

EI-147

GOLDA (GUTA) LASMAN

BIRTH DATE: DECEMBER 15, 1915

INTERVIEW DATE: 5/7/1992

RUNNING TIME: 1:42:58

INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE, PH.D.

RECORDING ENGINEER: SAME

INTERVIEW LOCATION: HALLANDALE, FLORIDA

TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: NANCY VEGA, 6/1993

TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR., 7/1993

POLAND, 1951

AGE 36

PORT: BREMEN

RESIDENCE: POLAND: LODZ: US: PHILADELPHIA, PA

LEVINE: This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. And I'm here today in Hallandale, Florida. It's May 7, 1992. I'm here with Golda Lasman who came, originally was born in Lodz, Poland, came through Ellis Island in 1951 when she was thirty-six years old. Why don't we start, well, first give your birth date.

LASMAN: Uh, December 15, '15.

LEVINE: 1915. Okay, uh, maybe to begin with if you would just tell how it was you decided to come to the United States.

LASMAN: Uh, after the war I was seven years in hospital sanitoriums, till '52. Actually I came in '52. And they told, and I had an operation on chest. I had T.B., and I had an operation on the chest. And they said to me that if I wait two years I can go straight to America. I didn't want to stay in Europe at all. At that time everybody used to go to America because nobody wanted to stay in Europe. And besides we didn't

have anybody. So, (she pauses) I was waiting more than two years because I came here seven years after the war. I came in '52. And I went through doctors, and they said everything is okay, you can go. I didn't go by myself. There was a whole ship, a thousand, eleven hundred people. Everybody went down from the ship and we stayed about a hundred seventy some people. And I saw that my friends who live in New York, they were waiting, but they couldn't see me. I saw them. And nobody came to us. They didn't give us nothing to drink, nothing to eat, the whole day. Well, finally at the evening, I am always the one, I must say, (she laughs) and I said, "What the hell you think, we're going to stay here a whole day?" We didn't have a little water, nothing.

LEVINE: Where were you then? Where, exactly, were you?

LASMAN: On the ship!

LEVINE: Oh, you were on it.

LASMAN: Then about ten o'clock in the evening they started to come, Jewish organizations, and they took a boat and took us to Ellis Island.

LEVINE: So how long were you on the ship altogether?

LASMAN: Eleven days.

LEVINE: And where did that ship leave from?

LASMAN: From Germany, from Bremen.

LEVINE: Breman. And the name of the ship? Do you know that? Oh, the General Stuart.

LASMAN: (she laughs) You remember, I don't. I don't it's from Bremen, Bremerhaven. And they took us to Ellis Island, we were about a hundred seventy some people. It's not a prison, but we were not free. Then we saw that people are going out and we are, whoever had family outside, they probably took care, or whoever had some other connections, and we were staying. And I send a card, a note, to the director of Ellis Island, and I pushed under the door, so he came out and he said, "Who's Golda Lasman." I said, "Me." I said, "Well, I didn't come to America to stay in Ellis Island. I came to work, to live here." He said, "I can, you want to go back?" I said, "Yes. I don't want to stay here." So he said, "I can send you back only to Germany from where you came, because you are stättelose." Stättelose means I don't belong to any country. Poland is not my country any more and Germany certainly not. I was only there because I had to. So he said, I don't know how you say Stättelose in English. I had, I didn't belong to any country. We stayed, a small group was left. So I said, "How long are we going to stay here?" It wasn't that, it wasn't bad there. I mean, they didn't, you know, I could get company. I got company. I had to send, there was a big book, like this, and if I sent, let's say, to you an invitation, they send you a note that you can. Because you couldn't get in or out from Ellis Island.

LEVINE: Now, you couldn't write directly a letter?

LASMAN: To whom?

LEVINE: To anyone?

LASMAN: So I started to make, I said, "Look, we're not going to stay here. I'm going to write in Polish, or German." And there was one man, I wrote in Polish, somebody translated this in English. We had a lawyer, we were only about eighteen people left. They all went.

LEVINE: And had they told you why you had to stay?

LASMAN: No, no. And he translated this and we sent a letter to Eleanor Roosevelt, to the immigration. I don't know from where I took the paper, I don't know from where I took the envelopes, because we didn't have anything there and they wouldn't give us. I don't know, maybe I ask somebody who came to visit me or someone else, we wrote letters to all the immigration, naturalization, to all the offices. Next day, the very next day, about ten o'clock in the evening, came a policeman, a woman. We had women policemen. And she said, "Who is Golda Lasman?" I said, "Me." "Come with me." And in Ellis Island they are underground, also. She took me, and I figure I don't speak English a word, and she, she said, "I know what you're thinking, don't worry. I speak Yiddish." I said, "Where I am going?" She said, "I was today in the office and there was a telephone from Canada for you, but we are not allowed to call passengers to the telephone. So I wrote down the number, I was in the office so I wrote down the number, and now I'm going to connect you." I said, "I don't have anybody in Canada." But she connected me, and it was a girl that I was working in the ghetto five years. And her husband is a journalist, so he could make the arrangements. I said, "How do you know where I am?" She said, "Don't you know today in the paper, in The New York Times, next day was, and I saw your name?" But Eleanor Roosevelt said, "If they are sick, we should send them to hospitals and heal them, and if they are well, they should go out and be free." Because I had an old case of, uh, and the White House decided that we should go for six months and every month to give blood and check if everything is okay. So I was sent, I was just

talking to a friend, they sent somewhere in Chicago, near Chicago was a sanitorium, and me they sent to Colorado, Denver, the National Jewish Hospital, which is the best in the country. And over there they, I was there six months and every month you give sputum and blood and all, and this was sent to the White House, they should check that everything is okay. And then I went out after six months. They wanted me to stay in Colorado. A social worker, she said, "Stay, and I'm going to give you a good job, and it's beautiful here." And so I liked it, I said, "Okay." I didn't have anybody, so what difference? So I said, "Okay." She said, "There is a family here, they have two children. You're not going to clean or do nothing. You speak French, you speak German, you speak Polish, they want you to speak with the children in those languages, and you will only be occupied with the two children." I said, "Okay." I didn't ask about money, nothing. I was not interested. Next day (she laughs) she came and she said, "I have very bad news for you. Did you hear last night a plane fell down on their house and even with the, nobody got killed, but there was no house any more." She said, "You must have something that you didn't go there, that you are lucky." And then I went to, I went out. She said, "I can look for another job." I said, "No, no, no, no. I'm not staying here. I'm not staying here any more." I went to Philadelphia and I got a job right away and I . . .

LEVINE: What did you do when you went to Philadelphia?

LASMAN: Oh, in Philadelphia I had a very important job because I was working five years during the ghetto in the pharmacy. So I had a cousin, this is a very big company that I'm talking in Philadelphia. I think one of the biggest in the world, Westrac Wholesale. And how do, I said to my cousin, he was working, "Talk to somebody. Anybody who can give me a job, I will sweep the floor, I will wash the floor. I will do anything, but I want to work." So, but he was very shy, and this, and I said, "With him I will go nowhere." I said, "What's the name of the boss?" He says, "What do you need

the name?" I said, "I want to know the name of the boss." And I went there. Of course, they didn't let me in. The secretaries, you know, he was a big man. And I couldn't speak English. So she said to me, "Who are you?" I said, "Family." When she heard family, she didn't know, maybe I came through, she said, "Go." And he was sitting in a big, you know, chair and hotel (?) and I said to him, "Look, I don't speak English." He said, but I said, "You can speak to me English." And he said, "You can speak to me Yiddish. I understand a little." And they gave me, all my cousins were pharmacists, and they were their customers, so he knew that I am not just from the street. He said, "I have a very important job for you, but you have to take this offer from the man who's right now, we want to take him out from there. You will need two weeks." Well, I didn't need two weeks. A few days, and I said, "You can go." I was working in a room like this, only narcotics. Actually, I was working for the paid person that I sent to Washington. I made, I ordered, this was a one-man job. I have to order, receive, fill out the orders and write those papers to and I send them to Washington. Well, they probably had a lot of trouble with the narcotics, because sometime it falls down something, and I didn't, you know, look. There must be a thousand. I don't know. I put them in, and as long as you have the . . .

LEVINE: The seal.

LASMAN: The seal, they give you credit every year and, well, as long as I was there they never had any trouble. I don't take narcotics. (she laughs) And they were nice to me. I didn't make a lot of money. I remember they started from twenty-four dollars. He said, "You will get more."

LEVINE: Did he know your situation? Did he know what . . .

LASMAN: Yeah. Well, I, they knew that I'm coming from Europe. They knew

that I don't speak. But, you know, little by, I started to go to school and I started right away to read. And . . .

LEVINE: Did you go to night school? Were you working a full-time job?

LASMAN: Yes. I went to school, but the most important I started to read right away in English. I never took any other work. And a friend of mine who was with me, she said, "If you don't understand everything, don't look in the dictionary. Only if this repeats, write down on a paper. If this one word repeats many time, write down, but otherwise I will ask you at the end about what was the book." And I remember the book.

LEVINE: This was a friend from work?

LASMAN: No, no. This was, four girls, we were on the ship together, you know. One was from Yugoslavia, she wasn't even from Poland. She said, "I will ask you about the book."

LEVINE: So this you were doing on the ship? Or this is after the ship.

LASMAN: No, Ellis Island.

LEVINE: Oh, Ellis Island. Uh-huh.

LASMAN: Yeah.

LEVINE: So what was the book?

LASMAN: The book was about the painter Gauguin. I still remember. And I started to read and later I got this job and I was in Philadelphia, and I didn't like Philadelphia. I got my citizenship papers, and I, my boss was very unhappy. He said, "Don't you have enough money? Why do you go away?" Because they had always trouble with those narcotics. People used to swallow them, and with me he was, he knew that I never had, I worked there I think fourteen years, never any question from Internal Revenue, never. And then I

didn't want to stay in Philadelphia. I went to New York. In New York I got also right away a job, and about one day I sit down, I said, "I'm going to count how many years I work in my life." I don't remember if I counted five years in the concentration camp, I didn't. This I don't remember. But it was thirty-five years. I said, "This is enough. I'm not working any more."

I am not so for money, you know, anxious. I said, "Now I want to see the world." And my boss couldn't stand this. He said, "I give you more money, and I give you." I said, "I am not." "When are you coming back?" "I don't know." And I, in the room, I packed a little bag, I traveled very easy, and I went to China, to Japan, to Hawaii, to Scandinavian countries, and I saw world. And I said, "I am not going, no. I don't want to work any more. I want to read."

LEVINE: So did you ever go back to work after that?

LASMAN: No. I think I said, for thirty-five years working for a woman is enough. Who makes this that sixty-five you have to work. (they laugh) But, anyway, I got, you know, people sometimes they think so me, I didn't know, even. I was fifty-six. And he, I came, somebody told me, "Go there." The country in upstate New York, "And tell them you want to freeze your wages." I said, "What do you mean? What does it mean?" And I, but I went. And I said, "Some people sent me here to freeze the wages. I don't know what this is." He said, "Are you working?" I said, "No." "Why?" I said, "Because I had a big operation on the chest." In Berlin, I have letters here, this operation was a short-lived operation, and they operated in Heidelberg. This is one of the biggest places in Europe, and one of the biggest professors. But this operation was a, was not good. They operate only maybe ten, eleven years, and they saw the system is no good, but I had it already, and you cannot change this. So he said, "Why are you not working?" So I said, "Because I had an operation and I had T.B." And he said, "You should be on disability until you're sixty-five." And they gave

me a disability. And he said to me, "How long are you not working?" I said, "Three years." I came home once and I got a check. I didn't even know from where it was, over three thousand dollars, three thousand something. So I called a friend of mine, I said, "Look, I got the check, maybe some uncle left me. I don't know from whom this is." He said, "Read the whole check."

So I read it, it was Philadelphia. He said, "You started to work in Philadelphia, and from there you got for three years that you didn't work." They were very nice to me. I can't complain. I also got a pension from the Germans. I had three lawyers, and I wrote them a letter. I withdraw my case. (she laughs) They said, "Look, we are working on it, and you will be the first one to get. Now you . . ." I said, "Look, I withdraw my case.

I'm going myself to Germany. Because the doctors here, I said, "I want this and this percentage." He said, "I cannot give you, because they, they didn't want to give me." Okay, so I said, she said, "You are working. How can I give you?" So then I got swollen legs, and I came to her and I said, she said, "I see, I see. You have to go to a doctor. I am not a specialist." And I went to a doctor, and he said, "You shouldn't work." I went to Germany and I got what I wanted.

LEVINE: You got a percentage that you wanted?

LASMAN: Yes. They didn't want to give me here, and I came there. I didn't, I wasn't, you know, I said, he said, "Look, Mrs. Lasman, you just came, and you are always so well-dressed." I said, "This is not of your business. Are you going to sign this or not?" He signed it right away. (she laughs) I wasn't fresh, but I spoke quietly, just like I talk to you. "You are always well-dressed." I said, "This is not of your business. I came to sign something." And I went to Germany, and they sent me right away to a beautiful sanitorium in Schwartzfeld, Black Forest. And the doctor said, "You can stay here as long as I tell you to stay." I was there for a long time.

LEVINE: Years, you mean?

LASMAN: No. About eight, nine months.

END OF SIDE ONE, TAPE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO, TAPE ONE

LEVINE: Now, what year was that, roughly? What year was that? You had already been working here for a long period of time.

LEVINE: No, no. Then, yeah, I was working, and the doctor said, "You shouldn't work three months." When I had the swollen. I said, "What should I do?" I said, "I'm going to Germany." And that's when I went to Germany and they send me right away to that sanitorium, which was beautiful. It's not something that can be, I'm not talking about a cure. There is oil inside, and this oil, they said to me, "You cannot live all your life with oil." I said, "Take it out." So I had maybe seven, eight doctors inserting needles, but the oil got hard and it's like a stone inside, so they couldn't do anything. And I get a pension now, too. Whatever they pay they are not paid even for one hour what I went through. I was in very bad because they were all kind of concentration camps, but I was lucky to get to the worst. (she laughs) But, look, I believe in, if you have to live you live.

LEVINE: Do you know what kept you going during those terrible . . .

LASMAN: I didn't fight for going. I didn't fight for my life. You know, when they were taking every day thousands of people I said, "Well, the only thing is death, so what." You don't have to live always. I have enough. I didn't, I never fight for my life. I never did anything. And the first thing I must tell you, when the war broke out I said, "Never will I take anything a job, you know, that you can do bad things for people or something." Because I want to work, that's all. I want to go out clean and

after the war I want to walk proud in the street. Because there are people, they did, even Jews, couples, you had probably they were a couple. Couples like a policeman. They were very, in fact, now I read that there is a group of people, they're going around the world and looking for those couples who did bad for the people.

LEVINE: These were like informers? Would you call them informers?

LASMAN: Yeah, worse. They had a better life. You know, the girls, we had a big business before the war, and the girls know me from school. They said, "Why do you lie on the floor and the lice eat you up?" There were millions of lice. I, she said, "Why don't you go to one of those big shots? They will give you a job." I said, "Not me. I'm not going nowhere." If I have to live, this is the way I want to live." And I really was in very bad camps.

LEVINE: You were in more than one? More than one camp?

LASMAN: Auschwitz, Stutthoff, Neur . . . , about six, seven. But I was liberated and you probably heard Carlsbad. Rich people are going there before the war. I was liberated in a hotel, but there was a camp, a small camp. And last year I went there, and I said to one who was making massages, I said, "Introduce me to somebody. You are from here." Who was here before the war, during the war and after the war. Because I want to find my camp and I can't find it. She said, "I will do it." And a couple, and I invited to the hotel for supper. They didn't want to come. I should come to them. They said, "I know where you were working." Because you tell me how long it took you, I was working, they bombed, there was an international agreement not to bomb three cities. Carlsbad, because it's for health, Heidelberg because of the universities and Dresden because of the beauty. And I was in all three. I was when was bombed, the most bombing was at Dresden. You ever heard? You never read? You should read about this. This was an

international, when we came there the only bomb was the, where the train goes, the station. This was bombed. And I was supposed to work there, so he asked me, "How long did it take you from the camp there?" He knew right away. He knew right away where it, he said, "Your camp is here." But, you know, when we came to Dresden, a beautiful city. All over, you know, I wasn't used anymore. Flowers in every window, clean, people are, you know, dressed. We were walking. We looked terrible. (she raises her voice) How could the Germans say they didn't see, they didn't know? Didn't they see us going in every city, going to work, how we looked? So I was cleaning that railway station. (she laughs) This was bombed. But Dresden was such a gorgeous city, and one evening, coming down, the woman, she was terrible. They killed her. Our boys killed her after the war. She said a very heavy, you say bomb Angriff, bombardment will be. I didn't move. I didn't want to go down to six floors. The doctor said always, I have a friend, a doctor, she was also a friend, she said, "Go, don't go down. Cover yourself. You cannot walk six floors up and down." So I didn't go down, but then I saw already fire in the window. I had no window right away. This was, they bombed house after house, house after house. You never saw. We were working in the street in a burning city. They probably, they built it up, but not . . .

LEVINE: What it was.

LASMAN: No, no. So I say, and, not everybody was in such places. I was in a place near Danzig, you know it? Near there. You heard probably that they, what they did over there. There was a gas chamber too, and there was gas and crematorium, but they took ships with women and throw them in the sea. I said, "For me it's no good. I don't know how to swim." (she laughs) But it didn't come to it, but they killed all of them, all of them. Every, not every day. We were the last ones, and the Russians were coming. We were about eighteen girls on that little boat, and the boat, and the men

who worked there, I saw them at night. They're getting off the boat in Seville, and they change. I said, "It's no good." If they're running away, the ship will sink, and the ship was like this already. (she gestures) But some, it was not far from the, somebody saw us, and he came with little boats and took us out. We saved his life. I don't know what he was doing during the war, but when the Russians came we said, "This man saved us, all of us." So he probably did something. I don't know what, I don't want to say anything, but we said to the Russians.

LEVINE: Were you a religious person before the war?

LASMAN: No. I am Jewish but I'm not religious. How can you believe? I used to stay at night, you know. They used to take us out, three o'clock at night, and count us, you know, till ten o'clock in the morning, and the cold. The cold was worse than the hunger. And we were one after, you know, one girl, we were, it was so cold because it was near the ocean and it was winter. It was worse than, well, hunger is, when you are hungry you don't think about anything. Just how to eat. We met there Norwegians, not Sweden, Denmark people. Yeah, they had a little better than we. We had the worst. We, they got packages from Red Cross. We never got anything. (a telephone rings) You will excuse me. (break in tape)

LEVINE: We're resuming now after a telephone call.

LASMAN: Did you get copies of this?

LEVINE: I have a copy of the newspaper article. Was this on that same page that you sent?

LASMAN: This, all these things.

LEVINE: You know, I saw that when I was at Ellis Island, but I meant to take it with me and I didn't.

LASMAN: Well, I have it. My family is waiting, my nephews. I said, they want this. I said, "When I die, you can have it. As long as I live, this stays with me."

LEVINE: Yes. Well, that's pretty important. Well, you were saying, when we were saying about religion, you really weren't religious before, and certainly the experience didn't . . .

LASMAN: Look, I used to stay three o'clock at night in the frost and cold and this. I said, "Where is God?" How can you believe in anything? They killed a million and a half children. What, the children were, did something wrong? You know, to kill six million Jews, it's a whole world. If not for the Russians, we wouldn't have Jews. Whoever went to Russia with their families, they came back later. (she pauses) I saw them coming back. I said, "Wait till you're going to see this here in Europe." A man with six children, seven children, where? It didn't exist.

LEVINE: What was your contact with the people in the towns where the concentration camp was?

LASMAN: We didn't have. There was no contact.

LEVINE: But you felt that they were aware of you because you walked through the town.

LASMAN: (she raises her voice) Look, we were walking to clean, to work. How could they not see us? Now they say they didn't know. That's not true. My opinion is that it is not only Hitler, but it's the whole German Germany, the whole, all the folks in Germany. They all helped him. He would never be a Hitler. He would never be what he did if not for the people. He was Maler, a painter, without education, without anything. So I was there where he committed suicide. I was there after the war, and I put my name. I

took a nail and I put my, so big, my name, that I was there. Over there he killed himself and Eva Braun his, uh, I think . . .

LEVINE: Mistress.

LASMAN: Mistress, maybe they got married, who knows. (she pauses)

LEVINE: So you think it's unique to the German people? You don't think another group of people could also act . . .

LASMAN: They are still, don't you see them now on television going with Hakenkreuz (German for "Swastika"). They start again, and this can happen again. The whole, you see, I have, if I have, I say always that the whole war is their fault because everybody was quiet, nobody said anything, and this didn't take a year, it didn't take months, it took from 1933 to '45. All right, to Poland he came in '39 when the war broke out, but he did plenty from '33. He couldn't do this alone. And the whole world was quiet, nobody said anything. There was this week on television. I knew about this because I read. I read all the books and everything what comes out about the war that I didn't know, because we were so closed, no paper, no radio, nothing. There is, I wanted to say something.

LEVINE: You were saying that you read everything that comes out.

LASMAN: And then he was not Jewish. And he lived in Warsaw. And he saw that there is a ghetto, and he saw, but he was out of the ghetto because he was not a Jew. And he said, "He must go in." You are not allowed, you know, to go, like, in Lodz, the ghetto, you cannot go out or in, nothing. He said he must see if this is true what people are talking. And he went in. He was working a few days like around, and he went in, and he saw what's going on in Warsaw. People are lying in the street. (telephone rings) I'm not answering. I'm not home. I should put away the receiver.

LEVINE: Or take it off.

LASMAN: Take it off, but now let them go. I don't have such important, I have two brothers in France. They call Saturday and Sunday. I call. (telephone stops) Okay. So he went there, and he saw what's going on, and I don't know how he took the money, and how he came to America, and straight to Roosevelt, and he told Roosevelt what he saw. Roosevelt answered, "I know."

LEVINE: What year was that when he did that?

LASMAN: This was '42, I think. Everybody knew, but they didn't do anything. Nobody said anything. There were people, they're begging, they were begging the Americans that they should bomb those, you know, the way where the trains were going with people, you know. They never bombed this. If they would bomb, they wouldn't be able to go. Listen, those are things that I, I knew less than you. I didn't know anything what was going on. We were like, uh, I didn't work so hard. Me, I'm not such a hard worker. (she laughs) In camp I remember he told me to clean such a big stones, and he was standing far away, he said to me, "I am watching you. You never took the shovel." I said, "Give me to eat." Because I knew the war is to end. I said, "Give me to eat, I will work." I run away four times. But they always caught me. And one time I was supposed to be, uh, they was supposed to kill me at eleven o'clock. So the girl said, "Guta," because my name was Guta, not Goldie. "Guta, you're going to wait till they come? It's already nine o'clock." They throw me over the, you know, over . . .

LEVINE: The fence?

LASMAN: Yeah, and I was walking in the street with the big Kahl "L" on the, concentration, like, such a big, and I was out there. Nobody paid attention to me. It was already, you know, towards the end. You see, when

Germany came back from Russia, actually, the war was ended because they got some knocking down there. And I was just there to see them coming back. The way they look, terrible. With swollen legs, you know, it's cold there. They are not used to that climate. And Stalin. Stalin said, he wasn't such an angel either, but the Germans were terrible when they went to Russia. They cut off the breasts and they did terrible things. So Stalin was crying. When he saw the women lying like this, he said, "We are going the same thing to do to the Germans." It was a very, I don't have any complaints. I have only complaints to the whole world, that they were quiet and nobody said anything. Like nothing would happen. He couldn't be a Hitler without people. Do you have copies of, did I make copies?

LEVINE: You sent a copy.

LASMAN: I did?

LEVINE: Yeah. How do you feel the whole experience, how are you in relation to just people in general as a result of this? Did your personality change a lot from before you went in and after you came out?

LASMAN: No, no. No. The people, what can I have to the people. Those are, I'm talking about the big people, that they can do. The small people, some were very nice. They even took in some Jews and hide them. You know that the Pollacks are always were known as big anti-Semites, against the Jews, but they still took in, I have a friend, she lives next door, she was, she and her husband all the years hidden by a Pollack. So you cannot generalize. I lost my whole family. I'm the only one left. I had two brothers in France, but they were over fifty years there. They didn't go to camps or nothing. But from Poland I am from a big family and I am the only one left. And they knew, my brother said, "If anybody will be alive, it's Guta."

LEVINE: Why did they say that?

LASMAN: Well, I remember my sister-in-law especially, she's not alive any more. When the war was ended she said, "The first one that will come will be Guta." And they send somebody to me and I went to France. They smuggled me. You couldn't go normally. But I stayed, I didn't stay long there. I was sick.

END OF SIDE TWO, TAPE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE ONE, TAPE TWO

LASMAN: No, nothing interested me. I was sick, and they sent me over there to a sanitorium. I was two years in the mountains, in a beautiful place, and the doctor said, "You are all right."

LEVINE: This was in France?

LASMAN: Yeah. And I went out in the street, and I said, "How can I be all right? I can't walk. I'm so weak. How can, this means that I'm healed, that I'm all right?" And nobody knew, nobody was in Paris, because in Paris summer everybody is vacance, vacation. So I put my little bag, and I went back to Germany to the sanitorium, where I was seven years. And they make new (?), and the doctor didn't show. And I said to my friends there, "Where is he? Why doesn't he tell me what's wrong? Is there something wrong or not?" He was hiding. He didn't want to see me. But finally they called him on the microphone and he came. And I said to him, I looked at him and I said, "I know. I need an operation." He said, "Yes, right away, and not here, because here they're going to kill you, but Heidelberg*."

LEVINE: So then you went to Heidelberg and you had that operation.

LASMAN: Yes.

LEVINE: And it turned out later that . . .

LASMAN: Well, it turned out later that, he realized the doctor, a short-lived operation. The operation was good. Somehow, look. I have, she was first operated, I was the second. She died already a few years ago. (shows photograph) Look.

LEVINE: So now do you have trouble with that particular condition, or . . .

LASMAN: The only thing I am, but this has nothing to do with the war. I think this is the time. I'm only tired and weak. But this is, I don't think this has to do anything with the war. I'm getting older, and, well, I am, I am sure that an American who never were in any camp, they also get tired, and they also are weak when they come to a certain age!

LEVINE: Well, when you, did you bounce back, I mean, after you came out of the camp, and after you recuperated?

LASMAN: Oh, it took seven years.

LEVINE: Seven years.

LASMAN: Seven years.

LEVINE: Then you started to feel good, did you, after that?

LASMAN: Oh, good, yeah. Yeah. Better. Seven years. Straight from the sanitorium in '52, it's no good. '51 I came to America. And I knew on the ship there's a doctor there. He called me once and he said, "You know, they will not let you down." He saw already, you know, they had . . .

LEVINE: X-rays?

LASMAN: X-rays. Little ones. And he saw that I have something. They didn't know what this is. They look like this and like this. Even here I

don't go to a doctor, because they don't know what this is. They look like this, and they look like this, and they are, "What do you have inside? What do you have?" Because nobody knows about this operation. It's just a spot. And you cannot do anything, but I don't complain. Without operation at my age it would be the same thing. I'm glad I have an apartment, I have my place, my privacy. I'm free. I can go wherever I want.

LEVINE: You've travelled. You went . . .

LASMAN: Oh, I saw whole world. I was, but I went with groups, not alone. I don't take friends. No. She's tired, she wants to sleep, she wants to this. I go with groups. Very interesting was China, very. Tokyo was just like New York, but China is very interesting.

LEVINE: What about the people who worked in the camps who were Germans? Were there also some nice ones, some of them that were . . .

LASMAN: Very seldom, very seldom. I'm sure there were but, you know, they were afraid. They were afraid. I can only tell you when, this was the end. I'm talking mostly of the end. And the Russians were coming nearer and nearer and Americans were not in a hurry. If they wouldn't be afraid that Russia will be first in Berlin, they would still be I don't know where.

LEVINE: But the Germans who worked in the camps were afraid to do anything but what they were told.

LASMAN: Well, some were sadists. Like yesterday they were showing, did you see, maybe, Mengele. He was the one that made experiments. Mostly with, um, (she pauses) how do you say, two children?

LEVINE: Twins?

LASMAN: Twins. Oh, he's well-known. But, look, he lived a beautiful life. America let him through. And South America took in all those bandits,

and he, okay, they show, I knew before that he fell down the water and
he . . .

LEVINE: Drowned?

LASMAN: Drowned. (she raises her voice) But he lived till '85. He had a beautiful life till '85. If he wouldn't drown in a beautiful place he lived. You must know the old people go, everything that people had from all over, they always sent to South America. Even during the war, they knew that this is the place where they will go. Even the Pope let them go. The Pope, yeah. Look, Eichmann. They took him. But how many were those Eichmanns? You saw it, probably, on television. I saw only one at the end of the war, when the Russians came they wanted us to go further, not to meet the Russians. So there was one German and he said, "Let those people stay here." Because the Russians were right there. "Let those people," and they didn't agree, so he killed himself. I saw it. He killed himself because he didn't agree that they should, because at the end there was, how you call it, I don't know how many people were left. Death march, called it, they were called. And they took all the people and I said to myself, "I'm not going." So here I have the one that called, next door, we were together. We were five. I said, "I am not going to no death march." Who wants to go, let them go. I will go under the trains. You know, the trains were high, so we would walk out here and there was full of shit and all, but I didn't care. We walked out and there were two Germans with pistols like this and they saw us. They didn't do anything. They knew it's the end. And we were walking and we went to a farm. We didn't have where to sleep. It was already dark. And he didn't let us stay. See, the German. He said, "Raus, Raus." (German for "Out! Out!") He didn't let us. But then a woman came. She said, "Where are you going?" I said, "We have no place where to sleep." She said, "Come, I take you." And she took us to her camp, a little camp. And there were Ukrainians and Pollacks, and they said, "They don't want those Jewish women."

And so the commandant, he was a nice man. If he would come today, I give him my whole apartment, a German. He said to me, "Don't worry. You will sleep here." He lived like in this room, we slept here. He said, "Go to the cellar and bring old clothes," and this, and we put on the floor, and we were there till the end of the war. He was a nice man, and he was, he had, he had, how do you call this? (she gestures)

LEVINE: A hunchback.

LASMAN: A hunchback. And that's why he was, you know, he was a commandant, but he was very nice, and the last night, the last day I was going from work, I met boys, they said, "Girls, don't work any more. The war is ending. Don't work any more." But we didn't believe it. And I came there and I was sitting, and there was a little house. I was sitting on the stoop, and I look at him, and I said, "My God, hundreds of thousands of airplanes." You never saw. And I hear zzzzzzzzzzzz. And he said, "You are not allowed to sit here." He saw that I am looking. I said, "Look, I need the air. I don't feel good. Let me sit here." He was working. He said, "No, you can't." He saw it was the end. It was the 8th of May. Today is the 8th of May.

LEVINE: The seventh.

LASMAN: Oh, you see? This was the night, and he said, "Go in. You're not, you can't." I said, "I must have air." And I never saw anything like it.

LEVINE: What went through your mind when you saw all those planes?

LASMAN: I said, "This is the end." Because the boys said, already, during the war, "Don't work any more." But I wasn't, we were not happy.

LEVINE: What was the feeling? Can you describe it?

LASMAN: Very sad, or I would rather say no feelings at all. You see, when he wanted to go to sleep, he had to go through us. And about eleven o'clock I woke up the five girls, and I said, "Did he go through?" Because I slept on the carpet. They said, "Uh-huh." I said, "I didn't see him. I didn't see him going through." They said, "You are the only one that can go to him." Because I had dysentery, and he used to give me a very strong narcotic. Otherwise, I wouldn't be able to go to work. "And you go in and tell him you need drops." So I knocked. No one answered. (she knocks) I knocked faster, no one answered. I opened the door, and I saw all the Hakenkreuz (German for "Swastika"), everything on the floor, and the window was open. I said, "Girls, this afternoon." It was twelve o'clock. He left the window open. The window was like parted, but a little higher. So he left this open and we were such idiots. There were such a place full with gold. We didn't touch anything, nothing. We were looking for drops, valerian drops. I was looking for mine, for the dys, nothing. And one that lives next door. "What are you looking for?" She wants a thermometer. You know? You know what was there?

LEVINE: A chest?

LASMAN: Full with gold. We didn't touch anything. Another idiot, I said, "Take few here and there in the pockets." Because it was so heavy we couldn't even lift it. This was then. The next day came the Russians, and they on the hunt. They took me, and they took me straight to a hospital. Oh, I was, if the war would be another week, not even a week, I wouldn't, no. They were nice, the doctors, the Russian. He said, "This is not for you. You are too sick to be in such a small hospital. You have to go to Prague, to a big hospital, and then, and they send me to American zone. They didn't have, you know, the Czechs didn't have themselves nothing.

LEVINE: So did you, is it that you ended up here with your friends, who

were also there?

LASMAN: By coincidence.

LEVINE: Coincidence?

LASMAN: Yeah.

LEVINE: Oh, my goodness.

LASMAN: I don't know coincidence. One lives here, I am here, one lives a little further up, maybe seven minutes from here. Those three. The rest. I wasn't, those were my friends and those were together we run away at the end. I run away before a few times, but they caught me.

LEVINE: Did they punish you?

LASMAN: No, no. The Germans ask me, the soldiers, "Why did you do it?" It was, you know, then otherwise they wouldn't talk like this. He said, "You know that the war is ending. Why did you run away?" I said, "Because I don't care." But he said, "You are young. In another few days there will be no war." I said, "I don't care either." You know, you come to, you don't care. You know, you are alone, and you know that the whole family is killed and there is no, I never went even to the city where I was born and went to school. I went to Poland to look for somebody, for a child. I figured my sister, I had an older sister who had a little girl. The boy she couldn't save because he was circumcised, and they looked. But the girl was over a year. I said, and she had only Polish girlfriends. I said, "Maybe she gave the baby away." And my brothers in France said, "You always go with this in your mind. Go!" And I went to Poland, and I went to that town. Not even a town, it's a village, smaller than a village. And I said, "Is there anybody I can talk to?" So I went to an office there. They said they were too young. I knew that they wouldn't know. I said, "Give me somebody who would

know." So they sent me to somebody, and I came out, I was surprised to see a man so handsome and so good-dressed in such a village. And I said, "Look, did you know, did you hear maybe about the name?" Her name was Leosha. He said, "Look, don't even look." I said, "Maybe I should go to another village." He said, "Don't even go because they came one day with trucks and they took all the Jews from all the small villages. So don't go." He invited me I should sleep there, I said, I came with a taxi there. And I wanted to go to Czechoslovakia and this taxi man, he took me. But, you know, this is water. You have to go through a bridge. So the Pollacks were there. They wouldn't, they didn't let me go. I said, "You don't let me go?" "Only with the police." And I asked if he could help me with the bag. He said, "We don't have porters." I said, "I don't need a porter. Just help." "We have nobody." "And I'm going." He said, "You are not allowed." I said, "Only if you call the police." And I went. They knew that I am from concentration camp, so they were, I said, "Only with the police you can do it." You know, after all this you get in a trance that you don't care about anything.

LEVINE: You cross over a line where it just doesn't seem, but does that come back? Did your caring come back after years, or it kind of never leaves?

LASMAN: No, I wouldn't say that. It's always, there are some people, they don't want to even think. When something is on television or a book comes out, they don't want to hurt themselves. And I am not that one.

LEVINE: Does it do you good to . . .

LASMAN: Not that it does it good. Why should I run away from this?

LEVINE: Well, I think . . .

LASMAN: They don't want to help themselves.

LEVINE: I was just going to say you can help yourself. If you can tolerate it, you can help yourself.

LASMAN: Yeah. And they don't want to hurt themselves, and I am not so delicate. I took many things, so I, when, many times there is special now they were showing this week because it's, the 8th of May is the end of the war, so they were showing quite a few things. I was watching everything. And the one, my friends that I know they are interested, I called them. The rest no. Because I know that they would rather play cards or do something else.

LEVINE: Distract themselves some way, yeah.

LASMAN: I don't know if they distract themselves. I don't want to run away from this. Not that I don't want to run, I don't ask for it, but when it comes I think that I should watch it. Because who else is going to watch it?

LEVINE: It's part of your life, for better or worse.

LASMAN: That's it. That's right.

LEVINE: Well, let's see. How many years ago, this was 1945, it's 1992. Uh, forty-seven years ago, you would have been, this would have been the last day of your being in the camp.

LASMAN: Well, actually I went out, seven years I was in hospitals, it was in '52. And now is '92.

LEVINE: That's forty years.

LASMAN: Is forty years.

LEVINE: But, I mean, the end of the war is May 8th.

LASMAN: Yes, but not for me.

LEVINE: Not for you because you . . .

LASMAN: Not for me, because I was sick seven years. I went straight from the hospital to America.

LEVINE: When you ran away and ran under the train, when was that? Was that May 7th? Was that the day . . .

LASMAN: No, no. Before.

LEVINE: Oh, before.

LASMAN: Before. They didn't, he could stop me. They were standing with, but they didn't care either. They knew the minute the Russians, the Germans came back from Russia, actually the war was ended. If you would see the Germans, in what condition they came back. I saw it. Not only did I saw it, my girl, some girls, they wanted to kill me. I throw them food.

LEVINE: The Germans?

LASMAN: Yeah.

LEVINE: Wow.

LASMAN: I took packages. We were in a hospital, the first floor, the balcony, and they were cleaning the garden. I throw them food. We didn't have too much, but I throw that. They said, "How could you do it?" I said, "I, whoever in my life I will see that he's hungry, whoever he is, he will get food if I have."

LEVINE: So that's . . .

LASMAN: Look, everybody has a different . . .

LEVINE: Even if he's German, right?

LASMAN: So even if he's German, I can't, I am not . . .

LEVINE: Vindictive.

LASMAN: No, I'm not.

END OF SIDE ONE, TAPE TWO

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO, TAPE TWO

LASMAN: One thing I can say, that nobody beat me. I never did anything, what was not allowed. Because I just didn't care. You know, when you are in the stage that you don't care. I did care when the war started, when I have my whole family. We were seven children.

LEVINE: Were you taken off together, your family, when you were first taken to the camps?

LASMAN: Uh-uh. One died in the ghetto, and the rest, they were different stages that they took away the people. I went to Auschwitz by myself. You know, I didn't even, I was now in Auschwitz. I didn't even know how, you know, when you go in and you don't know what they're going to do. I didn't, now when I was in Poland I went to Birkenau, I went to, I have pictures here. To Auschwitz. I didn't know, if I would see the gas chamber, I wouldn't sit here. I would be gassed. I didn't see the crematorium because I would be burned. So I didn't see. But now I was there. I also was in Stutthoff, near Danzig. But over there is, I would think, is like a museum. I remember there was one man, he was the guide, he had people. So I said, "Where are the gypsy Lager?" He said, "What do you mean the gypsy Lager? Why are you asking me such a question." " Maybe I was there." He said, "You?" You know, I was dressed. (she laughs) There were so many years after the war. So he said, "It doesn't exist."

LEVINE: What is the word, gypsy Lager?

LASMAN: Gypsy Lager.

LEVINE: What is that?

LASMAN: This, you know, they treated the gypsies and the Jews the same.

LEVINE: The same, yeah. The idea was to exterminate both groups, yeah.

LASMAN: Well, he, this week was a movie, he said. I read once in a book that Hitler was afraid. He had a feeling that he comes from a Jewish background.

LEVINE: Gypsy? Oh. Hmm.

LASMAN: I don't know, so many books. If he, for you it would be very good to read at least one book from him. He is an Italian. He didn't, they didn't take him because he was a Jew. They took him for political reasons. But then they saw Levy, so they knew that he is political and he is a Jew, too. But he's one of the biggest writers now in the world. Did you ever heard Primo Levy?

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

LASMAN: Yeah?

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

LASMAN: Did you ever read anything?

LEVINE: I know of him, but I don't, I haven't read him. I should read him.

LASMAN: He's terrific.

LEVINE: So he was in a camp?

LASMAN: He was eleven months in Auschwitz, and he writes, his first book is that he goes home to Italy, one year he is walking. After the war there were no trains, nothing. One year. I think I have it. (break in tape) Oh, no. Okay.

LEVINE: Well, is there, I guess I'm interested in that reaching that point where you don't care any more.

LASMAN: No.

LEVINE: Do you think the Germans who were working in the camps reached the same point? They didn't care either?

LASMAN: I think so. I think so, that they saw later, they shouldn't listen to everything what Hitler said. They shouldn't go so blind after him what he said. I'm sure, but don't think that this cannot happen again. The way it looks now, what I saw now, those young Germans with the Hakenkreuz (German for "Swastika"), looks very bad. But I don't care any more.

LEVINE: I don't know about that.

LASMAN: No. I would, I do care what would happen to other people, but I'm not afraid for myself.

LEVINE: Maybe that's a good . . .

LASMAN: I would, I care what would happen to the children, to other people, to old people. But not for myself. There are some people, they never take a book. They never read. They don't want to see. They, you know, they are like, the only work that I can find, they don't want to help themselves. Sometimes when I come in from somewhere I cannot go now because of that Bells Palsy, that's ten months already. I said, "This is all mine.

I just can't believe it." Oh, we lived like, there was one camp I remember, I met, she said that she's a cousin of mine, and it was nobody, it was new. Those camps were new. She said, "Oh, Guta, you will never go out from here."

And I never saw her again. I never saw her again, but, you know, you didn't even pay attention. How many times did I lie on dead people. (she pauses)

You probably saw on television a show. The Russians came and the America. They were crying, the soldiers, when they saw it. This high with naked bodies. Look, this will go to the rest of my days as long as I live. This cannot be forgotten. You send this, where does it go to, what I was talking now? Where does it go?

LEVINE: This is, it's a tape and it will be in the Oral History Collection, which is part of the Ellis Island Immigration Museum.

LASMAN: Like this?

LEVINE: Yes. Maybe this is a good place to stop. I'm just going to say this is Janet Levine . . .

LASMAN: I told them I would love to be there, but I am in Florida and I don't feel like going now to Ellis Island, to New York. But . . .

LEVINE: Well, now we have . . .

LASMAN: When I will be in New York . . .

LEVINE: You'll let us know.

LASMAN: I will go there.

LEVINE: Good. Okay, that sounds good. Okay. This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service, and I'm signing off. And I've been here, it's May 7, 1992, and I'm here in Florida, in Hallandale, with Golda Lasman.