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FAGEL RIVKIN
BIRTHDATE: FEBRUARY 16, 1909
INTERVIEW DATE: FEBRUARY 16, 2001
AGE AT TIME OF INTERVIEW: 92
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INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE, PH.D.
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TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: TAPESCRIBE
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POLAND, 1921
AGE: 10 or 11

SHIP: POLAND
PORT:
RESIDENCES:

LEVINE: Today is February 16th, the year 2001. I'm here in Palm Beach, Florida with Mrs. Fay Rivkin, who came through Ellis Island from Poland when she was 11—10 or 11 years old in 1921.

RIVKIN: Right.

LEVINE: And she came—you didn't remember the name of the ship?

RIVKIN: I think my sister told me it was Polsky.

LEVINE: Polsky.

RIVKIN: P-O-L-S-K-Y or K-I.

LEVINE: Okay. She thinks the name of the ship was Polsky.

RIVKIN: I'm not sure.

LEVINE: Okay. And this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. Would you start by saying what your name would have been on the ship's manifest? When you came through Ellis Island, what was your name when you were a little girl?

RIVKIN: My Hebrew name?

LEVINE: Whatever name you went by when you came to this country.

RIVKIN: Well, my Jewish name is Fagel—F-A-G-E-L.

LEVINE: Okay.

RIVKIN: That's why I'm called Fay.

LEVINE: Fagel. And—and what was your last name?

RIVKIN: Goldberg.

LEVINE: Goldberg, okay. And who did you travel with?

RIVKIN: My mother and three other sisters and my grandfather on my father's side.

LEVINE: Now, what was their—what was your mother's name?

RIVKIN: Gittel—G-I-T-T-E-L Goldberg.

LEVINE: And do you know her maiden name? Your mother?

RIVKIN: Yes, sure. Pearlstein [PH].

LEVINE: Pearlstein. And your sisters' names?

RIVKIN: My oldest sister was Emma, next sister was Selma. Then came Fay and my younger sister was Ida. She lives 10 minutes from here.

LEVINE: Oh. And your—let's see—your grandfather's name.

RIVKIN: My father's father came with us.

LEVINE: So his name was what?

RIVKIN: Seimher [PH] Goldberg.

LEVINE: How do you—

RIVKIN: Simon Goldberg is good enough.

LEVINE: Okay. And what—

RIVKIN: He—he didn't live with us. He had a daughter and son-in-law. My aunt came at the same time with us. I had an aunt and her three daughters. Her husband had been America for many years.

LEVINE: What was your aunt's name?

RIVKIN: Magid was her last name—M-A-G-I-D.

LEVINE: Okay. And three daughters.

RIVKIN: And three children.

LEVINE: Right. Now, you said the name of the town you were coming from.

RIVKIN: Drohytchin [PH].

LEVINE: D-R-O-H-Y-T—

RIVKIN: C-H-I-N. I'm not sure.

LEVINE: Okay.

RIVKIN: C-H-Y-N—I-N. They—it was called Drohytchin.

LEVINE: Drohytchin, okay. And that was in Poland. You were leaving—when you—

RIVKIN: It was originally Russian. I think it was Russia when I was born and, as the armies marched and took over, when I left it was Poland. So my nationality had to be Polish.

LEVINE: Okay. And what was your birth date?

RIVKIN: February 16th, '09.

LEVINE: And—and you came through Ellis Island in 1921.

RIVKIN: Well, we—wait a minute. We came here in January of '21. Yes. When we reached America, it was 1921. It was January.

LEVINE: But you left—

RIVKIN: We left Europe in December of 1920.

LEVINE: Right.

RIVKIN: So we came here in January of ’21. It took two or three weeks.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Why don’t you say what it was like traveling? When—do you remember leaving home?

RIVKIN: Somewhat. As I get older, the memory gets dimmer.

LEVINE: Do you remember anything about that? How you left? Did you go on a—a horse and a wagon or no?

RIVKIN: There was no cars then.

LEVINE: So what—

RIVKIN: My—my grandfather had a horse and a wagon. There was no cars in 1920 in Europe—

LEVINE: Right.

RIVKIN: —that I know of.

LEVINE: Right.

RIVKIN: And I—one thing I do remember, my grandfather had to do—he was about 70 years old—and for two or three years he was—had to do forced labor, slave labor.

LEVINE: Why was that?

RIVKIN: Ev—every male available had to give one or two days a week, or three days a week to forced labor during the Polish government, during the Russian government.

LEVINE: What kind—what he was he doing? Do you remember? Did—was he at home? He was living at home but he just had to—

RIVKIN: He was living at home and when they drafted him—so everyday, like, for five days a week, he had to go—whatever they made him do.

LEVINE: Was he technically in the army?

RIVKIN: Huh?

LEVINE: Was he technically in the Polish Army at that time?

RIVKIN: Oh, no.

LEVINE: No.

RIVKIN: It wasn't the army.

LEVINE: Oh.

RIVKIN: Was right for the city or the state or whatever. They—they conscripted every male. Any able-bodied male had to give them so many days a week in forced labor.

LEVINE: Oh.

RIVKIN: They didn't pay him. You were forced to work. But outside of that, the way we made a living—nobody worked in those days. There was no place to go to work. So my father died in World—right after World War I in 1915. And there was an epidemic of either typhoid or cholera; I don't know which. There were—people were dying like flies. And I had a brother, Noah, that died the same week and two little sisters that died, all from the same epidemic.

LEVINE: Do you remember what—what people were trying to do to help people who had typhoid or whatever it was? Were there any kinds of measures taken to help—

RIVKIN: [unclear]

LEVINE: —help them get well?

RIVKIN: Well, they took them to hospitals. When they get sick, it must have been a very infectious disease because people were dying like flies. So the minute they got sick, they took them to hospitals. But I do remember that they all had it in mild form. If it was bad form, you—they were taken—I know I was sick and my sisters were sick. But we rallied within a week. But the older people—that's when I lost my grandfather, my grandmother, my brother, Noah, and—and my father, whose name was Lasa [PH] Goldberg. The same week, practically, they died. They took them to the hospital because it was contagious. But we didn't even know that he was gone, but it was a friend of my mother's, a Polish woman, who worked at the hospital. So she told my mother that my father will be dying because he caught the—he had that disease. And they didn't do anything to

[unclear] to get him, to help him. No medication. They said, "Let that Jew die." They were very anti-Semitic.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Do you remember any other incidents that pointed out the anti-Semitism when you were a little girl?

RIVKIN: Oh, I had a fear of any—anyone that wasn't Jewish.

LEVINE: Really?

RIVKIN: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

RIVKIN: Well, I mean, that—there was an awful lot of anti-Semitism. The Jewish people were in the minority and we lived—I remember we had a beautiful home. My father had bought us a very, very big, beautiful home on the outskirts of Drohytchin. And we rented part of it to a dentist and his family because we—we needed income. And we were the first ones in town to have heat in the wall.

LEVINE: Oh.

RIVKIN: And nobody had it. That's how modern that house was. And I remember it was a white house, beautiful. And the reason we had it rented because we needed income. So we rented it to a doctor and his family. We became good friends afterwards. As a matter of fact, when they left for America they got in touch with us when we first came to Hartford. They went to Chicago.

LEVINE: Now, was this a Jewish family?

RIVKIN: Jewish family.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

RIVKIN: And I remember, as a little girl, maybe five or six, going to one of their daughter's wedding next door.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh.

RIVKIN: And I remember we learned the Kuzulski [PH], was called. [chuckles]

LEVINE: What's that?

RIVKIN: It's a dance.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh. Uh-huh. Can you remember how the wedding was celebrated?

RIVKIN: Oh, yes.

LEVINE: Was it different from here?

RIVKIN: They had the big—very biggest wedding in town. And the little kids—I remember my mother bought us a maid. They sew their own clothes—made us little new dresses. And we were so proud. Her name, I remember was Sarah, I think. Weisman [PH] was their last name. He was a doctor and many of the daughters were in the medical field.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And what did your father do for work?

RIVKIN: Well, he bought and sold horses. He was a businessman. He was trading.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm.

RIVKIN: They called it a [unclear]. He would go to the market and buy horses. There was no advertising then. He used to sell them; I don't know how. Maybe he just—people just knew that this man bought and sold. That's how he made his living. But he died when I was five so I don't remember that much about him. I do remember that when he used to come home, all of us kids would—would [unclear]—we wanted to be near him. So we'd fight each other just to get on his lap.

LEVINE: Was he in World War I? Did he—was he in—

RIVKIN: This was World War I.

LEVINE: Was—was your father in World War I? Was he a soldier?

RIVKIN: When I was born, no.

LEVINE: No.

RIVKIN: No, he was home.

LEVINE: He was home—

RIVKIN: Well, he died at the beginning of the war, 1915.

LEVINE: '15.

RIVKIN: The war in Europe wasn't like in the United States.

LEVINE: I know. Uh-huh.

RIVKIN: The war there started, like, I think 1914—

LEVINE: Yes.

RIVKIN: —'14 and a half. And he died in 1915.

LEVINE: I see.

RIVKIN: The war was still on.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, okay.

RIVKIN: And then I remember when my sister became 14 or 15 or maybe even 16. We tried to go to America. So she and her girlfriends her age got passports. My grandmother came in 1903 so she kept sending us passports. My mother didn't want to budge before then. But after she lost my father and things were so bad, my grandmother sent us other passports for all of us, she decided, "Okay, we'll go." And my grandfather said, "Don't go to America. You won't have food. Who's going to support you?" He was supporting us. But then my sister used to say, "Zeder [PH], don't worry. We'll find something to do." So he really stopped us. But finally, he came with us.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Now, your grandmother—how was it—

RIVKIN: My grandmother was my mother's mother.

LEVINE: Right.

RIVKIN: And the one there was my father's father.

LEVINE: Father, right. Yeah. Now, how come your mother's mother came to this country in 1903?

RIVKIN: She came because my uncles were all here. My uncle—my mother was the oldest of five or six children. My uncle, Hillo [PH], came in 1901; 1902, my uncle, Aaron. They—all my uncles came, the single [unclear]. And then they brought over my grandmother and two or three of my mother's single sisters came with her to the United States.

LEVINE: Hmm. And where did they settle?

RIVKIN: We all settled in Hartford, Connecticut.

LEVINE: Do you know why Hartford—why they settled—

RIVKIN: Well, it was somebody they knew, either a landsman [PH] or a relative. For one reason or another, everybody came to Hartford. I think we—well, my grandmother came for that reason, because there must have been somebody she knew.

LEVINE: I see.

RIVKIN: Otherwise, we might have been in New York. We came to New York.

LEVINE: Right, right.

RIVKIN: From Ellis Island to New York.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

RIVKIN: From New York, we came to Hartford. I do remember when we landed on the ship and we saw the Statue of Liberty and the excitement on the ship. Everybody's—"Look, we're in America! This is America!" You know. As little kids, I—I still remember the joy. We're finally in America! Because it took two or three weeks to cross.

LEVINE: Do you—do you remember if it was morning or when—when the ship came in? Do you remember what you saw?

RIVKIN: I remember the ship came in. We were all at the ship's rail, because my uncle wired that he was going to meet us at the ship. So those little boats came up to the big ship and—well, my uncle's boat came near the ship. He all waved to us and, oh, we were really excited. Then I remember another thing that happened. My mother, when we were in Belgium—was a beautiful city, Antwerp, Belgium. My mother decided to buy a fur coat. You know, she had a few dollars. We sold the house that we were living in. And it was just beautiful. She had never had that thing. Lo and behold, when we get to Ellis Island, they put it to fumigate and shrank it so they had to throw it out.

LEVINE: Oh.

RIVKIN: It was—she was so heartbroken; I just can't tell you. She cried like a baby because all her money was in that fur coat.

LEVINE: Oh.

RIVKIN: And these things, when I think about it, she didn't have anything. I mean, what did she have? An old [unclear]—old [unclear] coat that she got there. This was a fur—actually, a fur coat. And she spent all that money on it. But they took everything and fumigated it. They did not allow you to come into the country without fumigating everything you had.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

RIVKIN: Another thing. I want to tell you what happened to us. My sister, Selma, had a very bad leg. She was wearing a cast and she was on crutches at the time. When she was about five years old—she was very talented and smart in school—one day she told my mother she couldn't walk. There was something in that leg that stopped her from walking. And my mother took her to different doctors and they said they don't know what's wrong. So we were all worried that she wouldn't pass to go into the United States. So my mother told us in advance, "If Selma"—Simma [PH], her name was—"is not admitted to the United States, we're all going back to Europe." She said, "Now, I'm telling you in advance, if she's not admitted, we're not—we're not going to the United States." And that, of course, made us sad. But thank God, she wore either a—a cast or a brace. No, I think then she wore a cast all the way up. And then after we came to Hartford, they took off the cast and she was—she went all through high school in braces, with a brace on it. [unclear]—was it a Jewish women's something—paid for it. My mother had no money. Council of Jewish Women—

LEVINE: Oh.

RIVKIN: —paid for her to go to—all through high school, four years, by cab. And we all used to get in. [chuckles] All the kids used to get in to get a ride to school.

LEVINE: And did her leg heal?

RIVKIN: Oh, well. When she came here she still had the cast. Then a few years after we came, there was an ad [unclear] a very big doctor that—that came to New York for a week or two. We were in Hartford. So my mother paid somebody to drive her to New York and they saw this doctor. And this doctor checked Selma out. And they told my mother she had a tuberculin [PH] bone that caused her not to be able to walk. So he put her in a cast. He put her in a brace and he took off the cast. But it was some frightening thing for us, because if they didn't allow her to come to the United States we'd all have to go back to Europe.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

RIVKIN: Then I remember we were so worried.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

RIVKIN: Because Selma was the smartest one of the four. She was a schoolteacher.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. So—

RIVKIN: She lived in Tom's River, New Jersey.

LEVINE: Oh.

RIVKIN: That's where they were married. They had a big chicken farm with a hundred [unclear].

LEVINE: Ah.

RIVKIN: She married a man who was—I guess had the—they bought a farm after she moved here. When she first married him he was just doing agriculture. [telephone rings] Whoops, excuse me.

LEVINE: We're pausing. [tape off/on] Okay, we're continuing here after a phone call. So—so did this doctor—was there anything that could be done for your sister's leg?

RIVKIN: [unclear]

LEVINE: [chuckles] Did—was your sister's leg—was the condition something that could heal or not?

RIVKIN: Well, it—it was healed afterward. What they did, they—she went back for surgery. And they stiffened the bone so she could walk with a limp. And after a few years wearing the brace, she didn't even have to wear the brace years—this is years later. But while she was going to high school—when she went to college, she was still on crutches and a brace.

LEVINE: Hmm.

RIVKIN: All through high school.

LEVINE: Now, what happened at Ellis Island regarding her leg?

RIVKIN: Well, when they examined her, we were all very nervous. I told you my mother told us that, "If Selma is refused entrance, we're all going back to

Europe." But when they examined her, there was nothing to see, just that she couldn't walk on that leg. There was no sores, no swelling. It was—we found out later it was the tubercular bone after we came to the United States. So they admitted her. But she was in—on crutches.

LEVINE: Do you remember anything else about Ellis Island?

RIVKIN: Oh, not really very much. Just remember when seeing Ellis Island from the ship, the excitement, the—the [unclear]. My God! Everybody was so excited. "This is Ellis Island! This is United States!" Just the excitement. "This is America!" You know, it was just a wonderful feeling.

LEVINE: Do you remember any of the things you saw when you first came to America that—that struck you as something different?

RIVKIN: Well, yes. You know what I was impressed with is the tall buildings in New York. I remember—I said we never had saw a tall building before. And I said, "How do they live like this?" And they said, "Well, they have elevators." I said, "What is an elevator?" Never had elevators. Tell you another thing that I remember about Warsaw. The first time we came to Warsaw we used an indoor toilet, bathroom. We never had that in Europe. So to me—and then you—you pull the plunger and it flushed. Well, as a little child, it was—[chuckles] I couldn't believe what I was doing. I can't describe to you the—the inward feeling. I said, "They go inside the house?" We had to go outdoors in an outhouse. That I remember, that I couldn't believe it. "In the house, you can flush it and go to the bathroom?" [laughs] Things that I remember, the unbelievable things and then the tall buildings. Oh, my God! And then the streets in New York and all the buildings. We didn't stay there but, you know, we arrived at the port.

LEVINE: And then you went to the train station, I guess.

RIVKIN: When we came, my uncle came—

LEVINE: Oh, your uncle came.

RIVKIN: —and took us to—must—must be train—took us to Hartford. At that time, it was a few hours ride.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

RIVKIN: When we got to Hartford, we first lived with my grandmother on my mother's side, my mother's mother. And she had lived in Hartford, Connecticut on Market Street, which was a Jewish neighborhood. The synagogue was not too far, all Jewish people around there. And that's

where we stayed until, I think a couple of years until my mother decided to get a job.

LEVINE: Oh, what did your mother—

RIVKIN: She had to go to work to support the children. There were four girls.

LEVINE: What did she do?

RIVKIN: A laborer. [telephone rings]

LEVINE: We're pausing.

RIVKIN: Unbelievable, the way you got all so hungry.

LEVINE: Right, right. Okay, well, let's go back to Ellis Island again. [laughs] Well, actually, Hartford. When—how—how do you compare the house you came to in Hartford with the one you left in Poland? How did you—

RIVKIN: [unclear] didn't even try to compare.

LEVINE: What would—what would you say? They were—were they very different? In what ways were they different?

RIVKIN: It's a different world. I told you we never had indoor plumbing.

LEVINE: Right.

RIVKIN: Would have to go outside. And we lived in a small town. Drohytchin was a small town; it wasn't a big city. And, well, the area where we lived—and I said we had a nice home and we rented out the larger part of it. And we lived in the smaller part of it.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

RIVKIN: But that's where—how my mother got an income. Otherwise, I don't know how they would have gotten by. But one thing we did have is an orchard with all kinds of food, pears, apples. I think we even had cherries because I remember, as a little girl, getting up early in the morning to go pick up whatever fell on the ground. Like, you know, the ripe apples and pears. And I would take—I don't know whether my lap or I took something, a pot to put it in. And also, we had [unclear] fruit. And my grandfather and my oldest sister, they planted potatoes and corn. So we had our own potatoes. We had enough so they—they used to bag it and put it in a place to carry us for the whole winter.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

RIVKIN: And then we grew our own corn. So we used to have that. But I—I can tell you experiences when the armies were marching.

LEVINE: Oh, okay.

RIVKIN: I was five or six and it was Poland. Now, the Polish Army was knocked out by the Germans. The German Army pushed the Poles out. This I remember distinctly because my mother and my oldest two sister went to hide somewhere. They were raping women. You know, when soldiers came in from another—so that the women were being raped. So my mother and the oldest two sisters went somewhere to hide. A—a friend of theirs was hiding everybody. And I was left as the oldest and my two little sisters and my little cousins, we all lived at the same thing with my grandfather, who was about 70 then. And when a soldier came in, he said—he put us all on a bed and he said to them, "Don't you touch my babies." He protected all of us. That I remember so distinctly because we were all so—so afraid.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

RIVKIN: And I, being the oldest, say, if I was seven or six or whatever, it was a frightening experience.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

RIVKIN: And I remember that to this day, that soldiers were just raping anybody. They didn't know if they'd be alive the next day. And I do remember that I learned a little bit of German. See, the armies were changing so the schools were changing. I learned—I knew a little bit of Russian, a little bit of Polish, a little bit of German, because I was so young. My older sisters were fluent in some of the languages.

LEVINE: Because they would start teaching school in the language—

RIVKIN: Yes.

LEVINE: —of the occupying—

RIVKIN: You had to go to school. So I remember even the looks of my German teacher. They were only there maybe a year or two, and then the Polish teachers. It was—I—I can't describe the kind of life. We didn't know any better. We just accepted whatever came. But the armies were marching. They would push each other. See, the Russians went up to a certain—I—I don't know the name of the town. But the Russians were there. When I

was born, my place was Russia. When we left, it was Poland. The country of Poland conquered—it was called White Russia. They conquered that area. [unclear] was conquered. [unclear] state—

LEVINE: Right.

RIVKIN: I came from that state and they were conquered so we had to go to German school. And when the Germans were knocked out it was Polish school. We really didn't get a good education but wherever we went to school—and then I started Hebrew with my neighbor next door, who was a Hebrew teacher. So I—I know how to read and write Jewish. But I was the only one and my older sister didn't. My little sister, Ida, doesn't know a single alphabet of the Hebrew even, because she was too young. [unclear] in kindergarten so she was too young.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm.

RIVKIN: It was rough. But we didn't know any better. We just accepted our life as such.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. How did your mother feel once she got to this country? Was she—was she glad that she—

RIVKIN: Well, my mother, after my father died, used to cry day and night. I used to find her on the bed crying day and night. She didn't know what to do. She was alone. You don't go to work. And she lost my brother, her son, and two little girls and my father all—all within two, three weeks. So it was very rough on her.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

RIVKIN: Very rough.

LEVINE: Did she—did she adapt to this country? Did—was there a time when she—

RIVKIN: Oh, once she came here, I—I started to tell you, after a while she did get a job in a—in tobacco—

LEVINE: Oh, rolling cig—rolling cigars?

RIVKIN: No, there—there was a factory or a store across the street where they were hiring people to sort tobacco. I think—I think she had to get 'em off the leaves or something. I don't know exactly what she did but she was working then.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

RIVKIN: For a while.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

RIVKIN: Then after a few years, they bought a store, a grocery store and she made a living for us. But when she first came, it was rough.

LEVINE: Yeah. Did she ever remarry?

RIVKIN: Didn't want to. My mother was so beautiful. I just can't tell you.

LEVINE: Really?

RIVKIN: Gorgeous. My mother was a blond. My father had the dark hair. My mother was blond, blue eyed. I have the blue eyes. And she was beautiful with skin—she never used makeup. Her skin was white as snow with rosy cheeks. She was beautiful.

LEVINE: Oh.

RIVKIN: And as I say, I used to say, "I wish I'd grow up to be as pretty as my mother.

LEVINE: Ah, uh-huh. So how was school for you in this country?

RIVKIN: Well, when I—I do remember the first day we went—we were put in an ungraded school, as to grades. My two sisters and I were all in the same room, my older sister, my younger sister. And then I even remember the name of the principal, Henke—H-E-N-K-E—a German women who spoke in German and we understood her because we spoke Yiddish.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

RIVKIN: So it was—this woman saved our life. We didn't understand a word of English. It—it didn't take long because your friends in school spoke English. And as a child, you pick up the language in no time. All my friends were not Jewish in my—from my school. So they used to visit us and speak English. We picked it up, one, two, three.

LEVINE: And how about your—

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A]

[BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE B]

RIVKIN: —languages.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

RIVKIN: She was educated from Europe.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. So—so you went to school and you—how long did you stay in school?

RIVKIN: Oh, I went—I graduated Brown School in Hartford, Connecticut. I don't know what year. Has to be '21—1924. In three years, I graduated.

LEVINE: Great. And then did you go to high school?

RIVKIN: I went to high school for only a year or two. And then I went to a business college. So I learned bookkeeping, stenography and that's what I did all my life.

LEVINE: Oh.

RIVKIN: I'm an excellent bookkeeper. I got my best jobs there. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

RIVKIN: I went about two years to high school. And my mother said, "I—I'd let you go to finish school." Now, my sister, Selma, went on through college because she had the bad leg and couldn't do anything. But she said, "You're going to have to go to work." When I was 15 I got a job in F.W. Woolworth on Saturdays. I was getting a dollar a day or whatever it was, and gave that mother to my mother because she was a widow and she needed income.

LEVINE: And of course, by then—oh, no. It wasn't the Depression then. It was before the Depression.

RIVKIN: Oh, before the Depression.

LEVINE: Right.

RIVKIN: This was in the 1920s.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

RIVKIN: I graduated school 1924. That's way before the Depression.

LEVINE: I see. So then you went to business college for what, a year or something?

RIVKIN: Well, the business school really gave me my—my life's earning. I—I took up shorthand, Gregg. I can do it to this day—and took up typing. And when I got through—when I graduated—the business college took 14 months, I think. And when I graduated, they gave you a diploma and you got a job. And I remember my first job as a bookkeeper with an automotive electrical place. I was the only woman there. I must tell you this story. They're all men. And the bathroom, it was, like, from here across the street. Well, being shy [chuckles] and working with all men, I used to dread passing—the men's work was in the back. Oh, I was very—I used to hold it something until I went to lunch downtown so I could use the restroom there. But I was so shy, just—oh, then they know that I have to go to the bath—[laughter] well, I don't know what possesses your thinking in—in that age.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

RIVKIN: I got over it after a while. But it—it was terrible for me.

LEVINE: Wow.

RIVKIN: And you know, they—the men are used to swearing. And when they saw me sitting at the desk, they'd apologize that they wanted to use the word hell. I never used the word hell; it's H-E two sticks. I never in my life—I thought anybody was so low down to use the word hell. Really.

LEVINE: You said—you said H-E two sticks?

RIVKIN: H-E-two sticks. [chuckles] I—I remember this distinctly. I said, "My God. She just used the H-E two sticks just like that. And she's a girl." Amazed me.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. Were there any ways that you—that you took on that you thought were American? Did—were you trying to be American? Was that something that—

RIVKIN: Well, I immediately felt American.

LEVINE: Oh, you did?

RIVKIN: The minute I started school—

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

RIVKIN: —I felt American.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

RIVKIN: The minute I started school. I told you we were all in a non-graded room. They put one of us in the first—they—they gave us—we were good—I was very good in math. So they gave us a math test. I think they put me in the second grade—second or third. But two weeks—two weeks in the third, two weeks in the fourth, two weeks in the fifth. That's all at once and the next one, until they put you in the right grade, but until you learned a little bit of English—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Uh-huh.

RIVKIN: But you see, because I knew math, it helped me all through my life because I was a secretary, a bookkeeper all the years.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. Did you stay shy all your life or did you change from being shy?

RIVKIN: No, not until I was married. I was very shy. Even when I was dating, I was very shy. It took a lot. The boys used to call me for dates and I'd shy away; I'd make an excuse.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

RIVKIN: I guess I was pretty enough to be called for a date but I was still shy.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. How did you meet your husband?

RIVKIN: At a dance. I used to love to dance. And I went with a landsman. A friend of my mother's had two sons. And they lived in New Britain, Connecticut. So when I—we came—the family came to see my mother and the two sons came with them. So he began dating me and called me for a date. And the—my first date was a—I think a New Year's dance or some occasion dance. And after—I was 15 when I first dated with him. And after that, it gradually—and my husband, Mo, that I married was a friend of this fellow's from New Britain. He brought him along to double date with my sister. You know, Hartford was right near New Britain.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

RIVKIN: I don't know if you know Connecticut.

LEVINE: Yes, I do. Yes.

RIVKIN: You do?

LEVINE: Yeah.

RIVKIN: Well, it's only about 12 miles.

LEVINE: Right, right.

RIVKIN: And the man—the boys from New Britain used to always come to Hartford for dates. How do you know? Do you know Connecticut?

LEVINE: I—I—I used to live in Maine and I always have gone through Conn—

RIVKIN: You used to live in Maine?

LEVINE: Yeah.

RIVKIN: Where? What city?

LEVINE: Tenants Harbor. Tenants Harbor.

RIVKIN: Ten—

LEVINE: Near Camden.

RIVKIN: Near where?

LEVINE: Camden.

RIVKIN: Oh, I—

LEVINE: What do you know in Maine?

RIVKIN: Well, I had—I had some cousins living in Maine but I can't think of the name of the city—after they were married.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

RIVKIN: I had—my cousin's daughter was married to a lawyer from that town. And when I moved to Hartford, this—I told you I had my uncles living there. And their daughters became our friends. One of my oldest cousin—right in Bloomfield, Connecticut married a—she went to university to Storrs, Connecticut. I don't know if you're familiar with that. And she married a dentist from Hartford, Mo Cohen [PH]. Maybe you even knew 'em.

LEVINE: No.

RIVKIN: Her name was Emma. To this day, she calls me on a Sunday. She still lives in Bloomfield, Connecticut. She's 95 years old.

LEVINE: Wow.

RIVKIN: And they're all gone. Oh, her youngest brother is alive. [unclear] youngest brother. There were five in the family. They're—all the others are gone.

LEVINE: Was—was there a big Jewish community in Hartford?

RIVKIN: Oh, yes.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. What was—could you describe Hartford, what—what the—the—

RIVKIN: Well, we had the Emanuel Temple, the synagogue on Friday nights when I was young before—way before I was married. You met boys and girls and you went to services. That's where you met everybody. You know, there's so many ways. But to me, I knew Hebrew; I liked to go to services.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

RIVKIN: I—I forgot most of it. But in those days, I knew it pretty fluently.

LEVINE: Now, did your mother hold on—your grandmother and your mother, your aunt—

RIVKIN: See, my grand—well, we first lived with my grandmother for a couple of years until my mother bought a store. And then we moved from Market Street to Clark Street, which was supposed to be a much nicer location for us girls. And we moved to a heated apartment. I remember it was heaven. We—we didn't have to—when we lived in the other place, we lived in back of a store. And I used to have to get up to make a fire. Otherwise, it was cold. This was when was going to high school. We started—in Hartford, you went in the afternoon when you were a freshman. So I had to get up. My sister, Selma, had the bad leg. Ida was too young. My oldest sister was already for work. So I was the only one chosen to do all the hard work.

LEVINE: So what—

RIVKIN: And when my mother bought the store, I used to deliver all her—[chuckles] all her orders to the customers.

LEVINE: Wow.

RIVKIN: So I—I got around very well. I was out—I used to say, "I'm the only work horse around here." [chuckles]

LEVINE: Well, what did you do when you say you lit the fire? What kind of fire was it? What kind of heat?

RIVKIN: I think charcoal or coal.

LEVINE: Coal, uh-huh.

RIVKIN: I don't know.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

RIVKIN: No, it wasn't the electric thing.

LEVINE: No, uh-huh. Did you—did you have an iceman and a coal man?

RIVKIN: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

RIVKIN: Sure, the iceman used to deliver our ice.

LEVINE: Yeah.

RIVKIN: And the coal man—I remember a quarter of a ton or a half a ton used to go down the cellar.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

RIVKIN: Yeah, those were the days.

LEVINE: Yeah. And then—and then you would take the groceries around the neighborhood?

RIVKIN: I would deliver the—the orders. They would give—they would come to the store and buy things from my mother. And it was all a Jewish neighborhood at this time. And I would deliver the orders. I carried it. And some—you know, this is odd. Some of the people that went to school with me knew me well because I used to deliver their orders.

[chuckles] She said—Aaron [PH]—Hilda Aaron—she moved here to West Palm Beach. This was really something. She's gone now. When she first moved here, she looked me up and we became friends again. We played bridge. I play bridge. We played bridge together.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

RIVKIN: She remembered everything about my mother, the store, everything, because they lived across the street. And we considered them rich—rich.

LEVINE: Why did you think they were rich?

RIVKIN: Well, they had their own home and with a beautiful house, like, up a hill. And another thing, the girls had fur coats, go to high school. They had raccoon coats. The first thing I did when I went to work, I saved up some money and I bought myself a muskrat. I couldn't afford—[laughs] couldn't afford a raccoon. And I remember it was like a—brown or something. But it was cheap in comparison to the raccoon. Raccoons were very expensive then. And the rich were—all wore raccoons.

LEVINE: Huh. Did your mother ever get another fur coat? No? [chuckles]

RIVKIN: No.

LEVINE: Yeah.

RIVKIN: And she cried like a baby. Imagine, to spend all that money and they—they just shriveled it to nothing. Did you ever hear of fumigating a fur coat? That's—

LEVINE: Well, I guess they were very con—

RIVKIN: This was on the ship. They didn't let you off.

LEVINE: Oh.

RIVKIN: Before you got off.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. Well, when you—when you look back on the fact that you came to this country and started another life here and lived your life here, do you think that immigration experience—do you think the fact that you changed countries—and do you think that made a difference in your personality?

RIVKIN: Oh, yes. I'm sure.

LEVINE: In what ways do you think it—

RIVKIN: In every way. I mean, this is a free country. There, I used to be afraid of anti-Semitism. Here, when we came we didn't have that feeling. It was a free country. I didn't come from a free country. You were afraid of the Poles. You were afraid of the Germans.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

RIVKIN: It was a different life altogether.

LEVINE: So, what has brought you a lot of satisfaction in your life?

RIVKIN: Well, my children, my family.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. What was your husband's name?

RIVKIN: Morris. Morris R-I-V-K-I-N. And he came from New Britain, Connecticut. I told you it was 12 miles from Hartford.

LEVINE: Was he born in this country?

RIVKIN: No, he came over when he was about four or five years old.

LEVINE: From Poland?

RIVKIN: No, no. He came from Russia somewhere.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And how about your children? What are they—

RIVKIN: And he was the youngest of five or six.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

RIVKIN: So he—he came over as a little kid. So he really was like an American. But I felt like an American after a few years because all my friends were not Jewish and American.

LEVINE: Oh.

RIVKIN: Doris Hibbon [PH] was Irish. The other one was Harris and she was Scotch. These were my grammar school friends. So I immediately picked up English.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

RIVKIN: They used to invite me to their home and they came to our home. And I'd give them whatever we had in the Jewish food.

LEVINE: And did you have different food—

RIVKIN: Yes.

LEVINE: —with them?

RIVKIN: Yes, immediately. You know, you—when you were a child you adapt so fast. It's just a different—different world. And then you were 10 years old. In no time.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. So let's see. So your satisfaction, you say, came from your family, more or less.

RIVKIN: My—I'm a very strong family person.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

RIVKIN: I have two children, a son.

LEVINE: What's his name?

RIVKIN: Leslie—L-E-S-L-I-E, who is my oldest. And my daughter is six and a half years younger. And my husband was in and out of hospitals all the time. He had two discs removed from his spine. We had to go to Boston to the Lehey [PH] Clinic to be operated on during World War II. There was no surgeon in Hartford that would perform that kind of surgery.

LEVINE: Hmm.

RIVKIN: So one of my sister-in-laws and I drove him to Boston to the Lehey Clinic. And we thought he—they told me he'd never walk again. And he came out like a newborn babe.

LEVINE: Hmm.

RIVKIN: We danced for the rest of our lives. He was a wonderful dancer. He said, "I'm going to fool them." The doctor said, "He'll never walk again." He said, "I'm going to fool them." That's what he said to himself. And he—had very good recuperating powers.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm.

RIVKIN: And at that time, our little baby was only a year and a half old and my son was about seven, eight. He's about six years older.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

RIVKIN: He lives in New York State and she lives in Allentown, PA. She's the one that's visiting with her daughter.

LEVINE: Oh, nice.

RIVKIN: With my granddaughter and my grandson, her husband.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

RIVKIN: And my granddaughter, the one that's visiting, is my—the apple of my eye. She's so bright. She got a scholarship to a university in Israel. So her junior year she spent in Israel. She—she got her master's—when she got her bachelor's it wasn't enough. She wouldn't get married until she got her master's. And she's beautiful and she's my favorite person.

LEVINE: Hmm.

RIVKIN: You know, my daughter was divorced and years ago, she lived in Allentown—years ago, when I came to visit my daughter, she might have been nine or ten years old. And my daughter—but so much in sorrow and trouble between her and her husband getting a divorce, they used to holler at Stephanie. Well, when I visited I took Stephanie around. And I said, "Stephanie, you're not the only one that's suffering pain." I said, "I, as a mother, have just as much pain as you, as a daughter." I said, "It's my daughter." So we became like this.

LEVINE: Wow, uh-huh.

RIVKIN: You know?

LEVINE: Yeah.

RIVKIN: Just telling her how I felt because it was my only daughter.

LEVINE: Right, right.

RIVKIN: She went through a bad divorce. She's remarried now.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, good. Okay, well, let's talk—is there anything else that maybe we haven't talk about? About life in Poland and the—the voyage here and coming—

RIVKIN: Ah, there's nothing—

LEVINE: —to Hartford? And did you work after you married?

RIVKIN: Oh, yes.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

RIVKIN: Well, I worked. I went back to work when my—I had my son six years later. We decided—I decided I didn't want children for a long time until we got on our feet. So I worked for six years. As a matter of fact, I worked till my eighth month in an office right in Hartford. And when he was born, I stayed home until he was nine months old. Then I got a sit-in—live in help for $5 a week. A week. Not an hour, not a—a little 16 year-old girl, Polish, where they came from Holyoke, Massachusetts. So she took care of him. And I didn't start staying home until I was pregnant with my daughter, which is six, seven years later.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh. Uh-huh. And then did you stay in—you stayed in Hartford?

RIVKIN: I lived in Hartford a long time. Well, we moved to West Hartford when we bought our own home. But in Hartford we rented.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. So you moved up—

RIVKIN: Oh, sure.

LEVINE: —as time went on.

RIVKIN: My husband bought a liquor store and he was doing nicely and we were able to move up. And then the neighborhood where I lived in Hartford was changing. Black people were moving in. So we had to get out of there. The neighborhood was deteriorating and I wasn't going to raise my children in that neighborhood.

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

RIVKIN: I moved to a beautiful area in West Hartford. We bought our own home. As a matter of fact, my uncle had lived on that street in West Hartford so I knew the area. And he was a real estate agent. So he's the one that called me and he said, "Fay, if you're interested, I can get you the house next to me," which was two—it was two families and I made it into three families. I rented the downstairs, was six rooms and a beautiful, enclosed porch. And there was three or four rooms up on the third floor, maid's

quarters. So I rented it out. We enclosed it, rented it out. So I had two incomes. But that put us on our feet.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

RIVKIN: That was the best thing I ever did.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So you did what your mother did in Poland. Right? [chuckles]

RIVKIN: [chuckles]

LEVINE: So, okay.

RIVKIN: It was interesting because the woman that rented my house downstairs, to this day, her children are friendly with my children.

LEVINE: Oh, nice, nice. Well, how about life here in—in Florida? You came here after you retired, I take it.

RIVKIN: I came here in 1971—

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

RIVKIN: —with my husband. My husband died in ’82.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

RIVKIN: But after you retire, I—I was very sorry that I retired that young. I didn’t need the money. I could have continued working and gotten a much bigger Social Security. But I went to the Social Security office to get advice. I might have been 60 at that time. I said, “What do you advise me? I can retire at 62 or wait until 65.” And I told them my age at the time. And they said, “People don’t live until 70s.” I never forgot that. They said, “You retire the minute you reach 62 because then at least you might have a few years.” She said, “People don’t live until 70.”

LEVINE: Wow. She wouldn’t say that today. [chuckles]

RIVKIN: No, not today.

LEVINE: [chuckles] Right.

RIVKIN: But—

LEVINE: Yeah, uh-huh.

RIVKIN: —this goes to show you—

LEVINE: Yeah, right.

RIVKIN: —that I got the wrong advice.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

RIVKIN: So I retired at 62. That's why my Social Security is very small.

LEVINE: Well, how about your life now? How is life for you now?

RIVKIN: Well, until recently, I was active—I was always an active person. So I was very active. I was president of American Jewish Congress Chapter, Hadassah and all the Jewish organizations, very involved with meetings. Then I started a—oh, I think it was here or maybe it was in Hartford. I started a—a book review club. We used to meet at my home. I would give reports. I was active. I just couldn't stay home and do nothing. I am not one to waste my time.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

RIVKIN: I do a lot of reading now that I'm older. I'm reading a book that's history of the Jewish for 2,000 years. My son bought it for me for $30. He visited me recently. It's like world history. It is just—I can't leave it alone.

LEVINE: Wonderful.

RIVKIN: Yeah. Well, I—I'm a—my greatest enjoyment is to relax and read.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. Okay. And is there anything in particular you're looking forward to?

RIVKIN: I hope I live long enough to see some happiness for my children. That's my life because I live alone. My daughter wants me to sell this—I own my apartment—and move up near her. And she thinks I should go into a retirement home. But I—I haven't really made up my mind to do that because I'm getting so I can hardly walk. I go down to the mailbox and back. I have osteoporosis at the end of my spine. So it's—and between this—this is because I had a mastectomy. I have to wear a prosthesis. So I've plenty of sores.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm. Uh-hmm.

RIVKIN: But I weather the storm. They always say, "Fay, it's your outlook." I say, "Well, maybe."

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

RIVKIN: I just thank God everyday for every day. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Wonderful, wonderful.

RIVKIN: Because when you reach my age, you don't know what tomorrow will bring at any time, especially when you get older.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

RIVKIN: I don't—I—I used to go to a clubhouse a lot. I don't go very frequently now, because I would need—I can't walk. So I would need a ride back and forth. And the women wanted $10 to just take me to the clubhouse and pick me up to see a show. Now, that doesn't make sense to me.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

RIVKIN: [unclear] to movies and whatever's on television.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

RIVKIN: And once in a while, if my children come, then we'll go to a movie outside.

LEVINE: Right. Okay.

RIVKIN: As I said, my daughter is visiting now. It's a pleasure. She does all the shopping. You see these two. That's my granddaughter's and my birthdays.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh.

RIVKIN: And my—my son-in-law, my daughter's second husband, sent it.

LEVINE: Very nice.

RIVKIN: He's not Jewish.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

RIVKIN: He didn't convert because the children were—he has three children from his first marriage and she had the two. But he's a very fine man.

LEVINE: Good, good. Okay, well, is there anything else you'd like to say before we close? Is there anything else you'd like to say about this country, about coming here, about your life experience?

RIVKIN: I'm—I'm an American. What can I tell you? I went to school here. So I—there's no difference by—whether I was born here or not, doesn't matter. As you know, when you speak a language.

LEVINE: Yes, okay. Okay.

RIVKIN: And you know, I told you I went to secretarial school. And that was very important because the pronunciation of words helped me tremendously.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm.

RIVKIN: You know, when you—when you have to do it in shorthand, you must pronounce it correctly. Otherwise, you can't write it out. So that helped me a lot.

LEVINE: Oh.

RIVKIN: I don't know if you ever realized.

LEVINE: No, I never did. That's interesting.

RIVKIN: When you—when you do shorthand, you have to pronounce it properly. Otherwise, you can't write it out.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. Okay. Well, I want to thank you for a wonderful interview.

RIVKIN: Yeah.

LEVINE: I'm speak—

RIVKIN: I'm enjoying you too.

LEVINE: [chuckles] Oh, good. Well, I'm speaking with Fay Rivkin, who came here in 1921 with her sisters and her mother and her grandfather.

RIVKIN: With my mother and my three sisters and my grandfather.

LEVINE: Right. And your aunt and her—and her three children. Your aunt and her children?

RIVKIN: Right.

LEVINE: Right? Okay.

RIVKIN: And you know, the first thing I did was become an American citizen. The minute I was of age I immediately went to get my citizen papers on my own, because my mother did—I don't know if my mother ever did become a cit—maybe she did years later after she went to school. That's the first thing I did the minute I was allowed to become a U.S. citizen. And I was very active in politics here.

LEVINE: Oh, really?

RIVKIN: Oh, sure. I love politics. I would—I was driving—whenever we have an election, since I was about 18, I worked at every election. Yeah, I would be a paid—paid worker. So I would pick up the people, bring them to the clubhouse. We voted at the clubhouse. And everybody on my street knew me. I'd call up. "This is Fay Rivkin coming to pick you up to vote." I made sure they voted.

LEVINE: Ah, uh-huh.

RIVKIN: And my neighbor on the corner—there aren't too many of us left—my neighbor on the corner said, "Fay, you and I are"—and one more that's left on the street—she said, "I still remember how you—you called me to come up to make sure that I vote."

LEVINE: Wow. Well, I guess it was very important to you to—having come from a country where you couldn't—

RIVKIN: Well, it was important because I—we never had that in Europe. And here, when you think of Pat Buchanan—I don't have to tell you. He's such an anti-Semite. I mean, when you think of people like that that can get in, you have to get active. And I—I can show you a letter from—I have a real good friend in Congressman Tom Lantos [PH] in Washington. And I—just sent me a picture of him and his family. He is also European born. He came from Hungary. And he's a U.S. congressman. He's a brilliant man. He was just nominated for something big. He's—he—this is his second or third term. The first term when he was running for election I sent him, like, 10 or $15. So immediately, we became friends. And then he sent me a letter telling me—of course, Rivkin—he knows I'm Jewish. And he's Jewish. Lantos doesn't sound Jewish—Hungarian Jew. He sent me a letter about his life. He said, "I know—I feel close to you because," he said, "I went through similar experiences." He's my best friend.

LEVINE: Oh, nice.

RIVKIN: I know I'm—I must show you his picture.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, we're going to close here.

RIVKIN: Yeah.

LEVINE: I thank you for a lovely interview. And we are signing off here.

[END OF INTERVIEW]