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RUTH AND HARRY METHNER
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LEVINE: Okay. Today is March 29, 1999 and I am here in New York City at the Hilton Millennium Hotel with Mr. And Mrs. Harry Methner, Ruth and Harry Methner, who celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary at Ellis Island yesterday, having been married there in 1949. This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. If we could just start at the beginning. Perhaps if you'd start, Mrs. Methner, just saying name, maiden name, birth date and where you were born.

R. METHNER: My name is Ruth Methner. My maiden name was Hyman [PH]. I was born in Mainz, Germany August 1st, 1924.

LEVINE: And you, Mr. Methner?

H. METHNER: My name is Harry Methner. I was born in Berlin on July 21, 1922 and stayed there till we left in 1938.

LEVINE: Okay. And [clears throat] let's see. Now, were—how—you were both in Germany until 1938?

H. METHNER: I left on Christmas Day, 1938.

LEVINE: And you?

R. METHNER December 13th, 1938.

LEVINE: Okay. Perhaps if you would start by saying the circumstances leading up to your leaving.

H. METHNER: My father was in business in—in Berlin as a butcher. By profession, he was a cook. And business was booming in '36—in 1937. In 1938, it deteriorated rapidly. We closed the store. We decided to immigrate and various places were considered, including Cuba, South America—South America, and just about any place where you could go that was available at the time. And we decided on Shanghai, China. Now, we left on the 26th of December from Bremen, Germany on a German boat and traveled around Spain, from Mediterranean through the Suez Canal into Bombay and Singapore, where my father received a position that lasted exactly 90 days, whereupon, after 90 days, we proceeded to Shanghai, China.

LEVINE: Okay. Now, how old were you at this time?

H. METHNER: I was at that time 16 years and four months—five months.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And did you have other options at that time as to where the family might go or—

H. METHNER: Well—

LEVINE: —why did you decide to go where you did decide?

H. METHNER: Well, there was one of the option, that when we reached the harbor, we tried to got on a boat with passage booked through a travel agency, which turned out to be the boat had been sunk 10 years before they sold us a ticket. And there was no boat to go to. And, as time was precious, Shanghai was taken as a destination for the simple reason that the war between China and Japan excluded any European non-Oriental-looking person. And there was no checks or balances when you entered the harbor in Shanghai. You got off the boat and you stayed. And there was nobody there to care or take a—take a look at you, per—period. And when we arrived in—finally, in—in April of 1939, after being 90 days in Singapore, there

were already over 3,000 Middle European refugees who found that haven.

LEVINE: Hmm.

H. METHNER: And mainly, because persons that were sent to a concentration camp, male persons, had their spouses look for a place to go to. And Shanghai was that open port. And the only problem was enough steerage to be able to get a ticket on a steamer, regardless what country's flag was flying it to get to Shanghai. That space was very, very scarce.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. What steamer did you get?

H. METHNER: We had the German boat called the Canizinow. There were three of those, the Canizinow, Shaunhorst [PH]. And the third one escapes me right now. And we took that passage. There were a lot of Japanese boats. The Tokyo Maro [PH] was a boat that one of my aunts and uncles used, same passage, arriving maybe five or six days after we got there.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm. Okay. Well, how about you, Mrs. Methner? Would you—

R. METHNER: Well, after Kristallnacht, my mother decided it was time to send my sister and myself with the children's transport to Holland. And we stayed in Holland approximately a year and a half, maybe closer to two years. And we left Holland just about two weeks before the Germans came and—and landed in Hoboken on March 28th, 1940. And I went to live with an uncle and aunt in Rochester, New York and my grandparents, who had come previous to that time. And I wanted to—I was 16 years old. I wanted to go to school. I wanted to go to work and they let me go to school. So I went to school for a while. I didn't graduate. And it became necessary for me to go to work. So I worked in a five and ten. I did baby sitting. I made all of 25 cents an hour, something like that. And the bus fare was a nickel and in order to save that money, I walked back and forth to work. And I collected the money and, with the money that I saved, I bought cigars for my grandfather. [chuckles] And—

LEVINE: And how—how would—[clears throat] when you think back of that time of your life, it was in—where—where were you living? In—

R. METHNER: In Rochester—

LEVINE: In Rochester. Yeah, in Rochester. How—how—how do you think about it? What do you—what do you think about it now, in retrospect?

R. METHNER: I think it was very hard, very difficult to get used to the new customs and new language, trying to make new friends. And later on, when I was 18, trying to make a living. And I supported four people on what—three other people and myself on what I made. And we lived very frugally. My grandmother kept house for us. She had $10 a week to take care of four people. And even with the $10 a week, she was able to start a bank account.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. And did you know each other?

H. METHNER: No.

R. METHNER: No. Never—never met.

H. METHNER: No, no.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

H. METHNER: No, [unclear].

LEVINE: Okay.

H. METHNER: Rose—Rose left from the Rhineland and I left from central part of Germany. There was never any contact until way past the war, 1948.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

H. METHNER: But that's another story. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Yeah, okay. Well, now, why don't we continue with your telling what happened in those years that you were in China?

H. METHNER: Well, we—it appeared that about—between 18 and 20,000 Middle European immigrants found a haven in Shanghai, China. They were coming there nearly through 1940, the end of '40, not by boat anymore, because the war had already started, but by train traveling 14 days and nights through Poland, Russia, Siberia and then Manchuria, and then ending up in Harbin where they took a boat and arrived in a—a two-day trip—in Shanghai, China. The—I believe the German-Austrian contingent was the largest of people—of these people present that were finding a haven. It was noted that

any and all professions—you can't imagine—were among those 18,000, starting from a seamstress and a hairdresser all the way to—to medical and legal professions that were available. There was very little work. There was support, financial support from America, Jewish organizations that funneled money, either direct, or then, later, through Switzerland. The Japanese, who were the occupying forces in Shanghai when we got there in 1938, used that foreign currency for their own benefit. But we did have food. It was not the best of food. It was a soup kitchen and we had to, I remember distinctly, twice a day go to one of the campsites. We lived off camp all the time. And we used to have a carrying utensil with a handle on it and they would ladle four or five scoops of soup into that, which I then carried home. And Mother would, if possible, maybe modify and improve on it a little bit, and that was our meal. Income, there was none. Some people, us included, were fortunate enough to have had some belongings shipped to Shanghai, household articles. Well, some of the stuff was sold for purposes of enhancing that food. We lived in a very small flat. But we were by ourselves. Then, as time marched on and the war started, using 1941 as a—Pearl Harbor as a guideline, we by then had already a poultry stand on the public market. My dad, as I mentioned, was a butcher or a cook by profession. We also, from family ancestry, were very familiar with poultry: chicken, geese, ducks, pigeons, [unclear]. So we decided to open a chicken stall on the market. My dad would buy the chicken in a public place. We then would ritually slaughter it in a kosher fashion and then sell it to the European populace. It was not scalded, like most of the poultry is done. It was dry plucked. So I spent many a day plucking chickens for hours. And that was part of the livelihood. I was not alone in that. We had three or four pe—the—I had my brother and my parents with me. My brother, being younger, had to attend school. My brother became bar mitzvah in Shanghai at the age of 13. And the congregations, synagogues were flourishing, mainly by the fact that there was very little work to be done. The Japanese occupation had us quartered, curtailed in a specified area. There were no barbed wires but you better not be caught outside those—those quarters, those—town. The penalties were—were—run rampant at the time. They set up a Japanese office, which you had to make an application for, and a Japanese official would issue you a pass so that you could go into town after the—especially after 1941. And as time progressed and the war got extremely difficult for them, the restrictions were higher and higher in—in—in severity. And less and less people were permitted to go to leave the confine of the part of Shanghai that was called Honkew—H-O-N-K-E-W. And some of the people that were living on—in the French and English sections were also compelled to for—be forced to move into the

quarantined area. The quarantined area, Honkew, was also a part of an ammunition manufacturing plant within the confines of the population, Chinese and Middle European refugees. And on July of 1945, we were visited by American fighter aircraft, each of whom loaded with 50-pound—with one 50-pound bomb that was leveled directly into that area in order to eliminate the ammunition plants. The damage was substantial. Casualties were plenty. And civilian training had been given by the local authorities, so that we had stretchers. No ambulances, but stretchers, and we were carrying people from the bomb site to the hospitals in order to get them first aid and maybe other help as necessary. As soon as the war was over in 1945, it was just like you raised the curtain to the next act of a play and the finale was—was apparent. Anybody and everybody who was Middle European immediately got a job from the victorious Allied Forces. I picked a food job, becoming a—nothing better than a server in a mess hall for American GIs, simply because there was the food that that—that I craved. We didn't have any butter for over nine years. We didn't have any, shall I say, meat products to the extent, besides the chicken, that we—beef was very, very expensive. Nice cooked meals were—were not available to that extent. The mess hall provided us with some—some leftover food that we [unclear] take home and then use for our own purposes. From the mess hall, in three months or four months of service, I went to another airfield and I became what they called a "follow-me Jeep driver." When I—American fighter or troop transporter would land on the airfield, I was—was my job to guide them to a parking space and flag them to a stop, and provide for some ground transportation. After about four or five months of that, I was picked to be in the office working as a aircraft dispatcher. The training was provided by the U.S. Forces. The knowledge of the English language was predominant. The fact that I was picked to do that. I worked at that, checking pilots' licenses and qualifications for these pilots that were coming in. And there were many, many of them, and took transports that were being used to ship the GIs back home. The job lasted for over two years. In the beginning, the pay was American dollars. Later on, the Chinese national forces insisted that the payment should be in Chinese currency and we got Chinese currency. I had pocket money. I had savings. It was like—like I said, it was between day and night. I moved out of the house. I lived in my own apartment for a while. I acquired a Chinese girlfriend. I had another young lady who was of Eurasian origin that was my partner for a few months. But then it was apparent that we didn't want to stay there for the rest of our lives. And decisions were made as to where to go. And there were four options to anyone and everyone, practically. And that was, number one, go where you ca—go back to where you came from. Number

two, Australia. Number three, Israel. Number four, the United States of America. [coughs]

LEVINE: Why don't we stop there—

H. METHNER: Okay.

LEVINE: —and—and pick up? But let me just ask, what—you were with your mother, father and brother?

H. METHNER: Yes.

LEVINE: Was—was that the extent of your family that was there?

H. METHNER: I was with my mother, father and brother. I also had, on mother's side, four aunts, two uncles. In 1939 in June, my grandfather, at age 80, arrived on one of the Italian boats, the Contoban—Bien Commano [PH], which was a huge steamer. As many as, maybe, 13 to 1,500 in one boatload arrived. We always made it a point to go down to the pier to see who was arriving, because we didn't have any pre-information as to what the load factors were or the passenger list. We helped with these people to get settled. There were at least five camps within that quarantined area, some of them substantial, some of them small. They used the smaller ones to—for the family units that arrived. The facilities were less than acceptable. I know of two families living in one room. The only division was a curtain, a blanket. Privacy was very, very hard to come by. And yet, the—the settlement was thriving. We had our own big problems with regard to tropical languages—I'm sorry, tropical ailments that our medical profession, available, was not able to cope with: typhoid, para-typhoid, dysentery, cholera. Those were the things that our doctors were quite unfamiliar with. And we lost a lot of people through, practically, epidemics. The cemetery—well, let me back up. My grandfather, within the first four weeks being there, caught one of those strains and passed on within four weeks. The cemetery in Shanghai is very, very shallow. You dig two feet and you hit water. So to bury someone in ground like that was a—make certain that within a month—six months, hardly anything is left. No remnants. There were no coffins. They were buried in a cloth. The requirement by the local authorities was there be four slabs of cement, one on the bottom, two on the side, and one on top. That was the resting place. You lowered the person, dressed in just a sheet, in there. I remember Grandfather passing away in the middle of June. Temperatures were already approaching a hundred degrees. And we were carrying him, physically carrying him [sniffs] about two miles [voice breaking].

And you could see the gas in the deceased rising to the point that the stomach lifted up, and it was way above the barrier that we carried to—and by the time we had him at the grave site, we already thought that the stomach might explode. The burial was practically within hours of death. You know, no overnight, no cooling, no—no—no storage whatsoever. The rabbi who officiated at the time talked about [voice breaking] the father bringing his children to safety before he—before he went [unclear]. I'm sorry. These memories are very, very vivid. [sniffs]

LEVINE: Okay.

H. METHNER: Shanghai was—Shanghai, to me, was the place that I—today, 60 years later, was a bigger detrimental effect on me, personally, than the "persecution" that I personally experienced in Germany.

LEVINE: Why is that so?

H. METHNER: Maybe because of just that personal—

LEVINE: [unclear]

H. METHNER: —experience within the family. My family, including Grandfather, aunts and uncles on Mother's side, were very, very closely-knit family to the point that even they could not find mates on the outside that they felt worthy enough to become part of the family. So you had a number of first cousins, marriages.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

H. METHNER: Quite prevalent, at least three on Grandmother's side. On my mother's side, the family was 11 children. On my father's side, the family was 10 children, or vice versa. And between two couples, you had 21 offsprings and on Father's side, most of them perished in Europe, which we found out after we got to the United States and had some research done. But the ones that lived in China, as I say, Grandfather saved them and they all survived. On my father's side, I had one uncle, brother to my dad, who passed away there in Shanghai. He lived all the nine years in a camp, or eight years. He passed away and he was buried. They also—we had a—memory wise, we had a young rabbi, 29, of a liberal Jewish belief, who also was caught in a cholera strain. And he—he passed on and we had a Zionist youth movement at that time started. I was about 22, 23 at the time. And I remember standing guard at the coffin all night long before the—for at least two-hour stretches, were enough of us there to take two-hour stretch doing guard duty to deceased before

we carried them to the cemetery to bury him. He was to us, that person in my mind, [voice breaking] shaped my future opinions of life in general. What a marvelous guy. So the—some of the time spent, coming back to my personal experiences, was a photo studio that one of the refugees set up for picture-taking in a family-type setting, mother and child, family portraits, that kind of thing. And he needed some help in the darkroom. And I worked there and I think the pay was something like, maybe, $2 a day or something like that. And he taught. So I was with him for over a year. That gentleman's hometown was Weslow [PH], Germany. And that was one of the things that I did. Another thing that came about, one day I was helping my mom in the kitchen washing dishes, and I have a pretty good voice. So I was singing and somebody walked by and [voice breaking] knocked on the door and said, "I have an organ three doors down the street. Why don't you come up and we'll give you a little voice training?" And I had four years of operating, training without having to pay a penny. I then officiated for holiday services as a cantor. Training was provided by another gentleman in one of the camps who, for lack of nothing better to do, took upon himself to train. I gave some stage appearances in operatic singing. I officiated, at least, for two years at a youth service, which was a full service, with the exception that the age difference between the regular congregation and what we had was about 50 years in age. I used that training when I came to the United States and officiated one year in Fredonia, New York with the High Holiday services.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Could you say something about how the—the—the communities around the camps treated the people who were in them?

H. METHNER: Well, the people in the camp and the people outside the camp was—there was no support or very little support, financial support, for the people outside the camp. So you might call these people—the middle class were the ones in the camp, or the ones that were single were mainly in the camp because they couldn't afford either the rent or the facilities that was needed to stay outside the camp. I don't remember a big diversion because—for the simple reason, there was only 18 to 20,000. We had five camps. There were still some—some—there was still some opportunity available outside the quarantined area in the French and English section of town during that time, all during the time that the—the war went on. But it was limited.

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A]

[BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE B]

H. METHNER: Community officials that were there made certain that everybody was, at least somehow, protected. Mr. Horace Kaduri [PH], through his generosity, started a—a school. And there were at least, I would say, 6 to 800 school children being trained from K to eighth grade, straight through, with English as a predominant language. The training was excellent. When—as I look back and leave Shanghai and see what happened to the people that were born or that were raised there through young adulthood and later life, they all became persons of means. The treasurer of the United States under President Carter was a schoolmate of my brother in Shanghai. And we had people with just their training in that school end up at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena. We—working on—on missiles. The schooling was such qual—I believe, quality that it was good enough for my brother to come to the United States much later than I did and get an engineering degree at the University of Colorado and worked at a missile plant till he retired, 33 years, one job. So the background was there. I do not remember large differences or culture clashes among those people. If there were, there may have been some background between the people that immigrated from Poland versus the ones that immigrated from—from Germany or Austria, which was more a, shall I say, Old Country competition—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

H. METHNER: —to—to name it in a friendly way.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Wh—to what do you attri—I mean, personally, your opinion of why the people who—who were there and got their education in Shanghai became so—

H. METHNER: I think the—

LEVINE: —so successful later on?

H. METHNER: I think the population itself was industrious. I believe that the val—evaluation or the valuation of an education has always been predominant among that type of people that Nazism says were a surplus to the world.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

H. METHNER: And I think their—their big mistake was that they did not recognize that.

LEVINE: Is there anything you could say about the community of refugees who were there, what it was like to form a community amongst themselves amidst an alien culture outside of themselves?

H. METHNER: The—the segregation was—was very, very apparent. It—the culture shock between a Chinese local population, the Japanese occupation forces, and the pressure on the Jewish community with the restricted means that were available to them are—was—was a big stumbling block for—for these people themselves. So they—in order to help themselves, the community had enough leadership, which was elected, by the way. It was not appointed. It was elected in—just on the campsites as well as in general, to function in a way, I think, copied, very much so, from the German way that they were used to, because it had a—it had value. It was a quasi-government status that they obtained because of the fact that they were elected [unclear]. And I would say that the German background of the people there, the German Jewish people there, was the adherence to—to strife and order where you would know that when someone would tell you something, you would obey that, whether he wore a uniform or not. It—it was in their own best interest to take that leadership and listen to it and do what they were asked to do. And with that, then they had, I believe, the connection to the Chinese and Japanese authorities that were required not to have an uprising or—or—or a large law influences prevalent among the people. Murders, shooting, fights were very, very rare—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

H. METHNER: —in—in—in that compound area.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

H. METHNER: And the compound area, I would say, was maybe, oh, three miles square, and it was widely dispersed with local Chinese people living right among the Jewish people, or vice versa. Or vice versa. The Chinese people were very appreciative because, even though there was very little money available to the sudden immigrants that hit the town, they just still provided an increased living style for the Chinese. There were many, many cooperatives that were formed between Chinese ownership and, let's say, Middle European know how of any kind.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

H. METHNER: Be it on the medical side, be it on the industrial side, doesn't make any difference. I had a cousin who had a coat factory there. And he would employ Chinese people to sew the garments that he would then sell on the outside, or the outside of the confines, being the other two parts of town. The town, being a French and—division and English division and a general division. And if you were in the French quarters or the English quarters, you were definitely upscale. If you were in the part that we were, the Honkew part, it was definitely the lower end of the spectrum as far as income was concerned.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

H. METHNER: And there was some income. The people were—were industrious enough to pick themselves up by the bootstrap and try to provide whatever meager living they could.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

H. METHNER: And the ones that were indigent or incapable were taken care of, after a fashion.

LEVINE: I was going to ask you what—co—this is a big question, but is there anything about human nature that you gleaned from that experience of being in that kind of situation—

H. METHNER: I—

LEVINE: —in that community?

H. METHNER: I believe that living—having a human being left to his own devices, but everything else being equal and no oppression from the outside, will try to strive to better himself, herself as a survival instinct.

LEVINE: Okay. Okay, let's switch back to you, Mrs. Methner. Could you talk about the war years and how they affected you once you got to the United States?

R. METHNER: Well, the main worry we had is what had happened to my mother. We didn't hear anything from her and we found out years later through the Red Cross that they were shipped to Poland to an extermination camp. And like I said before, I went to high school and then I had to quit. And my sister went to school. She graduated and I went to work and I supported my sister and my grandparents. And we made friends. We went out and we did

the—tried to do the normal things that young people did. And I don't know.

LEVINE: Did you—what was your sense of—of Americans—

R. METHNER: Very strange. [laughter]

LEVINE: —and their response to the war that was going on, from—from this new perspective that you had?

R. METHNER: Well, they were all working together for the war effort and everybody did their part. And of course, people had relatives in the Armed Forces and they were worried about them. And you tried to carry on your normal life as best you could. There was food rationing, not to the point where we would starve or anything. But we got a—a coupon book where you could get maybe a pound of butter every other week, coffee, a half a pound if you were lucky, if you knew someone. And I smoked at the time and I couldn't get any cigarettes. So I had a boss who was very nice to me and he went and he got cartons of cigarettes for me through some connection. I don't know what. And I was telling my husband the other day, we couldn't get any butter. So they were selling margarine. And in that margarine there was a little capsule of yellow food dye. So we tried to soften up the margarine enough so we could work that food dye into it so it looked like butter. And sugar was rationed. But other than that, clothing—the shoes weren't made out of leather anymore. They were made out of material. And there was a certain amount of fabric that could be used for clothing. You couldn't have a skirt longer than a certain length and the amount of material they could use. Stockings, well, if you could get them, you wore them. I remember in the summer we painted our legs because we couldn't get any stockings, and when it rained all the paint ran down. [chuckles] And it was hard but we managed. It was better than what anybody else had.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. And what about the community in Rochester? Were you—were you a part of a—of a—a Jewish community, a German community?

R. METHNER: A Jewish community and, within that Jewish community, the German people that had come kept to themselves, mostly because they were older people and there was a language difficulty. The younger people got together. But the ones that went to school together, we got together and we tried to fit in. And that was very difficult. It was very different from what we were used to.

LEVINE: Did you have social clubs or organizations that you belonged—

R. METHNER: Not till much later.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

R. METHNER: After the war. At that time when we first got here, all we wanted to do was blend in.

LEVINE: Did you want to become American or did you want to—

R. METHNER: No, no, no.

LEVINE: —preserve your—

R. METHNER: No, become American.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

R. METHNER: To the point that we—we have never worn makeup. We were allowed to put on makeup at the 14, 15, 16, which was unheard of, tried to paint my fingernails red. And I wasn't allowed to do that so I took a red crayon and I put colors—nail polish over that so it looked red, just not to be different. And unfortunately, I couldn't buy—afford to buy any clothes. So the Jewish Family Service in Rochester was very nice. They went around and they got donations for everybody. [clears throat] Excuse me. And they handed out clothes. I put on those clothes and I was afraid every time I would go somewhere somebody would recognize their own clothes. Very uncomfortable feeling. And like I say, we—we—I went to work and we went to the movies. And we went on picnics and did the normal things that young people do. We didn't have a car. We traveled by bus or we walked.

LEVINE: And do you remember when the war was over?

R. METHNER: Yes. [clears throat] At that time, there wasn't that much change because we had a different effect of it [clears throat] afterwards. I mean, there wasn't anybody that came home from the war, like brothers or sisters or—at least not for me—or husbands. So life didn't change that much. Suddenly, there were a few more boys around. That was about it. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

R. METHNER: But I had some friends who had brothers and sisters in the—in the Army too. And for them, of course, it was different.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

R. METHNER: But—

LEVINE: So by the time the war was over, how—how would you describe yourself, as compared with the you that—that landed in Rochester, what, five years before?

R. METHNER: A little more—a little more mature. More mature and I—I don't really know what I expected. I wanted to find a good-looking husband and get married, and that's all I know. [laughs]

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Okay, good. Well, now, let's see. We should take you, Mr. Methner, from Shanghai. And then you said there were four options of places you could go to when you were all thinking about leaving.

H. METHNER: As I said, when the war was over and everybody that could walk or run could find a job with the Armed Forces in practically any profession that you picked, or that they trained you for. Their main goal was to get the soldiers home in the fastest fashion probable—prof—possible with the proviso that the safety that they tried to establish was still there, so that they wouldn't have any casualties, being after the war, so accidents because of neglect of a safety fashion. The Jewish community at the time in Shanghai was working to get the people out of Shanghai in one form or another. The immigration quotas of the United States did not see any change, to my knowledge, right after the war, at least immediately after the war. So with the four options, my family decided, and I discussed it with my dad and mom, that whatever would happen, whoever comes first with an offer to take me will get me. The U.S. government had this—had passed a new law for displaced persons, and provided with the confines of the quota that was established for that person's origin. And the United Jewish Appeal in the United States apparently formed a nucleus with a fund that should provide assistance so, should any of those displaced person arrive and need public assistance, which was not available to them because of their displaced person, new arrival status. But at least they would get that from the Jewish organization that was the safety belt, or safety net below them. I was born in Berlin. I was, at the time the war ended, 25 years old, especially on the Pacific Ocean, which ended on August 5. And—August 5, 1945 and I was 23. By the time we—all this came to pass, I was 25. And they offered me a—a

visa to enter the United States. And because I had worked for the Armed Forces and was able to provide my own passage to the United States, I had the choice of cities that I wanted to settle in. Being born in Berlin assured me the German's quota, which was a very favorable quota compared to, let's say, the Polish quota, which I believe at the time was 3,500 per year, the Chinese quota, which was something like 300 per year. The English and the German quota was in the high thousands as far as new immigrants were allowed. So the German quota for me was—was, I think, the key that I got here. Now comes the question of where to go, seeing that I did not even have a fifth cousin in the United States to join. However, there was a gentleman of—that I had befriended in Shanghai who had picked Rochester, New York, because he had an uncle on the outskirts of that town that ran a papa-mama grocery store. And of course it was his uncle and he was a nephew so he moved there. And shortly after being there, in January or February of 1947, got a job with the Eastman Kodak Company in Rochester, New York, which was the predominant employer in that city. Well, as I didn't have anybody, I elected to join him in Rochester. I arrived in Oc—on October 15, 1947 in San Francisco. And some of the people on the boat with me elected to stay in San Francisco. Well, seeing that I was there, I looked around and within five or six days, I was very, very miserable—

LEVINE: Could you [unclear]—

H. METHNER: —not knowing anybody other than—than those few people that I had—that I knew from Shanghai and that were on the board and elected to stay there. Turns out to be that the majority of the people arriving on the West Coast stayed at the West Coast later on. I did not. I hopped a train and I went to Rochester, New York where this gentleman picked me up at the station.

LEVINE: Why—what was it about San Francisco that you—

H. METHNER: That I didn't like?

LEVINE: Hmm.

H. METHNER: I think mainly the place can be glittering with gold. If you don't have anybody to talk to or see, you become, oh, I would say something that just grows in the shadows of the city and does not know its purpose. I am a person that is gregarious, that likes to have people around him. And I didn't have that. And while I stayed in a hotel and I paid my own room for those 10 days, I did not see anything in

San Francisco that makes me believe that that was a town I wanted to—to stay in.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

H. METHNER: Knowing that I had, at least someone somewhere on the East Coast that I could lean on.

LEVINE: Now, was the ship filled with people coming from Shanghai that were—

H. METHNER: Yes, with a troop transport, with a troop transport with the—predominantly people from Shanghai. It was not a private line. It was a government boat that we used, but we paid. The people that could not pay, they got free passage. But then they had to go to a town or city that the organization prescribed. It was mandatory. In other words, you could not stay in San Francisco just because you wanted to stay. If your passage was provided for, you had to go to Memphis or you had to go to Kansas City or wherever they decided that the Jewish community had funds and—and placement for you to work.

LEVINE: Ah, and you didn't have a say in which one you would do?

H. METHNER: No, I could pick whoever I wanted to.

LEVINE: Oh, you could. Uh-huh.

H. METHNER: Because I paid my own fare.

LEVINE: I see.

H. METHNER: In fact, it was—it was [chuckles]—it was hilarious. We landed in Hawaii. This was the first American ground and there were five of us at the table. And we said, "Let's go into town and have dinner." And we went into the Royal Hawaiian Hotel, the only hotel at the beach at Waikiki at the time in 1947. And I ordered a $3 steak and that steak was two and a half pounds. [laughter] It was hanging over on all sides of the platter. And I guess my eyes were more hungrier [chuckles] than my stomach. I couldn't finish it. Couldn't finish it. And there was $3, which was a young fortune. [chuckles] And we went on and [unclear] we got to San Francisco. I took the train to Rochester. I was picked up at the station by this gentleman. He lived at the Jewish YMCA. No, the Jewish Y, no C. [laughter] Jewish Y. [laughs] The Jewish Y. He—above the third floor, they had rooms. The room was 7.50 a week and they would provide

linen. You had to provide your own towels. I saw no problem with that. This was a Wednesday that I arrived, and on Thursday morning I went to the Jewish family service, introduced myself to a middle-aged lady, maybe in her late 40s. And she says, "Yes, we knew you were coming." The gentleman had advised them that I would be there. And she said, "What can you do?" Well, I talked about her—my singing. I talked about my photography. I talked about my work for nearly two years on the Armed Forces. The English she noticed very early was—was very adequate. And she said, "All right. Let's see whether I have a job for you." She picked up the phone. She dialed the number and the secretary on the other end answered. And she said she wanted to talk to so and so, happened to be the boss. And she told him. She says, "I've got a guy here that just arrived, 25 years old, has some experience in photography. He will start at your place on Monday morning." There was no "no" expected. [chuckles] I started Monday morning at 65 cents an hour. This was a photo studio laboratory. They had 14 places where they were taking family photos. This was the 3rd of November, 1947. And I guess they were very busy with family photos, portraits for Christmas season. All these photo studios lab work was sent to the place where I was with 50 or 60 people retouching photographs, developing the films, pulling the portraits out, mounting the portraits, framing them and having them ready for a Christmas present. My job was to fix the pictures after they came out of the fixation bath and wash them, each picture for 30 minutes in a spinning water drum. And he had 30 of those running along one line. I was allowed one minute for each machine in tap water, cold tap water, to load 30 machines in 30 minutes and empty them. It was regular, steady work, 65 cents an hour. I did that for the entire season, first, eight hours a day, then up to 12 hours a day with time-and-a-half for the 65 cents overtime, which was about a dollar. This cold water—my—my hands and elbows—up to my elbows looked like crab feet, were all—all—all red constantly. The water was cold. We did the job. By that time, I found out that my brother, who had remained in Shanghai, had—had caught TB and he was in need of medication. The forerunner to penicillin was tetracycline, which was not available, which the medical profession there recommended to my dad that he should have. And I provided that. The paycheck—and you were asking about the background and the culture clashes. The paycheck was such that 10 percent of any paycheck, regardless how small or how large, would be sacrosanct for savings. At the JY there was no food allowed in the room. So I rigged up that a milk carton could hang outside the window with milk. So we—[chuckles] some of them fell down to the ground eventually. So that—that was milk. Around the corner there was a restaurant that was called the Greasy Spoon. The Greasy

Spoon sold meal tickets, 5.50 for $5. I ate at that place many a meal. The waitress was befriended. She got the tip. A 5.50 meal ticket—we called up the friendly waitress—lasted two weeks. She would have to clip the amount of the meal. It was never the amount of the meal.

LEVINE: Okay. I'm going to pause here because I want to turn the—change—

H. METHNER: All right.

LEVINE: —the tape. Just a second.

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE B]

[BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE A]

H. METHNER: [unclear]

LEVINE: Beginning here with tape two and I'm speaking with Mr. and Mrs. Methner. And you were—you were talking about life and its changes in Rochester.

H. METHNER: Well, the life in Rochester was, as I experienced it, being a newcomer to the United States, the next experience within the first—still in 1947 was that the week after Christmas with all these pictures and photos delivered to their owners, I was punching out. I believe it was the day before New Year. And the boss called me back after I punched out and said, "Harry, you're not needed here anymore." I was shocked. This was something that I did not expect it, number one. Number two, I told them that where I came from there was something like a notice given to the employees before a layoff. I wanted to know whether I had done anything that offended the management. He says, "No, no. It's just a regular cutback after the season is over." And they thanked me for my work but there was no notice and there was no pay. There was no severance pay or anything like that, like you have today. I was suddenly unemployed and this was after about eight weeks on the job with one raise in between, was raised from 65 cents to 70 cents an hour. And then I thought I did [unclear] work. But as he said, it was just a regular cutback. On some of the weekends in that eight-week period I attended Saturday services at a synagogue near the Jewish Y. And being a strange face in the congregation, I was approached by some people, find out where I came from, what I was doing and why I was there. And I told them and one of the gentlemen, who I at the time did not know, was one of the kingpins of the Jewish community of Rochester, New York, in an offhand

way said, “Well, if you’re any—if you need anything anytime, just give me a buzz.” I took this for [unclear] coin and value and as soon as I was—had lost my job, which [chuckles] I believe it was near a weekend, I called him and I said, “You mentioned something two or three weeks ago about calling you when I had a problem.” I said, “I need a new job because this one just had expired.” You know, he was—I—practically dropping the phone. He did not expect that I would take that as—as an entry to a job application. Well, he told me to come to his office on Tuesday morning and he would see what he could do. Well, I was there on Tuesday morning and he introduced me to his brother, who was part of the organization, who introduced me to his brother-in-law, who was the manager of a warehouse. And it turned out to be that he was in the paper wholesale jobbing business, but not only paper. He also was involved in canning jars and supplies. The organization did not have a railroad siding but had a huge warehouse, had lots of trucks and help. And he says, “You can stay right here today, Tuesday morning, and you can work so you can see whether you like what you’re doing. I’ll assign you to a driver and we have on the railroad track a carload, a freight carload of Mason jars and lids. They have to be emptied to put on a truck, trucked to the warehouse, taken off the truck and stacked in piles. If you’re willing to do that, you can stay here. What was your pay?” I said, “Seventy cents when I left.” “We’ll start you out at 80.” With 80 cents an hour and I was overjoyed. It lasted exactly four hours. I wasn’t overjoyed anymore. This was hard work. This was labor. I stayed on the job for nearly four years. Pay was raised to $1.10 at the time I left. I was promoted to truck driving. I traveled the shores around Lake Ontario on the American side extensively. The organization being Sabbath observant, worked on Sunday but was off on all Jewish holidays. It was then that I contracted for—to be a cantor in Fredonia. I was given permission to take that time off, be holiday anyway, but I needed to travel to get there and stay there. And I came back and then went back for a second session of the holidays. Then I was given time off for that again. The pay in Fredonia for the three days and all of maybe 24 hours work was $300. A fortune. I—as my melodious background was different from what they practiced at that congregation, it was apparent that I was probably somewhere off the mark when it came to the community portion of the theme, not having had the exposure. And I elected not to do that anymore in the going down the road, because, well, one, I was not Sabbath observant. And the—the—one of the requirements, probably, to get a position like that, would be you have to play the game by the rules of the religion in order—in order to—to—to be—to make it acceptable. During that time, on my spare time in those four years, this friend of mine and I

continued the background from China where we had a youth organization. For lack of anything better to do, we formed and started, not with a Zionistic ideology behind it, but with a more Jewish, cultural background behind it. And we had lectures and dances and excursions to an extent in China after the war. And we tried to continue that in Rochester. It was not there, was not available. So I contacted this Jewish Family Service person, who had got—get—got me the first job and said, "Hey, we would like to have as—names and addresses of all Jewish people that entered Rochester, New York and are still here since 1936." I'm now talking 1948. So those 12 years, and they gave us 200 names. Friend and I, we wrote 200 postcards asking them to come down to the Y, Jewish Y. We got a room and we would have a meeting, see whether we could get a cultural group of young, new Americans going. We used the same mission statement that we had in Shanghai. We wrote out the postcards. We provided some soft drinks out of our own pocket at the Y. We had the room for free and, here, 80 people show up, including my wife, her sister [voice breaking], her fiancé, plus countless others that—they all knew each other but they never had an opportunity to get together. Well, I was a spokesman and opened the meeting and told them what—what I wanted, what we had in mind. And after the meeting was over, I guess she complained to some of the other people who this loudmouth was that came here [chuckles], is only here six weeks or eight weeks, three months, and is trying to take the city over. [laughs]

LEVINE: Meanwhile, had your family thought about coming over or—

H. METHNER: No, no.

LEVINE: —what was—

H. METHNER: Not that—that—that was not in the cards. My family was unable to come over. I alluded to the quota system. My brother, being younger than I was, or I am—he's still younger today (doesn't change anything on that) [chuckles]—has a—with the—with the illness, with the ailment that he had and the sickness that he was trying to—to survive with, it wasn't an entire stretch. My parents, both born in Germany, at the time they were born that part was Germany. In 1918, it was deeded to Poland. The immigration laws used 1924 as a guideline. In '94—in 1924, that part of Germany was Polish. So the German quota to them did not apply. So coming over on the Polish quota was out of question, simply because persons who were Americans—citizens would have a priority. I was not an American citizen. So if they were to come to

join me, already a stateless person with just, maybe, a green card, was not—was not in the cards. So that was out.

LEVINE: Right.

H. METHNER: That—that—that came—

LEVINE: And the quota was very low.

H. METHNER: That—that—yes. That was—that was down the road. That happened but a little further down. Anyway, we started this organization. We found out we had five cars in that group of 80 people that were available for Sunday [unclear]—[chuckles] only Sunday trip. A field trip, per se. And we took names and we set—set a couple of lectures, invited some people that lived at the Y who were knowledgeable about certain subjects and we had—we got it going. It was a cultural organization. It lasted probably no more than 18 months, two years but six couples got married. And I felt it was pretty good [chuckles]—pretty good profit line on the bottom, including myself. And we did take a trip to Niagara Falls. It was the first excursion. We then went to some of the other sites in—in New York, Glens Falls. Watkins Glen was one of them. We had a morning bas—baseball—I mean, volleyball team set up. We did that for, maybe, a bunch of Sundays. We went—took a couple of boat rides on the Finger Lakes. So things like that. Went to Shallot [PH] at—near the Ontario Lake for a—

R. METHNER: [unclear]

H. METHNER: —group outing in the summer, swimming, something like that, lazy cajoling around, or messing things up and go—

LEVINE: Okay, what—

H. METHNER: [unclear]—yes?

LEVINE: Why don't we hear your—[chuckles] do you remember getting the announcement [unclear]?

R. METHNER: Yes, and I—I didn't want to go. And my sister talked me into it and she says, "Let's just go and see what's going on." So we went there and, like he says, here was this guy with a big mouth directing the whole thing. "We're going to do this. We're going to do that." And at the time, my brother-in-law said, "Who is this guy? Who does he think he is?" And we decided, "Well, we'll go back. We'll see what happens." And we met all these other people and we

became pretty good friends. And like Harry said, we went on social outings. We went—they had dances. And little by little, all these people paired off and they got married. And we always guessed who was the next one, and we were sure nothing was going to last. All these marriages were going to fall apart. As it turned out, they all lasted quite a while. A few people passed away, unfortunately. And as young couples, we suddenly had a different interest. I mean, we became more involved with our mates rather than with a group. And then the next problem was, who's going to have the first baby? So we became baby sitters. Everybody had a baby, one after the other. And this went on for quite a while. And then, like he says, the club fell apart but these individual friendships remained. And to this day, there are about five or six, maybe seven couples that we still are in touch with. And we got to know their children and eventually their grandchildren. And you go to a bas mitzvah. You go to a wedding and that's how the whole thing evolved.

LEVINE: Did the—the beginning of this club change your life in Rochester?

R. METHNER: Yeah, definitely. I met him. [laughter]

LEVINE: Uh-huh. [laughter] But you really hadn't been part of a—of a group—

R. METHNER: No.

LEVINE: —once you—

R. METHNER: I had some—some what you would call girlfriends and dates, but nothing serious. Blind dates. Heaven forbid. [chuckles] We had this group of girls. We got together. We went to school together and you know how high school girls are after school. We got together. We went shopping if we had any money and talked about clothes. We talked about boys. [clears throat] But once he came into the picture the whole thing changed.

LEVINE: Why?

R. METHNER: Different—different interests, different experiences. His experience and mine were entirely different.

LEVINE: We—what changed? I mean, first, you—you had a kind of negative opinion and—

R. METHNER: I don't know. I just suddenly realized what I had. [laughs] For one thing, he had a big car. [laughter] And before then, I don't drive. I've never learned how to drive. And before that, everywhere's I had to go I had to take a bus. This doesn't mean I still didn't take a bus, but at least I could go out on a date and I didn't have to take a bus and stand in the cold and wait to go home. He came with a car. So that was one plus. [laughs]

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

R. METHNER: As a young person, that—that was very important.

LEVINE: Well, did you—did you decide then you were getting married while this organization was still in existence? Or did that happen—

R. METHNER: Yes.

LEVINE: —later or—

R. METHNER: No, no. While—while the organization was still in existence.

H. METHNER: It was—these were still going. Then we got engaged at one of the festivals in 1948 in the fall, September something or other. Right?

R. METHNER: October.

H. METHNER: October. October something. We got engaged with no date set but a ring. It was—was—

R. METHNER: Like Dr. Laura says—

H. METHNER: Dr. Laura.

R. METHNER: —"A ring and a date." [chuckles]

H. METHNER: "Have you got a ring and a date?" We had a ring. We didn't have a date. What we did know is that, sooner or later, something was breaking in China. And of course, I had steady correspondence with my parents. No telephone calls—that money wasn't available—but letters, and about his progress, "his" being my brother. The—when Chiang Kai-shek gave up and Mao Tse-tung became the dominant force in Shanghai, the United Nations—read, United States of America—decided that these people would have to be evacuated from these Chinese communist element that was going to prevail in Shanghai and the rest of China. And this was the time that Taiwan was formed and used as an escape for the local

populace. Decision was made to take these people and ship them out of Shanghai, around Africa, up the west coast of Africa into the Mediterranean to Italy. Final destination, Israel. This was a five-week trip. And I guess the State Department elected to say, "That's too expensive. Let's look at a better way of getting these people to—out of Shanghai to their destination." And they decided to use American transport, put these people on board in Shanghai, ship them to San Francisco, debark them in San Francisco, put them on a train, take them across the country, get them to New York, embark them on another boat and take them to Italy, destination, Israel—would save two week's travel time. Was strictly an economic measure that they used. We were elated. We were—that we knew that there were at least three transports coming, maybe a month apart, two months apart. We decided, "We will get these parents off that transport while they are on the train, get them to a synagogue in Rochester, have them present while we get married. And then they may keep on going," with never any intent to hide them, put them underground or anything like that, was strictly all above board. And with that, I approached the Jewish Family Service, who declined any assistance in Rochester. So I wrote myself to the State Department, asking them to—for permission to get the parents off that transport, that was the second transport that came by, and have them attend the wedding and then we'd turn them back to the—to the group. Got word back from the State Department that I was hallucinating. These people are not in the United States. It's a fiction of my imagination. They're never going to be here. And if they're not here, they couldn't be—possibly be at the synagogue in Rochester. And so I should make other plans. That was the gist of their—their wording. Well, my mother's mail read differently. They were going on the boat. They were getting to San Francisco. And from there on, she did not know. But they were definitely going to San Francisco. So later on, it turned out that they did get to San Francisco. They put them on the train. I expected them to take the direct route from San Francisco over Salt Lake City or Denver, Cheyenne, whichever way, come back east, Chicago, New York, and would be very nice and we'll see them in New York City [unclear]. And I'll try to get them off there. And I did the same thing again, turning—made a copy of that letter and sent it to Washington. And again, "Sorry, we don't know anything about that." Denied any knowledge. Well, they didn't put them on that train. They put them on a different train and shipped them down through San Diego, through El Paso, through Louisiana to the East Coast, and then up the East Coast through Georgia to Hoboken. And when they arrived in Hoboken we were there. Each door on that train was crowded by an FBI man. For five days, they had—could not leave that train at any of the stops that they had.

They never left the train. The train was sealed. But we were two or three railroad cars. The station terminal was cordoned off. There was press there. There was a line of people waiting to see them come off the train. In front of us was a rope. She and I were staying at the rope. [voice breaking] We saw these people come off. We duck under the rope. We chased to them. [unclear] us. They tore us apart, separated us physically just behind the rope again. And we were all crying. The press came up and wanted to know what was going on. And we told them that we wanted to get married. "They told us from Washington these people are not here. I just kissed my mother. I kissed my dad. I kissed my brother. We still want to get married, want to get them to a synagogue." The H-I-A-S was there, the HIAS, which is the Hebrew Assistance Organization and the United Service for New Americans were at the station, which was a competition to the HIAS, not in existence today anymore, I am told. Their cooperation was negligible up to that point that we were separated. And they said, "We'll have to do something." Unbeknown to me, some of the people in the press got a hold of Washing—and advised them that if we would not get married, the publicity in tomorrow morning's headlines would be quite detrimental. And the power of the press apparently, like my son told me yesterday, somewhere around 9:30 in the morning, 10 o'clock, permission was given to have a wedding on Ellis Island. And by 2:30 the same day, we got married with the rabbi who officiated—sorry. The rabbi who officiated had one-hour notice. He picked up a bottle of wine on the way to the ferry and a glass. He did bring a utensil used in the Jewish wedding, which resembles the sky above you, which is only helped by four posts that are standing firm on the altar in this—in the temple. This one was held by four people attending the ceremony. We were given two hours to get this completed. After the two hours were up, they graciously extended it for another two hours. It was very emotional. It's the first time that my wife had seen her in-laws and relatives. When the ceremony was over, she was very heavily grilled—

R. METHNER: In—interrogated. [laughter]

H. METHNER: —by my mother, my aunts who were present. My side of the story ends simply there, that we made arrangements to, maybe, see them again the next morning. We were at the ferry by nine o'clock the next morning. They had already sailed. They were gone. My brother was put into the portion of Ellis Island that was acting as a hospital for one night. And the parents slept with the other people in a—in the community hall and then on cots. And then they—they took off and ended up in Italy. The destination, Israel, went further away for the fact that Israel said, if my brother was the carrier of

an—of a disease, contagious disease, they wouldn't have any room for him. They had hardly room for the healthy people. And they denied him access. See, that he was still a minor at the time, my parents elected to stay with him. And here we are in 1949. They were—became inhabitants of another camp on the east side of the Italian landscape and stayed there for a great number of months where then, finally, they got a little apartment on the west side of the island near the pope, near the Vatican's place, staying at the bottom of the mountain called Kosta Gondolfo [PH] where they had a small apartment. My brother needed only the change of the climate, I believe, to cure the TB. He stayed there from 1949 till 1953. One of the fortunate things, happenstance, by being married on that particular day, St. Patrick's Day, 1949, good Jewish holiday, [laughter] at least it is for me—had me marry a citizen. One of the things that I did with my fiancée was we went to citizen class and practically all the beginning of '48. She made citizenship with a group of 250 people, and she was sworn in in the presence of a very famous New York senator.

R. METHNER: Representative.

H. METHNER: Name of Keating [PH]. What was it?

R. METHNER: Kenneth—Kenneth Keating.

H. METHNER: Kenneth Keating.

R. METHNER: [clears throat]

H. METHNER: The teacher that she had in that class was fantastic. It was so good a lecture that, when it became my turn to become a citizen eventually, I didn't need to go to any more classes. I had passed it in a hurry. By being married to a citizen, even a young one, as far as citizens goes, the requirement of five year citiz—domicile in America is dropped to one year marriage and two year presence. So I became a citizen after two years in the country. I immediately sponsored an affidavit of support for my parents and they came over in 1951.

[END OF TAPE 2, SIDE A]

[BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE B]

H. METHNER: —'51? We made that in fairly short order.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Can you say any more about the—about the train and—and—

H. METHNER: The train wa—

LEVINE: Anything more about how that happened?

H. METHNER: I—I believe—I believe the train was a disaster. I mean, not so much because it was a train but because of the route that they took. And I understand all three trains took the same route. It is—it is practically inhumane to put people five days into a railroad car, not a freight car like they did in Germany—put into a railroad car—and not give them access to get off that train, even at a station where the thing may be laying over for 20 minutes or a half an hour. And it—it is, I believe, reminiscent to the fact that the Japanese Americans feel of the treatment when the war started in 1941. That had not changed by 1949.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

H. METHNER: I do not believe that now, as we talk here in 1999, this thing would be even acceptable today, as even 90 percent reduced of what they did then, would be acceptable today with the opinion of today's atmosphere and that type of relationship. But they—they complained, of course, with the ladies—my parents already being elderly, with swollen legs from constant sitting. There was no facilities, or poor facilities, probably box lunches at the time. I don't know. Not much was discussed. For us, it was a—a time being overjoyed, at least having the option of getting married while they were there, which something, according to Washington and their releases, was not in the cards for me at all.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

H. METHNER: One thing that I would definitely like to put on there is, as far as an opinion—is, aside, rather personal, and when we went to New York, not knowing that we would get married, my wife insisted that there would be no return to Rochester unless she is married. She would say that, "I'm not going with you for one week as a single woman to Rochester and I come back a single woman. My reputation would be ruined." Right?

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, okay. [chuckles] Okay. Why don't we—[chuckles] why don't we start with—from your perspective, going to New York and what was involved and meeting your future in-laws?

R. METHNER: Well, like he just said, I insisted, “I’m not going to go back if I’m not married. I want to get married one way or the other. I can’t hold my head up if I go back.” That was a moral standard where I came from and maybe at the time. And when we finally got a hold—or they finally got a hold of the rabbi and they told us he would meet us at the embarkation point, and we got on that boat—it was a little boat that you see in front of the building now. It wasn’t anything like the one today. And I kept thinking, ‘What am I getting myself into? I don’t know this family. I’ve seen pictures. I’ve read letters. But that’s it. What am I going to do?’ And I—all I could think of is, ‘I wish the boat would go down,’ and I don’t swim. [chuckles] We finally got there and they guided us into the great hall, which at the time had a row of benches, a wall peeling and the bricks were sticking out. It was a very depressing atmosphere.

LEVINE: Were there people there?

R. METHNER: There were other people there that were on the transport. Each little family group sat by themselves on these benches. And then, finally, they decided they were going to take us upstairs into a room. And all I remember is that there was a dusk in that room behind us and we were standing in front of this canopy with Harry Perns [PH] and his brother and some other people who were witnesses. And the rabbi performed the ceremony.

LEVINE: Now, had you had a chance to talk with his parents?

R. METHNER: Just very briefly.

LEVINE: And—

R. METHNER: And I was at the point where I almost refused to speak German. I—I just wanted to speak English. And it’s still very difficult for me to speak German. I only speak German when I have to. And we just briefly talked. And after the ceremony, we went back downstairs and we sat on these benches. And there was Harry’s mother. I don’t know where his father was. I know his brother was around. And there was his mother and her two sisters. And they sat me down and they started to interrogate me. “Where do you come from? Who were your parents? What did your father do? How much did you pay for this suit? How much did you pay for this hat?” And I, like an idiot, answered every single question. And then, in a very warm and sincere gesture, one of the aunts took off a gold necklace and handed me this Star of David, which I have had all these years. [unclear] She took it off from around her neck and she gave it to me. And my mother-in-law took off a ring and she

gave that to me. I don't know. This has nothing to do with it. But years later, after they came to Rochester, I gave it back to her because it couldn't be made smaller to fit my finger, and she was very offended. So I think I got an inkling right then and there what I had gotten myself into. My brother-in-law was a very nice young man. My father-in-law didn't have to say too much. And all in all, I don't know. I was glad when the whole thing was over and we went back to Manhattan, [laughs] the hotel. Then I had a cousin living here and she was very offended that we didn't invite her to the ceremony. "I'm sorry. I—I didn't know." And nobody else was allowed to go to Ellis Island. So there was no way that I could have let her know. And then a few weeks later when we were back in Rochester, I got a letter and it asked, "Are you the daughter of Hamar Herman [PH] from Mainz? I'm your aunt and I live in New York." And I had no idea that she was living there. And then that way, we found quite a few people through the publication and the newspapers.

LEVINE: Oh. You mean you were purposely looking for people?

R. METHNER: No.

H. METHNER: No.

R. METHNER: They—they happened to read a newspaper article about the wedding on Ellis Island.

LEVINE: I see.

R. METHNER: And they came back with these letters. You see, nobody knew, "Is this person still alive? Were they exterminated? Where do they live? How were they rescued?" And this is how these people suddenly surfaced.

LEVINE: And what was the newspaper that—that they read? Do you recall?

R. METHNER: One was from Australia. I can't think of the name of it. And, like I said, the other one lived here in New York, must have read one of the local papers. And we thought that—it's in that—in that book.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, hopefully, we'll have a lot of this on files.

R. METHNER: Yeah, well, you will have [unclear] copy.

LEVINE: Right. Okay.

R. METHNER: So—

LEVINE: So what did you think about being—having the wedding on Ellis Island? How did you perceive Ellis Island?

R. METHNER: Well, anything—anything he wanted to do, as long as the family was there, was fine with me. I, having lost my parents long ago, figured this is what he should do. And this was the only opportunity we had so that's what we did.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And you had lost your parents before you came to this country? You knew this?

R. METHNER: During the time.

LEVINE: Oh.

R. METHNER: Yes, during the war. We knew they were sent to a concentration camp but we didn't know where. We made some efforts to locate them, so the Red Cross—and for a while we did get some mail and then it stopped. And after the war we made an effort to find out. As a matter of fact, we still did about five or six years ago. And they're still trying to find that. I haven't had any response. I know they were killed. And my sister and I—my sister got married. We got married and we just started to settle down in Rochester. It wasn't very easy. I worked for four years till my oldest son was born. And from then, I decided to stay home. I didn't get married to go to work. [laughter] Contrary to everything that happens today. Being a wife and a mother and running a household was career enough as far as I was concerned.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Now, is there anything else about Ellis Island that—that you remember? Because it was—it was a unique time at Ellis Island. Anything else? I mean, it was apparently not in good repair.

R. METHNER: No. I remember we were escorted, I—I don't know by whom, to visit an uncle of Harry's, who was in the infirmary. And we went to see him. And I believe that's the—when you walk out of the building, the main building in Ellis Island, it's to the right. And I saw yesterday that that is falling apart too.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Now, how did your uncle come to be in the hospital at Ellis Island?

H. METHNER: The uncle was the youngest male in my mother's family. And I stress that with both grandparents, Father's side and Mother's side

were extremely prolific. There were 10 children on Father's side. There were 11 children on Mother's side. Two families, 21 offsprings. The—there were five girls. There were five sisters. My mother was one of five sisters. The—three of them were at the wedding. The uncle, born 1902, developed very early—I remember in—in—in Germany, yet, maybe in 36 and 37, fairly young man, Parkinson's Disease. And it deteriorated through all the nine years in Shanghai. And it got worse after I left in—in '30—in '47, because when we saw him in '49, it—deterioration was very, very apparent. And I guess in—rather than keeping him in the general facility on the island for that one night, they put him into—put him into the infirmary. As soon as—I also found out about that time, which I don't remember, that my brother was staying there also, again, for the purpose of—of protection and separating—separation because of the ailment that he was carrying. So they had to keep that separate. What I remember of the island is not so much the great hall. I remember the room that they considered to be the interdenominational chapel, in which the procedure took place, except we go—went into a room. We went into a room yesterday too. This one was a barren room. There was nothing in there. It was just white walls and nothing there, probably in the stage of being remodeled for something different. The—the one that we saw, what I think was very well appointed. It had the religious symbols of religion, like a Star of David and a cross and other religious symbols. Yes, so, definitely. [laughter] [unclear] you saw what I saw displayed and the—the—you could see that it was a—a place in my estimation that was somewhat different from the rest of—of the facility in order to give it a—a more of a standing to the [unclear]. When I met a year ago Mr. Lee Iacocca at a corporate function in Denver, Colorado, I went up to him and I asked him whether that was still there. And he said, "Definitely not." And he says, "That was done away with." I also asked him whether he thought there would be a place where we could have a celebration of repeating of the vows at the time of the vows, the—the—and he said, "Well." He says, "I think they could find a place. Just contact them and they will take care of you." And, well, I think they did. I had something maybe much more different in mind than—than what actually was brought—transcribed by it. I would have preferred to make it a—a showpiece for Ellis Island, a—a public affair to the extent that it would show something other than Monica Lewinsky to—to emphasize that there are two sides to every coin. I think 50-year marriages are just as rare as presidential affairs. They are there but I think they ought to be played up just as much on one side of the coin as this one was played up on the other side of the coin. And I think it would give the—the country some balance. That was my idea. It didn't turn out to be that way. Fine. I—I live

with what—what transpired. The thing that struck me on the way coming back, we were interviewed on the boat by a number of reporters in that short trip back. And it was—even most surprised me was that when we hit the streets of Manhattan again, just four hours later the "Daily News" and the "Herald" was—had already pictures on the front page. That could be done then but it couldn't be done now, and that's what's regrettable. And that it's not for the lack of not trying on our part. I think it's a lack of trying on their part. Now, the Park Forest System, which is now the Park System, which is now the—the head honcho of the island, may not be as marketing-oriented as they ought to be, maybe. I don't know. It's—it's just a matter of looking at it.

LEVINE: Oh.

H. METHNER: But I wanted to get that in on the tape—

LEVINE: I'm glad you did.

H. METHNER: —just as well.

LEVINE: Do you know why Ellis Island was chosen initially?

H. METHNER: Way back in—in day one?

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

H. METHNER: I believe, from the history that I read, it was something that they needed in order to, again, look for either undesirable elements, either on the medical or social side.

LEVINE: So the whole train—all of the people aboard the sealed trains had to be processed through Ellis Island?

H. METHNER: Yes, definitely. But they were also not even processed. They were—they were told that they could not stay, which staying was not an option.

LEVINE: Option, uh-huh.

H. METHNER: That option was never even discussed, nor do—no, I—do I believe it was even desired by these people. Oh, it may have been desired but it was—was never in the cards. It was not anything that, "Now that you're here, we are going to change the rules and you all can stay." I don't think—they may have dreamt that but that was not the idea. If that's what the State Department tried to imply when I

asked for permission, no, they—they—I was fully aware that they could not stay, because I was familiar with the quota system by which the immigration authorities operated. And there was no way of changing that. The thing that—the thing to change it for me was to get married to a citizen, which was not the purpose of our marriage at that point. [chuckles] No, there was no ulterior motive [unclear] that I want my parents there, and she becomes the pigeon that's going to do that. No way. No way. [laughs] No, definitely—that was not the deal.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Well, is there any more before we get to having the ceremony yesterday? Is there any more to this story after you—

H. METHNER: Well, yes. I—

LEVINE: —were married in Ellis Island and—

H. METHNER: No, not much at Ellis Island but life in general.

LEVINE: Okay.

H. METHNER: For great lengths of time—I would say for a goodly number of years, I have been wrestling personally with the—just with the event that most every human being asks themself in life one time or another. "Why me, oh, Lord? Why me?" The fact that I was privileged to speak here today in itself was something. The rabbi yesterday mentioned a prayer that we speak in Passover services, which ends up each line with, "Is—it is enough." Would have been enough. Just leaving Germany and getting to China and living there for nine years and close the curtain might have been enough. Coming over here would be more than enough. Getting married and having a happy life for 50 years would be more than enough. Having the parents at a wedding [voice breaking] would have been enough. Bringing them over afterwards and living with them for another 10 years, 15 years, with my mother, over 30, would have been enough. So I want to impress—leave the impression that there are things, that every religion is manmade. There's some men that stand out when they made it that take on a godly creature and provide some way of mechanism that makes us [unclear]. Because it couldn't be all just one guy gets everything and the other guys [voice breaking] end up in the gas chamber. And I'm still not done with that [unclear]. Is it the children? Is it the future? Why me? I do not know. There I would like to leave it.

LEVINE: Okay. And Mrs. Methner, well, will you say the number of children you had and their names?

R. METHNER: I have two children. The older one is Bruce, who's here. And the younger one is Sidney. One is married. The older one is married. I have two grandchildren. I have a lovely ex-daughter-in-law and two ch—two grandchildren, a boy named Jason and a girl named Cameron. And that is actually the extent of my immediate family.

LEVINE: And when you look back on your life coming here—

R. METHNER: I never thought I would make it. [laughs] Fifty years is a long time. You forget a lot and you remember a lot. Some of it was happy. Some of it was tough. Some of it wasn't so happy. But we made it.

LEVINE: And how about the 50th celebration and going back to Ellis Island? How—how was that [unclear]?

R. METHNER: I'm a very private person. I would have preferred that just Harry and I'd go back by ourselves as a sort of pilgrimage.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

R. METHNER: But the children wanted to do this and I was told, "It's important for the grandchildren and it's important for the future." So I went along with it. And I didn't wish that the boat would go down the second time. [laughter] There were too many people on it. [laughs] And I still can't swim.

LEVINE: Well, I think one thing that came out is that this interview will be at Ellis Island for posterity. And your stories will be there for the researchers and any interested person. And I think that's certainly a welcome asset to the archive at the Ellis Island Immigration Museum. Okay, we have about five more minutes

R. METHNER: Thank you.

LEVINE: Is there anything that you would like to say in closing?

MAN: Yes, the question I would have is how can one access this wealth of data that you're collecting? Is it available to the individual—any visitor to the island?

LEVINE: Yes, it is. We have a—we have a library called the Oral History Library."

MAN: Right.

LEVINE: And we have computers and you can access the tapes by use of headphones with the computers, and—and the transcripts when they get transcribed. And we're—we're updating that so it's going to be—it's going to be a lot faster and a lot more efficient than the one we presently have.

MAN: So it eventually may even be on the Internet.

LEVINE: Maybe. Not at this point.

MAN: Yeah.

LEVINE: But we do get researchers from all over the world and they—they make use of this material. And we—people can—can actually purchase, for a minimum amount, tapes, transcripts, use them for books, use them for whatever purposes, documentaries. And there may be people who would want to contact you personally, in which case I would contact you first and tell you what their project is and ask them if your interested—ask you if you're interested in being contacted. We wouldn't just give out your information.

H. METHNER: Not a mailing list.

LEVINE: Pardon?

H. METHNER: It's not a mailing list subject.

LEVINE: No, no. No.

H. METHNER: [laughs]

R. METHNER: Thank you. I appreciate that.

LEVINE: Yeah, yeah.

L. METHNER: The other question is, you asked why Ellis Island? Why we were transported from San Francisco to Ellis Island.

LEVINE: Why don't you say your name and your association here?

H. METHNER: Should we give him a microphone?

LEVINE: It—he'll pick it up. Yours will pick it up.

L. METHNER: My name is Lothar [PH] Methner. I'm the brother of Harry Methner. And I'm one of the person that—I'm the person, actually, that was

on the transport. The reason, of course, is all—after reading many books and so forth—the reason Ellis Island was selected, because at the same time as we were coming from China, there was a huge wave of boats leaving Europe with displaced persons.

LEVINE: Oh.

L. METHNER: And as those boats returned to—to Europe to pick up another load of displaced persons from the camps that were still in Europe, we were given then passage to go from Ellis Island. In other words, we went on a—

H. METHNER: Return trip.

L. METHNER: General—General Stakes [PH], I believe, was the transporter, Army—Army—

LEVINE: Troop trans—

L. METHNER: Troop transporter, right.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

L. METHNER: And then the other question that—the comment was made about why were we not allowed to stay in the United States? Well, this is post-war and the State Department could not afford to le—to make these exemptions, which would have been very nice, to stay here. But the exemptions to Polish quota and exemptions of not following medical entrance requirements would have put the State Department, which was already in straight public relations problems, would not have been very conducive to the government. So it's—there's is a political answer to that and that's what I just told you.

LEVINE: Oh, thanks.

L. METHNER: It would not—we would have loved to stay, you know, [unclear]. But it wasn't just possible. The prime purpose was to get everybody out of China in time to prevent the communists, to have any repercussions that would—so that's the only comment I have. Basically, what my brother said in his interview is—is correct. There's some—after 50 years, there are some mild variations in there but in general, he was—he's all right. [chuckles]

LEVINE: [chuckles] Well, thank you very much. And how about—

MAN: How about when you came back? Did you come through Ellis Island when you came back?

L. METHNER: Oh, when I—

R. METHNER: No.

L. METHNER: No, at Ellis—

R. METHNER: No.

L. METHNER: Ellis Island, no. We—

LEVINE: It was closed in ’54. I’m not sure when you came back.

MAN: ‘50—

L. METHNER: I came back in ’53 but we still bypassed it here. It was already in [unclear]. My comment yesterday after I went back to Ellis Island is, “I wasn’t aware that this whole island facility was in such a bad shape for to be”—I mean, it stand—what? It stayed six years without any occupants, I understand, or seven years.

LEVINE: It was—

L. METHNER: ’54 to—

LEVINE: ’65 is—

L. METHNER: That’s when—

LEVINE: —when it became a national [unclear].

L. METHNER: And why a facility like this had been deteriorating without any government intervention with the city or government, it’s beyond my comprehension. I mean, it’s such a nice piece of property. [laughs]

LEVINE: It is. Maybe you could say a couple of words about the hospital facilities when you were there.

L. METHNER: I do not remember. I stayed in the hospital for quite a few months, maybe several years. But the facility in—in—in Ellis Island was just a transitive of one day. Even on the train coming over through the United States, we stayed in—in a regular sleeping cars, Pullman sleeping cars. And it’s all very vague as to what happened 50 years ago.

MAN: How about the ceremony?

L. METHNER: Pardon?

MAN: How about the ceremony? Do you remember—

L. METHNER: Oh, the ceremony. Yes, I was—by—by nature, I was the last person, maybe, to leave the boat.

R. METHNER: Uh-hmm.

L. METHNER: Because—they shake their heads. My parents were eager beaver to leave the boat. And I took my time because it—the island will be still there. So everybody has gone ahead of me and here was I, carrying my suitcase. And I finally saw my future sister-in-law and my brother, and then took all over, because the ceremony, I remember very vividly. But what they—what they said is correct. But the impression from Ellis Island is—is not as marked as, maybe, his, because it was a day in—in the life. It was just another day. They got married. They broke the glass and they lived happily ever after, I hope. [laughter] Another—another 50 years. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Did you interrogate your future sister-in-law as well or—

R. METHNER: No.

L. METHNER: We did—that was—

R. METHNER: No.

L. METHNER: The short—the time was so short—

LEVINE: Oh.

L. METHNER: —that the—the parents and my aunts, more or less—I wouldn't say domineered the situation. But by nature, they—

H. METHNER: They did. They did. [laughter]

MAN: And did they say anything to you later?

L. METHNER: Did they do what?

H. METHNER: Any comment afterwards?

MAN: Did [unclear]—

R. METHNER: Did the parents say anything?

MAN: Did the parents say any—make any comment to you?

R. METHNER: I never heard that.

L. METHNER: Oh, I don't—I—

R. METHNER: Mmm, uh-hmm. [laughter]

LEVINE: They gave you the Star of David and the ring so [laughter]—

MAN: [unclear]

L. METHNER: Like—like, I would say that my—they would—there—there could have been comments, usually in the family, that my mother would discuss the future daughter-in-law in regard to my brother here. And these are comments that occur in every family, whether she's accepted or not accepted, and eventually it turned out all right.

H. METHNER: Well, it's too late. It's too late. [laughter]

LEVINE: Okay. Well, we're at the end of the tape.

H. METHNER: Good.

LEVINE: I want to thank you so much.

L. METHNER: Thank you for coming.

R. METHNER: Thank you.

LEVINE: For a wonderful interview.

R. METHNER: Thank you. How many of these do you do in a month?

LEVINE: Let me just sign off. I'm speaking with the Methners on the occasion of their 50th anniversary. And this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service signing off. [tape off/on] Okay, we're going to have a little postscript here, if you would just repeat what you just said.

H. METHNER: The postscript is simply that the ceremony in 1949 was the—performed by Rabbi Joseph Kaminetski [PH] of New York City. The rabbi passed away 50 years to the day, on March 17, 1999. And the repeat ceremony was performed by his son, Rabbi David Kaminetski of New York.

LEVINE: Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]