

**EI-430**

**REGINA LEIBNER KELLNER**

**BIRTHDATE: DECEMBER 14, 1913**

**INTERVIEW DATE: FEBRUARY 20, 1994**

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**INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE, PH.D.**

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**TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: JOHN MURIELLO, 3/1996**

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**GERMANY [BORN FRANCE], 1921**

**AGE 7**

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**RESIDENCES:**

- **FRANCE: PARIS**
- **POLAND/AUSTRIA: TESCHEN**
- **US: NEW YORK, LONG ISLAND, NY; US ARMY BASES;  
ORLANDO, FL**

LEVINE: This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service, and I'm here today, it's Sun day, February 20th, 1994. And I'm here at the home of Regina Kellner. And this is in Orlando, Florida. Mrs. Kellner came from Germany in 1921 when she was seven years old. So I'm happy I finally...

KELLNER: Actually I was, I think, we came in September and I was eight in December,

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so, I don't know, but...

LEVINE: You were practically eight.

KELLNER: Right.

LEVINE: Well, you mentioned before you were born in Paris.

KELLNER: Right.

LEVINE: Tell me your birth date.

KELLNER: December 14th, 1913.

LEVINE: Okay. And did you live in Paris for a long time?

KELLNER: We left Paris, we, we were, we stayed at, we were in a detention camp, the whole family until the, until we were allowed to leave Paris. It was during the war, and they detained, they kept the women and children and the men. But as the war was ending, they, they allowed the women and children to leave. The reason they kept the men behind was because if they had let them go back to where they originally came from, which was Germany, they

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would have had to join the German army. And the French were not about to let people go and join the German army.

LEVINE: Were you actually born in...

KELLNER: I was born in Paris...

LEVINE: ...in the detention camp?

KELLNER: No, no, no.

LEVINE: No.

KELLNER: I was born in Paris, the Sixteenth Arrondissement. I have my birth certificate, so I know.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KELLNER: But I don't know, I was the only one born, I and my younger sister who was two, two years younger than I, were both born in Paris. The rest of the family were born, you know, somewhere, in Austria somewhere.

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LEVINE: I see.

KELLNER: Right.

LEVINE: Were you, were you in France because of the war? Is that why you...

KELLNER: No, my parents were in business in France.

LEVINE: Oh.

KELLNER: Yes.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KELLNER: Yes.

LEVINE: What was your father's name?

KELLNER: Joshman. J-O-S-H-M-A-N.

LEVINE: And, and his last name was Leibner?

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KELLNER: Yes.

LEVINE: Leibner. And, and what was his business? What did he do?

KELLNER: Well, when I --- when --- it was not until the States actually when I, as far as I'm concerned. And he, the only thing he could find to do at the time was to sell merchandise to housewives, I guess. He went from one place to another. He built up a client, clientele. And sold merchandise to them.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So, so, do you remember anything about the detention camp at all?

KELLNER: No. The detention camp I don't recall, but I do recall where we lived after that. When we left there we lived in Teschen. I think it's spelled T-E-S-C-H-E-N, something like that. I think I only saw that thing once throughout the years. It, it was a very small town, and it was on the border of Poland and Austria. I don't know just what that is now.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KELLNER: But because I was three when I started school.

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LEVINE: Oh.

KELLNER: We started very early. And I recall going to school. So...

LEVINE: Really? When you were three?

KELLNER: Oh, yeah. Yeah. 'cause I went alone. I mean, we were very independent; my mother had five of us at the time. And you just didn't walk people to school. I mean, you walked alone. [She laughs] And it was, it was very interesting.----- Interesting, ---- I don't know. Because if you, you actually passed through a borderline. So that you, there were guards there, you know, and you had to, to, you were frisked; actually, I guess is what the word is called. And you kind of took this as a daily thing that had to happen. That's just happened, you know. You didn't know any better.

LEVINE: Wow. So you were going, you were going from Poland to...

KELLNER: Probab-----, yeah.

LEVINE: Austria, or the other way around?

KELLNER: Yeah. That's right.

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LEVINE: And, and do you remember anything about the school?

KELLNER: No, not really. I don't think it was much different you know, than most kindergartens or pre-school things or, you know. But I did, when I came to the States when I was eight, I, I, they tested me, and I had, I had been through five years of elementary school. So, you know, I, I had done everything that they do here, except I didn't, I didn't know how to speak English. Or read it or write it. And that came very rapidly, of course.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KELLNER: You know, as a child you do, besides the fact that you're very anxious to assimilate. That was the most important thing. Because you didn't want to be different. You know, children, children are cruel and, and, and make fun of other children who are different. So we were so anxious to assimilate that my mother who spoke three languages, French, German and, and well, after that ---- English; we wouldn't let her speak anything but English. And we refused to speak anything but English. And we said, we made her go to school at night. You know. She really had no time for, but she did. She learned how to read and write and speak English. And the only ones that remembered French and German, you know, well, were my two older

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sisters, naturally.

LEVINE: Well, tell me your mother's name.

KELLNER: My mother's name was Sylvia.

LEVINE: And her, do you remember her maiden name?

KELLNER: Goldfinger, I think it was.

LEVINE: And how about your brothers...

KELLNER: Or Ginsberg. I'm not sure, you know. Yeah, I think it's Goldberg, Gold, Gold, Gold something, Goldfinger, on my birth certificate, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And how about your brothers and sisters, if you could name them, just starting at the oldest and.-----

KELLNER: Well, the oldest was Natalie, and she lives in California. She's at a, a, not a nursing home, but a, oh, the senior citizen place. And the next one was Eva and she died. And the next one was Joshua and he had gone to Israel and he died. And then me. And then my younger sister, Ann, who has

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retired to Israel.

LEVINE: And she was born here? No, she was born...

KELLNER: She, she was born in France.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KELLNER: And then the youngest, very youngest one, Stanley, who, who was ten years younger than me, and he died since. So there are just three of us left. Three sisters.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KELLNER: At the very corners of the earth. [She laughs]

LEVINE: Yeah. Right. Well, tell me what you remember about life, after you left, after you, when you started school, did you stay in Touschan --Tesch...

KELLNER: Teschen.

LEVINE: Teschen, until you left for America?

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KELLNER: Yes, yes. We stayed in school...

LEVINE: Do you remember what Teschen was like? Do you remember anything about it?

KELLNER: Teschen was a little hut with five children and my mother. And if I remember correctly, I think we all slept in one bed. And it was one of those real, little villages, you know, with, poor. Very poor. And we had no money, either, at all. I guess that's why my mother ended up there. And my father was still in France. And when he came back, which was just about a year before he left for the United States, he, he came back, and he, he, whatever he did, I don't know, I guess they wait until they get enough money together to pay passage, and he left a year before we did for the States. And then we followed.

LEVINE: Do you remember at all what your mother or father said about his going to America, and what that...

KELLNER: Well, we were never, they never discussed things, you know, with us particularly.

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LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KELLNER: But I do recall the fact that he was a total stranger to me, because I didn't recall knowing him from before, and he left very shortly after he came as far as I was concerned. I mean, I was like in the middle there where, you know, it was neither here nor there. [She laughs]

LEVINE: Yeah. Uh-huh.

KELLNER: And it just ended up that way. I mean, you know, we never had, really had any relationship particularly. He and I, anyway.

LEVINE: Yeah.

KELLNER: Yeah.

LEVINE: So the family started out in Germany, did they?

KELLNER: Yes, they started out in Austria. Right.

LEVINE: And then they went to France for...

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KELLNER: Right.

LEVINE: ...for, for business purposes.

KELLNER: Business purposes, right.

LEVINE: Then you were detained there?

KELLNER: Yes.

LEVINE: Then you went to the border of Austria and Poland?

KELLNER: That's right.

LEVINE: And then you came here?

KELLNER: I don't ---- my mother probably went there because she may have been-----  
somebody may have been close by that she knew or was part of the family.  
I don't recall that at all. I was too young to be concerned with that.

LEVINE: Yeah.

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KELLNER: You know.

LEVINE: Do you have any idea where your family was in Germany before they went to Paris?

KELLNER: [superposed] Well, I know my mother had a sister in Vienna who we stopped to visit on our way to the boat. And my father's mother who had a farm. I can't tell you exactly where, somewhere in Germany, who we stopped to visit with. And a brother. We didn't, my father's mother was the only one of his family that, that I got to know at all.

LEVINE: Oh. Do you, what do you...

KELLNER: Just for a very short time, we stayed with her for a short time before we went on. This was all riding by train from one place to another. Yes...

LEVINE: What do remember about her?

KELLNER: Lovely little lady. Yes. I remember distinctly she taught me how to milk a cow. Yeah, which was a lot of fun. And the first time I ever drank milk, you know, right from milking the cow. And just being wonderful, and big open area with animals, you know, and so on, where I came from this little hut. It

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was actually really like a, really a hut.

LEVINE: Well, did it have an earthen floor, or was it a...

KELLNER: The hut?

LEVINE: Yeah.

KELLNER: That I don't recall, particularly. No. I don't recall that.

LEVINE: Do you remember anything like the stove, what your mother cooked on?

KELLNER: I remember animals being around. Not in my house, but pigs in the area, you know, and so on. Must have been a coal thing, a coal stove, which is what everybody used.

LEVINE: Oh.

KELLNER: And I remember a big hill on the other side of the road with a big house on the top where somebody very rich was supposedly living, you know. This was, these were, I don't know whether this was things I heard, you know, them talking about or what it was. But like I said I was at an age where

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everything was very, very interesting, very exciting. You know, just getting on the train, or going anywhere, you know. So that I just had no problems personally.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Do you remember, was, was your family religious at all? Did you observe--?

KELLNER: My father, yes. My father was, yes, they were orthodox at the time. When my mother came to the States, she discarded the *shetel* (ritual wig). We had her do that immediately, and she did keep a *kosher* home until my father left. They separated because they really had nothing, nothing in common, because they had lived, you know, they'd been separated off and on, and just...

LEVINE: Well, that's not unusual for that to happen...

KELLNER: just, yeah, not unusual. Right, right.

LEVINE: So your father left a year earlier.

KELLNER: Right.

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LEVINE: Then did, did they write back and forth, do you know?

KELLNER: Well, must, they must have communicated some way, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KELLNER: He had a brother who was living here. I don't know how long his brother had been here. I was not aware of any brother or cousins or anything like that until we got here. And that never developed into, you know, very close relationship at all. But a nephew, a nephew stayed in touch with us. In fact he became a patient of my husband's and his family. And I think his family is probably still living in Brooklyn, you know, where the Sephardic Jews are?

LEVINE: Hmm-mm.

KELLNER: And lovely people, Oscar and his wife. I got to know them. But, they just, he came here, and he had a brother, and, oh, you asked whether his name was Leibner, and it wasn't. He changed his name when he came here because that's what his brother's name was. Where Liebner came from, Leibner, whatever, came from----- I have no idea, really.

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LEVINE: Oh.

KELLNER: Really. So...

LEVINE: Do you remember what the name was bef-----, when you were in Europe?

KELLNER: [superposed] On my birth certificate it says Kleinseller. I had a time with Social Security with that one.

LEVINE: Yeah.

KELLNER: Yeah.

LEVINE: Kleinseller. So you...

KELLNER: Yeah. And I don't which side of the family that came from, really.

LEVINE: Right. Uh-huh. I see.

KELLNER: I, through the years I wondered about it, just never got around to asking my mother. It's strange, isn't it?

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LEVINE: Yeah.

KELLNER: You just don't get to talk about something that you wonder about?

LEVINE: Yeah.

KELLNER: Unfortunately, but that's...

LEVINE: Yeah. That's the way...

KELLNER: And my sister, I asked my sister not too long ago and she didn't seem to know.

LEVINE: Your older sister...

KELLNER: Yeah. Yeah.

LEVINE: who might know.

KELLNER: Yes. And now, she doesn't have a birth certificate, so she, you know, no idea.

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LEVINE: Well, let's see. So do you remember, when you were leaving, do you remember what you packed, or your mother took with her?

KELLNER: I remember sleeping on a lot of trains. [She laughs] That's what I remember.

LEVINE: That's when you made the rounds visiting your relatives?

KELLNER: Yes. I remember a lot of sleeping on trains, which was always fun. You know, I was a very outgoing child, and was very independent, and had been raised that way ---- had to be on my own.

LEVINE: Yeah.

KELLNER: So that I just went visiting. Wherever I was, trains or whatever I was visiting with people all the time. [She laughs]

LEVINE: And, and do you remember anything about either your grandmother or any other relatives that you visited en route to the boat?

KELLNER: I remem ---- I remember in Vienna we rode in one of those carriages, horse carriages like on Fifth Avenue. Central Park. And that was exciting. I

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remember going to the opera. My mother was very big with music and theatre, and took us as often as possible. And, you know, just fun. Just fun.

LEVINE: And so, when you got to Hamburg...

KELLNER: Yes. Hamburg.

LEVINE: ...right? That was where you were, do you remem----, was the name of the ship The Hamburg?

KELLNER: No. And they mentioned it in Ellis Island, and I knew it right off, and now I can't think of what it was, the name of the ship. It was one of the very famous ones, one of the ones that went very frequent, back and forth, continuously.

LEVINE: Aquitania?

KELLNER: No, no. No. It started with an 'A,' too.

LEVINE: An 'A.'

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KELLNER: Yeah. I'm sure it did. I think so. I, I tried to think of it quite recently, and just can't remember what, what the name of the ship, but that's very easy to. I think.---

LEVINE: To find out.

KELLNER: ...find out. Yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah. Maybe I can...

KELLNER: Yeah. Sure.

LEVINE: look it up and then confirm it with you.

KELLNER: [superposed] Because at that time that was doing a lot of going back and forth. But that was a very interesting situation. We all, we, my mother got to the boat with, the ship, with five of us. And my older brother, who was the only boy at that time, was detained, because, they wouldn't let him go with us, because he had, I guess, what's --- pink eye, I suppose, now that I realize it. Something wrong with his eye.

LEVINE: Hmm-mm.

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KELLNER: And they wouldn't, they'd examine you thoroughly, and if there was anything wrong with you, you couldn't go until you were okay. So at ten years old, that's what he was, ten years old he was detained alone, and to have whatever it was done to him. You know, I, maybe my mother knew, but I, we didn't talk about it. And didn't even think too much about it either, really, because these things, I mean, it was just taken for granted that you did what you had to do. So he didn't, he stayed...

LEVINE: So he was detained...

KELLNER: [superposed] He stayed in Hamburg and, and we went on. And he came alone to the States about six months later. And he was okay. And when he got old enough, he just went to Israel. [She laughs] He actually was going to law school at the time when he stopped. After the second year he said, "I don't think I can learn anything I'm really interested in here." And this is what I want to do here and become very active in the Zionist movement. And very good friend of Judge----- oh there's a, there's a university named after him. He, he was a, a what do you call it judge.

LEVINE: Supreme Court?

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KELLNER: No. Yeah, but what was his name? What was his name? Judge, but...

LEVINE: Frankfurter?

KELLNER: No. There's a university. Brandeis.

LEVINE: Oh, Brandeis.

KELLNER: Yes. Very good friend of Judge Brandeis. He wasn't a judge then. And in fact, they built; they named one of the buildings in ----- at the Kibbutz. The Kibbutz is named after him. The Kibbutz is *Ein Hashofet* and that means "the judge."

LEVINE: Oh. Uh-huh.

KELLNER: So that's how that all evolved. But...

LEVINE: But do you...

KELLNER: We came across just...

LEVINE: Do you remember anything about the passage?

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KELLNER: Oh, yes. A lot.

LEVINE: Oh, good.

KELLNER: We, we were in; we were in, what's the lowest?

LEVINE: Steerage?

KELLNER: Steerage, of course. And everybody was sick. Everybody as far as I could remember. I mean, I, I was alone, so evidently everybody was sick. But I roamed the whole ship. And I had a ball. 'cause I was not sick, and I was old enough to get around by myself, and just, was fed. Everybody was very nice to this little girl who was all alone. [She laughs] And it was wonderful. And I recall distinctly arriving at Ellis Island, coming into the island with the ship, and everybody up on the top deck, you know, to see the Statue of Liberty. And even as a little girl I recall being very overwhelmed and very impressed. This must be a very, very important thing. And everybody was, of course, silent, and you could feel, you'd feel all their hopes and all their, their dreams and everything was just right there. And as they used to say years back, the streets in, in America were paved with gold. At least that's what we all thought. It didn't work out that way, but that's what everybody

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thought. So it was a very, very, ----- it stayed. It stayed with me. And getting off the ship, Ellis Island was just, well, you know, a madhouse. You're a little girl; there are fifteen thousand people, high up there around you. You just stayed where you were. And we finally got through with the immigration authorities.

LEVINE: Do you remember anything about that?

KELLNER: Well, just standing on lines and lines, and waiting and waiting, you know, all day. And then we got off the ship, and my father met us and his brother. And...

LEVINE: At Ellis Island?

KELLNER: At Ellis Island. Yes.

LEVINE: Do you remember that meeting?

KELLNER: Yes, because they handed me, somebody handed me a banana. That was totally strange to me. I had never seen a banana, I had never eaten one, I didn't know what it was. [She laughs] I finally, and a, and a doll, which was something I never had. You know? Which was just wonderful.

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LEVINE: Your father brought these?

KELLNER: I guess so. They were the only two that met us. I don't whether it was my father or my uncle at the time, whatever. And, because he was staying with them, I guess. He had found an apartment for us which was on the east side. You're familiar with that. And I don't recall just what street.

LEVINE: I think you wrote that it here. Ninth, 719 9th Street.

KELLNER: Yes. Yes. East 9th Street. That was off the river, too. It was just two blocks in from the river. And we lived there I guess about two years. And I became very, my second home was a neighborhood settlement house, which was on 9th Street and Avenue C.

LEVINE: And what...

KELLNER: Or Avenue D.

LEVINE: what do you remember about them?

KELLNER: Well, that was just a second home. I, I spent every minute that I wasn't in

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school.

LEVINE: Well...

KELLNER: School was right across the street from where we lived.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KELLNER: And this was just a block or two up, I guess. Yeah. And it was just a little bit of a building. A little four story house when we, I first joined there. I think it cost twenty-five cents. Something like that to join. And you were able to go to all the activities, which was singing, I never had a voice, but I went. And learning how to play an instrument, and being----- belonging to a club. Belonging was the most important thing in the world. Belonging. [A dish falls] And the Girl Scouts. Everything they had I joined. And I was there from, the hours, till they closed. So, I was raised there actually. Really, I think, I'll never forget when, I was most thankful to the Christadora House. It was non-sectarian. We went to Jewish services on Friday night. We had Jewish services and Christian services on Sunday. We went to both. [She laughs] And the same thing at the Girl Scout camp. And the first year that I was a Girl Scout, I was the best scout, all around scout that year, and they sent me to their camp without charge. So...

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LEVINE: Where was the camp?

KELLNER: The camp must have been in, somewhere Jersey or New York, you know. I wasn't familiar with the outside----- outside of the east side I didn't know where I was. [She laughs] Oh. Then, then we moved. The first time I went to camp. I came home. My older sister met me at the Christadora House and said, "We moved." Well, we got on the subway and we went up to The Bronx. And there I saw trees, which was great. We lived on Prospect Avenue which was close to Crotona Park. And it was a, a, a what do you call, railroad flat [not understood] kind of thing. And that's when my father left shortly after that.

LEVINE: Do you remember anything about that, because that was not that un----, that unusual. Do you remember anything about?

KELLNER: Oh, very...

LEVINE: what, what had happened?

KELLNER: Well, you see, my mother was very independent, and just took care of five of us until, six by the time; by that time my younger brother was born. And

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worked and went to school, and my father made no attempt to develop into anything more than just, you know, what he was doing. And he joined the temple, and that's where he was all the time. My mother was not, by that time did not feel that she wanted to continue with this orthodox thing. I'm sure that's what it was. And, of course, she had stopped wearing a *shetel*, and that was very bad. And they just had a bad time for a couple of years. I remem----- I recall a lot of fighting and a lot of, you know, yelling and so on, and it was much better when he was gone. Although...

LEVINE: Did you ever get close to your father?

KELLNER: Yeah. Well, it's interesting. 'cause I didn't see him for a number of years, and he became ill and died of cancer. I'm sure it must have been cancer. At that time they didn't even t---, say the word. And he was at, I forget, some hospital downtown. On an island or something. And at that time I already knew my husband, I mean, and we were keeping company. We were kids. I think we were sixteen. And he went with me. I went to visit him. And I was the only one in the family that went to visit. And I went several times, you know. I didn't know him too well, but I went. And...

LEVINE: What kind of a man was he? What...

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KELLNER: He was gentle man. He was, yeah. Quiet. But they just had nothing in common by that time. Just nothing. My mother never remarried or anything, but just. Yeah.

LEVINE: So tell me about school when you first got to this country.

KELLNER: That was all very exciting, you know. School was across the street. It was a big building. And you got then --- at, at that time everybody played out in the street, you know, all day long after school. That kind of thing. And there were a lot of kids and a lot of people. And the first English words I, I learned were two of the worst, which was taught to me by a little boy who lived next door. I had no idea what they meant. I had, you know, I was very proud of the fact that I could learn English words. Anyway, I learned better [She laughs]. But anyway...

LEVINE: Well, do you want to say what they were?

KELLNER: I, I didn't understand at that time. No, of course not. Now, today the children, children. The movies, everybody uses the words. They don't mean anything anymore. But at that time even "damn" was a bad word. You know, you just didn't say those things.

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LEVINE: Is that, is that one of them?

KELLNER: No, no. No. No. [They laugh] My brother was the one who knew what I was saying, I guess, because he really stopped me instantly. And we were, my older brother and I were close, 'cause we were close in age, and he put me up to everything, you know. I mean he, ----- I, I was with him all the time and he would just. And when I got a little older, I had my younger sister who I was baby-sitting for and then the younger brother, and I was the one who was, you know, they were following all around. I didn't like that at all. No. So...

LEVINE: Yeah. It cramps your style a little. [She laughs]

KELLNER: Yeah. Oh. No.

LEVINE: Yeah.

KELLNER: No, the youngest one was ten years younger, so that was really bad. And my sister who was two years younger than I, she was really a nuisance. A real, yeah. [She laughs]

LEVINE: So, let's see. So you learned, you learned quickly. You learned English...

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KELLNER: Oh, yes. Yes. Because they kept advancing me. As soon as I learned English they kept pushing me to the next grade. At that time they used to do that, I guess. And I ended up graduating with the advanced group at the same time as that age.

LEVINE: Oh. Uh-huh.

KELLNER: You know, I had skipped, I went, did seven, they used to seven-a, seven-b, they'd have six month. You know, like half a year, each one.

LEVINE: Yeah. Yeah.

KELLNER: And this was only for students who were advanced. And that's what I went into at the end, at the end of elementary school. I went to the eighth grade at that time. And I just graduated where I normally would have.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So, you met, tell me how you met your husband.

KELLNER: I met my husband in the settlement house. He had...

LEVINE: What was the name of it? Say it again.

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KELLNER: Christadora House. C-H-R-I-S-T-A-D-O-R-A.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KELLNER: And that, you're probably familiar with the name of, what do you call it, it starts with, Houston Street.

LEVINE: Oh, yeah.

KELLNER: Yeah. Sure. It's the same...

LEVINE: It was there?

KELLNER: ...same kind of thing.

LEVINE: Oh. Oh. Uh-huh.

KELLNER: Only this was on 9th Street and Avenue, Avenue B, C. Avenue C. And that has been closed down. But after I was married, the first year, for three years after I was married I went back downtown and worked for Madison House.

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LEVINE: Oh.

KELLNER: Which is also a settlement house down around Houston Street.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KELLNER: Right.

LEVINE: So, so do you remember what your husband was like when you met him in the settlement house?

KELLNER: Well, when I met him we were already fifteen, because he, he, his family was very comfortable, and they lived right across the street from Tompkins Square Park in the brownstoned houses. And he, his mo ---- he used to go private camp. When he was a kid I didn't know, his father owned a shoe store on the corner of Avenue B, which was a block from my house on 9th Street. A family shoe store. And, of course, everybody bought their children's shoes there and everything else. And I remember this little kid running around, but I was a kid then, you know. I didn't mean anything. But we met because he was going---- he was going to the boys club, which was on Avenue D. And, a private camp. But then he got to know this group of

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boys that were at the Christadora House, you know, that we palled out with. And he insisted on going to the camp we were going to. He was on only child. And that's when I met him. But he was fifteen at that time. And then he, he worked there, we both did. For many years I, I worked there as a, I was a waitr----- I came down from high, up in The Bronx, and I went to high school at the time. And I used to come down after school for the dinner t--period and work, the settlement house had grown into a, a nine story building at that point. It was sponsored by very wealthy people, trustees. And they built this big building. And they had social workers working, working, living there on the eighth floor, and the ninth floor was a restaurant. Not for the public, but just for the people who were working in the building.

LEVINE: Was it still by the same name?

KELLNER: Yes.

LEVINE: The Christadora House?

KELLNER: Yes. Still retained the same name. And I was a waitress up there after school for many years. And also at the camp during the summer. So that, that's, and he worked the camp. And he also taught swimming at the Christadora House for many years when he got his, his Red Cross license.

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So...

END OF SIDE ONE      BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

KELLNER: ...so that's how we, yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Wow. So what, what did your mother do for work?

KELLNER: Well, she started out doing what all the women were doing at that time was taking work home. You couldn't leave the children. So they did things like, oh, she made bow ties, and she would, I worked for a lady across the street I remember, earning two dollars a week. I did everything I possibly could to earn money. See, that was also the second most important thing. [She laughs] And I earned two dollars a week; I was just a little kid, stringing pea--, pearls. They would, they would pick up the, the merchandise from the people who, you know, I don't know, who put them together I suppose, whatever, in, in just like a hundred strings of pearls. They weren't strung, they were just on, on por---, on cotton, you know, thread. And we would string them. And that wasn't, it wasn't that easy, because it was close work, you know, it was very, and she'd have kid ---,

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children working for her, I mean this woman. We were just little kids. I mean I wasn't even ten years old. And at two dollars a week, that was a lot of money, you know.

LEVINE: What did you do with your money when you were little? Do you remember?

KELLNER: I pro---- I probably just kept it to use for what I had to do, because I remember when I went to high school, even by that time, I would get five cents for the bus, and I would walk, to save the money. I was in, at that time I was, I was inheriting a lot of clothes, most of my clothes from my older sister, and I didn't like that. So if I was able to buy something on my own that was great, you know. [She laughs] And I don't recall particularly, you know, just what I did with the money. It wasn't frivolous I don't think because I just never thought that way. You know? I didn't have, so I, you know, I had to make do with what I had. So...

LEVINE: Yeah. What about clothes? Do you remember anything about the change in the way you dressed once you got to this country?

KELLNER: No, not really. [Cough] I was, I just wore whatever was given to me when I was in Europe. And when I got to this country it just went on that way,

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you know. My mother bought what we needed and, or got.

LEVINE: So, so your mother did piece work...

KELLNER: Yes. Yes. They all did.

LEVINE: at home at first?

KELLNER: Yes. Yes.

LEVINE: And then...

KELLNER: And then I think she, then she did some sewing for people and that kind of thing. It was all work from, from the house. It was not away.

LEVINE: Do you...

KELLNER: Oh, yes. Until, until, you know, until we were grown. And at the beginning of the war she immediately became a block captain where we lived, we, you know, that kind of thing. I mean, she was always active in something. Oh, yes. And also, she, she became a, a, a baby nurse. And, newborns. And was so good at it that my doctor hired her to, to take care of his two

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children when they were born. You know, that kind of thing.

LEVINE: So she must have had some training. She must have gone to some kind of a...

KELLNER: Well, I think, no. I, what happened was, it started out, now that I remember, it started out my older sister had a very good friend who, who was going to have a baby. This was during the war. And would she, would she help her with the baby. This was when the war started. And she did. And then she did it with the second one that she had. And they recommended, she, you know, recommended her to other people. And it got to the point where we begged her to just not take one after the other, because it was just too difficult. I mean, she would stay with them two weeks, that kind of thing.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KELLNER: And she was so good at it, you know, I mean, she was so conscientious and so, she liked what she was doing, that she really, she was over doing the thing. You know, you're up a great deal during the night, but, for a lot of, most of the babies. And we wanted her to stop doing it one after the other like that. And wanted her to let us help her, because she lived

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alone. And I know I used to send her a check for fifteen dollars, which at the beginning was a little difficult to do, but she would return it. She just wouldn't take any money from any of us. And when she, then she, Social Security started, and that helped a little bit. And she was still working. She was seventy-four when she died. She left the States finally at seventy-two, and I remember seeing her off on the boat, knowing very well I was not going to see her again. And she was going to Israel where my older brother was and his family. Not to stay at the kibbutz. Not to live kibbutz, but to retire there, to Natanya, as a matter of fact. And she died of a stroke two years later. But she did this because she did not want any help from any of us, and she knew she was reaching the point where she could not work continuously like that. And this was, that she could live there on her Social Security, and that was, you know, okay.

LEVINE: Wow.

KELLNER: So.

LEVINE: Can you, can you think of any attitudes or any kinds of values that your mother tried to instill in you?

KELLNER: Well, I think being a little too independent, which I still am. [She laughs]

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And, and just being very concerned with security, which was I guess very, you know, for her was very important. Sure.

LEVINE: Well, let's see. So, so you graduated from, did you go to high school?

KELLNER: Yes. Oh, yes.

LEVINE: You graduated from high school.

KELLNER: Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

LEVINE: And then...

KELLNER: 1930, 1930 I think it was. Yeah.

LEVINE: And what did you do after that?

KELLNER: Oh, my first job was with Macys, with a buyer in Macys, just running errands, you know, on the floor in the material department, I remember. I wasn't there too long, because my older sister was working in Brooklyn, in the, oh, the name for that, that section. It was all, it was all-commercial, you know, big commercials, industrial area. And she used to have lunch

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with girls from other offices, you know, and so on. And she told me one time that there was going to be an opening, and I should go and that she'll arrange an interview for me. And I remember going in. It was as a bookkeeper, I think it was. And I got the job. I worked there, went from The Bronx to Brooklyn on the subway to work, which was a trip. And I got the job and I hated it. I hated the man I was working for, but you didn't quit jobs that time. This was the Depression. I mean, you were lucky to have anything. Wait a minute. Before that, before that I, I don't what happen in Macys. I think they cut down or something, and I just, I was looking for a job, and I walked Sixth Avenue. Now I don't whether you're familiar with what used to go on during the Depression on Sixth Avenue. Every store window, I mean, every, every block had an employment agency, you know, store agency. And, and the windows would be completely covered with these little index cards and what jobs were available. And a couple of hundred men standing in front of these windows, you know, reading them. It was, it was really a very, very bad time. Very bad. And I, there was one agency that I haunted every day. You asked me what I did with my money, there was carfare. And they finally hired me. They got so sick and tired of seeing me, I guess. And I worked for them for a while. Then this bookkeeping thing came up in Brooklyn. So I went there, and I worked for this man. And I disliked him intensely because he was one of these people who smoked cigars, and

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would spit in my wastebasket. And I always said to myself, no matter what fell into that basket I never ---- could be a thousand dollar bill ----- I will not pick it up, you know. [She laughs] Just. And he, they, they moved the factory. They made boxes, cardboard boxes. And they moved to a factory in, in Hoboken. And you said--- what a trip that was from The Bronx to Hoboken, by ferry...

LEVINE: You went there?

KELLNER: [superposed] Going down by subway and then by ferry to Hoboken. I didn't want to go. And I told him I was leaving. And he was so stingy, that I think I was there three years, and I hadn't been able to get a raise with him at all. He offered me the big sum of twenty-five dollars a week, which was unheard of, to stay, and to go. And I thought, well, I'll just go, and I'll interview people for him. And I'll get him somebody else. But in the meantime I, I could use that money. So I went, and after he rejected every single person I said was fine, I finally didn't show up one Monday. I just didn't show up. And he was furious, absolutely furious, but I couldn't take it anymore. It was, that, the place was heated with space heaters. It was a tremendous, tremendous room. And just freezing, concrete floor, and just freezing. I went, I remember going there on the, on the, on the ferry, at four degrees above zero. It was just terrible. Terrible. But I went

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until; finally, I realized he was not going to hire anybody else. He was going to find fault with everybody that I recommended he use, and I just didn't show up. And then I worked for a millinery house as bookkeeper on Sixth Avenue ---- 36th Street and Sixth Avenue. And got married. I got married in June, four days after my, my husband graduated from dental school. [She laughs] We couldn't wait. And we worked the camp that summer, private camp. He had started going, you know, working at private camps during that time. And we...

LEVINE: As a dentist or as a counselor?

KELLNER: No, as a waterfront.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KELLNER: Waterfront. And he, and I got the job as bookkeeper that summer. So we came back. At the end of the summer, I was the only one that got a bonus. My husband was told if he ever came back again, they'd hire him by the day, because the entire month of August rained. [She laughs] He wasn't doing anything. Just bothering me. And he, we started looking for practice, you know, an office. We had no money, and we finally found an apartment in Forest Hills. I got the job at Madison House at that time. As

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soon as I came back a friend of mine, a friend of ours was working there and recommended me. And as soon as we came back from camp, I went down to the interview and got the job. So I was working. I earned, I started out at twenty-five dollars a week, and our rent was eighty dollars a month, with, so that covered that more or less.

LEVINE: Yeah.

KELLNER: And we just, we furnished the office. The office was part of the apartment. Our, our foyer and his private office was sectioned off for us, and the front part was the operating room, and the kitchen, bedroom and bathroom was our living quarters. So it wasn't too private, because everybody kept making the mistake of opening the door, thinking that was part of the office. Obviously it wasn't. I mean, there was no reason for this other than curiosity, you know. So, I went to work, and he just sat around, walked the dog at lunchtime to make friends, you know, and patients. And he had to wait, you know, for the practice to grow. And it took us three years to pay off the equipment. And that's when I, no, I didn't stop working I worked while I was pregnant, but I became pregnant after three years. And I worked in Madison House until, I used to go down to, down, from Long Island down to the east side, even when, I think I was in my eighth month when I stopped the ninth month. Because I, although I had

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left the job at Madison House itself, I ran their theatre parties for them, where they would have an office on Madison Avenue. You know, I was there alone just handling all the tickets and everything, because we would, they would, they would, at that time they would have, what do you call, previews, you know, and rent, and, and sell the entire theatre to an organization. And the trustees would be involved, you know, with this. And they would take over the entire theatre. Ethel Merman, every show she was in. And just buy out the whole theatre. And then sell tickets for Madison House, for Christadora House, or Madison House. Yeah. And, and I would, you know, take care of the tickets and the checks and whatever came in. So that went on for three years, almost four years, and my youngest ---- eldest son was born then.

LEVINE: Well, tell me your...

KELLNER: [superposed] And when he was a year and a half, when my oldest son was born a year and a half, my husband volunteered to go to service.

LEVINE: Oh.

KELLNER: He didn't have to go. But he just felt the war was going to be over in six months, and it was patriotic duty to go, and we just put everything in

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storage, and I went with him.

LEVINE: What was your husband's name?

KELLNER: Robert.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KELLNER: Yeah.

LEVINE: And you went with him? And where did you go?

KELLNER: Thirteen moves in four and a half years. And we started out Langley Field which is still in existence, and ended up there after thirteen moves. So I just questioned what the whole purpose of moving us around was. He never went overseas.

LEVINE: Hmm.

KELLNER: He was, you know, they kept using him at the, the highest levels, you know, and did dentistry and, for the officers only, you know, that kind of thing.

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LEVINE: I see.

KELLNER: And then, we never lived on the base until the very last move. We had to find our own housing. And sometimes it was very bad. And we didn't get treated very nicely traveling around at all.

LEVINE: Hmm.

KELLNER: We had a dog and we had a little boy, and we were traveling in a two-door coupe. A 1940, 1941 car. And we ended up way across the country to California when my second son was born, and back again. And every time we would stop while the war was going on, there would be a vacancy sign, and they would take one look and see a child and dog, and obviously we were Jewish, and they was all filled. So the last night, I remember that so distinctly. Well, one place we, we called the haunted house till the day he died, when we'd talk about it. It was so bad. In Virginia. And after four days, he finally got the Board of Health to get after the woman who owned the place, and just closed it down. It was so bad. Really, so bad. And I, and I learned how to do, and this was something I had never done before. We lived in Forest Hills, you know, prior to that. And I had diaper service, and I had, you know, brand new building, it was the first two---- ten,-----first

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two high rises that they built in Forest Hills at the time. And, you know, I went to work, it's true. And, but--- and we didn't have any money, extra money. We managed to save a thousand dollars after five years, you know, extra from what our bills were. And we had paid everything off. We never owed anything to anybody. But we, I, we just had learned how to wash sheets by hand, hang them out on line to dry, and make a coal stove, and you name it. Diapers, wash diapers. No diaper service or anything like that in the towns we lived in. So that, you know, it was not easy by any means. I mean, I, my daughter-in-law's mother, the one that lives in town right, just recently we were talking about it, and I realized that I've known her twenty-three years now that my son is married. She never really believed any of this. I mean, husband never went into the service. Her husband worked for the federal government. And she just didn't believe that if you were an officer, you know, you had to do all this. Because some of the questions she would ask me several times, you know, I could see that she didn't believe what I was saying. And we didn't, we came out with no money. You know, whatever he, he got as a salary went towards subsidizing our living during the war, you know.

LEVINE: Was it that you couldn't live on the base, or you chose not to?

KELLNER: [superposed] They didn't have housing for us.

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LEVINE: Oh. Uh-huh.

KELLNER: They didn't have housing for us.

LEVINE: I see.

KELLNER: No. And we just made --- the when we got to California, when we got to California we were so excited, you know, really, that's where we wanted to go finally, we ended up sleeping in the car that first night. The three of us and the dog, and I was pregnant. I was in my fifth month. And we had just traveled across country with the car. So that's just gives you a good idea. And then we lived, and then we got a room. It was always through somebody, you know, a previous officer or so on. At a motel. This woman wouldn't allow us to take the dog into the room at all. He had to----  
- he, a prior person that had a dog had built some kind of a, you know, one of these square things with wire, and we kept the dog out there. She let us keep the dog out there, and I had to feed the dog out there. And there was a deposit where you didn't get it back if you found anything, dust or anything in the room when you were ready to leave. Charged us an outrageous amount of money to stay there. And when my husband came home the last day before we were leaving there to go to, back to North

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Carolina, I was on my floor on my knees, in my, I was in my six, seventh month washing the floors, so she would find it clean and get that money back. So, you know, it was that kind, situations were not what people thought. And if we wanted to cash a check, I remember we were, we were in, in, oh, one state. I forget. Out west. And we were out of, out of money, out of cash. And we had a bank account in New York, you know, with the little money that we had there. And my husband, we went in, and, and he, we always looked around to see if anybody had a soldier's picture on their desk, you know, to be able to talk to anybody. And finally this man was, you know, sitting at a desk, and he had a young man's picture at his desk, and he agreed to wire for us, you know, for some money from our other bank, from the bank, so we could go on St. Louis, I think it was. You know, we had to stay over night to wait for that to come through.

LEVINE: Wow. Well, now, what, what are your children's names?

KELLNER: My oldest son is Jon. J-O-N. And he was named after my father. And, and his, his grandfather. My husband's grandfather. Yes. And the younger one is Kenneth. Yeah. And the older one is a dentist, and the younger one is an obstetrician.

LEVINE: And, so what, what would you say you're most proud of that you, that...

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KELLNER: My sons.

LEVINE: Yeah.

KELLNER: When we, they went to school, college and professional schools nineteen years. My son --- youngest son was, just became a full professor at the medical school, at Jans [PH] Hospital. And very proud of them both. Yes. Quite an achievement.

LEVINE: How about this phase of your life? How, how is this for you?

KELLNER: Well, this is lonely. And we had a very, very, very good marriage. Very good marriage. It's just lonely. [She cries]

LEVINE: Hmm. Yeah. How do you, how do feel about the fact that, you know, you started out in, in Europe and came here when you were seven and started a new life. Do you think that that affected...

KELLNER: Definitely.

LEVINE: the way you are now?

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KELLNER: Definitely. Definitely. I just, I, I can't, I can't agree with this generation completely in that they,----- well, my sons aren't, aren't as bad as some people I know. But they, they don't give too much thought to the future. I think, well, I guess they, they don't have to, really. They've never, you know, there's a saying; you don't know what hungry is unless you've been hungry. And they've never been hungry, you know. So it's very hard for them to understand what that means, really. And, especially, the grandchildren. And that bothers me, because I always say, I say to my son, if anything was to really, anything bad was to happen to this country, if there was a real depression, they just couldn't handle it. They couldn't handle it. We handled the Depression. We just went out and did what we had to do. I, I got, managed to get jobs during the Depression. I was going to school. Five dollars a week for an artist who needed his phone answered. Anything. Anything. I went out on an interview one time to clean house. I got to this woman's door, I remember this so well. [She laughs] I'd never done this. And she took one look at me, and I was little. You know, I was little and I always looked ten years younger than I am, you know. Not anymore, but I did. And, and she took one look at me, and she said, "Did you ever do this before?" And I said, "No, but I'm sure I can." You know, I was. "Well, I think, maybe you ought to wait a little longer." [They laugh] I was probably fourteen or something like that. I

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was looking for part time work. Anything. Had part time papers I was going to work. [She laughs]

LEVINE: If you, if you were going to give some advice to a seven year old child...

KELLNER: Seven.

LEVINE: coming to this country today, would you have any?

KELLNER: Well, even their lives have changed in Europe. I mean, they're, you know, it's so different.

LEVINE: Yeah. That's true.

KELLNER: Sure. And I wasn't aware of it being bad when I was there. I didn't know any different. And I didn't think about it even in later years as having been bad. You know, I was too young, I guess, to really ----- you'd have, probably have to ask my, my older sister, you know, a question like that.

LEVINE: Yeah. Yeah, that would be...

KELLNER: She's going to be eighty-eight next month. Yeah.

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LEVINE: Uh-huh. Well, let's see. How are old you now? You're, you were born in.-----

KELLNER: I was just eighty.

LEVINE: Eighty.

KELLNER: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Yeah. Well, good. Well, is there anything else you'd like to say before we close. We're just about out of tape.

KELLNER: I can't think of anything I haven't told you.

LEVINE: Well, you really tell a very interesting story. It's really been a pleasure to talk to you.

KELLNER: Well, yes, I'm just, well, I guess I have a more interesting background than most people do. In fact, I'm anxious to see "Schindler's Choice..."

LEVINE: "List."

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KELLNER: "List." I, we were in Germany, my husband and I. He wanted very much to take me back to wherever I had been, you know. And we always made Paris our base, and then we would go on from there in all directions. And we were in Germany one time, three-week trip. And this was while the Wall was still up. And drove through the, the checkpoints and all the different gates. And that was quite a trip. You know, interesting and scary and everything else.

LEVINE: Hmm-mm.

KELLNER: And we saw a lot. I mean a lot that you probably see in the movie. I haven't seen it yet, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KELLNER: Because at that time we were still around a lot. We went, we crossed over into East Germany at that time, and, you know, you had to leave behind any German money you had. You went in, you bought whatever you were allowed to buy, and then you couldn't go out with any of it. But we ended up with this tea house just on the other side of the, what do you call it, "Checkpoint Charlie." And they had this, this little building on the west

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side, which you went up and you could look over, over the wall at what was going on. The wiring and the guards and everything else. And we crossed over and saw some of the, you know, historical things on the east side. The buildings were terrible. All, you know, bombed and everything else. And saw the changing of the guard there. And we couldn't wait to get out of there. But when we, the last thing that was before you crossed back over was this teahouse. And we had this money. And we didn't want to just give it away, you know. So we stopped in there, and it was filled. Huge room. Huge. Twice the size of this house. And filled with little tables, and Germans, you know, sitting there. Oh, I felt so conspicuous, felt, it was terrible, you know. And we got the tea, and we ran to get back out. Oh, on the way in we had to pass, we had to check in at the American, what do you call it that they had there, the, the guard. And we signed the book, and my husband said to him, oh, he said he came from Massapequa. We asked him where he came from. A young boy. And he gave us our, his phone number and his mother's name, you know, to please call her. And my husband said to him, well, now what happens if we don't come back out, you know, before sundown. And he said, "Well, you're out of luck, because we don't do anything." We said, oh, great. Terrific. You know, I like that. [She laughs]

LEVINE: Wow. What year was this? It was during the Second World War?

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KELLNER: No, no. No. Now.

LEVINE: Oh, now.

KELLNER: [Her mic is knocking against a table] Yeah. Before he died. Well, we traveled from the time, we were married forty-eight years, and we started traveling, our twenty-fifth anniversary was our first trip out of the United States. We went to Mexico at that time. And after that we just traveled every year. But we were in, in Israel the first time in 1970. 1970. I know this, I mean, my husband has records. I haven't even had, I've got boxes of pictures there that I haven't gone through yet. I have some ivory chopsticks that a young boy in Hong Kong became a pen pal of my husband's. We were there in 1970. And he wrote to this boy, and sent him things until he was in college. And this is a funny story, because he, this young boy wrote to him. And he was so thrilled he was coming to the States to go to college, and, and where do we live, you know, thinking he was going to be right around the corner, and this was in California. So we made it clear to him that he was quite a ways from where we lived. But then it was his birthday. So he wrote to us that he was very excited that his friends were taking him to a Chinese restaurant. Had we ever been to a Chinese restaurant? He was about, I think he was like about twelve at

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the time when we met him. He was doing homework, he was sitting on the, sitting the ground, you know, his mother had this little, little kiosk there. And my husband looked over, we were walking by, and it was in English, so he started to talk to him. And they be, he asked him to be his pen pal. So anyway, had we ever been to a Chinese restaurant. My husband had the most wonderful sense of humor. He got out the New York telephone book, and he tore out the yellow pages of the Chinese restaurants, and he sent them to him. [They laugh] To show how many Chinese restaurants we had where we lived.

LEVINE: That's good. Well, okay. I think we need to close here. And I want to thank you very much.

KELLNER: Oh, you're very welcome.

LEVINE: You're most interesting.

KELLNER: You're very welcome.

LEVINE: I'm so happy to have met you...

KELLNER: I am too.

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LEVINE: and heard your story.

KELLNER: I am too, Janet.

LEVINE: Good.

KELLNER: It was a pleasure.

LEVINE: Okay, this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. I've been talking with Regina Kellner. And it's February 20th...[Tape ends]