

EI-1258

HEDY (HEDWIG) JUENGLING GRASL

BIRTHDATE: JULY 16, 1935

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AGE: 15

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RESIDENCES:

LEVINE: Today is October 10th, the year 2002. I'm here in the Ellis Island Oral History Studio with He—Hedy Grasl, who came here from Germany in 1951 when she was 15 years of age. She arrived here on the General Stewart, which is—is or was a warship, and left from the port of Bremenhaven. This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service and I want to say welcome. And if we could start out by you're saying the name you were born with.

GRASL: The name I—I was born with is Hedwig Juengling.

LEVINE: Could you spell that, please?

GRASL: H-E-D-W-I-G. Juengling—J-U-E-N-G-L-I-N-G.

LEVINE: Okay. And [clears throat] where in Germany were you born? Or where were you born?

GRASL: I was born in Milschew, Poland, which is now the Ukraine. It was under the—the Polish government at the time.

LEVINE: Okay. So perhaps you could spell that for us—for the tape.

GRASL: Milschew—M-I-L-S-C-H-E-W.

LEVINE: M-I-L-S-C-H-E-W.

GRASL: Yeah, correct.

LEVINE: And that was Poland or the Ukraine?

GRASL: Yes, Poland.

LEVINE: It was Poland when—uh-huh.

GRASL: Yes.

LEVINE: Okay. And [clears throat]—and how long did you stay there?

GRASL: [sniffs] I lived there for five years.

LEVINE: Okay. W—why don't you give your birth date?

GRASL: July 16, 1935.

LEVINE: And so in 1940 or thereabouts you—you left Poland. And where did you go then?

GRASL: To another part of Poland where Hitler—Hitler had taken over p—part of Poland, the Blitzkrieg at the time. And he made s—with the Russian government at the time, they—the—the Russians bought the land that my parents had there, and then they put my parents into another part of Poland. They took them out of there and—and put them in Lubraanchic, Poland.

LEVINE: That would be what? L-U—

GRASL: B-R-A-A-N-C-H-I-C.

LEVINE: Now, who—who put them out and took them—ma—had them go to another—

GRASL: Hi—Hitler and Russia, they—they wanted the—the people didn't want to stay in that part—of Russia, to be under the Russian rule. So Hitler—

the Russian people paid with gold that German government to get us out of there. And so then Hitler put us on—in—into Milschew, all the refugees there, where we lived for five years b—before World War II—

LEVINE: Oh.

GRASL: —broke out.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

GRASL: Yeah.

LEVINE: So that was right before World War II. I see.

GRASL: Yeah.

LEVINE: So—

GRASL: Yeah, right before.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So were you—do you have any memories of those five years from the time of your birth until you left Mil—

GRASL: Milschew.

LEVINE: Milschew.

GRASL: Yes. As a little girl, I remember having a good life there and with family and my—my parents farmed, and so did all of our relatives that were there, and visiting each other and having a fairly good life there till Hitler had this Blitzkrieg. And I don't quite understand it all but anyhow, then they had to—the govern—the government had—drew a line and they says, "Okay, these people on this side of—of the river can go to—to Germany and the other ones will have to stay in Russia, which was—we didn't want to be under the Russian rule. So then the German government and the Russians, they had made a deal and they took us out of there for pay. The Russians paid the German government with gold. And so they took us out of there and they put us into a—another part of Poland in Milschew where they took the Polish farmers off their land and put the German people on the—those farms to farm. And so that's when my dad farmed and became a very successful farmer, built a new home, because when we got there it was just a little—little mud hut and just—the buildings were very poor with st—straw ro—roof. And where you had living quarters on one half of the house—house, in the half the house were animals housed. And so it didn't take us long. My dad built a new

home and we—we lived there for about five years till World War I broke out. And my dad had—was taken into the army.

LEVINE: World War II.

GRASL: Yeah, World—

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

GRASL: World War II.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

GRASL: Yes. And then after World War II broke out, my dad was in the army. We—at that point, when Hitler was losing the war, we did not know where my dad was. My mom was left with seven little children and in Poland and tried to flee Poland. But she was not successful and the bridges were blown. And she could not get across into the East German border, or the Polish border into East Germany. That's where the—the German people in that area fled to, as far as East Germany. And so my mom had no—no choice but to turn back and go back to the farm, where we stayed. And the Polish people were kind enough to take us—take us back and kind of—we lived in hiding for about six months all o—from November till spring because the Polish people were not allowed to house or protect the German people. They were turn—supposed to be turned over to the authorities and—and put in labor camps. And my mom did not want that so she begged the Polish people to keep us there on that farm. And she worked for the—for the people, and they let us stay. But come spring, the Polish government found out that we were a German family living there. So they rounded up a few other German families and put them in a—in a little barn and ordered the women to go and work the fields each—each day and left the children all unattended. And my sister, who was just a baby crawling, we—she was so worried that she might drown, and there was a pond nearby. But thank God, as my mom prayed, nothing happened to the baby. But I was not allowed to go with my mom. These Polish people kept me as a little maid and to herd their cows and to help these eld—this elderly couple there on the farm. And my mom was very saddened because she needed—being the oldest of seven children, she needed me to watch the children. And well, it didn't happen. So all summer long, I stayed with these Polish people. They treated me well. But soon, my mom found—found out that the Polish families could leave Poland if they go to the Red Cross and go through the Red Cross and get papers to leave, which was quite difficult to—to get the paper—to get those papers. But my mom was able to manage to get the papers. And for the other four families that s—were staying in this barn with her, she was also able to get papers to get out of Poland. And that's what we did.

We got—crossed the Polish border into East Germany. And we lived there for one year. The government there put us in a—in the attic of a farmhouse, and we—we lived there for—for one year. And meanwhile, my mom was searching to see what she could find out about my dad. Hopefully, you know, all the—they weren't—wasn't much information at the time yet but she just really tried. And then she had this idea about writing to one of the Polish maidens that would help my mom with the children q—quite often. And she would—she was very friendly and we were good friends. Also, she was Polish and, oh, so my mom wrote to her and—and with hopes of, if my dad was still alive, that my dad would do the same thing and that our addresses would, you know, go to the same place. And needlessly enough, it did happen.

LEVINE: Hmm.

GRASL: My dad, you know, [chuckles] about the same time, he was also searching. He was alive and he had been stationed in Norway during the war, but at that time, left Norway and came to West Germany. And he was searching for—for us. And so it just was a matter of prayer. My—my parents really—really prayed that the Lord, if—would us—put it t—would us—would put us together again if my dad was still alive. And so that's how we found each other.

LEVINE: Hmm.

GRASL: And my dad wrote us a letter and says, "I'm coming to get you." And so he had to cross the—the Russian border to get into East Germany, which wasn't too bad. But getting out of East Germany was difficult. He packed us up and se—

LEVINE: [coughs]

GRASL: —secretly during the night, we snuck out—out of the city, out of the town where we lived and in East—East Germany and got on the train and went by train as close to the Russian border as we could. And then we had no idea how we would cross the border at that time, because it was heavily guarded and not too many people made it across. And my parents again prayed and just asked the Lord to lead us and guide us, and—and it was just a miracle how this all came together, how we noticed that one of the families, refugee families, like, they knew what they were doing. And they knew that, you know, they were going in a certain direction. And my dad felt impressed to follow this family, that they might have a lead or somehow to, you know, how we could cross the—the border. And so sure enough, they—they—it—they went to a farmer's house and they—there were some guides that were experienced in helping people get across. They knew when the changing of the guard was and they were

able to sneak us past the guards during the night, walking through the woods. And also, they were not willing to take my—our family because of the baby being small, and the guard did not want to w—take us at first. But my dad kept on persisting and gave him money and everything he had, he just gave him just to take us along with him. And then he—he s—he said, “Okay. But you have to keep the baby quiet. One peep out of the baby and we’re all dead.” And so they promised him that the baby would not cry. And my mom fed the baby and—and took her in her arms and wrapped the blanket around and that’s how we took off through the night and stopping on occasions and where the—the guide would search out to see if it was okay to go on, and then we would go on. And we crossed a river and they had some boards hidden. And they put those across and they—they lit—literally carried us one by one across this little river and kept on going, pressing through, through the night. We heard guns—shots in the distance and voices of Russians—soldiers. But we kept on going. By—by morning, we arrived. Finally, we had crossed and—and gotten to a place where it was considered safe. And we were all exhausted and just collapsed and rested a while. And then we decided to go on, not knowing where to go. But there was a farmer in the field that had a wagon. And he saw us and he just came and offered to pick us up and take us to the authorities in West Germany. And so they placed us. Germany was very overcrowded with refugees, and so they—wherever they had—someone had a room in their house, they had to give it up for the refugees. And so we were placed on—on this small island in the North Sea called Baltram [PH]. And we lived there for five years. Should I go on?

LEVINE: [clears throat] Maybe you could tell the whole thing and then—

GRASL: Okay.

LEVINE: —we’ll go back. [chuckles]

GRASL: All right.

LEVINE: Okay.

GRASL: And [clears throat] so we—we lived that for five years. And there was—it was a lovely place to live but it—there were no—no opportunities for us as we were growing up. And I w—I was getting to be 14, 15 years old and there was no future for—for me on that island to—to continue my education or anything else. So my dad and mom began to pray and just seek the Lord again. And then we were able to get some addresses of—of relatives that we—my mom had several uncles in Michigan. And my uncle in—in Michigan had a large farm in Bainbridge, Watervliet area. And so we did write to him and my dad immediately received a letter back

saying that they would—to come. They would sponsor us and just to come as quickly as we can. They had a home for us. They had enough work for us. [sniffs] And that was a real answer to my parents' prayer. And we had to go through an awful lot of red tape. We—before we departed to the United States, we were in—in Bremen in—for two weeks and had nothing but asking questions and just all kinds of physical—

LEVINE: Examinations?

GRASL: Yeah, examinations. And they were very strict. We even heard that some people being turned down if they had—wear glasses. They couldn't enter the United States. And you know, in Germany, would tell my dad. He says, "What are you going to do with nine children in—in America? You can't—you have to buy nine pair of shoes." By then, we had two more children. [chuckles] And so there was 11 in the family. And—and my dad looked at this German officer and he says, "Well, sir. Can't you see? They all have shoes now and they will have—have shoes when we get to America."

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

GRASL: And so anyhow, we were tested and all kinds of information that we didn't think that they had anymore because of the war. And we were s—we were surprised that they had all kinds of information on our family.

LEVINE: Oh.

GRASL: Yeah, our background and everything.

LEVINE: Did—can you remember what kinds of information they had that surprised you?

GRASL: Yes, is where we were before, all of that, you know. It's all—was all documented, and why we left the—the different times we had to leave our homes. And in—in—also, in politics, that, you know, my dad was—was not in any of the politics. And it was—he was just—just clean. You know, there was no records, criminal records or anything. And so finally, we were a little bit threatened because my one brother, they took a chest x-ray, and they said he had a spot on his lung and that he would not be able to enter the United States. And my parents were very grieved about it and we were almost willing to leave him in Germany with my grandparents and still go, because my dad was very determined to make it to the United States, because his—his dad had gone to the United States before World War I. He worked in Milwaukee on—on the railroad for two years and earned enough money to bring his family back. But when he came back to Poland where we were born, he—World War I

broke out. And he was not able to return at that time and he lost everything that he worked for. And—but he instilled in his children (there were three boys and a girl) that if they ever, ever get a chance to go to America, that they should pursue because that was the best place to live. We were tired of being driven from one place to another and never calling anything our home. In last 15 years, it's just like every five years we were some place else and war and everything. So this was in my dad's heart to—to maybe, you know, make it to the United States. His other two brothers were—died during—in the war. He never heard from them again. My dad was the only survivor, male survivor. And so he was the only one of the family to make it to America. And so once we had—the papers were all okay, they—we were supposed to travel by boat. And—and my uncle would pay for the fare and then we would have to work it off once we ga—we would—we came to—to America and worked on his farm. Then we'd have to work and pay him back. And so that would have been a lot of money, but it was just at that time when president Truman decided to bring some of his warships back to the United States that were left from the—from the war in Germany. And he would put the refugees on there and, for—for the pay, they would have to work on the boat and clean up the boats. So when, by the time they got to—to the United States, the boats would be all cleaned up and the—some of the repair, you know, done. And this was the—the thing that we had to—had to do, and then it wouldn't cost us anything to come across by boat. And so that was a—a wonderful blessing also, because all we needed to pay my—my uncle, my mom's uncle back was just the fare that he paid from New York to Niles, Illinois where we—where they picked us—where my uncle picked us up by—with a car. And—

LEVINE: Well, maybe we should just go over some of the things—

GRASL: Sure.

LEVINE: —in Germany. Do you remember in Milschew, is—do you remember what river that was on? You said the—the—it was divided. They sent the people on one side of the river—

GRASL: Yes. I—I was trying to find out my—I asked my dad. He's still alive. He's 95 right now.

LEVINE: Hmm.

GRASL: But he—he couldn't remember anymore. And I thought maybe it was Oder [PH] but I am not positive. It—it just went across and that's—I'm not real sure. Also, I'm—I'm searching to find out yet.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And was your family Polish? What—in other words, your—your mother and father’s parents and [clears throat] grandparents, were they Polish people?

GRASL: No.

LEVINE: [clears throat]

GRASL: We were Germans, full-bred Germans. We have—Russia offered—I—offered some land to the p—surrounding, oh, la—to the surrounding people there to—to come and pioneer the land for reasonable. And they made all kinds of promises and the—I guess the czar married a German—oh, some big shot. I forget now what it was. I have it written down. But anyways. And she wanted some German culture to come into the country. And so they offered, you know, that people can come there and they would receive land for very reasonable, and they would make provisions. But a lot of the people that left Germany to go out to pioneer the land, they never made it there. The—the—the voyage was s—I mean the getting there was so hard with horse and buggy and winter and all of that. And once they got there, they found nothing but wilderness. They couldn’t—it was so bad; my mother said that it was even hard to make a garden because there were so many wild animals. And though, the beginning was very, very hard and a lot of people died. But my family were survivors and that’s how a lot of people from the neighboring lands went to pioneer the land in Russia—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

GRASL: —which was under the Russian rule.

LEVINE: Right. And you—you—your family was a religious family, I take it?

GRASL: Yes.

LEVINE: What religion were they?

GRASL: My dad was Lutheran and my—my mom was Baptist. Also, in Milschew, they had some missionaries from Milwaukee come and visit some relatives that lived there. And they shared the Gospel with the people there and the people, not being very hungry for God and the word of God, were just so happy to hear the word of God. And they—they received the Lord as their savior and became what is called a born-again Christian when you surrender your life and you live for—for Christ. And a lot of my dad’s family also being Lutheran, they felt that they were no—had not been given all the truth, that there was more to the truth, to the Bible. And they accepted this teaching where we all have to be born again to enter

the—the kingdom, according to John 3, 16. And so they became very devoted Christians and lived a very—well, good Christian life. I considered a—a great heritage that my parents have passed down to us children, that even when we came to the United States, it was not for the money and—and how rich we can be, but it was mo—mostly because of the freedom of religion that this country offered and that the children would be able to continue on their religious—well, not religion, really—this born-again experience and grow in—in the Lord and serve him the rest of the—their lives. And this is exactly what happened. We were—looked for a church immediately and we found even a German-speaking church in the area and connected with them. And we are still to this day, still connected with this German branch of the Assemblies of God.

LEVINE: Hmm, uh-hmm.

GRASL: And—

LEVINE: Can you—can you remember how—well, first of all, w—were—were your family persecuted in any way for their religion—

GRASL: Yes.

LEVINE: —before they came here? In what wa—can you remember any of that?

GRASL: Yes. In—in Poland, in Lubraanchic, where we lived last in Poland, under Hitler rule, police would come to our house and order my dad to join the SS and different, you know, parties. But my dad, being a Christian, knowing that that was wrong, what they were doing, he did not believe in what Hitler was trying to teach. And they desperately tried to stay out of politics. And one time, I do specifically remember; we heard the motorcycles coming down the road, which on occasions, you know, we—this would happen. And us children would get—we were very frightened of the German police and we would run upstairs and hide in the attic and look out the window and see them coming down the street. And so they would threaten my dad to take the farm away, the children away if we wouldn't—if he wouldn't join the politics. And my dad found a way of getting out of it. He—he joined—oh, he said he had to collect dues for the Red Cross, and then so he did things like that just so he wouldn't be involved in politics. And—and the other threads, as far as religion was concerned, Hitler had all the churches closed and he was not allowed to have any religious services anywheres. But our family still wanted to get together with a fellowship with other Christians and read the Bible and pray and—and sing their songs. They made their own songbooks and wrote music. My dad was very musically inclined. And so there was a lot of—always singing and music. My dad played the violin, and I remember as a child. And this particular time, this—the police came barging into—

one policeman came barging into our house and opened up the door to where all my family was sitting. They was just—my uncle was reading the Bible and they were just having their devotions, and he stepped inside the room and stood there and he didn't move. And my uncle, as he was reading the Bible, then he finished the—what he was reading and he looked up and then he says, "Can I help you?" You know, "What is the problem?" Then he first was able to—to say something.

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A]

[BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE B]

GRASL: And he says, "Well, don't you know it's—it's against the law to have religious services? And—and he just has to stop, and if we ever catch you again, you will be per—you will be"—

LEVINE: Killed or—

GRASL: Yeah, p—[chuckles] I was ordered to, you know—

LEVINE: Punished. [chuckles]

GRASL: Punished, yeah, somehow. And—and he left and he left kind of abruptly. And we were kind of wondering, you know. But then, a few days later, a cousin had met this particular policeman and—and he had asked, "What kind of people are those? There was—when I stepped into that room, I could not move. I was, like, paralyzed. I could not move." And he says, "And I was ordered to go there and if I find them, you know, having religious services, to shoot 'em all." And—but God's protecting angels protected us and it just paralyzed this man. He could not reach for his gun or shoot. He could not do anything. [chuckles] And so we just, you know, we—we just still marvel at God's protection throughout our lives and throughout this—our whole ordeal with the war and with Hitler's—at the time when he was in control. And—and my folks—m—my parents were able to just stick to what they believed and never, you know, and to—at one point, he was—one time, he was also threatened. And my dad literally had to tell him. He says, "Yes." You know, "You can take my children away. You can take my farm away. But you know what? What's in my heart, you cannot take away." And, "Oh, well!" You know, they just got all upset about that. "We'll see about that," you know. But then when my dad—dad was finally called into the—into the army, at first, they didn't take him because he had a large family and also was a successful farmer and they needed the food. But then, towards the end, Hitler was desperate and he took my dad. And so when my dad went to the office and to—he had gotten a letter, you know, and he had to go to the office and that he was, you know, enlisted or ordered to—to go into the army.

And my dad was able to tell them, you know, some things, how he felt. And—but they couldn't do anything because he had the orders to go in the army, and even the police there couldn't do anything to my dad. But he—he was able to tell them that—that they can—you know, that Hitler was not going to win the war. He literally even told them that. He—by then, we had kn—we had kind of rumors where that he was doing terrible things to the Jews. And the Bible says that the Jews are God's apple—the eye of God's ap—no, the apple of God's eye.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

GRASL: And that whoever goes—comes against the Jews will not succeed and will not prosper. And they knew all this was in the Bible and they—they feared for Germany that Hitler was not going to win the war, because he was doing this.

LEVINE: Was there a time—I—I know for s—other people I've spoken with, there was a time when they thought that Hitler might have a plan that would make life better for people. Did—did you—did your mom or dad ever, in the beginning, think that maybe, you know, as far as economic betterment for the people, jobs and whatever, that—that maybe he was going to help?

GRASL: No, they never really cared about that so much than they cared about the things he was doing that were so very ungodly and were demonic. And it's just that a ruler with—that was doing—killing Jews and doing this kind of thing to other people and whatever his—his controlling and how he was going to take over the whole world, no, they only feared—

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. And you—you mentioned, like, your uncle was reading. Did—did—how did p—how did your family and others worship during this period of time? Did you have—you didn't have churches? Or you—

GRASL: No.

LEVINE: So—

GRASL: No.

LEVINE: It was what, in people's homes?

GRASL: Yes. We would get together. We would take turns every Sunday to go to the different relatives. And there were a few friends that we would get together. My—my uncle kind of took charge because he was the first one to—to give his heart to the Lord and to become a born-again Christian. And he was instantly delivered from cursing and swearing and he would—

just had a real foul mouth. And he was—when he went to the services, just wanting to find out what these crazy people are doing [chuckles], and he found that he needed the Lord and he needed to surrender all of this to the Lord. And he was instantly delivered and that—such a miracle that it got the rest of the family thinking that there is more than just religion. There is more. You can have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ and live a Christian life, and God will—you know, God will help you and—if you trust in him. And that was—he was kind of—a real testimony to the rest of the family. And then he began reading the Bible and he told my dad to read the Bible. And my dad was really seriously reading the Bible, and he saw that a lot of things that the Lutherans were preaching, and there wasn't really a—they were missing—missing out. There was a lot. They were not preaching—or not preaching the right things. And the Bible, they took the Bible literally. And so they—they would get together and my uncle would take charge and read the Bible. And he would just kind of—kind of preach a little bit, explain what the scripture was saying. He just had a real keen—I think the Holy Spirit just taught him and just gave him—gave him the wisdom to know what the scripture was saying. And he would just interpret some of the things and talk about it and—and then they would—they would sing together and then they would pray. And everyone was able to—to pray, if they felt led to pray, and pray for the family and also for the government, which they prayed a lot. And so that was their worshipping the Lord.

LEVINE: When you—when your uncle became a born again—w—do you remem—do you remember that? How old were you at that point?

GRASL: Yes. I—I must have been about five years old and basically, remembering going to—to their homes, you know, for—for the Bible. It was kind of exciting for us kids. My—my dad would have—get the coach ready and the horses. And we'd get all dressed up and go to my uncle's house. And he had—he was actually a—a mayor of the town. He was so respected for his common sense and his dealings and that, that he was made a mayor of the town. And so we—we just loved going there. And we just—just all, somehow, just respected. It was such a respect, even as a child. You know, my Uncle Michel [PH] and Uncle Willem [PH] and it was just so wonderful. It was just—they treated us so well as children. We could feel the love. You know. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

GRASL: Yeah.

LEVINE: Well, now, as a child, you—had you been—considered yourself a Lutheran up until that point, or a Baptist, or—up until the point when you became born again or—

GRASL: No. We—we didn't consider us, in all, Baptist or Lutheran. We—we would say more of a free—free, in German, frei Kirchelige geminded [PH]. That means it's—it's not a religion. It's—

LEVINE: Oh.

GRASL: —a relationship. Yeah.

LEVINE: I see. Well, then, as a child, did you—did you become delivered as a born again—

GRASL: No, not as a child, but when we came to the United States, we—as we started to—to go to the First Assembly of God in Benton Harbor, and they had services there. And we had evangelistic services. And the—they would—at the end of the service, they would ask if anyone would like to come and give their heart to the Lord and—and surrender. And—and it's the first time we—my sister and I, we—first time we ever heard the invitation, we raised our hands and we went to the altar. And people prayed with us and we accepted the Lord into our lives. And it was just—so I was never really a bad child. I was very obedient or anything but it was just a piece of God, having that in your heart. And it was just such a—a wonderful experience, as I was 18 years old. That's when I made a decision. Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

GRASL: And before that, I just went with my parents, you know, to church. But that's when, you know, the rest of my brothers and sisters became born-again Christians.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm.

GRASL: And—

LEVINE: Well, it must have been quite a reunion when your father—when you found that your father was, in fact, alive and when he—when you saw him again. Do you recall that?

GRASL: Yeah. Yes, I do. We were living in—in the attic in East Germany with a farmer, and my mom had been o—out. She has—was visiting in the next town. We found out there was some relatives so she went to visit and so she left me in charge of the children. And we knew our dad was coming to get us, but we didn't know when. And so this one time, I boiled a—a pot of—of small potatoes that we picked up—food was very scarce—that we picked up in the fields after the farmers were done harvesting. And we

had that big bowl of potatoes on the—on the table and a little pile of salt in front of ev—seven—us—of us. And we would just peel our potatoes and dip in the salt and eat it. All of a sudden, there was a knock on the door and we said, “Come in,” and here was a soldier opened the door and stood there and looked at us. [sniffs] And the—the younger ones didn’t know who he was but my sister belched out, “That’s our dad!” And [chuckles]—and then he—“Yes, I’m your dad!” And then she ran to him and then we all ran to him. We hugged and, you know, and embraced and—and I, being about 10 years old at the time, I all a sudden, when I saw my dad literally being there, then all a sudden I felt like, ‘Everything’s going to be okay. Our dad is with us now and we don’t have to, you know, fear.’ We were living, even on that—in that little room up in the attic. They had another little room where—which a—a couple lived, and the man was a communist. And he would get drunk and—and during the night and try to break into our room and knock on the door. And we would just be horrified, you know. And—and so he—he was just—and we had to—they—he had a stove in his room and we had to use his stove, do our cooking there. And I would go in there because he wouldn’t let anyone go in there. But for some reason, he found favor, you know, with me and he let me come in there and cook. [chuckles] You know. And he never har—harmed me or anything. And—and m—my mother also, there was always the fear of being attacked by Russians and everything but, thank God, you know, we were n—were never—that never happened to my mother or us children. My one sister was kidnapped during us crossing into—into East—into East Germany. This couple was helping us with the kids and they held my sister on—on their lap. And then when it was time to—to get off the train, while the hustle and bustle, we lost each other. And then my mom was looking for her and she couldn’t see the couple with my sister. And so, anyhow, she felt, ‘Well, I’ll find her. You know, they—they have to be here,’ you know. And so she put us down somewheres in a corner and told us to stay and she would go look for my sister. Well, she went looking once. She went twice. She went three times; she couldn’t find the couple with my sister. And then she came back and she says, “I don’t know what I’m going to do.” And she waited and she says, “You know, I’m going to try one more time. They has to be—they have to find her.” [sniffs] And then she did. She was—just went in a different corner, whatever, and they were kind of huddled, you know, kind of hiding, and they literally were planning to kidnap her.

LEVINE: Mmm.

GRASL: And so my daughter—my mom took her and—and just, you know, asked her why did they do this to her? And they answered. He says, “Well, it’s—you have so many children. You’re not going to miss one. But, you know, if we get to Germany and we don’t have any children, they’re going to put us to work.” [chuckles] So that was that.

LEVINE: Were you off the train or—

GRASL: Yes.

LEVINE: —were they still on? Uh-huh.

GRASL: Yeah, off the train. Yeah.

LEVINE: Wow. Mmm.

GRASL: Yeah. They—they just snuck off and, ah. So, yes, there was quite a few experiences.

LEVINE: [clears throat]

GRASL: Another experience was also when we were trying to leave Poland by horse and buggy. And we had the wagon packed and, you know, a top on the wagon. And this—then all of a sudden we heard this noise in the sky, and a bunch of—real lot of planes came diving down and—and, you know, down, heading towards us. And so we quick ran into the woods nearby and—and then when the planes had left, we went back to our wagon. And—and we were heard screaming in the—in the wagon and then we realized we had left my sister, Trudy, in the wagon. And she was the same one that was kidnapped. Things were always happening to her. [chuckles] And she was cry—screaming and—but at least she was not harmed. And so there were bullet holes in the wagon and—and—but she was not harmed. And—

LEVINE: Hmm.

GRASL: So that was—I remember that. So it's just—all I can say is just God's protection. No matter, you know, what we had to go through. It was hard times but God pr—God's protection seemingly was upon us and we always came out of it okay.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

GRASL: And we're—right now, we're still all living. All nine children are still living and they're married. And my mom passed away two years ago but my dad is still living. He's going to be 96 January the 6th of next year.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

GRASL: [sniffs] And he still drives a car and his—his mind is just as clear as—as ever.

LEVINE: Hmm.

GRASL: And does everything for him—himself and does really well. And it's just—it's amazing, you know, the hard times that they had and yet, you know, still be so healthy. And—and I really think that it's the grace of God. And even now, my dad is an intercessor. He prays and reads his Bible. He supports missionaries in Europe a lot, because that's where his heart is, [sniffs] and let's us know that he's praying for us, the children, and—and the people in the church. When there's someone ill, just, not too long ago, he—this one friend that—that was ill and was in a lot of pain, and he felt impressed to call her. And he called her on the phone. And he says, "You know, the Bible says when two or three are [unclear] together in his name that God will hear from heaven. Do you believe this?" And she said, "Yes, I believe this." So he prayed a prayer of faith and she immediately—the pain left her and she was fine. And this has happened, you know, often with my dad. It's just God would use him. The power of God would go through him and [sniffs]—and touch the—the lives of people.

LEVINE: Hmm.

GRASL: And they're always kind people and good people and they love their family.

LEVINE: Hmm.

GRASL: My mom and dad were true to each other, no matter when they were separated. There was, oh, probably during the war, maybe about close to three years where they were separated. But they were—my dad—teaching us morals was, "You know, when I was in the army and all those soldiers would go ca—carouse and—and go out with other women, all of this, and they wanted me to go along with them?" And he says, "No, I can't and I won't. I says, 'I can't do this, you know, against God. And I can't do this, you know. I have a family. I want to go b—come back to my family someday.'" And he says, "Those soldiers would spit at me and—and go out." And he says, "And I'd take my New Testament and pull it out my—and would, you know, be in my barracks and—and cry and read." And he says, "You see, you can be strong. You don't have other people—let other people bully you into making wrong decisions, even moral." He says, "You have God and God can help you overcome and you can be strong." So that's how I—[chuckles] I remember him teaching us was through practical experience and his own experiences.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. So let's—let's continue on to when you were on the General Stewart.

GRASL: Uh-hmm.

LEVINE: Anything about the passage that you remember in particular?

GRASL: Well, it was—we were anxious to—to see the Statue of Liberty, of c—the minute we—we got on the boat, that was our focus, to see the Statue of Liberty. And it was rough because we were in a storm and it was so bad that we literally had to tie ourselves to the bed, to the bunks so we wouldn't be hurt. There's several days of very bad storm, and we were wondering if we even—even going to make it. But so even that was hard for us. But coming to—to Ellis Island and, well, first of all, seeing the Statue of Liberty was the most wonderful thing that we—[sniffs] that we ever experienced. It—it was just getting a glimpse of her [voice breaking] with the torch held high and welcoming us home, home to America where we—there is liberty and justice for all. And God bless America. This has been a wonderful country to us, a shelter. We were never tormented. We were never—never went hungry again. We lived in peace and [sniffs]—and had a wonderful life. And we thank God for this land.

LEVINE: Mmm. Just to go back to that—you said that the General Stewart was a warship. What kind of—what kind of accommodations were—I mean, what was—what—were you in a cabin? Were you in a dormitory, kind of, on the ship?

GRASL: [sniffs] Yes, there was large rooms and the women were all—all together, all the women and children and the men were separated through the whole voyage. They did not sleep in the same areas. And we would just see my dad once in a while, because he was ordered to, you know, different duties and even with the cooking and, you know, and all of that, and keeping order and all that. So it—the weather was—the food was okay, you know. We—they served us food. [clears throat]

LEVINE: And you—you said that people worked o—on the ship. Your dad worked. Did your mother do work also on the ship—

GRASL: [sniffs]

LEVINE: —or—or not?

GRASL: No, because of the small children, they just let the mothers, you know, be. They might have duties, just keep order with—with the women and the children to keep everyone orderly and, you know, and help each other and to—to get through this.

LEVINE: I see. So it was really your dad's work—

GRASL: Yeah.

LEVINE: —on the ship o—during the passage over that—

GRASL: Yeah.

LEVINE: —paid for—paid back your uncle, in large measure, for—for his sending you the tickets? Is that—

GRASL: Well, no. He—he didn't have to send us tickets because we—when we found out that we can enter the United States, you know, by boat and the—that President Truman is allowing refugees to cross with—you know, for free, except to work on the boat. That was the only thing.

LEVINE: Oh, I see.

GRASL: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

GRASL: So my uncle had not, you know, sent us money yet. And so we—able to write him and tell him this, and then we just needed money for—and from New York by train to Niles, Illinois.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, I see.

GRASL: Yeah.

LEVINE: [clears throat] Let's see. And how about Ellis Island? How was that for you?

GRASL: Oh, that was wonderful. That was wonderful. We—we got off the boat and here were all these friendly people. The Red Cross was there with—with hot chocolate and doughnuts. [laughter] I'll never forget that as long as I live. It tasted so good and was so nice and just to—to have the people, so friendly. We—we had just kind of forgotten. People were—even in—in Germany after the war, they—gotten hard and, you know, and callous. And—and here, to be treated so nicely and warmly and—and i—it's—it was just—just something else. It really was great.

LEVINE: Hmm.

GRASL: Yeah.

LEVINE: Can you say anything else about what the wartime did to people? W—

GRASL: Uh-hmm.

LEVINE: How—I don't know—how human nature responded to such a dire—

GRASL: Uh-hmm, yes.

LEVINE: —conditions.

GRASL: The way, you know, I saw it and I would say that the people that didn't have any faith in God had it harder. They had no one to turn to but themselves. And they saw their whole life's long of work in—in ruins. You know, we went in Berlin. We saw the ruins there. It was awful. And people took their lives. They—they were—through the shock and—and the trauma, they were emotionally ill and where they couldn't function afterwards. And it was—they were hard. They became hard. And it's just a—there was no future in their lives. They had nothing to look forward to. And what I saw in—in my parents having the Lord and trusting him, even if we lost everything and having to start over several times already in their lifetime, and then coming to the United States and—and starting all over from scratch again, it—it was a—it made a difference. It made a difference how people felt about everything. And it was—it was sad. I—I can tell myself—you know, I was always a happy child, very, very happy about everything, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

GRASL: And it just—and I—I think that's why people took me to me. I—even the Polish people. They wanted to keep me. They wanted to raise me. [chuckles] And they wanted—and my mom needed me and they didn't want to let me go. And so it's—I—I can say that, even what the—the faith that my parents had, it rubbed off of the children. We always felt safe with my parents, with my mom.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

GRASL: We knew that she prayed and that she was protected and did everything. She was very—had a lot of common sense and could really help herself. It's—was amazing how this woman survived with so little and so many times. We would pick mushrooms in the f—in the woods and blueberries, wild blueberries and sell them and in East Germany and go in—after the farmers harvested the field and harvest, you know, potatoes and to get us through the wintertime. The winter times were always the hardest, you know. And having to go out in the woods and—and get wood so we can, you know, burn it and cook. And this one time, my mother went out with another lady in the woods, and they saw these logs already cut up. They

had numbers on them. Well, they kind of knew that's—that's special wood. And they looked at each other, says, "What do you think we're going to do? You think we're going to just let those logs lay here?" [chuckles] "We're going to load 'em up." She says, "You know, how are we going to cut a tree down?"

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

GRASL: "Two women. Where are men?"

LEVINE: [chuckles]

GRASL: "The men are in the war," and this—her friend was quite a—you know, my mom needed someone, you know, to be so brave. And so they started loading this wood on and the—the ranger came and he says, "What are you women doing?" [chuckles] And—and then this one lady, her friend went—walked up to the ranger and he says, "You know what?" He—he—she says, [sniffs]—I can still see her do this.

LEVINE: [chuckles]

GRASL: She says, "Our men are in the war. And we are two women and we got to survive this winter. We have—we have chil—eight children here. And how do you think we're going to do this?" She says, "We're going to cut a tree down and, you know, have wood for a fire?" And she says, "I'll tell you what." She says, "You know what the Russians say? '[speaking in Russian].'" [chuckles] And I'll never forget. I don't speak Russian but I never forget that. And it means, "You know what the Russians say, they says, 'What belongs to you belongs to me too.'" And they take it. [laughter] And so they took it home and they chopped it. He says, "Okay. Just get out of here and go." [chuckles] And—and they—so that was kind of humorous and also, survival was at that—at that point too, it was going and begging, going from house—from farmer to farmer and beg for food. And you got—some farmers were nice and some sent the dogs after you. And—and I remember a sad story. My—we went to ask for a—for food. And this one farmer had a big pile of potatoes in his yard and—and cattle. And he says, "What do you think I'm going to do is let my cattle starve and give you the—the food?" He says, "Get out of here!" And he sent the dogs, you know, and chased us away. And the next morning, we heard that a Russian truck pulled up and they took—loaded all the—the cattle on—

LEVINE: Hmm.

GRASL: —and all—all the food. And he was left with nothing. And so we—we just said, "See? Maybe God was punishing him. You know, when it's—

someone, you know, that is—doesn't have any food and asks for food and you don't give him anything, that's a sin, you know. My mom would never, never let—let a person—she always gave a lot of food away, you know. She would—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

GRASL: Always, she was—

[END OF INTERVIEW]