

Name: Irene Skolnick

Age: 78

Birthdate: August 22, 1937

Birthplace: Przemysl, Poland

Religious Identity: Jewish

Holocaust Story:

I was born in Poland, on August 22, 1937 in the unpronounceable city of Przemysl, Poland. I was born Ruth Rinder and now I go by Irene Skolnick. My father's home town, my father came from an orthodox family the youngest of seven. Two things are important about that, one is that my grandfather was a very successful entrepreneur, we were one of the wealthiest families in town we owned a factory and a general merchandise store, and my father managed the store. The importance of Przemysl is that about two weeks before Hitler attacked Poland he signed a secret non-aggression pact with the Soviet Union to protect his eastern front. That once he conquered Poland he would share it with the Soviet Union and the partisan went right through my home town putting us on the soviet side that was a blessing and a curse. A capitalist under the Soviets was almost as bad as being Jewish under the Nazis. Because you were once in the class of oppressors you weren't worthy to join the ranks of the workers and so my father couldn't get any employment. All our possessions were confiscated; we weren't entitled to food stamps. So gradually everybody we all moved deeper into the soviet area, to a city called Lemberg, or it's current Ukrainian name Lviv, it was a bigger city so my father had a much better chance of hiding his "criminal past" as he called it. We lived under soviet occupation until June 22nd 1941 when Hitler broke his agreement with Stalin and attacked the Soviet Union and within days we came under Nazi occupation. That's when life changed juristically, all the discriminatory laws really reduced Jews to second class citizens at best, and there was daily humiliation, constant uncertainty as to your life. As rumors started filtering in as to what befell people who were deported, allegedly labor or relocation, the horrors of what was actually happening, no one believed them. Except my mother, anything bad she believed. There was one incident that occurred in particular in October 1941 the order came out that Jews had to wear the armband a white armband with the blue Star of David, contrary to the rest of Europe that had yellow star on your chest. Only for people twelve years and older so myself and my younger brother were exempt, and one of my father's sisters didn't feel she needed to wear it. She was stopped by a Ukrainian Militia man who checked her papers, which revealed she was Jewish, he asked for a bribe and she wouldn't pay the bribe, she was imprisoned for a month, during which time the family tried to buy her freedom unsuccessfully, at the end of the month all the prisoners were all taken to the forest and executed. Two important things here are, that we really understood that the Germans meant what they said, and when the family tried to buy her freedom they were offering dollars they were forbidden to be owned by Jews. One morning my father was at work, my brothers and I must have been in school or somewhere, mother was in bed, two gestapo guys showed up searching for dollars and they started searching the rooms. When one of them was looking at some albums and another one picked up her found her purse, it was where she had them hidden, in trying to distract him she started trying to get him interested. They got angry at her and told her

to sit down and take off her nightgown. Sat on the edge of the bed, the man searching through her purse got distracted and threw it aside and that danger passed. The second man went to her dressing table which was another place where she had dollars. Face powder it came in a round tall container, the puff went inside the case, she put the dollars in between the inside lid and the puff. He started rummaging through her cosmetics, she was very nervous; naked as she was she started explaining the cosmetics. She held the dollars with her thumb while showing them the puff and quickly closed it. This time they got very angry and sent her out, but the danger was passed so she left the room. They didn't find anything and they left. This humiliating experience was at the root of my mother's decision that she wasn't going to stay in the ghetto, because the next month we were herded into the ghetto and life got more challenging. In the spring of 1942 she came to the decision that surviving in the ghetto wasn't an option, she was going to stay and put up with the daily humiliating and uncertainty of life she was going to obtain false papers and pass herself off as a catholic. We referred to this as "going Aryan" or pretending to be Aryan. My father said he couldn't deny his Judaism, that it wasn't in him, but said that she could do it with the children if she wanted to. The chauffeur that was employed at my grandparents factory who was in very good standing with my family, he and his wife offered to sell their birth certificates to my parents, my mother accepted, as soon as she got it she went to a counterfeiter she knew and asked him to do three things. Modify her polish papers to match the certificate, and make her a fake German ID, and she asked him to create a birth certificate for my father without telling him about it. There was a massive deportation in my hometown in August of 1942, my grandparents took cyanide pills to be spared the deportation, and it was the most expensive item on the black market. When my father learned that news, he changed his mind and said he would go with her. They sensed that time was getting very tight and they first decided to get the kids out. From the Russian days my father had become good friends with the principal of the women's business school, and had maintained a relationship with her, and asked if she would take the children out of the ghetto, she agreed to take my brother. She was single and gone all day at work, she only could take one, couldn't trust two to not make noise while she was in school, so she said she would take the oldest. One of the other teachers said she would take me, she had a daughter my age, she said "oh she can come, play with my daughter, be a companion." The next day, now I'm five years old at this point my brother is 7.5 we are told by my parents what our new names are, forget your old name, this is now what you are called, forget everything about the past, you don't know where we lived before, what your father did, you forget it all. My brother was instructed to particularly never to take his pants off in front of anyone, because in Poland only Jews were circumcised, for boys it was particularly hard to pass off being Aryan/catholic. Everything went well except that later that afternoon as I played with my friend a Ukrainian boy from the neighborhood recognized me from the Russian days. So this Ukrainian boy's parents told the teacher you are sheltering a Jewish child if you don't get rid of her we'll report you, they threatened to report her to the authorities. The next morning my parents woke up and it was their plan to leave the ghetto, but it was surrounded. My mother snuck out to get the papers, they both left the ghetto. In the meantime the teacher took me back to the principal's home and the principal would not change her position and couldn't risk taking me into her home with my brother. So the teacher brings me back takes me back to the ghetto, my parents are gone, it was my luck that the apartment that we shared was shared with a childless couple and the husband was a physician, and as a physician he was at that time exempt from roundups and he took me as his daughter. Driven in great elegance to the hospital where I spent the night. The next day I was reunited with my parents we hid for two weeks while the deportation went on, and when it ended the question was "where do we go and how do we go?", it was dangerous for Jews to go out on their own. Jews were banned from using public transportation, and my parents didn't know

what changes had happened within the railroad station my parents were still they were uncertain with their new identities. They wanted the protection of a Christian or a Pole to shepherd them out, my aunt made contact with one and she wasn't very sure about him, my mother wanted to speak to him and she said were going with him and were going tonight. She gave him a down payment and He said he would take us to Lublin where he pretended to have contacts to help my father get settled. The one good thing about this pole is that he knew what route to take if you traveled by major lines there was a high probability of paper inspection, if you took the side roads the chance of that was very slight. In the morning we arrived in Lublin, the pole had no contacts he knew no one, it was the site of madjanek, the second largest concentration/extermination camp in Poland. The Germans decided to make it a Germanized city, everything was controlled by the Germany authorities, you could not stay in a hotel, and you couldn't do anything. That was the first dilemma. My father who was less brazen than my mother was a phenomenal negotiator with incredible people skills, he noticed an ad in the newspaper for people to enroll in a book keeping school, why? After the Germans got rid of all the Jews and poles they didn't have enough people, and they started this school to train new book keepers. My father enrolled in that school and that gave him a legitimate reason to stay in Lublin it gave him first legitimate piece of ID, documents. He ended up getting permission to move into a refurbished apartment in the former ghetto, after the Jews were deported they started tearing them down, and before they did they realized they could move the poles in the ghetto apartments and take their nicer homes. That's where we moved in. I talk in terms of four basic essential requirements to be successful. First of all you couldn't look like a Jew, in Eastern Europe they look at you and they know. My mother was a perfect picture of an Aryan, blonde with blue eyes, high cheekbones, no one ever suspected us of being Jewish. The next thing would be language; you had to speak a perfect unaccented Polish. Jews in general, Yiddish was their primary language, they lived apart from the poles the city where we lived was 1/3 Jewish if I remember correctly. Language of the home was Yiddish, but for some reason I never thought of asking my father why all of their children were sent to polish public schools, usually they went to Jewish schools where Yiddish was the language. My mother's language was Polish, when it came to language we were set with her. Number three if you're going to pretend to be Catholic you should know something about Catholicism. If you live apart from the Catholics, You don't have much opportunity to learn about Catholicism. This orthodox grandfather of mine, in the general merchandise the major merchandise was catholic religious items, my father being a good business man, he knew all of this and he was familiar with it, and his customers were the Catholics and the priest of the town. There is a greeting formula that is used among Christians and if Jews used this they would understand, if you ask "how are you?", you get one answer you get "blessed be the name", same thing holds true for Catholics in Poland and because my father heard this interaction and knew this greeting. The same thing really held true for my mother before she got married she worked in her partners store where they sold high end fabrics, the Catholics of the town were all customers. Catholics nuns of those days did a lot of embroidery, my mother was exposed to this interaction and way of speaking. Fourth and final item, the absolute necessity of being constantly alert and aware of your surroundings, the ability to respond appropriately on your feet, to a comment or what have you. I like to say all of this would be no use if you weren't lucky; it was unbelievable how lucky we were. So we moved into this apartment in the former ghetto, and right off the bat I was put to the test. There was another family that had moved in there they had a little girl my age, and I went over to play with her at her apartment because she had toys and I didn't and her mother started asking me questions, "Where did you come from, where did you live before this?" and I couldn't answer any of her questions I just clammed up. When she repeated the questions I still didn't answer, and she eventually gave up. There was

a whole series of situations where this last item of being able to think on your feet was so essential; my father didn't have a German ID. In Lublin they had no contacts, so my mother traveled to Warsaw where she would meet a counterfeiter; they were stopped by a Polish policeman who asked to see their papers. Her friend pulled out his German ID, and this man asked how much did that cost him and he told the policeman the amount that it cost exactly to get a counterfeit ID and my mother realized if she produced her German ID it would be too obvious so she produced her Polish ID. And the policeman got angry he asked her what she was doing, and he asked for her German ID. She said I come from the east and they haven't been there that long and haven't given us the German ID's yet. She and her friends went with this Polish police officer, they asked where they were going, and he said I think you're Jewish. My mother burst out laughing, "now that is a good joke, wait until I tell my friends, of the adventure that befell me when I visited the nation's capital" she was so convincing that she threw him off track and he started doubting himself and he gave them back their papers and let them go.

I can go through situations where this kind of behavior was absolutely key, circumstances that you just couldn't predict. My father started looking for a job when he got his bookkeepers certificate, he saw an ad for a German speaking person capable of carrying on correspondences in the German language. He applied and was hired; the company was a company making bouillon cubes, under the control of the German authorities who provided the materials to make the product. It was owned by two Polish brothers who didn't speak a word of German, so they were very happy to hire my father and he was very happy to get this job. He got the sense that they were decent people this doesn't begin to describe what phenomenal people they were. He was such a good people's person, he was able to successfully advocate for employees when they received orders from the Germans to leave the city, because they wanted to make the Poles leave. It was young man who appealed the call up. All his appeals were denied, he asked if my father would go with him, and his boss said I know you can't do anything but we have to show that management cares, and my father went to the Gestapo with this man. As soon as he appears there, the man said the case is closed he's been here before, and my father made a case that they needed him as an employee for the company or else the production would slow down. He was able to stay, but his family had to leave. This is one favor my father was able to do for the employees of the company. A brother of my father's who had remained in the ghetto felt that their security was getting bad. They had placed their daughters in a convent and with nowhere to go they came to us into this little tiny apartment and my parents had to take them in they couldn't say no. It was very dangerous, my father was successful in getting permission from the Germans to move into a single family home, close to the factory. It had a large kitchen and large bedroom and large cellar, no electricity, no indoor plumbing. But it gave us good opportunities to hide people in the cellar and the attic. So things were settled for a while. 12 people mostly family members, 8 had to remain hidden my aunt and uncle and eventually their daughters who were in the convent, and whenever family members lost their safe place they knew they could come to us. Half mile from Majdanek, We moved into that house around January 43 stayed there until July 44 when the Red Army liberated us. Entire immediate family survived, father lost two siblings the sister who was shot and his older brother who was a radiologist, he and his family were ordered to report to the deportation place, he actually sounded the alarm to the family he sent a postcard back home saying, depending who tells the story, do what you must but don't get deported, other members say the postcard said go where Oscar went don't go where I went. He was one of the brothers who happened to be in France before the war and did not return to Poland, and made his way to the US during the war, it was quite clear to the family to not get deported.

What is important is the ingenuity of the members of the family to behave appropriately to any given situation; you have to think about how old we are. My brother is about nine year's old maybe eight; he is out playing with his buddies on a hot day. Nobody had bathing suits in those days, you swim naked so he pretends to be very clumsy and falls and slips in the water with his clothes on and says while he's wet he might as well stay wet. For kids it was really challenging to play this role, you were one person out in the world and another person behind closed doors. When I was raising my children I always thought could they do that? Knock on the door to indicate whether they're alone or with somebody. After a while the hidden people started resenting staying inside, and they started coming up with reasons to come out. It meant you didn't really bring anyone over to play which was suspicious in itself. My father had to travel for business once he had to go to Krakow with his boss at a time where there were sudden roundups on the street; they were also rounding up Poles. When they finished their business and were ready to go home, he had second thoughts and got a certificate that they attended this official German conference, and his boss said sure if it makes you feel happy go ahead. The train stops the station is surrounded by the SS and a registration for Majdanek, my father presents his certificate, and he then pointed them to an exit, and the man that picked these them up said they were the only two men who came out of the station. The fact that my father was so fluent in German almost tripped him up a few times. The factory was running in three shifts, and so therefore it was using up a lot of electricity which is always scarce during a war so an electricity guy came out to investigate why does this company need so much electricity. He was German, so my father takes him around and explains and halfway throughout this he asked how he speaks German so well, poles spoke polish, the Jews were the linguists, for a moment my father was stumped, knowing history he said well I come from this town in the west and it kept flipping sides and people from there tended to speak both languages, and as the devil will have it the man was from that town and started asking him questions about people he maybe knew. Of course my father didn't know any of them, so he said I am from this little town next to it, and my mother cousin had a business there he mentioned it and the man didn't know of this place and he let it pass. Another time my father was in a tavern with his boss, drinking and there was a commander from Majdanek and started talking and my father does the translation and he asked him how come he speaks German so well. He decided that after a drink he could push back, he said you think only Germans can speak German a pole can speak German too, and he was so aggressive about that, that the commander let it go.

A Jew escaped from Majdanek, the address he gave was ours. In the morning my father was due back from a trip it was a dangerous trip and we were all very nervous and we were all waiting for his return and this gave all the hidden people to come upstairs in the morning and wait with us. As The tension was rising my mother asked my brother if he could look and see if my father was coming, and the street we lived on was very long and you could see quite a bit into the distance, he saw a German truck with soldiers, and had stopped and were coming towards the house. He closed the door and warned us all, they all started running towards the attic, The plan was that the last person up was the one who could pull up the ladder close the door, and my uncle devised a mechanism that locked the door and so you couldn't push the trap door open from the bottom. ,, This time there wasn't time, and my uncle was still on the ladder when the Germans started pounded on the door. To cover the sound of my uncle climbing the ladder My mother started raising her voice saying "who's pounding on the door!", it gave my uncle time to get into the attic and closed the door, but not time to pull up the ladder, he stood on the trap door, they search and asked what was upstairs, and my mother cool as can be says idk and says it was closed and locked we can't open it, it was like that when we moved in, a German tried to push it open and my uncle

standing on it he couldn't get in and he climbed down. And they left. Multitude of situations where it was do or die, it was keep your cool and think what would be an acceptable answer and even in suspicious cases that maybe they wouldn't say something.

We were fortunate being in the eastern part of Poland, we came under Nazi occupation almost two years later than the west, and we were liberated almost a year earlier in July 1944 by the Red Army, whereas the rest was in May of 1945. Things were getting very dicey for us, and my father was picked up by a few black mailers and they came by the house a few times, and we ran out of valuables for them to take.

All during this, my father's bosses, the two brothers and their wives knew we were Jewish, they were suspicious and then my father told him, because the wife of one employee felt neglected that my parents didn't socialize with them started spreading rumors that we were Jewish, and my father pleaded to his boss, and they relocated the engineer. This engineer's wife sent a letter TO THE POLISH police and fortunately did not give his name, and said that a Jew worked at the factory. .SO these Polish policemen come one day and speak to my father, we understand that you hire a Jew here, so my father sent them to speak to one of the brothers, he didn't come up with anybody he said that everyone is okay. He said look we'll just come in here and said we'll have everyone come in and pull down their pants and we'll see. By that time my father got his wits back and he said we work in three shifts there's no guarantee that the man you're looking for is her during the dayshift. He said he'll get word that you're looking for him and escape, so he suggested that he'll investigate and get back to them. After a few days one of the brothers was very nervous, they were taking very significant risks, so he went to the police station to inquire and they told him the captain wanted to speak to him. He said oh I know you we used to go hunting together; apparently years before they lived near each other and used to go hunting. He asked him if he employed a Jew so this brother told him no of course not, and the captain disregarded the letter. There were some very good people who stuck their neck out for us.

When did you first come to the U.S/how?

Getting to the U.S is like now, the US doesn't want refugees, there was a high quota for East Europeans, but my parents wanted to get out, France was very open and liberal, so was Italy. We went to France, getting a visa to go to France wasn't all that difficult, and the hard part was getting permission to stay in France. You were caught in a vicious cycle, you had to have proof of employment but you couldn't get employment without that permission to stay. They were impoverished and didn't have many jobs. My father got a job with a Jewish organization because when the fact of the Holocaust became known by the American Jewish community, there was a tremendous outpouring of assistance, mainly of clothing. So my father became in charge of sorting and distributing the clothes that came in from the U.S Jewish communities. We were housed in a building that was owned by the rochild family that was given to the Jewish community to hold the D.Ps in the areas. When Russia consolidated its grip on the east European countries something changed politically, because a D.P. is supposed to go back to where we can from but now we could claim that we didn't want to go back to Poland because of the political party. There was an organization within the U.N. called the IRO (International Refugee Organization); we became subjects of the IRO so we gave up our polish passports, and nationality. As subject of the IRO and the U.N. we were given permission to stay in France. My father started a business, and my younger brother was born in France we thought we'd be staying in France. Until the Korean War broke out it brought a wave of fear in Europe that WWII was around the corner, Germany wasn't built up again, we thought the communists

were going to invade France. And my parents already having encountered the Russians, we didn't want to go through that again. We really felt that we would be first targets for Siberia, in the meantime Our number came up from the U.S, and my parents neglected that because we felt settled, and with the Korean war we said our original plan was to get to the U.S. so that's what we're going to do, and in 1952 we came to the United States. Everyone together, we always moved as a family, may the fate of one be the fate of all. We settled in New York City, my uncle had settled there when he came over in 1941, so that was natural that we would stay where my father's brother was. In New York Until I got married.

What was your first job here, what occupation do you identify with?

Giving French lessons I was 14.5 what could I do right. First we came in January mid school year. To finish the school year I went to the French private school to finish the year. My brother stayed on to get his French education and I went off to an American public school. I went on to Brooklyn College; I got Bachelors in Chemistry.

When did you meet your spouse, can you tell us about them?

I met him in 1959; the facetious answer he likes to give is "he met me in a tree". We both attended a young adult summer camp run by the 92nd street YMCA and we went on a hike, and I liked to climb trees, and I was up in the tree and he decided to take a picture of me. We moved around got married when Leon was in Medical school so we stayed in new York for him to finish, we moved to Philly for internship, came back for residency in New York, went to South Dakota for his military service two years in the air force. Leon took a position in Syracuse NEW YORK called upstate medical center, stayed there for six years when he decide to try his hand at Private Practice and took us to Tulsa which was minor disaster which brought us back to academic practice in to Pittsburgh. Twins were born in New York City when Leon was a resident. The baby came in Syracuse. Three children.

How many/if any children do you have? Do you have any grandchildren?

3 children, 7 grandchildren. Scattered, older son in Kansas City, twin sister is in MT Lebo, youngest in Potomac Maryland.

What is your favorite thing to do now and why?

I like to read; when in Pittsburgh I take classes at Pitt, literature, history and art. When in Florida, I do some of that, but it's a more outdoor life, swimming and biking and walking on the beach.

Do you think your experiences during the war held you back or motivated you?

The experiences gave me a tremendous amount of self-confidence, that I feel that I can meet any challenge that comes my way, Leon says I'm a survivor. I don't buckle down in front of challenges. What I found very interesting is how my older brother raised his children versus how I raised my children. My brother also married a survivor, both of them really cuddled and protected their daughters, I taught my children how to live in this world, and that it wasn't cuddly or warm and fuzzy. And how to think on their feet, we always encouraged them to travel and I sent them out. I found it very interesting how drastically differently we reacted to essentially the same experiences.

