

EI-1022

ESTELLE KURK-FEINBERG

BIRTHDATE: MAY 14, 1914

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AGE AT TIME OF INTERVIEW: 84

RUNNING TIME:

INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE, PH.D.

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LEVINE: Today is September 19th, 1998, and I'm here at Ellis Island with Estelle Kurk-Feinberg, who was born Esther Fanny Wallach, which the Fanny later changed to Phoebe. And she came from Poland, which was Russia when she was born in 1914, and came through Ellis Island in 1922 at the age of eight years. Today Mrs. Kurk-Feinberg is eighty-four years of age. And this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. Let's start at the beginning. If you would give your birth date, and where you were born.

KURK-FEINBERG: May 14th, 1914. I was born in Bialystock, Poland, which at the time, well it had become Poland, yes.

LEVINE: Oh!

KURK-FEINBERG: It had been part of Russia.

LEVINE: Okay, all right. And Bialystock—do you remember it at all?

KURK-FEINBERG: Yes, I do. My grandmother, my—my grandmother on my mother's side lived in Bialystock, and her sister, or sisters. I think there were—can't believe this—twelve girls. My mother—twelve girls and one boy. My mother was the twelfth, the youngest, and according to her, the prettiest! She had a wonderful sense of self, otherwise she never would have survived the years! And I remember the streets in Bialystock, rather bare. Only one memory particularly stands out in my mind. We were walking on a street, and there was a store with windows, very tall windows, from ceiling to sidewalk. And I saw an orange there for the first time! And the person—I don't remember who was with us—said, "That's an orange." And I remember seeing an orange!

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And let's see, so as far as relatives, was it a large family that you connected with?

KURK-FEINBERG: No, a lot of—I don't remember my mother's sisters, who would be, what? My aunts, yes, except for Tante Sora. Sara was the oldest, eldest—how do you say it? And my mother was the youngest. And the one brother. I do remember my mother saying that growing up she was always in fear. Her parents were old! She was afraid they would die, you know, the youngest of twelve children, and that she—right from the start, it seemed, from adolescence, she had so many fears in her life. I do remember that.

LEVINE: Now what was your mother's name?

KURK-FEINBERG: Bertha.

LEVINE: Bertha.

KURK-FEINBERG: Yes.

LEVINE: And do you remember her maiden name?

KURK-FEINBERG: Gonionsky.

LEVINE: Could you spell it?

KURK-FEINBERG: G-O—Gonionsky. I don't remember. G-O-N-I-O-N-S-K-Y? Something like that!

LEVINE: And how about your father, his name?

KURK-FEINBERG: My father's name was Mandel, M-A-N-D-E-L, and he was extremely handsome! Extremely handsome. And my mother's story about the courtship: she lived—she had been born in a dorf, or like—smaller than a village—almost like a plantation. And her father was a boot maker, and her mother was very aggressive. She would take the wagon, horse and wagon, and go into the other villages and towns, and she was selling and buying leather. And my mother, who was the youngest, as I say, was always in fear that they would die. But my mother at the time was very much in love with a Hebrew student, naturally, poor. And naturally, he was going to be a teacher. And suddenly, on the horizon, from wheres I don't remember her telling me—he lived in Bialystock—Mandel Wallach comes, meets her, falls madly in love with her, woos her with all the most expensive, in those days, gifts. He was very sophisticated; she's from this little, tiny, smaller than a village, as I say. And he was so handsome! And of course, she was very attractive, and she had a good sense of self. She believed in herself. In any event, he finally proposed, and they did get married, and they lived in Bialystock for a while. Do you want me to go on on that? Because that's another story! [Laughs]

LEVINE: Well, go ahead, yeah.

KURK-FEINBERG: Well, how long?

LEVINE: Well, let me ask you this. You mentioned that your father had left years before?

KURK-FEINBERG: Yes, yes. In order to avoid—which a lot of young men those days were doing. After I was born, and I think my brother had also been born. She had the children immediately. The first—she became pregnant almost immediately, and then my brother. There was only about a year, a couple of months' difference. And suddenly he disappeared in order to escape serving in the Polish Army. I understand a lot of the young men did that then, especially Jewish young men. And for seven years she never heard from him. And she had to raise us. Do you want me to go on about my mother, because that's another story? It's all right? She's another immigrant. Okay, so about eight months, I understand, eight months or a year, into living in a beautiful home in Bialystock. She had a maid for herself; she had a nurse for me. The most beautiful furniture! She had gowns made in Paris, if you can believe it!

LEVINE: What was your father doing for work? How did he--?

KURK-FEINBERG: Well, there's the point. My father was the son of a very wealthy man, a very tall, strong, handsome man, who supplied meat for the Polish Army. And he had about two hundred men who worked under him, because when we lived in Bialystock, at the end of our street was the commissary, and I remember once as a child being taken into the commissary, and the smell of pork—I have never forgotten that! [Laughs] But in any event, he would roam the countryside, of course, you know, buying meat and so forth. And once a year he would come home and make another baby! [Laughs] And I understand that his wife, my grandmother on my father's side, was supposed to be a little queer mentally! [Laughs] But in any event, my father, when he married, charged everything to his father: the magnificent furniture, the lovely home, the gowns, the nurse, everything. When my grandfather, at the end of a year or so, came home suddenly, people appeared, according to my mother's story, people appeared at the apartment, took away everything. By that time he had disappeared, you know, so that he would not serve in the army. He had no—he never contacted her for seven years. His story, when they finally—when he finally sent for her was that he was concerned that if she knew where he was, the soldiers who came periodically, checking every house, putting the gun under your chin, under the woman's chin, "We know you know where your husband is, and you won't tell us!" In any event, he wanted to save her from that. And by the way, she had to "sell herself." "Sell herself" in order to survive, for a five pound bag of potatoes, or whatever it was—a sack of potatoes. And my grandmother on my mother's side knew about this. It was tolerated because it was a matter of survival in those days. But in any event, they came, and they took away everything, and she became a [Polish], a wanderer. And she took me and my brother, and she started roaming the countryside. And this was in the Ukraine by now, and she would knock on the door, and ask for permission to sleep at the kitchen stove—you know, they had these enormous stoves where it heated as well as cooked. And she would ask permission. She would work in the field during the day, and then if it was a kind family, they would let her sleep in the kitchen, on the floor, at night. And this went on I don't know for how many years, until some way, somehow, she met this gentleman Mr. Factor, F-A-C-T-O-R. Apparently he fell in love with her, and he's the one that got in the episode where I wake up under the bed, and the two brass beds next to each other. He had gotten her this two-room house, and they were living together. And that was the episode when I woke up at night, and there were my grandmother's feet going to the slop jar, if you recall that? But in any event, so this went on for many years, and

apparently my grandmother accepted it. It was a matter of survival, and there was no shame attached to it. This was wartime, and you do everything and anything. But as I wrote about my mother, she had the most wonderful sense of self; it's remarkable. I guess she could never have survived. Oh, let me back track! So when this happened, she was devastated! Thrown out on the street on her own, after having lived the life of luxury, and really, in those days, that truly was living like a princess! And my grandfather, my father's father, came and visited her, I think once or twice—about the only time they ever saw each other. And he said, "You know, your husband charged everything to me, and I'm teaching him a lesson." And he said, "You have married a womanizer, a wastrel. You will regret it all your life." This is the way he talked to her, to this young woman! And that's all I remember her telling me. I guess it was a bitter experience, and she just blocked it out, all the rest. I've never even seen a picture of him, of my grandfather on my father's side.

LEVINE: How do you think your mother, as far as her personality, how do you think she came to have such a--?

KURK-FEINBERG: I guess as a survivor, as the twelfth girl, and just the one brother, I guess—first of all, she was extremely beautiful. Somewhere along the line she received such a fantastic—she got somewhere or other—maybe a matter of survival. She just—when she came to America—that's one of the stories I wrote about—when she came to America, she had a very, very hard life with him and so forth. But at one point, she said something that has always stayed with me. She said, "To succeed in America, you must do two things, and do them well. You must always step with your right foot forward," meaning you must have self-confidence, "And you must know how to lie well." A la Clinton, our President! [Laughs] But these were her two criteria for success! And she was, by those standards in those times, successful, because what does success represent? Not a college degree, but money in the bank, or some more real estate. That was a security, to buy another house, and another house. You know, as I think about it, that was the security blanket.

LEVINE: Can you think of any other things that your mother—attitudes she expressed, or, what, tenets to live by? Anything that she tried to instill in you?

KURK-FEINBERG: She tried—no, I will say this: you know, Jewish parents, especially Jewish immigrants, the emphasis was always on more and more education. I went to Yonkers High School. We ended

up in Yonkers, as you know, and I went to Yonkers High School. And because I was highly motivated, I graduated in three years. And I knew I wouldn't go to college, so I took typewriting at night the last year. Well, I won a scholarship for NYU, and the principal came up to my mother. My father is not too much in the picture; he was a womanizer, and they had a dreadful life together. But in any event, just like his father said, came to America, ditto. In any event, so the principal came up to the house, and my mother was, you know, she's the gung-ho, and she's head of the family, so to speak. He was a house painter, by the way—very erratic wages and so on. That's another story. And the principal said, "All you have to do is give her her lunch and ten cents car fare," because Van Cartland Park, you took the subway and you went all the way down to NYU. When she heard that I wanted to be a teacher, which was my greatest—oh, that would have been heavenly!—she said, and he also corroborated her afterwards, "A teacher! An old maid on our hands? No way!" B.S.

LEVINE: What did she want for you, do you know?

KURK-FEINBERG: Marriage.

LEVINE: Oh.

KURK-FEINBERG: Yeah. So their standard of life, a girl seventeen to eighteen should be married and raising a family, and that meant that she was successful. And the interesting thing is that my brother was extremely talented in art, ditto. Two teachers, when he graduated high school, two teachers came to the house. "We will underwrite all his art school education." "A crazy artist in our family? No way!" This is so unlike the Jewish immigrant that I can only surmise that it was a matter—they had had such a hard life, that it was a matter of survival. And to them, a teacher, an artist, which was, you know, they couldn't be breadwinners. It's the only thing I can think of in those days.

LEVINE: Wow. Well, let's go back to Bialystock first, and see if there's anything else that we should cover before we talk about leaving. So your father had left, completely?

KURK-FEINBERG: Disappeared.

LEVINE: Disappeared.

KURK-FEINBERG: Oh, excuse me. Did I tell you that he refused to walk next the carriage, because I was so homely?

LEVINE: No!

KURK-FEINBERG: Yes, she told me that, and she devastated—I had an inferiority complex until two years ago! [Laughs]

LEVINE: Oh, thank goodness you got over it, huh?

KURK-FEINBERG: I did, with some help from my friends. I was lucky to meet some very good friends; we have a nice circle.

LEVINE: So he—so when you were first born--?

KURK-FEINBERG: Yes, that was a big disappointment, that I was female, and that I was so homely. And my mother said he would not walk next to the baby carriage. He did not want anyone to know that he had sired such an ugly child! [Laughs] What can I do? I do remember her telling me that.

LEVINE: Anything else about your father in Poland?

KURK-FEINBERG: In Poland, no, because he disappeared. I never—I never knew him; I never saw him. I did not know him until when we were walking out of the gates at Ellis Island. They had finished delousing me, and so forth [laughs], and we started, my mother and my brother and I started—my brother and my mother walked first, and they started hugging and kissing. So I surmised that that must be my father, because during the seven years, I think she had one picture, and at one point she was so furious with him that she tore it up. So I never knew what he looked like. As a matter of fact, he sent her, the first time, he sent her six hundred dollars cash to come to America. And she thought it over; she said, “Oh, no, only the lowest of the low, criminals, whores, would go to America, leave their homeland.” She was so attached, despite all her hardships. She was so attached to Bialystock, and her wanderings in the Ukraine. So, she spent the money, and she continued. [Laughs] And then, a short period afterwards, he sent her two paid-for tickets, and with letters saying that, you know, children have to have a father; a girl has to have a father to help raise her. How can she do that? She must come to America. At that point she gave in, and we did come, from Antwerp, I believe. Yes, it was that.

LEVINE: Do you have memories of going, wandering, with your mother, and staying in people’s homes?

KURK-FEINBERG: No, I think I was an infant. My first memory, as I wrote, was when I was three, and by that time we were living with Mr. Factor. And there must have been a nursery school, or something like that, because I didn't even—when I started remembering, I didn't realize I'm remembered this episode, of [unclear] teacher, Molly.

LEVINE: Why don't you tell about that, for the tape?

KURK-FEINBERG: Oh, so we asked—well, I remember that we were sitting, kindergartners, I said. And we must—I was about, I know I was three years old and the World War One was three years old. And all of a sudden these black leather high-button shoes step over one of the children into the circle, and I looked up, and there was [Yiddish] teacher, Molly. And she is standing there, and looking at us. She is so happy, and she's very slowly speaking to all of us. "Oh, children," she said, "Somebody in America, some good person, has sent us enough money," something to that effect, "To buy you hot chocolately cocoa, and white rolls!" We had never tasted white rolls! Cocoa, of course not! Well, we were ecstatic! We'd heard about it, you know. We were just ecstatic, and block, that's all I remember of that moment! And that was my [laughs], that was my first memory.

LEVINE: Just a silly question, but are bialys from Bialystock?

KURK-FEINBERG: I think so! [Laughs] I've been told that many times, yes. I understand that there's nothing left of Bialystock now but a war memorial in town. Someone who had traveled to Poland told me that a while back. I don't—as I say, I remember the orange, the store, the sidewalks, very few people, and of course I do remember where we lived. Where we lived, you know, was the semi-circle, as I think I described it. It was a semi-circle of houses, and our house and the end house of the semi-circle touched the sidewalks. In between was lovely, grassy lawn. And that sidewalk led from the [Polish], the railroad station, passed our house on the sidewalk. Beyond our house was a cornfield, and then there was an apple orchard, and then there was the Polish commissary that supplied meat for the Polish soldiers. And I remember my mother telling—telling my brother and myself. She was so incensed with the Polish soldiers! They were so arrogant! The railroad—did I say?—the railroad station, the [Polish], was at one end. So there were teams of soldiers very often passing our house, possibly on their way to the commissary; I don't know. And she—I remember she told me, "The Polish soldiers, beautifully dressed in their uniforms—so arrogant! They pick the best apples without so much as a bye or leave." The Russian

soldiers, their feet bound in rags, dressed miserably, would diffidently ask permission to pick a green apple. And once, I think I told you that, when we went into the commissary, to this day, the smell! But that was the cornfield behind our house, where she had sent me to steal corn for supper, and where I had my first sense of honorableness or something, when there was a shaft of light. You know, the corn was taller than my brother and I, and we were—I was filling my apron, and he was filling his pail. And that was going to be our supper. And all of a sudden there was like a clearing in the cornfield, and there were shafts of brilliant sunlight lighting up that area! And I got terrified! All of a sudden I realized I was stealing! I was stealing corn! And the shafts of light said, “Thief! Thieves!” to me. And I dropped my corn from the apron, and my brother dropped his pail, and we ran like hell back into the house! And did she give me a licking, because—she slapped my face, because that was our supper, and I had not performed! Yeah.

LEVINE: Was your mother strict?

KURK-FEINBERG: In what sense?

LEVINE: Well, were you—were there certain rules that you had to follow?

KURK-FEINBERG: Not that I recall, no. No, we just grew up, and I remember that my brother was my only playmate. I had no other friends. And other than this little episode when I was about three, and World War One was three, which I love to remember, I don't remember playmates. Certainly no schooling. Certainly no toys. I don't know. I don't know.

LEVINE: So when your father sent them the tickets—

KURK-FEINBERG: Yes!

LEVINE: --after having sent the money—

KURK-FEINBERG: Yes!

LEVINE: Oh, just before we leave there—Mr. Factor.

KURK-FEINBERG: Yes.

LEVINE: Is there anything else about him?

KURK-FEINBERG: I don't remember, except that he must have been very kind, and very much in love with my mother. She never talked about details. I only remember that the two very high brass beds were in this one room, next to each other. And do you want me to talk about that one episode?

LEVINE: Sure.

KURK-FEINBERG: Yes, and I remember one night awakening, and being on the floor under the bed, with this [unclear], or this eiderdown coverlet—thick eiderdown—on top of my brother and myself. The two of us were sleeping on the floor. And as I woke up—you know, I was still drowsy—I heard whooshing, horrible sounds, above my head! And it was like an enormous whoosh, whoosh! From one wall over our heads, and then I kind of felt that it was breaking plaster, or something, excuse me, above. And I couldn't imagine what it was! And then suddenly I remember hearing, the night before, that some of the grown-ups—I guess my mother must have had a friend, or maybe she and Mr. Factor were talking about it—that there were still skirmishes outside in Bialystock. Maybe the railroad station was a factor, but there were skirmishes. The Russian, the Polish and the German soldiers, in those days the skirmishes were, pertained to, defining the borders of Poland. When I was born in was part of Russia. After the war it became independent. But the borders had not been defined, and it was only when these skirmishes, I guess, took place that they finally—but it was horrible! But still, I was terrified! My brother slept right through it, but I was terrified, because it kept—that sound, whooshing, crackling, breaking plaster! And all of a sudden I saw my grandmother's feet walking to the slop jar. She must have been visiting with us, and of course we had no plumbing. We had an outhouse, but we had no plumbing. But she was using the—and I just saw her feet go to the slop jar. At that point I started screaming in terror, as much in fear for her life as for mine. And that's—I remember the next morning I wanted to go out to play, and I got yanked back into the house. They wouldn't let me go out to play. But the moment that—for the few seconds that I was out, I saw that the grassy lawn that, you know, in this half a circle of houses, was covered with a blanket of bullets. You could not see the grass, and there were a couple of bodies, which I presume were soldiers, on that grass. And that's it. That was—black out! [Laughs]

LEVINE: Do you think you have any ramifications from that period of time?

KURK-FEINBERG: I think I'm much stronger. I think I kind of like to talk about it to show off a little bit as to what—how I survived, [laughs] if the truth be known! That I have said for the first time out loud! [Laughs] I must have kept—hey, you're good!

LEVINE: Well, that's interesting, isn't it—

KURK-FEINBERG: Yes, yes.

LEVINE: --to have been through that at such an early age.

KURK-FEINBERG: Yes, yes, I think I had a lot of strength—I got a lot of strength. I was on my own growing up, all the time. And I must say that most of my values in life were drawn from all the Victorian novels that I read. I identified with all the beautiful heroines in all those beautiful Victorian novels! So—

LEVINE: Oh, well that came when you went to the library after, right?

KURK-FEINBERG: Oh, yes, of course!

LEVINE: Well, let's get to this country, and then we'll talk about that part.

KURK-FEINBERG: Okay.

LEVINE: Okay, so you have the tickets. Now, do you remember preparing to leave?

KURK-FEINBERG: I don't remember preparing to leave, but I do remember the one memory of walking down the cobblestone main street of Antwerp. And it was sunny. I don't remember the time of year, and I don't remember the name of the boat. I'm going to do research now that I've met you, and [laughs] I'm inspired. But I do remember that it was sunny. I do remember that on either side of this main cobblestone street there were tall buildings that must have been factories, that the windows were open, and that the smell of chocolate boiling was utterly overwhelming! That mixed with the brilliant sunshine! And we walked down the main street, my brother, my mother, and myself. And we must have boarded the ship then, but I don't remember the actual boarding. I don't, as I say, I don't remember the name of the ship. But that memory, and the smell—Belgian chocolates, I understand, are tops! Right, so I guess that really is true; it happened! [Laughs]

LEVINE: So when you went to Antwerp, did you stay there at all?

KURK-FEINBERG: No, I don't recall. I don't think so. I think we just went directly into the ship, because I never remember staying—I would have remembered that, I think.

LEVINE: Probably.

KURK-FEINBERG: No, I think we just—and how we got there I don't remember.

LEVINE: Okay, and how about the voyage? Do you have recollections of that?

KURK-FEINBERG: Oh, the voyage, yes. The first thing I remember is my mother crying. She was like in the little cubbyhole, screaming, crying! She was very dramatic about everything! And, "Please, throw me overboard!" She was so seasick, she just didn't—so of course, my brother and I had the run—his name was Kal, Kalman, K-A-L-M-A-N, Kalman—and we had the run of the ship, you know. And so [laughs] I suppose we had a great time! The one thing that I do remember is a tremendously heavy rainstorm! I mean, it was heavy rain, and we were running around, and there were tremendous flashes of lightning! And several times—not just once, but several times—in those tremendously strong flashes of light, fish flying up from the ocean! The flying fish—that I do remember. I've never forgotten that. That's about all. I don't—except being pushed into Ellis Island afterwards with a horde of strangers. I was very—always very tiny for my age, and I wore Buster Brown, I remember. And my brother was taller and stronger and everything, even though he was a year younger. But I do remember that it was awful being, you know, just pushed along. I couldn't breathe or anything! And there we were at Ellis Island, we were told, behind the gates. And before you know it, they were pouring kerosene. That's the one thing I remember. We stayed there I don't know how long, but I remember kerosene, and the scrubbing of the head, and my crying and screaming, and everything! And then the next thing I know were these tremendously tall, tremendously heavy iron gates that opened up. And my mother and brother were before me, as I said, and I followed along. And then I realized that has to be my father. As I say, she had torn up his picture in anger. I never remember saying good-bye to Mr. Factor or anything. That must have been quite a scene between him and my mother! He must have—they must have cared for each other.

LEVINE: Yeah.

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KURK-FEINBERG: And in any event, so there was my father with a doll bigger than I was! [Laughs] I'd never had a doll!

LEVINE: Oh!

END OF TAPE ONE, SIDE A

BEGIN TAPE ONE, SIDE B

KURK-FEINBERG: Did I tell you a little bit about my mother selling herself?

LEVINE: No!

KURK-FEINBERG: "Selling herself"? Before—that is, what she experienced, she had to be a very strong woman. And I forgive her for everything, you know, not letting me go to school, for the kind of strength she had to survive. I told you that she would knock on the door. She wandered all through the Ukraine, and eventually, I don't know how she met Mr. Factor, which was great. And during a period of time before she met Mr. Factor, I remember she told me of one incident that stands out. My grandmother was there in the house, and there was a general or somebody high up who apparently liked her very much. And she was sitting on his lap, and my grandmother was there, too. That's one episode. The other episode that she told me, how many times a soldier had the gun, his gun, under her chin, pressing it hard, "We know! We know that you know where your husband is!" And then when she was in the Ukraine she remembers having to sell herself for food, "sell herself." And I think her morals, even in America, must have been affected by that. Well he, too, my father, was a womanizer when he came, just as his father had said! There are many episodes there, but I don't want to go into that.

LEVINE: Yeah.

KURK-FEINBERG: But in any event, she was a survivor.

LEVINE: Yes.

KURK-FEINBERG: And that's the important thing. And my father, you have to give him credit. He had come to America, he told us. He had walked to Korea, and came to America via California. And I remember

one thing—I think I wrote about it—that there were many experiences, of course, that he had, but he never told us too much except this one that stayed in my mind, where the men in Korea wore these huge, what he called, tents. And periodically they would dig in under the “tent” and pick out a few lice, and eat them. That was a delicacy in Korea! That’s the only think I remember. Then he came to America via California, got a job as a butcher, unfortunately cut his wrist badly, so that he got in touch with his one uncle who lived in Yonkers and had a paint store and a hardware store. So he finally did come to Yonkers. And Uncle Judovich [PH] got him, or gave him jobs, taught him how to paint. And so my father became a housepainter. But the—it was very difficult, because the pay at the end of the week on Friday didn’t come regularly, and if he was not paid my mother had to survive on the—in those days the butcher used to throw out liver, lung, and miltz [PH]—I don’t know what miltz is, but it must be an organ—and soup bones. And so they would—that’s what we would survive on. And their—I guess because of money, their relationship—and maybe because he was a womanizer, or whatever. But they were very much in love! That’s the funny thing. And I think if life had been easier they might have had a normal relationship, and we, the family, would have had a good life. But as it is, there was always physical fighting, even, because, well, I guess for survival, that’s the way they had learned. And I remember, if the money didn’t come in on Friday night, it was awful! [Coughs] Excuse me. Every Monday and Thursday she was throwing out his clothes! [Laughs] And he was going to leave! And of course, he would come back! But it was very unusual for Jewish people, who, you know, even if they were poor—you’d read about the Jews on the East Side. My God, they sacrificed everything for education for their children! And poor as they were, they, you know, they lived in the tenements, so many, like my Tante Sora. And yet, they had dignity and so forth. But my mother and father were almost animalistic in their giving in to their feelings, and no—they didn’t mince words or anything. If they felt it, they—

LEVINE: Hmm. It’s almost as though they expected more, and they were angry when it didn’t—

KURK-FEINBERG: It could very well be.

LEVINE: --materialize.

KURK-FEINBERG: Maybe—but they were really, physically in know they were very much in love, but maybe if life had been kinder, they would have

had a good relationship. But as it is, there were so many hard knocks. You know, in my maturity I can look back now and see that. But living in that family was—was, oh, it was so painful! And especially I had all these idealistic ideals, you know! [Laughs] I was not in this world, and it was very painful.

LEVINE: Did they stay together?

KURK-FEINBERG: Yes. They should have divorced, but no, they stayed together. There are many stories, but it would take too long to tell!

LEVINE: Okay, well why don't we go back to when you and your brother and mother met your father, and then where did he take you?

KURK-FEINBERG: Right away he took—my mother, my mother's elder sister Tante Sora, Aunt Sara, had been brought over to America many, many years prior. And my mother, apparently, was very attached to her, the youngest with the oldest. So she said "We're in New York." And my father had a car, whether he rented it or whether he owned it—I think he owned it for a short period. She said, "We're in New York. I am going to see my sister before we go any place else." So he drove us to—she lived on Broom Street, which is the worst—uh! Broom Street was the pits! Anyway, and I think I told you, he drove us from Ellis Island, New York City, down Delancey Street, I learned later on, and Delancey Street was an astonishment! So many people! Police, I learned later, and so much noise and clutter and cars! We had never seen anything like it. And wherever I looked, not a blade of grass! You know, it was an astonishment to me! And I told you the episode where he stopped the car for a moment on a corner, and suddenly--my brother and I were sitting in the back seat, and all of a sudden he opens the door, and he hands us what I thought were two yellow snakes! Both my brother and I, we recoiled! We were terrified! Why is he giving us snakes? And he started howling with laughter. They were two bananas, and we had never seen bananas! He peeled them for us! Anyway, we finally found Broom Street, which was the pits—really! I mean, Broom Street was, I mean, there were many streets. It was filthy! And the tenements! We had never seen tenements. We felt they would crush us! And the people, so many people! And carts and cars! It was an onslaught on all our senses. We were terrified! And finally we get to the Broom Street, the number where she lived. And she lived in a tenement five-floor walk-up. And on every floor, of course, we would stop to catch our breath. And on every floor was what we later learned—I had learned on ship, board ship, that that's a toilet. So there would be the toilet—always the

door open! [Laughs] I guess the families shared the toilet. And finally on the fifth floor, when we stopped, there was the toilet! And my Aunt's door was to the right, and I remember we had seen signs written in Yiddish, and one of them was translated—my cousin translated. He was very—Uncle, Cousin Hymie was very religious. And he had put a sign up at the toilet that said, "Please, do not tear paper or crack Indian nuts on the Sabbath." [Laughs] Anyway, when Tante Sora opened the door, we literally fell back! She had on her every sample of perfume that Woolworth's gave, you know, gave out free, in honor of our coming, I guess! [Laughs] We literally reeled back! It was incredible! And then of course we met—I had five boy cousins, and one girl cousin. And the apartment was very dark, and very disorderly and so forth. And I remember my uncle—I remember him vaguely. He was like in the background, very quiet. And it was rather, not too bright there. But I do remember that the, you know, that my cousins and my brother and I, and so forth, we immediately hit it off. And it was just so wonderful to feel that we had family in America! So we really loved each other right away.

LEVINE: Oh, and then what? Did you stay the night, or did you go--?

KURK-FEINBERG: No, we went to Yonkers, where my father had rented an apartment for us. It was in the basement of an apartment house on Nepprehan [PH] Avenue. Lower Nepprehan Avenue, because Upper Nepprehan Avenue was, in the near future, became quite, you know—

LEVINE: Posh.

KURK-FEINBERG: The more comfortable, yes. But this was lower, and I remember my first, my first at this tremendously tall building. It was next to a, oh, what do you call it? I forget what the name is. It was like leaning against—oh, I think I mentioned it in the story. I don't remember what it was—aqueduct! It looked as though that tall building was leaning against the aqueduct, or something. Anyway, the apartment that he rented was in the basement. I think it was a five-story building, but I'm not sure. But it was brick. And of course, it was a railroad apartment—you know, we had the front room, then was the kitchen, and then was another, was the bedroom, I guess. And I think there were two bedrooms, and a long, narrow hall. And I remember that I wanted to look out of the window, so I got a stool, and I stood up on the stool, and when I looked out of the window, all I saw were feet passing by! We were in the basement, and that was my introduction to our golden land! It was—I was scared stiff, and of course the rats and the

mice, and the roaches—that's inevitable, for Greenhorns.
[Laughs]

LEVINE: Well, did you feel like a Greenhorn in those early days?

KURK-FEINBERG: I don't know that I felt like a Greenhorn. I was very un—very conscious that I didn't understand the language. I was thrilled with schools—Public School Number Twelve on Ashburton Avenue—that to me was heaven! There were kids, children! I never had a chance to, you know, be with girls and with boys! And you know, the freedom that we have in America! To me, they were running, racing around, and playing. And there was a playground, and there were hot lunches! And it was just marvelous! And it seemed to me the teachers were so elegant and refined! They must have all been Gentile, but I don't know. But I always associated refinement, and so forth, good manners, with Gentile people. Jewish people were for the pits, in my experience! [Laughs] But—

LEVINE: Was your mother religious in any way?

KURK-FEINBERG: No. No, she never was. And—

LEVINE: So tell about when you went to school, and how you fared, as far as learning the language?

KURK-FEINBERG: Yes, that was—I was—all this was so wonderful, but I was so, almost ashamed, self-conscious, that I didn't understand a word they were saying, and I couldn't communicate with them. It was dreadful. And then finally, I guess this was really good luck. This teacher got this ingenious—or it was good luck that there was a kid in the class that understood Yiddish. So this teacher started like a relay system. She would tell, or ask the question to be answered, in English, to the student, who would translate it in Yiddish. We would answer back in Yiddish, and he would translate it back in English to her. And so I really learned very, very quickly. You know, in those—when you're that age, you, you soak it up, and especially when you're so eager! And it was—they were, the school years were just wonderful on Ashburton Avenue! And then as I got older, I guess a year or two, or three later, when I discovered, as I said—found in Yonkers. Remember "Lost in Yonkers"? So that came to a—found in Yonkers!—the library! And that really became my salvation, because I would run away from the fighting at home. You know, they were always at each other. And it was refined, and it was quiet, and it was the best that America could ever offer. And to me, it was an oasis; it was

heaven. It was where I really grew up and developed all my values, and my outlook on life, and I'm so—wonderful, wonderful America! Yeah.

LEVINE: And how did your reading—can you remember either particular things you read, or how it was that your reading, the turns it took? What was a particular instance?

KURK-FEINBERG: I don't have a good memory now, but I do know that I was always into the romantic things. But mostly, Louisa May Alcott, of course, and Mark Twain, I think. But mostly, whatever I laid my hands on, and they must have influenced my values tremendously, being honorable, not lying, not cheating. Where parents lived in a beautiful home, and the children and parents respected each other, and there was gentleness. Oh, I just loved all those stories of a fine family life, and I loved all the romantic—romantic, to this day! [Laughs] I don't remem—I mean, I've been a reader all my life, but at this time in my life I don't remember! Except that I did identify with so many of the heroines in all the novels that I read! And as luck would have it—oh yes, you know the prince dressed in the white suit, riding a white horse? Would you believe it? Fate is so strange! When I met my husband, I had just gotten my first job in New York. I had worked in a department store, in Genung's [PH], in Yonkers. By the way, I ran away from home, but that's another story, because it was dreadful! I was—I don't want to go in—I don't think that's part of the thing. In any event, my first job, real job, was in New York, Karo [PH]. They manufactured bathrobes on Thirty-Second Street, off Fifth Avenue. Even though my memory's bad, that I remember!

LEVINE: Excuse me, this was when you'd graduated high school—

KURK-FEINBERG: Yes, and I couldn't go to school.

LEVINE: --and you couldn't go to college?

KURK-FEINBERG: That's right. So I quit Genung's, where I was head of the—what do you call it, where they sell spools of thread? Notions. I was head of notions. And when they said I couldn't go to college—what did I know about Hunter College or anything like that? Besides, I wouldn't have been qualified, because I lived in Yonkers. You had to be in New York, even then. I learned that later. Anyway, so I got this first job, and of course I lied and told them that I had had five years of bookkeeping. And five minutes after working on the job, the head bookkeeper comes—I remember she was rather a stout lady—and she said, "You've

never worked, have you?" I said, "You're right." So I thought she'd fire me, but apparently she liked me. She said, "I'm going to send you to learn the bookkeeping machine at night." And so she tolerated me, and I learned the bookkeeping machine, and so I just stayed with them. I stayed with them like eight months, though, because I got the job, I think, in January, and a month—for Decoration Day, the beginning of May, or maybe two weeks into May, this very tall secretary—and I was always a little self-conscious with very tall people, uncomfortable, because I'm on the short side. Anyway, she said, "You're not going to get a vacation because you just started work." She said, "There's a three-day Decoration Day weekend coming. Why don't you come with me? I'm going to Tamiment for the weekend, and why don't you come with me? My brother's going to drive us." Well, I—first I wanted to say no, because I was very intimidated by her height. But she was so warm and friendly, and it was like I was doing her a favor! So I said, "Yes." And I remember Saturday morning we were—oh, she said that her brother would be driving us, but then she called or told me at the job that we would have to take a bus, that he couldn't drive. Okay, and I remember getting up in the morning, and I had to iron—it was about six o'clock—and the iron gliding back and forth on the ironing board said, "Estelle, don't go! Estelle, don't go!" [Laughs] I was sure we'd have an accident with that bus! We get to Tamiment—I'll make it short—and Saturday night, you know, there was a dance. It was my first time away from home, and with a job! And boy, I felt so sophisticated! New York City, you know, the works! And a hick from Yonkers! Anyway, we had—we were quartered in a little bungalow quite a distance from the recreation hall, so we started walking on the dirt road that led to the recreation hall. And on the left I saw a knoll with a bunch of people there, so I called out, "Is this the way to the recreation hall?" Out steps this young man, believe it or not, dressed in a white suit! I could not believe it! High up on the knoll—not on a horse, but high up on the knoll, and he tells us, calls down to us where the recreation room, and he adds, "Oh, save me a dance!" And this very "sophisticated" young lady said, "Oh, I'd love to, but I'm nearsighted and I didn't wear my glasses! You'll have to look for me!" [Laughs] And it took him half the night to find me, because a very big crowd had—this was Tamiment, did I say that, in Pennsylvania? Very liberal. And he had been going there for every weekend. He was about fourteen years older than I was. He had been going there. He was already ready for a wife by now. And I didn't know all this. Anyway, as we walked out at night—it took me half the night 'til he found me; after that we danced all the time. He had come with his best friend Jules and another, a girl. And we walked, as we walked out that

night, Al—his name is Alexander—Al, it's a tall name for a short man, Alexander! [Laughs] Anyway, we're walking out, and his friend Jules, that he had come with, and I think her name was Ann—yes, Ann—were walking behind us. And Ann afterwards told me that as we walked out of that recreation hall, she and Jules made a bet—ten dollars—that by Christmas time, Alexander and Estelle would be married. And it came true! [Laughs] Isn't that romantic? [Laughs]

LEVINE: Very romantic! Why don't you talk about, is it Tamin? Tamiment?

KURK-FEINBERG: Tamiment, yes.

LEVINE: Talk about that for the tape. That was—

KURK-FEINBERG: It was a very liberal resort, and my husband had been going there every single weekend. He loved the sports, tennis and swimming, and so forth. And it was liberal, and I don't know much about it, actually. I never looked into its history. But I do know that it attracted a lot of young people, liberal young people.

LEVINE: Coming from New York City, a lot of them?

KURK-FEINBERG: Yes, mostly from the metropolitan area, yes. And apparently it was a great weekend place for young people. And I suppose there were many such marriages, you know, culminated there, their visits. I guess these were young people who were looking! Don't forget, they weren't sophisticated, and we didn't have TV and all that, excuse me, openness that we have today. And it was a different time; this was 1937, 1937 when I met my husband.

LEVINE: And now, so was his name Alexander Kurk?

KURK-FEINBERG: Yes. It was Kurkowitz, but at Ellis Island—he also came from Europe—and Ellis Island, they lost their wits. It became Kurk, K-U-R-K, in stead of Kurkowitz.

LEVINE: Huh, and was he from an area--?

KURK-FEINBERG: He was also from Poland, yes, and he had come over. He had his citizenship papers, so when I married him, what did in know about becoming a citizen? My parents, you know--[laughs].

LEVINE: Your parents didn't do that?

KURK-FEINBERG: No, no. Oh, my father eventually did become a citizen, but he faked it. He put a lot of pencils and pens in his pocket, and was very V.I.P. They wouldn't dare ask him, "Do you know how to read or write?" [Laughs] Whatever, he bribed somebody; I don't know. He did get it. But I became a citizen through my husband, which was quite a feat for me. I didn't realize how important that was, but he did, you know.

LEVINE: So then what happened? You were married by December?

KURK-FEINBERG: December we were married, and the honey—he had not had a—he worked for, oh, I forget the name. It'll come to me. Anyway, he had a very important job, the advertising. Oh, Detecto Scales, and he was their whole advertising department. He had not had a vacation in twelve years, so he combined the honeymoon with a vacation. And unfortunately I was not in the sophisticated position to appreciate the—the original Statendam, where Mrs. Felix Warburg, with an entourage of fifteen, came on board. And it was sixteen days, an experience! I mean, the service then! I remember one time my husband wanted sour cream, and they didn't have sour cream. They apologized profusely. The next day they served him sour cream! Overnight, they made sour cream for him! That was the kind of service in those days. And of course, to me, it was over my head. I was impressed, but nowhere near as much as I would be today, knowing what all that involved! It was sixteen magnificent days! We went through the Panama Canal. I remember wearing—I have a picture of myself. I treated myself to a dress for two ninety-eight, I want you to know! [Laughs] It was a—oh, Lordy! And then there was—then there was one stop that I did write about this, many years later, because it stayed in my mind so. The ship docked at Cartagena in South America, and I remember, we got on the bus. And the bus went through a forested area—beautiful! And suddenly, the bus stopped, and we were driving through a village, the likes of which even I, in Europe, had never seen! Dirt, dust, naked children running around with swollen bellies, women sitting in the doorway of hovels, naked to the waist, nursing their children! I have never forgotten that: the dust, the smell! And then the bus continued on, and suddenly on the outskirts of town it stopped, before—there was a tremendous stone wall, and in the center—it's a very high, very thick, very long stone wall on the outskirts of Cartagena—part of Cartagena, though—and in the center were these very big—something like the gates in Ellis Island at the time: very tall, very big, very black wrought iron. And the bus stopped there in front of the gates. And through the gates—we all got out, you know, the sightseers, and we were able to see a beautiful

meadow, sort of a slight hill, stretching up to a very long, low building. And coming towards us, smiling and laughing and glad, coming down towards this knoll, were three what I would only say were slatterns. You know, they were—they just had shifts on, and one of the shifts—one of them, I remember—the things that you remember! Golly! The strap—well, I was so correct in my values [laughs]—and her strap was coming down. She almost showed part of her breast! And she was holding the hand of a very naked little boy! And all of a sudden I hear our guide saying, “These are the town whores.” So my husband heard that—that low building and everything. They were way ahead of us, believe me, having a place just for the town whores. And my husband said, oh, he’d take a picture. He started setting up—in those days he had the tripod, you know, and focusing his camera, when this one young woman who was holding the little naked boy, [gasps] she got, like, agitated! And she started, you know, holding up her hands, “Stop! Stop! Don’t!” you know. And she said, and she halted, and she ran back—this all took seconds—she ran back to the building, and ran back towards us. She was holding a beautiful royal blue velvet little pillow. She put it in the front of her little boy, and then she nodded to my husband, “Now you may take the picture.” So this whore had the sense of self-respect, she would not permit her naked little son to be photographed! To this day I cry when I remember that! [Sobs] Talk about humanity, dignity, sense of—that to me, that was—I wrote a one-page, I guess I wrote more for cathartic reasons than for anything else. I’m not a writer writer, you know. But for cathartic, to be able to survive and cope and come to terms with so many of these memories. I will never forget that. And I’m dying to get back to Cartagena. We may sign up—there’s a cruise going [laughs] from Fort Lauderdale, and one of the ports of call is Cartagena, and the other is the Panama Canal! So we may just—

LEVINE: That’s made for you, it sounds like.

KURK-FEINBERG: I have to convince Ben, my current husband.

LEVINE: Okay, so let’s see. So your husband continued in the advertising line?

KURK-FEINBERG: Yes.

LEVINE: And then where did you live?

KURK-FEINBERG: No. Well, what happened was he would have continued working for Detecto Scales, but having had the experience of my father,

working for other people, I told my husband, “I don’t care if during your lifetime you earn a quarter working for yourself of what you would earn working for someone. Be your own boss.” And he was scared stiff of the responsibility, you know. So, but I persisted, and I went back to—they were nice enough to take me back, and I worked there for eight months, until he established—he was very scared, he was very, very reluctant to start business on his own, but I had a gut feeling that he would do well. And sure enough, when he announced to Detecto that he’s opening up his own advertising agency, they were his first client. And after that, he got another client, I forget what, also a big company. And he gave a lot of personal—he was extremely bright and experienced, and he gave a lot of personal attention, whereas the big advertising agencies were inclined to be a little on the impersonal side. So he did very well. And so for eight months we lived on the twenty dollars a week that I earned, which was very good, and very important. But after that, so then we got an apartment in Sunnyside. He was, as I say, he was fourteen years older, and we wanted to have a child. And so we, our first boy was—first born was a boy. In fact, both my sons—I had two sons, that’s right. And we moved into Sunnyside in one of these garden apartments. I don’t know if you’re familiar with Sunnyside?

LEVINE: A little bit.

KURK-FEINBERG: Little bit? Our porch was like an enlarged playpen! [Laughs] And we lived there for about a year or so, or two years, I don’t remember. And then we heard that Great Neck, Long Island, and Scarsdale, had the best school systems in our part of the world, our neck of the woods. And his best friend had just bought a house in Great Neck on Colgate Road. It was sort of a developer, you know. There were about a half a dozen houses that a developer had built. And my husband very much admired Jules, and so if that house was good enough for him, he didn’t even need an inspector or anything. So across the street we bought a house. In those days you paid eight thousand dollars for a house. Mortgages were three and a half percent! [Laughs] And as a matter of fact, I said, “You know, I have to modernize the kitchen,” and so they deducted eight hundred dollars so that I could modernize the kitchen! And in those days, I not only modernized the kitchen with the best quality of cabinets, you know, but I had sixty dollars left over to bring in two twenty electric, [laughs] electricity! So it—and that’s how we got started, and our family, because of the school, the reputation that Great Neck had for the school system.

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LEVINE: And now, what are your sons' names?

KURK-FEINBERG: I lost one son when he was forty, David. And now I have one son, his name is Neal, N-E-A-L, who's quite a big shot in Ware, New Hampshire. But that's a whole long story—it'll be forever if I tell you about that! But he's quite—he's a professor in the New England College of Henniker. He's town moderator; they will not let him go! He plays saxophone in the band, and marches like everybody else. And four years ago, he was voted to represent them in the State Legislature, and now he's head of finance. He still teaches, but he also is head of the Finance Committee in the state legislature, with responsibility for spending six and a half billion dollars! And he is the biggest tightwad you ever laid eyes on, and I feel very sorry for the people in New Hampshire!
[Laughs]

LEVINE: On that note, we're going to stop here.

KURK-FEINBERG: Okay.

LEVINE: I'm going to—I'd like to put on one more tape, and we'll just finish off, okay?

KURK-FEINBERG: All right.

END OF TAPE ONE, SIDE B

BEGIN TAPE TWO, SIDE A

LEVINE: Okay, we're starting here on Tape Two, and I'm speaking with Estelle Kurk-Feinberg, and it's September 19th, 1998. And we're just going to continue a little bit longer. So you have grandchildren. How many grandchildren?

KURK-FEINBERG: Yes, three: two boys and one girl. And of course, they're all very successful. Today you write your own—they're all college graduates. Our son Neal was the first college graduate in our history! Brown University. And he was everything in high school, you know, just one of those—it never occurred to me to tell a kid to do your homework. I mean, I just expected him, and he was a workaholic, which is great. And he was president of the class, and he represented the school at the United Nations when Bunch, was it, was in the United Nations. In any event, he is quite

successful. And he believed, he was—do you want me to talk a little bit about him? I think it'll take too long. I don't know, whatever you need.

LEVINE: Well, if it follows along—if there are any connections with the fact that you came here, started a new life, and somehow he's sort of the culmination--?

KURK-FEINBERG: No. The only thing is the fact that he was the first college graduate was a tremendous—for me, personally, and for my husband too, you know. Because my husband went to City College, you know, on the cuff, and all that.

LEVINE: Wonderful!

KURK-FEINBERG: But Neal went to Brown University, with all that that entailed. And my other son went to Johns Hopkins. But the values that my son had, I don't know—in no time at all, when he graduated Harvard Law School, he got himself a job in New York City. I think he was the token Jew in this very big law firm. Two and a half years in New York City, they had it made. They had the six-room apartment with the swept-around porch and the bathrooms, and the glamour and the glitz. And my husband and I felt like the most successful immigrants in the world, to have achieved this kind of thing! And one day, he almost broke our hearts. He announced that he and Helene, who by the way was born in Holland, and she too has a very interesting history, they were giving up New York City. By that time they had their first child, Kendra. Their first born was a girl. He didn't—they didn't want the rat race. They didn't want the crime. They didn't want all those people around. Without consulting me, because they knew I would say no, they had bought a two hundred year old house in southern New Hampshire, a town called Ware, halfway between Concord and Manchester. A hundred and eighty-six acres, a pond, lots of woods. The house had the original Indian shutters that slide in and out of the wall. A private cemetery in the back. And, "Mother," he assured me, "If we're making a mistake, it's only money. I can always go back and get another job in New York." Mean time, he immediately got a job in a small New England college, New England College at Henniker, because with his credentials—he was a Fulbright Scholar, by the way, too, as well as a Harvard Law School graduate. At any event, with his credentials, they would take him. They had something like a—anyway, my husband and I were devastated! We immigrants had achieved the pinnacle: a college graduate, a Fulbright Scholar, a successful lawyer in Manhattan! How could he do that to us?

Well, we had quite a period of time back and forth. And thank God that we were sensible enough to realize they had—he kept assuring us, “Mother, it’s only money, if we made a mistake,” you know? But I—my husband and I were sensible enough to realize they had every life, every reason, every right, to live their lives the way they saw fit. We could either be the carping Jewish, you know, in-laws, and lose love and respect, or we could accept their lifestyle wholeheartedly, and have a wonderful, loving relationship. And thank God that our backgrounds of hard work and the emphasis on education—I guess we were very lucky that our values were such that we accepted their lifestyle wholeheartedly. And I remember the moment of fruition, really. I was standing in the back. They had a big lawn in the back, and there were the apple trees, and there was the pony, you know, back and forth on the grass. And there were the three kids—by this time they had three kids—in the sandbox, and on the swing, and so forth. And my daughter-in-law turned to me. I remember we were standing—it was a Sunday afternoon, and it was a wonderful moment in time! And Helene turned to me, she said, “Mother.” This is a gal who came from a millionaire family, by the way. Her history is something else again! In any event, she said, “Mother,” she said, “This is everything I have ever dreamt of!” At that moment I accepted it wholeheartedly, and we have been, have had the most wonderful relationship all these years. And that to me, I feel whatever rotten things I’ve done in my life, this atones for it! [Laughs] You know, so it’s a sweet moment, yes.

LEVINE: Well, thinking back about coming here, and starting a new kind of life at age eight, do you think that your early life, and your transition, made a difference in the kind of person that you became?

KURK-FEINBERG: Of course it did, and I think I’ve been very lucky that I have good common sense, that physically I’m very strong, and that I was practical; I was a realist. And I felt very grateful for any good things that crossed my path, and so that, as I say, I identified with all those heroines in the Victorian novels, so P.S.: all my dates were very correct, I want to tell you! [Laughs] Unlike the way it is today. I just saw on the ship a couple standing—I couldn’t believe it, in broad daylight! Anyway, so and then the hard life, the early years with my family, made a strong impression. I would be everything that they were not. Their values, their outlook on life—everything. So I think in that respect, while it was dreadful, you know—they physically fought. I remember one time—oh God, this was horrible! My youngest brother, he had been born in America, David—Daniel. Now, wait a minute, I forget. David, yes. My

mother and father were fighting physically, and David and I were crouching under the kitchen table. And we were terrified! And she, a Jewish mother, a Jewish housewife, was screaming she's going to call the police! She's going to have him thrown out, because he had given her a punch here, and she was afraid that she was going to get a rac, R-A-C. A rac was cancer, she would get a cancer from the big blow he gave her. And the shame of a Jewish family calling the police! I remember that. So I think that in my desire to forget all this, and to overcome all this, I went the opposite direction in being honorable, and emphasizing the values of gentleness and femininity, and kindness and respect, and all the things you want to inculcate in your children. And I think those were the formative years. So that was the good side of it. I was very lucky that I didn't become, you know, neurotic or mean, or what have you. And that must have been an innate strength that I got from somewhere along the line, you know, yeah. But it was horrible! There were so many—they should never have stayed together! But I think sexually they were very compatible. It's the only thing I can think of, in maturity, that held them together. Because there were incidents that were horrendous.

LEVINE: Yeah, now you mentioned the Jewish family, but the family was never religious? But did you have--?

KURK-FEINBERG: Not really, except she always celebrated the holidays with fantastic meals. No, we did go—she did go to the Elliot Avenue—I never remember services. She may have gone; they may have gone. They never went together, but she or he may have gone. I remember when we were, when my brother and I, when we first came to America, we were living by this time in Elliot Avenue in Yonkers, and they invited my brother and me to perform. Apparently we knew a lot of the Hebrew dances, and the Hebrew songs, and I remember that they put us up on a big table, and we performed for the congregation. And I remember Yessele Rosenblatt, who did play the violin, and he played with his eyes closed. He was on that—he was one of the entertainers that night. Isn't that funny? I just remembered that for the first time in a thousand years! God! So I guess there were good things. There must have been good things, too. And of course, we celebrated the holidays with the meals; that was the big thing.

LEVINE: And how about the Jewish culture? Was there anything else about that?

KURK-FEINBERG: No, except that my mother, and or father—maybe they did go together once. There was Bialystock Shul, or Bialystock

Organization, in downtown New York, near Broom Street, in that area. And I know that once in a while they did go there. I never remember an affiliation, an honest affiliation, with any synagogue or temple. I never remember Yiddishkeit, except that for the holidays. Maybe Friday night she must have lit the candles, because she brought to America the silver candlesticks. But going to temple, or to shul regularly, I never remember anything like that, except this one incident where we entertained at the shul. Gosh, I had forgotten that completely!

LEVINE: That's great. Well how about his time of your life? What is it like for you now?

KURK-FEINBERG: Oh, my God, I'm in seventh heaven now! I feel, especially with this experience, meeting you, and where I'm sitting here. It's like the culmination of all the good things that ever happened to a human being! It's just wonderful. I tell you, we've been very lucky. We had taken a trip around the country in a house trailer when my--in the nineteen--early, 1950 I think it was. And my husband was convinced that he was dying of ulcers in those days, and these were, of course, were the polio years. And no way could we afford to go see the beautiful country before he died, as he said! So, nor would I want to subject the children to, you know, restaurants and sleeping with all the polio that was there. I remember that was also the time that McCall's Magazine advertised "the period of togetherness." There was a whole period when togetherness was a big thing with them; I don't know why that stayed in my mind.

LEVINE: What years are you thinking of right now?

KURK-FEINBERG: Wait a minute--1950, '49, '50. I remember. Anyway, I don't remember how, but we latched on to the idea of a house trailer, so that Al could see the country, the beautiful country. And we did go. For close to three months we traveled the United States. I remember my neighbors in Great Neck were horrified! Tin can tourists of America. Did you ever hear that expression? In those days, only the lowest of the low lived like that, traveled in trailers, or lived in house trailers. A respectable Jewish family, to go live around the country? No way! They had a room ready in the nearest institution, my neighbors and friends! [Laughs] But we rented the house, I remember, so that we could afford the trailer, and the trip. And my husband took three months, almost three months off, because as he said, he was convinced he was dying of ulcers. And they were--I kept a log, and I wrote the children's reactions. They added so much to the trip! You know, they made

every farmer in the Midwest so rich! They improvised games that were marvelous! And anyway, so I kept a log, and added my own comments. And when each of the boys got married, I had it bound in a book. I gave them that book to read on their honeymoon! The younger one cried, and the older one, of course, took it in stride. But that was—that was exciting. What else did you ask? I don't recall.

LEVINE: I was asking about this time in your life, and how it is for you now?

KURK-FEINBERG: Oh, now in my life, I feel so lucky! Because A, I'm lucky enough to have gotten good, strong genes. I'm, you know, quite good for my years.

LEVINE: You look wonderful!

KURK-FEINBERG: Yes, thank you. I have the high energy, and not to many aches or pains. And life has been so good! In Great Neck, when I lived, I volunteered all over. My high point in Great Neck was I saved the Great Neck Symphony Society from absolutely—I don't know what you say. They were going to disband. They had been very successful, and then I don't know what happened, whether they lost musicians, whatever. But in any event, I did publicity for them for about nine years, and turned everything around! And that was—oh, that was a wonderful feather in my cap! And then when we retired, and we got old—oh, after the trailer trip, I can't go into it, it would take too long, but in any event, I could not part with that trailer. That was my security blanket, you know! So we, my husband had—his best friend had bought a house in Lee, in the Berkshires, because his son, Gilbert Kalish, who is pretty well-known—he was head of the chamber music at Tanglewood for thirty years. He just—there was a brou-ha-ha, and so he left. But in any event—

LEVINE: Was this Jules? Was this Jules?

KURK-FEINBERG: No, no, this was Kelly. Israel Kalish, nicknamed Kelly. He was an accountant. Anyway, he, Kelly, and my husband had been friends when they were five. Kelly had moved to—bought the house in Lee because Gilbert was very musical, and they wanted him to attend the music school at Cummington in the summer time. So Kelly said to my husband, "Bring your trailer up here," because I would not part with it. It was my security blanket. I thought, "God knows, he'll never get his business back. At least I'll be able to have a home!" [Laughs] And so, and Kelly said, "Come and park your house, park your trailer in our driveway, and maybe you'll

find a farmhouse behind which you can park the trailer, and you'll have summers and Tanglewood, the concerts." And we loved music, but we'd never heard of Tanglewood. "And so you can enjoy summers here, and you can have your vacation, or take a day off, have a three-day weekend," which we finally did do. Anyway, so we did! We brought the trailer up there. That's how we discovered the Berkshires. And when we—when we came there, I remember—because after two and a half—I won't go into the story, because it's just—I maybe will send it to you—that I wrote up about Howard Barrett. I called it "The Price Tag." Apparently, for cathartic reasons, and to be able to continue—because I never considered myself a writer, really—not a writer writer. But I guess in order to be able to survive and to function, I had to write it out, and then it's like cathartic. So I had written out this episode where we finally did find the house, a farmhouse, just as Kelly had said—talk about fate, luck, chance! Anyway, two and a half years, and that led to our buying some property in Lenox, which that in itself is another story that I wrote up! And it turned out that the house that we bought, which was much too expensive for us—nine thousand dollars instead of forty-five hundred for the first house, that we were sure we were [unclear]—anyway, we bought this house, and it turned out, I named it October Mountain Farm, because it faced the state forest range called October Mountain. Anyway, when my son, the attorney, did the—he went to City Hall in Pittsfield and took a history of the house. We discovered that not only had the house been a grant—that and hundreds of acres—a grant to a British general, but the fourth owner was J. P. Morgan, and the famous Morgan horses were bred in those magnificent barns behind us! And we—it's a big story of how we bought the house and seven acres, and survived. And so I took guests for sixteen years, because my husband would not have his wife work, nor would he have his wife go to college. I would be—as liberal as he was, as broad-minded as he was, and Jewish, who usually, you know—he had a little Napoleon quality. His wife would never work, and he did not want the competition of a college graduate. He scoffed, "What do you need it for? You need another paper on the wall?" Whatever, that's another story, again. In any event, so for six—in order to survive, and he wouldn't let me work, and I did—we were over our heads with expenses with this expensive house, seven acres, a creamery, a milk house next to it, an ice house, a big barn beyond. So I took guests for sixteen years, and with my penchant for talking and feeling very comfortable with strangers, the minute—I remember a taxi driver once visited us, and he said he'd been around a great deal. He said never did he remember feeling so comfortable, so—the minute he stepped into the living room,

he felt comfortable! I was lucky to have, because I really liked people, and to this day I don't see the negatives in people. I'm very Pollyanna that way. Anyway, and that was so important, because with this need to talk, which was a sickness or whatever, I could talk to the strangers. If they would like me, fine. If they didn't, they go off in the pine grove and read. Ditto for me; if I didn't like them, I'd go off in the pine grove and read. So those—and my husband, instead of taking vacation, he took Fridays off. So he had three-day weekends. And when he would come Thursday night from New York, he never saw a dollar pass hands. And except one time when I advertised in the New York Times, after that I never had to advertise again! I had six bedrooms, and people would tell their friends, and then they wouldn't—they didn't want to tell their friends for fear there would be no room for them! And of course, I used to serve a Jewish continental breakfast. You can imagine how loaded with food and calories [laughs] that was! So everybody told everybody else, and I just loved it! It was marvelous! Really wonderful years! And that was in lieu of a job or college, or what have you.

LEVINE: Good for you. And then how about now? What are your activities at this point?

KURK-FEINBERG: Now, of course, living in the Berkshires, and my God, ever since the '72-'73 gas crunch, when they started advertising one tank full of gas, round trip to New York? The yuppies discovered us; real estate prices shot up. Then the white heads like myself discovered the condos as second homes, summer. We're overwhelmed, we've become so popular! And more and more, we have more and more cultural activities to offer the public. It is a tremendous area—it's very fulfilling. There's Tanglewood, there's New Music Foundation, there Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival, summer stock—Williamstown has the reputation of having the best summer stock in the United States. And then we have the Berkshire Theater Festival in Stockbridge, and the Unicorn Theater for young people. There is—there is so much doing that we have. Canyon Ranch is there if you want something that's really a posh resort. And then we have Kripalu, which is for—I don't know if you've heard of Kripalu, but that is like a retreat, and that is wonderful. When I lost my first husband, that was a lifesaver. Instead of joining a grieving group of women, I used to go every Monday, all day, to Kripalu. And it just saved my sanity and everything. Because Al died eight and a half years ago; I'm married eight and a half. No, he died about ten years ago. In any event, so the area has so much to offer! So of course, we have a saying: the only people who pay admission are the tourists;

natives volunteer. Freebies! So I used to volunteer at the Pillow, but I don't now. But now I'm a guide, as I told you, at the Norman Rockwell Museum, and the oldest guide, and I'm rather proud of that! And I do make people of my—I used to keep this to myself, but now I share it with my groups when I end my spiel. And I tell them, "I do hope they exit a very happy museum happier than when they entered." And that really is my private goal! And then I usher at Tanglewood every Saturday for about four hours, and then I usher at the Berkshire Playhouse and at the Unicorn. And music, the Music Foundation, if I like the concert. You know, I'm not too much—into jazz too much, but if I like, like, Rollins—what's his name? Sonny Rollins, I think. He's a saxophonist. Man, he was fantastic! So we, you know, we pick and choose to volunteer there. And then there is so much culture—lectures. They now have the same thing that they have in Florida, the Lifelong Learning Society that is so successful at F.A.U., Florida Atlantic University in Boca Raton. They have ten thousand members! They just built their own building on the campus, and they have become part of the college, the F.A.U., Florida Atlantic University College. And the people here in Lenox have copied that. We now have that kind of an organization for retired people here in Lenox, and they put on marvelous programs. Retired professors, retired teachers, all volunteer their services. They're exhilarating classes! And so there is—there is so—of the art, oh, Chesterwood, in addition to the Norman Rockwell we have Chesterwood. We have the Berkshire Museum, which now under their new head is really gung-ho, doing marvelous things! And musical organizations, I mean, up the kazoo! So since, of course, when the yuppies discovered us, the real estate shot up like crazy. I don't if I said that. That was tough. And as a matter of fact, it took the builder of condominiums fourteen years before he sold his last condo. The concept of a condo was not accepted in the staid New Englanders. They all liked their own little private homes. But as I say, we retirees who are more and more older people seem to be in the majority—we discovered it's wonderful! We live six months in Lenox, in Rolling Hills. And a lot of my antiques, and a lot of the furniture that I had in Great Neck, and in October Mountain Farm—I had expected to be buried from October Mountain Farm! That was an episode in my life, but he became ill. He got cancer of the bones, and we had to sell, and that's when we got into Rolling Hills. And—

LEVINE: So now you go to--?

KURK-FEINBERG: So no, we're six months in Rollings Hills, and six—and I remarried eight years ago. And six months, we're in Delray Beach. So I feel

I have the best of two wonderful worlds! And having inherited a strong constitution, you know, I'm—and maybe that's nature compensating for being short! Whatever!

LEVINE: [Laughs]

KURK-FEINBERG: Or maybe those strong Russian genes, you know, the black bread, and all, and no candy, no cake, no nothing in the early days! Whatever it is, or maybe it's just my good luck! So I feel that at eighty-four plus, I'm on top—knock wood—I really am on top of the world. I feel so grateful! This episode, talking to you now, is truly the icing on the cake!

LEVINE: Well, that's a beautiful place to end! I want to thank you for a most wonderful interview!

KURK-FEINBERG: I want to thank you! I had a feeling a heart would feel a heart here. [Laughs] Thank you so much!

LEVINE: Thank you! I've been speaking with Estelle Kurk-Feinberg, and this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. And I just want to say that we will have some of the writings of Mrs. Kurk-Feinberg on file in the Oral History Office at the Ellis Island Immigration Museum, so that an interested person can even have more information on this most interesting interviewee. Signing off.

[Tape off/on]

LEVINE: Okay, we're going to put an addendum on here. Is this—wait a minute, I don't know. Okay, we're resuming here for a few minutes, because in the course of conversation, Mrs. Kurk-Feinberg mentioned something that I think should be recorded, and this pertains to your mother, and the statement that she made, which I think coming from an immigrant woman at that time is quite extraordinary. So why don't you tell what your mother--?

KURK-FEINBERG: Tell you that one statement?

LEVINE: Well, and any other peripheral about your mother.

KURK-FEINBERG: Well, I don't know where you want—did you want me to start with that one statement, and backtrack?

LEVINE: Yes, yeah.

KURK-FEINBERG: I will say that immigrant lady, who wrote the most interesting English—it would be anyone’s good luck to read! She broke up the language. A comedian would have had a ball with the way she expressed herself! But she sized up America in this way. She said, and she meant every word of it, sincerely, “Estelle, if I had had an education, I would be President of the United States.” This kind of confidence, from an immigrant lady, who when her husband didn’t bring home the pay Friday night—he was a house painter. When he didn’t bring home the pay, she had to survive on the bones, the soup bones, and the lung, liver and miltz that the butcher threw out! So she was really a—I don’t know how to evaluate her! A tremendous sense of self, confidence, survivor, of course, of the terrible—you know, she wandered the Ukraine as a young married woman, and survived by working the fields, and getting permission to sleep on the kitchen floor next to the stove with her little babies. Survived horrible experiences, not particularly in a war, but after the war, when survival was very, very tough. Poland was devastated, very poor! And the constant skirmishes that went out, around about the borders and so forth. And where she had been practically abandoned by a husband who had—a young husband who had disappeared rather than serve in the Polish Army, as I said earlier. And where many times, she had to “sell herself” for potatoes, just to survive.

LEVINE: How about heroes? Did your mother or you—well I guess you had a lot of heroes, from your reading?

KURK-FEINBERG: Heroines, not so much heroes.

LEVINE: Heroines.

KURK-FEINBERG: No, she was not well-read. She did read. I think she must have read the Bintelbriv [PH], you know, the Jewish book—was it the--?

LEVINE: *The Forward*?

KURK-FEINBERG: *The Forward*, yes. But she was not well-read. She was a very hard-working, practical person, extremely conscious of her beauty and her inner strength that is hard to fathom, considering all the things that happened in her life. Maybe she developed that because it was a matter of survival. She never had a woman friend. No woman would ever trust her! The men always flocked around her! She would sit in the living room; there was always one or two men admiring her! And when she borrowed the five hundred dollars to buy her first piece of property in Yonkers, a place called the Big Egg—it was a corner house, a two-story

corner house, and the basement was a saloon, on the corner with this tremendous, tremendous stone shaped like an egg, so that they had given this building that name. She had borrowed, "borrowed" five hundred dollars from one of the admirers, and she bought the house. And as I say in the story, a year or so later sold it for seven thousand dollars net cash profit—unheard of in those years! And forever after she and her husband were in competition. She never trusted him, because they had started out with a mutual checking account, and one day he took out all the money, and there was nothing left. And from that day on, she never trusted him. And they were really in competition, because when she bought the Big Egg, he went a house. When she bought another house, and always cold water flats—they couldn't afford, you know, in Yonkers. And he would buy a cold water flat. And they—they really had a terrible life together on one level, and on another level, the physical level, they were very much in love with each other! And I don't know. As a child growing up, I don't know whether I saw the truth, you know, and the right perspective. But at least these are the things that at this time in my life I remember. And I think they must have been reasonably true.

LEVINE: Okay, we're going to stop here again, and signing off.

END OF INTERVIEW