

EI-309

SAM GROSS

BIRTH DATE: AUGUST 2, 1895

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AGE AT TIME OF INTERVIEW: 97

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INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE, PH.D.

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TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: NANCY VEGA, 7/1994

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HUNGARY, 1912

AGE AT IMMIGRATION: 16

SHIP: CARMANIA

PORT: LIVERPOOL

RESIDENCES:

HUNGARY: MUNKACS

THE U.S.: HOUSTON ST., NEW YORK

LEVINE: This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service, and I'm here today, it's May 1, 1993. I'm here with Sam Gross, and we are in Lauderdale Lakes, Florida. Sam came from Hungary in 1912 when he was sixteen years old. Well, I'm very happy to be here, and I'm very happy to be able to get your story down on tape so we can keep it at Ellis Island.

GROSS: All right.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, why don't we start with your birth date?

GROSS: My birthday is August the 2nd, 1895. I was born in Hungary.

LEVINE: And the town?

GROSS: The town is called Munkacs.

LEVINE: Could you spell it, please?

GROSS: M-U-N-K-A-C-S. Munkacs.

LEVINE: Did you live in Munkacs the whole time until you were sixteen and you left for the United States?

GROSS: Until I came to the United States, from the day I was born.

LEVINE: What do you remember about the town? Could you describe it? What was it like there?

GROSS: What was it like? It was a city, not a town.

LEVINE: Oh.

GROSS: It was a nice city. People knew one another. They were friendly. It was very nice, it was very nice. It was a town that anybody could live. But I didn't want to stay there. I didn't want to stay there because, well, my

father wanted me to be a rabbi, and I didn't want it. So I saved up some money and came to America.

LEVINE: Okay. Before you tell me about coming to America, do you remember the house you lived in?

GROSS: Yeah.

LEVINE: Could you tell me what it was like?

GROSS: It was, it was a new house. My father made, had had another house, but they had torn it apart and built a new house there. It was a large living room, and in the living room they had two beds, one for my father and one for my mother. And to the right of there was another room that was supposed to be a bedroom, which it was. I, me and my brother, me and my brother lived there. We slept there. And the other, the other two brothers slept. My father was a cattle dealer, so he was not at home too much. He used to go away Mondays, probably not come back till Friday. My mother (he is moved)

LEVINE: Maybe, before you talk about your mother, did you ever go with your father when he went on his little trips, on his cattle dealing trips?

GROSS: No.

LEVINE: No?

GROSS: No. Uh, my mother was one of the best women there was. (he is moved)
There wasn't a better woman in the world.

LEVINE: What was your mother's name?

GROSS: Sobol. S-O-B-O-L.

LEVINE: That was her maiden name? Oh, Sybil. And her maiden name, do you
remember her name before she married you?

GROSS: I never knew her maiden name.

LEVINE: And what, do you remember your mother cooking different things?

GROSS: (he laughs) She was a wonderful cook.

LEVINE: What did she make?

GROSS: She make anything! Any and every thing that you can mention in cooking,
she made it. And she made it good.

LEVINE: What were your favorite things that she, what were your favorite things
that she made?

GROSS: My favorite thing? What could I say? My favorite thing was her cooking
mostly chicken. And she made different kinds of soups during the week.
But chicken only on Fridays and Saturdays. And baking, she was
wonderful on baking. She used to make those cheese blintzes. She used

to make those plum, plum, what do they call that?

LEVINE: Pudding?

GROSS: Not pudding.

LEVINE: Hamentashen.

GROSS: Hamentashen. She used to make that. She was wonderful.

LEVINE: Did she ever tell you things to try to, things that she wanted you to learn, things that she thought you should know? Do you remember any things that she told you as a little boy?

GROSS: Do I remember anything that she told me?

LEVINE: Yeah.

GROSS: She wasn't very much on saying. Her, she was the boss of the house. Whatever she says, everybody does because, you know, I've got five brothers and two sisters. And they, and whatever she says, they do it.

LEVINE: Was she strict?

GROSS: No. She was not strict. She was very, very good. Very good.

LEVINE: But everybody listened to her.

GROSS: Everybody listened to her, because everybody loved her. Even the

people, the outside people, people from around the block. Not the block. There was no blocks there. There was a straight, straight streets with people delivering on each side, you know. Everybody knew her. Everybody respected her. She was wonderful.

LEVINE: And how about your father? Was he the strict one?

GROSS: My father was a very strict man. He was a very strict man. He wanted me, as I said, to be a rabbi.

LEVINE: Why you? Why were you the son he wanted to be the rabbi?

GROSS: Well, somehow I had a very good head. I learned quickly. The teacher used to put things on the board, and told me to look at it and turn around and say it by heart, which I did. I had a very good head. And somehow I picked up everything. And then my father came back, on a Saturday after dinner. He used to lay, he used to lay down and rest for a little bit. After he rested he got up and called me, called me in, and then he says, "Let's hear. What did you learn this week?" And I had, he had a book in the front of him. (there is a disruption in the microphone) And I was sitting on the other side, and I had to tell him by heart what's in that book, what I learned that week. Very, very strict. Our town did not have a movie house. But they used to come and put up tents, big tents, you know. Benches, and they came in with movies from, from different people, different places. And he would never go but, you know, I was a boy, I was

interested. I wanted to know and see. So I used to go. But he didn't like the idea.

LEVINE: Do you know what he had against the movies? Why didn't he want to go?

GROSS: It seems, it seems that, I don't know, that he was very religious. He was very religious, extremely religious. And somehow he didn't like anything. He didn't like no theaters, he didn't like no movies or anything like it. His time was taken by his business, and when he was home he was mostly either home or in the temple. He was a very religious and a very strict religious man.

LEVINE: What was your father's name?

GROSS: Bernard.

LEVINE: Did you go to the temple with him?

GROSS: Yeah. I used to go to temple with him. If not with him, I was to be there to come there, too. But I only went there on Friday nights and Saturdays. Other times I didn't go. He did, but I didn't. Why? Because he had a seltzer factory. Besides my father, that he was a cattle man, he had a seltzer factory. And my time was taken up in the seltzer factory. I used to fill the bottles, wash them and get them ready for, you know, to be taken out. And my brother would come and before my brother came, before he had his breakfast, I used to pack up the wagon. I used to, see, we had,

we had a wagon there, a covered, closed wagon, you know. And two cells. We used to pack the bottles in boxes, and they'd put them in there. And then when he went to the places with the full bottles, whatever he sold. He used to exchange them, like if the party had let's say ten bottles. So if eight bottles was empty, so he used to sell them eight others, you know. And . . .

LEVINE: So you got everything ready, and then your brother drove the wagon?

GROSS: Yeah.

LEVINE: What brother was that? Which brother?

GROSS: Milo. Milo, uh, I really don't know what they called him.

LEVINE: And did you have other chores that you had to do?

GROSS: Other chores?

LEVINE: Yeah.

GROSS: Yes.

LEVINE: What else?

GROSS: After he came back, as I said, during the time when he went away I filled other bottles and made it ready so that he can go, when he comes we should have the bottles ready, and pack them over on the wagon so he

can go again. And then we had customers in a small town. I don't remember the name of the small town. And he came back I used to pack up the wagon and I would go with the wagon to the small town and serve the couple of customers that they had there. Sometimes I wouldn't come back till seven, eight at night. And that was my job.

LEVINE: Now, did you go to school? Were you in school when you were doing these jobs?

GROSS: Oh, yes. In fact, I had two schools. I had a Jewish school, and I had the Hungarian school. The Hungarian school I, the Jewish school, that meant when I was smaller, before I worked in the factory. I would get up and go to the Jewish school. And say my prayers, and whatever the rabbi said there. And then by eight o'clock we went to the Hungarian school. And then twelve o'clock we went home. Had a lunch. Went back, and we didn't come back till after three, three o'clock, on the mark. That was the school learning there.

LEVINE: Do you remember anything about the school there, any experiences that stand out in your mind about school?

GROSS: Well, there was really nothing to remember. It was an ordinary school. And boys my size, they had, that was a boys school. See, they had boys school and girls school and had boys my size, my age. And I remember that school. And it was a very, very strict. The government made it so

that you had to go to school. If they didn't go to school, they'd fine you. And if you didn't have the money to pay the fine, they will take things out of the house. They made it real strict. And the boys had to go to school.

LEVINE: What did you do for fun? What did you do for enjoyment?

GROSS: Enjoyment? They didn't know the word enjoyment there. They were, it was a case of work, school, eat, sleep. The next day the same thing over again. And we would go on a Saturday night we would go to the chief rabbi, and oh, they had, oh, they had, that's the enjoyment they had. They were singing and dancing and they had ate, they served there something, you know. Not a meal, just something. And they spent their a couple of hours. And I used to go along, I used to go along. My father was kind of proud of me that I knew what was going on. So I used to go along. That was, that was the enjoyment. There was no other enjoyment.

LEVINE: So did you know the songs and the dances?

GROSS: Oh, yeah. The dances, the dances I couldn't, because I was small and I, you know, I couldn't dance along with them. They were, they were dancing, you know, sincerely. You know what I mean? They were dancing, they were dancing so, so, dancing, full dancing. I couldn't dance along with them. The dancing that I did was after when I came to America, not before. And I was a very good dancer.

LEVINE: Now, did you, did your family grow any food that you ate?

GROSS: Yes. The, you see, my father had a house, our house. And then he had a few tenants in that house, and the other house had a few tenants. And then in the back they had a stable and a place for, you know, things to put away. And on top of that they had a place where they put the hay, and then in the back of it we had a garden. We had a garden, and in that garden we had mostly plums. They had sugar plums, those white ones. And they had the brown ones, the plums. And I used to pick them and give them to my mother, and my mother would wash them, and then we'd make jelly out of it, you know, cook them, make jelly out of it.

LEVINE: Do you remember doing that? Can you tell me what you did with your mother when you were making that jelly, that plum jelly?

GROSS: Nothing I could do. All I could do was make the fire, and she would put, you know, we had a sort of a four-legged, four-legged, um, I wouldn't know what to call it, like a stove. And they would put that on there, and underneath of it they made a fire, and that would make, that would boil, boil the plums and then let's see, what, sift it, like, so that the kernels would come out, whatever, and have pure plum jellies. She was very proud of that. Then in the front, see, on one side of the place was the house, and the other side of the place we had also a little garden, which I used to do a lot of planting, you know. I used to love to go and take a tomato, wash it off, and eat it right there. (he laughs) I used to do that. I loved to do it. And my mother used to do the planting mostly, but I, you

know, I prepared everything. And my brother, my younger brother was too young to do things. And my older brother, they were away. The two of them were away. And one, one was, one was home, the one that was doing most of the working delivering the seltzer. And my brother, my little brother.

LEVINE: What was his name, your little brother?

GROSS: Harry. Harry. He came to, to New York after, after I was also here, oh, several years.

LEVINE: What were the names of your older brothers, the ones who were away?

GROSS: Slyman, Solomon, and Milo, and Milah.

LEVINE: Now, Milah was the one that delivered the . . .

GROSS: Did the work.

LEVINE: Yeah. And you had two sisters, too?

GROSS: Two sisters.

LEVINE: And their names?

GROSS: One was married. Her name was Blema. And, no. Her name was Lebah, Lebah. You know what Lebah means?

GROSS: No.

LEVINE: Love. And the second one was Blima. I got a picture of them here.

GROSS: Oh, good. We'll look at them after. What were your brothers doing when they were away? Were they away for work, or . . .

GROSS: Learning, learning. They went to what they call yeshiva. They were learning. They were mostly away.

LEVINE: Now, just, before we finish, did you have a grape orchard as well on your land?

GROSS: No, not on the lawn. Being several miles away, we had mountains there. The Carpathian Mountains. And in there they had caves. So my father bought some part of it, and they used to plant grapes, and we made wine. I remember I used to take off my shoes and get into the tub with the wine and dance around to smash the grapes, and then we'd put them into a press and press them, press out the wine. And we didn't do it commercially, just for our own benefit.

LEVINE: When would you drink the wine, on what occasions?

GROSS: Mostly Friday night and every holiday, and I rarely drank, if I really drank, sipped a little. I wasn't much of a drinker. But my father liked it. But, you see, we had big barrels, and they, they wouldn't, they wouldn't drink the

wine less than a year old, because new wine used to make them sick. So they had a yearly wine, yearly, over. It was nice. I remember once, (he laughs) I remember once I was eating the grapes, and there was a bee on the, on the grapes there. And it caught my lip. My lip swelled up. (he laughs) It swelled up like, it was, it was bad, but fun.

LEVINE: Now, in other words, the grape orchard or vines were on the mountainside, and the cave where you made the wine was there, too.

GROSS: In the mountain.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

LEVINE: Was that usual? Did a lot of people make wine?

GROSS: Whoever was able to afford.

LEVINE: Well, it sounds as though your father was well-to-do.

GROSS: Fairly well, fairly well. But he was, he got well-to-do after I was born. See, before I was born he was a poor man, and he heard that in the City of Bells was a rabbi that can help people, so he went over and told the rabbi, "I've got a wife and children and I'm poor." The rabbi told him that, "Go home. You'll be all right yet. Start dealing with cattle." So he left there

and he went home. Then that rabbi died from welts. He named me after him. So that's one reason, that's one reason, too, why my father liked me. He liked me. But he was very strict. He was very strict. If he didn't like you, "Boop."

LEVINE: Were you his favorite?

GROSS: Huh?

LEVINE: Would you say you were your father's favorite?

GROSS: I wouldn't say I was his favorite. Milah was his favorite. I was next.

LEVINE: So maybe that's why he wanted you to be a rabbi too.

GROSS: Maybe.

LEVINE: Because of this other rabbi.

GROSS: Maybe. He wanted, as I said, he wanted me to be a rabbi and, you know, the Jewish school, you had to pay for, because the, those people that were teaching you, they were teaching you in their home with a certain amount of children, and that's what they lived on, you know. So we, I used to go to that school.

LEVINE: How many years did you go to the Jewish school?

GROSS: Oh, till I was thirteen.

LEVINE: Oh. And you started when?

GROSS: I started about, oh, about four, three, four, five, I don't know when exactly.
I started when I was a little boy.

LEVINE: Did you go, how often did you go?

GROSS: Every day.

LEVINE: Every day for all those years.

GROSS: Every day except Saturdays.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So you could speak Hebrew?

GROSS: I can speak, I can speak, but I wouldn't say I could now. I forgot most of it.
Don't forget, that's ninety years ago, you know. Especially when I came
to America, I didn't use it at all.

LEVINE: Were there other people in the city that were not Jewish?

GROSS: Oh, yes.

LEVINE: And how did people get along?

GROSS: Oh, fine, fine, fine. They got along very good there. They were, they were,
in fact, they were very nice people, every one of them.

LEVINE: So there wasn't anti-Semitism that you remember in Hungary?

GROSS: No, not anti-Semitism at all. There was no, let me say this. We lived on, there was a river there called Laturtza.

LEVINE: Can you spell that?

GROSS: L-A-T-U-R-T-Z-A. And on this side of the river was Munkacs. And on the other side of the river was, uh, what, Orosvag.

LEVINE: Do you think you could spell that one?

GROSS: O-R-O-S-V-A-G. Orosvag. And Orosvag was mostly Slovaks because from before, before Hungary had Czechoslovaks, you know. There's the Yugoslovaks over on the other side, and Czechoslovaks on this side, and Hungary was in between. And so when we, when my relatives were mostly on the other side they had, you had to go across a bridge. They had an iron bridge. It used to cost two cents to go across.

LEVINE: Would you go with a wagon, or you would only walk across.

GROSS: Walk used to cost five cents with a wagon. And if you walked across it would be two cents. And in the city where I lived they had a marketplace, a big piece of territory where the farmers used to bring their cows, their chickens, their whatnot, and sell them to the people in the city. And, you know, the people on the Orosvag were poor. They were mostly poor

people. They didn't want to pay the fare of two cents to walk across, so there used to be places on, in the river, the Laturtza, where it was small, so they were able to walk across. And that's what they did. And the women used to lift their skirts up to walk across to go into the market. And my relatives, there was two places on the other side because I believe now that originally my mother came from on the other side of the river, and my father married her from there.

LEVINE: Did you have grandparents who were alive? Did you remember any grandparents in Hungary?

GROSS: Grandparents?

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

GROSS: I didn't know any grandparents because they were dead before I was born.

LEVINE: Well, how was it decided that you would go then to America? You saved up some money.

GROSS: How I decided?

LEVINE: Yeah.

GROSS: Well, we, my father and I started to disagree on things. I didn't want to be a rabbi. So I had what they called pass on the boat side, you know. Hair

hanging down. One day I went to the barber, get a haircut, and I had him cut it off. My father came home and naturally was mad. "What'd you do? What'd you do?" I says, "Look, Father, the barber made a mistake. He cut one off, and I told him he might as well cut the other one off." I told him a lie. A couple of days later he comes and tells me, "I seen the barber. He told me what happened. You told him to cut off." So, anyway, I cut it off. And that wasn't the only thing. He was very strict in the Jewish religion. And I couldn't go with it. I went along with it, but I couldn't go to the extreme the way he went. And we started to disagree, you know. So I told myself I think I'd be better off to myself. That's why I came to America. And . . .

LEVINE: So how did you go about it? How did you go about getting to America?

GROSS: That's easy. You go by train from Munkacs to Budapest, from Budapest to Vienna, from Vienna over, over to France on the side of the canal, you know, the English channel. Over, over there, and the by a boat over to Liverpool, and then with the, with the Cunard Line to America.

LEVINE: Well, was that your first time traveling?

GROSS: Yeah.

LEVINE: How did you feel making such a long trip?

GROSS: How I felt?

LEVINE: Yeah.

GROSS: I felt not, it was just nothing to me. It was nothing to me. It's was, everything I done was, it seems like I done it before, you know? It didn't seem, it didn't seem lost.

LEVINE: Well, how did you feel saying goodbye to people?

GROSS: I didn't.

LEVINE: Oh, what did you do?

GROSS: Just took off.

LEVINE: You just took off. I see. So, uh, did you think you'd come back?

GROSS: No. I didn't think I was going to. Hold on, I did think, see, World War One was a time that everybody that could work was hired. I'm running ahead of myself. So . . .

LEVINE: You were in the United States by then.

GROSS: Yeah. I came, I came to Ellis Island.

LEVINE: Well, first tell me the name of the ship, what you came on.

GROSS: Uh, Cunard.

LEVINE: Carmania?

GROSS: Carmania.

LEVINE: Carmania. From Liverpool.

GROSS: From Liverpool.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And what do you remember about the voyage?

GROSS: The voyage? It, that was something new to me, you know. And it was nothing, nothing new. It was, you might as well say you took a trip on a vacation trip. It was very nice, except on the third day. The third day on the sea it was a tough weather and I got sick as hell. I just felt like throwing myself into the ocean. That's how bad it was. It was going up and down. That day, but other, the other days it was beautiful, just like taking a vacation.

LEVINE: Were you in the steerage, or were you in a cabin?

GROSS: Steerage.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And how were the accommodations?

GROSS: The accommodations was all right. They, people, people, let's say people, they didn't cater to the steerage too much, you know. Because after all what it cost, twenty dollars, to make the trip? So all those, in those days

twenty dollars was a lot of money.

LEVINE: Did they feed you?

GROSS: Well, yes, they feed you. Breakfast, lunch, supper. First take a walk around the ship. That was a big ship. You see, before that it used to take two, three weeks for a boat to come from England to America. This Carmania took six days.

LEVINE: That was fast.

GROSS: Fast, very good. It was very good.

LEVINE: Did you eat in the dining room, or did you eat down in the hold where you were sleeping?

GROSS: No. We ate in the dining room, not for the First Class. They had two, they had the same dining room, but they served first for the First Class, and then, you know, then for the steerage. But they gave us pretty good food. I have nothing to complain about that.

LEVINE: Do you remember coming into the New York Harbor?

GROSS: Yes. I came into New York Harbor. I seen, I seen the Statue of Liberty there. It was, it was, to me it was a wonderful thing, the Statue of Liberty, you know, you come and you see that. Anyway, from there, after we left they took us to Ellis Island.

LEVINE: What do you remember about that?

GROSS: What I remember about Ellis Island, I came to Ellis Island and there was a doctor, I believe, that examined people. He examined me as well as the others. And it was all right. It was more like in a home. It was nice. But the only thing is I didn't know anybody. So anyway, we used to, we used to go, like in between meals there was a place we used to, there was benches there, long benches. So I stretched out on a bench, and I was thinking to myself, at that time was shavous. You know, was the shavous is? Shavous is a holiday, a Jewish holiday. And it was the holiday of the Jewish people getting the Torah. That was that holiday. And there was a song to it and I was laying on the bench singing that song to myself. I'm getting ahead of myself. But due to the fact that I didn't have enough money to support myself they kept me in Ellis Island. They wouldn't let me out.

LEVINE: How much money did you need?

GROSS: I think you needed about twenty-five dollars. And I didn't have it. So they kept me in Ellis Island. And, what's more, I lost the address of that cousin of mine to which I was supposed to go to. While we were there in Ellis Island a man from the paper, from the Jewish paper, Morganblatt, came in and took different papers, different whatever and he took mine. He asked me where I was going, who I was going to, the name of my cousin, but I

didn't know my address. So they went and advertised it in their paper. And not my cousin, but my cousin's friend seen it in the paper and he brought it to my cousin. Now, my cousin lived with his cousin. There was, you know, two marriages cousins, and he had a cousin who actually worked in Ellis Island. He was an inspector. As I said before, I was laying on the bench singing that song to myself. And I hear my name called, "Sam Gross, Sam Gross." I got up from the bench, and he says, he didn't tell me he was his cousin or anything like it. He says, "They know all about you. They know where you're going." And that's all. And his father is an old man. He had a beard this long. So he came to take me out. That is, this here cousin of my cousin, he was the one that done all the necessary things. And then we had to go in front of a judge. The judge says, "Are you going to take care of him? Are you able to take care of himself?" He says, "Yes." So they let me out. So I remember going out from the Battery. At that time they had horse, horse cars. From the Battery through, what the name of the street again, my memory is so poor now.

LEVINE: It seems good to me. You went by the horse and wagon, or carriage.

GROSS: Yeah. And they stopped on Houston.

LEVINE: Houston, uh-huh.

GROSS: Varick Street, the wagon came, you know, not the wagon, I mean, the car,

came to Varick Street. And it came to Houston and Varick. And on the corner of Houston and Varick is where the Kesslers, who were they, that, the cousins, the Kesslers lived. And that's where they let me out with this here old man, uncle. And that's how I came to America. When I came over there, I couldn't, somehow I couldn't stay there without, without paying or taking care of something. You know, I just, I just couldn't take it. So I started looking around for a job. I looked around for a job making garters. I don't think you remember the days, I don't think you ever knew the days when a man was wearing garters to hold up their stockings. So that was where, for six dollars a week, no, five dollars a week, because it was only five days that we were working, five dollars a week, a dollar a day. And I was making garters.

LEVINE: You were sewing them?

GROSS: No, making it for a manufacturer, you know. I was working there. So after a while I just couldn't, I couldn't, it seemed kind of small to work for five dollars a week. So I said goodbye to my uncle, to, that is two cousins and uncle, and I went to Bridgeport.

LEVINE: Why did you choose Bridgeport?

GROSS: Because Bridgeport is a manufacturing town. And another fellow I got acquainted with, he also went to Bridgeport with me. And he went to Bridgeport, and I got myself a job with the Columbia Phonograph

Company. I was making, working on Dictaphones. Do you remember Dictaphones? I worked on Dictaphones. And I was making twelve dollars a week. Then, it was before the war, before World War One. The Remington U.M.C. was making guns for England, Russia, you know. Because they were in the war we were on. And so I got myself a job over there. It was hard because, you see, at first they were afraid that I was, that I was a spy or something, you know. Because my name is Gross, and Gross seems like a German or so, you know. So I had to lie about my name, but I, they hired me. After they hired me I was there, working there for a while. They called me down to the office. "Your name is Gross?" "Yeah." "Why did you tell us another name?" So I told them, "Look, I wanted a job, and I knew that you were against the Germans, Hungarians and (?), you know. So I told you, because I needed a job." Anyway, they changed my name, and they let me work.

LEVINE: Do you remember the name you gave in the beginning?

GROSS: I think Johnson. (he laughs) Anyway, anyway, I worked there on milling machines. I was doing all right. They liked me.

LEVINE: Let me just interrupt you here, because this tape is going to run out. We're going to stop this tape and I'll put in another tape. Okay, this is the end of tape one, and I'm speaking with Sam Gross.

END OF SIDE TWO, TAPE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE ONE, TAPE TWO

LEVINE: We're starting again now. This is tape two, and I'm talking with Sam Gross, and it's May 1st, 1993, and Mr. Gross is ninety-seven and will be ninety-eight in August of this year. And we were talking, we'll go a little more quickly now, but we were talking about Bridgeport and how you changed your name to get a job, and then you were called down and your right name was resumed.

GROSS: They changed the right name.

LEVINE: Yeah, okay. Just, when you first came to this country, do you remember things about it that struck you as very different from anything you had known before?

GROSS: Oh, naturally. New York City, you know, compared to the town that I was in, was you could put the city that I was in a corner of New York City. In fact, in the beginning I was lost. What I mean to say is I got myself a job after this. I left some of it out. After I didn't have that job, that I was referring to, I got myself another job on Sixth Avenue and 28th Street pleating, pleating ladies' wear, you know, like dresses and so forth, you know, pleats, like side pleats, box pleats, you know. All those pleatings. I got myself a job there.

LEVINE: Was that, did that involve sewing or pressing, or how did you make the pleats?

GROSS: The pleats, they had, they had patterns, paper patterns. Not paper, it was heavier than paper, patterns. And the patterns were already made. Then we used to put the cloth over one, and then we put another, another one over on the other one, and then we rolled it up and put it in the steam, and we steamed it. And after we took it out, let it dry out. When it dried out, and then it was, it was pleats. And that was on dresses. But then they had machines, like sewing machines. They had, you know, when they make the pleats like on clothes, on women's clothes, like on, not on dresses, mostly, they had small pleats, like, you know, like about four inches wide, you know, four or five inches wide. And I got that job over there, but that didn't pay much either. So that's why I went to Bridgeport.

LEVINE: I see. And then what did you do, can you just briefly tell what else you did in your life for work?

GROSS: Uh, after that my cousin, I had a cousin. He said to me, "Let's go over to Detroit, because Detroit is a big manufacturing town, city. And I got myself a job. I'm going to, I'm going to leave out some, huh.

LEVINE: Okay.

GROSS: I got myself a job with the Packard Motor Car Company, and I worked there for quite a while with, my cousin didn't work. He got himself some kind of a teaching job because he was, he was more or less like a student, you know. And so he got himself a teaching job there, and we were there

together for a while. Then I came back to New York. Wherever I went I went Detroit, I went through Cleveland, Toledo, Cincinnati, around there. Then I went to, from Cincinnati I came back to New York. I was here for a little while. But I, over here I couldn't, it seemed that I couldn't get a decent job in New York, so I took off again and went to different places like Chattanooga, Tennessee. I went there, they were making oil well machinery, and I got myself a job over there, and they liked me there, too. From there I went to Birmingham, Alabama. And I got myself a job, but I didn't like. So I only stayed there a little bit.

LEVINE: When did you work for the railroad?

GROSS: For the railroad? Where would that be? During, not long after I got myself a job for the Pennsylvania Railroad. Then I . . .

LEVINE: What were you doing for them?

GROSS: I was already a machinist. I was working as a machinist. You see, I learned the mechanical trade by myself. I learned it piece by piece. I'll give you a little idea how I learned it. In Bridgeport there was a local mobile company, automobiles, expensive automobiles. And they done everything by machine, hand machine. They didn't have automatics there. Everything was done by hand, and the allowance was only about two thousandths of an inch. But I got myself a job there, and the foreman came out and took me in and asked me, "You're the lathe man?" I says,

"Yes, but I never worked a lathe." And I came in, you see, it had sections like lathe had a lathe section, say, a half a dozen machines that are working on lathes. So they gave, the foreman took me in and I was standing there. And I was watching how the other fellow was working his lathe, while the foreman went to get material for me to work, and I was watching the other fellow, and I was working. I was doing the work. And they liked it, too.

LEVINE: And how did you meet your wife?

GROSS: Oh, that's a story. That's a beautiful story. My cousin was to get married. And they made, they made a big wedding. So my aunt had two daughters. She wanted, she wanted my wife's brother for her daughter, so they invited them for, you know, to go to the wedding. And they says, "Come on, come on, you'll have a meal." "All right." So I went along. But to this wedding I was best man, tails and all, you know, as a best man should be. And after the ceremony and so forth and dance, and then I seen, I was on this side, but on the other side I seen my wife and her brother. So I went over to my wife and I asked her for a dance. I asked her for a dance, and she says, "Yes." And we had a dance, and that was a waltz. And I says to her, "Can I come and see you sometimes?" "Yes." Next month, and I lived, at that time, in Brooklyn with a cousin of mine. And next morning I took the subway and I came to 96th Street and Lexington Avenue. I went and called my wife, because she gave me the

telephone number. I called my wife, and, "I'm on 96th Street and Lexington Avenue. Can I come up?" Because they lived on 97th Street and Lexington Avenue. I says, "Can I come up?" "Yes." Anyways, I took her out.

LEVINE: What was her name? What was her name, then?

GROSS: Frances.

LEVINE: And her last name?

GROSS: Ackerman. Frances Ackerman. I took her out. We went to, to Central Park. They had a lake there in Central Park, and they had boats that they rented out on the lake. So we went on, we got a boat, and we pedaled around on Central Park, and I took her home.

LEVINE: What did you like about her?

GROSS: Everything. It was just like a magnet. (he is moved) She was beautiful. Show her the picture.

LEVINE: Oh, wow.

GROSS: See that picture over there?

LEVINE: Yeah, yeah. She is beautiful. Yeah, she was. Uh-huh. So how, so did you court her a long time before you got married?

GROSS: Seven months. Seven months later we were married. Yeah.

LEVINE: And then how many children did you have?

GROSS: We had four, two daughters and two boys.

LEVINE: And their names? The names of your children?

GROSS: Estelle, Gloria, Melvin and somebody around here. (they laugh)

VOICE OFF MIC: He's better be here, dear, otherwise I wouldn't.

LEVINE: Alfred? Uh-huh. Okay. So do you have grandchildren too?

GROSS: Oh, yeah. I have grandchildren. I have great-grandchildren. Yes.

LEVINE: So when you look back on your life, when you look back on starting out in Hungary and making the decision to come, what do you think about that? What does it mean to you to have come here as a young man?

GROSS: It means to me to be on my own. And I was working hard. Don't think that I had a picnic. I had no picnic. I had to work hard. Because, as I said, what did I know about mechanics? But after, if you'll excuse me a minute.

LEVINE: Wait, I need . . .

GROSS: Oh, no, never mind, never mind. I'll show it to you after.

LEVINE: Okay.

GROSS: Estelle, on the top of my dresser there's, there is a . . .

VOICE OFF MIKE: She knows what you mean.

LEVINE: Yeah, she'll get it. So you didn't know anything about mechanics.

GROSS: Nothing.

LEVINE: And you learned it yourself.

GROSS: Nothing, what did I know. All I knew about the machine that we were making sodas, seltzers. That's all I knew. But that was all the mechanics that I knew. And then, you know, I learned here, a little here, a little there. A little of that. A little at a time.

LEVINE: Okay. We'll wait, when we're finished we'll look at it.

GROSS: I'll show it to you.

LEVINE: What, is that what you're most proud of?

GROSS: Huh?

LEVINE: Is that what you're most proud of?

GROSS: Yeah.

LEVINE: Learning a trade yourself.

GROSS: Myself. The only thing is, uh, before World War Two things was hard. It seems that the Germans were sinking the boats that left America to different places, so they didn't manufacture too much because they were sinking it. So I opened up a grocery store on Eighth Avenue and 132nd Street. And it wasn't much of a success. Why? Because I made one mistake. Because I had the A&P on the next block, and on the other side they had a big store. And I opened up a small store, so it wasn't much of a success. So anyway I had it for two years. But I thought to myself, "Now I got to go ahead and learn the necessary thing to be a real mechanic." So I went to high school and learned blueprints, because blueprints is a job all by itself, you know.

LEVINE: Did you go at night?

GROSS: Yes, after work. I went at night to school. And I learned, learned blueprints. And I, and I was a real mechanic then. In fact, I was working in a place in Brooklyn where they, a job place, you know. they were taking jobs from different things, and working on blueprints. And they, when I had that thing there I seen something that didn't jive, you know. Somehow it didn't. So I brought it into the engineer, and I showed him. "See this here? It doesn't look good to me." He says, "Thank you." And he took it, and made out another print. Anyway, that's the reason they fired me after, because the foreman was a German, and they, they didn't particularly like me because I was the only Jew there, and, but the fact is that when they

started to get, you know, slackened up, they hired me the first one. And why, because I shouldn't have brought, brought that over to the engineer and to the office. I should have given it to the boss and showed him, and he would have, you know, the honor that he found out the mistake. So they fired me.

LEVINE: Do you think much about all your experiences now that you have more time and you can, you don't have to go out and work, and you have time to think?

GROSS: My mind is just like a book, just keep rolling around. I can, I can just think every day. I can't go to sleep without it.

LEVINE: Does it bring you pleasure to think about your life and your experiences?

GROSS: It brings me pleasure, but sometimes it doesn't let me sleep.

LEVINE: (she laughs) Okay. Well, before we close, is there anything else you'd like to say about coming to this country?

GROSS: About coming to this country? What could I say more. I can only continue, oh. I got myself a job in, what's his name, in Pennsylvania, Scranton. I got myself a job in Scranton in the Pennsylvania Railroad. That was already after I was married, and Estelle was a little bit of a baby. So I took my wife and Estelle. We went to Scranton, but my wife didn't like it. She was in a hotel there, and she didn't, she wasn't home, she

didn't like it. So I had to give the job up. But that was railroad stuff.

LEVINE: Well, are you glad that you came to the United States?

GROSS: Huh?

LEVINE: Are you happy that you made the decision to come to the United States?

GROSS: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. I had hard times here. I had very hard times here sometimes, but I worked it through.

LEVINE: Well, I want to thank you very much. It's really been a pleasure hearing your story. And I want to say that I've been speaking with Sam Gross, and it's May 1, 1993. You'll be turning ninety-eight in August, and you came to this country at age sixteen in 1912 from Hungary. And this is Janet Levine signing off. Thank you.

GROSS: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW