

EI-541

BETTY BORELL BLEICH

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POLAND, 1920

AGE: 13

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PORT OF EMBARKATION: AMSTERDAM

OLD COUNTRY RESIDENCE: WARSAW

UNITED STATES RESIDENCE(S):

LEVINE: This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. And I'm here today on September 12th 1994. I'm here with Betty Bleich. We're in the oral history studio at Ellis Island. Mrs. Bleich came from Poland in 1920 when she was thirteen years old. Today you are eighty --

BLEICH: I'm going on eighty-eight.

LEVINE: That's right. Eighty-seven going on eighty-eight years old. And Mrs. Bleich was not detained overnight at Ellis Island but she does remember.

BLEICH: Oh I remember everything, yeah.

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LEVINE: So I'm really looking forward to everything you can remember. And let's start at the beginning, Mrs. Bleich. Tell me your birth date, when you were born.

BLEICH: Oh I was born in February 14, 1907.

LEVINE: And where in Poland?

BLEICH: Warsaw.

LEVINE: Did you live in Warsaw up until you left?

BLEICH: I lived all my life in Warsaw.

LEVINE: Okay. When you think of Warsaw what, what comes to your mind? Is there anything about living there, growing up there till you left?

BLEICH: Well you mean coming here?

LEVINE: No. I mean before you, before you came.

BLEICH: Oh before. Well my father came here. He was here seven years before us. And he was going to come back to Warsaw but my mother didn't let him. When he heard there's a war going on, well for four years when America went in they didn't, he couldn't come back. But before when he heard that there's a war, you know, in Europe, there's going to be a war, it was really the First World War, he was going to come back before it broke out. This was maybe, he was here maybe three years, you know. And my mother wrote him not to come back.

LEVINE: Why was that?

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BLEICH: Because she said he'll, you know there's a war going to break and he'll have to go to war. So then we couldn't correspond. We didn't know anything. He couldn't write to us. We couldn't write to him. And then, then after the, right after the First World War we got tickets to come here, big package, you know. And, and my mother made the arrangements.

LEVINE: Well, tell me, what do you remember about your father before he left for the United States, when you were a little girl in Warsaw?

BLEICH: I hardly remembered that because, you know, he went away. We were young. Then we went through the World War, you know. There was no comparison to the Second World War. But still it was a war. They were rationed. My mother was on line to wait for all night long for bread or for potatoes. We were young children, you know.

LEVINE: Now what was your mother's name?

BLEICH: My mother's name was Gussie.

LEVINE: And her maiden name?

BLEICH: Minski.

LEVINE: And M-I-N-S-K—

BLEICH: M-I-N-S-K-I, I imagine.

LEVINE: And your father's name?

BLEICH: My father was Joseph Borell.

LEVINE: Borell. And you had brothers and sisters?

BLEICH: Yes.

LEVINE: And their names.

BLEICH: I had my older brother was Sam. Then I was. Then I had a younger brother three years younger than me, a brother, Harry. And then I had a sister, Edith. We were four children. And then my brother Dave, was born here. So with my brother, Harry, that's really his story if you want me to tell,

LEVINE: Your brother Harry? Now he's the,

BLEICH: He's the, I'm the only one left. They're all deceased.

LEVINE: Your brother Harry came after you.

BLEICH: He was, yes, three years younger than me. All the sailors were crazy about him. He was short and chubby. And there was, they loved him so the sailors on the boat, they would take him on the poles when they changed flags or they cleaned them, you know, whatever had to be done they took him all over with them.

LEVINE: This is on the boat.

BLEICH: And my mother kept on sewing for him because he ripped his shirtsleeves, whatever he wore, you know, from climbing.

LEVINE: Well, let's, let's first talk about life in Warsaw and then we'll talk about [unclear].

BLEICH: Yeah. Yeah.

LEVINE: Now in Warsaw when, did you go to school?

BLEICH: Well we weren't compelled to go to school. We, It was very, very cold or snowy, Europe is cold, you know. It's, well last winter we had a very bad winter here. But Europe it was bitter, bitter cold. My grandma, grandmother would take rags, flannel rags, and wrap my hands and my neck and my feet. But we hardly went to, you know, it wasn't compelled to go. We weren't,

LEVINE: So in other words, you didn't go a lot of the time.

BLEICH: I went but you know it was, it was bad, you know. The weather was bad. I don't know. The circumstances were very bad. They didn't compel us to go to school. We went, you know.

LEVINE: Well do you remember anything about school? What do you remember about school when you went?

BLEICH: Not much. You know there were plenty, what do you call it, plenty of water went under the bridge, you know. Life isn't, I went to work. I was very young.

LEVINE: Oh, you went to work while you were in Warsaw.

BLEICH: No, no, no. My mother worked at nine years old she was when she worked in Europe.

LEVINE: Well now how about your grand, you say your grandmother,

BLEICH: Yes.

LEVINE: wrapped the flannel around you. Was this your mother's mother or your father's mother?

BLEICH: Yeah, my mother's mother.

LEVINE: And did you have a grandfather, too.

BLEICH: Yes.

LEVINE: Do you remember them?

BLEICH: Sure. They were very good to us.

LEVINE: And, and tell me anything you remember, any experiences with your grandparents, either one of them.

BLEICH: Well, well, my grandfather had, (coughs) oh excuse me. Had a business, poultry. My mother had to help him. Then at night she would stand on line, you know, to get us some food, potatoes, like I said. And they rationed potatoes. And I kept, and sat all day long peeling potatoes.

LEVINE: How old were you when started peeling?

BLEICH: As soon as the war broke out everything was rationed. And,

LEVINE: Do you remember anything about your grandfather's poultry business?

BLEICH: Yeah, yeah.

LEVINE: What do you remember?

BLEICH: Well he was selling everything under the sun. He was selling rabbits. He was selling whatever there was in poultry.

LEVINE: I see.

BLEICH: And we lived in a place, did you ever see Budweiser, they go into it, they open up the gates? That's how we lived. Big, six floors, seven floors but no elevator, you know. Maybe, when

LEVINE: A courtyard, was there a courtyard?

BLEICH: We had to walk up. We lived on the fifth floor. And we had to walk up.

LEVINE: Now was it a lot of buildings around a circle?

BLEICH: Yeah, all around buildings. And there were pushcarts, business. And each place, each building had like a commissioner. If anybody was born, anybody died, we had to report it. You know and every war that there's an epidemic. They had typhus fever. So my oldest brother got it. And we had some, you know we thought it funny, you know. The typhus fever must have, it fever, you know. He used to uncover himself and run out of the bed, you know. He said he's burning up. And we were kids. We were laughing. So he asked for the Bible. You know, if he's going to die he wanted to look at the, read the Bible. Not that we were so religious. And then one Friday night, I was the oldest girl. You can imagine. I had an aunt. When my father came here my mother had, we were five children because one of the twins was killed during the war. His heel of his shoe, it was from Red Cross wooden shoe, so the heel would go in the track coming back from school. He went on one side and his twin, my twin, his twin brother, went on the other.

LEVINE: What was his name the one whose heel got caught?

BLEICH: His name was, well his Jewish name was Mendel.

LEVINE: Mendel. Well who was he the twin of? Who was his twin?

BLEICH: Harry, Harry, yeah. That's why he was short and chubby. So anyway, so this, I was the oldest girl. So when my father came here my mother moved in with them, you know, her parents. They had two enormous rooms. We had, my, my uncle, well every ten months she had a baby. The midwife would come deliver the baby and I took over. You can imagine. Well she came in during the day to see how everything is. So I was a child, you know. So I took over. And, you know, I was taking care of the, the baby infant. [Unclear] but what did I know about it. But then the midwife came back and forth. Well, I started [unclear] my brother was sick. So one night, you know I was the oldest girl so I used to, Friday night, Saturday, Friday we had a better meal, you know.

LEVINE: What might you have for Friday night?

BLEICH: Chicken, you know, chicken. We had like a, a, you know, better meal than all week. So well anyway, I used to serve the table. I was the oldest girl. So I served the table for everybody to, you know, eat. I didn't, you know I might, I didn't cook. You know my mother cooked, my aunt cooked. But to put the silverware on, you know, whatever. And then, of course, when I used to serve the food, also. but the one Friday night I wasn't around. After my brother got well my mother had to go into commissioner and tell him that he got sick so he'd take a look. My mother, at home my mother she'll take care of him so he don't have to go to hospital. Then when he got better, so I got sick. And they didn't, this was Friday night. They were looking for me. And I was in bed. I wasn't the type to complain, you know. I just didn't, could not hold my head up so I went into bed. Then they found me in bed. They knew already, I'm good and sick because I never complain. After that, when I got sick my mother got sick. So my mother got sick. They had to report somebody else in my family. And the commissioner said that we got to go two people in one house, it's no place to stay when two people are sick.

LEVINE: Now did you have typhoid fever?

BLEICH: Yeah. And my mother got it, too. So Saturday morning they took her to the hospital. And so they took her, there was an uproar in the hospital. They brought in the mother and her daughter. And Saturday was a big thing, you know, that they should bring in the hospital, to drive, you know, and all. So that was it. So my mother got sick and I got sick. And the doctor, the nurse would bring me in pills. I would put them under the bed. I would never take it. And I still can't take pills. I get sick. Well anyway, so then there was a discussion about cutting the hair. After, you know, after we got well they, the doctors had a conference. And all the doctors from the hospital that they, if they should cut my mother's hair or not. So they cut my hair. And my mother's they decided not to cut. It wouldn't look nice, you know. So they cut, shaved my hair off. And I wore a kerchief. And that was it.

LEVINE: Do you remember how they treated the typhoid fever? Do you remember anything about the treatment or about the hospital?

BLEICH: Well, they gave me pills. That's the most I remember. Years ago I don't think they had injections like now.

LEVINE: Do you remember anything about the hospital like how it compared with hospitals here, after you got here?

BLEICH: Well, it wasn't like here.

LEVINE: What was it like?

BLEICH: No. It was, you know people, they brought in hundreds of people. It was like a clinic. But they had beds for, we were in beds, you know. They gave us beds.

And the medication, the pills, that's all I remember they gave me is pills. And then I threw them under the bed. My mother as sick as she was—and she had a high fever—she used to say to me, take the pills. And, you know, and I can't take even now. I go to doctors and I go very often. I have high blood pressure. She gives me pills. I just can't take them. They make me more sick. As a child, as you grow older you act the same way.

LEVINE: Yeah. Yeah. So, let's see. Did, so did, how, getting back to your grandfather with the, with the poultry business, what, where, did he have a pushcart? Did he, how did,

BLEICH: He had a pushcart. Yeah.

LEVINE: Did you ever help him?

BLEICH: No, no. My mother had, I was in the house mostly, you know, helping out my aunt with the children. He didn't work, my uncle, so he made children (laughs). Every year, less than every year, they had children.

LEVINE: What was your aunt's name? What was your aunt's name?

BLEICH: My aunt's name was Mindel. It would have been Mindi.

LEVINE: And she was your mother's sister?

BLEICH: Yes. And my father and my grandmother were very nice. I was the, you know, laughable type. And there's another word, you know, I used to giggle. Yeah. So my grandfather, my grandfather used to, you know his mind wasn't on hearing me giggle all the time. So he used to say you know to stop or whatever. I remember my grandma used to say don't, don't, don't. Let her laugh. What else has she got? And till now, you know, I mean that's what keeps me going. I'm good-

natured. And I like to do favors, and what's life all about if you're not, but I got into the wrong place. I can't pay high rent. I get it, it's high. So you know I get the, my rent is, what do you call? Aoh, I can't think of the word. Subsidized. That's why my, you see, that's why they have no use for people. But I live in a big building. The social worker told me three quarters of the building is subsidized. But they got my records in the office, somebody that helped out the manager. And that's it.

LEVINE: Well, tell me about anything else you remember about the house you lived in in Warsaw?

BLEICH: Well, this is it.

LEVINE: You went in through, through a big gate and,

BLEICH: Oh, and we,

LEVINE: And that was a courtyard?

BLEICH: Yeah. Then it was all around buildings.

LEVINE: Yeah. And then you walk upstairs.

BLEICH: We walked upstairs. There were people living on the sixth floor. We lived on the fifth. On the seventh floor there was attics. Each side had a room of the, of an attic, you know.

LEVINE: To store things?

BLEICH: Yes. Yes.

LEVINE: And do you remember any games that you played when you were in Warsaw?

BLEICH: We used to play, for the holiday we used to play like tic tac toe with a nut, you know. And, you know,

LEVINE: You mean like hopscotch? Hopscotch?

BLEICH: Yeah. And they used to say there's a ghost down there (laughs). So I used to be afraid. My mother wouldn't, she didn't know how to read and write Jewish. She, are you Jewish? No. Yeah? Well, so you know—

LEVINE: I'm not very well informed, however, but, yeah.

BLEICH: Yeah. But anyway, Europe, my mother didn't know how to read and write. She had to stop and go to work at nine years old. And I had an older brother, not that he would have a big bar mitzvah, you know, we couldn't, nobody could afford it. But she had a rabbi come in for a meal and a quarter. That's what he got paid. So being she didn't know how to read and write she wanted, she was anxious for me to learn. So he taught me and he taught my brother. Whenever he came my brother wasn't around. He used to run around to the family, you know. And he, that's how he would get a meal. He would go to my other grandparents'. And so I used to stay in the house. And, yeah, so anyway, after he, after he taught me the lesson he wanted, my mother wanted me to go look for my brother. His name was Sam. So I used to tell her, you know, I'm afraid at night, especially in winter. And they used to say there's a ghost hiding in the attics on every floor, you know, in every room. So I was really afraid. So he told my mother, he says, if anybody's afraid you're not supposed to make them do things, you know. So he wouldn't, really, you know, he'd tell my mother not to do that. And many a time he wouldn't even come, my brother. He was away, you know, so—

LEVINE: Why? He didn't want to learn? Is that,

BLEICH: He did. But sometimes, you know, he would just, the weather was bad or whatever.

LEVINE: So you said the rabbi would get paid a meal and a quarter?

BLEICH: A meal and a quarter. That's how cheap it was. But the meal and the quarter, to my mother it was worth it. I corresponded with my father. She used to dictate me and I used to write the Jewish letters to him. Then when we came here we started one day and I was, you know, a big girl. So the teacher would walk out. She'd make, she put, they put me in one-A. So she would make me monitor. I was tall for my age. So but the learning was very easy for me. A, B, C is in Polish is A, ah, Bed, Ced, A, B. It was no time I learned how to speak, read and write English.

LEVINE: Do you remember any stories that you were told as a child in Poland?

BLEICH: Ahh. (pause) What kind of story?

LEVINE: Well did your grandmother ever tell you stories or your mother?

BLEICH: Yes. She would tell me old-fashioned stories. Like years, years ago they ate up a meal and they would throw the plates out and buy new ones. There was no water. They had to go outside. Well even for my time. Yeah. I mean for my time, sure. There was, my other grandparents, well here we had an apartment and we had our bathroom. But my grandmother lived like in a one-family dwelling. You know they had all the bungalows there. And they would have the bathrooms in the outside. So, and then my grandmother would tell me stories about the plates, you know, how they would finish eating and they would throw the plates out. It was so cheap. China was very cheap. But there was no water. They had to walk to the well. I mean she used to tell me stories like she used to say you know years ago, many years ago she remember there was no mirrors. So there was a woman looking for her husband. She didn't know where to find him. So she once went up

to an attic and he invented mirrors, you know. So she walked in. She didn't see anybody. She was looking for him. And all of a sudden she sees a mirror, you know, standing up. So she looks and she said, you know, you should excuse me, [unclear] a mensch. She looked at herself, [unclear] a mensch. You understand what I—

LEVINE: Yeah. Say it on the tape?

BLEICH: Oh, in Jewish?

LEVINE: No, say it in English.

BLEICH: How would I pronounce it?

LEVINE: Just translate it.

BLEICH: Huh?

LEVINE: Just translate it.

BLEICH: Yeah, but how? I was, did they hear the story about the mirror?

LEVINE: So, so—

BLEICH: So she went, puff. Are you also, a mensch, and then I don't know how to say,

LEVINE: Are you a woman or are you a man?

BLEICH: It was a woman. She was looking for her husband. So how can I translate it?

LEVINE: Well, I guess that's good enough.

BLEICH: Well, you're not a, are you for real (she laughs)? That was really, I mean she told me little stories.

LEVINE: Yeah, that's nice.

BLEICH: Then my grandfather had a lot of books I would read. Not really often the very rare religious bible. He had a big library, a lot of books. And they died just before Hitler came up. Luckily, they, they were so happy together that I remember that they always wished to die, they should die together, you know, at the same time. And they had their wish. My cousin was in war, you know, and he went out in the cemetery. He saw all his family, my grandparents lying there without a, without a coffin or anything, just lying there. They used to make lampshades out of the skin. Did you ever hear that? But my family, imagine, you know, children. There were young boys. And they saw my grandparents just lying there. They died within days before Hitler came in.

LEVINE: Well, tell me about, you say you, you weren't a particularly religious family.

BLEICH: No.

LEVINE: But did you do some observances?

BLEICH: Well, you know, Saturday we would keep this, not that I had to go to work or anything, you know. The only thing is we didn't cook. We didn't have what to cook.

LEVINE: What did you eat, like not on the Sabbath, but on the regular days?

BLEICH: We had, like I said, potatoes, breads. There was hardly anything to eat.

LEVINE: Did your mother bake the bread?

BLEICH: No. No, we got it. It was potato bread they called it. It was like black pumpernickel with potatoes. You could see the potato lines, you know. They mixed it.

LEVINE: And, let's see. Is there anything else about life in Warsaw that you can remember?

BLEICH: Well, they had a museum. We went to the museum. Before we went to America I had an uncle. He was a rich man. He used to make the cork [unclear] the bottles. But they, so he treated us to go to the museum. You know we went like, and that's about all. I mean I don't, you know I was a child. I didn't go out much. I was mostly in the house.

LEVINE: Did you, so you were the one who wrote to your father?

BLEICH: Yes.

LEVINE: Do you remember what you would write to him?

BLEICH: Well I would, whatever my mother, you know, like, we stopped off, she didn't want all the money at once to come here. Wherever we stopped he would send us money. They used to steal money, you know. You know everywhere that professionals. I don't know what they, wherever we stopped at each port, like we were in Germany for three days, there we got the train to go to, well we went by train by Warsaw to Berlin. We were there three days to go to Amsterdam. There we got the boat. So my father, wherever we stopped, he would send us money.

LEVINE: I see. You knew where you were going to stop.

BLEICH: Then he sent us money to Amsterdam. And she bought us clothing. When we came here we were like Americans. She bought the navy skirt and white middy blouses, sailor collars. When we came here nobody would believe that we were from Europe. We were both, I had, my sister was a redhead. She had a face like an apple and red cheeks. And my cousins brought their friends. They would never believe that we were starving in Europe. And I was never too thin. It was my nature, you know.

LEVINE: Well, tell me, when your mother dictated the letters to your father, before you came, what did she dictate? Do you remember any of the kinds of things that, that she wanted to say to him when he was in America?

BLEICH: Well, he wanted to come back. He didn't want to leave. You know he didn't know how long the war will go on so he wanted to come back. He thought he would come here and bring us. He had a good trade. He was a watchmaker and,

LEVINE: Was he a watchmaker in Warsaw and a watchmaker in the United States?

BLEICH: Yeah. His whole, his great grandparents were watchmakers. And he was a watchmaker before he came here. And he came here, well years ago they didn't pay you so much. But he was a very good watchmaker, you know, from years back.

LEVINE: Do you remember what you knew about the United States before you came?

BLEICH: Oh yes. They used to say that we, we sleep here in golden beds and we step on gold, we walk on gold. I guess you heard about,

LEVINE: Did you think, did you think that was true?

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BLEICH: Well, no. I had to go to work in the factory. I was fifteen years old, fourteen, vacation time. There was a factory there that they had all year round. Day and night they were open. A textile. So I went there for, you know I didn't have the nerve to ask my mother, well if I'd have asked my mother she would say go over and give daddy, you know, my father a kiss. And I was getting matured already, you know. And so I felt, well, anyway, when you're seven years without a father or mother, you know. With a mother it's a different story, you get warmed up right away. But with a father you feel a little strange, you know, I was maturing. So she said go over and give poppa a kiss.

LEVINE: This is when you first saw him again?

BLEICH: Yeah. When we saw him.

LEVINE: When you were here?

BLEICH: Yeah, yeah here. So I, you know we didn't have the nerve. So at fourteen years old I, I had a girl friend, she was born here. She was stupid. She went to work in that factory. So we both went there for vacation. And I used to tell the foreman we came from California and we worked. And then after we, you know, had to go back to school. I said I've got to go back to California. And then after I said that I'd go on back there. And I kept on working, you know.

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

START TAPE 1 SIDE B

LEVINE: Well, but, tell me about the ship. Now you got to Amsterdam. You got more money from your father when you were in Amsterdam,

BLEICH: Yeah. Well he sent us, he sent us money to Amsterdam. So she bought us clothing.

LEVINE: And, and did you stay in Amsterdam a while before you left?

BLEICH: Yeah. We stood there a week before we got the boat.

LEVINE: What do you remember about that, that week in Amsterdam?

BLEICH: Amsterdam was just beautiful. There were, you know, years ago there wore really wooden shoe, the pointy shoes and the hats. And when we came here we had very long hair. My father wanted us to look Americanized. So he went in to about three, four barbers before he would cut my hair and my sister's. But she was a redhead. Finally he got a barber that cut our hair. So we have an aunt, my father's, well my great-aunt, she made wigs out of it. She dyed my sister's hair and made a wig. And my hair she made a wig. I had a nice color, auburn.

LEVINE: So how did you get your hair cut when they cut it? When they cut, when the barber cut your hair, how was it cut?

BLEICH: It was cut, well I had very thick hair. My mother used to braid my hair in Europe, two braids, in two big braids, you know. So I had thick wiry hair. And my sister also had very thick hair. She'd braid it, you know. But three or four barbers yelled at my father, you want us to cut her hair, blah, blah and then tie it, you know. But finally he got one and he cut it.

LEVINE: And when he cut it, did he cut it real short or how did he cut it?

BLEICH: Well, not too short. I started to wear short because the braids, you know, I look good in it this way. Because she made the two braids, you know,

LEVINE: Going out ,

BLEICH: And braided it into the big, two big braid, you know. So my hair was really long all this time. Oh I've got this, yeah. Yeah. So that was about it. He wanted,

LEVINE: So you just have shorter braids after they,

BLEICH: Yeah. I got shorter, cut short, yeah. I always look good in short. Well later on I had it growing back. And but I looked too old when, you know, I, when I got old I used to grow, my hair grows very fast. So I used to let it grow and cut it.

LEVINE: So is there anything else,

BLEICH: About speaking English, my mother, we felt sorry for her, you know. We went to school so we, we only spoke to my mother in Jewish when we came here. So my father wanted my mother to learn English and he wanted us to, you know. So he used to, whenever we, he was home he used to watch us. He held, that was for fun. He held something in his hand to make believe he'll throw it. He looked in our mouths. If we would speak Jewish he would throw something at us. But that was only a joke. So when we saw he held something so we spoke in English [unclear].

LEVINE: Now did anybody ever know Polish? Did anybody in the family,

BLEICH: Well I remembered mostly. My older brother didn't care to remember things, you know. I don't know. He didn't. I remembered a lot of the things.

LEVINE: Like when you went to school in Poland was, was, was the school in Polish?

BLEICH: Yeah, oh yeah. But that's one of the good advantage I had from Polish to English. It was very easy. The teachers were wondering.

LEVINE: Okay. So now what was the name of the ship that you came, that you came on?

BLEICH: Rotterdam. There was three chimneys. Today I read in the paper where they still keep it up. It's still here.

LEVINE: Now what do you remember of the voyage? Do you remember experiences on the ship?

BLEICH: The voyage? Well that the voyage, you know. We were supposed to be in the third class. So my brother, Harry, he was never in the first class. They sold, the tailor, the sailors would call him in there. He would eat with them. And, and then we all went in there, you know. They used to, you know, we'd run back and forth. We were children, run back and forth and we had a good time. But when we saw the Statue of Liberty, ohh, we started to dance on the boat. And what we carried on, everybody young and old. We saw the Statue of Liberty, I think, two days before it landed.

LEVINE: You had to stay on the ship two days longer.

BLEICH: Yeah. Well, you know, it, you see, after you see for fourteen days water and no, and the sky, we saw just a, just a, we hardly saw, we hardly saw her. So it took, you know, about two days. Then coming here we didn't know who our father was. There were hundreds of men, maybe more than that, maybe thousands of men. People you know waiting at the, for the ship to come in. So we used to say if we saw a man dressed, all dressed up, we'd say here's our father [unclear]. Brothers and sisters, we had fun.

LEVINE: So do you remember actually seeing your father for the first time?

BLEICH: Yeah.

LEVINE: What was that like?

BLEICH: Oh, it was an excitement. Then we couldn't get an apartment. You know it was very hard to get an apartment. So my father's cousin had a one-family house with a basement he rented us the four rooms. And we lived there a short time and we got an apartment, a bigger apartment. We were four, four children and six people. So, you know, we got a bigger apartment.

LEVINE: Do you remember the reunion with your mother and father when they first saw each other having been apart for all those years?

BLEICH: About what?

LEVINE: When you were here at Ellis Island?

BLEICH: Yeah.

LEVINE: How did you find out which of those men was your father?

BLEICH: Well, my mother knew. I mean my mother would recognize. And he would know my mother so, he, somehow, he recognized. It was such a thrill. What can I tell you? But I felt I'm going to break down today, you know. Here I'm the only one left. My brother, lost him in January. He was sick for three months and he was gone.

LEVINE: And this is Harry?

BLEICH: In Florida. No. Harry died a long time ago. He died about ten, twelve, he had no children. They got married. So—

LEVINE: So this is Sam now you're talking about? No, David.

BLEICH: Sam, Sam. David was the youngest. He was born here. He died in January. He died in Florida. And everybody wanted me to go to see him. How can you go to see when somebody's dying? That was my, I would break down with him. But he got a very fast cancer. He died within three months. Ugh

LEVINE: So tell me when you first came to this country, were there things about it that struck you as different, things you'd never seen before?

BLEICH: Oh yeah. This I must tell you, when we came to Ellis Island we saw black people. So we used to call out in Jewish, ma, ma they schwarze menschen. So my mother never saw a schwartze, you know. Now they're all over Europe. But we'd never saw. She said, shh, shh. She was smart. You know, she said, shh, shh. Don't say [in Yiddish, be quiet] Then we called them schwartze. Then really now they're black. They don't like when you call them colored, you know that.

LEVINE: So was there anything else, once you went to the apartment things that you saw that you didn't—

BLEICH: My father got furniture through a peddler and pay out. You know, he couldn't afford it. So he had to have, we had four rooms in the basement. So he paid out a peddler.

LEVINE: Now how would the peddler, would the peddler actually have a,

BLEICH: Oh years ago they had peddlers coming into the house. They were selling everything, linens, everything.

LEVINE: So, in other words, this peddler would come in. Would you see this furniture before you bought it?

BLEICH: They, I, they brought, my father, I guess, went to see it. He went to pick it out. So they would come and show you, you know, pictures.

LEVINE: So there were all kinds of salesmen coming around to sell things.

BLEICH: Yeah. Yeah.

LEVINE: The linen, furniture,

BLEICH: Everything, everything. And, you know, a man, he wasn't so, my father was never experienced. I remember he always said he didn't know how to cook or clean. Now they know. Years ago they didn't know especially European men. They don't know anything. And he always used to say to die, he wants to die before my mother. She knows how to cook, how to clean. I always heard that conversation. You know when you start a talk you talk about a newborn and then you started talking about dying. So he died very young. He died at, he wasn't even sixty years old.

LEVINE: Well what did he do when you mother and your brothers and sisters were still in Warsaw and he was here? How did he live?

BLEICH: He lived in the borders, you know. Women, women used to tell my father, used to talk to my mother that we had company, you know, from the ship. They call, you know, you get to know landsleit you know from the boat. My mother got to know a lot of people. So they used to come around. And they used to converse. They would say, so my father would, all the other men that had their wives come in from the same boat that we came in, the women, the old maids used to say to my father, what do you need to bring here a woman with four children? He's crazy. He's this and that. Do you see how women are? So, and then, another thing, men would send a, right after the war the women never believed, they never heard

from the men. They were too stupid to understand that you couldn't, during war, you couldn't correspond. We didn't hear nothing from my father for four years. And they could not understand it. They thought that one day the husband don't want them or the children. So big packages came in for four children, five, you know. It was money and tickets to come here. You know they would do. They'd throw it out the window. They'd threw the kids out. They thought they asked for divorce. That's how people are. They used to throw the children out the window. And they would go after them, commit suicide. They thought they'll never come here to them, that the husband don't want them. And this is the truth. You never heard anybody tell you these things?

LEVINE: No. Now, now in Warsaw during the war, was there anything that affected you directly? I mean did you see anything of, of the war, of the soldiers, of the fighting?

BLEICH: Well, yeah. German soldiers would come into Warsaw. It was a beautiful state. Everybody, well, before the First World War it belonged to Russia, if you, I mean it's, that's in history. So then they would come in, the soldiers they would throw us down. And beautiful uniforms they wore, you know, in red and navy or whatever. And the horses, they were just beautiful. They wanted Warsaw to buy all the people. So they would throw down chocolates from the horses, you know. It was so high up. And candy, cookies. They would, you know, throw, just throw a lot of things down to get,

LEVINE: So the people were inclined to like the German soldiers?

BLEICH: They wanted we should, yeah. But they weren't like Hitler was, you know. Maybe he was building then already to be a Hitler. But they were very good. They were good to us, especially children. They saw we came home from school. They would throw things down that were really, it was good. We never saw anything like it.

LEVINE: So you personally knew of some women who threw their children out the window and then jumped because they felt their husbands no longer wanted them.

BLEICH: Their husbands doesn't want them. That's, you never, nobody ever—

LEVINE: I haven't heard that one.

BLEICH: Well I come from a big, you know, big, everybody had to come to us to get whatever they needed. They had like the senate there and everything.

LEVINE: Were you living in Warsaw, were you living in a special Jewish section or were you,

BLEICH: Well, they were known, we happened to live right near a church. And there was a big, like a,

LEVINE: Catholic Church?

BLEICH: Catholic Church. They had maybe ten floors, twelve floors high. And when we passed they watched us. They were sitting there lower or higher. Maybe the lower ones would tip off the higher. Anyway they watched us if we speak Jewish or Polish. And as soon as we walked passed we spoke Polish. And those were the good times.

LEVINE: Did you, did you get along in general with the Poles, with the—

BLEICH: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Like I said, well my grandfather, he sold or rather he had to deal with the Polish people.

LEVINE: Did he buy the rabbits and things from them?

BLEICH: Yeah. They used to bring it to him, you know. And then he would sell it. They had fruit markets. A lot of them would bring fruit to my, you know, at times he would sell fruit. Once I took an apple, you know, so my grandfather would, counted everything. And I loved, you know I wanted to know what it taste like. So I got an argument from my, because I took an apple. They were counting everything, the Polish whatever they brought. Then one day I took a bite out of a tomato and I thought it was an apple. And since then I don't like tomatoes. You see I was so disappointed in the taste.

LEVINE: What else did you have of fruit because apples?

BLEICH: They had oranges, also. But I, we didn't, couldn't get anything unless you take, you know, and that's like stealing. Even from my grandfather because whatever day you sold them everything was accounted for. But we really couldn't get anything. I couldn't walk because, you know, I was undernourished. And then when I came here I started to get, have trouble my spine. It's osta, what do they call it, osteoporosis, I have. It's all started when you're very young, no milk, no nothing, you know. All we ate was potatoes and bread. And we were happy to have that. To stay all night long my older brother would go relieve my mother. She should go home, have a cup of coffee. I don't think she even had time to, for coffee. She had to go right back. You know he was a child. They wouldn't give him when it would come to her turn. So they wouldn't give him anything.

LEVINE: So when you got to this country did you, did you discover new foods here that you had never had?

BLEICH: Oh yeah, we had food. You know my mother used to ask me, she says, if she'll ever, we'll ever come to live, to come to America she'll ask me what to buy and what to cook because I suffered the most. I sat too, all day long, you know, and

it's no good for the spine either. I had, I couldn't walk. I couldn't walk. I had, and then I had to pick a trade, textile, walk, standing all day and lifting heavy things.

LEVINE: That was here you did that. Yeah.

BLEICH: Yeah.

LEVINE: Okay. Well do you remember any attitudes or any things that your mother or father tried to teach you, tried to instill in you, any ideas?

BLEICH: Well, they tried. My father wanted me to continue going to school. He wanted us to look our best. And you know he used to give my mother, my mother wanted table money. Years ago they didn't make much. I know myself I made ten dollars a week.

LEVINE: Your first, when you first started working?

BLEICH: (Coughs) Then, all in all maybe the most I made when I stopped working was eighteen dollars. So you know they tried. My mother tried her best. She asked me every morning what you should cook. And she cooked the best for us. She used to yell at us we should eat, eat, eat. And I loved my food. I really did. I do. But they, you know, you work in a factory it's not easy. Fifty hours. I worked Saturdays till one o'clock. My father, too, worked till one o'clock. We came home. We had a feast, seven-course meal my mother would make. She never knew how to bake a European, she used to bake and bake. I'm telling you she made everything. She made a challah.

LEVINE: Did you father become a citizen?

BLEICH: Oh yeah. Oh sure.

LEVINE: Do you remember when he became—

BLEICH: Oh sure. He became a citizen, I think, in 19 (pause) 27.

LEVINE: Do you remember, was he proud of that? Do you remember if he was proud of that?

BLEICH: Oh he was very proud. (Coughs) You know he got pneumonia. And tanks, you know, what you called, to breathe, the oxygen, oxygen. So then they, Roosevelt, President Roosevelt ran for the last time. Everybody got out to vote for him. My father he had pneumonia. He got out of bed to vote for him. So my mother said that the voting polls, who were policemen, you see, he's sick. He was perspiring. He had pneumonia, walking pneumonia. So the policeman said, look lady, there are here crippled and they sick, they sick, you know. So he stood in line and came home and died two days later, a day later. He was not even sixty years old. Because he went, everybody went and voted for Roosevelt. And believe me if not for Roosevelt where would we be with social security. I live on that although my mother didn't get it.

LEVINE: Was your father then put, did he take notice of politics and what was going on in the country? Was he—

BLEICH: Politics? Oh yeah he knew. He knew, yes, oh sure. We used to read the Jewish paper, you know.

LEVINE: What are you most proud of that you've done in your lifetime?

BLEICH: Oh I'm proud of everything. I love America. What can I tell you? They used to say we'd step on money. But it's, you know, people make up stories.

LEVINE: Yeah. Well when you got here then you, you started working. And then when did you meet your husband?

BLEICH: Not right away I didn't start to work. I started school. That summer I worked maybe six weeks. And then I waited till I was sixteen and I went to work. My husband I met when he was, I was about nineteen. When I got married I was nineteen and a half. But years ago my father thought I'll be an old maid, you know. And years ago you got married young, eighteen, nineteen.

LEVINE: How did you meet your husband?

BLEICH: In a club. You know boys and girls.

LEVINE: Was it a club of people from the,

BLEICH: Social.

LEVINE: From the same country or was it people from,

BLEICH: No, no, no, no. I just went into there. I belonged there. I wasn't too much of a run around, you know. You worked hard. It was very hard work. Textiles is the worst job.

LEVINE: So did your husband come to this country or was he born here?

BLEICH: He was, no, he wasn't born here. He also came here.

LEVINE: From where?

BLEICH: Russia.

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LEVINE: From Russia. And how many children did you have?

BLEICH: Just her, my daughter.

LEVINE: Diane.

BLEICH: One, the one child.

LEVINE: And do you have grandchildren?

BLEICH: I have a great grandchildren. And a great granddaughter, she was fourteen in May.

LEVINE: Wow. She's older than you were when you came to this country.

BLEICH: Yeah. Oh but America's beautiful. It's only bad now, you know. The people make it bad. I could have, when I was, you know, before I got married I could have walked. When I was single we'd go out. Girls would meet. You know we knew each other from wherever I worked. We used to go to movies Saturday. And then we went to an ice cream parlor. And we never, you didn't see a soul. But you could have walked all night.

LEVINE: Do you remember the movies that influenced you when you were first here?

BLEICH: Oh yeah. Harold Lloyd. All these very funny, Charlie Chaplin. All these old actresses. There's nothing [unclear]. You were born here naturally.

LEVINE: Yes, I was.

BLEICH: Yeah. You're very sweet. You are very, you've got a beautiful disposition.

LEVINE: Thank you.

BLEICH: That's your job I guess.

LEVINE: Well, I like my job so I guess it works out well.

BLEICH: No, it's your, you know the way you are.

LEVINE: Thank you. So tell me who else? Were there any other people that you looked up in your life? Like you considered somebody either a famous person or maybe somebody you knew that you really admired.

BLEICH: Well, I read a lot and I like a lot of people. I love people. I was a saleswoman in A and S's in the lingerie and I loved the people. And to my bad luck I moved into a seniors citizen. It's worse than an old age home. The people are so mean. You know there should be a write-up about these senior citizen homes. I really mean it. It's terrible what's going on, they hurt ---. You know they don't get, They sick. They make the next to them sick and then they die and . . .

LEVINE: Well, tell me, how do you think,

BLEICH: Does that go in the tape?

LEVINE: It's all on here (laughs).

BLEICH: Well, I don't care. I don't care.

LEVINE: It's okay. It's okay. It's your opinion.

BLEICH: Where's this going, the tape?

LEVINE: Well this tape will stay, Ellis Island we have a library. And then I can make you a copy and your family will have one and there'll be one in the Ellis Island library. But let me ask you another question. How do you think it influenced you, the fact that you started out in Poland, you stayed there for twelve, thirteen years of your life and then you came here and you lived out the rest of your life here. How do you think that made a difference, the fact that you were born in another country?

BLEICH: Well, it made a difference because my father was here, you know. And my mother built a, what can I tell you, we really built a life here.

LEVINE: Did your family ever want to go back?

BLEICH: I don't think so. I don't think so. There's nothing to go back to. They were killed. I had, I had a cousin that he had seven beautiful sisters and brothers. His parents they were killed. Then I told you about that rich uncle. He had two beautiful children. One, one by the way, his daughter was killed. But the son is in Israel. He's a lawyer. He's a very big lawyer. They were very rich, maids and everything.

LEVINE: How about your family and their customs and how they did things? Do you think they tried to become Americanized or tried to hold onto—

BLEICH: Oh yes. No, no, no. As I said my father wanted us to be Americanized right away. He was so happy that we spoke, you know, when we first started to speak English. He wanted my mother to learn, too. She didn't want us to talk our mother language. He wanted her to be Americanized.

LEVINE: Did she? Did she learn?

BLEICH: Yeah, oh yeah, yeah. We had to otherwise my father would,

LEVINE: Throw something at you (laughs)

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BLEICH: Yeah. We laughed. It was funny. We really loved, my father loved this country.

LEVINE: And did you grow to be close to your father?

BLEICH: Oh yes. Yes. You know, in the beginning it was hard, you know. I was getting mature, you know. But my father was very, very good to us. He gave us everything, whatever he could.

LEVINE: Okay. Well I think we're at the end of the tape. And maybe this is just as good a place to end as anything. I want to thank you very, very much.

BLEICH: Oh, you want to thank me? I should thank you.

LEVINE: (They laugh) You're very sweet.

BLEICH: This is, I really thought I'll break down today because, you know, as I said we came here with, with my mother. And we got a thrill meeting our father here. And good old America, it's the best country in the world. I don't have to say it. Everybody knows that.

LEVINE: Okay. Well I just want to close by saying I'm speaking with Betty Bleich. It's September 12th 1994. We're here in the Ellis Island studio. And this is Janet Levine signing off.

END OF INTERVIEW