

EI-1056
GUSTEL BERKOWITZ
BIRTHDATE: DECEMBER 28, 1920
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INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE, PH.D
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TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: JENNA CIACCIO
TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY: IRV SILBERG

GERMANY, 1937
AGE: 16

SHIP: QUEEN MARY
PORT: CHERBOURG, FRANCE
RESIDENCES:
*GERMANY: FRANKFURT AM MAIN
*US: SAN ANTONIO, TX; BATTLE CREEK, MI;
TAMARAC, FL

LEVINE: Okay, today is March 19, 1999. I'm here in Tamarac, Florida with Gustel Berkowitz who's maiden name was Sharlach [ph]. She came from Germany in 1937, when she was sixteen years of age on the Queen Mary. At the time of this interview Mrs. Berkowitz is seventy-nine years of age and this is Janet Levine.

BERKOWITZ: I'm going to be seventy-nine in December.

LEVINE: Oh,

BERKOWITZ That's okay.

LEVINE: You're gonna turn seventy-nine, okay, in

BERKOWITZ: That's all right. [Laughs]

LEVINE: December. So you're really seventy-eight, let's not push it, right? [Laughs] Okay so you're seventy-eight at the time of this interview and this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. Okay, if you would start at the beginning and tell your birth date and where in Germany you were born.

BERKOWITZ: In Frankfurt am MAIN, which you would call Frankfurt on the Main. The Main River there. I'm born at December 28, 1920.

LEVINE: And, what was your father's name?

BERKOWITZ: Max

LEVINE: And your mother?

BERKOWITZ: Recha, R-E-C-H-A. [Laughs]

LEVINE: And her maiden name?

BERKOWITZ: Hirsch,

LEVINE: And, did you have brothers and sisters?

BERKOWITZ: Three sisters

LEVINE: In Germany?

BERKOWITZ: Yes

LEVINE: And their names? And their birth order, the oldest first.

BERKOWITZ: The oldest is myself. The next one is Ruth. And ----- who came along a year later. The next one is Margo and all of their last name changed now. They're not Sharlachs anymore. And the last one is Edith.

LEVINE: And did you have grand parents in Germany who you saw?

BERKOWITZ: Well at the time we left we still had a grandfather on my mother's side. But he was in the ninety's and he could not come along. You had to be in very good health to come to this country.

LEVINE: Do you have memories of your grandfather? Experiences with him in Germany when you --

BERKOWITZ: He liked the Kaiser. [Laughs] And he thought he was the best of the Jews.

LEVINE: Well, what did he do before he became too old to work?

BERKOWITZ: Oh, he was in textiles. And my father got into the same business. He had to sell on the road all kinds of different shirts, socks, things like that. And sometimes, I was able to travel with him. He took me along in a car to where he was seeing costumers, so I got around a little bit.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, Uh-huh. So did your father go off for periods of time and travel through the co... through Germany?

BERKOWITZ: No, not long trips, no.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And it was in Germany that he was doing this? Uh-huh

BERKOWITZ: In Germany, yes.

LEVINE: And, how would you describe your father, as a girl growing up in Germany? How do you remember him there?

BERKOWITZ: He was a jovial man. He had a very great sense of humor and he wrote lots of poems, which he did when he couldn't sleep at night. And the ones he wrote in Germany were in German. And after we came here, he wrote them in English. And I still have a collection of these. And also for occasions like somebody's birthday and a wedding and so forth, he would make up a poem. In our family, it's still a tradition. When we have a special celebration; we make up a poem or a song and sing it.

LEVINE: Aww, Can you recall any of them? Any poems or songs from your childhood in Germany that you could recite or sing or do you have any committed to memory?

BERKOWITZ: Oh, Yes. I played piano and I remember many, many songs that we learned in school. You see I had just graduated from school. So I don't have much other experience, and we learned a lot. We had choir and we put on some musical performances. And those songs still stick in my head. Although I don't need them anymore and nobody knows them here.
[Laughs]

LEVINE: Well maybe, towards the end of the tape if you feel like it, you might sing, and so it will be on the tape. [Laughs]

BERKOWITZ: My voice isn't really that good. I mean I sing on key but it's got an old age frog in there. [Laughs]

LEVINE: Well I think it would be sort of nice to have it, since it's a part of your childhood. And you know you're family might like having it also.

BERKOWITZ: eh-hmm. Towards the end

LEVINE: Okay, okay, fine. So, you went through school in Germany, you were finished with the equivalent of high school in Germany?

BERKOWITZ: Yes, they had a different school system

LEVINE: uh-huh

BERKOWITZ: I went to a parochial school. [Samson Raphael Hirsch school. No relation to my mother. Which was a very orthodox school system. The boys had to be in a different school than the girls. The girls were in the lyceum and the boys were in the gymnasium. But we learned, I think, about the same things.

LEVINE: And, were you planning to --- a career? Any particular kind of work that you had in mind when you finished?

BERKOWITZ: Well, the school is a forerunner to college. And so you plan what you might wanna be after you finish college. Only we never got a

chance to go to college there. I thought I might be a kindergarten teacher or something like that. A piano comes in handy there, you know.

LEVINE: So did you take piano lessons from an early age?

BERKOWITZ: Uh-hmm, from about six to twelve. After which it became extremely hard to go to my piano lesson because of Hitler's rules.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, can you talk a little about Hitler's rules and when they started and how they affected you and your family?

BERKOWITZ: Well, Hitler started in 1933. And a number of people who had a chance to move out of Germany left. Because according to his book *Mein Kampf*, we didn't have anything good to look forward to. But nobody believed that he really would do all that---that he wrote in the book. And even my father didn't believe it. And he said, "I'm not going to leave, I have a business here. I have four little girls here. I have to provide for them. I'm not going to run to another country and start all over again, especially since you can't take anything with you." At the time we left, you could take fifty marks with you, which is less than fifty dollars per person. And we could take a camera each. So he bought us a Leica for each one of us. And personal clothes, and furniture, enough to fill a lift, which is a big box ----- in which they put all your furniture --- which was inspected that you don't hide any money or diamonds or something in it. And that was allowed to go out of the country to where we were eventually settling. At the time, my father didn't intend to move.

LEVINE: Just to clarify. You could take as much as would fit in, say an elevator, or standard size elevator? Would that be about?

BERKOWITZ: Something like that, yes. But furniture cramped together, you can get quite a bit into it. At the time, like I said, my father didn't believe. "I'm a good German. I'm a patriotic German. I fought for my country. I earned the Eisener Kross (Iron Cross). I ... what can Hitler do to me that ---- I, who am such a loyal German?" Even though we were orthodox Jews --- that had nothing to do with it. You were a loyal patriotic German. We belonged to the J?discher Front Soldaten ----- Bund der J?dischen Front Soldaten ---- which means the club of the Jewish soldiers that were at the front. They made a difference between those and not Jewish. [Laughs] But we were honored and we had many celebrations and sometimes I played piano at some of those celebrations.

LEVINE: Was that distinction made prior to the build up to World War Two? That the..

BERKOWITZ: Yes I think it was like Bnai Brith and such ----- where you wanted to have a separate Jewish organization, 'cause you felt more comfortable there. But the idea of being a good German did not help anybody in Germany. They persecuted everybody no matter what your status had been. And they especially persecuted the people in the small towns first. So many relatives left their town and came to move in with us. We lived in the big city. Where people didn't know yet, "You're a Jew

and you should be punished because you're a Jew." So they moved in with us, until they would have a chance to leave the country.

LEVINE: So when did that start? You're relatives moving in with you?

BERKOWITZ: I'm guessing at 1935, 1936, something like that.

LEVINE: And where were they mostly going?

BERKOWITZ: Well, we had some relatives that went to the United States when we did. My father was sent an affidavit by the whole family putting their money together, into escrow, so they could afford to have a number of families come over. For which you have to promise that you take care of them for five years so they will not fall a burden to the American Government. And they took a number of families out. We were one of them. And the people who came to live with us were a family my aunt, and uncle, and three of the children. They weren't children anymore. They were grown up enough. They were a few years older than I. [Laughs] And they went over the same time we did.

LEVINE: Well now, what, what family members did you have in the United States before you came?

BERKOWITZ: Oh, my uncle, and aunt, and nine children. In San Antonio, Texas. My uncle had died; he was the brother of my father. My father was the youngest in his family and so the other people were older and the cousins were near our ages. And they had quite a bit of money because they had insurance. When the father died young, the family inherited insurance. And they, like I said, they put this money together, so that they could bring all of us over. But before my father accepted this, he still said I can't come there as a pauper and also a sick man. He had heart trouble ever since World War One. So he didn't want to go. And the relatives wrote that the visas are no good anymore. We have to make up new visas. You have to accept it, or we are not gonna do it anymore. This happened two or three times. I think it's probably the third reason that my husband accept--- my father accepted because he didn't see any other way out anymore. And he knew we had to do something. Things were getting worse in Germany. All the reports of people getting killed in concentration camps. Everything was secret, hush, hush. But people told each other. And some people were being sent urns of ashes from their relatives that had been taken away to concentration camp.

LEVINE: How would they, I wonder how they would get to get them out. I guess maybe through a guard or something, to get ashes to be able to send it...

BERKOWITZ: No they were being sent from the concentration camps to show here, this is a souvenir for your family. He happened to get sick and died in concentration camp. Nobody knew how bad it was.

LEVINE: How about your treatment? Friends, were you, before this were you friendly with gentile people?

BERKOWITZ: I would say our neighbors and some business acquaintances. But we mainly associated with Jewish people. I belonged to the Jewish synagogue there, Broya Gemeinde, which is still in New York. And this was part of the back up for the school system, for the Hirsch School --- which also had an elementary school, a middle school, and a high school. So we went through all of this, the school system and the synagogue ---- mostly associated with Jewish people. These Jewish people in Frankfurt were not as persecuted as the ones in the small town, like I said. But they tried to get out, and only if you had a blood relative could you get out to, let's say United States. Some other countries had other rules. Some people left to go to Cuba, to South America, to Israel. Whoever could get out on some kind of a quota. It was all done by quotas. And we had to have health examinations. We went to Stuttgart, to the American consulate and had a health examination before we were allowed to come over. They found that my father had heart trouble, and so they had a special rider, that when we arrived in this country, we had to be re-examined. My mother had a special rider, 'cause she had varicose veins and had to be re-examined when we come to this country.

LEVINE: So this country had the stipulation that it had to be a blood relative. It couldn't be someone willing to sponsor you, who wasn't a blood relative.

BERKOWITZ: No. After we were here, we found out that it's possible that somebody can sponsor you that has a job for you, which nobody else will fill. There is nobody here that can do the same kind of a job. That's very, very hard. We had an uncle and a aunt. He was teaching opera singing and organ and ---in Frankfurt. And she was teaching piano and they thought maybe they can find something that they wouldn't have too many people of that type here, but they couldn't get anything. They were not related, because they were my mother's sister, not on my father's side where the blood relatives were. We tried after we were in this country. We had many, many people killed from our relatives --- ended up in concentration camp. They couldn't get out. And from school, our, my girlfriends, they ended up in many different countries. And the first time I was in New York for a visit, I tried to get names and find out who is where. One would know another one, so we got quite a few together. Maybe at least a dozen. That had been in my school class with me.

LEVINE: Did your family have a rich cultural life, prior to this build up?

BERKOWITZ: I would say yes. We were involved with my uncle and the opera and the recitals and the, oh it's partly, you see museums. You're ---- you're interested in art. And cultural --- what other things belong to that?

LEVINE: Well I think that's, yea..

BERKOWITZ: We learned in school, we learned English, French, and Hebrew. More French than English, but meanwhile I've forgotten most of my French because I live in this country and I had to use English. So we end up knowing the language well in a country where you live 'cause you use it.

LEVINE: How 'bout your mother and father? Did they know any English?

BERKOWITZ: My mother had had it in school. She had gone to the same school that we had gone to. And in her young life, before she got married, she was a governess. Tea -die ----- teaching them languages to ----- and families, she had to live there. Teach them French or teach them English. And she came in contact with some very high, blue-blooded people, whose children she was hired to teach. Since we had this background, it wasn't so hard to learn the rest of English --- because we had the grammar and basics. We had French for four years and English for six years. But I still wasn't used to the way they talk here. We learned English English, like they talk in England. Came straight to Texas. Yea, with Ellis Island in between.

LEVINE: Well, how, can you recall the circumstances around your actual leaving? Did you have a home? Did your, did you...

BERKOWITZ: Our relatives bought a duplex. For my aunt's family on one side and for us on the other side. So we would have a ready-made home to go into. They also hired my father as a bookkeeper, for their stores --- different cousins at different stores. And because the figures are the same, and he just had to learn more English. My father had not had English, but he hired a teacher to come privately into our home and teach him English. And he made great progress, although, when you're older it's much harder to learn. But he did. Till he ended up making English poems. [Laughs]

LEVINE: So, did, so did you, did you just leave your home? Or did you try to sell?

BERKOWITZ: You had, no, you couldn't sell anything.

LEVINE: Oh that's right, cause you couldn't take any money anyways.

BERKOWITZ: We had a store; we had a shirt manufacturing company. A small scale, custom made shirts. And a, no you couldn't sell it because the gentiles didn't want it. The Jews, the gentiles wouldn't give you money for anything. You just had to leave everything. You had to abandon it. And a, we had a Jewish girl working there who said, I'll take it over and see what I can do with it. Because you couldn't trade with gentiles anymore. You had to trade only with Jews, under Hitler's rules. And there goes a lot of your business, ninety percent. And people who couldn't get out yet, they tried to make a living, whatever they could. Her name was Biata [ph], I remember. Biata Shiffler I think. Shiffer. We were friendly with --- for instance, the people that rented us the facilities where we had our shirt manufacturing. And every Christmas we would go to them. They had a tree that turned around and played music. It was a thrill for us. [Laughs] And on Chanukah, the gifts were different than the Christmas tree presents. And that is every year, my parents brought down from the attic, the things we already had that were locked away. That we couldn't play with them until Chanukah. [Laughs]

LEVINE: Like what would be something they might bring out?

BERKOWITZ: Like, a store, and a dollhouse, and things like that. Little, you know, compartments. And a kitchen, you could cook something with spiritus (alcohol). That's, what would you call it, gas? With alcohol and things like that. We kids loved it, and we looked forward to playing with these things. Boys had train sets; they only got it for Chanukah again. That was the custom

LEVINE: And you'd just have it for that period, and then there was...

BERKOWITZ: We would get maybe one new present, but not the deal that they do here.

LEVINE: Can you remember any other kind of observances of holidays or ...

BERKOWITZ: Every Shabas (Sabbath) we went to shul (synagogue). And our prayer books stayed in the synagogue. But for yomtov (religious holiday) we had our own prayer books. Everybody owned their own and you brought it to the synagogue 'cause it's on a weekday. And you could carry it. Except, let's say Yom Kipur, you had to leave it there. Our father went to Friday night services. And he put on his high silk top hat. We women weren't that dressed up. [Laughs]

At the synagogue, ever'body stood outside and talked. There was no inside serving like they do here. And Hitler forbade all the talking together. You couldn't assemble. He was afraid; somebody's going to plot against him. So you couldn't assemble in groups, and three is a group on up. So we had to leave and just two at a time. And that's why I had trouble getting to piano lessons too. And we had, we were forbidden, let's say, to go to, anything where there's an assembly. Where there's a big group, let's say movies, let's say shows. They stopped giving all these big recitals and things like that because you couldn't assemble.

LEVINE: And what was, I would imagine the emotional response to these rules that were coming in, was everything from fear to anger, to...

BERKOWITZ: Our neighbors that had been very friendly with us before ---- all of a sudden, they had to shut us out. Because else they would be accused of being friends with a Jew. So we couldn't associate with them anymore. Our neighbors became our enemies -- that had been our friends. We had a servant girl who was gentile and she kept warning my father, "I rule the roost here now, and she said if you do anything I don't like, I'm gonna go to the government and tell them that you raped me and they will punish you and put you right in concentration camp and your whole family too"

LEVINE: Wow

BERKOWITZ: Yea, our walls going upstairs, we lived on the second floor, were full of graffiti about Jews. I don't want to quote those now.

LEVINE: uh-huh, uh-huh

BERKOWITZ: I don't know who wrote them on there.

LEVINE: What did it do to your sense of Jewishness, or ----- other people, that when these kinds of repressive measures were starting out. Did you, did some people try to pretend not to be Jewish? Or give up some of their...

BERKOWITZ: I would say on the contrary. People, who thought they weren't Jewish, found out that some of their ancestors were Jewish. Maybe their grandma and now they are labeled Jewish. People hadn't been living as a Jew. Had been of mixed marriages, so they were very disappointed, and shocked that all of a sudden they, they'd considered Jews. And had to, deserved the same punishment as Jewish people.

LEVINE: So do you remember actually leaving your house?

BERKOWITZ: We just had to leave it. I know that people, it seemed we took quite a bit of furniture along. We couldn't take everything, but we could take our favorite pieces. And you couldn't buy anything new. And we heard that in this country, they have refrigerators. We used to go to the market everyday and buy something fresh. So my mother and father bought a refrigerator, and they scratched it up a little bit, so it wouldn't look new. Because we knew after we get to this country, can't afford to buy things. So we had to take what we could. So I remember that about the refrigerator. It had a lock on it. Everything had a lock on it.

LEVINE: Why would...

BERKOWITZ: All the, I dunno all the buffet and everything had. Why? Maybe you don't trust your servants.

LEVINE: uh-huh.

BERKOWITZ: But it also keeps children out of there. [Laughs]

LEVINE: So, how did you go from your home to the port, where you boarded the ship?

BERKOWITZ: Besides the Queen Mary? We sailed from Cherbourg. And on the way to Cherbourg, France, we went to Belgium, then we went to Paris and some of the '37 world's fair for a few days. And then we went to Cherbourg. We thought that, leaving from there, that my father would be in better health condition on the trip over. Because he was the sick one in our family. And instead, we all got sick the entire trip --- seasick. And my father wasn't. [Laughs] But when we got here...

LEVINE: Now were you traveling in...

BERKOWITZ: We had to go to Ellis Island. And that's another story.

LEVINE: Okay, before we get to Ellis Island. What were your accommodations on the Queen Mary? Were you in?...

BERKOWITZ: Second class

LEVINE: uh-huh, so it was pleasant I would imagine? I mean as far as...

BERKOWITZ: They had wonderful menus, and we couldn't eat. We lived on tea and toast. And the last day, I said, "Oh boy it feels good, I feel fine again." It turned out that the ship had docked. And it just took several hours to get off the ship. During that time I was entirely well. [Laughs]

LEVINE: Do you remember seeing the Statue of Liberty when you came in to the New York?

BERKOWITZ: Yes, no from Ellis Island we saw it. I don't remember. We had to go over with a ferry. And after we got to Ellis Island, we were put there to wait, till my father's health would be cleared. And the doctors couldn't come because it was voting weekend. Tuesday morning there is election and they don't come on Friday, and they don't come on Saturday, and they don't come on Sunday. So when we arrived, my father had several days of rest. They put him in the hospital. And they put us in a detention part. We were not together and we were not told about each other. We were not told how our father was doing and he wasn't told what they did with us. It was a very trying time for my mother.

LEVINE: Were you afraid that they would send you back?

BERKOWITZ: I met-

LEVINE: Is that what you were thinking?

BERKOWITZ: -- a number of people there that had been there for half a year, for two years, for three years, and they couldn't get into the country yet. They were handing out crafts items.-- You could make a belt, you could make a rug, you could make a you know, to keep you busy. And that was a very bad sign because it meant we...

END OF SIDE A

BEGIN SIDE B

BERKOWITZ: But after the doctors could get to --- after voting, I guess the next Wednesday ----- got to Ellis Island and the hospital part. My father had had enough rest for his heart, that his EKG showed up real good. And it was a miracle. Because we were all on the same passport ----- affidavit together as a family. And if they would have sent him back, they would have sent all of us back. So we have to thank God for this miracle.

LEVINE: That it happened to be Election Day.

BERKOWITZ: Yes, yea.

LEVINE: Wow. And how were you treated during the ----- those period of days when you were there?

BERKOWITZ: I would kind of think of it like prisoners. [Laughs] You had to get up very early in the morning, I don't know if it was five o'clock or six o'clock anymore, and be marched out into the court yard ----- matrons standing all along that you wouldn't escape and have a certain amount of time to walk around. Then you came back in. And then they were given ---- you were given breakfast. We had like milk and crackers, which I thought were heavenly because the milk tasted so good after what we had had in Germany. And they had eggs. We said please make 'em soft boiled. They served 'em raw almost. [Laughs] And they boiled them maybe one or two minutes. They were terrible. But it was something that we had to get used to. And the beds had springs that went up and down, we weren't used to that. Our beds were much harder in Germany. They didn't have two mattresses on top of each other, like they have here. So, because the bed jumped, all of us still felt sea sick in bed. All of this nauseous-ness came up again. It was not a happy time, waiting to see what would happen to my father. But the most distressed was my mother because we were still school children and didn't have as much of a anxiety about the whole thing.

LEVINE: But you were all together? Your mother, and your sisters, and you.

BERKOWITZ: Yes, em-hmm

LEVINE: And were there many other, were there many people there, when you were there? Was it a crowded place? Or not particularly? Or...

BERKOWITZ: I couldn't tell you that. We were in dormitories. And I was visiting Ellis Island ----- where you have the date, about -- maybe three years ago. And they aren't dormitories anymore. They had some pictures of how they used to be. But it's entirely different now. Now it's a decorated museum, compared to what it was. [Laughs]

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh. Well they have one little dormitory room set up. As an I ----example.

BERKOWITZ: uh-huh, yea.

LEVINE: But you were in the great hall? You were in the main building or were you in another building?

BERKOWITZ: Upstairs, upstairs dormitories.

LEVINE: uh-huh, yea, right. Let's see so, when you left, can you remember when your father, when it happened that you learned when your father was all right and that you were going to be released and you could stay in this country?

BERKOWITZ: We had to go in front of a judge there. To some kind of a court hearing where they asked us questions. And what we know about United States. And another health exam. And my youngest sister saw a black man there, and he was rolling his eyes at her and she giggled. And started my next sister giggling. Till we were all giggling and my mother

said [whispers], "Stop, stop they're gonna send us back to Germany." We had to hold ourselves back from that. We weren't used to black people and one rolling his eyes at that.

LEVINE: [Chuckles] So when you saw your father, then you were able to go by the ferry back to Manhattan? And then what did ---- did your uncle or did your aunt meet you? Or you were, then going by trains?

BERKOWITZ: Then we had to take a train to Texas. We had paid for this train already in Germany ----- to have tickets for it, because we knew we wouldn't have any money in this country. So we tried to arrange as much as possible ---- the passage and all the way to Texas.

LEVINE: Can you remember that train trip? Anything during those first days, weeks that

BERKOWITZ: Yes.

LEVINE: struck you as different?

BERKOWITZ: We were eating our own food on the train. We had to buy some food. And when we got to St. Louis, my mother was running out of food and the train stopped long enough, or we had to change trains, I don't remember that. But she went in a grocery store and with her best English, which she had had for years, she asked for bread. And they said oh you want potatoes, so you know how good her English sounded [Laughs]

LEVINE: [Laughs]

BERKOWITZ: We also bought some bananas, they were little and they were pink. And the ----- they were different than any bananas we had seen.

LEVINE: But you had seen bananas before that?

BERKOWITZ: Yea, then yes in Germany we had pineapple. We had bananas that were imported, yes. Yooh --you know, like here. And we had these shopping bags, they look like a net and you can put a lot in there. Or fold 'em up and put 'em in your bag. So you could buy your food. Also because we were kosher, perhaps, we couldn't eat on the train or we ----- I don't know if there were no meals, or we couldn't eat them because we were kosher, or because we hadn't paid for that ahead of time. I don't know. But when we got to Texas, to San Antonio, then we got a big welcome, by our relatives.

LEVINE: Why don't you tell about that ---- when you arrived at San Antonio. What happened, the first day ---- night, whatever?

BERKOWITZ: They probably took us to the little duplex, where we were going to live. And showed us what they had gotten for us. Even food in the refrigerator and some hand me down clothes that we could wear if we needed 'em. And we were the poor little relation that came over. But after we started to make some money, I mean little money. I worked some. I had to go back to school. My relatives said, they go two more years here to school than you did. And you have to make the diploma. You have

to get a diploma from this country. Else they won't hire you any place. So we had to go to school two more years.

So my older sister and I went in the same class in the San Antonio Vocational and Technical School. And when I started school they found out that in English we were way ahead of what they were learning. That is grammar and Shakespeare. So they were trying to learn, like aint is isn't. We never learned aint, you know, so I didn't have any problem with that. And we took choir and English for foreign --- no, that was in the evening. We took --- we had government, civic. What was it called? Civics. We had to learn a lot about this country. And then we also were supposed to have a trade, learn some kind of a trade.

So my father looked up what do they need people for -- what kind of jobs will available, and he said to me, "You're the oldest; you have to be a secretary and a stenographer. And the next one, yes, she had to be one too. They needed that many. And the third one, he said they need cosmetologists. You're gonna be a beauty shop operator, I mean employee. And the youngest one, he said they need sales ladies. You gonna be a sales lady. We had no say so. My father always made all the decisions. That was the way they did it in Germany. That's the way he continued it here. And he was right, he had looked it up.

LEVINE: And yet he was a, was a, you said jovial, he wasn't a strict...

BERKOWITZ: Oh yea, oh, up bringing was strict.

LEVINE: Up-bringing was strict? Uh-huh. And how about your mother? How was she as far as your deciding how you should conduct yourself? Or...

BERKOWITZ: I think my mother was the cultural half of the family. And she helped us with our homework. Did I mention she was in the same school before the...

LEVINE: Yes, uh-huh.

BERKOWITZ: And she had some of the same teachers. So you know how old some of the teachers were. [Laughs]

LEVINE: [Laughs] How did the school, the, conducting the school ----- how was the school different, as far as how it was run, compared with the one you had left in Germany --- the one in San Antonio?

BERKOWITZ: Not strict at all in San Antonio. Kids would sit in class and chew gum and bring eyelash curlers, and during the middle of the lesson they would curl their eyelashes. And they'd come to class and say I haven't done my homework. That was impossible; in Germany you didn't do that. You did everything you were told. If you had homework and so many pages, you did it. And you certainly had to have enough respect that you don't do anything in class that is not suitable in school.

We had to sit in class. And then the teacher would come in and everybody would get up. We didn't change classes, we changed teachers. We changed some classes only, like the lab, chemistry lab. Or the choir music room,

then we had to go in that. But in general the teachers came in and we stood up. Out of respect, there was a lot of respect for the teachers. No comparison to here. But that was that year when I went to school. I don't know how it is now. I heard its worse.

LEVINE: I would think so. So how, so you did the two years, in order to get your diploma and then did you in fact become a secretary, stenographer?

BERKOWITZ: Yes, uh-huh. I started small. Five clerk and --you know --- to get acquainted because we didn't know English that well and the English alphabet didn't but --- didn't get, come that easy to us. It's the same alphabet except it's pronounced different. And the names are different. And when you look up things it takes longer.

LEVINE: Were you the only immigrants who had come from Germany that you were aware of, like in your neighborhood and in your school?

BERKOWITZ: Oh, in our school we were the only ones. And my younger sisters went to, I guess it's a middle school, and but in the whole town, of San Antonio, were a number of other German families that come there. And they all had to start up the hard way. There was a doctor and he ended up moving crates. You cannot just step in where you, with the same profession you came from. Because you have to pass all kinds of exams, that include a lot of knowledge of English. And you had to be there long enough to know enough English, so you can answer all of the questions properly.

LEVINE: How bout your father? What was he able to do when he came here for work?

BERKOWITZ: Yea, my relatives hired him as bookkeeper, and sent him to several of their stores. Because he had had heart trouble, they wanted his job to be easy so he could sit down and he was very accurate. And they were very happy to have him. Now a days you probably wouldn't look that hard for a bookkeeper. You go in your computer and you do it.
[Laughs]

LEVINE: And were you having any correspondence with people, relatives, who were still in Germany, after you got here?

BERKOWITZ: Yes, my aunt, my mother's sister and family. We had --- my mother had four girls. And my aunt had four boys. They also lived in Frankfurt, but unfortunately she didn't have the blood relationship that we had through my father. So the oldest son, during the earlier years of Hitler, went to Argentina. Ones next oldest ----- one is not the next oldest, the third. Oh. Yeah, the oldest son stayed with them. The next oldest went to Argentina; the third one went to Israel. I don't know he was, how he was able to get to Israel, but he was. And the youngest son came out of Germany with the Kinder Transport (transporting children). Maybe you're acquainted with that. I think that was through the HIAS. And ended up in England. In England, they ended up choosing him as a translator -- in German they call it dolmetscher ---- in the army. And

he was sent to Germany, but as a English soldier. He ended up marrying a German girl.

LEVINE: Oh wow.

BERKOWITZ: Thank God, they're divorced. She came from a Nazi background and he has married an English girl since. But his mother and father, and oldest brother were killed, were put in concentration camp.

LEVINE: So you started working, and did you meet your husband soon after or much later?

BERKOWITZ: Oh, during the war years. I lived in San Antonio and they sent most of the country's soldiers to San Antonio to be trained. We had Fort Sam Houston. We had Kelly Field. We had numerous fields where they trained the soldiers. And I used to go to the USO from our synagogue. And we danced with the soldiers. We had a lot of fun those years. Oh we had a ball. You would dance with them, and then you went home again.

You had no further acquaintance with them. But I also joined a group called the Liberty Belles and they sent you in a bus to different places where they had USO's and there you danced with the soldiers. And you went home again on the bus, but it was all a lot of fun. I learned jitterbugging. Lots of American music that we didn't play at home. We had German music; I even brought a few German records with me, which later on didn't mean anything to me anymore. [Laughs] I wanted to be American.

LEVINE: Did your mother and father want to be American or were they more wanting to hold onto their...?

BERKOWITZ: No, we tried to talk as much English as possible at home because we heard you learn English better if you keep using it. But at first you end up talking a language of English words mixed with German words, you have a mixture. But you eventually learn to talk all in English. My one cousin, who came over with his family, from the same relatives, said he had a dream in English. And he said once you dream in English, that's it, than you are a real American. [Laughs]

LEVINE: [Laughs] So your, your first husband was someone who you danced with at a USO?

BERKOWITZ: Yes, uh-huh.

LEVINE: Uh-huh

BERKOWITZ: And he wanted to take me home and I said no such thing, you know. I have three sisters here; we're all going back home together. And besides I don't even know if you're Jewish ----even though it was a Jewish USO. And he said just a minute please, and he pulls out his dog tag. And they have it on there. [Laughs] And we got better acquainted. My mother invited him for meals, and they invited lots of other soldiers too, for holidays for Shabbas.

And my sisters all ended up with a soldier boy, boyfriends. The one who lives in Rochester, New York now met hers in San Antonio. The one who lives in Oregon now, her husband was a soldier in the army. I think she met him in New York, but I'm not sure. By that time I had left home, I was married. And one sister ended up in New York. See my father died and my mother was alone. And my sisters decided they would go to New York, New York City. And they would find jobs there and live in a German neighborhood, which they did.

And they met boys through, like this one sister married a boy from a family that had several sons. They had no girls, they just had sons. They were all recommended, it's a schadchen (marriage broker) type thing. You don't go to a paid schadchen but you go ----- friends introduce you, you know. And she ended up marrying that boy. They told her that there were several girls in our family, who are not married, and in that family are several boys and maybe some would match each other. It worked out. That's the sister who I told you to call.

LEVINE: Oh good, okay. Well then I'll keep calling her when I get back. Well now what was your husband's name?

BERKOWITZ: My first husband, Maynard Fred Kaiser.

LEVINE: And, did you have children?

BERKOWITZ: Yes, three children.

LEVINE: And their names?

BERKOWITZ: Sarah Kaiser, Holly Kaiser, and Mary Kaiser: Middle initials, too. Their married names are not being used because my oldest daughter got her diploma with her maiden name.

LEVINE: Oh so she uses that.

BERKOWITZ: Yea, she uses that. And then she got married, and then she took this name back. I mean ---- continued, she got married twice. [Laughs] Anyways, she took her maiden name back. Then my second daughter, never even changed it because of her diploma. And my son married a girl who kept her maiden name. So all the children's names are hyphenated now.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh.

BERKOWITZ: With both names.

LEVINE: So when you married, did you move to New York, or where did you?

BERKOWITZ: No, I was in San Antonio and got married in San Antonio.

LEVINE: uh-huh. And then did you stay, at some point you went to Michigan, what

BERKOWITZ: My husband was from Chicago. And his family, his mother, and father, and sisters came over to meet me, in San Antonio. And then they approved of me. [Laughs] My husband had to be approved by my father too, about what his plans are for the future. And how he will provide for me and so forth. It all had to be accepted on both sides of the family and then we got married. It seemed like a long process but it really wasn't. I made him Pesach (Passover Holiday) in that year and I got married Thanksgiving that year. But we went through all the proper procedures. By September, we were engaged. By November we got married, but always on a soldier holiday. Where they can get, have a few days off. You know you can have a few days off Labor Day. You can have a few days off Thanksgiving. If you arrange it, Passover. So those were my dates.

LEVINE: How do you think of the, of your, of your German side and your American side? How do you think about yourself in those terms of being German, being American, or

BERKOWITZ: I found out, unfortunately, while we were in San Antonio that the people who were there from other countries, or their parents came from other countries, like Poland and Russia, they didn't approve of the German Jews and they didn't want to associate with us. We were discriminated against, by our own Jewish people. They said when the Polish and Russian people came to Germany, that they were not treated nice. And so they are going to give us the same cold shoulder. Did you ever hear that before?

LEVINE: I heard it in reverse. That it was the German Jews who looked down on the Jews...

BERKOWITZ: And then it became in reverse.

LEVINE: uh-huh, uh-huh. Oh so, uh-huh, so really your community was more with German Jews than with

BERKOWITZ: Yea, we associated by needs with German-Jewish people at first, until we got to be Americans.

LEVINE: Do you feel that you changed a lot ---- can you, can you talk about, what, well when you first came did you, were you right away ----- given the circumstance, I would think you wouldn't have been happy to be here, but did you change your attitude toward ----- I mean, did you think for a while that you might someday go back to Germany, or?

BERKOWITZ: That's an interesting question. A lot of German people have found out, German Jewish people, that the government would pay for them to come back to Germany, the trip and being treated there, if they give some speeches there in public areas. Like they invited to speak the school or the chamber of commerce and places like that. And they took the trips and went to where they came from and had a look at what Germany is like now. And others I think were able to get there on a trip, on a visit, without having to make all these speeches, but I don't know enough about it. But the general attitude was --- we don't really want to go back.

LEVINE: Is there anything else? We have about five minutes left. And I hope you're gonna either recite a poem or sing or whatever, but would you want to say anything further about your coming here ---- your family's coming here. How it impacted your life later or anything else that you concluded about your immigration to this country.

BERKOWITZ: My education made a difference. I was supposed to go to college and I couldn't. And our first, last year of high school was the first year of college here. You learned by lectures. And it's not the same system here. We just made our own education by going to classes. I went to English for foreigners in the evenings. I took Spanish in San Antonio because there were lots of Mexican people there, to be able to converse with them. I forgot most of it by now. We continued --- we had brought our piano ---- continued my music, but I didn't have lessons anymore. Until my husband, who had been brought up in Chicago was sent in the war to India. And came back after two and a half years. Until he moved to Battle Creek, where his father had meanwhile moved and there we bought a little house with a down payment that ---- of the money that I saved from the allotment as a soldier's bride and made the down payment on it. Yea and I bought a piano and I took some lessons which entitled me to be a beginner for private teaching.

LEVINE: And then did you do that?

BERKOWITZ: Some, yes. During ----- some after school hours.

LEVINE: Ok, well, how about any of your father's poems or songs that were part of your early life?

BERKOWITZ: It's in another room

LEVINE: Ok, let me turn this off.

LEVINE: Ok, we're resuming now, and you're about to read something that was probably a song, or sung, lets say, that your father wrote

BERKOWITZ: For family gatherings. On the occasion of moving, in San Antonio from one house to another. Sharlachs, have you heard I'm moving, because I think we are improving. The living standards, isn't it nice. They bought a brand new house, that's wise. The fixtures and facilities are hundred years of age, at least. The roof is leaking and below termites eat the wood like dough. A thousand mice, and many rats play gaily hide and seek with cats. There are no doors and neither sills only a box with unpaid bills. Merrily the sun plays ball, through the ceiling on the wall. Pools are gathering when it rains, because the windows have no panes. [Phone rings] A skunk, the stinkiest of its race lives where once was a fireplace. [Break for telephone]

LEVINE: Ok we're resuming now after the telephone call and we're gonna start where the phone started ringing.

BERKOWITZ: Pools are gathering when it rains, because the windows have no panes. Clash, clash. A skunk, the stinkiest of if it's race, lives

where once was a fireplace. In the kitchen is a sink, dirty muddy black as ink. Frogs are jumping here, hop, hop. Reptiles loaded for close chop. The papering has been forgotten. Everything is more than rotten. If I were a Sharlach, surely know in such a house I would not go.

LEVINE: Ok, and that's just one of many poems and some of them were put to music that your father wrote. He started writing them in German, but he finished writing them in English. And Mrs. Berkowitz has a whole folder full of them, hopefully we may have a few on file at the Ellis Island Oral History office. And this is Janet Levine for the National Parks Service. I've been speaking with Gustel Berkowitz who came in 1937 through Ellis Island, at the age of sixteen and I'm signing off.

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