

Interview of Irene Menkin by Michele Milgram, 9/26/1976

M: This is an interview with my grandmother who lived in the shtetl.

I: You want a pen or a pencil?

M: No. Which shtetl did you live in?

I: Vitebsk. You got that?

M: Where was it located?

I: In Russia, in the central part.

M: When did you live there?

I: When did I live there? From the time I was born, till I was almost five. [Note: This is what she told me, too, but it is inconsistent with her supposed birth date in the winter of 1893-94, and the fact that her older sisters Annie and Fannie, who came to America before Irene, arrived in late 1899, according to passenger arrival records and their passport.]

M: Oh. What is your most vivid memory of the shtetl?

I: You know what I remember once? Going with my mother, and she was carrying a lantern, it was early evening. And we were going to pick up my brother who was two years older than I, he must have been six, to take him home from the cheder. You know what a cheder is? Where they went to study. You know, I was trying to think, I don't think they ever taught them there to read or write. They were just studying the Bible. Yes, the Bible.

M: What did they teach them?

I: To read the Bible, and to know the prayers. And that was the thing, because I don't think they taught them Yiddish, writing and reading. So we went to pick him up, and I remember so distinctly when we came there, it was one long, long— with a long table, and all these little boys with their yarmulkes [laughs], sitting over the Bible, reading. And then we took him and he walked home with us. I remember that.

Then I remember, we seemed to be living— you see, that was already, my father was already here in the United States. He came first. You know how it used to be there, then? We were very poor, and I had an aunt who had come to the United States, my mother's sister, and was living here already. So she sent him the ticket, to come here. So he came alone. And then when he came here he started working, and when he had saved up enough money— and you know how he lived, he worked in a shop, and he slept there, and he ate there, and he saved money, and when he saved up enough for two tickets, he sent for my two older sisters. They couldn't send for the whole family, they never had enough money. And they came here when they were teenagers, my two older sisters. [Note: Actually Fannie and Annie were 8 and 10, but to Irene, who was about 5 at the

time, they must have seemed like teenagers.] They came with an uncle who was traveling here. [Note: Fannie and Annie's passport shows them traveling with an "Avram Kan," who is evidently supposed to be their uncle Abe Cohen. But the picture does not look like Abe Cohen, and in fact looks quite a bit like their father. Probably their father actually brought them over, but pretended he was Abe Cohen, so that the Russians would let him out of the country even though he hadn't served in the Army. On her citizenship application, Fannie said that she had come to the United States with her uncle Abe Raiken. Apparently Fannie had forgotten which uncle her father was pretending to be. It may be that Irene didn't know all this.] And then, when my two sisters came, then we had a little apartment, and once— Fannie, the younger one, went to school, and the older one went to work as a dressmaker. And then, when he saved up enough money, then he sent for my mother and for my older brother, and Libby was then the youngest. So the four of us were traveling together. But I remember, we seemed to be living in one room— [...] I think it was one room— and you know what I remember about that room? It had an oven. Have you ever seen a baker's oven? Where the bakers bake bread?

M: Yeh.

I: This oven was built in the room. And it must have been built, either of cement, or partly brick or something. That was where my mother was always cooking. I remember, even when she baked bread, she had those long-handled things to take out. Also, there was space between the top of the oven and the ceiling. And in cold weather, we'd climb up and we'd sleep there.

M: [...] what covering?

I: Yeh. You see, I remember distinctly, how we'd climb up and we'd sleep there in the wintertime. And otherwise, I don't remember. I remember we had a table there, and eating, and I suppose we slept in that one room, the four of us.

M: Do you remember any of the games you played when you were little.

I: No.

M: Do you remember any other everyday things in the shtetl?

I: [after long pause] I don't think I ever played games. I was very...very...

M: Do you remember any of the games that anyone played? Do you remember everyday things that—

I: You know, I remember when my father was still there, we lived in a different place. And I remember when he'd come home, you know, and candles would be lit, and we'd all sit around the table. And also, what I remember, on Saturday afternoon, we'd all take a walk, and there was a river nearby, and we'd walk along that river. While we'd come back, I remember we always had tea and sponge cake. And Saturday night we'd have

whatever meal was left over. See, they never cooked or baked during Friday night or Saturday.

But you know, what I remember very distinctly is our coming here. You know, we came in steerage. You know what steerage is? We came by boat. And in those years, all the poor people— There were three classes. First class, and second, and steerage.

M: Why did your family leave?

I: When?

M: *Why* did your family leave?

I: To join my father here. Oh, why my father came? We were so poor, there was no way for them— And then they were always afraid of pogroms. You know what a pogrom is? I remember a pogrom. I never knew whether I heard it, or actually saw it. Because I remember, out in the street, a group of men on horses. And they had whips. And then— when we saw them coming, we all ran and hid in the house. And these men were the Russians who would come, and really kill the Jews, kill— or whip the Jews. You know, I never remembered whether it actually happened to me, whether I actually saw them, or whether I had heard it so many times—

M: [...?]

I: Oh, sure. That's why the Jews always lived together, they always lived in a shtetl. They weren't allowed to live in any other places. They had to—

M: What— Go on.

I: But what I remember coming across here, in steerage, it was way at the bottom of the boat. And my sister, who is three years younger than I— We had to leave here there, and [...?] didn't see her. I asked my mother where she was. She said she put her in the hospital. And all the time my mother would sit and cry. I think she thought she'd never see her again. She must have been ill, and when we got on the boat, they must have put her in the infirmary.

M: Do you remember what the shtetl looked like?

I: Sure.

M: What did it look like?

I: A little town, small houses, they were all small houses.

M: What did the houses look like?

I: Wood, usually. And occasionally there was a little store in the house. And cobblestones, there were no paved streets there.

M: Oh. And that's all you remember about the shtetl?

I: Yeah.

M: You had herring most of the time?

I: Most of the time, I remember the herring and the bread, and we must have had something to drink. Because I imagine— I don't remember what food they served, because— She wouldn't eat it, first, because it wasn't kosher.

M: [...?]

I: On the boat.

M: But what about in the village? In the shtetl?

I: Oh, in the shtetl we had all kinds of food.

M: Oh. What type?

I: Herring mainly, and bread. And we had chicken. I remember we had chicken, in the chicken soup. And she'd make cholent, which is— A lot of the things that you can keep in the oven, from Friday to all day Saturday, without lighting a— So the cholent was really a combination of potatoes, and meat, and prunes. It was like a sweet dish. And sometimes if they had— I don't know if they had sweet potatoes. In this country she used sweet potatoes. Now we never had such a thing as oranges. We had apples. You know what they used to do? They'd take the apples when they were ripe. And of course we ate them when they were ripe. But then they would store them in the basement, so they would freeze, and then you could eat them all winter. They kept the apples from rotting, by freezing them. And they also made jam out of the apples, you know.

M: Yeah.

I: They made a lot of jam. They had fruit, because I remember my mother would make all kinds of jam.

But you know, in the steerage, in the boat, you know what I remember? I would be up on the deck, and I remember seeing Gypsies singing and dancing. They were also in the steerage, on the deck. And then I— I would look down, and once one of them motioned to me, and she handed me an orange. You know, I had to reach up and take it. [Note: In the version she wrote in 1963-64, Irene says that the orange was thrown down to her by a lady on one of the upper decks, not handed to her by a Gypsy woman in steerage.] And an orange was a very, very big luxury. But I was [...?] over the whole—

M: What did your father do?

I: There? In Russia? He dealt with— I think he bought and sold horses. I think more like to the butchers [...?] For the gentiles, I guess. And I don't know what else, they must have used them for other things.

I: [...?] children. You know, the Bible. And she also taught them to read and write Jewish [Yiddish]. And that way she had a little income. I don't know what else she lived on while we were there, until my father was [...?]. He couldn't have sent her much because he was saving everything while we were over there. But see, I remember we were living near his mother, my grandmother. His mother, who was living with a daughter, his sister. So we were living, surrounded by some relatives. [Note: In a conversation with Joan Gerver in Miami Beach in 1973, mentioned in a letter, Irene and Libby said that their father's sister who lived with their father's mother was named Asna. Actually, Asna was Irene's father's niece, not his sister, but she was born in 1873, so was closer in age to Irene's father than to Irene. The Yiddish word "Mima," literally "aunt," was often used to refer to any older relative, including cousins, so this may be why Irene assumed that Asna was her aunt.]

M: Also, wouldn't the Russians, wouldn't they have, like, opened some of your things, and just kept them and not let them go on? They would just keep them, some things they sent you.

I: You mean watching the mail and such things?

M: Yeah.

I: In those years they wouldn't have [...?]. It's different now with the Communists, they check everything. In those years, especially among the Jews, they knew the Jews had nothing.

M: Oh.

I: I don't know if they actually sent money, or— Because I imagine, every penny they saved, he was saving to get the ticket, to send us.

M: But also, the money wouldn't be the money that you used, it would be American money. So if they sent it, it wouldn't do much good to you.

I: I really don't know how they sent money.

M: Also, if they sent money, you would have had to get a bank account, and then send a check.

I: We didn't have checks in those days. [...?] There were special places, where you could come and bring the money, and they would give you the equivalent, for that country.

M: Oh.

I: [...?] I also remember being very cold.

M: Do you remember the specific types of clothing you wore, besides just warm clothing?

I: No, [...] there was no such thing, they had other things to think about it. So it was more or less old, and all-purpose things, you know.

M: Oh. Were there any other things, were there any events or things? Do you remember how they celebrated holidays?

I: Yes, in the house. They would come from shul, and my father would say the prayer, and cut the challie. And then as a rule, when they would say the prayers, they'd sing. There was always a melody.

In our class, there was nothing joyful, because life was so hard. And what would happen, so many of the people would have someone go off to America, and sometimes they didn't hear, and so families would be broken up. So it was a very hard life.

M: Oh. You mean they would send someone off to America, and the person wouldn't have enough money to survive, and would just die, and they'd never hear from them?

I: Or sometimes— What happened, of course, in those days, we didn't have anyone in our family, but people who had boys who could be conscripted into the army— By hook or crook, they'd get those boys out of the country. There were such things, the boys would even mar themselves, cut off a finger. So they shouldn't be taken into the army. Because for a Jew to get into the army, he might just as well—

M: They'd have to work on Shabbos.

I: Not only that! But they abused them, so they would— so these people would disappear.

M: Also, they would have to kill other Jews, if they were in the army, so it would be very hard.

I: The thing that was always ahead of them, the horror— that the boy must do something to get out of the country, not to go into the army.

I: [...] And I remember I was covered with a pillow. And she [Irene's older sister] was rocking me, the cradle, with her foot. And then as soon as the rocking would— the room was dark, it must have been at night— as soon as she'd stop rocking me, I'd begin to cry. And then she'd come back, and she'd rock me again. And that I remember. It's strange.

M: Because you were so young, you'd have to be a baby then.

I: In the crib!

M: Because I can't remember what I would do when I was a baby.

I: Yeah. It's strange how certain things stand out. [...] But you know what else I remember? I was very sick when I was about three, and I was in the hospital. Look at all these marks that I have on my body. And my mother always said— Before that, we lived in a house that faced a river. And I remember the house, because at night through the

windows we could see some of the boats lit up, passing by. And when we got out of that house, at the end of the little road was the water. And I was always playing in the water. And when I got sick like that, my mother used to tell me later that I got some infection from the water. So I was in the hospital, and you know what I remember? Being carried on a pillow by the doctor! See, it was all my back. And I remember the doctor carrying me on a pillow like that, I was lying on a pillow. And I always remember, my mother never came to the hospital, but this older sister used to come, and sit with me, and talk to me. It was here, various times when I'd get a general check-up— many years ago, I remember the first doctor, when he examined me, he said, "What are all those marks?" You know, I have some under here, and some there. The result, you know, in those years when they operated. I said, "That happened when I was three years of age, and my mother said that I got some infection from playing in the water." So this doctor said, "What you really had was malnutrition!" And that was more like it [laughs], the way we ate. We never had enough to eat.

M: Oh.

I: But it's interesting how certain things you remember. I remember that house. I remember there was a house, and yes, it was more than one room! And I remember the dining room, and I remember my mother bringing the food to the table. And it's very interesting, I remember thinking to myself— see, by then we were already five children— I remember thinking to myself that there wasn't enough on that plate for all the people, so I didn't eat any. It was easy for me. I was never hungry.

But I don't— It's interesting. I remember, walking to her [Irene's mother's?] house, you passed the place where the Gypsies were living. We had no, you know, feeling against them or something. I was just interested.

What was your earliest recollection?