

INTERVIEW WITH RITA ROITMAN

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**Transcending Trauma Project
Council for Relationships
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INTERVIEWER: [This is an interview with] Rita Roitman, a child of survivors, and it's December 15, 1994.

I just wanted to start with some identifying information about you right now: your name, your birth date, where you were born.

RITA ROITMAN: My name is Rita Roitman. I was born July 11, 1949, in Munich, in Germany.

INT: And are you married?

RITA: Yes.

INT: How many years?

RITA: Fourteen.

INT: And any children?

RITA: One daughter, who is almost ten.

INT: And are you employed?

RITA: I'm self-employed as a psychotherapist.

INT: And your education level?

RITA: I have a master's in social work.

INT: How would you describe your economic level? Middle class, upper class?

RITA: I don't know what the criteria are anymore. I don't know what the lines of demarcation are. We're certainly comfortable. I'd like to be more comfortable. (laughs)

INT: We all would. (laughs) But you're comfortable.

RITA: Yes.

INT: It's not a struggle.

RITA: No.

INT: Okay. What is your religious affiliation?

RITA: I don't really have one. I was raised in the Jewish religion, though my family didn't practice any of the religious beliefs. What we practiced, and I guess what I practice, are the traditions. You know, I like having Seders and things like that.

INT: But if someone asked you what was your affiliation, would you say you were unaffiliated?

RITA: I'd probably say Jewish.

INT: Jewish. Okay. Any organizations that you belong to or are involved in?

RITA: In terms of...

INT: Anything.

RITA: Oh, a lot of professional organizations. NASW, which is a social workers organization. Therapist organization called the Delaware Valley Group Psychotherapy Society. Other professional things.

INT: Any volunteer things?

RITA: Not now, no.

INT: At your daughter's school, or...

RITA: Oh, well that I do. But that's not really part of any, I do that through the classroom usually. Depending on what the teacher wants. I'm the homeroom mom. (laughs)

INT: Oh, okay. You make the phone calls. Bake the cookies.

RITA: Exactly, you got it. Exactly.

INT: Okay, if we could talk a little bit about, oh, before I leave that. Your husband. What is his age, where was he born, and what is his education?

RITA: He's fifty. He was born in Arizona. And he's a Ph.D. in molecular biology. And his affiliation religiously is Protestant.

INT: Okay. And he would identify himself as Protestant, probably, if you asked him?

RITA: It would be similar to me, in that we don't really practice.

INT: But that's how he was raised.

RITA: Yeah.

INT: Family of origin. Could you tell me about your mother and father, their ages, where they were born, their marital status. (laughter)

RITA: That's a good one. Both my parents were born in Poland. I don't know the exact years. I'd have to sit down and figure it out. My mother is seventy. My father turned seventy-five or seventy-six, I can't even remember. Seventy-six, I think, in August. They separated almost a year ago. What else did you want to know about them?

INT: What did they do for a living when you were growing up, or what do they do now? Are they retired?

RITA: They're both retired. My father was, I don't know that he ever had any training before the war. And he did all kinds of stuff to sort of make his way, and make money. When we moved to Canada, when I was two, he began factory type work, and then developed certain skills in terms of being a coat maker, originally. He worked in a factory, doing those kinds of things. And then opened a business. I must have been about...I think I was about fourteen when he opened a business, and that was a dry cleaners, and he did, at that point, with the knowledge that he had gained in terms of sewing, he did a lot of the alterations on the men's clothes, or the heavy type things, and my mother did the other sewing.

My mother...

INT: Was that a family business?

RITA: Yeah, it was just my mom and dad. My mother worked full time. My mother, in terms of...I'm trying to think. My father, I don't think, had much formal schooling. My mother went further in school, and was much more a student, and interested in school, and went to a private school. Her family was a lot wealthier than my dad's. But she never felt secure enough to do anything with that, once she came to the United States, or even in Canada. So she worked when I was a kid in a gourmet shop, selling a lot of European foods and things. And then when my dad opened a business, she worked with him.

INT: What would her education level be, do you know? What she finished before the war?

(DOG BARKS)

RITA: The war started, I think when she was about fourteen or fifteen. And...(pause)

INT: You were saying her education level.

RITA: I think that she was probably at the beginning of high school. But she was an extremely good student. Extremely good student.

INT: Was she ever able to finish, or take any courses?

RITA: She didn't want to. She felt too insecure. I pushed her to do it on continuing ed stuff, or even to take, she could have passed an equivalency exam, because she's very bright. She never felt secure enough to do it.

INT: How would you describe their economic status?

RITA: Poor. (laughs)

INT: Poor. Right now.

RITA: Yeah.

INT: Both of them.

RITA: Yeah.

INT: And their religious status? How would they describe themselves religiously?

RITA: My father would strongly consider himself Jewish. My mother...my mother is uncomfortable being Jewish. During the war she passed as a Catholic, and felt much more comfortable with the Catholic religion, and whatever the psychological reasons are for her feeling more comfortable, I mean, that's complex. But at times of distress, you could find my mother wandering into a church, now, even. She does not feel at all comfortable in synagogues. So I don't know what she'd call herself, but I think in terms of her level of affiliation, on a deep internal level, it would probably not be Jewish.

INT: Okay. She's more comfortable with Catholicism?

RITA: Yeah.

INT: Their siblings. Do they have any siblings, your parents?

RITA: No. None that are alive. My mother had six siblings that died before the age of two.

INT: Oh, boy.

RITA: And so she never grew up with siblings, except for very short periods of time. They were either stillbirths, or I forgot. One of the kids, I think, got polio. And died before two. And that was the only one that my mother remembers. My father is one of nine children. And none of them are still alive.

INT: He's the only one alive?

RITA: Yeah.

INT: Okay. Could you, to the best of your ability, give me what your parents' background is, what their parents did, how they were brought up, what their economic level was growing up?

RITA: My father lived in a really little village, a shtetele, and his father didn't work. He was, you know, a scholar. I don't get a sense of him being a very educated man, but the sense I get is that he didn't work, but went to shul, and did whatever one does there, forever. (laughs) And then had all these children. Who went to work.

INT: But how did they support them?

RITA: I have no idea, because his father, now maybe, you may know more about this than I do. My memories of what he's told me have nothing to do with his father having any job. But that the kids went to work, and that they were really extremely poor. You know, he would tell stories of not having shoes, and having to wear somebody else's shoes, and he still, his feet are all deformed, because the shoes never fit, kind of thing. The family was extremely poor.

My mother comes from a very different kind of background. Her father was educated. Her mother, her mother's family owned a business, like a general store, that was attached to a granary of some sort. And so her mother had money, and came from a family that had money. And her father was a businessman, who had completed whatever education was available to him. And I think that they were **much** more comfortable. There was always someone to help out, because her mother was ill. There were maids.

INT: What was the matter with her mother, do you know?

RITA: (sighs) I would speculate and say she was schizophrenic. I think her condition, I think she was a very fragile, emotional person, and the loss of six children pushed her beyond her coping, which I, is totally understandable. Some of her behavior towards the end of her life, she was hallucinating. She had auditory and visual hallucinations.

INT: Your mother has described this to you?

RITA: Yeah. She...she wasn't oriented in terms of reality. And it certainly wasn't that way when my mother was growing up. She was, she doesn't sound like a robust, gung-ho kind of lady, but she was functional. And certainly cared for my mother very well.

INT: So when did she become...

RITA: I think as the children died, and then my mother's father died, so she was left alone. You know, abandoned by the children who died, and abandoned by the husband who sort of nurtured her and took care of her. And she went back home to live, to her parents, with my mom, which was out in the country.

INT: How old was your mother when her father died?

RITA: You know, I can't remember, but it was sometime after the age of ten, I think, between then and then with the war starting. Her father died of tuberculosis. Once they were back at her grandparents', I think that things went very well, until the war started. Because there was enough money. My mother's mother's siblings, a lot of them were at home, and so it was a very large family that was...fairly involved with each other. It sounds like they were happier. That there was a lighter mood.

INT: What was the name of that town, do you know? Or the town where your mother was born?

RITA: I don't know. (pause) I can't remember. I'm not sure. I can certainly ask, if it's significant for you.

INT: Do your parents, your mother's mother came from a comfortable family with a lot of siblings, and her father, do you have any sense of what kind of family he came from?

RITA: No.

INT: Were they religious growing up?

RITA: I don't think so. I think my grandfather attended shul, but I don't get a sense, my mother doesn't talk about the family doing things that were organized around the shul. And the more I think about it, probably not, because when my mother was sent to school, the better school was the school that wasn't the Jewish school, and that's where she was sent. So it was in the city. She would take the train, and go to a school that wasn't Jewish, and I think at that time, my impression at least, is that the families that were religious would not consider something like that.

INT: Okay, so education was more important to her parents than the religious angle.

RITA: Right. Yeah.

INT: Okay. And your father's family was religious, I guess, if his father was in shul all the time.

RITA: Yeah.

INT: Could you tell me, start with your mother, and tell me what you know of her experiences during the war.

RITA: Wow. She talks about...having to leave whoever was left of the family, and it's not always very clear to me what happened in terms of the sequence of time. Like what happened

first, and what happened next. Some of the siblings left Europe. Her favorite aunt went to Argentina. Her uncle came to the United States.

INT: These are on her mother's side?

RITA: Yeah. And...let me think. Leah. Leah stayed with her parents in Poland and...I don't know at what time my mother felt or knew that they were coming to get them, in some way. You know? And she went and hid.

INT: How old was she, do you know?

RITA: She was fourteen or fifteen years old. She had a lot of friends who she met through school, who were not Jewish. And she went and hid through them, and through teachers from the school. And came up with the idea that basically she just needed to disappear, so that no one would know where she was, and that's the only way she could survive, because she knew they were all going to be killed.

INT: What about her mother and her grandparents?

RITA: Her mother was hospitalized in some kind of psychiatric facility, and was poisoned by the Germans, who basically poisoned all the patients. So she knew that her mom was dead. She tried, I think, initially to stay in the area, but hidden where no one knew she was, and then came up with the plan of pretending to be Catholic, and her good friend facilitated it, basically. Went over stuff with her, in terms of Catholicism. Gave her a Bible. And my mother became a slow-witted, dumb servant. Trying very hard to make herself very unattractive. You know, her stockings would always be falling down. Her hems would be crooked. You know, she'd look like hell, so that people wouldn't approach her. And she worked in various places through the war.

INT: What happened to her grandparents?

RITA: Her grandparents were killed.

INT: What happened to them, do you know?

RITA: I think they were rounded up by the Germans and killed.

INT: Rounded up before she went to hide, or afterwards?

RITA: During. When she was still in the area, but not with them.

INT: And did they give her the directive to go hide, or did she do this on her own?

RITA: I think so.

INT: They told her to go hide.

RITA: Yes.

INT: And then they were rounded up, and she was hiding.

RITA: And she stayed in touch with Leah. Who, at that point, the family still had money, and was trying to bribe, you know, paying soldiers off, and doing things like that. It's funny, because just a week ago, my mother and I were sitting and talking, and she was talking about a friend of ours who survived also and is in Canada. And right now the stories feel sort of muddled in my head, of like which one is Sophie's, and which one's my mom's? So it's hard for me to get it clear. Because a lot of this wasn't talked about. I never wanted to know as a kid, because it seemed **horribly** scary to me. And my parents fell apart whenever anything was raised, and I didn't want to have to handle it. (laughs) You know, their getting upset and stuff. And it wasn't something that was ever presented just as matter of fact information. Because it was too loaded. You know, it had too many strings.

INT: I want to ask you about that, but before we get to how they related their Holocaust experiences to you, if you could just kind of finish what you know about your mother.

RITA: Yeah, so basically I know that when she knew, she somehow got papers, you know, saying that she was whoever she was supposed to be. And she worked throughout the war as a servant in various people's homes.

INT: She was visible, but she was just in disguise, sort of.

RITA: Yeah, yeah. And you know, she's a very, very, bright, perceptive woman. And she would accommodate to whatever the situations needed. You know. I do know that she had horrible experiences when the Russians came through. That that was actually worse for her than dealing with the Germans. (pause)

INT: Do you know what happened when they came through? This was at liberation?

RITA: It was before. The only thing I know is that she was raped, and that it was a platoon. Like it wasn't like one person. That it was a group.

INT: This is Russians, or Germans?

RITA: Russians. And that her fear and belief was that she could never have a child, that she was damaged internally during the rape, and that there were real questions. Whether they were verified medically, I don't know. But I know that this was reality for her.

One of the things that she had was a lot of support from people who were not Jewish. You know, friends who she's still in touch with. Her friend Jeanie lives in New Jersey, and probably saved her life, you know, more than once.

INT: Is this the one who taught her how to, gave her a Bible and taught her...

RITA: Yes. And I may have the story all farmisht. You know, I wouldn't be surprised if I don't have it the way it really is. But this is certainly my perception of it. And she has like a teacher who took her in for a while. People who knew that she was Jewish, and were willing to risk their lives, and their family's lives.

INT: It's unusual.

RITA: For her it's not. I mean, I think she felt that there were people there for her. Certainly not that they could pretend that she was their child, and sort of give her a comfortable life, but people who were willing to go out of their way.

There was a person who worked with her grandmother, who brought his wheat to the granary, or somehow did something in business, who took my mother in the middle of the night, someplace, pretended, not the middle of the night. I don't know what it was. He had to take her through town, and pretend that she was his fiancée, to get her, and said, "Your grandmother did very nice things for me. And whatever I can do." And said to her, "I will know, and some people in my family will know what I'm doing; others I cannot tell, because they will not be able to maintain the secrecy." And people who fortunately had good judgment, and facilitated her survival, basically.

INT: So she doesn't relate any anti-Semitic incidents as a child, or growing up, among the Poles?

RITA: No.

INT: Seems like only positive experiences.

RITA: They were mostly positive. And yet I'm sure that the negatives were there. (pause) She talks about that a lot now, in terms of Polish people being anti-Semitic, but yet the people that she knew, or chose to affiliate with, I don't know. I think her family stood in somewhat high regard in the community, which may be some of it, too. I mean, if somebody wants credit in her grandmother's store, they're not about to call her a dirty Jew. And if she owns the store. (laughs) You know? So maybe some of that helped. I don't know.

INT: But it sounds like she had a lot of good people, and friends that were non-Jewish, who really risked their lives to help her.

RITA: Yeah.

INT: Okay. So she got through the war basically hiding in different people's houses as a sort of...

RITA: Servant.

INT: And your father. Do you know?

RITA: My dad had a brother who was in Russia. And went with another brother to Russia. And was in Siberia for most of the war. So he wasn't in Poland. His parents were killed. I have to remember how many siblings were left after the war. The brother in Russia survived. The other brother, Yitzchak, who he traveled with to Russia, survived the war. I think the rest were all killed. You probably remember more details than I do.

INT: So your father left his town.

RITA: He left his parents, who were still alive. I think they asked the parents if they wanted to go to Russia, and they didn't. I get a sense of his parents being very unsophisticated, simple people. My father, and his oldest brother, the one who was in Russia, I think were much more politically astute, and had more of a sense. My father was in Warsaw, I think, when the war broke out, and had more of a sense of what was going on. He wasn't in the little town. I think he also, because of his socialist beliefs at the time, felt that that was a way of life that would work better, and his older brother was very involved with that. He had gone to political rallies and had heard, this sort of idea of Communism presented in terms of everybody being equal, everybody having, everybody sharing.

INT: And him coming from a poor background, maybe that was appealing.

RITA: I'm sure it was. And it's always appealing, I think, to belong to a group that has these positive ideals. Whether they can work or not, you don't know initially. And I think it was a very strong motivating factor. I think he also looked upon his oldest brother as a parental figure, and wanted to be with him.

INT: His brother who had already left for Russia.

RITA: Yes.

INT: So which brother did he go with to Russia? One brother already left.

RITA: One was there, and I can't remember his name. But Yitzchak was the one who was the next oldest to my dad. My dad was the youngest, and the one that was the next oldest went. They went together. Now, he was married already at the time when they went to Russia. My dad wasn't.

INT: How many siblings, again, does your father have?

RITA: I can't remember. It's either eight or nine. But it's a large family.

INT: And everybody else stayed.

RITA: I think so. I think the rest stayed in Poland.

INT: Was everyone killed, that stayed?

RITA: Yes. Yes.

INT: And when the war happened, your mother was about fifteen or sixteen?

RITA: And my father's about six years older, so he was in his early twenties.

INT: Okay. He was a young man.

RITA: Yeah.

INT: Liberation. Where were they liberated, and had they told you any of their experiences of liberation?

RITA: My dad, I don't know. I know he was in Russia, and that he went looking for whatever family there was at that time. His brother and his brother's family. The one who had been in Russia. He went looking for them. So he must have been in Russia when the war ended. My mom is much clearer. When she found out that the war was over, she went to a market, and bought clothes that fit, and walked into the house where she was working, and they didn't know who she was. They literally did not recognize her. She combed her hair, did whatever, you know. Had clothes that fit. The whole thing. And they had no idea who she was, and were very surprised to find out what her story was, and I think she left that day. I mean, I think she did not stay. If she stayed it was for like a day or so. And then went looking to find...

INT: She was all alone.

RITA: Yeah.

INT: So she went by herself to go look for her...

RITA: Well, she had been by herself for many years. At that point she was older, and wanted to see who was left, who was around.

INT: Is that when she found out about her grandparents, or she already knew?

RITA: I think she knew before. I think the first person she went back to was her teacher. And from her teacher, since her teacher was from the same area, probably got some information, and I think she got in touch with Jeanie, and found out. Because Jeanie's farm was next to her grandparents' farm, kind of thing. And knew about that. She knew that her mother had been killed. That she knew much earlier. And felt **tremendous** guilt, because I guess my mother was the one who took her to the hospital. And felt that it was her fault that she was killed. Because

she had brought her there. And not willingly. I mean, her mother did not want to be hospitalized at the time. It sounds like she was very florid in a psychotic episode, and did not want to be hospitalized, and cried and carried on. And medications certainly weren't available. They didn't exist to stabilize her. So I think she knew already that her mother was dead. And I guess at some point fairly soon she tried to make contact with the relatives that had left the country.

INT: Okay. There were no relatives left in Poland, on her mother's side or her father's side?

RITA: Nobody.

INT: Nobody. Everybody had either gotten out or was killed.

RITA: Right.

INT: Okay. So where did she go after she was in Poland?

RITA: She went to, the only person who was left, was, and I keep forgetting the connection. Someone who was related to someone who was married to somebody who was part of the family kind of a deal. And it was my aunt, who now lives in Winnipeg. I call her my aunt, and I don't think she really is. She went to her. And it was while she was staying with Geitel, that she met my dad, and within six weeks they were married.

INT: Okay. How did that work, how did that happen?

RITA: It happened because my mother was pregnant. And nobody wanted her. Whoever she knew from before the war, who was in wherever area Geitel and her husband were, thought that my father was a philanderer, and a no-goodnik kind of person, who had no future, who basically was a party kid. You know? Who wanted to have a good time. And nobody supported her marrying him. I don't know if she told them she was pregnant. But they had all kinds of other people that she should marry instead. You know, there was a guy who now lives in Memphis, who she should have married. They had a whole slew of people. I think the other piece of it is that my mother had fallen in love during the war...

(END TAPE ONE, SIDE ONE)

(TAPE ONE, SIDE TWO)

INT: Okay, she met someone...

RITA: She met someone, I think, when she was with her teacher at one point, who she fell very much in love with, and who reciprocated the feelings for her. He was not Jewish. His, he was a...I don't know if he was injured during the war as a soldier, or what, but he had only one leg. Very educated man. Very quiet man. Who didn't want my mother to marry him, because he felt that her life would be too difficult.

INT: She fell in love with him after he was wounded?

RITA: Yes. And she didn't know him before, at least, that's not what I remember. And so I think she was very much driftless and frightened, and young. Traumatized. Without any connections. And to find out that she's pregnant, when she thought that she could never have a child, had an enormous...

INT: Pregnant from your father...

RITA: Yeah. Had an enormous impact on her. And there's no way she would have made any choices other than to have me, and to have a father for me. And so they got married, very, very quickly. Now how the hell she knew she was pregnant that quickly, I mean, unless they had sex the first night they met! (laughs) And her period was due like...do you know what I mean? There's not a heck of a lot of time!

INT: But she tells you six weeks.

RITA: She tells me, it **was** six weeks from the day they met. That they got married. Which is really wild and woolly.

INT: Quick.

RITA: Yeah.

INT: So she was staying with this, you're not sure what the connection is, woman named Geitel.

RITA: Yes.

INT: And Geitel was married, and was taking her in?

RITA: Geitel was married. Her family had been killed during the war. She had twin sons who were murdered. And another child who was murdered. And had quite a fascinating story, if you can look at it, and say it's fascinating. She had a horrific war experience. And...

INT: Could you tell it a little bit?

RITA: Geitel was hidden by a farmer, also. A Polish farmer, in a hole that was dug in the ground for doing something. I don't know if it had something to do with farming, but there was a hole in the ground, either under the barn, or near the barn. She was in there for a year with a few other people, where if one person turned they all had to turn. She talks about it as being, she lived in a hole in the ground.

INT: Her children were...

RITA: Her children were dead already. Her husband and her children had been killed. And she felt that she deserved to die. And being in this hole in the ground was like, this is where I belong. When the war ended, she already knew this man that she then married. David. Dovid. They knew each other. His family had also been killed. And he was a kind man, who promised that they would take care of each other. And they stayed together, fairly happily, I think.

INT: Did they have children?

RITA: She miscarried. She could never have another child. She had **numerous** miscarriages. But they, they were in whatever town it was in Poland, waiting to leave Poland to go to Canada. And Geitel was and still is the kind of woman who will take in anybody and make them her family. She is a personification of like Mother Earth. (laughs) You know, kind of person? She's very nurturing, very warm, very loving. Also very direct, which is like really a riot.

INT: She'll tell you just what she thinks?

RITA: Yeah. Oh, she's so funny. She'll do things, like she'll give you a present, and you'll say, "This is too much money." And she'll say, "You have your hands in my pockets? You know how much I have?" (laughter) She's a riot. She's an absolute delight. She took in my mother, and made her hers. You know, and has continued to do that since the war. And evidently did it even before, where she just has these big arms that will envelop everybody and anybody. She's a love. And she basically took in my mother and offered to take her to Canada, to bring her over to Canada once they were there, which they did do. They were the ones who filed the papers, and brought us to Canada from Germany. Because the uncle who was in the United States, the quota was much more difficult to get into the United States. It was a lot easier to Canada. And they had even prepared an apartment for us. I was, I guess I was two when my parents left Europe. They had prepared an apartment for us in Winnipeg, in Manitoba. And my parents arrived in Montreal, and my father refused to go. He said he wanted to stay in Montreal. And I think their lives would have been very, very different, had they moved where there was a family connection, and an older person to sort of tame my father. And give my mother more of a sense of connection to support, which she never had. My father sabotaged it, and my mother didn't say, "Fuck you. I'm going anyway." (laughs) You know, kind of thing. So they stayed in Canada. I've gone totally off track.

INT: Yeah, before we get to Canada, though, how did your father meet your mother? How did he get to that town?

RITA: He was back in Poland, from Russia. He was back in Poland looking for who was left, what was around. It must have been Warsaw. Maybe they were in Warsaw. Maybe he came back to Warsaw, which was some number of kilometers from this little shtetle where he had grown up. Zulkiewka. Where he grew up. And met my mother, you know, there.

INT: Just by chance?

RITA: Yes. At somebody's house, or something like that. I mean, the Jewish community was not very big at that point, and probably everybody knew everybody, and everybody wanted to know everybody, to see if they could find out any information about where were you during the war? Did you ever see anybody from this town? I mean people were **grasping**.

INT: Word of mouth, trying to find...

RITA: Trying to find people. You know. I mean, there were no records. Certainly you couldn't go someplace and find out what happened to who.

INT: Do you get a sense that your parents fell in love, or what is your sense of their...

RITA: No. No. I don't. (pause) What happened between them? I don't know what the hell happened. They're so different. I can't imagine, and they're not different in that opposites would attract. I don't understand what they would have ever seen in each other.

INT: Well, describe your parents. Describe your mother, and then describe your father.

RITA: My mother's a very serious woman, who's very pessimistic. She's very realistic. My father, for my father the glass is always half full. For my mother it's always half empty. My father loves to party, to this time. My father loves to be in social situations. He loves to talk, he loves to sing, he loves to dance, he wants to play cards. He wants to have a good time. My mother takes life very hard. It's not that she doesn't like to have a good time, but her idea of a good time, is not to be in the middle of a party. My mother loves to read. My father never read until about ten years ago. Their values are totally different.

INT: How so?

RITA: To my mother, her family is the most important thing. It's all that she has left. It's all that she created. To my father, what other people think, and how he comes across is the most important. My father is very narcissistic. He's very infantile in his needs. You know? He wants to look good. When my father came back from Israel recently, I said, "So how's everybody there?" "They thought I looked **great**!" It's not exactly what I asked you. But it **typifies** my father's level of relationship. My mother isn't like that. My mother is a very different kind of person. My mother connects. She gloms onto you, you know, in an effort to recapture some connection to people, you know, on a deeper level. She's infantile also, but in wanting...wanting to be nurtured. Wanting to have a connection, wanting to feel that people care.

INT: What do you mean, "Gloms onto you"?

RITA: (pause) She is all-encompassing. My mother has no boundaries. You know? She doesn't, she'll call you six times a day to say nothing, because she needs to know that you're there. She has a hard time separating from people, and giving them room to do what they need to do. She's over-protective. She's very insecure. She has no self-esteem. You know, so she borrows all of those things from you. You know, she like tries to get a sense of who she is by

being with someone and getting their reflection of her. And if they think that she's good, then she feels good. And so she sort of attaches herself (laughs) to you, you know, in some emotional way to get all of that. But I just...

INT: So would you say, "dependent," is that a word?

RITA: Totally.

INT: Totally.

RITA: She's a fascinating woman, my mother. She's totally dependent, and yet this woman moved mountains. When I think of what she did in her life, and how she survived. How can someone make it on their wits to live the way that she lived at such a young age, and to survive, and to make some kind of a life for herself? And yet, you'll say to her, "Could you make this deposit for me at the bank?" "I don't know how to do that." "**Excuse me?** How did you get from being able to do everything, to doing nothing?" And she'll fluctuate, depending on how she feels. At other times she will do **everything** herself.

INT: So it's not like after the war she just became...

RITA: She is just this...she's fascinating. She's such a complex person, you know? It's hard to define my mother in simplistic terms. (pause) She can do so many things that I don't see other immigrants doing. My mother negotiates systems **very** well. My mother handles hospitals, doctors, medications. Here, she came to Philadelphia, she never knew Philadelphia. And my mother knows parts of Philadelphia I've never **been** in. She'll figure out the bus system. My mother can go from one, I said something about a TJ Max up in Exton, and that they had a pair of shoes, and I was going to try and get back there, blah, blah, blah. My mother found a way to go there by bus. And calls me and says, "Guess where I was today?" This is the same woman who sometimes can't, I guess this is the part that always hurt me. When I was a kid, I was always called upon to be the negotiator. They didn't know enough. I knew English. I understood better than they did, I should figure it out. And yet here she is showing the ability to figure and maneuver, but they have a tendency, both of them, to slip into this dependency kind of thing.

But I still, to go back to what we started with, I have no idea what the hell brought them together except maybe some physical attraction. Something that sparked, I think had they been together longer, and my mother not gotten pregnant, there's no way they would have gotten married.

INT: They're just too different.

RITA: Totally different. Totally, totally different. Their whole way of dealing with life and with people. It's just...

INT: It's different.

RITA: Yeah.

INT: What happened, once, she got pregnant, they got married, in that town?

RITA: Yes.

INT: Okay, with Geitel?

RITA: Yeah, she made the wedding.

INT: She made the wedding for them. So then what happened? Where did they go?

RITA: They had to get out of Poland, and they went through the border illegally into Germany, and I don't know why they had to get out. I guess, I don't know, part of Poland was still occupied in some way, or that the Americans were already in Germany and had set up facilities for immigrating people out. I don't know. All I know is that they had to get out of Poland, and they couldn't do it legally. That they had to pay money to have somebody take them through the woods and the forest, in the middle of the night.

INT: Why did they want to get out of Poland?

RITA: They both felt a desperate need to leave Europe. I think that there was a fear that it wasn't over. That it could happen again. America held the magic dream. I mean, it was the land of milk and honey kind of thing.

INT: Was Israel ever a possibility with them?

RITA: My father's brother was in Israel, and no, it wasn't. And probably because of my mother. My mother would have sooner, I don't know what, stayed in Poland, than go to Israel. She had no, I think that being Jewish meant to her that she was persecuted, that her family was killed. She never felt strongly Jewish on some gut level. She would have not gone to a Zionist country where her affiliation would have to be Jewish. And where everything would revolve around.

INT: She was just not comfortable with being Jewish.

RITA: She had absolutely **no** desire to go to Israel. And she had a relative here. You know? She had her mother's brother, who lived in the United States, who had a business, who was sending money to her in Germany, who kept saying, "I want you to come."

INT: Where did he live in the States?

RITA: New York. New York.

INT: So they got illegally into Germany, into the American Zone.

RITA: Yeah.

INT: And where did they end up?

RITA: In Montreal.

INT: No, but in Germany, what happened to them?

RITA: Munich. They were in Munich. We lived, in fact, I went back to see the place that we lived. They rented an attic. And I was born there. My father didn't live in Munich with us all of the time. He went to do something in a sugar factory someplace. And we lived in Germany until I was two, until the papers came through.

INT: Okay. So two years you were there, waiting for the papers.

RITA: Yes.

INT: And then wound up in Montreal.

RITA: Yes.

INT: With this aunt?

RITA: No, Geitel was in Manitoba, and we were in Quebec, which is quite a ways away. We saw her. My mother and I would go out to Winnipeg and stay with her for the summers and stuff. But my parents stayed in Montreal, and basically it was like a holding pattern. They were waiting to go to the United States. That was their dream.

INT: And your father, what is your sense of why your father didn't want to go to Manitoba? Why he wanted to stay in Montreal?

RITA: My gut level is that he didn't want anyone to control him. That he had a couple of friends that he knew from Europe who were coming to Canada who were in Montreal. And I think that Geitel and her husband represented parents in some way, and I don't think he wanted, I mean, he had left home once before, you know, and I don't think he wanted anyone to dampen his style. And maybe I'm totally wrong. But that's my gut feeling, is that that's why he didn't want to go.

INT: But he knew, I guess he knew that your mother wanted to go. Or **did** she want to go?

RITA: Oh, yeah.

INT: That didn't enter into it?

RITA: I don't think they ever made decisions based (laughs) on anything, they never made decisions. Decisions in my parents' house were made by default almost. There wasn't a lot of sitting down and saying, "Okay, these are the options. How do we, you know, you want this, I

want that, where can we compromise?" My family was one of **incredible** fights. Nothing was discussed. Things were fought about. Tempers flared.

INT: So who would win?

RITA: (pause) Who would win? A lot of times my father, and a lot of times my mother.

INT: Half and half. So decisions would be fought out that way? That's how they would be?

RITA: Yeah.

INT: So the Montreal thing was probably, you were too young to know what was going on at that time.

RITA: In some ways it was a good time, because there was a little bit more money. They came with nothing. They came with less than a hundred dollars, I think. No language abilities.

INT: Neither of them knew English, or French, or...

RITA: Nothing. No family there. Nobody. And they survived. And made a life for themselves. I mean, we lived very poorly. We lived always over a business, you know. We never lived in an apartment building, or in a house. We always lived in some kind of an apartment that was over a store. On a commercial street, because that was cheap.

INT: What did your father do when he got here?

RITA: He was working in a factory. My mother learned English very quickly. My mother has an incredible capacity for languages. She would only read and speak in English. She bought a radio. She would only talk to me in English, and learned the language, and took whatever classes were given by the HIAS, or the Hadassah, or whatever was available. Took some classes, and just communicated. I mean, she just did just that until she learned to communicate. And worked at night when my dad was home with me. And so she had some money. She was a little bit more independent.

In the meantime, they had brought my uncle from Israel with his three children, to Montreal. And they lived with us, I think less than a year, and then got an apartment. And they followed us to the United States, also. When we came, we brought them to the United States. It's like this constant, it's like a nomadic, you know, trying to find a place for themselves, existence.

INT: What would be your earliest memories of childhood?

RITA: See, I actually have memories of Germany, which I never knew were Germany. And it's kind of funny. I described to my mother a sense of being in what looked like a field to me, and there were big stones, but they were set in the ground, and I was running. And I remember this feeling of having my arms out, and just running in this field of stones. And my mother said,

"Do you know where that was?" I said, "I have no idea." She said, "It's the Central Square in Munich." It's cobble-stoned, and it was the day that they got their papers to leave Germany, and I was running in this cobble-stoned courtyard.

INT: And you remember that. You were only two.

RITA: Then the other memory I have is...all I can see is a pitched, like an attic-type, or a dormer, I guess it's called, type ceiling. And there's a window, and I can see light coming through it. And I said to my mother, "That doesn't sound like any place I ever was." And she said, "That's the view from your crib." Which according to all of my psychological training (laughs) I'm not supposed to remember this stuff! And here it is. So those are my earliest memories.

I remember the apartment very well in Montreal, and the people who lived in the building, and stuff like that.

INT: What was it like? What was it like growing up in Montreal? You were there from the time you were two until you were...

RITA: Till I was ten. Um...what was it like? My family was not a very happy family. I don't think I was a very happy child. I remember a lot of fights. I remember everything being very strict, and very rigid. My mother would wash the floors and line them with newspaper, so you'd have to walk on the newspaper. I remember family friends. I remember a Seder in the foyer. (pause) I don't...it doesn't seem horrendous to me, but it doesn't seem wonderful. My fondest memories are that I got a cat. And that my mother was afraid that if the cat was in the room with me, the cat would kill me at night, like it would lay on my head, you know the typical Jewish mother stuff. And so I'd get put to bed, and I'd pretend I was asleep, and I'd tiptoe to the door after it was quiet, and I'd open the door just a crack, and I'd whistle, and the cat would come. Fluffy. And I would take the cat into bed, and I'd hold onto the cat, and it would calm me and make me feel secure. But I knew I'd have to let go, because if my mother found the cat in the bed, we'd both be up the creek! (laughs) And so I would get really comfortable, and feel really good, and then I'd have to get out of bed, and send the cat on its way and shut the door again.

INT: Couldn't fall asleep with him.

RITA: No. My parents were, my father not so much, my mother was incredibly strict. **Incredibly** strict. Very typical European, you know, these are the rules, these are the rules for children kind of things.

The thing I do have a real sense of is that I was very loved. I was very loved, and very cherished by both of my parents, and I knew that that was always there for me. No matter what I did, and I still have that belief. The shit that I give them (laughs) at times, it's quite amazing that they haven't washed their hands of me. I mean, it's not that I've been a bad daughter, but I've...I've been a normal person in that I certainly have given a lot of anguish to them, as any child does, you know. And the thing that is **unfaltering**, always, is their love for me.

INT: That's with both of them.

RITA: Yeah.

INT: You had talked about your mother being strict. Could you give examples of how that was?

RITA: I was very young. I had started school. There was a butcher's store on the way to school. We had to walk to school. My mother would walk me. And there was a butcher store on the corner of the block where the school was. The cat had kittens. I really wanted a cat. The only way I could get the cat was if I carried the cat home. Well, there were no cat carriers. Here I am, maybe six years old, trying to carry this cat, and cross these busy streets. It was a nightmare. I get the cat home, and the first time that the cat peed or pooped someplace in the house other than the litter box, my mother left it for me to clean up when I came home from school because it was my cat. And gave me hell. And made me feel like I had done something wrong. (laughs) You know, I had raised this cat improperly, and it was acting up. Punishments were very severe. My mother did this, she'd get mad at me, and she wouldn't talk to me for days, kind of thing. And I was not just by my accounts, but by family friends that I talk to now, who are my parents' age, I was a child who never did anything wrong. I mean, I had no **chance** to do anything wrong. I mean, I was too scared to do anything wrong. I was scared a lot. I was scared of not pleasing my parents. There was no room to be a kid.

INT: You felt like you had to make them happy?

RITA: I felt like I had to make them happy, and I felt like I had to grow up real fast to take care of them. There were all these conflicts between them. I always knew about the conflicts. My mother would always, I was her confidante. She would burden me with whatever was going on in her life.

INT: At how early an age would that start?

RITA: Always. I don't remember it ever not being that way.

INT: If she would have a fight with your father, she would tell you what it was about?

RITA: Yes.

INT: Inappropriately, do you think?

RITA: Yeah. I had no business knowing this shit. It wasn't my problem. It was their problem. I think it's inappropriate to tell a kid. I'd never do that to my daughter. You know, what I might say is, "Daddy and I had a disagreement, and it's really not yours to worry about. We'll work it out." (laughs) You know? "It had nothing to do with you, it's not your responsibility. I'm sorry

you heard us yelling, and if it upset you, I'd like to hear about it," but that would be the end of it, you know?

INT: Why do you think she told you so much?

RITA: Because she didn't have anybody. Because she was alone.

INT: She didn't have friends?

RITA: She's not a very, she's not easy to make friends. She's very...my mother is social, but to get really close to her, you have to prove that she can trust you, because she's afraid people will hurt her in some way. And she doesn't open up easily. I think I represented to her and my father everyone that they had lost in the war. I was their mother, I was their...and they actually would say that. I was their mother, I was their father, I was their sister, I was their brother, I was everyone that they had lost. I was the one who was carrying...their hope. Their...I was the family.

INT: That's a lot to carry.

RITA: Yeah. Yeah. It's too much. It's too much to carry. But it's not uncommon. I mean I saw it happening in all the families around me. It wasn't just my folks who did this. I mean, it's a very typical survivor...

INT: Was the neighborhood survivors? A lot of survivors in your neighborhood, and your parents' friends?

RITA: It was mixed. My parents' friends were all survivors.

INT: All of them.

RITA: My father especially. My father **still** feels most comfortable with Europeans. He's not even that comfortable with American Jews. Until he had a business, my father really wasn't fluent in English. And as I said, he never read until he was, I guess when he retired, he started to read. If he read, if I bought...

(END TAPE ONE, SIDE TWO)

(TAPE TWO, SIDE ONE)

INT: Did he also only speak to you in Yiddish?

RITA: Yes. My father spoke only Yiddish to me, which drove my mother crazy.

INT: Did he expect you to answer back in Yiddish?

RITA: Yes. It didn't matter. I mean, he encouraged me to. In fact, it was funny, when Elizabeth was born, I said, "Daddy, speak to her in Yiddish." And he looked at me, he said, "Why don't **you** speak to her in Yiddish? You speak Yiddish." And I still do. You know, I still, there are times where I will lapse into Yiddish with him, or there's a word that I can't say any other way but in Yiddish. My mother felt uncomfortable with his speaking Yiddish to me. She felt that Yiddish wasn't a real language. That it was a conglomeration of other languages, and that therefore it wasn't a true language, and that if he was going to speak to me in another language, it should be a language that I could use.

INT: Your mother knew what languages when she came here?

RITA: My mother spoke Polish. She spoke Russian. She spoke German. When she worked for someone who was Hungarian, my mother learned Hungarian. My mother speaks English. My mother never studied any of these languages. That's the bizarre thing.

INT: She's just very gifted.

RITA: My mother translates Russian letters to me now, and speaks Russian to Russian people, **fluently**.

INT: Where did she learn Russian?

RITA: When the Russians were in Poland. I mean, she just has such a gift for languages. She has a real ear.

INT: So it was important to your mother that she only speak to you in what language?

RITA: English.

INT: English.

RITA: Because she wanted to learn English. That was very important to her.

INT: But your father only speaks Yiddish. He didn't want to learn...

RITA: He also didn't want to learn English.

INT: Why not?

RITA: He's not very good at it, for one thing. And it's not, it wasn't important to him to assimilate into a new culture.

INT: Well, how did he manage to get around without knowing English?

RITA: He spoke enough English to get by. But if we went to the theater, it was the Yiddish theater. If he listened to the radio, my mother would put on Hit Parade (laughs) and listen to the words of the songs, with Patsy Cline singing, so that she could learn the language. My father would find the Jewish station. My mother would buy magazines in English, my father got the Forverts, you know, or whatever paper there was that was written in Yiddish.

INT: It's such a dichotomy between them.

RITA: It's unbelievable. They were like Ying and Yang and they still are. (laughter) I mean, it's like they had no meeting point. The meeting point was me. And that was it. Other than that they shared **nothing**. Absolutely...they shared not, they don't have the same beliefs in terms of money, religion, education.

INT: All right, wait, so let's talk about those. Let's start with money.

RITA: My father wants to have a good time. My father has always worked very hard, and did really his best to provide for the family. But my father came first. You know, if it was a question of his having a new suit...because he was going to a bar mitzvah, or wanted to look good, that came before saving money to buy a house. Or it would come before, I don't know what.

INT: What about getting something for you? Would it come before that?

RITA: No. My father always had, he was funny. He would say things like, "So, this is how much you had to spend on a **dress**?" My mother would say, "So you come to the store, and you see." So he would go to the store, I'd put on three dresses, and he'd say, "You're right. The expensive one looks better, take that one."

INT: So he wasn't selfish when it came to things for you.

RITA: No. But he also had no idea of what I needed. He was from a generation where he certainly didn't participate in raising me very actively. That was my mother's job. He would complain. You know, and then it would be explained, and he'd sort of go along with the program. But he wasn't very involved, in terms of decisions, or even knowing who the hell I was. He had no clue, I think. He had an image of who he thought I was, and I was a good kid. It's not like they had to dig.

INT: So what was your mother's, your mother's view on money? Your father's view of money was just, it was there to sort of spend and have a good time, kind of thing?

RITA: Yeah. My mother's view. My mother worked because there wasn't enough money. We were very poor. My mother also wanted to spend, but she wanted to spend on all of us. She wanted to spend on the house. She would want to buy something for the house. That wasn't important to my dad. How the house looked, unless people were coming, didn't matter.

INT: Do you think that comes from their backgrounds?

RITA: Probably, because he grew up in a shack, you know?

INT: So anything better than that was probably all right.

RITA: Right. Where my mother grew up in a home. You know, there were glass dishes, there were candlesticks, there were silver. She still talks about furniture. When I started buying oak pieces, my mother said, "Gee, my grandmother had a lot of oak furniture." My mother came from a family that had jewelry. Maybe not diamonds and rubies, but they had, you know, they had gold.

INT: A comfortable family.

RITA: Yeah. My father didn't have a clue. About any of that.

INT: Do you see your mother as being more sophisticated than your father?

RITA: Oh, sure. Sure.

INT: What about religion, what are the differences, well, you spoke about your mother's view of religion, but what about your father?

RITA: My father told me that he was an atheist. Certainly given the communist interest that he had, the belief in G-d didn't play a big part in that. I think that the war took away from him any belief that he had that there was a G-d. You know, if there was something still there that could have been developed, given whatever his circumstance...you know, I get the sense that, now, I have to say, my mother believes in G-d. Which blows my mind. I don't know how and where she found this G-d for her, but she believes in G-d. My mother will pray. My mother will believe that there is some force, some being, some thing, that controls the universe in some way for her. I don't think my father has that.

INT: Because of the war, you think?

RITA: I think because of the war, and also because of, it's funny, as uneducated as my father is, when it comes to politics, which are an **avid** interest of his, he is **so** knowledgeable about events, certainly in terms of Stalin and different Russian history, Polish history. He's very, very knowledgeable about that. And even now, I mean, my father can watch the news for 24 hours a day. He'll sit down, watch the news, come inside and say, "Oh, the news is on." "Daddy, you just finished. What do you think happened in the last hour?" "I want to go hear."

INT: Why do you think...

RITA: I don't know. I have no idea. So it's an interest of his; I don't know where it comes from.

INT: Well, pre-war he was involved in all that political stuff.

RITA: Yeah, I'm sure that's part of it, but I never thought my father was bright enough, actually. My father at times...doesn't seem to get simple concepts, and yet can retain data about history and politics, that I just, I don't know where he gets the ability. You know, but it's there. It's clearly there. And he's very eloquent, almost. In a way that I don't hear him at other times. When it comes to stuff like that. Interesting.

INT: So your mother believes in a G-d. And your father, you think, is still an atheist.

RITA: He never talks about G-d. He never gets comfort, I think, from a G-d. You know, when things happen, when his brother died, or even more recently when my aunt died. I don't get a sense that he feels a connection in terms of G-d.

INT: How about in terms of Judaism? Of his Jewishness?

RITA: Oh, there, he's totally connected. I mean, it's a cultural connection for him. One of the reasons he gave for not moving to Philadelphia from New York was that he would lose his community. And he lives in a Jewish ghetto in Brooklyn. There's no other way to call it. It's totally Jewish.

INT: And he's comfortable there?

RITA: Oh, like a pig in shit! (laughs) He just...he just needs that population of people who have had similar experiences, who speak Yiddish, who he can sing Jewish songs with. And it's important to him.

INT: And your mother doesn't need that. She can be more nomadic, you think?

RITA: She hates it. She hates it. She feels that it's narrow-minded, that there's no room for these people to see the rest of the world. That they live in a country that they don't know. That they will isolate themselves from other people, other experiences. Totally finds it...

INT: Do you think safety comes into that at all with your mother? That she might be safer away from all that?

RITA: No. No, she calls them yentas. They're very small-town mentality, according to her. They sit and gossip about other people. They're people who live in New York who've never been to Manhattan. They're people who would never go to a museum. Who would never eat in a restaurant that served Chinese food, or something different. You know, they're intimidated. That's not her, you know? She's an explorer, my mother. She's an adventuress in some ways.

When, my mother traveled in the United States on a bus, just to go see it. These are not, it's a kind of people that huddle together for comfort. That's not my mother's comfort. To be with a bunch of people who...who she can't relate to, you know?

INT: What's comforting for your mother?

RITA: A good book. A radio. Her family.

INT: She likes music?

RITA: Loves music. Likes to have the radio on. A sense of security, you know. That she gets...it has to come more from inside her, you know? She doesn't...she doesn't need a group to feel good.

INT: She's always been alone.

RITA: Yeah.

INT: She can find her way that way.

RITA: She finds her way that way, and she needed to be closer to me. She needed to see Elizabeth. She needed to be a part of our lives much more. She also needed the security that if something was wrong with her, given that she has a lot of medical problems, that I would be close by and could take care of it.

INT: Okay, now you're talking about the separation of your parents. They separated about a year ago.

RITA: Right.

INT: So why did they separate, do you know?

RITA: My mother has, ever since I remember, the spoken word, my mother has been unhappy with my dad, and has wanted to leave. And never felt that she could. It used to be when I grew up, then she would leave. When I was out of the house. That she couldn't take me away from my father. That that was too important. And that basically, whatever my father was, he was a good dad. And that she wouldn't separate us.

When I got married and left the house, obviously she didn't leave. Things didn't get any better between them. They got progressively...I don't know that they got worse. They just were always bad.

A couple of years ago, my mother's level of depression became much more severe. Her hysterical view of life became...overwhelming, I think, and she used to come to visit us, and burden me tremendously with it. To the point where, when she would leave, I would find

myself...taking a lot of it out on Elizabeth, you know, where it was like the pattern was continuing. What she did to me I would now do to my daughter. And once I recognized that, I would become very short-tempered, and I'm **not** short-tempered with Elizabeth. So I knew that it wasn't like this is my, this is just who I am, kind of thing. And it would be that my mother would take so much out of me that I was on empty, and then my child would need something, and it was like, get the fuck away from me (laughs), I can't do anymore! And at that point I said to my mother, "You can't do this. I can't do this. I am not going to allow you to perpetuate this pattern. I will protect Elizabeth, and I will pay for you to go talk to somebody, because I don't want to hear it anymore. I can't hear it, because this is what happened." Once I put it in terms of my daughter, she was like, very taken aback, and accepted the help, which I had offered. I mean, I've been a therapist for a long time. I was in therapy for a long time. I had offered this to her a very long time ago, and she'd never been able to take it. Once I put it in terms of her grandchild, she accepted it.

INT: That hit a chord in her.

RITA: And she went into therapy. And what she says is, that she finally accepted and realized that she deserved more out of her life. And so she made plans, very carefully and very thoughtfully, to leave. With my father kicking and screaming all along the way.

INT: He didn't want it to happen?

RITA: Oh, G-d, no. Why should he want it to happen? She took care of him. You know, he was never home. He was out partying, still, at the age of, you know, in his seventies. He'd come home, his meals were cooked, his clothes were cleaned, his house was taken care of. I mean, he lost a servant. And he lost someone who takes care of him very well. I mean, my mother's a **wonderful** caretaker. She does a **great** job, you know. Cooking and cleaning, and doing all of it. And she accepted his behavior on whatever level in that it continued. And...

INT: Did he know that she was planning this?

RITA: Oh, yeah.

INT: And then she just left. How long did it take her to get it together to leave?

RITA: About a year. She prepared him. She taught him how to do things. My father had never done a frigging thing. My father never even, if you called my dad, and said, "Stop and buy a bottle of milk on the way home," he would say, I mean he'd say it in Yiddish, "Ich kenn nisht. I can't do that." "**Why** can't you do it? I'm not asking you to buy Kotex. I'm asking you to buy a bottle of milk." "**You** go."

INT: Why couldn't he do it?

RITA: Who the hell knows? I mean, I remember that as a kid. That he would just never do anything. Certainly after he retired, and they would go to the supermarket together, it was totally

reluctantly. He would drive my mother there, then he'd **leave** to go **do something**, and then she'd have to wait for him to come back. And half the time she'd get fed up, and she'd just take the stuff and carry it home.

The same was true with the laundromat. I mean, he never knew how to wash. This is a man who had a cleaning store. I mean, how complex is it to throw your wash into a washing machine? Never knew how to do it. Never made a bed in his life.

INT: She totally took care of him.

RITA: Totally.

INT: So what happened when she left him?

RITA: He threatened to kill himself. He wanted everyone to make her stay. She moved him into a new apartment. She set up the apartment. Moved the furniture into the apartment. Gave him everything that he wanted to keep and take, feeling that if he had things he knew, he'd be more comfortable. That to go out and buy him new dishes, or new silverware, or whatever, would be disorienting for him. You know? Set up the kitchen. Filled the freezer with food. She still fills his freezer with food. Negotiated all of the paperwork, which he claimed he couldn't do on his own. Signed the lease with him. You know? Did everything. Absolutely everything. And when he was moved, still stayed in New York for a while. So that she wouldn't leave him totally alone. Taught him how to make certain meals. Taught him how to make salmon patties. Taught him how to make chicken cutlets. (laughs) Taught him how to make schmaltz herring. I mean, the whole nine yards. Taught him how to do his laundry.

INT: Why did she do all this, if she...why do you think she did all that?

RITA: She says that she, I mean, she has this line. She says, "I could never kick someone when they're down." She feels sorry for him. There's a real sado masochistic connection between them. One of them is always hurting the other one, and the other one is taking it. (laughs) You know? And she says, and I guess this is true, look, they were together for 46 years. That's a long time. They went through a lot. They don't have anybody left. You know? I mean, no one else is alive anymore. You know?

INT: Do you think they love each other, or they have any fondness for each other at this point?

RITA: I think they care for each other. I guess on some level, you'd have to say they love each other, because they care for each other, you know, after such a long time. They haven't been able to dismiss each other. My mother says that they are actually better friends, or **friends**, which they never were, now that they're not together. I would be damned if I could tell that if you saw them together. I mean, they still bicker. They're like, they are so caustic when they are together. It's **awful** to even be in a room with the two of them.

INT: So you don't see any change.

RITA: Um, there is some change, but it's not any place close to a relationship that I would consider normal! You know? I mean, they...

INT: What do they fight about?

RITA: Nothing, basically. (shouts) "Avrom! Why are you carrying the plate that way? It's going to fall off!" "I can never do anything right." "You want a cup of tea?" "Ah, I don't know." (shouting) "Why don't you give me an answer?"

INT: But it sounds like that's your mother. Your mother is after him.

RITA: A lot. A lot.

INT: Is it the other way around?

RITA: She is after him a lot. My father...how does he come back at her? My father creates the arguments in a very passive-aggressive way, where he will do something that he knows he shouldn't do, or that will create someone yelling at him.

INT: Such as? Can you give me an example?

RITA: He's supposed to come here. It's Elizabeth's birthday. He wants to sing at a club on Friday night. Her party is Saturday morning. It's more important to him to sing at the club. He doesn't get, he'll come early Saturday morning. We'll come pick him up early from the train. Well, screw you, you know? (laughs) Those kinds of things he will do. He will do like, you know, it's harder for me to put myself in her shoes, because I am so different from her, but he will do things that anger **me**.

Like...he was going to Israel to visit the family. I know that he has no money. He was cashing in Israeli bonds that were long overdue to be cashed in, which he wouldn't cash in and buy **other** Israeli bonds to get more money. No. That, that he won't do. It's better to take the money from his daughter, you know, kind of thing.

Okay, so Ray and I felt that it would be awkward for him to go there and not have enough money. So in addition to sending money for the relatives there, and gifts for the relatives, so that he didn't have to buy anything, we gave him spending money. He comes home without a present for Elizabeth. A chatchka. **Anything**. You know, buy it in the airport. Buy her an Israeli chocolate bar. It doesn't matter what. I thought I was going to kill him.

INT: It's his only grandchild.

RITA: I really thought I was going to haul off and kill him. And it doesn't, and you know what his answer will be? "If you wanted me to do that, you should have told me." I don't want to have to tell you, to act like an adult. Or like a caring person.

INT: Do you think it's selfishness on his part, or he just doesn't think, or...

RITA: He's a schmuck. It is selfishness. It is that he doesn't think about other people. Does he love Elizabeth? He **adores** Elizabeth. Adores her.

INT: It just doesn't occur to him.

RITA: Out of sight, out of mind, with my father, you know? But he'll do things like that, where you'll end up yelling at him for something else, because you're still pissed off (laughs) about the big stuff. So that's how my father creates the arguments.

INT: So your mother's just always angry at him.

RITA: Yeah. So am I. Always. Constantly angry at him. And it's old stuff. It's like, not necessarily stuff he's done today.

INT: So your mother moved down here to be closer to, or to leave your father, or to be...

RITA: Both. Both. And she did offer -- I don't know why -- she offered to my father that if he was **so** unhappy at living alone, that he would move here, too, and she would take care of him, which was unbelievable. She wanted out of New York, which is harder and harder to live in, especially as you get older. And she also wanted away from him. But, when his reaction was so extreme at being left alone, she said, "Okay. If it's so important for you, and you're so afraid to be alone, then I'll get a bigger apartment. Move to Philadelphia. I just have to get out of here."

The other thing that my father has done is within this very tiny community, he has embarrassed my mother, by having affairs with other women in the community. So my mother, one of the reasons that she doesn't feel any comfort from this group, is that she feels that people are talking about her. Because he's done whatever he's done. And I have to say it's true. I mean, having lived with him, it is true that people talk about him. And it is true that people talk about you for putting up with his behavior.

For my father, I went to one bar mitzvah with my parents, and said I would never go again. Because my father doesn't sit with you. He dances with **every** other woman, and not you. And by the time he comes to ask you to dance, he's already spent two hours with everyone else, and you're so **mad** at him, that you're, "Dance with you? Over, you know, forget it," kind of thing. And he doesn't get it. He doesn't get it. He doesn't know why you're mad. "What did I do to you? You were sitting beside, you know, Shloime. You could have talked. You could have gone danced with Shloime."

INT: He really doesn't know what he's doing, you don't think?

RITA: It's quite convenient not to. Because then he can continue his behavior. He doesn't take responsibility for his behavior, basically. Which is not to say that, he was very unhappy with my mother. She was not his type of lady, and probably has felt bereft at not having a companion.

INT: What is his type?

RITA: Someone who wants to party. Somebody who sees the glass half full. Someone who is optimistic, someone who is up. Someone who feels well. When someone is sick, when other people are sick, he can't tolerate it. And my mother's been sick a lot. (pause) He wants someone to have fun with. Someone who laughs a lot, you know. That's what he looks for.

INT: So you think it's possible for your mother to have fun? Do you think she's capable of that?

RITA: Oh, yeah! Oh, my mother has a **wonderful** sense of humor.

INT: So it's just very different from your father.

RITA: She'll laugh at different things, you know? Oh yeah, my mother has a lot of fun. My mother can make fun out of standing and frying latkes. I mean, she can...from, like it's typical. My mother will be happy making latkes for the family, and be laughing and joking around and whatever. For my father to have a good time, we'd have to have seven other families here.

INT: He needs a big group.

RITA: And he needs to be the center of attention. So it's that kind of a situation where that was always his expectation, you know, as opposed to hers.

(END TAPE TWO, SIDE ONE. GO ON TO SIDE TWO)

INT: [This is a] continuation of an interview with Rita Roitman, child of survivors, and it's January 12th, 1995.

I wonder if we could start now with **your** life, now that we spoke a lot about your parents, and anything that you can remember about your childhood in Canada. You came when you were two, I think?

RITA: We came when I was two. A lot of the memories that I have are things that were told to me. The memories that I have for myself start a little bit later.

When my parents first came, there was no one there to meet them. There was no facilitator to get into Canadian life, or anything. And they had, I guess they had the names of a couple of other people who came at the same time, but everyone was sort of on their own. There wasn't much prepared for them. And they ended up renting a room in someone's house, and it was someone who didn't want children, and I was two. But who, for whatever reasons, made this concession,

and ended up thinking I was adorable, you know, kind of thing, and it wasn't a problem. So it didn't seem to be a problem for them.

My father, being very unskilled, didn't have a trade that he could go out and look for a job. And so it was through connections with other people who had just come, who would get jobs, and say, you know, like if it was in a factory say, "Oh, I know someone who could do this, too. Do you need somebody else?" And so I think he ended up, if I remember correctly, working in a leather factory, either making things out of leather, and that was sort of short-term. But it got him started in using machinery. Sewing-type machinery. So I think that financially, while they came with nothing, at least my father was working and my mother was home in this one-room situation, taking care of me.

INT: What kind of neighborhood was this? This was in Montreal, right?

RITA: It was in Montreal. I don't know. I mean, I don't think, I think it was a poor neighborhood, but I don't think it was a particularly scary...

INT: What about survivors? Were there other survivors around?

RITA: Maybe not in the exact area where they were living, but certainly there were survivors in the city. These were my aunts and uncles, you know, sort of, as they became to me. That I still call.

INT: They became family, in other words.

RITA: Yeah, yeah. Whatever survivors came. There was a family, and I think the husband had been in Siberia with my dad. The Blooms. And Chaim and his wife were friends. His wife was a Canadian, and so she was probably more able to facilitate things and do things. There was another family whose daughter was the same age, I guess she was about a half a year or a year older than me. The Shechters. Some of my early memories of being a child are playing with Celia, their daughter. And you know, there were other families like that.

So the part about where we lived in this one room kind of thing, I don't have many memories of that. What I do remember is after that, and I think they stayed there for about a year or so, maybe longer, I don't know. After that we moved to an apartment that was, it was a main street in Montreal. It was a three-story building. The bottom floor was a sort of haberdashery type shop, with women's stockings and clothing. It was owned by a woman who I adored, Mrs. Flamer, who owned the whole building. She lived on the second floor, and she rented out the third floor, which was an apartment to my parents. And I have memories of her being this very warm, enveloping, easy-going person, who would let me come and work with her in the store. I mean, I must have been like four or five years old. How much work was I doing? And she'd give me like a dust thing, you know, like a feather duster, and I'd go around dusting boxes. (laughs) It was adorable.

INT: Was she Jewish?

RITA: Yeah. She was a Jewish woman, who had been in Montreal, I think, most of **her** life, so I think she was, if she was an immigrant, it had been when she was quite young, and by the time I moved into that house, she must have been in her fifties or sixties already.

INT: And she owned a building.

RITA: And she owned a building, so she had been well established. Her children were grown already. I think one of her sons, when we first moved in, was still living there. But she was one of the people who...made me feel like there was a normal person around. Someone who wasn't always, "Oh, my G-d, don't do that!"

INT: Is that how your mother was?

RITA: Yeah. My mother was wired. She was very nervous, she was very over-protective, she was very frightened. She was a nervous wreck, basically. And this woman would say, would counter her behavior.

INT: Would she see the behavior of your mother, and sort of deliberately...

RITA: Yeah. She'd actually tell her. Oh, she'd actually say, you know, "Leave the kid alone. You're making her crazy. You go upstairs, leave her with me." You know. And she was a love. I mean, she was really...

INT: A safe haven, sort of.

RITA: Yeah. And I even went to see her, she moved down to Florida when I was...I went to visit her when I was about twenty or thirty years old, down in Florida, and the woman was still coherent, and by that point was close to ninety. And still remembered the kookiness of my mother, and still was very much, you know, the maternal, protective, you know, to me, kind of person. She was a very nice woman.

INT: This reminds me, you had mentioned in our last interview, you referred to it as your mother's "hysterical view of life." Could you describe that a little bit, what you mean by that?

RITA: I guess I mean it in a clinical way. My mother is a hysteric. Everything throws her. Everything gets blown out of proportion. Things don't roll off my mother's back. She's a very vulnerable person. She's, her defenses are rigid, she can't be flexible about things. There's one way, and it's her way. And anything that happens that counters that makes her hysterical. You know, she doesn't know how to adapt to it. And life certainly doesn't go according to plan, so anything would throw her off.

INT: Even small things?

RITA: Oh, yeah, I mean it wouldn't take a lot. She was very, my memories of the apartment in Montreal were that when she cleaned the apartment the floors were covered with newspapers. That she had to have things perfect.

INT: Cleanliness-wise?

RITA: Cleanliness-wise, and in terms of everything. Be it that I wore the prettiest dress, that I was the best child, that...she was never, yeah, I was thinking about this actually before today. My mother continued to survive the war for the rest of her life. To my mother life is a war. You know, she's constantly overcoming something. It's never stopped for her. When there were concrete things that fit in, like when they had a business and somebody tried to hold them up, and there was a gun, she reacted like a war survivor, you know, knowing to flatten on the floor, so that a bullet wouldn't hit her kind of thing. But those sort of guerrilla tactics is how my mother lives her life. She's warding off danger, be it internal or external. And everything is a matter of life and death for my mother. You know, nothing is like, well, it doesn't matter. You know, if it's choosing the right couch, choosing the right apartment, picking a career. Whatever the hell you're doing, it has to be done just so, and I think it's this incredible feeling of vulnerability that she has.

INT: She has to be in control of what's going on?

RITA: Yeah. And it's very hard, it was very hard for me as a child, because my mother would always try to control my life. As an adult, it's **obnoxious**.

INT: Well, give me examples as a child, as a small child. I mean, you're four and five, and you're feather-dusting downstairs. What was it like? How did she mother you as a small child?

RITA: Very affectionately. My mother was always very demonstrative, and she would hug and kiss me. I knew that...

INT: Oppressively much, or it was...

RITA: At times. At times. But I think when I was very young, it didn't feel that way. You know. I think it was...it was lovely. I was used to being held, I was used to being cuddled, I was used to being kissed. I grew up, and my father also. I mean, my family was very affectionate. Which was a blessing.

I remember her being the most over-protective mother of any one of my friends, where if kids reach certain stages of their life when they were ready to do something, the parents would be able to allow them. My mother could not.

INT: For instance.

RITA: For instance. (pause) Okay, here's a great example. I wanted a pet very badly.

INT: Yeah, you had talked about this cat that you brought home yourself.

RITA: And this feeling that I had to be able to handle all parts of it...

INT: Even when it messed up.

RITA: Even when it messed up, and the fact that I was a child wasn't part of the equation, you know? Things had to be done the right way, whatever the fuck the right way was in her head.

INT: As an adult, in an adult way.

RITA: Yeah. And there was no allowance for the fact that I was a kid.

INT: You had mentioned to me once about a bicycle, that you never learned how to....

RITA: She never wanted me to ride a bike because I could get hurt. And I remember, there was a, there's a mountain in the center, well, in the center of where we lived in Montreal called Mount Royale. And at the base of this mountain was a Jewish library. And it was like a gathering place where all the men would like schmooze. You know, they'd come in their suits. (interruption) All of the men would stand around and schmooze. Now, my mother had started working, and she worked in, I call it a bakery, but it was more than that. The man who ran the place was a Hungarian, who imported a lot of delicacies from Europe to Canada, because there were people there from so many different places.

INT: How old were you when your mother went to work?

RITA: I was young. I mean, I don't know exactly, but my guess is I was about five. Maybe even younger. Before then my mother, she'd try to find things she could do at home to make money. She worked for a jeweler, stringing beads, and she would do that at home, at night when I'd go to bed. I don't know what else she did. I remember the jewelry, because we still have some of it. And then she went to work in the store, and the man that she worked for accommodated the fact that she was parenting, and that she could come to work only when my dad would come home. So she'd work in the evenings after my father came home. I lost sight of the question.

INT: Well, you were talking about bicycle, and that place you had gone.

RITA: I guess on Sundays my father would take me. My mother would go to work for a couple of hours. My father would take me, and we would go to the library, and he'd get a couple of, there was a children's, there was like one shelf that had children's stories. And since my father couldn't read in any other language, the only way that he could read to me were these Yiddish storybooks. So we would choose some storybooks, and then we would go to the outside. And it was just like across the street was this park that was at the base of the mountain. And a lot of the people would bring their kids there, and the kids would play. And I didn't know how. Because I

had never been in a position where I was with other kids where there was any sense of freedom to do anything.

My father was such a contrast to my mother. My mother was all over me all the time. "Where are you? What are you doing?" (laughs) "Are you standing up straight?" Dah, dah, dah, dah. My father, on the other hand, would start to talk to these people, and it was as though I weren't there anymore. And I remember a friend of his had a kid, and they were there on a bike, and I said, "I want to ride a bicycle." Well, my father thought that I should get on the bike, he'd hold it for five minutes, and I'd know how to, and then he could go on talking. And he held the bike for less than half a block, and then let go, and expected me to be, and was **shocked** that I fell off. You know, that the bike tumbled to the ground. And that was the kind of contrast in parenting. It was **horrible**. Because there was no one there who set appropriate, my mother set goals that were unreachable. I had to be a grownup. I had to know how to do things. I had to do them right for **her**. My father just like abandoned me to the winds, (laughs) you know, basically. My mother would be overprotective, my father would say, "Let her go do whatever she wants," without any boundaries. There was like nobody normal in the picture.

INT: Could you tell that story about the bus?

RITA: Oh, G-d. That was horrible.

INT: That's a good example of your father.

RITA: It really is. We were going to the Yiddish theater. My mother was working. And my father had tickets for the Yiddish theater, and wanted to take me. And actually in some ways, one of the few things I shared with my father, both as a child and as a young adult, was that even in New York I would go see the Yiddish plays with him.

INT: Did you enjoy it?

RITA: I loved it. They were...amateurish, but I was a kid, you know. Everyone would delight in the fact that here was a young kid who spoke Yiddish, and so I was always like a big deal (laughs) you know, so why wouldn't I like it? You know. And it was a special time with my dad, who didn't pay...that much attention to me, unless it was something that he could get something out of. You know, it's like, taking me to the theater was fine, because **he** wanted to go. But sitting down and playing house with me, or dolls with me, or school with me when I was younger, he didn't know how. You know, and so he wouldn't. He wouldn't play with me.

So here we are. I was under ten, because we left Montreal when I was ten. And we're off to the Yiddish theater, and we had to take a bus. And we get on the bus, and it's exciting because it's night, and I'm going to the theater, you know, kind of thing. And there's a seat, and my father says I should sit down in the seat on the bus. And he spots a crony of his at the other end of the bus. And he leaves me there, and goes off to talk to this person. And I remember he was wearing a felt hat, you know, a brimmed hat, as he always did. And the seat that I was in was close to the back door, you know, the rear exit of the bus. And at one point, I looked up, and I

saw a hat like his getting off the bus. And my sense was that my father could forget that I was on the bus, and get off without me. And I thought that that was what had happened. And so I jumped up and ran off the bus, only to get out on the street, see the bus pull away behind me, and look around, and there is no man in a hat anymore. You know? Whoever got off the bus was gone already. And it was such a strange feeling.

I didn't panic, because I knew exactly what to do. I knew I had to look for a policeman, and tell them where I live. And I also knew that we were very close to a place where my aunt worked. She also worked in a bakery/specialty shop. There were like these whole series of these stores. And it was close to the theater. And I knew that we were on the street where she worked, and that if I walked, I could find my Tante Dobe. You know, she would be in the store, and she would take care of me.

INT: This was at night.

RITA: This is at night. Now how late at night, it couldn't have been incredibly late, because we were on our way for the start of the theater, but it was dark. But it wasn't a scary street. I mean, it was a well-lit busy street, you know, with traffic and stuff.

INT: So you weren't panicking at this point? Do you remember panicking?

RITA: I remember being very afraid, but knowing exactly what I needed to do to deal with the situation. And I started to walk towards where, up the street, and before I even had to cross an intersection, there was a policeman. And he asked me what was I doing, where was I going, and I told him I was lost. That my father had gotten off the bus and forgotten me, and that I was on my way to find my aunt. Well, where was I going? And I said, the Yiddish Theater. And he said (laughs) "I have no idea where it is." And I didn't know the name of the store, where my aunt worked. I had been there, but I didn't know the name of the store. And he's, you know, I remember him kneeling down to talk to me, and I'm just explaining all this stuff to him, and all of a sudden my father comes racing, I guess, you know, having noticed that his child was no longer on the bus. He comes racing up the street, you know, swoops me up, like, "Oh, my G-d! Oh, my G-d, don't ever tell your mother that this happened!"

INT: That was the first?

RITA: That was one of the first. And he was terrified, much more than I was. And I remember the policeman saying to him, "She's okay." (laughs) "She's fine." And off we went to the... you know, got on another...

INT: So your father was frightened.

RITA: He was terrified. He was absolutely terrified. And very guilty. Felt very bad. But he didn't make me feel bad that I had gotten off the bus, which was very nice.

INT: Would your mother have done that, do you think?

RITA: Probably. I mean, my mother had pretty strict rules about, but my mother never would have stepped two inches from my side on the bus. I mean, there's no way I would have gotten off the bus (laughs) when my mother was with me. It wouldn't have happened.

INT: So he didn't make you feel bad for making a mistake, or whatever.

RITA: No, and I think that, I think there was recognition, in his asking me not to tell my mother, there was recognition in the fact that he had **royally** fucked up. I mean, you don't leave a kid on a crowded bus, and go talk to a friend. I mean, you just don't do that with a young kid. Either you take the kid with you, or you talk to your friend later. The friend was going to the theater. You know, he could have talked to him there.

There were things like that, I'm trying to remember.

INT: But how did you feel about that incident, as a kid? Do you remember how you felt about your father?

RITA: I remember more how I felt as an adult. (pause) It sort of typified his inability to care for anybody, or take care of them effectively. It's not that, my father loves me, always did love me. But my father's, I can count on my hand, and it's funny, because he's come through for me at times when I wouldn't expect it, given his history. There are just instances in my life where I have felt that my father was a parent. Most of the time he was...ineffective at...modulating my mother's behavior, you know, and sort of balancing it and giving me something different. He's a very impotent man. You know, he has no power. And I never felt that he did, for me. I mean, he was never someone I could turn to to help me with anything. Where my mother, with all of her craziness, always made me feel that she'd protect me against all odds. My father, I felt, was like, he was like a kid. You know? His needs were important, his talking to his friends were more important than taking care of me. Not that he didn't love me, but that he couldn't even figure out the game plan. (laughs) You know? I just always felt that he was terribly ineffective.

INT: So, of the two of your parents, who was the strong one, do you think?

RITA: My mother. My father will cave in.

INT: Because you were describing last time the arguments that they would have, and it always seemed like it was your mother who would sort of start them, even though he was, as you described him, "passively aggressive," but she would always start the arguments.

RITA: Well, she was more, she wanted things a certain way. He didn't care. You know, stuff like that didn't matter to him. The stuff that mattered to my father was what other people would think. I don't know. It was so confusing growing up with them. It's hard to sort of look back on it. I guess in some ways I've distanced myself from it, and I've wanted to. You know, being around them reawakens the feelings of being torn, being confused, being the only grown-up in the group. And it was easier to parent my child than to parent my parents. You know, because it

was right. I **was** the adult, she **was** the child. My parents always put me in the positions of, I was the one who understood, be it the language, be it the new lifestyle, whatever it was. I was the most educated. I was...I was good at what they trained me to do, which was to be the grownup in the group. You know, and I wasn't as damaged as they were. You know, whatever damage they did to me in terms of, you know, psychologically parenting me a certain way, it wasn't **close** to what **they** had gone through, and so I was much more intact, you know?

INT: You see them as damaged people?

RITA: Oh, yeah. I mean, as I said, I see my mother as, my mother still fights a war. Whether the war is with my father...

INT: She makes her own wars all the time.

RITA: Yeah, yeah. The war is her being sick all the time, and having to overcome the obstacles of being ill. The war is that she has so much difficulty trusting. She is **very** wary of people. She's convinced -- and I have to say a lot of times, has been proven true -- that people will hurt her, or not be nice to her. But it's never really ended for her.

And for my father, the defenses that my father used during the war in terms of denying, spacing out, partying, finding the good in the situation, being optimistic, he's continued to live his life that way. I mean, those were defenses that got him through the war, and they're still keeping him going. I mean, he will try and look on the bright side. He's the one who will see the glass half full, and my mother's the one who sees it half empty.

INT: How do you think they cope with obstacles now, post-war? How does your mother cope, and what are their mechanisms that they use?

RITA: My mother first gets hysterical, when something doesn't work out. She'll get **frantic**. Then she'll be convinced that whatever she does, it won't work out. And then she'll tackle it. She goes through stages.

INT: And when she succeeds, how does she feel, does she feel that it was her?

RITA: That it was a struggle. It exhausts her.

INT: Does she ever see that **she** did that, that she...

RITA: The only time she has taken credit for what she's done recently is the fact that she was able to leave my father. That she sees as a **major** accomplishment in her life. The other thing I think, that they both see as an accomplishment is raising me. Because I have been more successful than I think they ever imagined. In terms of my marriage, in terms of my child, in terms of my professional accomplishments, in terms of my financial security. I mean, I think that in some way they've almost blown that out of proportion. You know, that they over-idealize it, like I've done something like no one else has ever done. Look at what I've done with my life.

INT: They're very proud of you.

RITA: **Very.** And not that they shouldn't be, I mean (laughs) I think I've done good things with my life. (pause) But I don't, and while they're proud of me, I don't know if they feel that they've made that happen. I don't know. When I watch my daughter cope with certain things, I can think back on the talks we had, or what input I had, and I know that much of it comes from her and who she is, but I also can recognize what Ray and I have contributed.

INT: You've given her some skills.

RITA: Yeah. Whereas I don't know that my parents can look at me and say that. I don't know if they do. I think they almost see it as separate from themselves.

INT: It just happened? Despite them.

RITA: I don't know. I've actually said to my mother, I mean, my mother will sit and cry over all of the things that she's done wrong to me. Be it that she said the wrong thing at the wrong time, whatever it is. And I'll say to her, as a way of trying to comfort her, "If you did everything so wrong, how come I turned out the way I am? You **must** have done something. Why can't you see your part in making me who I am?" And she doesn't, she can't. She really can't. She sees me as being not an outgrowth of her, but very separate and very different from her.

Now, did you want more childhood stuff?

INT: I do, but I want to just finish up with this. How does your father cope when there's a difficult situation?

RITA: He wants other people to solve it. Or, he'll be very impulsive, and do stupid things. An example. My father's living alone in an apartment, and the woman who's been helping him in terms of cleaning the house bought furniture when she came to the United States, which was a couple of years ago. I guess she's a Russian immigrant, or a Polish immigrant. Something. She bought this furniture. One of the things is this **humongous** big-screen TV. Okay? My father lives like a poor man, because he is a poor man. He does not have luxury (laughs) things in his apartment, okay? She says that she'll sell him her furniture because she's immigrating to Israel, and the prices that she's asking are stupid. I mean, it's like you could walk into Silo or Circuit City and buy something that's much more appropriate for him. He'll break this thing. He won't know how to run the controls. It'll be too...he can't even use my remote control on the television, you know, without pushing a button that suddenly we're onto another circuit, okay? (laughs) Suddenly we're on VCR, you know, and the screen is blank. And there's a menu. He's like, "What is this?"

INT: "I just want the news."

RITA: Right. "Give me the news!" And here he is, and Ray and I have said to him...

(END TAPE TWO, SIDE TWO)

(TAPE THREE, SIDE ONE)

RITA: "We'll take you some place where you can choose something that will **be** better for you, and will cost you less, and will be brand new. What if this thing is broken?" You know?

INT: It didn't occur to him.

RITA: Not only doesn't it **occur** to him, but he doesn't understand. To him the fact that he's buying something used instead of something new means that he's saving money. He's very, very naive in some ways about, he's **very** naive in terms of money.

My father had gotten Israeli bonds years and years and years ago. When the bonds matured, Ray suggested to him, and so did I, that he cash in the bonds and buy new Israeli bonds, because they were not interest-bearing past the point of maturity. My father has no frigging money. He wouldn't do that because he felt that he was taking money away from Israel. So instead it's okay that I have to send him money every month. That I have to work extra hours to find money to support him and my mother. That's okay. On some level, that doesn't occur to him. But the fact that he just doesn't get...that's what I meant when I say, he is such a, he's a fascinating man if he weren't my father. He can understand the most complex, convoluted political concepts, and put things in perspective, and have an ability to analyze it, and yet you say to him, "Take the money, put it in the bank where you'll earn interest, and buy new bonds." No.

INT: He's not practical at all, it seems like.

RITA: **Stupid!** (laughs) I mean, it's almost like an inability to process information. I mean, it's almost like you think there must have been some brain damage, where he can't process. And so when he gets to a point where he has to make a decision, or something like that, he regresses to a very infantile stage, where it's (in baby-like tantrum voice): "This is what I want! And this is..." It's like talking to a two-year-old. Because he doesn't understand you. And I'll tell you, and **I** get crazy, and I start to scream, and I throw my hands up and say, "Fine, do it your way!" Ray has the patience (laughs) of a saint. He will sit there with a pencil and paper and try and explain this stuff to him. And he can't get through.

INT: Why do you think that is?

RITA: I have **no** idea. I really sometimes wonder if there **is** some organic inability to process certain things. He was very much the same way with a business. I mean, like the thing with not putting my mother on, listing her as an employee so that she has no Social Security. You know, she only gets half of what he gets. She was never listed as an [employee]. I think I said that. Did I?

INT: No.

RITA: Okay, I should explain that. My father owned a business when we came to New York, after working in a factory in the garment district for a very long time.

INT: Sort of like a dry cleaning store?

RITA: He opened a dry cleaning store. I was about fifteen at the time. My mother worked in the store with him. **Every** single day. In fact, ran the store during the times when my father would have his heart attacks and be hospitalized and, you know, convalescing at home. Ran the store basically herself. My father never listed her as an employee, because he'd have to pay taxes as an employee. Even as a kid, I remember saying to him, "If you don't pay Social Security for her, then she will get no Social Security benefits when she's older." By the time they got out of the business, I was married, divorced and with somebody else already. So it's not like there wasn't a long period of time where she could have...

INT: She could have been collecting Social Security.

RITA: Everything, every insurance policy, everything that was taken out, was for him.

INT: Why? He just wasn't...

RITA: You got me. And she, I don't know. It just, it's so infuriating, because there again, I see other families plan their old age, or their retirement, so that their children don't have the burden. You know, and that's one of the motivating things, is that I watch it with my husband's family, where they don't want to be a financial or emotional burden to their children. My parents **say** that, and yet all of their plans, all of their organizing factors, all of the things that they did, did not take me into consideration. You know? It didn't account for the fact that when they ran out, I would be the one. I'm not about to, you know, to let them live in the streets. I'm gonna be the one who's going to support them till they die. I'm the one who's supporting them **now**. And there's no, and while they feel bad about it, they feel **guilty** about it, they feel sad about it, they didn't do a damn thing so that that wouldn't happen. And it's another time where I feel like, "Why is that my job? Why **didn't** you plan so that I wouldn't have the burden that I have had since I was a child, of taking care of the two of you? When does it come that you grow up, and you plan for yourself, and you take care of stuff?"

INT: It seems like a consistent theme. They just never grew up, sort of.

RITA: Totally. Totally. And yes, I feel very strongly in terms of my morals and my ethics, that it **is** my responsibility to care for my parents, and I will, and I have. But it pisses me off that, not that these people ever had an enormous amount of money. My parents worked **incredibly** hard. But when they had a business, there was a reasonable amount of money coming in.

INT: They could have planned better.

RITA: Yeah. And even when my father was still in the business and I was well out of the house, and Ray was around and was saying things like, "Why don't you put money into an IRA?"

It doesn't have to be a lot, but put money..." "I don't trust those things." You know, or Ray had opened some kind of a mutual fund account when we were just dating, and said, "Why don't I start something like this for you guys?" And he knew, I mean, he didn't push for them to make up for all the years they hadn't planned. It was just like, if they could even get a couple of thousand dollars over a couple of years into one of these accounts, it would help them later. It was like this total lack of understanding for any of that. So it was a typical...

INT: Sort of a lack of responsibility? Do you see that as...

RITA: No, because I think they're both very responsible people. I don't know what the hell, I don't know what you can call it. Except...

INT: But it makes you angry, the part that they didn't plan.

RITA: It makes me furious. (laughs) It makes me feel used and abused. It makes me feel like I've always been put in a position where to not do what they want goes against my ethics. To say, "This is how you planned your life? Fine. You live with it."

INT: You can't do that.

RITA: I can't do that. I can't divorce myself from the fact that they are my parents. That they...you know, I hate both of them, but I love them. I mean, I hate what they do. I hate many of the things that they've done to me. I hate being put in this position. But, I have a basic, on some level I'm two years old, and these are my parents, and I love them.

INT: It's a love/hate relationship your whole life with them.

RITA: Yeah. And at times it's not terribly ambivalent. I'm like right into the hate. (laughs) You know, it's not like I'm confused about it. It's pretty out there. (pause) It's a tough situation. I don't know if they could have done it any differently. I don't have a sense that they consciously set out to do this stuff to me. But that it always happens. It always comes down to the same bottom line, you know.

INT: Okay, let's get back to your childhood, sorry.

RITA: (laughs) Which we keep leaving. I guess I leave it on purpose.

INT: Could you talk a little bit about school, what that was like, when you started school in Montreal?

RITA: Sure. I remember the first day of going to kindergarten, and I was one of the few kids who wasn't hysterical. I was very excited about going to school. It was presented to me as a very, I was going to be grown up and it was going to be wonderful, and it was a sign of maturity, kind of thing, to be able to go to school already, you know, kind of thing.

INT: Who gave you that feeling?

RITA: I don't know. I don't know, but it was fine. I mean, the idea of going to school was fine. I remember the school was within walking distance of our house. Not super close, but about four or five blocks away from the house, and I remember my mother taking me to school. I remember what the room looked like. There was a "cloakroom," we called it, where the kids would hang their coats. I don't remember cubbies, but being in Montreal, there was lots of room for boots (laughs) and heavy coats. And I remember going to school. The room had big tables. I remember sitting at a round table with a bunch of other kids. And it was fine. You know.

INT: What kind of school was it? Public school?

RITA: It was a public school, yeah. The schools were much different than they are here. We wore uniforms to school. And I remember my mother feeling that I had to have the woolen uniform rather than the polyester one. That that was important.

INT: Because that was a better quality?

RITA: Yeah, because it was better. And I don't remember much else about kindergarten, except I couldn't understand why there were kids who were like screaming and carrying on. And I remember that there was a glass window in the door, and I remember looking out and seeing my mother there, and seeing her sort of wave to me, and then she left. And I was fine, and I knew she'd be there when I came out, and it just wasn't a big deal for me.

INT: No problem.

RITA: No. I felt comfortable. By the time I got, I guess I was there until the fifth grade in this school. I have different memories. I remember a boy named Israel falling in love with me in the first grade or second grade, and slipping me little notes saying, "I love you," and thinking, "Ugh!" (laughs) You know, like what do I do with this, kind of thing. And taking them home and showing them to my mother, and her thinking it was adorable.

There were a couple of sort of outstanding memories. Some good and some bad. The good ones were, I remember they taught ballet after school, and I asked if I could take ballet classes, and my mother was very supportive, you know, and of course we went out and got the tights and the best shoes, and all the get-up, and I did it for a while, and then I think there was an art class there after school that I took for a while.

INT: Now she was encouraging these extra-curricular things?

RITA: Yeah, yeah. I mean she was very, and she was very, when she was in school, she was very involved in all kinds of activities, so that felt fine.

INT: Friends.

RITA: Friends. I don't remember a lot of friends. I remember one friend whose mother died when we were in the third grade, and I felt very sad for her. And I remember my mother offering, calling her family when the girl, I think the girl's name was Rachel. I remember when Rachel's mother was, she was terminally ill with cancer, and so we all knew that it was going to happen. And my mother called her family and said, "Can I help?" And they asked if Rachel could be picked up by my mother a couple of days, and could Rachel stay with us after school, sort of thing.

I don't remember close friendships, except with the children of friends of my parents. I don't remember close friendships with school kids.

INT: Do you know why that is?

RITA: No.

INT: What kind of kids were they? You mentioned some Jewish-sounding names.

RITA: It was a mixture. It was a very mixed neighborhood. There were a lot of immigrants in the area, and there were also some French kids in the area. It wasn't a very affluent neighborhood, and so you had a real mixture of probably blue collar, you know...

INT: Did you learn French in school?

RITA: Yeah. Studied French.

INT: But these kids, these kids are children of survivors, so how would that work?

RITA: Every weekend almost, somebody would sleep at somebody's house. If there was a party that someone had, babysitters were very rare. I don't know if that was true in other families, but I know in my family it was very rare. The one person who babysat for me, and I guess it was a New Year's Eve kind of thing, and all of the families were going, so there wasn't anyone who could take your kids. For one thing, I think it was too expensive to pay a babysitter. These were people who were living on very, very little money. [There] was a grown woman who had a family who would babysit, and I remember that she left me a pack of Dentyne gum, and a little chocolate bar under my pillow, so that when I woke up, and I was like, floored. (laughs) This was like the best, this was like really positive.

INT: Tooth fairy.

RITA: Exactly! And so what would happen a lot on weekends, were if your parents got invited some place, then they would call a friend, and I'd go stay at their house kind of thing, or their kids would come to our house.

INT: So you sort of had more opportunities to be friends, so it was more intense friendships, because they were sleeping over, or you were spending more time with them, than the kids at school?

RITA: They were like family. They were family. I didn't feel like they were my **sisters**, but I felt like it was my cousins, definitely. It was part of a very large family. I remember sleeping at Celia's house. And I was little. I don't know where my parents went. Now, her parents moved to a different neighborhood, a more affluent neighborhood. And they had an apartment in an apartment building, rather than over a store. And I remember that striking me, you know. And I stayed at their house, and I wet the bed at night. Which I didn't usually do, you know. And I remember Celia and I popping up in bed and going, "Why is it wet?" (laughs) And Celia's mother coming in, and handling it very well, and saying, "Celia, why don't you give Rita a pair of pajamas?" And stripping the bed. And Celia seeming more frightened than I was. Because I wasn't used to being punished for something like that. And again, I don't remember being a chronic bed-wetter, except that I once had a very bad bladder infection as a kid, and always felt like I had to pee when I had the bladder infection, and that **was** a time where it would happen, but it was handled very...

INT: Matter of factly.

RITA: Yeah. Yeah. It wasn't a big, for stuff like that I wasn't punished. But say the wrong thing at the table, and then you'd get punished, kind of thing. But things like that would make you feel very close to a family, you know, if you've peed in their bed! (laughter)

INT: Yeah, right, and they didn't yell at you!

RITA: And they didn't yell at you, and they loved you, and you know, it was just...

INT: You felt comfortable there.

RITA: Yeah. The thing that happened that I think is significant, was when I think I was three or four, my father's brother, my parents had filed papers for my father's brother to come to Canada from Israel.

INT: This is Yitzchak, the really close brother.

RITA: Yeah. So that they could be reunited. Now, he had three kids. This was...I remember being excited because my father was so excited. I remember being scared, because I didn't know these people. And I **certainly** was not prepared to deal with two boys and a girl, as an only child. And that continued through most of my life, where they surprised me, they shocked me, they, I didn't know how to deal with them for most of my life. But once they came, there was a real family.

INT: Did they move in with you?

RITA: They lived with us for about a year, and I gather it was a difficult time. My mother didn't handle the stress well, and my mother has told me that it was when they were living with us that she would hit me for things that would go wrong, and that she feels very guilty for doing that.

INT: She was stressed out.

RITA: Right.

INT: Well, explain that family. So who were these people?

RITA: Okay, so it was my uncle Itchik, his wife Dobe, and their three children. The oldest girl was Sarah, then after her was my cousin Jacob, and then my cousin Nathan. Nathan is... (counting months) is four months younger than I am, so we were **very** close in age. Jacob is about two years older than me, and Sarah is now 51, and I'm 45, so she's six years older than me.

INT: How old were you when they moved in?

RITA: I would guess, three or four. I don't think older than that.

INT: And you remember that time?

RITA: I remember vague snatches. Some of them funny. Like I remember, it was before Passover, and there was a market area near us, called "Rachel Market." And there was someone who would pluck the chickens, I mean, you could go choose a live chicken. And there would be, and it was a very Orthodox, you know, like the butcher was Orthodox. Which didn't mean anything to my mother, but I guess had more meaning for my aunt, or else meant nothing to either one of them, but it was convenient, and it was fresh. I don't know. And there was like farm stands, farmers would come with stuff.

Well, they bought a carp. A live carp. And I remember coming home, and there was this fish swimming in the bathtub! (laughs)

INT: There's a children's story called, "The Carp in the Bathtub."

RITA: Oh, well then it happened in my house, and I remember they couldn't kill the fish. (laughing hysterically) And I remember on the kitchen table was this, what seemed to be an enormous carp, I mean like the size of a dolphin because I was little, (laughter) and they're banging it, they're trying to club it on the head! And after it's even dead, I mean, they move, like frogs. And I remember being half terrified and half hysterical. I mean, it was **funny**.

Okay. My aunt was a real character, who had a **wonderful** wit and sense of humor. My mother also has a great sense of humor, mixed in and overlaid with all of this crap. And if you can get to her sense of humor she's **very**, very funny. And so I remember that some of these instances in the house were tinged with an enormous amount of laughter, and a camaraderie, also, which was

very surprising for me to see, because my mother was not very close to people. You know, she would stay quite distant.

INT: Did she know them before the war?

RITA: Not at all. Not at all. And she did not particularly like them, either. My mother's a real snob in some ways. And my mother was raised very differently. My father's family are peasants. You know, they were uneducated, unsophisticated, narrow-minded people. My mother was on the road to being a well-educated woman, or kid, in a family that was more professional. Her father wore a suit to work. Her grandmother owned businesses.

INT: Different.

RITA: Very different. And I think the differences in Poland were much more striking than they are here. You know, in some ways there's much more blending and melding here.

Anyway, the other instance I remember that was hysterical was that there was a mouse in the kitchen. And my aunt got up (laughing) on the kitchen table, and my mother's running around with the broom. And I remember laughing so hard that I peed in my pants, and so did my aunt, on the kitchen table! (laughter) So there were these funny, you know, kind of memories. And there was also the fact that you had four kids in a two-bedroom apartment, who were fighting all the time.

INT: How did you get along with these cousins, do you remember? You were pretty young.

RITA: Not well at all. Not well. They were...they teased me mercilessly until I was, you know, old enough to say: "Go to hell," and walk away from them. You know, they were two boys whose ways were very different. They had also grown up in Israel and were born in Israel. No, let's see, Sarah was born in Siberia, and I guess the boys were both born in Israel. They had lived in a very different atmosphere than I had. I had grown up **all** of my life in city apartment-type, or a room. My life had different boundaries than theirs. They were...

INT: Like boisterous, or...

RITA: They were "wilde chayas," (laughs) was how it was described to me. They were wild, they were loud, they were...they were kids. You know.

INT: In a small...

RITA: In a small, cramped place, probably feeling very uprooted, I mean, they had been yanked out of what was **their** life, and thrown into this apartment with this other family who they didn't know from, and what was interesting was the same kind of pattern: what was important was what my father and his brother wanted. The rest of us could really, you know, we just had to cope. And not that it wasn't important that the family was reunited. I don't think that was ever an issue.

But...my father's support would always be thrown behind his brother, rather than **his** family. Whether...

INT: That was his first allegiance?

RITA: Always. Always. And what was most important for the amount of time that my uncle lived was that he and his brother saw each other **every single day**.

INT: Wow.

RITA: There was never a day when these two men did not see each other.

INT: That's incredible!

RITA: They were **so** bonded, it was like they were Siamese twins, attached at the hip. And I'm sure that created certain tensions among...

INT: It must have been hard for your mother, in a way, in many ways. The fact that she liked everything a certain way, and then you have all these people in the house making a mess, probably, all the time. And then the closeness of your father with his brother. Do you think he shut her out a little bit in that period?

RITA: You know, I don't think I was aware of a hell of a lot of anything. I was little.

INT: So what happened? And they moved out.

RITA: So they stayed with us for a while, and then they moved, and I remember their apartment vividly, because it had a cast-iron stove, still, in the kitchen. And I remember that there were two bedrooms, and there was a closet that connected the two bedrooms, and I remember we used to pretend it was a secret tunnel, and I remember going to their house to watch the "Ed Sullivan Show" that first had Elvis Presley on.

INT: Wait, and so they moved to a nearby neighborhood?

RITA: Yeah, it was very close by. And I remember that when there was a fire, there was a very bad fire, when I was a young child, and again I was...probably five or six. We lived on a busy commercial street, over a store. Next door to us, and next door was the corner of the street, there was restaurant downstairs and apartments above it. I think the restaurant also served liquor. I don't know that it was a bar. You know, it wouldn't have registered that way to me. I remember being in my room and smelling smoke, and I woke up. And to get to my parents' room, I had to walk through like a foyer, but a very large rectangular space, and then I had to go diagonally across to my parents' room. The place was filled with smoke. Two people died in that fire next door. And I woke up my parents, and I remember my mother wrapping me in a blanket. Most buildings in Canada at that time were built with an outside exit. I have no idea why, but the architecture was...

INT: A fire escape.

RITA: It wasn't a fire escape. It was a regular staircase. Like every place seemed to have a different exit. And so behind our apartment was like a balcony-type thing with an outside storage closet, and then stairs from there to go downstairs. To get to that room, you had to go back into the foyer, and then through the kitchen, and out the back door. And I remember being wrapped in this blanket, and carried out of the building. And I don't know how we got...First we went across, there was a bakery, a French bakery across the street that baked just bread. And it was cold. It was winter. And I remember that the three of us, and probably other people, went across the street, inside, because the bakery was open. And they opened up to let people come in because of the fire. And I remember being held in there, and then my father taking me -- I don't know if they called a taxi, or somebody came -- I remember being taken with my dad in the car, to my aunt and uncle's house and put to bed. You know.

INT: What happened to your apartment?

RITA: The apartment had smoke damage, but our building wasn't damaged. The other building, as I said, I think two people died in the fire. And it was something that had occurred in the restaurant. There was some suspicion of arson, because the people hadn't paid their rent. I don't know.

INT: But if you hadn't woken up, do you think you all would have...

RITA: We could have died. I mean, clearly, if other people died. And the place was filled. I mean, I remember hardly being able to see to get through to my parents' room, that it was really bad.

There was another fire incident in my life.

INT: This was before smoke alarms.

RITA: Yeah. We lived over my uncle's bakery when we came to New York, and I woke up and smelled smoke, and woke my parents up again. At that point I must have been about twelve. (laughs) And I remember I was wearing Dr. Denton pajamas, and I had big fuzzy slippers, and I had just gotten a new jacket, and I grabbed my new jacket, and the sparks coming up from the chimney in the bakery had set part of the roof on fire. It was easily put out. But in times like that, I remember...I remember my mother having an edge to her, you know, of being, not that I wasn't scared. I mean, I was a **kid**.

INT: It's terrifying.

RITA: But not thinking clearly. I mean, I remember the one in Canada, there was no way that other than wrapping me up, and I don't even know what my parents were wearing. I don't know that there was even time to get anything. That was **so** severe. At my uncle's when it occurred, I

remember my mother racing around looking for picture albums, because she didn't want to lose pictures. And my saying, "Get out of the house!" You know? And my father saying, "It's not so serious. Everything will be all right. Just, let's get out."

INT: So he seemed better in a crisis at that point than she?

RITA: I don't know. I mean, he wasn't **real** good in a crisis.

(END TAPE THREE, SIDE ONE)

(TAPE THREE, SIDE TWO)

RITA: [My mother had a] hysterectomy when I was in junior high. Before the hysterectomy, she had incredibly heavy bleeding and she ended up having a huge fibroid tumor removed, and so clearly there was a lot of discomfort. They had gone out someplace, and come home, and my mother in the car had begun hemorrhaging. And my father brings her upstairs, and he doesn't know what to do. He's like flitting around like a lunatic. And my mother's like literally passing out in his hands. And I said, "Would you put her down in the chair, and stick her head between her legs, and get the blood back to her head?" And he's like "What? What? What do I do?" Just like a lunatic.

INT: And you were twelve, or something?

RITA: I was twelve. And I get her in the chair, I stick a towel, and I say, "Go get a towel." "What do I need a towel for?" "Because she's **bleeding**." (laughs) You know? I stick a towel under her. And I went, the only wine my parents ever had in the house was Manischewitz sweet wine. But I gave her a glass of wine, you know. And I put a cold cloth on her head. I mean, it was like...

INT: You knew what to do, and you were not panicked?

RITA: No. No. My father had his first heart attack, I was fifteen years old, I was home with him. My mother was, he didn't feel well, so my mother went and opened the store, I don't know if it was a Saturday or something, that I was home. He walks into my room and says, "I have pains, I have really bad, it's getting worse, and I have pains on the left side, and I can't move my left hand." And I said, "Go lay down." And I walked to the phone and called my best friend at that time, her father was a physician, I said, "Dr. Salz, can you come here? I think my father's having a heart attack." And he said, "Well, where is he?" And I said, "I put him to bed!" And he said, "Good. I'll be right there." And I'm like, well, we'll deal with it.

INT: Where did you get that from? You didn't have any role model to show you how to do that.

RITA: What I had was two parents who needed a parent.

INT: So you had to function, because they weren't functioning.

RITA: And I can't **tell** you. I mean, I could keep going. There were stories and stories and stories.

INT: Well, tell me more. Tell me more stories.

RITA: We went to sign our citizenship papers. It was very important for my parents to become American citizens. Somehow that represented safety for them. Even though being in Canada, they weren't threatened in any way, somehow this was really the land of milk and honey, they were going to succeed here, and they were finally never going to have to be afraid again.

For me to go to a state or city college in New York City, I had to be a citizen, and my parents didn't have any money to put me through college, because my father had basically given a lot of it away, and gone on trips to Russia and South America, and spent a lot of money. So there wasn't a lot of money for me to go to college, and it was something that I felt I wanted to, needed to, was expected to do.

We go to sign these citizenship papers, my parents had to pass an exam, right? I remember sitting, it was before the real thrust of the Vietnam War, but I was very...against the war, even at a very young age.

INT: How old were you now?

RITA: I must have been about fifteen or sixteen years old. Yeah, because you have to be in the United States, is it six or seven years, before you can become a citizen? Maybe fifteen, because I came here when I was ten. And so I had to be at least fifteen years old, and a junior or senior in high school. And the war had started in Vietnam, and we go, and my parents pass this exam, which was unbelievable. I mean, I think someone just asked them two or three questions, I don't think they had to do very much more than that. And we sit down to sign these papers, and my parents don't even read the documents that they're signing. I, on the other hand, being in the first place, a snot-nosed teenager who's about to rebel against anybody, I'm sitting there demanding to read the papers, before I put my signature on anything. And my parents are like **terrified** that I'm going to blow this in some way.

And I read the papers, and it says that I will be willing to go fight for my country. And I looked at whoever it was, and said, "I'm not going in the army." (laughter) "I'm not going to war!" And...my parents were absolutely **horrified**, totally horrified.

INT: You're rocking the boat.

RITA: And they were convinced that it was going to be **really** detrimental to them. And I, you know, my father couldn't have read the documents even if he had tried. My mother could have. My mother, by that point was **totally** fluent in English.

INT: And she (?)

RITA: Yeah. I mean, and I'm not sure that as an adult I would have, either. You know, I mean, they're sort of standard, and if I wanted to become a citizen of a country, I wouldn't take issue with this. But it was that...I remember the look on their face, and the person who was there was much more savvy, and sort of explained to me that this was a standard form, and that women were not inducted into the armed services, and blah, blah, blah. And I signed the papers, but my parents couldn't move into that role, you know, to be the one...

INT: You were the adult, and the questioning one. You took control of the situation.

RITA: Yeah. When I was, I guess public school in New York went from kindergarten through sixth grade, and then you went into Junior High for seventh, eighth and ninth, and then you went on to high school. They gave all the kids in the school an I.Q. test, and a placement exam, you know, sometime during the sixth grade. I was very advanced, coming from Canada, where the school system was **much** more rigorous. I had already been studying a second language. I was way beyond what the kids were doing. And so I sort of floated through fifth and sixth grade without even doing anything. And they did an I.Q. test, and I scored above the, whatever delineation they had for kids who could be put in an accelerated program. And so my parents get this letter that I am seen as a gifted student, and that I can go into one of two programs: one is an enrichment program, where you go through seventh, eighth, and ninth grades, and your program is given, you're given extra, or more in-depth classes, or challenged more. Whatever.

The other possibility is that you do the seventh, eighth and ninth grade in two years. That it's an accelerated program, and you go through it more quickly. And that I am eligible for both of these. My parents never made the decision. I made the decision. My parents never even went to talk to the counselor, or somebody at the school. The letters were sort of there, and it was whatever you think is best.

INT: They gave it over to you.

RITA: Yeah. And I was certainly not the person to make the decision. Yes, I should have had input, someone should have sat down and talked to me about what the differences were, what it would mean to me.

INT: Like a counselor at the school or something, if your parents couldn't.

RITA: Also my parents. My parents should have.

INT: Do you think maybe your parents just didn't know how to maneuver...in the United States?

RITA: They didn't. They didn't. And they didn't...all of my life, it's always been, "You know the best." And so I made my choice, you know.

INT: Which was?

RITA: Which was to go into the accelerated program, which my cousin Nathan also was in, and was in my class, actually.

INT: Did it work out, that choice? Was it the right choice?

RITA: No. No, it wasn't the right choice. I was, from that point, I went from being the smartest kid in the class, to being one of the dumbest kids in the class, because I didn't have the support, or the...I mean, I think it had a tremendous impact on me moving here. It wasn't an easy move for me to make.

INT: Yeah, I want to get to that. I do want to get to that. But this is another example, what you're saying now, of how they would just, sort of give it over to you, and you would be the adult, and you would make decisions.

RITA: I mean, I was twelve years old. It's a time where I should certainly be listened to. I mean, I'd listen to a child at any age, in terms of what's going to happen to them, I think they need to be able to express their feelings, and that their needs and **their** desires are taken into account. But the final decision should not rest with the child. It should be either a family decision, where everyone has input, or a parents' decision.

INT: You had talked last time that they just didn't make decisions. They fought about decisions. And it just sort of happened, or evolved. It wasn't, sit down and discuss it.

RITA: No. No. And neither was this. I mean, I was put in the position of making the choice and then living with the consequences. And the consequences were severe, because I never recovered until I was in graduate school, I would say, where I felt, I was labeled an underachiever, and that stayed with me. And no one was able to really break through that, until I went through therapy and decided, okay, this is what I want to do with my life, and I don't have to have that anymore. You know, I can decide how well I want to do.

INT: So it was the wrong decision, and you had to make it. And then you had to live with it afterwards.

RITA: Mm-hm.

INT: Okay, let's just go back if we can, to Canada, before you left Canada. Is there anything else, do you think, of significance, that you would want to talk about, those years till you were ten, living in Montreal?

RITA: (pause) I'm trying to think of what else would be...I think anything I would say would probably...Oh, I guess the one other significant event that occurred that is still very much a part of my life, is that my parents took in a roomer for a while. After my aunt and uncle moved out, another man that they knew had marital difficulties and separated from his wife, and he came to live with me, with us, and for a while I gave up my room, and he lived...And I would have it as

my room. My things were still in the room, and I could play in the room. But at night he would sleep there, and a bed was put into my parents' room so that I slept there.

And he has always been, he's my uncle Haskel, again an uncle, who is not at all related, who has always been a very important person to me. When he separated from his wife, he had a daughter who was the same age, and he was denied...seeing her. And so he was always very attached to me. For my tenth birthday, he gave me my first piece of real jewelry. He gave me a gold ring with my birthstone. His family was very important to me. He remarried when I was, maybe around eight. Married a Canadian woman, who was probably...one of the most wonderful people I've ever met, who became my mother's only friend. She was the only person my mother allowed into her life.

INT: What was her name?

RITA: Ann. Their daughter, Connie, is a year older than I am, and I'm still in touch with her.

INT: So he had another child with this one.

RITA: So this was another family where I would stay.

INT: Now how long did he live with you?

RITA: Maybe about a year. And my memory of him was that he was a merciless teaser. I mean, he always teased kids, but never get one over on me. He would try, and I would always sort of cut through it. As a very affectionate child, I was very affectionate towards him, and he would literally cry when I hugged him. And there was a very strong tradition in my family. When I went to sleep, I gave everyone a kiss goodnight, and I got hugs, and it was a very warm...And when he was there he was part of it. You know, he was my uncle, and I loved him, and he was **very** gruff on the exterior, but would absolutely melt in front of my eyes.

INT: Because he missed his daughter, do you think?

RITA: Yeah. Oh, he was devastated. Absolutely devastated. And he was a butcher, and had been a butcher before the war. And had survived a camp. He was the first person I saw who had numbers on his arm. And he loved me dearly. You know, I think what saved me in terms of my well-being was, I was really very loved by people around me. Whether they functioned well or didn't function well, what came through from all of them -- and I think all of the families that I know, if I think back to that time -- we were so cherished as children. We were **so important**. And while that had its down side, I expected to be loved. I came out of that with a sense that...that I always would be loved, and that I was really important and special.

INT: So they did get that across to you.

RITA: Yeah. Very much so. And I got it from everybody. I really did.

INT: Do you think your friends also felt that from their parents by and large?

RITA: I know that Celia didn't. While, and it's interesting. I still speak to her parents. She committed suicide as an adult, and had a very difficult childhood and adolescence.

INT: This is your friend where you wet the bed, and the mother was so...

RITA: Yeah. Her parents were even more focused on perfection. I mean, it was the kind of house where, I mean, all these Europeans were very obsessed with cleanliness. I mean, that was like a real big thing after the war. In their house your chair when you leaned back could never touch the wall, because you could scratch the wall. You could never shuffle your feet on the floor, cause you'd leave marks. You had to eat everything on your plate, because people had starved. In my house that was tempered a bit. I mean, my mother would put the newspapers on the floor, but you could sit on the furniture.

INT: You didn't have plastic all over the furniture or anything like that?

RITA: Yeah, we did. But that was in the living room. And you weren't allowed to sit on the bed, you know, kind of thing. But my house wasn't **as** rigid. I guess, while it was rigid to me, and is rigid by my standards now, it wasn't as rigid as the Shechter's home. And Celia never lived up to their expectations. If she came home with 95, the first comment would be, "Well, why couldn't you get 100 if you were so close?" Where in my house, whatever I did was seen as...stupendous. You know? I was the best, the teachers were wrong, I was right. Where in Celia's house, the teachers were right, and she was wrong, you know? At the same time, when I went to the Shechter's, I didn't get that from them. I wasn't their child, and so I didn't have to be perfect, but I was held up as an example, which was difficult as we got older.

INT: She would say that in front of the two of you?

RITA: Yeah. Yeah. Her father used to call me, "Katchkele," which is "little duck." And he would talk about, and I was a very good child. I mean, like when I think back on my behavior, it was abnormally good, I mean, it wasn't appropriate. I never did anything **wrong**. I was never a **kid**, you know. Where Celia, I think, was more, maybe more defiant than I was, and so it was harder for her. She didn't comply the same way.

INT: Was she a very close friend of yours?

RITA: She was for a time, and then I think this kind of stuff of being compared with me, really drove a wedge between us, though we had a way, these children of survivors, of trying to find what we could from whoever we could. She would get things from my parents that she couldn't get from hers, like when she was a teenager and having a very rough time, she came to spend a summer with us, and she found my mother such a relief compared to hers. And actually, when her mother came, said to her mother -- and I guess we were all in the kitchen or someplace -- said to my mother, "Why is it that Eva at the end of the day can say to me, 'What was your day like? What did you do today? Did you have a good day? How did things go today?'" You don't

ask me that. You never talk to me." Now, some of it is typical teenager kind of stuff, but there was a truth to it. That the thing my mother came through the war with, was still her ability to be affectionate, to be warm, at least to me. Maybe not to a stranger, maybe...and once she was hurt by my father, I think she withdrew that from him. But she could summon that. That was a capability that she still had. And she could extend it to Celia, or to...yeah, I see she extends it to Elizabeth, to my daughter.

INT: So to other children, would you say?

RITA: Yeah, to children, and to people who touch her in some way. She's a very, very giving person.

INT: Could you get anything from Celia's mother that your mother couldn't give you? Did it work in that way?

RITA: I don't think I needed those things. I mean, what I got from them, and still get from them, is that if I needed something, and called them today, that they would do it for me. When Ray and I were faced with the possibility of not being able to have a child, and having to adopt a child, the fees were quite high. We had just bought a house, we didn't have any money. And I remember Ray saying, "Well, how are we going to work this out?" and trying to plan, and I said, "It's not a problem." And he said, "What do you mean, 'it's not a problem?'" And I said, "Because I have people I can go to who will give me money." And I could do that today. And I wouldn't, you know, and there's no feeling that I could or shouldn't, you know?

INT: It's just like part of your family.

RITA: It wouldn't bother me to call any of these families and say, "This is what's happening in my life; can you help me?"

INT: Even after all these years?

RITA: Mm-hm.

INT: Did you always keep in contact with them?

RITA: Oh, yeah. They're all my aunts and uncles. I still, when Ray and I went, Ray was presenting at an AIDS conference in Montreal, Elizabeth was four or five, we went, and Ray said, "Are you going to stay in a hotel?" I said, "No, no, I'm not staying in a hotel. I have people I can stay with." I went into the Shechter's home with my child fully expecting to be treated like their daughter, and I was. And Elizabeth was treated like a part of a family.

INT: That's amazing.

RITA: It's totally amazing. And if I tell you that I walk into their house and nothing is unfamiliar to me, be it the style in which they set the table. They have, you open their

refrigerator, and it looks like my mother's: every shelf is lined with Bounty, (laughter) so that nothing gets dirty. The same shmattas are hanging by the kitchen sink. The **style** is exactly the same. And Elizabeth at the age of five walked into that house and said, "This is the cleanest house I've ever been in." (laughter) And they have the plastic runners covering the carpet so that you shouldn't make anything dirty.

And it was still, he worked as a manager for someone who imports fruits and vegetables, and so their house was the only house you could always get strawberries and blueberries, and things out of season. Well, the first day I said, "Elizabeth really likes raspberries. Can you bring home raspberries today?" (laughs) Without skipping a beat, like I would say to my mother or father. And he said, "Okay, I'll look and see what we have." And he came home with strawberries and said, "The raspberries didn't look good. I got these instead. Will she eat strawberries?" And that was like no...

INT: No big deal.

RITA: No.

INT: It's like an extended family, which you didn't have.

RITA: Right. And in **that** way, I think there was something special and unique when I was growing up of feeling, like when I got lost. I mean, I knew that I could go to my aunt.

INT: That was your Aunt Dobe. That was Yitzchak's wife.

RITA: Right. And I knew that these people were all my family, in a way that, I don't know. And it's not like you, you never separated from these people in some way. I mean these survivors formed some kind of an unspoken agreement to replace each other's families that they had lost. Whether they talked about the war, I don't know. Whether they actually said, "I feel close to you like I do to...I would to my..." I don't know that any of it was verbalized, but it was there. It was really there. It's fascinating.

INT: It's amazing.

RITA: And so I think that I came away, you know, when I think back on my time in Canada...a lot of my memories focus on these kinds of inter-family, you know, relationships. Things that I did.

INT: In a positive way? Do you look back on those years as positive years?

RITA: You know, what's always negative are my parents for me. No matter where I was. My parents...parents always disappointed me. And yet I got a lot from them. You know, and it's sort of a bittersweet kind of a feeling. When I look back on Canada, I think that had they stayed there, they would have been better off, that it was a lot harder for them, coming to the United States. They had more connections. It was an easier life for them. Coming to New York was a

dream that never panned out in some way. So I guess when I look back, I'm sad that they left. It was a hard move for me personally. It was hard to be uprooted. When I came I felt very much an alien when I came to New York.

(pause)

INT: One other relationship that you had mentioned the last time, as being a really strong one, is your, who you called your Aunt Geitel, and she lived in Canada, and she wanted your parents to move to Winnipeg?

RITA: Yeah, Winnipeg.

INT: And your father didn't want to, you said. Did you visit her in those years?

RITA: Yeah. I think once or twice my mother and I took a train trip that lasted like, I don't know, two days and a night, something like that. And I remember being in a sleeping compartment. It was very exciting.

INT: Your father didn't go.

RITA: My father came, I think, the second time. But when we would go, we would go for like six weeks. This was not like a short visit. It was like we were in for the long haul. (laughs) It was hard to get there, it was expensive, it was far away. Nobody was flying by plane. And so it was a real investment. And so, once you got there, you stayed for a while.

I can't remember the first time I met her, but I remember coming to her home...and, in the first place, she was the first person who really looked like a grandmother to me. She had grey hair, and she was very soft. I remember when she hugged you, she was soft, you know, and she would sort of envelope you. She also took on a very maternal role with my mother, and she would **constantly** challenge my mother in terms of -- and I remember it in Yiddish -- you know, "Leave the child alone. She's fine." You know...

INT: As a mother would talk to a daughter.

RITA: Yes. Very much. And she really took on a parenting role with my mother after the war.

INT: Did your mother listen to her?

RITA: She tried. She tried. And she loved Gitchi. She really did. Still does.

INT: So you'd go there for the summer?

RITA: I would go there for the summer, and it was a good time for me. It wasn't in a city. You know, they lived in a, in the first place, the city is tiny. I mean, it's tiny now. So you can figure back then it was really a small town. They lived in a house. And so they had a backyard, which

was planted as a garden, and I would go out every day and pull radishes, and...my aunt was also a much more gregarious person, and so there were neighbors coming. People would drop in. She was a real, she was the center of the community there, very much so. Children would stream in and out of that house constantly. I mean, everyone would come to Gitchi for a cookie, (laughs) or for herbs from the garden, or all kinds of things.

INT: It was so sad that she had lost her own children, and then she couldn't have any more. It's very sad.

RITA: Yeah. But she took on everybody else's kids. Everybody's kids became her kids. And to this **day** she still, you know, she calls me her grandchild. When I got married, gave me a thousand dollars. I remember looking at this thing and saying, "Wait a minute. There's too many zeros." (laughs) And she's another one, where today I could call her and say, "Gitchi, I need something," and she would say, "Mamele, whatever I have, you can have."

INT: A very generous person.

RITA: Always.

INT: She was like a grandmother for you, do you think?

RITA: Yeah. She **was** my grandmother. Still is my grandmother. I mean, to the point where I still travel to see her when I can. I took Elizabeth to see her. Elizabeth adores her, which is amazing, since she's only met her three times. When I gave birth, Geitel came.

INT: All the way from Canada.

RITA: Came from Canada and stayed for six weeks, and was the first one who said, (in Yiddish accent) "Vy isn't this baby varing a het?" (laughter) You know, kind of thing. And went and said, "I have to buy presents for the baby." Bought her a high chair, bought her a playpen, bought me a microwave. You know, just, and not only the material stuff. While that's...coming from as poor a family as I did, the material stuff always represented a generosity. You know, that, because people....

(END TAPE THREE, SIDE TWO)

(TAPE FOUR, SIDE ONE)

RITA: Took on different proportions, because these were people who didn't have a lot. But...I don't know.

INT: You were saying more than the financial...

RITA: She was always on my side against my mother and father. She felt very responsible for my mother after the war. She had really tried very hard that my mother not marry my father.

And while she's a very strong believer in, you get married, you get married. You know, make the best of it kind of thing, from her generation, her mother had been divorced, which was...

INT: Unheard of.

RITA: **Totally** unheard of in Poland. And she was much, she's a fascinating woman, Geitel, because she's a gentle, wonderful person, who yet speaks her mind very clearly (laughs) when she doesn't agree with stuff. And also, maybe because she was older, my parents couldn't slough off her comments as easily as they could somebody else's, you know? Somehow she had more impact. And she represented the generation that was gone. She was one of the few that was left, and so...

INT: A bit of an authority figure?

RITA: Yeah. Yeah. And I guess this is where I always had difficulty. My father would cave in to my mother and give my mother the responsibility for raising me, without protecting me, I felt. When I talk to him about it now, he says that he would fight with her when I wasn't there. What I felt was that she was the one I had to do battle with, and that I was constantly at war (laughs) with her, you know. For independence, for...for everything. I mean, I felt like I always fought with her. I still fight with her all the time.

Geitel was one of the people who would stand up to my mother without cringing, and still does. Like, when I went to see her recently, she knows that my mother is living on very little money. She gave me money to give to my mother. And I said, "You know, she's not gonna want to take it." And her response is, "I'm older than she is, she'll do what I **say**." And when I gave the money to my mother, she said, "I don't want to take it." And I said, "Go fight with **her**. You know, don't kill the messenger." And when she called her and said, "I don't want to take money from you," and blah, blah, blah, my aunt's response was, "You have your hands in my pockets, you know how much I have? This is not your decision." And would always counter...

INT: Real no nonsense.

RITA: Totally. And would counter my mother at the drop of a hat if she felt that what she was doing was inappropriate.

INT: And how would your mother respond?

RITA: She wouldn't fight with her.

INT: Yeah?

RITA: Whether she did what Gitchi wanted or not, she wouldn't fight with her the same way.

INT: Would she change the behavior, though?

RITA: Yeah. Gitchi also represented to my mother a safe haven. When my parents' marriage would get really bad, my mother would go and stay with Gitchi for months. When my mother had what I think would be diagnosed as a nervous breakdown, when I got my divorce, she went to Canada to stay with Gitchi to recuperate. Gitchi was always there to take care of us, you know, when she could. Her house was open to us. She was, she'd come and stay with you, if you were sick or needed something. That was the other thing that's **fascinating** about these families is that, if anyone needed, someone gave. And someone did for you. You know? There was a sense of, in fact the people who were **shunned** from this group were the ones who couldn't do that. If they were not sharing either of money or of themselves, they were out of this crew. You know, this was the expectation. That you do for people, you're there for people. What's mine is yours, kind of thing. If you have a job, and you can get me a job, the expectation is that you'll do that, you know, kind of thing. It's amazing to me that people picked up these kinds of roles for each other.

INT: Where do you think that...do you think the Holocaust had anything to do with it?

RITA: I don't know. I would think that it came out of surviving the war and knowing that you couldn't survive on your own. That you had to have help. You know?

INT: They were all in the same boat, pretty much.

RITA: Yeah.

INT: And they had no families.

RITA: They had no one to turn to. So someone like Gitchi would, you know, who wanted to mother, and take care, she had lots of candidates, (laughs) you know? And she took **all** of us.

INT: How did she deal with your father? She didn't want that marriage to happen. How was their relationship over the years?

RITA: It was very good. She tried very hard not to take sides, and not to go against, for one thing, she didn't have as much contact with him. But, like she called here the other night, and my father answered the phone, and it was very warm and very caring, and stuff like that. Now she'll call my mother and she'll call me. She doesn't call my dad. You know, so there's that kind of a difference.

INT: How old a woman is she now?

RITA: She won't tell anybody.

INT: But she's older than your mother.

RITA: She's at least ninety.

INT: Wow.

RITA: She must be about ninety years old. Yeah, and she's...

INT: Still going.

RITA: She's just a love. An absolute love.

INT: Okay, I think we'll stop there.

(PAUSE)

INT: This is a continuation of an interview with Rita Roitman. It's January 26, 1995.

The last time we were talking, we pretty much finished up with Canada. And what I wanted to ask you, you painted a really vivid picture of what the survivor community was like, and what a support system that was for you as a child, and as you remember. And I'm wondering, when you moved to New York, was that kind of community there for you, as well?

RITA: It was different.

INT: Well, tell me first, how they, what was the reason that you decided to move, your family decided to move.

RITA: My parents came to Canada as a means of getting to the United States. So I think from the time that they were in Canada, there was an application in. (pause) There was always in their minds that they'd be safer, have opportunities that they couldn't have, in the United States. And so I think I told you that my mother had wanted to go out to be with her aunt in Winnipeg, and my father wanted to stay in Montreal. The thing that I think they both felt was that somehow their lives would be better in the United States.

INT: Where did they get that from?

RITA: I think it was...you know, the only thing that comes to my mind is that the United States represented freedom. It represented...opportunities to them that weren't there in Canada. Why, I don't know. The economic system certainly wasn't the same. Montreal was a much more depressed city financially, economically, in terms of opportunities for people, where certainly New York City, for uneducated, unskilled people, offered enormous opportunity at that time. And it really was seen as the land of milk and honey. That somehow you could make it here. You know?

INT: Were there relatives there that they wanted to go to?

RITA: My uncle was here. Was in the United States. He was in New York. And he was the one who had regularly sent money. It's my mother's mother's brother, Eli, who had married an

American right before the war as a way of getting out of Europe. And came to New York, set up a business, and was the one who filed papers to bring my parents, saying that he could offer employment to my parents, were it necessary. And since he had at that point two very well established bakeries, he certainly could do that.

So there was family here, and as soon as **we** came, we brought my father's brother, the same way we had brought him from Israel to Montreal. He then came.

When we came to New York, we moved in initially, we literally moved into their house. Into their house -- they lived in a two-bedroom apartment, three-bedroom apartment, in Brooklyn. And we stayed with them for a couple of weeks, and then my uncle offered my parents an apartment that was upstairs over his bakery on Church Avenue in Brooklyn. And it was supposed to be temporary, and we lived there until I was about sixteen. And it was a very stressful living arrangement. And when my father's brother came, he took the other apartment that was upstairs over the bakery. So while there was...

INT: Why was it stressful? Why was it stressful living there?

RITA: It was stressful with all kinds of family shit. You know, like, first they paid no rent, and then they paid some pittance, but the expectation was that whenever my uncle needed help, that we would drop whatever we were doing, and go work in the bakery. If it meant that at 5:00 breads had to be taken from the bakery where it was being baked, to the other store, which didn't have the capacity to do its own baking, and the truck was full or something, Eli would come upstairs and wake everybody up, and say, "You have to do this for me." Or, "The store's really busy, Miriam is sick. Somebody come downstairs." I thought it was a hoot. I mean, I used to love going downstairs and helping, you know, as a kid. And my job was to sit and put together the boxes. I'd make the boxes.

INT: Oh, yeah, the little white boxes.

RITA: Yeah. And eat. (laughs) You know? And my uncle would take me behind, you know, into the bakery part, and I'd meet the bakers, and you know, it was just, for me it was great.

INT: Did you have a good relationship with that uncle?

RITA: My uncle adored me. And I adored him. He was a self-centered son of a bitch. While he was generous to my parents, he always expected...

INT: Pay back.

RITA: Pay back. And tenfold. You know, you could never pay him back. But he **was** very generous. He always had money flowing out of his hands for me. You know, if I came down to help in the bakery, he'd pay me. And I'd say, "I don't want anything. Can I go get a cookie?" (laughs) You know, "Let me have an **éclair**." (laughs) But he would offer all kinds of things, like his daughter went to camp, and he offered to send me to sleep away camp. My parents

turned him down, which broke **my** heart. He would offer, "Oh, she likes ice skating. Why don't I buy her an outfit?" Or, things like that. I mean, he was generous in many, many ways, to **me**, and again, while I'd hear all the gritching about why they didn't like him, to me he wasn't like that. He was a very big man, he was a very attractive guy.

INT: He must have been a lot older than your mother, though, because he was...

RITA: Not much, because he was her youngest brother, and so there really wasn't...

INT: A big age difference.

RITA: Let's see, I think at this point Eli would have been -- he only died a couple of years ago - - he would have been...maybe ten, fifteen years older than my mother, so it wasn't like a huge gap.

So while stuff would filter down to me about things that weren't good about him, or his, he had a **horrible, horrible** relationship with his wife. And could be very abusive in his use of people. And wasn't the kind of parent that my parents respected. You know, all sorts of stuff. But again, my feeling of him, I remember this very big man, who would **always** smile when he saw me. Who would hug me and kiss me. I was a very affectionate kid. And who also thought it was incredible that I spoke Yiddish, and would show me off to customers. And he was very warm and loving to me.

INT: Made a fuss over you.

RITA: Yeah. And he loved me.

INT: Did he have children?

RITA: He had two children. An older son and a daughter. The only one alive still is his daughter. His son became a drug addict and died of a heroin overdose on the streets of New York. He had a very, very sad life, my uncle. You know. A very tortured life. And I gather was quite a...I'm trying to think of the right word. Scoundrel, even in Poland, you know. He was the one who would try to get out of doing any work on the farm or in my grandmother's store. Would disappear on a horse and wouldn't see him, and would find blonde hair on him afterwards from some girl. (laughs) You know, he was a rogue. And married, as I said, unhappily. Married primarily to get out of Europe, and married a real embittered old maid type of woman, who was really, she's still alive, she has Alzheimer's, now. A very cold, nasty, bitchy lady.

INT: And he just basically married her to get out.

RITA: He married her to get out, and you know, she got pregnant, and you know...

INT: They just stayed together.

RITA: They stayed together and had a really horrendous existence together.

INT: So you lived above the store. What about your father, he got a job right away?

RITA: My father got a job in the garment district. I think immediately. I don't remember. I was ten. And many of the immigrants from New York had lived in Canada, that my parents knew. We weren't the only family to do this. Let's see, my father's friend Seveck, who was one of like, I don't know, it seemed like a cast of thousands, he had like twelve brothers and sisters, and it was one of these incredible families that like never, and none of them were killed.

INT: They were in Siberia, also?

RITA: I don't know where they were. But they were all in New York. And lived in the same little area of Brooklyn, or not very far away. So there **were** connections. It wasn't the same. I'm not sure why it wasn't the same. But it wasn't the same once we came to the States. There was other family here, but I didn't have, I guess the people who made me feel connected were two or three families that actually stayed in Montreal. And...

INT: Who were they? They were Celia's family?

RITA: Celia's family, the Shechters, and then there was my Uncle Haskel, Charlie, that was the Bravermans, and...then there was another family that, while we didn't spend as much time with, my father knew from Siberia -- the Blums. And...

INT: And they all stayed?

RITA: They stayed. In Montreal. But there was no lack of contact, trust me. It was like, the first summer that we were in the United States, I went back to spend the summer, and I stayed with one of these families.

INT: You went by yourself?

RITA: Yeah. I don't remember if I went, traveled by myself, or my mother took me there and left me for a while. (laughs) But I was back in Montreal a **lot**.

INT: Were you homesick? Was it hard for you to leave?

RITA: It was horrendous. It was horrendous. Mostly in terms of my connections with kids. There was this aura, I remember the day we got the letter, that we had an interview for going to the United States. I can't tell you the joy. I mean, they were like dancing, my parents. I think nobody touched the ground. The day that we went to see the Consulate, or whoever it was we went to see, in Montreal, I remember my father had this broken-down car. But I remember the sense of pride, the sense of excitement. It was just an unbelievable...it was like they had achieved nirvana in some way. And then it was downhill, because it was never **exactly** what they wanted. Though my father did quite well, you know.

INT: He did better here financially than he did in Canada.

RITA: Yeah. There were many more jobs available to him. You know, and he was able to work. They were able to save enough money to start a business, which, you know, was pretty significant, considering that they came to Canada with two hundred dollars, you know. So I think it offered a lot of opportunity.

INT: So what about school? What did you do about school?

RITA: I came in in the fifth grade, and it was hard. There was a lot of...commentary by other kids. "Oh, you're from Canada. You must have lived in an igloo," kind of stuff. I was very ostracized. I was also very different. The schools were very different. The schools in Canada were very strict. I wore a uniform. You sat in your desk. You **never** got up to go anywhere, and it seemed to me like I walked into a three-ring circus, when I went to school the first day. I mean, if your pencil needed sharpening, you got up and you went and sharpened your pencil. I couldn't understand. I mean, I had no **clue** what was going on. Kids got food at their desks. You got milk and pretzels, which I was like, I mean, it was just alien to me. Kids were wearing, you know, they weren't wearing uniforms, so immediately they looked very different, and I **felt** very different, because my parents didn't have a lot of money for me to have little outfits. You know, I was used to wearing...and it was an enormous savings, putting me in a jumper and a white blouse. And even though my mother wanted top of the line, you only needed one or two, (laughs) instead of seven days' worth of clothing. So that was very hard.

I didn't feel very connected to the kids. And my mother did something very nice. She made me a party. And I invited a whole bunch of kids, and then suddenly, that broke some of the ice. And it was nice. But the kids that I was friends with at that point were really the outcasts. There was one girl, Marsha, who had a physical deformity. And it was genetic, because her father and her brother had it. I stayed friends with her for quite a while. She became a cellist. But she was, you know, odd-looking. You know, she was clearly different, and yet approachable, and you know, friendly to me. Then there was a girl, Jeanie, who had flaming red hair, a face full of freckles, whose mother had cancer, and her mother was dying, and my mother sort of took her in, and Jeanie would come to our house after school. Then there was the girl that I wanted to be friends with, Sheila, who lived around the corner from me, who had blonde hair that always curled under (laughs) and, you know, had the...I guess I'd have to say a kid's look of Barbie doll, like what it would be like to be the perfect kid, you know? And she lived around the corner from me, and this kid was **vicious**, absolutely vicious. And we sort of became friends on and off. It was one of those really painful childhood relationships.

INT: She was very popular?

RITA: She was the popular kid in the class, you know, and...by the time, I guess, now, I was in public school there through the sixth grade. The other thing that isolated me from the kids was that I was far ahead academically. The schools in Canada worked at a very different pacing, and I had always, by that point I already had two years of French. So I already had another language.

The math...so I didn't, I was not challenged by the work. I was immediately identified as one of the brightest kids in the class. Whether I was or wasn't, the fact that I had already done the work once before gave me a leg up on it, and so that isolated me from the class. The teacher that I had, while she was very nice to **me**, didn't handle it very well. She used me as an example, of this is the kind of behavior you should have.

I remember she asked me once to go take a note to another class. And she said, "Do you know where it is?" And I said, "I think so. Isn't it that room?" She didn't hand me a pass, which was like, how can you walk, I mean, I didn't know you didn't have to have a pass. Well, I come to this other room, and the door is closed, so I'm knocking on the door. I stood out there for ten minutes. Because nobody knocked on doors. You just walked in. And I came back with the note in my hand and said, "They're not answering the door." Which made me look like I was an alien, which I was. You know. And she thought that was incredible, and wonderful, that I would be that polite.

INT: To wait.

RITA: But it made me very much an outsider from the kids. By the time I was in the sixth grade, it was a lot easier. It was just a bad, it was a transition year, and it was a tough year. By the sixth grade I felt, I had been put in with the brightest kids. They were already, you know, you knew which class was the bright ones, and they sort of grouped them that way. And I felt more comfortable. I think I had someone called Mr. Mann. I got a kick out of that. And it wasn't a great year, but it wasn't horrendous. And by that point, I think I had, while I didn't have a lot of friends, I had some friends.

INT: Was your mother working at this point?

RITA: She would work with my uncle, when he needed her. Of course it was always when she had just started something on the stove, or that kind of thing.

INT: So what was the stress level like in your house after you moved to New York?

RITA: It was high. My parents weren't getting along. Any decisions that had to be made were handled the way they always were, which was that they'd fight, rather than make a decision. My father...my father was very stressed by working. He would do a lot of overtime. And I remember, I think I was a little bit older, already, I remember an awful fight, where, I'd never thought of my father as a violent man, but he certainly has it in him when he loses it. I remember him taking something off the table, and hurling it, you know, food, like a plate full of food, hurling it across the room, across the kitchen, and then taking all of the money out of his wallet, and that went with the food. Money was a big issue. Not having enough to do whatever it was they wanted to do. And I don't know what it was about. Having my aunt and uncle live next door. Where the two brothers were joined at the hip constantly, and so the wives were...it was a weird, you know..

INT: Can you describe that relationship a little bit?

RITA: Which one?

INT: The one of your father and your uncle.

RITA: They were like Siamese twins. They walked the same. They didn't look the same, but they, they both had the same, one hand would be behind the back, and one would be down (laughs) when they walked. They spent more time with each other than with anybody else. They were each other's confidante. They were the ones that they talked and made decisions with, as opposed to their wives. It was, in some ways I guess a wonderful relationship for them, but a pain in the ass for everybody else, because there wasn't much room for anybody else. And their world was very narrow. Their world was...no one that they would meet in America that wasn't a Jew, that wasn't from Poland or from their little, you know, their experience. They were very closed, very ghettoized. At the same time...you know, they were young enough and New York was a fabulous place, then. So I think that there was much more, I mean, you'd go into New York, you'd go to Times Square, you know, it wasn't a haven for hookers, it was Times Square at its prime. You could go to a movie. You could go out to eat. It wasn't that expensive, you could take the trains. It was a fabulous city. And they used to do that. You know, my aunt and uncle and my parents would go out.

INT: Take advantage of New York.

RITA: Yeah, and they would. I mean, not that they went to museums, but they'd find Israeli clubs, or they'd go to a movie, or whatever the heck it was that they did. I don't know. But they would go out, and they enjoyed it a lot. They really did.

INT: What was **your** relationship with your uncle, and your aunt?

RITA: My uncle scared me. Because he was very aggressive, and very violent with his children. Which I had only experienced from my parents in very small doses. My uncle was not very giving. He didn't relate well to children. Neither did my aunt. Theirs was not the kind of house that you'd come into and they'd say, you know, "Can I get you something? I baked some cookies," kind of thing. Eventually they'd feed you, when they fed everybody else, you know, kind of thing. But they didn't, one thing I knew was that it wasn't just me. They treated everybody like that. They were not very warm. They weren't affectionate, which was also kind of odd to me, because my parents were always very affectionate for me. And always had pet names for me. I was never called by my name. I'm still never called by my name. There's always, you know, "Pussycat, Mamele," whatever. It's always something else. It's never, unless there's like an emergency. (laughs)

INT: Then they'll use your real name.

RITA: They'll use my name. Whereas my aunt and uncle weren't like that. And this, you know, I kept thinking about this after we talked last time. I don't know what it is that **I** felt...I

have felt special with a lot of people. My aunt, who was one of the most distant parents in terms of mothering, and was very negative and very critical of her...

(END TAPE FOUR, SIDE ONE)

(TAPE FOUR, SIDE TWO)

RITA: Well, I guess starting way back. I remember having, we lived over the bakery. We lived in the front apartment, my aunt and uncle and their three kids lived in the back apartment. I remember, and the doors were open. They were very frequently in our house. I was less frequently in theirs. But there was a lot of movement (laughs) between the apartments. I remember having a fight with my mother, I have no idea about what, and being probably about twelve or thirteen when I was very dramatic, and I'd throw myself on the bed, weeping, right? And I remember feeling totally misunderstood and alienated, and just like my mother would never understand. My aunt came into my room, and sat on my bed and rubbed my back. And talked to me. I don't remember exactly what she said. I just know that I felt shocked, surprised, pleased, and I knew that she cared about me.

INT: She heard you crying from the other apartment?

RITA: I think she heard me crying from, yeah, she may have been in the kitchen when we had the fight. There was no, secrecy was not a big deal in my house. (laughs) If you had something that was going on, it was hollered. You know. But she came and tried to comfort me. I had never seen her comfort a child before.

INT: Including her own children?

RITA: Yeah. Never. She was, she would slap them, she was hot tempered. Critical. Whatever. She was never that to me.

INT: Why do you think that was?

RITA: I have no idea. I have no idea. She died this year, and I said something to my mother about how I always felt that she liked me, and I said, "I don't know why I feel that way, because she certainly didn't like a lot of people." And my mother said, "Well, she **did** like you." And I said, "Well, what do you mean?" And she said that a couple of years ago in talking, my aunt had said to her that she had always felt that I had more to offer than any of her kids. That I would go further in my life, that I had made more out of myself. That she respected me more, that she liked me more than her **children**. Which is a pathetic kind of situation, but on some gut level I knew that she felt that way. I mean, I have to say that from the time that I got married until she died, maybe she was in my home six or seven times, okay? So it's not like I spent a lot of time with her. But she never came to my house without saying, "Nu. So this is how people should **live**." You know, she spoke Yiddish a lot of the time, although she was certainly also fluent in English. "Look at this house. Look at how she sets a table. How come you don't ever have serving dishes, and you don't have this and you don't have that? How come Rita has that?"

INT: Now who is she speaking with?

RITA: She's speaking with her son or her daughter. With **her** kids.

INT: So she's criticizing her kid and lifting you up as an example?

RITA: Yeah. And, or she would walk around the house with me and say, "This is so cute."
(laughs) "Look at this chatchka. You have so many little chatchkas I like." You know, things like that.

INT: Must not have endeared you to the cousins.

RITA: No. No. It sure didn't. Or she thought that I, and this she said very openly. She thought I was an incredibly good cook, and she would carry on about what I made, and you know, all kinds of stuff like that. Or she'd compare recipes with me, or stuff like that. I don't know. Even the last year she was alive, at Passover, she was in the hospital, and I invited my cousin, Jacob, to come here for a Seder, and we called my aunt, when everybody was here, you know, to wish her a happy Passover and stuff, and she got on the phone with me and she asked to talk to me, and said, "You are the only one in this family who would reach out and not let my children be alone on Passover. And I really thank you for it. And you're a good person." Kind of thing. So she always somehow gave me the message. She let me know. But at the same time...

INT: In her own way, because she wasn't real affectionate.

RITA: Yeah. You know.

INT: Now, you said you were afraid of your uncle. What was your relationship with him like?

RITA: Minimal. You know, I stayed away from him, and I didn't have much of a relationship with him.

INT: He didn't pay attention to you?

RITA: No.

INT: I mean, you were the only child of his only surviving....

RITA: He really didn't. No. He didn't pay a lot of attention to me. He didn't pay a lot of attention to **kids**, and when they got in his way, he'd like literally move them out of his way. You know, he was a very...and it's interesting. I spoke with my father about this recently. He was talking about how dysfunctional, really, all three of my uncle's children are. And I said, "Well, given the kind of family that they grew up in and with, it doesn't surprise me. Anyone who's raised the way that they were raised has a hard time relating to other people, and making connections, and stuff like that." And I said, "How come Yitchi was so violent with the kids?"

He was physically **incredibly** abusive. And my father said, "I don't know." He said, "I have to tell you that every time I saw it, I would talk to him and take him aside and say, 'This never happened to you. Why are you doing this to your children? You never grew up this way. Our parents never hit us like this. What are you doing? How could you hit a child like this?'" And my father has no idea.

INT: He doesn't have a reason. Anger, the war, before the war...

RITA: He doesn't know. You know, and you can speculate, you know, forever.

INT: What do **you** think?

RITA: (pause) I think that...in all of them was a lot of anger and rage, and a lot of deprivation that had gone on before the war and during the war. I mean, my father's family was incredibly poor. They had been deprived of everything. You know, from shoes, to food, to education, to all sorts of things. And I think that there was a lot of stuff, depending on how they coped with it, and how much defense they had to repress it, it came out more or less. And depending on their circumstances, it would bring it out. And I think that certainly kids will tap into the deepest regions of you and bring out things that you don't like about yourself, you know. And I think that my uncle just didn't have the self-control to contain it.

INT: Couldn't handle parenthood.

RITA: I really think he couldn't. He and my aunt split the kids in terms of: this is your son, this is my son. And nobody really wants Sarah.

INT: Oh, boy.

RITA: Which is bizarre, because as a girl, as the first born, as the child who survived in Siberia, you would think she would have been cherished. She was looked at as a piece of shit. She was abused. I mean, I remember, I literally remember seeing my uncle drag my cousin Sarah across the floor holding her hair. I remember, my aunt and uncle went, when they came to the States started a, they had a candy store. Like a luncheonette kind of thing. Well, you know, go from a bakery to a candy store. I mean, you've reached the ultimate in any kid's eyes. I mean, here's someone who has ice cream, candy, you know, soda. (laughs) You know, kind of thing. I remember sitting in their store, and I don't know what Nathan did. I mean, Nathan was an obnoxious kid, and he did something to anger my uncle. He's in a public store. **His** store. My cousin, he hit my cousin, who was my age, and so, we weren't teenagers yet. Nathan fell to the floor. It's a tile floor, and my uncle starts kicking him, and he's wearing, I remember, heavy black leather shoes. My aunt is standing behind the counter not saying a thing. My father grabs hold of his brother and pulls him off a **child**. And takes him in the back, or I don't know where the hell he took him. And my mother said, and my **mother** turned around to my uncle and said, "If I ever see you do that again, I'm going to call the police. I don't care who you are." I mean, the level of violence...

INT: The rage.

RITA: Was horrific. And it was something like, I was like, I would never want to get close to this man! (laughs)

INT: You were there when that happened?

RITA: Yeah. I remember seeing it. And I...this is what was surprising. I mean, here's a woman who watches her husband beat her kid, and yet she comes to comfort me when I cry.

INT: Yeah. It doesn't make any sense.

RITA: It **doesn't** make any sense to me. And in many ways growing up never made sense to me. It was a very, the mixed messages, the confusion, the lack of stability was...it was very disorienting, it was very frightening. It was...I didn't get it. I didn't understand.

INT: Can you give some examples of that in your home life, not with your aunt and uncle, but in your life, with your parents?

RITA: I remember walking, my parents fought all the time. I remember once I was old enough, just, they would start to fight, and I'd open the door and I'd walk out. And I'd walk in the street with tears streaming down my face. I felt like I had no place to go. You know. There was no place to get away from this.

INT: Did you have a friend you could go to?

RITA: Yeah, I would go to, at that point I had girlfriends. I went...

INT: They wouldn't call after you when you left?

RITA: Yeah. I mean, they were not neglectful of me, and I wouldn't be gone very long. (laughs) But there was this desperate sense of: **Get me out of here.** The only thing I can say is that I became much more and more introspective, and depressed. I mean, it wasn't fun growing up in my house. While I felt cherished, special, loved, that certainly gave me a lot. I also felt...burdened and...as though someone had taken my childhood away from me, which they had.

INT: You were saying last time, you always had to be the adult in the situation.

RITA: Yeah. I mean, you know, when I got, I remember sitting on the toilet talking to my mother and saying she should get out of the relationship. I was like thirteen years old. I just, it was like, how can you live like this? How can **I** live like this?

INT: Did you see your father at that point as being the offender, and your mother having to get out?

RITA: I always did. I always did. Whether it was right or wrong. My gut instinct was: whether my father was right or wrong, my father never protected me. I never saw my father as my ally. My mother, while she was crazy and...burdened me more than my father, my mother was stronger. To identify with **her** gave me more strength. My father was more passive. You know, he couldn't protect me. He couldn't even keep me on a bus. He'd lose me.

INT: You described him last time as having no power.

RITA: Yeah. I mean, he's impotent. And whether he was the right one or the wrong one, I felt abandoned by him, where with my mother it was much more that she was so enveloping, that I couldn't, I mean, she was stifling me. But that was preferable to being abandoned.

INT: So you sided with her, pretty much.

RITA: I still do. And I'm not sure that she's the **right** one, but instinctively, or on a gut level.

INT: What would she say when you told her that you thought she should leave?

RITA: "I'll leave. It's important that we stay together while you're home." You know. "I can't take you away from your father. He loves you." So then there was the added burden. It was my fault that they were together. It was my fault that they **got** together, because I was born.

INT: Did you know about that?

RITA: Oh, yeah.

INT: When did you find out about that?

RITA: I don't know when I knew about that. But I sure knew about it.

INT: She told you, your mother told you that?

RITA: Yeah.

INT: So you felt guilty for...

RITA: I felt guilty for being born, and I felt guilty because they were staying together because of me. And I was sure that the day that I got married, that they would separate. It only took 25 extra years. And certainly at that point I didn't have the understanding that it wasn't me. You know, that I was the excuse, the rationalization, for what they needed or wanted to do. But I always grew up with the sense that it was, and maybe that's why I tried to take care of everything. You know, if it was my fault, I'd better fix it. (laughs) You know, I'd better facilitate it, I'd better make it work, I'd better be the best kid that I possibly can. That was always very important to me.

INT: Yeah, you described your behavior as being "abnormally good."

RITA: Yeah. It was. Until I was a teenager, and then even, what my mother considered outrageous teenager behavior was so minute, you know.

INT: Like...

RITA: Like answering her back sometimes. Saying, "No, I don't want to do this." (laughs) When it got to where she had serious concerns, I was already in college. You know, I was dating someone she didn't like. I married someone she didn't like. She thought he was dangerous to me because he smoked pot. So she saw me on the road to being a heroin addict someplace. And again, you know, as a parent now I can understand her concerns. And not that I almost didn't even understand her concerns then, but the way she handles it is just...unproductive, you know.

INT: Can we talk a little bit about discipline in your house, what that was like?

RITA: Yeah, I was thinking about that after we talked last time. My parents were very strict. My mother was very strict. My father went along with whatever rules my mother set, basically. My mother was very strict, very European in what's age appropriate. Even though I might be the only kid -- and we weren't living in Europe anymore, and it didn't matter that kids in Europe only wore white anklets until they were twelve, we were now in the United States, and everyone was wearing stockings, and I wasn't allowed to. She had very strict ideas about what you did do, and what you didn't do, and there was not a hell of a lot of negotiation.

My mother's form of discipline was to not talk to me. And she could do that for a very long time. Whether it was as long as it seemed to me, I know that it went on for more than a day, where she would, I mean, she would talk to me, "Dinner is ready," but she wouldn't talk to me.

INT: Like if you asked her a question, she wouldn't answer you?

RITA: Yeah. And using silence is something she did with my father, also. The not talking shit went on a lot. And it's actually a very Jewish tradition. At least Judaism as I know it. People got mad at each other and wouldn't talk. It went on in the family, it went on with friends, and if someone insulted you in some way, you wouldn't talk to them. You know, you wouldn't talk through it, you wouldn't talk about it, (laughs) you just wouldn't talk to them. And...

INT: Well, what was it like being on the receiving end of that?

RITA: It was horrific. Because she was always in my face. And having that, you know, it was like, there was nothing in the middle. It was either she was too involved, or she would withdraw her interactions with me. Initially it was very scary. It still scares me, and she still does the same stuff to me. And on some, you know, I'm 45 years old, I don't deal with it the same way. On some gut level, it induces total panic in me, when my mother doesn't talk to me.

INT: Not anger.

RITA: The anger will come after the panic. But the first thing that happens is, just this sheer panic. And I can't even describe what I'm afraid of. I'm just afraid. **Then** I get angry. At the manipulation.

INT: Well, maybe she was abandoning you, you know, that was her way of abandoning you.

RITA: Maybe it was anything. You know, whatever it was, it was something that she used.

INT: How did you try to, would you try to break out of that, or to get her to talk?

RITA: Oh, yeah, oh, of course.

INT: So what would happen?

RITA: Eventually she'd break down. I would apologize, I would cry, I would beg. I would...basically humiliate myself. And then she would, you know.

INT: So she was never wrong, is that how it worked, or she...would you apologize even when you weren't wrong, or you didn't feel that you were wrong?

RITA: Yeah. Yeah. I wanted my mom back.

INT: Did she ever say she was wrong?

RITA: Yes. Yes. It just comes later. After she's already acted out the scenario. You know, the scenario gets set up and...that's the confusing part about my mother, and what I still have trouble with. Is that her behavior can be totally irrational, strange, upsetting to me. She'll turn around, be it a week, a month, even a year later, and say, "You know, this is bothering me. I feel like I did something really bad and wrong." And she'll want to talk about it. (pause) The confusing part is that when she wants to talk about it, she seems normal. You know, she seems like a normal person who can process something, and that there's a capacity for change. And so I was forever expecting that somehow she would stop this craziness. You know, that the behavior would end, that I would somehow explain things finally the right way so that she'd get it, or that she'd want so much to change, which she clearly did. I mean, the relationship with me is **so** important to her. And on a conscious level, she does not want to do anything to jeopardize that. You know, I'm her link to everything. And yet she'll do such insane things to create the rupture. To antagonize me, to alienate. And maybe she's not doing it to **me**. Maybe she's just **doing** it, you know, and (laughs) I'm the one who's there, so I get it. But it's that constant...thought that I can at some point have the parent that I want. That then gets shattered. You know, the wish and the disappointment. And I have reached points in my life where I've stopped wishing, and I've accepted that that's who she is, but I can't hold onto that.

INT: No. You're still disappointed.

RITA: I'm **still** always disappointed. I'm still...fighting with who I want her to be, and accepting who she is. And **that** feels like a burden. It's like, who needs this shit? You know, I don't need to be spending my energy on this at this point in my life. And it's always like that.

I mean, when she moved here last year, I did what I would have done for anyone. She had an apartment. I arranged for the person who cleans my house, to come with me and clean my mother's apartment. Knowing full well that it would never meet my mother's standards of cleanliness or excellence, but figuring, okay, I know that I can sit on the toilet, I know that the first layer of dirt is gone, and then she'll do it anyway, so. I put tea and coffee and milk and bread, soap in the bathroom, toilet paper, just so that when the day that they arrived in the apartment, with all this stuff, with the mover, I brought over my mother's card table, with chairs, so that there would be a place to sit down. There was a towel in the bathroom. You could use the bathroom. There was something to eat. I got paper plates and some stuff. A teapot. Just stuff. Just so that you could walk in and they had just traveled with the mover from New York. They were exhausted. I could give people something warm to drink, something cold to drink. Something to eat. And Ray and I could work with them to unload the stuff, whatever.

There was not a thing that I bought that was not the wrong thing. I bought the wrong soap for the bathroom, I bought the wrong dishwashing soap, for the kitchen. The teabags that I got aren't the teabags that she uses. She never drinks coffee. Over a period of about three weeks, every single item that I bought for the house was returned to me. Every, there was not a thing that was the right thing.

INT: How do you deal with that? No thank you, no acknowledgement that you...

RITA: She knew on some level that she had fucked up royally. You know, many people have said to me, "Why don't you argue with her? Why don't you tell her when she does something like that?" It's not like I haven't. It doesn't. It's like talking to a **wall**. I will at some point make some comment to indicate how I feel, but getting into an argument or a discussion, it's too exhausting. She debilitates, she just **exhausts** me. At least half a year later, we were sitting in the car, going to IKEA or someplace, and my mother says to me, "There's something I have to talk to you about." Whenever she says that, I want to run away. Cause I don't know what shit's coming, and I don't want it, whatever it is, it's not good. And she starts to cry, and she's hysterical. "I know that I really hurt you when I gave everything back when I moved into the apartment." And at that point I said, "Yes. It was rude. If you didn't want to use any of it, you didn't have to. But given the fact that you have no money, it wouldn't have killed you to use a bottle of Palmolive instead of a bottle of Dove, or whatever the hell it is you use. It wouldn't have hurt you." And I said my sentence or two, and she's weeping hysterically. So now what, now where do we go? Because she's not, she's not someone you can argue with constructively. It's not like, "You're pissing me off. What are you going to do about it next time? Let's go someplace from here." It's, "Oh, my G-d, what have I done to you?" Forget what you've done to me, just stop **now**. I don't want the drama. My mother is a hysteric. She gets dramatic. I get paid to listen to people like that, you know? I don't have the energy to do it, when she's my mother. I really don't. I just want no part.

What ends up happening to me is that I want her to die. The rage is **so** overwhelming. The built-up **years** of having to put up with this. I just want her out of my life. And so what happens then is that I just wish she would have a heart attack in the car (laughs) and die, just to get peace. I mean, I just want quiet in my life. And I guess that's what I've ended up with, with both of my parents, is this sense of...they are a burden. They take from me -- and I don't mean the monetary stuff, because that's easy for me to give. It was no big deal for me to go and set up my mother's apartment. It was fun. You know, it's kind of fun to wander around the supermarket and try to figure out: okay, let's see, what should I have in the apartment? What would be fun to come in, what would make the place...That stuff is **easy**. It's this other shit that they exhaust me. They absolutely exhaust me. As an only child I feel like I've carried them for 45 years. You know. I just...they never are fully independent from me. And that's bizarre. It should be the other way around. It really should.

INT: Why did they have no other children, do you know?

RITA: My mother was pregnant when I was an infant. And felt that my father did not deserve another child. That she could not bring into this horrendous marriage that she had, another child. And probably felt overwhelmed. And had an abortion in Germany. I don't know, I probably know someplace in my head, but I can't remember right now, what my father's feelings were about that. But my mother had an abortion. For some reason, she seems to think that the baby that she aborted was a boy. How she would know at the stage where she had the abortion, doesn't seem possible to me. She seems to think she aborted a boy. The guilt over the abortion is tremendous for her. And it pisses me off, too. Because the thought that I could have had a sibling, who could have taken (laughs) some of this away, who would have been another focal point in their lives, angers me, too. At the same time, given how they were living, it would have been, you know, an incredible burden.

INT: Do you get the sense that was your mother's decision, or did they...

RITA: Probably. I don't think they ever made a decision together. (laughs) My sense is that it was her decision. Now, when they came to Canada, I think that they tried to have more children, and my mother never conceived again.

INT: Because of the abortion?

RITA: I don't think so. My mother had been told after the war that she could never have kids, period, because of the rapes, and that there was some internal damage. I don't know what the damage is, because knowing her gynecological history now, I don't know of anything that was wrong. But she never got pregnant. My mother wanted to adopt a child, and offered to take an Israeli refugee, thinking my father's bias was that he would never raise a child that wasn't Jewish. My father said he didn't want to do that.

(END TAPE FOUR, SIDE TWO)

(TAPE FIVE, SIDE ONE)

RITA: One of the million issues that was between them forever, you know.

INT: She wanted, and he didn't.

RITA: Yeah. It was always: she wanted, he wanted. Somebody always wanted something different, and they never reached an agreement between them. You know. I've always had a fantasy that my father has another child. My father has always had many affairs that I always knew about. And my father was not a very discreet man.

INT: Starting from when? How old were you?

RITA: I remember going to bar mitzvahs with the family, and my father would dance with every other woman. And would leave my mother and I sitting alone. He was embarrassing in the things that he would say and do to other people. He came on to a friend of mine at my wedding. And she was the one with the biggest boobs. He would always do things like that, and it was always very obvious. It was not like he was (laughs) and, I guess, and I always felt that he was so **stupid**. I mean, you could do all of this without anybody knowing. And I knew that as a kid. I knew how to lie. I knew how to hide things. Why didn't he? You know, nobody knew what **I** did. Nobody knew what **I** thought. Why did we have to know what **he** thought? You know? It was embarrassing. He was very **shaming**. You know, I mean, he'd make me feel ashamed of him. He still does.

INT: Do you think your mother, he wanted your mother to know?

RITA: I'm sure.

INT: That he was doing that?

RITA: I'm sure. I'm sure. But he had an affair with a woman who was one of my mother's friends, who was living in Israel, and my father went on some trip there. And they had an affair, and they continued to communicate by mail, and my mother was devastated on many levels. One, that he had an affair, two that it was someone that she knew who betrayed her. And she calls her, what does she call her? (pause) I'm thinking she calls her "that bitch, that Israeli bitch," but it's something else. I can't remember. But this woman has a son, and I had asked my mother if there was a possibility, because my father was sending this woman money. Which was also very difficult. We never **had** a lot of money, and my father was always giving money away to other people. So when I wanted to go to college, there was no money for college. But when my father wanted to send money either to the relatives in Russia, or he wanted to take a trip to Argentina to see somebody, or he wanted to go to Israel, there was money. But he would send this woman money. And at some point -- I must have been a **lot** older -- I said to my mother, "Is it possible that he's supporting this child? Maybe this is his child." And she was like, "Ah! **What?!**" And I said, "Well, doesn't it make sense on some level? Maybe this is his son. And if he is, I'd like to know him!" (laughs) And she said that she really didn't think so, and gave me various reasons, because she knew the woman's husband, when the husband was around, and I guess the husband died. She didn't think that this was his child. And she said that she really felt

that if my father **did** have a child, that he would acknowledge him. That he wasn't a bad man, my father. That he would never leave a child without a parent. That however it would work out, he would not do that. I don't know. You know, it's still a fantasy. I've never asked my father. But I've never acknowledged, or discussed with my father that I know about his screwing around all over the place, either.

INT: Oh. He doesn't know that you know. Would your mother tell you, or how did you know?

RITA: My mother would tell me everything. My mother would tell me everything.

INT: So that's why you don't have any siblings.

RITA: Yeah.

INT: Do you want to talk a little bit about your high school years, what that was like? What kind of a kid you were?

RITA: High school. By the time I got to high school, I had a really strong nucleus of friends. People, many of which I still am in touch with. My best friend was Kay, whose father was a doctor, and a survivor. Her mother died. I met Kay when I was in junior high school. I met her when I was twelve, and we're still friends. She and I were in high school together. We had a whole group, and it was an interesting group of kids, because they were all honor students, except for me. By that point I was labeled an underachiever.

INT: You had talked about that a little bit last time, because you picked the wrong program, because that decision was on you.

RITA: Yeah. And I think it also had a lot to do with a lack of self-esteem and confidence. I think it had to do with me, and who I am. I didn't become a good student until I went into graduate school, where I allowed myself to do well, and I allowed myself to study. The rest of my life I floated on being bright. And it can carry you so far (laughs) when you're doing algebra and stuff that you have to learn. But in high school, I had a nice group of friends. It was a mixed group of males and females.

INT: Jews and non-Jews?

RITA: Let me think. I never looked at it that way. I always had some friends who weren't Jewish, but being in the area of Brooklyn where I was, most people were Jewish. I remember being invited out by George Marciano, who was this **gorgeous** Italian kid in high school. And he called, and he was a sweetheart. Became a doctor. Very sweet, gentle, gorgeous kid. Called and asked me out. And being who I was, I said, "I have to ask my mother." You know, even in high school, I would check. And I said that George had asked me out. My mother said, "I'm not going to tell you not to go. But I'm going to tell you that it's going to create a real stink. And if you're willing to put up with the fight that you're going to have with your father, then fine, go ahead."

INT: But she didn't care that he wasn't Jewish.

RITA: She didn't care. Now, who knows? I mean, she was speaking for my father. Maybe my father wouldn't have said anything. I don't know.

INT: Oh, you never found out?

RITA: I never found out.

INT: What did you do?

RITA: I told him that I couldn't go out with him. And I don't remember. I know that we stayed friends, George and I. That we would talk, and he was a buddy, in school. I don't remember if I told him the real reason, but he ended up dating another girl in the school and marrying her, and they're still married, which is unbelievable, and they still live in Brooklyn! (laughs)

INT: And he's a doctor. (laughs)

RITA: And he's a doctor! And so, you know...

INT: So wait, so you didn't want to have the fight with your father?

RITA: No. I avoided it. I avoided it. The guys that I dated were Jewish.

INT: Just because that's who the kids were?

RITA: Yeah. None of them were religious Jewish. We did not live in an area that was Orthodox in any way. People would go to Temple on Yom Kippur and stuff like that. Some of them would fast on Yom Kippur. People would have Seders, things like that. But you would never know that it was Shabbas, in any of their homes, or on the street. You know, it was business as usual, kind of thing.

INT: A lot of survivor kids, or you don't know? Children of survivors?

RITA: I don't think nearly, I think percentage wise, it wasn't that high. A lot of the people were American. Maybe from European backgrounds, but maybe a generation removed. I don't remember a sense of there being a lot of survivors. I'm trying to think of friends that I've mentioned. None of their parents were...well, Kay's father was Polish. I had a good friend in junior high school, who was Italian, a girl who, actually the first family that I knew who was divorced. Her father was a cop. Emily, her parents were American. Jewish American. No. I guess there weren't.

INT: It wasn't like Montreal.

RITA: No. No. And I think part of it was where we were living. You know, we weren't living in the area necessarily where that population would have lived. So high school was, high school was good. I had good friends. My home was always open to all of my friends, and we moved like (laughs) an amoeba. You know, there would be, we were like this group, and we would sort of move from house to house. We would celebrate stupid stuff, like the day, the first snowfall, we would all get together and have a party.

I was dating. I was involved with a guy who had graduated. He was a year ahead of me. Mickey. And this was the funny, I was going to connect this with, the girl Sheila who lived around the corner, who I always wanted to be like, when I started dating...

INT: How old were you?

RITA: Fifteen years old. My boyfriend was Mickey Tannenbaum, whose parents were Dutch survivors. I dated Mickey for a while, and one day we were talking about other, how relationship started. Turns out that in junior high school, he had dated Sheila, who had moved to Canarsie, another area of Brooklyn, and he had dated her. And it was just like, "Ha! I got him in the end. I beat ya!" (laughs)

By the time I was in high school, I was not in the popular group of the football/cheerleader stuff, but I was in the honors student, nucleus of kids who were college bound, who were the good kids. We were very good. We were interesting, we were a nice group of kids. It was lovely. It was really very, very nice. There were all the ups and downs of dating, and when do you start using deodorant, (laughs) just all of that kind of stuff. All of the sexual, questions about sexuality and things like that that would come up. But it was a good time for me until senior year, when all of these honor students, who had really high grades, were accepted to Barnard, Columbia, you know, who went off to really good schools, and I was rejected -- by Brooklyn College. And that was devastating. That was **totally** devastating. My mother was afraid I would commit suicide. She was **seriously** afraid that I would commit suicide.

INT: You were that depressed.

RITA: I was **very** depressed. I don't think that I considered suicide, but I was very depressed. And I was, I felt unnerved. I had never expected not to move on with this group of people in some way. And again, my parents didn't have a clue of what the hell to do. You know, they did not know how to help me. And so I was the one who went to the guidance counselor, to find out what I could do. I was the one who ended up making arrangements to go to a junior college in Manhattan, I went to Manhattan Community College, and then transferred after two years, to a four-year school. And it was while I was in junior college that I met the man that I married.

INT: But you, again, you had to go figure it out.

RITA: I did it all. Yeah. They were supportive. My mother said, at that point they had an established business, and while money was always a question, there was money, at least some money around. At that point we had not, we had moved into a normal apartment, and didn't live

over a store. I was always very embarrassed by the way we lived. And it's something that I have carried with me through my life. Ray, who is so much more secure, and never...never felt that his home did not reflect who he was, has come to understand over the years how important to me, and it's gotten less important. I've become more secure with stuff. Once I moved out of my parents' house, my apartment, or my home was critical to me, because as a child I was embarrassed to have people come to the house.

INT: Why?

RITA: Because we lived over a bakery. It was very poor. My mother would sew a drape to separate two rooms. It didn't look like other people's houses. I mean, I went into other people's apartments, and they had towels that matched. They had...they had furniture that looked like it belonged together. My house was always, you know, we have no money, what can we buy, what can we borrow, what can we put together. They also had very different tastes. They had very European tastes, that didn't fit with what I saw around me, you know, in other people's homes.

INT: So were your friends more well-to-do, by and large?

RITA: Probably. I would think so. I mean, like my best friend's father was a doctor. You know, and I mean, I don't know that he, I know he didn't, I know how much he had when he died, he didn't die a millionaire, but he sure died a lot richer than my parents are.

INT: So that carried with you through your life, so that your home is still...

RITA: Yeah. My, I've always felt...that my home needs to reflect me. And in that way, it can't be makeshift. It was important for me in terms of Elizabeth, that her room, her space, that she have things that she's comfortable with, that she'd feel good about having people come to our house. I love the fact that my house has always been the place that kids choose to play. You know? That more kids will say, "Oh, no, let's play at your house." You know, kind of thing. That there is always space made for children, you know. Be it that I created a playroom out of one that wasn't there, or that her room has become a place that's welcoming. And that there isn't a sense of embarrassment. I was always embarrassed. I was embarrassed because my parents never dressed like other people. They were either too dressed up, in a typical European way, or "drong" in some way. They still do that. My parents still ask me what they should wear.

INT: They ask you.

RITA: Yeah. I mean, we took them to see Disney on Ice, and my mother's like, "Well, what should Daddy and I wear?" You're going to the Spectrum! (laughs) I don't care what you wear! You know, my only suggestion was gatkes, long underwear, for my father, cause he'll get cold. Other than that, I don't care what you wear. They still will not be able to gauge what's appropriate.

INT: What about clothes for you as a teenager? How was that?

RITA: Uch, it was a nightmare. We used to fight a lot about what I'd wear, or what I wouldn't wear, or what my hair looked like, or...

INT: Why, because, was it your mother and father doing this, or just your mother?

RITA: No, my father really didn't care very much. My father would care in that we were spending too much money (laughs) would be the plaintive cry, which sounds, I mean, it just sounds typically male. My mother would, I don't know.

INT: Was she critical of how you looked, or she wanted you to be a different way, than what you wanted? She wanted you to wear different clothes?

RITA: I don't know, (interviewer's name), I really don't know. I just know that we, and I don't know that that part of it was so abnormal. I mean, it's like you have to fight with your mother about something (laughs) and clothes is actually a lot safer than some of the other issues I could have raised. I think her criticism of me as a teenager would be more around issues of sexuality. That threatened her a lot more.

INT: For instance.

RITA: My mother talks about the fact that she hit me when I was a young child, and my aunt and uncle were living with us in Montreal. I don't remember it.

INT: You were very small.

RITA: I was very small, and I don't have any...I just don't have any sense of it. It doesn't seem part of my life. The other time that I remember being hit, and my father standing by and allowing it to happen, was when I went to Montreal one summer, there was a neighbor who had lived next to us when we lived in Montreal, her name was Sharie. Sharie was, you know, maybe a year older than I was, and we were friends. Sharie was a much more...adventurous, spirited child. She wasn't a "good kid." She was, you know, the kind of kid you might not want your kid to be friends with. And we had written to each other, and my parents would read my mail. And we had written about, I don't know what, some sexual something.

My mother met me -- I was in junior high -- my mother picked me up from school, and had the letter with her that she had opened and read, and there was some reference to something that we had been writing about that had to do with sex. My mother was appalled. When my father came home, she and my father -- this was the only time my parents were unified, and the only way they could be unified was to be against me. That was the only time I remember being hit. My mother took a leather strap and hit me, and my leg started to bleed. She cut my leg with the strap. I remember being on the floor in the living room. My father sitting in a chair and crying, and the whole thing was, what had I done? How could I shame them this way?

INT: What **had** you done?

RITA: I had somehow written about, known about, sexual things.

INT: But not done it.

RITA: Well, I can't fuck **her**. (laughs) I mean, she was another girl! I mean, what could I **do**?

INT: So the awareness, the fact that you were aware of sex, is that what was bothering your mother?

RITA: Yeah. My father left the next morning on a train to Montreal to show her parents this letter. Talk about over-reaction. My mother did not speak to me for weeks. It was another one of those periods. I remember going to the bathroom looking for an antibiotic cream to put on this gash on my leg. And being, I felt like I was in the Twilight Zone. I mean, I think I dissociated, basically, from the whole experience.

INT: What were you, twelve, thirteen?

RITA: Eleven or twelve, I think. It was normal behavior. Exploring sexuality with a girlfriend. Even exploring each other would have not been abnormal. To my parents it was somehow such a threat, such a disgrace. They felt that something horrific had happened, and I was punished. I was grounded from I don't know what. I mean, I was basically isolated for weeks. And my mother wouldn't talk to me. And I had no idea what happened when they went to Canada. When my father went. I mean, he went and came back, like in two days. By train. I never heard from this girl again. I was forbidden to ever, oh, no, that's not true. I was forbidden to write to her, and I guess a few years later she wrote, and my mother again opened the G-d damned letter.

INT: How did you deal with that whole episode?

RITA: I went into therapy (laughs) when I was older. I mean, I don't know that I've ever, you know, as a therapist now I can say to people, and honestly know, I used to think that therapy would make it all go away. That somehow you'd get rid of it, and you'd go on with your life. Well, that's not true. You have a chance to explore it, you have a chance to diffuse it. You don't really make it not happen. I don't know how I dealt with it. It affected my life critically.

INT: This incident?

RITA: Yeah. I think it affected my sexuality tremendously. It inhibited me tremendously. My mother, again, as she always does, apologized for this years and years later. And said that she had no, she said, "I did not understand what I was doing. I did not understand your behavior. I am appalled by what I did. Can you ever forgive me?" kind of thing. I mean, she wants absolution. And there's a part of me that wants to not give it to her, and there's another part of me that feels how pathetic she is. You know, how can you live with that guilt forever? (laughs) It's like, what's the point? Where are you going to go with it? You know, like what for? It was another one of those instances where I felt my father's abandonment.

INT: He didn't protect you.

RITA: Not at all. Not at all.

INT: He sat and cried, is how you described it, right?

RITA: I had sullied his mother's name, was the message. I was named after his mother, and the fact that I was somehow involved with sex, I mean, I hit the incest taboo (laughs) you know, big time, and flipped **him** out, you know. What the hell trigger it pushed in my mother, I mean, that was pretty, her behavior was wild.

INT: The rape maybe, do you think?

RITA: I don't want to know. You know, it's like her problem. It's not going to, I think that I have as much understanding of my parents as someone can have, in terms of putting things in perspective, understanding how disturbed their lives were before the Holocaust, and with the Holocaust, and the events that happened. And it makes me understand who they are. It doesn't make me **like** who they are. And it doesn't take away really, from what they've done to me. And I guess on some level, I'll never forgive them for that.

INT: That was my next question.

RITA: They never...they never allowed me to have a childhood. And they, as an adult, they don't allow me any peace. (laughs) They never leave me alone. As a child, or as an adult. They just...and it's not the way they present me to other people. Because the way they talk about me, and the way they even say to me, they have **enormous** pride in me. They have enormous respect for me. They have enormous dependency upon me. I'm still the one who fixes everything. I'm still the one who takes care of everything. I'm still the one who now provides for them. I'm always a caretaker for them in one way or another. And it's not how it should be. But it is how it is, you know? It's depressing. To be put in this kind of position. And it feels heavy. You know, it's a pain in the ass. It's a constant burden.

INT: You can't extricate yourself?

RITA: Yeah, I guess, you know, I say that I can't, and in reality, I guess I could. I guess I could cut them off. You know, I could say, "I never want to talk to you again." I could never do that.

INT: But have you learned ways over the years to...

RITA: You know, sometimes they work, and sometimes they don't. And the fact that they are now seventy and seventy-six, in reality, there are things I have to do for them, you know? Unless I leave them to fend on their own.

INT: And you couldn't do that.

RITA: No, no.

INT: Why not?

RITA: I guess ethically it's not something I could live with in myself. And they are my parents. Whether they did parenting right or wrong, they are my parents. They did not set out to do it wrong. And they didn't turn [me] into a monster. I'm a very functional person, who has...as good a marriage as most people can have. Who has made a lot out of her life. You know, I've achieved an enormous amount. I had to get something from them.

INT: To be able to do all that, sure.

RITA: And I think I told you at the very beginning, the thing that I always got from them was that they loved me. And they still love me. You know, even though they turn it inside out and upside down, and make me jump through hoops, they still love me. I think what's happened over the years is that I'm not sure I love them anymore.

INT: When did that happen?

RITA: I don't know. I don't know. But I know that I don't feel, I don't get a wave of love inside me when I think of them, when I look at them. I get a sense of like, when is this going to be over?

My father, who I don't see that often, within minutes of seeing him, I can't wait to get him away from me. There's almost a sense of repulsion. He feels physically repulsive to me. I don't want to be physically near him. Part of it is that he smells. I mean, he just has, and he's so unaware of how he affects people, you know, in terms of bathing or not bathing, or using a deodorant, or something. I mean, he just is like totally oblivious.

(END TAPE FIVE, SIDE ONE)

(TAPE FIVE, SIDE TWO)

RITA: He also, they have no sense of boundaries, which I keep saying over and over again. My father doesn't come for a two-day visit. My father comes and plants himself here for two weeks. And while he doesn't say he expects us to change our lives around him, having him here changes our lives. And there's no sense of that.

INT: Can't you say to him, "I don't **want** you to stay for two weeks?"

RITA: I have. I have. "How could you say [that]? I'm your father. How could you not want me to be around? How could you...I'm not a **guest**." This is their home. They see this as their home. There's no sense of, that this is **my** house. My mother, in talking to other people, will say, "In our house..." And I've stopped her. And I say, "What do you mean, 'in our house'?" This

isn't your house! (laughs) What are you saying? Listen to yourself." And then she's like confused. Hurt. Like, what am I pointing out?

INT: Is this because you've always made it so welcoming for them, and so they...

RITA: It's because they don't have a separation of you and me. (laughs) There is no boundary between what's, and my father actually said that. When Ray and I wanted to buy the house, I asked to borrow money from them. And my father's response to me was, "In our family, whatever I have is yours. You don't have to ask me; you don't have to pay me back. If I have, then it's yours." And that's how it was presented to me. When Ray and I wanted to pay him back, he wouldn't take it back. Because it wasn't his money. It was "our" money.

INT: He really believes that.

RITA: Yeah. And I guess he assumes that it goes both ways. What's difficult for me, is not giving him the money. It's having his presence.

INT: It's easier for you to give him money.

RITA: Yeah, I give him money. (laughs) Buy him stuff. That stuff's easy for me. It's the emotional part that's so hard. (pause) I guess the other reason that I would not put them out of my life is Elizabeth. The thing that she has that I didn't have is four grandparents. She feels very connected to, and has always been very connected to. Ray's parents, too, even though they live in New Mexico, she sees them a couple of times a year. And feels, and they write to her. They call her. When she loses a tooth, she calls them. There's a connection that she has. I have no siblings. She has no cousins. You know, she's not connected to a lot of family. I can't imagine denying her her grandparents, and she loves them. She gets frustrated. She'll tell my mother to leave her alone. She'll tell my mother to leave the house.

INT: (laughs)

RITA: She'll tell my mother off.

INT: Why, what does your mother do to **her**?

RITA: She tries to do a lot of the stuff she does with me. The over-protectiveness. I mean, my mother was sitting for Elizabeth one night, and I had said, "Elizabeth needs to take a shower." My mother goes and sits in the shower, in the bathroom with her, because she's afraid Elizabeth might fall in the bathtub. The next time, that night, when I came home, Elizabeth said to me, "I don't want Nana to sit with me anymore." "Why not? What happened?" And she tells me the story, and I said, "That's **sick!**" And I said to my mother, "If you're going to do these kinds of things, she will not allow you to stay with her, and neither will I. So either you get your behavior in line, so that you can have access to her, or else she doesn't want to be with you."

INT: To which she responded?

RITA: "Okay, you just have to tell me."

INT: Seems like when it comes to Elizabeth, she can...

RITA: When it comes to, she can, she's a smart woman, she can pull herself together at certain points, and at other points she can't. And that's what I said. It's very confusing. Because you never know which part of her you're going to get. You know, are you going to get the person who's going to fall apart, or is she suddenly going to rise to the occasion, you know? It's disorienting. It's **very** disorienting.

INT: You can't depend on it. You can't depend on her.

RITA: No.

(PAUSE)

INT: This is a continuation of an interview with a child of survivors, Rita Roitman, and it's February 9, 1995. I wonder if we could talk about how your parents communicated to you about the Holocaust growing up. Do you remember what age you were, and how the information got to you?

RITA: I don't have a clear sense of when I was told what. There were a couple of times. I mean, we never sat down as a family and said, "Look, these are the things that happened. We want to tell you a little bit about it." There was nothing like that. My father never talked about it unless he was asked. And is still that way. If you sit down with him and say, "Tell me about what happened, where you were, blah, blah, blah," he'll very happily -- and I think with a sense of **relief** -- talk about it. I never looked for the information. I didn't want to hear it. It was too scary. And my parents seemed to me to be such fragile people, that opening up that door to what caused it was too much for me. I was already carrying more of a burden with them than I felt that I wanted. So, what would happen was...

INT: But how old were you when you got that sense that your parents were...

RITA: I don't know. I really don't know. I almost feel like I always had that sense.

INT: And that you always knew they had been through terrible times?

RITA: Yes.

INT: Okay. You always knew that.

RITA: I always knew that my father had come from a family of nine children, and that there was only one other brother alive. That there was a question about a brother in Russia. But that basically everyone had been killed. I knew that my mother's family had been killed. And that's

big. I mean, knowing that people you know were **killed**, I mean, I'm now 45, people weren't getting killed (laughs) all the time that I...you know. So the idea of somebody getting killed was pretty horrific.

What would happen is that there would be references, either when there were people over, or groups of people, or in discussion, where there would be a reference to "Cousin So and So," who was shot by the Germans. Stuff like that. I guess the most **vivid** memory that I have of being told about what happened was when I was around fifteen years old. I was dating a guy, Mickey, whose parents were, let's see, his father was Israeli and his mom was from Holland, and she had been -- I'm not sure exactly how -- but somehow involved in either helping people, or somehow involved in protecting Jews. And Mickey was Jewish. And we had gone someplace and come home, and my parents were in their bedroom, and Mickey and I were in the living room, and we started making out. And my mother must have been standing, to see what we were doing. And when Mickey left, I remember, I was in the bathroom. Somehow she was in the bathroom with me, with the door locked, to tell me how she had been raped by a platoon of Russian soldiers. And that somehow my making out with someone...you know, that this was something you didn't do. You know, that sex was...something that you don't engage in. How she made the leap from one to the other, I don't know. I know she scared the shit out of me, because I wasn't scared of kissing somebody, or being held by somebody. But all of a sudden, the image superimposed on that was of her being raped, and I hadn't known that she had been raped. Not once, but repeatedly, to the point where I guess there was some internal -- whether it's verified or not, I don't know. She claims that there was internal damage from the rapes. And that it was what made, she thought, she had been told, or she thought, whatever, that she couldn't have children. And so when she conceived me, it was like, I was the miracle baby. And even though she was not married, there was no question in her mind that she would have the baby.

Which is funny. I mean, here's a woman who was raped, who then goes on to have sex with someone when she's not married, and she sees her daughter becoming sexual, and flips out. You know.

INT: How do you...

RITA: I don't think she's ever been comfortable. I think that...(pause) I think that stuff went on in her family before the war, and I know that it did. You know, her father died when she was very young. Her father died when she was, I'm either thinking ten or thirteen, I don't remember which. And so she hadn't had, and her mother was very disturbed, emotionally disturbed, and had lost six babies to various, you know, infant mortality kind of things that went on. And was nuts. Basically, her mother was crazy. And her father was the stable one. What went on in terms of the family dynamics was already enough so that she wasn't healthy to start with emotionally. She then goes into a war where nothing really good is going to happen, and only exacerbates whatever...

INT: How old was she when she was raped?

RITA: I don't know, she was fifteen when the war started. So...I have no idea. It was when the Russians came through.

INT: That was the beginning. The beginning of the war, or the end of the war?

RITA: I don't know. I don't know when the Russians came through.

INT: She was either fifteen, or she was twenty then, at the end of the war.

RITA: I don't know. Again, I have such a sense of being overburdened by my parents. And they don't tell you...my parents never tell me anything without the expectation that I'm going to fix it. Even now. If it's a simple thing like, "I got a letter from Israel, and this is what's going on there." At the end of the paragraph is, "So what can you do to help them?" So it's always been that way.

INT: So why was she telling you at fifteen?

RITA: To make me stop being sexually active.

INT: It scared her in some way.

RITA: Mm-hm.

INT: How did you process that? Do you remember how you dealt with it at the time, when you were fifteen?

RITA: I remember crying, being very upset. And not understanding why the hell she was telling me, and why then. You know? And I didn't know what I was supposed to do with this information that I now had. You know, I didn't know where to **put** it, in terms of my life, in terms of her. She became even more damaged and more...fragile to me. You know, she...it was a burden. I can't think of any other way to say it. I don't know that it changed my behavior in any way, except to probably feel like I wanted to get away from her. You know, it was a sense of not being able to help her with it, not knowing what to say about it. I was a kid, you know.

INT: But it didn't frighten you away from boys?

RITA: No.

INT: Did you ever sit down and talk to her at any other points about that?

RITA: No.

INT: That was the one and only time it's ever been discussed that you can remember? In your whole life?

RITA: You know, it may come up in her saying something like, "There are things I never want to talk about. There are things I wouldn't tell anybody." When my aunt is around, there's much more talk about the war and what happened.

INT: Which aunt?

RITA: Geitel. And then she and my mother will talk about this cousin or that cousin, or that relative, or what happened to them, or things like that. The specifics that she talks about more readily are her relationships with the teacher who helped her. You know, some **stories**. I will hear stories. But not the horrific ones. Those I really don't hear.

I guess as an adult we've talked more about her mother, and what it was like for, one of the most horrible parts of the war for my mother was that she, her mother became more and more deranged. And at some point had to be hospitalized. My mother was the only relative who could sign the papers. So my mother signed the papers for her mother to be hospitalized, with her mother screaming in the background, "Don't leave me here!" She was then killed, in, all of the patients in the hospital were poisoned or gassed, or whatever. I think the burden of guilt...

INT: Her father was dead at that point, so there was no one else...

RITA: Oh, yeah, her father was dead for a very long time. He had died well before the war. And that will come up. She will talk about how horrible that still feels to her. When she went back, and I don't know who she got this from. My mother has like four or five beads that come from different necklaces that her mother had. And they're in my safety deposit box. And I know that they're precious to her. And when we go to the box to do something, we'll look at the beads, and maybe talk about her mother, or she'll say, if I get a piece of oak furniture, "My grandmother had that, and it was destroyed during the war." And then there'll be little pieces; it's not like it never happened. But we don't sit and...

INT: She doesn't want to.

RITA: No.

INT: She doesn't want to, and you don't want to hear it.

RITA: No. No. I don't.

INT: What about with your father? Did any of his stories ever come out?

RITA: My father's stories were much more in terms of what it was like in Siberia. I mean, even things like the mountain lions that they had in Siberia. I mean, suddenly you'll be talking about lions, and he'll talk about lions, and I'm like, "What are you talking about lions? (laughs) Where did you see lions?" And he'll say, "Well, there were lions all over Siberia." You know. So things...my father in many ways is healthier in that he has a certain distance from his experiences. You know, there's a certain, he can reflect back on it. He's not necessarily in it.

When my mother talks about this stuff, she's **in it**. She's reliving it, her defenses are inoperative. You know, what you get is this **overwhelming** gush of her feelings, her fears, her chaos. With my father, you get a more intellectual process. You know, he will reflect.

INT: Unemotional?

RITA: Not that he's unemotional. My father cries easily. My father is a very emotional man. But he doesn't pull you into it the same way. He's more distant from it, and from people. Where my mother is so symbiotic, that she expects you to feel what she's feeling. My father doesn't. You know, he has some distance. And my father is also much more in tune to whether or not you want to hear it, and so he will censor, he will hold back, he will give you pieces. My mother, once you open the gate, my mother has...

INT: She'll tell you?

RITA: Yeah. Yeah. And I don't want to know. You know, I don't want to hear what it's like to be raped by a platoon of Russian soldiers. I heard enough. And it's not like I know nothing of what happened. I mean, pieces would come out at different times. Part of what was difficult was that it was always -- and I don't know when the **right** time is to tell somebody -- but it felt like it was always the **wrong** time. The middle of the night is not a time to sit and discuss the war.

INT: She did that?

RITA: Well, when this guy left it was after midnight. I mean, you know, that's not a time to have a discussion with a kid. With anybody! (laughs) I mean, it's **night**, you know? Everybody's tired. You know, you can't process things. I don't know how they could have done it differently, given who they are. But it never felt...and it's interesting. It's not as though I haven't heard stories from other people. Like my Aunt Geechie, I sat and talked with her for hours. And her stories aren't better. I mean, she watched her children being killed. She lived in a hole in the ground for months, you know, with other people, where they peed on each other, they shat on each other. I mean, they were, when one turned, everyone had to turn. I know **those** stories. But I never felt overwhelmed by her stories.

INT: Why not?

RITA: Well, part of it is she's not my **mother**. You know, so the connection is different. Part of it is that she told them in a different way. There was no expectation of getting anything from me. My mother always wanted -- whether she wanted it or I felt that she wanted it, you know -- my mother always wants someone to make it better. You know, she's always so **bereft**. Whereas here is, like Geitel, someone who went through a nightmare, and went on with her life in a way that was much more productive. You know, it didn't tear her apart in the same ways. You know, and again, I don't know if it's that she wasn't as nuts as my mother is when the war started. You know, she was more intact as a person. But it's not like I haven't heard these stories from other people.

INT: So it's not that you're afraid of hearing them from anyone else.

RITA: No. It's...

INT: It's your parents. It's something about your parents...
Or your mother.

RITA: Part of it is that it's my parents. Part of it is the expectation that I feel from them when they tell me.

INT: I see.

RITA: And the thing that I did grow up knowing was that I was the replacement for everything that had been lost. And that was verbalized over and over again. "You're all we have left. You have my mother's name, you have Daddy's mother's name." If I did something wrong, I shamed the names of my grandparents. Well, that's a lot of weight, okay? I think that it was always that I was the embodiment of all these people who were dead, and who had been tortured and murdered, and maimed and, you know, horrific things had happened. Well, I don't want to hear that. I don't want to hear that that's a part of me. And somehow their telling me always had that part of it in it, you know?

INT: It's the burden part, and the fix it part?

RITA: Yeah.

INT: Whereas Geitel...

RITA: Never did that. No. It was like, "You wouldn't believe what I went through." (laughs) You know, kind of thing, and then she would talk. You know. And other people, too. I mean, I know what happened. We had friends of the family who had numbers on their arms. I knew what they meant. I knew that Haskel had been in Auschwitz, and I at some point said to him, "Some people have the numbers taken off. Why don't you do that?" And he looked at me, and he said, "No. I would **never** remove this." You know, and talked about why. It's not like I couldn't talk about this stuff. I grew up knowing it. It was a part of who I was. It was that other people didn't...and again, I wasn't their child, so the dynamics were different -- I don't know. I don't know what else I could say about it.

INT: Well, let's just stay with it for a minute. And how have you told your own daughter about the Holocaust, and if you haven't, how would you do it, the same or different?

RITA: Interesting. What I've told Elizabeth...

INT: She's ten now.

RITA: She's ten. What I've told her...is that I have no grandparents. That my family, in terms of older relatives, were all killed during the war. I've never gone into a lot more detail than that.

INT: What about what her grandparents have been through? Does she have any idea?

RITA: She has ideas in that I will say things like, she'll say, "Why is Nana so nervous? Nana's always scared." And I'll say, "Things have happened to Nana that have made her very scared. And even though it's not happening now, she feels still frightened." And I'll make, and I'll talk about a little piece of it. More as a way of trying to explain their behavior. I really haven't talked to her about it.

INT: When did you sit down and say you didn't have grandparents, and all the older members had been killed? How old was she?

RITA: I have no idea. I don't think I ever really sat down and had a discussion with her about it. It was more like, combing her hair, and she'll say something about her grandparents, and I'll say, "It's so wonderful that they're so much a part of your life. It's something that I missed a lot when I was growing up, that I didn't have grandparents." Or when Geitel will come to visit, I'll say, "She's not really my grandmother, but she always felt like my grandmother. You know, she sort of took her place."

INT: So she hasn't asked any questions yet.

RITA: No.

INT: Have you thought about how you would present it?

RITA: No. I hadn't, until you raised it.

INT: You really hadn't thought about it.

RITA: Not at all. Not at all. (pause) Yeah, that's interesting. I'll have to think about that.

INT: I wonder if we can move on now to your college years.

RITA: (laughs) I finally made it to college.

INT: How you met your first husband.

RITA: He was a student at the school. I was at New York Community College, Manhattan Community College. And he was a student there. I was very...smitten by him, immediately. Very, very good-looking guy. Looks exactly like Al Pacino. And his family was French, which was **really** intriguing to me, and he had a sophistication and charm that was very unlike the boys in Brooklyn! (laughs) He had been to Europe on and off throughout his life, had been born in France.

INT: Was he older?

RITA: He was the same age. He was in the same year that I was. And the only way I can describe him is he was essentially French (laughs) you know, which was to be charming, and seductive, and all of those things. And I fell madly, totally, completely in love with him.

INT: You were eighteen?

RITA: About eighteen or nineteen. And...I've always thought that that was what you had to have. If you found someone that you could love like that, then everything would be okay. You know, that that was what you needed...for everything to be happily ever after. And here was this guy who I absolutely, totally adored. Who had a lot of problems. A lot of problems. A lot of emotional problems. And in my euphoria, I knew enough to say, "Before I will marry you, you have to go into therapy." And he **did**. And I figured, I had all the bases covered! (laughs) You know, I had really been smart about all of this. My parents were absolutely appalled.

INT: Was he Jewish?

RITA: Yeah. He was Jewish.

INT: How long were you going together before you got to the point of marriage? Talking about marriage?

RITA: A couple of years. A couple of years. And...

INT: Why were they appalled?

RITA: He had a beard. He wore torn jeans. He wouldn't cowtow to them. He was not...he was quite arrogant, which probably appealed to me at the time. He drove a fast racecar. He had a sports car, a little MG. He was everything that would appeal to me, and everything that would scare the shit out of them, okay? And he was totally, utterly, out of the world that I had grown up in. I mean...

INT: Were his parents survivors?

RITA: Yes. They had fascinating stories. His mother was part of the French underground. Now, here's a woman who told me her **entire** story, including her camp experiences, including her escapes. Everything, I knew everything about her. And I had no trouble. I mean, we'd sit on the subway in New York and talk about this stuff. And I could hear it. And she could tell me. She was really idiosyncratic. I mean, every piece of food that was left from dinner was wrapped in little pieces of tin foil. Nothing could be thrown out. Food could **never** be thrown out. And yet, she would never prepare a meal where there was enough food. Never.

INT: She just wanted it all to be finished.

RITA: I don't know why. But you know, somehow, and she was a great cook. I mean, here's a woman from Paris. I would go there for dinner, and she would serve things that I, I mean, her table looked different. You know, she was from a different part of Europe. Her whole way was very different. And I loved her food, and there was never enough food. And it's not like I ate a lot at that point. I was very, very thin. And I remember other people in the family saying to her, "Why couldn't you buy more? You knew people were coming tonight. Why did you buy just the one chicken and cut it up? Why couldn't you make two?" Or, if she was making, she used to make me French fries all the time, the Parisian way, and I **loved** them, and it was like, they weren't poor by any means. They were much more well-off than **my** family. In my family there was always this abundance of food.

INT: I was going to ask you what was the food thing...

RITA: Oh, man! (laughs) There was enough food to feed **armies**.

INT: Were they upset if you left it over?

RITA: No.

INT: They weren't. Okay.

RITA: No. And there had to be enough that you could never finish, really.

INT: So they needed a lot of food.

RITA: Well, my father, my father just went along with whatever the program was. (laughs) My father, to this day, if you don't have anything ready, if you give him a piece of bread and butter, he's fine. You know? He's okay. Give him a cup of tea, and he's set.

INT: It's more your mother needed to have all the food.

RITA: My mother needed to have a lot of food, and she needed to have the best food. She wouldn't buy something because it was on sale.

(END TAPE FIVE, SIDE TWO)

(TAPE SIX, SIDE ONE)

INT: We were talking about your mother-in-law.

RITA: Yeah. Anyway, she was an interesting woman. Her husband had also been in France, though his parents were originally Austrian, Austrian Jews. And I knew his story, too. It was very different. They were much more...they weren't passive people. When the war hit **them**, they fought back, very actively. By joining undergrounds, by becoming involved in rescue

operations. I think they were also a lot more educated than my...than the general population in the Jewish little towns in Poland. And it was a fascinating world for me, to be part of their lives.

I went to Europe. That was the first couple of times I went to Europe was when I was married the first time. Much more cosmopolitan people. And they represented to me that I had somehow moved into a different sphere of life. I had never been in a home where towels matched or people had matching dishes, and you know, served champagne for a special occasion, or had paintings on the wall that weren't...I don't know. It was just different. It felt very different to me. And they adored me.

INT: How were your parents with the wedding? What was the wedding like?

RITA: (laughs) The wedding was a Jewish, it was like out of "Portnoy's Complaint." You know, it was the carved, you know, the chopped liver in the shape of a swan, and the whole bit. And it wasn't the wedding that I wanted. And I asked my parents to give me the money to buy an apartment. And they wanted to make a big wedding. They wanted a wedding for their friends. And they were not happy. They cried. My mother had, I guess what you would call a nervous breakdown, that I got married. She absolutely felt that I was on the road to drug addiction, sin, whatever. I mean, I was just lost.

INT: Why? Was he into drugs?

RITA: He smoked pot. And my mother, of course, had read all of the mail, you know, knowing no boundaries. She knew more than she needed to know. And more than I would have ever told her. And she didn't need to be tortured about it. But she was. You know, she was protective, over-protective, wanted to know exactly what I was doing, where I was doing, etc., and so she found out. And so then she had to live with it. Because she wasn't going to dissuade me.

My father tried once to talk with me about possible problems that he saw, and that this really wasn't the person that he thought I should be with. And when I said to him, "This is who I love, this is who I want to get married to, and I'm going to do this," he said, "Okay." And backed away. Never fully supported it, but didn't give me shit. Where my mother wailed and cried (laughed) and had histrionics like you see in the movies.

INT: How did you get the strength to fight that?

RITA: I wanted desperately to get away from them. And the only way I knew how was to get married.

INT: Is that why you married him?

RITA: Mm-hm.

INT: You didn't love him?

RITA: I **did** love him. I adored him. But I adored him as a teenager adores somebody. Which is where you give your heart and your soul, and you figure that if you can't have this person, you'll die. I absolutely, I don't think I've ever loved anybody that way. I don't think I'd ever let myself love anybody that way.

INT: It was very intense.

RITA: It was incredibly intense, and incredibly, the highs were very high, and the lows were really down in the pits, you know?

INT: So did you see him in some way as rescuing you?

RITA: Yeah. I saw him as opening up doors for me that I could have never gone through before. He...he literally dressed me, in a style that was something I never would have known about. His, he took me through the world. I mean, we travelled for six months through Europe and Africa. I mean, where would I have done that? I was a little girl from Brooklyn.

INT: And that was his initiative. You were just going along for the ride there.

RITA: Well, I mean, it's not like I didn't have part of the planning. I mean, he had family all over Europe. I mean, I was, you know, taken to places and saw things that I never would have seen in my life. He did open me up to what I could be. Where I could go. He really broadened my life. Would I have not done it without him? Probably I would have, you know, given who I am. But it didn't seem possible to me at the time.

INT: How old were you when you got married?

RITA: 21. I was 21.

INT: So what was the relationship like?

RITA: Intense, I guess, would be the best word for it. It was a very passionate relationship. Very intense. He was in many ways very much like my dad. He was a womanizer. The thing that drew me to him was what ended the relationship.

INT: Which is what? His attractiveness?

RITA: That I suspected he was having an affair.

INT: That's what **drew** you to him?

RITA: That's what ended it. I thought you asked...what drew me to him? His charm. I mean, he was gorgeous. (laughs) And he was fascinating, and interesting.

INT: But you said what attracted you is also what destroyed the relationship.

RITA: Well, what attracted me was that charm, and what ended it was that the charm was being turned towards other people, too. And by that point I was strong enough to say that I wasn't going to repeat the pattern anymore. That okay, I had chosen someone like my father in his...his constantly needing women to think he was the greatest thing on earth. And that I wasn't going to be part of that anymore.

We were only married for two and a half years. I mean, we stayed together for two and a half years. We were separated for at least another two years before I initiated divorce proceedings.

INT: I see. So how far into the relationship did he start fooling around?

RITA: I don't know for sure. You know, he would do things that would seem okay on the surface, and yet I'd find myself very upset, and not understand why. Like. We knew an enormous number of people. We had this incredible network of friends and people that we knew, who were all very different. From very different places. And there was one woman who lived near us, who we knew through a friend of his brother's who was an artist, a Black artist, who was at...not FIT, the other art school in New York. I can't think of the name right now. And he knew this woman, who was very upset about something that happened in her life. Well, Bernie was walking down the street, and there was someone selling flowers, and he saw a bouquet of violets, and he thought, "Maybe this would make her feel better." So he'd buy the violets, and drop them off at her house, and then...

INT: Who's Bernie?

RITA: My husband. And then he'd come home an hour late. Well, the superficial part, the upper layer of it was, well, he was thinking about someone who was feeling really bad, blah, blah, blah. But the inappropriateness of buying flowers for somebody, and leaving your wife sitting at home, I was not unaware of, you know. Or an ex-girlfriend would be breaking up with her current boyfriend, and having hysterics, and he'd rush over there, and call me while she's in the shower. Well, what the hell is she doing in the shower, if you're there, trying to be nice to her? I mean, what were the two of you just doing, that she has to take a shower? And I would rage, it touched so close, you know. It didn't pass me by. It's not like I was, you know, oblivious to it. And at a certain point, I said, "I'm not taking this. I can't live like this."

INT: This is what your mother had put up with.

RITA: Yeah. And I knew I wasn't going to. And the day that he, and I was the one who said, "You have to leave. This is over, you have to leave."

INT: You had an apartment in New York?

RITA: Yeah. And I gave him a date that he had to leave, (laughs) and it was, I said April first. It was April Fool's Day. And it was this feeling of maybe I'll wake up and find out this is a joke. (laughs) This is some major trick. It was the hardest thing that I ever did, because when he left, I **still** adored him totally. But I also felt totally depleted. He was very, very needy emotionally,

and had really taken everything out of me that I had to give, and I felt totally empty. And by that point, I had already been in therapy for a while. And I think that was also, you know, what helped me get to the point where I felt that I...

INT: Why did you go into therapy?

RITA: I had been in therapy for a very long time, even before I was married.

INT: Like, what made you...

RITA: I was very depressed when I was around seventeen.

INT: Because of the college thing.

RITA: The college thing, and I was just very unhappy. And so by the time Bernie and I were together, I had already been in therapy for years and years and years, trying to figure things out, and cope, basically. And so by the time he left, I already had a lot of therapy under my belt, and was very aware of what was going on. So that ended. And...it was probably the most horrible thing I've ever gone through. I hurt all the time. And it was almost like physical pain.

INT: You really missed him.

RITA: (sighs) I didn't miss **him**. What I hurt from was that my fantasy of what my life would be like, I felt was destroyed. It was almost like he destroyed the illusion that I had, that if you loved somebody, that was enough. Because I couldn't imagine loving anybody more than I loved him. And I knew that he loved me. I mean, I never felt that he didn't love me. And so it was that that hurt. I felt like a piece of myself was destroyed. That innocence. And that I had given myself so whole-heartedly to this person, and that it still didn't work, you know. It was incredible to me. It was absolutely, it really shook my world. Totally. And you know, even though I was the one who said, "This is ending. I have to get out. You're destroying me. I can't live like this," kind of thing, it still felt like it had been done to me. And...

INT: Was there any "I told you so-ing" going on from your parents when all this happened?

RITA: My parents didn't know that we separated until about six months later; I didn't tell them.

INT: Why didn't you tell them?

RITA: Because I thought that that's what would happen, and that I wasn't strong enough to cope. I also was afraid that their response would be: "You have to come home." I mean, I was only like 23 at the time! (laughs) It's not like I was 40 years old. I mean, I was still a kid in many ways. And I didn't have, my parents were so unhappy with my marriage, that we really hadn't had much contact through the years that I was married to Bernie. There was very little contact between us.

So one day I remember calling my mother. I was at work. And she was at their, they had a cleaning store. And I called her and said, "I need to talk with you. And I'm telling you right now that you really can't say anything. I don't want any questions. I don't want any comments. I'm going to tell you something, and then I need you to just hang up the phone and not discuss it with me, because I can't do it right now." "What's the matter?" "Bernie and I have been separated for six months. I don't see us getting back together again, and I don't want to talk about why. I'm fine. I've been living alone for months and you didn't know. I'm okay." And my mother's only comment was, "Is there anything you need? Can we do anything for you?"

INT: Which was...

RITA: Which was wonderful.

INT: It was the right response.

RITA: It was what I wanted.

INT: So she came through.

RITA: She came through. Partly because I told her (laughs), I told her she had to...and I said to her, "If you say **anything**, I will hang up the phone. Because I can't take anything right now." My mother then proceeded to have a nervous breakdown and end up in a hospital.

INT: Really.

RITA: Within a couple of months, she was... I mean, she went in for stress anxiety, heart, blah, blah, blah. Basically she was falling apart at the idea that I was by myself. I was hurting. Whatever. You know. And again, there was more distance between us at that point, and I wasn't very involved.

INT: What about your father's response to all this? Did he ever talk to you about it?

RITA: "What can I do? Do you need money?" That was when my father actually said to me, "If there's anything you need, you just tell me, because whatever I have is yours. We're a family." And I did. In fact, at that point they gave me sixty dollars a month for a while -- quite a while -- to help me cover expenses. And my mother would take me shopping, you know, and whatever I wanted. You know, if I needed shoes, whatever.

INT: But your relationship had created a distance between you and your parents. And so once you had separated from your first husband, did you get again into that kind of symbiotic thing with your parents, or...did you keep a distance?

RITA: Not as much. Not as much. We did get closer, but you know, it's hard to look back, because they're so dependent on me now, I feel like they're, that it's been that way always. But it wasn't. At that point they were younger, they had a business, that took a lot of time. I mean,

they couldn't be. We lived, I lived in Washington Heights; they lived in Brooklyn. And getting from one place to another took longer than it would take them from Brooklyn to come here to Philly. I mean, you could drive around for two hours looking for a place to park your car (laughs) you know, in New York.

So...it was fairly distant. My mother went to stay with Geitel. For a long time. I'd say at least three or four months.

INT: During this nervous breakdown.

RITA: Yeah.

INT: Was she on medication?

RITA: I don't know. I think she was on...she may have been, at that point, I think the medication of choice was probably valium, which would have depressed her even more, but I think that's, you know, probably what she was on.

INT: Did she go into therapy?

RITA: No. She had an internist who said to her, "You don't need to go into therapy. If you want to talk, come talk to me." Which was incredibly self-destructive, and the worst thing he could have done for her.

INT: So what happened with you at this point in your life?

RITA: I was working. I kept the apartment.

INT: What were you doing?

RITA: I was working as an administrative assistant, which was basically a secretary, for one of the people who was like the second in command at the Institute for Cancer Research, in New York City. I had graduated college, with a degree in cinema, which was **terribly** helpful. (laughs) I had worked in a, at a company selling TV time, thinking that I would go someplace with the degree, you know, into the field somehow, and hated it. Everybody was really...nuts. And ended up working. And I worked for a man who was wonderful to me. He was a Black guy, who was the only Black guy in any position of authority, and was basically a figurehead. Had no real authority. But what he gave me was the most incredible atmosphere of support. He was wonderful.

When Bernie and I broke up, I was working there, and had worked there for a while already. And he knew what was going on, and he would say to me, "If you need to lock the door and just cry, just do it. People will come back. They'll knock on the door, and they'll come back later. Stick a sign saying you'll be back in twenty minutes." When I got sick, he would drive me home, so that I wouldn't have to, I mean, the hardest part was that I'd never lived alone. For a short

time, my best friend from junior high, Kay, lived with me. Shared the apartment with me, and we didn't get along very well. I mean, we're still good friends, but we really could not live together. But she had moved in with me right after Bernie left. So for a couple of months I had somebody there, and then I lived on my own, and I really enjoyed it. I got very much involved with women's groups. I started volunteering at a psychiatric hospital.

INT: What year is this? Seventies?

RITA: I must have been about 24, so you'd have to figure it out. I was born in '49. How much is 49 and 24? (laughs) The math mavens are here!

INT: '73.

RITA: Yeah, something like that. And the guy that I worked for kept saying to me, "You're too smart and too good to end up being a secretary. Go to school." And I had already finished college, and it was like, go to school for what? And he said, "You work for Columbia. You could go to school at Columbia for free. Why don't you look into some programs here? If they're related to work in any way, they'll pay for your tuition. And you can go during the day and I won't tell anybody." (laughs) He was **so** supportive. Well, you know, I'm sitting and looking at these catalogues, poring over them, and it was the most boring stuff. It had absolutely no interest for me.

And at the time I volunteered at the psychiatric hospital, which was part of the same medical center. It was Columbia Presbyterian Medical Center, and that's where the Cancer Research Center was. And I moved into what I thought I had wanted to do when I was in high school, which was to work with people. I mean, at the time I thought I'd go into psychology. When I was in high school, I thought I'd be a psychiatrist, psychologist, something like that. In working as a volunteer, I started talking to more people and realizing that I **could** get to do what I wanted to by going through social work, and I'd be doing it a lot faster, and a lot cheaper, and it would take me less time. I mean, at this time I'm supporting myself. It's not like I...

So, the guy that I worked for basically said, "Well, go find something that will...go figure this out." You know, and was really very supportive, and really pushed me to do all of this. And to not stay where I was. And it was amazing. Once the relationship with Bernie was gone, what I realized was that I had put on hold anything that would jeopardize the relationship, like, if I grew up, and went on with my life, it would have upset the equilibrium of the relationship, which was that we were both operating at a certain level. And he was **not** an achiever. He was into drugs. He was selling drugs. He was doing things that were illegal. And I wouldn't have any part of it. I wouldn't be involved. If he went to pick up drugs, I wouldn't go with him, kind of thing. I wouldn't allow him to keep stuff in the house. I didn't know where the stuff was. So he just hid it all, basically. But I knew that it wasn't the kind of atmosphere where I could say, "I want to go on to graduate school, and become a...blah, whatever it would be." Because **he** was never going to do that, you know, and it was really, there was a real fine line.

INT: Would it be threatening to him?

RITA: Yeah. And there was a real balance that had to be maintained between us, in order for the relationship to work. Once he was gone, I could continue to grow, and that's exactly what I did. I mean, I just, it was like letting me out of a cage. I didn't have my parents to worry about, I didn't have Bernie to take care of. I just had a ball. And it was a wonderful time in my life. It was a scary time in my life, but it was a time where I finally got to the point where I had a sense of who I was, what I wanted, and how I was going to get it, and I knew that nothing was going to stop me. And I found a work/study program, where I could work and go to school, towards my master's, and I was accepted.

INT: In psychology?

RITA: In social work. I was accepted without any difficulty at all, because I was much older than kids coming straight out of college, and I presented, I mean, I was someone who had been on job interviews. I mean, I was much more sophisticated, and knew exactly how to get what I wanted done, done. And I had a lot of support. I mean, the guy that I worked for was, "You have an interview? Go. You have something to write up for school? Do it." Great. And it was a good time. It was a very good time.

INT: So you finished your graduate work.

RITA: Yeah. I went to Fordham University, and it took me, I guess the social work program is two years. It took me, I think, three or four, I can't remember, because I was working full time. And I worked for Spence-Chapin, which was an adoption foster care agency in New York, and I still work for them. I mean, I still have people there who will call me. I still work for them as a consultant. And then I began working on a research project at Psychiatric Institute on schizophrenia. I was doing interviews out in the field with diagnosed schizophrenics.

INT: That must have been interesting.

RITA: It was wonderful. It was scary, but wonderful. I had such a sense of power. I just felt so empowered for one of the first times in my life.

INT: So you felt self-confident?

RITA: Yeah. And like I could do anything that I wanted to do. It was great. (laughs)

INT: Any other emotional involvements at the time?

RITA: Oh, yeah. Man. I was very sexually active. (laughs) It was the time for it; it was the seventies. And I did all the dating that I hadn't done when I was at home.

INT: What were you looking for?

RITA: To have fun.

INT: You didn't want a serious relationship at this time?

RITA: No. I was so burned out on serious relationships. I had no idea what I wanted from somebody. I just wanted to have a good time. And I did most of the time. I had lots of different relationships. Some short-lived, some longer. And then came a point where I thought that I wanted something different. I had had enough of that. And I met Ray. And he was **so** different from anyone that I had ever dated, or ever met in my life, that in some ways he seemed so placid and boring, because the relationship with him didn't have the highs and the lows that it did with Bernie. And I really had to question, like, is that normal? (laughs) You know, is that okay? Kind of thing. And it was really, it was a tough, I tried really hard to sabotage the relationship. We've now been together eighteen years. Lived together. The living together, I mean, we had a lot of stuff to work out.

INT: Okay, well let's start with how you met him.

RITA: He was a research scientist at the Institute for Cancer Research.

INT: Oh, okay. So you met him where you were working.

RITA: Yes. And I had made a rule for myself that I would not date anyone who worked there. Because the place was filled with young guys, and I thought, this is all I need. To get this reputation, you know, where I work. And it was a very safe place for me where I worked. The guy I worked for, Bob Jones, was, as I said, just very supportive. Very nurturing, and very good to me. And I didn't want to sabotage that part of my life that was working really well. And yet here are all these gorgeous young guys, you know, all hot to trot! (laughs)

INT: You had to hold yourself back.

RITA: I really did. I really did! (laughs) And let's see, the first guy I had an affair there with was the son of one of the contractors. Man, was he good looking! You know, I'd see him outside when they would do construction on the building. He'd, like, not be wearing a shirt. Just this **beautiful** young man. So I went after him. And then I got accepted as, it was when I was, I hadn't seen him, I didn't see him very long. Maybe a couple of weeks. It was a very short fling. It was during that time that I got accepted into graduate school, and into the work/study program. Well, once I knew I was leaving, I figured, okay, (laughs) now I can go after somebody here.

And I remembered hearing about Ray. And certainly I had met him through work. The first thing I remembered about him was that he came in, I processed all of the orders, and set up all of the contracts with different companies to provide them with the different materials, be they radioactive, or glassware, or whatever you needed to run a lab, had to be ordered through me. And I had set up a whole system. You know, I developed a form, and you had a whole process, okay? He was the only one who came in the office and said, "Can you order this?" And would hand me the form, and I'd say, "Yes, Dr. Sweet, I'll take care of this." And he'd say, "Dr. Sweet? Please. My name is Ray!" (laughs) He was just **appalled** that someone would call him that, and

just felt uncomfortable. And so he wasn't full of himself. You know, he was this very...and he also had a reputation, it was a very cut-throat lab. The man who was running the lab had been considered for the Nobel Prize, and was pushing his people to produce incredibly. Ray had the reputation for being the only one out of this group of about twenty researchers, who would not steal somebody's work. Who would not backstab. He was the only one who seemed to have some integrity. They were all...and this guy would pit you against each other to make this, because it was...

INT: He wanted to look good.

RITA: Well, it was a motivator. If he...

(END TAPE SIX, SIDE ONE)

(TAPE SIX, SIDE TWO)

RITA: ...how unusual he was. What a gentle soul he was, kind of thing. But I also knew he had a girlfriend, and I'd see them nuzzling outside the building. And then one day, evidently Ray had found a dog. There was this dog wandering in the street. This beautiful husky, and the dog was clearly lost. No collar, nothing. And he brought it into the lab, and had it in one of the offices, and everyone was coming to see the dog. So I went to see the dog, you know. And just got to know him a little bit. And then one day he hatched some chicken eggs, and came down and said, "Do you want to see baby chicks? Have you ever seen chicks before?" Went upstairs, blah, blah, blah. It was just something very different, and a very different person.

INT: Was he much older than you?

RITA: He's five years older than I am.

INT: Were you attracted to him?

RITA: Yes! I mean, he's adorable.

INT: So you were physically attracted to him.

RITA: I was physically attracted to him. And...something about him just, as I said, seemed very different. Seemed very, he was just very different than anyone I had ever met. The hard thing for me was that what was different about him was a sense of stability, and that wasn't what I looked for in guys. I looked for people who made my blood boil. You know, people where things would be very intense. Ray is not like that. Ray is very stable. (laughs) And it was very hard for me to let that be part of my life.

INT: Well, you never had stability.

RITA: No, no, I really hadn't.

INT: Maybe you didn't know how to function with it.

RITA: It didn't attract me, in some way, you know? I kept saying it was what I wanted, but I didn't know what to do with it.

INT: So you wanted excitement and passion?

RITA: Yeah, yeah. The thing that Ray gave me, with the stability, was the more he supported just...the less Sturm and Drang there was in the relationship, the storm was gone, the more I could go on with my life. And he was, at that point, so I met him, I had just started graduate school. And I would say things like, "Oh, my G-d, I'm going to be thirty before I finish. What's going to happen?" And I would come up with all of these things. The school was near Lincoln Center in the middle of Manhattan. I would take classes at night. How am I going to get home? "Oh, I'll meet you at the train. You have a problem, I'll drive down and pick you up." To him, the idea of going to school was what one did. You know, I mean, you went to school, you went on, you know, with your education. You achieved. You accomplished. That was his, somehow those had not been goals for me. I had not done well in school **until** I got to graduate school, even though I was bright.

INT: Do you think he influenced you to work...

RITA: Tremendously. Tremendously. Mostly, and not the way that I was used to being influenced. The way I was used to being influenced was being brow-beaten. "You should do this, it's good for you. You should do this, it's a reflection on your family." You know, that kind [of thing]. With Ray it was just like, he **enabled** me to go to school. If I had a paper to do, Ray wouldn't say, "Oh, there's a concert downtown. Let's go." It would be like, "Oh, you have a paper to do? Okay, I'll bring work home."

INT: So you moved in together?

RITA: Not for a while. We were both very skittish. I mean, I was certainly very skittish, and so was he.

INT: Why was he?

RITA: (pause) I think he was basically scared. You know, he was a real scientist, and he had chosen science because it isolated him from people, you know. So there were certain things in his personality. And it was quite fascinating to him that I was so full of life. I mean, I was young, I was adorable, I was attractive to very many people, people were after me all the time, and I chose him. He was like, Huh? (laughs) You know, that kind of thing. And...the thing that, he had lived in this very isolated life in terms of his work. His work and his career were really foremost for him. And he made a very conscious decision at some point in his life that he couldn't continue to live that way. That he needed to meet people, you know. That he needed relationships.

INT: Did he want a family?

RITA: Yes. Yes.

INT: Talk a little bit about his background, where he comes from.

RITA: He's a WASP. His parents both, let's see, his father's family had come here a couple of generations ago, and his father grew up in Colorado. His mother's family had come, his mother was born in the United States, and her parents had come from England. Her mother had come from England. Where did her father come from? He might have already been here. Ray was born in Phoenix, in Arizona. His father is an engineer, geological engineer. His mother graduated high school and wanted to go on to college, and I'm trying to remember. She had met Fred, her husband, Ray's father, in high school. And I think they got married shortly after she came out of high school. And so she had never gone on. Her dream had been to be a principal of the school. Very, very educated woman, who has continued to educate herself, you know, throughout her life.

INT: Siblings?

RITA: Ray has a younger brother, who's five years younger than he. So Ray was born in Phoenix, and then his father got a position as a...I think he was the comptroller at the Colorado School of Mines, which was located, one of their branches in Socorro, New Mexico, where they did a lot of mining. And then when Ray was young, but had already started school -- I think he was around ten or eleven -- they moved to Albuquerque from this tiny little dusty town that had a one-room schoolroom. They moved to Albuquerque. And he had gone to the University there. And then for graduate school had gone on to the University of Wisconsin. And his post-doctoral position was with Saul Spiegelman in New York. And so he was really this...person who had never been in a place like New York. Who would pick drunks up off the street, (laughs) and prop them up against buildings, and buy them coffee. Just this very, he's a very gentle, loving man, who hadn't been exposed to what New York City was like, and wasn't intimidated by it, which is amazing. I mean, just really loved exploring New York.

I mean, he's...he has this capacity within him that I find amazing. He's a very serious man, but he has the capacity to play like a child that I have never seen in an adult. Even watching him play with our daughter, he can play in a way that I never could. And he's like that about everything. I mean, if we go to Europe, he's got a lot of enthusiasm and excitement and exploring everything. He's like that here in Philadelphia. I mean, like, "Oh! Look at this! Let's go try this." There's an enthusiasm to him that's infectious. I mean, he's the one that took me to Disneyland, you know, and goes on rides like a ten-year-old. You know, and at the same time is the most **serious**, responsible human in the world. I mean, he's unbelievable. And he has all of those facets in him. It was all very confusing to me. I had never met anybody like Ray.

INT: Such a different background from you.

RITA: Totally. Totally. And one of the things that has made the relationship work, is that Ray has this capacity to accept people for who they are. And to not change...The patience and tolerance that he has with my parents, who have basically turned their lives over to him to run. If anything goes wrong, it's, "Call Ray. Call Ray or Call Rita. They'll fix it."

INT: So he's a fixer like you.

RITA: Yeah. They know that they'll never end up in the street, because Ray will support them financially. And has supported them financially, ever since he's been in the family. If it's with advice, my mother still, if something's broken in her apartment, "Well, when Ray has time, he'll look at it." You know?

INT: How did they react to your marriage? He wasn't Jewish.

RITA: They had an interesting reaction. My mother's reaction was, "It didn't work with a Jewish guy. Maybe this will be better." (laughs) My parents, by the time I said I was going to marry Ray, knew Ray, and...loved him. I mean, it's hard not to like Ray. I mean, he's not offensive in any way. You know, he's...he also was very comfortable with them. They just were not threatened by him at all. The only comment, even my father, my father never said a word to me. The only thing that I remember being said to me, and I can't remember who said it. (pause) That their concern was that if we had a fight would Ray ever make a comment that was derogatory about my being Jewish. And I remember standing there going, "Huh? I can't imagine that." And it certainly has panned out. I mean, Ray is so comfortable with my Judaism, and however I choose to live it.

When we were in Germany, Ray was invited to teach, I don't know what the initial, at an EMBO Conference, which is some science, something in molecular, biological organization. European Molecular Biological Organization. He was invited to teach a course in Berlin, and he was going to be there for six weeks. And I said, "Oh, this is great. You go to Europe, I'll come after you, towards when you're finished the six weeks, and maybe we can travel for a while." Fine. I come in, it's the first time I had been in Germany. I'd been to Europe lots of times, but I had avoided Germany like the plague.

INT: You didn't want to go.

RITA: I arrive in Berlin. And, oh, Ray is just so excited, and wanted me to come to the supermarket and see all the wursts, and the this, and the foods, and the people, and the...he's just like all excited with this. And I'm like trying very hard to process what I'm doing in Germany, and feeling comfortable and uncomfortable at the same time, which was fascinating. I understood what everybody was saying. If they didn't talk too fast, just speaking Yiddish was enough for me to have a sense of what was going on. And my first language was German. You know, being born in Munich. So it all felt familiar. The food felt familiar. Everything felt familiar. I didn't feel, I mean, I felt more out of place in France, where I would have to struggle to understand what people were saying.

We go out to dinner, the first or second night that I'm there, and we go to a beer garden. And people are talking, and I turn to Ray and I'm translating for him. Because at some point, they had lapsed. I mean, they all spoke English, but people had lapsed into German. And somebody...Gunther...turns to Ray and says, "How come she understands what we're saying?" And Ray, with this very...like this very proud look on his face, "Well, Rita speaks Yiddish, so she understands." And there's dead silence that hits this table. And everyone is so uncomfortable except for Ray (laughs) who doesn't, he didn't live through any of this. He's been protected in some way, and isolated. For him the war is intellectual. You know, he doesn't have the guilt that the German people at the table have. He doesn't have the anger that I as a Jew, I'm sitting there thinking, "These people could have put me in the ovens," you know. I'm on guard the whole time that I'm there, and I'm not about to tell anyone that I speak Jewish. Ray doesn't have that. You know? It was a very, it was amazing.

INT: How did you feel about that?

RITA: Scared. When there was silence at the table, I was scared. And I was scared driving on the highway, and seeing a sign that said, "Dachau."

INT: Did you go?

RITA: No. And in my typical way, we're standing in Munich, on a corner. I want to go to a department store that's across the street, and I look both ways, and there's no cars. I cross the street. And some guy in Lederhosen says, you know, says something to whoever. "They're breaking the rules!" And I turned to Ray and said, "What a fucking country is (?)." These are the kind of people who will follow a man like Hitler, because they can't even **think**, that if there's no car coming, why can't I cross the street? (laughs)

So I had lots of confused reactions, you know. I didn't feel comfortable there. We went back a second time. Ray was...oh, I know. He was doing something else. He was collaborating with a group of people who had been at Columbia, who were German, who went back to their labs in Germany, and he was doing some collaboration, and ended up being invited again, and at this time we went to Munich. And I wanted to see the house that my parents had lived in when I was born, and all that kind of stuff. And we stayed with a friend of ours, who we both knew in New York. Rudiger Hellmann, who is a physician. And he was all excited that we were coming, and could we stay with him while we were in Munich. And he's a physician and actually knew people at the hospital, and knew where the hospital was where I was born. And knew the area, and all this kind of stuff. Just very warm and open and...the kind of host you'd want to have.

I had never discussed the war with him. And he, it had never come up. And it was uncomfortable. You know, I had never **wanted** to discuss the war, because there were parts of him that made me uncomfortable. Like, he introduced us to his girlfriend, and we all went to see some Schloss, a castle, Neuschwanstein, in the Black Forest. And we're standing on line, and Rudy gets pissed off that we're standing on line, and storms off like a storm trooper, and I'm looking at him walking, and all I see is that he's wearing big, black boots. And he yells at somebody, and he comes back, and he's carrying on about the fact that, you know, if you pay

your money, you shouldn't have to stand. And I looked at him and I said, "You're being really obnoxious and embarrassing me. Could you shut up? I mean, everyone else is standing on line, too. You don't want to stand on line? Go someplace else." (laughs) Kind of thing. And his arrogance was **appalling**. I mean, he was like one of the entitled people. And I told him that. I mean, it's not as though this stuff stopped me from telling him.

We then went to dinner, after we saw Neuschwanstein, and he got into an argument with his girlfriend, and grabbed her hand and started bending it backwards at the table. And I looked at him and I said, "Your behavior is really sickening. And I want to go home. I don't want to sit in a restaurant with you. You have to stop what you're doing." She had tears running down her face. And I said to Ray, "The sadistic streak in him is just like something I can't take." You know. And he apologized and said that they had a very difficult relationship, and blah, blah, blah, whatever.

INT: And you saw Nazi, or you saw...

RITA: I saw Nazi. I saw someone who was so angry that he could hurt me, and I was very, very uncomfortable. And I think, you know, on some level, there was also the fact that I'd be uncomfortable with anyone who had that kind of behavior, whether they were German or not, and I probably would have said exactly the same thing. The added fact was that he **was** German. And that I was in a country where the Germans had used that behavior against my relatives and me in some way.

INT: Did you ever talk about any of this with Ray?

RITA: Oh, yeah. Oh, I told all of it to him when it was happening.

INT: No, but I mean, just your feelings about the war, about your parents.

RITA: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah.

INT: So how did he...

RITA: He was very sympathetic. Very gentle. And very supportive of, "If you're mad at Rudy, then tell him. It was fine that you told him to stop what he was doing. If you don't want to stay here, we don't have to," you know, kind of thing. "And yes, that behavior is appalling." I mean, there was no sense that I couldn't tell him what I was going through at all.

Anyway, we left, and I guess the next time I saw Rudy, he was married and had a child, and I was shocked that he would have married someone and had a child. And I hadn't seen him as a family type person. And he visited us in New York, and we were sitting in the car, and I guess we were talking about the trip to Germany, and I said something about how uncomfortable I felt in Germany, and he made a comment about...his discomfort at being made to feel guilty for things that he had had no part of. And I said, "If you say anything else like that, you're going to have to get out of the car, and you're going to have to leave my house. I understand that you

didn't do this, but I can't emotionally cope with you not accepting (laughs) responsibility for this, **given** the behavior that I've seen in you." You know. And he backed off, as he would with any strong woman, you know, or any, I mean, he's a bully, basically, and with a bully, once you confront them, they deflate, you know.

INT: How do you feel about the German people in general?

RITA: It's interesting. I have a very, very good friend who's German. Who I met when I was working at a company, I worked for an import company when I was in college that imported Christmas decorations from Europe. And the man who owned the company was a German Jew. And a lot of the beautiful glass ornaments come from Germany. And so many people who worked in the company were German. And there were many of them that I was very uncomfortable with, but I made a really good friend that I have till now, my friend, Monika. And she and I had to talk about the war, and that was sort of like, someone like Rudy, I could never sit down and have a discussion with. With Monika I could talk about, "Okay, what do **you** remember? You were a kid in Germany when the war was going on. What was it like for **you**? How do you feel about my being Jewish? How do you feel about coming to my house? How do you feel about eating chicken soup?" Whatever. It just comes out. We always talked about it, and we knew that if we had to build a friendship, we would have to talk about it.

INT: You had to work that out.

RITA: Yeah.

INT: How do you feel about German people in general? Do you take them one on one like that? Where you can look at Monika and be friends with her, or do you just take all the German people and...

RITA: You know, I guess it depends on where I am. When I was in Germany, I looked at this mentality of, you can't make any choices or decisions for yourself. You people don't know how to think. If the light is red, you won't cross the street, you know, even as a group of grown-ups. (laughs) You know, I don't understand that. So there I lumped and generalized, and didn't really see any differences. But if I meet people, I think that...the fact that they're German is there for me, and it depends on who they are.

INT: Oh, okay, so you can take each one on their individual...

RITA: Again, if I'm in the middle of Germany, probably not. You know, if I feel threatened, if I feel scared, I probably won't see individuals.

INT: Do you think they're all anti-Semitic?

RITA: Do I think they're **all** anti-Semitic. (pause) I think an enormous proportion of them are. I know that from Monika, I mean, she was one of the first people to talk about the increased Nazi movement, when she would go back to Germany. That it was one of the reasons she felt she

could not move back to Germany. That she was uncomfortable with the way children were exposed to Nazi propaganda now. So clearly I think that there is a very strong anti-Semitic element in the culture. It's not a country that I would look to go visit.

INT: But yet you could make a close friend who was German.

RITA: Yeah. Yeah. Who I still open my house to. I mean, it was her son who I had here. She's the one who stayed with me this summer because her son...

INT: Her son was in the accident. Oh! That's interesting.

RITA: And she was one of the friends who supported me when Bernie and I got separated. Monika was one of the people who said to me, "You don't have to be alone. If you have nothing to do, call me. If you don't want to be alone, call me."

INT: So you've known her for a long time.

RITA: I know her since I'm eighteen years old.

(END TAPE SIX, SIDE TWO. GO ON TO TAPE SEVEN -- Long pause of about three minutes at beginning of tape. What is contained in brackets is a partial reconstruction of what was said during the pause.)

[**INT:** This is a continuation of an interview with Rita Roitman. It's March 30, 1995.

The last time we talked about how you met Ray and what attracted you to each other. I'm wondering if we could talk about your marriage, how you work together as a couple over the years, decision-making...]

RITA: ...adjustment for me. You know, to balance out and to make that an okay part of my life. The part that that allowed me to have was that I continued to have a freedom in my marriage that I hadn't had in any relationship before, which was to pursue whatever I wanted to pursue. You know, there was no thing like, "No, you can't go to school because we have to have dinner every night together," or, "You need to be home when I'm home." You know, Ray never...

INT: He gave you freedom to do what you wanted to do?

RITA: Well, he didn't **give** me freedom, he just assumed that we both **had** freedom. That we were two separate people. And I wouldn't have tolerated him **giving** me something. It needed to be on some level a very different kind of relationship where we made our decisions, and while we took the other person into account, our decision wasn't made for the other person. It was made for ourselves.

And I remember even as recently as in the time that we lived here, I was offered a position consulting for an organization, or a place where I had worked in New York. And it involved

having interviews with birth parents, which meant that I'd be running all over Philadelphia to who knows where. And you know, Ray came home and I said, "You're never going to believe this. Spence-Chapin called me, and they want me to be a consultant for them, etc." And Ray looks at me and he said, "Well, you're **certainly** not going to do something like that." And I said, "Excuse me?" And he, he's been sensitized (laughs) after living with me for a long time to know that it's not his decision. It really isn't.

INT: Well, how did you handle that when he said...

RITA: I just said, "Excuse me?" And he sort of looked at me and he said, "Well, okay. Why do you want to this?" (laughs)

INT: He backed off right away.

RITA: Totally. And my response to him is, "I'm not a stupid person. I have good judgment. If I could run to places in New York, and make myself safe, then..."

INT: So he was worried about the safety issue.

RITA: Yeah. But I felt that as an adult, I make those decisions by myself. You know, how to make myself safe, and that he doesn't really see things more clearly than I do. You know? And yes, he may see an aspect that I don't, and we can talk about it, but the final decision of whether to take a job or not is really mine. And while I appreciate his giving me input, it's not his decision to make, if it has to do with me.

INT: Right.

RITA: You know. And the same is true...

INT: How does that work in reverse?

RITA: In the same way. The same way. When Ray was, when we were in New York, and it was clear that he couldn't stay at Columbia, he had offers from all over the country, and he was very interested in an offer at Duke University. And I said, "If that's important to you, and that's where you want to go, then you need to do that, but I'm telling you that I won't go with you." And he said, "Why?" And I said, "I'm not going to live in the South. That's totally against..." And he said, "Well, you know, this is a college community, there's a lot of people from..." And I said, "Well, the community exists within a larger framework, and I will not live in the South."

INT: Why did you not want to live in the South?

RITA: I didn't want to be the only Jew. I didn't want to be in a culture that was prejudiced against Blacks. I had always lived in a big city, where there were a million types of people. I mean, growing up in New York City, I mean, you can't walk a block -- I don't care where in the city -- without seeing, you know, six different ethnic, you know, ethnicities. And I was not about

to put myself in Ku Klux country. (laughs) I mean, it just wouldn't work. And bottom line? Neither could Ray.

INT: Oh. So how did he respond when you said you wouldn't come with him? I mean, that's basically making the decision for him.

RITA: No, I said, "If you feel that that's important for you, then you need to go." And at that point, we weren't married yet. We were living together, but we weren't married. And I listed why I would not live there, and he said, "We could have a long-distance relationship, because this may not be a permanent kind of thing." He might be there for two years, and then go on someplace else. And I said, "I can't give you any guarantees as to what's going to happen over two years. You know. I've been married, I've been divorced, I've had a lot of relationships. I don't especially want a long-distance relationship. But again, if you feel that this is the move you need to make, then you need to make it. And I will need to make whatever decisions or, you know, respond however I feel, and I can't, I don't know what it will be. He didn't take the job. He also didn't take jobs out in California that were offered to him.

Then he got two offers in Philadelphia. And he, you know, he understood, while Ray was able to leave **his** family thousands of miles away, he understood that my relationship with my parents was different, and that my parents didn't have the kind of connection, and the kind of ability to manage by themselves as his parents did. And one of the things I said to him was, that I really didn't think that my parents could cope with my being that far away. That in an emergency I needed to be much more accessible. I didn't have to live in the same city as they did, and I didn't have to see them all the time, but I needed to be able to get to them quickly if something happened. And by that point my father had already had his first by-pass surgery. And seeing how difficult it was for my parents to cope, it was pretty clear to Ray also that we needed to be close by. And so he had these two opportunities in Philadelphia, and I didn't have any great desire to live in Philadelphia. It wasn't like a mecca that I was looking to come to. But it offered him the two different positions; both of them offered him a lot of opportunity. And it was close enough to New York that within an hour or two, you know, I could get there. It also meant that the practice that I had in New York I could continue with on a part-time basis. So I would say all of our decisions are handled in a way that's totally alien to me. My parents never made decisions together.

INT: They just kind of shouted it out, sort of.

RITA: Yeah. And whoever screamed louder, you know, kind of got it. Or, I don't know. There was never...Ray and I, while we are very, **very** separate people, you know, I don't know what happens in his, you know, at work on a day-to-day basis. He keeps his work very separate; so do I.

INT: Do you talk about it with him?

RITA: In very superficial...I mean, I'll know if he's working on something that's very important. I'll know if there's a lot of stress at work. I'll know if he's got, you know, a paper that's coming

out, and he's working on. I don't understand what the hell he does. And by the same token, neither does he. You know, he doesn't understand how to be a therapist.

INT: But do you feel a need to...to know what is going on in his life, or do you feel that that can just be separate, and you can just...

RITA: I feel that I want to know how he's feeling about what's going on. But if he starts to explain to me...when he was working on AIDS, and he was trying to explain to me the different chromosomes, and the genetics, I mean, I'm lost. I'm like, it's another world for me.

INT: Your eyes glaze over.

RITA: Yeah, and I'd fall asleep. (laughs) You know, and he tries very hard to simplify things, and certainly I have a general sense of what he's doing. But he's not the kind of person who comes home and wants to sit and talk about work. His feeling is, "I've done that for fourteen hours today. Let me move on to something else." Unless there's something that's pressing. You know, if it's something about someone he's working with, or some major thing in the company. You know, it's not like he doesn't talk about it at all. But he really doesn't want to sit and talk to me about which experiment worked. Because I'm not going to understand, and I can't...you know. He can do that with colleagues.

INT: But what do you talk about?

RITA: A lot. We talk about whatever's come up that we want to talk about. I mean, it's not like we don't talk. There's no lack of, you know.

INT: So explain how you're independent, how you're each independent in your relationship.

RITA: Well, our professions don't overlap at all.

INT: Right.

RITA: I remember having to teach him that when I talked about psychotherapy that he didn't give me answers. The same way I can't give him an answer for what's going to cure AIDS, he can't give me an answer for how to treat a patient.

INT: Was he doing that?

RITA: Yeah. Yeah. And you know, he doesn't know what he's talking about. Which doesn't mean he's not, you know, well-meaning, but sometimes, and I don't want to spend the time teaching him to be a therapist, nor does he need to spend the time teaching me to be a molecular biologist. I mean, that's not what we are. What we need to do is be there for each other in the areas that do overlap, and if I say I'm in a really bad mood, because a patient of mine is really upset, or someone talked about some incestuous material that really is upsetting me today, so I'm in a bad mood. That I need to be able to say. You know. But I don't need to sit there and give

him details, because it's none of his business. You know, it would betray someone's confidentiality, and it would serve no purpose for him. You know. But if something comes up like, when our daughter was old enough to sleep at other people's houses, and I said, "Geez, this scares me, because the idea of her sleeping someplace where I don't know who's there after some of the stories I've heard, frightens me, probably more than it would somebody else," that's important for us to talk about.

INT: So how do you handle decisions regarding your daughter?

RITA: I think like most parenting, a lot of the times we fly by the seat of our pants. You know, it's like, when something comes up, you deal with it. We do a lot of talking about stuff in terms of our perceptions about her, or things that we feel that she needs or doesn't need. Or if Elizabeth, like when Elizabeth said she wanted to take horseback riding lessons. She knew other kids who were doing it. She told me about it. She'd like to ride. Okay, well, we'll see if that's possible. So I start talking to people and finding out where, when, how much, etc. Certainly Ray was aware that this was something she wanted to do. Well, one night we had to sit down and talk about, "Can we afford this, should we do this?" and he raised a lot of fears about her physical safety.

And so then we find out, okay, well what's done to ensure their safety? How are they taught, what are they taught? You know, all kinds of stuff like that. And so we'll get a whole bunch of information and then make some decision. Or, like Elizabeth was studying violin, and seemed to be getting incredibly frustrated, and Ray was not helping, because he is such a perfectionist, that he was trying to push her. And I came up with an idea that maybe what we needed was a private teacher, on a not constant basis, not an every-week thing, because I felt that would add more pressure. And so I laid it out to the both of them. You know, "Look, you both seem to be having this major issue with this violin stuff. Elizabeth, you're like crying all the time, every time you have to practice violin. This is not the point. You know, either you do this because you love it and you want to, or else we don't, we don't have to choose to do something every day that's going to make you unhappy." And I said, "Why don't you both think about whether that's, whether it would be helpful to do this?" You know. And they both, you know, thought about it, and the next day Elizabeth's like, "Yeah, I want to do that. Why don't we try that?" And Ray said, "That's a great idea." (laughs)

INT: So you involved her in the decision-making.

RITA: Yeah. I mean, it's a very, we never sat down and said, "How do we make, how do we go about doing this?" There's a lot of talking. There's a lot of fighting. I'm the one who fights, Ray listens. After eighteen years, he now has learned how to fight. Because he's not a fighter. He's...

INT: What does he do when you're having an argument?

RITA: He's a negotiator. And he's an intellectual. You know, he...

INT: He doesn't get angry?

RITA: He doesn't show, well, now he does. But he never used to. He never used to. He would avoid pushing it to the point where there would be a strong emotional response. And I pushed him to that point (laughs) many times, you know, like no one else can. Ray has a reputation of being somebody who is unflappable at work. I mean, it takes a **lot** to push Ray to be angry. Except with Elizabeth and I. You know.

INT: How do you handle your anger?

RITA: I scream, I yell, I carry on. I talk about it all day. I mean, I am a blabbermouth, as you can tell from how many tapes you have. (laughs) I process things as they're going on.

INT: How do you feel about that, when you're screaming, or you're losing it, or whatever? Does that bother you to be like that?

RITA: It's never out of control. I'm never, you know, I'm never afraid that I'm going to do something that I don't want to do.

INT: Do you ever think back in terms of how your mother raised you in that respect?

RITA: Yeah, and that I'm very different. I will say to my daughter or my husband, "You're **really** making me angry right now." You know, "And I'd like you to get out of my face, so that we both calm down." (laughs) I don't do the...I'm so angry I won't talk to you.

INT: I was just going to ask you, the silent treatment.

RITA: I don't do that. I've never done that.

INT: You were on the receiving end of that, so you know.

RITA: I've never done that. Nor could I ever. I need to talk too much. You know, I need to share, I need to let people know what's going on. That's my style.

INT: Now how does Ray relate to that, the fact that you are so...

RITA: Talky.

INT: No, open with your feelings. And he's not? It sounds like he's not.

RITA: He certainly wasn't. He is more so than he ever was. When we first got together, he was absolutely (laughs) baffled by my behavior. And I kept coming back to, "I was not any different when you first met me than I am now. Obviously you made this a choice, to not continue with this closed, let's-not-talk-about-things attitude that your family has. So you made a choice to be with somebody who's **very** upfront." I mean, there's very little that I won't talk about. I may get mad, I may scream, I may threaten, I may carry on. But there's almost no topic that I won't, that

I'm not willing to talk about. I'm not trained to not talk about things. I mean, I went through years of training. I spent thirteen years in therapy. I mean, you don't spend that much time talking to somebody learning how not to talk, you know? It was very hard for Ray. It was very hard for his family.

The first vacation, Christmas vacation, that I went out to Albuquerque, Ray's brother's wife lost a baby in her eighth month of pregnancy. I didn't know these people, but my response is, if somebody's pregnant and loses a baby is "Oy vey!" You know? (laughs) I mean, that's a **terrible** loss. Well, so the phone call comes in that Bill has Cheryl at the hospital, and it seems that the baby is dead, and they're going to induce labor. Well, I hear this, and I turn to Ray and I said, "Well, obviously you need to go be with your brother." And he's like, "What?" (laughter) I said, "You need to, don't we need to do something to show them that we're being supportive, and that we recognize how hard this is?" "I guess so." (laughs)

INT: Never occurred to **him**.

RITA: And he's not a withholding person at all, you know? And Ray's mother was in the kitchen when the call came in, and she's like, I don't know, cleaning. I remember her being like near the counter and the sink and something. Well, I walked up to her and I said, "I'm really so sorry." And I put my arms around her. And she started to cry. And that was **fine**. I mean, that to me was normal, you know? And she has told me years later, and even at the time, that there is **no one** that she knows who would have done that.

INT: Really.

RITA: That you know, her training as, her mother was English, and just her generation...

INT: Stoic.

RITA: Is very stoic, and you keep things quiet, and you don't get ruffled, and when you cry you get ruffled, you know? And that these are things that are very private. Well, I'm not like that.

INT: That's not where you come from.

RITA: No. And I have to say that both Ray and his mother, and even his dad have welcomed me and my ways into the family. And, you know, as I said, I was hugged and kissed all the time as a kid. And Jewish families, European Jewish families that I knew were always very huggy, kissy, you know, very physically affectionate people.

INT: And that comes naturally to you, do you think?

RITA: Yeah. Yeah. I mean, it's like my normal response, you know. It's my...my unthinking response, you know. And that's what I brought into their family. And it was something they never did.

INT: Well, what about bringing it into your relationship? How does that work? Affection? How is affection expressed?

RITA: You know, Ray was uncomfortable, I guess, being demonstrative in public. Well, if I want to hold his hand, I really don't care who's there. You know. And he had to either tell me that no, I don't want to do this, or he had to, I mean, he had to let me know. So in some way it forced an issue for him, you know. And he has, over the years, become more comfortable with being more expressive. He's not as...I mean, we had a fight this week while he was in Albuquerque long distance. You know, he made some comment, I got mad, I told him he could stay in Albuquerque, and that he didn't need to return home. Well, had I said that eighteen years ago, there would have been silence at the other end. You know, he would have been just, like, blown away. Well, now he comes back with, "No, you can't tell me that. If I'm saying something that makes you mad, then you're going to have to discuss this with me. That's what you're always saying we have to do. So don't like push me away. We have to have this discussion." So he has **certainly** learned (laughs) all the techniques.

The thing that has **always** been the thing that I guess I love the most about Ray is his capacity as a fifty-year-old man, or as a thirty-year-old man, to change and to grow. He has not **ever** closed a door to looking at himself, to figuring things out. And maybe it's his scientific, inquisitive, I don't know. But you know how some people, like you know that this is how they are, and they just can't change? If I had felt that way about Ray, I could have never married him. Because being from two different cultures, being from such variant backgrounds, it was clear that we had to adapt. And had I not seen in Ray an ability to adapt, I could have never stayed with him. I could have never been with him. And he has surpassed anybody else's capacity to grow and change, including mine. I mean, he is more willing to look at himself, and to make adaptations, and to try and work things out than most people that I know. You know.

INT: Have you ever felt a need to be in any kind of marital therapy?

RITA: It's come up at times. Certainly, it was weird. After living together for a couple of years, getting married, the first year was horrific. The first year of marriage, it was terrible. And...

INT: Why? Because you'd been so independent, and...

RITA: Because I was so scared. Part of it was, I was very destructive in terms of the relationship. I kept pushing him away. I was uncomfortable with being married. It was very scary for me.

INT: Why?

RITA: I guess because of what had happened before. Also, the relationship with Ray is so different. I don't have any -- or didn't, I mean, now I have years of living with it, but -- this relationship is unlike any that I ever grew up with or saw. I mean, we have a real working relationship where we work together towards whatever it is we want. Be it that we both decide

that we want to have a home on the shore, and we figure out how we can financially do that, and what commitments or restrictions, or just planning stuff. Be it that, or figuring out how to handle a problem with our daughter. Or something between us. We work, you know, very hard at that. I never saw...

INT: Where did you learn how to do that?

RITA: I guess from thirteen years in therapy.

INT: So your decision-making skills are very good for both of you. It seems to work. You can sit down with a problem and figure it out.

RITA: Yeah. Yeah.

INT: Does one ever dominate over the other? Or do you see yourselves as pretty equal?

RITA: I think it seesaws. I think it seesaws. I think when it comes to making certain financial decisions, Ray makes better ones than I do. I am much more impulsive. I need to have my wishes gratified. (laughs) Ray is much more a planner for the future. And while I'll fight with him about it, saying, "I don't know if I'm going to live when I'm eighty years old. I may be dead. I don't want to save everything for then. I want something now." And we have to negotiate that, too. But my bottom line feeling is that he makes much better financial judgments, or else we'd never be where we are today.

INT: So you sort of give it over to him a little bit?

RITA: Yeah.

INT: And what about with Elizabeth? How does that work with her?

RITA: I would say I probably have more power than he does. Ray has always given me credit for knowing people a lot better than he does. And given what my training is of understanding developmental issues, things like that, he will certainly fight if he thinks I'm doing something wrong, but he usually doesn't think that I'm doing something wrong. It's more the other way. I think he's doing things wrong. (laughs) And...but also the fact that I spend a lot more time with her than he does. So whoever's here makes the decision. I mean, you know, you're not here, you don't get a vote. I'm not going to call him.

I know that we tried at the beginning. Like, if Elizabeth got sick, I would call Ray at work and say, "You know, she's running a fever. I don't know what to do." And I found that I didn't like the answers I was getting. And so I thought to myself, "Why am I asking him? He's not here. If I feel a need to take her to the doctor today instead of waiting till tomorrow to see if it'll resolve itself, what am I asking him for? Because then I don't agree with what he says. Why do I put myself in this position?" And so many times I will over-ride something that he may say about Elizabeth.

But we still do a lot of talking. I mean, we sat up last night talking about things that she had said recently, and was there any way that we should handle this, and he made a comment about how he had taken her for the first time to a violin lesson, and so he got to meet this private teacher, and said, "You know, that was a really good idea. This is how I saw it working, when I listened today, and it was really great, etc." We still, we talk about stuff, I don't know. That part works well.

INT: Can you talk a little bit about your decision to have children, and how that was for you, and do you think that the Holocaust had anything to do with your decision to have children?

RITA: I went through times where I wanted a very large family, when I was young. Then I went through times of not wanting a family. Then after working in a foster care adoption agency, and seeing kids who had been abused, I was so burned out on kids that I really wanted nothing to do with them. They just seemed...it was just some of the stuff that I had seen was pretty horrific. And the responsibility of having a child felt much too big for me.

And then it changed. I mean, it was one of those things that really sort of, depending on the day, I'd have a different answer, you know, kind of thing. When we were in New York, at some point we decided that we felt more ready. I was finished graduate school, and I was clearer on being able to give up working if I needed to. We were more in a position where we could afford for me to do that.

(END TAPE SEVEN, SIDE ONE)

(TAPE SEVEN, SIDE TWO)

RITA: Down the East Side drive. And I remember getting on the ramp, and his saying, "If we have a child, I really don't want to be an absentee father. I want to be there for doctors visits, I want to be there for school plays, I want to be there, etc." And you know, his being very clear about how he had been parented, and that he felt that his parents did a really good job, which absolutely shocked me. I had never heard anybody who thought their parents did a good job raising them. I mean, most people that I know bitch about their parents all the time. And one of Ray's comments was, "If I can raise my children with as much love, and as much consideration, and the way my parents did, I will feel that I've done an incredibly good job." Well, that was like, "**What?!**" (laughs) And certainly he doesn't raise Elizabeth the way he was raised. His father was not **nearly** as involved as he is. And his father has commented on how much he admires how Ray is involved with Elizabeth, and how sorry he is, when he thinks back of the things that he didn't do with the boys. You know, and that watching the boys raise their children gives him a much clearer sense of what he didn't do.

INT: So you both wanted children at this point.

RITA: Yeah, and we certainly fluctuated. There would be times where I would want a child and Ray would say, "No, this isn't a good time." Well, by the time we got around to it, it proved to be much more of a problem than we thought it would be.

INT: How old were you and he at that time?

RITA: I guess I was around thirty. In my early thirties, and Ray is five years older than I am. And so we decided, okay, we would try to get pregnant. And nothing happened. Basically it just wasn't, you know. Time passed.

INT: You weren't getting pregnant.

RITA: I wasn't getting pregnant. At one point, and after having been pregnant I was clearer on this. I think I was pregnant and miscarried very, **very** early. I had a lot of the same kinds of physical feelings as I had when I was pregnant. And then we were at a friend's house, and I remember not feeling well, and getting stomach cramps, and having, and getting my period, but with...

INT: Tissue, and heavy bleeding.

RITA: Yeah. And it wasn't, you know, it wasn't, certainly I couldn't have been more than a couple of weeks, you know, kind of thing. But...when we moved here, we had already been trying over a year. And nothing was happening. And it was, again, the kind of thing where Ray is perfectly happy thinking, "Well, when it'll be, it'll be. And it'll be fine." You know, kind of thing. And being, his being an optimist, he looks at things that way. It'll work out. Being a pessimist, and a cynic, I'm like, it'll never happen. You know, something is wrong. And it was only when friends of ours who were going through a similar situation, who had moved here from Washington, went to see an infertility specialist, and the infertility specialist said, "It shouldn't take more than a year. If it's taking, if it's been a year for you to try, then it's time for us to find out what's wrong." For them. Then I said, "See?" (laughs) "I told you there's something that we should be doing."

It ended up that we had tried and were going through infertility work-ups and stuff. It was close to three years before we conceived Elizabeth. And before we conceived her we had started the adoption process with an agency in Texas.

INT: You decided to try that?

RITA: Mm-hm. Yeah. We had our papers in.

INT: I've heard so many stories like that that people get pregnant after...

RITA: Yeah. And statistically, actually, it's not true.

INT: No? Okay.

RITA: No, but it's interesting. I've heard them, too. Especially now, working as an adoption specialist, I hear it also. But we were going through all kinds of studies, and I had had laparoscopy, and just the whole thing. And there were all sorts of little things, but nothing that should have stopped it from happening. And that was a very trying time in our marriage. The stress was unbelievable. The emotional roller coaster that we were both on was unbelievable.

INT: Did your desire for children remain strong?

RITA: It almost gets stronger. It becomes an obsession at that point. You know, and it's irrational, and it just becomes an obsessive process, and everything that the doctors do make you more obsessed. You know.

The thing that was significant, I guess, was that through all of that, while we certainly were emotionally stressed, we were both pretty much there for each other. You know, and I can't say, you know, there are certain issues that I think men don't understand. And I can talk about them, Ray can listen, and his biology is just so different, that I think that there's no way he's going to get certain, you know, stuff, in terms of my explaining it. And so there were certain ways in which I felt he could never understand. And so I would turn to women friends to talk about things. And I felt like I could say half a sentence, and they knew what I was talking about. Ray couldn't, but he was still very empathetic. It wasn't as critical an issue for him that it be a biological child. It really wasn't. He wanted to be a parent. He was clear on that. He probably would have been more comfortable with a lot more in terms of even taking in a child. I don't think it would have mattered to Ray if the kid was purple and polka-dotted. Where I was much more aware of what my limitations were in terms of who or what I could accept.

INT: Could you explain that a little bit?

RITA: I remember feeling that it would be really hard for someone to hand me a baby and for me to attach to it. This would be a stranger, and it would take me time. And what if I didn't like this one? You know? And it was a real conscious, I was very aware that I was afraid. That I might not like that baby. You know, I remember sitting on the train, and of course, when you're trying to get pregnant, everybody you see is either pregnant or having an infant in their arms. And I remember thinking: What if one of these women turned around and said, "Here, take this one. You say you want a baby so badly." And I'd look at this baby and there would be snot in its nose, and it would have, you know, have just thrown up, and it would smell, and I thought: How do you, what happens? What if they said, "Here, take this one," and I said, "I don't want that one." (laughs) You know, I want the Gerber baby, or you know. And Ray had none of that. Whether he had it and wasn't aware of it, I don't know. You know, I've seen him with children that aren't his kids, and he's much less...what's the word? I don't like all kids. It's very clear to me. Ray likes most humans. I don't. You know. And so I think his ability to accept and relate to a child would have been easier than mine. And that was something again we had to talk about.

INT: How do you explain that, that you come from a family that, with all its difficulties, did manage to get across to you affection, and the message that you were loved. And yet it's hard for you, it's not hard for you to show affection, but it's hard for you to...on the one hand you just said that, you sort of described yourself as a "people person" as compared to Ray, but yet Ray's more accepting of people than you are.

RITA: Ray grew up in a very secure life. You know, his, there wasn't much trauma in his life. There was some. But...I think that his security in his family, his feeling grounded, makes him more able to...he has a generally positive feeling about life. That life will be okay. I don't. I don't have **any** belief that life is going to be okay. It's like: Yeah, prove it. I expect each day to be filled with hardship, and for me, it often is. You know, be it that I have an argument with my mother that, you know, rattles my kishkes, or that...he takes things very differently. He has more of an ability to let things roll, and to sort of have this basic trust that in the long run it'll be okay.

INT: So he's more trusting of people than you are.

RITA: Oh, yeah.

INT: And of just...life in general.

RITA: Yeah. And I think the other part of it is that, as a therapist and as somebody who understands people, (pause) I see a lot more than he does. I also see the dark side of people a lot more. I listen to it all the time. I know what people are capable of. And...he doesn't. He doesn't look at somebody and imagine the worst, that has either happened to them, or that will happen. His life hasn't had that kind of a palette. Mine has. Both in terms of what I saw my parents and their families go through. I mean, he didn't grow up knowing that his family could be killed. He didn't grow up...hearing from his parents their horror stories. The first time his parents thought he was making out with someone, they didn't keep him up and go into a bathroom and tell him that they were raped. You know. My life isn't...I didn't **have** fairy tales. You know, I had very harsh realities. His life was much more even. There were differences between his parents. There were arguments. There was all sorts of stuff. But it didn't have that horror to it that I feel like mine did. He wasn't married and divorced.

INT: So you had that also, the trust in the relationship.

RITA: Yeah. I mean, there were a lot of things that for me never went, you know, according to plan. And my life's plan was different. It's just...and I think he has this basic belief that things will work out. I mean, and he'll say that all the time. I'll say, "Well, you know, Elizabeth said..." and he'll say, "Yeah, but most kids that age say that. It's no big deal, Rita. Let it go."

INT: Does that help you?

RITA: No. (laughs)

INT: You feel just as pessimistic as ever.

RITA: Yeah. Yeah. I mean, it helps me in knowing that there are people who still believe that things are good. You know, it's like lovely that there's somebody out there... (laughter)

INT: Yeah. It's kind of quaint, you know. (laughs)

RITA: Yeah, it's lovely. Does it change how I feel? No.

INT: And you feel that your way is the right way?

RITA: I feel it's the only way I have.

INT: It's the reality.

RITA: It's the way, it's just the way I am, and I'm certainly not...

INT: But do you feel that the world really **is** that way, an unsafe, chaotic, mistrustful...

RITA: Yeah. Um...I think that life is very hard. I think that there are a lot of crazy people out there. They come in my office all the time. (laughs) I think that there are a lot of damaged people who can do things to hurt you. At the same time, I don't think that there's danger lurking around every corner. I think that I have made my life safe. I don't feel...I don't feel threatened, and yet I have very good antenna for picking up things that are dangerous.

INT: So you're wary.

RITA: Yeah. Well, it's also, you know, living in New York for most of my life, I'm very street smart. You know, and it's funny. I talk to people who have lived in other places, in smaller towns, and haven't dealt with the level of violence that there is in New York, or in their lives. I know who to stay away from. I can spot loonies. You know, in street people. You know, or just walking on the street. I can look at someone's eyes and get a sense like, Oh, nobody's home here. You know, I need to move away. You know, I rode the subways in New York from the time that I was a teenager, you know. And you had to learn. You had to learn how to hold your purse. (laughs) You know, I watch Elizabeth swinging her purse around and thinking, "You know, kid, if you were in New York at the age of ten, you would know you can't do that." You know? All kinds of stuff like that. You know. Put me in a crowd, I automatically hold my purse differently than I do someplace else. I mean, I walk into Acme, you know. I check every zipper on my purse.

INT: So you don't think that's necessarily Holocaust-related, but more just growing up in New York.

RITA: And I think that maybe there's a compounding of certain things. I have a sense of life's fragility. That maybe other people don't. I have a sense that people will not always be there; that they can die.

INT: Including your own child?

RITA: Oh, yeah. And there's a real issue there. I mean, when Elizabeth was four weeks old, she got pneumonia. And...she was quite sick. There was talk about whether they should hospitalize her, whatever. Well, maybe there are mothers who wouldn't ask this, okay? When the doctor was explaining what exactly was going on, and that Elizabeth had RSV, which is very common, and etc. And it seemed like she had pneumonia. Some people would just sort of stay with that. Well, I looked at her and said, "Are there any life-long effects of being this ill at four weeks old?" And she said, "If you had not asked me, I wouldn't have told you. But yes, there are. Sit down." And I said, "What are we talking..." and she said, "These children have a higher risk of SIDS." Well, you know, here you are, first-time mother, it's taken you three years to get pregnant, and someone tells you that your kid might die of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome because they have pneumonia now. So even when this baby is well, there's a reality that has been, you know, sort of laid out for you that you could lose her. Well, for the next two years, the monitor, every time she slept, was on. You know? Part of what I have that maybe others...and I don't know if it comes from being a child of survivors, or if it's my personality, I don't know. I ask a lot of questions. I want to know very much about what's going on around me.

INT: You don't hide from reality.

RITA: Uh-uh. I want to know what it is so that I can prepare myself. And there is that sense of, I need to prepare myself, and steel myself in some way for whatever's going to happen. And maybe part of that is related to having to defend myself against being hurt. You know, some of that could also just come from being raised by very damaged people. You know. I never knew when my mother was going to fall apart, and somehow dump some shit on me. I never knew what would send my father over the edge so that he'd bang his head against the wall, in, you know, in despair.

INT: Had he done that?

RITA: Mm-hm. My parents displayed behavior that was not normal, and they displayed it to me from the time I was very little. I've **had** to learn. And that's my role model for the world, you know, is that people can fall apart and that I've got to pull it together. You know, and I've got to be prepared and somehow know how to deal with it. And that comes across, too, in how, you know. I mean, I ask, like when I go to conferences about Elizabeth, and they talk about how wonderful everything is, I'm always the one who says -- Ray doesn't ask -- I always say, "Well, okay, aside from all of this, what areas do you see that are problems?" And Ray will look at me and say, "I wouldn't have thought to ask that."

INT: Because you can't believe that the picture's all rosy?

RITA: Because I want to know what the problems are so I can deal with them.

INT: Mm-hm. But you're assuming there **were** problems, even though they didn't bring **up** any problems.

RITA: Yeah. And I **do** assume that there are problems, all the time.

INT: When Elizabeth was born, how was that for you? The maternal feeling came right away?

RITA: Oh, it was absolutely wonderful. From the day that I found out...Well, what had happened was that I was scheduled to go in for surgery with some big "mahoff" at another hospital different from the infertility specialist that we had seen. Through some connections that we had I was going to be able to see somebody who ran the in vitro project at Penn, and even though there was a very long waiting list, I got in to see him. And he had scheduled surgery, to do an exploratory.

A few days before the surgery was scheduled, he was called. He had a relative who died in Spain. So it was postponed for like a week. I was due, and all of this stuff had to be scheduled based on my menstrual cycle. Well, I was supposed to get my period on a certain day, and I didn't. And the surgery was scheduled a few days later. And so I called the office to let them know, knowing that we had to be, you know, that all systems had to be at a certain point in order for surgery. And so I called the office in the morning, and said, "You know, I was supposed to get my period yesterday and I didn't. What do you want to do? Do you want to reschedule, or how do you want to handle this?" And she said, "Do you think you're pregnant?" I said, "You can't ask me that, because after three years, I think I'm pregnant every month. I have no realistic judgment about this." "Fine, come down for a pregnancy test, and if it turns out to be negative, then we'll know, and we'll just go ahead with the schedule."

So I go down to take this pregnancy test, and I come home, and I was very anxious about it, and I had had G-d knows how many pregnancy tests already at that point. And the phone rings, you know, in the afternoon, and she said, "I have great news for you. You're pregnant." And I said, "You must have the wrong test tube." (laughs) I mean, this can't be for me. And she said, "No, and the..." I forgot what it is, there's a certain level of some hormone that's elevated. And she said, "No, the level is very high, you're definitely pregnant." And for the rest of the day I walked around with my hand on my stomach, that there was a baby inside of me.

I went to the store, I decorated the whole entranceway to the house. I got, it was in the spring and I found a...they had all these things for graduates, like "Congratulations, Graduate." So I found this "Congratulations" banner that I hung. And I went and I bought a baby toy, a little squeaky toy, and I suspended it from the light fixture in the foyer. I decorated the whole thing, and I didn't tell Ray on the phone. I wanted him to walk in and the whole place was decorated in pink and blue, and etc. So from that day I connected with this baby.

When I had amniocentesis, they found something wrong. There was a chromosomal abnormality. And so I get this phone call saying, "We have the results of your amnio, and there is something wrong, but we don't know what it is." And to make a long story short, we had to go and Ray was able to read the chromosomal study better than the geneticist who was there, and

because of the abnormality, he was able to contact somebody that he knew who had worked on that chromosome, and we had, in the time lapse, there was like 24 hours where, until he and I, they had to do genetic mapping on both Ray and I to see whether this abnormality was one that we carried. Because if it was, and we were okay, then the likelihood would be that the child would be okay. Because they didn't know enough about this chromosome to know what this abnormality meant, except that there was something that was off.

So we had 24 hours. Well. I remember coming home in the car from the blood tests for Ray and I, and I said to him, and I was so pregnant. I mean, from my second month I showed. I was so happy to be pregnant. I just looked pregnant. I mean, I was just, and I was **big**. (laughs) I was like a house. And at that point, I was in maternity clothes, the whole shpiel. And I sat in the car with Ray and I said, "I don't know how I'm going to cope with aborting this baby if we have to do that. Because I feel like this is my child. I don't feel like this is a fetus. I feel like this is my child." And I had already gone through a bout of staining, where I thought I was going to lose the baby. I mean, it had been not a carefree pregnancy. And it had not been an easy process to get pregnant. I was a high-risk pregnancy. And the thought of having gotten this far, you know, through the getting pregnant, and we made it through the staining. (laughs) Then we made it to the point where I could have amniocentesis, and now to find out that there might be something wrong. And at the same time there was this recognition that neither Ray nor I wanted to bring a child into the world that was going to have such serious handicaps in some way that they would not be able to function independently at some point. I mean, we were not very young parents. We would not be around forever. And having a baby later in our lives meant that we would not be available for as long to this child. And if the child was going to have some serious problem, then it was going to be a real issue about whether we were going to continue the pregnancy. But at that point I was already very connected, you know, to this baby.

And when Elizabeth was born, when I saw her the first time, they handed me Elizabeth, and she was still connected with the umbilical cord, and she looked like a newborn baby, which is, she was slimy. (laughs) She was, you know. And I said to Ray -- he remembers me saying this -- I said to Ray, "She is the most gorgeous thing I've ever seen. She's so beautiful." And Ray looked, his face looked like sunshine. He was **glowing**. I mean, he was just, and we were both in like another dimension. And I remember they took her to clean her up, and I had requested birthing in, and so I started to nurse her in the recovery room. And the physician who had worked with us, and gone through all of this horrible pregnancy, knew my parents were out in the waiting room, and she said, "There's nobody else in here. It's just you. I'm going to get your mother and father." Because Ray had been running out to tell them the different, because it was a very long labor, and a very difficult one. And my mother was hysterical. I mean, my mother cried. From the time I called her to say I'm in labor and we're going to the hospital, it started to snow, and she was afraid they couldn't get to Philadelphia, and my father was driving. And she was hysterical out there. She had cried for like 24 hours. And my mother and father walked into the recovery room, and there I am holding a newborn, who looks squished, you know, the whole shpiel. And I said to my mother too, "Isn't she beautiful?" And my mother said, "Yes." And at the same time, she said to me later, she said, "You know, she really wasn't beautiful at that point!" (laughter) "I mean, she was a beautiful baby in that she was yours, and she was perfect,"

but she said, "You know, it was amazing just looking at your face and how you thought that she was absolutely gorgeous." So there really was no difficulty.

INT: And it meant a lot to your parents as well.

RITA: Oh, my G-d! To have a grandchild?

INT: It meant a lot to them.

RITA: Yeah.

INT: What about the issue of Ray not being Jewish? Was that a problem with the child, or...

RITA: Not at all. I mean, it would have been more of a problem, now we knew that we were having a girl.

INT: Oh, you found out from the amnio? You wanted to know?

RITA: Yeah, I wanted to know. In fact, when they called me to tell me that there was a problem, at the end of the conversation, because I said things like, "Well, are you telling me that this baby has no eyes, or that they're going to have green eyes? I mean, what are you telling me? What's the range?" And they said, "We don't know." And at the end of the conversation, I thought, "Well, I should ask if it's a boy or girl." I said, "What's the sex?" And they said, "It's a girl." And that's what I wanted. I **really** wanted a daughter.

INT: Now why is that?

RITA: I was afraid I wouldn't know how to raise a boy. I'm not athletic. I'm not a real rough and tumble kind of person. I felt that I understood girls, being a woman. I just always wanted a daughter, and I felt it would be really hard. And one of the reasons I had wanted to know was I felt that if I was carrying a boy, I'd really have to work on issues before this kid came out. (laughs)

INT: Take some tennis lessons or something.

RITA: And the other reason, I think, that was really there, though I don't think I talked about it a lot, was I really knew that if I had a boy, circumcision and bar mitzvah were going to be an issue with my parents, and I just wanted to avoid it. Because I knew what I wanted, I knew what Ray wanted, and I knew that it was not going to be what they wanted.

INT: Which was what?

RITA: We both had felt that if we had a boy, the baby would be circumcised in the hospital, with a physician. That I was not going to have a mohel. And that I wanted, you know, sterile instruments. The whole shpiel. I mean, I wanted the protection of a hospital. I also knew that it

would be really tough for me to send a boy for religious training, and yet hard not to. You know, that it would be a real conflict for me.

INT: So this you felt, having a girl avoided all those issues.

RITA: Yeah, it really did. And my mother wanted, I don't know, there was this whole family history of wanting girls.

INT: Yeah, I wanted to ask you. Your mother was, not, I mean, not originally, but she became an only daughter. You were an only daughter, and you had an only daughter. Have you ever thought about that, and that connection?

RITA: Well, my mother...you know, my mother had gotten pregnant after she had me, and had had an abortion because she felt that her marriage couldn't sustain another child. So she had made a decision not to have more children. Though, when at a certain point she did want to adopt a child. I really wasn't sure whether Ray and I would have more children. And given how hard it was to conceive Elizabeth, it was very possible that we wouldn't.

INT: How did you decide not to? I mean, how did that work that you didn't have more children?

RITA: That I didn't have more kids? I was so overwhelmed with having a baby. You know, I found it a lot more work and a lot harder than anything I had imagined, and the fact that I was on call 24 hours a day was really unbelievable to me. And Ray and I really wavered a lot.

(END TAPE SEVEN, SIDE TWO)

(TAPE EIGHT, SIDE ONE)

RITA: In my life. It also wasn't so horrible. I mean, I certainly came out fine, you know, being an only child. At times I was afraid to have more kids. You know, thinking I couldn't handle it. That it was going to be too hard, you know, kind of thing. There were other times where I really wanted to. I remember we were on vacation. Elizabeth was about...she must have been about two and a half or three. We were in California, staying at a hotel right on the beach. And we were close to San Simeon, the Hearst castle, and I really wanted to go, and I thought, "How am I going to take this two-and-a-half-year-old on a tour through San Simeon?" Well, we went, and Elizabeth was great. And I thought, I could do this. You know. She's at a point where she's more independent. She was about to start like a little nursery school type thing. I could have another baby. It would work. And Ray and I talked about it, and he was at a point where he felt so stressed at work and that he just didn't have the energy to start all over again. And it seemed like for about maybe four years, three years, we kept seesawing. When I was at a point where I felt like, "Okay, I can do this," he would feel he couldn't. When he felt he could, I was like, "What are you, crazy?" (laughs) And you know, the kind of accidents that happen to other people, they never happened to us. I mean, infertility was clearly an issue. For us to decide to have a child would have meant going through the whole thermometer sex on demand, thing. It

was a nightmare, you know. And doing that, when we had a kid, it was hard enough to go through that without a child around. It just...you know, and there were no accidents that ever made the decision for us, you know, kind of thing. And at a certain point it was clear that I was just too old, and so was he. And part of it was, that, you know, I was 35 when I had Elizabeth. I didn't have a lot of time to play with. I really didn't. You know. And maybe had I had her when I was 30, when we first started trying, it would have been a lot easier.

INT: Do you have any regrets about that?

RITA: At times. I feel as though...her life would be very different if she had a sibling. Some ways good, some ways bad. But I feel that...it would be in the long run, better for her if she had a sibling. Even in terms of having someone to talk to about what a pain in the ass Ray and I are. You know, that she would have a partner, you know, in some way. Someone who had grown up in the same home, and who could, you know, relate to that.

There are certain advantages she has as an only child, also, and given who I am and how seriously I take parenting, and how I work at it all the time, I'm so exhausted, you know. I'm 46 years old. I'm not sure what it would have been like to have two children. How I would have handled it. I don't know.

INT: Did the Holocaust come into it at all, about wanting to...

RITA: To repopulate? No.

INT: It never entered into your decision to have children?

RITA: Because I'm not raising a Jewish child. You know. I'm not, I'm raising what I believe to be a very sensitive, giving, I mean, Elizabeth is one of the most gentle children that I've ever met. She doesn't, she's one of the most understanding children in terms of other people's behavior. I have every teacher, every parent who has come in contact with her talks about her personality and certain aspects of it. I feel that I am raising a very ethical, good human being. But I don't feel that I am raising a religious child. I'm not.

INT: I was going to ask you, it can't be, it's not mutually exclusive to raise a Jewish child and have that child be ethical.

RITA: No, of course not. Of course not. But Ray and I...early in our relationship talked about what role religion did or didn't play in our lives. He was raised more religiously than I was. You know, the family went to church. He belonged to church groups. When he worked for, I guess he was in college, or in graduate school, he worked for a summer in California, and knew no one. And chose to try and meet people through a church. I mean, that was a continuing...I mean, that was an avenue for him. And so at some point he had to, in his life he made a choice to leave that. That he did not believe in G-d. He did not feel that the church played a part in his life.

INT: Does he still feel that way? He doesn't believe in G-d?

RITA: Mm-mm. And so when we talked about having a family, we had to decide how we were going to handle this. I mean, it came up even in terms of how are we going to get married.

INT: How **did** you get married? What kind of wedding did you have?

RITA: I never had a Jewish get, so I couldn't have been married without going through that. And we got married by a judge at family court in New York City, who was the father of a friend of mine.

INT: Did your parents come?

RITA: Oh, yeah. Yeah.

INT: Are they okay with that?

RITA: Oh, they were so happy I was marrying Ray, you know, that...

INT: So the non-Jewish issue wasn't an issue for them. Not really.

RITA: I mean I think on some level they would have loved it if he had been Jewish, but they don't feel uncomfortable that he's not. I mean, Ray wears a yarmulke at the Seder. You know, Ray's very happy having a Seder in the house. Ray welcomes differences. He's more interested than I am in talking to my parents about the Holocaust. He's, he loves family stuff. You know, he wants to know about all the relatives who existed, and where they are, and what happened to them and stuff. More so than I do.

INT: So he's been very accommodating through all this.

RITA: Oh, yeah. But Ray and I had to decide. And one of our decisions was that we would expose Elizabeth to whatever came along. So when I felt she was, you know, old enough to understand some of what was going on, we took her to hear things at the synagogue. When we're in Albuquerque and Ray's parents invite us to go to church, we have gone with them. You know, we don't avoid going, but it's not a part of our lives. We don't go because we believe. We go because...we want to expose her. I mean, the same way, if there were a Buddhist temple, I'd probably take her to see what that was like. When we travel, if there are churches to go into, or synagogues, that are interesting in some way to us, then we go in. And I talk to her about it all the time. When an occasion comes up I'll talk to her about the fact, I mean, I remember her saying, she had a friend who had all of these gorgeous dresses to go to church. You know, and then there was the confirmation dresses, and she wanted a dress, and she wanted to be able to wear it someplace. And I said, "Well, you know, when there's a special occasion, we can buy you a fancy dress, but we don't go to church." And why, and how some people believe certain things, and some people believe other things, and other people...and I've always answered stuff to her. I remember, I mean, when she plays with, when she and Tirzah used to play, when they

were little, with the dollhouse stuff, there was a little menorah, and there was a Christmas tree. And I remember they would play Shabbas, and then they would play Christmas.

INT: No problem!

RITA: No, and there is no problem. Because we will light Chanukah candles, and we will have a Christmas tree. And we talk about it in terms of traditions and cultural stuff. I mean, I have to say that I can talk until I'm blue in the face, what it boils down to is that she wants her presents. You know.

INT: But it's not a religious issue as much as, you're making it...

RITA: It's a tradition.

INT: It's a cultural and traditional thing.

RITA: Yeah. Which is what latkes are, and Passover.

INT: How do you feel about that?

RITA: I feel fine. I mean...

INT: Do you believe in G-d?

RITA: No. No. And I don't remember ever really believing. I remember wishing that I thought, I remember wishing that there was a sense that someone could make things good for me, or that I believed...you know, I've always understood G-d as a construct of needing a parent. Of needing to feel that there was somebody that you could turn to who had more power than you did. Who could make sense out of things that didn't make sense. And once I accepted, or came to feel that for me, there was nothing like that. My parents never had that power. I never believed that anybody did. The idea that there could be something...like that just seems alien to me. I mean, I don't believe in...I don't believe that we really know everything there is to know about the world, or the order of the world, or people, or what might be out there, wherever "out there" is. But the idea that there's a heaven and a hell, the idea that there's...a **thing** called "G-d," it doesn't...

INT: Creating nature, anything along those lines? It's just there.

RITA: It's science. You know. And I remember I was in junior high in an advanced program, and so we had a science teacher who was doing stuff that was much more advanced than it was. And he was an Orthodox Jew. And I remember coming up to him after school -- his name was Mr. Tishman. And I said, "I have a question, and I don't mean to offend you, but I'd like to understand how you balance being a scientist and being a religious man." And...

INT: It's a good question.

RITA: And he never gave me an answer. Never gave me an answer. But for me it seemed mutually exclusive. And I never could.

INT: And here you are married to a scientist.

RITA: Yeah.

INT: Who feels the same way.

RITA: Yeah. I mean I just, I need facts. You know.

INT: So where do you go when you need to, when you need to cope with something, where do you draw from? Where do you get the strength to get through...

RITA: From my kishkes. I mean, I go into myself. I go to my friends. I also don't have the same expectations as other people, in that I expect the worst.

INT: Right. But how do you deal, so that makes it easier to cope with things, because you know it's going to be bad, so you just have to, but how do you get through it? What gets you through a difficult period in your life?

RITA: I'm a very strong person. I just get through. I...I suffer, I cry, I wish I were dead. And I know that I'll be okay, you know.

INT: But that's an optimism of a sort, that you'll be okay.

RITA: I know I'll be okay because I have been okay. You know, I have gone through what I've gone through and I'm okay. I have a lot of sense that I have a lot of control over my life and a lot of power. I don't feel like a victim. I feel that I have abilities and strengths that I can draw from, and that I do, you know?

I remember I said something to my mother one day. I don't know, we had some kind of fight. And I said, "You can't keep asking me to do," whatever it was she wanted me to do. And she looked at me, she said, "What do you mean I can't keep asking you? You're **so** strong. You always seem to be able to do whatever is asked of you." And I looked at her and I said, "Are you telling me that if you cut me I don't bleed? I mean, I'm not, I am human, and you can't keep doing this to me." But that's...people have that sense of me. That I will survive. And on a bottom line level, I do, you know? I turn to Ray, I turn to, I have a friend who I have known now for...I met her when I was about 22. I know her for like 24 years. When shit hits the fan, I pick up the phone. (laughs) And I remember when I moved out of New York, one of my first comments to Ray was, "If I am leaving New York, you must understand that the phone is my tie to my friends. And my friendships will not end." I'd say for me my strengths come from talking...

INT: To your friends.

RITA: To friends, and to people in general.

INT: Ray?

RITA: Yeah. Yeah.

INT: You see yourself as a survivor in a way...

RITA: Oh, yeah.

INT: Of your childhood, or of...

RITA: Very much so.

INT: And how do you relate that to your parents being survivors, or do you?

RITA: I'm sure that it's a part of my identity. That...my mother for her fragility had survived so much. She's such a strong woman, with her fragility, you know? And my father, too.

INT: It's a paradox.

RITA: Yeah, it **is** a paradox. But, I said this to her the other day. She said, "Oh, I feel sick." And I said, "Mom, I know you feel terrible, but the fact is you never thought you'd live to be 70 years old, and you have. And you never thought you'd live till Elizabeth was ten, and you have. And you thought you'd never live to the day where you lived alone, and you do. And you never thought all kinds of things, and you're still doing them. And you're not in a bed. You know. You're not in a closet. (laughs) I mean, you're still alive. You can still do and go and be whatever you want." And I said to her, "You are a survivor. Otherwise you never would have made it through what you made it through."

INT: How did she respond to that?

RITA: "Yeah, but I feel terrible today." (laughter)

INT: Does she give herself any credit for surviving what she went through?

RITA: No.

INT: How about your father?

RITA: I don't know if he gives himself credit. I don't know if he thinks in those terms. I have no idea.

INT: One thing that we really haven't talked about is your choice of going into psychotherapy as...what propelled you into that?

RITA: Let's see. When I was in high school, I thought that I wanted to be a psychologist. It was too hard for me to do that at that time. I think my self-esteem, and my academic achievements were too low. It's interesting. The other paradox in my house was that in most Jewish families, education is really revered and enforced. In my family, whatever you did was okay. And I was like...in some ways my parents thought I could do no wrong, you know.

INT: You were the miracle child.

RITA: Yeah. And my parents also were not sophisticated enough about what went on in education to really understand some of what I did or didn't do. So I would say that I didn't come into my...my awareness of how smart I was, or how much I could achieve, till I was a lot older and out of the house.

But in high school, I wanted to be a psychologist. I did not do well. I was not accepted into the college that I wanted to go to, and I was the only one of my friends like that. I was always, like most of my life, my life is sort of this mixture of stuff. I was in honor classes in English, and doing failing work in math and science. I was labeled as an under-achiever, and so I don't think I had very realistic, or...I really didn't know how to go about accomplishing what I wanted to accomplish. So I ended up in a community college, and started to understand a little bit more. But not a hell of a lot. I didn't know how to study, I didn't know how to work. And I didn't want to. I mean, I didn't **want** to put a lot of effort into it. (laughs) I wanted it to happen.

My other interests have always been in the arts. And so I ended up with taking a lot of literature courses and analyzing. I mean, I love to read things. And I love to figure out what somebody might be saying. Which is not so different than being a therapist.

So I was taking, going towards a major in English, and I ended up with having two or three courses left to complete a major in English, and they were old English, like Beowulf kind of stuff, and I just **hated** it. I mean, absolutely hated it, and it felt irrelevant, and I couldn't...so I dropped the major, and went into film, because then all I had to do was sit and watch movies, and eat popcorn and analyze movies. And why people did what they did, and what did it mean. And it was sort of a continuation...so I ended up with a major in film when I came out of Hunter College in New York. Well, there's not a hell of a lot you can do. But there were a lot of jobs around at that time. I mean, it was the early seventies. Money was all over the place. You could do anything you wanted. I worked in advertising for a short time and hated it. Everybody was crazy and on drugs. And I think the complicating factor was being married to somebody who wasn't an achiever. Which I felt, I really felt like I couldn't do more than he did.

When Bernie and I got divorced, or separated, I went on a vacation to Jamaica with a cousin of mine, who was in graduate school in social work. I'd never heard of social workers. Never had any idea what they did. And here she was talking about her field placement, and what she was doing, and it was **fascinating** to me. And you could get a master's in two years, which was

unbelievable. And I started looking into that, and I started volunteering. I think I talked about this a little bit. My boss was encouraging me to go into business, but I started volunteering at Psychiatric Institute, and I took a couple of social work classes, and they were interesting to me, basically, because it was more of what I always did anyway. And at the time, I was in therapy, and had been in therapy since I was about eighteen. Seventeen? Seventeen or eighteen, was when I first started therapy. And I'm sure that part of my wanting to become a therapist was because I had spent so many years in therapy.

INT: What were the issues you were working on in therapy?

RITA: My "mudda." (laughs)

INT: Just your mother. That was the major issue.

RITA: Mostly. Mostly.

INT: For thirteen years.

RITA: Mm-hm. Yeah.

INT: Do you think you've...gotten there?

RITA: There were times where I thought that I had gotten there. You know? Lately I'm not so sure. Where I got was that whatever the issues were that I had with my parents, they no longer stopped me from going on with my life. But yes, I certainly have issues with them. I mean, that will never stop.

INT: What's it like for you to be a psychotherapist? To have people come in and tell you their problems, and their dark side? How do you come home with that at the end of the day? Where do you put it?

RITA: I love what I do. I'm very good at what I do. I feel very good about being able to have a role in making people's lives better. I was trained by my mother to be a therapist. You know, I've had a lot of years of training of how to listen, and it was almost easier -- it **is** easier -- to do it with other people, you know, than with your own parents. Getting training, going on for psychoanalytic training, gave me more and more tools of how to help people, rather than just having to help my parents, and being a parent to them.

I feel good about what I do. At times I find it exhausting. It's harder now that I'm a parent to be a therapist.

INT: Why?

RITA: I feel like I have only so much energy, emotional energy, and I need to have most of it available to parent.

INT: So it drains you, the job.

RITA: Oh, yeah. Yeah. It's also **incredibly** rewarding. I mean, when I know that, through the therapy someone has been able to remove, or work through, or go someplace else with their lives, it's just such a wonderful feeling. And it's such a gift that people have given me, of allowing me to come into their lives that way. It's wonderful.

INT: So you find it a very rewarding experience, your job.

RITA: Yeah.

INT: How do you balance your work needs and your family needs?

RITA: I work very few hours. Is basically what I do. If I were doing it full-time, I couldn't balance it. I think it would be too hard for me.

INT: Are you comfortable with that?

RITA: Yeah. Yeah. And it's one of the few jobs that someone could have, where I can schedule things based on my needs. If Elizabeth has, and she does, she has a chorus concert next week. Well, I'm not working that night. I re-shifted everybody someplace else. And I don't have to answer to anyone, except for working that out with the people whose appointments I have to change. It's wonderful. I mean, I have an enormous amount of freedom. If Elizabeth's home sick, I just don't go to work. You know, whatever. I really had to make, when I had her, I remember at the beginning feeling torn. Well, how can I work this out? You know. I don't **have** to work it out. My priority is her. You know, and yes it will be, the abandonment issue will be made harder for my patient, but hey, she comes first. You know, I don't need her still sitting on somebody's couch, you know. (laughs) Which she probably will anyway, but I don't need to add to those issues for her. So, it's an exhausting job, it's an emotionally very draining job. But I try to keep the parameters so that it's not too hard. I screen my patients very carefully. I don't take people who are suicidal. I don't take people who need me on call 24 hours a day, because I can't do that when I have a family.

INT: How do you parent? How do you see yourself parenting, and how do you handle discipline with Elizabeth, and what are your goals for her?

RITA: How do I see myself parenting. I do the best that I can, like everybody else does. I think that I have a very close relationship with her. I think that because of who I am, I tend to raise issues with her all the time. I try to keep communication going. That's a goal of mine, that...that I know what's going on in her life. I know that she needs to have distance and privacy, especially as she becomes a teenager. But I'm not someone who skirts around issues. If she drops a clue, I pick it up. And I try to make it okay for her to say things to me that are not okay. You know? She doesn't have to tell me only good things. She doesn't have to...be nice to me all the time. You know, I can accept...

INT: You can handle that.

RITA: Yeah. That's okay with me. She can be angry at me, she can, you know. I mean, I guess what I try and do is bring my understanding of human development into parenting. And sometimes I do a better job, and (laughs) sometimes I do a worse job, you know. I'm sure that I make lots of mistakes. And I have no problem telling her when I make a mistake, and I know that I've done something wrong. You know, that I've handled something badly. I will tell her that. You know, that I screwed this one up. I'm sorry. You know. We need to go on from here. What can I do, whatever, and that kind of thing.

INT: How about discipline issues? How is that handled?

RITA: She's such an easy kid, that it really hasn't been an issue. I mean, I once said to Ray, there are times where I'll say to her, "You have to take a shower. You have to take a shower, you have to take a shower." And finally, I'll start to count. And Ray said, "What happens if she doesn't do it?" (laughs) And I said, "I have **no** damn idea." Because I have never had to discipline her beyond her knowing what I wanted, you know. And she'll...I mean, it happened last night. She was very upset with me that she didn't have time to play yesterday, and she went to bed mad at me, because I wouldn't let her play. And I said, "I'm really sorry, but you had to finish your homework, you had to practice your violin, you had to take a shower. I'm sorry there wasn't time for you to play." "I'm really mad!" "Yeah, I'm sure you are." (laughs) It's like, it never goes past that with her. If there's something I need her to do that she doesn't want to do, we talk about it. She's a very easy kid. I mean, she's never pushed.

INT: So discipline has never been an issue.

RITA: I've actually said to Ray, "What would we use as a way of...let's say she does something terrible. What the hell would we do?" And we both said, and I'm thinking, take away TV. She doesn't like to watch TV, so that's no issue. Take away going to the movies? She hates movies. The things that she loves the most are reading. I'm not going to take away reading. I mean, I could never do that to her. And it would be counter-productive as far as I'm concerned. I do things like, "Elizabeth, if you don't finish dinner, you can't have dessert." (laughs) That's as far as it's ever had to be. I mean, when she was little, I used to say things like, "If you don't put your toys away, they're not going to be here tomorrow morning. They'll be in a bag in another room."

INT: She'll get them out of the bag. (laughs)

RITA: "Okay!" You know, it's never. And I wonder what I will do. I have no idea.

INT: What about goals for her? What would you like to see her become?

RITA: I'd like to see her be a happy, productive person. That's really my goal for her. She's very bright. She's very gifted in many ways. I'd like to see her feel good about herself, and able to achieve whatever she wants to go for. Which I'm sure is the same as what every parent wants

for their child. I have no idea who she will be when she grows up. What she will choose to do. I don't have a clue. She has certain areas in which she is very talented, and I could see her doing well. She's **very** gifted in math.

(END TAPE EIGHT, SIDE ONE)

(TAPE EIGHT, SIDE TWO)

RITA: I would also like to see her be much more aware of how terrific she is. She tends to be very down on herself, and that, I think, is part of being ten. But she always has been very critical of herself. And...she's very analytic. You know, she pulls situations apart and figures them out. (pause)

INT: How do you think she copes with difficult situations?

RITA: She tries very hard to understand them, is what she does. And...and she struggles with them. She's not...she's not like me in many ways. She's very different than I am. She's not thick-skinned. She's not quick-tempered. She's much more sensitive, and internalizes things more than I do. I throw it right back at them. You know, I spit it out somehow. She keeps it inside.

INT: Like Ray?

RITA: Yeah. And she tries to figure it out. And only when it gets so big that she can't contain it, does she then come out with it.

INT: She'll come to you.

RITA: Mm-hm. What'll happen is, she won't specifically say, "I need to talk to you." I'll find her crying, and sit down and say, "What are you crying about?" "I don't know." "Well, name two things that might be bothering you." (laughs) You know, and I have to go through this whole process with her to get her...

INT: You have to pull it out.

RITA: Yeah. She doesn't, she was very articulate when she was younger. Now she does not articulate what she's feeling that well. And yet, then she surprises me. Then she'll say things like, she had, her best friend when she started the school year sort of abandoned her for another kid, and it's been this whole, you know, saga through the year. We were sitting in the car driving someplace, to her riding lesson, and she said, "You know, at some point Maggie's going to find out that she's lost a lot of her friends because of what she is doing with this other girl, Tyler." And she's ten years old.

INT: She has real insight into people.

RITA: Yeah. And she'll articulate it in that way. And at the other, on the same hand, you can ask her, "I don't know. I don't know." You know, kind of stuff. And I think it will come together in some way for her, and she'll find times, I think the older she gets, the more mature she gets, the more she will be able to articulate, because I think she has that ability. I think that right now it's still hard to formulate some of the ideas. But she works very hard at figuring stuff out. You know. And yet she is very like me in many ways, and very much like Ray. Is it possible we left something out, (interviewer's name)? (laughs)

INT: We're almost there. I guess I would ask you what you do to enjoy yourself. How do you have fun?

RITA: I love to read. I always have.

INT: Like your mother.

RITA: Like my mother and like my daughter. I enjoy being with friends. I love to cook. I love to bake. I love to garden. I love to travel, which we do a lot of. I do whatever I need to do at that moment that makes me happy.

INT: But you're capable of being happy.

RITA: Oh, yeah. I mean, I'm also capable of very deep depressions. But I can have a good time. I'm not...however, I mean, I think that most people see me as being very serious, and I **am** very serious. I'm not playful. I mean, I have to work hard to be playful. I remember people saying to me, and they still do, "You don't smile enough." Well, I guess I don't, you know, by some people's standards. I smile when I want to smile. (laughs) But at the same time, I think I have a pretty good sense of humor, and I can find humor in certain things.

INT: But you're capable of happiness.

RITA: Yeah.

INT: Any regrets, looking back on your life at this point?

RITA: Hm. I think that the things that I went through made me who I am, and I'm pretty comfortable with who I am, so I can't say that I wish that I hadn't gotten married to Bernie when I did, because I think I got a lot out of going through that experience. I guess my regrets would be...not having been able to make certain choices in my life sooner, like...but I don't think I could have done it any differently. I did it how I had to do it. But had I gone to graduate school earlier, and gotten my career started earlier, it might have worked out better. Had Ray and I...decided earlier in our relationship to have a child, we might have been more successful in having a child earlier, and that probably would have worked out better. It would have given us the option of having a second child. But none of the **decisions** that I've made were bad decisions. You know, they were what I needed to do at the time, and...it's worked out. You know, and in the long run it's worked out.

INT: And you're happy where you are now.

RITA: Yeah. I mean, I'd like to be further along in certain ways. I'm ready to retire. I wish I had enough money to do that. I wish I had enough money to buy a new car. (laughs) Because ours is eleven years old. Stuff like that, you know. I mean, there are things that I would like in my life. I wish I had the ability to support my parents financially where they didn't feel like they were taking away something that I had, from me, you know, kind of thing. But basically I have achieved much more in my life than I ever imagined. You know, I've come a long way, baby, kind of thing.

INT: I guess my final question would be, how do you feel that the Holocaust has impacted on you in your life?

RITA: Oh, G-d, tremendously. Tremendously. I mean, it's shaped my whole life. Because...because it made my parents who they were, they raised me a certain way. Because of the way that they raised me, I am who I am. Not having an extended family is something that pains me a lot. It's very, it touches me all the time. And that's one thing that I'm sad for, for Elizabeth. Elizabeth doesn't have cousins galore. She doesn't have, she is more fortunate in that she still has both sets of grandparents, but she does not have a large extended family by any means. And that makes me sad for me, and it makes me sad for her. There is a sense of family, but not a sense that, if you don't like this cousin, you can spend time with another cousin. It's like you've got very few.

Maybe the other thing is that...the depressive parts of my personality, I think are linked...in some fundamental way to the Holocaust. I think that my mother's sadness, her...holding onto me so tight, have a lot to do with my sadness, and my depression. Her sense of having to protect me, left me with this wariness of the world. That I see other people don't have. I mean, Ray doesn't have it. You know, Ray's not afraid of the world. And on some levels, I'm enough of a fighter that I'm not either. I know that whatever's out there I can lick, you know, kind of thing. But that sense that there's such fundamental evil out there, or that somehow our lives have been disrupted to such a deep extent. I mean, I think that that comes from that.

In terms of my dad, my father is a very happy man on some level. He's an optimist. To him, life is a joy. On some level, the glass is always half-full. And I think had the war not touched him, he would have been even more so. And maybe I could have gotten more of that from him. Though my guess is, I mean, a basic fundamental way my life was touched: Had there not been a war, there is no fucking way that my parents would have been together.

INT: It was an accident of...

RITA: Of fate. You know, it was...they never would have crossed paths, because their lives were so different. Their families were so different. They never would, I don't think my mother would have reached out to a man like my father in any way, had she not been so bereft. So, I mean, I think that I wouldn't be here, were it not for the Holocaust. I would be somebody

different, you know. A product of some other...union between two people. So I think in a very real way, I wouldn't be here were it not for the Holocaust, and I wouldn't be who I am, you know.

INT: Is there anything else you'd like to add to this interview?

RITA: My G-d, I can't think that there's anything I haven't said! (laughter) I don't think so. I mean, certainly, if when you go through this, if there are gaps or questions, I'll be very happy to answer them. But I can't imagine what I haven't covered.

INT: I want to thank you very much.

RITA: Oh, you're very welcome.

(END OF INTERVIEW)