

Fanny Maas (Mashinka) Gerson

Interview by Ned Goldberg, JCRS Executive Director

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Houston, Texas

Transcribed by Theresa DuBois; Edited for Length and Clarity by Marlene Trestman



*Figure 1 Fanny Mashinka Gerson 11/15/2003.*

NG: Ok, here we are today. Today is November 15, 2003. I am in Houston. I am speaking with Fanny Gerson. And Fanny your maiden name again was?

FG: Mashinka.

NG: And, she is one of seven siblings. Six of whom were in the Jewish Children's Home. I'd like you to tell me what was going on with your family right before you went into the Jewish Children's Home.

FG: Well, I told you, when my mother died. I remember they brought them to the hospital and that's when the three of us went to the De Pelchin Home in Houston.

NG: What did your mother die of? What happened to your mom?

FG: Well she died—well she had seven children, but she had some kind of female thing, you know. And, I think she only had doctors in the house,

and I don't think she ever went to a hospital. I really don't know, and she was 38 years old when she died. And, that's when they decided that they were going to send us to the Jewish Orphan's Home because my daddy wasn't really that educated, or he wasn't Americanized. [MT Note: Annie Mednovich Mashinka Oct. 3, 1919 death certificate states cause of death was "abscess of liver." Maurice Mashinka filed his petition for naturalization on July 16, 1915.]

NG: So, they gathered up your brother and your sisters, is what you are saying?

FG: Yes, we were all together, but I remember the first thing they did they shaved my brother's hair, and when we had a picture of us at the station, waiting for the train, his hair is shaved. They took us to the train station to take us all to New Orleans, you know, and there was six of us, and they had I think a Spanish lady came with us to help my daddy, take us there, and then I remember, well we were undressing sleeping in the lower berth, that I remember he shook me, and he says, "Wake up", and he says something about, "We're crossing the river." And I guess it must have been the Mississippi River, we had to cross over it, you know, to get to New Orleans. And, I know when we got to New Orleans the first thing they did, they put us in isolation. We stayed in isolation until they examined you, and to see if there's anything wrong. And, they would take care of you. But, that's what happened to the six of us. And, I never played with my younger sisters

because we played by ages, you know, I barely saw my little sisters because they were busy with their age group. But we had a real nice, wonderful group of girls that I was with. And, when I left, I'd visit them and they would come to Houston and visit me, and it was really like one big happy family, with all kind of good opportunities offering you. And, I just was not that type of person who was looking forward to college, or anything like that. We looked forward to camp – we went to camp every summer – every summer, can you imagine? Bay St. Louis, Mississippi, it was wonderful, it really was. And, I know if I hadn't have been there who was going to send me to camp every year and have fun? Who? There wasn't anybody that would send me, uh-huh.

NG: Well, you were there for fourteen years?

FG: No, I was there twelve and a half years.

NG: Tell me some of your fondest memories.

FG: Well, I remember the boys –they would want to get friendly with you, but there was one boy that really liked me. Ralph Beerman, and he came out one night, and I had to go get my books, you know, from the locker, and so he says, "Wait I'll go with you", and while we were walking, you know what he did? He proposed to me! I never even heard of a proposal, you know.

NG: How old were you then?

FG: Well, I must have been about, I would say fifteen or sixteen, maybe seventeen. And, you know what I told him? I looked up at him and I

said, "Oh I can't marry you, I'm going to marry a rich man". Now, I don't know where I got that story from, but I thought that was a cute story. And every now and then, Ralph and I would write. I know he does a lot of good work, you know, I know he does that. But anyway imagine I got a proposal. That was something. And, they had another boy, a little boy he liked me very much, and his parents had given him a bicycle, so he automatically offered it to me. And, I rode that bicycle night and day, around the home – I don't think he ever took that bicycle away from me. Did you ever hear anything like that? So, it was nice.

NG: You mentioned something to me, too, about dance lessons.

FG: They offered us dance lessons, I mean by a professional dancer – I'm not talking ballroom dance. We had a real beautiful woman, she came up, she was so pretty, and I didn't sign up for dancing lessons. But I wanted to learn how to play the coronet. And, so I went to coronet lessons for a while. But I couldn't blow that thing, you know. So I didn't get that. I passed up a lot of good opportunity – and really not realizing it. But I was happy there. I played, and I climbed trees, and fell out of trees. But I loved to sweep, I used to always be sweeping. I swept the home every day.

NG: How old were you when you did that?

FG: Well, let's see, I must have been about maybe ten, eleven, twelve years old. I got hold of a broom and I never let go of that broom – I

loved that broom because it swept, you know. And, oh, we had lots of good wonderful memories.

NG: Tell me about your school memories there.

FG: Well, school didn't mean that much to me for some reason. And, I wasn't really doing well because that school was preparing you for college see, and I wasn't good with college marks, and I wasn't doing all that good. And, Uncle Harry called me in his office one day, and he said, he used to call me Fee-Fee (ph) sometimes, and he said, "You're not doing too good, you know, on your report card." He says, "I don't think that you're college material." And he said, "Now what we're going to do with you is we are going to send you to business school." So I went to business school and I must have apparently done all right because I graduated from there. And, I took a course in selling, so I was allowed to go from school, to leave early and I'd work at Maison Blanche on Canal Street. So I would work there and then when I got through I would go home. Maybe I'd work two or three days a week. I don't think I got paid because I was doing it for credit marks. And I remember a lady came into the store, and I said, "Can I help you?" And she was a sister – you know dressed up in that habit, and she said, "I want to look at some ladies underwear." So I showed her, and she says, "And I want a gross of them." Well, I didn't know what a gross was – I never heard of a gross. So I went to the floor walker and I told him, "Some lady wants a gross of ladies panties underwear." He

says, "That's okay, I'll take care but you go back to your business." So he made a big sale off of those underwear – 144. I never knew that. So, that was an interesting experience for me. But I liked getting out you know, and working like that. So, I made my grades in selling.

NG: Someone told me they got their clothing from the department stores on Canal Street. Do you remember that?

FG: Yes, I remember that Uncle Harry's sister would take us downtown and our clothes were all made by a seamstress that was up there. Her name was Eola and I remember because she used to let me sew a few hems – I really did like to sew. And, she would let us pick out maybe a dress that we liked or something like that. That didn't happen very often, but that was one of the things that they did for us. And, I remember there was a family there that was named the Rosenberg family. And, they had big shoe stores, I guess a factory. And, they would furnish our shoes once or twice a year, in the name of Rosenberg. And, but I never was interested in fashion, I just liked to ride a bicycle, sweep the home, and swing. I used to love to swing. We had a swing set. And, I climbed trees, yes, I'd climb trees – I fell out both times and knocked my knees out – so I had a scar on each knee, and they went in opposite direction – but they were exactly alike. Now I'd never heard of that and I couldn't get over that – a scar on each knee. But, they formed like a "T" or something. So that was another one of my experiences. But, we had a wonderful time at camp, we

really did. We used to go crabbing and we'd catch the crabs, and we'd clean them, and we never ate them, but we gave them to the supervisors, and they ate it, you know. But we used to catch them. So that was fun too. The camp was beautiful, and we used to go every summer. The girls would go two weeks, then the boys would go two weeks, and then towards the end, they let the boys and the girls go together, so we had a chance to stay a whole month at camp. Wasn't that wonderful? I know I wouldn't ever stay that long anywhere. And we had a black man working there, his name was Bill Parker. And, everyone loved him, and he liked all the children. And, he would help them, and sometimes he would take us to camp in a truck, and he would drive the truck. And some years we'd go on the train, to bring us to the camp. But it was a good place. And some of the fellows were by the sea wall, by the camp and someone would pass by and she'd want to know, "Is this the Jewish Federation Camp?" And he'd say, "No, this is the Jewish Concentration Camp." So everybody heard that rumor – and oh, we'd just laugh, you know we thought it was so funny you know. And, we'd never even heard of the concentration. But he said, "No, this is the Jewish Concentration Camp."

NG: Now, tell me a little bit about something about each of your brothers and sisters, who were in the home. Start with each sister.

FG: Sadie. Sadie. And, we never played together because I wasn't her age, see. So she used to get highly insulted when I wanted to play with

her. She'd tell me, "Go off and play." So you see, and even towards the end, she was with the big girls and I was with the next girl. Now Bessie and Pearl were the twins and Esther was the baby – I think she was about a year old when my mother died. That's what they told me. So, she was in the nursery, and of course, I never saw her, you know. And, I didn't see Bessie or Pearl – they were the twins – I didn't see them because I wasn't their age. I just saw my own age group. And we were made some wonderful friends, dear friends, you know we would write and exchange letters, and they'd come see me, and I'd come see them.

NG: Tell me as you got older, how you were prepared to leave the home.

FG: Well, I don't remember preparing before I left the home, but I knew that I was going to. Some of the girls and boys wanted to run away from the home. And, they had suitcases – someone - I guess their mothers sent. And, I couldn't understand, "Why are they packing clothes in the suitcase? Where are they going?" They want to run away from the home. I never wanted to leave the home, you know. And, we had these very wealthy women who were like our big sisters. They would send the chauffeur to the home, he'd come get us, first opened up the door for us, and we went in that car, you called it a jump seat. It was like a limousine, but the seats folded up, and you would fold them up and they used to take us there. And, you know something? And we would go to the show, and he would pick us up after the show, and bring us



to the ice cream parlor and get us an ice cream cone, and then he would take us home, open the doors for us, and check us into the home when we got there. So anyhow, so when I came out of the home, my big sister gave me a little suitcase and I packed a few things. I don't remember even packing, I guess I did, I had a suitcase.

NG: How old were you?

FG: I was about – let's see when I came out of the home, you see, I was about nineteen and a half. My big sister used to give me beautiful clothes for my daughter that I used to make or remake or whatever it is. So, when I came out of the home, and we were at the station, my sister was at the station, and my cousin Ida was at the station, and then a fellow by the name of Charlie Horwitz who went with my sister, and Joe Frank went with my cousin Ida, so when I got off the train, I looked around and I said, "Did a chauffeur come for us?" They thought I must have come from another planet. But, can you imagine? Four families, and we went to this little house, and it was three bedrooms, and about sixteen people living there. And Uncle Frank had added on a big sleeping porch for the boys – see they had five boys and two girls, we had five girls and two boys, so, and before you came out somebody had to sign for you, you know that they'll be responsible for you, so they were responsible for me. And, but I can't get over how I said, "Did the chauffeur come for us?" because I was used to being

chauffeured in that big limousine, and I don't know what they could have thought when I said that.

NG: Tell me again, the story you said about the first time you were ready to leave, how you stayed to work with the younger children.

FG: Well, there was a mother and a daughter taking care of the nursery children. And, the mother got very sick, and I was already through with school. And, I never asked about leaving because I was waiting for them to call me and tell me. But anyway, Uncle Harry called me in the office, and he told me that he wants me to stay longer because I was going to help take care of the children until this lady got well. I must have stayed six, seven months, maybe even a year, I really don't know. But, I was there and that's how come, and then they told me I was going out of the home, so I said, "Okay." Just like that. But I never prepared or even knew what I was going to do, you know. But anyway, I remember getting on the train, and this friend in my little fly seat, she was as short as I was, and she gave me her purse, and in that purse I had \$35 in that purse they told me. So it must have been money that I accumulated. You know we all had bank accounts, so that was the money I had in my purse. I had \$35 at one time in my purse, and I don't know where it came from. They must have give it to me of course, you know. So anyway, it was very hard trying to figure out money – you know – we didn't really know about money, and so forth and so on. And, that's what she gave me, she gave me that purse.

And, I remember my cousin Ida said when we went to the house, had my little suitcase and she said, "Is this all that they gave you?" And I said, "Oh no, I have a steamer trunk packed with clothes that's gonna come." And they had to pick it up you know. It was all of these beautiful clothes that my big sister had given me. And, so that was something wasn't it?

NG: Did your father remarry while you were in the Home?

FG: All I know – I was there twelve and a half years, and he came to see us one time – one time – I didn't think anything of it because I really didn't know what a family was, you know. And after, when I got out, then it dawned on me that he really was a father to us in name only, because when my mother died – now this is the story that they tell me from my family. He took the insurance money from my mother, and he sent it to Europe and he bought a wife. They said she was eighteen years old, and he was about forty-five. And at that point I didn't understand, but I knew of it, and wasn't that something?

NG: Is that who he married?

FG: So anyway, at the home, some lady told us she had some nieces, the name was Testa, and when she saw them, she used to live next door to us, before my mother died, and she was the one that told me that my daddy had remarried, and had three other children, and he didn't tell us and we didn't know it. Then I began to figure, "Well that wasn't really your daddy. He was just a daddy in name only." And, ever since

then I didn't like him. And, I didn't want to go see him. After I got out of the home, I didn't want to go see him you know. And, that part, even though I didn't understand what family life was, I thought that was a terrible thing to have six kids that you put in a home, not to write them, not to give us a nickel, didn't bring us a stick of gum, and that was it. I thought that was terrible. I couldn't explain it because I didn't really know of it, I knew there was something wasn't kosher then – but to come to just see us one time? I don't understand that. And, to marry, and to not let his children know. But anyway, it was more like I always say that we were the forgotten children, and we really were at that time. We really were at that time.

NG: You're talking about the kids in your family? The Mashinkas.

FG: Yes, talking about the ones that were there. And Sundays, when the parents would come up to see the children, we didn't have anyone. But this other friend of mine, she had a mother and there was three girls, but they were older than we were. And, this girl told her mother, "When you come next Sunday", and they used to bring candy, and she said, "Get a bag and call it the hang-around bag, and put candy in it, and those that hung-around you give them a piece of candy." And, so that's what happened to me – I'd go there and get a piece of candy, and then I'd run away. And, I was happy, I didn't know. But no one ever came to see me – we didn't have anyone to come see us. No, but I never thought about it was so bad or anything – I never thought about a lot of

things until I left the home, because I was a pretty happy girl there. I really was. We had no worries, we had nobody, you know. There wasn't anybody down our back all the time. We knew we had to do certain things. You get up in the morning, you make your bed. And, once a week you strip them, and they put the clean linens, and you would make your bed when you come home from school. But we really didn't have any what you'd call hard work or anything. And, I used to say that, "I thought I lived in Never-Never Land" – you know, it was all there for us – everything on a silver platter, and that was good, but it really wasn't good they didn't preach to us, you know. They would get groups together, and they'd read books, and they were trying to tell us what life was all about. We didn't know, and I never paid any attention to it. But I had fun there, I really did. Not realizing I didn't really realize how good off I had it, or how happy I was, you know. And, I used to say, "I'm from Never-Never Land." That's why it was very hard when we left the home.

NG: And tell me what you did when you first left the home.

FG: Well, I went to my Aunt and Uncle's house. In Houston. And, that was when I went from the station I asked, "Did a chauffeur come for me?" Then we came home, and I said, "Show me my room, show me my room." And my cousin, Ida said, "I'll show you your room, and there's three other people sleeping in it." I said – I couldn't get over that. And, there was a double bed, and my sister Sadie and I slept in there. And,

then they had what they called a trundle bed where you pulled it out, and my cousin and I we were always sleeping on the floor, and so anyhow, and when I came out I had my graduation dress, and I laid it out on the bed with my shoes and everything, and my cousin, Ida, she had a big mouth, and she said, "Now where do you think you're going with that party dress?" And, I said, "Well, I'm here aren't you going to give me a party?" They almost died from me, because we had such a different life. And, when I went to the bathroom, and I yelled through the door, "How do I flush the toilet?" And they yelled back, "Pull the chain." And, I said, "What chain?" I didn't know what they were talking about, so they had to come in the bathroom, and show me that the chain, you pull the chain and you flush the toilet. You see we didn't have that – we had real toilets. And, my Aunt Jo had a little bitsy ice box four fourteen people. You put ice in the top, and the ice man would come, and I looked at that and I said, "What is that?" And you put a sign in your window of how many pounds you want. And I said, "I never heard of that." Little bitsy ice box that big for the whole family, and I said, "We had great big ice boxes." So that was a rude awakening for me – I didn't even know how to flush the toilets. And I was already – I was nineteen and a half when I came out. I should – but we did know how to flush toilets the right way, but they yelled through and I yelled, "How do you flush the toilet?"

NG: What kind of work did you first do when you came out?

FG: When I first came out I had – one of the first jobs I had – these two Jewish boys they opened up a dress shop, and they knew my sister Sadie, and they knew my cousin Ida, and they worked there, and I worked up in the office because I took shorthand, typewriting, bookkeeping ... the whole works.

NG: When were you a switchboard operator?

FG: I was a switchboard operator in – well, anyway we only worked five and a half days. We worked on Saturday. And, the people I went to work for is Weingarten's, they knew all about the home and everything. And, see when I came out it was the Depression Year. I didn't know what depression was, but they finally told me. And so, that's how I got my job at Weingarten's, and I was a switchboard operator.

NG: What was Weingarten's? Was it a grocery store?

FG: Yes, the big Weingarten's. And so, when I went to apply for the job, they knew already who I was, so they gave me this job and he says, "Did you ever run a switchboard?" And I said, "No." I didn't even know what a switchboard was. He said, "Well the girl quit, and would like to teach you how to run the switchboard." And, I said, "Okay." Just like that. I made \$10 a week! That was a lot of money. And, so they taught me how to run the switchboard, and I did. I was the first – there was a write up about me in the paper. And, they had installed on my switchboard, a broadcasting system, which means, that when I went to work at Weingarten's we had eleven stores, so I was able to plug in all

of the stores, and ring the bell and tell them, "Price change." And I'd line them all up, and if they wouldn't line up I'd fuss on that phone, and tell them, "Get on this phone." And I had to tell them, "Tuna fish is now forth-nine cents and bread is sixteen." Or whatever it is. But I was the first person to ever run a switchboard with a broadcasting system on it.

NG: And they didn't teach you that at business school in New Orleans?  
How to run the switchboard?

FG: Oh no, not at business school – but I learned real quick. I had to call each store, one at a time, and let them know how much money they wanted and how many tens they wanted ... so I did all of that. I ran the board. I don't know how I did it – I really don't. And, I did a damn good job, but they weren't very generous with money. They really weren't. But, making ten dollars a week was good, but when I finally got the nerve enough to ask for a job, ask for raise – I think I got fifty cent raise a week– so that was more money.... I turned into a big shot, and they tell me, "If I didn't take my vacation this year." I was making twelve dollars a week then "that they would pay me twelve dollars plus an extra twelve." And I said, "What am I going to do with twelve dollars?" And I went on my vacation. I went to New York, and stayed for ten days, I didn't get permission even from the company – I just picked up and left with my cousin. And, when I came out, I wrote them a real funny letter, and when I came back do you know they gave me that job? How do you like that? And, Joe Weingarten caught me and he



says, "You know even if you are a member of the Weingarten family you're not supposed to take two and a half weeks." So, I did everything and I didn't get permission, but I was lucky - isn't that lucky that they gave me that job again? That was during the depression, and they were hard to get.

(End of Recording at 35:14 min.)