

EI-222

GERTRUDE (GUDRUN) HILDEBRANDT MOLLER

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ORAL HISTORIAN'S NOTE:

The recording is marked by a mechanical reverberation throughout the interview – Paul E. Sigrist, Jr., 9/30/1993.

LEVINE: This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service and I'm here today at Ellis Island, in the recording studio, with Gertrude Hildebrandt Moller, who came through Ellis Island, from Germany, in 1929 when she was nine years old. Today is October 5th, 1992 and Mrs. Moller has come from her home in Jacksonville, Florida to Ellis Island to be interviewed. It's a pleasure to meet you. I'm very happy that you are here.

MOLLER: Thank you.

LEVINE: And, why don't we start by your telling me your full name and any changes that have occurred over the years.

MOLLER: I was born Gudrun Hildebrandt and married Moller, Mr. Moller, who was from Denmark. He immigrated here many years later and we met in New York. However when I started school in Chicago, where I grew up, needless to say, first of all, I couldn't speak a word of English, and I was the only child in the school that couldn't speak English. And (she laughs) it wasn't too happy the first couple of years but my mama said "Take heart because some day you're going to be able to speak two languages and all the ones that were teasing you will speak only one". And it was true. She was always right. So, my teacher suggested, since none of the children could pronounce Gudrun, which is an old Germanic-Scandinavian name, and a very beautiful name (I hear), she gave me a list of girls' names to choose from. So that all the kids could converse, you know, know what to

call me. So I picked the name starting with a g, as with my name, and it was Gertrude. I'm not very happy with it, but it has stuck with me all of these years.

LEVINE: Okay, and how about your birth date?

MOLLER: June 15th, 1920.

LEVINE: And what town were you born in?

MOLLER: Hamburg, Germany.

LEVINE: And did you live in Hamburg until you left for the United States?

MOLLER: Yes.

LEVINE: Do you remember life in Hamburg?

MOLLER: Oh, yes. Everything. Everything.

LEVINE: (she laughs) What are the features of life there up till you're nine years old that you remember when you think about it.

MOLLER: Ah, my first day in school. Also, taking my little brother, who was two years younger, by the hand. Every Sunday my mother was busy doing things and we'd go to church and I was very diligent about to the Lutheran Church and I visited, by the way, several times when I went back to Hamburg. The church, of course, seemed a lot larger when I was nine years old (she laughs) you know. Also, my first day in school, my first hour of school, I saw this beautiful face, all these little girls were in the rear with

their mothers. Some were crying and they didn't know what they were getting into, but I was real happy because I like a crowd (she laughs) so I spotted this beautiful face way over in the catty corner and I gravitated towards her and her name was Ursula, and we are still friends to this day, sixty-something years later, and, in fact, her birthday is today.

LEVINE: Ohh.

MOLLER: I just happened to think, October 5th. And she sends me German candy every Christmas and so on. It's wonderful. I remember all of the people whom I loved throughout my lifetime and I have a correspondence a mile long.

LEVINE: So, have you seen her since coming to the United States?

MOLLER: Yes, I have seen her twice. I have seen her twice. (she laughs) I don't know if this would fit into this story, but the first time we got together she was telling me about the war. After the war was, World War II was over, not the Civil War, World War II (she laughs) I sent notices to the Red Cross to try to locate her and three or four other of my school friends, you know. We all went to school together the first three years, until I came to America. And, she was telling me that it was against the law evidently at that time to slaughter any of their animals, you know, like their pigs and so on. But, you know, let's face it, everybody was hungry, and so they just thought well we just have to take a chance because we really are hungry. So they slaughtered, I think her uncle or somebody, slaughtered, they were out in the country and they slaughtered this pig (she laughs). Well all of a sudden, the next day they heard boom, you know, on the door; somebody knocking. And they all thought oh, my goodness (she laughs) word must have leaked out about the slaughter of the pig. And so the

cousin or the father or somebody answered the door and he said, "Do you have a Mrs. So and So here?" And they thought Oh, what's this all about. So, Ursula, she says "That's me." She says, "Do you know somebody in New York City – when I lived in New York City – by the name of Gudrun Hildebrandt (she is laughing). She says "Of course!" She says, "Well, she's looking for you." (she is laughing hard.) And they all went "Haah", you know, took a deep breathe.

LEVINE: How do you spell her name, by the way?

MOLLER: Ursula. Like Ursula, U-R-S-U-L-A but through the years they all call her Ula for short.

LEVINE: Tell me about your immediate family in Germany. Your mother – what was her name and her maiden name?

MOLLER: Wilhelmine Beckmann, two n s.

LEVINE: And your father?

MOLLER: Albert Hildebrandt.

LEVINE: And you had two brothers?

MOLLER: One brother and one sister.

LEVINE: One brother and one sister; and what were their names?

MOLLER: Siegfried, from the Wagnerian opera, I guess, and my sister is Johanna.

LEVINE: And where did you fit in line? Were you . .

MOLLER: I was in the middle.

LEVINE: And who was the oldest?

MOLLER: My sister.

LEVINE: Were you closest to any particular family member?

MOLLER: My grandmother.

LEVINE: Your grandmother, and she was also in Hamburg?

MOLLER: Yep.

LEVINE: Tell me about her. What she –

MOLLER: She paid a lot of attention to me. I don't remember her ever giving me anything per se, toys or, you know, that just wasn't done. She raised eight children. And my grandfather was in the coal business. And I used to go with grandma – we used to go over there every weekend, and it was just across town – and I would go with her to the fish market. And she would always buy a live fish and put it (she laughs) in a bucket of water and carry it all the way home. And I thought, oh you poor thing, you don't know what's facing you (she laughs). I'd be looking down at that fish and and she'd get it home and I just couldn't stand it because then she took the hatchet and you know (she is laughing) and so forth; and oh, that fish was always so delicious. I had qualms about eating it you know. But she had me help her. She'd say "Go to the basement, go to the cellar and get

some potatoes for eight people or six people" or whatever, and she'd have me scrape the carrots. And I felt that was so wonderful and she was very good to me.

LEVINE: Now was that your mother's mother?

MOLLER: My mother's mother.

LEVINE: Uh huh, and how about your father's mother and father, were they around?

MOLLER: I never really knew them. I only met her one time and they, evidently, didn't even want, there were six children in my father's family and none of them had any children except my father and (sighs deeply) he took off for America when I was four years old and, to try to make a better life for his family and probably send for us, but he, he did start working, painting houses or something in New York. I forget what part. And sent money home for about a year and then we never heard from him anymore. And he had met some German female and (sighs) that was the end of that. My mother divorced him then, some years later, and she had to have a way to support herself and her three children and she did housework by the day.

LEVINE: In Germany?

MOLLER: Yes. After all in those days the only thing that ladies were trained for was to be a good housewife and a good mother and so forth. And she knew how to bake, she knew how to cook, she knew how to sew, and it was very hard. You know, she took in sewing and she took in laundry and she did day work. I don't know how my mother did it. She had a lot of, lot of guts.

LEVINE: Do you remember things that your mother taught you that were kind of ideas that she wanted you to have? About life...

MOLLER: Oh, yes. Oh a lot of values. A lot of values. I can't remember right now. I guess one of the most important things that she taught us was "Don't ever take anything that doesn't belong to you." And, "Don't ever buy anything you can't afford, that you can't pay for." That has stuck with me. Also, "Don't ever lend and don't ever borrow." And those were just a few of the little things. There were a million of them and, of course, she always said she wasn't superstitious, but she'd say now "If you give anybody a pair of shoes, they have to give you a penny." And I said "Why?" And she said, "Because, well," she said, "I'm not superstitious, but (she laughs) she says, "that means that if they don't pay you for the shoes, that they'll walk away with the friendship. And also, if you give someone something sharp, like a knife or scissors, they have to give you a penny because, the same thing, it will cut the friendship if they don't pay you. If they don't buy it from you, you know.

LEVINE: Was your mother very much like her mother?

MOLLER; (pause) Well, we all raise our children the way we are raised, more or less, really.

LEVINE: Do you see some continuities between your grandmother, your mother and then you?

MOLLER: Yeah, yeah. Of course, my grandmother had eight children and she also helped sometimes in the coal business. And, you can imagine what a life she must have had. She died, not young, but she was only sixty-five when

she died and it was just from over-work. But, yeah, the values that my mother instilled in me, I'm sure that that came from my grandmother. I mean everybody had to toe the mark. When there's eight children in the household, you know, they have to, they can't be petted and what have you. They have to toe the mark, I think.

LEVINE: Was your mother a disciplinarian. Would you say?

MOLLER: Oh, oh, she sure was. And, of course, when you get older your grateful but at the time you don't appreciate it. I couldn't have any dates until, she said "You can do what you want when your twenty-one."

LEVINE: But until then...

MOLLER: Uhm hum, I had to toe the mark and I to, up until I was sixteen or maybe even eighteen, I had to be home by ten o'clock, regardless of – I said, "Well, so and so down the street, she can be home at one." She says, "I don't care, so and so isn't paying your rent or our rent."

LEVINE: What did you know about America before you came here?

MOLLER: Oh, that's a good question. When people, word gets around, you know, in the neighborhood and the children and so forth. And then the kids go home and tell the parents, "Oh so and so is going to AMERICA, you know, the land of plenty." So, I remember, I don't remember whose parent it was, father or mother said, "Oh, I hear you're going to Chicago." And I said "Yes." And he says, "Bang, bang, bang." (she laughs uproariously) And I didn't know what he meant by that and, of course, I found out years later that it because it was during the twenties, Al Capone and all that. (she's laughing) You know, I'm nine years old, I don't know what it's all about.

And then somebody else said, "Oh, you're going to, I hear you're going to Chicago." And I said, "Yes" and they said, "Well, you know, when you get to America," he said, "did you know the money grows on trees." And, you know, the first thing I did, I couldn't find many trees in New York when we arrived, but (she laughs) on the train going to Chicago, every tree in sight I checked it out (she's laughing) and there weren't any dollar bills growing on any of those trees. And, of course, through the years, you know, you discover that if you're willing to work hard in America, in the United States, you can make it.

LEVINE: What determined, for your mother, that she would actually leave?

MOLLER: She was having a very hard time. She could not support all three of us. My sister was seven years older than I and, at age eleven, we weren't getting any support from our father and so she was maneuvered over to, had to go live with my grandparents across town. And every Friday or Saturday, we'd go over, you know, in fact, my mother took my brother's baby buggy over every Saturday to pick up laundry of my grandmother's. My grandmother paid her to do some of the laundry, and it was very hard times, you know. What was the question again?

LEVINE: The question was what was it that determined for your mother that she would leave?

MOLLER: Well, taking in sewing, taking in laundry, and sometimes that little room where I slept for awhile, off the kitchen, she had lines strung all around, you know, the ceiling. All this wet laun ... and no washing machines. It was like this, big bed sheets, and then she'd take them around her elbow and squeeze all the water out and then take these great big bed sheets and

what have you and hang them up and the water would drip on me, all night. And that was just some of the things. And –

LEVINE: How were you compared with your friends? Were they having as hard a time as your family?

MOLLER: No, not that I know. In fact, my friend, Ursula, she, when we talked, the last time I saw her – but we write to each other all the time – was in 1981 and I stayed with her, in Hamburg. We had a lot of long talks and I told her some of these things and she was really flabbergasted. She said, "I didn't really ... see we used to play together. She said, "I never realized that you had such a rough time." And I said, "Yeah, from the time I was four, four and a half years old, it's been a long, hard road. But I think one of the things that has helped me with the tragedies in my life is a sense of humor. In fact, I said to myself, when all the children in the school in Chicago made so much fun of me all the time because I couldn't speak English, like my mother said, "You'll be able to speak two languages some day." I started thinking, I used to spend a lot of time in the movies. Well, on Saturdays and I'd stay all day. I would bring my lunch (she laughs) and that helped me learn to speak English because I would see the movie two or three times. And one time I chewed bubble gum all day and I came home and (she starts to laugh) my mother said, "What's the matter with your cheeks? Sticking way out!" But it did help me, you know, to learn the language. And I was a stickler about learning spelling particularly because, and it really irritates me when people come to this country and they live here for years with the relatives and never bother to speak English. It really hurts me to think that they have so little regard for their adopted country. I love this country very much. I really love this country. It's truly a land of opportunity and, if you're willing to work hard, you can be almost, almost, anything you want to be and I think I'm living proof

because, little did I ever dream, I would ever sing on a stage. I sang at Carnegie Hall, auditioning; Town Hall, I auditioned for another agent and I sang in beautiful hotels, for the Armed Forces, I think it was the Jewish League I think, over on Fifth Avenue at the time and all the soldiers and sailors and what have you and the Stage Door Canteen. Little did I ever dream and opera, I sang in the Chicago Opera House, you know, auditions, and, of course, in the chorus, but I never dreamed I could do all this, you know?

LEVINE: Well before we – we'll try to move chronologically.

MOLLER: Yeah.

LEVINE: Before we leave your, setting sail from Germany, when you talk to your friend or just think about those first nine years, what are your fondest memories before leaving Germany?

MOLLER: And that's something else I didn't quite, I go off on a tangent, that I didn't tell you about what my mother – remind me about what we were going to say – my mother decided, from all that she heard about America – that it's the land of opportunity and she thought she would have an easier time raising the three children three of us, and, rather than in Germany. Things were really tough. Of course, she wasn't trained for anything like the women are today. You know, and except to be a good house wife and sew and cook and everything and, it turns out, that friends of, a friend of my grandparents, who was a German but a citizen here, sponsored us. You had to have a sponsor. This was very important and you came in on a quota system – so many from Denmark, so many from Germany, so many from here, so many from there, and now it seems they just open up the gates and they come in by the thousands. They don't bother to learn to

speaking English. They have no way to support themselves. You had to have a sponsor because he had to say, "Well I've got x amount of dollars in the bank in case my sponsoree, you know, gets sick, if that person can't support himself anymore, then the sponsor was responsible. Either that or they shipped you back to the country where you came from.

LEVINE: And did your mother have to buy the tickets or did the sponsor?

MOLLER: I don't remember that. Whether he sent the tickets to us or what, but it took my mother a few years to pay him back. She wanted to take all three of us but she thought, in fact, my brother was going to come with us and then she was going to send for my sister later if things worked out in the new world. But then she changed her mind and thought, "Oh my, probably it would be harder to bring two children back as it would one, in case they don't work out. And, it turned out that my mother got sick at one point and it was very rough. I didn't see my little brother for ten years.

LEVINE: So it was just you and your mother who actually came. And your older sister stayed with your grandparents? And your brother?

MOLLER: My brother stayed with my mother's sister and she raised him for the ten years and she had a son and a daughter, so they all got along pretty well. My brother came over ten years later and I didn't see my sister for twenty years. And she now lives near Jacksonville and we see each other pretty often. The other question was?

LEVINE: Your fondest memories of Germany?

MOLLER: Well, (she sighs) the few times that my mother took us down town. You know, we didn't have much money, I used to love to watch the swans in

the beautiful lake, which is called the Ouster, in the center of downtown Hamburg. And it sort of snakes around the city and it's so well kept and I used to love to look at the flowers and I liked going to church. And, even though I couldn't read, (she laughs) I guess I was about five and a half, (she clears her throat) – excuse me – I used to pretend that I could read and I would sing along with the congregation, la la la, you know.

LEVINE: Was your mother religious? Was your mother and her family –

MOLLER: Yes, but my mother had too much to do, to try to make ends meet. And she'd be ironing or doing this or that, but she got us started, you know, with church, and it was very important to me. And, of course, I loved (pause) my teacher in school. She was beautiful. She was tall and blond, and we all just absolutely adored her and, rather than get a teacher for each grade, a different teacher, we had her for my first three years of school. I still have a transfer that she wrote, going to America, and of course it was in German, and the teacher (she laughs) couldn't read it. But I had it translated and I need to admit she said that "Gudrun is a very happy child. She tends to be distracted by the birds and the trees and watching the leaves rather than pay attention to (she giggles) me," you know, what was going on with the class. "But she was always the first one to raise her hand when the curtains needed to be taken home and washed and ironed and when the blackboard needed to be cleaned. And she was always the first one to, she was always very helpful in the class. She needs to calm down." Here I am, at my age, and I still haven't calmed down, you know. But that's my temperament.

LEVINE: How would you describe yourself as a nine year old, when you left Germany?

MOLLER: Always into something. Always into something. I had one memory (she giggles) to me it's funny now, but (pause) it sort of scared me to get on a big ocean liner because I heard that that ocean was mighty big, you know, and my aunt and my mother and brother went on the train with us to Cuxhaven, which is North of Hamburg. And we got on the ship and (pauses) soon as the ship took off, I worked myself up in such a lather, thinking that the ship was going to sink, and the more I thought about it, the worse I cried. And, lo and behold, the next thing I know (she laughs) it got, the word got back to the captain and he sent for me. And I marched into this handsome captain's room, or his office or whatever, and before I knew it I was sitting on his lap, and I'm just crying up a storm and I say, "I just know it's going to sink!" and he said, "Now, now" he said, "now listen," he said, "Do you think that I would let you drown?" (she laughs) He said, "because if I let you drown that means that I'm going to drown." I said, "Oh really." (she laughs) And, of course, the tears are still coming, but he had a whole bunch of little dolls lined up on the shelf, see, different kinds of little dolls. And while I'm talking, when I spotted the dolls, I could hardly pay attention to him because I'm sizing up all these dolls that he had lined up behind the bunk. And, finally, when he had me all calmed down and he promised me, faithfully, that the ship wasn't going to sink, he said, "Now, that's a good girl," and he said, "Now you can have your choice of one of those dolls." Well, that kind of did it. So which one did I pick? I didn't pick the ones with the beautiful hair and the this and that, and they were all about the same size, but I picked the one that was made out of rubber and any time you squeezed it, the tongue came out. (they laugh) And I had that thing for years. I loved that thing and, of course, it finally, the rubber just muyaah. (she laughs)

LEVINE: What did you have with you from Germany on board? Do you remember anything you had?

MOLLER: Yes. My German bible. I came across it the other day. In fact, I thought I might like to send that in, if it isn't too late, you know. We didn't bring very much. I noticed the luggage department down on the first floor; there are two of them down there that could have been my mother's. But I don't know, she gave it away or whatever, years, years later. You know this is sixty-three years ago we're talking about. I can't believe it. Sixty-three years later I'm sitting here in the same building (gasps) where we spent our first night in America, (sighs), you know.

LEVINE: How does it make you feel to visit here?

MOLLER: Well, when I walked, you know I came last year, and when I walked in with my friends, into the Great Hall, into the entrance there, all of a sudden I stopped (starts to cry) and it was like my mother, whom I lost in 1971, I felt her hands on my shoulders and I thought "Gee whiz, mama, I'm back here." And, you know, our first years here were not very easy. And we did suffer some, but when I think how much better off we were by coming here (pauses and clears her throat). I wouldn't want to live over there for all the tea in China, regardless of the suffering that we did go through here. I keep saying that if you have the fortitude and the determination to make something of yourself, this is the country to do it. But nobody in this whole world gives you a hand-out, I mean, you've got to work. You've got to work and you can attain your goal. I still feel that, in spite of all obstacles. (she clears her throat) But, now what, I get so carried away – (she sniffles).

LEVINE: Was your mother (Moller clears her throat) I was going to ask you what your mother had brought (pause) from Germany as well.

MOLLER: I'm sorry, I go off in tangents. When I first walked in, like I said, last year, of course everything, the place looked even larger when I was nine years old when I walked into that huge area. And there were a lot of benches and I remember mostly sleeping – I got tired! You know we had to spend the whole night. We got here six or seven o'clock and it was dingy and, by the way, it was the month of October, and it was cold. The nineteenth of October. Isn't that something, the same month. And so we had, I remember she had to go to a cashier or something towards the end, after we were checked by a doctor. He said, "Stick out your tongue, aahh," (she laughs) and they check your eyes and this and that and it really wasn't all that hard. But then she said she has to change some German money for American money and we lined up and she got some money, of which we didn't have very much. Then I lay down on this bench. I was very tired. And she rolled up her coat and put it under, under my head for a pillow and she sat next to me the whole night. And once in awhile I'd wake up and I'd see people milling around, and there were a lot of people.

LEVINE: So, in other words, you didn't stay in a dormitory?

MOLLER: No.

LEVINE: You slept on the bench.

MOLLER: Yeah, and I never forgot that hard bench. (they laugh)

LEVINE: And did you have a meal here? Did you go to the dining room?

MOLLER: You know, we must have. I really don't remember that. We must have because we got, well it was the whole night. I'm sure we must have had a sandwich or something. I don't remember that but I remember getting off

the boat and everything is so dark and, ah, unforbidding. And when we walked into this building I said, "Mama, I really think I want to go home. I don't think I'm going to like it here." Because everything was so strange, and all these strange tongues, you know, for a child, it's frightening.

LEVINE: Do you remember your mother's kind of attitude or anything she...

MOLLER: Like an iron horse. I mean my mother had, was so gutsy. How many, I don't know if I could do it, if I were a mother and bringing a child to a strange country and not knowing, you know, how things are going to be and what is facing you. The culture is completely different. You know? Everything was different than it was. Now, the whole world is getting smaller and smaller. (she clears her throat) But we made it.

END OF SIDE A, TAPE I
BEGIN SIDE B, TAPE I

MOLLER: We were in Chicago about three or four days and she got a job washing dishes in a huge cafeteria. So I used to be able to go in the kitchen and she was washing these big pots that they make salads in and so forth. And then, just a couple of weeks later, we moved to another part of Chicago and we rented an apartment – they call it "flats" – over a cafeteria, a small cafeteria.
(pause) She did day work. What she did, when she got a little bit of money, there was some junky furniture there and everything, in that one little place in the back, what my mother did is go to the second-hand shop and buy up some furniture and beds and things and furnished every one of those rooms in that flat – you know, it's a long, like a railroad flat, and

rented out rooms. And that paid our rent. And then she got a day job and I had a key and, when I got home – Oh, starting school was really something. A sense of humor, eventually, got me through it. I said to myself, "If I could make these kids laugh, I'm in." And, sure enough, it took me about six months I guess, or so, you know I did things to make them laugh (she laughs). If you can't make 'em cry, you know, if you can't cry, you know, you don't want to cry, you make 'em laugh.

LEVINE: Do you remember what you did? Your antics?

MOLLER: (laughing) I really can't remember. I must have made faces or something that they'd always laugh. I'd like to tell this little anecdote. So, (she clears her throat) On the corner, downstairs of us on the corner they had, there was a real estate, a big real estate office. And word got back that would my mother like to have the job of cleaning this real estate office, like five o'clock in the morning. Of course it wasn't a long walk. It was just downstairs of the corner. So she said "Yes." So anyway she started – God, with a mop that wide and, it was a man's job – and she did that whole office every, five mornings a week, five o'clock in the morning when it's snowing out and it's dark out and everything. So, finally, she said, "You know, I'm awful lonely in there," she said, – and I'm nine and a half – and she said, "Would you like to – excuse me – would you like to come and do the dusting? I'll give you ten cents a day."
(she sighs) I said, "Okay." (she sighs) We got up at five o'clock in the morning – and this lasted, I don't know, a year or so – and my job is to desk, ah, dust all the desk tops and empty the – and I loved that part – you emptied the waste baskets because I thought, "The American people are very –" (pause) What's the word? – "wasteful." And why I thought that, they would, well this is before your time, they had these big blotters. You know, everything had to be blotted, with the ink wells and everything. And

they would, get a little mark on there and then they just fold it up and throw the whole big blotter out. So, I thought, "Boy this is really terrific!" And I, right away, got a brainstorm and I took all those blotters out of the waste basket, took them home, when I had time I would cut them all up into nice, neat blotters and then, to make points with the kids in the class who were making fun of me all the time because I couldn't speak English, I would have, in the morning, I'd feel real important. I'd pass out all the blotters. "Oh! Look what Gertrude gave us! Look what –" you know. And little by little, boy I was in. And also I found a lot of pencils, about that size, (she indicates). They got down to that size, with a nice eraser on the end. They would throw them in the waste basket. Boy, I'd sharpen them on that pencil sharpener and I took (she laughs) all those to school and from then on – it took about six or eight months, I guess, you know – and I had some friends and –

LEVINE: Do you remember your initial days in America? Well, maybe just taking the train from New York to Chicago?

MOLLER: I certainly do. (she laughs) That was memorable. (she clears her throat) When we left Ellis Island, no doubt somebody put us aboard the ferry again, back over to Battery Park I suppose, and somebody was in charge of getting us into a taxi, and this is where the story begins. This taxi driver of course knew that we couldn't speak English. He found that out, and we were going, I believe to Penn Station. Looking back, it had to be Penn Station, I'm sure, where years later I would, you know, I would leave from there to go home, when I lived in New York City years later. That taxi driver must have driven us back and forth through Central Park a half a dozen times before he took us to Penn Station, and my mother had so little money. It was really sad, and she argued with him in German, and he argued in English and, I mean, I don't know how it was settled. I never

really remember talking about it, but it was so much money that this man, you know, but finally we did, we got on the train. But, of course, in those days there was no such thing as air conditioning and, it was in October, and sometimes a porter would come. (she laughs) My mother had a beautiful white satin blouse on. (she sniffs) I remember that white satin blouse. It was white when we got on the train. (she laughs.) And the porter would come in once in awhile to get a whiff of air. He'd pull that thing up and I guess, you know, trains usually go through all the whistle stops, so to speak, in this country and through some not very nice neighborhoods and so forth and all the soot used to fly in this window, and my mother, my poor mother, when we arrived in Chicago, the black soot marks were all over her blouse, you know. But, there again, I guess it must have taken us twenty-two or -four hours. I remember because I made that trip many times. I don't remember, I think, I'm sure there was a dining room, you know, where we ate and so forth. But –

LEVINE: Were you able to speak with anyone?

MOLLER: I don't remember that. I really (pause) (she laughs) But the porter came in with a broom and I don't know what he, it was sort of a brush or something. I remember him brushing the seats or something and all the dust would Pruh (she makes a blowing sound) (they laugh) All over my mother with her white blouse and, I mean, when you look back and you think about it, it's it's humorous, you know. (she's still laughing)

LEVINE: Did you have beds? Were you in a regular –?

MOLLER: No, we had, slept on the, you know, I guess they must have given us a pillow or something. Ugh, you do what you have to do.

LEVINE: And then when you arrived in Chicago what happened?

MOLLER: Well, our sponsor met us at the train station. And we lived in this ah, probably not one of the nicer areas of Chicago, where he lived. And he was a single person and, well eventually my mother married him, but that, it wasn't, I'd rather not even talk about it. Uh, he wasn't the nicest person. But my mother, she paid him back every dime for our trip, you know. We only lived there I think a few weeks in that area I told you, she was washing the dishes and so forth. So, oh, this is what I wanted to tell you, ah, living in the second place that we moved to, and she had that flat, and the cafeteria was downstairs. One saving grace was that there was a nice German couple that had the cafeteria downstairs. (she clears her throat) And (clearing throat) – excuse me – so, my mother having [to] get up earlier than I did to go to school, she said, " Would you, I talked to Mrs. So and So down there and she said that she'd love to have you work in the kitchen before you go to school. Then you can get your breakfast, and she'll give you ten cents every morning." So I thought, "Oh, I'm in." You know, "I'm really in." And it was a real challenge and (she sighs) and now, of course, today they call it child labor. But it didn't hurt me. I got up at, I don't know, five or six o'clock and I was down there I guess from seven-thirty, quarter of eight, and I had a wonderful hot bowl of oatmeal. In the mean time my mother's off to work. And I was what they call today a latch-key kid, you know. But they sort of looked after me I think – nice couple. And so, I had my breakfast and then I did my job. And I couldn't be in the restaurant, in the cafeteria part, so I was in the kitchen and there was a little trap door about this wide (indicating) that swung back and forth and the waitress or bus boy or whoever would throw, uh push all the trays of dishes through the trap door and I'd be on the receiving end. (she laughs) And I had a ball. Here's this big cart and I guess the rest of my life, I always like to have everything in place. This is the way I am, you know. I

don't like things sitting around. I don't like clutter. So here I am, all the silverware goes here, the plates go here, and the cups go here, and so forth, and the trash, you know, went (she's laughing). And I worked my way, I guess almost an hour and then I'd watch the clock and I'd get off to school, about two blocks down the street. So, you know, it worked out.

LEVINE: And what was the school like. How did the school compare with the school you had been attending...?

MOLLER: Very similar. Very similar. In fact, about two or three or four years ago I went back to Chicago and I had one of my friends that I used to baby sit for when I was twelve, she, of course, now is almost a (she laughs) senior citizen. And she drove me around, bless her, to all the different houses that we lived in. And, the one where the flat was they were ready to tear it down. And, of course, the cultural aspect of people are completely different now from what they were sixty years ago. You know, it was a very old neighborhood. Very, very nice neighborhood at that time and it wasn't very clean and neat when I was there last. But I remember all the buildings and I remember they school. They had to, when I started that school, Frances Scott Key School was the name of it. We had, the first thing in the morning, like in Germany, we had a little bible session. The teacher would read from the bible. I learned an awful lot. I really did. And I enjoyed it. I looked forward to it. Then we saluted the American flag and, of course, I finally did learn that. And we sang, I think at that time, the national anthem was (she sings) "Sweet country 'tis of thee, da da da dee da da, Of thee I sing." Do you remember that? Well now, of course, it's the Star Spangled Banner, which I have sung millions of times, when I started singing in New York. During the war I had to sing it before every show that I did. Supper clubs, you know. They must have had an awful lot of children because they had two or three what they call separate buildings – What

did they call them? – on the grounds that they had to build. And they had pot bellied stove in each one for warmth.

LEVINE: This is in the school house?

MOLLER: On the grounds, in the school yard.

LEVINE: Oh.

MOLLER: Three buildings. In fact, I lived in, in Florida I live next to a school and there must be, portables, that's what they call them, portables. And they were warm as toast and I guess they held twenty-five or thirty children each. So, for awhile, I was in one of the portables there and, of course, when the snow was out that high, it wasn't very pleasant when the bell rang and you had to go out and play out there in the snow, you know. But, it was fairly much the same. The teachers that I remember in that first – I went to two grammar schools in Chicago – the teachers were really nice to me. It was the kids and, of course, children can be cruel, you know. One of the teachers, and I wish I could remember her name, I don't remember her name, but it's hard to, you have to use sign language when you can't get your thoughts across to somebody. And, what she would do, she would say, "Gertrude," point to the chair, sit down, all the kids left, and then she would take for my benefit, she had a whole bunch of pictures she had cut out of magazines. And I always appreciated that and I remember she took the pictures out and I thought, "What is she going to do?" You know. And she would show me a picture and she would, and I remember this one. It was a lion. And she would look me in the eye and she'd show me the picture and she'd say "LI ON" and I would say in German, "Das ist ein Löwe. Löwe. "LI ON", she'd say, "good." And then she pointed to the window, she said "WIN DOW" and I looked, "WIN DOW" and I said

"zindow", WIN DOW" well of course I can, Germans have a hard time learning "window". They say "vindow", you know. And every day I would come home and wait for my mother. I'd let myself in, of course, and my mother would come home and say "Mama, I learned a new word!" And she'd say, "I learned a new word today too." (she laughs) Doing day work, you know. She worked for some very nice people. (she clears her throat) And she'd say "What's the word that you learned?" And, for instance, I would say, "Well, Treppen, Treppen is stairs, see. I said, "stairs." And she said "What's that?" And I said, "Treppen". And she'd say "Nein, Treppen, stairs, it's not stairs, it's steps. (she laughs.) You see, it can be confusing. (she clears her throat) The English language can be confusing because many words are not pronounced the way they're written. For instance, the word knowledge is a very good example. Would you believe if I told you that after, I guess, a year, year and a half, I became one of the best spellers in the class.

LEVINE: And how did you do that?

MOLLER: It's unbelievable. And a lot of the kids, as a result, thought I was cheating. Not a lot, but it was intimated at one point, making fun of me that I was maybe cheating because I always came out with a ninety, ninety-two, ninety-four. The teacher would write, we had our spelling book. And every week we had to learn six or eight or ten, ten more words. (she clears her throat) Excuse me. (she clears throat again) And she would write those ten words for the week up on the blackboard, so that you saw them every day. And every day I'd stare at them and I would say the words to myself in German. The word knowledge, that always stands out because that's a very tough word. (she clears her throat) You don't pronounce the "k". You don't pronounce the w. You don't pronounce the d and g; you pronounce that as a j and not a d and a g. So, in German, I said to myself, over and

over, knuv nud ge. So when the teacher erased the ten words, when she said, "All right, now" and she'd rattle off all those ten words and she got to the word knowledge, I would say, "knov led ge." None of the kids got that word. Isn't that amazing? And really, I, I have become a stickler in spelling. In fact, my son, who has two masters degrees in public health. He's a statistician. He got a second masters in Chapel Hill, North Carolina (clears her throat) on a student loan and, very dedicated, and he can, well some people consider him a – can't think of the word – he's an intellectual, you know. He makes fun of me sometimes. And I say, "How dare you. You didn't have to learn a language all over. (she laughs) You know, like I did. But, boy, doesn't he come to me sometimes and say, "Mom, how do you spell so and so?" You know, he's very good in spelling also, but, you know, I tell him, I said, "You came into this country the easy way. (Levine laughs) You know, that's true, I mean, people who are born here, I don't think appreciate America as much as the people who come here (pause) and really get started the hard way. Ellis Island is typical of that feeling, you know. Coming through here and – I'm sorry.

LEVINE: No, go ahead.

MOLLER: Well, it's just, even today, I think, even with the economy the way it is and everything, I think that this is the best place in the world to be.

LEVINE: Well, tell me about your mother's attitude about becoming American. Was she wanting for you and for herself to be Americanized?

MOLLER: Oh, yes. Oh, yes, oh, yes. I don't remember the year that she became a citizen. I really can't remember that. I have her citizen papers. And, as a result, I, because I was not eighteen, I became a citizen through her. But some years later, I had to get my own papers just to prove that I was a

citizen. But I didn't have to go through all that rigmarole. But my mother, I think she, we were all in Chicago maybe two weeks at the most when she said, "I've got to start night school." She had heard from somebody. She says, "I've got to learn English." And that's when she used to come home and say, "I learned a new word." You know. We were very proud when we learned – But one time she went to the, (she clears her throat) there was a German butcher right near us in Chicago and she says, "Mr. Schmidt, I learned a new word." she always went in there for her vegetables and her meat. So, (she clears her throat) – I'm sorry I'm so hoarse – she came home and she says, "You know I made a, in other words, a bu bu, you know, I made a mistake." I said, "What do you mean?" And she said, "Well, I wanted to show off my new word that I learned to Mr. Schmidt (she laughs) and he says, (microphone becomes detached) – I'm sorry – he says, "What else would you like Mrs. Hildebrandt?" And she said, uhm, "Well", she said, "I would like (pause)

LEVINE: (referring to microphone) That's fine.

MOLLER: "I would like two pounds" and she pointed over to the cabbage. She said, "I would like two pounds of gabbage." He said, "Nein, nein, Mrs. Hildebrandt, you don't want two pounds of gabbage." She says, "Yeah, yeah, two pounds of gabbage." She was so proud, you know. And he said, "Nein" and she says "What do you mean?" And he says, (she laughs) he said, he said, "You are almost right." He said, "It is not garbage. It is cabbage." "Acht, yeah, cabbage." (she howls) You know, so word by word, every day, a few words.

LEVINE: So there was a German community, some what.

MOLLER: Well, he was I think, the only one right there. But later we moved to the north west side of Chicago and there were quite a few Germans, Scandinavians, my best friend was Jewish. We grew up together and I don't know how we gravitated to each other because (she laughs) they came from Hungary and they came, I think, through Ellis Island. I'm sorry to say that in our twenties, when I went to New York, we sort of drifted apart. I hope she's still living but Edith and I were very, very close – Edith Klein. In fact, one time she showed me a picture of her mother holding her as a baby on the ship. And maybe that's the thing that brought us together, coming from Europe and all. And I used to love her mother's Jewish food. It was wonderful (she laughs) I ate over there a lot, you know. That's another thing that, this country is very diversified with the kind of people that live here. I had, later on I had a wonderful Greek girlfriend and I ate, I was invited to dine with them a few times and I became, became to love Greek food. And I had, at another time, an Italian girlfriend and, oh, the whole family would sit around this round table and I thought, "Oh, this is great." I've always been very lonely. You see, I cried all those years for my brother. I'd sit in the movie house all by myself on Saturdays, cost a dime to get in, you know. And I would cry for him, wishing he was sitting next to me. It was very lonely. I was like an only child, you know, for ten years. And I think that's one of the reasons I reach out to people because – I've been told I'm a very warm person. I like, I'm a hugger. I love people. I have a correspondence like that (indicates a long correspondence). It takes me all year to answer all my Christmas mail and so forth. And I love it. I couldn't be any other way. I need friends. And I have many.

LEVINE: And what part did the movies play in your life, coming from...?

MOLLER: Oh, wonderful. I used to be able to imitate (she laughs) Laurel and Hardy (she laughs) In fact, really, strangely enough, it's funny you should say

that, movies helped me to learn to speak English. I would spend all day Saturday there and my mother one time, she was close to calling the police because (she laughs) I forgot to tell her I was going to stay to see the movie three times that day and so forth. But, she finally knew that I would stay at least for two showings because the words and English that I missed the first time, I would match the wording, the pronunciation, to the action: Like, "come here" or "go away". And, really, I learned an awful lot from the movies. And, of course, I got to know who was married to who in Hollywood. And a friend of mine, some neighbor or other, gave me her used movie magazines, and I used to cut all the movie magazines out. And that became a game later on. I think all the girls my age, some years later, twelve, thirteen years old, we, when we had nothing else to do on a weekend, we'd bring our own pack (she laughs) of movie pictures and that was a game. I mean, you know, nobody had any money so we had these movie pictures. Her favorite was Jean Harlow and mine was Janet Gaynor. So whenever she got a new Janet Gaynor, she'd say, "I'll give you, I'll give you three (she laughs) I had one beautiful Jean Harlow, and she says, "I'll give you three Janet Gaynor's for that one Jean Harlow." (she laughs) And Clark Gable, and you know, all the rest of them and it was, it was wonderful, you know. But the movies really helped and, of course, in those days they had the wild and wooly West and I used to love, my favorites though were Laurel and Hardy. I mean, their humor was so wonderful and it was, I don't appreciate a lot of the movies that children see today or even grown-ups. I'm ashamed to sit in a movie house sometimes with the things that you hear and see in a movie. It's a shame what has happened and I guess it's that way all over the world now, but that's why I don't go to movies very much anymore. But I have the wonderful memory of all the wonderful (she laughs) comedies that I saw. And, you know, in those days, for ten, for a child it was ten cents, usually you got a free candy bar when you went in on Saturdays, and sometimes

they even had little tricks. Every week you get a little different magic trick. Sometimes they had a, you get a little ticket and then they had a raffle and then one time the whole stage was loaded up with a bicycle and oh, God, I never had a bicycle in my life, you know, and I thought, "Oh, if I could just win that bicycle." And there were all kinds of games and puzzles and what have you and a little table and chairs and everything. And everything, I kept watching my number, and everything (she laughs) was raffled off and finally there was a yo yo left on the stage, and guess who won the last thing, the yo yo. I thought, "That's the story of my life," you know. But I hung on to that yo yo for quite awhile. (she's still laughing) You know what a yo yo is. They're coming back. And we always used to, you got to know all the kids lined up because the same faces in that little neighbor (...) and I'm sorry that they tore that theater down. The name of it was The Plaisance. P-L-A-I-S-A-N-C-E. The whole block is gone where that movie house was. And they used to have what they called penny candy. I don't, that, before your...

LEVINE: I remember that.

MOLLER: No, you couldn't. No. Anyway, penny, actually penny, and there must have been fifty different varieties that you could get each one for a penny. So there were three little penny candy stores right around the school. And, in one of them, was a real, kind of a I think he was German, kind of one of these staid, course if I had a business like that I'd probably be the same way (she laughs). He was kind of a sour puss and the kids used to hate to go in there but he had special kind of candy (she laughs), so they were scared to go in there because he was always like this (she grimaces), you know. And, so, I remember standing there one time and waiting for this kid to get through and he had three cents I think, and he says, he took a long time to pick out what he wanted, and here's Mr. Katsky, you know,

standing here like this (she postures) cursing under his breathe, it seemed, so finally the kid says, and he's waiting to reach (she laughs), and the kid says, "no, ah, I'll have one of those," and Mr. Katsky grabbed it, he said, "No," he says, I've changed my mind," he said (she's laughing) I want one of those and I used to get the biggest kick out of this, you know. Simple things like that. I used to love to laugh and (she laughs) I haven't changed. You know, you know what they say, "When you can make somebody laugh, it sort of changes the world a little bit for you." You know?

LEVINE; Where do you think you got that idea?

MOLLER: I don't know. It's a challenge. There was a gentleman downstairs at the Information Desk. I don't know his name but I walked up to him and I asked him something and he seemed like he was tired or, you know, he answers questions all day so I didn't want to, I eventually asked him about where you, if you had shown up. But, at first, he turned around and thought I – I was standing in back of him, see – and I, I don't know what I said to him. Oh, yeah, I finally said, "Do you, have you seen Miss Janet Levine?" And he said "No, not yet" or something and I said, "By the –" and he sort of, and I said, "By the way," and he turned around again and I said, "How are you with giving infor – with a big smile on my face. If you have a smile on your face you can make people laugh because its ingrat..., it's catching. So I said, "How are you with information?" And the man got a half of a smile. And he says, "Well sometimes it's not always correct." (they laugh) You know? I mean it cheered him up a little bit I think and I enjoy doing that. It's a challenge. When you come into a store – I'm getting off the tangeant here again – but, you walk into a store and somebody is tired or had a problem with their wife or something and when you walk in they look at you as if to say, "Oh, God, here's another customer I have to

wait on." And, if you walk in with a smile, you see that person already very belligerent, you know, and you walk in, you say, "Hello there. How are you today?" "Oh, okay." "Would you have so and so?" And I think of something funny to say and before you know it they're grinning from ear to ear. And then, most of the time, they start talking to you nicely. It's, I just love people.

LEVINE: Was your mother also a people lover?

MOLLER: Yeah.

LEVINE: Well, it sounds (Mrs. Moller clears her throat) as though, even though you had a hard time, financially, you and your mother,

MOLLER: Always.

LEVINE: It sounds as though she allowed you certain – what do I want to say? – childlike indulgences or enjoyments.

MOLLER: Yeah.

LEVINE: Did she have some kind of philosophy that –

MOLLER: Yeah, all kinds, but I really couldn't sit here and tell you, you know, right off. Through the years all her values and so forth come through. I try to live my life the way, you know, because we were very close.

LEVINE: You must have had a tremendous bond, coming to this country together.

MOLLER: Yeah, it's like two, two (pause) – what word am I searching for? – two people in a wilderness, clinging. What's, what's out there? You know? And (pause) my mother (pause) (she sighs) when I was seventeen, she married her third husband and was, the sponsor, he was out of the picture. He was a bad person, it turned out. Kind of mean, very mean. Called me a pest and children should be seen and not heard. And I could never talk or ask for anything at the table. And I was like this all the time. (she postures a frightened countenance)

END OF SIDE B, TAPE I

BEGIN SIDE A, TAPE II

LEVINE: And when was he in the picture? What years were you?

MOLLER: Well, you know, he brought us over and, I don't know, I guess she married him a year or two later and I was about fifteen when she finally divorced him. It was terrible. So, when I was seventeen, my mother all this time was doing day work. When I was fifteen she started working – Fate, I'm a strong believer of fate. If you say, "I'm going to take the left road." Fate will come along and say, "You can't take the left road, you got to take the right road (pause) or the rear road" or whatever. You can't fight it. My mother, this is very interesting, my mother at, when I was fifteen, she saw three ads in the paper for day work, (she clears her throat) housework. And she could have called the other two, but she called this one first; this particular one. And I don't remember what the ad said, but – she told me all this, of course. And so she called this lady up and the lady said, "I'm sorry. I thank you for calling but we already, my husband and I have more or less decided. We have had a half a dozen ladies here already this morning"

and so forth. "And," she said, "you'd just be wasting your seven cents carfare." And my mother said, "Well, I really don't care about that." I mean seven cents was hard to come by. "But," she said, "I really would like to talk to you." And she said, "Really, I beg you," she says, "please don't come." And my mother was, she had never been that insistent, but that particular day, three or four times she says, "Please, I want to come even though you won't hire me." Isn't that strange. So she gets up there. So, of course, everybody was poor. And they were living in a beautiful apartment house just a stone's throw from beautiful Lake Michigan where all the yachts were and everything. Some people still, you know, had yachts during the Depression. Nineteen thirty-five, and they lived, they were the only people in the whole building, on the fourth floor on the right and the only reason they were allowed to live there, rent free, three children, mother and father, was because the owner, whoever it was, had no money. People didn't have money to rent apartments. They all had a live, the whole family had to move in together, the grandfathers and the grandmothers and the nieces and the nephews. I mean, like ten people in one little apartment in one little apartment and they all had to, nobody had jobs. And the few that did had to support the rest of them. Well, anyway they lived up there and they were a very happy family. My mother, so she shows up. She had to climb those four flights, no light in the hallway. And she thought, "what am I getting myself in to?". So she gets up to the fourth floor and, you know, knocked and the lady, with a German accent (she laughs), she was from Vienna, it turn out. She came in and when they heard my mother's accent, you know. And she said, "Well, I'm Mrs. So and so." And she said, "Oh, you're the lady I told you not to come." And, after they talked to her for awhile, Fritz and the lady, her husband Fritz, they looked at each other and she says, "Excuse us." She says, "My husband and I want to have a conversation." So they go in the other room and they come back and my mother was hired. Oh, after they asked her,

“Will you teach”, not teach, “Will you promise to speak some German with our three children?” It turns out, so my mother comes home, tells me she got the job, and she says, “Guess what? She’s a singing teacher.” I said, “Nice. That’s very nice.” And I let it go at that. I couldn’t care less. I think I told you this, didn’t I?

LEVINE: Tell it for the tape.

MOLLER: Yeah, so (she laughs) I hope I’m not boring you.

LEVINE: No, not at all.

MOLLER: And, so she said, I said, “Well, that’s nice.” So, of course, she goes back the next day. So, about a week later, she came home and said, “You know, Mrs. Metzger asked if you, how many children I had and I told her two in Germany and one here.” And, “What is the one here, a boy or girl?” You know, and so forth. And she said, “Well, my husband and I think so highly of you and we really appreciate you and we wish we could pay you more than five dollars a week.” And she worked there five days, five hours a day, five days a week, just so’s there somebody there when the threes children came home from school. And, so she said, “In lieu of being able to pay you more”, she said, “I decided to give your daughter a year’s scholarship, singing.” And I said, “Mama, I don’t want to be a singer.” I said, “I want to either be an actress or I want to be dress designer.” She said, “Well, you better show up at Lake View High School, because I don’t want to lose my job.” So the first Tuesday that came along, I thought, “Maybe if I don’t show up, she won’t even remember me. I’m sure she’s got a lot of pupils.” They were paying, the going rate was twenty/five cents a lesson. So , my mother came home Wednesday night and she says, “Mrs. Metzger asked me this morning where you were.” I said, “Oh Mama,

I don't want to, to learn, I don't want to be a singer. That's sissy stuff." So she said, "I beg you to go." So the following Tuesday I walked back and forth and all I heard was la la la la. You know, la la la la, and I tkought, "Oh, gee, do I have to go through this?" You know, but I thought, "Well, (she laughs) my mother needs the job", so I, finally, I was late getting in there, so, she didn't know me from Adam and the whole class, there were about twenty/five kids in there, you know, and so she says, "Sit in the back. Take the seat in the back." So I did and after the class was, I just joined right in la la la la, like that and she, after the class was over, she said, in fact the door had a glass, you know, and I looked through and I saw the kids there, and I did notice a couple of nice looking boys (she laughs) that were just sitting there. You know, being fifteen. And, to this day, a lot of the girls in that class are still very good friends of mine. In fact, one of them lives in Flushing and they took me there last year. And that's how I met Brian and, what's his name, Paul, Paul Sigrist. So, anyway, three years later after I got to like it, because about two weeks after my second or third lessons, this very handsome young man walks in. He was one of the older one. He was nineteen, I think, eighteen or nineteen and, you know, I was fifteen. And I thought, you know, he's so beautiful. I used to just sit there and stare at him and so forth. It turns out, three years later, my teacher's opera company, I did Marguerite in French, the whole role of Marguerite in Faust and he was Faust. It's a very, very wonderful opera, with costumes, scenery and, in fact, one of, the wig maker used to make Caruso's wigs at the Metropolitan. And he had moved to Chicago and he did all of the Chicago Opera people with the wigs and the make-up. (she laughs)

LEVINE: What determined, do you remember when you decided you might actually really like to be a singer?

MOLLER: Yeah. You know, a lot of kids in their teen years, they're lost, they don't know what they want to be. Sometimes 'til twenty-two, twenty-four, twenty-five. And first you, well, when I was I ten years old I'd made up my mind I wanted to be an street car conductor (she laughs) because it was so much fun punching the tickets, you know. I'd watched them. That, I mean, that's silly. I really had my heart set on being a dress designer. I finally settled on that because I was always drawing and so forth. So I had to go to work when I was sixteen, before Mama married my wonderful step-father. I miss him to this day. He was sixteen years older than my mother and we then lived in a lovely house with a lot of nice, warm heat in the winter and we didn't have to worry about, but I had to go to work when I was sixteen, before they married, because my mother was only making five dollars a week and, you know, we just. And do you know, I never finished high school. I had one year of high school, and a Harvard professor, who taught at Harvard for forty years, that's another whole part of my life. I met him through the hobby, my hobby was sea shells. That's a whole new world. I haven't even touched on that subject and we can maybe talk about it later. So, what made me decide to be a singer? Well, I went to, I worked all day and I was earning like, I worked in a factory, sewing, sewing buttons, millions of buttons on, eight hours a day. And I made six or eight dollars a week. It wasn't called piece work. It was the only thing, I wasn't trained for anything, you know. And so I, I had to satisfy myself by going to the Art, I joined the Art Institute. At age seventeen, In Chicago, you know, with the lions sitting out front. And I had two years of evening school. Worked all day and two nights a week I went to evening school. By this time, sixteen or seventeen, I was, my teacher invited me to the opera class, and that was the thing, you know, to be invited to the, with the older kids. And it was Downtown, on Michigan Avenue. And every Monday and Thursday was opera class. And Tuesdays, I think, and Fridays I went to Michigan, you know, it was right near where I worked. And I was getting

quite good. I had two years of dress designing and fashion design and fashion illustrating. And I entered this Chicago Land Music Festival when I was eighteen. People who had studied in Europe, all kinds of singers would be in categories, all the sopranos today and all the tenors tomorrow, and so forth. And they would pick one man and one woman over all of Chicago to sing at Soldiers Field, and there was a big extravaganza. But it was also a very wonderful experience for us. Well, I did not place when I was seventeen. I sang. You had to learn certain numbers. And the second year, when I was eighteen, I don't remember the song that I sang. (She sings a melody without words) Anyway, it was called the villanelle or something. That was the song for the sopranos, and I really almost fainted when I came in third out of seventy-three sopranos. And, I really was flabbergasted. I decided, when that happened, I thought, "Well, if people think that I'm that good, I have got to make up my mind soon as to what I want to be because you can't throw your time and your effort and your energy into too many things." So I decided it had to be singing. If people, the judges, deemed that I was that good, you know, because if there's anything worse than, there's nothing worse than fooling yourself into thinking you're something or somebody you're not, in my estimation, because there were a few of the students in my teacher's class who. They loved singing so much and they sounded horrible. You know, like an elevator going around a curve (she laughs), they used to say. And they just stuck with it, but they really sort of croaked, you know, and I thought that's not going to happen with me. And I always had doubts and I would always hold my ears like this (she gestures) to try to catch the sound and, if it was a bad sound, I was going to give it up. So anyway I quit art school and I concentrated for seven total years of, every night. Some of the neighbors, in those days people could not afford, because of the Depression, could not afford, when they moved from one house to another, to move their pianos. It cost too much. So they just left them.

Everybody was leaving pianos all over. And somebody down the street must have heard me, la la la la, you know, practicing, and they came over to my mother and said, "Listen, we're moving and your daughter must be a voice student. We'd love to give her the piano but you'll have to move it." So we got somebody, a couple of people to move it, move the thing. And boy, I, it was one of those play, I'd learned to play, but not very well. But it was one of those were you go like this and the music rolls, you know. And, I had some of the opera class kids over and, Wow, we'd be going to town (she laughs) singing. All of my parties were singing. And they didn't cost anything. We had good clean fun. Goodness, we never heard of drugs or alcohol or smoking. In fact, one kid, one boy smoked one time out in the hallway and he was ousted from the opera class for a whole month. See what I mean. She was very strict. As one young man put it, we had a reunion in her memory. We all went back to Chicago in 1985, about two dozen of us, from all over the country. And her three children were there, of course, now adults. I called the Chicago Tribune and they came. And they interviewed the different ones of us. And, as one fellow put it, he and his wife met in the opera class, and they'd been married for over fifty years, and they're the ones who brought me here last year. As Harold put it, he said, "You know, our voice teacher, opera teacher, taught us how to live, the values." He said, "It was lasted us all these many years." He said, "God only knows, if I hadn't taken singing lessons, the trouble I could hve gotten in to (they laugh). You see what I mean. He has a terrific sense of humor.

LEVINE: Now, let's we don't have a lot of time left.

MOLLER: Yeah.

LEVINE: So tell me what you're proudest of.

MOLLER: Gosh, I (she said realizing the time). What I'm proudest of? Having three children.

LEVINE: Well, perhaps you can tell me how you met your husband. And his name.

MOLLER: Yeah, I was singing in this Scandinavian, in the war years, here in New York. The Scandinavian restaurants, the Kungholm, Gripsholm, Iceland, Wivel, The three Crowns, and so forth, were very popular all the country. They were well known. I don't know how many of them are still here. I know Wivel closed after thirty years. And I sang, first, at Zimmerman's Hungarian, with the gypsy violins and the floor show there. They seated almost a thousand people for dinner. Well, I met my husband at a second place where. It's a Scandinavian place where a lot of, of course, Scandinavians. And during the war the Merchant Marine, my husband was a Merchant Marine. And I was introduced by another chap who used to come in with his girlfriend all the time. And he was kind of, liked to throw his weight around, as to knowing the entertainers. So, one day he brought in this handsome blonde fellow; he was also blonde. And, he came in with his girlfriend and so he wanted to show off to them that he knew, well he didn't really know me but my boss introduced me to this guy, with his girlfriend. So he was going to show off that he had been introduced to me, you know. So he introduces me to this handsome blonde fellow and his girlfriend from Brooklyn or somewhere. And he invited me to be sitting at the table, and I said, "Well, I would have to, after the first show I would be glad to come over." He bored me to death. He was kind of a, but anyway, so I went up and I changed my gown, after I sang, and sat down with them. They had just had their dinner and I had a glass of wine or something. And I tried to be nice to everybody. You know, my boss also and his wife introduced me to – I was one of the members of the family. I

sang there almost three years. It was on the 54th Street, between Broadway and 8th, right below, in the basement of the CBS Theater, and once in a while our doorman would give us free tickets and I'd see Lawrence Tibbett. And one time I saw Lucille Ball, standing in front with her flaming hair, waiting for the doors to open, and so on. It was very exciting. So, anyway, this blonde fellow, after my third show, I thought, "Oh, God". I tried to sneak out, you know, and he said, "Wait a minute! You're going to join us for a night cap after." I said, "No, really, I want to get home." And he kind of bored me, you know, and people they, they all bored me. (she laughs) But tried to be nice. So, anyway, he insisted that we go, go to the Iceland for a night cap, and I thought, "Oh gee." So the three couples and myself, I went with them and so forth. And this blonde fellow, he didn't seem to have too much personality. I thought, "Well, he's nice looking, but he doesn't talk much and I think they had a fight or something." But anyway, so the next night I get a dozen roses to the dressing room and I couldn't figure out who they were from. I met a lot of people and the name just didn't ring a bell. It was him! (she laughs) I couldn't even remember his name. It didn't mean a thing to me, you know. It wasn't one of these love at first sight things. And, so he came in that night and he said, "I hope the roses are right?" And I said, "Did you send them to me?" You know? I said, "Well, really, I mean, you don't even know me, right? I don't know you," and so forth. Well, he came in every night. Before you know it, he'd invited me out for dinner and between shows and he grew on me. In fact, I have some pictures here I'd like to show you when we get through. I have to be down at the theater at ten minutes, about five minutes after four. Is it already four o'clock? You know, I have hardly seen anything in this building.

LEVINE: Okay. Well let's finish off by, what's your husband's name?

MOLLER: I pronounced it Knud. It would be like "newt". K-N-U-D. He was from Bornholm, Denmark. It was a beautiful island and we went there in 1972. He sailed as a Merchant Marine, as an alien for Uncle Sam. He risked his life, I mean, he was torpedoed once on a ship and floating around the ocean and, for some years. He came over when he was nineteen.

LEVINE: This was when? This was –

MOLLER: During World War Two.

LEVINE: Before you met him?

MOLLER: Yep. He left Denmark, I think he said, when he was nineteen. He said when Hitler came into Denmark, he said, the place wasn't big enough for both him and Hitler, so he left. (she laughs) So, that's the way he put it. He had a, he got to have a wonderful sense of humor. But when I first met him, he hardly ever said a word. But through the years he even told a joke the way I told it. With the same, you know, acting it out. (she clears her throat) He got to be pretty terrific. (they both laugh)

LEVINE: Good. And what about your children? What are their names?

MOLLER: Dianne, Erik and Linda. I made up my mind to name my children, give my children names that if when they grew up, and they've traveled to other countries, that nobody, regardless of what country they went to, would have a problem pronouncing (she laughs) their names. And you know where that stems from, right? I didn't want them, although my name is very beautiful name my mother said. It's a very old Germanic name, very, very old. And I understand it's in one of the Wagnerian operas, too. It's also very popular in the Scandinavian countries. But they called me

Goodie and, you know, they just couldn't pronounce it, so anyway, I made do, and regardless of rose by any other name, I'm still the same person, you know. (she laughs)

LEVINE: Well, why don't we close, I think we need to close now.

MOLLER: I hope I –

LEVINE: Oh, this has been delightful. I'm very happy. It's longer than many interviews.

MOLLER: Oh, gee. (she laughs)

LEVINE: It's rich and full and I'm very happy to have it. What would you say, kind of in summary I guess, about coming here as an immigrant, as a child, and growing up here and struggling and then finding a better life for yourself?

MOLLER: If I had stayed in Germany, of course, we never know how, where fate would have led us. But if I had stayed there, in other words – I don't know how it is now, but it seems to me there was always a caste system, like in India, they put a certain spot on your head or whatever, you know, on your forehead. If you're the carpenter's son, you have to be a carpenter. You'll never be, amount the president of a company or whatever. This is what I tend to think, and from what I have heard through the years. Like I said, I never dreamed that I would be singing at the Waldorf-Astoria, at a benefit with people with diamonds on and with ermine fur and they're all sitting there at attention, listening to little old me, an immigrant who couldn't speak English. This, to this day, amazes me. And, you know, I look at some of these pictures and I think, "That couldn't possibly have been me". It's, it's, I keep saying this over and over, but you have to put your

shoulders to the wheel. I told my kids when they were growing up, “Your shoulders to the wheel, your feet on the ground and something else”, you know. You have to keep pitching until you finally attain your goal, and then you stick to it. And you will be what you want to be. You have to have determination. You have to sacrifice. You have to sacrifice, you can’t run out. You have to save your money and you can’t run out and spend every nickel if you want to attain your goal. I was earning like six, seven dollars a week, if I was lucky it was seven, on piece work in factories. The one factory I worked in, at eight o’clock sharp, the boss threw the switch and hundreds of machines and the din for eight hours was so horrible. But boy, it was wonderful when at twelve o’clock you pull that switch again and it went off for thirty precious minutes, and my mother always fixed me a lovely lunch, and the only reason that I could live with this situation, this horrible situation, was that I had this dream. And I knew that this horrible thing was not going to last forever. That’s the only thing that kept me going. It was pretty bad. I never had dances and what did they call it in high school – you know, they all have boyfriends and they picked up and they go to the movies and all. I never had that all. But, boy, did I make up for it when I started singing in New York. (she laughs) I went to all the best places. I heard Perry Como one night. I heard Sinatra the next night. I ran into all kinds of movie stars on the elevators going up to see the agents. I had dates. My phone rang off the hook. The phone was in the hallway of the rooming house (she laughs) where I lived and I had a wonderful Viennese lady, who was like a mother to me – I was very lucky – on 89th street between Broadway, and, no, between Riverside and West End.

LEVINE: Wow.

MOLLER: It was wonderful. (she pauses) It’s here for the taking, you know, there are a lot of things free, even today. You can go to a library and get a library

card and you can sit there all day and read all about the wonders of the world and they have improved. Even the libraries have improved with, you know, computers and all of that. There's so much here. There's just so much. I wouldn't want to live anywhere else. You know, I was homesick for years because of my relatives, and you know, my sister, my brother and all this. But I couldn't live over there anymore.

LEVINE: What was it like for your mother?

MOLLER: Very lonesome.

LEVINE: And for you, regarding your sister and brother, who did not come?

MOLLER: Many a time, when my mother and I would walk down the street, and she saw a little dark haired boy with big brown eyes, she would fall on her knees, but, he'd be with his mother usually or he was playing out in front of his house. She would sort of almost fall on her knees and she'd say, she'd say, "What's your name? What's your name?" And she'd stroke his hair and the tears would come down and I would stand there and watch her cry (she is moved), you know. And I missed him terribly. I missed him. My brother, long story, he came over ten years late at age, it was his sixteenth birthday. We picked him up over here in the 40s somewhere off the ship. It was a big, huge ship. And so we had spent, drove all the way in an old jalopy from Chicago. My beautiful step-father, and he mortgaged his home. He took a mortgage on his home to have some money to get my brother over here. It was during the Depression. And we took this (she laughs) this old jalopy. We barely made it. And so I had contacted one of my opera class friends who had moved to New York, with her parents. They moved in the basement of a brownstone in Brooklyn. And so we looked them up. We spent the night, and the next morning I was so

excited, I hadn't seen my baby brother since he was six and here's this handsome young man, sixteen years old, you know, walking off the ship. And it was so wonderful. But when he was drafted, of course, the war. Got him over here just in the nick of time. Sixteen, some people said they were surprised that Hitler let him out, you know. Anyway. We got him over here and we were very happy. We were really, it was a happy family. My step-father was just really wonderful, we were always laughing and always. I was the apple of his eye and it, it really made my life because I never had a daddy, you know.

LEVINE: And where was he from?

MOLLER: He was from Stuttgart. He came over before Ellis Island even opened, I think. Because he was older than my mother. And he jumped ship or something. I don't know how he got, no, I think he had a brother in Chicago, or a cousin, a cousin and I think he sponsored him or something like that. I hear about people jumping ship (she laughs) and swimming ashore and all that. It shows you that they really want to be over here. (she laughs) I wouldn't do that, you know. But he was wonderful and he never went back. He was sixteen years old. Can you imagine, a sixteen year old kid coming over to this country alone? But he did have that cousin over there. And he built, he helped build Chicago, literally. He became a stone mason. He built theaters, apartment houses, and he worked very, very hard. Well, I talked him finally into moving to Florida and I'm now living in the little house that they bought in Florida.

LEVINE: Oh, nice.

MOLLER: You know.

LEVINE: You know, I was thinking maybe a good way to close, do you remember any songs that are German. I mean, could you like sing something in German and then maybe something that you connect with the United States?

MOLLER: When the ship, maybe today still, when the ship leaves Germany they always play this very sentimental, and I don't even remember all of it (she clears her throat) I was, it's kind of a sad song, it's a sweetheart leaving, a young man leaving his sweetheart, standing on the dock. And it goes: *Muss i denn, muss i denn zum Städelein hinaus, Städelein hinaus und du mein Schatz bleibst hier*". That's the only thing I remember. And the violin, the three piece band aboard the deck played that when we left the dock, and everybody cries, you know, and everything. It means, "Do I have to leave you, I'm leaving on the ship and I have to leave my sweetheart here". That's basically what it means Oh, you asked me about an American? (she clears her throat) Well, of course, I love all the Irving Berlin things. (she sings, "I'll be loving you always") "I'll be loving you always. With love that's true, always. When the things you've planned need a helping hand, I will understand always, always," (she clears her throat) Excuse me. "Days may not be fair, always. That's when I'll be there, always. Not for just an hour, not for just a day, not for just a year, but always." (she is moved)

END OF SIDE A TAPE II
BEGINNING OF SIDE B TAPE II

MOLLER: I'm sorry.

LEVINE: Oh, don't be sorry, I thank you.

MOLLER: You should have told me to practice before I came. I haven't sung in ten years.

LEVINE: It sounded wonderful.

MOLLER: I have sung up until ten years ago, from the time I was fifteen. When we moved to Jacksonville I thought, "Oh my goodness, my career is over with", you know, and all this which was 1948. But through someone that my husband worked with, they had an aunt or something who was a very excellent organist in a huge cathedral type of a Presbyterian Church in Jacksonville. And a few months after I got there, I was soloist. And my first song was (she clears her throat) for Christmas. (she sings the melody to, "Oh, Holy Night") "Oh, Holy Night." (she continues singing the melody) And for Easter I did. (sings the melody to the Mozart "Hallelujah") If I'd practiced up, I could have done a little better than this, but that's (she laughs). That's it.

LEVINE: Wonderful, and I thank you very much.

MOLLER: I do have to go. I have loved it. Bless you.

LEVINE: My pleasure. I've been here today with Gertrude Moller and we've been talking about your coming from Germany in 1929, when you were nine, and what happened before and after. This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service signing off.

END OF THE INTERVIEW