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IDA BERZINS

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RESIDENCES:

- **LATVIA: SELNE**
- **THE US: BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS**

LEVINE: Today is October 6, 1999. I'm here in Bradford, New Hampshire with Ida Berzins who came here from Latvia when she was 35 years old in 1951. This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. Okay, if you would start at the beginning and tell me your name when you were born and when you were born.

BERZINS: I am Ida Berzins. I am born April 26, 1916, and I'm born in Latvia.

LEVINE: The name of the town where you were born?

BERZINS: Selne.

LEVINE: How would you spell that?

BERZINS: S-E-L-N-E, that's all.

LEVINE: Oh, [seal in a]

BERZINS: Selne

LEVINE: And did you live in Selne until you left Latvia?

BERZINS: I did live and I was there as a kid. I went to school there and I went to college, to Daugavpils Teacher's College, but when I start to work then I went to different places for the job. But summers usually, I came to my parent's farm and enjoyed summer and helps them, this all kind farm work. And was healthy living there because there was lake and there was plenty room. We had to help parents. Any time we could. It was physical work. Was tiring, but that builded us strong and healthy. That later on in my life that survive, make me survive. Healthy physically and mentally too. Because was very, very healthful, very good surroundings and my parents they have real nice family.

LEVINE: Now was your family's farm in Selne?

BERZINS: Selne was off that town, that was far of that town. About six, seven miles off that village. But we used to go to school over there to Selne. We left in school days. We were left for a whole week there. We lived in one room. Quite a few girls were in one room and we did our cooking ourselves. We did get also later on somebody did prepare food for us, but we shared everything. And sometimes we didn't have so much food

in beginning of week, and sometimes we ran out food by end of the week (she laughs).

LEVINE: Now is this where you lived or where you went to school.

BERZINS: Went to school.

LEVINE: So you learned cooking in school?

BERZINS: Yes, they held cooking classes in school, too. And we had all kind of crafts we learn and how to make socks, how to make mittens. And when I was about third grade, when we had all kind of knitting to do. And teacher ask what would I like to knit. And I said, I like to knit gloves. All right, she said. That is complicated job. Of course it was very complicated. You have to make five fingers. And I did start up the fingers, but later on I could not figure out so my mother had to finish my gloves (she laughs).

LEVINE: You were in third grade after all.

BERZINS: It was just kid to start big project. And all kind other things, I like to start, but I didn't have very much patience evidently. Then, was very fashion to by that time to have long, linen towels. And at the end of towels we did put embroideries, all kind design, whatever, or lace. So I decide to make one of beautiful towels. Was big, big dai, sunflower design on each end. So that start everything nice and beautiful. I like so much, but the project was too hard for kid (she laughs). And I never finished. And later on, I was, oh, everybody was teasing me. My big brothers they kept asking, guys ask when you finish that towel, then we'll marry you! (laughs)

LEVINE: What was your mother's name?

BERZINS: Wilhelmina.

LEVINE: And her maiden name?

BERZINS: Saleks, S-A-L-E-K-S

LEVINE: And what was your mother's.. mother like? What her personality like when you were a little girl growing up? What kind of a temperament did she have?

BERZINS: Mother was very happy person. And ah, whatever she did, she did sing. We had lot of singing in my house. Mother used to make dresses for us. And she was sitting at sewing machine and there was singing. And she was singing in all language she knew. Some German songs, some Russian songs, some Latvian songs. And was very nice. Everything was written in one big, big like book. She did write herself out it. Too bad I don't have that. That was very interesting. And that was how we learned to sing very early. And girls, my sister and me, were singing all day long like my mother. Some days father said, could you shut up girls, for a while! (They laugh)

LEVINE: What was your father's name?

BERZINS: Peter.

LEVINE: Peter. And what was he like? What kind of a temperament did he have?

BERZINS: My father was, was very serious. Was very serious person. Evidently when he was very young he had, he had poor health. He had TB. But his brother was vet doctor, veteran doctor, and somehow he knew how to

treat it. My father was treated by his brother vet, and he was, he had good health by end of his life.

LEVINE: Do you know how he treated it? At that time...

BERZINS: Some, something from, I don't know what did he make, but something to do with pines. Like a pine tea. I don't know what really he did, but he really did good job.

LEVINE: So were you the oldest child?

BERZINS: I was oldest one yes. I was oldest one.

LEVINE: And you had a sister? And did you have anyone else?

BERZINS: Ya, ya. We had two brothers too. And when I start to grow up and go to dance, I feel so bad because I don't have elderly brother. And my sister did have two brothers when she went somewhere her age, to for dance, she had two brothers to accompany her. And I was always jealous about that. That my sister was so fortunate that she had two brothers (she laughs) to take her dance.

LEVINE: Oh, I see. So it would be traditional for the brothers to accompany you when you go...

BERZINS: But once was really, really funny story. I was already out of college. And I did have a lot of colleagues and a lot of young people who went to military school, cadet school. And summers they used to come to Daugavpils for summer trainings. So I was invited for dance. And of course it was so tempting to go, to dance with all those cadets. Was real tempting. So I said, "Ma, could you let me... Never! Never! Never!" I

say, then I start to ask my brother. He was much younger than I am. Eh, he says, all right, I'll go with you. (reluctantly) So he went to the dance. Of course, I had great time. Was asked to dance from one person to other person, I had real great time. Poor, my little brother was sitting somewhere and he felt so sad. And he said, my dear sister, I'll never do that again. (glumly) (they laugh) Was real good one.

LEVINE: Okay. So, let's see, when you first started working, doing chores on the farm, you were about eight years old, you mentioned earlier. So what did an eight year old do? What kind of chores were you given to do at that early age?

BERZINS: I did not have much choice. You have to start to work (she laughs) about age eight. That was very, very hard time. I could not get up early in the morning. About five o'clock in the morning you have to get... Take care of our herd, you know, cows and, and sheeps, and, and pigs. And ah, was everything all right nice days, but when start to rain, that was so bad. And I was so lonely, I did want to go and play with other kids. By then I start to pull out with me my younger brother. And he was much younger (she laughs). He was about three, four years younger. I don't remember any more. So we did have good time. We sat down, start to play and forgot our job.

LEVINE: Now, what was your job?

BERZINS: To watch cows. Make sure cows don't go in one field or other field, or neighbor's properties. And few times happened just stopped our games and we did not have any (laughing) cows around. And here comes neighbors with all cows. He said, if you ever do that again, I'll punch myself. (laughs) Then I went to library, pick up some books to read. And one day I was sitting reading books and suddenly I had to turn the

other cow back and by the time I came back, my book was in bull's mouth. (She's laughing heartily) Bull ate my book from library. Ah, gosh, I had to admit librarian how that bull ate my book. (laughs)

LEVINE: What else. How about religion? Was your family religious when you were young?

BERZINS: Yes. My family, especially mother. We used to go to Evangelish Lutheran. And used to drive by horses, you know, didn't have real cars those days around at all. And we went, especially holidays was beautiful. Then we went to my grandmother's house after church service, and was Christmas tree and we had to do, go all kinds, play games whatever, show something we learned in school, that we had to give some entertainment there. Then we did get candy, didn't get much presents. Did not have any. Don't remember. I think I had in my life just one doll mother made for me. That's all.

LEVINE: What was the doll like? What did it look like?

BERZINS: That was rag doll. Made of rags. Ya. That was only doll I had.

LEVINE: When you celebrated Christmas or Easter, was there a lot of festivity?

BERZINS: Yes. Especially now for holidays, we did prepare lot, a lot of food. We celebrate Christmas, we celebrate three days. First day was like breakfast at homes and was all kind of traditional food, then we went to church and usually then we went to my Grandmother's house after then. There we stayed overnight. We all stayed overnight there. And ah, Christmas Eve we did held Christmas, big celebrations. It was usually Christmas tree lit up, and we sang songs. And in my college years I remember we did held Christmas tree in my house, Christmas

celebration. And my girlfriend came from college too, and we sang. We sang and we really knew how to sing then! And I never saw somebody's face so happy as my father and mother. They were so happy seeing younger generation growing up. Be happy.

LEVINE: What would be some of the traditional foods that you would have at this time?

BERZINS: One very traditional, ham and sauerkraut and baked potatoes. And then we'd get that like jelled meat. That was very good too. And [rasal, rasal] was made from different kind. Like beets and pickles and some eggs and all mixed up with this sour cream. That was real good. And ah, of course, and bacon. We did make Latvian pierogies. Pierogies was like dough made and filled up with ham inside, and baked nice and brown, crispy, with these fillings. And then all kinds of pastries. Some were very simple. Some were kind of complicated. And cookies. We had to bake cookies ahead of time. We had to make at least like bucketful, or two buckets of cookies. Homemade. Gingerbread cookies. Tiny, little cookies. And it was hard to make them (she laughs). It took a long time. So... Different kinds of cookies.

LEVINE: Were you taught how to make cookies and how to cook when you were very young?

BERZINS: Ya. We started as kids. Mother made, we had to do too. That's why when my grandchildren come to my house. We did make for Christmas, stories, with my great granddaughters. I had two sons. So I did not have daughters myself. But with my great granddaughters. We make all those. Pierogies. And sometimes we make cookies and they love to come to do that with me. And they now, they have the recipe, and they now make them themselves now. I remember once my great

granddaughter Cassandra came over and she said, okay, I have to get a recipe in my school. They want to have ethnic foods in school and we have to make for each one at least one of those pierogie. So we worked all together, including my granddaughter, great granddaughter and made this stuff for whole class. (She laughs.)

LEVINE: Now, do you remember experiences with your grandmother when you were growing up?

BERZINS: Yes.

LEVINE: What do you remember about being with her?

BERZINS: She was very, very old fashioned lady. When she came in with carriage, sitting in carriage and we had to come over, to run over and kiss her hand. Oh, my god! I did not like to do that! And that was old tradition from their age. So we get to kiss grandmother's hand. I say, oh, my gosh, I don't like to do that. All right. I did it for a while. And later on, I ask her, Vatsma, can I kiss instead of hand, can I kiss your cheek? (Laughs).

LEVINE: What did she say?

BERZINS: She said, all right, all right. I understand. You are big girl now, you are in college. You don't want kiss grandmother's hand anymore (laughing). This starts and everybody stops kissing hand. That was old tradition from maybe now hundred years old back.

LEVINE: Were there any other traditions that your grandmother kept up that you can recall?

BERZINS: Ya. She want all us to be very friendly between me and sister. I thought my sister such a beautiful girl. Ah, and I said, ah, my sister is so beautiful, it makes me jealous. She said, don't be jealous. You are beautiful too. You are just each one different beauty, you have. She did calm down. That was very wise ways of saying, really. You are sisters. You have each one, little different, but you are still all, both are beautiful and you love each other and don't be jealous.

LEVINE: Uh, huh. Uh, huh.

BERZINS: That's my grandmother. Did you have sister?

LEVINE: Yes. Uh, huh.

BERZINS: Did you have such a feeling?

LEVINE: Yeah. Yeah. Right. Yeah.

BERZINS: (laughs)

LEVINE: Now is this your mother's mother?

BERZINS: My mother's mother.

LEVINE: And did you know your father's mother too?

BERZINS: No, she had passed away when my father was very, very little boy. And then his father did get married to somebody else and his stepmother was very bad to, to my father. He had hard time, really. He , those hurts at a very early age. Running around in almost bare feet, especially cold fall days and that's how he ruined his health.

LEVINE: Yeah. Yeah. Okay, now anything else about where you lived? Could you describe the house you lived in when you were growing up?

BERZINS: Ah, that was farm. I remember, I don't remember when my parents moved to that farm. But my father owned once before, he owned store.

LEVINE: What kind of a store was it?

BERZINS: That was variety store. And ah, and then he got money and he bought, he bought a farm. And ah, during change of a different regimes, Russian regime, Tzar regime, and Latvian regime, in the store people coming, ah, please we need some sugar, could you give? We'll pay you later. My father used to give to people and he never did get paid back. So he lost his store and mother was so angry. She said, you are poor businessman. So he had to return to, come back to farm. I was very young, I don't remember how they came. But farm was in bad shape. He bought that farm, our neighbor did have a huge farm. So half of that land, he sold to my father. And of course, this part was much, needed much work. And my neighbor, our neighbor kept the best part of farm. He get very good soil and everything was perfect. But, we had to work so hard to get up, to build it up, that farm, you know. I remember that clay sometimes was in, and they bounced like rocks and pieces you know, and we have to go and hit with sticks to get all nice and soft. And was really very good [?], we worked so hard. I was working hard.

LEVINE: What kind of things was your father growing?

BERZINS: We grow all kinds of crops like beet and rye and linen. Linen was very much in demand at that time because then we did have a whole bunch of

factories that made linen fabrics, linen clothes. Linen did good. Then grew some animals just to sell them.

LEVINE: The cows, and pigs.

BERZINS: Ya. Cows. Pigs. Special pigs you know. Used to take to market and sell them.

LEVINE: And what did the house look like that you lived in?

BERZINS: The house was, let's say, like remind of duplex a little bit. One end, one huge room. At other end, another big room and in the middle was like [] the house took another area. And that area was like dining room, separately, and kitchen. And all was log house. And since I remember first we did have straw roof. Later on was replaced. And my parents came in and they start garden. They planted apple trees and pear trees and my mother made all kind berries, berry bushes. And garden was great. We liked those apples. Especially early in the morning in the fall. We ran out. There were special ones, very good kind of apples. They were so sweet, and so big and light. Early in morning whoever gets first gets on the ground, pick up those nice apples. They can fall from tree when they were ripe already. And they were so delicious. Another tree was very tiny apples. And very sweet. They never had chance to get ripe because we ate as soon as they get sweet. (They laugh.)

LEVINE: Well, before we leave your life before, your early life, do you think you could, would you want to sing any of the songs that your mother used to sing, that you and your sister would sing when you were a little girl? Can you remember any in particular?

BERZINS: (softly) I don't know. I don't recall. I cannot recall whatever. But I remember one.

LEVINE: Maybe what you sang around Christmas even?

BERZINS: Christmas songs too. No. Christmas songs that were traditional songs like "Oh, Christmas, Oh, Christmas Tree." It goes in all languages. German. Latvian. English. And lately even translate in English too. But ah...

LEVINE: Did you mother have a favorite that she used to sing a lot?

BERZINS: I cannot recall. It's a long time ago (she laughs). That song, about little teddy bear... (sings softly, sweetly a song in Latvian) That about bear. They went pick up some, they began to pick some honey, mother, berries and little teddy bear had to sleep. And they came back, they said all set for little teddy bear because he was sleeping so nice and quietly, all that honey and berries for little one. By the end, all they grew big and nobody cuddles them or cuddles them, and nobody, I don't how to tell, nobody took very great care of little bears and they still grew up big and strong (she laughs).

LEVINE: Ah, that was beautiful. Thank you. Now also, while you were in Latvia, what was happening as far as... You were born during the first World War. Can you just say what happened in the country and how it affected you and your family as far as...

BERZINS: War.

LEVINE: War.

BERZINS: First World War we did not see exactly battle fields. But I remember they used, once I remember a group of soldiers, Latvian soldiers, freedom fighters came to our parents house. And ah, I remember they took our little cow. And they went over the bridge over the stream and I was running by and crying, why you take my little cow? Why you take my little cow? Little cow? And mother came out and she said, that's okay, kid, we'll get another one. But they need that little cow because they were fighting for our freedom and they need some food. My mother explained me how I lost my little, little pal (she laughs). So I did calm down. But I don't remember anything else from that war.

LEVINE: From the first World War. And then how about the Second? Do you remember the build up to it and then what happened to you and your family?

BERZINS: Exactly about war right?

END SIDE A, TAPE 1

BEGIN SIDE B, TAPE 1

BERZINS: That was very horrible time. First of all, 1949, Russian occupied our country. And that was big shock to all of us.

LEVINE: You mean after the war? 1949?

BERZINS: Ya. 1949, you know. They came in.

LEVINE: That was '39. You mean?

BERZINS: Ah, '39, '39. Sorry.

LEVINE: Okay, yeah. Go ahead.

BERZINS: '39, yeah. Occupied our country. And that was just unbelievable.

Without any warnings about anything. Just beginning of song festival, in Dougoph, in suburbs. And somehow some kind there was a little gossip going like Russian troops are at the border. And so we did not know what will happen, but we were confident like our soldiers will fight and rest will be behind us. But, suddenly, you know, I was singing in that choir in the front line and, and suddenly we heard like Russians coming over, over border. We did not well, knew quite sure about that. But then, we expect that our person come. So woman comes over, then was announcement. He's not coming over. He's staying in capital city, Riga, because very important decisions he have to make. And then he said, ya, Russians came over border. And you know, all people, all public they get on their feet and was crying and singing that, our hymn, God Bless Latvia, [Dios Veti Latvi]. Oh, they sang three times that hymn, and everybody was crying. And there was an exhibit, and I was in charge of one crafts section there. Next day I went over, I get to be there, to see, to make sure, exchanging our people, don't stay too long on their feet. And, ya, they came in. They came by, and they said, (low voice), oh, boy, what a beautiful display here. And so we tried to explain, I knew Russian, explain that all the craft is done for people by hand, you know, they do at home. [Sure, what they will say.] (sighs) And, okay, and then that everything was taken down. And I stayed overnight in one lady's house and was scary. We didn't know what's going on. Look through the window, Russian troops are marching on streets. They led other people off to jail. Some people were in jail too. And everybody was yelling, Down with the Building! Down with that Building! That building was builded a few years ago -- like for theater for concerts. For public use. And [they lay building down to start building.] (She laughs.) Then somebody of those, Russian officers came over. Don't get the building down, she said. We can use that building too. Ah. (sighs) At that time, I

had one steady date for few years. And he was in like military service. He was cadet. So I went to stay with my nurse. She lives there in that fort. And everybody was gone. Did not know where they went. And so, I went in later and found out, oh, cadets they get to march from Daugavpils over to Riga. And he had to march.

LEVINE: So your boyfriend had left with the others.

BERZINS: Ya, ya. He was there and we did not anything of what did happen with those people. And later on, I get in contact, but... Did not survive anything. So that was the first start. Start to get involved. Latvian troops too. And there were recalled once there new cadets or officers to maneuver with Russians together as they was, later on I read in the paper like one line were the Russians and other one were Latvian officers. And on the count on three, Russians start to shoot and they shot all, all of them. All of them.

LEVINE: They shot all the Latvian soldiers.

BERZINS: Ya. As many as they could get at the time. Officers. Not regular soldiers, but officers. (sighs)

LEVINE: And they did that right in the town.

BERZINS: Outside, outside town. And that was later on a massive grave, you know there, somewhere. Ah...

LEVINE: So did you have German soldiers as well?

BERZINS: Yes. We did have German soldiers. Then ya, start the news. Listen, wasn't allowed to listen to radio, whatever, the Russians did not allow us,

because of political tension was between those two powers and we expect something to happen then. War between two of them. War, and German soldiers came in and Russian soldiers were kind of raggy you know, no manners. And German soldiers were brave and handsome (she laughs). So they did all right. And then was Latvia occupied from Germans again. And somehow, Germans were very wise (she laughs). They tried to organize Latvians Legion. And they, to fight against Russians. That was whole idea. To fight against Russians. Of course, a lot of people joined. A lot of people joined. But they actually were infiltrating us. Like who was left in service, you know, they would just change from uniform to other uniform. That how we did have that, sometimes brotherly fight.: Brother against brother. (whispers) [We were occupied.]

LEVINE: So there was the Latvian army, and then there were the Latvians who went with the German army, and then there were the Russians.

BERZINS: Ya, Russians took first, first they took over, over completely Latvian military. And they get like whoever was alive still, those officers. They get promotion, higher status. And everything was changed for Russian uniforms. Russian army. And of course, brother, people have to make decisions too, sometimes. Stay with Russians, stay with Germans. But since we had so bad experience with Russians, like departure and all this stuff, and lot of people, especially, they were out to educate people. They want destroy, first educate people. So when Germans came, lot of Latvian guys you know, in Russian army, escaped. They just did not follow to Russia. But some still did. Everybody could not escape. So we had some in there, some in there.

LEVINE: And then there were the freedom fighters. Were they still operating? The Latvian...?

BERZINS: They were actually, actually some Freedom Fighters were fighting all on, the very last. Some were hiding in the woods. Quite a story they had. Sleeping somewhere in little bunkers under trees. And get food. And farms, they came over in farms. But when Russians caught up somebody, you were dead. If somebody get, find out you are feeding those freedom fighters you are in big trouble. What the hell. Oh, I hope I never see that war again. I think I have pretty good hope (she laughs) not to see any more. Ah.

So when, okay, Germans took over, and Germans start to lose that war, so when Russians came closer, we decide to leave home. And that's all. They left. Left home, and went to safer part of country. And later on...

LEVINE: When did you leave? When did you leave your home?

BERZINS: About 1944.

LEVINE: And did your mother, your father...?

BERZINS: No. No. Father was passed away. But ah, we left the home. I was separate. I was married. I did not live with my mother. My sister was, she has real sad story too. My sister was with mother and her little girl. Between maybe I should tell my sister's story too.

LEVINE: Okay.

BERZINS: Ah, (sighs) she married. She did finish, she went to agriculture school. She finished her school, then she got married to a very wealthy farmer. He had some farm education, experience and that was very, very nice living. They have beautiful, beautiful farm. And very wealthy people too.

And that was (sighs) what year, 1943, I think. And that father, father-in-law, build building special for social life around. People had dancing and play, and concerts and everything. That was like first in town almost could see. And that was Christmas Eve. There was dancing. My sister went and her husband went over there. And then they came home. My sister was pregnant by that time. By the time they got ready, she changed for her nightie. And he's changing. Somebody knocked at the door. And ah, the husband Arthur, ask, who is that? German soldiers, but we did get lost. Could you tell us how to get to such and such a place? So he opened the door and he was shot. Shot in stomach. My sister heard the shot and she ran out naked. No nightie. Into snow. Deep. And then she hears somebody asking where is lady of the house? Where is lady of the house? And she did hide behind tree. To make sure they don't see her. Somebody looked around, did not see her. And then that person turned around and get back to other group. She ran. She ran two kilometers naked. And she stopped at one people's house who could open doors for her to get in. And they did not want to open doors because no one knows who's there. But then they let in and she was shock, completely. And they called her mother, and mother came and picked up her. And then they knew that husband was taken to the hospital. To Daugavpils. At the [] in kilometers by horse in the winter. So he was admitted to hospital. My sister went over to see him in the morning and he was operated, but he did not have chance to survive. So she came over, said hi to him, and she said good, you're still alive. (pauses, quietly) He passed away.

So, that was... They were, like come as groups. From Red Army and they were hiding in the woods from Germans and they came for food. Just get some food. And same day she lost husband, little girl Anna was born. On day. Because she was (sighs) physically so exhausted (sighs). Ah, helped my sister. So she was staying with my mother for a while. As

a refugee she was with my mother and little girl. And I was with my husband and my little guys too.

LEVINE: And you had a baby by then too?

BERZINS: Ya, I had little boy too.

LEVINE: So you married the cadet.

BERZINS: No. No. Never married.

LEVINE: So your mother and sister and your sister's little girl and your brothers -- they left the farm?

BERZINS: They left the farm too, but later on they were in legion, Latvian legion. So they were killed during war, two brothers. And of course sister's husband was dead, and all right. We did not know. We went each different direction because no telephone connections were there. I lost my mother, didn't know what had happened to them. But through the newspaper we found each other. So later on my mother was with me, my sister and sister's little girl. And ah, that was [Gunthis], my little boy and [Duus] was just born with us, just months old. And so we went by road towards Riga and did not know what to do. And stayed few nights. It was fall already, November, cold. So we had some people who knew that will happen. They said, we don't get any help from West. Everybody was hoping, get help from West and to fight fight. Another World War II, hey had to fight two enemies. Germans and Russians and get our freedom. They were after us again. So we did get chance to get on the ship and get to Germany. Ya. First, during that time, my husband was still with me. And German troops stopped and questioned why he's not in service. So he was questioned all the time. Once he was

questioned, second time, third time they said all right. You have choice. You run, escape from us, we'll shoot you. Or you join our fight against Russians. So they took him.

LEVINE: This was the German army?

BERZINS: Yeah. So he was in German.... That was nothing to do with German. It was Latvian Legion. So many historians don't know how that happened. How that happened all over the sense like that was German. No. That was not German. It was Latvian Legion and with all for Germans, they start organize that Legion. They start organize that legion. They said, you are not going to fight against West. You are going to fight against Red Regime. Because that was, they did not keep exactly so good (she laughs), promise. So and ah (sighs), last I saw him, we were landing the boat. He helped us to pack and young and handsome. Four years marriage.

LEVINE: And then he was taken off to the Legion and that was the last you saw of him.

BERZINS: Ya, I last saw him. And I will land on boat and he left. Left Riga.

LEVINE: How did you get to get on a boat? Was that difficult?

BERZINS: Ya. All right. We knew somebody who was actually in some kind of committee, what you say? Like one of highest officers and he helped us to get those tickets. Yeah, to get those tickets. That was kind of little help from outside. And [] one woman said, all right. Leave you his suit with you? I said, yes, I have his suit with me. Maybe he should go and hide somewhere on the boat and change for private. My gosh, we got so scared you know (she laughs). Change, drop his uniform and change for

private. But we would not get very far anyway. They get in trouble anyway who did that. (sighs) Ohhh. All right. Then he was in Legion. But he actually was not in active fighting. Because he knew languages. And they, they use him in the office as translator and, and all kind of other jobs, like distributing the food from one place to other. And ah, everything seems okay. He was there and we were in Germany.

LEVINE: Now, were you with your mother and your sister and her child and your son?

BERZINS: Ya, ya. With two boys. Two boys, I did have, two.

LEVINE: Oh, the two sons.

BERZINS: Ya. Two sons. And ah (sighs), on the way to Germany, once Russian fighter did spot our ship and definitely we were in danger. So that captain on the ship, he change his route. He change for Sweden, and made, thanks god, that's how survived. One refugee ship was drowned. Because the Russian ship threw bombs.

LEVINE: What was it like on the ship? On the refugee ship?

BERZINS: Oh, gosh it was horrible. (laughs chokingly). That was real.. we could not sleep, we could not eat, we could not do anything. Refugee ship was, I don't know if we had any, if somebody gave us food we had some food. My mother was real prepared for everything. We had big, big huge can of... slaughtered on pig. And then she fried it without onions, just a lot of salt and packed everything in and fastened the top. That, that was a real... very much, (she laughs) very heavy, we didn't like to drag that. She said, you have to do that girls. And that made us through our refugee time. We did get some food, they gave like bread. No butter, no stuff, no nothing. No real very good.

LEVINE: And so the ship was very crowded?

BERZINS: Yes, it was really packed, really packed. Like two, two, bunk beds there were and there were women with kids and widows with kids (laughs). But ah, we made it to shore and surprisingly, surprisingly, Germans were very, very good to refugees. First of all, when we get out, they get some kind, each one did get a cup and there was bouillon in. That was not real bullion, everything was artificial in Germany by that time. So we had something in our... Later on they gave us food. And we wait in line to get some food. There was some kind, like porridge, you know. And I remember some ladies were wearing hats and still like fancy, dressed up, and (in a high little voice) [our pig's head] (laughs) my mother said to one of them, all right, this is not time to complain. You are lucky you get something here. Then we ate whatever we had in that big can, little bit meat, little bit fat. We did pretty good. And then she saw one professor. Poor old guy. She said he was so skinny, probably all during these wars he never had enough food. She gave some food to that guy too. He was so appreciate, he was so happy. He was so happy getting some help (she laughs). People have feelings for somebody else. Ah, that guy.

LEVINE: Could you comment on that? What were people like? How did people react to other people and respond in such a situation. Like being refugees and fleeing the country? How did they treat each other?

BERZINS: I think some people were... Different kinds, different kinds. A few ladies, like they complained of bad food. Mother said, no, don't complain. Lucky you get something. Another side, if you would be refugees towards Russian you would not get nothing at all. And ah, Germans did organize everything really good. Very good. And when we did get out, you know, of that camp. And we stayed in one little village. We slept a whole bunch

of people slept, in one room. And ah, we were young, me and my sister and whole bunch of young people. We did not worry. But my mother, she cried her heart out. She cried her heart out. She said, you don't know what you are losing now. Maybe I didn't realize. Maybe was little adventure for us, we young people. But she said, we lost everything. She said, we lost our home, we lost our farm. We lost everything we have.

LEVINE: And by then you had lost your two brothers. Or you didn't know.

BERZINS: We did not know. For a long time, we did not know what had happened. And ahhh, (sighs) my mother cried. But we did not cry. Matter of fact, we were singing songs even. And ah, and kids did get sick. Kids did get sick. Little babies. They did not get ill really much at all. And one lady was very, very nice. She had kitchen in the village and prepared food for all of us. And she asked women with little kids to come over to the kitchen and if you like she gave something, something like milk, but there was something artificial. But they had very good artificial stuff. Something to feed kids. And one woman lost her little boy.

LEVINE: On the ship?

BERZINS: No. No. In the camp, in the camp already. So we managed to pull through that time.

LEVINE: And how long were you in the camp when you got to Germany?

BERZINS: I think that was, about, almost month. And then they sent us to farm, to [Heide], to that village Heide and to the farm. They put in one farm. I was there, another one was my sister, mother and little girl. My sister got to work in the farm. That was that lady took. And she had two sons in

service, that farm lady. And ah, that was pretty good. They had one room, this iron stove, but that was kept nice and warm. I was at another farm, like across the woods, another farm. And I was on attic. And there was broken window, and ah, I had iron stove and I had two little boys and did not have enough heat. Was cold. At night we slept in one bed. Luckily I did have fur coat. Lamb coat and we covered with that to keep us warm through the night. During day we went to my mother's house, farm, across. And so there were French soldier, no, prisoners, working in the farm. So they left extra, did not have wood to heat that stove. Like pressed moss whatever, something, like bricks, so they left at my door for heating enough. And then they left sometimes food. They were really, really very nice. They helped me. And by then, once I ate with farmers in same kitchen, same food they prepared. Once came a nurse, German nurse. She was really, really, a real person. And she was sitting at the table, she said, okay, you don't give much food to her, to that woman. But at least you could give one apple. You see how many apples you have fallen from tree on the ground and you don't give even to people, or want people to eat. So and she said, that woman does not have even proper window upstairs. You did get money, you know, from government fixing your windows because during the tax, bombs fall around maybe, this was how they broken, you get downstairs window, but did not fix upstairs. So she gave kind of lecture to that. She was, never forget that woman. And you know, later on, that nurse disappeared? She was arrested and she was.... And I don't think she survived. Can you imagine?

LEVINE: Now, these farms. Were they individual people who had a farm and then they, the government gave them money and they took in people? Is that how they did it?

BERZINS: You know how that works.. Actually there was kind of organization, whatever. Ya, they helped. But that woman, that bad woman, she did not get anybody, but she did not get any credit either. She was real bad. Really, really bad. The way how she treated people. And all those prisoners, they worked so hard. They did get all kinds of packages, those prisoners from France, you know, so they left me some cigarettes. I said, I don't smoke (she laughs). Don't give me cigarettes.

LEVINE: Rather have food.

BERZINS: Plus they gave a few times chocolate. So we were kind of stuck in different situations but still in one problem. We living with such a mean, mean people. Really. That woman was real mean. Young girl, young couple.

LEVINE: How about your mother? How did she fare in the farm she was staying in?

BERZINS: Ah, she never felt right, she never felt right, really. Because she miss her home, her farm, she miss everything. She was nothing, suddenly. Suddenly nothing. But ah, all right. And then start, okay, start to lose at war...

END SIDE B, TAPE ONE

BEGIN SIDE A, TAPE TWO

LEVINE: You were just saying, okay, so then you were in the camp for a period of time, then what? The war was getting over?

BERZINS: Ya. War was getting over. And I was in farm at the time, getting over. And so now Germans are losing, but what will happen to our country? So we did not know what will happen to our country? Where that stay? With West or East? And ah, by that time you know, people start to, to,

spread rumors like Russians, Communists taking over Latvia. And we did not want to return because we know there would not be any chance for living. Will be way to Siberia, you won't see even, you know, country. But some people said, oh, no, no. I like to get home, I like to get home, and later on we found out they never made home. Sent right to Siberia. Russians picked up, sent to Siberia. So they were questioning us why we don't want to go. So we explained. Tell them. We don't want. Unless we know there is Western power. Not Red power there. And we stayed in farm for a while. But later on, they got us all together. They put in German military buildings. I don't know how you call it. Not barracks, like buildings, real buildings. So we were, and they gathered a lot of Latvian people came together. So big crowd. Hundreds, hundreds people.

LEVINE: Of refugees.

BERZINS: Of refugees. Ya. And still was propaganda going trying to get us home back. And we had one lady who spoke real good English. And she says, We are going back unless we know what is there in our country. If we get to our country. So we stayed in that big, big camp like. Big camp. A lot of buildings, a whole bunch of buildings there was. And we had all kinds. Educated people, we had professors. We had artists. We had ah, architects. We had start to organize their own community. And there will be on the top like, like top floor like attic, and our designers made it like big hall. A big hall for plays and concerts and dance and everything. And they used those boxes, wooden boxes where Germans keep that military stuff in and they used that stuff to building like in church now, benches and seats and stage. And ah, on the front of that stage our artists did put Latvian, Latvian lady. Like that one about, for painting. And at the other end of that top floor, they built a church. Everything start to build from scratch, from scratch. And the church was beautiful. Get together every

Sunday for service. And in one building they start to organize school. There was school where they have all the teachers and professors and everything. There was like grammar school, high school and kindergarten. So kindergarten was separately. I was running Kindergarten. So I get nice, nice time with those little kids. I had whole bunch of Latvian kids and we did have all kind activities you know, and nice program for Christmas holiday celebration. And everybody came and watched our little kids doing stuff (she laughs).

LEVINE: And how long were you in this building?

BERZINS: Oh, boy. I cannot tell. That was quite a while, quite a while.

LEVINE: More than a year.

BERZINS: More, more. Few years, few years.

LEVINE: Where was this physically located? Where in Germany?

BERZINS: Western part of Germany.

LEVINE: Was it near the farm that you had been on?

BERZINS: No. No. That was further. No, not to close. Not too far. Not too far. But ah,

LEVINE: Was it near the border?

BERZINS: That was let's say, about how far from Hamburg? That was real, very, very active life. And some people study, some went to colleges you know, and I had two little boys, and, and little boy, oldest son, did get very

sick. He was very sick. He was admitted to the hospital. German hospitals, you know. And that was in the Fall. And all windows were open always. They kept always open windows. I don't know why, that was always open windows. And poor little guy did get pneumonia. Was very, very sick. And ah, he actually, one night, I said, okay, he needs some light, so took, put him in separate room. And I was there. Laying down. There was nurse sitting there too. And ah, he was, doctor prescribed him some heat. Like, lamp. And he was getting that heat, he felt a little better and then that nurse turns it off of us and she used that heat. And ah, so little boy start to feel real bad. And I took him in my hands. He looked at me so sad. He was unconscious. But time he looked at me he was conscious. And then he looked and said, bye mother. My father is waiting right there. He saw vision of father. He passed (voice breaks) away in my hands.

LEVINE: Umm.

BERZINS: So when I, later on when I complained about that nurse, she lost her license for two years. That was worse of my stories (sighs). That was awful.

LEVINE: Then did you remain in the same building that the Latvians had built up from scratch for a while after your son died?

BERZINS: Yes. We did stay still there. And I was running that kindergarten. And ya.

LEVINE: And you were already a teacher. You had been a teacher in Latvia before.

BERZINS: Ya. Ya. So I liked work with childrens. Still I like to do things with kids now. (She laughs.) Really enjoy doing with them.

LEVINE: Do you do things with children now?

BERZINS: I worked here when I came over here. Before I retired, I worked once in Latvian school, grammar school. Then I had job with overtime and keeping houses. That's not so easy. Then I quit for a while. But when I retired I worked again for five years. For five years I worked, I worked again. We have Latvian school, Saturdays. Latvian course. Kids learn history and language. But ah, since my sons did get American girls, they are not so much involved (she laughs).

LEVINE: What is it about the Latvian culture that you, that you personally value so much and would like to see carried on?

BERZINS: You know the old like folks, folks songs. And ah, like poem. There are so many verses. We have like four verse, that ah, little, little folks, folks songs. They sing them and they used to one place and they are for generation, generation, survive through mouth to mouth. And then suddenly, somebody decide to write them down, make sure they don't get lost. And I hope they don't get lost. Because there is so much wisdom.... And folk songs and fairy tales, and everything. There is so much life wisdom in all, all, in all that. That what really kept the nation through hundreds of years.

LEVINE: Mmm.

BERZINS: Before even Latvia was first found (she laughs) by Germans. And ah, but it was so important. And something about that, it says like, you have to

live, you have to be happy and easy go over all difficulties. That is what I really learned from all Latvian, all traditions, all generations.

LEVINE: Say that again, you have to be happy and what did you just say?

BERZINS: Get over all difficulties. Over all the difficulties.

LEVINE: Mm, hm. Is that something that's like in fairy tales in Latvian folk tales?

BERZINS: In all those folks songs. Like ah, all right, one say [sings in Latvian] [translates to English] "put my worries on the rock and go over the song." That one four line of verse. That makes really sense. Get over, be optimistic. But when relationships, you know how to keep healthy relationships with people. Learn very much of that. We did have hard time. Hard history.

LEVINE: So you actually taught these folk songs and folk tales to young children to help to carry this on.

BERZINS: Like now, okay, my grandchildren don't [] the voice. I always try to okay, go to bed, you have to be relaxed, you have to rely on God. And once, little song, just four lines, I taught to them. "Now, I lay me down to sleep, please dear God, you close my eyes. Your loving kind watch over me. All night long when I asleep." Little Mark is now four years old. And then Sam, he wants me to sing that song (she laughs). And I tell him, ya, God is watching over you. And you don't have to be afraid. He said, I am afraid, there might be ghosts. I say, there is no ghosts. (laughs)

LEVINE: So, um, what happened? Did a lot of the people who were staying where you were in Germany, in western Germany, did they, then some went back to Latvia? Some came to the United States?

BERZINS: Ya, some, most of us, we want all get, not to go back because we knew Russians took over. So first of all, we get whole bunch of people who served Latvian Legion. England took those men. Because they were young and strong for labor. But they managed to get up in the life. Everybody managed to get somehow. And some went to Australia, and some went to United States. And ah, some are still left in Germany, because they could not pass physical exams. Like my sister's husband -- he had TB. And he had to be in lungs, and he had to be in wards. He was so sick he could not make. My sister did not come. So she is still there in Hamburg. Lot of people could not pass physical exam.

LEVINE: So there must be quite a Latvian community around Hamburg.

BERZINS: Not so many left. Most are still, still some other countries. And of course, then we had to pass political exam too. Make sure we are not communists. We are not fascists. (laughs)

LEVINE: So where did you have that exam? In Germany?

BERZINS: In Germany, before getting chance to go to United States. Ya.

LEVINE: So it was from the United States Embassy that you had to....

BERZINS: I don't know. Who was that woman who questioned me? Some kind. It must be, remember... I don't know really.

LEVINE: And how extensive was the questioning?

BERZINS: Ah, ya. She says, first of all if I believe Hitler? Did not believe. Two devils are fighting. (laughing) I said, one devil another, one red one

black. How I felt against Jewish people? I say, they are people like we all us. And how I feel if I have to work for Jewish people? I say, as long as they treat me properly (laughing) and fairly, I said I don't mind. I did not have against anybody. So that was question what I had to answer. And they came to Island, that was whole thing all over again.

LEVINE: Ellis Island?

BERZINS: Ya, Ellis Island. They treated us really like we were some kind (she laughs) of criminals. But probably there were some criminals too.

LEVINE: Yes. Well, tell me. Why did you leave Germany when you did? What were the circumstances under which you left?

BERZINS: First of all, what was, most thing was most frightening was because Russians were so close to Hamburg. So we did not trust them. If they suddenly will be somewhere else. They'll take over all Germany and then we are made to Siberia. That was (laughing) clear. It was clear. And that was the main reason. And besides, we want to do something. We want to start life somewhere. How long you can live in the camps. And for sake, for safe sake, that's all.

LEVINE: Why did you decide on the United States?

BERZINS: Australia did not like because it was so far. That was so far, I said, in the case we have chance to go home, back, I said, at least this will be closer. And ah, in England, first they want just male. I was, besides I did have kids, you know, kind of complicated. And ah, so I go to America. As a kid I thought, my gosh, how that New York looks like. I have fantasy. Skyscrapers, how they look like. And I did not like them at all. I did not

like them at all. I said, oh, my gosh, look at that, wall, wall, wall, wherever look up (she laughs). Are you living in skyscraper?

LEVINE: I think it has twenty some floors. I don't know if that's a skyscraper?

BERZINS: Still high, still high. My son Vilnis, lived in Boston on 5th floor once, he want to try. And I was working there in City Hall that was close by. Charles River and City Hall. On stormy nights I stayed over there, I said, oh, boy, that city doesn't sleep at night. Noisy. Oh, boy, oh boy. So he did try one year and later on he gave up. Moved out to the suburbs. Ah, noisy city.

LEVINE: So when you were a little girl in Latvia, you were thinking about skyscrapers?

BERZINS: Ya, I think I would like to see. I would like to see New York (laughs). It [wasn't exact way I get to New York in my mind} But I get to see New York (laughs).

LEVINE: So then you decided that you were going here. Now, was your mother with you?

BERZINS: No. My mother did not come.

LEVINE: So were you traveling just with your one son then, when you actually took the ship.

BERZINS: And my husband. I was married second.

LEVINE: So you married while you were in Germany?

BERZINS: Yes. Yes. In Germany I did marry. That was not friendly hi to newcomers. Ellis Island.

LEVINE: So you took the General Muir, right? The ship? And what was that voyage like, when you were coming to this country?

BERZINS: Ya, that was kind of.. First of all, was very bad experience when we get on the ship. First of all, they separate me from my boy. And...

LEVINE: Why did they do that?

BERZINS: Because he had different last name. Yeah. They did put him somewhere else. And I saw he is on the ship, I am here still. I waited, I did not know, I was completely panicky. I went over to that lady, whoever it was, I said, where is my son, I said. Why you did take that away. Ah, check out. Doesn't say you are his mother. So he was completely separate. Of course he panic. I was in panic. I said, my gosh, all right. Then I was boarded up, and then I said, I start to look , to look for him, but matter of fact my husband was looking for boy too. He did get him to his cabin. But kid was so panicky. He was so frightened. He lost his father, now he's losing his mother. And by the end, somehow I pulled in my room. And there was like one, two, three four bed.

LEVINE: Oh, the bunk beds.

BERZINS: The bunk beds, ya. We did have two blankets. I did wrap in one blanket. I did put next to me. I said, you stay here. Then the ladies said. Oh, he's in bunk? I said, yes. How old he is? Seven. He is much too old, he cannot come with us, sleep with us. We ladies, we have to change. I say, never mind, he's in blanket. All right. So that how he stays there. Oh, my god. (sighs) Oh, my god. So I did hold that kid, but his hand did

not move one step off of me. He was so frightened really. Then the land, then the harbor.

LEVINE: And what was it like when the ship came into the New York Harbor.

BERZINS: Ah, that lights. Was so fascinating. And a lot of people, they so happy, you know. The ladies did get dressed up. High heeled shoes and fancy dresses, you know. To go to New York, you know, and husbands next to them. I did not (laughs), I did not do that. I was so frightened really. I said, now is strange country. No language. No profession. I'd lost everything. What I'll do there? What I'll do there? Maybe will scrub rest of my life floors for somebody else. (sighs) And, ya, that city was so beautiful, really. Because during war we were not allowed to keep lights in the house even. Was dark. And suddenly there is so much light. So we did wait over night. In the morning, they get off the boat and of course, everything was checked out. Names and everything. Vilnis was next to me, won't go no place. Okay, then they separated all our belongings by cities where you go. And there was for Boston, says Boston, and now...

LEVINE: Is that where you were going?

BERZINS: Ya, that where I supposed to go. There was pile of stuff, we looked up, did not see our pile. What had happened to our stuff? I said, not so much but bad if we get lost. But then we found our separately pile. And there was another group, separately piled too, that was outside of city sign. So they were questioning too, what will happen now?

LEVINE: So what was your impression when you first got into Ellis Island? When you went into the building, what was your impression?

BERZINS: Oh, that was horrible. First of all, that lady was so rude to us. One woman. She was so rude to us.

LEVINE: Was she an inspector?

BERZINS: No. She was just give orders, what to do, what to do, what to do. Okay, then she went, why this boy is here? Ask about why Vilnis is there. I said, I am his mother. Does not say you are his mother. Ah, she was so horrible. I said, okay, she was questioning why that kid is here on Ellis Island. All right. Okay. But he has to go to sleep with men. Somewhere else. You can couple keep. I said, no, I will not leave kid until he is same room with me and my husband. How he can sleep? There is double bed. I said, he can sleep in the middle. No. He is much too big to sleep in the middle of bed. She gave blanket, and he slept on the floor. Oh, god. I said, oh boy, the morning. Knocked the door up. Up, up, up, up, up, up! All right, okay, up, up. That was jail. Honest to god, that was jail.

LEVINE: So you had to stay over because of the problem with your son having a different last name?

BERZINS: No, no, no. We did not know. Nobody said anything.

LEVINE: You didn't know why you had to.

BERZINS: Our guide, who was supposed to drive us to Boston, he did not know either. He said, just we are, kept us. We'll go to Island. All right. I think few days we stayed there. I don't remember. Around three or four days. One day, they called him. He has to go to city. I asked why he has to go. No answer. No explanation why he has to go. And before that, we went, all those days were so terrible. I said, Arnold, have you something in your past, something that can cause you troubles? He asked me same

question (sighs). Was panicking. And, all right. So he went to city. Did not know what will happen now. What's going on. And he questioned what will happen. Where they send us? Back to Germany? Or to Russia? Give to Russians? Ah...

LEVINE: So did you go to the City too? Or were you still at Ellis Island?

BERZINS: I was still on Island. I was still on Island. Boy was with me, and we wait and wait. Late afternoon he comes. I can see his face lit up. Okay, so he said, everything is all right. But ah, he has a big chest, you know, evidently x-ray before departure was not very clear and that why he was checked. Because nobody gets in with T.B. or something (she laughs). So everything worked all right. And so that woman did run to us and very nice, and said, sorry, the way I treated you. So our guide was right there.

LEVINE: When you say your guide, how did you get a guide?

BERZINS: I think that was, that was whole affidavit, who's was, actually church gave us. We did get affidavit from church.

LEVINE: From the Latvian church?

BERZINS: No. That was American church. They used to give like, ah, like say license or permission to get such and such a people to United States. You know, church help us.

LEVINE: So they had like a social service people for people.

BERZINS: Ya. Social Service. That young man, he was student. Now he is lawyer and his sons are big Latvia (she laughs). His sons grow.

LEVINE: This person who was your guide?

BERZINS: Ya. Ya.

LEVINE: You kept in touch with him?

BERZINS: He is here in Boston. I know that guy. I need lawyer, I call. (laughs)

LEVINE: Oh, that's nice. And was he helpful to you when you first got here?

BERZINS: No, ya, he helped. He introduced to people and showed us around. And got in touch with other people, you know.

END SIDE A, TAPE TWO

BEGIN SIDE B, TAPE TWO

LEVINE: So when your husband came back, he said it's going to be all right. And ah, they gave him another x-ray, I take it, and it came out okay?

BERZINS: Yes. Ya, it came out okay.

LEVINE: So how long were you actually at Ellis Island?

BERZINS: Few days, anyway. I don't think was week. But, five days, maybe four, five days. But it was nightmare.

LEVINE: Especially not knowing what or why...

BERZINS: Not knowing. Ya. Why. I guess would tell what's wrong, what we can expect. No. Nothing said. And then we had to get up certain times and

certain times breakfast, she rings a bell. Okay, breakfast. No TV, did not have TV that time (she laughs). And outside for walk we went. And there was high, high, high fence around there. And other section was, I think there were criminals. Cause those women, they were terrible.

LEVINE: So what did you see of other people like that? They were in another kind of fenced off area?

BERZINS: Ya. Ya. Like around the building were fences. And we were in one section. There was another section. I remember those women. Oh boy.

LEVINE: What were they like?

BERZINS: I think they were (softly) prostitutes. Because one made pass at my husband, oh, gosh (she laughs).

LEVINE: So they were being deported, do you think?

BERZINS: I think so. That's how... And other ones, somebody want to exchange money for some kind of... I don't know. They came out, we just walked there. But still they try to get conversation, get involved.

LEVINE: Hm. So when you left, you took a train then to Boston?

BERZINS: Yes. We took train. I looked around, I looked around. I said, my goodness sakes. America. What the hell was that laundry hanging up at the roof! (She laughs.)

LEVINE: You passed it on the train?

BERZINS: On the train, you know. I was wondering how that come, how they get that laundry so high hanging? At roof height. (laughs) We did not have that. But they have that... Later on I found out.

LEVINE: The pulley on the clothes line.

BERZINS: How people from second floor could hang up their laundry outside. That was neat.

LEVINE: Uh, huh. Any other first impressions? Things that you remember that you saw?

BERZINS: Ya. When I went.... Oh ya. Oh, ya. There was one incident too. What station that was, I don't remember what station. When I get off the train, one lady came over to me, and she says, are you Jewish? I said, no, I am not Jewish. You must be Jewish. No. I am not. Don't hide. You are Jewish, you can be free. Now, you don't have to be afraid. I said, (she laughs) lady, I am not Jewish. How that comes your little boy is wearing that little cap on the head. In Europe, lot of kids wore them. I said, because in Europe kids wear them. You must be Jewish, she insisted. I said, no, I'm not Jewish. She said, don't worry, we can help you, she said.

LEVINE: Well, maybe she knew you had come with the refugees from a camp and she just assumed you were Jewish.

BERZINS: Ya, ya, ya, ya, ya.

LEVINE: Oh, that's funny. So then where did you go, after you got off the train?

BERZINS: All right. We had some people, gave us name to the church and call us to the United States. And some people I knew, friends. So we stayed with friends for a while. And then, okay, we start look for jobs. And ah, that my husband did find. After all he is mechanic engineer, he found some kind of job with machinery. And I start to go to sewing factory to do some sewing.

LEVINE: And how was the language?

BERZINS: No language (she laughs).

LEVINE: How did that work out for you?

BERZINS: That language was hardest part of all. Did not really have chance to study language in Europe. I had to work somehow, and small kids. Two little boys. And now, I had hard time. Oh, boy. Quite a few funny stories about language, how Latvians spoke English first (she laughs). But ah, then I start to take some courses. But later on I move from one town to other town and they did not have so close courses, so I had to drop, and I worked overtime too, to meet ends. And ah, marriage with Arnold did not survive.

LEVINE: Do you think it was in part because of all the upheaval of coming to a new place and all of what you went through? Do you think that that...?

BERZINS: It was a fact a little bit too, but I don't know. He start drink too much, and that was main reason. And I want to do certain things. I wanted work and then I want to get, I like to take some acting lessons, you know. And go to choir to sing. No. He said, no, no, no. Did not let me do anything I liked to do really. I liked acting, and I was very good. And there were courses. Latvian. We had good actors, and they want me to take those courses.

Give everything up. I did not like that either. And I have good voice, and want to continue to do some singing, you know, practicing, taking course. That how I ended up being by myself anyway.

LEVINE: So you kept working in the sewing factory for a while?

BERZINS: I worked for quite a while. In between, still was married. Then I did get pregnant, I did get Don, my little boy. Another little boy. And ah, so still did not want me work. He did not, ah.... Tsk. And, (sighs) did not keep very good jobs himself. He always get in fight with bosses. (laughs)

LEVINE: So when you got divorced did you stay working in the sewing factory?

BERZINS: No, I did not work. After baby was born I never worked in sewing factory anymore. Then I start to take, to take some computer course at Northeastern. And it was kind of fascinated. How that machine do same thing people can do? And so I started take courses, and I like them. I took some courses.

LEVINE: By then you knew the language? Get along.

BERZINS: No, but get along, And one girl want me join sorority, so I joined. Was nice. I did get nice group of ladies around and one of them worked for the city of Boston. She was civil engineer there and she did help me get job there.

LEVINE: Was this a Latvian society, sorority?

BERZINS: Latvian. So she help me get a job working for city hall. Mayor White was mayor there, and that how I started work in data processing division.

LEVINE: Wonderful. Let me just ask you a question from before. When you first came to this country you were working in the sewing factory and you really didn't know English. How were you treated and what was it like to be in a factory like that, without the language.

BERZINS: Ah, without languages, one guy, elevator said to me you are kraut. At first I did not say anything. Then he did always call me. I said, you know, how you would like if somebody call you, you are a Jew, whatever. So he stop. (laughs) I say, I am not kraut. Kraut, I think that both...

LEVINE: German.

BERZINS: German, ya. Is that what they meant?

LEVINE: I think that's what he meant.

BERZINS: I said, I am what I am and you are what you are. I am not picking up with you. Then I told to his boss, he was so mad at me. I said, just too bad. I not call people like that.

LEVINE: It may have been short for sauerkraut. (Mrs. Berzins laughs.) I'm not sure. It could be.

BERZINS: No. I don't know.

LEVINE: But were you treated well? You were shown what to do?

BERZINS: Yes. Yes. They showed me what to do, and that was kind of routine. That was so boring by then, I could not stand any more. I said, I said, I can do something else, I said. I don't want to do one thing all time, all time, all time. That makes me nuts (she laughs). So they offered me to

do maybe something in the office and I was not ready for that yet. And ah, they treat me very nice, very nice, ya.

LEVINE: Were there other people who had immigrated, also working in the factory, do you know?

BERZINS: Lot of people, lot of people. Most of them start work in the factory. Matter of fact, one interesting story, one dentist, she was here. She was hired as a maid. And she said, all right. She was doctor. And she was maid now. One day she set the table, dinner table, she was serving all the food, everything around. And ah, somebody, one of guests said, oh, everybody at this table, at dinner, have doctor's degree. And so my dentist spoke up, even including your maid. (big laugh).

LEVINE: That's a great story.

BERZINS: Including your maid. So she had to go to take degree back again for five years. She had to study it over. And then she had to have private office, private practice and she did very good. She did very good. She lives in Boston (she laughs). But that was good story.

LEVINE: So you worked in City Hall. Did you retire from City Hall?

BERZINS: Yes. I retired. I worked ten years there. I worked before, too. I worked sewing factory. What else I did? Ah, babysitting. I did everything (she laughs).

LEVINE: And it seems as though you've stayed in contact and the Latvian community is still a big part of your life.

BERZINS: Ya. Still now, still we have the church and all of the regular service once a week, and we go to church and there is always something else going on. After ten, have coffee all together. They have concerts and they play, visitors sometimes come from different place, to celebrate our country's birthday, Independence Day. That is big celebration. And here in [] biggest celebration is John's Day. Janis. And that is June 24. Then people come from all over the country. We have the field all full of tents. Young generation come and that is ah, most of Europe, most parts of Europe celebrate John's Day. John's Day is change from Spring to Summer, that is season. By that time everything is blooming and people come from one house to house, special people with John's name -- Janis. Like last year we did have 200 something people and they go from one John's house to other John's house. Dozen John's house. Last year they celebrate two groups. One went to the right, one to the left, and that guy who was here he had John's name, Janis, so we stopped at his house too. And we sang songs, special songs for that night. Special songs for that night. And we sang songs and we put real wreath from oak made for his head, and flowers, ladies have flowers in our... That goes all night long. Then we stop there and he had to, everybody, all Johns have to have homemade beer -- that is not homemade now (she laughs) -- and homemade cheese, pierogie and have to pass around.

LEVINE: Now, did you celebrate John's Day in Latvia when you were growing up?

BERZINS: In Latvia too, that is from Latvia that whole tradition came over. That once a year we held here, that's John's Day celebration.

LEVINE: Wow.

BERZINS: And that is big occasion. It is beautiful. Beautiful. It's so unique. And that little guy here, little grandson has John's name and we stopped at his house too (she laughs). Little child was so cute.

LEVINE: We should probably mention on the tape that we're here in New Hampshire in a Latvian community, church community and so the people who live here and have cabins here are connected with the Latvian community.

BERZINS: Ya, ya. Maybe I should tell now, I did not mention that. And ah, that big John's Day celebrations, we call Janis, and special songs, Ligo, Ligo songs, and we spend that day in Piesaule in Latvian church camp. And that tradition goes for years. And that village established since 1953. And unique that night is that people come from so many different places and they sing for special for that night songs, and then we have bonfire, and then dancing and singing all night long. And all Johns, Janis, have to entertain those visitors. Whoever stops at their house with songs, you have to sing songs. And then get some beer, homemade cheese and pierogie. And unique with Piesaule is that we have self-built church. And that whole idea came from young generation. From youths and they start to think about building up church and give to that.. They build up themselves church and give to this church as property. And that is youths build the church in Piesaule. And that is nice little church, right in the woods, and a lot of things happen in that church. There are christenings, there are weddings and there are regular services. And children come to the camp to Piesaule and big building, we have barn for dance, and cabins to sleep over night for very reasonable price. And ah, since I am retired, I am very happy to have one of those 45 cabins we have here for cottages and I stay half year here. And go home, back to Boston when it gets really, really cold. But once, a few times in the winter, I come out in the snow. Is beautiful too. Ah, what else I can say

about? And besides church we have also, all the people made a pond. That was little, little stream was running there and was swamp around. People decide to make lake out of that swamp and so that started gradually with one acre. And now about three acres, maybe even more. And people come and help and we have our own, made it a lake. And during camp hours, the time when kids have camp, one week or two weeks in summer, they, water is always checked out. Make sure that is nice and clean. That is clean, because it comes from streams from underground. Some people even use as a kind of water for drinking.

LEVINE: Let me ask you this. Do you think that all that you've been through and all that you've experienced, how do you think it's left its mark on you as far as who you are and what either your philosophy is or your values... How has all of what you've experienced changed you maybe, or influenced you or marked you or...?

BERZINS: Ah, (sighs) whatever I taught to my sons, hard work and honesty. That will give you success and strength to live in the life. Even sometimes maybe you have to suffer for being like that. But I said, always you succeed. And thanks God, we manage to survive and succeed. And somehow we have certain blessings. And my children always appreciated what I taught them. And sometimes they say to me, Ma, without you, we don't think we could make. It's appreciated really.

LEVINE: What would you say are, what has given you a lot of satisfaction in your life? What maybe, a good time in your life, or what has brought you a lot of satisfaction would you say?

BERZINS: Most of all I want my children get education. Because with education, even if you get thrown out of your real surroundings, still you manage to survive and see possibilities in the life. That what we did see,

possibilities. If children get education, that will like, I work with them since they were kids. Make sure you get education. We had not so easy time to get (she laughs) through that. But kids were bright, you know. And they start to work very young, and so they made very good. And that what really makes me happy, because really they, they are honest people and they succeed in this, old philosophy probably helps them. Just work hard and be honest and you'll be good to other people who are under you, workers or whatever.

LEVINE: How about thinking of yourself. You think of yourself as Latvian, obviously. How about American? Do you feel like you have a side of you, or how do you feel about being here for forty some years now?

BERZINS: Ya, ya. No, I feel like this is real country where we have really freedom. Each ethnic group can survive and can keep their different culture, different ways, and give something to this country. That's what's so beautiful. Because you can keep your individual opinion, individual bringing-up, and still belong to this country. Matter of fact, my youngest son served Marines, and he says, Mother, I love this country. I know, my original country, but still I love this country and I am American. But I also can be Latvian. And so you can keep that individual feelings, and individual difference you know. I think that's wonderful. I like to go from different ethnic group occasions. Sometimes see how celebrate one. Then we have German clubs, club, in Boston, we have all kind you know, different things. And I like that. Really makes this country rich. Rich in culture.

LEVINE: Now, you said earlier that you had gone back to Latvia. When did you do that?

BERZINS: Well, (sighs) was four years ago. And was real bad, very bad situation there. I hope they have, somehow they manage. I think maybe younger generation will do better than old generation. Because some who lived under Communist regime still have good jobs you know, but now they have to start all over. Like a lot of us. But young generation is doing just great. They are doing just great, do their best they can. And find out their talents, they use those talents in their lives.

LEVINE: What would you say, we're nearing the end of the tape now, but what would you say about starting over? I mean, that's something that a lot of people don't ever have to do to the extreme that you did.

BERZINS: I think it's very important for people experience very simple life. Like my grandchildren, three grandchildren go to Montessori school, and they teach at that school, very simple life. They take those kids to farm and they stay in farm for few days, or maybe even longer. And they do everything, whatever has to be done in farm. And I think that is very important to live like our ancestors used to live when we did not have computers, when we did not have flying (she laughs) machines in the air and all that stuff. Who knows, what can happen. And maybe we have to start all over again. You never know what can happen. Because world is not peaceful. And that's why it's good to have basics.

LEVINE: And you mentioned that that's what you feel you have here in this New Hampshire cottage. And tell me why you like being here so much, where it is so simple and basic.

BERZINS: I like to be here in Piesauale, New Hampshire, because I have here my own little home. I here all surrounded by Mother Nature's beauty. And then you look out and all trees now changing colors. And you can see blue skies there and go to the water, in the lake and go outside and see

even snake. Everybody thinks snakes are terrible. No, they are not so terrible (she laughs). Sometimes, one thing I would not like to meet bears. Somebody tries to frighten me and goes bears are here! But I did not see and I don't think anybody else did see them. So I feel like part of nature. There is everything. I feel like I am part of that Mother Nature and this earth is beautiful and I experience it. Fresh air coming from mountains, and all green and all colors change in the fall, and the winter. And I feel like I am here with Mother Nature. And I respect all this earth's beauty, and I like everybody else learns to realize how beautiful is our Mother Earth. And I hope we don't ruin that.

LEVINE: Well, I want to thank you for a very beautiful interview. (Mrs. Berzins laughs.) It's been very wonderful speaking with you. I've been speaking with Ida Berzins and we're here in New Hampshire and this is the end of tape two, and this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service and I'm signing off.

END OF INTERVIEW