

EI-526

ELAINE KLEIN WEISS

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RESIDENCES:

- **HUNGARY: MISCOLZ**
- **THE US: NEW YORK, NEW YORK**

LEVINE: This is Janet Levine for The National Park Service. I'm here in Manhattan at the home of Elaine Klein Weiss, who came from Hungary in 1921 when she was seven years of age. Today is August 8, 1994, and that would make you 80 years old at this time, Mrs. Weiss? Okay. Well, I'm very happy to be here and I'm looking forward to hearing whatever you can remember ...

WEISS: Sure.

LEVINE: ...and whatever you've been told. Let's start by you stating your birthdate.

WEISS: I was born on May 3, 1914.

LEVINE: And where in Hungary were you born?

WEISS: I was born in Miscoz.

LEVINE: Could you spell that?

WEISS: I wish I could. M-I-S-C-O-L-Z. (questioningly) Miscoz.

LEVINE: Miscoz. Did you live in Miscoz up until the time that you left for the United States?

WEISS: Yes.

LEVINE: Okay. So, I know you were seven and you don't remember a lot. But when you think of Miscoz and your life there, are there certain memories that you do have of that period of time?

WEISS: Well, I don't have many memories. All I know is what I heard from my family when we'd sit around the table and it was discussed many, many times. And I sort of visualize that I remember. We lived in a, an, a, like a little, a house that was owned by a baker and ah, he had three children and this is my sister's story, who was ninety-one years old, as I say, fourth of July, and she told us that there was a big yard and ah, we would be playing with the owner's children, whose name was Fogal. And ah, she told me stories about how they put a tub of water outside, and being seven of us they couldn't carry the water out for each and every one of us

so we would each take turns taking a bath in that same tub. And ah, she used to tell me stories about how people over here have such luxuries like ice cream soda. She said that she used to make us a thing that tasted like she says now, ice cream cone, out of Bromo Seltzer. And she said it would fizz and when she saw the ice cream sodas here she sort of compared it to that. I was three days old when my father came to America. So I didn't remember much about him, but when we came to America in April of 1921, and I remember the name of the boat. It was the Acquitania. And ah, my mother kept saying how sick we all were on the boat and it took quite a few days. It wasn't as fast as the transportation now.

LEVINE: Tell me about your father. Did he send money back?

WEISS: He wasn't able to send money because ah, the war ca-, the war came. You know it was 1914. And my mother used to go to the market with horse, with a horse and wagon with my oldest brother who at that time was fourteen years old. And then the next day she would sell it. And my grandmother lived with us. So my grandmother took care of us a lot.

LEVINE: What was your mother selling in the market?

WEISS: Well, whatever they were able to buy. What was marketable, you know, to make a living. Because you know, my father wasn't able to send any money. My father lived on the Lower East Side. And the stories he told us was that he worked over in Brooklyn. He never did this before but he worked in a dry cleaning plant. And he'd walk over the Brooklyn Bridge and he never bought a newspaper or anything, because everything, every penny he saved to bring us out. And he would go into a bar, he said, for his lunch and buy a glass of beer, and there would be all that food on the counter. So that's how. And ah, seven years later, which I think was

wonderful, he accumulated enough money to bring out nine of us. My five brothers, my sister, myself, my grandmother and my mother. And we came to Ellis Island and I, the stories again, I sort of visualize it and maybe this is the story I tell my children and they think that I remember. (sighs) (under her breath) Dr. Est.

When we got to Ellis Island my father had, came for us the next day and one of my brothers had a birthmark on his arm and every time the lilacs would bloom these lilacs would come out on his arm. And as they examined us, we were, everybody was sort of, I don't know if everybody was examined, but as they examined him, they didn't know what this thing was on his arm and they pulled him to the side and before my father had a chance they said they may have to send him back, cause they didn't know what this birthmark was on his arm. And my grandmother said if they send him back she would go back with him. Well, my father came with a friend and a doctor the next day. And they doctor explained to them that this was a birthmark and it only comes out in the time of the lilacs.

LEVINE: Do you remember seeing that birthmark?

WEISS: (softly) Yes.

LEVINE: Was it lilac?

WEISS: It was lilacs on his one arm.

LEVINE: And did he continue having that birthmark come out at the lilacs?

WEISS: As the years went on I think it ah, went away. But in the meantime it was a scary thing for us because we, nobody wanted anybody to be sent

back. Anyhow, they let us out. And I remember this already. We came over on the ferry from Ellis Island. There was a ferry and it was April, as I say, and it was snowing. In 1921. It was snowing. By the time we got into the city it stopped snowing and the way the Europeans came, and I saw all this in Ellis Island, the bedding and everything. Of course my mother brought out all her down feather bedding and we were all carrying bedding and the luggages and everything. And ah, I don't think my father had enough money to put us in a taxi, so we came home on the Third Avenue elevator, and I remember ah, you know, we probably filled up a whole car of it, you know, the family. And he had an apartment waiting for us at 426 East 79th Street. It was a third floor walk-up, and he bought it with furnishing. And we lived in five rooms, ten of us. And we all seemed to love it. And there was a lot of love in the family. I mean it's difficult living in five rooms with ten people, but as time went on he bought us new beds and nobody slept three on a bed, everybody slept, even if they put our beds in the kitchen, but nobody slept more than two on a bed. And we lived there for many, many years. It was a cold water flat and one winter the ah, gas froze and we had a heater dividing like the living room, and the dining room was separated. We had a heater there which we would all fight to sit in front of the heater on the cold days. And when the gas froze and we didn't have the heater, my father said, we're not going to live here any longer. We're going to move to a steam heated apartment. So we moved to 437 East 80th Street. Just a block away. And ah, we lived there, I lived there 'til I got married. And then ah, my parents, when my father, when we came out and my father didn't want to work in the dry cleaning place, so he bought a little grocery store on 79th Street, a block away from where we lived and my mother and father managed it. And we as children helped in the store. And then one of my brothers, the one with the lilac, was an iron worker. He was already married. And he got a heart condition, so my parents gave the grocery store to them. And they went on a little vacation. When they came back,

they bought a store on 223 East 82nd, that's right across the street from where I live now. And when they moved here, they lived, moved into a building two blocks, two houses away from where I now live. When there was a vacant apartment, I moved after them. I was the youngest of the seven and I was very close, much close... Well, we were all very close, but I never cooked. Even after I got married cause my mother said, we had such a large family, everybody got married and I wouldn't cook if I didn't have who to cook for, so I with my husband and three children would eat at my mother's. And how convenient can that be? So I moved after them. And ah, my mother passed away about fifteen years ago, and I live here at 222 East 82nd for 53 years.

LEVINE: Well let's um, tell me your father's name?

WEISS: Well, his name was Sam, but his Hungarian name was S-A-M-U, [Shamul].

LEVINE: And his name was Klein.

WEISS: Klein, that's right.

LEVINE: Uh, huh. And your mother's name?

WEISS: Hermina

LEVINE: Hermina. Is that H-E-R?

WEISS: H-E-R-M-I-N-A.

LEVINE: And her maiden name?

WEISS: Her maiden name was Grossman.

LEVINE: So that was your grandmother's...

WEISS: My grandmother was Rebecca Grossman. That's who my granddaughter is ah, named after.

LEVINE: Now do you remember your grandmother from when you lived in Hungary?

WEISS: My grandmother, I'll always remember her. She was wonderful.

LEVINE: Tell me what she was like and what you remember about her.

WEISS: Well, she was a active lady. And never tired. I mean, she took care of seven children while my mother earned a living. And ah, she, ah, stopped us from getting a lot of beating. My mother was very fast with her hand. I guess after having seven children and working hard and everything, you lose patience. I lose patience with three. And my grandmother would stand between us all the time and she'd say to my mother, you have to hit me first. So we idolized her.

LEVINE: It's a little unusual to have brought a grandmother with the family.

WEISS: Well, she was like part of the, you know she went through so much with us in Hungary. My father's mother was alive. Her, I don't remember. But let me tell you a story about my father's mother.

LEVINE: Yes.

WEISS: So my brothers all went to work eventually. And ah, one day we got a letter saying that my grandmother on my father's side passed away. And I as a kid used to wait on the corner for my brother's to come home and I ran up to my oldest brother and I said, Grandma died. And he turned white. And I said, it wasn't the real one. And ah, it's probably cruel. But I didn't remember my father's mother. And ah, my mother's mother was just wonderful. She, when she was sixty five years old, she learned how to smock. You know what smocking is on children's... And she did that to bring, to earn enough money to bring her son, the wife and two children out from Hungary. She did it with her own money.

LEVINE: Wonderful.

WEISS: And ah, she was just wonderful.

LEVINE: So how old was your grandmother when she came here? Just roughly.

WEISS: Well, she was sixty-five when she learned how to smock... She must have been about ah, fifty-five or sixty cause my mother was eighteen years old when she got married. So she was very young. And when we came out she was still pretty young. But my grandmother must have been sixty years old. And she was very active and my ah, son and my older daughter remember her because Linda, the one I showed you, my parents when they had the grocery store, you know, across the street from where I live, and my parents lived on the same side as we did, and my grandmother would want to cross, my little girl was three years old, maybe, and she would hold my grandmother's hand to cross her.

LEVINE: So what was your mother like? She was, I guess, the disciplinarian of the family, but what else?

WEISS: Well, she was a very wonderful woman. And we used to kid around with her. My mother was short, and my father was over six feet tall, and we'd kid around. My mother had a very good sense of humor, of course, you know, she lost it at times, because, now I understand after having children how you can lose your temper. But we would say to my mother at times when we'd joke around with her, you know, we don't know why he ever married you, you're so short and he's so tall. And she would say, I'm not short, only my legs are short. And this was cute. And she was an extremely good cook.

LEVINE: Did she cook Hungarian dishes?

WEISS: All Hungarian dishes. And my mother would cook and she would bake...

LEVINE: Can you describe them to us?

WEISS: She made strudel and everything ... And when we asked her, we took her to Washington because my daughter already lived there and my son and I drove down and we took my mother. And you know what crepe is? Well in Hungarian it's called polachenta, and my daughter wanted my mother to tell her the recipe, how to make polachenta, and my mother never had anything written down, although she did write it down. My birth certificate and everybody's is full of recipes.

LEVINE: Really? On the birth certificate?

WEISS: Yeah. On the back of it. Because if she couldn't find a piece of paper she would write recipes on whatever she found. And I was looking for my birth certificate the other day and I knew this. And I looked at it and I couldn't believe it. All the, you know, whatever recipe she heard about she would write down. Well, any how, my daughter said to her,

Grandma, tell me how to make polachenta, and my mother would say a pinch of this and a pinch of that because she didn't measure. And my daughter said to her, well, maybe my pinch is different from your pinch. And she said a pinch is a pinch. So, she said, if you have to add something to it, all you do is add to it. But she was very, very good. And she used to sing Hungarian songs to the children.

LEVINE: Do you remember any, besides the crepes, do you remember any other dishes?

WEISS: Everything. We ate, she cooked a lot of soup. Because soup was very filling. And we had soup every day. And ah, with a lot of vegetables. And there were chicken markets on 79th, the live chicken markets. My mother would go cause she was kosher. And my mother would get the, the rabbi or whoever cuts the chicken, and my mother would pluck it and clean it. She was an extremely good cook. And when she had the grocery store, people would come in and as I say, she'd always be writing down recipes and trying them. And we would beg her all the time, don't listen to people, what they tell you. Because her cooking was so much better than the recipes she tried that we always said, don't listen to people just do it the way you would. My mother baked her own bread.

LEVINE: What kind of bread? Do you remember?

WEISS: Well, it was rye bread and you know, she would bake about eight, ten loaves of bread because, and it never got moldy the way the breads over here. She made her own noodles. We had a big dining room table. Of course you needed a large dining room table. And she would do her own strudel leaves and we'd stand around watching the way they'd blow up and everything. She was an extremely good cook. And I never cooked. I used to wash the dishes because we ate at my mothers. And when my

mother went into the hospital, my children said, if grandma doesn't come home soon, we'll all end up in the hospital. And my specialty, of course, at that time was spaghetti. The easiest thing to do. But I've learned how to cook. I make stuffed cabbage. I cook good. And I did that because my sister, I said to her when my mother passed way, well where do I start? I watched my mother cook, but I was never interested in it. And my sister would say, you fry onions and you throw onions in and you throw everything in and that's the way you cook. So she's got a point there.

LEVINE: What about your father? What was he like? His temperament.

WEISS: My father was a very gentle man. He was very quiet. And of course I learned only to you know, have a father at the age of seven. He was very patient and he was wonderful.

LEVINE: Do you remember getting used to having a father? After you got here?

WEISS: Well, I guess I had to get used to it. He was very easy to get used to. He was a little bit strict with my brothers because at that time, you know, everybody played out on the street. Not the way they do... And he'd, if we did anything, he would never hit us, but he'd, the punishment was after you came home from school, you had to stay upstairs, not go out. And my mother, my poor mother was glad to have us go out. And she'd say, try to get up before your father comes home. And my older brothers would, I don't know if you know, but they would play, gamble on the street, like play cards. I had a brother that always won, and when my father saw them playing cards or shooting dice, and he came home from work and he said to them, I never want to see you do this again. And then they forgot and the next time he saw them, so he slapped on of them and he said that he never got over it. He never hit us. But you knew. When he said something you knew that he meant business. And this is

the difference between what the children go through now with their parents beating them. Like I don't say, a slap on the backside, I hit mine. I didn't beat them. But when you hear about this, all a father had to do was say something to you and you knew that that was the way it had to be.

LEVINE: What about your brothers and your sister? Could you name them in their order?

WEISS: Sure. Do you want me to give them the Hungarian and English name, because everybody changed.

LEVINE: Maybe if you could spell the Hungarian ones.

WEISS: If I could. My oldest brother was Geza, G-E-Z-A. And he had himself called George. Then came my sister who was Margit, which is Margaret. Margit is M-A-R-G-I-T. Then my brother with the lilacs was Imre, I-M-R-E. Imre, and he was called Emery. And then my next one, my other brother was Miklos, M-I-K-L-O-S. And he was Mickey. And then my other brother was Chandor, and he was Alex. And then I had a brother Paul. He was Paili, P-A-I-L-I. And then I came. So that's the story.

LEVINE: Well, it sounds like the name Alex doesn't really sound like...

WEISS: Chandor.

LEVINE: The Hungarian name.

WEISS: Well, I think most Chandors are called Alex. And then he shortened it to Al.

LEVINE: Oh. Were you particularly close to any one of your brothers and sisters?

WEISS: I was particularly close to all of them.

LEVINE: All of them.

WEISS: It was my sister who was a difficult person because she was a little bit jealous that after all these boys I came into the picture and there was a little bit of... Not with me, but with her. Like when my grandmother knew how to sew very well. And she would cut my sister's dresses down to my size and I didn't care. And neither did she at that, she didn't care what they did. But when she got married and she went to the country and my mother said to her, why don't you take your sister along. You know, she doesn't get out. And she didn't want to take me, but she had to I guess. And I had long hair at that time, and she wouldn't comb my hair and I came home loaded with nits. So these are the things. And actually, she was a little bit jealous and how we became close was, I worked up at Mt. Sinai. My husband and I ah, when I got married, a few years after that, my husband had hypertension, high blood pressure. And ah, we bought a candy store on 81st Street on the Avenue, on Second Avenue. And ah, (pauses) My thoughts are wandering about my sister....

LEVINE: We were talking about how you got close.

WEISS: Oh. So she, after my husband got sick, we sold the store and I, I was home about six months and I said to him, would you mind if I got myself a part time job. Cause by then, the children weren't home and it was just too much. You know, doing nothing. And he said, he didn't. So I applied at Mt. Sinai and they accepted me right away. I got a job as a clerk up there. And I was working up there a short time when my sister was to be admitted and through me she didn't have to wait for admission or

anything. And when she came into the hospital, she sort of changed. Like she needed me then, and so that's when I think we became closer. She's very difficult to get close to. She's still got that European habit of being rigid. Like she thought whatever she said, everybody had to follow her orders. And I'm a very funny person. My grandmother used to say to me, you listen to everybody and you always do what you want. And when my older daughter got married I said, I give you only one advice. You know, you have to learn by your own experience. You know, things don't always turn out right, but whatever you feel a gut feeling, do it. And when I told this to my niece, my sister's daughter, who my sister was very rigid and really, those two children, even to this day are a little bit afraid of her. And I said to my niece once, I said, I only have one advise to give you. I said, move far away from your mother. (laughing) She told her mother this. This is to show the intelligence of my poor niece being under my sister's control. But my sister, by now she's pathetic. You talk to her, sometimes she remembers things. But she still lives at home. Her son never got married. And my niece who lives out in Jackson Heights, still comes in every day to see that her mother eats. They don't want to put her in a nursing home. And they're two wonderful children. I think their whole lives are ruined, but that's their prerogative. I feel sorry for them. Because I'm pretty independent and my two daughters live in Washington, as I say. I went for a cataract operation. I never told them, because I thought, I'm coming home the same day. Why do I want to have them come here and just sit around worrying. And they were very angry at me. But I said, what? I'm very independent. I try not to tell them anything. Which I don't know if that's good or bad, but that's the way it is.

LEVINE: Now, when your sister went into the hospital and you were working at Mt. Sinai, was that much later in her life?

WEISS: Yeah. All of our children -- well, her son never got married -- but it was... I worked there for sixteen years. So it was in that time. She went in for an ear operations. She had this meniere's, where she was getting dizzy and they took her inner ear out. So it was quite a frightening experience. And working there, I was able to go visit her more often, I had more privileges. And she sort of started to depend on me more. But she doesn't depend on me any more now because I can't do much for her.

(pausing for the doorbell)

LEVINE: Okay. We're resuming now. Mrs. Weiss's son and daughter-in-law are here. Lets talk about packing up to go. You had mentioned that your mother had all this luggage. What did she bring from Hungary?

WEISS: Well, there were a lot of down comforters and of course they couldn't pack that in valises so everybody was carrying it when we got onto the Third Avenue elevator. I don't know about how much luggage. I don't think we had much luggage. It was mostly bedding. I think she found that that was the most important thing that she wanted to bring. Well, when we got here, ah, my father and my mother, after my father showed her how to take the elevator. We all went down to the Lower East Side to Orchard Street to buy clothing. And my mother was a wonderful bargainer. I think I learned that from her. And we were all... Everybody got their suits and dresses. And then my father sat everybody down, the older ones and wanted to know what they wanted to do. Do they want to go to school? Do they want to go to work? Well, he asked my oldest brother first, and my oldest brother said he wanted to go to work. When he asked my sister she said, I don't want to do anything. So he said, well, you have to do something. You either go to school or go to work. And she said, well, it's your responsibility. You brought us out here and I don't want to do anything. And actually she didn't go to school and ah, she stood home for a while. Then somebody brought her in as a milliner.

They taught her how to be a milliner. But my sister wasn't very ambitious so she got married soon after that and didn't work any more.

LEVINE: Well, how about the rest of your brothers?

WEISS: My brothers? Well, the two younger ones. The one that was Paul and Al, went to school. The rest of them, the other three went to work.

LEVINE: What do you remember? Did you go to school in Hungary?

WEISS: I went to school here.

LEVINE: So this was a first. Tell me what going to school was like for you.

WEISS: Well, when we lived on 79th Street and the school was on 81st. I was registered over there. And after my sister didn't want to do anything, so it was her job to take me to school. Now this is a very funny thing. They were painting the fire escapes and when she went they had the orange coating on them. My sister has a very poor sense of directions, as I do. And when she came back the fire escapes were being painted black and she couldn't find the house. So that was a very funny incident.

LEVINE: How about learning English? How was that for you?

WEISS: Well, I learned English. The older ones all learned English but they all had their accents. It was just my, the ones that went to school, didn't, don't, didn't have accents. But the ones that didn't still have. Well, unfortunately now there's only my sister and I left. But the two older, three older brothers, all had their accents. Their Hungarian accent, oy.

LEVINE: Were there a lot of other immigrant children in your school?

WEISS: Well, not so much in the school as there was where we lived. When we lived on 79th Street there were a lot of people that had immigrated. And most of them were from Hungary. There were a few Irish families. But they all had very large families. They all had seven and ten children. And every Wednesday, in the summertime, the mothers would take the children to Coney Island. Even if it rained. Because if it rained, we would run up and down in Steeplechase on the, I don't know if you know Coney Island, but the station had like a, a, you ran up and down. If the sun came out we went out on the beach, and if it didn't we turned, got back on the train and came home. And my sense of direction, one day, I went into the water and you know how you come out and you don't sense it right? Well, I got lost and nobody missed me for a whole day. When people were going home and the beach got empty was when I found the bunch that we belonged to. And nobody missed me all day long.

END SIDE A

BEGIN SIDE B

LEVINE: Do you have any particular memories about Coney Island?

WEISS: Coney Island? Yes. I loved it. I hated the water. I hated the cold water. I never liked cold water. But I liked Nathan's. I liked my, you know, the, my mother would make up sandwiches. And we had a lot of fun. I mean, until I didn't get lost. But we had a lot, there were so many children there. And then when I got married, and took my children there was a taxi driver here and he would drive us all out and my three children would come and we would take other people's children and that was a lot of fun. Coney Island was a very popular place.

LEVINE: How did you meet your husband.

WEISS: How did I meet him. Well, he was introduced to me. I told you my parents had a store on 79th Street and I was introduced to him. And I really didn't want to have much to do with anybody because I was so happy with my five brothers. They used to take me all over as I got older. And this guy just kept coming around. I guess he grew on me.

LEVINE: (laughs) What was his name?

WEISS: Joseph.

LEVINE: And so when you got married, then you stayed in the neighborhood?

WEISS: Yeah. Apartments were a little bit hard to get then, so we got an apartment on 79th Street. It was called the Suburbans. Sure you heard about it. It was a lot of things about it. Some guy that owns the newspapers bought it and wanted to tear it down. It's the Suburbans on 79th Street and we got this cute little apartment, not knowing. The Suburbans was 79th and 78th Street. It was like you paid your rent by the week? And ah, we didn't know that this cute little apartment had the boiler room for both streets under us. And we got married in June and it was very, very hot. And we would sit down by the East River which is now the drive, but it was just the East River then. They'd have, we'd sit there all night long cause it was so hot. And my father gave us a fan. The bedroom was so small that we both woke up in the morning not being able to talk because the fan was hitting us all night long. So then my brother and brother-in-law went to the country. My brothers after a while had a store downtown, a grocery store. And I would sometimes help them. So I went away on my honeymoon with my brother and my brother-in-law. When I came back, there was an empty apartment on the floor where my parents and my sister lived. And they furnished it, and

they didn't tell me. And when I went up, my brother Mikey had gotten married six weeks after I did, and we didn't have a kitchen set on 79th Street, so when I walked in I saw the kitchen set, and you know I thought it was his apartment. They said it was his apartment. And when I went into the living room I said, this looks like my living room. And the bedroom. And then they said, this was your apartment. So I lived there until Ronnie was born there. And Linda was a month old when we moved over here. And that's how it happened.

LEVINE: Well, looking back on your life and coming here as a little girl, do you think the fact that you were born in Hungary and came here at seven years old had any influence on you? On the rest of your life?

WEISS: Well, not knowing Hungary, which I do know now. I've been back I think three times, and I like Hungary but I wouldn't live there. You know it's a nice place to visit. Oh, I loved America. I think we all loved America. There was nothing not to like about it.

LEVINE: How about your mother and father and grandmother? Did they ah, learn English, become citizens, those things?

WEISS: Well, they became citizens. I, my grandmother, I don't think became a citizen. My father couldn't pick up the language, he didn't have a good tongue for language. My mother went to night school. And she learned the language pretty well. As a matter of fact, as a student at night school, they took them to Washington, D.C. She was like a child. So happy to go. You know, they took 'em on a bus trip? She loved it. My father loved the United States. He never, never went back. He said he would never go back. I'm the one that went back. You know, Gail lived in London at that time, and my sister and I decided we wanted to go back. That was the first time either one of us went back. And I asked Gail if she

wanted to come and learn with us. So, London is not far from Hungary. So she came and we were there for three weeks and loved it! But as I say, we loved it but wouldn't live there. This is, this is where we wanted.

LEVINE: Did you actually see your house? Or did you go back to where you...

WEISS: No. The first time nobody went back to where. The second time, no, I think the first time. We went to Romania to see... My husband was born like in Romania, which was sometimes Romania, Transylvania. And Gail and I took the train and went to see it. We wanted to see where he was born. And it was very depressing because ah, he had only two nieces that were alive from concentration camp, and a nephew and the nephew went to Israel and the niece was the only one that lived in this town we went to. I didn't know here last name, but I knew her first name. And it wasn't a big town. So we found her. It was very sad. She was the only Jewish one living there. And she lived in a, it was pathetic to see how she lived. They sat on crates. And ah, when we went there, and the husband and the daughter and the son came home, they wanted to give us food. I thought that when we went over there we'd stay at a hotel or something. There were no taxis. Chickens were running across the road. And there was no hotel or anything. And this was so pathetic. When we saw them that we hadn't eaten since we left Budapest. And when they put on sausages or something I told her, Gail didn't speak Hungarian, and I told her we weren't hungry. I couldn't see taking the food out of her mouth. And there were no restaurants. And so they had no place to put us up. They took us to a woman who inherited the house. The mistress was Jewish and they killed her. You know, concentration camp. So she inherited the house. So the husband of this niece took us over there and we stayed there. And she had like a hope chest. She made herself a bed on that and gave us her bed. And ah, during the night we couldn't sleep. And we kept going under the cover because

there was the horsehair mattress. Every time we turned the horse hair would stick us and the two of us would laugh. And we didn't want this woman to hear it. Then I said to her in the morning, we were starved by then, you know, she gave us some kind of jelly that she made, without anything, and so I said to Gail, we're going back to Hungary. She said, I'm so glad you said that. So we went back to Hungary. And then I said, I don't even want to go see where I was born. You know, by that time I had enough of seeing, but I hear it's a wonderful place. Cause when I went back the second time, I met a couple. They were a dentist. We met in a restaurant. And they gave me their card. They wanted me to -- they heard that I was born there. And they invited me which I never went. My sister said that it was, it was a big city. And I don't, I can't tell you anything about it. I didn't go back.

LEVINE: Hm. Okay. Let's see. What do you feel most proud of having done in your life?

WEISS: Well, I'm proud that I got married and had three great, three great kids! (she laughs). I mean, what else? And they're all healthy, thank god. And I have great grandchildren. Nice family. Son-in-laws. Daughter-in-law. I really have a lot to be thankful for.

LEVINE: And what about this, now that you're eighty years old. How is this phase.

WEISS: It's not easy. That's the worst part of everything. When I hit eighty, all of a sudden of a sudden I seem to fall apart. I had a fear now which I never had before. 79 didn't do this to me. 80 did. A fear. Which is hard to describe.

LEVINE: Let me ask you just a few more questions about this neighborhood when you first came into it. There were a lot of Hungarian families.

WEISS: This is, we lived on 79th. First of all it was a very wide street. I don't know if you know the area. 86th, 79th. It's very wide. It was a wonderful street to live on. And it was a mixture. But it was a lot of Hungarians.

LEVINE: Were there social clubs? Hungarian social clubs in this area at that time?

WEISS: There was a Hungarian movie. There were quite a few Hungarian restaurants. And it was a mixture. We had an Irish family. But mostly Hungarians on 79th. As you go in other streets, like 74th was Bohemian. 86th was German. So it was a split up. Now it's, all different.

LEVINE: So when you went to school were there mostly Hungarian children in the school?

WEISS: No. It was a mixture.

LEVINE: And when you were learning English, did you just pick it up sort of naturally? Or was there any...

WEISS: You know I don't remember. You just learn it. I don't remember that part. I guess when you put, I guess it's different now. Because at that time everybody had to learn English. Now they learn Spanish. But at that time everybody had to learn English.

LEVINE: And how about religion? Was your family religious either in Hungary or here?

WEISS: Well, my grandmother was very religious. She wore the *sheytl*. My mother was religious. My father kept it because of my mother but he didn't, couldn't care less. And we went along with it. I, you know, I

wouldn't eat, to this day I don't, I have never tasted, it's upbringing. Bacon, ham or anything like that. Anything that, I don't keep kosher and ah, when we had our store we used to close for the Jewish holidays and go to Florida for the Jewish holidays. That's when I really started mixing the milk with the meat. Until then, I wouldn't do it.

LEVINE: Mm, hm.

WEISS: But my sister is still kosher, as much as she remembers. Her daughter is kosher.

LEVINE: How about enjoyment? When you, when the family was newly arrived here? What kind, you mentioned Coney Island. Were there any other...?

WEISS: Well, that wasn't all, Coney Island. We didn't go 'round much. I mean, as children you play down on the street. When you came home from school, you went down and you played. And ah, I think that was most of the enjoyment. As my brothers got older and they bought a car, you know, occasionally they would take you for a ride. And ah, that's it. No. We didn't do much. I didn't go to camp. I'm so glad that I didn't. I wouldn't have liked it. I mean, if they had they money to send me, I would have hated it.

LEVINE: Why would you have hated it?

WEISS: Cause I don't think I would like camp.

LEVINE: Mm, hm. Well,

WEISS: My son loved it.

LEVINE: What about customs? Did your grandmother or your mother or father, did they carry on certain Hungarian customs, or were they more...

WEISS: Well everybody, we spoke Hungarian at home. As a matter of fact, the two older ones spoke Hungarian because my grandmother never learned English and I wanted them to be able to talk to her. And Ronnie spoke Hungarian until he was four years old when we moved over here and he started to play outside. Children made fun of him and he came in one day and he said, talk nice to me. And he's the first one that dropped the Hungarian. And ah, Linda and Gail, I think they picked up a lot in Hungary. I think they both understand. I don't know about Ronnie. He always says he doesn't understand, and I don't know. I can't say that he does or doesn't. I can't see through him. But the other two understand. They don't, like Linda would speak more words, you know, when we, she calls me she greets me in Hungarian. She loves the greeting. And ah, she, she understands everything.

LEVINE: Is there anything about Hungarian that you like to hold on to?

WEISS: I hold on to it because I speak the language fluently. And ah, it was very good when we were in the business. And then '56 when all the Hungarians, you know, a lot of them came out and it was very nice that we were able to talk to them. And I like. I always say, any language you know you should stick to it because you never know when you need it. I wish I knew more languages.

LEVINE: Okay. Well is there anything else you can think of that...

WEISS: I think I've told you the story of my life.

LEVINE: Oh, food. We did talk about food before. Is there anything else about your grandmother, your mother, you?

WEISS: Well, they were excellent cooks and ever, occasionally, there's a Hungarian restaurant here which I go to. I mean, there's nothing different about it. But it's Hungarian food and as I say, we had lots of Hungarian restaurants. Ah, this neighborhood has changed and there's not too many Hungarian restaurants. There's a lot of Italians now, and Chinese. But the Hungarian food is good. You can get an ulcer from it. (son laughs) My mother ah, made her own chicken fat which wasn't the healthiest. A couple of my brothers had ulcers. (laughs) This was from the good food.

LEVINE: Okay, well, I think maybe we can close here. I do know that you visited Ellis Island and your name is on the plaque there, on the wall of honor.

WEISS: I could tell you that I went back to Hungary three times and I loved it. It's you know, knowing the language, it was good. And ah, but as I say, it's a nice place to visit but I wouldn't want to live there.

LEVINE: Okay. I think we'll stop here. This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. I'm talking with Elan, Elaine Klein Weiss in her apartment at 222 East 82nd Street, New York City. And Mrs. Weiss is 80 years old. Today is August the 8th, 1994. And I'm signing off. Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW