

Sheppard Helen 2017-01-18 Transcript

0:00

Elizabeth Weinstein (EW): My name is Elizabeth Weinstein. I am a board of trustees member at the Tully Library but I am here today at the Oaks at Menorah Park in DeWitt. Today is Wednesday, January 18th 2017 and I am speaking this afternoon with Helen Sheppard. Good afternoon Helen. Helen refers to me as Betsy, so if she calls me Betsy that's just fine. Okay Helen, I wonder if you could tell us long love you've lived here at the Oaks?

0:46

Helen Sheppard (HS): I think it will probably be ten years next April, maybe 11. I'm not sure anymore.

0:58

EW: Where did you live before Canada?

1:00

HS: I came to Syracuse from Toronto, Canada but before that I originally came from London, England.

1:11

EW: Where did you group up in London? That's what I wanted to ask you- if you could tell me a little bit about your parents, what they were doing in London, were they born there?

1:23

HS: No, that's a long story. Both my parents were born in Poland, it was probably part of Russia at the time. My father was born in a small town in Poland. My mother was born in Warsaw. She prided herself on being a Warsaw girl, and not a country girl. They came to England in 1919 after the First World War and I was born in 1920. My mother and father came to live, and I should say-- because her brother had already come to England sometime around 1910-- and he brought his sister, my mother, and father, to London.

2:25

EW: Excuse me. Essentially it sounds like your extended family transported/emigrated to England to London specifically.

2:31

HS: No. My mother's sister and her family and my mother's sister's husband but was all. My father's family all remained in Poland and all the old people died in the Holocaust. It was all the younger people that left and came to London to us after the second World War.

2:58

EW: So how old did that make you when the Second World War began?

3:00

HS: Must I tell the truth? [laughter]. I was 19.

3:13

EW: Do you want to tell us what was like, when war broke out in London?

3:18

HS: Well, it's sort of hard to tell. I remember very well when the war first broke out. I remember what happened in the time before the war because I remember the Spanish Civil War. I had friends who up went to fight in Europe and came back. I remember when the Japanese invaded China and that had me very, very worried because we saw pictures of the bombing. We remember going to the movies; they were showing news programs and we would see the bombing. I was very, very scared because I was worried my two younger sisters. I thought that I would manage and my other sister who was two years younger would manage, I didn't worry about my mother and father but I did worry about the two little girls. I was terribly afraid that the war would come to England. But when the war actually came, I wasn't afraid anymore. There was no point in being afraid of it. It was there. And so I could tell you a whole story about hearing that we had to gas proof our rooms. Would you like hear all of that?

4:46

EW: Yes.

4:47

HS: Okay, I remember hearing Chamberlain telling us that he's come back with a paper from Hitler that there wasn't going to be a war. I remember that war was declared, I think it was on a Sunday morning. We had been prepared for that. We were told if war was declared, we may have gas. We may have gas. So you have to make a room ready where you could all shelter. And we were told to wet our blankets and hang them up over doors and the windows so that the gas couldn't penetrate. I don't know whether it would have done any good but anyway, I did. I was the oldest and I did that. I hung up a wet blanket over the front door. My father was out at the time. He used to go and listen to speeches at Hyde Park

but he came home as soon as the declaration was made. We were all sort of sitting in the room, waiting to see what would happen. My father opened the front door and the wet blanket hit him in the face. [laughter]. My father had a temper and when he came in he was so annoying. What stupid foolishness is this, he said. Well daddy, I said, we were supposed to do this. He said forget it, if the gas comes a wet blanket won't help you. That's the story of the wet blanket.

6:24

EW: So that was the last wet blanket that you hung.

6:27

HS: Yeah. I could tell you more about that but um.

6:31

EW: Would you like to?

6:33

HS: If you like. I went to work, I was already working by the time. My sister was working too and it was fairly quiet as I remember for a while. We were issued gas masks and showed how to wear them and told that we had to carry them with us all the time and so we did. But eventually there was some London was bombed and I think I remember that part of it because my mother, we would when the siren went off-- it seemed to always be just at the time when we're sitting at the table for dinner-- but my mother was prepared for this. She would bring all of the covers of the pans, the saucepans, and when the sirens went off she would cover our dinners with the saucepans. We would go across the road to where there was a residential hotel. At the basement of the hotel there was a very big billards table and the young people would get under the billards table. The old people would sit around the table and talk. We did hear gunfire, but I lived in North London and the gunfire was in the distance. I remember had some soldiers billeted in the hotel-- these were British soldiers, not American- they came afterwards. They would say: Well I think it's all right, we can go out and see if we can see anything. So we would go out and see if we could see anything. It was dark but fortunately London wasn't bombed right away.

8:27

EW: I want to ask if you this is a question that you can answer-- if you are aware of the war in a different way because your family was Jewish, if your friends were aware of it-- if your friends you grew up with were not Jewish?

8:49

HS: Not at all, not at all. I was working in a big dress company for a while that changed afterwards, but no one ever seemed to talk about it, especially during the first part of the war. My mother and father I'm sure were worried about their parents but they never talked about the war to us. They never made us frightened that the Germans might come. They-- weren't scared about that at all. The thing that I was worried about was the bombing. That we would eventually be bombed. But as I said before, we were there. If we were going to be bombed we were going to be bombed, there wasn't a point in worrying anymore.

9:43

EW: I believe you told me once that you met your husband, or the man who became your husband, during the war. Can you tell us about this?

9:53

HS: Yes. I belonged to a youth group, um it was called Halbonim. It was a Zionist Youth Group. We all believed very definitely that one day we would be able to go to Israel, it was called Palestine at the time. About once a week we would go to this youth group. We would walk there. It was quite a walk but that was okay-- there was no bombing or anything like that. And I would like to read science fiction magazines. It was at a private house that we had. I would like to read science fiction magazines and if there was no one there, I would simply take my book and read. One night, I'm reading my science fiction book over by the fireplace. We would have open fires in those days. And I looked towards the doors to see somebody come in-- a tall, handsome soldier. I took one look at him and I thought- oh, that's for me.

11:15

EW: He was a soldier?

11:16

HS: Yes he had just been taken into the army. I think he was still doing his eight weeks of training. He looked not at me, but at the magazine I was reading. It was an American science fiction magazine and they were very hard to get because we didn't have them in England. He wanted to read the magazine, so he came over and talked to me. And that's the end of the story!

11:40

EW: Well that isn't quite the end of the story, because you told me that you met him in February and got married in May. Is that correct?

11:54

Yes. I met him the first week of February and the crowds were going to a Valentine's dance. So he asked if he could take me to the dance and I said, "Oh, I'll meet you there." I didn't want him to pick me up. And I did, and things proceeded very quickly. Remember there was a war on, and we didn't know what was going to happen next. He might have been sent off and so he proposed to me, I think maybe two or three weeks after Valentine's Day. I said, well you have to ask my father because I knew my father was very old-fashioned and he was not like to have me just say I'm getting married, so Harry came to the house. This was the first time he came to the house and he asked my father in the dining room. Well our dining room was our special room. It was not used normally. We had a big kitchen and little sort of scullery off the kitchen where my mother did the cooking but the kitchen was really our living room. So he went into the dining room and spoke with my father and apparently it was okay.

13:19

EW: Did either you or Harry ever go to Palestine?

13:23

HS: No. Harry, after the war, he did make an application to go and he came back very annoyed with him because they asked him-- what will you do when you're in Israel? He said well, I'm a chemist- I want to work with a research chemist. They said to him -- well we don't need any chemists, we need people to work on the land. And Harry had worked very hard to become a research chemist, his family was not well off. His oldest brother is the one that helped him go through school and university. He felt well, if he was going there, he wants to do what he's been trained to do. Apparently, the man who interviewed really put him off so he didn't go. But eventually we both went to Israel and visited.

14:29

EW: I thought so. Cause I knew you had made some trips. But you did emigrate to Canada, what year was it? Wasn't it because Harry got a job as a chemist?

14:39

HS: Yes, yes. In 1947 Harry was working for a chemical company that already had-- I don't know what the word is-- they sold a process to a company in Canada. The company in Canada needed someone to set up the plant so this process could take place and so they asked if Harry would go over there. Apparently it was going to be a three month thing and Harry said-- should I go? I wasn't going to hold him back so he went to Canada. Eventually, he wrote to me and said they've offered me a two-year contract to leave the London company and come work for us for two years and would you like to go to Canada for two years? And I was excited- I loved the idea! I wanted to see Niagara Falls! Besides which as

Jews, we were used to go from one country to another to make things better. And things in England were not great for Harry as a research chemist. First of all, you really needed to have some if you are going to work in an university, you really needed to have private money so that you could do this kind of thing. Harry worked within a commercial company, May and Baker, which is a big chemical company but he couldn't see that he would advance there. In any case, the pay was smaller and he didn't really see that he would advance although the family had changed their names to Sheppard, which made it easier to get the job. Of course it was known that he was Jewish, but not obviously Jewish, so Harry didn't see that he would advance in the company or anywhere else because it was a tight little group, I don't know how to put it exactly.

16:53

EW: Was in Toronto where he came?

16:57

HS: Yes. So I came to Canada and after two years Harry had another contract on another contract and so eventually we stayed in Canada. Then he was headhunted for a job in Chicago so we went to Chicago. The company in Canada was eventually sold to an American company and they wanted Harry to come back, so we went back to the original company. This went very well until another company bought the American company, and they were going to close the Canadian company. Fortunately what Harry did was wanted and he soon found another job here at Bristol in Syracuse.

17:57

EW: Thank you. We're going to finish up in a few minutes although I wish I could record your entire life story. I may get back to that. I wanted to ask you for my last question or question type-- if you worked when you moved to Canada. And if you did not have a formal job, what was your chief interest, that you may or may not have?

18:28

HS:

About two years after we came to Canada, my daughter was born. I didn't work for about five or six years. I did volunteer work, I became a Girl Guide. At least I'd always been a Girl Guide, but they wanted a brownie group and I became the brown owl as we called it then. I carried on with the Girl Guides, I volunteered with a theater group.

18:58

EW: Does that mean you acted?

19:01

HS: Yes, but I would only get small parts because I couldn't do a Canadian accent, I couldn't do an American accent, so the only thing I could do was a cockney accent or an English accent. So I did a Lady of the manor or a cockney servant-- there weren't many parts I could get, but it was amateur stuff in Canada. I also liked to read science fiction, which I read a lot of and a joined a couple of groups that were interested in science fiction. But it didn't go very far, I mean what are you supposed to say, I read this book and I liked it?

19:50

EW: You didn't try to write science fiction, did you?

20:01

HS: I just knew that I would prefer to read.

20:02

EW: I know that you're an avid reader to this day.

20:03

HS: I am.

20:04

EW: Is there a particular genre that you like to read?

20:09

HS: I still like to read science fiction but it's not the science fiction that I used to read. It's the kind of thing that tries to decide what life will be like in a hundred years time or the difference in social outlook. I like to read about the philosophy of religion and very interested in that. Um, I think that's about all.

20:42

EW: Helen, I want to thank you for doing this interview. Again, this Helen Sheppard and today is Wednesday the 18th of January. I appreciate this time. Is there anything else you want to say?

21:00

HS: No, I don't think so.

21:03

EW: Thank you very much.

21:05

HS: Thank you.