

EI-1051

ARTHUR KURIS

BIRTHDATE: APRIL 18, 1913

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INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE, PH.D.

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RUSSIA, 1922

AGE: 9

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RESIDENCES:

LEVINE: Today is March 17th, 1999. I'm here with Arthur Kuris in Hollywood, Florida. Mr. Kuris came from Russia in 1922 when he was nine years of age on the Constantinople. That's the ship. This is Janet—

KURIS: Cunard Line.

LEVINE: Cunard Line, uh-huh. This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. If you would say again, please, where in Russia you're from and your birth date.

KURIS: You want a street number and all that?

LEVINE: If you know it, sure.

KURIS: Number 23 Meschanskia [unclear]. Meschanskia. Do you hear it?

LEVINE: M—

KURIS: M-E-S-C-H-A-N-S-K-I-A or Y-A.

LEVINE: Okay.

KURIS: [sentence unclear].

LEVINE: Obitza?

KURIS: [unclear].

LEVINE: Oh, Odessa.

KURIS: [unclear] street.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh.

KURIS: [unclear], Odessa, Russia.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, and birth date?

KURIS: April the 18th, 1913.

LEVINE: Okay.

KURIS: The year before the war.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Did you live in Odessa up until you left for the United States?

KURIS: Yes.

LEVINE: And you lived in that—on that street, uh-huh.

KURIS: I was born in that house and so were all my brothers and sisters.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Can you describe the house?

KURIS: The house was a two—two-story building running around a courtyard. All—almost all Russian buildings round a big courtyard. It's part of their living space, really. Two—it was a circle and then three sides are living quarters. Two stories. One's ground floor. And then the wall is on the fourth side and the wall is 10 feet high.

LEVINE: This is on the outside; is the wall?

KURIS: One side is on the [unclear]. Three-stories building. The fourth—three sides, the building. The fourth side is a wall.

LEVINE: Wall.

KURIS: And the wall has a very thick—walls, a difference of walls and door—door also. It's locked at night, can't get in.

LEVINE: About how many families? How many houses in the c—around the courtyard?

KURIS: Around the courtyard, probably seven, eight families [unclear].

LEVINE: And the courtyard was used as part of the living area?

KURIS: Where the kids played, was underneath it. We lived on the second floor and below us lived my grandfather and my uncle. And my grandmother would be outside. And she would come out and there was five grandchildren [unclear]. Then the Kaminskis [PH], my uncle, who lived around the corner, his kids were be there. Across the way, the Weitzenbergs [PH] were, again, cousins, their two kids. So there were about 10, 12 kids. And Grandma would come out there with a big apron and big pockets. And you'd run over and say, "Grandma, give me a—give me something." She'd take out a cookie and give it to you.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. What—what else do you remember about that grandmother?

KURIS: Well, wonderful old Jewish face, kindness and love.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm. And how about your grandfather?

KURIS: He was—do you want to see pictures?

LEVINE: Well, I'd have to unhook your—should we do this now? Or afterwards—

KURIS: Yeah.

LEVINE: —maybe you show me.

KURIS: [unclear].

LEVINE: Okay.

KURIS: I have [unclear]. He was a man with a beard, a scholarly man, a—a devoted Jew, who went to synagogue on Fridays and Saturdays, which was two blocks away. And Saturdays, we—the kids all—a bunch [unclear].

LEVINE: And how did he treat you? How did you—how do you remember your grandfather?

KURIS: A—a little distance. We—we just went in and out. We—we were roughnecks. Yeah. He was there. He was a presence. Communications with him was not—for a little boy, very little. But you know, just remember a kindly old man.

LEVINE: Was he working or was he mainly just being religious?

KURIS: In my time, he was already retired. Yeah, my father was his oldest son.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh. Now, was your father's family from Odessa?

KURIS: Yes.

LEVINE: Going back further?

KURIS: As far back as I can remember.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And how about your mother's side?

KURIS: Same thing.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And your father's name? Your father's name?

KURIS: Avram Moishe [PH] Kuris.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. And—

KURIS: Abraham Moses Kuris.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And he was the oldest.

KURIS: Yes.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Now, what did your grandfather do before he—

KURIS: They were in the leather business. And my father was in the leather business. They brought in tanned leathers from the [unclear], finer leathers from Germany. He was a—a European. He was a trader. He traveled all over. He wasn't a peasant.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. I see. So he bought leathers from other places.

KURIS: Yes, he—he would have them treated there. He would take horsehides from the [unclear], send them to a place in Romania where they prepared them to make soles. I remember these things because I used to go to—into the—he had a—sort of a sales store on one side. It went from the street into the courtyard—thick leathers for soles, I remember.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KURIS: He would spread out the cow's skin and put down the form and cut out the [unclear]. I can't—components for shoes. There was a name for it. Was [unclear].

LEVINE: Lasts?

KURIS: No, lasts is the form that—

LEVINE: Oh, that's the tongue.

KURIS: —shape it.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So as a little boy, d—did you go with your father? How—how—did you have certain—

KURIS: Yeah. Of course, my [several words unclear] on a weekday, sometimes. Holidays, all—all the time. My father was a family man. He took his children everywhere.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Now, what was your mother's name?

KURIS: Sophia Natavana [PH] Krevasues.

LEVINE: Could you spell the last two? [chuckles]

KURIS: Natavana means [unclear].

LEVINE: Oh.

KURIS: Sophia's Sonja.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KURIS: Sonja is the familial name for Sophia.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KURIS: A—and the name was Krevasues, the second name.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KURIS: And in the United States, they shortened it to Krever.

LEVINE: Okay, how would you spell Krevasues?

KURIS: K-R-E-V-A-S-U-E-S.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KURIS: Krevasues.

LEVINE: And they shortened it to—

KURIS: Krever.

LEVINE: K—

KURIS: R-E-V-E-R.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Okay. Now, how do you remember your mother when you were a little boy in Odessa?

KURIS: I remember she was with us till the very—maybe 10 years ago.

LEVINE: Oh.

KURIS: She lived to 90-odd years old. She—beautiful woman.

LEVINE: Wait. Now, don't forget. You're hooked up.

KURIS: Oh.

LEVINE: Wait. Let me pause here. [tape off/on] Okay, we're resuming here after seeing some wonderful photographs over the years. And there's a lot of old ones from Russia. Beautiful.

KURIS: Yes. Yeah, I have—I managed to bring along a lot of old photographs. Most people d—don't bother.

LEVINE: That's right.

KURIS: It's a mistake.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. So let's see. We were talking about your mother's side.

KURIS: My father came here with my mother about 1905, and my brother and sister. My sister was two years old. She got the flu and she died here at that time. So he—he had money. He—he decided America is for poor people. It's not for him.

LEVINE: He came, expecting that he might stay, but decided against it?

KURIS: They—they—they just came to stay.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KURIS: But—

LEVINE: He thought it was for poor people.

KURIS: It was for poor people. It was not for him.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KURIS: And he brought—he had brought over my—my mother's whole family at his expense, his doing.

LEVINE: Oh. You mean her mother and father and everyone?

KURIS: Huh?

LEVINE: He brought over your m—his wife's mother and father?

KURIS: My—the father was dead a long time. As a matter of fact, [several words unclear]. They're all very—the—the—the kids. My mother—the oldest daughter was 12 years old when her father died.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KURIS: And there were seven kids. And she—my mother and my grandmother brought up the seven kids. So [unclear] it was then for poor people. And—but then the housing they lived in, the—the Bronx was—wasn't the—in existence at the time. It was just opening up [unclear] up north. The housing was poor, generally, and especially, the Jews lived in extra poor, being very poor themselves. And he decided it wasn't for him. And he went back, but the next time he came he was poor. [sentence unclear].

LEVINE: You mean, did he—did everyone go back?

KURIS: No.

LEVINE: No.

KURIS: My mother and my father and my oldest brother. I told you [unclear] who died then here.

LEVINE: Yes.

KURIS: Which was also the—a misadventure for them, terrible.

LEVINE: So they went back and then your father continued in the leather business.

KURIS: Yes.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KURIS: He was [unclear]. He just got richer when he went back. They had a lot of money. And—till the Revolution. Along came the [unclear] and took the money.

LEVINE: Okay. Tell me about the time before the Revolution. What was Odessa like—what—as a city?

KURIS: Beautiful city. Even, you go there today, you can see. It was—the Russians didn't get down to the Black Sea till 1800. So the city was built after 1800, which was a modern city, new—new city. It w—it wasn't like the old European cities. And I took the kids there to see it, a marvelous time and it's still a beautiful city. The streets—it was designed by a Frenchman and the streets were one main street like this, then two side streets on the same streets. It was very wide boulevards. And they ran the—they designed the boulevards like boulevards of Paris.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

KURIS: Wide streets, like [unclear] passageways are the streets. And the—the houses were very well built. The rich people lived in Odessa. Initially, it was all built for rich and it still shows.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KURIS: So next time you get a chance, go.

LEVINE: Yeah. Tell me, what—what—what was it like for someone like your mother and father to be—consider themselves cosmopolitan Europeans? Right? I mean, they—they considered themselves—

KURIS: Well, they were well educated, relatively speaking. My mother went as far as girls used to go, the equivalent of a high school. My—my father wen—went to the University [unclear], studied business or whatever. There were educated people there like there were educated people here that traveled all over. They went to Germany. They went to [unclear], Crimea.

LEVINE: Did they speak other languages?

KURIS: My father spoke German and Russian and J—Jewish, of course.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

KURIS: Yeah.

LEVINE: Hmm. Do you remember school in—in Odessa? What was that like?

KURIS: I was a very little boy and I—I was there during the Revolution, my early childhood. I had no school. There was no school for me. And [unclear] my mother took my two brothers—she told—used to tell a story that, took them down to register at school. This was a Russian school [unclear] school. And she tells the story that she put down the money for her sons' and then put down a bundle and said, "This is for two other boys."

LEVINE: Hmm.

KURIS: And that's the way they went to school.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm.

KURIS: [unclear].

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

KURIS: They paid.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Wh—what do you remember personally about the Revolution?

KURIS: Not so much the Revolution but the famine.

LEVINE: The famine. Okay.

KURIS: People dying in the streets. Literally, from my balcony, I could see—fall down. A man would be walking with eyes glazed, saying "Yagalot," [PH] "Yagalot. I'm hungry. I'm hungry." It was an incredible famine. Later, I learned that this was a forced famine by Stalin, who wanted to starve the

Southern Ukraine because the Whites were coming in and he didn't want them to have any food. So he starved us all.

LEVINE: Hmm, hmm.

KURIS: But it was a very e—evil time.

LEVINE: When—even though you were wealthy, relatively wealthy, were you also hungry?

KURIS: Starving, yes.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KURIS: Matter of fact, there's—there's one point that things got so bad that my father, that at the risk of his life, one night—we were not far from the border. If you know the map of Russia, comes down like this and Odessa is right at the edge to Romania and Crimea and this [unclear]. Stole across the border at night and two, three days later, came back with a blanket full of fat [unclear] bacon, big sides of bacon, bread and honey.

LEVINE: Hmm. And how long did it go on?

KURIS: Oh, two years. And [several words unclear]. The Germans came in. The Germans went out. The Reds came in. The Reds went—were pushed out. The Whites came in. A dreadful time.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. And during World War I, were you—were you—did you see soldiers coming and going and—

KURIS: World War I started in '14. I was born in '13.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KURIS: I was a year old when it started. It's the Revolutionary—in '16, the Russians were—were left—yeah, by the time I was really cognizant of what was going around [unclear] Russia [unclear] and lost—lost [several words unclear]. [chuckles] The Germans acquired our piece of paper. Lenin and Trotsky sold out the Ukraine. They—they wanted—they didn't care what they did to save the Revolution. So they gave the Ukraine to the—to the Russian—to the Germans, who really took it only on paper. They never got that.

LEVINE: Hmm, uh-hmm. So why was it that your mother and father decided in 1922 to leave?

KURIS: They were—they were ready to leave anytime. But it was a question of getting passage in a boat. What boat was going for Odessa to the United States? None. There was no communications. That—what they decided to do was to gamble. And one night we got on the Greek—little boat. I remember it clearly, the Athebia [PH]. And we sailed across the Black Sea to Constantinople.

LEVINE: Now, had your father and mother liquidated their house and their—I mean, had they sold off—

KURIS: They left everything.

LEVINE: Left everything.

KURIS: Just—

LEVINE: Picked up—

KURIS: —packed what there—whatever they could carry and that's it.

LEVINE: Hmm.

KURIS: The—no, the rest was just left. When I came back la—later on, the guy who's my guide—I don't know how we got him. But he was already a one-armed man. After the Revolution, he lost his arm. And he used to do electrical work for my father. And he became my guide for myself and my family. And he said, "Do you remember your piano?" He says to me, "I've got a month-old girl." They—they all took whatever was—was takable. He took the piano.

LEVINE: What did your mother and father take? Do you remember what they brought?

KURIS: Clothing and jewelry sewn into cloth. Whatever they could—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

KURIS: Gold or diamonds or whatever—they—they got away with it. They brought it here.

LEVINE: How about you? You—you were nine. But was there anything that you wanted to take with you?

KURIS: No, but by the time we got to Turkey—we lived in Turkey for about—in Constantinople for about six months. And I remember clearly getting—bought the Kilgore [PH] pistols for the paper bullet noisemakers, bup, bup,

bup! And then a Horner [PH] harmonica. I got—I got freedom. They—they couldn't take care of me. I wa—I was a wild kid traveling around Constantinople. So were my brothers.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. What else do you remember about Constantinople, those six months?

KURIS: A great time. We lived at a sort of [unclear] on a hill. And the hill went straight down into the sea, no—no water edge. And I used to climb up and down the—the hill and down to the water. And I remember the Turks to be very amiable.

LEVINE: Hmm. Hmm. Was there a large Jewish community where you were in Constantinople?

KURIS: Oh, yes. The refugee—there was a large refugee community, everybody waiting for an admission ticket to the United States. You couldn't enter. You couldn't just come.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Well, there were quotas in by then.

KURIS: Yes.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

KURIS: Heavy quotas, all based on the past people who came.

LEVINE: Right, right.

KURIS: To keep out the easterners.

LEVINE: Hmm, right. So did your—did your father do any business while he was in Constantinople? Or he was—he was just waiting to get out?

KURIS: I—I wouldn't even know about it.

LEVINE: Yeah.

KURIS: Whatever trading they did was to trade stones or jewelry for cash money or whatever.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. So then, do you remember when the procedure got started so you were actually leaving?

KURIS: Yeah, it took about six months, which was not really much. And one day, Pop said, "Tomorrow, we leave." And we all grabbed a bundle of

suitcases and packed them and repacked them and left what was—and left. And we left in a huge ship, the Constantinople, which was the—part of the German reparations. It was Kaiser Wilhelm [unclear]. You could see it over there, the boat, the name, the real name. It was a—a modern ship.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Before, you said you were a wild kid running around Constantinople.

KURIS: I was, I mean, loose.

LEVINE: Wh—what—what did you do? What was your daily [unclear]?

KURIS: I had the guns. I had my pistols. I did a lot of exploring, myself and one or two other kids. We—we just rambled around. My mother used to have to ask, “Did you have lunch somewhere?”

LEVINE: Do—how do you recall that time?

KURIS: Very pleasant.

LEVINE: Pleasant, uh-huh.

KURIS: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Okay, so then you were aboard the Constantinople. What about the passage? What do you remember about that?

KURIS: The passage. It took about five, six days. The—we had one terrible storm, which was—sick like a dog. We were all sick. Seasickness is the worst thing that I can remember that can happen to somebody. You’re throwing up and there’s nothing to throw up. Terrible. Well, that storm passed and the last day was all right.

LEVINE: Do—do you remember your accommodations on the ship?

KURIS: Accommodations, we went across third class. There were, I would say, a room like this, a—

LEVINE: Small cabin.

KURIS: Yeah. And in the cabin there’s a bunker—bunker—the bunk. That’s it.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

KURIS: [unclear] accommodations.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

KURIS: There was room to stand in between the—the bunks. The space was just about the size of this kitchenette.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

KURIS: Yeah.

LEVINE: And how about food aboard ship?

KURIS: Food, I don't remember. They all—they talked badly of it. And I—I didn't care. I didn't remember lousy food.

LEVINE: Did you have any encounters on the ship with other people besides your own family?

KURIS: Oh, I was—there were one or two kids. I was left alone. My mother was sick on the boat and my father—care of my mother and—and the boys took care of themselves. What was that? The only thing I remember is eating the—that corn bread, mamiliga [PH]. I don't know if you ever hear the word before, mamiliga.

LEVINE: Hmm.

KURIS: It's—[chuckles] it's a kind of a corn bread made of corn.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

KURIS: And the Romanians favorite. It's a Romanian dish, supposedly. And I hated it. [chuckles] I had to be very hungry before I would eat it. But, you know, you make peace with it. You eat it when you have to.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KURIS: Yeah.

LEVINE: So that was served.

KURIS: Not served. My mother went on a [unclear]—we weren't fed by the boat.

LEVINE: Oh.

KURIS: It's what you took with you.

LEVINE: Oh.

KURIS: As a matter of fact, one little vignette, we stopped at the boat stop at Marseilles. And my mother and one or two other passengers, people that we get friendly with, they went of see what they could buy, perhaps piece of meat, bologna. And they get to a store and there's beautiful bolognas hanging around. And they buy it. And they walk out. My mother says, "We have to tell the rest of them." "Well, let's see what [unclear]." [chuckles] Horses [unclear]. Horsemeat. The French eat horsemeat. It's unbelievable. I later got back to meat and there was stores that just sold horsemeat.

LEVINE: Huh.

KURIS: Yeah.

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A]

[BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE B]

KURIS: They didn't take any chances—

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KURIS: —of losing a kid.

LEVINE: [chuckles] Losing their child, right.

KURIS: Yeah.

LEVINE: Okay, so then you remember the boat coming into the New York harbor?

KURIS: There was a kind of a—especially when they found the sore on my brother's shoulder. And we were sent to a—to—to an island, Hoffman Island, and they [unclear] for a day or two [unclear]—what's the word for—

LEVINE: Quarantine?

KURIS: Quarantine, yeah. To see if that's going to become something worse than that. In a day or two, we were allowed off.

LEVINE: So the whole family was quarantined on Hoffman.

KURIS: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KURIS: On the island for, I think, t—two days. And that was memorable by a man there giving me a little bowl of chocolate cream, you know, Jell-O. [unclear] that was the most fantastic thing I—I [unclear]. [unclear]. This was my mem—memory of the United States. The second memory was when we got off the boat at Battery Park and got into taxi. And we went up north. Suddenly, we hit a place. All the people were black. [unclear]. [chuckles] They were all—never saw a black man in my life before. They were all Negroes, Negroes, Negroes. Unbelievable. These are the two initial memories of the United States.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So when your brother was examined and they found that—were you on Ellis Island? Did you go to Ellis Island?

KURIS: Oh, yes.

LEVINE: And from Ellis Island, they sent you to Hoffman.

KURIS: And they sent that—to the [unclear] island.

LEVINE: Now, do you have any other memories of Ellis Island?

KURIS: No.

LEVINE: Impressions, descriptions?

KURIS: Lines, lines. We stood on lines. Life was—I used to—I got to hate lines.

LEVINE: Now, what—okay, you gave me your two first impressions. Then, how did you get—where did you go to stay?

KURIS: We went to my aunt's house in the Bronx. She lived at 1510 Crotona Park East. Do you know Crotona Park?

LEVINE: A little.

KURIS: Yeah. But that—that was a beautiful place. I suppose it's still all right. And the building that my aunt lived in was just built. The Bronx was just being opened up, really. And—

LEVINE: Did you stay there long?

KURIS: Oh, I don't remember how—only a few weeks till they found an apartment. They found an apartment on Charlotte Street that was made famous by one of our presidents visiting it. Who was it, Carter, who vi—visited Charlotte Street? So the—it was the three blocks straight running from

Jennings to—to the park with the public school, P.S. 61, at [unclear]. Then—impressions of the United States. November, it snowed and they gave me a little pail and a shovel. “Go downstairs and play.” I go downstairs to play. There’s another little guy. And we start sort of talking. So I said, “Me [unclear].” [chuckles] He says, “Me Itchy.” So we—we played a while and he keeps trying to tell me that he’s got a beautiful mother. And [unclear] I’ll come up with him upstairs I’ll get milk and cake. I wasn’t sure what milk and cake was but I went up with him and, sure enough, there was this beautiful lady [unclear]. Then we got milk and cake. That was [unclear], my friend, Itchy.

LEVINE: And he stayed your friend for a while?

KURIS: Yeah, we used to play downstairs.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KURIS: Yeah.

LEVINE: And did you start school soon after?

KURIS: Yeah, my aunt took me to P.S. 40. It was about three, four blocks down on Prospect Avenue. And they put me in—in a second grade. I was old enough to be in the fourth grade by that time. I was two years behind. And at the end of the first year, I was speaking English fluently and I could write—well, I started to skip—skip, skip. So the time I got out of high school, got out a year ahead of time. I picked up three years by skipping.

LEVINE: Do you remember learning English? How was learning English for you?

KURIS: No problem. No problem.

LEVINE: Just in the natural—

KURIS: You learn—you learned it as naturally as a kid learns anything. No effort. You understood or you didn’t understand. The second time or third time or fourth time, you understood well enough.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

KURIS: And I had no—no problem learning English. I had no accent.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

KURIS: [unclear] had zero accent. My next brother, Jack, if you listened carefully, you heard an accent. My brother, Michael, older still, an accent, clear. And [unclear] also. That's why kids have good ears.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

KURIS: Olders are too well set.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. And how about your father? What did he do then, once you were getting settled in this country?

KURIS: He went to see some people and he went to do his own business. And they taught him how to cut leather tops for ladies shoes, to lay out the leather and [unclear]. And then this is what he did the rest of his life. He earned a reasonable living being a cutter.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Did he feel that it was a come down from his time—

KURIS: He lost all his money in—in—I never heard him mention it or anything. He did the best he could. He made a living for the family and he—he was satisfied. He was satisfied that we got off without losing any one of us.

LEVINE: Do you remember how his money was—was confiscated in—in Russia?

KURIS: That came in not one shot. You lost houses. You lost the—the shop or the—whatever he had. It started with—by the time we [unclear], we had nothing.

LEVINE: Hmm.

KURIS: It was all taken away.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Only what you could take, jewels or—

KURIS: What you could hide.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. Uh-huh. And how about your mother? How did—and your father—how did they like being in America?

KURIS: Oh, [unclear]. [unclear] very much.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

KURIS: My father liked being here. He—well, he had Jewish, this language, to communicate with the neighbors when we moved to Charlotte Street. It was a Jewish neighborhood. I don't know if there were any non-Jews on

the whole street. And the markets were down there. My—they all operated half Yiddish, half English.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And how about their cultural life? Did they—did they have one—

KURIS: My father—

LEVINE: —in this country?

KURIS: —read “The Forward,” which was the socialist paper, and he was a mild socialist.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

KURIS: He loved to go to see the Yiddish play, see [unclear] sing the—the Jewish [unclear] go downtown.

LEVINE: On Second Avenue.

KURIS: Second Ave.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And did you go?

KURIS: I went once or twice.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm. Let’s see. So you—you finished school a year early. Finished high school?

KURIS: Yeah.

LEVINE: A year early. And then what did you do?

KURIS: I went to college. I went—the—the high school was Thompson Harris [PH] Hall. I don’t know. Did you ever hear of it?

LEVINE: St—

KURIS: Thompson Harris Hall.

LEVINE: No.

KURIS: It was the prep school for City College. Originally, it was the City College. It was a three-year school and become a five-year school. And that included [unclear] schools, founded in 1840. It was—the college became independent and broke up from the high school, became the City—City College [unclear]. Another name for it at the school, high school [unclear].

it was appendence [PH]—appendent to the college. It was a three-year school. You—in three years, you did what other kids did in four. And it was difficult to get into. You had to get an I.Q. exam and you had to have an I.Q. of 140 or 130 before you could get in.

LEVINE: Hmm. So—

KURIS: Scotch—[chuckles] so what—what creates success in life? The next building to ours or Charlotte Street had a new janitor, a Scotchman named McDermott. And they had a kid named George McDermott. And we played soccer. And this kid, he's going to school and he says, "It's a three-year school." "What do you mean, it's a three-year school?" All—all the kids now go out to Clinton or some other school. "What are you going to do in three years what the other kids do in—that that's for me." So I went up there, spoke to one or two of my friends and went—went off and took the exam.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KURIS: And plus, we all got in. And Thompson Harris was the ultimate. If you graduated Harris, City College took you [unclear]. So I went to City and graduated with a bachelor's degree in '35.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And what was your field?

KURIS: My field [chuckles] was [unclear] field, psychology, more or less. I was just bumming around—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

KURIS: —wi—without a particular field. I really meant to—really to go into engineering, do chemistry. And I didn't.

LEVINE: Okay.

KURIS: Yeah. The—when I got out of the school, I had one of these non-fields.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KURIS: There—there was psychology. Every kids who wanted to bum around the school—

LEVINE: Took psychology [chuckles].

KURIS: —took psychology.

LEVINE: [laughs] So—so what did you do when you graduated City College then? And wait a minute. What year was this when you graduated?

KURIS: 1935.

LEVINE: Okay, so the Depression was already on.

KURIS: Oh, yeah. And Roosevelt was in power and thank God for Roos—he created all kinds of classes and schools and whatnot where you could earn some money, 40 cents an hour—to earn—to give people a chance to—so the scholarly basis, there was the adult education program. You could teach at night and I taught. I—I got these—[unclear] exam to see whether you could read or write.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

KURIS: I could. And for some of the years, I—I taught psychology. I got the stuff so—so pat. There was a terrific textbook. I never saw anything [unclear] where you took—psychology was broken up into learning, memory, imagination.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

KURIS: And that—no other—thereafter, I looked for these divided—

LEVINE: In that way, uh-huh.

KURIS: —[unclear].

LEVINE: What was the textbook, by the way? Do you remember who wrote it?

KURIS: I—I no longer remember.

LEVINE: Hmm.

KURIS: I look for it every time I go to the bookstore.

LEVINE: Used books, uh-huh.

KURIS: Used books. I look for the—the book.

LEVINE: And you never found it?

KURIS: I—I haven't found it. There are others that I see. I would recognize the name when I'd see it.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. So who were you teaching?

KURIS: Adults, grown-ups. We were sent as a—I was sent to Rosewood [PH] High School on Forta [PH] Road. And put up a sign for the adult education. [unclear] come in and register. We will study psychology, whatever it is [unclear]. And two people would show up. [chuckles]

LEVINE: And were they paying for this?

KURIS: Oh, what?

LEVINE: Were the people who were taking the class—

KURIS: They didn't pay, no.

LEVINE: They didn't pay.

KURIS: It was free.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

KURIS: It was free. No. It was hard to get them in free. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KURIS: And I was very good, if I say so myself.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KURIS: So that by time three months went by, I had 200 people in my class by word of mouth. I made it interesting. I went into the [unclear] and all kinds of things. Then I learned that I was a good speaker. And if I prepared my lesson, the second time I gave it I—I was very good.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KURIS: If I say so myself. So I had a place in Brooklyn. I went to—and—and happened then, I went [unclear] and I got enough classes where I earned the pay, 20, \$25 a week.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh.

KURIS: Which was something.

LEVINE: Yeah. Is there anything else you can think of about the Depression and how it affected you and your family?

KURIS: Me, personally, it didn't affect.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

KURIS: Whether what was on the table was enough or not enough, it was always enough for me.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

KURIS: [unclear]—my father and mother might have taken it a little more, because he—he got jobs, specialty jobs and this jobs. And he didn't work for two, three weeks. Was—[unclear].

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

KURIS: But Pop put out all he could. He went to all kinds of places, went to New Jersey. He knew people and they would get him a little work for a few weeks, a few days. And we—we survived.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. And then what did you do after you were teaching the psychology in adult education?

KURIS: Oh. Oh, that's when I went in my business, went off on my business venture. [chuckles] My brother, Jack, was a jeweler and casting, the lost wax process, came into use.

LEVINE: What process?

KURIS: Casting, lost wax.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KURIS: Do you know what—do you know it?

LEVINE: No.

KURIS: You make a mold of a ring and you draw marks. And then you take the wax and set them up like a little tree, seven rings. And you're making a big mold. But this mold is then—what's the—what—what is—

LEVINE: Plastic?

KURIS: No, what's this material? Calcium.

LEVINE: Oh.

KURIS: Calcium powder. And then you throw in wax. And when you burn out the wax, you throw in coal and out come the rings. And after filing and touching up and so on, just thing that came out of dentistry.

LEVINE: Oh.

KURIS: Revolutionized jewelry [unclear].

LEVINE: Hmm.

KURIS: Dentistry also. So the—I worked for Jack. He taught me how to file rings. The casting came out with a kind of a heavy coating and had to be filed off before you could use it. So I learned how to—I found that I had very good hands, used to make 75 cents a ring. Seventy-five cents a ring. In no time, I was making 5, 6, \$7 an hour [chuckles], which was a lot of—J— Jack willingly paid me 75 cents when I earned only 3, \$4. And when I earned 7, \$8 [chuckles] when he wasn't making that, so I said, "Okay. I'll do it for 35 cents." And I made \$5 an hour just the same.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

KURIS: And then, after about a year of that stuff, I said to Jack, "I'm going into business. Would you rent me one of your desks there?" He said, "You're crazy. Look, I spent a lifetime learning this business. What are you doing? What do you know about this business?" [chuckles] [unclear]. Anyway, I started—the Army was around then. I saw military rings so I started to prepare the line of military rings. And I went on 23rd Street, walking along. They had these stores selling military goods at the time. I don't know what they got there now. And I remember this young—young lady standing outside and leaning against the door. And I said, "Help us out. Could you use any military rings?" [chuckles] That's how I sold [unclear]. "Yeah, sure," she says. "Come on in." That was the beginning of my fortune.

LEVINE: Wow.

KURIS: Come in. She bought some rings. And I expanded the line. I—I learned where the customers were from her. This was a very nice girl. She sort of took me under her wings to where the customers are. I didn't even know where. I didn't know anything about military rings. I didn't know anything about the—the—what do you call those stores for the Army?

LEVINE: Surplus?

KURIS: Huh?

LEVINE: Army surplus?

KURIS: No, no. The regular stores. The [unclear].

LEVINE: Military?

KURIS: Military stores. The—they had a name. Anyway, then when I learned where the stores were, I went to the stores. And before you know it, I was making more money than—than I know what to—I was astonished. I was becoming a rich man.

LEVINE: And that's what you did?

KURIS: Hiring people. I hired people in the shop [chuckles] and [unclear].

LEVINE: Wow.

KURIS: And that was that.

LEVINE: And that's what you did then—

KURIS: Yeah.

LEVINE: —until you retired?

KURIS: I became a general jeweler. I had a—I had a job one summer at my brother's place as an office boy. And when I—for—for two weeks. There was some kind of a thing that they needed while somebody else was on vacation. And then when I left, I was speaking to one of the kids on the street, a kid from a very poor family, George. Really poor. They—they lived on—before they moved around there, where—the [several words unclear] subway line was. Really poor family. So I said, "George, you want the—this job? You can have it. It pays \$10 a week." He says, "I make \$9." [chuckles] So he took the job. Well, the reason I'm telling you, when I went into business for myself, he was still working for the—my former boss. So he—he used to come down, see [unclear]. [unclear] said, "Listen, I want to go [unclear] partners." So I said, "[several words unclear]. You want to buy half?" I said, "Sure." So—so, "How much?" I said, "Sell you half of [unclear] for \$750." I says, "Done." And he gave me \$750. And he [unclear] father-in-law, "It's too much. You could buy it for 650." [chuckles] So he comes back and he says to me, "My father-in-law said, Arthur, that was really too much. It's unfair. All it's worth is 650." So I said, "Okay. Here's your hundred dollars back." [chuckles] Anyway, we became—we became partners.

LEVINE: Partners.

KURIS: [chuckles] Successful b—business partners. And so I [unclear].

LEVINE: Wow.

KURIS: Yeah.

LEVINE: Okay. How did you meet your wife?

KURIS: My wife, I met in Baychester. You know Baychester?

LEVINE: Baychester?

KURIS: Pelham [PH] Bay.

LEVINE: Queens? No?

KURIS: No, Bronx.

LEVINE: Oh, Pelham Bay. Okay.

KURIS: Yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah.

KURIS: Pelham Bay in the Bronx. And the bay go—goes through this Bay—Baychester, Pelham Bay and other places. And we used to go—I and a couple of friends of mine, guys from school originally, who—two or three friends—we would, on Sunday, pack up goods, lunches and what that my mother would bake cakes for [chuckles]—all kinds of terrific Russian bakery. And we'd go there and the three or four of us would spend the day playing pinochle and having our time in the sun. And one day we're there and a boat pulls up. This I used for—to convince my wife. A cockeyed goy is rowing the boat and they—they put on shore three girls, Honey, my wife; Rosie, her friend and Virginia—Ginnie. And—and there they are. So of course, by the time we got through with the day, the goya [PH] were forgotten and [unclear]. The Jewish kids got the Jewish girls and we make a fire and we cook—give them some steak, reach them through their stomachs. [chuckles]

LEVINE: [chuckles]

KURIS: And that's how I met her.

LEVINE: And what was her name?

KURIS: Henrietta Rockoff [PH]. And—

LEVINE: A—and how many children did you have?

KURIS: Four.

LEVINE: And their names?

KURIS: Armand [PH]. He's a professor of biology, Emerson [PH], California. Jay, he's a medical doctor. Leslie [PH], out in Seattle with three kids, and Cindy in Chappaqua was magna cum laude, University of Cali—of Pennsylvania.

LEVINE: Wonderful. Now, we don't have too much time. But when you think back about coming here with your family as a nine-year-old, do you think it made a difference in the kind of person you became—

KURIS: Certainly.

LEVINE: H—in what ways do you think that [unclear]?

KURIS: I—if we continued living out there, my environment would have been a block around—around where we lived. Well, by the time we got here, the world was wide—my—my field of operations. And—and then the—the—did I tell you the story of the Scotch kid? Because of who, I found Thompson Harris. I never heard of it. By that accident, I entered the collegiate world through Thompson Harris, three-year school. First, the [unclear]. Then I—I got in. I got free entrance. Other guys are breaking their backs trying to enter City College. All I had to do was walk across the street.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm.

KURIS: Life is full of these—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

KURIS: —accidents, incidents that push you, if you take advantage of them when you see it.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

KURIS: Once I saw how [unclear].

LEVINE: How about your greatest satisfactions in your life? What would you consider has given you great satisfaction?

KURIS: The greatest satisfaction was marrying Honey and the four kids. Great kids.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

KURIS: I—I'm really proud of my—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

KURIS: —my kids. Terrific kids. I don't know what I did to [unclear]. Actually, it was probably Honey's doing.

LEVINE: Hmm.

KURIS: She was just a very nice person.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

KURIS: She raised nice kids.

LEVINE: Do you think there's anything that you had to overcome in your life that made a difference?

KURIS: No.

LEVINE: Do you think you changed?

KURIS: Anything that—anything that I wanted to overcome, I overcame. Period. Nothing really blocked my way. Whenever I came against something, I just—to overcome—what—the instance—what do you have to overcome? You have to overcome ignorance. You have to overcome poverty. You have to overcome prejudice. No problem.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm. Do you think you changed much over your lifetime?

KURIS: [chuckles] Of course, yeah.

LEVINE: In what ways?

KURIS: I got older.

LEVINE: You get older.

KURIS: Yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah. But I mean, you know, the way you approach things and—

KURIS: [unclear]

LEVINE: You've always had sort of the same—

KURIS: Yeah.

LEVINE: —basic—

KURIS: Life was a cinch.

LEVINE: A search?

KURIS: A cinch.

LEVINE: Oh, a cinch.

KURIS: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KURIS: Was little problems.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KURIS: [unclear] we [unclear] Itchy [unclear]. That's—that's always—

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KURIS: There are [unclear] difficulties.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. Is there anything else about coming to this country?
Anything else about—did you—did your family become citizens?

KURIS: Oh, yes.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KURIS: Oh, yes. Everybody—

LEVINE: Yeah.

KURIS: I had to become a citizen in my own name.

LEVINE: Hmm.

KURIS: By that time, the [unclear] of 1922 was past. You had to become a—you couldn't become a citizen on your father's paper anymore [unclear]. Period. We missed it by a few—

LEVINE: Ah.

KURIS: —months.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KURIS: But then I went to—in the—become a citizen [unclear] a couple of college kids—friends in my—were horsing around all the time. I always [chuckles] thought that we were going to be kicked out of the office. Yeah.

LEVINE: [unclear]. Okay. Well, we're at the end of the tape. I want to thank you for a very interesting interview.

KURIS: You're welcome.

LEVINE: And I've been speaking with Arthur Kuris, who came at nine years old in 1922 from Odessa. And this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service signing off.

[END OF INTERVIEW]