

EI-411

GERTRUDE GARTENBERG WEISEMAN

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LEVINE: This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. It's November 15, 1993, and I'm here today in the Oral History studio at Ellis Island with Gertrude Gartenberg Weiseman, who came from what was Austria in 1913, when she was six years old. I'm very happy you're able to come today, and I'm looking forward to hearing about your story.

WEISEMAN: Thank you.

LEVINE: Okay. You were, why don't you start out by

saying your birth date.

WEISEMAN: My birth date is September 15, 1906.

LEVINE: And the town that you were born in.

WEISEMAN: I was born in Stryj, S-T-R-Y-J, Austria.

LEVINE: And do you remember anything about Stryj?

WEISEMAN: Very little. I do remember that we had some sort of a business there. It must have been just a general grocery store, but very little, because most of the time I was kept at my grandparents', who lived in Bolochow, B-O-L-O-C-H-O-W.

LEVINE: Now, these grandparents, were they your mother or father?

WEISEMAN: My father's parents.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So their name was Gartenberg.

WEISEMAN: Right.

LEVINE: And do you remember their house?

WEISEMAN: That's the one thing I do remember. They had a long, it was a long hallway to get into their apartment. And I remember that it was next to a cemetery, and that's about the only things I remember about that house.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Do you remember your grandparents?

WEISEMAN: Oh, yes. We brought them over here.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Uh, when you were a little girl, before you left Austria, were there things that you did when you went to your grandparents' house, any kinds of activities?

WEISEMAN: Well, they were always very, very grateful that I was there, and always couldn't do enough for me. But, uh, actually I remember taking nice walks and picking flowers, and that's about the extent of my memory for them.

LEVINE: Now, what did your grandfather do? Do you know?

WEISEMAN: I really don't know.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

WEISEMAN: I don't know what his business was.

LEVINE: And, uh, and your father?

WEISEMAN: Yes, my father was in the wholesale fruit and vegetable business.

LEVINE: And what was his name?

WEISEMAN: Aaron, A-A-R-O-N.

LEVINE: And your mother's name?

WEISEMAN: My mother's name was Celia, C-E-L-I-A.

LEVINE: And her maiden name?

WEISEMAN: Her maiden name was Nadler, N-A-D-L-E-R.

LEVINE: And, um, when you, did you have brothers and sisters in Austria?

WEISEMAN: Yeah. When we came over here, we were three children. I had another sister and a brother.

LEVINE: And what were their names?

WEISEMAN: One was named Samuel, my brother, and my sister was named Dora.

LEVINE: Dora. And, uh, were they older or younger?

WEISEMAN: Younger, both younger. But just very, you know, just a couple of years apart, each one.

LEVINE: So you were the oldest child.

WEISEMAN: Yes.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And did you have aunts and uncles around?

WEISEMAN: Oh, yes, yes, a lot of aunts and uncles. My father's family was a large family. There must have been about six, seven to eight children. They weren't all living, but there were that many children.

LEVINE: This was in Austria, where you had the aunts and uncles and . . .

WEISEMAN: Yes. And then they came, most of them came up here.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So, uh, do you remember anything about religious life when you were still in Europe?

WEISEMAN: Not very much, because I was all of six years old.

LEVINE: Right.

WEISEMAN: And, uh, there wasn't, I know my parents, my father was quite religious. He was orthodox. And, uh, of course, the wife usually goes along with what he was. But I don't, they belonged to an orthodox synagogue when they came here, but, uh, I don't remember in Austria anything about synagogues.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. How about food? Do you remember any kind of food that you liked when you were little?

WEISEMAN: Yes. I remember my grandmother used to make a wonderful potato pancake and, uh, whenever I'd come she would always make one for me.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. Would you say that your

family was comfortable as far as, um, having,  
uh . . .

WEISEMAN: I wouldn't say they were comfortable. I'd say  
they just got along.

LEVINE: Got along. Uh-huh, uh-huh. And do you  
remember playing at all, or do you remember  
games or stories or any of that kind of thing?

WEISEMAN: I really don't. I really don't remember  
anything of that sort. I don't remember  
whether I had any friends, or, or what. I  
don't recall any of that. Most of my, most of  
the people I was surrounded by were older  
people. And we used to take walks, you know,  
things of that sort, and pick flowers.

LEVINE: Do you remember, uh, the countryside?

WEISEMAN: Well, that was all, Belhav [ph] was all  
country. There was very little that I could  
remember of anything much except country.

LEVINE: And how about where you lived, in Stryj?

WEISEMAN: In Stryj. That was really more like a business area. And, uh, I don't remember too much about that, because they really didn't keep me there very much. Most of the time I was down at the country with his grand, with my father's parents.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And do you remember anything about, like, either livestock or, uh, farmers markets, or any events like that in the town?

WEISEMAN: I don't. I don't really remember. This was more like country. It was all away from any of the cities.

LEVINE: Now, did you, did your mother and father tell you anything about America before you came that you recall?

WEISEMAN: I didn't even know I was coming here.

LEVINE: Oh. ( they laugh )

WEISEMAN: It's just the, we were just told that we were going, and that was it. The only part I remember is that we, where we traveled through

Belgium, and I don't remember how we got there, or what, what transpired. All I remember is that we were in Belgium and that we did this long walk to get to the boat.

LEVINE: And where did you leave from?

WEISEMAN: From Antwerp, in Belgium.

LEVINE: And do you remember the name of the ship?

WEISEMAN: Lapland. It was supposed to be a big ship at that time.

LEVINE: And were there any kind of examinations that you recall before you got here?

WEISEMAN: Not really.

LEVINE: So you got on the ship, and it was your brother and sister, your mother . . .

WEISEMAN: My brother and sister, and my mother and father.

LEVINE: And you.

WEISEMAN: Yeah.

LEVINE: And do you remember the accommodations on the ship at all?

WEISEMAN: Oh, they were very bad, really bad. Because we were tickled to death when people from the other class would drop down some fruit or oranges, you know, or apples, or things of that sort. That's about the only thing I remember on that boat.

LEVINE: Do you remember, I mean, it was a . . .

WEISEMAN: A big boat.

LEVINE: And were you able to go around on the boat?

WEISEMAN: I don't think that they let me. I mean, I think my parents kept me close, close to themselves. And I don't remember doing any type of walking or anything. It was a long trip. At that time it took, I don't know, it must have taken at least ten or fifteen days.

LEVINE: So, uh, when, were you, do you remember food at all on the boat?

WEISEMAN: I don't remember at all.

LEVINE: Now, do you remember when the boat came into the New York Harbor?

WEISEMAN: I don't remember, but there was lots of joy, you know. Because we were finally landing, and we were coming to my mother's brother, who was, who had a business in Plainfield, New Jersey. And, uh, he had sort of a lower cellar apartment for us. He was fairly, fairly well-off.

LEVINE: Do you remember anything about Ellis Island?

WEISEMAN: I have a better memory after we came here to take my, uh, pick up my grandparents. But when we first came in I don't seem to remember too much.

LEVINE: Okay. So you went to Plain . . .

WEISEMAN: Plainfield, New Jersey.

LEVINE: And what was your mother's brother's name?

WEISEMAN: Uh, Elias Nadler.

LEVINE: And so he had an apartment for you in his . . .

WEISEMAN: In his building.

LEVINE: The building he lived in?

WEISEMAN: Yeah. He had, like, two floors, and we were in the ground floor.

LEVINE: Do you remember that apartment at all?

WEISEMAN: A little bit. Very, not too much. I remember there were lots of nice people on the street, and I immediately made some friends, although they couldn't understand me because I couldn't speak the language. But, uh, and then immediately I was put into school.

LEVINE: And what was that like?

WEISEMAN: Well, it was, it was nice because you had other children, you know, around you, but I don't remember too much of that era either.

LEVINE: Were there, do you remember if there were many

children who had also come from Europe in your school?

WEISEMAN: In my class? I don't really, I don't remember. I don't remember. I don't think there were. As far as I could tell, we were the only family in that area, you know, that had just, that had come in.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So had your uncle arrived . . .

WEISEMAN: Oh, he was here many years.

LEVINE: Many years before.

WEISEMAN: Before.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And, uh, what was his business?

WEISEMAN: He was wholesale fruit and vegetables.

LEVINE: Oh, so the same thing your father had done?

WEISEMAN: Oh, yeah. Well, he brought my father over to be in with him. It was his only sister.

LEVINE: I see. And so, um, your father went to work with your uncle.

WEISEMAN: With him, right.

LEVINE: And, uh, you went to school. Your brother and sister were too young for school the first . . .

WEISEMAN: Oh, yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

WEISEMAN: My brother would have then been just about four. My sister was just two. There was about two years' difference between each one of us.

LEVINE: And do you remember learning the language? Any incidents that?

WEISEMAN: No. That's peculiar that I don't remember that, because that would have been the hardest thing to overcome. But I don't remember too much about it. But I must have, as a youngster, you know, you pick up things fast.

LEVINE: What were you, what language were your . . .

WEISEMAN: I was speaking Polish and Yiddish.

LEVINE: And did your mother and father continue to speak that at home?

WEISEMAN: Well, they did, because that's the language we understood. I understood, at least.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

WEISEMAN: I don't know the first thing about Polish now. I lost every bit of it. I'm sorry, because if they would have continued I would have had another language, you know.

LEVINE: Right. So you were speaking Polish even though you were coming from really Austria at that time.

WEISEMAN: Well, that's what they spoke there.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

WEISEMAN: That was the language.

LEVINE: So there were a lot of Polish people living in Stryj?

WEISEMAN: In Stryj? There must have been. Uh, Polish was the, I think the national language there if I remember, if I recall what they have ever told me.

LEVINE: So how did your mother and father like it here once they, once you got here?

WEISEMAN: Once they got here there was lots of hard work. But, uh, eventually, you know, they got accustomed to it. Especially they were bringing their children into a new country where they felt that things, there were more opportunities for children. And we were five children.

LEVINE: Oh, so they had two more.

WEISEMAN: Two more after that. My father was only about, uh, thirty-seven or thirty-eight years old when he came here.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And your mother, was she about the same?

WEISEMAN: She was a little younger. No, she was a

little younger.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

WEISEMAN: I don't remember how many years' difference there was, but there was some difference.

LEVINE: Do you remember any attitudes or values that you could say that your mother and father tried to instill in you, uh, that they wanted their children to have?

WEISEMAN: A better life, yeah. They always were, they were always around us, always ready to help us in whatever form they could. And made sure that we had friends, you know, would come in, and they would play with us, you know, things of that sort.

LEVINE: Well, how about your mother? What kind of a person was she?

WEISEMAN: She was more aggressive than my father.

LEVINE: Was your father sort of the more religious member of the family?

WEISEMAN: Well, he was, yeah. He instilled, of course, a lot of religion into all of us. But she was the more aggressive.

LEVINE: How would she show it, that she was aggressive?

WEISEMAN: Well, she would treat, you know, in later years she got into organizations, and she helped go out and solicit, you know, different things. Getting membership and things, like the Hadassah, or to temple, you know, where she was religious, where she went for her religious services. Many things, you know, that you could see each day. She was, you know, if it was up to her, she would have done other things, you know. My father was more quiet.

LEVINE: Um, do you remember, now, did you stay in Plain, in Plainfield?

WEISEMAN: We stayed in Plainfield most of our lives.

LEVINE: And did you stay in that apartment, or did you move from there?

WEISEMAN: No. We moved, there was some friction there between the two brother-in-laws, and finally I guess my father must have gotten fed up, and they decided that they were going to go on their own, so they did move. Eventually he came back again to him many years later, but for a while there, I guess, that was the aggression, the fact that they were a little bit more aggressive, and they did, uh, rent a little house, and he had a big barn there, so he used to be able to keep his vegetables and things there. But he used to sell, you know, mostly to stores. He didn't sell any private. It was all wholesale, you know.

LEVINE: Did, so your father went into business on his own at some point?

WEISEMAN: Right, uh-huh. He was, he did that for quite a number of years, and I don't know whatever happened, they went back again. They got together again in later years.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Did you have chores as a child?

WEISEMAN: Oh, sure.

LEVINE: What did you have to do?

WEISEMAN: We all had, we all had to work. We, we used to help my father. Because, you know, when you get in wholesale like that, many times you have to take, uh, bushels apart, and take out things that are kind of spoiled and all that. But they always gave us time for ourselves, you know what I mean. But we did a lot of, we did a lot of helping. And then in the house we had to do things as well.

LEVINE: Like house . . .

WEISEMAN: Housework.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Well, you were the oldest, so you probably had more responsibility.

WEISEMAN: I got most of it. I got more than my share. But everyone had to pitch in. We were all fairly, fairly good children, I mean, as far as my father was concerned. He was happy with whatever we did, you know.

LEVINE: Were you closest to any particular family member?

WEISEMAN: Well, the two oldest, my brother, one that just passed away about a year or two ago. I was really probably closest to him. But then I had to help with the others as well, so we were really all a close (?) family.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And did you have, um, you had other family members, then, that came over?

WEISEMAN: Oh, yeah. There were many others that came over. After that, after a number of years, like when I was fifteen, which was about six to fifteen, I was nine years. We were already here. Then we brought over our grandparents.

LEVINE: And do you remember meeting them?

WEISEMAN: Oh, sure. We, uh, we went to Ellis Island again and, uh, I had quite an experience coming over. My mother and I came to take them off the boat. Uh, there were, I think, two children that came with them.

LEVINE: Now, whose children were they?

WEISEMAN: They were their children. They were my aunts, who would be, my two aunts, I think, came over, at the time. And, uh, they lived with us for quite a while, until they got their own apartment, because they already had two other children that were here previously. So between the, all of us, they finally got their own apartment, and they lived with the, whatever children had come here. And not the ones that were in New York. They were the two oldest brothers. But, uh, they came here, and they, there were other sisters and brothers, because they were a large family, about seven, eight or nine children.

LEVINE: Would, what do you remember about Ellis Island when you and your mother went to meet your grandparents and aunts?

WEISEMAN: It was quite an experience, because I was fifteen years old. I don't know how I got into the shuffle of the, uh, of the boat, and

that was taking us into Ellis Island. And I lost one of my shoes. And I was climbing under feet in order to get my shoe back. But, uh, everything seemed to be pretty good. My grandfather was held there for a few hours because he seemed to have like some sort of a mark on his, uh, face, and they wanted to see what it was. But then after a few hours they left him, let him go.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. What was it like for you seeing them after all those years?

WEISEMAN: Oh, it was just great because, you know, I had been their favorite. I was their oldest grandchild and a, uh, and we had a, we had a ball. And then, of course, the fact that they lived with us, you know, made it even so much better.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And, uh, and, uh, did, was there a social community that, uh, like maybe social clubs, or were there any kinds of, uh, social activities that, with people that were coming from, uh, Austria, or other countries in that

area?

WEISEMAN: Not really, because my father was orthodox, so his friends were mostly of, of Jews, and they used to meet in the, you know, the congregation. And they used to have little affairs and whatnot. Of course, children went to the Hebrew schools. So, you know, you make friends when you attend anything.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So did they become citizens, your mother and father?

WEISEMAN: Oh, yes.

LEVINE: So they, did they learn English?

WEISEMAN: Well, some. They spoke the language, because they had the stores, so, and they were all kinds. So he, uh, he spoke, he spoke fairly good. He wasn't a perfect English but, you know, enough to bring him to get by. And he used to go to the markets to buy and all that, and those people are not all of your own kind.

LEVINE: So you went to school, and how far did you go in school?

WEISEMAN: I went all the way through to high school. I finished high school. But, of course, there were no funds for college. We didn't go, all of us, except one brother was able to get to college. Otherwise the rest of all made high school.

LEVINE: And what did you do after you graduated?

WEISEMAN: Well, I took commercial courses, so I, of course, went right away into business, because I was equipped for bookkeeping and stenography and all that.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And, uh, and then do you remember your first job?

WEISEMAN: Yeah. My first and my last. ( they laugh )

LEVINE: What's that?

WEISEMAN: I got into this, uh, to this furniture business, and my, uh, my husband was the

owner.

LEVINE: Oh, so you were already married?

WEISEMAN: No.

LEVINE: No.

WEISEMAN: That's when I met him, and that's when we started to go together, and I remained in that business.

LEVINE: Wow. So you met your husband by taking a job in his business?

WEISEMAN: Yes.

LEVINE: And, uh, do you remember what it was that you liked about him?

WEISEMAN: Well, he was, he was a gentleman, you know. He was very fine, well-educated. And, uh, we had a lot of things in common, you know. We liked music, we liked many of the things that, uh, each liked the same kind of things. And we liked to go out. So, uh, it was mutual.

LEVINE: And what was his name?

WEISEMAN: Albert Weisman.

LEVINE: And, um, was he also coming from Europe, or he was born . . .

WEISEMAN: Yes, he came. He came from Europe. In fact, we just realized now that he came two years prior to our coming. But he had studied, and he came from Roumania, and he had studied in a, he had been in Egypt. He had gone to an agricultural school in Egypt, and he thought he was coming over here to get into agriculture, but, uh, the conditions in agriculture were not that pleasant here at that time in this country. So his brother was, was here long before, and he was in the insurance business, and then he got into the furniture business, so he sort of followed.

LEVINE: Was it unusual for someone from Roumania to go to Egypt to study that way?

WEISEMAN: Well, this is what he wanted. He wanted to be in agriculture. Closest thing he ever came to

wood was in the furniture business.

LEVINE: So, um, then how long, then you, um . . .

WEISEMAN: When I graduated high school I immediately went to work there, and . . .

LEVINE: This was in Plainfield.

WEISEMAN: Yes. He had a store, he owned a store in Plainfield, a furniture store.

LEVINE: Do you remember the name of it?

WEISEMAN: Yeah. It's the same name we're using even today, to this day. We've been in that business for seventy years, over seventy years.

LEVINE: Oh, my goodness.

WEISEMAN: See, my sons, one of my sons is, my older son, the one that's here, he's in the business, and that's where I remained. And the younger son, of course, went into law.

LEVINE: And what's the name of the business?

WEISEMAN: The name of the business is Wachung Furniture, and now we've added, we've discontinued that store because the town didn't warrant it, so we added The Country Manor to it. So the furniture store isn't known more, it's called Wachung Furniture's Country Manor, but it's known more for Country Manor.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So how many children did you have?

WEISEMAN: Two.

LEVINE: Two.

WEISEMAN: Both here.

LEVINE: And their names, for the tape?

WEISEMAN: Is Philip, and Jack.

LEVINE: Now, do you have grandchildren?

WEISEMAN: Seven. Each one of them, my oldest son has, uh, four children, has three children, and my youngest son has four. It's his second marriage. So he has two from the first wife and two from the second.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Well, what do you feel proud of having done in your lifetime? What makes you feel good?

WEISEMAN: Just to have a nice family. And nice grandchildren. They were all very nice.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

WEISEMAN: My oldest granddaughter is a partner in a law firm. My other daughter, my other granddaughter is with the, uh, I don't know if you ever heard of The Rodale Press? She's, uh, an executive there. And, uh, the third granddaughter is, uh, does special ed. She's now a teacher with disabled children. So she's made a nice name for herself, works very hard. And my youngest grandson is, uh, is just college, just in his second year. That's the younger son's children. My older son's children is the, uh, the older son is really, uh, a furniture store, a furniture chain, and he's doing very nicely. My granddaughter is, she's at home. She's taking care of a baby.

And, uh, that makes, how much? That makes four? ( they laugh ) Six. And, uh, oh, yeah. One son, my grandson, is the one that Phil was talking to you about, that's a teacher, a science teacher, with this new idea between Cooper Union and, uh, the name of the other, Outward Bound. It's a big firm, big outfit. And the two of them have combined and they're starting a different type of a school. And he was, he is giving his services there. So they're all done pretty nicely.

LEVINE: Well, do you think having come here as a young child from Europe and starting a new life here, do you think that made a difference in your life?

WEISEMAN: Oh, I'm sure it did, because I don't think these things could have been accomplished under the conditions that we were in in Europe, and coming here we had all the opportunities, and all the children had various opportunities, and you were able to give them a good education. I mean, they both

went to college, and they, it makes a difference.

LEVINE: And how about this phase of your life? How do you feel about this time in your life?

WEISEMAN: I feel, I feel fine because, you know, when you have your children all around you and, uh, I've been working, of course, all these years, and I'm still working. I would like now, if at all, if it would be possible, times are not the best, you know, and, uh, now I'd like to get out of it, but you really, you can't because it's part of you, you know what I mean? If it was sold or something like that, then there would be a difference.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Okay. Well, is there anything else you'd like to say before we close?

WEISEMAN: Not really. I think this is just a pleasure to have come here with both of my children, and, uh, interested enough to bring me here and to re-live my life a little bit.

LEVINE: Well, I want to thank you very much. It's

been a pleasure for me to talk with you. And I've been speaking with Gertrude Weisman. It's November 15, 1993, and this is Janet Levine signing off.