

EI-100

HELEN (CHAJA) INTRATER ROSENTHAL

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RESIDENCES: POLAND: GALACIA BLARZOWA

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LEVINE: This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. It's Thursday, September 26, 1991, and I'm here at Ellis Island with Helen Rosenthal, who came through here from Poland in 1940 when she was thirty years of age. It's very nice to have you here, Mrs. Rosenthal. And let's begin by my asking you your birth date.

ROSENTHAL: I was born October 7, 1910.

LEVINE: And where?

ROSENTHAL: Galicia Blarzowa, at the time under Austria, the provence of Austria.

LEVINE: The provence of Austria. Could you spell it?

ROSENTHAL: Galicia, yeah. G-A-L-I-C-I-A.

LEVINE: Now, the name of . . .

ROSENTHAL: The name is Galicia. That's the provence.

LEVINE: The town?

ROSENTHAL: The town is Blarzowa, B-L-A-R-Z-O-W-A. It's a very small town. There was no railroad. It's in the lower Carpathian Mountains in Poland.

LEVINE: Now, was it a farming town? Was it a town where farming was the main occupation?

ROSENTHAL: Farming. Surrounded, a small town, there were something like maybe four or five hundred people in town. One small street with stores and one market where people came every Wednesday, brought their greens, their vegetables, and their cows in and things like that to sell, and also bought what they needed, like kerosene and things, and different material for the clothing and things like that. The town in itself was small but nice. It was, it was like home. You knew everybody in town, and most of the people who came knew everybody else. It was comfortable. There was a little brook, and we could go swimming there. There was lots and lots of woods where we could go walking and playing and things like that. It was quiet, convenient, very nice. My father and mother, they had a nice brick house. Because before I was born in 1907 there was a big fire. The whole town burned down. They were all wooden houses. So when they rebuilt it was already houses of brick, brick houses. We lived with us a grandma, also my father's, a sister who died and her child was at that time two-and-a-half years, and my mother took care of her. And we were four children our own, my two brothers and two sisters. I was the third in the row. My name in Poland was Chaja. Chaja is a Hebrew name. It means, actually, an animal. And "chaj" means life, so you could say a live animal, or if my husband wanted to tease me he said a wild animal. (they laugh) But when I came here they read it "Chaja," (shd pronounces "chacha") C-H-A-J-A. Everybody said "Chaja." I didn't like that name. So when I became a citizen I changed my name to Helen.

LEVINE: I see.

ROSENTHAL: My maiden name is Intrater, and my family came to Poland, we lived there for four hundred years, from Spain, but we have no papers left. Everything was gone when my parents were killed by the Nazis. Nothing was left. I lived in Blarzowa till I was twenty. I wanted to leave. My mother didn't want to let me go. I was a Zionist and wanted to go to Israel. When I was ten years old in 1920, Poland became a country by itself after the First World War. And I never forget that day. When we came to school, all the children said, "Get out of here. Wynoscie sie! Do palestyny!" (In Polish "Get out of here! Go to Palestine!") I felt like nothing. And that day I made up my mind that I wouldn't have a child in Poland. And I said to my father, "If you keep me here I will be an old maid because I'll never have a child here." And that was my way of getting out there. My sister married a man who went to Belgium, and she lived in Antwerp, Belgium, since she was married. Then my oldest brother went there. He

came back. He married his sweetheart and he went back to Belgium. So I said, "Now it's my time." And my father said, "Let your youngest brother go. You stay with us, because we need somebody here." I said, "You should come with us there. There's no point for you to stay here. Sell the house, sell the business, and come." They were very orthodox, and they didn't feel like going to a big town like Antwerp, Belgium. They just felt we were born here, we lived our lives here, we'll die here.

LEVINE: And what year was that?

ROSENTHAL: Well, in 1939, in 1936, I have to tell you that I was married. I met my husband in Belgium, in Antwerp, and we got married, and we went home on our honeymoon, because his parents also lived in Poland. So we went to their house first in Tarnow. That was a big town in Poland. And his parents and his brothers and sisters came with us to my parents' house. And there were other, you know, it was like a seven-day wedding that they made for us in my mother and father's house.

LEVINE: Well, before we leave the town in Poland, before you left it, tell me, what was your mother's maiden name?

ROSENTHAL: My mother's maiden name was Necha, N-E-C-H-A. And she, her name from home was Goldwender. Goldwender, I don't know the translate, it's like a German name at that time.

LEVINE: That was her first name?

ROSENTHAL: That was, no. That was her maiden, second name. The first name was Necha.

LEVINE: Oh, I see, I see.

ROSENTHAL: You would read it "Necha," N-E-C-H-A.

LEVINE: I see, I see. Now, both your mother and father's families were from the little town in Poland. They were both located there.

ROSENTHAL: Yes. No, my mother was born in another town. But my father was born in Blarzowa and lived there all his life. He had a business. We had a, how do you call it? An iron, all the things that you have to plow the earth and use, all the little machinery.

LEVINE: Tools? Uh-huh.

ROSENTHAL: And also pots and pans and all, like a file or like a thing to cut the grass.

That, all this kind. And to build a stove, because stoves were built out of, there was no electricity and no gas in Blarzowa, not even in 1936 when I came back. And there was no railroad, but in 1936 they had already bus that went to the big town. (she coughs)

LEVINE: I see. And your father sold these implements in a store?

ROSENTHAL: Yes, in a store.

LEVINE: He had a store.

ROSENTHAL: And the house had four rooms, and a big, tremendous eating kitchen. And the stove was on the side of the house also. A big stove with iron, with all the, for to make stoves for cooking and stoves for heating. Everything was heated with wood. There was lots of wood. We were surrounded by woods all over.

LEVINE: And could you, would you describe your father? What kind of a man was he?

ROSENTHAL: My father wore a beard and he was not a very tall man. But my mother was thin and tall, very, Mother was a very good looking woman. He was chunky like, not heavy, but smaller build, but more, you can see the picture if you want to see it there. (showing a photograph)

LEVINE: Yes.

ROSENTHAL: No, that's my husband. I have one picture of my father. If I had known you were going to ask I would have brought it. We lost all our pictures. We lost everything when we flew. That's another story.

LEVINE: Now, how about in temperament? What was your father like?

ROSENTHAL: He was a good man, but my grandma used to say, "I'll tell your father," you know, if I did something wrong. And I used to say, "I'm not afraid." She says, "You're not?" I said, "No." I could talk to my father. He was a man mostly of learning. He studied a lot of Torah, a lot of Hebrew, and he was, it wasn't a store, but only because he had to make a living. But his major thing was to study.

LEVINE: And he was a religious man?

ROSENTHAL: Very religious, and my mother too, and my grandma. That's another story. (she laughs)

LEVINE: She was religious as well.

ROSENTHAL: She wanted us to be so terribly religious, which was a hardship.

LEVINE: Now, how about your mother? What was she like?

ROSENTHAL: My mother, how do I describe her? My daughter is like my mother. Good people, such a good person is far to see. She cooked and she always had little pots to send out to give to this one, to give to this one. She never cooked for the family alone. There was always people coming and going and eating. People came for wood. We had a big woodshed. She loaded their things. One woman came with sleds, so she sent me out to help her, to bring it home, the wood. The woman didn't have wood to make from Friday night to Saturday, the meal. So she sent us out to go and get it. And my father, whenever a holiday came he had a, called a "nancza" (Polish for "nanny"), a woman who used to feed him, breastfeed him, because his mother got sick at the time when he was the youngest.

LEVINE: And what did you call that? What was the word you used?

ROSENTHAL: I beg your pardon?

LEVINE: What was the word you used to describe that?

ROSENTHAL: A "nianka." That's a Polish word, a woman who breast, I'd say substitute breastfeeding. So whenever a holiday came, he says, her name was Tonka, he says, "Go and bring Tonka this." He used to send her some money so she should feel good. It was really a, to live there was a pleasure. But I still wanted to leave.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, why did you want to leave? What was your . . .

ROSENTHAL: All four, I wanted to go to Israel, to work for Israel. I went to learn how to sew.

LEVINE: Did you feel the anti-Semitism in your town?

ROSENTHAL: Not really. Only at one time, when Poland was declared Poland, and that time, it was a Saturday. And on a Saturday all of the stores were closed because they were owned by Jewish people. And one man came and knocked and knocked and knocked at the door. And he says, "He knows I am not going to sell him anything." So my brother went out. He says, "No, I don't want to buy anything. I just want to talk to your father." They, my father's name was Simcha, S-I-M-C-H-A, and that means in Hebrew happiness. So he says, "Pana Simcha," and that's Polish, like, "Sir, Simcha." And he says, "I want, I came to take your family to my house." He says, "You know it's a Saturday. We are not going on the Sabbath to travel." He says, "They're going to

come to this city. They're going to rob you. They decided, and I came to take you." My father said, "Look, you go home. I thank you very much. I'm going to go to the synagogue and I'm going to tell to everybody, when it comes evening, to leave their homes and go to their neighbors who were not Jewish." Because there were a lot of good people, too. You know, you can't say these people were bad. There were good people all over the world, and this is the way it is.

LEVINE: Well, now, what was the composition of the town? Was it half and half?

ROSENTHAL: Mostly Jewish.

LEVINE: Or it was mostly Jewish.

ROSENTHAL: Yes. There were some people, the mayor was not Jewish, and there were a lot of people who lived there, too. Most of the stores were Jewish, dominantly. And there were two synagogues in that little town. There were a rabbi and all that. And they built a, like, there was no, you know, we had no running water or anything, but they built a place where there had water for the women to immerse themselves and they had places where you could go in and soak underwater and wash yourself and all that. The Jewish people built it on their own, but anybody could come and take a bath or anything like that.

LEVINE: What happened that evening? Did, in fact, did . . .

ROSENTHAL: That evening my father came back from the synagogue, and Saturday night there was a ceremony that you light a candle and you say the prayer that the Sabbath is, and we are now free to do whatever we want to do because through the Sabbath we did nothing, just pray or read a book or read the bible, nothing else we could do. So, and then my father said to take the candles, you know, the silver menorah and all the silver, whatever we had, and put it up on the roof, not, in the attic. And my brother and my cousin, who lived with us, he was older than my oldest brother, and they did it. And then we started to hear shooting. So when shooting came my father said, "Take Grandma and go up to our neighbor above." A block away from us was a neighbor. He was the organ player at the church. "He'll let you in, and Mother and I will lock up and we'll come up." So we started walking with Grandma, and Grandma said, "I can't walk no more." She got scared. "I'm going to go into this Jewish place right here, and you go ahead." So she went in, she knocked at the door, they let her in, and she stayed there, and five children went up to this place. When we came there the daughter opened the door and she says, "Our house is full. Everybody came to our house. I have no place to put you. I'll put you in with the animals in the," you know . . .

LEVINE: The stable?

ROSENTHAL: You know, with the cow. What you call?

LEVINE: The barn, or stable?

ROSENTHAL: The barn, in the cow barn. But we had a little brother, and he started crying, so we said we're going to wait until my father and mother is coming. So we waited about half hour outside by the house, and when my father and mother came up he knocked at the door and the man came out and he says, "I'll take you in in my daughter's room." And he gave us, and we put our youngest brother into the bed of hers, and we sat there. Then the man came in, this, what do you call it, the organist, the man who played the organ in the church. He says, "I'm going out to look at the town. I'll come back." So my father said, "I have a request of you. I'll give you the keys to my house. We forgot the book." He says, "What kind of a book?" He says, "You know, all year round the farmers comes. He takes the things at the end of the year. When he gets his produce in, he pays us back. And everything is written down in that book. If they're going to come in, they may tear up the book." So he says, "I'll go in and get it." Then my father says, "I left the one lamp there lighted when we went out from the house." He says, "I'll see." He took the key and he went. He came back without the book. He says, "I'll tell you something. Your house wasn't opened. Your store isn't touched. They did not get in there. I was afraid if I opened and go in, somebody else will follow me, they'll start robbing it." He says, "So I did not open it." But they ruined the whole street, every store. But they couldn't take whatever sacks of flour or sugar. They couldn't take. It was too heavy. They put naphtha, you know, petrol, over it so to spoil it. When we came back in the morning the windows were broken, glass all over everything. The doors were broken. They did make a terrible mess. Nobody was killed and nobody was hurt. So that was, the whole town knew because my father told them. But we were ashamed. My mother and the children, we were ashamed that they didn't open our store. We were the only ones not touched. But my father was a very honest person, and he treated the people very nicely, and I think that's why, but we couldn't figure out why that should happen. And maybe they didn't need pots and pans, who knows. But that was, so my mother went in and took the biggest pots and cooked for the whole town. Every child in town we brought in and my mother fed them. And we helped all our neighbors to clean up and to straighten up. But for four weeks we didn't sleep at all.

LEVINE: For fear, you mean, that they would come back.

ROSENTHAL: It was very big unrest.

LEVINE: Now, who was doing this? Who did you think were the people responsible for the . . .

ROSENTHAL: It's hard to figure out. They were some of them who had the guns. Those young men who came back from the war. And those young men may have been unrest. It was, and whenever there is something like that they felt that the Jews, it was just that way. And I don't know why, but that's the way it was.

LEVINE: Now, was it after that incident that you wanted to leave and go to Belgium?

ROSENTHAL: That incident, the next Monday that we went to school, that incident happened. People that I grew up with, people that I knew from the first grade, children. We played together, everything. I thought they were my friends. I was a Polish. I knew all the kings, I knew all the history of Poland. I was a Polish person. I was a person, and surely I was Jewish, but we had a different religion, but that didn't mean that we were different in any other way. We lived here. My great-grandparents and great-grandparents lived there. We came. At the time, from Spain, King Sabieski. I learned the Polish history. He, that was king in Polish was Crul Sabieski. I speak a good Polish. I still remember the language very well. He asked the Jewish people to come into Poland because he needed the commerce, and Jewish people were good at that. So that was the beginning of Jewish people coming into Poland. And when we heard that as a child, I have, you know, it's, I am eighty years old, it's seventy years ago. I have never forgotten that. I'm talking to you like I'm telling you a story. It's not a book story. It's a story of a life. That's what it is.

LEVINE: So that put in your mind to go to Israel.

ROSENTHAL: I wanted to go to Israel.

LEVINE: So you started out . . .

ROSENTHAL: And my mother said, "I'll die if you go to Israel." That was, at that time was Palestine. It was very hard life there, and she says, "You're going to, you're going to split rocks in Israel? I did not bring up a child of mine to go and split." I said, "Mother, I'll be a free person there." She couldn't understand it. So I went to Belgium.

LEVINE: And how old were you when you left for Belgium?

ROSENTHAL: Twenty.

LEVINE: Twenty. And did you expect to stay in Belgium?

ROSENTHAL: And I had already a boyfriend in Poland. This boyfriend of mine did not live in our town. He came about eighteen-and-a-half, I must have been, eighteen-and-a-half, to visit his sister who lived in Poland. His sister and her husband, they had a

drugstore in our town, and his sister was very lonesome because they were not religious, and religious people did not accept the non-religious Jewish people. But I became friendly with her, and I used to come to her, I used to invite them for coffee to our house, and my mother was too good not to be nice to her. And then her brother came for a vacation and we met and we used to go out together during the summer. Not much, because it wasn't permitted to, you know. So we became engaged, and he studied in Prague, in Czechoslovakia. He had already, at that time, two-and-a-half years of college, or university, actually. So I said, "I'm going to Belgium. I'm going to leave now and go to Belgium." He says, "Okay. I'll try to come to Brussels and study there."

LEVINE: Mrs. Rosenthal, let's pause here so that we can turn over the tape.

END OF SIDE ONE, TAPE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO, TAPE ONE

LEVINE: Okay. Well, let's take up where we left off on the other side, which is where you were engaged, and you said you were going to Belgium.

ROSENTHAL: Yeah. And we traveled together, and I went, I stopped off in Vienna. I had, should I talk?

LEVINE: Just come a little closer. (referring to Mrs. Rosenthal's position to her microphone) I had cousins living in Vienna, so I stopped there. And then he went to Prague to finish that year off, and he will go to make applications to Brussels to come and study. But Brussels did not accept him. They wouldn't let him go into the third year. He would have to start from the beginning. And he says, "I can't do that to my parents." You know, it wasn't easy and it wasn't cheap to send a child out of the country to study because Poland had a quota, only three percent could go to a college of Jewish people.

LEVINE: Could go in Poland.

ROSENTHAL: Could go into Poland. So those who didn't make it, they had to go out of town, not out of town, out of the country. So he studied in Prague. So he tried to get to Belgium, and he couldn't. And he said, "And what are you going to do when I finish now? Are we going to get together and go to Poland to live?" That's where I had my parents, and that's where I want to go back. I said, "Luneck, that's not for me. I will never go back to live in Poland. Either you come to Belgium or we're going to go to Israel." He said, "No. I have promised my parents that I'd come back." So I sent him back my ring and I said, "Forget it."

LEVINE: Wow. Okay. Well, let's continue the story on from how you, when you decided to come to the United States.

ROSENTHAL: I did not decide. We lived in Belgium. I lived with my sister for two-and-a-half years there. I worked at his, at my brother-in-law's office. I was an accountant and carried on the books. And I met my husband there.

LEVINE: And he was from Poland?

ROSENTHAL: And we got engaged in 1936, and we got married.

LEVINE: And then when did you decide to come to the U.S.?

ROSENTHAL: Well, I think that I had a (?) in me. I had a feeling all of a sudden that it's getting, that the war is coming closer to Belgium and that the Germans will have to go through Belgium to go to France. And I kept on saying to my husband, we were married at that time four years, "We have to leave." So we tried to go to Israel. We couldn't get papers. My cousins from Vienna came to Belgium. They said, and they told us atrocities and the things that the people there put them through. And I said to Paul, "Send money to the United States." I said to my sister, "We got to go. We got to make the men come." And they said, "You know what? Take the children and you go. We'll come later." I said, "Never mind. You come with me or I'm not going." I had one child, my son was born. And then I kept on crying and screaming. He sent money to the United States. I don't remember how much he sent. I just never was that interested in money. It, I just don't remember. I was thinking about that. I never asked my husband. You know, it went by. It just, so he says, "You want me to send money? You want me to, where am I going to do?" I says, "It's not important. We've got to leave here." So one day he came home. He says, "A man came, and said that we can buy passports to Haiti." I said, "Go ahead. Buy it." So we got together, my sister, my brother, and the youngest brother was also just married, and he had no money. So we told him we'll get together to buy you the passports. He says, "I don't want charity, and I don't want to take it." And he never bought it. So my sister and her husband and two children, my brother and his wife and two children and we, we all got the passports. But we sat there. We didn't leave. The war broke out. We hired a bus, and we were going to France. French said, French people, the government said all the diamond dealers, my husband was in the diamond business and my brother-in-law was in the diamond business and my brother was in the diamond business, you all can come into France, we'll take you in. And they did take us in. But by the time we got there and by the time we were there the Germans came around the other way and we had nowhere to go.

LEVINE: Well, then, you . . .

ROSENTHAL: We were caught in France in a small town down near, not far from

Dunkerque. And the Germans made us go back. We had to hire a man with a car. It was a Swiss man who took us back to Belgium, and we went back home.

LEVINE: And how did you get to leave from Lisbon?

ROSENTHAL: And then, but we had the passports. So then we found out that with those passports we can leave. So, a Paraguay attache in Belgium said that he's going to take us across France to Spain, and from Spain we can get to Portugal. So my sister went first with her husband, two children, and their partner, and then as he came back my sister wrote me a letter in Polish, and I knew her handwriting. "Everything is fine and we are across the border." So then we went. So they said, "Take two valises and come." But it came to load the car, only one valise went in. So the other valise we left standing. I closed my apartment. I had this beautiful, I don't want to talk about it. It doesn't matter.

LEVINE: You left most everything.

ROSENTHAL: Left everything standing there, and nothing. We were four years married, we just had organized our home the way I liked it. It's not important. Left the valise. Then I didn't know whether I had a suit for my husband, whether I had a dress for my, but it was one or the other. We went, we went through, we came to Perpignan in France, on the Spanish border. It was right across, it was right on the border of the Spanish. And we got all the visas, everything was organized. And he took us to the border of the Spanish, and the Germans stood there and they said, "You need an outgoing visa from France. You can't go out without a visa." We had to go back. We went back to Perpignan, stood in line, got the outgoing visa. Called the man. He says, "My car broke down and I can't take you, but I'm going to arrange for you to go by train." We were now two families, my brother with his wife and two children. The voyage on the little boat, later, I'll talk to you later about that. So, I'm jumping the gun.

LEVINE: So the train ride, then, you had.

ROSENTHAL: So that was, so we went back and he made arrangements. He even gave us, each family, permission to take a thousand dollars with us. We had twelve thousand dollars in money and diamonds with us. He said he's going to bring that, and his car will get. You didn't see him, we didn't see him.

LEVINE: You had twelve thousand dollars in dollars or in diamonds?

ROSENTHAL: In dollars and diamonds beside.

LEVINE: In dollars and diamonds.

ROSENTHAL: I don't know how much the diamonds were. But part of our, what we did before when my sister went we divided up. They took half of ours, and they left us half of theirs. So we had half of our diamonds when we came. My sister came to America about two months before. So we went from Spain to Portugal and in Portugal we stayed there about three months. You couldn't get a boat, we couldn't get a plane. Everybody was trying, and everybody wanted to go.

LEVINE: So you were staying there?

ROSENTHAL: It was a hard time. We stayed in Portugal almost three months.

LEVINE: And what town were you in there?

ROSENTHAL: In Lisbon.

LEVINE: In Lisbon. And you stayed in a hotel, or a house?

ROSENTHAL: Well, first we went to a hotel, but it was too expensive. So then we went into a boarding house, where it was cheaper. Because we only had a thousand dollars with us. This man never came.

LEVINE: So it was you and your husband at this point?

ROSENTHAL: Me, my husband and my child, my son. He was three years old. And my brother and my sister-in-law and their two children. They had a daughter of five and a son of one-and-a-half.

LEVINE: Now, what was it like every day? Did you go down to the docks to see about getting a boat, or . . .

ROSENTHAL: My husband was there, all, and my brother. They were there every day trying to find a plane or anything. One day they found a, there was a boat that was going to leave in ten days. So we paid the passage, but I don't know how, what, anyway. The boat didn't leave. What happened, Germany invaded Greece. It was a Greek boat, so we couldn't go. We started, we didn't have any more money to pay till we got back the money they didn't. It was a problem. So we sent a telegram to my sister, who was already. And we had money in America, so they knew it, so they sent us money. Finally we got a berth for seven people, four grownups and three children in one berth. But we went on that boat.

LEVINE: And what was the name of that ship?

ROSENTHAL: Nyassa. I have it on this paper, I think, somewhere.

LEVINE: Yes, you wrote it down.

ROSENTHAL: It's there. It was a small boat. It must have been a cattle boat. They just put a paint over it, and that was it. One meal I ate on that boat, the first night. And after that it was very hard. We travelled for twelve days. The small children. My son run around. He was, he didn't throw up, he was fine. But I couldn't eat no more. We lived through it because the boat went on the edges. It was afraid to go through the middle of the water because of mines, water mines. It was during the war. So . . .

LEVINE: Can you remember that voyage, what you were thinking about, or what was on your mind?

ROSENTHAL: Only survive the day. That's it. Nothing else mattered. To survive the day and survive the voyage. Nothing else. It, I didn't cry for what I lost. I didn't cry for what I haven't got, and I didn't care. To wash my face, to wash my hands, to keep the child going, and to be well. That's all. The food was okay, but we couldn't eat. It was, first of all, it was a nervous time. One day they said there are mines. One day they said a German boat passed by. We didn't know whether we get there, but we got here.

LEVINE: Can you remember . . .

ROSENTHAL: Oh, how did we get here. The American Consul sent a telegram to Haiti to ask whether they will accept us, whether we are citizens? We paid for that telegram. And it came back, "Yes, they are citizens, and we accept them." So that was good.

LEVINE: Now, can you remember . . .

ROSENTHAL: I went up to the Consul. He gave us twenty-four hours to be in the United States. And I begged him, I said, "Have pity on us. We are with three small children. We're going to travel in the boat for such a long time. Give us three days at least to breathe free, to go on another boat." He wouldn't give us seventy-two hours.

LEVINE: So within twenty-four hours what did you have to do?

ROSENTHAL: Take another boat to Haiti.

LEVINE: So can you remember, first of all, coming into the New York Harbor?

ROSENTHAL: Yes, I remember.

LEVINE: What was that like?

ROSENTHAL: It was beautiful. We were so elated. We were so happy. And the first, when they landed, they said, "What do you want? You want something to eat?" I said, "I want a good glass of milk." That's all I wanted. And the milk tasted like cream. It was delicious. That's all I remember. (she is moved)

LEVINE: Do you remember seeing the Statue of Liberty?

ROSENTHAL: Yes, I remember. We stood all by the rail, and we were blessing America that we could get there. We never thought that we'd get here. It wasn't an easy trip, and it wasn't a light trip. But we got here.

LEVINE: Do you remember what people were doing on the ship when they came into the harbor and saw the Statue?

ROSENTHAL: Everybody was, they weren't screaming, they were just, I think, the elation came from the heart. You could see it on the faces. That's all you could see. The face of the people. They were in awe. It, like, we were safe. That's all there was.

LEVINE: And then how about Ellis Island? Do you remember the boat and coming here?

ROSENTHAL: Well, it was a terrible letdown for us. We didn't expect to go to Ellis Island. Why should they put us in jail? We didn't do anything wrong. Nothing we did. And we lost most of our money that we had with us, and we had only one valise, nothing. Yes, I had a coat, a winter coat, made for myself, because I didn't have, and I knew we come, we came in in December. It, I don't know. It was such a letdown, that I felt like just lying down and screaming and crying.

LEVINE: What did you know about Ellis Island before you actually got . . .

ROSENTHAL: Nothing. We didn't know. They just wouldn't let us off.

LEVINE: You just didn't know that that place existed and all of a sudden . . .

ROSENTHAL: I don't know why. We didn't know what. We didn't know what it is. We didn't know it existed. I didn't know ever of the existence of Ellis Island.

LEVINE: I see. So then how, what happened?

ROSENTHAL: They just said, "Something came up and you can't get off the boat. You have to go to this place." Examination or something, what kind of a rule, but we didn't know it. We didn't know why. We weren't explained.

LEVINE: And also . . .

ROSENTHAL: And I didn't know a word of English, no. Neither did my husband. I spoke German, French, Flemish, Yiddish and Hebrew. Not a, and Polish, of course. Not one word of English.

LEVINE: So when you, what was explained to you when you did . . .

ROSENTHAL: Nothing was explained to us, nothing.

LEVINE: And you thought you had to be in Haiti by seventy-two, for twenty-four hours.

ROSENTHAL: No, there was no time limit. There was not, we didn't know why they didn't let us off. Nobody knew. Not my brother, not my husband, not my sister-in-law. We weren't told anything. Well, in Ellis Island this tremendous room, one room, you never saw it probably . . .

LEVINE: Well . . .

ROSENTHAL: Before that. It doesn't exist now, you know. There were maybe three to four hundred people in that room all day from seven to seven. I had such a headache. I couldn't breathe. It was a very hard time.

LEVINE: Do you remember what kinds of people were in that room?

ROSENTHAL: Yeah. There were a lot of people from Belgium. It was that time for people who came from Belgium here. And there were a lot of Jewish people, but there were other people. Not, the only, my husband, I'll tell you about that, it's a funny story. My husband slept with men, you know, in a separate room. Every morning, every evening at seven o'clock you had to take everything up with you and go upstairs. The beds were very clean and nice. The rooms were clean. And you slept in the bed, fresh sheets every night and really clean. But the men slept separate, and the women slept with their children separate, and we were about six beds in the room. All this didn't bother us because you felt it's only for a little while, it will get over. (she whispers) But then I want to tell you. I had two suits for my son, he was three years old, and they both were white linen. So every day I washed a suit, hang it up overnight, and every morning I put him in a clean suit. His underwear, everything. I had nothing to change. I wore a blouse and a skirt. I didn't care. It didn't matter. My husband slept with men, and one man was there who was a young man alone and he said, "You are Polish. You may understand me." And Paul tried to talk to him. He was a sailor from a boat that got sick and they took him off his boat from Czechoslovakia or from, I don't remember, either Yugoslavia or Czechoslovakia. And he talked to Paul, and Paul talked to him in Polish,

and they understood each other. And there was one policeman at the door that was Jewish. He spoke Yiddish and he spoke English, of course. So Paul talked to him in Yiddish, and when he wanted some fruit or he wanted something to buy. So he gave him the money and the policeman the next day brought it to him. So this sailor asked him also for little things, and Paul did give it to this policeman, and they brought it for him. So one day he comes to Paul and he says, "I would like you to do me a big favor." He says, "What favor?" "I want you to write a letter to the President Roosevelt for me that I am not sick any more. I'd like to go back with my boat to my country. I don't want to stay here." So Paul says, "I don't know how to write English. I can't write an English letter." He says, "How do you talk to this policeman if you cannot write English?" He says, "He is Jewish." He did not know what a yevre is or a Jewish or anything. He says, "I can't understand you. You are not, you are lying to me." Paul says, "Why should I lie to you? If I could write a letter for you I would do it gladly, but I can't write in English." He didn't understand that he could talk to this man, who was a policeman in America, and only speaks English, but this man spoke Yiddish. And Paul talked to him in Yiddish. So that is this, that I remember. There was another incident on Christmas time, you know, that I was here, we were here. We came, we were seven weeks here in Ellis Island.

LEVINE: That's a long time.

ROSENTHAL: And why it took so long. Well, two of the ladies, I don't think they were Jewish, but before Christmas they came probably to Ellis Island to help out people. So they came and we stood in line and we went over and she says, "What do you need?" I says, "I need nothing." "How can we help you?" "The only thing you could help me is to get out of here." She spoke French a little. I said, "I'll thank you." She says, "I'd like to give you something." I said, "What can you give me? I don't need it. I really don't need anything. But I, they give us good food. The HIAS, this is a Jewish organization, sent in all kosher food and we ate well. And we were treated well, but we'd like to get out. That's another story." She says, "That I can't help you." I says, she says, "Would you like to make an apron while you're here?" I said, "I haven't got much time." She said, "So what do you do with yourself?" I says, "All I do is running after my son." Between so many people, he was wild. So she says, "I'll give you a piece of material." I says, "I haven't got the scissors, I haven't got the needle, I haven't got anything." She says, "I'll give you all that. I'll give you thread, I'll give you scissors and I'll give you the material. Will you make an apron?" I says, "Maybe. I'll try." That's the incident. I kept that apron for many years, but all of a sudden it disappeared somewhere, I don't know where. But I wanted to show it later on to my children, but, you know, I didn't need it. (she laughs) And it wasn't a very nice-looking apron, all around.

LEVINE: Do you remember what it looked like?

ROSENTHAL: Yeah, it was round and it has stripes. And then I made a little bit, like a

bib up here, (she gestures) with strings attached. I wasn't very good at it, and I had to do it all by hand.

LEVINE: Was it an apron that you used then?

ROSENTHAL: No.

LEVINE: You just saved it for a while.

ROSENTHAL: I never used it. I just saved it as a memento.

LEVINE: Now how, do you remember, then, when you got word that you would actually be able to leave Ellis Island?

ROSENTHAL: Well, why it happened, we didn't get to know at the beginning, my husband couldn't find out why we were kept here, till that mystery cleared up, what happened. My brother-in-law, my sister's husband, gave the money for the passage for all seven people on a boat that should go to Haiti, right, to the lawyer. The lawyer's name is Einholm. He was a Jewish man. He took the money and he gave his check to Cook, the . . .

LEVINE: The travel agency.

ROSENTHAL: The travel agent. And his check bounced. We didn't know it. They kept on asking us why we're not going and they said, "You didn't pay the passage." So we didn't know the telephone to my sister's. We didn't, we were in jail!

LEVINE: Uh-huh. This is an important point. Let's stop here so we can get another tape on and continue.

END OF SIDE TWO, TAPE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE ONE, TAPE TWO

ROSENTHAL: So where do we start now?

LEVINE: Okay, we were talking about that you didn't know why you were being retained here at Ellis Island. So then what happened? How did you come to find out, and what happened?

ROSENTHAL: Paul and Aaron, that's my brother, he's my oldest brother. They called to a meeting. He came in, they were sitting, men in uniforms. He didn't explain what kind. He didn't realize that it was American men in uniforms, and they asked them

questions, how did you get the passport, how did you. So they said, plain and simple, "We paid for it." That's all they did. He says, "Then it's legal." He says, "It was legal, because the American consul has made us paid for a telegram to Haiti, and they said they accept us. So they asked, "Why didn't you go?" He says, "You brought me here, and I don't know why." They said, "You're lying." He says, "What do I lie? What can I lie? I told you the story. I told you the truth, and that's what it is." We have money here in the bank but, as Roosevelt was smart, he blocked all the monies that came in from Europe because otherwise the Germans would hurt the people in order to bring it back. So to safeguard those people they blocked all the money. "I can go to the bank and I can bring you a receipt." They sent the policeman with my brother and my husband to the bank.

LEVINE: Oh.

ROSENTHAL: Would you believe that!

LEVINE: You mean, to a New York bank?

ROSENTHAL: To a New York bank. And they came back. They said, "Why didn't you pay your passage?" Paul says, "The passage was paid." Through a translator, they had a Jewish translator. I'll tell you another story with that Jewish translator. He says, "It was paid by my brother-in-law." He says, "It was paid by your brother-in-law." Cook said they didn't receive any payment. The check bounced. So now he says, "I have to get in touch with my brother-in-law and find out what happened." So they let him call my brother-in-law, he called, and my brother-in-law says, "I have a receipt. I gave the money to the lawyer, and the lawyer was going to go there and pay for the passage." It was true. The lawyer's check bounced. So they said, "You will have to put that lawyer into jail when you get in." Okay. So after that they let us out. But it took seven weeks to find that out why we are here. Would you believe that?

LEVINE: Wow. So then what did you do when you left?

ROSENTHAL: So they let us go and we took another lawyer and he wrote a letter to the government that we have money here and we got to get the money out. We can't go to Haiti without money. We have no money. How can you go to a strange country, you're a stranger. We knew French, but that, my husband doesn't, I didn't, he would have nothing to do in Haiti, which is his business anyway. Well, and that started a rigmarole. Every four weeks we had to write a letter. The money didn't get unblocked till one year. We kept on borrowing money from people in order to live on.

LEVINE: And you were staying in New York at that time?

ROSENTHAL: We were staying in New York. We were staying first at a boarding

house in Rockaway Park on 122nd Street there. And then we decided we'll take an apartment in Rockaway, because we had no furniture. We thought that the war would be over soon and we'll go back to Belgium. We didn't want to stay here. But it was different because we didn't go to Haiti.

LEVINE: Right.

ROSENTHAL: We, after a year we made an application that we want to stay here, and we went out to Canada and came back for the immigration. We worked out immigration papers. When we came back to the immigration after five years we became citizens and we stayed here.

LEVINE: Now, tell me about the fact that you came knowing no English and how did you come to learn English?

ROSENTHAL: Ha, ha. I first, in Ellis Island there was a young doctor, a young man. He wasn't married, and he was friends with us. He came over and showed me a Life magazine. He says, "Helen, sit down." Chaja, he called me. "I want you to look at it, and you see that you read. This is like French and this is like German, and this is like English, this is English. It's very easy to learn English," he said. So I started to read. And I said, "And what does that mean?" He says, "It's laughing." "Laughing?" To me it looks like "lauging." Lauging is laughing. "What does laughing mean?" So he explained it to me in French. And I said, "That's a funny language." (she laughs) So when I came I had the child and it wasn't easy. But I started to get all the magazines and little stories, and somehow I took a dictionary. I had a French/English, I had a German/English. I couldn't get a Polish/English. That would have been the easiest for me. I came across, I went to the library and one of the women said, "Did you read this?" And I said, "No." She says, "Try this. Gone With The Wind." I read this book for a year with the dictionary. And that's how I learned how to read. Also you going into the store and you're going into there, and with the radio and then later, by then, my son went to kindergarten and my daughter was born and I learned with them. With my son I was afraid. I didn't want him to have my accent. So I was afraid to teach him. But with my daughter I already felt better. So one day she comes in. She was playing with three little girls. They said, "Mommy, Mommy, what's an accent? They say you have an accent." So I sat her down and I explained it to her. She thought I have a disease. (they laugh) That's a funny little thing, you know. That's an accent.

LEVINE: So tell me, let's make clear here, now, your husband's name was Paul, and your daughter and your son's names are what?

ROSENTHAL: My husband's name was Pinkas when he came here and he changed it to Paul, just like I changed mine to Helen. My son's name is Leon. He was born in Belgium, in Antwerp. And my daughter's name is Judy. She was born here. And her

name now is Judy Kraushaar.

LEVINE: So could you spell that?

ROSENTHAL: K-R-A-U-S-H-A-A-R. She lives in Gillette, Wyoming. She has a husband who is a psychologist there, has an office. She was teaching here for three years in Massachusetts when they lived there. Now in Wyoming she is doing his office completely. They have two children, a son, Stephen, who is now in college, in Denver, Colorado, a daughter, Debra, who is in high school. And my son has three children. Leon, his wife is Linda Rosenthal. And they have a son David who is in college in Albany. They have another son whose name is Todd, and he is college in Chicago University.

LEVINE: Well, tell me, how did you, what made you decide to stay here when you, I mean, essentially you expected . . .

ROSENTHAL: I didn't finish the children. I only . . .

LEVINE: Oh, I'm sorry.

ROSENTHAL: I also have a granddaughter, Leon's daughter, and Linda's, and her name is Robin, and she's also in high school. The girls are sixteen years old, and when they were fourteen I took them both to Israel on a trip, to Israel and to Egypt. They were very good girls and I liked it. Okay.

LEVINE: Well, let's say why you decided to stay.

ROSENTHAL: Well, first of all, the war was on, and the war was, and my husband was doing work. He was a cleaver, and he was doing work for the, there were diamonds that they used for, they used it for ball production, for to produce certain instruments. They needed a hard rock, like a diamond. He was splitting diamonds to make them, to go into a machine to cut all the things. What they make, I don't know what, bombs or things like that. It was for war production. So during the war, the whole time of the war, he worked for these diamond special. And our money got freed after a while. It took almost a year, more than a year, almost. And we rented an apartment in Kew Gardens in New York, you know, on the Island, in Queens. And then my daughter was born. We needed another room. And I got an apartment in Forest Hills. I lived there for twenty-nine years with my husband. Now, the last ten years I live in Orchard Towers, that's on Grand Central Parkway, one of those big buildings. It's very comfortable there.

LEVINE: So then you were sort of established here by the time the war was over and you . . .

ROSENTHAL: By the time the war was over and the children went to school, and then we did stop and we didn't think any more of going back to Belgium.

LEVINE: Now, I guess you then got word about your family who had been left in Poland.

ROSENTHAL: That was, by the time we found out my mother and father were killed, all my cousins, the whole town. First of all, by, till '42 we still had mail from my mother and father. After '42 they evacuated them. They took them out from their home, and they sent them to a big town. They became refugees. They, the big town, all the little towns were put into big towns. There was no space for anybody to get an apartment, for anybody to live there. And you had no money, and they just had to leave with one valise. It was very hard. And after that we didn't hear from them. I have a cousin who saw them in Auschwitz, and they were put in the ovens. And my husband, Paul, his whole family got killed. His father, mother, his two sisters, a brother who was married with a wife and two daughters, they all got killed in Poland. (she is almost whispering) He was the only survivor.

LEVINE: Can you think of some things that your mother taught you that sort of, ideas to live by that come from your mother or your father that you think of today?

ROSENTHAL: I was in Israel and we were at the Yatvashem. You know what this is? The Yatvashem means the hand and the name. They built there a memory to the people who died. And then I was there with two friends, and in back of us stood a man, a young man, and he asked my friend, "How do you feel now when you see that? Do you hate us?" My friend said, "I can't answer you that, but Helen, will you answer this man?" I looked at him. He must have been about forty, forty-five. I said, "I don't hate you. My father and mother never taught me to hate, and I didn't teach my children to hate either, but I pity you. I feel pity for you that you are the son of people who made those atrocities, for those atrocities were done by people like you. You probably weren't alive then, or maybe you were a child, but your father and mother, whether they did it themselves, were there when this was done, and that I pity you that you have to live with that." That's all I can tell you. If you become, if you hate you lose yourself. There's nothing left in this world after hate. I can't hate. I have never been taught to hate. Even after pogroms, after all that what happened in our town, my father tried to say they were poor, they didn't have. I said, "At that time, when I was ten years old, I asked that question why." There was no answer to it. There still isn't.

LEVINE: How about your being here, your decision to come and to stay here? What do you think about that now in retrospect?

ROSENTHAL: I tell you, when President Truman, Truman, President now, Bush, went on television, you may not have seen it, and said, "Somebody told me that I hate Jews."

He was very angry. He didn't want, I don't know whether he will yet, approve the loan for Israel. It's only a loan they're asking to guarantee. No money from the United States or anything. I wrote a letter, but I didn't send it. When he went onto the television now and he asked the United Nations for them to erase, they think that they said that Israel is like, Zionism is like Nazism, I wrote him a letter and thanked him for it. I can only do good. I don't feel that I want to tell people, "You are hateful." I can't do it. It isn't in my makeup to tell people they are bad. There are a lot of bad people. We don't know from where they come. We don't know why they are hateful. And the only thing you can do is avoid them as much as you can. Going on hating does not help anybody. It only makes you burn up. That's what I say. My mother felt, whatever she could share with anybody, she was there to do it, and I'm trying to do the same, whatever I can.

LEVINE: Okay. I think . . .

ROSENTHAL: That's all you can do in life. What else are we here for? Be good to your people. Be good to your children, and be good to people who haven't got. Share it with them. That's all I can do, and that's all I try to do. Because I don't believe in hate, and I'll never be hateful, and my children are just as good. I took a course in NYU at one time, literature. And we took a book, Catcher In The Rye. And the teacher asked me, "How do you feel, Mrs. Rosenthal? Would you like your children to be catchers in the rye?" I said, "It's not that I would like, they are." He says, "They are?" I says, "Yes. Both my children are catchers in the rye. They don't understand anything else. But they never went through anything bad in their life." See, the difference is that you grew up here. You can't be hateful. It's a good life. I had a very good life here. I had a good husband, and we made the best of everything we had. Now I am, I am well off. You know, I don't go around bragging. I'm just telling you, I have enough of everything I want, and I'm fine. But you have to know. I respect every person that I see that is before me, that talks to me, and I expect the same thing for myself. And if I don't get it I walk away. I say, "He's ignorant." I pity him. A person who hates, I pity. That's all I can say.

LEVINE: Okay. I think maybe that's a good note we'll end on, and I thank you very, very much for being here.

ROSENTHAL: I have not talked like that in a long time.

LEVINE: I've been here with Helen Rosenthal, and this is now Janet Levine signing off for the National Park Service.

ROSENTHAL: Thank you.