# **English Transcript of Irene Rzadzinksa Testimonial**

Interviewees: Irene Rzadzinksa and Eva Nathan (daughter)

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**Translated by:** Parker Brocker-Knapp

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

### Giovanna

Irene, you told us you were born in 19...?

### Irene

1922

### Giovanna

And in Warsaw?

### Irene

Yes. In the center.

### Giovanna

What can you tell us about your family? Who was part of your family? Do you have siblings? Brothers or sisters?

### Irene

They all fell in the Holocaust. I was left alone. They all died in the Holocaust.

### Giovanna

How old were you then? You said "I was left alone." How old were you?

### Irene

Sixteen

Giovanna
Sixteen years old. When did you come to Uruguay?
Irene
I had an uncle.
Thad an unde.
Giovanna
Here?
Irene
Here. I was left alone, I wanted someone from my family. I knew that I had an uncle, and I
applied. There was a special committee for families, and they found him.
Giovanna
Was he an uncle on your mom's side or your father's side?
Irene
Who?
Giovanna
Your uncle, here in Uruguay
Irene
Ah, my uncle was my father's side?
Eva
I think it was your mama's side.
Irono
Irene
What?

Eva

Wasn't it your mom's side?

Irene
No.
P
Eva
Mixed up?
Irene
Yes. I get it mixed up.
Giovanna
It happens. So when you arrived here in Uruguay you were 16, 17 years old?
Irene
Yes, I wanted to find my uncle. But I was sorry because my uncle was very poor. But luckily,
because I knew English, I got immediately a job.
Giovanna
What did you do for a job when you came here?
Irene
A secretary, I studied, I finished my studies at Academia Pitman.
Eva
Mama, tell her where did you go before you came to Uruguay.
Irene
What?
Eva
Eva
Where did you go before you came to Uruguay?
Giovanna

You didn't come directly from Poland to Uruguay, you went somewhere else.

From Poland? No, no

### Giovanna

No. Where did you go?

### Irene

I don't remember

### Eva

She first went to Russia.

### Irene

I didn't go to Russia, I was taken to Russia. I was a hostage. Taken

### Eva

She was taken to Russia, to Siberia.

### Irene

I didn't go to Russia, I was taken to Russia.

### Giovanna

How long were you there?

### Irene

In Russia? About four years. I ate very bad food and I got a spoiled stomach.

### Giovanna

And how long did you say you lived in Russia? How long? Months?

### Irene

In Russia, in Siberia, four years or so.

Four years. Were there any people you knew from Poland before? Did you see or did you meet anybody from Poland when you were there?

### Irene

Yes. We were a whole group. I wasn't all alone.

### Eva

And then you went to India, tell her how you get...

### Irene

No, I went to India... I got mixed up.

### Giovanna

That's okay. You went to India before coming to Uruguay too?

### Irene

Yeah, naturally.

### Giovanna

How did it happen that you went from Russia to India?

### Irene

How did it happen? I don't know. I don't remember

### Eva

She went to Kazakhstan.

### Irene

To Pakistan.

### Eva

No.

Giovanna
Kazakhstan. And you did that alone? That trip to India.
_
Eva
No, we were a group.
Giovanna
And why India?
And why india?
Irene
I don't know
Eva
Because she was an orphan.
Giovanna
So the orphans were taken from Siberia to India.
Eva
Yes.
Rona
After Siberia was there an attempt to take them back to Poland, or to relocate them?
Eva
Or to India. Yes.
Or to maia. res.
Irene
I was also in Afghanistan. I stood It was not India, I remember. He was cutting meat.
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Giovanna

That was the work that you had to do? No.

Irene
No, I just happened to pass and he threw a piece of meat to me. And I went to the river against a tree, I ate it crude.
Eva
Raw.
Giovanna
In Russia? We are talking about Russia?
Irene
No. I'm talking about Afghanistan. I know it's a bit mixed up.
Giovanna
Complicated, yeah.
Irene
And I cried, I cried when I ate it. And of course I had a spoiled stomach.
Giovanna
So you said you were in Russia for four years, more or less. For four years, in Russia.
Irene
Yes.
Giovanna
And then how long were you on that trip around India, Kazakhstan, and all these other places.
Irene

It wasn't a trip.

The time you went through all those countries.

Irene
I was taken.
Giovanna
Yes.
Irene
It's all mixed up.
Eva
Six years.
Giovanna
Six years. So when you arrived here you came from India?
Irene
No, I arrived from England.
Giovanna
From England.
Irene
I stayed with Spanish Jews, what are they called? They have a special name.
Rona
Sephardic?
Eva
Sephardic
Irene
Sephardic, no, no. It has another name, I don't remember now.

And they were able to locate your uncle living in Uruguay?

### Irene

My uncle was located through a special agency. They were still working at that time to find relatives.

### Giovanna

Family members, etcetera. And you remembered that uncle? He had been -

### Irene

No, I did not know him.

### Giovanna

You did not know him. And at that time, what did you know about Uruguay? What did you think about Uruguay and what Uruguay would become?

### Irene

I did not know anything

### Giovanna

Nothing. You came without any expectations. Do you remember when you arrived? Do you remember when you arrived in Uruguay? What were your first impressions? First impressions

### Irene

Yes. The democratic authorities, they did not let me get off the ship because I had to travel via England. I didn't get a place because at that time England moved its troops from one side to the other after the war. So, the Argentine ambassador told me that he would give me a visa to Buenos Aires. He... [said to]... disembark in Buenos Aires and then pass into Uruguay. But it didn't work like that because the Uruguayans didn't let me get off the boat because it was not humanly possible to get a ticket. But in the end, a man completely unknown to me gave me six hundred dollars as a guarantee so that I could get off the boat. Then when I started to work, I had a good salary, and I went to repay him, and he did not want to accept it. He said he was not married, he had no children, he had no one. He said it gave him pleasure to give me the six hundred dollars.

### Giovanna

Where was it from?

Irene
Who?
Giovanna
The man who helped
Irene
English.
Giovanna
English. I didn't quite understand, why didn't they let you off in Montevideo?
Irene
Because I had to come on an Uruguayan ship.
Giovanna
Ah, and you came on an English ship?
Irene
Yes. Either English or
res. Littler English of
Giovanna
They only let you get off if you came on an Uruguayan ship?
Irene
Yes.
Giovanna
How old were you when you arrived in Uruguay, more or less?
Irene
You'd have to calculate it. I was very young.

You were very young, Twenty'-something?
Irene
Twenty-something, yes. I wasn't yet thirty. Here, I met my husband, and all that.
Giovanna
You did not speak Spanish when you came.
Irene
Who?
Giovanna
You.
Irana
Irene Correct.
Giovanna
How was that process of coming to a country where you didn't speak the language at first?
Irene
I spoke English.
Giovanna
You spoke English. Did many people speak English?
Irene
Here?
Irene
Yes, at that time.
Irene
No, I made very ugly mistakes. I made one mistake that you can't commit. You should never

translate from one language to another literally.

Giovanna
Literally, yes.
Irene
I made so many mistakes that I didn't know where to hide myself.
Giovanna
But you learned right away and you also spoke At that time you spoke English. Did you speak Polish?
Irene
Yes, yes. Polish was my language.
Giovanna
And you spoke German.
Irene
I spoke German, yes.
Giovanna
So Spanish was your fourth language.
Irene
Yes.
Giovanna
How long did it take you to learn to feel comfortable in the country?
Irene
In Spain?
Giovanna
No, here.

Irene
Not long. No.
Giovanna
Not long. And for work, it wasn't an issue? You were able to start working and then learn Spanish?
Irene
Yes, they accepted me without certification, without anything. Just for the fact that I was European. They said that the Uruguayan employees were lazy, no good.
Eva
British Airways.
Giovanna
Let me share with Rona. So she worked for British Airways, that was her first job.
Giovanna
As a secretary for Spanish and English, German and English.
Giovanna
Because she spoke all of those languages, and apparently the Uruguayan employees were kind of lazy.
Irene
My eyes are burning. I don't know what's wrong.
Giovanna
And you lived with your uncle?

What?

Giovanna

You lived with your uncle when you arrived in Uruguay?

### Irene

No, no. Right away I went to British Overseas Airways Corporation, and they took me right away without any vacancies. Because I'm European.

### Giovanna

Where did you live? Who did you live with in Uruguay?

### Irene

Ah, no. I rented a room from a lady who rented rooms.

### Giovanna

And were there other people who had just arrived from Europe after the war in this place, or not?

### Irene

At this place? No. I know they came, but I don't know exactly.

### Giovanna

Did you feel welcomed in Uruguay, or was it difficult?

### Irene

No. I felt guilty because of my uncle's poverty. I was adding another mouth to feed, you know. Right away I went to look for a job. I went to the embassy. No, not the embassy. What comes after the embassy?

### Giovanna

Consulate. The consulate?

### Irene

No.

### Giovanna

Not that either.

Anyways, he told me to go look for a job with BOAC (British Overseas Airways Corporation). They hired me right away.

### Giovanna

When you arrived in Uruguay, did your uncle know you were coming? Had he been told?

### Irene

We were writing to each other. I wrote to him. Once I knew his address, I wrote to him. And he spoke Polish.

### Giovanna

Sure. What year did you come? I didn't catch that. Wel, around the time we're talking about, more or less. And he came over when?

### Irene

My uncle?

### Giovanna

Yes, much earlier?

### Irene

Before the war

### Giovanna

Before the war, why did he come to Uruguay?

### Irene

What?

### Giovanna

Why had he come to Uruguay?

### Irene

Me?
Giovanna
No, your uncle.
Irene
He wanted to improve his life. He was very poor. He was poor in Poland. And here too, he was still poor. He had a wife that wasted everything gambling.
Giovanna
But you two stayed in contact once you came to Uruguay? Did you see each other? Did you have contact in Uruguay once you arrived?
Irene
With whom?
Giovanna
With your uncle.
Irene
I was living in his house.
Giovanna
Ah, I didn't understand that.
Eva
At the beginning.
Ciavanna
Giovanna
You lived with him at the beginning. He was married to a woman from Uruguay?

No, no, no.

Giovanna Polish?
Irene
Polish, they came over together.
Giovanna
Did they have children here?
Irene
Did I?
Giovanna
Did they? Your uncle.
Irene
Yes.
Giovanna
Here in the country, in Uruguay?
Irene
Yes. But a son who I loved very much died because he ate 'garbage.' I don't know why, it's all a mystery. But he was found dead.
Giovanna
That was a cousin, your cousin?
Eva
Yes.
Irene
First cousin.

First cousin. Was he the only first cousin on that side?
Irene
No. I have more. I have more.
Giovanna
There was a large Polish community, right? In Uruguay at that time, after the war? Do you remember?
Irene
Yes, yes.
Giovanna
Were they in contact? Did they meet? The Polish Jewish community, did they meet a lot?
Irene
Yes, a Polish group.
Giovanna
Did you participate in these meetings?
Irene
Yes.
Giovanna
You can tell me one way or the other, but they say that the Polish community is more religiously observant than other Jewish groups that came from elsewhere.
Eva
No.

Irene

I don't know, I have not been in religious communities.

Did your family practice religion?
Irene
Yes, but not very They were not adherent.
Giovanna
And neither were you, after.
Irene
No.
Giovanna
But they met socially. They maintained, they interacted with others that had come.
Irene
Yes.
Giovanna
When you arrived, Irene, would you say that you identified as a refugee?
Irene
It was like
Giovanna
Did you consider yourself a refugee, or not?
Irene
No, I don't know. I got a good paying job right away.
Giovanna
Did you consider yourself Uruguayan?

Giovanna

No, never Uruguayan.

How do you define yourself? What is your identity? Uruguayan, Jewish? Uruguayan, you already told me no. Polish, Jewish?

### Irene

A mixture of Polish and Jewish.

### Giovanna

Of Polish and Jewish. You came over young, but you started to work right away.

### Irene

Yes.

### Giovanna

What aspects of Uruguayan culture were most difficult for you to get used to? I don't know if any were especially difficult. What were your impressions of the culture? What was the process for you to adapt to living in Uruguay?

### Irene

No, I had no difficulties.

### Giovanna

No. We know that you wrote a book. They told us about it here at the nursing home. And we're going to read it. I wanted to ask... You're the first person we've met with who wrote a book about your experiences and we wanted to ask you, how did the interest in writing the book come about? Why did you want to write that book?

### Irene

No, I wrote the book as an inheritance for my children, about my life. I had no other motives.

### Giovanna

We know Eva, how many children do you have?

Irene
Two.
Giovanna
Eva and a son, or another daughter?
Irene
I also have a son.
Giovanna
When they were kids, did you tell them your story of coming to the country?
Irene
No, I didn't tell my kids. When they were little I told them nothing from my past. It was enough
that I had to carry that burden. I didn't want to burden my children with it on top of that. I thought
that maybe when they grew up I told almost no one about my past.
Giovanna
And when you wrote the book, was that the first time you told your story? Or did they already
know something?
Irene
They knew something, yes. They knew I was in India. Superficial things.
Giovanna
Because the book is from 2015.
Face
Eva
I do not remember, I didn't read it.
Giovanna
No?
NO:
Eva
No, I can't do it.

# Giovanna The book says 2015, and that's only 4 years ago. How was the process? Because it's a long book. It's a big book. How was the process of writing the book? Irene I dictated it. Giovanna To a person who was going to Irene Yes. Eva But she's an archaeologist. Irene My Spanish was never that good.

An archaeologist wrote it. She located each citation and talked about what's going on there. They talk about what;s going on in the world.

### Giovanna

I see. And it's a long process, isn't it?

### Irene

Long what?

### Giovanna

In terms of time. The dictation.

### Irene

Long? To adapt? No.

Giovanna
They were interviews with the archaeologist?
Irene
Yes, Yes.
Giovanna
And you read it afterwards?
This year read it alterwards.
Irene
The book? No. What for?
Giovanna
I don't know. Well Eva tells me how the person who worked with you on the book located what
you said in terms of the world today.
Eva
Very good question.
Giovanna
No?
Eva
No
Giovanna
Your husband was born in?
Irene
He was German

He was German

# **Irene** A Jew

### Giovanna

And he came to Uruguay before you?

### Irene

Before the war

### Giovanna

Before the war

### Irene

He came as a child. It was before.

### Giovanna

Did he identify as Uruguayan? Or did he identify himself as a German Jew?

### Irene

Not Uruguayan. He identified himself as a German Jew.

### Giovanna

German Jew. I, personally, didn't know there were so many nationalities represented in the Jewish community in Uruguay. Truthfully. We were talking earlier to two ladies from Romania. I didn't know that a group from Romania came here. When you came at that young age, did you know about the existence of all these different Jewish communities in Uruguay?

### Irene

No, I didn't know. I didn't think about those things.

### Giovanna

There wasn't time. You were all working, weren't you, too? All day long.

### Irene

I said to a boy, my first cousin. I don't know. He said something to me. I said "I wanted you not to embarrass me." In English, 'don't embarrass me'. But I said 'don't impregnate me.'

### Rona

I heard "don't embarrass me."

### Giovanna

Yeah, because to be embarrassed in Spanish is to be pregnant, so she wanted to say 'don't embarrass me' and she said 'don't get me pregnant.'

### Giovanna

It's like this, these things.

### Irene

It's nothing to laugh about. I didn't know where to hide!

### Giovanna

No, I know that. Of course, yes. You said you wrote the book because you wanted to leave that legacy for your children. Right?

### Irene

To my children, as my legacy. Yes.

### Giovanna

Did you ever tell your husband? Did you ever talk to your husband about your experience in Russia?

### Irene

At first, I did not.

### Giovanna

No

### Irene

I didn't want to. I didn't tell him. I was known as Polish. I didn't tell him I spoke German. We met a couple, she was Russian but she escaped from Russia before the war and lived in England. She spoke perfect German and he was German. And he told us we would be together. My husband and I weren't yet married. So we all spoke English together. She spoke perfect

English. And she wasn't even English. In English, he said to his friend, "I like that one, the Russian, she's the one I'm going to marry." "Uh-huh" I said.

### Giovanna

He thought he was speaking in secret, without knowing that you had understood everything. Were you able to use all of those languages you spoke in your work throughout your life here in Uruguay?

### Irene

If I could what?

### Giovanna

Use all the languages you speak?

### Irene

When I worked for BOAC, I translated works on the process of how certain remedies are made.

### Eva

She's talking about Roche.

### Giovanna

Ah, from the lab. Yes, yes.

### Irene

To get in, and I did very well.

### Eva

She worked at Roche for 20 years.

### Giovanna

You were just telling me... At the beginning, you didn't tell your husband your experience. But at some point you did?

### Irene

When we were already married.

He had come before the war. Was his family in Germany...?

### Irene

They first migrated to, I don't know... Italy and from Italy they came here.

### Giovanna

We talked before about how they were not considered religiously observant. Did Uruguay receive the Jews who came to the country well? Or was there anti-Semitism?

### Irene

I was well received. I had no problems. Except for this 'pregnancy/embarrassment.'

### Giovanna

Throughout your life in Uruguay, have you felt that your Jewish identity has been respected?

### Irene

No.

### Giovanna

Or were there periods when the identity was...?

### Eva

It was never really shared publicly. We weren't sent to Jewish schools. And when they ask for her father's name, instead of Abraham, she says Andrés. That's what is says on my birth certificate.

### Irene

No, no. I learned throughout my life to lie about my religion because it kept me out of trouble.

### Eva

They did not circumcise their son.

But at home you talked about your Jewish identity?

### Eva

No. Nothing. We were not doing anything differently. Public school. My brother went to an Adventist school.

### Irene

My eyes are burning so I'm going to close them.

### Giovanna

Is the light a little strong?

### Irene

No, I have bad eyesight.

### Giovanna

Poor vision.

### Irene

My eyes are in bad shape.

### Rona

Giovanna, are the lights bothering her?

### Giovanna

Her eyes are burning a bit, but it's not because of the light.

### Rona

We can turn those off.

### Giovanna

Yes. We can turn off the lights.

Ah yes, that light wasn't good for me. That's good.

### Giovanna

You can see?

### Rona

It's darker, but I think it's fine.

### Giovanna

Irene, I was thinking about... And please tell me if you don't want to talk about it. There are very few other people who can teach us about what your experience was like in those years in Russia. What do you think we should learn, those of us who didn't have that experience?

### Irene

Do not eat raw meat, of course.

### Giovanna

Can you repeat that?

### Irene

Do not eat raw meat. No, nothing special.

### Giovanna

Is there anything that you believe that today's generations should learn from what happened?

### Irene

There are many things- It's better that they don't know.

### Eva

She used to say that we must not forget.

### Giovanna

And now, why do you think it is better not to know? Why do you think today that it is better for young people not to know about the things that happened?

It's not so tragic when one does not know well. I survived better than the others in my group because I ate raw onion. That's what they said, the commission of doctors that examined me when I arrived here.

### Giovanna

And there are people who sometimes wonder: How did the people who survived survive? Now you tell me something that has to do with diet or with what you ate. But do you think there were other characteristics or attitudes? What made you survive other than what the doctors said? What do you think helped you survive?

### Eva

Instinct

### Irene

I had premonitions because it was just one day before the Germans arrived that I barely escaped.

### Giovanna

Where had you gone?

### Irene

I had already left, yes.

### Giovanna

Where had you gone?

### Irene

Next to Russia. Although no, I was not in Russia but I didn't put myself in situations I didn't like.

### Giovanna

And that was because you felt it was dangerous to stay at that time? You felt you had to leave?

### Eva

She wanted to leave at all costs and the family didn't.

Where to?

### Eva

I'm saying that your mom went to consult a rabbi.

### Irene

Yes I wanted to go, the Germans were still in Poland. My mom said "How are you going to go alone, little girl?"

### Irene

I told them, if they don't let me go, I'm going anyway. They consulted a wise rabbi that was very well known for that wisdom. The rabbi said to my mom: "We live in insecure times. If her desire is so strong, let her go" And they let me go. And how great. Then they went looking for me. The rabbi was indeed wise.

### Giovanna

And your family didn't feel the same rush to leave?

### Irene

Sadly, they all said that I wasn't healthy, that I was crazy.

### Giovanna

They didn't think anything was going to happen.

### Irene

Nothing. So I was the only one. Yeah. I also had a brother, eight years older than me.

### Giovanna

Older. It was three siblings, you said? Four siblings?

### Irene

Four, yes.

Giovanna
Four. And you were the? The second? The oldest?
Irene
What?
Giovanna
You were the oldest? The youngest?
Irene
I was the youngest.
Giovanna
The youngest.
Irene
I had visions. My brother To this day, I have no idea how this could have happened. One morning my brother woke up, and left. I never saw him again. No one saw him again.
Giovanna
Before you went to Russia?
Irene
Yes. Before. I'm a bit
Giovanna
Of course.
Irene

Yes, no worries.
Irene
No, I can listen.
Giovanna
Well, I just wanted to see if there was anything else you wanted to share with us. And to thank
you for your time. We're going to read the book.
Irene
The book is very interesting. You will love it.
The book is very interesting. Tou will love it.
Giovanna
How did you decide who would work with you in writing the book?
Irene
My son promised to translate it, but he never did.
F
Eva
Someone was recommended by my brother's friend.
Giovanna
I don't know, Rona, if you have any questions.
Rona
I didn't

We were talking... Eva was saying that in the past, Irene would say that we shouldn't forget. But

now she's saying that it's better that younger generations don't know.

Giovanna

Giovanna

Eva
Your book is a document, mom, that you want people to not forget. So that it never happens
again. You always told us that.
Irene
Yes.
Eva
She always told us that. Because then came a coup d'etat and my mother was scared. She sent my brother to Israel and we went to Argentina.
Giovanna
And your mother was scared of what? That your brother Of the moment in the country?
Eva
Eva Yes.
Yes.
Yes.  Giovanna
Yes.  Giovanna
Yes.  Giovanna  And how long did you live in Argentina?
Yes.  Giovanna And how long did you live in Argentina?  Eva Six years.
Yes.  Giovanna And how long did you live in Argentina?  Eva

# Eva

He's in Israel.

## Giovanna

He stayed in Israel. Have you traveled to Israel?

What are you asking?

### Eva

If you went to Israel.

### Irene

Yes. I went to Israel for the birth of my first grandchild.

### Giovanna

How many grandchildren do you have?

### Irene

How old is he?

### Eva

He's 38. But she has three grandchildren and a great-grandchild on the way.

### Giovanna

Well, let's see... If I didn't interrupt you, it seems I was going to say something. No?

### Eva

She tires quickly.

### Giovanna

Well, we have to thank you for giving us the opportunity to meet you.

### Irene

I want people to know. She doesn't like to talk about it.

### Giovanna

About the book? About what's in the book? Well, it was many years, wasn't it?

Irene		
Well, yes.		
Giovanna		

And you made the decision to tell it at a certain point. At that point, what made you decide that after so long? Was it something in particular?

### Irene

I don't know, what did you say?

### Giovanna

I said the book is from 2015, at least that's what the paper says.

### Irene

Yes

### Giovanna

So it was many years before you told that story. What made you want to tell it after so many years?

### Irene

My children told me to do it. I wanted to leave it for my children, the memories.

### Giovanna

All the years you lived in Uruguay, apart from talking to your husband, did you talk to anyone? Did you talk to anyone who had a similar experience to yours?

### Irene

I don't understand the question

### Giovanna

During the entire time you've lived in Uruguay and leading up to you writing the book, did you ever share your story with other people who had experienced something similar to you?

Irene
No
Giovanna
No
Irene
I do not remember
Eva
No
Irene
I did say I was in Siberia, but no details.
Giovanna
No details
Irana
Irene
I'm so tired
Rona
You asked about the book and who it's written for and what she hoped came out of it?
·
Giovanna
Yes, she did it for her children
Irene
What time is it?
Giovanna
She wanted to write the story for her children

### Eva

We're going to have a snack. It's five.

### Giovanna

Ah, well.

### Eva

Thank you very much.

### Giovanna

No, thank you very much.

Thank you to Irene Rzadzinksa, Eva Nathan, and Hogar Israelita