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Mrs. Levenson

Social Studies Period 3

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An Oral History with Sarah Wiener

Are you named after anyone?

Yes. My name is Sarah Wiener. I am named after my grandma.

Before you came to America where did you live?

I was born in Poland and I lived in Germany.

Why did you leave Germany?

Oh we had to leave. I didn't want to be there in the first place. I just had to be there because it took so many years till you could get the visa and come here.

How did you come?

We came on a ship, called S.S. General Taylor.

When you came did you have a job?

Well, my parents didn't have any money because they had to spend all the money that they had to pay you know we stayed during the war with some Polish people that kept us in the sub-basement. My parents had to pay the Polish people to hide us because it was very dangerous for people to hide Jews at that time. As children we couldn't even stand up in the basement. We had to crawl. We had to be very, very quiet. We were confined. I remember hearing children playing outside from the basement. I asked my father, "why can't we play outside?". He said, "one day soon the war will be over and you will play".

How long were you hidden?

Two and a half years.

What was the house like where you grew up?

We had a lovely house. And it was a very nice life. I lived in a small town in a house with my three sisters, my parents, and of course relatives. But, when the war started and they started to put all the Jews together and started destroying synagogues, they burned them down and they started to kill people it stopped.

Was your community Jewish?

No we had about 4,000 Jews but mostly were not Jewish. But, we lived with them. We were happy.

What languages were spoken in your house? We spoke Yiddish and Polish and I knew Hebrew. I went to Hebrew school. When I was three years old. And, half a day we went to public school which was mandatory and half a day we went to Hebrew school. So, by the time I was seven I spoke Hebrew.

What in your family felt Jewish?

We observed shabbat and all the Jewish holidays. My parents went to shul and my father went every day.

Did you like your school?

I loved my Hebrew school I liked my other school but my Hebrew school I loved.

When you were living in Germany did you know what you would want to be when you were older?

Well I lived there up till I was seven years old and at seven years old then they took out all the Jews and send them to Auschwitz or whatever other concentration camps so we have no choice.

Over your summer did you do anything?

Yes. We had a little cottage in the woods and that was fun we used to go there when we had vacation from school and we play with the animals. It was lovely. We had a nanny and she would come out and say vonkayest. She came and she brought us goodies and it was fun. But, most fun was in May and we used to get up early in the morning. At 5:00 we went to the fields and we picked flowers and vegetables and we made crowns and put them on our heads and we sing songs and that was fun but it all ended too soon.

What in American history has been important to you?

Well, I think when I came to the United States to America, I thought it was the best country ever. I did suffer a lot in Europe, but there is no other country like the United States. I was here only one day and my parents didn't have money and I had to help them because I was the only one in the family that spoke English and spoke Hebrew.

So, I was here one day and i got sick and they sent a doctor and he gave me a shot of penicillin. I was one of the first people to get it. And I got better right away and the next day I went out to New York. We were living in Brooklyn and I got a job in an office. But, I always look to improve myself, so in a few months I got another job.

What was the job?

I was a secretary in an office and the first check I got I gave it to my parents because they had to pay the rent. They were very well off before the war but all the money was given to the Polish people that we stayed with because they risked their lives for us.

When you were staying with the Polish people was your whole family together or was it just you?

No , it was my two other sisters. My father and my older sister. My father wanted that one of us should live and be a witness to live and tell what really happend. So, he divided the family. His mother came from a big town, from Lodz, and her daughter, my aunt so, he aranged for them to go and hide by another Polish people and for my oldest sister also another Polish people. But on Sunday, the priest had a sermon, and he said that the Poles should not hide any Jewish people. When they came home they threw them out, they killed my grandma, the Polish people, and killed my aunt and my sister went back to the ghetto. We got up in the middle of the night, and we left the ghetto, because rumors got that there was going to be an evacuation. So, she came back to the getto and the Natzis tortured her. They wanted to know where we are, but she wouldn't tell them. She knew where we were but she couldn't come there, so the young people that could work they put in one place and the rest they send away to Auschwitz and be killed. So she didn't tell them and there was a truck there and here were some young men on the truck that were being sent to a work camp. So one of the guys pulled her up she was about 15, and she went to a camp and she worked there.

In your life what has been the most important to you?

Right now the most important thing is, I'm very lucky. I have beautiful three daughters, and I have eight grandchildren and that's the most important thing to me that I want to live and see them happy, get married and have some, nachas, grandchildren, great grandchildren.

Before you came to America who were your role models?

Well, when the war ended we went back to our town, and there was nothing left. Our house was burned. So we went to the Polish people and they assigned us a room from another Jewish family that was probably sent to Aushwitz, and we stay there for a few days and then the Poles threw in a granade and we were very lucky no one got killed. So we left the town right away. There were no other Jews left from our town. We were the only family that survived.

I don't know if you know who Chaim Nachman Beololk was, but he was a Jewish poet, and I used to go to a Hebrew school. Yavneh, it was named and he came one day and he wrote a lot of poems and he was very well known by everyone and I was about three or four years old and he recited one of his poems el hatzipor- to the bird, beautiful poem and I come over and he said I hope one day we are going to meet in the land of Israel.

Looking back what would you have done differently?

Of course. Two and a half years, you cannot imagine. I cannot imagine how I could survive. I couldn't go to school. We didn't have any food. All we got was a piece of bread and water for two and a half years. I couldn't take a bath. Couldn't stand up. So, I would have like to get a better education, which I never had because we couldn't. But when we were liberated to Germany, I worked half a day because I knew Hebrew and that helped me a lot. So, I got a job for the Jewish agency in Germany and I stayed there for five years. So, I did half a day school and half a day work. So I went to high school and started college, but I couldn't continue when we got to the United States because we needed to work. My parents, they didn't know English so I was the only one that could help them and I was thrilled that I could help them.

What about America did you love the most?

I loved the freedom that we had and that I could do whatever I want to and that we had a new life. I was a young girl, I was 16 years old when we came, But I can't complain It was everything that I dreamed of. I wanted to go to Israel. We had papers to go but at the last minute my father was afraid. He didn't have any money for his girls and to get married you need the dowry and he wanted us to marry good guys so he decided we come to America and we all got married and we all have wonderful families and it was wonderful and it still is.

Is there anything that you regret?

One day, I was driving and I came past these kids about my age went I went into hiding and I never look back I didn't want to talk about my past I just wanted to move on with my life. But, we brought the Polish people here after the war to repay them for their good will because if the Nazis found out we were living there they would kill us and them. So we invited them to come to America. When we get to the airport, there were about a hundred people who wanted to know what happened. When we go home and they start to write in all the fancy news papers, New York Times, what happened to us. I was telling my story to a reporter. When I come home my youngest girl comes up to me and she goes, "I don't believe one word you said", because I never spoke about it to her before. I erase it from my mind. I never told my kids, "you need to eat because I couldn't". I just wanted them to go on with their lives. Only after a lot of years I start to speak about it. We were very lucky. We were the only ones that survived from our town.

After the war did your family find each other again?

Well, My oldest sister Rita the one who was working in the factory. When the war ended, we were in Poland and we started to ask people and they told us that my sister passed away. One day we were walking on the street and a girl was asking for our address and no one recognize that she was my sister so she went, "mommy you don't recognize me?" My parents sat shiva after her because they thought she died. But, she was alive. Her hair was shaven off. She was frail. We didn't recognize her. So, we were very lucky that she survived.

What did you think of this interview experience?

Oh I loved it. And I hope that you learned something. I used to speak at schools and I got almost one hundred letters from the students that they loved it and what they wanted to know more. Once I spoke at my synagogue and there was not one dry eye. So, I hoped you learned something.