

EI-413

ESTELLE S. FRANKFURTER

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BORN IN THE UNITED STATES

SISTER OF SUPREME COURT JUDGE FELIX FRANKFURTER (1882-1965)

FELIX FRANKFURTER CAME TO THE U.S. FROM AUSTRIA IN 1899

ORAL HISTORIAN'S NOTE: Estelle Frankfurter is the friend of Renee Taubman, Interview EI-412. Paul E. Sigrist, Jr., Director of Oral History, 2/1/1996.

FRANKFURTER: That was the training department of Normal College.

LEVINE: Okay. Let me just start by introducing, this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service, and it's November 15, 1993. I'm here at the Ellis Island Oral History Studio with Estelle S. Frankfurter, who was born on November 6, 1895. So you have just had a birthday.

FRANKFURTER: I just was ninety-eight years old.

LEVINE: Well, it's really a pleasure. I'm very happy that you came to Ellis Island on this trip.

FRANKFURTER: We didn't come to see you. We came to see the island.

LEVINE: Okay, that's fine. (she laughs) Okay. Why don't we start out. Can you tell about your early life in New York City?

FRANKFURTER: I don't remember that. I remember that there were horses that, Borden's Milk was driven by horses and carriages. We lived at 931 Park Avenue in my early life. I went to the TDNC, which is Training Department of Normal College, and that was what is today known as Hunter College. And there were, it was almost a private school. You didn't pay, but we went to school till twelve o'clock. At noon we had our lunch in school, and we went till two o'clock, and then we went home. And we went to school as we would have gone to a private school. And there were about twelve children in each class, and I think all twelve went through the school as we did. It was sort of a different kind of a school.

LEVINE: So that your teachers were people who were learning to be teachers at Hunter? Is that the way?

FRANKFURTER: No. Teachers, our teachers were full time teachers. They were our teachers.

LEVINE: But you were at Hunter College, what became Hunter College?

FRANKFURTER: We were TDNC. I still have the pin from TDNC. And I know the names of most of the, about twelve children in my class, and we went right through from the first grade to the end. And after that we went to Ethical Culture High School, and I went on to Radcliffe. And I went through Radcliffe, and after Radcliffe I went to, I don't know, Hunter was, I don't know, we went to Hunter, around there, I went to Hunter. I had my training, I got a Master's, because I thought I'd get a PhD at Harvard. And by the time I finished my first year, the reason I liked going to Normal College was that the, the reason I didn't like it was that the, I had no friends in New York. My friends were all over the United States. I went

to the, uh, I got a, I lived in Boston. No, I didn't. I got a Master's, and at the end of the year I knew I didn't want to get a PhD. So I went to work.

LEVINE: Could we, um, go back to your, to your early life? You were born in this country.

FRANKFURTER: Yes.

LEVINE: But your older, uh, brothers were born in Vienna.

FRANKFURTER: Yes. All were born abroad.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And, uh, tell me the family stories that you remember.

FRANKFURTER: I don't have any (?). The age between my stories and my brothers was very great.

LEVINE: Oh, you . . .

FRANKFURTER: There was, there was, Felix was fifteen when I was born, I think. And I was very intimate with them, but they were grown men in long trousers.

LEVINE: I see. What do you remember of Felix when you were a little girl?

FRANKFURTER: He was at college. He went to Harvard. He went to Harvard. He didn't go to, he went to City College, and he went to Harvard Law School. And then he went, I don't know what jobs he had. I know them, but they'd be of no interest today, and we made no distinction between the brothers. They were much older than we, and we were, Fred was the boss of the family, and my father's job was mostly going out to Ellis Island and meeting, by that time he was a citizen, and he had been here in America before my mother came over with the children, with the five children, alone. My father was here, and they had a gorgeous apartment arranged for her. And he made it his job for himself going out to Coney, to Ellis Island, and when the ships came in and brought them home to sleep at our house.

LEVINE: Oh, he would bring people? Were they people he knew from . . .

FRANKFURTER: No, no, just anybody. He was going to help make Americans of those people.

LEVINE: And what was it like for you to have these people

coming into the . . .

FRANKFURTER: For, they stayed overnight. My father helped getting them jobs and something of that sort. He concerned himself with them. Supposedly he was in business, but that didn't concern him as much as people who were becoming Americans. He was an American before he was an American.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And what kind of business did your father have?

FRANKFURTER: Well, he was in the linen business, and supporting himself by selling linens to wholesalers and to people at restaurants, but he was much more concerned with brand-new Americans, and he died very usefully in age, and I was very close to my father. And I was an American. I didn't know anything. We spoke German at home, and we were brought up, I guess we were Americans pretty fast, and that was that. There was no fuss made about it.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

FRANKFURTER: And Felix became, and that was Felix's life. From

there he went to Harvard. After Harvard Law School he was taken into a law office that he soon, there were three Jews in all Harvard Law School as students, and all of them we knew.

LEVINE: You knew them from, from New York?

FRANKFURTER: From his, through him.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

FRANKFURTER: And I'd go to the dinner at the home of the widow of one of those three men. And I celebrated my seventy-fifty anniversary from Radcliffe. I was the only (?) of a long line of graduates at the Harvard Commencement, I was the oldest class president at Harvard. And I, my picture was in The Harvard Journal, and that is all there is. And I've been, I was the leader of the, of the Harvard graduation, and my picture is in the Harvard alumni magazine, and I had it sent to me from England because a Harvard graduate showed it to a friend in England, and England showed it to me. That was that.

LEVINE: What do you remember of your brother, Felix,

from . . .

FRANKFURTER: No, because the difference is we were very good friends, but I can't talk for my brother. We didn't talk in his lifetime, and I don't talk to him. Greatness was the great thing. He was a great man, and Harvard is known. He died unpleasantly because he had, he was ill for about three years and then he died in 197 . . .

LEVINE: Sixty.

FRANKFURTER: '65. And the rest you can read about him in lots of other . . .

LEVINE: Yes.

FRANKFURTER: . . . places and loads of other (?).

LEVINE: Yes.

FRANKFURTER: And that's what I can tell.

LEVINE: Okay.

FRANKFURTER: And we were a close family, and we separated over the United States, and my sister was a social worker, and I was always (?) under the United

States, the government of Massachusetts, then to Washington.

LEVINE: What kind of work did you do?

FRANKFURTER: Well, I had a Bachelor's and I had a Master's, and you don't describe what you do with the government. I mean, this was a labor department, I was, and all through the war, and I was in Germany for a year for the government. I had, my first work was in the, practically always in the Labor Department, and I was a worker. And I think that's all I have to tell you.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, how about one last question. How is this period of your life now?

FRANKFURTER: How is what?

LEVINE: How, how do you like this phase of your life, this old age phase?

FRANKFURTER: At this moment I don't like it. I don't like America, and I don't like the rest of the world either. It's a very different world than one knew.

LEVINE: What, could you say more about that, what the changes . . .

FRANKFURTER: The changes are terrible, the clothes are terrible, women wearing pants and going dressed when they're undressed. And it's not a very nice, and for the ten years I was a volunteer teacher in a downtown school in New York and I walked, it was about three miles each way, and never in ten years did I arrive. The snow would be as high as it can be in New York City, and that's the way I walked there and back. And I am a very happy person for my life.

LEVINE: Well, that's maybe a good place to stop. I want to thank you very much.

FRANKFURTER: That's all right.

LEVINE: I've been speaking with Estelle Frankfurter.

FRANKFURTER: And everything, Felix, they can read about him.

LEVINE: That's true. Okay. Thank you, Ms. Frankfurter. This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service, signing off.