June Salander Transcript

Sandy Gartner: This is Sandy Gartner and Ann Buffum, meeting with June Salander to record a life history interview as part of the Vermont Jewish Women's History Project. Today is June 29, 2005. We are at June's home on Kingsley Avenue in Rutland, Vermont. June, do we have your permission to record this interview with you?

June Salander: You have my permission.

SG: Thank you, June. We're going to ask you some questions. If you want to take a break or whatever, just let me know, and I'll stop. Where were your parents born? When did they immigrate to the United States?

JS: Both of my parents were born in a little village in Poland called Rus. A couple of years ago, Jimmy and I and a couple of cousins went to Poland. Sure enough, there's a sign that says, Rus. It's still there.

SG: Do you know what their lives were like in Poland? Could you talk about that a little bit? Or do you have a story that you could share with us about their time in Poland?

JS: Well, at the time, we were occupied by many nations – Germany – this is all during the war, 1914. She

SG: World War I we're talking about.

JS: Yes. We were occupied by the German Army. There was a time when we were occupied by the Russian Army and the Polish Army. So it was quite a change in our lifestyle, but it didn't bother us. We had no business, no trade or anything. We're just small-town people who existed with what we had available. There was a factory not far away that we worked in.

SG: Your dad worked in it?

JS: My dad was a builder. No, he didn't. Rus is located near [inaudible]. That's on the map, even to this day. Each conquering nation took over. They took care of us. We were a small community. We didn't mingle with the non-Jews. We just lived our own lives.

SG: What made your family finally make that decision to come to the United States?

JS: Well, my father couldn't make a living in Rus. So he had a sister who lived in New York City, and her husband was into commercial property. He went there – came to the United States. My father followed. He went to the United States to make a living. When he saved up enough money, he came to our house. When he left, my mother wrote to him, "You left me a present." She was pregnant with my brother.

SG: Isn't that something?

JS: In 1914, he sent for us, and we came to this country [on] August 15, 1920.

SG: So all of you came over?

JS: All of us came over. He was already here, working for his brother-in-law. He found an apartment, partially furnished, and that's where we lived on Fifth Avenue on 116th Street in Manhattan. We all went to different schools that we age-wise belonged to. They put me in with twelve-year-old girls.

SG: How old were you then?

JS: I was twelve.

SG: You were twelve, as well. I mean, you were all 12-year-olds?

JS: No, I was twelve. My brother was six. My sister was fourteen. So we were not babies. We all went to school. My sister went to business school. She eventually got a job. My brother, after a while, joined the Army. So this was our base for becoming Americans. People were very, very nice to us. We were kind of an oddity.

SG: Why were you an oddity? Because you were Jewish? Because you came from Poland?

JS: Because I came from Poland. They were all Jewish people.

SG: Where you lived?

JS: Where I lived in Harlem, and they were very nice to us. They gave us presents, and they taught us a little bit of the language. Eventually, we became Americanized and went out on our own.

SG: We were looking over some of the questions that you wrote out for us – some of the answers – and it looks like you went to a business course before you completed high school.

JS: Yes.

SG: I was wondering, how come you decided to do your education that way?

JS: At sixteen, I had to go to work, so I couldn't go to college. Eastern Business School, it was called. I learned typing and shorthand and eventually made out very, very well. This was during the Depression. By now, we're 1928.

SG: 1928.

JS: It was hard to get a job at that time because people were not hiring anybody. It was a little while before I could find a permanent position. My mother worked in restaurants

[and] hotels, and started out doing kitchen work. But she was a wonderful baker and cook, and she quickly acquired the skills necessary. Then, she worked in hotels in the Catskills. We all worked. When I finally went to work, I always had more than one job. My mother and father were divorced.

SG: I never knew that.

JS: It was our responsibility to help make a living. We had a one-bedroom apartment in Harlem. When my mother took a job in the summertime at a hotel, we rented that one-bedroom to a couple that had just got married. So we were very creative. We were all fortunately well. My brother graduated from Cornell, and then he went into the Army, met his wife – she was a Red Cross worker – and that was it. He married a girl from the Detroit area. He fathered two children. That is our early beginning.

SG: When you were living in New York City, did your family belong to a synagogue there? Did you have a Jewish education?

JS: Yes, yes. When I arrived, my father registered me at a Jewish Hebrew school. It was a Hebrew school on the East Side. Every day after school, I would take the subway for a nickel and go to Hebrew school.

SG: Every day? Isn't that something?

JS: But then we found – [Telephone rings. Recording paused]

SG: You were talking about – I asked you about your education. You were going to synagogue or Jewish education. You said your dad sent you.

JS: There was a synagogue around the corner from where we lived in Harlem. So we decided, instead of going to the East Side, that I would go to Hebrew school there. It was very, very good. They were very impressed because the short time that I went down the

East Side, they were very conscientious and professional. So I had no trouble getting into that school. I went there until I was sixteen. I was way ahead of the classes there. At sixteen, I went to work, but that doesn't tell you very much.

SG: Where did you first go to work?

JS: After school, I worked in Woolworth. At three o'clock, I would come home, and then I'd go to work; I don't know how many hours. I worked there [for] about two years in Woolworth on 116th Street.

SG: When did you meet Lew? How did you meet Lew?

JS: That's a romantic story …

SG: You were talking about Lew, how you met him.

JS: Right. I had a job – just a minute.

SG: Take your time.

JS: I lived in Washington Heights at this time. I met a girl. We would run for the – she lived around the corner. I met this girl. We would run to the – grab a newspaper and get on the subway. We became friends. Her uncle was a doctor who – his office was at 44 Park Avenue.

SG: Nice. [laughter]

JS: At that time, the WPA [Works Progress Administration] was giving free instructions. What I took was English literature, poetry, and stuff like that. Well, they were going to read my poems [in] this particular class. So I came to her office to pick her up, and we were going to go to the class that I was attending through WPA. Her uncle comes out of his room. I think we were introduced. He said, "Are you married?" I said, "No, I'm not."

"Well, I'd like you to meet my brother-in-law." So I said, "What's he like?" "My brother-in-law says he's an overgrown Boy Scout."

SG: He's an overgrown Boy Scout. That's great.

JS: That's right. We arranged the next time he came to New York – because Lewis ran a store on Center Street, and he'd go periodically for merchandise.

SG: What was the name of his store?

JS: Combination Store.

SG: Combination.

JS: The Combination Store. The next time he came, I came to the office there. He looked at me; he said, "Sit here, young lady."

SG: I can hear his voice.

JS: Right away, he was in command. We joked about – how can you live in New York? It smells, it's noisy, and all that. On this very trip, he met me for lunch. It happened to have been Pesach. We continued seeing each other on a couple of his trips. During a couple of trips – we all had different classes. So I dated him whenever he came to New York. This was in April. We went to the fair at that time. The World's Fair was on. We got along real well. I had a week's vacation coming from my job. I worked for a firm called the National Screen Service.

SG: National what?

JS: National Screen Service.

SG: Screen, thank you.

JS: They're the people that printed these big posters in the lobby. That was their job. I had a week's vacation. I said I was planning to go to Maine. "Maine?" I said, "I love blueberries." He said, "Why don't you come to Vermont?" He had a friend who had a cottage at the lake and took temporary guests.

SG: Was this Lake Bomoseen?

JS: Lake Bomoseen. I came there for the week. At night, after he closed the store, he'd come, and we'd all be together. We decided that – he proposed. His father used to come to – people at that time used to come to – [Recording paused.] We stayed a week in Bomoseen. He had a room and board. [Recording paused.] I had to use his bedroom, but there was another bedroom around the corner.

SG: Okay. Where Lew was boarding?

JS: Dr. Everett's house on the corner. I said, "Oh, what will people think that here I am, in Vermont in your bedroom?" He reached in, took out his diamond ring, slipped it on my finger, and said, "You tell them you're going to be Mrs. Lewis Salander."

SG: What year were you married, June?

JS: In 1941. This is March the 9th.

SG: Did you move up to Vermont at that point?

JS: Well, I went home with my ring and by train. I gave notice for my job. My mother was ecstatic. I was twenty-eight years old. My mother said, "I'll give you a thousand dollars or a wedding." We took the thousand dollars.

SG: Smart.

JS: I tell you, I didn't know how to go about setting up a wedding. It never occurred to me to take notes or observe anybody else's. I knew that the bride is the one that puts on the wedding.

SG: When you moved to Vermont with Lew, did you work in the business, or what did you do when you first came?

JS: He wouldn't have me at the business. My husband was a very proud man. He's [inaudible].

SG: I don't know what that means.

JS: That means it's not proper. When Easter Time or Christmastime, I would man a register, but on the whole, he never approved of my checking-in in the morning and all that. He had an eye on this house. A bachelor lived in it. So he arranged to buy it from this man. I never could find out how much he paid.

SG: That's wild. Shortly after your first son was born, you went to work as a Gray Lady at the hospital.

JS: Oh, yeah.

SG: That was during the war, right? Part of it?

JS: Oh, yes.

SG: Can you tell us a little bit what that was like, to be a Gray Lady during the war, what was going on, and the kinds of things you did.

JS: Well, we felt very important. Mrs. [inaudible] was the charge of [the] Red Cross. We had to take a course. We went there in uniform with a starched cap [and] white shoes. We took our job very seriously. We started being Gray Ladies in the building next to the

current building.

SG: I bet I know where it was. Nicholas Street.

JS: Right.

SG: That was the old hospital then. Were you there at the old hospital?

JS: The old hospital.

SG: Yes, okay. [inaudible]

JS: We got mail and sorted it and delivered it. We would fix flowers, find a vase – I mean, we were busy. We all took turns to work the night shift. Everybody took their job very seriously.

SG: What was it like being a young Jewish mother in a Vermont town during that time period? [inaudible]

JS: My husband was a very important man in the community, so we entertained a lot. I'd have twelve, fourteen people to dinner in my dining room – all home-cured food homemade. My husband was everything in my household. He'd walk home from the store, and the children and I would come down the street and meet him as far as Roberts Avenue. Always, dinner was ready. He didn't come home for lunch. Oh, when we first got married, we lived on Creek Road.

SG: [inaudible]

JS: Yes. In a little colonial – no, not a colonial. Anyway, it was on Creek Road, and he'd come home for lunch. My father-in-law came to visit us – this is after we moved in here. I wanted to cook kasha, and I didn't know how to cook kasha. So I called my sister long-distance. I had a very good friend (Carrie Hughes?) who lived on North Main Street next

to (Steve Klein?). I spent a lot of time with her. I learned a lot about Vermont ways. There was a little grocery store on that corner where Steve Klein was. But I learned by living. We used to go pick strawberries and the apples, the drops. We did a lot of that. But my husband was a smoker.

SG: You've been part of the Rutland Jewish Center for a long time. I was wondering if you could talk about some of the work you've done at the synagogue. I know you taught there, and you've been part of Sisterhood. Was a Hadassah there ever? Was there ever a Hadassah organization there?

JS: Not active. We were invited to lunch in Burlington, where there was a Hadassah – Clarice Ravit, myself, and somebody else – three or four of us. So we signed up to be [inaudible] Hadassah. I think it was fifteen dollars at that time or twenty-five. We just continued paying dues until we got the opportunity to become life members for a small fee, which I did – which I am now. Oh, two years in a row, we were – I don't know how to describe that. They have a –

SG: Are you thinking about Hadassah?

Ann Buffum: Are you talking about Hadassah?

JS: No, not a Hadassah. Sisterhood function which met in Massachusetts.

SG: I know there's a regional conference, and then there's a Light of Torah award.

JS: Right. I got that one. We went to two of them. Ilse Fuchs was one of the recipients. I got that award once. I'm not very sharp.

SG: You're doing great.

JS: Well, we went two times.

AB: Was this early on, in the 1950s, or was this later?

JS: Much later.

AB: Much later.

SG: You said you worked as a teacher in the synagogue.

JS: Yes.

SG: When was that?

JS: First when Rabbi Handler was here. I did that on Saturday morning.

SG: When was that? In the 50s?

JS: 1941. My husband was a member of the synagogue, of course. The first meeting we went to, they gave us a maxing machine. It came from (Hackels?).

SG: [inaudible] Vermont Electric.

JS: Yes, Vermont Electric.

SG: You started to say you taught on Saturday mornings. You helped Rabbi Handler, or you taught on Saturday mornings?

JS: No, no. I never helped Handler. Sunday mornings [is] when I did that.

SG: The teaching?

JS: And then, when Rabbi Goldberg came on [inaudible] and Rabbi Handler left, they needed someone to teach during the week, so I became the Hebrew school teacher for three afternoons a week until I took up the career of real estate and continues until, I think, ’72, when I became a real estate broker.

SG: You had a bat mitzvah as an adult.

JS: Bas mitzvah.

SG: What made you decide to do that? What was it like doing that kind of work?

JS: What happened [was] the rabbi announced – Goldberg announced that he was going to have a bas mitzvah class. Five or six of us joined that class. And it was wonderful. It was so stimulating, so gratifying; nobody ever missed a class unless they were ill or out of town. We were wonderful. Some of us started – didn't know (an alef from a bet?). Fortunately, I had a little background. But Robin Lash – she's up there now reading from the Torah. She did all that under the tutorship of Rabbi Goldberg. I learned six haftorahs. Whenever I finished one, I'd come home, and I'd look at the next one. I was so excited about it. He was a wonderful, wonderful teacher. Never anything suggestive or nothing. He was a perfect teacher. After my sixth one, I'm already on in years; I didn't prepare another one.

SG: These were the Torah portions?

JS: Yes. For a bar or bas mitzvah, you learn the maftir, which is the last paragraph of the reading. Then it's a prayer, and then it's a number of long prayers, and you go into the haftorah.

SG: How did it feel to be a bas mitzvah like that?

JS: No different. I can still burn something on the stove. It just feels good. You have a feeling of accomplishment. When you're working on this, you must feel wonderful that you're doing something nobody else can. It's creative, and it's energetic. You learn something each time. Marilyn Goldberg used to say everything she knows she learned by going to synagogue.

SG: I know that you're a great cook. I'm wondering if you had learned some of the recipes from your grandmother, from your mother. What are some of your favorite things you like to cook?

JS: I come from a family of good cooks and bakers. I have an uncle who lived in Minneapolis, and he was a cook on a train. He made scrambled eggs for President Roosevelt. I learned to make strudel. Whenever I came to visit the children, I would make it. Jimmy in Hanover [was] so impressed that this time, Jimmy called him a couple of neighbors to watch because you make the dough from flour and water, and you make a mixture. You do things to it. You add things. Among the neighbors that came was Joan Nathan. She was fascinated. Afterward, you have to rest it. She says, "Would you mind if I write it up for a magazine article?" I said, "Sure. I have nothing to hide." The next time I came, she arranged for a crew to video how to make strudel at her house. I thought it was going to be like a bar mitzvah. She had a staff – a manager, a lighting director, and all that – four or five people there. So we made the video.

SG: Was that for public television?

JS: Yes. She put that on public television. Of course, I had to bring a dough ready to be stretched. So I brought that. When we put this on hold, which would be like overnight or four or five hours, I had this ready to do the dough with. I did that for this group, and then I stretched out the dough, put the chopped apples, cinnamon, sugar, whatever goes into the strudel – I had all that prepared. I had all that prepared – the chopped apples, cake crumbs, cinnamon and sugar, and a little oil. We put it in the oven. By the time somebody else was on that program, somebody else did a demonstration of making a bagel. So time went by, and it was baking. When it was baked, we took it out of the oven and cut it up, and started to eat it. In the tape, I'm the last one that takes a bite. It's so good. That was the end. I have it here. It takes about a half-hour, the tape. Would you want to see the end of it or part of it?

SG: Yes, yes. We would like that.

AB: Yes.

SG: We probably have to stop this tape for a minute to turn it over. Should we do that? Take a little break?

AB: Sure.

JS: Sure. Whatever you think. [Recording paused.]

SG: You started to say it was so successful, the video and the strudel.

JS: The video about the strudel was shown all along the East Coast and into Texas on Vermont Public Television. A cousin got a call from her daughter, who lived in Texas – "Mother, I just saw June Salander." But you got the book.

SG: Yes, thank you. When did the book come out? How was that in relation to the tape?

JS: I can't tell you when it came out.

SG: It was a different project?

JS: No, no. She recorded all that, and Vermont Public Television took over. They had the tapes, and they showed it forever. As a matter of fact, it was shown so much that when you go to the hospital, they say, "Hey, doc, I just saw you on television." It was very popular and amusing. I think, if you don't mind, I'd like to show that. Then, as I say, this was such a success that they decided I should make a video and tape it of my challah making. That was also a big success. They showed it. I guess it's thirty tapes on a video. I'm not saying that right. As soon as they were used up on the thirty minutes – so that's how it got on public television. But they came to do it here for the challah-

making. That's a story all by itself. They moved things. There was a plant that couldn't be – they took over the whole property with equipment across the street, on the roof – a serious taping of the challah. I'm not as pleased with it as the other because Jimmy talks a lot about his wonderful mother. Anyway, a demonstration of making challah from scratch, which is ambitious.

SG: When did you start the tradition of making challah kids' bar and bat mitzvahs and special occasions?

JS: Yes. I just did. Boy, they go for that before they'll go for anything else on the table. I have a knack for challah-making. Nothing spectacular. When you make challah, you have to have things warm. I couldn't have the fan on. You start the dough – you have to rest it a few times. When it doesn't give, and it becomes too tight, then you have to rest it five minutes or so. Those are the little secrets – resting them, warm atmosphere, and the dough has to be when you're finished like a baby's behind. You make up the dough, and you let it rest, punch it down, rest it again. When you make them, it's a thing of beauty.

SG: You're not kidding. I've had the benefit of eating it. [laughter] They're wonderful. [Technical issues.] June, can you talk about the book, too? I know you were in that cookbook that Joan did.

JS: Yes. That was the first one. The one with my strudel is the first one. After that, she has written a number of other cookbooks. [Recording paused.]

SG: June, you've been part of the last century. I'm wondering if there are key moments in history or significant people or significant events in your life in the world that really shaped part of your life?

JS: Almost everything.

SG: Really?

JS: Almost everything was a – so much. So many. After my mother and father got divorced, we took an apartment across the street. On that corner was a theater. I was a kid that had no fear of anything. I wandered into the theater backstage. Ed Sullivan came. Did I have any talents? "Do you sing or dance?" I didn't. He says, "Then I can't use you." That was my contact with Ed Sullivan. When we went back –

SG: You went back to New York City?

JS: Yes, the marquee was still there. That's what it's called, right? I'm going to go back to our trip. We came by boat. We didn't fly into Ellis Island. Everybody was sick on the boat – seasick. We traveled third class. My mother had the money to upgrade. We could have gone, but she wanted to arrive with some money, which she saved. I'm not sick, and I just wandered around dancing and visiting. I was a carefree kid. I found myself at the back door of the first-class kitchen. A guy came out [and] gave me two California navel oranges. I, of course, quickly took it to my mother – made a lot of people happy. I never buy a California –

SG: California navel orange?

JS: – without remembering that. That was a happy moment. When we got to Ellis Island, my father was there. There was some paperwork and long lines. Everything with long lines. This is Sunday. My mother said, "See that tall man with the hat. That's your father." I guess we left Ellis Island in a taxi. I don't remember going on the subway with all our luggage. We moved into my husband's sister's apartment overnight. Then, I had an aunt in Woodbridge, New Jersey. She came the next day and took us to Woodbridge. There, she stripped me of my long dress that I wore when I came and put me in American clothes. We stayed there [for] a week in Woodbridge, New Jersey.

SG: You said the first apartment was your husband's sister?

JS: My husband, yes.

SG: Did you mean your dad's sister's apartment? In New York when you were a kid?

JS: I'm sorry.

SG: When you first came to New York, whose apartment did you stay in for the very first night?

JS: Yes. His sister.

SG: Your dad's sister.

JS: That's the first time that I ever took a bath – what kind of material baths are?

SG: Porcelain?

JS: Yes, Porcelain bath. My sister and I got in the bath together. Then, we would fool around and take water from my side and put it on her side. We were a happy bunch. Then we set up housekeeping at 116th Street and Fifth Avenue. My father was a very frugal man, and my mother couldn't take that. For so many years – for six years, she was independent. She made decisions. During the war, my mother smuggled whiskey from (Polkowice?), and she got picked up. They took her. She got picked up. They brought her home with the evidence. We had a big fireplace that served as everything [inaudible] the house. I came out from behind the stove. The guy looked at me and walked away. But that's one of the things she did. So I say my mother, the bootlegger?

SG: Is there anything else you'd like to talk about now that you'd like to tell us that we haven't asked you, or you'd like to put on tape?

JS: Well, I was a happy, carefree child. I didn't mind going to the East Side to Hebrew school. But when we found that there was a shul around the corner that had Hebrew school, I went to that, not to the East Side. So there are changes in my life. But I was very lucky. I was safe. I used to come home from Hebrew school; it was dark. I

remember one time – and nothing to do with that. But there was a snowstorm. When I came out of the subway to come home, snow was up to my hips. I almost didn't make it. That's Washington Heights. So I experienced many, many things. But I was lucky; I had guidance. I wouldn't do anything that would shame my mother. My mother wouldn't like anything that was not kosher. The neighborhood that I lived in in Washington Heights – what's his name lived there – Kissinger.

SG: Henry Kissinger.

JS: Kissinger lived there, and so did Leonard Bernstein. They came from that shul. Everywhere that I lived, I have happy memories about them. We didn't go on any relief. We didn't have any government help. All our friends were Jewish. All our friends were nice people who guided us. I know there was one cousin; he sold insurance. My mother took an insurance policy [and] paid twenty-five dollars a week for that policy. People were very kind. One year, when my mother was working in the mountains, I was there –

SG: I'm sorry. Where was she working?

AB: In the mountains.

SG: Oh, mountains. [inaudible]

JS: Yes. I had a job. I had a job, and I spent the summer – (Sharrow?) Lakes, I think it was called. I've been to a lot of places, but they were all happy events. I made money when – I worked for Schrafft's. When I came home, with the tips, poured it out for my mother; she was in charge of that. She didn't do anything severe to be sure that she got it all. It was my pleasure. My brother had numerous jobs. He was what they call a butcher [boy]. They travel with the train and sell candy, going up and down the [aisle]. They'd go from Grand Central Station to 125th Street. He worked in a bathhouse. He was a movie usher – everything. He ran errands for a pharmacy. He had assorted careers. He was a skater – not ice skating, but roller skating. He [had] wonderful

equipment and everything. My sister specialized in ice skating. They'd go to Rockefeller Center when they had ice. She was very, very good. We all did something interesting educationally.

SG: You want to take a look? That's great. June, thank you so much for doing this for us. Really, it's terrific.

JS: Are we off?

SG: Now we are. [Recording paused.]

JS: So she was sewing a coat for somebody and asked me to model it. A spool of thread rolled onto the bed. I went to get it, and I fainted.

SG: Oh, dear.

JS: Anyway, I have lots of interesting experiences, but they're not important. My sister couldn't get over it. "How does it feel to faint?"

[END OF INTERVIEW]