

EI-231

ANN (ANNELIESE) BACKES KALAFUT BANKS

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- **GERMANY: FRIEDRICHSTHAL, SAARLAND**
- **USA: NEWTON, NJ**

LEVINE: This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service and I'm here in Newton, New Jersey today with Ann Banks, who came from Germany in 1929, just a few weeks before her ninth birthday. Today is November 23, 1992 and I want to say that I'm very happy to be here.

BANKS: It's nice meeting you.

LEVINE: And I look forward to hearing your story. So why don't we start with where you were born.

BANKS: Well, I was born in a town called Friedrichsthal.

LEVINE: Could you spell it? Words like that, if you could spell them.

BANKS: F-R-I-E-D-R-I-C-H-T-T-H-A-L. [sic: Friedrichsthal] I think that's correct. In, it's in the Saar Basin, very close to the French border. And we lived in an apartment, and my father, I don't know if you want background on him.

LEVINE: Yes.

BANKS: Okay. He was one of thirteen children, and his father's family were farmers, but his father didn't like farming, so he went into the coal mines, which was in that town. My father was brought up and born in Altenwald, which was the town next to Friedrichsthal.

LEVINE: Can you spell Altenwald?

BANKS: A-L-T-E-N-W-A-L-D. That means old wood, old woods.

LEVINE: So he went into the mining.

BANKS: His father, yes. And when my father, he went to school for eight years, and then he started to work for, at the age of fourteen worked for a butcher delivering meat and taking orders, and then at age sixteen he went into the mines, to the coal mines to work. And then after he was there two years the war broke out, and he enlisted the day after the war started and he was, I think just seventeen. So after the war he came back home and through his sister he met my mother, and they married a year later. And in that year his, one of his sisters moved to Passaic, New Jersey. And the year after they had moved here they came home for a visit and, of course, just praised the United States and what a wonderful country, and the opportunity. So my father got all enthused. And they

loaned them the money to come over, and he lived with them for the ten months before we came.

LEVINE: What was your father's name?

BANKS: Matthias Backes. (she laughs)

LEVINE: B-A...

BANKS: A-C-K-E-S. Yes.

LEVINE: And your mother's name?

BANKS: Anna.

LEVINE: And her maiden name?

BANKS: Baumgarten. Yes. So, uh, he, they loaned them the money for him to come, and my, his brother-in-law got him a job as a baker's helper. But the money was so bad, it was eleven dollars a week, and he had to pay board to his sister, send money for us in Germany, and try to pay back what he had borrowed from them. So he got very discouraged, and he talked to this grocer who lived in the same apartment house, a Mr. Greenbaum, who heard his story and felt very sorry for him, and he offered to loan him the money. He closed his store, went with my father to get the tickets and made all the arrangements, and my father was so excited and, of course, so were we that we could come ten months afterwards. So we had a very rough trip across. It was a ten day crossing. And someone had given us a ball, and we lost it overboard and we were crushed. (they laugh)

LEVINE: Well, before we get to the voyage, how about life as you remember it up into your eighth year.

BANKS: Okay. We lived right across the street from the church that was attended.

LEVINE: What was that church?

BANKS: It was the Catholic Church. And I went to school there. And my earliest memory is of taking a prayer book in my hand and walking across the street to that church. And we had relatives that lived there, and they visited a lot.

LEVINE: You must have had a lot of relatives, I mean, your father had a big family.

BANKS: Yeah, we did. Yes. And my mother had two sisters and a brother, and her sisters lived in the same town. So, and nieces and nephews. We had a big family. And her mother was still living at the time. I don't have a recollection of my grandfather. He must have died when I was very little or before I was born.

LEVINE: What do you remember of your grandmother?

BANKS: Not much. I don't remember feeling sad and leaving. I guess I didn't know her that well. Of course, my mother was crushed. But I don't remember, I guess we were so young, it didn't have too much meaning for us.

LEVINE: How about your father's mother and father?

BANKS: His parents were dead. And another sister had moved to the United States in the meantime. And the others (a clock chimes), there's one sister still

living in Germany, and one sister is ninety-three or ninety-four, still living in the United States, and a brother in Florida who is eighty-nine.

LEVINE: Wow.

BANKS: Yes.

LEVINE: Well, so did you celebrate religious holidays as an extended family or . . .

BANKS: Oh, yes. And I remember, oh, I had forgotten that. We had Christmas trees with real candles on them. And of course we didn't get many gifts. We were just a poor family whose father worked the coal mines. And most of our gifts were just fruits and nuts and things like that, but, yeah, I do remember that. And, you know, the families getting together, and they always had a good time singing. They knew how to have a good time.

LEVINE: Let's see. How about your cousins and aunts and uncles? Did you have a lot of contact with them, or...

BANKS: Yes, we did. A lot of them lived in the town. And of course after we came here there was one niece of my mother's who kept in touch with her until my mother died two years ago at the age of ninety. And my father died much earlier. He was seventy when he died.

LEVINE: So did you attend a Catholic school?

BANKS: Yes, I did. I was in third grade when we left, and when we came to the United States they put, they put me in the third grade and my sister into third grade so that we could be together because we didn't know a word of English, not one word.

LEVINE: Well, tell me about the school in Germany.

BANKS: Well, we had the sisters, and I do remember they were very tough. I remember having to hold my hands out and they would hit you across the hands with a stick, and I never knew why. I don't remember ever doing anything so bad. (she laughs) Of course, maybe you block that out of your mind. I don't know.

LEVINE: So did you like school? I mean, was school...

BANKS: Yes, I did. I liked school. Yes, I did.

LEVINE: And how about, now, did you say you lived in an apartment?

BANKS: Yes.

LEVINE: What was, can you describe the building, and maybe the living quarters?

BANKS: Well, it was a very old building with three or four floors. And we had just, I think, two bedrooms and a kitchen and, I don't know if we had a living room. It was a big kitchen and a coal stove, you know, in the kitchen. And I don't remember too much else.

LEVINE: Do you remember foods that your mother made?

BANKS: I remember more of the foods that she made when we came to the United States. (she laughs) I don't remember any special foods. I know we ate everything as kids, not like the children today. (she laughs)

LEVINE: Well, now, did your mother work at all, or she was at home?

BANKS: No, she was at home.

LEVINE: And what was your father's motivation to come here?

BANKS: Well, he wanted a better life for us. He felt that he could do better financially, because we didn't have very much, and his sister and brother-in-law talked so much about all the great things in the United States. And he loved, he always wanted travel, and this was a great opportunity.

LEVINE: Is there anything else about the town that you think of when you think of that place?

BANKS: When I, every time I think about it I think of our apartment and the church across the street. That's all I really think about.

LEVINE: So then you had two sisters while you were still in Germany?

BANKS: Yes.

LEVINE: And what are their names?

BANKS: My sister who is a year younger than me is, her name was Helen, and the youngest sister is Hilda, and she's four years younger than I am.

LEVINE: So were there, are there any customs or ways that you do things that you think are a carry-over from your early beginnings?

BANKS: Not now, no, no. My family, my parents became very Americanized very

quickly, and they weren't like most people where we lived when we moved to Franklin. We had a lot of people, all of our neighbors were either Hungarian, Polish, Slavish, Russian and, I think, we were one of two families in Franklin that were German. And my parents learned English immediately, but these people spoke their language forever.

LEVINE: So your mother and father wanted to become American.

BANKS: Yes, and they both got their citizenship.

LEVINE: Do you remember anything you heard about America before you actually came?

BANKS: No. (she laughs) Just that it was a great place to come to. You know, in those days the adults talked and the children were in the background.

LEVINE: Do you remember anything you brought with you?

BANKS: We brought very little, just our clothes, and we had one trunk. We didn't bring very much. Some kitchen utensils and she didn't bring her sewing machine. She was a seamstress. She did do some sewing, and she sewed all our clothes. She always made identical dresses for the three of us, for years.

LEVINE: Do you remember what you wore when you came?

BANKS: I think I have a picture of little V-neck dresses that she had made for the three of us with beige collars. (she laughs)

LEVINE: Did she have the same color and everything?

BANKS: Yes, uh-huh. They were cream-colored, yeah. With little brown belts on them, I think. It's funny how these things come back. (she laughs)

LEVINE: Well, do you remember leaving? Was there, was that an event, actually leaving?

BANKS: No, I don't remember that being so dramatic. (she laughs) I just remember getting on the boat.

LEVINE: Okay. So you left your little town. Then how did you get to Bremen?

BANKS: We went by train.

LEVINE: Was that a first for you, to take a train?

BANKS: No. We had been on a train to get our, I guess it wasn't a passport that we got, but an immigration visa of some kind. We had to go on a train to get that, and I do remember those two train rides. And we were just excited to get on a ship. (she laughs)

LEVINE: So now, then, what happened when you got to Bremen? Do you recall?

BANKS: No, I don't. All I remember is on the train, and then we were on the boat. And I don't know why I don't remember more detail of that, but I don't.

LEVINE: But you remember the boat. Were you, do you remember the accommodations?

BANKS: Yes, I do. We were all in the same, what do you call it?

LEVINE: Like a dormitory room?

BANKS: No. We were just, just my family and I, my mother and the three sisters. We had one room for us, so we were all in one room. And it was just like they look like now, I guess, you know...

LEVINE: So it must have been, was it bunk beds?

BANKS: They were bunk beds, yes. And I remember the food. (she laughs) It stands out in my mind. Every morning we'd go up for breakfast and there would be this huge bowl of hard-cooked eggs, and to this day I love them and I can't eat them any more. But we just, we just loved all those hard-boiled eggs. And the food, other than that I don't remember very well. It's just the eggs that stayed in my mind. (she laughs)

LEVINE: Well, now, when you were in the dining room, did you sit at a table with just your family, or was it a sort of a...

BANKS: No, community, yes. We sat with long rows of tables with other people, yes.

LEVINE: Now, did you find it a pleasant trip?

BANKS: Yes. It was a very rough trip, but we didn't mind. I know a lot of people were ill, but we were fine. And one night they had a, they had a party, and everyone wore party hats, and it was like a welcome party or something. And my youngest sister stayed down in the state room and went to bed because she was only four years old. (she laughs) But my sister, oh, we have a picture somewhere of us at that party, yeah.

LEVINE: So do you remember anything your mother told you about coming here?

BANKS: We were just excited about seeing our father, and that was the extent of that. (she laughs)

LEVINE: So then do you remember when the boat came into the New York Harbor?

BANKS: Yes. And we were all up on deck. It was a Sunday, July 1st, and everyone was excited about seeing New York. And of course they were all excited about seeing the Statue of Liberty, the adults, and I'm afraid we just weren't that impressed as little children. And my father was waiting for us, but we couldn't get off the ship that day because it was a Sunday. So we had to wait until Monday, and then we were taken to the Great Room to wait, and we were all examined. It was really a superficial examination. But everyone was extremely nervous, because if you didn't pass that exam you were sent back to your homeland, and everyone was very nervous. But we all passed, and my father waited for us. And someone asked me, "Is this your father?" And the three of us said, "Yes, this is her father." (she laughs) So then we had our first car ride, and he took us immediately to Franklin where he had rented a house and in the meantime he had gotten a job in the zinc mines in Franklin, because it just wasn't paying enough to be the baker's helper. So he had bought second-hand furniture and had this little house waiting for us. They were called Zinc Company houses. They were owned by the Zinc Company, and we rented, but eventually my father bought it, and we had an outside bathroom, and Saturday night baths in a tub in the kitchen, which people joke about, but it's true. But it wasn't long, I think in one year he had paid back the money that Mr. Greenbaum had loaned him.

LEVINE: Do you remember, would you have known what it cost for the four of you to come?

BANKS: I have no idea. I have no idea. There are so many things I wish I had asked my mother. And she's only been gone two years. So, again, my father was in the mines, and things were very tough, I guess. The Depression had started, and we were poor, but we didn't know it. We had enough to eat, and we had the necessary things, and our needs weren't, you know, we didn't have very much, but we were happy.

LEVINE: Do you remember anything else about Ellis Island, before we get into...

BANKS: I just remember the Great Room, mostly, and people waiting to be examined, and we were all nervous about that, and that's all I remember about it. I think uppermost in our minds was to see our father.

LEVINE: Did you actually stay at Ellis Island that night, or you stayed on the ship?

BANKS: No, we didn't. We stayed on the ship.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. But you were able to see your father?

BANKS: From the deck when we, when we came in, into New York Harbor.

LEVINE: What was that like for you as an eight-year-old?

BANKS: Well, we were so excited, and he was so excited, and he couldn't wait to see his three little redheads, as he called us. Believe it or not, we had red hair in those days.

LEVINE: I believe it. (they laugh)

BANKS: Now it's graying. And that's all I remember of Ellis Island. In fact, when we went to visit there last year the outside didn't look like anything I'd ever seen before. I think uppermost was to see Father.

LEVINE: So he made this whole little house ready for you?

BANKS: Yes, yes.

LEVINE: And what was it like for you, then, going to school, initially?

BANKS: Well, I remember the first day of school very well. My sister, my younger sister wasn't old enough to go, but Helen and I were in third grade together, and we sat at the desk, and the teacher said, "This is desk, this is pencil, this is paper." And I don't remember ever having her tell us anything again, and the next thing you knew we were just talking English fluently. We learned very, very quickly, and we came home and taught our parents.

LEVINE: Can you remember, could you give me a flavor of how would you be, like, with your parents at home getting across the English to them? Can you remember any scenes around the dinner table or anything like that?

BANKS: I think my father was one to ask a lot of questions. He would ask what certain things were, and he did know a little English, because he'd been here ten months. And he started night school and went to night school to learn, and he learned to write very well in English, and he was very interested in everything. My mother not as much. But he learned to speak very well very quickly, and I was always impressed because all of our

neighbors, they spoke their native language at home, and we didn't do that after a while. We were completely Americanized. (they laugh) Yeah.

LEVINE: Was your mother happy she had come?

BANKS: Yes. She missed her family, but I don't remember her ever being depressed about it or sad. She was happy to be back with my father and that we were all together. And after a couple of years her mother died. And, of course, you know, then you had to go by ship, and she didn't go out, couldn't go out. But, and my father began to enlarge this little house, which he finally bought, and added a bathroom and a big kitchen. So then we had two bedrooms. The three girls shared a bedroom, and we had a living room and dining room and a kitchen and bath.

LEVINE: Now, was your father able to do that work himself?

BANKS: Oh, yes, yes, he was. Yes. And I didn't realize how hard, what hard work there is in mining until last year they opened up a mine as a museum in Ogdensburg, which is where I lived for many years after I married. I couldn't believe it. And my father never complained about the hard work. And he worked in the mine for twelve years, and then he began to have trouble with his back. So he knew he had to find some other kind of work, and he had his sisters living in Clifton, so he borrowed money from someone, I don't know who, and bought a little grocery store in Clifton. So they moved to Clifton and lived there for eight years with a grocery store. And then his health wasn't the greatest. He had emphysema. So he sold the grocery store and had an opportunity to buy a small hotel in Vernon, New Jersey, which was just a few miles from where we lived in Franklin prior to that. (a machine is heard humming in the background) So they ran that together. My mother cooked, and it had a little bar in it, and had some

rooms. And they owned that for several years but his health got bad, so then he retired. And when he retired he moved back to Franklin, where he had originally come from Germany.

LEVINE: Did your mother, when she cooked, either for the family or the hotel, did she cook German kinds of food?

BANKS: Oh, yes, and the people loved it. To this day I make the red cabbage that she made. And as the years went by she said I made it better than she did. (she laughs) And I agreed. Oh, and she made Sauerbraten and the German meat cakes and the German cakes I make to this day. They're like a tart, you know, with the applesauce, or blueberries or cheese. And it has like a shortbread crust.

LEVINE: Describe it in detail, because sometimes people are really interested in the things people made.

BANKS: Well, she made this crust that was like a shortcake crust that you pressed into the pan, and then you either poured applesauce into that, into your baking dish and baked it, or you, you could put blueberries or cut up apples. And I've made it with plums. Oh, that was our favorite, the Italian plums that were freestone. I make those to this day. That's right. (she laughs) And she, all her life she baked cakes like that and the yeast cake, not baking powder things. That just isn't the German way. And she, after my father died she was a widow for twenty-four years, and had a comfortable life because he had really made quite a bit of money owning that hotel and the grocery store, so we had a very good life. We had a very good life. And they were grateful all their lives to this man that made it possible.

LEVINE: What was your father like as far as his personality and his attitude towards being here?

BANKS: Well, he was a very strict father, I think, as all German men are. And I think in those days most men were. They were the head of the house and you did as you were told. When we sat at the table to eat, we were not allowed to talk. It was to be seen and not heard, and that was the way it was in those days. And, of course, the three of us, we'd get the giggles once in a while and we couldn't help it. And my father would get madder and madder. (she laughs) That was a long time ago. (the sound of water running is heard in the background)

LEVINE: And how was your mother as far as what she, did she discipline you at all?

BANKS: Oh, yes. I was just telling my husband yesterday. I remember when we did something she didn't know who started it. So she'd sit in a chair and the three of us lined up. And one after the other had to lie across her lap and she'd spank us. Well, all that provoked was giggling. (she laughs) She was a lot easier-going than my father, but we were really disciplined, we were.

LEVINE: And how about your religion, the Catholicism. Did that carry over into this country?

BANKS: Oh, yes. Oh, yes, it did. It does to this day. We go to the Catholic church, yeah. Yes. And my mother was a very strong woman. After my father died she seemed to gain all this strength, and she was a very, she had a lot of ailments, but nothing kept her down. And she fought and had a sharp mind right to the end. She had a massive stroke before she died and couldn't speak, but she understood everything, and was just, she used to tell me I was terrible before this stroke that I couldn't remember things and

she remembered everything. She had a wonderful memory.

LEVINE: Wow. Do you remember any kinds of values that she tried to impart to you?

BANKS: Well, both of my parents, honesty. That was the big thing, and I think I instilled that in my children. I have four children.

LEVINE: Okay. I wanted to ask you. How did you meet your husband?

BANKS: I met him at a dance. This is my second husband. My first husband died from Alzheimers. And I met my, I met Jack. He was also widowed. His wife had died. So we've been married just nine years. And I was married to my first husband for forty years.

LEVINE: What was your first husband's name?

BANKS: John Kalafut. So all my children are Kalafut. That's a Polish name. He was, his parents were Polish. His mother was Polish and his father Czechoslovakian. And he was born in Austria. But he was just one year old when they came here so he, you know, he was completely American.

LEVINE: And so what are your children's names?

BANKS: My oldest child is Nancy, and then I have three sons. And Jack was next, and James was next, and then David.

LEVINE: And is it C-A-L-L...

BANKS: K-A-L-A-F-U-T. Yes.

LEVINE: Okay. And how, do you have grandchildren?

BANKS: Oh, I have seven grandchildren, and I have nine step-grandchildren, so we have a total of sixteen grandchildren. And we have four great-grandchildren.

LEVINE: Really, wow!

BANKS: They were my husband's. He's two years younger than I, but he has the great-grandchildren. I don't have any yet. But I have a twenty-eight year old granddaughter who is now engaged.

END OF SIDE ONE
BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

LEVINE: Well, thinking back over your life, I mean, starting out in Germany, coming here as a child and sort of starting fresh again, how do you think about it?

BANKS: Well, it's funny. As the years went by and we lived here so many years and I got married and had children, I considered myself to be an American. We didn't, my mother was not one to live in the past and talk about the past very much. She lived in today and tomorrow, and even when she was ninety years old she talked about what she was going to do two years from now, a very optimistic person. And you're busy with your children and your lives, and I just, I was just American. (she laughs)

LEVINE: How do you feel about your German heritage? I mean, is that part of who

you are? Do you consider that...

BANKS: Well, I guess I do. But not a strong, strong feeling. Now, we took a trip to Germany, but it was a tour. And we were, we did not go to where I lived, and that didn't bother me. But my sister, she said, "If I want to go to Germany I want to go where I was born." And I don't know why, but I don't have that strong feeling. I have no idea why.

LEVINE: Well, perhaps being the oldest you took on your mother and father's enthusiasm for being American.

BANKS: I must have, yeah. And in her later years, I would ask my mother how to say something in German and she had forgotten. I couldn't believe it. I could still speak German, but not as fluently as I would like to. But I have no one to speak to. And when we were in Germany on that tour, oh, it came back so fast. It really did. If I was there a month, I'd be fluent again, yeah. So we've had a good life in the United States.

LEVINE: Well, okay. Is there anything else that you can think of that, how was it seeing Ellis Island?

BANKS: Oh, that, we really enjoyed that. And it was such a great feeling to walk into this Great Room knowing we had been there before. And, as I told you before, I don't know if it was on the tape, my husband took a picture of my sister and I sitting on a bench in the Great Room. And it was a great feeling, and we enjoyed it. We want to go back again. We went through the museum and we just really enjoyed it. It brought back some memories of that room and what was going on at the time.

LEVINE: Well, good. Well, okay. I think that's maybe a good place to stop, and I

want to thank you very much.

BANKS: Yes, thank you.

LEVINE: It's a very interesting story. And this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. I'm here with Anne Banks in Newton, New Jersey on November 23, 1992, signing off.

END OF THE INTERVIEW