

EI-1098

MARY HOBBS

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LEVINE: --with Mary Hobbs, who's celebrating her ninetieth birthday here at Ellis Island. She came here first at a year and a half, in 1910, and was coming from Austria, and is ninety at the time of this interview. And this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. Okay, now please, your birth date, and where you were coming from?

HOBBS: My birthday, August the 5th, 1909, in Vienna, Austria.

LEVINE: Okay, and your father? Why don't you give his name, and tell a little bit about him?

HOBBS: My father was Louis Anton, A-N-T-O-N, Saghy, S-A-G-H-Y.

LEVINE: And that was your maiden name?

HOBBS: Yes. Now his father—I don't know. Now, his father was Cal Ladislaus Saghy. He married Barbara Budinski, B-U-D-I-N-S-K-I, of the Polish Royal

House. Of this marriage, there was an issue of seven children, my father being the youngest, the seventh child. As a young man, he served in the European Military for a brief period; it was compulsive. He then had visions of America. And three times he came to this country, and decided, "This will be my life." So he went to America. He established—he became, in his younger years, a cobbler, because of an affliction with his right hand. His parents did this. And then he went to an agricultural school, and then he came to America. He came and landed in Baltimore, Maryland. Well, no agriculture there right now, so he opened up a shoe shop, and he repaired shoes, and he made shoes to order. Now, he sent for my mother, who in the mean time had been deported because her passport was in arrears. And the reason for this: my aunt and uncle who lived in Baltimore were her sponsors. They sent her the first class ticket for her to come here, but her brother Stephen, who lived in New York, said, "Why don't I go to Ellis Island and pick her up? It would be easier." He went to Ellis Island when the boat docked. When he could not show his sponsorship papers, my mother's passport was stamped "Deport." She was sent back on the ship. Now the Captain said, "Please stay on board ship. You will be taken care of, and so will your child be taken care of, for life, and will get a good education. However, there is one stipulation. After your child is born, it is to be named Bremen, after the ship." My mother didn't even ponder this; she said no. She wanted me to be born in America. Well, it so happened there wasn't time for America. So she went back to Vienna to be with her mother-in-law, and she stayed there, well, I was a good year old, and then my father sent for her and me. And that's how she came through Ellis Island to the United States. And that's how I got here! [Laughs]

LEVINE: Okay, would you give your mother's name, and her maiden name?

HOBBS: Her name? Oh, I didn't say that! Marie Kokron, K-O-K-R-O-N, and marriage name Saghy. And she was born in Czechova [PH], Hungary. That is a city or town next to Budapest. So she came to America, and always she would remind me of [unclear], and tell me different little things. There were, and always I was called by my Hungarian name, Marishka [PH].

LEVINE: Okay, now did you live in Vienna for the whole time before you came here?

HOBBS: Yes.

LEVINE: And did you have grandparents that you knew?

HOBBS: Oh, yes, Grandmother Barbara Budinski Saghy. She was a midwife. And the grandfather I never knew; he deceased.

LEVINE: Did you have—did you, well, you wouldn't remember your grandmother quite, because—did she come to this country, too?

HOBBS: She came to this country when Russia—this was when Russia was having a bad time. They stormed into her house. They had an estate; they were landowners. They came into her house, and told her, “Out!” And she had to go out with just the clothes on her back. In the mean time, she got in touch with her daughter Gladys, who married Joseph Rossman, and she, and Gladys Rossman sent for my grandmother. She was seventy-two years old when she came through Ellis Island.

LEVINE: Do you know what year that might have been, roughly, when the Russians forced her out, and then she came here?

HOBBS: I guess, 1920. I guess they were having the bad time at 1820.

LEVINE: Were you about ten or eleven years old, do you think, when she came?

HOBBS: Yes, I was.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

HOBBS: I guess around 1925, I'll put it that way.

LEVINE: Okay.

HOBBS: Okay.

LEVINE: Now, your father, you said your father came here—

HOBBS: First.

LEVINE: --first. And he—do you know why he wanted to come to America?

HOBBS: He had traveled through Europe, and went to different countries. Incidentally, he spoke seven languages, [laughs] so he got along! And then he tried America. He liked it. And he tried it again; he liked it better. And the third time he said, “This is it. This will be my life.”

LEVINE: Do you--?

HOBBS: But he didn't come through Ellis Island. He came through the port of Baltimore, and at that time it was on Ford Avenue and Locust Street.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

HOBBS: And so he continued with his shoe business, but then he went to the suburbs and bought a plot of ground, and he went to his agricultural, and a beautiful

garden! And there were six children. I was the oldest. And always he called me Marishka, always. And my sister was Irene. And my oldest brother was [Hungarian], for Louis. And then Stephan, Willem, and Imray [PH]. And I grew up in a ethnic neighborhood. Every house was a different nationality, and each child spoke their own [laughs] individual language! But we went to school; we learned English. And when we left the house to play or something, we became Americans. We spoke English.

LEVINE: What did you speak in the home?

HOBBS: German. Always German. In Europe, the central Europe nations, they all spoke German: Austria-Hungary, Czech, Serb—they all spoke German except Russia [laughs]. But to this day I speak German. We're the ones that can still speak it! And I have one brother left, and we lapse into German. And, but it was a nice childhood.

LEVINE: Were you a religious family?

HOBBS: Pardon?

LEVINE: Were you a religious family?

HOBBS: Oh, yes! Oh, yeah, Catholisch [PH], Catholic. We made our first communion, confirmation, yes. Yes, we were Catholics.

LEVINE: Now, can you think of some traditions or cultural ways that your mother and father kept of the old country when they were here?

HOBBS: Well, the cooking.

LEVINE: What was that like?

HOBBS: The cooking? Like goulash! [Laughs] Or paprikash, and stuffed cabbage made with sauerkraut, and maybe—and stuffed peppers. And my mother made noodles from scratch! I can still see her rolling that dough, and it would be as big as this table here. And she would drape it over something so it could dry a little bit, so she could roll it up and then cut it. And we lived off of our garden. I did not know what a canned or a frozen food was. And she baked strudel, yeah. Also, she was very talented at embroidery or needlepoint, and she used to work for stores in Baltimore, like Herschel Cohen's. She would sew these tapestries for thirty-five dollars! And she taught me how to embroider. Not the cooking—I didn't show no interest! [Laughs]

LEVINE: How about attitudes? Where there any attitudes that your mother tried to instill in you? Things that she wanted you to live by, or how she wanted you to be?

HOBBS: How she wanted me to be? She—whenever something would come up that was like, lifting something heavy, she would say, “Not Marishka, she’s too little,” like that. Always I was too little! [Laughs] She was a very, very good person, very.

LEVINE: What was her temperament? What kind of--?

HOBBS: Very good. She was soft. Now, that Hungarian temperament of my father’s, once in a while, would flare up! But he was emotional, too, but he loved his children. I know he did, for what he did! One day he called us all out. He said, “Sit on the steps here,” the back porch steps. And he went into the corn patch, and he broke off ears of corn, and came back with an armful of corn, and he made a fire. First he took some husks and laid them out, and then he laid the corn down, and roasted them. And I thought that was the best party! The best party! He did things like that. He would buy my sister and I presents. They sort of kept a little old-fashioned. When I went, I was still in the seventh grade, and had to wear high-top shoes. And my father said, “You have weak ankles.” And I never will forget the day he told my mother, “Get the girls ready,” and I got my first pair of Mary Janes! [Laughs] And I couldn’t have been happier! And the same way, we’re growing up, and I was sixteen, and I went to mother and I says, “Mom, I would like to go to this dance they are having out at Aryan Park.” [Laughs] She says, “I’ll ask your father.” Surprise, surprise! She says, “Yes,” and she made us dresses, pretty dresses! So we got dressed, my sister and I, but so did my father! And I thought, “Hmm.” Do you know, he chaperoned us! [Laughs] We were the only two girls who were chaperoned! [Laughs] But he led us to the dance floor, and he says, “All right, I’ll be out here with the men.” But he was strict, but he was good, yeah!

LEVINE: Now, how—you stayed in school? Did you go to high school?

HOBBS: I finished it in night school. I was, I graduated from grade school when I was thirteen. I was a pretty good student. And I got a job in a dime store, but I had to get it on a permit, because I was fourteen years old! So, I said, “This isn’t going to work out.” So time went by; I was seventeen. On my lunch hour from the May Company, I went to the Telephone Company, and asked if they needed help. They did, and I became a telephone operator.

LEVINE: Oh! What was it like being a telephone operator when you first started in [unclear]?

HOBBS: When I first started it was a large board. I guess you know what a switchboard is. We used plugs, and the headset was a heavy thing. You know, we had it on one ear. But I liked the job; it was nice. At that time, in 1928, they started you at thirteen fifty a week. But that was good pay! But I stayed there until I married.

LEVINE: And how did you meet your husband?

HOBBS: I met him on a train, commuting to work! [Laughs] But, in the mean time, I would not look at a foreign boy!

LEVINE: You wanted to marry an American?

HOBBS: Yes! Not only that, he had to be tall, blonde, and nice-looking! I got it! I got it when I married Littell Hobbs.

LEVINE: Littell, L-Y-D-E? His first name?

HOBBS: No, it's L-I-T-T-E-L-L.

LEVINE: What was it you liked about him? His looks, and what about his personality?

HOBBS: I saw in him something different that I didn't see in the foreign boys or men. Foreign men are very tight on their purse. And he was good-natured. He was fun! And we had three children.

LEVINE: And their names?

HOBBS: And then I had two boys, and my daughter Mary Lou. She had to be Mary Lou for my mother and father. She graduated from college. She's doing well.

LEVINE: And what were your sons' names?

HOBBS: The oldest son, Littell, and the youngest, George.

LEVINE: And who is the one that's here with you today?

HOBBS: Littell. Littell. He used to be kidded about that name when he was little, so when he was little I used to call him Kleine. It means little one in German. My mother and father always called him Kleine. [Laughs] One day, years later, one of his friends said to me, "You know, I didn't know his name was Kleine!" [Laughs] I said, "No, it's just a sweet little name in German."

LEVINE: Kleine. What are some of the things that don't exist any longer, that you can remember about your early life? Things that have kind of gone away to be replaced, I suppose, by other things?

HOBBS: Commuting to work by train—that vanished. I was a little, couple years, not to be a flapper, and I wanted to be one! [Laughs] And what else? Oh, things like in my working days when I started, I had to type, and the shorthand. I went to night school for this. And spelling, and arithmetic, and English! And then it graduated to Dictaphone. Well, the Dictaphone went out, and now we're doing it on the computer. That has changed. And sometimes where we lived in the suburbs, from the distance in the evening or at night I would hear the train whistle go by. I don't hear it now! It used to be such a comforting sound! But I had a nice childhood.

LEVINE: Can you recall your childhood? What was it like, growing up in Baltimore as a child? Can you recall the neighborhood?

HOBBS: Yes, in South Baltimore. I then started school at Holy Cross. It's a Catholic school, and they spoke German, yeah. And my father was strict in this sense: we could not go out on the steps, front steps, where we lived. No. Very careful who came to visit us, even who played with us. But children think their parents are strict, but he really meant it for the good of us. And people, the ladies now don't sew anymore. I still do needlework [laughs] that my mother, dear mother, showed me how to embroider. And people don't do that anymore. I dabble in ceramics, even tried an art course one time! [Laughs]

LEVINE: How would you describe yourself as a little girl, growing up? What kind of a child were you?

HOBBS: Very active. I was athletically inclined. Like one Christmas, my brother got a wagon and a horse. My sister and I got a doll. I put the doll on the [laughs]—on the bureau, and went for my brother's horse and wagon. I was very athletic. I was Captain of my dodgeball team, and I was a pitcher on the softball team. I just loved sports! I won a bronze medal one year, and promptly lost it! [Laughs]

LEVINE: Did you do things to try to be more American? Was that something that you worked at?

HOBBS: No, I automatically fell right in with it. I had American friends, and you just fall into their pattern, and you do it their way. But my father said, "This is my country; this is our country." He never—or never did my mother ever say they wanted to go back—never!

LEVINE: Did they become citizens?

HOBBS: Yes. Yes, incidentally, during World War Two, everybody who was born in Europe had to register, to be fingerprinted. So I took my mother and father down, and they were fingerprinted. And the clerk says, "Where were you born?" I says, "Vienna, Austria." He said, "Get in line." So I had to be fingerprinted! And then I had to get books. I got so many books on American history! I wanted to be a citizen. This was terrible! That was really a shock to me, but so I went and applied for citizenship, and I worked at it, and I studied. So the big day came for me to pass the test, and the question was—to this day I'm surprised! He said, "When is Labor Day?" All that book reading! All that studying! And when is Labor Day? I said, "First Monday in September." He said, "You made it."

LEVINE: That was the only question?

HOBBS: That was the only question! They must have seen how hard I tried—I really did! I wanted to be a citizen, because I thought, "Who knows, maybe I'll work for the government, and I would have to be a citizen." That was my thinking.

END OF SIDE A

BEGIN SIDE B

LEVINE: --mother and father, and were you, nationalistic? I mean, were you people who put out the flag, or those kinds of things?

HOBBS: The American flag?

LEVINE: Yeah.

HOBBS: Yes, yes. Yeah, my father loved this country. He loved it!

LEVINE: So did he feel a little bit slighted, or, having to be fingerprinted during World War Two? Do you know what his attitude was?

HOBBS: No, he didn't think nothing of it. He said, "If that's the way you have to do it, you have to do like they do in Rome. Have to do it." He was great; he knew how to go through things.

LEVINE: And how about your grandmother when she came over? How did she like it here, and what was it like for her?

HOBBS: Well, I was surprised to see her. I expected to see a gray-haired lady, but it wasn't so. She had dark hair, dark eyes, and she was a midwife. And to her end of her days, she wore her symbol of midwife, and that was a little caplet on the top of her head, that she was a professional!

LEVINE: But she didn't do midwifery here?

HOBBS: No.

LEVINE: But she still—oh, that's funny!

HOBBS: But she still held on to that belief, of wearing that symbol.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Now how about English? Did your mother and father master the language, would you say?

HOBBS: Oh, our father was very, very quick at it. And every day, my mother, after dinner, would get the newspaper. Her and my Aunt Rose, the same way. They learned like that, they really learned! Well, you see all kinds of words in the newspaper. But sometimes in her fractured English, I would laugh, you know! [Laughs] But she learned English, yeah.

LEVINE: And how about you as the oldest child? Did certain responsibilities fall to you, being the oldest one?

HOBBS: No.

LEVINE: And were you kind of a go-between? I mean, I assume you learned English very rapidly, as a child does.

HOBBS: Yes, yeah.

LEVINE: And then did you kind of interpret, or did you act on behalf of your parents in any ways?

HOBBS: I can tell you one thing they did: if they didn't want us to hear anything, they talked in Hungarian. And but any other time, it was German. We spoke always German in the house. My father chose German because he said, "You've got to have some kind of an education." So we spoke German. Until the end of their time, we always spoke German.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Do you remember the house you lived in when you were little?

HOBBS: Yes, I do, yeah! It was a country house, and he was, oh, he could landscape a garden! And he made a porch, but I used to follow him when he was planting seeds to see what he was doing, and how he was doing it. So he

made us a porch, I called it. He put up posts, and then he planted grapevines. And all this grew up, and then over that, and I used to love to sit under that porch, his grape arbor porch!

LEVINE: And did your mother put up grapes?

HOBBS: Oh, what she put up! Oh, our basement! Jars and jars of things. We never ate anything that didn't grow in our garden. Never. My brother Steve once says, "[Unclear], they all get sick now." I said, "Steve, we had good food!" We did! And for the winter, my father would dress two pigs, and get a side of beef. And we had a big pantry, and my mother used to go in there and just cut off what she needed, you know.

LEVINE: Would they be smoked? How would they be preserved?

HOBBS: Oh, yeah, he had a smokehouse, too!

LEVINE: Oh, talk about that. Do you remember the smokehouse?

HOBBS: Oh, yeah, I remember the smokehouse. You better not open that door while that smoke was on! Oh, yeah! [Laughs] Oh, he made the best sausage! [Laughs] They were so proficient people! It's so different. That's what's so different about life now. You don't wait to have it handed to you; you go out and do it! And he instilled that in us. Every one of us became gardeners. Yeah, I love to garden, yeah.

LEVINE: So you were in Baltimore, but it was country, country, where you lived? It was more country than city, would you say?

HOBBS: No, Baltimore was city.

LEVINE: But were you in the city? Were you living in the city itself?

HOBBS: Yes, yes, in South Baltimore, Ford Avenue. But my father didn't like that. I think I was about five years old when we moved into the suburbs, and then we stayed there. They couldn't take that house to house living! [Laughs]

LEVINE: Now, were your mother and father part of any social groups?

HOBBS: No! No, not really. They were home people, always with their children—always.

LEVINE: What kinds of things can you remember doing as a family when you were growing up?

HOBBS: Oh, Christmas time was nice.

LEVINE: How did you celebrate it?

HOBBS: They—sometimes they made something called wine soup? No, that was for New Year's. Christmas, holiday thing. And she would make nut cake. She would bake bread, not in little loaves! It would be as long as this, and as wide as this.

LEVINE: Oh, my goodness! About two feet!

HOBBS: Oh, that was so good! And we'd all say, "Mom, can I have the heel?" [Laughs] Oh, wonderful days! Oh, she was a good cook! Oh, just think: six children and two adults. I used to notice after we left for school she'd start cooking. Start cooking. Yeah, good.

LEVINE: When you think of your German heritage, or Austrian-Hungarian heritage, how do you think about that as far as you the person? What part does that play in who you are?

HOBBS: It—I sort of feel like I have some kind of a kinship there. Although my father, I never heard him once say anything about the aristocracy. He didn't want no part of that, hm-mm. And from what I hear, and how he had it, they had a nice estate, and he wanted no part of it.

LEVINE: Now he would have grown up in that estate, is that right?

HOBBS: Yes.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, but he made his own way?

HOBBS: Yes, yeah.

LEVINE: And how about the high and low points of your life? Is there anything that you would mention as being particularly satisfying in your lifetime, or the opposite?

HOBBS: My happy times was when I could dance! I loved to dance. I even danced at my graduation, that's how I loved it so! And I really wanted to dance, so I wrote to a producer on Broadway. I was seventeen! And I told him I was interested in dancing, and that I think I would work out, and would I hear from him? I came home from work one day. I was at the telephone company. My father waves a letter in front of me. He says, "What is this?" I said, "What is what?" He said, "Who, who is this guy from Broadway?" He answered my letter! What he said, I don't know, because my father tore it up! He says, "You are not going on the stage." He nipped that. But I wanted to go so bad! I just wanted to dance! [Laughs]

LEVINE: Was dancing a big part of your life? I mean, did you go to dances?

HOBBS: Not really. Oh, again, I did want to go to the dance, and my father was chaperone! And then we went. But I had fun, even though he went along. I had fun. It was nice to be with young people, you know [laughs]. My sister and I got used to it, yeah. If that's the way our mother and father is, what can we do? Not my mother, she was more lenient, yeah. [Laughs] We could sort of get around her. But the low point? When death would come to the family. That. Although I didn't cry or carry on, but it hurts. And that's the low point. Outside that, I had a very nice childhood. It was ethnic, but it was American, too! So I grew up with a dual, I won't say personality. It didn't change me like that. But, but that's how it was. All our ethnic playmates were the same way.

LEVINE: Yeah, you mixed with a whole lot of different nationalities?

HOBBS: French, Croats, Lithuanians, Polish. Every house was a different nationality. But us kids, we got used to it.

LEVINE: Would you go to play in the houses of other families?

HOBBS: We could not go to nobody's house, but they could come to ours. But we could not go out of our house or yard.

LEVINE: Now how about the mothers? Did they mix? In other words, were they learning how to cook goulash if they were Italian? In other words, was there much intermingling in that way?

HOBBS: If one had a certain recipe that they did, and they didn't make, they would ask for it, or how you did it. And, but most—most of them could cook all ways, anyway! My mother didn't bother much about—what was it? Roast beef. I don't think she bothered much with that. We had veal a lot, and we did have some beef. Sow, we had. Goose for Christmas. That's nice—that was nice! [Laughs] Not for the goose! But every—these people, these fine people, just seemed to know how to do it, or what to do with it! And we would pick up parts of their language, you know. And it was nice. I really had a nice childhood. I'm glad I grew up like that, glad. It was a little hectic in the beginning! [Laughs]

LEVINE: That's your daughter-in-law. Wait, we're going to pause here [unclear].

HOBBS: You're going to have to put all this together some how, huh?

LEVINE: Well, what we do is, we don't edit the tapes. And I'm going to copy this, and send you a cassette tape, so you can play it on any standard recorder.

HOBBS: Oh!

LEVINE: And it will be here for your children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren!

HOBBS: Isn't that something!

LEVINE: And I'll show you the library where we will be having your tape. And we get researchers from all over the world! They come and they use this material. So your story, your voice, will be here at Ellis Island. And then if you send pictures or anything else, we'll keep in a folder with your name on it, so if a researcher got interested in your interview, they would have access to that.

HOBBS: Where would I send the pictures?

LEVINE: I'm going to give you my card, and you can send them there. And also, when I send you the tape, I'll send you also the [unclear].

HOBBS: All right.

LEVINE: Okay, well let's just think if there's anything else, reflecting back. Did your mother and father ever talk about Ellis Island, that you can recall?

HOBBS: No, she only told me about the time when the Captain once said, have me named Bremen, and—

LEVINE: Now she was pregnant when she first came, and then was sent back?

HOBBS: Yes, yes.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Yeah. And let's see. Is there anything else that you can think of, that has been of satisfaction to you in this country?

HOBBS: It has been a great satisfaction. I, as a young immigrant, and just out of school, I was able to work, or get a job at different places, like the telephone company. My nationality didn't come into question. It was my ability. And I did pretty good there, until I met a certain [laughs] someone! But this country lets you do [coughs]. You can do it here. And there's no word like can't. I had someone ask me, "What did you do?" when I was in the hospital with my knee a few weeks ago. She said, "What did you do to attain your age?" I thought about it, and I said, "I never felt sorry for myself." And still don't. I was always glad that I had parents. I was glad I had brothers and sisters. I was glad for all of these things. But then, isn't that what life is for? It's not just for money! But, I think I've been a happy person most of my life. And I like happy people around me! [Laughs]

LEVINE: And how is this time, this time when you're no longer working?

HOBBS: That I miss. I miss not working, but—but age comes to you. And I accepted it; I still accept it. Imagine living to my age, ninety! You know, I'm the only one in my family that has attained that so far. All the others that have gone have gone earlier, even my sister at sixty-eight—the only sister. And, but most of my life has been happy. And this country gave me a chance.

LEVINE: I think that's a beautiful place to end.

HOBBS: Yes.

LEVINE: Thank you so much.

HOBBS: It did. It did give me a wonderful chance! It's so nice meeting you. I told my daughter-in-law, I said, "I'm being treated like a star!" [Laughs]

LEVINE: Well, this is your birthday celebration!

HOBBS: Everyone has been so nice!

LEVINE: Okay, well, I'm signing off here. I've been speaking with Mary Hobbs, who came here at a year and a half, in 1910, from Austria, and is ninety. It is her ninetieth birthday today, and this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service, at Ellis Island, signing off.

END OF INTERVIEW