

EI-265
CELIA LEVENTHAL STEINMAN
BIRTHDATE: DECEMBER 25, 1901
INTERVIEW DATE: 3/24/1993
RUNNING TIME: 50:00
INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE, PH.D.
RECORDING ENGINEER: KEVIN DALEY
INTERVIEWED AT: DAUGHTERS OF MIRIAM HOME, CLIFTON, NJ
TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: JOHN MURIELLO, 9/1995
TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY: CHARLES MITCHELL, IRV SILBERG

POLAND, 1913
AGE 11

SHIP: "THE NEW AMSTERDAM"
PORT:
RESIDENCES:
? POLAND: SUWALKI
? US: NEW YORK, NY

STEINMAN: Did you want a light?

LEVINE: No. This is Janet Levine with the National Park Service. And I'm here today with Celia Steinman, whose maiden name was Celia Leventhal.

STEINMAN: That's right.

LEVINE: She came from Poland in 1913 when she was eleven years old just about to turn twelve. Today's March 24, 1993, and I'm here in Celia's home in Clifton, New Jersey, and I want to say I'm very happy to finally get to talk to you.

STEINMAN: Thank you. I'm happy to have you interview me.

LEVINE: Great. Okay, well let's start at the beginning by your saying your birth date.

STEINMAN: Yes. I was born December 25th, 1901 in Poland in Suwalki.

LEVINE: Can you spell that?

STEINMAN: Yes. S-U-W-A-L-K-I. It's near Bialystok, near, it's Grodner Guberni. Grodner is G-R-O-D-N-E-R. Guberni is like a state that would I say, or a...

LEVINE: A...

STEINMAN: ...a town. No, it's bigger than...

LEVINE: ...a region?

STEINMAN: A region, maybe.

LEVINE: Or a province? Something like that?

STEINMAN: I would say province best of all.

LEVINE: Can you spell that last, Guberni?

STEINMAN: Grodner, G-R-O-D, like in David, N-E-R. Grodner, Guberni. Guberni would be G-U-B-E-R-N-I.

LEVINE: Okay. Did you live there the whole time before you left the United States?

STEINMAN: Yes, yes.

LEVINE: Do you remember the town? Can you...

STEINMAN: Suwalki.

LEVINE: Can you, can you describe what Suwalki was like.

STEINMAN: Oh, I could. I went to a Russian school. And in that school I must tell you, it might be interesting. As a Jewish girl we had the pictures of the Czar and Czarina in our classroom. And before we started our studies we all had to pledge allegiance to the Czar and Czarina. We had a beautiful kostel [Polish Roman Catholic]. kostell is, exactly is a Russian place of worship. We had a tserkov [church] which is a polish place of worship and we had a synagogue. We had a beautiful park there. And we lived on the main street which is called opposite the gubernator. The gubernator is the, like a, a mayor of the place. And it was a beautiful street. And in the summer time I remember we used to have tables and chairs sitting outside, and people would come and sit down and have their lunches, and have, they were known for very good ice cream. That was in the summer time.

LEVINE: Where would the tables and chairs be?

STEINMAN: On the sidewalks. Sidewalks cafe, like. And the park was very lovely. We used to go the park. I used to go with my father to the park every Saturday afternoon. And there we were surrounded by all the places of worship. And the place was beautiful to sit around in.

LEVINE: Hmm.

STEINMAN: And...

LEVINE: Can you spell the places of worship that you mentioned? Can you spell those words?

STEINMAN: A tzerkve, I, I could spell it according to my way, but I don't know whether it's right. Tzerkve is T-Z-E-R-K-V-E, tzerkve. And

that's a Russian place of worship. A kostol is a polish place of worship, and that's spelled K-O-S-C-H-O-L.

LEVINE: What was the composition of the town? Was it, was it about equal Jewish and non-Jewish or, or not?

STEINMAN: It was more, I only knew mostly Jewish people, so I could say it was more Jewish. And that was the place where I lived.

LEVINE: And what did people do for work in the town?

STEINMAN: All I can tell you is my father was a designer. And he would design in those years, those people who lived -- the, the men who were really of higher up in, in politics and in, in the administration, they would wear nightgowns rather than pajamas today you wear. In those years they used to wear nightgowns, long nightgowns, and they used to wear hats when they'd go to sleep in the wintertime. Now those, they were wealthy people and they had very lovely homes, and they would ask, have somebody to design different kinds of nightgowns for them. My father was a designer. My mother had some girls working in our home who would help her to get, get that all done.

My mother would arrange with these people how many they want and the price, and my father would do the designing of it. They also would make, in those years they had quilts. Now you have electric quilt. But in those years they used to have down quilts, and they were hand made. My mother used to do that, too. So that's the kind of work that I know. And of course there was a, a shoe maker on the block, and there was a tailor. You know, the usual thing. But outside of that I don't know what the main type of work was in the city. That I couldn't tell you.

LEVINE: Was there a market day? Was...

STEINMAN: Yes. Yes. And I remember going to those markets, too. It was wa, nice to look at. And they would have like apples in one basket and they would have pears in another, oranges in another, you know. That's, and then there was a store I remember where we used to get, like a grocery store. That's the only stores I remember. We did have in back of our house, not in the back but next place, was our, a small synagogue where people in the immediate neighborhood would go to. Not the big one near the park, but in there. And it was just Jewish people that I knew. And peop-- my father was a learned man. So when they had to discuss politics or so, they would pass that road. And we had a big window. My father's table was right near the window. And they would stop, open the window and talk about, I remember that time they had that French boy, who was, what's his name, and now I forget his name. And they talked about that. They talked politics. And they talked what went on in the city.

LEVINE: What was the situation with the French boy?

STEINMAN: He was, uhm, a Jewish boy, who was in the university. And maybe you would know the name. It's a very popular name and I always did know it. He was, he was told because he was Jewish they had arrested him, and he was in prison. And of course the Jewish people were very

hurt about it. So they talked a lot on it. I forget the name. Can't think of it.

LEVINE: Hmm. He was arrested because he was in the university? Or...

STEINMAN: Well, he, he was arrested because he was Jewish. They said they picked something on him that he did or said something. This is, I remember that they used to talk and mention his name. And, but I did know a lot more about him than I do now.

LEVINE: Hmm-mm.

STEINMAN: I can't...

LEVINE: What was your father attitude, uh, toward politics? I mean, how did he feel about the Russian Czar and Czarina, for example?

STEINMAN: Well, we, they used to come in, not the Ru, the Czar, but the officers used to come to our house, because they used to look at the, whatever my father had designed, whether they liked it or not. So my mother, my home had to be always nice and clean and presentable. And we had in our home also the Czar and Czarina. I remember that, very, in our living room, that's where it was.

LEVINE: Hmm-mm.

STEINMAN: So he would s, he took it for granted that that's the way life is, and you go on from it.

LEVINE: Hmm-mm.

STEINMAN: And that's it.

LEVINE: Yeah. Well, do you remember, well, first of all, what was your father's name?

STEINMAN: Jacob Leventhal.

LEVINE: And your mother's name and her maiden name?

STEINMAN: Her name, her maiden name was Sara Gele, G-E-L-E, and her last name was Pertcik, P-E-R-T-C-I-K. She, when they came to this country, because she came with her mother, that's my grandmother. So, my grandmother had a son in this country, and he had already changed his name to Friedman. So she, my grandmother's name became Freedman.

LEVINE: Why did your, why did your, let's see, your uncle then, right? Your grandmother's son?

STEINMAN: Yeah.

LEVINE: Why did he change his name to Friedman?

STEINMAN: Because it was easier for people to under, to sign Friedman than it was Pertcik. There are many names now that many people don't change only because of the pronunciation is hard, or the spelling is hard. And that's what they did then, too.

LEVINE: Hmm-mm. But there's no real connection between those two names.

STEINMAN: No.

LEVINE: I mean, it doesn't mean the same thing, or anything like that?

STEINMAN: No. No. No, sometimes it does.

LEVINE: Yeah, yeah.

STEINMAN: Yeah, that's right.

LEVINE: Okay, so, well, it's sounds like you were a comfortable family then.

STEINMAN: Yes. Yes, we were what we would call a middle class fam-- family. My father was ill. He did not walk so good. I don't remember him walking straight. He always had a cane. And my mother used to take him to Germany, in Königsberg for treatments. I don't know whether you would call it arthritis or whatever it was, but on some of the pictures we can detect that his fingers are a little bit cripple. So we take it for granted that it must have been arthritis. But my mother used to take him every couple of months there for treatments.

LEVINE: And then would he, would he stay there for a period of time, or he would just go and have a visiting...

STEINMAN: No, just a few days, I guess, and come back.

LEVINE: Hmm-mm. So, let's see. You had two older sisters.

STEINMAN: Two older sisters that came with me. But I had already a married sister here in the United States, and I had these two brothers. One was twenty-seven, the other one was only eighteen.

LEVINE: When you came?

STEINMAN: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Now what were your two older sister's names?

STEINMAN: Esther and Ida.

LEVINE: Hmm-mm. And your brothers?

STEINMAN: My brothers' name was Alex, A-L-E-X, and Louis, L-O-U-I-S.

LEVINE: Were you closest to any particular family member, would you say?

STEINMAN: To my father.

LEVINE: To your father.

STEINMAN: Very close to him.

LEVINE: Can you remember times in your childhood where you either went places with him, or any experiences that you can recall about your father?

STEINMAN: I, I know a lot about my father. My father because he was a little handicapped, not being able to use his feet and hand, he had a sewing machine that you used to turn. Those sewing machines, most of them had foot pedals. But he didn't, he couldn't use that. So he had a hand machine. And in order to work on the machine, it's hard with just two hands, one turn and the other watch it. So I used to do the turning and he used to work on it. But while, to make it interesting for me, he taught me a lot in arithmetic. He taught me arithmetic beautifully, because he wanted to keep me interested in helping him. and many other things that he taught me was only because I was with him at the time he work. So that's what I can tell about my father.

LEVINE: Hmm-mm. So you must have gone to school then?

STEINMAN: When I came to this country?..

LEVINE: You didn't go in Poland?

STEINMAN: Yes. That's where I said I used to pledge allegiance to the Czar and Czarina.

LEVINE: Oh, right.

STEINMAN: Yes, I did go to school there.

LEVINE: What was school there as compared with when you came here and went to school?

STEINMAN: Oh, when I came here it was a different story altogether. Then...

LEVINE: Well, first tell me about there. What was the school like?

STEINMAN: All I remember is really -- what I can remember over there is very little, because I don't --. I learned how to read and write, naturally in Russian --which I have forgotten all about. And the arithmetic is what I remember. But I don't, I couldn't say that it left me with much from over there. I was only affected with the fact that I had to pledge allegiance to the Czar.

LEVINE: Hmm-mm. Do you remember any stories that you liked when you were a little girl that maybe your grandmother told or your mother or father? Or, kind of like fairy tales or stories that children hear? Do you remember any thing like that?

STEINMAN: No, not that. But I do remember going to the opera in Europe. This was very interesting. We saw Aida, and my mother took the three girls to go to the opera. But that's one big thing that I remember.

LEVINE: Did you, you had to travel, did you, to, to go to it?

STEINMAN: No, that time I remember we walked. You know, years ago people didn't use any vehicles at all. They used to do, use their feet to get places. Even in this country when we came here. I remember walking from one part of Brooklyn to another part. And it's a long distance. By car it takes you few minutes, but walking we always did. In fact we'd walk so much, you know, you get involved in a conversation and you watch the moon. And we used to say the moon is following us. And we'd get to the place where we wanted to. "Let's go back," and we'd go back and the moon would follow us. Those are stories that I can tell you.

LEVINE: Hmm-mm. Well, now, does that mean it was a traveling opera company? How did, or was there an opera company in your little town, or...

STEINMAN: It was, must have been an opera that come in the town, or else a traveling opera. I wouldn't know that. But I do remember Aida.

LEVINE: Do you remember any other kinds of entertainment, or what did people do for...

STEINMAN: I remember a wedding. One of my distant cousins were married. And being I was the youngest one, somehow -- I had just lost my father, whether they had pity on me or whether they thought it would be easier for my mother and my sisters to -- if I go away. So they were married, and they went to another small town, Bialystok. And they took me on this, and at that time they went on the wagon, horse and wagon. And I remember coming into that house, which was -- in those years the way if you got married the, the bride would supply the house and everything else. And it was really a very poor thing. I remember walking into the house and there were no, no floors on the, it was just you walked into the dirt. In the afternoon they would take a nap and they would shut the shutters. And that's all I can remember about windows. (she laughs)

LEVINE: Hmm.

STEINMAN: Yeah. But why they took me as a child with a bride and groom on the wagon is beyond me, too. But those are the things that happened.

LEVINE: Yeah. Let's see. Do you remember the house you lived in?

STEINMAN: Oh, sure.

LEVINE: Describe that a little bit.

STEINMAN: Well, my mother used to say that that house, that her grandmother lived in that house, then her mother lived in that house, and she lived there. So it must have been a very old house. And I remember that we used to have a man deliver (I don't know how many times a week or once or twice a week) dairy products. And there was a cabinet in the hallway, where he would open the cabinet, put in the cheese and the milk and whatev-- cream, whatever we needed. And that's about what I remember of the house.

LEVINE: Was it a, was it a big house, or how many rooms about?

STEINMAN: No, it only had three rooms. But I do remember, are you Jewish? Then you are familiar with a sukkah.[tabernacle] We had a sukkah right outside of our house during that period. And there was a big tree there, too. And we used to serve from the windows to that sukkah. A lot of little things. It was a nice little house and a nice little place to live in.

LEVINE: Hmm-mm. Did you have water, running water?

STEINMAN: Yes. We had a pump outside. We did not have running water. But we had two tables in the kitchen, one was for dairy and one was for meat. And in the middle we had a pail always with water. And the ovens, I remember, is all made out of tile. And it's nice.

LEVINE: And was it a wood, a wood stove that fired it, or...

STEINMAN: No, no, it was tile.

LEVINE: No, but I mean what did you burn in, how did you get the heat?

STEINMAN: They, I imagine it's wood. I don't know. I never got the wood for it, so I couldn't tell you. But I do remember my grandmother sitting by the stove and knitting socks. In those years you wore those warm socks. And she had four needles, I remember that. And every now and then she would scratch her head with a needle. (she laughs) But she was always wearing a white apron, you know.

LEVINE: Hmm. What was your grandmother's name?

STEINMAN: Chaia, C-H-A-I, Rishe, R-I-S-H-E, Pertcik. And then it was changed to Friedman.

LEVINE: Hmm-mm. So did you, did you ever have any experiences with your grandmother? I mean, did you ever go places with her or anything?

STEINMAN: I always took care of her. And every time, in fact, all my blessings that I experience now I'd say because my Bubbi [grandma] had wished it on me. I would take her to synagogue, I would take her

different places. And every time I would do anything for her, she'd say, "A guten leben sollst du haben. A guten Leben." Do you know what that is?

LEVINE: A good life?

STEINMAN: Yes. "A good life you should have." And, believe me, when I have it I always think of her that she blessed me with it. (she cries)

LEVINE: Hmm. That's beautiful. So, tell me about your father, then. When, did he take ill?

STEINMAN: Yes. He took ill and he died. He was only forty-seven years old. But when he died, he died just on Fourth of July, and so my mother sent a telegram to my brothers who were in this country to say Kaddish [prayer for the dead]. But we never knew whether they received it or not. So I, being the youngest one, was told by the rabbi to say Kaddish. So I used to go from one synagogue to another to say Kaddish. And I, I did it until we came to this country. It was a few months, you know.

LEVINE: So then, you, did you then get a letter from your brothers saying...

STEINMAN: Then he, we got a letter that my brother, the oldest brother is the one that did all the work. He got us the tickets to come here. And he is the one that said that my mother should realize that she cannot take care of the three girls, and that he would help her here. So he did that.

LEVINE: What was your brother doing here? What were your two brothers doing?

STEINMAN: He was in the factory, working in childrens clothes. Childrens coats and suits.

LEVINE: Hmm-mm. So your whole family really knew about designing and making garments.

STEINMAN: Yes. Yes. They did know that.

LEVINE: So, did he then send tickets for you...

STEINMAN: Yes. And he really did it in good style, because we did not suffer like many of them. But we were sick on the boat just the same, because I remember for ten days we were, we saw nothing but the sky and ocean. And, of course, we were sea sick.

LEVINE: Hmm-mm. Well, tell me about, once you decided that you were leaving, how did your mother feel about going?

STEINMAN: I don't know. Because she arranged everything. And I know she did all that. I remember though, I think because we were going to go for such a long stay, and we didn't know what kind of food we're gonna have, I remember my mother preparing - salami? -- or was it something

that would stay long and yet be nourishing and good. But she took care of everything so I couldn't tell you that. I don't remember much.

LEVINE: Did you pack anything yourself to take with you?

STEINMAN: No. No. But one thing I do remember that the candlesticks, by the way they are here, that's something that you really must always take care of, no matter what you do. Even when I came from New York to Florida, I also took my candlesticks first. This is the first thing you do. There was a fire one time in Europe in our town, and everybody in the middle of the night realized that there's a fire and it might spread to our way. And I remember my mother taking a big sheet from the bed and putting all the things in there to take along. But the first thing went the candlesticks. That you take along all the time, you have it.

LEVINE: Do you know why that is?

STEINMAN: No.

LEVINE: Why the candlesticks are so precious to...

STEINMAN: I don't know. Just because we are Jewish, and we need it every, no matter where we are we bless candles on Friday night. But that's the reason. I don't know. But that's, I remember that.

LEVINE: So, so your mother took the candlesticks. Is there anything else that you remember that she brought?

STEINMAN: Oh, she brought, she had at that time already a grandchild. So she brought a little fur coat for this grandchild. This grandchild is now a grandmother herself.

LEVINE: Hmm. Did you have new clothes to make the trip, do you remember?

STEINMAN: No. See, in my home we used to get right after Chanukah, we, my mother would bring in the shoe maker and bring in the dressmaker, and they would take measurements for us. We'd always get new shoes for Pesach and new dresses. But what else happened during the year I wouldn't know. But we had new clothes for those holidays. It seems Jewish people prepare that.

LEVINE: Can you describe yourself as an eleven year old? Like, what, what were you like when you were (???)...

STEINMAN: I'll tell you I'm right here. (she indicates a photograph) I am on one of them...

LEVINE: Be careful because you've got the microphone on.

STEINMAN: Yeah. I know, I know. Oh, I see. I am right here. The one sitting down, that's me.

LEVINE: Oh, oh.

STEINMAN: And that's my father, my mother and my younger brother.

LEVINE: Hmm-mm. What were you like as a, your temperament? I mean, what kind of a little girl were you?

STEINMAN: I was a good girl. In fact, my Bubbi used to say, my Bubbi is a grandmother, and she used to say to me - my sister Ida who was older than I, she wanted always something, so my Bubbi would say, "Du bist a guten kind, du gib es er" "You are the good one, so you give it to her." And, you know, it's not a good a, it's not a good idea because I used to feel, "Why should I be so good, always give away whatever I have?" So those are the little things that I can remember.

LEVINE: Yeah, yeah. Well. Okay, let's see. Do you remember leaving the town? Do you remember...

STEINMAN: I remember being in a kareta. Kareta is like, I would say it's like a taxi here.

LEVINE: Was it a carriage?

STEINMAN: A carriage.

LEVINE: Well, how, can you spell the word, karetké?

STEINMAN: Karetke. K-A-R-E-T-K-E. Karetke. But it's really a carriage. I remember that. And then we had to pass a certain boundary line. And then I remember my mother saying when we were in it, "Are we already passed it? Thank God." So that means we were safe to go to the boat. So that part.

LEVINE: Okay, well this is maybe a good place to pause while Kevin turns the tape over.

STEINMAN: Okay.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

LEVINE: Okay. So, once you passed that border line when your mother says you were safe, then do you remember getting to the port?

STEINMAN: No, that I don't.

LEVINE: Did you...

STEINMAN: But I do remember the boat itself where we, were, had to sleep. And I remember most of the time we were in bed. We were nauseous and didn't feel good.

LEVINE: And what was the name of the ship?

STEINMAN: New Amsterdam.

LEVINE: Okay. And you were in second class, you said.

STEINMAN: Yes.

LEVINE: So, did that mean you were in a cabin?

STEINMAN: Yes.

LEVINE: Was the cabin just for your family members?

STEINMAN: That's right.

LEVINE: So that's your two sisters, your grandmother, your mother and you.

STEINMAN: Yes.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And did you, were you able to eat? Did you go to a dining room?

STEINMAN: We, yes, we went to a dining room. We had a menu there. Every time, in fact, we knew a little Polish (a ringer buzzes), so we - no it's not for me.

LEVINE: Oh.

STEINMAN: So the menu had potatoes. (a ringer buzzes) You know how to spell potatoes. So when we came to this country and they asked us what did we eat, we said, "patatoyes" [ph] because - (an intercom interrupts)

LEVINE: Okay, wait a minute. You know, do you think we should, it'd be nice to say that again, I think. Yeah, you think that's finished? Yeah.

STEINMAN: I think so, I don't know.

LEVINE: Okay. Say it again, Celia, just because it was interrupted on the tape.

STEINMAN: I see. When we came to this country, they asked us what kind of meals did we have. And being the menu always said potatoes, and potatoes is spelled P-O-T-A-T-O-E-S, so we said, "Patatoyes" because we pronounced it according to the way it's spelled. We had a lot of fun.

LEVINE: Yeah. Do you remember any other incidents that happened aboard ship?

STEINMAN: Well, I really don't, except that I know that my sister Ida and I were very sick most of the time. But my mother and my grandmother and my sister, Esther, they ate.

LEVINE: Do you remember coming in to the New York Harbor?

STEINMAN: Yes. And there, of course, they had, we were afraid of Grandmother being sent back, because she was elderly, and we were afraid that she doesn't see so well. So we were scared. We were standing in one corner, and they took my grandmother to test her eyes. And they put up one finger, and she knew it was one, and she said it was one, and they thought that's, we were feeling so good we applauded. And then she, they put up two fingers and asked her whether she sees the two fingers, and she said, "two." And we were so happy as long as Bubbi is with us. So that was one thing.

LEVINE: How old was your grandmother?

STEINMAN: She was about ninety-four. She was a strong woman.

LEVINE: So, then, do you remember being examined?

STEINMAN: I remember only my brother sitting there with this gentleman who interviewed him about what he's going to do with the family. That's what I remember.

LEVINE: You re-- how long had your brother been in the United States?

STEINMAN: He had been, he came here when he was sixteen, and at that time he was twenty-seven, he was about eleven years older.

LEVINE: So you really didn't know him.

STEINMAN: No. But my mother used to tell me that when I was born, he used to get hold of me, and want to hug me and kiss me and keep saying to me, "What do you have? Do you love me?" And I always tease him and say, "No, I hate you." And my mother used to remind me all the time that that's what I would say to him. But he was very, very good to me. He let me have the best of everything when I came to this country. My sisters did go to work in factories, but I went to school immediately, and he dressed me well, and took care of me very well.

LEVINE: Do you remember, when you first met him at Ellis Island, what that was like?

STEINMAN: Yes. I saw a gentleman, but I didn't know, I didn't remember him at all. And, of course, he hardly remembered me, too. So that was it.

LEVINE: So, how, where did you go, once your brother came to Ellis Island? How long were you at Ellis Island, do you remember?

STEINMAN: No.

LEVINE: Did you stay overnight, do you think?

STEINMAN: I don't think so. I don't remember sleeping there.

LEVINE: Well, then, where did you go when you left?

STEINMAN: Oh. He got a taxi for us. And I remember going over the Brooklyn Bridge, and we went to my aunt's house in Brooklyn. Brownsville. And I remember she served us bananas. That was the first time I saw a banana. I didn't know what a banana is. And, of course, there was, I had another aunt living on the same block, and she was there, too, so we had quite a large number of people from the family there. And that was their mother. The grandmother was their mother, the aunts' mother. So that was it.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So, now, was, let's see, so that was your mother's mother, too.

STEINMAN: That's right.

LEVINE: So then, where did you settle?

STEINMAN: In Brownsville, near my aunts' where my brother had rented a six room apartment and furnished it from A to Z. And gave us all good beds, good dining room, nice kitchen. It was a lovely place to live in. And, of course, school was not far away. And my aunt had to go to, to notary for me to be able to enter school. I was going always by my Jewish birth date which is the last day of Chanukah, and you had to have an English date. So in order to do that you go to a notary, and the notary had to find out the date...

LEVINE: The equivalent date, uh-huh.

STEINMAN: And that's how I was registered in school, and I went to school. I was put into 1A with all the little children. And being my father had died only five months before, so we always wore black. And I had to wear a black ribbon around my neck to show that I am in, in mourning. And when I come in with those little children they were all sitting in their seats, so they used to pull my black dress. And I, I was always a good student in this respect that I obeyed. I, I was told to sit up straight, I sat up straight. But to them I was a, a new kind of a person. They didn't know what's all about, I was taller than them. And I didn't know how to speak their language. They used to pull my black dress. They wanted me to turn around, they should see what kind of a animal I am (she laughs). It was funny. And I kept skipping, and I got through with school in four years instead of eight years. And that's what happened.

LEVINE: You mean you, you got finished with the eighth grade in four years?

STEINMAN: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Well, it must have been a very hard time for you. I mean, you just lost your father. Then you came to a totally new...

STEINMAN: It's a new life. It's a new life altogether, but people make changes in life. And I, as young as I was together with, I still had my mother with me. I had my sisters. I wasn't in strange places

altogether. And my aunts, I remembered my, one of my aunts who, she had nine children. They used to come to our house in Europe a lot. And so I knew I them. And that's how we got along.

LEVINE: Hmm. How did your house compare in Brownsville, Brooklyn. How did that compare with the house you had when you were in Poland.

STEINMAN: Well, in Brooklyn we had a larger place, a much larger place. And it was different. It was different streets, different stores, you know. And you get used to it. You feel, this is it, and that's the way you, there's no two ways about it. Just like many people come in to this place here. Even though they may not like the way they had it as good, they feel there's no better way, so you do it, and that. And I guess I accepted it too at that time. I felt that's the way to do it. I had no choice of any other way.

LEVINE: How about the school? Could you make some comparison to your old...

STEINMAN: Oh, I was very good in school. I was, in fact, they made me a monitor, and I had to stand outside in the street and make directions, you know, for children to cross. And they, I was considered a good student, so teachers wanted to make me a lim-- monitor in school. We used to get up for exercise, open the windows, and everybody would stand in the aisle, and I would have to say, "Breath in, breath out." And then we'd make, stretch our hands, you know, and things like that. Well, that's what we did in school.

LEVINE: Can you remember any experiences that you had while you were learning how to either talk or read in...

STEINMAN: Oh, yes, I do remember. I could not pronounce, I couldn't pronounce the 'th'. And I, they were telling me that I have to put my tongue between my teeth. I couldn't do it. But from where I lived to the school that I had to go to I had to pass several blocks of empty lots. So walking to school I used to out loud practice the pronunciation, and that's how I learned some of the words.

LEVINE: So you would say the word that had "th" in it?

STEINMAN: Sure.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

STEINMAN: They taught me how to do it, but I couldn't do it in the house or in the street where I lived. You just don't do those things. But there nobody would hear me, so I was (she clears her throat), and when I'd get out of school, if we had a test in arithmetic, they would all gather around me and ask for my answer. If I had my answer they knew that they, they were right. If they didn't have the answer that I had then they knew they failed. But I, I remember that, how they'd gather around me.

LEVINE: Hmm. Well, did you make friends easily here?

STEINMAN: Yes. I had no problems with that.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Well, were there a lot of young people who had come from Europe?

STEINMAN: No, but you see, the wo-- the aunt who had nine children, she had some children my age. So I hung out with them. Some I liked and some I didn't, you know.

LEVINE: Were there customs that your mother held on to? Customs from Poland, from...

STEINMAN: Only as far as Jewish habits are concerned. That's what she held on. And we...

LEVINE: How did your mother feel about being in this country?

STEINMAN: She felt, she had a very hard time. I really realize now what a hard time she had. She had lost her independence of getting work, doing work, running a house. She came here, she didn't know the language. She didn't know where to buy anything. She didn't know how to cook. My mother never cooked. My grandmother did the cooking. If we were hungry we went to Grandma, we didn't go to my mother. So to her it was very, and she didn't know the money that she had over there. It was very difficult for her. But she learned to live, only to sixty-four years.

LEVINE: Did she ever become a citizen?

STEINMAN: No, not a citizen. And she didn't know how to read or write. So that was hard on her.

LEVINE: How long did your grandmother live?

STEINMAN: Hundred and one.

LEVINE: Wow. And did, was your grandmother glad that she was here, or did she miss...

STEINMAN: Well, she had, had children here. She had her three daughters here. My mother and two aunts, you know. And she had us. She was used to use a lot because we lived together.

LEVINE: So you were a family of girls and women.

STEINMAN: That's right.

LEVINE: So you went through eighth grade. And then what did you do?

STEINMAN: Then my brother married a girl who was a comptometer operator. And he thought that's better than to be in a factory or to do any other kind of menial work. So he sent me to a school called Felt and Tarrant, which is on Broadway in New York. And he paid for it. And I

learned comptometer, that's an adding and calculating machine. And they are supposed to supply you with jobs. So I did work for American Express, for AT&T. I worked for big places, and I, they always supplied me with work.

LEVINE: And how did you meet your husband? What were the circumstances...

STEINMAN: Oh, that's another story. My brother was in the union, an, an executive. Their factory people used to go on vacation in the summertime when the season is off. And there was one man who donated, or contributed to a big [not understood] in Pennsylvania called the Unity House. And these people from the factory used to go there for half rate. He being in the union was able to get me in there. And I went to that place. And I had my vacation. I worked for AT&T at that time. So I went, too.

And in the Unity House I met my husband. And he, he too didn't belong there, because he was in the plumbing business. As a plumber they don't have that kind of a union like the Amalgamated, like the clothing people have. But he went because he had just returned from World War One. And he was having friends, and they, one of the friends had a brother who worked in the factory. And he got him a ticket. So they asked him if he would go, and he thought he would go because he had just come back from service. From my husband I must tell you another story. He had a boyhood friend from Europe. He came from the same town as I did. No, he didn't, he came from Pinsk.

LEVINE: Your husband came from Pinsk?

STEINMAN: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

STEINMAN: But he had a boyhood friend whose name was also Abe. And this Abe was also in the army. But he was stationed in Florida. And in Florida when the war was over, his name was a very odd name. Gamsey, G-A-M-S-E-Y. And he looked up in the telephone directory, there was another Gamsey. And being he was alone, he wanted to meet family. So he went over there. And as he was going up the steps he noticed a girl who was washing the steps. And he fell in love with her. And it seems that her father had several grocery stores. And he was anxious to marry off his girls. So he, he told this Abe that if he married her, he could become a partner in his grocery store. He took it and he thought it was a good idea. But he was in touch with my husband all the time.

And there was a sister that the father wanted to marry off as well. So he asked this Abe to get in touch with my Abe, and he kept after him all the time. He says, "Look, it's a grocery store. You'll never be hungry. You can always get a can of sardines or something. And they have some chickens there, you can have a good breakfast, you can get an egg, a fresh egg, and so on." He kept after him for a long time until one time my husband came home from work. And he lived on the fifth floor in the Bronx. And as he takes out his, the (she pauses), he takes the

mail. And he finds a card. And on the card it says, "Opportunity knocks at the door only once. You better come now. This is the time for you to come." So he came into the house, and he told the people that he was moving to Florida because he wants to try. He says, "I don't know whether it will work," but he says, "I'll be away for a year, anyway."

And so he cleaned everything up, his bank account and everything, and he says, "I'll be away for a year. Whether I'll be in business, whether I'll be, remain there I don't know. But one year you can count that I won't be here." So he came back, he went down there, and he did accept him as a partner in the grocery store. But he didn't like that kind of eating and that kind of living. He says if the chicken would get up on the tree and drop the egg, so you have no breakfast (she laughs), and that's not for him. He liked to eat and eat well. So he got out of that. But he traveled in different towns in Florida while he was there to make up the year.

And when he came back these boys asked him to come to the Unity House, and that's where he met me. And that's my story. So to my wedding he told them that we're getting married, and I, while in those years a bride and groom would sit on the bema. You know what a bema is? It's the pulpit in the synagogue. The bride is on one side and groom on another. And as we were sitting there, we see him coming in. He came from Florida just to the wedding. I think I told you an awful lot.

LEVINE: (she laughs) That's wonderful. Now, but in other words, your husband didn't have to marry the other sister in order to...

STEINMAN: No. He did...

LEVINE: ...get the store (???)

STEINMAN: No. No, he came, he went in on trial...

LEVINE: I see (she laughs).

STEINMAN: ...as a partner, but it didn't work. He did not believe in that.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So your husbands name was Abe...

STEINMAN: Abraham Steinman.

LEVINE: ...Steinman. And, and then did you have children?

STEINMAN: Three.

LEVINE: What, what are their names.

STEINMAN: Jerry, Maria and Ruth.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And grandchildren do you have?

STEINMAN: I have nine grandchildren. And I have twenty great-grandchildren.

LEVINE: Wow.

STEINMAN: So that's my story.

LEVINE: That's wonderful. Well, when you look back on your life, when you look back on the fact that you started out in Poland and you came here as a young girl, what effect do you think that being an immigrant early on in your life, do you think affected your life in some way?

STEINMAN: No, it didn't. Everything that you go through is an experience. And you add to the, to life that way. That's how life goes. You learn from experience. But to say that I could have done anything else, this, this was the road, and that's the way we went.

LEVINE: Hm-mmm. Do, do you remember when you were newly in this country, did you experience any like prejudice as being a greenhorn, that kind of thing?

STEINMAN: I can only remember a lot of things about, my first born was a boy. And we, I, we lived in a street, (she swallows) excuse me, in a street that had really a league of nations. We had all kinds of people. And a lot of them, and there was a church not far from us. So naturally we had anti-Semitism a lot. And my boy would go outside and they would, if he would play ball and I'd say it's time for Hebrew he'd get beat up, because he's Jewish. And one time he walked into the house, he says, "Mommy, I'm not dirty, I'm only Jewish." They used to call him a dirty Jew. He says, "I'm not dirty." But experiences that you go through in life.

LEVINE: What is it that you're proudest of, or most thankful for in your life?

STEINMAN: I am thankful that I'm here at this age. And I am thankful for having my son being as good as he is to me. I have one daughter who lives in Buffalo. And she comes in, and they have nice families. I'm thankful for all this. I am grateful. Life has good to me. And only because my Bubbi used to say to me, "A guten Leben sollst du haben. A guten mazel sollst du haben."

LEVINE: Maybe that's a perfect place to stop.

STEINMAN: I think so.

LEVINE: Then, I thank you so much...

STEINMAN: You're very welcome.

LEVINE: ...for a very interesting story.

STEINMAN: Thank you.

LEVINE: Thank you. And this is Janet Levine. And I've been speaking with Celia Steinman. And this is, we're in Clifton, New Jersey, March 24, 1993, and I'm signing off.

STEINMAN: Good.

LEVINE: Wonderful.
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