

Vera Nissenson Lyons
Narrator

Rhoda Lewin
Interviewer

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Lyons's home, St. Louis Park, Minnesota

Vera Nissenson Lyons - VL
Rhoda Lewin - RL

RL: Okay.

VL: I'm Vera Lyons and I am sixty-two years old. No, I'll take that back. I'm sixty-two years young. I'm interested in everything. And my major interest is cooking. In this respect, I think cooking can be fun. And I take advantage of all kinds of shortcuts. I don't believe in starting with killing the cow and doing everything by hand. If there are things available, I improvise and I use whatever products are available. My one restriction is, however, that I do keep kosher, which makes it a little difficult. However, I have learned to read labels. And I . . . it has come into a very good stead for me because I get much better buys that way. And the reason I read labels, of course, is to find out if the product is usable for me and from the *kashrus* [kosher] point of view.

But I enjoy teaching young marrieds to cook the traditional old dishes. However, I cook them in a much faster way than my mother ever did. And furthermore, I cook well in advance of a holiday and my freezer is the kind of capacious type of freezer whereas if my husband should call me up and says I'm bringing somebody for dinner, it doesn't scare me, because I simply go to the freezer and take out . . . And usually I cook when I feel like cooking. And I stock it up. And that's how it works. And for me it works very well.

I don't subscribe to the school that things from the freezer don't taste as good as fresh. I don't believe it. I think if you put in something good, out comes something good. And as I said, I like to improvise; I like to cook with a flair. I never use a recipe the way it's written. I always manage to doctor it up in some way, I just throw in a little wine, can't hurt. And I do all the things that make cooking fun rather than a chore. And this is the thing I'd like to leave to posterity [chuckles] if such a thing is possible, that all these traditional dishes don't have to be made in the traditional way by taking the chicken to the [unclear] to kill. It just doesn't . . . isn't necessary. And that's been my philosophy.

And I'm active in many, many organizations and have headed organizations. One of them is Hadassah. And I've worked in Hadassah for many, many years, being president at one time. Now I'm regional Zionist affairs chairman. I am sometimes upset by certain things and I'm very outspoken.

RL: And now let's talk about . . . oh, when you came to this country, what life was like as a child. Before you came and how you lived after you came here.

VL: Alright. We were brought here by an uncle of mine, a Rabbi Friedman whose sons, Isadore, Dr. Isadore and Dr. Harry, are my first cousins. Now, in those days, it was not at all unusual to bring over relatives because there was this feeling of kinship to relatives that you hadn't even remembered, particularly. My father in law brought over practically an entire Hungarian village. Because he had . . . he brought his sisters, and his sister with her children, and cousins, and just [unclear] but that was not an unusual . . . that was the kind of thing one did from a feeling of [unclear]. And it was . . . that's how we got to the United States.

And I had never even heard of this aunt of mine. My mother talked vaguely about some sisters. I had never seen her. Now they also brought over another sister of theirs with four children. Wait a minute . . . no, I think it was four children. I don't even remember anymore. And it was . . . everybody did that! We were housed, we lived in their house on Knox Avenue North, and we . . . I came in the winter of 1924. I was about twelve at the time. And the thing that amazed me most of all was the *smallness* of Minneapolis in terms of the little houses and the dense snow. The reason for that was that before we got to this country, my father, who was a very orthodox rabbi, very orthodox—however, was a very, very progressive thinker. And he felt that as long as we were in Europe, it would be *stupid* not to see the capitals of Europe.

So he took us on a tour of Paris. I remember the Palace of Versailles and that before we went there on our own, after I . . . long after I was married, I described the Hall of Mirrors to perfection to my husband. We went to Berlin because there was a famous synagogue my father wanted to see. We went to Marseilles and we went to Cherbourg. We went to Riga, Latvia, and the reason for that was because my brother who was a student at the university, two hundred . . . approximately two hundred miles—or two hundred *verst* as the Russians figured it—from the small town Krivoy Rog, where we lived, was subject to the draft. And he and a fellow student decided to escape and *walked* by night and slept in haystacks by day to get to Latvia, which was in the furthestmost corner of . . . which is now the U.S.S.R., but at that time, Latvia was an independent republic.

RL: Mmmm-hmmm.

VL: And this young chap had a cousin living in Riga, and he thought that maybe they could give him sanctuary. And thus escape service in the Russian army. That's exactly what happened with a slight variation. My brother fell in love with a beautiful woman [chuckles] who was the daughter of this very wealthy man who was related to this student friend of his and they proceeded to get married. And we on our way to America had to stop and see the *machatanim* [the parents of the brother's new bride]. So this is how we made the circuitous trip through Europe.

RL: This was a very uncommon thing though, wasn't it?

VL: It's really uncommon. But my father was a very uncommon man. *Way* ahead of his . . . not only his generation, but *extremely* sophisticated in terms of the fact that here was a small town

orthodox rabbi; he was . . . and so well read that he knew there was such a thing as the Hall of Mirrors. He knew that there were certain wonderful things to be seen in the big cities of Europe. And he was going to see them if he had the opportunity, which he did.

RL: Well, how many of you children were there?

VL: There were only two of us.

RL: Oh. Okay.

VL: My brother is fourteen years my senior, which means that he was old enough to get married and I was just a youngster at the time. On my first . . . so my first view of Minneapolis, particularly since our relatives crossed up on...on directions and forgot to [unclear] people. And we came by train from Ellis Island where we were interned for a couple of weeks because we were all undergoing . . . going through the most rigorous kind of examinations. And unfortunately, many, many Jews [unclear] Ellis Island were turned back because they had like trachoma, or some other...or tuberculosis, or some other illness. We traveled, of course, through that way not in first class. Steerage was a [unclear] and I shall never forget that trip. Because [chuckles] it was . . . according to, I think, modern shipping, we should have been *sunk*. It was a horrible thing. And it took us about eight days to cross the Atlantic Ocean. [Ellis Island records show that an individual fitting the profile of Vera's father named Schmuel Nissenson, aged fifty and from Russia, was included on the passenger list for the T.S.S. Zeeland, which arrived from Cherbourg, France, to Ellis Island on February 9, 1924.]

And we finally arrived in Ellis Island. And we were interned there, I think, for a couple of weeks. And we had relatives in Philadelphia who came to see us, and they really wanted us to stay there. But no, my father decided that he was going to Minneapolis, Minnesota, because he had a congregation waiting for him. That was how we could get here to America [unclear]. Alright. This congregation turned out to be a little synagogue on Seventeenth Avenue South, known as a "Rumanian Schul" [Romanian congregation] and afterwards, my father became the rabbi at B'nai Abraham Schul, which was the *real* "Rumanian Schul." Then we moved North; but for a period of time we lived South. And it was a very traumatic thing for me, living South, because I was thrown in with people who were non-immigrants. Who were non-Jewish, for one thing, and non-immigrants.

And I remember a very traumatic experience one day when I was jumping rope. And my English was very . . . not colloquial. And I said to the kid, "I'm very fond of jumping rope." [Unclear] use the word 'fond' in that fashion [unclear]. And they started to chant, "Greenhorn, greenhorn, greenhorn!" You know. So my life was not exactly one of gaiety. Furthermore, because my father was orthodox, I stayed out on every . . . on all holidays, and some of which they'd never even *heard* of, so that made it a little difficult. And my name being Nissenson, which didn't sound particularly Jewish, nor did I look very Jewish because my hair at that time was sort of reddish blonde. It made it very hard to convince the teacher that I wasn't [unclear]. So my life was not exactly a bed of roses at the time.

But I had a very positive home and I never questioned these things. And furthermore, I had a wonderful relationship with my father, who was a very, very understanding and warm human being. And it was the [unclear]. I had that kind of relationship with him. And he had a philosophy, which I wish were more prevalent today. His basic philosophy in life was that one never shuns another believer. And it manifested itself in many, many ways. He never could insult anyone, because he said that that was a greater sin than breaking [unclear]. And that is why he was a . . . to *me*, a symbol of everything that was good and everything that was [unclear]. And this is the kind of [unclear] he gave to me. This is why Judaism, to me, is very important and has . . . it has so much value. Because he instilled his values, I don't know whether I [unclear].

And this is the kind of person he was. There wasn't a Friday night that we didn't sit down with a table full of [unclear]. I always laugh say the reason I got to like to eat the chicken legs and the chicken neck was that's all we . . . my mother and I ever got to eat, because the one chicken doesn't go far, when there are four strangers sitting at the table. And there wasn't a Friday night, nor do I remember a holiday, where somebody, some stranger wasn't there to have dinner. My father would go to the synagogue if there were people who didn't have a place to sleep. [Unclear]. This is the kind of man that he was. So . . . and this was his religious belief, that [unclear], charity, it's fundamentally being nice and being warm and being good [unclear]. But it's with the young that you . . . I don't know if I should . . . I should tell the story to you, I've told it so much, I've laughed so many times over it.

My father used to wear a certain kind of garment that had . . . that was made by Maurice L. Rothschild [& Company]. They used to have store on [unclear]. And that particular garment, an orthodox Jew has to have it made especially in which the lining does not have a mixture of cotton and linen. It has to be . . . there cannot be a mixture of the two. So Maurice L. Rothschild, at that time, were equipped make these kind of garments. So he would need me. I was to choose . . . help him choose the garment, the quality of the materials that were [unclear]. But he went ahead of you and [unclear] of course. And I would [unclear]. And I . . . as I was approaching them, I saw my father backed up against the wall of the [unclear] and a man standing there, pointing his finger like this and talking very vehemently. And [unclear] he left. So I didn't get close to my father until I saw the man leave. And as the man was leaving, I said to him, when he left I came up to my father and I said to him, "What was he trying to do? What was he talking to you about with such feeling?" He said, "The *meshugganah* [crazy person] was trying to convert me. So I said [unclear]." [Unclear].

And that is the way I was taught many of the principles of behaving. By example, by . . . I think he led mainly by example. And that's the kind of thing that made a very lasting impression on me. And that is why I feel so wealthy in having had this kind of a background. And when I got married, I chose a man who would meet my father's expectations in religiosity, and in knowledge, mainly. Because I was going with somebody else. And I *never* considered marrying this chap. And when I broke up with this fellow, my father . . . I did it because . . . Meanwhile, I had met my husband. And he . . . after knowing him very briefly, I realized that this was the kind of fellow who my father would be proud to have as a son in law.

So . . . but nevertheless, it was kind of a wrench to break up with someone you've been going with for a long time. Although I had no intention of marrying him. I couldn't see him . . .

couldn't see the connection between this chap and my father. So I was crying one night in my bed when my father came in. He said, "Why are you crying? Are you crying because you broke up with that other fellow? [Unclear] you love him. I'll teach him. Don't *worry* about it." This is the kind of man that he was. And these are the kind of things that . . . that you don't forget! These are the kind of things that shape your life. These are the kinds of things that give you a sense of value. And living as an immigrant in a community like that, is . . . it's very, very interesting, yet traumatic.

And I feel for every immigrant. The adjustment is unbelievable. You have . . . it is . . . I don't know whether it's more difficult for older people than young. Younger people learn fast, but younger people suffer a great deal from being different from their peers. For instance, I was born, and then shortly after birth they pierced my ears and I wore little golden earrings. The first thing I did when I came to America, I took a look, and no little kids wear earrings. *Out* came those earrings. And I wore clip-on earrings when I got to be an adult, because in all these years I never wore them. I wouldn't. That was a sign of being an immigrant, a greenhorn, which was probably an appellation that was hated most by Jews.

I went . . . when I came to this country, I went for a very brief period to a school, a summer school to learn English. And this was very . . . it was very . . . it was kind of a school. [Chuckles] There were children and there were adults, and there was an admixture, and we all read The Little Red Hen.

RL: [Chuckles]

VL: And it, and the reason . . . People say to me, "I can't understand why it is you were almost an adult and you have no accent." And the reason for that is: is that which I thought was traumatic turned out to be the best thing that ever happened to me. Because we moved away from the North Side where I would be hearing and being . . . not have to learn English as fast, and moved to the South Side where I was in a group of Americans. Which was probably the greatest thing that ever happened to me. Which made me talk . . . I made a conscious effort to forget Russian and to think in English. And when I think of it now, at that time it was very difficult. But now I think it was a great blessing that it happened to me.

RL: Mmmm-hmmm.

VL: So coming to this country, I can appreciate what immigrants to any country go through. The greatest trauma is to listen to people talk around you and you can't understand what they're saying. And not to be able to comprehend the simplest thing and you think to yourself, here I am, grown, and I don't understand. So you make a tremendous effort. But if you're older, an adult coming here has even a greater trauma, because it's hard to learn as you get older, it's very difficult. And many people were involved in scratching out a living and couldn't go to learn how to speak English. And there were . . . and then, of course, the milieu in which they moved was non-English speaking, so they didn't have to. So they didn't. And it's . . . if they were, if they did learn how to speak English, it was because they made a conscious effort or they were young enough to be influenced by their peers.

And living in those days was a really . . . it was really interesting. You didn't . . . we all lived on an economic level that was almost similar. I didn't know any rich people. Not personally. Of course, there . . . I have heard that in this beautiful house in Homewood lived a very wealthy man. But wealth wasn't a divider. It wasn't a . . . the Jewish community was, I think, cohesive, even though there was a wealthier element. There wasn't an economic stratification as there is now. And I think mainly because the old traditions of Europe where money wasn't the important thing, where what a man knew, whether he was a [unclear], I think that's why the stratification was not as . . . as intense as it is now, where society is based on economic level. And it makes a difference.

So this is . . . this is the way I grew up. And I grew up not resenting the values imposed on me, and the restrictions imposed on me. I had . . . I don't know whether I was unusual in that respect. If I rebelled, it was an unconscious rebellion. I didn't hold anyone responsible. I mean, I didn't blame my parents for restricting my activities. I just didn't. I don't . . . and I don't think I was unusual in that. I don't think that rebellion was prevalent as it is now. Because, for one thing, I think that the fact that parents laid down laws, laid down the rules, made it easier, really, for children. It's very hard to have to make . . . strike out a path for yourself. It's much easier to go along that trodden path. So maybe I grew up in the times where that was the thing; or maybe I didn't feel any rebellion because I had an understanding parent, or parents. Actually, my father was much more influential in my life than my mother. My mother worshiped my father. Whatever he said was absolutely fantastic.

And I always carried in my mind, what would my father think? If I did anything. How would it sit with him? How would it . . .? He never even asked me, "What are you taking at the university?" He assumed I was so bright, that if I carved out a career for myself, then I knew what I was going to take. And he . . . he never doubted the fact that I was going to . . . he had this wonderful . . . Well, I think it is a quality of . . . to give self-confidence to me. And I think this is something that if any young parent could learn, a whole lot of problems of the world would be solved. To make you feel that you can do anything. This is a quality [unclear]. And it is fantastic. It's . . . I never doubted my [unclear], my ability. I knew I *could*. And that's the confidence that he instilled in me.

Now I always had a feeling of . . . I have a sense of pride. Even though my clothes weren't fashionable. Fashionable! My mother used to buy remnants, and before each [unclear] I'd sit down and run up a dress. That's how I got clothes. And I married a poor lawyer. So for the first five years of our married life we lived with my parents, in the same bedroom that I . . . and we also added a son to that bedroom. And finally, I graduated . . . we got married during the time I was a senior at the university. I graduated and I got a job for ninety dollars a month and we saved enough money up for . . . I was making . . .

[Buzzer rings]

VL: . . . to put a down payment on a little house. But of course that didn't mean that I could go to the grocery store or to the meat market and buy things. So my father who was a *shochet*, a ritual slaughterer, would bring home all kinds of packages of things that nobody wanted to buy like liver [unclear], spleen, sweetbreads, oxtail. And I learned how to cook these exotic things

because I didn't know how to go in and buy a pound of hamburger because I didn't have any money. In the second place, I had all this meat and I improvised ways of cooking it. And my kids, for a long time, didn't know that you didn't make hamburgers out of sweetbreads.

RL: [Chuckles]

VL: And this is how we lived. And I don't think that . . . it certainly didn't hurt me. I think it gave me a fantastic kind of background that I wouldn't trade with anybody.

RL: What year was it that you got married?

VL: 1920 . . . I got married in 1935 and came here in 1920. 1935 was the height of the Depression. My husband graduated law school in 1934. Nobody needed a lawyer. And I . . . the reason I took social work, because . . . is that was the one field that was open. And I worked for the department of public welfare and [unclear] I made the [unclear] sum of ninety dollars a month. It was an awful lot of money compared to nothing. So and we didn't have to pay rent, we lived with my folks, so we accumulated five hundred dollars, which was the down payment for our house. It was terrific.

RL: So that would have been in 1940 or so?

VL: We bought our house in nineteen . . . we got married in 1935. Nineteen thirty . . . no. It had to be 1940. Or maybe just before. I really don't remember. Dates have a way of getting mixed up in my mind.

RL: Mmmm-hmmm. Now when you got married and . . . well, before you were married, too. Because, let's see, when you got married, you were how old?

VL: Twenty-two. I was an old maid according to my mother. [Chuckles]

RL: [Chuckles] What had your social life been like before you got married?

VL: Oh! We had made . . . my social life was centered around the Talmud Torah because, of course, I went to the Talmud Torah. Everybody did. And I walked from . . . we lived at 923 Morgan and I walked to [725] Fremont [Avenue North]. There was no other way of transportation. My father certainly didn't have a car and I didn't know of anybody else who had a car. And walking was part of the thing we did. I walked to North High School. You know, back and forth, and then to the Talmud Torah. And it . . . it didn't....

[Recording interruption]

[Tape 1 Side B]

VL: It was . . . and this whole . . . we were all on a similar economic level. So all my friends were in the same pot, and we all did the same thing. But the . . . my whole social life was centered around, at that time, mainly, until I went to college, around the Talmud Torah. And

even after I was married, because we had a Talmud Torah alumni group and we had adult services because we couldn't afford to be members of the synagogue. And all this kind of cohesiveness was centered around an educational institution.

RL: Did you have study group or classes?

VL: No.

RL: Or parties or . . . ?

VL: We had parties. We had alumni meetings, which were our whole social life. It was at parties. And . . . until we were married. Because I remember one party, four of us were sitting . . . we could barely get to the table because we tummies yea big, we were pregnant. And . . . but our whole life was centered around that kind of thing. First of all, it was inexpensive. [Unclear] and money was certainly very tight. And all our . . . my friends and I, girlfriends from school, I mean, we did those things that people . . . I don't know what the people, young children do nowadays. I didn't . . . the boys did belong to Cub Scouts. I was not a Girl Scout. But I took piano lessons because my father said [unclear]. And I don't know where he got the money, but he bought this piano, and we had it for many years and I took piano lessons. I never was very good at it. And I don't know where I got the time to practice, because between school and Talmud Torah five days a week . . . yes, including [unclear], five days a week. It was pretty rugged. And the interminable holidays that always came when we didn't . . . you didn't do things.

RL: Mmmm-hmmm.

VL: So yes, it . . . and we did all the things that kids do. [Unclear]. When I was a little girl, we lived on the South Side. I was a little girl. I was twelve. There was one man who was a milkman. And he had a . . . and of course the milk was delivered in wagons, with a horse and wagon. And he had on his yard an abandoned big milk wagon. So the kids would then . . . in the neighborhood, got together and that was our playhouse. And we used to dress up, you know, in old clothes. We did all the things that you read about in books, of another century almost. Because there wasn't *organized* activity.

And parents weren't busy taking their kids from one organized activity to another organized activity. The parents assumed that their kids would get along. They . . . what were they doing? They were playing. So kids were very inventive. Their games were . . . were extremely non-regulated, which is a . . . I think a wonderful thing. It gave vent to imagination. It made people . . . it made the children *think*. You . . . of course you went to the library, and you read a great deal. All the kids did. Besides, you got a gold star if you read a certain number of books. So life was much simpler, but I think much richer. Much richer.

The parents had their role. And the children had their role. And I think there was a kind of cohesiveness in family life that is unfortunately absent, because there's too much locomotion. Everybody's going here and there and everywhere. You're being dragged to a Little League, you have to make a wrestling match, you have to go to this event, you have to go to that event. And

the children are really torn. And I don't . . . I honestly don't think they enjoy themselves as much as we did. I really don't think so.

But I think that the spirit of competitiveness that is instilled in a child from the time he's a wee tot has a negative effect on his personality and carries over into later life, making it difficult if you don't make the grade in a certain sense. And you . . . there is no opportunity for the expansion of a personality as a *person* without having to be a *somebody*. And I think it all stems from this . . . this competitiveness that we instill in our kids from the time they're infants. And it's wrong. I . . . I think it's . . . I think it's *sad*. I think it's *tragic*. And mainly I think it is doing our children a disservice. We kill the inventiveness that is *part* of childhood. Everything is ready-made. And we . . . and children expect—only because parents have led them to expect certain things. And this is why I think that so many young people, as they find the realism of life, [unclear] this, a dream-like [unclear].

RL: Mmmm-hmmm.

VL: And that's . . . that's sad. But I think it stems from way back. And that . . . that's to me the most unfortunate aspect of modern society. I don't know whether you can change it. I think you can in trying in your own circle of . . . family circle, to instill values that are based on other than competitive reasons. I think you can do it. [Unclear]. But I think it can be done.

This was in the 1920s. There was a very active Jewish community made up mainly of migrants from Romania.

RL: Mmmm-hmmm.

VL: And we were sort of interlopers, you know, being from Russia. The community was very active, and it was a very circumscribed area around Thirteenth Avenue South and Ninth Street and around that area. And there were two synagogues, as a matter of fact. There was the original B'nai Emet...B'nai Abraham Synagogue. And my father was the Rabbi of the B'nai Abraham Synagogue. And he was the only . . . and it was very strange, because his congregants were all Romanian, and we were Russians.

And they . . . and the customs were a little different. But the community was very, very active. It was a very cohesive community. And the South Side Neighborhood House was a focal point of all social life. And all the clubs, just like the Emanuel Cohen Center here, was a focal point. And besides, as I said before, the Talmud Torah was my . . . part of my youthful social life. It was the community center was my . . . part of my youthful social life. But it was a different kind of community center. It didn't have a gym. It didn't have any kind of facilities. It had only meeting facilities. And it was . . . and it had clubs of every kind, interest groups. And they had an immigration . . . as a matter of fact, my husband headed . . . was active in teaching new immigrants how to get citizenship. So they had a very . . . because that was a very important part of becoming an American, to become a citizen. That was the dream of all immigrants.

But the South Side had a very definite community. And it was a list . . . it was a very cohesive community. And it . . . the wealthier you got, economically, you moved from the South Side to

the North Side. Although there was a group of fairly wealthy South Side Jews. But, by and large, the wealth of the Jewish community congregated in the Homewood area. And they became the nucleus for the conservative movement in Minneapolis.

RL: Yes. You said though that you . . . the children you played with in the neighborhood you lived in were not Jewish.

VL: Well, I played with two kinds. But they were . . . I played with Jewish children, but I lived, for a period, on . . . away from the Jewish community, because we lived on Seventeenth Avenue South, which was *not* a Jewish community. And after my father became . . . because he was the Rabbi of the Seventeenth Avenue Synagogue, which was composed of Romanian Jews but it was sort of a strange . . . a strangeness where they were a little bit off color, and with their families that were produced. As you're recording, I shouldn't tell you this. They were the [unclear] of that [unclear].

RL: Right.

VL: So that was that . . . so where I lived for our first few years in that community and that area, and because . . . remember, transportation was a problem. And transportation was your two legs.

RL: Mmmm-hmmm.

VL: So then when we moved and my father became the Rabbi of the B'nai Abraham Synagogue, we moved into the area which was more Jewish. And then I . . . by that time I was already an American, very Americanized. I spoke English fluently, and I was already in school. You know, I had achieved all the symbols of Americanism already by that time. So . . . it didn't matter anymore, but originally, it was very difficult for me.

RL: How many people would you say did go to college? Was this rare that you, a girl, was going to college?

VL: No.

RL: Or was everybody going [unclear]?

VL: No, it was not rare at all. It was not rare among the Jewish people—let us put it that way. Because . . . because they were so steeped in the importance of education that even money was no bar. If you . . . absence of money. You worked. There was a certain grocery man who said he put more dentists in school than anybody else. [Chuckles]

RL: Mmmm-hmmm.

VL: You worked. There was no one that didn't work their way through school—or on a loan. You know, my husband, for ten years after he graduated, was paying off loans. My sister in laws worked in the dime store. They did anything. The difficulty with me not being able to work was that I had to observe the Sabbath. And it was very hard to get a job if you couldn't work on

Saturdays. So my father . . . I don't know where he got the money. But somehow or other . . . I . . . and of course tuition was minimal. But it was not at all . . . it was *the* thing. I mean, every . . . at least of the Jewish kids that I knew, they all went to school, all went to college. That was the thing to do. That was what your parents [unclear] and strove for. They couldn't get the education but, by golly, their kids would. And they did. Very, very strong emphasis on education.

RL: Mmmm-hmmm.

VL: Because that's the . . . the Jewish ethic.

RL: Now we hear . . . when we talk about the 1930s, we hear an awful lot about anti-Semitism. [Unclear].

VL: Yes. Yes, there was. A *tremendous* amount of anti-Semitism. We had a very traumatic personal experience. When we were ready to buy a little house, and for having lived five years with my parents, married in 1935, and I already had a child. And we had money to buy a house. We saw a nice little house on Twenty-Fifth Avenue North for thirty-nine hundred dollars. It was perfect. We could afford it, we could [unclear] it. It was ready. And a man by the name of Gustafson—he was in the [unclear] business—owned the house.

By that time, my husband had already changed his name from Labovitz to Lyons, which is a story in itself, as to why he did it. Because of the anti-Semitic . . . because he was trying a lawsuit. And the opposing attorney kept mispronouncing his name to influence the jury. And my husband came home angry. He said, "I am going to change my name so *nobody* can mispronounce it and use it against me." And he did. And he took the literal translation of Labovitz to Lyons, which how we got our name.

RL: Mmmm.

VL: But in any case, to get back to the house. Our name was Arnold Lyons. You know, it doesn't sound Jewish. Arnold didn't look Jewish, he was blonde and tall. He looked . . . didn't have any of the characteristics that are stereotypes of a Jew. And he comes into Mr. Gustafson's office. He loved the house, and we loved it, and everything was beautiful. And he was ready to sign the papers. And [Gustafson] said, "You know, what Hitler is doing in Germany is terrific, they should have it over here." My husband said, "You can take your house and you know what you can do with it. I wouldn't *buy it* from anyone who had feelings like that. I am Jewish. And if that's the way you feel about it, I'm not doing business with you."

So he came home. And he told my father what had happened. [Unclear] said, "What do you mean?" He said, "[unclear]. You liked the house, it's [unclear] you're going to change his feelings about Judaism because you're not going to buy the house from him?" That was the old conception of you scratch a [unclear] you find [unclear]. Unfortunately. Unfortunately, [unclear] not a lot of cases, but in too many [unclear] and there was a *tremendous* amount. My husband applied to the FBI and he said that's [unclear] make a living. No. [Unclear]. The FBI didn't hire him. That's the way it was. And there was . . . I'll never forget when Father [Charles E.] Coughlin was invited to speak at the University and I was absolutely *furious*. [Father Charles E.

Coughlin was a Depression-era priest and radio commentator who became known for anti-Semitic speeches and writings.]

RL: Mmmm-hmmm.

VL: And the old principle was used: freedom of speech. I said, “Sure. Freedom of speech if somebody gets into a crowded theater and yells, ‘fire’—that’s freedom of speech?”

RL: Mmmm-hmmm.

VL: He’s inciting to riot. I said, “Where is the . . .? Where is the justice of this kind of thing? How do you rationalize letting a virulent anti-Semite talk in a house of learning that’s supposed to be teaching ethics of justice?” And that the answer was free speech.

RL: Mmmm. But it didn’t keep you from getting a job or [unclear]?

VL: It didn’t keep me from getting a job? No. They made us social workers to dole out relief.

RL: Mmmm-hmmm.

VL: You see? So I worked with the Department of Public Welfare. And I’d wager to say that nine-tenths of the department was made up of Jewish people. Because that was the only kind of a job you could get, was a job in social work. Or if you graduated in a field like medicine, for instance. But doctors didn’t starve quite as badly, but lawyers starved. Many lawyers sold shoes. Many engineers did the same. It’s very hard to assess why . . . whether anti-Semitism played a great role in job procurement because there was a *terrible* Depression on. So it’s very hard to . . . to say which is the cause and which is . . . you know, which is the effect. In other words, was there so much anti-Semitism because they blamed the Jews for the Depression? I wouldn’t be surprised if they did. They probably did. I think Jews have been used as scapegoats before whenever there’s a Depression. To this day, they say that you don’t have to go very far. You know why the oil prices are so high? If that goddamned Israel would only get off the map.

RL: Mmmm-hmmm.

VL: The Arabs would sell oil to the United States a lot cheaper. So, you know, and this kind of anti-Semitism is very smooth and unobtrusive when they say it. It’s definitely there. And for those of us who lived . . . who, the Nazi Holocaust, at least time-wise historically, not actively myself, but . . .

RL: But kind of . . .

VL: But it started psychologically. I *can’t possibly* not recognize the signs. And you know when I was a young . . . when I was young, before I came to the United States, I lived through all kinds of pogroms. Pogroms were something that every Jew [unclear] and suffered at. That was part of living as a Jew. You were subject to these terrible, terrible experiences. And I had one that . . . *many*. But one that I can never forget. That’s one that I did [unclear] in the beginning. Identified

so strongly, for that character and for that book that I . . . I started to have dreams again about that. The kind of dreams that I had when I first came to this country, of pogroms. You grow up very fast when you live through trauma. And so . . . it's very maturing, unfortunately.

I don't know. Let me explain. One of the most traumatic experiences . . . see, my father was a rabbi in a *shtetl*, in a small town in Ukraine. And as I said, my brother did not . . . my brother is fourteen years my senior, but did not study Russian or in a gymnasium [school] because a Jew was not eligible. So he studied in the Jewish school. Besides, he studied with my father. He studied . . . my brother studied in the Yeshiva until the age of nineteen. But surreptitiously, he studied Russian. And he took the tests at a university. He must have been pretty brainy, because he got in without having had any kind of schooling [unclear] but that's what he did on his own.

But he was in a . . . at a university in a city about two hundred miles away from our small town. Now in this small town we lived on a yard, a sort of a compound owned by one peasant, all the homes, and we rented from him. And they were double houses. And it was before the Bolshevik Revolution, it was before 1918, which was the Bolshevik Revolution. And we lived in the same house until we came to the United States. But in the interim, there was this change of government. But we lived under the czar's regime first. Well, the gentiles were . . .

[Telephone rings]

The gentiles were extreme, and the *church* was very, very anti-Semitic. *Extremely* anti-Semitic. The time of Easter holiday—they were Greek Orthodox—the Easter holidays coincided with Passover, because they used the lunar calendar. During the Easter holiday, you did not set foot outside of your house, because you would have been slaughtered. They . . . the idea of the Jews as Christ-killers was absolutely *indelible* in the minds of every peasant.

And this very big yard, this one peasant owned this whole ground, and we lived in a double house. And one night . . . there was another Jewish man who lived in that, in the second part of the house. He was, at that time, the head of a sugar refinery. You see, the Jewish people, not having the right to own land, had to be in commerce. The [unclear] so . . . and so they became the sort of the middle man in the business world.

One night there was a knock on the door, about nine o'clock at night. And a knock on the door at night didn't go well for the Jews. And a group of very drunk peasants with their faces masked walked into the house. And they demanded money from my father. Why did they demand money from my father? Because my father was the custodian of money collected by the Jewish community for dowries for widows and [unclear]. And that money my father kept between the leaves of one of his [unclear]. And these *goyim* knew that my father was the custodian of these funds. So they got good and drunk one night, and they came to take the money. And they were brandishing rifles with long bayonets and they were dragging the neighbor from next door between them, because they first stopped next door when they came to our house. And they said my father had this money and he'd better turn it over.

And despite my father's [unclear] which [unclear]. So they thought he was a Russian. There was a root cellar out in the yard, and anybody had . . . there weren't any basements under these

houses. You had a root cellar what where you kept your vegetables, and your produce, and whatever you could. Potatoes. You didn't keep very much, apples, probably cabbages. So they dragged these two men [unclear] they were so drunk they weren't about . . . they . . . meanwhile, they had wrecked the house looking for the money. But since they couldn't find any, they were going to kill him. So they dragged these two men down to the cellar. And we *never* expected to see them again.

But [unclear] and this was a big cellar. He sees the next man [unclear] my father [unclear] crawling out a window of the house. And this was the [unclear]. One man went down the steep ladder with my father and this man, because he was to kill them. And the other two stood with big bayonets that they had. It was pitch dark in the cellar and it was at night and [unclear] really dark in the cellar. So they lit a candle. But there was nowhere to shoot.

So my father said to them, to this man who was down there with them, asked permission to say a prayer before the shot. And he started to pray [unclear] and has he said [unclear] the candle blew out. And my father was smart enough to grab this neighbor and *pull* him behind a sack of potatoes. This guy was so drunk and he . . . and it was the fellow from up on . . . standing on top said, "Did you already shoot the [unclear]? Did you?" He said, "I can't find them!" So they said, "Oh, I *will* shoot him." And the guy said, "Don't! Don't! It's dark in here. Don't shoot! You'll kill me!" So they said, "Ah, let's forget the whole thing." This is [unclear]. And this is the kind of dream....

[End of recording]

[Vera Nissenson Lyons was born on July 28, 1913 and died May 28, 2003.]

Transcription by Marilyn Olson-Trembl
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