



Interviewed: Shirley and Hilton Silberg
Oral History Clip Title: Immigration Tribulations
Theme: Leaving
Interviewer: Naomi Raichyk
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(Hilton)

And in our first foray into—Well, it wasn't really our first. We'd landed into Europe, gone skiing, almost broke Shirley's leg skiing, went to England.

(Shirley)

[laughs]

(Hilton)

She had to limp around. It was a nightmare. This is 1976 by now. There weren't painkillers. There was...

(Shirley)

Torn a ligament.

(Hilton)

And you certainly couldn't... There was no insurance at the beginning of a year-long trip to cover the knee, so she made-do. Anyway, we went to England for a while, made that as our base with a friend of my sister's. And our first foray into Europe was in Amsterdam. We went to Amsterdam. It was the month, the week, the day that South Africa troops went into Cuba—into South West Africa, Namibia, to fight the Cubans. So it was a real war. It was serious. And we, being typical propagandized, censored South Africans sat—in those days, you never had a television in your room at the hotel and we weren't even in a hotel. We were staying in pension, but we'd gone to a hotel TV room to watch something on TV. The Eurovision. Some contest. And the news came on. And we were sitting with these other European and American kids and I literally remember saying, "That is absolute lies. We left South Africa a few—There is no my way my friends are fighting in South West Africa."

(Shirley)

[inaudible]

(Hilton)

"That is pure propaganda." 'Cause you see, we'd been taught that the rest of the world was wrong and South Africa was perfect. And that they were all mad. "What do you mean blacks and whites mix? Are you mad? What do you mean? Of course." And I remember saying, "That's absolute lies. It's

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propaganda. They're just trying to make South Africa look bad." Anyway, the more we spent a good six months travelling around Europe—right the way through, ending up in Turkey, and flying to Israel for my first trip to Israel—and it just became evident that we'd believed all the nonsense and the world did not live that way. And Shirley's brother Brian was right that this is obscene and immoral and it was no way to ever live. Even though we knew deep down that it was obscene and immoral and no way to live, there was a... And by the time we'd finished our trip—and then we went to the States and we spent I think about a month-and-a-half, two months travelling around the States, ending up in Canada, at the—The whole reason of the trip was to end up at the Olympic Games in Montreal, which we did and we attended the Olympics. And South Africans are very sport-conscious, as you're aware. Very nationalistic. And it was the worst being in a place where you had no one to cheer for. Because we weren't there. They were banned.

(Shirley)

Yeah.

(Hilton)

It was the worst. We cheered for Israel. There were a few Israeli weight-lifting guys and whatever. And I think that that was... When we got back, Shirley's brother was getting ready to leave, and her sister had just been admitted to Canada, and that for us was the—This is absolutely no way to ever want to [sic] bring up your children. And in fact, we made a concerted decision not to have children there. Not for most people's reasons, because we are disorganized. Most people's reasons was [sic] that it was too hard to move with a child. It's too expensive. I just didn't want my children to ever have to say they were born in South Africa. I wanted them to say, "I'm Canadian." That's what I wanted.

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By pure coincidence there was a Rexall pharmacy—not the Rexalls of today. It was a buying group under Rexall. And the first name on the list was Amherst. It was “A.” It could have been “Acme.” It could have been anything. It was “A” for Amherst. And I figured that’s the head office, so I wrote them a letter [sic] the same letter that I’d sent to Shoppers Drug Mart, Top Drug Mart and Super X...and Tamblyn’s. And at this end, the guy who got it handed it off to his sister-in-law, who happened to know a South African couple. There were no South Africans here in ’76. There were none. And she phoned them and said, “Is Silberg a Jewish name?” And they said, “Yes.” So we got this amazing letter back saying, “We’ve waited forever to help a Jewish family. We will help do anything to get you into the country. And it was like one shot in a million. And we—Because we’d been rejected already three times by the Canadian government as students—we had tried three times—so when we got the letter it still wasn’t cut and dried. I went to the Canadian embassy and told them after the third rejection they’re making a terrible error and that I wanted to see the consul and they said, “Yes, you can in six weeks,” and I went, “Well, it’s not good enough. I got to be in Canada in nine weeks. We’re starting school on [sic] after Labour Day.” And she said, “Well, you can’t.” I said, “Well then, I’m not going to move. I’m going to sit here with these magazines and read until you send me someone because I think you are making a terrible error.” And, as I did say to you, you couldn’t do that in 2015 ‘cause they’d arrest you or kick you out or call the police or security. But being nice, lovely Canadians as they were, they let me sit there. And finally, at about 5:30, 6 o’clock, this tall man came down. He said, “I’m Mr. Smith and I’m the first secretary of immigration and come into my office.” And I had a long chat with him ’til about seven o’clock. He telexed Canada. Most people watching won’t know what a telex is. It was this big, clunky, old, huge typewriter, and it came right through over the phone lines to Canada. And he said, “I’ll get hold of you within a week.” And he called me a week later. I told my staff, “If someone with a funny accent calls, you call me to the phone right away.” The staff didn’t speak English, by the way, so it was a funny accent. And he came on he said, “I got a rejection again on you again from Canada, but based on our interview, I’m going to let you in, and your visas are in the mail.” And our visas actually arrived...three days—while they were packing our goods. And we had not much to pack.

(Shirley)

[nodding] Our visas arrived. Yeah.

(Hilton)

And the only coincidence is that the people who—from the pharmacy, the Bedermans and the Roznikas—that’s who they were—had created a contract for us as though we were going to buy into their business in case anything happened that we weren’t students. And so they brought us in. That’s how we got into Canada. Otherwise we would... We never would [inaudible].



(Shirley)

And we worked for them.

(Hilton)

And we went to work for them as well.

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