

**EI-364**

**HELEN GOTTERER ORATOFISKY**

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LEVINE: Let me say this first: This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. It's August 1st, 1993. I'm with Helen Gotterer Oratofsky in her home in the Bronx, New York. Helen came from Hungary in 1921 when she was thirteen years old. I'm very happy to be here. I'm looking forward

ORATOFISKY: I'm happy too.

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LEVINE: (said at the same time as Oratosky above) . . to your story.

ORATOFSKY: It puts a little life in my dull life.

LEVINE: Okay. Why don't we start at the beginning. Tell me your birth date and the town you were born in.

ORATOFSKY: Gyo gyos. You know how to spell it?

LEVINE: No.

ORATOFSKY: I'll spell it for you. Capitol G-y-o, g-y-o-s. And the os have two dots, that makes it Gyo gyos. Other it would be gy-oh; and its gyo; not exactly o. That's Hungarian. You want me to write it down?

LEVINE: No, that's okay. And your birth date?

ORATOFSKY: May 14th, 1907.

LEVINE: Now, Gyun gesh, or however you . .

ORATOFSKY: Gyo gyos.

LEVINE: Gyo gyos. Tell me about the town. What do you remember about it?

ORATOFSKY: Oh, I remember as if I was there today. It's a small town. It's not poor.

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What should I say? Middle class, sort of middle class people lived there, because some of them were millionnaires. And it was very small. It was smaller than Co-op-City, than this section [of] Co-op City. And a lot of people were rich there. They had businesses and the poor struggled. What else can I say? (Levine: uhm) They had schools, lot of, enough schools. Everybody had to go to school. If not, they were fined. A man came --what do you call it? A truant officer, no? --came and they were ready to put my mother in jail because Theresa, my sister, she didn't let her go to school. She had to help her.

LEVINE: Well, what was your mother's name?

ORATOFSKY: Her, Johanna.

LEVINE: Johanna. Do you remember her maiden name, by any chance?

ORATOFSKY: Yeah, I should remember. Johanna (pause) Gotterer was my mai . . .  
Gotterer.

LEVINE: Well, that was your father's name.

ORATOFSKY: No, that was my father's name. Schimmel! Johanna Schimmel! S-C-H-I-M-M-E-L! (In a softer voice) Ohh, I remembered! (She laughs.)

LEVINE: And (she laughs) how about your father. His name?

ORATOFSKY: His name was Max.

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LEVIINE: And your sisters?

ORATOFISKY: Miksha! In Hungarian, it's Miksha!

LEVINE: M-I-C-H

ORATOFISKY: Mik, no, M-I, Mik, M-I-K-S-H-A. (She pronounces it phonetically.) Mik sha.

LEVINE: And how about your sisters; their names?

ORATOFISKY: The oldest one was here in America already. She came seven years before we did. Her name is Rose. But, in Hungarian, you want to know?

LEVINE: If you want to. Either way.

ORATOFISKY: Rosza, Roszee, in Hungarian. R-O-S-Z. But, uh, Rose.

LEVINE: And then the next sister?

ORATOFISKY: And next was Serian, that's Serina, Serian, but they changed it in America to Slyvia. They gave us different names.

LEVINE: And the next one?

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ORATOFSKY: Theres . . Teresz, Teresz, T-E-R --You know Prince Theresa, Princess Theresa? That's interpret Theresa. And mine is Helen. My mother had three other children. They died.

LEVINE: Do you remember that? When they died?

ORATOFSKY: No, I was the last one.

LEVINE: Oh.

ORATOFSKY: But I was still, three girls. We were seven girls. My mother didn't like my father because he only made girls. (They laugh.) It was his fault. My mother blamed everything on my father. (She lowers her voice.) My mother was a terrible person, but don't put that in. She was mean.

LEVINE: What did your father do? (pause) For work?

ORATOFSKY: In Europe? (Levine indicates "yes") Nothing. He was a religious man and he went to shul everyday. We were very poor. My mother, and my father came to America with my oldest sister. They had a lot of relatives here; rich and educated. One was a principal of a high school, of a school.

LEVINE: These were your father's relatives?

ORATOFSKY: Yes, all my father's. They were rich and they're the ones who took us out, gave us money. We didn't have money. We were very poor.

LEVINE: I see, so you were about seven years old --

ORATOFSKY: So, my mother, no my father and Rose, the oldest, came seven years before. Figure that out, when that was. I can't.

LEVINE: Do you remember your father from Hungary? Do you remember like when you were really little, when he was still there?

ORATOFSKY: (Spoken at same time as line above.) I remember. He was a short, chubby man with a red beard. He had a red beard. I remember it as it happened today. (Levine starts another question.) My mother was, my father was nice, good natured and my mother was very mean.

LEVINE: Do you remember any things that you did with you father?

ORATOFSKY: Yeah, he went to shul every day. That was his life. He was very religeous. He never made a living. You know when he made a living? We made wine in Gyo gyos. They were famous for wine. You know how they made the wine? In a big vat, wooden vats; put the grapes in and put white socks on, and do it. They had no machine in those years. And he was, and Passoache he helped make the matzoes and summertime he helped make wine, to step, step the wine. You know, they had no machines to grind it. So they took a few men and they put on white socks and they did it. Then we got wine like that. I mean, not we, but that's how my father made a living. And he was very religeous.

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LEVINE: So was the whole family religious? Like, did you have to do, observe .

ORATOFSKY: Well, they tried it but, we girls, soon as we came to America, we threw it (said as though she were heaving it) back to Europe. None of us observed it.

LEVINE: When you were there, what did you do? By way of observing? Did you go to the temple and --

ORATOFSKY: I went to school. I had to go to school. I was, I went to day school and we had a Hebrew teacher. Once a week they taught us Hebrew, the Jewish. It was a lot of the Jews in a little city. The whole city was smaller than Co-op City.

LEVINE: Were there gentiles in the city too?

ORATOFSKY: They were a lot but they were, most of them, were very anti-semitic. And then the Romanians came in, soldiers. I don't why they picked this little city. And the mothers all had to hide their daughters in the cellar because they would rape them.

LEVINE: Do you remember anything about the first world war? When you were there?

ORATOFSKY: You know what I remember? There was a very religious man, no, a very rich man. His daughter was Julia, went to school with me. And

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because the Romanian soldiers, you know what it means in war time to take over a city and the enemy comes in? They killed half of the Jews. And coming home from school, the main street was a circle, and they were hanging a man whose daughter went to school with me. And I saw it. And I started to cry and the woman next to me says, in Hungarian, "Don't cry. They going to punish you. They see that you feel sorry. These are soldiers. They kill us." And they hung him up because he had money. He was a Jew. (pause) And nobody stopped him. They had, they had soldiers, they didn't, they were very anti-semitic. I remember that so clearly.

LEVINE: What else do you remember about school?

ORATOFSKY: We had a nice school. We had a woman teacher. Her name was Gizella. And she was so strict! If you didn't do your lessons, you had to hold out your hand like this and she hit it with a bamboo stick. That's how they punished the children there, not like in America. You're not allowed to touch a child. We have to hold our hand and they hit it, the teachers. But they taught us good. We came to America, we had good education. And, you know what? We learned the English language, except my father never learnt it. My mother, two weeks later she was sitting on the street reading the paper, the Hungarian-English paper. (She laughs heartily.)

LEVINE: Wow.

ORATOFSKY: She was a devil but she was mean. She was mean to her own children.

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LEVINE: Do you remember your house? Do you remember what the house you lived in looked like?

ORATOFSKY: Yeah, we were poor. We were poor because my father never worked. Summertime, it wasn't bad. Heat, we didn't have. We had one room where we had two beds and four of us slept here. We were three girls and my mother. So two beds: I slept with my sister Theresa. And my mother slept with one of the other sisters. We were four of us. My father was in America already. Before that, I don't remember. (Levine starts another question.) And the kitchen was with earth, not with wooden. And full of mice in the rooms. Oui, we were full of mice. (She laughs.) We were poor. We were very poor. My mother made a living --you know how she made a living? She raised goose, geese, and sold it to the Jews, parts, and she made a living from it. They knew, everybody knew us. That we were nice, religious people. We had a good name. My mother, too. Well, my mother was good to people, but she wasn't good to her children. Only to me because I looked like her, (she whispers) so she liked me. I was the youngest. But she didn't like my sisters. She used to hit them.

LEVINE: Did you have to do chores? Like around the house?

ORATOFSKY: Of course we have to do chores. But I didn't do anything because when Theresa says, "Helen, I'll wash the dishes, you wipe." My mother beat her up. She says, "She's weak. She can't wipe the dishes" --meaning me. She like me because I looked like her. That was Europe. (She

laughs.) Never heard of such a thing, did you?

LEVINE: Yeah. Where did your mother raise the geese? Right, in the backyard?

ORATOFSKY: Where did she what?

LEVINE: Raise the geese?

ORATOFSKY: We had a coma . You know what a, what do you call it, where you keep the wood and everything, and junks and, a wooden little house with a door with a lock on it. That's where we kept and that's where my mother raised the geese. And they got fat and then she had a, a sherkah, what's a sherkah? One who cuts the, religeous, you know, who

LEVINE: Oh, breaks the neck?

ORATOFSKY: How do you call that? In the Jewish religion. You should know something about the Jewish religion. Are you Jewish? (Levine laughs.) [To her son, Paul, who is present at the interview] Is she Jewish?

LEVINE: I'm about a third Jewish. (She laughs.)

ORATOFSKY: A third? How could you divide yourself in three? Who cut you up? (They laugh.) Levine starts another question. (Speaking at the same time) My mother raised the geese there. All you needed was corn and, you know, she put a little fat on it, and that made them fat. I remember that so vividly.

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LEVINE: And do you remember, did people come there to buy them or did she take the geese someplace?

ORATOFSKY: She took it. They were rich people, only to the rich. There were a lot of rich people in my city.

LEVINE: What did they do, the rich people? What did they do?

ORATOFSKY: I don't know. The husbands were businessmen. They went to Budapest and bought things and sold them. They were business too. One had a ice cream parlor, but we never had money to eat ice cream. My mother wouldn't give us money (she laughs) to eat it. My mother was foxy. She was mean though, very mean.

LEVINE: How was she foxy? What did she do that was --?

ORATOFSKY: She made the children do things that they didn't want to do. Like Sylvia learned how to be a dressmaker. You have to pay a dressmaker's . So she says, "Well, you have to wash the floors." And she never did any work. She made the children do the housework. She wanted them to (pause), she wanted them to do everything, clean the house. We had a trunk in the kitchen. The kitchen was about half of this room, with an earthen, wooden, not wood floor, earth. And there was a trunk there, I remember, and she kept all the junk there. And once I opened the trunk and a mouse appeared. I screamed. So my mother said, "What are you afraid of? The mouse is smaller than you." She wasn't

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afraid of anything. She was a real battleaxe. She didn't want to come. She came to America. But we were here about two weeks, she said she don't like America. The air isn't good. She'll take me and go back to Europe. I says, "Mama, I'm not going with you. I'm staying with my sisters, right here." She wanted to go back.

LEVINE: First, is there anything else about your house? Like, what did your mother cook on? In Hungary?

ORATOFSKY: We had a, a coal stove. We didn't have, we had no electric either, candles or, you know what a petroleum lamp is?

LEVINE: Kerosine lamp?

ORATOFSKY: Kerosine lamp.

LEVINE: And did you have running water?

ORATOFSKY: No, we went to the well. Where we had there were one, two, three tenants. It was, the yard was bigger than this area (indicating her living room). There were three tenants. One was a couple, no children. One was a bussinessman -- he had a store right there --that had three children. And she had an affair with his, her husband's brother. He went out of town to buy stuff and she, he crept into the window. And we saw it and he made a child and she gave birth to a little girl. But her husband liked her. He forgave her. (Levine laughs.) And we were there. We were very poor. They were well off. We were the only poor

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ones. We were very poor.

LEVINE: This is a house and it had three families?

ORATOFSKY: Three families, a big yard, and there was a well in one corner, where you let the pail, but that wasn't drinking water. It wasn't good. Artesian well. You know what an artesian . . . ? We had to walk as far as maybe over here, where what do you call? Where PathMark is?

LEVINE: Like the shopping center there?

ORATOFSKY: Huh?

LEVINE: You mean as far as the shopping center is from here?

ORATOFSKY: Yeah. (that is about one block away)

LEVINE: Uh huh.

ORATOFSKY: The well, artesian well they called it. That was good water. So we had to carry in a pail our water to drink. For washing and dishes, this water was good. But we went to the artesian well and schlepped the big, heavy, enamel pots. Big one. And we put it on a board and covered it up. And we drank that until it left. That's how we lived.

LEVINE: Did you have to go get the water?

ORATOFSKY: No, me they didn't. I was the youngest. My mother pampered me. She

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made the others do it. She cursed them. She didn't like them. She didn't like her children. (pause) I don't know why. (She sighs.)

LEVINE: Did you have other relatives around, like grandparents or aunts and uncles?

ORATOFSKY: In Europe? From far away. You know where? In Czechoslovakia. My mother came from Czechoslovakia. And my father. They were married already.

LEVINE: Oh.

ORATOFSKY: They had nice family, beautiful family. They came summertime to visit us. They were very religious and they came to visit us.

LEVINE: Do you know why your mother and father moved from Czechoslovakia to Hungary?

ORATOFSKY: I don't know. I never found out because my father --oh, my father's family lived there and my father was supposed to marry one of my mother's sisters. And my mother said, "You can't marry her. She's younger. I'm the oldest. I marry you." (She laughs.) So my father had to marry her. They were well off. They were business people. Anybody who was business, they had it pretty good.

LEVINE: So what did people do in the town? Did they, they had grapes, right? That was one kind of --

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ORATOFSKY: And fruit. We had fruit orchards, big, nice. And you know what? In back of our house we had a crazy house, a hospital. I remember that.

LEVINE: What do you remember about it?

ORATOFSKY: Oh, we used to, the people, there summertime, they let them out on the yard and they put some wire gate. And we used to stand and say "hello", in Hungarian, not in English. (They are laughing.) It was a crazy house right near our house.

LEVINE: Do you remember any of the patients?

ORATOFSKY: No, I don't know them. My sister had a girlfriend and she walked with her on the street and, all of sudden, she was --they were very good friends --. My sister was about-- no that was the oldest, when they were in Europe yet. She looked at Rose, and my sister Rose, and slapped her. She said, "Why do you hit me?" "Because I feel like it." She was crazy. They put her in the crazy house. But otherwise, my sisters learned how to sew. They were a dressmaker. My mother paid her couple of --how do you call money in Hungarian? I forgot already. (pause) (To Levine) I forgot.

LEVINE: I can't think either.

ORATOFSKY: Money. And they taught her how to sew. My sisters, all of them, Theresa too --a little bit; not as much. But the two oldest were good

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dressmakers, very good dressmakers. They pursued that here and they were hired.

LEVINE: When they were still in Hungary did they make money from being dressmakers?

ORATOFSKY: Well, not much because it was a small city, very small.

LEVINE: Do you remember your clothes? What you dressed like when you lived in Hungary?

ORATOFSKY: Well, I was a child and Shmatas. You know what schmatas ? (She laughs.) We weren't well off. We had what to eat. My mother, you know, she bought (pause) war was, surrounding places, many times little wars broke out. And my mother once went to --I forgot the name of the city --and she bought up tobacco leaves and she sold it. And she put it here (indicates ) and we were in the train, I was with her. The soldiers said, "somebody . . ." --and that was illegal, to transport tobacco --and the soldier was walking back and forth and my mother was near the window. I was sitting next to her. And he says, (she shouts) "I smell tobacco. I smell something. You got --" She says "No, I'm pregnant." She made herself pregnant and they let her go. They didn't bother her. You know what? If they would have caught her, they'd put her against the wall, without trial, without anything they shoot her.

LEVINE: Did that happen much? Did you ever see that?

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ORATOFSKY: Well, it happened. They hung a man for no reason. Because he was rich. I saw him. I saw it. But there were a lot of rich people. I don't know how they got rich there. Gentiles, Jews, some Jews too.

LEVINE: Did Jews mostly live in one section? (pause) Do you remember?

ORATOFSKY: Well, I don't remember my mother moving. There was a tremendous market there. That I remember. First we lived in a hotel that they turned into apartments. And we moved in. We only had one room and a kitchen. We slept in the kitchen, in the bedroom. Bedroom wasn't a room. But I have to go to school all the time. School was very far. And there was a big market on Fridays.

LEVINE: Tell me what it was like on market day.

ORATOFSKY: The peasants brought the horses with wagons and they sold everything. And my girlfriend --I had a Gentile girlfriend -- they had a saloon next house. And we were the same age and I was friendly with her. She was Gentile. My mother tolerated because she liked me. So I used to watch the men play cards and I learned how to play cards (she laughs).

LEVINE: (laughing) This was your friend's parents', your friend's parents owned the saloon? (pause) Your girlfriend.

ORATOFSKY: She lived the next block from me, next block. They were rich. They were Gentiles. They were peasants. They worked themselves up. And

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they sold everything and they had a saloon. Hungary was a drinking, the Gentiles always drank. Jews didn't drink. It was like here. What do you call a saloon? A saloon.

LEVINE: Yeah. Were they drinking wine?

ORATOFSKY: Whiskey! What kind of wine. They brought stuff to sell --horses, and animals, and vegetables for the people, and we bought. Because there were some stores in the city, very small city I lived in.

LEVINE: So is that where your mother would sell the geese? In the market?

ORATOFSKY: Yeah, yeah. No, she didn't go to the market; nobody did. They wouldn't let her. These people were all peasants from out of town. They came with wagons on horses. There was no automobiles in my city. Later on, when we were already ready to come here, I remember we saw an automobile and oughhhhh, an automobile! (She laughs.) And you know, we have toilet out in the yard and it stunk. They cleaned it out once a year. That's how, that's how we lived, primitive, very primitive.

LEVINE: Do you (she clears her throat), do you remember any games you played or any things you did for fun? Any toys you had?

ORATOFSKY: Me?

LEVINE: Yeah.

ORATOFSKY: For fun? I was a little girl. When I came here I was young. What fun did we have? My girlfriends, I don't remember, we played. We jumped rope --they had rope jumping. But I had a Gentile girlfriend, but my mother was good to her. She didn't like the Gentiles. The Gentiles didn't like the Jews. Why was there, even in those years, anti-semitism.

LEVINE: How about foods --

ORATOFSKY: Imagine coming from an atmosphere to a country like America. Can you picture that? And how we fitted in and my sisters, right away, my sisters, we were here two weeks, Sylvia and Rose went to look for a job. They hardly knew English but they picked it up very fast. And they saw policemen on the corner, so they went over to the policeman and said, "What time on the clock? What time is the clock." They were learning English. And my sister learned something else. The turnstiles came out then. You know, the subways. It was new. And my sister Sylvia was a bren. You know what a bren is? She (whispers) was fired. So when we went visiting the relatives --we had a lot of relatives here, American relatives. They came in the eighteen . . ., 1891 and 1893 they came to America. I don't know why. And when we went to visit an aunt, so Sylvia said --turnstile, you put in a nickel that time. Sylvia says I should go first. I says, "I don't want to go first. I'm afraid. You go first. You got the nickels. Give me a nickel, I'll go." "No," she said, "you go first." And she learnt it right that day. She put the nickel in and snuck in behind me. (They laugh.) You remember the s ? No, how could you. My sister Sylvia was a terrific person. She snuck, I says, "You

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know, you're going to do that, I'm not going to go with you. They put you in jail here." She snuck in. But she got a job right away. We lived on the East Side.

LEVINE: Wait, before you tell me more about this country. Do you remember police in --

ORATOFSKY: What?

LEVINE: Do you remember any encounters with police? When you were still in Hungary?

ORATOFSKY: No. They were police so my sister would pass by. We learnt English in no time. I don't know how.

LEVINE: No, but I mean, when you were still in Hungary.

ORATOFSKY: Oh, in Hungary, we never had anything to do with police.

LEVINE: How about food. Do you remember any food that your mother made or that you, that was common that you ate when you were still in Hungary? Kinds of dishes that you had?

ORATOFSKY: What kind, what?

LEVINE: What kinds of food did you have?

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ORATOFSKY: We had good, we had food. My mother made, my mother was raising geese. We always had to eat. And they were delicious. They were big geese. You know, when you feed them, they get big and fat. If she didn't sell part of it, so we had what to eat. We didn't, I never went hungry. And my mother was a good cook and she knew how to bake. I don't know where she learned it.

LEVINE: Well how was it decided that you would come to America? How did that happen?

ORATOFSKY: I tell you, my sister and my father --the rich family wrote to my father and said, "We'll send you money. Come to America." And my father went with my sister Rose. And there was always war brewing in Hungary. Always wars, Hungary on the map was very large. So my sister, and Rose came here seven years before we did.

LEVINE: Then did they write to you?

ORATOFSKY: Oh, they sent us money and everything. Sure. My father got a job right away, pressing pants in a factory. I don't know how he learned it. He was a yeshiva bucha. You know what a yeshiva --he made a, he was dovinig, he was praying and the Jews, the religeous Jews were --how should I say it? --they were charitable. And we used to have every, once a week, one of the students, the hassidem, their religeous and we gave them food for nothing. They ate by us. They were poor. We were, everybody was poor, very poor. There was no jobs for, only business, if you had money you go in business. So who had money?

LEVINE: Do you remember what Rose or your father wrote and what they told you about America?

ORATOFISKY: They loved it here. They came to our aunts or, my aunt --what was their name? Look I forgot their name. They lived on Riverside Drive. You know what it was in 1921 to live on Riverside Drive? They were rich. I don't know how they got rich. And their children all went to school. They became, later on they ignored us. They didn't bother with us. When we came to America, they didn't bother with us much, especially after my father died.

LEVINE: What did you expect when you were first leaving Hungary and coming here? What did you know about America? What did you think?

ORATOFISKY: We didn't, we expected better. First of all, my sister sent us money, my father and my sister. My father got a job right away. So did my sister. So they had money, so they sent us money. Seven years later, though. So we came second class. You know what it means to get second class? You know why? Because we found out --my mother was very shrewd -- you know, if you were not clean they --and we all had lice. My mother never bathed me. Would you believe it? We had a little brook there. So Sylvia used to bathe me. My mother never, I had lice. I came to America, teacher sent me home for two weeks. She said you have to clean your lice up.

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END OF SIDE A

BEGIN SIDE B

ORATOFSKY: . . .and a girl was teaching me how to talk English. I came in May, May fourteenth, 19--, May, no January.

LEVINE: No, that's your birthday. You came in the winter, you said.

ORATOFSKY: When?

LEVINE: In the winter.

ORATOFSKY: January. And I was taken to school right away and this girl was --at that time, a lot of immigrants came. The country was full of immigrants, United States. So I, my father registered me too. No, an uncle came, a tall uncle. His name was Gotterer too; my father's brother. "Come, I'll take you," --I couldn't speak English yet. I don't know what language he, he didn't speak Jewish. "I'll take you to school." I was here two weeks. So he took me to PS 71, downtown. D'you ever hear of it? Avenue A, Avenue B? (Levine is laughing.) There was a library there. So the teacher said these --there were a lot of immigrants --"All right. You teach Helen how to talk English and read and everything." I was

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entered, I don't remember what, we came in January I think. In May? No, then came vacation. She was teaching me English but I didn't know what the hell she was talking about. I couldn't learn from her, a Jewish girl. Then we had two months vacation. That's when I learned English. And I came back to the same school. Maybe I skipped, they skipped me. I don't remember. I spoke English and this same girl [said] "I was teaching her!" (They laugh.) Not talking Eng . . arithmetic. The teacher said, "You're teaching her?" I says, "Well I know better. I went to school in Europe." I did. I was good in school. You had to go.

LEVINE: So how did you learn it so well on vacation?

ORATOFISKY: I learnt it very fast.

LEVINE: By playing with the kids? Is that how you, did you learn it by playing with other kids on the street?

ORATOFISKY: Oh, sure, I had friends right away. We learned from the teacher, even the Hebrew teacher. There you have to go to Hebrew too. It was illegal, it was legal there, they have to have a Jewish teacher, one day a week, every week. One day we have to go to Hebrew. He came to school and, in a class, teach us Jewish.

LEVINE: This is in Hungary or here?

ORATOFISKY: In Hungary.

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LEVINE: So tell me, do you remember leaving your town? Do you remember leaving to come to America?

ORATOFSKY: Sure I remember. We didn't take nothing. We had a few smatahs. You know what smatahs are? Furniture we didn't have. What did we have? We were very poor.

LEVINE: Did your mother take anything that you can remember?

ORATOFSKY: No. We had nothing. Junk. And we packed up clothes. And they told us, you know, that if you have lice they send you back. Because people were dirty. So, but, we came, my sister knew it, the one sister, Rose. My father never learned English. He never even knew English, a word. But Rose learned right away and she found out that if you're not clean, they don't let you in. They examine everybody. They take their hair apart. But we came second class. "You second classs, go ahead through." If you came second class.

LEVINE: What did you leave the town in? Did you go in a horse and wagon from your town to get to the boat?

ORATOFSKY: No, we had a train. We had a nice train. In Swall. It was about, far, if we had to walk it. I don't remember. Maybe like the Concourse. We walked it. By train, we came by train.

LEVINE: And then where did you go to catch the boat? Where did the boat go from?

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ORATOFSKY: Amsterdam. Then we took, we had the passport to come to America so they told us how to, they put us on the trains. And then we came to Amsterdam I think. The boat was waiting. And we were second class.

LEVINE: Did you get examined in Amsterdam? Do you remember?

ORATOFSKY: I don't remember. I don't know.

LEVINE: Do you remember the name of the ship?

ORATOFSKY: I don't think so.

LEVINE: Do you remember the name of the ship?

ORATOFSKY: Yeah, but I can't think of it now. My sister would remember. (pause) I can't think of it.

LEVINE: What was the ship like? What was the voyage like?

ORATOFSKY: Oh, we were second class, was beautiful! We had an up and down, you know. I slept on top, and my mother slept on the bottom. And they had good food. We never had such food. Who ever saw such food? But we were there, they had a storm on the way and the boat stopped for three days and we were were petrified (she gasps) that we'll never get to America. But we did. We got here. Storm. They had to stop. But second class was, ouhh, everybody looked up to us, second class.

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LEVINE: That was because --

ORATOFSKY: But we were filthy and dirty.

LEVINE: But it was because your father and your sister sent you enough money for second class.

ORATOFSKY: Money. Yeah, yeah, yeah, they sent money, yeah.

LEVINE: Was there anything else about the voyage that you remember?

ORATOFSKY: I was sick all the time. I was in the cabin day and night with my mother. And my sister Theresa and Sylvia were galavanting around and fooling around with boys. But they were friendly, everybody was. I was sick. You know, the boat was going up and down. And there was a storm. We were scared that we going to drown. I was in the cabin all the time; my mother too. My mother wanted to go back to Europe.

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

ORATOFSKY: Yeah, I remember the little window where we had to go through and my uncle and his wife were waiting. And they waved to us. I never saw them before but they waited for us. They let us go right away. They saw American people. They told them where they lived and they sent us money. We were privileged. Second class to come to America, what a question. So my sister cleaned me up. My sister Rose, she was here seven years. You know, they sent me home from school. She

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said, "You can't come to school with lice." So I told Rose, I said, "They sent me home." So she took kerosine and every day she bathed me with kerosine and two weeks later I was clean. ( She laughs. )

LEVINE: So you didn't have to go to Ellis Island?

ORATOFSKY: No, we never went. Second class don't go to Ellis Island. But my name, our name was written there somewhere. Somewhere there, took all the names of the immigrants. Oh, the boats were filled, filled, filled with immigrants from all over. They all had relatives here. I don't know how did my family came here. I don't know why. They were rich people.

LEVINE: Well, do you remember the people in steerage? You were in second class. Do you remember the people who were coming steerage, in the bottom of the boat, all together in one big space?

ORATOFSKY; My sister sneaked out. My sister Sylvia was a devil. She was, I don't what she, she sneaked into the third class. They were so poor. They were sleeping on the floor. Very poor. I said, "What are you going over there for. Over here we live like queens." She says, "I don't know." She went to look, to, she was a daring one. But we came like millionnaires with lice in our heads. (They laugh.)

LEVINE: So you went, then your aunt and your uncle picked you up. And how did you go and where did you go to, when you got off the ship?

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ORATOFISKY: I think they (pause) I think they had an apartment for us. This I don't remember. But I'm almost sure. We lived on East 8th Street and the landlord, was a three family house, a private house, and he bought it. He was a German, a German Jew. And we took the top apartment. They gave it to us. I don't know. My mother must have had the money or what. My sister must have paid for rent. We paid rent. And we (she coughs) my sisters got jobs right away.

LEVINE: How was the apartment different from where you lived before?

ORATOFISKY: (under her breathe) Oh, my god. We had a kitchen with tile on the floor. And the bathroom, we had a bathroom! (She gasps.) We had a bathroom! And my sister said, Rose, she was American. She had her nose up in the air. She says, "Over here you have to be clean. You have to take a bath every day." (She coughs.)

LEVINE: Want a drink?

ORATOFISKY: We had a three family house. I forgot their name.

LEVINE: And what was the Lower East Side like when you came? When you first moved in?

ORATOFISKY: The what? The what?

LEVINE: The Lower East Side, where you were living.

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ORATOFSKY: It was nice. It was beautiful. Avenue B, you know what Avenue B? Was all dress stores and there was a Woolworth on one side. And my sister Sylvia got a job there, by the dressmakers, to help out, right away. And my sister Rose lived with an aunt of ours. She didn't have an apartment. With my father, my aunt took her in. But then when we came, they looked for rooms and we moved on the East Side, on East 8th Street, between B and A, not A, B and C. Have you ever been down there? (Levine indicates yes.) When? I'll learn. When? Years ago?

LEVINE: Yes.

ORATOFSKY: That was the East Side. You know on Avenue C they had markets on the street. Did you know that? Did you ever see that?

LEVINE: You mean for food, you mean.

ORATOFSKY: And I had an uncle there who had a store. He sold everything. I don't remember already. He sold paper, things like that, paper and things. I don't remember. My father's brother. But we had it good.

LEVINE: Was it a mixed neighborhood? Were the people from all different countries?

ORATOFSKY: Most of them Jews. Lot of people came in. Loads! The boat, how many people take a boat? Boat takes in loads of them.

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LEVINE: Do you remember anything else that struck you as different when you first came?

ORATOFISKY: My sister, Theresa, we never had electric. And we lived on the second floor, two flights up, and Theresa, she was the one three years older than me. And the landlord was saving money and didn't put the light on daytime. It was dark coming down. We lived on the third floor. So my sister came down and the steps had reinforcement. You know, metal, what is that for?

LEVINE: Like a strip of metal. Yeah.

ORATOFISKY: And my sister tripped. It was dark. She didn't, she ran down or what, she missed a step and she fell. And we had an ambulance take her to Bellavue, not, is it Bellavue, big hospital?

LEVINE: Bellavue, uh huh.

ORATOFISKY: And she cut her face over there. Here, this way. She fell against the stairs. It was dark. The landlord would't put the light on daytime. So when my older sister Rose took her doctor and, you know, somebody said to my sister that you can sue the landlord. So my sister was uh stupid. She was the American and she didn't want to sue. She wanted to be nice. She said, "Well, if we'll sue, they'll send her home because they'll think tht she'll be a burden on the government because she's sick. And she wouldn't allow to get a doctor or nothing. They didn't even stitched it up. I don't know what they did. And years later my

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sister said, "I could have been a rich woman." The one who was here seven years, didn't let her go, have a doctor. She said, "I'm afraid they'll send her back." Because my sister was a little silly. But she was okay and she was mentally all right. She didn't want to call a doctor and make a case out of it.

LEVINE: Well, tell me about in Hungary, what did you have for medical, what did you do if somebody got sick?

ORATOFSKY: Oh, we had doctors, beautiful, very good doctors. We lived in a, not in a village, where it was earthen. The whole city was paved. That's supposed to be A-1. We had a gymnasium for boys. Over there girls don't go with boys, together. I had to go to school. If my mother didn't send Theresa to school a week, she got a summons. They wanted to put my mother in jail. (She laughs.) It was a modern city, but there were a lot of goyim. They were anti-semitic. But it was a beautiful city.

LEVINE: When you first came here, were you treated like a greenhorn?

ORATOFSKY: Wait, say that again.

LEVINE: Were you treated like a greenhorn by anybody when you first came?

ORATOFSKY: No, we were, you know, in two weeks we knew everything (she laughs). We didn't speak well English but, my sister would say, "What time is the clock?" (She laughs.) She would meet, once a policeman, she said to the policeman, "What time is the clock? I go to work, work, work." But

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they picked it up very fast. Young people picked it up fast.

LEVINE: So did you like school when you were here.

ORATOFISKY: I didn't like school because I was big and tall. I was already thirteen, fourteen, 4B. They put me into 4A, 4B. And how old were they in 4A.

LEVINE: About ten.

ORATOFISKY: Ten years old and I was already thirteen so I was ashamed, but the teacher liked me. Her name was Gi- Gizella. We called her "Aunt," I don't know, I think, Gizella mainly, AUNT Gizella, we called, in Europe. So, (pause)

LEVINE: In Europe or here?

ORATOFISKY: In Europe, not here. Over here, well wait, where did I have that? No, I had an American teacher. What was her --she wanted to skip me and I refused.

LEVINE: Why did you refuse?

ORATOFISKY: Because I was self-conscious. I said, "I'm big and they are little children. And I can't go to school with them. I don't want to go to school."

LEVINE: But if she skipped you, you'd be with big kids.

ORATOFSKY: She wanted to skip me, but she says, "You know the work. You don't have to be, go to --" I said, "I don't want to skip." I refused. (pause) Stupid. (They laugh.) I was ashamed because I went with little children. They taught me. I learned fast. I learned very fast. Then I became sixteen or fourteen. You had to go to school. And I, my sister wanted me to go to learn bookkeeping. I says, "I don't want to go to bookkeeping. I want to go --" I went to continuation school. You know what that is? They had from fourteen to sixteen you had to go to continuation school.

LEVINE: So you went during the day or night?

ORATOFSKY: Day, daytime.

LEVINE: So you finished that?

ORATOFSKY: I finished it but it didn't amount -- and I went to work. When I was sixteen I had to have working papers, I think up to eighteen, I don't know.

LEVINE: What did you do for your first job?

ORATOFSKY: I worked in Macy's, Christmas time, down in the basement, packing Christmas presents. I didn't learn much. I never had a decent job. I don't know why.

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LEVINE: So did you go to social clubs? Were there people that came --?

ORATOFSKY: No, I was shy all the time. I don't know why.

LEVINE: And did your mother turn out to like America? Or not?

ORATOFSKY: Nah, she --she was here, wait, we came in February. She had money. My sisters had to give her part of her pay. I was the only one who went to school til sixteen. She says she don't like America. The air is not good in America. Not like where I come from. So, she went to --what's that Jewish country place? That, only the Jews go there, the immigrants came. I forgot the name of it. She went to the country when she was here, the first year. She says, "I need the air. This is not like in Europe. American air is no good." So she went to the country for two weeks. She liked herself. She had money.

LEVINE: How did your mother and father get along, having been separated?

ORATOFSKY: My mother was fighting all the time. My mother cursed my father. My father was quiet. But my father never learnt English. Never became a citizen. My mother (said emphatically) became a citizen. My sister was here seven years. My mother was a witness for her. My sister never became a citizen until we came to America. And my mother, she will, she used to sit outside with her chair and read the paper. She was the first one to become a citizen. She was a bren. You know what a bren is?

LEVINE: (Indicates that she does.) Did your mother work at all when she came?

ORATOFSKY: No, she worked. She made the children give her the money from their pay. She amassed a fortune. We didn't know. When she died, she left lot of money. We didn't get a penny out of it. She married --my father was dead already --so she married an alte cocket. You know what a cocket is? (She laughs.) And he must have stolen her money, because she had a stroke, but before she had the stroke, she went to the hospital. She says, "Under the frigidaire," --we had a cover --"under the cover is money." There was no money. She remarried. But we didn't get a penny. She married from a stroke, I mean she died from a stroke. She never liked America. I don't know why; she had it good here. She never did a thing. We did all the work. We had five -a living room and a dining room. We had a dining room. You know in those years you had a dining rooms? You know that? And a small bedroom there and a small bedroom at the other end and my two sisters slept in an opening bed in the, in the dining room. So one night I couldn't fall asleep, I slept with my sister Rose, and I couldn't fall asleep. I says, "Papa is snoring, I can't sleep." We slept at this end, Papa was at the, near the street, the window. She says, Rose says to --I slept with Rose --she says, "Get off slowly and knock on his door, and tell him to stop snoring. Wake him up." So I took a walk through the dining, we had beautiful living room. New furniture. We came here like millionaires, I'm telling you. So I didn't, the door, the door was opened and I found my father in bed with my mother. So I quickly ran back in to the bedroom. I says, "Rose, papa is in bed (pause) with mama." "All right," she says, "then go back to sleep." (Levine laughs.) She didn't like my

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mother but, (she"s laughing) I mean my father, but she liked to sleep with him. She had seven children.

LEVINE: Did she have more children? No, no, she didn't have any more once she came here.

ORATOFSKY: No, no.

LEVINE: So when did you meet your husband?

ORATOFSKY: Ohh,

LEVINE: What were the circumstances?

ORATOFSKY: You know, I don't remember. How can you figure it out? Figure it out. (She laughs.) (pause) I met him through a Hungarian. My mother had a friend, a Hungarian woman. And she was making dresses for actresses. Sewing. And she had an abnormal child, a boy. And she hired a man to teach him Jewish. He understood a little but he was real abnormal. You know, those with the drooling all the time. But at times they talk. So I went to look for my mother and I landed, I went up to this woman. She lived on Avenue A. She made dresses for actresses. She made a living. And I went up there. I says to her, "My mother here?" She says, "Yeah, why you looking for your mother?" I see a young fella, "Here, meet a young fella is teaching my son Jewish, Hebrew." And that's where I met my husband and from there he took me home. I says, "Well how come you teach?" He says, "Well, I work

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in laundry. My father "--his father was a laundry man, so he worked with him, but he didn't like it. So for, make a side money, he was teaching him. And he took me there, home. He took me home and he fell in love with me. And to get out of the house, I married him. I didn't have a wedding. Nothing. We went away to, to City Hall and got married. But he was okay. He wasn't so bad.

LEVINE: What was his name?

ORATOFSKY: He never got, he didn't get along with Paul. (She laughs.)

LEVINE: What was your husband's name?

ORATOFSKY: Solomonchik, ( she laughs) that's what his mother called him. Sol, Solomon.

LEVINE: And, you had one child, his name?

ORATOFSKY: I had another one. He was born paesech. You know what paesach is? I had a child born with paesach. I says to the doctor, "Why did they pick me for that? How come they picked me to have a child paesach disease?" I says, "Nobody has it in the family." He says, "I should know." He was a doctor, my cousin. So he got sick, so my doctor said, "Take him to the hospital. Don't say nothing. You don't know from nothing. Don't say what's wrong, what. And leave him there no matter what they say. Leave him there. Because you can't handle him here." He was a year old and he didn't sit up. He didn't know me. He was

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always leaning on, ah, it was so pitiful. I says, "Why me?" She says, "What can you do? It's misfortune." And he lived, I don't remember how long, couple of months? And then he says --my Sol let him know that the baby died --he says, "Don't let Helen go to the cemetary." So I didn't go. So I says, "Can I have another baby? Will I, be born like that?" He said, "No, never. You go right ahead and have another baby." (She says in a whisper, indicating her son.) Then he came.

LEVINE: So what did you name your other baby?

ORATOFSKY: Daniel. Daniel. I forgot his name. You know? What?

LEVINE: No, the son that you have, say his name for the tape.

ORATOFSKY: Paul.

LEVINE: So you have one son, Paul, and you have a grandson? I'm saying this so it's on the tape.

ORATOFSKY: Then I had Paul. Oh he was beautiful. He was eight pounds, with hair, long hair, blonde. He was gorgeous.

LEVINE: Well, when you look back over your life and you talk about, you know, starting out in Hungary and coming here.

Oratofsky: (sighs) Yeah.

LEVINE: What difference do you think it made to you

ORATOFSKY: Oh, a big difference.

LEVINE: that you started there and ended up here?

ORATOFSKY: Well, what would I have ended up in Europe? Nothing. Married, some klutz. Who knows who? They never made a living. Who made a living there? So I was lucky that I got to America. (speaking very softly) It's a different life. But I, at first I corresponded with a girlfriend of mine. She said she missed me, in Hungarian (smilingly said), you know. Then we stopped.

LEVINE: What are you most proud of? What makes you feel proud?

ORATOFSKY: That I came --

LEVINE: In your life.

ORATOFSKY: Nothing. I was noth . . ., I did nothing to make myself proud. (She laughs.) I always had an inferiority complex. Do you know what that is? (she's laughing.) Very bad!

LEVINE: Why do you think you had that?

ORATOFSKY: I don't know. I was more sensitive than my other sisters. I was the youngest. They liked me. They were good to me. But I was different. I felt different.

LEVINE: Well what do you feel satisfied about? In your life?

ORATOFSKY: Well I haven't accomplished anything to be proud of, except giving birth to Paul and raising him. Look what I got. You know, did you ever see -- should I show him? Should I show you his--

LEVINE: His baby pictures? (She laughs.)

ORATOFSKY: No. The albums, the school ones. Oh, he was excellent. He was A all the way through. I was very proud of him. That's the only thing. I wasn't a happy child because I was the last one and I realized lot of things, that my other sisters were occupied. They got jobs. I was never good at anything. I don't know why. I was the seventh child. I saw my mother's fault. My mother was very mean woman. And my older sister didn't tell it to me, but she told it to Theresa, next to me. My mother had seven babies and three of them --they were all girls and she didn't want girls --and she put -- In Europe, you know how, in Europe they take a new baby and they have those thin pillows, not like this, they're square, and they wrap the baby, you know, up in while they're very tiny. And my mother put a, something over three of the children. And they died, suffocated. She was never caught. But Sylvia knew about it. She told Sylvia. She didn't want girls. She says, "All girls. All girls. Maidlock, only girls." So she blamed my father. She killed them. Nobody knew. In Europe they don't go into it like here. The baby died. He suffocated. The doctors don't come and examine it. They buried her. They were all girls. My mother did that. My mother was so mean. She was mean to Theresa. She didn't like Theresa. Very mean. So what do you have

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with a mother like that. You know. She liked me because I was the youngest. I looked like her. Is that enough to like a child?

LEVINE: Well it seems like you were a good mother, even though you didn't have a good mother.

ORATOFSKY: Oh. Look what I have (indicating her son, Paul). (She laughs.)

LEVINE: And you have a grandson.

ORATOFSKY: Oh, he's gorgeous. You know, he called me up a week ago. He called me up but he's not happy there. He went to Germany. Why did he go to Germany?

LEVINE: Say his name for the tape. Your grandson.

ORATOFSKY: Daniel. What's his middle name? (Implores her son, who has been instructed not to speak.) You should know.

LEVINE: Mark. Mark 4.

ORATOFSKY: She remembers and you don't? (pause) Why you can't talk.

LEVINE: Helen, the tape is just about over. Is there any last thing you want to say?

ORATOFSKY: Is there any --oh.

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LEVINE: Before the tape is through.

ORATOFISKY: Well, I'm very happy that I came to America. But if I never accomplished much, it wasn't because I didn't want, I was shy. Brought up with a mother like that didn't do much for me.

LEVINE: Okay, I think we'll close here. I'm talking with Helen Oratofsky. It's August 1st, 1993. You're 86 now, right?

ORATOFISKY: Eighty-six. I was 86, May --

LEVINE: And this Janet Levine for the National Park Service.

END OF INTERVIEW