EI-520
MORRIS MILDENER
BIRTH DATE: APRIL 1, 1911
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INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE, PhD
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TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: NANCY VEGA, 11/1998
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POLAND, 1920
AGE 9
PASSAGE ON "THE SUSQUEHANNA"
PORT OF EMBARCATION: DANZIG

RESIDENCES: SHEBRESHIN; NYC - LOWER EAST SIDE

LEVINE: This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. It's August 4, 1994, and I'm here in Far Rockaway, New York with Mr. Morris Mildener, who came from Poland at the age of nine in September 1920. Now, you were, uh, held over one night, I think, at Ellis Island.

MILDENER: That's right.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, I'm happy to meet you, and I'm looking forward to your story. Let's start at the beginning, Mr. Mildener. What is your birth date?

MILDENER: April 1, 1911.

LEVINE: And where in Poland were you born?

MILDENER: I was born in a small village that was called Shebreshin, S-H-E-B-R-E-S-H-I-N. That was the name of the village. It was located in eastern Poland. The nearest city of well-known name was Zamush[ph], after that is Lublin, which everyone probably is

familiar with, Lublin. And there were provinces there. They were called, in Poland, in Polish, gubernias. And we were part of Lublina Gubernia. And in 1913, the conditions in Shebreshin were horrible. It was very hard to make a living. My father, of blessed memory, was a young man who had eight children. And didn't have what to give them to eat. And in our town, this was many of heads of families, we heard at that time that America you can pick gold in the streets, and it was called in Yiddish, The Goldina Medina, translation, The Golden Land. Everyone believed that you could pick gold in the streets. However, we knew that no matter what things were there it was a lot better than where we were. So my father, in 1913, like other heads of families, went to America with the idea of making money and coming back to help feed his family. Unfortunately, a year later, the First World War broke out, and there was absolutely no communication. Letters arrived sporadically, but that's about it. There was no money, and as bad as conditions were, when my father was there, they were worse during the war, because our particular town was a battleground. And we, our experience was, uh, we were near the Russian border. And the town that we lived in, the part of Poland that we lived in was under Russian dominance. In other words, there was a Russian governor in the town, and the Polish people that lived in our town were persecuted as well as we were, so we were their friends. But as soon as the war broke out and Russia was very weak, Poland took back. They became independent. That's when the Polish friends that we were there, that we had. As a matter of fact, a Polish neighbor that we lived together for many years told us, in so many words, in Polish, "Zhit[ph], get out." Zhit[ph] means, "Jew get out." Here there's a man that was

friendly with us. We were neighbors all these years. But misery loves company. When they were in the domination of the Russians, they were our friends, they were deprived. But as soon as they became independent, this is what they told us. Anti-Semitism was rampant, and as bad as things were when my father left, they were even worse then. We were actually starving. Of the eight children that my father left, five boys died, mostly from diseases from malnutrition. There was no medical, as a matter of fact, I remember vividly, one of my older brothers, the only one that I can remember, got sick with a mastoid. There were no hospitals in our area. And, uh, my mother took him to Lublin where there was a doctor. She had no place to stay. She had no money. But she knew a relation, a distant relation, a friend, that she pleaded to let her sleep on the floor while she stayed there where my brother was supposedly being treated. She didn't ask for any food, but she told us later she was starving. And they had a cat, this family, and they put some milk out for the cat. She takes the cat away to drink the milk just to keep body and soul together. Well, to make a long story short, he died there.

LEVINE: Did he get any treatment?

MILDENER: He must have gotten some treatment, but evidently he was still far neglected. It was a mastoid. A mastoid here can be treated and fine, but over there, at that time, anyway, most of the other five brothers, four brothers, died from malnutrition, and, uh, no care. She came back, she was almost out of her mind. Anyway, we suffered like that till the war was over. When the war was over my father must have sent money, he told us later, he sent money that never arrived to us. When we finally got

some money, we were the first one in our village that received money, and received enough to come to America. Well, we set out on a, you had to bribe everybody. We set out on a first journey by train to go to Warsaw, that was the main town. And from Warsaw the embarkation point for going to America, for crossing the Atlantic, was at that time the free port of Danzig. Now, Danzig has got another name now, under Poland, but it's under Polish domination. But at that time it was a free port of Danzig, and there were many immigrants that went there to wait for a ship to take them to America. Uh, we lived in tents for weeks. We had to be processed.

LEVINE: Were these tents provided by the shipping companies?

MILDENER: I don't know. I don't know who, I think it was provided, I think Germany had some share in it, because I remember people were speaking German. They had to delouse you before they let you on the ship. They had to examine you. And there was a lot of hardships there. We waited there for a ship to take us to America. My father had sent enough money to go second class. He struggled, he slept, he saved every nickel he could. And what was left was my mother, myself, and two older sisters. Well, while waiting for a ship we ran across two young boys from our village that had run away to escape the draft, the Polish, Poland was drafting them into the army. In spite of the fact that they were, they were terrorizing all the Jews, they still wanted them to serve in their army. So they ran away. They had no money, and they were at the port of Danzig even before us. They saw us, they came to us and pleaded to save their lives, to loan them enough money to buy a ticket, steerage. Well, my sister did. They felt sorry. It so happened after getting

them, loaning them the money, I think it was seventy-five dollars each, it was a hundred and fifty dollars, but after loaning them the money we didn't have enough money to go second class. We had to go steerage, too. And as a young boy of nine, I remember what a horrible trip that was, when we finally got the boat. The name of the boat was The Susquehanna. Why do I remember the name? Because later on when I became a citizen, I had to show what boat I came on. That boat was a real tugboat, it was a real tub. It took us three-and-a-half weeks to cross the Atlantic, which shouldn't have taken more than five, six, days, seven days the most. And we slept in steerage. What you hear about and read about now, I witnessed. We was down in the holds, three-tier beds, no facilities for washing. There was one bathroom for everybody. People were nauseous, and they were sick, and they were defecating and vomiting. And the smell was unbearable. Well, my younger sister and myself, the one right next to me, she was fifteen and I was nine.

LEVINE: What was her name?

MILDENER: Doria. She lives here now. She's eighty-nine years old. She's a very sick woman. My older sister passed away. My younger sister and I never stayed down there. We went up on deck. At least we didn't get the smells. And people wondered later on where we were. That we were up on deck, but we weren't washed overboard, because we went through a lot of storms, and that boat, as a matter of fact, when we finally got here, they retired that boat. That was the last trip it ever made across the Atlantic. Well, that's enough with the boat ride. As we passed, when we finally got to New York, as we passed the Statue of Liberty I remember everybody crying and, happiness. And we

finally came to Ellis Island. Ellis Island we knew as Castle Garden. Why it had that name, I don't know. But all the immigrants referred to that as Castle Garden. Well, I remember it then, and I saw it afterwards, after it was renovated, it was far different, it was like a big hangar, and there was lines, you had to stay on lines, and there was lines of doctors examining all the people, okay. My two sisters, my mother and myself, our hearts were in our mouth as they examined us that God forbid they shouldn't find anything wrong, because they did find some people wrong, and they sent them back, when it was something that was serious, like trachoma or anything like that. Well, I, my other sister and my mother passed through. My older sister, for some reason or other, they found something wrong with her eyes, and they set her on the side. Others they gave the okay. They set her on the side to see an eye specialist, an ophthalmologist. Well, we were worried. But finally the ophthalmologist gave her the okay.

LEVINE: What was that sister's name?

MILDENER: Rifke, Rebecca. My younger sister was Dora. Anyway, what I remember vividly. You know, there's a limit to what a nine-year-old boy can remember seventy-four years later, but what I remember vividly is, uh, my, we came there. It happened to be Yom Kippur, which is the holiest day in the Jewish religion. And my father was an Orthodox Jew. He did not, in spite of the fact that he hadn't seen his family for eight years, seven, eight years, he didn't want to travel on that holy day. So he waited till the next day to pick us up. So we had to remain on the Ellis Island, in that space, overnight. Very few of us were there. But I remember vividly there was beds, not too many, but

some beds, because not, very few people stayed over. But there were no mattresses on the beds. There were springs. And we slept on the springs overnight.

LEVINE: What about your sister, Rebecca? What happened? They set her aside.

MILDENER: Well, they, they, the general doctor that examined her found something that he thought was wrong with her eye, but he wasn't, he didn't reject her completely. He told her to go see a specialist, an ophthalmologist. Evidently what he saw wasn't that terrible that he gave her the okay afterwards. But in the meantime it gave us a scare. Well, the following day my father came. I didn't even know him, because he had left in 1913. I was eleven, I was two years old. I didn't know he was my father. They told, they pointed out a bearded man. They said, "That's your father." "Okay." And they took us off the boat. At that time, 1920, there was no, no apartments to be gotten. There was no rooms. So he had a brother here, an uncle of mine, that had a three-room railroad flat on the Lower East Side, on Sheriff Street. We all stayed there, including him. He was a widower. We stayed there, slept on the floor, until my father was able to get an apartment in, lower down, on Garlic Street. It doesn't exist any more because they have a housing development there.

LEVINE: Oh. What was the first street where your uncle was?

MILDENER: On Sheriff. It's all on the Lower East Side.

LEVINE: Sheriff?

MILDENER: Sheriff Street. Then there was Willard Street, and then there

was Cannon Street, and then there was, uh, after Cannon, Lewis, Cannon, Columbia, Cannon, Lewis, and then there was Garlic Street. And after Garlic Street was Mansen Street, and later on in years I went to a high school that was called Mansen Junior High School, 97. That was the waterfront, the Lower East Side waterfront. I remember I used to, when I grew up a little I used to jump off the boat into the East River that was polluted. It was terrible, but to us it was good. And, uh, those streets don't exist any more. They built on it, they've made a housing place there, Lower East Side. And, uh . . .

LEVINE: Did you start school right after you got here?

MILDENER: I was so short, no reason. Nine years old, I looked like six. My father took me to, to, uh, school. They put me in kindergarten. Not in kindergarten, they put me in 1-A, the first grade. Well, my mentality was a nine-year-old, not a six. It didn't take long, they promoted me. In a short while I went up, I was even with the other children. And that was, the school was on the Lower East Side. It was up to, it was on Lewis Street, Lewis and Rivington. Rivington was the main thoroughfare at the time. Pushcarts used to be there. And from there I went to, uh, that school was only up to 3B. Then I went to, to a school that was on, on Sheriff Street, near Houston. And they had a park there, it was called Hamilton Fish Park. Today that school is an annex to a junior high school, but at that time it was a public school. And they had assembly. I don't think they have that any more. They had assembly. Instead of an auditorium, are you still there, instead of an auditorium they used to roll the doors from the classrooms and it became an auditorium. I don't know if you remember that. I

didn't think you would remember that.

LEVINE: Well, um, tell me about those first few days and weeks in this country. Do you remember things that struck you as very different, that stand out in your mind, your first impressions of this country?

MILDENER: The first impressions I got, being used to a small village like we lived in, and we used to walk around barefoot. You know, it was like the woods. Here I saw houses, tenement houses, six floors, walking up, with railroad flats. I walked out one time in my bare feet. Somebody, a friend of mine, a cousin of mine, says, "You don't walk around barefoot in here." I wasn't aware of that. Those are the things that struck me. But I soon learned English. My two older sisters went to night school at night. They got jobs working.

LEVINE: Where did they work?

MILDENER: Uh . . .

LEVINE: I mean, what kind of work?

MILDENER: Factory work. And they went to night school at night. They used to have dances there, for social, to get together, in the evening. As a matter of fact, when I grew up, sixteen, seventeen, in high school, I also went to learn how to dance. I used to go to, they had what they call dancing schools on the Lower East Side. They had, they had neighborhood houses, settlement houses. As I recall, there's one very famous one.

LEVINE: HIAS.

MILDENER: The Grand Street Settlement House.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh.

MILDENER: That was on Grand Street, Grand and Sheriff. And there was a Turney[ph] House. I used to go there to play basketball. Then there was, on Cannon and Rivington, there was a Clock House, it used to be called a Clock House. There was, the social activities, athletic place, we used to go there.

LEVINE: Now, were these always Jewish people, or were they other . . .

MILDENER: The Lower East Side consisted of, I would say, ninety percent Jewish. The problem, this I remember as a youngster, where I lived in, where my father finally found an apartment was on Garlic Street, after we stayed a few weeks by our uncle, and it was on the third floor, a railroad flat, three, three rooves. The bedroom was just enough for a bed. And if you opened the window you looked into a skylight where the next building was there. And we lived on a third floor walkup. In the summertime when it got very warm we used to go up on the roof, because you had no air on. We used to go up on the roof and sleep there some nights, on very hot nights. But what I do remember is on, we lived on Garlic between Rivington and Stanton. On Garlic Street between Rivington and Delancy, it's called Chip Parkway. That's where the Williamsburg Bridge used to go, it still goes over there, was strictly an Italian block. And, uh, they used to have their saints days, they used to have parties, and we used to go over there. It was very nice. They used to sell stuff, foodstuff, and all that. But at other times we used to battle. Many a time we used to have fights, youngsters, fighting between the Jewish boys and the Italian boys.

LEVINE: Were you fighting because you were Jews and they were Italians, or were . . .

MILDENER: No, just because sometimes they thought we were taking over their turf, or we thought they were taking over our turf. Because at that time when election day came around we used to throw down wood to make bonfires. Why? I don't know. That was the, that was the custom at that time. So if we used to . . .

LEVINE: Throw them down from the tenements?

MILDENER: From the roof, yeah. We used to throw them down so people could gather them together. We made sure we didn't hit anybody with it. And we put it together to make bonfires for election day. We used to fight about that. Those are some of the things I remember. I also remember one strange thing. When we used to come, being we were an Orthodox family, on the Sabbath, they're not supposed to cook or anything. So we had a gas range. First of all, there was no steam heat. We used to have a stove, a coal stove, in the kitchen, and they'd cook on that. And on the Sabbath they'd cover the stove over with aluminum foil so you couldn't see the light, and you'd keep things warm on that. Also we used to, we had a bakery across the street from us and, uh, on Fridays they used to make cholent, if you know what cholent is.

LEVINE: No.

MILDENER: It's a special kind of a dish which consists of beans and meat. You cook, I used to bring it down, we used to have a name on it, you used to bring it down to the baker and he'd put it on the stove and he'd leave it, it would have our name, and Saturday

came around we used to, everybody would go down and pick out their pot. It was a big pot, and it was enough for the whole family to eat. They sometimes serve it. It's very good. It consists of beans, chick beans or whatever, and, uh, you ever heard the word cholent? It's spelled C-H-O-L-E-N-T. Cholent.

LEVINE: No.

MILDENER: Religious families would know about it.

LEVINE: Was that a dish that you had in Poland?

MILDENER: Yes. We used to do that in Poland, and we did it when they came here, too.

LEVINE: Were there any other things that carried over that you remember, any things that, maybe cooking or anything else, that you did in Poland that you, customs that you kept going in this country?

MILDENER: Well, we were very clannish. Where we lived, in Garlic Street, when we came to this country, we had to, we used to, we couldn't stay in the houses when it was summertime, it was hot. Either we went up on the roof to sleep, but during the day we'd sit on the stoop. And we'd all gather together there and talk and sing.

LEVINE: You would sing?

MILDENER: Yeah, we'd sing songs. That's right. When I finally got a bicycle, we used to ride a bicycle. And one time, and we used to go to Central Park with the bicycle. And Central Park, as you know, is on 59th Street.

LEVINE: Right.

MILDENER: It was quite a ride. But we'd go there and sleep there on the

grass, on those hot summer days. Those are some of the things I remember.

LEVINE: Yeah. Uh, the songs, were they songs from Poland that you would sing? Or were they songs from . . .

MILDENER: Well, they were Jewish songs. Some of them were from Poland. Some of them were what we learned here later on. But, uh, some of them were Jewish songs. As a matter of fact, many Jewish songs, the melodies carry it over. We later heard them in American songs. Whoever wrote the songs carried over the melodies from then.

LEVINE: Oh, I see. So then they'd have English words with the melodies . . .

MILDENER: Yes, yes. The melody was from there.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Can you think of any values or attitudes that your mother and father tried to instill in you . . .

MILDENER: Well, yes. Schools then were far different than they are today. I remember when I finally went in a higher class . . . (disturbance to the microphone)

LEVINE: It's going to pick up on the mike, the rustle.

MILDENER: Oh, I see. I'm sorry. When I went finally to a higher class where we changed periods all the time, we were young, and I remember vividly there was one teacher who was, he was trying to keep order, because you'd walk around from one room to another. So somebody had said, made a statement said, "Look at that teacher there, he's shorty. He's a little short." And I laughed, you know? He heard it, he turned around, and he saw me

laughing, he thought it was me. He gave me a wallop in the face. Teachers don't do that nowadays.

LEVINE: No.

MILDENER: But they did then.

LEVINE: And when you got home, did you, what did . . .

MILDENER: It so happened, I walked into his room. He had music, he was a music teacher. And we went into his class, and he saw me, and he was real mad. Oh, you're in my class. Then he first grabbed me by the hair, by the head then. I don't have hair now. And he slapped me again then. So I was real mad. I came home, I told my mother about it, my mother and father. She says, "What'd you do wrong?" She didn't take nothing. She didn't take my part. "You must have done something wrong. The teacher wouldn't hit you for no reason." I says, "He did." No, she wouldn't believe me. That's the attitude that parents took in those days. I remember that vividly, because I still feel the slap in my face.

LEVINE: Were you ever treated like a greenhorn by people when you got here?

MILDENER: Yes. There were some things that were done on the Lower East Side. For instance, this I remember. We used to sit outside on the stoop most of the time, and at ten o'clock rumbles started falling down from, from, and they had no, they had no garbage can, they had no garbage in those days. So people lived on the third or fourth floor, they weren't going to walk down with their garbage, so they waited till night, and they'd throw the garbage out in the street. So it came ten o'clock, we used to

be careful not to stay near the buildings, you know, to walk on the side.

LEVINE: What was your mother's name, and her maiden name?

MILDENER: Her maiden name was Traub[ph], the second name.

LEVINE: T-R . . .

MILDENER: T-R-A-U-B. Hannah Traub.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And your father's name?

MILDENER: Was Chiam. Hyman. I remember when he got very sick, he got a stroke, and we were called in, this was just before he died. And we . . .

LEVINE: How old were you at that time?

MILDENER: Well, I was married. I was in the thirties. My father died in 1948. So we called in a specialist, and he tried to see if he was aware, and he scratched something on his, on the heel of his foot to see if he had any connection. And he said to him, in Jewish, "What's your name?" (Yiddish) That's in Jewish. "What's your name?" So he told him, "Chiam," in Jewish name, Chiam. And Chiam in Hebrew, Chai means life. He says, "Chiam to leben[ph]." To live. I remember that vividly. '48, that's, uh, forty years ago, over, fifty, fifty years ago. More, fifty six years . . .

LEVINE: Forty-eight.

MILDENER: Yeah, fifty, no, it's forty. Forty-six or so.

LEVINE: Right.

MILDENER: Yeah. Yep, that's the life. Well, I was eighty-three in April.

LEVINE: You look good. You look . . .

MILDENER: Thank God, knock wood, I'm all right.

LEVINE: Yeah.

MILDENER: I've had my share of sicknesses. I've had, uh, a malignancy of the colon that was operated on. Thank God everything is fine. I've had heart attacks. But, look, I've done all right. I can't complain.

LEVINE: What do you think, how do you think starting out in Poland and living there for your first nine years, how do you think that affected you in your, in your life here later on?

MILDENER: Well, it made me aware. The prejudice, I remember. It made me aware that this was a country where there was no prejudice, in spite of the fact that we used to fight with the Italians. But there was no vicious prejudice. There must have been prejudices in this country when we came here in 1920. As a matter of fact, there still are, I guess. It still exists, to some extent. But not as vicious. I remember as a young kid, other young boys, Polish boys, knew that we weren't allowed to eat pork. They would purposely try to force pork into my mouth, just to show, you know? Those are the things I remember. Well, actually, my youth, I grew up with my grandfather, because my father was here. My father I didn't meet till he was nine years old. I lived in the house that my grandfather owned.

LEVINE: What do you remember about him?

MILDENER: Oh, he was a fine man. He came in, he came to this country. We took him over. He came to this country about, uh, ten years after we got here. He was a man then in his seventies.

LEVINE: What was his name?

MILDENER: Avin Zalick[ph]. I don't know how you can change that into a, two names. Aaron Solomon or something.

LEVINE: And this was your mother's, uh . . .

MILDENER: It was my father's father.

LEVINE: Your father's father.

MILDENER: And he, he had his, his wife had passed away, and so he was alone there. So my father and his brother, my uncle, they took him over. And, believe it or not, he stayed in our house, and we were three, four, five people in three small rooms, box rooms. It was another one. He stayed there, too. As a matter of fact, there were families there lived in three rooms, they took in boarders, because things weren't too well there in 1920. You had depressions here. My father fortunately had a job where he worked. He worked, he peddled for three, four days, and then the last two days he worked in a fish store.

LEVINE: What did he peddle?

MILDENER: All kinds of clothes, from Bayard Street, down in the Lower East Side. He'd go around from house to house and buy up clothes, whatever they had to sell, and then he'd resell them.

LEVINE: You mean used clothing?

MILDENER: Huh?

LEVINE: Used clothing.

MILDENER: Used clothing, yes. And then he'd resell them. And from that, and the three, he worked Thursday and Fridays in the fish store. Between the two jobs he made a living throughout the entire depression. We were fortunate. We had what to eat, but there were people that didn't.

LEVINE: Tell me any experiences you remember with your grandfather, both in Poland, and . . .

MILDENER: Yes, one thing sticks in my mind, you know? In Poland, well, my grandfather was vigorous at that time when I was a youngster. And we used to, he used to, we used to walk in the fields. It was an agricultural base, and there were peasants, Polish peasants, working the land. And they'd see us and they'd yell out, "Hey, Moishe!" To them every Jew was named Moishe. It so happened my name is Moishe. So I used to turn around to my grandfather and says, "How does he know my name?" This I often repeat, because it struck me as funny. You know, one of the ways we used to make a living, during the war, the first World War One, when my father was here. One of the ways we used to, my grandfather was an old man, he couldn't work. Vividly, I remember, when the war broke out, the cossacks, the Russians, invaded Poland. They were fighting in Poland. And there was, the Austrian army was billeted in our town. They were decent, not like the Germans, the Nazis, the Second World War. They were nice to us. They were billeted. They, as a matter of fact, when they had to retreat, that the cossacks, the Russian army was coming, they'd come in and warn us, and they'd say, "Your German is somewhat similar to . . ." Jewish is a bastard

language of German, and they'd say, (German), meaning, "Jews, run away, the battle is going to come, and they're going to show." And we used to run to the hills and hide. They would, when they came into town, my sisters were, you know, young, fifteen, or fourteen, twelve, fifteen, around there, they used to hide, because they'd rape and kill and do anything you want. You had to hide. And they'd grab a hold of Jews. They were, to this day they were anti-Semitic.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

LEVINE: You're talking about the Russian.

MILDENER: The Russians. There was, there was groups in Russia today, the end of communism, the end of the Soviet Union, that are still anti-Semitic. So at that time they saw a Jew, because they had the pogroms in Russia, and, during the 19th Century, during the '80s, the 1880 or something, the people from Russia came here. Well, these Cossacks, when they came here, they ride their horses, and they had whips, and sticks, sabers, and they'd grab a hold of any Jew that they saw with a beard. A beard, a man, a bearded Jew. And they'd grab him and slice the beard of. Sometimes they'd slice part of the chin off with it. I saw that. As a young kid I saw that. This is, this is the kind of life. And the only way when, during the First World War, my father was here, the only way we could make a living is we would rent for the season the orchards that the, uh, Polish people had. They owned land, they owned (?), we didn't own nothing. But they had orchards, but they didn't know how to, how to, uh, take the fruit and market it and take it. So we'd rent the

orchards. And when the fruit, picked the fruit, we'd get wagons and, uh, sell it at different places. That, it's only a seasonal thing, but we had to earn enough money to last us for the entire year.

LEVINE: Uh, what kind of fruit were the orchards . . .

MILDENER: Well, they were peaches, they were pears, they were plums. These are the things. But we had to sleep there on the land to watch it, because if we didn't watch, they'd be pick-pick without us watching it, like we weren't there.

LEVINE: Now, was your grandfather in on this?

MILDENER: No, my grandfather was too old, but my family was. My mother, my two sisters and cousins, you know? Got together, and they'd rent the orchard. They'd pay the Polish people a certain amount of money, and we did that every season. What we earned during the, during the fruit season, had to last us for the rest of the year.

LEVINE: Do you remember after picking it what was involved in . . .

MILDENER: Well, it was involved in picking it and crating it, putting it in crates, and renting a team of horses, and to go to, to a fairly big city to, we sold it to a broker, but whatever we made was enough to last us. They had, in our town, uh, market days, a couple of days during the week. And they'd meet in the market and they'd barter stuff, sort of barter. Buy eggs, get eggs, and get them something else, get them clothing. That's how we used to, there was nothing to buy. That's how we used to live, from bartering. Later on when that, during the war they couldn't come to market. We used to go try to smuggle stuff,

smuggle cigars, cigarettes, whatever, anything to make a living. But it was rough. It was a tough life. I may not have felt it as much being that young, but older people felt it a great deal.

LEVINE: Do you remember when you, when your family brought your grandfather over? Do you remember any of his reactions to this strange place?

MILDENER: Yes, yes. One strange thing, he used to spend most of his time in synagogue. He'd go in the synagogue in the morning and stay there most of the day, and when he'd come home on the Sabbath sometimes he'd walk over to a, a candy store on the corner. This was on Sheriff Street. And the guy would be selling stuff, you know, a businessman. I don't know if he was Jewish or not, he'd go over to him and talk to him and say, "Listen, it's a holiday, it's the Sabbath. Why do you keep open on the Sabbath? Don't you think you'd make a living without keeping open." The man looked at him, I don't know if he was Jewish or not, but he looked at him, but he had respect for him, he didn't want to tell him anything. Or he'd go over to, there used to be, they called them gangsters. You see guys hanging out on the corner on the Sabbath, smoking a cigar. And he was a smoker himself. He smoked about two packs of cigarettes a day. But he didn't smoke on the holiday. He'd come on a Saturday and he'd go over to them and he says, "Why do you smoke on Saturday? You know you're not allowed." The man was nice enough, I don't know if he was Jewish or not, but he figured an old man, he didn't want to answer or anything, he'd throw the cigar away. Those are the things I remember.

LEVINE: Yeah.

MILDENER: He was a fine old man. He didn't stay, he didn't live too long when he came here.

LEVINE: Was he happy that he had come?

MILDENER: Yes. Well, he was with his, with his sons, you know? He was there alone, and there was, even after the war, in the '29s, there was a lot of anti-Semitism. My, my sisters, who were older than me, wanted to go to school, public school. In those days the only public school in our town was a Catholic school. And if you wanted to go to Catholic school, they let you go, but you had to kneel and, and say the, uh, catechisms, you know, crazy. And they wouldn't do that, you know? So they didn't get no education, outside of a Hebrew education, which I got. I went to Hebrew from morning till night, from the time, among the Jewish people, when you're three years old, three, age three, you started Hebrew. And each rabbi had an assistant who would come and dress these kids. Three-year-olds, you had to dress them and bring them to the Hebrew. And I remember being, and I'd stay there in the wintertime, the short months, we used to carry lanterns with us, because there was no electric lights in the town. In order to come home in the evening, to see where you're going.

LEVINE: How long would you stay, as a three-year-old?

MILDENER: It's, well, as a three-year-old, you wouldn't stay all day, but later on five, six, seven, you'd stay there at that time, all day, from morning till sundown.

LEVINE: And how do you remember, like, um, how the Hebrew was, you were strictly learning Hebrew?

MILDENER: Yes.

LEVINE: Or you were learning . . .

MILDENER: We were learning . . .

LEVINE: The whole culture, and . . .

MILDENER: No, just Hebrew. We were learning Hebrew, we were learning Talmud, and we were learning the five books of Moses. Not just to read Hebrew, but when you graduate from that you learn the Talmud, you learn the Mishnah, you know, different parts of it. (he coughs)

LEVINE: So You were in this Hebrew school from age three till nine, till you left, or was that disrupted by the war?

MILDENER: Well, in spite of the war we kept going. We, we still, uh, attended. We went to Hebrew during the war. Not, of course, when the fighting was in our town, that was disrupting. But after that, then they went through Hungary. There was the Carpathian Mountains. But when they passed through there was a period of time when they were fighting actually in our town.

LEVINE: And you saw that?

MILDENER: I saw it. These cossacks used to come, they used to look for food, they used to grab chickens and twist their necks. I remember them like, vividly, as I see them now. They had big, black horses, and they had these sabers, and they'd run with the sabers, as soon as they, they'd bend over. They wouldn't even get off the horse. As soon as they'd see a Jew they'd bend over and slash with the sabers. And the Jews ran, they ran to escape

them in the worst way.

LEVINE: Well, you must have, you must have, uh, learned sort of an attitude about what it meant to be a Jew.

MILDENER: Oh, yes, I sure did. We knew it from the time we were born, we were aware of it.

LEVINE: Can you, can you say, like, what it was you learned being a Jew meant?

MILDENER: Yes. Uh, most of the people in our town were Jewish. And we knew that we had to go to synagogue and we had our way of life. We may have been friendly with our neighbors, with our Polish neighbors, with our Gentile Polish neighbors, but we, we led our own life. They respected us for our religion, we respected them for their religion. Until the war when they became, when they were under the jurisdiction of the Russians at that time, but once they, they chased the Russian governor out of our town, complete change. I couldn't believe it. They said, "Zhit[ph], get out! This is not your land." Although I don't know how many generations we lived in that town, but that's the way it was.

LEVINE: But even though your family went back for generations, you really didn't consider yourself Polish, or did you?

MILDENER: Yes, we were Polish Jews.

LEVINE: Yeah. Oh, so you did.

MILDENER: If you remember the history, there was a, when Russia, when Poland was under Russia, our part of town, our part of Russia was eastern Poland, they had what they called the

PaleSettlement. You remember that, in history?

LEVINE: Yes.

MILDENER: The Russians, they couldn't get rid of all the Jews. They were, Poland had the biggest, next to Russia. Between Russia and Poland there was the biggest amount of Jewish people, and they represented a large part of, a good percentage of the population. And they couldn't easily get rid of them because they were influential. Some of the Polish Jews were influential in government, they were influential in other parts, in marketing and finance and everything else. But they, they tried to, they were prejudiced, no question about it. And I don't know how it was in the big cities of Warsaw or anything like that, but in our town we felt it. In other words, we couldn't get an education. If we wanted to go, there was no school except the parochial school, and if we wanted to go, we had to bow down, we had to live up to their religion, which we wouldn't do. So we didn't have an education. We had our Hebrew education, but not a regular education, a secular education. I learned how to write Hebrew, Jewish, when I was six years old. I came to this country I was able to write, to write Jewish. I only took it up six, six months time. But a child remembers things, easier to learn.

LEVINE: What about your sisters? Now, they couldn't, unless they went to the Catholic school, they couldn't go, so what did they do? Did they have any kind of education?

MILDENER: They just didn't have. As a matter of fact, when they came to this country my, the younger sister was fifteen, she went to, uh, she went to work, and she went to, they had what they called

night schools there. I don't know if they have it now. Adult schools. They may have it now. They went to those schools. My oldest sister went to, but how much can you learn? They went for a short period of time, and they went, they worked, and they went after work, in the night. I had a regular education because I went through public school, junior high school, high school. I even tried to attend a couple of years of college. I went to, they had what they called The New School of Science, on 14th Street. It was a socialist school. I became a socialist. What they called YPSL. YPSL stands for Young People's Socialist League. And I remember at the time, maybe I, you wouldn't remember it, Morris Hiltwhit[ph] ran for mayor of the City of New York, and he garnered about a quarter of a million votes, a very popular man. And we were, we were active in politics. As a matter of fact, when Roosevelt was elected in 1932, he was a runaway. When I lived on the Lower East Side, Tammany Hall, the democratic party, Tammany Hall, was crooked as you make it. They, they bought votes. In other words, they'd go around to you and give you five dollars to vote for them. That's how, that's how it worked in those days. And I was about, at that time I was twenty-one years old, I became a citizen on my own, and I was going to vote that year. Because my father never became a citizen, because he had plans to come back. He didn't have plans to stay here. So by the time we came here he never had a chance to become a citizen. And to start studying, he wasn't, it was too much. He had to work two jobs to make a living. So I became a citizen on my own later on. But before that i joined the socialist league, and I became active in politics. Not only I, friends of mine from school. And, uh, by, when the time Roosevelt ran for office, when they made us

watchers, we were watchers, to watch at the polling place to see what goes on, they have it now. And they gave us instructions, if, I don't know if you remember, you wouldn't remember that, 1932. Tammany Hall on the Lower East Side was as crooked as you make them. They had gangsters who, who put them in power, because they worked hand in hand. So the gangsters vote, worked to get a good turnout election for them. In other words, there was an election district in the Lower East Side that had listed, let's say, uh, a hundred Republicans. Most people were Democrats in those days, they would divide the votes. In other words, they saw to it that there was, sometimes they, there was a registration of six hundred, there were seven hundred people voting democrat. Maybe they'd give a break to one, one Republican and one, uh, socialist. So I was a watcher at one time. I left work, and I wanted to watch, on the Lower East Side, in my particular area, the fourth assembly district in the Lower East Side, and I saw what was going on. There was, there was roughnecks, guys that didn't let anybody vote. If a guy came in and they were, one guy voted twice, within my time. So I, I went, there was a policeman there, so I went over to the cop, I was told not to fight. Any irregularities that you see, you notify the policeman, and write down when it happened and what. I went over to the policeman, I says, "This man just voted fifteen minutes ago." The policeman didn't know what to say. And all of a sudden, two guys came over and pushed me aside. I said, "Oh . . ." I wrote it down. I figured no sense in me wasting my time. They said, "What's going on?" I went to work. Later on they had a trial, and I testified at the trial. I was told later, what I saw, and these people were convicted, the Democratic captain and all that. I was told later if I

didn't testify I would have made myself, I could have gotten a thousand dollars in bribe. But I was worried, I, and some of my friends, my cousins, I was worried about it that they would get after me later on. So we started hitchhiking. We went to the coast for three months. These are some of the things.

LEVINE: Were you a watcher, um, because, due to your affiliation with the socialist group?

MILDENER: That's right, that's right. Due to the fact that I was concerned. I, people used to, uh, campaign at that time on city, on the open streets, you know, on platforms, from wagons, and I'd listen to all these. I don't know if you remember, there was an August Classens[ph]. He was one of my teachers in speech at the Rand School. There was a Rand School on 14th Street. I took a course there. So, I used to, he was a good politician. He used to talk, they at one time had five socialists in the, uh, in the city assembly, and they had a caucus. He used to kibbitz around and he'd say, "We caucus in the telephone booth." Believe it or not, they were later thrown out, in spite of the fact that they were elected, they were thrown out. If you look up the history, you'll find that out. Five socialists were elected in the assembly. This must have been in the late '20s or maybe '30s. Anyway, when Roosevelt was elected overwhelmingly in 1932, so they figured at that time that they would show up the Democratic party at that time, they'd show up the corruption that was going on. The Republicans had that. The Republicans were working with the socialists together. Can you picture that? As long as they could show up the Democrats that they were crooked. But they figured, they did it at that time that it was so overwhelmingly

that, Roosevelt won so overwhelmingly that it wouldn't have changed the election at any rate, and they picked that time to, uh, to try to show up the corruption on the Lower East Side, which it was.

LEVINE: So then you went to, you went to, uh, to California?

MILDENER: Yeah. We went, we traveled with the finger and with the freight train. We had no money with us. For three months we were out of the country.

LEVINE: Now, how old were you then?

MILDENER: Huh?

LEVINE: How old were you?

MILDENER: I was twenty, twenty-one.

LEVINE: Twenty-one.

MILDENER: That was the time. I must have, I must have been in about forty of the forty-eight states.

LEVINE: And do you remember any, uh, impressions or any, uh . . .

MILDENER: Yes, I do remember.

LEVINE: Conclusions you reached?

MILDENER: Yes. This was the height of the Depression. You remember that, 1932. We went on, we went on the highway wherever we could, you know, hitched rides. Came a time when you couldn't get a ride, so we used to go to the nearest depot, freight trains, and hop on the freight train. They refused to know. They had the jungle that they used to know, people, the hobos, I used to ride

the freight trains just to know where each train was going. So we were in Kansas City at the time and we went, we couldn't get a lift out of there, so we went to the, where the freight train depot was, and we met a lot of people there, hobos, you know? And we used to wait till it got dark, and there was boxcars, and when the train started moving we'd run and jump into one of the boxcars that was open and close the doors. That's what we did. And I remember we got on Kansas City, we got into a boxcar. It was during the night. We rode and rode for quite some time. That was the Southern Pacific. And it dipped into Mexico. We were on Texas, Laredo. And before we could dip in there, it was during the day, they stopped the car, and they knew there were hobos riding there, they wanted to, immigration. It was the immigration office. They wanted to have people get out and check 'em, you know? So they stopped the train at the border, and we all got out. I thought we were the only ones that got on the freight train. I saw lines of women and children, hundreds and hundreds of people that, you know, a freight train is long, all there. Why? Because they wanted to go from place to place, they had no money. And this was the way they got a free ride. They had detectives, railroad had detectives, they used to try to check it, but they couldn't. It was overwhelming. There was too many. I remember one incident that I'll never forget. My cousin and I, so we took pictures of it. To us it was a lark, you know. I took about fifty dollars with me when I went. I came back, I had it about the same. We worked hard time wherever we did. One instance I remember. We were waiting for a freight train, and there was a young couple, a fella, and I don't know if it was his wife, or girlfriend, whatever, sitting there, waiting to get on the train. And there was regular hobos

over there that were eyeing. They were looking for a train to get on, too, and they wanted to stay near, near this couple. I knew what they were after because, you know, once you get on the freight train, there's a girl there, you know, you take advantage. And this guy, so we waited, and we hopped on the train, and he wanted to wait and let them go, this fellow with the young girl wanted to wait and let them go first so he could take a freight train that wasn't, anybody wasn't there, but they were smart, they waited, too. And the train kept picking up speed. So he finally had to go and grab the train. And these guys, these hobos, went into the same train, too, the same boxcar, and I went in, too. It was towards dusk. I and my cousin, and we were traveling together. I said, "I know something's going to happen here." Sure enough, we all sat there, we sat down on the boxcar. There's no seats, you know? And, uh, this fellow sat down with his girl, and he had a knapsack, too, and he put the knapsack down. And the other guys, the hobos, we were in the middle, the other hobos sat down also, and they kept an eye, they were watching, they were waiting till it gets dark. I says, "Something's going to happen here." I don't know what we could do to stop it, but we figured we'd watch and see. Well, sure enough, this fellow with the girl, as it got dusk, reached into his knapsack and took out a blade, a knife, this big. Didn't say a word, just took out a knife this big, and laid it on his lap. In other words, anybody wants to try anything, this is, this is here. I was so happy when the guy did that. I says, "Now these guys are, they got no guts, and they're yellow." And they didn't do anything. They were afraid to go near him. I was happy about that. That was something I remember.

LEVINE: So, now, what was your first job?

MILDENER: I had several jobs. Uh, as a matter of fact, my father said to me, "Look, you want to go to college, I'll pay for it." Although at that time you could have gone to City College and all that. But I didn't, because my friends started working when they were sixteen, and I did, too. My first job, in 1927, I remember vividly, not only I, two or three of my friends' cousins who we hung out with worked there too. Lindbergh flew across the ocean that time, 1927. When he came back, they gave him a ticker, a ticker parade. And I worked on a job that was making pennants for the ticker parade. That's how I remember, it was 1927, because that's when he, that's when he made the Atlantic trip, 1927. That was my very first job I had. How long can you work on that? I finished making the pennants, and that was the end of it. I had several jobs, factory jobs, here and there.

LEVINE: Was Lindbergh a real hero of yours?

MILDENER: Huh?

LEVINE: Was Lindbergh . . .

MILDENER: No, he wasn't.

LEVINE: No.

MILDENER: No, especially later on when I, when I heard, when he went, when the got a medal from Hitler. Did you know that, that he got a medal from Hitler? He joined the America First at that time, that was the name of the group, and they were, uh, they were a reactionary group, a right wing group. And, uh, they didn't

want the Second World War, later on, they didn't want a thing. They didn't care that the fact that, what Hitler was doing, what the Nazis were doing. In other words, they weren't sympathetic to the Jews. So, uh, he was no hero of mine.

LEVINE: Okay. So then, uh, you, you bounced around to different jobs, and then you . . .

MILDENER: Yes. Then I went into the fur line. I became a furrier. And, uh, the fur line was seasonal work. You worked six months, it was a union job, and you got paid well but, uh, you didn't work all year around. The rest of the time you collected unemployment insurance. I remember the time the unemployment insurance pay was fifteen dollars a week, which was enough for the table. I got married in 1936.

LEVINE: How did you meet your wife?

MILDENER: We had club rooms in those days. Along, if you're familiar with the east side, there's, East Broadway used to have club rooms, social clubs, they were called. And most of the boys, I didn't hang around the streets, I didn't go out mugging people, they joined these clubs, the social clubs. And we formed a social club of our own. We had our own group. And we used to want dances, you were able to get a dance on a Saturday night, get a group of boys, three boys, to play for, for twenty dollars. And we'd charge half a dollars admission, we'd get enough to cover expenses. That's how we spent our time. We joined social clubs, where we all spent our time. Later on we had a social club on the Lower East Side, then we had to give that up. We had a power flowing basement. Later on, we all lived on the Lower East Side, but we joined the club, we bought a basement in

Marcy Avenue in Williamsburg. We had a club there. We used to come there and play cards, listen to the radio, bring girls down, have parties. And we had a party there one time, and there were some girls there, and there wasn't enough for us, for me and somebody else. We came outside, and I met two young girls. I said to them, "Look, would you girls like to come down? We have a party here," you know? So they did. One of them was my wife.

LEVINE: What was your wife's name?

MILDENER: Anne.

LEVINE: And her maiden name?

MILDENER: Levitov[ph]. She's here. She lives upstairs.

LEVINE: Oh.

MILDENER: We live in the building.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. Now, had she come from Europe?

MILDENER: No, no. She was born in Canada.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So you were saying, um, so you were being a furrier when you married . . .

MILDENER: I was in the fur line when I married her, yes.

LEVINE: And you were on unemployment half the year.

MILDENER: That's right.

LEVINE: And you were working half the year.

MILDENER: That's right. Later on I went into business. I bought a candy

store, a candy store, a luncheonette, whatever you want to call it. And I worked in the fur line, too, whenever I could. I went in business with my brother-in-law, and my wife stayed in, so we used to open the store seven, six thirty in the morning till eleven at night. I had three stores during my time, during the years.

LEVINE: In the Lower East Side?

MILDENER: Huh?

LEVINE: In the Lower East Side?

MILDENER: No, this was in Brooklyn.

LEVINE: Brooklyn.

MILDENER: By that, when I got married, I moved to Brooklyn, because my wife lived in Brooklyn, in Brunswick. So we lived in Brooklyn. Up until then I always lived on the East, Lower East Side. I got married, I moved to Brooklyn.

LEVINE: So did you have children?

MILDENER: I got three sons that's (?). My oldest son is fifty-six years old.

LEVINE: What are their names?

MILDENER: Monty. I call him Son Number One. My middle son is going to be fifty this December. His name is Steven, and he's a supervisor, he's an administrator in the Board of Education, if you're familiar with the Board of Education in Queens, special education, you might hear of him, you might know of him. His name is Steven Mildener, Steven Mildener. He's an

administrator, just recently got that job of, uh, Community 25. You know where that is?

LEVINE: No, I don't know Queens too well.

MILDENER: It's in, well, it's in Queens. It's in, uh, Bayside, I think, part of Bayside. And my youngest son is forty, forty-one. He lives in, uh, my two older sons have homes out the island.

LEVINE: And what's your youngest son?

MILDENER: My youngest son name is, uh, Henry. He recently got married, recently, oh, six years, and he lives in Bayside. He doesn't have a house of his own. He doesn't have any children. But my older son has two sons and a daughter. And, uh, one son is twenty-eight, one is twenty-six, and a daughter is twenty-four, and she's a schoolteacher, too, and his wife is a schoolteacher, and my son is, uh, an engineer.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So you have grandchildren?

MILDENER: I have grandchildren, that's right.

LEVINE: And you have great-grandchildren? No.

MILDENER: No, grandchildren.

LEVINE: Yeah.

MILDENER: None of my grandchildren got married yet, so . . .

LEVINE: Okay.

MILDENER: They can't, they can't have, I can't have great-grandchildren.

LEVINE: Not yet.

MILDENER: Until they get married.

LEVINE: (she laughs) Okay. Well, we have about a minute left. Um, tell me what you're most proud of in your life, what makes you feel most proud of . . .

MILDENER: Of my sons. I'm most proud of my sons. They're wonderful boys. And I'm glad that they're doing well. I tried my best to give them an education. Well, of course, when they went, my older son went, uh, graduated, he graduated Brooklyn Tech, and he wanted to go onto college, and couldn't afford to go to an outside college like his children are going, but he went to college in the city. He went to, uh, Poly Tech Institute, became an engineer. I remember what I paid tuition at that time, three seventy-five a semester. That's what I paid for him at that time. I think he pays that for, for one month, for his children, he paid.

LEVINE: Well, I think we're at the end of the tape.

MILDENER: Okay.

LEVINE: And I want to thank you very much.

MILDENER: Okay, okay.

LEVINE: Wait, let me just say that I've been speaking with Morris Mildener, and it's August 4, 1994, and this is Janet Levine signing off. Thank you very much.

MILDENER: Oh, you're welcome.

LEVINE: That was wonderful.