

EI-764

MAX GETZLER

BIRTHDATE: JANUARY 27, 1911

INTERVIEW DATE: JULY 8, 1996

AGE AT TIME OF INTERVIEW: 85

RUNNING TIME: 59:50

INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE, PH.D.

RECORDING ENGINEER: JANET LEVINE

INTERVIEW LOCATION: NEW YORK CITY

TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: TAPESCRIBE

TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY:

AUSTRIA, 1920

AGE: 9

SHIP: LAPLANDER

PORT: ANTWERP

RESIDENCES:

- **AUSTRIA: ZAGOSH**
- **THE US: BROOKLYN, NEW YORK**

LEVINE: I'm sorry to say I missed what we've talked about.

GETZLER: I beg your pardon?

LEVINE: I'm sorry to say that I missed what we've talked about.

GETZLER: The whole thing? Oh no! [Laughs] Is it on now?

LEVINE: I believe that it is, yeah. Let's see. Okay, I'm afraid that I didn't have the record button pushed, so we're going to try to recap.

GETZLER: Go ahead.

LEVINE: I'm speaking now with Max Getzler, and it's July 8th, 1996. Mr. Getzler came from what was Austria in 1920, when he was nine years old, through Ellis Island. Today he is eighty-five years old. And we were talking, and I'll just try to recap. Would you just say your birth date again?

GETZLER: Yeah, my birth date is January 27th, 1911.

LEVINE: Okay, and again, where you were born in Austria?

GETZLER: I was born in a little town near the Seine River. It's now Poland. After the war, First War, Poland got that land back. And the town, the little town I was born in, it was a very small town, called Zagosh. It's hard for me to spell it, but it sounded like Z-A-G-O-S-H, something like that. It's still on the map, because I saw it on the map a few years ago in France. The next nearest city to it was called Sanok, which was on the other side of the Seine River. S-A-N-O-K I believe was the best spelling I can think of.

LEVINE: And your grandmother and grandfather, their names?

GETZLER: Yes, my father's parents were named Hersh, and I'm not quite sure about my grandmother's name, but I believe it was Leah, L-E-A-H. They were large landowners, owned a lot of real estate. They rented out houses for rent, and they had a lot of peasants working the land, raising crops. And there was an arrangement made, I believe, where they got half the crops, and my grandfather got the other half. My grandfather, in turn, gave them free housing.

LEVINE: So there was no money involved, as far as you know?

GETZLER: Not really. Well, I really don't know. I can't say. I was only a little boy then. And my other grandparents lived in Sanok, where my mother came from. His name was Abraham. My other grandmother's name I don't recall, quite recall. She didn't live very long when I was alive. She had a bad heart, and passed away. He lived there for quite a while, and I believe he probably lived, except during the war when Mr. Hitler came to town, probably took care of him and the rest of all my family. I had a large family in that whole area there, lived in the surrounding towns. What else can I say?

LEVINE: You said your grandparents, as far as how they were, and how they treated you?

GETZLER: Well, my father's parents were very remote to me. They never paid too much attention to me, and I can't say they were very friendly to me. I saw them once in a while. My mother's parents, on the other hand—my grandmother, as I recall her before she passed away, was very nice to me. My grandfather was all right. He was pretty strict with me, especially when I'd come home from Hebrew School, and he'd ask me questions, and I didn't answer them properly, he would get quite angry at me. And he also had this big—they used to own a lot of land, farm land, which my

mother ran. My grandparents, both my grandparents, never worked, I don't believe, a day in their life. They lived off the property they owned. My mother used to run the whole show. And they also had a lot of people working there. I remember my mother telling me they had a pond where they raised fish, and she was very fond of it. But my grandfather one day decided he wanted to move to the city, and he sold all the land, and he bought a big house in the city.

LEVINE: So she had to move to the city then?

GETZLER: Oh, sure. She wasn't married at the time, I don't believe.

LEVINE: Did you ever hear stories about how your mother met your father?

GETZLER: No, I never heard anything. I never heard of that, never heard anything! I should have asked, but I never did. It's much too late now; they both passed away.

LEVINE: Now, what kind of a woman, how would you describe your mother when you were a little boy?

GETZLER: My mother was very loving, very capable, and very strong-willed. She was considered like the mayor in the small town. Whenever anybody got in trouble, they used to run to my mother. I remember one time after the war, when the Poles started shooting people around, and some woman came to town to my house, crying she was wounded. And I remember my mother took care of her, medically speaking. She wasn't a doctor, but she took care of her.

LEVINE: And for the tape, your mother's name and maiden name, and your father's name?

GETZLER: My mother's maiden name was Fanny Shiner. My father's name was Jacob. His maiden name, of course, was Getzler, which originally was spelled, Austrians spelled it G-O-E-T-Z-L-E-R. The O was dropped later on. My original name in Europe was Mandel, M-A-N-D-E-L, probably pronounced Mendel. When we came to this country, after the war we came over. We were citizens when we came over, because my father got his citizen papers, and he put my mother and my sister's and my name on it. So we originally, we came over as American citizens. Eventually I got my own citizen papers.

LEVINE: Now, as far as you say your mother and father really didn't have to work. What did they do? What did they do with their time? What did they do for enjoyment?

GETZLER: Enjoyment? Nobody had any enjoyment! They used to go to the synagogue [laughs]. There was no movies or anything you have. In fact, I don't recall seeing a car the nine years of my life in Europe. I don't recall seeing a car until I got to the big city. When we started to come back to this country, we went across, we went through—I remember my railroad—through Berlin. The only thing I remember about Berlin is when we got to the station, I had to go to the bathroom, and I couldn't find one! [Laughs] That's the only thing I remember about Berlin! I also got very sick there. We stayed there for a while. Because I was eating green apples, and I remember we stayed in a little boarding house, I presume, I don't recall exactly what. But my mother couldn't leave me, so she sent my sister, who at that time was two years older than I, thirteen years old. She spoke a little German, which she learned in school. Somebody told her where to go to get some medicine for me, and she went all by herself, I remember, across the city of Berlin on the street car, found it, and came back! That was one of the great things I remember about my sister.

LEVINE: Okay, and how about tasks or chores that you had to do as a little boy, before you left Austria?

GETZLER: I don't think I ever did anything!

LEVINE: Well, you mentioned before the horses?

GETZLER: Oh yes, I did that in my grandfather's house in Liskow. He opened a restaurant in his building, because in a city like that, these farmers used to come to town one day a week. That was a market day, and of course they came in horses and wagons. And my job was to take the horses down a big hill to the river, and let them go in the water and drink water there. And I used to ride them down bareback! [Laughs] I was a little boy, but I wasn't afraid. My grandfather in Linsk, my mother's father, had a big barn in the back of his house. He had fruit trees there. I remember particularly one pear tree that I—I never forgot the taste of it. I never tasted pears like that ever since! And they had one cow just for milk. They didn't have enough grass in the back of the house, so he had rented some space in the city. And my job was to take the cow for pasture. I remember one particular, the first time, I took the cow, the cow started to run away! So I tried to stop it. I held on to the tail, and wouldn't let go. And finally it stopped when it got to the grass, you know. And everybody in town after that used to kid me, used to laugh at me, because I wouldn't let go of the tail [laughs].

LEVINE: How about food, other food? Do you remember any dishes your mother made that you particularly liked when you were a little boy?

GETZLER: Frankly, I don't remember [laughs]. Oh, my mother was a very good cook. She used to make the normal, you know, gefilte fish, that's a Jewish food. What do you call it? Matzo ball soup, noodles, chicken. Chicken was a big thing there; there wasn't much meat around, but chicken, every had chicken, raised chicken. We used to have a garden in the back, which I remember particularly because I loved the carrots, and I used to pull them out of the ground and eat them raw [laughs]. And, but other than that—barley was food. My mother used to take me to the forest, which was just right out of town, and she used to pick mushrooms. My mother knew good mushrooms and bad. And I remember going with her. And strawberries, berries, like that. Across the street from our house was a orchard owned by some Polish ex-officer, and I remember one time climbing over the wall, and taking an apple or two. When the owner saw me, he threw a rock at me. And I was wearing a little cap, and as I was climbing over the stone fence, and I didn't realize it, but when I got to the house, took my cap off, and I was bleeding [laughs]. He had put a hole in my head! Maybe that's why I'm so stupid now [laughs].

LEVINE: So let's see. So it sounds like you had a pretty happy childhood?

GETZLER: As a child, I was reasonably happy, I would say, over there, yeah. I had friends, naturally; I had a lot of friends.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, and you had an extended family. You mentioned earlier you go together on—

GETZLER: Holidays.

LEVINE: Holidays.

GETZLER: And you know, used to go to the synagogue.

LEVINE: Yeah, and you mentioned also about making the matzo, right?

GETZLER: Oh yes, when Passover came around, all the women used to get together and find one house with a big room, put up a long table, and spread the flour, or whatever you call it. And my job was to make the little holes with a little wheel that you see on the matzo normally. That was my job.

LEVINE: And talk about wash day.

GETZLER: What?

LEVINE: Wash day, for the women?

GETZLER: Oh, washing day. Yeah, in the back of my house was a river, very clean I remember it. But I mostly remember they had large stones on the shore, and one of them particularly was in the shape of a bathtub. So I used to love to go there, swimming there. The women used to wash their clothes there. Practically like once a week they used to go down there and wash their clothes, including my mother of course.

LEVINE: Do you remember that as like a social time for the women?

GETZLER: Oh yes, oh yes, sure. They talked. Didn't talk to me, but they talked to themselves!

LEVINE: And how about market day? Do you have any remembrances of market day?

GETZLER: Market day? Well, they didn't have market day in my town; it was too small. But in my grandfather's town, in Lisko, oh yes. They used to come in that whole area and they'd bring all kinds of vegetables and fruits, and people used to—and chickens, they used to sell chicken. And people used to buy.

LEVINE: Now were these like, was it true like the Poles were sort of the people who worked the land, and lived outside of town?

GETZLER: Yes, the Poles were the peasants.

LEVINE: They lived around the town?

GETZLER: Around the town there, they had little houses. I remember particularly my father's father, who had [unclear], because I don't recall my other grandfather's land. It was a different town entirely. But they had little houses, which they—I'll say this about the Polish women: they kept their houses very clean. They used to clean the streets outside. I always remember them there.

LEVINE: Can you remember the house you lived in?

GETZLER: Yes, I think I can. It was a stone house, roof I don't recall what it was like; I was very small. We had a cellar in the basement, stone cellar, and the door used—you had to pull the door up from the ground to get down there, in the steps. I remember that one time because my sister got careless, and didn't look, and she fell down and cut her lip. And to the day of her death she still had a scar there! I remember that. And during the war, when the Russians came to town, the Russians used to come marching in on horseback. They were the Cossacks; they used to come in with big spears they used to carry. Scared the hell out of everybody! And they

decided one day they were going to take over my house. And my mother didn't want to talk to the officer, and she says, "You can't take over; we only have one large room where we used to live in there, with an open oven and all that." And he said to her, "Listen, if you don't let me take my men in here, I'll bring the horses in." That did it! So my mother took all the mattresses and bedding down to the basement, and that's where we lived, in a stone cellar, during the war. Because they were fighting. We were right in the middle of the fighting, because it was a valley, and there were naturally two mountains on each side. The Russians had their artillery on one, and the Austrians, which was my home team, had it on the other. Unfortunately, both of them were lousy shots, and a lot of the shots landed on our roof, and made big holes in our roof. We had a pretty strong house, so it didn't collapse or anything like that. That's what I remember.

LEVINE: Did you have daily contact with the Cossacks who were living in your house?

GETZLER: Oh, sure!

LEVINE: How did they treat you? What were they like?

GETZLER: Oh, I was a little boy. I was probably a cute little boy, and you know, they used to play with me. But my mother at one time, before the war, as I mentioned before there was a railroad running through town which was built by the Germans, and the Germans ran it. They had conductors, and all the help were there. My mother rented out rooms to about four or five of them, and they were very nice to me. They used to play with me. I guess I reminded them of their children back home. No, I never had any trouble with the Germans. The Poles were the problem.

LEVINE: The Germans lived—your mother rented them rooms, but not in your house?

GETZLER: Yes.

LEVINE: Oh, in your house?

GETZLER: Yeah, we had—yeah, it was a good-sized house. And my mother ran a store in the front, a general store, merchandise store, which my father had run before he left for America. And that's how I guess she made a little money. Then my father used to send money in the mail until the postman started stealing it, so he found a way to put money in—he sent pictures. He'd put the money inside the pictures, and then paste it, and that's how money used to come for my mother. And of course, we had a garden in the back so we had vegetables to live on. We needn't need much money.

We didn't have to pay any rent or anything, and no such thing as taxes in those days.

LEVINE: Do you have any other memories of the war years?

GETZLER: Where, the war years there?

LEVINE: Were you going to school during them?

GETZLER: No, no, couldn't go to school. They were shooting and bombing, and artillery fire on both sides. No, I remember living in the house, and I used to know the shots. My mother used to laugh at me when I'd say, "That's a [Yiddish] shot," I used to say in Yiddish. [Yiddish], a Russian shot. I used to know from the sound which artillery was coming over! [Laughs] Yeah, I always remember that!

LEVINE: Do you think you have any carry-over from that time, of being like in a war zone as a little boy?

GETZLER: No, I don't think so. I really, no, I don't think so. No.

LEVINE: Did you see a lot of actual killing?

GETZLER: I saw one soldier get killed. I was looking out the window and he got shot, right in front of my house. And we lived right next door to a Catholic church. There was a big stone wall right next to our house, and there was a Catholic church there. And I used to like to climb up there, and the priest used to chase me off [laughs].

LEVINE: But do you remember what—like, you said you had friends. Some were Polish.

GETZLER: No, most of my friends were Jewish boys, yeah.

LEVINE: Do you remember anything you did with your friends for fun?

GETZLER: For fun? Oh, I used to play marbles, I guess, or something like that. That's about all; I don't remember too much. I remember I used to go sleigh riding. I remember a funny thing: there was a friend of the family; he was a Polish man, and he made me a sled. I didn't have a sled, and he built it for me, I remember. I was very happy with it. And then after they had one of those pogroms, I guess you'd call it. I came out later, a few days later, and I saw a Polish kid with my sled, so I couldn't dare ask, try to get it back. And that I remember, because that's what bothered me!

LEVINE: Do you remember any ceremonies, like weddings, or funerals, or religious ceremonies? Anything?

GETZLER: Yeah, I remember funerals. One time my sister and I went for a walk on the outskirts of town. I was like a meadow, a slight hill, and we walked up there. I saw a lot of people around, and we walked over there. And there I saw a woman dead in a casket, and she was so pale! I could draw you a picture if I could draw! But I never forgot it. They hadn't closed the lid yet, I guess, that's in those days. They were burying this poor woman. [Unclear] about that. Weddings? No, really, I don't remember any weddings. No, I can't say I do.

LEVINE: Birth? Were there any ceremonies about birth?

GETZLER: I don't remember. I don't remember.

LEVINE: Did you celebrate your birthday? Was that a day of celebration?

GETZLER: No, no. No, we didn't think it was that important in those days. Over here, everything is so important. The birthday and Fourth of July is very important here. Not over there, not in that—I was only a little boy. You have to remember that. I'm surprised I'm remembering what I do remember!

LEVINE: Yeah, you remember a lot.

GETZLER: Yeah.

LEVINE: So let's see. You mentioned before that you went to Hebrew school—well, you didn't go to Hebrew school, you went—

GETZLER: I went to a regular school. It was a Polish school at this time; it was after the war. And the only Hebrew I learned was from a private teacher called a malum [PH], and they used to come to my house once or twice a week, I think we'd call him, to teach me how to read Hebrew.

LEVINE: And he was also a strict teacher?

GETZLER: Strict? Oh, God, he was strict! [Laughs] If I made a mistake, he'd chase me around trying to hit me! [Laughs] Yeah, he was.

LEVINE: Let's see. So your father—why was it decided that the family would come here when you did?

GETZLER: Because things were better in this country than over there. There wasn't much of a future there. The land that the family owned was owned by the

parents, my father's parents, and my mother's parents. So there wasn't very much that my father could do there. He was running this little store there, and when his brother came over here, he finally settled, and he sent for him. And he came over. And I remember it was quite a trip coming over here. I always remember my uncle, who was my father's younger brother. God, I forgot his name. What was his name [unclear]? You can see from the stone; I buried him in the cemetery plot.

FEMALE VOICE: Abe.

LEVINE: Abe?

GETZLER: Yes, I think it was Abe, yeah. Yes, Abe.

LEVINE: And he came first, before your father?

GETZLER: He came first, yeah. And he was quite a guy! Never worked a day in his life! He became a professional gambler [laughs] believe it or not! I never heard of anybody.

LEVINE: In this country?

GETZLER: In this country, he was a professional gambler! He never worked a day in his life! Yeah, that was quite interesting. And I remember because when we finally came over—you want to know about my trip here?

LEVINE: Well first, let's just say, do you remember when the war was over? Do you remember realizing the war was over?

GETZLER: Yeah. Well, yeah, more or less, sure. And then the Poles got very strong, you know, and they started beating all the Jews. They never liked you, they were all so—Polish people were very anti-Semitic in Europe. Very.

LEVINE: So even though people who had been friendly up 'til then?

GETZLER: Started to change, yeah. You know, my mother's—they were very friendly with my mother; my mother helped them a lot. They started to change. And then I started to go to this little Polish one-room schoolhouse, and they were trying to teach me Polish. The teacher was naturally Polish. At this time they wanted everything to be Polish, to get away from Austrian, which was a big mistake, because Austria was a very civilized country in those days.

LEVINE: So when things started getting—well, the war was over, so you could leave. And also, things, conditions weren't good.

GETZLER: Right, well, my father had to send us enough money for tickets, to buy tickets here. And then we left. I remember going to the railroad station. The only taxi was a horse and wagon; we didn't have any automobiles in those days. Once in while I saw a plane fly over. I never saw a car when I was living in that little town—never saw an automobile!

LEVINE: So let's see. You left by train for Berlin?

GETZLER: We left by train, through Berlin, to Belgium. We finally wound up in Antwerp, where we were supposed to take a ship. But we had a long wait for a ship. In fact we lived for probably two months in a boarding house in Antwerp.

LEVINE: Now this is your mother, your sister, and you?

GETZLER: My mother, my sister, and myself.

LEVINE: And why don't you tell about Berlin, and what your sister did?

GETZLER: [Laughs] When I was in Berlin, as I mentioned, the only thing I really remember about Berlin is when we got to the station, I had to go to the bathroom, and I couldn't find one. And I was getting kind of desperate, so finally I found one. And then I got sick there. I love green apples, and I guess I ate too many sour apples, and I had a terrible stomachache, and I was very sick. And my mother was afraid to leave me alone, so she sent my sister, who at that time was thirteen years old and did speak some German because she had taken German in a school in a bigger town near where we lived. Sent her, she went by streetcar to an address that one of the people in the building gave us to get some medicine. Probably it was a pharmacy of some sort. And my mother naturally was very concerned about her going alone; she was only thirteen. But she went there, got the medicine, and came back. And I always remember that about my sister, who I loved very much!

LEVINE: Okay, and then you spent time in Antwerp. What was that like? Do you have memories of that?

GETZLER: Oh yeah, I remember it, because it's the seaport. And I used to go down to the seaport and watch the boats come in. The fishermen used to bring the fish in there. I used to sit around the seaport. It's the first place I ever at ice cream, and loved it! [Laughs] Never had anything taste like the ice cream in Belgium. And finally, we got on the boat. The name of the boat was the Laplander. It was an American line. And we had quite a rough trip coming over! Everybody was sick, and we were in the lower class, so we used to live, like, on bunks, sleep on bunks there. And I remember they used to feed us herring, some bread, and for dessert, bananas. And

I didn't want to eat the bananas; I thought they were rotten pears. I never ate a banana before in my life! I remember that. I also remember we had a rough trip across, and I had a fight going all the way across with some other little boy, and when I finally got to Ellis Island I was all scratched up. My mother was ashamed of me. She says, "How's your father going to see you?" "Well, he'll see I'm a fighter!" which I was [laughs].

LEVINE: Do you remember the Statue of Liberty? Do you remember seeing it?

GETZLER: Oh yeah, I remember that. And I also remember Ellis Island. They had, like, a playground. They also had like dormitories where we stayed. I don't remember how many days we stayed there.

LEVINE: Oh, you stayed over?

GETZLER: Oh yeah, on Ellis Island, sure! You had to wait to be admitted. And I remember staying. Also I remember on the ship, when the ship came over, I noticed a little boat coming to the ship with two men in it, a small boat. And I don't know what got into me, but I had a feeling one of them was my father. I don't remember what he looked like, but I thought it was my father. And they both came along side of the boat. And one of the men must have recognized me. I was talking, and they asked me who I was. He put some money on the—you know, one of these poles where you pull the boat to the shore, with a spike on the end of it? He put money on the spike, lifted it up, and I called my mother. "Mom, Mom, I think Papa's here!" you know? And she came running over, and sure enough, she took the money off. Because you had to have twenty-five dollars to get off Ellis Island in those days. I don't know what it is today. Today, they're not using it now. So, that's the first time I really saw my father that I recognized. He came over with my Uncle Abe, who was the younger one. And then I was playing in the playground. I was on a swing, and I was swinging up and down. They used to call out the name of the families when they were ready to be released. And all of a sudden I heard Getzler. I got so excited I fell off [laughs]. I fell off the swing! Lucky I didn't get hurt. And then when we got off there, my father and my uncle met me, and the first thing my uncle asked my mother was, "Do you have any Schnapps?" That's liquor. Because this is prohibition! [Laughs] He wanted to know if my mother brought any! As a matter of fact, she did bring it; she brought a lot of wine and brandy. Basically, that's what we lived on on the boat. We couldn't eat the food; couldn't eat. The food was bad. So we ate on bread dipped in brandy. My mother brought brandy [laughs].

LEVINE: Do you remember anything else she packed and brought with her?

GETZLER: Not really, I don't remember that. Yeah, I'm sure she—I know she brought some silver, what do you call it? A candle holder?

LEVINE: Candlesticks?

GETZLER: Candlesticks. She brought a few of those, which I think they're still around the family. I think my sister got them after my mother passed away. Probably one of my nieces has them now.

LEVINE: How about bedding? Did she bring bedding?

GETZLER: Bedding? She might have. Yeah, I wouldn't be surprised she did! I wouldn't be surprised she did bring it, yeah. I really don't know. I was busy fighting all the way across [laughs]! I don't know why.

LEVINE: Tell me a little about that boat. Was it like a little motorboat?

GETZLER: The boat that came? It was like a large rowboat.

LEVINE: A large rowboat?

GETZLER: Yeah, with a motor on it, probably a little outboard motor. I guess my uncle rented it. I always remember my uncle, and I always owed him a debt that I finally repaid. When I came here as a little boy, he took me to Wanamaker's. Remember Wanamaker's? Do you remember Wanamaker's, on Astor Place?

LEVINE: I don't remember that one, but I remember it.

GETZLER: Yeah, it was on Astor Place. It was a big department store. He took me there, and we went up to one floor where there was a toy department, and I saw a lot of bicycles. I never saw a bicycle in my town, you know? And he said, "Pick one out." [Laughs] He bought me a bicycle! I never forgot him for that, never! And eventually, he died, in the city. They found him dead in a rooming house somewhere in the Bronx. And they found my father's name so they called my father. My father called me in the office crying. He says, "Uncle Abe is dead! Uncle Abe is dead!" I says, "Well, where is he?" He says, he gave me the phone number of the police precinct in the Bronx. They wanted somebody to go up there to identify him. I says, "Don't worry Pop. I'll go there." So I went up there, go to the mortuary in one of the Bronx hospitals. They pull him out, and I see a little old man. Boy, how do I know what he looked like? [Laughs] But every indication was, it was he. So I says, "I guess that's him all right." And I made a funeral for him, a good funeral for him, and I buried him in the plot that we owned in Long Island. So I repaid him my debt!

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LEVINE: Yeah. What a beautiful gift for a little boy!

GETZLER: Oh, you can't imagine how excited I was!

END OF SIDE A

BEGIN SIDE B

LEVINE: Where did you go? Well first, what were your impressions of Ellis Island? Anything you remember about being at Ellis Island?

GETZLER: Well, I remember sleeping in like a dormitory type of thing, you know. I never knew the word dormitory, but then I realized it was a dormitory! But people used to come over, a lot of people from different nationalities, and they'd have to wait there a few days before they were processed. When they were processed, they'd leave. You had to have a certain amount of money; that's why my father came with that boat to give my mother the money. I remember the playground was very nice; I was busy playing there. And whatever food there was, I ate. That's the only thing I really remember about Ellis Island.

LEVINE: Do you remember your mother's feelings? Was she frightened, or looking forward to it?

GETZLER: Oh, she was looking forward to, of course. She hadn't seen her husband in all those years, 1914 to 1920, six years. My mother didn't frighten easily. She was a very strong woman. She was quite a woman!

LEVINE: Do you remember anything you expected of this country before you actually saw it and got here?

GETZLER: Yes, I expected the streets to be paved with gold bricks! Matter of fact, when I left, one of my little friends said to me, "Don't forget—send me a gold brick! Send me one of those bricks from the street." They thought [laughs] the whole country was full of gold, you know? Yeah, I remember. And we moved. My father had taken an apartment in one of these apartment houses on Forty-Third Street and Borough Park, between Thirteenth Avenue and Fourteenth Avenue.

LEVINE: So now, was your uncle living there, too?

GETZLER: No, no. No, he was in New York, in Manhattan. He was a Manhattanite. He was a gambler!

LEVINE: So what did your father do?

GETZLER: My father? Owned a grocery store. Oh, he used to work in the trunk factory, and then a couple of cousins in my family, they were in the business of running grocery stores. My first uncle who died—no, wait a minute. My mother's uncle was here, and he was running a jitney bus in Pennsylvania. And finally he got together with my father, and they decided they'd buy a grocery store, open up a grocer store. And they bought one in Borough Park. That's where we lived. And I even know the address: I remember 220 Cortelia Road. I remember that, and we lived in the same building above the store. There was a large apartment there. And everybody worked. My mother worked, my father worked, my uncle worked. And then my uncle decided he'd go in for himself, and my father stayed. So we lived there for quite a while, and then we—

LEVINE: Now you started school right away, when you got here?

GETZLER: Oh yeah, started school right away in P.S. 164 in Borough Park. I remember it very well. I remember coming in the morning. They used to have, like, steps to get in the door, and I couldn't speak the language, you know. And I saw the steps, I walked up the steps, and I waited for them to open the door. And some tough Italian kid—he was king of the hill. I didn't know that. You know, he was the big shot around, with all those kids there, and he saw me there, and he hit me, you know? So, I didn't do anything about it, but the next time that I saw him—he wore glasses— [laughs] I hit him and smashed his glasses, you know. Because I became king of the hill. But I ran home crying, and I told my mother what happened. She says, "Oh!" She says, "The police are coming! They're going to send you back to Europe!" [Laughs] Oh, I carried on like crazy! I always remember that. It's funny how you remember little things like that, yeah!

LEVINE: So was it an ethnic neighborhood?

GETZLER: What's that?

LEVINE: Was it an ethnic neighborhood in Brooklyn at that time?

GETZLER: Yes, yes, it was Jewish and Italian, mostly. Some Irish.

LEVINE: So a lot of immigrant children must have been in your school?

GETZLER: Apparently, apparently, yeah. School? No, the kids were able to speak English. I was the only one that couldn't speak English. But I learned fast! I really learned very rapidly.

LEVINE: Do you remember anything about the learning of English?

GETZLER: No, no, I don't remember. I just learned it. When you're born, you learn it. That's the way it was with me; I was reborn.

LEVINE: Was your father already speaking English?

GETZLER: He was speaking English, yes. What I remember about my father: he couldn't write too well in English, and I was so proud of him! He went back to night school. He was running a store, a business, and apparently he must have been in his high forties, I guess, at that time. He went back to school, took night courses, and he got his diploma! [Laughs] I was so proud of him, that he could do that. My mother could read and write English also. She learned by herself, without going to school, yeah. And then we moved to Flatbush, as I told you before, which was a very nice residential area. That's probably why I learned English very rapidly, because the people around there were a higher class, and spoke good English. They were my father's customers. So in that way, we both, my sister and I, learned English very rapidly.

LEVINE: Did you help out in the store, too?

GETZLER: Always, always. Before I went to school, and when I came home from school. I always helped out.

LEVINE: And what kind of a father did you come to learn you had? What kind of a man was he?

GETZLER: A very loving father. Yeah, he was a great man. I was crazy about my father! Every time I think of him, I could cry!

LEVINE: So was he—he went into another grocery store after?

GETZLER: No, he kept the store there, and my uncle went to another—opened up another store. Actually he opened it up in Laurelton. You know where Laurelton is? In Queens, almost Long Island.

LEVINE: Yeah, yeah.

GETZLER: Yeah, which was a very nice town. He did very well; he owned a nice house. Unfortunately the Blacks came and took over, and so it became all Black.

LEVINE: So I see. So your father just simply moved the family out of the building where the store was, but he kept that store?

GETZLER: No, no, no. The store was always in Flatbush.

LEVINE: Oh!

GETZLER: But we lived in Brooklyn; we lived in Borough Park. But after a while we took an apartment in the same building that the store was in, in the basement. And we lived in, like, the third floor apartment up there. Nice apartment, it was a big apartment.

LEVINE: So you went through—how long did you stay in school?

GETZLER: Well, I went through grade school. I started late, of course, because I couldn't speak well. So I was behind all the other kids. And then, when we moved to Flatbush, I went to another school, which was like a block away: P.S. 179. And they wouldn't skip me there. You know, I was very anxious to get up to normal grade. They wouldn't skip me, so they told me to go to another school in Flatbush, P.S. 90, which was right next door to Erasmus Hall High School. Remember that high school? It used to be a great school, but now—anyway, I used to have to go there by streetcar. So I used to go there, and the kids there were tough kids who were bad students, you know, really tough bunch of kids. And there I must have skipped three grades in a hurry, because you know, I wasn't stupid, I just didn't know the language! As soon as I learned the language, I started to do better. And eventually I was graduated from P.S. 90, and then I went to high school. I went to the Yewchick [PH] High School in Bay Ridge. I went there, although I could have gone to Erasmus Hall, which was considered a bigger school, but they didn't have any business courses, and I wanted to take business courses. I wanted to become an accountant, because my father didn't have much money, and he couldn't send me to one of the top colleges. I had to go to NYU, where I went to the School of Commerce, and I was graduated from there, and graduated as an accountant.

LEVINE: And then, when did you meet your wife?

GETZLER: My first wife—this is my second wife, as you probably guessed—I met my wife, who was going to nursing school. She actually came from Waterbury, Connecticut, but she was taking a nursing course in the Brooklyn Jewish Hospital. Is that name familiar? It's still there. And it used to be a very good hospital, and it had a very good school in those days. And her aunt lived on the street where my father's—oh, my father had moved the store up a few blocks; he had lost the lease--the street where my father had the store, and they used to patronize my father's store. And she used to stay there some, a few nights or so. And her brother also was there. And one night her brother asked me if I wanted to

go to the dance. And I said, "All right." This was a dance that was given by the nursing school. That's where I met her.

LEVINE: And do you have children?

GETZLER: I have two children.

LEVINE: And their names?

GETZLER: The name is Herbert, my son. I call him Buzzy. We've called him Buzzy since the time he was a little boy. And I have a daughter Lynn who is living in Paris. Both of them have families with them. Matter of fact, one of my granddaughters from Paris just finished a graduate course at Columbia Law School. She's probably the youngest woman that ever passed the Bar in the Paris Bar, in France. Very bright, very bright. And now she's studying for the Bar here. She wants to take it; I don't know why. She's not going to live here. And she's still living up there at Columbia now. She'll be finished, I believe, the beginning of August. Then she'll go back to Paris.

LEVINE: So, what was your wife's name, and maiden name?

GETZLER: Her name was Sylvia Sirkin, S-I-R-K-I-N. They lived in Waterbury, Connecticut. She had three brothers. Her father was the insurance agent for Prudential. Actually, she was born in Nova Scotia, where her father had opened a big store there. Then he went broke [laughs], and he had to come back to Connecticut. He went broke because there were a lot of mines in Nova Scotia, and they had a strike which went on for years and years. And he gave everybody credit, and nobody paid him. So he couldn't pay his bills, so he had to get out. So he came to Connecticut.

LEVINE: So what did you do? Once you got your degree in accounting, what did you do?

GETZLER: Well, yeah, I took the summer off and I studied hard. I wanted to get my C.P.A. certificate, which I took. I didn't even look for a job then, and I passed it right off, which is very unusual. If anybody knows anything about the C.P.A. exams, they're very hard. And then I was looking for a job. I couldn't get a job. This was the Depression; it was 1933, the depths of the Depression. No, I couldn't get a job for any reason. Finally one of my father's customers, my father talked to her, said she had a cousin who was an accountant and she'll talk to him. So finally she talked to him. I went over to see this guy. His name was Recoossen [PH], Ted Recoossen. I'll never forget him! And he said he'd hire me; he can't pay me. I said, "I don't care. I'll work for nothing." I worked six months for nothing, absolutely nothing, and then he started to pay me a little money.

LEVINE: Did you ever regret that?

GETZLER: Well, I wanted to get my certificate. Basically, I never really needed it, because eventually I went into the finance business. I had a brother in law, my wife's, my daughter's—my daughter's! My sister's husband was in the underwear business. He also wanted to go into the finance business. So one day he asked me if I wanted to go in the business. I didn't know anything about it, but I says, "Anything's better than this." I had to make some money. I was married at that time, and had a baby already. Our little boy was born. So I went into the finance business.

LEVINE: Finance what? What is it?

GETZLER: We financed—we made business loans, commercial loans, secured loans, with security—basically, accounts receivable. You know what that is?

LEVINE: Yeah.

GETZLER: Yeah, and I stayed in that business a long time. In fact, I stayed there all the rest of my life, different company.

LEVINE: Until you retired?

GETZLER: Until I retired, yeah.

LEVINE: And what about your Uncle Abe? How did he fare in America, being a gambler?

GETZLER: I don't know, we never—we lost track of him, eventually. Once in a while he'd call my father up, when he needed some money. So I says, "All right, Pop, I'll give you some money to give to Uncle Abe," [laughs] you know? And then, he saw him maybe two times in maybe over a year or twenty. He was a very funny kind of guy. He never worked. He had a lot of friends, probably all gamblers. I remember one time—the only vacation I really had in my life, because I always worked in the summer, in the store—he took me to the Catskills to one of these small hotels there? And I must have been around thirteen years old. I was very small when I was young, then I grew. After I got Bar Mitzvahed, I really grew. And we stayed at this hotel. Then I realized what he was after. He used me as a shill for gambling. He didn't want people to know he was a card shark! [Laughs] And the funniest thing is, one day he rented a car and driver, and he says, "We're going for a ride." I says, "Fine." I was very happy to get in a car; I didn't have many rides in my life. We rode to Ellisville. I don't know if you ever heard of that town in the Catskills. They had a federal prison there. And we stopped at this prison, we go in. I'm

wondering what it's all about. And he goes in, and he asks to see somebody. And we went in, and he took me there, and there was somebody, one of his friends was in jail there! He wanted to visit him [laughs]. He took me along! I never forgot that; that's something you don't forget. [Laughs] He was a strange man, my uncle! Yeah.

LEVINE: So when you think back now, on, you know, the fact of coming here when you were nine years old, and living out your life here, how do you think about that? How do you think about the fact that you immigrated, and—

GETZLER: Oh, I was very happy, believe me! I had nothing in Europe; we had nothing! I didn't even have a pair of skates. I couldn't skate anyway, because the roads weren't paved! I didn't have a bicycle; we didn't have a car. We had nothing!

LEVINE: Even though you were fairly well off?

GETZLER: Considering all the other people in town, we were—yeah, we probably were the richest family in town, and my grandfather also, in his town. But it didn't do me any good. We had nothing in town. There wasn't anything, no such thing as a movie house, nothing to do there. Nothing at all. We didn't even have a restaurant in town, that I can recall.

LEVINE: And what do you feel satisfied about, that you've done in your life? What makes you feel satisfied?

GETZLER: I raised two wonderful children, and six grandchildren. And now I have two great-grandsons, who were just born recently, within the past month. One married a German fellow. My oldest granddaughter from Paris, now she married a surgeon, a German surgeon. They were married, and they had this little boy. And then my other grandson, my youngest grandson, my son's youngest, he was going to University of Wisconsin for his doctorate in economics. He almost has it now, as a matter of fact. And his wife gave birth to a little boy. And he always told me, he says, "Grandpa, if it's a little boy, it's going to be called Jacob," because he loved my father. He loved my father. And sure enough, he did!

LEVINE: And why don't you mention your current wife's name and maiden name?

GETZLER: Current wife's name is Sylvia Vinlalon, V-I-N-L-A-L-O-N. She's Chilean. She came to this country about thirty some-odd years ago. She worked as a secretary, bilingual secretary for some attorneys. She worked in the Irving Trust Company Bank and another Venezuelan Bank, and she's been living in this house, apartment, for God knows how many years! When I married her, I lived in Long Island, but I got divorced, and we sold the house. I came to live here because the rent was so cheap; it was rent-

controlled. I couldn't resist it! It was less than two hundred dollars. And since then, then I bought a place in Fort Lauderdale, so I have a place there. Now, you've got me up to date.

LEVINE: Yes, I did. How about when you visited Ellis Island? Did that bring back any—how was it for you?

GETZLER: Oh sure, it brought back memories of when I was there as a little boy, of course, yes. And then I saw my parent's name on the board. I was going to do it, but then my niece said, "Uncle Max, I did it already." I didn't know she'd do that. She did, which was very nice of her. But I was definitely going to do it, of course.

LEVINE: Okay, let's see. And how is this time of life?

GETZLER: Now?

LEVINE: Yeah, now that you're retired?

GETZLER: It's all right, but my health isn't that good. I had a bad accident two summers ago here. Want me to give you the details of that? You're interested? I don't know if you're interested or not.

LEVINE: Yeah.

GETZLER: Anyway, I got bitten by a spider in Florida there. We have a big pool there, and basically my life revolves around the pool in the that building, the swimming. And apparently when we got here, in June, my ankle swelled up a lot, so we went to see a dermatologist at NYU Hospital, which is only a few blocks away from here. She gave me some antibiotic. I got the medicine, and came to the house. And my wife was away; she had to go downtown for some reason or another. I took one pill, and my body went crazy. I started to throw up, I had diarrhea. I got dizzy as a top; I felt like I was dying! And I called my sister-in-law, her sister, who lives on Twenty-Third Street, and I told her, "Sonia, you better call 911. I'm dying!" And I didn't realize it, but she had her machine on; she wasn't listening to me. When she came back, she heard it, she did it, and came running over with her husband here, and they took me over to the Emergency Room at the NYU Hospital here. And called the doctor who had given me the pills; her office was in the building there. And she apparently gave me some medicine, and she thought I was better. And then she decided, "Eh, to make sure, I'll keep him over one night." She was talking to my wife at this point. I was pretty sick. And she kept me over one night. They put me in a room with about two or three others; my wife got panicky. She saw the men there, they looked like they had AIDS, all of them. And I stayed over that night, and my stomach was still bad,

and I had to go to the bathroom. I kept ringing and ringing for the nurse, the nurse, and nothing came. So about two in the morning I started to climb out over the barriers. They had the barriers up, and they found me at four in the morning, unconscious, on the floor. I landed on my head. I think I was unconscious—how many days was that, five days?

SYLVIA: Seven days.

GETZLER: Seven days I was unconscious in the hospital there, and I've never been the same since. They never thought I was going to come out alive, but I did.

LEVINE: They detected that it was a spider bite?

GETZLER: That's what the doctor said. I don't know. That's what she said; I didn't know. And from that day on, I've never been the same. I can hardly walk, and I still have troubling walking, and that's sort of changed my whole life. What I do in Florida, basically we have a nice big pool there, almost Olympic sized. Everybody lives around the pool. I go walking in the pool. I used to be a very good swimmer; I was a good athlete. All my life I was a good athlete. Now I can't do anything. I walk for about a half hour every morning, and I try to do it at night. Walking is easy for me in the water; walking on the ground is very difficult. My feet get tired, and I get cramps in my legs. So it changed my whole life. By the way, there's a picture I'm looking at. If you want to see my sister and what she looked like—over there. [Pause] No, no, no. That's my family.

LEVINE: Oh! This is when you came over?

GETZLER: No, I was thirteen at that time.

LEVINE: Oh, okay.

GETZLER: I know because I was playing a fiddle. Did I have a fiddle there?

LEVINE: No.

GETZLER: My son and daughter. And there's a big picture when we came over, on the wall. Don't bother taking it off, Sylvia.

LEVINE: Yeah, I'll see it when I get up. We're just about to finish.

GETZLER: Yeah, you want to see my sister. She was gorgeous! Platinum hair, she was gorgeous.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, and how did she fare in this country?

GETZLER: Oh, very well. She married this gentleman who I wasn't crazy about, but apparently she was. He was in business, in the underwear business, and he was quite wealthy. And they wound up living in Scarsdale, in a big house, you know. And she was happy there. Unfortunately, he died, and she got so sick! It wasn't Alzheimer's. My mother had Alzheimer's; she died of Alzheimer's. But it was what they call dementia. It was almost the same thing. She didn't know anything, didn't know anybody, didn't know her children, didn't know me. But my wife and I always—we loved her. We used to go up there every weekend and take her out for dinner, just to get her out of the house. Because she lived in this big house alone, with help around the clock—had to, couldn't leave her alone. Couldn't leave her to go out. And unfortunately, actually she died.

LEVINE: Do you think that your mother or father tried to instill certain attitudes in you that you tried to instill in your children?

GETZLER: Well, they were both very honest, hard-working people. And I guess they got that into me. I never stole anything; I never took anything from anybody. I was always a good friend. If a friend needed anything, I always gave it to them. No, they were very good people, my parents were, very good people. My father was religious. I still remember when he took me for my Bar Mitzvah. He took a half a day off on a Thursday, when they take the Torah out. You're Jewish, so you probably know that.

LEVINE: I am, but I'm not practicing.

GETZLER: I'm not practicing much, either [laughs]. I remember he took me to a synagogue not too far from the store where we lived. And I said my thing, came home, and that was my Bar Mitzvah! Oh yeah, my mother made a dinner Saturday night for the family. That was my Bar Mitzvah! Today, they spend thousands of dollars on a Bar Mitzvah. They even go to Israel for a Bar Mitzvah now.

LEVINE: So your mother and father were always happy they had come here?

GETZLER: Oh yeah, oh sure. Yeah, they got along great. Yeah, my father loved my mother, and my mother loved him, I'm sure. They were very happy. And they lived in a nice neighborhood. We lived in Flatbush, which was a very nice neighborhood. You don't have these robberies any more, these muggings. In those days, you never had it. Nobody had drugs that I could remember, anything like that. I have good friends around here in the area. In fact, most of them either became doctors or dentists, all professional people. So, and the best time in my life was high school. I loved high school!

LEVINE: Why did you like it so much?

GETZLER: Well, I was into sports. I played the violin; I played on the orchestra there. We had the best orchestra in the city, and we used to win the contest every year, the Yewchick High School. Always used to win. We had a great conductor who I loved. He was a very bright man, a German guy, Philip Brayley. [PH]So I enjoyed that part of my life. College wasn't so easy. Didn't have much money. My father's store was going bad. Even though the tuition was low, I had trouble paying it, and one year I didn't want to ask my father anymore—I knew he didn't have it. So I did a stupid thing. I was pretty strong in those days; I was a good fighter. I took two professional fights [laughs] in the clubs over in Queens. The Ridgewood was one of them. What was the other one? I forgot already. Anyway, after the second fight I had enough money to pay my tuition, and besides, some Irish kid caught me unawares. I thought I was pretty good; it broke one of my ribs. So I stopped. Of course, if my mother ever found out, she'd kill me! [Laughs] She would have killed me if she knew what I was doing [laughs]. So that was my life. I had good friends in those days, very good friends. Yeah. I never went out much with females in those days. In fact, I never had a female friend to my knowledge. I always helped out in the store, because you know, my parents worked so hard. My mother had an apartment, I don't know, it must have been seven rooms upstairs, that she kept clean by herself, cooked, washed, stayed in the store, my father's. And I helped. Whenever I could, I helped. I was a good son. In fact, one day there was some opening of a business, my sister's son's business. And she told everybody around and made an announcement. She says, "Here's my brother. He's the greatest son that ever lived!" [Laughs] I always remember that! She was proud of me. I was a good boy; I always helped wherever I could. My sister didn't help much. She was busy with her friends, you know, she was a girl. And she was going out with people. I never did. I couldn't have seen my parents working that hard, but I did what I could. Finally when I got out of college, my parents bought me a little used Chevrolet. And the store used to be open like six and a half days. It was half a day on Sunday. And after that, my mother used to make a picnic basket, and I always drove them out to Long Island to some park. That was their recreation. And I did it every weekend. I never went out with girls, never! I didn't want to spend my money on them; I didn't want to spend my time. My time was more important than money. I wanted to give my parents what I could. I know I'm bragging, but it's true.

LEVINE: Well, it's a beautiful story. Okay, well I think, unless you have something you'd like to add, I think—

GETZLER: I really don't. What can I add? I love this country. I love this country; I'm a very patriotic American. Matter of fact, during the war I had two children,

and I had a high number, draft number, and I wasn't called. And my friends were called. And I told my wife at that time I was going to enlist in the Marines. You know, at that time I wanted to kill Germans. My wife got panicky, and she told my mother about it. My mother came running over, and she carried on like crazy: "You've got two children and a wife! You're going to get killed!" I would have, too, if I joined the Marines, and over in—the funny thing is I would be fighting Japs, not Germans. I didn't know! And so I didn't do it. But I love my country, I really do. This is a great country.

LEVINE: Okay, well thank you very much.

GETZLER: You're welcome.

LEVINE: This has been a great interview; I appreciate it.

GETZLER: Sorry you had a problem at first [laughs].

LEVINE: I am, too. I apologize. Okay, I've been speaking with Max Getzler, and he came from Austria in 1920 when he was nine years old, and today he's eighty-five. It's July 8th, 1996, and this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service here in New York, signing off.

END OF INTERVIEW