

EI-1135

RUTH GREENSTEIN

BIRTHDATE: AUGUST 14, 1908

INTERVIEW DATE: MARCH 3, 2000

AGE AT TIME OF INTERVIEW: 91

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INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE, PH.D.

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POLAND, 1923

AGE: 15

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PORT:

RESIDENCES:

LEVINE: Today is March 3rd, the year 2000. I'm here in Delray, Florida. And I'm here with Ruth Epstein [PH] Greenstein—

GREENSTEIN: Greenstein.

LEVINE: —who came from Poland, although it—the borders changed so it was—

GREENSTEIN: Yeah.

LEVINE: —sometimes Russian, sometimes Poland. But we're going to say she—

GREENSTEIN: At that time.

LEVINE: —is Poland [unclear]. And that was 1923 when Mrs. Greenstein was 15 years of age. At the time of this interview, how old are you now?

GREENSTEIN: I'm 91. I'll be 92 in August.

LEVINE: Okay, 91 years of age. This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. And I want to say that I'm glad I got to see you.

GREENSTEIN: Me too.

LEVINE: We'll try to go quickly. Okay?

GREENSTEIN: Okay.

LEVINE: Now, if you would say again for the tape your birth date, and where in Poland were you born?

GREENSTEIN: I was born in Kartuz' Bereza. That's the name of a small town.

LEVINE: Do you have any idea how to spell that?

GREENSTEIN: Yeah. Kartuz—K-A-R-T-U-Z'—Bereza—B-E-R-E-Z-A.

LEVINE: Do you know where that is?

GREENSTEIN: That's Degrotena [PH] . Degrotena is the capitol. I believe that Degrotena must be the capitol. Grotena [PH]—Goberna [PH]. Goberna is the capitol. That's in Russia.

LEVINE: Okay. And did you live in the same place up until you left?

GREENSTEIN: Yes. Never traveled any place.

LEVINE: Okay. How would you describe that place?

GREENSTEIN: A small town where we used to walk barefoot in. And [unclear] carry water from the well. I remember carrying water from the well because I was the oldest and I, during the time, I was—we had two—I had two more sisters than—the three. There were four girls.

LEVINE: Oh.

GREENSTEIN: The fourth one was born during the war, during the—the First World War.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh. Okay. So you were the oldest one. What was your mother's name?

GREENSTEIN: Razel [PH].

LEVINE: Razel.

GREENSTEIN: Razel. Are you Jewish?

LEVINE: I wasn't raised Jewish but my father was Jewish.

GREENSTEIN: Ah, [unclear] Razel.

LEVINE: And your mother's maiden name?

GREENSTEIN: My mother's maiden name is Rosenkrantz [PH].

LEVINE: Rosenkrantz. And your father's name?

GREENSTEIN: Hy [PH].

LEVINE: Hy. And did you have grandparents who lived near you?

GREENSTEIN: My—had my—I never knew my grandmother. My grandfather was killed during the war. A soldier—he was coming—walking to my house and a soldier beat him up with a gun, with that—the end of the gun.

LEVINE: The rifle.

GREENSTEIN: The rifle, and he cut his beard. He tore beard off. He tried to—he was screaming. And I—he was in the middle of the street coming. And I hadn't—I saw him from far, the way he was beating him and I started crying. And he looked over. Then he [unclear]. A couple of days later he died.

LEVINE: Hmm, wow.

GREENSTEIN: That was [unclear] through. And, oh, the war was—every time there were fighting, the Russian came in. The Poles went—went out. And the Pole—the Poles [unclear]. And every time they went in and out, another—another group of people, they burned the city. They used to throw that—the sparks, whatever. And there were small homes. Some even had straw on the roof.

LEVINE: Oh.

GREENSTEIN: And they'd burn the city and there was a time that we—we went from the—they told us to run because the—the Russians were

coming. You know, the Poles were coming and [unclear] changing. And all the time there was no food. And one time we had to leave and [unclear] and it was raining. On the way, we had two horses. We didn't have a—a man that we paid was going to take us because Mother was pregnant. And it was getting cold already. It was September. And we—we left our town. It was burning. My father remained home because he wanted to save something from what we owned there. And he—he and most of the men remained and the women left. And it was getting—raining and we were sitting in a small forest. And the Germans came and took away the horses. Then the Germans came in too. The Germans were fighting too. They took away the horses. I don't know how we got—we—we got to some barn, far away to a different town. And it was very, very bad for us because there was nothing to eat. And the whole—not the whole town, but all the people that left the city landed in that barn. So we were [unclear] sleeping [several words unclear] the children. And my mother was pregnant and they thought she was going to give birth any day. And it was a terrible feeling until it quieted a little. My father came, the summer, came back home. But the soldiers slept in my house and [unclear] windows. All the windows were out from the—from shooting, from throwing the bombs. All the windows were broken. So we stayed overnight in the neighbors. And then the next day the soldiers left. [unclear] they needed—they needed [unclear]. So that—that's the way it was. That was my youth, my childhood.

LEVINE: Wow.

GREENSTEIN: And then it got better, a little. Fixed up—had—the house was repaired. And then we stayed there. And then when there was no food. It was so bad, and my aunt sent me a passport to come to the United States with her sister and her sister's child. And her husband was in Russia. I told you that. Her husband stayed in Russia because they thought he was a spy. But he wasn't. He came there to buy some food for the store. They had a store that they sold kerosene and some different kind of materials, whatever they—they were able to get to sell something and earn a few dollars, or a few pennies. It wasn't dollars. And until 1923, I was already fif—I was 14 going on 15. And—and I came to the United States. And I came by myself because my aunt didn't want to go because her husband came back. They let him out. They realized he was not a spy and that he can go. So he came home. So she didn't want to leave him and go [unclear]—separated again. They didn't know Hitler was going to come and make an end to all of them. And then they killed all the Jewish people in the town. Nobody was left. One young fellow was in there lying and—

because they shot them. They had to all undress. They [unclear] around that [unclear] in the forest. And they shot them and they were all crying and screaming. The people heard but not—nobody came to help.

LEVINE: You—you're talking about World War II now.

GREENSTEIN: [unclear]

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. Yeah.

GREENSTEIN: So that's the only young boy, 15 years old. He came out after it got dark. And he was laying with the corpses. And they—full of blood. And he was still alive and all the others because the bullet didn't hit him. So he [unclear] out and he walked until he saw a light and knocked on the door and went in there. And when they saw him, they got scared how he looked. And they, I suppose, gave him [unclear] and gave him something to eat and told him to leave because they'll kill him. This was the Second World War.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, hmm.

GREENSTEIN: And he came after the war ended, somehow. How, I don't know. He was safe. But he's in Israel now too. And he wrote in the newspaper and that's how I found out. And then I have two sisters who left for Israel just the last [unclear] before the—Hitler came in.

LEVINE: Huh.

GREENSTEIN: And they saved themselves and they live in Israel. They know this—this young man. I don't know if still alive. I didn't even ask. But he [unclear] and wrote a book about what happened to our people in [unclear].

LEVINE: Wow. Well—

GREENSTEIN: Yeah.

LEVINE: Let's go back to your childhood. Your grandparents. They—

GREENSTEIN: Yeah.

LEVINE: Were they from that same area?

GREENSTEIN: Sure.

LEVINE: From [unclear] parents?

GREENSTEIN: Sure. My aunts and uncles. We had about—maybe six different people that lived the same town near [unclear].

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh. And—

GREENSTEIN: Yeah.

LEVINE: And did—you went to school?

GREENSTEIN: I went to school there.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

GREENSTEIN: And—

LEVINE: Was there a temple? Did you—did you have—

GREENSTEIN: Had the old fashioned little synagogues.

LEVINE: Little wooden ones?

GREENSTEIN: Yeah, little [unclear].

LEVINE: Can you—do you remember that? Can you describe it? [gap in tape] We were talking about the little—

GREENSTEIN: The temple, yeah. The shul.

LEVINE: Shul.

GREENSTEIN: On my block, there was one. And—and it was burned during the First World War. And when my grandfather died, they made a memorial before his burial. And that broke and that—the—whatever's left over after a fire. And that—they put down the coffin on there and made the memorial. Whoever—the whole town came to that.

LEVINE: Oh. Was it—

GREENSTEIN: Yeah.

LEVINE: Were there mostly Jewish people in this town or were—

GREENSTEIN: There were—see, the gentile people lived the outskirts. They had fields. They—they worked on the fields. They had homes. They lived several miles. They have [unclear] all around. And town—lived in town too.

LEVINE: And what were—

GREENSTEIN: Yeah.

LEVINE: —the relations, generally speaking, like, normally?

GREENSTEIN: Not bad. Not bad. They were pretty good. I mean, you know, when there was a holiday and they—they—like Christmas, we were afraid that they shouldn't come, because they made pogroms. You know about it? You know about it.

LEVINE: You—would—did you ever see that? Were—

GREENSTEIN: I didn't see a pogrom but we were very scared to go outside. We were in the house and we put the shutters down and locked the doors. And [unclear].

LEVINE: What did your father do for work?

GREENSTEIN: My father also worked with the—in that store. See, my grandparents had that store. And it goes over from generation to generation.

LEVINE: I see.

GREENSTEIN: So we all [several words unclear]. It was difficult. My mother used to go—oh, and during the war my father was taken as—for slave labor, even then. And he worked on a railroad because they had the—out of town there was a small railroad that—that was [unclear] to the biggest [unclear]. And I [unclear]—and my father worked there.

LEVINE: Now, who—when you say that they took him for slave labor—

GREENSTEIN: Yeah.

LEVINE: What? The government?

GREENSTEIN: The—during the war. The First World War.

LEVINE: Oh.

GREENSTEIN: Whoever was there.

LEVINE: They took—

GREENSTEIN: Yeah, they had to fix it. They had to do something so they took the men for slave—slave labor.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So were you in school—when you were in school, h— your school was disrupted during World War I? Or did you—were you able to keep going?

GREENSTEIN: No, during Wor—during the war, nobody went out anyplace. But as soon as it settled, we went back to school. Yeah, they fixed it. It was near the [unclear], the school. It was a—a piece of land, so they build up from woods and boards, made a school. And that's where we went.

LEVINE: And was it a school where there were Polish children as well as Je—

GREENSTEIN: No, no. Only a Jewish school.

LEVINE: Oh.

GREENSTEIN: And there was a Polish school too, all over down on my block because there was a church all over down on the outskirts, a—a church and a—and somebody, a rich owner that owned property, a gentile man, and a forest. He owned a lot of land. So that's where the church was. And near was a school, a Polish school, or a Russian school or whatever they taught there. So I went to that too but I didn't go too much because they kept on fighting. And in 1920—ended, 1918 and that—and then I started in the Jewish school. And I learned that and then in '23 I came here. And I had to go to school here until I was able—I was a minor yet because I had to—I had nobody to support me. My aunt and uncle didn't have—and they wanted—and when I came in Ellis Island they were going to send me back, first of all, because I'm a minor and I wasn't supposed to come here by myself. But somehow, I—I got—I didn't know any better [unclear] supposed to come. But my aunt—and my aunt didn't want to leave her husband. So I came by myself. I didn't want to lose the [unclear] because it—it's costly at that time. And every penny was costly.

LEVINE: Well, how—when you found out that your aunt wasn't going to go and you had to go by yourself, what did you think? Or what did you—how did you feel?

GREENSTEIN: I wanted to go because that was the greatest thing. I didn't want to leave the family, of course. I was very upset about that. But I said, "I'll come and I'll study." I had so much hope. "And I'll become somebody and I'll send for them." And this was my—the reason why I went and I said, "I'll suffer for a while but they'll all come and we'll be together." But we had already—and I worked and I already tried to make papers to send to my—at least, for one sister to come, the next one to me. It was too late. Hitler already. They were [unclear]. The ambassador—the Polish am—at that time, the Polish ambassador said that they—"We can't do anything because there's going to be"—they started a war.

LEVINE: Oh.

GREENSTEIN: And that was too late already for [unclear].

LEVINE: Do you remember leaving your—leaving your home?

GREENSTEIN: Yes.

LEVINE: What was that like?

GREENSTEIN: It was very sad. I was—you know, I didn't travel anyplace. I didn't know. I felt so lonely and I—every time I ran away and I [unclear], like, another room and [unclear] cry. And my parents too, they all [several words unclear]. We took a picture with all my friends and my sister—my sister, my [unclear]. I have the pictures. If I had [several words unclear], I would have prepared more because I have pictures, that pictures. It took [unclear] my friends that are all gone. All were killed.

LEVINE: Wow.

GREENSTEIN: And—

LEVINE: So when you left, did people come over to say goodbye?

GREENSTEIN: Yeah, not too many. Not too many. They all were depressed because it was a terrible time. There was no—nothing to eat. It was—it was like having [unclear]. We had potatoes. We—[unclear] we had. My mother went to dig potatoes with someone that had a field of potatoes. And they gave—for that, they paid her

with a sack of potatoes or whatever she was able to carry. And we cooked. We had no soap. We had no milk. We had no bread. It was a terrible time.

LEVINE: So how did you travel from your little town to the port?

GREENSTEIN: I came to Warsaw. Warsaw was the [unclear]—most of the—

LEVINE: The capitol.

GREENSTEIN: Warsaw was the big city everybody knew, even now. And—

LEVINE: How did you get there?

GREENSTEIN: An uncle of mine, who was probably most of the time to get stuff for the—the store—

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

GREENSTEIN: —knew, was acquainted. So he took me there. And then he brought me over to the place where I was supposed to [unclear]. [several words unclear] the town where I was supposed to take a small boat to Southampton. I forgot that—it was a—a port.

LEVINE: Bremen? Was it Bremen?

GREENSTEIN: Bremen. Not—there was another German town—German. And—and, you know, and someone came over and said, “Oh, you’re going on the boat. You [unclear] what to eat. If you have \$10, I’ll go and buy for you.” I don’t know how much is said. I didn’t have that much money. I had to have \$25 to show when I came here. And I didn’t have—I had some Russian money, Polish money. And he says, “I’ll bring you some—something”—what do you call a—not a—“a salami, some bread so you’ll have [unclear] to eat, have something to eat.” So I gave him the money and then waited and waited and never came. And I didn’t have the food. But the food wasn’t so—so while—while my uncle brought me over there, all the people were sitting with the—with a—was a valise, a packet, with a bundle to go and—and to board the—a small boat. It was a small boat to England from Germany. So my uncle said to her—oh, a younger woman with a little boy, maybe seven, eight years—so she says, “You’re going to New York too?” She says, “Yeah, my husband is in New York and he’s going to meet me in Ellis Island and is going to take me off the boat. And I haven’t seen him for so many years. He left before.” And he said, “What is your name?” And I heard that. I don’t remember, Cohen or something else. I

remember the name to say when they told me, "With whom are you traveling?" I said, "With Mrs. Cohen." So they put her down and she was next to me waiting. After [unclear] she didn't say anything. If she would have said, "No, she's not"—she was sitting—I wouldn't have been here. I wouldn't be alive already. [unclear] a long time. I would be where my whole family is. She didn't say anything but after, she says, "Why did you say that? In case [unclear] something happens and they stop—they stop you from going, they'll stop me too and say I'm responsible for you." I said, "You'll see. I'll be all right. I'll be fine and you'll be fine and I'll help you." And, you know, it was like that. It was a [unclear] and it was rocking from one side to the other [unclear]. And they was—and everybody got sick. They were throwing up. Two women from Riga [PH]—two young girls and myself were the only people that went every morning for breakfast. The tables were [unclear]. And nobody is—she couldn't get off the—the bed. And I got an apple for her and I got water for her and I got [unclear]. And I cleaned for her. And—and then I said [several words unclear]. I don't know. I didn't think [unclear]. I was smart. So I said to her, "Remember, I said I'll help you." And I hel—I did more than I could because I wanted to show her that she did me a favor. How do you like that? And when I came in Ellis Island, my aunt came to see me. I didn't [unclear]. They called my name. I go out. I look [unclear] more people. I don't know where. I don't—didn't recognize. I went in again. Then again, they called out. Then I stand looking, looking. Then I see a woman is walking toward me. And she told me—called off my name. And that was my aunt. And she says—

LEVINE: And you never saw your aunt? Or did you know your aunt?

GREENSTEIN: I've seen her when I was very young. She came here many years ago. And she went to see her husband's family in—in Russia. It's [unclear] to see her father—her mother was gone at the time—and her sister and brothers. And that's when I saw her but that was so many years—brought me two little dresses and for my sister, the same. [unclear] came back from—from Odessa—Odessa, Russia. Oh, I never had anything like this. I thought it was the greatest. I—when we put on the dress and walked out, everybody looked at us—at that. You know what we wore? We used to take the sheets from the—the soldiers gave away old sheets when they left. And they—they cut it. They dyed it. My mother used to dye it and made the dresses by hand. That's what we wore. And I told you. I bought a pair of new shoes to go with [unclear]. I bought a house dress, a plain house dress. And I would wear it in the house but for me, it was new. So—and this was—that's the reason I wanted to

come to the United States, to better myself. And what about all the immigrants? Didn't they come for that reason?

LEVINE: Mmm.

GREENSTEIN: Some—some people did. Some people became engineers. I just watched how—how New York was built. Maybe you saw it.

LEVINE: Yes, I did.

GREENSTEIN: How did you like that?

LEVINE: I loved it.

GREENSTEIN: How the great Brooklyn Bridge—

LEVINE: [unclear].

GREENSTEIN: I knew Brooklyn Bridge very well because I used to go over there from the Brooklyn [unclear]. And how all the towers, the high—the highest buildings, like the Empire State Building was built. And all the things that [unclear] so familiar to me. In Holland—I was in Holland in 1923 when I came.

LEVINE: You went to Holland?

GREENSTEIN: And another thing, no—not in Ho—in Holland—

LEVINE: Oh.

GREENSTEIN: You know, what else happened to me in—in Ellis Island?

LEVINE: What?

GREENSTEIN: I didn't have—I had a little valise but I didn't have the clothes to put in. But my mother gave me along a pillow and a—and a cover from feathers. And also, that's—they gave me a present, a going-away present, and dried mushrooms. That was a big deal [unclear] in—in Europe, it was—it took the place of meat, because my mother used to go to harvest the [unclear]. My mother was very young—and picked the mushrooms because it was there. And then they dried it and somehow—and that was the [unclear]. In America, they don't have [unclear]. It'll be a big deal. So she worked on it and made—works on—I don't know how—and made a package like this. I was able to carry it and put it into a sack and sewed around to make it—and put around the cord. And I carried this and

I carried the little valise. I come to Ellis Island and the package is [unclear] that I brought it. Well, when I had to go [unclear] area—no, I took it on the [unclear] area. [unclear] too. But when I came to Ellis Island, what do you call the men that [unclear] come? He looks up and looks over your baggage.

LEVINE: Inspector?

GREENSTEIN: Inspector. The inspector came up and says, “What have you got there?” And I was [unclear] to because my uncle was supposed to come to take me into the boat. That was it, stayed two weeks already. And they put in a—they gave it to the government—to the city a \$500 bond that they wouldn’t have to support me. They’ll—my—they’ll get the money back when I’ll give the—my uncle [unclear] money. So I had to pay my uncle the money, the \$500. Anyway, so I [unclear] the government so the government would give my uncle back. It doesn’t matter whom I paid [unclear]. I don’t remember anymore. But so then the inspector says, “What have you got there?” I said, “I got a pillow. I’ve got a cover, like a quilt, from feathers. And I have the dry mushrooms [unclear].” Oh, it’s very hard. It was like this, a package like—he says, “No, you have a [unclear]. You know what [unclear] is? You should know.” “No, we never had [unclear].” He tried to [unclear]. And he says, “You have to open up the”—I says, “How can I open up? It’s so sewed around. How am I going to close that? I have no cord. I have no cotton. What am I going to do?” He says, “Then you can’t go out.” I was crying again. “What shall I do? How am I going to make the package? I know.” He says, “No. It’s a [unclear] You’re lying.” I says, “I swear to you. I never—haven’t even have a [unclear].” He make me so upset. I says, “I’ll tell you. Open up. But you have to close it because I can’t do that. I have nothing. I don’t have a cord to—so tie it up again. How am I going to go? I have to go. My uncle is going to come to take me home.” He opened it up and he saw. I’ll tell you. I wished him the worst because if he can do that—I—I swore to him. He sees a kid, poor. I looked awful. [chuckles] I can imagine how I looked. He—he making me so upset. Then my uncle came.

LEVINE: So was he able to put it back together for you?

GREENSTEIN: He took a cord. He tied a cord [unclear] so then it didn’t fall apart. I was able to take [unclear]. My uncle came and it took me on the train. And it [unclear]. I walked out. I didn’t know where to look first when—when the boat came to take me off Ellis Island. And it was—and when the [unclear] passed the Statue of Liberty,

everybody didn't sleep. We were all on the boat to see how [unclear] exciting.

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A]

[BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE B]

LEVINE: —all new to you?

GREENSTEIN: The lights, the buildings, the subways. I haven't seen anything like that. And my aunt lived—I told you, Harlem is the—before Manhattan. But that's the—settled. People lived in—Manhattan's [unclear] a lot of business but it's a big—New York is a big—a big city.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

GREENSTEIN: And they have a lot of boroughs.

LEVINE: Yeah.

GREENSTEIN: So when I came, I went on the train. I saw people sitting on the [unclear]. Everything was new to me. And then my aunt lived on the third floor on 114th Street near Lennox [PH] Avenue. Do you know any—are you [unclear]?

LEVINE: Yeah, [unclear].

GREENSTEIN: Near Lennox and Fifth—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

GREENSTEIN: —on the third floor. That was—I thought the higher the floor, the more expensive it is. [laughs] I figured, oh, it must be [unclear]. And of course, she had dinner. She [several words unclear]. And she had a little girl, a year old. And—and when the girl started to talk, I spoke to her English, not—[laughs] I still don't [unclear]. But that's how I—I lived there. Then they—they moved out again. And then they moved to Brooklyn and I moved with them to Brooklyn.

LEVINE: Did you go to school right away?

GREENSTEIN: I went—yes.

LEVINE: In Harlem?

GREENSTEIN: I even went to school, 116th Street near Lennox, between Lennox and Fifth there's a [unclear]. And I went—I came to May and I went to summer school immediately. And I went in a class where they taught for—for foreigners. But I knew arithmetic. I knew to write. I knew a little Russian, a little Poland. And—and I wor—wherever I worked, I—I took—and when I took the subway, I went to my other aunt, another aunt. I mean, I—everything was very exciting. And I used to write home a postcard every week and told them all the things. And my uncle took me one time to a—a show on—in New York on 42nd or whatever. So I don't know. I met other girl across the street and I was glad to have somebody to talk—also came from Europe. So we became friends. And when she came to—she had a stepfather and she had a mother and she had two sisters. I didn't have anybody. So I saw a picture of her and she went to same school too. So I used to go in there and—and it was—we talked Jewish. And we talked—we tried to talk English a little. And I took care of my—and I went to school. So it wasn't easy because my aunt says she wasn't so handy. And she had another child. She had a child. I had to [unclear] for the school, take off and take care of the—had the baby—the older one. And—and I—and she had two boarders that time.

LEVINE: What was that like, having the boarders in the house?

GREENSTEIN: Two boarders, a man right near the door. As you walk in, there's a little hole. A man lived in a room. And a girl lives in the bathroom—near the bathroom where—in the kitchen. From the kitchen, you go into her room. Two boarders and I was—I had to clean the whole house. But I took everything—but you know what? One thing, my other aunt, who lived in the Bronx—and when she put in—the quarter in the meter for the gas, she had to cook or bake. She was—she baked and cooked. She had to—three children. So she had to put a quarter in the meter. That—that was—everything—everything was new to me. And—

LEVINE: Were you happy? When you got her, were you—were you homesick? Were you glad you had come?

GREENSTEIN: I was homesick. Oh, I had—I had a cousin. I got in touch with a cousin who lived downtown, Lower East Side. And they had—I knew the—my cousins because one was a little older than me and one was older. She had already a boyfriend. And he was left because she came before to [unclear] in America. And they lived there. But the bathroom was in the hall for all the tenants. And—and the Chinese and the—her bedroom and—and the—I used to sleep over there. So there was, like, a hall. You know, a—a—two

stories—three-story building. And this was the b—the windows from—from the Chinese [unclear] the building from us. And the windows, and we saw each other at night to make a light to see everybody [laughs] in bed, everybody sleeping, everybody talking. It was so—it was scary too, I thought, [unclear]. “Move over. They can come into our room.” I was scared. [laughs] That was scary [unclear]. And what—what else?

LEVINE: Were you—were you—were you happy you were there, even though you were homesick?

GREENSTEIN: No, I wasn't happy to be with my aunt because there was nothing for me to do. So I used to do all the work, come from school and clean and do—and do the homework. And Friday, I did the shopping already and my uncle had a grocery store on 113th, stopped off and took—bought whatever my uncle and my aunt needed, brought it upstairs and take it to subway and go to the Bronx. There my aunt—and the children went to a park. It was summer, went out and sometimes she went with me because her little girl was very little. And I was already big. So she used to take me for ice cream in the ice cream parlor and talk to me and show me all the window stores. The stores—so many stores and so many windows, so many things that's available. And—and she made me a dress and she sewed too. And my other aunt made me a dress. I didn't have—that's how I learned how to work, not from them but I figured, 'If I get older, I'm going to learn how to sew.' What things are bad, you make your own clothes because material, you'll get pieces, remnants, and you can do something. I did that. And I went through a Depression in 1929 and I was married in 1930. The Depression here, it was awful. It was, you know—

LEVINE: How did you—

GREENSTEIN: Oh, you don't—you don't remember it ever.

LEVINE: Were you—were you finished being in school by the time the Depression came? Were you out of school by then?

GREENSTEIN: The—1929?

LEVINE: Oh, yes.

GREENSTEIN: Of course!

LEVINE: So—

GREENSTEIN: I was married by then.

LEVINE: Oh, you were married. What did you do when you stopped going—when did you stop going to school?

GREENSTEIN: Oh, I was—I finished public school and I started junior high. And my aunt said, “We can’t support you. You have to go to work.” I didn’t know what to do. I thought, ‘If I have another chance, I would become a typist.’ A typist, a stenographer. I would work in an office. So my aunt says no. So, what? She says, “I’ll take you to a place, to a factory where they teach you how to sew on electric machine. And from that, you’ll make a living.” So when she came to school to tell the teacher that she wants her—me to go out to a—give up school, they was so shocked. I remember the time that they said—they took her outside and they spoke to her. And they went in and said, “Well, that’s your decision but that’s not the right thing to do.” So I figured, “I’ll learn how to sew. I’ll go to work and I’ll go to school at night.” So I went and I register. And she saw my report card. I had a very good report card because I studied day and night. I wanted to get finished and to become something to send money to—to my family. So I—I have finished. So I—I register and—and she was—she praised me and she says, “I wish I have many students like you with such a report card.” And I come to my aunt in the Bronx and I says—told her what I did. She says—that’s the one that took me out. She’s gone already. But she says, “You know, that wouldn’t be good. You have to work and you work; you don’t go to school. And that’s how you work up. And—and if you want to stay with me, until you work up, you can do that. But I want you to stay with the kids at night to baby sit.” That—that, I felt very bad. I called my friend and I cried and I figured—and I told my aunt—my other aunt and uncle. And I told them what happened and I can’t go to school. He says, “I don’t know about school but, you know what? You stay with me.” And listen, I helped them too. “You stay with me and when you—and work. You can’t go to school. It’s no good. It’s stopped already. It’s no good. But I won’t charge you for that. So you’ll save up the money. You’ll pay me the \$500.” And then—and I wanted to send. And I sent some money to [unclear], my—I didn’t make—the beginning, I worked to—that wasn’t good. The machine, the working—the machine was—the second time, I learned on a machine. The first time, she took me in the Bronx to a hat store and they taught me how to trim hats. But they pay—

LEVINE: That was your first job?

GREENSTEIN: But they paid me \$5 a week and that was not good. I couldn't get anyplace. So I left that and I went to the factory. And that—at first, I didn't make much. But then I started to work piecework, ladies underwear. And that made it better, \$30, 35. So I paid off and I sent—helped my family. And that's—that's how I lived. And I worked all this time until I met my husband.

LEVINE: And how did you meet him?

GREENSTEIN: How I met him? I went to Brownsville. You know Brownsville in—

LEVINE: Brooklyn. In Brooklyn.

GREENSTEIN: —Brooklyn. That was the poorest neighborhood there was. My friend, who lived across the street from me in Europe, lived there. And I had her address. And I got the—in touch with her. She had—they were so poor. [unclear] her father used to go around and—and buy rags. Rags. Oh, not buy—asked them to give you rags and sell rags. And they lived in such a poor neighborhood. And I used to—they didn't let me go home. I used to go there for the weekend. I used to get up and I went to work. I came home and I worked already. And then Friday I walked from Eastern Parkway, Brooklyn, to Brownsville. And there I stayed over. We used to go to Coney Island, young kids. And Coney Island is—they have the rides and they have the—the—frankfurter. And it was—it was a new world for me opened up. And that's where I met the girls. And they knew some boys and that's how we got acquainted. And that's how I met my husband in Brownsville.

LEVINE: Wow. Can you say any more about Coney Island in those days when you first [unclear]?

GREENSTEIN: Coney Island was such a—who didn't go to Coney Island? Whoever came to the United States, Coney Island was something. We used to go—when my children were little, I used to take them—on a Saturday or Sunday, take them in the carriage and go there and take food along and—and we'd have lunch and would have dinner. And we'd bathe. We'd be in the water and then come home at night. That was the greatest thing at Coney Island every Saturday. [unclear] Sunday we went to Coney Island.

LEVINE: And what was your husband's name?

GREENSTEIN: Ben.

LEVINE: Ben. Uh-huh.

GREENSTEIN: Yeah.

LEVINE: And you have children?

GREENSTEIN: I have two daughters.

LEVINE: And their names?

GREENSTEIN: Norma, Francine.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So when—after you got married, did you work?

GREENSTEIN: You know, my father-in-law was so old fashioned, I said, “I’m going to work.” He says, “Who heard of that? Only Italian women go to work. Nobody else goes to work.” And he was a plumber and we thought he’ll make a living because he went through and he had the—the—studied for it. And he started with \$60 a week and that should be fine. Who should know that they start building the building, finish a building. That’s it. You have no work. You can—you can go to work the same day and they say it’s all finished. They no longer need you. You put in the plumbing. They don’t need you. You’re finished. So you—it wasn’t a steady job. If you worked a couple of months, we caught up a little. But it was very hard to live like that. We had no checkbook. We had no account. We had no money. We had nothing. And it was suffering, had terrible—in the United States. But you know, it made me very strong it taught me how to live carefully. I’ll tell you, not everything is bad. They say God gives you according—according to time. Gave me at that time but it gave me strength and gave me—to learn how to live. That time, when you buy three eggs and a half a bread and that’s it. And you can’t afford to buy—you have no money to buy anything else. In the United States.

LEVINE: Well, this was the Depression time.

GREENSTEIN: Depression. Nothing. Dozens of people came to shovel the snow. They couldn’t get a job, even that, to do. It was no break. Just a terrible, terrible time.

LEVINE: Hmm. And then what? When World War II started coming, was your husband—

GREENSTEIN: My husband worked for his brother because he couldn’t make out during the war. Th—they stopped building. They tried—he went to South Carolina. He went to Washington where they made, for the

soldiers, barracks. But that was it. He—he got himself bleeding ulcers and he got sick. And he was so sick and the doctor says—he smoked too. And you know, you go to a town at the—first of all, you don't want to spend too much. And secondly, you can—you have—you want to make a meal from—from a little nothing. And it didn't agree with him. He had to have—be very careful because when he came home he didn't—couldn't work for a while. And it was bad. And then his brothers went into [unclear] business. And they said to him, "If we'll make, you'll make too. And we'll—we'll go broke; you wouldn't have anything ei—" But they really made. They made. And he didn't. He didn't belong to a union. He didn't have—he didn't have anything, security. He had nothing. And when he was 65 years, they didn't need him anymore. So he said to my sister-in-law, whom he introduce—we introduced my brother-in-law to this woman, young woman—said to me—my father said—so—so—and my husband says, "You know, I'm finished. I'm 65 to the date—to the day. Now, can you give me at least a couple a days a week and pay me the same amount you pay all the workers?" The workers that—just coming to work at the—at the—what do you call—the money that you have—allowed to pay? Yeah.

LEVINE: The—

GREENSTEIN: I forgot the—what you call that.

LEVINE: Minimum wage?

GREENSTEIN: Minimum wage. So she says, "I'll tell you. My father wants to work for nothing. We don't need him." And that was the end. I'm still friendly with her. Her husband has Alzheimer. He was good but she wore the pants and st—whatever she said, went. And she knows I—I—I [unclear] because I—I took it. When I—I have to say it sometimes to her. And she knows it. And it bothers me because he wanted to make the few days and she wouldn't hear of it.

LEVINE: Hmm.

GREENSTEIN: And it—and that's it.

LEVINE: What would you say were your greatest satisfactions in your life?

GREENSTEIN: Satisfaction. I don't know what. I'll—told you. It wasn't as good as I thought. I was disappointed when I was young. I thought, 'At least I'll go to school. I'll better myself.' What satisfaction? The children were born. It was a tough time.

LEVINE: Hmm.

GREENSTEIN: Rough. In fact, I wanted to go for an abortion, the second one. It was three years later and I went to the doctor. And I didn't hear. So he says, "You have to pay me that much." I don't remember how much. I says, "I don't have any." Says, "Then I can't do it."

LEVINE: Hmm.

GREENSTEIN: So I went back. Maybe [unclear]—I don't know. I don't know. What can I tell you? I belonged to an organization for 60 years. Maybe that is a nice satisfaction. It gave me a lot of satisfaction.

LEVINE: Which organization?

GREENSTEIN: This was before Israel became a state. I—I know they had the organization 10 years before I thought of it. And they had clubs all over New York, all over—all over the United States.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

GREENSTEIN: And Golda Meir, who was the secr—prime minister of Israel, she was at that time the secretary of our organization. And everybody respected her. And—and I didn't—I was very young then. It was 1935. They—they were organized in 1925 and we made a group in—in Brooklyn, in Bensonhurst in 1935. And I—I was the young—I had small children. And some people were—were younger yet and they had—they [unclear] at the time. They joined first and then—and we had this club for 55 years.

LEVINE: And what did—

GREENSTEIN: And we [unclear] like this. We had speaker to come and speak to us. And she came to my cousin's house. I mean, we—we knew about it. We knew about it. We went to other clubs. I knew but I didn't—I couldn't grasp it. I had problem with money, with all that. An organization, you know, you have to work. You have to have older children to give you a chance. And then you have to work yourself too. So when can you go? But this young woman came to my cousin's house. I remember it as if it's today. That was 65 years ago. And she said she—she comes from Israel. And she told us what the—the money goes for. It started in '25 because they needed a well for—to water the saplings so they can have something to take them—plant potatoes and vegetables and have [unclear] to eat. Because the people that came there to Israel,

they're young, educated people from Russia. They were very educated, college graduate. They said that the Jewish people must have a piece of land of their own to call their own homeland. And they came and they are struggling so and they had no water. The main—the problem—it still—it's still the same problem. And who knows if it'll ever settle? And there were a few well-known people in New York, educated also, also from Russia. And they made an appeal and they spoke and they organized. And they send the \$500. They needed \$500 for the well. And then Golda Meir came and started a talk, that wouldn't help enough. We need to give them more help to do—to plant—to buy land. They say [unclear] everything belongs to them. They bought—we were here, raised the money and they bought land. And they planted. And were you ever in Israel?

LEVINE: No.

GREENSTEIN: No. When you see what—what they did—I was there in 1959. And—because my two sisters were saved from Hitler and they came there. And they lived—still live there. So you see, when—where—you can tell the difference where they are [unclear]. Well, at the beginning, you couldn't tell. I said, "They'll never be able to have anything there," because they had only dunes of sand and stones. Nothing. Not a little tree, not a flower. Nothing. Mountains of—of sand. How do you build? How do you plant? What do you do with that? It was impossible. I couldn't—I couldn't believe that something—well, a couple of years later when I came, I saw—and now, now, it—they made—and I spoke to my sister. They opened up now a store, like a department store. Must be a—a flea market too. I don't know. She says it's so beautiful that it's nicer than the nicest in the United States.

LEVINE: Hmm.

GREENSTEIN: People make money. There are always rich people and poor people. But the rich people invest. And there it's cheaper to invest because land was cheaper. And somehow, they did great. It is a li—Garden of Eden there. You'll go—

LEVINE: Why did—

GREENSTEIN: Yeah?

LEVINE: Why did you get so much satisfaction out of—

GREENSTEIN: Oh.

LEVINE: —being in that organization?

GREENSTEIN: You know, I wanted to be something. I wanted to do something. I wanted to do something for—for my people too and—and for myself. I felt that that—I—I became the first—the first secretary. We had no president and I became a membership chairman. Everything, with two small children, a baby in a carriage. And I accepted it and I went to hear—listen to speakers at night, eight o'clock at night. A few women used to get together, take the subway, go to New York and—and listen to the speakers. We had the greatest—the greatest. And every speaker, every thing I wrote down. I wrote down and I came and I gave them a report. And I became a big shot. I went to a convention. I brought a report. Sometimes I didn't believe that I did it myself. If I didn't like it, I rewrote it. Then I re—I didn't sleep much. I sewed and I baked. I had no refrigerator. I had no washing machine. I had nothing. And I—and I worked at night and I washed at night and I ironed at night. And—and I went to meetings. And every place they needed, I was there. [unclear] I ran around looking for old stuff. What did people give you? Especially, you don't know rich people. You only know poor people. [chuckles] So whatever that's old and they can't wear, they give it away. And we sold it, a quarter a dress, 10 cents, whatever. That's how it work. I gave of myself. I couldn't give money. But that's what I give. Day and night I was busy. Day and—and writing. And writing. And it was difficult for me. It was so difficult for me to write reports. I wrote it and rewrote it. And then I—if I had somebody to listen to it, to tell me whether I did it the right way, whether I made the—the right choice. I went to Israel the first time and—and one of the women who was very active, and she had a little business. She sold things to homes. So she was—and she had no children. She was able to give more money and she did good. And everybody knew her and all that. So I met her there. And she comes over to me and she says, "You know what?" And she used to sell a lot of things from Israel. She had a sister there. She says, "You know what? I have some things. Maybe you can take it. Being you're not taking much, it didn't mean much. I brought some old stuff I got from the family. I got [unclear]. I didn't come empty handed. Coffee. Coffee is expensive. Sugar. Whatever—I brought there. I took a big pink carton and I made a big package and I brought to my family." That—so she comes and brings me a package. What did she have? And my sister says, "How are you going to drag it? That's very heavy. You can't even"—she brought things to sell. So she brings it over to me. And what would happen if—if they—the inspector—you have to tell what you're bringing.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

GREENSTEIN: I would be in trouble. So my sister says, "I wouldn't let you take it. Call her up and tell her to come and take it back. You can not do it." She was angry at me but she came and took it back because I said, "My sister is right. That would"—too good-natured.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

GREENSTEIN: And—and the satisfaction is that—that I was there for 60 years. I have what people wrote about—we celebrated our—our 60th anniversary when we left for Florida.

LEVINE: Oh, that's wonderful.

GREENSTEIN: And I have poems. I have things out of papers. I have what—what they wrote and what they said and things. But I'm not [unclear]. It's [unclear].

LEVINE: That's wonderful.

GREENSTEIN: But it gave me so much satisfaction. When we had an appeal, a fundraising, you need that. We had it at the beginning. We cooked and we baked and we got around to—to look for people. And if it made \$10, it was good. But later on, we made \$1,200.

LEVINE: Oh.

GREENSTEIN: And we made more. And we had a quarter—15,500—\$1,500. And we did well. People gave and they—we—it just gave me the greatest satisfaction and it then reached my life by belonging to this organization.

LEVINE: What's the name of the organization?

GREENSTEIN: It used to be Pioneer Women.

LEVINE: And now?

GREENSTEIN: And now it's—

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE B]

[BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE A]

GREENSTEIN: It's a Hebrew name. It's called Namat [PH]—Working Women of Volunteers. And they are volunteers. And I have—you know, you will like it. I have a journal that I—I [unclear] it once in—in a couple of months. We used to get it every month. But the organization's not doing as well because the older generation is gone. Would you believe it, that the regional founders up in Bensonhurst Club Pioneer Women, I'm the only one left over, the original founders. All the founders—there were about eight—are gone. And older members—and the—the club isn't here anymore. But there are others. There are some younger. Some started later. But that's it for so many years. This is—

LEVINE: Okay, I'm going to—I'm going—

GREENSTEIN: I'll give you this.

LEVINE: Okay.

GREENSTEIN: You'll enjoy it. And if you like it, you can always get—right there. There's the national—

LEVINE: Okay.

GREENSTEIN: The national office is in New York.

LEVINE: Okay. I want to close here with the—

GREENSTEIN: Yeah.

LEVINE: —end of the tape. And I want to thank you for a wonderful, wonderful interview.

GREENSTEIN: You will do whatever I said. You write whatever. You heard what I told you?

LEVINE: Yes.

GREENSTEIN: You mean you—

LEVINE: It's on the tape. And now, we're going to give you a tape [unclear]—

GREENSTEIN: I don't know how good I—I don't know if I spoke—

LEVINE: Okay.

GREENSTEIN: —so good.

LEVINE: You—you were—

GREENSTEIN: I didn't even know you're taking it now.

LEVINE: Okay. Let me just close off. This is—I've been speaking with Ruth Epstein Greenstein, who came from Poland in 1923 when she was 15 years old and is 91 on the time of this interview.

GREENSTEIN: Wonderful.

LEVINE: And this is Janet Levine signing off.

[END OF INTERVIEW]