

Interviewee: Clara Silvia Leb
Interviewers: Claire Jenkins and Joseph Jung
Date of Interview: March 27, 2019
Location: Goddard Library, Clark University, Worcester, MA
Transcribers: Claire Jenkins and Joseph Jung



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Abstract: Clara Silvia Leb, known socially and professionally as Silvia Leb, was born in 1939 in Bukovina, Romania, and after leaving Romania for Israel in 1970, permanently settled in Worcester in 1974. One year after arriving in Worcester, she and her husband, Dr. Laszlo Leb, had their daughter, Ellen. After completing her higher education during her early 20s in Bucharest, Romania, she became a lawyer, working as legal counsel for over eight years before her husband received a fellowship as a physician to come to the United States. In this interview, Silvia discusses how she did not speak any English when she first arrived in Worcester with her husband, and she explains how she first attended English as a Second Language classes, how she started volunteering at a legal services office, and how she became a Northeastern Law School graduate while her daughter was in elementary school. She reflects on her roles as a wife and mother while being a full-time law student and lawyer thereafter, and her hopes for her family's integration and acceptance in America. She touches upon the anti-Semitism she faced in Romania, and she shares how she overcame further challenges in America, and what it means for her to be an American now.

CJ: My name is Claire Jenkins.

JJ: My name is Joseph Jung, and we're here with Silvia Leb at Clark University's Goddard Library. The date is March 27, 2019. We're completing a citywide oral history of the lives of Worcester women aiming to collect stories about a broad range of experiences. Thank you for your help in this important project. Is it okay to record your oral history today?

CSL: Yes. Just be aware that I go under Clara Silvia Leb, but I am known socially and professionally as Silvia Leb.

JJ: Thank you, so that was the first question, if you could just restate your full name and if you have like your maiden name, and your married name?

CSL: My name is Clara Silvia Leb. Leb is my married name, and my maiden name was Bleiweiss.

CJ: So, when were you born, and where?

CSL: I was born in 1939, in a province of Romania which belonged, until the end of the first World War, to Austria, and upon the end of the World War I, Romania gained some territory and that territory was called Bukovina and became part of Romania. So at the time I was born in '39 Bukovina was part of Romania.

JJ: The next question is, have you ever married?

CSL: Well I'm married, yeah. I'm married for 55 years to Laszlo Leb.

JJ: Congratulations.

CSL: Thank you, I see your faces, yeah, you don't see many of those anymore today.

CJ: [Laughs] Yeah that's like my grandparents.

CSL: It's much better than getting divorced, I was a divorce lawyer—I mean a family law lawyer—so [laughs].

CJ: Oh wow, do you have any children?

CSL: Yes, I have a daughter.

JJ: And then, what cultures or ethnicities do you and your family identify with?

CSL: We are identifying as Jewish. We are not very involved but we do observe some traditions. And, at this point, we are Americans [laughs]. And, when we left Romania in 1970 we lived for three and a half years in Israel and then came here in 1974. And my husband came here—he's a physician and he came here on a fellowship.

CJ: What was it like living in Israel?

CSL: Well, after Romania certainly it was a breath of fresh air [laughs]. It was an open and democratic society. It was not easy. I didn't speak Hebrew. I was a lawyer in Romania, I graduated in Bucharest in 1960. I was of the generation which, after the war, went through high school on a shorter schedule—we only did all together 10 years of schooling before we went directly to the university, those of us who went further. So by the age of 22, I was a lawyer. Worked for eight years in Romania as legal counsel, and when we applied to leave there were reprisals from the government. My husband was an assistant professor at the medical school in Bucharest and he was fired. I was legal counsel at one of the banks in Bucharest and I started to have a lot of chicanery and eventually from the first time we ever applied to leave Romania to immigrate, until we did actually got permission, we waited for 12 years.

CJ: 12 years, wow. That's a long time, to get a visa, to come in?

CSL: For Israel?

CJ: Yeah.

CSL: We got a visa, from Romania to Israel.

CJ: Was it longer, like from Romania to Israel, or from Israel to the United States?

CSL: To get the visa? No, to the United States, we came—my husband came on a special visa as he came on a fellowship under Visa H. And it was done as soon he got a position here. In Romania it was very difficult to get the visa as I say, it took 12 years. From Israel to come here it got resolved in six months.

CJ: Could you tell us what it's like to be an immigrant in the U.S., in Worcester?

CSL: Yeah, people ask me those questions and I have trouble answering. You know, when we came here, I didn't speak English at all. My husband did, he had to speak English because as a foreign graduate physician he had to pass before being entitled to get the visa and get his position. He was required to pass an exam at the embassy, the American embassy in Israel. And only after he passed there—and that had two parts, it had the professional part and the language part, and he passed and thereafter he found a position and then the visa was not a problem. So, he spoke some English but certainly not as good as he speaks now. And I didn't speak any English except for yes and no and exit and entrance [laughs]. But we got housing from the city hospital, at that time was an affiliated hospital with UMass [University of Massachusetts] and so it was tough. I was afraid to drive because I was afraid that if I'm getting lost, I won't know how to get back. We lived on Queen Street, do you know where this is, where the family health center is now, downtown? One of the very run-down areas. So, we lived there for about 10 months and it was hard. Eventually, I got pregnant and before Ellen, our daughter, was born we moved first in an apartment building and then after my husband got his boards and license he had to go through all the boards in order to be able to become an attending specialist and then we bought a house on Newton Avenue North. English, I learned—I was welcomed by somebody from the international society in Worcester and they were running some monthly gatherings. And we met there a number of immigrants—most of us were spouses of physicians who came from fellowships or training from various countries. And, so through one of them who was from Brazil, she knew about the program, she was here for a month before, she knew about the program for English as a Second Language classes, which was run by the public school during the mornings and I started going there, I started to learn, I started—then my [laughs] Mr. Rogers,

Sesame Street, those were good sources too, to learn English. Then what can I tell you? Some people befriended us, some people outraged, and slowly, slowly we got adjusted. And what else do you want to know? Those were the early, immediate early years. Do you want to know what happened next?

CJ: Yeah.

JJ: Yeah, so from that point how did you go to law school?

CSL: Okay, from that point. Our daughter was born one year after we came, so for the first three years I didn't do anything. I was home with her, but I then she started to go to day care to nursery school it was called at that time. And I met some people who were lawyers and through somebody I knew I volunteered at the legal services and I worked at the benefits department under the supervision of the managing attorney, Emily Starr. And then three years later—four years later when our daughter was seven and was in school and my husband had finished with his boards, we decided that I have to do something. And there is no law school in Worcester, so the only possibility was to go to Boston. And, my husband was a great support, he really encouraged me and so eventually I applied at Northeastern [University] and got accepted and started law school in 1982. I got some limited credits for my previous profession, and professional activity in Romania, but when I tried initially just to take the bar, based on my educational experience as a lawyer in Romania, I was told sorry unless you come from an English-speaking country you have to go back to law school. And eventually I did so I commuted. My husband was very helpful. We had somebody helping out three days—three afternoons with our daughter. And again, without him I couldn't have done it. And I don't know if you are familiar with Northeastern, it operates with the first year academic—full academic year, then it has one year co-op and one academic semester. One co-op one semester—quarters actually. And so I completed the first year, and then I got some co-ops here, one was with a friend of mine—of ours—Judge Mel Greenburg, was a district court judge at that time. And the second co-op was with Arline Rotman who was at Gould and Ettenberg—was a different name at that time of the firm. And after I finished my second co-op she offered me the job for when I graduated. From school I got credit for two quarters, for one academic and one co-op for my previous studies and experience. And after I graduated indeed I joined Arline at the firm of Gould and Ettenberg. I was fortunate that they were willing to make some allowances for my family obligation, because Ellen our daughter was only 10 years old when I graduated. So, it was that you do what you have to do.

CJ: I was gonna ask what it's like to be like a mother, like also have a child? And also be a lawyer at the same time, have both obligations. Was it that . . .

CSL: Well, it was hard as I said. The only way I could do it was with support from my husband and with arrangement—and it was a trade-off. I certainly made less money and worked less hours because I made it clear that I am not available every day, from nine to five or six or weekends or so on because I have a young daughter, and I have to be available. So, there is no magic in anything, the hours of the day are limited and you have to set your priorities. Either you try to

balance and you need some support for that –make some sacrifices. Some sacrifice family, some sacrifice outstanding careers. I'm very happy with my career. I had a good career and good reputation, and practiced for 25 years. So, there are no magic bullets. It's hard to have everything at the same time, but after she went to college and then was no longer home I put more hours in.

JJ: And then, why did you become an attorney, or why did you want to go to law school?

CSL: Well to begin with, I was an attorney in Romania. And [laughs] I was 16 years old when I graduated from high school in Bucharest. In Romania like in many other European countries there is no division of undergraduate and graduate. So, the admission criteria to the universities were very rigorous and I pondered—I was always good on my toes, and always good in expressing myself and making the case. But that was not my first choice. There was at that time, in Romania, a law that all graduates of medical school or any teaching career are required to first spend three years in some of the remote villages in Romania. Now, in Romania the remote villages were at the level of 100 years behind and it was very hard to go there. And so, many young kids looked for what profession can you go into not to have to go to the village. And at that time, I was influenced by a relative to try and go to the school of dentistry. Wasn't really what I wanted and luckily enough, I failed the admission exam [laughs]. And then after one year just doing some tutoring, I spoke to my former advisor from high school and he said I should go to law school. And it was a very tough competition, there was kind of affirmative action there too at that time—you didn't call it affirmative action, you called it something else. There were children from middle class families—had the limited number of spots available and children from worker and peasant families had priority. So you really had to be good enough to fit into that third small percentage. Well, I did get accepted and I liked it. It was—and after I graduated actually, I had difficulties with graduating—after graduating because while I was still a student, we had applied for the first time with my parents, my mother and my step father, to immigrate to Israel. And as a result, many of the students not only from law school but from all the universities were expelled. And for some reason they didn't find out because I didn't live in Bucharest at that time. And I managed to support my thesis. We had to support a thesis at the end of law school which was also, in lieu of the bar examination. And then there was a panel which were assigning jobs to the new graduates. And at that time, I was notified that they have no jobs for me because I applied to leave Romania. And they refused to give me my diploma. So eventually I got a job as an accountant which was horrible because I am not that good in calculations and math [laughs]. And after another year they reversed their policies and I obtained my diploma and got a job as a legal counsel in my—not in my home town. My home town was Cimpulung Moldovenesc. But the regional center was in Suceava, this was all part of the former Bukovina. And most of the jobs were jobs that you got from companies which were owned by the state. So, I was legal counsel at the bank and participated in arbitration, the disputes regarding payments or so on and it was all silly because they were disputes between government-owned companies so it was just taking from one pocket and put it in the other. But coming here,

I really didn't know, didn't have any particular interest for something else. I could have gone into government studies. At Clark, they offered me a master's program and so on. And then, I also had to be practical, what do I do with it? And do I like it? And I decided no.

CJ: Was practicing law—like how was it different in Romania than it was here?

CSL: The law?

CJ: Yeah did you change the kind of law, like and how is it different, or were you surprised by it?

CSL: Well, the law is different in many respects. But what is a transferable skill is the legal reasoning. And so, this was certainly what I was able to transfer and do well in law school here but the system, the law here is very much based on case law, on precedent. It's not that much statutory. In Europe and in Romania, it's statutory. And so, there is not much room to say well this case might be similar to this one and there is precedent but maybe it's not that similar and have all those. Besides, the system: a plaintiff—or a defendant for that matter, the parties, were not allowed to testify on their own behalf in any trial because it was assumed and presumed that they are going to be biased and the testimony is going to be self-serving, which is the case. Witnesses were not very much emphasized because, again, even in good faith, witnesses, what you see is not necessarily exactly what happened, let alone that they are not always in good faith. Circumstantial evidence, scientific evidence, demonstrative evidence and in terms of experts the parties did not hire their own experts, it was the judge who appointed one independent expert from a list of independent. . . But, sure in Romania, there were other biases because the judges, they all had to be members of the Communist party. Usually the panel was one judge and two who—judges were appointed, prosecutors were appointed. And, the judge who was sitting together with two laypeople people like you would—say like the jury but it was not really a jury. So here, of course it's very different. We did not have plea bargaining [laughs]. And, but a case was judged based on your political affiliation and your—the economic sabotage and then if they wanted to get rid of someone, then there were the political trials where they [laughs] made you admit what you did and what you didn't do. So, yeah there are differences. I certainly rather have it as it is here than as it was there.

CJ: Yeah, there was a lot—I guess a lot more freedom also cause you're coming from communist Romania so. . .

CSL: Oh yeah, sure.

CJ: In the U.S., there is a lot of freedom to express.

JJ: Could you add more to what are some of the biggest. . .

CSL: To what?

JJ: What are some of the biggest differences in your life here than your life in Romania?

CSL: Oh [laughs] I don't think it's even comparable. Romania was an anti-Semitic country. Although its policy now is not. Talking about antisemitism actually, I should mention as I discussed before, that I was born in that province of Bukovina. Romania was an ally of Germany during the Second World War. And on June 22nd when Nazi Germany attacked Russia, the Romanians joined them but went into a different front which was into the Ukraine, and then in October of 1941, the Romanian government deported all of us, all the Jews from that area, from the Bukovina to the Ukraine, it was under Romanian administration, that's why they named it Transnistria and we stayed there for three years in a bombed out, abandoned place. It was like a ghetto, you couldn't go anywhere, you couldn't make a living, you couldn't—a lot of people died. So, when we came back it took three years until we were able—when the Russians came in and the Germans started to retreat. So my memories of the deportation itself are very scant because I was only two years old, but at the age of four or so I do have memories about that. One room in which we lived with kerosene lamps, with no heat, with [laughs]—my parents and I and my grandparents. And food was scarce, dessert were pumpkin seeds. So, it was cold, it was a lot of disease. When we came back to our home, luckily we found our home intact because the front didn't pass my hometown. But then the policy of the government, they followed anti-Semitic rules. Accusing the Jews of being cosmopolitan, of being—you know, same thing you hear sometimes from some people in the government.

CJ: Did your parents at the time face a lot of like hatred from people around them, like for being Jewish? Did they have specific instances where they faced it?

CSL: Well I don't know but certainly the deportation itself was culminated from the hatred, and was intense by the soldiers and the gendarmes and so on. And I myself growing up had a good friend in Romania tell me, "You are so nice, like you wouldn't be Jewish." And so, it was a lot of prejudice and obviously the way were treated throughout the years, yes. Yes.

JJ: And so, would you say it's better here? Or how would you describe Worcester?

CSL: Well there is no comparison. There is no comparison. The freedom and the level—sure, as I say, we are away for 45 years, and the level of the development, which occurred—I'm sure now certain things have developed there, as well, but. The freedom to travel, when we got to Israel in 1970—then in 1973, we took a trip to Europe of five weeks and went to Switzerland and Italy, France. All the years in Romania, I was 30 years old when we left Romania, we could never travel. Could never get the passport. And when we left Romania, we left on certificate of travel, which were valid for three months. And we were stateless actually when we left. Sounds like those things sound familiar to you.

CJ: Yeah [laughs] because that's exactly like the story of my grandparents pretty much. Like my grandfather was Jewish and my grandmother was Catholic. And she had to hide the fact that my grandfather was Jewish. So that's also why they had to leave Romania, so yeah.

CSL: Yeah, so anyhow, but I think regarding immigration, I never considered myself a refugee, I never considered myself—never got help from anyone [laughs], didn't ask for anything. We just tried our best and worked and then went ahead.

JJ: Yeah you sound like you and your husband have really accomplished a lot here. And so, do you have any advice for anyone else that is immigrating, or that is trying to succeed here?

CSL: [Laughs] You know, it depends. A lot of it is education. It depends with what your background is. I knew when we left that my profession is kind of not going to take me anywhere anymore, unless I start again. So certainly, it's easier for people like us, not everyone did it. Not everyone was willing to go back through the—or able or whatever to go back to from—of all my friends who came around the same time with me from Romania who were colleagues of mine in law school, I was the only one who went back to law school. They went into different professions. They went into social work, they went into something—which was less demanding. I just don't expect anything from anyone [laughs]. Do what you have to do. Don't feel sorry for yourself—it's hard. And, you know, you made the choice to come, it's not perfect. It's hard. And just do the best you can, I don't know, what else can I say?

CJ: Can you elaborate when you say it's hard? Like what are some of the other challenges that you faced?

CSL: Well the language challenge of course. To this day I have an accent. To this day I probably mispronounce certain words. It always used to bother me, it doesn't bother me anymore. I am opening my mouth and they ask me where are you from? So, it gives you this sense of, you don't really belong, who are you, you are a foreigner, right? Culturally, it is different. You have to get used to certain customs, to certain ideas, sure. We don't have a lot of family here, we are pretty much—it's just us and I have a cousin who lives in Rochester. And our daughter Ellen and her husband, who—they live in Providence and our two grandchildren. They lived, for the first fifteen years after they got married, they lived next door to us on Newton Avenue North, so that was very nice but they had to move. And, you know, you never fit a hundred percent. And you have to kind make the best out of it.

CJ: You said there are differences culturally, I was wondering if you could elaborate on that?

CSL: Well, starting with little things like the sense of humor, okay. I don't understand to this day some of the jokes which people that we know are kind of laughing and it's funny. And, there are some jokes that I tried initially to translate, and people don't get it so I stopped saying it. There is the much more isolationist culture. Many people, although we have a number of friends, we belong in a book club, people are highly educated and so on, but some of them are just

citizens of the world and some are very, very parochial—very provincial. And so, the way you look at things, and how you interpret things, it's a very different view. I'm trying to think of other things, it's just a different sense. You never really feel—we are Americans and we really are glad that we are Americans and we have no desire—we didn't ever go back to Romania since we came and it's our country. And you know, we are grateful that we were able to integrate to a certain point, but the truth of the matter is don't expect you are going to integrate a hundred percent, culturally and what else. Now, the foods, I don't know, now it's an international cuisine, it doesn't matter anymore.

JJ: Thank you so much for sharing, and I really gained a lot of insights from everything you shared.

CSL: Okay, okay. Well it was nice to meet you both.

CJ: Yeah, very nice to meet you.

CSL: And, I hope that you draw some conclusions, that with all the problems which we have in this country, it's still a great country.

JJ: That's a great note to end on.