

EI-1462

MARIE VARE

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LEVINE: Today is August the third, the year 2007. I'm here in the oral history studio at the Ellis Island Museum with Marie Vare, V-A-R-E, who came here in 1950 when she was fifteen years of age. She has a rather unusual story and stayed here at Ellis Island for five months with her family. So um, (clears throat) let me um -- this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service, and if we could start at the beginning please. If you would say um -- what was your name when you arrived here?

VARE: Mare Evert.

LEVINE: Could you spell it please?

VARE: M-A-R-E, first name, and Evert, E-V-E-R-T.

LEVINE: And um, what was your birth date?

VARE: August 19 (coughs) – August 19, 1935.

LEVINE: Ok and um, you were coming from Sweden. However, your family is Estonian, is that right?

VARE: [superposed] Correct.

LEVINE: Ok. Um, now, it seems like you mentioned earlier – you came -- you left Estonia for Sweden in 1944.

VARE: [interposed] Right.

LEVINE: So let's talk first about those years between 1935 and 1944 when you were in Estonia. Where in Estonia were you?

VARE: Well I lived in a capital. I was born in a capital in Tallinn and my family lived there.

LEVINE: Ok. And you lived there the whole time till you left?

VARE: Yes.

LEVINE: Ok. And what kind of -- well, what was your mother's name?

VARE: My mother's name was Alexandra.

LEVINE: Alexandra. Do you remember her maiden name?

VARE: Yes, it's a Russian name. Jegorava.

LEVINE: Could you spell it?

VARE: J-E-G-O-R-A-V-A.

LEVINE: And was she Russian?

VARE: Um, her father was Russian, but she was born in Estonia and her mother was Estonian.

LEVINE: Ok. And your father's name?

VARE: Hugo Evert.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And was his family Estonian going back generations?

VARE: [superposed] Yes, yes, they were.

LEVINE: [superposed] Yes. Ok and um, when you think of those early years – those first ten, eleven years – what are – what are the things you remember most about growing up in Estonia?

VARE: Well um, I think until about – I was about five years old things were pretty normal. I mean, we led a normal life for its time. My mother would take me out to the park and we would go walking and she'd meet with her friends. And in Estonia it was very popular to meet your friends for coffee. Here, people meet for lunch. Over there, they would meet for coffee and cakes. And then (clears throat) when the war started in 1939 everything changed. And um, the Russian forces occupied Estonia and uh, there were a lot of um

– a lot of people were just taken away. They would knock on the doors at night and would put ‘em into wagons and ship them to Siberia. And uh, so there was a lot of fear -- especially going to bed at night -- because you never knew what was going to happen. And then the next year the German forces entered Estonia and um, even though the Germans had their fault, at least we were not afraid of being woken away at night and taken away.

LEVINE: They weren't taken anyone away, the Germans?

VARE: [interposed] Not the Estonians, not the Estonians, no.

LEVINE: [interposed] Now, was there a Jewish population –

VARE: [interposed] A very -- very small -- very small Jewish population. And yes, if you were Jewish, that was a different story, yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Now your family -- what religion were you?

VARE: Lutheran.

LEVINE: Lutheran, I see.

VARE: And so, I mean there were incidents that -- that -- that I -- I do remember. As a matter of -- well--. Let -- let -- let me put it this way.

LEVINE: [superposed] You can tell them if you would like to.

VARE: [interposed] So what my father was afraid of -- I mean as they were following the war, my father and a friend of his got a small boat and they hid it. Because you know, while the Germans were in there, we still could not do things openly. And -- and they hid this boat and they had it in hiding and then

when uh, the war -- when things -- the Germans were losing and the German armies were retreating and the Russian armies were coming into the country again -- that's when my family escaped. And as a matter of fact, I did not really know, but I was nine years old -- but apparently there were some Jewish prisoners and the Germans -- in the morning that we escaped there was a terrible smell in the air and apparently they were burning -- we met some Estonian soldiers, and they said they were burning the Jewish prisoners. So, that's what the smell was.

LEVINE: Wow. Now the Estonian soldiers, who were they --

VARE: Well, they were -- well they had no freedom. They -- they -- when the Germans conquered a country they had to become part of the German army but then they -- they were -- eh -- on -- you know, when the forces were retreating they were not going to Germany. They -- they were kind of on the loose. (laughs)

LEVINE: I see, I see, I see.

VARE: [interposed] And then my family escaped to Sweden in a small boat.

LEVINE: And how many people were in the boat?

VARE: Five. M-- my --- my father, my mother, my brother, I, and my father's friend. And uh, and so we escaped to Sweden.

LEVINE: Now how -- how long did it take you to get from Estonia --

VARE: [interposed] Well that's another long story (laughs) but I don't know if I --

LEVINE: [interposed] Well go ahead, I mean this is part of it.

VARE: [superposed] Well we were caught -- we were caught in -- in -- in a terrible storm on the Baltic. And we were actually -- we kind of lost control. Our motor gave out and we were kind of whipped around on the Baltic and finally after five days we were picked up by a Swedish vessel.

LEVINE: Oh my goodness. Now just to get a sense of this, how big was the boat? Do you have any sense like, how many feet long it was or --

VARE: I think they said it was five meters, but I'm not sure. Actually it made -- made the Swedish -- it seems to me that we made every newspaper wherever I came to. When I came to Sweden it made the Swedish newspapers because it was the smallest boat that made it across -- there were many Estonians and Latvians and Lithuanians who were escaping at that time.

LEVINE: And the Latvians and the Lithuanians as well as the Estonians went to Sweden?

VARE: Well some went to Germany, some went to Sweden. And -- and so there were many boats coming in at that time. But ours was the smallest one so it did make the Swedish papers, that it was the smallest boat that made it across.

LEVINE: Do you remember being whipped around in the Baltic?

VARE: Oh yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah?

VARE: Oh definitely. Well after a while you become kind of drowsy but --

LEVINE: Yeah. I mean were people afraid that the boat was gonna capsize and that you would drown?

VARE: [superposed] Oh yes, oh yes. Well, it – it was um -- actually from – I don't know if I remember it or if it's stories from my parents but we -- we did arrive at the Swedish coast. We could see the coastline, but there were all the rocks and we couldn't get close to it. And we were really – the – the – the worst part of it was – you know we were afraid that the boat was going to hit the rocks and we were going to perish. And so when the boat – as the waves took it further back out onto the Baltic it was almost a relief, because you didn't have that imminent danger.

LEVINE: [superposed] Danger, yeah. And it was a – it was a -- what did you say, a Coast Guard vessel?

VARE: Well, I don't know if it was. It could have been a Swedish Coast Guard vessel. I don't really remember. I was nine years old so I don't really know.

LEVINE: But some vessel, a larger boat.

VARE: [superposed] Yes, a – a large -- a large vessel.

LEVINE: [superposed] A large ship, yeah, picked you up.

VARE: Picked us up, yeah.

LEVINE: Oh my goodness. So, so um, let's see. So then you got to Sweden and then what happened?

VARE: Well originally, there were so many refugees that came all at the same period. You know it was like during the week's period, Sweden was kind of inundated. And they put us in different camps and then um, I don't know.

LEVINE: This is 1944?

VARE: Yes, in the -- in the fall of '44. And um, I don't really remember. Some people were in camps two, three months, they found places and work. Other people were maybe five months. I really cannot tell you for sure, but I'm sure it was no longer than five, six months. Then my father then found some work and we ended up in Gothenberg, Sweden, where we lived.

LEVINE: [superposed] Ok. Now what did your father do in Estonia and what did he do for work in Sweden?

VARE: Well, in Estonia my father was um -- he was a buyer for a -- I think it was a steel company., a -- a manufacturer -- and he bought the raw materials and things like that. And of course in Sweden it was just manual labor. As a matter of fact, I don't recall what the very first job was but I think the second job -- or the one that he spent most of his time was -- was in a hose factory where they did nylon stockings. And I think they dipped them into some -- he did the coloring, or they were dipping it into some color or something like that. (laughs).

LEVINE: Wow, wow. So um, so, when you say -- when he worked for a manu— bought for manufacturer -- was this um, was this cloth, or -- in Estonia -- what kind of materials?

VARE: [superposed] No, no, no, no. No, no. In -- no, no. It was steel.

LEVINE: Oh steel, I'm sorry.

VARE: Steel.

LEVINE: Ok, steel. Ok so – so, and of course nylon stockings. That's the thing you always hear about World War II – the women didn't have nylon stockings, right? But he was dipping them into color or something.

VARE: (laughs) [interposed] I think that was what his job was.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, ok so what was life like for you and your family in Gothenberg?

VARE: [interposed] It was great. I mean, for me it was great. I mean I hated to leave because I went to school there. I learned Swedish and I was fif—well actually I turned fifteen on the Atlantic. I was fourteen when we left and I was fifteen when I arrived in U.S. \

LEVINE: Ah.

VARE: And um -- but I had done my first year in what we call the high school or *gymnasium* and – and I really didn't want to leave at all. But uh, well, there were some – there were some political situations that um -- by that time the Russians had -- you know they were in control in Estonia. And I – I don't know, I think that the Swedish – you know I was a child so I'm really not up on those politics so much. But I think that the Swedish government returned six or seven Estonian soldiers to Russia and this did not sit very well with many of the people there. And so, I-- like I say, my father just – when he heard about these Latvians, who were building this ship, or they had bought a ship and rebuilt it for this purpose, of cross--

LEVINE: [interposed] To get to the United States?

VARE: Yes to get to United States. He bought passage on it for our family.

LEVINE: And it was a big ship?

VARE: Well there were a hundred and fifty people. There were a hundred and fifty people and most of them were Latvian. And I think there were only like -- maybe six, seven, eight Estonians that were on that ship. Most of them were all Latvians. There might have been some Lithuanians. I don't know. I would be --

LEVINE: Was there a period of time from when the Latvians were -- were preparing this ship --

VARE: [interposed] Yes.

LEVINE: [interposed] Till you actually --

VARE: [superposed] Which -- during which I led a perfectly normal life and didn't think at all about leaving (laughs)

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And you felt -- you felt safe in Sweden the whole time.

VARE: [superposed] Oh yes. Oh absolutely, absolutely. I thought I was Swedish (both laugh).

LEVINE: You kind of look Swedish

VARE: (laughs) No, no.

LEVINE: No? (laughs) Ok so you -- you were feeling -- and you were a teenager, so you -- you had your friends, and your life, and you--

VARE: [superposed] Yes, exactly, exactly. I was very upset when we came here.

LEVINE: [superposed] Yeah. Do you remember when the war was over -- in 1945 -- do you remember that day?

VARE: Yes I -- well, I remember things about the war being over. I don't know if I exactly remember the day.

LEVINE: [interposed] Well whatever, what you remember.

VARE: But yeah I -- well it in -- we -- actually it was in Sweden when the war ended. And so you know we were talking about it but we were no longer involved the way we were in Estonia. Because in Estonia there were bombings and things like that.

LEVINE: It was kind of at a distance but you knew --

VARE: [superposed] At a distance of course, yes, yes.

LEVINE: Was your father politically involved, do you know?

VARE: Um, well in Estonia, perhaps. Not really politically but there were -- he -- he was part of -- I don't -- I don't know -- really know what the translation -- what I would call it. Um, [long pause] the National Defensive League or whatever-- something like that.

LEVINE: [interposed] Uh-huh, to defend Estonia.

VARE: Yes, yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. And – and um, let's see -- so do you remember when you were told that the ship was ready and that you would be leaving?

VARE: Yes.

LEVINE: And what did – did you have belongings? What did you do? Did you sell everything or did you take things or wh--?

VARE: [interposed] Well we hardly took anything. Just clothing and maybe -- and picture albums and things like that. But everything else was sold or left behind -- yeah.

LEVINE: Ok and um, and –

VARE: [interposed] Oh and I have to say. I did take two dictionaries. One was Swedish to English and the other was English to Swedish (laughs).

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Do you still have them?

VARE: You know, I don't know what happened to them.

LEVINE: But they were important at that time (laughs).

VARE: They were very important.

LEVINE: And what about your mother's attitude? What was her feeling about coming to America?

VARE: [superposed] Well it was alright with her. It was definitely a joint agreement on my mother's and father's part.

LEVINE: Ok so you and a mostly Latvian group of people of about one hundred and fifty – how was that voyage? Now was that on the Mosen[ph]?

VARE: Mosen[ph], yes. But actually that -- that voyage was very peaceful until the very end. Of course it was boring (laughs) but the weather was wonderful, the Atlantic was wonderful. We were watching the dolphins play, but it -- you know, one day after the other was the same. But, I don't even recall any rainy days. I mean it – and then one morning we woke up, we had a little break. And I do remember that -- that was a beautiful picture after being on the water all this time. They stopped at Azores -- at Azores Island. It was a beautiful island with all beautiful um, white roofs and voluptuous plants and flowers. And – and we did get off the boat and we walked around and looked at all the fruit and bought as much fruit as we could (laughs) and then boarded the ship and continued.

LEVINE: And was, was everyone kind of jubilant at the, at the prospect of getting here? What was the attitude?

VARE: [superposed] I really don't know. I mean you know, we were children and –

LEVINE: Were there other children your age?

VARE: Very few, but there was one – and – and there was – there was a widow and she had two daughters, and she was the widow of the Latvian (pause) president's son. So those two girls – one was my age and one was two years younger – they were the grandchildren of that first Latvian president. But their father was deceased, so it was the mother and the two daughters. So I spent most of my time with this other girl.

LEVINE: Wow, yeah.

VARE: Her name was Ana Cakste. I have lost touch with her but I remember because all the time here, on Ellis Island, was spent with her.

LEVINE: Oh! Can you spell her last name, by any chance?

VARE: You know I'm not really sure, I think it's C-A-K-S-T-E but I also remember that – that there was some kind of a little –

LEVINE: [interposed] Punctuation?

VARE: [interposed] Uh yeah, hyphen on top of something but I don't remember exactly.

LEVINE: Ok, so do you remember when the Mosen[ph] came into the New York Harbor?

VARE: Yes.

LEVINE: Oh well wait a minute, you were going to Boston first, right?

VARE: Yeah we were going to Boston. We never did come into New York Harbor.

LEVINE: Ok.

VARE: Ok what happened was, we were coming in and I think that the um, uh -- the captain, or the people in charge, decided that we were approaching U.S. but they decided that rather than come in at night they would come in in the morning. And we came in with a bang, (laughs) I said I always made the newspapers where I -- wherever I arrived. Just that morning it was very very um, foggy, and one of the U.S. fishing vessels collided with us. So what happened was of course they called the Coast -- Coast Guard and -- and we

came in with a big ado because I think the helicopters came out and said look at this -- here's this boat full of one hundred and fifty illegal immigrants (laughs) arriving. And -- and so actually we made the Boston papers. So I don't really know the date but if I had to I guess I could go back and find it out -- that it was in 1950 and some time I think the last week in August but I'm not positive.

LEVINE: Well you said you turned fifteen on the ship—

VARE: Yeah.

LEVINE: So it probably was towards the end of August.

VARE: Yes, exactly.

LEVINE: Yeah. Um, so ok, so you came in and um, here you are, a hundred and fifty illegal immigrants, so what did they do with you?

VARE: Well they put us into -- I believe it was a school house, I really cannot tell you what kind of a building it was. But they really didn't have the facilities for it. So I think we were there two or three days. I th-- and uh -- I think -- I'm not even sure if -- but it was wonderful. We were able to take showers and we had fresh food and then they put us on buses and shipped us to Ellis Island.

LEVINE: So you went from Boston by bus to Ellis -- to New York to Ellis Island?

VARE: Uh-huh. It was a long ride, there were no freeways (laughs).

LEVINE: And what did people think was going to happen?

VARE: Well, they kind of expected that there would be some difficulty and uh, so they – everybody expected that they were going to get permission because you know there -- there were no criminals. These people were all seeking asylum. These people were all honest people and-- and you know, they had held jobs in Sweden and all that. So what they needed was – and - and I think the American government didn't know what to do with us. And that's, I think, why we were that long on Ellis Island. Because finally they decided to put us under the displaced persons act – admit us under the displaced persons act. And at that time, everybody needed a sponsor. So, you had to have some kind of a sponsor here in the states. You know who -- they wouldn't let you off unless you had a place to go to. I mean you – you weren't just gonna leave Ellis Island and walk around Manhattan (laughs).

LEVINE: Yeah. Did you know someone who could sponsor?

VARE: [superposed] Well my father -- my father knew someone. But what we also needed – and I – I want to talk about that, because I'm very proud of my father, for doing this. After my parents had paid for the passage for – and I don't – on this Mosen[ph] -- this ship – my father had nine hundred U.S. dollars left.

LEVINE: [interposed] Left.

VARE: Yeah. And when we were at Ellis Island there was an opportunity – they – they asked for the men, if they wanted to work in the kitchen. And they paid him ten cents an hour. And my father worked ten hours every day in the kitchen.

LEVINE: For a dollar.

VARE: For a dollar. And [long pause] I guess I get emotional [voice cracking] [long pause]. I'm sorry. (sniffing)

LEVINE: That's ok. You need a tissue? Oh I don't know if I have.

VARE: I -- no I -- I'm fine.

Levine: You ok?

VARE: Once the permission came through that we could enter U.S. -- and we did have a person here, but we needed five hundred dollars per adult. And my dad had that extra one hundred.

LEVINE: From working for the ten cents an hour?

VARE: I know.

LEVINE: Because you were here five months.

VARE: And, so we left immediately, on the very first day that the permission got through. And there were others who did not have the five hundred dollars per adult. And um, I don't -- I don't know how long it took them. Eventually everybody came up with the money and all that.

LEVINE: What if they didn't have a sponsor? Did you ever hear of anybody being sent--

VARE: [interposed] I -- I really didn't. Because most of like most of them were Latvians and we really did not stay in touch. I did stay in touch with this girl Ana for a while.

LEVINE: Well wasn't that – I can see why you're proud of your father. I mean, that's amazing. Ok so, so you were -- you were – well let's talk a little bit about when -- those five months when you were here and what a typical day was like for you. If anything you can describe about the place.

VARE: Well yes. A typical day was, we got up. Well, like I said, in the beginning when we first came, they separated the men from the women. And we were all put in a room -- I don't know, maybe thirty, forty women. And the men were put in a separate room. But um, when it looked – and I really don't know how long we lived in that huge room – maybe a couple weeks. Then it looked like we were not leaving immediately and as rooms became vacant families were given private rooms. So we got a private room -- our family. And u, then we'd get up in the morning and we'd go down to breakfast. My father got up earlier because he went in the kitchen. And we would go down to breakfast and then on Monday through Friday it was some kind of a charitable organization – I really do not know. It was a women's group. .You know it could have been, whatever, a -- a women's club. And they had a lady who came here, t-- and it was on the lower level, in one of the lower rooms that – that we went to where they had a little school. But of course the make up – for the children – but of course the make up of that school changed all the time because, with exception of us -- and there were not that many of us you know, who were here five months. Because some children would come and they would be here for a week and they'd spend a day in the school and then they were gone and but um (clears throat) I guess the idea was to teach us English but they really – well it – it was still nice, that they did. We learned 'I am', 'you are', 'he/she', 'it/is' and things like that and we learned the Pledge of Allegiance and we learned *My Country, 'Tis of Thee*. (laughs) And we learned um, what was that uh, that Australian song.?

LEVINE: Oh uh...

VARE: Sweet Caroline? No, no it was something else. *Oh My Darling, Oh My Darling Clementine!* (laughs)

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So, so that was pleasant enough and you had your friend--

VARE: [interposed] Well it was -- it -- it was -- it was like maybe for an hour -- well it was really no more than two hours. But like I said we would go down to breakfast and then we'd come up, and maybe ten o'clock we'd go into the school and -- and we would spend two hours there. And uh, then there was lunch time. And you -- we -- we were allowed to go outside on the grounds. Now, I'm going to interject with something else which I was looking for in the building here and I did not see. There was another section of people on Ellis Island and they were all men and they were kind of part of the criminal element I think, because we always thought of them as prisoners. And -- and it seemed to me that we were able to look out the window -- or was it when we were outside -- they were fenced in. And uh, they would be allowed to come out and exercise -- you know, get fresh air and things like that. Whereas you know, we could go outside I think whenever we wanted to because you know, we couldn't hop off the island pretty well. So uh -- but they were -- they were guarded.

LEVINE: Were they people who were to be deported, do you think?

VARE: It's possible. It's again I do -- do not know, do not know what the political status was, but it was definitely different because there would be people who'd be coming in -- they might have difficulty with their papers, with their visas, with their documents -- they would be put into this section where this big hall was. And, and then there was that group.

LEVINE: Now do you know, could you say anything about their ethnicity?

VARE: I have no idea, no idea.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Just roughly like were there fifty of them or were there a large number of them?

VARE: It seemed to me like it was a real large number. I kept thinking like a hundred or more but I don't really know. You know again, I do not know.

LEVINE: I know, when you're young things seem –

VARE: [interposed] Bigger and – (both laugh)

LEVINE: Yeah. And just um, were you here -- do you think you were here for five months because our government was trying to figure out what to do with you?

VARE: [interposed] What to do with us. Yeah, absolutely.

LEVINE: So, so I see.

VARE: And I can go back to the rest of the day. And I was looking at this big hall that we were in. On one -- ok there was the center, and then there were a lot of tables underneath these pillars. And -- and I -- I can't remember but I think there were also some booths -- you know like you go into restaurants -- that -- that -- some booths like that. And people would just sit around and play cards. But then there was on either side, in the -- in the narrow part -- on one side there were billiard tables. And the men would play a lot of billiards. And we, the girls, me and my friend Ana, tried to play billiards and the men always chased us away -- didn't want these girls there. And on the other side there were ping pong tables. And I think that Ana and I played ping pong all day. (LEVINE laughs) All day. We became quite good, both of us.

We became really good ping pong players (laughs). And as I was saying earlier, also to break the monotony, there would be new groups of people coming in. And every time a new group of people came in we would get curious and we would go and look – who are they? What do they look like? And they would be standing there with their bags and they would be led to different rooms and--. But, like I say, I do not recall any other group coming in and staying as long as we did.

LEVINE: Right.

VARE: Yeah, but then I -- I do remember one thing. Every now and then we would get Chinese, and especially the Chinese guys. And they wanted to play ping pong, and they were really good players, but they were really surprised that here were two girls, fifteen years old, who could beat 'em (laughs). And they held their rackets differently.

LEVINE: (laughs) Ah, I want to ask you how they held them but we're gonna pause here, turn the tape, and then we'll continue.

VARE: Ok. Wow we're pretty well done.

LEVINE: Yup. And you -- you feel ok?

VARE: I'm ok right now.

LEVINE: Great, great, great, great, great, great. I'm so glad we were able to do this.

VARE: Well I think this is pretty much it. You know, I really don't know what -- what else.

LEVINE: Ok. Well tell me how the Chinese held their ping pong rackets.

VARE: Oh, somehow –

LEVINE: Oh instead of with your hand –

VARE: [superposed] We held, we held them inside our hand and they held them like between their fingers so that the outside of the hand –

LEVINE: You -- you were like palms up holding the handle and they were palms down holding the –

VARE: [interposed] Exactly (laughs).

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Well um, so, if you could say more about the groups that passed through, anything else.

VARE: I really don't know much about them, I really don't know much about them.

LEVINE: But was it a constant thing? I mean did many different groups pass through over the pass -- course of –

VARE: Yes, yes, I mean uh, p-- you know, maybe – I'm not saying that groups were coming every day, but maybe at least every other day. And, and, but sometimes it would be only one or two people, and other times it would be thirty people, sometimes it would be fifty people. And like I say, sometimes the Chinese usually – they -- they usually stayed about a couple weeks. And uh, there were other groups, but like I say, none of them stayed too long. And there might have been a few that became permanent but they kind of um, melted in.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. So you were teenagers. Did you – I mean were there boys for you to flirt with? I mean what was going on?

VARE: No, there – there really – well, there was, there was one kid that came over the um -- on the same boat with us. He was a year or two older, but he had acne and we didn't think much of him. (both laugh)

LEVINE: And how about your mother and father? How did they, I mean, it sounds like it wasn't unpleasant for you.

VARE: [interposed] No, no.

LEVINE: How about your mother and father? Were they upset at being detained so long or what was their attitude?

VARE: [superposed] No I don't -- I don't think so. I mean of course there was a concern what they were going to do and how things were going to go and all that, but um -- I don't know. Maybe they had been through it once and my father had a friend here so when we – oh when we -- then when we – his apartment was in Harlem and –

LEVINE: [interposed] Your father's friend?

VARE: Uh-huh. Well maybe it wasn't quite in Harlem. It could have been 110th Street. 110th Street and 2nd or 3rd Avenue, I'm not sure. And we did not spend too long with him. We spent maybe two, three weeks with him. His quarters were quite tight and – and you know he really went to a lot of trouble to put us up.

LEVINE: [interposed] Now is this the friend that came with you –

VARE: [interposed] No.

LEVINE: Or this is another friend who is – who lived here?

VARE: Who lived here, yeah. And um, then my father found work, and my mother found work.

LEVINE: And did you stay in East Harlem or around there?

VARE: And we found an apartment on 125th Street -- 126th Street, in Harlem. By Third Avenue and Lexington, I believe it was.

LEVINE: Now what was that neighborhood like then? Can you recall? Who was living there?

VARE: Well it was mostly black, but – but I think by Second and Third Avenue it was kind of a mixture.

LEVINE: A lot of immigrant people?

VARE: Well to me, they -- they all looked foreign. Because you know we – when you think of Sweden and it was kind of a monogamous population and – and -- and – and so you know you see all these people with (laughs) slanted eyes and different color and – and – and you know – it – it -- it all looked foreign but um--

LEVINE: So this was new to you? To be living in a place where there was such a variation of people?

VARE: [superposed] Right and well – and – and I'll tell you what, I went to, I – then, I – I don't really know who made arrangements – it could have even been with

help from Ellis Island or um, I don't know, I'm speculating now. But I was sent to a school in lower Manhattan, close to Seward Park – Seward Park High School. And Seward Park High School had a program for immigrants, for people who did not speak English. And I remember I took the Third Avenue L every morning and I rode down to Seward Park High School. But like I say we -- we got out -- we -- we got out I believe in the beginning of February. So we got February, March, April, May – four months seems almost too long – but then spring vacation came – but I don't think I learned too much there. I mean, over at Seward Park High School there were all kinds of people. There were a lot of black people, there were a lot of Jewish people, there were Italians, there were – all the people who didn't know English, who had very short, or limited knowledge. But I don't think that um - - I don't really think that their programs were that good. I thought they were pretty poor in retrospect (laughs). I don't think I really learned that much, in retrospect. But then my -- like I said, my parents found work.

LEVINE: What kind of work did they find here?

VARE: My – I don't know what my dad did. I – I – it was some kind of work that didn't pay very well. I think they got twenty-eight bucks a -- a week. And my mom I guess -- she found work in a sewing factory, and she was making almost fifty. So she was the one who was bringing in the big bucks. And uh, then when school let out, I mean here we are, what are you gonna do with me? And – and my brother -- and my brother was four years younger. And, so my parents gave us money, and over in Harlem, I think on 125th Street, there were a couple of theaters that were running movies – five, six picture shows all day long, twenty-four hours. And I think it cost twenty cents. So we both got twenty cents and we were supposed to go to the movies.

LEVINE: Every day?

VARE: Every day. (both laugh) But you know that's a very good way of learning English. (laughs) You sit in a movie, watch the picture, you hear the people talk.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So did the movie strike you as um, you know, different than movies you had ever seen?

VARE: No, not really, not really. I -- I remember there were who -- who were there was -- Loretta Young and -- and Kirk Douglas and --

LEVINE: So that's how you spent your summer, pretty much?

VARE: [superposed] Yes, pretty much. And then in the fall -- many of the Estonian people still corresponded and they were looking for better opportunities and then my parents -- my dad found work in Cleveland, Ohio.

LEVINE: Now how did he do that, from here?

VARE: Well -- like -- like the friend who we stayed with. He was Estonian and he'd let him know about other Estonians and, and there was kind of a network. And uh, and -- and then they heard that the Ford motor company was hiring people. And -- and uh, you know at a much better salary than twenty-eight dollars a week. And so we moved to Cleveland, and my dad started working at Ford and that was it.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And so did you stay there then?

VARE: Yes, mo-- yes I would say so. I -- I went to high school in Cleveland.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. How did Cleveland compare with New York?

VARE: Well, (laughs) you know, it's really kind of funny. Again, I'm laughing to myself. I got kind of used to New York in the short period of time. Third Avenue and all that – I thought Cleveland I was kind of dull.

LEVINE: When did you go to Cleveland, about what year, roughly?

VARE: Uh, '51.

LEVINE: Oh '51.

VARE: Yeah '51. I would say maybe around September. B-- you know -- we got out -- we entered here in '51 in February and I did that little stretch at Seward Park High School and then came the summer and then we moved to Cleveland.

LEVINE: [superposed] Uh-huh, uh-huh. So you had gotten used to New York, so Cleveland was -- was calmer, I imagine.

VARE: Yeah, it was definitely at the time.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. And were you in an -- in an Estonian community, in Cleveland?

VARE: Well there were other Estonians. No there -- well Estonia is a small country, and there is no such thing as an Estonian community. But there were around two hundred Estonians in Cleveland. So they yes, in a sense they -- my parents had people to associate with and all that.

LEVINE: Now was there an Estonian -- was there a church that mostly Estonians went to?

VARE: [superposed] Yes, yes, there was – there was no church, but there was a congregation, and I think that there was a minister who came from Buffalo. I think he came every other week and -- and we -- they um, rented or used – a church let him use their rooms for a service I think a couple of times a month.

LEVINE: And would that service have been in Estonian?

VARE: Yes, definitely, definitely.

LEVINE: [superposed] Uh-huh, uh-huh, uh-huh.

VARE: But then they -- they rented a hall, I – not all the time but you know, and they had a lot of Estonian parties and they started things like Estonian folk dancing for children and youth and things like that.

LEVINE: Now was your – did your mother and father have the attitude that they wanted you to hold onto your Estonian heritage or did they want you to become Americanized – did you have a sense of that?

VARE: Neither. I'm sure that they wanted me to hold onto my Estonian heritage. There was no urgency for me to become Americanized. On the other hand, there was never anything that well, 'This is too American' or 'You don't do that' or 'You have to—'. It was neither. I mean, I was expected to assimilate into the culture here and still maintain the Estonian heritage.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. And but, for your parents, were their social groups mainly Estonian people?

VARE: Oh yes, definitely , definitely, definitely. Because my father's English was really not very good. He never did speak too well. Now my mother had a talent, she was very efficient. I cannot sew at all but she started working – I

don't know if you've ever heard of it but there was a ladies' sportswear company Bobby Brookes, Bobby Brookes Sportswear?

LEVINE: Yeah I've heard of it.

VARE: And she made out very well. She became a floor lady and you know, came in charge of some of the departments and um, and um, and, and so you know her English was better but –

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Were your mother and father happy they had come here? Did they have any idea of going back to Estonia at some point?

VARE: No, no, no, no. I mean, this was it.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And how about your brother, what was his name?

VARE: My brother's name was Henn, H-E-N-N. Unfortunately my brother died in 1987. He just -- was four years younger than I am. He had a heart attack and so it was kind of sad.

LEVINE: Yeah. Now did he, did he take to this country?

VARE: Oh absolutely. He was younger and you know he was, a – probably had a – here I am still carrying this accent. I've been here fifty-seven years and people say 'Where are you from?' It's kind of a pain in the neck. And you know, he probably didn't even have as much of an accent because he was four years younger when he came here.

LEVINE: Younger. Yeah, yeah, yeah. And now how about you now. Do you consider – how do you think about your Estonian side and your American side? How do you think about yourself in those terms?

VARE: Well I know where I'm from but I certainly don't think of myself as an Estonian. Now as a matter of fact, I, (laughs) I have had some – it's -- I did go back to Estonia the first time in 1997 and of course we left in '44. And uh -- but since then I've been back many times and um, that's because, that's really because of politics. Because – in nine-- what is it, 1990 or 1991 that Estonia got its independence back? All those years, from '44 to that time, to 1990, it was under Russia. And my b—my father had built an apartment house -- an eight apartment apartment house. And at that time when Estonia got it's independence back, I was the only heir. And they started restoring personal property. So in 1997 (laughs) I got the house.

LEVINE: You got the apartment building.

VARE: Yeah.

LEVINE: Oh my goodness.

VARE: And so I still have all kinds of problems with it (laughs), trying to take care of it from a distance.

LEVINE: Oh my goodness. Now um, when you went back, how did it strike you, being in Estonia?

VARE: Well, it -- it's hard. It – it – well, I'll tell you. We had – we had -- we had been on a trip to the Far East. We'd been to Thailand, we'd been all this and that. And I had picked up this cold, this virus. And we came back home, and I had to go back because that's when they were going to turn this building over to me. And I arrived in Estonia with this terrible virus so I was so sick that it didn't really (laughs). Because I think that I picked that up in Thailand somewhere.

LEVINE: Oh I see.

VARE: But um, but uh, the first time I went back, um, I thought it was terrible. I mean it was in November, I was sick, the days are short, it got dark, it was a weird light – it never got light properly. But in a way you know I did live in Sweden till I was fifteen and the climate is very similar because the countries are very close. And um, since then I've been back. You know they have long days in the summer, short days in the winter. The climate I don't think is the greatest.

LEVINE: Yeah. Well um, what, so what happened? You went to high – did you finish high school in Cleveland then?

VARE: Yes.

LEVINE: And then what did you do after high school?

VARE: I went to college. I graduated from Kent State.

LEVINE: Oh.

VARE: And uh -- the infamous Ken State -- and um, then I got married, and --

LEVINE: How did you meet your husband?

VARE: Well he's Estonian too.

LEVINE: Yeah.

VARE: And uh, his parents [not understood] met him through the Estonian community, and uh, then –

LEVINE: And why don't you say your husband's name?

VARE: Alec, Alec. And um, well I guess I -- after he graduated he got a job.

LEVINE: Oh so you met in college? No, you met in Cleveland.

VARE: We met in Cleveland. But we started dating while we were in college. And um, so he worked for BF Goodrich for a while, in Akron. And we end-- started up living in Akron. And then he got transferred to New York, and we lived in New Jersey for a few -- for about five, s-- five years. Then he got transferred back to Cleveland – I mean not Cleveland, Akron. I -- I think that most of our married life we lived – well we lived in Akron, we lived in New Jersey, and uh, then went back to Akron and lived twenty-five years in Akron. He was working and then he got -- thank god -- transferred to Greenville, South Carolina and where the – where the weather is nice (both laugh).

LEVINE: Ah, ok. And that's where you live now?

VARE: Yeah, and he's retired now, of course.

LEVINE: So um, did you work after college?

VARE: I taught.

LEVINE: What did you teach?

VARE: I taught business.

LEVINE: Yeah? And did you have children?

VARE: Yeah we have two children.

LEVINE: And what are their names?

VARE: Ok our daughter is Ingrid. She's the older one and she lives in Newport, Rhode Island, and she has her own catering business there. And our son's name is Alan and he lives in Fairfield, Connecticut, and he's um, he works for Morgan Stanley. I don't exactly what he does.

LEVINE: Ok well um, now what would you say has brought you a great deal of satisfaction in your life that you've done?

VARE: Well, I think one of the things that certainly is – I've been very happily married. My husband has had an interesting job. We have traveled an awful lot, all over the world – Asian, Australia, Africa, all kinds of places. I think that's brought me a lot of satisfaction. So, you know, I've had a good life.

LEVINE: Now what would you say about the impact of coming here as a fifteen year old? In other words, starting out in another place -- in your case, starting out in two other places -- and then changing your life again, in this country? And that whole experience of being an immigrant, how has it shown itself in your personality, do you think?

VARE: Well I think that it definitely did have a um, an effect in the early years. There's no doubt about it. Because I don't think I felt American even though I went to high school. My fr-- best friend was a Latvian girl, kind of the same type of background.

LEVINE: This is Ana?

VARE: No, no, we -- I lost touch of her after we left New York. But uh, it was another Latvian girl. And uh, we kind of hung together and uh, I don't think we -- and, and then, I don't know, when we went to college, slowly you became more Americanized. And I think once we graduated and started working I mean you know, I just never even thought about it.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. But there was a period when you felt a little outside --

VARE: I, I think so. And of course in the early years -- and I'm gonna come back, I'll tell you this story -- I mentioned that I brought from Sweden a Swedish/English dictionary and English/Swedish dictionary. And when I started high school in Cleveland, it was in -- the school had already started. I think the school year started after Labor Day in those days, and I think we came in early October. And um, I did not know the language that well, even though I had sat in those movie houses. And I was -- I think that -- how shall I put this -- I think somehow the European schools had more respect for the teacher, even in those days, than the American schools did. And I had this history teacher who was very harsh -- Ms. Vickory, I remember her name. And uh, she gave us these assignments, and I would go home, and you had to answer these questions, and I would read the chapter and if I didn't understand it I translated it into Swedish. And then I answered the questions. And then I translated them back into English. And this went on for about a couple of months. And she also had this pattern that she gave you seat assignments according to your test results. So, at the end of the first test I sat in the last seat in the last row (laughs). And um -- and then like I say, after about couple of month, all of a sudden I ace the test and I'm sitting in the front row in the first seat (laughs). And um, then I realized, that she just checked off the name and threw the papers in the waste basket. By that time I was no longer in that kind of terror and -- and -- but you know, it gave me a base. And then all of a sudden, I didn't need those dictionaries

anymore. You know – and – and – and -- and all that. But I'm -- I'm laughing in retrospect that Ms. Vickory taught me English. Because I would stay up long hours answering those questions.

LEVINE: Was there something about her that commanded you to do well?

VARE: [superposed] Yeah, well you, you, no, no it wasn't that. It's just that you were just afraid of her. Nobody dared to speak, everybody's – she never lectured, she never taught. We came to class, and she'd say open up your book and answer questions from page so and so (laughs) and she was a very poor teacher. But, but she did have good discipline, I guess.

LEVINE: I guess, if you were afraid of her.

VARE: But anyway.

LEVINE: Wow, wow. So let's see. Is there anything else that um – just to – just to back up a minute. Did you say that the ping pong tables and then billiard tables were on each end of the Great Hall? Or on each end of the balcony?

VARE: No, no, they were in the Great Hall. Ok here are – the balcony goes around –

LEVINE: [interposed] Yeah.

VARE: And here's the center and the pillars are here.

LEVINE: Right.

VARE: Yeah. They were on either side of the pillars.

LEVINE: Oh.

VARE: As you came down the stairs – no, I didn't look. At the time that we were there, if you were at the end there were stairs coming down from both sides.

LEVINE: Ok yeah because the stairs were different at different times.

VARE: Yes, uh-huh. And – and then as you got down they were on – the outs -- between the windows and the pillars.

LEVINE: I see.

VARE: On one side there were the billiards tables, on the other side were the ping pong tables.

LEVINE: I see, yeah. And you said that your – your meals, were they served on big tables with benches?

VARE: [superposed] We always went downstairs. Yes, there were big tables. There were – well I don't know I – I -- actually there was a – and you see that was one of the reasons why my dad had to work such long hours. Because there was -- as I mentioned earlier -- there was this prison population. And we were not allowed together with them. So first they would have – the prison population would be fed. And they would empty out the dining room and then we would go down there. And – and this was for lunch, breakfast, and dinner. So – so there was a turnover.

LEVINE: Yeah. And what about the quality of the food?

VARE: I don't remember either way. I don't think it was all that great, but it wasn't really that bad either. So it never made that great of an impression on me.

LEVINE: And how about a library? Do you remember that at all?

VARE: No I don't recall there being one.

LEVINE: And how about entertainment?

VARE: [interposed] There was none.

LEVINE: [interposed] Was there anything like that?

VARE: No, there was none. But actually you know we enjoyed going to those little classes and we sang (laughs) but it was -- like I said, it was very monotonous --in retrospect.

LEVINE: Yeah, yeah. Um, ok is there anything else you can think of related to --

VARE: Not really.

LEVINE: This. And, and, so this is -- you say you've been back a few times, to Ellis Island?

VARE: No. I've never been back. [interposed]

LEVINE: This is your first.

VARE: Yes.

LEVINE: Ok so how does it seem to you coming back here today? [superposed]

VARE: Like I said I was ex-- I was extremely disappointed when I walked into the back because I -- I -- into front there -- because I did not see -- I did not know that this hall was on the second floor. So I was very, very disappointed. And I -- I kind of thought that perhaps they should have left those ping pong tables and the billiard tables and the benches and the tables were -- that are long, that were kind of lined up along the pillars, and there was a path left in the middle. But then I understand that we were here in 1950 and there were groups that came through here in the year 1900 and before that. So obviously there really was no set historical pattern. I'm sure it changed year after year.

LEVINE: That's exactly true. Yeah so that's why. They restored it, -- they restored it to a time when the largest numbers came through here, which was earlier than your time.

VARE: Ok, yes, yeah.

LEVINE: Ok um, so uh, how about a rooftop? Was there anything going on on a rooftop at that point?

VARE: No.

LEVINE: Were there little children here too?

VARE: Only with some of the groups. See there were none in our group. There were very few children in our group. There were the Cakste girls and there were a couple others and -- and -- and maybe this one boy. But I don't really recall. There might have been a couple of smaller ones -- you know maybe some five, six year old little boy that we really didn't pay attention to. But there would be people with families with children coming through, but again, they were a short period of time and that would be it.

LEVINE: And do you know at all if people were being sent to the hospital across the slip there?

VARE: You know I do recall something that there was a hospital but I don't know much else about it. But I do recall that – I don't recall anybody really becoming sick or if somebody did. I do know that there was a hospital.

LEVINE: But your parents, as far as you remember, were not frightened of being sent back? They didn't think they were really gonna be sent back?

VARE: You mean from the U.S.?

LEVINE: Yeah.

VARE: No, no.

LEVINE: [superposed] No. Uh-huh, you didn't have that fear.

VARE: [interposed] We all figured that it might take time uh, but no, there was never that concern.

LEVINE: Ok. Well, I'm delighted that you visited today and that I got a chance to do this interview.

VARE: Well I don't know what use it will be but –

LEVINE: No, it's a very good interview and you have been – you stayed longer at Ellis Island than most. So um, and you remember some things that are very good to have in our collection, in our oral history collection. So your interview will now be part of that collection.

VARE: [interposed]Ok.

LEVINE: And um, I want to thank you very much.

VARE: [interposed] You're welcome.

LEVINE: [interposed] And I've been speaking with Marie Vare, and this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service on August 3, 2007 and I'm signing off.

END OF INTERVIEW