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MICHAEL SCHELL
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INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE, PH. D.
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AUSTRIA, 1945
AGE: 7

SHIP: GRIPSHOLM
PORT: MARSEILLE
RESIDENCES:

LEVINE: Today is April 29, 1996 and I'm here in the office of Michael Schell, who came from Austria in 1945 through Ellis Island. Michael Schell was seven years of age at the time of his immigration. And you left after two and a half years in POW camp.

SCHELL: Right.

LEVINE: Right. Okay. Well, I'm delighted to be here and we'll go from the questionnaire. And if you'd start at the beginning with where in Austria you were born and when you were born.

SCHELL: Okay. I was born in Austria on September 25, 1937. My—at that time, my mother was—had been born in Poland and had gr—grown up in Poland, and that's relevant. And my father had been raised in Czechoslovakia. Both Poland and Czechoslovakia at one time, or those parts that they lived in, at one time been part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire under Kaiser Francioso [PH]. So it was not unusual for people to

have—to know each other and to meet in that circumstance. But I was born there and my father was a—had a small insurance business.

LEVINE: What was your father's name?

SCHELL: Alexander.

LEVINE: And your mother's name and maiden name?

SCHELL: Frieda [PH] and her maiden name was Pearlberger [PH].

LEVINE: And you had a sister?

SCHELL: I have a sister named Rita, who's 20 months older than I am.

LEVINE: Okay. Do you remember early childhood in Vienna?

SCHELL: No, I—we left Vienna when I was two years old so I wouldn't remember that very—very much.

LEVINE: What—what are your earliest memories?

SCHELL: The earliest memories, when I—we left Vienna in 1939. My father was coming to the—we—were all supposed to come to the United States. And as was the pattern at that time, he left shortly before we did. We were going to follow him when he had arrangements put together for us to come to the U.S. with. And I—during—well, also, he left Austria. We went to my mother's family in Poland. Things weren't very good in Austria; they were probably worse in Poland. [chuckles] And they lived in a city in Poland called Velitchka [PH], which was not terribly far from Krakow. And so we stayed with my mother's family there until circumstances got pretty hot there too. But my earliest recollections are of being in Poland [several words unclear] Poland.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Now, did—was your father—your father then came to the United States—

SCHELL: My father—

LEVINE: —when you left Vienna?

SCHELL: My father came to the United States in—in 1939, or late '39. And he was able to immigrate. My entire family had papers that were able to come to the U.S. And my mother's—my father's parents were going to come to the U.S. also. But they had to pass a physical examination in order to come to this country. And they sent my father and my grandparents to a

doctor who was probably a Nazi to get a physical exam. And my father, who had a double hernia, which is really bad [chuckles], was sure he was going to fail and they weren't going to let him out. Well, apparently, his—the miracle of his life was [chuckles] he didn't and he passed the physical. And my grandparents, who were in perfectly fine health—my grandfather had a slight infection around his fingernail. And the doctor said that—"You—you're not in perfect health and the U.S. won't allow you to come in." And he kept my grandfather there. And my grandmother said, "I'm not going to leave without him," and so they were both killed.

LEVINE: Oh.

SCHELL: For a nail infection. [chuckles] So strange illnesses, yeah.

LEVINE: So your father left alone?

SCHELL: My father left alone and he came to the U.S. and settled in Philadelphia. And then when he tried to send for us, the—it was already too late for us to get out of—out of Poland. And we went to the Gestapo and the Gestapo denied us permission to leave. And my mother's entire estate was ransacked at that point. And we went into hiding for a couple of years, hiding in people's home and being taken care of by well-intentioned, well-meaning Christians who—who sheltered us. My mother was able to find Arian papers for us so that—and she's blond and blue eyed. And my sister is blond and blue eyed and I was a baby, and so we apparently passed as—as Christians and were able to survive a good part of the—of the war. I remember at one point it became very difficult for my mother to continue this isolation and hiding and even living with people who were constantly condemning Jews. And so she decided that she would rather be with other Jews in the Krakow ghetto. And I do remember going to the ghetto with her and my sister. And we stayed and her family had been quite affluent in Poland and had—and so the Krakow—the rabbi of Krakow knew my mother and my mother's family. And so she went to the Krakow rabbi. And I remember staying in his home one night. He had a big white beard and [clears throat] I slept in his bed and had a red blanket over his bed. And there were white lice crawling in and out of his beard all over this red—this red blanket. And I remember that so clearly because I didn't know whether the lice [chuckles] were part of his beard or what they were, as a child. It's fascinating for me to watch that on the red blanket. But the Krakow rabbi told my mother that if he had—that everybody in this city is going to get killed. The Nazis were going to kill us and that the only chance you have—and you have no right to be here if you have an option. And so we left and left and—left the ghetto.

LEVINE: When was that? Do you know?

SCHELL: I—it probably—I don't—I don't remember but it—it had to have been—I don't know when the Krak—when was the Krakow ghetto destroyed? I—I didn't watch "Shindler's [PH] List" because I [chuckles] couldn't quite bear to see it, but it must have been in—in—I'm going to guess in '41 that we were there.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm. And what—what were the conditions that you remember of—of—

SCHELL: Of the ghetto, I don't remember at all. I just remember coming out—coming outside of it and I remember what the outside looked like, which, when I saw photographs from—from the film, that was exactly what—I mean, it was—I saw them and I said, "That's exactly what my memory had been." And also, I was told—when I told people about the story about the lice, they said the book and film were full of stories about the lice. And that was so much the case, because that's the strongest memory of the ghetto with the lice in the—in the Krakow ghetto. But we—we hid and were sheltered. And my mother tells me we spent a great deal of time in Polish cemeteries because, apparently, the Nazis didn't bother [chuckles] people in the cemeteries. That was a strangely safe place.

LEVINE: So, were—were there other people in hiding also in the cemeteries?

SCHELL: My—I have a first cousin who was in hiding with us but she remained in the ghetto. And she and her mother were two of the very few people who escaped the ghetto when it was destroyed. And they've got a pretty amazing story about that also. But they were in—in hiding with my mother and sister and I. And my mother's family—my mother had 12 brothers and sisters. She was the 13th child. And all but three were lost in the war—lost in the [unclear].

LEVINE: Hmm.

SCHELL: But the—so after—so we—we hid and we were sheltered. And I remember spending a great deal of time under a table in a—in some nice person's home that kept us hidden for awhile. But once—one time we were out in the street. We were spotted and taken to a—a—a prison in Poland called Montelupe [PH]. And we spent three months in the prison. And—

LEVINE: What do you remember of that?

SCHELL: I remember that pretty clearly. I mean, that was an—a hideously awful place. There were mattresses all over the floor. There were—there was a—a—a row of pots with a wooden bench over the top of it, which was the—the toilet for everybody. And I remember that once a day the Germans would come in and they'd say, "[unclear] aus." People would carry the things out. And people would die in that room—in that one big room everyday.

LEVINE: How many people were in a room?

SCHELL: I—and again, I can't quite say but it was a—it seemed to me at that time and I was, of course, pretty young—I would say there was a—there must have been 50 or 60 people in the room. And the—and the windows had a steel plate over them. A little bit of light came in from the top of the steel plate but nothing else. I think—thought there was big garbage cans against the window. So—and then once—once a day they'd feed us with coffee and bread. And—

LEVINE: That was it?

SCHELL: That was it. And that's my recollection. Of course, as a child, I found ways to play and feel comfort in there because our mother was around. And mothers give you—give children a great sense of comfort so—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, wow. So was it—it was a—it was crowded. I mean, it was a big room but it was [unclear].

SCHELL: It was [chuckles]—it was—they—there was—I mean, the floor—every inch of floor space was taken and that's where people lived and spent the whole day.

LEVINE: And do you remember anything of the people who—who hid you?

SCHELL: I remember—I have a vague recollection of one wonderful woman. And I don't remember the detail of it but I remember spending time under the table and I—because I—I see these four legs around me as an important sign in my life. [chuckles] And—and she was—she was quite a person. She fed us. She took care of us. She kept us hidden and sheltered. And when the Nazis came—the Gestapo came to arrest us, they said to her that, "We understand you have Jews here, that you're hiding"—she says, "No, I've got people that I'm hiding," is what she had the courage to say to them. So a pretty spectacular person. But I don't have any—I have no idea who she was or what happened to her as a result or anything like that.

LEVINE: And this was in Poland?

SCHELL: This was in Poland, yeah.

LEVINE: Was—was there any religion going on in your early life in Europe that you remember?

SCHELL: I—I remember the first spring that I was in Poland when my mother's family was still all there. And it was Passover and I remember a huge seder. My—my grandfather's—my grandfather had a pretty big estate in Velitchka. He was the primary employer in the town, had a leather tanning factory. And there was a gate and there was a hill coming up to the house and there was quite a lovely house. And there was a barn down the road across from the house and then there was a whole farm set up in back with a lake behind it. And I used to take cows down to the lake. But I remember on Passover the house being full of people and big stacks of round matzahs everywhere and—and a lot of festivity. But that's about the only religious think I—I have any recollection of. I remember sledding or riding a ski down the hill towards—in--into the gate, but I must have been three or four years old so there's nothing very clear on that.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, do you have any recollections of your grandparents?

SCHELL: None. None at all. My—my grandfather probably had died already by that time. My grandmother was there and, from what my mother tells me, they—she had the chauffeur take her and her Mercedes to Russia, which was a hell of a way to—to leave. But that was through family affluence. And of course she perished in Russia. Nobody knows what happened to her. But we were—when all this ended we were eventually incarcerated in this Montelupe prison where we were about to be moved to a concentration camp, because everybody from there was about to go to the concentration camp. And curiously, we were heading probably to Bergen-Belsen. And [unclear]—so—but apparently, as we were being processed through, the Germans found a—some record of our being American citizens. And as a result, we weren't sent to Bergen-Belsen but we were sent to Liebenow [PH], which was a civilian civ—prisoner of war camp. What had happened was that my father had lived in Philadelphia and he discovered that there had been a fire in Philadelphia that destroyed all the municipal records. But if he could produce a family Bible that showed the birth, the death or something or somebody, you could get a birth certificate. And so he had a scribe, a Jewish [unclear] inscribe the marriage and—and my mother's birth in Philadelphia. And so he said that my wife was American citizen and my two children were lost someplace in Europe. And they—to the Red Cross and the Red Cross recorded that American citizens were lost somewhere in Europe.

So that's what saved our lives at that point. A pretty creative thing to do, I guess, huh?

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. So—okay, so then you—you—you were sent to the—to the [unclear]?

SCHELL: I was sent to the camp. I have a recollection in here also—I have a recollection in here also of a—of the shower scenes. And I—I—that I really do remember where the Germans were hosing everybody down in a—in a mass shower. That's the thing that I've got some memory of and I can't say exactly where, but it was when we were leaving Montelope and being processed to go to a concentration camp, I think, is where this thing was—being happening. So—but anyway, so then we got to—to Liebenow, which was the name of the—the POW camp. And Liebenow was a convert—a convert. I'm sorry. A—Liebenow was a place where nuns and priests live, a—

LEVINE: A monastery?

SCHELL: A—not a monastery but—

LEVINE: A convent.

SCHELL: A convent. I was close with a convert, right? [chuckles]

LEVINE: Yeah, right. [chuckles]

SCHELL: Was a—was a—a convent. And there we were forced to pretend we were Catholics. And I went to synagogue—went to syn—went to church services, which I didn't like very much. My sister liked it a lot. She learned all the songs. My mother was quite ill and she was in—she was sick most of that time. We stayed with children in separate—in separate quarters. And I—and those years went by because in a playful way we played with kids—other kids. I learned to speak French and Dutch and English, because that's what all the other kids were who were there. And we had a nice—you know, a nice group of friends and, for children, it wasn't so terrible. The—

LEVINE: Was there school at all?

SCHELL: I don't think I had—there was any school there. In fact, I'm pretty sure there was no school there. But we played and there was some—you know, the—we—they had some big farms and fields where there was some peach trees. And I remember being out there and—and then the Nazis would always chase the—the kids with the—with the dogs. So they would send the dogs in the field and the dogs would chase us and

we'd run all over the place. And boy, I still developed a fear of dogs. I'm not comfortable with dogs as of today from that—from that time. But that—that was probably quite tolerable for us and probably hard for my mother. But at that point we already had—we were put back in touch with my father, who had found that—who—and he would send us packages, those that got through. And there was a sense of a hope for the future at that point, which became much—quite tolerable.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Did you see any real violence in [unclear]?

SCHELL: Not—no. I mean, actually what happened was that when—when—when the Allied bombings would take place, there would be some—we'd go into shelters. And those were pretty horrible because you'd feel the ground shaking around you even in the shelter. And you'd hear the bombs going off and [unclear] go off and you'd find piece of shrapnel all over the place. But that was the extent of it. I didn't see anything other than—we didn't—we didn't see anything much worse than that. At least if they did, I didn't see it.

LEVINE: Was—was it explained to you somehow as a child? Did—I mean, did you have—

SCHELL: I had no grasp of what was going on.

LEVINE: —idea of what was—

SCHELL: No, I had no grasp of it at all. I mean, at least my recollection of it now in the case I had no grasp of it at all.

LEVINE: Right. [telephone ringing] Do you want to pause here?

SCHELL: No, it should ring three times and it'll stop then.

LEVINE: Let's see. So you were with your sister then the whole time.

SCHELL: I was with my sister and my mother and, in an interesting way, I felt pretty secure. I didn't feel in jeopardy—overtly in jeopardy. I just didn't like to go to—

LEVINE: Church.

SCHELL: —the church. And I would tell my mother that, "[speaking in Polish]," which is Polish for, "I will be a Jew anyway," even though we had to play at not being Jews. And of course, I don't know what, because it wasn't consequential but it was just my recollection. But my mother kept us very empowered and kept the image of my father very much alive and

kept the sense that, “We’re all going to be okay. As long as we’re together, we’re all okay.” I don’t—I guess if I had been separated from my mother I would have gotten panicked about the process. But as long as she was there, even if she was sick, she was still a sense of security so—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Do you remember any incidents with the nuns or—

SCHELL: The—the—not really. The—just as an aside, during the time that we are hiding there is—there is—I guess I had really—we’d starved for a long time, been really hungry. And my mother says that for three or four months I walked around with a piece of bread in my fist, wouldn’t open my fist for three or four months. She couldn’t wash my hands; she couldn’t do anything. So the sense of hunger and the fear, but it didn’t stay. Those kinds of frightful memories didn’t stay with me very clearly. The Nazis coming to the door—they—they came to the house and they—they wanted any precious possessions that we had. And I—my mother said we didn’t have any. And I said, “Oh, we do have some.” And I took them to some [chuckles] of the things we had because I didn’t want—I thought that was a safer way to be. But there isn’t—I don’t have any—any of these horrific memories. Or if I do, they just don’t surface so I leave that very much alone.

LEVINE: Yeah. Do—do you feel like you have any ramifications from that period of time at this point?

SCHELL: Oh, sure. I mean, I’m sure. I know I do. I know I do and I know that it colors my whole perception of homeless people in the streets of New York, as a matter of fact.

LEVINE: Hmm.

SCHELL: When I see a mother and homeless children, yeah, it’s—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm.

SCHELL: —a pretty powerful connection. And it’s—and it’s pretty much my whole perception on life and on morality and—and human decency and appropriate behavior towards people. So it’s got an enormous impact. But I think that because, maybe—because I was so young and also because my mother gave me such a strong sense of comfort with it, it’s mostly a positive message that I take away from that. I don’t take much—I don’t—I don’t have much of a sense of hatred or anything. That’s—that’s been [unclear].

LEVINE: Oh, that’s the best possible—

SCHELL: Yeah, that's—that's the best—the best scenario.

LEVINE: Yeah.

SCHELL: And that, of course, is more to my mother's credit than it is to anything else. But she was an enormously powerful woman. I mean, here was somebody was—who, while sick herself, was able to give comfort and protect these two babies that she had, and never relinquish hope and never relin—and never do anything but maintain a very vivid picture that we're going to be coming to my father in America and everything was going to be wonderful. And the power and the strength that that took is unbelievable. But then when we finally did come to America, she just relinquished all authority and all power to my father and became this very subservient woman, which is a very—very interesting in a strange way for somebody to become.

LEVINE: How do you remember her in your—I mean, like, what did she look like and how was she with you?

SCHELL: She was always—she was great comfort. She was always loving. She was always very supportive and she was always very beautiful. There was—whenever she was nearby I was very secure. I would wet my bed for all the years that we were there. But as soon as we left and I got out of—we got out of there, or whenever I slept in the same room as she was, then I didn't do that. So the sense of—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

SCHELL: But that—that was about the only [chuckles] trauma that I can remember out of that whole thing. And then we—in the meantime, my father was in the United States and he was trying to get us exchanged out on prisoner of war exchanges. And what's really interesting is that he would go to Washington all the time. And he'd talk to the FBI and he'd talk to the Red Cross. And the FBI—a guy from the FBI once told him, "You know, Mr. Schmuckus [PH], we—we know that they're not really citizens. But we're going to get them out anyway. We're just going to get our people out first." And I thought that was also a pretty decent thing. You know, that—

LEVINE: Yeah.

SCHELL: —he—they—they allowed my father dignity of his charade.

LEVINE: Right.

SCHELL: And they also weren't going to—and even though they knew that these papers had been generated the same way—probably other people had done that—they still had a decency, the fundamental American decency of standing up for—for people who are in trouble. So it's pretty nice.

LEVINE: So you—that's where you were. You were in—in this—in this convent—

SCHELL: Right.

LEVINE: —for the two and a half years?

SCHELL: Called—yeah, called Liebenow for two and a half years.

LEVINE: And—and where was that located in Poland, do you know?

SCHELL: I don't know. As a matter of fact, I ought to find out. I ought to go to visit it at some point. Because I travel to Europe so much, I ought to do that.

LEVINE: It's—it's Liebenow?

SCHELL: Liebenow.

LEVINE: Liebenow.

SCHELL: I'll find out where it is.

LEVINE: And so do you remember the day when—when you realized—

SCHELL: Well—

LEVINE: —you'd be leaving?

SCHELL: That didn't make such a big impression. We were taken out on trucks and we went through Switzerland. We got to Switzerland, was—it was in January. And—

LEVINE: A group of people?

SCHELL: A group of people. And in Switzerland I got very sick. I had boils and the—the Swiss were pretty horrible, as a matter of fact. The—I mean, here were people who were coming out of the—of the worst hells in the world that were passing through Switzerland. And they kept us in January in a—in a stable sleeping on straw. I mean, they wouldn't offer any real kind of hospitality or—or decency and kind of a—but, so actually I was pretty ill. And they wouldn't have a doctor tend to me. They had a—a vet lance the boils on my back, which was also pretty interesting.

LEVINE: Now, was your mother still ill?

SCHELL: My mother—my mother was—yeah, but my—you see, my mother was ill because she had bad ulcers. But it never—I never had a sense that she wasn't strong.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

SCHELL: Yeah, it was just I didn't have that. Anyway, so when we came out, we came out through—through Switzerland. And somewhere in Switzerland we got on a train. And when I was on this train the people sitting across from us were people who had been let out of—somehow gotten out of Bergen-Belsen. I don't exactly know how. But they were people who were apparently in Monte—or knew people who were in Montelupe with us. So that's where I thought that we were heading for. So—but we got—took the train to Marseille and in Marseille we were supposed to get on a ship to come to the U.S. And that was pretty amazing because we get there and there is this beautiful white ship. And it was music playing on the white ship; at least I think so. And there were beautiful women on this ship. And then there was this awful black ship. And I said to Mother, "Oh, I really want to go on the white ship. I really want to go on the white ship." Actually, they put us on this black ship, which was a pre-World War I troop—Italian troop carrier. And there were, like, six or eight stacks of bunks, of hammocks. And we were put in one of these rooms and I was lying in the hammock, and there were rats, huge rats running up and down through there. The—and we were heading to North Africa, or actually probably going to be to South Africa is where they were taking immigrants. And my mother said, "It's a mistake. We should be going to America." And we were moved out and the ship sailed out. And it went out for a day in the Mediterranean and stopped. And it was lying at anchor. And the consulate FBI came on the ship and they interviewed my mother and my sister and I—

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A]

[BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE B]

LEVINE: What language was your mother speaking?

SCHELL: Well, my mother spoke a little bit of English. And I think we all spoke enough English at that point. As a matter of fact, I spoke English fine at that point. I mean, I had an accent but I had been playing with Brits all the time, so English wasn't—was not a problem. And they did an interview and they checked the results of the interview. And they brought the boat back. And we and several other people went on this beautiful

white ship, which was the Gripson. And the Gripson was going to bring us to—to the United States. And that was the—that was wonderful. That was just a wonderful—they—it was a hospital ship carrying wounded soldiers back and some civilian POWs. And we did the crossing, the North Atlantic crossing, in early February.

LEVINE: What do you remember of the voyage?

SCHELL: Just that it was the fruition my mother had told me all the time, that we're coming to see my father; we're going to be with my father in America. My mother told me that on the voyage she, for the first time, started to lose heart, you know, saying that, "Is he really going to be there at the other end?" You know, "Is this really—what's going to happen?

LEVINE: But you didn't know that.

SCHELL: No, I didn't know that. And I don't remember very much about it, except that it was a wonderful world for a child to explore. And I remember how beautiful the women looked. I remember how beautiful American women looked. I'd never seen women with makeup or with lipstick or with the hair done. I mean, for—everybody I'd seen was—was in this hell of a concentration camp or whatever, so—or prisoner of war camp. So it was not people I'd seen who tended to themselves.

LEVINE: Well—w—we—where were these American—how come American women were on the ship?

SCHELL: They were the—the nurses who were taking care of the sick soldiers. I mean, I'd seen soldiers all my life. I'd seen people with their legs and arms blown off. So that didn't ter—that didn't make as much of an impression on me as the—as the women [chuckles]—[unclear] silly as I'm saying this. But—but that's what my recollection is, you know. So beautiful women have been a problem for me then for the rest of my life. [laughter] But that was my recollection of—of that time. And the—you know, and it—it was just okay. I mean, it wasn't—I didn't have any strong reaction. I have no strong memories of the crossing, except of the anticipation, the building anticipation. And then I remember early one morning—at least, I think it was early one morning, there was a huge commotion and excitement. And we all—and would come up on the deck. And everybody's over one side of the deck and there's the Statue of Liberty. And it was fabulous. It's indescribable what the Statue of Liberty meant to everybody on the boat, and even to me. I mean, it was just—excited. And I didn't expect to see it; I didn't know what I was seeing. But I felt the incredible force and excitement of everybody who was—and what they were feeling. So it was very, very special. And today, anytime I go past the Statue of Liberty, it's still—no—no matter

what, it still does that to me. And I do—and I go there often because it's a great feeling to—to get. I often—I feel badly for people who come to this country now and don't go past the Statue of Liberty and have—have a chance to experience that thrill. And then we got to Ellis Island.

LEVINE: And apparently you had a good experience there?

SCHELL: It was the best place I'd ever been to in my life. I have the best memories of Ellis Island. The first wonderful memories I have of my—of my life were at Ellis Island.

LEVINE: Oh.

SCHELL: The place was big and clean and, I mean, not—nothing at all like the horror that it's described at Ellis Island in the late 1800s. The—we had a room on—I—I clear—remember the way the balcony is set up around the big open space, and we had a room on the very top. And I remember we went to school there. We got toys. I had cake. I had a Drake's [PH] cake. I had never eaten a cake before. The Drake's cake was what was the most thrilling thing I can possibly remember, and so delicious. I didn't want to leave. I mean, this was just heaven. I was in a room with my mother and sister. We were in together.

LEVINE: Just the three of you?

SCHELL: Just the three of us—at least, seems that way to me. And people cared. People were nice. It was a wonderful place. It was just a wonderful place. The—and a wonderful greeting to America. So when—and we were there for a few days because what had happened was—or for two days. What happened was my father had been waiting and waiting for us because he knew that the ship was com—we were on the ship that was coming. And then the—we were put in Ellis Island. They told him to go home back to Philadelphia because didn't know how long it was going to be, and then the next day were released—were prepared to be released to him. And then they had to send for him from Philadelphia. And we were picked up. We went out on a launch boat and taken to—to Battery Park, I guess. I don't know where it was. And we sat there for hours and hours, and my mother was convinced that my father was not going to come for us and we'd be sent back. What happened—what's happening at that time is that the—the government was very much afraid of German spies being sent over. So we needed—needed a lot of collaboration of our stories and a lot of validation of who we were and that—that we really weren't the spies in the first place [unclear].

LEVINE: And all that paperwork was at Ellis Island?

SCHELL: All that stuff was at Ellis Island, yeah, apparently.

LEVINE: And your father had worked through the Red Cross and through—

SCHELL: Through the FBI—

LEVINE: —the FBI.

SCHELL: —and the Red Cross. Yeah. Well, the FBI, because they're the ones who kept doing the checks, I think, with—through him. And the Red Cross were the ones who were taking care of getting packages to us and tracking our progresses through the—through Europe.

LEVINE: Well, when you were sent to Battery Park, what—was HIAS [PH] or any—any other organization involved?

SCHELL: Not that I can think of. The only one—because we waited. There was—there somebody fr—and there was somebody from Ellis Island, a woman, who was responsible for us, who took us over. And—and that was it. And then—so we waited for a few hours until my father made his way back from Philadelphia. And that's the first time I saw him.

LEVINE: And what was that like for you?

SCHELL: Well, my sister was convinced that it was not my father. I would have accepted anybody who would have walked along because it didn't matter. And so it was great to—it was great to see him and it was great to know that we were together.

LEVINE: Do you remember your mother, how she—

SCHELL: And my mother—I—yes, I remember my mother was extraordinarily excited and she was—and—and happy. And it was—and it was—it was quite a reunion. But again, I was look—I was thinking more—I remember that he bought me an ice cream, which was probably the first time I had an ice cream, which was fabulous. I mean, a wonderful thing to be eating. [chuckles] It's funny how people remember food [unclear]—

LEVINE: Yes.

SCHELL: —[unclear] such a profound recollection.

LEVINE: Was it a Popsicle or a cone or a [unclear]?

SCHELL: Actually, it—it was one of these—they used to have something called a Melloroll [PH], I think it was, which was kind of a roll with some paper on

the outside. And they were—and they were dropped into a cup. That's my recollection of what it was. And it was strawberry and I loved it and it was—and it was great—it was a great reunion for my mother and for me. I mean, I hadn't seen my father for over five years. I was seven years old so I—I—I didn't know who he was or who he looked like. But he was a nice enough guy and it made my mother happy, so it worked for me. [chuckles]

LEVINE: [chuckles] What about your sister? Did she have any recollection?

SCHELL: She—she wasn't as trusting or as accepting at that point. And so she—she was very frightened. And, of course, the whole world changed because all of a sudden, instead of being under the loving care of my mother, we came under the more serious child rearing. My mother was only concerned with keeping us alive. Whether we had any manners or whether we had—raised in any way was really irrelevant to that point. It was just that we were alive, so that everything changed. And my sister resented those changes very much. I don't remember them so—but that moment was a pretty stirring moment. And I didn't—I was sorry. I kept asking, "Are we going to go back to Ellis Island? Are we going"—you know, so—

LEVINE: Where did you go?

SCHELL: We went to—we stayed in the hotel. My father took us to a restaurant at that time called—I think it was called Shapiro's—was the—was a kosher restaurant and—

LEVINE: In the—in the Lower East Side?

SCHELL: No, it was in Midtown Manhattan. And we had a dinner. My sister saved the pickles because she loved the pickles, and she wanted to have them for dessert. And the guy came and cleaned them up, took them away so she yelled to bring them back. But my father said it was purem [PH]. And we thought it was a—I didn't know what purem was. My mother thought that it was a joke. But it actually was purem and it was a nice night to have a celebration [unclear].

LEVINE: Wow. So where did the family then go? Where did you live?

SCHELL: We lived in—in the Upper West Side on—in Washington Heights on 188th Street between [unclear] and Audubon Avenue. And it was—and I went—I started school and tried to become normal, which was pretty challenging at that point, because I hadn't had that kind of a normal environment. So as a matter of fact, today people would probably send children through some extensive therapy and—but we just were thrown

right into the daily life and somehow we survived it. I didn't do very—I never did very well in school. My sister did great.

LEVINE: Do you remember any firsts? Things that were new and different that struck you as you started your whole new life here?

SCHELL: Not really.

LEVINE: You were able to speak a little bit.

SCHELL: I was able to speak some English. People used to laugh at my accent a little bit. And I was a very tough little kid because I—I didn't realize how tough and aggressive I was, but constantly in fights with kids in the neighborhood and constantly asserting myself and not easily intimidated.

LEVINE: Do you think that came out of your experience or [chuckles] your nature?

SCHELL: No, I think it probably came out of my experience because, you know, here—a response to that sort was encouraged. And I'd gone through all these years where you could never respond. So it probably came through that.

LEVINE: And how did your father treat you? I mean, how—how was it, having a father?

SCHELL: He immediately started to treat us as he would have expected people—they immediately tried to get into a normal lifestyle. And it was very difficult, very difficult and not good for me and not really good for my sister. I mean, there needed to be a period of decompression. There needed to be a period of building the family. But he didn't know that. I mean, he himself had gone through hell not knowing for years and years if he'd ever see his family again. So he didn't know what to do. And—and I guess he did the best that he could. But it was a tough adjustment fitting back into a normal—normal education, normal life, normal going to school for a child. And so I was constantly in trouble. I was constantly in trouble all through elementary school. And then by the time I got to high school the die had been cast and I was even worse in that process.

LEVINE: Wow. So what was your father doing for work here?

SCHELL: My father was one of the most intelligent men, best read, a real scholar. And he became very religious when he came here. And so the only thing that was important was that he could do work that wouldn't threaten to have to have—violate the Sabbath. He ended up working in a factory as a garment cutter, which was a incredibly horrible thing for somebody of his intelligence and his gift to be able to do. I think he spent all of his life

hating what he was doing and hating the world that made him do that. So he was not a happy man. He was not a light—there was nothing light in him ever. He was always heavy.

LEVINE: And how about your mother? How—how was her adjustment here?

SCHELL: She went from being—as I mentioned here, she just turned us over to my dad to do the—to do the child rearing. And so he became a disciplinarian. And—

LEVINE: Which you needed, apparently. [chuckles]

SCHELL: Well, which I particularly needed but I really didn't need—you know, I would—so, for my mind I had a disciplinarian. I would have liked to have had something else, but—but—and—and she was just a loving, caring mother and—but left the child rearing and the instructional part of the process to my dad.

LEVINE: And how about your community? W—did you—did you have a circle of people who—who maybe had had some similar kinds of experiences had come here too, or, you know?

SCHELL: Everybody had a story at that point. But most of the people I had—I was with—the school—young kids I was with in school were kids that had been raised—their parents had stories. But the kids had pretty much been raised in America, yeah. So it wasn't—it wasn't quite the same because I was in that generation where there weren't many people who had gone through what I did and come to the United States at that point. So—so most of them were Americans. So I had—I have always felt a little bit culturally out of sync with the rest of the world, partially because I was raised in a very orthodox Jewish environment and the rest of the world is American and—and American Christian. And I had a difficulty with working, functioning effectively in those two worlds. And then, even when I got through college and I—and I started to get into business, I still had these two cultures I was juggling. And as I got into my current work—I mean, 10 years ago, even every time I would travel outside the United States, and I travel all the time now, I would always wonder whether they're really going to let me back in. [chuckles] I would never feel terribly comfortable leaving America. Every time I went through Customs Immigration I would feel very uncomfortable.

LEVINE: Oh.

SCHELL: So—

LEVINE: Yeah. So let's see. How do you think you changed? Just kind of looking back from when you got here and then those next years—you be—you became a behavior problem to some extent. But were there any other ways that you feel like you—you changed over the course of time?

SCHELL: I mean, since—

LEVINE: From the time you came here and—or I guess anytime since then.

SCHELL: Well, [clears throat] I mean, for—for the longest time I really assumed that authority was—I was threatened by authority. Authorities were threatening. Authorities were the Nazis. The good people were the people who were fighting and—and trying to upset the authority. So—so I was always a borderline problem because I never wanted to accept anybody's authority. And that—so that I—you know, I—the—the sense—my sense of right and wrong—my sense of the police as being friendly, the way my friends would see the cop as a neighborhood guy on the beat, was okay. To me, he was an extension of the Gestapo. And my mother, for example, never—could never walk past the—a military person or a policeman without getting herself really excited and—and nervous about it. And I kind of had the same reaction, never saw them as supportive people. And of course what happened was eventually [chuckles] I realized that they became human beings and—and not—and not the Nazis. But that was—that was the perspective for a long time.

LEVINE: Yeah. Is there anything else that—ways in which you think you—you have changed the way you think about that whole chapter of before coming here or—I mean, over the course of time we tend to change the way we either remember or think about things that happen.

SCHELL: Well, you know, for a long time I didn't want—you know, when there—this whole process of the Germans paying [several words unclear] their lives distressed, my parents wanted me to apply. And I didn't want to apply because I didn't want to allow the Germans to think that they could buy back a sense of—with money, a sense of forgiveness. But as time went by, I realized that I was meeting many Germans that I liked. [chuckles] And I happened to like Germans. And I couldn't quite fathom—I still can't fathom how they could have done what they did. I've met some wonderful Poles and I can't quite understand how they could have done what they did. And I still can't understand. I mean, I still can't even come close to being able to understand it, except I—I do believe that they did it with—and loved doing it because they did it so well. But I can't get my brain around it; I can't get my mind around it. And I decided somewhere along the line not to hate anybody for it.

LEVINE: Do you think any other group in the same situation would have acted the same?

SCHELL: No, no. I mean, candidly, I think that there was something culturally in the character of the Eastern European which allowed them to be the violent anti-Semites and—and Jew killers that they were. And part of that—if you caught any of the—you go to churches in Prague or Budapest or anywhere in Eastern—Eastern Europe, you see all over the place great Christian soldiers killing the infidels.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

SCHELL: I mean, everyplace you go there's a guy with a—with a Jew hung on a spear or an arrow [unclear] on a spear. I imagine that if people are raised with that kind of a visual—I don't care what the priest is saying up there but I know what the kid is looking at.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

SCHELL: And the kid's looking at it's pretty good to run your spear through a—through a Jew. And then wh—and then when you add that, you couple that to the—to the Christ killer stories, that prepared people to do that. Now, do I think that those people—that a Polish person or a—a Czech raised in the United States with a different visual imagery and a different mindset—I mean, I don't think it's genetic to th—

LEVINE: Right.

SCHELL: —to them. But I think that was what it was. And—and the Nazis are just—just Germans are very efficient. Whatever they undertake, they're very efficient.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

SCHELL: And they were very efficient. But I—but the hatred went away and—because it's too debilitating anyway so—

LEVINE: Did you—did your mother—did your mother also lose it and your sister? Or do you feel that they—

SCHELL: No, they've—they've all—I think they all did. My children, on the other hand, have no tolerance for—every time they deal with Germans, they're—they—they have no tolerance for it. They—from the stories they've heard, they've decided not to forgive.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

SCHELL: Which is kind of an interesting thing.

LEVINE: Interesting. Now, were you—you were always able to talk about it—

SCHELL: Yeah.

LEVINE: —to your children?

SCHELL: Yeah.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh.

SCHELL: Yeah, I made a point of talking about it to my children.

LEVINE: Yeah, uh-huh. Let's see. And how about—you mentioned you—you go back to the Statue of Liberty and—and you've—obviously, you've visited Ellis Island.

SCHELL: Right.

LEVINE: This is how you got this.

SCHELL: Right.

LEVINE: How was that for you?

SCHELL: It was wonderful. It's [unclear] and—and makes me appreciate my life. If I ever feel that there's something not right in the world, I just have to go to Ellis Island and the Statue of Liberty and I can tell it's all right.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

SCHELL: So—

LEVINE: Well, that might be the perfect place to end.

SCHELL: Yeah.

LEVINE: I want to thank you very much.

SCHELL: Well, it's great. Thank you.

LEVINE: Very interesting interview. And this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. I've been speaking with Michael Schell, who came in 1945 at seven years of age from Poland.

SCHELL: Indirectly, from Poland, that's right.

LEVINE: Oh, from Austria via Poland.

SCHELL: Right.

LEVINE: Okay, thank you.

SCHELL: Thanks.

[END OF INTERVIEW]