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IRWIN SCHIFFRES
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LEVINE: This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. I'm here with Irwin Schiffres, who came from—well, Germany and a circuitous route, finally leaving Portugal for this country in 1941, at ten years age. And we're in Rochester, New York and we're going to start again here.

If you would say in your words about your background, your father's citizenship and what happened in Germany in the late '30s.

SCHIFFRES: All right. My father was born in Grotner [PH], which is a city which was originally Czarist, Russia; later after World War I became Poland; is now Belarus. But in 1917 it was under German occupation during World War I and at that time he decided to go to Germany for economic reasons. Really, to better himself, especially after the way Jews had been treated in Czarist Russia. Germany was really considered a better place. He became a dentist in Cologne, where he met and married my mother, whose name was Leah Hochstein, who was German born, and under the laws at the time they became Polish citizens and I was considered a Polish citizen when I was born in 1930.

In 1938 apparently the Poles had announced that any Polish citizens who would not—who had been away for a number of years and did not return to Poland would lose their citizenship and sort of in retaliation, the Germans decided that they would deport all Poles back to Poland before they were sort of stuck with them, as the bureaucratic mind figured it. Luckily, my father happened to be in synagogue one morning on the anniversary of his father's death on his [unclear] and he heard that in other cities the Gestapo had come during the night and picked up Polish Jews and deported them. But Cologne, which had been, I'm glad to say, less anti-Semitic, people were not picked up in the middle of the night. They were going to be picked up during the day.

What my father was able to do was contact a physician who had treated him previously for kidney stones, various problems he had had and asked this physician, who was not Jewish, because I don't think the Germans would have believed a Jew to put him back in the hospital. Stay that he had to stay in the hospital, and the doctor agreed and so when the Gestapo came to our house, my mother could say my father was in the hospital. And then again through this bureaucratic mindset that the Germans had they decided that, okay, if he got out by a certain time he could, and just going through my father's old papers today, I found one paper—I don't know when they received it. It's dated the 27th of October 1938 and says in typical German officious language, "Under law such and chapter such and such, you are forbidden to stay any further in Rischovite [PH] within the territory of the Germany Reich. You must leave the Reich immediately. If you do not, you will be literally shoved over the border." [speaks in German] "You will be deported."

But he got this extension and this is dated the 29th of October, 1938 and it says that "In accordance with the law," you know, with the "prohibition of your staying here any longer, you will now be given an extension until the 1st of March 1939," and again it used that language, "If you're not out by then, you will be expelled or deported." So then the problem became where do you go? It was not easy. Many people had wanted to get out and actually, I understand had already earlier in 1937 applied for an American visa and under the quota system, my father being eligible only under the Polish quota, or Russian quota, I'm not sure which, would have had a long wait. He was on a waiting list. My mother and I were eligible under the German quota, because even though we were Polish citizens, the US went by country of birth.

LEVINE: Oh.

SCHIFFRES: And my mother and I could have, I understand, gotten a visa already, but my mother did not want to leave without my father. So the

question is then where could you go? Very few countries let anyone in. My father had a brother in Belgium and so he was able to get a visa to visit his brother, but what's interesting too is that he could not get a visa to bring his wife and child along because I'm sure the Belgians knew or all these governments knew that if you brought your whole family, you were likely to stay there. You know, not just a short visit. So my mother luckily had a brother in Holland, and the same thing, she got a visa to visit her brother in Holland, and my mother and I went to Holland. The one thing I remember from some biographical material that I wrote as a child is that we were searched, you know, and actually stripped naked by the Nazis. I don't know what they expected to find, you know.

LEVINE: Oh, wow. This is a composition you wrote—

SCHIFFRES: Well, this is interesting. My mother must have kept this. I found that. This was written September 1942 when I'd been in this country for only a year and a half and I was in the seventh grade. I was asked apparently to write an autobiography and I don't know why I have this topic. Perhaps it was a first draft. My vocabulary after a year and a half was fairly good, but my sentence structure was like German. I was thinking like the German, and I wrote in here about how we left for Holland on December 10th, 1939. I'll quote you, show you the English I wrote as an eleven year old. "That night when I and my mother came with the train to Calcunkilshun [PH], the German town at the Dutch border, I was undressed completely by the German official to see if I didn't hide any money. He even looked in my shoes. The same thing was done with my mother by a woman in another room. After we also passed the Dutch officials, we went to Rotterdam, where we stayed for four weeks."

Now, what I did not put in there because I guess as an eleven year old new in the country, a twelve year old, I was afraid to mention anything that might have been considered illegal at the time. Basically, my mother and I were smuggled across the Dutch Belgian border, which is something like the US-Canadian border. I mean it was a very open border, but somebody had to be paid to say that we were his wife and child, you know, and take us across the border so we could be reunited with my father in Belgium.

At that time we settled in Spa, which was a resort time. Famous, you know, the word spa, everything, which is quite close to the German border. Why they settled there, I'm not sure. Maybe there was a feeling that some day we'd be able to, you know, go back home. So we were in Spa from about January of 1939 until September because in September the war broke out. Now, the war at that time did not affect Belgium yet, but of course people were very nervous, getting close to the German border. So we moved to Antwerp with my

uncle. I think one reason we had stayed in Spa is that my father did not want to be dependent on his brother. So we moved to Antwerp with my uncle and so we were in Antwerp until September of '39 until May of 1940. May 10th, 1940 the German armies invaded Belgium, Holland and Luxembourg.

Immediately—let's see if I have that. Oh—well, apparently my parents had some friends in Belgium in Antwerp who had a car, which we did not have, and you know, knowing what it could be like after the way we'd left Germany, what it would mean if the Germans over ran Belgium, we left immediately to try to get to France. When we got to the town of Latand [PH], which is right on the Belgian French border by the ocean, there was a rule there that Dutch, French, Belgians and English could pass into France because these were considered allies. We were Poles, so there was some doubt about it. After about a week they changed their mind and decided that Poles, after all, were also allies and we could cross. But the people in whose car we had been were not Poles. They were what the Germans called Schttattenlose. They had revoked the citizenship of German Jews and made them stateless. So they were nothing, as far as the authorities were concerned.

So as I wrote here, that evening we passed the French border with no more than two small suitcases because we had to leave behind in the car. The next day, we were crowded onto a truck. By now the French were trying to do something about all these refugees who were assembling there, and we were taken to Dunkirk. We stayed about two hours in Dunkirk. This is of course the city famous for the evacuation of the British just a few days later. Then they put us on a bus to Calais. From Calais we tried to get to Paris and a train that usually takes five hours took about thirty hours because of the bombing overhead.

Well, I don't want to go into too much detail, but we went—you know, we stayed in Paris for two and a half days and again people were nervous because we knew Paris was going to fall to the Germans. We got on the train to Bordeaux, which of course is further south in France and there my parents took a furnished room and we lived there for four weeks. Again, people are always thinking, "Maybe we can stay here." Of course, in the meantime the Germans took Paris and then they decided to advance down the coast towards Bordeaux.

On June 21st, as the Germans were nearing Bordeaux, we got on a train to Andynr, which is a French town on the Spanish border. We later heard this was literally the last train to get out of Bordeaux, and what was especially moving to me, last year for the first time I was back in France and when we were in Bordeaux, we walked over to the synagogue and on the outside of the synagogue there was a plaque with several hundred names of Jews who had been members

of that congregation who had been deported to concentration camps by the Nazis. So we were so lucky to get out of there, because I guess having already been refugees, we knew that we had to get going. Whereas the average person, you know, stayed hoping something would happen.

Anyway, everybody was heading for the French-Spanish border at Andyne. Of course, the Spaniards were not anxious to let all these refugees across. So then we went onto another couple places. It was a long story. We finally got to Marseilles and we stayed there for two months. Now, in Marseilles, I even mention I went back to school for eight days. Again, I don't explain how we got out of Marseilles in this little composition, but what happened is people were nervous and rightly so, because although the Vichy government theoretically was independent of the Nazi government, they did cooperate and eventually rounded up Jews. So most people at that time at least wanted to get to Portugal, which was neutral.

How do you get to Portugal? You have to have a visa to another country beyond, so that the Portuguese would give you a transit visa to let you pass. Luckily, and to their great credit the Dutch, who of course Holland had been conquered, but the Dutch government in exile authorized its consulate in Marseilles to give people visas to the Dutch East Indies, what is now Indonesia, knowing very well that very few people had any intention of going to the Dutch East Indies. But once you had that, you could go to the Portuguese. They would give you a transit visa. Then you went to the Spaniards and they would give you permission to cross Spain.

So by that system we finally managed to get to Portugal.

LEVINE: Now, have you become—what was your family's relationship to the Dutch when you were there? What was your status?

SCHIFFRES: To the Dutch?

LEVINE: To the—

SCHIFFRES: None really.

LEVINE: You didn't have any. So the fact that they did this—

SCHIFFRES: No, apparently—I'm not sure exactly. As I say, I was only ten years old and I heard these stories later, but apparently the Dutch, anybody who came in and said "We want to go to the Dutch East Indies," or maybe you know it was refugees and that they were using this way to help out.

LEVINE: So you didn't have to have a connection?

SCHIFFRES: No, not at all. Now, I Portugal, of course we know by hindsight that Portugal stayed neutral throughout the war, but people were very nervous because the general theory at that time was that Franco, Francisco Franco, the Spanish dictator who had been helped by Hitler and Mussolini was going to, you know, team up with them and he would probably over run Portugal. So people were quite anxious to get out of Portugal.

Again, as I mentioned, we couldn't get to the United States yet. We didn't have a visa, but there various countries, Latin American countries that were offering visas. I can't say for sure whether this was done just out of generosity or sometimes it was done for money. I don't know what it was in our circumstance, but my parents were able to get a visa to Ecuador and with that visa, they were given a transit visa to go to the United States, just to come here supposedly and then transfer I guess to another ship. I don't think people flew much in those days.

LEVINE: No.

SCHIFFRES: To go on to Ecuador. Now, when we got to the United Stats, because we did not have a permanent immigration visa, but were only in transit, we were immediately taken off the ship and sent to Ellis Island. Apparently, the rule was that, you know, if they let us off the ship, we could just disappear into the crowd, you might say. In a sense, we would have been like illegal immigrants today, but we had the transit visa. In order to permit us to get off Ellis Island into New York itself, I guess my parents had to prove that, you know, somebody would be responsible for us, and years earlier, already when they applied for a visa to the United States, they had contacted a cousin in the US. At that time it was required to have an affidavit from someone that you would, you know, not become a public charge and so on. And for reasons that I'm not completely clear on, it took about a week to do this paperwork, to find this fellow and, you know, to have him guarantee that he would be responsible for us. So we were kept on Ellis Island for a whole week before we were let off.

Possibly a little longer than necessary because the story we were told is that although we have always spelled our name the way it is now, S-C-H-I-F-F-R-E-S, my father, even since he came to Germany spelled it that way. When he went to the Polish consulate about six, seven years after he arrived in—no, it was about ten years after he arrived in Cologne, they gave him a Polish passport and they wrote it S-Z-Y-F-R-E-S, which is the Polish spelling pronounced Schiffres, but it's a Polish spelling. Well, the story we heard is that at Ellis Island over the loudspeaker they kept calling Cypress, which is the way they

would pronounce S-Z-Y-F-R-E-S, and of course my parents did not react to Cypress. They had never heard that name before.

LEVINE: So you might have been released earlier?

SCHIFFRES: I don't know. Apparently, it took an extra day until they finally caught up with us. Then, again, even though I'm a lawyer, I'm not quite sure of the exact legal process, but perhaps because it was wartime, and the Ecuadorian visa expired somehow, we were permitted to stay as visitors. There was a second stage. First there's the transit visa, then comes the visitor's visa, and this visitor's visa was extended often enough—I think it was six months each time—until November of 1942. That's a year and a half after we arrived and by that time, my father had become eligible under the quota system to become, you know, a regular legal immigrant.

LEVINE: As a Pole?

SCHIFFRES: As a Pole, and under the bureaucracy of our government, I as a lawyer am not crazy about, you have to leave the country in order to enter it legally. So one fine day, took a day off from school, my father took a day off from work. We took a train for Detroit. Took a bus to Windsor, Ontario, went to the American Consulate. Got the official paper stamped, went back. –

LEVINE: You were citizens.

SCHIFFRES: Back to Detroit, back on the next train to New York. Legal immigrant. Citizenship comes five years later. So basically I don't have too much memories of Ellis Island, that week we spent there. I do remember that I guess they had some kind of segregated dorms for men and women so that my father and I were together, but my mother was somewhere else. That's really I remember about the Ellis Island part of it.

LEVINE: Do you remember if you were treated well or do you have any sense of the feeling of the place?

SCHIFFRES: No, not—

LEVINE: Just as a child.

SCHIFFRES: What's fascinating to me is that this little—it's not so little—eight page biography that I wrote in 1942, that it does not mention certain things. Like, I don't know if I was embarrassed by it or not, because let me just read to you. "We finally"—this is in Portugal. "We finally got our visa

and ship tickets and on March 15th onboard the Serpa Pinto, we departed from Portugal. The ship was filled to the brim, and we slept in a large room without windows." In other words—

LEVINE: Steerage.

SCHIFFRES: Well, it was worse than steerage. This gives you an idea of the sentence structure I was using at the time. "In which, as I with my own eyes saw, on the return trip automobiles were loaded." We were waiting on deck to be taken to Ellis Island and we saw cars being loaded into this area where we had slept. "I and my father slept together with a hundred and thirty men and my mother with sixty women. For all this we paid, as in regular times you would pay for a first class cabin." I don't know if that's quite accurate but my parents, thank God, did have money. It was not a question of money. You just could not buy the space.

The ship was held in three days in Bermuda by the British Authorities, who were looking for, I don't know, contraband or spies or something. The result was that a normal ship's journey from Portugal to New York should take six days, it took fifteen days because also with submarine warfare at the time, it was very slow. And this is—pardon, this is a twelve year olds' writing. "Finally, after sailing fifteen days on the Atlantic Ocean, we saw the Statue that all free loving people like to see, the Statue of Liberty."

So I didn't say anything here about Ellis Island, interesting. Maybe I was a little embarrassed, you know, writing this in school. Then I mentioned how in a year and a half, in the good old days when they didn't have bilingual education, they started me in first grade and within a year and a half I progressed through all the grades until I caught up with my age group in the seventh grade.

LEVINE: Wow. You know, that—a copy of that autobiography would be just wonderful.

SCHIFFRES: Yeah.

LEVINE: On record.

SCHIFFRES: Right, as I said, it's not complete. I also have, and this is the most frustrating thing. Written in German, I don't know when, but it must have been written after we got to the US, but it starts—this is really funny, it starts, "Fifth part [speaks German." First chapter, The Departure from Lisbon. Fifty part, makes me think that I must have written a whole bunch of stuff before this and I couldn't have been more than ten years old when I wrote this, but I have no recollection of it.

LEVINE: Well, you've been a writer in your later life, right?

SCHIFFRES: Yeah, [reads German]. We had many difficulties in getting the tickets for the ship and—oh, yes, this is interesting. I didn't remember this. It says we had to deposit a thousand dollars in Ecuador. So in other words, in order to—that didn't say that it was payment for the visa, but you had to deposit a thousand dollars that you would get back if you got to Ecuador, and my parents apparently had no great desire at the time to go to Ecuador. Though there were Jewish refugees, I met people later who wound up in Ecuador and Panama and all kinds of Latin American countries. Cuba had quite a few and the Dominican Republic, interestingly. Those two countries took quite a few Jewish refugees during the war when regrettably the US was not that generous.

LEVINE: Yeah. Oh, my goodness. Well, any of those things that you would want any copies on file, we would love to have them.

SCHIFFRES: Hmm. Well, sure. What else—

LEVINE: Just to go back a little bit.

SCHIFFRES: Sure.

LEVINE: Do you remember anything up until the time when the family was essentially uprooted and had to start? Do you remember life in Cologne prior to that?

SCHIFFRES: Yeah. Well, I should mention my mother was one of twelve brothers and sisters. Well, about half lived in Cologne, others in other German cities, and one had moved to Holland, as I mentioned. Life in some sense was not too difficult. If it had been difficult, maybe people would have been more ready to leave. The laws worked in strange ways. I think it was 1935 when the Nazis passed the law saying that among other things Jewish doctors could not treat Arian patients, non-Jewish patients. Same time Jewish people could not hire non-Jewish domestics. You know, all this racial segregation. Because as a youngster my mother had always had—you know, they were fairly well off. Had had, you know, a maid, a full time woman at home who was not Jewish and of course she wasn't allowed to have that anymore. My father was a dentist and both he and some of my uncles who were doctors, didn't really suffer economically because when they were no longer allowed to have non-Jewish patients, the Jews who had been going to non-Jewish doctors now came to them. So my father's dental practice was, you know, we quite well to do until we left.

In fact, the Kristallnacht, which everybody knows about, you know, in a way was caused by this Polish deportation that I mentioned because what happened, there was a young man in France—what was his name? Greenspan, I think, who was so infuriated when he heard that his Jewish parents had been deported to Poland from Germany—he was in France already—that he went and he killed this official at the German Embassy in Paris, which the Germans then used as an excuse for Kristallnacht, for breaking into stores and burning synagogues. Interestingly, my father, who had a dental practice, an office, at the time this was not broken into because the landlord said, "Well, he's already left. He's gone," which wasn't true, and so you know—but, you know, life had not been that terrible in a way.

Cologne was one of the better cities to live in at the time. When we went back to Cologne a few years ago, they were very proud about two things. Number one, Cologne was the city Hitler least liked to visit because he didn't get enough adulation there and that the Mayor of Cologne, until he was thrown out by the Nazis was Comrade Adenauer, who later became the first Chancellor of post war Germany. The Nazis, in fact, in the last free election in Cologne did not do very well. They came in like fourth of fifth, which in a way made people complacent and they had not been anxious to leave.

One uncle, my mother's brother who was a physician, been an active Zionist. He had wanted to go to Palestine and in the 1930s, '36 I think, he actually went by himself to what we then called Palestine to Tel Aviv to, you know, like a cautious, conservative person to see if this was a good place to bring his family. After that he applied to the British to, you know, what they called a license, I think like a visa, which was also difficult to obtain. They finally got permission to take his family to Palestine in 1938. Actually, 1939, excuse me, and he went to Holland first because in Holland they had arranged to leave by ship from Rotterdam. The Nazis marched into Holland before the ship was due to leave and we know that that whole family wound up in Bergen-Belsen because two of their children survived. Bergen-Belsen was a camp where most of the people died of malnutrition and, you know, disease, not of gas chambers.

And one sister of my mother's got out in early 1939 to England. She was an unmarried sister, but basically all the others perished in the concentration camps in Germany, some ten brothers and sisters and their wives and most of their children. A few children got out. So, you know, some people did want to get out, but it was not easy. There were very few places, you know, that would take you. Now, how many except for this one uncle, how many others had made attempts to leave, I have no idea. I just don't know.

But as I said, I remember one anti-Semitic incident where some kids beat me up on the street when I was about seven years old. However, I was also beaten up once in New York City when I was

eleven years old. [Laughs] In an Irish Catholic neighborhood, you'll pardon my saying so. So that was not anything that unusual and as a child I really didn't notice too much because what happened ironically is the Nazis set up a segregated school system for Jews and non Jews, but those who could afford it, would not send their children to the so-called state run Jewish school, but would send them to a private school, which was run, you know, like a Jewish day school and that's what I went to.

LEVINE: And that was Jewish.

SCHIFFRES: Yeah, run by Jewish people, just like a Jewish day school would be today. So in terms of going to school, you know, I really did not have any great feeling of hardship at the time.

END OF SIDE A
BEGIN SIDE B

LEVINE: Was your family particularly religious?

SCHIFFRES: I guess by American standards, you would call it Modern Orthodox. You know, observed the Sabbath and observed the dietary laws and went to synagogue quite regularly. In fact, my grandfather was very religious. My mother's father, who lived in Cologne until 1938. In fact, what's interesting too, what must have given people a good scare, I don't know how generally known this is. At the time of Kristallnacht, not only was there this destruction but the Nazis arrested what they considered Jewish community leaders and two of my mother's brothers were arrested. Ironically, they had both served in the Germany army during World War I, and many Jewish people felt, "After all, we're veterans. Germans. Good Germans. How could this happen to us?" The two brothers were both physicians. One was the man I just mentioned who tried to get to Palestine and his brother. They were both sentenced to Dachau in November of 1938 and they were let out after about six weeks.

LEVINE: Because they had been in the army?

SCHIFFRES: I don't think so. I think a lot of these people were let out. I'm not sure. I haven't done the research on that, whether it was just to scare the Jewish community. I mean this was a period I know different authors will argue about this, whether there was a plan to kill all the Jews at this time or just to get rid of them in some way, push them out, you know. So it was after that six week period that my uncle was still able to, you know, to get to Holland. Regrettably, their father, my

grandfather died during the period that they were in Dachau, during that short period. In fact, he died on December 1st and we had to leave on December 10th, barely after he had died. He was in his eighties, but it was quite a shock to him.

LEVINE: Do you remember him, as a boy?

SCHIFFRES: Yes, I do. Yes, he was a real patriarchal type, you know, with a long beard. He was a very learned, religious man and his wife, my grandmother, was a very tiny woman. Unbelievable. She gave birth to fourteen children, only one of whom died in childhood and one as a young woman. So as I said, there were still twelve living that I remember. She managed to live on until 1942 and die in Cologne before the last Jews were deported from Cologne, but we only heard that later. So that must have been very tough on her because by that time a number of her children had already been deported to camps and elsewhere.

LEVINE: And then do you remember your mother and father talking about this afterwards? I mean about particularly fleeing and all the different places that you—

SCHIFFRES: Well, I sometimes say I wonder how much I remember from my own or remember from hearing from my parents later. Though I don't think we talked too much about it, but I know it was—you know, it was a very difficult period and my mother was the moving force. Always said, "No, we can't stay here. We've got to go on," you know, because so many people figured, "Well, we could stay." In fact, there was one incident I didn't mention after the French were trying to make some order of this chaos of all these refugees in Southern France. After we left Andyne near the Spanish border, we were put on a bus and the bus took us out to some little village in the country and they announced that the people living in the village, the farmers and so on, were willing to take in people, and you know, we could get off the bus and stay with these people and we would be well taken care of. Most of the people on the bus were quite complacent, willing to do that and my mother said, "I'm not getting off this bus because if we get off and we wind up in this little God forsaken town where we don't have train or bus transportation or anything, one day they're going to come and round us up," which was true. And that's what happened to most of those people. She refused to go, so we went back.

They took us back to Toulouse, larger city and they put us in a movie theater over night. There was no place else, you know, there were so many refugees. Now, they put us in this movie theater and like about six o'clock in the morning, my mother woke us up and she says, "Let's sneak out the side door of the movie theater, because if

we stay here, who knows, they'll round us up, where they'll send us." And we got out and we got on the train to Marseilles and as I say, in Marseilles we managed to stay for two months until we got the visas to leave there. So there were several very close calls.

LEVINE: It sounds like she had the right instincts all the way.

SCHIFFRES: Yeah. In fact, I remember in Bordeaux it was very interesting. When we came to Bordeaux, someone recommended there was a nice beach town maybe, I don't know, twenty, thirty miles away, Rouen. Why don't you take a summer cottage there, you know. This is in June and my mother said, "No, no, no. I want to stay near downtown, near the railroad station," because that was the lifeline in those days, of course. It was the only way you knew that you could get out of town.

LEVINE: Wow. So in later years, it was not talked about that much? It was—I know with the Holocaust survivors often they didn't speak about it.

SCHIFFRES: Yeah. Well, you know, thank God we were not survivors in that sense.

LEVINE: Right, I know.

SCHIFFRES: We never went through that, but no. You know, that really is not the kind of thing you rehash. I mean I've told my wife. I've told my kids. You know, it's come up in conversations.

LEVINE: How do you think it affected you? Do you have any sense of how that whole ordeal played itself in your later life?

SCHIFFRES: That's an interesting question. I don't know. I think it was an awkward age at which to arrive. As I say, in those days they took a ten year old and put him in the first grade. Within a couple of years I caught up to my age group, but still my English was somewhat awkward. It's probably difficult to make friends at that time and I was probably a little socially inept for a few years.

LEVINE: You were also probably old beyond your years, I would think.

SCHIFFRES: Then going to an all boys high school probably didn't help. [Laughs] But, no, otherwise I certainly got in—I don't think it really affected me. I got very involved in organizations, even I remember I helped organize a youth group in our synagogue and then when I went off to college, I became eventually president of the student government at City College and so on, and went on to Harvard Law School. So obviously by that time I didn't have—but I think that was true of many of the refugees. That in a way it's like today they say the Asian kids come over and

they do very well in school and at that time—it was funny. I was in junior high school and they already kept grade point averages, which I think is foolish to do in junior high school. So when we graduated in ninth grade, I knew I had the second best average in school and the girl who had the best average was also a refugee from Belgium who had arrived, you know, about the same time. So somehow we—I don't know whether we had the incentive or we were pushed at home to do very well.

LEVINE: Do you feel that was true? That it was even more important to achieve somehow because you had been through that?

SCHIFFRES: Yeah, and we had to prove, you know, that we were as good as the American kids. So—and luckily I think in terms of alter adjustment, I lost my foreign accent. I've been told I don't sound very different from any other American, whereas, you know, some kids even at that age, who came over always retained a foreign accent.

LEVINE: Was that purposeful or it just so happened.

SCHIFFRES: No, it just so happened.

LEVINE: Happened that way.

SCHIFFRES: I think I have a good ear for language. I had learned French and some people, they joke about Henry Kissinger. I mean, who never lost his accent, but he was a little older. He was fourteen when he came to this country and it makes a difference. There are certain ages where you can still adjust.

LEVINE: So your uncle—your uncle said that he would make sure that you were not public charges?

SCHIFFRES: Oh, no, that was a cousin. That was just a cousin. There was no very close relative in this country. No, the uncle I mentioned was the one in Belgium who helped us get—because he lived in Belgium, we were able to go to Belgium.

LEVINE: Right. So then when you went, you came here, your cousin was the one on 95th Street? No, that's Bronx. He was in the Bronx?

SCHIFFRES: No. No, as a matter of fact, I think he lived in Brooklyn. We didn't even—I mean, it was just a paper thing. He had to certify that we'd be all right, but we stayed with some other people that my parents knew.

LEVINE: With friends.

SCHIFFRES: Yeah, and then my parents rented a furnished apartment and, you know, within a year they bought their own furniture and moved into a regular apartment.

LEVINE: So were you growing—well, after you got here, were you in the Upper West Side for a period of time?

SCHIFFRES: Oh, yes. We lived on 97th Street. You know, all through college I lived there, and my parents continued to live there until my father passed away in the late '60s.

LEVINE: Well, maybe we could talk something about City College at that time. That was such a really boom time.

SCHIFFRES: Yeah, yeah. Well, I came to City College in 1948 from Styverson [PH] High School and it was a very substantial number of Jewish kids. I think that was the predominant group there, and it was a very challenging school. I suspect one reason that I got very active in Hillel, which is the Jewish students' organization is I think by that age you really need to go away from home for awhile. Like kids go away to college, but of course being at City College, I still lived at home and my parents would complain about the hours that I spent at Hillel that I should be spending at home doing homework, you know. From Hillel it went onto Student Council and, as I said, I ran for various offices there and wound up as president of the Student Council the year I graduated.

LEVINE: Popular, also. I mean, you must have been well-liked.

SCHIFFRES: I guess so, because I was president of Hillel first and then president of Student Council. Yeah, I mean—but, you know, there were many refugees there and I don't think that mattered. There's certainly no discrimination against them. In those days at City College they were not treated any differently from other students.

LEVINE: Were you struck at all when you got to this country with the large mix of people from different places that were here? Or wasn't that something that—I would imagine in Cologne it wasn't that way.

SCHIFFRES: Well, I'd already been so used to, you know, different mixes. It's fascinating, in a way how my schooling was often interrupted and yet I managed to learn. When we went to Belgium my parents put me in a Jewish day school where we learned in French, as well as learning Hebrew and Jewish subjects. In Marseilles I even went to school for a little while. When we got to Portugal, it was very interesting. By that

time there were so many refugees different kinds, that they no longer sent their kids to the public school because they really felt, "Well, we're not going to be in Portugal forever, what's the point of the kids, you know, being educated in Portuguese." So the refugees had set up their own school in which classes were taught in English and French, in German. Hebrew classes, you know, and everything, and I went there. I seem to remember only by retelling that I did learn to speak Portuguese enough to make myself understood, though I don't remember a word of it now because we were only there for a half a year.

So we were used to a great mix of people, so when we came—when we lived on the West Side, as a matter of fact, again it was that particular area had a lot of Jewish refugees from Germany, from Belgium, from France, you know, that I met in school. It's interesting, the junior high school I went to, Joan of Arc on 93rd Street at that time, I think tended to be to a very larger percentage Jewish and the main reason is that a couple of blocks away there was a parochial school and all the Irish and Italians went to the parochial school in those days. So you had a sort of unplanned segregation, I think.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh, so then from City College you went to Harvard?

SCHIFFRES: Harvard Law School.

LEVINE: Right off?

SCHIFFRES: Oh, yeah, sure. Sure.

LEVINE: Right away, and were you married at some point in there?

SCHIFFRES: Well, we married—yes, we met at City College and we got married after my first year at law school.

LEVINE: And who—what is your wife's name?

SCHIFFRES: My wife's name is Mimi, M-I-M-I.

LEVINE: And her maiden name?

SCHIFFRES: Gelman, G-E-L-M-A-N. She was born in the Bronx of parents who had come from Poland and interestingly, too, you know, the different—I don't know if they came through Ellis Island. I know they came over in the 1920s. The different language background. My wife tells me that for the first few years of her life she only knew Yiddish because her parents only spoke Yiddish, but of course in the streets she learned

English, and so you know, once she went to school she had no problem.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, and did you have children?

SCHIFFRES: Oh, yes. Yeah.

LEVINE: And their names?

SCHIFFRES: My daughter Debbie is thirty-six and she's got four children of her own, lives in Syracuse, and my son Jeremy is thirty-three and lives in Kingston, New York, and he's got one child. So they're all American born, though it's strange in a way. My daughter married a young man, Neil Rosenbaum, both of whose parents were born in Germany. So it's sort of like a connection there.

LEVINE: Yeah. Did anybody in the family ever go back?

SCHIFFRES: Well, I know my parents went back to Germany back in the—I think it was in the '60s, late '50s, early '60s, especially to straighten something out about these reparation laws so that, you know, they could obtain some payments because my father had been a dentist in Germany and under the post war reparation laws, he was entitled to a certain amount of compensation. I did not go back to Cologne until 1992, four years ago. It was the first time I was back.

LEVINE: What was it like for you?

SCHIFFRES: In fact, my wife was very reluctant to go to Germany, but we had a trip to Switzerland planned, so we took four days in Cologne. Well, it was rather strange. I went back to the place where we had lived, but I knew already from my parents that the building which we had lived had been completely bombed during World War II, and there were now some new apartments. So that had no real connection or meaning. I did go back to the synagogue where we had gone which is the one synagogue that was not completely destroyed during the war and then was rebuilt later and is now a functioning synagogue in Cologne.

LEVINE: What's the name of that?

SCHIFFRES: I don't know if they have a specific name. It's just the—Geminda [PH] they call it, the Kuna Geminda [PH], the Synagogue of Cologne and that was moving. There was a woman we met there, she and her husband, who was a Protestant pastor, had been very active in trying to what they call reconciliation between Jews and Christians. They had worked on this many years and she was very helpful taking me

back to the school or at least a marker where the school had been that I had gone to. Her husband at that time—he's now passed away—Korba [PH] was his name. He had really taken an interest in what had happened to the Jews of Cologne and he had even gone to the trouble—at that time he wasn't there because he had gone to Minsk in Russia, Belarus, rather, because the last train of Jews deported from Cologne had been sent to Minsk, and these people had been taken out into a forest and shot. They hadn't even been sent to concentration camps, and he had, you know, written about this to show what had happened to the Cologne Jews.

Of course, that was very moving, but the congregation was sort of strange to me because the Jews in Cologne today are a mixture of a very few who came back after the war descended, some Israelis who have settled there and do business there. Some Russian Jews who have come, you know, in recent years, just like they've come to this country. So—

LEVINE: Did your father—did he work as a dentist once he go to this country?

SCHIFFRES: No, as a matter of fact, because under the rules at the time, he would have had to go back to college and prove he had a university degree and then a dental degree. First, he would have had to acquire the knowledge of English just to do that, and so he didn't do that. He set up a dental laboratory because he also knew that and for that you didn't, you know, need the same kind of licensing, and he worked in that for a number of years, and then he got into another business.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So it really affected him. I mean, at least professionally.

SCHIFFRES: Yeah, yeah, and he adjusted better, though, in a way because he had to be among people and he picked up English fairly well. My mother never really felt comfortable in English. I mean, we came in 1941. She passed away in 1979. We always spoke German to each other, which helped me keep my knowledge of German, to some extent, because she really never got comfortable in English. You know, she moved in a very limited circle of friends who were also, you know, refugee or immigrant families.

LEVINE: And they became citizens after they were here for—

SCHIFFRES: Oh, yeah, they become citizens, you know, about five years after we got to the US, and so did I.

LEVINE: Was there ever a question of not settling here, but some place else?

SCHIFFRES: No, I don't think so.

LEVINE: They wanted to—

SCHIFFRES: No. I never heard any discussion of, you know, of going anywhere else. I mean they visited Israel a couple of times because we had relatives there. One of the ironies to me of the 1930s is that the Jews in Poland in a lot of ways were treated worse than the Jews in Germany until the very end. The last few years of Nazis, of course, were very bad, but the Jews in Poland had suffered a lot of anti-Semitism, both economic and otherwise and so my father's family, quite a few of his relatives and my wife's parents' family, quite a few of her relatives, left for Israel, for Palestine in the '20s and so we have relatives there. Whereas, the ones from Germany did not go. So, as I say, my parents visited cousins in Israel or nephews and nieces of theirs in Israel. But I don't think they ever, you know, expressed any desire to settle there or anywhere else.

LEVINE: Well, what were their attitudes about being American? Did they feel they were American?

SCHIFFRES: Oh, yes, very much so. I think so because I remember in 1948, which was the first time they could vote for President, and I was—you know, an eighteen year old of course is a wise guy. He knows everything. I'd been studying at school and I told them who I thought they should vote for and I was somewhat enamored at the time with Henry Wallace, who was later considered pro-Communist, though we didn't think so. He was sort of a left wing and, you know, they got tired of me arguing with them and said, "Oh, yeah, sure, sure, we'll vote for Wallace." Then later they said, "No, we voted for Harry Truman." But, no, I think they certainly took seriously being American citizens and you know, grateful that they were able to live here.

LEVINE: Yeah. I don't know, this may be a peculiar question, but how do you feel about sort of the average German? I mean, not officials or Nazis, but how has this colored your contacts with Germans or your attitudes? You've been through such a horrendous ordeal.

SCHIFFRES: Yeah. Well, I have mixed feelings. Again, it may be colored somewhat by what happened in Cologne. When we were in Cologne, it was very interesting. I saw graffiti on one wall, the only graffiti I saw, and it was in two handwritings, which is very significant because the first one said "[German]", defend yourselves and this had been used by the Nazis as "Defend yourself against the Jews," you know, watch out against those Jews. So somebody had written [German], and on the next panel someone had written in a different handwriting [German] Nazis, "Defend yourselves against Nazis." I think in a lot of ways the

Germans are more conscious of what anti-Semitism can do and they fight it more today than perhaps some of the Slavic countries in Russia and the stories I've heard of some of the other former communist countries where, you know, now that everything is supposedly free, you can be free to be anti-Semitic, too. I'm sure there are still anti-Semites in Germany. Every once in a while we do hear of incidents, but hopefully it's no worse than elsewhere, and I don't feel I can hold this generation, you know, responsible for what happened in earlier generations. Though, if one meets older people, one always wonders, you know, where we were they back then. You know, where did they stand?

LEVINE: And I suppose maybe because you're so knowledgeable about this, the idea that an average German could become a Nazi, given the whole—the whole, what do I want to say?

SCHIFFRES: You mean the history of—

LEVINE: Yeah, given the—oh, I can't think of the word. The propaganda that was given against the Jews, and—

SCHIFFRES: Yeah. The one thing that bothers me is that it seems that German mentality, something about Germans is that they have always been more ready to follow the rules, which sounds good on the surface, but to follow the leadership. I think the French, the Spanish, the Italian, are something more relaxed about them. They don't do write away what's told to them, so if you have dangerous leadership, as you had with Hitler, it was easier for them to follow. I think Italy proves that in a way because Mussolini's attitudes were somewhat similar to Hitler's and yet I don't think the Italian people were as ready to follow that. So I think Germans do tend to have a little too much of this discipline and to use that as an excuse. You know, "We were told we had to do this, therefore we did it."

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. How do you feel about your life, looking back on it, as far as any particular moments of satisfaction or are there any particular highlights that you feel very proud about or good about?

SCHIFFRES: Well, as I said, I worked for over thirty years in a rather esoteric legal publishing, legal research and editing of legal articles and before my retirement, my final position was as editor of American Jurisprudence. American Jurisprudence is to lawyers somewhat like the Encyclopedia Britannica is to the general public. It's a tool, a hundred volume encyclopedia for general research. I thought the fact that, you know, I didn't speak a word of English until I was ten years old and that I was able to edit, you know, a leading legal publication like that is something

I can be relatively proud of. And as I say, I have a very nice family, two children, five grandchildren and so I have no complaints. [Laughs]

LEVINE: Okay. Well, is there anything else you can think of about either immigrating to this country or your particular experience, looking back on it now, that you'd like to mention before we close?

SCHIFFRES: No. I don't know if my life might have been different if I'd gone away to college. I had an interesting experience when I was at Styverson [PH] High School. In those days I think the—what do you call it? The counselors who advise you where to go to college, it was a lot less organized that it is today and I was frankly looking for a scholarship because, you know, money was very scarce at that time, after we got to this country. I was told, "Well, there is this brand new school that's opening in September, but we can't guarantee whether it will ever be accredited or it will be a good school. We can get you a scholarship there." That was Brandeis University, which I think is well known now. So I decided, no, that was too risky, so they had just taken over the campus of a veterinarian school in Waltham, Mass. So instead, I went to City College in New York. I had been admitted to NYU, too, but again City College was the only one that was tuition free, and even after four years at City College, interestingly, when I applied to law school, I was admitted to Columbia, Harvard, Yale and NYU, the four schools that I applied to and none of them offered me a scholarship at first, so I decided to go to Columbia because I could live at home. It was very close to home, and I sent them my deposit, and after I sent in my deposit, to my great surprise, Harvard notified me that they were giving me a full tuition scholarship, which was the glorious sum of five hundred dollars in those days. So off I went to Harvard and at the end of my first year at Harvard we got married and I brought my wife up there.

So that, you know, but—

LEVINE: Well, your family's finances really did change significantly then.

SCHIFFRES: Yeah, my—I know my parents had some money in Europe and I'm not sure how much they were able to take out. It was enough, you know, to get over here. But I know that a few years after we were here, things were pretty tight and my father was, I think, talked into getting in a business that he really didn't know much about. This was in around '44-45. The embroidery business, which was right across the river in Union City was doing a great job of making military patches, cloth patches that were worn on uniforms. Every unit had a different patch, and that was a great business that lasted about a year until the war was over. [Laughs] So I think he lost his investment in that and I know that for a number of years things were quite tight. Then luckily they did

get some reparations from Germany, which did help out. But, certainly he was never as affluent in this country as he had been in Germany.

LEVINE: Okay. Well—

SCHIFFRES: That's all I can—

LEVINE: I think maybe we've covered this and I want to thank you very much.

SCHIFFRES: Well, you're very welcome.

LEVINE: [unclear] interview of your particular plight.

SCHIFFRES: Yeah, I should have had this Xeroxed. I hate to give—

LEVINE: Well, let me turn this off and then—

SCHIFFRES: Okay.

LEVINE: This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. It's August 15th, 1996. I'm here in Rochester, New York. I've been speaking with Mr. Irwin Schiffres, who came to this country in 1941 fleeing as a refugee from Germany and taking a very circuitous route to this country.

END OF INTERVIEW