

**EI-1419**

**EVELYN TOMIAK**

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**AGE AT TIME OF INTERVIEW: 84**

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LEVINE: Today is May the 24<sup>th</sup>, which happens to be the eighty-fourth birthday of Evelyn Tomiak, who was born May Evelyn Johnson, and we're going to put that with an E-N on the end—

TOMIAK: Yeah.

LEVINE: --and an O-N on the end, for her mother who was Norwegian, and her father who was Swedish.

TOMIAK: I just found that out! [Laughs]

LEVINE: There you go! [Laughs] Okay, and she came here—

TOMIAK: From Lillistrom.

LEVINE: --from Norway.

TOMIAK: Lillistrom.

LEVINE: Oh, great.

TOMIAK: Yeah, Lillistrom is the town I was born in. I think it's L-I-L-L-I-S-T-R-O-M.

LEVINE: Lillistrom, Norway.

TOMIAK: Yeah.

LEVINE: She came here in 1926 when she was four years of age.

TOMIAK: Yeah, four and a half.

LEVINE: Four and a half.

TOMIAK: May, and I came, this was December 19<sup>th</sup>, we landed.

LEVINE: Oh, great. Okay, so December 19<sup>th</sup>, 1926 is when you landed--?

TOMIAK: Yes.

LEVINE: --in New York? Okay, and this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. Okay, if we could start. You were born in Lillistrom, Norway, and what date were you born?

TOMIAK: May 24<sup>th</sup>, 1922.

LEVINE: Okay, and did you live in Lillistrom right up until you left?

TOMIAK: As far as I remember, yes.

LEVINE: Okay, and what was your mother's name?

TOMIAK: Selma Agnes Marie Sward, S-W-A-R-D, Johnsen. No, excuse me—Gulbrenson. Sward was her father's name.

LEVINE: Okay.

TOMIAK: But I think my grandmother remarried, and then that name was Gulbrenson.

LEVINE: How would you spell that one?

TOMIAK: G-U-L-B-R—Gulbron—B-R-E-N-S-O-N.

LEVINE: Okay, and so she took her stepfather's last name? Is that--?

TOMIAK: I think so, but I don't truthfully—I think I knew it later, but I don't remember if it said so on the—

LEVINE: On the manifest?

TOMIAK: Yeah, and the—well, you know, the—

LEVINE: Any paperwork—

TOMIAK: --the visas that you came over with. You know, the passport.

LEVINE: Okay. Okay, and your father—what was his name?

TOMIAK: Eugene--Alshane. Alshane, you say in Norwegian. Eugene Norman Clifford, I think, Johnson.

LEVINE: Johnson. They seem to have a lot of names! [Laughs]

TOMIAK: Well, one was named for one person, the other one was named for the other person.

LEVINE: Yeah, uh-huh.

TOMIAK: So that's the reason. Every—I have so many Selma's in my family, that you'd be surprised how many Selma's there are.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

TOMIAK: My aunt, when we came over, we went to her house. We called her Tante, Aunt. But her name was really Selma something—Ergens. Whereas, when her son, his wife had children, they all had their names, but every middle name was Selma.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh.

TOMIAK: So I guess they liked the name Selma, or felt they better name it after the mother-in-law! I'm not sure.

LEVINE: Well now, did you have brothers and sisters when you were in Norway?

TOMIAK: Yes, I had my brother Roy, who never came to this country.

LEVINE: Oh!

TOMIAK: And still hasn't come, and he's still there!

LEVINE: Wow! And how old—?

TOMIAK: He's eighteen months older than me.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

TOMIAK: And my sister—oh, it's such a complicated—my sister Vivian and my sister Sonya grew up in Sweden, but were born in Brooklyn.

LEVINE: Oh.

TOMIAK: And my brother was born in Norway, but he grew up in Sweden, with my mother's mother, Bestemor. But you see, my two sisters were born during the Depression. My older sister, at that time, was between three and four, so she went to my Tante's house. My sister Vivian, who was only eighteen months old, went with someone we called my crazy cousin Mary! [Laughs] My crazy cousin Mary—oh, no, my Tante—finally told my mother—and they were not old, but they were a little elderly at the time, around fifty, I guess. And they couldn't cope with a three, four year old! So my mother had to get her back. Now my mother didn't have any place for them, because she was working, so she took my sister Sonya and put her on the boat in charge of the nurse, paid her, to watch my sister 'til she got to Sweden. A year later, a year and a half—I'm not sure of the time there, but fairly close—my cousin Mary brought Vivian back, and said, "I can't take care of an infant," you know, a baby. So my father, who was not feeling well at the time—he never was well, all his whole life, almost—took her on the boat, and went back to Bestemor, who was then in Sweden. And so Roy, who never left, Vivian, and Sonya all grew up together. Vivian married later on, came to America. And so my sister Vivian—I just saw her at the christening—she lives in Massachusetts. But Sonya and Roy still live in Sweden.

LEVINE: In Sweden, uh-huh.

TOMIAK: And, since we didn't have money, my sister Eleanor and I went to a children's home in Spring Valley New York—very nice place. It was called Lakeside School. It was run by the Gould Foundation, Edwin Gould.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

TOMIAK: You know, at that time the Rockefeller's had money, the Gould's had money, etcetera. And he was a philanthropist, I guess you'd call it.

LEVINE: Yes, uh-huh.

TOMIAK: He established children's homes and camps. And I was lucky. The one that I went to was his best.

LEVINE: Wow.

TOMIAK: And it was very nice. I stayed there nine years.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, so it was—were there a lot of children there?

TOMIAK: I think we had up to about a hundred. I'm not sure, but I think about a hundred.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

TOMIAK: We had three main cottages for the younger ones, the middle ones, and then as we got toward high school we went to the Gould Cottage, yeah.

LEVINE: I see. Oh, wow. Well, I'd like to talk about that, but let's start first at the beginning. Do you have any memories—

TOMIAK: Of the boat?

LEVINE: --of Lillistrom or Norway at all?

TOMIAK: Of Lillistrom itself, I can—I don't remember. They tell me I skied; I don't remember. They put me on skis—that's a better way. I only remember, mm, I would say some snow. I remember some barns. But I don't really remember anything else about that. Now my mother told me I walked from her house to my Bestemor's house, my grandmother's house, which wasn't far away, to get some eggs because I loved eggs! [Laughs] But that's all I remember, you know, really. I was too little!

LEVINE: You were too young. Do you remember your grandmother at all?

TOMIAK: Only because about fifty years ago, fifty-five years ago, she came for the first visit to Brooklyn. And we met her then. But I did go to Sweden, because my husband was stationed in Germany. So when my two sisters, Eleanor and Vivian, went to Sweden where my sister Sonya and brother Roy was, I came up from—my husband drove us up from Germany with my two children.

LEVINE: Oh, that must have been—

TOMIAK: And we all met, yeah. And then from Sweden we went to Norway. But to this day, five of us have never been together. Because my sister Sonya had the two children, so she had to stay back in Sweden, where my other two sisters and myself, we went to Norway to visit.

LEVINE: I see.

TOMIAK: And there I saw my father again for the first time.

LEVINE: Okay, well now, when you came here in 1926, was your father already here?

TOMIAK: No, he was on the ship with us.

LEVINE: Who traveled with you?

TOMIAK: My mother, my father, my sister Eleanor, and me.

LEVINE: Okay, and did your mother or father ever tell you why they decided to come here when they did?

TOMIAK: Yes. I guess times didn't look as good for them in Sweden or Norway as-- Tante's children used to come for a visit to Norway, and my mother would see them doing handstands, you know, on the grass. And she said just money—change—fell out of their pocket, and that looked so good! And my mother told my father, "Boy, they must have good times over there!" So because my aunt said she would accept us if when we came off the boat, they decided to come to America.

LEVINE: And your aunt was whose sister? Your mother's?

TOMIAK: It was my grandmother's sister, Tante, yeah.

LEVINE: Your grandmother's sister, so it was your great aunt?

TOMIAK: Great aunt, I guess. Well, my aunt. I don't know who it was, but it was—we called her Tante, and that's all we called her.

LEVINE: Right. Well now, you said your father was not a well man?

TOMIAK: Well, I have—it's hereditary—from my father I got it. I don't know how far back it goes. I really have what's called essential tremors. It's a real disease.

LEVINE: Huh.

TOMIAK: It is—I get like a newspaper all the time, *The Essential Tremor Report*. More people in America have essential tremor than Parkinson's, but because nobody famous, like Ali and J. Fox, you know, has the disease—even Katherine Hepburn had it in her neck.

LEVINE: Oh, is that what she had?

TOMIAK: Remember she used to shake?

LEVINE: Yeah, sure, uh-huh.

TOMIAK: She was that. But I have it in my hand, see? This one's the worst. But I could sit here for an hour, and if I didn't move my hands you wouldn't maybe know. Whereas Parkinson's, they're moving all the time. So he told me when I saw him in Norway—and I didn't have it then. I was in my sixties someplace. He said he was sitting at the kitchen table, and he told my mother that he felt like—I never felt this—like a cat scratched him. And my mother said, "Well, we have no cats in here." We had two rooms; we had no cats! And from that day on, he just progressively got a little worse.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

TOMIAK: And finally he—well, you know, when you're sickly and you're an immigrant, there's no place. Who wants to hire you? My mother—we stayed at Tante's for a while; I don't know how long. But I do know this: my mother got a job right away in a Chinese laundry. And I said, "How could you do that? You don't speak Chinese." She said, "No, and he didn't speak English!" [Laughs] So he just showed her how, on these big rollers, how to do the sheets, and how to fold them, and how to iron. So she—that was her first job. And she did—like she'd go and take care of children in a house, or do the housework in another place. I mean, all that, but after all these houseworks—well, the last place she went they had two little boys. That's my stepbrothers. I saw one of them the other day. She took care of these two little boys, and did this small apartment for a man whose wife had TB. And she was dead in about a year, and my mother stayed there for quite a while. But she decided to go to school, night school, and learn to read, write, and speak English better. And that's what she did. And but, of course we, especially me who was older, used to come home from school. I mean, they threw me in school. What did I know of English? I guess I learned something from somebody. But I would tell my mother the words that we learned in school.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh.

TOMIAK: Yeah.

LEVINE: Well, your mother sounds like she was spunky.

TOMIAK: Oh, she was a marvelous woman. I mean that.

LEVINE: Tell me about her personality, her temperament—what she was like with you when you were growing up.

TOMIAK: Soft. Soft.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

TOMIAK: Very caring, loving to all get out. Very seldom a harsh word. If she didn't like something, she'd say, "Ish, Evelyn, why did you do that?" or "Ish, how could you do that?" Or, you know, but never, never, never spanked us—never anything. And when we were at the children's home, we went home at Christmas, and stayed at Tante's house for the first few years—and Easter. But when she stayed—this man who had the wife, Eng—she married him years and years later. I mean, years later! She got married the same year I did, in '44, so that was quite a few years later! Then she brought us to Ralph's house. We had the studio couch, you know, and she had one bedroom. And he and the boys—they were little—had another. So we felt better there than at my aunt's.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

TOMIAK: You know, because my uncle, he kind of scared me, because he had half an arm. Oh, that's there. And he had gotten that cut off on the railroad in Norway or Sweden, running away from the cops! [Laughs]

LEVINE: [Laughs]

TOMIAK: So that's all I knew about him. But you know, they kind of belittled my mother a little, because my mother came home—I still remember this. My mother came home. I didn't hear her tell them, "I've got a job," but I heard—we lived in the basement. Then came the kitchen, you know, and the parlor, and upstairs was their bedroom. But I heard her downstairs in the kitchen, calling upstairs, "Papa, Agnes got her job!" They thought that was a riot! But my mother worked! She was a waitress; she was everything, just to get money. There was no handouts! But the sad part about my mother, why we really went to the children's home—I was nine then, and my sister came with me; she was seven. My mother had two mastoid operations on one ear, one on the other, appendectomy, and two kids, all in the space of—she came in '27, was it, we came? In December—

LEVINE: Right.

TOMIAK: --'26. And we went to the children's home in '31. That's five years later. And in that space, she had—and you know, my father had taken, you know, Vivian, and finally Sonya, you know, they went. So Eleanor and I went up to Lakeside. So you know, my mother tried to improve herself at every turn. And I still remember, she had a lot of Norwegian friends, and four or five of them would meet for cards maybe once a month, you know. I don't know if

they played bridge or what. But I still remember, one night she said, “Now, we’re all just going to speak English. No Norwegian. Let’s practice it.” And they did that! You know, they wanted to be Americanized, and they were. And when my mother died, she was working in an office, downtown New York.

LEVINE: Wonderful.

TOMIAK: So she really improved herself!

LEVINE: Yeah, she did.

TOMIAK: Yeah.

LEVINE: Now, was your father ever able—did he work in Norway?

TOMIAK: Let me think. I haven’t heard that question in a long time. I truly—I have heard it. It doesn’t come to mind. But my mother was an—she went to be a milliner, a hat maker. She did that. She learned to do that. In fact, when we finally all lived together, which wasn’t very long, and it was way after I graduated out of high school, my girlfriends, when they came to visit me, she would make them all cute little hats, if they bought just the basic round, or whatever shape they wanted. Oh! She would put flowers on them, and ribbons on them. They thought she was marvelous, you know, for doing that for them!

LEVINE: Yeah.

TOMIAK: And we stayed at Tante’s until my mother finally got a waitress job, and then we only had a room. But my mother kept my sister and I right near the restaurant, downstairs. So she knew where we were.

LEVINE: I see.

TOMIAK: Yeah, she knew where we were. And my father was long gone, yeah.

LEVINE: So do you have any idea where you left from, when you left Europe?

TOMIAK: No, but I think from what—December 1<sup>st</sup>, it seems to me, that Pam told me we left whatever town. I don’t think it was Lillistrom. And it took her, took them up ‘til December 9<sup>th</sup> to leave from Bergen. Or maybe they left from Bergen, Norway. But I think we left from Bergen to get on the ship.

LEVINE: I see.

TOMIAK: I think so.

LEVINE: And the actual—do you remember the name of the ship?

TOMIAK: Bergensfjord.

LEVINE: Oh, Bergensfjord. Okay, I'm wondering—oh, okay. So that must be—Bergensfjord.

TOMIAK: Like Bergen, B-E-R-G-E-N-F-J, I think, fjord, F-J-O-R-D, yeah.

LEVINE: Okay. All right, and was there any family stories about the voyage?

TOMIAK: Not really. The only—I remember water, so I must have gone on deck sometime, because we were way down in steerage. The only thing I remember, and it must have been a farewell party. I must have thought later it was a Christmas party, but when I knew I got off the boat, on the 26<sup>th</sup> or whatever it was, of December, 19<sup>th</sup>, whenever, then it probably was a farewell party. I knew that, and I knew a doctor, my mother, my father, my sister and I went in a separate room and he examined us.

LEVINE: On the ship?

TOMIAK: On the ship, as far as—or maybe we came off, but it was in a room. It wasn't in a line like I've seen people here. I still remember my mother and father there, and we were by ourselves. And I asked my mother years later—I didn't think anything of it then—"What were we being examined for?" And she said, "Well, they have to see if you have a disease. And they have to see, you know, if you've got TB." You know, she just said you had to be all right.

LEVINE: Do you know, by any chance, if the family was examined before you left Norway?

TOMIAK: That I don't remember.

LEVINE: You see—

TOMIAK: It might have been there. I thought it was after we got off the ship. But I was only a little girl. All I remember is we were examined. So it might have been then; I don't remember.

LEVINE: Okay.

TOMIAK: I don't remember getting off the ship. I don't remember going to my aunt's house—I don't think so. Although I know when we walked in the door--and how we got there I'm not sure--she called her children, who were older than

us, that Agnes and the children were there. So that's all I remember, really. And then we moved to Fifty-Second Street. My mother finally got an apart—well, it was a brownstone. It's still there.

LEVINE: In Brooklyn?

TOMIAK: Still in Brooklyn. Fifty-Second Street. I can see the houses plain as day.

LEVINE: Describe it.

TOMIAK: Well, it was 352 Fifty-Second Street, and it was brownstone houses. And my mother and father got free rent for taking care of boarding—I mean, what do you call it, when people came to get rooms?

LEVINE: Lodging.

TOMIAK: That we would, you know, encourage them to rent rooms there. And it must have had one more floor. But, when my—I never remember my father at all doing anything. But I do remember [pause] my mother going to the hospital with these operations. I'm sure my father must have tended to us somehow, but I do remember after I had my sister in the Sonya in the carriage, my sister Vivian in the carriage, my sister Eleanor by my side—that was Jerry's grandmother. Yeah, that's his mother. Eleanor by my side, we'd go up to the Lutheran Church in Brooklyn. I'd walk up there with the kids, having like a lunch pail, and we'd get lapskaus in it. That's like a Norwegian stew. And I'd get that, and I'd go home, and we'd eat it.

LEVINE: Wow.

TOMIAK: Do you know, when you have no money? I mean, I'm talking—there wasn't really much welfare in those days. And the church, who saw me come all the time, and I used to have to be absent from school a lot of times. I rented the rooms. And, washed down the stairs. And one of the roomers that—a person was woman named Clara, who was our friend for years to come. And she's the one who told me—I don't really remember it. She said, "When I asked you if you had a room to rent," she said I said, "Oh, yes, yes! You come up these stairs, and we can arrange that room." I was so excited that I was doing something for my mother! "And you can have the bed anyplace you want. It was just a rented room. I just wanted to embellish it, you know? And she said, "I always remember this little girl working so hard to rent me a room!" And she's the one who told me, because I didn't remember it, you know. But I do remember I had to wash down the stairs, and clean the hallway. You know, only a few things I remember, but I never resented it—never.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

TOMIAK: Even when I went to the children's home. I can still remember shortly after I got there, maybe a few months after—maybe a year after—I got into bed, and I was happy. And I thought, "Yes, I'm happy because my mother doesn't have to worry about us anymore," you know. "Where we are, what we're going to wear, what we're going to eat," because all that was taken care of. We were a welfare—like, they paid for us. My mother didn't pay. Some people paid like a hundred dollars a month to be there. We hadn't seen a hundred dollars in years!

LEVINE: Now, were you with your sister in the home?

TOMIAK: Eleanor came with me, yes.

LEVINE: So you were both in Spring Valley?

TOMIAK: Spring Valley, yeah. That was—have you ever been to Spring Valley?

LEVINE: No.

TOMIAK: That's a nice town. Used to be a very nice town. I don't know how it is now.

LEVINE: Yeah. So it sounds like for your father, coming here was not a successful venture?

TOMIAK: No, it wasn't, because he got sick shortly after. And even my mother and father, or just my father, told me that. But I think my mother also said—because I think I asked her one time, "What was my father?" I never called him Dad or anything. But, "What was my father doing all this time?" And she said, "He was sick." And because he couldn't get work, that's why he brought Vivian over. That's why my mother had to leave that place, and get other work, you know.

LEVINE: Mm-hm.

TOMIAK: So she worked for this Mr. Eng, E-N-G, with the two little boys, and his wife died of TB. And she more or less kind of, you know, raised them, you know, up.

LEVINE: I see.

TOMIAK: So that's—and we'd go home there, like I said, for vacations. That's really all I remember of that, yeah.

LEVINE: Well, it sounds as though it was a difficult situation, but your sympathy and empathy was with your mother the whole time?

TOMIAK: Yes! Even though I was little, it always was!

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

TOMIAK: It's so funny! I mean, now my sister Eleanor, she'd say, "Oh, Evelyn, I want to go home." You know, and I'd say, "Well, Mom will come visit you soon. Don't worry about it." I mean, I had to take care of her, you know. But even at that, I don't know. I just didn't resent it, because I knew it was helping my mother. So you know my mother made a very big impression on me. But she came to see us once a month, all through those nine years. And we went home twice a year, except in my junior year in high school and senior year in high school. We had our own grammar school on the grounds. We went to the high school of the town when we went to high school, and that's where I met my husband, in high school. But it was a beautiful—it's country up there.

LEVINE: When you said to yourself as a little girl, "I'm happy,"—

TOMIAK: Because in my mind I knew my mother was relieved. She didn't have these worries.

LEVINE: Now how old were you when you--?

TOMIAK: Nine, when I went.

LEVINE: You were nine when you went, and it was about a year later that you realized--?

TOMIAK: Well, somewhere between nine and ten, I realized—I don't know. I guess it was a nice evening, got into a nice, clean bed. And I still remember it was kind of light out, but it was eight o'clock, bedtime, come rain or shine, up there. And I just was so contented, because I knew I had it nice. It was a great place.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

TOMIAK: It was a great place. We had rules, regulations, and punishment was never hitting. It was: you can't have candy. We got six pieces of hard candy twice a week, and as we got—and then you couldn't have candy one of those days. Or, when we got older, we saw one movie a month, then we couldn't go to the movies that month. So that was the extent of punishment. Or, when we were littler, we had to sit on the steps going

down to the living room, you know. But that's no real punishment. We sat there until suppertime; then it was over with, yeah.

LEVINE: Well, I guess you had experienced being without, so that when you went to the home--?

TOMIAK: I had.

LEVINE: Yeah.

TOMIAK: I knew that we had it better. But that was not my first concern. My first concern was my mother.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

TOMIAK: Who I knew was very pleased when she came up, saw the place. I mean, it was a beautiful—big grounds, all swings, and a monkey bar, and three gorgeous cottages. And we had a big lake in front. We learned, in the rowboats, how to row. We learned to swim up there. And years and years later they built—and I was still there—a pool, gorgeous pool. I mean, they did everything they could, you know.

END OF TAPE ONE, SIDE A

BEGIN TAPE ONE, SIDE B

TOMIAK: They really did. So I was well satisfied. But my sister always wanted my mother, or I don't know. She left there two years before I did, her and her girlfriend, so that they could go to an art school. They put in permission, you know. So okay, but my mother had no place for her then, so they went—opposite Prospect Park in Brooklyn were these brownstone houses, four of them, I think—maybe three—where they had cut all the partitions out, so that it could be a long way. See, I mean, rather than this room, that room, that hallway, or next door, or something, they cut all those partitions out so that it was like this was the cubicle, this two in this cubicle, you know, and sleep here, and the bathroom was next to it, and more cubicles. But it was very nice. Even there, we had to work. We had to take turns making sandwiches for all the girls who went to work the next day. That was all fixed the night before. But it was rotated, just like up at the school where I was for nine years. We learned to wait tables on the staff. We learned to work in our dining room, which had four to a table, and set all the tables correctly. How to serve to the right, take away from the left, you know, or

serve here, take away there, whatever. And we learned to dust, and sweep, and I mean, you know, and then we worked in the laundry there, too. I think we got paid fifty cents a month for working! [Laughs] A quarter a week, or something, for working in the laundry. So we knew a lot of things. You know, every Tuesday we sat and darned stockings, you know. And she'd have a pad with your name on it. And she gave you a needle. And then when you were finished, you put your name through the needle, and she knew you returned it, and she wouldn't be worried about stepping on needles! Yeah.

LEVINE: Wow.

TOMIAK: So I mean, you learned many things in many places.

LEVINE: Now were there other children who had immigrated in the Spring Valley School?

TOMIAK: If they did, I didn't know it.

LEVINE: You didn't know, uh-huh.

TOMIAK: No. If they did, I didn't know it. And by then, I was very Americanized. I probably never even spoke of it.

LEVINE: I see.

TOMIAK: Yeah, I probably never even did, yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Now, maybe you could describe yourself as a little girl, a ten year old little girl. You obviously had a different kind of personality than your sister?

TOMIAK: Oh, yes! Entirely different! My sister, even though she wasn't the youngest, was my mother's baby. She was born in '24, very cold winter—my mother said the coldest in umpteen years. And she had a big muff, fur muff, my mother? She said, "I would put Eleanor in that to keep her warm inside the house." But that's all I remember what she said. But it was always, "Mama," you know, "Mama." So I had to be grown up from day one. It does that to you, you know. I had to—when I came over, I was four and a half; my sister was eighteen months younger, so whatever that made her. My mother had a big silver trunk, steam trunk, you know, bag? And she would sit my sister and I on that trunk. She went out looking for work and she'd say, "Now you keep your sister quiet," because Tante and my uncle were upstairs. I don't know if I did a good enough job or not. I don't remember my mother saying too much, but always, you know, "Don't let her cry, and do this, and do that." And there was a bathroom in the other room,

so we could go there. But when we got older and went to visit my aunt, there was a great big kitchen downstairs, which she didn't use. Maybe at one time she rented the place out; I don't know. But then we had a place to sleep downstairs, not the room with the big trunk in it, where we had to sit, and my mother and father, you know, slept. I don't remember sleeping arrangements at all, you know, except in that first house in Brooklyn. We had two rooms; that was not hard to forget. One was the kitchen, and one was bedroom/parlor. My sister Eleanor and I slept on a mattress on the floor. Maybe my sister Sonya did; I don't know. But Vivian slept in the carriage. She was the baby. So, and my mother and father had the bed. And our bathroom was outside the kitchen, but you slid the door open, and then a short walk, and here was the bathroom door. I still remember to this day, yeah! But that's all I remember about that. And I know I met some girls there—young girls, my age, you know. And we would play. What we played, I have no idea.

LEVINE: Well, do you feel you had a childhood?

TOMIAK: Oh, yes! Oh, yes. I felt I had a childhood, absolutely. Even though you have to mind somebody, as they get older, you know, she had her friends up at the school, I had mine. In fact, we're still--in California, one of the girls, two of the girls live there.

LEVINE: Oh.

TOMIAK: So we see them from time to time, my daughter and I.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

TOMIAK: Yeah, they moved out that way, yeah. There was three of them, but one of them, the sister, moved to Arizona, yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah.

TOMIAK: Yeah, very much so.

LEVINE: So how—when was it that--?

TOMIAK: And we had, I told you, our own private grammar school, so really you were with the girls, you know, in your particular class. And we all played outside after school. There was no TV, you know, or anything. You just played all these games, and played jacks, and played jump rope, or on the swing. We had a good time! I say.

LEVINE: Were there teachers there that encouraged you, would you say?

TOMIAK: Probably. I didn't consider myself a good student. I mean, I was graduated, fine. But I didn't really love school, you know.

LEVINE: Mm-hm.

TOMIAK: But I would say they were very kind, yes. I don't know about how much encouragement. I don't remember any encouraging, but I never heard anything discouraging.

LEVINE: I see.

TOMIAK: Yeah, and they were nice.

LEVINE: Yeah, and so when you were in high school, your husband-to-be was also in--?

TOMIAK: He was a senior; I was a junior, yes.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And so how did you get together?

TOMIAK: You know, he would come, he would walk that mile up to the children's home, because he lived in Spring Valley. So he would—he didn't have a car, so he would walk up, and we would have a dance every Friday night. And they were allowed to visit from one to five on Sunday. So we would sit on the swings, you know. Everything's wide open there, so there was no hanky panky. You know, it was just plain being with one another. And we'd laugh and giggle, and you know, all kind of young stuff, yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Did you feel that there was any kind of—what do I want to say?—discrimination against you because you were in this--?

TOMIAK: No, from the high school?

LEVINE: Yeah.

TOMIAK: No. They'd just say, if someone asked where someone lived, sometimes they would say, "Oh, she's up at Lakeside." That's all they would say. Oh, no, they—

LEVINE: But you didn't feel badly that you were coming from there?

TOMIAK: No!

LEVINE: Oh, that's great.

TOMIAK: Not at all! Not at all. I was very proud I came from there, yes.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Well they must have done a good job with what they were doing.

TOMIAK: Yes! And I have always been: I'm happy to get up in the morning; I'm happy when I go to bed at night. I'm peaceful with myself.

LEVINE: And that's been true from the time you were a little girl?

TOMIAK: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

TOMIAK: Absolutely. So as long as I didn't have my mother to worry about, I was all right, yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So in a way, it was almost like you were the mother when you were a little girl?

TOMIAK: Yeah! [Laughs]

LEVINE: And making sure that your mother was all right, right? [Laughs]

TOMIAK: Well, yes, because I would see how hard she worked, you know.

LEVINE: Yeah, mm-hmm.

TOMIAK: And she would do everything she could for us. Like she would send us a package of funny sheets. I thought that was the package. But in that funny sheets, they had like a paper doll, and then they had two dresses you could cut out. And we would take a blank piece of paper, outline the dresses, and the tabs where you put them.

LEVINE: Oh, yes!

TOMIAK: And we thought that was the package! Yeah. Once she sent us a pair of roller skates we shared. Oh, boy! We thought that was the living end. And at the very end, we finally shared a bike, because I'd always wanted a bike. Finally we shared a bike, yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

TOMIAK: But I mean, we had a sled, I don't know where from. But you know, I never felt deprived.

LEVINE: That's great. Well, what was it about your husband that attracted you to him?

TOMIAK: I thought he was cute. I married the wrong man! Oh, this is on tape!  
[Laughs] No, he was really very cute. The war spoiled him. He was very handsome, and he grew handsomer as he grew older.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

TOMIAK: He looked something like Errol Flynn, believe it or not. And all the girls would tell him. You know, like he would be stationed somewhere, and I'd have to wait to get there. By that time every girl had told him he looked like Errol Flynn! [Laughs] But he was a very nice, nice young man. He was.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

TOMIAK: Very nice.

LEVINE: So you finished high school? Did you finish?

TOMIAK: Oh, yeah. I graduated in I think 1939, yeah. And then I went down to Brooklyn, because my mother still didn't have a place for us. It was still very bad times, you know, '39.

LEVINE: Right. And was she married by then?

TOMIAK: No, no. She was still out working. And—

LEVINE: Did she live in the places she worked?

TOMIAK: Only one, in Eng's place, because there was an extra bedroom then, when his wife died, you know. In fact, she had the studio couch. I shouldn't say an extra bedroom. But she had a dresser in the other room, and a closet and everything. And I knew she was boss there, so she was fine there, you know.

LEVINE: Mm-hm.

TOMIAK: She was fine, yeah. She was fine.

LEVINE: And so you came back to Brooklyn. Your mother still didn't have her own place?

TOMIAK: No. We went, I went, to the same place where Eleanor had gone two years before, and was still there, in these brownstone houses that had been, you know, gutted—not gutted, but redone on the top floor where the bedrooms were, yeah. Absolutely, so Eleanor and I were there. And then, I went to work right after high school to a children's home, believe it or not,

Episcopalian children's home! But all I had to do there was to straighten up their apartment, but take care of their boy. He was six years old, John. You couldn't call him Johnny—John. And I had that until my mother said, "You ought to get another job," and I said, "Okay." So I quit there.

LEVINE: Now why did your mother think that?

TOMIAK: Rather than take care of someone's children, she wanted me to work downtown New York, because I was pretty good, you know. So first day, she went with me to get a job, because by then she had finally gotten an apartment. And then she came with me to downtown New York as I went up to the Personnel Department, you know. And finally I could see she was getting tired. I said, "You go ahead, Mom. I can come home on the subway. I'm going to hit one or two more places." And I got a job, when she wasn't there! I went up to Personnel. And then only had to fill out one piece of paper—your name, your address, you know. And when I got home—that was the Aetna Insurance Company. When I got home, my mother said, "Oh, you got a job!" because they said, "We'll let you know Monday." And she said, "Did we go to the Aetna Insurance Company?" I said, "No, that's the first one I went to," on Maiden Lane, in New York, after she left me. So that's how I started. And I was a file clerk at first. Then I think I was a file clerk and something else, nothing important, for a while. But then I got a job about a block and a half away in another insurance company, and just a little more money, started at fifty-five dollars a month!

LEVINE: Wow.

TOMIAK: Talk about being old! That's old! Then I went, and I got maybe five more dollars; I don't remember the exact amount. But, I was a file clerk, but I was also, had to go down not only to file all these claims, but to find different papers that they couldn't find, you know, in the files. Because the bookkeepers would be working on them, and couldn't find different claims, so I was one of the girls who went down to the—that file room was as big as the whole floor—big, almost up to the ceiling files, down to there. At least four big drawers. And we had to look and look. And a lot of times you had to—you know, somebody had misfiled it, so you looked around there. Then the men start being drafted for war, so they made me a bookkeeper!  
[Laughs]

LEVINE: Oh!

TOMIAK: And then, I got married when I was a bookkeeper. Then I left the company, yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Can you say anything else about the build-up to World War Two? What in your world happened?

TOMIAK: Tell the truth, I didn't pay much attention. I was out on December 7<sup>th</sup>, 1941, Pearl Harbor Day, with my husband. We had gone to the movies, had some cocoa, and we were standing out on the roof—I mean, not roof—the porch of this brownstone building where we went in the door. And we were standing there talking about when he was going to see me next, because he had to go all the way back to Spring Valley. He just came to see me for the day. And someone came out of the apartment and said—because he was a soldier by then, a private. He wanted to go to West Point. So the best way to do that, if you couldn't get a Congressman or someone to back you up, was get in the Army or someplace. Army and Air Force were together then. So he was just a private. If he could get any lower, I don't know, but that's what he was. Twenty-one dollars a month! And they came out and said, "Pearl Harbor has been bombed, and every soldier has been asked to return to their unit." That was—and my husband got busy and went on his way. Yeah, that's about all I remember, except when I got much, much older, I thought--those war years, I had such a good time, with all the guys in Prospect Park, all the guys at the Coast Guard station! They had dances, you know, and different shows, and everything. And only when I was much, much older did I think: those mothers were suffering, those wives were suffering. Children lost their fathers. You know, you don't think of that when you're twenty-one and twenty, having a ball, you know? And I had a good time. But you know, finally I was free and I was working; I had a little money, and then I had this nice boyfriend! [Laughs] So I mean, the world looked pretty good!

LEVINE: Right.

TOMIAK: Yeah.

LEVINE: That must have been an exciting time, in many ways.

TOMIAK: It really and truly was!

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

TOMIAK: I can look back and say that was a good time! That was. Because my husband was far away! [Laughs] No—

LEVINE: He wasn't your husband yet?

TOMIAK: No, he was my boyfriend.

LEVINE: Your boyfriend.

TOMIAK: And I went, started to go with someone in the Coast Guard, you know. I had had a boyfriend from the, a lieutenant from the Army. But then I started to go to these Coast Guard dances. My girlfriend said, "You ought to come. They've got these big bands there." So we went down to Sheepshead Bay, and every Friday night, and that's where I met another guy that I went with for quite a while! [Laughs] He was also blonde.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, yeah.

TOMIAK: Yeah, so he was German and I was Norwegian. So he would keep these baby pictures of me in his wallet, and he'd say, "That's my children!" [Laughs] That's what young kids do—you know, foolish.

LEVINE: Now the man you married—was he born here?

TOMIAK: Yes, yes, but his folks weren't born here. They came from Ukraine, the Ukraine. White Russia, it was called when they were there, and it's known as the Ukraine now, yes.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

TOMIAK: And she was—I didn't know my father-in-law; he wasn't around too long. But my mother-in-law was just a doll, an angel! You know, Janet, my daughter, remembers her as this old lady, but she wasn't that old. It was just a different—she had never really seen elderly people before. And she had this Slavic look to her. It was different. She wore a babushka when she went out shopping, you know. But good as gold! Loved her to death! She was so good to me. I loved his whole family.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And was your mother—did your mother live a long life?

TOMIAK: No. My sister Eleanor, Karen and Jerry's mother? My sister Eleanor died when she was fifty-six. Cancer. My mother died when she was sixty-one. Cancer. Yeah.

LEVINE: Hm. Now did your mother-in-law live a longer life than your own mother?

TOMIAK: Oh, yeah. She was quite near her eighties when she died, yeah.

LEVINE: I see. I see.

TOMIAK: Quite near. And very old-world, you know, person. But a heart of gold, heart of gold, yeah. When my mother died she said, "I'll be your mother," you know. She was very sweet, very nice, yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah.

TOMIAK: Very nice.

LEVINE: Wow. So was there ever a time, when your mother remarried, that you lived with her?

TOMIAK: No.

LEVINE: No.

TOMIAK: When my mother remarried, I was—let's see. I think she got married two months after I did?

LEVINE: Oh, that's right, yeah.

TOMIAK: In July, I think. And I was—no, I got married in September, and September, October, November—she must have been married after me, anyhow. Someone told me she was married in '44. I didn't really remember what year she got married. And she got married to this Mr. Eng she had worked for for years and years. And even when we had our own apartment, us two girls with my mother, they would come over and play cards, so we got to know all her Norwegian friends. And the woman I rented the room to had a room upstairs! [Laughs] It was so funny! And that's how I learned—from her! Otherwise I would not really have remembered too much about that.

LEVINE: Yes, I see.

TOMIAK: Yeah.

LEVINE: Now was your mother's second husband, Mr. Eng—is that Chinese? E-N-G?

TOMIAK: Eng is Swedish. No, Norwegian. Norwegian, yeah.

LEVINE: Oh, oh, oh, Norwegian, uh-huh.

TOMIAK: I know. I used to think Eng was a very odd name. but you look in a phone book, and there's a lot of Eng's in Brooklyn.

LEVINE: I think I interviewed a Chinese man named Eng.

TOMIAK: Oh, I wouldn't doubt it!

LEVINE: Yeah, uh-huh.

TOMIAK: It sounds Chinese to me! No, he was pure Swedish—Swedish or Norwegian, yeah. I think Norwegian.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So did you keep up any kind of social contact with Norwegians here?

TOMIAK: Not really. The only Norwegians I knew were my mother's friends. We all belonged to the Sons of Norway, you know, my mother did, so she drug us kids along. And Karen still marches in the Sons of Norway Parade on May 17<sup>th</sup>, I think it is. So, and her Dad did, and my mother marched, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

TOMIAK: So they all belonged to that. Not her Dad, but my mother did.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Was the area in Brooklyn—you said, what, fifty--?

TOMIAK: Bay Ridge.

LEVINE: Bay Ridge, was largely Norwegian, wasn't it?

TOMIAK: Scandinavian and Italian.

LEVINE: Ah!

TOMIAK: Isn't that a funny combination?

LEVINE: Yes, it is, yeah.

TOMIAK: But up and down the street, Italians and Scandinavian. All, you know, around that area, Scandinavians and Norwegians. And it's so funny that two of my in-laws, sisters-in-laws, they married Italians. You know what I mean? I don't know. And I loved all my brother-in-laws and sister-in-laws. They were great, yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

TOMIAK: Maybe because they liked me, I liked them so much! [Laughs]

LEVINE: And you mother, did she keep any of her Norwegian ways in this country?

TOMIAK: Well, we all still cooked, baked, at Christmas time, certain Christmas things. And we can make, even during the year, scones. It's a machine. They have a better machine now, but we had a flat one, about that big. In the middle you put whatever the batter was, and you squeezed these two long handles together. And then you had a thing, and it flipped over. And then it

came out, it looked like, just, not big, but a round thing. But while it was hot you rolled it up on a scone, a dowel, like, that looked like.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh.

TOMIAK: And when it was through, it looked like an ice cream cone. But of course, it was a different consistency.

LEVINE: Yeah.

TOMIAK: But we loved those, and some of the other Norwegian cookies, yeah. And cakes.

LEVINE: And you mentioned before that stew. Can you say it again, and spell it?

TOMIAK: Lapskaus?

LEVINE: Yeah. Do you know how to spell that?

TOMIAK: Skaus is S-K-A-U-S, but lapskaus? Lapskaus.

LEVINE: L-O-P?

TOMIAK: [Whispers] Lapskaus. I imagine, but that would sound like lapskaus. I think it was L-U. Did you say L-U?

LEVINE: I said L-O, but maybe it's L-U.

TOMIAK: Lapskaus. Now, Karen would know. I think she would know lapskaus. Or even Jerry might know. But that's the stew. It was corned beef with mashed potatoes and carrots, very finely, you know, mixed, or whatever you want to call it. And that's what they gave us.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

TOMIAK: And I always liked it, yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah, uh-huh.

TOMIAK: But Karen would remember lapskaus. I never thought of that, yeah. But that's what they gave us in that pail. Now I'm sure my father went and bought milk for the babies, the little ones, you know.

LEVINE: Mm-hm.

TOMIAK: But, and I'm sure he did other things. But I don't truly remember, because I didn't seem to see him around too much, you know?

LEVINE: Mm-hm.

TOMIAK: One time my mother was in the hospital for four months. That's after my sister Sonya was born, and I think she also had one of the—I don't think it was one of the ear operations, or appendectomy, or what. But they kept Sonya there at the same time, so I only had my sister Eleanor that time. But then my mother came home with Sonya. Then she had to go back to the hospital, you know. And then I had Sonya.

LEVINE: So you were taking care of the house, more or less?

TOMIAK: Everything! I don't remember my father doing one thing, and I'm sure he did. But as far as remembering, I don't.

LEVINE: But you felt responsible?

TOMIAK: I only remember doing really the steps leading upstairs. I don't remember cleaning our house at all. I just remember the kitchen. I remember the bedroom. Bedroom, dining room, whatever, yeah. Because we all went around the kitchen, you know. But we were poor.

LEVINE: Mm-hm.

TOMIAK: I remember my mother, if she didn't have real stale bread, she would put it in the oven to make it a little stale, and put it on our plates, put milk and sugar. And then she would take a little bit of coffee. And we thought that was a big treat! But that's what we had to eat. Or she made riesegrot, rice gruel, if she had money for the rice, yeah, and milk, because you cooked that in milk, yeah.

LEVINE: Do you think your mother, did she ever express to you regret that she had come to this country?

TOMIAK: No, only that she never brought my brother with her.

LEVINE: Oh.

TOMIAK: And first it was the Depression. See, when we came, the Depression hadn't quite slammed down yet, or else my aunt and uncle never would have said, you know, "You can come to our house." And so that was the only thing. So after Depression kind of eased off—and it took quite a while, you know, and then came the war. She was planning another trip, to come

and get the girls back. So by the time the war was over, that was too late, you know.

LEVINE: Mm-hm.

TOMIAK: And I think—I just saw my sister Vivian this weekend. I think she said—she and Sonya must have spoken as they got older, and I think she said that they felt a little resentment, because we seemed to have it so good in America, while they were still on this farm, I guess. You know, wherever my grandmother lived. She did go on this farm and reap hay, you know. But I don't know for how long a period, if it was for a month, a week, or what it was. But I have a picture of her doing it with my brother Roy, you know.

LEVINE: Oh.

TOMIAK: So I know they were there for a while. But I think Vivian said this weekend that they only went there for a while.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

TOMIAK: No, my mother felt very bad that Roy was there. She felt badly that the girls, after a while the girls couldn't come over, Sonya and Vivian. She wanted her mother to come over. You know, and the times, and the war. You know, it was just all bad timing.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

TOMIAK: Bad timing.

LEVINE: Yeah. Why didn't Roy come in the beginning?

TOMIAK: He was going to, but my grandmother, who adored him—he was six—said to my mother, “You know, you don't really have a place in America. Why don't you let me keep Roy while you take the two girls with Alshane, my father?” Why don't you take Roy, and you can send for him later, or come back and get him.” “Oh, fine,” you know. I'm sure it was more than—I mean, better than there. I'm sure they had a big conversation about it. But that's how he stayed behind.

LEVINE: I see, uh-huh, uh-huh.

TOMIAK: How his reaction was, when I finally saw him again, in 1961, I never thought to ask him.

LEVINE: What he thought about it or felt about it?

TOMIAK: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

TOMIAK: I did see him. I was stationed in Germany, and my husband and I and the two kids, we went up to Sweden first, stayed at my brother's house for a week, went over to Norway, stayed there two nights, and then came back to Sweden. Picked up my sister Eleanor, brought her to Germany with us for a week's—

LEVINE: A visit, uh-huh.

TOMIAK: --stay or something, and then my sister Vivian went home to Brooklyn. Because they left their kids in charge of my mother, you know. So—

END OF TAPE ONE, SIDE A

BEGIN TAPE TWO, SIDE B

LEVINE: Tape Two, and I'm speaking with Evelyn Tomiak. And actually we were just talking about the pastor. Were you religious at all, growing up?

TOMIAK: No, but I've always gone to, like, at the school? We went to Sunday school every Sunday. When we got older, we had to go to downtown, church, every Sunday. After—

LEVINE: What church was it?

TOMIAK: That was the Dutch Reformed Church. And when I got older, I joined the Presbyterian Church, which is the sister church like it, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

TOMIAK: And I would say more, if you want to say, "religious" now than I have been, because I have time to read my Bible and study it. Before, you're bringing up kids. Other people who are religious make time, but I never made time.

LEVINE: I see, uh-huh.

TOMIAK: But off and on I would go to church.

LEVINE: I see.

TOMIAK: And of course, Karen is a fine Lutheran. Right now Janet and I, especially at Easter, we go to the Lutheran Church. We love that little church. But right across the street from where I live in California is a Presbyterian church. And I hear they have a new minister who's very good, so when I go back I will try that.

LEVINE: I see.

TOMIAK: Yeah.

LEVINE: How about your mother? Was she religious? Did she practice?

TOMIAK: No, but she made sure those kids went to Sunday school every Sunday!

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

TOMIAK: She made my sister send them to Sunday school all the time.

LEVINE: Was it a Lutheran one?

TOMIAK: Well, no. You know, the closest was the Methodist, so they went to the Methodist! [Laughs]

LEVINE: Whatever was close, uh-huh.

TOMIAK: Right. Ever since going up to Jackson, which is many years now—over thirty years—they've been going to the Lutheran Church, yes. Oh, she's, you know, head of the women's group here, and this. And she's a big lay reader. You know, the minister reads; she reads. They do different things than the Presbyterians, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

TOMIAK: But oh yes, she's a well-known figure in the church--well-known. Very well liked by everyone.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

TOMIAK: Everyone.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

TOMIAK: Very nice.

LEVINE: So how do you think of yourself, as far as American and Norwegian? How do you—

TOMIAK: I see myself as American. If someone asks me, of course I always remember I'm Norwegian. But I have always thought of myself as an American who came from Norway, you know. We just came, Americanized right away.

LEVINE: Yeah.

TOMIAK: You know, that's what we did. We, like I say, we finally all learned to speak in school, you know?

LEVINE: Mm-hm.

TOMIAK: And then I would teach my sister, who was younger than me. So she had it a little easier. But I don't really remember having a hard time in school, but I'm sure I did.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

TOMIAK: Have some kind of a hard time, somewhere along the line. And I liked school, but I never loved it. I never really excelled at it, but I passed everything. And then, from eighth grade there, from our own private school, eighth grade—oh, yeah, that was—mm, no, that was their test, I think. But our high school, we took a state exam, and you have to get at least sixty-five points, you know, to pass, from the state, everybody. You know, they just don't pile them out of school like they do now. No, everybody had to know; everybody had to read. When I got my citizenship, the judge says, "Well, I see you grew up in American schools." You know, "There's not too much to ask you." He just said, "Who makes the laws, and what's the members of Senate or Congress?" I don't even remember now. He said, "You're all right." You know, "You passed." [Laughs]

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Was that a particularly big day for you?

TOMIAK: Well, I'll tell you. I was excited. I was working. Well, when I—I don't know. When I work, really got my citizenship papers, one I remember applying for them. And then I had been working at that children's home with that one little boy I said? No, no, no, no, no! At a hospital first. And they had—in the private kitchens upstairs on the floors, not downstairs where they were being prepared. And I would just put them on these carts that they wheeled in. But they had somebody that had some kind of a disease, and so we all had to get these extra shots. I forget what the disease was. And I couldn't really eat, you know, and I had to work and everything. And I got with my mother, and we stood there. We all had to get papers or something. You

know, it's not very clear. And he was asking us something. I just fainted dead away. Well, you thought the world came to an end, with my mother saying, "Oh, she just got some shots, and she's been--"! I mean, she looked so flabbergasted! [Laughs] I had never fainted in my life!

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

TOMIAK: So no [laughs], I don't remember too much, except I did get my citizenship papers when I was working in an office. And I came back from lunch hour, and they had a cake with the American flag on it, and saying congratulations, with two flags sticking up! And it was cute, you know.

LEVINE: Who had the cake?

TOMIAK: They had it at the Aetna Insurance Company.

LEVINE: Oh, I see.

TOMIAK: The girls that I worked with.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

TOMIAK: You know, they had bought the cake and everything.

LEVINE: I see.

TOMIAK: And everybody clapped when I walked in! [Laughs] Because then I had become a citizen, you know. I was very proud that day, too, you know. Now I could say I was a citizen, yeah.

LEVINE: Right. And how about your mother? Did she become one?

TOMIAK: Oh, yes, definitely! We all did.

LEVINE: Do you remember when your mother got her citizenship papers?

TOMIAK: Do I remember? I think I remember hearing about it.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

TOMIAK: But it must have been when I was up at the school.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh.

TOMIAK: So I can't really say I remember it. My sister Eleanor—I think I was, I forget where I was; I might have been overseas with my husband; I don't know.

She went to Ebbets Field with a lot of other people. So she got her citizenship papers there.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh, yeah.

TOMIAK: That she did. So she had a day to remember, you know. I had a day, in a different way, to remember.

LEVINE: Yeah, yeah. When you look back on it, maybe not—well, I'll ask you about yourself, but also about your mother. Do you think coming to this country, and having to start again, and make a life, had an impact on your personality, the way you approach things?

TOMIAK: I don't know. My mother said I talked to everybody that walked by the house, in Norway.

LEVINE: Oh.

TOMIAK: "Hello." And she was so afraid I'd walk off with someone, because I could go traipsing off! So I've always been an outgoing person.

LEVINE: Mm-hm.

TOMIAK: My sister was laid back more, more of an introvert, but not a real introvert. Quiet, like Karen, very lady-like. You know, me, I'm [unclear]. I'm all over the place sometimes. [Laughs]

LEVINE: But you think that's more inherent nature—?

TOMIAK: I think I—

LEVINE: --rather than having to do with picking up--?

TOMIAK: No, I think I inherited all my nature. Yeah, I think so.

LEVINE: And how about your mother? Did you—well, you wouldn't really have noticed any changes in her, because you were so young when you came.

TOMIAK: No. I know that she was worried in the beginning. That's why I was so happy that we had a place to go to. But, and she never expressed, like, "Oh, I'm so sorry you're here," or something like that, you know. She never said that. If she did, I don't remember it. But she heard that I was happy. And therefore I think it made her feel relieved. But words were not expressed, you know.

LEVINE: Right.

TOMIAK: But she was always glad we went to that school.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

TOMIAK: She thought it was a very fine school, yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

TOMIAK: It really was. Compared to some of her friends, we did real good. You know, we did real good.

LEVINE: Yeah.

TOMIAK: Because I remember everybody was poor in Brooklyn at that time.

LEVINE: Right.

TOMIAK: She had one special friend. Minerva, I think her name was; I'm not sure. Whenever each one had gotten something, like from the bakery, you know, day-old cake or buns—usually buns—they would call—not call—come to each other's houses, and share, you know. They'd bring their children, and we'd all share. So it was a time of sharing.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

TOMIAK: Maybe, you know, I guess I just learned. I don't know. It must be in me.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

TOMIAK: My daughter is the very—I mean, she can have a bad temper sometimes, but she's a very giving person, and a very caring person. She's a great daughter—great daughter.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

TOMIAK: That's why I moved to California, to be with her, you know.

LEVINE: With her, oh, I see. Well now, what was your husband's name?

TOMIAK: Steven.

LEVINE: Steven. And how many children did you have?

TOMIAK: Two: a boy, Steven, and a girl, Janet.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. And you have grandchildren as well?

TOMIAK: Well, my son has two grandsons. Now, I never really see them anymore. There's kind of a rift in the family there. But they're there. I do, once in a while, I get an email from my oldest grandson. He's twenty-seven.

LEVINE: Oh.

TOMIAK: He never says anything too much at all about the family, but he will say how he is, you know, and something.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

TOMIAK: And I used to baby-sit for him when he was little, and he was lovely. It's after they moved to Pennsylvania that all this trouble started, because they thought I'd be back and forth. And I had this rickety car—

LEVINE: [Laughs]

TOMIAK: --that Lee Iacocca owes me money for, riding back and forth, you know, on the parkway. Is that what you call it? I mean, it was terrible! The Pennsylvania Turnpike, and this little car. And me, I hated traffic, even in the little town I lived, and all these big trucks all around! Oh! No, I am not—I am only a happy local driver. But I don't drive in California at all.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh. Well, what are you looking forward to now? You're eighty-four years old today.

TOMIAK: What am I looking? Well, just living a little more! [Laughs]

LEVINE: [Laughs] Well, you look like you're in great shape!

TOMIAK: Outside of living a little longer, staying healthy—because I am healthy.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

TOMIAK: Except for my tremors, I have nothing wrong with me.

LEVINE: That's wonderful.

TOMIAK: No, I have no arthritis, no back pain, no stomach pain, no headaches, no chest pain.

LEVINE: Wonderful!

TOMIAK: I do water aerobics three times a week.

LEVINE: Mm-hm.

TOMIAK: And I do my own grocery shopping once a week, you know. And we have chair exercises. I'm in a senior apartment in California.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh.

TOMIAK: And every afternoon except Sunday—every afternoon—we play cards. We play the new domino game. We play dice. We play anything! We are just socializing for about four hours.

LEVINE: I see.

TOMIAK: Every afternoon.

LEVINE: So you have friends that—

TOMIAK: Oh, yes!

LEVINE: --live in the same building?

TOMIAK: I've been there for twelve years in that building.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

TOMIAK: I'm one of the oldest tenants in the building, you know. But there are three of us. The man who lives next door to me, we share a patio, and one other woman who lives around the corner—we're the oldest.

LEVINE: Okay.

TOMIAK: Because they opened the building about twelve years ago, you know, for people. So here we hare!

LEVINE: Yeah! Well now, did you mention the two things that Jerry wanted you to mention?

TOMIAK: Yes, he wanted me to tell you about going down with kids in the carriage. What was the other one? I'm sure I mentioned it.

LEVINE: Okay.

TOMIAK: He thought it was important, so I'm sure I did mention whatever—oh, about renting the rooms, and how Clara was our friend for years afterwards!

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

TOMIAK: She was Danish, one of my mother's best friends, yes.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. And is there anything else you can think of relevant to you and your family? Well, I mean, your family was divided, but--

TOMIAK: We did take—no, we did take, you know, a visit to Norway and Sweden, and I was glad to see my sisters—I mean, my sister and her family, and my brother, and his family. And my father I saw over there. [Coughs] Because I hadn't seen him in thirty years. But maybe it was more, I don't know. But at that—yeah, about thirty years. But that's about the good part, you know. And [coughs] no, I can't think of any. Of course, getting an apartment with my mother for the first time, and my sister—that was a big thing for us.

LEVINE: Yes, uh-huh.

TOMIAK: Yeah. And I don't know. I just like life in general, I guess you'd say.

LEVINE: It seems it. It shows.

TOMIAK: I do.

LEVINE: Yeah, uh-huh.

TOMIAK: And of course, I adore my niece that I stay with.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

TOMIAK: And she's—and she has a marvelous daughter, and who has these two cute children, one a little over two and a half—Miss Personality herself!

LEVINE: [Laughs]

TOMIAK: Really! She is one for the books! One for the books! I told her, "Kaylee, remind Aunt Evelyn, we have to bring the fruit to Grandma's." I was at her house. I said, "Kaylee, what was it I was supposed to remember?" "Bring the fruit to Grandma's." [Laughs]

LEVINE: [Laughs]

TOMIAK: She's so cute, she really is! The baby is adorable, the one that was christened. Those are my loves! And Karen has a fine son.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

TOMIAK: Very nice son. But he lives in Florida, but he was up.

LEVINE: Oh, good. Okay.

TOMIAK: Yeah.

LEVINE: Well, I think maybe we've covered everything.

TOMIAK: Yeah. Of course, I can't tell you much about Norway. I remember very little.

LEVINE: Yes.

TOMIAK: Snow, that's about all.

LEVINE: Yeah, yeah.

TOMIAK: You know, so I told that to Jerry, and I said, "I don't know why she'd be interested."

LEVINE: Well, I think your life in your country was really of interest.

TOMIAK: I guess so, yeah. What I would say, in this country, we went improving from step, to step, to step.

LEVINE: Mm-hm.

TOMIAK: My son, I was so proud of him, in our family. He graduated from college, he was graduated—one of the first ones in our family. And that was a big step, you know.

LEVINE: Yeah, yeah.

TOMIAK: But, and my daughter did very well after high school. You know, she became a secretary, and then a big secretary, you know.

LEVINE: Mm-hm.

TOMIAK: To the CEO, to the boss, so she had good jobs. [Coughs]

LEVINE: Yeah, well it sounds as though your family flourished over here.

TOMIAK: You know, we finally, you know, little by little we worked our way up.

LEVINE: Yeah.

TOMIAK: Yes, absolutely.

LEVINE: Okay, well that's a good American story, right?

TOMIAK: Yes! [Laughs]

LEVINE: Well thank you.

TOMIAK: Well, if you have an opportunity, and don't really take it, then it's up to you. I feel that way.

LEVINE: Well actually, one more question.

TOMIAK: Yeah.

LEVINE: Do you think there were certain principles, or certain attitudes, that your mother had, that she tried to instill in you, that—things that you--?

TOMIAK: Always kindness.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

TOMIAK: Always niceness. Yeah, always niceness. You know, think of the other person. My mother always said that. If we would complain, you know, when we were younger, "Oh, this one, that one," "Think if you were her," you know. "Always put yourself there." That was one of my mother's favorite things. And you know, you keep that in your head, I guess, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

TOMIAK: And while I'm far from a goody two-shoes, I try to be very kind, very nice to people. I like people, I really do.

LEVINE: Yeah, well good. That shows. Okay, I'm speaking with Evelyn Tomiak, and this is her eighty-fourth birthday. And this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service, and wait a second—

TOMIAK: And I want to thank you very much for being so nice to us. And I appreciated meeting you. [Coughs]

LEVINE: Well, thank you. It's been a pleasure.

TOMIAK: Thank you.

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END OF INTERVIEW