

Pittsburgh Oral Histories
Pennsylvania Department
Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh



JR

Interviewed by Barry Chad

Interviewed in Squirrel Hill at the home of her daughter EJ and son-in-law MJ who also participated in and assisted with the interview

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Interviewer's Note

A very quiet—but also outspoken—dignified lady with a somewhat wry sense of humor whose family escaped from Holland after Holland capitulated to the Germans. One step ahead of the Nazis. From Holland to England to the United States. A family engaged in the diamond industry, the hide business, drapes and slipcovers—in fact making the drapes hung at Heinz Hall when it first opened.

Interview

bc: How long have you lived in Pittsburgh?

JR: Since 1954.

bc: You weren't born in Pittsburgh.

JR: Nooooo. I wasn't born in the United States.

bc: Where did you come from?

JR: From Holland. That's where I was born and that's where I grew up.

bc: Did you come on your own?

JR: No, no, I came with my family—with my parents and my sisters and my uncle and his family.

bc: You escaped the Holocaust.

JR: Yes. We left when Holland capitulated. In May. After the German invasion, yes.

bc: Did you have trouble getting out of the country?

JR: Yes. When the War started, we lived in the South of Holland. And you were very lucky to get up North. We fled to Amsterdam.

bc: And then where did you go next?

JR: We stayed in Amsterdam. And then, when we heard that the Queen had fled to England, my father and uncle said, We better get out too. And we went in the car; we went to the harbor of Amsterdam. There were little fishing boats in the harbor. And they said, Jump on if you want to get out; you're going to England.

bc: And you went to England. How long did you stay there?

JR: Three months. And then we got a visa for the United States.

MJ: What did your family do for money?

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bc: Your son-in-law is asking more personal questions than I would ask. I would guess that your family had some savings or you depended upon the kindness of strangers.

JR: No, no, no, we were very lucky. My father and uncle, they had money here in the United States and we didn't need an affidavit.

MJ: Wasn't there something that they took along with them?

JR: Well, they took some cash too. Yes.

MJ: And jewelry?

JR: Little bit of jewelry too.

bc: What did your family do in Holland?

JR: They were in the hide business. The hides—before they get tanned—were imported mostly from Argentina. Oh a smelly business, yeah. [She laughs.] It was a good business.

MJ: Your mother?

bc: Your mother was a homemaker, no?

JR: Yes.

MJ: I thought she was a lawyer.

JR & EJ: She got her law degree, but she never practiced.

JR: And she was very active in Jewish organizations. So was my father.

bc: Essentially you were one step ahead of the Nazis.

JR: We were really fortunate because we were close to the Belgian border. And a lot of people fled to Belgium, and there they were picked up.

bc: These fishing boats—were they all escaping from Holland at the same time?

JR: Well yes...there were quite a few. They wanted to get away from Holland, yes. And, while we were on our way to England--while we were crossing--the German bombers came over, they tried to bomb and strafe us. The bombs fell right next to the ship.

EJ: Didn't you all already have visas?

JR: No no, we got the visas in England. My father was thinking for us to leave earlier for the United States—before Holland was invaded—but then he changed his mind and we stayed. Oh we were very fortunate.

bc: Where did you stay in England when you got there?

JR: In London. My parents had some friends there...distant relatives...so we stayed with different people.

bc: You had connections in the United States as well?

JR: Not really. My father did very little business...he knew some people here....

MJ: How come your parents didn't go to Israel, to Palestine?

JR: They didn't want to. They were thinking of sending us girls there first—the youngest girls to Palestine—but that didn't pan out either.

bc: How many brothers and sisters did you have?

JR: I had two sisters. They're still living. They're living in Israel.

bc: And, when you came to the United States, you came to where?

JR: New York.

bc: How long did you stay in New York?

EJ: Didn't you go through Canada?

JR: Oh that's right. [Laughter between mother and daughter.]

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1940...and I got married in New York...[my daughter's] a born New Yorker...'til '54. Then I came to Pittsburgh. The ship we were on was an English ship transporting the English children to Canada to get away from the War.

bc: You were lucky you didn't get torpedoed.

JR: You're not kidding! That ship went the real Northern route because sure they were afraid that we would get torpedoed. Oh yeah—we saw icebergs come to think of it. We went way up North.

bc: So why Pittsburgh?

JR: I was married by then....

bc: Where did you meet your husband?

JR: In New York. I finished high school in New York. I also went to college there.

bc: Where did you go to college?

JR: Queens College. It's connected with City College. You didn't have to pay—just pay for the books.

bc: What did you study?

JR: Dietetics.

bc: Really?!

EJ: See—you knew nothing about her.

bc: Did you make a career out of that when you got to Pittsburgh?

JR: I worked at it for a while but I had two children and then, in the '60s, I had a third one.

bc: Let's backtrack for a second. Where did you meet your husband?

JR: In New York. On a blind date.

bc: A blind date? What did he do for a living?

JR: He used to be a diamond cutter before he went to the Army. He volunteered. I think he wasn't even 18. He was in the Infantry, carrying a bazooka.

MJ: Wasn't he involved in interrogating Nazis?

JR: Yes. They wanted him to stay after the War but he wanted no part of it. My husband also escaped the Nazis. He came from Austria.

bc: You went to Queens College; you got married in New York, and had two children there. How did you come to study dietetics?

JR: I started out with Chemistry...and I just got interested in dietetics.

bc: Did you work in a hospital?

JR: Yes, in New York and in Pittsburgh as a dietician. West Penn Hospital here.

bc: Did you give that up while you raised the children?

JR: Yes. And then, also, my husband started a business in Pittsburgh.

EJ: After the War he was no longer a diamond cutter.

JR: When he came back from the War, the diamond industry...there was not much left in New York. So he was looking for something else. Then he learned interior decorating—the technical side....

EJ: More the doing than the decorating.

JR: He made slipcovers. He made drapes.

EJ: And installed the drapes—so he made the drapes and installed them.

JR: We tried to start a business in New York and it didn't work out: [interior decorating with slipcovers and drapes.] And so he was trying to find work and then, in the *New York Times* there was an ad for a drapery-installer in

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Pittsburgh. So my husband applied for the job and they accepted him and that's how we came to Pittsburgh.

bc: At first he worked for somebody else and then he started his own business.

JR: He did some "industrial" work too.

EJ: Heinz Hall. (He didn't design it.)

JR: But he worked for the decorator.

EJ: Our decorating shop made the draperies for Heinz Hall that were designed by some other decorator—when Heinz Hall first opened. Those were our drapes.

And, once he started his own business, [my mother] helped with it.

bc: How long did you and he do that?

JR: He passed away in '72. About twelve years.

EJ: And then you ran it on your own for a couple of years.

JR: [In the mid to late '70s is when I gave it up, sold it.]

bc: You didn't retire. How did you spend your time?

I continued to work as a dietician again at West Penn and some other places. I worked in the main kitchen and I helped supervise all the workers. I helped with the ordering.... And I was still raising my youngest one.... I belonged to Hadassah, played mah jong.... I try to go to Israel every other year 'cause I have a daughter living there and grandchildren and great-grandchildren and sisters and nieces and nephews and cousins.

MJ: When did your mother move to Israel?

JR: That was before the '67 War. In the early '60s she must have gone.

MJ: When did your sisters make Aliyah [Jewish immigration to the Land of Israel]?

JR: In the '50s.

MJ: Your mother followed your sisters to Israel....

JR: After my father died.

EJ: My grandmother returned to Holland first.

JR: My parents went back to Holland after the War.

bc: What did they find when they got there?

JR: My father's business was still there.

EJ: As was the house and some of its contents.

JR: Holland cooperated with the Jews who came back.

MJ: Where did your parents meet?

JR: My parents met at the Zionist Congress in Switzerland. They were ardent Zionists.

bc: The first time you arrived in Israel what was it like? What was your experience?

JR: You felt at home there--with all those Jews there. That was a beautiful country. Today it has changed so much. Not for the better.

bc: So how has Israel changed over the years?

JR: It's all built up. And they have too many highways, like here. Too many cars.

bc: When you got there it was more rural?

JR: Boy! was it rural!

bc: You didn't stay on a kibbutz, did you?

JR: Yes, because my daughter is on a kibbutz. She's still on it.

bc: I'm guessing that they're not as popular as they once were.

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JR: No, and they're changing. They're becoming...like a business.

EJ: It's not as socialistic as it used to be.

JR: That's it...more capitalistic.

bc: What led your parents to become Zionists to the degree that they did?

JR: I really don't know....

EJ: What leads anybody to believe what they believe?

MJ: At that point in time it was a natural course of action.

EJ: Not for everybody.

JR: No. I wouldn't say that. A lot of Dutch Jews were assimilated. No.

MJ: Not "natural" like "universal." But, it wouldn't have been uncommon for Jews to become Zionists.

JR: Where I grew up, there were not many Jews. In Southern Holland. I didn't live in one of the big cities.

bc: So, was assimilation an issue for your family in Holland?

JR: No, we weren't assimilated. I wouldn't say that...since my parents were Zionists. We weren't Orthodox, but we kept our religion. We celebrated all the Jewish holidays.

bc: Was it a small community where you lived?

JR: Yes.

bc: You had your own synagogue and all.

JR: Yes. I grew up in a strictly Catholic section.

bc: So how are you spending your time now?

JR: I volunteer: at West Penn Hospital, at the soup kitchen, and at the public school. At the hospital and at the soup kitchen [in East Liberty] I work in the kitchens. At the soup kitchen I also help with the serving. And I just started tutoring in the public school, in Sunnyside.

bc: What kind of tutoring are you doing in the schools?

JR: This is through Oasis, it was at Kaufmann's, now it's at Macy's.

bc: Is it for Seniors?

JR: [Yes. Through Oasis I got this tutoring job. Some reading, some writing.]

bc: Let me ask you about your personality. I've attended a number of Seders here. Am I correct in assuming that you have a very quiet personality?

JR: I guess so.

bc: Let me ask your daughter and son-in-law.

EJ: Yes and no.

MJ: Like EJ and I, we're basically quiet people.

JR: I'm a shy person.

And, by the way, another thing I enjoy doing is doing exercise. At the Community Center.

EJ: And how often a week do you swim and how far?

JR: Three times a week. I swim for about half-an-hour—about a mile.

EJ: She's quiet, but she's also outspoken.

JR: You think so?

EJ: You give your opinion—like that. Without thinking.

MJ: Yes.

JR: Okay. If you say so....

bc: You've kept your accent.

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JR: I know. That's what everybody tells me. When I went to college, they gave me speech lessons. I got private speech lessons. Didn't help.

EJ: And I'm not sure whether she kept her accent or it came back as she's gotten older.

JR: Why? You notice it more?

EJ: Well I notice it, but I don't live with you anymore.

JR: That could be too.

EJ: Growing up I never noticed it.

bc: Can you speak Dutch?

JR: Yes I can.

EJ: Didn't your mother know multiple languages?

JR: Yes, my parents did.

MJ: Seven languages?

JR: No, no. They knew French and English and German. And Dutch. And a little bit of Hebrew.

bc: Among your sisters, where do you fit in the birth order?

JR: I'm the baby.

bc: Did your sisters look out for you?

JR: Oh yeah yeah. I always tease my second sister that she was my second mother.

bc: You've lived in Pittsburgh since about '54. How has the city changed? For the better or for the worse?

JR: Of course the big change was the steel mills closing. That made a tremendous difference in the city. It was a big hit for the city.

MJ: There are people still around waiting for the steel mills to reopen.

bc: I think you can sense that.

JR: Especially in the little towns around Pittsburgh.

bc: Why did you move to [the] Stanton Heights [neighborhood of Pittsburgh]?

JR: ...a lot of young Jewish people were living in Stanton Heights.

bc: So there's a strong Jewish community there too.

JR: Not any more. There was. Yes.

bc: I got a lot of surprises from sitting here and talking to you tonight.

JR: I could see it in your face.

bc: There's no reason for you, at like a Seder, to just start telling your life story; and you're not that kind of person either.

EJ: And there was no reason to ask these questions at a Seder.