A Conversation with Esther Seiden

Ester Samuel-Cahn

Abstract. Esther Seiden was born in 1908 in West Galicia, Poland. She studied mathematics at the Universities of Krakow, Wilno and Warsaw and obtained a Magister of Philosophy degree. She moved to Palestine in 1935, where she came to Statistics by chance. She obtained her doctorate in statistics in 1949 from the University of California at Berkeley, under the guidance of Professor Jerzy Neyman. She has held positions at many American universities, notably the University of Buffalo, the University of Chicago, Howard University, The American University and Northwestern University. In 1960 she accepted a permanent faculty position at Michigan State University, where she stayed until her retirement in 1978. She has visited many interesting places, such as India, Russia, Turkey and Cyprus, being involved in teaching and research. Her main research interests are optimal design of experiments and finite geometries. As of 1979 she resides in Jerusalem, Israel, where she still is active in teaching and research. The following interview took place during July 1991, at the Mount Scopus campus of the Hebrew University.

THE EARLY YEARS: LIFE AND STUDIES IN POLAND

Samuel-Cahn: Hi, Esther; it is nice of you to agree to give us an interview. Can you tell us about your early childhood memories?

Seiden: I was born in a little town in West Galicia, Poland, which was at that time part of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy. My family belonged economically to the upper middle class due especially to the successful business activities of my grandfather. My father received a traditional Jewish education. However, as was customary in that part of Poland, he attended the Government grade school available in the little town. He continued his education as an autodidact and was well versed in German and Polish literature. As an adult he joined the Zionist movement, and in fact he was the first Zionist born in that little town. My father read and discussed with friends and his younger brothers the writings of the Jewish counterpart of the parent European Enlightenment movement. He kept reading current Hebrew journals and literature. When I left home, I used to correspond with him in Hebrew. His hobby was law, and he studied Polish government publications pertaining to law. When there was a need to defend my grandfather’s business against discriminatory threats, he wrote the appeals to the Court of Appeals. Shortly after the start of the First World War, he was drafted into the Austro-Hungarian army. He served as an officer in the air force base near Vienna until the end of the war. While he was serving in the army, he asked my mother to start teaching me and my older and younger sisters Hebrew as a spoken language.

Samuel-Cahn: How was it that your mother knew Hebrew?

Seiden: My mother was what would nowadays be called a forerunner of the feminist movement. She insisted on an active participation in discussions of the Zionist movement, which often were based on reading the modern Hebrew literature. She learned Hebrew with the help of my father and her brothers-in-law.

Samuel-Cahn: So what language did you speak as a child?

Seiden: Polish. My parents believed that the first language should be the language of the country one lived in. They considered Yiddish as a language of the Diaspora and thought that the next generation should be detached from it.

Samuel-Cahn: Was there compulsory elementary schooling at that time?

Seiden: I imagine that there was. Every Jewish child in the town attended the small public elementary school, which went up to the sixth grade.

Samuel-Cahn: So you finished the sixth grade in that school?

Seiden: No. Since our parents planned higher education for their children, we started following the gymnasium educational program after finishing the fourth grade. But there was no gymnasium in our city. There were some young people—teachers and students—