

EI-1044

SARA REA

BIRTHDATE: JANUARY 29, 1924

INTERVIEW DATE: MARCH 14, 1999

AGE AT TIME OF INTERVIEW: 75

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INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE, PH.D.

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ROMANIA, 1929

AGE: 5

SHIP: DEUTSCHLAND

PORT:

RESIDENCES:

LEVINE: Today is March 14th, 1999. I'm here in Fort Myers, Florida with Sara Webber [PH] Rea, who came from Romania at the age of 5 on the Deutschland. She came with her mother. It was just your mother, wasn't it?

REA: Yes. My father had already been in this country for five years.

LEVINE: Okay.

REA: Long enough to become a citizen. So he could bring us over—

LEVINE: Okay.

REA: —on a non-immigrant basis.

LEVINE: Okay. So—so Mrs. Rea came with her mother in 1929 and she was five years of age. And this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. If

you would start, please, by saying your birth date and where in Romania you were born.

REA: I was born January 29th, 1924.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

REA: And I was born in a small Saxon village called Kleinschelken. And that's a German name because we were of German extraction years and years ago. And that is spelled K-L-E-I-N-S-H-E-L-K-E-N. Today it is known by a different name because the Romanians changed all the German names to Romanian.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Okay. Do you happen to know the Romanian name of the town at this time?

REA: I do but I couldn't spell it for you. It's Sheikemika Sheikemare [PH].

LEVINE: Well, is it—where is it located in—in—

REA: In Transylvania.

LEVINE: Okay.

REA: And I get a lot of fun out of that.

LEVINE: How so?

REA: Because of, you know, Count Dracula and all that. And I always tell people, "Don't fool with me because you don't know my uncle, Count Dracula." [laughter]

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Okay. So what was your father's name?

REA: George.

LEVINE: And your mother?

REA: Sara.

LEVINE: Sara. And her maiden name?

REA: May—M-A-Y.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Now, were both your mother and father from that area in Romania?

REA: Yes, the same village.

LEVINE: The sa—oh, uh-huh. And how about grandparents? Did you have grandparents—

REA: Oh, yes.

LEVINE: —there that you—

REA: Yes.

LEVINE: —remember?

REA: I remember them vaguely. I remember my mother's parents because we lived with them until my father could send for us. And vaguely, I remember my father's parents, the Webber grandparents.

LEVINE: What's the—what—when you think of them, what—what do you think of, your father's grandparents? Do you have any, either visual images or any—

REA: Well, I have pictures of them.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

REA: So—

LEVINE: Y—yeah. And any experiences that you ever remember?

REA: Well, I do remem—with my May grandparents, with whom we lived, they adored me, my being their only grandchild at the time. And I remember my grandfather, who was—who reminded me more of a Turk with his big handlebar mustache. And he would not permit my mother to chastise me. [laughs] So it was pretty nice, what I can remember.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. How about your grandmother? How do you recall her?

REA: Oh, the same way. She coddled me and I remember several times I used to sleep with her in her big bed and—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, yeah. Now, do you remember the house at all that you lived in when you were there?

REA: Yes, it was—the house is still in existence and has been for hundreds of years. And I was born in that house, as was my mother, although she was born in Austria, Hungary, and I was born in Romania.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm.

REA: But the province was given to Romania after World War I.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Now, could you describe the house? Was it a big house? Was it—what was it made of? Was it—

REA: It was made, it seems to me, of a form of concrete, like they built those houses centuries ago. The house is about 3 or 400 years old. And it reminds sort of like the fairy tales I used to see and the pictures they showed of them. And I do have some pictures, if you would like to see them later.

LEVINE: Oh, great. Yes. Well, when you say fairy tales, w—what—what about it was—was fairy tale-like?

REA: Like they showed in fairy tale books, there were these old, old houses and we had a courtyard with big gates that you go—the wagons could drive into the courtyard. And there was a huge outdoor oven where they baked their bread.

LEVINE: In the courtyard?

REA: Yeah, up next to the house.

LEVINE: Were there other houses around the courtyard?

REA: Oh, yes. Next to each other.

LEVINE: Attached?

REA: No.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

REA: They each had their own yard and they backed up to a hill or a mountain, whatever it was. And they used to send the farm animals—there would be a herdsman come through the village. And I know that the pigs and the sheep—and—and perhaps some of the cattle went with these herdsman when they came by and blew their horns. And he took them out to graze, because the villages were built with strong fortifications around them and a fortress church in each village, because in the years

gone by, the Turks used to attack a lot. And when there—they did, everyone would go within this fortress church. And the grounds—the farms were around the village. And people used to go out to them to work their farms.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

REA: And their—their—the crop that I remember my grandparents raised was the grapes to make wine.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh. Now, would there be several complexes of houses around a courtyard in—

REA: No.

LEVINE: —the village? Or the village consisted of that?

REA: The village consisted of individual houses with their own courtyards. And then they had a center where the public buildings were—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

REA: —and were near the church.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Well, how m—do you have any rough idea of how many people might have been in that village?

REA: Village? Oh, I would guess about 3 or 400.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm.

REA: That's just a guess.

LEVINE: Now, was—what—what was the church? What—what denomination?

REA: Lutheran.

LEVINE: Lutheran. And was everyone in the town Lutheran?

REA: Oh, yes.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

REA: Yes. And they all spoke German and they taught in the school in German. They had to learn Romanian after it became a part of Romania.

But their own German was still much in use then. It isn't now anymore. In fact, most of the Saxons are gone from there.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

REA: They all went to Austria and to Germany and so forth.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. But when you were there for that period of time, it was Romania?

REA: It was but was—

LEVINE: But it was Saxon in—

REA: Yes.

LEVINE: —in culture.

REA: Yeah, they're called Transylvanian Saxons.

LEVINE: Okay. Uh-hmm.

REA: Uh-hmm.

LEVINE: Okay. Now, how about your mother? How do you—by the way, is your mother still alive?

REA: She died two years ago.

LEVINE: Oh.

REA: When she was here with me.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. How do you remember her as a little girl, a five-year-old girl, coming from Romania? W—how would you describe your mother at that time?

REA: Well, she was—it—it's a strange thing. We hadn't—I had never seen my father until we came to this country when I was five years old. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

REA: So they had been apart for five years. My father managed to snag one of the last visas to come over. You know, they wouldn't let just anyone come over. There was a limited number of people—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

REA: —from those countries.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, yeah. Right.

REA: And my mother was—well, like I said, while in Europe, my grandparents were really my mainstay. And it was after [chuckles] we came to this country that Mom and Dad were in my life.

LEVINE: I see. Well, now, what was your mother doing while your father was in the United States?

REA: She had to help in the vineyards and in the chores and looking after the animals and what—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

REA: —everyone else did there.

LEVINE: Yeah. And—and was—you said there was a place—were there shops, such a thing as shops in—in the village.

REA: There were—there were little stores. In fact, my grandfather had a small tavern built into the front of the house—

LEVINE: Oh.

REA: —where they sold wine and beer and things.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Do you remember the—the—anything about the—the grapes, the picking, the making of wine? Any of that?

REA: No, that, I was never a part of. When they all went to work in the vineyards, I was put in this childcare, like a kindergarten thing. And our lunches were packed and we were there until they came back from the fields.

LEVINE: I see. And h—were you put in—in that kindergarten thing, like, from age three, four, five?

REA: I really don't remember.

LEVINE: Yeah. Do you remember anything about that—that [unclear]?

REA: I remember being there and I remember I had a little rucksack that I would—brought with my lunch in it. [chuckles] And I always remember

when I had a favorite food in there, that I would tell the teacher, "Well, my mother said I should eat that first." [laughs]

LEVINE: What would be a favorite food that you recall from then?

REA: Oh, we [clears throat] had a—a kind of a cured bacon that had been fried and made almost crisp. And I—I would eat that with the homemade rye bread and onions.

LEVINE: Hmm.

REA: And I liked that.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Can you recall any other foods that—that you re—you had when you were little?

REA: I liked mush, cornmeal mush and milk—

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

REA: —together.

LEVINE: Now, cornmeal mush, would that be just cooked cornmeal? Is that what that is? Just—

REA: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

REA: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm.

LEVINE: Anything in it?

REA: Well, for a specialty, sometimes Grandma or my mother would make—make it with cheese—

LEVINE: Oh.

REA: —and kind of bake it a little.

LEVINE: Huh. Uh-huh. And anything else about—about food and—and [unclear]?

REA: Oh, our homemade sausage. When they would have the slaughtering of the pigs, of course, all of that pig was used. They would make cracklins [PH]. They would make sausage that they would smoke a lot of meat so that it would keep for the winter.

LEVINE: What are cracklins?

REA: They are like bacon pieces. They're—they're lard that's been rendered way down and what's left is the—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm. Wow. And so, like, where would you have the cracklin? Wh—how would you h—what would you have that on or—

REA: On—on bread.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh.

REA: Uh-hmm.

LEVINE: And you said the homemade rye bread. Were there ovens in—

REA: Oh, I told you those big ovens—the oven we had in our courtyard. There was a bake day where they would bake these round loaves with the thick crusts on them. And that would keep, those loaves, until the next baking day.

LEVINE: So would—would several people at the same time be using the oven?

REA: No. Their—they all their own.

LEVINE: Oh, they all had their own.

REA: In their—yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

REA: Uh-hmm.

LEVINE: So y—it was a big loaf, the way you're—

REA: Yeah, big round loaf.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

REA: And it had this thick crust on it that they would crack and remove when it came time to eat—eat the bread.

LEVINE: Oh, so the crust was like a—a protective covering—

REA: Yeah.

LEVINE: —to keep it fresh.

REA: Yeah.

LEVINE: Oh, interesting. So—so, really, you didn't eat the crust.

REA: Well, there was another crust under it.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, yeah. Let's see. Anything else about—about the town that you recall?

REA: Well, there would—

LEVINE: Or the village?

REA: There would be a fair every so often where people would come from around, you know, from I don't know where all. And they would have, like, a farmer's market. They would have set up their wares and it would be— oh, and—and my grandfather, of course, would always give me a little money to go buy some of the sweets when they had them. And there were gypsies that came into the area who were noted for stealing. And one of—the interesting thing was I had a nice little coat with a belt. And I had it over my arm because it was too warm to have it on. And someone saw a gypsy come and slip that belt out from there without my knowledge. And they told me about it [chuckles] when I couldn't find the belt.

LEVINE: Wow. Do you remember what you were told about gypsies as a little girl?

REA: Stay away from them. Never have anything to do with them and—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. And was that your only experience that you—

REA: That I can remember, yes.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Wow. So in the—when the—it was a fair day, was—was there produce as well as—as trinkets and—

REA: Oh, everything. I remember my father told me he used to love to go to them when he was a boy. And they would have strings of sausages hanging where they were cooking them. And he'd always rush to buy some of that. And with me, it was mostly the candies and things like that that I remember.

LEVINE: Now, would people come from other villages?

REA: Oh, yes.

LEVINE: Is that what—what—

REA: Yes.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

REA: Each village would have its own fair, you know, and everyone would go to—if they were close enough by, because, you know, there were no such things as automobiles. We had wagons.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm. And would your grandfather take his grapes to a fair in another town?

REA: No, no. We would use our—our grapes to make wine with. And my grandfather also built barrels, made—

LEVINE: Oh.

REA: —big wooden barrels with the iron staves around them.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, wow. Okay. Anything else you recall about the town or—your family or you? What kind of a little girl were you at five years old?

REA: Probably spoiled rotten. [laughter] At least, that's what my mother said I was.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

REA: And we—I remember Christmas and going to the church and getting goodies. They didn't have a Santa Claus. We had—a representative from the Christ Child would come and give goodies to children. And I remember one time getting an orange, which never seen before, and, usually, cookies, things like that.

LEVINE: What would this representative of the Christ Child look like?

REA: Oh, it was usually a man with a—something—a hood over his head so we wouldn't know that it was probably our father or a relative or something like that.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And—and would the child—like we do it here, would the child go up to this—

REA: Oh, yes.

LEVINE: —representative [chuckles] and—and—

REA: Yeah. He would hand them out and—and then sometimes he would just shower little things and we'd all scramble for them.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Any other church observances that you recall?

REA: Well, they had all the regular observances but I don't remember them.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

REA: They—they had the Easter service and the Christmas and—and I do remember they had big weddings. When anyone in the village got married, the whole village was invited.

LEVINE: And what would—do you recall any wedding, how it was con—either conducted or the ceremony or afterward or—

REA: No, just from what my mother told me.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-huh.

REA: I have a picture of my aunt, my—my mother's only sister in her wedding clothes in—in—in the costume that they wore. You know. That they were starting to wear modern, more American clothes. But they still liked to—to wear their national costume.

LEVINE: Saxon—w—would they wear that on their wedding day?

REA: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

REA: Uh-hmm.

LEVINE: And, like, in place of a—of a bridal gown.

REA: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

REA: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Wow. Let's see. I'm trying to think if there's anything else that was—how about social life and getting together? Do you recall anything in the village?

REA: Oh, there was a lot of that. There was a lot of that. People visited each other and then—then they would have parties in the main—like an auditorium.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

REA: In fact, that's where our kindergarten was held too for the children whose parents were working in the fields and where the weddings were held. And at the weddings, everyone contributed food and baked goods and things like that.

LEVINE: Was the church involved? In other words, were the—were the couple married in the church and then they went to—

REA: Oh, they were married in the church.

LEVINE: —this auditorium. Uh-huh.

REA: Uh-hmm.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

REA: Oh, yeah.

LEVINE: Huh.

REA: And in fact, they had a parade from the church to the—and everyone that was in the wedding would follow the bridal couple over to the—

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Wow. Yeah. And how about music, dancing, anything like that?

REA: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. We had our oompa bands. You know, the bands that play polkas and waltzes and things like that.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And when would there be music? Wh—what would be a—

REA: Well, like the weddings or at any party that was held there, they always had a village band that would play.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, wow. Okay. W—why—what—when your—your father left five years before you did. Why did he leave?

REA: Well, because his older brother would inherit the house and the acres and so forth. And he felt that [clears throat] there was more opportunity here, you know. They all heard that, you know, that that's the place to go is America. There—there you could make your fortune.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. And d—do you recall either knowing or your mother probably telling you what your father wrote to her when he was here?

REA: She would—she would tell me about my father but I had no concept of him.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

REA: My grandfather and grandmother were really my parents at that time. And in fact, when we came to this country, and I remember we took a train from New York to Cleveland. And I remember my mother saying, "Oh, look. There's your father." You know, I saw all these people out there. I had no why which one was my father. [laughs] That's the first time I saw him and from then on—

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

REA: I had heard of him but, you know.

LEVINE: Well, now, you say your—your grandparents were like your mother and father initially. That was because they didn't have to work in the fields at—I mean, they were too old to work in the fields? And your mother was working in the field. Is that why?

REA: Well, no. It's just we all lived together. And my grandparents, of course, loved taking care of me and being with me.

LEVINE: I see. Uh-hmm, uh-hmm. Okay. So your father went to Cleveland.

REA: Yes.

LEVINE: Did he have—did he have any reason to go, specifically, to Cleveland?

REA: Yes, my uncle who lived there had to sponsor him and provide a job for him.

LEVINE: And what was your uncle doing in Cleveland? Do you know?

REA: I think he was a foreman in a—in one of the factories there.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. And is that what he—

REA: Got my father in there, yes.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. So your father was able to save up enough for you and your mother?

REA: Yes. Well, five years, you know. He had a lot of time to save. And he went to night school to learn English immediately. And when we came here, he had a house. They—they were renting it, completely furnished with everything.

LEVINE: Wow. Hmm.

REA: And he sent us, of course, the fare to come over. And as I said, we didn't have to come as immigrants because we were the family of a citizen.

LEVINE: It sounds as though that was very important to him.

REA: It was.

LEVINE: And to—

REA: Oh, yes.

LEVINE: —to the family. Uh-huh.

REA: Yeah.

LEVINE: Well, do you remember departure? Do you remember leaving your grandparents?

REA: I remember, not particular that, just getting a—we—we had to take the wagon to the city of Hermanstadt [PH], which was a—a modern, larger city, and from there, on a train. First time I'd ever been on a train, and we went through Czechoslovakia and, I think, Poland and Germany to Hamburg, Germany where we boarded the ship.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. And was there any kind of farewell? Did people come—

REA: I—I don't remember that.

LEVINE: Do you remember anything your mother, or even you, as a five-year-old, took with you?

REA: No, hmm-uh.

LEVINE: And do you remember getting to Hamburg? Did—did you have to spend some time in—in the port before y—you boarded the Deutschland?

REA: Well, I—I imagine we did. I can't recall that either. I just remember being aboard the ship and walking around on the deck and being seasick almost the whole time. [laughs]

LEVINE: And do you remember the accommodations aboard the Deutschland?

REA: I know that we had bunk beds and my mother was in one and I was in one. That's—that's about it.

LEVINE: Do you remember when the ship came into the New York harbor?

REA: Yes, and them pointing out the Statue of Liberty to me. And then, after getting off the big ship, we got into a small one. I don't know what—what they call them, the—

LEVINE: Tender or—

REA: —tender type.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

REA: A small one. But in it—you know, after being on that tall ship and looking at the ocean, and then being in that little one with those big waves up close, [laughs] I remember that very well.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

REA: And then coming to Ellis Island, I remember we had to go through all kinds of things with people and I think we had to take baths there or showers or something like that and go through a lot of interviews with papers and things that my mother had to do. And I—I remember just looking at everything, which was so strange [chuckles] and different to me.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

REA: And then getting on—when we got on the train, I remember seeing the first black person that I'd ever seen.

LEVINE: And what was your reaction or response?

REA: I just asked my mother. I said, "What kind of a person was that?" [chuckles] You know. And she just said, "Well, there are people like that

all over the world.” They just never had been in our little village of Kleinschelken. [laughs]

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. Do you remember any other things that were new and different in those first days and weeks in America?

REA: Well, I remember that the second day after we were established in our new house, I was sent to school without knowing a word of English. Not only that, I didn't speak much German yet because I hadn't been to school. We spoke a German dialect called Saxon at home. And my mother said that [chuckles] they received a note from the teacher that said, “What language does this child speak?” [laughs]

LEVINE: Were you the only immigrant child in your class that you recall?

REA: Evidently, I was.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

REA: Uh-hmm.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So how—how—how did it go for you in school?

REA: I don't remember any difficulties so I must have picked up the English very fast. Being around children and teachers that only spoke English, it seemed to me that I learned it so fast and, in fact, became the best reader in my room. I don't know if I learned to read and not understand what I was reading. But I remember that I could read very fast.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Hmm. And is—did the kids pick on you or anything? Did you feel that, you know, being a greenhorn, did you—

REA: I don't remember it so it must not have been too traumatic.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm. Now—

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A]

[BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE B]

LEVINE: Now, in Cleveland, were you part of a—of a community of people who had come from Europe?

REA: Was part of a com—[clears throat] community. We had a Transylvanian Saxon club there.

LEVINE: Hmm.

REA: There were quite a few of them. And they had a building called, in German, Saxenheim [PH], which is the Saxon home. And it was a fraternal organization.

LEVINE: And what happened there?

REA: Oh, that's where we went to meet the other Saxon people and we had our festivities there. We had weddings. We had parties. And as we became more Americanized, we'd have Valentine parties for the kids and Christmas parties and so forth. And several members also owned acreage in the area where we would go for picnics, things like that.

LEVINE: W—was there a large number of people that attended these—

REA: Yes. Yes, a large number.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Where in Cleveland w—was the family and where was the—the society?

REA: We had one—Cleveland, of course, is divided by the Cuyahoga River, and the east side and the west side. We lived in the west side and we had a Saxon home there. And the east-siders had one too.

LEVINE: Oh.

REA: And we would sometimes visit the other. And if we had a big event, you know, they'd all come.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

REA: And we had our own churches too, one on the east side and one on the west side.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

REA: Lutheran church.

LEVINE: Wow. And [clears throat] how about other ethnic groups? Was that—were—was that something new to you, all these different kinds of—of people and did—did you mix? Is—

REA: No, not so much. With the German groups, we did.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm.

REA: They sort of were alike, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm. So then what? Did you—you—you stayed in school. And how long did you continue in school?

REA: Well, I graduated from high school.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. And then did you work?

REA: I went to work right after high school. I had trained—I had taken secretarial, stenographic—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

REA: —work in school. So I was able to go right to work.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Now, you came in 1929 so you really hit the Depression right off the bat.

REA: That's right. But I didn't realize we were poor. Actually, my father had a job all the time and—

LEVINE: All through the Depression?

REA: All through the Depression. And I remember he made \$18 a week, which was considered excellent.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

REA: And we—we would go shopping. My mother would buy me a dress for 50 cents. And I never thought we were poor. We had everything we needed. We had our social life. We had our Saxon Club and our church and I never thought we were poor. [laughs]

LEVINE: What was it like having a father for the first time?

REA: I think that took a little adjusting. And my father was pretty strict. And of course, nine months after we got there my twin sisters were born.

LEVINE: Hmm.

REA: And of course, they got all the attention then. My little spoiled days were over.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

REA: And I had to take care of them and I—I think resented them very much at that time—

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

REA: —but outgrew it, you know.

LEVINE: Yeah, yeah. Uh-huh.

REA: And my sisters and I are great friends. They come and visit me here.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. So you're—you really had to change and adjust and—

REA: Right. [chuckles]

LEVINE: —adapt and—

REA: School, a father, sisters.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

REA: And my mother, I understand, was always homesick—

LEVINE: Oh.

REA: —for Europe, for her parents and sister and all that.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

REA: But Mom went to school too to learn some English and also to study to become a citizen herself, because she didn't automatically become one. I did.

LEVINE: You did, uh-huh.

REA: I was on—in fact, on my father's papers, I was listed as his child.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. So when did you—you cha—you had to change from being a spoiled [chuckles] brat, right, to—

REA: Right.

LEVINE: —to being sort of responsible for these two upstarts [chuckles] that came into your life. And—and then can you think, like, further down the road,

did—were there other changes, times when you changed again during your life?

REA: Well, I think I just grew into being a typical American kid.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

REA: I always thought my parents were too strict. You know, all of us that had the same background, “Well, you know, they’re from the Old Country. What do they know?” You know.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm.

REA: And—

LEVINE: You must have learned English more quickly than your mother.

REA: Oh, definitely. And of course, they both still had accents.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

REA: And I didn’t.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Was there a period of time, because people have told me this, where they were embarrassed by their parents because they did have an accent and they did—did you ever experience anything like that?

REA: No.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

REA: No.

LEVINE: Yeah.

REA: I associated with—mostly with our own ethnic group.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

REA: And we were on the same boat.

LEVINE: Right. Do you remember any American ways that you began to acquire, that—

REA: Oh, I acquired all of them, I think.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

REA: We all did. We went to high school and I was involved in things in school. I wrote for our high school paper and was in our senior play and I enjoyed going to football games and things like.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. So then after you star—started working, when did you meet your—how did you meet your husband?

REA: Well, it was during—at the beginning of World War II. My husband was in the Navy and he was stationed in Cleveland in the Marine Recruiting Office. And he met a friend of mine. We used to see them. They—they'd each other on the streetcar going into downtown Cleveland. And my friend got to talking to the sailor and, one time when I was visiting her, he came over. And that's how I met him.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

REA: And he's from Virginia, a southerner with a real southern accent. [laughs]

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. Now, did—did your—did your parents hope that you would marry a Saxon?

REA: Yes, they did. And I dated some Saxon boys and—and then my husband, Gene, came along and that was that.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm. And did you have children?

REA: I had one son and I now have three grandchildren.

LEVINE: Great. And what's your son's name?

REA: Dennis.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, and the grandchildren?

REA: Charlie, who is Charlton; Robby and granddaughter, Darcy.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

REA: The oldest grandson graduated from the University of Virginia and he married last year. And his wife is—was also at the University of Virginia and is now in the medical school there.

LEVINE: Hmm.

REA: My second grandson is a senior at Appalachian State.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

REA: And my granddaughter will graduate from high school this year.

LEVINE: Hmm. When you look back on having come to this country as a five-year-old and—do you think that experience of immigration—do you think that affected you in a way that you—your personality has some aspects that came from that experience?

REA: I think I would understand the people that come to this country better.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. In what ways were you thinking?

REA: Well, I don't resent them—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

REA: —wanting to come here. And, however, I do resent the ones that come and aren't willing to learn English and get a job and take care of their families—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

REA: —like our parents did.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm.

REA: I think they should have to do that too.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Did you ever have heroes in your life? Heroines? I mean, anybody you really looked up to, either someone you knew personally or someone you knew of that—that you felt you'd like to be like or you—influenced you in some ways?

REA: I was kind of in awe of my cousin, George, who was the first one to go to college. And he went to Western Reserve in Ohio there. And I always had this desire to also go to college.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

REA: My parents couldn't afford to send me when I graduated. So I started slowly and I took a class at a time and got through three and a half years of college before I was through. And then I think, [clears throat] because I traveled around the country so much with my husband, [clears throat] that

I didn't go ahead and finish. And I'm always kind of—been sorry that I didn't.

LEVINE: Well, you could do that now.

REA: Oh, I could, except I'm still working now.

LEVINE: Oh, you are? Uh-huh.

REA: Yes.

LEVINE: What are you doing now?

REA: I am the administrative assistant at a—I don't know if you—when you drove by, coming from Bonita—

LEVINE: Bonita.

REA: The Koreshan Unity State Historical Society.

LEVINE: Oh, yes. Yeah.

REA: I work for the foundation right across the street from it.

LEVINE: Oh, I've noticed that. Uh-huh.

REA: And I—I was the administrative assistant to the president of the foundation for almost 10 years now. And she just retired at the age of 84. And now our adminis—administrator—I still continue to work there for him.

LEVINE: Do—could you—just a thumbnail sketch. What is the Koreshan philosophy? Or what is it about?

REA: Koreshan. They were a communal group that settled there. And they were—they had a—a few ideas which, of course, have since proved to be false. Dr. Teed, who was the leader, believed we lived on the inside of the earth, that the earth was actually the universe and everything was in it. But other than that, he had a lot of great ideas. He believed, for instance, that women were just as good as men. They could do anything the men could do. And he had them do the things in their commune. And he believed God was a father/mother god. He was not just one person sitting up on a throne, you know. And anyhow, they wanted to live—they weren't—they were Christian. They weren't of a different religion. But they weren't overly worked up about religion.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

REA: Their lifestyle was more what they wanted. They wanted to be left alone, to have their own totally self-sufficient community and to not have any politicians or bureaucrats telling them what they had to do. So they were—they—they all came from the Chicago area.

LEVINE: Hmm.

REA: They were city people, educated people. And they came to this wilderness in 1894 and built their community with their own hands, even. [chuckles] [unclear] never done anything like that before.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. And did they have children? I mean, did—did it perpetuate itself or—

REA: Well, Dr. Teed encouraged celibacy.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

REA: You didn't have to be celibate to be a Koreshan but you didn't live in the compound then. You bought land around it and had your home and families and still be a Koreshan. But the leaders of—of the commune had to be celibate, sort of like priests and nuns, you know—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

REA: —in the Catholic—

LEVINE: Hmm. Hmm. So have you enjoyed—

REA: Very much.

LEVINE: —your association with the—

REA: We—we are involved in perpetuating their legacy, to—to let people know about them and so forth.

LEVINE: Are there any left?

REA: No.

LEVINE: No.

REA: The last one died in 1982.

LEVINE: Hmm.

REA: And she was a little Jewish lady who fled Hitler and came here. And she was the last official Koreshan to be accepted. And by the time she came, which is like in 1940 or something like that—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

REA: —there were very few of them left.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

REA: And she just kind of held it together until she was able to donate the 300 acres that the settlement was on to the state with the understanding that they would preserve it.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, wow. So you're very active—

REA: Oh, yes.

LEVINE: —still in—

REA: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Is there anything else about coming to this country? How—how do you consider yourself American Saxon? How—how do you reconcile in your mind—

REA: Oh, I'm strictly American.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

REA: I've never been back to visit.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

REA: Although some of my friends have. [clears throat] And especially, when the Iron Curtain shut them off, nobody could go there or wanted to. And you know how terrible the R—the Romanian government was and—and they persecuted the Saxons that were left until they all left. Those that could, left. And the villages are crumbling because the Romanian aren't taking care of them.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. So you don't feel connected to go back there? Uh-huh.

REA: No.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Okay. Well, is there anything else you would like to say before we close?

REA: Well, I'm kind of proud of being what I am. And it's a small group, when you consider how many were—I would say that there are very few Saxons left that came from there originally.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

REA: There are offspring of those that came. But even, just like my own son, he can't speak a word of German, although he even took a year in college [chuckles] but—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

REA: But they think it's interesting and unusual for the background that I have.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. What would you say has given you a great deal of satisfaction in your life?

REA: Well, the thing now, of course, that I'm 75 years old, is my family and my son and daughter-in-law and grandchildren.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

REA: And my middle grandson was just here last week on spring break.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh.

REA: And I go up to Virginia and visit them every so often too. And after my—well, my husband and I came down here 25 years ago. And he lived for 15 of those years. And in fact, he chose this place—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

REA: —for us to live and then he died 10 years ago. And it was kind of tough being here alone with no family.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

REA: But then I got acquainted. I have good friends at church. I'm involved in—in the affairs here at the condominium and my job, of course. I work three days a week.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

REA: And I love to read. I've done some writing.

LEVINE: Hmm.

REA: I wrote a book on the Koreshans.

LEVINE: Oh, really?

REA: Yes.

LEVINE: Wow.

REA: And—

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

REA: —I guess that's about it.

LEVINE: Wow.

REA: [unclear] we came here, both to this country and down here.

LEVINE: Wow. Okay. Well, that's a perfect place to end, I think. I want to thank you very much. Very interesting interview. I've been speaking with Sara Webber Rea, who came in 1929 from Romania. Well, Transylvania, we could say. Right?

REA: Well, they don't even call it that anymore. But it's—it's known—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

REA: —as the Transylvanian Province.

LEVINE: Right. And today is 75 at the time of this interview. And this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service signing off.

[END OF INTERVIEW]