**Halina Moss – Life Before The War**

Halina describes her life in Poland and Russia during the war and how she eventually came to Scotland.

**Read the transcript**

INT: Could you tell us when and where you were born and what was your name at birth?

HM: I was born in Warsaw and my name at birth was Halina Lewiner (L E W I N E R)

INT: When did you come here to Scotland?

HM: I came to Scotland to stay permanently on the 9th of December 1947, but I had been here before just before the war.

INT: What age were you when you came in 1947?

HM: 18.

INT: Why did you come here to Scotland and how was it possible?

HM: Well I came here with my parents. My mother had a sister in Glasgow. She and her husband made great efforts to get us over to Glasgow, because the situation in Poland was getting a bit untenable. The communist regime was encroaching. Various friends of ours got arrested and held for days at a time and a lot of them left Poland but they didn’t go officially because they couldn’t, they had no relatives like we had. They just went across the illegal border to Czechoslovakia, to Germany, but we were lucky because we had relatives who sent us genuine visas. And that’s how we got here.

INT: And where did you stay? Did you stay with your mother’s sister?

HM: Yes, we stayed with her for a while but we moved out after a couple of months.

INT: Did your family find work here?

HM: My father found a job, a very lowly job of course, very poorly paid but a job nevertheless. And my mother tried to make a living out of dressmaking but it just didn’t work out because she was too high a class of dressmaker. She couldn’t really compete with the ready-mades and she didn’t get enough of the higher class of customer. She had a few who were very pleased with her, but she couldn’t expand because she had no backing really, but she did manage to make a few pounds here and there with dressmaking.

INT: What were your impressions of Scotland?

HM: Well I had already been before, you see, and I was a great Scottish and Polish patriot and I was so delighted that Poland and Scotland had some connection through the mother of Bonnie Prince Charlie.

She was a Polish princess, and I had known this since I was nine! I loved it here. When I was returning to Poland, my school friends clubbed together to give me tartan presents. Before the War we came because my Auntie, my mother’s sister was pregnant and she had a little boy and she felt she could do with her sister’s company. My father didn’t come then, just myself and my mother and after a month they decided that they had enough of me under their feet and they sent me to school. So I went to Shawlands Academy for about five months and I learnt English beautifully without the slightest trace of an accent, which I’m afraid is not the case now!

INT: So you think you’ve lost your good Scottish accent?

HM: I had a good Scottish accent and what’s more I could read and write with perfect spelling. I know that because my aunt kept my letters and I found them after the war and I spelt words like ‘caught’ and ‘would ’ perfectly. I still have them.

INT: What age would you have been? About fourteen?

HM: No, I was about nine.

INT: Nine!

HM: Nine. I had my tenth birthday in Glasgow.

HM: We went back to Poland. We had stayed six months in Glasgow and then we travelled a bit in England, and then France and then we left France on the 14th of July, just after the celebrations of the 14th of July. Six weeks later the war broke out.

INT: Your father must have been quite worried though?

HM: He was and that’s why we went back partially because he kept writing, saying, “What are you doing there?” and “I am lonely, come back” but there were other reasons why we went back. My mother didn’t intend to stay here really because she had a thriving dressmaking business near Warsaw, in a small town where we lived.

And, war was in the air. We listened to Hitler’s speeches on the radio and the radio nearly jumped off the shelf because he was so loud, and the Heil Hitlers and everything, and the barrage balloons floated over Bellahouston Park and they were practising with, what do you call them, lights?

INT: The anti-aircraft lights?

HM: Yes and they intercepted aircraft so we knew war was on its way but we just didn’t really believe it, not quite. My mother just couldn’t make up her mind but finally she decided we would go home.

But my mother had an idea, at least she had two ideas, which she chased; she chased both ideas, quite different ideas but she chased them both (my mother was very energetic). One was to get to Vilna which was in a neutral country then. Lithuania was still a neutral country and was not absorbed either by Germany or by Russia. From Lithuania you could apply for a visa to Britain or to America. Lots of people went and my mother said to we will be in Vilna, wire Auntie Hannah and she will promptly send us visas and off we’ll go to Britain.

On the other hand, she had a sister in Moscow who had emigrated to Moscow in the 1920s. She wanted to get an education in Poland but she couldn’t because she was too poor. In Russia, just after the Communists won, after the Bolshevik Revolution, education was open to all and she was longing for an education so she went there. Actually, my mother’s brother went even earlier so she went to join her brother and that’s how she was in Russia. After a while she couldn’t come back to Poland. They wouldn’t let her out. So she kept up a correspondence with my mother and her own father but after a while, about 1938, the correspondence stopped. There was nothing. My mother wanted to see both her brother and her sister in Moscow so she started applying to the various institutions, the various offices in one of the Russian authorities.

One authority sent her to another, “We don’t deal with it, go to that one” and then another, We don’t deal with it go to that one” and she went round in circles until one official took pity on her and said, “Look citizenness, you will never get permission to go to Moscow so forget about it. How long is it since you have seen your sister? Eighteen years? Well if you haven’t seen her for eighteen years you’ll never see her.”

That was the Russian approach. In fact later we on, we discovered that my uncle, the brother, was no longer alive. He had been arrested in 1937 in the big Purges and he was shot in the service of capitalism. My auntie was afraid to write about him but it was later, during our stay in Russia we discovered all this.

So you wanted to know how we got into Russia? At the start of 1940 there was no question of going to Lithuania because Lithuania was annexed by Russia so that path was closed to us. We couldn’t go to Moscow but there was a chance to register for a return back to your own home. The Russians declared, all the refugees must register either to receive Soviet passports or to go home. My father decided (we were still living separately) [they were in Bialystok at this time] he decided that he would go to back to Warsaw. He was fed up with Russia, being forever arrested and released and forever persecuted/ prosecuted. He’d rather stay at home and whatever happened with everybody would happen to him. But my mother still had this dream of going to Moscow so she applied for a Russian passport and I was on it.

One day the NKVD came for us in the night of June, I forget which date, in 1940. They said to my mother, “Well, we’ll have to take your husband away but you and the girl can stay” but my mother suddenly became very brave and said, “Wherever my husband goes, I go and that’s how we got transported by cattle trucks, a journey of about 12 days, far into Northern Russia, and that’s how we did not get put into gas chambers or shot by the Germans.

INT: So in other words, your father who had said he wanted to go back to Poland, ended up being Russian or made into a Russian citizen like your mother and you?

HM: We never became Russian citizens. It was a big fight not to become citizens but because my mother decided to go with him, my mother and I were saved. Had we decided to stay (in Bialystok), which would have been quite easy because it was comfortable and by going, we were going into the unknown, my father would have been taken away and we would have been shot by the Germans in due course.

INT: So was it Siberia you ended up in?

HM: Well it used to be known as Siberia because it was a place where politicals used to be deported but it wasn’t actually Siberia, geographically it was actually still Europe. It was nearer Archangel.

INT: Up north, near Japan then?

HM: No, nearer Finland.

INT: So how long were you there?

HM: Well we were in the Archangel area for about a year and a half and while we were there the Germans attacked Russia. We were detainees before the attack but once the attack happened, we were allies. Suddenly so from not being able to go out of the settlement any further than a five kilometres radius, we were told we could go anywhere we liked, we could do anything we liked. By then my Auntie, my Moscow Auntie, had been evacuated to another place called Bashkiria, which was near the Urals which was almost in Siberia and all the inmates of this settlement near Archangel were going to go out. They had had enough of that very cold place where we were forced to do labouring in the forests and so on.

They were going to go somewhere where there was some food; food was short and it was cold, they were going to go somewhere where it was warm so they all went to central Asia, except my mother and me because we knew where we were going. We were going to Bashkiria to join my Auntie from Moscow.

INT: It must have been bitterly cold I would imagine?

HM: Yes in both places. Near Archangel the temperature could go down to minus 55.

INT: Goodness that’s cold.

HM: But we lived in a valley so there was no wind so it was bearable, just about bearable but in Bashkiria we were living in the Steppe and the temperature minus 40 was quite common. Usually it was minus 25, minus 26.

INT: With a horrible, cold wind?

HM: There was a wind, yes, and sometimes it would whip up the snow. You couldn’t see, whirling snow everywhere. There were two memorable days while we were there when the temperature dropped to minus 65.

INT: My goodness, I couldn’t conceive of that! You couldn’t go out in a temperature like that?

HM: No but you had to. You had to go to the bathroom, you didn’t have a lavatory in the house.

INT: Did you get an education there?

HM: Yes, the first thing I did was to go back to school. To begin with there was no school in the Archangel settlement when we got there. The men were required to go tree felling, lumber jacking in the forest.

The women and various other able bodied people had jobs. My father was over 50 so he was not required to fell trees but he was required to be out, collecting the branches and making big bonfires out of the branches. He and a sixteen year old boy did this, and I think they quite enjoyed it. But after a while he was dragged away to jail. That’s another long story.

INT: I thought you were all on the same side by that point, why was he jailed?

HM: Well, long before the Revolution and even after the Revolution for a bit, he was politically engaged and in fact he was deported, in exile, in the same area near Archangel by the Tsar; he got detention for three years without a trial because they didn’t have enough evidence against him but they did want him out of Warsaw so he was given three years of detention in that place that was known as Siberia but was actually near Archangel.

He spent a very interesting three years there. He was imprisoned with the wife of Trotsky, and various other well known personalities. I’ve got a photograph which we always had in the family and when Trotsky’s biography came out, on page 8 there was the photo with my father in it.

INT: But if he was with Trotsky, was he not a Communist then?

HM: My father? No, he wasn’t a Communist, he was a Bundist. I don’t know whether you know what a Bundist is?

INT: Ah yes, that’s the German Jewish Trade Union Movement?

HM: No not German. No it was called the Bund of the Jewish Workers of Russia, Lithuania and Poland.

INT: I see, not German.

HM: Bund simply means a union and it was an organisation which was non-Zionist but nationalistic which wanted better conditions for Jewish workers of whom there were a lot. Not only material conditions, but also cultural autonomy for Jews. In other words Jewish institutions should flourish; it was secular, was non-religious. It was anti-religious, anti-Zionist but pro-workers so it was a socialist organisation and he was very active in it when he was young but the activity sort of tailed off. But the Russians didn’t forget about it and that’s why he was harassed while we were in the occupied Polish part. That’s why he wanted to go back, because they harassed him and then when we were in detention up North, someone tipped off the authorities. (I’ve got it all written up you know, somewhere).

There was a bit of an uprising in the settlement; the young protested that they were working and they didn’t get enough to eat and they didn’t want any money, they wanted food for themselves and the children. The Russians considered this a revolt and these young people were all arrested but one of them seems to have said to the interrogating officer, “Oh you are arresting us, we used to be Communists in Poland and there’s this Bundist and you haven’t touched him” so they went and got my father too, dragged him in.

INT: So was there quite an age difference between your father and your mother?

HM: Yes, my mother was 8 years younger. When my father came from the detention in Russia under the Tsar he was 26 and he met my mother and my mother looked at him and she said, “Oh, a hero of the Revolution” and she thought he was wonderful. He was quite good looking too so they got engaged; he was 28 because my mother was 20 when they got married.

INT: So there you are, stuck in Russia and how did you manage to get to Scotland?

HM: Once the war between Russia and Germany, was underway, there was a Polish government in exile in Britain and this Polish government in exile demanded that the Russian government allow all the Polish citizens in the territory of Russia, who were in detention, to be allowed out, so my father was allowed out of jail.

Not only that but, the jail official thought he was a VIP and they conveyed him to Moscow in a VIP manner. He didn’t know what had happened to him; there he was starving and dirty in a first class carriage going to Moscow. At the same time we were allowed out from our detention. We didn’t know where my father was by then, because although he did write from the prison, after a while he stopped writing. But they managed to put us together and we went to Bashkiria and afterwards, when the war was coming to the end (that was over four years later) there was talk of repatriation of the Polish citizens and that’s when we were very glad that we never took Soviet citizenship, My mother just forgot her passport, she didn’t think about it but my father didn’t take a passport. Every time they asked us,

“Why don’t you become Soviet citizens” he would say, “Well we can’t because we can’t have dual nationality and I don’t want to relinquish Polish nationality”. “Oh you’re Polish, well prove it” so he kept doling out little documents, whatever he had to show he was Polish so at least they knew we were Polish and there was a rumour that we were going to be repatriated, which we eventually were. Poland, at the beginning, soon after the war, was still reasonably democratic so we could communicate with my Auntie Hannah from there. When I say ‘we’ I obviously mean my parents because I was just a child really.

INT: And they eventually arranged for her to get you a visa to come here?

HM: Yes.

INT: Yes? And that’s where we started!

HM: Yes, we came legitimately here without too much trouble.

**Halina Moss – Life During The War**

Halina describes how the family managed to leave Warsaw and finally settle in Bialystock where Halina went to school.

**Read the transcript:**

INT: Can we take you back. You went back to Poland, obviously a very dangerous time. What happened after that?

HM: Well we got to Poland and we reoccupied our flat and on the 1st of September, a Friday, bombs practically fell in our backyard and we discovered the war had started because the night before the atmosphere had been electric, war, war, war. My father said, “There will be no war. I’m sure there are talks going on somewhere to stop the nonsense.” Well during the night war was declared. We didn’t know because we didn’t have a radio at the time, our radio had been broken, so we only knew when the bombs fell from a German bomber. It just sowed the bombs in our back garden and of course there was panic.

My father left the house on the 9th of September. People to this day don’t know exactly what happened. What we were aware of was that the main road from Warsaw out east was absolutely full of people walking with bundles and suitcases, some on bicycles, the odd car here and there, the odd horse-driven vehicle, but mostly people were on foot and it was like a river of people moving along. My father was sitting in the garden and my mother said, “What’s this? What are all these people doing?” and he said, “Well I don’t know, the weather is lovely, I’m not going anywhere” but my mother said, “You go. You never know, it might be important”. So she put some underwear and some sandwiches into his briefcase and sent him off. Luckily he was a good walker.

Later we heard what happened on the road. Most of them were young people and a lot of them were Jews, although not all, and the rumour was that the government in Warsaw had decided that there was no point in trying to keep the Germans out of Warsaw, better to go to the east and form a new army in Eastern Poland. That was one theory anyway but we don’t really know why people left.

INT: But I would imagine your parents understood well that Hitler was going to be very dangerous for Jewish people?

HM: Oh, of course they knew. I mean, my Auntie who brought us here, had lived in Germany until 1936 and she came over here en route to Canada but while she was in here in Britain, in Leeds, she met her husband and that was it.

So we knew alright that things were happening but we didn’t know how bad it was. People would be arrested and kept as hostages. If there was any outrage against the German, every tenth person would be shot. In fact every nine out ten people were killed. Anyway, my father, who was already in his fifties then, decided he would go, and about a month later my mother decided that she couldn’t stay. The Germans had already stepped into the town and occupied it. After battles and bombing and all kinds of things happening, (we had watched Warsaw being bombed for two weeks) and, because we were just outside of Warsaw, my mother felt the weight of the German occupation. The janitor of our flat suddenly stopped calling her ‘Mrs Leviner’ and just called her ‘Leviner’ which was very disrespectful.

Also she was in a queue for bread and there were people saying to the Germans who were watching the queue, “This is a Jew, take him out of here.” She had rations for bread, coal and so on, but everywhere the local Poles were worse than the Germans. I’m not saying they were all like that but there were enough of them to cause trouble because they were anti-Semitic as well you know. So my mother decided to leave and she managed to organise an escape for the two of us. We travelled with a young man who had been in a small place near Warsaw called Otwock. It was a holiday resort but people went there to, to be treated for TB. It was supposed to be a wonderful place to get treatment for TB. The air was pure and the weather was usually very even. The young man was 25 and he was going home to Vilna with his nurse so my mother joined them and we travelled in a droshky. I don’t know whether you know what a droshky is?

INT: Is that not a horse and cart?

HM: It was a horse and carriage but it was very comfortable. You know it was like this settee and there were seats facing this way and seats facing that way and of course the young man with his nurse sat there and my mother and I sat facing backwards but there was enough room to take sufficient luggage. It was a rather uneventful journey but on the way we saw the carcasses of dead horses and broken cars and broken bicycles, all that was left from the original exodus. These people had been shot at by low flying German planes and they had to hide in the surrounding woods and after a while they didn’t walk by day, only by night; by day they hid in the woods. My father had a hole in his briefcase from shrapnel or something and he would have been killed him if it hadn’t been for his briefcase.

Lots of people had died on the way but I suppose they must have been buried by the surrounding peasants because we didn’t see any dead bodies but we saw dead horses and broken down cars which had run out of petrol. We stayed in peasant huts overnight and at one point we were chased by a German patrol and luckily we made our driver stop (he was a bit deaf) and the Germans came over to us. They started pulling us out of the carriage and the nurse, who knew German and said, “Ein kranker – don’t touch him because he’s ill.” but they were still pulling us and my mother decided to pretend that they wanted her gloves so she let them pull her gloves off but another older German came and he said, “Lass ihn, leave them alone, let them go.”

INT: And did you know what had happened to your father by then?

HM: We heard rumours. It’s amazing; he would send a message. There was no post or telephone but someone would be coming back and would let someone else know that Leviner was seen in Brest or in Rovno or any of these towns so my mother thought she’d find him alright. We went for Bialystok, my mother and I. My father had friends everywhere because before the war he was an agent for a publishing firm and he used to place book orders especially among the intelligentsia and among the institutions like libraries or schools so he had lots of friends there. In Bialystok we found somewhere we could at least have a corner, because the place was overrun with refugees.

The flat we were in was a manufacturer’s and he had a big flat by Bialystok standards: four rooms, each with its own bathroom and in these four rooms there were never less than 16 people.

INT: That’s a lot of people.

HM: The family was just himself, his wife and a little boy and luckily my father knew him and that’s why we could get in there but my father couldn’t. There was just room for me and my mother. My father found somewhere else where he slept on a table. He would spread his bedding on the table and in the morning he would roll it up and put it under the table

INT: And you met him there then?

HM: Yes we met him within a few days of arriving. I can’t remember, maybe the following day and it was quite easy because people passed on the news his wife was there and we eventually moved out, just outside of Bialystok, my mother and I, because my mother was hoping to do some sewing. This move was wonderful for me. It was a very severe winter and ice covered the ground and there was snow and everything but I got to go to school. I was always keen to go to school. Now there was a choice of different language schools because the Russians had just stepped in and they were the idealistic Communists and they were going to encourage the expression of ethnic cultures so they allowed various schools and in fact encouraged various schools to flourish; there was a school where the language of instruction was Yiddish and one in which Polish was the main language.

Then there was a Belarus and a Russian school so I had a choice of four, and I said to my mother, “I want to go to the Yiddish school.” I had never been to Yiddish school. It was a most wonderful school with very devoted teachers and I learnt to speak Yiddish, learnt to read Yiddish and write Yiddish and learned some science taught in Yiddish as well.

INT: That would be very handy in Woodfarm Secondary!

HM: Well there was a lesson I could pass on. It was about convection. The teacher took a candle and held it high up in the open door and the flame pointed out and he held it down below the bottom of the door and the flame pointed in. You see cold air comes in and warm air comes up and goes out of the door – convection

**Halina Moss – Settling In**

Halina describes how she found it difficult to integrate with the Jewish community at first.

**Read the transcript:**

INT: Why were you so keen on Scotland?

HM: I don’t know, I was just the kind of girl who was enthusiastic about countries.

INT: So when you came here were your dreams met or were you disappointed?

HM: No I wasn’t disappointed. It was a different situation I was in. Now I was an adult and my aim was to study and I did go to study but it is more difficult to make friends when you are older. I just didn’t understand the mores and the way of going about things here. And it took me a few years but I was very happy on the whole, yes.

INT: And did you meet and mix with the Jewish community here?

HM: Well to a certain extent. My Auntie made sure I’d meet some young Jewish people and they took me to various things but there was a young Zionist organisation and I went to their meetings and various birthday parties and things like that but I was estranged, I was out of my milieu. And nobody particularly made too much of an effort. In the community, they didn’t make much of an effort to draw me in.

INT: We’ve heard that from other people. I think that was a common experience. What about the refugees themselves? Did you know about the refugee centre?

HM: I heard there was a refugee organisation but my parents were really the people who would be interested in things like that. I had my university interests and besides we felt they were probably more for the German incomers than for us. We didn’t feel we were refugees. We felt we were asylum seekers.

INT: That’s quite interesting, that even then you differentiated.

HM: Yes, we were not refugees; we hadn’t come here before the war escaping, or even after the war, escaping the horrors because we escaped the horrors in Russia, but we did come because of the political situation so we were asylum seekers.

**Halina Moss – Integration**

Halina remembers her early years teaching in various schools in Glasgow.

**Read the transcript:**

INT: And what did you study at university?

HM: I did an ordinary degree, which is not brilliant in Physics and science in general, but Physics in particular, and Maths.

INT: That sounds hard to me. And how were you able to fund it at the time?

HM: Funding? That was difficult because to begin with I thought I would never get any funding and my relatives were not all that keen to fund me. My mother would have done anything for me, my father was barely earning a living and someone tipped me off that Glasgow Corporation gave bursaries, no not bursaries…

INT: Grants?

HM: Grants to students and to begin with we didn’t quite believe it but when I applied, lo and behold I was successful so I was funded for the three years that I was there.

INT: That’s excellent. And after university did you begin work straight away?

HM: Oh yes, I became a teacher. I went to, teacher training college at Jordanhill and I got a job straight away.

INT: And so where did where did you teach? Can you remember?

HM: Yes, my first appointment was in Kelvinside Academy, no North Kelvinside Secondary School.

INT: I taught there for a week once.

HM: Did you? Well did you not find any traces of me there? For a few months anyway then I taught at St George’s Road.

INT: In Maryhill?

HM: Yes, almost Maryhill. Then, I was married so to begin with I didn’t teach anywhere, but I had to earn some money because things were tough, so I went to teach in King’s Park Secondary School and then I had another short job in Battlefield Junior Secondary School. After each of these jobs I had to have a rest because it was very hard but after each rest I realised if I didn’t go and make some money I would have no clothes to wear and the children will have no clothes to wear. My husband was a teacher as well and while he was brilliant and was hard working but teachers’ pay was very low. So, the next job I had was in Eastwood and I taught Russian there for five years. I was a qualified teacher but not qualified to teach Russian but I knew enough Russian to teach it.

Then they got a qualified teacher who was also qualified in French which I wasn’t, so I had to go and then I decided to take a proper permanent job which was in Woodfarm High School in East Renfrewshire.

HM: I stopped there thirty years ago nearly. No no twenty-five years ago.

INT: And you taught science there?

HM: I taught maths. The first tranche of my teaching I did teach science but I find science was a dirty job. You had to handle equipment and I’ve had more cuts on my hand than you can imagine and they were always full of carbon, sorry sulphur carbon eh…

INT: Sulphuric acid?

HM: No copper sulphate and copper sulphate is blue and gets under your nails and was difficult to get out. Vaseline was another dirty substance and my overalls were burnt through wherever the acid fell and of course bunsen burners so I said no more.

INT: You wouldn’t be allowed to do any of that nowadays, health and safety would stop you!

HM: Yes!

INT: And everybody would be wearing covers over their eyes.

HM: Not then.

INT: Absolutely not!

HM: Now they do but not then. There was a period when they could do anything if they could get hold of the equipment. In fact, they were delighted if something went wrong because ‘oh, we’ll get compensation’ but after that, I think health and safety came in and now there are supposed to be experiments where they must be goggled and gloved.

**Halina Moss – Reflection On Life**

Halina describes meeting her husband and starting a family.

**Read the transcript:**

INT: So, how did you meet your husband?

HM: I met him at a student dance a Glasgow Jewish Students’ Society Dance. I was a wee bit too old for it as I was already out of university by then but my mother insisted I go because I had just finished with my boyfriend and I was a wee bit low. I said “I’m not going” and she replied, “Yes, you’re going!” So I went and there was my future husband and he was looking a bit forlorn as well! It’s a story really about him and it’s connected with Hannah and Lionel Levy. Well they were looking for a suitable bride for Hannah’s brother, Morris, and when they saw me they thought ‘Oh…Oh’ and they started following me around the dance floor and you know wherever I was, Morris would come and want to dance with me. Well I didn’t fancy him so I kept escaping. Finally Lionel, who knew Izzy, said to him, “Look there’s a damsel in distress, go rescue her. Don’t tell my wife!” So he came to me fifteen minutes before the end of the dance and that’s how we met.

INT: Very nice.

INT: And you had two children?

HM: Three.

INT: Three children?

HM: Yes.

INT: Your daughters and a son?

HM: Yes a son as well.

HM: At the time I had my reasons. I was the one who decided these things. I said, “Look, the Jewish people lost a third so we’ve got to replace them which means that we have to have three children but on the other hand we can’t have any more because the world is getting overpopulated so we have to restrain ourselves.”