

EI-1031

BETTY BRENNER

BIRTHDATE: JANUARY 8, 1908

INTERVIEW DATE: DECEMBER 21, 1998

AGE AT TIME OF INTERVIEW:

RUNNING TIME: 42:45

INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE, PH.D.

RECORDING ENGINEER:

INTERVIEW LOCATION: ELLIS ISLAND

TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: TAPESCRIBE

TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY:

AUSTRIA, 1914

AGE: 6

SHIP: KAISER AUGUSTA VICTORIA

PORT:

RESIDENCES:

LEVINE: Today is December 21st, 1998, and I'm here in the Ellis Island Oral History Studio with Betty Brenner, who was born Brana Nebelkov, on January 8th, 1908, in Austria. Mrs. Brenner immigrated in 1914, in August, at the age of six. This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. Okay, I guess I've sort of said your birth date, and you were born in Austria. Where in Austria were you born?

BRENNER: A small town, a small village, country village [laughs]—Rokbuta.

LEVINE: Can you spell it?

BRENNER: R-O-K—Roka--B-U-T-A, I guess.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BRENNER: That's as near as I can come to—I haven't heard from it since [pause]—Austria!

LEVINE: Okay, was it near any larger city?

BRENNER: Yeah, Lemberg [PH].

LEVINE: Pardon?

BRENNER: Lemberg.

LEVINE: Lemberg. Okay, and you were only six, so but do you—did you live in the same village up until the time that you left Austria?

BRENNER: Yeah.

LEVINE: Oh, okay. So now, can you describe that village? Or, do you remember anything about that village that you think of when you think of it?

BRENNER: Yeah, well, it was a farm—my mother had a farm. And also she had a—she sold things, I don't know, from the farm [laughs].

LEVINE: Like eggs?

BRENNER: Yeah, stuff like that.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Now—

BRENNER: Chickens. I think maybe she had a cow—I don't know. I was—[laughs].

LEVINE: Well, now your mother—what was your mother's name?

BRENNER: Anna.

LEVINE: And her maiden name?

BRENNER: Imdyk

LEVINE: I--?

BRENNER: I-M-D-Y-K.

LEVINE: Okay, and so your mother had a farm. What about your father?

BRENNER: Well, my father, he was in America [laughs].

LEVINE: Oh, when—how old were you when he went to America?

BRENNER: I must have been younger, a couple of years, a year, younger. He used to commute up and back.

LEVINE: Oh. So do you have—well, what was your father's name?

BRENNER: Jacob.

LEVINE: Jacob. Do you have any memories of your father in Austria?

BRENNER: Yeah.

LEVINE: What do you remember that either he did with you, or--?

BRENNER: I used to say, my aunts came over, they said, "Where's your father?" I'd say, "He's on the wall!"

LEVINE: He's on the wall?

BRENNER: Yeah, he's hanging on the wall! [Laughs] He was—he had a picture of himself on the wall. My mother had a picture. [Unclear], "My father's hanging on the wall." That's what I remember—they used to laugh hysterically, and everybody laughed! I didn't know why they were laughing—I didn't! I was very young—I didn't know! He used to go over and come back, worked here.

LEVINE: What did he do when he was here, when you were there?

BRENNER: He was a furrier.

LEVINE: A furrier, uh-huh.

BRENNER: [Unclear]

LEVINE: Do you remember his visits at all?

BRENNER: No.

LEVINE: Do you remember what you knew about America, you know, from him, or from anybody else, before you came?

BRENNER: Well, I just loved the country where I lived. I liked it there, so I didn't think about America very much. Because I loved the village, and the trees and the flowers, and the fresh air. And I was a kid! I was carefree, you know?

LEVINE: Yeah. Did you go to school at all?

BRENNER: No.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, yeah. Did you have much of a family? Did you have any other brothers and sisters?

BRENNER: Oh, yeah.

LEVINE: Over there?

BRENNER: Yeah, we were five, so there was four more. Brothers, three brothers, and one sister.

LEVINE: And where did you fall in the birth order?

BRENNER: I was, let's see. My brother was the youngest, and I was next, next to him. Then my sister with the two brothers. That's five.

LEVINE: Were you closest to any particular one of them?

BRENNER: Ah, to my sister. I had cousins there, too. Yeah, I had a lot of cousins I was fond of.

LEVINE: So was it your mother's family? Did your mother come from that area? Did her family come from that area, too?

BRENNER: I think so, yeah.

LEVINE: And your father, do you know, was his family also from--?

BRENNER: Not from that area. They came from somewhere; I don't know anything about his background.

LEVINE: Oh, okay, so you didn't have family on his side? It was on your mother's side, then?

BRENNER: No, I just was friends with my mother's side there, because they were there, you know.

LEVINE: How about any grandparents? Did you have?

BRENNER: I had grandparents, but I don't remember how I knew them. I saw them, but I don't know how I happened to see them, whether they came to see, or we went there. I don't know.

LEVINE: Do you remember any experiences with grandparents at all, in the Old World?

BRENNER: No. They were very religious, naturally, you know. And I was just [unclear].

LEVINE: How about your own family? Was your mother religious?

BRENNER: Yeah, they observed, yeah, kosher, and all that.

LEVINE: So you grew up with that? That was part of your life as a little girl?

BRENNER: Yeah.

LEVINE: And so what did you do for fun? Do you remember?

BRENNER: In Europe?

LEVINE: Yeah.

BRENNER: We used to run around in the fields and play, and we used to make wreaths of flowers. And our cousin was always making wreaths of flowers, and putting that on me. I think I was the youngest. You know, putting wreaths of flowers. They used to make wreaths. They was always dolling me up. And then they used to scare me. They'd say, "The skutzim [PH] are coming," and then they saw some boys, you know? So we used to run like crazy! I don't know where, but we'd run [unclear]. I remember that; that's something crazy to remember! [Laughs]

LEVINE: [Laughs] And did you have like games, that we have, the same kinds of--?

BRENNER: No. I don't think so.

LEVINE: How about, like swimming, or in the winter, did you do any winter—ice skating, that kind of stuff?

BRENNER: No, nothing there. It was nothing there, really.

LEVINE: So is there anything else, like when you think about Austria, that comes to your mind, that's a memory? Either a fond memory or a memory that you're not happy with?

BRENNER: Well, I never went to—I never went outside of where I was, you know, so there was a lot of beautiful things in Austria, but I never saw that, unfortunately.

LEVINE: It sounds like you were really in the country, and that was beautiful, and you were happy there?

BRENNER: Yeah, I was—yeah.

LEVINE: So it sounds like you had a rather happy childhood over there?

BRENNER: I think so, yeah. More so than when I came here! [Laughs]

LEVINE: Oh, okay, well we'll get to that. Now what about your mother? Now, was she actually working on this farm, or did she hire people?

BRENNER: She must have had some help, but she worked, you know, very hard.

LEVINE: What kind of a mother was she? What kind of a person was she?

BRENNER: A very busy woman. [Laughs]

LEVINE: Taking care of a farm, I would, yeah.

BRENNER: And children, and customers, and this and that, spoke Polish. Polish. Most of them were Polish, the Polacks.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh. So this was near the border, is that why they were--?

BRENNER: It might be, yeah. Polish. God, I need a map where Lemberg is, then we'll find all the little spots around it. But they spoke Polish.

LEVINE: And so did your mother speak a few languages then?

BRENNER: Just Polish and Jewish.

LEVINE: Jewish, uh-huh, yeah. And do you remember her having any kind of enjoyable moments when she wasn't so busy?

BRENNER: Oh, well they'd have parties, and holidays, invited the cousins and their children. Cooking, mostly [laughs].

LEVINE: Do you remember, like, the house you lived in?

BRENNER: It was just a cottage, or a, you know, a one-family, like you have here with a kitchen, a bedroom, a bath or toilet or whatever.

LEVINE: Do you remember, like what did she cook on? Was it--?

BRENNER: Pots.

LEVINE: [Laughs] No, but I mean, what kind of—like a stove, or a fireplace, or--?

BRENNER: Stove, coal stove. Coal.

LEVINE: Okay, well before we talk about you getting ready to leave and everything, is there anything else about those years that stick in your mind?

BRENNER: Nothing, because I told David, there's not to much I could tell about there.

LEVINE: Okay, well we'll continue now, then. When—how was it decided that you would leave for America when you did?

BRENNER: Oh, that was—that was a vital thing. We were going to go into—my father used to write my mother, that we're going to go into war, there's talk of war in this country, and it's Austria and Germany will be very involved with it. Naturally, we learned that in history—they were! So he said, "As soon as possible, sell off what you got there, and pack up, and come!" And he did that. He was working here; he was making a living. So he was preparing for that. So he sent us tickets, and that's how we came over.

LEVINE: No, do you know, just because somebody might have told you, do you know why your father came here initially?

BRENNER: From my mother! There was a [Yiddish], [laughs] you know. So he met my mother, [unclear]. Came to meet her.

LEVINE: Oh, you mean he came back from the United States to meet your mother? No.

BRENNER: No, he was—the family was—in the beginning, my father didn't belong to this village, but he met my mother. That's how—he was introduced to my mother; that's how they got married.

LEVINE: I see.

BRENNER: But then he went to America to work, to make money, the golden land, you know. The golden land.

LEVINE: Did he have any family here when he first came, do you know?

BRENNER: I don't know. He had a lot of brothers; I met them all here.

LEVINE: Oh, so some of them maybe were here, and he came because they--?

BRENNER: Yeah, right, yeah. They were very close. He was very close with his brothers.

LEVINE: I see, so you really got to know your father's family after you got here, but you didn't really know them over there?

BRENNER: Exactly.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So, he told your mother to sell everything off and come over, and she did? So what was it like, the departure? Do you remember?

BRENNER: Yes, everything was done one, two, three. The war started—when did it start? It broke out in August, too, I think.

LEVINE: I don't know what month, offhand.

BRENNER: It didn't take no time before the war was—yeah. Well, I guess, and my mother didn't want to come. She liked it over there! [Laughs] She had her own life there she liked, and she didn't want to. But he kept coming over and saying, "You've got to go. You've got to go. The children—you're not going to be safe here. You're not going to--." There was no Hitler then, but there was other problems, you know. But he finally persuaded her. That's how we came over, on the Kaiser Augusta Victoria [laughs]. What a boat!

LEVINE: [Laughs] Well, do you remember anything your mother brought?

BRENNER: Brought from Europe?

LEVINE: Yeah.

BRENNER: Some pots, maybe [laughs].

LEVINE: Yeah? How about you, as a little girl? Did you bring anything that you wanted to have with you?

BRENNER: No. We didn't play with toys.

LEVINE: Oh, okay. So okay, so when, right before you left, did people come to say goodbye?

BRENNER: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah. There was a lot of that, but I wasn't interested in that [laughs].

LEVINE: What were you thinking, can you--?

BRENNER: We're going to go—let's go! Let's get it over with! [Laughs] I wasn't happy about it, but let's get it over with, you know?

LEVINE: Did you know a lot of people who were leaving? I mean, were there children that you knew, or other families that were leaving for this country?

BRENNER: No, I didn't know anyone that was leaving. There was a lot of Polacks living around there, you know?

LEVINE: So they weren't leaving, they were staying?

BRENNER: No, they weren't going anywhere.

LEVINE: So okay, so you left your house, and do you remember if you had to travel very far to get to the port?

BRENNER: I remember that we had to travel. Now, the point is, the thing is, I don't know whether that's—there isn't anybody I can ask. My cousins are gone, and who's not gone? I think we went to Italy. Is there a port in Italy? [Laughs]

LEVINE: Yeah, Naples.

BRENNER: Maybe we came in from Italy.

LEVINE: So do you remember anything about that journey, before you reached the place where you got the ship?

BRENNER: No, because it was all rush, rush, rush, rush, rush, rush. The whole thing was rush, rush, rush.

LEVINE: So it was your mother and your four--?

BRENNER: Five.

LEVINE: The five children?

BRENNER: Yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah, and was anybody else traveling with you?

BRENNER: No.

LEVINE: Okay. Oh, so your mother had her hands full?

BRENNER: Yeah. That's why she used to keep putting it off, but finally my father said, "You better come or you won't be able to get out of there." In fact, you never know in a war who's going to win, and what they're going to do with you, you know.

LEVINE: So now we come to the port and the ship. Why don't you tell about the ship, what it was like?

BRENNER: The ship was awful! [Laughs] The worst part! It smelled! There was no good sleeping quarters, and everybody seemed to be huddled. And oh, it was just awful! After a nice life in the outdoors, and having fun with playing in the grass and the fields, and running around like a meshugenah, this was confining, smelly! Couldn't stand the food! I couldn't stand the food. Whatever food we had was awful; I couldn't stand it. I think I used to throw up. And sleeping quarters was not too good.

LEVINE: Was it like a dormitory? Is that what the sleeping--?

BRENNER: Yeah. Bunk beds.

LEVINE: And was it a long—do you have any memory of how long it took?

BRENNER: About eight days.

LEVINE: So, when you—do you remember the ship coming in to the New York Harbor?

BRENNER: Yes.

LEVINE: What was that like?

BRENNER: That was awe-inspiring, even for me! [Laughs]

LEVINE: [Laughs]

BRENNER: I looked at the Statue of Liberty, and I says, "I never saw anything so beautiful in my life!" I says, "It's just unbelievable!" That's when I opened my eyes; I was sleeping all the time! [Laughs] I opened my eyes, I said, "Ooh, look, look! We're here! We're here!" you know. "That's the Statue of Liberty." And I looked! There was my father waiting at the pier.

LEVINE: How would you describe yourself as a six year old little girl, when you first came to this country? What kind of a temperament, or qualities, did you have?

BRENNER: I was precocious and unhappy at the same time, you know? That's it.

LEVINE: And when you—you must have seen your father, what, after you went through the examinations at Ellis Island? Is that when you--?

BRENNER: Yeah, when we went through. They didn't let you go until you went through. You didn't see anybody. Then when we went through, we saw him, you know? He was waiting, waiting at the pier.

LEVINE: Do you remember if your mother was worried, or anybody was worried, about passing, about, you know, if you had any sickness--?

BRENNER: Well, I was the one that couldn't open my eyes. I was sleeping most of the time! [Laughs] I blocked it out!

LEVINE: [Laughs] You didn't want to come, so--?

BRENNER: I actually hated it, you know? Except the Statue of Liberty; I've got to tell the truth. But when I saw my father, I says, "Ah, he started all the trouble!" [Laughs]

LEVINE: If it wasn't for him, you'd be back where you wanted to be?

BRENNER: Yeah.

LEVINE: So how about your brothers and sister? How did they feel about the whole thing?

BRENNER: They didn't feel like me. They took everything the way it's supposed to be taken. Well, my oldest brother immediately joined the Army, the U.S. Army. He was—how old was he? Sixteen or seventeen.

LEVINE: That's how old he was when you came?

BRENNER: Yeah. She spaced us all the time, because he used to go to work in the United States. So he took off—isn't that funny?—and he joined the Army. Went to Texas. He had a good life. He used to come home, he was close. He was a nice guy, really, a doll, beautiful-looking.

LEVINE: What was his name?

BRENNER: Sam.

LEVINE: Sam. Well now, just before we go further, Ellis Island—is there anything you remember about it? How would you describe it when you saw it that first time?

BRENNER: It just looks like a palace, by comparison. It was a smelly old hovel, and the guys that were working to push you through—

LEVINE: Inspectors, yeah.

BRENNER: [Unclear], they'd give us a hearty welcome! [Laughs]

LEVINE: Did they give you anything? Did they give you food here?

BRENNER: On the boat?

LEVINE: No, here at Ellis Island?

BRENNER: We weren't here that long. No, they didn't give us anything.

LEVINE: Oh, so you went through very quickly?

BRENNER: Very quickly, yeah. That's how they went—they did very quickly.

LEVINE: So you met your father, and where did you go with him?

BRENNER: Well, he took an—he got an apartment for us on the East Side.

LEVINE: The Lower East Side?

BRENNER: Yeah. Naturally! And I didn't like that! [Laughs]

LEVINE: What was that like?

BRENNER: Terrible! It's a tenement house—ooh! Listen, I don't want any of this stuff to get out! [Laughs]

LEVINE: [Laughs] You mean, what we're taping? Well, was the tenement a lot worse than the living circumstances that you had had in Austria?

BRENNER: Much worse! I was free there! Where was I going to run on Delancey Street? Where was I going to go? Where was I going to breathe? Where was I going to have fun? School started right away. I liked school; that was the only thing I liked. And I liked reading, so I used to bury my head in a book. And I was an avid reader of Horatio Alger [laughs]. And that was usually a boy's book. When girls were reading the love stories, I was reading Horatio Alger! I didn't like love stories—the hell with that! And that was nice, from farm boy to president, all that, and ambition, kids with ambition, you know? That's the way I was.

LEVINE: And how do you remember learning English?

BRENNER: In school.

LEVINE: Was it difficult, or did you need special help?

BRENNER: No, no. It was so easy, I can't believe the way they speak English today, and teach it. Make a big to do about it.

LEVINE: You just picked it up?

BRENNER: My mother picked it up from us! We all went to school; my mother picked it up. Those that went to school—the others older. Yeah, my sister and my baby brother, who was younger than me, and I went to school, and we picked it up. And my mother picked it up from us; she was very bright. In no time, she was reading a paper!

LEVINE: Wow! How did she like it here?

BRENNER: Well, she never told me how she liked it, but she was [pause], she was with my father, and they had two more babies, two sisters, I have. And they never through what I went through, or the rest of us went through, so they don't know. They didn't have it so good. Parents are old already, you know? No time to have children! Different times. Different times.

LEVINE: How did the Lower East Side strike you, compared with the free and open country?

BRENNER: Very bad! Very, very intolerable!

LEVINE: What was it about it that really bothered you?

BRENNER: The noise, the crowds, the garbage, the this, the that! Push carts. I didn't like it! [Laughs]

LEVINE: How about your teachers? Did you like them?

BRENNER: Well, I had a few teachers that—I had one teacher particularly that was very good. She was my English teacher. She liked me very much. But there's a couple—there was a, let's see, there was a couple of Irish teachers that were—I thought were, they used to say, "Stand away! Stand away! Don't get near me! Stand away!" you know? The Irish, they were very mean. I was good in geography and English, history. I liked that. I lost myself in that, and Horatio Alger [laughs].

LEVINE: Let's see. So your oldest brother joined the Army right away?

BRENNER: Immediately! He took a look and he said, "That's it, I'm going." So he went to Texas. He joined—they grabbed him; he was adorable! They went to Texas. Used to come home on furlough and everything. He was a good boy, but he made a different life for himself.

LEVINE: And how about the next one down?

BRENNER: He went to the first—he went into the fur business with my father.

LEVINE: Right away?

BRENNER: Yeah, and that's a mistake that he made. He should have went to Texas also with my brother. He would have been happier. But he was very cranky all the time; he hated it. My sister, also, she went in to work at a factory, went a couple of years, I don't know.

LEVINE: Like sewing? Is that the kind of factory?

BRENNER: Sewing, yeah.

LEVINE: And so it was you and your younger brother were the two that went to school when you first came?

BRENNER: When we came. So my brother didn't like it, so they used to say, "Your sister likes it, and she's so good! Can't you be like your sister?" [Laughs] He used to come back and tell me! I liked it. That's the only thing I liked about the whole thing, you know? So thank God I found something to like, and I still do a lot of reading anyway.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So, let's see. So your father—he already knew English when you came over?

BRENNER: Yes, he knew English, and he taught us all the dirty words! [Laughs]

LEVINE: Oh, really? [Laughs]

BRENNER: Don't put that in! [Laughs]

LEVINE: What was your father like? What kind of a personality would you say?

BRENNER: He was happy-go-lucky. No, not really. He worked hard; a hard worker. And he was a good father, you know? We were bad children, that's all! [Laughs] He was a good father!

LEVINE: What would you—why were you bad? Like, what--?

BRENNER: He was a good father, very good. He loved us all. Orthodox, religious, you know, hard-working, made money, gave my mother the money, bought her jewelry. He was very good to my mother. Very good to my mother. She did the right thing to come here, but not for us!

LEVINE: Was there a point where you changed your mind, and you were happy you were here?

BRENNER: Never! [Laughs] Never! Until I—I went to school, and then I went to business school. I took up typing and bookkeeping and all that. I started to work. That was all right, you know?

LEVINE: Did you stay in the Lower East Side for a long time?

BRENNER: No, no, no. He moved. He bought a house in Williamsburg, and he kept bettering himself, you know, buying a nicer house. He worked very hard.

LEVINE: So how long would you say you were in the Lower East Side before the family moved?

BRENNER: Not long, a couple of years.

LEVINE: Okay, we're going to pause here. Kevin will turn over the tape, and we'll continue.

BRENNER: More?

LEVINE: Yeah.

END OF SIDE A

BEGIN SIDE B

LEVINE: Okay, we're continuing here on Side B. And we were talking about that the family—your father was hard-working and bettered himself and the family, and you moved from the Lower East Side after a few years to Brooklyn.

BRENNER: To his own house in Williamsburg.

LEVINE: Williamsburg.

BRENNER: That's right.

LEVINE: And then, so you went through school, and business school, when you were living in Williamsburg? Or you moved yet again after that?

BRENNER: No, when I was in Williamsburg.

LEVINE: And so, what was your first job?

BRENNER: Assistant bookkeeper.

LEVINE: And it was a big company, or small?

BRENNER: No, small companies. I was feeling my way about it, you know. I made nice, nice—average wage then. It was twelve dollars a week! [Laughs] Can I go to the bathroom?

LEVINE: Oh, okay, we'll pause here. [Tape off/on] Okay, we were talking about your starting out working in small companies.

BRENNER: Yeah, getting experience.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And did you have a social life? Did you mix with--?

BRENNER: Yes, well I liked swimming. I went, used to go to the Y, the Y we had near my house. I used to go there to swim, you know, active, remain active. And it was [pause] oh, I don't know. A hall, a social hall that we used to go dancing, you know. [Unclear] I forgot the street. Williamsburg.

LEVINE: So were there a lot of--?

BRENNER: It was a nice place to live in those days.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And how about, like, the people in the neighborhood? Were there a lot of people from Austria? I mean, were there people from all different--?

BRENNER: There were people from Austria, but there was a lot of people, different people, you know?

LEVINE: And was that true the whole time, in school and in--?

BRENNER: No, in school we didn't discuss our backgrounds much. We were in school for one thing: to learn and to do our best work. That was it. We weren't socializing in school. I don't remember socializing in school. Maybe some kids did. But I didn't. I used to like to read, and just study.

LEVINE: Was, so did you remain working for some time?

BRENNER: Oh, yeah. 'Til I got married.

LEVINE: And how did you meet your husband?

BRENNER: Through my job. My job.

LEVINE: And--?

BRENNER: He came up to my place. He was buying merchandise from my—from my boss, for his work. And my boss introduced us. He says, "I can't take her out because I'm married, but you're not married," he said, "You can take her out." I said, "Oh, look at that, he's a [unclear]," you know? So my [laughs], he went on vacation and he wrote to me, you know, from his vacation. That's how I started to go with him, you know, got married.

LEVINE: So did you like him right away?

BRENNER: He was a charming man, good looking. Look at my daughter! [Laughs]

LEVINE: Yeah, so after you married, did you continue to work, or did you stop working?

BRENNER: No, I didn't work. I stopped. I got pregnant. I have another daughter.

LEVINE: So you have two daughters?

BRENNER: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. And then did you stay in Brooklyn or did you move?

BRENNER: No, I moved to Forest Hills. When my husband worked himself up, we moved to Forest Hills. And there my daughters me doctors! That's the success story of my life! [Laughs] My daughters!

LEVINE: How about you personally? What do you feel very satisfied about that you've done in your life?

BRENNER: I wouldn't say I feel very satisfied.

LEVINE: Well, let's say, what do you feel, maybe, very good about, that you've done in your life?

BRENNER: I don't feel very good about anything! [Laughs]

LEVINE: Oh, come on! [Laughs] What were the high points, then? Let's put it that way.

BRENNER: When my daughters got married to doctors! That was the high point. And this one got a divorce. That was the low point! My husband passed away, that time. And she's a wonderful daughter; so's the other one nice. That's—

LEVINE: David's mother.

BRENNER: David's mother—very clever girl, very nice.

LEVINE: Yeah, I should say for the tape that Mrs. Brenner's daughter Rosalind is here with her today, and David Warren, who is your nephew. Or, no—

BRENNER: Grandson.

LEVINE: Your grandson, is here also today.

BRENNER: And he's the son of my other daughter, you know, Marilyn. She's Rosalind. That's it.

LEVINE: So what about—you said you were such an avid reader. Did you have—well, you said Horatio Alger. I was going to ask you what heroes you had in your lifetime that you—either people you knew that you looked up to, and respected, and wanted to emulate?

BRENNER: Oh, you mean authors?

LEVINE: It could be somebody you read about and was a hero, but also it could be somebody you knew. Did you have heroes growing up?

BRENNER: Not—authors, books, yeah. Favorite books, well, I forget already, so many. I used to love to read good, deep books, you know. English authors were mostly my favorites. English authors. English movies are usually good, too.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. When you look back on it now, your whole family coming here and starting out all over again, do you think that made a difference in your personally?

BRENNER: As a child, I imagine it did, because if I was so happy where I was, and was so unhappy where I came, it certainly made a difference. Now, I was too young to grow up being disappointed, you know? But I had to make something out of myself, so that's how I did what I did, with my—

LEVINE: Schooling?

BRENNER: --business school and all that. I couldn't go to--[sigh].

LEVINE: I mean, I imagine business schooling was sort of the highest thing that a girl would aspire to at that time?

BRENNER: No way! College is the highest thing! High school, and college.

LEVINE: Was that a possibility for you?

BRENNER: No. No.

LEVINE: How about the rest of your family? Do you think coming here made any big difference in the family as a whole, or in the individual members?

BRENNER: [Pause] We weren't close. You know, not with my brothers and sisters. One sister that came along with us, she died. And these two, the ones that are here now, the younger ones—I have nothing in common with them. I try to be an older sister, you know, and all that, but I really have—they're so different! So different!

LEVINE: Do you think that has to do with the fact that they started out here?

BRENNER: It has to do with the fact that they came to my parents late in life, and they were treated very well! But, they haven't got the background. I don't know if I should brag about it, but they haven't got the background that I [laughs]—we have nothing in common. [Pause] The one that died I had something in common with. She was good, and she was close to me and everything. Unfortunately her husband died, and she followed him right away.

LEVINE: Yeah. And how about this period in your life, this time of, you know, you don't have to work, your children are grown? What is it like for you now?

BRENNER: Boring!

LEVINE: Are you still a reader?

BRENNER: Yeah, but my eyes aren't what they used to be. But I'm still reading, regardless. I'm reading.

LEVINE: And how about, just looking back on your life, is there some way you would, I don't know, characterize it? Or ways you changed over time, or anything that you would say about that?

BRENNER: There's such a change in this country, it's unbelievable! And when I think and look back, people are so different! They're not taking anything seriously, you know? And they do this, and then they're going to say, "Oh, we'll undo it," when I do something here. You know, "We'll undo it." They do terrible things, then they undo it! I mean, why do all these horrible things?

LEVINE: Like, what kinds of things are you thinking of?

BRENNER: Like try to get rid of the President! He's not such a bad President! He had to have his coffee breaks! [Laughs] That's—if his wife can stand him, why can't the country?

LEVINE: Uh-huh, yeah, I agree. But you've seen a lot of changes—

BRENNER: Oh, yeah.

LEVINE: --over the time. And you think people in general are different in the way things are approached now?

BRENNER: People are very different, very rude, uncaring, you know. They shove you aside, you know? We were taught in school: please, thank you, this and that. I don't know. But that doesn't bother me; that's their business, you know. It's none of my business how they are, they too. I do what I do, and that's it.

LEVINE: So you consider yourself fully American? In other words, the part from the old country, do you feel that that's a part of who you are today? No.

BRENNER: No. There wasn't enough there to make an impression.

LEVINE: Okay, well is there anything else that you can think of that relates to Ellis Island, or coming here?

BRENNER: No, I think I told you everything about my trip over, and how I felt in the boat, how terrible it was. It's a wonder it didn't fall apart [laughs] in the water! And even when you read a book about it, some of the authors put that into a book, and the way they described it, I said, "Gee, that's just my feeling, the way it was!" That's the way it was.

LEVINE: Well, I hope you enjoy looking around a little bit today.

BRENNER: I will, yeah.

LEVINE: And I want to thank you so much. This was a lovely interview.

EI-1031/BRENNER

BRENNER: I'm so happy to meet you, too.

LEVINE: And it's a pleasure.

BRENNER: Thank you.

LEVINE: So I've been speaking with Betty Brenner, and she came from Austria in 1914 when she was six years old. And today is December 21st, 1998, and this is Janet Levine signing off for the National Park Service.

END OF INTERVIEW