

EI-745

GERTRUDE DEVORE

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INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE, PH.D.

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PORT: BREMERHAVEN [PH]

RESIDENCES:

LEVINE: This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service and I'm here today. It's May 6th, 1996 and I'm here in Kutztown, Pennsylvania with Gertrude DeVore, who came as a 10-year-old through Ellis Island from Germany in 1923.

DEVORE: Uh-hmm.

LEVINE: Today, Mrs. DeVore is 83 years of age and we're going to start at the beginning, talking about Germany and life there. And then we'll—we'll proceed from there. If you'd start with your birth date and where in Germany you were born.

DEVORE: I was born in—February the 5th, 1913, Honnef Ama Rhein [PH]. They always Honnef Ama Rhein—R-H-E-I-N—along the Rhein.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-hmm. And you were born in—on February 5th.

DEVORE: Fifth, 1913.

LEVINE: Thirteen, right. And then how long did the family live there?

DEVORE: We lived in Honnef till I went to a private Catholic school and we lived in Honnef for—till I was about nine years old. And then we—my mother decided she would like to live closer to her mother. So we sold our home in Honnef and moved in with my grandmother, who lived all by herself, and while we were having a home built in Seind [PH]. And while we were having our home built in Seind—this was right after the First World War—the French soldiers had invaded the Rheinland. And the French government did not support the French soldiers properly. They had to—in order for them to survive, they had to steal. And the—the French soldiers were not vicious; they were very nice young men. And—but they went in the vegetable gardens and picked our vegetables and picked the fruit off the trees. They had to do this to survive. When we went—it wasn't safe anymore to send a child shopping, because they would take the money away from the child so that they could buy food for themselves.

LEVINE: What was their purpose in being there? Do—did you know?

DEVORE: Well, the—after the First World War—Germany, I guess, lost the First World War so the French invaded Germany. And this—in the Rheinland.

LEVINE: I see.

DEVORE: And—and my mother, who was—who—the reason I say my mother—my mother was a woman's libber. My father was killed in First World War. So she remarried. My father was—my stepfather was a landscape gardener but it was my mother who was a woman's libber. She did—she made all the arrangements. She did all the—she ran—she ran the show. And as much as she hated to leave, but she said, "We don't know how long this is going on." And she had friends that already were living in this country in the United States. And they kept writing to her, "Why don't you come to America? Why don't you come to America?" So finally my mother decided, well—and she hated to do this. She decided maybe that would be the answer, in view of the fact that we did not know how long Germany was going to be invaded with the French soldiers, with the French. And that's the reason we left Germany. I had a very nice childhood. I went to private schools.

LEVINE: When you were still in Honnef, were you in private schools all—

DEVORE: Yes, yes. Yes, I went to private schools so—

LEVINE: Can you describe what—what was it like? It was a private—was it a Catholic school?

DEVORE: It was a private convent school.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DEVORE: Yes. What was it like? Well, I was taught by the nuns, who were very strict. And I remember I had long hair and my mother used to comb my hair like this. And she would put a—we wore uniforms, black uniforms, black stockings, black shoes. And she would always put a ribbon in my hair that looked like a butterfly. And as soon as I got to school, the nun would come along and she would put her hand on top of my head to push down my hair ribbon. She's—and she would say, "Having a hair ribbon in your hair like that, you look as though—that's a sign of vainness. And being vain is a sin." So she put her hand—I remember this so well. I'll tell you another funny experience. I had a fr—a girlfriend that I wa—now, it took us over—over—I think the school was about three miles away. And we walked to school. And I had a girlfriend. She and I were—were inseparable. There was a Catholic hospital right alongside of the convent school. And she and I were very curious and sometimes we would go to ring the doorbell at the Catholic hospital. And the nun would come to the door and—and she would ask us what we wanted. And we asked her—this is a terrible thing to say—and we asked her if we could—if we could look—go to the morgue and see the dead people in the morgue. And she would go with us and show us the people. And—and the two of us was just standing there and looked, and it didn't faze us at all. And we thanked the nun and she took us back outside. And she thought we were the—the two nicest little girls that were not afraid of dead people. [laughs]

LEVINE: Did—did you have any ideas at that time, like, about death or—

DEVORE: Yes, I did because my mother was very neighborly. And when someone was very sick—my mother had a very good education—and when somebody was quite ill they used to call my mother. And—and then, of course, she would come home and talk about it. And I think that's how—I think that's what made me think that death is not something to be afraid of. I just took it naturally—

LEVINE: Yeah.

DEVORE: —because sometimes I would go with my mother when someone was dying, you know, and she would take care of them. And so it didn't—really didn't bother me.

LEVINE: Hmm. Well, did you have religious—you had religious training.

DEVORE: Ver—yes, the nuns—yes, the nuns in Germany in the convent school were very—very religious.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DEVORE: Yes.

LEVINE: Did—did you have ideas of heaven and hell and—

DEVORE: Oh, yes. Heaven, hell and purgatory. Oh, yes. We—we were brought up—we were brought up very strict.

LEVINE: In—in what ways? What was—

DEVORE: In what—well, we were not allowed to answer my parents back. We were not allowed to tell lies. And we didn't dare go and take a cookie out of the cookie jar without asking. And when somebody came to the door, my mother entertained quite a bit. And when someone came to the door, we had to stand there and shake their hand and curtsy. Yeah.

LEVINE: Now, who was the disciplinarian?

DEVORE: My mother.

LEVINE: And what would she do if you—if you didn't—or did do something wrong or didn't do something right?

DEVORE: My mother used to scold us.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DEVORE: I don't think my mother ev—I don't think I ever got a licking from my mother. She used to scold us. We would just look at my mother and the way she looked at us. Now, I—I dearly love—my mother was everything in my life. She was a wonderful person. She wasn't mean; she was very fair. But she was also a disciplinarian. And my father was a landscape—he was more or less—my stepfather, a landscape architect—he was a dreamer. And whenever my mother—when my mother scold us, was fine with him, no matter what—what she said was fine with him.

LEVINE: Do you think you—you carried on certain attitudes or values or ways of thinking about—

DEVORE: With my children.

LEVINE: —what's right and wrong—

DEVORE: Yes.

LEVINE: —that came from your—

DEVORE: Oh, yes.

LEVINE: —childhood?

DEVORE: Oh, yes.

LEVINE: Can you [unclear]—

DEVORE: I—I feel—I feel I was raised strict and it has never bothered me that I was raised strict, because it has taught me to cope with everything that I've been through.

LEVINE: How did being raised strict help you to cope?

DEVORE: Well, I don't kn—well, first of all, moving into an area that was mostly Protestant and there was a little—there's a little friction when a Catholic family moves into a Protestant area.

LEVINE: Here?

DEVORE: No, in New Jersey.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DEVORE: And also here. And my mother was—I would say my mother—to my mother, it didn't make any difference who or what you were, and that's how she raised us. Whether you were poor or whether you were rich, you was—you was supposed to like these people. There was no—there was no barrier between anyone. And that's how we were raised and—and that's how I raised my children too. She was very fair. Yeah. Then—and now, this, like I say, I really had a very nice childhood in Germany. I can't say that—and it was quite—it must have been quite a—a trauma for my mother to move from Germany and not be able to see her mother anymore, although—although—and I'll tell you—when we came to—do you want to know—do you want me to go on?

LEVINE: Well, let's talk first about Germany and then we'll talk about when you came here.

DEVORE: All right.

LEVINE: So let's see. How about—what else? Enjoyment, and what you did for enjoyment in Germany or what your mother and father did, your stepfather did in Germany?

DEVORE: Oh, yes. In Ger—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DEVORE: —we used to hike a lot. And my father was—he had a beautiful voice. And when we used to hike through the mountains, he used to yodel. And he—and he'd try to teach us how to yodel. And we all had bicycles so we all used to ride bicycles.

LEVINE: Now, what was your—your natural father's name?

DEVORE: Karl Reusch.

LEVINE: Ah—

DEVORE: R-E-U-S-C-H.

LEVINE: Okay, and it was a k or a c—ka—

DEVORE: K.

LEVINE: K, Karl. And your mother's name?

DEVORE: Maria Eisenbach [PH].

LEVINE: That was her maiden name.

DEVORE: That was her maiden name.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And did—d—your sisters and brothers?

DEVORE: I have—I had one natural brother. His name was Hans Reusch. Now, my brother died about nine years ago, which was John—which would be John Reusch. And then after my mother and father were married, I—they had a young lady. Well, it—I have a sister through this marriage.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DEVORE: I have a half sister who I'm very, very fond of. We have a very nice relationship.

LEVINE: And her name?

DEVORE: Her name is Marianna [PH]. Marianna Ley—L-E-Y.

LEVINE: And—and that was your—the last name of your—

DEVORE: Stepfather.

LEVINE: —stepfather.

DEVORE: Uh-hmm.

LEVINE: And his first name?

DEVORE: Fincence—Vincent.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh.

DEVORE: Uh-hmm.

LEVINE: Okay. So when you say you went hiking and—and—and all that, that was with your brother—with mother and fa—

DEVORE: And my little sister.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DEVORE: She was little at the time.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DEVORE: And we used to—and—and then we used to stop at—at a little resort. And my mother and father would have their coffee and we would have seltzer water. They didn't have soda, like we do here, at that time. So we had our seltzer water.

LEVINE: Oh.

DEVORE: And then—then my—then my—we would—would pick flowers and make wreaths. And my father would show us how to do this, pick flowers and make wreaths out of flowers, and we would put them on our head.

LEVINE: Wow.

DEVORE: Yeah.

LEVINE: Do you remember any kinds of food that your mother or grandmother made that you particularly liked?

DEVORE: Oh, yes. My mother made a lot of soups, which I'm—a lot of vegetable soups, which I'm still very fond of. And every Friday we had—Fridays we had mashed potatoes and fish and a—a vegetable. Very little desserts. The only desserts we ever had was either fruit or pudding. No pies or cakes. That was only Christmas time. And I'll tell you something else, what my mother used to do at Christmas time. My mother didn't bake. She was a good cook but she did not know how to bake. So at Christmas time she would buy flour, sugar and eggs. And she would take a clothes basket and put these three things in a clothes basket and take it to a bakery. And she would order her cookies. And she would use the ingredients that she sent for the cookies. And at Christmas time—of course, at Christmas time at that time was different. We—our Christmas was Christmas morning, not Christmas Eve. And then, of course, we got up very early in the morning to see what Kriskind [PH]—it wasn't Santa Claus; it was Kriskind—left us. And my father would scare us. He said, "Oh." He said, "I think I hear something in the living room." The door was closed. "I think Kriskind is still here. I don't think we can go in yet." And of course we were upstairs. The bedrooms were upstairs and we went downstairs. And when he said that we ran upstairs because we were so afraid that Kriskind was still there. So we ran back upstairs and then he would tiptoe downstairs and he'd say, "I think it's safe now to come downstairs." And then we would—then he would open a door and, of course, then we went inside.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. What did you think about Kriskind? What—what kind of a—a character or figure was he in your childhood?

DEVORE: Well, I think to—I think to us, Kriskind—more like Christ child.

LEVINE: Oh.

DEVORE: Yeah. Now, the fifth of December, Santa Claus would come to visit our homes with a belsnickel [PH]. That was his helper. And he would ask us if we were good or bad little children over—

LEVINE: So someone would actually come?

DEVORE: Actually would—someone would actually come dressed like Santa Claus the fifth of December in the evening after dinner. And he would have a bels—the belsnickel with him, and the belsnickel wore a brown

outfit like a monk. And of course, because we were raised good Catholics, we didn't tell a lie. He would say, "Were you good children during the year? Did you talk back to your parents? Did you go in the cookie jar when you weren't supposed to?" And we had to tell the truth. And one year my brother, who was bad during the year—and then he would get—leave a piece of fruit—orange, an orange. And if you were bad, he left a piece of coal. He gave you a piece of coal. And from the fifth of December on, every night we would put a slipper on the windowsill. And during the night, Santa Claus—we were told that Santa Claus left something in our slipper, always a piece of fruit and a cookie and some candy till Christmas. [chuckles]

LEVINE: So if your brother was bad during the year he got a piece of coal.

DEVORE: He got a piece of coal.

LEVINE: But then when he put his slipper on the—on the window so he could—he could get—

DEVORE: Yes, yes. Then, yes, after that.

LEVINE: If he was good for that period in between—

DEVORE: If he was good for that period in between, yes, he was rewarded.

LEVINE: I see.

DEVORE: Yes, uh-hmm.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. How about a Christmas tree? Did you have one of those?

DEVORE: Yes, we had—oh, yes. We had a gorgeous Christmas tree and my mother would put—she would mix—oh, I forget what it was. It was some kind of white stuff and she mixed it with water. And then she would put it on a Christmas tree and it looked like snow. It would dry like—I think it was plaster—plaster of Paris. And it would dry on a tree. But we didn't have electric lights at that time. We had candles and then she would light—the candles were only lit while we were in the room. Otherwise, they were not lit. And then—

LEVINE: They were on the tree?

DEVORE: They were on the tree. They fastened on the tree, the candles. There was a little thing—you know, something on there. You stuck the candle on there and that would fasten onto the tree. And then—and we had a lot of different colored Christmas balls.

LEVINE: Were they handmade?

DEVORE: No, they were not. The—no, we didn't have any handmade ornaments. These were like the regular Christmas balls that you buy, not the plastic ones—the very thin—I don't know what they're made from but, yeah. But most of them were in designs, like bells and, oh, like little church—a little church or a little house. Different designs. Angels. We had a lot of angel ornaments on our tree.

LEVINE: And did you exchange presents?

DEVORE: Well, we got presents but we didn't exchange presents. Now, my mother and father—well, my mother—yes, my mother gave my mo—my father a present and my father, my mother. And my mother gave us presents. But brothers and sisters, we did not exchange presents. Now, this was Christmas Day and Christmas Day you stayed home and enjoyed your Christmas and your presents. But the day af—after Christmas, the second day of Christmas, then you visited your relatives.

LEVINE: Now, who would you go to see?

DEVORE: We—we went—I went—we went to visit my uncle because my uncle lived close to us in the area. So we visited him. And then, of course, the parents would talk and the children would play. And we would have coffee and cake.

LEVINE: Now, who's—who—this uncle, what was his name?

DEVORE: His name was Joseph Eisenbach [PH], my mother's brother.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DEVORE: Uh-hmm.

LEVINE: And what do you remember about him? Do you remember any experiences with that uncle?

DEVORE: Yes, he was—well, we used to sing Christmas songs when we went to him—when—yeah, all of us would sit down. And he would—oh, we had—he had a Victrola, one of these windup Victrolas. And he'd put Christmas songs on and we would sit there and sing Christmas songs.

LEVINE: And how about your grandparents?

DEVORE: I never knew my grandfather. My grandfather died before my mother was married. But I had a grandmother and she was a wonderful lady. She was little, tiny, thin and all—I spent all my vacations with her. My mother would put me on a train in Honnef and she would give me a sandwich. And I would eat it on the train and in—and my grandmother would meet me as I got off in—not in—in Bendorf. In Bendorf, I had to change and get a shuttle to Seind, and that’s where my grandmother would meet me. And I would spend all my vacations with my grandmother.

LEVINE: And what would you do on your vacation?

DEVORE: On my vacations, well, let’s see. My grandmother owned orchards. What would I do? Well, she always used to find me climbing in the trees, which I wasn’t supposed to do. But [chuckles] I used to love to climb trees. It’s good fun. And I would eat the fruit when it was still green [chuckles], which—

LEVINE: You mean apples?

DEVORE: These were apples and plums and they were still green, and pears. [laughs] And she used to scold me for that. But I was—and I was very—oh, and then there was a girl there that—whose mother was my mother’s friend in the area where my grandmother lived. And the mother went to school with my mother, and her daughter, when I went on vaca—when I spent my vacations with my grandmother, I played with this girl. And we did very simple things, hopscotch and tag and hide and go seek. Very simple things.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DEVORE: Yeah.

LEVINE: How—why was it that you were the one that got to go, rather than your brother or sister?

DEVORE: My sister was too small at the time. She was quite small because my sister was three years old when we came to this country.

LEVINE: Oh.

DEVORE: So she was quite small. I—I think the reason—well, because—maybe because my grandmother couldn’t cope with my brother. Maybe that’s why.

LEVINE: Were you and your brother close?

DEVORE: My brother and I were very close.

LEVINE: What was he like as a child? [unclear]

DEVORE: He was—well, w—we—my mother had a bicycle built for the two of us so that we rode bicycles, we—I would ride in the front and then there was a seat in the back for him. And one time I remember climbing up a hill. And I said to my brother, “Oh, I—this is so hard to pedal up this hill.” So I turned around and here he wasn’t even pedaling. He had his legs sticking out like this. He did—he let me do all the pedaling and no wonder. I thought—I said, “No wonder it’s so hard going up this hill. [laughs] My brother was the kind of a—a—if my brother could get away with something, he got away with it. And I think—and I think maybe my—my grandmother probably figured she couldn’t cope with my brother. And that’s the reason she—my mother sent me—also, my mother always thought I was very independent. And I think that’s why she let me do the things that I did by putting me on the train, and I remember so well. And the conductor would come around and he would—he would say to me, “Are you doing all right?” He would—every so often he’d come and check on me and I’d say, “Yes, I am.”

LEVINE: Well, your mother must have—I mean, being an independent woman herself—

DEVORE: She was very independent.

LEVINE: She must have been pleased that—that you were—

DEVORE: Yeah.

LEVINE: —able to do that.

DEVORE: Yes, uh-hmm. Yes, she was.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, so—

DEVORE: I think—I think my mother got to depend—also, I think because she found out I was so independent, I think she also came to depend on me.

LEVINE: Even when—before you came to this country? Or do you mean later?

DEVORE: Well, I think—I think my mother—I think my mother figured no matter what would happen, she could always—she always knew that I would be self sufficient and I was dependable, and she could depend on me. I know s—at times, she would have—I—I—I remember very few times

that I actually had to take care of my little sister, because she had somebody come in to take care of my little sister when she wasn't home. We did have—she always had a baby sitter, in spite of the fact that I was there and my brother was there. But she still had a baby sitter from—just for my little sister.

LEVINE: So your mother was active in your stepfather's business [unclear].

DEVORE: In—when we came to this country.

LEVINE: Oh.

DEVORE: But not—not in Germany. My father was a landscape gardener. My mother—my mother was a housewife in Germany.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DEVORE: But when we came to this country, that was a different story.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, what—what—you mentioned earlier why—

DEVORE: Why—why we came—

LEVINE: —your mother decided.

DEVORE: Yeah, why mother decided, why with came to this country. And I remember my mo—my mother—we had a big house in Germany and she had two huge paintings—huge paintings with gold leaf frames around them. And she wanted to bring those to this country with her. And, you know, most people in Europe have quilts. So she had cases built for these b—huge picture—pictures. And what she used as a buffer for these pictures were these quilts. And—and, of course, she didn't—she didn't want to part with those quilts. And she also—another thing she also brought over was her china. And she also had cases built for that. Yeah.

LEVINE: Now, do you remember leaving?

DEVORE: Yes, I do. I remember leaving and we—first, we landed in Bremen. And in Bremen we were all examined by a doctor, eyes, ears, everything. And we had—although I was—we were all vaccinated when we were little, but we got—we were vaccinated again in Bremen. We had a thorough medical checkup, all of us. And we stayed there for a couple of days while this was going on. And then we went to Bremerhaven and from Bremerhaven we sailed to America.

LEVINE: And do you remember life aboard ship en route?

DEVORE: Yes, I do. Yes, I do. It was fun. We jumped around on the ship. We—we went—I think we went third class because we were all in the same cabin. And we all went and we ate in this huge dining room. And I remember being seasick. And I think the only one that wasn't seasick was my father. My mother was a little bit seasick but my—my sister and I were—my little sister and I, we were quite sea—yeah, we was. But the trip was long; it took 10 days. But we were out on deck and jumping around, uh-hmm.

LEVINE: And your brother? How—what did he do?

DEVORE: And my br—my brother too, yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DEVORE: Uh-hmm.

LEVINE: So w—was there anything that happened aboard ship that you remember in particular?

DEVORE: Nothing—no, nothing unusual. I—I think it was a very pleasant trip, except for the fact that I was seasick.

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A]

[BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE B]

LEVINE: And how about coming into the New York harbor? Do you remember that?

DEVORE: Yes, I do remember that. We landed outside the harbor and I remember the tugboats coming along and taking us into the harbor. And I don't know if we were in the harbor overnight. It seems to me as though we were. We did not land right away. I think we were on board ship overnight.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Well, sometimes when Ellis Island was very crowded, people had to stay on board ship until other people were—

DEVORE: Yes.

LEVINE: The whole process.

DEVORE: Uh-hmm.

LEVINE: So then do you remember Ellis Island?

DEVORE: Yes, I do.

LEVINE: The process of that?

DEVORE: Yes. I remember getting off the ship and at that time you had to have a sponsor to come and meet you. And getting off the ship, we went into this huge hall and our sponsor was there. And I remember going through, would you say Customs? And there was a man there and he looked at all of my mother's papers. And he looked at—and he—he just looked at us and he let us go right on through. And we went—with our sponsors, we left—we didn't have any problems on Ellis Island whatsoever.

LEVINE: Where were your sponsors? Do you know?

DEVORE: Yes, their name was Odenthal. Mr. and Mrs. Odenthal.

LEVINE: How do you spell it?

DEVORE: O-D-E-N-T-H-A-L.

LEVINE: And they were people that you knew?

DEVORE: From—from Germany.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Uh-hmm.

DEVORE: They had already rented an apartment for us. We—they lived o—we lived on 123rd Street. They had already rented an apartment for us. So we—they took us home with them and, you know, when I went to Ellis Island and I saw—and I heard how—I—I heard this tape, how some people had trouble. They were ill; they had to go back. We didn't have any problems. It was just as though—we came off the boat. We went through Customs, and our sponsors were there and we went right on off.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DEVORE: And so we went home with them and we stayed with this couple for a couple of days till my mother bought some furniture for the apartment. And we moved into our apartment.

LEVINE: Do you remember the first few days?

DEVORE: Yes, I do.

LEVINE: Do you remember any things that—

DEVORE: Yeah. Yeah, going out on the street and looking around. And I'm—I wasn't used to living in a city. I lived in the country, you know, a house. Well, we lived in one of these—at that time the—these frame houses on 123rd Street. The basement is—is a few steps down. And then there's steps going up to this first floor.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DEVORE: And that's where we lived, the steps going up to the first floor. My mother was a beautiful seamstress. And we were there—we were in—and we—in New York City in the apartment for a couple of days. And my father, who was a landscape gardener, applied for a job right away to the Woodlawn [PH] Cemetery. Now, that's up in the Bronx somewhere.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DEVORE: He left for Wood—he left a couple of days later to apply for a job and he didn't come home. He left on a Monday. And my mother was worried sick. She didn't know what was going on. And he came home Saturday afternoon. And my mother was so worried and she—and she wanted to know where he—he said, "Well, I applied for a job and they told me to stay." And they had a boarding house up there and that's where he stayed. So he—that's where my father worked when we first came to this country, at the Woodlawn Cemetery as a gardener.

LEVINE: And he would go every week and stay?

DEVORE: He would go every week and stay. In the meantime, my mother, who was not really a housewife—she wanted to do something also. And right around the corner—well, actually, off the main street there were always two stores on Third Avenue, off—there were always two stores. And there was always a tailor or a laundry. So she was walking with us one day. And she passed this store and this lady came out. She was a Jewish lady and she could speak German and she said—my mother had on a beautiful royal blue paisley dress. I remember the dress so well. And she said to my mother, "Who made that beautiful blue dress?" My mother said, "I did." So she said to her, "Oh, do you sew?" And my mother said, "Yes, I do." So she said, "Put a sign in your window, 'Dressmaking,' and I'll send you all the customers that you can take care of." But my mother said, "I can't speak English." She said, "That doesn't make any difference. I'll send you all my Jewish friends." And

that's h—my mother saved enough money, between my mother and my father—they saved enough. And the funny thing is, because in Germany you go to school on a Saturday. I went to school on Saturday and the building was closed. And I came home crying and I said—my brother and I. And I said, "I can't go to school. The school is closed." That was public school. But—we—I—so then after my mother found out that there was a Catholic school 10 blocks away, which was on 112th Street, she—she enrolled both my brother and I down to the Catholic school. St. Queen of Angels Catholic School.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And what was your school—what was it like in the beginning when you couldn't speak English?

DEVORE: The—the nuns were German.

LEVINE: Oh.

DEVORE: So she gave me a book, English book and I had to write—copy everything down in English. And that's how I learned to speak English.

LEVINE: W—was there German too?

DEVORE: Yes, it was German and English.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DEVORE: Uh-hmm, yeah. And I be—and I became the best speller in the class. [chuckles] And I remember one time—you know, we were never allowed to chew gum. Oh, that was—that was a sin. So I remember one time I chewed gum and I forgot to spit it out before I went into the classroom. And I was chewing in the classroom and I—and the sister said, "Gertrude, are you chewing gum? And I got all red in the face and I said, "No, Sister. And I swallowed it. And my mother—my mother told us one time that if you chew gum and you swallow it, you're going to die. [chuckles] And I thought I was going to die right there in school—in the classroom. [laughs] And I remember the Salvation Army giving toys and clothes to the poor people. So my brother and I found out about this around the holidays. So we decided we were going to go to this—we were going to go to the Salvation headquarters and get some toys and—and clothing. So—and we came home with this and my mother said, "Where did you get this?" And we told her. She said, "Well." She said, "You're going to go right back there and give it back." So we had to go right back. [laughs] We had to go back to Salvation headquarters and give everything back that we brought home with us.

LEVINE: How did your mother like living in—in the United States in New York?

DEVORE: Well, sh—she said—well, I'll tell you what. My mother—my mother—my mother's parents were fairly well to do. But coming to this country, she knew that she had to work to survive. And I don't think it really bothered her that much because she—she was—she was a go-getter.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DEVORE: And between my mother and father, they saved enough money in three years to send for my mother, my brother, my sister and I to visit my grandmother. But she had her—her shingle out, "Dressmaking," and she was so busy.

LEVINE: Do you remember people coming in and—

DEVORE: Oh, yes, I do.

LEVINE: —and having things made?

DEVORE: Yes, I do. Uh-huh.

LEVINE: Well, what was it like? Would people come in with—

DEVORE: People would come—people would come in and my mother had—the sewing machine was in the living room. And they would try on their dresses. Of course, she took them in—in the bedroom and they would try on their clothes in the bedroom. Yeah. And my—and then, of course—and then after she had us enrolled in the Catholic schools, she also entertained the priest. They would come to the house and—and she would entertain the priest. Can I tell you a story about my—my confession?

LEVINE: Oh, yeah.

DEVORE: I was—I was 12 years old when I made my first Holy Communion. And the sister told us what—before we made our first Holy Communion, we had to write—we had to write down our sins on a piece of paper. But she said, "Follow the Ten Commandments." And of course, being naïve, I followed the Ten Commandments and everything, you know, followed it all. And some of it, of course, I didn't understand. And—but I wrote down, you know, how many times I lied and how many times I had a fight with my brother. Oh, that was all a sin and how many—how many times I sneaked off and all this. You had to write all this down. Then—but we weren't allowed to put our name on the piece of paper. And then the sister would collect all these papers. So the first time I went to confession she passed out the papers. And we had to read off

the papers to the priest our confession. So one of—one of the priests—I remember his name so well. His name was Father Constantine. And he would come up—he would come up and visit at the family on a Sunday and he would have coffee and cake. And I remember I went—I went to him to confession and I took out my paper. And he said—and I couldn't read it. And he said—he—I said, "I can't—I can't see, Father. I can't see." And he knew—he recognized my voice and he said, "Gertrude, when you go outside, turn to the left. There's a switch. Turn the switch on and then come back inside." So I did that. I went back inside. Then I opened up my paper and I looked at the paper and I thought, 'Ah, those are not my sins! This looks like a boy's' confession.' The sister had—did this on purpose. She mixed up all the confession papers because we didn't have our name there. And I—I was so embarrassed. I—and I said to Father Constantine, "Father Constantine"—I started crying. I said, "I didn't—I didn't do all these sins that are on this paper." [laughs]

LEVINE: [chuckles] Did he say anything?

DEVORE: He snickered and he said, "I forgive you everything you have done." [laughs] I'll never forget that. That was so funny. And then after that, the first time he came to the house again on a Sunday—and of course we knew when he was coming. My mother would tell us. She would—she would make sure that we were dressed very—very nicely because we had to receive the priest. [chuckles] When she told us Father Constantine was coming to the house, I made sure I wasn't home. [laughs]

LEVINE: Well, now, did your mother make your clothing as well?

DEVORE: She made all of our clothes, coats, everything.

LEVINE: Oh.

DEVORE: Except, of course, underwear. Yes, for years. Uh-hmm.

LEVINE: And did you learn to sew as well?

DEVORE: Yes, I did. Uh-hmm. And then I learned to sew and—which is something—well, when I saw my mother sew, I used to sit on the floor. And she—I used to make doll clothes and she would—when I'd get stuff, she would teach me how to make—would show me how to sew these doll clothes. And I've always taken an interest in making clothes. And this became my profession then.

LEVINE: Well, when—how long did you stay in school?

DEVORE: Well, I—I—well, of course I graduated from grammar school and then—by then from—we lived in—in New York City. Then we moved to Brooklyn.

LEVINE: And w—was your stepfather still working in the gardens?

DEVORE: As a landscape gardener. Yes, when we moved—no, then my mother—let's see. We moved from New York City. We moved to Brooklyn. My mother opened up a store, a flower shop.

LEVINE: Hmm.

DEVORE: I was her interpreter. I went to the real estate agent with her and she rented a store and she signed the lease. My mother did all this. She was a woman's libber.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DEVORE: And she opened up a store, a flower shop. And my father was a landscape gardener. He worked for people and he did—he—he bought a pickup truck. I'll never forget, one time, a little green pickup truck. And he would go and mow people's lawns and—and plant their flowers. The area we lived in in Brooklyn, there were a lot of Jewish people living there. And so he—he could talk and they loved—they killed them. They didn't know how to take care of them, which—which was fine with us. But he made—he laid out beautiful gardens for them. And my mother had the flower shop.

LEVINE: So they were kind of working together in a sense—

DEVORE: They were working together.

LEVINE: —because he was doing—

DEVORE: Yes. Yes, that's right. Uh-hmm. Yeah, who—my mother, who never did anything like this—after all, she was a dressmaker—actually, my mother went to—in Germany, if—people that had means, they sent their children to sort of a college, one year of nurse's training, another year of business, another year of dressmaking. So she had, like—almost like now, your home ec course in school, in college where you learn everything, because my mother knew how to do everything. She made a dre—first of all, she was in this dressmaking business. And then when we moved to Brooklyn, she started—opened up this store and she made the most beautiful flower arrangements, something she had never done before. And she was quite successful at it too.

LEVINE: Hmm. And did you work in that?

DEVORE: I wor—yeah. Well, I did—actually, I went to school but then I helped at home. We—we all had to—we all had to help at home.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. So when you left school, then—

DEVORE: W—

LEVINE: —did you work in the flower shop or did you work—

DEVORE: When I left school—let's see, when I left we moved to New Jersey. This was just before the Depression now. We were in Brooklyn all that time. We had saved enough money to buy two large greenhouses to raise flowers for the market in New York City. So we moved to New Jersey two years before the Depression, before—in 1927. And the Depression was in 1929. And I remember raising flowers, sweet peas and, uh, two—the greenhouses—both greenhouses were 42 by 200. I'll never forget. And my father hired girls and I was the fore-lady. And I was supposed to watch over them. I didn't have the heart to scold them. I just made sure, you know, [chuckles] that didn't—that they didn't talk too much and, you know. And—because I didn't—I didn't like to cause any problems. I don't—I never liked to make waves. But anyway, every week my father would take—we would—we would bundle these in different sizes, medium, large, extra large, the sweet peas. And then my father would take them to the market. But then in 1929 at—in the crash, well, people didn't buy flowers anymore. And we lost the greenhouses. We lost everything. So we moved—my mother rented a store and she opened up a tearoom. First—no, first she rented the store and—oh—and sold flowers. Well, that didn't—didn't go too well because y—people were not buying flowers. So someone told her—said to her, "German people are good cooks." One of my mother's—one lady that used to come in there and buy flowers—she said, "German people are good cooks." She said, "Why don't you open up a restaurant or a tearoom?" So my mother opened up a tearoom. And she only served lunch. She was so busy. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Like, what kind of lunches would she have?

DEVORE: What kind of friends?

LEVINE: What kind of lunch? I mean, what—what—

DEVORE: Oh, lunch? Well, she would have—she would make sandwiches and soup. She made the most delicious soup. Yeah, vegetable soup and

pea soup. And then, as people asked her about oyster stew and clam chowder, and she said—my mother—“What’s oyster stew and clam chowder?” Well, there was a young man whose mother bought some flowers from us—from her at one time. And she said to my mother, “Well.” She says, “My son can te—can—he will get you the oysters and the clams. And he will show you—he will even open them for you. And he will show you.” Because this young man’s father owned a tavern. And they sold clam chowder and oyster stew. And this woman said, “My son will even show you how to do it.” This young man eventually became my beau. And he would come and deliver clams. He would tell my mother how to make the clam chowder and she made clam chowder. And he’d tell her—showed her how to make oyster stew and she made oyster stew, and she made the best oyster stew. And that’s what people came—for lunch.

LEVINE: Huh.

DEVORE: No matter what my mother did, it was a success.

LEVINE: And—and so in the meantime, were you working in the tearoom?

DEVORE: I was—in the mean—no, I went to New York City and one—one of—there was a Swiss lady who was—became a very good friend of my mother’s. And she said she had a friend who had a dressmaking shop in New York City. Would I like to go and work for her? And I said, “Oh, I’d love to.” So this lady lived on—she—a Swiss gal. She was—she had a private dressmaking establishment and she lived on 60th Street between Second and Third Avenue.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DEVORE: And all of her customers were very wealthy society people. And she had an apartment on the—her shop was on—again, steps—steps going down. But these were brownstones now. And her shop was on the first floor. And the second floor was—an Oriental couple lived in the second floor and her apartment was on the third floor. And she said she had a spare room and that I could use—have the spare room. So I lived with this lady. I was in the spare room. And I w—I worked for—but didn’t—but before that, I took several courses in dressmaking and designing while we were still living in Brooklyn. So I worked for this lady. I started out as an apprentice. And then she sent me out and do all the buying for all the trimmings. And the only trouble is, I picked out the most expensive trimmings I could find. [laughs] And I worked for her. I worked for her for—for three years.

LEVINE: Would you go home on the weekend or would you stay?

DEVORE: Not all the time. Not all the time. I—I—I had a—I had—when I didn’t—when I—when I didn’t go home, I stayed there. And of course I could find things to do. I went to the movies or I went to the stores shopping. I used to go to Bloomingdale’s a lot. At that time, Bloomingdale’s wasn’t quite that expensive as it is now. Or I would go to the park. I could always find something to do.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DEVORE: And I worked with—but in the summertime she closed her shop. She went to Switzerland because her—her father lived in Switzerland. And I went to the Catskills to work in a boarding house.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DEVORE: And the first year I did that, my mother was so angry. She said, “I didn’t raise you to be somebody’s maid.” She was very angry. She and my father came up to get me, to the Catskills, and I wouldn’t go back home with her. I said, “No.” I said, “I don’t want to come back home. I want to stay up here.” And I stayed. I didn’t have to make beds but I waited on the tables and I was able to have a good time with—with her guests. Most of her—she was a Swiss lady and most of her—the people that she had in the summertime were Swiss people. So I could—when they went for walks, I could go for a walk with them. But I did help with the dishes and I—and I waited on tables. But I didn’t have to clean the rooms and I didn’t have to make beds. And I did that for two years. But then in—and—and after three years my mother said—she said to me, “Well.” She says, “Gertrude, I think it’s time you come ho—you came home now.” She says, “I’ll set up a shop for you.” And she says, “You can do dressmaking on your own.” And—which I did.

LEVINE: Hmm.

DEVORE: And I had a few customers. I must have had about four but I had the cream of the crop till I got married.

LEVINE: So would you design dresses?

DEVORE: Yes, yes. I had—I had a customer who was complete—very, very—very heavy. She—these people—I got these people through my mother because my mother had a—had a greenhouse at the time, a flower shop and a greenhouse. And she had one cus—one lady who was extremely heavy and who had trouble finding clothes. So she would pick out a picture in a pa—in a—in a magazine and she would show it to me. And she would say, “Can you make this for me?” So I had to design it first. I

had to make the pattern first. And it's a good thing I learned how to make patterns.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DEVORE: I had to make the pattern for her first. And I did all the sewing for her and she was so thrilled. And I also had one—one lady who was quite wealthy and I made her clothes. And sometimes when she was—had something special that she wanted to dress for, she asked me what—you know, what kind of material to buy and what colors would suit her. And she had three daughters and one wedding gown, which was altered every time the daughters were married. And when the last daughter was married I altered her gown. What she did, she bought a sewing machine for this daughter and she had a sewing room. And she said to me, "I would like to have you come here and al—do the alterations here and—on this new sewing machine for my daughter," which is what I did. And I had lunch with them and I went up—I went there in the morning and—and then she had me alter some other things for her. Then the photographer came and I had to dress her daughter. The photographer came to the house and I had to dress her daughter to take her picture.

LEVINE: Hmm.

DEVORE: Yeah.

LEVINE: So how did you meet your husband? How did that happen?

DEVORE: Well, I was going—I was going with—my husband was—he worked for—wait a minute. He worked for Dugan [PH]. Dugan Bakers went from door to door to sell their produce, bread and coffee cake. And I was going with this other young man that taught my mother how to make clam chowder and—

LEVINE: Oyster—

DEVORE: —oyster stew. And we were supposed to go out New Year's Eve. Well, his father had a tavern and one of the fellows didn't show up this New Year's Eve. So he—this young man called me up and he said—oh, he said—you know, he said, "I can't take you out. I have to work for my father." So I was home and I was sitting home and I was playing the piano. And this young man who worked on the truck, he stopped at the house because my mother had ordered some baked goods from him, which he didn't have on the truck. And he lived in Newton, New Jersey. And he said, "On the way back, I'll drop it off." So when he came into the house and dropped off the baked goods, he walked—well, be—being us, our apartment was—was in back of the store. He heard me

play the piano and—and he said, “H—Why are you playing the piano?” He said, “How come you’re not out?” I said, “Well.” I said, “I was supposed to go out tonight but I was stood up.” He said, “I haven’t got a date tonight.” He said, “How would you like me to pick you up later on in a couple hours?” And he said, “You can come out—go out with me.” So h—I went out with him and his two brothers and two brothers’ wives. And that’s how I started going out with him.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DEVORE: And we—oh, we went steady and then after awhile—after—oh, after a year we were married.

LEVINE: Oh.

DEVORE: Uh-hmm.

LEVINE: Now, do you have children? Did you have children?

DEVORE: I had three. I had—my oldest daughter died nine years ago. And she’s got four very nice children. And my second oldest daughter, she lives in New Jersey now. She lost her husband two years ago. And my sons lives across the road from me.

LEVINE: Oh. Now, what was your husband’s name?

DEVORE: My husband’s name was Gerald [PH] S. DeVore.

LEVINE: And your children’s names?

DEVORE: Gail Marie and the second is Jan Patricia and my son is Gerald DeVore.

LEVINE: Okay. We’re just about out. Is there anything you’d like to say about coming to this country at 10 years old and living out your life here and—

DEVORE: I’ve—well, I—during my lifetime, I have met a lot of very nice, interesting people. I have always been able to, I think, mix well. We’ve moved around quite a bit, also after we were married. But through my children I got involved in all their activities. Whatever—what—I was in PTA, Woman’s Club—hospital. I’m a—I’ve also been a volunteer. I’ve been a volunteer for years. I started volunteering even before I was married. I—and I still do a lot of volunteer work.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Okay. Well, I think we’ll stop here. I want to thank you so much for a very, very interesting interview.

EI-745/DeVORE

DEVORE: I hope it was. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Yeah, I've been speaking with Gertrude DeVore, who came from Germany in 1923 when she was 10 years old. And this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service and I'm signing off.

[END OF INTERVIEW]