

EI-730

FRIEDA UNGER

BIRTHDATE: MARCH 23, 1923

INTERVIEW DATE: FEBRUARY 16, 1996

AGE AT TIME OF INTERVIEW: 81

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INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE, PH.D.

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AUSTRIA, 1929

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SHIP: STUTTGART

PORT: BREMEN?

RESIDENCES: BURGENLAND

ALLENTOWN, PA; NYC

LEVINE: Okay, today is February 16th, 1996, and I'm here in the apartment of Frieda Unger here on West 23rd Street in New York City. Frieda Unger came from Austria in 1929 when she was five years of age. [doorbell rings] Whoops, we're going to pause here. [tape off/on] Okay, we're resuming now, after a visitor and his dog. [Laughter] Okay, I was saying that it's February 16th and I'm here with Frieda Unger, and this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service.

Would you tell me first your birth date and where in Austria you were born?

UNGER: I was—let's see. I was born March 23rd, 1923. I was born in Burgenland, Austria.

LEVINE: Can you spell that?

UNGER: B-U-R-G-E-N-L-A-N-D.

- LEVINE: Did you live in Burgenland up until the time you left for the United States?
- UNGER: No, let's see—from three to nine months old I lived in Yugoslavia.
- LEVINE: Oh, why was that?
- UNGER: Because my father's step-mother wanted me and so then she asked for me because my parents were going back and forth. They were trying to build a house here, you know.
- LEVINE: They were coming back and forth to the United States?
- UNGER: To United States, they came back and forth. See, my father stayed here quite a while. My mother went back and forth quite often, and they come to see us and everything. So I used to call her "auntie," because I didn't know her too well because she was always going, you know. Anyhow, so then I lived in Yugoslavia because they asked for me because I was the youngest. My grandmother asked for me, but then when she died, my mother's mother took me in Austria. So then I stayed there until I came here.
- LEVINE: I see. Do you remember—you probably don't remember your father's mother because you were a baby.
- UNGER: Well, I know she was very good to me.
- LEVINE: What do you know about her?
- UNGER: Well, she was good to me, but the thing is her children were alcoholics and my mother used to send back money, you know, to give me milk and everything. So the family drank it. The daughter drank it, drank the money. So the neighbors, so the neighbors wrote to my mother, "Come and get her," because I was put in a corner. I wasn't taught how to walk. I wasn't taught how to talk. I was just put in her corner and they drank her money. So they sent for me to, you know, to go to Austria. So that's where I was.
- LEVINE: I see, and why don't you mention also that you were born with cataracts.
- UNGER: I was born with congenital cataracts.
- LEVINE: And how was your loss of vision treated? I mean how did—
- UNGER: Nothing was done for my eyes then until I came to America, and I had my tonsils taken out and they told me in Allentown if I had my tonsils

taken out, I might be able to regain some of my sight. But that didn't work. That was only a fallacy.

LEVINE: How was it discovered that you were not able to see?

UNGER: Well, people came and gave me bottles of milk and I didn't—I didn't grab it. So they could tell there's something wrong.

LEVINE: So when you were with your grandmother in Yugoslavia was it known to the family then that you were not able to see?

UNGER: I don't know. I do not know that.

LEVINE: Yeah.

UNGER: Because that was too far back. That was when I was three to nine months old.

LEVINE: So then do you remember your mother's mother in Austria?

UNGER: Oh, yes, yes, yes, yes. I could still see that dog that they had. They had a police dog and she was very good to me. Anybody wanted to hit me, she said, "No, no, don't touch her," you know. I was spoiled on account of my handicap.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh. Now, what was your mother's name?

UNGER: Rose.

LEVINE: And her maiden name?

UNGER: Gotzi, G-O-T-Z-I.

LEVINE: And so that was your grandmother's—

UNGER: Mother.

LEVINE: I mean your mother's mother, that was her name?

UNGER: Yeah,

LEVINE: And do you remember her first name, that grandmother in Austria?

UNGER: No. No.

LEVINE: Okay, and how about your father, his name?

UNGER: Peter.

LEVINE: And his last name.

UNGER: Unger.

LEVINE: Oh, yeah. And how about your sister?

UNGER: He was in Rox in Austria. Rox, R-O-X.

LEVINE: Oh, okay, and your sisters.

UNGER: My sister Rose is in Indiana and my sister Ann lives in Pennsylvania.

LEVINE: And Rose is the older?

UNGER: Yes.

LEVINE: Oldest?

UNGER: Yeah.

LEVINE: She's two years older than you.

UNGER: Yeah, and Anna is one year older.

LEVINE: Anna is one year older.

UNGER: Say around thirteen, fourteen months older.

LEVINE: Now, where were Rose and Anna when you were in Yugoslavia?

UNGER: They were with neighbors because my grandmother had had—she had four or five children of her own, you know. So they couldn't take her, you know. I mean take them, so they kept me only and neighbors raised them.

LEVINE: So your grandmother in Yugoslavia had other children that were still at home?

UNGER: Yeah.

LEVINE: Still lived at home. I see. So then when you go to your mother's mother in Austria, did you have contact with your sisters?

UNGER: Oh, they came to see me. In fact, they were jealous of me because I got everything, I wanted. I had a white hat. I can still that hat, and my sister wanted that. She used to pull it off my head. You know, jealousy, sisters, because I got everything, yeah.

LEVINE: And so do you remember your mother coming back to visit?

UNGER: Oh, yeah, she came back and forth to see us and I used to call her "auntie," and she used to say to me, "I'm not your auntie, I'm your mother," but I wasn't used to it. So a couple times she used to slap me.

LEVINE: What about your grandmother, what did you call her?

UNGER: I call her like moter, like mother, because she was there with me.

LEVINE: Yeah, yeah. What do you remember about her, about what she did or how she was?

UNGER: Oh, she baked all the time. I don't know, she just comforted me all the time, you know, she was so good to me. We had a nice house. Not a house, like a farm. It was a farm, like it was shaped like—what they call it? Like a square almost. You go outside, there's a pig, there's a cow, there's the chickens, like all around. I can still see that and they had a police dog. I recall one time they send me outside to see the police dog, and I can still see that dog. I was about two inches away from that dog, he would have had my nose. The thing is they forgot about that. I wanted to feed him, you know. So all of a sudden they grabbed me back because he would have bitten me otherwise.

LEVINE: Oh. Now, who tended the farm?

UNGER: My grandfather. What you call him? My—yeah, grandfather.

LEVINE: Oh, what was his name?

UNGER: Michael.

LEVINE: And do you remember—

UNGER: Gotzi. Gotzi.

LEVINE: And do you remember anything about him, how he was with you?

UNGER: Well, I was out. I saw him again. I was out there five times. I was there in '64, '67, '69, in the '70s and '81 I was out there last. They keep on saying, "Come out, come out," but thing is, that's a long trip to go out

there. I said, "Why don't you come in here?" People say, "I don't want to fly," you know. But I recall when we came to America, she hired—my mother hired some lady to take care of us on the boat.

LEVINE: Oh. Okay, well, before we talk about that trip, do you remember—have any memories of your grandfather from when you were in Austria?

UNGER: Him not too much because he wasn't home that much. He was over on the field.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh, uh-huh.

UNGER: Yeah.

LEVINE: And did you have aunts and uncles?

PP I had cousins. I had a lot of cousins. I had a cousin in Vienna. I had a cousin in some other part of Austria. I had my father's—my father's sister lived in Gratz, Austria, and then they had some other aunts. My father had—my father had three sisters. One in Allentown. Three, four sisters, and he was the only boy.

LEVINE: Did you ever recall seeing your father when you were in Austria?

UNGER: No.

LEVINE: He would stay—he was staying here then.

UNGER: That's right.

LEVINE: It was just your mother who was going back and forth?

UNGER: That's right. I don't recall him at all.

LEVINE: And do you have any other memories of the house or Burgenland?

UNGER: Burgenland.

LEVINE: Burgenland.

UNGER: I know it was hilly. It's on a high hill, you know.

LEVINE: Do you remember any—how about religion, was your grandmother religious?

UNGER: They used to go to church but not—like on Sundays. They didn't go every day, you know, like on Sundays. I don't recall going to church out there. I don't recall that.

LEVINE: What church was it, do you know? Was it a Catholic church?

UNGER: Catholic church. Catholic church.

LEVINE: And do you remember any holidays? Any celebrations of any kind?

UNGER: No.

LEVINE: Do you remember anything that had to do with births or marriages or deaths? Any kind of ceremonial—

UNGER: No. No, nothing happened then. My grandmother died while we were here in Allentown. I mean at the farm, my grandmother died. In 1930 something she died.

LEVINE: I see. Do you remember any of the things she baked?

UNGER: Oh, yes. Some kind of strudels, different kind of strudels, buckwheat cake. All that stuff, you know. I can still taste it.

LEVINE: Yeah.

UNGER: [Laughs]

LEVINE: What was a typical day like, like when you were there? I mean what did—

UNGER: Play. Oh, yes, I had to take care of my—my cousin used to—my cousin lived with us, one of my cousins. He was about three or four years younger than I was, and I had to rock him in the cradle, like a carriage, a cradle. I used to, you know—I wanted to go out and play, but you got to rock him first that he goes to sleep. So anyhow, so then I rocked him. So then he'd go to sleep. All of a sudden I'd go away, he started crying again and I used to get so mad because I was always told about this. I used to shake the crib, I said, "Go to sleep!" you know, like tempers, you know. I recall that. I mean I was told about that, too, so many times.

LEVINE: And when you went out to play, what did you play or who did you play with?

UNGER: My cousins. The girl cousins, you know.

LEVINE: Do you remember any of the games you played?

UNGER: No, just the play in the hay and that kind of stuff, you know.

LEVINE: And how about the animals?

UNGER: With the chickens and all that stuff, you know. I used to love animals. Yeah.

LEVINE: Did you have any duties as far as taking care of animals?

UNGER: No. No, they wouldn't let me.

LEVINE: You were pretty young.

UNGER: Yeah, and scared that I couldn't see it or something like that, you know.

LEVINE: You could always see a little bit.

UNGER: Well, I could—well up until 1959 I saw almost perfect and then when I came to this country I had five operations in Philadelphia and they took off the cataract. Then, what you call it? Then '59 my scar tissue opened up, which caused a detached retina and they fixed that twice, but then it folded again. So now this eye has just light, that's all I could see, in the corner of the eye. And this eye I can see. I can see the door there, but when I read, I got to go like this very close. I've got magnifying glass and I read Braille and I have tape recorders.

LEVINE: Okay, do you remember what—[dog barks]

UNGER: Peppy! Shhh! Sorry. Peppy! [dog barking] Peppy, no!

LEVINE: Do you know why it was decided you would come to America when you did?

UNGER: My mother wanted to better themselves. Get jobs.

LEVINE: What was your father doing over here in America?

UNGER: Brick layer. Brick layer.

LEVINE: And did your mother work?

UNGER: Yeah, she worked in a cigar factory over in Allentown.

LEVINE: And what was it—when you came—

UNGER: Around 1930, something like that, '31.

LEVINE: When you came here with your sisters—you came with your sisters?

UNGER: Yeah, we all came together, the three of us?

LEVINE: And your mother?

UNGER: She was here.

LEVINE: No, but did she come back and then take you over?

UNGER: No.

LEVINE: Who did you travel with?

UNGER: Well, some lady. She hired some lady to take care of us. This person that she hired had her own child. You know, she was coming here with her child. So then her job was to take care of us, watch us on the boat.

LEVINE: Did you know this lady?

UNGER: I didn't know her. I didn't know her, but she was very mean to my sister Rose. My sister Rose. She was jealous. I don't know, she was jealous of us because we got so much, you know. My mother used to give her money so much, that she took things from us and gave it to her own son. Well, she was good—I don't recall her too much, because I was—I don't know. But the thing my sister Rose used to say she was mean to her because she didn't take care of her. She watched—she looked out—well, she looked out more for her son.

LEVINE: So do you remember leaving your grandmother's house in Austria?

UNGER: Yes.

LEVINE: What was that like for you?

UNGER: It was sad because I knew I wouldn't see her again, you know.

LEVINE: And what she tell you? Did she give you any advice or did she say anything to you that you remember?

UNGER: No. No. No, just cried and, you know, said goodbye to us.

LEVINE: Did you take anything with you, that you recall?

UNGER: Not that I recall.

LEVINE: So then you left Burgenland—

UNGER: Burgenland.

LEVINE: And where did you go? How did you go?

UNGER: We left Burgenland and then we came to Allentown.

LEVINE: But I mean, when you were going to the port?

UNGER: Oh, went to Germany. Went to Germany.

LEVINE: How did you get there?

UNGER: I think it was a boat or something—a train. A train. A train. What's it called, that place again? It's on the passport.

LEVINE: Oh, you mean where you left from?

UNGER: Yeah, it's in Germany. I forgot. Frankfurt or somewhere. Somewhere around there, where the boats go. I forgot.

LEVINE: It could have Bremen.

UNGER: Yeah, Bremen. Yeah, Bremen, I think.

LEVINE: And the name of the ship?

UNGER: Bugenland. Uh, Burgenland. Uh, I told you before.

LEVINE: Stuttgart.

UNGER: Stuttgart, yeah.

LEVINE: Right, and okay, so we think that if—apparently your visa was issued in February, early February.

UNGER: Yeah.

LEVINE: 1929 and you think that you left sometime after that, not too long after that.

UNGER: Well, some—my mother had mentioned to us something about October 29th, you know.

LEVINE: Well, yeah. Well, it isn't clear then whether you left—whether you were five when you left.

UNGER: I don't know. I was very small. They put a tag on me that I couldn't speak English. I was very tiny, you know.

LEVINE: Yeah. So do you remember anything of the voyage on the Stuttgart?

UNGER: The boy?

LEVINE: The voyage.

UNGER: Oh, the voyage. Oh, I just know that they fed us and just sat us down all the time. We didn't do too much on the boat.

LEVINE: Were you in what was called steerage on the boat? Do you know if you were like—were you in a kind of a large space with a lot of people, like a dormitory kind of?

UNGER: I don't recall that.

LEVINE: Do you remember cabins?

UNGER: I don't recall the boat trip too much, you know, because I don't know. That part has gone from my mind, you know, the boat trip.

LEVINE: Do you remember when the boat came into the New York Harbor?

UNGER: Yes.

LEVINE: What do you remember about that?

UNGER: I recall [unclear]. See, my father was not there yet. So they put us on like chairs they have there. We sat in the chairs and then they came over to me and they kept me there, and my sisters had to stay there until my father came, came for them. Then I was there a couple days.

LEVINE: Now, why—you mean you were there and your sisters weren't?

UNGER: Yeah.

LEVINE: Why were you there?

UNGER: On account of my eyesight.

LEVINE: And what do you recall about the examination?

UNGER: I cried. I cried. I cried. I cried.

LEVINE: So in other words, you were there by yourself?

UNGER: Yeah.

LEVINE: Oh, no wonder you were crying.

UNGER: Yeah. I cried and finally they come and pick me up, you know.

LEVINE: Yeah. Well, do you remember what you were told?

UNGER: I don't think I was—I forgot what I was told, but I know I wasn't happy.

LEVINE: Do you remember anything about the dormitory or the—

UNGER: Yes, I do.

LEVINE: What do you remember?

UNGER: It was a big room that time, you know. Now when I saw it it was like a small room what they have, but it's a big room, what I saw.

LEVINE: Yeah, you probably were in a big room. There's a dormitory building.

UNGER: Yeah, yeah, and that's where I got my first enema.

LEVINE: Why did you get that?

UNGER: I don't know. I didn't know that. I know I didn't like it. I bet they still got them there, you know. Get an enema and I cried.

LEVINE: Well, do you remember like who was taking care of you?

UNGER: Nurses.

LEVINE: Oh, well, perhaps you were in the hospital building.

UNGER: I don't know why. I wasn't sick. I guess I was just quarantined, probably, you know.

LEVINE: So then did they examine your eyes a lot?

UNGER: Yeah. I recall—I recall seeing some girl there. She had—she was older than I was and she had long finger curls. You know, she had long finger curls and she had part of her thumb missing, you know, and they said she can't stay and her mother cried and cried and cried. I don't know what happened to her, though, but I can still see her. She had long, long like black hair, you know, finger curl they used to have years ago. Yeah, that was nice though. Oh, but she cried so hard, though.

LEVINE: Were there other things that you saw there that were going on with other people?

UNGER: No, but that girl stuck out on me, how she cried and how they took me away, you know.

LEVINE: Were you able to speak with anybody?

UNGER: I couldn't speak English.

LEVINE: Right, was anyone speaking Austrian or German?

UNGER: Not that I recall.

LEVINE: Well, that must have been—

UNGER: They might have probably because, you know, they wouldn't just take me off. The thing is, I don't recall that, but I know I was taken away and then my father came for me a couple days later and took me to Allentown.

LEVINE: Now, you had never—you didn't remember your father. What was it like meeting your father?

UNGER: I think it was strange to me because I don't recall seeing him that much. The girls, either.

LEVINE: And how did he treat you when he picked you up?

UNGER: What?

LEVINE: How did he treat you when he picked you up?

UNGER: I guess average. Average, I guess. I don't recall too much about that time, you know.

LEVINE: Do you recall leaving Ellis Island and traveling to Allentown?

UNGER: I recall the train. He had a train—they had a train ride, yeah. Lehigh Valley train ride, you know.

LEVINE: So it was just you and your father traveling?

UNGER: Yeah, yeah.

LEVINE: Were there any things about America that struck you as new and different when you first got her?

UNGER: No. I was too—I was too petrified, you know.

LEVINE: What an ordeal for a little child, yeah.

UNGER: I was scared and then my sisters—then they took me to Allentown, my sisters were so glad to see me. Within five, four couple of days we all got used to each other, started fighting.

LEVINE: And how about your mother, what was it like to see her?

UNGER: Well, she was glad to see us, but the thing, I didn't know her that well, you know.

LEVINE: Yeah, yeah.

UNGER: "I'm your mother," you know, she used to say to me all the time. "I'm your mother." Auntie, no. Then they got used to it.

LEVINE: So did you start school soon after you got there?

UNGER: No, I started school when I was eight years old.

LEVINE: Oh, how come you didn't start?

UNGER: I went to school in Pennsylvania. I went to regular school. I went to a school where they had like a country school, but then I couldn't see. I couldn't see the blackboard, so I'd just stay in the classroom. I was left back because I couldn't see the board. So the principal found out that I couldn't see. So then he wrote to my mother and says "I want to see you." So then she came in and he says, "I know of a school up in Philadelphia, it's called Overbrook," and they send me there.

LEVINE: Was that a school where you stayed?

UNGER: I stayed for Christmas, Easter and summer.

LEVINE: You mean you lived there?

UNGER: A boarding school. Boarding school. It was a school for the blind. I was there for two years and my teachers all through grammar school up to eighteen years old, they had to write to Washington about my progress. If I was a burden to the country, about my behavior, if I was good or bad. If I was [unclear], that kind of stuff. Every month she had to write to Washington.

LEVINE: And do you know why that was?

UNGER: I don't know. I never asked her. I used to say, "What are you doing?" She would say, "I'm writing about you to Washington."

LEVINE: Huh, this was in the regular school system as well as—

UNGER: Yeah. Yeah, yeah.

LEVINE: Well, how did that make you feel?

UNGER: I didn't care because I was about average like. I wasn't bad. I was an average child. I had my friends, my gang, all this kind of stuff. I wasn't doing nothing bad. So I didn't care.

LEVINE: How was that phase of your life when you were in the boarding school in Philadelphia? What was that like for you?

UNGER: That was—well, when I first went there my mother used to say, "You've got to stay in this school here. So we'll come back for you tomorrow." Tomorrow came, they never came back. So then I got used to it because I was left so many times, you know. I went to school, then I cried. When I come home from school, I cried because I got used to it there. But I was shifted from place to place like, you know.

LEVINE: Do you remember any teachers or any students from the boarding school?

UNGER: Oh, yes. Yes, yes, yes, because I was eight to ten years old. I recall I was in the kindergarten building, you know, where I learned Braille. I had a very good time over there.

LEVINE: How did the boarding school compare with the public school that you went to after you left the boarding school?

UNGER: Well, when I went—I went to school here up in PS-59 on 57th Street. They have a school over there. That time it was—well, they had three—it was an average school, grammar school, but they had three extra rooms. One was for the blind people, like for the Braille. Then they had a sight conservation. Then they had a retarded class, you know. I was in the Braille class. So then I used to mainstream. I went out to the regular classes and then for my official room, I went back to the Braille room. So what I did when I took a test, I took a test in an average room when I was mainstreaming. Then I wrote down what the teacher asked in Braille and then I took it back to the other teacher, she put it underneath what I wrote because she read Braille, the teacher, you know. So I went to high school that way, too. I went to Wadley High School, another Braille school.

LEVINE: What was it like? I mean how did you—was that a good education you think you got?

UNGER: Well, truthfully—truthfully, I think a handicapped person should go to like a boarding school up to high school because there's certain things you can't do in school. I couldn't have gym. I couldn't have cooking, that kind of stuff. But when you go to a sheltered school like a boarding school where they teach you that extra, they have smaller classes. So then I was cheated out of that. I was cheated out of gym. I was cheated out of home economics, that kind of stuff, you know.

LEVINE: In other words, you could have had gym and home economics if you were in the boarding school because it was smaller and you got more attention.

UNGER: Yes. Yes, yes.

LEVINE: Yeah.

UNGER: But they do have a school up in Pelham Parkway. I should have gone there, but thing is I got so tired of being separated from my family that I wanted to go to an average school and come home every night, you know. Yeah.

LEVINE: Well—

UNGER: My father, when we came here, he turned out to be an alcoholic. He made life miserable for us.

END OF SIDE A
BEGIN SIDE B

LEVINE: And did your mother continue to work when she was here?

UNGER: She got a job as superintendent, you know.

LEVINE: Do you remember where you lived?

UNGER: Well, let's see. First we had a house in Allentown. So they sold that house. They moved to the farm in Mechanicsville and then through me we had a lawyer and everything. They lost the farm.

LEVINE: What do you mean through you?

UNGER: They had to have a bond for me, you know. Put up a bond for me that I was able to stay here, you know.

LEVINE: And you think that they lost the farm because of that bond?

UNGER: Yeah, I think so. The money—they didn't have the money so they couldn't afford t keep the farm and we had a lawyer. She had a lawyer, which cheated her, my mother, you know. That's how she lost the farm, she said. Then they moved to the city here, 90th Street where they got a job as superintendent in the basement, but then that was no good because it was in the basement. So they moved to West Side and we stayed there forty-five years as superintendent.

LEVINE: Where was that?

UNGER: On 89th Street and Amsterdam.

LEVINE: Well, how did you feel—how was it for you learning the language? I mean just going back when you first arrived?

UNGER: I went to school. I went to the boarding school. My father used to say, "I want German spoken in the house," you know.

LEVINE: Oh, he wanted to hold onto the old country.

UNGER: Yes.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

UNGER: And when he wanted to learn English, he put on the radio station. Sometime like WINS, you know, the news station. He put it on over and over and over. I got so tired of hearing the news, you know, he used to put it on so much.

LEVINE: He wanted to learn English, but he wanted you to speak German in the house.

UNGER: Yes. He said, "I want German in the house," you know.

LEVINE: And how about your mother, how did she feel?

UNGER: Well, as soon as he died we went to English, you know, except my relatives in Pennsylvania, had to speak to them in German. Like mother mother's sister, my aunt, and then had to speak to them. Then I went back to Austria so many times, I'd speak German to them.

LEVINE: Did your mother or your father, did they ever have certain values or certain attitudes that they held that they wanted you to be like or to live by or did they ever express any kinds of ways that they wanted you to act?

UNGER: No. I mean—I mean I could have gone—I had a sister who was very smart and she wanted to go to college and carry on, but she was the oldest daughter. But my father wanted her to go to work. On her eighteenth birthday, he threw her out of the house because he was kind of—he was drunk and was drunk all the time, and she couldn't wear lipstick, she couldn't do that. But I could have gone to school until I was a hundred, you know.

LEVINE: Why was it that you could have gone?

UNGER: Because I was handicapped.

LEVINE: So was he kind—more kind to you?

UNGER: Yes, he was.

LEVINE: Because of your handicap?

UNGER: Yes, yes, yes.

LEVINE: Were you like his favorite, would you say?

UNGER: When he was drunk he used to call me names, cripple. A cripple because I was handicapped so then I used to say, "Pop, I'm not a cripple," and he says, "I didn't mean it that way," he said, you know. But then I could have gone to school until I was a hundred, but then she wanted to go to school and she couldn't go to school. She moved out. She lived on her own.

LEVINE: So do you think your mother was pleased that the family had come to America?

UNGER: Oh, yes. Yes. Yes, she was.

LEVINE: And how about your sisters?

UNGER: My sisters would never go back to Austria. I took my sister out in 1969. I treated her, you know, my sister Ann and I was her interpreter, you know, because she forgot her German and out there she says, "Frieda, let me get back to the United States. Let me go home." She says, "I like my private house. I like my everything," you know like out there they had outhouses and things, you know. She said, "I like my conveniences." She was so glad to come back here.

LEVINE: Well how do you feel personally about the fact that you were born there and then you came here at about five and lived the rest of your life here?

UNGER: I'm happy here. In fact, my father's sister said to me, "Frieda, if you stay here with me, I give you everything I have. You can have my house," I mean her apartment. "You can have all my furniture, my money if something happens to me." I said, "No thank you." I said, "I'm going back to America."

LEVINE: Was it that—what's the difference, as you see it, between—

UNGER: I think a handicapped person out there—a handicapped person out there, I'd be lost.

LEVINE: They don't have the services that we do here?

UNGER: No, no, no.

LEVINE: Well, [unclear]—

UNGER: The only thing that they do have, a person out there who is blind puts on a black band, you know. That means you can travel for nothing on the trains and busses, but you got to put on a band, black band on your arm. And I was happy here. I have my friends, here, you know, education here. I mean I don't mind going out there just seeing my family, but to stay there out for any—stay out there forever, no way. No way to stay out there forever.

LEVINE: So then did a lot of your cousins come also, to this country?

UNGER: One cousin came one time. There was three of them that came just for a week, like a week excursion, that came for a week, but they didn't want to stay here.

LEVINE: They feel the same way. They want to go back where they're comfortable.

UNGER: Yeah, to their country.

LEVINE: When you were living in Allentown and your family was there, were there a lot of immigrants?

UNGER: Yes. Allentown years ago was a lot of German people out there. Like a little town, you know, but now it's like a city now. Now it's mixed now.

LEVINE: But how do you remember it, when you were young, when you were like living there? What was Allentown like?

UNGER: Well, Allentown is—I don't know, it's just like a little town where your relatives are and everything, you know. And, you know, but the thing is—thing is we had no—I didn't go to school there until I went to a mechanic school in Pennsylvania because I was in the hospital so many times, my eyes, you know. I had five surgeries in one year.

LEVINE: About what age were you then?

UNGER: That must be around six or seven. Six or seven, around there.

LEVINE: I see. So when you first came here, it was I would say a lot of turmoil.

UNGER: Yeah.

LEVINE: There was just the whole being kept at Ellis Island, going to the boarding school.

UNGER: Going to my school, operations. Well, total I had thirteen operations in my life, you know. Not all on my eyes, but different things. So now I'm—I worked for Catholic Charities for thirty-five years.

LEVINE: Well, tell me about—you went to high school.

UNGER: Yeah.

LEVINE: And then what did you do after that?

UNGER: I got a job in some kind of toy factory. I worked in like factories for a while, like advertising places but then I got tired because each job that I had was a couple months and I was out of a job again. So then I went to the Guild for the Blind. They trained me on Dictaphone training, you know, and I taught myself how to type right and everything and I got a job at Catholic Charities. Dictaphone operator. I used to work on adoption cases and things like that.

LEVINE: And how did you feel about working there?

UNGER: I liked that. I worked there thirty-five years.

LEVINE: So that's where you retired from?

UNGER: Pardon?

LEVINE: Is that where you retired from?

UNGER: Yeah, I retired in 1991.

LEVINE: So how is this time of your life, now that you're retired?

UNGER: Well, right now I'm happy because right now I have my activities. I have current events classes. I have a class called Moving Forward where we discuss, you know, behavior. Then I have ceramics and then I have—we go to gym class downstairs.

LEVINE: Are all these classes right here in this building?

UNGER: Gym class, yeah, where they have bicycle and we got a treadmill and everything like that. I made that black dog over there.

LEVINE: Wow, that's lovely.

UNGER: Yeah.

LEVINE: So in other words—what's the name of this building where you live?

UNGER: Associated Blind. It's Selis Manor.

LEVINE: Sellers?

UNGER: S-E-L-I-S, Selis Manor.

LEVINE: Selis Manor. Now, are all the classes right here in Selis Manor like the current events and the ceramics.

UNGER: Wait a minute, I'll show you.

LEVINE: You can show me after. We'll finish and then you can show me.

UNGER: Oh, okay.

LEVINE: Just for the tape. In other words, this is a community of people who have sight loss.

UNGER: Or they're wheelchair cases. Like somebody has MS, you know, that's in a wheelchair. Well, they have two wheelchair apartments on each floor where it's bigger. You know, bigger place. Bathroom is bigger and everything is bigger there, like you know, kitchen is—like open kitchen and things like that, you know.

LEVINE: I see. So in other words, this is where you can socialize and take classes?

UNGER: And we got a roof garden and we got a backyard, you know.

LEVINE: And so how do you feel about living here?

UNGER: Huh?

LEVINE: How do you feel about living here?

UNGER: I like it. I'm here. I came here in 1981. I came on January 2nd, 1981. I've been here ever since. I've seen a lot of changes since I'm here, like a lot of people died and people moved and that kind of stuff, you know. But I made close friends here.

LEVINE: How did you feel visiting Ellis Island?

UNGER: I felt, I don't know. I felt like I said, "Gee, I lived here once." I was here once, you know. And the funny thing was, I was in a room—I was in a room talking to someone where they had those—where the man talks to you, interviewing room like where the man tells you all about. Where they have pictures like—where they have pictures.

LEVINE: It was a park ranger who was like giving a little talk about the place.

UNGER: Yeah, talk where they show pictures first. Slides and like a place and everything there. So then the man talked, you know. So then the man asked anybody here was in Ellis Island. So my girlfriend—I was sitting next to my girlfriend. I said, "I'm not going to tell him." He said, "Oh,

you're not going to tell us? Come on, tell us," you know. So he got me up.

LEVINE: And did you talk about it there?

UNGER: I said I was here.

LEVINE: And he said, "Why were you here?"

UNGER: I said "Because of my eyesight," and that kind of stuff, you know. And then I went outside. The guy gave us a paper outside and you filled out—the one that I sent you.

LEVINE: To be interviewed.

UNGER: Yeah, yeah.

LEVINE: Oh, great.

UNGER: He said, "Fill it out," he said, you know, "what could you lose?" So I was there three times.

LEVINE: Huh, well, it was an unhappy experience for you when you were the first time.

UNGER: I know, but the thing is just think that I'm happy now. Like I'm all right.

LEVINE: Well, you are the kind of person that Ellis Island is honoring. That's why it's there. That's why it's a museum, to honor people who came to this country as immigrants and found a new life here.

UNGER: Oh, yeah.

LEVINE: So it really is a tribute to people like you. That's the whole purpose of it. So I'm glad that you—I'm glad that you enjoyed the visits after the first one.

UNGER: Yeah.

LEVINE: Okay, is there anything else, Frieda, that you would want to say before we close?

UNGER: Nothing too much because I don't record that much. Just these small things that I record, but not too much. Because I was too young, you know.

LEVINE: Yeah. Well, it sounds like you found a life for yourself here.

UNGER: I did, yeah. I wouldn't go back. I wouldn't go back there again. I felt like I was a praying here. [Laughs]

LEVINE: [unclear]

UNGER: That's funny.

LEVINE: I want to get you laughing. So now—oh, maybe we should just mention your companion here in the apartment before we close.

UNGER: Mention what?

LEVINE: Mention your companion here.

UNGER: Oh, Buffy?

LEVINE: Yeah.

UNGER: My little Buffy, I got her in 1986 from the ASPCA, and she was about nine months old when I got her and she's a great joy to me. She's a little Chihuahua. Yeah. Where is she?

LEVINE: I don't know. She's awfully quiet.

UNGER: Yeah, Buffy, come here. Buffy. Buffy. Nope, she won't come.

LEVINE: Hmm. [unclear].

UNGER: Are you finished today now?

LEVINE: Yeah.

UNGER: Oh.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, I think we'll close here. This Janet Levine for the National Park Service. I'm speaking with Frieda Unger in New York City. It's a very snowy day outside.

UNGER: It's going to snow more.

LEVINE: It's February 16th, 1996 and this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service and I'm signing off.

END OF INTERVIEW