

EI-291

MARTHA MUELLER LESTER

BIRTH DATE: NOVEMBER 6, 1886

INTERVIEW DATE: 4/20/1993

RUNNING TIME: 1:01:23

INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE

RECORDING ENGINEER: SAME

INTERVIEW LOCATION: ST. PETERSBURG, FL

TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: NANCY VEGA, 9/1994

TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY: CHARLES MITCHELL, 10/2006

GERMANY, 1913

AGE 27

PASSAGE ON "THE BREMEN"

PORT OF EMBARKATION: BREMERHAVEN

RESIDENCES: GERMANY: OLDENBURG

US: NYC, E 86 ST.

ORAL HISTORIAN'S NOTE: There is some initial confusion about Mrs. Lester's year of entry in the U.S. and her age at that time.

The information given above is an estimate based on her proven birthdate and assumption that she arrived in 1913. Paul E. Sigrist, Jr., Director of Oral History, 11/3/1995.

LEVINE: This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service, and I'm here today with Martha Mueller Lester, who came from Germany when she was seventeen or eighteen

years old.

LESTER: That's right.

LEVINE: She was born on November 6, 1886.

LESTER: That's right.

LEVINE: So she probably came in 1913 or thereabouts.

LESTER: That's right.

LEVINE: Today is April 20, 1993. (Mrs. Lester laughs.) And Martha is one hundred and six years old.

LESTER: That's right.

LEVINE: I'm at her home in St. Petersburg, Florida. I want to tell you, it's a pleasure to be able to talk with you (Mrs. Lester laughs) about your experiences.

LESTER: Yeah.

LEVINE: Let's start by your telling me where in Germany you were born.

LESTER: Yeah. Oldenburg.

LEVINE: Oh, wait. Let's see.

LESTER: I was born in Oldenburg

LEVINE: And was Oldenburg a big town, or a small town?

LESTER: No, it was, not a big town, no. Not Berlin, or not like that, no. It was a smaller town, Oldenburg. That's the city. And then we moved from the city when I was about four years old, we moved to the country, and we lived ever since in the country. We had to walk to Oldenburg to get a city. We were, we moved on the outer, we had a garden, you know, land, to plant potatoes and all like that. My mother was a farm girl, and my father was a city boy. So my mother knew more about farming than my father did. So my father was a shoemaker, and he made the shoes.

LEVINE: Great.

LESTER: And I still see his room. I had to take the iron for the shoes to him, to clean the heels. We kids had to help our father. And then I had to help my mother digging the potatoes. I had to do that all, and (?) and wuerzeln, you know, carrots.

ANNIE: Yeah, yeah.

LESTER: All like that. We had to work. And string beans, and

string beans, and everything else, and peas. We had a garden around the house. We kids had to work. And then we had to help my mother. And, you know, that we, when we burned our fire, that was, that grewed by us, that's what we burned that time. And my mother and I had to go and dig that, the grounds, and we had to dig that and we took that and spread it all over the ground and let it dry for three weeks. Then my mother and me, I had to always help my mother. I was the tough one. And the other, I was the second one. Well, there were not eight all in one there, you know, one after the other. I was the second oldest.

LEVINE: Can you tell me your mother's name?

LESTER: Huh?

LEVINE: What was your mother's name?

LESTER: Mother. I was always with my mother working outside in the yard.

LEVINE: What was your mother's name?

LESTER: Oh, Johanna.

LEVINE: And do you remember her maiden name?

LESTER: Johanna was her name.

LEVINE: Her name before she married?

LESTER: No. We called her Mama.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

LESTER: We called her Mama.

LEVINE: And your father's name?

LESTER: Oswald.

LEVINE: Oswald?

LESTER: Oswald.

LEVINE: And your brothers and sisters?

LESTER: Oh, one was Herman, one was Fritz, one was Emma, one was Helen. They were, Helen was here, and Elizabeth was the youngest one from the eight. She was in Brooklyn. Her daughter lives in Brooklyn. She calls me every week, Eleanor. She, you talk with her. (referring to Annie) She tells me she talks with you. She called me yesterday. Yeah.

LEVINE: So what else did you do when you helped your mother?

What other things?

LESTER: Torf. We make our own, torf. You don't know what torf is. (she laughs) We dig that on the grounds, and that had to be about, I don't know just how many feet, we had to dig that. And that really dried. That came in little loaves, like that. And my mother and I and my father had to do that, that digging made it torf, because my mother couldn't do that. My father had to do that. And then in the wheelbarrow, and that was digging over on the grounds, and that we left dry for how many weeks. That all depends on the weather. If it was much rain, it dried sooner. Then we had to put it all on three rings, and put it, put (?) on it like this to dry. Then my mother and I, we went again in about six weeks, and then we made big, big, oh, big ones, big, high ones, and throw them all inside. And that stayed all summer on the field, you know, where we digged it. And then when that was dry then we had to take a man and a hired one and brought it all into the home, upstairs in the ceiling. That came in our house, on the top of the ceiling, inside. For outside they throw that all in there. That was for the winter, for us to burn in the house to keep

the house warm. We had no coal, see. We had no coal.

LEVINE: What did you have for a stove?

LESTER: Torf, we called that.

LEVINE: Torf, uh-huh.

LESTER: Torf. T-O-R-F. Torf, we called it.

LEVINE: And did you burn it in a fireplace?

LESTER: Yeah, we stored it up in the attic. All winter we kept that there. And then we had a box next to the coal stove. We had a coal stove, but the coal was too expensive. We couldn't buy that. So we always brought the torf, and torf came in two colors, light and dark. That dark was the best. The light was, you know, fluffy. Not much heat in there, in the dark. That was good. So we burned that, us kids. And the, we had a cellar. We had on the, in the cellar, also. And we had a roof, you know, upstairs. We had a, we kids had to go and get that and put it into a wooden box next to our kitchen stove. And so my mother, she didn't go on the attic. We kids had to go. So . . .

LEVINE: Can you describe your house?

LESTER: Huh?

LEVINE: Can you describe the house you lived in?

LESTER: Oh, that house, we lived in a very, we had a kitchen, we had a front room. We had a front door, made a hole on it, and one stairs, upstairs. The bedroom was upstairs. And they were still there when I went to Germany, when I was here. I, when I was, I made four trips to Germany, and that house was, that we paid rent. Then when we were here my older sister was here one year, and then she stayed, let me come. And then I was here, and made four years with her, and, well, we saved a little money and sent it to our parents so they could buy a house. We had to pay rent all them years and all them years, we had to pay rent. So then we came here in America, then we saved our money, and then our father, there were two houses built when I was a kid. They were about, I would say, one block. One house was on one corner, and the other one was on the other corner, and the middle came our garden. One from house and one from her, in the middle. And the other end was my brother's, I don't know you remember, I don't think you remember, Annie. Annie was here, she was here, too, in America. And her parents lived

there, so we both lived on each corner, on one block.

We lived on one corner, and her parents lived on the other corner, and the yard came together. Half was hers and half was ours. And then the, when you come from the street, and there was a little wooden ditch, there was all shrubbery in there. We kids played in there. And there was a rock, a very big rock, into our front door. And then our front door, when you got in through the front door, the right side was upstairs. You go upstairs, up on it. We had a bedroom, and when somebody came to visit, we had a bed upstairs. Downstairs we had no room. We had a front room with all furniture in it. And later on it was that chair in there, where you're sitting on there, yeah, later on, in the later years. But first my mother, when she married she didn't, she has what we call (German). (German) is a chair, you know.

LEVINE: What was the furniture like? Tell me what the furniture looked like?

LESTER: Like roll. You have to, it's real, no wood and no, I never saw anything here like that. That was when I was a kid.

LEVINE: It wasn't wood.

LESTER: No.

LEVINE: What was it?

LESTER: (German)

LEVINE: (German) Is that like a rope?

LESTER: That was, that had all little holes in there, all little holes in there. (voices are heard whispering off mike) It had all little holes in the seats, and on the back, too. And I, I don't know, I never saw them here. I don't think I saw them here, no. So we . . .

LEVINE: And what else? Can you describe anything else about the furnishings in your house, what your house looked like inside? How it was decorated?

LESTER: Decorated paint. We had to paint it. My mother had to paint the house inside, and outside we had it painted. Somebody painted it from the outside. Oh, once in ten years maybe. No money.

LEVINE: What was the house made of?

LESTER: Cement. Cement and stones, and all, here, like, it looked like this. It looked like that, and in the back we had wood. That toilet we had outside. We had to go, when we were kids, we had to go outside. And on the (?) in the winter when it was cold, during the day, all outside, out the house. And that was there, yet, when I was in America, and I was eighteen years old, and I make my first visit outside to Germany, I spent my money to have their toilet fixed inside that the old people didn't have to go outside no more. So we built that on in the back of our house, that toilet, so that my father and mother didn't have to go, no my mother, I didn't see my mother no more after I left, but I had a second mother. My second mother was not strange to me. She make my, when I came out of school you got different dresses on, you know, when you come out of school there in Germany at that time. I don't know how it is today, but at that time.

LEVINE: You wore different dresses when you went to school?

LESTER: Yeah. When we got out of school, when we were fourteen, fifteen years old. And we had, the first long dress.

LEVINE: Do you remember what the dress looked like?

LESTER: The dress?

LEVINE: Yeah. What did it look like, your first long dress?

LESTER: Oh, I don't know. Just like, my, that was my stepmother. Later on it was my, it was our dressmaker, too. And my father, when my mother died, I didn't see my mother no more. I was just married, and we had the first business on First Avenue in New York. We had our bakery, so I couldn't go out. So I had to, I didn't see my mother no more. And then Elizabeth, my little sister, she was real small when my mother died, so my older sister was, went back to Germany from here, and I was here all alone in New York.

LEVINE: Well, tell me about school in Germany. Did you go to school?

LESTER: Oh, yes.

LEVINE: What was school like?

LESTER: Oh, well, the school was boys and girls in one room. On one side they're girls, on the other side of the

room, and in the middle was a walk. And on the end, way down on the end was the teacher, a man teacher. We had a man teacher. Later on, when I was out of there, they had women, too. And then the teacher's wife came and learned us, learned us making stockings, you know, knitting, and sewing. We made our own clothes. Not fancy clothes, you know.

LEVINE: Can you describe your clothes?

LESTER: Yes.

LEVINE: What were your clothes like?

LESTER: Well, we, you know, the stores at that time, they had no ready-made clothes. You had to buy the yards, the yard. You had to buy that. And then my, when I came out of school you have, the first long dress when you get out of school. At that time it was a black dress, and a (German), a (German). That is the Friday before you had any dress, the first long dress, any color you can have. But your father and mother had to buy that. Well, if you're poor, you can't afford so much, you know. You can't afford so much fancy stuff. So we didn't have no fancy stuff. We were poor, too.

LEVINE: What did you do for fun when you were little? What did you do for enjoyment? What did you do for fun? You were working.

LESTER: Sure. As soon as we got out of school, was fifteen years old, they, you look in the paper and they have advertised they want a servant girl. And then my mother took me there to these people in the city. We had to walk about an hour, an hour-and-a-half, all the (?), where the people lived, in the city. We lived in the country, you know. So we had to go there, and they had a business downstairs, some kind of drug store business. And we, I had to clean the apartment. We had an apartment. And then their mother died there, and then the daughter stayed home. Well, then, I had to get another place. So my mother looked in the paper again, so I got a place with, there were nine kids. I had to work there, I'll tell you. That was a three floor house, and all the stairs I had to, each stair, each step I had to clean, and I was only fifteen, sixteen years old. I worked hard all my life. Even when I was married I worked in a store.

LEVINE: Did you, was your family religious? Was your family religious in Germany?

LESTER: No. We were too far away from the church, too far. Special days like Confirmation, when I came out of school, they went with me to the church. And special Sundays we went, but not every Sunday, no. We were too far to walk. Oh, we had to walk about an hour-and-a-half. We had to walk, in the mornings we went to school. We took our sandwich along, and we ate that at twelve o'clock in the school, and then at night at four o'clock we came home. And in the morning eight o'clock we went to school, and we had to walk an hour, an hour-and-a-half. Then in the evening we came home again at four o'clock. We didn't come home at twelve o'clock. No lunch.

LEVINE: Did you have grandparents? Did you have grandparents, a grandmother and a grandfather?

LESTER: A grandfather?

LEVINE: A grandmother, did you have?

LESTER: No, I never know my grandparents, no. My mother came from a farmhouse, and she worked in the city. And when my father was a shoemaker, and I suppose they went to dancing, I heard, and they met there. So my

father and my mother met, it was a city boy and a farm girl came together. I often think of that. I wonder.

And later on when they were married it was the same way. My mother had to do all the yard work. My father don't know nothing. He was from the city. He came from Sachsen, Sachsen, in Germany.

LEVINE: Can you remember any other things that your father did when he was fixing the shoes?

LESTER: I had to help him, too. He cleaned, you know, when you make shoes, like this here, like here, like here, the heel.

LEVINE: Heel.

LESTER: And my father make the heels, make the soles, and then this here, my father, when I was that high, they have irons for that to clean it. They always cleaned the shoes when they, back when the people brought their shoes, your shoes, oh, they had to be polished. And my father and the kids had to hold the iron and do the iron, and then my father cleaned that all around. That was it. They cleaned the iron, all soles. So that's the way. I don't think they do that now any more. Do they?

LEVINE: I don't think so.

LESTER: I don't think so either.

LEVINE: Do you remember any food, any dishes that your mother cooked that you liked when you were a little girl?

LESTER: Yeah, everything in soup. Potatoes, and we killed our own pigs when we lived in the country. We had two pigs and two goats and chickens. So we had our own eggs. Well, eggs we had with that. We had soup. My mother cooked a lot of soup. And meat, she cut it in there, and potatoes, she cooked in the soup. And I like that today yet. I like that today yet. And I, when I'm home I always make my, I like string bean soup, and I like potatoes in it and meat in it. And I cut that all up and eat that. I like that. So I ate that today, but I don't get a they don't know how how, to cook it here. (she laughs)

LEVINE: What were you like as a little girl? What were you like when you were young?

LESTER: I didn't like (German) very much. I didn't like (German), you know, carrots. And I don't like carrots. I don't like carrots. Carrots are (German).

And (German) is turnips. I don't like them. I don't like them today yet. I like peas and beans, I like most. And I like them today yet. They always bring me mostly, she is good to me, she always brings me something that I like. When I don't like it, she says, "What's the matter with it?" I say, "I don't like it." (they laugh)

LEVINE: Well, when you were a little girl, when you were a little girl, what was your personality? Can you say what kind of a little girl you were? Describe how you were in Germany?

LESTER: Clothes?

LEVINE: No, you. What were you like? What was your personality?

LESTER: To eat?

LEVINE: No. You were a little girl. You were a hard-working little girl. You worked hard. And what else? How else could you describe what you were like when you were little?

LESTER: What did I do?

LEVINE: Yeah.

LESTER: What I do? Oh, I had to work, help my mother. We had to help each other. I had to dress the smaller ones in the house. I dressed them to school. In the morning I come, I had to dress my self. And my mother, except in the back. She fixed in the back. But otherwise we had to dress ourselves. And then when we were dressed, ten, twelve years old, we had to help the little ones, and help them, so little they were. And then go, when you come home from school, my mother put them in the carriage, and when it was nice weather, we had to go on the street and the sidewalk.

And there was a street, you know, for horse and buggy, and a walkway for people to walk. Just like here, too. And we had to walk, take them out and walk them up and down, so that my mother could go more outside and work. So we had to take care of the little ones.

LEVINE: Did you have a horse and buggy?

LESTER: Huh?

LEVINE: Did you have a horse and buggy?

LESTER: Oh, God, no. We had no money. We had no money for that, no. All by hand. That's why it was so hard work. All by hand. And a spade and fork, you know, the tools. That's what we had, we had to work with it. No, no.

LEVINE: So you had no farm equipment? None, you didn't have farming equipment at all?

LESTER: We had Christmas?

LEVINE: You had Christmas?

LESTER: Oh, yes.

LEVINE: Tell me what Christmas was like.

LESTER: Oh, my father was for Christmas. Oh, yes. We had a Christmas tree, and the kids didn't see it. Here the kids all see it. We didn't see our Christmas tree until the Christmas morning, because my father made, fixed the Christmas tree. He brought the Christmas tree home in the evening, and we kids didn't know it. We didn't see our tree. The next morning, when my mother came in our bedroom and cleaned us and washed us, she washed us the night before good. And then in the morning she just washed our face, and so, and

dressed us, and then we got out our bedroom, the Christmas tree was burning. That's what my father did, while we were getting dressed. My father made, fixed the Christmas tree. We didn't see no Christmas tree before.

LEVINE: What did it look like?

LESTER: The Christmas tree? Well, we had, the richer people, they had it on the floor. But we had only a smaller one that you put on the table, and then to the ceiling. We have ornament, and then my, we had it after new year, and then my father put it all in boxes and took each piece from the tree and put it in the boxes after next year.

LEVINE: What did the ornaments look like?

LESTER: Oh, they were something like here, yeah, something like here. A little different, yes, Not so rich looking, more poor looking. And we didn't have the big balls, no. We had little ones. We couldn't afford the big ones. No.

LEVINE: Were there candles on your tree? Were there candles?

LESTER: No. We had candles, too. Oh, yeah. We had candles,

too. My father stood there. I still see my father.
(a noise is heard in the background)

LEVINE: He licked his finger to put . . .

LESTER: My father stood by the tree. We had candles on the tree. Some of them, not all, but he stood there. And watched the tree so that the tree wouldn't burn. Oh, yes. I see it. I still see my father there. And then under the tree when they came out of the bedroom, my father stood by the tree, and he lit the tree, and there was a table there. There was our plate. Mother, so, you know, all the names, with all the names on the top of the tree, on the top of the plate. And there were cookies on there. That was something new. We never got cookies. We never ate cookies. Only on Christmas like that, yes. Christmas and Easter, that was the main. But otherwise, no holidays, no holidays where we got something special, no. We hardly got a piece of white bread. We only had that heavy bread, black bread, that heavy. You get sometimes a little square in a delicatessen here, too. That comes from Germany. That is not the right stuff. I bought it already in New York. It's not the right one what we had, you know, it's different.

LEVINE: Where did you get your bread?

LESTER: From the baker. Farm people, when my mother came on a boat, a farm where she was born, they make their own bread, yes. And my mother made, my mother made the bread. So much, it cost too much, so we bought it from the baker. The baker has it, too. But it's not the same like the farmers do. The farmers had different bread. Oh, yes. Different, more solid. Oh, yeah, more solid bread. Well, we always got enough to eat. That was enough.

LEVINE: Is there anything else you remember about Germany? When you think back, what else do you think about, from when you were in Germany?

LESTER: When I was visiting, you mean?

LEVINE: No. When you lived.

LESTER: I was, kids working. That's all. We had to work in the house. In the morning we had to get up and dress the little ones, and the bigger ones had to help the little ones when my mother was already outside in the yard working, and we kids had to dress the little ones and wash them and dress them and give them breakfast.

The oldest ones, my older sister and me, we had to feed them, and then we had to eat ourselves, and we had to push the plate there with the rolls. The rolls, we didn't get. We got all that black bread, big, heavy bread. Rye bread was too expensive. We couldn't buy that. Only on some special days. Maybe on a birthday we got a little piece of cake that my father orders from the city, a little piece of cake on a crisp, on our birthday morning there was our coffee and a little piece of cake there. That cake was something special because we never got that so much, you know. That was some business. And we enjoyed that. So, that's all.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

LEVINE: Did you have any toys?

LESTER: Toys? My father, he was going to work, and where he was working as a shoemaker he had to walk every morning, about an hour, an hour-and-a-half, I don't know how long he took to go to our house to his place to work. He worked six days a week. Sundays we worked home. He had a little room, and a little

shoemaker, made shoes for neighbors, and charged them for the heels and for the soles. And then we helped him, and he had, and then he, well, in the morning he went to work, and at night he came back.

LEVINE: And did he bring you toys sometimes?

LESTER: Well, and them people where he worked for, they had two children, a boy and a girl. And their toys, their playthings, they gave my father, and my father brought it home to us, yes. And that boy, what they had only one son and one daughter where he worked for, and that boy got killed one day. Oh, and my father came home, and he cried even over that boy. That was such a nice boy. He liked him so. And my father worked there over twenty years. And then, when that boy died, he got killed, and then the father gave it up, and my father, his father gave it up and killed. And one morning my father went to work. They had about one, two, maybe they had about, I would say, six or seven people working for them upstairs, shoemaking. And one morning my father went to work and we kids went to school, and my father came back from the city to our farmhouse. And I said, "Papa, why are you coming back?" And he started crying. The father from that

boy killed himself, he killed himself. My father was what they call the foreman, the head man, over the others. And he lived, he had a little place for himself, and there were the other men, all sitting, one here, one here, one here. And that was windows, and that was upstairs. And they looked downstairs. When we went for my father from the farmhouse to the city, and we met our father in the city. Then he stood across the street. There was a window up there, we could see our father sitting there, and we always went over there, and see, and wait till our father looked out the window, and then we waved to our father. We'd be waiting for him when he came down. So then the boss that he worked for hung himself in his little room where he stayed. So that was the end of that work. Then my father had to stay home and try to get from the people around, home work. He wasn't brought up fancy. (she laughs) He had to work.

LEVINE: Do you remember, how was it decided that you would come to America?

LESTER: Well, that was my, I had a cousin. I had an aunt and a cousin. We didn't know them, but their parents lived in, near from us, my parents. But they were

older than me, you see. And we went to school yet, and they went to America. And when we went to school yet and came out of school, my sister that was two years older than me, she's dead now, too. She died, she died in New York, in Brooklyn. And she died, she went back to Germany later on. And she was here five years. Later on she came here, and she met a man, and that man was by the army, and had a, they couldn't marry for ten years. And so she waited for him and waited for him until, then she had, she had five years to marry, then she let me come over here, my older sister. Then I went with her on the state. Then during the five years I met my husband.

LEVINE: Where did you meet your husband?

LESTER: In 86th Street, New York, where I worked. Where I worked, there was a German washwoman. I had, I didn't have to do the washing, but I had to do the cleaning from the whole house. They had a washwoman every Monday morning, and that German, that she was German. And she talked German to me so I, you know. I went by the baker one time. I'll never forget that, in a grocery store. And when I was in this place and they, the man, he was a very, they took me, these German

people, as a servant girl. They were very nice people. They were over, two of them were over eighty, him and her, either one, and they were very nice. They were not, you know, the most of them in New York, they don't let you talk to them. They're too high class. But they were very nice. I liked it there. And they both died.

LEVINE: Who did you come to America with?

LESTER: Alone.

LEVINE: Alone, you came. So you left your town, and you went to . . .

LESTER: My father brought me to the boat. He had to stay overnight, from Oldenburg to Bremen, to Hamburg. And he had to stay overnight, put me on the boat.

LEVINE: Do you remember leaving? Do you remember leaving and saying goodbye to everyone?

LESTER: Only a colored one. I saw the first colored fellow on the boat, and I was seven days on the boat. That was my first trip over the ocean.

LEVINE: What did you think?

LESTER: Oh, in August, some time in August. I forgot. I don't know. I forgot it.

LEVINE: You went on the Bremen. The ship was called Bremen?

LESTER: Oh, the Bremen, yes, Bremen.

LEVINE: And you . . .

LESTER: From Bremen to Hoboken.

LEVINE: To Hoboken.

LESTER: Yeah. We came to Hoboken. And when we came to Hoboken, we should have got off because I came the lowest class of the boat, and the lowest class had to go to Ellis Island. Well, we came all too late in Hoboken, so we had to stay overnight in Hoboken on the boat. And there were three, two or three on top of the other. We had to climb up there to get up there. No tables, no, breakfast, cup in one hand and sandwich in the other hand. That's the way I came over from Germany, and here in Hoboken. And then the next morning already they shipped us to a ferryboat and go to Ellis Island. And Ellis Island, then my aunt and my sister, my aunt came from Chicago to New York and to my sister. And they both came the next

day to Ellis Island.

LEVINE: Tell me what Ellis Island was like.

LESTER: Oh, I went there later on. That was closed up, you know.

LEVINE: Yeah, but when you came from Germany, what was it like then?

LESTER: We were, we were all together there. I don't know if we got something to eat there or not. They put me in a, wire all around me. You know, locked me up in some kind of wire, and I stood there and stood there and stood there. And I stood there, oh, I don't know how long, pretty near all day, I think, until my cousin came from Chicago, and I didn't know my cousin. And I saw from the (?) where they locked me in, there was a (?) in the elevator, you know, (you could look out. And I saw a woman, a big feather on her head, and walking up and down and up and down. And I didn't know it was my cousin. I didn't know her. So, and she was waiting for me, and she didn't know me. So then all of a sudden they came to my door, and they called, "Martha Miller! Martha Miller!" You know, my name. Then she stood there and looked at me, then she

heard my name, and it was my cousin from Chicago. I know her parents. They lived near my parents. I know her parents, and I had her address, too. But I didn't know, did I know where Chicago was? I was only seventeen, eighteen years old, what the heck? (they laugh) And I saw the first colored fellow on the boat.

LEVINE: What did you think when you saw, what did you think when you saw this colored fellow on the boat?

LESTER: I don't know. I couldn't figure out that he was colored. I always stood in front of him and looked at him, and he talked German, yeah. He came, he was in America as a chauffeur for German people. And the German people went for a visit to Germany and he went with them to Germany. But he brought into Germany, and they stayed there for a while, and he came back on the same boat that I came in with. That's why I met him, that German, that colored fellow. The first time I ever saw a colored fellow. I never saw one of them in Germany. Now it's different. Now you see everything there.

LEVINE: Did you have an examination? Were you examined by the

doctor?

LESTER: Oh, yes, at Ellis Island. Oh, yes. Very bad, a lot of them got sent back. Oh, yes. Oh, yes. They don't let you get off. Two or three different doctors. Oh, yeah. I must have been healthy. (she laughs) I'm still pretty good. (they laugh) Still.

LEVINE: So then your aunt came, and you, and you went with your aunt to Chicago?

LESTER: No. I left, no, I didn't go. My aunt went back, and my aunt was not married when she came and took me from Ellis Island, but she was pretty old. She was in the forties, I think, when she married. I only saw her once, and that was when she visited Germany one time. Her parents, and her parents lived near us, my parents. That's why I thought, you know.

LEVINE: Well, where did you go? When you got, left Ellis Island, where did you go to stay?

LESTER: My sister and my aunt had a place for me on 86th Street in New York, but on 84th Street was my servant in a German place. They had that for me. They had a servant girl there for twenty years, an Irish girl,

and she wanted to go back to Ireland for her last days by her family. So they needed a new servant girl, and they were lovely people. Oh, they were very nice people. And they both died when I was there. She, they were both in their eighties. Then I, then my sister was here yet, so I came to my sister, and they, she was working for a doctor's family, and the doctor lived with his mother. He was not married. And so they, and then the woman was very nice, too. She told my sister to take me in till I got a place. And then I stayed with her, and they looked in the paper, so they found a place. Then I got a little sick, then their doctor was there, and he took me to another doctor, and he said if I could I should get out of New York, in the country. So then they looked for a country place for me and I came to, oh, where did I come to? I came to a country place. They found a place for me in the country. And that man used to fix, in New York, the bridges, the big bridges. Yeah. So I came there, and they had one little girl, and they had another servant girl, and I came there as a servant girl. I don't know what the name is now. I forgot it. And they out in the country, and every two weeks I got my day off to go to New York. If I

visited, if I wanted to visit somebody. Well, my sister was there yet, you see. She didn't go back yet right away.

LEVINE: What was it like around 86th Street? That's called Yorkville.

LESTER: All German, all German.

LEVINE: Tell me what it was like when you first were there.

LESTER: All German, all, there was a German bakery. I'll never forget that. We had a dinner there in a German bakery, and we had a lot of German places there on 86th Street. Later on when I married and we had a bakery and a restaurant, and we went a lot of times to 86th Street to, you know, visit there, and visit someone. We would, we had a place in New York on Third Avenue where the elevated is, we had a restaurant and a bakery. And then we took myself.

LEVINE: How did you meet your husband?

LESTER: That washwoman, but we had, where I worked, that washwoman, she had him. She thought he was after her. Then he, oh, I don't think, otherwise she wouldn't took me to the dance. (they laugh) She took me to

the dance, and there I met my husband. (she laughs)

LEVINE: What was your husband's name?

LESTER: Fritz. Fred, in English, Fritz in Deutsche.

LEVINE: Was he from Germany?

LESTER: Yeah, he was from Germany, but he was here quite a few years already. Yeah, yeah.

LEVINE: And what did you like about him?

LESTER: Well, I liked him because he was German and he was a baker, and (?). So then, then afterwards they were all came, and so on. Then his father died. He didn't see his father no more. When I did that lady where I, that was where I worked. They had a washwoman. I didn't have to do the wash. I had to do the cleaning. But that washwoman was after, she thought he was after her. She would have never took me, she would have never took me to the dance if she knew that he was after me. (she laughs)

LEVINE: What was the dance like?

LESTER: Huh?

LEVINE: What was the dance like?

LESTER: Oh, German dance, Dutch.

LEVINE: Yeah, what happened?

LESTER: Waltz, (?). Waltz, (?). (?) and schottisch.
Schottisch, you know, just plain, plain dance. And it had another name. When I went to Germany later on, I went back to my old place where I used to learn dancing. And now I was married and was back again in my own home town. Yeah.

LEVINE: How old were you when you got married?

LESTER: Twenty-two. Twenty-two, I was married.

LEVINE: So did you have children?

LESTER: No. I never had children, no. My husband had to work at night. I had to work (?). (she laughs)

LEVINE: Tell me what your husband did.

LESTER: He had no time for (?). (they laugh) When I got up in the morning he went to bed. So he worked nights in a bakery. Do I have to work nights? Anyway, in our bakery we had to work nights. So that's that.

LEVINE: And where was your bakery?

LESTER: On Fourth Street in New York. On Fourth Street and 14th Street. 14th, Fourth Avenue and 14th Street. You know where that is?

LEVINE: Yes, I do.

LESTER: Yeah, we were there. We were there four years, and then we sold it, and we wanted to go home to Germany. And I don't know, he had a little trouble. I think on account of whatever that was, I, he couldn't, he had trouble to get his pass, you know, his . . .

LEVINE: Visa?

LESTER: Huh?

LEVINE: His visa? He had to have a visa.

LESTER: Yeah, something. It was something wrong. I forgot now. Something, so he couldn't go with me. I had to go alone to Germany. And that was my first trip, and I wanted to make it because the, my husband said when we buy a bakery maybe we buy one in the country somewhere, not more in New York. So I didn't want to go to the country without seeing my parents. Me, all

this (?) and everything else, my mother got, was (?) out there, but she got sick. And I see my mother today yet, sitting in a wheelchair. And my aunt, her sister, was visiting us. We lived in the country then, and our sister lived somewhere else in another place. And my, I see my mother sitting in a bakery, in a big wheelchair, sick. Well, that's the way I left her. And I never saw her again. I never saw her again. The next time went out, when I went out, my stepmother was in the house.

LEVINE: That's when you put in the toilet.

LESTER: Eh?

LEVINE: You put the toilet into the house where your mother was.

LESTER: Yes, I did. Well, they had the toilet on the outside in the yard. You had to go always outside. When I was a kid, we had to go all the way around the house in the (?) out there. The (?) is a big heap there. My mother, that's, when I was a kid yet, my mother, my real mother, she made that. We had that, that had to be emptied every time. They had to watch down that that pail don't run over with all them kids. So she

fixed that. Oh, my mother worked hard. She was a hard worker. My father didn't know nothing about land, you know. He worked in the city. So he didn't know much about yard work. Oh, my mother, she worked hard.

LEVINE: Did you keep any of the customs from Germany? Were there things that you did in America that you kept that you used to do in Germany?

LESTER: I don't know if I did or not. I don't know. Anyway, now I not got nothing. But that's the end of what came from Germany. When I visited Germany, what I had in my home, in that shiny closet, you know what I had? There was a lot of people, a lot of stuff there from Germany yet. I don't know where that all went. I don't know if they sold it.

LEVINE: When you think back about coming to this country . . .

LESTER: Yeah, my sister was here.

LEVINE: What does it mean to you that you came from Germany and lived here?

LESTER: The first time they make a mistake. They put, instead of Martha they put Emma there, and Emma was my older

sister's name, so they had trouble there already with the name, that they changed it. That took time up. Then when I came, I came a year later than my sister, so, well, then I not want to come. The first time that they made the mistake and they had my name on it, I didn't want to go. No, I didn't want to go to America. Then after the year she was here they changed the name and everything was all right. Then she went in her name, and I stayed in Germany with my name. So then, but after a year, you know, she sent a couple of times a dollar. And that was money, money, money, so that was different. When you work in Germany you can't, at that time, today it's different, but at that time you couldn't touch, you got nothing. What did you do? You had to, I figured out, when my sister was here, where she had to work for one month, I had to work for a whole year. So that's why I wanted to. Then when she was here, I wanted to come, too. So then I came, too.

LEVINE: Are you glad you came?

LESTER: Yes, I am. Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

LEVINE: What are you most proud of, or most grateful for in

your life?

LESTER: Eh?

LEVINE: What do you feel most grateful for in your life?

LESTER: Well, I don't know. Just what I did and what I didn't do, I suppose, working. Our bakery, I liked our bakery. I liked the work, After I was married. And then my husband got sick. Then we wanted to come to, to here.

LEVINE: To Florida?

LESTER: From New York, yeah. So, that's all.

LEVINE: Are you enjoying your old age?

LESTER: Well, I take it the way it comes. I don't see any, I'm not sorry for this and I'm not sorry for that. I just take it. And I watch my doors. That's the door down there, and that's the door to the bathroom. And that's all I, so long I remember that, and so long I know where I am. That's it. Sometimes when I wake up at night I have to watch myself, too. You know, I forget.

LEVINE: To what do you attribute living so long?

LESTER: Huh?

LEVINE: Why do you think you've lived so long, so much longer than most people? Why do you think you've lived to a hundred and six?

LESTER: Well, I don't know why. I'm the only one from eight. How is that? That I can't figure out.

LEVINE: Why you?

LESTER: Why me? That is what I'd like to know. (they laugh) Who will tell me that? That, I can't understand that either. I think of that a lot of times. Why me? I'm not the oldest one. I don't know. Eleanor called me yesterday, my niece from Brooklyn. She called me yesterday.

LEVINE: Well, maybe you're special.

LESTER: Huh?

LEVINE: Maybe you're special.

LESTER: I don't know. (she laughs) Well, I was, I don't think, I can't remember that I was real, I was real sick for a while. I don't remember that, nothing. I

was sick, yes, but I don't remember that I was real sick. I don't know. I was working, working, working, that's all.

LEVINE: How do you feel now?

LESTER: Well, only my walking is bad, yes. My walking is, I miss that. I miss the outside, yeah.

LEVINE: Do you think about the past a lot?

LESTER: Well, I had, Andy took me always there, you know, with my hair. You mean my hair?

LEVINE: No, when you're sitting here, do you think about your childhood and times past?

LESTER: When I sit here?

LEVINE: Yeah. Do you think about when you were a young girl, and your life?

LESTER: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Oh, yes. I remember when we moved from the city to the country when I was four years old. I remember that, that I had the, my older sister was two years older than me, she wheeled the wheel carriage, and there was two babies in there. One in the back underneath the thing, and one where the

handle is. I remember that, yes. And I was about four years old, and I hold my hand on the baby carriage, and my mother stayed in the city and sent us to our country house. And I didn't know where that was, but she know. So we got there and we lived there over forty years. So that's right. And then I had to work. I met my mother outside in the yard, and do yard work. Plant potatoes, dig potatoes, dig carrots and all stuff like that. We had to work.

LEVINE: Maybe all that work is what's made you so strong.

LESTER: What?

LEVINE: Maybe all that work has made you so strong.

LESTER: Yeah. My mother didn't fool with us. She made us work. Oh, yes. She made us work. The little ones, she made work in the house, and the bigger ones like me, outside in the yard. Oh, yes.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, the tape is about to run out. Tell me again all of your first names, your front names. It's Martha, and then . . .

LESTER: Martha Sophie Helena.

LEVINE: Martha Sophie . . .

LESTER: Sophie Helena. Martha Sophie Helena Mueller was my maiden name.

LEVINE: Yes, okay. Well, I want to say it's a pleasure. I'm so happy I had the chance to talk with you.

LESTER: Yeah. I remember myself that I, my noodle is pretty good now. (they laugh)

LEVINE: Well, that's a good place to stop. Thank you so much. This is Janet Levine. I've been talking with Martha Lester, and it's April 20, 1993, and Mrs. Lester is 106 years old, or young, and I'm signing off.

LESTER: Where you going to put that?

LEVINE: We're going to put it in the Ellis Island Library in the museum.

LESTER: I was there. That's nice, yeah. I was there after when it was fixed.

LEVINE: Oh, good.

LESTER: I make a trip there from New York out, with a boat to, when it was all fixed up.

LEVINE: How was it seeing it again?

LESTER: Oh, different, different, all this. Different, yeah. Yeah. Well, I didn't stay there overnight, you see. There I had to, I met a friend on the boat, and she was going to Chicago, and she wrote me later on. I didn't get much correspondence, but one or two letters. She said she had to stay a whole week in Ellis Island and it was terrible. Yeah, it was awful there.

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