

Museum of History and Holocaust Education Legacy Series
Rochelle Lawrence Interview
Conducted by James Newberry
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Transcribed by Camden Anich

Born in Poland in 1929, Rochelle Lawrence immigrated to Palestine with her family in 1936. After two years of bombings and food shortages in Tel Aviv, Lawrence's family moved to the United States with the support of relatives. In 1949, Lawrence married a veteran of World War II. She made her home on Long Island before retiring to Georgia to be closer to her daughter. She recorded her oral history at Kennesaw State University in June 2019.

Full Transcript

Interviewer: This is James Newberry and I am here with Rochelle Lawrence at the Sturgis Library at Kennesaw State University on Friday June 14, 2019, and I want to thank you Miss Lawrence for sitting down with me sharing your time.

Lawrence: My pleasure.

Interviewer: I have to ask, do you agree to this interview?

Lawrence: Yes I do.

Interviewer: Well wonderful. So, could you please tell me your full name?

Lawrence: My name Rochelle, friends call me Shelly, Lawrence.

Interviewer: And can you tell me your birth name?

Lawrence: My birth name was Ruchla Flancenbaum

Interviewer: And, when did you change it and why did you change it?

Lawrence: Actually, it was changed when I came to the United States. My uncle decided he's going to give me, and my brother new names. My name became Rochelle Flancenbaum and my brother became Sanford Flancenbaum.

Interviewer: Sanford.

Lawrence: Sounds good [Laughter].

Interviewer: [Laughter] Please tell me your birthday.

Lawrence: I was born in uh, on uh August 30, 1929.

Interviewer: What were your parents' names?

Lawrence: My mother was, in English it would be Adele Flancenbaum, and my father was Louis Flancenbaum.

Interviewer: Can you tell me their original names?

Lawrence: My mother was Adel, that's a Jewish version of [Adele] it. And my father was Lazar.

Interviewer: Tell me about your family.

Lawrence: I, my mother and father of course. I had a brother who's two and a half years younger than me. And uh, the rest of the family, we lived in Poland with my grandparents.

Interviewer: So, can you tell me the town you grew up in?

Lawrence: It's ca—the town was a small town. It was called Janów Podlaski. Um, it's called a little shtetl. Very small. No running water, no busses or cars, no streets, no paved streets. [shrugs shoulders]

Interviewer: What about the people?

Lawrence: I didn't know the people to well, because we were Jewish. My grandfather had a carpentry shop which worked all the, you know, the big places there you know? He was very busy and very well liked. It was a nice for him, and for us it was very pleasant.

Interviewer: And can you describe your grandparent's home?

Lawrence: We had a beautiful home right on a corner, and it was like a real large "L" shape, because we lived, my mother, and father, and brother, and I lived there. My grandparents had their apart— little apartment. And my father's brother and his family, with four children, also lived there. So it was quite a large family home.

Interviewer: Did you have your own room?

Lawrence: No—never even heard of that. [Laughter]

Interviewer: [Laughter], who did you share with?

Lawrence: My mother, father, and brother. [laughter]

Interviewer: I see, can you talk to me a little bit about what your parents did for a living?

Lawrence: Well my father worked with my grandfather. They were carpenters, any my mother was a housewife. And she seemed very happy there. [Laughter]

Interviewer: Can you tell me about your early education?

Lawrence: None as far as I know, because I left when I was just about six years old. I believe I started school maybe for a week or so, and then we left.

Interviewer: I see. What languages did your family speak?

Lawrence: I only remember, um, my parents probably spoke Polish when they didn't want us to understand. And, the rest of the family spoke Yiddish most of the time, Jewish.

Interviewer: And what role did Judaism play in your life at the time?

Lawrence: It was always very important, um, we lit Friday night candles, we had din— Friday night dinners were, you know like, like a catered affair. And we probably, and we celebrated all holidays, and that became, you know, family time.

Interviewer: Was there a local temple or synagogue?

Lawrence: I don't remember it. I was six when we left.

Interviewer: Right, so that time in your life, those first six years in Poland, um do yo—do you have conscious memories, or are these things that you've taken from your parents?

Lawrence: No, these are all conscious things that I remember as—, that I recall. As a matter of fact, my nephew uh, he's a hydrogeologist, went to Poland and asked me what I remembered, and could I make a map for him and I did. I made a map to show him where everything was, and he called me from Poland, from [05:36 Yonav] to tell me that he found everything. So, I did have a good recall. I – I told him exactly where the river was, where the monastery was, where the shook was. The shook is uh um a farmer's market that came in, I think every Tuesday. So, he was aware of all the thi—the things that I remembered. I thought it was pretty good. [Laughter with shoulder shrug]

Interviewer: From the age of five or six.

Lawrence: Uh, by that time, well we left when I was si—before I was six.

Interviewer: I see.

Lawrence: And uh, tha— whatever I remember.

Interviewer: From a very young age. So, your father was a Zionist.

Lawrence: Yes.

Interviewer: And um, how was he involved in sort of Zionist movement or Zionist organizations in Poland? Do you recall?

Lawrence: No, I only know that when I was about, I guess about three, um we were packing up, you know, we were helping my father pack up and he was leaving for Palestine

at that time. Of course years later I found out why, and he left because he just felt that Jews were not being served properly. And he thought that Palestine would be a safer place for us.

Interviewer: How did the rest of the family feel about him leaving in that way?

Lawrence: My grandmother cried all the way to the train. My grandfather was a man, you know, men don't cry, but it was – it was very hard for them. When my father left he wanted his brother to come with him, but his father said no at that time, but a few years – maybe a year or so later he did follow him to Is— Palestine.

Interviewer: So, do you know the year he left?

Lawrence: 1932.

Interviewer: Ok, and where did he live in Palestine?

Lawrence: In Tel Aviv. He went directly to Tel Aviv. I found some cousins living there and did, you know, [her father] worked as a carpenter there.

Interviewer: Why couldn't, um, his wife and you children go?

Lawrence: Uh he – you couldn't immigrate to Palestine unless you were a citizen. So, he had to stay there, he had to work there for four years to become a citizen. After the four years, that's when he came back to Poland to take us back to Palestine.

Interviewer: And you continued to live at your grandparent's house?

Lawrence: [Nodding her head] Yes. Yes.

Interviewer: And your mother continued to work in the home. Is that correct?

Lawrence: [Nodding her head] Yes.

Interviewer: Had – Do you know if other people from the small town there in Poland had immigrated to Palestine?

Lawrence: Only the young – my father's brother.

Interviewer: I see. So, he was gone for four years, um, how did you correspond with him during that time?

Lawrence: Letters, postcards, I still have some of them, pictures a lot – he sent a lot of pictures. So, we always knew that he saw the cousins, he wasn't alone.

Interviewer: And what did you – and what did he tell you about his life there?

Lawrence: Well, the pictures showed it. The scenery was wonderful. The sun shone there. The beaches were beautiful. He was – it was a different life, because it was a city, a

large city. There were, you know, movies, theaters, buses, I mean it was what we have in New York.

Interviewer: And, after he returned, how did your mother feel about this big move?

Lawrence: [Sighs] My mother was pretty happy living where we were. She got accustomed – she wasn't from that town. She was from another city. As a matter of fact, she was from a larger city, but she really enjoyed [10:16 Yonav] And she didn't really want to leave the ci— that city. She be—had friends there and she seemed very [shrugs shoulders] pleased with her life there.

Interviewer: Do you recall any conversations between them, any conversations about the move, her resistance, his encouragement, that sort of thing?

Lawrence: I'm sure I must have, but it wasn't part of my life, you know? [Laughter] I was just – I was just a little kid.

Interviewer: Right, well tell me about what ultimately motivated her.

Lawrence: That was one night my father and I took a walk, and we walked from our house, which was a real corner-house, you know, down the street to the monastery, which was just about two blocks away. And while we were walking, in front of the monastery, some kids were – started throwing stones at us. I was not hurt that I recall, but my father was hurt, he was hit in the head and he – we came home and he was bleeding, and when my mother saw that she was horrified. And my father said, "This is not a place for Jews." That's the only thing I remember, and six weeks later we left.

Interviewer: Had anything like that happen before to members of your family or friends in the community?

Lawrence: No, that was the first time that, an incident, seemed to appear. And my father said that if it can happen with children it can happen with adults and that was it.

Interviewer: Did you – this may be an odd question, did you know any of these children?

Lawrence: [shakes head] No.

Interviewer: Were they local children?

Lawrence: [nods head] Yeah.

Interviewer: I'm assuming Catholic children?

Lawrence: Probably, because the monastery was a Catholic mone—my grandfather did all the work at the monastery at the, you know, church. He was very very well known. So,

I – we don't know what caused this to happen, but my father – he surmised that things were starting to heat up – that Hitler's influence was starting to spread.

Interviewer: I see. So, you said six weeks after that attack your family was making the trip. What did your family pack for the trip to Palestine?

Lawrence: That was another thing, you couldn't take anything out of, worthwhile, out of Poland. We were only allowed to take our bedding, you know, pillows and blankets. My mother was able to take the head of a sewin— [gestures with hands] just the head of the sewing machine. And when she was packing up she sort of put our um, our um candelabras [gestures with hands] wrapped in the blankets and we still have them. I broug- we – my daughter has them, grandchildren will share them, and uh, the clothes on our backs and that was basically all we could take.

Interviewer: What did you expect to find in Palestine?

Lawrence: Well, from my father's letters it was beaches, swimming. We didn't even know what theater was. We didn't know what buses were. We didn't, we lived a very sheltered life in Poland.

Interviewer: Can you tell me about the journey, and crossing borders, and transportation?

Lawrence: We started in [14:27 Yonav]. By horse and wagon we went to the next town, which was [14:33 Byalla], and from [Byalla] I guess we took a bus to Warsaw. And in Warsaw we boarded a train, and that train just went through [gestures with hands] all the countries, all the way down to Turkey. That's where we boarded a ship, and being small kids, my brother and I had a ball on that ship. We ran from morning till night, and then we headed to Haifa in Palestine. I think we did stop in Venice and Genoa somewhere along the line, but I don't know how that came about. We didn't have any paperwork or anything, or at least I didn't. And then on to Haifa in Palestine.

Interviewer: Did your father have a place there waiting?

Lawrence: He had an apartment, was rented for us, and we were in Tel Aviv, right in the heart of Tel Aviv. And many years later I went to visit, but the city was magnificent, I mean, we had streets I mean real streets not, you know, horse and wagon [laughter] streets. We had theater, we had movies, we had buses, we had schools, we had – we saw apartment buildings. I had never seen an apartment building. We only saw [gestures with hands] little houses. I thought that the apartment buildings were up to the sky, but some of them were only three-stories high.

Interviewer: It was just different.

Lawrence: Yeah, totally different.

Interviewer: And you've mentioned the movies and the theater several times. What did movies mean to you at that point, I mean did you go to many?

Lawrence: Yes, we went to movies. We saw Shirley Temple. I mean, that was probably the only thing I can remember. Theater - there was music all over. And we went to the beaches. We had the beach. Tel Aviv beach was beautiful. We went swimming. I didn't know about swimming. I mean, we were allowed to put our feet in the river, but we didn't know anything about swimming.

Interviewer: Who were your neighbors there?

Lawrence: Honestly, I don't remember, but I know I had a friend who had a Shirley Temple doll. We never - I never had that. My grandmother made ragdolls for me. So, I was pretty impressed with that. I went to school there from - I went first grade and second grade. We learned the language immediately. We were talking. We had no problem with that. My brother was only six years - no my brother was three-and-a-half years old. He was probably close to six by the time we left.

Interviewer: And, were you interacting with mostly Jewish people in Tel Aviv, or did you have interactions with other?

Lawrence: I don't know. We had a lot of cousins, so we interacted with them. And, my father made friends there. Otherwise, I really didn't know too much.

Interviewer: And, did your father continue working as a carpenter there?

Lawrence: Yes.

Interviewer: Do you remember the sort of jobs he was doing?

Lawrence: Wood, cutting wood, you know I really didn't know the extent of his work until many years later.

Interviewer: And what about your mother? What work did she do in Tel Aviv?

Lawrence: She was a homebody. My mother was - I think she was kind of sickly, but I didn't know at that time. My brother, unfortunately, was hospitalized several times while we were in Palestine. And, that was very scary. We were always concerned about him.

Interviewer: What was his illness?

Lawrence: I think he - he had very severe pneumonia twice, so he ended up in the hospital quite a bit. And, then things changed and we - my father and mother felt that we couldn't survive there any longer. We were getting a little hungry. There was very little food there, very little. And if there was any food it was too expensive for us to buy. Another thing, we also had bomb scares, a lot of bomb scares in Tel Aviv.

We lived in sort of in the middle of a block, and at the beginning of the – at the corner of the block there was a lumber yard, and the Arabs would put bombs in between the boards and then they would tell us that they're gonna [sic] blow it up and we had to run for shelter. So, that happened quite a number of times. And another time my brother and I – we went to the shook, which is the, um, a farmer's market, which wasn't very far from our house, maybe a block away where the Arabs and the Jews held – sold their wares, and a bomb exploded. My brother and I were not hurt. We just ran home when we heard the bomb explode. So, that was enough to scare us.

Interviewer: Did you know any more about the situation there than your experience of these bombs?

Lawrence: [shaking head] No, just what my father told – probably told us later on when we could understand it better, but it scared us enough to consider leaving.

Interviewer: Well, before we move on to the trip to the States, can you tell me how much contact you had with your family back in Poland while you were in Palestine?

Lawrence: Oh, we tried. We kept in touch with everybody, because my uncle went back to Poland. He was there with his family, so the contact was with, you know, my parents with the grandparents and my uncle and his family.

Interviewer: In terms of the rise of Hitler and Nazism in Germany and right-wing groups in Poland, I mean, is that something that your family was conscious of at that time for those relatives that were still there?

Lawrence: My father was. He begged and begged and begged for them to come, and they just said this is their life and they'll stay there.

Interviewer: And your grandparents who had been there, did they leave at some point, or did they remain?

Lawrence: [shaking head] No no no. My, my uncle, this was many many years later, my uncle and my grandfather were shot in front of the house. They were shot dead. They killed them. We never found out what happened to the rest of his – my my uncle's family. We suspect that they were put into concentration camps, but only one cousin did survive from that era. And, he was in the underground, and whatever he found out was what we kne- were told. And it was pretty sad.

Interviewer: So talk to me about the early stages of planning to leave Palestine. How did you make the decision, and how was it possible?

Lawrence: [wipes eye] That was my mother and father got married and my grandfather, my mother's father, had already been in the United States from 1910. He came back –

I believe he came back to Poland during the First World War, and after the First World War he went back to America. My mother and father were married in 1928 at this point, and my grandparents, my grandfather, took the whole family except for my mother who was now married. He took the whole family to America, brought them all to America. My father's family was mostly here. He had a brother, an older brother, and four sisters who emigrated to the United States. So, a lot of the family was in the United States. And my father called, you know, wrote to them and said things don't look good here in Palestine. Isn't there a chance that we could come to America? And somehow my uncle, my grandparents were able to sponsor us, and eventually we left. After two-and-a-half years in Palestine my parents were ready to leave, because we just weren't making it there.

Interviewer: This was about 1938?

Lawrence: Just about.

Interviewer: And, tell me about the journey.

Lawrence: The journey was frightening. We had to go from Tel Aviv to Haifa. I don't know how the trip was. All I know is that we went through a lot of mountains, and while we were going through the mountains we were told to duck our heads towards, you know, under the seats. So, many parts of the mountains we were told, you know, drop to the bottom of the – buses I guess it was. We had to protect ourselves, because the bus that left earlier than we did was shot at. And, for protection we had to sit with our heads below the windows, and we managed to get out.

Interviewer: And where did you proceed from there?

Lawrence: From Haifa we boarded a ship, [26:37 The Rex]. The only reason I remember [The Rex] is because they gave us postcards with the [gestures with hands] ship emblem on it, and we had – my brother and I were so proud of that. And we were in the lowest section of the boat, so we really didn't see too much. I don't even know if we had windows or anything. The only thing that I remember from the ship was that they – it was an Italian ship, so we learned *mangiare mangiare*. That's food or eat or something, and the food was excellent. And then we started to come closer to America, and the day we arrived there my father took me up on the top deck, and we were there from five o' clock in the morning, very early, it wasn't even light out, waiting to see the Statue of Liberty, 'cause that was the biggest attraction. I mean all I heard was the Statue of Liberty. And, we came into Brooklyn Harbor or something. The whole family was there, all the family. Cousins, and uncles, and grandparents. I mean, I never saw so many people at one time, and they had cars! They had their own cars, which we could never imagine. And that was the start of a good life.

Interviewer: Do you remember being processed in as a passenger or as an immigrant? Where did you come through? You mentioned Brooklyn Harbor. What was that process like? You may have been too young.

Lawrence: We didn't go through Ellis Island that I know. We came through directly to Brooklyn, and we had a very exciting time. After meeting the whole family we were waiting for our baggage to be [gestures with hands] unloaded, and to our surprise our baggage was in [gestures with hands] a, not a carton, but a wicker basket or something and it [gestures with hands] dropped. So, anything my mother had in that basket was fairly much destroyed except the [gestures with hands] candlesticks. That survived.

Interviewer: And where did you get setup to live at that time?

Lawrence: We stayed with my grandparents for a couple of months, and then we moved to the Bronx where my father's whole family was, his sisters, his brothers, and we lived in the Bronx – Bronx, New York.

Interviewer: Where did your father go to work there?

Lawrence: We came in on May 13th, Friday May 13th, and somehow my father went to work on Monday, got on a train, had an address to go to and started to work as a carpenter.

Interviewer: So he remained a carpenter.

Lawrence: All his life.

Interviewer: Three continents. Three countries.

Lawrence: [Nods Head]

Interviewer: Living in the Bronx, I mean you obviously had a lot of family there. How did you feel living there? Did you – did it feel sort of – did you immediately sort of blended in [Lawrence nods head no], or did you stand out? How did you feel about living there?

Lawrence: Well, I was a green horn, and that name stayed with us for a long long time. And, I wasn't accepted too well, but eventually we became Americans. We learned to speak English very fast, because we were young my brother and I. My brother was exceptionally bright as a child, always. And, um, so he had friends and I had friends, and we went to school. We did everything Americans do. We acclimated very easily. I – we were not left with any major accents, so whereas a lot of children who came from Europe, especially Germany, had heavy accents, but my brother and I never really had a severe accent, so we blended in very easily.

Interviewer: What about your mother? What was the process like for her?

Lawrence: My mother was a great lady at that time. She went to night school. She had never been to a school in her life. So, here she is in New York Ci—in the Bronx, and she is going to night school and she was a great lady.

Interviewer: What was she learning to do?

Lawrence: Just to speak the language. To assimilate, you know.

Interviewer: Did she like living there more so than say, Palestine?

Lawrence: She never talked about it. It wa – America was calm. We didn't have – we didn't have to worry about bomb scares. You know, nobody was throwing stones at us. It was peaceful.

Interviewer: Tell me about becoming a citizen.

Lawrence: I didn't do that for a long time, because by law, I was a citizen when father became a citizen, and he became a citizen five years [gestures with hands] after we were here. He didn't waste a day. So, I just assumed I'm a citizen and that worked fine, but when I married my husband, my second husband, I – he was, um, he worked for the government mostly. He was an engineer, and had a hundred percent clearance, and I think – I don't know whether he was told or he realized that it was important for me to have my own citizen papers. So, after I think I had my daughter [laughter] I decided to go and become an American citizen. And, you know, it was easy. I went to school here. I knew all the answers. I could read. I could write. I pledged [gestures with hand] allegiance to America.

Interviewer: [laughter] So, lets sort of return to the early-mid forties. You're in the United States. During the war, I mean I'm assuming there was very little to no contact with remaining family members.

Lawrence: [shakes head] None.

Interviewer: Okay.

Lawrence: We lost contact completely.

Interviewer: And, as the war came to a close, and sort of the atrocities began to come out, did your family ever discuss or reflect on having left Poland, and what it meant?

Lawrence: We knew we were so lucky. We were very very lucky. One cousin survived and came back. He was in the underground, and believe it or not, when he came to the United States, people thought he came here with jewels, and money, and gold. He had nothing. So, my house was his – the sole house he could go to comfortably. We accepted him wholly, and he was – he lost his whole family. He knew the atrocities. He went through terrible times, and we were the lucky ones. How grateful we were.

Interviewer: Can you tell me his name?

Lawrence: [35:46 Gadallia Ridlevic].

Interviewer: So, how far did you go in school here in the United States?

Lawrence: I graduated high school.

Interviewer: And where was that?

Lawrence: In the Bronx. Roosevelt High.

Interviewer: And tell me about meeting your first husband there.

Lawrence: Oh, I met him at – I was with friends at the beach, Orchard Beach. I met him and a whole bunch of his friends. We just got friendly. We used to meet at the beach all the time, and he didn't know old I was. He didn't know that I was still in school at the time. He was a veteran already. He was a marine, and eventually he realized that I was the one [smiles] and about two years later we were married.

Interviewer: What was his name?

Lawrence: Maurice Smith.

Interviewer: So, you met him as a highschooler?

Lawrence: I was – yes, I think I was in – I think I was just about going into senior year, and he says how – he had to stop seeing me for a while, because he was embarrassed to tell his parents that he was dating a se—a high school kid, but it was okay. It worked out. He was really a fine person. He worked for his father, and we did very well, you know?

Interviewer: Can you tell me about the wedding?

Lawrence: It was a simple wedding. My father made a living, but he never became – there was never any wealth in our family. We lived in a one-bedroom apartment on a fourth floor. Then we were able to move down to the second floor, which was [gestures with hands] a treat. My mother was very ill and my brother was ill. We had a lot of illness in the family at that point. And, my brother eventually got better, hospitalized many times. He had rheumatic fever. And, there was a time when we lived on the fourth floor my mother had to carry him, and by that time he was about ten or eleven years old. And, it was a strain on her. She had a heart condit—severe heart condition and a high diabetic. I didn't find out about a lot of these things until I was an, you know, much older. They didn't talk about it. They never talked about it. [sighs] I think we lived as good a life as anybody could, and we tried to do all the right things.

Interviewer: Where did you and your husband find a place to live?

Lawrence: Well, his – the business – his father's business was in Yonkers, and my husband was probably the manager of the business. So, we moved to Yonkers. And, we lived there for eleven years.

Interviewer: Tell me about starting a family.

Lawrence: Well, my son was born in 1950 I think it was. Yeah 1950, and then my second son was born in 1954 and then we moved to a house in Yonkers. And, no sooner did we move into the house in Yonkers and my husband became ill and was diagnosed with Hodgkin's disease. And, he survived seven years, difficult years for him, because we didn't have chemo then. We only had radiation, which wasn't very positive, and he survived seven years, which was amazing. He was only given one year to live, and nev—he never complained. Never, never never never.

Interviewer: How did you get by?

Lawrence: [shrugs shoulders] Willpower I don't know. I learned to drive into the city. We found doctors that would take care of him. And we would go for radiation, sometimes on a daily basis, and we survived.

Interviewer: Can you tell me about the loss of your husband and your mother?

Lawrence: I'm sorry [did not hear question].

Interviewer: The loss of your husband and your mother. I know that came at a fairly quick succession.

Lawrence: [sighs] My mother died in June 3rd and my husband died November 12th. It was very rough timing with two children. And, we managed. We were lucky enough – he was a veteran. My husband was a veteran, so I was able to get support from the government for them, and I got social security for my family, and I took a part-time job. And, I was always home in time for my children to come home from school.

Interviewer: What was your part-time job?

Lawrence: I worked in a laundry in Tuckahoe, New York I think it was. I was a – I worked the cash register and I did some bookkeeping for them, and we survived.

Interviewer: And, you were still very much sort of connected with your father and your brother at this time, or no?

Lawrence: My father, yes. My brother was married by this time, and he had a family of his own. So, my father was – my father and my children were my responsibility.

Interviewer: How long did your father live?

Lawrence: My father was such a visionary to get us out in the first place. He was a wonderful man, very sweet, easy going, carpenter all his life. And, he was just a sweet person. Cared – everybody loved him. My friends adored him. And, he died at 83, but he had married twice in between. He had two nice wives. And, he was there to see my daughter born. He was there to see my second husband, who he adored, and they became very very close being a carpenter and my husband being an engineer. That was the best.

Interviewer: Well, tell me about meeting your second husband. How did that come about?

Lawrence: Well, I was widowed about two years, and I remember my mother-in-law saying to me, it's time ya [sic] got out of the house, time to get out of the house. So, a friend invited me to go to a meeting of parents without partners, and they had a social every Friday night. And she took me to the social, and I met a group of women there who became my very very best friends. And, he was there. He was the president of the chapter. And, he apparently took a liking to me [laughter]. And, I became social secretary to the organization, and we did a lot of things with our children. It was basically parents without partners, and we took the children all over and my kids got to know other children, you know. We went to West Point. We traveled all over with our kids. It was very – it was very – it was like family, and I've stayed friends with all these people for all these years.

Interviewer: And what was his name?

Lawrence: My husband was Bob Lawrence, Robert Lawrence.

Interviewer: And, did he have children then, if it was parents without partners?

Lawrence: Yes, he had a daughter who was in college at the time, and when she met us and we met her it was like a whole family together.

Interviewer: So, you were merging families?

Lawrence: Oh yes.

Interviewer: When did you marry?

Lawrence: I was married in 1965, lost my husband in 1961 and my children adored my stepdaughter, loved her. And, we did – we created a family.

Interviewer: He was also a veteran of World War II.

Lawrence: He was a veteran. He was a – also a marine. He was a first-lieutenant, and when he came out of the service he started – went back to school, got his electrical engineering degree and worked for all the big companies. And, the last company

he worked for was Grumman, and he was an inventor. He invented many things for the company.

Interviewer: And you had another child with him.

Lawrence: We had a daughter, surprise. And, pride of my – it was great. It was really great. The family grew and it was a very warm family, and my husband's family took over my two sons. They loved them, especially my daughter of course, but my two sons were part of the family in everything. And, they grew up.

Interviewer: Where did you make your home with him?

Lawrence: We started out in New Rochelle, my name, and we eventually built a house ourselves and my children were part of the building process. They designed their own rooms, you know, my boys. And, we were there a short time, about three years I think and my husband changed jobs and went to work for Grumman on Long Island. So, we eventually bought a house on Long Island, moved there. We had everything. We had a swimming pool. We had – we had gardens. We had – we did it all ourselves. We were – we loved working together my husband and I. I was a carpenter's daughter and he's an engineer, and my father was around and we built outdoor bathroom and cabanas. We did it all and we loved it. My children grew up. My son went to Stoneybrook on Long Island, and my other son went through high school and my daughter. It was – we did very well there. We were a very very lucky.

Interviewer: And you went to work outside of the home.

Lawrence: Yeah, when my daughters started school I decided to volunteer at my – at her elementary school. Well, I volunteered there for a while and then they kept asking me to, you know, take part in the school and do this and do that. And, eventually I became – I started working in the reading room with five teachers, and I was their support. And, it went very well. I was started with I think an hour-and-a-half to two, and I gradually worked myself up to more hours. And, it was good. It seemed good, but we had a strike, a teacher's strike. And, we weren't allowed to come into the school. We were threatened. If we come into the school and they would never – you'd never work again or, you know, I don't know. Whatever it was it wasn't pleasant. So, the strike was over and we started – a friend of mine in another school who was also – actually she was also a victim of the war. We decided, if it works for the teachers maybe we should join a union, but it's not that easy to organize. You're dealing with people who are not really making very much money, who maybe can't even afford, you know, putting a dollar into a, you know, the union. You had to pay some dues. It was hard. It took us a year of really stomping from one school to another school to talk to people. And, we finally – we spoke to a

union who said they would accept us if we could get enough people to sign up. We finally got the number we needed. We needed about ninety-some-odd names, you know, people to join, and we eventually got them. There was just three of us who worked this. My friend and another girl from another school, three of us, and we organized a union.

Interviewer: How did it change, working conditions, things like that?

Lawrence: [laughs] That was the best part. The first year, we were earn – we started working at the school at two dollars and sixty-five cents an hour. I think we were up to maybe three dollars an hour by then, and when we joined the union they worked with us and they said, well what do you think would be fair, and they raised us seven dollars an hour in the first year. When the teacher's union – when the teachers learned about it they said, come to our union. Come to our union. Join us! And, we said no thank you we did it. We got what we wanted. Not only that, but we were able to get other privileges. We were allowed to take time off to go back to school to take courses. We were able to join, oh, it was a – we became people. We came paraprofessionals. We did a lot of work in the school that we really weren't allowed to do. We worked – I worked with children on my own for twenty-three years. I worked with children who were actually learning how to - we started – I worked with children in kindergarten and first grade. I had no experience. I did it all on my own, and it kept me going all those years. By the time I left school we were earning sixteen dollars an hour.

Interviewer: It's a big difference.

Lawrence: Many of our people became teachers, certified teachers. I didn't feel I needed it. I felt good enough doing what I was doing. I taught computers. I taught the kindergarten children and the first graders. The teachers seemed to like me so [shrugs shoulders]. I stayed until I retired.

Interviewer: So, let's talk about your move to Georgia. What brought you here?

Lawrence: My daughter married the most marvelous person I've ever met [laughs], and she wanted us to move closer to her. So, she was living in Florida at the time, and one day she called up, and we went to Florida to see whether we would consider something like that. And, we said it's okay, you know, if you're gonna to live here and you want us around, we'll join you. And then one day she called and she says, mom you're gonna to hate me, and I said, why would I hate you? She says, we're moving to Georgia. Well, the only thing I knew about Georgia is when you go through Georgia you make sure you don't speed and you don't do anything that would attract attention [laughs], because you don't want to be picked up by the police. I didn't know too much about it. So I said, don't worry about it, but we

really weren't ready to leave. We had a gorgeous home and it was the pride and joy, our pride and joy. And, she moved to Georgia and just about, I guess maybe a year later, she called up and she said, mom if you come to live in Georgia I'll give you grandchildren. I couldn't resist that offer. My grandchildren were living in Virginia at the time and I was visi – we were visiting Virginia, but to live in Georgia and have children right there – grandchildren right there, that was a treat. So, I moved to Georgia.

Interviewer: And you settled in Marietta first?

Lawrence: Yes, we built a house and my daughter and her husband were the caretakers during the building of the house and it turned out beautiful, and she promised me children and I got two grandchildren, two granddaughters.

Interviewer: Well, can you tell me about your family today?

Lawrence; Well, I have five granddaughters, who our very bright [laughs], very bright. We have a school psychologist. We have another one who is a math teacher in her own high school. She was hired the day she – about a month before – she was hired about six months before graduation to work in her high school and she is still there. And, another one that's an English teacher. And, my daughter's two daughters. One is at University of Georgia and the other one is Georgia Tech.

Interviewer: Wonderful.

Lawrence: And, I did have a grandson, but unfortunately, he was killed in an auto accident at eighteen and it was a terrible loss.

Interviewer: And your sons [inaudible].

Lawrence: My sons are wonderful.

Interviewer: Where do they live?

Lawrence: They live in Virginia. They are doing very well, and now one of my sons is a grandfather.

Interviewer: So, you're a great grandmother.

Lawrence: I'm a great grandma.

Interviewer: So, Miss Lawrence, can you tell me why you agreed to share your story with me today?

Lawrence: My friends, I have wonderful wonderful friends here. Belong to small groups of friendship, and sometimes my [gestures with hands] history comes out slowly, you know, talk about something and I have something to say. So, they felt that I had a

history that they would like – would I share it with them. So, one day I said I'm not a speaker. Most of the time I think I'm a little shy. I've overcome some of it now. So, I said okay, it's not a large group is it? She said, no only about ten or twelve people and it'll be a Saturday night and we can just talk if you'd like, and just tell us what your experiences were. So, I sat down one day. I'm not a writer either. I sat down one day and I started writing, and I showed it to one of my friends who really knows how to write. And she says, this is it. This is exactly what you are going to say. So, I went to the meeting with them, and I was supposed to talk for about twenty minutes. I got there at seven o'clock, never left until about eleven-thirty. And, I put it away. I put my papers away, and then one day my daughter [points to her] called me and she says, mom I met somebody who would like to hear your story [shrugs shoulders]. So, here I am.

Interviewer: Do you consider yourself a survivor of the Holocaust?

Lawrence: No, I didn't suffer the atrocities that others did. I came to the United States, because my father just envisioned a better life for us. I lived to come to the United States and be a part of a wonderful country. And, I would wish that on a lot of the world today.

Interviewer: Do you have additional comments you'd like to share?

Lawrence: No, it's just that I'm such a happy, lucky woman.

Interviewer: Well, thank you so much Rachele Lawrence, and we'll conclude there.

Lawrence: Thank you.

[conversation continued after interview]

Interviewer: Well, that was wonderful. How do you feel? [laughter].

Lawrence: I feel fine [laughter].

Interviewer: She's so calm.

Lawrence's daughter: Did you want to hear any details about her cousins, like the cousins, you know the twin cousins that were – that died or the things you know about your uncle in the underground? You want to share any?

Lawrence: [shakes head] I don't know enough. The only thing he – [1:03 Gadalia] told us was that my uncle and my grandfather were shot to death in front of the house. By this time my grandmother was already dead. She had a heart-attack just before that.

And, as far as my aunt and cousins I – we don't know whatever happened to them, but when my grandson was Bar Mitzvah'd we shared the bimah with my cousins that were killed, you know, we had their names were mentioned and honored, but I don't know anything more about them.

Interviewer: And the camera is not is it? Okay. Would you like to have him turn the camera on and run through that real quick?

Lawrence's daughter: Are you asking me?

Interviewer: Yeah.

Lawrence's daughter: No, do - I mean—

Interviewer: Would you like to share on camera, that last bit you just shared with me? He had turned the camera off.

Lawrence: If you think it's—

Interviewer: Okay, let's turn it back on real quick and that'll just be an add-on at the end. So, I'll prompt you with a question and then you can tell me that part again. Okay, so could tell me just a little bit more about your relatives and what happened to them and how you remembered them later in life?

Lawrence: We got a letter – somehow we got a letter from Poland that my grandmother died, which was very hard because my grandmother was the sweetest lady ever. And, then we didn't hear from anybody for years. I think it was 1946 or 47 when we got word that one cousin survived and that we were bringing him to the United States, collectively the family all got together. And, he did come to the United States, but it was a very sad situation at that time when people came from - survived the Holocaust. People here thought they had jewels and diamonds, and that's how they survived. It wasn't that way. They survived by sheer luck. He came here. He had nothing, but we used to sit – he used to come to my – our house. He was always welcomed at our house, and eventually he started to talk – couldn't at the beginning, but eventually he started to tell us things about what went on. And, one of the first things he told us was that my grandfather and my uncle were shot to death just in front of the house. In front of everybody, no reason, no reason whatsoever. And, then he went into the underground and didn't know anything else. He lost his family, his wife and several children, and we never found out – we could never find out what happened to the rest of the family. It was – it was awful, and we always remembered there was a set of twins. My uncle had a set of twins, which were I think my age, and when my children – when my grandson was Bar Mitzvah'd we set chairs [gestures with hands] with their names on it, on the chairs to honor them.

And, it was called – I think it was called like B’nai Bar Mitzvah something¹. It was the only way we had – we did nothing else for them. There was nothing else we could do for them.

Interviewer: What were the twin’s names?

Lawrence: Masha and Michle. It would be like Maurice and Michael.

Interviewer: Well, thank you.

Lawrence: Thank you for having me.

¹ When two or more boys celebrate their Mitzvah, it is called a B’nai Mitzvah.