

EI-784

FRED NIELSON

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INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE, PH.D.

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DENMARK, 1925

AGE, 9

SHIP: FREDERICK VIII

PORT: COPENHAGEN

RESIDENCES:

- **NORWAY: STABEKK [OSLO]**
- **DENMARK: GEISLING [COPENHAGEN]**
- **US: ROCHESTER, NY**

LEVINE: Okay, we're going to resume again here. I'm talking with Fred Nielson, who came through Ellis Island in 1925, coming from Norway via Denmark. He was born in Norway, although your family was from Denmark originally.

NIELSON: From Denmark, yes.

LEVINE: And today Mr. Nielson is eighty years of age. Today is August 15th, 1996 and this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. Okay, if we could—I'm sorry to do this again.

NIELSON: That's all right.

LEVINE: Could you say again your birth date and where you were born?

NIELSON: Yeah, I was born in Christiania, which was the name of the capital at that time, but it was changed back to Oslo again in 1925 to the original name, which was Oslo. And the reason he did come to Norway, I think, is looking for various opportunities and so on, and there were a lot of opportunities over there. He and his brother both came over at the same time, and both of them with their families and so on.

LEVINE: U-hmm, and what was your father's name?

NIELSON: Jens Karl Nielson, J-E-N-S, which is the equivalent of James and so on now.

LEVINE: And your mother's name?

NIELSON: Ingeborg. She had no middle name at all.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, and her maiden name?

NIELSON: Nielson.

LEVINE: So Nielson was a name on both sides.

NIELSON: Yes, it was. It was a very common name, just like Smith over there, since my mother's mother's name was also Nielson.

LEVINE: Wow, wow. Well, I know people married who were like cousins and things like that. At that time that was not as uncommon as it is today. Were people related within your family that you know of?

NIELSON: No, there was no relations because my father came from one of the islands over there and my mother came from another one.

LEVINE: Yeah. Okay, so your father and his brother then left Denmark and went to Norway.

NIELSON: Norway, yes.

LEVINE: Did they go into business, or what did they do when they—

NIELSON: My father was in the building trade.

LEVINE: Oh, and so the picture that we're putting in your folder of the house, who built that?

NIELSON: My father built that.

LEVINE: Your father built that.

NIELSON: With help of course, yeah.

LEVINE: And that was in Norway?

NIELSON: That was in Norway. In fact, the town that we lived in was right outside of Oslo, called Stabekk.

LEVINE: And so up until the time you went to school, do you remember—well, do you remember what you did for fun or play or—

NIELSON: Oh, we -- children's games, I guess, and so on, and we had a lot of fun because every year we had a pigging. We raised the pig and then it was butchered at the end of the year and raised for meat, and we looked forward to the new one coming every year. And we did a lot of ice skiing in our front yard; you know, down a small hill, a little grade there.

LEVINE: Oh, and about your—you said you remembered your birth of your brother. Do you want to tell about that?

NIELSON: Well, my brother, the day he was born, August 11th, 1919, and I remember being in this garden. Have --yeah, Haven, they called it, were—on that day we were out in the yard and a plane came over and the man who owned this area told us that the plane had brought [chuckles] a brother for me that day.

LEVINE: Wow, and do you remember starting school?

NIELSON: I --vaguely. I don't remember too many of the details, but—

LEVINE: Do you remember anything about school in Norway before you left?

NIELSON: I do vaguely. I'd have 'em --- so--- books. I had them. I gave them to my children to keep. ABC books and so on, and it's very unusual. And both this history book I used in school was the same one my mother did when she went to school.

LEVINE: Wow, huh. So—

NIELSON: What—

LEVINE: Go ahead.

NIELSON: What was unusual, too, there was a book that I had also, Tante Brun, Tante Violet, and Tante Gren. It's Aunt Violet, Aunt Brown and Aunt Green, and so on, and after when we went to Oslo one time, she noticed the same book on display in the windows over there and that was in 1967.

LEVINE: Wow. Huh, huh. Do you—do you remember where you lived when you were in Norway?

NIELSON: Yes. I --

LEVINE: Do you remember?

NIELSON: I remember Stabekk, yes. In fact, I --- my father was in the process of building and I do recall out ---being in the yard many times when he was not on his regular construction work and watching him paint and do various jobs. Feeding the pigs and so on. So that is not—it's a vague remembrance of that.

LEVINE: Yeah. So why did the family then go back to Denmark?

NIELSON: Well, a serious depression came along and that was in 1923. You maybe read, too, that's --- it's the same depression that hit Germany when the mark was almost valueless, and you needed millions of marks just to buy a loaf of bread. But it was so bad and he could not find work any place else. He had to sell the house at auction and all our belongings and then brought us back to Denmark, where he left my mother, brother and I. And that was at her father and mother's house in Giesling [PH]. That was outside of Copenhagen, and we were there nine months and he had earned enough money to send tickets back to us. Fortunately, he was a very good tradesman and he was hired by Stuart and Bennett, the local contractor right away. In fact, he was so good, at that time Stuart and Bennett was rebuilding the storefronts for a small chain store, People's Outfitting Company, and he was sent to various towns throughout the East Coast here for— con---

LEVINE: Construction of these.

NIELSON: Constructing, yeah, building these storefronts and so on. In fact, one year we wer ---in 1929 we were in Cleveland and we saw the National Air Races at that time. We remember seeing Hugo Eckener and so on, in that area. Another year we were up in the Adirondack Mountains, Saranac Lake and spent some time up there. So it was a very interesting thing to be able to travel so many places with him.

LEVINE: Yeah. Do you reme — do you have recollections of living with your grandparents when your father came to this country, but you and your mother and your brother were still in Denmark?

NIELSON: I do remember that, especially of my father's mother's house. There were some very unusual incidents there that I remember quite distinctly.

LEVINE: [softly, in background] Did you really want to-----

NIELSON: We playin' ch--- Well, should I tell this one?

LEVINE: Uh, huh. Yeah.

NIELSON: Playin' ta---We wore wooden shoes all the time. My brother and I, we played tag and tried to catch each other and my grandfather had an area out in the corner of his lot, we were not supposed to go there. When they cleaned out the outside rooms and so on, to — I don't know, to bring them back to shape again so they would be usable. Well, I'll never forget the day that he chased me and I ran up there and sank in about three or four feet of that. So they had a little creek running through there, which I went down and tried to do my best in cleaning it. [Chuckles]

LEVINE [laughs]

NIELS But we do remember his little shop in that house where he was constantly at work making these barrels, butter, for England. That was in English on the staves and so on.

LEVINE: Do you remember how he did them and everything?

NIELSON: Oh, yes.

LEVINE: Could you describe it?

NIELSON: Well, he had a form on which he assembled all the different staves. Then he puts the bands on each, then hammered them into position and so on.

LEVINE: Were you able to help him, or not?

NIELSON: No, we didn't do much help. We did more watching than — and he was also a stamp collector and he's the one that started me on stamp collecting. He had a big box full of stamps and gave them to me, and I still have quite a few of those. Still continuing the hobby. In fact, they

call them philatelists, and I'm such an avid collector, I'm --- they're beginning to call me a 'fatalist.'

LEVINE: [laughs] So let's see. So this was your mother's side?

NIELSON: This was my mother's side, yeah.

LEVINE: And she had—you had some articles on her father.

NIELSON: Yes.

LEVINE: What was that about? Why was he written up in the newspaper?

NIELSON: Oh, he had a very good job in Holbeak and he was in charge, head of the credit union and so on and was very involved in business, as well as at barrel making, which he did at his home. And he did a lot of work in that Copenhagen, he was very important man at that time.

LEVINE: And how about the other set of grandparents, did you see them once you got back?

NIELSON: Oh, yes, I remember him because he was a baker and he would deliver it from his wagon. Many times my brother and I would go with him on a early morning in the back of his bake wagon there and come back late at night in the dark. But we looked forward to the trip on that bake wagon with him. He was sitting up there driving with the horses, and we were back there where the baked goods were carried.

LEVINE: Now, did he actually bake them?

NIELSON: Oh, yes. He had quite a bakery. In fact, Bernice remembers that bakery quite well.

LEVINE: What kind of a man was he, your father's father? How would you describe him as a person?

NIELSON: Well, he was quite a robust fellow, moustache and all. In fact, I have a picture of him over here, if you want to see him.

LEVINE: Oh, okay. [Pause]

NIELSON: And that is—

LEVINE: And your grandmother, do you have memories of her?

- NIELSON: Yes, I remember. She died at an earlier age, but I do remember her vaguely.
- LEVINE: And did you have aunts and uncles around?
- NIELSON: Oh, yes. In Norway we actually had an uncle and a couple of—they had two children, two cousins and we played with them and got together with them quite frequently. But back in Denmark we had relatives living on all of the islands, including the peninsula Jutland and Zealand and all of the various islands.
- LEVINE: Did you get together for particular occasions with the rest of the family?
- NIELSON: Oh, yes, we did and Christmas Eve was very important. It was very—but they had one room set aside that was only opened on very special occasions, but in both of these homes, that was Christmas Eve was the time.
- LEVINE: What happened on Christmas Eve?
- NIELSON: Well, they called it Christmas Eve, *Lille Jul Aften* or Little Christmas Eve, the day before. They had—we'd go to church and come back and have cakes and pies and so on, a little entertainment and the Christmas tree was set up. You can imagine, we never forget those candles being lit on that tree and we could never—we often wondered why they never had any accidents, but we never did with fire starting and so on.
- LEVINE: How were the candles actually attached to the tree?
- NIELSON: There was a little clip, spring clip and in that clip was a circular little area where the candle was put in and to hold it --- the wax in position.
- LEVINE: I bet it was beautiful, though, with the real candles.
- NIELSON: Oh, it was, yeah. But we looked forward to getting home from church on Christmas Eve so we could go in there, and usually what we got, we got an orange and some other little small gift and so on, which was very important to us anyway.
- LEVINE: And how about, were you a religious family?
- NIELSON: Yeah, we were—they were all Lutherans there, but we did attend church quite a bit on Sundays and so on.

LEVINE: And were there any other like ceremonies or rituals, anything that you remember from there, like having to do with birth or death or a wedding or—

NIELSON: Well, in Norway we had what was called *Sydden Mai* that's the 17th of May, and by the way, that's the day one of our granddaughters was married, but that was Norwegian Independence Day and every year there was quite a march through the streets of Oslo, bands playing and so on. The same as you see here on the 4th of July. But that was very important.

LEVINE: And how about in Denmark, were there any occasions that something in particular happened, other than Christmas?

NIELSON: Christmas was the most important thing.

LEVINE: How about birthdays? Was there celebration on a person's birthday?

NIELSON: Well, visits. We did a lot of visiting and traveled in our wooden shoes. We left them at the door and then went in in our stocking feet or maybe slippers or something there. But we did a lot of traveling that way, and I do remember visiting many cousins, aunts, uncles and so on

LEVINE: And you wore wooden shoes all the time?

NIELSON: Wooden, yes.

LEVINE: Was it difficult to walk in them?

NIELSON: No, It wasn't for us. We –

LEVINE: Wasn't for you.

NIELSON: we were used to it.

LEVINE: Yeah, and the house that you lived in, well, I guess in Denmark with your grandparents, did they have like a garden or did they grow food?

NIELSON: Oh, they had gardens, yeah, and they grew quite a few vegetables and so on and raised, most of them, for existence and so on. And there's a habit over there, too, so many of them, if they did not have the land to raise these vegetables, they rented these small plots in various areas in cities where they may have them, and they spent a lot of time in there to watch their ----- take care of their growing vegetables and so on, until harvest time came.

- LEVINE: Was there any to-do when it was harvest time? Did people get together at harvest time at all?
- NIELSON: Not as much as we did here. The family, there was very many family visits, or much family visiting.
- LEVINE: And how about marketing, markets? Were there like times when people brought what they grew into a market?
- NIELSON: Well, I don't remember too much about the shopping, but they did have small boutiques they called them and they did go to the shopping areas to buy food and so on. And they did a lot of baking, too. Most people did.
- LEVINE: Did you have a favorite among the baked things?
- NIELSON: Oh, we liked Danish pastry. The one thing I do remember about Norway, though, was eel fishing. We did a lot of that. The kids liked that. What we would have, we had a fork and a stick taped onto this fork and we'd go through these streams here in the summertime when the streams were quite dry and not much water left, and lift it up, and there would be the eel underneath there. Before it could get away, we would grab that and then bring it home and have fried eel. It was very good.
- LEVINE: Whoa.
- NIELSON: That was very interesting, too. I remember one time when I caught one, it started to get away from the fork, so I held it up to my chest here, you know, to try to catch him, but he got inside of my shirt and that was quite an experience to have a eel wiggling around there now.
- LEVINE: Did you—was there anything to do with fishing in Denmark that you recall?
- NIELSON: Not too much. There was quite a bit of it in Norway. We saw the boats go out on their fishing excursions. In Copenhagen, though, there was one thing that we do remember. There was the Tivoli Gardens. We there --- went there quite frequently and there they had fireworks on important holidays and so on. If you've ever seen Tivoli Gardens, you probably know what it was.
- LEVINE: Did you go there—like would you go there on a Sunday or what would be the—
- NIELSON: Well, any time that there was anything of importance.

- LEVINE: Uh-hmm, wow. And, let's see—so, how far in school did you go when you were back in—when you were in Denmark?
- NIELSON: I tried it grade wise, I don't remember too much, what, actually what grades they were, but we did have—I went to school in both countries, Denmark and Norway.
- LEVINE: So your father came here when you and your mother and brother went back to Denmark?
- NIELSON: Yeah, that was April, 1925 and we came in October that same year.
- LEVINE: I see. Do you remember leaving Denmark to come here?
- NIELSON: Oh, we remember that very well because being my mother's birthday, all our relatives were there to wave goodbye to us and I know as we sailed out of Copenhagen, my brother had one of the sailor cap on him. One of 'em blew --- it blew off into the drink [laughs] and he lost it. When we got to New York, mine blew off. It was a regular cap with SS Frederick VIII band on the sailor cap. We remember those things, though.
- LEVINE: Do you remember anything about the Frederick VIII?
- NIELSON: Oh, yes, we were in the tourist compartment. We could not go up to the upper decks, but I remember that. The dining areas and so on were long tables with a ridge around the table so when we did run into rough weather, the dishes would stay on the table and so on.
- LEVINE: And was the sleeping in like a big dormitory area?
- NIELSON: No, there were hammocks we slept in.
- LEVINE: Oh, hammocks?
- NIELSON: Yeah.
- LEVINE: Were you in cabins or were you all together in one space?
- NIELSON: Well, there were separations in there for various families and so on, but we were close in one basic area for sleeping.
- LEVINE: Did anything happen aboard the ship on this trip that stands out in your mind?

NIELSON: Well, the only thing was going through the North Sea. That was pretty rough at that time. That was a pretty rough area, but we do remember coming into New York, look -- waiting to see the Statue of Liberty.

LEVINE: You knew beforehand?

NIELSON: Oh, yes, we knew. That's what we were looking for.

LEVINE: And what happened when you saw it?

NIELSON: Well, it was a lot of hurrays, hoopla and so on. That's what we were aiming for, was --- come to America, go through Ellis Island and then—

LEVINE: What had you heard about Ellis Island? Had you heard anything before you actually got there?

NIELSON: No, we --- I never knew anything about it, but I realized the importance of it when we did, we went through.

LEVINE: So when you were there, you said you had the examinations. You remember the examination. Do you remember any—

NIELSON: Well, they were mostly medical examinations and they really checked you out quite a bit. No—that was the primary examination that ----

LEVINE: How long did it take for you and your mother and brother.

NIELSON: We were there a total of two days; I think we were there.

LEVINE: So, now, did your father come and meet you? No.

NIELSON: No, he didn't. He met us here in Rochester when we landed, when the train arrived here.

LEVINE: Okay. So do you know why you were detained overnight?

NIELSON: Well, the number of people in there was so great that—

LEVINE: They just couldn't get to everyone?

NIELSON: No, no.

LEVINE: I see. I see. Do you remember anything about the accommodations at Ellis Island or the food or anything?

NIELSON: Well, to me we had no complaints at all. We seemed to have plenty to eat and no objection to any of the food or the care we had.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Now, did your father know when you were going to arrive?

NIELSON: Oh, yes, he's the one that sent the tickets over for us, yeah.

LEVINE: Okay. All right, so he knew. So when you did—when you were examined and you were told you were free to go, what happened then?

NIELSON: Well, they made arrangements for us to --- the train for Rochester.

LEVINE: And then you went to Hoboken for that train?

NIELSON: No, I think there we went to New York. In fact, we have the permit to -- - that we passed the exam in Ellis Island in here some place. Then --- oh, it was in New York I think where we went that time.

LEVINE: Anything that struck you as new and different those first few days or weeks here?

NIELSON: Well, the new and different were that little one dollar package or whatever it was with the rye bread, cheese and so on, and the implements we had to cut that on the train and so on, so we could eat that on our way up here to Rochester.

LEVINE: That was the box—they gave you a box lunch?

NIELSON: Yeah.

LEVINE: At Ellis Island, with that. Uh-huh. Now, could anybody speak English in the family at that time?

NIELSON: No, no one, and what was unusual, too, most of the --- quite a few of the people were Danish, but there were quite a few other nationalities there that we couldn't understand at all.

LEVINE: And were a lot of them on the train going up?

NIELSON: There we were the only ones, as far as I remember. There may have been—there were a few people that were going down to the Penn Yan area, and there may have been a couple of them on there, but I don't remember any contacts with them while we were traveling up here. I guess our main concern was to get here to Rochester to see our father and my aunt and the relatives we had here.

- LEVINE: Well, can you describe what happened when the train did get to Rochester?
- NIELSON: Oh, it was a gala reception, [laughs] I guess.
- LEVINE: And your—well, let's see, you remembered your father because it hadn't been that long.
- NIELSON: Oh, yes, we remembered him quite well.
- LEVINE: Yeah.
- NIELSON: Well, he was quite a man, too. I don't know where we have the picture now, but he was scheduled to go to the Olympics in Stockholm in 1912 as a gymnast, but he never did go, but he was trained for it and ready to go.
- LEVINE: Did he continue any of that here?
- NIELSON: No, not very much so.
- LEVINE: No?
- NIELSON: Primarily carpentry and so on.
- LEVINE: And how about you and your brother, were you athletic? Did you get involved in sports?
- NIELSON: Well, my brother was a horseshoe pitcher in Rochester. Yeah, he did very well. In fact, he was Class B champion for quite a time.
- LEVINE: He was?
- NIELSON: And he did go into the service. I didn't.
- LEVINE: Oh, how was it that you didn't have to?
- NIELSON: Oh, the reason I didn't, I was registered in a very large board and my number in the draft in Washington, out of the nine thousand numbers drawn, mine was the eight thousand eight hundred and forty-fifth number that was pulled out of the — and our daughter was born before Pearl Harbor and I was in Kodak, where I had an occupational deferment because of the work I was doing. So my name did not come up till almost the end of the war. I wanted to enlist, but in Kodak there were quite a few naval people in there for training, film

processing and so on, and they told me, "Don't enlist. Wait until you're called." So that was one reason I did wait. I did take my physical, passed it in 1945 when I was called, and the war in Europe ended and I was never called.

END OF SIDE A BEGIN SIDE B

LEVINE: What were you doing at Kodak that it was a deferment?

NIELSON: Well, what I was doing, I was working in the Photographic Technology Division. I went in Kodak without any formal education, but they treated me very well. In fact, when I graduated from high school, I did it in three years, and when I graduated, people from MIT there, they said if you had enough money to pay your board for the first year, we would give you a scholarship. But they --- we didn't have that money. My father didn't --- was not able to pay for a college education, and I didn't get a chance to really work for it either, because I was put on trick work. Changing so much that ---- It was during rough times, Depression and it was hard to get a job, but they treated me well in Kodak. I know when ----I was there forty-two and a half years, and when I did retire, I was on salaried payroll and very fortunate to have been with such a company as Kodak.

LEVINE: Can you remember Kodak—

NIELSON: Oh, very well, yeah.

LEVINE: In the old days and how

NIELSON: Oh, yes, I remem ---

LEVINE: some of the changes that happened?

NIELSON: Oh, yeah, I remember all the changes. In fact, I remember the day I was hired. They took me into a building to show me around and there was Bernice, that same department. She had been working there.

LEVINE: So did you like her immediately?

NIELSON: Well, yeah, I guess she was all right. She

BOTH: [laugh]

NIELSON: —but our meeting was very unusual. We belonged to this Lutheran Young People's Group and we very friendly and active with our

particular group from over here at Redeemer Church. Believe it or not, that same group, we still get together to ----

LEVINE Wow.

NIELSON: now. Quite a few of them have passed on, but we were at a meeting one night and a friend of mine wanted to sell me a ticket for a dinner dance the following weekend, and I said, I don't know whom I could take and he kept on and I says, "No, I don't want it. It sounds good and so on." He says, "You can get someone. You should buy the ticket." And I don't know, he saw her over there or something and said, "Why don't you take that girl," and so on. She looked up and she says, "Yes, I'll go." [Both laugh] So that started it.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So is there anything else about Kodak that you can think of, just about what it was like in those early days?

NIELSON: Well, it was ---- well, actually I worked as processing film and so on, but in latter years I worked in—I was an assistant to the assistant personnel manager and what they told me, what I did, I did everything that no one else wanted to do. I was fortunate. I had charge of shipping, receiving, mail service, messenger service, switchboard operation, and I even had the capital equipment budget. So I did get around, had an opportunity of being in contact with people from all over the company.

LEVINE: Were people generally satisfied?

NIELSON: Oh, yes, they were very—this was during the Depression, those years, and people were very fortunate to have a job and they showed it. They were at work on time.

LEVINE: What was it like for your family because you came over here—well, five or more years before the—well, say roughly five years before the Depression, and your father was trying to better himself and the family by coming, and then the Depression hit here. What was it like for your family?

NIELSON: Well, with the experiences of a Depression in Norway, it was apparently was not as bad on him as it had been previously. He worked on WPA ---

LEVINE: Oh, he did?

NIELSON: and he was working ----

LEVINE: Oh.

NIELSON: Yeah, constantly and Stuart and Bennett and so on treated him well.

LEVINE: Well, do you remember anything about the WPA projects that he was on?

NIELSON: Oh, yeah, CC. In fact, I was in the CCC's during the Depression, but I remember all the relief work and so on, WPA.

LEVINE: Was your father constructing buildings?

NIELSON: Yeah, he was working for various contractors, you know. He was a cabinetmaker and really a good one.

LEVINE: With the WPA, though, was he building.

NIELSON: Oh, WPA he worked in ditch digging and so on when he wasn't actually doing carpentry work.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

NIELSON: But we seemed to do well at that time.

LEVINE: And how was your—what was your mother and father's attitude about being here? Did they want to become American or did they want to hold onto the old ways?

NIELSON: Oh, yes, they really wanted to become American. Yes. My mother went to night school, too, but she developed eye problems and so never finished. When my father did die, she went back to Denmark to visit a few times and finally the last time over she figured she'd stay. She was admitted to a nursing home over there and that's where she passed on there.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

NIELSON: So, as far as --- I'm --- we were just lucky I feel, and the greatest break for us was coming through Ellis Island to become an American.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Did you—you visited. That's how we got this questionnaire.

NIELSON: Yes.

LEVINE: Yeah, and how was it for you seeing it after all these years?

- NIELSON: Well, that was our first time down there. You were with me then. [Aside] We visited a couple times after that. So it was just very interesting. We did a lot of reminiscing and that to see the baggage come off and the emigrants coming—immigrants coming in.
- LEVINE: Uh-hmm, it must be quite wonderful to somebody who actually was part of it to see it now.
- NIELSON: Uh-hmm. Not being able to speak the language and so on, we would have had a problem, you know, coming to this country because they were very—they handled everything to us. They checked us in and gave us a lunch bag and sent us on to our destination.
- LEVINE: Fed you, uh-huh. Okay, let's see. How about, we skipped a little part there. When you came here and started school, what was school like here, compared with school in Denmark or in Norway?
- NIELSON: Well, they were just as strict here, but they were very lenient, too. I know trying to master the English language was a little rough, but they were very cooperative and we never took any ridicule from any of our classmates or anything. They were very nice people. In fact, I'm a still friend with some of them there that we met when we first came to this country back in 1925.
- LEVINE: No kidding?
- NIELSON: Yeah.
- LEVINE: Wow. So you really—you really put down roots here in Rochester.
- NIELSON: Oh, yes, we did.
- LEVINE: And you still have some of the connections with people.
- NIELSON: Oh, people here in Rochester, yes. Oh, we have many friends. No, I became active in the Masonic Fraternity and there I've been very active and we've met so many wonderful people.
- LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Are there any moments in your life that you feel very satisfied about?
- NIELSON: Oh, I feel satisfied with everything. I have no complaints at all. I feel fortunate that I had the opportunity of living in Europe as a youngster and very fortunate that I was able to come to this country. As you know, that Ellis Island was the best experience that we—that I ever

had and I'm constantly talking about it. You can see all the material I have on Ellis Island there.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Well, you have wonderful photographs and scrapbooks. Now, did your mother make those scrapbooks in this country?

NIELSON: Oh, yes. Like that big scrapbook, this one here is a US book.

LEVINE: Yeah, that one definitely. And the one with the flowers, the dried flowers?

NIELSON: Yes, she made that one in Norway and she has other ones in there, too. We can show you. I can show you quite a bit of what she has in there.

LEVINE: How would you describe your mother? What kind of a person would you say she was? How was she temperamentally?

NIELSON: Well, she was just as good a mother as my wife has been to our kids.

LEVINE: Oh, that's nice.

NIELSON: So you can't beat that.

LEVINE: No, no. So why don't you say for the tape your wife's name and maiden name?

NIELSON: Her maiden name was Hilzinger, H-I-L-Z-I-N-G-E-R, and there are no Hilzingers left in the Rochester area now.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, and that's a German name.

NIELSON: German name, yeah.

LEVINE: And Bernice is your wife's first name.

NIELSON: Bernice, yes.

LEVINE: How about your children's names?

NIELSON: Well, we have one Janet, Janet Louise. James Frederick, and by the way, Janet was a teacher, too. She taught English in Greece Arcadia and other areas, and then when she married, she went ---she started to work in St. Lawrence University and she's still working over there. Craig went to Vietnam and that's the longest year we ever spent. He made up for the missing of the service, which I never had. That was

the longest year we ever spent, but he didn't want to go to college. We wanted to support him. He wanted to drive trucks, and he took lessons and so on, and he works for Custom Line now. He is really good as a driver. He's got a very good record.

LEVINE: That's nice.

NIELSON: But, you know, I feel strange about bragging about our children. That they were college, went and now are working in university, both Jimmy and Janet. But Craig did not want any further education, but since he's in the transport business, I say he is very well educated because right now he's so good; he's a Roads Scholar. [Chuckles]

LEVINE: [laughs] And he gets to travel all around the country or?

NIELSON: Well, it's a local area now, yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Okay. How do you feel about being Danish and being American? How do you put it together in your mind?

NIELSON: Well, we're both the same as far as I can see. We're all from some area and we're all basically foreigners because we were not Indians. Not very many of us. But I have never felt any harm in that. I seem to feel good about it, because I get so many chances to talk about our nationality, because of our trips to Denmark and so on. We have met many Danish people over here.

LEVINE: How is this time in your life, now that you're retired and your children are grown?

NIELSON: Well, I like home life and so I don't want to travel too much, but we do quite frequently. As I say, the Masonic Fraternity keeps me busy. I'm very active in that and Bernice is associated with the Eastern Star and there she is quite active. They've given me the breaks, too.

LEVINE: How's that?

NIELSON: Well, I was honored thirteen years ago with the Thirty-Third Degree, which there's not very many people that have had that good fortune. That enables us every September to travel to some city in the eastern section here where we have our Supreme Council meetings and we have met people from all over.

LEVINE: Wow. Oh, I'm sure you distinguished yourself or you wouldn't have been awarded—

NIELSON: Yeah.

LEVINE: Well, that's great. Okay—

NIELSON: In fact, our friend Jack Kemp is right up from Buffalo area and we met him. I saw him get his Thirty-Third Degree just a very few years ago. He's a friend.

LEVINE: Oh, isn't that nice. Wow. How about the politics of the country. I mean that beautiful scrapbook that your mother made with, I guess it was World War II, that around there? But are there any political events that have particularly struck you during your life that, you know, stand out as milestones for something?

NIELSON: Well, now, what has bothered me quite a bit is the deterioration of our morals and so on, something which the Depression and other conditions forced upon us.

LEVINE: When you say that, how do you mean the Depression forced it upon you?

NIELSON: Well, Depressions and so on made it difficult for people to earn money and so on. Their families kind of broke up and breakage ---breaks in family life and so on. So many have not had a parent or guidance as they should have, and it's not just right.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Do you have an opinion about the immigrants coming in today? This is now, another time, when there's so many people coming into this country.

NIELSON: Well, there are a lot of them coming in and if they come in through legally and so on, but there are so many getting in the back door and that's what hurts, too.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

NIELSON: So, I don't know what we're leading up to. You know, people are saying about these conditions that exist now, it's going to improve, but you have seen no improvement. It's gradually getting worse and so on and I'm beginning to feel that maybe it's going to take a national calamity of something to wake people up and bring them back to their senses.

LEVINE: When you think about how the society was earlier on and how it is now, could you try to pinpoint what it is that's different?

- NIELSON: Well, what is different, we used to be able to walk the streets and so on. We'd visit and so on, no problem at all, but you're taking a chance if you walk the streets now, which is unfortunate because there are so many wonderful people living all over and so on. There's just a few that are giving us the trouble.
- LEVINE: How about in Denmark now, how does it compare?
- NIELSON: Well, I don't think you see such a turmoil in cities as you do in this country. We haven't found that at all, going over there recently. You can walk the streets any place and so on, but I suppose if you get into the much larger cities like Paris, London, Berlin and so on, there's where you have your problems.
- LEVINE: And how about you yourself over these years, since you came to this country, can you think about ways that you've changed? I mean obviously you've gotten more mature and older and all that, but have you changed, do you think?
- NIELSON: As my father used to say all the time, it's more better as you age, you learn. [Laughs] I get corny. [Chuckles]
- LEVINE: Uh-huh.
- NIELSON: No, it's been a nice life and so on. I have no qualms about it. It's been good to us. We have friends, many of them. I don't know what else to say. I'm just thankful.
- LEVINE: Yeah, yeah. And how about Rochester, can you think of any ways that this place has changed, compared with when you first came here?
- NIELSON: Well, I guess Rochester is just going through the changes and so on, the problems that most major cities have today.
- LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Was it like a small town when you first got here or no?
- NIELSON: Well, it had quite a bit. It's grown quite a bit, but—
- LEVINE: Well, there is a big ethnic mix in the city.
- NIELSON: Oh yes, much more so, yeah.
- LEVINE: It seems. Yeah. Okay, well, if there's anything else you can think of. I see you made a contribution to the Wall of Honor and you have your certificate.

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NIELSON: Uh-hmm.

LEVINE: Did you see your name on the wall when you were there?

NIELSON: Yes, we did, yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, yeah. I think we may have covered everything, unless there's anything else you can think of before we close.

NIELSON: Well, I don't know. Have I missed anything? It's a little difficult at times. I don't know why, I'm getting old. I'm losing my memory or something, I don't know. [Laughs]

LEVINE: Well, you've got Bernice there to remind you, so there you go. Okay, well, I think actually maybe we've covered it.

NIELSON: I hope I've given you enough information.

LEVINE: Oh, absolutely. Absolutely. It's a very interesting story of a Danish family that had to leave and go to Norway and then—

NIELSON: Back.

LEVINE: Back and then here, and you have such wonderful information and pictures. Okay.

NIELSON: Well, being a Dane, of Danish descent or Norwegian—they're both the same. I'm proud of that. [clock chimes in background]

LEVINE: As well you should be, yeah. Okay. Well, I'm going to close here. This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. I've been speaking with Fred Nielson and Mr. Nielson's wife, Bernice, is here with us and it's August 15th, 1996. We're here in Rochester, New York, and I'm signing off.

NIELSON: Uh-hmm.

END OF INTERVIEW