

**EF-412**

**RENEE KOLTUN TAUBMAN**

**BIRTH DATE: JANUARY 9, 1932**

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**INTERVIEW: JANET LEVINE, Ph.D**

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**TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: NANCY VEGA and RUCHI JAIN**

**TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY: IRV SILBERG**

**EGYPT, 1942**

**AGE 10**

**SHIP: MILITARY AIRPLANE**

**PORT: ALEXANDRIA**

**RESIDENCES:**

**FRANCE: PARIS**

**EGYPT: ALEXANDRIA**

**US: NEW YORK, NY**

**ORAL HISTORIAN'S NOTE: Renee Taubman is a friend of Estelle Frankfurter, Interview EI-413.**

**TAUBMAN:** I was a French citizen, by the way, because I was born in Paris.

**LEVINE** Oh, okay. Let's uh, this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. I'm here today with Renee Koltun Taubman, who came through Ellis Island in 1942 when she was ten years old. Now, you have a very unique and unusual and complex story, but perhaps you could summarize where you started from and what your route was that led you through Ellis Island.

TAUBMAN: I came to the United States the first week of July of 1942. I started my journey in Alexandria, Egypt, which is where my stepfather and my mother, who is an American citizen, resided. We are Jewish, and my stepfather was prominent in the Jewish community, and during that, well, first days of July, the Battle of El Alamein, the first Battle of El Alamein, was about thirty kilometers from Alexandria, and it looked as though the allies were losing the battle. And so, all the Jews who could, evacuated out of Alexandria.

The rest of my family went to Palestine, but my mother was an American citizen, she was in uniform, and she was working for the United Seamen's Service and the American Hospital Reserve Corps, which entitled her to space on a military plane. It was a paratroop transport. And she went there with me. I was a French citizen. And, uh, I had no papers to entitle me to be on that plane, but my mother was very persuasive, and the people were very kind, and they let me get on this military plane, which was a paratroop transport and very uncomfortable. But we were very fortunate to be on it.

There were only military people and newspaper people. And my mother and I were the only females. And we had to fly across West Africa to avoid the anti-aircraft being used against planes. And we got to Lagos in Nigeria with torrential rains, and we had to stay two or three days. Then we took a clipper ship to Belem in Brazil. The next day we flew to San Juan and spent the night there. The next day we arrived in Miami, Florida, on July 7th. When we arrived my mother was told that I could not enter the country and would have to go back where I came from, and she said, no, that wasn't going to happen.

And she got on the telephone to some friends in Washington and they were very effective and said that in a few days they would manage to do what they did during the war, which was propose special bills to allow individuals special consideration and special entry. And I was very fortunate that was in the works. In the meantime, they placed me in my mother's custody. We went to New York to be with our relatives. And then I don't know how long it took, but eventually, it must have been perhaps as long as a few weeks, we were required, my mother and I, to fly to Montreal and then come back, spend the night, and then come back by train, it was a very long journey, come back by train.

And when we came to New York, I remember that I came through, quote, Ellis Island. I don't know, I cannot remember the exact procedure of getting off the train, coming here, and then going back to the city. I don't have a concrete memory of that. I do remember that the trees were very beautiful on the journey from Montreal to New York. So I imagine it was in the late summer or early fall, and I wish that I had access to the records to find out what day all of this took place, and I'm going to pursue it at the National Archives, because it is of great interest to me, because I'm enormously grateful to all the good people that allowed me to enter this country, and I became a citizen in 1951. And I'm now married to an American and I have two children.

LEVINE: What is your husband's name?

TAUBMAN: Charles.

LEVINE: And your children?

TAUBMAN: My daughter's name is Adina, like my mother, A-D-I-N-A. And my son's name is, uh, Henrik Perry.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Do you feel, having started out in-in-in Egypt or well, I guess you were a French citizen.

TAUBMAN: I was born in Paris.

LEVINE: You were born in Paris. Having come here as a ten-year-old, and then, have you lived in this country since that time?

TAUBMAN: Yes, fifty-one years.

LEVINE: Do you feel those early years, being uprooted and starting again in this country, do you feel that that has had an impact on the rest of your life here?

TAUBMAN: (sighs) Um, I'm not sure that that's a very good question, if you don't mind my saying that, because I'm not sure that I can answer that. Wh-what do you mean, precisely?

LEVINE: Well, I was just wondering if having immigrated here, as a child, has made a difference in your life in some ways?

TAUBMAN: You know what, that's not a good question, because how could it not make a difference? (laughs)

LEVINE: Well, I was ...

TAUBMAN: I mean, do you want to know, what is it you want to know, because that is not a good question, and I'm going on record with it. It's not a

good question.

LEVINE: Well, then, why don't you just say whatever you'd like to say about, that you would like to be on record here at Ellis Island in our Oral History collection. We have tapes of people who immigrated to this country through Ellis Island, and they have in their voice, in their words, what they would like to have on record here. So why don't you just tell me what you would like to have on record here in our collection.

TAUBMAN: All right. I will tell you that all my life, for fifty-one years, I have kissed the earth of the United States and given thanks for being here, and I love this country greatly. And I think that naturalized citizens are much better citizens than native born because they never, ever, take it for granted, and they take their duties as citizens very seriously, and they have a great many ideals, and idealism, and they want the country to be what it says it is going to be, and they work very hard at it. And I'm very proud that I have instilled this in my children. My son is a lawyer. My daughter is a drama student, but she's an activist. She'll go for any cause. And I am very sure that the difference of their passionate American spirit is due to me, their naturalized mother.

LEVINE: Well, perhaps that's what my question was aimed at.

TAUBMAN: I'm sure I gave you the answer, but the question quite, I just think that the question is phrased in such a way that I would - I found it difficult to know exactly what you wanted me to say, that's all. My husband's main joy in life is general semantics, so I'm a hard customer. (laughs)

LEVINE: Yes, you are (laughs). Is there anything else that you would like to say on-on this tape as far as your experience is concerned?

TAUBMAN: I'd like to say that you have been very kind to me personally the past few days. I'm absolutely thrilled to be here. And when I - my reason for being in New York right now is to celebrate Estelle Frankfurter's ninety-eighth birthday. She is the sister of Justice Felix Frankfurter. And I said, "Stella dear, what is it you'd like to do while I'm in New York?" She said, "I want to go to Ellis Island," because her family came through here. And that is the reason I'm here today, and I'm just very touched and honored that you asked me to record for you. And in my family they will know that they can come and hear this, and that makes me feel very happy and very immortal and part of the great fabric of this extraordinary, beloved country.

LEVINE: Thank you very much. It's a pleasure to have your story as part of our collection. This is Janet Levine. I have been talking with Renee Kolton Taubman. And it's November, 15 1993.

TAUBMAN: (whispers) Can I add something?

LEVINE: Yes, and one more thing to be added.

TAUBMAN: And, unfortunately, I don't have the precise details, that is, the precise date when they arrived seperately, but my husband's father and mother came through Ellis Island in the beginning of the century. But I'm not prepared to refer to their experience except that they too, have instilled in their children a great and deep love of this country. And I think that perhaps the reason the United States is such a great country is because each wave of immigrants come

with their ideals afresh and their hopes and their energy, and that's what makes it, uh, what it is.

LEVINE: Thank you very much.