

**EI-528**

**MIRIAM MOSTOW**

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**PORT: LE HAVRE**

**RESIDENCES:**

- **AUSTRIA: VIENNA**
- **THE US: NYC, WASHINGTON HEIGHTS**

LEVINE: Today is August 10, 1994, and I'm with Miriam Mostow who came from Austria when she was six years old in 1938. Mrs. Mostow is 62 years old now, at the time of this interview. And this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. Okay, let's begin at the beginning. If you would say your birthdate, and your maiden name.

MOSTOW: All right. I was born on July 22, 1932. And my maiden name was Miriam Nachimowitz.

LEVINE: And your mother's name?

MOSTOW: Ida Spirgel.

LEVINE: How do you spell Spirgel?

MOSTOW: S-P-I-R-G-E-L.

LEVINE: Okay. And your father's name?

MOSTOW: Joe Nachimowitz.

LEVINE: And did you have grandparents when you were in Austria that you remember?

MOSTOW: Certainly. And they came here.

LEVINE: Oh, uh, huh.

MOSTOW: Right.

LEVINE: Where in Austria, you were in Vienna?

MOSTOW: Correct.

LEVINE: Okay. And were you in Vienna the entire time before you came to the United States?

MOSTOW: Yes. We lived in Vienna.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, when you think of those first six years, are there any

incidents or experiences that you recall with any frequency or vividly that happened in your early years?

MOSTOW: Yeah. You're talking now pre-Hitler time, before he, because I do remember the night, you know, that Hitler conquered Vienna. I remember that vividly.

LEVINE: Really.

MOSTOW: Oh, exactly.

LEVINE: Could you describe it in as much detail as you can?

MOSTOW: Absolutely. I was, we were, we had just moved into a new apartment which was really lovely. We were sitting in the sitting room. And I still remember, I guess shades of Proust, I remember what we were eating. (laughs) Strawberries and sour cream with sugar. And my aunt and uncle were there too. And my parents were listening to this very big radio. I guess it was one of those large console kind of things. And I think it was Dolphos, I still remember the name. He was the Chancellor, and he was talking about that they weren't going to give up, and then you literally heard him being taken away from the mike as if somebody you know, sort of choked him and I remember my mother and my aunt crying. And I was disturbed to see what was happening. And so I do remember them marching in. Now, my parents had a business. And it was interesting, in the very beginning ah, they didn't, they sort of did, I would say, acts of sort of trying to insult you. So, my father, see, my parents had never become Austrian citizens. They never, they made it very difficult for Jews to become Austrian citizens. So the anti-Semitism was there from day one according to my parents. So

they remained Polish citizens, and I think that saved our lives. Cause my dad, all day, hid out at the Polish consulate. And my mother ran the business. And ah, he'd come home at night. Yes. If you questions, please.

LEVINE: Okay. So in other words, it was the men who were being picked on.

MOSTOW: Oh, absolutely.

LEVINE: A Jewish woman could still function.

MOSTOW: Could still function. Yes. I remember we had a maid. And she was still able to stay. And I remember she took me the park. And this is true because I just came from the, I just saw the Holocaust Museum, and we saw this actually happening. I was telling this to my friend who I went with. Ah, I wanted to sit on the park bench with her, and she said, you can't because you're Jewish. And she wasn't being mean. She was a Christian maid, but she was a nice young woman, and I guess she didn't want to do anything wrong. After that, my parents had to ask her to go. Because they weren't permitted to employ anybody. In the meantime, and this is all from what my parents have told me and I was part of this. You know, they always included me in what was happening. My mother had two brothers in the United States. And apparently, and this is from also what I've read later on, um, they knew more in the United States what was happening than let's say the Jews in Austria or wherever things were going wrong. And they ah, they knew enough to send papers for us. Also, my mother's parents were living in Vienna so they sent it for them, and for this aunt and uncle who were visiting us, who had a little daughter. But this is a little aside,

this aunt who's still alive, you might want to interview, who's a very interesting woman. Ah, she also, you know, everybody worked hard and they had their businesses and they did well. She said, am I crazy? Am I going to leave everything? This is a family story. Tore up the papers. Flushed them down the toilet. Bad. Because what happened was, they barely escaped to Trinidad. See, there were certain places that let you come in. Another aunt and uncle who lived there couldn't come because my uncle was a Romanian citizen. They landed up in Venezuela. Which was, they were kind, you know, certain South American countries. Oh, another memory. I remember, and you know, this is childish and years later, I was a little ashamed, but then my mother said to me, but you were a child. I literally remember, I actually remember them marching. Saying we're going to, whatever it means, we're going to kill. Jewish blood is gonna to flow. And my mother had a little Tyrolean outfit for me, and I remember saying to her, well, let's march like the Germans so that they won't know that we're Jewish, you know. Because you wanted, you have that instinct I guess. But we were very lucky and I remember the night we left, and, you know, the whole business. If that's, I don't know if you have questions for me. Please.

LEVINE: Yeah. We'll take it chronologically.

MOSTOW: Please, ask me.

LEVINE: So, do you remember how you felt or thought about being Jewish? As a six year old or younger? In that situation?

MOSTOW: We were Sabbath observers. I remember. No. We had a nice life, you know. My parents had their business closed on the Sabbath, you know. They belonged to something called the Polish

Synagogue in, in, and we had a very good life, my, we, it was a kosher home. And ah, but Jewish per se? I was too young. I remember my parents always saying, I was going to go to something, I guess, here it would be the equivalent of a Jewish day school. They always said that that's the school that they had chosen for me. 'Cause I was ready for school. You know, it was just the timing was right when we left, if there is such a thing as good timing.

LEVINE: So you hadn't actually attended school.

MOSTOW: I went to kindergarten. To private kindergarten. Which I remember it was on top of a movie theater. It was very interesting. And as I mentioned to you before, I think it was the Montessori school. (laughs) So that was lovely. I mean that was, I was a little girl, you know? Oh, another thing. My grandfather, one of my earliest memories. He would call for me from, from kindergarten. He had a little beard. Now he was one of the people, again, the indignities that began. He was one of the people who was scrubbing the sidewalks. They took him away. But I remember my grandparents were the first ones to leave. I guess the way my uncles arranged it, they were able to come first. And then I think a month or two later, we were able to come. And as I said, my aunt (laughs) who tore up the papers wasn't that lucky. She first came a few years later. Yeah. So she sort of was always very ah, (laughs) temperamental. Yeah. But I remember that. Yeah. There's a lot. Sure.

LEVINE: Do you remember your grandmother at all?

MOSTOW: Sure. My grandmother lived here. My grandfather. So they lived, ah, and it's interesting about my grandmother. She was a bright

woman. But she was so proud that she, I never heard her utter an English word. She was afraid that people would laugh at her. She read the English paper, and the Yiddish paper. She, we'd see all the movies with her. She'd go to Yiddish plays. But would never say a word of English because she was such a proud woman and think that people were going to make fun of her, which we weren't, but I guess that's how she felt. She really wasn't that old when I think about it. She was probably my age. Yeah. But it's a different outlook, you know? So it's the way she perceived things.

LEVINE: Do you remember any activities with your grandparents, either or both of them, while you were still in Austria?

MOSTOW: In Austria.

LEVINE: That you did together.

MOSTOW: The only thing is that grandfather actually called for me from school. So that was lovely, you know. And he, he looked like Santa Claus actually. And he carried a cane, and that carried over to the United States. In first grade he would call for me too, you know. But, and my father would always tease him and say, you became Americanized. Your beard became shorter and shorter. (laughs) You know. So I don't know if that was on purpose or whatever. But with my grandmother there were quite a few grandchildren. We'd visit them every Sunday. You know, that was the way you did that. And we continued doing that in the United States, I think 'til I was fifteen. And then you know, you start going with your own friends. But that was like every Sunday, we'd visit.

LEVINE: Now, is this your mother's...

MOSTOW: My mother's parents. My father's, unfortunately, died in Poland. And that's also an anecdotal memory.

LEVINE: [ ].

MOSTOW: My father was not too keen on going to the United States, cause he was doing business with his father in Poland. And he wanted to go, instead of to the United States, to Poland. And my mother, when I think back, she was such a, both my parents are gone. She was such a young woman, but must have been very bright. You know, and foresight. And she said, this is not, this war is not going to stop here. It's going to go further and further. And I remember them having a really big argument. You know, how children, because (laughing) I was hiding under the covers. It was pretty loud. And I remember my mother saying, Ich nim das kind! I'm going to take the child. If you don't want to go, then you stay. So then my father saw she meant business. And unfortunately, he couldn't get his family out. There was just one brother who remained, who did come here.

LEVINE: Oh, uh, huh.

MOSTOW: Yeah. My uncle Ezra. So that was lucky. But it was unfortunate. So I never knew my father's parents. Yeah. That was Poland. Yeah.

LEVINE: What business was your father and his father in?

MOSTOW: Ah, the feather business. Yeah. Feathers. Which is a very good business. Apparently goose down is a very precious commodity, which I learned later in life. You almost, it's almost like diamonds in

a sense that it's very expensive and you could barter it and really do quite well at it. Yeah.

LEVINE: I see.

MOSTOW: So I never knew that, but years later.

LEVINE: Yeah. So did your father buy the feathers or have the feathers made into something?

MOSTOW: Yeah he did. I think he, he manufactured quilts and pillows, you know. And I remember my mother buying, going with my mother to the ah, outer, I guess it was small towns in Austria to buy feathers from peasant women, you know? And buying that. So that was some of my early memories. I'd go along with her and they'd make a big fuss over me 'cause I was the little city girl, you know. But ah, so I remember that they dealt with that. That was like a family business from way, way back.

LEVINE: So was there a factory?

MOSTOW: Yeah. My Dad had a factory and he had two stores. You know, you could do quite well as a middle class person. If you worked hard, you did very nicely. Yeah.

LEVINE: Do you remember in those trips to the countryside, do you remember your impression of the peasants, as compared to your own life?

MOSTOW: Yeah (thoughtfully), I didn't always understand their German. It's like maybe if I went now to the Bayou country or something, or

maybe on the very deep South. Perhaps that's the kind of German. My mother though, was able to speak the dialect. She also, if there is such a thing as looking Jewish, I don't know anymore, but you know, the stereotype. She didn't look Jewish. So I think they kind of didn't know what a Jew was, so they kind of listened to her more. And ah, her German was, she could talk the elegant German, she could talk sort of the peasant German. 'Cause it was, I didn't understand it at all. But, be that as it may. They were nice. The only thing is my mother said I wasn't allowed to eat there cause everything was made from lard. So I wasn't permitted. You know, they would offer you food and she used to say, you always have to say you ate. 'Cause, you know, you can't eat things out of pork. So I remember that. See, things are coming back to me. Yeah. I remember so much about it. Oh, yeah. Right.

LEVINE: Do you remember the house you lived in?

MOSTOW: It was an apartment. Well, actually the apartment I grew up in was actually very small. And I remember I had a governess, not a maid. So my mother would come home from helping my Dad in (laughs) the store and serve dinner and cook and clean, and my father would say, this is ridiculous. And she used to say, no, I just want someone for Miriam. I don't want her to do both things. But then, I guess things were better and about six months before Hitler came, we had, I guess moved into a much larger, in a better section. And had the whole apartment designed by an architect. And I remember I had light blue furniture. And actually, my parents brought a lot of the furniture to the United States. In the very beginning you could still do that, you know. Where you paid a mover and they sent it like a few months later. So that part was reliable, yeah. So it was good stuff. So I remember that. Oh, I

even remember the way the you know, the outlay of it. It went into a foyer, to the right was this room I guess where they had this big console radio. To the side was the kitchen and the maid's room. Then you went ahead and to the right was my room, the dining room, and the left was my parents' bedroom, and I guess two different bathrooms. So it's like it was, it's whatever you remember. Because my parents were so happy that they had achieved this. They were very young, you know, when I think about it, they were in their twenties. My mother was only twenty years older than I. So she was a young woman. So I remember that.

LEVINE: So the radio. There was a room for the radio. Did people sit in it?

MOSTOW: Yes. It was like a sitting room. It was like a sitting room. I guess now they call it a rec. room. If they had had TV I imagine they'd have that. And I guess there was a place for records on it too, you know. So, ah, it was a lovely sitting room. I don't know what they called it, you know, but I remember this very big, and I guess you could get different, it was almost like a short wave kind of idea. Where you could get different countries and so forth. So I remember that.

LEVINE: What about, was radio something that was listened to on a regular basis?

MOSTOW: People listened to it, yeah. Yeah. And, even the movies. I remember children could only go to see Shirley Temple movies. They were very careful of what you saw. But I did, occasionally, I remember the only movie, adult movie I saw with my parents was *The Good Earth*. And I remember when the locusts descended. If you remember that book, you know. And I remember the movie

because my father's store was around the corner. I think he knew the owner, that's why I could go in. But otherwise, you could only see Shirley Temple movies.

LEVINE: Really. And were they in English?

MOSTOW: I guess they were either dubbed, they probably were dubbed, like you would go here. You know we would see a foreign movie. Cause I couldn't read. So, that must have been, because I understood it, so obviously it must have been. Yeah. I figured that much.

LEVINE: Yeah. Do you remember how you felt about Shirley Temple?

MOSTOW: I was in love with her. I wanted to marry Shirley Temple, if you can believe that. And it's funny, because my older daughter, years later, my daughter is 33, she was in love with her too. I mean it was like so insane. I said to her, she says, you know, she was a little girl. I said, I know Sary, I understand. I was so crazy about her too (laughs). It's so funny. I mean, I was in love with her.

LEVINE: I didn't realize she had appeal in other countries.

MOSTOW: Oh, so appealing. Such an appealing, you just wanted to grow up to be her friend. Or to be her, or just to be in her orbit, you know. It was amaz... And then I went to see her here because I remember they had the *Blue Bird of Happiness*. Then she was in *The Little Princess*. That I saw in the United States.

LEVINE: How about your own friends. Do you remember friends there?

MOSTOW: There. One, I had a little boyfriend in the kindergarten. And what was interesting is we each had symbols cause we couldn't read our names. So we had our little baskets. So mine was, ah, a little wagon and his was a butterfly. I still remember. And I remember my parents saying that they escaped to Romania, so I hope they did. His father was a doctor and he was an adorable little boy. And then we played instruments. So I played the flute and he had a toy saxophone. But girlfriends I don't remember. I just, I don't know his name but I remember him as being my friend and sort of whatever. Yeah.

LEVINE: In the school, in the kindergarten, was it Jewish children exclusively?

MOSTOW: I don't think so. I doubt it. I doubt that. Yeah. I don't think it mattered to my parents. Yeah. And we had to call the director "aunt", you know, "tante". You know Tante Pia instead of Mrs. Or here where the kids call you by your first name if you're in a private school, you know. So that was sort of very respectful in European.

LEVINE: Do you remember, you said later you realized it might have been, or must have been a Montessori school.

MOSTOW: Yeah.

LEVINE: Do you remember things that you did that, that led you to believe that?

MOSTOW: Ah, well, I, because I taught school. So later on when I took these Method courses, I once said to the teacher, I went to that kind of a kindergarten, you know? And when she started asking she said,

sure, that's when it all began. What we did, well I remember the orchestra because I always liked music and I remember making a bowl for Mother's Day and painting it like light blue and of course my mother made a fuss. And ah, we had to learn poetry to recite to our parents. That was a big thing. To sit there, you know, to sort of... And we had to learn to curtsey, you know, that was like very good manners.

LEVINE: And you did that when introduced?

MOSTOW: Yeah. To older people, right. But that, I quickly got rid of that in the United States (laughs). I didn't want to stand out. You know, you want to be part of whatever. But that was about all I remember doing. I know my mother read a lot to me.

LEVINE: Oh, she did.

MOSTOW: Oh, she read a lot.

LEVINE: Fairy tales, or do you know what?

MOSTOW: No. She read me, she read poetry to me. She actually read good stuff. I think she, she probably did it because she was bored with the other stuff, so she did that. She read me fairy tales too, but I remember good things. Yes. I remember that somehow, maybe she liked the rhythm or she wanted me to be a genius.

LEVINE: She wanted to hear it herself.

MOSTOW: Maybe for herself. Because she was so busy working, I think it was part of her reading also, you know.

LEVINE: Uh, huh. What kind of cultural, it sounds like your family was a cultured family.

MOSTOW: Not really. My father actually never went beyond fourth grade. It was my mother more. She would always say later on when I was in college, when I sometimes would show her my work, she said, I have to tell you. I did this in high school. Because she never went beyond high school. She was one of nine, and I don't think girls were encouraged to go to college. Also, they were encouraged to marry young. My mother married at 18. So ah, but there was so much. I remember seeing Hansel and Gretel, the opera. So I remember that very well. That was so beautiful. It was just there for the... And if your parents wanted to take you to these things, it was there, you know. It's like here. Being around Lincoln Center. You want to take advantage.

So I don't think they were intellectuals. No. My father was a business man and really not formally educated. But when I think now of him, he was, you know, smart man because you had to survive. That's the most important, you know.

LEVINE: Is there anything else you remember about Vienna?

MOSTOW: Vienna? Mm. Just later on, only a story that my mother told me. Which (excitedly), oh yes, I do remember. My mother -- you know, you had cash, you had to bribe people. But...

LEVINE: To get, when you were getting out, or before that?

MOSTOW: Yes. Of course. Like you see in the movies. If you bribe the right officials. So you didn't want to hide in her own, your own house. So apparently my parents had hidden this money in my grandmother's flower pot on the bottom of a flower pot. Now either she watered without remembering, but it came the day where my mother had to sort of exchange it for other notes. This is the story. But I know I went with her. And there I was sitting, again, in the Tyrolean outfit. Probably to wear that not to look Jewish, who knows. But I remember a German SS man coming over to me. This was in the beginning where they try to make it very pleasant. So he came over and he said, the big thing then was to go to these Hitler youth camps. It was like offering a kid a Girl Scout camp or something. And went over to me and said to me, would you, wouldn't you like to go to a Hitler youth camp, you look like such a nice little girl. Now, I wasn't a dumb kid, I didn't say, no, I'm Jewish, you know. Meanwhile, my mother is leaping across the bank, thinking, it's still a child. So I just said, no, no. I want to stay with my mother. And my mother said, oh, you know, she's an only child. She's attached. And my mother later on had heart trouble here and she always says Hitler gave her her bad heart (laughs). She says, I didn't get that from nothing you know. It had an affect on me. And I believe that. You know, I think the emotions can catch up with you. So that's, that I remember very (softly)... Oh, and so my mother gave this wet money to the teller. And he said, oh, how come this money is wet. Like suspecting. So, see as luck had it, it was raining. So my mother said, oh, I just took it out. And she always tells the story. Now, I wasn't privy to that. As if to say, I know you're lying, but what am I gonna do. It depends on who, who you, some people still were a little decent. I don't think they, the hatred was as rampant at the very beginning. They were sort of testing the waters. This I'm saying from the vantage point of an adult. And

then I read many things afterwards. But these are definite memories, you know, that I have. Oh, they're very vivid. So ah...

LEVINE: Before Hitler was gaining ah, momentum, do you remember anything of the way relations were between Jews and Gentiles? Before it really started escalating?

MOSTOW: I think my parents basically had Jewish friends. I don't think they socialized with Christians. They were very friendly with my aunt and my uncle. You know, they were like each other's best friends. So sometimes that happens in families. And they didn't have that much time because of their business. And ah, I don't think so, that I was aware of. You know, except my aunt who's still alive, if you ever wanted to interview her, I don't know, you know, how she feels about it. She had a neighbor who they were very close to you know, a gentile woman. Who was very helpful to her, you know, later on, when my cousin, they couldn't get milk for my cousin. The one who tore up the papers. And she was, and she after the war, helped her out. You know, she felt ah, you know, thankful to her and so forth. But I, my parents, no. I couldn't say as a child that I felt anything of that. No. No. 'Cause it's a sheltered life.

LEVINE: Yes.

MOSTOW: You know basically you go to school, you go. Whatever.

LEVINE: Do you have any other memories ah, just prior to the decision to leave?

MOSTOW: To leave.

LEVINE: Or the actual leaving.

MOSTOW: No. Just that there was a lot of, you know, talk. And it was very nerve wracking because my father would come back at night, you know. And just waiting for these things. And we left on a Saturday night. We left to go to France for a week, cause you took the boat there. We went by ship from Le Havre. And later on, my aunt was able to get, I guess we were still able to write. They came for my father Monday morning, to take him to the concentration camp. So talk about time. 'Cause they took my aunt's husband for a little while. He unfortunately died in the US as a young man. But the thing was, they did, then they started to escalate. You know, as I said, they'd do things little by little. First the indignities then a little more, and more, and more and more and more and more.

LEVINE: Were you aware of people being taken away before you left?

MOSTOW: Yes. My father's best friend. I remember, he was a single fellow. In fact, his parents then owned a big restaurant in the US and did all the kosher catering for the airlines. But he was their, his best friend and I remember, he was taken away, and my father cried because they sent back his ashes. So he was one of the very first people to do that. And the parents luckily got out, I think another son and daughter. But they did. There were people who did get killed in the concentration camps in the very beginning too. So for whatever reasons that was. Yeah.

LEVINE: Do you remember anything more of contact with the soldiers, besides seeing them marching?

MOSTOW: Ah, yeah. My father had, um, it's true. He would see Anton. He had a man, he was like his delivery boy. Man? But he was a boy. He was a young kid. And one day, he came back in his uniform. And you had to put signs up saying Judengesheft, you know, that it was a Jewish store. Of course Father was, my dad wasn't there. My mother was a little lady. So he, he made her stretch as high as she could to put that. And my mother must have been feisty cause she said, Anton, you know, we're your friends. And he said, no, I'm an SS man now. So he knew the Jew's store. So I remember she, coming home so angry. And then later on, she said, I must have been crazy, I thought I still had rights. You know? Because she said, look who? I mean, you know, I think they treated him okay. He worked for them. Guess he got a salary or whatever. But then he got this power, you know. He was the SS officer. So they took any bum. I mean you didn't have to be a big genius. They were really ruffians.

LEVINE: Mm, hm.

MOSTOW: I tell you, I grew up. I was not surprised who was the Austrian guy that they said was so terrible? Mm. He was from the UN. I forget. My mother always said she wasn't surprised. They were always bigger anti-Semites than everybody else. Because they would mask it by being very sweet and polite. You got it?

LEVINE: Yeah.

MOSTOW: So she wasn't at all surprised. She used to say, it's not surprise. So that was that. No. That was it. That was the soldier. Yeah. I remember them saying he came back.

Actually, Hitler marched in in March. And we left in August. So March, April, May, June, July. So we were there only five months. Which, there was a lot of activity you know, to leave, to leave things over and I guess bribing the right people. And they could have the last minute deci--, (excitedly) Oh, I still remember on the train to Paris, they said, once you reached French soil, you were home free. But until then, they could take you out of compartments.

LEVINE: Wow.

MOSTOW: Yeah. So I remember, but you see, my parents shared all this (laughs) with me. I don't know if I would have done that with my own children. Maybe American parents are a little more protective, or they, they, they want their kids to be in Never, Never Land. 'Cause I remember even telling my daughters and they said, Grandma? Really? Why? You were a little kid! I said, well... You know, they didn't think of the psychology of the thing. They just were so scared. And they were young. When you think of it, you know? Be that as it may, and I remember when we passed that thing, there were other little kids in our compartment, and there was a French conductor and he taught us some nasty song about Germans, you know. Like we were so happy we were free. You know, that was a good feeling. You really breathe a sigh of relief when you get... So I remember that in Paris it was nice.

LEVINE: So did you go right to Le Havre?

MOSTOW: We were in Paris for a week.

LEVINE: Do you remember anything about that?

MOSTOW: Yeah it was very nice. (laughs) I remember the steak being bloody. I had never, eaten, seen such red, ruddy thing like the French fries. Always thinking of my stomach. And my father couldn't understand why people didn't understand German. 'Cause he spoke German to everyone. And he thought you had to understand him. But ah, they were, it was just to get the ship. And I remember that my parents, we couldn't even have a cabin together because you were so many people. So the women were separate from the men. And of course, I being a spoiled little girl, didn't let my mother out at night. (laughs) She had to stay with me. So I remember that. But thank goodness we came, and that was the good part.

LEVINE: Mention the name of the ship.

MOSTOW: The Manhattan. I don't know if it's, it may have been, whatever, dry docked or destroyed or what have you.

LEVINE: Were these like dormitories?

MOSTOW: Almost like dorm, it seemed to me because we were so glad to get on. Maybe people had their own cabins. But you try, I think now, in retrospect, they probably tried to get as many people as possible. So if you weren't, husband and wife weren't together for whatever the trip took, big deal. But my mother always teased me. She'd say, (laughs) you didn't let me even see Daddy at night. They were young. You know, I think back now, would my daughter tolerate that now? I don't know. But that's the way it is.

LEVINE: What about the voyage? Do you remember anything?

MOSTOW: I was seasick. I remember they served frankfurters and asparagus. I've never eaten that combination since.

LEVINE: On the boat they served that?

MOSTOW: Yeah. That was one of the meals.

LEVINE: You went to a dining room.

MOSTOW: Yeah. It was very civilized. I don't know how Kosher it was. I don't think at that point my parents cared. But ah -- Oh, and I remember. Actually it must have been a nice decent ship because we stopped in Ireland, in Dublin, and this lovely family came aboard. And there was a children's playroom. There were these lovely little Irish girls. We didn't understand each other, but it was nice just... They seemed like nice little sisters, you know. So obviously it wasn't like a cow boat because people were traveling. So that was the stop they made, in Ireland. So I remember that, yeah.

END SIDE A

BEGIN SIDE B

LEVINE: So you were, when you got to the New York harbor, do you remember seeing the statue?

MOSTOW: No. But I remember my first impression, which is, as a child, I had never seen a black person. And my fear was, I wasn't going to be able to tell them apart. Isn't that funny how you perceive things? They were obviously the men on the docks. Quite dark. I haven't seen such dark men in many... Cause as, through the years, even I have noticed, people, I guess there's intermarriage or what have you. Lighter. But I remember saying that to my mother, how will I be able to... And she used to say, don't worry. They don't all look alike. You'll, you know. You'll adjust. But that was such a vivid memory, thinking, not in, because it was an innocent thing, really. Just how will I be able to tell this black person from that black person. It was all black. I'd never seen a black person before.

LEVINE: Do you remember encountering, either on the ship or on Ellis Island, different people speaking different languages?

MOSTOW: No. But what I remember is, I don't know what they test for with the eyes?

LEVINE: Trachoma.

MOSTOW: Trachoma. That was so painful. You literally felt that they were turning your eyes inside out. That was very scary. Cause it hurts! So that was, that I remember very vividly. And my mother being nervous, probably cause god knows they could find something wrong with you that you didn't really know, and... So I, but ah, no I don't remember the Statue of Liberty because I remember just being very ill. Very seasick. So that part as a little girl. Yeah. But I, my father loved this country, you know, like he was always so proud that we came and all.

LEVINE: And he was the one that initially didn't really want to.

MOSTOW: Didn't want to because he thought he should go to his parents, you know. So he loved it. My mother loved it, but was very nostalgic for Vienna, because she was raised there. So there was this life that she sort of deified, and my father used to say, they're a bunch of anti-Semites. Why are you yearning for them? You know? But she still had that, that Viennese [veltshantz] or whatever you want to call it. I remember that. Yeah.

LEVINE: How about Ellis Island. Is there anything that you could describe that you saw? Or heard?

MOSTOW: The only thing I remember is that, is that where they examined your eyes?

LEVINE: Yes.

MOSTOW: That's what, that was such a horrible experience. And I was just so glad to get out of there. It was not a very pleasant, because it was painful. And then of course, at the dock, my two uncles were there. Uncle Sam and Uncle Leon. And I don't know if my grandparents, they may have been back at the house, because there was a big party, you know, for us. So that was very welcoming. Yeah. That was nice.

LEVINE: Now you knew your uncles? Did you know them?

MOSTOW: No. I didn't know them. I didn't know them at all.

LEVINE: Do you remember your impression?

MOSTOW: Ah, I loved Uncle Leon. He was this handsome, he always, I always thought he looked like Spencer Tracy. He was the bachelor uncle. And actually he came to live with us for about two years, because that's what you did. You know, cause either it was economics. We lived in Washington Heights. We had a large apartment. He lived with us. And I think my dad and he always liked each other, you know. So I think he lived with us until he got married. And actually my father introduced him to his wife. Maybe to get rid of him, who knows? (laughing) No. I don't know. But ah, yeah, he lived with us. And Uncle Sam was nice. He had a wife and three children. I didn't get along with my girl cousin. She was two years older, and to this day, I don't like her. (laughing a bit) Isn't that silly? And she's a perfectly nice woman, you know. But it's funny how you still...

LEVINE: Yeah.

MOSTOW: ... have these childhood memories. She's a perfectly fine woman. I'm sixty two, she's sixty four. I mean, time to let go would you say? (laughs)

LEVINE: Do you remember what it was?

MOSTOW: Why I didn't like her? Absolutely. We came, and my mother was always very correct. So she brought us each two little gold rings. So she gave one to me and to her and then I remember she brought beautiful gifts for my aunt, you know, like a beautiful alligator pocketbook which was very, you know, chic. Because she bought it in Paris. And Marilyn lost her ring, but claimed that I took it. That that was really her ring. And really was at it. And I was, of

course, you know now from the vantage point of an old, big mouth lady, I should have... But I was a very shy, you know, little girl and it was just so horrible. And then about two years later, my mother had been very ill and my aunt was very nice and invited me to spend summer with them. They went to the country, you know. And she was so mean to me. She was the meanest kid alive. And I can never forget that. And I think I communicated that to my own daughters who become very protective. They say, Ach, why does she think she's so great? She's this fat, stupid woman that is so boring! I say, well, girls, I think you're being a little protective. But it must have been, that's why I didn't like her. She accused me of theft and then she was cruel to me. She used to say, I had to share a bed with her. You know, these bungalows in the mountains.

LEVINE: In the Catskills?

MOSTOW: Yes. My aunt meant very well. She was my aunt by marriage. Uncle Sam's wife, who's been dead many years. Very sweet woman. You know, it's childishness. But that's why. But they really, we have them to thank. You know, that we're here. We're very lucky.

LEVINE: Mm, hm.

MOSTOW: Cause people didn't have that. I'm just reading this book, *The Rest of Us*. Ironically, the Birmingham book. He wrote, *Our Crowd*, and he did, and *The Rest of Us* is about the Polish and the Russian Jews who came here. So he also writes about how many people in the United States could have helped more. You know, getting people out. But people weren't all lucky to have relatives. So, that was that.

LEVINE: Were your uncles Leon and Sam your mother's...

MOSTOW: My mother's brothers. See, my father had no relatives here. That one brother was remaining in Poland. Who came over here. We found him. That's another story for another time. We found him after the war.

LEVINE: Oh?

MOSTOW: Oh yeah. He was looking for us in the Yiddish paper. You know the names? And people always said, well, change your name from Nachimowitz it's such a hard name. And my father said, no, I can't do that. Cause maybe somebody will be left alive and they'll never find me. See, he was very smart. Thinking man. And sure enough. When I was about fifteen, we found him.

LEVINE: He put an add in the paper?

MOSTOW: Apparently when they were freed, you know, the different camps. Different organizations came. And they put names. They would say, do you have anyone in the US? And my uncle knew. So he put the name. And I remember I was at my best friend's house, we're still dear friends, and her mother was looking for relatives. I remember she always had newspaper on the living, dining room table. And one day she said to me, does your father have a brother named Ezra? I said, yes, that's his youngest brother. Well, he's looking for you. So I remember flying home. We were doing some report for school. And my dad just broke down. And then that day a lot of other people called because obviously they were doing that. And within about two months he came here. And Ira, you know the

aunt who tore up the papers? And who's husband had died here? Cause he was very ill? They got married. And that was, my uncle just passed away five years ago. A dear man. And really, it was a lovely, you know, they had a nice life together and he raised my cousin. You know, she considered him like her father. So it's like six degrees. You know, whatever. Yeah. People's lives. We were lucky at best. You know, we can't say we suffered.

LEVINE: No.

MOSTOW: Cause you hear these stories of people in camps. I was visiting Aunt yesterday, she lives on the Lower East Side, and cause her daughter is here now, visiting. And we were just sitting on the benches there, I guess, near the [Mt. Mary] and you start listening to these people. There was one woman who was crocheting. I just have to, because I can't get over this story. And she was doing such beautiful work and I said, gee, my mother never did that. Who taught you to do that? She says, in Siberia with two twigs. Ahh. (exclaiming) I said, boy, I said, you're really dramatic. And then she starts telling me where, her history and her journey. Unreal. I don't think she was that much older than I. I'm telling you. I could have looked like her daughter. Because she really went through a heck of a lot. But when she said, with two twigs. Isn't that amazing?

LEVINE: It is.

MOSTOW: So I think my story is sort of very lucky and really not much to be said. Please.

LEVINE: Well tell me when you met your uncles and then you went to your aunt's place?

MOSTOW: To my Uncle Sam's house. We were there, I think, for a week.

LEVINE: Where was that?

MOSTOW: In Washington Heights. Yeah. Like 181<sup>st</sup> Street. And we looked for an apartment. And we got one like very near by. And we lived there for about, hmm, two years. And then my father, cause he was looking for a business. You know he had to learn English and he finally found a store in the Bronx so we all moved to the Bronx. You know, just my parents and I. And I really was raised in the Bronx. Which was great.

LEVINE: Were you able to take money out with you?

MOSTOW: Yeah. We were, at the beginning were able to. But we lived on that money actually. So, I remember my parents being very, very careful with their money. But I never suffered you know. It's not like, if I needed an ice cream it was there for me. You know, so we were not lavish spenders. Obviously my mother must have been a good manager, you know. Of course things were cheaper then too. You know, so you have to think that way. But we didn't go on vacation and my mother did the cooking. I don't remember going out to restaurants and things like that. But a child doesn't suffer that way if they have the security, you know. As long as I had a library near by, (laughing), that's all I cared about.

LEVINE: You were a reader?

MOSTOW: Oh, to this day. That sort of was in me and that gave me a lot of pleasure.

LEVINE: Do you remember any other things that you saw when you first came to this country that struck you?

MOSTOW: Struck me? Mm. Ah! I was the first one really to speak English. I think I learned it within about a month. So that's why all this bi-lingual nonsense that I was involved in, I don't believe in. Especially if a child comes at a certain age. They learn it very quickly.

LEVINE: You went to school right away?

MOSTOW: Absolutely. I started in Washington Heights. PS 132. I was six in July and school started in September. And it's ironic. The teacher spoke German and would speak it to my mother and if I ever asked her anything in German she used to say, only English. I don't understand you. So she didn't make it easy. But, there you are. So since I was sort of the first one in the family to speak English my mother would send me to the store, you know, which was around the corner for milk and stuff. But I hate to say that again, but there were little boys who were beating me up because I was Jewish. Little Irish rotten kids. I don't want to sound ethnic. But that's who they were. They must have been, I probably didn't look American. I was probably still wearing, I remember I had to wear high shoes. That, you know, that was the big bone of contention with my mother and I. Cause I kept saying, I don't look American. You have to get me others. But I don't think there was that dollar for a pair of shoes. You know? But of course I got them eventually. They would always hit me. And my first friend was the girl next door. That's

why I always love the Armenian people. Helen Vaneskian. I adored her. She was my defender. You know? I think we looked alike. We both had dark hair, you know. I think Armenians and whatever. Oh, they were the loveliest neighbors. I just, you know, she and her little brother Johnny. They'd come to us for the seders. And I loved their Christmas tree. That was like a big treat. You know, because we didn't have that. But I remember that. It was so ironic. That you had to get beaten up by little... And I kept saying to my mother, I can't go. My mother said, but you understand English, you have to go. You know. So that happened a few times. And then Helen got even with them. She was a tough kid.

LEVINE: Helen is...?

MOSTOW: Is the Armenian, little Armenian girl.

LEVINE: How did she get even?

MOSTOW: She hit them. She was a tough girl. She was this big tough kid. And she, I guess afterwards they lost interest. It wasn't a vendetta. I guess it was something interesting for them to do. But I remember that so well. As if to say, here you're escaping and then you're starting to get beaten up by these rotten kids. So these things have always been with us.

LEVINE: Do you think your parents ran into any anti-Semitism here?

MOSTOW: Here? No. No. Because they weren't in the work world. Don't forget they, they ah, had a business in the Bronx. It was half Italian, half Jewish. That's how the ethnic makeup was. My father was thrilled. He was able to talk Yiddish. Cause to the Jewish

customers. I mean, of course he learned English eventually. Always spoke it with an accent, but you know, read the Times and was very informed about things. But no. Because they weren't in the corporate world or anything like that. So I wouldn't say that they did.

LEVINE: Did your father take night courses?

MOSTOW: No. My mother did. My mother went to night school. I remember when I was doing my homework, she'd be doing it next to me. You know, in Washington Heights. But my father had no patience. No. He just said to my mother, you tell me about it. But we'd go to the movies a lot. We went to about three movies a week. Oh, we were like, everything that's on AMC now I've seen. Because I grew up with these movies. It was amazing.

LEVINE: Did you go in order to learn English?

MOSTOW: No. It was just the way we did it. We went Friday night. Then Saturday afternoon. I actually went four times. Saturday afternoon I went with a friend. Saturday night with my parents and again, Saturday afternoon we went to Grandmother. And we took her to the movies. And we went out to eat. So I was just recalling that with my cousin. We said, we had such a nice childhood. You know, we went to restaurants. And we went, you know, cause then everybody was in business and it was a different thing. You could afford that. Yeah, so that was good.

LEVINE: Did your mother and father become citizens?

MOSTOW: Oh, right away. And I became a citizen on my own. I wanted to make sure. You could automatically become so. But when I was twenty-one I did. And I remember two of my pals from college, we celebrated. You know, they thought it was so funny. And my husband would always tease me, he would say, I have to send you back because you're an immigrant. (laughs heartily) He'd say to the girls, you're mother is not an American. I think she's not here. So that part was good. Yeah.

LEVINE: Do you remember your mother and father becoming citizens? Was that a big thing?

MOSTOW: It was a big deal, and it was ironic because my father's name was actually Judah Nachimowitz, you know Judah, that good Hebrew name? But he, it's ironic. He wanted to Americanize it. So he became Joe. Not the last name, mind you, which is so foreign. But he said, I'm Joe in American. So he thought that was the greatest American name. So he made a point of having all his papers as Joe. He had that all legally changed. Which we always laughed. We would say, Dad, do you think you could have maybe made it a little easier? And he said, no, cause giving that reason, hopefully that people would be alive, you know.

LEVINE: Yes.

MOSTOW: Which was so smart. Cause if we had been Nach or Nash, you know, that's probably would have been probably the thing. Cause I see my daughter's married name is Freemont, so I said to her father-in-law, you were never a Freemont. He said, I was Freidman. I wanted to be an American. So his brother's Friedman, he's Freemont. To me that's a little -- whatever. They can't miss

him. I don't think he's ashamed of being Jewish, he really wanted to be so American, you know. He thought that was a very American name. I think it complicates things.

LEVINE: Well, what about your mother and father? Was there, it sounds like, well, let me ask it this way. Were there customs that they kept from Austria and did they want to be Americans?

MOSTOW: Ah, mm. That's an interesting thing. I think they wanted to keep me very European. And I was, that was my rebellious streak. In terms of ah, oh, my father was very strict. They always, for a young, maybe that was the era I grew up in. A young man had to come to the house to call for you. My mother would be there to greet him and probably interview him. When I think now in retrospect, just to see. And a lot of times she would just say, well, I hope you're not going out with him again. And I met him under the nicest circumstances. Sometimes it was through a friend, sometimes at a party. Whatever. (phone rings) Oh, excuse me. Oh, may I? Is that all right?

[break for phone call]

LEVINE: We were talking about customs your parents kept and in what way they really wanted to be American.

MOSTOW: I don't know how American they wanted to be truthfully.

LEVINE: They wanted to keep you as a...

MOSTOW: As a very proper European young lady, and were very thrilled at age eighteen when I somehow became very friendly with these

three European, girls of European background. They were out of their, it just happened that I met one of the girls on summer vacation. And she had these two other friends and we started sort of to become very dear friends and they thought they, they were, and they're still friends to this day. But the American girls they looked at a little like maybe they're a little wild, and are they going to be a poor influence on me and so forth and so on. So I think they did want to keep me very European. They loved this country, they were so proud of it. But they didn't like, my father's worst ah, insult was don't bring home a candy store boy. Meaning the boys that hung, you know they used to call them drugstore cowboys. Worse kind of boy. Like, because we would have the candy stores in the Bronx. Of course I knew some of them from school. Believe me they weren't that interested in me. But he used to say, well, I hope you're not going to bring home one of those boys. (laughs) So yes, see, as I'm speaking, definitely wanted to keep me European.

LEVINE: Can you think of any other attitudes that your mother and father had that they wanted to instill in you?

MOSTOW: Ah, to be religious, which I'm not any more. (laughs) So there goes that. But you see my two kids went to Yeshiva. I figure I have to expose them to it. My husband's background was the same, but we both said, it's their business. They're adults. So whatever they're going to do, that's good. As long as they're good human beings, you know. Ah, the religion part. I don't think so. I don't know what other attitudes. If you name some...

LEVINE: Values?

MOSTOW: Values I think are universal. You know. I think so. They were, they got along with people. I mean, I'm, actually a usual amount of prejudice. Of course you must go with a Jewish boy. That goes. But I've instilled that in my daughters to be very blunt about it. And I made... Yes. I made an issue because in college, you know, and I used to say, one thing, and maybe I was too blunt. I said, your grandparents did not die in the Holocaust for you to bring home a Christian boy. I did. I mean, if you can't put it any more... And they tell me now. They said, mother you were a little blunt about it. Now, I didn't go after them and say, who are you going with? Because it's a whole different world. I very rarely met any of their boyfriends 'til they really liked them or then they would say, oh, mom, you want to meet us for dinner, for something. But it was not the way I was brought up, you know, so. Whatever. But the point is, I would say those are the values. To marry within the religion. Oh, of course, somebody should be a good... My father always said, what does he do for a living? I guess I'd ask that too. Not as much because I could be told to mind my own business in a very nice way. It has trickled down. It's a middle class, I don't know how American. Could be American value too. I don't know.

LEVINE: Yeah. Can you think of any other ways you either reared your children like you had been parented, or unlike?

MOSTOW: Similarly. Oh, unlike. More unlike than like, I would say. I've given them so much freedom. I mean to the point where they, even my younger daughter said to me, Mamie, you should have been a little more strict with me. Well, she's twenty-nine years old now and is living in California with her boyfriend, but he's a perfectly lovely young man. I think she did very well. Whether she'll marry him or not, I don't know. But I think she has good values in having chosen

him. Whatever. But I was much easier. I had a curfew until I got married. Which was insane. And yet, I always said to them, look, if you're at a party, just call and say... Or if somebody, if it would be too late I would say, well, have that person... Even a boy, I would say, let him sleep over, because I don't want some young kid driving home alone at night. You know, so that was it really. So I was much freer with them. Yeah. Very much so. I think it's the times. It ah, I don't know if that's American or European, it's just the way it is. I don't know of any my friends who were stricter with their children. I can't think of it off hand, you know. But that, I always said I wasn't going to interfere with their lives. I was going to just say, well, I taught you certain things and what you choose to do now, well, and if you make a mistake, well, that's life. You're going to have to learn. You're entitled to that. You know. [ ] I was pretty consistent. I mean, you always try to put make yourself, put yourself in a good light. (they laugh).

LEVINE: So how long did you stay in school and what did you, did you work when you finished school?

MOSTOW: Ah, yeah. I taught school. And then I had my children and I was home with them for twelve years. And then I went back when we bought a house. Cause I couldn't stand the suburbs and the money was very handy too. And I was glad I did that. Yeah. I taught in Washington Heights. Coming full circle. Different kind of milieu. But I liked it very much and I actually retired two years ago.

LEVINE: Ah. Uh, huh. And how did you meet your husband?

MOSTOW: Ah. I met him ah, he was an American, of Russian parentage. I went, I was starting my Masters at Columbia and I went to

something called the Jewish Graduate Society. It was really to meet men, and I was meeting a friend and I came late. But I figured she's gonna be there so I sat outside in the corridor and he came bounding up the stairs also late. So we started chatting. He was meeting a friend. And we, it turned out I knew his friend so I figured he's not Jack the Ripper cause he asked to take me home, you know. So he was, it was very nice. He was a good man. Unfortunately he died. Yeah. Five years ago. So that was a sad... No. Seven. Gee, it's been seven years. Too young. That was kind of, you know. We had a rough time, yeah, that was sad.

LEVINE: What was his name?

MOSTOW: Morton. Morton Mostow, yeah. His family came from Kiev. And settled in Boston. So that was that background.

LEVINE: And ah, how many children and their names?

MOSTOW: Two. Sarry and Deborah. Two girls. Yeah. So I've been fortunate. They're good women. Yeah. They're nice. I think I'm satisfied the way... I hate for the younger one to be away, but I said to her, you got to follow your stars, I said. If that's you know, because she had a lot of friends here and stuff. But I think she met this young man on a business trip and she just said to me, what do you think? I said, Deborah don't stay here and mind your furniture. She lived three blocks from me. In fact, she got me this apartment. Yeah. So I said, you have to do what you have to do. You know. So, I miss her. But listen, there are telephones and we visit, so... People have to have their lives.

LEVINE: When you think back about coming here, starting out in Austria and coming here, do you think that affected the rest of your life in any ways that come to mind?

MOSTOW: My mother would always say, I think she may have glamorized it, she always said to me, oh, you would have gone to a finishing school in Switzerland. I used to say, ulch, who would want that, Mother? I would rather be home in the library hanging out with my best friend who's still my dearest friend.

LEVINE: The Armenian girl?

MOSTOW: No. No. That's my friend Zel, the one who's mother found in the Jewish paper. You know, age twelve. And I said, I don't know if I would have wanted that kind of fancy life. You know? Cause my father then was really doing very well, you know, financially.

LEVINE: When he went into business here, what was his business?

MOSTOW: He went, actually for two years he was a door-to-door salesman in, I think he did that for a year in Ohio. And I think back, how did he do that without language? That must have been so hard for him. But finally I think he knew that wasn't going to be his life so he ah, whatchamacallit, I think he looked for a store in the Bronx. It was a dry goods store. Also feather pillows, but also you know, stockings, underwear, blouses, yeah. Yeah. So he did nicely. It was a hard work. You know, the hours were long. But it was a different world. He loved working, you know. So I think, and I helped. You know when I was a little girl. And my husband always teased because Christmas time it was very busy so he, the minute I became engaged to him they said, you have to come help in the store to

make sure that nobody is taking, robbing us. We married you know, on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of December. He always used to, well he was funny, he used to say, we spent our anniversary helping my father-in-law in the store. (laughs) Cause he was happy to have another pair of hands, you know, to watch. Cause people steal. It's, whatever. But my dad loved that business.

LEVINE: And did your mother help out?

MOSTOW: Oh, absolutely, too. Yeah. She liked it. And we lived across the street. And then we lived, we got a nicer apartment a few blocks away, you know. But ah, she liked being in the business. Yeah. Yeah. I think that was good for her. So I always saw women working, you know. She was, I think she made decisions with my Dad. I think the aunt, you know, that's still alive, she also ran a business, so I think they were a family of business women. And the aunt in South America who's also dead, she ah, was in the jewelry business with her husband. So I think the women seemed to have been businesswomen.

LEVINE: Hmm.

MOSTOW: Which is interesting when I think back now. Cause that would have been, you know, the time of the housewives and so forth. So that part was ah, yeah. But we were still lucky. I don't care what anyone says. This is a great country. I do love it and I know its mistakes, but I, this is my home and that's how I grew up and I really love it. And I don't just say that because it's the interview but that's how I was raised. That, you know, to really love this country. To appreciate it.

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LEVINE: Well, that sounds like a perfect place to end.

MOSTOW: Ach. Oh, well. How's that? Okay.

LEVINE: So I want to close now. I'm speaking with Miriam Mostow and it's August 10, 1994 and ah, you came at six years old from Vienna, Austria and this is Janet Levine for the National Parks Service. Thank you very much.

MOSTOW: My pleasure.

LEVINE: And I'm signing off.

END OF INTERVIEW