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DIANE GREENE
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LATVIA, VIA GERMANY, 1949
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SIGRIST: Good afternoon. This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is Friday, July 16, 1999. I'm in the Ellis Island recording studio, using he portable digital equipment, and I'm here with Mrs. Diane Greene. Mrs. Greene came from Latvia, via Germany. It was 1949 when she came to the United States, and she was eight years old at that time. Present also in the room is her friend, Charles Austin. Thank you both for being here. And can we begin, Mrs. Greene, by giving me your birth date?

GREENE: May 29th, 1941.

SIGRIST: And where were you born?

GREENE: Jelgava, Latvia, and that's spelled J-E-L-G-A-V-A.

SIGRIST: J-E-L-G-A-V-A?

GREENE: Uh-hmm.

SIGRIST: Say it one more time, slowly.

GREENE: Jelgava.

SIGRIST: Where in Latvia is that?

GREENE: It's very close to Riga.

SIGRIST: Do you have childhood memories of the town?

GREENE: No, I was—we left Latvia in October of 1943, and I was only two and a half years old at that time.

SIGRIST: Do you have any first-hand recollections of Latvia at all?

GREENE: Bombing. As we were leaving the country, the—we were trying to get on a German freighter. And the coastline was being bombed, and my father told me that he would lie over me, so I wouldn't be hit. I do remember vaguely some bombing.

SIGRIST: One thing I should ask you before we get too far along: what was your name when you were born?

GREENE: Daina, D-A-I-N-A.

SIGRIST: D-A-I-N-A.

GREENE: Boitmanis, and that's spelled B-O-I-T-M-A-N-I-S.

SIGRIST: B-O-I-T-M-A-N-I-S.

GREENE: Yes.

SIGRIST: Boitmanis.

GREENE: Un-huh.

SIGRIST: And tell me a little bit—before we get into World War Two and all of that, tell me a little bit about your parent's background. Were they always in Latvia? How did that all come to be?

GREENE: Yes, they were always in Latvia. My father, occasionally, he said he cross-country skied to St. Petersburg, and sailed to St. Petersburg, and worked there for some time, a little time, on business. And this was before the Communist takeover of Latvia. But I don't know how long those periods of

time were. And his father owned a plumbing and heating kind of business, and my mother was a bookkeeper. A middle class kind of family.

SIGRIST: What was your Dad's name?

GREENE: Roberts Boitmanis, and it's spelled like Robert, R-O-B-E-R-T, with an S.

SIGRIST: Boitmanis?

GREENE: Uh-huh.

SIGRIST: And tell me a little bit about his personality.

GREENE: He was a very gentle, very loving person who was very interested in the arts, and opera, and the arts. Spoke several languages, and had a wonderful sense of humor, but a very soft kind of sense of humor. And he was very tall; he was six four—six three—and had blondish hair, and a rather handsome man.

SIGRIST: Tell me something, and it can be in Europe, or it can be in this country—some experience that you and your father shared when you were a child.

GREENE: He built me a sled while we were in a displaced persons camp that was made out of pipes. He, after the American forces took over, and we lived in a D.P. camp, he was able to work a little bit for the American Army. And so he salvaged some pipes and built a sled, and I remember him pulling me around on the sled. And we went to get a Christmas tree, pulling it back on the sled. And I was the only person in the camp, as I remember, or as I was told, who had a sled! So I was a popular child.

SIGRIST: Because of your father's ingenuity.

GREENE: Uh-hmm.

SIGRIST: You mentioned that he was in the plumbing and heating business in Latvia.

GREENE: Right.

SIGRIST: What did he do when he came to the United States?

GREENE: The same thing. Not his own business, but he worked for someone else, right.

SIGRIST: What did your father do for his own pleasure?

GREENE: Fished. He loved to fish. He loved sports, observation.

SIGRIST: And you mentioned interested in the arts, earlier on.

GREENE: Uh-hmm.

SIGRIST: What was your mother's name?

GREENE: Austra, A-U-S-T-R-A.

SIGRIST: And her maiden name?

GREENE: Perkonis, which is P-E-R-K-O-N-I-S.

SIGRIST: And what do you know about your mother's background, her childhood?

GREENE: She was one of, I believe it was one of five. And she was very interested in the arts, but kind of acting on, a hobby. And she was a more serious person than my father, and excellent in math—I remember that.

SIGRIST: From your own schoolhood memories? Her excellence in math?

GREENE: Uh-hmm, yes, yes.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about her personality.

GREENE: Again, she was more serious. And my grandmother happened to come to the United States with us, so my grandmother was really somewhat more involved with us. There were a number of children, and so really the fondness was more with my—the warmth was with my grandmother more than my mother.

SIGRIST: Was there one thing, though, that you did do with your mother that you can remember, either a common activity or a special occasion, that sticks out in your mind from your childhood, either in Europe or the United States?

GREENE: Sewing. She taught me to sew. She had a very excellent sense of decorating, with nothing. She just had a good sense of style in putting things together.

SIGRIST: Do you remember her doing something specific that way?

GREENE: Just our household. We had absolutely no money, and it always looked like it was done in good taste.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me a little bit about your mother's educational background?

GREENE: She was [pause] I guess the equivalent of high school, and then she went to like a vocational, bookkeeping, and that kind of school.

SIGRIST: And what about your Dad?

GREENE: The same thing, and then—in Europe in those days it was kind of a vocational school, an apprenticeship after high school. But both very literate and very well-read.

SIGRIST: And what languages did they speak, or language?

GREENE: My father spoke Russian fluently, and German, and let's see, what else? And my mother did, too. I think less fluent in Russian. And my father particularly was interested in Russian literature and poetry, and music. But he was very—I studied Russian when I went to college, and he was not much for that, because—because of the association with Communism and so forth then. But he said if I could learn to read *War and Peace* in Russian, then it probably was worthwhile to [laughs], to take those courses!

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about your grandmother. Whose mother was she?

GREENE: She was my father's mother.

SIGRIST: And her name?

GREENE: Alvina, A-L-V-I-N-A.

SIGRIST: Do you know what her maiden name was?

GREENE: Not right off the top of my head.

SIGRIST: And tell me a little bit about your grandmother's personality. And you've mentioned your fondness for her—some of the things you did together?

GREENE: Oh, that brings tears!

SIGRIST: Well, take your time; it's okay.

GREENE: She was very busy with taking care of children, so there wasn't a lot of recreational kind of things that we did together.

SIGRIST: Did she teach you how to do something?

GREENE: Cooking, and she just was an excellent listener, and fun. Very, very warm.

SIGRIST: And she came all the way to the United States with you, through that whole process?

GREENE: Yes, uh-huh, she came.

SIGRIST: Oh, well good. Well, we'll talk a little bit more about her as we go along. Do you know how your parents met?

GREENE: My father was almost ten years older. I don't remember that clearly, no.

SIGRIST: My box of Kleenex is in the other room.

GREENE: Actually, no, I brought some from—[Tape off/on]

SIGRIST: We're now resuming, and Mrs. Greene you said that you did actually want to talk a little bit about your grandmother?

GREENE: Right, right. I think my fondest memories, other that just a loving relationship with her, were with flowers. She was very fond of flowers, and grew flowers in the back yard.

SIGRIST: Did she have favorite flowers that you can remember, the types?

GREENE: The lilies of the valley, and the lilacs, and zinnias, and [pause], zinnias in particular, uh-huh.

SIGRIST: That's interesting. You mentioned, you started talking about how your parents met. You said that your Dad was ten years older than your Mom? And--?

GREENE: I really—I just, it's not coming back. I know I've heard it; it's just not coming back.

SIGRIST: Okay. And all right, well this is probably a good time. We've got the background. Oh, brothers and sisters?

GREENE: Yes, I had one brother born in Latvia, younger than I, and he died of pneumonia before we left Latvia. And then I have, had one sister who was born in Germany, and her name is Rasma, R-A-S-M-A, and she was [pause] probably four years younger than I. Four years younger than I. And she was the only one born outside the United States.

SIGRIST: Other than you?

GREENE: Other than myself, right. And then I have a brother named John. Naturally his name, as far as the family, what we called him, was Janis, which is a Northern European version of John.

SIGRIST: J-O-H-A-N-N-E-S?

GREENE: No, J-A-N-I-S. And then I have a sister Sandra, and Valda, V-A-L-D-A, and Christine.

SIGRIST: Oh, so it turned out to be a large family ultimately?

GREENE: Uh-hmm. Uh-hmm.

SIGRIST: You mentioned the bombings in Latvia. You have some memory yourself, as well as other things that were told to you. Tell me other things that perhaps you were told about your life prior to getting out of Latvia.

GREENE: My father's business was burned when the Russians came back into the country, and our home was burned, if I'm not mistaken. And so we actually hid in the woods for quite some time in Latvia before we left the country. And my mother's sister was to go, to leave with us, and they had a rendezvous set in the woods somewhere. And she was cross—a railroad bridge was bombed just before she could get over, so she did not get to come with us. That story I remember.

SIGRIST: Did she survive the war?

GREENE: Yes, uh-huh. I think that's the sister that was sent to Siberia after the war.

SIGRIST: Oh, Mr. Berzins talks about that!

GREENE: Oh, really?

SIGRIST: Because he was sent to Siberia and put into solitary confinement. Not to interrupt your interview, but that just struck me—you'll read about that.

GREENE: Uh-huh, yes, yeah. And my mother's sisters and brother stayed in that country during the war and did not leave. And so then after, somehow we heard of a German freighter that we could get on to go to Germany, and waited for that, and were able to go to Germany on the freighter.

SIGRIST: Do you have any recollections of being on that freighter?

GREENE: No. No, huh-uh. And then we hid out, and were allowed to live on some farms of German people. And my Mom and Dad would help with some of the farm work. We moved around the country somewhat, and we were in

Berlin at some point. And I remember a lot of—a lot of bombing, a lot of bombing and ruins and so forth.

SIGRIST: Once you got into Berlin?

GREENE: Once we got to Germany, period, but particularly Berlin.

SIGRIST: What year was it that you finally got into Germany?

GREENE: It would—October of 1943 is when we left Latvia.

SIGRIST: What is the group of people who are traveling? Obviously it's you and your mother, and your father.

GREENE: And my grandmother.

SIGRIST: And your grandmother. Any other family members?

GREENE: No, hm-mm.

SIGRIST: Did you have grandparents on your mother's side?

GREENE: Yes, and they remained in Latvia.

SIGRIST: Do you have any memories of them?

GREENE: No, I've just seen photographs.

SIGRIST: And what about other relatives? Like, did your father have brothers, or--?

GREENE: No, he was an only child, and his father died sometime around the time that we left.

SIGRIST: Are there any—before we get out of Latvia completely, are there any stories that your parents may have told you, or that your grandmother might have told you, sort of about happy events, everyday life, in Latvia? Maybe religious practices, or you know, stuff like that?

GREENE: Well, we were Lutheran, as a majority of Latvians were, as I understand it. And so church, the church was not like going to church in America. It was not an every Sunday kind of thing that you did; it was special occasions, and baptisms, and around Lent, and Christmas, and so forth. But I felt like they were quite religious and spiritual people. A lot of gardening and sailing. There was a town Jurmala, which is J-U-R-M-A-L-A, and my mother, one of her brothers lived there, and I think a sister perhaps lived there. And that was—that stands for little village on the sea. And it's still a

resort area, and we spent some time there. But really from the time I was born, the Russians had taken over, and Communism was there, so it was not a light time. [Pause] The photographs I've seen, I had a very beautiful baptismal dress, and buggy, and so, and pictures of my mother, wedding gown and all, were, you know, quite lovely. So I think the family lived reasonably well.

SIGRIST: Were you named after someone?

GREENE: No, not that I know of, no.

SIGRIST: Tell me where your memory kicks in in Germany. What are the first memories that you have of being in Germany, and beginning that experience?

GREENE: I remember a lot of woods, forests and trees, and blue flowers, and farm land, but nothing specific at all, and a lot of bombing.

SIGRIST: The war is still on, at this point?

GREENE: Oh, yeah, uh-huh, yeah. And then, but my most vivid memory really, I think, is when the Americans marched in, and we were—

SIGRIST: What do you remember about that?

GREENE: Yeah, I do remember that. And we were standing, observing, and clapping, and so forth.

SIGRIST: Did you understand as a child what was happening?

GREENE: To some extent I did, uh-huh, yeah. I mean, just great joy at that time. And then I don't know at one point the displaced persons camps were made available, but we moved into them. And apparently we moved, from what I understand, we were in three different camps, but most—most of the time it was, the longest one was Erlingen, and that was the one that we left from.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that please?

GREENE: E-R-L-I-N-G-E-N. It was near Nuremburg.

SIGRIST: And how long were you there?

GREENE: [Sighs] Several years. But I could be wrong, because apparently we were in three different camps. I know I have those dates accessible somewhere, but not in my memory.

SIGRIST: But that's the one that sticks out in your mind?

GREENE: Oh yes, definitely, uh-huh. Definitely.

SIGRIST: Tell me everything you remember as a little child about being there.

GREENE: There were three families who lived in one room, and we had bunk-type cots, as I understand it, and remember. And I don't really remember the times as being bad. I remember we had to be quiet because there were so many people there. One of the families had two children. I was the oldest of the three children living in that room, and in fact, I saw the girl who was in that room with us last fall—yes, last fall or the fall before that. And I tried to help her with her memory, and she mine, but she had been back to that camp since then. So, and I remember the food, mainly. We had potato soup, as I can remember, and was reinforced to me, approximately three meals a day. And women would go and peel potatoes, and I remember helping with that a little bit. And, but the potato soup was very watery. It was just mostly water, and a few little shreds of potatoes. And, but I do remember good rye bread, and I don't know who made it, if that was also made by the women in the camps. Wonderful, heavy, heavy, sour rye bread, which is typical of Northern Europe. And going to school, and learning to read and write.

SIGRIST: In what language?

GREENE: Latvian. I did speak some German then, but it was in Latvian. It was by a Latvian minister, I believe, most of the class.

SIGRIST: Do you remember anything else about the camp that was geared specifically for Latvians? This surprises me, that the Latvian—that that would be being taught at this camp. I'm just wondering if the Latvian community was doing anything else in this camp also?

GREENE: I remember church services, the Latvian Lutheran church services. And I still have a picture of the minister. And I remember singing, and you know, singing the national songs. And I remember Christmas particularly, because we did, we brought a tree back on that sled, and we had the real candles on the tree. And I really just remember lots of happiness! There aren't bad—bed memories of that, other than no food, you know.

SIGRIST: Who ran the camp?

GREENE: I know we were in the American sector, and it was—the camps, I think, were jointly funded by a number, the allied nations. But I think ours was mostly, probably through American funding.

SIGRIST: What was the layout of the camp?

GREENE: What I remember is a large courtyard in the middle, and then it was dormitory-type brick, brick or stone buildings, around the periphery, so that it was closed in, like, on all four sides, with buildings. And probably four stories, three stories high.

SIGRIST: Were there special places to go for school or the church service, or other places?

GREENE: I remember some, just that there were some larger rooms, and that the church area had more benches. It wasn't chairs and tables, there were some benches. And an altar, and you know, the white lace tablecloth.

SIGRIST: What about to eat? Where did you go to eat?

GREENE: A large dining room, and it was picnicky, you know, the oblong tables, and benches, I think, on either side.

SIGRIST: Do you have any recollections of interacting with military personnel of one sort or another who were in this camp for some reason?

GREENE: Somewhat, yes. I have visions of them being around, and we were very fond of the American military. And I guess they were really the only ones—they were the allied country that had that area. And I remember traveling occasionally on the Army trucks, you know, with the flap sides. And probably as we, maybe as we went from camp to camp, but definitely as we left, I remember sitting on those benches. And one memory that I have that is still just so vivid is one of the families that was leaving with us—and I think this had to have been when we left to come to the United States. They had a retarded son, and he couldn't come. And I remember part of the family leaving with us, and the son standing behind the truck, and knowing they were leaving. I don't think that he had enough intelligence to know the significance of their leaving, but I remember we were all in tears watching that. And I don't know if that was a Latvian—but it wasn't like a small boy. He probably was late teens, or maybe even a young adult.

SIGRIST: Wow. Where there medical facilities in the camp?

GREENE: I don't remember what they were.

SIGRIST: You have no memory of you having to interact?

GREENE: No, no, yeah, no. But back to the American forces—the American forces, and Americans were living not that far from our camp. And so we learned that they threw away lots of food in their garbage cans. So we would go

and rummage through the garbage cans in the evenings, and would, you know, take food that was thrown away. And to this day, I cannot throw food away! I mean, it has to be spoiled in the refrigerator before I can throw it away! [Laughs] And I'm very much a packrat for food, and other things, I think because of those experiences.

SIGRIST: Sure. I want to try a different microphone placement on you. I just want to try something different. I'm going to put this cord around the back of you, and try it over there. Because you have a good, strong voice, and I just want to—there you go! And, well this is very interesting, because you know, we just don't find people who were in refugee camps who can talk about it.

GREENE: And then the other food kind of memory is, even as the American forces came through that first time, I remember cigarettes being passed out, and candy bars, and gum. Hershey candy bars. And so somebody taught me how to sing "My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean." I have no idea who. And I was this cute little blonde girl, but rather shy, and so my mother would take me to stand on street corners whenever American soldiers would be going by, and I would sing as loud as I could--and I cannot carry a tune in church, even now! [laughs]-- "My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean," and they would give me candy bars and gum. And so then, I don't even remember ever tasting the candy bars or gum, but we would take them to the German farmers nearby, and exchange them for fresh fruit and vegetables. And so, between my father working for the American Army a little bit as a plumber, and my helping [laughs] to feed the family by song—and I had no idea what any of those words meant—and you know, we probably lived better than most.

SIGRIST: I wonder how you felt, you know, as an eight year old, about having to give up your candy bars, you know, for vegetables! [Laughs]

GREENE: [Laughs] And then I remember the, somehow my memories of Germany were that it was dirty, and that it was, you know, between the bombing. I remember when we would go to the, by a lot of the German homes--and this must have been farmers—that there would be like manure in the front, and so forth. And it must have been just the smells that I remember, but I had never wanted to go back to Germany, because I remembered it as being cold and mean, and dirty. But I think that was just the war. And I have not been able to go back since. I've been back to Europe since, but I haven't been to Germany.

SIGRIST: Do you remember in the camp itself, like, who took care of the grounds, and who took care of the cleaning?

GREENE: I remember the women did a lot of cleaning.

SIGRIST: The internees, in the camp?

GREENE: Uh-hmm.

SIGRIST: Do you remember other nationalities in the camp, amongst the internees?

GREENE: I really don't, because our relationships were mainly with other Latvians. And there were a number of them there, quite a few.

SIGRIST: Who sticks out in your mind, some of the other internees? Can you think of specific? You mentioned, you know, the family with the son. Any other individuals or families that stick out in your mind for some reason?

GREENE: Well, the family who we shared a room with, and they have a daughter Anita, and the one that I just saw recently. And, oh, what is her brother's name? I remember them.

SIGRIST: What are the things that stick out in your mind about them? Why do you remember them?

GREENE: Play, and you know, we would play with the sled. And then Mrs. Berzins, Regina is her name, R-E-G-I-N-A.

SIGRIST: And Berzins, B-E-R-Z-I-N-S.

GREENE: Z-I-N-S, right, and they were the other, the third family who were in this room with us for quite some time. And they had no children, and her husband was an excellent carpenter. And she was just really a master seamstress, and I remember she made several outfits of clothing for me, and continues, continued to do that until probably she stopped sewing fifteen years ago. But she continued to sew for my sisters.

SIGRIST: Was there some way in the camp to get things like sewing materials?

GREENE: I don't know, because we have some photographs of—Buncis is the family that had the children in the room with us. It's B-U-N-C-I-S. I remember in the photographs we were nicely dressed, and so I don't know how that happened. Probably with whatever money my Dad made, you know, we bought fabrics. And there must have been a sewing machine. I have, still have one article that was made, that Mrs. Berzins had made for me.

SIGRIST: A piece of clothing?

GREENE: Yeah, and I don't think it was all sewn by hand, so—

SIGRIST: Can you describe it?

GREENE: Well, this was actually a linen—an off-white linen top that was the traditional style that you'd see in photographs, that really was not clothing that would be worn at that time. It was the national costume kind of thing. And then she made something with a Hawaiian print, and [laughs] I have no idea! And I may be mixing up the early years in the United States—early year in the United States. But I just have this idea that I had this Hawaiian, reddish skirt and top that she made.

END OF SIDE A

BEGIN SIDE B

SIGRIST: It's possible. It's definitely possible. Was there a place in the camp that was like a store of some sort, that you can remember, where you could actually buy things you might need?

GREENE: No, I don't—no, it was—we were very close to some German stores, the camp was. And, but I don't remember ever going there to buy anything other than the—and I don't know that we bought the tree. We maybe, probably cut that down. I'm sure we did.

SIGRIST: Can you talk a little bit about your father working for the U.S. Army as a plumber?

GREENE: Other than his salvaging the metal for the sled—

SIGRIST: Was that at the camp? Was that where he was--?

GREENE: No, it was fairly close to the camp, and he made good friends with some of the American soldiers. And apparently they were very pleased with his level of skill, and—

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about—you said you remember playing, and you started talking about school, and we sort of got rerouted a little bit at that point. So anything else about going to school at the camp that sticks out in your mind in any way? Or maybe something that happened once while you were attending school there?

GREENE: Not there. People often comment that I have excellent penmanship, and I think it's because I learned to write in the European style, where the paper was lined, but slanted also, so that you had to have each letter at a slant. And I've always been glad that I had that training, because I have fairly decent penmanship. I really, I don't remember a lot about the school.

SIGRIST: You mentioned a little bit earlier some of the ways that you think your experience in the camp has affected you as an adult. Were there ways that the experience in the camp perhaps affected your parents in their later years?

GREENE: Well, I think my mother, the same—particularly my mother, the same way. I mean, she was a terrible packrat! And you know, of course because we had a number of kids in the family, and you know, not a lot of money, she very much looked for bargains and sales, and I'm terrible in that way. And my daughters just really, really get after me, as do my friends! [Laughs]

SIGRIST: [Laughs]

GREENE: I can hardly open closet doors or the garage door. I can't throw things away! Or if I see something that somebody's throwing things out, like even in my neighborhood—I live in a very affluent neighborhood in Jacksonville, Florida—and on Sundays—the garbage is picked up on Monday mornings. And if I drive by and I see that there's something that somebody can use, even though it's not myself, I stop and pick it up. In fact, I moved back to a station wagon a few weeks ago, just [laughs] to enable me to better do that!

SIGRIST: [Laughs] More room!

GREENE: And then—yes! And so I keep it for a while, and if I see I'm not using it, or if I know immediately that, like, it's a child's thing, then I take it to the Salvation Army, or give it to somebody I know who can use it. But I really make my life complicated by that strong, strong indoctrination. Just, it's—it really infuriates me; intellectually I know that it's not a healthy thing to do, but it's very strongly engrained in my personality.

SIGRIST: Is there anything else about the camp that you can remember, before we move on and get you on your way to America?

GREENE: I remember, and I—a Christmas, and again, it could even be that same Christmas that I remember pulling—I don't think so. So this would have been the Christmas in 1948. And I remember standing around the Christmas tree, and we were singing, and there was a knock on the door, and somebody came to announce that we'd been selected to come to the United States. I remember the candles on the tree, tears, and I think that's probably the last thing that I haven't mentioned.

SIGRIST: And that's sort of a good introduction to the next part of your life. What happened then? What was the process to actually get you out of the camp, and to the ocean liner? Or the parts that you remember?

GREENE: I know there were interviews that my parents, you know, were—people came to talk to them, and they had to go to some, an office somewhere. And I know that some time passed between our being told—no, that must have been before it was announced that we were coming, that we had been selected. But then some time still passed, after we were told that we had been selected, before we left. And then I just remember, you know, getting on the ship, and—

SIGRIST: Where did you go to get on the ship?

GREENE: Hamburg.

SIGRIST: And how did you get from the refugee camp to Hamburg?

GREENE: A train.

SIGRIST: Do you remember packing or anything along those lines?

GREENE: Actually, I shouldn't have said that with such certainty. I remember taking trains in Germany that were very crowded. And I also remember being on the American Army trucks. I do think it was a train that we took, though.

SIGRIST: Do you remember taking an object that was yours, like a certain thing that you brought to America that was yours?

GREENE: No, hm-mm.

SIGRIST: Do you remember saying goodbye to anyone in the camp?

GREENE: No.

SIGRIST: And you're going, and your grandmother, and you Mom and your Dad.

GREENE: And my sister.

SIGRIST: And your sister who was born in the camp! Oh yes, of course, we didn't talk—

GREENE: Though actually she was not born in the camp. She was born during the war, in a German—we stayed in a barn, and she was born in the barn. And I remember—

SIGRIST: Do you have any recollections of her birth?

GREENE: No. I mean, I remember her crying a lot. I shouldn't even say that she was born in a barn, but I know we were staying in a barn. And she's much, quite a lot taller than I am. In fact, I'm by far the shortest one in the family, and I think a lot of it is the nutritional status, you know, during that time, the fact that there wasn't milk, much milk. And she was breast-fed for quite a while. And you know, the food was very scarce, and so my bones are more fragile, and I'm shorter. I have terrible teeth, and the rest of my siblings have good teeth.

SIGRIST: She would have been quite a small child then when you were in the camp?

GREENE: Yes, uh-huh.

SIGRIST: Do you have specific memories of dealing with this baby sister in a camp situation, which could be inconvenient? I suppose the potential was there.

GREENE: No, except that she always had to tag along with me, and [laughs] just that. Just, not really.

SIGRIST: So you mentioned taking the truck to the train to Hamburg, to get on the ship. Do you have any other recollections of that journey from the camp to when you get on the ship? Anything else?

GREENE: No, I remember stories of people, some people saying how it wasn't going to be so wonderful in America, how they—they had this potato [unclear], three meals a day with that. They ate all this corn. And warnings that the bread would be terrible. But I remember big pots of corn, and their warnings that bread would be bad.

SIGRIST: Why would corn be something that Europeans wouldn't like to eat?

GREENE: I don't know, because I mean, corn is available in Europe. I just, I do remember corn being something to dread.

SIGRIST: [Laughs] Tell me what you thought when you saw the ship, what you remember.

GREENE: I really—I mean, I remember the ship; I don't remember any response to it.

SIGRIST: What are some of the things that you remember about being on the ship?

GREENE: Being very seasick. In fact, I was down below a good part of the time, and my parents would—like, when we went past England and the white cliffs of

Dover, they would bring me up to the top of the ship, so that I could see. And then I remember that I was selected, kind of, to be the mascot, or the representative of the American group on that ship, and I was dressed in the national costume. And there was a point at which people posed for a photograph. I have that photograph at home, and I'm in the center, being held up. And I was supposed to present the Captain with something, and it may have been singing "My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean", [laughs] I don't know! But I was supposed to do something, so I was kind of a big deal then.

SIGRIST: Do you remember—we talked a little bit about this before we did the interview, and I can't remember. Do you remember the name of the ship?

GREENE: No, I have that at home.

SIGRIST: Oh, you [unclear] on the papers, yeah. You already said that, that's right. Because I had asked you if it was one of the Generals, you know, the General Halsey, or one of those ships.

GREENE: And I remember on the ship, the warnings about food came true. We had our first white bread, the Wonder Bread kind of bread, and we just could hardly eat that. And we had brought a loaf or two of rye bread, this heavy, heavy rye, on the ship. And we were getting down, like, to the last slice. And my Dad and I would fight over that. I mean, he kiddingly would try to take it from me, and keep it from me. And then it got down to crumbs of that rye bread that we were just treasuring, because we were told, you know, in America that we probably wouldn't get that. But that was just a very strong memory of that white bread, and to this day I just could not swallow a sandwich with white bread unless I was really hungry!

SIGRIST: Any other memories about food on the ship?

GREENE: I had an orange for the first time. And the food was really quite good. It was the bread thing. The food was probably very, very good, and people were extremely happy about that. I remember we had meat of some type, and oranges.

SIGRIST: What was the nationality of the crew?

GREENE: For some reason, I think there were a number of Americans on the crew.

SIGRIST: Do you remember interacting with any of the crew members for any reason?

GREENE: They were very friendly, and kind of happy, and trying to make us comfortable.

SIGRIST: Describe where you slept on the ship.

GREENE: On a cot-type bunk. I remember there were bunks, and it was kind of a cot surface. Canvassy.

SIGRIST: And in what kind of a configuration?

GREENE: I don't remember anything bad about it, as far as being overcrowded or anything, you know.

SIGRIST: Did you have a cabin, or were you in a big room, I guess is what I'm getting at? If you remember.

GREENE: I think probably more of a big—not like everybody in one room, but there were a lot of people in a room.

SIGRIST: Do you know if you were allowed to be with your mother and father on the ship?

GREENE: I think so. I don't know one way or another, but I think I would remember if I was not.

SIGRIST: And do you have any memories of your grandmother being on the ship, and maybe something that happened to her while you were going across the ocean?

GREENE: Not particularly. I think she stayed down below with me a lot, and my mother and father were on the deck.

SIGRIST: You were the only one in the family who got sick?

GREENE: I don't know. I think I probably was the worst.

SIGRIST: Do you remember being on the deck of the ship at some point?

GREENE: Oh, yes, uh-huh!

SIGRIST: What could you see when you were on the deck?

GREENE: Well, I remember the white cliffs of Dover, and sometimes coming up above and watching the waves. And then the Statue of Liberty is the first memory I have.

SIGRIST: What do you remember of the Statue of Liberty?

GREENE: Just very, very imposing. And I remember it kind of from the back or the side first, the, I mean, just—and people were crying, and it was just very, very moving.

SIGRIST: How long did the ship take to get to New York?

GREENE: I don't—I don't really know exactly.

SIGRIST: What time of the year was it?

GREENE: June. We arrived June 18th, 1949.

SIGRIST: That's right, you said your birthday—you turned eight in May, and then you—

GREENE: Uh-huh, right, uh-huh.

SIGRIST: Did anything happen? When you turned eight, did you know you were going to be coming to America at that point?

GREENE: Yes, uh-huh, but I don't remember any specific celebration, no.

SIGRIST: So, the boat comes into New York Harbor, and you told me a little bit of what happened before the interview. If you could say some of that again, please, about your grandmother's x-ray?

GREENE: Ever since I can remember—I mean, I definitely remember that there was some turmoil about my grandmother being able to go with us. And there was talk about tuberculosis, and something about x-rays, and the fact that she may not be able to go with us, and may be held, or something like that. And that I remember very vividly. And my sister, who really has—I did not spend a lot of time with my parents after I went to college, so basically the stories I would have heard would have been from age eight to, actually, probably eighteen or nineteen. So, ten solid years, but my sister stayed in the same part of the country, in the same town, for quite a while, as my parents. And my grandmother lived with one of my sisters until she died at the age of late eighties. So that sister heard a lot more stories. And she remem—what my grandmother had emphasized was that she was being viewed as a family different from ours, and she was going to be sent somewhere else in the United States, and that there were a lot of tears and turmoil about that, that we may be separated. And my father happened to see someone who was acting as an interpreter who was from his town. I believe he went to high school with her. And so she was able to intervene, and we had to apparently go before some other people, and phone calls were made to Illinois where we were to go, and they said that we could all go to the same place. So it ended up well. But I think there were two

things that were holding us up that were very traumatic, and one was something about her x-ray, and the other one was being separated to different locations.

SIGRIST: And you had said to me earlier you thought that that all took place here, at Ellis Island, these problems?

GREENE: Yes, yeah, yes. I had—I came to the Statue of Liberty, I think it was 1972. Or no, probably '71, for the first time since we left. And I had strong recollections then when we went by the Statue of Liberty of this island and the buildings. And then today when we walked in, I mean, the feeling was just there! It was overwhelmingly that I had been there. And the size of the room and the darkness of some of those halls. But I have no idea how long we were there. And I have a memory of a lot of people, but I don't know exactly where that was. I thought it was here, and sitting on wooden benches that were all kind of lined up together. That I very clearly remember. And waiting, and just everyone being just terribly, terribly frightened that my grandmother would not be able to go with us.

SIGRIST: Well, both of those concerns about your grandmother would have been reasons that you could have been brought out here in 1949, most definitely. Do you know when your grandmother was x-rayed? Where in this process?

GREENE: No, I remember we were all—I remember we were all x-rayed, and I remember being x-rayed several times, and people looking at heads and skin and so forth for infections.

SIGRIST: This is during the refugee camp period, or was this the period beginning here?

GREENE: Before—I think it was before we left the refugee—or it might have been in Hamburg, or—I don't remember where. But, and I don't remember myself being x-rayed, but I remember—yes, I do! At some point, when we arrived. But what's confusing it is I was just reading, the last few days, this—the history of the D.P. camps, and what happened to those people. And the process that was described there was that before, when they were first selected to come, they were x-rayed. And then when they came, that often it was on the ship that they were re-x-rayed before they could get off, once they arrived to the United States. I think the United States Public Health Service representatives got on the ship and checked people. So I don't know. I mean, it could have been what I've read just the last few days that's clouding, that's introducing things that I would not have remembered.

SIGRIST: You're a very honest interviewee.

GREENE: Yeah, uh-huh!

SIGRIST: [Laughs] One thing I did want to ask you: did you have any choice in the matter as to where you went in the United States?

GREENE: I don't remember that we did.

SIGRIST: Why Illinois?

GREENE: I think—I think the Midwestern states were very similar to, from where we came, as far as weather and the topography, and so forth. And there was, there were quite a few people from the Baltic states in the Chicago area, and we went to a small town, that's Manlus, M-A-N-L-U-S, Illinois. We were sponsored by a Lutheran church there. And the minister of that church actually was originally from Latvia. It was a very tiny town, so we were the only refugees here.

SIGRIST: How did long did you stay there?

GREENE: A little over a year.

SIGRIST: That'd be your first year in the United States?

GREENE: The first year, right. We heard that—that one of the other families in the camp had settled in Clinton, Iowa, which was probably fifty miles away. And we went to visit them, and that was a significantly larger town, and more opportunity. And so we moved. We moved there eventually.

SIGRIST: We have about eight minutes left, and I'd really like to hear about that first year in the United States, and some of the experiences that you went through adjusting to this country.

GREENE: One of the memories after leaving New York was that we—we went by train to Chicago. And I remember being in Chicago, and near the Wrigley Building, and the Chicago River, probably, and crossing that bridge, and eating bing cherries. I mean, that's just—that was the most wonderful thing. It was a sunny day. And then we went to Manlus, Illinois, and we lived in a farmhouse there. And the people from that town and from the church had just provided all these groceries, and just everything we could imagine! We were so warmly greeted! But one memory that I have is somebody had given us popcorn, and we had no idea what this popcorn was. And so we were all sleeping, and my grandmother was downstairs cooking, and we heard this shriek! And she was just shrieking, because she had put this popcorn in a skillet, and it was flying all over the place! [Laughs] She had no idea what was happening! And that was just a funny story, and I remember that being a very, a very, very happy year.

SIGRIST: Tell me about the summer. You got here in June, so I'm assuming you were not put in school until September?

GREENE: Uh-hmm.

SIGRIST: Tell me some of the things that you did as a young child during that summer, before you were put into school.

GREENE: Just playing with children.

SIGRIST: How did you interact with the other children?

GREENE: Well, I had to learn English immediately, and because I was the oldest of the two children, and children learn more quickly, I don't remember there really being a problem, other than reading. And I was put back into a younger, lower grade than I would have been for my chronological age, because I didn't speak English.

SIGRIST: Do you remember how you felt about that?

GREENE: The age thing didn't really, except I was a very tall child, and so even if I was with my own age group, I would have been a tall child. And so I was really big! Really tall [laughs]. And it was so important just to pronounce the words as they were pronounced in Illinois. And I remember we had to go around and read, and there was a book about, probably *Dick and Jane*, or something like that. And I had to read about a red wagon, and I pronounced the word bahgoan [PH]. W was the hardest letter, really, to learn to say correctly. But I said bahgoan, and the accent was on the wrong syllable. And I remember all the children laughing, and I remember to this day that that was just so devastating! So, before I said anything, I wanted to be sure I said it correctly! [Laughs] And then I was really the interpreter for my family, the spokesperson, until my parents—and they learned English fairly quickly.

SIGRIST: Who had the harder time with it?

GREENE: Well, my grandmother never really did. She understood, but—and we protected her, and she stayed home. And my father had a little bit of a hearing problem, and so he had a little harder time.

SIGRIST: What do you mean, you protected your grandmother?

GREENE: Well, she stayed in the house, and she was this nurturing person, and we never said, "Look, you know, you have to speak for yourself." And we always translated, until the day she died. And so she was in the United States for thirty-five years, probably, before she died.

SIGRIST: Were there any Old World Latvians of her generation that were living in this town that she could interact with?

GREENE: No. There were—in the town in Illinois, yes, Mrs. Berzins, who still is living, and she became quite good friends. And then we found Latvian people in Davenport, Iowa, and my parents interacted with them for celebrations and so forth. But otherwise, we were the only two families in the town.

SIGRIST: Do you know how you felt about that at that time? Once you realized that you were, you know, a very small minority, how that made you feel as a young person?

GREENE: Oh, I didn't want to be part of that; I wanted to be American. I remember that so strongly! And I was embarrassed that, if I made mistakes in speech, and that my parents spoke—well, not really embarrassed that they spoke broken English, but I wanted to be American. I did not want to be any different.

SIGRIST: What did you do to accomplish that, at that time? Were there ways that you worked very hard to be American, you know, when you were nine, ten, eleven, twelve years old?

GREENE: Well, you know, no—I would take traditions home to the family. We had to learn to make apple pie, instead of a tart like my grandmother would—we would normally just make apple tarts. And I said, no, we had to have apple pie, with the crust on top [laughs], and dressing at Thanksgiving time, and things like that.

SIGRIST: And how receptive were your parents to these things?

GREENE: Oh, they enjoyed them.

SIGRIST: Were there ways that they maintained their European customs in the house?

GREENE: Yes. For breakfast, as long, I mean, until they died, we always had the Northern European kind of food on the table, which was rye bread and cheeses, and many of the other, like in Finland, the same thing is true. You have very much the same food on the table: cucumber slices for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, and herring, again, even at breakfast time.

SIGRIST: Talk a little bit about with whom your parents socialized when they first came to the United States.

GREENE: Well, we did have the couple that we were in the camp with, and they were quite friendly with neighbors. They were both very busy, and you know, we had so many kids. So mainly just immediate neighbors, and then the Latvian families in the towns that were not that far away.

SIGRIST: How do you identify yourself in terms of nationality now?

GREENE: Well, if someone asks me where I'm from, and they usually mean where in the United States, because my Midwest accent is very obvious, you know, I say, "Well, kind of all over, in that I was born in Latvia. But I've lived many places in the United States, but grew up in Iowa."

SIGRIST: And did you say you have been back to Latvia?

GREENE: I tried to go. My husband and I had—were going to Finland as part of a health care group to study the Finnish health care system five years after socialized medicine. And so that was only about forty miles across the Baltic Sea, and so as soon as I knew we were going to go I called the Russian Embassy and tried to get a visa. And they said absolutely not at that time. This was still during the cold war, in seventy—this would have been '76, that I would not be comfortable in the kind of housing that my family could provide. And at that time my grandmother was still alive, and so I could not. And my sister's been there twice, and I really very much want to go, and hope to go and take my two daughters.

SIGRIST: How do you think your life would have been different if your family had never gotten out of Latvia and into Germany?

GREENE: It would be very difficult. We would have, you know, certainly lost our home and business. And from what I understand, the relatives, and I've met some who've come here, when you have someone else taking care of you, like under the Communist system, then you lose incentive, especially the younger people, to provide for yourself, and to make the best of your life. And you depend on others to do that. So, in my generation, I think I would have been much less of a—pretty much a self-driver, and have succeeded educationally and in my profession, and have really pushed to succeed. And my cousins who stayed there have not. Yet their parents are very driven to do the best that they can, and so forth. So I would have been a very, very different person.

SIGRIST: Great! Mrs. Greene, thank you very much!

GREENE: Oh, you're very welcome!

SIGRIST: You've gone a full hour here.

GREENE: Oh, good!

SIGRIST: Let me just do the sign-off. This is Paul Sigrist signing off, with Diane Greene, on Friday, July 16th, 1999, with her friend Charles Austin in attendance. And we're in the Oral History Recording Studio. Thank you very much.

GREENE: Well, thank you!

END OF INTERVIEW