EI-126

ILSE REICHENBACH ORTMANN

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INTERVIEWER:	**JANET LEVINE, PH. D.**
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AGE 7

SHIP: S. S. BALLIN

PORT: CUXHAVEN

RESIDENCE:

- **GERMANY: COCHSTEDT, NEAR MAGDEBURG**
- **USA: BROOKLYN, NY**

LEVINE: This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. And I'm here today with Ilse Ortmann, who came to the United States from Germany at age seven in 1926. I'm very happy to be here, and I'd like to start by asking you when your birth day, what was your birth date?

ORTMANN: My birthday is March 29, 1919. I'm seventy-three.

LEVINE: Oh, so you're about to be seventy-three. Uh-huh. And what was your mother's name?

ORTMANN: My mother's name is Ilse Anna Richard.

LEVINE: And your father?

ORTMANN: My father was Gustav Peter Reichenbach.

LEVINE: And did you have brothers and sisters?

ORTMANN: No. I'm an only child. And the three of us were born there, of course.

LEVINE: In Germany.

ORTMANN: In Germany.

LEVINE: And what town in Germany were you born?

ORTMANN: Cochstedt.

LEVINE: Could you spell that?

ORTMANN: It's like a small town, outskirts of Magdeburg. And Magdeburg is near Berlin, East Zone.

LEVINE: Can you spell the name of the little town?

ORTMANN: Cochstedt?

LEVINE: Yeah.

ORTMANN: C-O-C-H-S-T-E-D-T. Cochstedt.

LEVINE: And did you live in Cochstedt the whole time before you...

ORTMANN: Yes. I was born there, and, yes. And then we moved to Aschersleben, that's a nearby town. And from there we moved to Magdeburg, the big city, which is near Berlin. And from there we came to this country.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And, now, do you remember anything about...

ORTMANN: Oh, yes, definitely.

LEVINE: Germany, even though you were seven?

ORTMANN: When we moved away, after baby days, we moved to Aschersleben, and I used to go with the little railroad to Cochstedt from Aschersleben to my grandparents. And that was Willim and Anna Richard. And he was mayor of the town Cochstedt. And he lived in a big house by the railroad that was like the White House here. And my mother would put me on the train to visit them all by myself. Of course, they knew me and took care of me. And it was such a happy, every other weekend I went to them with the choo-choo train, so to speak.

LEVINE: Excuse me just a second. I wonder if we're going to get the noise of the dog. (break in tape) Okay. Now we're resuming again after quieting the

dog down, and we're going to begin with your telling about going by the choo-choo train to your grandparents.

ORTMANN: Yeah. All right. Yes. All right. (caged birds begin to chrip) When we lived in Aschersleben my parents, every other weekend, would put me on the train by myself. Of course, I was taken care of by the conductor, to go to my grandparents. And before I even got off the train I would be yelling out of the window, "You got cream for me? You got apples for me?" Because they had a farm, animals, and I just had a wonderful time there. They had a garden, gazebo. I used to put the lambs and the bunnies in my carriage, dogs and cats all over the place. It was a wonderful place. And I looked forward to that every other weekend, you know.

LEVINE: And how about your grandmother and grandfather? What do you remember about them?

ORTMANN: Well, he was, so to speak, a big shot. He made speeches and was the head of everything, it seemed. He was mayor of the town, and my grandmother ran, and also my great-grandmother lived with them, and they ran the farm up there, and she also did the business. And the great-grandmother used to be, like, the cashier. People taking the train ride, they took care of the whole railroad bit. And I used to play in the waiting room and put all my dolls and an old alarm clock and play there, and then they would say, "Hurry up, clean up, the next train is coming." And I would have to gather everything up and go elsewheres, you know. It was just wonderful. Happy memories, you know.

LEVINE: And how about your mother and father? You were an only child.

ORTMANN: An only child, right. And my father was a molder. He skillfully learned this

trade. Age fourteen they start you already on a trade, which he had. So he always heard about America, and that was his dream from even before he got married. And so my mother lived with this for seven years, knowing she has to leave her parents, you know, because he wanted to come to America. But he was not hasty. All his friends, seven of them, that he went to school with, went to World War I with, they all came back, they weren't killed. One by one went to America. And Alex, his very best friend, is the one that vouched. You had to have somebody in this country to vouch for, and he said, "When are you coming?" And the wives of these men were also friends of my mother in school. They were heartbroken, they were separated from my mother. Well, happy day came in 1926. My father says, "Okay, we go. I go first, and you come three months later. Let me get settled first. In case not, I come back again. However, on the word go, sell everything, and take care of everything and come in August." And that's what we did.

LEVINE: Can you remember what your father heard from his friends before he decided to come?

ORTMANN: Well, it was prosperous. You could get ahead. You can have everything you want, anything you can eat. You can get clothes cheaper and furniture cheaper. You can buy a whole house for, oh, I don't remember the amount but they said it's just impossible to get that in Germany. That you have to come, you have to come. That's all we heard, you know.

LEVINE: And then when your father came here, did he write letters back to your mother?

ORTMANN: Yes. The friends, yes, yes. When he came here, he told my mother, I don't remember. Was it a month later, or whatever. "It is good, you're to come.

Sell everything, and get ready, and come in August." And that was taken care of, the steamship. Of course, my grandparents were heartbroken, right. And my mother often said that, "We'll send for you." At my father. We called him *Vati*, and mother is *Muddi*. She's *Muddi* to everybody, and *Vati*. But they never came because my grandmother feared the water so. And she said to my grandfather, "You go, I stay back." Of course, they didn't do that, so they never came. So it was letters and packages back and forth, back and forth, you know. It was heartbreaking.

LEVINE: Before we leave the old country, can you tell me, describe the house you lived in?

ORTMANN: Yes. I have it here. After living in three living quarters in, wait. That's left U.S.A. In Germany, which was Cochstedt, Aschersleben, and Magdeburg. Then we came to the U.S. to Ridgewood, Brooklyn. And...

LEVINE: Really, like the house in Germany. Which one do you remember most?

ORTMANN: Really all three. It was just three small rooms in Cochstedt. In fact, my daughter and I went in 1984. My mother and I visited in '73. We seen the house that she was born in, I was born in, my grandparents were born in. That's all Cochstedt. My daughter cried so seeing all this again, you know. When I pointed out, "That's where your mother was born, that's where your *Muddi* was born and *Vati* was born." (noise of bird chirping in background) So, where was I?

LEVINE: I just wanted you to describe the kind of living conditions that you had in Germany.

ORTMANN: In Germany. Well, Cochstedt was three small rooms. Then we moved to

Aschersleben, a little bit better. And I remember it was maroon walls with white furniture. It was beautiful. And from there we got better and went to Magdeburg in an apartment. We visited all three sites again.

LEVINE: What about your grandparents?

ORTMANN: Huh? (noise of bird chirping)

LEVINE: You think we could cover the bird?

ORTMANN: Yes.

LEVINE: Okay.

ORTMANN: You know, the more you talk the more they... (break in tape)

LEVINE: We're resuming again now, the bird having been covered over. I wanted you to describe whatever you remember about the house that you lived in, and then also your grandparents' house.

ORTMANN: Well, my grandparents' house is a big house. I got pictures here. A big flight of stairs. I think there were four floors, because my great-grandmother lived there, and then my mother had a step-brother, Karl Richard. They all lived in that house, you see. And he was killed in the war, Karl Richard, my mother's brother. And it was a big house. My goodness, rooms all over the place. And downstairs was like an office which my grandfather, you know, he was mayor, that was all office. The second floor, no. I'm wrong. The second floor was his office. The first floor was the railroad, the tickets and everything, and the people coming. That's what it was. And then the third floor was all the bedrooms. And, uh...

LEVINE: So the railroad tracks were running by there. This was like, the railroad station was in your house.

ORTMANN: Yes, yes, yes. It's the biggest house in the whole town. The whole town only was three thousand people at that time. It's more today. And it's the biggest house in the whole town. I mean, if you could see the pictures you would see what I meant. And around it is all, like, railroad things for baggage and all this and that, and then there was a garden on the right side. And the farm up the hill behind the house.

LEVINE: And who took care of the farm? (bird chirping)

ORTMANN: The what? What do you mean?

LEVINE: Just a second. (break in tape) Again, the bird's in the other room. (they laugh) Okay. I was asking you who ran your grandparents' farm?

ORTMANN: Well, they had help, they had help. Of course, my grandmother and my great-grandmother, even I used to go in the fields and help a little bit, but they had help, hired help, you know. They couldn't run all of it.

LEVINE: Was it a big farm?

ORTMANN: It was a big farm, sure. Potatoes, cauliflower, name it.

LEVINE: They were selling their produce in the market.

ORTMANN: Yes, yes. But at that time you were only allowed so much and the rest was the government's, and they weren't paid for that either.

LEVINE: Oh.

ORTMANN: You know, they could have their food. They planted it. But it belonged to the government, and they were not paid for that. You had to give that up.

LEVINE: This was after the First World War.

ORTMANN: Yeah, right, right. And they lived there for years. I really don't know till, when he no longer was mayor naturally he had to get out of that house. And he was mayor like, say, if the run is four years, he would double or triple that. Almost all his life you could say, as a young man till later age. Then he had to move out of there and moved in Cochstedt, and he stayed in Cochstedt, and we visited all these different places. And I went back to Germany with my mother, that was 1926. And in 1935 my mother and I went for three months in the summer and visited them. My great-grandmother was still alive. And that, of course, was another house. It was no longer that house. So between 1926 and 1935, you know, that was this span when he lived a certain amount of years there and then moved.

LEVINE: What do you remember about your great-grandmother?

ORTMANN: My great-grandmother, she didn't want her picture taken. She was robust. She forever wore a kerchief around her head because of headaches. She was robust, though. She ran the house, you know. That's about all. She didn't want her picture taken, but we got pictures of her. Um, milked the cows.

LEVINE: Was that superstition? Was that a superstitious idea, about the picture-taking?

ORTMANN: Oh, she said she was old. She didn't want her picture taken. I remember her saying, "I'm old now. Don't take my picture." You know. She lived a good ripe age, close to ninety. My grandmother was eighty-one, just like my mother lived to eighty-one. My grandfather died kind of early in his seventies.

LEVINE: And what kind of a social life did your mother and father have? Can you remember anything about that in Germany?

ORTMANN: No, I really don't. Friends, of course. We were all friends together, the Trowlichs, the Monikers, the Winkelmans. All of them, they were over there, and they lived in nearby towns: Schneitling and in Aschersleben and Magdeburg. They were all in that area visiting friends.

LEVINE: Now, these are the friends that came over to America first.

ORTMANN: Yes, yes, yes. One by one left.

LEVINE: And do you, have you had contact with them in this country?

ORTMANN: All my life we were in this country we were together. Of course they all died now. And now we children are here and still together with our children. Get it?

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So that was quite a firm bond.

ORTMANN: Oh, yes. I have a friend in Florida now that's sixty years we're together, you know, since 1926. Naturally, they were born here. I was born in Germany, and when they came over, I forget who. None of them were

born in Germany. They were all born here, except me. So they were born later. In other words, in America here.

LEVINE: Yes, yes, yes.

ORTMANN: So we're still all together. We're still all together.

LEVINE: Can you remember what your father heard from his friends before he made the decision to come to America?

ORTMANN: Well, that work is great and the pay is good, and you can get ahead faster than you can in Germany. And you can eat all you want, you can buy all you want, it's cheap. That's about it, you know. That's what made the move, because it was so hard in Germany. My mother used to, I remember this. I used to love the black and white. They called them Americanas, black and white, big cakes. They're black and white cookie cake, right? She used to go roundabout way not to pass the bakery because I would beg to have one and she didn't have any money. So if there was a special occasion I got that cake and we passed that bakery. I remember that part.

LEVINE: Now, you were saying before your father was a molder.

ORTMANN: Yes.

LEVINE: And he started at fourteen, as an apprentice.

ORTMANN: Yes. He worked for a crook. That's in Magdeburg. He used to travel from Cochstedt to Magdeburg. He made out but, you know, it was hard times. It was hard to get ahead. And it was my father's dream, that's the whole

thing, to go to America and leave his homeland. He never saw it again. He never went back. But he sent my parents, he sent my mother and me.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. But your mother, on the other hand, was reluctant to leave your...

ORTMANN: Oh, she was, but of course she went with my father and it was me, right. And it was very sad, very sad. And the things that my grandmother would hand my mother I have today yet. In fact, my granddaughter Wendy had a birthday and I gave her something that my grandparents gave me when I went back in '38, and I was nineteen then. A hope chest, a smaller type hope chest, a wicker. And my daughter often admired it, and she says, "I want Wendy to have that." So now Wendy was nineteen just a few days ago. Well, she cried so when I handed that hope chest over to her and in it was a tablecloth I made for her and an apron and doilies all embroidered. So now she's starting a hope chest, see. So, in other words, '26 we came over, '35 my mother and I went. Then when I graduated in '38 from high school, my grandparents sent me a ticket as a gift to come.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Before we go into life here, let me just ask you a little bit more. Were you a religious family back in Germany?

ORTMANN: Not that religious. Of course, we went to church, but not that religious.

LEVINE: What religion were you?

ORTMANN: Protestant, Protestant.

LEVINE: What kind of, what denomination?

ORTMANN: What do you mean?

LEVINE: In other words...

ORTMANN: Presbyterian.

LEVINE: Presbyterian.

ORTMANN: Yeah, right, right.

LEVINE: And do you remember anything else about games you played as a child when you were there?

ORTMANN: Games? (she laughs) My favorite toy was the teddy bear. And then, of course, I had one little doll, which I still have, and the teddy bear, well, that really, I have a picture of it, that's all. You know, I would take, my mother would give me a cup and a spoon and I would play in dirt. Some kind of marbles, I remember. Of course, by my grandmother, she had all these little things. An old alarm clock, an old doily which I put the alarm clock on. I had stuff there which I didn't have home, so that was wonderful, you know.

LEVINE: So you're, would you say that your grandparents were fairly well-to-do over there.

ORTMANN: Yes, yes.

LEVINE: But your father was struggling.

ORTMANN: Yes, yes, he was struggling, but better off than the others, by the way, being he had this trade. The other men, I don't want to degrade them, they

had a trade too, but not as good as a molder.

LEVINE: A molder...

ORTMANN: It's a wonder my father didn't go first, you know. But he wanted, he was cautious.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. When you say a molder, is that someone who makes moldings?

ORTMANN: Yes, he makes moldings. Like he worked for Century Lighting, Kliegel Lights. He made all Jones Beach lighting, Paramount, Radio City, he made all the lighting. The name is Kliegel Lights.

LEVINE: K... Could you spell it?

ORTMANN: K-L-I-E-G-E-L. Kliegel Lights. And Century Lighting, Paramount. He worked for the movies over in California. Of course, that was transport. He had all these big jobs and little jobs besides.

LEVINE: So in other words he continued the trade that he had learned in Germany.

ORTMANN: Oh, definitely, yes.

LEVINE: He continued in the United States.

ORTMANN: He was three days in this country, he got a job in Hoboken as a molder.

LEVINE: Okay. Let's, before we get to, now, when you made the decision, well, your father then came in April.

ORTMANN: Yes.

LEVINE: And then you and your mother came in August.

ORTMANN: We came in August.

LEVINE: Do you remember anything about the letters that he wrote to you once he had arrived here?

ORTMANN: Well, you know, I was only seven, but I just know that my mother used to tell me how wonderful it is over here and we can have more than what we got here, and that's why *Vati* wants us to come. *Vati* says I'll have my own bed and my own dresser and roller skates and what else did he tell me? I don't know what you call it, a, where you put one foot on the thing and you push. What do you call that?

LEVINE: A scooter?

ORTMANN: A scooter. And that he already has it for me, you know, and I couldn't wait. All that stuff that I couldn't have in Germany, I would have here.

LEVINE: In other words, in Germany you didn't have your own bed?

ORTMANN: No. In Cochstedt they put me in a bottom large drawer. I had no crib or nothing. But then when we moved to Aschersleben I sort of had a bed. But that's what you pull out of a sofa, and you pull it out, it's like a day bed, and I would lay on that. In Magdeburg the same thing, the same thing. I did not have my own bed, no. It's a sofa you sat on. You pulled it out at night.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Okay, so do you remember what you and your mother packed when you were getting ready to come?

ORTMANN: Well, my mother was a dressmaker. She made my own clothes. And she made clothes galore, new, that we were to have nice things that we come here that she made. I remember my teddy bear went, my doll went. Then it was heartbreaking how my grandmother walked around. I remember saying, "Here. Take this for Illa someday, and you take this." I'm trying to remember, an ashtray, my grandfather said, "Give this to *Vati*." My father. Souvenirs. They went around the room grabbing things and telling them to pack it and take to America with them, you know. It's heartbreaking.

LEVINE: Did you have some trunks that you packed?

ORTMANN: Yes. Huge trunks, huge trunks, which my grandparents had. We didn't have them, but my grandparents had. I don't know where they got it from. And it's up in the attic, one of them, yet. Like when we went to Ellis Island and they had it blocked off all the old trunks, I got one right upstairs, yeah. Huge, huge. And that's all we had, and we had two other bags. That's all. That's what we came with.

LEVINE: Now, did your mother work as a seamstress when she was in Germany?

ORTMANN: Yes. She worked as a tailoress, yes, to make extra money. Yeah, sure.

LEVINE: And then did she continue that work here?

ORTMANN: Yes. She did some of the sewing here, but when we came to this country, like I said, my father in three days got a job in Hoboken, and my mother got a job in a bakery, in a German bakery. And she managed for three

hours, while I was in school she worked in a bakery. Plus at home she did sewing for people, yeah.

LEVINE: I see. So, now, what, can you describe the clothes that you wore when you were leaving?

ORTMANN: Oh, my God, yes. She made me a white satin dress with lace over it. That was supposed to be my party dress. Then I had skirts and tops with it, and I wouldn't part with, I was starting to go to school at age seven, and in Germany I have a, like an ice cream cone shape. You get that in school, with candy, when you go there. And also you have a schoolbag that you wear on your back. I still have that, and a little lunch kit that you took every day that was made of leather. And you would strap that on your back, and the lunch kit was in the bag. What else? (she laughs)

LEVINE: So those things you took with you.

ORTMANN: Oh, yeah.

LEVINE: And do you remember how your mother was dressed when you left.

ORTMANN: Oh, my God. I wish, you'll see the pictures later. (she laughs) Terrible, you know, the clothes were good clothes, I mean, she made them. But, I mean, instead of the waistline being at the waist it was down below. Like the style now, too, is below the waistline, you know. And my father liked blue for him. She wore a lot of blue. And I like lavender. From small on, everything lavender. Why, I'll never know. And she made me a lot of lavender dresses. Velvet dresses with a lace collar. And later on in years when we were in this country my mother used to make sundresses for herself and me. We matched. People used to turn around and say, "Look

at that."

LEVINE: Now, do you remember your sendoff? Was there a party, or do you remember when you left?

ORTMANN: Yes. Very big, very big. My grandfather, of course, everybody in town knew I was leaving, you know, that we were leaving. And my father had left already. That was more on the quiet side. You know, he left, and that was it. But then when we left, my mother and me, we did have a get-together in that big house, you know. But it was sad. It was sad.

LEVINE: Okay. So do you remember, when you left, you left from which little town? Where were you when you...

ORTMANN: Well, Magdeburg, really. But we were a lot in Cochstedt all the time, you know.

LEVINE: Well, when you left Magdeburg what did you, what means of transportation. How did you go then?

ORTMANN: Train. It was a little less than an hour.

LEVINE: And then the train took you to where?

ORTMANN: To Cochstedt. You know, back and forth, like every other weekend, or... There my mother, after all, that was a big town. There she didn't send me alone. It was just when we lived in Aschersleben to Cochstedt. That was maybe three-quarter hour, not even, maybe a half hour ride.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. But then when you actually left to come to the United States.

ORTMANN: Yes.

LEVINE: What, how did you travel? Do you remember?

ORTMANN: From Magdeburg we went to Hamburg, right. We left from Hamburg. Cuxhaven, they call it, Cuxhaven. C-U-X, haven, H-A-V-E-N. Eleven days on board ship.

LEVINE: Cuxhaven was the name of the ship?

ORTMANN: No. Cuxhaven is the seaport. And we left from Hamburg. And eleven days. The first three or four days we were deathly sick, you know, seasick.

LEVINE: Do you remember the name of that ship?

ORTMANN: S. S. Ballin, B-A-L-L-I-N. S. S. Ballin. It was a smaller ship. My father, I don't know which one my father took. That was a bigger ship. But we were on the S. S. Ballin, so we probably could get, you know, I don't know, in eleven days.

LEVINE: And were you down in the hold?

ORTMANN: Yes, yes. The cheapest possible. And we were very sick.

LEVINE: You were both sick?

ORTMANN: Yeah, yeah.

LEVINE: What else do you remember about that trip?

ORTMANN: That trip, I was so seasick. I was on the top berth, where I wanted to be. And as sick as my mother was, she used to put her legs up and bounce me up and down to humor me because I was so sick and I wanted to die. I didn't want to live any more. Whereas land, I couldn't get over to see all that water. I kept saying not even a grass path. And my mother said, "No, there's all water. There's land there." "When are we going to see land?" Every day I would look for land, you know. When I was no longer seasick. What they gave me, believe it or not, was *Schwarzbrot*. That's black bread with wine. And I was seven years old, and that did it. That black bread, I couldn't eat it all. They made me chew this black bread with a little wine, not much of course, and I came around. And they had a pea soup, a green bean soup, a pea soup and a bean soup. I ate that like crazy. I think I asked for four plates full because I was now hungry, right. And I couldn't get over all the food that we could have. And the games we played, shuffleboard, and I was just running all around the place. And people would say, "Is that the little girl that was so sick?" Because I no longer was sick.

LEVINE: Now, were you eating in a cafeteria, or in a dining hall?

ORTMANN: No, it was a dining room.

LEVINE: The dining room.

ORTMANN: Oh, yeah, yeah.

LEVINE: And they were serving you food.

ORTMANN: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. That was regular steamship, you know. That was

fine. And they had entertainment at night. And...

LEVINE: Now, had your father sent the money to your mother for the passage? Do you remember?

ORTMANN: Gee, I don't remember. I guess my mother had money, too. My father took care of the ticket.

LEVINE: And then do you remember coming into the New York Harbor?

ORTMANN: Oh, yes. Well, we're coming to that now. I don't even need my notes. My mother would say, "Soon you're going to see the Lady of Freedom." In German, of course, right? And I said, "What's that?" And she said, "That you're free here. You can do as you please. You can talk and say what you want. And when you see that lady we're in America."

END OF SIDE ONE
BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

ORTMANN: All of a sudden we were all standing on deck looking, looking, looking. And finally we did see the Statue of Liberty. And my mother cried. She says, "Illa, we're in America. There's that big lady." We see land. I couldn't get over seeing land, right. So the next thing was, I wasn't too concerned any more about the lady. I wanted to see my father, you know. "Where is *Vati*? Where's *Vati*?" Here we go. We go, all our friends were there when we came, and couldn't even talk, we all cried.

LEVINE: You mean, when you got to Ellis Island?

ORTMANN: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

LEVINE: So describe that, when you got to Ellis Island.

ORTMANN: Well, you know, when I went back to Ellis Island, I'm not saying it's the bench, but I remember this, straight benches, sitting on there waiting and waiting and being examined and all, you know. And impatient, I was so impatient. I wanted to see my father. You didn't see him right away, you know. You had to go through examination and everything, papers. And my mother was nervous. She was afraid that maybe they would find something that can't get in for some reason, you know. So then finally everything passed. She says, "Illa, now we're going to see *Vati*. We're going to see *Vati*." So sure enough we did, and he couldn't talk for crying. It was really something. And the next thing, he would carry me and say, "Now we go to our house." He called it a house. And it was this six-room cold water flat, railroad flat, they called it. "And you're going to have your own room." And he would tell me about it, and I was impatient. I couldn't wait, I couldn't wait. So now we got into Ridgewood with the subway, five cents fare subway, from New York to Ridgewood, Brooklyn. And that was on Seneca Avenue. And when he opened that door, it's unbelievable. You've seen a table set with a vase with flowers, three cups, three bowls, three plates, a big long sink with a basket underneath it. And there was a stove with a coffee pot on it, a soup pot and two other pots. And then there was a pantry with shelves with canned food on it and an icebox, and with real ice in it. You can keep it cold. And I remember him opening it. Well, I was just beside myself. And behind the table was a sofa, in the kitchen. And then to the right, he said, "Illa, come here. Muddy." He showed us the bathroom, no longer an outhouse, it was a real bathroom, which we had in Magdeburg too but, I mean, not in Cochstedt or Aschersleben. And then I

wanted to see my bed, I wanted to see my bed. I went to see, it was like a metal post around, you know. I had my own bed, my own dresser, and a lamp on it. And then my mother's room had a bigger bed with a dresser and a lamp on it, and then there was a front room and it had a leather two-seated sofa and an extra chair and, like, a buffet with a lamp on it, and that was it. That was the house. Well, I couldn't believe to think this was it, you know. And going to bed that night, my goodness. Instead of laying there thinking about everything I guess I was so tired I remember, boom, I fell asleep. And when I woke up I couldn't believe it. You know, I ran into their bedroom. I remember that part, but what was said, I don't remember. Then in back of the Seneca Avenue apartment was a yard, you know, you had to go down to the cellar and come up through a hole in the yard. And that's where I would play. Well, I thought that was heaven, that I could go out in the yard and play there.

LEVINE: How did your mother feel about coming? I mean, she was...

ORTMANN: Well, I mean, she was just, uh, she had, well, I'll tell you. She had a very nice place in Magdeburg. Like I said, it was maroon walls, white furniture. It wasn't quite that elaborate, you understand? The furniture was not as nice as in Germany. That was their real home. It was a wooden bed and wooden this and it was white furniture against these maroon walls. I remember that. It was a nice place. And this was not that glamorous. It was a bed and it was this and it was that, but of course, *Muddy* said this much later, that she was a little not let down but from what she left this was less. But in no time they got better. And I think in two years they moved to Norman Street. We got new furniture, and it was getting better and better. Now Depression came. That was bad. My father worked only three days, and so he sold car polish and went from door to door. My mother not only had still the bakery, she also cleaned houses. And when I

was of age later on she got a hold of me and I cleaned with her and she gave me pocket money, that I would learn how to take care of a house, too. It didn't hurt me, right after school. And, oh, Depression was so bad that we, uh, our dentist. We made friends with a Jewish man, Dr. Lear. He said, "Reichenbachs, you can move in back of my office rent free, but take care of the office, and if people call that they need me call me. On the half hour with the trolley car, I'll come. Take care of the office, clean the office." And that's what we did. We moved from Norman Street to Fresh Pond Road. And three little rooms in the back. It was a nothing. I had to sleep on the couch. It was a let-down. This was Depression. I had to sleep on the couch. My father and mother had the bed in a small room. That's all the fit in there. There was built-in closet, all there was room for was a bed, but they managed. And my father said, "I got to go in business. This is no good." He kept talking about going into business. And then the people upstairs moved. We got a little better, I guess, and we moved upstairs, but still taking care of the office. Of course, we had to pay rent upstairs, right? So we lived eleven years upstairs, above the dentist, taking care of that. And as time went on I went in high school. He trained me as a dental assistant. After school he trained me. He sent me to an inlay school, to New York. He really was a very good friend. Sent me on vacation with his two daughters. And my mother cleaned the office and we took care of it. You know, and then I got a little pocket money, but not that much. I didn't care for dental hygienist, so he had said that, oh, what do you call that? What do you call that, the government thing, when you take a test?

LEVINE: Civil service?

ORTMANN: Civil service. Now, there was another nurse there, Rochelle. She and I took a civil service test. I passed with an eighty-two, and I moved out of my mother's house and moved on the grounds in Rockland State. And I

went into training for three years, and I was called what they called a nurse. It's like nurse's aide today, but then it was a little better. I got my cap, I got my stripe on my cap. And that was Fresh Pond Road. Let me backtrack a little bit. In Norman Street, before the Depression, I had a piano, he bought a car. All that, see. We still had that when we moved to Fresh Pond Road. Now, times were getting better. (speaking to the dog) Down! Shh! Shh! Down, *Liebchen* [my darling]. Times were getting better and we bought a house in Queens Village. I was working in Rockland State. Maybe it's not nice to say this, but of all our friends, believe it or not my father really made out, you could say, the best. He had the better house, but we were still all friends, nothing was there. But, I mean, they had nice houses too, but my father had the house. And always the last one to get, you know. He waited till he could get these things. He says, "I could have got a house three years ago." But that didn't satisfy him. So now we lived in Queens Village and my teen years I was kicked in the stomach by a mental patient. (speaking to the dog) Down! Down! (addressing Dr. Levine) Push her down. And I had to leave the hospital on leave. I was kicked in the stomach badly by a patient. And my father said, "I don't want you to be a nurse. It's hard work. Look what happened to you." And I sort of got away from it, and I got a nice New York job in an office with a C. P. A. I went to Drake's Business School and picked up there. My teen years were in Queens Village. From Queens Village they moved here, where I'm sitting now. And...

LEVINE: What year was that, roughly?

ORTMANN: Uh, 1957. And before they moved away they bought Eddie, my husband, and I a house in Queens Village, bought me a house. And we paid, of course, taxes and all that. And we lived there, that was my youth with my children. Both my children were born there. And then as they were aging

and living here, Eddie's mother died and we got into some money. And he said, "Let's give the money back to your parents. It's my turn now." Because he got money from his mother. So we sold 211th Street in Queens Village and came out here, and we lived here in Cambridge Drive with his mother's inheritance.

LEVINE: Well, let's go back to the Ellis Island part. Is there anything else you remember about Ellis Island?

ORTMANN: Ellis Island?

LEVINE: Were you there...

ORTMANN: Food, food.

LEVINE: What about the food?

ORTMANN: A Frankfurter. (she laughs) Oh, my goodness, I must have had three of them, you know.

LEVINE: Was it the first time you've had one, or no?

ORTMANN: Oh, no. I had Frankfurters, but they were just different, you know. Over in Germany you got a Frankfurter on a piece of rye bread with mustard smear. It was just different. Here you got a roll and Sauerkraut on it, you know. And the soda, oh, my God, that was a treat. Whether it was Coke or what, I don't remember. Candy.

LEVINE: Now, did you stay at Ellis Island for any period of time, or were you just there for part of the day?

ORTMANN: No, no. I don't know whether it's, you know, like overnight? No, not that I recall. Uh-uh.

LEVINE: Do you remember what impressed you about...

ORTMANN: Ellis Island?

LEVINE: ...seeing all those people that were probably different from the people you had ever seen.

ORTMANN: Oh, I looked at the clothes and the people and looked at everything. But my main thing was to see my room. (she laughs) You know?

LEVINE: Do you remember being...

ORTMANN: I was only seven then, you know?

LEVINE: Yeah, right. And, of course, you were anticipating that.

ORTMANN: Yes, yeah. "I want to go home. I want to go home. I want to see my room." You know.

LEVINE: Do you remember, from the point of view of a seven-year-old, when you got to this country, things that struck you as being different?

ORTMANN: Well, I couldn't speak, for one thing, you know. It was very hard. And I was sent to school, Public School 77, right near our home town. I was able to walk. And, I mean, and I was blonde, and I mean blonde, almost white-head. That I was called the bleached blonde later on in years and I wasn't!

That I wanted my mother to darken my hair so I wouldn't be called a bleached blonde. And I was that way till sixteen. I was really blonde. I couldn't talk. I couldn't talk English until I got into it. And I have friends, Anna Vogel, Anna Sweeney, Elaine Hellburgh. Friends today from the 1-A on, that I knew, I know them today. Of course Anna died, and Elaine died now.

LEVINE: This is from school?

ORTMANN: This is from school, the 1-A, that I made friends. They accepted me more than, the others laughed at me, you know, because I couldn't speak. And I had different clothes, really, because my mother made them, you know, from Germany, and they were a little different than here.

LEVINE: Can you say anything about the clothes? The clothes you wore or the clothes the other kids wore?

ORTMANN: Well, I remember, I kept telling my mother, "Put the belt up here." Because it was down further, it must have been style in Germany, right. And, oh, I was always dressed to kill. I think this is what, why they laughed at me because I was so dressed up that, you know, like a velvet dress with a velvet collar. I mean, that's more, looked like a party dress, but my mother wanted me to be dressed nice going to school. And that...

LEVINE: You don't remember what the kids said, or anything like that?

ORTMANN: Oh, look at that dress, you know. I mean, what was wrong with it? Dress nothing, as far as I was concerned. It was just different style. So in time my mother caught on and changed things, you know. But I have dear friends to this day. Of course, they all died. I'm still alive, but they're gone.

But we kept friends all. In fact, I have a daughter coming here, Gloria Keller. That is the daughter of the Anna that I knew since the 1-A. She still comes to me. And when Anna died, she says, "You were my mother's best friend." She visits me every birthday and Christmas and gives me a gift. I told her to stop, and she says, "Look, I don't have a mother any more, and you were my mother's best friend." So it goes on.

LEVINE: Do you remember any attitudes that your mother had that she had from Germany that she maintained?

ORTMANN: Attitudes? You mean regrets?

LEVINE: No, just ways of thinking about life or the world or...

ORTMANN: Well, she had no regrets. She got better, right. No, no, no. She loved America and she thought it was wonderful. And so many friends, you know, we had a lot of friends. No, that part was all right. But it's just that one point she had to leave her parents, continuous writing and sending packages.

LEVINE: Do you remember any ideas she had, like things she tried to teach you, in other words, that you should do or ways you should be in order to be a good person, or...

ORTMANN: Other than in Germany, you mean?

LEVINE: Well, any time. In Germany, or when you got here. Were there, were there kinds of things that she taught you that, you know, she felt were important?

ORTMANN: Well, I was very talkative. They kept telling me to keep quiet more and listen. I don't know if that's what you mean, yeah. I was talkative. In fact, this Anna, I was talkative. And when the teacher was doing something I'd be, my mouth would open up and I'd talk. And so that I wouldn't get in trouble, here's a friend for you, she took the blame for me. She says, "Ilse didn't talk. It was me this time." You know, we often talked about that, how she took the blame for me.

LEVINE: How about your father? Was he, did he give you any ideas about ways he wanted you to be, or lessons he wanted you to learn?

ORTMANN: Well, I liked nursing. I nursed my dolls, they're sick and I bandaged them, and all this and that. And *Muddi* kept saying, "Illa wants to be a nurse." "No, no, no, no." This was wrong of my father. I mean, you shouldn't, today they say you should leave the child do what they want. But he, in World War I he was shot in the leg, and they were going to amputate his leg, which he refused, and he had it till the day he died. And he seen how those nurses had to work. He just didn't want me to be a nurse and work so hard. And my heart was in it. And he was so happy when Dr. Lear was training me as a dental hygienist. At the chair, I helped him and everything. He just didn't want me to be a nurse. And I pushed it through and I did it anyway. So after I graduated eighteen, not that I was mad at him. I says, "*Vati*, I like it and I got a chance. Civil Service, I got eighty-two, and I'm going with Rochelle, you know." Only Rochelle went to a different one. I went upstate and she went, where did she go? I think she went to Welfare Island. I didn't want Welfare Island. I went up to Rockland State. It was brand new, it was in the country and I came home once a week. Oh, my father, as a graduation gift, gave me his car. That's what I traveled with back and forth to Jersey, to Rockland State.

LEVINE: Who was the disciplinarian in your family, your mother or your father?

ORTMANN: My father.

LEVINE: And how did he discipline you?

ORTMANN: Well, like he told me, he doesn't want me to be a nurse. Not that, if I haven't got the money, I'll take a loan out. "But I don't think you'll make it. Nurse is hard." This was wrong to do. He should have let me try. If I got an eighty-two in psychiatry work, you know, I mean, maybe I could have been an R.N., which I wanted to be. And, you know, I pushed it through all my life. I worked in Park View Nursing Home. I worked in Mid-Island Hospital. I worked in Welfare. I worked in St. Alban's during the war with the paratroopers. As an assistant, not as an R. N. And then when I got married I did not renew it, so I was not a licensed practical nurse any more because my husband didn't want me to work, but I always did private jobs, which I do today yet, when I have it, private nursing. Now I do child care.

LEVINE: When you were first in this country with your parents, were you living in an area where there were a lot of immigrants?

ORTMANN: A lot of what?

ORTMANN: Immigrants who had come from other places?

LEVINE: Yes. Ridgewood is noted for Germans to settle there. And Italians, Germans, Italians, I don't know what else. But that was called Germantown, Ridgewood.

LEVINE: Now, when did you meet your husband?

ORTMANN: I met my husband when I was in Queens Village. And through, again, Freda Rutter, which is my sister-in-law. She's gone now too. Through her I met my husband. And he was a twin of her husband.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And she was someone you knew from...

ORTMANN: And she, I knew Freda since the 1-A, just like I knew this Anna, and we're still. And she had moved away, but we wrote to one another. And all of a sudden we met on 42nd Street and Fifth Avenue and we couldn't believe it. She said she was going to write me, and surprise me, but she didn't get to it yet, that she moved back to New York. So we became friends, and that's how I met my husband.

LEVINE: Now, was she from Germany, Freda?

ORTMANN: Uh, her parents were born there, but not she.

LEVINE: I see. So was your husband then also of German descent?

ORTMANN: No, he was born here, but his parents were German in Cologne, Germany.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, just a few more questions. Then you had how many children?

ORTMANN: Two.

LEVINE: And what, I'm sorry, I should ask you your husband's name?

ORTMANN: Uh, Edward. Edward Louis Ortmann.

LEVINE: And you had two children, and what are their names?

ORTMANN: Yvonne Ilse, my name, and Richard Edward. And they're four years apart.

LEVINE: And you have now grandchildren?

ORTMANN: And I have grandchildren. I have my Scottie who I lost. Yeah, he was fifteen years old. He had a heart condition. And then his sister Wendy, who was just nineteen. And then I have my son's children, Heidi, Christa, and after twelve years he got another baby, Briana. So she's the new one that plays around here. (she laughs)

LEVINE: Now, just in closing, is there anything else you would like to say about having come here? Are you glad that your family came? How do you feel about the fact of starting out in Germany and coming here, and really essentially living your life in this country?

ORTMANN: Well, like I said, my mother and I went in '35 for three months there, and I seen how they lived, Cochstedt. It was precious to me, but I wouldn't want to live there. Then my gift in 1938 from my grandparents, I went alone, and I went to nursing school in Magdeburg there. And I traveled back and forth a couple of hours three times a week. And I was there a whole year, and my parents would send fifty dollars to my grandparents. You had to do that. This was the Hitler thing. And money was coming in okay, but not to spend their money. So fifty dollars is nothing today, but then fifty dollars a month for my keep. And all of a sudden they sent a telegram, "No more money. You're to come home." They knew before we did that there was war coming. Because while I was there maneuvers were going on all the time. Sirens, close the shades, put the lights out, put your mask on. I went

through this. I went through hell, and as far as food was concerned they got an egg each a week, a quarter of a pound of butter every other week, between the two of them. Now, I was there yet, so they shared it with me. I had to stand on line seven o'clock in the morning for a loaf of bread. So therefore I enjoyed being there, but I wouldn't want to stay there. So then that was...

LEVINE: Were people frightened at that time?

ORTMANN: Oh, yeah. Frightened, quiet. I used to blast the radio on and get England on and my grandmother would run, "Don't do that!" To have English music on, you know. You couldn't do that. And I had to be shut up, "Don't say this, don't say that." That was 1938-9, and then the war came, right.

LEVINE: Now, was Hitler, did you have any knowledge of Hitler while you were over there?

ORTMANN: Oh, of course. I even seen him.

LEVINE: Oh, you did.

ORTMANN: I saw him in June 3, 1939, before I came back here. He was with the Yugoslavian prince passing under the Linden, you know that Brandenburger Tor, and I stood on line, nine o'clock in the morning, with a friend of mine, Heinz Eckleber. He's a friend I met over there. And he was only passing at four, but to get a spot, nine o'clock in the morning we stood up on some kind of pedestal. And then he would leave and get food, and then he'd come back and I would go and get food so we would keep our place to see Hitler pass, you know.

LEVINE: And what was the response of the people at that point?

ORTMANN: Hush, hush. They didn't dare say anything. My grandparents used to say, "We can't say anything. Don't say anything." They were afraid that even if I would say something, it would be innocently said, but they, everything was quiet, quiet. And you would see these Gestapo around. You had to be careful what you do, what you say. There was movies once, and there was these Gestapo all the way around. You didn't dare make a peep. I remember that. And Heinz would always say, this fellow, "Shh, shh. *Sei ruhig*. Be quiet." If I would ask a question or something. I did not want to be there any more. I was heartbroken. But I loved Cochstedt, to see where she was born. That was in this house and that house and the playground and all that. And friends. Now, my mother's friends were dying off, but their children were, like me, I would see them. Today, yet I got a letter just the other day again from my mother's friend and her daughter. And now that it's better in Germany, and they're going to sell the house. It's her mother's wish, which is my mother's friend, right? Said, "Take three thousand *D-Mark* [German Mark] and visit Illa," meaning me, "and go to America. It's her wish." So she writes in a letter she hopes when all this is settled, this estate and everything, she wants to come see me.

LEVINE: Well, that's a nice place to end, I think.

ORTMANN: Yeah, yeah. So that was 1938, '39, just when we, quick, let me put in (?). In 1973 my mother and I went back. That was her last time. She knew it would be, and it was very nostalgic to see. My grandfather had died, but my grandmother was still there. That was '73. Then it was my mother's wish, you take Yvonne, and give Richard the same amount of money that it cost you for Yvonne and go to Germany with her. Well, I'm telling you, Yvonne did nothing but cry. Here and there, to see these different things. I

didn't cry this time. I saw it. I knew it would be my last time too, you know, but she enjoyed it. She wants to go back with Wendy now. But whether they'll be, I don't know. So that was '84. So since then that's the end. This drawer I told you about, this little hope chest. I couldn't take it with me in 1938. My girlfriend kept that in her attic, hidden, for thirty-four years for me during the Hitler and the war and everything. Packed stuff on top of it that the Russians wouldn't find it because they were ransacking all the houses. And when my mother and I got there in '73 she bought that hope chest down. It's a wicker thing with handles on the side. Again we wouldn't take it out. They wouldn't allow it. My father's cousin in Hamburg found out that you can send something to Hamburg, but they didn't tell us this till later, that they should send it to Hamburg, and they were coming to America anyway for a visit, that they would bring it. They planned this. But we were heartbroken in '73 that we couldn't take that along. Plus it was filled with pretty things, a vase and this and that. So when they came, the friends, the cousin, and the valises were coming up the ramp, all of a sudden there was the hope chest. Thirty-four years in the attic. So my granddaughter, who just got this, she cried so when she saw it, to think it's hers now. Yeah, yeah.

LEVINE: Wonderful. Okay. Well, Ilse, thank you so much. It was wonderful to hear your story.

ORTMANN: Thank you. It was nice to do it.

LEVINE: And the continuity of your family. It's beautiful. This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service, and I'm here in Massapequa, Long Island, New York, with Ilse Ortmann, and it's March 23rd, 1992.

ORTMANN: Oh! My grandmother's birthday. Yeah. (she laughs)