago on the third floor in an apartment was very hot. And I had already gotten used to wonderful Seattle. So what I did was I rented a cottage in South Haven, Michigan, where a lot of Jews would go to just relax and also that was not far from the camp that I went to when I was a teenager, which was called Mount Pleasant. So I rented this cottage for my mother and my grandmother who stayed with me and I drove the car with my son in there and my mother and my grandmother went with their uncle. So I rented this cottage and I had my mother and my grandmother with me and my little boy, Alan, and I would get letters from my husband who was in Korea and it was then that I noticed my grandmother[’s condition]. At this time maybe they would call it Alzheimer's. Then, they called it “hardening of the arteries.” She would say to me, “Rokhele.” I say this in Yiddish, “Rokhele, du veyst—” [“you know”]? And then she'd switch and she'd say, “Mayn eynikl’s man iz vu men ken geharget vern” – translated, “My granddaughter's husband is in a place where he could get killed.” And at that point I didn't know whether to correct her or to listen. And she would repeat that quite frequently. And sometimes I'd say, “Bubbe, ikh bin dokh dayn eynikl” – “But Grandma, I am your granddaughter. You're talking about me

to me.” And then she'd say, “Oy vey, mayn kop!” and she'd be very embarrassed.

PL: [Translating] “Oh, my head.” [laughter]

RP: Yes, “mayn kop” [my head], “why am I saying this?” And then other times she'd speak very clearly. But other times she would refer to “her granddaughter's husband who was in a very dangerous area.” So I think back now to—it could have been at that point Alzheimer's but we didn't know much about it. So anyway we stayed there for the summer and came back [to Chicago]. […] So that was the summer. And then of course my husband came home and then we as I say he finished off his tour of duty in Fort Louis, which was near Olympia. And that's where we met the Thybergs, or I met his family. And at that time it was just his wife and his son Randy. And Randy is just a few years younger than my son Alan. And Alan would sometimes help feed him and there's where we became very good friends – Barbara Thyberg and Ruth Peizer. Friends till now.

PL: So tell me then—when did you decide to have a second child?

RP: Second child. Well my husband was now in Fort Louis and he was on duty quite a bit of the time. And the times that I would be able to conceive, he was always working. So fortunately we hit it off at some point and I did become pregnant with my daughter Annette. And she was born in January of 1955. So you see, he was taken—he went off to Korea in ’52 and was there for 13 months and then we finished off the tour of duty here. So finally she came on the scene on January 21st, 1955. And that was another tough delivery. A tough delivery because this time she was really induced when I don't think I was ready.

PL: How did that happen?

RP: But I've got to tell you a funny story too. My mother came from Chicago to be with me again. And I went to have my regular exam with Dr. Fine and he said to me, “Oh,

we're going to deliver you tomorrow morning." So I said, "Oh, okay." So I got up the following morning and had my little suitcase all packed, and we were living in another house then. As I'm going out the door, my mother said, "Where are you going?" I said, "I'm going to have my baby." And she was always comparing Seattle to Chicago. Because when she first came here, on one of her first trips, she said, "Seattle is so quiet." I've got to say this in Yiddish, "Men ken arumloyfn nakedik vet keyner nit zen" – "you can run around naked and nobody would see you." Because there was nobody on the street. Because in Chicago everybody's on the street. They're driving, they're walking, they're doing. So when I got up that morning with my suitcase— where's the thing? When I got up that morning with the suitcase to go out of the house, she said to me, "Where are you going?" I said, "I'm going to have my baby." She said [hitting the table for emphasis], "Men hot afile kinder anderish do in shtot Seattle" – "You even have children differently here in Seattle." [laughter] She was very funny.

PL: Well, given your first experience—

RP: So I went off to be induced by Dr. Fine.

PL: But given your first experience of being induced, didn't you think—did you think it at all odd that you were being induced again?

RP: Well, wait a minute. No, the first time, he said he does inductions. But the first time with Alan, I was ready. I came and he didn't induce me then. But he just stitched me up real good. However, I want you to know that I had second thoughts about going back to him because I didn't want that same experience. But as a doctor's wife, I didn't want to have anything reflect upon my husband because we did buy Dr. Fine a lovely gift even though he didn't charge us for the first delivery. But I was afraid to go back to him. So do you know I didn't have any prenatal care until I was like in my seventh month? Because I didn't want to get near him. And I was doing very fine. I was taking my vitamins and I had a very nice—I carried very well. But I went back to him because of professional stuff. I

went back to him because of that. I really wasn't too comfortable but I did go back. It took a lot of courage too. And with Annette he did induce me, because that's when he said, “Come tomorrow.” And I went back, went to the hospital on some morning and he induced me and it was not a pleasant labor. I mean, he broke my water bag and I was not very comfortable. But then again I was put out and the next thing I knew was Dr. Gomberg —

PL: Spell that?

RP: — Bernie Gomberg coming to me and saying, “Ruth you have a beautiful baby daughter.” And that was my Annette. And she really was beautiful. I've never seen a prettier child. She was very, very pretty. So that was nice. And I thought to myself, “Gee, I must have done something right. First a boy and then a girl and that's great.” And I was very happy with that. And my mother was here and she took care of Alan while I was giving birth to Annette and we brought the babies home, brought her home, and she was a lovely baby.

PL: What did they tell you about breastfeeding then?

RP: Oh yes, that's another thing. My husband was always for breastfeeding because he told all his OB patients that that was the best way to do it. However, it didn't appeal to me. It really didn't appeal to me. I must admit right or wrong, at that time I felt like I'd be a cow. And it just really did not appeal to me.

PL: Are you talking about body image or are you talking about—

RP: I am talking about the idea of—I just felt it was so much easier to just stick a bottle in their mouth. First of all, as a physician, we were getting cartons, crates of SMA, the most fantastic formula that was filled with vitamins and no allergy stuff. It was just a wonderful – like Similac, like SMA – was a wonderful, wonderful formula. And my son Alan thrived on it. He was doing so well. I had no problems with allergies or anything like that. And I

do want to say that I had Dr. Norman Klein to take care of Alan when he was born and I want to tell you that when Norman Klein first saw Alan after 24 hours. He was the leading pediatrician at that time. He took care of Roosevelt's grandchildren. And so we hired him to be our pediatrician. He came, took one look at Alan who was supposed to be this big, big baby, he was six pounds, seven ounces. And this is what Norman Klein said: “You know, he's probably never going to make the football team but he's the executive type.” How true it was. It was very, very true.

PL: So did you breastfeed Alan?

RP: So I did not breastfeed Alan.

PL: Not even the first day after?

RP: No. I didn't breastfeed any of my kids.

PL: And was there any compulsion on the part of the nursing staff the way they do today where they take you and they teach you?

RP: Nobody taught me anything. They simply said, “Do you want to breastfeed your baby and I said I'm really not too comfortable with it.” So they said, “Fine.” So they put a thing around my breasts to whatever. I had this wide, wide thing like this that kind of went around my back and that was that, and I never breastfed my children. Now so if that means I wasn't that great a mother, so be it. I sure made up for it though. So I didn't breastfeed Alan and I didn't breastfeed Annette. However, Annette did have a problem with rashes and stuff and so we would put her under a sunlamp and that took care of that.

PL: When was Mark born?

RP: And Mark was the easiest. He was the easiest birth. Mark was born on December 5th, 1957. And it was very interesting. I had these two beautiful children and I felt, “Well, you know, I've got my boy, I've got my girl, dayenu – enough already.” But I had this very good friend whose name was Sally Youngman and she was a very nice person, and she said to me, “Ruth you have such beautiful children, you really ought to think of having another one.” And I said, “No, I've got my boy, I've got my girl.” She said, “No, they're such lovely children, you really ought to think of having another one.” And Sam, my husband, also wanted another child.

PL: Hold onto your thought, I'm going to change tapes.

RP: Okay. Now nobody's going to call.

PL: [laughter] That's good.

[END OF CD 3]

PL: We're continuing with the oral history interview of Ruth Peizer. This is minidisc tape #4. Today's date is August 6th, 2001. So you were talking about the birth of Mark in December 1957.

RP: Yes. He was born on December 5, 1957 and we had gone grocery shopping, that is my husband and the children and my mother [who] was here. We had gone grocery shopping and I was supposed to go to some baby shower. Somebody's baby shower. And all of a sudden I felt that I needed to go to the hospital instead. So I had just had—we had dinner and, by golly, it was one of those things. No inductions. I was ready to go to the hospital like any other normal person, and we called Dr. Fine, again – he delivered all three of our children – and he came to the hospital and he said, “Oh my, you had dinner? Oh we're going to have to pump your stomach, we're going to have to do this.” I said, “Oh, I don't know.” It wasn't that bad. I went, I had a baby, it was wonderful. The easiest birth. Again, I was put out but it was the easiest birth. It was no induction. I

had stitches obviously but it was the easiest birth that I had. And I don't know, maybe that's why he's so easy to be with.

PL: Well the fact that you were put out each time—

RP: Each time, yes. In those days that's what they did.

PL: Did they even discuss with you natural childbirth?

RP: No, no, no. And each time this is the way Dr. Fine had it. He wanted his patients out.

PL: You mentioned earlier that you had a friend that helped convince you to have a third child. Can you continue with that story?

RP: Sally Youngman, yes. Well Sally Youngman's husband's name was Al Youngman and he was a gantse macher [big shot] here and he loved Yiddish and so did she. So because of my Yiddish, they sort of adopted us. Because nobody else opened up their homes to us – that is relatives – we had a lot of friends. Lillian Radinsky certainly enters into the picture.

PL: Spell her last name?

RP: R-A-D-I-N-S-K-Y. She's the one who called just now. She literally adopted me and she feels like I'm her sister and I feel the same. She was older. She was about eight or nine years older, but she just took to me. And Sally Youngman, of course, her husband was a big macher here in Seattle and he loved Yiddish and he said he was into the Yiddish theatre many years ago. But Sally Youngman was a very generous woman. Very generous and I loved her dearly. I still have the little red rocking chair that she gave Alan when he was a little baby. She was just a lovely person. She recently passed away.

PL: So coming to Seattle and having three children now, what did you and your family like to do together and what were your social circles?

RP: Well, many of our friends were also newcomers. They were imports from the East, from the Midwest because they liked Seattle, they liked practicing here. So many of our friends were also in medicine. Most of them medicine. A few dentists like Dr. Nicholas Berman. They were our first friends. Wonderful people. We just visited them at The Summit. So our friends were mostly professional people. We all had children about the same ages. We would entertain casually. As we got older and the kids got older we'd have dinner parties. I used to have some lovely dinner parties. They would have dinner parties. Our friends were the Fagans, the Fines, the Frankels, the Franklins – all these people are still our friends – Rosenbaum, Mildred and her husband. So these are all old, old friends that in times of good times and bad times we were there with them.

PL: Where did you go on your vacations or what are the things in Seattle?—

RP: What are the things with the children, you ask. We would take them to Seward Park and feed the ducks. I was very concerned that they would always hear Yiddish music. So I made it a point to sing “Rozhinkes mit Mandlen” with every child when I put them to bed. When they came home from Sunday school, I made it a point to have Yiddish music. Now it's tapes but then it was records. So I wanted very much for them to know about Yiddish music, Yiddish folksongs. I would sometimes speak to them in Yiddish although now when I think back I should have spoken more Yiddish to them. But we would take them to Seward Park and feed the ducks. We would go on—when my husband's day off was on Wednesday, we would take them for rides and we would go to various places where they could swim or picnic. Sometimes when my mother was visiting we'd all go on picnics to various places. And we'd drive around this area and there were so many nice places to go to. And that's how we would entertain our children. And when we had birthday parties for them, I would bake my own cakes for them, there was no hiring or clowns or magicians or anything like that. They'd have the neighborhood kids come in and they'd have the usual cake and ice cream or the prizes. We'd play “Pin the Tail on the Donkey.” In the other home there we'd have a basement, we'd bring them downstairs

and show them childrens' movies, “Pin the Tail on the Donkey,” play games, and send them home gezunterheyt [in good health]. Now when I see our children, my God, they have in their rooms it's Toys ‘R Us. First of all I made it a point never to buy a gun for any one of the children. So guns were a no-no. And it was mostly books, puzzles. I spent a lot of time with them. Sam was very busy so he really didn't spend as much time as he would have liked. Probably looks back now and wishes that he did. But when he took a vacation from the office, we always went with the children or we would go to various places. And we did take them as they grew older.

PL: What places? Anything that's local to this area?

RP: To this area? No, we'd go to, as I say, Seward Park, Alki. That's when they were small. Then when they got bigger, we would drive to the Thybergs and we would visit with them and we would stay with them and we'd go to the various interesting spots around Oakland and San Francisco. We took them to California, to Los Angeles a lot. And so we took them on family vacations and of course when they did get much older, in ‘68 we took them to Israel and to Europe. We took them to Hawaii. We took them to Mexico. Yes, that trip to Europe was quite a trip. So yes, we took them. And then we also took a trip East to visit my mom's cousin in Grand Rapids, Michigan. We never took them further East than Chicago and Michigan.

PL: To get back to something you said about the Yiddish and teaching and inculcating your children with Yiddish. What efforts did you make and did you and Sam discuss this and how far did you feel like you wanted them to go with Yiddish?

RP: Well, I was sorry that Yiddish was not being taught in the Hebrew school that I was taking them to.

PL: Which was where?

RP: Which was always Herzl. We were members of Herzl. We've been members there for over 50 years now. So I was sorry that they weren't being taught Yiddish but nobody was teaching them Yiddish anyplace. So at home at least I always threw in Yiddish proverbs and always had Yiddish music so our kids are very familiar with Yiddish music.

PL: Was there any point where they could speak Yiddish?

RP: Well with my mother, perhaps, a little bit. Unfortunately, they never knew my father. So they did have a very close relationship with my mother – but Alan more so, Annette a little less and of course Mark very little because he was such a baby. I did the best I could and as I look back now I almost wish that I had done more. I was so busy. I was really busy being a doctor's wife and being there for him all the time and having dinner ready for him all the time. And there were no microwaves at that time. So when he would come home late, I would call say at 6:00 in the evening and I had three children to feed. And I'd ask his nurse, “How many patients does Dr. Peizer have?” And she'll say, “Oh, he has about six or seven people left in the waiting room.” Well then I knew that we would eat alone. So I would eat with the children and then when he would come home, like around 8:00. It was in and out of the oven – to keep it warm. No microwave at that time. So that's what our daily lives were like except for Wednesdays which he took off.

PL: Did being a doctor's—

RP: And we would drive out with the children.

PL: Did being a doctor's wife and having to always live on his schedule, in a sense, was that frustrating? Did that cause tensions in your marriage?

RP: No. No. I just accepted that. It was part of my being married to a physician and a very busy physician. And how about the nights that we'd get night calls in the middle of the night and I'd wake up. But when we moved into this house, we made it a point that we had a [phone] jack in our bedroom so that when he left in the morning, I wasn't

interrupted with any calls. I would just pull the telephone.

PL: Ruth, what were—if you were to kind of gloss over but talk about – some major and significant things that happened while your children were still living with you, or in their teenage years, what were they? I know that you did mention one thing to Hilary in your pre-interview about your son's accident.

RP: Mm-hmm.

PL: I don't know if you want to talk about that or maybe there are other things that really stand out in your mind about being a mother.

RP: Well I loved being a mother. I loved my children and I did whatever I could not to spoil them. I definitely feel that today our children are getting much too many material things, perhaps not enough time.

PL: Do you see that in your grandchildren?

RP: I see that my grandchildren have a tremendous amount of toys and I think they could do very well without it. It doesn't really make them that much happier to have so many things. Of course I was always there for them. Today's children I guess in some cases they have been brought up by babysitters and daycare centers. That's not to say that I didn't have a babysitter. Sam and I would go out a lot. I mean not every day but we'd have—we'd go out to dinner, we'd call in a babysitter, we'd go to the theatre, we always went to the symphony, we always went to the opera and to the theatre. So as the kids got older, they knew that we had our lives and we had dinner parties and friends. So it's not as if I was a martyr to these kids. But when they came home from school, I was there 95% of the time.

PL: So what are some times that—

RP: It was interesting with Mark, who I always read to. And one evening I said to Mark – and he was about four years old. One evening I said to Mark, “Honey, I have a meeting to go to tonight and Daddy will read to you.” And he opened up his big brown eyes and he said, “Can Daddy read”? I'll never forget that because I was always the one reading to them. Always. And I was always the one listening to my daughter who could talk to me for hours. She may not remember it now but I have listened to her for hours. She came home from camp once and I was up until midnight listening to her mayses [stories]. My husband would say, “Where did you get the patience?” But I listened to her. And just now, he just had a birthday, and my son, my youngest son, bought him a card that said – it was a very nice card – and it said, “Dad, I always came to you and you always knew what to say.” And then when you turned the page: "Go ask your mother." He always had the right thing to tell me. And you open up the thing: “Go ask your mother.” How true that was. Because the kids always talked to me about their problems, their questions, their this, their that. They always respected their dad and he was always wonderful to them, although he felt his [first] son had to think the way he does, but I cleared him out of that one. But they always really had to do with me. Because I was always there and he was really mostly in the office.

PL: So what are some of the significant markers of your children growing up? Things either happy or sad that happened?

RP: Well, I think they had a happy childhood. They certainly came from a very nice home. Their mother was always there for them. I was always there to listen, to help, to talk to. I guess I did bake cookies even though what's her name, [Hillary] Clinton, said, “Oh you mean you just stay home and bake cookies?” Yes, I did bake some cookies for them, and I was always here for them. I also remember my daughter coming home from high school once with a couple of her friends, and some antisemitic kid said to her, “You know, Hitler was right. He should have burnt all of you.” And my daughter was just probably 13, 14 years old. She came home. She was devastated that afternoon. But I

was here. And I was here to help her. And I'll never forget that and I said, “You know Annette, there will be people out there like that.” And I tried to help her get over this hurt that she had. And I'm just wondering who would have helped her if she came home to an empty house with a key around her neck. So I really feel it's unfortunate that in today's world it almost takes two paychecks in order to pay the bills, and I understand that fully. I know that in my daughter's case, she does have to continue working. But my young daughter-in-law – the one who's married to my youngest son – has the opportunity to stay home and take care of her son even though she is a pediatric dentist. She chooses not to work.

PL: I would like to in a moment start talking about the fact that you have been very involved in the community and in civic service and in the Sisterhood and all this so that you were home but you also were very active in the community.

RP: Oh yes, oh yes. I was active in Sisterhood. One time, I'm a Hadassah lifetime member. And I was always interested in continuing my own interests. And Sisterhood was very much a part of my life.

PL: Can you talk about Sisterhood a little bit and what you did with Sisterhood?

RP: Well, I would just go to the meetings, really. I was on the Board for a while. I was Vice President of Programming. They did want me at one time to be president. That was not my goal in life. So I was active in that capacity.

PL: Are there particular events that you programmed?

RP: Oh yes. We had many, many, many rummage sales with Marian Aronson and Dorothy Becker. And I must say we used to have a ball. We were young, we were energetic, we had a wonderful time Marian Aronson and Dorothy Becker and I, we would run those rummage sales and of course there were other people helping too. And then we had donor luncheons where I presided over that and was involved with donor

luncheons, was involved with rummage sales, was involved with fundraising events. Very early in my life I was involved with going door to door here in West Seattle for Jewish Federation, soliciting funds for them. That was before they became so highfalutin. And would take Esther Katzman, this woman that I told you helped me when we were being asked to leave Seattle and go to Korea. She came and she didn't drive so I would pick her up and we would go together to some of these Jewish homes. We had a list of people to contact, so we would solicit for funds for Federation. But that was a long time ago.

PL: What was going on with Federation at that time that they needed your door-to-door solicitations?

RP: Well, you know they always need money. Right? Now they have fancier ways of doing it but this was way back when we first came here, probably in the early ‘50s when they actually sent out people in various neighborhoods if you would volunteer to do that. They'd give me a whole list of places to go and I found in West Seattle there were many intermarriages. And so it wasn't the most pleasant thing to do, you know, to go knocking on a door and saying, “We're soliciting funds for Jewish Federation, and this is Esther Katzman, I'm Ruth Peizer.” And so they'd write out a check for $10 bucks or $20 or something like that. And we would put it into the envelope and bring it to the Federation. So that was what I did early, early on. And then of course I became very involved with Sisterhood when we joined Herzl.

PL: When did you join Herzl?

RP: Oh golly. It must have been over 50 years ago.

PL: Why did you join there?

RP: Well, even though I was brought up in an Orthodox home where we observed kashrut and all, when I first came to Seattle, as I told you, it was a provincial town. And

living here in West Seattle, there was no kosher food here at that time. I mean there was none of this frozen stuff that you can pick up now. You'd have to go into the center of town. And just between you and I, I would go into some of those butcher shops with the sawdust on the floor and the chickens hanging on a hook and the smell would just get to me. And I said, “You know, I know what my level of Judaism is and my observance is, and I just cannot drive to the center of town to pick up this stuff.” And so I decided that we would have a Jewish home but not necessarily a kosher one. In other words, I felt at that time that when I put my dishes through the dishwasher, they are very clean and very sterile. And I know what kashrut is all about. I know that it's a matter of discipline and I know this. I do not have any pork products in my home. I do not have any shrimp or anything like that in my home. But that doesn't mean that I only buy kosher meat.

PL: Will you eat shrimp and things like that out of the home?

RP: Yes. If we go to a restaurant and if it's an appealing dish, we will eat out, but I don't have it at home and I have never had any pork products at home, and I wouldn't eat it out either. And my kids know that too. And so that's where I draw the line.

PL: What other ways, you mentioned to me that you were very active also in doing programmings and Jewish music programming at Herzl?

RP: Oh, well, when Rabbi Pomerantz and his wife Kay were here, I think it was in the early ‘80s, that we decided to have a cantors concert and invite all the cantors of the city to sing folksongs: Yiddish folk songs, Hebrew, and Russian folk songs and Ladino. So we invited all these cantors including Cantor Frankel. And the first concert was held at the Sephardic Bikur Cholim in 1981 or ‘82. And people were hanging from the chandeliers. There must have been over 800 people at that concert. And I chaired that. And what was interesting about that was of all people, who was in the audience? The daughter of my teacher, Pomerantz, who had died many years ago. And I couldn't believe that here was his daughter that was involved with Judaica on the East Coast, had come here to Seattle.

And I mentioned it in my remarks, my opening remarks. I welcomed her and I said, “Of all people to be in the audience tonight, it's the daughter of my teacher, Dr. Pomerantz.” So that was very nice. We had Cantor Helfman at that time was a cantor at Herzl. He had a beautiful voice and he sang Yiddish folksongs, which fortunately he chose the ones I suggested. And then there was Mel Poll, who was the one who gave his kidney to my friend Harvey Poll. And there was the cantor from the Bikur Cholim, from the Sephardic Bikur Cholim. He sang Ladino songs. And the cantor from the Ashkenazic Bikur Cholim, who sang Russian songs and some Yiddish. And what else? Yeah, Ladino and Russian. [The Sephardic cantors (hazzans) sang in Ladino and Hebrew.]

PL: So the first one was at Sephardic Bikur Cholim.

RP: The first one was at Sephardic Bikur Cholim and it was a tremendous success. And I was getting notes and letters from so many people saying, “Ruth, what you have done is you have brought the whole community together with this kind of a concert.” Because you know, up until now, and even now, it's pretty divided. I mean, one says they're a better Jew than the other and so forth and so on. So it's pretty polarized. But at that time, everybody was there: the Orthodox, the Reform, the Sephardic, the Ashkenazic. We were all together and it was like over 800 people. And it was a wonderful, wonderful event. So the following year we had it at the Ashkenazic Bikur Cholim. And again, we had a tremendous success. The third year—and by the way, Kay Pomerantz is a very smart woman and she did a lot of the publicity and we worked together on this. The third time, we held it at Herzl and do you know that the cantor of the Bikur Cholim did not come.

PL: The Sephardic or the Ashkenazic?

RP: Ashkenazic. He did not come.

PL: And his reasoning?

RP: Well I think they felt that our torahs are not as kosher.

PL: Because Herzl is a Conservative shul?

RP: Yes. And they are Orthodox. So Herzl is a Conservative shul. And so he did not show up. But we still had a very nice showing, even though there was a tremendous thing going on on TV. It was one of these big—I forget what big movie was on [“Winds of War”], but we still had at least 500 people there.

PL: How did you feel about that, Ruth? Given all the work you had put into it?

RP: Well, I was very pleased with the two that we had. The first two concerts were wonderful. And it was very gratifying to know that all that work that we did was so well accepted. And I mean, I felt that this was not Jewish. I mean, as a Conservative Jew, I feel just as Jewish as anybody else. And we, those of us who were there and who had worked hard, felt insulted that they chose not to come – that this cantor chose not to come because this was a Conservative shul even though we weren't praying there. This was a concert.

PL: Can you describe or explain how this might reflect more broadly the way that the Jewish community functions in Seattle?

RP: Well, I think it needs to be more united. I think there's too much polarization. It's am yisrael chai, we are all one people. And I feel this is the way we should think and we should act. And I don't think that one is more righteous than the other. We're all Jews and we're all one people and that's how we should be. And we shouldn't go around saying, “Well I'm a better Jew because”—I don't know, because what? “Because I have a kosher home?” Well, what if this other person doesn't have a kosher home but does so many mitzvahs, gives to tzedakah, helps the poor? There's a lot of other things.

PL: What about the Sephardic/Ashkenazic relations? How have you been a part and parcel of those?

RP: Well let's put it this way. In Chicago, I didn't know a Sephardic Jew. When I first came to Seattle, I was shocked that there was any other kind of Jew but an Ashkenazic Jew who spoke Yiddish. And what was this person, that's a Sephardic Jew is what? Then I learned that he comes from Greece or from the Oriental countries and so my first introduction to Sephardim was here in Seattle. And of course I had my personal opinions of some of them. I must tell you, I was rather surprised that one of the Sephardic families was going to Israel and I said to this person, “Oh”—was going to Greece, and I said to this person, “Surely you're going to visit Israel.” And they said, “No.” And I was very surprised. I think they were going to the Isle of Rhodes or Greece or something. And you're going to be right there in the neighborhood. To me, how can you not visit Israel when you're visiting Greece or the Island of Rhodes or whatever? I mean you're right there.

PL: What did that mean to you?

RP: Well, I felt that they weren't as interested in Zionism as I was. I felt that Israel was a very important place to visit. I had visited Israel six times. And when I was in Israel I felt very much a part of it. I did something in Israel that I probably would never do anyplace else. We were there for our first trip in ’67 and in ‘68 we decided to take our three kids. And in ‘67, you know, we went there five weeks after the Six Day War and we were told, “Oh, don't go,” and we left our three children here. One was at camp, while Dorothy Becker and her husband took care of the other two. And then they went to camp so they kind of interchanged there. But I left them with the Beckers, which I always appreciated. And they were very, very good friends. They still are except that they joined another synagogue and somehow we sort of split. But I still consider them good friends and I will always appreciate what they did. So we went in ‘67. That was right after the Six Day War, when all the white flags of surrender were out and it was a very emotional time. And when we were coming back was a Hadassah tour. I sat there [on the plane] and cried when we were leaving Israel and I felt so much a part of it. And I said to my husband,

“You know, we have to bring our three children here.” He said, “Sure, sure, sure.” But he didn't realize I meant like next year. So the following year we took the same Hadassah tour and took our three kids and I guess they fell in love with Israel too at the time. And what we did at that time and I was just talking about it the other day, when we were there the first time, we were flying over the Negev and we were flying over Mount Sinai, and it was a very small plane. First of all I would never fly in a small plane like that here, but there, I'm a yakhsen. I'm a real knoker [big shot]. So sure, I'll go anyplace in Israel. So here we are flying over Mount Sinai and now we're bringing our three children the following year and we also wanted to do the same thing. But there were so many more people this time on this tour that the guide said, “We can only take X number of people on this plane.” And he said, “So we're going to pull names.” So he put all the names in a hat and he called out the youngest person in the group, which happened to be my Mark. And he said, “Mark, come on up and you pull out who is to go on this tour on this trip over the Sinai.” I think they could only take 12 or 15 people. So he pulled out one name. Fine, that's great. And the next name was Peizer. Now that meant five seats for the Peizers. I tried to be a mensch all the time, [and] said, “No. We cannot take up two seats when we have already been there. So we will give up our two seats to someone else so that they will have the opportunity to go.” And we let our three children go alone without us!

PL: For how long?

RP: For just the day. But that was a whole day flying in a small plane over the Negev with other strangers and these were, what, a teenagers and Mark was ten years old.

PL: It meant a lot to you that they should see Israel.

RP: It meant a lot to me that they should see what we saw the year before. And it also meant a lot to me that I shouldn't be a khazer [selfish; lit. pig], that we should go again when there were two other people who really wanted to go. So we graciously gave up our two seats and we let our children go without us. And as Sam and I were walking in the

streets of Tel Aviv, I said, “Sam, what did we do? Our kids are up there flying in a small plane over the Negev and we're down here in Tel Aviv drinking coffee.” So when I think back now I say, “Well, you do things when you're younger I guess.” I was so idealistic about this that I wanted them to see what we saw but I still didn't want to be [inconsiderate of others]—

PL: Getting back to Seattle, how did Zionism galvanize or pull the community in either direction?

RP: Well, I think that most people were Zionistically inclined. I know the Ashkenazim definitely were. As I say, I couldn't understand this one Sephardic family who didn't even think of visiting Israel when they were so close to it. So I can't really make a judgment.

PL: Let me ask you a little bit more about other times that the Seattle Jewish community galvanized. I understand that for instance some of your work around Soviet refusniks and that period. Can you talk a little bit about that?

RP: Well yes. That was a very interesting time. Every synagogue was adopting a family from Russia who was allowed to leave Russia.

PL: What time was this?

[break in tape]

PL: We're continuing with the oral history interview of Ruth Peizer. This is August the 14th, the year is 2001. And we are continuing with the interview. So Ruth, when we ended last session, you were telling me about your involvement with the refusniks and Soviet Jews coming into Seattle. Can you start at the beginning?

RP: Okay. At that time, every synagogue was adopting a family from Russia – hopefully, that they were being released. And Judy Poll called me and said, “I understand that you

are a Yiddish teacher and I have a Yiddish letter here that needs to be read for me and translated." So I invited her over and read the letter, which was beautifully written by a young man named Ilya Goldin.

PL: Could you spell that?

RP: Ilya is I-L-Y-A. Goldin is G-O-L-D-I-N. This letter was beautifully written. Very nice handwriting. And I was very impressed to think that someone from Russia would write a letter like this. And I read it for Judy and apparently this was going to be a family that her temple was going to adopt. The letter was so beautifully written that I not only wrote a letter for her in Yiddish to Ilya Goldin but I also decided to write to him myself, complimenting him on his beautiful Yiddish. And he wrote back saying that everything that was good he learned from his mother. Everything that was bad he learned on his own. And we started this correspondence. And he was definitely a refusenik. This correspondence went on between him and me for a long, long time. I believe this goes back to 1977, early 1977. And it's because of Ilya Goldin that Judy and I became very good friends. We decided that we were going to get this fellow out of Russia. And of course his mother and father were there as well. Apparently he was an only child and the whole family wanted to get out and they really wanted to go to Israel. Well, we tried everything. Judy, who has access to a lot of these things, would send him watches – I'm sure he had watches going up to his shoulder – hoping that that would help him get him out of there. I think he was also in prison for a while. And we did everything. We wrote to Jackson, we called Jackson, Senator Jackson, who was at that time very active in the refusenik problem. Ford, you know, President Ford who comes from Grand Rapids—I have a relative who lives in Grand Rapids. I wrote to her and I said, "Irma, is it possible that you can get in touch with Ford and ask him to do something about Ilya Goldin." We just about tried everything. To make a long story short, after many, many months, we received word from Jackson's office that Goldin was on his way to Israel. And we were very happy to hear that. And that took care of it. We had accomplished something.

PL: Was there a reason why he wouldn't be adopted here? Was it because he was single—

RP: He wanted to go to Israel. He really wanted to go to Israel, he and his parents. Apparently, his father must have died in the interim and—I think it was in 1984 that my son and I went to Israel, and it was Simchas Torah. And I definitely wanted to see him [Ilya]. And we went to his apartment, and as I say, [it was] Simchas Torah [and] he was in the nearby synagogue. To make a long story short, [his] mother saw me and she only saw my picture so she recognized me from that and [exclaimed], “Oy, my shvester!” And they were so welcoming and so wonderful and so warm and he immediately gave my son a torah to carry around – it was Simchas Torah in that little shul. And then we went up to their little apartment and he had in the interim gotten married to apparently a very Orthodox woman who wore a scarf on her head and she was pregnant. And he became very religious all of a sudden. And I remember going down the stairs from his apartment and it was pitch black. I said, “Ilya, do iz finzter kheyshik” [Ilya, it is so dark]. “Why can't we turn on a light? Men ken geharget vern do” [One could get killed here]. Well he became so religious that on yontif [holidays] they didn't turn on lights.

PL: Could you translate that for the record?

RP: Yes, on yontif, as I say, he became so Orthodox that they didn't turn on the electricity. So we were feeling our way, as we would say in Yiddish, “Men ken topn di vent” – that we were feeling our way down quite a stairway in the dark. And as we got into the car, my relative came and picked us up. As I got into the car, I said, “Ilya, let us know when your baby is born.” Well, after all that correspondence and a stack of letters that probably goes up to the ceiling, I've never heard from him nor has Judy Poll. He managed to get out of Russia. We helped him get out of Russia. He's now in Israel and we never heard from him again. So much for Ilya Goldin. But that was a lot of effort and a lot of time and energy put into that.

PL: Well, I'd like to know what it is that motivated you to be involved in this cause and how disappointed you felt by his lack of contact.

RP: Well, first of all, I felt that our people in Russia who wanted to leave should be free to leave. I just believe in freedom for everyone, Jew or non-Jew. And it was very hard for me to understand. Well, it wasn't hard for me to understand. I must erase that. I just felt badly that these people wanted to go to Israel and were imprisoned and certainly weren't able to continue their Judaism or even know about it or learn about it. It just so happened that this Ilya had a mother who knew her Yiddish so well and he learned it from her. But I just felt that this was something I wanted to put my energy towards and helping some of these refusniks get to Israel, and get out of Russia, where they really had no Jewish life. So that was one of my reasons for helping out there. However, I've had an entirely different experience with Vadim Krongauz.

PL: Can you spell his name?

RP: Vadim is V-A-D-I-M K-R-O-N-G-A-U-Z. Now with Vadim Krongauz—this happened in 1977, I believe. Well as a matter of fact, I think I just saw you after he was here last week. My relative – well, it's really my mother's cousin, Evelyn Waldstein, a molecular biologist now living in Tel Aviv and working at the Tel Aviv University. She wrote to me and she said, “Ruth, you've been so involved with the Russians and with the refusniks. I have a friend who is also a scientist, a chemist, and his son is now stuck in Rome. They're on their way, he and his wife and younger son, on their way to Israel. But he wants his son to come to the United States to get his PhD in chemistry. Would you help him? See what you can do to get him to the U.S.” At that time I had fallen and I had a couple of broken vertebrae and I was in bed. So I got on the telephone, which was in bed with me, and I called the Jewish Family Service. And I believe the one I spoke to at that time was Irene Steinberg. And there was another social worker. I said. “Since our city is adopting families, one a month, is it possible for you to adopt this young man, Vadim

Krongauz?” So they said to me, well we really like to adopt families and we don't think that Seattle would be an appropriate place for a single man because he may not be socially happy here. So I said, “If that is the only thing that is keeping you from bringing this young man to Seattle, I will guarantee his social happiness.” Those were the exact words. “I have three children. They're all about his age, and whatever. I'll guarantee his happiness here.” So, she said, “Well, I'll take your word for that.” And the next thing I knew, he was—oh and there was a young woman [Betsy Rosenbaum] that I knew had worked in Rome for the HIAS [Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society]. I somehow managed to write to her that, “If you should come across the name Vadim Krongauz, try to put it on the top of the list instead of the bottom.” And I tried very hard to get him out to Seattle. When I called somebody at the University, and – obviously a non-Jewish professor – and he said, “No, I would have to write to his professor in Moscow to get a recommendation.” I said, “This young man wants to get out of Russia. You're not going to get a good recommendation from his professor. He's not going to have anything good to say about him. So it's a waste of your time and everyone's time.” So somehow we talked with HIAS and he got from Rome to New York and I was so happy about that. The social worker called me, she said, “He will be here Friday at whatever time and we're going to go meet him at the airport.” So I literally pulled myself out of bed and I said, “I'm going with you and we went to the airport.” And I shall never forget this. People were coming off the airplane and I saw all these people coming off [the plane]: a man with a guitar, all kinds of people, young, old, middle-aged. And suddenly everybody was off the plane and I said to the stewardess – which I thought at this time now I think is a stupid question – “Did you see any young man who looked like he might have come from Russia?” Well, what, he’s supposed to have horns? So what we should have done on our end was to hold up a sign saying, “Welcome Vadim Krongauz.” But as I say, I just got out of bed. The social worker should have really done it. But there we were. So I sent her down to the baggage and I remained by the gate. And there we are, paging his name, paging Vadim Krongauz. And after a short while, they paged me to come down to the baggage and I came down

there. And I shall never forget, this was the young man with the guitar. He must have been in his early 20s. And I said to him – again, not a very smart statement – “Gee, I thought that since you were coming from the HIAS, you might be wearing one of their buttons.” And he said, very cleverly and very smart, he said, “I felt that now that I was in a free country, I didn't have to show any identification of who I am.” And we brought him to his apartment, which was all arranged by [Sylvia] Saperstein and my wonderful friend Dorothy Wittenberg. The two of them had set up the apartment because this is what the Jewish Family Service did. And it was a Friday. They had a challah and a mezuzah on the door and a bowl of fruit and a bottle of wine. And we brought him to this apartment in Capitol Hill. And he was a very quiet person and I invited him to come with me on Friday night. He said, “No, he was very tired.” So we promised that we would pick him up the following day. And this was a wonderful experience. Frankly I think I'm the richer for it. Because the following day we picked him up, brought him to our home, introduced him to our kids, our family, and Vadim became one of our family. He was like an adopted son. And he was here at the University getting his PhD in chemistry. Not only is he brilliant in his chemistry but he's also an accomplished artist. And all the pictures I have ever seen that he had drawn had a round thing in it, whether it was up in the right hand corner, or wherever, but it was like the KGB looking over your shoulder. And it just shows what his impressions were growing up in Russia. And of course he told us all about conditions in Russia and how he lived there. And he became part of our family. And I brought him to the Social Security office. I brought him to a supermarket; it was really a culture shock. And I brought him to the library. And I'll never forget his saying, “Mrs. Peizer, can I really check out as many books as I want?” And I said, “Of course, if you've got the time to read them you can check out as many [as you can read.]” “Well,” he said. “No, in Russia, there was a limit. And there was also a limit on what books I can check out.” And as we were coming home, I remember him saying, “Little by little I'm becoming a free man.” It was just last week that he was here and he is now a chemist working in a chemical company in Illinois, and he was here to arrange some business between his company and the

University of Washington. He reminded me that last week was August 5th when he was here, and he said it was exactly August 6th 25 years ago that you picked me up at the airport. Now I see him as a 48-year-old, very sophisticated man with very fashionable glasses, well-dressed. [He] brought me a whole bunch of those lovely pink carnations and a gift for each of the grandchildren. So he's a real mensch. We have kept in touch quite different from Ilya Goldin.

PL: I'm going to skip now—unless you have something else to add about this story.

RP: No, no.

PL: But your motivations for humanitarian aid also began in Riga, Latvia as well. And I would like to know – to skip to work that you've done since 1992, to humanitarian aid to Riga. What motivated that?

RP: Okay. In 1991, we were planning a trip to Israel, my husband and I. And it was my son Alan who said, “Mom, you've always wanted to visit Riga, which was your mother's birthplace.” And I used to hear so much about it. My mother always used to brag about her city. It was a city of beauty and a city of culture. It was just a beautiful city. So he said, “Why don't you think of visiting Riga on your way to Israel?” And that was a great idea. So I made arrangements to fly to Riga and there we met a travel agent from Washington, D.C. whose name was Maurie Finkelstein. He was there to review the situation for future tours. Because as you recall, that was the breakdown of communism, the coup in ‘91. And so we met with him and he said that he was going to have a heritage tour the following year. So I said, “I want to be with you on that tour too.” So that's how my first trip to Riga was in ’91, and that's when I met this wonderful Yiddish scholar named Abraham Bar Masel.

PL: Can you spell his last name?

RP: B-A-R M-A-S-E-L. And I only knew of him through Aaron Lansky of the National Yiddish Book Center. So we were with Abraham Bar Masel the whole time that we were in Riga. And that was when he put me in touch with this Yiddish-speaking guide and I had that experience with the Latvian official in getting my mother's passport.

PL: Can you explain that?

RP: Yes. It was my student, Judith Walters, who is a genealogist, who suggested that when I go to Riga that I should get my mother's birth certificate. Which was a great idea. And so I told this Yiddish-speaking guide that I would like to go to whoever, whatever official, to get this document. So she brought me to this Latvian official and we walked into his office – I wasn't very impressed with him – and he said to her when he heard what I wanted, “You tell your American friend that this piece of paper will cost her $50.” So she turns to me, he told her this in Latvian. She turns to me in Yiddish and she says, “Es vet ir costn fufsik dollar” [“It will cost you $50”]. So I replied to her in Yiddish, “Shik im in drerd” which means —

PL: “Go to hell”?

RP: —“Tell him to go to hell.” So with that, I ran out to my husband, who was sitting in the car with a driver and I quickly asked him for some cigarettes which I brought from home because Aaron Lansky told me that for a pack of cigarettes a cab driver will take you to the moon and back. So he gave me several packages of cigarettes and I came back to this official's office and put it on his desk and all of a sudden he became soft as butter, a whole different mood. And he called in a young woman and told her what it was I wanted. And together we walked out into the hallway and I told her my mother's maiden name was Blumberg. And she said, “Her mother's maiden name was also Blumberg.” As I say, I realized that it was a very popular name in Latvia. And to make a long story short, the following day, not only did she bring me copies of my mother's application for a passport, which was I believe dated 1919, but she also brought me copies of application

for passports from my father and my grandmother, which really was a surprise. And all the people on our tour – there were like 13 other people – were very envious that I had these valuable documents. So I really treasure them. And it's because I knew the address of where my grandmother was born that on a future visit that I took with my son and daughter, I was able to visit her birthplace, the house where she was born and which was not far out of Riga.

PL: Do you feel a connection to Riga?

RP: By the way, the name of the town is Sabile. Do I feel a connection? Very much so, yes. It is a city of beauty and it is a city of culture. Unfortunately, so many of the people, the Jewish people, were killed during the Holocaust and when we were there we visited the mass graves. It's called Rumbala.

PL: Spell that?

RP: Rumbala. R-U-M-B-A-L-A. It's like a forest and thousands of people were rounded up and killed and buried in that mass grave. And I feel that if my folks hadn't come here when they did, I possibly would be one of those people in the mass grave. Because they just massacred all the Jews. On July 4th of 1941, the Nazis marched into Riga and ordered the Latvians, who were very happy to oblige, to round up 500 men, women and children, and forced them all into the big synagogue, set the place on fire, and everyone perished. It is now being rebuilt and I understand that the government is trying very hard to make amends. But that's what happened in the Holocaust. And there are many, many wonderful Jewish men, women and children who were killed. So yes, I feel a very strong connection to Riga because I've always heard of Riga as a child growing up in Chicago, and so that prompted me to send humanitarian aid.

PL: Tell me more about that.

RP: Yeah, well, when I joined the group in 1992, when Maurie Finkelstein organized this group to go to Riga, to Vilna and to Kovna. That was the following year, in 1992, and I was one of this group, which was a Jewish heritage tour. And apparently a lot of these people had relatives, parents who came from these various cities. And that was when I really met the leaders of the Jewish communities. I met Dr. Zilber, Leon Zilber. Somebody had sent me some money from California to send to him because they apparently were neighbors. So because of that I was able to get to know Dr. Zilber and his mother with whom I still correspond in Yiddish. And he really drove me to my father's birthplace, which my father always referred to as Vindau but it's really called Venspil now. So I was with this group and after we left Riga, we went to Vilna and from Vilna – this was a fantastic experience – we went to Kovna. And because of my knowledge of Yiddish, the people, the guides, felt closer to me because they could relate to me in Yiddish. And this one woman, Freida Preskeliene, who was our guide in Kovna—

PL: You will have to spell that last name if you can.

RP: Yeah, Freida and Preskeliene. I learned that I-E-N-E at the end of the name means that she's married, like our “Mrs.” So it's Preskeliene. P-R-E-S-K-E-L-I-E-N-E. She became very, very close to me and to this day we correspond. And I must say I'm a little concerned about her because she's now in Israel and I've heard from her from Israel but I haven't heard in the past few months. At any rate, she and I became very close and when we met with the [other] leaders, the other leads of the group in Kovna especially, my group asked me since I was one of the few Yiddish speakers in the group, to ask what did they really need the most. And I was sitting next to a man who was an attorney and I asked him in Yiddish, “In vos neytikt ir zikh?” [What are you in need of?] And he replied, “Men netyikt zikh in medicine” [We really need medicine]. And of course before we left we all left money with these people.

PL: Was this an organized community? And why did the Jews need so much? Can you tell me the situation?

RP: Well, because these were mostly—the Jews left in Kovna and in Vilna are mostly elderly people. They are living on very meager pensions which I think at that time was like $50 or $60 a month. For that they have to pay for their rent, their utilities and whatever food they can buy. And let's forget about clothes because they have nothing left for that. When he said they needed medicine, it really [struck] a nerve here with me as I was flying home. I thought to myself, my husband's office is cluttered with medical samples. And I need to do something. If they need medicine, I need to see what I can do to help them. So I learned through some research, word of mouth, that there's a big Latvian community here in Seattle. Latvian Latvian, not Jewish. And I got in touch with these people, and I learned not only are they in Seattle but three of the sisters live here in West Seattle. Very nice people. One is a teacher here in a local school. And they are sending so many things, even cars, to their relatives in Latvia through this shipping industry [with which they have connections]. And I decided to become one of the people using the shipping industry. So, their church and their community center is in Northgate. And so I became the only Jew who would go down whenever there was a shipment going out and shipping all the stuff to my people in Vilna, in Riga and in Kovna. I started doing this in 1992, at which time I was sending like four shipments a year. And when I say shipments, I mean tremendous cartons. They were [filled with] hundreds of pounds of medicine, clothes and food. Food such as coffee, tea, honey. They're big on honey. Dried soups, peanut butter, things like that. So at first I was paying for the shipping costs. And then one of the doctors' wives who I was getting samples from said to me, “Ruth, you know, why don't you get the Jewish Federation to help with the shipping cost because you are putting in so much effort, so much time.” And oh, this was when I was introduced to thrift shops. And I'd go to the thrift shop and pick out some lovely things to send. I mean I never sent anything that was missing a button or a spot. I never sent anything that I wouldn't wear myself. And some of my friends would say to me, “Why are you

washing and ironing?” I did more ironing for the people in the Baltics than I ever did for my family. And I'd say, “Well, because when I send it, it's got to look like it came from Nordstrom's.” So yeah, I spent a lot. And even though everything I bought was really clean. I still felt better putting it in the washing machine. So I would do that. And I bought sweaters like for a dollar apiece for children. And I had got such satisfaction from doing this. So anyway, that's when they started sending the stuff to the—the medicine, the food and the clothes. And I would get the clothes from a lot of my friends. Beautiful things. Really beautiful things. I started in ‘92. And so I got the Federation to agree. And I wrote letters and I showed them the letters of appreciation and everything, and they did pay for the shipping for about two or three years.

PL: Everything was donated that went to those shipments?

RP: Everything was donated. Except some of the things that I might have bought. I'd go to Bartell's [Drug Store] and if I saw tea on sale I'd buy a dozen of them – or coffee or honey if I saw those little things, you know, that were $.99 cents. I'd buy a dozen of those and pack them into some to Vilna, some to Kovna, some to Riga. So they did pay for that a few years. And after a [couple of years] they said, “Ruth, why are you doing this? Why are you knocking yourself out? Why don't you just leave it to the Joint [Distribution Committee?] to take care of it?” So I would simply respond by saying, “Look, I was there. I saw these people. I saw the need. And this goes directly from my home with no middleman, directly from my home to the destination in Riga, in Vilna and in Kovna.” So I had to fight for that. And they finally said, “No, we're not paying for any more shipping costs.” So who do you suppose encouraged me to continue sending this humanitarian aid? It was Dorothy Wittenberg who said, “You go ahead and do what you're doing and I will pay for the shipping costs,” which could easily run anywhere between $200 and $275 for each shipment. And that's why I think Dorothy Wittenberg is an angel. Not only has she paid for the shipping costs, but she would say, “Oh, I saw men's socks on sale” or “I saw men's underwear on sale,” and she'd just bring packages of men's underwear, socks

or whatever that I would put in with my shipment. And the way she'd get it here is either she'd see my son at Herzl and they'd transfer it from one car to another, or Herb Wittenberg would bring her over here. And by the way, Herb Wittenberg I think has emptied out his closets because I have sent some beautiful men's clothes to Dr. Zilber and to Vilna. And I also want to say that when I was with Dr. Zilber, he was driving me around – and of course I paid him for the gas and all this because these people don't have any money – I took him to a restaurant for lunch and I said, “Please order whatever it is you want” because I couldn't speak Latvian to the waitress. And he said, “Oh I'd like some steak, some meat.” And then he wanted to order that for me too. And I said, “Well. you know, in America we're so concerned about cholesterol.” And he said, “Well here we don't have that problem.” So he went ahead with his meat and I had something else. But yeah, it's a whole different way of life. And I must say that when you come back home here to Seattle, you realize how lucky we all are. We are living in paradise compared to what our people are living in and what conditions they're living in over there.

PL: Can you put your finger on any special talents or need that you had – or Dorothy Wittenberg, for that matter – that motivated this kind of individual commitment?

RP: Well simply that I was there. I witnessed some of this lifestyle. I saw how people lived there and what their needs were. I spoke to the people, the leaders of the community, and they expressed what their needs were. And here we had so much. My husband's office was literally filled with all these medical samples. And now that my husband isn't practicing anymore, I'm still doing it. I'm still getting samples from other doctors, from […] Dr. [Joel] Konikow. [He] is the one who has made sure that I had a lot of samples that were given to him. And I would honestly say that I have sent now especially that I know the Bikur Cholim Hospital in Riga, which is a Jewish hospital – and by the way treats Jews and non-Jews – I have sent them thousands of dollars worth of medicine that were contributed by Dr. Konikow.

PL: What kind of recognition do you get for doing something like this?

RP: I have letters here from the director of the Bikur Cholim Hospital who has sent me thank-you letters saying that “Not only the fact that we don't have the money to buy these medicines, they're just not available here.” So it is certainly a lot of gratitude and I don't need any more gratitude than the satisfaction of knowing that I am in a small way trying to help some of our people in these areas. Obviously areas that my folks came from. I'm doing my little bit to make their lives a little easier, a little brighter. When I send these beautiful clothes—I mean, just beautiful skirts and jackets and suits and dresses. These people can't afford to go out and buy this stuff and if they did it would be so terribly expensive there. And when I send them food like coffee and tea and honey, they now have that and can use their pension money for their utilities and for their rent and stuff like that. So I have the satisfaction of knowing that in my small way I am making somebody's life a little brighter over there. And these are people who have survived the Holocaust. These are the so-called lucky ones. But now they're old and they're sick and this helps them. I've sent warm sweaters and what a wonderful feeling it was when I went to visit Dr. Zilber's mother on my recent trip with Mark and with Annette.

PL: Which was when?

RP: Which was in—was it 1994? Yes. Mrs. Zilber goes into her little closet and she takes out this sweater and she said, “Dos es. Rokhl, this is the sweater that you sent me last year.” It's just a wonderful feeling to know that I know it was a lot of work and a lot of time, a lot of energy expanded. It's so much easier to write out a check and just send it to Federation or whatever. But this takes time and effort and energy. This table when I get ready for a shipment is cluttered with clothes. Men's clothes over there, women's over here, on chairs, on the couch. I've spent hours consolidating medicines because when these samples come, they're like two pills in a little container. Well, we pay for the shipment obviously, so I sit and I consolidate and put in as many pills into the container

that the container will take, and that takes a lot of time.

[END OF CD 4]

PL: We are continuing with the oral history of Ruth Peizer. It is August the 14th, 2001, and this is minidisc #5.

RP: What is involved in sending these shipments to the Baltics takes a lot of effort. I was invited to speak quite a while ago. I think it was shortly after my return from my first trip in ‘92. And I was invited to speak on the conditions and my impressions and my experiences in the Baltics. And I met—I believe I spoke to a group of physicians—and I met one doctor who said that he had a brother who was in the box business. And sure enough, I contacted him and up until recently he has been donating beautiful, white boxes that are quite large. I would say that each box that I send is about four- or five-feet long and about three-feet deep and they're tremendous boxes. These are not just pekelakh – they're not little packages. They are cartons. Hundreds of pounds. And of course you know, the shipper weighs [each carton] and you pay. I think it's $1.25 a pound. These are hundreds of pounds of medicines, food and clothes.

PL: What particular medicines have they needed?

RP: Oh, everything from arthritis medicine to heart medicine to blood pressure. I send all medicines but I never send any narcotics. I never send any—even cough syrup that has a narcotic in it. The medicines are high blood pressure, heart medicine, diabetes, arthritis and certainly these old people are suffering from all – many of these conditions. And right now, I used to send it to the various communities – to Vilna, Kovna. And they have—there are little—they're doctors offices and they would put them into those cabinets. Because I saw them when I visited with my son and my daughter. We visited the group in Kovna and they wanted to show me where some of my medicines were and how they were being stored. It was also when we visited them, it was quite an experience to see

some of the tea that I had sent from Bartell's here in Seattle. They were serving us tea and cookies. They just didn't really know what to do for us. Also when I went back last time with my son, people gave me some money to give to the poor. And this was right before Rosh Hashanah in 1994. I carried all this money. I must have had over $1,000 in a money belt. And believe me, I kept feeling that money belt every so often. And I left some money with the people in Kovna and in Vilna. When I left it, I just said, “I want this money to go to the poor people to sweeten their Rosh Hashanah.” I forgot about that. But yes, I did bring a whole bunch of money.

PL: Were they receiving any aid from anywhere else?

RP: Oh yes, yes, of course. Certainly they're not just living off what I've sent. The Joint is very much involved obviously. But they're involved also with sending educators there to teach them about Judaism and to kind of maintain that and I'm sure that they also must have a meals-on-wheels kind of program.

PL: Were there any major problems that you confronted or political situations that got in your way?

RP: Yes. Since 1992, I've had no trouble sending these shipments to these various places like Vilna. And I would send to the community center in Vilna. Either there or the museum. But most of the time to the community center. With the names of Rokhel Kostanian on there. And the man who is the head of the center [Dr. Alperovich]. So I would send it there and I would send it to Kovna, to this Freida Preskeliene because she was sort of in charge of this and I knew I could trust her. And she would gather everybody together and she would help distribute all this, and then of course to Dr. Zilber, and also to the community center in Riga. Well, I had no problems all these years – ‘92, ’93 – four shipments a year. However, I believe it was not this last shipment but a couple of shipments before this, probably a couple of years ago, when I didn't hear from these people. And I usually anticipate receiving acknowledgements of the receipt of these

tremendous cartons. When Freida wrote me, she said, “Rokhel, we still haven't received the cartons that you said you sent out.” Nor did I hear from Vilna. I didn't hear from anybody. So I checked into it with the shipper who by the way comes from Northern California. He comes up here to Seattle and Portland, and he comes up with a container. And this is how we do it. We have to shlep all this stuff down to Northgate, to their center. And the container is right there on the grounds and then that has to be placed onto the container after it's weighed and paid for. So I talked with the shipper and he said, “Yes, we're having a problem.” And what was the problem? That particular shipment, at the Lithuanian— everything went well in Riga. But the cartons that had to be transported [to Lithuania]. And what happens there is once it gets there to the port of Riga they unload it and then they have to take the stuff that's going into Lithuania on separate trucks to bring it across the border. Well, that particular time there was some pilferage and at the border some of the cartons were opened. And most of it was delivered but they helped themselves to what they wanted. Well, I was irate. I just decided this had to be taken care of. And the shipper wrote and I wrote letters to the Lithuanian Embassy here, and to the president of Lithuania – a very nice letter saying, “I'm sure that you would want to know about this – that you want to be aware. Here we are trying to help your people with food, with clothes, with medicine that they desperately need, and we have this kind of a problem at your border.” So I wrote to the president. I wrote to the Lithuanian Embassy. And one of the people in Lithuania, I guess it was—what do you call it, that they have to pass through various, whatever—the officials wrote and said, “We have to be careful that you don't send cigarettes. That you don't send alcoholic beverages or cigarettes or something like that.” I wrote back and I said, “We never send alcoholic beverages. We never send narcotics. We never send cigarettes. We are sending clothes, medicine, and food to the people who need it the most. Your pensioners that are living on a meager pension. And it would seem to me that you would be grateful for the help that we're giving your citizens.” Well, we somehow figured that we are no longer going to have it go across the border this way. And this last shipment. You won't believe this. [For] the last

shipment, the shipper told me, “This is what you should do. Riga is no problem. Everything goes there very nicely. But to go to Vilna”—and this last shipment I didn't send anything to Kovna because Freida Preskeleine is now in Israel and I wasn't sure who I could send it to in Kovna so I didn't send a shipment to Kovna. But to go to Vilna, I sent tremendous boxes. What we had to do then is to get a great big box. Address that great big box to his representative in Riga. And in this great big box, enclose two smaller boxes addressed to the people in Vilna. So that when this representative in Riga opens up the big box, she will already have the two smaller boxes addressed to Vilna and she can send it either by their parcel post or whatever she feels is secure enough to send to Vilna. So this is how the last shipment went. And if you—it's very complicated to find the right size box, the right size smaller boxes to fit into the big box [laughter], to make sure you've addressed the smaller boxes to Vilna and make sure that the address on the big box is going to the representative in Riga.

PL: So much effort and detail. Well, speaking of Vilna—

RP: But I must tell you, that I had one of my students here who really helped me. Her name is Audrey Bennett. And on my last shipment here, she was here until midnight that Saturday night because I had to bring the stuff which was October 8th, which was the morning of Kol Nidre. And so I had to arrange my time that I would bring all the stuff in the morning to Northgate and be back here early enough to have dinner for my family and get off to Kol Nidre at 6:00. So that was an effort. But she was here with me, Audrey Bennett is now in the Midwest. But she said, “Ruth, this is such a wonderful feeling and I thank you for allowing me to be part of it.” So she was here, as I say, packing, and she brings a lot of clothes, too. “Now where does this go?” She'll hold it up. “Does this go to Vilna or to Riga?” And so I decide where it's going. So in a way it has been fun. But it's a lot of physical energy expended.

PL: So just to transition—you mentioned your students and you also mentioned Vilna and those have both been centers of Yiddish life.

RP: Yes, I should say.

PL: And it's very interesting that you're sending all this aid to Vilna which at one point was the center, it was the cosmopolitan center of publishing, of everything in Jewish life.

RP: It was the Jerusalem of Lithuania.

PL: And I'm wondering if you can transition from this – Vilna of today – to your Yiddish teaching and your students and talking about the importance of Yiddish and the work that you've done in Yiddish in Seattle.

RP: Yes, in Seattle. I just happen to have a love affair with Yiddish. And it was—oh, I must add that I used to go to the Kline Galland Home every Tuesday, I believe it was, to read short stories for these people and to bring folksongs and I'd have them join me in singing. And I did that for a couple of years. And that was in 19[80 and ‘81]. Well, before they called me to teach at the University. So it was in the early ‘80s when I used to volunteer to read and to give a Yiddish program for the people in the Kline Galland Home. But I must tell you that that was quite depressing for me. I would drive there and I would read obviously short stories because their attention span is so short. And there was this group of people, very nice people, who were in wheelchairs and walkers and—very nice group of people. And I really got a lot of satisfaction in getting them to sing with me and I would read these short stories that were very humorous. But then to see a woman, who happens to be Solly Ringold’s mother, whom I remember coming here as a young bride, she was still a very vital person and there suddenly I see a puddle under her wheelchair. And to see these people in walkers. And so I would drive back home and the tears were just rolling down my cheeks. So after a couple of years of that I was almost glad that the University [of Washington] asked me if I would teach [Yiddish].

Apparently, one of their teachers flaked out or something.

PL: They had a Yiddish teacher at the time?

RP: Yes, they had a young man there and he just didn't work out. And so they called on me if I would be interested to just teach that one course, Yiddish. And that really came out of the German department.

PL: Well, I wanted to ask you to provide some background on what the milieu for Yiddish was in Seattle and at the University and how they knew of you if this was really your first foray into teaching Yiddish.

RP: Well, before that I was teaching at Herzl's High School, so I had high school students. And so I was teaching some high school students and some adult classes but I guess they just knew of me and they invited me to come down and I think it was Dr. [Michael] Stanislowsky who checked on my credentials and my qualifications to teach and when he realized that obviously I knew my Yiddish. They hired me. And I had this class in ‘81 and ‘82 and it was really an interesting situation because I had at least 15 to 20 students in the class. Most of them were Jewish of course but some were not. One was a musicologist and she was very interested in all kinds of music and that's why she took the Yiddish course. She was a very bright student. She had her own problems and she used to come and sit in my office and I used to help her a lot with that. But then there was another couple who were living together – she was not Jewish but I didn't know this; he was – from Chicago. And it was only when I gave them a midterm and I said, “Why don't you just write in Yiddish anything you want to write about on any issue.” And here I thought this was a nice Yiddishe meydele [Jewish girl]. She was a short gal and she was going with this Jewish young man from Chicago. And to tell you the truth, she was a better student in Yiddish than he was. And I mention this now because it was only through her midterm that I realized that she said something about not being Jewish. And she came from the South somewhere, because I said, “How does a nice Yiddishe

meydele [Jewish girl] get farblunget [lost] down there in some small Southern town?" In Georgia, I think it was. And she said, "Because I'm not Jewish." [That] was very interesting, but we never talked about it in class. So there were people who were not Jewish and there were people who were and there were at least 15 to 18 students there.

PL: What were their motivations?

RP: And what was interesting is most of these people were PhD candidates in other areas. Most of them, like one I know now—as a matter of fact, Murray Meld, who was very active in the Yiddish group here, his daughter was one of my students and she is now a psychologist. But she was one of my students taking Yiddish. And really these people didn't need this for their studies but they wanted to. I think it was a roots thing. I think it was returning to your roots. Those who were Jewish, this was a vehicle to learn more about their roots as Jews. And I really think that by studying Yiddish, you do, you do learn a lot about your [Jewish] roots. And I think it's the President of Yale that said that "Unless you can read and write Yiddish, you really cannot understand and appreciate your Jewish—your Yiddish heritage." A lot of the books that they have now at the Yale library was sent by the National Yiddish Book Center.

PL: I'm wondering how it is—

RP: Are you sure you wouldn't want to join me on a trip to the National Yiddish Book Center? [laughter]

PL: Anytime. But I'd like to ask then how you catered your own class situation. This is a University, what books were you using and how did you cater to the needs of your students if they weren't using it for an academic circumstance.

RP: Oh okay. We used the textbook called College Yiddish by Uriel Weinreich, which is the book that is used in all college courses. This was by the way a five-credit course. It was a daily course. Pamela, I must tell you, there was one winter when we had an

unusual winter here. I don't think I took off my boots all winter because it snowed and the snow never melted. And I would drive to the junction and take the bus to the University. And I would trudge through the campus to get to my classroom, my office at the Denny Hall, which is one of the oldest buildings there. And I would say to myself, “Ruth, why are you doing this?” I would tumble out of bed, leaving my husband still in bed sleeping. And I'd get out of the house and take this trip down to the University and I'd go across the campus. It was snow, it was icy, it was cold, and I'd say, “Why are you doing this?” I obviously didn't need the money. My husband was still practicing. And I said, “My parents would be so proud of me. They would want me to be doing this. And so I guess I'm doing it for them.” And yes, and once I got into my classroom, I came alive. I just loved being there. And yes, I did use Weinreich's book, which is not an easy book. Weinreich's College Yiddish is really geared to college studies. And I taught them the alphabet. I sweetened the course with proverbs, with an occasional song because grammar is not all that interesting. And I just loved it. And so I taught there every day in ‘81, in ’82. Gee, I can still remember when Reagan was shot. I was coming out of my classroom and walking to the bus when I heard the news and I just enjoyed doing what I was doing because I was sharing my love of Yiddish with these young students. And in a way, the few that were not Jewish learned an awful lot about our people and our values and it was very informative and it was a good course. And I was very sorry that Reagan cut many of the programs and of course the Yiddish program was one of the programs cut. But what was interesting was the chairperson of the German department was a German woman. And we were having lunch in the faculty [lunch room]. Yeah, it was one time we were having lunch, the whole group. And she said to me—she knew nothing of what I was teaching. This came out of her department. Well, why would she know? She said to me, “Are you actually teaching Yiddish in transliteration?” And I looked at her and I said, “No. I am actually teaching the Hebrew alphabet.” And she was amazed. She was so surprised that I was not teaching Yiddish in transliteration. And I was sort of shocked to think that she was so unaware of what was going on in her own department.

PL: I was going to ask, actually, about what kind of understanding or misconceptions there were around Yiddish at that time whether by your colleagues or in terms of taking it as a serious academic discipline.

RP: Well, apparently I think it was from the Jewish studies program that they decided to have Yiddish and as a matter of fact it's being taught now in the summer. They decided to have this course taught and, as I say, it came out of a German department. And the German chairperson knew nothing about what was going on – just happened to be that it was her department and we used one of the classrooms in that area. But that's how it was. And we had a very good class and, as I say, most of these people were PhD candidates. Most of them in psychology.

PL: What was your perception nationally about the teaching of Yiddish at this time? Were you in touch with people at Columbia University? Was there a Yiddish studies program yet?

RP: Not really. I just got a hold of College Yiddish and obviously just jumped right in with my love of Yiddish. And, oh yes, some of the evaluations at the end of the quarter were very interesting to hear what my students had to say about my teaching. And I have them stuck away somewhere. Most of it was that they enjoyed my enthusiasm. It came through. I wasn't just teaching a cut-and-dry grammar or—it wasn't cut and dry. They felt my enthusiasm. They felt my love of Yiddish. They felt my wanting to share this wonderful feeling that I have for this marvelous language. And that is really most of what the evaluations were about – that I made it so interesting for them and it was so obvious to see how much I loved what I was doing. So I thought that was kind of interesting.

PL: Some of the bearers of teaching Yiddish such as Mordkhe Schaechter and people like that have very much almost adamantly said that Yiddish a libedikhe sphrakh – that it's a “living language” – that it's meant to be spoken as opposed to read or to be taught in only a read format. And I'm wondering, we can start with your teaching in 1980, but I'm

wondering, what's the ability today to get students to actually speak when in many ways it's so much easier to just learn how to read and there's a lot of reward in reading Sholem Aleichem or whatever it is?

RP: Yes. Well, all I can say is that Yiddish is a thousand years old. And for Ashkenazic Jews, it's another vehicle to learn more about a lifestyle, about values. And when you think about it, Yiddish was spoken for a thousand years in the marketplace, at home. Hebrew was only used in the prayer book. So Hebrew in a way is not as old as an actual language for communication as Yiddish. It's only since Israel was born that it became a language where they actually speak it in Israel. You'll find very few people speaking it here. I only know that when I traveled, whether it was to Mexico, to Israel, to the Baltics – certainly to the Baltics – to South America, I didn't speak Hebrew with anybody there. I was able to communicate with these people in Yiddish. So there's something to be said for that. And of course, reading Sholem Aleichem who always leaves you chuckling, reading Y.L. Peretz who leaves you thinking. By the way did you know he was an attorney? Y.L. Peretz was an attorney. This is why you have all this legal stuff in [his short story]

“Bontshe Shveig” [“Bontshe, Be Quiet”]. So I don't know, there's a real rich treasure there that we have and we shouldn't lose it, and I really in my classes now – and I was talking to Hilary [Bernstein] too – that I think we're going to spend some time with conversation. But I also want them to get the flavor of Sholem Aleichem, to get the flavor of Peretz and to be able to read some of the poetry because it will add an extra dimension to their lives.

PL: So since your course at University of Washington, how have you taught Yiddish? Describe where you've taught Yiddish and how many years it's been?

RP: Oh, well I've taught at the Hebrew High School. I taught high school students there. And I taught an adult class for the Jewish Community Center. So I really taught at the Hebrew High School in the evenings and at the community center which was an adult

program. And of course, I loved teaching the students that I have now.

PL: Explain the situation and where this—

RP: Well, we're teaching at the Jewish Education Council. We used the library there. And the students paid me directly because they didn't want to bother with the details of payment and all this. So they just pay me directly which is a very nominal fee. We have a very special relationship. We actually look forward to seeing one another every week. And we have lots of fun. We've become very good friends and they're very special people.

PL: So it's the same group of people that keep coming back?

RP: Mm-hmm. And I've had new students too for the beginners. And they've worked out well too. It's just unfortunate that in November I fell and broke my shoulder and I had to discontinue [my teaching]. But up until then we were going strong and we had a beginner's class and we had what I call the advanced class. Because they've been with me for a long time. Judith Walters has been with me for a long time. Wendy Marcus, yeah, she's another very special person.

PL: And the people like Myra [Rothenberg].

RP: Myra is relatively new but, my God, I must have inspired her because she's going oyf ale redlekh – on all wheels. She's really on the ball there.

PL: She's one of the progenitors of the MameLoshn [Festival] in Seattle which is—what is the MameLoshn?

RP: Well it's a group of people who are interested in Yiddish. And what we did in the past few years is we'd have classes. Like I would teach a beginner's class or an advanced class. So I would maybe have two classes. And Rita Katz would teach another

class. And then there were various activities. And that's fairly recent. That's really fairly recent. And Myra has been inspired to do this and, you know, with all the stuff that I've had to do. I've been involved in these cantors concerts, and I know the time involved and I know the energy and the effort involved and all this, and I said, “Myra, as much as I'd love to help you, you go it alone because I just can't spread myself that thin.” So she's pretty much working on it and I understand now she's planning for October 28th. Well that's fine. Yiddish shouldn't be passed over. And there are lots of people there who are interested in it. So why not accommodate them?

PL: What's the past, present and future of Yiddish in Seattle?

RP: In Seattle? Well, I hope I'll be around to keep it alive. But Wendy Marcus has sort of taken off to teach a children's class but as much as I love Wendy, she is qualified to teach Yiddish songs. She does a beautiful job with that. And she certainly knows how to get along with kids. She's got enough of her own. She does a great job with that. But to really teach a serious Yiddish course, she's not qualified to do. Because she's had to drop out of my class. She's a cantor now at [Temple] Beth Am and she was also teaching a music class at some children's preschool or something. And I love her dearly. She's such a mensch, but she is not qualified in my estimation to teach a serious Yiddish course. But she is qualified to teach songs and that's about—and very elementary Yiddish.

PL: Who is qualified to teach Yiddish?

RP: Rita Katz is a fluent Yiddish speaker.

PL: Is she a geboyrner, a born Yiddish speaker?

RP: Yes, I believe she was born in Vilna. She actually survived in the forests during the Holocaust. So she is a very fluent speaker. I don't think she's ever taught other than maybe a class at one of the synagogues and that's fairly recent. But yes, I would say that

she is a fluent Yiddish speaker and we used to have a wonderful scholar here by the name of Arthur Lagawier.

PL: Can you spell that?

RP: Arthur. Lagawier was L-A-G-A-W-I-E-R. Now he was take [really] a scholar. He not only spoke Yiddish, but you name the language and he spoke it. So he might have spoken 20, 25 different languages.

PL: Was he also a born speaker?

RP: Yes. He I believe came from Holland. He was a very good friend of Gizel and Nick Berman's. He was the one who gave Gizel the idea of how to spell and what to use in the sculpture that she has at the [Jewish Community] Center. They were very close, he and his wife were very close to Nick and Gizel.

PL: I guess what I want to know, Ruth—

RP: So he was really the scholar.

PL: And how did he support Yiddish in this area?

RP: Well, he really would give lectures and he spoke on Judaism, period. I don't think that he actually taught Yiddish per se. When I first came here, he gave lectures on Judaism. Interestingly enough he was not an observant Jew, yet he knew all about Judaism. And he was a very brilliant man and he lived to be well into his 90s and his mind was as sharp as can be. Of course at that age he couldn't see very well, and couldn't hear very well. He does have a daughter here who is also a very brilliant woman. But I remember calling him. I believe it was one of the Yom-tovim. Probably it might have been even Yom Kippur when we take a break in shul. And so I called him from a friend's home and I wondered if it would be convenient to come out and visit him because he

lived out in Bellevue in one of those retirement centers. And I'll never forget him saying to me, “Ruth Peizer? You're speaking to me in English? You speak such a beautiful Yiddish. Why don't you speak to me in Yiddish?” This man was like in 94, 95. So of course I switched to Yiddish. But he did tell me at that time he was just getting up and it wasn't convenient to visit with him, and I guess shortly after that he passed away. I was very sorry that I didn't get to see him.

PL: I want to ask a larger contextual question about you've lived through a period of the twentieth century where Yiddish and Hebrew were “at war” – literally, those languages with each other. And there is an antipathy towards Yiddish in American Jewish culture because of the prevalence of Hebrew as the national language and Yiddish as the language of galut or Diaspora, and that affects the way that people view Yiddish.

RP: And that bothers me. That really does bother me. You know, it's amazing to me how many people are ignorant of Yiddish. I once had a guest sitting at my table, exactly where you're sitting now, and we were having lunch and we were talking about Yiddish and he said to me, “Does Yiddish have a dictionary? Does Yiddish have textbooks?” And I looked at him. I thought he was from Mars. He obviously is not one of my favorite people. So with that, I ran upstairs to my study and I brought down Weinreich's dictionary and my College Yiddish textbook and I said, “This is a legitimate course. This is a legitimate language. Ashkenazic Jews have been speaking this for over a thousand years. Of course there is a dictionary. Of course there is a grammar.” And I tried to be as diplomatic as possible but I must tell you I was very angry. I was very upset. Because Yiddish is a beautiful language. You know, when I went to some of the camps and I saw some of the things written out in Yiddish where people who were tortured and killed in the Holocaust – and I see these in the museums – and it says in Yiddish, “Fargest undz nisht” – “Don't forget us.” Another one was, “Nemt nekome” – “Take revenge.” If it's not, we shouldn't be speaking Yiddish only in the memory of the people who were murdered in the Holocaust because I think Yiddish should be a living language and we should

certainly try to perpetuate something that has been so beautiful and has been around for a thousand years. But most of the six million Jews who were killed in the Holocaust were Yiddish speakers. And it wasn't just six million Jews, it was their descendants who would have continued to speak the language. So a lot has been lost through the bloody hands of the Nazis. And so I don't think we as Jews should help kill it.

PL: The resurgence in Yiddish – what's been termed a Renaissance, although we can question that term of Yiddish – especially in the East Coast with groups like Yugntruf and Youth for Yiddish and things like that, what's your hope or what do you see are the prospects for—I mean you obviously know that I've studied at Columbia [University], the Yiddish studies program, but yet I'm not a geboyrner – I'm not a born speaker.

RP: Yeah, well I know what you're saying. Let's face it. Well I was born here in the United States, so I obviously learned it through my family and through actual schooling. Many of the people who have emigrated from Europe obviously are passing away, the older generation. I think it's sad. I think that the future of Yiddish will have to be in the hands of people like you, like Wendy, like the people in Yugntruf, like the people who are still studying Yiddish. Can you imagine that they were offering a course in Vilna in Yiddish? I mean that blows my mind.

PL: In Crakow.

RP: In Crakow too, yes. So I think there is a resurgence but it will have to be through the younger generation and if there is enough interest with people in your generation to perpetuate this beautiful language. And it will have to be in a different way. And that's unfortunate and I feel very sad about that.

PL: It seems as if Yiddish folksongs have really become the stronghold of that transmission—

RP: Mm-hmm.

PL: —because the challenge of reading Sholem Aleichem is often also Talmudic because he uses so many references in Hebrew and things of that nature. So where do you see the music as being the bastion of interest?

RP: Well I think the music will always be there. I really do. I understand that they've had Yiddish festivals in New York from some of my friends who have attended. And thousands of people have come out to it. And I understand that there is some Yiddish theater going on now in New York.

PL: The Folksbiene [Yiddish Theatre]?

RP: The Folksbiene. And another one that she mentioned which was Yiddish Public Theatre or something like this. I do plan to go in October. I spoke with the National Yiddish Book Center yesterday and they're going to be closed Simchas Torah. So that will be the 2nd and 3rd and also the 9th and 10th of October. So I'm hoping that I'm going to squeeze it in sometime after that. If I can manage. And I'd like to go to New York, and I'd like to see YIVO [Institute for Jewish Research] in their new environment. I think it's some museum that they're with. Have you seen it?

PL: Yes.

RP: Yes. I would like to see that. I would like to attend a Yiddish play, maybe the Folksbiene or whatever. Something like that. Obviously what we've had here in Seattle does not come up to my standards.

PL: Well there is a Yiddish Club and I wanted to ask you about the Yiddish Club because let's face it, Ruth, these folks, some of them are your peers or older.

RP: Right. And I think it's very nice that they have that. Did I tell you that we're going to have a Yiddish group here in West Seattle which really shocked me. They're having this picnic on the 19th, and they're inviting all the Jews living here in West Seattle. It's called

the West Seattle Yiddish Education Program or something like this. And there's some rabbi involved here and I've checked with them and it will be interesting to go to the picnic and see what's going on.

PL: What is it about the Yiddish Club that doesn't do it for you?

RP: Well I'm sure they're very lovely people and Murray Meld is very active in that. I'm very sorry to see that the other people—I think the woman just passed away. What was the name of the person who was really heading it? I forget. But I read in The Transcript that she just passed away too. But Murray Meld is very, very active in that group, and I told you that one of my students was Murray Meld's daughter.

PL: And Harvey. what is Harvey's last name? He sings a lot of the labor songs, the Yiddish labor songs.

RP: Harvey who?

PL: Kuwalt—? [phonetic] I can't remember his last name, I'll have to fill it in in the transcript [correction: Frank Krasnowsky].

RP: Oh, you mean. Oh yes, I know who you mean.

PL: Chutzpah.

RP: Chutzpah. Yes. [whispered] He's got chutzpah. Yes, he sings a lot of the labor songs.

PL: But these are also other lightning rods. These people have been other lightning rods for Yiddish. You of course are the grande dame, but I'm wondering what it is that they're bringing to the study of Yiddish or keeping it?

RP: Well I think they get together every other Sunday and they converse in Yiddish. And I don't know whether – since I have never attended their meetings, this is all hearsay – somebody might try to read something in Yiddish. There's one woman there who would really bore you to death if she started reading and so I think they very nicely tell her somehow not to continue, whatever. But from what I understood, there was this fellow by the name of Alan Sachs who was here for a while and he was a real Yiddish scholar. He was a young man. Very young. Probably in his 30s. And my God if you made a grammatical error in Yiddish, he would go bananas. He was really ballistic. I mean, you couldn't even make a tiny grammatical error with him. He's now teaching Yiddish I think at the Arbeter Ring in New York. But he would go to these things—

PL: What was his name?

RP: Alan Sachs. S-A-C-H-S – a perfectionist. And he would go to these meetings and according to him, of course, as I say, he'd go ballistic if he heard something that was not quite right. He'd say, “Ruth, it's the blind leading the blind.” And he said, “It's not for you.” So I've never gone there. Number one, because it's so far away. I'm in West Seattle, they're in the North End. And I find my Yiddish is being satisfied with my classes. Because my classes are structured. They're not hit and miss. I don't have to sit and listen to somebody say something in Yiddish that would just blow my mind. I mean really. And it's not that I'm trying to say that I'm better than anybody else but I'd like to be at least on an equal level with somebody who knows Yiddish or better. But to just go and listen to somebody – hok mir a tshaynik [lit. knocking on a tea kettle; nudging me] – in Yiddish just because they happen to think they know Yiddish. It's okay. I mean, I'm not knocking it. I think it's fine but these people have found an outlet and they found this interest in conversing in Yiddish. I don't know what else they do. Whether they read, or I certainly wouldn't want to listen to this one woman reading to me.

PL: Are there folks that you continue to speak Yiddish with on a daily basis or a weekly basis? That's up to your standards of Yiddish?

RP: Well, first of all I write Yiddish to these people in the Baltics. Like I write Yiddish to Rachel Kostanian and to Freida. These are all written in Yiddish. I also write Yiddish to my relative in Rio De Janeiro. And when they write me email it's, “Tayere Rokhele [Dear Ruth], I wish we had email in Yiddish.” And by the way, I'm sure that we can get that. I just need to do a little more research on that. And maybe one of these days I will do that – get a Yiddish thing [Hebrew font] to put on my computer. But yeah, so I write Yiddish to people in other areas. And do I speak Yiddish to anybody? Well, to my students. Unfortunately, my parents are gone. Oh, my makhetonim [in-laws]. My makhetonim from Argentina. They're coming in a few days. They speak Spanish but I don't speak Spanish. How do you suppose I communicate with them? In Yiddish. Now I must say, my makheteneste’s [daughter in-law’s mother] Yiddish is pretty bad. But at least we can understand each other. So they will be coming here within a few days. I will have them here for dinner, obviously, and the only way we will be able to communicate will be in Yiddish. Okay. Golly, I'm grateful for that otherwise I wouldn't be able to speak with them. They don't speak English and I don't speak Spanish. My daughter-in-law however speaks Spanish only to her child.

PL: Any other last words about Yiddish?

RP: About Yiddish. As I said, I think that the future of Yiddish is in your hands. It's in the hands of this new generation that is studying it at Columbia or at the various universities they're offering it. They're offering Yiddish in Israel as well.

PL: But sadly they just shut down the graduate program at Columbia. It's now only a summer program.

RP: Really? That's too bad. That's really too bad. I must say, regrettably, that if people in your generation won't at least keep up the love and the enthusiasm for Yiddish, it will die. And I'm really very sorry to say that, but I'm also a realist.

PL: How do you relate to Ladino? How have the Sephardim of Seattle related to Yiddish?

RP: Well, I must say I don't relate very well. It's a very foreign language to me. I think that the Sephardim certainly should perpetuate their language. But it's not for me. I mean I feel very alien to it. I certainly respect them as fellow Jews. [phone ringing; break in tape] But as far as Ladino is concerned, I mean you know I know nothing about it. I think they have beautiful folksongs and I also feel that their language should be perpetuated. I don't know just what they're doing about that. But my interest lies with the Ashkenazim and Yiddish. And I can't honestly say that I feel any closeness to Ladino because I don't know anything about it.

PL: Have you continued to read Yiddish in your leisure time or listen to Yiddish radio shows or listen to Yiddish tapes?

RP: Oh yes. I used to get The Yiddish Forward – both the English and the Yiddish. But you know, we get so many periodicals, so many journals, and I just wish we had more than 24-hours in a day and there's—I just don't have the time to read all the stuff that comes here. But somehow I still have The Yiddish Forwards and I go through it. And you know, in each issue they have the “Yiddishe Vinkl Fun Der Yiddisher Velt” [“Yiddish Corner From the Yiddish World”] and I do not have the heart to throw that out. So I have gone through each issue and cut out whatever it has to say about Yiddish and I save it because it may come in handy when I want to teach something to my class. So I'm always really looking for more material and anything that has to do with Yiddish takes priority. And I do read as much as I have time to read. Actually the [National Yiddish Book] Center has sent me a group of children's books to review and to comment on but

they came just when I broke my shoulder, and I told the gal yesterday that I did accept to do that but I just don't have the time to read all these children's books and comment on them.

PL: When you say comment, you mean review them?

RP: Review them and give my own commentary on some of it. I just don't have the time to do it.

PL: Is that for their magazine?

RP: It's really the way they get a lot of books, they sell them, and they get a lot of volunteer stuff. But I just didn't have the time to volunteer for that. And I told her that.

PL: What are some of the favorite books that you have taught in your classes or stories? What's been the biggest help to you?

RP: Well, other than the College Yiddish which I do think is probably one of the finest textbooks, there have been other textbooks that have been written. One written by somebody I met many years ago. What was her name? [Sheva] Zucker.

PL: Yes.

RP: She was in my home here a long time ago. What was her first name? But I know her last name was Zucker and I have her book. And of course [Mordkhe] Schaechter. I've used that. And I have also used Invitation to Yiddish which is mostly for the beginners, and that's very simple.

PL: What about fiction?

RP: Fiction? I've tried very hard to introduce Funem Yari'd [From the Fair] which is the autobiography of Sholem Aleichem. And we did beautifully with that about a couple of

years ago. I would xerox each chapter and pass it out to the students and read to them so that they know how it should sound. And then maybe have them read too. And that was wonderful. And Wendy loved it and a lot of the students loved it. But Myra said, “Look, we need to get back to the grammar.” So like Wendy said, and I agreed, “That this was a beautiful way of getting a glimpse into a world that is no more.” And it was so beautifully written. Ah, so beautifully written. And by the way I had it in English as well and I have it in Yiddish. And so this is what I was trying to share with them and I hope to still do that. But we'd have to start from the beginning because we've lost the continuity now. Oh, and we have read a little bit of Y.L. Peretz. I would like my students to get that flavor at least from these two wonderful authors, Sholem Aleichem and Y.L. Peretz.

PL: What is it about the content or the writing that offers flavor, that offers a taste?

RP: Well, it as I said gives you a glimpse into a world that is so different. I mean, when you read about Sholem Aleichem, what was important, the impressions, their value system.

PL: And yet he's also commenting on it at the same time.

RP: Yes, yes. I really feel that it would be so nice for our students to be able to read Sholem Aleichem but that will take a lot of time and a lot of work. And you can't do it all in a once-a-week [class]. I know that. But who has the time? These people, they're working. Like Hilary, she's working every day now. So I would like to have them read Sholem Aleichem and Y.L. Peretz but that's going to take a bit of doing.

PL: I'm going to shift gears here Ruth, unless you have something else to add.

RP: You're going to do what?

PL: Shift gears. I have another subject area that I really want to cover before we end this interview. And I want to ask a little bit about you and your husband and the processes by

which you've grown together, you've shared your lives together and the things that have—in some ways, how you've aged together. You've been together how many years?

RP: It will be 55 years in October.

PL: Can you talk a little bit about the arc of your relationship and bring us up to date?

RP: Well, let's see. My husband—gee, I don't even know where to begin. We've had a pretty good marriage. I don't think any marriage is perfect. I once knew somebody who had married late in life, and she had also married a doctor and he was very persnickety and everything had to be just so. And she said to me at one time, “We have a wonderful marriage. We agree on everything. And we never argue about anything.” And I honestly thought to myself at that point, that either she is the biggest liar or neither one of them has an ounce of brains in their heads. Because how can two separate people agree on everything and see everything the same way? I just don't think that's possible. It just so happens that my husband has been very easy to live with most of the time but he and I also had our differences. But they were very minor. My husband adores me. To this day he thinks that I'm the best thing that happened [to him]. I love him in a different way. I love him for what he has done in his life. I respect him for the kind of human being he was and would still like to be but is unfortunately not able to do what he did. He was a wonderful family physician. All of his patients adored him because he was down-to-earth and he spoke their language and he was very sincere and he was a good diagnostician and he knew his limitations. He knew that he certainly wasn't going to do any neurosurgery and he just knew who to refer these people to. But he also knew what he knew and he did that well. For this I respect him. And I respect him for the fact that he's honest and he's just a fine human being. Unfortunately, it's a very sad situation that he's now suffering from a dreadful disease.

PL: Can you talk a little bit about when it is that you first heard that your husband had Alzheimer's?

RP: Well, you see he practiced way late into life. I mean a lot of these doctors are retiring at the age of 65. I believe he practiced up until—he retired in December of ‘94. So he was well in his 70s at that time. The reason he retired was: number one, he was a solo practitioner and the HMOs were coming in and there was enough paperwork to do without all that stuff and he didn't want insurance people to tell him how to practice medicine; and he had had it. It was 50 years of practice and he was feeling his age already and I was beginning to see that he was forgetting a few things. And rather than being sued for a malpractice, we both decided that, you know, comes the end of this year, it's time to throw in the sponge. You have to be realistic. You have to know what you can do and what you can't do. And when you're dealing with people's lives, you have to be very careful.

PL: Was he aware that he was an Alzheimer's [patient].

RP: No, no, no. I don't think he still—I don't think he knows now. What amazes me is as a medical person, he has no idea of what's going on with him. He has absolutely no inkling. And he'll say to me things like, “I don't know what's the matter with me. I'll try and do better tomorrow” or “I'll try and do better” or “I hope I get better.” And I know that he is not going to get better. I know it's only going to go downhill. And you know it's kind of—[doorbell ringing; break in tape]. To go back to when we were first married, Sam has always been a very loving and wonderful husband. When we had our children, he was always the one who got up [for night feedings]. And this I will never forget. I have a tough time getting up in the middle of the night. So he always gave the children their night feedings. This I must remember and must be grateful for that. And I said to him, “Why?” He said, “Because I've done internship, I've gotten up many times in the middle of the night, it's easy for me to get back to sleep. You can sleep.” That was wonderful. That was really a great gift. And I appreciated that. Of course, I did a few things for him as well. I've always been there for him. He put in many long hours in his practice. And there was always a full meal waiting for him, whether it was at 6:00 or at 7:00 or at 8:00 in the

evening. I took care of the home. I took care of the children. I pretty much managed everything in the household. He did his thing in the office, in the hospital. I worked with him during our first year of practice here until I had my first child. So it was really a very good partnership, which is what I think marriage should be. I'm very grateful that we've had a very successful practice and he certainly has done well to provide us with a beautiful home, with education for the children, private schools for colleges, many trips. We've taken the children to Hawaii, to Mexico, to Israel, to Europe and to a lot of places here in the U.S. So we're grateful for that and I think that our children appreciate that as well although they're very busy with their own lives now. And I am really the sole caregiver of my husband at the present, and I find that to be one of the toughest jobs that I've had to do. It was tough when he left for Korea and I was left with a one-year-old child. But I was younger then and I managed. I had the support of my mother, and I went back to Chicago and I stayed there. But I do find that this terrible disease of Alzheimer's is worse for the caregiver than it is for the patient. I really mean this. Because my husband is out of pain. He has no responsibilities. He has no worries. I take care of everything that has to be taken care of here, whether it's paying bills or managing the household or managing finances or dealing with children and whatever problems. He is oblivious to all this. He only sees the beauty in the view, in the home, in me, in friends. And he just—like now he's at a daycare program. Yesterday I took him to a picnic. He didn't realize that it was the Alzheimer's group that I attend meetings twice a month.

PL: A support group?

RP: It's a support group. And they are wonderful. I'm the only Jew there but these people have been there, done that, or they're going through what I'm going through now. And they have been very supportive and very, very wonderful. They've given me some books to read on the survival of the caregiver, because the caregiver, God forbid, can get very sick from this. So I'm trying very hard to hang in there and it hasn't been easy. Because it's hard to see—it's very sad to see a fine mind crumble. And it's crumbling day by day.

It's very difficult to have to dress an adult man. And to be perfectly honest, I'm very much many times I feel I'm alone. And I am alone. It's worse than being alone because I'm alone in one sense but I still have the responsibility of taking care of this very fine human being who can't help himself. So I have to learn at this stage in my life to accept something I cannot change. And that's hard.

PL: How do you then focus on yourself and your own process of aging and when you've got so much responsibility at this stage in your life?

RP: Well I just hope and pray for my good health. Because if something were to happen to me, my husband would definitely have to go into a nursing home because he could not function without me. This whole house would have to be sold and everything would just go down the chute. So I am definitely the one, the anchor, that is holding everything together.

PL: How do you do it?

RP: How do I do it? Well, it's not easy, Pamela. It's not easy. It's just trying to be strong, trying to—I really would welcome a little more help from my family. But I also understand that my two sons are very busy with their families and their work. My daughter also. Each one is working in their own field. They all have their lives to take care of. And many times, unfortunately, parents may be put on the back burner sometimes. Although I must say that all three children are wonderful. In an emergency they'd be here in a minute, and it has happened where I've had two emergencies with my husband just recently and the medics were here in five minutes and so was my son Mark. They've been there in an emergency. No question about that. But when the emergency passes, I remain the sole caregiver. And I must admit that I would welcome a little more support. I guess there's no limit to goodness and there's no limit to support. […]

PL: We only have about a minute and a half left to this interview and I would like to take the last few seconds for you to just kind of look inward and look outward at where are you now in your life? And do you have different significant experiences? Things that you're doing to make the joy in your life and your health as good as it can be?

RP: Well, I'm trying very hard to cope with a situation which is very difficult. And I would welcome any help that I could get from anybody.

PL: You've recently just hired some help for the first time.

RP: Oh yes, yes. I've hired some help and sometimes it's nice to have unhired help. But yes, I've hired help and I'm trying very hard to keep my wits about me and trying to cope with a situation that is very sad and many times very distasteful. But I have to learn to accept it – although that's very difficult – and just cope. You know that old saying about the serenity prayer? Oh, well I think it goes like, “Lord, give me the serenity to accept what I cannot change, the courage to change what I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.” And I have accepted a few things in my life that I would love to have changed but I couldn't so I just had to accept it. And the wisdom? I do think that I know what the difference is and this I can't help.

[END OF CD 5]