EI-1275
HORTENSE VANKRUNKELSVEN [PH] KELLER
BIRTHDATE: JULY 6, 1912
INTERVIEW DATE: JUNE 2, 2003
AGE AT TIME OF INTERVIEW: 90
RUNNING TIME:
INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE, PH.D.
RECORDING ENGINEER: JANET LEVINE, PH.D.
INTERVIEW LOCATION: ELLIS ISLAND
TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: TAPESCRIBE
TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY:

BELGIUM, 1920
AGE: 8

SHIP: KRUNLAND [PH]
PORT:
RESIDENCES:

LEVINE: Today is June 2nd, the year 2003. I'm here at Ellis Island with Hortense Vankrunkelsven [PH] Keller, who came from Belgium in 1920 when she was eight years of age. She left from the port of Antwerp and w—and arrived in America on the Krunland, the Red Star Line ship. This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. And if we could start, please, again if you'd say your birth date and where in Belgium you were born.

KELLER: My birth date is July 6th, 1912 and I was born at Hoboken in—near Antwerp, Belgium.

LEVINE: Oh, Hoboken?

KELLER: Just like Frank Sinatra.

LEVINE: Really?

KELLER: [chuckles]

LEVINE: Oh, okay. And then where did you live up until you came to the United States?

KELLER: We were living at Kiehl [PH].

LEVINE: Okay. And you mentioned before that Kiehl is a part of Antwerp.

KELLER: Yeah, it's right next to it, like towns adjoin each other here, you know. It was right—we took the streetcar in Kiehl to go to the—the city.

LEVINE: I see. I see. So it's the greater Antwerp area.

KELLER: Yes, right.

LEVINE: [chuckles] Okay. And what was your mother's name and her maiden name?

KELLER: Her—her—she was Delphine—D-E-L-P-H-I-N-E.

LEVINE: Okay.

KELLER: And her last name was Staut—S-T-A-U-T. A little more simple. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Uh-huh, yes. And your father, his name.

KELLER: Gummarus, and it's G-U-M-M-A-R-U-S. Now, again, that sounds Scandinavian. I know of no other Belgian with that first name.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh.

KELLER: So I don't know where—where we originated, actually. But as far back as I know, we were Belgians.

LEVINE: Do you know about grandparents or great grandparents?

KELLER: I—yes, let's see. Her name was Julia Varweg [PH]. His name was Jacob Varweg. That's my mother's parents. My father's parents—her name was Joanna and his name—I think it—I don't definitely remember his first name. But we were not close. And my—Joanna was dead before I was born. But tho—that's as far back as we go.

LEVINE: I see. And did anybody ever talk about whether the family lived in that area around Antwerp?

KELLER: I'm sure they all—I'm sure my father was born at Lier, which is not far from Antwerp. So they more or less—Belgium [chuckles] isn't very big, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KELLER: So they—they, more or less, lived in that area. My mother's people lived across the Scheldt [PH] River and at Beveren—B-E-V-E-R-E-N.

LEVINE: Okay.

KELLER: Or St.—there's a town named St. Nicholas that's always—also close. Now, my mother was—became a seamstress and that she gravitated to Antwerp where her skills would be more used. My father was a seaman. And until I was born, until shortly before I was born, he was with the Belgian Merchant Marine.

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

KELLER: So—

LEVINE: Well, is—were you the first child?

KELLER: No, I'm the second. I had an older sister who was six year—ei—six years older than I. She was 14 when we came. My father came first. He came in October of 1920. Go back a little further. My mother's brother had come to America and was sponsored by his wife's cousin. And they came over in February of 1920. And my mother had always had a yen to come to America. And so the brothers sponsored us then. And my father came. He left on my birth date in July 6th, 1920. And he found work over here so he immediately made arrangements for us to come because he was working. He had a job. And so we then arrived here around the 15th or between the 15th and the 20th of October.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KELLER: So then, by the next Monday, I was put in school. I learned one word of English while on board ship, "upstairs." Upstairs. To get the people to get some fresh air, you know, the passengers.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KELLER: And so—and I also knew the words to "It's a Long Way to Tipperary. [PH]" But just like people—well, I'm Catholic and we used to sing our mass [unclear] in Latin. And we'd sing Latin hymns and never know what

they meant. [chuckles] I knew—I knew that song because "It's a Long Way to Tipperary" was a famous World War I song.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KELLER: So—

LEVINE: You learned that in Belgium?

KELLER: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

KELLER: Oh.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

KELLER: Yeah, and in Belgium during the war, food was very scarce. Is this of interest to you?

LEVINE: Yes, absolutely.

KELLER: Food was scarce and so my mother took us to—at school each day. We would get a bowl of soup and that was sometimes—I remember very well going hungry. And—and to this date, the word "diet" is a no-no for me. You tell me I can't have something and it's exactly what I want. [chuckles] But so, anyway, food became very important. And my mother, being a seamstress and also a, I thought, quite a smart woman, had a—she was tall—wasn't tall. She wasn't much taller than I am—very slender. And she made a robe-like that was just like a slip. But it had all little pockets in it, you know.

LEVINE: Oh.

KELLER: And the people from across the Scheldt who were farmers who were truck gardeners—they didn't have big farms—could send over stuff that they grew. And my mother could take stuff from Antwerp that they couldn't get. And between the two, we helped feed each other.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KELLER: And so that—

LEVINE: That was during World War I?

KELLER: That was during World War I. When World War I was over on that day, well, one of my mother's sisters died of consumption, tuberculosis—

LEVINE: Oh.

KELLER: —that she had in—she was made to work pretty hard. There were Bel—or German soldiers stationed everywhere. But she used to have to do their laundry and stuff. And, well, she died.

LEVINE: Hmm.

KELLER: And her—had baby and I believe the baby di—yeah, I know the baby died too. She had one little girl that lived but that was it. And her husband, his trade was making wooden shoes. And I had the cutest pair of wooden shoes. And they were figuring—trying to figure out a way to get it across the bridge between Antwerp and the other side. And Mama said, "Well, there's never a way you can hide wooden shoes." So she says, "You're just going to have to take"—you know, they talked it over and I—I was to carry my wooden shoes across. When we got to the bridge, and this I very well remember, a German soldiers was sentry, the station there. And I ran away and I said, "Can I take these?" And, now, this was in—during the war on—you know, probably about '16 or '17. And he—he looked at me and he got down on one knee. And he held me and he looked up at my mother and he said, "I've got one of these at home."

LEVINE: Oh.

KELLER: So my hatred for Germans was also always mellowed a little bit by the kindness that was shown to me. And so—and the uncle had made a special job. He had painted them black and had put little—painted little roses on them. They were so pretty. Can you delete any of this junk?

LEVINE: No, we—we—we'll keep it as is but it's all of interest. Let me just ask you. Did you take those shoes with you when you came here?

KELLER: No.

LEVINE: Oh, they—you were much younger, I guess—

KELLER: They—

LEVINE: —then.

KELLER: I was—must have been about five years old.

LEVINE: Yeah, yeah.

KELLER: And in coming from Belgium, you bring the—only the most essentials. One of the things that I had that, oh, I cried when I had to leave it behind was a—a little house made out of matchboxes by an aunt who was a nun. And it—it was—it was a little house but she had made it out of matchboxes. And it was so pretty. And I had to leave that behind. I think I regret that more than the shoes.

LEVINE: [chuckles]

KELLER: So—but in coming to America, my mother, she had these big rattan trunks that they had, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

KELLER: And one of them, she brought our feather bed and a set of pots and pans and, figuring these were things she couldn't get here. The—the pots and pans were a gift, I believe. But there were—what I mean is we could only bring the essentials, coming that distance, for shipping charges and everything. So we went from—our relatives were in Rock Island, Illinois. So we got on the train in New York and we went to Rock Island.

LEVINE: Oh.

KELLER: And so, as I say, the Monday afterward I was started in school. And I was started in a public school. I had been trained or taught by nuns. I missed the nuns and on Sunday, I would go to church and sit up near the nuns. And one of the kind souls saw me there several times and—and spoke to me and—and she said, "Wouldn't you like to come to our school?" I said, "Oh, I'd love to come but I—my people just can't afford it, you know." And she said, "We'll see about that." And so she saw about it and I went to Catholic school then. And—

LEVINE: And did you feel more comfortable then?

KELLER: Yes.

LEVINE: Yeah.

KELLER: Yes, yes. Yeah, you—you—see, they not only fed me, they taught me to knit. They—they entertained me so they made a big impression in my life.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

KELLER: And so that's how—what happened there. And then I went though eighth grade and I wanted to be a nurse. And in those days, you had to pay to be a nurse. And my people never accepted charity. They—there was one time when some kind soul advised the Salvation Army that we were in need. And they left the—and this was around the holiday. And they left a bunch of groceries, which made my mother furious. She—it hit h—her pride. She said, "We can do it. You know, we'll do it." And we did do it. They bought a home and my older sister was 14 when we came. The first two years, she helped take care of the baby because my mother was a good seamstress. And people in that time, especially people who couldn't fit their own clothes—I remember one of her customers was a lady who must have weighed 350 or 400 pounds and just couldn't find any clothing that was—you know, my mother sewed for her and that lady became our landlady [chuckles] in a rental.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh.

KELLER: So bread cast on the waters, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KELLER: So about—about 19—about 1922, they bought a home. Now, it was a newly—fair—it wasn't brand new when we bought it but fairly new. But it had a room made between two bedrooms that was large enough for a bathroom. But it had n—no fixtures in it. The toilet was outside and water was inside, though. We—but anyway, we lived there. When my sister was 16, she went to work in a factory. My mother always said, "My oldest girl helped us buy a house. The second oldest helped us through the Depression, " which was when I was working—

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KELLER: —and helped out. So—and her third one—well, she was the lucky one.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

KELLER: [chuckles] But she did her part too. But I mean, the need—

LEVINE: Right.

KELLER: The need was different so—

LEVINE: How about in Belgium? Was the family—your—your father was a seaman.

KELLER: Yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah.

KELLER: But not in a—when I was born, he was already a land man.

LEVINE: Oh, I see.

KELLER: And he worked in a sugar factory that—where he was a stoker, like he was on the—feeding the big boilers on steamships—

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KELLER: —is what he did. So he found that in a factory. And so he was never in the service because they needed him in—all through the war, he worked. But the wages were—and they—they had enough to start buying a home in—before the war started. When the war was over, we had nothing. And the wages were paltry and—and so we had—we came on borrowed money. And—

LEVINE: So it was World War I that—that sort of wiped out your finances and—

KELLER: Yes, yes.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KELLER: Yeah, but in—in keep—getting food and in giving to—I mean, when Mama would go over to Beveren, she always took what she could spare, you know. And—and they helped each other and—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

KELLER: But that's—and Papa was that until we came to America.

LEVINE: Is that why your fa—or maybe you can tell me why your father came to America—

KELLER: Yes.

LEVINE: —when he did.

KELLER: Yes, because you had glowing reports of my—my uncle, who had been here just since February who had gotten wages, and gotten work and gotten wages. And the wages were better. And they figured life itself was better over here. You know, all of your people came here for hopes of a better—we didn't all want the—the streets paved with gold. But it was another chance to—now, my father was 38, 39 years when we came

over. So it—but it meant right after the war in Belgium, you know, things were still tough.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

KELLER: I had my first banana aboard ship when we across, and only that because we had a cousin who—a cousin of my father's who was a steward on the second deck, second class. And he was able to send—get a bowl of fruit down to us, which was a luxury. I mean, we were fed aboard ship but it was life sustaining and not much more. I don't remember specific dishes. I don't. But I do remember the banana. [laughter]

LEVINE: Did you like it?

KELLER: Yes. Well, yes, I did. But that same day, I got seasick and I don't know whether the banana had [chuckles] anything to do with—and I was seasick for only about half a day. So I think I was probably—I wasn't used to it. But my older sister was sick for two or three days, and we had a couple of rough days when, even in the hallways, they—you know, they were tilted, that the ship was tilting. And it was a bad North Atlantic storm in—in October. And we were all—oh, so many people were ill. That w—that was bad. But my mother and my father, being a seaman, had told her that if she took something salty, and she had dried beef. And she would cut slivers of that and she had a big hunk of it. And she would pass that around to other pa—there were—where we were, I guess they planned it that way as a—there were other Belgians aboard, about three or four that were a—aboard the same ship. And they kind of lodged us together.

LEVINE: Oh.

KELLER: So my mother helped but wherever—that was her nature, wherever she could help with something. And—and it did—you know, it did stimulate your appetite, your thirst too. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Oh, right.

KELLER: Yeah, but—so when we got here, there was nobod—no—we were put aboard a train then to, I think this is—I don't know if the Rock Island ran all the way to New York. But we saw Rock Island cars and my mother imagined it would be—I think probably it was the New York Central that probably took us. And I remember going up along Albany and across. I remember my train trip. I remember my surprise at seeing my very first black woman and child. I had—my eight-year-old—hadn't grasped the

fact. I was deathly ascared of the black men who'd come and get me if I didn't behave.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

KELLER: But I—the woman and child were fascinating to me. I—I'd never seen them, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KELLER: So then we got to Rock Island and everybody met us at the train. And as I—well, I said to my family this morning, "Shall I tell everything?"

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

KELLER: And I—I was telling of two incidents, the one—and they said, "Yes, it—it would be—it—it's part of the trip."

LEVINE: Absolutely, yeah.

KELLER: Be aboard ship—well, we were kind of quartered. And as I recall, our [unclear] room [unclear] wasn't very big. But the other Belgians were around us. And—but anyway, when my moth—mother went to put us to bed, she slept in one section with Phyllis—Philamina [PH], my younger sister and Phila—and Julia, my older sister, and I had another sleeping area. And my mother got so excited. She was—kept killing fleas all night. And—fleas.

LEVINE: Oh.

KELLER: And of course, the people who had been traveling for weeks to get aboard ship, you couldn't fix—but, oh, she was very much put out because of the fleas.

LEVINE: Hmm.

KELLER: So I don't know whether I should tell you, but understanding the story, you understand that it was p—you know.

LEVINE: Oh, yes. It was very—

KELLER: Yeah.

LEVINE: —prevalent.

KELLER: And we were talking about odors. And I said, "I remember one odor aboard that ship and it'll never leave me." It was the odor of the antiseptic that they used to spray and to—

LEVINE: Oh.

KELLER: —kill other odors, I guess. But I remember that odor and it was a sickening—it wasn't a body odor in that—it was a v—it was the—the antiseptic that they used back in 1920. God only knows what it was, you know.

LEVINE: Right. [chuckles]

KELLER: I always have to think, that was 1920.

LEVINE: Yes. [chuckles]

KELLER: And so I went to school and after eighth grade, I—I didn't want to work in a factory. My—they let me go to night school to learn—I had one year of high school. And then I wanted to learn—and they had a business course in our school. And I wanted to take a business course and that would be one year. And no, it—it wasn't in the cards. But they let me go to night school. And I went to night school from September until about January. Then my—I had expressed my wish to the nuns and the nun who taught the business course had al—also been instrumental in getting me a position out of town away from my people for a bank receiver, 19—this, no, is now in 1928, '29.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

KELLER: And she had recommended me for this position out of town. So when I couldn't—I couldn't be a nurse. So I did—she said, "If you—you can come—come to school here and—but you'll have to graduate, you know, by June. And she says, "I know you can do it." So the—the incentive was so great. [chuckles] Who couldn't do it? Anyway, I finished and—

LEVINE: You mean you finished school early so that you could take this position? Is that what you did?

KELLER: I finished school. No, I had—I got that position later. I finished school so I could get a job outside of a factory.

LEVINE: Oh, okay.

KELLER: And then so after school, I—my first job was with a real estate agent in Rock Island. Then a—the—a friend, who was later my bridesmaid, got

me a job in the Oldsmobile agency in Rock Island, so I was there. No, I was there first and then I went—real estate first, then to—then to—to Galbraith, and then the—no, the receivership was last. The receivership was closed and then there was nothing. And so we had had neighbors who had moved to Chicago. And the woman had said, "Well, there's hard times in Chicago too but there are more people and more jobs." And she says, "Why don't you come and see if you can find something here?" Well, I went to Chicago and, because I had been away from home before, my mother permitted it. And when I got to Chicago, we—we looked around and the Belgians, like all groups, had a social—socially, they stayed together. As people, most of them became janitors in the buildings in Chicago. And they had a club called the Hand in Hand Club. And the—I'm sure this isn't the—

LEVINE: Oh, no. This is very interesting [unclear].

KELLER: So the—there were a group of doctors who were graduating. One of them was a—the doctor from Marin [PH] was the son of the Belgian Consul in Chicago at the time, who was also a doctor. They were opening offices and there were three doctors—four doctors and a dentist. And they were going to open as newly doctors in 1930, this is. They had a rough road to hoe. Well, anyway, the Belgian doctor—his father was also a doctor. But he was retiring and he turned his practice over to his son. And being clannish, as you are in those circumstances, a lot of our first patients were Belgians. They wanted someone who could speak Flemish to them.

LEVINE: Ah.

KELLER: So that's how I got that job. And that's—and it was in the doctor's office. It was as near to nursing as I could get.

LEVINE: Yeah.

KELLER: So I was in seventh heaven. I worked for them until we moved to—

LEVINE: When you say "we," did your whole family move to Chicago?

KELLER: In time. Their house was paid for and it—for economic reasons, it was cheaper for them to come and live with me and to rent out their house. So that made that a transition.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

KELLER: And later on, because they had never sold their house while Papa was alive, they moved back to it because my father got a heart attack. He

was a janitor for the church in Chicago that I was married from. And he was no longer able to do work so then the best thing was to go back home.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

KELLER: And in Chicago, I met my husband. I worked in a—a doctor's office in a building and my husband worked in a drugstore on the first floor. And hours being what they were, you almost had to meet people at work. And none of the Belgian boys appealed to me. But this man in the drugstore downstairs did. And in the office, I was called Miss Van because Vankrunklesven—doctor always said he could do it himself by the time he [chuckles]—when that was my name.

LEVINE: He called you. [chuckles]

KELLER: So I was known as Miss Van in the building. One night, I was sending a letter home and I needed a stamp. So I—by that time, we were talking acquaintances because I used to have my lunch. That had—the time when it had lunch counters and drugstores.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

KELLER: And so he twirled my letter around and he says, "My Lord, is that your name?" And he said, "Somebody ought to do something about it." And I think, if I were [unclear] in both places, I had liked him and we were good friends, you know. So I married him.

LEVINE: Ah.

KELLER: And then—

LEVINE: Now, what was he? Was he also someone who had immigrated?

KELLER: He was a drugstore clerk. No, he was—

LEVINE: He was born—he was [unclear]?

KELLER: He was born in Chicago, yeah, and his mother had died a couple of years before. And he lived with his sister and his father. And after we married, we had a tiny apartment close to the doctor's office and close to the drugstore.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KELLER: And he went on and became a Prudential insurance agent. And then in the late—you're running out of time.

LEVINE: No. No, no.

KELLER: Late—

LEVINE: He became an insurance agent.

KELLER: Agent, yes, and—and living in Chicago. In late—in about '38 or '39, I got a—a strep infection. And at that time, we didn't have penicillin. And they had, oh, the medication before penicillin. But it didn't work and the doctor—the internist, who was a woman doctor, she said, "Do you have any people that live out west? And I said, "Yes, my father has a cousin. And by the way, he's coming to visit us soon." And she says, "I think a change of climate would help you. And this—so the cousin came and with his family, and when he heard about it, he says, "You're going back with us." So I—I had my older son, the one you met. He was a baby. Well, he was—he was about four years old then. And so we went back for the summer. And Frank said, "I'll pick you up when I get my vacation. I'll drive out and pick you up." So the—I was there for two months and the change was dramatic. I—you know, I—and so when he came, you know, he said, "Maybe I can get a transfer." He went back to—to Chicago. He got a transfer and, six weeks after we left here as visitors, we were back as citizens. And he was stationed in—these people lived in Longmont. And he was stationed in Denver, which is 30 miles south of Longmont, Colorado.

LEVINE: Oh, so you moved from Chicago to Colorado.

KELLER: To—to Colorado.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, wow.

KELLER: Then I—we lived in Colorado for 20 years and at that time, he had various positions.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KELLER: He was an insurance man and he was on the highway patrol there for a while. And for our 25th wedding anniversary, we decided—by that time, we had—the three other children were all born in Colorado. On our 25th wedding anniversary, we decided we had—we wanted to go to Las Vegas. And so we took the two girls along and we went to Las Vegas. And my sister-in-law, Frank's sister had—she was a nurse and she h—was stationed in Long Beach, California. She met us in Vegas. And we

went by one route, and being the travelers that—it's—it's in my blood. I love to travel. I said, "Well, let's go back another way." And so we came back the coast road, number 1, to San Francisco, and then we would go back to Denver.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

KELLER: So we had a lovely time in Vegas and had a lovely time with [unclear]. And then when—and my first view—have you ever been to San Francisco?

LEVINE: Yes.

KELLER: Have you ever come in from the south on Highway 1?

LEVINE: [unclear]

KELLER: When all of a sudden, that lovely coastal road—and all of a sudden, there the city is before you, just, oh! And so we stayed in—and—and in San Francisco in a motel and it just won our hearts over. I said, "Oh, I wish we could live here!" The kids wished—Frank said, "Well, I'll see if they have a job."

LEVINE: [chuckles]

KELLER: He was no longer an insurance man but he had been a collector. And so he went to a collection agency and they hired him. [chuckles] But he had to—he said, "I have to give two weeks notice where I'm working, you know, in order to do this." Okay. We went back and by that time we had property in Denver. And we—the tenants in one house wanted to buy the house. So they're still there, incidentally.

LEVINE: Oh.

KELLER: And the other house, we sold in that time. And so he came two weeks before I did. He gave his two weeks and then I stayed two weeks longer to bind up the loose ends and to figure out—we sold the house furnished and brought just what we could put in the car. My older son was already in college at—in Washington, DC where he had scholarship to a Catholic university.

LEVINE: Hmm.

KELLER: And my younger son was on the point of joining the Navy. So the two girls in the front seat, all—anything we could cram into the back seat on top of the car and in the trunk, I brought along. And I had been driving

just a couple of years. Well, I crossed the Rockies and I crossed the Cascades. And you know, to this day, I think those highways are better than a parking lot. Believe me—

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A]

[BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE B]

KELLER: So we drove into San Francisco on a Sunday afternoon. And there, immediately, I went to—oh, I went to an agency, this—a public agen—a work agency. And my—I took the driving test in front—in driving, I had gripped the wheel so hard I had calluses on both hands and front. [chuckles] The typing test—well, there's only one other thing to go. I was going to go to a medical agency. And while I'm sitting there talking to, you know, what could I do, one of my jobs in Denver had been as a transcriptionist. And I worked for the police department for a couple of months and I couldn't take the—because everything was ad lib and some of the language I heard. [chuckles] And then I worked in personnel for a while too. But anyway, the—while I'm talking to the a—the agency, a call came from St. Joseph's Hospital. And they needed a transcriptionist for their X-ray Department. You see how my life was—one thing, we—crazy risks we took to change—the changes we made, you know. And the appeal of what could be next, I think was what motivated us.

LEVINE: Yeah.

KELLER: So anyway, I went to St. Joseph's. And then UC San Francisco was just a few blocks up the hill. And that's—I was getting a little bored with—x-rays are mostly negative, as you know. In those days, they didn't use them as freely as they do now. And so I went up there once and I thought, 'I'm going to take the test. I'm going to see. If not, I'll just be satisfied by what—by what I have.' I took the typing test and I passed it. And I—I told them. I said, "I don't know if I can pass your test but I'd sure love the chance to try." And later on, I told this to the supervisor that I didn't know it all, because all my—what I had learned in the doctor's office in radiology is just nothing compared to UC. Well, she gave me the—well, gave—she gave me the test and it was an oper—a procedure on a thyroidectomy. I missed one word.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KELLER: And when she said, "You know, you're teachable. If you know—if you don't kn—know it all. You're teachable." Well, I worked at UC for 12 years and loved every minute of it and retire—well, I didn't retire. We—I did re—in a sense, retire but not with the idea of retiring. We wanted to buy a home in San Fran—in Colorado but they're already much higher

there, and especially in Denver. So I decided one day—my husband and I were riding on a Sunday afternoon and near Stanford—near Palo Alto, there was a mobile home park. So I said, "Let's go look at tho"—I'd never, you know, seen a mobile home. So I went and I was—we were both totally captivated. I said, "You know, we could get a mobile home paid for by the time we retire. And—but to get a mobile home, there are none in—in San Francisco that I know of." We had to go to the suburbs. So we went to the suburbs and bought a mobile home. And my daughter—my one daughter was married already and the other one was going to—to college in—and she went to college in Corte Madera is where we landed.

LEVINE: Oh.

KELLER: And she went to college there. And we had took a—a studio right across the street from the hospital. So, you know, that was an economical way to live because a—a studio didn't cost very much.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

KELLER: And so then later on, I decided, "Well, I would like to be closer to—to the girls."

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

KELLER: And so I decided to—to move up to—to move up to Corte Madera. And then we decided that, in retirement, we didn't want to live in Corte Madera because it was one of the mobile homes, which became popular during wartime. And people were—war plants were hiring people. There wasn't a place to put them so they put up mobile homes parks as part of filling stations. And this was our mobile home. There was also a stipulation that you—you—if you—in a decent park, you could not move your coach in if it was more than three years old. So it behooved us to get into a decent park. And so that's where the change came about. And we moved—moved our mobile home. And after a mobile home there, my daughter got married and lived in Santa—in Santa Rosa. And then the time came when we were both ready to retire. And so we—she said, "You can possibly help us with the children when they're young and maybe we can help you when you're old." I'm living—this is my son. I'm living with my daughter in Santa Rosa. I have a daughter who lives in Capitola. I spend time with her. And the other one, well, he—his lifestyle is such that he has no children. And—and their social life is so busy. I go to visit them but I don't have any permanent—but I'm welcome in every other home and I love it.

LEVINE: Wow.

KELLER: That's why I use—I'm here part of the time and New York part of the time. Now that I'm 90, people are beginning to wonder, you know, "You're—aren't you afraid to go?" [chuckles] I'm not afraid. I've done so much traveling in my life and they take very good care of you in airports. Now, what else did you want to know about—

LEVINE: [chuckles] Well, that's great. I—[clears throat] that's good that you just told everything. I'll go back now and—

KELLER: Very well.

LEVINE: —ask some specifics. Okay? [clears throat] Tell me any memories that you have. We—I think we talked about this before the tape was on—but memories of—of life in Belgium, anything else that you remember?

KELLER: Yeah, I remember going to school. I remember a few trips to the other side, to the relatives. I remember my first Belgian soldier after the war. We were at the German occupation and I remember the kids making fun of the German soldiers, and it wasn't always good. They would get a carrot and stick it up through their head, you know, their helmets. And we learned to hate that helmet. And as I say, life was pretty humdrum as far as I—yeah, I had an aunt who died on Armistice Day. So I remember the flu when it hit Belgium. And a lot of people—the—the flu in 1918—

LEVINE: 1918, uh-hmm.

KELLER: —killed people worldwide, you know, and—

LEVINE: What did you remember about it? Did you know people who were killed?

KELLER: I—I know people who were ill, among my relatives were some who were ill. But the only thing I remember was one time when we went to—to a funeral. And the road into the cemetery was one wagon after the other, because there was just a—there were hardly a place to put them.

LEVINE: Hmm.

KELLER: I remember that.

LEVINE: Was there any kind of care that could be given? Do you remember anything about what kind of care these people got when they—when they had the flu?

KELLER: Care was a thing that you did for each other. There was—there were no establishments. I don't remember if—if so, I—I don't remember if there—

they were probably were active in Belgium. But I don't remember any direct connection. I do remember when the Americans came in 1918, they brought their chuck wagons and—into Antwerp and they baked bread. And to this day, the smell of home-baked bread really brings back—but that was my first memory. We had eaten this black bread that was—you know, things are hard—were hardly fit to eat.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

KELLER: And—but you made do. I remember my mother with a loaf of bread counting the number of slices she could get out of it. Papa, the—the breadwinner, had to be the one who was kept, you know—and then with the soup, we made out. You know, we m—made it through. But it was not a happy time. I—if there was a Victory parade, and I'm sure there was in Belgium, I don't remember it. But I do remember the fireworks at night, the Victory fireworks. And to me, there has never been a fireworks like those fireworks. They were good, mind you. But they—you know, that was the best. I mean—

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Did you see soldiers much—

KELLER: Oh, yes. They—

LEVINE: —during World War—

KELLER: They were stationed and they would come—oh, yes. Another memory I have, copper was a very valuable commodity. And all the Belgians buried their copper. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Oh.

KELLER: And we had a shoehorn about this big. And as a little girl, I was already—as a child, I was already in long skirts. It was the way we were dressed. And we carried a separate little pocket under our skirts. All during the war, I carried that shoehorn. [chuckles] But they never made a bullet out of it.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

KELLER: And then, of course, we had the nice job of polishing it up when we dug it up.

LEVINE: Oh.

KELLER: And they used quite a few copper utensils in 1920 in Belgium.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

KELLER: So those things, I remember. Then, they would make periodic searches of your home. Wool was—on the blankets was another thing. And—

LEVINE: And they would take copper?

KELLER: Oh, yeah.

LEVINE: They would take wool?

KELLER: Oh, yeah. Yeah, yeah.

LEVINE: And did the soldiers ever stay in the homes of the local people?

KELLER: No, they were never b—lived with us.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KELLER: They had their own places. They would take whatever property wan—they wanted, a school or a—or a building. And no, they were never with us and they were visible. But as far as any inhuman treatment, I never saw it.

LEVINE: Oh.

KELLER: But if the kids would tease them, they would get after them. [chuckles] And—but—and it wasn't—oh, the thing is, when my sister came here she fell in love with a German.

LEVINE: Oh.

KELLER: That was a little rough but the German—his father had been in the Indian wars. So he was a very American—although his mother did not speak English.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

KELLER: They were—you know, they were not German in our terms. They were—but anyway, my husband was—Keller is a German name. He says it's Irish, that it was Kelleher at one time, and he had a grandmother whose name was Keller and a grandmother whose name was Schnitger [PH]. So the Germany's still there.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KELLER: But I long ago—I'm—I'm colorblind and I'm nationality blind.

LEVINE: Yes.

KELLER: I learned that in school.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KELLER: You learned that when you go to school in a—where you can't speak any English, what you go through before. Kids can be cruel to kids. They made fun of my food. They made fun of my clothes. They made fun of my speech. And many of them became lifelong friends.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

KELLER: So—so any—those are the things about Belgium that I remember.

LEVINE: Well, tell about your first memories that we were talking about earlier. You said you remembered something as far back as—as being two years old?

KELLER: Two. The other things had to do with food during the war.

LEVINE: Oh.

KELLER: Yeah.

LEVINE: What—

KELLER: And, you know, the—the—our home was a pleasant home. My father—my mother was always a staunch Catholic. In Belgium, and as is true here and in Italy too, the men aren't so church bound. Papa would go to the local pub on a Sunday morning and, because I—I was told I—a very—well, a wiggle worm is what they called [chuckles]—and so he took me along to the bar and parked me on the bar. And so I would sometimes empty the glasses of beer, which on Sunday afternoon made me a very docile child, and I took a nice long nap. [chuckles] I—and now that, I remember from being talked about. That has no visual—

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KELLER: —picture. But I heard about it enough, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KELLER: And Christmases were very slim. I remember two Christmas gifts two different Christmases, one in which I got a pencil box. And, you know, and then [unclear] another in which I got an orange. And I carried that orange around. Just the smell of it was, you know—

LEVINE: Hmm.

KELLER: So that, I remember. And—and those are visual, believe me.

LEVINE: Yeah.

KELLER: And—

LEVINE: And how was school? How would you compare school with when you attended in Belgium with when you came here?

KELLER: Well, they—at first, of course, I had a lay teacher here and there I had nuns who taught us our prayers. However, by the time I left, I was eight years old and I was—they were beginning to teach me French, being a bilingual country. And so I had—they were kind but I—I was learning French.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KELLER: And—

LEVINE: Could you speak Flemish?

KELLER: Oh, yeah. Well, that's what—

LEVINE: Is that what—is that what you spoke at—

KELLER: That was—that was the language I spoke.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KELLER: Yes.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KELLER: And that's why I got the job in Chicago is because I could—and all the other Belgians, the ones that sponsored my uncle now, they had come over in the early 1900s, 1910 and before that. So their children were all Americanized to the point that they no longer—and when I came, I said—we continued to get a Flemish newspaper that was printed in Detroit. But my father always wanted—and so that's how I maintained my Flemish

because, as far as teaching it to my children, I couldn't see the wisdom of teaching children Flemish because it was so little spoken. It was—it's Dutch, you know, but with a different accent. It—it has different words in it. And many of the words in the Flemish that we knew had French words in them.

LEVINE: Oh.

KELLER: Now, I did not know the—the Flemish word for umbrella when I left. But I knew [unclear] was—which is the French word for [unclear].

LEVINE: Oh.

KELLER: So throughout Flemish—especially in Antwerp, because a cosmopolitan city, there are many French terms that you do. But la—as a language, I began with, "This is a pen." You know, same kind of stuff. But we left there in October and it was just those few weeks between that I—I was into French.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KELLER: But when I got h—we had other lessons too because when we came to America, until I was in fourth grade, I didn't have to learn anything but the language, because I knew arithmetic and I loved history. And I loved geography. And so those were—you know, they were very happy, happy times to learn the language. And in two years, I had lost my accent. And my sister, who was 14 when she came, never lost hers.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh.

KELLER: It just—at a time when—I have a—a family now who have—who's—to whose benefit it was to learn Spanish. And the—the government sent them to Mexico. And there—and they took their—they could take their child along. So when they came back, and he did very well, I said, "You keep—keep speaking. Keep this language"—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

KELLER: —"with the little one, because in California most of it's Spanish now anyway."

LEVINE: Right.

KELLER: But to—if—if the language is going to be used, because in Belgium you're not educated unless you know at least three languages. One of

my cousin's children speaks five. He speaks Flemish, German, French, Italian—German, Flemish, French, Italian and—

LEVINE: English? English?

KELLER: And English. Well, that—by the time I left, that was beginning to be. After the war, they—they speak—you know, they taught English very quickly. So—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm. Let's see. [clears throat] Was it the attitude of your mother and father to have you become Americanized? Or did they—would they like to have you retain—

KELLER: No, America was—was all—as it still is today, it's the Mecca. It's the place where everybody wants to go. And the i—idea of a new start and a new beginning and a—a land where there was opportunity. My mother, after she came here, quickly became a dressmaker, and a good one.

LEVINE: Hmm.

KELLER: So when there was a Depression, sort of, in about 1922, and jobs were few, my father and one of our other relatives went to Woodburn [PH], Indiana and worked in the beet fields during the season. And when it was over, they came back to Rock Island. And they had something to show for their summer and things they'd picked up that they got work again.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KELLER: But, yes, America is everybody's dream, Janet.

LEVINE: Yeah, uh-hmm.

KELLER: And, oh, even to me, going to America, that was, oh—

LEVINE: What did you expect as an eight-year-old? Do you—can you think of [unclear]?

KELLER: I don't know. Well, I had heard only good things, you know. Say, the fact that there were women and children that were black [chuckles] never, never occurred to me.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KELLER: And—and there was no fear. Even aboard ship once, I was up—you were supposed to be in your quarters at night. But I had, as I say, being

the—oh, and every place I went, it was my duty to find the rest room, give her—eight-year-old who couldn't sit still something to do. [chuckles] And so I did. But anyway, one night I was up on top yet but I was under an eve. And I think they call them capsend [PH], the big iron things that they lay the ropes around.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KELLER: And I was sitting there on that looking over the ocean. And I heard my name being called. And it was my mother and a steward who were looking for me. Well, I—my britches got hot that day. [chuckles] But—

LEVINE: Were you in a dormitory or a cabin on the ship?

KELLER: It—it was a—it was a dormitory. Well, it was halfway between. It wasn't big enough to have many beds in it. Like the others, they were—and they were, you know, piled on top of each other. I remember once, during this bad storm, one poor old man kneeling in his upper bunk, praying and praying. And I felt so sorry for him. It was sad, you know. But it was—I say, that seasickness is something that you even—if it was only for half a day, it felt like I was seasick. I had all the—the symptoms. But my sister was quite ill. And my mother, with her—my mother wasn't ill and the baby was fine. She was breastfed and so she was—she was all right. So anyway, we made it. And my father was homesick. At—they tell of the time when we were living in Rock Island and they came back east. My mother had a sister who followed but lived in New York. And they visited her in the '39 World's Fair. And my sister tells of going—I wasn't with them but my younger sister was, whose name is up here. She was with him and she said they went to Coney Island. And my father stood there looking out over the ocean. And she said the look on his face was—she'll never forget it. And I can just predict that—that he was—he regretted, I think, coming to America.

LEVINE: Oh.

KELLER: But my—I never heard my mother express a regret. But she went back. Papa died in 1947 of heart trouble. And Mama lived until 1957. And she also had a heart problem. But not—nothing ever stopped her. And—

LEVINE: So did your father go back? [unclear]

KELLER: He never got to go back.

LEVINE: No.

KELLER: There was never enough money, you know. But after he died, there was insurance. And so she made the trip back once.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Why don't you describe your mother, her—her temperament and her personality?

KELLER: Well, I suppose in—in today's language, she wore the pants in the family.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh.

KELLER: I think that—but in such a way, it was always with family's benefit. And Papa was very much his own man but he—he—he—there are some men, and I'm not putting my—their father down, but they accept—they realize that, well, she had more of a business head, what with her sewing and everything. She learned English. And my younger sister taught my mother English, so to speak, because she'd go out and play with—with playmates. She'd come in and Mama would—and she'd say—and Mama would say, "Well, what is that? What did she"—Phyllis would translate it for her. So she spoke Flemish before—of course, me being in school and knowing that it was filling up, the one thing I did was change her name when she went to school. Her name is Philamina. And I had Hortense made so much fun of that I said, "You're going to be—your name is going to be Phyllis." When my father got his citizenship papers, they advised him it would be—if he wanted to, he could change Vankrunklesven. And he said, "Nope. I've got three daughters. Their name is going to go anyway. I'm going to live with it." So it st—now, my daughters, or my children went after your mother's maiden name. [chuckles] That stuck with them and I hear about that every once in a while. So, well—

LEVINE: Well, how about y—your—now, what did I want to ask you—your—had—you've never had any other n—you never changed Hortense?

KELLER: No.

LEVINE: No.

KELLER: Had I known, I would have asked to have it changed.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

KELLER: But even now, [chuckles] oh, my family here, we went down through southern part of the country in the Carolinas. And I walked into a restaurant there and the waitress had the name Hortense. I said there—and she had heard my name. Well, hey, we were friends right away—

LEVINE: Immediately. [chuckles]

KELLER: —just because we had similar names. [chuckles] Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KELLER: It's a burden, you know, and if you try—I didn't want Phyllis to go through what I went through, although she spoke good English, you know, when she went to school. But I—it was one thing, I thought, 'Well, they won't do it to her.' And the Vankrunkelsven, God knows was bad enough. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Well, it sounds like the—the children gave you a hard time with the [unclear].

KELLER: In the beginning, yes. Yes, they did. They made fun of my lunch and to the degree, and that hurt me because it had to do with food again. They were making fun of my lunch. And I went home and I cried to one of my cousins, who could write English. And she wrote a note to the nun and said that Hortense is being made fun of. And they made fun of—well, the nun sent me home because I wore knee-length stockings. Belgium is not as cold as Illinois. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Oh.

KELLER: And they made me go home to put on long stockings and—but that was for my benefit. But these kids when, you know—and so what the nun did, she gathered up all the kids and marched them into the cloakroom. Do you know what a cloa—do you remember what a cloakroom—

LEVINE: [unclear].

KELLER: No. And she gave them a lecture. Well, the kids came out and each one of them took a delicacy out of their lunch and put it on my desk. I was never so angry in my life. I said, "I don't want their stuff. I want them to stop making fun of me." And so, the poor kids—you know. And the poor nun—I—I gave her a hard time. Anyway, I kept in touch with the nun and she—she remembered that incident very well. She s—"I'm trying to help." I said, "I know you were but I wasn't ready to receive it." [chuckles] So—

LEVINE: So were you—you were bringing Belgian food, I—I take it.

KELLER: Oh, well, yeah.

LEVINE: Something that the children were—

KELLER: Yeah, and the funny thing is, I don't—some people will ask me for a recipe. My mother never had a recipe, so much of this and so much of that. And we—we had—Belgium, being on the coast, during the war even we had a lot of mussels and—and fish were more readily available than meat. Belgians, to this day, eat horsemeat, you know.

LEVINE: Hmm.

KELLER: And when I took—my husband was with me on one trip to Bel—I hope that's turned off.

LEVINE: No, it's on.

KELLER: Oh, dear. Took me—took to Belgium. And so we were having lunch and she had the horsemeat. But it was in that form again, like—

LEVINE: Like a steak?

KELLER: Dried beef, you know, it—

LEVINE: Oh.

KELLER: And so I said to them in Flemish, "Don't say anything to Frank. I want him to taste this before we [unclear]." So we had it, you know. "Oh, by the way, Frank. How did you like that meat?" He said it was good! I said, "Do you know what you were eating?" And he said—I said, "Horsemeat." "Oh," he said—well, he said, "It was all right. All right." [laughter] But to this day, when I went back to Belgium, [unclear] time we ate out I'd order mussels. To this day, if I mean a restaurant that has mussels, so, you know, I—

LEVINE: Yeah.

KELLER: But in part of that, and—and you know, you—as I say, a recipe. My mother made raisin bread that was out of this world. Even Jim remarked about it once that he was in Southern California and stopped, and they got some raisin bread and he brought me a loaf. He said, "Now, doesn't this taste like Grandma's?" [laughter] But—and she lived with us before she died. Papa died and she lived with us for the 10 years between. So we had a lot of chance—and she—they didn't have variety but they—they made, like, stew and things like that, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

KELLER: But I remember the fish better than I remember the meat.

LEVINE: Yeah, uh-huh. And did your mother and father hold on to any other cultural Belgian culture?

KELLER: We belonged to—we belonged to the Belgian clubs. And so our social life was very—but otherwise, I—it—this is—there were so many of us in—in Rock Island and in Chicago with the club that their—their social life was mostly with the Belgians.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh.

KELLER: So.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And then did they become citizens?

KELLER: Oh, yes.

LEVINE: Both of them?

KELLER: Oh, yes. And I had—I was going to bring my citizenship papers. I'm citizen because of my father.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

KELLER: And I—as I say, if I thought these things were important, I have the manifest and the—and I have my marriage license, which shows my change of names.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh.

KELLER: So, yeah.

LEVINE: Well, we're getting near the end of this tape. And I think I'd like to ask you a few more questions. So if you don't mind—

KELLER: No.

LEVINE: —I'll put on another one.

KELLER: No, no, no.

LEVINE: If that's okay.

KELLER: Oh, haven't I bored you enough?

LEVINE: Oh, no. You—you have a wonderful memory and this is really interesting.

KELLER: Well, things that are important. As I say, I love to travel and I—and I've always been nosy. You know, [chuckles] curious and I wonder why and—

LEVINE: Wow. Nosy is one way to say it.

KELLER: Yeah.

LEVINE: Curious is another. [chuckles]

KELLER: Yeah.

LEVINE: Okay. I'm going to end tape one here and we'll start tape two.

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE B]

[BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE A]

LEVINE: —at the beginning now of tape two. And maybe we could just—reflecting back on coming here as an eight-year-old, do you think that that experience of changing worlds, so to speak—do you think that had an impact on you, on your personality, on the way you think about things?

KELLER: Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

LEVINE: How so?

KELLER: I—I can see two si—two sides of a story better, that there—you know, the—your viewpoint and my viewpoint and the right viewpoint. I—I think that perhaps, if I can claim anything, I think I'm more broadminded because of it.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, because—because you've seen so many differences? Is that what you mean? Is that what—what accounts for it or h—how—how do you mean? Because you mentioned earlier that the children used to tease you and then they became your—your friends.

KELLER: Uh-huh.

LEVINE: Is—is that part of that whole thing?

KELLER: Yes, yes. When I knew them better, you don't hold the one big thing—you—when they did so many kindnesses. And we got along so well—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

KELLER: —that—and I'm—I'm sure that, you know, that there are two sides to a story that, as much as I disliked them for what they did, it didn't stay. It didn't stay. When they became my friends, you could, you know, there are some people who can't—can't change their mind. I think the ability to change my mind is probably some of it.

LEVINE: Well, that's interesting because you even mentioned about the German soldier.

KELLER: Yeah, right, right.

LEVINE: And that—and that was a—

KELLER: And I remembered that then, you know. No, they weren't all bad, you know. I mean, that was the general opinion. They—my folks were pleased as punch that I got through with those shoes. So that was—but, yeah, it—and—and America was—also had a—always had a halo over it, you know. And while I was Belgian here, I was very American too, believe me.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KELLER: Always have been.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

KELLER: And—

LEVINE: What would you say were the hi—was the highpoint of your life? I mean, as far as satisfactions that you've had over the course of your life? What—what things do you remember as most satisfying?

KELLER: My wedding.

LEVINE: Was it a big wedding?

KELLER: No, it was—it was a church wedding and the—there was—I was married in 1935 so there wasn't much celebrating. My mama had a—fixed the ham dinner for the closer relatives and stuff. And on my honeymoon, I took my attendants and two companions. We took them along and went from Chicago to Benton Harbor in St. Joe, Michigan for our honeymoon and came back the same day and had champagne in our—we'd rented a

studio in—in Chicago. And, yeah, my wedding was certainly a highlight. I think the birth of my children.

LEVINE: Why don't you say your children's names in their order?

KELLER: Cath—Ja—James Anthony is the—the boy that you met.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

KELLER: He is 66.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KELLER: And then came Rob—or James Anthony and then seven years later, Robert Gamaris [PH]. I wanted to keep the family names. Then my mother's mother's name is Julia. So we all have—all of the children have Julia or Julian in the family. Then came my first daughter, Julia and then came my youngest daughter, Catherine [PH], who is also named after a—a—a grandmother, whose name was Joanna Catherine.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

KELLER: And so I've tried to keep family names, you know. But they're—they all have good, solid American names. They're not going to make fun of their names. And, oh, yeah. Well, when we—the different moves we made were always a thrill. A new—a new beginning, you know, and, yeah, they were—and—

LEVINE: Do you think you were more apt to be able to pick up and move because you had made such a big move when you were a child?

KELLER: I think so. I think—now, my younger sister has lived in the same house for 55 years. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh. So different people—

KELLER: And i—it must be in our genes and then I take it from my dad, because he was a seaman.

LEVINE: Yeah.

KELLER: And—but the others, none of them have a—they all love to travel. My younger—well, my—my two daughters, who now both live in California, went to New Orleans together here just this—a few weeks ago. And they love to travel. So the love of—and my mother had the love of travel too.

She [chuckles] used to say, “I married a sailor but a lot of good it did me.” [laughter] So—

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KELLER: Yeah, and—and I’m not afraid to take a chance sometimes either. I think—and part of that is all mixed up from that background, don’t you think?

LEVINE: I—it sounds like it.

KELLER: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Well, how about the Depression? Can you say any more about how the Depression affected you and your family—

KELLER: Well—

LEVINE: —during the ‘30s?

KELLER: The Depression—I worked all through it. I started to work for the doctors in 1930 and worked for them until we moved to Colorado in 1941. My father was out of work, which was one of the reasons, since he was out of work in Rock Island anyway, that I had them move to Chicago with me. And when he was here, he worked on the WPA.

LEVINE: Oh.

KELLER: So—

LEVINE: What did he do on that?

KELLER: Street work.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KELLER: They worked on the bad streets and things. He worked on the streets. And again, there were rough times but we owned our own home, which was a big thing. And you needed some—and—and my mother could—clothing was never a problem because sh—she, you know, could make things over.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

KELLER: And I remember her. She used to knit my father stockings. And when they got holey, she'd just rip them out and start over [chuckles] and had a brand new pair of socks.

LEVINE: Oh.

KELLER: You know, the worn part was gone. And the economies that were practiced were—well, she was a clever woman. She could do a lot with a little. Believe me.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm.

KELLER: And then I was working for the doctors. And I had a little studio apartment. Now, I couldn't send much. My wages were $18 a week. But I was able to send home $5, maybe not every week but, you know, and as often as I could. And I would tailor my living to—you know, to—as cheaply as I could.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KELLER: And—but everybody—everybody I knew felt the Depression. I—my older sister—we didn't know this until after it was over—lived on rice for three or four days at a time. Now, if she had come home, Mom would have given her the shirt off her back, you know. But she was proud.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KELLER: And we all made it through. And you make it through and I think one bad thing—or one good thing about a bad Depression is you sure appre—appreciate the good stuff a lot more.

LEVINE: Right.

KELLER: Yeah.

LEVINE: Well, you had a hard time during World War I.

KELLER: Yeah.

LEVINE: And then again—

KELLER: As a child, the hard part didn't—wasn't that—you know, it—I—I never went—I was hungry but that—you know, and the memory certainly has stayed with me. But I mean, actually remembering actual hunger, I don't remember that much. I mean, I think that was one of the things,

mercifully, that [chuckles] what—what I did get made more of an impression than what I didn't get.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

KELLER: So—

LEVINE: And how about World War II when you were in this country?

KELLER: Oh, well.

LEVINE: Did—what were the effects of that on you and your family?

KELLER: The effect of that—well, like everybody else, let's see.

LEVINE: Do you remember, like, when we were building up to World War II and—

KELLER: Oh, I remember Pearl Harbor Day.

LEVINE: What—

KELLER: Very much. We were in church in Denver. And ordinarily, they never make lay people s—talks. The monsignor came and the mass was going on. And the monsignor came out. And the m—they stopped the mass and he said, "Pearl Harbor has been affected—has been hit by"—you know. And we were stunned. Oh, so stunned. Then the—the effort was, I had two boys who—I lived close to Fitzsimmons [PH] General Hospital in Denver. It is in Aurora. We lived in Aurora. And one boy lived with us. I had a spare bedroom. And another boy had his meals with us then. They both worked at Fitzsimmons. They both went the very next day to—to sign up.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

KELLER: And Bill Wurley [PH] went into the Navy and the other fellow went into the Army the very first chance they had. And then I had wives who were visiting their husbands at Fitzsimmons. I—I had—I made room. Because I had a spare room, I made room f—for them and met some very nice people.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

KELLER: And so in hard times, people can hit—you know, together.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm.

KELLER: And you learn something from the different people you—you're with. The one girl did needlepoint and got me interested in needlepoint. And my mother tried to get me interested in sewing but I—whatever I did, I had to—hand sewing. I know how to hand—hand stitch by hand. You know, if I didn't do it right, and it had to be done over, well, everything had to be done over to the—and sewing—to the degree that a sewing machine was a [unclear]. And first thing I bought after I was married was a sewing machine. [chuckles] Tell me—tell me the rationale there. [laughter] And I—I like sewing but I like handwork a lot more. I be—I learned to quilt along the way.

LEVINE: Oh.

KELLER: And that handwork—hand needlework. I got a trigger finger from crocheting too much. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Oh. [laughs]

KELLER: But, you know, it—and life is a wonderful experience.

LEVINE: Yeah. Well, that's great. Well, now, how about when the war was over? Do you remember that, when the—when the—when the World War II ended?

KELLER: I—oh, yeah. There was much rejoicing, as I recall, with specific daily occurrences, I don't know. It was that the rationing would be over. The rationing was all—you know, you were rationed. Everything was rationed.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

KELLER: And—and even there, you made out that if you had something that you—you didn't need or could do without, you—somebody who could would get it. And we—people help each other in hard times. That's the—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

KELLER: —the one thing you learn when times are tough. Look at the way New York came together after the tragedy.

LEVINE: I was just going to ask you about that. Wh—what—do you remember your reaction or response when that happened?

KELLER: I—it was early in the morning and my two—my son-in-law and my daughter were just setting out to work. And I was coming downstairs for breakfast, and I fixed my own. And they were staring at the TV. And my

daughter looked at me. She said, “Have you heard?” I said, “Heard what?” She said, “They bombed the big center in New York.” They were just—stood there. They couldn’t move. And I stood there with them. I—I couldn’t believe it, that beautiful, beautiful building. I go by now. The empty space, to this day, gets to me.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

KELLER: So, yes, it—it had an impact and it—on everybody. And I have a—a picture. It happened that the month before it happened I was here, and my older sis—daughter came to pick me up. And we were at Ellis Island and at Liberty Island.

LEVINE: Oh.

KELLER: We had—the kids want to know their source, you know. [chuckles] And I took a picture of—of the skyline of New York. There are wonderful pictures that you can get, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

KELLER: And then I said to Julia, you know, “A picture’s always better when it’s personal. Get in and let me take this picture.” I took her picture. And I have the two pictures before and after. And the—the tower was hit—the picture was taken around the 21st of August and the tower went on the 11th, within weeks of the time it fell. But I’ve got them both. And they’ve made a big impression on a lot of people, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, yeah.

KELLER: So.

LEVINE: Yeah.

KELLER: They’re among my precious possessions.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KELLER: Yeah.

LEVINE: Okay. Let’s see. Well, this has been just the most wonderful interview. I thank you so much.

KELLER: Really?

LEVINE: And one—oh, yes. You're delightful. Is there anything else you can think of about coming here, living out your life here, anything else that you would like to say in closing?

KELLER: Uh-huh. Well, going back to Belgium was a—a—all through the years, I had had this dream of going back to Belgium. That's my father in me, I'm sure.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KELLER: And each time I would get to the door, I would be at the door and I'd wake up. I never got to finish the dream. So when—when Frank and I were going to Belgium, I had wrote about this dream to one of my cousins. And so, when I got back—[unclear] got to her house, she said, "The door is open." [chuckles] So, yeah.

LEVINE: Wow.

KELLER: And they were so kind and they're wonderful people. So—and—

LEVINE: Well, I want to say thank you so much and—

KELLER: Well, I—for what it's worth, I've sure been a blabbermouth. I—I should [chuckles]—

LEVINE: No, you're—you're the—you're the kind of person that this whole museum is—is devoted to.

KELLER: I'm sure. I'm sure.

LEVINE: And so it's wonderful to get your story.

KELLER: That's what I thought. What can an eight-year-old contribute? Really, is the way I felt [unclear].

LEVINE: But look, all you had to say and—and then now this will become a part of history. And I thank you very much.

KELLER: Well, I'm proud to be a part of history. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Good. [chuckles] Okay.

KELLER: Oh, my goodness.

LEVINE: Well, I've been speaking with Hortense Keller and this is Janet Levine for National Park Service and I'm signing off.

[END OF INTERVIEW]