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UC SAN DIEGO

## Getting Here

An Odyssey through WW II

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1 hour, 14 minutes, 03 seconds

Interviewer: Becky Tran  
Interviewee: Mrs. Ruth Hohberg

Transcribed by: Rachel E Lieu

[Holocaust Living History Workshop](#)

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- Time      Transcription
- 00:00      [The Library UC San Diego]
- 00:05      [Getting Here: An Odyssey through WWII with Ruth Hohberg]
- 00:11      Susanne Hillman: Good afternoon. I am Susanne Hillman the Project Manager of the Holocaust Living History Workshop and I am delighted to welcome you all to the beginning of this year-long lecture series. The title of this series is Hidden Histories, or Hidden Stories rather, Legacy of Pain. It is amazing to me as a historian, and also to many others who have been involved in Holocaust education, how much scholarship has been generated over the 70 years uh since the end of World War II. And what is even more amazing, I think, is that despite the tremendous amount of works that have been published studies, sociological analyses, there are still so many stories that have not been heard, stories that have been sidelined, or that have been outright forgotten. And with this in mind, I decided that this year's lecture series should be devoted to experiences and stories that have not been heard, or that have not really, uh, fit, that don't fit what is, uh, expected as a traditional or conventional Holocaust narrative.
- 01:25      Susanne Hillman: Some of you know that UCSD [University of California, San Diego] is one of only 50 institutions worldwide with access to the Visual History Archive. The Visual History Archive is a database of videotape testimonies, videotaped testimonies with survivors of the Holocaust and other genocides. And this archive is available for anyone to research, to do research in. I'm happy to provide individual consultations and I think video testimonies are a wonderful way for people to get a look into, or to forge a connection with a face. The Holocaust can seem so overwhelming, having claimed millions of people, I think the only way to really confront the tragedy is through an individual face. And having said that the Visual History Archive is a really great resource, I would add that there's one thing that's even better, one thing that will probably last, make more of a lasting impression and that is hearing a person relate his or her experience. And that's exactly what we'll do tonight. Um, before I introduce our guests I would like to thank our sponsors, the UCSD Library and Judaic Studies. They have supported our project from the beginning, and I would also like to draw your attention to our next event.
- 02:58      Susanne Hillman: Those of you who come to our events often know that usually we um, hold them on a third - no on a Wednesday, like today, on a Wednesday. Our very next event is actually going to be on a Thursday. That's not a mistake. It's, it's supposed to be that way, November 13th. And please help yourself to a flyer on the way out. We also offer a lunch seminar with the historian Wendy Lower and it's open for the public but I do ask you to RSVP. There's flyers there, also brochures for the Jewish book fair. We would like to draw your attention to um their tremendous program that they have this year. Uh, I've got brochures for that too.

And now it is my pleasure to introduce our speaker Mrs. Ruth Weiss Hohberg of Bielsko, Poland originally. Mrs. Hohberg will be introduced by Rebecca Tran. Becky is a fourth-year student at UCSD's Revelle College. She's double majoring in the Study of Religion and General Biology, and I salute her for this very ambitious program of study. She's also minoring in Vietnamese. I, I'm impressed. Uh, her focus within the study of religion is Judeo-Christianity and I think that explains um, well that's one of the reasons why she got interested in the Holocaust. So please join me in welcoming Mrs. Ruth Hohberg and Becky Tran.

- 04:35 Becky Tran: Okay um, thank you for having me here today. This is my first time interviewing in a live audience so excuse me if I'm nervous. I just wanted to say that we'll welcome questions after the interview. And with that shall we start?
- 04:51 Mrs. Ruth Hohberg: Well let me thank you for having been invited and the fact is, it's also my first time. So Becky and I will swim through this together and we'll each row with one oar and try to put it together.
- 05:06 Becky Tran: So my first question is, what are your first memories of your childhood?
- 05:12 Mrs. Ruth Hohberg: The funny thing is, I don't know for sure. But for many years I always remembered looking out the window of my room and seeing across the street a, a striped awning and a man standing, well the shopkeeper was standing in front of it. But that that is not a memory of of war, or peace, or anything. It's just a kind of a little vignette, a little snippet of vagueness at this point. But for many, many years it was a very strong memory, to the point where I remember, I remembered - I don't anymore - what color the stripes on the awning were. And sometimes I talked to my mother about it and she didn't remember that. But that's a long time ago. Can you hear me by the way?
- 06:04 Audience: Yes.
- 06:07 Becky Tran: Um so, I wanted to ask that question because Ruth has written a memoir of her experiences, and she starts at the age of four. And I was surprised that she remembered so much at such a young age. But to more related questions, do you remember feeling safe as a child?
- 06:27 Mrs. Ruth Hohberg: You know, that question strikes me kind of interesting because I don't remember feeling safe or unsafe. I, my, my parents were there and and that was my rock, right? So I don't think I felt unsafe. I do know that I felt very anxiety-ridden because when you see people in there, in a railway station - which is, you know, my, my image, my mental image - uh, and there's a great deal of noise, and most of the people are in tears, and there's a lot of hugging, and more crying, and that kind of thing makes a huge made a huge impression. I mean, somebody who's about yey high, everybody else was bigger and it resounded in the railway station.

So those kinds of things would bring anxiety, but I don't know that I could characterize it as fear. Uh, and then you know, other things were, were at the time when, when the, the um, the Soviet Army moved in and this, they simply appeared at the apartment where we were hoping to be safe with bayonets and screaming, and broke down the door, kind of thing uh, that makes you feel nervous and frightened. But I don't know about the safe aspect so, some other word would have to be put in play there.

- 07:57 Becky Tran: Okay and if you said you wouldn't characterize it as feeling safe or unsafe, can I clarify?
- 08:03 Mrs. Ruth Hohberg: I didn't know what could happen. I really didn't know what could happen. It was just that it was different. You know, as you grow up and you know well, you could be killed, you could be maimed, you could be hurt. I didn't know any of that as a, as an intellectual construct. I just knew that something was happening, and it was big, and it was noisy. So I don't know how you characterize a feeling as as that person of four and a half years old.
- 08:36 Speaker 1: What year?
- 08:38 Mrs. Ruth Hohberg: Oh okay, uh talking from approximately 1939 on.
- 08:45 Speaker 2: But the Russians didn't come until much later.
- 08:48 Mrs. Ruth Hohberg: Where?
- 08:49 Speaker 2: I thought, in Poland.
- 08:50 Mrs. Ruth Hohberg: Well again, where in Poland? As I said 1939 on.
- 08:55 Speaker 2: Yeah, but I was just wondering these particular Russians came with bayonets when was that?
- 9:00 Mrs. Ruth Hohberg: Uh I would think - see again, I, I didn't have paper or pencil or any of those things to keep track. But I, my, my sense of it would be 1941-ish - if I may use that ending.
- 09:16 Becky Tran: Okay, um -
- 09:21 Susanne Hillman: Could you tell us a little bit about your home life? I don't mean to interrupt the interview, but I think we would all be interested in hearing a little bit about your family. What your parents did?
- 09:32 Mrs. Ruth Hohberg: Oh sure. Yeah sure, sure. Uh okay, I'll start with the siblings because there's nothing to say. I'm an only child which is, which makes it very uninteresting. Uh of course I used to be very envious at times for not having siblings, and at other times I was very happy to be the apple of everybody's,

everybody being mommy and daddy uh, because all, you know, all attention went toward me. But as far as home life, my dad - well I was born in Krakow, which is the same city my mother was born in, except we were born in different countries because of the years that have passed. And the, the Poles had gotten their country back. Uh, what was the -

10:21 Speaker 2: What did your father do?

10:23 Mrs. Ruth Hohberg: Yeah my dad, my, my dad was a mechanical engineer, architect kind of person and his father had emigrated to the United States when he was about 16 with the entire family. I think there were six siblings or so in my grandpa's family and they settled in Brooklyn, New York. And sometime in, probably, I don't know when, but must have been in the early years of the 20th century, the father, in other words, my great-grandfather and one of his sons - my grandfather - did not like it in Brooklyn, New York and they went back. And my grandfather finished his growing up in Bielitz, or Bielsko as it's known in Polish, and established his family there which is why I wasn't born in the United States in the first place. But if you don't mind I'm gonna put this on, air conditioning makes me cold. And uh, so we, we were living. So anyway, my grandfather also, so he established a business for himself and it seems that he was a representative of the um Czech Okocim beer companies. And they, for all I remember - and I don't know how it came about exactly - he either had it built or he built it himself. There was a building with a yard, with horses, with a delivery situation for um, for the beer. You know, horses and, what do you call those things? Not buggies, but wagons with the, for delivery purposes. And then I remember there was a Buick and a chauffeur named Lawrence. Strange little bits and pieces that one remembers when somebody asks. You know, you don't think about those things as you live, but when somebody asks they suddenly, kind of, come. And so it was a very comfortable life in this, in this building - which does stand now.

12:46 Mrs. Ruth Hohberg: And I, I hope it's in some sort of condition. Anyway, while I'm on that, if I may, after the war we were repatriated if we wanted to be, and we were, but when we came to, well the there was nothing touched actually in Bielsko. The city was quite intact. It wasn't like Warsaw in 1946 where there wasn't a stick that was standing. When we passed, that's how I know it. Otherwise, I am not interested. In other words, I've never took an interest in Warsaw in particular. But in Bielitz everything was intact, at least the streets were. But when we came and rang the bell, the door was shut in our faces, and people were terribly rude, and sorry that we had survived, and they let us know it. So that's just by, by way of what, what happened fast forward, which is why I never went back. I never went to visit, to see the birthplace. So, so it was a very comfortable life. And in 1939, I believe, my mom - well the doctors always said I should be in the mountains so don't, the city was a an industrial city. So the doctors felt that it was a nice thing to send this little girl with her mother out to the country. So we were in Zakopane, which was a

ski resort, in the summer of, I believe it was [19]39. And my dad sent a telegram saying, do not come back. Go on to Krakow, where his sister - he had a twin sister. She lived there, and she was in desperate need of company because her husband had gone to Portugal on business. And she was left with the two children, and the servants but she was alone, basically. So my dad sent us to keep her company. And as fortune would have it, I became very, very ill. And we had to leave town and she wouldn't come with us, because she was waiting for her husband. So you know daily - stupid little daily events - lead you to either survive or not. And that's exactly what happened.

15:24 Speaker 2: Where'd you go when you got sick?

15:26 Mrs. Ruth Hohberg: We went on, we, we - well the doctor told my mother to make sure to be near or in, preferably, large cities, where she could get medical care for me. So we went on to Lemberg or Lviv, and that's really how it happened, that I survived, initially. I mean, there were places along the way where I could not have survived anyway. But that kind of put us on that particular track evidently, because then the Russians came in and took us to Siberia.

16:04 Becky Tran: And you said that your father told you to go on um how are you to find or how were the three of you finally reunited?

16:14 Mrs. Ruth Hohberg: Oh well my father and his father - the the boy who went to Brooklyn - uh, packed their rucksacks and left. And they left on foot. They went to Krakow first to look for his sister, and they found her in a um, they said it was the forest kind of a place uh, outside of Lublin. And there were a lot of people there apparently. I must say, I don't picture their living conditions. I don't know if it was some sort of an organized camping situation, or what. In any case, they were there and my father insisted on continuing on because he knew that we had gone to Lemberg. But my grandfather, and my father's sister, and her children refused to come along. So my guilt-ridden father left and found us. And he walked across Poland basically, because Lwów is just uh, on the edge of Ukraine which by the way now it's called Lviv because it's part of Ukraine now. Does that approximately paint it?

17:40 Speaker 3: When did you go to Siberia?

17:43 Mrs. Ruth Hohberg: Okay that's, that's coming. I mean if you wanted to - uh so while we were in Lemberg, uh the the Germans uh, were advancing and the Russians were coming in from the other side. And one night the Russians took the city. And after that, I don't know how long or anything like that in detail, the one morning, around 8-ish, the Russians came through the door of the apartment in which we were staying with an aunt, and they gave us 30 minutes. Well, first they ransacked the place. We never knew what they were looking for, but they gave us 30 minutes to take what we could and get downstairs where we had trucks awaiting

us. And we were taken to the railroad station where they loaded us on cattle cars. Nobody ever told us where we were going, but that in effect is where we ended up after four weeks of luxury travel shall we say.

19:00 Becky Tran: And how old were you at that time?

19:03 Mrs. Ruth Hohberg: About four and a half.

19:05 Becky Tran: Okay um, could you share some of your memories of what you remember um, in your trip in Siberia?

19:14 Mrs. Ruth Hohberg: Well I can tell you that on the way, again my memories are very little bits and pieces, they, they don't have a real continuum, you know, drama. Uh various stops on the railroad, and once a day we used to stop someplace. I particularly remember a stop someplace near a river, very open fields kind of thing. But there was a river going down. Oh, I'm still talking with my hands. Um, and they made some kind of soup which smelled terrible and tasted worse. And you know, I haven't eaten fish until I moved to California after that. It was some kind of fish soup. It was god-awful and even if you were hungry, oh, that smell was just terrible. So those are little little bits and pieces that I remember. But you know, there were hundreds of thousands of others that I don't remember, and my parents never wanted to really. They said, well what's there to tell? Well, there's a lot to tell, actually.

20:25 Mrs. Ruth Hohberg: As far as life goes well, when we arrived we were taken off the trains. We were told to get off the trains, and we were loaded on trucks again. We had no idea where, where we were. The only thing that my dad knew, and I mean he shared it with anyone who would listen, was that we were not in Europe. Because he saw, he saw when we crossed the Ural mountain range. It happened to be around sunset and he said, uh oh. You know, we are leaving Europe? Uh, so we we kept on traveling, and then we were unloaded someplace, and we had to get on trucks, which took us to a place where there were - we call them log cabins here in the country - no windows. It must have been October-ish. Again you know, these are all things that are very memory, memory grounded, but I can't get more detail out of it, out of my head. And somehow windows appeared. They got put in, some kind of thing to to close up those openings. And there was an outhouse someplace on the hill, and then down the hill, there was a river. And it was quite cold, and we were issued what is known, well let me put it in English, quilted jackets and quilted pants, and felt boots.

22:00 Mrs. Ruth Hohberg: And so, so that was what - they didn't make them in children's sizes though. So that was too bad. And all the adults were told and assigned what their labor was going to be. The men were put to chopping trees, and building roads, felling trees I should say. And the women, whatever was needed. They were assigned as an as-needed basis. But everybody was assigned to work. My

grandparents were with us, so they were considered too old to work. And of course, I was considered too young. So I was being supervised by my grandparents. And as far as well nutrition, that was very tough going. There wasn't any. Uh whenever the trucks could make it, which was certainly not any time during the winters, we'd get an egg a month, or something like that. Yes sir?

- 23:09 Speaker 4: What was the name of that camp in Russia?
- 23:13 Mrs. Ruth Hohberg: Posyolk Drazhnei. Can you find that? I couldn't find that.
- 23:18 Speaker 4: No. [unclear] My family were, had the same story. They were in [unclear] Oblast
- 23:28 Mrs. Ruth Hohberg: Which?
- 23:29 Speaker 4: [unclear]
- 23:30 Mrs. Ruth Hohberg: [unclear]
- 23:32 Speaker 4: It's a little more west
- 23:34 Mrs. Ruth Hohberg: This was Yakutsk.
- 23:39 Speaker 2: On the map there?
- 23:41 Mrs. Ruth Hohberg: I didn't, Oh lovely, wonderful. Yeah wonderful, whoops. Okay some place, some place, Aldan, um the Aldan River. Some place along here. At this point, I don't think they have those settlements, or even their names recorded. Maybe the Russians do someplace, but no. Well originally, actually, I came from - well it's over, over there. I should have, if I had known you were going to do this I would have brought my pointer. My, my late husband had a wonderful pointer that comes out. I'm sorry too because I'm so short. Um anyway, so it's over there. And we went through, let's see, we went through here, whoops, through Kyiv and then we went through - I remember some of the names of the cities we passed because we didn't go straight through that way. We went down, let's see. I think yes, we went through Omsk, I remember Novosibirsk, and I somehow, or other we ended up, up there. Eventually however in 19, I'm not sure what year, [19]42ish - oh yeah yeah yeah. Too many too many goodies. I'm right-handed. Um ah, lovely. So eventually we were liberated in um, when [Josef] Stalin, Stalin and um, what persistent um, [Władysław] Sikorski, Sikorski at that time it was Sikorski, um they made an agreement whereby the people who were transported like that.
- 25:41 Mrs. Ruth Hohberg: And by the way, uh in reading this I - this is a translation from the German that was written by my great uncle who was 50 at the time, and it covers the same period. And he explains why all those thousands and millions of people were transported to those far away nothing places. Because we were all inhabitants of borderlands and Stalin felt very threatened by the fact that many of



those people would go over to the German side hoping to save their necks. So he saved their necks but took them away from being threats to him, from the borders, and put them in the hinterland where he never allowed people to visit before that. But all of a sudden it, he opened it up to, I mean visitors in a way - they were prisoners - but still he allowed people in. So at some point in, in the for in [19]40 maybe [194]1 or [194]2, late, late in the year, we were quote liberated end quote. And we were permitted to travel if we could find, excuse me, a way to go to uh, anywhere except cities. So my mother had a fancy thing when she was young. She was fascinated by carpets, woven rugs from Bukhara. So she said south, we go south. So we started going south and we got picked up by the military once again and we were taken to somewhere, somewhere, well I guess it's not here. We were taken to Uzbekistan. Okay.

27:47 Susanne Hillman: It's here. I picked the map.

27:51 Mrs. Ruth Hohberg: I also have to, I have to make, make my confession and apologies, with all that traveling, I know no geography. I absolutely don't know where on this globe I is. It's terrible, but what can I tell you? We all have our gifts. Uh yeah, so we, we ended up spending a night in Tashkent railroad station, two nights or three nights, sitting on the luggage - whatever was left. And then we, well as I said, we got picked up and ended up in Fergana, which is probably a lovely place when you have something to eat um, for a few months. And then we were taken out of there again. It always seemed like the military was showing up at 1 AM or so, but that's that's the art of intimidation everywhere and I'm sure. You know, that's when the Germans show up, that's when the North Koreans show up, etc. In any case, so in Uzbekistan, we kind of had to settle in. And we stayed there until the end of the war, at which time we were given the option of leaving. In the meantime, during that period we also had to take Russian passports, which was a major tragedy as far as my mother was concerned. But we didn't realize that, at that time, that eventually we could chuck those, which we did.

29:27 Becky Tran: And how was your life in Uzbekistan?

29:31 Mrs. Ruth Hohberg: How was life? Well, I would say it was a life of discovery in a way. I fought long and hard with my mother to allow me to go to school, and by the time I was nine, she finally did. She realized we weren't going anywhere, and so she allowed me to go to school which I loved. You have a lot of questions sir what can I tell you?

29:57 Speaker 5: Is it correct, this is what I know from similar stories, that unlike the Nazis who deported large numbers of people to murder them - the Russian deport, the Russians deported you and many like you to those camps in order - and they say that they did not kill people - and that's a significant difference.

- 30:21 Mrs. Ruth Hohberg: I would absolutely agree with you totally. Which is why I said, that's why I am here regaling you or hopefully entertaining you in some fashion. But yes, hundreds and, well thousands, of people died from malnutrition, from this, that, the trees falling on them. Yes but I, I always I always say when people say that that the Russians mistreat you, no they treated us as well and as miserably as they treated their own people. And in that sense, there's really nothing to complain about.
- 30:54 Susanne Hillman: Excuse me if I interrupt, may we keep the questions for uh, after the presentation, the interview, so that we can pass around an interview? Not an interview, a microphone, because we would like to be able to record the questions as well. So please, just hold your questions, okay? Becky, please.
- 31:17 Becky Tran: Um and how was your experience with school? How did you like that?
- 31:20 Mrs. Ruth Hohberg: Oh gosh, I loved school. I could finally I, as you can probably deduce by now I, I like to talk, and being that I was growing up kind of alone there were kids around me and I loved it. And I also very, very much loved the learning aspect. I was really ready to, to bloom, and be open, and learn things. And I loved being able to have something to write on occasionally because we had no paper. We had no pencils. We had no ink. We had no pens, and I, I really very much loved the physical motion of writing, writing letters. It was just something I liked to do. I very, very much loved school. I don't know how distant it was. I know it took a long time to walk there but I, I just loved it. And I got to, let's see, almost finished third grade and always admired the um, the kids with the red [unclear] which were Pioneers uh, which is part of the, the - it's like scouts only it's more politically minded at that time. Again you know, everything that I say to you was very, it's in a time frame. It doesn't exist in the same way anymore. It was, it's like a time capsule because that's what I experienced, okay.
- 33:02 Becky Tran: So, I know you said that um, you and your mother and father were separated because you were sick, and you went to the mountains. Were you sick during this experience as well? Did you ever recover?
- 33:14 Mrs. Ruth Hohberg: Oh well I, I recovered. I recovered from whatever, you know, whatever was wrong with me then. I don't really know what it was. It was very, it was quite serious. It was very high fever and um, I, I actually, I got very nasty. I, I hit a playmate, which I had never done before during that, and uh, whatever it was. But eventually, yeah. Well, you know we had malaria. I had pneumonia. I mean you know, in the course of living, children get sick. Yeah so I, I was sick quite a bit. Being an overprotected child I was sick a lot. And well, having malaria on a regular basis kind of keeps you in a state of, I would assume from from this vantage point, in a weakened state in general. And the malaria thing, I think I had my last attack sometime in 1947.

- 34:19 Becky Tran: And so, you said your parents were overprotective.
- 34:22 Mrs. Ruth Hohberg: I'm sorry?
- 34:24 Becky Tran: You said your parents were overprotective um, did they try to protect you from any danger at the time? Was life normal?
- 34:31 Mrs. Ruth Hohberg: Oh absolutely. They tried to protect me from any and all danger. They try to, it's really hard to explain when you get one egg a month for the family and they give it to you and if you get, and sometimes when you're standing on these long lines, by the time you get there it's gone. So you've wasted a whole day. You know, you're scheduling in other words. Today if I, if I have to wait for five minutes in the store it's like [exhilation sound]. You have a different, different way to pace yourself. You know that you're going to spend x number of hours on the line whether you get it or not. And, and by the way, most interesting to me at least when I was working on this book, and the reason I worked on it was because it fascinated me in German. And I said, gee let me see if I can do this, and I got drawn in, and oh - just, just a few more pages you know, and I couldn't stop. So I kept going. He is writing about the same period in Kazakhstan. It was completely different. They had stores. They had kindred spirits as it were. He had conversations with people. We had none of that; we were completely you know, isolated in terms of having any people from our particular environment with us. There were people from all over - with the exception of my grandparents. But I never really had a good connection with my grandparents, a comradely. I had a good connection but it wasn't the car, it wasn't comradely, you know. We didn't, we didn't really jive. They would, they were the, the rule the rule makers, the rule givers, and the rule enforcers. They weren't commerce. They my, my grandma didn't play with me. And that brings me to something interesting that I, this is all very unplanned, Susanne.
- 36:44 Susanne Hillman: That's all right.
- 36:46 Mrs. Ruth Hohberg: And might be a lot longer than you want. But play is an interesting thing. My older son told me many years ago on the phone one night, gee you never let us play or you never played with us, something, something like that. And I said, oh that's interesting. By this time he was the father of children. And I happened to, that evening when I spoke with my mom I said, you know I made an interesting comment about play. And she said I'm not surprised. How were you supposed to know how to play? You never had a chance to play anymore then. And she said, and part of it has to do with me - meaning her, because World War I hit when she was five, and so she didn't play much. Except that she played a lot more than I did because, number one, she had a brother. He was always bossing her around and they ran around tables and whatnot. I, I never had anybody. And number two, I was taking care of the household. When my mother was carted away with a really near-fatal attack of malaria, I was left to cook for my father. I was six

years old. I was left to feed him. So you know, play was not exactly part of the curriculum there. And so, when my son said that to me I thought that was very interesting. You know, perceptive in a way on his part, but his attitude was blame rather than understanding. So that's, that's how it is.

38:27 Becky Tran: Um and fast forwarding, do you remember the day that you received word that the war was over, or that you can return to Poland?

38:36 Mrs. Ruth Hohberg: In a way, I do. My expectations of that day, well I was, it was 1945. So I was 10, and don't do the math. Uh, it was something I had waited for for with, you know, like my - I can't even say bated breath, baited body - and then it just came and it happened to be a pretty day but, the birds sang the same way as they always did. And then the day turned into night, and I was really disappointed. Things just kept going you know, things just went on. Nothing huge, and drastic, and dramatic, and wonderful happened on that day. So that was a kind of a, it was almost an anti - no it was not almost - it was an anti-climax kind of thing. Uh, in a way, I don't know. Is that a universal feeling? I just don't know, but it struck me that way, that the bells didn't ring. So it was a kind of a - oh well it's over. Oh well, okay. No, no, no people went to work. We had lunch kind of thing. I, I had to go I don't know pick the mulberries or whatever, anyway nothing fabulous happened that day. Only in retrospect, and you might have noticed by the way, that some of the experiences you have look a heck of a lot better later on when you look back on them.

40:20 Becky Tran: And how shortly after the war was over did your parents decide to go back to Poland?

40:26 Mrs. Ruth Hohberg: Oh, the decision didn't need to be made. It was, it was just waiting to get, you know, we didn't know what would happen. The announcement that came through, because don't forget we had no radios, we didn't really have anything things, kind of trickled through. But we actually left, which is really the only thing I remember, we left on April 26, 1946. So that was approximately a year after the war ended until things, you know, were able to be - well a train was able to be sent to that particular uh, settlement where we lived. And then the people who wanted to repatriate got ready to, to go and board the train, and that kind of thing.

41:14 Becky Tran: And how was your journey back to Poland?

41:16 Mrs. Ruth Hohberg: Journey back was very different. Well first of all the cattle cars, it took two weeks not four because we weren't coming back from Siberia. We were coming back from Uzbekistan. It was um, it was kind of nice. Well, it was exciting, just the whole idea. It was an adventure and the cattle cars were not locked which they were on the way up. So we could stand in the open doors and and see the landscape go by. And, and again you know, it's like gee the, the farmers are tilling

their fields and everything was just, just as if it was always that way, and somehow my, my 10-year-old self went to drama and excitement.

- 42:05 Becky Tran: And so you said, when you came back to Poland you weren't welcomed. Um where, what did your parents feel? When did they they decided to come to America?
- 42:17 Mrs. Ruth Hohberg: What my parents felt, I would never know. They were not saying what they felt. I could only you know, observe. Again I by this time I was 11, and I could only observe visually and draw my conclusions. And at the time, my conclusions probably weren't drawn until I was an adult and started thinking about it because, when you're going through an experience and you need to get from day to day your thinking process is very different. You know, now I can - almost 80-year-old lady of leisure - I can sit back and think, cogitate, but you just, you don't think about things in the same way as when you when you can look down that corridor of events. So what they thought, they were not very happy. And that's another thing I realized much later in life, a couple of things, many things, one of which is that I never knew my parents as the really nice, joyous people they were. I never saw that. I just realized later on that they must have been because of all the good things they did, the fun things they did. I never knew them as fun people. They were always concerned and worried about the next thing, the next day, the next meal, you name it, the job. There was always something to worry just, just surviving some antisemitic remark, and what I would bring home coming home, you know, beat up or whatever. So they were always worried.
- 44:05 Mrs. Ruth Hohberg: And when we came to the United States, they had no basis for, for anything. They had to start from the beginning, and they didn't even have the language. So it was, I never knew them as I said as - and the other thing I realized, also very much later - probably maybe 10 years ago - sometime in the mid, no [19]43ish, I remember every single day bursting into tears, uncontrollable crying for two or three hours every day. And I don't know how long that went on but it just hit me, that was PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder] because then it stopped. And my mom didn't know what to do with me, and in the end, she would sit with me and cry. She was so, she said well tell me what you know, tell me what it is. And sometimes she threatened to give me something to cry about if I didn't stop. But I couldn't stop and she ended up crying with me. And all these years went by, and you know like 10 years ago I said to myself - it just hit me one day when there's a lot of PTSD work going on - I said, yeah that's what that was. Children get it too. So anyway, these fun little revelations.
- 45:33 Becky Tran: And could you tell us, your journey of how you came to America?
- 45:37 Mrs. Ruth Hohberg: Well yeah so we were, we went back to to Bielitz [Bielsko], where they were very sorry that we survived. But there were some exceptions. I mean the people who were servants in my mom's home if they were still there, and

if they happened to meet her, they were, they were thrilled that we were still there. There's one particular story which I'm not going to tell now because I'm going to cry if I do. And they, they were very sweet. But for the most part, people were very upset that we survived. And of course, our apartment was not going to be given back to us. And so, we tried very hard to get out. Eventually, we did through, we couldn't get a quota number for quite some time, so we went through Stockholm, where there was an embassy. There was no Polish, excuse me, American embassy in Poland at the time, but in Sweden there was and somehow we made our way to Sweden.

- 46:46 Mrs. Ruth Hohberg: At which point the uh, American, you know we got on some sort of a quota line there. And I know nothing about those particular technical aspects of things because my parents protected me from all those worries, and then we went. My father went to the the ship liners somehow. Anyhow, berths and ships were not available in any big way and when there was a cancellation, my parents, the cancellation was for two people - two females. So that was March 12th and she advised my father that he should take them and send his wife and daughter because it was going to save us 90 dollars. I turned 12 on March 15th the board, the ship boarded on March 14th. So I was able - I mean that was the, the ship landlady engineered that for my father. So my parents decided, okay they would separate one more time. Because they, after the separation that, when we went to the, in 1939 and when my father got stuck in Poland and walked across Poland they said, never again would they allow themselves to be separated. Well, they did and so that's how we came to the United States and uh well, here I am.
- 48:30 Speaker 2: Just to follow up on what you just said.
- 48:30 Mrs. Ruth Hohberg: Could you hold your question until later, please?
- 48:36 Speaker 2: I was trained by the Shoah Foundation to interview survivors. So my question to you is the beginning of many questions. First of all, would you do your testimony with the Shoah Foundation or not?
- 48:52 Mrs. Ruth Hohberg: You want to hear about that?
- 48:53 Speaker 2: No. I just, yes or no?
- 48:55 Mrs. Ruth Hohberg: No.
- 48:57 Speaker 2: Okay, I'm sure you had your reasons.
- 48:59 Mrs. Ruth Hohberg: No, not because I didn't want to because they pulled out. [Crosstalk] They lost interest.
- 49:02 Speaker 2: Well okay, that's very surprising. Well, we'll go from there. You, you were you were in the camps. Were there schools in the camps in Siberia or there

any um, religious holidays celebrated by the people who were there working? Or when you left um your, your home city what kind of, did you have any Jewish life? Were, were - I mean did you have a synagogue? Did you have friends?

- 49:38 Mrs. Ruth Hohberg: Okay. Let me address that. Your imagination is wonderful.
- 49:43 Speaker 2: I I've also interviewed a lot of people who had all that.
- 49:46 Mrs. Ruth Hohberg: Really? Well, the Soviet Union was an atheistic country and if you wanted any kind of worship, it had to be the worship of Uncle Joseph [Stalin]. Uh no, so basically the answer is definitely no. Any worship that or, or any observance that was conducted was strictly in secret. Certainly no synagogue. Good grief.
- 50:19 Speaker 2: No, no I meant in your hometown.
- 50:21 Mrs. Ruth Hohberg: Oh in our hometown. Our hometown had an opera, it had a synagogues, it had - my hometown had everything, but of course, on Kristallnacht, everything was destroyed. The Poles are, hmmm, helped, and so did the Ukrainians.
- 50:45 Speaker 2: And I, I understand there were no synagogues in Siberia. I just meant was there any Jewish life before and then when you ended up in Siberia you then went to Uzbekistan and was there any life there for you? Any communal life? You said you were like a little entity, the three of you, did you have any life there?
- 51:08 Mrs. Ruth Hohberg: It's actually not something that I can, that I have much memory of. I do know that my dad, who was very mathematically inclined, always figured the calendar. And if he could find a little tiny piece of paper, he would write down in the tiniest little letters so that we would - we meaning him and my mother - would know when what is in the Jewish calendar, particularly the high holy days. But I, I must say, we were a very secularized, assimilated family. We knew who we were, but it was not a deep thing for, for. Although peculiar things do happen with people. My dad observed sabbath by not smoking that day, and being a miserable critter, but that was his way. And he said his prayers from a teeny, weeny little, he had a little tiny prayer book which somehow survived in a pocket all those years. And he said his prayers every morning in a very private kind of a way, I happened to notice.
- 52:37 Speaker 6: Uh, would you comment on why the Shoah Foundation wasn't interested? I'm curious about it.
- 52:43 Mrs. Ruth Hohberg: Where are you? Oh, I you know, I, I kind of like to make - What, why they weren't interested? It was, I don't really know. They came, they interviewed me for three hours plus. We made an appointment for uh, for whatever the next thing is. And just at the same time I was moving my mom who was elderly,

I was moving her to my home, and so I had called them and I said, could we change the appointment? And they said, sure. I explained to them what the problem was and they said, let us know when you're, when you're available again, when you get her settled, which I did. And they said sorry we're not interested anymore. I, you know, I didn't get very warm feelings about how they handled things.

- 53:34 Speaker 7: I'd like to know after you came to the United States, how you settled in and what kind of a life you had here?
- 53:44 Mrs. Ruth Hohberg: Okay. Uh, we were supposed to be met at the dock by my, my dad's brother, who didn't show. Um, we were met by a very large lady in black who took us to an amazing building in a taxi. It was raining and the uh, so she took us up to the 29th floor in this amazing building and it turned out - I knew nothing about this.
- 54:26 Speaker 8: This was in Brooklyn?
- 54:28 Mrs. Ruth Hohberg: No this was in Manhattan, on 72nd Street, in Manhattan, at the Majestic. And these, these men in white gloves came out. I mean, it was, it was unbelievable and the lobby had flowers in it, and there were people in, what I later learned were, minks. It was March, so it was cold. And it poured all day uh, and um it, so this aunt it turned out that this was an aunt. And if anyone here is familiar with the name Arthur Schnabel, his sister, one of his sisters. No, he was a pianist. Uh, it was one of Arthur Schnabel's sisters. The whole thing is so, so, so weird. And so she took us to this place with, at the 29th floor, like a private lobby, with big flowers, and a mirror, and a black lady opened the door. And she wouldn't let us in until this lady with the black dress told her that her, her, her employer had said that it was okay for us to come. So that turned out to be my mom's cousin, who was married to a very wealthy banker. All of this stuff was, I had never heard of these people. This was all new to me. So we were good for two weeks there. I was very sick on the crossing because we hit a very heavy storm. I was terribly seasick. I swear I would never go, go on a ship again. The building swayed all night long. Well, it was a tower the 29th floor in a in a two-tower building. So that was quite an experience.
- 56:28 Mrs. Ruth Hohberg: But as far as settling in, it was not easy. It was 1947 in New York. Apartments were scarce; people would not rent to children, I mean to people with children. I was 12 years old. I didn't qualify as an adult, although I behaved like one, unfortunately. And it was tough. It was, it was, it was tough. It was long; it was tough. Uh, eventually we found a, in a row house a German couple rented as a room. They were very sympathetic with our situation. They were very expensive, and they became quite vicious as time went on, and so finally we managed to find an apartment. Anybody here familiar with Manhattan? 142nd Street? A wonderful apartment, lots of sun, many windows, overlooking the Hudson River. It wasn't then on Riverside Drive, but it's a very hilly street, and so so we began to settle in. And I



went to junior high school and that was very tough because I didn't know English, and I didn't know that you go from classroom to classroom, all kinds of stuff like that. So all these little, little bits and pieces that became, you know, great big hurdles and big issues. And uh, and then I got kicked out of there because we were living on 142nd Street and I was out of the district, and we knew nothing about districts either. So you know, it was hard. That's all I mean. I can go on and on; let's not do that.

- 58:30 Becky Tran: And just really quickly, how long was it until your father finally was reunited with you and your mother?
- 58:36 Mrs. Ruth Hohberg: Oh no, no. We came together. Well, two weeks, just two weeks. It was just two weeks. The ship was, you know, he, he was on for the next sailing of the ship, but there were only two on this ship. And she said, get out while the going is good. You save 90 dollars. And at that time we, we had no, you know, I don't even know where he got the money from. You know, how he managed to get the ship money.
- 59:06 Susanne Hillman: Other questions?
- 59:12 Speaker 2: So you never found out from your dad or mom how they managed to um, support themselves in all these different places, or have enough money to go to Stockholm uh, Sweden. Or when they came to the US with no language skills uh, that were comparable, how on earth do you have enough money to go on a boat and where did it come from?
- 59:34 Mrs. Ruth Hohberg: Well my father's brother had left Europe to go on vacation in 1930, I don't know eight or nine or something, anyway whatever their odyssey was which I couldn't really find out much about because my aunt wouldn't tell me. Uh yeah, people are funny. Uh, I know they were in France eventually they, I believe, they were in Cuba but he did meet up with his brother eventually. That day he didn't come to meet us, I don't know, he was working or some such thing. They did meet up together and they, I think, he had, I think, the brother had some money that he was supposed to share with my father. So maybe he did. I, that's something interesting, and that family money was never ever discussed with me. So everything that that happened, just happened. But I know that, well as far as how did they make it through, it was they were working. Uh, between felling trees, and branding steer, and translating a a handbook for an American truck from English. Oh, this was real fun. English, let's see it came, it was written in English. My mother tried to read it and to translate it to my father in German, from where I went into the Russian. So it was a real three-way effort. Hey, you know what, the truck ran.
- 1:01:25 Speaker 9: Hi um, your command of the English language is fabulous.

- 1:01:29 Mrs. Ruth Hohberg: Oh my gosh. I love you. I love you already.
- 1:01:32 Speaker 9: Well thank you. Um, my mother was also from Poland. She's, you know, was here in the United States for 50 plus years and her accents were very noticeable and things like that. So could you talk a little bit about your continuing education here in the United States?
- 1:01:48 Mrs. Ruth Hohberg: Well as I said, I started out in junior high school. As far as language goes, thank you for the compliment. There are some people as soon as I say hello they say, where are you from? I hear your accent. Okay, but I used to be able to pick up languages. I mean, it just it was just something I had. Uh, I never figured out how I learned perfect Russian, but I did. And I mean Russians were complimenting me. So, I seem to have had some kind of a language, linguistic gift. And I, I love language. I, you know, just have a love for it. Which is, I think, where I got hung up and hooked on uh, writing. And I rewrite my stuff over, and over again, because each time I look at it I can, I think I found a better way to say it. So it's just something that I have, you know, I guess. Oh, sorry. Excuse me, this lady has the mic.
- 1:02:51 Speaker 10: My next question um, could you tell us something about your husband, your children? What they are doing? How long were you married and okay, is, was he also from Poland?
- 1:03:08 Mrs. Ruth Hohberg: No, no. Well, I was, I was married for 20 years the first time around. I had two children. Then my husband died in 1976, and then I made friends and married someone after eight years of being friends with, in 1989 - with a completely dif... Well, my husband was a boy from the Bronx [unclear]. Uh very, very, uh very talented very artistic. Ultimately, very sick. Uh, my son, one son is now 57, the other is 51. Eventually, as I said, I, I remarried in 1989 to a boy from Brooklyn with, with, interestingly enough, German, Polish, Catholic background, and it was, it was good. Uh, he died in 2007.
- 1:04:28 Beck Tran: The question was, just for the microphone, was is have your children been influenced anyway, or your grandchildren been influenced in any way -
- 1:04:44 Speaker 11: [interrupting] from your experiences. Have your children suffered from your experiences?
- 1:04:49 Mrs. Ruth Hohberg: I don't know how they may not have because, I guess, I became who I am partially because of whatever I experienced. I believe it has, in some ways, formed my values, attitudes to things. That's one thing. The other thing is that their personalities who will reject, and then there are others who will accept that kind of thing and -
- 1:05:30 Speaker 11: [interrupting] I don't understand what you mean.

- 1:05:31 Mrs. Ruth Hohberg: I'm going to try to explain without showing my pain. My oldest son, who is 57, rejects any of that knowledge that I might impart. He rejects me. He protects his children from me. So that's how some people respond to this person that's been formed by those things. My other son, who is 51 now, responds in a very different way. He is frugal. He doesn't waste. He, whenever something really bad happens to him he says, well it's not Siberia I'll get over it. You know, he, he always comes in, into that. He says, okay, you know, I'll, it's not as bad as what you had it. Which, I don't know why he does that, unnecessary.
- 1:06:36 Speaker 11: What did you say? I didn't hear that.
- 1:06:40 Speaker 12: It wasn't as bad as she had it.
- 1:06:41 Mrs. Ruth Hohberg: It wasn't, he always says, well it's, it's, it's not Siberia, and I'm not hungry. You know, he always goes back to that. So these are different reactions from two different personalities. One rejects it completely, and the other one says, well you know, things are not as bad to me, he says. You know, about his whatever, because he's made some really bad mistakes.
- 1:07:10 Speaker 13: My questions are a little different than that. In the years of befriending and knowing Holocaust survivors, there are some that discuss it, that go to the schools and talk about it, and there are others that we've been close to never discussed it with their children, grandchildren, and I don't blame any of them and kept it within. Which did you, keep it within, or discuss it with the children?
- 1:07:41 Mrs. Ruth Hohberg: I can't say I discussed it because it was not a subject that was invited by their father. In other words, the atmosphere, the, the ambiance was not conducive to telling stories. As a matter of fact, it never even occurred to me to write about it. I, this is like washing my laundry out in public. But my motivation to even begin to write came in a very strange way. I never thought of writing, or being a writer, or being an author, or any of those things. When my older son had his children, and I asked to see them, he was very reluctant. He made, he put all kinds of rocks in my way, and he was very unkind and unfriendly. And it occurred to me when I was taking care of my mother, that she didn't really tell me anything about my grandparents, my great-grandparents. And I thought, gee maybe these babies will someday want to know who their grandmother was, and if things continue as they are with their parent - with their father and their mother - they'll never know they even had a grandmother.
- 1:09:02 Mrs. Ruth Hohberg: And somehow, between taking care of my mother, and realizing that I wanted to record what was happening with my mother for self-protective purposes - because my son, as I said, was very unfriendly and I had a feeling that he may come back at me someday - so I wrote things down on a daily basis. And then I said, gee you know why don't I write down other things, you know, like about my life? So if, if my grandchildren should ever want to know who I

was, it'll be there for them. And then we moved, and there was a writing group across the street that I found out about. And I thought, well I'll go down and take a look and asked if it was okay if I were to write about me. Because I thought, with my background, me was a totally non, it wasn't important. In the Soviet scheme of things, the me is really secondary, no tertiary, if at all. So, the lady who was in charge that particular day said, sit down. And I felt very frightened, but then they asked me to read what I had. And it was in pencil, and in a notebook, and they chastised me for making a laundry list of events. And they told me to show, don't tell. And slowly I began to peel down, to be able to say what I just did, but it took what 10 years or something.

- 1:11:11 Speaker 14: You're a remarkable woman.
- 1:11:15 Mrs. Ruth Hohberg: Well, thank you.
- 1:11:16 Speaker 15: You've paid your dues many times over.
- 1:11:18 Mrs. Ruth Hohberg: Yeah, and that's why I sometimes feel that my life was filled with must, have to, should, ought to, any other words that mean the same thing? Don't want no more.
- 1:11:37 Speaker 16: But the fact is, you're still here.
- 1:11:40 Mrs. Ruth Hohberg: And I aim to finally have some fun and I am.
- 1:11:48 Speaker 17: [unclear]
- 1:11:50 Mrs. Ruth Hohberg: Well thank you, thank you so much. Yes sir.
- 1:11:53 Speaker 18: You made a comment there at one point in your while growing up you had bouts of two, three hours of crying which was a response, stress response, basically.
- 1:12:03 Mrs. Ruth Hohberg: I imagined so.
- 1:12:05 Speaker 18: And you called it?
- 1:12:06 Mrs. Ruth Hohberg: PTSD.
- 1:12:09 Speaker 18: Yeah, PTSD. Um, what's the source? Is, is that a known phenomenon?
- 1:12:15 Mrs. Ruth Hohberg: The PTSD? Post-traumatic stress syndrome.
- 1:12:18 Speaker 18: Yeah no, no. I don't mean that. I mean the crying parts, connected to PTSD.

- 1:12:22 Mrs. Ruth Hohberg: I have no idea I never followed it up. Life is you know, I've got things to do.
- 1:12:29 Speaker 18: It makes sense, but I wonder where it comes from.
- 1:12:32 Mrs. Ruth Hohberg: I have no idea. As I said, it just hit me one day. And I said, oh that must be what it was. And it's like, so.
- 1:12:43 Speaker 19: Has your family ever considered moving to Israel, instead of the United States?
- 1:12:49 Mrs. Ruth Hohberg: Well I did, personally. Personally I, I had considered it when I was 19. In fact, I was, I was totally in love with a young man who was from Israel. But when I got there, we went to visit my grandmother, my mother and I. My grandmother lived, by this time they had moved to Israel from Poland, and they lived on Mount Carmel. So it was a consideration, but it didn't happen.
- 1:13:28 Susanne Hillman: Well, I would like to thank all of you for coming, for your very good questions. And I especially would like to thank Becky Tran and Ruth Hohberg. And may you have a lot of fun in your future years. Thank you very much. Please feel free to come forward and to meet Mrs. Hohberg personally if you like, and don't forget to take a flier on your way up. Thank you for coming.
- 1:14:00 [The Library / UC San Diego]