

EI-456

LEAH BURDICK NASS

BIRTH DATE: DECEMBER 9, 1908

INTERVIEW DATE: APRIL 12, 1994

RUNNING TIME: 44:20

INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE, PH.D.

RECORDING ENGINEER: ROY SWANSON

INTERVIEW LOCATION: STATEN ISLAND, NEW YORK

TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: NANCY VEGA, 5/1996

TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY: CHARLES MITCHELL, 2/2010

RUSSIA, 1920

AGE 11

PASSAGE ON "THE ZEELAND"

PORT OF EMBARKATION: ANTWERP

RESIDENCES: SAMAVALOVICH (NEAR MINDK); BROOKLYN, NY

LEVINE: This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service, and we're here today in Staten Island at the home of Mrs. Leah Burdick Nass, who came from Russia when she was eleven years old in 1920.

Today Mrs. Nass is eighty-five years old and, uh, we're very interested in hearing your story.

NASS: Well, where do I begin? What . . .

LEVINE: Let's begin with your birth date and where in Russia you were born.

NASS: Oh. I was born, well, to tell you the truth (she laughs) I made up the birth date myself, because every year it came out a different date. On Hanukah, the first candle, fifth candle, but when I came to the United States my aunt said, "This is the date now." So I made it December 9th. The year was right, 1908. And I was born December, 1908. And I arrived here in October 9th of 1920.

LEVINE: And where in Russia were you born?

NASS: I was born in a small town named a shtetl. I don't know how you would say that. A shtetl. It wasn't a suburbia town, because there were villages all around. But we were the first shtetl to Minsk, eighteen miles from Minsk. That's where I was born, in Samavalovich [ph]. I don't know how many people were there. I was too small to know the amount of people that lived there. But it was a small community.

LEVINE: Could you make a try at spelling it?

NASS: What do you mean? About?

LEVINE: The name of the community.

NASS: Samavalovich [ph] was the name of the shtetl. In fact, there is a cemetery in Elmont that has their name, because all our people belong to the society, and those that were buried during this time a hundred years ago, they're on that cemetery, and it says there Samavalovich [ph] Progressive Association. Yes.

LEVINE: How do you spell Samavalovich [ph]?

NASS: Well, whichever way you want to spell it. Spell it the way you sound, Samavalovich [ph]. Samo, whatever it is, you know. That was the name of the town where I was born. And I lived there until I was eleven years old, and from there I came to the United States.

LEVINE: What was your father's name?

NASS: My father's name was Harry Burdick [ph].

LEVINE: Burdick [ph]. And your mother's name?

NASS: And my mother's name was Gisha.

LEVINE: And what was her maiden name?

NASS: Levine. Gisha Levine, yeah.

LEVINE: And, uh, did you have grandparents?

NASS: I had grandparents, but my grandparents immigrated to the United States. I didn't know them. I was, because they were here. My father came here in 1914 with my oldest brother. And they came before, a few years, maybe 1908. They knew that I was born, but I didn't know them, you see.

LEVINE: Was this your father's . . .

NASS: My mother's parents.

LEVINE: Your mother's parents. How about . . .

NASS: My father's parents lived in the same shtetl.

LEVINE: And do you remember them?

NASS: Vaguely. I remember them, yes. They didn't live much, very much longer, you know, before I left for the United States. Maybe I was about eight years old then. And, uh, the, I remember my grandfather, my father's father. I remember the mother, but they both died before I left for the United States. So I really don't know much of them. My mother's parents, of course, when I came here, I lived with them, because we were orphans, you see. My mother died during the first World War when they, in 1914 when the influenza broke out, and typhoid, that's when my mother died.

LEVINE: Do you remember her being sick?

NASS: I remember her being sick, yes. I was eleven years old. I was the

oldest. See, I had my brother, who lives here now. He was nine. And I had a little sister who was three. When my father left, I don't remember my father because he left in 1914. I was only six years old. I never knew my father. I only knew my mother.

LEVINE: What do you remember about your mother before she got sick?

NASS: I remember about my mother, she was a mother, you know. (she laughs)

She had three small children there. She did insist that my, now, the question comes up why did my father leave my mother and go to the United States. Doesn't that put a doubt in your mind what happened then? My mother was very anxious to get to the United States because of her parents and her brothers and sister all came to the United States. She only wanted to come to the United States. My father did not want to come to the United States because he had, um, you know what a master skaya is, a Russian? He used to make suits to order, my father. He had a business of his own there. And he was very happy living. His parents had a, were manufacturing shoes. My father's father was manufacturing, he made the shoes for all the villages around the area to order, high shtibbel, you know, the high shoes and all that. And they didn't want to come to the United States, but my mother did, because her parents were here. so she felt that if she'll send my father with my oldest brother, he will never leave him there and come back. You understand? Because of the child. And she knew that her parents would never let that child go back, you know, grandparents. But, unfortunately, the war broke out in 1914, the First World War. My father couldn't come back. We couldn't come to him. So that's how we remained in Europe until it was an epidemic and my mother got very sick. All of us were sick. We all had the typhoid. But after, my mother was the

one that died. And we were left all alone there, with the exception of my father's brother, who was working in the shoe business there. His parents were gone already, but he took over the business. And, so he took us into his house, because we were three small children, you know. I was the oldest then. I was about ten years, because another year it took for us to get the papers to come. We couldn't even get papers, because they couldn't get mail through the United States and Europe. It was like a closed deal. My father here did not know that my mother died, because you couldn't correspond. But we did advertise in the HIAS, in the paper. And my grandfather used to read the Tag and the Forward. And he read in the paper they, I didn't, I wasn't that smart, but the HIAS said that the three children are left all alone because the mother died, and they're looking for their father in the United States by his name. And when my grandfather read it in the paper, you know, there was a certain, that's how they found out. But they couldn't do anything, because you couldn't get mail. It took another year until we were able to get through mail.

LEVINE: Was it your father's plan to come to the United States and then go back?

NASS: He wanted to see what it's all about. You see, my mother thought once he'll come here maybe he'll decide to stay here and then she can come. He would send for her with the three children. But unfortunately, as I said, the war broke out, and there was no corresponding, there was no coming here, there was no going there. Now, the next stop was, the next story is, I didn't have a bowl of cherries there. Believe me, I was the oldest, but I remember that when mail started to go through and we were able to

correspond with my father, you know, I didn't write to him, but the HIAS took over, you see, and they wrote, and they told him what the story is, that we're there all alone, but my uncle, we're with my uncle, and now let my father take it from there. He had to make out papers for us, you know, visas and all that. It wasn't easy. So my father got on the ball, and I don't know if you're acquainted. Vilna, you know where Vilna is. In Vilna they do all the Jewish articles. They write all the Jewish mezuzzas [ph] and all those things. They really are, I think, the biggest in the world, is in Vilna. They have all these Jewish articles. Talasim and all that stuff. The lodge that my father belonged to, you know, years ago everybody had their shtetl, the lodges. This delegate was coming in to buy a religious article in Vilna. He was an American citizen, and my father sent money with him that he should look us up, and he should see to work out our passports so that we could come back. He would bring us back. How else could we manage, you know? He was coming to the United States anyway, back again, after he purchased his merchandise. So my uncle, who we stayed with, we got our papers through the HIAS. They worked on it very quickly, because they wanted us, you know, they felt three children, you know, that here was our opportunity. We'll be able to go back with this delegate. Well, would you know that the Bolsheviks came into our town in Minsk, and we couldn't go to Vilna no more. There was no passage any more. He was a United States citizen. He could have gone, but he couldn't take us out. We had no papers. So now we're stuck again. In the meantime, my uncle took us to Warsaw, because from Warsaw he was supposed to come and pick us up. From Vilna to Warsaw is not far. He couldn't get out, he couldn't get in, he was afraid, you know. So what do

we go, where do we go from here? Now we're in Warsaw. We cannot take my uncle with us. He has no passport. My father didn't want him. He only declared the children. He was a married man.

He had a wife and child there. Well, it got so bad that my uncle said to me what do you, he says, "I cannot leave you kids alone. I've got to take you to the United States. I must take you. I cannot leave you all alone. Nine, eleven and three." So we had to start all over again through the HIAS. And the worst part of it was we were in Warsaw for six weeks, that I had to go all over and make the papers, because my uncle had a beard, and they were sending all the Jewish people to Siberia. As soon as they saw a Jewish man, immediately they cut off his beard, they cut him up to pieces and sent him away to hard labor in Siberia.

So my uncle was out of the picture completely. We had to hide him out. And for six weeks it took for me to go to the HIAS and get all the papers and all the, get the visas, and my father sent a passport for my uncle, and that's how we came to the United States. It wasn't easy. Believe me, we went steerage. We traveled on, on, for sixteen weeks we were en route, you know. We were six weeks in Warsaw, three weeks in Germany, Danzig, and three weeks in Antwerp, Belgium. We couldn't get our transportation from Danzig, from Germany, which we originally were supposed to leave because the papers weren't ready. So we missed there, we had to go to Antwerp. And from there we landed in the United States, finally. My uncle came. He stayed here for two years, and he went back, and Hitler killed him. That was his doom. We begged him, my father begged him he shouldn't. He should send for his wife to settle here, he didn't want to. He only wanted to go back.

LEVINE: So you were the, you were eleven years old, and you were taking care of . . .

NASS: That's right, that's right, of all these things, I took care of.

Because I was afraid if my uncle would go out in the street in Warsaw they would kill him right away. They would send him away to Siberia. So he was hiding out. Six weeks he didn't go out. He was inside in the house.

LEVINE: Well, what was involved before you could actually get on the ship. What did you have to do?

NASS: Before, we had, first of all, he needed a passport. He needed a visa.

He needed certain credentials that he didn't have with him. You know, he came from Russia. They just don't let you on, you know.

There were all these here formalities that had to be taken care of. But the HIAS did work with me. They did. They did an awful lot for us.

LEVINE: Did you have examinations before you left on the ship?

NASS: Oh, before we left on the ship? No. Our, in, at home, at home we did, in Minsk, you know. There we went through, we had to, before we got our, uh, visa, whatever it was. But, uh, we were examined here, when we came to the United States. That's what I remember how awful it was in that, uh, in the Ellis Island. It was like a dungeon. They had the beds, one on top of another. Fortunately for us, my father came the same day and took us home, you know, and took us away, but people there had stayed for a week. It was terrible.

LEVINE: What do you remember that happened to you at Ellis Island?

NASS: Me, nothing. Nothing bad happened to us there. My, we came, and they examined us. Each one did something else, you know. Because we were examined all the time in Germany. Hitler wasn't in effect then, but they were mean. They were terrible. Especially the soldiers there. Uh, frequently they would call us down and examine the eyes and the chest, whatever, you know. But, of course, I was a little girl. It didn't make much difference to me. But the older girls resented it. They shaved them and they cut their hair off, and it was very sad. But we were kids, you know. I didn't mind it. And when we came to the United States naturally we went through a routine of checkups. Each doctor did something else. As I said, I, that already was a minor thing, you know, compared to what we went through. We had a tough time in Germany, a tough time. They didn't let us go into the city. We were in quarantine for three weeks. We were in the barracks, right near the port of embarkation. You see, they did not allow us to go into the city, because they were afraid we shouldn't carry any germs, disease, or something, you know. It was hard. It was very hard. I remember my brother and I climbing on the picket fence, trying to get in. We wanted to get better things to eat. (she laughs)

LEVINE: So you were, so you were actually detained there, outside of Danzig?

NASS: We were in Germany for three weeks, because my uncle's papers weren't ready, you see. So we had to stay there. Not for pleasure. And then when he got his papers we moved down to Antwerp. And don't think it was easy. Three times we took my uncle on the train, and three times the soldiers took him off, we came off. We, until finally we made it. It was a terrible trip. I remember

like now, it was a terrible trip.

LEVINE: What would the soldiers do? They'd come on board the train?

NASS: The soldiers would come on board the train. Have you seen the Holocaust? Have you seen Schindler's List, they way they pulled them off and pulled? That was us. That was us. The same thing, when I saw Schindler's List I says, "Here we go." Yeah, the same thing. It was terrible. It was . . .

LEVINE: What was your uncle's name?

NASS: His name was Borag [ph] in Jewish. I don't know what he named himself here in America. (she laughs) I don't remember. Ben, I guess.

LEVINE: Was he, was he married, your uncle?

NASS: Yeah, he was married.

LEVINE: And his wife stayed?

NASS: His wife was there with a little girl, and he went to take us, yeah. He said he wouldn't leave us go alone. He couldn't. He says how could he let three small children go by themselves. He did.

LEVINE: Do you remember your life between the time your mother died and your uncle took you in?

NASS: Yes. That year was not a bed of roses either. We stayed with my uncle, yes. And my aunt wasn't too gracious, no. She wasn't so good to us. We couldn't . . .

LEVINE: Did you go to school?

NASS: Uh, of course I went to school. I went to, uh, a (?). Of course, I

went to school. I was the only one, I think. My brother went to the Yeshiva, to the Hebrew school. But I did go to the, uh, school, yes. And when I came to the United States, they put me into the 4B, because I knew arithmetic, you see. (she laughs) That was good. Language, I didn't know. Well, you didn't expect me to know the language. But, and then I went to junior high. Then I graduated with R-A, R-B. I wasn't a dope.

LEVINE: Well, tell me about the ship. What was the name of the ship?

NASS: The Zealand.

LEVINE: The Zealand. And what, what was it like going aboard the Zealand (?).

NASS: It was gorgeous. We were on the steerage. We were throwing our guts out. (she laughs) It was the most awful trip. We were so sick we couldn't keep our heads up. I was very sick. I just, the other two, I don't know, because they were young, you know. My brother I don't think felt that bad. He used to, he was busy running all day long on the top, on the bottom, you know. And then I used to sneak in sometimes when I felt a little better in the first class to see what was doing there.

LEVINE: What was that like? What, do you remember?

NASS: Beautiful. It was nice, sure. We were in steerage. We couldn't see anything, only the water. We were all the way down.

LEVINE: And what was your brother's name, the one that went with you on the . . .

NASS: Jack.

LEVINE: Jack.

NASS: Yeah. And Eleanor was my sister.

LEVINE: And how about your older brother who was here?

NASS: Julie. Yeah. Yeah. He's in Florida. Yeah, but he's, he's on the way out. He's not well. Well, he's eighty-nine years old, and he's quite sick now, yeah.

LEVINE: So, um . . .

NASS: And my sister died, unfortunately. She was only forty-three years.

LEVINE: And so your brother Jack is here?

NASS: Yeah, he's here. He lives in Brighton.

LEVINE: I see. Well, is there anything that happened of note on the trip. Do you remember coming into the New York Harbor?

NASS: Well, the only thing I remember is that we came in, it was like beginning to dawn, like, you know. And it was lit up, everything was so bright, it looked so nice. And a little boat came and pulled us in, because you can't get in with a big ship, you know. It's, the water was too shallow. And, oh, we were so excited! We were so excited, we saw the Statue of Liberty. Of course, I didn't know what it was then. And that was lit up. It looked so pretty when we landed. But, of course, when we, then, from there, they took us in with small boats to Ellis Island. Oh, when you walk in there, it was so gloomy, so miserable, you know. But, as I said, my father came a few hours later, and he took us home. Yeah. That . . .

LEVINE: What was it like seeing your father at Ellis Island?

NASS: I didn't know my father. I didn't know him at all, because I was six years. He left in '14, and I was born in '08, so I was six years old. I didn't know my father.

LEVINE: Do you remember how you felt when you met him?

NASS: I didn't feel anything. I was like numb, you know. It's like as if I came out of space. I don't know where, I've had such a terrible trip, for sixteen weeks we were all loused up, so to speak. You know, we, we lived under terrible conditions, you know. And, uh, naturally when I came in my grandmother was there, my grandfather, you know. And they were very excited, you know, to see us. They didn't know us either, because they were here before we were born.

LEVINE: Did they come to Ellis Island, or that was after?

NASS: No. Just my, uh, father and my uncle. He drove a Ford car, I want you to know. He had his own automobile.

LEVINE: Your father.

NASS: No, my uncle.

LEVINE: Your uncle.

NASS: My father, my father worked in a shop in the cloaks, you know, for the Amalgamated Union. My father, at that time, made six dollars a week, if you want to know. It was such a hard life. And my grandmother was a sick woman. My life, I could write a book. Believe me, if I would write a novel, it would sell. It would make money. She was so bitter, she was arthritic, and she was sickly all the time. And I was the oldest, and she made a drudge

out of me. She didn't let me play. It was such a hard life. I wanted to play ball. I wanted to jump rope. I wanted to go skating. I liked all these things. And she used to say that I am there to wash clothes, mend, you know. And my grandfather was an angel. Oh, he was so good to me. He used to say, "What do you want from her? She's a child. She has to play. She has to play. She can't live like this." I had a hard life, very hard life, very hard life.

LEVINE: Where did you go when your father picked you up, and your uncle and . . .

NASS: Oh, we went to a nice place. When my uncle had a house on Eastern Parkway. We came to a two-family house with electricity, with steam heat. That was seventy years ago, mind you. And my grandmother said to me, "You see? You see the light? You see?" I says, (Yiddish). You understand Jewish?

LEVINE: No.

NASS: Oh, you don't understand Jewish? "I have seen it before." She says, "Where did you see it? Not in the shtetl where we came from." I says, "I know, but I was in Warsaw, I was in Germany, I was in Belgium. I've seen lights. I've seen steam heat. I'm not excited over this any more." I was in Warsaw for six weeks in a very nice hotel with, with terraces, with flowers, with everything. I said, "This doesn't phase me. I've seen it." She was so surprised, she says, "The (?)." You know what a (?) is? When you come from Europe, you're a greenhorn, right?

LEVINE: Oh, yeah. What does that mean?

NASS: You're a greenhorn.

LEVINE: What is the expression from?

NASS: I don't know. That's how they, that's how they say it. "You're a greenhorn." Even here people will often say to you, "What's the matter with you? You're a real greenhorn. You don't know? Where were you born?" And I says, "I was born in Russia." But I paid my passage. I didn't come here by foot.

LEVINE: Tell me what struck you as new and different in this country compared to what you knew before this?

NASS: Well, uh, I'll tell you the truth. I was a little disappointed. You know why?

LEVINE: Why?

NASS: Because Warsaw is so clean, spotless. You don't see a piece of dirt on the floor, or a piece of paper, and their trolley cars run on electricity. They don't go like here, buses. So I have, in Germany, of course, I was in the barracks, so I cannot tell you. Belgium was nice. So I wasn't too impressed at first. And I came to, I didn't come on the east side, you know, and I didn't come to a place where you had to go to the bathroom in the, uh, in the hall. We had a bathroom, we had a shower, we had a bath. So, but maybe because I was a child and I went through so much that nothing, nothing really excited me. You know, I was, I was too hurt. I was, you know, I was, uh, I really can't explain it. But she, my grandmother used to walk, "You see the lights? You see the heat?" I says, "I've seen it. I've been there." She said, "The greenhorn." (she laughs)

LEVINE: What was it like going to school here?

NASS: Well, I liked it. I liked it. I liked, the children were very nice to me. You know, they put me into 1-A, and right away they put me into 4-B, with bigger children, you know. I liked it. Yeah. Of course, it was, we learned English very fast. We picked it up very quickly, all of us.

LEVINE: Do you know what helped you pick it up fast?

NASS: I don't know. I guess necessity. I don't know. I guess I, I had to learn, otherwise I, I didn't know where I belonged. I spoke a little Russian, you know, when I was in Europe, and, of course, Jewish. And I knew Hebrew. But English was, it was hard, you know. English is not an easy language. I learned a little German during the war because the soldiers were, that stayed with us, you know, we had books that they brought in. I used to read them. But, uh . . .

LEVINE: When did, what, tell me about the soldiers who stayed with you during the war? What was that like?

NASS: Well, it wasn't good, believe me. They used to come in. They took over completely the house. We, and they took away whatever we had in food, you know. They were mean, the Bolsheviks were terrible. The Cossacks, they were such mean people. And, of course, for my mother it was very hard. A young woman, she was only thirty-eight years old when my mother died, you know. We were small children, and when they used to come in with their, you know, those swords. You know, they didn't have no revolvers. They had those big, uh, swords, the Cossacks, you know. And we used to huddle, I remember, around my mother. We used to get so closed up to her. You know, we were frightened. We were

terribly frightened. I remember I had plenty of nightmares. I used to get up at night and scream my head off, and my mother didn't know what to do for me, and it was very bad, it was bad. But we survived it. If my mother had lived, she would have been in the United States. You see, unfortunately she had it so bad, the typhoid that she couldn't make it.

LEVINE: So then you lived with your grandparents and your father?

NASS: No. Then I lived with my uncle for a year, and then we came to the United States, and we lived with my grandparents for two years, and then my father bought a little house, a four-family house, and we went by ourselves. Yeah, we went by ourselves. By then already I was fourteen years old. I finished junior high, and my grandmother says, "She cannot go to high school. She's got to help me. I cannot take care of them. I'm sick." And so I remained home that way. And then I met my husband. (she laughs) I was eighteen years old.

LEVINE: Tell me first how, how, did you get used to being with your father?

NASS: My father was good to us. He was very good to us. He was very, as good as he could be. He worked from six in the morning until six at night. And after he came home at night he used to go to a cleaning store to make a hem on a pair of trousers for twenty-five cents. He worked very hard. When I think of my father I can just cry, how hard he worked.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

NASS: We, there were four mouths to feed, at six dollars a week. He worked

very hard. But he was good to us, yeah. And there were times when, when we got a little older, my brother and I. We used to say to my father, "He should get married. He really should. It doesn't make sense for him to be alone." You know, we were getting older, we were dating. And he says he couldn't possibly think of getting married on four children. He said there would be chaos here. You know, four adults, four teenagers. And, you see, we grew up, all of us, and we didn't go on drugs, and we didn't steal, and we didn't, I didn't become a call girl. (she laughs) We grew up decent, honest-to-goodness citizens. By ourselves, God was with us.

LEVINE: Did your father become a citizen?

NASS: Of course. My father became a citizen as soon as he came to the United States, a few years later. And I became a citizen right after I was here a few years, when I was of age. I went and I got my paper. There was no problem. All of us are citizens. And I voted every year since I'm here. I've never missed a year. Good, bad or indifferent.

LEVINE: Was your, was the attitude of your father, and maybe your grandparents, was it that you become assimilated, that you become Americanized, or did they want you to hold on to some of the ways of Russia and . . .

NASS: Oh, no. Oh, no. Oh, no. They wanted us to become, my aunt, as soon as we came here, she says, "You've got to go to school. You're not going to no Hebrew school. You're going to the American school, and you're going to learn English." No, no. They wanted us to become, my brother at that time was going to Boys' High already, the older one. And he really resented us, you know.

Because he was the apple of everybody's eye. There were five adults, five uncles, you know, and suddenly four, three others came into the picture. They had to share, and he didn't like that. He was going to Boy's High at that time, and he had no patience with us. When we asked him if this is right, you know, the reading or writing, oh, he had no patience. (she laughs) He wasn't so, he wasn't so good. (she laughs) My father was working like a slave, you know. He had no time for anything. But . . .

LEVINE: What was your personality like when you were first here? What kind of a temperament, and how would you describe yourself?

NASS: Well, I, like my brother always said to me, my younger brother. He says, "I don't remember my mother, and I don't remember my father. I only remember you as my mother." See, I took care of them. I took care of my brother and I took care of my sister. Not, the older one already was big, you know. He had the love of everybody. But I really took care of them, you know. He says, "I only remember you as if you're my mother." To this very day he can tell me sometimes.

LEVINE: Was that the person you were closest to? Were you closest to any particular member?

NASS: No. I was close to my, I'm very close to the one that I, my brother in Florida, too. They're my brother, he's my brother, you know. But, of course, it took a little while for me to accept him as my brother. I didn't know him. I didn't know anybody, you know. Because we were so young when they left.

LEVINE: So tell me how you met your husband.

NASS: Oh, boy. (she laughs) She wants to know everything, huh? Well, I met my husband on a boat ride. Isn't that interesting? We went, Fourth of July weekend we went on a boat ride, the girls, five girls or four girls, I don't remember. Believe it or not, I was a flaming redhead. I wasn't a bad looking girl. Now I'm all wrinkled up. (she laughs) I was eighteen years old. And we went on a boat ride, and my husband was there with a friend of his, and I don't know why he picked me. Don't ask me. (she laughs)

LEVINE: So he came up to you and . . .

NASS: He came up, he had no seat. They were all taken. All the seats were taken. So I offered him a seat. I had an extra seat with my food, whatever I brought with me, I don't know. We were going for an all-day excursion this Fourth of July. And so I offered him the seat, and that's how the romance started, you know. My husband was very comfortable then, you see? He had his own business. He was only three years older than I was. He had his own delicatessen store in Astoria, Long Island, and he did very well. And he really showered me. I never had it so good in my life after I met him. But, uh, there were problems there, too, you know. My father, he wanted to get married, my husband, and I said I can't leave my father with two children, you know, they're youngsters. And my father says, "You can't get married and leave us alone. We need somebody in the house." So for five years I went around with my husband. We didn't get married. Then I finally got married. They all got bigger, you know. They grew up already, and my sister started to work. And that's how I met my husband, and I had a wonderful life for fifty-seven years

until he died seven years ago.

LEVINE: What was your husband's name?

NASS: Samuel. I never, I had a wonderful married life. And now I miss him.
What could I tell you? I'm lonely. I'm very lonely.

LEVINE: So how many children did you have?

NASS: I only had one daughter.

LEVINE: And her name?

NASS: Joan, the one you spoke to. She's Joan. And she has three sons. I
had three boys. And I have a little great-granddaughter.

LEVINE: Now, what would you say you're most proud of or most satisfied
with in your life?

NASS: Well, the most satisfied life I had with my husband when he retired, we
had wonderful eighteen years. We traveled, we went to Israel, we
were in Puerto Rico, we were in California, we were in, uh,
Hawaii. And we were away every winter, stay five months. I had
a little efficiency there. And we had a good life. He was very
good to me, and it was wonderful.

LEVINE: Did he also come from Europe?

NASS: He came from Austria, Vienna. He came in May of that year, and I came
in October, yeah. Yeah, he came from Austria. And he had his
share of trouble. His father was killed by the Austrians right
in front of his eyes, you know. They killed him. His mother
wasn't well. Listen, you can go on and on and on. It's a
lifetime of misery, if you want to, I guess it's how you look at
it. I don't know. If you want to be grateful for what you have

now, I have a good, uh, a very good daughter. The boys are very good to me. My son-in-law is good to me. So, I guess, what more can I ask for? My husband, I can't get back. My husband went to sleep and he never got up. He wasn't even sick. So it's, it's very hard to, to adjust to your life that way, you know. At the beginning, I thought I would never make it, you know. But as time goes on, you know, you have to. I can't bring him back.

LEVINE: Tell me what it was like for you when you visited Ellis Island after all those years.

NASS: I was very much surprised to see the, uh, how they organized it, how nice it looks now, you know. I was very surprised. Because as I remember it, it was like a dungeon there. And now everything is lit up. The floors are nice and clean, and the beds are even made, you know, the bunks. It's an altogether different ballgame. But nobody comes, then, now, to stay over. I mean, they don't come through Ellis Island now. But it's a, there's such an improvement there. And the windows are big. You know, they had tiny, little windows in those. It was so gloomy when you walked in there. It's hard to visualize, anybody that wasn't there. And when I said it to the guard there, you know, the guide, he agreed with me, you know. (she laughs) He says, "You remember that?" I says, "Yes, I remember it." It left a very bad impression on me. Certain things you remember, you know.

LEVINE: How do you think those early, those first eleven years of your life in Russia, how do you think they affected you as far as the rest of your life was concerned?

NASS: Who accepted me?

LEVINE: Affected you. How do you think your early years in Russia affected the rest . . .

NASS: My early years were very good. My mother sent me to, uh, to gymnasium. You know, that's like a higher-up school. I went to Minsk. I was away a few years, from home. My mother liked things, she liked the better things in life, you know. She wasn't a village girl. She sang beautifully. She had a very good voice. She was an intelligent woman. And she wanted the better, to better our conditions. That's why she insisted that my father go to the United States, that this is no place to live, with the pogroms and all that that goes on in Europe, you know. It's time to move on. And since her parents were away, she said here's her opportunity. But unfortunately it didn't work out the way you planned, you know. Things don't always work out the way you want them to. And that's all I can tell you.

LEVINE: Is there anything else that you would want to say about life here, your life in America? Anything else?

NASS: Life in America was very good to me, as I told you. I met my husband, I was eighteen years old. He wined and dined me. I had a wonderful youth, after eighteen. You know, prior to that, forget it. (she laughs) I went through hell, you know. But after that, my married life was good, you know. Everything went along nicely. We made a nice living. I mean, I didn't have, I didn't want for anything that, you know, that would really make me miserable, you know. I had whatever I needed, I wanted. I didn't have luxuries. I wasn't a millionaire, but I had what I wanted, you know. And I had a wonderful child. She was very good, my daughter. She was good in school, she was good all the

time. She had a good marriage. She's got nice boys. I have, my oldest is a lawyer. He's in Washington. And now that she's away, they check on me every day, another one calls to find out how the old grandma is. (she laughs) "Grandma, are you all right?" I just says, "I'm fine." Wait until I tell them I had an interview.

LEVINE: Yeah. Well, thank you very much. It's a very interesting story.

NASS: It's a very, I think it's a sad, it's a sad story, and I . . .

LEVINE: But it turned out to be a very beautiful life, it sounds.

NASS: Well, now, yeah, in later years, yes. I guess if you wait long enough, you know.

LEVINE: Yeah, well . . .

NASS: Things get better.

LEVINE: Yeah. Well, thank you very much.

NASS: Can I give you, offer you a cup of coffee?

LEVINE: Well, let me just close off here.

NASS: Okay. I'll make a cup of coffee.

LEVINE: Just wait. You've got this on. (referring to the microphone)
Let me say thank you. I've been speaking with Leah Nass, who is in Staten Island. We're at her home. It's April 12, 1994, and this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service, signing off.

NASS: Very good, very good. Now . . .