

**EI-1433**

**ROSE BENZ**

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- **CHINA: SHANGHAI**
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- **U.S.: SEATTLE, WASHINGTON**

**Historian's Note: Rose Benz was born Miriam Rosi Meier in China during the flight of her Hitler-refugee parents. Her husband, Gary and daughter, Rachel are present.**

LEVINE: The tenth. Today is November the 10<sup>th</sup>? No, the 9<sup>th</sup>.

BENZ: The 9<sup>th</sup>.

LEVINE: ...2006. And I'm here at the Ellis Island Oral History studio with Rose Benz, who was born Miriam Rosi (with an 'i') Meier. And she was born in

Shanghai, China. She was born on November 7, 1946 and came here with her mother, her father, and her brother, Klaus on December 9, 1947. So she was thirteen months of age when she last came through Ellis Island. It's interesting (just to make a little note here) that her brother's name was Klaus with a 'k,' but that her mother and father Americanized it to a 'c' later on. Since we have so many people who think all the names were changed here at Ellis Island, it isn't always the case.

Okay, this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. And this is a multi-layered story and I want to say that Rose is writing a book about her experience and her family's experience. The title of which will be 'From Here to Shanghai'. And so hopefully, we'll have that in our library at some point. And this will probably touch on some of the highlights, and the fuller story can be read in her book in the future. I also want to say that Rose is here with her husband, Gary Benz and her daughter, Rachael Kastenbader. Kevin Daly is running the equipment. Okay, if we would start, if you would say for the tape where you were born and the circumstances under which you happened to be in Shanghai.

BENZ: Well, I was born in Shanghai, China. And to clarify that a little more, I was actually born in what was called the Hongkuo ghetto. And I was born November 7<sup>th</sup> of 1946. And I happened to be born there as my parents fled Nazi Germany in 1939. And they actually were not married at the time. They fled separately. My mother was married to someone else. And she fled with her at that time husband in February 1939, and from Berlin, Germany. And my father left Germany by himself, fled. And he lived in a small town along the Rhine River -- Phillipsburg, Germany -- and fled Germany about the same time. They left Germany. My mother and her husband went by train over Brenner Pass and to Italy -- from Germany to Italy. And then there in Italy, from there they got on a -- a ship and -- and came to China. My father's route was similar, except he came from a little

bit different part of Germany by himself and went from there to Italy. And happenstance had it, or circumstance, that they met in Italy -- my mother and her husband and my father. Because there was a huge -- or there was a number of people in the same situation trying to leave the country. And that's where they all congregated until they got on the ship. So they met. And just in passing, so to speak. My father took an earlier ship, was able to get on an earlier ship. You know, it was a matter of numbers on the ship and so on -- how many people could get on leaving Italy to China. And then my mother and her husband at that time, Heinz Goldberg, left two weeks later.

LEVINE: Okay. Why don't you give your mother's name and maiden name, and then your father's name?

BENZ: My mother's name was Ruth Berger, was her maiden name. And my father was Ludwig Meier.

LEVINE: Okay. And did, did they tell you anything about the circumstances right before they left? Before --that caused them to flee, exactly when they did?

BENZ: Yes. They -- they -- my parents especially told my brother and I the story many, many times because they didn't want it to be forgotten. And so we pretty much had it in detail. You want -- I should talk about that now?

LEVINE: Yeah.

BENZ: Well, my mother lived in Berlin with her husband, Heinz Goldberg. And she worked for a, two attorneys. And she was a legal secretary for the attorneys. And she and my -- and her mother lived in Berlin also. Her father had died a couple years prior to that -- to the 1938. And *Kristallnacht* happened as you know, know in 1938. There was a, anti-

Jewish violence, 'Night of the Broken Glass'. And it, it, it erupted throughout the whole Reich. And prior to that, Jews were – were forced to leave their places of work. They weren't allowed to work anymore. And they were -- lots of things were being taken away from them – their rights and their, their personal possession and so on, so forth. So after things calmed down, after *Kristallnacht*, my mother went back to her job, and a time later, because they needed the money. Her husband was already without work because he was Jewish. And they said, 'No Jews can work here any longer', where he worked.

So my mother went back to work. And when she went to the attorney's office where she worked, she was met by the SS. And that was part of the, the Reich. The Third Reich's police, or Ges--, similar to Gestapo, they were called the 'SS'. Because the two attorneys that she worked for, unbeknownst to her, were helping people smuggle their money and their art out of Germany. And they had taken off sometime after *Kristallnacht* and, and fled. And so they were trying to associate my mother with what these attorneys had been doing what were, unbeknownst to her. And trying to tie her into their, their dealings and their doings. And so they interrogated her for the entire day and like she said, she sweated blood and water that whole day, you know. Of course, she told us that in German. My parents spoke German to us in the home.

Anyway, finally they, they let her leave and she went home and she knew she needed to get out of the country but things were very, very tough at that time, you know? It was in the middle of the Depression, people had little money. The country was in upheaval. Much of their possessions had been taken away from them. So they couldn't even sell jewelry or whatever. That was already gone. So they were, my husband and – my mother and her husband were able to borrow money from one her uncles, enough to buy transport to go to China — to go Italy and to go to China.

Everything was – all other ports were closed. There was no place to get out of the country. No place that would take Jews. And so that was the only, the only escape route. The only place you could go with a passport, no visa. No questions asked, you know. You paid your money; you bought your ticket, and showed your passport. And you could get out of the country still at that time.

LEVINE: So they had, she and her husband had passports I take it?

BENZ: Mm-hmm.

LEVINE: So that was lucky.

BENZ: Yeah. They were lucky they had a passport.

LEVINE: And how about your father, what was his name? Well, you said his name. What was his circumstance?

BENZ: His circumstance –, he lived in a, a small town on the Rhine River. And he was a traveling salesman. And he sh-- he sold what's called here in the United States 'shoe findings'. In other words, things for shoemakers to repair the shoes with -- the leathers, the soles, the heel. You know, all those things that they needed. So he traveled around from small town to small town selling those things. And he was married to a Gentile woman. And he had been married for fifteen years. And one day when he was near the German-Swiss border driving his car on his route, there was a, a young man trying to get across a border -- escape. And as he was running across the border, of course the border patrol was yelling at him to stop. You know, '*Halt oder wir schiessen!*' That's, 'Stop or we will shoot!' And my father took his car, sped across the border. Spun it around, yelled out of the window, 'Get in!' And so the guy got in with him, and he ran him

back across. Because he knew otherwise he'd be gunned down. So within the next few nights, or few days, the SS came to my father's door and picked him up.

LEVINE: Because of that incident?

BENZ: Because of that incident. Within, I don't know, what the time difference would be – a few days or whatever by the time they found out who he was and, you know, tracked him down. And they put him in jail. And so they jailed my father. And he was – they were going to put him on a train to go to a concentration camp, to go to one of the camps. But the train had pulled out. It was full. So he spent the next few days in jail, and the jail he said, kept getting fuller and fuller. So his father, my grandfather, worked with the Jewish underground and he came to the jail to visit my father. And at that time, you could still get someone out if you could, again, provide – show that you had a ticket or a --

LEVINE: Passport?

BENZ: Passport. He -- my father had a passport. But you had to have the ticket to get out of the country, too. And the only place again was China. So, if you could show that you had that... So somehow, my -- my grandfather scraped up the money and bought the guards off as well, you know. And got my father out and he left the country. And he left the country by himself without his wife. She was Gentile. And prior to that, stepping back a little bit, he -- he divorced his wife because her father worked for the postal service. And he would have lost his job if they would have found out that his; his daughter was married to a Jewish man. So that he did. My father divorced his wife to save his father-in-law's job.

LEVINE: Wow, prior to his leaving?

BENZ: Prior to his leaving.

LEVINE: But he was still living with his wife?

BENZ: He was still living with her.

LEVINE: I see. And it's interesting that both parents had passports, 'cause I don't think that was typical.

BENZ: I don't know why they did. I don't know that. I still have their passports, so. I have those at home.

LEVINE: Wow.

BENZ: So then my father, again, left. And left to Italy and then Italy to China.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BENZ: And just in the nick of time, because the SS had come to his door the very next night. And, and to pick him up and round him up again. And he was gone.

LEVINE: Well, did —, were there any ramifications to his Gentile wife as a result?

BENZ: No.

LEVINE: No, uh-huh. Okay, did they ever —, talk just a little bit maybe about the time in Italy? Was it, was it a short period?

BENZ: Very short period of time; just a matter of a couple weeks until they could get on, on the ship to come to China.

LEVINE: And I take it there were lots of people in the same situation?

BENZ: Yes, a lot of people. About seventeen thousand, seventeen to eighteen thousand Jews were able – that small a number. That's a small number when you consider all the Jews that were in Germany -- made it out via that route from Germany to China, one way or another.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And in, in Germany, was the family a religious family do you know?

BENZ: Well, they held the holidays. And they were what's considered Reform -- I mean, not Reformed -- Conservative Jews. So they were considered Conservative; both families.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BENZ: And they went to the synagogue. They didn't hold Kosher. But they, they held the holidays and the Jewish traditions and those kinds of things.

LEVINE: Yeah. And so, what were there --, when they got to Shanghai? Was there already a Jewish community there?

BENZ: Well, in Shanghai, there was a, there was a --. Actually let me, let me explain a little bit further here. There was a settlement. There were several settlements in Shanghai. There was the -- the Russian settlement, and there was the Sephardic Jewish settlement, and the French settlement or quarter, whatever you want to call it. And so there was a group of Jews that were there, Sephardic Jews. There's two different sects of Judaism. There's the European Jews, Ashkenazi Jews, and the Sephardic Jews.

And I'm considered Ashkenazi Jews -- Jew 'cause I'm from Europe, from that part of Europe. Germany. And the Sephardic Jews had, had a settlement there. And they were business people and into banking and, and that kind of thing. And there was also the Russian settlement there and -- and French quarter as well. So it was quite an international city, Shanghai, itself was.

LEVINE: Well now,

BENZ: At that time.

LEVINE: Were, were some of these people there prior to World War II?

BENZ: Oh, absolutely.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BENZ: That was the Sephardic Jews --

LEVINE: Sephardic.

BENZ: -- were there for -- since -- oh, probably the late 1800s or early 1900s. They were there since then.

LEVINE: I see. So they had a little community of --

BENZ: They had a community.

LEVINE: -- like, like-minded people perhaps that they could move right into.

BENZ: Well, actually what happened there is that Jews came from Germany -- many of them came with not a nickel in their pocket. They spent every penny just to get a ticket to get out of the country. There were some that still had money, some money. You know, there was different levels I guess you could say. Some -- some had money and -- and like my parents had nothing. Not two nickels to rub together. So those people when they got off the boat they ended in what's called (like my mother did) a *Haym*. Which is a Yiddish or -- word for a 'Home'. And, and it was in the, the poor part of Shanghai, which was called Hongkuo. And later, it became the 'Hongkuo ghetto'. And I'll talk more about that -- when the Jews were all, all the immigrating Jews, were forced to live in the Hongkuo ghetto. Which was an area which was less than one square mile. So you had about seventeen or eighteen thousand Jews plus about six thousand Chinese all living in this one square mile area of, of what was called the Hongkuo ghetto.

LEVINE: Why were they ghettoized? Or you want to --

BENZ: Well, we can,

LEVINE: -- get to that?

BENZ: Yeah, we can get to that.

LEVINE: Okay.

BENZ: Let's see here. In -- in the -- in the *Haym* -- . Let me talk a little bit about what happened with my parents. How they dispersed kind of there. So my mother ended up with her husband in one of the *Hayms* there in Hongkuo. And my father kind of struck out on his own. And he came from a farming background. And one of the things my father always said and my mother:

'What you learn, no one can take away from you.' So if someone is willing to teach you something, take the time to learn that. Because what you learn, you never know when that's gonna stand you in good stead. So my father came from a farming background so he went to the Dutch sector there. And got himself a place to live and food to eat from a Dutch woman for taking care of her, her little place and her animals. She had some – some chickens, and some geese and ducks, and whatever else. I don't know. Small, small group of animals there, and taking care of her place. So my father had a place to live and food for that in return. So he was able to stay out of the *Haym*. And my mother and her husband, they were kind of stuck there.

LEVINE: I see.

BENZ: So my mother -- her husband tried to find a job and -- and the jobs were scarce, few. Especially if you didn't -- if you're, if you're -- didn't have much that you could draw on. He was a shoe-salesman in Germany, so that doesn't bode well there in China. I mean, they don't sell a lot of shoes I'm sure in those circumstances. So he couldn't find a job. But my mother worked as a -- a job as a waitress at, at a restaurant for tip money. No, no wages. And -- and just enough barely to get food to -- to get by.

LEVINE Right in that quarter?

BENZ: Right in, yeah. And she worked in Shanghai but lived at the *Haym* at this time.

LEVINE: Mm-hmm.

BENZ: So that's, that's where she was for, for a period of time. And on February 18, nineteen-forty...and oh! I better step back a little bit. The Hongkuo area was, was governed and dictated over by the Japanese.

LEVINE: Oh.

BENZ: Interesting, huh? So the Japanese held court over the Hongkuo area. And on Feb-- in fact, the Japanese played a bigger part in China than you would think. In February 18, 1943, the Jap-- Japanese issued a proclamation that restricted all the Jews in the Shanghai area. They rounded them all up. Within three months, they all had to find living quarters or someplace to live in the Hongkuo, this one square mile area of -- part of Hongkuo. And they gave the streets between this and that, that they could live. And so some of them had already taken their last money and gotten a place to live in Shanghai. And now they had to give this up and move to Hongkuo. So one of the things the Japanese wanted them to do was trade with the Chinese living spaces and to get the Chinese -- some of the Chinese out of Hongkuo to make enough room for the Jews to live there.

So there it became very cramped and very difficult. Because now, if they had any kind of job at all outside of the Hongkuo area in Shanghai, they couldn't go to that job. They were restricted to the Hongkuo ghetto. There was a Japanese fellow by the name of Goia. He was this short little man, with this short little man syndrome that ruled Hongkuo with a kind of an iron fist. And you'd have to get a pass through -- via him to get out to go -- If you had a job out of -- out of the Hongkuo area. And he would, you know, depending on what mood he was in, 'Yes' or 'No'. Or, you know, he might hit you or -- or do whatever. So you were kind of at his mercy to get in or out. You know, to get out if you wanted to do something.

LEVINE: Well now that they were experiencing something similar to what had happened --

BENZ: Uh-huh.

LEVINE: -- earlier on in Germany, did they have communication with their parents or with anyone in Germany at that point?

BENZ: Communication was very slow, you know. It was by mail, and sometimes you'd be months and months trying to get mail from here to there. And my mother would write her sister, who would manage to get to Seattle. She -- my, my aunt went -- and her husband went -- directly from Germany through Switzerland. They only were there a couple days to Seattle. Because they had --

LEVINE: A visa?

BENZ: -- they had relatives.

LEVINE: Oh.

BENZ: He, my uncle, had a cousin and an uncle that lived in Seattle. And he could get a quota number and the guarantee. The bigger the guarantee, the quicker you could get to the United States. And meaning, the guarantee, meaning if you had relatives that were -- had established themselves in the United States, could show that they were -- had money. Had a business, let's say, and could provide for you.

LEVINE: Could sponsor them.

BENZ: Sponsor them. And they had to get huge declarative statements. In other words -- the more money you had, the quicker you got a quota number. The higher you went on the list.

LEVINE: Mm-hmm.

BENZ: So they were fortunate they got out. But --

LEVINE But they wrote to your mother and,

BENZ: Mail was scarce.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BENZ: And you probably want to know how my Mom and Dad met and,

LEVINE: Well. And yeah, what happened to her original husband?

BENZ: Well,. As time went on, you know, under those kind of circumstances when you're under that much stress and that much going on in your life that -- that is so unknown. Then, and he couldn't get a job and....And they eventually separated. He went his way; she went her way. And my mother became ill. She, she got dysentery which a lot of the people in Shanghai got. You gotta remember, this is a whole different country. The water was, had a lot of problems. The food had a lot of problems. They got dysentery, beriberi, typhus. Malaria was all over the place. You were living in such a small, confined area. Well, my mother got ill. She got dysentery and there was no medications to speak of, you know. And so this just went on.

So friends of hers, the Neubachs, who had met my father on the ship (they came over on the same ship with my father from Italy to China) said -- and

they had gotten, they knew where my father was staying out of town. Said, 'We want you to come and visit a friend of ours and get some fresh air out -- he lives out in the country away. So we will take you and maybe that will help you.' So they went out there for the day. And when my mother and father -- when my mother and her friends got to where my father was staying, they recognized each other and said, 'Well, we met in -- in Italy!' And my mother was very, very ill. So at the end of the day, my father and they told their stories and you know, talked and whatever. My father said to my mother, 'If you go back, you will surely die. Because, you know, there is not enough food there, the lev—' The amount of food that they were getting not enough to -- not even subsistence level. And so my mother stayed and my father nursed her back to health and then they were together.

LEVINE: Mm-hmm. So did they actually marry in, in China?

BENZ: Yes, they did.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BENZ: And, and that's a whole 'nother story because they had to find her husband. They had to locate him to di-

LEVINE: Oh, to divorce?

BENZ: ...to divorce before they could -- they could get married.

LEVINE: And they found him?

BENZ: Mm-hmm. And that was after, after --. And my father, here's -- here's an interesting part of the story. Again, back to 'what you learn, no one can

take away from you'. My father in order to, he didn't have enough to eat even living with this little farm. So he built what's called a 'Dutch oven' out of, out of rock. He built an oven outside. He-- fired it or heated with – with wood, and baked the pumpernickel rye bread that his mother taught him how to bake. And that's what they lived off of.

LEVINE: Wow.

BENZ: So. And it's a longer story, but I don't want to take up the whole time with that. You can read my book! [Laughs]

LEVINE: Okay, alright. So, so they married while your father and your mother were living with this Dutch woman?

BENZ: Nope.

LEVINE: No.

BENZ: They didn't marry them because they hadn't found, found her husband yet. So when the Jews all got rounded up and they had to live in Hongkuo, then they had to have another way to – to live and to eat. My father borrowed money from friends of his and built a brick Dutch oven on the streets of Hongkuo. Baked his bread, got a pass to get out of the ghetto, and sold his bread to the British officers.

LEVINE: Wow.

BENZ: And then came back into the Hongkuo. Well, then, he paid all his friends back, and then he was able to get a hold of a small bakery there called, the Dalny Bakery or the Hongkuo Bakery. It had two names.

LEVINE: What was the first one?

BENZ: 'Dalny'. It was on Dalny Road.

LEVINE: D-A-L...?

BENZ: N-Y.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BENZ: And so, he had a small bakery. And baked the bread that his mother taught him to bake -- the, the pumpnickel rye bread. And he baked the bread and they lived in -- in the --, there was kind of an attic above this little bakery. And my mother and he lived above the attic. And my brother was born there in China. And then two and a half years later, I was born.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, this --, we're gonna stop here. Switch the tape, turn the tape, and continue.

END SIDE A, TAPE 1 BEGIN SIDE B, TAPE 1

LEVINE: Okay, so we -- we were just saying there was, there was a very lively community,

BENZ: Mm-hmm.

LEVINE: ...of Jewish people in Shanghai. Why don't you talk about the community into which you were born in Shanghai?

BENZ: Okay. In, in Hongkuo, even though it was under very dire circumstances and the housing there was, was meager...I mean, a room that would be

smaller than a -- than someone's -- half the size of someone's normal bedroom today. Would be a place where six, or eight, or ten people would live. There was no running water. Water had to be purchased from the Chinese coolies out on the street. And it had to be boiled. And there was no bathroom facilities. They were out behind the, these -- these ramshackle apartment buildings. One for every, every -- every huge building that was there. So. And then what it was, it wasn't even a flushable toilet. It was a toilet that people used and then they pick up the pot and put it out on the streets. And someone would come, the Chinese would come and pick it up and -- and whatever with it.

But the Jews tried to keep their culture alive. They knew they had to keep up their spirits. So with what they had, they did. They fixed up the ghetto area as best they could. They had theater there. You know, they had talented people there. They had a, a music. They had a con—they concerts and orchestras and street-side cafes. And you know what? In street-side cafes, nobody had money. So you'd go and sit and you'd -- you'd -- with your -- a, a, whoever you went to the café with -- your date or your husband or your boyfriend or girlfriend. And they'd have a cup of hot water with a few drops of soy sauce in it.

LEVINE: Oh.

BENZ: And sip that because there was not tea or coffee that you could afford or have. And so that was, that was part of the culture. They kept the synagogues going and the high holidays they observed and so on and so forth, whatever. People -- what's-- what clothes they came with (if they could part with anything) they'd sell it on the street to make a few, few, a little bit of money so they could eat. I mean, food was scarce; times were difficult. Medicine was almost un-, you know, wasn't there. The doc-- the Jewish doctors that were there did the best they can. My father -- at one

point -- got malaria, beriberi, and typhus all at one time. And he was in the isolation hospital. My mother and Chenti --, Chenti was a Chinese coolie, or a workman you'd call him. That my father (stepping back a little bit) met when he was living out in the country.

Chenti and his friends walked by everyday on their way into Shanghai to -- to earn -- to try to earn some money. And my father befriended Chenti, and got him to buy the flour that he made the bread with. And so when he moved to Hongkuo, Chenti came with them. And my father taught him how to bake. So my mother and Chenti baked the bread. And my mother put it in -- in the baby carriage (I was born by then) and -- and -- and delivered the bread and on --. Chenti delivered it on the bicycle with the basket on front of it. And delivered it to wherever they could to, to sell the bread so that they could -- they could live.

LEVINE: Wow. Well now, was this known to your Japanese captor that was, that was, that was watching people who left the quarter and -- and went out into greater Shanghai? I mean, was that approved of?

BENZ: Well, you had to go through Goia to get out,

LEVINE: To get out.

BENZ: And so some days, yes, you could get out. Some days, maybe you couldn't. Some people in, in... some of the bread was sold within Hongkuo. You know, I mean, we aren't talking about lots of loaves of bread.

LEVINE: Right.

BENZ: We were talking about what they – everything was mixed and done by hand.

LEVINE: Mm-hmm.

BENZ: And so it was – it was whatever they could make and whatever they could sell.

LEVINE: But, but Goia knew that they were doing this?

BENZ: Mm-hmm.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BENZ: Oh, yeah. Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Now, how about the Jewish people who had been there before World War II? Were they -- they must have been of more comfortable and of --

BENZ: They --

LEVINE: ...higher means.

BENZ: ...they supported the *Hayms* in -- with, with money and, and what they could. They did a good job of that. The Chidori family was one of them that that was big on helping the immigrants that were there. Yeah, they did their part. And all the other money came from contributions in the United States from the Jewish Fed-- Jewish funds of different sorts. And, and Jewish – United Jewish Appeal and things like that.

LEVINE Mm-hmm. I see. So they got they got, they got some assistance?

BENZ: Yeah, American Jewish Joint Committee regulated all the money that came in to feed the people. And, and do what they could for the people as far as medicines or whatever.

LEVINE: Mm-hmm.

BENZ: But my mother didn't know if my father would make it. He didn't know if he was alive or dead. Finally, several weeks after he'd been in the isolation hospital, someone came to the bakery door and asked – knocked on the door and said, 'Are you Ruth Meier?' And she said, 'Yes.' And they said, 'Ludwig is still alive.' So that was the only contact she had.

LEVINE: Wow. Now, were you born when your father was that ill? Had you been born?

BENZ: Yeah. I was, I was a – I was already born, yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. Are there any circumstances around your birth that, that are of particular note?

BENZ: Well yeah. I -- when I was three months old, I weighed less than I was born -- when I was born.

LEVINE: Because of the food? Because of nourishment? And was it,

BENZ: Well, when my mother had me, she had me in what was called the Jewish hospital, which was a tent. [Laughs] It was called the Mount Sinai Hospital.

LEVINE: [Laughs] Oh, wow.

BENZ: It was, it was a, let me see. I take that back. I'm not sure if I was born yet when my father was in the, in the --.

LEVINE: Isolation?

BENZ: Let me go back on that. Isolation hospital or not. But, but anyway, I weighed less when I was three months old than when I was born. And my mother was nursing me! And I'd -- I'd nurse and I'd throw up the m-- I'd throw it up. My mother said I would just eat and throw up and eat and throw up. And when she was in the hospital, there was no milk to be had either. I mean, you know, my brother had rickets, my older brother. Because there was no vit- not, no milk. Hardly any. And so unless you bought it on the black market and that was illegal. But lot of people did, including my father. So my mother also -- there was two other women in the hospital at the same time that had children. And they were not able to nurse their children. And they never came into milk. So the children would have died. But my mother had so much milk, she expressed her breast milk and fed those babies as well the whole time that we were in --, the rest of the time we were in China. So she kept two other children alive besides my, besides me.

LEVINE: Mm.

BENZ: So when I weighed less than, than I was born -- when I was three months old -- they were very, very worried, of course. And they, the doctors, wanted to do a operation on me. They said something was wrong with my stomach. And my mother said, 'If they operate on her, she will surely die.' So a friend of -- of theirs, an elderly lady, said, 'Come. Take -- take Rosie,' that's me, Miriam 'I have an old friend who's a pediatrician from Germany.' So my mother bundled me up and walked however many, however

distance it was. Something else than a mile, of course, because it was only one square mile we lived in. Up these several flights of stairs, she told me, knocked on the door.

And a very elderly gentleman answered the door and had my mother come in. And he unwrapped me on the kitchen table and examined me right there and said, 'Hmm there's noth-' And asked my mother a number of questions. 'Nothing wrong with her stomach. It's your -'. There's a Yiddish term goes *meshuganah milch* [crazy milk]. Her -- she was too upset. And her breast milk apparently reflected that and I kept eating it and throwing up. But then they had to feed me something else. What are they gonna feed me? Well, fortunately my father --, very brave man, very insightful. Had -- knew that we had to get out of Shanghai at sometime.

And the money -- the, the Yen was worth less and less. Got to the point where'd you have to a whole wheelbarrow full of money to buy a loaf of bread practically (as my father'd explain to me). So he bought American dollars on the black market. And if you were -- that was very risky -- and if you were caught with that, then they would jail you. Throw away the key, and forget it. And he did. He bought American dollars on the black market. And he also went out on the black market and bought powdered milk and, and Gerber's rice cereal in a box. And my mother would sift it to get the worms out. [Laughs] So, and he bought a baby bottle and they started, my mother, started feeding me. And I, I stayed alive.

LEVINE: Survived.

BENZ: I survived.

LEVINE: Well, it was must have been something about your make-up because she nursed two other babies, right?

BENZ: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

LEVINE: And they didn't they weren't throwing up.

BENZ: Nope.

LEVINE: Her milk was okay for them.

BENZ: Yeah. I must have had a sensitive stomach or something.

LEVINE: Right. Yeah. Wow.

BENZ: So, I made it.

LEVINE: Well, I imagine a number of people were entrepreneurial within that setting  
--

BENZ: Mm-hmm.

LEVINE: ...as your father certainly was.

BENZ: Mm-hmm. Well they had to. They – in order to survive, you survived on what you knew and what you were -- you were willing to do, you know.

LEVINE: Mm-hmm.

BENZ: And he was a,

LEVINE: Did they talk about their captors at all, besides Goia?

BENZ: Well, there was also a – in a Japanese like SS that came around. And they'd have periodical blackouts where they had to do pull down the blackout curtains and darken everything up. And, and, and when the bombing was going on – and my father at one time, at one point -- there was a little, small crack of light that came out from the bakery. 'Cause he was baking in the wee hours of the morning, you know? And they came and knocked on the door, and they beat my father up, and so. But he survived that as well.

LEVINE: Did your mother and father ever talk about how they felt, or what they were thinking during that period of years?

BENZ: Well, they were there for nine years so that was a long time. Yeah, it was, it was trying. It was very, very difficult. Very, very trying and it was, it was a, a, you know, diff--, hard time. But they knew that the alternative, you know? They were, felt fortunate to get out of Germany and be alive. Because my mother got a letter at one time near the end of the war. My grandmother want, want -- trying -- was trying to get out of Germany and they didn't have any money. And any way of guaranteeing that what little they had would get to my grandmother. So she could get her way out of, out of China. And then what routes? By then,

LEVINE: Out of Germany?

BENZ: Out of Germany. And at that time, the Chinese border was closed, too. It was only open from '39 to like '40 or '41. A few people still got in but that was the end. So, so my grandmother ended up perishing in the concentration camp. And she, she was taken away in 1942. And, and right about there was the last my mother heard from her. And she – it was later on found out that she died just before the end of the war.

LEVINE: Mm. So your mother didn't really know until after she left China that her mother had, in fact, died in the camp?

BENZ: Yes. Yeah, that's right.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Well, were they thinking beyond China? In other words, were they thinking what they wanted or hoped for?

BENZ: Well. Well, yes. They were, they were, they were trying to get to America. And most, you know, because of, you know, this is the 'land of milk and honey'. And my mother's mother was here and that's family. And those ties are important, you know? And, and, and that's what it's all about for the Jewish people, is family. And, and so, that was – that was the whole deal. But they put in requests to go almost any place.

LEVINE: They were able to do that? At what point? After the war?

BENZ: After the war, they put in the request to try to get to Israel, to the United States. And, of course, the quota number was far, far away. And they didn't have any guarantees or anything at that point. To go to Santo Domingo where my uncle Morris, my Dad's brother, was. And to go to Argentina and, you know,

LEVINE: They'd go anywhere? Anywhere?

BENZ: ...South America. Anywhere just to get out.

LEVINE: Right.

BENZ: And they decided that wherever they got the 'okay', or the -- to go to -- or the paperwork to get to, that's where they'd leave to. And that was Santo Domingo.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So, let's see. Did they ever talk about when the war was over? And when they heard about it and what the response was from them and, and the rest of the people who were with them?

BENZ: Well, of course, they were relieved. But they were also worried because they didn't know of the fate of their families. My father lost his sister and her husband and their three daughters in -- to, to the camps and many of their other relatives. Very, very few were fortunate enough to get out. The, the, when my -- what happened in Germany that the older people, the parents and the grandparents, felt that the Reich would leave them alone. That they would only bother the young people. And, of course, they still had faith in their, their country. And this was the only thing that they knew. And, and for old people to travel to the unknown was very, very difficult. I mean, here was a strange land -- the Orient. You know.

LEVINE: Other side of the world.

BENZ: Other side of the world. They went,

LEVINE: Right.

BENZ: To go there, they didn't know what to expect, or what was gonna happen. And so, the word was, or was the -- the 'You go and find out how things are, and then we'll follow you.' But,

LEVINE: And everybody thought that, including your parents probably?

BENZ: Yeah.

LEVINE: That the elderly would be left alone.

BENZ: Yeah, would be left alone. And, or at best, if they could get them to follow -  
- to come with...But I'm sure in their heart of hearts, they knew that that  
wasn't gonna happen. I mean, the last time my mother saw her mother --  
she was under twenty-five-years old. So I mean, she was born in 1915  
and this is 1939. So that was the last time she saw her, was when she  
boarded the train to go to Italy.

LEVINE: Mm. So when the war was over, did your parents ever talk about that?  
What happened within that Shanghai community when, when word was  
out? I mean, it must have been different.

BENZ: Well, yeah. And at that point, you know, the history changed. Not  
changed, but the Japanese – the Communists were taking over. And there  
was -- there was quite a, quite a struggle between the Japanese and the  
Chinese. And, you know, Chiang Kai Shek-- shek was losing the struggle  
with the Chinese, you know, and Mao. And there was a lot of things going  
on – lot of, lot of turmoil. Lot of, of, of fight between the Japanese and the  
Communist Chinese. And, you know,

LEVINE: Was life any better for them once they were –, were they still confined to  
this little quarter?

BENZ: It was, they could then move out of Hongkoo and move back into  
Shanghai. But they didn't, they stayed there. But they were able then, my  
father kept the bakery going and --

LEVINE: And quit actually?

BENZ: ...and sold his bread outside in Shanghai. And, and at that point, he -- that's where at, for that period of time, he made enough money so that we could have transport out of Shanghai to Santo Domingo.

LEVINE: Santa Domingo.

BENZ: Otherwise,

LEVINE: So Santo Domingo was the place that came up that was available for you to go to?

BENZ: Yeah, yeah.

LEVINE: And did a lot of people go with you at the same time?

BENZ: Yeah. There was, there was a fair a number of people, I mean. And when they left, they smuggled their American dollars out. Now that was the big deal. And two gold bars. So, and that was all illegal. They were, they were kind of sweating blood and water going through the customs again; and going through everything to get to Santo Domingo.

LEVINE: Did they have to --, they had to conceal it, I guess?

BENZ: Oh yeah, they hid it.

LEVINE: Do you know how they hid it?

BENZ: Oh, yes. I had...there was,

LEVINE: Oh, shoes?! It was in the shoes?

BENZ: No! It was not in the shoes. [Both laugh] I was in the baby buggy. My father – it was a pram. It was an English pram that he bought in China from wealthier people that were done with it, or whatever. He took the handle off, rolled up the American bills, put it in the handle of the, of the baby carriage and put the handle back on. Then he also had a, a baby powder tin -- Johnson & Johnson baby powder tin. They were in tins then. Took the bottom off, made a false bottom between that and the powder itself and folded up more money. The gold bars were sewn into the hem on my mother's coat.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BENZ: And so she never left the baby carriage out of her hand.

LEVINE: Or the coat off her back? [Both laugh]

BENZ: Yeah, or the coat off her back. And they were, they got on a converted troop transport,

LEVINE: Do you know the name of that one?

BENZ: It was the –, just a second. I have it here. It was, I think it was the...[rustling of papers]. The *General Gordon*. It was the, it was the shipping line that they --. They used -- this General Gordon Line was used to ship troop transports, too, to Europe. And then they – after the war – then they used that to take the immigrants to wherever they were going. Whether it was to the United States or to Santo Domingo, or whatever. They – they had a shipping lines of several of these ships. And so they were all -- the whole deck was made into bunks that were stacked one on

top of the other. And they put up blankets. This is the women's side; this is the men's side. And, and that's where you were.

LEVINE: I imagine some people stayed,

BENZ: Mm-hmm.

LEVINE: ...in China. Did your mother and father have contacts with people who,

BENZ: Not too many people stayed beyond 1950 because the Communists taking over, and, and that. So they were all pushed out. And they all got out for their own --

LEVINE: They wanted to go.

BENZ: They wanted to go. And there was a group of Jews, about five hundred to eight hundred Jews, that went directly from China to Santo Domingo. And at that time, it was under -- Santo Domingo was under a dictatorship. But he opened the borders to Jews to come from Germany. But the difficulty was there, and they actually were well-kept there. But here's -- the difficulty was to get transport to get from Germany to Santo Domingo. Because the, all the shipping lines were used for troops and supplies. And so,

LEVINE: You couldn't. Submarines --, and when they weren't,

BENZ: Yeah. And you couldn't book passage on anything. And you were fortunate if you could get there. It was called the Sosúa settlement, in Santo Domingo.

LEVINE: So in other words, when people like your family came from China to Santo Domingo, there was already German-Jewish community,

BENZ: Yeah, there was a settlement.

LEVINE: ...of several hundred people.

BENZ: Yeah.

LEVINE: I see. So how long did your family stay in Santo Domingo?

BENZ: Just for a few months, until we got the quota number and we got guarantee. And my uncle arranged that.

LEVINE: To go, to go to Washington?

BENZ: To go to Washington. My mother's sister's husband arranged the – the guarantee. And we came, then we came to New York.

LEVINE: Yeah. That's great. Okay.

BENZ: That's how we landed here on Ellis Island.

LEVINE: Island. So did they ever,

BENZ: A big rust-bucket of a ship. [Both laugh]

LEVINE: Well, did your mother and father ever talk about coming into the New York harbor or Ellis Island?

BENZ: Yeah, I have a couple of pictures.

LEVINE: Oh, wonderful.

BENZ: And I can get copies of those to you.

LEVINE: That'd be great. We'll put that in your file, yeah.

BENZ: And of my mother holding my brother on the deck of the ship as we're coming in,

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BENZ: And yeah, it was quite a sight. And it was – it was very – I'm sure -- joyful time for them to get to the United States.

LEVINE: Did, did,

BENZ: And here we were.

LEVINE: Did they ever describe what Ellis Island was like, or did they have any anecdotes or anything regarding Ellis Island?

BENZ: Well, my father said that, you know, the inside of the place was very big. And he was amazed at the high ceilings and, and, you know. There was a little bit frightening for them because they didn't know if they would – You know, they heard stories about people being turned back. And we had to have the, the health certificate saying we were all healthy and that, you know, we had all the paperwork right. So anytime you go through that kind of control, for people like my parents who –, it was a life and death situation. In, in previous times, they'd been through those kinds of things. It was a little unnerving for them.

LEVINE: Right.

BENZ: So they were a little, a little afraid.

LEVINE: Well now, this was December 9, 1947.

BENZ: Mm-hmm.

LEVINE: Were, did they talk about whether there were lots of people coming through when they did, or anything?

BENZ: Well, the people – the sh-- they talked about the people on their ship. That they all got off and came here. So whatever the ship held, you know, ship full of Jewish immigrants came, so. And they were all processed through here.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And what –, did they, did they encounter like people who were being detained to be deported, or any of that? Did they ever talk about that?

BENZ: They didn't talk too much about that but my father said some people didn't get in. That's what he said, 'Some people didn't get in.'

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. So they,

BENZ: For health reasons, or whatever.

LEVINE: Or legal paperwork, whatever.

BENZ: Uh-huh.

LEVINE: Okay, so they were here. And then --

BENZ: In fact, my mother always wore a scarf around her head and around her neck because she had a goiter,

LEVINE: Oh.

BENZ: ...and she didn't know if that would, but --

LEVINE: Oh.

BENZ: ...for the health issue. But she got through.

LEVINE: Yeah, she kept her scarf on.

BENZ: [Laughs] Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Okay, well then how did they -- did someone meet them here? What happened next?

BENZ: Their -- they had distant, my mother had a distant cousin here. And her husband, the distant cousins' husband that lived here in New York; and came years before. They were in the garment business. And they met him here. And they were just here for a few days, my parents were, and they were just long enough to arrange transport to go to across the United States by plane and train to --

LEVINE: Oh, right.

BENZ: ... to Seattle, Washington.

LEVINE: Mm-hmm.

BENZ: The Hamlins met him here.

LEVINE: The Hamlins. And they must have corresponded, I suppose, from Santo Domingo?

BENZ: Mm-hmm.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Yeah. Okay, so they, they left New York City by plane or train? Do you know?

BENZ: I think by plane. I'm not sure.

LEVINE: Huh.

BENZ: By plane. They, my –, they just talked about by plane and train they went across the United States.

LEVINE: Now, okay. And then they, did you, like, live with your mother's family in Washington,

BENZ: In, in Seattle.

LEVINE: ...when you got there?

BENZ: Yeah, yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BENZ: And – and they tried to get an apartment in Seattle, but apa- they wouldn't rent apartments to families with kids very easily and non-Am-- non-English speaking.

LEVINE: You were speaking German, Yiddish?

BENZ: German, mainly German. My parents did speak some Yiddish.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BENZ: But they -- their native tongue was -- was German. My mother could speak English better than my father. She spoke English fairly well.

LEVINE: You mean later? Or when she arrived?

BENZ: When she arrived. She learned English in school.

LEVINE: Oh, in Germany?

BENZ: In Germany.

LEVINE: But not, she didn't learn anymore in China?

BENZ: No, no. Just a little bit. Enough to say, you know, few phrases and some words and things. So she could get by a little bit, but they... My aunt was here, my *Tante* Pauli and her husband, Gerd Rosenberg were here. And they took them in and they lived with them for a period of time. And then they -- it was illegal to have the gold bars. So jewelers oftentimes would buy the gold bars for not anywhere near what they were worth. They, they made out very, very well. So my parents sold the gold bars and that was enough money they -- that they had, could live here for -- 'til my father got

a job. What they did is, they bought a very, very old, old, old house on Queen Anne Hill in Seattle. That's when Queen Anne Hill wasn't the – a spectacular place to live. My father walked downhill everyday. Several miles down to the bottom of the hill to Vandicamp's Bakery and sat on the back steps. Because one of his friends from China, who immigrated just before him came directly to the United States instead of via Santo Domingo like we did – was a janitor at the bakery. So one day, a janitor didn't show up. My father did this everyday for two or three weeks and finally he got hired as a janitor. Then they found out he could bake and they made him into a baker.

LEVINE: Okay, we're gonna end this tape here and continue with another tape. Wow.

END TAPE 1 SIDE B BEGIN TAPE 2 SIDE A

LEVINE: Okay, so we were saying at the end of the last tape that your father first became janitor and then a baker at this bakery.

BENZ: Mm-hmm. Van de Camp's Bakery.

LEVINE: *Vandicap's?*

BENZ: Van de Camp's.

LEVINE: Van de Camp's.

BENZ: Mm-hmm.

LEVINE: And that's in Seattle.

BENZ: Yeah.

LEVINE: And so his mother's teaching him to bake bread certainly served him well, didn't it?

BENZ: Well, saved it -- saved our lives. 'What you learn, no one can take away from you.' So that was -- that was a important part,

LEVINE: Yes, uh-huh.

BENZ: ...in our coming to America.

LEVINE: So then he kept his job at the bakery?

BENZ: At the bakery. And, and as time went on -- my father was a very, very proud man --which is good. And immigrants were, were looked down upon at that time,

LEVINE: Oh, talk about that. What kind of prejudice did you,

BENZ: ...in Seattle. There was, there was quite a bit of prejudice. And especially Jewish immigrants, you know, at that time in Seattle. And there was some kind of incident that happened at the bakery. And I don't know the details but -- but a couple of the bakers tried to make it my father's fault. So they came to my father,

LEVINE: Scapegoat him.

BENZ: Scapegoat. And they fired him. Well, he had a friend at the bakery, and his name was John. And I don't remember John's last name. But John spoke up for him and in my father's behalf and said -- found and, you know, got

to the bottom of the whole thing. And righted the situation and said, 'Nope, these guys are the ones that did it,' and he had showed proof. And so they wanted to hire my father back. Well, being the proud fellow that he was he said, 'No'. So in the meantime, his brother -- my uncle -- lived out of town in a small town at that time called Kent, which was about twenty miles or so -- twenty-five miles out of Seattle. And he was a farmer there. And he --, was actually a cattle dealer. He bought and sold cattle -- cows to farmers; milk cows and beef cattle, and that kind of thing.

And so my father took our family in, and we moved to Kent. And we lived in a very small hovel of a house in Kent on five acres of land (because my father wanted to be a farmer) that belonged to my uncle. And bit-by-bit my father paid for the -- we paid for this piece of property and this little house, which was actually the washhouse of the big house next door. And it was tarpaper on the outside and the roof leaked. But it was our own, so that was important. And it was a beginning. It was another step forward. And my father kept a day job at Pacific Car & Foundry, which was a steel fabricating place in Seattle. So he commuted to Seattle everyday and in the evening he --. And in the morning, before he went to work, he milked the few -- the handful -- of cows that we had. That he bought on credit [Laughs] and from my uncle and paid for the cows. And my father was not a young man, because when I was born, my father was forty-five years old. So by this time, we're now into the early fifties. And my father --

LEVINE: His fifties.

BENZ: Yeah. And he's milking cows morning and night, and he's going to Seattle to work in steel fabricating at Pacific Car & Foundry. He worked the milling machine for the whole eight hours or ten hours a day. And so he worked hard and long. And my mother helped on the dairy. And she did her part, as well and -- as well as raising my brother and I.

LEVINE: So are those your first memories of being in Kent?

BENZ: My first memories were actually of Queen Anne Hill in Seattle where we lived.

LEVINE: How old were you then?

BENZ: Four.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BENZ: And, you know, three. I don't remember then. But I remember just before we moved to—to -- t—Sea-- to Kent. I remember sledding in the winter when it was very snowy there. We had a -- a -- an unusually heavy snowy winter and my father and I walking up to the, the corner hardware store to buy a sled. And that was a big deal because we didn't have much money. But my father bought my brother and I this Red Flyer sled so we could go sledding. And then, later memories were of Kent and living in this little house and my mother churning the butter. And we -- raising our vegetables and crops -- fruit and vegetables -- and canning and going to school. And oh! I remember my brother in Seattle when we lived in Queen Anne Hill went out to play with the neighborhood kids and came home crying because he told my mother they couldn't understand him. And he couldn't understand them. He only spoke German, and they only spoke English. But eventually he went to kindergarten in Seattle, so he learned to speak English. And --

LEVINE: How was learning English for you?

BENZ: That was -- I learned English living in, in between Seattle and Kent. By the time I got to kindergarten (I spoke with an accent, I know, because that teacher told me that) and I went to school speaking English.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Now were there --, I'm sorry go ahead.

BENZ: Go ahead.

LEVINE: Were there other immigrant children in your classes?

BENZ: Not in Kent. The only Jewish families that lived in the whole town of Kent were my uncle's two children, Harvey and Eva; and my brother and myself. In fact, at the school a lot of teachers when I took off for the Jewish holidays (Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur) the teachers didn't even know what that was, you know. And they wanted to make it an unexcused absence. Wait a minute!. Had to take care of that, and educate 'em to what -- what this was.

LEVINE: What was, what was it like being the only Jewish families? I mean, did you have any kind of -- were there any ramifications to that?

BENZ: Well, the only ramifications was I couldn't share with other kids in school that we're having Chanukah now. And, you know, they didn't understand that -- that we didn't celebrate Christmas. We celebrated Chanukah, and it was usually at a little bit different time during the year. But we went to Seattle when we could to the synagogue there in Seattle; to the Hertzl Synagogue on East Cherry Street in Seattle.

LEVINE: Hmm.

BENZ: And it was a Conservative synagogue. And about sixty percent of the people that were in that synagogue were immigrants from Shanghai.

LEVINR: Oh.

BENZ: And people that had been on the boat with my parents or that they knew in Shanghai. So there was quite a little Shanghai community at this synagogue.

LEVINE: Do you know why such a large number from Shanghai ended up in Seattle?

BENZ: Well, it wasn't a large number really. There was,

LEVINE: Oh, but it was sixty percent of the congregation!

BENZ: Sixty percent of the congregation. And the congregation was probably three hundred people, you know. Three or four hundred people, or maybe three hundred people, I'd say.

LEVINE: Yeah.

BENZ: There wasn't a large congregation. But there was sixty percent of those were from Shanghai, I'd say. And they were family names that, you know, they —, how they got here? The same way we do. Because their guarantees happened to come from people that lived on the West Coast. And, and maybe their family members or, or friends that got here before them, or whatever. So, and they came in on the quota.

LEVINE: Mm-hmm.

BENZ: For a variety of reasons, and usually some connection. It had to be some connection.

LEVINE: Yeah.

BENZ: It had to be some connection.

LEVINE: Did your mother and father – do you have a sense of once they got here and got a little bit established in this country, did they ever talk about...it? Did they ever talk about your life?

BENZ: My father, my father talked to me often about their life in Shanghai and what happened. 'Cause I was a tomboy and I was always out with my father milking the cows or working in the fields or, or whatever. And so I, I spent a lot of time with my Dad. And, my mother didn't talk about it nearly as much – only when she was angry about something. Like if there was some kind of a situation where someone didn't treat us well or, or were anti-Semitic in one way or another towards us. Then she'd talk about our past. It upset her way too much to talk about it. She'd start crying and it would upset her. But my father often told me the stories about what happened. Then when I started writing my book, my mother was a great record-keeper -- being a legal secretary. I have the trunk at home that says 'L. Meier, New York, New York' right on it. And so, in the trunk were the records. My mother kept all the papers that we had to have, to get out of --. Had like their passports to get out of Germany, to go to Italy – the stamping on the passport to get to China, the paperwork requests that we had to go to different countries. And, and all the paperwork to get to the United States and, and --

LEVINE: Wow.

BENZ: So, and she also kept a kind of a chronology. Of, of dates, and places, and things that happened, too, as well..

LEVINE: Do you think the experience in Germany and then in China had ramifications on your mother and father's personality. I mean,

BENZ: Absolutely.

LEVINE: In what ways?

BENZ: Well. When we were here -- it was always family, food, shelter was very, very important. You know, we were never without plenty of food in the house. And, and, and being able to take care of ourselves. And, and keep money stashed away at home in case, you know, you had to get out of the country again. So they --, those kinds of things.

LEVINE: Mm-hmm.

BENZ: And, and my mother especially would be leery of strangers to some degree. And she relaxed more as she got older and was here longer but it was always a -- they were always a bit guarded.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And how about their German side and their, and their American side? Did they become citizens?

BENZ: They became citizens. And my father was and -- my parents never missed an election. They never missed being extremely informed on every issue, every thing on the ballot, everything. Every candidate. I mean, they voted it, for everything that they could. And were very, very well-informed, and supported the working class and --

LEVINE: Do you think that was a result of --

BENZ: Yes.

LEVINE: ...having been through,

BENZ: Absolutely.

LEVINE: Right, uh-huh.

BENZ: You know, their freedom and their right to, to help uphold the freedom was very, very important to them. And they really instilled that the work ethic, in my brother and myself. And in supporting their -- your country and, and,

LEVINE: Well, how,

BENZ: ...being good citizens.

LEVINE: How about their German, um, their German side? I mean, did they keep up certain cultural things? Did they want to hold on to that, or did they want to forget that and become American? What was their stance?

BENZ: Well, it was kind of a mixed cultural thing. My mother cooked German food. And -- and as far as the cultural things like, probably, their enjoyment of the arts and things like that -- opera. That -- they brought from Germany. And, and cooking and just a -- some of their ways and things. Yeah, they kept some of that. But they never wanted to go back to Germany. It took them, they were here --. 1965 I think was the first year that they -- first time that they finally went back to Germany.

LEVINE: And what was it like for them?

BENZ: Kind of tongue-in-cheek, they went back. And they – their first trip back was with my aunt and uncle. And they went to Germany, then to Israel.  
[Laughs]

LEVINE: Oh.

BENZ: And so, they went back to my mother's hometown -- to Berlin. And there was no one there that they still knew. And they went back to my father's hometown then. And my father still had people that knew him. And he'd go up to someone's door and knock on their door. And they'd say, you know, 'Ludwig -- Meier Ludwig' -- as they always said their last name first and then their first name. 'Meier Ludwig' and they recognized them right away. And so after that, my folks went back several times. And then my father became ill when he was in Germany one year and he didn't go back anymore. But my mother continued to go back. But she went back to my father's hometown, where she was really well received. And only went back to Berlin one more time after that.

LEVINE: Mm-hmm. How about your feeling about your German part? What --, how do you feel about,

BENZ: Well, I have no desire to go back to Germany. Or I mean, for a long time, I didn't have a desire to go to Germany. I wished I would have gone back once with my mother so that she could have showed, --shown me around. But, you know, I didn't do that. And, but my German part? I don't think a lot of my German part. I -- I still cook like my mother does. That's probably the Ger-- only German part I really, really kept. And that mixed with my Jewish part. [Laughs]

LEVINE: Right.

BENZ: And we aren't, we aren't overly religious. We're Reformed -- my husband and my children. I have a s—a daugh-- a son as well as my daughter. I have a son, Samuel, and he's twenty-eight. But you know, I'm -- I'm kind of part of the melting pot, you know. American, Jewish, German descent, via China, you know, quite a combination. My folks used to cook Chinese food, too! My mother was a good Chinese cook. She learned over there to cook Chinese, so she --. You know. We had a -- quite a mix here, quite a melting pot.

LEVINE: Well, what was your impetus to write the book?

BENZ: Well, it was for my children, you know. I wanted my chil- I didn't want any of this to be forgotten. Although I've told this story to my children many times and -- you know -- they're very, very interested in -- in where their mother and as well as their father's come from, and their history and family history. And they were fortunate enough to live -- we lived very near my mother and father. And so they had, my parents had a great influence on our children's lives. So that was very, very good for them. And I wanted my children to have this written history to pass on to their families. And so I started writing the book

LEVINE: Mm-hmm.

BENZ: And it was just kind of by fluke that I started it. I 'm --, it just sort of happened.

LEVINE: You mean, you just sat down one day and started?

BENZ: Well, actually, I wasn't the best English student in high school and didn't have the best writing skills. But later on, in my job that I -- that I had --

held for twenty years, I did a lot of writing. So my writing skills really improved a great deal. And, and when the Internet came about and we started e-mailing all our friends --. I had stayed great friends with my tenth grade English teacher. And we started e-mailing each other and so I'd e-mail her a few e-mails. And I'd write a few short, short, kind of a short story about what happened at work, or whatever. And one day, I wrote a longer story and she wrote me back and says, 'Rose, you have the gift. Keep writing'. And I said, 'What?' I e-mailed her back and I said, 'Are you kidding?' 'No, keep writing.' So I liked writing, and I took a couple of classes at community college, the local community college -- the personal enrichment kind, you know, that you take. No grade, no pressure or anything, no tests.

And, and I started writing. Someone mentioned Natalie Goldberg, who was a, who's written several books and a couple of books on writing. And one of the things she says in her books is, 'Give yourself permission to write the worst garbage in the world. Just write. Don't worry about spelling, grammar, punctuation, or anything.' So. And she says, 'You have to practice writing.' So I was practicing writing. And she said, 'Start with 'I remember.' So one evening, I started the keyboard with the computer 'I remember.' So I started writing about baking bread, the bread that my father taught me how to bake. And then all of a sudden, it dropped into 'Germany was a difficult time in 1939, or '38.' I think I wrote. And there came the first chapter of the book.

LEVINE: Wow, wow. Did you, did you make any discoveries about your family and its history in the course of doing this?

BENZ: Well, what was surprising is over the next few months I wrote several of the chapters in the book and over the next couple years. And I wrote it as

I remembered it from the things my parents had told me. And I didn't open the trunk not once. And so I just, I just wrote.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BENZ: And I just wrote and wrote and wrote. And as time went on --. Then one day (decided after I had written quite a bit of it) I opened the trunk and I got into the briefcase. And I started looking at my mother's notes that she had written. You know, this kind of a timeline of things and the paperwork and everything and putting it together. And very surprising, I was quite accurate. And there was also some discoveries.

LEVINE: Like what?

BENZ: Oh, like paperwork that I had forgotten. Didn't remember that we had from Doctor Ditner saying that we were well enough to go, leave China. And some of the documentation about when I was, I was born. And different, different paperwork of different things like that. Where we lived. The -- I have the plate thing that you put on the bag that imprints the bag with the name of the bakery -- with the Dalny Bakery. So I have that. And, and the little -- little cutout from the newspaper, the Jewish newspaper. They had a Jewish newspaper at that time -- several of them going on in Shanghai -- with advertisement from my father's bakery in it.

LEVINE: It was in German?

BENZ: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BENZ: And some of them were Yiddish papers as well.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BENZ: And so German and Yiddish papers, both. So those kinds of things.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. And how – so personally, have you felt a real satisfaction of some kind?

BENZ: Yeah, it was – it was kind of like what--. When I wrote this book, it was kind of like a -- it kind of brought everything together. And it – it kind of settled everything. It was kind of like, like, like it -- it brought everything home. You know. Kind of put it all in perspective and all in a -- in a place. It kind of encapsulated everything.

LEVINE: And I guess that was important for you?

BENZ: Yeah, it was important to do that.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

BENZ: To make sure that this was documented. And that this hist-- the family history was written now.

LEVINE: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

BENZ: To this point.

LEVINE: Yeah. Well, is there anything that we haven't covered, that you think is important to mention before we close?

BENZ: Mm. Let me see here. Well,

LEVINE: I can see you have some of your mother's genes, as far as record keeping, making sure you've covered everything.

BENZ: Well, no. Other than...Oh, some of the things that people did in China! I could talk a little bit more about that. They took their clothes and --. We had tailors – very talented people. Like, the suits would run out -- they didn't have more clothes. And they'd take them apart and use the good parts and turn things inside out. And re-manufacture clothes and things or cut them down and make clothing for the children, you know. Make the pants shorter and smaller. And so we had very talented people that way. And they'd keep – keep a sense of it. Doing these things, having a theater, having these little cafes, setting up their shops. It, it gave them something to hold on to. It gave them some simula-- you know, it kind of simulated life as they used to know it.

And it -- it kind of kept the community and kept their spirits up. And gave them something to do and made them feel useful. And that was very, very, very important to do all those things. And one of the things my father did on the way over on the ship, he brought his hand-working tools because, as I said, he sold shoe-findings to shoemakers. He sold the leather and the things they needed to make hand-made shoes. And in the evening, he used to sit with them as they made the shoes and he learned that trade as well. So. And how – and repairing the shoes. And so on the ship, his contribution was that he fixed everybody's shoes that needed repair on the ship. Because his idea or his thinking was that at least when they got off the ship to the unknown that they'd have something on their feet. Because who knows how much they'd have to walk, or the next time they'd be able to find some shoes. So he, he repaired the shoes for people on the ship.

LEVINE: Wow, that's beautiful. Were there other people doing the other kinds of things?

BENZ: Yeah. Whatever they knew how to, knew how to do, you know. Sew clo- you know, repair people's clothing. Do whatever it took, you know. The barbers cut hair, you know, whatever. Whatever it took to make, to make, to keep them alive and to keep, keep things together.

LEVINE: Mm-hmm.

BENZ: And that's what they did.

LEVINE: Yeah, well that speaks well of human nature when, when put in a very difficult confined,

BENZ: Also in the bakery, you know, I mentioned they had to find my mother's first husband.

LEVINE: Right.

BENZ: When they found him, he was not in good health. And my parents took him in and let him sleep in the little backroom of the bakery. And, and fed him so that he – to keep him alive.

LEVINE: Mm.

BENZ: So you know, you did what you could do to help -- each other.

LEVINE: Mm-hmm, yeah. Well, I'm glad the family made it here.

BENZ: And another thing is to know that, that I was --. I had it pictured in my mind what my father's bakery looked like. But I, you know, just from his description. And through friends, I'd been searching around trying to find someone that knew my parents. I found a -- got in touch with a fellow made by the name of Bodo Zimmerman. And he was sixteen years old -- as a sixteen-year old young boy in China; he worked for my father in the bakery.

LEVINE: Oh.

BENZ: And he drew a drawing of the bakery and exactly where everything was and everything that he could remember about my parents. And it was -- and then send it to me. And we had -- we've had phone conversations on the phone as well about these things. So it was -- I was pretty, pretty right in what I was thinking.

LEVINE: Oh, it matched,

BENZ: It matched.

LEVINE: ...what you had in your mind?

BENZ: Yeah.

LEVINE: Wow. Well, that's wonderful. Well I want to thank you for a most interesting interview. I'm very happy to add this to our Oral History Collection.

BENZ: I'm very, very happy to be able to do to this. Thank you for asking for me to do this. I appreciate it.

LEVINE: You're most welcome. And I've been speaking with – you go by Rose now?

BENZ: Rose, yeah.

LEVINE: Rose Benz. And this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. And I'm signing off.