

English Transcript of Enrique Shapira Testimonial

Interviewee: Enrique Shapira

Interviewed by: Dr. Giovanna Urdangarain and Dr. Rona Kaufman

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Interview conducted at Hogar Israelita Nursing Home in Montevideo, Uruguay in January of 2019.

Giovanna: And Enrique, you said you'd rather do the interview in English?

Enrique: Of course.

Giovanna: Okay, and then so Rona and I and Riley, we, the three of us will be able to ask questions.

Enrique: Okay, I agree.

Giovanna: Okay, thank you so much for giving us the chance to talk to you.

Enrique: Why not?

Giovanna: So our first question is...

Enrique: At my age, nothing happens anymore.

Giovanna: Ah, but you have such a rich life story to share with us! So, the first couple of questions we have are where were you born and when?

Enrique: I was born in Vienna, 15th of May 1938. I was staying there until I was five months old. That's why I left the country, because I was Jewish and the Austrians were persecuting all the Jews. And I was lucky, and my family was lucky because my father, in the First World War, was a captain for the Austrian Empire. And they told them, "you have exactly a week to leave the country. If not, you're going to go to jail." That's why we left.

Rona: Can you tell us who was in your family?

Enrique: Huh?

Rona: Who was in your family?

Enrique: My father, my mother, my brother. My brother was eight years older than me. Lucky that he died very young... Unlucky, that he died very young.

Rona: How old was he when he died?

Enrique: Fifty-nine. So very young. He was... He got a sickness that nobody knew. There was a kind of pollution, because he was an engineer, he was in a construction company. The pollution of the work fell down and he got cancer and he died in three months.

Rona: Oh my God.

Enrique: Gone.

Giovanna: I'm so sorry to hear that.

Enrique: The same happened to my wife after 41 years. She got sick from the tongue. She ... goodbye. In three months she left, after 41 years of marriage. It was really... For me it was very bad. I was, one year like a zombie. I didn't know where to go. I was working, but the worst was the weekends. The weekends, Saturday and Sunday when you see the empty, empty bed. I wish it is never going to happen to you. I never thought that she was gonna die before me. Never. So is life. What else do you want to ask me?

Rona: What can you tell us, what did your parents do? What was your father's profession?

Enrique: My father was a... My father was a lawyer in Austria. And in Austria, in that time it was the big country. It was not small. This is why my father learned 10 languages, to speak to different parts. In Europe, 95 percent of the countries, when you move from one country to the other, it's a different language. Only Europe. When you go from Spain to Portugal, it's a different language. From Spain to France, it's a different language. Go to Luxembourg, all different languages. To Holland, to Belgium... In Belgium, a lot of the people speak French. But they speak more the "Flamande" (Flemish). It's the language from them.

Giovanna: Enrique, do you remember why your family decided to come to Uruguay instead of a different country?

Enrique: Yeah, I remember. It wasn't by accident. Because my family was thinking to go to Argentina, because it had some family. But my grandmother, who was with my father, she didn't like the weather, it was too high humidity. She wasn't feeling comfortable.

That's why she stayed in Europe.

Rona: So your family migrated from Vienna to Uruguay?

Enrique: Yeah. It was a very interesting story. I heard it when I was older. My father left Austria because he was the owner of a bank. The bank was confiscated, but he sent money with him. And he took, one night, the car with my mother, my brother and I. I was a baby. From there, he went to the frontier to Swiss. From there he went to Italy. From Italy, he took the first ship and left from Genoa. The first ship came to South America.

Giovanna: And did you go first to Argentina and that's where your grandmother realized she couldn't stay?

Enrique: No, my father went first. We stayed here, my father went first, to see how it was in Argentina, because he had a friend or somebody in the family. He returned back, "It's not healthy. We stay here."

Giovanna: So it was your mom, your dad, you, your brother and your paternal grandmother who came?

Enrique: Yeah, paternal, paternal. My grandmother, she was a lady. I remember her. She was a very, very clever lady.

Rona: So, just to make sure I'm understanding... So, when you were in Italy, your father just took the first ship that he could.

Enrique: Yeah. Yeah.

Rona: And it happened to be going to Uruguay.

Enrique: To South America.

Rona: To South America.

Enrique: It was just... The first ship that left in January, he took it.

Rona: Do you remember the name of the ship?

Enrique: Wait a moment. I remember. It was... No, I don't remember. This was... I was a baby. I was sleeping in a bag, because I was a baby, about five months old. No. May, June, July, August, four months old. We left the 28th of August. And we arrived...

Rona: 1938?

Enrique: 1938, and we arrived the 10 of, the 11 of September. 15 days. It was very interesting.

Giovanna: Did you hear later on, or, how was that trip possible for your family? Like financially, people were coming here...

Enrique: Yeah, because my family was very wealthy and he grabbed certain gold money. And I remember because my mother showed me the last coin...

Giovanna: At one point.

Enrique: From all the... They were a very wealthy family.

Rona: Did your... So your family was Jewish?

Enrique: Yeah.

Rona: Were they observant Jews?

Enrique: Yeah, me too. Every Friday night we have a meeting here, we pray every Friday night. We conserve. 95 percent of the Jewish, they don't believe in anything. They are from the people, people of Jewish. That's the difference: there are people of Jewish and Jewish in religion. Most of them are the people of Jewish, they don't believe in it anymore. Different times. I was educated in a different way. It was the tradition. The tradition, the tradition, the tradition. That's why the Jewish are together, because of the tradition.

Rona: Do you know if your family experienced anti-Semitism...

Enrique: Yeah.

Rona: ...in Austria? Before...

Enrique: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah.

Rona: So you said that your father was only given the, kind of, one week...

Enrique: Yeah, that's right.

Rona: ...time because he had been in, he had served as a captain in World War I.

Enrique: Yeah, that's right. And he was a lawyer for different officers. That's why they gave him a week to leave. If not, they'd take him to prison. The Gestapo was ready to grab him if he stayed more days.

Giovanna: Once you came here with your family, obviously you were a baby so, did you talk...

Enrique: My mom was a very, very handy female. She went... In Vienna, she went to be a... As we say, she knew how to handle scissors, and she went to work in a big factory. My father, I don't know what he was working... But then, I remember, when I was five or six years old, he has his own business. His own factory. My father, with my uncle.

Giovanna: What language was spoken at home?

Enrique: German. My mother... Spanish... Poor lady. She was killing the Spanish. It's very difficult, Spanish is a very difficult language. I learned it because I was a baby. And they sent me because in their time, the second very important language was French. That's why they sent me to French school.

Giovanna: Here in Montevideo?

Enrique: Yeah.

Giovanna: Liceo Francés?

Enrique: Ten years.

Rona: So you were... Growing up, you were, you were speaking German at home, French at school, and Spanish...

Enrique: And Spanish on the street.

Giovanna: Did you go to Jewish school too?

Enrique: No. No.

Giovanna: Do you remember if your family... Did you get together with other Jewish families of German ancestry here?

Enrique: Yeah.

Giovanna: How was that interaction?

Enrique: There were... My family was together with Jewish German mostly, they were together.

Giovanna: Was it a large community of Austrian and German Jews?

Enrique

Certainly, certainly. NCI. Do you remember NCI? Okay, you don't. It was a group of Jewish Germans, a big group. They were together. And they went to play... I remember, I was a baby. They went to play cards or whatsoever, play chess. I knew all the clubs.

Giovanna

So there was this community that you remember as being part of? ...that your family was part of too?

Enrique: Yeah. I remember. From there I... A copper was a friend of my father. I met my best friend, his son. Franklin Marcus. Still, he's the only one who stayed alive. Everybody died.

Rona: So he was... That family was also German Jewish?

Enrique: Yeah.

Rona: Okay. You mentioned an uncle. So is this your father's brother?

Enrique: Yeah.

Rona: So he migrated to Uruguay too?

Enrique: No. To New York.

Rona: But you said that they owned a factory together?

Enrique: The youngest one. He came later. My father has three brothers.

Rona: Okay.

Enrique: The medium went to New York. The youngest went to my father, came to my father, here to Uruguay. He was 20 years old, the youngest brother of my father.

Giovanna: And the oldest?

Enrique: Oldest? My father was the oldest.

Giovanna: Ah, okay.

Enrique: The second one, who went to New York, I met him there in New York.

Rona: Did they all leave Vienna... They were from Vienna?

Enrique: Yeah.

Rona: And did they all leave around the same time?

Enrique: Yeah.

Rona: Okay.

Enrique: The families there, your family was all together, because of the... The problem was the pogroms. They must be all together. To have defense, to have certain defense, against the rest.

Giovanna: Did anybody from your mom's family come?

Enrique: No, they were killed. The Germans killed them. Because my mother was from Germany. They killed them in 1934, '35. They were very wealthy. They had land, they had woods and whatsoever. I don't remember what my mother told me. They came, the Germans, and they shot them on the spot.

Giovanna: Do you remember having these conversations with your parents?

Enrique: Yeah.

Giovanna:

When you were young? Did they talk about it?

Enrique: No. When we were young, no. When I was around 20, 21 years. My mother told me everything, my father didn't want to speak about it. My mother told me everything, and then four years later I left to New York, New York. Because I started to see that there was no future. I lost almost a year, and I said "forget it." It wasn't so bad. I learned a lot. I was working there. I had my family there. I married a girl who was from South America, from Argentina.

Rona: But you met her in New York?

Enrique: You know how I met her? She was living in Baltimore. You know how I met her? In a wedding. In a Jewish wedding. You know, the Jewish weddings are huge [inaudible 00:17:07]. They make a lot of "whoopie," as we say. Unbelievable, there were around 200 people there. And I remember, the guy... I was invited because of the father of the bride.

He was a friend of my... I don't remember how it was a relationship, but I was invited to this wedding and he came to me and said, "hey, I have a girl who's from your same

country," because they don't find out what is Argentina and what is Uruguay. They found out all together that it's not like this. So I said okay. That was my fatal moment.

Rona: So can you say again how old you were when you left Uruguay and went to New York?

Enrique: How old I was?

Rona: Yeah.

Enrique: 24 years old.

Rona: Twenty four. And it was tied to the strike, the national strike?

Enrique:
No, I left when there was a national strike here.

Rona: Yep, that's what I... Okay.

Enrique: Yeah.

Giovanna: And your brother at the time was here?

Enrique: Of course, he was already a professional. He was an engineer, has a construction company by himself.

Rona: Oh, he's eight years older.

Enrique: Yeah, he was doing okay.

Giovanna: When your family came here from Austria, do you remember... Because again, yes, you were a baby. So do you remember later on talking about how difficult or how easy it was for them to adapt to Uruguay?

Enrique: No, it was... My father had the knowledge of the language, it was much easier. My father, because of Latin and Greek, he learned the Spanish very quickly. I think in the same week he began to speak Spanish without any problem. My father had the gift of languages, unbelievable. I remember one day we were walking next to the Russian embassy. They came, a guy out from the embassy and my father began to ask him, in Russian, "what are you looking for?" I couldn't believe it. They were talking. "What do you mean you know how to speak Russian?" "Son, I know a lot of languages. You know only four." Ten languages. Because, it was helping because he was Latin, the old classic Latin and the old classic Greek. He told me many years later that one of the courses that he had was the Roman law in Latin. Unbelievable, there was very strong...

In Europe, to be a professional was very, very strong. It wasn't so easy.

Giovanna: Now, you mentioned that your mom was working also, pretty soon in the country.

Enrique: Yeah. My mother... My father met my mother because he was the... He was teaching her because she was in the University of Vienna. She was studying philosophy. I don't remember which course she was taking that my father was the professor. It was a big problem.

Giovanna: How was it for her to live in Uruguay?

Enrique: Very bad. She was always suffering. She didn't know how to speak correctly in the language. She didn't fit in properly, she was in a situation where she couldn't do anything. She never learned Spanish well, never. It was a mess when she began to speak Spanish. She never feel confident, she was suffering a lot. I can't imagine. To grow up in a very wealthy family, because her family was very, very wealthy and lost everything. And she was not a girl, she was already a mother with two kids. It was very difficult for my mother, very, very difficult.

Giovanna: Did she make friends here among other women who came from Austria?

Enrique: Yes, from Germany, from Austria. But... My mother, she had a lot of friends, she was lucky that she found somebody many years later in Uruguay, because she lived in Tölz when she was in Germany. She find out, here, a girl who was in her class

Giovanna: In school?

Enrique: In Germany. Unbelievable, she found her.

Giovanna: Wow. How did they find each other? Do you know? Do you remember how that happened?

Enrique: I don't know, I was a kid.

Giovanna: I'm thinking of what you said that you were studying in the French school here in Montevideo. Were there many Jewish kids in the Liceo Francés at the time?

Enrique: Let me explain.

Giovanna: Okay.

Enrique: Ninety five percent of the professors they were running from France because they were Jewish. 95 percent of our professors were Jewish.

Giovanna: I didn't know that. Liceo Francés, okay.

Enrique: 95 percent.

Giovanna: Did kids talk about the reasons or the history of their families coming here at any time? Or it was not something...?

Enrique: No, they were professors. Don't forget, in their time, professors in this way, and students there. Forbid it. A bit of respect in their time.

Giovanna: But you knew they were Jewish. So did they...

Enrique: Because of their last name.

Giovanna: Only because of the last name, okay. They never openly discussed their story of migration?

Enrique: Already, they knew that I was Jewish and they would tell me. Tell me certain... I remember one of my professors was a great professor in history. He told me "Henry, don't forget that the day after tomorrow is New Year's Eve." Our New Year's Eve.

Giovanna: And among your classmates, were other Jewish students? Many? Or not many?

Enrique: Only two. There were only two. The rest were all Uruguayan.

Giovanna: Did your parents ever tell you why they chose that school for you instead of the German school for example?

Enrique: No, no. Germans? Are you kidding, 95 percent were Nazis. No, forget it. Don't forget they were German Nazis that ran away after the war. Because if not, they would go to jail or whatsoever.

Giovanna: How was that, the interaction being here, knowing that there were Germans in the city?

Enrique: Nothing. And the German school was very far away, it was on Soca and Rivera. It's still there. I think so. The German school. A lot of them, Nazis, they run away and went to teach there.

Rona: Do you know if your parents were aware of what was happening to Jews once they left?

Enrique: Of course they were. Don't forget that my mother's family was killed.

Rona: Right.

Enrique: In Germany. I remembered today that my mother was talking to me after that. They were a very wealthy family. They took away the money and shot them on the spot. His uncle, his cousin, his father, his mother. It was very bad. 1934 or '35.

Giovanna: Now that you said that it was incredible that she ran into a friend of hers from school many years later...

Enrique: Yeah.

Giovanna: Was she able to find anybody that she knew aside from...?

Enrique: I don't know.

Giovanna: Enrique, if we ask you or your family, because maybe the answer was different, how would you identify, now or then? As a Jewish person first? As an Uruguayan? How do you identify?

Enrique: It's different. One is the religion and the other one is the people. I'm from Uruguay, but my religion is Jewish. It's different. You can't put it separated. They are all of those together. Like the Christian and Uruguayan, it's the same. The same situation.

Giovanna: How did you family identify?

Enrique: My family, in the same way. They were not very religious. They were normal. There's only three times a year they went to temple. New Year's Eve and Rosh Hashanah.

Giovanna: Did your brother... Was your brother born here or in Austria?

Enrique: No, in Austria.

Giovanna: Okay. And did he ever felt Uruguayan or did he always define himself differently?

Enrique: No, there was living here. He did all his career here, he went to college here, he went to university here, he was working here, he had his own company. He was more Uruguayan. He was only eight years old when he left the country. It's the same if you grabbed her daughter, and when she left the country, she would only feel from where she's raised. Like this.

Rona: Do you think your mother came to feel Uruguayan?

Enrique: Never. My mother was an exception. She never knew how to speak correctly the language. She was only feeling that she was a German. She would feel... It was her life, it was her feeling. Her situation, whatsoever.

Rona: But your father? Did he...?

Enrique: My father was different. My father was... Because he knew how to speak the language, it was completely different. He was more assimilated to Uruguay. He had a business. He was in touch with people. He had a little shop. He would be in touch with people who would come to buy.

Giovanna: But you still... It was always German, the language of communication within the family? Even when you were an adult, or a young man?

Enrique: Yeah. Yeah, all of it.

Giovanna: You only spoke German at home?

Enrique: Always, at home, it was German. Until I left. Then I became my other language. "I'm Enrique."

Giovanna: When Rona asked you about antisemitism in Austria, do you remember experiencing that here, in Uruguay?

Enrique: What?

Giovanna: How was it to be Jewish in Uruguay?

Enrique: There was a little bit, but not anymore because this is a very free country. There are certain, as usual. But not so... Almost nothing. Almost nothing.

Giovanna: Did your family ever experience discrimination for being Jewish?

Enrique: I don't think so. It was a very free country. They think different. They told me in Argentina it's not the same, when it was Perón. The same happens with Brazil, it's not the same. Because I have an uncle who was living in Rio, he died early. But, he told me, that's why he sent his daughter to study to Italy. She's a chemical... She's living in Milan. It's my second cousin. I don't know. It's the daughter of my uncle.

Giovanna: Do you know... Do you remember if your family was aware at any point of some laws in Uruguay that had to do with helping Europeans coming as refugees?

Enrique: This I don't know. I was too young. It's really... It's a question that I can't answer because I was a baby. And then, I don't know now, today, but must be, must be something to help them. Who helps a lot is this, our collectivity. This helps a lot. The [inaudible 00:07:42] and everything. The different... Macabi, they help. But they are too... I don't know when, but they were helping. Still they are helping today.

Giovanna: Yeah. So your family never identified as refugees in Uruguay?

Enrique: Yeah.

Giovanna: They did.

Enrique: Yeah. Because they were. But they were a different group, as we can say. A different group.

Giovanna: Do you remember growing up talking or interacting or meeting Jews of different origins here and not only from Europe, but from the Middle East or...? Because it's a pretty diverse community.

Enrique: You know, I don't remember to have different communities from not... Only from Europe. Yeah. I don't think so. I don't think so. They are... The different Jews from Asia and Africa, they went to Israel. They went direct to Israel. Since 1948, there's a huge community of Ethiopians, Jewish Ethiopians in Israel. They are black, but they have problems because they are segregated. It doesn't matter. It's unbelievable. They are Jewish, but because they are black...

Thank you to Enrique Shapira and Hogar
Israelita