

EI-1004

RENEE NACHIM GROSS

BIRTH DATE: 1910

INTERVIEW DATE: JUNE 5, 1998

RUNNING TIME: 3:04:54

INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE, PhD

RECORDING ENGINEER: SAME

INTERVIEW LOCATION: GREENWICH VILLAGE, NEW YORK CITY

TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: NANCY VEGA, 11/1998

TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY: IRV SILBERG

RUSSIA, 1921

AGE 10

SHIP: SUSQUEHANNA

PORT: DANZIG

RESIDENCES:

- **POLAND: ROSCC/VOLKOVYSKI**
- **US: N. PLAINFIELD, NJ; FAIRFIELD, CT; NEW YORK, NY**

LEVINE: Okay. Let me just say that I'm speaking with Renee Gross, who is the widow of Chaim Gross.

GROSS: Right.

LEVINE: The well-known sculptor and painter. Uh, this, today is June 5, 1998, and

I'm here in Greenwich Village in the home and also museum of Chaim Gross' work in New York, and I am talking with Renee Gross, who came from Russia, a part of Russia that is now Lithuania, in 1921 when she was ten years old, nearly eleven years old, and she came on the Susquehanna.

GROSS: The Susquehanna. And the reason I know was done is that I had written to them once why we did not go to Ellis Island. I wanted to. But, I don't know. I mean, I didn't write, my mother wrote.

LEVINE: And she wanted to know why you didn't go to Ellis Island.

GROSS: Yes.

LEVINE: And did you get a response?

GROSS: No. No, we did not. Unless we, we had, unless she did receive, which we do not have.

LEVINE: Well, why do you think you didn't go to Ellis Island?

GROSS: We didn't know. We were very -- to push it, we were very, um, disturbed, because we stayed on that island a whole month.

LEVINE: Oh, my goodness.

GROSS: And Papa came to visit. He was lonely. I mean, Mother was not so old,

because she was, she became pregnant, and she didn't want the child, and it was a big to-do. And she, and my sister, the one who came with Papa, were talking about it, and they didn't want me to, what they were talking about, getting a, a, um . . .

LEVINE: An abortion.

GROSS: An abortion. 'cause she was ashamed to have grown children, and then -- - but when he came, and we --- we were not allowed to see him except to touch him in the gate. [In tears]

LEVINE: Really. Oh.

GROSS: And my mother was touching, he was touching her hand. [In tears] I'll never forget it, never. And I said, I said, I was pulling Mama's skirt, "Mama, who is that man?" Because, you know, the year that he had gone, I didn't recognize him. When he went away he had a beard, and he had lots of red hair. And when we saw him he didn't have a beard. He was clean-shaven and youngish-looking. So I said, "There is a *man*, so *Mamale shvayg*." "Be still. This is your father (*Dus iz ir Tata*)." [In tears]

LEVINE: Ahh. Well, tell for the tape how it was. There was --- tell about the illness on board, and how, what happened.

GROSS: Yes. So, they quarantined all the people, a whole month.

LEVINE: Now, you, and you didn't . . .

GROSS: In Maine. And it looked like a little prison. And every person, child and adult alike, was, was, uh, sprayed. You know, not to be carriers.

LEVINE: Oh, disinfected, like for lice?

GROSS: Yeah, we were disinfected.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

GROSS: That's right. Every one, even little children, even babies. There were some. There were so many people. And finally the month was over, and th--- there was no, no more illness.

LEVINE: Do you know what that illness was?

GROSS: I don't remember. I think it was some form of typhus.

LEVINE: And it was an island . . .

GROSS: A carrier, the island, way down, I'll tell you the name of the island. I know it was in Maine. I can call up a friend who came on the same boat. I'll ask her.

LEVINE: Really, uh-huh.

GROSS: Because we all had to be there. It didn't matter, even if you were rich and

you could pay. Everyone was treated the same. When the month was up, the illness was gone. So every family went where they were designated. Some went to Chicago; some went to, to Connecticut. We went to Connecticut, because Papa had a business in Fairfield, Connecticut. And that trip was so long. It seemed longer than the ship trip. [Laughs]

LEVINE: You mean, you sailed?

GROSS: We were three – three hours, three, uh, weeks on the Susquehanna.

LEVINE: Coming across the Atlantic.

GROSS: Three weeks.

LEVINE: And then you went to the island off the coast of Maine. And then you took the same ship, the Susquehanna, down . . .

GROSS: No, no. That was dumped there.

LEVINE: Oh, it was dumped there.

GROSS: Right there. No, no. People took trains. We were given the, the means of going by train; everyone was given by the ship company the money to go wherever you had to. But it seemed to me like it was an endless trip. You know, when you're, when there's anxiety.

LEVINE: Yes.

GROSS: But we made it. We finally came to Fairfield, Connecticut, because that's where he was. You had to go to someone.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. What business did your father have when you got to New York?

GROSS: He was a peddler.

LEVINE: Of produce, or of . . .

GROSS: Of produce, yes. And the reason he was a peddler, he dealt with Polish people, because he knew Polish well, and also he used to charge when they couldn't pay. He dealt with farmers in Connecticut. That's 1921. Finally the year ended, and we were put in grade number two. My brother was very tall. Papa was very tall, he was six feet three, and Mama was very short. We used to call her *Lukshen* (noodle). And she, she reached up to here.

LEVINE: [Laughs] His armpit, right?

GROSS: And she saw how we felt very miserable. [In tears]

LEVINE: Be careful . . . [Referring to the microphone]

GROSS: That's all right. I'll be careful. I want to get some tissues. Go to the bathroom and get some tissues.

LEVINE: Okay.

GROSS: Bring the whole box.

LEVINE: Okay. We're going to pause for a second here.

GROSS: Mama hired a teacher.

LEVINE: Oh.

GROSS: So we wouldn't stay. Because we knew some things, we knew. We had a tutor in the *shtetl* (village). We had a very good tutor. The people -- her sister was in a big city, and she had fourteen children. There was not enough food. So they came to our house to stay, just for food, and we were studying with her, you know, mathematics, geography, everything. The reason she hired a teacher is that she saw that we were miserable because the kids in town were pointing to the greenhorns, you know, in grade number two. [In tears] It was a *shanda* (shameful).

LEVINE: Wait. When you cry like that, is it because you're sad or because it just brings back, uh, memories of people that, you know, uh, the family that. -- . Oh, God, yeah.

GROSS: Oh, God! [In tears] Oh, that. Papa died first, then Mama. [In tears] Then my brothers. No, first my sister, then a young brother. They were very sad when he died. He was young. [In tears] The oldest brother -- see, my son is named after him. Papa brought him to America to save him

from -- because they, they would have taken him at age fourteen to dig graves. They did that.

LEVINE: To the what?

GROSS: To dig graves.

LEVINE: Oh, dig graves.

GROSS: And our town was bombed. Volkovysk, near Volkovysk. It's not far from, uh, from Bialystok. Not far. Anyway, now it is Lithuania, that region. 'Cause, you know, World War One, it was chopped up, and each leader took a portion.

LEVINE: The shtetl, did the shtetl have a name?

GROSS: Yes, Rosccs. R-O-C-C [not understood]

LEVINE: R-O . . .

GROSS: R-O-S-C-C, Roscc.

LEVINE: Oh, Roscc. Roscc. Uh-huh.

GROSS: It was, you know, my granddaughter and I were in Israel two years ago, and we saw, in the lost, the lost region, in the Yavashin [ph], we s-- they have a, an edition of the Polish and the Lithuanian towns, which were lost.

They don't exist any more. But what there are --- people remembered is [Not understood]. And my grand-----, I was looking, and looking, and looking, and she found it.

LEVINE: Wow. Well, tell, why don't you say, for the tape, whatever you can remember about Roscc, especially since it no longer exists.

GROSS: It doesn't exist.

LEVINE: When you think about it, what are the things that you remember about the shtetl?

GROSS: A beautiful garden with fruit. And the soldiers used to come to Mama for cigarettes. She made them by hand. And they used to bring sugar, and sometimes they brought us grain from the --- that they confiscated from the peasants. And we took it to the mill until it burned down. And so we always had bread, we always had milk.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

GROSS: She traded. She was very clever. Because Papa left her, and she really acted like a widow, with very little.

LEVINE: Now, was Papa sending money over?

GROSS: No, never. We didn't even know if he was alive until the papers came and a letter that he is ---- four-and-a-half years later.

LEVINE: Now, why?

GROSS: Germany attacked. We were against Germany then fighting.

LEVINE: Right. And you, and why did you think that your father was dead?

GROSS: That's what we were told, that the ship he was on sunk.

LEVINE: Oh.

GROSS: So, so she acted like a widow. She really did. And we did everything she told us. Naturally.

LEVINE: What was your mother's name?

GROSS: Leah, Leah Naomi, Leah Naomi. Leah Naomi.

LEVINE: And what was her maiden name? Do you know?

GROSS: Finkelstien.

LEVINE: Oh, Finkelstien. And how about, uh, your father's name? What was his first name?

GROSS: You mean my father's parents?

LEVINE: No, your father, his first name.

GROSS: Oh, Benjamin.

LEVINE: Benjamin. And it was Nekken [ph]?

GROSS: Yes.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

GROSS: That was it.

LEVINE: And then in the family, who were the children, from the oldest on down?

GROSS: My sister, her name is Genya, and, um, she came to America with Papa in 1917. And she worked as a ----- she was on the East Side with a family. I'll never forget it, because I went to see the house, and, 336, something like that. It was on the East Side. And I know the town; I know the, uh, the street, and the house, because later when relatives came, they stayed. Even if you had no room, they stayed in a cot in the hall just to be near until they got established ---- until they got their own way of life.

LEVINE: So, so your, Papa and your oldest sister . . .

GROSS: And my brother who died here.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. They went to the Lower East Side?

GROSS: No.

LEVINE: No.

GROSS: No, they went; they were on the Lowest East Side only for a day. They were told to go to Connecticut because they could make a living. He remained --- my sister remained here. She was a, she was an educator. She had gone to gymnasium, so she was able to get a job with some distant relatives whose names I don't remember. I know they --- they ---- later we met them, their name was Wein, and they moved to Clarion from, from the East Side, because life was difficult five floors up. And then my Aunt, uh, Jean, that was Mama's sister, was married to a man named Wein, and he was a tailor, but they heard if you go to . . .

LEVINE: Connecticut?

GROSS: Pennsylvania, you do, you can find a small town and you can establish yourself, which they did. And for years we didn't see them or have letters. No communication. I found out later, because I always asked Mama, "Where is, you always talked about your little sister. Where are they?" And so she told me, and we went, we went there. Clarion, Pennsylvania. It's about forty miles north of Pittsburgh. And they did become very well --- they had a small store of *shmatas*, of clo --- clothing, because he was a tailor, he was very skillful. And then they had in Reynoldsville a store, and then they had --- they spread out.

LEVINE: I see.

GROSS: In all the little towns nearby.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

GROSS: And they had a big family, all of whom ---- one of them just died recently. She was ninety-five.

LEVINE: Wow, wow. So Leah Naomi, who was your oldest sister . . .

GROSS: No, Genya.

LEVINE: Oh, right.

GROSS: No. Leah Naomi was my mother's name.

LEVINE: Your mother's name, okay.

GROSS: Leah Naomi Finkelstien.

LEVINE: Right. And your sister, who's, what was she doing when she, uh, came here?

GROSS: She got a minor job, and a cot to stay in, and one meal a day.

LEVINE: Oh.

GROSS: Many people ---- not to pay too much ---- would give you something to do. So either you were a servant, or something in an office. If you, if you had some education you were able to do something. But this, my father thought that anything with a pencil, anything that had to do with education was better. [In tears]

LEVINE: Anything that had to do with a pencil was better then, right. (They laugh) Uh-huh, uh-huh.

GROSS: She later married a man who was from Hungary. And what did they do? Oh, they quickly had a child who is now ---- he has five children, and my sister married a man from whom she had two sons, one of whom died. The older one became a very wealthy farmer. He had a hundred and fifty cows.

LEVINE: Oh, where was that?

GROSS: In, in Three Bridges, New Jersey. It's not far from Flemington. And he --- the son, my nephew, the son of my sister --- married late in life. I mean, that's why she, my sister, used to [imitates sound]. She used to cry, "All my friends have already grandchildren, and I have nothing." I said, "Well, don't worry. If you had a girl, you'd have to worry." But he came to a dance here at NYU, met a young woman of eighteen or nineteen, and in ten days he married her.

LEVINE: Wow.

GROSS: And he had five daughters and one son. Four of the daughters are already married. We had to go to the wedding. I mean, we didn't have to, but . . .

LEVINE: You wanted to.

GROSS: He wanted they should meet members of the family, because the family is small, and some are way out in Pennsylvania. So ---and some are in North Carolina. I have nephews in North Carolina. My brother's son.

LEVINE: I see. Well, now, you, the oldest one was a sister, and then who came after her in the family?

GROSS: Then Julius.

LEVINE: Julius is a brother.

GROSS: Who died.

LEVINE: Right.

GROSS: And then Sam.

LEVINE: Sam.

GROSS: Nechen, who lived in, in Fairfield, Conn--- no ---. in New Jersey, Plainfield,

New Jersey, except it was North Plainfield, you know, a small, the town are very near.

LEVINE: Right.

GROSS: Just like in Pennsylvania are many near towns.

LEVINE: And then it was you, did you come after Sam in the family?

GROSS: Then I came, then, Genya, Julius, Sam --- whose son is now in North Carolina. In fact, I'm sending him -- I'm sending him a gift, because his son already is graduating high school. He just enrolled to Enrini [ph].

LEVINE: Uh-huh, that's nice.

GROSS: I don't even know him, but his mother must have told him to, you know, to get in touch. After that was, uh, Israel, and after that was, uh, me, and then was, uh, Morris. He was the youngest. But he's dead. He was in, um, Fort Lauderdale, Florida.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh. So when you . . .

GROSS: Far away.

LEVINE: When you, when you came to this country, your papa and your oldest brother and your oldest sister were already here?

GROSS: Oh, yes. They were --- they were here almost five years.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

GROSS: Because it took four-and-a-half years to get the papers, only the minute she heard she picked up her children and her, and her *laychter*, her candlesticks, which were stolen. They were silver. She always cried.

LEVINE: Where were they stolen?

GROSS: We were in Warsaw. When you fell asleep, it was a very bad time. It took a whole month to get the visa, because Papa's, Papa's papers ----- see, we thought he became a citizen. In those days you didn't have to wait long to be, you declared to, and the wish to be. So, so the papers were not in order, but Papa had a niece in Warsaw, and she was integrated. She was --- spoke only Polish. She didn't act like a Jewess. In fact, this is a very interesting incident. Mama took me to meet her, and I never saw a piano before, and she had a beautiful piano, and I went to touch it, and she said in Polish, she didn't know that I knew Polish, I knew a little bit German, a little bit Polish, a little Russian, and she said to her maid, "The child has soiled hands. Tell her not to. I cannot do that." So when I heard this I didn't say anything. I stopped, and I again was pulling my mother's skirt, and I said, "Let's go, let's go. This is a mean person." She says, *shvayg!* (Quiet!) I have to get a favor. And she helped us get the right papers, which took us to Amsterdam. No, no not Amsterdam.

LEVINE: Antwerp. Antwerp?

GROSS: She took us -- she didn't take us to Amsterdam. Where did we come from? We didn't come from . . .

LEVINE: Was it to Belgium, to Antwerp?

GROSS: *Nein, nein, nein, nein* (no. no. no, no). It was Germany.

LEVINE: Oh, um . . .

GROSS: Near the port. I'll call my friend. She'll remember. I have a friend here --- in the same ship, and her family, too. All of them are dead, five brothers, and she was the only female. I'll call her in a little while. Dan -- Danzig.

LEVINE: Danzig.

GROSS: That's where we, from ---- from Warsaw we got to Danzig, and there we were able to buy chocolate and oranges, and we were so happy. I wanted to stay there forever, and clean, and it was so nice. And from Danzig we got to the ship *Susquehanna*, and they brought us here.

LEVINE: Now, is there anything else about . . .

GROSS: I was not sick, but I had to go where everybody went.

LEVINE: Before we leave, uh, talking about your life up ---

GROSS: Danzig, Danzig.

LEVINE: : until you were ten years old. Rosccs? Is that the name of the shtetl?

GROSS: Rosccs.

LEVINE: Rosccs.

GROSS: Rosccs.

LEVINE: Rosccs.

GROSS: In Russian it's R-O-C-C [not understood] (Note: Russian alphabetical construct, perhaps "palatanize"). There is a hard way to say it, and a soft way. Rosccs.

LEVINE: Rosccs. Well, is there anything else about Rosccs that you can remember?

GROSS: Well, I remember the rabbi who used to teach us, you know, after school, after what we had. We didn't have school. Only when the Germans stayed in our town, first the Russians were driven out. The Czarist Russians were driven out. Then the Poles came, and they were driven out. And the reason we had so many armies coming and going is because the town had a very important station, railroad station, which brought in troops, you know, coming and going. Also we were bound, and

there was a very, very nice, we were told, a very – a *graf* - a *graf*, (a – a -- count, nobleman) a high, a high, a man who owns a lot of property, a high, and rich. And he had a beautiful home and a garden, and he used to take the small children and the elders during a bomb. And he took the elders; he didn't care if you were a Jew or a Pole or whatever. We were mostly Polish and Russian, and we were, when the German came, it was very good for the Jews.

LEVINE: Why was that?

GROSS: Well, it wasn't the Germans who were later. They were the regular Ger--, the World War One Germans. Because they opened the schools, and they treated the children well, and they kept us clean.

LEVINE: Do you remember any, uh, contact with soldiers during World War One?

GROSS: Only that they brought things to eat.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh.

GROSS: They were nice. They were nice to Mama because she made them cigarettes by hand.

LEVINE: And where did they stay in the town?

GROSS: Oh, they, they, there were barracks. There were --- it was a tremendous, wait. Then when the Germans were driven out, the Poles came back.

And then the Poles were driven out, after that the Bolsheviks came, at which time we left. When the bo-- they even made my brother, my brother Sam Benjam-- Sam Nechen a commissar. He was only maybe twelve years old, but he was very tall, so they thought he was older. And also he was, he had more education.

LEVINE: And they tried to make him what?

GROSS: A commissar, somebody. The Jews ran out to the streets. I'll never forget, when the armies came, they ran out to the street, and they welcomed them. They said, "*Bratsa*", they said, "Brothers." In Yiddish [Note: from the Russian - bratski], you know, they said it.

LEVINE: Wow.

GROSS: The Jews were very happy to see them. What happened later, I don't know, because as quickly as possible, as soon as the papers came, really we didn't even wait a week, because whatever she couldn't sell, she left with someone whom she cared about. I know the rabbi was very kind, and I'll never forget the rabbi's son. That everybody thought he was a fool, but I thought he was so nice. I used to play, you know, hopscotch, and then I would go by, and I used to see him work, and I'd say, "*Velvel, vas tust du?* (What are you doing?)" And he said, "And now, *vayst du mit genau [be]* (You know exactly) ---- a fool does not get half the knowledge. A fool should not be told what, what I am doing." Because it was not done. *Halbe arbet* Half work, in Yiddish. He always said that to me. And I thought he was so smart. Why did they call him the foo---Velvel, the

poop, they used to call him. (Dr. Levine laughs) Everybody had a nickname, and they were not nice.

LEVINE: What were some of the other ones that you can remember?

GROSS: I remember, I remember a few people. Very few. They were killed. They were killed later, you know, when the -- when the Nazis came.

LEVINE: Yeah. But what, uh, so in other words the Bolsheviks were the worst of the, of the troops that came through your shtetl.

GROSS: But the Jews liked them.

LEVINE: They did.

GROSS: The Jews all went out and greeted them as if they were brothers.

LEVINE: The Germans, you mean.

GROSS: No. The Germans were driven out long before. First the bro-- czarist army was stationed. They were driven out by the Germans. Then the Germans were driven out by the Poles. The Poles came twice. And when they were driven out, you know, it took time, because the war started in 1914. And I remember when people talked and cried and carried on, because, because they wanted to destroy the czar's family, and they did. But we had, the Jews had nothing to do with it. And we were a small town anyway. I don't think we were ---- [Aside: Don't mind it. This is being

taken care of by their pathologist. Um, she thinks it's cancer. But it's external. It's not bad.]

LEVINE: So the Poles came back a second time?

GROSS: The Poles came back a second time, and some liked Jews and some did not. I mean, you could make a living, you understand? Because what, you were either a tradesperson, or someone who knew how to sew, or someone who knew how to --- how to trade with people. And then when the Germans came, they were the best. They used to, uh, buy things from Mama. They always bought candy, and they spoke beautiful German, and we all, we had to go to school. It was a very good time for us, for the Jews.

LEVINE: Yeah.

GROSS: Then the graf, he was a Pole, but he was very kind, and he had a beautiful, big castle in a park where we saw even strawberries and tomatoes ---- which most people did not ever see them. And he was very kind to the old and the babies. Only small children were allowed to be there. That's how they were saved, I guess. I don't know. You know, it's a --- it's a long time ago.

LEVINE: Yes. (They laugh) Well, so, you went to school there? Were you, you had the tutor when you were there. Did you have a tutor when you were in Russia?

GROSS: Mama, Mama paid the, uh, nieces and nephews who came from Bialistok, which was a big town, because my aunt had many children to feed, and they came. She spread them out in different towns, because there was not enough food during the war. I'm speaking of World War One, you understand?

LEVINE: Yes, uh-huh, yeah.

GROSS: And in these small towns, there was always some peasant who was willing to part with part of his flour, which went to the baker, which went to the family to bake. And, and vegetables, we could get, you know, cucumbers. They -- I remember --- and I'll never forget the way they saved potatoes in the basement and beets.

LEVINE: How did they do it?

GROSS: It was with earth, to keep them fresh. And it was very cool in the basement. I loved being there, and dreamed, and played.

LEVINE: How would you describe yourself as a little girl in Russia, before you came here? What were you like?

GROSS: I was much happier than coming to America.

LEVINE: Really?

GROSS: Coming to America and being in Plainfield. There were hardly any Jews,

and the kids in school always were ---- you see, as soon as we came, my sister got us – got me a midi-blouse with a co--- white collar, and a pleated skirt. Which we had. Then when we came home from school, we had to hang it up to keep it fresh for the next day so Mama wouldn't have to start ironing. And we helped. Everybody helped to do something.

LEVINE: What were your jobs?

GROSS: Because she finally had a store. And, like, uh, like here they call it accommodation.

END OF SIDE ONE, TAPE ONE
TAPE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO,

GROSS: Because there were no, there were no such things like a supermarket, or there were small stores. And here such a store would be called an accommodation store, when people forget a quart of milk.

LEVINE: Right.

GROSS: Or they haven't got the money to buy the bread, so they come to that.

LEVINE: Now, this was in Connecticut?

GROSS: Yes.

LEVINE: In Connecticut.

GROSS: Fairfield. Wait, that was only less than two years, because in 1923 some cousin came also, an aunt's child, whose name was Minnie, Minnie Landau. A lovely lady. I used to look at her and admire her. 'Cause, you know, she was American, and she was beautifully dressed, and she was, um, flirting, and people talked that she had a lover besides her husband. You know, we used to hear all this gossip. And she said to Papa, "Uncle Nekkhen, you have to come to Brooklyn." He said, "Why?" She said, "In Brooklyn, *M'shart gold*." You rake in gold. You don't even have to work. You just rake it in. [Laughs] And he listened to her. So without discussing anything with the children or Mama, because it meant, you know -- if we were to move in the middle of the year, we'd lose again school that we tried to get out of the grade number two, so we, we, uh, were very unhappy. He didn't say anything. He took his release with money, and he went to Brooklyn. And guess what? He bought a house on Avenue K, 2921 Avenue K. The streets were not paved, but in that part of Brooklyn they did have very wealthy homes, beautiful gardens. Because I finally went there, I mean, I had to go to my family.

LEVINE: What section of Brooklyn is that?

GROSS: Uh, Flatbush.

LEVINE: Flatbush.

GROSS: It's beautiful. The trees almost meet, you know? But at that time the

street was not paved, and so Mama went. But Papa wanted ---- everybody went but me. I refused to go. I was a rebel. And so they --- they rented me out to a home where I took care of the babies. [Laughs] This is also very --- I'll never forget, I had to take care of their babies, and they gave me food and lodging ---- until I was able to go to Brooklyn, to my parents. And even that trip, it seemed like forever. I didn't want to lose a term. My brothers didn't care.

LEVINE: So you, so you went to school, and then you took care of the babies, and you were given food and lodging until the term was over?

GROSS: Till the term --- when the term was over, the very day school stopped, which, I don't know. I know in June. And I ---- I was very unhappy because that family had a daughter aged sixteen, and she used to sit on the porch and rock with her boyfriend, and I was so jealous. I used to peek through the door to look at them. "Why does she have that and I don't?" But, you know, I was a servant. I had to stay and earn my lodging. They didn't give any money. They gave only food and lodging. They treated me nice. I mean, I had no complaints. I had to go early to bed and early to --- because I had to come from school. And, interesting, their name was Finkelstien, like my mother before she was married.

LEVINE: Oh.

GROSS: So she, she found them. She thought they were relatives, but they weren't. Just the name was the same. And when school stopped, I took a train, and I came to Brooklyn. And at that time there was no Brooklyn

College. The trip from the subway, I was told what subway to take, and what trolley to take to come to Avenue K, not to walk. I should do that, and I did. And it seemed endless. The trip, I thought, was lasting too long, I was so anxious. But finally I came to their address, and, um, I cried, because I was tired. (Dr. Levine laughs) Maybe tired and hungry, I don't know.

LEVINE: So how did the house compare that your father bought? How did it compare to . . .

GROSS: Oh, it was beautiful.

LEVINE: Yeah?

GROSS: It was a beautiful apartment, and we, my sister and I had a room of our own. It was big, you know. And, and Papa was doing very well, until the, uh, the A&P opened nearby.

LEVINE: Oh.

GROSS: And the people thought that the A&P is cheaper. He used to, he used to, uh, write very beautifully, and credit. People paid once a month. People, people did not go to the store like we do. They charged, and they called on the phone, and it was delivered to them. The same, I'll tell you about Chaim, because he got a job as a delivery boy. Not, nothing interesting about our family.

LEVINE: Well, I don't know about that.

GROSS: My brother went, my brother Sam Nechen, whose son is now in North Carolina, a big shot with some insurance company, who already has children, who just graduated. I'll show you a little boy, a very interesting boy. (Disturbance to the microphone) Because the card only came yesterday, and I was wondering what kind of a book, because I had told, you became a farmer.

LEVINE: She's the one that went to Pennsylvania? No.

GROSS: Nein. She went to Three Bridges, New Jersey.

LEVINE: Three Bridges, New Jersey.

GROSS: He was very bad. She married a lawyer who had no job. It was the depression, in 1929. He lost his job. So Papa gave him five thousand dollars, and he bought a farm. A hundred and forty-five acres. Can you imagine? With a house. It had no improvements. It had no electricity. It had no running water. They had to go to a well. Because I used to go there. I liked the country. Uh, I used to go there, you know, later, with my kid. But we always paid them. Chaim never wanted me to go for nothing. Because she used to be a, um, what is a person who takes on children that have no home, mother? What is it called?

GROSS: Foster mother?

LEVINE: She was a, yes. In order to earn, because they didn't have much, they had land. They had a horse, who died, and a cow that's very old, and a house with no improvements, so she was a foster mother to three or four children, and the state used to give her the money. They paid her. And they stayed until they got married. Even later they used to come to se--- to visit her.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Huh.

GROSS: She worked --- she worked very, very hard, but she loved it. She loved the country. It made her think like in Europe.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh. And meanwhile did you like Brooklyn once you, once you finished the term and went to Brooklyn, to Flatbush? How did you feel about that?

GROSS: Nothing spectacular. I went to, uh, a high school in, uh, where did I go? I don't remember the high school. Where did I go? I don't remember the high school. Can you imagine? See, my friend, my friend even went to, uh, to college. She got two degrees. And, well, she married a psychiatrist. She got a degree in social work at Columbia. She got a degree in Women's College, City College, on 68th Street.

LEVINE: Hunter.

GROSS: Hunter. In fact, she was written up in two publications, and Hunter College gave her a luncheon.

LEVINE: Hmm. Well, um . . .

GROSS: But no one became --- my brother went to, to City College, the tall one, I told you. The other one went to a school for trade, a trade school. And my sister, I told you, went in 1929, by that time it was '29, the Depression, it was very bad. People didn't have money to --- to have any kind of comfort above the needs. Before that we could, you know, we could, we could buy a coat, instead of a hand-me-down.

LEVINE: I see. So, in other words, you never suffered. You still had food, but you couldn't have anything extra during the Depression.

GROSS: No, no. No, we never had vacation or anything like that. Only when we, in the s- the – in Brooklyn, in the store, we went to school. Early morning, then we hung up the school clothes, and put on a white apron, and stood behind the counter to help. They, my brother did not help because he was busy at college. Papa was very happy that he went. The others went to trade schools. And I went to, where did I go? I went nighttime. I went to City College uptown, too. But I never graduated. For many years, I took all kinds of courses, and I was a rebel anyway. I was, um, I was, now they would call me a Communist.

LEVINE: Oh, really? And did that happen when you were at City College? Is that when you got interested in it? Uh-huh.

GROSS: I mean, not, they would call that, because we were always, uh, going on --

-on uh, with placards.

LEVINE: Oh, really?

GROSS: We were always, uh, even later on when I was already with Chaim, you know, we lost our passports.

LEVINE: Oh.

GROSS: The FBI came here. And I was stupid. I was not supposed to let them in. We had to later get a lawyer to get the passports back. It was bad.

LEVINE: So what attracted you to that, to the whole idea of . . . ?

GROSS: Something, uh, something free. We went on picket lines, we fought for the teachers' wages, they didn't get enough pay. You know, we heard all that, and we had to participate.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Do you . . .

GROSS: I mean, not many, just a few would do that.

LEVINE: Yeah.

GROSS: I'm trying to think of the high school I went to. I have, I still have some of the diploma.

LEVINE: Really? Oh. What, do you think the fact that you had been in Russia, that you had started out a life in Russia, do you think that, something about that was connected with your being interested in the communism and the movement for fair, uh . . .

GROSS: No. You had to be an adult to understand that people are exploited, that some people get a lot, and some people have little. You read. I read The Daily Worker. I read The New Masses. But Chaim didn't. He was too busy working. (They laugh)

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

GROSS: So let's go to Chaim.

LEVINE: Okay. Uh . . .

GROSS: Because our family did not amount to too much.

LEVINE: Well . . .

GROSS: Except work, work, work.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

GROSS: Study, study as much as you could. Papa insisted on that. That was very important to him.

LEVINE: That was important even in Russia before you came.

GROSS: Oh, yes, very important.

LEVINE: Yeah.

GROSS: The most important. And in the, in the *Yiddishkeit* (Jewishness), he learned a lot. The boys learned a lot. My sister -- the people were so stupid, that they said, "Papa Nechen has so much money that he even sent his daughter to gymnasium." And you's --- you're not supposed to. You were supposed to only send the boys. And the girls don't need it; the girls must learn to sew. They have to learn to cook; they have to know how to keep a household clean, etcetera. They were very, you know, primitive, ignorant.

LEVINE: But I guess your father had, he had other ideas.

GROSS: Yes. He was more, he was very learned himself, and he --- he let his wife work too hard, because he was always with the Torah. It was too much Torah.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh.

GROSS: We used to be angry at him, also. We always looked at the table. Mama always gave Papa the big, the big portion, and we had little. When there's meat for *shabbas* (Sabbath), the children had small pieces, but Papa always had the big portion. And we, we didn't like that. But we had to do

what Mama said.

LEVINE: What was it like, did you, did you feel that his religion, his, at that time, did you feel that it was too much?

GROSS: Oh, we weren't allowed to sew or do anything on the Sabbath. If we did, God would punish us. And we always had company. I'm speaking in Europe. People from the cities, because Papa had also sisters. The Nazis killed them. They acted like they were Poles, integrated. Like the nieces that we went in Warsaw to help us get the visa, then in Bialystok she had a very rich brother, Gordon. He was a very distinguished gentleman, very handsome. He had electricity. He had a beautiful home, and maids in the house. We didn't have that. And so we always looked up to them. They were the --- then his sister who had fourteen children, and they couldn't feed them. In the war years, I remember. And I remember how I always helped in the store, in the shtetl. I always helped them. I used to fold things that people took apart. That they had, ever--- besides foodstuff, they also had small things for peasants. They had shirts and pants and things like that.

LEVINE: Like a general store.

GROSS: And I used to fold them and stay on it. They gave me a little (Beynkel), a little, uh, stool, so I could reach. Everybody had to do something. That was it, that was the thing, in order to survive. If you didn't you were, you were called bad names. [Laughs]

LEVINE: Yeah. So you helped out from an early time.

GROSS: We had to, we had to go to *kheder* (*religious school*), and we had to learn the, the Hebrew. Everybody had to. This is even before the armies and going and coming.

LEVINE: So it sounds like you were, uh, a religious family, and the girls were treated better than, than girls generally, in the sense of just learning to sew . . .

GROSS: Generally all the, all the girls were able to do was what Mama told them in the kitchen.

LEVINE: Right.

GROSS: And not outside. That was an interesting part that, because the townspeople always talked about, about Benjamin Nechen ---- that he was rich. That's why he helped the girls.

LEVINE: That would be the only reason they could think of.

GROSS: That's what they called him.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

GROSS: The *gvir* you know -- he was the rich man.

LEVINE: Interesting.

GROSS: I mean, it was, when you think about it, it's so s-- ignorant.

LEVINE: Yeah.

GROSS: And primitive. It's like going to Mea Sherim in Jerusalem, where the -- I know one time Chaim went in, he was sketching, and they told him not to. And I was on the porch because they didn't --- you had to wear long sleeves, and that --- in the Mea Sherim region where the religious Jews are. A young lady came out, I don't know what she- a very lovely young lady, and I began to speak to her in Yiddish because I don't, I don't know Hebrew. And I said, uh, "Are you going to go, did you go to gymnasium," you know, "Did you go to, uh, school?" She says, "Yes." I said, "Are you going to go to the university?" In Yiddish, I asked her. And she said, "Nein." And I said, "Why?" She said, (M'tur nit). "You're not allowed." And I said, "What are you going to do?" "Oh, you have to get married early, very early. You have to know how to cook, you have to know how to bring up children, you have to know all that." Just be; just be, like a maid.

This is already in our time, in the modern times. Because we were many times in Israel, on visit. And that's the truth. 'Cause I spoke to them. I was not allowed to go in because I didn't have long sleeves to cover. You had to be covered, your head. Just in that part, in the religious part. It's like that in Boro Park in Brooklyn. They're primitive. All they know is Torah. My own son, my son and my grandson ---- a year ago he promised

he will leave the, the, uh, the, uh, Yeshiva where he goes, 147 East Broadway, and go to, uh, John Jay College. It's part of City College. And I said, "Why do you choose that?" He said, "My friends are already there." And he's, he's not out of high school. He will be in June, because he's seventeen. He will be graduating. "And I was so happy to get away from that Torah business." Because he knew very little. I used to ask him questions, and all, and he --- and my son is acting like, like in the olden days, there is never enough Torah. And it's too much. It's not healthy.

LEVINE: Well, how did you meet Chaim?

GROSS: Oh, that's bec--- see, I -- I was always with the poets. On 8th Street there were bookshops, and I used to hang around to try to get a little culture, to be not like most people. And I flirted. And a gentleman by the name of Roth, I'll never forget him, but I didn't care for him. It's just that he said he wrote poetry, and he said, "I have a friend by the name of Jake, uh, Friedland, who has a wonderful studio, and it's on 9th Street. You want to come with me?" And I said, "Yeah, sure. I'll be glad to." And he took me there, and Chaim was there, because Jake was making a very lot of money, ninety dollars a week. Why was he getting so much when all the others, *shlemiels* (Jerks) didn't make more than two to seven -- you know, delivering papers, or being a delivery boy, like I'll tell you in a minute. Because he was doing commercial lithography, very big lithography. In those days there was no television or radio. The advertising for theater and movies was through these large . . .

LEVINE: Posters.

GROSS: Posters. But they were lithography. They were real. They were not reproductions. Now they're collector's items. They're very -- people collect them, if there's any that they find. [Aside: And thank you for this. I would have sent something to him. I'll bring it to him when you tell ---- where does he live?

LEVINE: He lives, 505, on the corner of Houston and, uh, NYU housing.

GROSS: Oh, isn't he lucky. Those are nice.

LEVINE: Very nice.

GROSS: Does the IM [ph] pay?

LEVINE: Yes.

GROSS: See, excuse me. If you live in these houses, which were Tishman's, the ones opposite us, excuse me, you can hear people pee in the toilet.

LEVINE: Hmm.

GROSS: But these are very, they're solid house. There's only one building that's outside us besides, I know a professor there.]

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh. [Resuming] Well, um, let's see. So, so, you went to the, the studio on 9th Street.

GROSS: Oh, wait. So we went to Jake.

LEVINE: Right.

GROSS: Jake, why did they congregate ---- most of the artists were painters. There was Rafael and Moses --- they were twins.

LEVINE: Right.

GROSS: They were not married. There was Louie Rebek [ph] who later went to, uh, southwest. It was hard because he had arthritis. There was Saul Berman. There was Nikolai Tsekovski. There was --- there were a number of people, and because Jake made so much money he gave them money to buy tomatoes and a cabbage and raisins and stuff, and they always cooked. Everyone had to do something. Clean the toilet, wash the dishes, prepare the vegetables for ---. I didn't know, I found out all of this later, that Jake paid for everybody. They were hang--- hang--- hangin', you know, because they didn't have any income.

LEVINE: Right.

GROSS: It didn't last long, but it was going on for maybe two, three years.

LEVINE: So Chaim was . . .

GROSS: Chaim was there playing chess in the corner. All the people, everybody,

especially Nikolai Tsekovski and --- and David Bolyup- ---- they were so, they were so ---- they -- I was young and healthy. They were begging me to come and pose, and I was so pleased. I felt like a queen that they should ask me. And I took their addresses. I didn't go so soon. But, I mean, but I said to Jake, he was the host, "What's the matter with that guy? Doesn't he like women?" And Jake liked me. I didn't like him. He was sort of roly-poly. A very kind man, but not to my face. Because I had, I had a boyfriend in Brooklyn that my parents chose for me. He was the son of their best friends, and he really became later a very prominent surgeon, lives in Baltimore.

I saw him once, only once, with Chaim. And it was a very strange meeting. We passed, and we turned around --- and we turned around and went just, when he turned around. Because I told Chaim, he was my boyfriend; also, it's long ago. So Jake said, "Ah, don't bother with him. He's, um, he's, um, a ne'er do well. He's nobody." I says, "So how come he knows how to play chess? Don't you have to be kind of smart?" (Dr. Levine laughs) "Do you . . ." I said to him, "Do you play?" He said, "Yes, but I don't play well enough." Nothing. So later, later on I went up to him, and I said, "Why don't you say hello?" So he mumbled something, "Hello." Anyway, they ate their borscht, and my friend and I had to leave because he had another appointment or something, I don't recall. And I asked where, I said, "Do you have a studio, too?" And he says, "Yes." And he gave me the address. Not on a piece of paper, but I remembered, because I sort of was taken by him. He was very shy, and everybody belittled him. Not the Sawyer brothers, but, uh, our host especially. He wanted I should pay only attention to him, naturally. It was very obvious.

Only it was very sad. Just that period when I kind of wanted so much to find him and see him, my brother Julius died. 1929. I'll never forget that. And it was just before the New Year. And no one went out. Nobody home went out any more. [In tears]

LEVINE: What did he die of?

GROSS: He had, in those days there was no penicillin. He had double pneumon--- he had pneumonia. But we didn't know, because he got up, got dressed to go to work. In fact Mama, I came home from a party with Rosalyn, the lady that said, "I'm going to call my best friend." She was stupid. She lived in a poor neighborhood, and we were in this nice, you know . . .

LEVINE: Flatbush.

GROSS: Part of Brooklyn. So she stayed in my house overnight. In the morning she went, her father was just the opposite. No, no. Her father was a, her mother was just the opposite. Take a business course. Get yourself a nice man to marry and, you know, she didn't want her to get a deg---. But her father said, "Don't listen to the *ved'ma*. Don't listen to this witch. You do . . ." And he was a very, he was a sexton in an organization, [Not understood], on East Broadway. I'll never forget. He was a tall, handsome man. He looked like, um, he looked a little bit like, um, an artist. But a very small earner, very little earning. But he managed always to give her a dollar to, you know, to, or two. This I'll never forget, how he encouraged her. "Don't listen, go to school. Get yourself an education." And she later did some interesting work, social work in, um, upstate. I

even knew the place. It's a famous hospital. And that's where she met the, a psychiatrist, whom she married. He was --- became very prominent. Anyway . . .

LEVINE: So when you . . .

GROSS: I'm *mishing* (mixing) --- *mishing* you up. For three, almost four months, nobody went out. My parents were very sad, and everybody was very sad, and all they did was pray and cry. But when that period was over, I finally got out. I had to go to school. My, my big brother, my tall big brother, he had to go to school. And so I found Chaim.

END OF SIDE TWO, TAPE ONE
TWO

BEGINNING OF SIDE ONE, TAPE

LEVINE: [not understood] from ---

GROSS: From, from, um, proper, proper people, and proper, whatever proper that was going on among each one's home. This was different. This was, this was freedom.

LEVINE: So did, did people congregate in that studio on 9th Street a lot?

GROSS: Oh, for a long time, yes. Because he was earning good money. We, later on he was a friend, I mean, he was not just someone who fed them.

LEVINE: Right.

GROSS: And he was a, he had a, his commercial, you know, commercial photography, but, lithography, but he was an artist. He also painted and so forth, never became very important. The only ones who later, because they got married ---- Moses got married first, because he married a teacher. See, teachers were always employed. When hardly anyone made a few dollars, they were employed. Maybe they didn't get the best wage, but at least they were working. So Rafael married, um, a young woman who was teaching in a private school. Moses, Moses married a dancer. She was with Helen Tamiris, I remember. Nikolas Kovski married an executive in the Board of Education. Their son is now very important in the, in the, um, in Washington. Anyway, it – it after a while, Chaim couldn't get rid of me.

LEVINE: [Laughs] Why did you like him so much?

GROSS: I don't know. Just because he was shy. And, and, see, at City College there was a publication, and I saw his name already in there. [Aside] Maria, you'll have to make your own lunch. I didn't make anything.

MARIA: Okay.

GROSS: Why did I like him? I don't know.

LEVINE: You just fell for him. Is that it?

GROSS: Yes, in fact, he had a girlfriend.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

GROSS: Whom he was seeing. But because, uh, he told me that he has a girlfriend, and unless she leaves he cannot see me. But during that time when nobody went out of the house, in my home, in Flatbush, he wrote, he called. In fact, in fact, you know --- and I used to answer him, and Rafael used to translate the letters to him. He knew very little English then. Why? I don't know. I don't know why.

LEVINE: So you, so . . .

GROSS: Then he liked me enough to part with --- because that girl, Melzer, her name was Melzer. M---Molly Melzer. I'll never forget her, because he was carving a sculpture of her, which he later broke. I don't know why. It was not my --- it was not because of me. He didn't break it completely. He cut her legs off, then he cut her arms off, then he cut her head off, because a friend of his who was a homosexual and a very lovely poet ----- he wrote only in Yiddish, and his name was Nochem Yud -- he said he likes the head but he doesn't --- can't stand the body. So Chaim put the ---- on the bench, chopped off, he sawed off the head and gave it to him, Nochem Yud. And he was then doing a portrait of him, too. A lovely man. I liked him myself, because he was highly cultured and quiet, a very quiet man.

Um, what happened? After that, I saw nobody but him. As much as I could. Because I couldn't see him summertime because he got a job as a, in a camp, because the, the food was very good. The pay was a little

then, but he --- but he saved it all. He was the camp director of, um, for art, and the camp is still existing, and people tell me that the mural he painted is still there. Can you imagine?

LEVINE: Oh. Where was the camp?

GROSS: In, up in Pauling, New York. 'Cause later, the last year he got a job for me, and so that was very nice. But, you know, they were the socialists, Camp Kinderland. I used to go to the communists.

LEVINE: It was another camp?

GROSS: Opposite, the same lake, it was huge. And on one side the communists and on the other side were the socialists. He worked for the socialists. *Die Arbeter Ring* ---The Workmen's Circle. They still exist, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

GROSS: He was seven years there, seven good years, because he had good food.
[Laughs]

LEVINE: So, so he was already, um, how old was he when he came to this country?

GROSS: He was seventeen.

LEVINE: So he was already considering himself an artist when he came here? No?

GROSS: No. He only knew how to draw. Because when he was in the --- before he came to America, he was in Vienna at one time. He stayed with a brother of his who was crippled from polio. That's how he found him, because he never met him. He only knew him through photographs. The same in America. He only knew his brother through photographs. But he saw him on East Broadway, when the HIAS took off him and his brother from the plane, when Chaim came by plane, not by boat.

LEVINE: Oh. So what year was . . . ?

GROSS: I mean, yeah, by plane. No, no, no, by boat. There was no plane.

LEVINE: No, he came in 1921, too, right?

GROSS: Yes.

LEVINE: Yeah. So he would have come by boat.

GROSS: By boat. By boat, yes. When they got off the boat, HIAS, an organization, took care of the immigrants. Each person or two, whatever they were, like a group or a family, were being taken by a member of HIAS. It's an organization that still exists, and they were --- until they found a place for them, or a relative -- to -- to take them away. And -- and Chaim said to his brother, Evrom Leib, he said, "This looks like Naphtali." Naphtali was here, came before the war, whereas Chaim and Evrom Leib came after the war. He says, "How do you know?" He took out the photograph. He

said, "See?" So when the HIAS people knew that someone he knows will take over ---- because otherwise they didn't leave them; they left.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

GROSS: And he, he came and he said to Naphtali, "You're my brother," and they embraced, and cried. [In tears]

LEVINE: Ah, something, huh? Yeah. Ah.

GROSS: All this was told to me. I was not there. I didn't meet him till 1929, over the end of the year. That's when Julius died. Anyway, after, after he, he left Molly, Molly, uh . . . [Laughs]

LEVINE: Melzer.

GROSS: Molly Melzer -- 'cause she asked him to marry her. She said, "Oh, sweetheart, you don't care for me, but you like to screw me." Excuse my language, but that's what was said. "We'll get married, and my relatives is big family." In fact, her father was the director of the camp he went to. "We'll get married, we'll get presents, we'll go to Paris, we'll have a good time, and after we come back, you'll divorce me." But he didn't listen to her. She told me, she told me all that. Whereas when he married me, when he found me, um, my people did not like him.

LEVINE: Oh, why not?

GROSS: Because he gave me a book that his brother wrote, and instead of saying, "Best wishes," or "With friendship," or whatever, he wrote, "From the Galiziana (Galician) Holtzhacker." A holtzhacker is a woodchopper, and that's the lowest category in Europe. They're lower than the *schneider* (tailor) who was as --- a --a -- who sews . . .

LEVINE: Tailor.

GROSS: They're lower than the shoemaker. They're lower than the *wasserträger*, the water carrier. Because water was not like in America. You had to go to a well to get it to bring it home. So the people of means always had a *wasserträger* who brought them it. And when my people saw it, all they saw was, the Galiziana was a town --- see, they were Russians. The Galicians were low --- lower Jews. They were not educated. And it's not, it's not true. Some were more educated than the Russians, but that's what they said. So they thought their poor darling daughter [Laughs] ---- you know, should fall into such ---.

Especially they wanted very much that young man who was still in medical school. In addition, he was a physician --- uh, he was a musician, and he used to come to, and Mama always *kvelt* (in delight) to see him. He played the piano there. He was a very fine musician too, besides. He was a lovely gentleman, and I really liked him, but I didn't love him. You understand?

LEVINE: Yes.

GROSS: He never made love to me. Those things. But, I don't know why, s's *beshert* it's fated.

LEVINE: So, so . . .

GROSS: Even though my family were not nice to him. They never welcomed him.

LEVINE: So it must have been difficult for you to marry somebody that your family really didn't approve of. Uh-huh.

GROSS: It was. [In tears] Then, then stupid, you know, they used to read in The Forwards, that artists love them and leave them. So they'll love me, all right, and then they'll leave me, maybe even with a child. They worried.

LEVINE: Whereas it was the kind of artistic intellectual life that you really wanted. That's what, that seems you were drawn to.

GROSS: I don't know. It was my fault. It was my fault. If I had explained to them that he's just a struggling artist whom I care about . . . [In tears]. It's my fault. So they never were friends. Even my sister used to get --- they always talked to her. Not if she had a phone, they used to tell her to come into, from Three Bridges, to talk to me, to make me sensible. And once she even came and called him bad names, went to school where he was teaching at The Educational Alliance on East Broadway. He was there seventy-eight years. First as a student. They told him to go there because he knew no English, so he had to be with, for communication. Besides, that's where he made a lot of friends. Um, not Rafael. Rafael

went to the school here on, on 4th Street, on 7th Street. On 7th, the Architecture and Art.

LEVINE: Oh. I don't know . . .

GROSS: Of course you do. Recently, um, what's his name, I'm mixing you up, Charles Watley [ph], the Architect, gave six hundred thousand dollars to the school in honor of his father.

LEVINE: Well, if you think of it.

GROSS: Here on . . .

LEVINE: On 7th and what? 7th and what?

GROSS: The Architecture and the Art. It was free at one time. That's where Rafael went. Moses went to The Educational Alliance. Nikolai Tsekovski was already an artist, established. Borduk was, already had his own home in the studio. Um, um, I told you Louie Reebek had, was not married. He went to Southeast. He went to, where it's warm. Um, Southwest.

LEVINE: Oh, for his arthritis, yeah.

GROSS: I don't know, each, and each one had to work. In the Sawyer family, too. They were a large family. The father was only a *lehrer a* teacher in the, um, Theological Seminary of America on 122nd near Columbus, Columbia, a big family. And every now and then when they saw Chaim

hungry they used to bring him there for a meal. And Mama Sawyer never said, "What, did you bring another mouth to feed?" She always welcomed him like a, like her own children. She, she was a lovely lady. And the father was a very learned. And Rafael and Moses who were twins talked in Russian very well. To this day, I mean, to the, till they died. They knew, they knew French, they knew Russian. Chaim didn't. He had no education. I mean, except what, to get in Cheder, which is nothing, to get slapped with a ruler by the *lehrer* [Laughs], if you don't do whatever he tells you.

LEVINE: What do you know about, what do you know firsthand, or through Chaim, about The Educational Alliance?

GROSS: He went there simply, two days after he came to America --- because two days he spent, Naphtali couldn't give them anything. He had a little room himself. He was unmarried, without very little income, and who bought poetry, especially Yiddish poetry. Sometimes he had to deliver a book because somebody paid him, and it was very sad. Um, two days after, he went to the Alliance, and they all welcomed him, all the artists welcomed him. There was, there was, uh, there was, uh, I have to look at the painting. Oh, the names. They all – there – even, even, even uh, Sir Jacob Epstein was in that class. He was twenty-one years old when he finally quit. He couldn't take it. And he went to Paris, but he didn't like Paris, so he went to London. That's where he remained. And Chaim saw him two weeks before he died, because we bought a sculpture of his, but that's all something else. At the Alliance people saw his drawing. He was drawing all the time. Why he didn't know how to draw --- when you hang

around in the cafes, you were able to get a publication and copy it. But he also went to a school, the, the something *Erwerber* ---- I can't even pronounce it ---- in Vienna. But because the regimes were coming and going, you know, changing, so three --- when the, when the good people opened the school, and there was a competition, and he won. See, he was going there as a -- and they used to give him a *kronen* (a coin). They used to give him, also, a meal, and the education, for drawing. That was, I think in 1927, and there were so many things happening.

LEVINE: No, wait. That would have been earlier, because he came to this country in 1921.

GROSS: '29.

LEVINE: Oh, he came in '29?

GROSS: In '21, in '21.

LEVINE: '21.

GROSS: '21.

LEVINE: You met him in '29, right?

GROSS: I met him in '29, towards the end of the year.

LEVINE: Right.

GROSS: I know it was December when my brother died.

LEVINE: But he went to Vienna before he came to this country, so that would have been before 1921 some time. Where was he coming from? Where was he born?

GROSS: From a small town named, uh, Kolomea. There were fifty thousand Jews in that town, and they were all killed in the, when the Nazis came.

LEVINE: Where is that, do you know?

GROSS: East Austria.

LEVINE: East Austria.

GROSS: At that time. Now it's Poland. The countries were divided by the, by the chiefs of state. You know, the each, each country had its own, uh, premier, and it's own . . .

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So when he left it -- it was East Austria. But when he . . .

GROSS: It was still . . .

LEVINE: But no it's . . .

GROSS: Yes, East Austria. That's how he came to America, from East Austria.

LEVINE: And he was seventeen at the time.

GROSS: And the town was named Kolomea.

LEVINE: Okay. So he, so he had, for his drawing, gotten some recognition and learning.

GROSS: No, he was just accepted like you accept any *shlemiel*.

LEVINE: Oh.

GROSS: 'Cause he got a job through one of those friends, I think through, uh, through, uh, Berman. We have a painting of his, because he finally met a girl, and they went to California. A very nice gentleman.

LEVINE: And he was at the Educational Alliance?

GROSS: Yes. So what, Sawyer, Moses, not Rafael. Rafael went to that school there on, I think it was . . .

LEVINE: On 7th, right.

GROSS: Very important school. In fact, they just asked me, they know that I write checks for scholarships. Not big ones, in honor of Chaim. That's another story that's very interesting, but that's, another time.

LEVINE: Okay.

GROSS: But, to come back to the early part . . .

LEVINE: Of The Educational Alliance, and what went on there, that you know of.

GROSS: It was a struggle. First he had a job delivering paper, and one day the bundle was so heavy that from his shoulder he dropped it on a bench in the hall on Riverside Drive, delivering, and it cracked, so he lost the job. He was fired. But then he got a very good job with a lady on, where now is Lincoln Center; at that time it was middle class Jewish families who never, never went shopping. Either the maid, or it was delivered. But they were never found going shopping. It was beside. It was not dignified enough. On 67th Street. He never told me the name of the lady, because she was very nice, and she wanted him for her daughter. So she gave him seven dollars a week. She gave him a cot, and she gave him one meal a day. And she also was very nice. She gave him, she allowed him to use the bicycle.

At five o'clock he was there, five o'clock in the morning. In those days people got milk in tins, in a can. It was not --- he delivered rolls. There were no bagels at that time, and milk, to families who already prepared an order which he delivered later. He made an agreement that he can work only till four o'clock. After that he went to the Beaux Arts, and she let him use the bicycle, so he saved ten cents carfare, two carfares. From there he went to the Alliance, because he had a seven, a seven o'clock class, and he stayed till ten. After that he had to sleep, you know, rest, to be

able to be up the next morning at five. And that went on for quite a while, because, well, at least four years.

LEVINE: And what was the class he was taking at the Educational Alliance? What class?

GROSS: Oh, the people who were there, some of whom already died way back, I mean, they died of accident. Like, one of them, a wonderful young man, I have his drawings, wait, let me think of his name. He died drowning.

LEVINE: Oh.

GROSS: I have to look at . . . Who saw his drawings and said, "You know, they're very sculptural. Why don't you take up a class in sculpture?" So he did. And, you know, it was free. It wasn't really free, but because they never sent him away when he couldn't pay, because it was supported by Federation. So even if -- if, everybody paid, but he didn't.

LEVINE: I see.

GROSS: And the other school was free. It doesn't exist. The Beaux Arts.

LEVINE: He was the chief, the chief student. He was very highly skilled. (She clears her throat) Excuse me. What can I tell you? I -- I don't know too much.

LEVINE: So he stayed at The Educational Alliance for several years, taking

courses, and, uh . . .

GROSS: After he was, uh, after he was studying, and then he quit, you know, to, to go to work, like these people that are writing the note. In '32 he already had five, six, seven pieces of sculpture, which were in an exhibition on 13th Street in a little gallery. And I told you, he had fifty dollars.

LEVINE: Oh, right.

GROSS: But, but what was interesting, he had no money for, for, uh, bases, and, like a frame and a texture, he needed. So I borrowed from my mother fifty dollars, and I gave it to him. I didn't tell her. I told her I had to buy a coat, something. I lied. Because if she knew that it was for him, she wouldn't have given it to me. And what was sad, he sold only one piece of sculpture for fifty dollars, so we had to give back the money, so he had nothing. [Laughs]

And before that it was very interesting. While he was still in the camp, I told you, seven long years. All the girls were crazy about him there. 'Cause I finally had a job myself. That's much later. He, he --- he was the art teacher, and people, parents, when they came to visit, always gave him tips. Lord knows why. But, still, he never had enough. He was always hungry. But in camp the food was wonderful. It nourished him for the rest of the year. One day he was told that if you go to Atlantic City during the holiday, during Christmas and Hanukkah, sometimes comes the same time, people are very generous when they're on a holiday. They give you nice gifts. But he didn't have money to go to Atlantic City. So,

because, you know, the seven dollars he was earning on 67th Street, went, went fast. But he had a ring that a girl gave him. This, he told me this story. I was not there. He pawned the ring, and he had the fare to go to Atlantic City. When he got there, they didn't give him right away a job as a waiter. They gave him as a . . .

LEVINE: Bellboy?

GROSS: Busboy.

LEVINE: Busboy.

GROSS: Who picks up the dirty dishes. But after a while the owner of the, oh, and he ate well. They gave him, they were very nice. They gave him good food, not just leftovers. And what was interesting is in six-and-a-half weeks, he stayed six-and-a-half weeks, he first, he left a funny note. He left a funny note on the door, in his studio, a card could open. And all the people he knew always came there and left, came and left. See, before, before that show on 13th Street he had four little pieces of sculpture already carved. They were kind of primitive, but they – they ---carved in lignum vitae. He liked the hard wood as a challenge. He had them in a very good gallery, and if he only stayed she would have made him very famous. It was Edith Helper, remember?

LEVINE: I don't, I don't . . .

GROSS: Oh, she was a very prominent dealer on Madison Avenue later. This was

downtown in a little gallery, and he was way out east on 14th Street, five flights up. Excuse me, there was no toilet. You know, he had to go to another floor to ----. But it had a fireplace, and I fell for all that. Oh, to me it was so romantic. (They laugh) And he worked hard. He really worked very hard. And she had four little pieces of sculpture. And it so happened that someone saw them, but they didn't buy it. One day he came to ask her if she made a sale. This is before he went to, to, uh . . .

LEVINE: 13th Street?

GROSS: No, before he went, I don't know what street it was on. Before he went to, uh, where he went.

LEVINE: To the camp?

GROSS: No, no. The camp was in, uh, New York State. Where Dewey had a home, that's the town. Beautiful country, beautiful. And the Sylvan Lake was where the Albert Deline [ph] camp was. No, before he went to, uh, when he left a funny note on the door, "Good-bye, boys." The gang that was always in that little circle. And it's interesting, because Berman continued delivering the paper, on 425 Riverside Drive. And one day he parked his, his, uh, his burden, and a man came out with a little dog. He was going to take the dog out. And he said, "Young man, young man. Is that what you do for a living?" He said, "Oh, no, I'm an artist. This is extra money to earn." And so this little man said to him, "An artist? What kind of an artist are you?" He said, "Well, I'm -- hope to be a fine painter." This is Berman, I told you. We have one of his paintings.

He said, "By any chance, do you know a man named Chaim Gross?" He says, "Chaim Gross? Sure, he's my friend." He says, "You know, he disappeared. We don't know where he is. We, we all went to the morgue, we went to the police department, and nobody knows where he is. They never found the body." So the man said, "Gee, it's too bad. I liked that little piece of his sculpture very much." He says, "Don't worry. I can take you to the studio." He called up Rafael to join him. Rafael at that time had a studio also on 67th, where Lincoln Center is now, the big. They went to the studio, and with a card they opened the door, and the man bought a piece of sculpture and a watercolor, and gave them a hundred and fifteen dollars, ninety dollars for the sculpture. They thought it is a fair price. And fifteen dollars, and fifteen or twenty dollars for the watercolor.

But in the meantime Chaim's not around. They're the rich guys. They're keeping the money for him. And that story I know, because they told me, not Chaim. Anyway, six-and-a-half weeks later, almost seven weeks, he came back, and whom does he call? Jake. And he calls him on the phone and he says, "Hello, Jake." So Jake acts funny. He says, "Who is calling?" He says, "What the hell is the matter with you? Chaim. Don't you know my voice? You talked to me before on the phone." He says, "Oh, Chaim, where do you come from? The other world? *Fun yener velt?*" So Chaim said, "What's the matter with you? Are you crazy? Chaim! I was away. I was earning money. Now all of you guys are going to be my guests. I have over two hundred dollars." He saved over two hundred dollars, from tips.

END OF SIDE ONE, TAPE TWO
TWO

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO, TAPE

GROSS: He said, "Ah, it's too bad, it's too bad, because while you were dead we were able to sell a piece of sculpture." In the meantime, everybody knew of the sale. It was a big deal. Because how many, how many drawings he would need for, to pay the eight dollars rent. That was history already. To get the studio rent of eight dollars, he had to get rid of many drawings, and then only because friends liked him that they did that. In the, in the Forward office was a guy named Sam Zalyet, a wonderful man. He was a cartoonist, a great guy, who was a friend all his life. He used to take five, six, seven drawings and, in the --- there were many people in the, uh, in the office. And he would get a dollar from this one, two dollars from that one, so he always managed. But, anyway, I'm going back some. So now he was a big shot, because when they told him that there was over a hundred dollars waiting from a sale ---- later that man, whether he was, it was very, like, he was a good friend of Chaim's later, but that always happened later. And so he was a big shot. He was able to treat everybody. Everybody, he took to Second Avenue, because there was a restaurant where, I think their name was, uh, I know he always took me there. (She pauses) They even; sometimes they even gave him credit when he had no money. And when he had money, he paid them. What was their name, very nice people? Because that also leads to a story.

LEVINE: Okay.

GROSS: Anyhow, and, and so, uh, he, he existed. And then his brother, the one he

met whom he never, who knew exceptional photographs, got angry at him, and for two years he didn't talk to him. Why? Because he said you have to send two dollars each week to the parents, because they were very poor and very old, and Chaim didn't have the money to send them. He says, "I do." But he didn't. So Naphtali didn't talk to him for two years. That was sad, because he was the only family he had here. But when he had he always put in two dollars in a letter. He wrote them in Yiddish, no other language.

LEVINE: So it was just . . .

GROSS: I have a lot of letters that he wrote to me in English – in the Yiddish. A whole shoebox.

LEVINE: Why, because you were separated? Were you separated at that time?

GROSS: No, I didn't know him during all that. When he was in, when he was, I, I knew him in ----- these years were before 1929, before I met him. All these tales were told to me.

LEVINE: I see.

GROSS: By the people who were always with him. I mean, nobody works all the time. You either go for a walk, or they used to go bicycle riding in, uh, way out where now is -- it's called New City.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh.

GROSS: And they used to paint in groups. He painted watercolors even then, where I have them from 1927, 1926, 1925, I have them. I didn't meet him till the end of 1929. Then we struggled for over two years, because, because my family didn't want him around. Not that he only came there once, and when he came, -- and I -- we had a flat upstairs, and downstairs were the groceries, the grocery store. I'm coming back now to my people. And when he finally came that one time, I put a tablecloth. And Papa must have been jealous, because he said [she snorts], "The prince is *du* (here)." And he walked back and forth. Because Mama never put a tablecloth for him, but I did. And, and he was jealous, I think so. Because why was he, because he was courteous. He did not; he did not show that he disliked him.

But he never went out of the way to say anything nice, nor Mama, for that matter. And my brother came to fight him in the school. He, at one time he only had fourteen-year-olds, and they were wild kids. And he, he made them normal, interested in art, kids. That all their life they were later ---- they worked in the post office, and they did different jobs, they used to come to visit him. I mean, they were friends forever. And they were very loyal to him. When they found out that my brother came to fight him, they found an exit in the rear how to leave the school so they wouldn't --- so he wouldn't be harmed. They were very loyal. That's already in my time.

LEVINE: Right, right.

GROSS: And so . . .

LEVINE: Was he associated then around Greenwich Village?

GROSS: Always downtown, never anywhere else, because he was less expensive. He had a studio, for instance, he had a studio at 63 East 9th Street. 61 is where Jake always was, and 61 was a very rundown but beautiful building. It belonged to Sailors Snug Harbor, an organization that took care of indigent sailors. It was a known organization. They even had a home in Staten Island, which is now a museum. Because now there are no indigent sailors, but at that time there were. And he was able to get a beautiful studio. In fact, it was almost two studios, a floor above, and a floor on the, with a stoop, you know, to walk up. And, and he only paid twenty-five dollars. He was there a long time, until they demolished, demolished the building, but he was there a long time. Then he was on, uh, but, no, he was on 12th Street for a short time. The sculpture was so heavy the landlord was afraid that they, it'll cave in. He was there a short time. But he was at 48 Horatio Street a long time, and then we got here, and I got in the studio here. I got in this place.

LEVINE: Really.

GROSS: And one day, I seldom went because, you know, I was busy with my kids, and the different organizations. Not only the parents' and teachers' groups, but different organizations that I belonged to. He never, he never said, "Don't do that." He never said, "I would like you not to go to meetings." But I had to have my life, like I lived before. He never interfered. And it wasn't that often. We had a, an apartment of, uh, three-

and-a-half rooms. One with two baths. We rented out one to a lady who used to be our sitter, and I gave her dinner once in a while. But she worked in Wall Street, so we were on Monroe Street, Monroe and Cherry. It was a, it was a house with partly city money paid, and partly the Metropolitan Insurance Company, and they did not want communists, and they found me selling The Daily Worker. [Laughs] So we were put out. But that's a long time ago, maybe, I don't remember. I don't even remember my neighbors. But, where were we? Because I – I ---- I'm jumping to too many things. It's very confusing.

LEVINE: [Laughs] There's a lot that, you have a lot of stories. Um, we were talking first about The Educational Alliance, and maybe you said everything that you can remember about that.

GROSS: There he made friends who were lifetime friends. To Barney Newman was, imagine, now gets millions of dollars for any of his paintings.

LEVINE: He was there also?

GROSS: He was in his class.

LEVINE: Oh! How about Mark Rothko? Was he involved in that?

GROSS: He was in his class.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

GROSS: But he didn't stay very long. He was a very nervous person. He had more than one wife. But that's something else. Who was there, uh, a great artist. He did suns in the paintings, uh . . .

LEVINE: John Maren [ph]? No.

GROSS: Not Maren [ph], no, not Maren [ph]. Wait. I'll tell you right away.
(Disturbance to the microphone) (Break in tape) Beginning to, like, ailing, you know, being . . .

LEVINE: Really? This is when Rafael Sawyer died?

GROSS: When Rafael died he spoke at the, um, memorial. He said, "Half of me died." [In tears]

LEVINE: Wow. So they were lifelong friends. Yeah.

GROSS: And she was a very dear friend. Because long ago he once wrote a little poem in Yiddish. Mrs. Sawyer, who died at ninety-two by the way, she was my friend. She was much more involved than I am. It's through her that I did what I did.

LEVINE: Well, maybe . . .

GROSS: Translated it.

LEVINE: Maybe you could say for the tape it was Gottleib who, who was the artist

that, that Chaim was friendly with.

GROSS: Yeah. And the Sawyers. All their life.

LEVINE: And he was . . .

GROSS: He was friendly with many artists.

LEVINE: And he was also connected with The Educational Alliance, Gottlieb.

GROSS: Afterwards he went, he spread out. He became famous. He didn't paint realistically. I have a painting from the WPA, because he was on it, like Chaim.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh.

GROSS: In fact, it saved us. We would have been dead, but the WPA, which was a great social upheaval. I mean, it was a renaissance, and it was under Roosevelt in 1933. Before that we could hardly make a living. I told you, I had to rent out a room --- so that our rent, which was forty-seven dollars, was -- she paid twenty-five, because she had the best room, and a bath. And we had already a child then, so she was also a baby-sitter. A nice person. In fact, when we moved uptown, she moved with us.

LEVINE: So the WPA . . .

GROSS: The W ---- and Chaim was called among the first people by Mrs. Pollack,

who was then a supervisor, a very bright woman. She was friends with, uh, with a lady who was the secretary to the, to the Whitney Museum. At that time the Whitney was on 8th Street. You're too young to know all that.

LEVINE: I read that.

GROSS: In fact, Mrs. Whitney's secretary bought a piece of Chaim Gross, and paid him by the month, so much, I don't know, ten dollars, something like that. Because he sold many pieces at fifty dollars and was glad to get it. But the WPA was --- he was seven years on the WPA. There are works, his work was never shredded.

LEVINE: Where are his, where are some things?

GROSS: They're in Queens College, two big sculptures, in ebony. They are about that size, or, um, one is called The Fencer, and one is called A College Girl. The Brooklyn Museum has a big ballerina carved. Menken High School in Brooklyn has over life-size sculptures, but very, he couldn't afford to buy a lot, so it's an inch thick. It's like a board. They have two big ones. In the Bronx, in the, what is the name of the school in the Bronx, he did something that had to do with Walt Whitman, the poet, something that had to do with, um, had to do with a dancer. In those days, you know, Martha Graham wasn't famous all the time. There was another lady who would have reached as much fame as Martha Graham, only she didn't have the *chutzpah*, (brass) she didn't have the, you know, the character, that Martha Graham had a character to go on no matter what. And Ida

Sawyer, and Moses already had a wife Ida, who, uh, who was a dancer in a group called Tamiris [ph], Helen Tamiris [ph], she was very, in those days she was very known. And when, when Ida heard that Chaim is going to Martha Graham's class, sketch class, to do sketches, because she invited him, she says, "How dare you? You must go to my, my group. They're more important, because I am there." He said he doesn't care anybody [Laughs] --- he doesn't care who's dances so long as I can draw and am allowed. And that's when he made it, and in honor of Helen Tamiris's [ph] sculpture. It's somewheres in the Bronx. I can't think of the name. If I look in the book, I'll find it.

LEVINE: So he did a ballerina? Is that what he did?

GROSS: Yeah, yes. And he, by the way, you had to be poor to be on the project. Any price, wasn't only for art. It was for teachers, it was for singers, it was for, you know, all music, where you could go to a concert for twenty-five cents. You could go to the theater on 14th Street. It was famous, Eva LaGaliene group, you know, famous people. They had famous plays, The Cradle Broke, we did that. It was a very intellectual and wonderful way of life. It was, it was rich. I don't want to mention it, because he always made a living. They paid him twenty-seven dollars a week. And until he got a commission or something else from the Fine Arts in Washington, then you had to get off, but as soon as we used up whatever they paid him, like maybe fifteen hundred dollars . . .

LEVINE: To get on again?

GROSS: He was able to get on. And the lady who was then a supervisor, she always thought when he was able to come back. So they never fired him. And he, and he was very . . . (she clears her throat) Excuse me. He was very honest. He didn't fool around. That was such a rich period.

LEVINE: Oh, yeah. Now, the abstract expressionist came out of that period. Was he ever tempted in that direction?

GROSS: No.

LEVINE: With Barnett Newman, and Rothko and . . .

GROSS: He did a few things, and it was shown in the -- in --- there was a very wonderful gallery. He had a few things, but he sold them at fifty dollars, and they were the ---- not realistic.

LEVINE: Was he ever connected with the Betty Parsons Gallery?

GROSS: No. No. I know she's known for showing the vanguard. No. No, he was, um, he was with, um, what gallery? I don't -- I don't remember. He was with the Associated American Artists gallery for twenty-two years. They were at 711 Fifth Avenue, when the owner of it sold it to, to somebody, I think Sylvan Cole [ph], because Sylvan Cole [ph] got out. Chaim advised him not to -- not to stick around. Be in a business yourself. Because he was, he was a president, but he was only a name, you know, a title in a business. They had a tremendous roster of artists, maybe forty artists on their roster. He was with many galleries. I don't even remember all of

them. I have to look in the book.

LEVINE: Do you think, uh, the immigration experience influenced any of his works that you can think of?

GROSS: No. Maybe, I shouldn't say no. But always after, in 19 . . . Excuse me. [Aside] Maria, will you please pour me some drink? My throat is dry. A little orange juice maybe, mixed with cranberry juice, please? For the young lady, too. For Ms. Levine.

LEVINE: You were saying, always after, the immigration experience might have influenced him.

GROSS: When, when he came from Israel in 1949 it was a very bad time for Israel. The housewife didn't have an onion to flavor her soup. It was right after The People's War. They had a very bad time. And he saw the --- all the devastation. They never, they never pulled away the things that were destroyed. They were left on the road for people to see. He went back to --- to thinking of his family and his parents, who were Hasidm. And he did a lot of, a lot of --- a lot of Jewish subjects, a tremendous number. He did, for instance, even in sculpture, always late in his life, you know, when he was already established, he did, um, things that had to do with, um, Abraham meeting the angels, or, uh, Jacob's Dream, or, um, Hanukkah subjects, things like that. [Talking to Maria] Oh, thank you very much. And some . . .

LEVINE: Can we take a little pause? (Break in tape)

GROSS: He had no particular -- he honored the memory of his parents. [Talking to Maria] Thank you very much. Thank you.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

GROSS: And a lot of, a lot of, he did a lot of menorahs, for instance. You know, they were on commission, and they paid well. For instance, he didn't like doing portraits, but if it was someone important, especially a particular gentleman, I'll never forget, because I urged him to do it. There was a gentleman named Samuel Belkin who was a big scholar. He even knew Greek, not only in the Hebrew. He was a president of Yeshiva University, also the president of Einstein Medical College. And he knew to be around this guy you could learn a lot. Something that he missed knowing. So he did a portrait. And it's interesting that they paid him well with a commission, even though he didn't like doing it, but he liked doing this particular gentleman. And it's in the dean's office at Einstein Medical College up in the Bronx.

LEVINE: I used to work there.

GROSS: A nice school.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

GROSS: They have many schools, and many grounds, right? I hear they're very rich. Anyhow, two years ago, when, when Cordoza School opened in our

neighborhood on 55 Fifth Avenue, he says, it's the law part of Yeshiva University. I, uh, fortunately the, uh, the plaster cast was not destroyed, so I made another cast, and I gave it to them. That was a gift from me. (Voices off mike) Including this friend, they like it. It's in the lobby, 55 Fifth Avenue. But that was only because it has to do with Yeshiva University, which gets a scholarship, a Chaim Gross Scholarship, since 1975. Also, uh, Stern College for Women, also Einstein Medical College.

LEVINE: They have a Chaim Gross scholarship? Wonderful.

GROSS: Since 1975. And how did it happen? We were, he was already doing very well. We were invited to a lovely home in Great Neck to a family named Richmond. They were in the music publishing business, and Mr. Richmond, who's dead now, too, unfortunately he wasn't old when he died, loved his work, and he had many things. In fact, he gave four – five th--- he gave maybe fifty things of the artist of Provin--- you know, but in, in late '30s we already began going to the Cape. And, you know, it's expensive to go, but we were already able to. But in, in 1974, Chaim was seventy years old. He was already an old man. I mean, to some people, to the younger artists he was an old man. (She pauses to drink) That helps. We went to, uh, Helen and Larry Richmond's home, to a party. And there were at least nine or ten couples, very nice. And among them was a wonderful gentleman and his wife. He was the governor of the State of Rhode Island named Fred Licht, L-I-C-H-T.

He was the governor of the State of Rhode Island, and he used to come to Providence to play chess with Chaim, and Chaim always let him win

because he used to get upset when he lost, and to Chaim it was the pleasure of playing, and not winning. And they became bosom friends. They told each other secrets, you know, and trips, trips and what they did on trips, and so forth and so forth. I'm still friends with the widow. Mr., Mr. Licht, Mr. Licht was knocking on a glass at the party trying to get attention, and nobody paid any attention, so he knocked hard. He said, "You know, today is Chaim Gross's birthday." So they said, "Who the hell cares? We all have birthdays." But he con--- he persisted. "This is a very important birthday. He's seventy years old." So they said, "That's good." "And all of you guys that you're saying that's good, sit down and write a check." "For what?" "For Chaim Gross' Foundation." They said, "Why should he have a foundation? We don't have one." "Well, because he, all his life, he wanted to give back to schools . . ." (she coughs) I don't know what's the matter with me, it's dry. (She pauses to drink) To schools that they never sent him away when he couldn't pay. He wants to give back. Oh, they listened. They were nine couples, wrote two thousand, two thousand dollar checks, so by the end of the evening we had close to twenty thousand dollars to start. And he, the lawyer, you know, because he wasn't only the governor, he was a prominent lawyer, made it that it should be tax-deductible, because that's how they liked the idea.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh.

GROSS: If it's tax deductible, you could write a check. And, we added to it every single year, you know, as our gift to the foundation. And because it wasn't enough to start, so in the beginning we only had three, the Beau Arts was already out, and we had The Educational Alliance. The Art Students

League never sent him away when he couldn't pay. (Disturbance to the microphone) And then it grew and grew. Do you know we have over two hundred thousand dollars? And you use only what this earns.

LEVINE: Interest.

GROSS: Because it's not in my drawer, it's invested. And the profit thereof is for scholarships. So first the Educational Alliance, the Art Students League, and two other places. I'll give you the names. We have now twenty-three scholarships. And since then, because the, uh, Yeshiva University was very good to him. They not only gave him an honor degree, they also gave him several kind of commissions for portfolios of lithographs. And they also, they acted like he was not ignorant, you know what I mean? So that was nice.

LEVINE: So, uh, a scholarship goes to a Yeshiva student also?

GROSS: Yes.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

GROSS: They're not big. They're eighteen hundred dollars, but it's better than nothing.

LEVINE: Oh, sure.

GROSS: And the Art Students League gets it, I told you, Stern College for Women.

So it's part of the Yeshiva. They have many branches, and they have now the law, it's called The Cordoza [Not understood].

LEVINE: On Fifth Avenue.

GROSS: They have buildings that people have given them, because we even knew the person that gave the building. He had a lot of Chaim's work. His name was, uh, Eugene [Not understood]. He was a big shot in business, but now retired in Florida.

LEVINE: Okay. We're going to pause here because we're at the end of the tape.

GROSS: Pause it.

END OF SIDE TWO, TAPE TWO

BEGINNING OF SIDE ONE, TAPE THREE

LEVINE: Let me just, uh, introduce, I'm speaking with . . .

GROSS: And we, we then, we did not come to New York because of the illness aboard.

LEVINE: Oh, okay.

GROSS: So we were . . . (break in tape) Let's not worry about the affairs of the world.

LEVINE: No.

GROSS: Because we can't fix it.

LEVINE: No, we can't. Okay, this is July 17, 1998, and I'm here with Renee Gross, uh, in, um, at 526 Laguardia Place, and, uh . . .

GROSS: Which is their home and their museum.

LEVINE: The museum of Chaim Gross' work, and also where Renee Gross lives, on the top few floors. And, uh, this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. This is the second time I've had the opportunity to talk with Renee Gross, so this time we're going to start by concentrating on some of the institutions and, uh, organizations that, uh, helped immigrants, or that were particularly known to Chaim and Renee Gross in New York City and, uh, whatever Renee Gross can remember about them, anecdotal or otherwise, would be great to have on record here. Why don't we start with The Educational Alliance, because that was a place that Chaim went to early on.

GROSS: He was there the second day of his arrival to the United States. He didn't know a word of English, but they said, "Go there because they speak Yiddish. You'll be able to get along. And there he met people who were friends all his life, and they were all wonderful. But the best friend he had was Rosa Sawyer, all his life. When he died, Chaim felt like half of him was dead, he was that close. And now their grandchildren are our friends.

LEVINE: Now, could you say something about, like, the art classes that Chaim was

able to take?

GROSS: In the beginning he had young people, teenagers, who were very destructive, but under his leadership and under the fact that they loved him after a while --- they didn't in the beginning. They were rough, they were destructive. They broke things. But at the end of the term, he made them friends. He used to take them to museums. He used to take them to a ballgame. He didn't take his son. To this day his son complains that he used to schlep him to museums, which he didn't care to. Mimi loved it, but he didn't. But those kids, and among them was a very famous man, Arthur, uh, Arthur Schindler, who made seven museums only. Harvard, Princeton, the museum in Washington, I mean, he was one of the students. He was poor then. And, I don't think he was an immigrant, but he was ---- he came from a poor family, Arthur Schindler, who became a multimillionaire. And it's interesting, maybe seventy years later, when we went there for dinner, because I didn't know he ever existed, he, he had so much art, especially Oriental, because the museum in Washington, he made it. He made a museum Beijing. He made a museum, I told you, Princeton, Harvard. I know, seven museums.

LEVINE: He was the architect?

GROSS: Oh, no. He gave the art and the money to make a museum.

LEVINE: And he was a student of Chaim's?

GROSS: When he was fourteen. They talked about it.

LEVINE: And how about Chaim himself? Can you recall anything about when he went there at first, before he could speak English, and what happened?

GROSS: He was very poor, and the lady saw how hungry he was. The lady who la-- who ladled out, who gave out food to the elderly, because that was the program. See, The Educational Alliance art school was only one part of the complex of the . . .

LEVINE: Alliance.

GROSS: Of the, uh, Alliance, of the, it was a settlement, you know, like, like the settlement, the university settlement, or the one where there's theater, way, way east.

LEVINE: Henry Street?

GROSS: New York, uh . . .

LEVINE: Henry Street?

GROSS: Henry Street, too. That's the second oldest. But now they're over a hundred years old, and at the time he was very lucky. He had good teachers. They were a wonderful group of people. Among the famous people, besides Chaim Gross, was, uh, Barnett Newman, who never did anything but talk kabala. I told you, Chaim couldn't understand because he didn't have the education. You had to be very educated to understand

kabala. You know, not just religious, but, because it's a form of mysticism.

LEVINE: And Barnett Newman used to talk about that?

GROSS: Even Sir Jacob Epstein was there once. Only at age twenty, almost twenty-one, he left. I told you that last time. He went to Paris. He didn't like Paris, so he settled in London, but he never came back to America. They had a lot of famous people.

LEVINE: And, uh, of the famous people, were there some that stayed here in Greenwich Village that you knew well? The Sawyers, of course, right?

GROSS: They did not live in the village.

LEVINE: Oh, they didn't?

GROSS: Let's see, 9th Street, West 9th Street would be the village. Moses was there, I think, for fifty years. His wife is also from the Alliance. She was in the dance group. She died before him. In fact, that's how he made a sculpture in the group that she was in, with Helen Tamiris, instead of Martha Graham. They were jealous, because both of these dance groups asked the artist to come and watch during rehearsal, watch movement, and Chaim didn't care. He went to any place they let him. When she heard that he's planning to go to Martha Graham's class to watch rehearsals, she got so annoyed, and she said, "You must . . ." she told her husband, Moses, "You must tell him not to go there, but to come to the Helen, Helen," what was her name?

LEVINE: Tamiris. Is that what you said?

GROSS: Whatever, I forgot.

LEVINE: Huh.

GROSS: He was very loyal because he ate in their soup kitchen. He was very loyal to the Sawyers, and they were very dear friends. They were like brothers, because now and then he was taken to their home up in the Bronx for a meal. I didn't meet him till almost 19, -- I think it was 1929. And then I told you about the tragedy, so at least three - four months went by I did not see him. But I was courting him, because he was scared to get him out. There were other girls who liked him, with whom he stayed. I told you, some of them wanted to marry him. All he did was work. He worked to earn the seven dollars a week, and this is now Lincoln Center, that region, because that's where he was a delivery boy. And the lady let him use her bicycle, so he saved carfare, and he went to the Beaux Arts Institute, then he went to The Educational Alliance. At first he was only drawing, but everyone who saw his drawings said, "they are sculptural, you ought to concentrate on sculpture". So he did. In the early days his work was very crude, but it had a certain strength. And, um, there were many stories as a result of that, different stories. And then when our period of mourning was over, I went to visit him.

LEVINE: And where was he then?

GROSS: He had a little dump studio way east near the river, on 14th Street, 557. There was not even a toilet. He had to go a neighbor's house for that. But the rent was only eight dollars. Many times he didn't have the money to pay, so I used to take his drawings and ask people for a dollar or two dollars to make it. Anyway, in 1932, the worst time, because he finally did have a one man show, and one piece of sculpture was sold for fifty dollars, and he couldn't keep the fifty dollars because he borrowed fifty dollars for the bases for the rest of them, so he gave me the money to quickly return the loan. The wife of the man who bought the, for fifty dollars, the little piece of sculpture, she's still alive. We correspond with her. All because of the painting that Milton Avery did of Chaim Gross.

LEVINE: Really.

GROSS: Because he liked it, and he told selling, if this is a sale and there's no other sales, sell it, and Milton will paint another one, which just, just exactly what happened.

LEVINE: You mean Milton Avery gave the painting to Chaim that he had done of him?

GROSS: No.

LEVINE: No.

GROSS: A painting was done of Chaim Gross.

LEVINE: Right.

GROSS: A man comes way up from Beverly Hills, you know, part of California, and likes it, and buys it. I think he bought it for fifty dollars, or whatever. In those days Milton Avery wasn't famous like none of the, everybody was glad to get five dollars, one dollars, ten dollars. If they got a hundred, they were millionaires, because each dollar brought in a lot of return. It was not like now, what do you get for five dollars, nothing. You have to give that to a baby sitter an hour. But in those days, anyway, we were almost starving. But fortunately, in 1933, a Mrs. Pollack, who was one of the supervisors, and a Mrs. McMann, whose husband was a professor at NYU, because we used to see them, had started the project on the Roosevelt Administration for the WPA, and that saved us, because he was, he was among the first people to be called.

Later there was ---- Ben Shahn was in his class, and, and, uh, even, even, uh, Jackson Pollack, other famous names. And it wasn't given just to art, just to painters and sculptors and graphic, to all endeavor, musicians and -- and theater people and writers, some of whom became later very famous. But it survived them, because this was just the period after the bad 1929 stockbroker's crash, and people were poor all of a sudden, through no fault of theirs. So times were very bad.

But we lived through it because of that. And in order to get it, you had to be poor. If you had an income, let's say from a daddy or a mommy or a brother or an in-law, you couldn't. You had to be on the basis of, uh, relief. Only Mr. Roosevelt was wise, and someone in the Cabinet advised him

not to give charity, but to give employment, so that each man and woman had his own dignity, because he was earning, or she was earning, whatever it is. As small as it was, but it was all their own earnings. And each person produced something, either he, he was a teacher, or even models were on the project. Roslyn [ph] was on the project at that time. She was still going to school.

LEVINE: She was a model on it?

GROSS: She was a model. I remember that clearly.

LEVINE: So . . .

GROSS: I was not poor, but I didn't say anything. They didn't ask me, I didn't get a job. So I was quiet. And I couldn't ask my parents all the time for something. So . . .

LEVINE: You were married then?

GROSS: Yes, of course. We were married in '32.

LEVINE: So what did it mean to Chaim, do you think? Do you think it really, uh, maybe, did it give him his dignity? Do you feel that the WPA . . .

GROSS: Oh, indeed, yes. He was very proud of the work that he gave to the government, to this day. I don't know if you hear in the news about arm. Murphy who is president of Queens College. He died, he was on a

trip and he died. A wonderful man. I think he was Irish, but he acted like a Jew. He even spoke Yiddish. I met him. Because Chaim has it in his – in his office, and that's from the WPA period, two carvings. His student, a female, and then a fencer, you know, the sport, a male, and one of them was stolen. It was missing for twenty-eight years, and finally it appears in the auction and we, and I see it. And I said, "Chaim, here is your girl."

See, every person involved in the various projects during the WPA, during the Works Project Administration, had a number, and his was 999, and on the sculpture it had that number, and I saw it in the, in the press. Many years later somebody who stole it was trying to sell it. They thought time went by and they'll get away with it. So we told the auction house. At that time it was Parke Benet not Sotheby's, to take it out, that it's a stolen piece of merchandise. They were not allowed to sell it. It took a long time. They had to call on, on a head of the art department at Queens to identify.

They didn't believe what was told to them, "Take it out." They had to be, it had to be proven. It took a long time. It took about six months to get it back. And when they finally did, it had some scratches on the breast. It was realistic. And the man from their museum, because now they have a museum. They used to, they used to, uh, chop up things to get rid of, but then finally when they knew that the art was of value, they stopped, and everything was being, uh, recorded and checked and taken care of. So Chaim said, "Why should I recommend you someone to repair whatever damage there was? If I'm the sculptor, I will do it. Bring it to me." So they brought it to the studio. I think at that time it was already here. That's how

many years went by. And he repaired it, and when it was brought back, I told you.

Dr. Murray --- Dr. Murphy was celebrating. They had a party, and they had a press and all, when it was returned. So they have two pieces of sculpture. In Lincoln, Lincoln High School in Brooklyn has all the life-size, only they were thin. He couldn't afford it in live. They were just one inch thick, like board.

LEVINE: Pictures?

GROSS: Yeah, over life-size. And it had to do with sport. Maybe that's why they picked it. Who knows. [A telephone rings] Where, in six different places is his work, and to this day . . . [a telephone rings] oh, excuse me, turn it off. (Break in tape) Chaim.

LEVINE: Chaim, and the WPA, and then he had five pieces in different places that he did during the WPA.

GROSS: Yes.

LEVINE: And how about the HIAS? Did you personally have any experience with the HIAS?

GROSS: No. Only the HIAS was an organization that took care of arrival immigrants. The only thing is they saw their brother who they did not know, they recognized him from photographs, Naphtali Gross, the Yiddish

poet, was on the corner of Jefferson and East Broadway. The Alliance was a little further. I don't know east or west whatever --. The Alliance was 197 East Broadway. This was maybe a block before. Who knows? And the HIAS were -- would not leave unless someone had where to go. They took care of every visitor.

LEVINE: And they took care of Chaim?

GROSS: When Chaim told them that now we have a brother, he was with a brother anyway. Bombay [ph] --that's, the girl that this woman went to visit. He's the brother's children. They're cousins to her. HIAS would leave them if they had where to go, whom to, you understand? Until they did that, they took care of each immigrant. It's a society that still exists.

LEVINE: Yeah, yeah. How about any other, uh, institutions or agencies, or places that, um . . .

GROSS: Well, they, uh, in 1933 he also had --- he resigned from the WPA, because he had a very interesting job with Tiffany --- in the Tiffany estate, up in their estate. And the director of that, they had about twenty-five artists. Each one had housing and food, and sometimes they even sold one of their works. And I know they, the base for the lamp was of that era, and downstairs is a carving, in ligna vitae of a bous[ph]. What is that, a bous [ph] is a pumpkin, was of that era. And the director bought two pieces for fifty dollars, so he made money, besides being summer. They did not allow the spouses to join them.

LEVINE: How long would he be there for?

GROSS: The whole summer. So that was a big deal for him. Where was I, then? I don't remember. Then he had a job in a camp for seven years, and they fed, they fed you very well. He was with the socialists, and I was with the communists, in a, um, very beautiful, physically beautiful area, Putnam County, where, Dewey came from there later on, very beautiful. And they had a huge lake that still exists, called The Silver Lake, and the reason he went there was he was the art director, and to this day people talk about the murals that he, he and his assistant, the students, helped make. It's still in good condition.

LEVINE: Really?

GROSS: Those were gold.

LEVINE: What's the name of the camp?

GROSS: Die Arbeter Ring. That's the workers, socialist workers program.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And then you worked there, too?

GROSS: He got me a job as a waitress, because I didn't want to be a counselor, because you're too involved. But a waitress sets up the dishes, and when the food is over you're finished, also you get better tips. And so, but I'm, I never stayed very long.

LEVINE: Now, when you were involved with the communists, did you know Emma Goldman?

GROSS: No, I did not know her.

LEVINE: You didn't. Was that, was that something that fermented around here, around Washington Square Park, or, where, where did you meet, or what did you do, or . . .

GROSS: We had meetings at different people's homes. I don't remember a soul. And I didn't see Rama [ph]. She was busy with two universities, so I didn't see her. In fact, I wasn't even friends with her. We became friends as adults, you know? When each one was already producing something for society, whatever it be.

LEVINE: What do you think has given you your greatest satisfaction?

GROSS: Then, or now?

LEVINE: Well, then.

GROSS: The life with Chaim.

LEVINE: The life, life in general. What do you think's been your greatest satisfaction that you've had?

GROSS: Well, the very fact that America was freedom, that you had food, because

don't forget we came after World War One, not World War Two, and we were hungry. And so, by coming to America and getting food and getting an education for free, because I was put in grade number two. I was already tall, almost eleven years old, and it was such a bitter thing. I told you how my mother hired a tutor; she could hardly afford it, to keep us, my brothers and me. She had a private lady who was willing, for two dollars a week, to give us lessons. But she always gave her dinner or something, I don't know. A very lovely lady, Ms. Johnson. She had the bluest eyes, and I loved her. She always said, "Don't cry. You'll spoil your pretty face." And she read to us, even. I'll never forget how she read Rowena and Rebecca, you know, from he, the story of, I don't know.

This I'll never forget, because that was the time, what satisfaction that my people ---- we were all together. The family wasn't separated any more. For four-and-a-half years we didn't know if Papa was alive or not, because not getting any letters we thought that he, the way people said in the small town that he drowned, that the ship went down, at the time. And that was, uh, before World War one began, when he left for America. We came after the Revolution started. When the Russians already were getting rid of the czar, and they had, uh, you know, a start of the program.

LEVINE: So you were there for the first, from the beginning.

GROSS: From the beginning, yes. But by that time we heard from Papa and we were able to think of going, because it took a long time to get the visa. Papa's papers were not in order. It took a long time. We were in Warsaw more than a year with thievery, with lice, in a rooming. We were three in a

bed at that time. Mama slept with two, and I slept with two. But we didn't care. When you're young, and you get chocolate and orange, it was the biggest thing. Who cares about anything else.

LEVINE: Right. But you were there a whole year just waiting to get the papers straight so that you could leave?

GROSS: Almost, more than a year.

LEVINE: Were there many other people also waiting when you were there?

GROSS: Oh, yes. Immigrants. I think that's why there was a lot of thievery. In a room, in a house, in a private home, was, was more easier to be with than those in a hotel or a motel or whatever they were. You know, those who could afford went to a hotel. Some people had money.

LEVINE: So where did you go? Did you go to a private home?

GROSS: I think Mama rented a room in a, two rooms for all of us. Because my father was here with my sister, who I told you about, and she was a farmer later. I mean, her husband lost his job in 1929 and they had nothing to do, so they took five thousand dollars and started a farm which later went into thousands, you know. Their children now are at NYU. They got jobs before, before they even graduated, they're so bright. Both the young man, because I told you my nephew married late in life. He was already forty-one. Still, he had four daughters and a son. The three daughters are already married, the one who just graduated last June, and the boy, who

was the youngest, they both had very good jobs. They have an apartment. I asked them if they would like to live here, and they said, "No. We earn money, we want to spend it." They have good jobs. I said, "How did you get so quickly a job?" They had the school records, which were very excellent. People waited for them to get out of school, to hire them. This is not here or there. Now, all of a sudden the relatives from all over, from North Carolina, who are distant, I don't even know them, from way out, from, uh, from Lincoln, Nebraska, there's a niece. She was adopted, but, still, she's a niece, my brother's child. They're all, all of a sudden they want to know about Chaim Gross. All of a sudden, I said, "Where were you before, when I didn't have a decent meal?" Oh, excuse me.

LEVINE: Yeah. So, um . . .

GROSS: In the beginning, he did a lot of outside work, and every time someone offered him fifty dollars to get rid of it. So there's very little of that era left, unfortunately. But he didn't know that he'd become known and, you know, make a good living, and so forth. It took time. It didn't happen overnight. Till about, he was already seventy years old when he was doing well.

LEVINE: Oh. It took that long for him to actually get established.

GROSS: Because he told me, in the beginning, way back in 1929, that he would never give up his work, whether he sold something or not, that's what he's going to pursue, and he will not change for a job no matter how lucrative it would be.

LEVINE: Then how did you get . . . ?

GROSS: But then he depended on teaching for years, but he never taught in the morning. He always had a class at night, in addition, because the day was always spent working.

LEVINE: How did you feel about that in the beginning, when he told you that?

GROSS: It didn't bother me one bit. I said, "I'm not after your money." (They laugh) Because you have none. "If I were after money, I would get somebody very rich, and not you." I always told him that. And he had so many girls who asked him to marry them. Even --that --the one who was my, our witness, when we were going to City Hall to get married finally, and this young woman who liked him very much [not understood] not only gave him the ring, the two dollars for the clerk, and ---and --- and --- she was so disgusted she said, "All right, and where is your witness? All right. I'll be your witness." And then she took us to her mother's house for dinner after. I mean, it was very nice of her. And she truly loved him, to do that.

LEVINE: Yeah.

GROSS: She couldn't understand why I --- I was marrying him. The --- the -- "On what?" she said. I says, "I don't know what do you need more? When you're married and when you're on--- single? You do the same needs, you sleep where you can, and you eat what you get." No?

LEVINE: Yeah.

END OF SIDE ONE, TAPE THREE BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO, TAPE THREE

GROSS: He struggled, but he didn't mind.

LEVINE: Well, you must have struggled along with him.

GROSS: Right. I u – I used to rent part of the apartment so he wouldn't ever, he never, never had a studio. He never worked at home, except on drawing in the evening when he didn't listen to music. And how he, how he knew so many things without getting an education was really a wonder to me. Because, you know, we had education --- free, but he didn't. But he learned himself. He learned. He did – he did many things that were a wonder to me. And this young woman who's married to his brother's son who lives, they live in Israel, too, that was an only son, and that's the person he saw at the arrival from the ship. That's how, he did land in Ellis Island, I did not, and I know that very, very clearly. I know it was in May, I know it was, like, a little prison, because each cubicle had three beds, one, two, three, assigned. And I don't remember a soul who was with us, except Rosalyn and her family, 'Cause we saw them later.

LEVINE: Right.

GROSS: They – they --- they were a large family, and very poor.

LEVINE: And, and you were there for a month, you said?

GROSS: A whole month. That's when the illness was cleared up, and people were let out. They opened the gate. It was with a --- it's an iron gate, locked. No one was able to communicate, except through --- through the gate. I remember how Mama touched Papa's hand. All I knew is those that were close to me, but the others I don't know.

LEVINE: So . . .

GROSS: We did talk, we did ask where. They say ---would -- they would say, Chicago, or some town in Bridgeport, Connecticut. What did I know the difference? It was all the same to me. Each town was like one town.

LEVINE: So when your Papa came to visit, he came to Maine to see you, out on [Not understood] Island?

GROSS: Yes, yes. He was very lonesome for his wife. And I, I did not recognize him. I th -- he was ---- he looked different than when he went away.

LEVINE: What was it like for you getting used to him after you actually got off of the island and went to live with him?

GROSS: He was not very, he was not very lo--- he did not embrace us like fathers nowadays. I mean, he did not, uh, play with us. I don't remember one day of playfulness with my parents, not one day, even.

LEVINE: Even your mother?

GROSS: Isn't it sad? My mother was always working. She was, she was the earner. Papa went back and forth studying all the time, with his hands in the back. And I told you the story, when I made a tablecloth, in back of the store. There were two rooms. We did not need upstairs, because there were all beds, and a living room with a piano, and I didn't want to study piano anyway, but everybody else played. But I think they had it for, to show off. It was status or something. Because, because they didn't know it too much about music, from what I recall. I don't think. Anyhow, what's interesting is that every day was almost the same, and Papa didn't get, except for Shabbas, a cloth, and be served. But I did that to Chaim, and I think they -- they were jealous or something, and you know what they called him? The prince. The prince is *du*. *He* would go back and forth with his hands in the back. Papa was very tall, my mother was very tiny. We called him *the luksh* (noodle), you know. They were not nice to Chaim. [In tears]

LEVINE: Oh. They wanted you to marry a breadwinner, I guess. They want. .

GROSS: Oh, they meant well, naturally. All parents do. Not only Jewish parents. Even Christian parents want the same thing. [In tears]

LEVINE: But then your mother really liked Chaim later.

GROSS: Yeah, too much. She [not understood] to back him. It was very silly. And he was nice to her. He would say, "Did you call your Ma?" And I said. "What for?" He said, "She's elderly and she's alone. Call her up." He

called her every day. [In tears]

LEVINE: Really. Do you think the fact that you were both immigrants made a difference to the, to the two of you?

GROSS: No, because I was like as if I was born here.

LEVINE: Oh.

GROSS: You see? I did not feel like an immigrant ever.

LEVINE: Not at your . . .

GROSS: Not ever. I felt like it's a continuation, just that I was slow, and, uh, my friends, the so-called friends, who knows when they were friends or not, were a --- were a little slow, or they were too smart, and I was slow. You know, from school and high school and all different schools. But Papa believed in education. That was very important. And he was always studying something. I tell you, because he didn't want to work. I didn't, I didn't think, oh, what a nice smart interesting father that he wants to know so much about the world. I just thought that since Mama was strong and doing all the earning, he just enjoyed. [Laughs] Except on a holiday, he would touch our heads and make a blessing, 'cause I never wanted to go to synagogue.

LEVINE: What do you think turned you against it? What do you think turned you against wanting to go?

GROSS: I always thought that the religion was like, uh, to cover up for poor payment to people who worked for you. They shouldn't, they shouldn't know, they should not know anything better. They should be satisfied with what they get. That it was a cover-up. I always thought that, even when I was a young girl, you know? I guess from reading.

LEVINE: So the idea that their reward would come in the next life, that they should just be happy with whatever this life has? Was that the idea?

GROSS: Yes. Be satisfied, don't demand.

LEVINE: Right.

GROSS: Those who demanded got kicked in the pants, or lost the job --- whatever it be.

LEVINE: So your father, then, never really worked in this country? He was more . . .

GROSS: Very little. Maybe before we came here to, to survive. He was a peddler in Fairfield, Connecticut. There were hardly any Jews. We stayed for a while there when we came from that place in Maine.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

GROSS: But we didn't stay very long because my, my kid brother was younger than

I am. He, they're all dead, by the way. He, uh, had to go to learn the, the Torah, for his bar mitzvah. Because, you know, time doesn't stand still. He was getting to be almost thirteen, so he had to have an advantage, and so we moved to Bridgeport, Connecticut. And it's interesting. Only recently a man called us, that's what I'm saying. All of a sudden people call us. He's out in, uh, Michigan. No, in, not Michigan. He's a professor of poetry.

LEVINE: Nebraska?

GROSS: Just a moment. Where did he go? All of a sudden, because when my family moved to Brooklyn, I told you that Papa was told that in Brooklyn you just roll in the money, so without discussing with a single child, even the older ones, or Mama, he took a valise and he went to Brooklyn and he bought a house. The streets weren't even paved. In 1923, which later, when everybody either was in service, or died, it fell on me. We were on, way out on 105th Street, and I used to leave the kids, uh, alone, to go and take care of her property, because I was the executrix, and I used to sell it, or continue taking care. See that they get the heating, you know -- it was rented.

That's, that's, after Papa died. Then fifteen years later, Mama died, but the property was there. And my brother was in Guam, my older brother had polio and couldn't do anything, and my sister was the farmer, and that was all that was left from that family who immigrated. And I was the executrix, and to see that the, that the, that the property was taken care of, that they got the oil for the tenants. So --- so finally, they paid twenty-

three thousand in 1923, but I sold it with all the things in it for eighteen just to get rid of it, because Chaim felt bad that I had to do it. There was no one else.

So we got rid of it, and we divided between, there were four people left, I think. And by the time we took care of the lawyer and everything else, there was each, each one of us inherited, uh, a little over three thousand dollars, because there were expenses on the other, we had to give to the synagogue something in honor of Mama. There was a glass, that I remember, the rabbi wanted a name. I don't know. Anyway, there was, each one of us got a little bit over three thousand dollars, and we got rid of the property, which was such a burden, you know, to --- to --- not to have it on our hands. Because my sister said, "Get anything you can." But, you know, certain years you can't do like, we would never have this property if it was now. It would be worth maybe a million dollars. But at the time, at the end of 1959, when the property, real estate was depressed, we bought this place with forty thousand dollars. It's worth close to a million.

LEVINE: I know.

GROSS: I mean, if we wanted. I'm not selling it, because we have now the little museum in honor of Chaim. And that took money. It didn't happen easy because NYU was courting us, but they didn't do anything. They used to come in groups. Luckily the president was a friend of ours, Dr. Barones [ph]. He's not at NYU any more, but he was a wonderful man. And then there was a lady by the name of Laura Kaplan who's now a professor, and she was taking care of black studies. She's not a black lady, but she was,

and she was courting us to get the African sculpture, of which we have a very important collection. That took over [not understood], because Chaim had, used to buy things, anything, a book, a drawing, anything, to have somebody, because he had nobody. It was like having a friend or a relative. And so, and it grew. And then every time he sold something, he bought something. It made him feel, you know, where, it made him feel socially useful. It was very interesting. He always had to have something. And I encouraged him. I was glad when he did that. And we didn't wait for an anniversary or a birthday to get something. It could have been any day that was possible. And also he used to exchange with a lot of the artists, give his for what he got from them, and that was very nice. Besides the friendship, it was very nice to, to feel proud, and be wanted. You understand?

LEVINE: Yes, uh-huh. Do you recall at all your brother's treatment, the treatment your brother got for polio?

GROSS: Oh, it was very bad. He had one thin arm, like a stick, and one thin leg. A very tall, handsome young man. He was like Papa, very tall. But he was, he attended City College, and he got a degree, and he was, in Europe the, the new regime made him a commissar. He was very tall, so he looked older than fourteen. He was, he was above me. I was next to him. 'Cause Mama had children every year. And then my kid brother who, he didn't find [Not understood] but he lived there in the war years. That's World War Two. That's not World War, we lived through the World War One.

LEVINE: Should I take this mike from you, or we take this off?

GROSS: No, wait. I wanted to show you the wedding. No, no, no, no. I don't have to go nowhere.

LEVINE: Oh.

GROSS: I just have to get up.

LEVINE: But was it the Sister Kenny treatment that your brother got, uh, for his polio?

GROSS: Mama took him to every doctor available, as far as Warsaw, trying to get. But they didn't have much then. There was very little, there was no penicillin. There was no, I know she was always busy trying to save him. He was a very handsome lad. And it's his grandchildren who are getting these good jobs.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh. So he just, he didn't really get anything that could cure him, but somehow he lived through it, and he simply had a thin arm and leg.

GROSS: One thin arm. I often watched him with wonder, you know, how he could exist. But he must have been a very strong person, because he lived a good life. The last part of his life he was, his wife died young, and one son at age thirty had an embolism in a chair and just passed out. I didn't even know what embolism means. It has to do with the heart. I think he was too heavy. Because the other son that's still alive lives in North Carolina.

He has a very good job and his children are well, you know, out of high school, with honors. He's not married to a Jew. He's married to a non-Jew. And they have their own home. He's with a big company who sent him to college and paid for him, so he must have had a good grade. And, except for a wedding, he never comes east.

LEVINE: Well, now, because your father was so religious and he wasn't earning money, was that a conflict between your mother and father?

GROSS: No, she was crazy about him. Yeah.

LEVINE: She just expected . . .

GROSS: She also looked at him, as if he was Jesus Christ. [Laughs] I mean it seemed to us with such adoration, all the time. And I don't know why, because . . .

LEVINE: Well, I think, in the old country . . .

GROSS: I don't even know the grandparents. I never met them.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, yeah.

GROSS: I think they were dead when I was born. I was named after one of them.

LEVINE: So did your mother hold onto a lot of the, uh, uh . . . ?

GROSS: Even fifteen years after he died, she's still talk to him with wonder. Yes. She was very much in love with him. We could tell, because, you know, she was still young when we came to America. We were all young. And she became pregnant. And in those days they whispered. My sister, who was an American already, you know, over five years in America, knew more about those things, but, still, it was never spoken openly to a ---for a --- for a, uh, an abortion. But because the children were so grown, she didn't want to have, get along with a baby. Besides, she had to make a living. She had to run the business, especially the one in Brooklyn, 'cause I didn't go with them. Oh, what I wanted to tell you, a professor calls me, I don't know where, and I said, he tells me that so-and-so, and so-and-so's daughter is in the poetry department. That he's, um --- the only thing I remember about his father, and I didn't know it was his father ---- is that he was editor of the, of the Scientific American. When he said Samuel, he says, "Don't you remember Samuel, a cousin?" And I said no, and I really didn't, and I didn't care. He tells me what university he's at, and that his mother is ninety, and I says, "Well, congratulate her."

And she called me the next day, but why did he call? He wanted to see if I remember that I stayed in her house, when Papa and everybody moved away, and I didn't want to be put to a grade lower again or miss the turn, I was going to stay to the end of the term, because they moved in April, and the term in the public school ends in June, late June, you know, like the 25th or the 26th. And so my family didn't want to spend the money. They boarded me out, and I took care of the --- Finklestien was the mama's maiden name -- and this lady was then a Finklestien, the one who became ninety years of age. Her husband had that son who is a

professor now. I said, "All of a sudden, where were you when we were poor and didn't have enough food?" [Laughs] Where were you, you know? He didn't know what to say. But, uh . . .

LEVINE: Do you have fond memories of that time, or not?

GROSS: No. No, because this woman, who is now ninety, and two weeks ago is when he called, did I tell you about it? It was very funny, because he also spoke of another cousin who is the only one survived from Bialystok, from our town, whose parents had fourteen children among them, and he survived because he was in America. But he is now dead, he lived in Hollywood, uh, Florida. And it's his children who are the professor in Purdue, Purdue. Where is Purdue?

LEVINE: I can't think.

GROSS: When they told me about it, and I said, "Yes, I once met him." And my cousin, we used to call him, um, what did we call him? Cucile [ph]. His real name was Charles, but the Yiddish, there was the, and he was, he used to stay in my mother's house because his family didn't have enough food for all, so she used to spread them out. And one of his sisters used to come, and during the war she gave us lessons. So Mama always took care of her. And I remember that lady, because later she came to Ame--- her daughter came to America. It was married to a pharmacist. And their name was Hade [ph]. I don't know how they got that name, Hade [ph], from Gordon, somehow. A very nice family. And they were first cousins. That's how I remember them. And I liked them, I liked to be with them,

you know, to have conversations with any, or read a book together, or discuss something. Because my parents had no time for us. I don't think they ever spent a full day with any one of us. I don't think so. I don't remember, I think left from them, or a happy day left from them. I don't remember ever having any. Whereas, you know, to kids a happy day, even not fancy, like you go to a ballgame or you go to the beach. We used to go to Coney Island, by the way.

LEVINE: You and Chaim?

GROSS: And the kids, and Mama. We always took Mama. We'd spread out the blanket and have food, you know, and swim. It was very nice, and it was free.

LEVINE: So you treated your children differently than your mother and father.

GROSS: Yes, we d--- because a happy day for a child is not very fine clothes or a very nice meal. A happy day for children is if you give them a toy or a playful day. That you remember forever. The good food, it comes, if it's there, and if it's not there, you eat whatever you can. It doesn't matter.

LEVINE: So would you say that you and Chaim had many happy days?

GROSS: Yes.

LEVINE: With the children?

GROSS: Well, more with Mimi than Judy. When she was born five years later, he was born in '35, she was born in '40. When she was born, he already made a little better living, and I didn't have to go to charity hospital, because when Uri was born I had to go to Hague Memorial Hospital in New Jersey, and the doctor who took care of me, he took care of anybody there. He was not a private. When Mimi was born, we were already in a room with a bathroom at Beth Israel Hospital in New York. We had a four-room apartment, two baths. One room I used to rent to a lady who worked on Wall Street. The room was downtown. And she paid half, she paid twenty-seven fifty, and the rent was forty-seven something, so she paid half the rent. 'Cause Chaim never worked at home. He always had a studio.

LEVINE: Really.

GROSS: Always.

LEVINE: And his idea was that he needed to get into a place where he . . .

GROSS: Yes.

LEVINE: Just concentrate on . . .

GROSS: Right.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

GROSS: He never . . .

LEVINE: It sounds like you were always sympathetic or empathetic with his need to . . .

GROSS: Always his need above everyone else's. But he did not neglect those that I needed, or that a child needed. Oh. So I began to tell you, when she was born, Uri disappeared. We looked for him all over. We couldn't find him. He went, he disappeared because he thought that he was not wanted any more.

LEVINE: And so where did you find him?

GROSS: It took many hours. [In tears] Some [Not understood]. And Moses was so sweet. He said, "Make packages. Send it to Uri. The baby wouldn't know anything. He should be getting attention." (A telephone rings) Every day he told us. He says, "I only had one child, but I learned . . . (a telephone rings) (break in tape)

LEVINE: We've got about six minutes left on the tape.

GROSS: Yes. What should we talk about? Something important.

LEVINE: Yeah. Let's do something important. Let's see. Well, um, have you had any heroes in your life that you would, either people you knew, or people you didn't know but you knew about, that you looked up to, that you wanted to, that influenced you?

GROSS: I can't tell you right, I don't remember.

LEVINE: Yeah.

GROSS: You mean, as a growing person?

LEVINE: Yeah.

GROSS: I don't think so. We were so busy to learn something, not to be greenhorns and be pointed out.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

GROSS: Like we had that experience in, in, uh, in, uh, Fairfield, Connecticut, because there were no Jewish families.

LEVINE: But you led a kind of bohemian life.

GROSS: More or less. We lived once at 48 9th Street with cockroaches, with all the flake in the bathroom. But to me it was heavenly. And the roof went through, and we didn't want to complain to the landlord, because our rent was then twenty-five dollars, so instead of complaining we hung up a Indian, like a cover for a bed in India, and everybody, even Rava [ph] used to come and say, "Oh, it's so romantic." (Dr. Levine laughs) And she didn't realize that it was then a necessity not to tell the la--- not to complain to the landlord, because he might increase the rent. You see, that --- that's an additional rent to the studio rent. The studio rent at that time was also I think either eighteen or twenty dollars, you see? And Chaim didn't

make enough. But we managed. We managed. We didn't owe nobody any money. We didn't charge anything.

LEVINE: So did you ever work?

GROSS: Oh, sure.

LEVINE: Outside the home?

GROSS: Minor jobs. I worked in Wanamaker's, I worked in Klein's Department Store on 14th Street. It was awful, just awful. You know, very mean, demeaning jobs, to pick up clothes and hang them up. But I didn't have enough education to get a, you see, Rava [ph] and Mi [ph], they had a teaching job. Rebecca Sawyer had [Not understood] teaching job. They were married ahead of --- they were married two years before. And Rafael didn't earn too much. Maybe he got twenty-five dollars for a painting. I myself bought from him. And I wasn't married to Chaim. I bought for fifty dollars a painting, which is now worth about fifty thousand, and I'm not exaggerating. And he was glad. And many times he sold a painting just to pay the rent. But Rebecca always worked. She was a teacher, and a teacher somehow always had a job. Even during the Depression, when many were unemployed, she always had a job. She was never without a job.

LEVINE: What were the Sawyer brothers? Like, I mean, were they very similar in personality, or were they very different?

GROSS: The twins?

LEVINE: Yeah.

GROSS: Well, for one thing, they were educated in Europe. They had an education. They spoke a beautiful Russian, which I understood a little of. They talked to each other every day, both in Russian, and they had, uh, they didn't have degrees, but they were educated, and their sisters all went to Hunter College. We used to admire them very much. There wa--- there was a large family. And now out of the large family only one exists. He's, uh, I think, he's not an artist. There were three artists who died. All their wives, Rebecca died, she was already ninety-two years old. She was my oldest friend in New York. Then Louise Nevelson's sister who lived on 23 11th Street who had, whose husband gave, gave, uh, Louise Nevelson's black sculpture to every museum, and made her famous. He gave it to Brooklyn Museum, to the Museum of Modern Art. I mean, his name, and my oldest friend was his wife, Lillian.

LEVINE: Oh, Lillian. Uh-huh.

GROSS: You were never --did you ever meet him?

LEVINE: Lillian was, uh, Louise Nevelson's brother's wife. Is that . . . ?

GROSS: There were two Lillians, darling. One married to the glass man who did the, uh, glass design.

LEVINE: Oh, okay.

GROSS: And they had the most beautiful house at 11, at 23 West 11th Street.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And that . . .

GROSS: Filled from ceiling to floor, filled with art. 'Cause he bought indiscriminately. Anyone who was --- who went to the park with a painting or a piece of sculpture. He bought from Chaim when Chaim was broke. I mean, Chaim never charged him more than twenty-five dollars. He used to brag that he got this for . . . (disturbance to the microphone)

LEVINE: So they were your best fr-

GROSS: --- then not only that but we had [not understood] at his house. We had parties. We were always invited to [not understood]. Very, very [not understood] Very generous. He went shopping and bought a tremendous amount of food. We never paid, by the way.

LEVINE: Really?

GROSS: I didn't -- Chaim didn't have any money so ----

TAPE ENDS