EI-1159
JENNIE GROER
BIRTHDATE: C. 1904
INTERVIEW DATE: AUGUST 2, 2000
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INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE, PH.D.
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ORIGINAL TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: KIMBERLY MAIER
TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY: JANET LEVINE

RUSSIA, 1905
1 YEAR, 16 MONTHS
SHIP NOT KNOWN

PORT:
RESIDENCES:
ODESSA, RUSSIA
NEW YORK CITY

NOTE: Mrs. Groer's niece, [daughter of Louis Strauss, EI 1147, who is Mr. Groer's cousin) was video-taping this interview. There are several interuptions and requests for Mrs. Groer to phrase her speech in particular words due to this. Janet Levine

LEVINE: Today is August 2, the year 2000, and this is Janet Levine for the National Parks Service. I 'm here in the Lower East Side of Manhattan with Jennie Groer who came from Odessa, Russia, when she was about one and a half years of age in 1905. At the time of this interview, Mrs. Groer is 96 years of age, even though you have three different birthdates that you've used. Would you start by just saying, my name is, what your name is, and when you were born.

GROER: My name is Jennie Strauss, my name was Strauss, but when I married, my name became Jennie Groer, ya. And I live on the Lower East Side, and my father's name was Meyer Strauss. And he was a butcher. And we had a butcher store in Montgomery Street on the Lower East Side.

LEVINE: Was your father a butcher before he came to this country?

GROER: My father was a butcher in Europe. He became a butcher when he was 14 years old. He was taught the trade and he was a butcher at that time, and as a matter of fact, he was a butcher that they called a surgeon, because he would cut the meat so perfect that it was like doing surgery.

LEVINE: Now, your mother. What was her name?

GROER: My mother's name was Gitel. And her maiden name was Shporin, S-H-P-O-R-I-N. Gitel Shporin. And of course when she married my father she became Gitel Strauss, ya.

LEVINE: Were your mother and father's families, their mother and father and even before that, were they from the same area?

GROER: They all came from Odessa, Russia. My grandfather, my great-grandfather, all came from Odessa, Russia. Yeah.

LEVINE: Now, did you have brothers and sisters? Did you have brothers and sisters?

GROER: I had one brother and one sister. Not when I came here. When I came here. I came here, I was the only child. But then when we were here, my mother gave birth to other children. And so I wound up with a brother and a sister, yeah. My brother's name was Louis, and my sister's name was Fejga.

LEVINE: Now, because you were one and a half years old, you don't remember life in Russia. But do you remember any things that your mother or father told you about your family's life there?

GROER: I know that my mother told me that when I was six weeks old, my father went to this country. And the reason he left Russia to go here was because he had been in the army and there was going to be a war between Japan and Russia and he knew they would call him back. So he didn't want to go back so he went to this country. In the meantime there was a pogrom where we lived. And my mother told me that I was six weeks old. She and her mother were in a basement hiding from the pogrom. And also, that I was sick. I had a bad cold and my mother wanted to run to the doctor that was at the end of the street. But my grandmother said, you can't go because they're killing people and if they kill me, at least the child will be left with a mother. But I can't let you go. So my grandmother took the chance and she ran to the doctor and she got in there. And when she got in,

the doctor refused to go because he said, I'm not going to jeopardize my life for your grandchild. But then there were so many dead bodies in the street that Nicolas, the tsar, was afraid there was going to be an epidemic. So he said that the doctors should be able to go. So the doctor came and said that I had pneumonia. Yeah. And I lived through it (she laughs).

LEVINE: Did you hear any more, anything else about the pogrom in Odessa at that time?

GROER: Yes. I know that the pogrom was at, my mother said, every year before Easter. The church used to say that the Jewish people need the blood of a gentile man to make their wine. And so they were illiterate people, and they felt that, that the Jewish people killed their god, and so they made a pogrom. And they used to run in the streets and kill everybody. No matter, everybody had to hide. And that was the pogrom. They killed people, they killed women who were pregnant, they cut their bellies open. They did terrible things. And that was in Odessa, Russia. The pogrom. So my mother told me about the pogrom. Yeah. And so, my mother, my father, when he was a butcher in Odessa, he made a pretty good living. But when he came to this country, he worked for a butcher and he was making thirteen dollars a month. That was the salary. And we were paying eight dollars a month for ah, for an apartment. A two room apartment. Cold water flat. No electricity. Toilets in the hall. And ah, the only thing my father got was meat and chicken. He got, yeah. But it was very, very difficult. Because if

you made thirteen dollars a month and you paid eight dollars a month rent, you only had five dollars a month left to live on.

LEVINE: Before we talk about life in the Lower East Side, what do, what have you been told about the voyage, maybe leaving Odessa, the voyage to this country. . . ?

GROER: All I know is my mother said that we were in a steerage boat. And it was very difficult. And she had her baggage, and she had good baggage because she wasn't married so long so everything she had was new. And the baggage was stolen. And when my father came to take us off the boat, he said to my mother, where is your baggage? Because the people used to bring their bedding, their [paranen], their linens, their clothes, their silverware, their candlesticks. Everything they brought. But my mother had nothing. She only wore what she had on her back, and what I had on my back. And when my father came and took us out of there, and we came to Madison Street and the two rooms, my mother said was slept on the floor because we didn't have no pillows, we didn't have bedding, we didn't have anything.

LEVINE: And how about Ellis Island? Apparently you had a particular experience when you first met your father. Why don't you talk about that?

GROER: Yeah. (clears throat) My mother never said Ellis Island. My mother used to say Castle Garden. When my father came, and my mother said to me, "there's your

father." Of course I didn't know my father, I was only six weeks old. So I ran to greet him, and as I ran to greet him, I fell and I cut my lip and I started bleeding and I got a mark from Ellis Island, (she laughs) that I have a mark that when I came to this country.

LEVINE: So you went to Madison Street first, and then did you stay there? Did your family stay there for a while?

GROER: We went to Madison Street, and then, of course we didn't have anything. So I had a cousin, [Yerne]. And his son came and he took my mother and my father to a furniture store and he said, buy what you need. So they bought a table and chairs and they bought a bed, and a sideboard, they called it a sideboard. And, and, and an icebox because there was no refrigerator, and an icebox. So I remember the ice box. I remember the table and the chairs. And the bed. Was a metal bed in the bedroom. That's all. And the icebox. I remember they used to put the ice in and put a pan underneath, then every time it filled up you emptied it. I also know we had no window in the bedroom. But we had two windows in the kitchen and in between, my mother bought a mirror. A long mirror. I remember the mirror. And we lived there. And then of course, (she clears her throat) my mother had another baby, we had another baby. A boy. And I was at the time already, when my mother had that little boy, I must have been about not even three years old. And there was a certain organization that they, you didn't go to a hospital to have a baby, you had it at home. So a doctor would come

from this organization and deliver you and he would come with a nurse. And when the nurse came, and the doctor delivered my mother this baby, she said, where are your sheets? Where are your pillow cases? Where is your night gown? Where is the clothes for the baby? My mother said she only had what she was laying on. And so the nurse said, you know there's an organization that helps out. They'll come. They'll bring you sheets and pillow cases, they'll bring you a night gown and they'll bring you clothes for the baby, and they'll even give you a few dollars. And my mother at the time, see people are not like that today, was so proud, that my mother said, I don't want anybody to give me anything for nothing. I have a husband and I have to get along on what my husband makes. And my mother turned it down. She would not accept anything. Today, is different world, you know. They come, they're on welfare, they get everything. But in those years, there was no such thing. And this organization is still in existence, and I'm a member of the organization.

LEVINE: What's the name of it?

GROER: It's called the NRS. They send money to Israel for the poor people who have babies and they can't afford it, and they also help out people here. It's a Jewish organization and I'm a member of it. Yeah. Yeah. Because I feel that if they came, and they wanted, they delivered my mother. You didn't pay for it. And they wanted to do so much, that an organization like that, that was started so

many years ago, the children -- you know these people that started it are dead, but their children, they keep it up. Yeah.

LEVINE: So can you describe anything else about the Madison Street apartment? (referring to her raspy throat) Would you like something?

GROER: (clears throat) No. The only thing is, what I want to say is, the apartment was on the fourth floor. And it had the toilet in the hall. Had no window in the bedroom. And two, two, ah, and it was a walk-up. And that's the way people lived. You didn't know anything different. And of course, you know, if you had an icebox, you couldn't afford to keep ice every day, so the only time you bought ice is for Shabbas. Because the Jewish people make the Sabbath Friday, so you have to keep the food so they, so for Shabbas we would have ice. So the women would go down, and the man would stand with a truck and he would sell ice, and for ten cents, you got a big piece of ice and you brought it up and put it in the ice box. And in the winter time, you didn't use no ice, you used to keep the things on the fire escape because it was very cold, so it would keep cold. But you didn't, you know, you didn't feel like you were, you were poor. It was a way of life. And everybody was the same position. They all stuck together. And everybody was interested in helping one another, you knew. I even remember that, then when I was about, I must have been about three years old and my father got a butcher store, so we got an apartment in Montgomery Street, and there we were on the fourth floor. And I was running around the house, and I

opened a door, and I saw a toilet. And my mother could never understand that when I saw the toilet, I said to my mother, ohh, we have a toilet in the house! Cause I was used to a toilet in the hall. We have a toilet in the house, we must be rich! And my mother, of course I didn't say rich, I said, [mizzenerreich] And my mother could never understand that as a child, I realized that we were already better off. Yeah. So I, so we had three rooms. We paid, I think, twelve dollars for three rooms on the fourth floor. And we had a kitchen, a front room, and a bedroom. But the bedroom had a window. The bedroom had a fire escape. And in the summer, I used to sleep on the fire escape with my sister. And the fire escape was not a full one. It had a hole. My mother used to put a chair there so that we wouldn't fall and we used to sleep on the fire escape. And I used to feel, when I slept on the fire escape, like I was in the country. You know we didn't go to a country, we didn't know about a country. And I slept on the fire escape. And I remember one time, it was raining. And I loved the rain hitting me. And I got soaking wet. And my mother got up in the morning and she said, it was raining! Didn't you know it was raining! You're all wet! I didn't want to tell her that I knew cause I liked the idea. I said, I didn't know. I was sleeping.

LEVINE: And how about the roof? Tell about going up on the roof.

GROER: See, it was very hot. The rooms were very small. And you had mice. Everybody kept a cat. You had bed bugs.

[STOP. PROBLEM WITH THE VIDEO]

LEVINE: Jennie, you were talking about going up on the roof in the hot weather. Why don't you tell about that.

GROER: It was very, very hot. The summers were much hotter than they are now. And there was no such thing… We didn't have a fan. We didn't have anything. So a lot of people used to go up on the roof and sleep on the roof. Some people used to go to the docks because Montgomery Street is not far from the East River. They used to sleep on the dock there, yeah, yeah. I remember my mother taking us on the dock because my brother had whooping cough. So we used to sit there and sleep there. And people used to take a blanket and sleep in the parks. Jackson Park was a park, we used to sleep there. And people used to go up on the roof and sleep there. And that was, we, I, my sister slept on the fire escape. We didn't go up on the roof. But families with small children went up on the roof and they slept there because it was impossible to stay in the apartment, it was so hot, you know. And we didn't have a bathtub to bathe, but we had a washtub where you used to wash your clothes. And so they used that for bathing purposes. But you couldn't sit in it, you know. It was very difficult. But they had these City Baths. Wasn't baths, but it was showers. So you used to stand on line, and you gave them two cents. So they gave you a towel and a piece of soap, and you would stand on line sometimes maybe an hour and sweat until you got into the showers. And then there were stalls with showers and they would

ring the bell and you would shower, and then they would ring the bell and you had to get out so the other people could get in, you know.

LEVINE: Was there anything else at the public baths besides the showers?

GROER: No. There was nothing else but these showers. There was no bath.

LEVINE: Do you remember where that was Jennie?

GROER: It was on Monroe Street. They had 'em all over. They had them on Catherine Street and Monroe Street. It was a big place, you know, and you took showers there. And I remember, and when you went out, you used to give back the towel. Two cents, you got a towel and soap. And that's how you washed. 'Course people didn't keep themselves so clean like they do today. As a matter of fact, when I went to school, when I came home from school, I had to take off the dress I wore, so I could wear it the next day, and put on something old. Because it was very hard. You had to use a washboard and you washed…

But there was one funny thing. When I had, my job was once a week… Children had responsibility not like today. Today, the children don't have any responsibility. My responsibility was that every Thursday I had to wash the floor. Yeah. And we had wooden floors. You know, we didn't have linoleum. It was wood. And so, that was my job. I remember I must have been about nine years old. My job every Thursday was to wash the floor. And my mother used to

stay downstairs with my father in the butcher store. So I used to take a pail and put in soap. The soap, I remember, was Octagon soap. There was Fells Napther and Octagon. And I used to take a brush, put soap and wash the floor. And then my mother when she came up, she'd say, didn't do such a good job. You didn't use elbow grease. (she laughs) But there was a man, an Italian man that used to come every week and he used to holler, ["Givelle Water! Givelle Water! Givelle Water!"] And that was like Clorox. And the people used to buy a gallon from him. He used to bring it in a gallon. Five cents was the deposit. You paid a quarter for the gallon, and you used to use that to wash clothes, so the clothes would get, you know, white. And so, it dawned on me, I was nine years old. If [Givelle] Water makes the clothes white, clean, why can't I use it on the floor. So I took [Givelle]Water and I poured it in the water and the floor came out beautiful. And my mother, I never told my mother, she never knew. Never! And she said to me, oh, she said, today you used elbow grease. The floor is beautiful. (laughs) And one time, the man didn't come. And I didn't have no [Givelle ]Water. (She's laughing.) So I remember that my mother said, this week, you didn't do a good job. But I never told her that I put [Givelle] Water in. And then you had, you used to wash the clothes in the wash tub. And when we lived in Montgomery Street we had hot water. So my mother used to use a wash board to rub the clothes and then we had a big, they called it a kessle. It was a big thing that you put on the stove and boil the clothes, you know, put stuff in. And then you had a line outside where you would hang the things on the line. And the people wore, you know, winter was very cold. My father used to wear

the long johns. You know, you used to call that, you know the whole… It was very, very heavy. Everything was… Believe me, it was no picnic because the women worked very hard. Very hard. And if you lived on the fourth floor and you had a baby with a carriage, you had to take the carriage down all the four floors and pull it up the four floors. And every day you went shopping because you didn't have refrigeration. Every day you went down and you bought milk, you bought cheese or whatever you bought. You went to the bakery. Rolls were three for a nickel. And ah, bread was six cents a pound. And milk was six cents a quart. And you went to the butcher every day, you bought every day, because you didn't have a, a, a freezer to keep it in, or refrigerator. You didn't use the ice box. So you shopped every day. The women had like a black basket, and they used to schlep it, you know, upstairs and downstairs. And you had to take the garbage down. There was barrels outside to throw the garbage down. And it was, when you lived with the toilet in the hall, every, every week another tenant would wash the toilets. And there was no light in the toilet so you couldn't use it at night.

LEVINE: And what did you do then?

GROER: You had what they called a tepple. People used to use a tepple.

LEVINE: Describe a tepple.

GROER: A tepple was a pot like this, and it had a handle. And you urinated in it, everything in it. You covered it and in the morning you would go in the hall and you would put it in the toilet. Yeah. It was, it was a different way… That's why, you know, today when I see the way things are, and people are so dissatisfied. They, they, nothing seems, like if one has one television, no, the child has to have television in his room too. Who knew about a television? No radio, no phonograph, no nothing. That's why the children used to go to the library. That's why Johnny knows how to read. Because that was the only form of learning. And I remember when I was five years old, my mother took me to the library. And I went over and I said I want a card, I want to belong to the library. And the librarian said to me, what class are you in? And I said, I'm in the kindergarten. She said, you have to come back when you're in the first grade. And I was so disappointed. And then when I was in the first grade and I learned to read, I used to go every Friday when I came home from school I went to the library and you was able to take out three books. And I would take out books and I would read it by candlelight because Friday night my mother lit the candles. And when the candles went out, then… But that's, and that's why we had a responsibility, you know. You, things were expected of you, you see. I remember when I lived on Montgomery Street, we had a, a what do you call it? A super, a janitor, they called him a janitor. And the people paid rent. They used to pay with cash. They didn't have checking accounts. So you had to give them a receipt. And the people that owned the buildings, they gave it like to an agent that the name was Hallek, yeah. He took care of all the buildings. And Mr.

Rice couldn't write a receipt, he couldn't read or write. So his daughter went to school with me. And I think I was maybe in the third grade. He used to say, Jennie, you'll go with me, you'll make out receipts for the people because he got the cash and he had to bring it to Hallek. So I said, your daughter is in the same class with me, why doesn't she do it. He said, she don't know how. So you see, I always had responsibility. And as I tell you, when I was seven years old and my mother had a baby, my sister was born, I went to Williamsburg, in Brooklyn…

END SIDE A, TAPE ONE

BEGINS SIDE B, TAPE ONE

GROER: The ah, trolley car was running underground and you bought three tickets for a nickel. So I went to my aunt, my aunt lived in Roebling Street, in Williamsburg. So I went to my aunt to tell my aunt that my mother had a baby, and she gave me lunch and then I came back and I used the other ticket, and I brought back a ticket. And I had to go from Delancey Street, all the way to Montgomery Street, and I was only seven years old. Now today, the parents they stand outside the school. When the kid comes out of school, they take the books because they think it's too heavy (she laughs) for the kid to carry. You see, you grew up with responsibility. I mean, it's… I remember when I used to ask my mother for a penny. Times were bad. And I wanted to buy a Hershey bar. A Hershey bar was a penny. And my mother would say to me, Jennie, for two cents you get a roll. Cause it was three rolls for a nickel, and for two cents you bought a roll.

And that was more important then buying a piece of chocolate. It was different.

So you see, I can see things today, what goes on. It's an entirely different world.

[PROBLEM WITH THE VIDEO]

LEVINE: Okay. We're resuming here. Now Jennie, we were talking about where you lived and what the apartment was like, and the water situation.

GROER: With no bathtub

LEVINE: No bathtub.

GROER: No bathtub, yeah.

LEVINE: I tell you what, why don't you say whatever you can remember about ah, about um, your father and the butcher store. Could you talk about that a little bit?

GROER: Yeah. You know, my father worked for a butcher, and this butcher said to my father, you know I'm bringing over a nephew of mine from Russia, and he, I want to make a butcher out of him. And my father said to this man, you know, if I'm going to make a butcher out of him, then you're going to have him and I'll lose my job. And the man said, oh, no, that would never happen. So he says, I'll open a store for him somewhere. So my father taught this man, his name was [Shalot], taught him to be a butcher. And he was a surgeon like my father,

because he was taught that way. And then, after about a year, he said to my father, you know, you'll have to get yourself a job because I have to take my nephew to work for me. And my father said, you said you would open a store. He said, I can't open a store for him. You have to… So my father went to Montgomery Street and saw an empty store and decided that that would be good, but he didn't have enough money. So he said to this boss, if you will lend me fifty dollars, I'll be able to, with the little that I have, I'll be able to open a store. And I'll put your name on it until I pay you out the fifty dollars. And then I will put my name. And the man was such a bastard, and he said to my father, fifty dollars? If I had fifty dollars, I would gladly give it to you, but I don't have it. And he didn't give it to my father. And my father took in a partner who was not a butcher for the fifty dollars. And he was with my father for about two years. And he was stealing. And my mother said that something doesn't run right here. And my father said, how can you say that about a man with a beard? He's a holy man, you know. And then my father caught him. So we had the store on Montgomery Street. And Sundays, you weren't allowed to be open on Sunday, but a grocery could, a bakery could, but not a butcher. But the people had to buy on Sunday. So we had a big shade, and my mother used to stand outside and say, [Effen], meaning, when the policeman passed, he wore, you know, he had a club and these hats, you know. And then, when the customer had to go out, my mother would say [faschlisch] and they'd get out. But sometimes my mother couldn't do it, because the kids. So I used to stand outside. I must have been about eight or nine, nine years old. And I used to stand outside and watch the

police, and every time the police went by I would say [faschlisch] because they would try to open the door, and when they went away, I used to say [effen], so they would go in. In and out, in and out, yeah. And there was one policeman that learned the world [faschlisch and effen], (she laughs) so he knew that my father was in there. So when he passed, he pinched me and he said to me, [faschlisch, effen]. Yeah. One time, my father was caught. The lady didn't go out fast enough and the policeman got her. So my father, my mother was very brave, but my father was a coward. He was so frightened. So frightened. So he went ahead, he bribed him. He gave him a steak (she laughs) and he let it go. Yeah, yeah. So you see, everything was very difficult. But as I say, I used to go to the library, take out books, I used to read. And I used to, you know, even though I couldn't read I would look at the pictures. I would try to educate myself. And then when my aunt lived in Williamsburg, so I used to go over there. But then my aunt's children began to work and so she moved to the Bronx. That was supposed to be high class. So she moved to the Bronx, and I remember she lived in 1508 Charlotte Street. So every Friday when I came home from school, I used to get dressed like Astor's pet horse and go to Charlotte Street. So I used to go to the Third Avenue Elevator, and then I used to change on 149th Street, then I used to get off at Freeman Street. Then you walked a few blocks, you was in Charlotte Street. So when I went to my aunt, I took a bath. Every Friday night, I took a bath, and Saturday night I took a bath. And it was so, so, you know, to stretch out in a tub, so when I used to come home on Sunday, I used to holler at my mother and father -- why can't we live like that? Why do we have to live

over here? But my father was afraid to move, because he said, you know, over here he has bread. And if he's going to look for cake, maybe he's going to lose the bread. So we stayed there. So when I used to come, my mother used to say, next week, you're not going anymore. Whenever you come from there you're always crazy, cause I was always saying we should move, you know. Why can't we live like they did?

LEVINE: What was different between where you lived and where your aunt lived? What else was different besides the bathtub?

GROER: Oh, and my aunt lived in a modern house, which was a nice house, was a nice area. And a few blocks away was the park, was a park. As a matter of fact, when I used to go home, I used to pick the daisies, and when I came home the kids used to say, oh, you were in the country. Yeah, because I brought home daisies. And you know, it was different. They had Wilkins Avenue. They had stores. There was movies. I went to the movies here, I used to pay ah, two tickets, two for a nickel. So I used to go with a friend. So one week, I'd pay two cents, and one week she'd pay two cents, next week I'd pay three cents. And that was to us a very big enjoyment because Sunday, I would get, my mother would pack me a lunch and I would go into the movies and we'd sit there a whole, it was silent movies. Pearl White and all those. And I used to sit there, we used to eat the lunch there. And we used to see the picture over, and over, and over. (She laughs.) And that was our place of entertainment.

LEVINE: Do you remember when talking movies came in?

GROER: Oh, sure. Oh, sure. But when I started in, it was silent movies. They didn't ah, you had to read the lines. They had the lines, but then of course the other movies came. But ah, we paid two for a nickel. They had it right here, on, on, on, what do you call it, Rivington Street. They had a movie house and they had another movie house on Canal Street. Yeah, we used to go there. And ah, oh, when I went to the movies I felt so… It was such an entertainment. I mean, that was the only thing. You didn't see movies.

And the people that came, they used to knock at the doors, you know, and they used to sell needles, cotton, hairpins, diaper pins, pencils -- they would go through the… knock at the doors, you know. And ah, we had a gas meter, you know, you put a quarter in so you got gas. And we had a coal stove. We cooked by a coal stove. You know, you made the stove and I remember I once had to make the stove and if it didn't start I'd put in a little kerosene and blew up. It was a wonder that I didn't get killed.

LEVINE: And how did you get the coal?

GROER: A coal man would come and he would bring up a bag of coal, a hundred pounds of coal. You paid, I think, fifty cents.

LEVINE: And he would bring it to the apartment?

GROER: He'd bring it up and the people wanted it cheaper, they used to carry it up themselves. If you carried it up, you didn't pay fifty cents, you paid less. And the coal still had a, had a thing, but the people later on they used to have bins in the cellar, so they used to buy like a half a ton of coal. Those that were able to afford, you know, yeah. So that what, so all week, that's how you heated the house. But in the summer it was very hot. To have the stove burning. So the tenants used to be like five tenants on a floor. So every week a different tenant used the stove, so everybody would cook and bake in there. You would bake your challah and cake and whatever you did and use the stove. So one week, so then everybody wouldn't have to… You compromised. You know it was a different… That's why I say that the people were more with each other.

LEVINE: Were there other ethnic groups besides Jewish where you were?

GROER: Where we lived was mostly Jewish, but in the building we lived, we had an Italian living there. His name was Mike Donato. And he had a store where he shined shoes. And he cleaned hats and he used to make ices in the summertime. Mike Donato. He lived in the building, yeah. And we had one Irish family. But there was Irish, a lot of Irish lived closer to the water, to the waterfront because… And then they, I used to see the men you know, go to the, with the hooks. They used to work on the docks, you know, take that stuff off, you know,

and I remember they used to have tattoos. The Irish. They were mostly Irish that had the tattoo. And my father when he used to see that, he used to say, [ze zeider finder staachen] -- they're strong (she laughs).

LEVINE: And did everybody get along? Did the Irish get along with the Jews?

GROER: Yeah. No. Got along, yeah, yeah. The Jews they used to call the sheenies. And the Irish they used to call, the Italians they called the guineas. And the Irish they called the ah, I don't remember, there was a name for them. But the Jews they called the sheenies (she laughs). But they got along. I mean, I mean, there was no such thing. But there was no colored where we lived. There was no colored people.

LEVINE: And did you swim in the East River? Did you ever swim in the East River?

GROER: No. You couldn't swim. You couldn't. There was no place. You had, when we got older, you know, things are different. We went to Coney Island. Yeah.

LEVINE: Tell about Coney Island. What was it like for you as a young girl, a young woman?

GROER: Oh, my mother used to take us to Coney Island. And we would have a bathing suit, and she would take along lunch and everything. And we would bathe in the

ah… But we didn't get undressed you know. We dried (she laughs) up with the sun. We came back here. There was a City Bath there. You know you paid ten cents to get undressed, but that was too much money, to pay ten cents to get undressed. So you went, and you would take along your lunch and sit in the sun and get sunburned. You came home. (She laughs.) You were sunburnt. It was a different, all together different.

LEVINE: Tell about the singing, that you were talking about. Maybe you could sing that song that you… Tell about going up on the roof and the song you sang.

GROER: Yeah, yeah. My mother, when they used to go up on the roof, so somebody wrote a song. And the song went like this -- I just want a drink. Here's my glass. (pause in tape)

Before vacation, when I was a kid, my father belonged to a lodge. The people that came from Odessa, they had a lodge. So you had like a society, you know. And ah, so every year, they used to go to Bronx Park. That was the outing. So I remember my mother used to pack a lunch with the, with tea, and we used to go to the Bronx Park. And ah, that was a big thing. We went to Bronx Park and you took along a blanket so you could lay on the grass. So it always happened that the day we had the picnic, it would rain. Either it rained before we went or during the time. So we didn't know anything. So we used to hide under the tree. Which was, and it was lightening and thunder -- was the most dangerous… But

we didn't know. We didn't know. So that was the picnic. Every year the Odessa Lodge had a picnic. Yeah.

LEVINE: Tell about the songs you would sing. Particularly the one about going up on the roof when it was hot.

GROER: You see, (she clears her throat) besides that, there used to be Jewish people that could play the violin. They used to go in the yard and sing songs and play the violin. And the tenants would throw down a penny. That's what you would throw down. And the people, I told you, used to sell cotton and those that didn't have a trade, you know, and so, and then you know, you used to buy everything on the pushcarts. We had pushcarts in Montgomery, not Montgomery, in ah, in ah, Monroe Street was pushcarts. Orchard Street was pushcarts. You could buy everything. (She laughs.) You could even buy glasses on a pushcart.

LEVINE: And how about food?

GROER: Food you had to buy, fruit you bought on the pushcart. You bought tomatoes, you bought lettuce. Then a horse and wagon would come with potatoes. I remember it was fifteen pounds for a quarter, you would buy potatoes. Then they would sell cabbage. People used a lot of cabbage. And the cabbage I think was two cents a pound. You could buy a big head of cabbage. They would weigh it for you, you know. And the Madison Street, they had a street car

running, but it was running with horses. Horses. I mean, there were horse drawn… They didn't have electricity to run the cars. No, no, no.

And as I tell you, you know, when I was twelve years old and we had no school, I got myself a job, because my mother would say to me, [maidala, da vusta kledeleh.] I liked clothes. You gotta go to work. So I used to, when I had ten weeks vacation, I used to look in the newspaper for a job. And then I saw there was a job on Vesey Street. Vesey. You know where Vesey Street is. And there was a factory there. And they had, they made, they had big machines like from here to here, and they made ah, quilting. Padding, for the hospitals, for table pads. It was, so I got a job. So when I got the job, you had to have working papers. You had to go to the Board of Health to get working papers for the vacation. But I wasn't thirteen years old, so I couldn't get working papers. So I went to Madison Street, there was a courthouse. That courthouse was across the street where Louis lived in Madison Street. And there was a notary public there. The name was Leif & Edisky. So I went in there and I said, could you give me working papers? And the man said to me, are you thirteen years old? And I said, yeah. So he gave me a paper, that I'm thirteen years old and I took that paper and I went to get the job. So when the boss saw the paper, he said to me, this is not working papers. You have to get working papers from the Board of Health. So I said, but it says I'm thirteen years. He says, but still, it's not working papers. He gave me back the paper. So I said, give me the job and I'll go during the week and I'll get working papers. So what I did there was, I used to thread the shuttles. You see, it was a big machine. And you know, made zig-

zags. But it had shuttles. So I used to thread the shuttle. And the machines made so much noise. And if I saw a man come in, I used to think maybe it's an inspector. I used to hide in the toilet, in the bathroom. Then I would watch, went away, I would come out. And every time that the boss paid me, I got seven dollars a week. And I worked from eight in the morning to seven at night. Yeah. So he paid me, he used to say to me, you know, you really shouldn't be working here. I could get into trouble because you haven't got working papers. So every week I told him, in the meantime, I worked nine weeks. And then I took, I had one week vacation. The tenth week. So I made eight dollars, so I bought myself a coat and shoes and a skirt and a dress, you know. I liked clothes. And then, in Montgomery Street, there was a lady who had three boys and that lady was a designer for children's clothes. Girl's clothes. So I used to watch her children downstairs so she said if my mother gives her the material, she'll make me clothes. So she used to make me the most beautiful clothes. She made me a pongee suit. And then I used to get dressed up. That's what I said, I used to get dressed up like Astor's pet horse and go to the Bronx. And my aunt used to say, Jeeper, how nice that blouse is. To me, it was, I always liked clothes.

[PAUSE FOR VIDEO PROBLEM]

LEVINE: I would like for you to talk about going on the roof and the song you sang as a child about going on the roo

GROER: (She clears her throat.) Yeah. You want me to start I'll start.

[Sings song strongly and clearly in Yiddish]

LEVINE: Beautiful. Okay. Just give a rough translation.

GROER: Oy. Summer, you went on the roof because it was so hot. You gotta get out of the rooms, they were like so hot it was like in a hole. You felt like you were in a prison. And you wanted to be free to breathe the air. So you went up on the roof and on the roof you put up, you brought a blanket, whatever you brought and you lay down and you fell asleep on the roof. It was like a, a, a paradise. So if you have never been on the roof, you don't know what you're missing. You missed paradise. That's the idea of it.

LEVINE: So when would you sing? When would you sing songs like that? Would you get together?

GROER: Somebody, no, we didn't get together. But somebody who wrote these songs, you know, see people didn't, they used to write about things. Like they used to write about they're a butcher. They used to write about, the women used to have boarders. Mrs. [Smithin] . There was always songs. [Ich bin ein butcherena] My father, ich bin a butcher. Ich [sings rest of song in Yiddish]. The Mrs. Smith Boarder, you know. And then they would sing, like the woman would fall in love with the boarder. (She laughs.) You know, they had songs like that. And

they would have songs, [sings another song]. He's single, he got divorced. [sings more] Wife's there. [sings more] (goes on to sing rest of boarder song in Yiddish).

END SIDE B, TAPE ONE

BEGIN SIDE A, TAPE TWO

LEVINE: … interview with Jennie Groer. And we're going to start with a translation of a song about the boarder.

GROER: Well, years ago the women had to have boarders because they couldn't afford to pay the rent, and they used to cook for the boarders. So they would charge them like, a quarter for a supper and they used to wash the clothes from the boarders. Yeah. So one man was married and he got divorced, so he was going to move out, so when he got divorced he was going to move out, his wife said, why should you move out and look for a place? Be a boarder by me. So he became a boarder by his wife. So he liked it so much, because he said, he can come whenever he wants, he can go whenever he wants, he can do whatever wants because he's a boarder, you see? And so, he's very, very happy and he doesn't have to watch his wife when the butcher brings the meat. He doesn't have to be there. He's very, very happy. And that's why he, and he pays her just the rent, that you're a boarder, and he pays for his supper, and he has this money for

himself. That's the idea. [Ich bin a boarder vy my vife.] And that's a wonderful job, that he's a boarder by his wife.

(pausing) (Niece talks.)

GROER: When I was a kid, I used to go to the Jewish theater. And you know how we went to the Jewish theater? That theater used to give you a poster to put in your window in the store. So they gave you free passes.

FV: So did you see Jacob Adler?

GROER: So I used to go with my mother and father. I was a little, maybe four years old, I used to go to the Jewish Theater.

LEVINE: What do you remember about the Jewish Theater?

GROER: Oh, I remember that every time that they had, when they had a part that they had to shoot somebody I used to think that they were going to shoot, I used to hide under the chair. (Niece talks in the background.) And the [greena kuzinas,] the song went, you know that?

FV: I know they sang it in the Yiddish theater. Did you see Jacob Adler in the Yiddish theater?

GROER: Yes.

FV: And Maurice Schwartz.

GROER: Yes. And Tomashefsky.

FV: And Tomashhefsky. You saw them all?

GROER: Yes.

FV: I did an ….

GROER: Only when I was very little. And Kessler, David Kessler.

FV: And David Kessler. And there was another woman. I don't remember. David Kessler's wife, I think.

GROER: I saw it when I was little. I didn't know anything.

FV: But that's what was entertainment. The Yiddish theater.

GROER: But we only went because we got the passes. The free…

FV: Ah, ha.

LEVINE: Did you hear the…

(FV speaking in background.)

GROER: I used to hear different things.

LEVINE: Jennie, the Yiddish theater. You mentioned the song, [Greena Kazina]. Did you hear that in the theater?

GROER: No. I don't think I heard it in the theater. But I heard the song. And it went like this: [sings Greena Kazina in Yiddish].

LEVINE: Give a little translation of that one if you will.

GROER: Somebody sent for her cousin from Europe, and she came to this country and she was so, her cheeks were so red, and her voice was like she sang, and her feet, she walked like she wanted to dance. And then her neighbor had a millinery store and gave her a job. And when she started to work (she laughs) in the millinery store, and had the job and she started to save a little money, so the cheeks were not so red any more (she laughs). And the feet didn't jump like they did before. It was all together different. But that was the Greena Kuzina.

LEVINE: Is there anything else you can think of about the Jewish theater? Did you go to Second Avenue? Is that where?

GROER: Yeah. Yeah. Now Second Avenue, yeah, it was David Kessler's theater. And the Bowery was Tomashefsky's theater. We went to Tomashefsky's theater. Was on the Bowery. Yeah. I know that. Of course then I was very small. Because later on when my mother had children already, she didn't go. But when I was still an only child, they used to take me. You didn't have a babysitter or anyone. Wherever you went, you took your kid.

FV: Do you remember the Jacob Adler theater?

GROER: Yes.

FV: Jacob Adler.

GROER: Yeah, yeah. I remember. As a kid I remember Tomashefsky, David Kessler, the what do you call it, Adler. They had other ones. They had other ones…. Then when I got bigger already, they had… But I used to go to…

FV: Molly Picon?

GROER: Oh, Molly Picon. I even saw Molly Picon in Mahopac. She lived in Mahopac. And I was in the supermarket with my daughter. With my daughter, she was walking with a wagon with a lady. And my husband went over to her and said to her, you're Molly Picon aren't you? And she said, yeah. So my husband said, we watched you for years and years.

LEVINE: What could you say about her Jennie, about what she was like when you saw her…

GROER: Molly Picon?

LEVINE: … on the stage?

GROER: Oh, she was marvelous. She could do anything. She was an actress. She would sing, she would dance, she would… She'd turn summersaults. She did everything. She was little. She was only about five feet tall. And she was thin. But she was marvelous. Molly Picon, yeah. Yeah. They had all… I used to see that, yeah.

LEVINE: So, how did you meet your husband?

GROER: Oh, that's a story. That's a story, how I met my husband. When I was sixteen years old, I went, it was the Depression. I graduated high school. I went to

Washington Irving High School and I wanted to be a teacher, but my mother wouldn't let me go to be a teacher because in my time, all the teachers were old maids. There was no married teachers (she laughs). They were all old maids. And my mother said, you're not gonna be a teacher because I don't want an old maid. So I wanted to go to college, but I had a brother and my brother said that she has to save that money for my brother

to go to college because my brother is a man that will have to make a living. But I'm a girl. I'll get married. Women didn't work. So, I didn't. So I took the commercial course. I, I did bookkeeping, stenography and typing. I did the Pittman System typing. And I graduated, I graduated in January and I was sixteen in March, in the end of March. So you couldn't get a job. There was no jobs. So I went to the Underwood Typewriter Company. They gave an exam, and maybe it was on a Friday I went. And it was pouring. I remember it was raining so hard, I wore an old coat with a little tam. And ah, they had maybe a hundred people taking the exam. They, they did a little bookkeeping. They, they, you had to type a letter that they gave you in stenography. And the, and you had to be there seven o'clock in the morning. I was there seven o'clock and you were there 'til twelve. It took five hours. And then you had to do some writing, to see your penmanship, you know. And then they, they examined right away and they called out five people, that they had five jobs. And I was one of them. So they told me to go to 12 West 27th Street. I was so green, I didn't even know where 27th Street was. But I found where it was and I went to 27th Street. And I went to 12 West 27th Street. And they gave you a card, you know, to show

that you were sent by them, by the Underwood Typewriter Company. So I remember going in the hall and the elevator came down. It was Hiller Brothers and Hiller I worked for. It was on the first floor. They had windows from the bottom to the top that said Hiller Brothers. So, I was looking at the card and the elevator opened up. And I wore high heels because I wanted to look big, and I stepped on a man, and it was one of Mr. Hiller. I stepped with my heel and he gave a holler. Can't you see where you're going! I got so scared you know, I said, I'm trying to go here. He said, it's on the first floor. I went up. And I came in there and the girl who worked there, she worked there for thirteen years, she was getting married. So I worked under her. So when I worked with her, when I came there, she dictated a letter to me in shorthand, and I typed the letter, and then she wanted me to write the first line in long hand. And she said, you're hired. I'm hired. That was Friday. And I didn't want to work Friday. It was late. But she said, but I was afraid to say that I want to start the next day because then I wouldn't get the job. So I stayed there. So she, they gave me fifteen dollars a week. And that was a very big salary in those times. Fifteen dollars a week. So I worked there for a few months and then the boss called me in and he said to me, you know Jennie, I want you to pay attention to what the girl does, because I want you to take her job when she gets married. And I figured, oh, I couldn't take her job. She worked there thirteen years. I was only there about three months. So I said to the boss, you know, I don't think I'm capable of taking her job. I said, I, I, I, I, I'm only a beginner and she's there… He said to me, let me be the judge of that. So I came home and I was crying. And I told my

mother I'm going to quit the job because I can't take her job, I'll mess everything up. And I can't work there. And my mother said, what do you mean you're gonna quit. You can't get a job. There's no work. And you're making fifteen dollars a week! It was a lot of money. So what happened was, my mother said look, if the boss has enough confidence in you, try it. If it doesn't work out, then he'll fire you. So I took the job and I worked there. And I worked there three and a half years. Yeah. And then I want you to know that the boss wanted to marry me. But the trouble was, I was only nineteen years old and he was forty (she pauses). And I, I, I went out with him, I was in Central Park on a hansom I rode, you know. I went to the theater with him. I went to restaurants with him, but I, I liked him, but he was too old for me. You know, a girl, today, a nineteen year, a twenty year old girl, if she sees a man forty years old if he's rich it doesn't mean anything. But I felt like he was my father, you see. So he took me to his mother's house, you know, and I saw that they didn't want me. I was too young for them. Well, at any rate, my boss said to me one day, Look Jennie, I don't want to rush you, but try to think it over. It's true, I'm twenty years, twenty-one years older than you, and I understand that when you'll be forty, I'll be sixty one. You think about it. And I, I said to my mother, I'll get married to him because I'll be able to do something for my family. Get my mother off the fourth floor. Get her in a steam heat. I only thought of them. And my mother, she was smart. My mother said, Look Jennie, getting married is not like buying a dress. You don't like the dress, you won't wear it. When you get married it's for life. And ah, I was, I was, you know, I was a pretty girl, I was nice looking girl. And we

had a customer in the store, and I had a lot of fellas that wanted to marry me. But my mother didn't approve of them. One was an operator, one was this, one.. One was an accountant, but I didn't care for him. And it's a long story. I wouldn't tell you about, there was one fella that I used to go in the restaurant to eat, and every time he came in he told the boss to call him when I'm there so he'll come down. He was in the fur business. But I didn't like him because he was short and I liked a tall man. He was short and somehow or other I couldn't take to him. It was, he wanted to shoot me. Cause he said nobody will get me, you know, if he doesn't. I had a very hard time that guy. We had a customer across the street. And she had a cousin that was my husband. And his mother, he was an only child. And his mother was a very sick woman and she wanted to see him married. At that time, I was nineteen and he was eight years older than me. So she told my mother that her cousin would be very good for me. So my mother said that she'll talk to me. So my mother, we didn't have a telephone, but she wanted the phone where I worked so he could call me up. I said, Ma, I got so many fellas, I don't know who to marry! I can't. . . My mother said to me, look, what you got to lose? Let him call you. So one day I get a call in the place, and the man says, I'm so and so's cousin, Meyer, and I would like to meet you. So, you know, I wasn't even anxious. I said to him, all right. I'll meet you downstairs. So he said, don't you think it would be nicer for me to meet you in your house. I said, okay. So he came. And I met him, and as soon as I saw him, I fell in love with him. He was such a handsome man. Tall, I have a picture here. He was so wonderful, I can't tell ya. And I went out with him. And I went

out with him six times, and after the six times, he came one Saturday night, and he said to me, you know Jennie, I brought you a little present. I figured he brought me a pin or something. He took a little velvet box out of his, out of his pocket and a little velvet box was a ring. And it was an engagement ring. And he says to me, I bought this for you. And I said to him, I was very happy, but I said to him, how do you buy a girl an engagement ring when you don't even ask her if she wants to get engaged to you? He says to me, if you don't take this ring, Jennie, I'm throwing it in the East River because nobody's ever going to wear this. And of course I put the ring on my finger, and he said to me, you see the difference between the people today, he said to me, I think now I could kiss you. And he kissed me. And that's how…. And then the following day, I met his parents. Yeah. And that's how I got married. And ah, when I got married, you know, I had a table for my boss and his brothers and his sister and the people that worked there. Do you know, that he came over to me, (she laughs) I'll never forget it, about a half hour before the ceremony he says to me, Jennie, you look so beautiful. It's still not too late, you could change your mind. And I got married, and of course I had to quit the job because my husband said, there's only one breadwinner in this house and that's me. Wouldn't have a wife working.

LEVINE: Now, did Meyer come from Russia too?

GROER: He came from Bialystock. He was born in Bialystock. Yeah. His people were Bialystocka.

LEVINE: Did he come as a young man? A young boy?

GROER: That's what told you. He came when he was five years, when this was a church.

FV: Right.

GROER: And I was married fifty six years. Those were the best years of my life. I had a man that was so good to me. He idolized me. Nobody was as pretty as me. Nobody was as smart as me. Nobody was as good as me. Every, and, when he brought, when he came, he gave me the money, he never asked me what did you do with it? Or what…. Nothing. We had a very good life. A very good life. And we had three children. Yeah.

LEVINE: Why don't you say your children's names? What were your children's names?

GROER: My Hindy, my Hindy is Harriet. But she's named after my grandmother. And my mother said, she will never call her Harriet. She will call her Hindy, cause her mother's name was Hindy. So it remained with her. She only signs Harriet. But even her husband calls her Hindy. And then I had Ellen. She was, her Hebrew, her Jewish name was Estherasher. So we gave her a name Ellen. If you remember Ellen McCay, when they had, she married from the McCays. They were from the, where you sent telegrams. And her name was Ellen, and I

thought that was a very pretty name and I named here Ellen. And then I had Bobby. Bobby was Robert. Bobby, I had a very good mother-in-law and I was so crazy for her, that I wanted to have a name for her, but I had Bobby. So they had to change the name. So Bobby is named after my mother-in-law. I had a mother-in-law that was so good to me. She was, if my mother would say one word to me, she would say to my mother, what are you aggravating the child? She knows more than you. Don't aggravate her. She stuck up for me all the time. I have a lot of stories, but I can't tell them. Yeah. My mother-in-law was very good to me. Very good to me. Yeah.

And then when I got married, I lived in the Bronx. Because we couldn't get an apartment here.

LEVINE: Okay, so you ah, you moved to the Bronx because you couldn't get an apartment.

GROER: And my mother-in-law wanted me to live in a nice house with a bathroom, with a bathtub, so I moved in Grand Avenue, I lived. In the Bronx, near the New York University had a place there. So I lived there. But I, it was in a walk up. But I had a modern apartment with a bathtub. Very, very nice. Yeah.

LEVINE: So how did you feel leaving the Lower East Side?

GROER: Oh, I used to come down every day (she laughs). I used to go to my mother-in-law. We used to have supper. My husband had his place in Eldridge Street. And then we used to go back. Yeah, yeah. When I was engaged to my husband I went to Flushing, Long Island, where her grandmother had, Bob's apart, Sam's house. I used to spend the weekend there. I got around.

LEVINE: When you started school, did you know English by then?

GROER: Well, I'll tell you. My mother started to go to night school. My mother was more educated than my father. And my mother used to say to me, I should speak English to her. So I used to try. But when I went to kindergarten, I knew you know, but most of the kids that went there were all foreigners, you know. And ah, I picked up everything very fast.

LEVINE: What was school like? Did you have a like a favorite teacher? Was there anyone that took you under her wing?

GROER: Oh, yes, yes. I have teachers. We had some very good teachers. And I remember that when I went to high school. I graduated, I was only twelve years old I went to high school when I was twelve. And I know that, I belonged to the Education Alliance, to a sewing class. I, you know, I educated myself. But my people, you know, they were foreign people. But they, they understood, my mother understood English very well, but they didn't read English.

LEVINE: Could you say anything about the Educational Alliance?

GROER: Oh, yes. It's still there, you know. The Educational Alliance, I used to go there. They used to, they, for a penny, two cents, they gave you a big schooner of milk with a cracker. You used to go there. And I belonged to a club there. Was a sewing club. I had a sewing teacher. She showed us how to, to embroider, to do things. Yeah. It was very, very good. The Educational Alliance was a marvelous place. They had a roof garden, you used to go on the roof garden. And they used to have sometimes, they used to have music. They had an auditorium. Sometimes they showed a movie. Yeah.

LEVINE: Did you ever go dancing?

GROER: I didn't go dancing. Ah, the Educational Alliance, you would have dancing. But when I got married, I could dance. My husband couldn't. So when we used to go to a wedding, the only thing he could dance was a waltz. But when it used to come to do other things, I used to dance with somebody else. And he didn't like it. So we went to Stuyvesant. They had a dancing class. And we paid. And my husband learned to do the Samba, the Fox Trot and all that. Cause he used to say, nobody's going to dance with you, only me. Yeah.

LEVINE: When you look back on it, you're such a spunky person, do you think the immigrant experience, you were so young, but that your family had coming to a new place. Do you think that had a part to play in your character?

GROER: Hm?

LEVINE: Do you think that something of your personality came out because…

GROER: No, they only, I remember my father used to say, [zi hut da minista kopf….] I have the head of a minister. I have a very good head. He used to say, my father. And ah, I was his favorite. He was, cause I did everything. My mother had to go to court, I went to court with her. And my father became a citizen. He used to come to my house every night and I used to teach him the questions, you know. What they're gonna ask him and what they're gonna say and everything. And for months, he knew everything, you know. Who was the first president and, everything he knew. And when he got to court, he lost his, he couldn't talk. The judge asked him questions. He couldn't answer. And the judge said, well, you'll have to come back some other time. And I was there. And my brother had come from the army. And my brother had a purple, Purple Heart. And when the judge said to my, I said to the judge, my father knows all the answers, he's just so frightened you know. He says, yeah, but you can't speak for him. So when he said he has to come back, I said to the judge, I'll never forget that, I said to the judge, you mean to say that my father isn't good enough to become a citizen of

the United States when his son has a Purple Heart, that he was in the Army and fought for this country? And the judge went ahead and made him a citizen because I said that. He said, you know, he changed his idea all of a sudden and he said, Mr. Strauss, if you son has a Purple Heart, that he fought for this country, you are entitled to be a citizen. So he made him a citizen. That's what I did (she laughs).

LEVINE: Wonderful.

END SIDE A, TAPE TWO

BEGIN SIDE B, TAPE TWO

LEVINE: What else do you remember about World War II? Either the build up to World War II, or what happened?

GROER: Oh, I remember the war. I used to stand on the corner and talk and try to sell the Liberty Bonds. Yeah. Yeah. I did that.

LEVINE: Why did you do that? Who were you. . .

GROER: You know, I was for this country, you know. I, I, and I remember we used to, in the sewing, we used to make dolls, rag dolls to send across to Europe. I, I did those things. I don't know. When I come to think of it (she laughs), I don't know, I was just, and I remember when I went to high school, I took Spanish as a

language. Because Spanish at that time was used a lot in business. And so I remember that the teacher gave us a, a, a poem to study. A poem (she laughs). I'll never forget this. And the poem, if I would study, I would sing it. As a song you learned it faster. So I remember the song was: [Io soy tu Paloma blanca, tu eres mi perchon a tu] and I sang it, and my father, my mother heard me sing and my mother didn't know that I'm studying a song, so my mother said, she only goes to school, she speaks the language already (she laughs)! Yeah, yeah. But we only had Spanish one period a week. Yeah. It wasn't a Spanish, you know. Habla usted Espanol. You know, things like that.

LEVINE: Is there anything else about your…

GROER: The only thing I'm sorry is that my people didn't speak Russian to me; that I would know Russian. I didn't know that. I only know, how do you say, something used to say, you speak Russian. But I never spoke Russian.

LEVINE: How about your religion? As you became Americanized, did your idea about your religion change at all?

GROER: We were kosher. We kept two sets of dishes. We didn't cook on Saturday. And that is in me. You see, I don't cook on Saturday. It's only the late couple of years that I don't ride on Saturday. I used to ride on Saturday. Because my husband, the only day he had off was Saturday. Cause we were in the business

where the whole section was closed on Saturday. So I used to ride. But now that I got old and I feel that I shouldn't be doing that, so I don't do that. You know, let me say something to you. You know, you are not born of your own free will, right? And you don't die of your own free will. But you will be accountable not of your own free will. And there was a man that went to a synagogue. And talked about religion. And he said to the crowd, you're not born of your own free will, you don't die of your own free will, but you will be accountable not of your own free will. And a man got up, a young man got up and said, why should I be accountable not of my own free will. If I'm born not of my own free will and I die not of my own free will. It's a long thing, but you want to hear it?

LEVINE: Mm.

GROER: And he said, let me give you an instance. There was a man that had two daughters. One was very ugly and one had a very vile tongue and he couldn't marry them off. Nobody wanted to marry a very ugly one, and nobody wanted to marry anyone with a vile tongue. So there came a matchmaker. And the matchmaker said, look, leave it to me. I will marry them off. And the man said, oh, it would be a marvelous thing. So the one that was very ugly, he married to a blind man. And the one who had a vile tongue, he married to a deaf man. And believe it or not, they lived very well together. So one time a doctor came from a town, and he said, you know, I could operate on you. I could make you see. And I could make you hear. But it will cost a certain amount of money and they

agreed. So he operated on the man that was blind and the man could see. And he operated on the deaf man and the man could hear. But when it came to pay, they didn't want to pay it. So they went, the doctor went to court. And the judge said to them, look, why don't you want, you made up with him to pay him for your sight and for your hearing. Why don't you want to pay him? And the man that was blind said, he says, now, he says, I, my wife is repulsive to me. She's so ugly. I never knew she was so (she laughs) ugly. And the deaf man said, my wife has such a vile tongue. I can't stand the way she talks. So that's why they didn't want to pay. So they judge said, look, if you don't want to pay him, you don't have to pay him. But you have to go back to where you were before. He'll make you blind and he'll make you deaf. And that they didn't want. So the judge said, the man said, if you value your life so much you don't want to go back to the way you were, then you have to pay the doctor. You have to pay. So he brought out that, you see, you're alive and you want to be alive and you live. But you are accountable for what you have to do. When you go, up to heaven, you are accountable for what you did. Pause (She laughs.)

LEVINE: Now, where did that story come from?

GROER: I read it. I read it and it had a very, a very impression on me. That what you do in this world, when you come to the other world, you have to pay for what you did. No free lunch (she laughs). And so, the Jewish people believe in tzedakah. You know what tzedakah is? Charity. According to the Jewish religion you

should give ten percent of what you earn for charity. You should do that. You know. If you lend somebody money who needs it, you shouldn't take interest from them, you know. So the Jewish people always had a pushkeh. A box. I have it. When you used to light candles you always threw in something for the poor people. And then you know, there's things there, you know, that you have to pray, you have to, so now that my time, my hourglass is running out, I feel that although I always was very charitable, all the time, even when I was a child. I always put a penny in the pushkeh. And when I went to high school I used to walk, I didn't walk to get there because you had to be there eight o'clock. But I used to walk home because I saved a nickel. And I used to walk home with the girls and we used to buy ice cream from a man. A double dip cone for five cents. And if I walked, and an old man came over to me and said, you know, I didn't eat today. I would give him my nickel. And the girls used to say, oh, you're crazy. You're walking to eat an ice cream cone, so you give him… But I felt better giving somebody who didn't eat something than I would enjoy from the ice cream cone. And I've been that way all my life. I mean, I never turn anybody down. I belong to charitable organizations. I always do that.

LEVINE: When you look back on your life, what are your greatest satisfactions?

GROER: I really don't… I was very happy. I mean, I was never, I felt that God has been very good to me. The only thing is that God took my daughter away. But I feel that I was a fortunate person. I never knew that I'm poor or that… I was, I was

happy. I always felt that ah, I'm a fortunate person. And I still feel that God is good to me. Look, I'm living so long. I have seven grandchildren. I have three great grandchildren. My children are all very fine children. They went to college, they all have college. My daughter's a professor. She's an anthropologist in a college. She's married to a scientist that's known all over the world. I mean, I feel that, I, I don't feel that I'm any better, that it's coming to me, that I'm any better than anybody else. But, but I feel fortunate. And when I go to sleep, I pray, I thank God every day for the day. And when I get up, I thank him for the day, and I speak to my daughter. I speak to my husband. I tell him everything that went on. I, I make it, I feel like they're away. But they're not gone. And I even, I told you that my mother-in-law was so good to me. I even, my mother in law, my father in law. I tell you. That's the way I am (she laughs). I don't know. Maybe I'm stupid. But this is something that keeps me going.

LEVINE: And what else do you do, now that you're older? Your children are grown. What's life like for you now.

GROER: Well, I'll tell you see, I'm, I can't walk. Now I don't see. But I still want my own place. Now, I wouldn't live with my daughter in Mahopac. She's not kosher. And I don't think that my son in law, he was an orphan, I don't think that he would be very happy, although he likes me, if I lived with them. And especially, my daughter would have to help me. I would be like a third leg. So as long as

I'm able to function. I'm able to do things myself, I have this girl that comes and helps me. I get somebody to clean up for me. But I'm able to do, my mind is not like somebody that's ninety six and a half years old. I ah, but I don't know how long that'll go on. But I wouldn't like to go to a home. If I have to have somebody, you see, I can't be on Medicaid. If I was on Medicaid, I could have somebody stay with me. Two in help. One for the daytime and one for the night time. But I have a little money. I have a little income. And I couldn't do that. Now, you see how my son is. I wanted to put the money on his name. Course, in order to be on Medicaid, you could only have three thousand dollars. So I wanted to do that. And my son said to me, Mama, you don't do things like that. You have to use your money when you don't… Daddy left you money. You have to live on that money. They never got a penny. It all went to me. And, and when you don't have money, then we'll talk about things. But Mama, people shouldn't pay taxes for you, just because you're giving me money. No. He wouldn't do that. So I can't be on Medicaid. I have to pay my own way for everything. And that's what I'm doing. I pay. I pay $500 a month rent. I pay $220 for health insurance. I pay for a telephone. I'll show you what I wear. I pay for the Lifeline, that if I fell, and something, I press here. This is the thing that I have, that's why I said don't touch. So that's what I do. I'm alone. I sleep alone. And I put this near my bed, you know. I have a telephone near my bed. And ah, I manage myself. You see, I could eat across the street. They have a lunch room. That's a federal program. You could be a millionaire and eat there. But I don't like their food. So sometimes if I'm not cooking I take something

from there. The girl brings it to me. But otherwise, I do it myself. And Sunday, my Bobby, God bless him, comes every Sunday, and he brings me everything that I want. And he, he takes me out for dinner. I go for dinner with him. He takes me to the Pathmark. He goes in and he buys what I need. And when I have to go to the doctor, I go with this girl. She goes with me. I can't go by myself. I call the Access-a-Ride. You're entitled to that. And they come and they pick me up. And ah, only if I have to go with my eyes, my Bobby will take me, or my daughter will take me. But I, I try not to bother. I try to do things myself. I'm used to that, you see. I always had a responsibility so I grew up that way, and that's why I used to play the stock market. I told you. I didn't show Frea, you see, Frea, there's a pillow I want to show ya. You see a pillow? I told her about it. My Hindy was in a, in Mahopac, in a flea market and she saw this pillow. And it's all made, needlepoint. See this picture's also needlepoint, a lady made for me. Yeah. So the woman says, oh, she says, your mother must…. She says, I want to buy this for my mother. So the lady said, oh, your mother must like to do needlepoint, so she said, it isn't needlepoint, but my mother likes the stock market (she laughs heartily). And that's how I got this pillow.

FV: Well, so is that how you made your fortune Jennie? With the stock market?

GROER: I didn't make a fortune. But I told Janet, that when I was young I always said, when you're young, you work to make money. You have to work to make

money But when you get old and you can't work, your money has to work for you.

FV: That's wise. That sure is wise. We have to know that when we're young.

GROER: So, I've been in the stock market. You don't always make money, but the stock market owes me nothing.

FV: That's terrific.

GROER: But now, you see, I used to look at the stock sheet, I told her, I used to buy on margin. I used to do the commodity. I did puts and calls. I did everything.

FV: How about your husband?

GROER: My husband didn't like it. My husband used to say, but he never stopped me from doing anything. He used to say, I don't like to put money in people's business that I don't know nothing about. But didn't feel that way. I felt that I'm investing. You know what I mean? Of course some things weren't so good, but in the long run it's what you did. There was a time I used to buy twenty five shares. I didn't have enough money, you know. But that's what I did.

FV: But you had foresight.

GROER: Heh?

FV: But you had foresight.

GROER: Yeah.

FV: Did we talk about what Jennie's husband did?

GROER: My husband had a store. We had a store. My husband also did a lot of things. My husband had a store in Eldridge Street. Cotton goods. You know what cotton goods is. We sold sheets and pillow cases and we had a partner, my husband had that.

FV: A linen store. Linens.

GROER: Linens, bed spreads, curtains, everything.

FV: There were many stores on the Lower East Side that sold….

GROER: Yeah. That was a whole section.

FV: It was Grand Street wasn't it?

GROER: They sold retail but they also sold wholesale. But used to sell peddlers that was customer peddlers. You know what customer peddlers are?

FV: I'm learning a lot.

GROER: People that didn't have a trade, they became a customer peddler. They would knock at the door, and they would say, we'll sell you sheets, pillow cases, furniture. They sold you everything. And you used to go ahead and pay it out. They would come and collect two dollars a week, three dollars a week. I mean, that's how things were done. My mother, my mother had a pair of diamond earrings. She bought it from a peddler. They would pay out. So the trade was customer peddlers. They used to come with a horse and wagon and we used to charge. I used to make out a bill. And then they used to pay you. But you see, a customer peddler, if he sold you something that he paid five dollars, he had to sell it to you for ten or for twelve. Because he had to make.. So most of the people were customer peddlers.

FV: What was the name of your store?

GROER: The name of the store we had was Groer and Levitsky.

FV: So you had a partner.

GROER: We had a partner because when my husband went in that business he didn't know nothing about that business. My husband was in the dried fruit business. He was a builder. They built four family houses in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn. I mean, he did things like that. So when he went in this business, he had to put in ten thousand dollars and his father and he, they got this partner, who put in only fifteen hundred dollars. My husband put in ten thousand and he put in fifteen hundred, because he was the man that knew the business. So we had a lawyer, who write out the papers, and at that time, Jennie said, you know, after Meyer is working there a number of years, he will have experience, so he should draw more money. But the guy didn't want it. The guy said, we are equal partners. But not to the investment they weren't equal partners. My husband, they drew the same salary, forty dollars a week. Forty dollars a week. But when they, they were in business together for nineteen years and they got along very well. And we made a living. And I used to play the market on the side.

LEVINE: Did you work in the store too?

GROER: No. This was, before, when he got, when we went in the business, Levitsky was the same age as my husband. But he had already two children. He got married, he was very religious. He got married very young. So, he said, you know, your wife will come in and be the bookkeeper. And my husband said, look, your wife don't work here and my wife don't work here. So they had somebody. But I used

to come once a week sometimes to check up, you know. They had an accountant. And they were partners for nineteen years. They were such good partners that on the block they used to be, people used to become partners and they folded up, nobody's like Groer/Levitsky. But one time Levitsky came and he said to Meyer, Meyer, you know my daughter is getting married and my son-in-law cannot work on the Sabbath or holidays. I have to take him in and that wouldn't be good. So Levitsky said to Meyer. You know Meyer, either pay me out or I'll pay you out. And my husband said, you pay me out. And that's how we parted. Yeah. And we opened up -- it's too long to talk. I could talk for days.

FV: We'll come back. (everybody laughs.)

LEVINE: Jennie, just before we close…

GROER: What?

LEVINE: Before we close, if you could say something about what it meant to you to go visit Ellis Island for your cousin's birthday.

GROER: I will tell you. It was something that I couldn't believe it. First of all, I couldn't believe that she did this thing. I, I mean it's unbelievable to me to be in contact with everybody. And we went across the bridge, we didn't even go with the.. And, and, and Bobby wanted to take a chair, my chair, and he wouldn't be able to

take anybody in the car. And she arranged that, that they came with the chair. I don't know. I just felt like it was unbelievable. That people could do things. That I'm nothing (she laughs) to what people could do, you know, I mean, it's something so unusual. And I, I, the speaker, the pictures that I saw, the movie. I mean, I got cold you know, when I saw. Though I didn't see it, but to see how the people were in the, and the people that had to go back. And it broke my heart. And of course I didn't see everything but the place is gorgeous. It's gorgeous. Even the bathrooms are gorgeous. Even had bars for people that are handicapped. I mean it was really something. And the food was very, very, very good. Everything was so beautiful. I couldn't sleep that night and I am still in a fog. I still can't believe it. I told it to my Hindy, and my Hindy says, Ma, cause you don't get around. That's what people… I said, nobody could do what she did.

LEVINE: Jennie say Frea's name.

FV: Say nobody could do what Frea did.

GROER: Nobody could do what Frea did. I mean everything that was done, is unbelievable. That a human being could get in contact and do things like that. I mean, I, I, I would never think of it. Yeah. Yeah. In my book, she's the greatest.

FV: I'll have to make copies of that.

LEVINE: Jennie before, the tape is nearly over. But maybe, is there anything else you want to say before we finish? We've got a couple of minutes, a minute or so.

GROER: Well, all I can say is, I'll say it like my Hindy says, Mama, it's a wonderful thing that Grandpa came to this country and that you came to this country because you would never be alive, nobody would be alive. And I think, you know when I think of this country, it's unbelievable. I mean, what's done for people, which so deprived of everything. I can't begin to tell you. But I will tell you this. The Jewish people were very progressive. And I'll give you an instance. My father when he had the butcher store, we had a family living on the ground floor. And they had come from Europe. And they had a little girl and her name was ah, ah, Machala, Machala. And I remember that she was standing outside, and of course she didn't know English. And she was watching the children play, and her mother kept calling her, Machala, Machala, Machala! And she wouldn't answer. So I said to her, Machala, zy mama [ ], your mother's calling you. She says, I know she's calling me. But [ ] goyish. She didn't know English, but English was to her goyish. She wants her mother to talk to her goyish. So I said to her, your mother doesn't know goyish. She said, she was only about three, four years old, she knows, she knows. I want her to speak goyish to me so I could play with the children. And then she said to me, [ ] Machala. And in goyish she didn't know how to say Miriam. She said, [in goyish esach Midgim].

So even a little kid like that already, wanted… There was no such thing as a linguist in school. You learned. You didn't have anybody speak Spanish or what. No. You did it on your own. I mean you put your feet to the ground. To me that's ridiculous that they have Spanish speaking… I mean, you come to this country, you have to be like this country. English should be the language. You can learn to speak all languages. You don't have to give up speaking Yiddish because… But, because Yiddish is also a language, but English should be… You live in an English speaking country, you should be English. See, you can't become a president, if you're not born in this country. But you could be everything else. You could be a congressman, you could be a… but you can't be a president. A president has to be born in this country. But ah, the opportunities that you have! People, they went to night school, they became dentists, they became doctors, they became lawyers., they became… They made something of themselves. They didn't depend on welfare. No. No. This is the best country in the world. There's no other country like the United States. And I feel that, that I'm lucky to be here.

END TAPE B