

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

**Interview with Helene Baraf
March 15, 1990
RG-50.030*0015**

PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of a videotaped interview with Helene Baraf, conducted by Linda Kuzmack on March 15, 1990 on behalf of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The interview took place in Washington, DC and is part of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's collection of oral testimonies. Rights to the interview are held by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The interview cannot be used for sale in the Museum Shop. The interview cannot be used by a third party for creation of a work for commercial sale.

The reader should bear in mind that this is a verbatim transcript of spoken, rather than written prose. This transcript has been neither checked for spelling nor verified for accuracy, and therefore, it is possible that there are errors. As a result, nothing should be quoted or used from this transcript without first checking it against the taped interview.

HELENE BARAF

March 15, 1990

Q: Please tell us your name, where you were born, and when you were born?

A: My name is Helene Baraf, named Zupnik. I am born in Antwerp, Belgium, the 24th of July 1927.

Q: Tell us about your family and your childhood before the war.

A: Uh...I will start to tell you a little bit about my...uh... ancestors. Uh...I come from two very famous branches... uh...of...uh...the Jewish religion. My great grand uncle was...uh...Rabbi Meisels (ph) who has a synagogue named ... uh...after him in Prague and on my father's side I have Rabbi Dovelando (ph), who was very famous too, who has another synagogue named...uh...after him. Uh...my mother came from a very religious family. She had four brothers and four sisters. And...uh...she was the only who survived the Holocaust, and they all had many, many children because that was the way of life in that time. And...uh...she was already...uh...an older person when she met my...my father who came from Czechoslovakia and she accepted to...to marry him after refusing many, many suitors. And...uh...they lived in Krakow for one year...uh...where my brother was born in 1924, in July 26, 1924. And after the...they stayed uncast. That means that...uh...her brother was...uh... keeping them for a year where my father...when my father was studying. And then after the time was gone, they came to Belgium where I was born the 24th of July 1927. Uh...I grew up there, and we lived...uh...nicely. My father and my mother...in the beginning were working in the diamonds business. She was a Schleifer which means she was, I don't know how to say that in English...she...they were...he...she was not a cutter. A Schleifer is what a polisher...a diamond polisher and...uh...little by little my father became...uh...courtier. Is that an English word? Courtier? Uh...He was selling for other diamonds and...uh...uh...life became easier and...uh...I was going as a child in...uh...in the...and my first language was French so I went to grammar school in Belgium and on Wednesday afternoon and Sunday morning I went to Jewish school. My brother went to a Jewish school for...uh...the whole day where he learned Hebrew and Jewish and...uh...French and Flemish. Uh...in...in 1940 when I finished...uh...no...let's go back to 1937...uh...when I came to America. To tell you the story why we came to America is because...uh...by great grandfather died here in America in 1936. They came, I think, after the First World War here with all the children but my grandmother was already married in...uh...in Czechoslovakia so she was...uh...I think she was the oldest daughter. So she remained with her husband and her children there in Czechoslovakia. This is why I have...uh...in reality I am a third generation already American because... uh...my family is here. So my father came here to America to...for the question of the inheritance. And he liked it so much because he found all the family here that he didn't know. His cousins, his uncles...uh...it was...uh...very happy situation for him. So he wanted to immigrate. And we immigrated really to America in September of 37. For me as a child it was a shock because it was in the depression era and...uh...we lived in the low east side.

We...compared to what...how we lived in New York or...in Antwerp, was a big difference. It was a misery compared to that. And...uh...although I...I loved to be with all these cousins that I didn't know but...uh...unfortunately they send me to school...uh...as a...with the beginners. I was already 10 at the time and it was very hard for me because I didn't spoke the language. My brother, who was three years older, and finished already grammar school, immediately entered to high school and instead to be in the sixth...I don't know...in the first year, they sent him immediately in the third grade. I don't know to compare that with the American. So he was very happy. I was very unhappy here, and I cried a lot and...uh...it...because it was a very difficult time at that time with the depression and my...my mother and father had a lot of difficulties making out. So we came to the conclusion that...uh...maybe it would be easier for my father if we send...we went back...uh...to Antwerp and...uh...this is what they decided to do. We went...me and my brother and my mother, we went back to Antwerp and my father stayed here in America. My mother was from...uh...the...from Galicia, and she spoke a beautiful Polish and beautiful German and she was great admir... admirer of...uh...of German poetry from Heine and...uh...and she sang German Lieders to me, so I...I never studied German, but I do speak and I do understand it. And...uh... she never believed that...uh... German with their culture could do anything to the Jews she said. Although we saw all the people coming from Germany in 1939, she said...but...it's not so terrible. My father was very scared because he heard all the rumors and he came to bring us back to America in September of 39. And my mother refused to go back to America. She said, "Not back and forth. You come back to...to Europe." My father said, "No," so he stayed in America. So unfortunately because of this...uh...dispute between them we stayed in Belgium. Uh...The German invaded Belgium in the beginning of May. I think...uh...around the 10th of May...I cannot know exactly...uh...and 10 days later we...my mother decided we cannot stay. Uh...It was the war. So we took some of our possessions and we took the train direction of France. The train was stopped at the...uh...I don't know how you say that. At the frontier?

Q: At the border?

A: At the border. And...uh...we couldn't take...uh...although we had little...few suitcases and we started to go across the border and walk in...because we didn't know where we wanted to go, but as far as possible. And we started to walk through Moucron. I remember the border was Moucron, and we walked with the suitcases and with a lot of other people who were stopped there too who...and we went to Amiens, to Cambrai and...uh...it took us about two weeks under the bombing...the uh...the German with...uh... How do you say that their...their planes they were...uh...shooting at us and we were...had to run in the...uh...in the ditches for...for protection and a lot of people were killed in front of us. But...uh...finally we arrived in Lille where they put us in a school. No, it was more a college, a college where they had dormitory and where we slept and we stayed there for a month. And...uh...then the German occupied all France, so we had to go to...towards...uh... normal life. So we...my mother rented an apartment in Lille. I remember it was rue Solferino 142. It's funny how my memory can remember certain things and ___ others. Rue Solferino 142, and not far from there, I had my high school. And my husband went to his high school. And...uh...my mother had a little

money so for a time things were alright. We lived...uh...and...uh...and days went by and the years went by because it was from May 40 til...I cannot say exactly when the Germans started to do all the miseries. I think it was from...uh...the beginning of 42. Uh...they asked us to register as Jew. We were forced to wear the...the Jewish...uh...star and...uh...we obeyed what we were...uh...uh...we're supposed to do and...uh...life went on. Unfortunately, my...my brother had a birthday in July 42 and for his birthday my mother bought...brought... bought him...uh...a trench coat. And...uh...this trench coat, unfortunately, cost him his life because...uh...the Jews were forced to...couldn't go where they wanted in a cafe. There was one cafe where the Jews could go and where they gathered. And...uh...my...uh...my brother was a very quiet boy and very shy and very straightforward, very honest...uh...no haughtiness. Uh...he played there...him with his friend, he played chess there. And one day when he was playing there...uh...the guy of the Gestapo came and asked...uh...to whom does belong that trenchcoat. And my father...my brother stupidly answered, "It's mine." And...uh...there was no Jewish...uh...cross...uh...Star of David on it, so they took him to jail. My mother immediately went to the Gestapo. She saw the guy of the Gestapo, and begged him to release him and say...telling him it was his birthday. It's a mistake. He had it on his suit, the Star of David, but not on the coat so. But nothing doing. They...they wouldn't release him. Uh...he stayed in jail in Loos. It's a section of Lille, and from there they sent him to...through Belgium, to Auschwitz. There were a few of them that were taken at the same day. And I know well that he was in Auschwitz because one of the guys who was taken together with him came back, and he told me that he was well liked with the German...they liked him because he...he has such a serious...uh...he was a serious nature, so he did whatever he had to do. And he was alive til July 1944 because...uh...he saw him at that time and then he...they were separated, and he doesn't know what happened to him. He was in Auschwitz-Birkenau, and he gave me his number, but I cannot remember it. He...uh...I know that for a fact that he was waiting because he was born in Poland, but he was very little...a baby when he came to Belgium so he didn't know the family. So he was waiting... uh...all the family there, and he introduced himself to the family so he...he learned to know his family...and between them was a cousin who...who...to whom he told that he came from Lille and...uh...and that we...me and my mother, we were there. So after the war, this cousin by accident met...uh...a girl from Antwerp and...uh...uh...he himself was the son of a very extremely rich man who had buildings and...and...uh...uh...petroleum _____ pit.... I don't know how you call that...uh...so he sold something and...uh...because he...he couldn't take the money so he bought some gold and put it in his shoe and because he didn't want to go directly to Antwerp, he came through France and was looking a way to go through the...uh...frontier. And when he passed Lille, he remembered...he remembered that he had an aunt there, so he went to the Jewish community and asked if there was a Mrs. Zupnik here. And he found us. And he told us that he saw my brother there in the concentration, but he lost him also in 44, and he doesn't know what happened to him. Uh...and he went to live in Antwerp.

Q: Tell us what happened to you and your mother after your brother was taken.

A: Yes. Because...uh...my mother went to the German Gestapo, she was scared to do anything because she thought if she would escape...she would run away, there would be retaliation against him. So we stayed. We continued for one month our life and on the evening of Yom Kippur in...uh...in very early in the morning, two men of the Gestapo came into our house and...uh...took us. My mother put some stuff, some money away, and gave it to the...the lady...uh...where we lived to put it way in case...uh... uh...we escaped...uh...we wouldn't be without anything. So, but the story that happened is really like a miracle. We went to the...uh...railroad. The German took us to the railroad where there were about 3,000 families...Jewish family were there and...uh...from the early morning. It was a very hot day. We stayed...uh...there at the railroad waiting what the German would do with us. And I saw a lot of people because it was the eve of the holidays, they went to their homes and brought back chicken and food and it was like an entertainment party, and suddenly I see my mother and she said, "Come. Come. We have to go somewhere." And she says...and I said, "No, I...I have my friends here. I want to stay here." Said, "Come. Come. Come. You have to come." So I followed my mother and we were taken to a room...uh...a very tiny room. We were about 13 persons there. And the door they put wood on the door so the Germans wouldn't know that room existed. After awhile, we heard...uh...the train...uh...leaving and the whole place was very quiet because...uh...3,000 people do a lot of noise. And we stayed there and it was a very scary night because we had a few...a few men who were very nervous. There was a window and we heard the Gestapo walking back and forth. And...uh...I was...uh, I was already 14 at the time.

Q: Who...who came to your mother?

A: A man...a man of the underground. And he asked her, "Do you want to be saved?" And my mother said, "Yes." And as a matter of fact I asked my mother later, "How come that you decide to...to be saved because you were scared...uh...that something would happen." Well...then she answered me, "I realized at that time there was nothing any more to be lost because they were taking us so I wanted to save you and myself." And so we were...uh...put in that room and men are men...very selfish...some people start to...want to smoke cigarettes and they put the lights and the matches and we were scared...uh...terribly because...uh...they could see the lights. So we stayed...uh...in...uh...all night there. I think around 1 o'clock men came through the window. They put a ladder at the window and they took us out. And since that time we were taken over by the underground. They took us...which is...uh...very curious story. And it is an explanation. They took us to a whore house because this where people who were...the whores. I didn't know, but they have very big hearts. They (pause)...they are known for that...that...that they will do lot of things for...to save people. And we stayed in a whore house for a few days, and we saw the underground coming back with guns and all things and it was a very scary story. And then they came back with ...uh...false identification for me and my mother and for the other peoples and we were separated. And I, as a girl, young girl, I could go to a convent. My mother could not, unfortunate, for her. So she had to go on her own and...uh...it was very painful. She told me that many times she slept in the streets. She had no where to go. She was in the hiding and for her, the situation was worse

because she went to the Gestapo and they knew her face. And she had the false identification. Uh...they gave me the name...I kept my...uh...my...uh...real date of birth because I was scared to...uh...to be mixed up, and I became Helene Delcombre. And...uh...I went to the convent and...uh...they were very nice to us and I...uh...my mother was...uh...worried because I was going to high school and for her the studies was a very important thing so she made me...uh... subscribe at a school where you could send...uh...correspondence school. But it wasn't working. And I stayed there from...from September til...I think a little bit after the Easter holidays. Then from...and...uh...I heard a lot of times that the German were coming in...uh...the convent looking for Jewish children. There I met a lot of other Jewish children and I met a girl that I knew and I know a lot of babies were taken. A lot of people of saved that we don't know about it but...uh...uh...one person were telling the other. Just by ear we found out that...uh...that the French people were extraordinary. And...uh...to them when they...when the people say that they were anti-Semites, they didn't even know what it was to be Jewish. They thought we were...uh...like...uh...des Auvergnats.¹ They were cheap with the money. It's a part of section of France where people are very...I don't know the right expression...one penny is a penny. They don't want to spend it. So they thought Jews are like these people. So to say that they were anti-Semite, it's the wrong thing because they didn't even know that...uh...what exactly is a Jew and physically the Jews looked like I and my mother who comes from an extremely religious fam...family. She looks like a Polish girl, like a Polish peasant with...uh...the cheeks and the nose. Uh...it's amazing.

Q: What was life like daily in the convent?

A: In the convent? I was supposed to have the normal life from the children. I was not supposed...I didn't tell no one that...uh...only one girl that I knew from the outside. I recognized her. The other children didn't know that I had to conform to the rules. I had to go everyday to Mass with the...I...I was doing except I didn't take...uh...I don't know...the...uh...I didn't take the whole ____ because I didn't go to confession. But except of this, I was doing exactly like the...uh...the other girls because...uh...I didn't want to attract attention...uh...to whom I was. I was normal to do exactly like the other children.

Q: And what did you do during the day?

A: Well, early morning we went to Mass. Uh...They were children that...uh...uh...uh...our Lady of the Good Shepherd...that was the convent that I went...and there were children that...uh...had thing...they were children how...I don't know how to say that. That did things that were not right. They were...or vagrant or children that did things that were not...uh...right for children to do. The rebellious children...uh...were...but they were very young. Some...uh...some were from...uh...the age of six til...uh... til...uh...16 because...uh...16 you are...in France you could work. So...

¹ People from the French region of Auvergne

Q: How did you get along with the other children?

A: Very well because...uh...why not? (Chuckle) I am a French girl like every French girl and I don't look Jewish at all. Nobody could...uh...guess...uh...anything and I...and I was smart enough...uh...not to talk about this things. Uh...I went to Mass. I ate. I...uh...I...uh...we had...uh... religious... uh...blessings...uh...I did whatever the other children...we did...uh...some work...uh...some hand knitting, some...uh... embroideries. Whatever the other children did, I did. And...uh...a little bit I did some school by correspondence, but it wasn't good. So my mother decided that I had to go back to high school. So then we were taken over by the Protestant community. Uh...I remember the name was Mr. Pausch, and this was in...I was staying in Lille, and this was in Roubaix which was... uh...there were three cities around Lille, Roubaix, Tourcoing, which were about...uh...half an hour distant one of the other.

Q: Did you see your mother often? How did you get from the convent to the Protestant community.

A: I never went out from the convent...uh...unless I had an operation from the amigdales. How do you say that? How do you say that. I had to have the...uh...

Q: Tonsils?

A: The tonsils removed. That's the only time I went out. My mother came to see me and brought me food. I don't know how she did it, but...uh...she still found the time to and the money to give me...uh...because it was...uh...very very hard time. We were eating bread with...uh...sawdust in the bread. It was...uh...very bad bread. The food was terrible. It was war, and many times we had...uh...we heard English plane coming and bombing. It was war. It wasn't... uh..easy time for no one and... So she decided I should go to school. So she...I don't know how she found out the Protestant community, and they gave us some lodging somewhere outside of Roubaix and I was enrolled in the Roubaix High School. It was very difficult thing because in that school I met a girl that I was in school in Lille and she knew my real name. And suddenly from Helene Zupnik, I became Helene Delcombre. And I didn't know how to do it. I was young. I was 15 years old and I was very childish at the time. But then I had an idea. I knew she was...uh...a scout. So I took her on the side, and I told her, "You know I want to tell you a story, but you have to tell...to swear me on your scout's honor that you will not tell nobody...uh ...what's the true story. I am a Jewish girl, and I have false identification paper and nobody's supposed to know it." She said, "Don't worry. I will not tell anyone." And the irony is that I didn't know that at the time, but that girl herself was half Jewish. And so...uh... uh...I stayed in that school...uh...til the end of the war. But I didn't stay...you see the thing is that every day life to be in...uh...people get tired to be...uh...helpful to others. You know it's not easy to take the...uh...uh...the mother and the daughter. They live and after awhile, the cohabitation with that person was difficult so we had to move and my

mother found a place in Tourcoing. She found a lot...a very miserable place, but we didn't have where to go so we were happy to go there. And I continued to go to Roubaix. And...uh...I spoke to that girl because...uh... she...she...she was the only knew...one who knew her...my identify and I told her, "You know, we are living in Tourcoing in a miserable place and with the bombing all the time and the cold. We didn't have what to heat." So she came her...her parents were very rich, extremely rich. Uh...uh...Her father was a kind of...uh...nobility and she said...she spoke to her parents and she said, "You know what? I have an idea. I will take you in my...uh...we have the gardener's house there. And she presented me to her mother and her father who were very nice and she took me out...in their house where we stayed til the liberation. And they never told us what they really were. After the war in December of 44, I had the surprise of a cousin who came and found me there. His name was Jerry Balomich from...uh...he lives in (pause)...at the time he lived in Brooklyn. And he found me. By miracle. How he found me, he first looked at the first high school, and he met somebody that I met a few days before who I told I was going to the Lycée of Roubaix and it's unbelievable, but he found me. Then...uh...he could report to my father that we were alive.

Q: Had you had no contact with your father at this point?

A: I received...uh...a letter of the Red Cross in...in 1941 from my father. That's the only contact I had. So he knew we were alive in 41, but afterwards he didn't know.

Q: What happened after the liberation?

A: ...happy time and we were waiting that...uh...my brother would come back and my father was writing. He said we should come to America. And my mother said, "Yes, but I have to wait first that my...uh...son comes back." And we went to Paris to the different organization...organization to find out if...if he was still alive and he was coming back, but we never...uh...we never got any news about him and we never knew except by...by these two witness who came back who told me that they...he was in Auschwitz-Birkenau, where he was alive til July 44. Then I have no...no other news and...uh...he never came back.

Q: You said your husband was in high school with you.

A: My husband. No. My husband came from Rumania. How could he come here?

Q: No. That's what I wondered.

A: No, no, no. No, no, no. Uh...no no.

Q: Okay.

A: Do you want to know more about my life afterwards?

Q: Yes. Tell me about the...the early years after the war.

A: After the war I continued to go to high school. And...uh... my father was much younger than my mother. And he was a very religious Jew and...uh...because he lost his son he wanted to have another son. So it was very important for him so and because she couldn't bear any children, he divorced my mother and...uh...I remained...uh...in France and he remained in...in America. And it was a terrible shock to me. I went into a deep depression because of that and...uh...I couldn't study anymore. And...uh...I got married very early. In 19...in December 1948 and I had a daughter and in 51...uh...when my father died, I couldn't stand my husband anymore. And I divorced him. And in 56, I met my second husband who came from Israel and...uh...we moved to Paris and we start a new life. Unfortunately, in ...uh...June 18, 1959, a car struck my daughter and she died the same day. And life goes on. And...uh...my husband always dreamed of America. Uh...As soon as he became French in...uh...in 66, the first thing he did, he came to visit America. He had...he...he also was a third generation of America. His grandfather came here from Rumania to...to Israel where he wasn't successful and then he came to America and Canada because it was difficult at that time to come to America from Canada. They went to Philadelphia. And...uh...he loved America too when he came to visit in 66. And...uh...in 69 we came. In June, as a matter of fact, the same day as my daughter died. June 18, 1969 we came to America, and we became American citizens. My husband died in...uh...May 29, 1980, and...uh...I remained alone.

Q: Have you...uh...made contact with your family.

A: Oh sure. Oh sure. I was...uh...accept[ed] with open arms. I'm the...prodigal...prodigal child...uh...because...uh...coming back to the...they knew me as a child.

Q: Do you have family here?

A: Unfortunately, most of them died now and...uh...now I am alone...uh...and it's very hard.

Q: All right. Thank you. Was it so hard as you thought?

A: When you start you...it goes, it flows. (laughter)
It is...uh...something very funny that...uh...it's tragic comedy at the same time. Uh...the lady who accepted her... us to stay in her gardener's house was very nice to us and said goodbye to us when we moved away and we lived in another section of Lille. And...uh...over the years we lost contact with her. But when I got married, my mother got very ill, and she couldn't stay by herself and in Paris we lived in a very small apartment and we couldn't...uh...keep her with us. So she went to the Rothschild Institution and she was accepted there. There she met a gentleman that she liked very much because he was a German Jew and she spoke a perfect German, so she found her alter ego. And...uh...it was a little love affair. He was (laughter) already 84 and she was in her...in her early 60s, so she was a beauty for him. And...uh...it

was by an irony...by a twist of fate, this gentleman was the uncle of the mother of my friend in school. So then I found out...uh...10 years later that the mother who received me in her house herself was a Jewish lady.

Q: And that was the first you knew that?

A: That's the first time I found out. They never told me. Montaigne was the name of her husband. I can't remember the name of the gentleman who was very good to my mother because...uh...she had Parkinson Disease. And...uh...she broke her ankle, and she was...uh...taken to the hospital and he sustained her very much. But the irony is that he was the uncle of the lady who saved her...us in her garden.

Q: Do you have any other memories of the war years?

A: Like what? What kind of memories? What we did through...during the war or...it was war time. Uh...but life goes on. Uh...I am a young...uh...girl...uh... I went to school. I...uh...I...I lived a normal life, but with false identification papers.

Q: What was...what were the nuns like in the convent?

A: Very nice. They...uh...they behaved with me...they knew who I was, but...uh...they behaved very nicely. They saved my life.

Q: Were there a lot of Jewish children?

A: Yes. A lot. But...uh...there were so many different places...uh...but I suppose from...uh...most of the Jewish community was wiped out...uh...

Q: Did...did you ever see the nuns again?

A: After the war, I went to...to find them. Yes. I went to see all these people who thanked me naturally, but...uh... Life goes on...uh...and you are taken by many occupations and preoccupation and...uh...you forget and...uh...I thought that it was important to tell these things because many people say it never happened so before I die I want to bear witness to these things because I...I suffered them and...uh...unfortunately I lost so many people because of it, and people say it never happened.

Q: And that's important for us. Thank you.

A: You're welcome.