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JAN DE RIDDER

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LEVINE: Today is February the 21st, the year 2002 and I'm here in Riverview, Florida with Mr. Jan—J-A-N—De Ridder, who came from Belgium and made several attempts to come into the United States and legally came in here in 1955. At the time of this interview Mr. De Ridder is 78 years of age. And this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. If you would start at the beginning, Mr. De Ridder, and say your birth date and where in Belgium you were born.

DE RIDDER: Well, I was born in March 18, '23 and I come from Antwerp, Belgium.

LEVINE: Okay. Did you live in Antwerp the whole time you were growing up?

DE RIDDER: Yes, my whole young life. Yeah.

LEVINE: Okay. And why don't you say your mother's name and her maiden name?

DE RIDDER: My mother's name is Anna De Backet [PH].

LEVINE: How—how do you see De Bucket.

DE RIDDER: De Bucket, C-K—B-A-C—yeah.

LEVINE: Okay.

DE RIDDER: C-K.

LEVINE: Okay. And your father's name?

DE RIDDER: Franz—Fr—Franz--Franz—

LEVINE: F-R-A-N—

DE RIDDER: Yeah.

LEVINE: —Z?

DE RIDDER: Yeah, regular Franz.

LEVINE: Franz.

DE RIDDER: Franciscus [PH], yeah?

LEVINE: Oh.

DE RIDDER: Yeah.

LEVINE: Franciscus. Okay. And do you remember any of your grandparents?

DE RIDDER: Yeah, my grandfather's name was Joseph [PH] De Bucket. And my grandmother was—for short, they called her Nellie. And the real name, I believe, was Petranella [PH].

LEVINE: Ah.

DE RIDDER: Yeah, my grandmother's name.

LEVINE: Do you have memories of them from when you were a little boy?

DE RIDDER: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. I remember them real good. Yeah.

LEVINE: What—what are the things you [chuckles] remember most about what they did or what they did with you or their personality?

DE RIDDER: Well, they—all they—they were always [unclear], you know. [chuckles] He liked to teach. He's in all these things. You know, my grandmother said, "There he goes again with the [unclear], you know." Little—little things like that. And he—in his younger days, he had—he was always talking about pigeons. That was a big sport in Europe. It's also a big sport in Italy and France and, you know, you could play for money with pigeons. The pigeons, they all—they all had bands on. And then they gave 'em—in transport, they sent 'em to the neighboring country, and then on Sunday morning everybody watching for the first pigeon to come home and win all this money, you know. And my grandfather had a—a—well, we don't call it [unclear] one time. But everybody would bring those pigeons and he ran it.

LEVINE: Oh.

DE RIDDER: You know, so he made them quite a bit of money with that. And he also was, what do you call, a first-class tailor. And all his—he had a—oh, my God—at one time I believe they had 10 children. And they were all tailors, the woman, the boys, everybody.

LEVINE: And your grandfather was a t—when—when you say first class tailor, what—what does—

DE RIDDER: That—

LEVINE: —mean?

DE RIDDER: A first class, that means he would make—instead of making three suits for hundred dollars each, he would make one suit and you paid \$300. He was known for that. You go there, you're going to pay through the nose but you get a suit.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DE RIDDER: You know.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DE RIDDER: That was a first class tailor in—in my day.

LEVINE: And then did he teach all of his 10 children?

DE RIDDER: All his children. You see, they had these big tables where they sat on, cross legs. They did it in those days. And everybody's sewing,

you know. I remember. My grandmother and all the children, everybody. They're all good—what should I call, a—

LEVINE: Seamstress.

DE RIDDER: Seamstress. The boys too. The boys—I remember some of the boys making the suits for their wives.

LEVINE: This would be your uncles.

DE RIDDER: Ah—

LEVINE: Your uncles?

DE RIDDER: Cousins.

LEVINE: Oh, your cousins.

DE RIDDER: They became cousins.

LEVINE: Well, no, wait. Y—was it was your mother who was the child of your grandfather who was the first class tailor?

DE RIDDER: No.

LEVINE: No.

DE RIDDER: My—my [unclear] was—like, my grandmother's husband, an outsider.

LEVINE: Okay.

DE RIDDER: Yeah. I don't know if I say that properly but—

LEVINE: So in other words, did—did either of your parents know how to be a tailor?

DE RIDDER: No.

LEVINE: No.

DE RIDDER: No.

LEVINE: Oh, so it was the generation before them?

DE RIDDER: Yeah, yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE RIDDER: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE RIDDER: [unclear] say that properly.

LEVINE: Yeah, okay.

DE RIDDER: Yeah, yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah.

DE RIDDER: Yeah.

LEVINE: So they were—

DE RIDDER: [unclear]

LEVINE: —tailors and then—and then what did your—this is on your mother's side, you're talking about?

DE RIDDER: Oh, my grandfather's side. Yeah, my mother's side, the—

LEVINE: Your mother's side.

DE RIDDER: —the De Bucket's were my mother's side. Yeah.

LEVINE: So then your mother, did she have a profession or was she—

DE RIDDER: No, she—

LEVINE: Or she was a housewife.

DE RIDDER: She was a housewife.

LEVINE: Right. Uh-huh.

DE RIDDER: Housekeeper and a good cook, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE RIDDER: In those days, everybody cooked then, you know. Women all got together. They all could sew unbelievable good. They all—knitting

and crochet, you know. I still have some in my house, from crochet works and, you know.

LEVINE: Sure, yeah.

DE RIDDER: They were all good. And that—somehow, that ran in the family, you know.

LEVINE: And how about your mother? How would you describe her as—when you were a little boy growing up, what—what kind of a mother was she? What kind of temperament was she?

DE RIDDER: Oh, a—a wonderful mother. Wonderful mother. We could do a little bit what we wanted with her, you know. And she always would take our side against Dad. Dad was more discipline than—Dad was discipline. Unbelievable. Unbelievable. Th—but she would always take our part, you know, sticking up for us, you know. Yeah.

LEVINE: What—what would your father be strict with you about?

DE RIDDER: Everything, everything. Discipline, unbeliev—and he was not afraid to hit his children. That was a customary thing in those days. In our schools, we got hit too by teachers. And then twice a month we had nuns, all the sisters, nuns—

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE RIDDER: —that were professors in the field. They would come and teach us and, if you didn't watch out, everybody got smacked by those women.

LEVINE: [chuckles]

DE RIDDER: Those nuns. You know.

LEVINE: So—

DE RIDDER: But—but you learned with them, you know. You didn't learn it, you didn't go home. You stayed after school. Not like here, you go home at three o'clock, you know. You stay in school till five o'clock.

LEVINE: And what did you have to do when you stayed after?

DE RIDDER: Special—special work, homework. They give you more—more—more schoolwork to do, you know, or just lessons to write the—which you're supposed to know, you—you know. You write all those down and four or five more.

LEVINE: So did you go to a religious school? Was it a religious school or—

DE RIDDER: Well, in—Belgium was more or less half, say, Catholic in those days. And most of the schools were. And then I go—went also in what— [unclear] parochial school.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DE RIDDER: The—they were—in the morning you just say [unclear] this and that happened. That was it in the religion way. We didn't really pray then. But they did ask you if you go to church once in a while. And somehow, you could build up points by saying, "Yeah, I was there," you know. And—

LEVINE: Were you? Did you go to church?

DE RIDDER: If I couldn't get away from certain things, yeah.

LEVINE: [chuckles]

DE RIDDER: But now, my mother sometimes would say, "Instead of going, you know, around the church, it's better you go inside once in a while."

LEVINE: [chuckles]

DE RIDDER: You know, it's—it's—"It don't—might do you a lot of good," she says. And then my dad never did go. But in—in our household there was lot of little crucifix hanging there. And my mother had a big statue of Mary, you know, because she was not—nobody really prayed in our household. But my mother would sometime say a little prayer for Mary. I said, "Why didn't you do that for God?" She said, "Oh, the—she's Mother." If he ask her to do something he'll—"Don't—don't you do things for your mother?" she says. You know, said, "Okay."

LEVINE: [chuckles]

DE RIDDER: That was her—our—our—our thing. Yeah.

LEVINE: Oh. What did your father do?

DE RIDDER: Oh—

LEVINE: In Belgium?

DE RIDDER: My dad was a big shot, the bi—the number one big shot in General Motors—

LEVINE: In Belgium.

DE RIDDER: —in Belgium. Yeah.

LEVINE: Ah.

DE RIDDER: In charge of 24 departments and so many [unclear] people. They—I wasn't even 18 years and he—at times, he let me work there, which was against the policies, you know, the insurance codes and everything. Oh, big wheel, big wheel. But I was the scariest one of the whole plant of my dad, because if you would stop 10 minutes before time and my dad happened to come through the region, then everybody would say, "John, your Dad!" And that way, I change my shirt and all these things, you know, and make believe I'm still working, you know. Oh, no exceptions for me, you know. Discipline, dictator.

LEVINE: Hmm.

DE RIDDER: Dictator. Unbelievable.

LEVINE: Did you have brothers and sisters when you—

DE RIDDER: One brother.

LEVINE: —were growing up?

DE RIDDER: One brother. He's—he's a Canadian.

LEVINE: Oh. And h—was he older or younger?

DE RIDDER: Younger, eight years younger.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE RIDDER: Yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah. So what did you do for fun when you were growing up? What do you remember as being enjoyable?

DE RIDDER: Oh, swimming and I was in a gym. I was a turner. I was—

LEVINE: A gym—gym?

DE RIDDER: —body—body building. A gym. Yeah, a gym is different than over here. Over here, you say—

LEVINE: Gymnastics.

DE RIDDER: Yeah, gymnastic. Yeah, gym—that—that—

LEVINE: Right.

DE RIDDER: Then the barbells and—and, say, a gym over there, you see ladders and sticks and big ropes to climb on and horses to jump over. And we don't have that over here because we're afraid people get hurt, I—I believe. Our gym is to—to be basketballs in it, to be [unclear].

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. So most children did gymnastics over there.

DE RIDDER: Oh, all these things. Oh, yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE RIDDER: Also, in the woods, in the—in—in the woods, in the pine tree woods, they are famous for—for pine trees over there. And there, sometimes we go almost all [unclear]. And the girls over there, not—not—not afraid of one another. Not afraid.

LEVINE: You mean doing gymnastics? Or not—

DE RIDDER: Yeah.

LEVINE: —in—uh-huh.

DE RIDDER: Sometimes.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE RIDDER: In—in the open in the sum—

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE RIDDER: —in the summer. Yeah. I remember that. And then bicycles races as youngsters. We didn't have no racers, of course. We could not afford that but we made a racer out of whatever we—bike we had. We always—we all had, like, growing up, two, three bikes. That was our pride, you know. Not like we do with cars today, you know. Yeah. And the—the people in the towns, they would sponsoring

our—our races and all this thing. They—they gave out prizes. And the—there was very nice living in these communities, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE RIDDER: People all, like, doing things for—especially for the—for the youngster, the kids, you know.

LEVINE: Yeah. Well, can you think of any attitudes or values or things that your mother and father tried to instill in you growing up in Belgium?

DE RIDDER: Well, our goals were more or less set. In school, we—we—when we came over, we had to finish our studies. You don't go outside or you don't do nothing unless you're finished what—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DE RIDDER: —the teacher had given you. And then outside the—growing up, we were all more or less prepared for marriage, you know. As youngsters, we all knew that some day, maybe at a young age, we would get married because you don't leave your home until you get married.

LEVINE: Ah.

DE RIDDER: You can stay home till your 30 or 35 years old. If you don't marry before that time you stay with your parents, because was so interwoven, was real—real nice, so to speak, because now I can look around and see dozens of people. They all live by themselves. You know?

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DE RIDDER: And they could have stay with the parents if they would have been over there, you know.

LEVINE: Yeah. So did you—did you expect to do that, to marry young?

DE RIDDER: More or less, yeah, because financially, my parents would have helped me, you know, pushed me a little bit, see?

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DE RIDDER: Yeah. And then, of course, because of my dad I would have a nice big job from General Motors, not because I was qualified for it but I had a good push wagon, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. So—so how long did you stay in school before you left to—to work?

DE RIDDER: Oh, till—till I finished my school in—what was that—18?

LEVINE: Oh.

DE RIDDER: Yeah.

LEVINE: Okay.

DE RIDDER: Yeah, my regular school.

LEVINE: You finished school.

DE RIDDER: Finished regular school.

LEVINE: And then did you go to—you went then to work in General Motors? Was that your first job?

DE RIDDER: No, not in—not in those days. First, I had to learn a profession. Then I had to—profession. I didn't know what to do in those days. You know, a young man, I couldn't make up my mind. So I went to work. My uncle—my dad had a—one of his brother was a contractor in—in woodwork in new buildings. It's a little bit different than we have today. And he had a lot of machinery and a big tool shop. There I went to work first. And then everybody said, "Oh, John is going to become a carp"—yeah, a carpenter. A carpenter.

LEVINE: A finish carpenter.

DE RIDDER: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE RIDDER: And then I went—I went more or less in the direction of furnitures.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DE RIDDER: Yeah. And I learned to work in all this machinery and I worked in shop, things and everything. It seems I became real good in that. But then—then my dad die at a young age. And then my uncle, which had no children, was allowed somebody from the outside to bring in his profession. And that was diamond cutting. So then I became a diamond cutter as a young man.

LEVINE: Hmm.

DE RIDDER: But as a young man, sitting there eight hours a day on the same table and this little machine, you know, [unclear], that—that was nothing for me. Big money. A—a—a profession a lot of people are proud about. “I’m—I’m a cutter.” You know, grinders. You know?

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DE RIDDER: Diamond grinder. But that was nothing for me. That was nothing for me. So I gave that up. And then I done a few odds and ends and then I—each time I wound up back in General Motors. And then eventually—eventually, the war came. And the war came and I was 14 years old.

LEVINE: Oh.

DE RIDDER: So then was all—all real fast in those days. That was—or whatever I say I was doing, learning as carpenter, learning a diamond cutter, that was all up until the age of 14. After that, I—I still went in. They knew their little bit, you know. I became real good in carpentry though because that was something I wanted to do, you know. But then—then that was the end of everything. The war came. And then I wound up—the Germans took the country.

LEVINE: Wait. We’re going to pause here. [tape off/on] Okay. So, now—

DE RIDDER: Where was I? Where was I?

LEVINE: Your daughter, Martha, has arrived at Edward’s and we’re going to continue. Okay.

DE RIDDER: Well, the war—the war came.

LEVINE: You were talking about the war. Now, what do you remember personally about the war?

DE RIDDER: Oh, the war changed everything. I went—I went in the—in—in an evening school for French, which is a necessary thing where I come from, to learn the French language. Everybody did. And—and to learn a—to learn a trade. And that was all free. The government paid for everything. And I—I did—times during the war I was in the schools.

LEVINE: Now, wait. Were these schools because the war had come?

DE RIDDER: No.

LEVINE: Is that why?

DE RIDDER: No.

LEVINE: Oh, no. You would have done that anyway.

DE RIDDER: I would have done that anyway. Yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah.

DE RIDDER: And then I—I—since I had chosen the carpenter's field that time, I—I have three years school of architect.

LEVINE: Oh.

DE RIDDER: Three years school. And one more years, maybe I woulda had my papers so could I be graduated. But the war was throwing everybody from left to right, you know. And then all of a sudden I got tired of Belgium. I wanted to go see Germany because all the people were going to Germany and talking propaganda, pub—publicity, whatever, how good it was and how nice it was and the mountains and this. And they would come back with the food, which they had—the Germans had stolen in Belgium. And we were allowed to load up our suitcases and bring it back. [chuckles] You know.

LEVINE: So who was—who was saying all this about Germany and how good it was?

DE RIDDER: The people who came back.

LEVINE: Oh.

DE RIDDER: You know? The—I had uncles who went over there and then came back with suitcases ma—say, for instance, with flour so we could bake a—now, remember, there was no food. Food—a loaf of bread was a week salary. That was the timeline then. Everything had to come out of the black market, you know.

LEVINE: Yeah.

DE RIDDER: So I don't know if that matters if I say that.

LEVINE: Yeah. Well, then, okay. So then you went to Germany to see for yourself?

DE RIDDER: Well, by that time I was back in General Motors. And over there, they were getting rid of all the people. They all had to go to Germans. At first, they started with the single men and then the—the married one without children, then the one with one child and then with two child till finally, everybody—there was a lot of work but you had to work for the German Commandant 2, they called it, a headquarters, see. So now, first I got my letter that was—by that time, it was, I believe, '42. The war broke out in '40. Never forget it. And then—oh, first, we all had to leave Belgium. We had to go to Ostend [PH]. And there the English ships were waiting for us to take us across the channel, the North Sea, to—to England. And they would—had to go in the army. And whatever they were going to do with us, you know, after that.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DE RIDDER: But—and by the time we got to Dunkirk the Germans were there with bombs and the English were—they were—and they—they blew up the whole city at first then. Maybe you seen it on the movie or something like that.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DE RIDDER: So that's where we were at that time. And then there were the English, the French, the Hollands, the Belgiums, the—the Germans [unclear]. And finally, when the Germans came in [unclear], then everybody disappeared, you know. Yeah.

LEVINE: Hmm.

DE RIDDER: So—

LEVINE: What was your feeling at the time abo—about the war? What—w—how did you think about it or feel?

DE RIDDER: Well, a—as a young man first, I knew it was something enormous something, but I—I—I—I still was too young, I would say. It—it was a—a big adventurous thing, though.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DE RIDDER: Used to all these [unclear] and—and grenades and rifles laying along the road, you know. But then all of a sudden, now [unclear] all the

dead people, you know. So that began to change your feelings about certain things, see. You know?

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

DE RIDDER: And then I—then I—then in '42, General Motors gave me my first letters, go to Germany. I had two choices. And I told the city of Yana [PH]—it's called Jana—Jana Touringa, Weimart [PH]. It's in Russian section. And there are [unclear] plants, factories of—you ever heard of Carl Zeiss [PH]? Carl Zeiss income, famous for his cameras.

LEVINE: Oh.

DE RIDDER: Very famous, this—the—the—the glass and everything. Very famous all over the world, Carl Zeiss.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE RIDDER: And I—I happened to work in that plant.

LEVINE: Oh.

DE RIDDER: Now—

LEVINE: Where was that?

DE RIDDER: In Jana.

LEVINE: In Jana, uh-huh.

DE RIDDER: And Jana is in—in—in the county of Weimart, I believe.

LEVINE: Right.

DE RIDDER: Weimart.

LEVINE: And did you know that you were going to work there when you went to Jana?

DE RIDDER: Yeah, but I didn't know, of course, the [unclear], anything like that. I learned about it when I was over there.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DE RIDDER: And I was—the mountains, they were like big hills. And they had this big plant in the middle with four towers. And there you could find

Germans, people who—that had to go in the war. Don't be—don't have to be in the military. And you could not do it in Germany. Even if you had no arms or legs, you still had to go in the military. Well, there you found people because they were not just tradesmen; they were artists. They could make things so—and they were sitting with the families in these—in these big towers.

LEVINE: And were they in the factory making the cameras? No.

DE RIDDER: Well, not really. Maybe not just cameras. They were the glasses. They were also making these glasses for—for periscopes, for submarines.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-hmm.

DE RIDDER: See? This kind of precision, kind of things of machinery. And at night, they let out these big—big [unclear] of cables, you know. The whole thing, you know, so you couldn't even come close to these areas, you know.

LEVINE: So they were specialized in—in what the—

DE RIDDER: Oh, yeah.

LEVINE: —Germans wanted—

DE RIDDER: Yeah.

LEVINE: —to have made and—

DE RIDDER: Yeah, yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Yeah. So you saw them there when you went to Jana. You saw these artists—

DE RIDDER: Oh, yeah.

LEVINE: —making all these—

DE RIDDER: Oh, yeah. Well, the—[unclear] sometimes they were allowed to go someplace and they had all the guards with them, you know, because they could pass secrets out, you know. You know, to—

LEVINE: Oh.

DE RIDDER: —to agency. They could not—they gave them no opportunity to get contact with anybody. So they took them with their wives and children wherever they want to go. Or they had—they—they were like—I don't know how to say—there was a place called One Sea [PH]. That was like a small ocean. You know, you can go there, see what—but these people were always separated from everybody else.

LEVINE: And that's why they were living in the towers?

DE RIDDER: In—in this big plant—

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE RIDDER: —where the four towers were.

LEVINE: Right, uh-huh.

DE RIDDER: And I worked in the plants. My first job was—they let me make a test, you know. And I made the [unclear]. I saw a lot of people there doing hard labor, you know, and I figured, 'I ain't going to do that,' you know. So I sat play—I [chuckles]—I—I'm not really, you know—so they gave me a test for something and I started to repair typewriters. I was a typewriter repairman. But I was [unclear] something for—you know, [unclear] if you know. I was too young to do these kind of jobs sitting on a table or on a desk. It's not for me, you know. So I wound up in a bunch of other people's [unclear].

LEVINE: So then how long did this last? You were doing these—this kind of—

DE RIDDER: The first stretch I did from '42. That was between six m—and eight months, maybe. And then I gave them more or less a promise that I'd come back. They say, "All right. You can go to Belgium to see your"—see my mother. See, in the meantime my dad die. My dad die in '42.

LEVINE: And so you were able to go back for that? Or no?

DE RIDDER: Yeah, I—I—I keep saying, "My mother has no support." My mother had money, you know. I said, "No support. She's all alone and, you know, and she—I got a little brother." [clears throat] And if I promised to come back, then I promised to bring cof—coffee for these people and chocolate. They never seen—children never seen chocolate in '42, never seen chocolate. And I promised to bring chocolate. In the black market, I could buy that, see, and coffee so they let me go. They let me go. And then, of course, the underground in Belgium was waiting for all these young men. Right

away, I went into the underground and, since it was real hot in those days, they sent me to France for the underground. And there, I work in—in construction. I could see, Dover, England—

LEVINE: Huh.

DE RIDDER: —from where I was, you know.

LEVINE: Well, now, wh—what—what made you go into the underground? Did you want to go? Or you were forced to go or what—

DE RIDDER: No. Ev—everybody automatically give money to that because you were coming in this and this place. And they say openly—they say, “He’s one of these lieutenants.” “Lieutenant what?” “The underground.” And people would not squeal, would not run to the Germans, say, “He’s one.” Belgium didn’t do that.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DE RIDDER: There was no such thing because I remember seeing two of them in German uniforms. I say, “Oh, we’re going to get them after the war.” They said, “This one and this one in a house.” They bri—they inform us. Accidentally, one of them got killed anyway, some Rus—but I remember seeing them in uniform and not realizing that here was an [unclear], see.

LEVINE: Yeah.

DE RIDDER: You know. And then, automatically, we went into the underground and did all kinds of things for them.

LEVINE: So you went to France and you—

DE RIDDER: Then—

LEVINE: —went into construction there?

DE RIDDER: I worked then in construct—in woodwork. Then in France they had these big mountains and the trains. They loaded the ammunition—yeah—and they would go into the mountains and disappear, you know. I—I remember that. And then I don’t know if it was that time exactly, but I believe they bombed Russia or Poland or something like that. I remember it was that year. Oh, and everything w—everybody started running in all kinds of direction. And they started picking us up and threw us in trains, straight to Germany, you know. But I—I got out of that train. [chuckles] I was always—“Don’t send me if I don’t

want to go there or tell me when I'm going to go." You know, I was always this, little bit, troublemaker. Not troublemaker. I just wanted—anyway, I found a little boy who could speak good French. And I paid his transportation. He—he was my guide. And this way, I wound up back in Belgium. See?

LEVINE: Oh.

DE RIDDER: There I went back in the underground. There were no jobs. Plenty of work but had to go to the German thing and they give you all the papers, all the work, any job you want to do, you know. There was no money to be made. But we made 20 marks, which was like \$20 but you could just buy a loaf of bread for 20 marks, you know. Yeah.

LEVINE: So what—what did you do in the underground when you went back to Belgium and—and got back—

DE RIDDER: Well—

LEVINE: —into it?

DE RIDDER: When—when—first night, transported—see, at night, I—I never really see these things really happen because that was only like nighttime or—or—or—or the evening. The English, they come into ration stamps. The planes, they come over and they have this spot and they—the lit up and all these things come down. The lights go out and all the Germans show up. And then there was, like, ration stamps for the people. And they—it—it seems, they got the good stamps from the government and we—no, we, the ones in the black market, they got the good stamps. And the people, they got the imitation of—from the [unclear], whatever. That was the first thing. Then we brought pilots who were shot down, mostly English, because we never heard about Americans in those days. They lost their planes and we had to bring them to a place where they took over. And they—they—eventually, they wound up in Portugal, from Portugal, in Spain, and back to England. But then—then we were armed. You know?

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh.

DE RIDDER: We—we were told not to use that gun unless some German's going to shoot me.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DE RIDDER: Then you defend yourself. And I was also told then you give the guns to these pilots that were usually older men, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE RIDDER: They would, well, look out for their own lives, of course. That—that were our jobs. And then—

LEVINE: What was it like? What was it like being a part of the underground? I mean, what—

DE RIDDER: Well—

LEVINE: Did you feel like a real camaraderie with the other—other men that were—that were working with you and—

DE RIDDER: Yeah. [unclear] there was such a—how should I say, ri—right away you accept what I say and you be my friend. And if you—now, we don't talk about money but if you—if you would say, "Give me a hundred," I would give you a hundred.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DE RIDDER: And I never seen you before. I know you're going to give me the hundred back. Not—today is different.

LEVINE: Yeah.

DE RIDDER: Today is different.

LEVINE: Well, why do you think that was a—at that time? Why do you think people behaved that way?

DE RIDDER: Probably of the war. I don't know. People didn't squeal on one another.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE RIDDER: There was no such thing.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE RIDDER: But the only thing—yeah, there were collaborators among us. And if they knew this guy wasn't—that was support. And we always had the son of the postmaster's. He was—he was one of the head of the underground. He opened all the mail. If they thought he had

something to do with the Germans, all the mail was opened up and he said, "After the war, we get you." And [unclear] correspondence and you see this and this [unclear], "Oh, we got a mole. Write him down," you know.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So—

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A]

[BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE B]

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So what if he—what if he found out that somebody was a collaborator? Would you then—

DE RIDDER: No, we don't really do nothing.

LEVINE: You didn't do anything?

DE RIDDER: But they—they all had—

LEVINE: But you knew?

DE RIDDER: Had these people on the list, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE RIDDER: You know, for whatever.

LEVINE: Hmm. So how—so then, how long did you do that—did you do the underground—

DE RIDDER: Till '45, you see.

LEVINE: Till liberation?

DE RIDDER: Ah, I had a girlfriend in those days and [unclear] was—really had to want to—to want to get jobs and not being bothered with the Germans. I decided to go to a [unclear] place where I had been in Germany. Wait a second. I've been in two places in Germany. I've been in Jana.

LEVINE: Right.

DE RIDDER: [sentence unclear]. In '44, I'm in my mother's [unclear]. My mother—my mother had a little bit of money, see, so she lived in the country—was her house. But it—she was a widow. But in the winter she goes

to the city. She had an apartment there, city apartment. And ever she one of the nicest sections of the city, because in that section had been in the old days all Jewish people. They lived there. They had the nicest place of the—of the whole city, the Jewish people because they had money, see. Then—you know. And that was all—we all got along real good, Jews, Catholic, everything, you know. Well, now the Germans had rounded up all the Jews and the other ones. I have an uncle had Jews underground, an underground. And so they all disappeared in all this area. This beautiful area, that all came vacant. And then the city or whatever, they wanted to rent these houses out. They wanted the money. They wanted the income. So they rented out. My mother had one of these beautiful apartments, you know, looking over the park, you know. Real nice when she lived—and then I had a girlfriend in those days. And at that time I was in my mother's apartment. And there I told my mother that if—if the Germans ever coming out, they were searching the houses. Now, in daytime, we could not walk in the street. Because somebody would walk up to me and says, "You're a young fellow. Aren't you supposed to be in Germany? Show me some papers." You know. I usually had phony papers, you know. But that time I was in my mother's house. So five Gestapo people came to my mother's house. They—they were informed that next door and I believe in the same building in one of the other apartments was another young man who lived there. And I don't know if they came for me or that other fellow. But anyway, one of my rooms was upstairs. You know, my mother's apartment. She had [unclear]. So I happened to come down and there is this stranger standing, one of the Gestapo people. To make it short, we were all in my mother's apartment. I had always told my mother, [unclear]—from my room there is a water pipe out there. And I fixed a little ladder there that I can go to the other floor and the other floor. "See, if they ever come in this house, I'll go to my room. You play along with them. Serve them coffee." That's [unclear] attitude. She stand there. So then I go to my room and you don't see me no more. I'll disappear. Because from there, I could go into the park and I knew where to go. And one of her brothers had a furnished rooming house and everything when these Jewish people was underground. I figured, 'I'll go live with them for a while.' So my mother start setting coffee and [unclear] for this guy. 'What the heck is she doing?' You know. But that was her attitude, you know, put cookies on the table. And now, finally, she said, "Don't you want"—say, "Yeah, I gonna have to get to my room to get some clothes." And they—they were feeling so comfortable. I believe that three of them left already. And I bluffed them that I had papers. They were—they were by my doctor and tomorrow I would get 'em. They says, "Ya, but we just—can not let—let you here till tomorrow." And I figured there's no way out so I told my mother, said, "Well, I'll go get my shirt and—up—up—here,

this is—and before I left the apartment she came running after me and she says, “Don’t leave.” She had just read an article where they take the mother when they take the—the people or anybody else in the headho—in the—in the—in the—and I—I could not see my mother being shipped to Germany because of me, you know. Says, “Don’t go.” She says, “Don’t go.” Says, “Can you imagine they throw me in a train w—with all these people without food and”—she—she had never worked in her life, my mother, you know. Always had it good, you know. And she was a—not heavy but a little bit, you know, so I said, “All right.” So I came back down and let the Gestapo take me to—to some headquarters there and lock—lock me up.

LEVINE: Hmm.

DE RIDDER: And then they put me on a train straight back to Germany and I wound up in Berlin that time, the second time. And then I put the—a year stretch and then I was liberated by the Russians. In April, when I was arrested three months later—three months later, the Americans invaded La Havre [PH] [unclear], France.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DE RIDDER: And being arrested three months before that and shipped straight to Berlin. And I didn’t know the year because the Russians were always going back giving it—no, the Americans were always going back giving it to the Russians. Now we were back with the Americans. Next morning, we were back with the Russians, back with the Americans, back with the Russians. They were doing that because I was in Berlin. And Berlin, they don’t let you out. Oh—

LEVINE: W—what did you have to do for that year when you were—did that stretch? When—

DE RIDDER: Oh, I worked in factories. Let’s see. The last year, what was I doing? Oh, I was in—in a big factory. I was in a big factory. And I tried [unclear] exactly—ah, yeah, I was doing woodwork and—and—and, yeah, and furniture. That was in German—for Germans that time.

LEVINE: It was, like, furniture—

DE RIDDER: Yeah.

LEVINE: —for the—for the Gestapo? For the—for the—

DE RIDDER: Yeah. Also, trucks and the bedding, the bedding for trucks, the—the back of open trucks, the platforms. That was—I wrote a little bit

about that in the old days. And in the papers, which I had, or what I say then, I could do that. That's—not to get it—kind of nice, kind of clean and, you know, th—I was doing that. Then I—what else? I was doing something else. And then we were sleeping. And before, in Jana, I was in a camp. It was guarded by the organization, top. Khaki uniforms, big—big sw—

LEVINE: Swastika?

DE RIDDER: —swastika. Re—red thing. Nice uniform. [chuckles] And they guarded us at—but in daytime, they let us out, let us go to the city where we worked in the construction thing, you know. And then at night we had to come back because our food was there. We had a ration camp and then they had these big bowls of soup, you know—you know. And you got your bread and everything there. And then in—in—in '44 there was the same thing. I wound up back in Ber—well, for the first time I wound up in Berlin. And then what else did I do there? I can't think about it, besides this working in furniture and with these trucks.

LEVINE: Did you have anything to do with weapons or—

DE RIDDER: No.

LEVINE: Oh.

DE RIDDER: No. Well, we learned, like, in fire drill and all these things, you know, because in Berlin continuous bombing—bombing every night at 10 o'clock. You see all the women on the street with the satchels that they had their watch in there and whatever they value and—

LEVINE: Because their house had been bombed?

DE RIDDER: No, because it was alarm.

LEVINE: Oh, alarm.

DE RIDDER: Every night at 10 o'clock exact—they were all ready, could see 'em waiting in the restaurants with their—their bags or whatever to go to the shelters. They all had their own shelters, you know, that—every night. Every night. And then during the night then the—they announced in the bunkers, "Oh, they're bombing over there now. Oh, they got the bridge now. Oh, now they're going farther. They're going to get to the other bridge." So people could prepare to leave, you know. Now, the big—real things, which I think they should have bombed, they did not bomb. They saved them for the other army.

LEVINE: What w—like what would they—might bomb?

DE RIDDER: Like in Belgium, the Belgium soldiers, they saved General Motors. They destroyed the desks and everything, the glass panels on there. They took a hammer, you know, but they didn't destroy nothing else. They didn't blow up the plant because the plant was for the Germans.

LEVINE: Oh.

DE RIDDER: And then the Germans, they didn't destroyed it because it was for the—we thought the English. Instead, that the Americans came and the English together.

LEVINE: Right.

DE RIDDER: So they—they—they—I couldn't understand really why—why—occasionally, a bomb fell next to it, you know. A little bomb, you know. And then other—a lot of—in Germany, the bombs in the housing where the people live, you have to see it. I—I can—it's impossible to describe that. The whole city—you see nothing but stacks of houses. People in the basement, all in the basement, in the other basement—in the other basement. They built something, made stones without cement on top of it. They're living in there. Unbelievable. The whole city and the next city and the next. And people walked through the streets like this.

LEVINE: Hmm.

DE RIDDER: On weekends—that's what we did on weekends. We worked seven days a week, 18 hours a day on a little bit of food, no meat, no milk, no cheese, no meat for one year. None. None of that. Somebody told me once, "It might do you a lot of good." [laughter] Anyway, on weekends, we cleared up the streets, make—make it—that maybe a truck could drive through and, you know, [unclear] like this, [unclear]. And then a lot of people, especially the women, they cleaned the stones where the—with all the [unclear]. They get the cement up there so they could—they all had this little—little bricks in Europe. You ever seen the little red bricks?

LEVINE: I think so.

DE RIDDER: All little—

LEVINE: Yeah.

DE RIDDER: You—you look around.

LEVINE: Yeah.

DE RIDDER: You see little red bricks.

LEVINE: Yeah, yeah.

DE RIDDER: That's how they build houses in Europe. We don't have these big cinder blocks. Now, they doing this to [unclear]. So they—they made 'em clean and then they go in little carriages and the women, they pull 'em out there. Because I remember. This woman came work with me. She came from [unclear], Poland. And she—and I could [unclear], "My God, is she—she gonna work too?" She got a nice fur coat on, manicured nails and all. I could see that she had worn jewelry but she had hidden that, you know. And—and start—and suede shoes and ever—and then she was [unclear]. She was bumped out. I think she came to [unclear] too in that area. They were just all picked up in the streets and in the stores and shipped to Germany. You know. Whatever the reasons were in those days, you know.

LEVINE: So—so when the liberation came, do you remember that day?

DE RIDDER: I wasn't there. I was in Berlin. My mother was there in Belgium because she was staying—we were standing in the streets. And the American troops, they came in and they [unclear]. They even were feeling [unclear]. My—my mother says, "Well, these boys, you know, came out of the front and they hadn't seen women for so long." We—we just ignored it, you know, [unclear], you know, everyone—every—all of them. She said, "[unclear] went in and seen good smelling woman," you know. And—but that was in Berlin.

LEVINE: Well, do you remember when you heard that the war was over?

DE RIDDER: Well, I was in Berlin and they had managed to be all the way on the west side. They had camps. I had transferred myself to g—because I had lived between the Germans one time. I had a girlfriend, you know. And she was the one who—and, oh, she's a beautiful, beautiful blonde and she would have been my wife. But—

LEVINE: This—was this the same girlfriend that you had when you were in Belgium before—

DE RIDDER: No.

LEVINE: No.

DE RIDDER: No.

LEVINE: A different girlfriend.

DE RIDDER: No.

LEVINE: Okay.

DE RIDDER: The—the Belgium one, they all—we all wound up—they—oh, yeah. I was going to go with her to—the Belgium one—

LEVINE: Right.

DE RIDDER: —with her in Germany when the Gestapo arrested me in my mother's house.

LEVINE: Oh, okay.

DE RIDDER: So when she came she said, "Jan is gone. He went to Germany." And a—a year came in between, you know. And then I was young. And then I was saying, "Gee, I should married her for this and this but I should not married for this and this and"—you know, and I began to—

LEVINE: Question it.

DE RIDDER: Yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah, uh-huh.

DE RIDDER: And then—maybe is good sometimes, you know.

LEVINE: [chuckles]

DE RIDDER: And then there is this group of gorgeous r—real typical—I would describe like a Scandinavian, blonde, and they've got these—these [unclear], you know, the—what do you call it?

LEVINE: Braids?

DE RIDDER: Braids, you know around these things.

LEVINE: Around, uh-huh.

DE RIDDER: And she did what—and her husband had been killed a year before that. She had a little girl. She was not a wild thing or nothing, you know, just come in bars and drinking, n—and I think it [unclear]. But then, as I said, every night you had these alarms, you know. And she had her bunker, or shelter. They had a big steel—steel roof in there. Could throw a bomb in there and the bomb would go, you know. But I was not—not allowed in there. I was an outsider, see. I didn't have that permit, you know. And, well, it's too long to tell the story how to get in there. But then one night, unbelievable, the bombing, you know. And that bunker, they could not break it, you know, but y—you hear the [unclear]. And all the entrances were blocked. You know, the bombs—they had bombs in those days. They called them dozen-comers [PH]. They would explode above the ground. And they would, for so many miles, destroy every—

LEVINE: Hmm.

DE RIDDER: —window and door and nobody had windows and doors in their houses. They just had boards on there, you know. And on the next bombing they're all gone, put some more boards, you know. The miserable life in these people, these women and children, you know. It's a men's war, they say, but—and then after that I found her no more.

LEVINE: You didn't find her anymore?

DE RIDDER: I tried to get her and there were so many deaths. I went where all the deaths were. But there were so many more and so many more still sitting in a bunker. They would be alive but they didn't have no time to get 'em out. There were so many other sitting in—people would go in—in the cellars.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DE RIDDER: And that was a mistake to do. In one street, you—you could maybe see 10 houses where people were sitting in the cellar. They're sitting in there three months already. But the Germans were good in something like hitting—they—they could drill—drill to it and pump air in it. But the electricity isn't there and the water isn't there and, you know. So the—most of these people, then they say, "No use drilling for them. They're sitting in there more than a month." And the water parts had broke or the electricity, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DE RIDDER: And so a lot of places you could smell that, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DE RIDDER: So—

LEVINE: So the—so you never knew what happened to her?

DE RIDDER: No, never.

LEVINE: Oh.

DE RIDDER: And after the war we were not allowed in Germany because that was the fighting, like four-fifths of the English, the Americans, the French, the Belgians. You couldn't get through the—had to have passports and nobody had enough influence to get a passport, you know.

LEVINE: Hmm.

DE RIDDER: And then the war [unclear] and I knew if she would have survived this thing, she would have contacted me—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DE RIDDER: —in Belgium.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DE RIDDER: Because she—she was more in this for our future marriage than—than me, as a young man. Maybe I—I would be able to get over it again, you know. But this time, I had my mind made up but she never showed up no more. So that was the—the second or third time that happened, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. So then you went back to Belgium as soon as you could leave Germany?

DE RIDDER: Well, then, when I got out of the Russian section, we walked [unclear] eight—eight other guys, all Belgians. We walked from Berlin to Belgium. We walked. A month long, you know, and we walked. And we had stole—well, we didn't really steal 'em—in the Russian section, we told the Russians, "Hey, we need the"—these—these people didn't even stay—you see, they were Mongolians. The real Russians came later with the artillery. I—I could see right away because at first, you look at these people, they were short, stocky. The women were like this [speaking in deep voice].

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DE RIDDER: And they had a big machine gun in the middle, you know. And you couldn't mess with them because it was—and, "I don't want to go there. I want to go this road then." Sure. "You want to go where?" Well, she decide what I could do.

LEVINE: Yeah, right.

DE RIDDER: You know?

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE RIDDER: Since—so they're little short, stocky Mongolians.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE RIDDER: Slight—slightly Chinese, you know. And nobody was friend with them because you should see what they did. Unbelievable. And if you ask them for food, ah! They go to the first [unclear], [unclear] the doors, open and get—I swear to God. They were—and one family, when I came, the woman sitting there and the husband and the two children. And we took all the food off the table. The—the R—the Russians [unclear]. And I left something lying there, you know, said [unclear]. So, you know, and the woman had grabbed the meat and she had—she had it over here, you know. And—and—and sh—she saw that I looked at it, you know, and [unclear]. I let her keep it, you know, because children, you know.

LEVINE: Well, you mean these Mongolians allowed you to take their food?

DE RIDDER: The food from the Germans.

LEVINE: To take the food—from the Germans.

DE RIDDER: Yeah, yeah.

LEVINE: Right.

DE RIDDER: Oh, they broke up the—they didn't open the doors. They break the doors, you know.

LEVINE: I see. Uh-hmm.

DE RIDDER: I was in another beautiful house and then the Russians were taking a bath there. And the water was coming from the second floor down

the stairways, all in the hall. I said, "What is this?" "They're taking a bath." And the guy, the German, [unclear] old man, he was sitting in the kitchen. He was cooking the chicken. He had boil—in boiling water, because I opened the pot. He looked at me, you know. We were in charge this time, see? And looked in the pot, you know. Let me keep his chicken [unclear] eaten chicken more than a year, you know. We came in there for bicycles too. And we went to the cellar and he told me, "Don't take that bike. See, I'm taking that bike." For one time, after one year, I could say something in Germany, you know.

LEVINE: Hmm.

DE RIDDER: And then we all had bikes and—and we left. And then, you see, all the Germans were shooting themselves, committing suicide. I—I could—I—we were changing one gun for the other, say, "No, this is nice. No. Oh, this is a German Ruger." I—you know.

LEVINE: You mean from people who had killed themselves?

DE RIDDER: Themselves, yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE RIDDER: Mostly soldiers, see. Yeah. Yeah. So—

LEVINE: You mean because they were being defeated and they were just all—

DE RIDDER: All German. That was—

LEVINE: —worn out?

DE RIDDER: That was a natural thing for a German to shoot himself.

LEVINE: If they were—if they had been captured or if they were—

DE RIDDER: Yeah, they knew, Ger—that the war was over, see?

LEVINE: Yeah.

DE RIDDER: The war was over and it seemed that t—that the Germans had the underground in Berlin—I mean, they lived underground, put it this way. It seemed that they had so much supply of food and water and fresh air, filtered air, for three more years, they said.

LEVINE: Hmm.

DE RIDDER: Underground, you know.

LEVINE: Hmm.

DE RIDDER: And then we were—the name of the city in Berlin, I believe was Fron—Fronau [PH]. Fronau, Humbeltem [PH]. Some German places, you know. But then farther away, we could see the whole town going up in—in—in bombing [unclear]. That was Potsdam. And there were—just everybody says, “The American are there! The Americans!” Said, “What do you mean, Americans? They’re all English.” They say, “Yeah, but Americans.” So we—we could not understand that. We knew the English were coming. Everybody—every German knew the English. They say, “The En—Eng—Englander is coming.” And we—we believed that, you know, because when I saw the first Russians and the uniform, I—I didn’t know what I was looking at, you know. Yeah. Short people and Chinese eyes and—and—and they’re always so—some of them were wearing German—part of German uniform, big—big coats, you know, to keep warm. Was April. April. Was in April, yeah. And then they did the worst thing you could think of, you know, killing people for nothing, shooting them. We broke into the contain—I was in—in a camp that time. Because you had to have some kind of a place where you—you would live so you could tell the Russians, “That’s my camp.” You know. And then, you know, the Germans put in another—what do you call it—offensive? Offens—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DE RIDDER: You know?

LEVINE: Yeah.

DE RIDDER: And they knocked all the Russians out of there. And then—then there was murder all over the place, people I know, women I know. They were all lying dead there, you know. Then, finally, we got out of there and now, back after bicycles, you know. That was very easy with the Russians, you know. When they came in the American zone, no more. We could not go in the houses. We could not steal bicycles. They wouldn’t give us no food neither. Then after that we started one month up to Belgium, you know. We were all feeling good, you know, but we wanted to eat. See? And then we go to the farms. Some of the German farmers were good, ga—gave us food, you know. Because I watched one of them during the night. I knew where he had all his stuff, you know. And he was all right. He treated us—gave us food and we left. And then—then there were

Americans there, you know. And then there was a road check there and a road there. And then they grabbed the [unclear] all the white powder for—for insects, you know, flea and lice, you know, the—and then living without food was not—not so—

LEVINE: So how—so how did you make it? Did you—

DE RIDDER: I—oh, it took—took us about a month. The—and then at night we would go and sleep. I don't know if I should say that. Maybe you can't [unclear]. We picked the nicest house—

LEVINE: [chuckles]

DE RIDDER: —along the road.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE RIDDER: Something where a big [unclear] you could see in that house and say, "Oh"—where there were always Hitler party men, National Socialists. And I've been in houses where you saw life size photos from Hitler and everything. And now, my friends and everybody—now, usually, people had been there already and wrecked half of the house. And then we did the same thing, you know. We found these big uniforms this guy used to wear if he goes in a parade with a [unclear], big [unclear], say, "Okay, give me the [unclear]. Say, what is it worth?" You know, and then we all destroyed extremely. You know. And this one house, they had this big hole, you know, with two wooden stairways. Beautiful. The—the—the—that oak wood, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DE RIDDER: You should see people—now, I didn't do that. I couldn't do that, you know. But we burned all the houses down after we left. We had one guy among us, he had found two big boxes of matches, them big—he used—your—you—

LEVINE: Strike them, uh-huh.

DE RIDDER: On—on—and they go on—on the stairway and he puts some more chairs and more papers and stuff. He [unclear] this National Socialist. And I [unclear]—this is one of the guys that kept that war [unclear], actually, the parties of Hitler, you know. But I—I couldn't really see destroying—maybe I would have shot him, you know. Maybe I would have done that. But not destroying this—this beautiful mansion. That was something—but I—I did [unclear] him down. I did [unclear].

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DE RIDDER: You know?

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DE RIDDER: All my friends did.

LEVINE: Yeah.

DE RIDDER: And then one time—I don't know should I say that—one of the Russians raped one of girls we had with us. They were going to get married. And [unclear] underground and all these things. And then the guy was not—not cowardly but there is this man, all armed, you know. And he [unclear], "I'll jump 'em," he says. "Help me. Help. I can't do it alone. Help me," he says. And there was a broken table with the legs, you know. And he grabbed one of those and he handed me one. He says—he said, "My woman is [unclear]." I said, "Well, you go first. If he's got the machine gun ready, you're going to get it first." But I said, "You hit him. I'll hit him." He went there. He hit him. Then I hit him. [unclear], you know.

LEVINE: Wow.

DE RIDDER: Must have been—well, he just raped this—this—this woman then.

LEVINE: Now, who—who—this man—

DE RIDDER: The Russians [unclear].

LEVINE: He was Russian, uh-huh.

DE RIDDER: All Russians.

LEVINE: Right.

DE RIDDER: All Russians, all the time. All the time.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DE RIDDER: All the time.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DE RIDDER: Unbelievable what these people did. They had such a thing. Now, I didn't see that but they said they were—if this a little child and they had a rifle with a bayonet, they used to bayonet the child. The child had to die, you know. I didn't see that.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DE RIDDER: I didn't see that. But what I did so, on that first camp when I left, we had a little pretty—pretty girl with us, French. And she would be nice to everybody. Everybody could play with her, real friendly, friendly little girl. She was a lot of fun to have around, you know. And the Russians had her. And when you leave the gate, we had this—this big arch, you know. She was hanging there dead. You know. And they didn't have to do that because she would give everybody a good time, you know. She was hanging there and I said—I said, "You know what I'm going to do, if I have the chance with my first Russian, he's gonna—he's gonna die. I don't care if he has anything to do with it."

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DE RIDDER: "I want to have a little revenge for this," you know.

LEVINE: Hmm.

DE RIDDER: [unclear] over these, a few of these little private things, you know.

LEVINE: Wow. Well, after all that experience then, [chuckles] is that why you decided to—to go to America?

DE RIDDER: Oh—

LEVINE: To get out of Europe?

DE RIDDER: Well, I had always made up my mind I was going to leave my home because of my dad, you know. Dictator, you know. Not that I had trouble with him. I just could not be so, you know—no—I was growing up, you know, and becoming a man. And then it happened on [unclear] Australia. And that's when I started the ships, because I could have signed a contract one time with the Australian government because I had all the papers and [unclear]—and [unclear] had 300 acres of land in Australia.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DE RIDDER: I had to go into the interior and the outback. I had to go in agriculture. I know where and how and I had to go stay in Sidney for six months and all. And that was my destination. But I didn't want to sign a contract. I signed a contract, I feel obligated. And I didn't want to break the contract. So I didn't want to sign. So I [unclear] my own. So I started to [unclear] ships and I wound up in America. [chuckles]

LEVINE: [chuckles] Well, is there anything [clears throat] from the time that you left Germany, went ba—you were—were you back in Belgium for a period of time—

DE RIDDER: Yeah.

LEVINE: —then?

DE RIDDER: Because I shipped out from Belgium.

LEVINE: Y—uh-huh.

DE RIDDER: Yeah.

LEVINE: And that—and that's when you started just stowing away? Is that—

DE RIDDER: No.

LEVINE: —what you did?

DE RIDDER: You get a job on the ships. They hired at the beach.

LEVINE: Oh.

DE RIDDER: The Scandinavia—they had a lot of offers, the Scandinavians. And the whole region, Swedish, Danish, the Finns, Panamanians, they were hiring at the beach. Don't even have to have valid papers and anything. They had more ships than—than merchant seamen.

LEVINE: I see.

DE RIDDER: Yeah.

LEVINE: So you hired on as a merchant seaman then?

DE RIDDER: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE RIDDER: Yeah.

LEVINE: And then where would you go when you—

DE RIDDER: Oh—

LEVINE: —started doing that with the ships? Where—where were you—

DE RIDDER: Wherever they were—I've been—I've been—let me see. I've been in a number of ports in the Mediterranean Sea. I've been on the Africa Coast, on west. I've been as far as Dakar [PH], Marocha [PH], Casablanca, Safi [PH], Port Lipi [PH]. You know, that—that side of the coast all the way to Dakar, no farther. Then I've been in South America, Brazil, Argentina, all these places, Ven—Venezuela, [unclear], all these places, you know. And I've been—[sighs] I've been seven—maybe nine times, I've been to Panama Canal, to the West Coast, you know. Not south. North. San Diego, California, that—that area. And—

LEVINE: So these were now cargo ships that you were a merchant—

DE RIDDER: Yeah, yeah.

LEVINE: —marine on?

DE RIDDER: Freighters.

LEVINE: Freighters.

DE RIDDER: I've been one time on a tanker. And now, later, [unclear] the company, they also had ships. I would go with them once in a while. And I had—I mean, one time on a tanker. But I couldn't go [unclear] on a tanker now.

LEVINE: No. I think we'll pause here because I want to change the tape—

DE RIDDER: Okay.

LEVINE: —before we continue.

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE B]

[BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE A]

LEVINE: —and I'm speaking with Mr. Jan De Ridder, who came from Belgium through Ellis Island. And we're going to continue the story where we left off, which was when you had joined the Merchant Marine.

DE RIDDER: Yeah.

LEVINE: And you were—

DE RIDDER: Yes.

LEVINE: —traveling—

DE RIDDER: Yes.

LEVINE: —lots of different places. And that's what led to your coming to the—

DE RIDDER: —to the States.

LEVINE: Okay.

DE RIDDER: Yeah.

LEVINE: So w—what precipitated your actually deciding to come to America?

DE RIDDER: Well, I heard so much about America, you know, that everybody was rich here. Everybody drives a Cadillac, you know. The European attitude, you know. "Oh, in Am—in there, we can make dollars," you know, and then every dollar in Belgium would be 50 francs, you know, and—you know, then—and I figured, 'What—why don't I try it once? It's such a great country, you know. Such a big army, all this stuff.' I decided, 'Well, since I'm here al—let's try it.'

LEVINE: Now, were you thinking at that time that you would come for a while and then go back to Belgium? Was that what you—

DE RIDDER: Yeah.

LEVINE: Or you weren't thinking—

DE RIDDER: Because I—I don't really know about—I was going to be accepted here, and if I could learn the language. I couldn't speak the language, see. And I didn't know that this country was formed with foreigners, you know, especially down—down—down New York, you know. You could hear all kinds of languages. So that—that played a little bit my way, so to speak, you know.

LEVINE: So how did you actually come here the first time? What were the circumstances?

DE RIDDER: [sighs] Well, let—let's try, see if I could make a living here, you know, more or less.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DE RIDDER: And learn the language then.

LEVINE: And the first ship. Do—do you—you don't remember the name of that ship but—

DE RIDDER: No. I know it was a liberty ship but I cannot think of the name. Fen—Fenries [PH] or something like that. I could not think of the name.

LEVINE: Do you remember, like, leaving?

DE RIDDER: Before—

LEVINE: Where did you—where did the ship leave from?

DE RIDDER: That first ship docked in Philadelphia.

LEVINE: But where did you leave from in Europe? Do you remember the port?

DE RIDDER: That was—[sighs] yeah, I—I remember. I can't think of the name of the port. Was a—a port in France near—

LEVINE: Le Havre?

DE RIDDER: —near the Belgium border.

LEVINE: Oh.

DE RIDDER: Near the Belgium border. They had a—a shipping office there. And I was sent from a Belgium company to that—to that area to find this office. And I would be able to ship out from there, see.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE RIDDER: Yeah. And then—

LEVINE: Were you by yourself or were—

DE RIDDER: Yeah.

LEVINE: —you with any friends or anything?

DE RIDDER: No, I—most of the time—

LEVINE: Oh.

DE RIDDER: —on my own so I could do what I wanted, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DE RIDDER: But then—then, eventually, oh, we went—we went all over with the ship. We were down—finally, when we got to—to the States we came to Philadelphia, I remember. And there there was somebody on the ship. He had been here already, also Belgium. He says, “Oh, we got to get off this ship and we take the streetcar,” he said. He says, “That way.” And then we get a little coupon. He says, “It’s called a transfer.” And then in the middle of the block I tell him where we get off. He says, “You go between the houses. You go there underground and there is a subway,” he said. So whatever it was, I followed the guy because he had experience, you know. Say, “You better know where we’re going.” And then the first train came in. Well, I don’t know I should say that. It was a little—be—being a European, well, let’s skip this. Finally, we got on that subway and we wound up in New York. And when we went first to the Greyhound’s bus station because we had a couple of bags there with things in, you know, shirts and shoes and, you know. We picked all that up and now we came to New York. And I had all the addresses I needed, you know, where I was going to stay, where I was going to work, all these things. I had—got all the information from people I had m—I had met who had been in New York.

LEVINE: So all the time when you were taking these different ships, you were finding out information—

DE RIDDER: I—

LEVINE: —and contacts.

DE RIDDER: I had all the addresses.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE RIDDER: Because New York, downtown New York, I knew there was called the South Ferry there. They had a big giant building. It was a Merch—Merchant Marine Building. That was a big building, which was put in

by a lady, the wife of a captain, who had promised her husband, "With all the money we have, I'll—I'll build this big building for the Merchant Marine, the merchant seamen." So a lot of people, they—you know, they drink up all their money. They sleep on the streets. So then these people would have nice housing.

LEVINE: Oh.

DE RIDDER: And I went to that building. That was a nice building.

LEVINE: Yes, I—I think I've heard of that.

DE RIDDER: The old building?

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm.

DE RIDDER: Yeah, that was nice.

LEVINE: So you went there?

DE RIDDER: I went there for—that w—that was my—my home there for a—for a while, you know

LEVINE: And there were merchant seamen from all over?

DE RIDDER: Oh, yeah.

LEVINE: Who were staying there?

DE RIDDER: [unclear] Americans.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE RIDDER: [unclear]. A lot of people, they—they spend all their money or didn't have no more money. And you could—you could go [unclear] as cheaper, less than a dollar. You know, they gave you a roll of clean linen with nice clean towels and a little bar of soap. And you had a room, you know, a place to sleep.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DE RIDDER: By the way, they done away with—what—what is he—he's sneaking all these little notes.

LEVINE: Yeah.

DE RIDDER: Huh?

LEVINE: Yeah. The Seaman's Institute, he—

DE RIDDER: Yeah. Oh, yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DE RIDDER: Now—now, finally, they—Wall Street don't cover. They got all the Merchant Marine out of there. They tore the building down.

LEVINE: Yeah.

DE RIDDER: And they builded a new one, a real nice one, a narrow one. I've been in there several times already. Very nice, but it's for Wall Street now. And the Merchant Marine doesn't have enough money now to stay there for a room. And then, I don't know if it's bad enough but they have a big union in America, the Maritime Union. And they—they, more or less—oh, yeah. They—they gave the rights for women to come in this Merchant Marine Building now. Equal rights, I guess.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DE RIDDER: And now, before you could hear a maestro in this building. They had these nice carpets and everything. A phone rang real soft. That was nice to stay in this building, nice. [unclear] and everybody come. But then, since the women took over there, now, my God, you can't believe. They stay there with the doors open and you hear five, six radios and they're all yapping on the door. You can't sleep no more now. And then—

LEVINE: [chuckles]

DE RIDDER: —it's unbelievable now. And they sit in there, five, six people in—in this one little rooms. And so, well, it's good I got out of the Merchant Marine. I don't think I would stay there anymore.

LEVINE: [laughs] Well, so tell me about that first time, when you—when you first came there and you were—you had the contacts that you had learned about from all your different—

DE RIDDER: Yeah.

LEVINE: —trips.

DE RIDDER: Yeah.

LEVINE: So what did you do when you first then came to New York?

DE RIDDER: I started to look for a job and, at first, I went to—what was the name of that street where you could buy a job? You could buy a job and they would take the first \$40 out of your pay. Yeah. Barclay Street or what were these streets downtown New York? You could buy a job. You go there and says, “Well, I’m a carpenter. I’m a this. I’m a that.” I remember the first job I bought was for a carpenter job. And I—I knew the streets and everything but underneath it, Brooklyn. And I didn’t know what Brooklyn meant so I scratched it out. And I went to that [chuckles] street and, of course, I wasn’t there because that street was in Brooklyn.

LEVINE: Brooklyn.

DE RIDDER: You know? That’s my first job. Then I worked in hotels, restaurants. At one time, I had three job full time because people say, “I can’t find no work. I got no job.” At one time, I had a full time job, a part time job and on weekends I worked in restaurants and hotels, had seven jobs seven days a week.

LEVINE: Mmm.

DE RIDDER: So at one time the cops were making \$80 a week. There was one time that I made \$75 a week and could speak English. [chuckles]

LEVINE: And this was 1951? When you first came? Was that when you first came or a little later?

DE RIDDER: That was f—later, already.

LEVINE: Later.

DE RIDDER: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE RIDDER: Later. Later, already. Yeah.

LEVINE: So what did you do? You continued to stay in the Seaman’s Institute for a while? Or did you—

DE RIDDER: Well, no. Later, I got—first, I got a little, cheap room, you know, like everybody does if you don’t know how—for how long—

LEVINE: Yeah.

DE RIDDER: —your money's got to last. And then I got a little nicer room and then I got a little studio room, you know. So that—and then time went on like that and I changed jobs in the meantime, you know, till I finally, I guess, met my wife.

LEVINE: And how did you meet her?

DE RIDDER: The factory we were working. We both working in the same factory and that's how we met, you know. And I saw this gorgeous looking thing sitting there, you know, and I figured I got to talk to her, you know. That's what I did and, finally, she decided to go out with me. And that w—that was—that was the beginning, you know.

LEVINE: And what was her name?

DE RIDDER: Anna.

LEVINE: Her maiden name?

DE RIDDER: Coln.

LEVINE: K or C?

DE RIDDER: C—C—Coln—C-O-L-N.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And let's see. So—so then you got married and you was—you were both working in a factory.

DE RIDDER: Yeah.

LEVINE: And then what h—what was the next phase? What happened?

DE RIDDER: Well, the next thing, that little boy came along so he—he started ever—messed everything up, you know. So then she stopped working, of course. Well, she—she never worked that much. It was a European attitude. You know, women don't work when you get married, see.

LEVINE: Now, was she from Europe, your wife?

DE RIDDER: No, she's from here. Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

DE RIDDER: Yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah? So then what happened? How did you land at Ellis Island?

DE RIDDER: Oh, well, I was working in Hoboken, a furniture factory. Ice [PH] and Brothers Furniture. And that was next to the factory where I had met my wife. I was—that was a candy factory where I met her. Next to it was this—this woodworking company, you know. Ice and Brother Furniture. So I—I had my eye on that thing. I figured I'll—maybe I need that place someday. So I went there for a job. They let me practice so I—I got the job. And on one day I was working there and the Immigration came. You see, there were a lot of Italians in this area.

LEVINE: In Hoboken, uh-huh.

DE RIDDER: All ship jumpers, all illegal in America. And somehow, we got to the Immigration, I guess. And they came in my factory and I—I didn't make no much out of it. "Y—you want me, okay." Well, you see, it was no problem for me to come back. I could always get on another ship and al—always could get off here. And if they didn't let me off, I'll swim. You know, it was easy. See. So—and then when the Immigration picked me up they put me in this car. And we stopped in, oh, five, six other f—factories where more people [unclear]. And they stopped twice at a factory where two of my friends were working, also illegal here. And I—I keep my fingers crossed. I hope they don't bring those guys out because they see me, they think that I'm going to—the one who told them, you know. Lucky they weren't there.

LEVINE: Hmm.

DE RIDDER: Yeah.

LEVINE: So now, there was a—

DE RIDDER: Act—Actually, we were four people lived in an apartment one time in Hoboken, New Jersey.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

DE RIDDER: From New York, I went to Hoboken, New Jersey.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE RIDDER: There was a—a Belgium guy, who had a—a nice bar there. And he had rooms upstairs.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE RIDDER: And he was willing to give us a hand, you know, in the beginning. You know? Real ni—nice—nice person. That's where we all wound up. We were four different nationalities. By the way, we could speak nine different languages.

LEVINE: Oh.

DE RIDDER: All—all four together.

LEVINE: So how was in for you, learning English during that period?

DE RIDDER: That wasn't that easy. That wasn't so easy but I knew I had to go through that, you know, in the—and I was—I wanted everybody around me just speak that language, you know. Because someone who would speak—I could speak a little bit German, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DE RIDDER: I avoided that because I only would take it that—if I had to have a certain word trans—translated.

LEVINE: Translated.

DE RIDDER: See?

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE RIDDER: In the meantime, I'm forgetting my German, you know.

LEVINE: So you—you never studied it, per se. You just learned it by—

DE RIDDER: Well, yeah. There was a time, oh, in later life though. I had two children already. Then I went to the—an evening elementary school for adults, 18th Street, New York, Eight Avenue, for adults.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE RIDDER: There, I think I was about three or four years in evening school for English.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE RIDDER: That was nice because when the winter months came around, then a lot of these teacher didn't show up because of the snow, the frost. We—we—we—we either could go back home or choose another classroom. So I wound up in high school in American history and—and you name it, I was there. The—the best classroom was where you could debate and discuss things. I love to debate, you know. I mean, debating, not arguing. Debating.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE RIDDER: That was my best classroom. And I think I done about between three and four years there.

LEVINE: Hmm.

DE RIDDER: Yeah.

LEVINE: So when you got picked up from—in the factory and you were—and you were in a van or something? You were—

DE RIDDER: No, a regular car.

LEVINE: A car, and they were bringing you now to—

DE RIDDER: To Colum—Columbus Avenue. Now, first—first, let's see. I'm—the first time, let me see. One—one time, they arrested me and the second time, I surrendered, because the first time they took me to the police station in Hoboken. And from there, I went to Columbus Avenue and they took me in a—in a private car with—with—was it two car that—let me see. They took me to the South Ferry and brought me to Ellis Island, first in the police station in Hoboken. Yeah, [unclear]. Yeah. Yeah. And then they put me on a little ferryboat here.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DE RIDDER: And they brought me down to Ellis Island, yeah.

LEVINE: And what happened when you got there?

DE RIDDER: Well, they locked me out. They took my belt out of my pants and the shoelaces and everything that could harm me, you know. I'm not allowed to shave no more. And they—let me see. Then they put me on a—oh, that was the time I broke out.

LEVINE: The first time that you were brought there was the—was the time you broke out?

DE RIDDER: The first time, yeah, because the second time they gave me a permit to go to Canada to get a visa.

LEVINE: Oh, okay. Well, w—describe that in as much detail as you can remember about why you decide to break out and how?

DE RIDDER: Well, [sighs] the next day they put me on a big dormitory, about 200 people. By the way, the—the guard who had to guard me or count me every time he had to go to the—to another door, so he says, “Number 16, 18,” you know. And then when he came till about—to inform that he was one missing. So he decided push one more. [sighs] Well, I’m—I’m jumping the conclusion now.

LEVINE: Okay. Go back then.

DE RIDDER: In daytime, we were allowed in a big—a big yard, big yard for playing baseball there with the guards. And the—there were about dozen Chinese and they were running the—the casino there, poker games. They had all the money. They had big tables. The guards were bringing in the chips and the cards. The Chinese, they had the money, you know. And then I was at about five days and were [unclear] and if you wanted to make a dollar, because a lot of people needed money to smoke, you know, in those days—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DE RIDDER: So you work with the guards in the laundry, in the kitchen or helping move furniture. So I decided to—I asked for an interview because I had my luggage in—in a hotel in New York. And I didn’t pay the rent that—that week. And I had my passport in my suitcase and I had a few hundred dollars in my suitcase. And I figured the guy in the hotel is going to grab all that. And I was worried about my passport, you know. Where would I get another international passport? So since nobody paid attention to my writing and my phone and all of these things, I figured—I got the idea when in daytime we were all laying in the grass in the yard, you know, with nothing to do, you know. [sniffs] And at that time, there was a big contractor painting the building. And every day, they would take one whole section of the building. I don’t know what they were doing, the—the—the metal work and whatever then. And then they go there. They moved the scaffold to the next section and then paint the other one. And that went on, like, for four days. And then all of a sudden I noticed that there was a window, the only window in the—on that side of the building or in the whole b—

section that had no bars, because I see the painters going in and out with the—the big pots of paint. And I figured if—if I ever have a chance to get in [unclear] way or something, I could come down on that scaffold. And I am—was a good swimmer and I could swim New Jersey, you know. And the fifth day—every morning they let us out. And that morning it was raining. What I don't realize, the paint is [unclear] when it rains. So they left the scaffold on the other side. One [several words unclear]. I didn't realize that. And that day, instead of letting us down in the big yard, they kept us in that room. And then there is a big hallway and then they let us on top of a roof, which is all framed of—ma—ma—made like chicken wire and all. You—you can jump off. That's what they—they claimed. So we were just running back and forth. And while we were there, here comes these—these guards with all—couple of—four, five of our guys helping him. And they opened that door. They go in this room. There's old furniture laying and old beds and all kinds of things they could use. But I saw all these pots, paint, sitting there. And there was another door, which was open at the same time the painters they came. I don't know what they came there for because they didn't work that day.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE RIDDER: But anyway, they left that middle door open there for a while and I—I didn't know what makes me do it. I say, "Oh, my God. That—that scaffold is right outside of this window. There are no bars." I say, "Maybe I'll give it a try. Now, there is a big boiler sitting in the corner. It's probably still there. It's a big monster, real big rusty thing sitting in the corner there. And I figure, 'I'll stay behind this—this thing,' while the guards were running back and forth. Yeah. I figured, 'Just walk, you know, behind that big construction.' There we a little window and I make believe I'm looking out the window, you know. [sniffs] So finally, all the guys left with all the junk they picked up. And then they yelled for the guys, "Anybody else here?" So in the meantime, the painters, they left and they closed the middle door. And I figure—I looked at it from the—it was only a padlock, you know. So then when he—when he's sure he had everybody out of there, he locked the outside door. He locked me inside these two—two rooms. I'm still standing on that lower window there. If he would have come and seen it, he probably would have said, "Hey, what are you doing here now?" Would just said—play stupid, you know. "I'm—I'm looking out the window," you know. So nothing happened. They left, you know. And they only had breakfast that day and I stayed in there all day without food. And then around 11 o'clock I couldn't stand it anymore, you know. I wanted—check if I was able to get out of there. Maybe they really had a buried alarm on the window; when you slide it up,

the alarm goes off or whatev—I figured, ‘If I can’t make it I’ll just yell for help, you know. [unclear] somebody, started banging on the door. Somebody’ll hear the noise.’ That was on the third floor.

LEVINE: Hmm.

DE RIDDER: So—

LEVINE: Which—where was it on the third floor? Do you remember what you could see out that window?

DE RIDDER: Yeah, I see Ho—J—the side of Jersey. There’s a big railroad station.

LEVINE: Yeah, I know—

DE RIDDER: Because I went one railroad over the other. And I’m on—well, that’s [unclear] later. [sighs] Well, around 11 o’clock I couldn’t stand it anymore. I figured I’ll check up. So I went there. I broke open a lock. No alarm went off. Then I went to these windows and they were sliding windows. So very careful, I checked everything for wiring, you know, this—what you do, you want to escape or break in someplace, you know. So I found no wiring [unclear] and everything. And I very slightly, very easy, I—I lifted up the window, you know. And then—and then in the meantime, I could see the powerhouse where they hid, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DE RIDDER: And there was this guy, this stoker. Occasionally, he would come out of the thing and then he opened a door and it lits up the whole yard, the light that came out of there. So much light they had in there. And I think, ‘Oh, that’s the guy I’m going to have to watch,’ you know. So I finally opened the whole window. Fine. But now, all of a sudden, I didn’t see no scaffold. And I went out at the window. That scaffold is, like, 15 feet away, I figure. Well, now, the buildings had a ledge. But the ledge is shorter than my feet. And that is now the most dangerous thing I have ever done in my whole life, because I—I’ll stand up to show you.

LEVINE: Okay, but—

DE RIDDER: It goes—

LEVINE: —don’t forget, you have the mike on. Careful.

DE RIDDER: Oh, yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah.

DE RIDDER: Then I stood against that building with my—with my heels against the building.

LEVINE: And it curves, doesn't it, that ledge? It's cement and—

DE RIDDER: No, no. It—it's straight but I figured it's there so many years, maybe it's—it's rotten or something.

LEVINE: Right.

DE RIDDER: I figured, 'If this thing—if something breaks under my foot, there's not a moment I can get my balance back.'

LEVINE: Hmm.

DE RIDDER: And in my mind I could see myself lying down there broken, arms breaking. I figured I got to lay there till the next morning till the—the painters come, you know, if I break my head on—oh, yeah.

LEVINE: Take—

DE RIDDER: I'm supposed to take the—

LEVINE: Yeah, go ahead.

DE RIDDER: And, well, I had—I was calling myself chicken and green and—and coward and the grit. "Why you can't show yourself? You're a—show you—you're be [unclear].' I—I was soon fighting with myself, you know. Either surrender, give up, be locked up again and deported, probably, or break my arms and legs or—or—or make it. So I walked with my back against the wall, the heels in my feet and—and my—my—the back—and my head—my head scraping against the wall because I was afraid, if I lose a couple of pounds of the weight forward my balance might go forward. Would you believe, I held my belly in as much as I could to try to keep the weight?

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DE RIDDER: That was all in my mind. And maybe it helped; I don't know, or if it was just imagination. But I shuffled f—inch by inch, inch by inch. I was afraid to look at—at where the scaffold was. I figured the little shelf, sooner or later. Now, that was three stories up and nothing in

front of me. Now, step—think about it. I—I'm really proud about it now.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DE RIDDER: Because—

LEVINE: That's okay.

DE RIDDER: Because step—step out of your window now and have nothing in front of you and let every—everything loose and just look forward. And that was something [coughs] in the human mind, something that pulls you forward, something that pushed me of this wall. It really did. Something was mentally pulling me forward, you know. I could see myself laying there, you know. I could see that. But any—eventually, I made the 15 feet and now I'm sitting in this big S—met—metal and [unclear] made out of metal that—which holds the scaffold. And then down there was a big block with six ropes to it, you know. A block—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DE RIDDER: [unclear]. And that was a big relief when that thing was at least six feet in front of me. I don't know how come it was so far out this building. It was because of that gutter, I guess. And then the thing goes like that and the block is over there. Now—now, [coughs] I knew I could make it. Was still a surprise, though. Now, I had to jump forward and I could not take a start. I had to jump me two feet together and that's not the way you jump, especially not a man, you know. So I tried to let one foot come forward a little bit—little bit, you know, to give a—

LEVINE: Push.

DE RIDDER: —start, a push, you know. And then I figure, 'Well, I don't know which rope to take. I'll take all six of them because I take the wrong one, I'll be fast'—so that's what I did, you know. I jumped forward and then I—I landed so maybe three, four feet below what I had thought I was going to land, you know. And I had all six ropes. So then I came down on this rope [coughs] but those painters, they had a big electrical wire from one set of blocks, from, you know, the ropes.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DE RIDDER: From one set to the other. In the middle, they had a, maybe, 200-watt lamp—lamp hanging there to lit up the scaffold. There were two

baskets and ropes sitting on there, you know. And when I touched this rope, this lamp starts swinging. And you could not imagine how many shadows in that yard. They all came alive. You know, the—the—the lamp shines on an object and an object moves.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DE RIDDER: The whole line. I figured, 'My God! If that stoker comes out in the yard now, the first thing he's going to look at, well, why is that lamp swinging and all these shadows in this thing?' You know. Well, I got over the lamp. Then I went underneath of the scaf—hanging on the scaffold because this thing must have been—they—they pulled that up maybe 15 feet or more. And after—and I looked down and I figured, 'Oh, my God! What a drop!' You know. And I—I really hurt myself when I—I hung on that scaffold to lower the distance, you know. And then I—I had no choice, you know. And then I dropped and I—I really stayed quite a few minutes because of the—the impact. My knees, my feet, you know. I really hurt me there that time. But then I'm pushing myself because I had to go. This—this—this stoker could come out of that thing any minute, you know. The [coughs]—the—to refresh himself a little bit, you know. So finally, I left there and I tried to bend over as much as I can. I even tried to hold my—my hands and knees for a while because I figured that's [unclear] object. They don't spot it so easy, you know, like a man [unclear] walks around. He—he's spotted easy in the dark, I suppose. So finally, I go all the way to where I think I was going to go. And this whole area came alive. The thing was loaded with rats there. Loaded with rats, the whole section! You can cut that out maybe later.

LEVINE: Hmm.

DE RIDDER: [laughs]

LEVINE: No, that's good.

DE RIDDER: Now, now, I didn't want to be low against the ground no more because the rat [unclear] are sometimes rat, they jump in you're fly—your face or whatever. So I had to straighten myself up if I wanted [unclear]. And they had them jumping left and right and left, you know, even make noise, you know. In the meantime, I hurried to get away from that—that stoker who might come out of there in a minute, you know. And finally, I was through the wall [clears throat] and the area was a little bit lit up, because underneath the—the—shining on the wall, that they had lights there, dim lights, but it lit up the—the area, though.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

[END OF TAPE 2, SIDE A]

[BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE B]

DE RIDDER: When I was there, I—I got to get my—my [unclear] back, you know, and my—my [unclear]. I was exercising my leg a little bit because that still felt the impact, see. And [coughs] let's see what else. Yeah, now, I went to check out the water. There was all kinds of junk lying there and broken pieces of wood. So I threw a few of them in the water to see which way the current is going, you know. At that time, the current was still [unclear]. So I sat there maybe for—I want [unclear] swim coming in with the current because Hoboken was on the left side. And that was the area where I was looking at from out of my window. And when out of my window, had picked certain stops high up in the air, like lights, because when I'm in the water I'm below—below the ground.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DE RIDDER: I won't be able to see the things down below. I got to see the things way up in the air, see. So let's see. So then I finally—I must have sat there, I don't know, at least 20 minutes or longer. And I occasionally still threw lumber in—in the—in the water, you know. And I had two choices. I figured, 'If the current is too strong and I cannot make it, I swim with the current to the ocean and I bear into the Statue of Liberty. And then I get off on the Liberty.'

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE RIDDER: So I had two choices, see.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE RIDDER: But then after maybe 20 minutes or half an hour, I threw in—something in the water, a piece of wood. And it didn't float in the water. It just stays right there. I had picked the right—oh, I—I [unclear] a dozen [unclear] of luck, you know. So I figure, 'Oh, if I wait a few more seconds, the current is going to go the other way.' But—had—I was impatient, you know. I figure, 'Well,' so I took my shoes. I had shoes and [unclear] laces. Why—why [unclear]? I had shoes [unclear] laces, crepe—crepe shoes, you know, big soles. I figured is good. That floats, you know. So I tied them both together between my belt. I needed them to walk on the street because the

cop would see me and they would get me again, you know. So then my—my watch, I believe, stopped or something, like, just before midnight. [unclear] water, you know.

LEVINE: Oh.

DE RIDDER: So then in the yard, the people, they talk about you jump in the water, there are nets there. There are pins there. You can [unclear] beyond [unclear]. You do that. You—you're going to hang yourself. You're going to kill your—you know. So I figured, 'Well, we'll find out what happen.' I figured I'll jump feet first in case there is an object. It's better than—than diving this way, you know. That's what I did and nothing happened. So I just went down the [unclear], came back up. And—but I had all my clothes on, you know. So finally, I started in the direction [unclear]—I—I—I called it Hoboken. Hoboken, the Hoboken side. Now, when I landed, I know that Hoboken is just a little bit farther.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DE RIDDER: Because that's a big track of railroads, you know, where I landed, and Hoboken has that too.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DE RIDDER: About that much. But anyway—so when—when all this things are happening, you know, I—there—there was—was real—no problem. I—I—from real slow, real good, just make sure you fast enough to—to beat—but the current was not really pulling me.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DE RIDDER: It was just like, maybe, standing still, I suppose. And now, when I was about in the middle, feeling good, you know—you know, my rescue was right there, see, you know, I looked at the right because something all of a sudden shot up in front of me. A big barge with a tugboat headed straight for me! You know. I said, "Oh, God. This—this is a—I get the [unclear]. I get out of this building and come down to the third floor. Now, this boat is going to run me over," you know. This big barge. So I figured, 'I'll swim a little bit faster and maybe get'—but the guy was going like this. If I go this way, he went that way and I go this—so I lost a lot of time there, you know. And I—I had learned that, don't try to hold yourself up against the barge like that because the water pressure is so severe, it'll pull you eventually over it.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DE RIDDER: So I figured I got left and right. Now, finally, I—I changed twice position because the barge was not steady, see. I think the captain was having a beer or something. So now, finally, I decided—there was still a mile—mile away of [unclear] a little bit current going that way. So I went that way back to the island. And then so if I don't swim real hard he—he only going to hit me, you know. So then I went like—like the way you do. And—and I think I—I think I was pretty good swimmer. And then I made it just [unclear]. And the—the barge scraped me all here and here, kind of pushed me and my feet and everything. And that was good I had no shoes and I had a good grip on this barge, you know. And I pushed my—and then—then I went next to the barge. Then I had to watch out for the people in the steering house. I figured, 'If they see me, there goes the whole thing again,' you know. Well, then I have to get away from this barge again because that tugboat got a big propeller. And you hear people saying that sucks you under.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DE RIDDER: The—the torch or the—or the propeller. When I—

LEVINE: Were you feeling really tired by now?

DE RIDDER: No, no. I was young, you know. But I—I had never had this in my life, like a lot of people feel, 'I'm tired and'—I—I never had this, never had this in my life. And then finally, I swum as fast as I can get away from this propeller, you know. And then I—in the Merchant Marine, I learned that if you threw something in front of the propeller, if it doesn't go immediately down, the propeller won't do nothing. Well, when I—that's the thing. I could feel the touch on my leg though. I could feel that—that—that vibration, you know, but of course, I probably was still, you know—[coughs] anyway, I made it. So I stopped for a while. Then I continued back—back to Hoboken, you know. I'm swimming in—

LEVINE: So had you swum quite a distance back towards Ellis Island to get away?

DE RIDDER: No. But—oh, quite a bit. I—almost—the shore was right there. The shore was, so to speak, you know—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm.

DE RIDDER: It was right there. I figure, 'All this thing for nothing,' you know. Now, about being tired of not being able to make it, I—I didn't thought about it. I was always so—in—in my things, 'Sure, I'm going to make it.' You know, like jumping ship and all these things. 'Sure, I'll make it.' Because the Immigration told me one time, "We'll deport you. Can never come back no more." And I figured, 'I come back anytime I want.' [chuckles] 'I'll make it.' You know, I was—I had this attitude, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DE RIDDER: And all right. I continue my way and I finally—the pilings still a good distance, the pilings, you know, the docks. And [unclear] up there, you know. And now, all of a sudden, here comes this light. Here comes this tugboat again but this time without a barge. And I don't know, instead of going nice, straight to the—to the channel, in my opinion, it was looking like going—it was off course, you know, going s—right towards me. I figured, 'Is that a joke or is that real or what—what he doing? You know, is he going—is he going to stop here or land here?' I figured, 'I'll swim back to the middle now.' So I began back to the middle. But I knew I—I—I didn't really think I—actually, I could make it because that tugboat, all of a sudden, he was there in front of me. And sometimes, you hear the people. They see an object in the water and then they take a rifle and shoot for—they shoot at it, you know. And I figured, 'Can you imagine? They start shooting at this object in the water and it's me?' You know. So—so I start taking me arms out of the water. And all of a sudden, my rescue was there and all of a sudden, I didn't want no more help, because if I would have asked for help, they would have pulled me out of the water. But I'd have been back on the island. You know? But I—I brought my arms out of the water to let these people know, "Hey, this is not a sea lion, other thing. This is a person here, you know." And I did like that and then I swear to God. The man put it in his logbook. You will—you will find it that he reported he saw a person in the water because he changed course for me. He did change course for me. He went—and first, there was one guy on the bridge who came out of his steering house. And then he must have called for the second. The second guy came up and then a third guy and they're all looking at me. And then he took a—a search light and put it on me. But they didn't said nothing and I didn't say nothing. So slowly, he went, like, around me. Now, he's supposed to put it in this logbook, that—that tugboat captain.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DE RIDDER: But anyway, the Coast Guard came involved too. Then—then when he was past me I figured, ‘Oh, my God! They gonna report me now. They gonna call the cops.’ “We saw some—some nut in the water or something,” you know. “A guy committed suicide. And since he was swimming this way, he must have come from Ellis Island, so must be one of those immigrants, probably, you know. Refugees, whatever.” So I swum as hard as I could. And then I swum in one of those docks. They’re all—they’re all [unclear] linings, those docks in Hoboken. You know, big—

LEVINE: Big brown—

DE RIDDER: Big boulders. Big boulders, one next to the other. And then, so the first one, I figured, ‘I’ll never get out of here because that’s all greasy,’ you know. So I swum through all that junk there, you know, all junk lying in the water, you know. And all of a sudden, a whole pile of broken guk. Some must—tugboats must—must have hit on one time, broke all these pilings.

LEVINE: Ah.

DE RIDDER: And that—that’s what a—my first thing, you know. And would you believe, for the moment, I didn’t have the strength. I lay myself on it and I—I said, “I got to hang here a little bit because” I—I [unclear] for a split second. But I figured, ‘What—they’ll come back,’ you know. But I wanted to get my legs out of the water because I—I don’t think they had sharks up north in those days, but I know the sharks down and my—my legs hanging in the water, you know. So finally, that—believe me, that took quite a few minutes though before I had my strength and I pulled myself out of the water. And all these broken—broken splinters there, you know, from these pilings. Anyway, I make it through that and I came to the top. And I—in front of me, the railroads, you know. But I—in front of me is a guardhouse. I figured, ‘Oh, God. I’m back in trouble now. If there’s a guard in there, how I’m going to get past this guy? Maybe the man is there to guard certain [unclear], something that might be stolen, you know.’ But that—if I went in the other side, that was deserted and the door had fallen out, that little guardhouse, like a telephone booth.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE RIDDER: The [unclear] guard and the door had fallen out. So that was good, you know. So I went in that thing and I was taking my clothes off, you know, get—get all the water out of there. I had a hell of getting my shoelaces apart. What I time I wasted with these things, you know. [sniffs] Then while I’m doing that, down there three—three docks

farther, I see this big searchlight, you know. And then I seen a— maybe a—a 15-foot little white boat. I said, “Oh, the Coast Guard.” These people on the tugboat must have—

LEVINE: Reported.

DE RIDDER: —reported the [unclear] that there was a mental case or some people, maybe a guy escaped from the island, since he was swimming that direction, you know. And he didn’t want no help so maybe he was a little bit—so—so while they were doing—they had— if they would have come a little bit closer, then I would have been in a tight spot. I would a had to go around the railroad, you know. But they—they was in the wrong pier and they wasted more time there. So, since occasionally the searchlight came my way, I picked up that door and I put it between the searchlight and me, you know. So then I put my shirt back on, as much as I could, tried to put on wet clothes. Oh! Then—and my socks. Man, you know. And I can’t walk without socks. And then, finally, they came all the way to right next to me because I didn’t want to move no more behind that door. I figured they’ll see something, you know. And then they—all of a sudden, they gave up and they went away. So then I waited that time a little bit to make sure they were not just watching, you know, because they—they—they should have believed this—this tugboat captain, right. So then, finally, I started to walk in—in the railroads. Now, in the distance, looking in the New Jersey direction, I could see there was a highway because I could see cars going there. It was dark, you know. I could see the searchlight, the—the headlights of cars, you know. And then way down there there was, like—was all lit up there. I figured, ‘That’s in the area where there’s some activity. You know, maybe people go to work or come from work, whatever. So I began to go to this railroad thing. But there were a bunch of subways parked there. Because I went in and out, I didn’t—didn’t care much for crawling over it unless two cars come together. There I would go on my hands and knees under it because I figured, “Aye! Can you imagine that’s just the one—this one they want? Not that one but the one I’m under it,’ you know. So I done that number of times. I—I—I say I—I went maybe over 10 tracks. In the meantime, all of a sudden, somebody comes my way there. But he’s swinging a big red light, a lantern, you know. I figure, ‘Here—I know that guy,” you know. So instead of going in the direction of the highway, I started to walk towards him. You know, I’m swinging my arms like I do this all the time, you know. So when I passed him I said, “Hi, how you doing?” “[several words unclear].” He [unclear], I could hear that. So he didn’t stop for questions so he thought I just worked here, I guess, you know. So as soon as he went out, the distance, I—I went back to—and finally, I got to the highway, big fence, you know. A fence is

not a problem, you know. So I waited till the—the real headlights were gone from some cars that come on, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DE RIDDER: Because then when somebody see me climbing this fence, he might report to some guy or a cop, say, “Hey, there’s some guy climbing the fence out on the yard,” you know. Cops might investigate that, see. So I waited for the right spot, went over the fence, jumped on the other side. And I started to walk real nor—normal, you know, in the direction from this lights. And when I got there a whole bunch of people were just finish working, or a different shift. They were working, like, for a bus, which I found out later. But there was a diner there. I was starved and I would have gave a hundred dollars for a cup of coffee, you know. So I went in the diner and I got my money ready right away. I wanted this guy—I had to wait to give me change because, if the bus come, I was going to be on that bus, see. So when I took my wallet out, the water still came out of my wallet, you know. And the guy looked at me and says, “What happened?” I says, “Well, on the way home.” Said, “I’m working. Then I fell in the dock and [unclear] work. Then I’m going home.” “I would do the same thing,” he said, you know. So—and—and I had a red wallet and the red—that was a wallet I had bought in Morocco, that ship, Morocco leather. Nice, nice, [unclear]. And that red was on my twenty doll—but the guy didn’t want—I [unclear] two napkins. And I said, “You know, it’s \$20 here.” So he gave me change and I ate Danish and cof—and I just swallow it, you know. I was almost finish and there was the bus. So I run—run out the bus, got on this bus with all these workers, you know. I—know where was going, just get away, you know. Then as—as we were driving a little bit I didn’t want where we going and what are you doing, because, you know, I worked there, you know. So finally, I—the bus slowed down and I saw another bus crossing as you stopped on that corner. So I jumped off this bus, was too late. That bus went. But anyway, I was changing directions, see, and that’s what I wanted. So immediately, another bus came so I just jumped on there. And then wh—while I was on there, then I asked, “How do you get to Hoboken, Jersey.” He says, “You’re on the bus for Hoboken.” He says, “You’re just going in the wrong direction.” So I got off and turned around. I wound up in Hoboken. And there I had three other friends living illegal here, the same ship. They were all having—we were all having an apartment here one time. And then I woke them up in the middle of the night. And then they—if I had m—as soon as I mentioned the Immigration, then they put up Ellis Island [unclear], they couldn’t sleep no more, said, “Are they after you? Are they outside? Are they”—spoiled the whole thing, you know. Said, “Now, everything is

all right. Go back to bed,” you know. So I waited till the next day and then all my stuff was in New York, see. So they let me sleep there all night. They were all illegal like me, you know. And in a—in a—in a time like that, they help—you help one another, you know. [sniffs] And then the next, I went to—to New York to my hotel where I had my suitcase and everything. And everything was still in the room. And I was overdue already on rent and I felt bad that I could not go to the guy and say, “Here is—I—I own this.” And I figured, ‘I [unclear] in New York.’ That was our hangout in those days, you know, Times Square. I figured I—if I go to that street, maybe I’ll tell this guy, “Hey, can we settle a deal? I still owe you some money.” But that—that never did happen though.

LEVINE: So you had the key? Did you—how did you get your things?

DE RIDDER: I had this key from this—this furnish rooming thing set up and I had the keys from that—furniture all in there, you know. I left there. Yeah. In those days, you didn’t want to spend too much money, y—you know, really working yet, steady. And you hang onto all the money and you try to live as cheap as you can, you know, because when I first came here—well, this is first when I came. Remember, I couldn’t speak no English. For the first several days, since I could not speak English and I could not walk in a restaurant and ask for a decent meal, but I could speak Ger—pretty good German in those days. I forget it almost now. But in German, you say two words, which you understand in English, Frankfurt, or frankfurter and Hamburg, or hamburger. So that’s what I was eating for breakfast, lunch and stuff. [chuckles] And I would walk in a restaurant, pick out a nice meal and say, “This.” Well, and I always had a la—a waitress who—who, “Yeah, but you—how do you want it? You want gravy on it? You want bread? Now, you want your bread [unclear].” You know, say, “Give me this, this.” And [unclear] would walk out, go get another hamburger, you know.

LEVINE: So what do you think that whole escape experience—what do—how do you think about it now? What—what—

DE RIDDER: Now, I—I think it’s either real foolish thing, walking on the ledge of that building and any—anything thing else didn’t matter. I’ll do it all over again, everything, swim through Jer—[unclear] or break out and everything. But that—walking on that ledge, if I think about it, that—that was—that was a foolish thing. That would—if I would have been, say, ah—you know what the—the—the head of the Immigration told me one time? The head of the Immigration, his name was Smith in those days, he—he wanted to see this guy who escaped the island, who got—without help. He says was impossible. Somebody must

have help him. "I want to see this guy," he said. He came all the way from Columbus Avenue to see me. Then—then I felt great though. He let me walk up and down a little bit. I had gray sport pants on, a gray shirt on, a sport coat and, like, I felt really—and this guy was 225, 225 pounds, six foot tall, you know.

LEVINE: And who was this person?

DE RIDDER: His name was Smith.

LEVINE: But—

DE RIDDER: The h—the head of Columbus Avenue, the Immigration.

LEVINE: [unclear], uh-huh.

DE RIDDER: That's—that's what—that's what a—the word went out. Said, "Be careful with that guy," because there were two lawyers, public defenders, whatever. They would—helping the immigrants. One liked the people. The other guy hated everybody. But the good guy said to me—he says, "Look. Now, this is the bil—big wheel on Columbus Avenue." That's what we were referring to these people from the Immigration, you know. He said, "Don't get smart with them because," he says, "Don't. You're out." He said—you know. "And if these guys say [unclear], you cannot be able to come back." He says—but anyway, this guy came to see me. What—what I was going to say about that?

LEVINE: You said he came to see you and you felt good that you had—

DE RIDDER: Oh, yeah.

LEVINE: That you—you had done all that.

DE RIDDER: And this—this—this—this, outside this bad lawyer, the one, you know, I—didn't like nobody—he says to the Immigration, says—he says, "Do you know that he didn't really serves in this military thing? That he [unclear] over the hill." Well, that's the story you have to know. You see, we should have been in the service during the war. I was in a class, '43. But in '43, the Germans were there. We could not do military time. Well, then after the war they were going to draft us. And I was a guy who was not going to go in the service anymore. I was so much older. And then in the meantime, all the young people, they were married and have children. The government says, "Oh, forget about. We don't need him anymore." So I fell out of it, see. But I didn't knew it at the time that I say, "I'm not going," you

know. Se this guy brought it up to this—to this—to this head of the Immigration that he—I refused the military service, you know, for Belgium.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE RIDDER: And I—and then he said—and then he—he was sitting so real—I call it typical American. He was sitting on that desk with his feet on the chairs with another foot on the other—on the other seat. And I figured I—we always thought it was typical American, you know, being [unclear] out like, “Hey, you’re my buddy. I—but I never seen you before.” I—I found that too in chewing gum, you know. Anyway, after this guy brought it up that I was more or less a—a military deserter, you know—he—he brought it up so like I was a real offender, you know. And then this—this guy, from—Mr. Smith, you know—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DE RIDDER: He said, “Yeah, that’s true what you say. But now, listen to this.” He said, “Do you know what he just did? Broke out of this island and came out the third floor.” He says, “Without a ladder, just on a rope and—and then swum to Jersey with all his clothes and managed to get away from it. And it took us three years to find him.” He said, “And then he had to come by himself because we couldn’t catch him.” He said, “Can you imagine now, we have a guy like that in our forces.” He says, “In our [unclear]. He’s going to do something,” he says, “nobody else is going to do.” You know. And then I felt like, ‘I—I ain’t gonna talk to you no more,’ you know.

LEVINE: [chuckles]

DE RIDDER: Hmm.

LEVINE: Well, what—you went there yourself? How did you happen to—to get caught after three years?

DE RIDDER: Let me see. I don’t know if it’s—in fact, the—the second time, I surrender. That’s when I went to Canada. Then I was back on—they put me back on the island. But let me see, first, with that. Ah—

LEVINE: When you were brought before Mr. Smith, w—

DE RIDDER: Yeah.

LEVINE: W—how did that happen? How did you come to go—be there?

DE RIDDER: Well, he—he knew I was on the island and I was waiting for whatever they were going to do with me.

LEVINE: Oh, that was because you were caught again?

DE RIDDER: [sighs]

LEVINE: Someone came and—and found you again? Is that what happened?

DE RIDDER: Let's see [unclear]. [sighs]

LEVINE: Because you escaped clean after that first—

DE RIDDER: Yeah, that's right.

LEVINE: Yeah.

DE RIDDER: That's right.

LEVINE: And then—

DE RIDDER: Yeah, wait. Yeah. That was the time then when I surrendered. When I surrendered, they put me back in—in a room. This time, they put a guard in front of my cell, also relieved me of all the things that could harm me. And he watched me eating. I asked him why. He says, "Well, you escaped one time." He says, "And this time"—and it seemed that the other man lost his job. He didn't do his duty because I see that I was gone for more than three days before he finally reported there was a man missing from this little—you know. He got—

LEVINE: The clicker with the count.

DE RIDDER: —suspicion, I guess, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE RIDDER: And the—and the island, they say, "We don't need people like that," you know. Yeah, that was that time.

LEVINE: But—

DE RIDDER: Yeah.

LEVINE: —do you remember why you turned yourself in after those three years?

DE RIDDER: Yeah, let me see. Why did I do [unclear]?

LEVINE: [laughs]

WOMAN: [sentence unclear].

DE RIDDER: No, that was years—years after that. [sighs] I don't remember exactly why I wanted to go back. It was something being [unclear] all or something, or then come back to the States and start something new, or go to a different state or try California. And I had all these things in mind, you know. I don't know exactly what set me up to that.

LEVINE: It sounds as though you wanted to be sent back for some reason.

DE RIDDER: Yeah. Well, at—at one time, I—I felt like—I got, like, people were just a little bit needling me, like, “Don't you know? People want to give their right arm to be”—I said, “Yeah, this is a great country but I come from a beautiful little country. See, I'm not afraid to go back there.” Said, “This is not communism. This is not Russia, you know.” Because at one time I said—especially that guy who—that nasty guy says he wanted to send me back. Said, “Give me the paper. I'll sign it.” You know. Let me see. Yeah, we—when I was on Columbia Avenue, the Immigration—the—back to that place, when I was brought in the first time I said—how the heck did I started that? I can't think of the—the thing.

LEVINE: Hmm. Well, if it comes to you, you can just mention that.

DE RIDDER: Oh—

LEVINE: Yeah.

DE RIDDER: Yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah. Well, apparently, you escaped e—even before that when you were in one of the work camps? You—did you escape when you were still in the Army?

DE RIDDER: I was never in the Army.

LEVINE: Not in the Army. I'm sorry. I'm—

DE RIDDER: Yeah, that's all right.

LEVINE: Um—

DE RIDDER: That's all right.

LEVINE: When you were in a work camp and you asked others to help you to escape—

DE RIDDER: Oh, no—on the island.

LEVINE: This was—no, this was back during the war.

DE RIDDER: Oh, yeah. All right.

LEVINE: And y—did you try to escape then too?

DE RIDDER: A number of times. A number of times, yeah. But you could never get any help. It's so—how everybody is. They—they just believe it's impossible and then I was one time on one place. They didn't want to come with me and since nobody wanted to help me, I figured, 'I get up—or if I get on this roof and I get to this door, I'm not going to hold the door open for you guys. I'm going to close the door. You don't want to give me a hand, I [unclear].' And I got up on that thing because they—they had good—good [unclear]. They put wire around the posts and I had managed to get big [unclear] because the barbed wire. So I could grab the—get on the roof rather than—wasn't a guard standing there, you know. And—and I jumped up on the other side. Then when they all saw I was on the other side and going to open the door they all came running. I closed the door in front of them. "You didn't want to help me," I says. "I'll do it by myself."

LEVINE: And so you did?

DE RIDDER: I did.

LEVINE: Yeah, you did and you got away. Okay. Well, apparently, you were afraid of losing your children when you turned yourself in that time.

DE RIDDER: Oh, yeah.

LEVINE: When you went to Columbus Avenue.

DE RIDDER: Yeah, they said—they were threatening about deportation and then there was—I didn't want to go. I didn't want to go with them, you know. You had to figure out something. And I mentioned the kids,

you know. I said about—and then this wise guy, again, you know, he said, “Well, you should have thought about that before,” you know, while the other guy was trying to help me, you know. And then—then I got a little bit nasty by saying, “I can come back anytime I want, you know, because where—where I am, my kids are going to be, see?” You know.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Okay. We’re going to—we’re going to stop here because we’re at the end of the tape. And this is the end of tape two with Mr. Jan De Ridder.

[END OF TAPE 2, SIDE B]

[BEGIN TAPE 3, SIDE A]

LEVINE: This is now tape three. I’m speaking with Jan De Ridder and we were talking about when you turned yourself in and you went to Columbus Avenue.

DE RIDDER: Yeah.

LEVINE: And—

DE RIDDER: I—I surrendered to the Immigration that time, yeah.

LEVINE: Right.

DE RIDDER: And, well, after I got to the—to Columbus Avenue, to the—the building where the Immigration is, they told me who and what to see. And when I c—came inside of the building, right away, I saw the person sitting there who had arrested me in Hoboken, New Jersey several years before. Or what was it? Yeah. And I—I didn’t want to give the man the pleasure to say, “You were the one who arrested me.” And then I think I did the right thing because after he spoke to me for a few minutes, he got up and went to his drawer, pulled out a big chain and a padlock and locked me up in a room there. And on the outside, he put his big chain through the lock and everything. And all—and that was to be maybe 30 people sitting there waiting to be interviewed. And then, oh, watching what he was doing with me. You know, they probably were hoping that won’t happen to them, being locked up like that, you know. [breathes deeply] And I—I couldn’t understand why all this happened. Now, later, they brought me before somebody else. And they said, “It’s getting late now. We have to take this guy back to Ellis Island.” Then two guys, two real gentlemen, you know, real nice—first, one guy came to shake hands with me. And he says, “Oh, you that guy [unclear]. Would you

believe,” he says, “we looked all over New York and in the neighboring counties. We went to Belgium farms and everywhere and we couldn’t find you. Isn’t that nice that, after all, they come back to you and said, ‘Case closed,’” you know. So then he said, “Listen, let’s hurry up because we—before we get late, we have to take that man to Ellis Island,” because, I don’t know, some boat or something was going to close up. So they took me downstairs where the garage is, where all the cars were. They were waiting for a car to take me to—to the South Ferry that time, to take me to Ellis Island. And off of there, while I was there, so first, they locked me up. And these two people, they say, “You don’t mind waiting here a second.” One guy had to do something. He left me alone. And then the other guy had to make a phone call. He left me alone, stay there too. And I thought, ‘What is all this guarding me for? Now—now, I can go when I want to.’ But anyway, I got in the car with them. They took me. And they were joking, real nice guys. They were talking about the—what I wanted to do back in Europe and why I’m going back and when I’m coming back, because I got two kids here and all that stuff. So now, finally, we—we get to the ferryboat. There’s a little tiny boat that’s lying there. Then when I was on the boat, the guys, they left to say, “You won’t have any trouble with him because he surrendered. You’d have to lock him up,” because I didn’t want to be locked up in a little boat, you know, in that. Can you imagine, if it sinks? So then when I was in the boat the captain of that little boat, it took me—he apologized for not having [unclear], same thing. He says, “But if you want,” he says—there were all these little coffee shops there. So he let me go back on the street, get a cup of coffee. He went in this Neddicks [PH]. Neddicks stores in the—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm.

DE RIDDER: —old days.

LEVINE: Yeah.

DE RIDDER: So I had a frankfurter and a cup of coffee. Then I figured, ‘Should I go back to the boat or not?’ [laughs]

LEVINE: But do you remember precisely why you turned yourself in that time?

DE RIDDER: I don’t know—

LEVINE: Why you wanted to be sent back.

DE RIDDER: Maybe it was—it was a [unclear].

LEVINE: Hmm.

DE RIDDER: There was a time that I—that I was a little bit disappointed. Maybe that—that has something—I—I couldn't get ahead. I had a—a wife who could not save money. If I gave her 20, she spent 30. If I spent 30—the milkman, he comes. He says, "Sir, you're—I'm glad you're home. You owe us for 10 bottles of milk." I said, "They didn't pay you?" He said, "No." And we didn't get along that—that well. And I—I was—maybe it had something to do with my culture. My culture was so that would never happen with them. You know, they—they would pay even more. They would arrange that. They would put money on that. They—they might do something but they made sure that, you know, the bills were paid and everything. And I—I—I didn't have that—that luck with this woman. Is a nice woman, you know. She was very good for the kids.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DE RIDDER: She could not handle money though. That was a little bit of our problems, you know. So—

LEVINE: So you might have been thinking of going back to—

DE RIDDER: Come back to—

LEVINE: —Belgium and—

DE RIDDER: And start all over again and—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DE RIDDER: —see what I have given a—a last ultimate, or—or say, "Listen, it's going to be this and this. Now, it's going to be my way. I want it this way and this way and this way." I—I let—I let her have more or less because I couldn't handle her. She—our cultures were different, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DE RIDDER: But I tried to figure out in the beginning, like, she didn't have to leave my culture with America. Say, "Let's make—live the American way, not yours, not mine, the American way." That didn't work neither. My way didn't work. That made it worse. So, you know, I figure, 'When I come back we'll see what we do with the kids.' And then one thing or the other.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DE RIDDER: You know?

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DE RIDDER: And then that—that prob—yeah. I—I'm almost sure now that's—

LEVINE: Yeah.

DE RIDDER: —this was thing that instigated the whole thing.

LEVINE: So then you—you had the [chuckles] frankfurter in the Nedicks and you went back to the ferry—

DE RIDDER: I went back to the boat.

LEVINE: —and you went to Ellis?

DE RIDDER: And I went back to Ellis Island and there the same [unclear] all over again, back to cell—back—or [unclear] from my belt and everything. I was not allowed to shave myself or nothing, you know. In the cell, a—a guy came and look every 15 minutes. Said, "I'm still alive."

LEVINE: Now, did—did people remember that you were the person who had escaped? People who were back there at Ellis Island?

DE RIDDER: Let me think. First of all, that guard knew somehow about me because he said to me, "I'm not going to lose my job because of you." I said, "What do you mean, because of me?" Said, "What did I do?" "The other man lost his job," he said. I said, "Why did he"—I knew right away, you know? I said, "Well, I heard they found people already," you know. They—they came to see me before that. He said, "Well, he's supposed to guard you and"—excuse me—"and since he didn't do what he's supposed to do, he got fired eventually." Says, "And he was a government worker, you know. He lost the pension and all this stuff," you know. But that's not my fault. He should have done his job. There's no problem, just counting a guy, you know. He had to count 200 people. They go to the cafeteria and would come back. They go in the yard, come back from the yard. That's all.

LEVINE: Right. So this time, you were kept in a separate—

DE RIDDER: Room.

LEVINE: —room.

DE RIDDER: Like a real jail. And—and [unclear]—

LEVINE: Do you know where you were? Where in the—in Ellis Island? [unclear] room?

DE RIDDER: This was in an upper floor.

LEVINE: On the third floor. Was a balcony outside that room? Do you remember?

DE RIDDER: That, I don't remember.

LEVINE: Hmm.

DE RIDDER: But it was also in the upper thing.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE RIDDER: Because I could describe certain rooms, the ones on the Hoboken side, so to speak, you know.

LEVINE: You could see out a window? In the cell you—or the room—

DE RIDDER: No.

LEVINE: —you were in? No.

DE RIDDER: No.

LEVINE: The windows were probably high.

DE RIDDER: Yeah, they're all high windows. Yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah, see, I—I think I know where you are. Yeah.

DE RIDDER: Yeah. But [pause]—what I'm thinking about [unclear]—

LEVINE: Did you ever—were you ever let out of that room then?

DE RIDDER: Let me see. The—my hearing came up right away. That time, they even wasted no time. I had to file this, the red—red [unclear]. No, a big red sticker on there that says, "Rush." They would take my file before—because if I came in a room and somebody wanting to interrogate me or say something, he says—well, no. They just—they

would say, like, "What do you want?" Or—or, "Who are you?" I said, "The red sticker there."

LEVINE: [chuckles]

DE RIDDER: And then—

LEVINE: So they rushed you—

DE RIDDER: —some guy knew the red sticker already. He said, "De Ridder?" "Yeah, that's me."

LEVINE: So—so your—you came right up to a hearing. And what—

DE RIDDER: Yeah, yeah.

LEVINE: What happened at that hearing?

DE RIDDER: Oh, there wasn't the preparat—oh, they put me on tape too. They had a—a machine with a roll—a roll. The tape was—was like—like a sleeve.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE RIDDER: They put the sleeve on this—on this thing, you know, and there was a heavysset Immigration officer interview me there, or whatever I said to him, and all in this little machine, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE RIDDER: Had it all on that. Because a couple times, I said something, have records instead of—then he repeated it, you know. I says, "You just asked me this and this and this," you know. Yeah.

LEVINE: So how long did you stay at Ellis Island that time, roughly?

DE RIDDER: [sighs] Only—I believe only several—three, four days, maybe, because there was also down—downtown New York, there was some kind of an agency. I believe it was a—a religion thing. They would help the immigrants.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DE RIDDER: Like they did—gave me a hand to prepare for my visa in Canada. One, this—that good officer, the guy who liked the people, he said, "You're going to get a lawyer." He s—says, "You want to tell you how

to do it.” Said, “There’s an agency there. It—it’s a Christian thing or something like that, I believe.” Say, “Go and see this.” The name of this woman was Sheeding [PH]—Miss—Miss Sheeding. I remember her name.

LEVINE: Hmm.

DE RIDDER: He says, “Go and see her. And if they find out who you are and what you did on the island, they’re going to have a ball with you.” He said—he says—and—and they prepared for my visa. And that—and then I had to go fingerprint. I had my—my birth certificate translated in—in—and—and a more of this and more of that. [sniffs] And then they—they made arrangement with American Consul in Toronto. And it took about a year. In the meantime, I had a—a—a permit to be free. I—temporarily permitted—

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE RIDDER: —to walk around, you know. All of a sudden, hey! Say, “Hey, I’m American, almost.”

LEVINE: [chuckles]

DE RIDDER: So they not after me anymore.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So in other words, you got a visa from Canada. Is that what you got?

DE RIDDER: First, they gave me a temporary permit to go to Canada and to cross the border.

LEVINE: Right.

DE RIDDER: And then I got my regular visa to come to America. So I came in the States—

LEVINE: Hmm.

DE RIDDER: —in ’55 through Buffalo, New York.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DE RIDDER: And I came legally in the States—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm.

DE RIDDER: —in [unclear] '55.

LEVINE: Wow.

DE RIDDER: Buffalo, New York.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So then you were here and you were—for a year, anyway, you were—knew you were going to become legal.

DE RIDDER: Yes.

LEVINE: So what did you do then?

DE RIDDER: [sighs] I don't know. I would say I started to work again and got back in normal way of life, I would say, you know.

LEVINE: And—and where were you living at that point?

DE RIDDER: I lived for a while in New York, 20th Street.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE RIDDER: Next to that school where I went for English.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE RIDDER: You know? Then I married. When I was married, then I lived in Brooklyn and I lived in Manhattan. And now, later, I lived alone from—by myself for a while back in Hoboken.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE RIDDER: And I'm back in—in New York because New York, everything was there, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE RIDDER: In those days, was easy for jobs there, at least for me was easy.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So did you keep working in different factories or did you—did you do woodworking or wh—h—

DE RIDDER: Yeah, I was—

LEVINE: What did you then do?

DE RIDDER: Se—se—several times, I was in a—a—like the United States Sliding Door Corporation. And I worked for a—a—a chain woodworking—I—I don't—can't think of it anymore. [sniffs] I worked a number of times in restaurants. I liked that.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DE RIDDER: Because on—on—on ships, I had been—been involved with food a little bit. I didn't want to get on [unclear] get dirty, you know. And then that way, I always had a good job, like in a restaurant. They said, "Oh, oh. We'll make a salad cook out of this guy." And then, "Oh, we'll make him a second cook," [unclear]. And I always had the goodies, you know. [sniffs]

LEVINE: So you never actually did go back to Belgium. Or did you?

DE RIDDER: Wait. Yeah, I did. When was that? Oh! I worked in the garment center. I was there for five years. How can I forget this? I worked in the ladies wear. David Crystal [PH], Fifth Avenue, big place. He has five places, one in Hawaii too. David Crystal.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DE RIDDER: They—he has a second name, Haymaker [PH] Sports and Hayette [PH]. Hayette was the cheap dress.

LEVINE: Hmm.

DE RIDDER: The other two were expensive, especially Haymakers. And it had—they have a big shower room and nine models in the season. And I had managed to go to the warehouse. The warehouse, there were no bosses. You had more freedom and I had my own thing there, you know. And that was on 10th Avenue. And I worked there five years. I was a shipping clerk there for five years.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DE RIDDER: Oh, I had a—I could have worked there a hundred years but the salary was, in those days, highest I went was \$87, I believe. The [unclear] were \$80 a week. I had \$87 and that was it. And then I had my own telephone but the big bosses were a little bit—because of my accent, you know. They were a little bit, you know—and I spoke a little bit worse than I do now, you know. A little bit worse than I do now. Now, I speak real good. [clears throat] So, yeah, I worked there five year—oh, when I went to Belgium, in '55, the—the [unclear]. [unclear] maybe that [unclear]. I says, "I—I'm going to take

a look in Europe and I'm going to stay there for a while. And then I'll come back and see what happen." And I went as passenger on the Adrea—a Holland Dutch ship, the Suderdam [PH].

LEVINE: Hmm.

DE RIDDER: The same time we were—I was on the ship and we got an SOS. The Andre—Andrea Doria was sinking—

LEVINE: Oh.

DE RIDDER: —off New York harbor.

LEVINE: And you were taking this ship back to Europe?

DE RIDDER: Yeah, I was not on that ship.

LEVINE: Oh. Not on—no, not—but you were taking the—

DE RIDDER: At—at that time—

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE RIDDER: —what—we—[coughs] because my ship had an SOS, because two days later we got another SOS. And a Norwegian seaman had a splinter in the eye. And we were the only passenger liner with a doctor on board. And we went back for 10 days with thousand people on the ship. They held them, seamen. The maritime law is that nice, you know.

LEVINE: Wow.

DE RIDDER: But that—that was the day the Andrea Doria went down. None—none of us [unclear]. The Andrea Doria, this big passenger liner sank—

LEVINE: Yeah.

DE RIDDER: —right at New York harbor there.

LEVINE: And you were on the Suderdam at the time?

DE RIDDER: A Holland Dutch ship, yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE RIDDER: A Holland Dutch ship. [sniffs] That was when the Andrea Doria was sinking. Yeah. And we got an SOS. Then, of course, you know, all the people with the cameras and, you know.

LEVINE: Did people know what was happening at the time?

DE RIDDER: Oh—oh, yeah. Yeah. The Andrea Doria, we found out later on. At that time, there were several ships more near closer by to the sinking ship. So they—needed our help anymore because they said, “With all these passengers, what they gonna do? They’re going to be in the way,” you know.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. So when you were going back on the Suderdam, wh—was it a crowded ship of people going back to Europe?

DE RIDDER: A regular passenger line. Actually, there was a—a converted—I believe what they call a converted liberty s—now, the liberty ships, they were all ships what were built during the war in a hurry.

LEVINE: Right.

DE RIDDER: The victory ships and the liberties. And that was a beautiful, swimming pool and nice—yeah. Nice. Three settings on the—sittings, dining room, you know. The [unclear]. Real nice. And I had no registers because I wanted to move around. You know, maybe I see a nice lady in there or—then I’ll move there and we’ll—you know. But they had the register on the table and number. And you want to register. And for the—finally, when it came to the—to the meal, I didn’t know where to sit, you know. And one of the persons—says, “Where’s the person here? Who can I talk to?” Says, “You didn’t register?” And then the real—the—the [unclear], the person says, “Oh, I—who—who you said you are?” So and so. And he was a Hollander. I speak his language. I can speak Holland Dutch, you know. Says, “Oh, you come sit in my table. [unclear].” [chuckles]

LEVINE: [chuckles]

DE RIDDER: And everybody said, you know, they thought I was one of the big officers, you know. I—sitting with the person. Not only that, the person said—I—he had—there was s—seven or eight Americans sitting on this table. And he was the only H—Hollander, Dutchman. And you know how the Europeans eat with knife and fork?

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DE RIDDER: You know? And the person says, "John." He said, "I can see you're European." He said, "You're the only one eats with a knife and a fork." He said, "The American is this. He eats like—gets the thing and then he lays this down and he switches. And he brings it to his mouth and then he puts it down and cuts this down and lays it down," you know.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. [chuckles]

DE RIDDER: Like there is something wrong with it, you know. [sniffs] I liked that.

LEVINE: So—so when you went back then and you w—how did you feel, going back to your original country after all those years of living in the United States?

DE RIDDER: Well, on other things, was like—like small [unclear] change. Then the—the—you—you believe in—in a short time—well, it wasn't only short time. There was several years involved. The—the street where my mother—and she lived in the town—had, like, say, 17 houses. And when I went there the whole street was filled in. And before, nobody had a car. Now, the—all—two cars. And we had any supermarkets. Now, we had supermarkets. The people, they wanted them in the town because, as I said, they're real tough. They shot the first two guys open superma—said, "We don't want that. We want the small people with the small—making a living." The guy said, "I'm going to open it anyway." Said, "I'm going to want to live." Shot—they shot the next one.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. So did you feel like you wanted to be there or y—did it feel comfortable or not—

DE RIDDER: Feel lost. Lost. The big city too, lost. Antwerp was just an old tram—a streetcar ride, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE RIDDER: And [unclear] that anymore, n—more—the friends are all there. They were married and they were involved in other things. And I never got up with them. They were talking about sports. I didn't know what they were talking about. You know, football and the bicycle races. Big sport, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DE RIDDER: France and [unclear]. And was kind of lost. And then how did I go back? Oh, back passenger line but this time on a—on a Norwegian

freighter. I went to Holland and joined the ship there. And that was the ship from the Black Diamond Line, who docks in Brooklyn all the time in New York. I don't know if that still happen now.

LEVINE: Now, thi—you were as a Merchant Marine, you came back on that?

DE RIDDER: No, I went as passenger.

LEVINE: Oh, as a passenger.

DE RIDDER: Passenger, yeah.

LEVINE: Ah, uh-huh.

DE RIDDER: On—on a—ev—those freighters, they take five—those freighters, they take five or—five or ten passengers, you know.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh. Uh-huh. So—so you came back and you—you decided then that you were going to stay here?

DE RIDDER: Oh, yeah. Yeah. Now, first of all, I knew, you know. But I had problems, see, in the beginning, you know. Half—half-ways.

LEVINE: So then, is that—was that the end? Did you just—you stayed then from then on? Or not?

DE RIDDER: Yeah, from that on. I used to take vacations once in a while, you know, go see my mother.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DE RIDDER: My mother was always, you know, "Maybe it's the last time. Maybe it's the la"—she was saying that for 17 years.

LEVINE: [laughs] Did she ever visit here?

DE RIDDER: My mother?

LEVINE: Yeah. No, no.

DE RIDDER: She went to Canada one time. And she says—my—she visit my brother. And she says—and she says, "If is America like Canada, then I don't want to go there," because she went for a walk one time and they didn't have any sidewalks.

LEVINE: [chuckles]

DE RIDDER: And that's the reason she didn't want to come here. She said, "America like that, didn't have any sidewalks [unclear]." In—in—in Belgium, we can walk all over the city on the sidewalk and streetcar. Transportation is unbelievable. You don't need a car—is—is a bother, you know.

LEVINE: Well, was it—was the fact that your bro—was your brother in Canada at the time that—that you got legally to come into—

DE RIDDER: That—that—

LEVINE: —this country through Canada? Was that part of how you did that?

DE RIDDER: No, when—when I was here, I was married already and living in Brooklyn. My brother came to visit me and he wanted to make up his mind, should he stay here—

LEVINE: Oh.

DE RIDDER: —or not? See? But he believes in nationalized medicine, like the Belgians. We have free medicine, see.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DE RIDDER: And we don't have that [unclear]. He says, "I'm not going to live in this country." He says.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE RIDDER: "That's not a country for me." See.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE RIDDER: And then he's very proud that when he calls me, he says, "We just went to the doctor with the two kids." Well, sometime ago.

LEVINE: Yeah.

DE RIDDER: The kids are big now.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE RIDDER: He said, "We didn't have to pay nothing." And said, yeah—

LEVINE: [chuckles] Were you ever tempted to go to Canada?

DE RIDDER: No, the climate. It's beautiful there and my brother is—[unclear] for me and he wants me and he's got a job for me and all these things. And he—he makes real good ad—advance in his life. He was harbormaster in the Frazier [PH] River one time in the Yukon.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE RIDDER: He had the whole river.

LEVINE: Oh.

DE RIDDER: Special boat for him and everything.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE RIDDER: You know?

LEVINE: Yeah.

DE RIDDER: And now, one time he got tired of that job and they made him a—a navigation—he was teaching navigation. I don't know what in the heck he wrote it, you know. He's also been in the Merchant Marine, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE RIDDER: And he—they made him a—he had to wear a navy uniform, which was illegal, more or less. But just for the teaching [unclear], the teaching, gave lessons—

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE RIDDER: —to impress the people, say they had the—you know? After you—really had to take the uniform off. It's not legally to wear.

LEVINE: I see.

DE RIDDER: That was just for the people, see.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE RIDDER: Teaching navigation. But [unclear] had a mind, see, if he reads the book to be a cook, he's a cook.

LEVINE: Oh, that's wonderful.

DE RIDDER: He don't forget.

LEVINE: Yeah, yeah.

DE RIDDER: Photographic mind.

LEVINE: Let me backtrack for a minute about Ellis Island.

DE RIDDER: Yeah.

LEVINE: When you were there, who was there? What—what other people? What—what people were coming through there or who were—

DE RIDDER: I believe—

LEVINE: —were there when you were there?

DE RIDDER: —there must be like a dozen prisoners.

LEVINE: That's all?

DE RIDDER: They—they claimed there were a dozen Chinese there. They claimed that. There were plenty of them but I don't know if there was a dozen.

LEVINE: But w—were they all people who were scheduled for deportation, as far as you know?

DE RIDDER: They were all there, stopping for whatever the problems were, I guess. I—I cannot see that—that something they were coming to. And—and I have—I have never met anybody actually had to go there for something.

LEVINE: Did you—I mean, the people you spoke with when you were there—

DE RIDDER: Yeah.

LEVINE: Were they all scheduled to be—

DE RIDDER: Yeah, yeah. The—

LEVINE: —sent back or waiting—

DE RIDDER: They were all—

LEVINE: —for a hearing and—

DE RIDDER: Most of them were waiting, like, for a hearing. Yeah.

LEVINE: And—and you think there were—there were a lot of Chinese. And then was the place crowded or not or—

DE RIDDER: I wouldn't say so. I won't say so.

LEVINE: No. And was it run—what kind of condition was it in when you—

DE RIDDER: Looks good to me.

LEVINE: Yeah?

DE RIDDER: I didn't know why it would—they would [unclear] or something.

LEVINE: Yeah.

DE RIDDER: I thought it was—looks good to me.

LEVINE: But were you aware of immigrants coming through to be processed? Or were you aware of, like, Coast Guard being stationed there?

DE RIDDER: No, we were—we're almost—always seeing the same people, more or less, say—say, maybe 500 of them. We met 'em at the yard. We met 'em at the cafeteria. We met them—we met 'em at a—going to our quarters, you know. And then I could see military [unclear] from our Navy or probably—

LEVINE: You could see them?

DE RIDDER: Navy, they coming up this boat or this boat comes in. And then in the back, they were docking there somewhere. And I heard that they were coming, spent the night there, that they have no place to stay or to sleep. Or that was just maybe a rumor because they could have come to Staten Island, I suppose.

LEVINE: Do you—were you aware of whether the hospitals buildings were operating for—for Merchant Marine, merchant seamen from other places?

DE RIDDER: Didn't hear nothing about hospitals.

LEVINE: Yeah. So [clears throat] when you look back over everything, what—what do you think—what difference do you think it made to you,

coming—coming to this country as a young man and—and—and changing your life and changing your culture. And how do you think it—what difference do you think it made to, like, how you see things, how you are, what your personality is? Do you think it made a big impact and, if so, what—what do you think—

DE RIDDER: Well, this is the best country to live in, you know. You know, that it's a rich country and it's a strong country and nobody could fight it. But I don't know. There is—there is still something I would say I'm missing, that the closeness of the people.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DE RIDDER: Is—maybe they don't do that anymore either now. You see, I'm—I'm many years out of it.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE RIDDER: See? There was no such thing as TVs in—interrupting, you know. So the families sit together and women were always doing something, knitting or, say, "Shall we—or need to do this way," or—you know, and they were always—they go from one household to the other. And they had big parties with cooking and [unclear] and not always working, you know. Just go there just to eat and sit and plenty food and home cooking.

LEVINE: So that's the Belgium you remember.

DE RIDDER: Yeah.

LEVINE: But it may have—be—

DE RIDDER: And it ain't—

LEVINE: —be different now.

DE RIDDER: It ain't no more like that now.

LEVINE: Yeah, right.

DE RIDDER: It ain't no—

LEVINE: Yeah.

DE RIDDER: —more like that now.

LEVINE: Yeah, yeah. What do you—

DE RIDDER: Because they got all two-car families now. My mother says, “My God! You come home with a car. You got to leave your car in the market.” She says, “And you know, you have to walk”—you know, the—so [several words unclear].

LEVINE: What do you feel proud of that you’ve accomplished in your life? What makes you feel satisfaction?

DE RIDDER: I can—I never thought about that, see. Well, I took—I—I got two kids, are troublemakers. They—

LEVINE: Yeah?

DE RIDDER: Maybe that was [unclear] good. [chuckles] No, they’re good kids.

LEVINE: Actually—

DE RIDDER: They’re good kids.

LEVINE: Why don’t you mention your children’s names for—for the tape?

DE RIDDER: Oh, I got the—the oldest one is my son, Edward. And then the second is my daughter, Martha.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE RIDDER: Martha. They’re—they’re both good kids and they done all right in life, because with all this drugs and all these things, and they live in a big city like New York where you could get anything you want as youngsters, you know. They never got involved or—nor—or n—nothing illegal. Honest, the truth. Never—I never found out there was anything illegal going on there.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE RIDDER: They’re good kids, e—even today. Even today.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

[END OF TAPE 3, SIDE A]

[BEGIN TAPE 3, SIDE B]

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And you have grandchildren?

DE RIDDER: My son, yeah. My son's got a—got a boy, Derrick.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DE RIDDER: He's 16 years now. He's very proud to have his driver's license now.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. So what are you looking forward to at this point?

DE RIDDER: [chuckles] Oh, I'm—I'm retired now, you know?

LEVINE: Yeah.

DE RIDDER: So I have—have a big garden where I—where I always working, keep myself in shape, I guess.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DE RIDDER: But I'm beginning to slow down so—I don't know.

LEVINE: And how do you think about yourself as far as Belgium—Belgian and—and American? H—how do you—

DE RIDDER: I—

LEVINE: —think about those two parts of you?

DE RIDDER: For some reason, I—I don't really care much about Belgium no more. I—I know it's a beautiful country and I had a—I had good years there. And I—I'm glad the United Nations is there and there are thousands of Americans in Belgium all the time. And there are thousands of them living in Belgium because of the nationalized medicine, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DE RIDDER: Because I know one of them, he says, "Me going back to the States? Not as long as my youngest is 18," he said. You know. And he—well, I says, "We should go back because that—the youngsters, they never had a peanut butter sandwich." You know.

LEVINE: [chuckles] Yeah.

DE RIDDER: But so it was a—was a good country at that time but I—it ain't no more now, the way it is now, I think, because of too many people there now. It's a little country, overcrowded.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. And—and how about [clears throat]—excuse me—the World Trade Tower bombing?

DE RIDDER: Oh—

LEVINE: How do y—how did that affect you?

DE RIDDER: Oh, that's a disaster. That—that's something unbelievable. That should have never happened, that—that's—that's not the way to fight one another. That's not the way to fight one another. But of course, that's the way a terrorist works, you know. I think it made a big impact on us. It done a lot of damage to our—to us mentally because we're not safe anymore now. We're not safe anymore.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DE RIDDER: Because tomorrow, some big thing could happen. Now, that's something that should never happen.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DE RIDDER: It should have never happened.

LEVINE: Well, do you have any desire to visit Ellis Island?

DE RIDDER: Well, [chuckles] [unclear].

LEVINE: [chuckles]

DE RIDDER: May—maybe some day, to take a look there. I don't know. But, see, I don't really—maybe I'll ta—take a look at the roof where I jumped from.

LEVINE: [laughs]

DE RIDDER: Or where I could have fall off.

LEVINE: Well, you're—you're certainly welcome to visit at any time.

DE RIDDER: Do—do I need—

LEVINE: I'd be happy to make arrangements for you to come.

DE RIDDER: Do I need a pass or something? Or—[unclear].

LEVINE: Well, you know, now there's a bridge where you—[chuckles] where you swam across is now a bridge. There's now a bridge there.

DE RIDDER: To—to Jersey?

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DE RIDDER: If I had known that—

LEVINE: Well, it wasn't there—

DE RIDDER: [laughs]

LEVINE: —then. It came later. Yeah.

DE RIDDER: There's a bridge there now?

LEVINE: Yeah, yeah. So is there anything else you can think of that maybe we haven't covered relevant to your coming to this country or escaping deportation? Anything else that—we've covered quite a bit.

DE RIDDER: I know I won't do it again though. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Yeah.

DE RIDDER: Especially on that third floor wall there. Well, I guess—I guess that would be it, I guess. Maybe some little things [unclear] maybe later but—

LEVINE: Okay. Well, maybe we'll close here and thank you for the most interesting [chuckles] interview.

DE RIDDER: Yeah, thanks.

LEVINE: It was wonderful.

DE RIDDER: Thank you for doing this.

LEVINE: And I have been speaking with Jan De Ridder and it's February 21st, 2002. And this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service and I'm closing off.

[END OF INTERVIEW]