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IRMTRAUD ONUSSEIT LILL
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LEVINE: Today is August 16th, 1996. I'm here in Rochester, New York with Irmtraud Onusseit Lill, who came here from Germany, the East Prussia part of Germany, in 1924, when she was two years of age. Today, the time of the interview, Mrs. Lill is seventy-three years of age and this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service.
Well, I'm delighted that you're here and thank you. So you were two years old, so I assume you have no memories of Germany.

LILILL: That's right, two years of age, I have no memory.

LEVINE: Is there anything that your mother or father mentioned to you about your life in Germany before coming here?

LILL: Well, my parents got married in 1921 and I was born a year later, and then a year and a half after that my brother was born, and my father wanted to, you know, make a good life for his family and conditions in Germany were very bad at that time. It was shortly after World War I

and people were on strike and weren't very happy. He said you almost needed a wheelbarrow full of money to buy a loaf of bread, and he kept hearing stories about how much better life was in America and he wanted to come to America. He was really gung-ho and enthusiastic and applied.

Now, my mother, she came from a close knit family and she had a lot with, you know, taking care of the children and everything and friends and she really probably was more reluctant. But she was an obedient wife and went along with it, even though she wasn't too happy about leaving.

My father, he wasn't that kind of a person. He'd been in the war and been away from home and he had no close ties. And they applied to come and they had to go through a lot of, oh, tests and examinations. I know one thing he mentioned, where we lived, to get to—the ship was going to leave from Hamburg and so it was a long train ride and they wanted to say goodbye to all their relatives, and he said they had to go through a part of, I guess they called it like a free state through Poland and on the train. Now, even though we left in December, they probably made preparations already late summer and because he mentioned we had to take a train and it was full of people maybe that wanted to immigrate and he said it was so hot and I don't know who did it or what, but he said, some people, they opened the window to get fresh air because the train was held up at the border. Now, I don't know if it was Russian or Polish or who that was, I can't remember if he said it, but no one was supposed to look out the window and I guess some men that did open the window and look out were shot. And he said everybody was so afraid, but finally we made it to visit relatives in the various little towns, and I don't know how long they stayed with each relative, but they knew they'd probably never see each other again.

LEVINE: Hmm. So you think maybe they started the journey in the summertime and it was six months long before they actually got to America.

LILL: Because he mentioned—yeah. The reason I think that, I'm not positive, but when he mentioned it was so hot on the train they wanted to open the windows.

LEVINE: Right.

LILL: So I'm just assuming and then maybe because the journeys to visit the relatives was so long, that maybe they stayed weeks, you know, with each relative for the final—

LEVINE: Goodbye. Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Oh, that's very interesting. What was your father's name?

LILL: His name was Fredrick, but everybody called him Fritz.

LEVINE: And your mother's name?

LILL: Emma.

LEVINE: And her maiden name?

LILL: Mueller. Now, she always wrote it M-U-E-L-L-E-R, but I'm sure in Germany it was probably M-U with an oomlat, L-L-E-R. Yeah, I guess over there Mueller was as common as Smith or Jones here.

LEVINE: I interviewed a Mueller just yesterday in Rochester.

LILL: That was her name? Yeah.

LEVINE: Okay, how about grandparents? Did you have grandparents there?

LILL: Well, my mother's mother died when like my grandmother would have been in her mid forties, but then her father married again, you know, a second time and that's how my mother met my father. When her father had a second wedding, she met my father at that wedding. He must have been related to the stepmother's side of the family, and they met. From what I gather, she always had a good relationship with the stepmother. She never said anything bad about her and she liked her. She had a very loving family and so it was really hard for her to leave the old country.

LEVINE: Yeah. Were both your mother and father from the East Prussia area?

LILL: I believe so, uh-hmm. Yeah, and my father, he had parents, but he wasn't close. They owned a bakery and there were six boys in the family and they were kind of left on their own, eat what they want. When they were hungry, they'd just go in the bakery and grab, you know, a bun or something. He said he never remembers eating vegetables in his whole life. They just, you know, were on their own, ate what they wanted. So his mother and father weren't—

LEVINE: Attentive.

LILL: Yeah, yeah. So that's why he didn't care where he lived, you know.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh. All right, so he was freer to go then really.

LILL: Yeah, and really anxious and, you know, enthusiastic about going.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm. So you know that you came—oh, wait, we should say for the tape the name of the town that you were leaving, where you living before you left. I guess where you were born. Yeah.

LILL: Koenigsberg.

LEVINE: Could you spell it for the tape?

LILL: K-O-E-N-I-G-S-B-E-R-G. East Prussia, and it won't be on a map now because now it's part of Russia and called Kaliningrad and it's on the Baltic Sea.

LEVINE: Okay. Now, let's see. Do you remember anything that your mother and father said about the trip over?

LILL: Well, for my mother it was a trip from hell. In those days they didn't have big liners with stabilizers and everything and this was crossing the North Atlantic in December and as soon as the ship started moving, she was seasick and she was seasick for the entire trip. I guess she was afraid she wasn't going to die. So my father, he felt fine and, you know, really excited about coming to the new country, and he had to take care of me at the age of two, and my brother was six months old and I'm sure my mother was nursing the six month old, and how she could manage that, I don't know. But he was walking around on the ship with the two kids and he got to make a lot of friends, and my mother, she never got out of bed the whole trip. She was just sick constantly. I don't think she ever left her bed, and not being enthusiastic about coming here, it must have been—she probably was homesick and then from the rough, you know, seas, it was not a happy experience for her.

LEVINE: Did they ever talk about Ellis Island?

LILL: Yes, but I often wondered because I heard people talking about, well, they came steerage or they came first class or something, and I never heard anything mentioned about it, but visiting Ellis Island and I saw the film and everything, now I know they must have come steerage because they said if you could afford, you know, first class and everything, you didn't have to go through Ellis Island. They came on the ship and examined everything. So because we spent time on Ellis Island, I'm assuming it had to be steerage, but I don't know. I always had the impression my mother, because she was

sick all the time, I thought maybe she had her own room or something, but when I saw the pictures, I couldn't imagine that they were all packed in like cattle on the ship and how that was. That part they never talked about, so I really don't know, but just visiting Ellis Island, I assume that it had to be steerage, because my father mentioned that—because shortly after they arrived in Rochester—now, even that, I don't know if it was days or weeks, he got very, very sick with a high fever and people must have helped get him to the hospital. And he said on Ellis Island, you know, he'd walk around and he said there was a big barrel with a ladle and everybody that was thirsty, they didn't have a drinking fountain. They would take the ladle and drink the water. So I know when I visited Ellis Island, I was looking for a barrel or some kind of a big container with a ladle, and from all the examinations they had to go through in Germany, several times before they could even board the ship. The whole family had to be examined for any kind of defects or, you know, health problems, so they were healthy. And then at Ellis Island they had another physical and, you know, they were allowed to stay so they must have been healthy and he said he couldn't figure out how he got so sick. In fact, it was diagnosed as typhoid fever and he says, it must have been on Ellis Island because he didn't—my mother probably never drank the water or anything, and he was the only one. He was going constantly to use that ladle and everyone had to use the same ladle. Now, there's no proof about it, but he can't figure out how he got typhoid fever shortly after we arrived here, and he was so sick at the hospital they told my mother he was going to die because they didn't have antibiotics in those days. She had a brother who came to America, oh, a year before and he lived in Pittsburgh. So somehow people who were helping them must have put us on a train or wrote a letter or something, and we went to Pittsburgh. But my father, he must have been very strong because even without antibiotics he survived typhoid fever.

LEVINE: Wow, that's really interesting. Now, did they stay overnight? Did they ever talk about that?

LILL: If they told me, I don't remember.

LEVINE: That's interesting. I have never heard before—

LILL: About that common drinking?

LEVINE: Right.

LILL: He called it a barrel. Now, I assume—when I think of a barrel I think of wooden barrel, and he said there was one ladle next to it and

everybody used the same ladle, dipping into the water. It's the first thing I looked for when I went to visit Ellis Island. I thought, gee, I don't see that barrel, but I saw a lot of those big wicker baskets and we had one. Ours was bigger than any I saw there, where they put—because in Germany they had feather beds and when a woman, you know, was still young, they started, you know, making sheets and pillowcases and embroidering them and everything to have a lifetime supply of linens when they got married, and all the feather beds. In fact, she made her own feather beds. I guess they had geese and they would, you know, use the down from that. So all that was in these big wicker baskets. In fact, we kept that until—and then I had it up in my attic and then when I moved to a smaller house, we put it out by the road and somebody says to me, "You throwing that out? Can I have it?" So who knows where it is now.

LEVINE: Oh, well, do you remember were there any other things besides the wicker basket and the feather bedding that you know that your mother brought with her?

LILL: Well, there must have been, you know, clothing. Like coming in winter we probably, you know, had wool socks and everything. Now, a lot of the pictures and things I've seen on Ellis Island, all the women were wearing babushkas. I never remember my mother wearing a babushka or anything, so I don't know, you know, how they dressed. But I know when we first came, I know people would stare at me because I guess in Germany all the little girls always had like a white pinafore over their like wool clothing, and I remember people pointing and staring. My first recollections of memory that I knew I was different.

LEVINE: Because your mother was still dressing you that way?

LILL: Yeah, uh-hmm. Yeah, probably until I guess maybe it was several years before they went to night school and learned English and then they became citizens. They really wanted—my father especially really want to become an American and like, if we came nowadays, I mean nobody printed things up in German so we could read it. If we wanted to get by, we had to learn the language and he wanted to fully become American. In fact, even in high school I still had to go to speech classes. I don't have an accent, I think, a German accent. So many Germans I know, they sound like they came over on the last boat, but we always went for speech therapy and everything to—my mother and father always did speak a little bit with an accent because they went to school—

LEVINE: They were older and—

LILL: Yeah, but they only had to go to school until fourteen. So they never lost their accent completely, but even though they spoke German to us at home and everything, going to school here, and then I still had to go for speech classes and my brother did, too. Although, when my youngest brother—he was born in 1929 and when he was going to kindergarten, the principal of the school called me in and said, "I want you to talk to your mother and father and tell them absolutely no German is to spoken at home. You're Americans now, you talk English." So they were kind of—they, like Germans, they'd follow orders. Like, "You will!" So when I told them that, maybe when they were in their bedroom alone they talked German to each other, but I think they were afraid to talk German. My daughter says, "Gee, that's terrible, you should have been—especially children, they can learn several languages." Now, I have a niece, you know, she's my brother's daughter and she married a man from Sweden and he talks nothing but Swedish to his daughter. So she speaks English and Swedish.

LEVINE: Who was the person who told you that, that your parents had to—

LILL: A principal at a school here, a public school, but I think that was probably just before World War II, when there was a lot of anti-German feeling and maybe she hated Germans, and she says, "No German is to be spoken," and we didn't. [phone rings] Up until that time, my mother would talk German to us and we'd answer her in English.

LEVINE: I see. Excuse me a second. [tape off/on] Okay, we're going to resume here. Well, let's just go back to when you first arrived. Were there any stories that your mother and father passed along later about getting to or actually being at Ellis Island or being at Ellis Island and going into—

LILL: Well, I just want to mention, I guess you couldn't immigrate unless you had a sponsor here, and it was a German Baptist Church that must have, maybe through the church they went to in Germany. I don't know how they happened to get in contact, and they agreed that they would—that we wouldn't be a burden on, you know, the government. That they would make sure we would be taken care of. So now I don't know if anybody was, you know, in New York City waiting for us. My mother in Germany she had never seen a Black person. I don't think my father did either, and so after we got through with Ellis Island—I have no recollection of the details about that, but we had to take a New York Central train to Rochester. How we got to the train station, I don't know, but the porter helping us, you know,

with our luggage and everything on the train was a Black man and my mother said I was just fascinated with him because I had never seen a Black man either, and I kept asking him for candy. She said he would smile and they all—so she said that was, you know, kind of strange to see, you know, a Black person. They had known there were people like that, but they had never seen any in Germany, and as they're taking the train to Rochester, my mother said to my father, "Oh, there must be so many wealthy people here." She said, "Look at all those wooden houses," because in Germany they had stone or brick houses and for summer homes, like at a resort or something, the wealthy people had wooden homes and she thought that looking out the train window she saw nothing but wooden houses and she thought that these were all just summer homes for the wealthy people.

LEVINE: Oh, that's true.

LILL: Yeah, so she was surprised about that.

LEVINE: How was it that your mother and father came to Rochester?

LILL: They must have through the sponsor. The church here must have—now, see, that part I don't know. Maybe the church they were going to in Germany had contact with, you know, the same denomination here or inquired and they must have got some kind of notice that this church would be willing to sponsor a family and be responsible for them, and that's why they came here. Now, I don't remember now if people from the church were there to meet us at the train and maybe they found an apartment for us. Actually, it was in not a very nice neighborhood and I remember we moved quite often in the early years, until my father, you know, worked and saved enough money and then they bought a small house. But in the beginning it was a lot of moving around, but he always tried to work, even when he got over the typhoid fever and he was so thin and work, and it must have still been winter, and the only job he could get then was shoveling snow. So I have a lot of admiration for my father. He always worked. We never—like now, people, they can't even speak English but they all know how to get money out of the government, and we never once got a penny from any kind of, you know, welfare. Later, after they could speak English and met people, they said, "Oh, you could have got this and you could have got that." In fact, the house they put then the Depression came and they lost the house, everything they had put into it. So they had a lot of hard luck.

And another thing, my father was a little bit disappointed, the weather here in Rochester. Now, I don't know what kind of a map he looked at in Germany to where they were going, and he thought the

weather was going to be like southern Italy and they come here in the middle of winter. So I guess he talked to his brother a lot, who lived in Pittsburgh, and he said, "I think we should head for California," but then came the Depression and everything. In fact, they never even got to see California, and their life was here then. But I think that was a little bit of a shock, how cold it was here.

My mother said when she was a girl in Germany, I guess the days were much longer. She said summer you could be outside reading a newspaper until almost midnight. You know, ten, eleven o'clock at night it was still full daylight, and here it got dark so early. So that was an adjustment.

LEVINE: Yeah. Were your family a religious family?

LILL: Yes, because they—you know, this German Baptist Church helped them and they had services in German in beginning, even also in English, and I'm sure the people there must have helped them. You know, I don't think they ever like sponged off the church or anything. My father always worked and if they did ever have to borrow, I'm sure they paid it back as soon as possible. They made do with what they had. I think the first extravagant thing my father bought for my mother was a Singer sewing machine and she had it until the day she died. In fact, I've got it in my basement now. To her that was the proudest, to have a Singer sewing machine because then she could sew our clothes. Like if people gave her like a coat or something, she would cut it up and make a jacket or a skirt, and she did a lot of—her sewing machine was her greatest pride to have that, but otherwise we lived very frugally and made do with what we had.

When times were bad, she made soup out of anything. Even in summer she made soup out of fruit, with egg dumplings, something that would lay—like to me, German food lays like a rock in your stomach, you know, because I think they never knew when their next meal was going to be and they tried to. Like their heavy breads and you know the soup. In fact, to this day I can't eat pea soup, we had it so much. Or even if like she got like a piece of sausage, like a steamer or something, she would cut it in little slices and make potato soup or something and my father always got, you know, probably most of it.

So, no, we lived a simple life and their whole life revolved around the church. Like when I was growing up, we weren't allowed to go to the movies. We weren't allowed to dance, play cards or drink, smoke. Nothing, but then my father worried, like when we went to high school he said, "Now you're going to come in contact with a lot of different people," and he says, "Well, I'll tell you one thing," and most of them smoke. He says, "You'll never be allowed to smoke in this house." For most people, they would be like, "Well, I

can smoke, but not in the house." To my brothers and I, none of us ever smoked.

LEVINE: Do you think you would have been the same way if you were in Germany?

LILL: Oh, yes. They were, you know, that type of people. Their life revolved around the church and all their friends were the church people.

LEVINE: I see. So it was really quite appropriate that the church was their sponsor because they did get very involved.

LILL: Yeah, I think so. And we just kind of associated—like I know there were German organizations. I don't know if they were political—social where they'd maybe be drinking and dancing and, you know, things like that, and they never belonged to anything like that. But sometimes, like at Christmas time, they were invited, like if there was going to be a, you know, big celebration for a holiday or something, sometimes they'd have, you know, bags of candy or books for the children. Other people, maybe somebody he worked with, would invite us to come to that, but as like an ongoing thing, they never joined any organizations, mainly because of the religious—the way they were. You know, they weren't party people.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, but they probably—do you think they had association with other German immigrants through the church?

LILL: Well, on the ship when my father, you know, he'd be walking around the ship with my brother and myself, and he met—there was a couple there. They were for a different part of Germany and they had a little boy, and he got talking with them because they said they were coming to Rochester, too. And I think there was a Salem Evangelical Church, a different church maybe had sponsored them and they came here, and they remained friends throughout their life. In fact, the man eventually he bought a farm and that's why even when times were bad, because they only had one child and they were better off financially than we were, and they always brought, you know, big, oh, bushel baskets of peaches and apples and cherries, you know, and my mother made everything possible of that.

And then my father, he did—in Germany I guess he did—he was an apprentice with doing metal work and he was good with ornamental iron and this friend of his had like a blacksmith's forge and a barn on the land where he had the farm. My father made—in fact, before the—just before the Depression he did a lot of work. Like there was a suburb—well, not a suburb, but a little town outside of

Rochester, Canandaigua, and a lot of wealthy people lived there and they had—now people buy, there's a lot of wrought iron railings and gates and lanterns and everything, and he did most of that work. He himself, he worked for an ornamental iron company and they would send him out there and sometimes—I don't know how he got out there because sometimes my mother would pack, you know, a picnic lunch with the kids and she'd stay at a park along the lake there while he was working. In fact, then when he worked later, he worked—in fact, I have this picture. These are some—he made—it was like a hobby. All his life he worked with iron and he'd hammer it out. In fact, he made all of us, you know, little safe boxes. They were just beautiful and so much of it he gave away. He was always happy, you know, doing that. Even when he worked—he worked at Bausch and Laum where he was like a sheet metal worker, but a lot of the, you know, the big shots at the company, they knew about his work and he did so much work for them making lanterns and special things and they probably didn't even pay him. I don't know.

LEVINE: Do you have these things or any photographs?

LILL: I have some—I have some. My brothers have some. Yeah, I have some. He made the special boxes for us and one I gave to my grandchildren. You know, to think—I always admired everything he did, and see he—

LEVINE: What was he like, temperamentally and personality?

LILL: He was a—oh, I brought a picture of him. This is when he was in the infantry in World War I, a German soldier and this is around the time when we came to America. That was my mother and that's my father. And this is my mother's family, just her brothers and her sister. And I think this must have been when we were visiting them before we were coming to America because I look like about two and that's my brother, six months. And that was his mother and father. She looks like a beast. [Laughs]

LEVINE: She's got a smile on her face, though.

LILL: Oh, maybe you're looking at the wrong one.

LEVINE: This one?

LILL: Oh, this one. This was his aunt. He liked her. Oh, she's probably trying to grin. [Laughs] But he never could say a kind word about his mother.

LEVINE: He couldn't?

LILL: No, he was glad to leave. I think only one of his brothers—two brothers in that picture. I think there were five boys all together, and he didn't—he corresponded, you know, back and forth but I don't think he had a day of homesickness. But my mother, in fact, after we were here a couple years, her—this is my mother's. She only had one sister and then came and came to Rochester. She wasn't married. I guess a boyfriend died during World War I, and you know she never married, but she did go back to Germany, just before World War II started and my mother never heard from her again. Then after the war she heard that she died of starvation and my mother felt bad because she encouraged her to go back and, you know, marry this person.

LEVINE: Wow. Well, they're beautiful photographs.

LILL: And this is—I became a citizen through my mother's citizenship. You know, my parents' citizenship, but then when I was in my twenties, I wanted to have my own. So I have my own certificate of citizenship, even though I was a citizen through my parents' citizenship.

END OF SIDE A, TAPE 1
BEGIN SIDE B, TAPE 1

LEVINE: I see, so what did you do? You just simply applied to have it as a separate citizenship?

LILL: Yeah, so that I had something to prove on my own. My granddaughter says, "Boy, you don't look happy there."

LEVINE: No, you don't. Well, how did your mother and father feel when they became citizens?

LILL: Oh, they were so proud.

LEVINE: Do you remember it?

LILL: Well, I remember it was at the Chamber of Commerce and they had a dinner for the people, and they were sitting down and my brother and I, we were in the balcony watching. Yeah, I remember that, and you know, it was official. We were proud of them and, oh, they were very proud to think that they learned English. And sometimes like now, I couldn't imagine myself going to like Sweden or Russia, not knowing a word and what to do. I know my mother, she probably had to be good at charades because going to a store—I think one time

she wanted to buy a rib and maybe she'd point to a bow I had in my hair, you know, about how—I can't picture myself doing that because now if I travel, I expect everybody to talk English.

LEVINE: Well, it's a different world I guess.

LILL: Yeah.

LEVINE: But your mother was in the end pleased to have come?

LILL: Yeah, I think. Yeah, she really adapted. I know in the beginning like with the food, I guess some of the people from the church when they were here new, maybe they invited her for lunch and I guess she said the first time the woman—she probably didn't know what to make. Well, times were probably hard for everybody and I guess this was a peanut butter sandwich and this was before they homogenized peanut butter and she said she took a bite. You know, she wanted to polite, and it stuck to the roof of her mouth and she didn't know what to do with it and she didn't know what it was because over in Germany—maybe now they have it, but she had never had peanut butter in her whole life. In fact, I don't even now want to eat peanut butter that wasn't homogenized.

So they wanted to learn American ways and it probably came slowly, but she still made do with, you know. And in Germany she didn't have any recipe books or anything. She said, like she would make, like baked goods with yeast all the time. You know, she knew yeast dough and she would just—like one time I said to her, you know, "How do you make that?" She'd take a handful of flour, a handful of sugar. Over in Germany they weighed things. It wasn't like a teaspoon or something. Everything was ounces, you know, ounces or pounds or whatever, and she cooked that way.

One thing, I don't think—I can't imagine that they didn't make pies in Germany, but she didn't know how to make pie crust or anything like that. She didn't learn that until, you know, years later.

LEVINE: Did she continue cooking German dishes?

LILL: Well, she started—she did, but then—[tape off/on] Machine's probably thinking, "I heard enough of this."

LEVINE: I doubt it. We're resuming here. Apparently there was a power failure and we missed a few things that we would like to discuss some more. One is the cooking classes and one is the ceremony for the people becoming American citizens here in Rochester. So why don't you talk again about the cooking classes your mother went to.

LILL: Oh. My mother took advantage of the cooking classes that the Rochester Gas and Electric offered and she would go there in the afternoon, and we always knew when she had been to cooking class because we had casseroles, which is something we never had before. She wanted to really become an American, too, and eat the way people here ate. So she enjoyed learning how to use the recipes and how to measure. She would up making beautiful cakes and all kinds of, you know, nice desserts and meals and she enjoyed that. She was a real homemaker. She never, you know, worked. She was a good wife and a good mother.

LEVINE: Did she continue to have correspondence with her family in Germany?

LILL: Oh, she wrote many letters to all her, you know, nieces and nephews and cousins, everybody she knew. She wrote all the time, but I didn't know these people, and I never was interested. I didn't want to hear about it, and I regret that now. It meant a lot to her and they would write in this tiny—you know, they'd try to get it on thin paper, they tried to write as tiny. I don't even know how she could read it. But, yes, she always kept up correspondence and like when relatives died, she always knew if somebody died. The envelope would be edged in black and then so they were prepared when they read that, you know, a close relative had died.

LEVINE: Would they actually do it themselves, make the edges—

LILL: No, you could buy—I guess in this thin like onion skin paper, apparently they could buy it. It was like printed that way, a letter edged in black and maybe they sold it special for when you had to give bad news. So whenever a letter arrived with a black edge, they knew that somebody had died. Of course, they knew when they left Germany they would never see anybody again, but I remember, yeah, she'd be sad when somebody had died. Yeah.

LEVINE: Would you say again for the tape about the ceremony that you and your brother watched at the Rochester—

LILL: Yeah. When my parents became citizens, they had kind of a celebration at the Rochester Chamber of Commerce. There was a big hall there and they had tables set up and they were given a supper or dinner, and their relatives were sitting up in the balcony looking down and they could watch, as they were given their, you know, papers, and then they were served dinner. It was a very—for them it was a very important and happy occasion. They were so

proud and even though I probably was still a young child, I remember being there and seeing that.

And I really give them credit because I've known like friends of mine who had relatives—especially people I've known from Italy. They lived here for fifty, sixty years and they never became citizens, never learned English. I thought, to me that doesn't seem right. If you come to American, become an American and learn the language. That's my attitude.

LEVINE: Yeah, yeah. Were there any other German ways that your mother kept or your father that they did hold onto?

LILL: Oh, I'm sure when they prayed, they prayed in German. Their life really revolved around the church, and they didn't—although when they lived, they were neighborly and would help neighbors and things like that, but as far as—well, where we lived, in the school I went to in those days it was like a—there was nobody really American. Everybody was like Ukrainian, Polish. It was a mixture, like a melting pot. Italian and Jewish.

In the neighborhood they lived, there was Joseph Avenue—it's all changed now. There used to be a lot of Jewish bakeries and fish markets where they'd kill the chicken for you and all that stuff, and she liked going there because the owners were Yiddish and Yiddish and German are similar and the Yiddish owners, they would help the immigrants. You know, they would speak. They knew what you wanted and if you said it in German, they more or less knew it, and so we used to, you know, go to the Jewish shops. Then the Italians, they had fruit and vegetable markets and I used to live kind of in an ethnic neighborhood until like I, you know, married and, you know, they mixed in with. Like my husband's family, they were all American and they learned. They got along well. Of course, I think if you learn the language and can understand, you can fit in most anywhere.

LEVINE: What was it like for you being a little girl who yourself came as an immigrant and being in a while community of immigrants? Do you think that was—

LILL: Well, I remember my first recollection of school, I was dressed—I must have had a pinafore on or something and I remember, now, even though there were a lot of immigrants, and I played with Black children—sometimes I brought Black children home to play. I couldn't see the difference. To me they were just, you know, kids. But I remember the teacher at school, she took me by the hand and she took me to all different classes and she'd say, "Look at this," and felt like I must really be different. Well, we always had to wear like

wool stockings, you know, long stockings. We probably dressed differently, more bulky or something. Now, there must have been other immigrants and so why this teacher singled me out, I don't know, but I felt, you know—I remember even when I got to high school, the first day in English class the teacher wanted us to write like a biography or something and I know, I guess I started out. I said, "All my life I felt like I was different from the other people," and you know, I wrote down that I felt that people would look at me.

Actually, in high school a lot of Jewish immigrants were coming. I guess they had heard about Hitler and the ones that knew about it, came over to this country and so there were a lot of Jewish people in the school I went to and I know some boys would ask me out or something and I thought, I knew there was German hatred and I would let them know. I'd say, "You know, I'm German," and they'd say, "Oh, yeah, I'm from Germany, too," but they were Jewish from Germany and I didn't want them—you know, I thought, gee, once they find out, they'll really hate me, even though in high school what did I know about, you know, politics or anything.

My family never was political. I know when I started working at Bausch and Laum they did, you know, war work and things like that, and I know my boss told me—oh, I read something in the paper and I said, "Gee, I read in the paper that, you know, if we're doing this work here"—even though I worked in the office and did the, you know, typed reports and everything that had to be probably sent to the government. They said you had to have FBI clearance and I didn't know it and he says, "Oh, you've already been cleared," and I says, "Nobody ever talked to me," but my mother said a couple of men came to the house, her house and I guess they looked in every room. Maybe they wanted to see if we had a German flag or pictures standing around or something. She was kind of scared, but she had nothing to hide. We never—in fact, we left Germany before anybody ever heard of Hitler, but my father did get letters, you know, from the people. At first they said, "Oh, this man, he's going around and he's saying, oh, he's going to do everything for Germany. There isn't going to be anymore, you know, poverty and all that," and then my father was thinking, gee, maybe we should have stayed. But then at that time, you know, they didn't say anything about, you know, eliminating the Jews or anything. Just he was going to do so much for Germany. Then after a while my father said, "I don't know," you know, he started—but they never really went to any political rallies or got involved with people who were political or anything like that.

But—so apparently the FBI, you know, came to the house and, you know, everything was okay. Although, I think I read in the paper some people, I guess they deported them. Maybe they had things around, but I know my husband in World War II, he was in the Merchant Marine and they took troops back and forth to Europe and

one time they had to bring German prisoners home. He gave them cigarettes and they gave him pictures of Hitler, those swastika armbands and everything, and I said, "Oh, my goodness. Get these out of my house." You know, he got them for souvenirs.

And my brother, who was six months old when we came here, when the war started, he enlisted in the US Air Force, and where did they send him? Germany, and he was a fighter pilot and he was on fifty-two bombing missions over Germany. But I asked him one time, I says, "Gee, did you ever think about, you know, maybe you're bombing relatives or maybe"—in fact, after the war we found out a cousin was in the German Air Force, but he got shot down over Romania, I guess. Because I said to my brother, "Gee, wouldn't it be—what would you think if you shot down one of your, you know, cousins or something like that?" and he says, "Well, when you get trained, you're so brainwashed with these missions that all you think about is you have a mission to do, you know, bomb this railroad station or something," and he said, "You don't stop and think about anything except what you're supposed to do." He got distinguished service medals and everything.

I know even after the war, a lot of people, they you know, talked—in fact, I never volunteered to people that I was German. I was almost ashamed to say I was German because there was so much hatred, even though I don't think I look German.

LEVINE: No.

LILL: People think I'm Italian or even Indian from India or Jewish. Nobody ever guessed that I was, so I just kept quiet, you know, but I heard people talk. But I thought, gee, now my brother—and then my youngest brother, you know, he was—I'm seven years older than he is and enlisted in the Air Force during the Korean War, but he couldn't fly because of his eyes. So they did their patriotic duty and like during the war when there was rationing and you had ration coupons for, you know, sugar and butter, my mother never—she just used what she could and my friends that I was working with, their parents, they were talking about how they could get all the gas they want and everything. So I always considered my mother and father to be better citizens than a lot of the people that were born here.

LEVINE: How did your mother and father feel about your brother doing the bombing missions over Germany?

LILL: They were proud of him being in the Air Force. Yeah, you know, she had—they had the little flag in the window, you know, where you have a serviceman. No, and they, you know, with the—they helped the war effort as much as they could. No, they never said anything

about it. They were proud of him. The day he—after flying fifty-two missions, he had been hit by flak and, you know, he didn't know if he was coming down. You know, he could have been taken a prisoner, but I guess he got help right away. So after that, they said he could go home for a month, I think, for rest and recreation and the day he ended in New York, the war in Europe ended. Yeah, and then I guess he was going to be home for a month and then they were going to send him to the Pacific.

LEVINE: Did you know other people who were either rounded up and put in deportation centers or [unclear]?

LILL: Not of any, you know—I'm sure people were, but nobody that we knew. Nobody, no. Like my father, especially, he came to America to make a new life and become an American and they did and I'm proud of them, because I don't think I could have. Especially when my father got sick and my mother, they're telling her he's going to die and there she is with two little kids. I couldn't imagine myself going through that. So I'm glad they came to America, and I think the last picture I got here—oh, this is—I have two grandchildren. I only had one daughter and this is—this was taken last year, I guess. My grandson, he just graduated from Cornell and he's going to start medical school in a couple weeks, and she just graduated from—or she's in her last year at high school, but they've had foreign students staying with them like from Japan and Spain and France, and then she goes and stays with them. So they're—

LEVINE: Well, getting back to, you said you worked for Bausch and Laum?

LILL: Yeah.

LEVINE: During the war?

LILL: Yes.

LEVINE: And what kind of work?

LILL: Well, I was a secretary, but I had to type reports about, you know, like the production of—what the enemy would ever do with any of that information, I don't know. Then we had to wear—after I was cleared by the FBI, I could wear a pin. It was a little like an oval pin with an E on it for the war effort, that I was, you know, cleared. That I was a good citizen and things like that. So my family, we were always proud, and one time after my father retired, I said to them, "Gee, you ought to go back to Germany and, you know, see the country and visit friends," and my mother said, "Oh, no." She said,

"We haven't even seen everything in America." They considered themselves Americans. Uh-hmm.

LEVINE: Well, you have—you must have some recollection about Rochester the city and how it's changed from the time you were a little girl.

LILL: Yeah.

LEVINE: Is there anything that you remember about the old Rochester?

LILL: The old Rochester downtown here, Main Street, was wonderful. Like, you know, the bridge over the river now, you couldn't see the river. There were all shops. Like have you ever been to Florence, Italy? Like over the Arno River, you can't even see the river because they have, you know, it's all built up. Well, that's how it used to be here. They had so many shops and a big department store. I can't remember the last time I—I wouldn't come downtown for anything. It's like I'm in a foreign country now. It used to be wonderful and had all kind of specialty shops and bakeries and restaurants, big movie theaters, gorgeous. I think it's a crime they tore that stuff down. So now everything's suburban shopping malls. If you don't have a car—my mother never learned how to drive a car, but—

LEVINE: How about you when you started dating and everything, were you looking for a German person?

LILL: I wasn't and my mother—one day, when I came home from work, she says to me, "A family, a man and his wife came," and I guess they had one son and he must have been—he opened up his own tool and dye company, the man, and they wanted their son to marry a German girl and if they had grandchildren or something, they wanted to have it strictly German, and my mother, when she tried to tell me this, that I was supposed to date this, and I says, "No way," and then she says, "Well, I married who I wanted," and she says, "A lot of people they still think, you know, the family should approve and pick out the"—but she says, "Just go out with him one time and if you like him okay, and if you never—but just to please this couple who wanted to pick out a German." And so I don't know how the boy felt. I don't even know if we talked to each other, but he probably, his parents were saying, "Just go out with this girl once and if you don't like"—and so we probably both hated each other, you know, just because.

LEVINE: Just because.

LILL: And I never—I went out with him. I never—probably wanted to get home as fast as possible, and my mother never—she didn't—I think she—because we were German Baptists, who I married I was Catholic and I remember—if I had my life to live over again, I got married in a Catholic Church and I remember she told me she'd rather be going to my funeral than seeing me get married in a Catholic church because they were very devote. You know, their life was really the church. I got married and then I know—and she said, "We couldn't come to the wedding or invite any of our friends, you know, to come," and I said, "Well, okay." And then I told my, you know, boyfriend at the time. I says, "Well, maybe we should just go to the priest's house and get married there," I says, and maybe in a year or so they'll get over it. And then it was, oh, only a couple of weeks before the day and my mother says to me, "Didn't you buy a wedding dress or anything?" and I said, "Well, if nobody's coming to the wedding, why should I get a wedding dress or anything?" and then she must have felt—she made my wedding gown out of white satin and she came to the wedding dressed in black from head to toe. [Laughs]

But she came and then after we were married, not too long after that, she really liked my husband and he was good to them, and then she said to him. "Don't ever bring her back," and they got to be friends with his family. Before that, I guess they had never been in a Catholic church before and they were suspicious. They thought they were almost like, oh, like praying to saints and then with the incense, almost like it was some like voodoo or something. My husband's family—in fact, my husband even said, "Well, why don't we get married in your church?" and I says, "Let's leave it the way it is now," and his family, I said, "They won't think we're married," you know, being Catholic. But they got to know each other and so sometime I think all this intermingling is good for people.

LEVINE: Ah-ha, what kind of ethnicity was your husband?

LILL: Well, he was German, but his mother was born here and I think his grandmother was born here. Maybe from, you know, 1700 or early 1800, I don't know. Way back they were German, but nobody knows where they came from or when they came. Maybe somebody some day will look it up.

LEVINE: But it sounds like your mother didn't care—

LL; What nationality.

LEVINE: Right. He was a German boy.

LILL: Actually, his background way back was probably German, but you know, American. No, to her it was more important the religious.

LEVINE: Right. Okay. Well, now, looking back on it now, we're getting close to the end here. Looking back on it now, how do you—what sense do you make out of coming here as a little girl and immigrating and really living your entire life in this country? What does that—how do you think that that affected you? What difference do you think it made, that the fact that that actually was what happened.

LL; Well, when I think about it, if they hadn't come here, I wonder, I would have lived in Germany, would have married a German and who knows what, you know. By coming here, it really changed and molded my entire life and future, everything, and I'm so glad they did because I feel thoroughly American and I'm very proud of what my mother and father went through to achieve what they did. They never had an easy life. They never made it big, you know, like when my father thought his plans were, "Oh, we'll become, you know, wealthy." They never got that part, but they were happy here and they were proud of us, you know, getting our—well, me finishing high school. My brother, like I said, he was in the Air Force and while he was home on that rest and recreation, he had to fly a general to Boston who wanted lobster that night or something and while he was there waiting for the general picking out his lobster, he went over to MIT and applied and they accepted him, and he got his master's degree in engineering from MIT and it didn't cost him anything because the government paid for it. While he was in Boston, he met this girl who was Swedish parentage and they lived there. So everything that happens kind of molds, you know, your future and I'm happy that it worked out that way.

LEVINE: Do you think you have any qualities that are German? Do you ascribe any sort of part of your makeup to that?

LILL: Well, I think I learned—I don't know. Probably in any, you know, nationality there's people who are thrifty. Like I call my grandchildren and my son-in-law and daughter, I call them the throw away society, where I'm still thrifty. I'll always remember the upbringing. You made do with what you had. If you couldn't afford it, we never bought on anything on time. We didn't buy anything unless we could pay cash for it, except, you know a big house. Even now, I'm careful with spending money and I wouldn't say that's a German quality. I'm sure everywhere there's people who are thrifty and appreciate the value of money. Then this modern generation, in fact, if I'm walking with my granddaughter and there's a penny on the ground, she would just kick it, where I would bend over and pick it up. So things like that.

But I like American food. I think the German food is too heavy, although even in my family, like on my birthday I could pick what we should have, and I always asked for sauerkraut. Now, people think everybody in Germany eats sauerkraut. I'm the only German I know who likes sauerkraut. My mother and father and brothers, they didn't like it. But I would always ask for that, and even now if I go to a restaurant—there's a German restaurant in a town, you know, near the lake where I am, and I love to go there and get sauerbraten and red cabbage. Although for every holiday, I do make red cabbage the way my mother made it. You know, chop up apples in it and let it cook.

END OF SIDE B, TAPE 1
BEGIN SIDE A, TAPE 2

LEVINE: Maybe you can—could you give us the recipe?

LILL: Well, actually, my mother never used recipes. She'd buy red cabbage and you cut it and of course there's more waste than red cabbage by the time you cut out the core. She would, you know, chop it up as fine as she could, you know, in slices and then she would rinse it and the water that stayed on it, she'd put into the pot and then it would wilt down as it cooked. Then she would cut up an apple in it and then put a little brown sugar and vinegar and cook until it was all wilted and she always made that for special holidays. So now when my daughter has, you know, holiday dinner, I says, "What do you want me to bring?" She says, "Red cabbage." My grandchildren love red cabbage. So that's one thing, we always have, you know, red cabbage for dinners.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, and what was your husband's—what is your husband's name?

LILL: He died in 1990. His name was Frances Gerard Lill.

LEVINE: And your children's names?

LILL: I have a daughter, Barbara and her name now is—she married a second time, Krause, because my grandchildren, their last name is Gorsinski. [PH]They were Polish, Italian and German. So everything's a melting pot and who knows.

LEVINE: Who they'll marry and what—

LILL: Yeah, because I know my brother, one of his kids married a girl from Korea. In fact, how they met, he was over—he was in Turkey in Istanbul going to the American School learning Turkish and she was there from Korea learning Turkish, and she couldn't speak English and he couldn't speak Korean, so they had to speak in Turkish to each other. And now they're married and have a couple kids. So it's a real melting pot.

LEVINE: Right. What about you—do you have any other children?

LILL: No, just one daughter. Yeah, and she wishes that I or my mother would have taught her German, and when I told her, you know, what that principal told me, she says, "I think that's terrible," you know, that she wouldn't allow German because she said, "When you're little, you can learn a language so quickly."

LEVINE: What happened when you—was there a period of time when you outpaced your mother and father, as far as being able to speak the language?

LILL: Oh, yeah, much more. In fact, like especially when I got to high school, I always, you know, kind of looked after them. Like if somebody was talking to or trying to sell them something. And I know when they lost their house—they lost their house and my mother, you know, she didn't know what to do, and I guess the neighbor said that I guess the sheriff came and told them that if they weren't out by the next week, they were going to put their furniture out on the street. My mother, I know she was crying all the time. So I went around in the neighborhood on my way to school and I found a house where it said for rent, and I found them. Then when I told my mother, it was right on a busy street like Clinton Avenue, which is the next street over, and oh, she didn't want to live there or anything. But eventually they had to go there, and I talked to the landlord. I remember he said it was going to be thirty dollars a month. Imagine, thirty dollars a month for a big flat? And they moved there and they lived there until after, when my brother was in the Korean War. He could buy a house on the GI Bill and so then he bought them a house and then they paid my brother back. Then she was very happy having her own house, but it took a long time and they achieved a lot, I thought.

Yeah, in my high school days, I could understand and speak English much better than they could and—but I always talked English to them. Sometimes she would, you know, say something in German. Well, different things she didn't know. I know as she got older, when the homosexuals came out of the closet and all that talk, she says to me, "What is a homosexual?" She couldn't even

pronounce it or anything, and I thought, "Oh, how am I going to explain this?" Then when I said, "Well, it's when a man wants to be with a man instead of a women," she said, "Oh." Then she understood, but she didn't—the word, you know, she didn't know.

So, yeah, sometimes we really didn't speak the same language after a while because some things in German you can't even translate, and slang. But, yeah, she—I think they adapted very, very well.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. Okay. Well, how about your life? Are there any moments in your life that you look back on as being particularly satisfying or important?

LILL: Oh, I think I've always been kind of an optimistic person. I always wanted to be like my father because he was always happy. My mother, I think she—she used to get homesick I think and think about—but she went along with whatever he wanted to do, and she was busy being a housewife and always cleaning. In fact, when they owned the house, you know, after the Korean War, she would even with a scrubbing—she would even scrub the sidewalk in front of the house. You could eat off the floor, and I'm more casual because sometimes she even said to me, she said, "Oh, don't ever tell anybody you're German." [Laughs] I didn't think having a spotless house was the most important thing. In fact, my sister, one time she bought a little thing you hang on the window, it says, "An immaculate house is a sign of a misspent life." [Laughs] I said, "Yeah, that's for me."

LEVINE: Well, were there any things that you did with your father growing up? Any kinds of experiences?

LILL: Just talking. Talking. I loved talking with him. He could talk on almost any—he loved—oh, he would subscribe to the National Geographic, or he liked going to the Planetarium and museums. He could talk about anything and he could fix anything. Anything, you know, even in the house no matter what plumbing, electrical work, anything, he'd fix it. He could do everything with his hands and, oh, he loved, oh, going for a ride and looking at the scenery. He just loved everything and I thought I'd like to be like my father.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Well, it sounds like you are a lot like your father.

LILL: Oh, oh. Well, I don't know.

LEVINE: Okay. Let's see. Is there anything else? How about this time in your life? I assume you're retired, are you?

LILL: Yeah. Well, my husband was sick for ten years before he died, so that was probably the most difficult time in my life. I told all my—[recording just fades out]

END OF INTERVIEW