

Museum of History and Holocaust Education Legacy Series

Sheva Vapne interview

Conducted by James Newberry

October 24, 2017

Transcribed by Caitlin O'Grady

Sheva Vapne

Born in Riga, Latvia in 1928, Sheva Vapne grew up in a Jewish family and attended Hebrew school. Following the death of her father from tuberculosis, Vapne's brothers supported the family of seven. After the Russian occupation of Latvia in 1939, life became increasingly difficult for the Jews. The family fled Riga in 1941 following the German invasion, and crossed the border into Russia. Vapne and her siblings traveled to Uzbekistan after their mother disappeared. Struck with typhus, the siblings struggled to survive in Uzbekistan, ultimately reuniting with their older sister and mother. The family returned to Soviet occupied Riga in 1945 at the conclusion of the war, where Vapne worked as a hat designer. After the death of her mother from Alzheimer's, Vapne immigrated to Italy with her children before settling in Atlanta, Georgia. She continued her design work in Atlanta at Neiman Marcus until her retirement.

Full Transcript

Interviewer: Alright. Well, thank you very much. This is James Newberry, and I'm here with Sheva Vapne...

Vapne: Yes.

Interviewer: ...on Tuesday, October 24, 2017 at the Sturgis Library at Kennesaw State University. And, Ms. Vapne, do you agree to this interview?

Vapne: Yes.

Interviewer: Thank you. So we'll start at the beginning. Could you tell me your full name?

Vapne: My full name is Sheva Vapne—last name. And I born in three, five 1928.¹ In Latvia, Riga.²

Interviewer: And you—what was your maiden name?

Vapne: Lapvincki.

Interviewer: Ok. So you were born in Riga. So can you tell me your parents' names?

Vapne: Yes. My father was Yakov Lapvincki. My mother was Dvoira Lapvincki.

¹ Sheva Vapne was born on May 3, 1928.

² Riga is the capital city and largest city in Latvia. It is also the largest city in the three Baltic States: Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania.

My two brothers was killed in the war. Was Abraham Lapvincki and Samuel Lapvincki. One brother died by Staraya Russa and the other by—by Moscow.³

Interviewer: Ok. So tell me, what did your parents do for a living?

Vapne: Mostly the Jewish in Latvia, before they live in small towns, who was tailors—who, who, who have different profession—and they was very religious. And they never make abortion. We was six children. My father died when I was six. If he would not died, maybe would be ten, you know. For each child what was born is for God. And each time they tell children, “If you wanted your life to have better life you need to study very well. If you was study well, you can be doctors, you can be engineers.” Did what mostly they did. We go Friday to the temple together with the parents. We change the clothes, and we have special clothes to go the synagogue. My mother didn’t like to go to Riga—she have rich relatives there—because my grandfather was a rabbi.⁴ And when his wife died she was Bat Sheva—I got the name from her. Did what I promise what I always do the best to remember what did for the Jewish. Because my grandfather thought I go to Hebrew school, speak Hebrew. Before the Russians came it was [00:02:27]—the school—because I need to speak only Hebrew. Well my grandfather was surprised for a short time. I start speak Hebrew like I born with Hebrew. Before, I speak Latvian, German, a lot other. When he promised me, you, the granddaughter for the rabbi, you need to speak Hebrew. I listening, and I did my best.

Interviewer: So you had—your family was Orthodox.

Vapne: No really Orthodox. They was real Jewish what believe in God. For example, Friday my mother prepared for Shabbat all ready meals.⁵ Because when she came from synagogue she have a lady what warm up and wash the dishes. It was the one Friday evening through Saturday for all of Riga to have a little vacation. We in Latvia didn’t have like a United States—we didn’t have dishwashers. We didn’t have...we did all by self. We didn’t have—like here—we, we put the food for three days gonna have—we didn’t have that. We cook everyday fresh meals and kosher meals.⁶ There were special kosher stores where we go buy kosher meals. We milk with meat, didn’t eat ‘cause that’s not what we eat. With milk, only with milk. When we eat with meat, only with meat.

Interviewer: Did, did...

³ Staraya Russa is a town located in Novgorod Oblast, Russia. German forces occupied the town between 1941-1944. Totally destroyed during the war, the town was later restored.

⁴ Rabbi originates from the Hebrew word meaning “teacher.” Today, it refers to a person educated in Jewish law.

⁵ Shabbat is Hebrew for Sabbath.

⁶ Kosher originates from the Hebrew word meaning “appropriate,” and refers to foods deemed suitable for Jews to eat. Land animals considered kosher include creatures that chew their cud or have split hooves. Sea creatures must have both fins and scales.

Vapne: My mother have dishes specially for this and specially for this.

Interviewer: Did you have any friends who were not Jewish?

Vapne: Yes. We have a lot Latvian friends. For example, my father—to make a living—he have a horse. And else they didn't have buses in, in this small town—Preili was before we came to Riga was Preili.⁷ And [00:04:13], my grandfather, or my mother's old sister [00:04:18] not far. With, with the horse we can go to visit them, but it was holiday, it was Shabbat. We was every time and other family together. We didn't have theaters there or movies. We read a lot books. When we came from school right away the mother give us to eat and we need to make homework. And then we have little garden. We go help a little in the garden. Or when my father took in the horse, give him food or take care. We listen for the parents still. When I came United States and when I see what going on some—it was surprise. For us the parents was what they tell, we did it. We was raised, what we did, to be good children and, and eat good, take care of the clothes. When we go to school they have uniforms. Men's go with blue, white collars. I have pictures how my children was going. The shoes need to be clean. The hair need to be cut. If you have long hair, need to make with a band. You couldn't come with the, with the eyes. When I go here the school, I was surprised they came without sleeves at school. In the university I was surprised they didn't have uniforms. And with your long hair, I didn't tell them, I didn't—we didn't tell them why you came like this dress because in Europe you should be dressed perfect.

Interviewer: So tell me how your father died.

Vapne: My father got—We didn't have too many doctors there. And sometimes when you need to go to doctor, you need to wait till have time for you. He was coughing. My mother make a chicken soup and give him tea with honey and milk and was thinking it would go away. When he—when you have six children you don't have much time to spend. You need to work, you know, also. Finally he got so sick. We have relatives in the capital—doctors in hospital—they was working. My mother tell you must go to your relatives to help. And he came in hospital it was already tuberculosis in the last stages.⁸ They tell—didn't want to upset him—they tell, “You don't have long to live.” Then he tell he want to come dying, back to us. When I was six years old when the doctor came late to tell you need to [00:06:47]. She was a German lady, half house was where she lived the other half was the drugstore. Why I was going took, my father my mother all night didn't sleep. I take my little brothers, I was six, and they were four and two. I take them to the park sit next to the drugstore. And she have a granddaughter—Gretchen was her name. And Gretchen asked me always the same question, “Where are your parents when you come with the little ones?” I tell, “My father is

⁷ Preili is a small town in Latvia, and is one of the oldest settlements.

⁸ Tuberculosis is an infectious disease that affects the lungs. Tuberculosis is spread from person to person via droplets in the air originating from coughs and sneezes.

very sick and my mother take care of my father.” And if I take them to play, maybe they will fall asleep a little rest. And she tell her grandmother this. Then when I came late by the door and crying for the medication, I always got the medication. Did what I—I was six years old when I know for to do it. How to got the medication for my father. I never come without medication.

Interviewer: So how did it affect your family when he died? What happened to your family?

Vapne: No, I tell you, it, it doesn't affect much because before my father died a rich relative was live already in the capital, in Riga, promised him before he died what they will take care of us. My mother was not too happy because the rich relatives they was Finnish and German [00:08:06] and mostly speak German. My mother didn't speak German. I was speaking a little but in kindergarten, when in school, you need to know language what kind of nationality is there. When I speak Latvian, when I speak a little German. Later I speak very well. But they kill all my relatives I stopped to use their language. Latvian I still speak right now perfect. When Russia, when the Russians came, I start to learn Russian and speak Russia. Because you need to speak all the language to communicate—to go to speak with the people what live there.

Interviewer: Right. Where did you go to school?

Vapne: When we came to Riga, my mother wanted to find apartment what was close to the school. My uncle take my older brother teach him to make shoes, and the other, gloves. Need to be not far to walk with. We didn't have cars, we need to walk. And also for my younger brother to go to the kindergarten. What was my job? To take my youngest brother to the kindergarten. To go to school. When I go back from the school my mother give me a list what to buy for food. And when I came she tell, “I don't want my children going to evening school hungry. Take them before they go to school.” Because my uncle promised my father what he want to keep education. They feel it the high school very well, they, they will learn for a job to do. What also go in the evening school to have higher education. They want also to be doctors, and lawyers, and architects, you know. Did what, did what maybe the Russian or the German hate us so much because the Jewish want to be smart. If they was doctors, they was the best. If they was tailors, they was the best. And for example, when I finish a hats designing with honor I finish it. And I came already '45 what I go through to Holocaust, no I try my best. My mother was sick, my children, no I was going in the evening, in the day I was working a store with coupons after the war. Everything you need to go [00:10:17] then I start to in a store. When I came I was seventeen after the war, and I was looking like a child. They tell, “What you want child?” I tell, “I came for a job.” “What you mean for a job? You are a child.” I tell, “I'm seventeen already. Maybe I don't look because I go too hungry. I was in Russia, hungry, and sick with typhus—with everything,” I tell. “No, I have a sick mother and two younger brother, I need to have money to buy food for them.” “Don't cry, don't cry.” I tell, “I was in school mathematic the best. You will see I be a good

worker.” And I was the best saleslady. You need to cut the coupons so right now 300 cups sugar, 200 cups sold—butter, this. Two days I was writing the [00:11:04], I remember. And I look old when the big lines came to me because I was working faster for the others.

Interviewer: Ok, well let’s go back. So after your father died, your brothers had to support the family?

Vapne: Yes.

Interviewer: And what jobs did they do to support the family?

Vapne: One brother was studying shoemaker, and the other gloves. The older was, was twenty—he was still not twenty before. Later he was—he start to make shoes. And the younger gloves—leather gloves and winter gloves with fur lining. Because there we need to go with us. Winter we go warm dressed in fur coats or fur collars—only who didn’t have money for fur coats. And it was not driving heated cars in the winter, we walk a lot. And we need to be warm dressed, yeah.

Interviewer: Did your family live in an apartment or a house?

Vapne: My mother didn’t like to live where it’s all the way up high. No, she was looking for a small house. But it was really a little too small for us. Was one bedroom, one living room, and a kitchen. My uncle was not satisfied because he promised my father—my father’s dream was to have a big house with a really big garden with fruits, apples, with everything. It was his dream. My uncle tell, “When you children already, I will start to pay then—maybe they be all doctors—you need to look for a bigger house with a garden.” My mother tell, “Thank you for your help. I got already use in the little house.” And we washed the—with hand—hot water we need to make to wash the dishes. The—I want my brother go to school very clean. I wash everyday almost in the evening—the white blouses where they need to go with blue outfits—the white blouses. And we didn’t have electric iron. The iron—I was a little girl—I ironed very well. Tell mom, “Don’t be upset. They look good.” And I ironed the shoes. But I clean up the house my brother came and tell, “Oh, smells so good. Sheva cleans so good.” When I was a little girl I was working very hard, you know. Then when I came to United States I was working hard because I was used to work hard, you know. We was raised different.

Interviewer: Right. Well tell me, how much did you know about the, the Nazis in Germany?

Vapne: Hah. In—in, in ’39, came the Russians. They take away from my uncle his...But he have the shoe—two stores and, and the factories. And the bank right away close and take away the money. Take away the big houses and put everyone—three families in one house. And when it was something bad, the Latvian tell, “The Jewish brought the Russians.” They didn’t see what they do to the Russ—to

the Jewish. To blame the Jewish always they try. And we were surprised, all the German go to Germany when the Russian came. Very little didn't go. And the Latvian was very upset when they don't have where to go, that they need to stay with the Jewish, till in Russia. And one time when I go from school, they tell me, "zhydovka."⁹ I tell, "Why you talk to me like this?" "You bad people. You brought here the Russians." I tell, "I didn't bring them. They, they came as they self." And the other children tell, "Don't talk too much. They come beat you all. So go away." I tell, "I need to explain what is not my fault. Maybe they don't know." They tell, "They know better for you. They only blame always the Jewish for everything."

Interviewer: So when did—Ok so the, so the Russians came in. When did the Germans come in to occupy Latvia?

Vapne: The, the Russians came the first time in '39.

Interviewer: And then in '41...

Vapne: In '41 came the German.

Interviewer: Ok, and what did that mean for your family? What did you have to do?

Vapne: Hah. What its mean. When the, the German came they start with planes and tanks. Kill right away. The Russian, at least, they take away before the houses, with this—no, they didn't go with planes and, and like the German. The German know in the area where the Jewish live. Where the rich Jewish live, where this live, where, where they... They know where we go in the synagogue. All my relatives were run to there. They go in a synagogue—we think they believe in God also. They, they make a fire. And kill women and children and everything. When we came back we didn't find nobody. When we run to the Russian, the last moment we find out what go trains we was hiding—but we were [00:15:48]. We was thinking there they will not find it. And we—The food is finished, the bank is closed, the stores is closed. My mother tell [00:15:58], "Children, let's go at least take a shower. We'll make a tea. If the German came we be clean to dying." When we came was a relative what she with her sister. The parents live in a small town of walking in Riga and crying. My mother tell, "How you come, and you not dead?" She tell, "I go with very small streets." And they full on the capital streets—full killing. My mother tell, "What you come here?" She tell, "My sister want to go to Russia, and I want to go to my parents." My mother know already what the Germans over there also—maybe her parents are dead already. She didn't want to upset her. She tell, "How your sister want to go? She have money? She have somebody there?" "Don't ask me questions. I don't know nothing." And start to cry—she want to go to her parents. In meantime, her sister know, but she don't tell nobody else. Only we was the one. We was not very close.

⁹ "Zhydovka" is a negative term associated with Jewish women.

Interviewer: Is, is this your mother's sister?

Vapne: No. This was the—my mother's relatives' daughter.

Interviewer: Ok.

Vapne: And she had older sister what also was working. Find out what go trains to Russia. And want to go—no she didn't want. She want to go to her parents live—where the parents live. Now finally her sister—no she don't have other place, she came to us. And she tell, "My crazy sister right away—after twelve minute the last train go away—or we was killed by the German." My mother tell, "Wait, we want to take a shower. Maybe we go also." She tell, "No. You don't have time. And you cannot take a suitcase. If you go with a suitcase, you be killed right away. The German is all over." So my mother tell, "How we will go to the train?" She tell, "We need to go with very small streets, where there—the Germans still not there." My mother was so tired—we without food, hiding there, and, and she was swollen her feet, we sitting there. She tell, "Children, maybe you go. I will go home, take a shower. They kill me—they kill me." I told, "No mother, we go all together." Finally, when we came to the train, it was so packed with people. And older people what make up their mind to stay here. Save room for the younger—pillows with warm clothes. And my mother tell people, "Go like people. We go with nothing. Maybe we go back." We told, "No mom, we don't go back." All in the train not to move. They start to bomb the train, and other good luck—we were sitting in the back. We didn't have close to the window there to seat. The windows was broken. All the people was dead cover up us. We couldn't move. We was covered with dead people. And my mother was crying, "Children, are you still alive?" She was thinking, maybe we also dead. "Yes mom. No, we cannot move. We covered up." Came to Russia and told—"Stand up, stand up. We need to bury the people. Only we can fix the train. Then you will come back. You go in the wilderness right away." Thanks God what it was wilderness not too far. We was all in blood. My mother tell, "Can we go in the lady's room wash up?" He tell, "I don't have time." They start to—mad at me, the Russian. "We don't have time. You need to go right away." My mother again start to cry, "Children, maybe we shouldn't go at all. We will dying anyways." She was going on. All over all the Germans. We was there hungry. And they tell other [00:19:33], "You need to cover up yourself because there's still the planes all over." And we heard only killing, killing, killing, killing. And they tell, "Only the night you can walk." My mother tell, "We don't know Russia where we can walk." No, we was sitting under the trees, and looking—maybe we find blueberry or something. We still not ready—we put in the mouth dirty—we put something. My mother tell, "If it would be a rain, we would have a little to wash up maybe." That was not rain at all. Finally, we hear Russian language. The soldiers they also—when the planes was running—they cover also in where we. Once they start to, to, to talk, my mother go to one and tell, "Do a favor, take my children. I will dying here." He tell, "What you

talking. I need to find the rest soldiers. We—also they somewhere hiding. Did you hear what all the time the planes and killing?” My mother tell, “It what we got here. The train was also killed people full.” He tell, “I cannot help you.” Finally, he changed his mind because right now they need people what go to help the men’s to take in the army with workers in Russia. He tell, “A little I can help you. I will make lines where you need to go right or left. No, only the right you can go.” My mother tell, “How we will see?” He have a, a little lighter. He give mother and tell, “No don’t like this—only here to see. When you walk only late in the night. Little by little a rest, you will come—and there maybe will be other trains already. I cannot promise you. No, if it will be fixed the trains, maybe they will wait for you.” I cannot tell you how long we was walking hungry like this. We mostly walk a little and again we fall under the trees. And, and finally, when we go already like three days—we look trains waiting there.

Interviewer: Where were you at this time?

Vapne: I was with my brothers, with my mother—all together.

Interviewer: But you weren’t in Riga anymore?

Vapne: No!

Interviewer: You were in...

Vapne: We was from Riga running to Russia—because in Riga was the German.

Interviewer: So you were making your way into the East?

Vapne: We was waiting the way to go to Russia. Where they would bring us, we don’t know about Russia nothing. Afterwards they bring us I will tell what we go through there—where we come. When it was the trains, was locked in the people what was the first train—maybe they got in a nicer place. When we came, they take us Yaroslavl Oblast—you will never find on the map.¹⁰ There was maybe people what they bring before and kill them. Broken windows with a broken roof with straw. When we go in, was smelling terrible. Not furniture, a big oven—in Russia it’s *pechka*.¹¹ My mother tell, “You speak Russia. I’ll see what men were brought, where we’ll eat, or where we will sleep.” I ask, he tell, “If you have not to eat, you will eat here. And you can go in the *pechka*—in the oven.” My mother tell him, “We don’t, you see, we don’t have nothing—not pillows—nothing.” I tell mom, “You didn’t hear what he tell. What they cannot help us if you will have what to eat. This means they will not help us.” I cannot tell you, we needed the night—we go in the oven. Black start to eat us. I don’t know how

¹⁰ An oblast is a type of administrative division associated with the term “state.” Yaroslavl Oblast is a federal subject of Russia located near Moscow and St. Petersburg (Leningrad).

¹¹ The Russian *pechka* was a large brick oven originally designed for cooking, and later to heat Russian homes.

this is—in Yiddish it's *vants* in German also *vants*.¹² How it's in English, I don't know. These big black—they start to eat us, but we go off and we fall on the [00:23:18].

Interviewer: Is it a bug?

Vapne: This a big bugs. Big bugs. This would come from dogs that never was cleaned. This was in the house, I don't know how long was there nobody live. Maybe the people when the war [00:23:32] when they came in '39 to when they was killed. Who knows. Smelling terrible.

Interviewer: Was it a barn? What sort of place were you...

Vapne: It was in Yaroslavl Oblast, a small place. Not, not streets, not buildings. Maybe there was some houses. They brought us in a place was nothing was.

Interviewer: What kind of people were there?

Vapne: Russian. And when we start to complain they tell, "All the men is in, in the war. Here are dying children with hung—hungry with [00:24:04]. So you ask for food or you ask—we don't have anything to give you." Tell my mother, "Ask, ask, ask them why they bring us here." I tell, "Mom, what you want to, to ask them? They bring because they was thinking we can walk sometimes. Do something. Right now it's cold, and we don't have where to walk." They tell, "When it will be warm, you will work. Maybe potato spud or pick up with them. Right now it was already cold when we came. Almost winter. Snow still wasn't—it was very windy and very cold, and we didn't have any clothes.

Interviewer: But your mother didn't want to stay there through the winter.

Vapne: My mother didn't want, but we didn't have where to go. After only, there start to be snow. She start to cry to him, "Can you let us go where it's a little warm?" He tell, "You have money to buy tickets?" My mother tell, "We don't have money—nothing." Then finally, he was sick and tired of my mother always crying. They need to give once a year of the last one, they don't have more to eat from the army. He tell, "We don't have good horses. You will stop the wagons, and you will go very—where you can ask them to go to Uzbekistan."¹³ There it's warm."

Interviewer: Why is—Uzbekistan?

Vapne: Why is Uzbek—because all over was the war. All over.

Interviewer: Well, how did people know that Uzbekistan was a good place to go?

¹² *Vants* is the Yiddish word for bedbug.

¹³ Uzbekistan is a landlocked Central Asian state bordered by Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, and Turkmenistan.

Vapne: It was far away. There still was not the German. And there it was warm, at least very hot.

Interviewer: And did, did—Were there people who had already gone there?

Vapne: There was maybe a lot immigration, and Uzbekistan was big. If it was come in beginning, maybe it was—would be Tashkent for example, in the capital.¹⁴

Interviewer: Right.

Vapne: In the capital, they have small houses, and there is more educate Uzbeks. When we came, was woman go with these closed faces. They never take off. And, and there is *kibitka*, there in that houses.¹⁵ When we came—I will tell you how we came. When before I go to talk to a man, that we want to go to Uzbekistan. He tell, “You have money? You have somebody wait for you?” I tell, “No, we are immigration for Latvia.” He didn’t know about Latvia—nothing. “So why you come here? Go to Latvia,” he tell me. Russia—not educated Russia. As a good luck, was one man was from the Ukraine and working there. And he hear what me crying. My mother was—it’s cold, the snow already come. We were dying. He came, he tell, “I was—I know the Latvian life. I was visiting. In Latvia was a good life because the Russian when the German come. A little I can help you.” My mother tell, “How you can help you?” He tell, “Tomorrow will be a train where was the Russian took the Jewish in camps before.” Because they came in ‘39. “And right now is the front very close.” “Does they put them in trucks like the German? And they need to go to Uzbekistan.” “They will be there, sick people. This is not a regular train. This is a train like the German put the people in trains to kill. And this what the Russians have—trains like this. And there I can put you early morning—but not when they see. I can go—they can put me in jail for that.” My mother tell him, “Tomorrow we’ll be dying on the snow.” He tell, “No, I will not do this to you.” “I’m also Jewish,” he tell. “I live with a mother, with a wife, and two children. I have one room with a small kitchen. You will sleep two nights in the kitchen on the floor. I can something do hot water. You will wash up a little. You will feel better.” My mother tell, “God bless you.” She have her ring on her finger. She want to give him. He tell, “This you will need for a piece of bread maybe. I don’t need from you—nothing. I know, a lot my relatives didn’t go and they may be dead in Ukraine also.” Ukraine is Russia. “And, and they right now in the front all over—in Moscow, in Leningrad—in all over in Russia. And they take you—maybe they will take two you son.” Yeah, they took two—they took my brother, twenty years, right away in the army. And my younger still “I will die anyway—I will go with you,” he tell. “No, you stay with mother, with the little ones.” He never—he was sitting, he never talk. He was so upset. He, he tell mother, “I will be died for to go

¹⁴ Tashkent is the capital and largest city in Uzbekistan. During the time of the Soviet Union, Tashkent underwent significant demographic changes as a result of forced deportations throughout the Soviet Union.

¹⁵ *Kibitka* refers to both a Russian yurt or carriage.

through all this.” [00:28:52] cry “Ma, ma, ma—with my little brother, sister, don’t have more to eat. They don’t have a bath.” We didn’t have where to take a bath—nothing.

Interviewer: So it was the three of you with your mother?

Vapne: We was—He go out when he go to the army—the seventeen. He tell...

Interviewer: They, they went into the Russian army.

Vapne: Yeah.

Interviewer: Ok.

Vapne: He didn’t tell my mother—he tell he go look for food.

Interviewer: And he just didn’t come back?

Vapne: He didn’t come back. Afterward he was killed we find out. What he was killed in Staraya Russia.

Interviewer: Ok. So you were with this Jewish man who helped you.

Vapne: He put us early morning in this train. And when my brother, the seventeen years, was in the train, and so were we—He tell him go look for food and water, and go to the army. Then I was with my mother with the little brothers. I was then thirteen. One brother was eleven and one nine, and my sick mother.

Interviewer: So then your mother went to look for food.

Vapne: I will tell you what—how it was. Two nights she was crying when my brother didn’t come back. She didn’t know what he go to the army. She was thinking maybe somebody kill him—what. Well then she tell, “I need to go to look for water. I just want you at least have a little water.” On the train in got and after stops came to Uzbekistan, I with my little brothers and out my mother. Came to Uzbekistan, “take us somewhere,” we cried. “No we cannot go. We will wait with go regular trains, maybe my—we forgot my mother. We were sleeping there at cement floor, on the street, and we found maybe asleep some train we would say “Mom, mom.” Nobody answer. We was three nights there till police tell them to take us to the *kolkhoz*.¹⁶

Interviewer: To the where?

Vapne: To take away—not to be there on, on...

¹⁶ *Kolkhoz* refers to a collective farm in the Soviet Union.

Interviewer: The coal house?

Vapne: This is *kolkhoz* where they put us. This is, they have not houses—*kibitka*. Maybe the army what was where the soldiers in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and not far from Tajikistan. And they don't have regular houses. They have out windows. They make not bread—the *pirozhki*—outside.¹⁷ No, they never give us any food and when I tell them—I show them—“we hungry.” He tell, “Go to Hitler. He will feed you.” And was laughing, laughing. What only Uzbeks speak a little Russia. He tell, “Don't cry, we will find your mother.” I tell, “How you find? I don't think you have the newspaper. How you find?” “We will find your mother, no.” I see him one time only, this man who speak a little Russian. He didn't come. When I was think, “Oh, I sorry he don't come. He promise to find my mother, and he didn't came back.” Finally, what we're drinking from the lake the dirty water was—smelling the water, washing with the same water we got with typhus sick.¹⁸ I the first one. Already they want to take us to hospital, there they dying the Jewish. No, there was a teacher, not far, a school where the Uzbeks go. He tell, “All the Uzbeks can go from them sick. You need to take them to the hospital.” I was the last one, what I didn't know already—nothing. My fever was so high. Then they take me, the first one, in hospital. When I came, I was there almost dead. Then good luck with me! A Jewish doctor was sitting on his seat. Nobody came to visit me, and I through fever would talk. “Mom bring my chocolate. Mom bring me cookies.” And I fall asleep again. He put me cold compresses, something put in my mouth. And, and after three weeks I opened the eyes. He tell, “Oh, sweet child, you opened the eyes. You talk a little German and a little Jewish, and I understand you are Jewish. And I don't see any parents come to you visit.” And I again fall asleep and tell, “Oh, my mother was here, she brought me chocolate.” And I fall asleep again. After I find out when I was better, he got typhus and he was dead—the doctor. And came an Uzbek doctor and she tell, “You very weak right now. You cannot walk because for that what you was—high fever and all. I have, with me feet something. Anyway, tell me what place they brought you.” I didn't remember nothing. Right now I know that it was [00:33:29]—and that I didn't remember nothing. I tell, “I was with high fever. I don't know where I need to go back.” She tell, “If you stay here longer you will got again, and then you will not survive.”

Interviewer: Where were your brothers?

Vapne: In the army.

Interviewer: Your younger brothers.

Vapne: Oh, the younger brother. It was they take after—I didn't know it—they take them in hospital. Yeah...

¹⁷ *Pirozhki* refers to individual sized baked buns stuffed with a variety of fillings. This type of bread originated in Russia and the Ukraine.

¹⁸ Linked to infectious bacteria, Typhus originates in unsanitary conditions and can be spread through lice and fleas.

Interviewer: So you were all in the hospital?

Vapne: They, they was in other hospital because this hospital was the closer one. I was the most sick, they brought me the first. And then when I came back I find out what they came a day before my brothers for the hospital. Yeah.

Interviewer: Ok. So, you recovered.

Vapne: I was covered—no, I was longtime very weak. I couldn't walk and—No after was a miracle when I—before I got sick. When I didn't remember for my older brother the number where he was in the army. I was writing him letters. The first time I tell him not the true. I write a letter because mother working. He [00:34:37], "Don't lie to me. My mother would never go sleep not to write me a letter." I was young, I remember the number. And then I think I did a mistake, I need to tell him the true. Then I tell him, "What mother go to look for food and the train is gone. And we came in Uzbekistan. We cannot speak the language. They don't help us. We not *kibitka*." And I—you know when I was sick I didn't write him long time. Nobody write him letters. Then he ask all the soldiers—maybe they find the husband for my sister. He should be—or maybe my sister is alive. Or maybe where she live is better because he tell the Russian, "take him in the army and come to my sister talk." And he put with his parents, my sister left, and we was thinking she's killed, she didn't come back. Now after, we find out that she left with his parents. And they was in the Chuvashia Republic.¹⁹ You can believe the Chuvashia Republic from Uzbekistan, if to go there you need to go change four trains.

Interviewer: Ok. Well I want to go back. This brother that you're writing, he's not the brother in the Russian army?

Vapne: Yeah. This is—he was, he was in the army, no. He still was alive before they—he was killed.

Interviewer: But how do you know where—Well, how did you know where he was?

Vapne: There was [00:36:03] it's in Russia. When he got me the first letter, was how to write him back, you know.

Interviewer: How did he know where you were?

Vapne: It was before we came with my mother. She the first time write him a letter in the army. We was already where they took him. He took him right away in the army—the older brother. The youngest...

Interviewer: Ok.

¹⁹ The Chuvashia Republic is a federal subject of Russia located in western Russia (European Russia).

Vapne: ...go later.

Interviewer: Right.

Vapne: The older they took for, for, for Yaroslavl Oblast already.

Interviewer: Oh, ok. So the second brother that left, that was off the train. You didn't have communication with him.

Vapne: No. For the youngest we didn't have. The older got right away when they brought us to Yaroslavl Oblast where we didn't have nothing. They took him right away in the army.

Interviewer: So tell me about reuniting with your—get, get—communicating with your sister's husband.

Vapne: It was like this. When my brother—the older—was in the army, he find out what he somewhere. That he was in the same place where he is because some soldiers went by Moscow, some by Leningrad—was the war all over in Russia. They didn't put all the soldiers in one place. No, somebody tell him he hear this last name for my husband for my sister. [00:37:19] was his name. And, and, and he tell, tell everybody, "If you hear from him, tell him to write to me or he can come where I am." No, my brother didn't find him, no. A friend after find him. But was promise my brother, "If I'm dying, you help my parents if you come back to Riga. If you will die and I come, I be." They was very close in the army, you know. They was also hungry in the Russian. You think they have food for the soldiers or warm clothes? They was in places freezing there. Some was dying from typhus and from all kind of other sickness. This was a—if you survived a little this was a miracle who survived. My brothers didn't survive. One by Moscow died at twenty years—and the seventeen by Old Russia.²⁰

Interviewer: Ok. So how did you, did you find your sister? Did you meet up with your sister?

Vapne: I will tell you. When I was in hospital somebody find her husband and give her other address. And when I came back from the hospital, was a letter with the Polish people what was also with us in the train. They didn't leave Russia though, they a little understand what Chuvashia Republic she is, and her name is Leah. When I came back they tell, "You have a sister, Leah. She's alive." I tell, "No, no. She died right away. The German kill her." "No, no. She's alive. We understand Chuvashia Republic. I understand that she." I start to read, "What my husband meet somebody for your brother and give the address. And he tell he promise was right away he will give the address for you and you need to find them. But they long time didn't hear. Maybe they dead. Maybe they're alive. And did what I write you a letter if you still alive, right away answer me. I cannot

²⁰ Old Russia refers to an area near the border of modern day Kazakhstan.

come to you right away. It's far away. I need money for the tickets. And I, I need what I can go there. Maybe I find help. I live with the parents for my husband. He is a good tailor, and did what we have something to eat. We not so hungry. If you come to me, I cannot promise you have a lot, but at least potatoes with a piece of bread, you will have." When I read this, I hear a—a potatoes with a piece of bread and hot tea. I was, "Thank god she in a nice place." Then right away I answer her, I tell, "You come to pick us up, but we have here nothing. Not clean water did what we was sick. I come only couple days from the hospital. And my little brother thanks God also survive from hospital came. No here I don't know how long we will be ok because we drink the dirty water and we don't have food at all." Finally, she got the money. And when I was a little better start to walk was already not apple, not apple—I don't know what—I go by the trees to find something to give my brother to eat. I was putting in the sun a little and we was eating what we got, you know. Grass—what we got. And I was afraid again we maybe we got sick, and we need something to eat. And I start something to pick apple, and I see my sister go with a bag. And when she saw me, "Oh my God." I was out hair, you know. They take out the hair, I don't know when you have typhus. The clothes was terrible—my clothes was old and terrible. And not washed also—we didn't have clean water to wash, not soap—nothing. I, "Leah!" Her name was Leah. "Leah, Leah, I was here." She when she saw me how I look, she start to cry. I tell, "Don't cry. I'm alright now already back if you come to pick us up maybe we be alive, and maybe we find the mother also." She, and she cry, we was crying. Then I said, "Come, the brothers need to see you also, come." When we came, she brought dry, dry bread—*suchary* in Russia.²¹ And she tell, "How you will eat. There's nothing where to put hot water." I tell, "This water's smelling from the lake, no." No we couldn't eat the hard bread—nothing. She go to the police and ask could they so fast take us back. To make us how train we need. She didn't know how to go back also. So finally, she give the address and will they help us and put—and she brought money. They tell, "For two, you need tickets. For me and the other. The little one can go out a ticket." She was happy what she don't need to spend a last penny for tickets. Now we need to change three trains. So far was it. When we came in the first train was already [00:42:30] hot water. "Oh," she tell, "then you can put the bread and, and eat all ready meal." When I go to pick up the [00:42:38], the hot water, I was out hair how from hospital, a lady look at me and she did. My sister was looking also very young. She came pinned up her hair. She was looking also very young. She look only children, and my mother was there from where this woman. When she go looking for us, a dog bite her hand and she was in the same hospital. The lady ask me, "Where are your parents?" I tell, "Oh, my parents we lost my mother when we go here. We lost my mother. And right now we was in hospital. See we don't have hair. And right now we find a sister. We go to my sister." She tell, "Was your mother's name Dvoira Lapvincki?" I tell, "Yeah! How you know?" She tell, "I go to Tashkent, I need operation." And she was pray—tell she was pray for me, maybe the children in a place without parents. I forgot how she tell it in Russia is it—I forgot the name for in Russia where she tell. "And to

²¹ *Suchary* refers to a type of hard or toasted Russian bread.

look for—I will pray for you to have good your operation, and you find my children.” And she give the address for the hospital where my mother if she out from the hospital. I ask my sister, “This is not so far. Maybe we go back to the mother.” She tell, “No. My husband is sent in Germany like a spy because he speak German. And they tell, if he will make ok, they will give him two weeks vacation.” And my sister was, I think, she was hoping what when he go to Germany, he came alive. I tell, “Maybe we go to the mother and then we go back.” She tell, “No, no. Maybe he wait for me already.” She was in a hurry to go. When we came was already what her husband was killed. And we got my brother’s was killed because she was also writing from Chuvashia Republic. We got already where they was killed. Who by Moscow, who by Old Russia. The younger by Old Russia.

Interviewer: Why were they—why was her husband killed?

Vapne: They sent him to Germany to do something right away till he came to Germany he was killed. He was like a spy. They want to send him like a spy because he was speaking German?

Interviewer: A spy?

Vapne: Yeah. And to give the information to the Russia.

Interviewer: So, like he went to Germany thinking that he could...

Vapne: Do something. And then they promise him if you do something they will give him two weeks vacation. And my sister was thinking he will come back. I understand this that he will not come back. I, I, I know it was special they sent him and the German army right away kill.

Interviewer: So, this woman who had met your mother, how did she meet your mother? Where did they meet?

Vapne: In hospital. My mother...

Interviewer: Ok.

Vapne: My mother go looking all over, and a dog bite her. And she was in the same hospital where this woman. No, in this hospital, they couldn’t operate—only Tashkent was the big—where the better doctors. There she going to Tashkent. And Tashkent, if we would have right know before, we would go to Tashkent. There was houses, and there where you would got the job, it would have what we eat. No, my sister was in a hurry to go to Chuvashia Republic. She was hoping her husband would come when on vacation when we come. Her parents were crying, they got already he was dead. And when my mother came she was with

Alzheimer's when she lost all the children. That was the beginning of Alzheimer's. She was crying a lot when we bring the mother also with her.

Interviewer: So your mother had been in Tashkent?

Vapne: No. She was not in Tashkent, she was where the lady leave before. No there, if we would go right away to my mother, there was better. There was a lot people immigration, and there my mother was working. She—we was very sorry what my sister didn't listen, and we didn't go. There was warm, better than the Chuvashia Republic. The Chuvashia was again, cold. And my—when we write my mother a letter to come. Then she ask, "I have a little money, what I was working in, what I can bring?" I tell, "Maybe you can buy, warm something to bring." So my mother put all in a big bag, and she have, have broken her hand. She ask a Russian to help her. He stolen everything was she have there. And she look for him. She didn't find him. He tell, "Yes, I can help you." He stolen everything. Her little money she have, she have her clothes—everything is stolen. In this time for the war, it was terrible.

Interviewer: When—do you remember when this was? Do, do you have a sense of what year? And...

Vapne: I can tell you what year this can be. The war start in forty—in '41. Then we was in, in, in Yaroslavl Oblast. We was a year Yaroslavl Oblast. Then when we come to, to Uzbekistan we was there two years when I got sick all together. Until we came to Chuvashia to my sister was about five years was, was going on the war.

Interviewer: So you—how long were you separated from your mother?

Vapne: Three years.

Interviewer: Three years. And so you and your two little brothers...

Vapne: Yeah.

Interviewer: ...were on your own?

Vapne: I was then thirteen. One brother eleven, the youngest was nine.

Interviewer: And you were in Uzbekistan most of that time?

Vapne: This was, I tell you, Yaroslavl was bad. There was not better also.

Interviewer: Well what did you do in Uzbekistan? Did you work somewhere?

Vapne: There, there was a cotton. We need to go pick up cotton. And I was—didn't have

shoes that my, for my feet. Was always infected from the hot what I go out shoes because I was already my foot bigger—and swollen the feet when we walk we didn't have. The ankles swollen also, you know. I tell you the true. I was crying the, the night. At least I would have warm water to put my feet to wash. We didn't have [00:49:05]. This dirty water from the lake I go behind and wash a little myself. Not toilets. You cannot believe. No, but I tell you the true. If I would not be this place somebody would tell me, "I could not believe what you can go through this and survive." I right not, I...lost my vision. I lost my teeth. And, and, and, and lost fifty pounds when I came back in '45. I, I start to eat and my stomach was from hungry and from everything—when I start to eat I have so much pains in my stomach. When I go in hospital they start to give me medication. I got a rash, and my kidney doesn't work—nothing—from hungry so many years.

Interviewer: Well tell me...

Vapne: Here, here in America the people cannot believe this. But thanks God they have food all the time.

Interviewer: Yes. So in Uzbekistan were, were there other Jews there that had, had come there?

Vapne: This was also the people that what was with us in the train. What, what these men put us in the train where was the sick people before was in Russia when the fronts was closed. Where they, they put them in the train, then they already didn't killed. They could kill them, no. They did right now to help the Jewish to fight also. The little Jewish what was in better shape, all in the army.

Interviewer: And you were picking cotton. So where did you live? Did you have a, a house or a...

Vapne: I telled you it was *kibitka* with stones the floor. We sleep on dirty stones.

Interviewer: *Kibitka*?

Vapne: *Kibitka*. Not windows—nothing.

Interviewer: Whose was it? Who did it belong to? What did it—like who owned it?

Vapne: It was the, the, the Uzbeks have that or the better places. They leave myself. And then when we came they give what nobody live there already.

Interviewer: Was there a family or a person that was helping you?

Vapne: [Shakes head no]

Interviewer: Ok. So you just...

Vapne: When I go I go to [00:51:09] cotton and I show them I'm hungry. Then he was tell—saying, “He go to Hitler, he will feed you.”

Interviewer: And you were there for two years?

Vapne: It was more what two years. I mean, this what I was in hospital. And, and was almost—Yaroslavl we came it was in...It was close to three years, yeah.

Interviewer: Ok.

Vapne: Close to three years, yeah.

Interviewer: So you, you were reunited with your mother finally?

Vapne: We was united with my mother. And when my mother came with us there's a got the letters what my daughter's—my sister's—husband is dead and this. And they was crying they tell for so many people they don't have place for us. “You need to look for other place.” Then we was the last years—this was, this was the Chuvashia Republic...Tatarstan Republic.²² How we got in to Tatarstan Republic...

Interviewer: Can, can you say it more slowly?

Vapne: Tatarstan Republic.

Interviewer: And where was that?

Vapne: I will tell you how we come there. This is also miracle.

Interviewer: Sure.

Vapne: When we was still by my sister in, in Chuvashia my, my cousin from Preili, where we was born—he was in the army, and his wife was in Tatarstan Republic and she bore him a child. And he, when he was in the army, how he got—I don't know—for how they got the address when we was in Chuvashia Republic. We got a letter from her when she born a child, and she got a letter from her husband was, was in the army still and got it. And maybe she bring us and we will help her to raise the child because she need to work. And here there was a good *kolkhoz* and tell, “If you working you have bread with potatoes.” Well we hear bread with potatoes. We answer her right away we was lucky to come. No we don't know how to come. We don't have money for tickets. She tell, “Will take her a little time. She will got money, and she will mail us tickets and explain how we

²² Tatarstan Republic is a federal subject of Russia located in the east-central part of western Russian (European Russia).

come.” I tell you the true, it’s a live miracles. When we came there we was all working at *kolkhoz*. It was a good *kolkhoz*. You—we’d go pick up potatoes, and we go when the bread need—How it’s in English the word? When you make from this. How is the...

Interviewer: Is it a seed?

Vapne: It was seed, and you go and you make from mill, you know?

Interviewer: Uh...

Vapne: How is in English the word—I don’t know, I was before. No, thanks God we were all family working in the *kolkhoz*. My youngest brother all—and we got sometime honey a little. They give us for good work. Thanks to her when she brought us there, we survived—because in Chuvashia Republic also we didn’t have much to eat. And it start to be cold, we couldn’t go work. And there, finally they give us something—boots something—to go to work. And we was working. We was working very good. We pick up potatoes and we go—How was there in Eng—uh ... We need to take out the grass to better clean up where there is something growing in the gardens.

Interviewer: Weeding?

Vapne: No, we was working clean up the gardens to be vegetables, you know, doesn’t have already vegetables also in this *kolkhoz*. There was a good *kolkhoz*. In the Russian some is other ones the lucky, they know how to do better life. And they was Tatarstan. This was Tatarstan Republic. No, this was—at least we have more to eat.

Interviewer: So you were part of a group of farmers? A collective?

Vapne: We were, we was a—Oh! We was with a, with a lady also sleeping on floor. No, she have for to make hot the oven. And we have hot water to wash ourselves. I, I, a little already we live like people, you know. We can for the toilet, not far where she live.

Interviewer: Did your mother work?

Vapne: Yeah, my mother was working also.

Interviewer: So do you remember the end of the war?

Vapne: The end of the war was in forty—in, in, in ’45.

Interviewer: And how did you get the news of it?

Vapne: There they have already radios also in this place where we was. And, and the first one they let me go because they need young womans for came in Riga. And what they want me but I speak so many language, you know. I speak Russia, and I speak Latvian. They want me to come, to go to the families what they big apartments to tell—they put two families in one apartment. No, I was afraid to go, they can kill me, you know. Then I go the street, and I see in a store they need a saleslady. And I go in, and I tell, “I came back, we didn’t find nothing for the belongings.” There is a Latvian man he tell, “he bought the house, and we were asleep temporary by people, let us sleep.” And they tell, “You a child, we cannot give you a job.” I start to cry. I tell, “I’m seventeen and I was in school, very good in mathematic. And I was a good saleslady also.” And then when I was crying the other day who brought me a pillow. I tell, “When I will work the first day what I need go you flea market and buy a bed for my sick mother. My mother is very sick.” Then when I came the second day, one brought me pillow. One man tell me, “You go to the flea market, you tell you got big apartment, not all the way till nothing. Who will schlep?”²³ I tell, “My brothers, we was working in *kolkhoz*. We schlep a lot of heavy stuff. We will bring.” He tell, “I will go help you.” And when I the first time when—and he bought a bed for my, for me—and tell where you got the seller, “Keep it. You need for you self.” So he start to help us when we came back to Riga.

Interviewer: So, where had you gone to get help? Where did you go? You were, you were on this farm and then you went somewhere. Was that Riga?

Vapne: No, when we came from the farm after the war we came to Riga in ’45. Was Russia again.

Interviewer: Ok, how did you get news that the war had ended?

Vapne: There they have a radio and we know already was ending.

Interviewer: Ok.

Vapne: We didn’t have right away tickets for everybody. Then I go the first one to Riga.

Interviewer: I see.

Vapne: And when I find a job I mail it to the rest of my brothers and my mother tickets to buy. I came the first one in Riga.

Interviewer: Did you see your, your home back in Riga?

Vapne: I came, there was a Latvian, he didn’t let us in. He tell, “He bought it. This belong to him.”

²³ “schlep” means to haul or carry.

Interviewer: Who was it? Was it a Latvian?

Vapne: A Latvian, yeah. There was a full Latvian. And he didn't let me in. No. Now my mother when she lost two sons in the army we were staying in the line, they should give us apartment. These people were the children—the, the parents have children who dying in the Russian army. They should give apartment. Then they give us apartment on the fourth floor with not elevator. And, and, and I tell—I start crying—“My mother's a sick woman. How she...” “You want it? Take it! You don't want? Go! Next.” They don't talk to you much. Then we didn't have a choice. We take the apartment on the fourth floor.

Interviewer: So these are the Soviets who are in charge now?

Vapne: Yeah. These already we came back to Riga and was in the '45, again the Russia. Yeah. No they was not so bad like they was in beginning because a lot Jewish helped them to fight against the Nazis. And, and, and, and, and they have the names for this. The names where they died and everything. And these people were the children dying in the army like my mother lost two sons. They must give apartment. These were they didn't was in the army, they was not hurry to give them apartment.

Interviewer: So did you live there with your mother?

Vapne: With my mother and with my little brothers. Yeah.

Interviewer: Did you go to work?

Vapne: Sure. My first job was in a store I was working.

Interviewer: Ok.

Vapne: Everything was bought with coupons.

Interviewer: What kind of store was it?

Vapne: It was a store for, for offices where post offices. In a, in a Russia it was [01:00:06]. This was for all offices where they go and buy food or with coupons—with cards.

Interviewer: And how did you obtain the job?

Vapne: Very easy, I tend the jobs. There you need to cut the coupons or have children was 200 grams maybe for the children—butter. Maybe for them was something better food. For these that don't have children was bread—half kilogram is 400 gram—bread. Then I cut and I write down, and I, and I was working.

Interviewer: Was it because of rationing or was it the communist system?

Vapne: That was still communist. They was not already so bad when they came in '45.

Interviewer: Ok. So they were, they were...

Vapne; They was the best apartments, and the best food was for them.

Interviewer: Ok. So how long did you work as a salesperson?

Vapne: I was working three years, and in the evening I go starting to finish hat designer. In the day I—You know, in Europe what was good in Latvia, in Europe, you can go in the evening study mechanical. In Germany—*handwerk schule*—in German.²⁴ This mean *handwerk schule* you can study, you want to be a mechanical, you want to be—make shoes—you want to, to dressmaker. Then I was designer—hats go in the evening study.

Interviewer: So it was a school for hat making?

Vapne: There was different schools. I make up my mind I want to go to hats there was. Next was a dressmaker, what was studying. You could learn, learn what you want.

Interviewer: Why did you choose hatmaking?

Vapne: Oh, this is a story. The Jewish always when they go to the synagogue they like always for holiday buy new hats. When I was crying, “Mom, I want to go with you.” I was then five and a half. When I came, I picked up for my my and for my mother, or for my aunt the hats. The owner tell, “How old is the child?” My mother tell, “five and a half.” “She be something special. Look, she pick up the right one. Oh, when she’s older let her come be for us saleslady, mommy.” If I were find him, maybe I would go there. Yeah. No, I was working. Three years I was studying, need to study. The second year you go—you can go the second year. The first year you too good already. I very fast with learning.

Interviewer: So when you finished this, this course...

Vapne: When I start to be hat designer, I stopped working in the store. Then I was hat designer.

Interviewer: Did you design them at home or did you have a store?

Vapne: No, no, we was working—it was, it was already hat designer stores. And there

²⁴ *Handwerk Schule* is an antiquated German word for vocational school. Today the term is *Berufsschule*.

was a hat fabric where they make hats also. They want me before to go in the fabric. I tell, “No, I cannot go in the fabric. I have a sick mother and two younger brother. I need closer where we live.” This was a store, and there we make the hats, and then they came and buy the hats. And special when I was already better what I designer, I make new bonus and everything. Then it was very with clothes, where you make dresses and, and, and, and the...all kind of, not only hats. It was a big office where you make everything.

Interviewer: And so, can you tell me about meeting your husband?

Vapne: My husband I, I meeting when I already still was working in the store. He came from the army, and his parents was all killed. They was living in a small town. They was all killed. He was one son and four sisters. None of them was alive. And, and, and he before the war starts, the parents—he was one boy—sent him to relatives to Riga to go studying something. And start the war, they take him with them. And he was also in Russia and they took him in the army. He was wounded, and he have good luck. I have in my book when the Latvian Jewish fight the Nazi his pictures. When the cousin was find him when he was wounded, put him on the shoulder, and brought him in hospital. This why he survive. When he would not pick him up, he was maybe dead. No, he was a very strong man. I have the two cousins with husband him in the same army. Vapne. Vapne was the name. What I have his name right now. My name was Lapvincki before.

Interviewer: What was his first name?

Vapne: My, my husband's?

Interviewer: Your husband.

Vapne: My husband's name I will tell you right away. Khona. Khona.

Interviewer: Khona?

Vapne: Khona. It was my son have Khona.

Interviewer: Ok. So when did you get married?

Vapne: I got married to, to—After the war I was seventeen. When I was twenty-two years old, old I got married.

Interviewer: Ok. So that was about 1950?

Vapne: Yeah.

Interviewer: Alright. And you continued to work as a hat maker for quite some time.

Vapne: I, I was all the time working with hats. I make more money for my husband.

Interviewer: Oh, really?

Vapne: Yeah.

Interviewer: Ok. And...

Vapne: He start my brother—when we came back my brother was fifteen. He met a man what was in the army with my brother. And they was talking who survived if they find somebody from the family is they will help. When I was working a store my fifteen year brother came with good news. He met a friend from my brother what was killed, and he promise he will help. He tell, “I will go, he will teach me mechanical job.” He make, he make bicycles he fix. And, and when you need to lock your home, lockers. And a lot of things. And he tell, “He will teach me and give me a little money to go and buy clothes and to help us furniture.” We didn’t have nothing. We came, we didn’t find nothing. We need to buy what we never was living there. Everything was taken away.

Interviewer: Ok.

Vapne: It was not taken away. The German, maybe they clear out. This German what killed the Jewish, when the Russian come back they run away. Because the Russian want to put them in the jail.

Interviewer: Right.

Vapne: Then...

Interviewer: To punish them?

Vapne: To punish them. Yes. Did what they run away. And this for the family what still was in Riga. They had all this stuff what they couldn’t take with them. And they put in the flea market to give cheap away. It was all what they take away from the Jewish—good stuff. There was good stuff in the flea market. Little-by-little we bought everything—beds, and, and, and a table. When I was working and we came with nothing. When we came back in ’45, we didn’t find nothing where we lived. Nothing of the belongings.

Interviewer: Ok. So you were living with your mother. After you married and had children did you continue to live with your mother?

Vapne: With my mother was, was, was living all the time. No, after I live high and my mother couldn’t go. Then my youngest brother, he was starting in school, and then in the academy. And we got a one bedroom apartment on the first floor for her. And still my brother was with her, and still she was not very sick. Not after

she got with Alzheimer's worse and worse. In beginning I didn't want in Russia was not what you can chose a better place. Was one place she was beginning Alzheimer's—she was crying a lot, she lost where she put away, she didn't remember. No, she was not so bad. Then she was a little with me, a little with my sister. Then one time my neighbor called me, she lost her vision. She operate her left eyes. She have cancer in her eyes. She removed her left—Did what I'm afraid maybe I have already cancer. Then they operate her eyes so she can see. And, and she couldn't hear also. Then my brother what go in the academy make what somebody at the door so there be light a little in her room. No, after she was so bad by herself with her Alzheimer's, she couldn't be by herself. Then finally one time call me the neighbor, "Sheva, you need to mother put in a hospital because she almost make a fire. She didn't—she, she want to put her candle out, fall to the floor. Good that we was in the home or hear what is smelling. When she was on floor she want to pick up. And she couldn't see to pick up." You know. Then I put her in the hospital.

Interviewer: So you were living in a different place?

Vapne: I have already living with my husband.

Interviewer: Where? Where were you living with him?

Vapne: Also in Riga.

Interviewer: Ok, but in another part of town?

Vapne: No. We was in Riga, no. When my mother was in Marijasstrasse I was in Blumenstrasse—different streets only.²⁵ No, I go after work always to her. And when she live with my brother, I go to bring them food. And help anyway. Only when my mother got sick did I—in my lunchtime—go to the hospital to make her a bath. To go a little bit her outside. And I was crying, what I leave my poor mother to hold in a place like this. I—if I would find somebody I would could pay—like here you pay to somebody—we would put together and not let her go there. Now there no, you couldn't find somebody would could take care of her. Only was one place with Alzheimer's—not what here you can a better place find something you pay, or what. There was one place.

Interviewer: So why couldn't you pay for that there?

Vapne: To take care of her a person?

Interviewer: Yes.

Vapne: Nobody want to take care of older people with Alzheimer's. You, you couldn't find other persons, no.

²⁵ Marijasstrasse and Blumenstrasse are cross-streets found in Riga, Latvia.

Interviewer: Ok. And they wouldn't have had a home or a retirement place? That sort of thing.

Vapne: There, there was not healthcare like in United States. There...

Interviewer: Describe the, the system for me. You said you were making money by hat making.

Vapne: Yeah.

Interviewer: More money than your husband. But did you keep that money? Did you—how was it—how much did you get to keep? Because of the economic system. The money.

Vapne: I tell you the true. I make money. For example, no, I, I, I paid for food. I go in the market. I paid more—how much—I was happy when I find because the stores was—Who people doesn't work in the daytime they bring up little in the stores. And was long lines. Sometimes they tell, "It's finished. You don't have more." No, my sick mother couldn't stay on the lines to in the daytime. And my brother also was working. The younger go to school. Then only I after work I go is empty—is nothing. I need again to come thanks God you have flours make pancakes—something. Why you think I, I, I, I was happy to give away my to the end I have a good apartment. I three times changed my apartment. I paid, and I change. Before I have apartment, I change for to have my mother on the first floor. Then was not windows in there for my son, and he was born, he got asthma. And the doctors tell, "You need to have with a lot windows to open, and with sun, and fresh air." Then, then I go in summer, and I rented by the ocean fresh air cost a lot of money. We was going when I take my sick mother there also. I didn't put her then. I take my mother with me also. Only when she was already so bad, that I—Also when I go sometimes there when she was not too bad, I tell my son, "I need to go to look for food to bring by the ocean. You pick up your grandmother and bring her also there. I don't want she stay by herself."

Interviewer: I see. So you had a son and a daughter?

Vapne: Yeah.

Interviewer: Ok. And you worked as a hat maker for about thirty-two years.

Vapne: And I, and I tell my children, "You need to study good. I want you finish something. I don't have education because my father died, I was a little girl. And then the war. I was happy. But I could study professional after the war. No before, we—I was children. I was washing the dishes with my mother. I was washing the floor. I did everything when I was a young girl at home."

Interviewer: So then your mother passed away in the 1970s. And how did you make the decision to leave Latvia?

Vapne: Before my mother was sick, I didn't want to go away. I go to visit her there, and I think and when my mother died, that I was thinking I want a better life. This, this was so bad when you go and the stores is empty. When you have money, and you don't—if you go very early in the market. When the, the president was a, a, a drunk. He take away the farms and make *kolkhoz*. You know, *kolkhoz* is in Russian. *Kolkhoz* is where we was what they don't have nothing in the *kolkhoz*.

Interviewer: Who was the president?

Vapne: Brezhnev.²⁶

Interviewer: Oh, ok, alright. So, so the—it was not a good place to live because...

Vapne: Because...

Interviewer: ...because you didn't get enough food.

Vapne: I tell you the true. You need everything connection to have. For example, to got a nice dress—nice shoes—you need connection to have in the store. Thanks God I make hats designer then I tell, "I need shoes. Tell me where is good shoes." You have money—no, with you money cannot got what you want. Everything was for the Communists.

Interviewer: So, did you have any connections?

Vapne: I have connection. I make hats. I have in stores connection, yes.

Interviewer: Were you—did people seek you out to get your hats? To buy your hats?

Vapne: The people was happy when I, I was—you need to make to got covered medication and hospital—you need to make hundred hats a month. Not only to make, you need to have patient. When came a young woman with nice hair—with a nice face—what she put on is good on her. Came a lady what she go through a lot—or maybe Holocaust also—with everything she came with not hair. She put on, doesn't look good. You cannot tell her you don't have patient. And you need to tell—be nice to her. I tell, "Maybe next week I will make you something new. I will make something special for you." "No, thank you Sheva." I have so many customers because I have patient with them, you know. I go through a lot. And I know she's not her fault what she don't have hair she lost in

²⁶ Leonid Brezhnev led the Soviet Union from 1964 until his death in 1982. He served as the General Secretary for the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. During his presidency, the Soviet Union was in a period of political stability. However, Brezhnev's inability to enact reform led to rampant political corruption and socioeconomic decline.

the wartime or, or from the Holocaust what she go through—what I go through. For me, thanks God, after growing up my hair good. I have nice hair at least, grow out my nice hair, and, and, and I start to look better also. But I was working the store—I eat hard bread, and this was not good for my stomach. Because I was working and put something—did what I got sick also after what we were so many years hungry. And you start to eat. Was not good. No, I didn't have time to make good soup. I came from work, you know. I need to clean and, and the house. And, and, and I need to give my mother—before we live together all—my mother was in the hospital, I run from work to her to the hospital. My brothers wait till I came. I make at least potatoes or something fast. We didn't have time, and didn't have good food what we need. Then we eat what we have, you know. The Russians take the best away. What you think? When I have to the end already a good apartment—three times—and put already furniture. It was with connection you could buy new furniture. When I have the money, I make hats. I make money. No, you need connection to, to buy this all.

Interviewer: Right.

Vapne: And I, only this what I have a good profession what have connection, and pay them a little more. You don't got from the money what is the price. You make them—because if the Russia will find out what they selling, they can put them in jail, you know. And they bring me my furniture in the evening.

Interviewer: Ok. Well let's talk about your immigration to the United States. So you came in '77?

Vapne: In '79.

Interviewer: '79. And you came to Florida?

Vapne: No, we didn't go for Florida. No.

Interviewer: So where did you go?

Vapne: To Toron—to At—Atlanta!

Interviewer: So you came...

Vapne: Now before we came to Atlanta, three weeks I was in Vienna. And five months it was in Italy till, till America accepted us.

Interviewer: Ok, and when this...

Vapne: You think right away you could come to America?

Interviewer: No.

Vapne: No, I tell you the true. Like we have education my children. And I also was speaking five language. Also in Italy, my son and my daughter was working. My son take people what they came in apartment there in Italy when it's cold. They need to go explain what they need to prepare. If, for example, they got sick, they didn't know how to tell what they sick. And my son already know a little Italy, and my daughter very well. They make a little money in Italy, my son, my daughter. When I find a lady, a lady what she find out I make, she tell, "Can you make me a scarf?" I go by her house and make her a scarf. And I make also little money in, in Italy when we...

Interviewer: So you stayed in Italy for five months?

Vapne: Five months.

Interviewer: And then you came to Atlanta?

Vapne: And, and I tell you I did a big mistake. When was like immigration was they know what in Toronto is better. They tell, "Sheva, you make your profession. Come to Toronto. There it's cold. You will make good money." No, people what come before came to Atlanta and they tell, "We have a swimming pool." Next, what is good to them, I think is good. What I will go there, I will go there. It was a big mistake was came to Atlanta.

Interviewer: So you should've gone to Toronto?

Vapne: In Toronto I could open by myself a store and make hats, and make good money.

Interviewer: So people weren't wearing hats in Atlanta as much?

Vapne: In Atlanta, everybody go in cars. Hats—they would buy them—they would not hire me for hats. They hire me for the fur coats. And fur coats was, at the time, what in New York they got the fur coats that was not too much work also. Why, why you think they let me go when I was two years to retired? Was not so much work already.

Interviewer: I see.

Vapne: And I tell the new manager—the German—what he want for the Neiman Marcus. I tell, "I can't go into hats. Make clothes also alteration." I was working for a weekend tailor shop before. And it was minimum \$3.50 and he paid me \$2.50. And she give me the most expensive suits. What I need my hands—small stitches to make. They very expensive suits. And I was happy. I didn't speak then very well English, and I tell "I got the job let's be \$2.50," you know. Yeah.

Interviewer: So you were at Neiman Marcus?

Vapne:

And then, I tell you how I got to Neiman Marcus. There was a, a man working for Ricky. Sometime part time for him, and part time in Neiman Marcus. It was before Christmas—they have a lot work in Neiman Marcus, and was not too many...workers. Then they—he tell me, “Sheva, I saw you make for Ricky, came a lady with a fur jacket. And you make, she didn’t know how to do. Come, I buy you a coffee. Come with me cafeteria.” And Ricky didn’t know what he will tell me, “Go to Neiman Marcus.” He tell, “Oh, he’s a gentleman. Go drink a coffee, Sheva.” I bring always from home my tea. And I was—have a very expensive suits to work, that I was working. I didn’t have time to go to drink coffee or something. After me was a black man with his ironing. God forbid, if he stay ten minutes and don’t have what to do, Ricky tell, “Sheva, you sick again?” I tell, “Ricky what you talking, I’m sick again? I feel not good. No, I’m working. He can iron fast, I cannot make so fast the suit,” you know. When you shorten sleeves you need to take out all the buttons, and shorten the lining. Then you put back the lining, and you need to measure to put the buttons in the right place. If you need to shorten here something—you need also the lining shorten, and with small stitches not so see. It, it very expensive suits. It’s very difficult to work—not everybody. It was working by machine one, two, three—was fast. Now me she put because I finish in designing in, in Europe. And I make very nice stitches, she give me the most expensive. And she paid me only \$2.50, not the \$3.50, and I didn’t complain. No, when I need to go to doctor I need to ask the Jewish Federation maybe, give me to a doctor—only to pay from my pocket. I didn’t have medical with her. Did what I was very upset. Now when this man tell me, “Sheva, what you doing here? You tell your daughter speak English. Why you don’t go in Neiman Marcus?” I tell, “Where is Neiman Marcus?” He tell, “Come outside. See where the black sign? Right here. Let your daughter fill out application right now before Christmas they very busy. You will got the job.” I came home, I tell my daughter. She tell, “Ok mom, I will go with you.” She fill out two applications. When I came, I was smart enough not to go to the manager. I go in the workroom. And there was the supervisor in the fair workroom from London. She know about Latvia. When I came, my daughter write me down how to tell I came from Latvia. I was thirty-two years hat designer. I work with furs—with silver fox, with mink, and with fabrics—with everything. She tell, “Can you finish the lining?” “Yes,” I tell. “Oh, you make beautiful stitches. Really you good. Can you sow by the fur machine?” Because fur you cannot sow it original machine. You need overlock like this go. “Oh, you do so much good job, Sheva. Come to the manager.” And his name was...what was his name? Later maybe I remember. He ask me, “What about if you need to go, Mrs. Vapne, for fitting?” Then she tell, “What you talking?” “She may need help work, you see what kind of good work.” “I will bring a radio, one o’clock.” Oh, Craig Garrison was his name. Craig Garrison tell, “Mrs. Vapne, what about fitting?” I tell, “I will try my best. I will learn English.” And she tell already, and she tell to him, “She came on her sis—her daughter write her down. And she tell me she came from Latvia. She was designer. I understand very well. And I will bring one o’clock lessons for newcomer. And I will help her, and she will learn.” After a month I was speaking English. Maybe with accent. Maybe right

now it's also my English not so good like American, you know. No, you know, when I go for fitting I know the best what need to be done. And they ask, "Oh yeah, nice lady with a nice accent from where you come." I tell, "From Latvia." "Where is Latvia?" I tell, "The Baltic Republic [01:24:27]." They tell, "Ah, forget it. You do a good job. This is important." I tell you, I learned it very fast.

Interviewer: Well, I'm gonna ask you one more question.

Vapne: Yeah.

Interviewer: And then we'll finish up.

Vapne: Yeah.

Interviewer: Ok. So you currently live at the Zaban Tower?

Vapne: I—Zaban Tower I was not living before when we came. We, we got apartment from the Jewish Federation. Until we got the jobs, they help us to pay. Now after when we already start to work, my son never make bridges, he make schools, restaurants, hotels, buildings. No, the Jewish Federation tell, "Maybe you will learn." He start for \$4.00 with bridges. It was a big mistake. I, I was—he was sitting with books near three o'clock. And I tell my daughter, "You speak English, help him." She tell, "Mom, I'm not architect. What can I understand in the books?" Then they for \$4.00, they hired him. Now was small companies, you know. They let him go in the mornings studying English—late in the evenings to work, and Saturday and Sundays. I give him lunch. He brought back, "Mom, I didn't have time. They send me inspection to make also." They take advantage of him! And I—he came in the evening and I tell, "Sweetheart, eat, and rest, and start to learn. I work already Neiman Marcus. And I don't like what you work for small companies." He tell, "Mom, I have a job, doesn't matter." He was not in hurry to pass the three examinations. And then he got married, with a wife, with a child. And I left to Florida, I got mad. She want to make me for a maid, to take care of her child. And she never clean. And I got mad, and I moved to Florida when I lost my job with Neiman Marcus.

Interviewer: And when did you return to Atlanta?

Vapne: When I got very sick. When I couldn't—You know when you sick, all the companies take advantage of you. I didn't know what I—before he, my son, bought me on the ground floor was not central air condition. I couldn't breathe, what I go through in the wartime with the pneumonia and with everything. Then I start to work for a lady with Alzheimer's there, and every penny I hold her to change. When after I change on the third floor—was too hard without the elevators on three and with a lot windows. I was looking for with a lot windows because I want to make alteration. Was too hot already then I was working day and night. My air conditioning a lot for electricity to pay. Well you need

companies to insure it all this. And if they see what you are old lady, they say, "Doesn't work. You need a new air condition." For example, I want to call in Israel there was still alive my sister and my brother. I need special to, to pay more for Israel, for this was expensive. And when I was working already with alteration and with this, and with the Alzheimer for \$4.00, I didn't make a lot of money. When I—And, you know, to work in there and make alteration, everything what you go through to Holocaust was not easy. Then I got sick. And, and the doctor's didn't accept me what I can—one doctor give me medication tell, "You don't have a car, Mrs. Vapne." I will give you for four months, thirty pills a month." I start to lose weight, and, and I couldn't move my hands. And I have then, I insurance was POP, the insurance. And I, and I go to the doctor he tell, "Oh, go next building, they will make a good massage and ultrasounds. You will feel better." I go there. They don't accept it, my insurance. They don't pay enough. Go to the Jewish Federation that helped me a lot. She come and she look in the books. All companies when they want you to take the company, they give you books. I couldn't understand all in the books what is, you know. She find, "Oh Sheva, that far you have who will accept when it's rehab they give you. At rehab they will pay how much they wanted." The rehab need to make the secretary for the doctor, she didn't make any time the rehab. And, and, and when I go they don't accept it, my insurance—I couldn't have in the time not massage, not ultrasounds. I got so sick. Then and the Jewish Federation tell me, "Sheva, you did a mistake. You make all your bills go through your Social Security. Go to the bank, they will help you a little more." No, when I got sick my son tell me, "Mom, make for to go directly for the, for the bank." But I see it's not enough—also in the same bank I will put a little. This was also mistake, you know. The Jewish Federation couldn't help me so much. No, when my air condition—they stop to fix my air condition—when I need a new, they bought me a new one in Florida. And when my glasses I was broken, they bought me before I left, new glasses also. And right now after my operations, is not good anymore, my glasses. And, and, and I, I don't have what to do. My son tell, "Mom, you was in the best hospital, in Emory. And they couldn't help you. What will help you other doctor." He will take for you money. He don't go to me to the doctor. [01:30:02] His son is a student, need to pay for him. And, and he don't have a steady job. Also, he so nervous, my son. When I was going in Emory to find a parking, you my God, we spend hours till he find apartment. And when you come late to sign in for you turn, and you the last one by the doctor—you spend days. When you paid for your parking what is all day there and for everything. When he—I have the Aetna insurance, my son make me when I came back to, to Atlanta. Then I pay the \$103 for my Social Security for medicare was not enough—and they a little. Then when we finished, was so much what we—for every visit, and for first on—\$355 for the visit. And they didn't many to pay. Then thanks God the Jewish Federation got a little help me to pay the bills.

Interviewer: Ok. Well, we're gonna end there. Ok? And I want to thank you for sitting down for this interview. Ok?